

A black and white photograph of a person walking on a dark, angular architectural structure, possibly a roof or a bridge, against a light sky. The person is seen from behind, wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants. The structure consists of several dark, parallel beams that create a sense of depth and perspective.

THE BOOK OF BLAM
ALEKSANDAR TIŠMA

INTRODUCTION BY
CHARLES SIMIC

ALEKSANDAR TIŠMA (1924–2003) was born in the Vojvodina, a former province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that had been incorporated into the new kingdom of Yugoslavia after the First World War. His father, a Serb, came from a peasant background; his mother was middle-class and Jewish. The family lived comfortably, and Tišma received a good education. In 1941, Hungary annexed Vojvodina; the next year—Tišma's last in high school—the regime carried out a series of murderous pogroms, killing some 3,000 inhabitants, primarily Serbs and Jews, though the Tišmas were spared. After fighting for the Yugoslav partisans, Tišma studied philosophy at the University of Belgrade and went into journalism. In 1949 he joined the editorial staff of a publishing house, where he remained until his retirement in 1980. Tišma published his first story, "Ibika's House," in 1951, which was followed by the novels *Guilt* and *In Search of the Dark Girl* and a collection of stories, *Violence*. In the 1970s and '80s, he gained international recognition with the publication of his Novi Sad trilogy: *The Book of Blam* (1972), about a survivor of the Hungarian occupation of Novi Sad; *The Use of Memory* (1976), which follows a group of friends through the Second World War and after; and *Kapo* (1987), the story of a Jew raised as a Catholic who becomes a guard in a German concentration camp. Tišma moved to France after the outbreak of war and collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, but in 1999 he returned to Novi Sad, where he spent his last years.

MICHAEL HENRY HEIM (1943–2012) was a professor of Slavic languages at the University of California, Los Angeles. Fluent in eight languages, Heim was the recipient of many awards and translated such writers as Anton Chekhov, Milan Kundera, Günter Grass, Bohumil Hrabal, Danilo Kiš, and Dubravka Ugrešić. He is the subject of *The Man Between: Michael Henry Heim & A Life in Translation*, edited by Esther Allen, Sean Cotter, and Russell Scott Valentino.

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THE BOOK OF BLAM

ALEKSANDAR TIŠMA

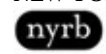
Translated from the Serbo-Croatian by

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Introduction by

CHARLES SIMIC

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

www.nyrb.com

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First published in Serbo-Croatian as *Knjiga o Blamu* by Nolit, Belgrade, 1972.

Reprinted here by special arrangement with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Cover art: Enrique Metinides, *Suicide Rescue*, 1971, courtesy of the artist.

Cover design: Katy Homans

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tišma, Aleksandar, 1924–2003.

[*Knjiga o Blamu*. English]

The book of Blam / by Aleksandar Tišma; introduction by Charles Simic; translated by Michael Henry Heim.

1 online resource. — (New York Review Books classics)

ISBN 978-1-59017-921-5 (epub) — ISBN 978-1-59017-920-8 (alk. paper)

1. Jews—Serbia—Novi Sad—Fiction. 2. Novi Sad (Serbia)—Fiction. 3.

Psychological fiction. I. Heim, Michael Henry, translator. II. Title.

PG1419.3.I8

891.8'235—dc23

2015032108

ISBN 978-1-59017-921-5

v1.0

For a complete list of titles, visit www.nyrb.com or write to:

Catalog Requests, NYRB, 435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

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Introduction

The Book of Blam is the first of three novels about the Holocaust in Yugoslavia written by the Serbian writer Aleksandar Tišma, the other two being *The Use of Man* and *Kapo*. It was published in 1972 in Belgrade and was well received, as were the two books that followed. Tišma's work was translated into seventeen languages and he became internationally known. Although a child of a Serbian father and Jewish mother, who lost relatives on his mother's side in the Holocaust, Tišma came to the subject of the camps late: He attributed this new interest of his to a trip he took to Poland in the 1960s and a visit he made to Auschwitz that reminded him of the horrors he registered as a boy but had learned not to think about in order to keep his sanity. The trip to Poland made him realize that he had a history he could not run away from. As Tišma's compatriot Danilo Kiš noted, "One doesn't become a writer accidentally, one's biography is the first and the greatest cause." Tišma would have agreed. In one of his journals he describes himself as a bug who had survived the bug spray and whose role now is to convey to the descendants of the killers the atrocities their fathers and grandfathers perpetrated on their millions of victims.

Tišma was born in 1928 in Horgoš, a town on the border of Serbia and Hungary, where thousands of Syrian war refugees lately have massed while waiting to be allowed passage to Western Europe. His father came from Lika, an impoverished region in western Croatia inhabited by many Serbs. Though his parents, expecting him to become a priest, sent him to school in Serbia, on graduation he went to work for a wholesaler and eventually started a business importing fruit from the south. Tišma's mother was Jewish Hungarian. She grew up in a small village in Hungary where her father ran a small, barely thriving store. She met her future husband at her aunt's rooming house in Horgoš where he used to stay on his business trips. The newlyweds settled in Novi Sad, the largest and most multiethnic city in the region, where Tišma lived for the rest of his life and wrote his many books, including *The Book of Blam*.

In April 1941, when Tišma was thirteen years old, Yugoslavia was invaded and occupied by German, Italian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian troops. Vojvodina, the area north of Belgrade, where Novi Sad is situated, was divided into three zones: one occupied by Hungary, one by the newly founded Croatian fascist state, and the rest under German control. Serbs, who had settled in the region after World War I, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dissolved and Yugoslavia came into existence, were to be deported; Jews, if they did not fall into the hands of the Nazis to be taken to Serbia and gassed in mobile gas vans, were persecuted or perished in a series of raids, the most notorious of which took place in Novi Sad. There, over a period of three days, starting on January 20, 1942, some 1,400 Jews and Serbs, including women and small children, were led at gunpoint onto the frozen Danube, shot in the back, and shoved into holes in the ice. Tišma and most of his family were spared thanks to a Hungarian neighbor who misled the soldiers knocking on doors and searching for people on their list, but his beloved grandmother Theresa Miller was rounded up with several hundred other Jews and Serbs and was on her way to the banks of the Danube to be killed when a cable arrived from military authorities in Budapest ordering an end to the mass slaughter.

Of course, the persecution and killings continued. In 1942 all Jews and Serbs between the ages of twenty-one and forty-eight were conscripted into forced labor battalions. Some 4,000 Jews from Bačka and Baranja were sent to Ukraine, near the front, where they succumbed to disease and starvation or were murdered; others were put to work in copper mines and on the railroads in Serbia and Hungary. In March 1944 when Hungary realized that it had taken the losing side in the war and began to negotiate with the Allies, Germany seized control of the country and the occupied territories.

Any remaining Jews—there had been approximately 20,000 in Vojvodina before the war; now there were 4,000—were collected and sent into camps. Some Jews had already left the region since—until that March—territories held by Hungary were safer than neighboring Serbia and Croatia. Tišma and his mother were among them. They had traveled to Budapest in 1942 and he had enrolled at the university to study economics (changing after a semester to French). He even got a job working in an office. As he later explained to an interviewer, students enjoyed a privileged status in Hungary during the war. In 1944, Tišma and his classmates were conscripted into labor brigades to dig trenches against the advancing Russian tanks, but except for sleeping in tents they were not otherwise mistreated. His mother and grandmother also survived, though living in mortal fear as they watched friends and relatives being taken away to the camps.

“All my novels are autobiographical,” Tišma said, explaining that he is not recounting his life but using elements of his experience in them. His central characters without exception share his own sense of alienation. Even as a child, he said that he was aware of being different and kept asking himself whether that was really true. He felt he didn’t belong, only pretended to, imitating people’s voices, accents, phrases, deeds, while remaining an outsider. Asked in a census which nationality he belonged to, Tišma checked off *undecided*. He had always wanted to leave, but he had never had the courage to do so, even when the opportunities arose. “I am a man who stayed in the hole because he couldn’t part company with its warmth,” he confessed in his journal.

Miroslav Blam, the protagonist of this novel, is that sort of man, a guilt-ridden Holocaust survivor, a Jew who married a Christian and was therefore exempted from annihilation while the rest of his family perished in the 1942 raid. He is a loner obsessed with the past, married to a woman who cheats on him. He has a grown daughter fathered by the Serbian collaborator who was his wife’s lover and who gave him a job and saved his life after his parents and sister were killed. He walks the city full of ghosts, a man whose faith in the world has proved to be futile, since those like his neighbors who lived by it expecting to thrive, as we all do wherever we live, ended up being murdered and forgotten. “Manhunt” is the name Blam gives to the onslaught of memories that pursue him and torment him wherever he goes. They make up the plot of this book and provide it with its large cast of interesting characters and their astonishing life stories. Tišma, who had previously published three short-story collections and a novel about a love affair, said that he wrote this book without a plan or a model, following his instincts, which, as the reader can verify, turned out to be flawless.

A friend who read the manuscript told him that even someone as inconspicuous as his hero must do at least one extraordinary thing. Not in Tišma’s books. The heroes of an age, he believed, are not the winners, but those who bear its wounds. He writes about the private lives of people at the mercy of historical events beyond their control, the choices they did or did not make, victims and killers, both of whom he sees clearly, neither judging them nor forgiving them. An interviewer once asked how he had come to write so well about murderers. Tišma responded that crime fascinated him; the violence he witnessed during the war had made him comprehend hatred and cruelty. I’ve read in my lifetime many vivid and ghastly accounts of people led to their death in novels and historical documents, but few that match Tišma’s depiction of what those thousands inching forward on the frozen Danube felt and told themselves while hearing the sound of a machine gun, growing closer and closer, louder and louder, firing in quick bursts and now and then falling silent in the early-morning dark.

One of the most poignant stories in *The Book of Blam* describes how in April 1944 the Jews and their families who were to be deported to the camps were assembled in the huge synagogue in Novi Sad. They spent three days and three nights there, not bothered by the guards, waiting quietly. The only discordant note came from five or six dogs who had trotted alongside their owners as they were being led to the synagogue and remained outside watching for an opportunity to dash inside. The guards chased them away, yelling and cursing, but the dogs came back. They did see their masters or

last time, nuzzling them and getting them to part with some hidden morsel of food, when they were the station waiting to be loaded into the train, but soon the train was on the move and the dogs were left alone on the tracks, though they kept running after it for a long time until at last their noses lost the familiar smells of their owners.

At the end of *The Book of Blam*, Blam goes to a concert held in that same synagogue, known for its fabulous acoustics. There is one other Jew in the large crowd, an old man who dodged death in a camp by playing the violin in a band that accompanied prisoners on their way to the firing squad.

—CHARLES SIMON

Chapter One

THE MERCURY IS the most prominent building in Novi Sad. Not the tallest, because it is overpowered by the steep glaciers of the high-rises and the sturdy wreaths of apartment houses that the postwar population explosion strewed over the fields at the edge of town. Nor the most attractive, because its builder and first owner, a prewar businessman, viewed it as a commercial venture, making the most of every square inch and avoiding costly ornamentation. And yet the Mercury, jutting into Main Square on one corner rounded like the stern of an ocean liner, running along broad, straight Old Boulevard in all its four-storied glory (and with its somewhat narrower decklike mansard) and boasting a continuous row of ground-level businesses, including a department store, a cinema, and a hotel with a restaurant and bar, is unquestionably the city's focal point.

Miroslav Blam, who lives in the Mercury's mansard, understands the exceptional, almost lofty status of the building and of himself as a part of it. He is proud of his status, though secretly and reticently so, not having come by it on his own merit. When he writes his return address, he does not use the generally accepted "Mercury Building" (the name comes from the name of the original owner's company); he uses the official though more complicated "I Old Boulevard," which he also uses when giving his address to acquaintances, and only if they slap their foreheads and say, "What's that's the Mercury!" does he nod hesitantly, as if yielding to the unofficial, slightly wanted designation, while in fact concealing his pleasure. Or, rather, vacillating between pleasure and annoyance, because he dislikes being pigeonholed, even in so minor a detail.

Actually, the reason he is so fond of his Mercury mansard is that it is in the center of things yet remains a hideaway. Lift your eyes from any point in Main Square or the boulevard and you'll say, "That's where Blam lives." But try to make your way there and find him. First you have to be let into the building or slip past the janitor keeping an eye on the courtyard from his kitchen. Then you have to climb stairs and stairs—four flights' worth, each with dozens of doors and more than dozens of people living behind them, meddlesome people constantly lolling on the balconies—and only then will you come to the mansard level. And are you willing to knock at every door and ask for him? If you're too loud and conspicuous, he may hear you before you find him and thus remain eternally hidden. Yet even if you do locate the door to his apartment. Because the mansard deviates unexpectedly from the pattern of the other floors, narrowing as it does to the width of a footpath, which path, protected by a low iron fence so people will not fall to the street, looks like a ship's promenade perched on what is entirely residential space.

Blam often visits this walkway, this place of celestial freedom, slipping out of his apartment through a passage tucked between the laundry room and drying room. Parading thus along the building's edge, he has a bird's-eye view of the Main Square's spacious rectangle and the narrow pointed spire of the cathedral that dominates it, or of the broad trough of Old Boulevard with its endless processions of cars and pedestrians, or of the ravine of narrow Okrugić Street, perpendicular to the boulevard, and the tables in front of the hotel. True, he is so accustomed to these sights that he scarcely notices them, his eye resting rather on an uncommon detail, a lone, dark, pillowlike cloud that seems anchored to the cathedral's spire, or a pedestrian, or a pretty woman who keeps returning to the same place. He pauses at the railing, leaning his elbows on it, eager to take part, to merge with the crowd. He becomes the pedestrian, he becomes the waiting woman. He knows nothing about them, yet for that very reason he can string together images of facts and possibilities. The image of an accident that once took place there, the image of two beaming faces meeting for a tryst. The screech of brakes or a cry of horror that overcomes the crowd like a wind. She is married, but her husband is in jail for

corrupting minors and she has phoned an old admirer and asked to see him. The pedestrian hit by the screeching car was Aca Krkljuš's father. Aca himself showed Blam the spot when he gave him his drunken account of what happened. His father's leg was amputated and he could no longer manage his leather workshop, so Aca had to take over and give up his own work and calling. As for the old admirer, he is probably frightened by the responsibility involved—after all, he has remained a bachelor (if he hadn't, the beautiful woman would never have asked to see him): he senses she wants him to replace her husband in the performance of certain familial duties as well as in bed. Aca, or the pedestrian whose choice of position on the street reminds Blam of Aca, seems to be surveying the terrain; he needs to make a sketch of it, a legal drawing, to support his indemnity case, which he had also told Blam about, while the man the woman has asked to see may have got the time and place wrong, mixed things up, because his memory is so poor. But the two people who are actually there waiting will in fact exchange a few glances and hastily thrown-together words; they will grow close and realize their common bond in the losses they suffered on the same spot. They will begin to trust each other, and he will invite her for a drink or even (because he might well be Aca) suggest they take a load off their feet by going up to see Blam, Miroslav Blam, an old school friend, a friend also of his brother Slobodan, who died a tragic death in the war, Blam always comes to hear my band, my new pieces, he's the one I told about the accident two months ago, the accident that cost my father his leg and me my freedom, he lives right here and he has a wonderful wife, don't worry, I'll introduce you to her, he's very understanding, and a lawyer, well, kind of, and maybe he can give you some advice about getting your husband off, it's right here, right in the Mercury . . .

A FAR-OFF RING, a knock on the door. Aca with his sagging cheeks, sagging nose, apologetically sagging shoulders, and listless expression suddenly looks amazingly like his dead brother. He pushes the pretentious stranger in and introduces her with a quick smile.

"Is Miroslav in?" he asks, winking as if referring to a secret agreement.

"He's around here somewhere," Janja answers, giving him a curious look. "Gone for a walk . . . I'll call him."

"No, no. Don't bother. We'll find him. Just point us in the general direction. We need some legal advice. You see, the lady's husband . . ."

Now they are out again, squeezed together in the passage, because Aca wants to let her go first but she also needs to show her the way, and she is rather heavy and afraid the wind will mess up her hair or lift her skirt.

The wind slams a door shut somewhere. Otherwise nothing happens. The two of them are still downstairs in front of the building; up here there is no one but Blam. His fellow tenants avoid the walkway. It is hot in summer and windy at all times. Should they feel the need for fresh air, they go out on the courtyard terrace, where they can drowse, shaded and sheltered, in deck chairs, where they can chat with a neighbor, read the papers, or take the children to play so the children won't disturb their afternoon naps. The reason Blam likes the walkway is that he can count on being alone there, at least until someone comes looking for him. Only until then. Because if Aca were in fact to come up with his lady friend, determined to find him, or if there were a search warrant out for him (and eventually there has to be—he cannot imagine living his life without one, without another war), the very fact that the mansard was secluded would turn it into a trap. He would not be able to double back to the terrace: an armed patrol would keep the passage covered. Nor would he be able to duck back into the apartment except through a window: in case of a manhunt, search, raid, or blockade, all windows are closed, all curtains drawn. Those are the rules of the game and have been from time immemorial. All the tenants can do is peek through the blinds, stare wide-eyed and trembling at him out there while a man with a pistol appears in the doorway. Where can Blam turn? His heart is pounding; he presses against the

railing, clutching it convulsively, his head bent over the side, his only way out. He refuses to let them corner him again, let them force him to await their orders and to comply; no, he'll jump, he'll swing his body into the air and plunge headfirst into the street as if diving into a swimming pool. He feels a cold stream of air rushing through his mouth, a void enveloping his shoulders, a lack of support, the vanishing borders of space. His legs flop as freely as a rag doll's, they come undone, his whole body loses its shape, its conventional solidity, his blood runs in all directions, everything falls apart, the whole world, the street he is about to crash into.

HIS HANDS TINGLE, his fingers burn, the bar of the railing digs into the bone. He spreads his hands, turns them, observes the red stripes slowly broaden and lose their intense hue. Meanwhile, down below, people keep strolling along the street, going about their business, stretching their legs. The stubborn pedestrian is still there, but the beautiful woman has disappeared; maybe the man she was waiting for actually came. They have no idea what is going on inside Blam; they cannot share it, they would not understand his fear, his terror, his certainty that the patrol will come for him and push him to the railing. What is wrong with him? Is he mad? Or is everyone mad but him? Though it amounts to the same thing. For if he is different from everyone, then he is a monster, a freak, an aberration, ripe for being split open and having his thoughts read, for being crammed into a cage and exhibited in an anthropological rather than zoological garden, exhibited naked, the better to be seen and poked through the bars until he produces the incoherent howls and shrieks expected of him.

The bars behind him rattle: someone is letting down the blinds. The noise comes from the left, which means it is either the retired woman with bad lungs or someone in his apartment. He does not turn to see, however; he fears the sight he would offer to the person looking out of the window: a twisted head on a body still facing the street, the abyss, with a face showing signs of an overactive imagination, an imagination more real to Blam than anything going on behind his back. Yes, he admits to himself with embarrassment though with a certain malice as well. That intimate world back there, so sure of itself—Janja doing some sewing, perhaps, his little girl doing her homework—is very much part of the manhunt, if not in its service. When passages are occupied, a home like that is disastrous. Any home is disastrous if it is alive, if you depend on it for your life's blood, if you cannot live without it. Then the bullets hit not only you, nor can you even fling yourself to the ground, take cover. There is no cover when you're burdened with love and the patrol is after you. There is no way out. You are being led to the altar to be sacrificed. They push you on, you can't turn back, your head hangs low.

His head hangs low as he waits to hear whether the noise will develop into a challenge, a cry of surprise, a death command. But he hears nothing more, nor has anyone seen him. He slowly turns around, keeping his eyes glued to the asphalt walkway, goes back to the passage. If he can slip through unimpeded, he will avoid the apartment, the home, the trap, and direct his steps in the opposite direction, the stairs. He will run down the stairs to the street and freedom. He may even catch another glimpse of the pedestrian or the beautiful woman.

Chapter Two

HE DOES NOT, of course. They have disappeared in the interim, swallowed by the crowd, or perhaps they are still there but no longer recognizable. People look different when you are on a level with them. The proportions of their bodies change. The relation of one part to another. Formerly conspicuous curves—foreheads, noses, breasts, shoulders—flatten out, and limbs scarcely visible from above jut out in all directions. New conditions of light, new reflections affect hair color, eye color, skin color. Clothes seem to hang differently, the new angle accentuating certain wrinkles and shadows while attenuating others. From above, a person's gait looks light and easy; at eye level, it is heavier, involving effort with one foot always pressed to the ground. From below, it is clear that people are not propelled by an unknown force, not pulled on a transparent string by a concealed hand; they move by contracting the leg muscles and shifting the weight of their bodies in the direction they wish to go. Their connection with the earth is obvious. True, they push away from it, stand erect, but it remains part of them and it they will return. At eye level, too, their variety—infant, girl, graybeard—arouses curiosity, but the progress of infant and girl and graybeard can be charted from start to finish and their mystery unraveled.

THE MAN WHO appears before Blam to have his mystery unraveled is a real estate agent by the name Leon Funkenstein. Blam sees him while standing in front of the Mercury surveying the far side of the square from the cathedral to the Avala Cinema. The area is full of parked cars because the street beginning behind the Avala and once called Jew Street is now sealed off at the other end by New Boulevard and thus closed to traffic. It is the destination of many idle strollers like Blam.

Seeing Funkenstein, however, Blam interrupts his stroll. He has no reason to avoid him, though he did go out to be alone or, rather, to escape the manhunt, his private term for the onslaught of present and past encounters and experiences, of which Funkenstein is unfortunately a part. He is not sure the old man will recognize him. Blam was still a boy at the time Funkenstein came to the house. But in the past few years, he has given Funkenstein several opportunities to refresh his memory, calling attention to himself with a shy smile, a nod, a barely audible greeting when their eyes meet on the narrow street. But this time there is plenty of room—the whole square beckons Blam to former Jew Street—and Funkenstein stands at the far end of the square bending over the radiator of a dusty gray Fiat, his bald pate so far down that he seems to be sniffing as well as inspecting it.

But as so often happens when he wants to steer clear of someone, Blam directs his steps straight at the man, crossing the square in such a way as to be most visible, justifying his conspicuous route by curiosity. Watching him fiddle with the car, Blam suddenly wonders whether Funkenstein hasn't changed profession. It would be perfectly understandable, given that all rent-bearing properties have long since been nationalized, which leaves only small—and therefore cheap—single-family dwellings on the market like the house the Blams used to own in Vojvoda Šupljikac Square, the one that Funkenstein had sold for Blam's father, Vilim. But he sold it just before Blam's father died, so his father may not have received payment in full, or if he had, then he hadn't had time to spend it all and it had fallen into the hands of plunderers.

He chafes at the thought that he will eventually have to talk to Funkenstein, quiz him on the particulars of the sale of the house to allay his doubts. He realizes he has postponed the talk too long as it is (and postponed putting to rest the doubts), but now he turns his head in Funkenstein's direction and is surprised to find Funkenstein looking straight at him. He can hardly believe it, but there can be

no doubt: from the old man's broad, pink face, still lowered over the Fiat's radiator, a pair of tiny but piercing brown eyes beneath unruly gray eyebrows and a shiny forehead are looking at him, Blam.

Blam pauses, whereupon Funkenstein straightens. The straightening does not much alter his spatial relation to the car—he is too short for that—but it does reveal his bold taste in clothes: he is wearing a white shirt with an apache collar over a pair of yellowish imitation-silk trousers. He sets his youthful outfit in motion by circling the car with a sprightly step—surprisingly sprightly for a body so stumped—and plants himself in front of Blam.

“Hello, Mr. Funkenstein,” Blam says, taken aback.

“Hello, hello,” Funkenstein answers cordially, but without using Blam's name, which indicates Blam's assumption that Funkenstein would not be able to place him was correct. Funkenstein holds out his firm, fleshy hand, though casually, almost incidentally, and with no more than a glance at Blam's face. “What brings you here?” he asks, clearly aloof and quickly turning his small twinkling eyes from Blam to something over Blam's shoulder.

“Just out for a walk,” says Blam, made uncomfortable by Funkenstein's lack of concentration, which obliges him to keep the conversation going. “Though now that I have you here, I thought I'd ask you about a house you sold a while back. Tell me, are you still in real estate?”

“Oh yes. Yes, of course I am.” Funkenstein trains his swift, piercing glance on Blam, but immediately looks over Blam's shoulder again. “Got something to sell?”

“Not anymore,” Blam says with a shrug. Suddenly he feels hurt by Funkenstein's indifference and decides to end the conversation, which was going nowhere anyway. “I see you're interested in cars now.”

“In one only.” Again Funkenstein glances up at Blam, questioningly this time, as if debating whether to trust him. “It's not mine, though. I'm watching it for a friend.”

Blam, baffled, turns to see a large green car parked alone in the middle of the square. Suddenly Funkenstein grabs him by the arm and twirls him around. “Don't turn again!” he whispers, raising his wild, imperious eyebrows and pursing his rosy, wrinkled lips, the corners frothy with spit. “I don't want to call attention to myself.”

Blam shifts uneasily, realizing that Funkenstein is using his bulk as a shield, that he, Blam, has taken the place of the dusty gray Fiat.

“Look! Look!” Funkenstein cries, triumphant. He is jumping up and down, bending over, peeking out from behind Blam like a child playing hide-and-seek. “See? They're getting on the bus!” The suddenly relaxed, he straightens his back and explains offhandedly, “It's a favor for an old friend, my business partner, actually. He's out of town for a while, and I'm keeping an eye on his wife. I knew she was up to something when I saw their car in the square. Well, she's gone off with a man on the bus. To his place, for sure.”

From the direction of Funkenstein's gaze Blam can tell he is following the bus (with his eyes or his mind's eye) that runs past the monument, on to the Danube, and into the part of town filled with new residential dwellings for newly arrived officials, following the dark, young, nattily dressed man and the tall blond woman on his arm, her strong thighs tightly encased in a blue skirt. If Funkenstein's “old friend” is Funkenstein's age, getting on to seventy, perhaps the couple is not so young as Blam had imagined. Perhaps the whole thing is a sham. He gives Funkenstein a quizzical look.

But Funkenstein is on his way to the green car in the middle of the square, bypassing Blam as if Blam were an object. Blam notices that the bus waiting at the monument only a moment before has gone.

“Where did you say your house was?”

Funkenstein has returned to Blam after looking over the car.

“I don't own it anymore, I told you,” says Blam, annoyed. “It belonged to my late father. Vojvodica Šupljikac Square, number 7. You were his agent. It was the beginning of the war. I don't know if you

remember.”

“Vojvoda Šupljikac . . . Vojvoda Šupljikac . . .,” Funkenstein mumbles to himself, lowering his head and pressing a short, fat index finger to his nose. Suddenly he looks up. “Is your name Blam?”

“Yes. So you do remember.”

“Vaguely,” he said. “Well, what is it?”

“I was just wondering whether my father ever got the money for the house. The whole sum, I mean. The man who bought it was a tailor. Hajduković, I believe his name was. But then he sold it to somebody else . . .”

Funkenstein does not let him finish. “If I was the agent,” he says curtly, placing his hands on his chest and stretching the white shirt, “you can be sure it was paid in full.” He gives him a quick nod and holds out his hand. “Goodbye.” And off he goes, stepping briskly on his short legs and wide feet in the direction of the monument.

VOJVODA ŠUPLJIKAC SQUARE lies not far from the center of town, in the maze of narrow old streets that now abut on the broad curve of New Boulevard. The houses form an oval around the square, and in its center is a neglected park surrounded by an iron fence with spikes bent out of shape by unruly arms and legs. The land has been so trampled that almost nothing grows there. The few benches are backless, their seats furrowed with lovers’ initials that rain has broadened into illegible scars. Only the trees lining the fence have been able to withstand destruction; they are tall and venerable, and their leafy crowns rise above the square like a vast green umbrella.

Blam, too, was a participant in the destruction of this oasis. On his way home from school for lunch he and Čutura would jump over the fence, trample the grass, climb the trees, and eat the berries.

Before he made friends with Čutura, he had no idea that such things were possible or could give him pleasure. He had climbed before, but only onto the hand pump of the well in the brick-paved courtyard of his house, where the sole reminder of nature was the flower bed running along the high, bare wall which broke off abruptly at the separate apartment rented by a widow named Erzsébet Csokonay. The wildest his childhood ever got was jumping from the cold, slippery pump onto the bricks and fighting with his younger sister Estera, which meant a scolding from his mother, or with Puba Šmuk, whose mother came to visit the Blams and brought him along. The house was a fortress under an invisible siege. Only relatives, friends of the family, and repairmen came to call—no strangers except for an occasional beggar. Guests could always count on homemade pastries and on fruit brought from the market and carefully washed.

Whenever he took walks with the family, holding hands with Estera (attired in white or navy blue like him) and walking in front of his parents, who kept nagging at them not to stray into the museum, Blam would look at the oval park through the gate, but he never asked the names of the trees that caught his eye by swaying gracefully in the breeze. For Blam a tree was a tree, something big and strong, yet pliant, alive, in cheerful contrast not only to the gray plaster of the street but also to the cartloads of raw, dry timber that arrived at the house at the end of every summer to be hewn into manageable chunks by woodcutters amid the buzz of saws and the smell of shavings and sweat. And while he was vaguely aware that “beech wood” and “oak wood” also came from trees, those trees grew in distant, unfamiliar woods he had never seen and were chopped down by lumberjacks and transported to the city in open freight trains.

Then one day Čutura said, “Hey, let’s get some of that fruit!” He jumped over a bent spike between two slanting iron posts and stepped into the bushes. It was about noon and blazing hot, the sun casting its golden lances through the leaves into Čutura’s long hair and acned face. Blam followed Čutura’s lead cautiously, but caught a trouser leg on the spike. Looking for a place to leave his satchel and free his hands, he saw Čutura’s books scattered on the ground in the sun (Čutura had no satchel). But out

habit Blam walked on until he found a shady spot under a tree for his satchel. Only then did he look see where Čutura was. He found him hanging from the lowest branch of the tree, his open shirt revealing a muscular stomach indented at the belly button. All at once Čutura swung, planted his feet on the branch, and in no time had hoisted himself up. "Catch!" he shouted, throwing Blam three deep red hawthorn berries still connected by stiff stems. Blam caught them but did not know what to do next, until he looked up and saw Čutura picking more and popping them into his mouth, chewing them, and spitting the tiny seeds out through his teeth. Blam decided to try one. The moment he bit into the berry, a warm, pulpy sweetness flooded his tongue and coated the roof of his mouth. It was like nothing he had ever tasted: it was like chewing spots of sun or a dusty leaf or the rust on the iron fence; it was like eating raw earth, dry and brittle, lying on the earth, burrowing into it. He kept taking fruit from Čutura, popping it into his mouth, chewing it, and spitting the seeds all over, stuffing more and more into his mouth until Čutura grew tired and sprang to the ground, lithe as a cat.

Chapter Three

IF ČUTURA WERE still alive, the beautiful summer afternoon might well have lured him out to the square, thus making him a witness to Blam's encounter with Funkenstein. Perceptive, enterprising witness that he had always been, he would have come within earshot and, after their abrupt leaving, pressed Blam into a conversation that might have run like this:

"Who was that man?"

"Forget him. His name is Funkenstein. He's a real estate agent. A former real estate agent."

"You were talking about the house you used to live in, weren't you?"

"Right. I thought I'd take the opportunity to bring it up."

"And?"

"You heard. He said he was sure my father had received the full sale price."

"And you never saw a penny of it."

"Right."

"Well, what happened? Or, more to the point, who took it?"

"I haven't a clue."

"You don't seem to have gone out of your way to find out, either."

"I couldn't. I didn't dare, if you really want to know. I didn't dare inquire after my parents' bodies to say nothing of their money. I was scared."

"Yes. At the time that made sense. But what about later? Have you ever tried to find out who robbed them?"

"How would I do that?"

"How! It seems perfectly simple to me! I mean, it could only have been an inside job. One of the tenants. You must have known that from the start. Remember the Hungarian who moved in with the woman renting the apartment in your yard? What was his name?"

"Kocsis."

"That's right, Kocsis. Well, I used to see him with an Arrow Cross in his lapel. Just the type to get rid of your parents and take over the house."

"How can you say such a thing!"

"Because it's absolutely clear he's the one. He was there the day of the raid, wasn't he? The military must have asked him about your parents. They used Arrow Cross people all the time. They need informers. He was perfect for them."

"You're just guessing."

"I'm just being logical. You should have at least looked into the possibility. You didn't do a thing."

"No."

"Which basically means you let those crooks get rid of your parents and grab everything they had. Where are they now?"

"Who?"

"Who! Kocsis and his mistress."

"How should I know?"

"You mean you don't even know that? Did they stay on in the house?"

"I think so. For a while, at least. But then they moved to Budapest. At least that's what I heard."

"So you did ask around! And did a little guessing of your own!"

"Don't be ridiculous. I had to go back to the house to collect what was left of my parents' belongings. It was the new tenants who told me that Kocsis and the woman had moved to Budapest."

“But you didn’t find the money.”

“No.”

“Of course not. The money’s what got them to Budapest. They wouldn’t have been able to budg without it. But if it hadn’t been for the money and the part they played in your parents’ death, they wouldn’t have needed to move. Can’t you see that? They were afraid they’d get caught, so they beat. They didn’t realize they were dealing with someone like you, who wouldn’t lift a finger to avenge the death of his parents. They could easily have stayed. They may even have come back. After they saw that nobody was going after them or making any claims and realized the dust had settled. In fact, I’m sure they’re back. How much could it have come to anyway? Ten thousand pengő? Fifteen thousand? That’s nothing for a bastard like Kocsis who can’t hold on to a thing. And when the money was gone and the fling was over, back they flew to the nest. Because I bet they left someone here when they went off on their ‘honeymoon.’ ”

“I don’t think she had anybody. Just a daughter, and I’m sure she took her with them. But Kocsis was married, if I remember correctly, and had children.”

“Well, then, it’s easy. All you have to do is track down the family and get them to tell you where Papa is.”

“No, it’s not so easy. I never really knew them. I don’t know where they lived.”

“The Bureau of Internal Affairs has all kinds of records. Might I ask the first name of this Kocsis character?”

“Lajos. His name was Lajos Kocsis.”

“I see. Well, it shouldn’t be too hard to look up every Lajos Kocsis in Novi Sad. Are you game?”

“Game?”

“To let me take over. I don’t share the compunctions you seem to have when it comes to the man. I think his crime cries out for revenge. The people who killed my family had my brothers to reckon with, and this Kocsis is getting off scot-free. I feel it’s my duty to do something about it, if only because of Estera, in her memory.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s the right way.”

“We won’t know until we try. But you can’t have anything against my asking around.”

“Of course not.”

“Good, it’s a deal. And you can be sure I’ll have something to report before long.”

BUT ČUTURA IS no longer among the living, and Blam leaves the square for the former Jew Street unencumbered by third parties, thinking his own thoughts. As he makes his way along the resplendent shopwindows lining both sides of the street, he feels a venal shudder of regret that Funkenstein would not let him turn and look at the adulterous couple caught in the act. Again he pictures the dark, nattily dressed man and the tall blond woman, her skirt pulled tight around her thighs, pictures them embracing, and realizes it is a goodbye embrace, the repetition of an embrace he witnessed long ago and experienced as a personal farewell.

He experiences it once more, with a bittersweet feeling of loss and withdrawal, though of liberation as well. The memory belongs to memories of the shops now catching his eye. The reality is that the shops have been remodeled, their entrances widened, the cracked wood of the window frames replaced with shiny metal, the merchandise in the windows transformed from aggressive jumbles into neat and expertly arranged displays, the exotic names of owners on the signs supplanted by staid generic terms, the staff supplemented by the young and apathetic ranks of the bureaucracy. It is all quite soothing, a step in the direction of impersonality. It relieves him of the conflict he used to feel when confronted with the dark, tense faces, the rolling eyes, the guttural voices fulsomely praising their wares and humiliating him with reminders of his background. Now the shops, purged of their past, have become

for him too places of straightforward buying and selling. I'd like this and that. How much is it? I take it or no thank you. Yet he could not help missing the more enterprising tribe to which, even reluctantly, he had belonged.

The goodbye embrace was similar to—yet in a way the opposite of—the farewell scene he had accidentally witnessed from a tram many years before. Accidentally, because on that day Ferenci, the head of the Úti Travel Agency which had just hired him, asked him for the first and last time to leave his desk and deliver a packet of documents to customs. It was a cold November morning in the first year of the war, and Blam sank against the wooden back of a corner window seat as the tram made its wobbly way toward the customs office. The streets were nearly empty, the morning rush to jobs and the shops being over by then, and all that Blam's absent gaze met as he looked out of the window were a dawdling old man, a housewife rushing home late from the market with her net bag, a postman, and an apprentice toting a basket on his back. Then, just before the customs office, where a few small houses huddled together, the tram came upon a couple embracing: a dark man in a gray overcoat and a blond woman in a blue suit. They were standing near the curb, between the tram tracks and the houses, on their own, free, with no one to bother them, leaning blissfully against each other, his swarthy hand resting on her tightly sheathed thigh, her arm over his shoulder, her head and blond hair covering his face. Yet Blam had no trouble recognizing the couple as his wife, Janja, and Predrag Popadić. The realization that she was deceiving him with that man was like a knife in the gut, it took his breath away, it nearly made him faint, yet he did not scream, did not leap up and rush off the tram; he stayed put, leaning against the wooden seat, turning his head to follow them as the tram tottered past. The sight of their embrace on the deserted street filled him, despite his horror, with reluctant admiration; he was almost moved. It was the last embrace of the tryst—he could tell from the way they stood there, from the serenity, the blissful ease of their bodies—an embrace reflecting pleasure and oneness that came from shared memories of recent intimacy. Joy radiated from them, the joy of oblivion, of having satisfied a natural instinct that, though now abated, still suffused their bodies, the joy of ignoring the world around them, the cold, gray day, the prosaic city with its trams and the troubled passengers. Their joy so vividly contrasted with his grief that for all the pain it caused him he could set it apart and display it like an exquisite object unfathomable in its harmony and forever beyond his reach. He knew then that Janja as she was at that moment, the Janja he had longed for when he was courting her, would never be his, yet the anguish of this knowledge was tempered by relief. Embracing the man out in the open, in the street, she was in a sense taking leave of him, achieving an ideal (even if many years later and with someone else), an ideal that Blam too had yearned for yet never understood and that now proved to be a gentle, sisterly parting, a farewell to a person completely unlike her, alien to her, which would resolve the strain and tension that had always weighed on their relationship, in much the way that the shame and danger of identification with the Jew Street shopkeepers had weighed on him, until they disappeared for good.

BEFORE THE WAR number 1 Jew Street was occupied by a leather goods manufacturing company called Levi and Son. It was run by Levi the son because Levi the father, the firm's founder, was racked by disease and spent all his time in the upstairs apartment with a black silk yarmulke on his head and a tartan traveling rug over his knees. (Levi the grandson was studying to be a pharmacist in Belgrade.) When the Hungarians marched into Novi Sad, they declared Levi the father's leather goods essential to the war effort and carted them away in military vehicles. The empty shop was taken over by Julius Mehlbach, the Levis' longtime apprentice, who turned it into a shop specializing in leather bags and accessories. Levi the son, however, had managed to hide quite a bit of leather in the upstairs apartment, and he offered it to Mehlbach on the condition that they share the profit from the bags made of it. Mehlbach agreed, accepted the leather, and reported Levi the son for concealing goods.

essential to the war effort. Levi the son was arrested and beaten so badly that his kidneys bled. He was released, but died before the week was up. On his deathbed he summoned Mehlbach and made him swear to care for his all-but-immobile father, promising him a gold coin a week to cover the cost. Mehlbach fulfilled his duty until the spring of 1944, when the old man was deported to a camp in Germany with the rest of the Novi Sad Jews. He never returned. (Nor did Levi the grandson or Levi the grandson's mother, who happened to be with him in Belgrade when the war broke out.) Mehlbach searched the upstairs apartment for the rest of the coins, prying up floorboards and digging behind walls, but never found them, and in the autumn of the same year he was forced to flee the advancing partisans and Soviet Army and thus to abandon the shop and the house.

Number 4 was occupied by a tailor named Elias Elzmann, a refugee from Galicia who had moved first to Germany, then to Austria, and finally to Yugoslavia. His knowledge of Polish enabled him to communicate with his customers, while his wife and grown-up children (who like their father were heavy build, with oxlike eyes and big noses) spoke only German. For that reason his family—a wife, two sons, and two daughters—did the sewing while he rushed from one customer to the next in constant sweat, taking measurements, making alterations, bowing and scraping, and lisping all the while in his Slavic mishmash. The Gestapo had the Elzmanns down as German citizens and required the Hungarian authorities to hand them over. They were sent to Serbia, where they perished in the gas chambers. When the Hungarian soldiers went to Jew Street to round them up, they amused themselves by making the Elzmann daughters dance naked in front of their parents and brothers, who had to sing foxtrots and waltzes and clap in rhythm.

Number 3 was the workshop of a small, hunchbacked watchmaker named Aaron Grün. He was commandeered to help clear the rubble from the Novi Sad Airport, had a heart attack, and died in June 1941. His elder son, also a watchmaker, was mobilized in the same year and sent to forced labor in the Ukraine, where he froze to death during the fighting at Voronezh. Grün's younger son, who was still in school and remained at home, was executed together with his mother in the January 1942 raid.

The upper story of number 6 housed the law office of Sándor Vértés. Vértés was a morphine addict and his wife had tuberculosis. They were childless. Detained as a Communist, he was interrogated and beaten for two days, but was released when he was discovered to be the wrong Vértés. He went home and immediately asphyxiated himself and his wife in the kitchen.

In number 5 a family of well-to-do Zagreb booksellers had opened a secondhand bookshop for the poor hatter brother, Leon Mordechai. After the Hungarian occupation, Mordechai and his family were deported to Croatia, where they ended up in an Ustasha camp. Mordechai's wife and daughter died there of dysentery, but thanks to an early apprenticeship as a tailor, Mordechai survived. Having no reason to return home after his release, he went to Zagreb, where he waited a year for members of his large family to show up or give some sign of life. When none did, he moved back to Novi Sad and joined a hat-making cooperative, where he worked until retirement. He never remarried.

Number 8 was the home of a cross-eyed woman who made bathing suits and girdles. Her name was Elsa Baumann, and she was the widow of a surveyor who died young of neuritis contracted during the First World War. She had one son, a student at the vocational school, who was thin, wore glasses, and had thick, constantly chapped lips. Mother and son were both killed in the 1942 raid.

Number 9 was Ernst Mahrer's laundry. Mahrer had learned his trade in Vienna and was the first to introduce dry cleaning and home delivery to Novi Sad. The van he used had a sun painted on it, with eyes, cheeks, and a smiling mouth. When the van was requisitioned by the Hungarian occupation forces, Mahrer drove it to the artillery barracks himself, parked it in the courtyard, and got out to work while the papers were drawn up. When the officer in charge saw the smiling sun and the firm's name, he reprimanded Mahrer for not having painted them over. Mahrer responded that that was the least the recipients of the free van could do. Furious, the officer snatched the rifle from the shoulder of a guard

pounded Mahrer with the butt until he fell unconscious, then jumped into the van, whose motor was still running, and ran over him. Word of the incident got around, and the officer was transferred and Mahrer's widow and children ordered to leave Novi Sad forthwith. They received official permission to move to Budapest. In 1943 the son was sent to forced labor in the Bor mines, but escaped and joined the Yugoslav partisans. After the war he remained an officer in the Yugoslav army. Mahrer's widow and daughter were killed during an Arrow Cross show of strength in the Budapest ghetto.

The owner of the shoe shop at number 10 was a methodical, meticulous man named Armin Weiss. A lover of things beautiful and costly—more aesthete than merchant—he was known as far as Budapest for his expertise. Immediately after the occupation a Budapest company offered to make his shop a branch of theirs and let him stay on as an employee. Armed with papers documenting this albeit-governmental commission, he escaped forced labor, which the military authorities prescribed for all Jews; he also survived the raid several months later. But when the Arrow Cross came to power early in 1944, Weiss was deported to Germany with his wife, two daughters, and mother-in-law. None of them returned.

Number 11 was shared by a lamp merchant, Eduard Fiker, and a stove fitter, Jakob Mentele. Fiker and his family were killed in the raid, while Mentele, a bachelor, managed to survive. He then left Novi Sad for Budapest, where he acquired false documents and lived out the war. After the war he remained in Budapest and died of cancer several years later.

Number 13 housed Arthur Spitzer's grocery and delicatessen. Spitzer played amateur soccer and had non-Jewish friends. Having married a Hungarian and converted before the war, he was spared persecution. He had no children of his own, but his sister sent him her six-year-old daughter from the Independent State of Croatia, where Jews had an even harder time of it. Spitzer held on to his business until the Arrow Cross came to power, and for a while his baptismal certificate, Christian wife, and soccer friends protected him. On the day his young Jewish niece was to be deported, Spitzer and his wife went to the station with her, hoping to save her with their papers and connections. They were crammed into a train for Auschwitz. There Spitzer was separated from his wife and niece. They all died.

Here is where the former Jew Street came to an end. The section after number 12 on the even side and number 13 on the odd side was torn down after the war to make way for New Boulevard, which intersects the stump of the street with a broad, open, two-way thoroughfare sprinkled with traffic lights. But in the distance, beyond the thoroughfare, its severed extremity—the dot under the exclamation mark—is still visible: a tall, secluded synagogue with Moorish cupolas that was occasionally used for concerts by the Novi Sad Chamber Orchestra or visiting ensembles because of its famous acoustics and absence of a congregation.

Chapter Four

WHEN HOUSES WERE torn down to make way for New Boulevard, the part of Jew Street subjected to the sledgehammer and pickaxe provided unexpected opportunities for observation and thought. As the work proceeded and the buildings lost their roofs, the jagged walls jutted into the sky like scarecrows, then became shorter and shorter—melting away, losing their domestic, human face as doors and windows disappeared to expose undreamed-of twists and turns, mazes like coloring-book puzzles—until finally only the foundations remained, naked and floorless, with gaping chasms where cellars and stairs had been and the last walls forming the backdrop for a drama of doom. Standing in parallel rows, shorn of crossbeams, these remaining walls gave the most poignant illustration of the temporary nature of human dwellings: from sky blue to pink and from pink to pale green, with brighter patches of various shapes and sizes representing the beds, pictures, wardrobes, chests of drawers that had stood in front of them, protecting them for years from soot and sun, with here and there a hook, nail, or brace sticking out of their otherwise smooth surfaces. The walls with stubborn magnanimity maintained the tastes and habits of the people who were no longer there; they demonstrated that each house, each room was distinctive, unique, providing each family, each individual with its own way of eating, sleeping, reading, cursing, making love, throwing a fit, and that these different ways of doing things coexisted in amazingly close proximity to one another as well as to what the buildings themselves had kept at bay—the world, the sky, the rain to which they were now pitilessly exposed—and with which they were now becoming one.

BLAM COMES OUT into New Boulevard amid the cross-fire of traffic lights and directional signals and the smoke of exhaust pipes. His way is blocked by a light-brown car with a body like a tortoise. He wiggles slowly onto the curb and stops at the very end of the former Jew Street. Blam also stops instinctively. The back door opens with a click, and out comes a pair of long, tan legs bent at bony knees and a dress hitched up to the thighs. The legs and narrow feet dangle for a few seconds, the changing traffic light reflected on the white sandals; then they alight on the yellow brick of the former Jew Street, knees together, feet apart, spreading spongelike under the weight of the body now rising head first, out of the open car door. It is a slender body topped by an elongated head with flat features. Protuberant, glassy eyes and sun-bleached hair gathered carelessly in a bun give the face a lifeless quality, yet the woman moves in a lithe, self-confident manner. She stands straight, stretches, and makes a half turn, swishing her slightly wrinkled green dress—loose but belted at the waist—around her bony knees. At the wave of a hand that is as suntanned as her legs, a child's feet in short white socks push out of the door, then the freckled face of a boy with watery goggle eyes appears in the sunlight, and eventually a whole little figure, slightly dazed and distrustful, staggers out into the street and up to the woman. She takes the boy by the hand, which he has automatically held up to her, and looks around. Her pale eyes fall on Blam, run up and down his diffident frame, then wander to the man standing selling lottery tickets, books and records, cold drinks and ice cream. Now she motions to the car, completes her turn, and sets off down the street with the child, passing Blam. The other door of the car opens, and a broad-shouldered, thick-necked man wearing a yellowish-brown T-shirt stretched tightly across a hefty stomach twists his way out. He slams the door, thrusts his hands into the pockets of his floppy gray trousers, and walks around the car, examining it with great care. Then, bending a little the way down, he takes one hand out of his pocket and feels a back tire (which is beyond Blam's range of vision), pats the lock on the luggage compartment, and closes the back door. The woman and boy

are now at the other end of the street, she slightly ahead of him. No longer holding hands, they are licking ice cream, which threatens to run down the cones onto their fingers. They come to a halt in front of the man but do not so much as glance at him, their attention riveted on the progress of the tongues along the smooth pink mounds. They lick the now-flattened top of the ice cream, then nibble on the soggy edge of the cone. At one point the woman mutters a few words and purses her lips in the boy's direction, and he, following her glance, lowers his protuberant eyes to his stomach, where the hem of his white shirt has come out of his tight shorts; but, having found nothing out of the ordinary, he goes back to licking, nibbling, swallowing. Before long their hands are empty, and they stand there staring at their idle, sticky fingers. The woman says something to the man, and he takes his other hand out of his pocket along with a crumpled handkerchief, which he hands to the woman. She unfolds it, wipes her fingers, then bends down and wipes her son's, tucking in his shirt while she is at it. She returns the handkerchief to the man, who examines it, folds it up, and stuffs it back into his pocket. As the three lift their faces and squint at the sun, which, though not visible, sends its rays down between the gables to form a triangle on the gray dusty street, a gold-plated layer of dust. The man walks around the car, opens the front door, and slowly, rocking the car's body with his bulk, squeezes behind the wheel. Then the woman opens the back door, picks the boy up under his arms, and, bending, swings him onto the seat. She watches him make himself comfortable in the corner, then turns toward Blam (that she sees him without seeing him is reflected in the harmony of her movements), and withdraws first her body and head, then her legs, knees together, into the car. The front door, then the back door clicks shut. The engine turns over and starts humming, and the car rolls slowly back off the curb and joins the stream of traffic moving along New Boulevard.

Blam sets off in the same direction—here the sidewalk is nearly level with the boulevard's asphalt surface—past the rear walls of the houses left along the former Jew Street. On one side he is whipped by the wind of the speeding cars and on the other soothed by the peeling plaster and pink-and-yellow bricks. The memory of the family that emerged from the car to act out a scene of their life for him is still fresh in his mind; he goes over the way they moved and gestured. But the houses he is passing also claim him—their proportions and materials, their stains and scratches so long familiar. One side of the street is the past, the other the present. He can't get at the present, he knows he can't, though he feels it, feels it bodily, on his skin, like the sporadic gusts of air from the boulevard that lash him and move on, carrying off group after group of people like those he has just seen. He knows he will never sit behind the wheel of a car he is both owner and master of and give himself up to the wind, the speed, taking along Janja and the Little One, who would have no trouble adapting to and merging with a strange city, a strange country. He lacks the self-confidence or the energy for it; nor does he feel the need. His will dooms him to return to the same old roads and streets, to remain their intent yet listless and melancholy observer.

New Boulevard forms a kind of bow arching through the remains of a once-lively community. The sidewalk narrows at the corner of a garden wall forgotten during the demolition process, then branches away from the houses to a side street. Blam passes the wall, enters a narrow alley, and, proceeding to its end, comes out into Vojvoda Šupljikac Square.

The square looks as it has always looked, its houses silently embracing the small park. There is no motion but the gentle sway of the spreading hawthorns. There are no pedestrians. In front of a gate two houses down from Blam's former house, an old woman sits on a low stool, her gnarled hands crossed in her lap, her jaw moving. At first Blam thinks she is chewing, but as he gets closer, he realizes it is an illusion, her jaw is moving for no reason or else out of boredom or pain. The bowl full of peaches in front of her is untouched. She is selling them here in the empty square, having picked them in her garden, a cramped space behind her modest house, or in her daughter's garden, or in the garden of a neighbor who does not care to expose herself to the street's prying eyes. The old woman is patient.

offering the peaches at a price below what the market is charging, in the hope of making a little extra money.

Blam has to stop; his legs force him to, as if he too were old, ailing, and exhausted from long waiting and hope. Gravity pulls him down, down to his knees, to touch the ground with his head and weep, not for the old woman's fate, for her thankless, hapless undertaking, her sacrifice; no, for her faith, which keeps her here by the gate, by the bowl of fruit. Blam sees her faith as the faith of a world now gone, a world of which he too is a remnant. That faith has proved pitiful, futile, because the people who lived by it have all been murdered and forgotten, erased by time and asphalt roads, and she is its last witness, the only person able to appreciate and interpret it, but only for himself. The old woman cannot, though she has survived and preserved that faith. She may even belong to those who did the killing or who looked on in silence while the killing went on or who thought the killing justified. But at this moment she personifies for Blam the now defunct world of ardent faith, and through her he returns to it, to the faces of the departed tradesmen and brokers of the former Jewish Street, the faces of his parents and sister and other relatives, the faces of friends who sinned against him and friends whom he sinned against.

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"Come with us!" Lili said or, rather, "*Komm mit*" in her guttural, voluble German, because she never learned Serbian or cared to, which infuriated Blam. Nearly everything about her infuriated him: her garish way of dressing and behaving, the sarcastic look in her multicolored eyes, the panache with which she paraded around provincial, patriarchal Novi Sad, swishing her willowy dresses and addressing everyone in loud German as though it were perfectly natural for them to speak her language rather than for her to speak theirs. "Eccentric" was the way he thought of her, not realizing he had taken the word over from his mother, and after possessing her physically and thus emotionally and intellectually, and feeling a need to correct and torture her, he used it openly with her: "You're an eccentric. No one can live life the way you picture it." But she would just open her greenish-brown eyes wide with amazement and turn the ends of her mouth down into a pout or up into a sneer, which then spread to the dimples in her cheeks and to the smooth expanse of her forehead. While she never protested, she never seemed to grasp the point of his reproaches; she simply waited until he got the best out of his system so she could snuggle up to him with one of her "eccentric" demands: "Kiss me quick!" "What I wouldn't do for some chocolate!" "I want to go dancing!" "How about a film tonight?" And "Come with us!" He would say no, routinely, more out of spite than conviction.

The only thing he always agreed to was meeting her in their hideaway, a room he had sublet on a remote Dositej Street at her instigation, though what Lili offered him was a mixed blessing and even cause for regret. To begin with, the widow he sublet the room from made him uneasy. She was a tired, lifeless woman who may have believed what he said when she rented him the room facing the courtyard with a separate entrance—namely, that he was a student from the countryside—but was undoubtedly shocked to find the room locked day and night and to see the young man only on his afternoons and always with a thin young woman whose arms, legs, and skirt were in constant motion and who never stopped chattering in her strange, incomprehensible language, not even after her greedy lover let her into the room. He suspected the widow would have thrown him out if she had been less worried about the expense involved in running another advertisement and the energy involved in showing the place again, and as a result he was full of remorse for living a lie and getting away with it, and that remorse poisoned his feelings for Lili. He upbraided her for flaunting their mutual lie the way she flaunted her loud dresses, loud laugh, foreign language, and even more foreign origins.

Shame and spite made him reluctant to follow her on the next leg of her journey, her migration

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