

# SANDRA GUGIĆ

## ASTRONAUTEN

### II. ZENO

17

Take aim and wait. That's what I did, with my gun, for whole days, in the village square, up the tree, right up there in the treetop, upright, me, the field marshal, observing the battlefield, hand shielding my eyes, total concentration, dead serious, nothing escaped me, everyone down there bang bang bang bang bang, all crawling down there, crawling on their bellies, and me, from up above, forward, cover, forward, men, yet, fuck me, we weren't men, not yet, and once one of them climbed, crept up to me and held his pistol to my head and screamed: you're dead, you're dead, and I grabbed him, rattled him, wanted to shove him down, out, do you wanna die, yeah, who's dying now, who's first, who's dead now, who? Then his t-shirt ripped and he started crying like a wuss because of the t-shirt and because he was shit scared of falling, what a wuss, they all shit themselves, but that was the one and only time, otherwise, no one dared, that stupid tree in the middle of the stupid fucking village was my stupid tree, my redoubt, my gun was made of wood but the shots I fired were real. In my head, they were real. From up there I could see everything, really genuinely every single little thing, the cars that went past, and the buses, and I checked if they were on time, me, the centre of it all, nothing escaped me, nothing at all, I knew everything, when the neighbours went out and where they went, when fat Sladja had opened her shop, always late, the old cow, slow and lazy, that's what my dad always said, but Milena on her bicycle, well, that was something else, the fittest woman in this dump, that's what I'd have said anyway, if anyone had asked me, and I'll say it even if no one does ask me, her legs always seemed to shimmer, was that her, bare naked skin, or was she wearing tights, can't say, and the wind got under Milena's skirt, and the skirt up over her thighs, and she slapped her hand down there, just so, firm, and me, a stupid little pisser, sometimes she patted me on the head, little man, Milena said, little man, what have you got there, are you shopping for your mum, and the heat rose up over my ears, to the roots of my hair, all stained red, and I hid the list, the one with the number plates, the list was important, count and write out, every single day, on and on that list, sorted by country, tidily, fucking tidily, me up there in that tree and them down there, the others, the strangers behind the windscreens, leaving me behind, off, onward, somewhere else, each a number plate, a number on my list, and no one knew about my list, no one. Where do they all

go, I used to ask myself, where do they go, I've never been there, I've never been further than the next village, I thought, I want to go there too, and every day the same game, the idiots crawl forwards, in the dust, the gravel, the dirt, skin their knees and elbows and legs until there's blood, me, field marshal, from above I bellow: forward, take cover, forward, men, and in the meantime the list, never forget the list, note the number plates, me, in position, the fulcrum, the navel of the fucking world, and everyone orbits around me, their erratic orbits, fuckers, every day, the neighbours, and Milena, the pick of the fitties, with her shining legs, on the way to work, on the way home, doesn't matter, on the way somewhere, with the wind in her hair, just you laugh, pat my head, whatever you want, once upon a time there was Milena, I waited a hundred years for the chain to come off Milena's bike, she's not laughing now, now she's stuck there, directly beneath me, under my tree, and I watch her bend over and swear and I dream myself under her skirt, but I'm too scared to climb down from my tree, to help her, and old Sladja rolls up her shutters and waves to Milena, from the far side of the street, and she waves back, but I know, that the old bag gossips gossips gossips what Milena does, opens her legs for just anyone, I don't believe it, me, they're all jealous, and I finally start climbing down, Milena didn't wait, she's already started pushing her bike down the road, swearing, and so what, she'll be back, they'll all be back, they all have to go past me, the neighbours, the strangers behind their windscreens pebbledashed with flyshit, the buses, all of them, pass me to continue your journey, that was my place in the sun, I could see it all from there, even that shitty Jesus on the stone cross, down there by the road into the village, and I asked dad if we'd ever get away from here, and once we got away, I took the list with me, I left my wooden rifle there, I asked my dad if I could have another gun one day, but one that can shoot for real. Dad said, God is an astronaut, now he doesn't remember that, he says the phrase is just another one, just another one of my fantasies, whatever, I never got a new gun, and the fact is, that village is history. Now here I am, in the middle of the green astroturf, pizzafaced with dimpled whiteheads, flags with three corners on reedy poles, welcome to Disneyworld for Stuffed Shirts. I paid for the gun at my shoulder myself so come on then, come on then, come on then. Why is no one out here, the weather's ok for fuck's sake, is it true that ok comes from zero killed, dunno, but come on out, come out to play you idiots, time to dress up, put on your white trousers, your caps, pull on those gloves, push those little carts over the course, from dirty brown hole to dirty brown hole, comeoncomeoncomeon, this is boring, and I see a little ratty red thing scabble up a tree, run along the branch opposite, stop, and its jaw gurns hysterically, its head zips from side to side, the fluffy ears pricked to receive, and the big black eyes look right at me, and I think to myself, target practice, excellent target practice, and I breathe in and out and fire, and it's gone, the vermin, rustlerustlerustle through the leaves, it fell or did it jump, maybe I hit it after all, maybe not, and now the fun begins: Contestant Number One appears, your classic victim, pulling his cart along behind him, from right to left, an old bloke in linen trousers, polo shirt with the

collar popped, sunvisor, greying hair neatly combed back, all fresh as a daisy, a vision of light and loveliness on the neon greensward, he trundles back from left to right, he hasn't got a clue, wotsitallaboutthen, did you read the papers the morning, you fat old prick, underneath the big fat headline, did you read what the police spokesman said, that *there was no indication of a connection between the location of the incidents or the victims*, and the psychologist *suspected that the culprit suffered from a narcissistic personality disorder destructive both to themselves and those around them*, and I'm worth 8 grand to them, not bad, a good starting point, I can work with that. Then the fatarse stands there and does not move, like he heard me or something, because I'm green green green, Mr Green, green green green, Mr Clean, my favourite colour, why does that pop into my head, God I hate that song, like every single sentence in the German for beginners book, but I'm not a beginner anymore, he puts a hand on his hips, wipes his forehead, chooses a club and sets himself and now he holds still, holds still, but the old bastard doesn't swing he puts the club back in the bag, trundles along again, scratches his arse, fiddles with his cock in his trousers, he feels right at home on this fucking astroturf, straightens up his cap as if he were lining up crosshairs, and now here he goes, club, set yourself up. Hold nice and still now. I breathe in and hit him plumb in the right arsecheek, the OAP moans like a donkey and buckles in two, and I creep back between the leaves, in case he were to, in my direction, somehow, maybe, yeah, he could smell it, sniff out where it might have come from, xaxaxa does that sting you fat pig, fuck me what a sweet shot, sweet as a nut, I could laugh myself to death, but don't laugh, don't lose control. If Darko were here, he would have laughed, the idiot, he gets more and more boring, he never has any fun anymore, I don't think he knows what fun is anymore, he doesn't get that friendship's not just a coin toss, that you keep your promises, because two plus two always equals five, and we could be those two, we could have numerical superiority, but Darko disconnects from everything we promised to each other, the guy thinks I don't realise, that I'm on my own now, now that he's left me to deal with all this shit all alone, my tasks, someone has to do it, but Darko, my number two, thinks he has a plan, and one is a lonely number, the loneliest number in the world, but I'm here and I'm now and I'm fucking tearing it up and loving it, however long I have to wait before I can add another one to the list. The list is important. That's enough now.

Over there, where the lights are, where the music's coming from, that's the park, that's where Darko will be, and I know it, and no, I'm not going over to him, I'm not going to obey the unwritten law that binds a father and his boy, that one should have his fun and the other should fear for his son. And although I've not pictured to myself how this summer will unravel, having only the idee fixe that I can do it differently from my father, possibly, probably, if, and what that if might mean, the if that makes all the difference, I'm sure I'll find out in good time, I'm certain of that right now, just as I was certain for the longest time, despite everything, that I was doing the right thing.

It's 21:21, I start the engine, I hear a ding that repeats itself tirelessly until I do up my seatbelt behind my back. All of these amazing warning systems, it doesn't take a fox to outwit them. I run the tip of my tongue over the rizla, roll up the cigarette and light it, I don't have a second's grace before it forces me to cough. How long have I had this cough? A scrap of tobacco is stuck to my lower lip, I spit out of the window and with the push of a button I make it motor, buzzing, up. In front of the snack bar opposite the drum of an ice cream maker rotates, churning red and green liquid, frozen yoghurt, it looks nothing like yoghurt. Molecules of deep-fried fat taint the air. A man is leaning against the door, smoking, a dirty apron draped loosely around his hips, he gives me a nod. I can smell coffee now. I could go in, fetch myself one of the polystyrene cups, black, no sugar.

The face in the rear-view mirror, is still me, a third-hand photocopy, bags under the eyes, eyes blurred. Chances are the spot on the back of my head where the hair's thinning, where the pink skin peeps out, has increased its radius. Decay's creeping conquest. You can hardly see it, unless you look closely, everything's fine. I'm wide awake, jittery though, I doubt I got more than the usual three or four hours of sleep, hard to tell sometimes if you're awake or asleep. Have I spoken to someone today, or are my thoughts, the same as every day, interrupted only by orders and information and dead conversations hissing from the shortwave radio, interlopers between the eternally recurring traffic reports. Warnings of traffic jams and diversions caused by demonstrations and marches and parades, megastore opening up sales, megastore closing down sales, slop from the car radio. Crowds bundle together and push and scrape slowly through the city like a thrombosis, being overtaken by harried hurried individuals. The whole world seems to be out there, if everyone who is sitting at home right now enjoying their 35-minute sitcom Mogadon, where problem and tension slip effortlessly into solution and release, punctuated by the commercials and a trip to the kitchen, maybe a chocolate bar, were to perk up and inject

themselves into the mass. The female lead is blonde and gives me the eye, it's easy, easier than you think. She crosses her legs, the way her tights rustle is familiar, like the hiss between stations.

"You need to get out of your head," who said that to me, just recently, was it Niko? I remember that we had arranged something, I think it was today. The FM voice repeats itself: be prepared for diversions and delays.

"I won't be able to make it today," my passenger says in his phone, he's tugging at the knot of his tie. It's hot outside, in here the aircon rattles and hums, it's defective, expect it to break down. I wait for him to give the word. The meter, which is activated by the seat, has been running since he got in. He doesn't notice, tosses the address at me without looking, as if he were tossing a coin into a hat. "How on earth do you put up with this music?" I answer his question by changing the station with my right hand, indicate, and merge with the treacly evening traffic. Now it's on me, I can take a shortcut or the scenic route, slow down at the traffic lights, I can speak or I can shut up. The passenger coughs when I do, as if he were imitating me, as if we had switched roles. I watch him in the rear-view mirror, there's something wrong with his eye, a squint or nervous tic, and I imagine him blinking twice to make the lights turn green.

A kid's game, a superstitious habit, long forgotten but remembered and resurrected the evening I took the girl home. She showed me how to do it: blink twice, and the lights turn green, cross your fingers and the lights turn red. There it was again, a bearable lightness, a feeling of invincibility that I had long since forgotten, like the feeling when you've just had a great fuck. When someone notices that you are a human being, not a number, or *a collection of molecules that randomly reassemble, somewhere, at the wrong place at the wrong time*. A moment of inattention when you say yes, go out of your way, make an exception, instead of keeping straight, like you promised yourself you would, be on time for the group, every Wednesday 7.15pm. It finds you, that moment, that you can never take back.

I spot the girl in the foyer lounging next to the coffee machine and the first detail that penetrates my consciousness is that the black of her left pupil stains the iris. An oval on its side, a tiny flaw in the symmetry of her features. An asymmetry that sucks me in like a fractal. She asks me if I have a cigarette.

"You can't smoke in here."

"Seriously?"

Acceleration, the quivering dial of the speedometer, I can remember that, and the giggling and the blinking and the crossed fingers. Red, green, red. I glance up at the rear-view mirror because I hear something clicking. My fare is trying to light a cigarette, shakes a disposable lighter.

“You’re not allowed to smoke in here.”

“But it smells of smoke.”

“You think?”

I’ll take it slower, cross my fingers at every set of traffic lights. Red, red, red. Get the bags out of the boot, slowly count out the change, to be interrupted by “keep it.” Say goodnight, and the night stumbles into day, a day like this, and the girl is pale and thin, and she slips off her shoes, tugs down her socks, braces her naked feet against the dashboard. A vein bulges through her skin by her right Achilles tendon, snakes blue through the flesh of her ankle. Only the little toe on her left foot is coated with red nail polish. That can be our little secret, nothing to see here, life goes on, if I keep following the rules and routine, the daily grind, doesn’t it. Or

am I just adding another tiny instance of helplessness, another suspension of connection, back in my flat, while above me the walls cut a window in the grey-blue sky. I keep up my routine of quotidian despair, for example counting the one hundred and thirty six pages backwards and forwards, press the print key, without thinking, no thought needed. My habits, the habits I care for as meticulously as my suits, to be exact it’s a trinity, three of the exact same suit, with three of the exact same shirt to match. My principles – all establish themselves before decaying into boredom.

The sheet of paper is still warm from the printer. By now I can fold Kitsune, the sitting fox, without even looking. Kitsune is shaped like an M, M like the girl who taught me how to make this fox. The printed lines run up and down and across and along Kitsune, the sitting fox, and I never hear him land in the dead space of the courtyard. I unfold the next sheet of paper, smooth it out, page one of one hundred and thirty six, now the story can begin.