

THE ACCIDENT

A Novel

Ismail Kadare



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CANADA

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**THE
ACCIDENT**

A NOVEL

**ISMAIL
KADARE**

TRANSLATED FROM THE
ALBANIAN BY JOHN HODGSON

**LONG
STREET
BOOKS**
AN IMPRINT OF
FALCONER

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Bond Street Books edition published 2011

First published in Albanian in 2008 as *Aksidenti* by Onufri Publishing, Tirana, Albania.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Kadare, Ismail

The accident / Ismail Kadare; translated from the Albanian by John Hodgson.

Translation of: *Aksidenti*.

eISBN: 978-0-385-67086-9

I. Hodgson, John, 1951- II. Title.

PG9621.K3A6513 2011 891'.9913 C2010-905492-X

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Published in Canada by Bond Street Books,
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v3.1

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Part One

It seemed the most ordinary kind of incident. A taxi had veered off the airport autobahn at kilometre marker 17. Its two passengers were killed outright, and the driver, seriously injured, was taken to hospital unconscious.

The police recorded the usual facts in such cases: the names of the victims (a man and a young woman, both Albanian citizens), the registration number of the cab, the name of the Austrian driver and the circumstances, or rather their total ignorance of the circumstances, which the accident had occurred. There were no signs that the taxi had braked or been hit from any direction. The moving car had slid to the side of the road and somersaulted into a gully, as if the driver had suddenly lost his sight.

A Dutch couple whose car was behind the taxi reported that for no obvious reason the car had suddenly left the carriageway and struck the crash barrier. The terrified pair, if they were not mistaken, had seen the taxi's back doors open as it spun through the air, throwing out the two passengers, a man and a woman.

Another witness, the driver of a Euromobil truck, said more or less the same thing.

A second report, compiled one week later in the hospital after the driver had regained consciousness, only confused the story further. The driver admitted that nothing unusual had happened just before the accident, except that perhaps ... in the rear-view mirror ... maybe something had distracted him ... At this point the policeman lost his patience.

What had he seen in the mirror? The driver could give no answer to the policeman's persistent questioning. The doctor warned him not to tire his patient, but he pressed his point. What was it that he had seen in the mirror above the steering wheel? In other words, what strange thing had happened on the back seat of his cab? Had there been a fight between the two passengers? Or was it the opposite, maybe, a particularly passionate embrace?

The injured driver shook his head. No.

"Then what?" The policeman almost shrieked. "What made you lose your head? What the hell did you see?"

The doctor was about to step in again when the patient resumed his feeble drawl. His report seemed interminable, and when he finished, the policeman and the doctor stared at each other. The injured driver said that the two passengers on the back seat had done nothing ... nothing but ... only ... they had tried ... to kiss.

The driver's evidence was not believed. He was considered to have suffered psychological trauma, and the file on the accident at kilometre marker 17 was closed. The reason for this was simple: whatever the driver's explanation for what he saw or thought he saw in the rear-view mirror, it did not change the crux of the matter, that the taxi had overturned as a consequence of something that had happened in his brain, an absence of mind, hallucination or blackout, which it was difficult to believe had had anything to do with his passengers.

As usual, other information surfaced when their names were disclosed. The man, an analyst working for the Council of Europe on western Balkan affairs; the beautiful young woman, a graduate intern at the Archaeological Institute of Vienna. Clearly lovers. The cab had been ordered from the reception of the Miramax Hotel, where the two had stayed for the whole weekend. A technical inspection of the vehicle reported no signs of tampering.

The policeman, in a last effort to flush out any contradictions in the taxi driver's story, asked a trick question. "What happened to the passengers when the car hit the ground?" The driver's reply, that he alone had hit the ground in the car and that the couple were already separated from him in mid-air, showed he was not lying about what he had seen, or thought he had seen.

Although initially routine, the case, because of the taxi driver's strange testimony, was filed away as an "unclassifiable accident".

This was why, several months later, a copy of the file reached the European Road Safety Institute and was passed to the fourth section, which dealt with unusual accidents.

Although the description "unusual" implied that only a handful of such accidents occurred compared to the common sort caused by bad weather, speeding, exhaustion, drink, drugs and so forth, there was still an astonishing variety of "unclassifiable accidents". The files recorded the most extraordinary incidents, from murderous assaults or vandalised brakes to sudden apparitions that blinded the driver.

Some of them, the most mysterious of all, involved the inside rear-view mirror. They formed a sub-section of their own. Seen in a mirror, only something especially hair-raising could cause an accident. In the case of taxis, the most frequent examples involved passengers threatening the driver with a weapon. There were also many cases of sudden illness: stroke, explosive vomiting of blood, insane fits accompanied by screaming. Sudden fights between passengers, and even knife attacks, were hardly exceptional, but they sometimes distracted inexperienced drivers. Less common were incidents in which one passenger, usually a woman who had climbed into the taxi a few minutes earlier clinging devotedly to her lover, suddenly screamed that she was being abducted and attempted to grab the door handle to leap out. There were even some instances, although they could be counted on the fingers of one hand, in which the driver recognised a passenger as his first love or a wife who had left him.

Explanations were found for most of these initially mysterious cases, but this did not at all mean that everything reflected in rear-view mirrors could be accounted for.

Besides hallucinations, there were cases involving something similar: drivers who were hypnotised by their passenger's eyes, suddenly intoxicated by an enticing glance from a beautiful woman on the back seat or, again the opposite, shaken by a stare from a void that devoured them like a black hole.

What the taxi driver testified to following the accident at kilometre marker 17 on the airport road, although too ordinary to be called a mirage or hallucination, defied all logical explanation. His two passengers' attempt to kiss, which the driver said had caused his confusion and, as a result, both their deaths, was a mystery that deepened the more one struggled to understand it.

The analysts dealing with the accident shook their heads, frowned, smiled cynically and then grew irritated as they went back to the beginning again.

"What does it mean? 'They were trying to kiss.' " It was an unnatural way of putting it, in fact illogical. You could imagine that one of them wanted to kiss the other, while the other refused, or that one of them was nervous, or both were nervous, or that both were scared of a third person, and so on. But it made no sense that two people in a taxi, with only the driver present, were "trying to kiss". *Sie versuchten gerade, sich zu küssen*, as the police report stated. Obvious questions arose. They had just left a hotel where they had spent the night, so why were they "trying to kiss"? In other words, if they wanted to kiss, why didn't they just do it instead of prevaricating? What was stopping them?

The more you tried to unravel it, the more inextricable it became. Supposing there had been some obstacle between the two passengers which prevented them from coming close together, why had this so distracted the driver? Hadn't he carried plenty of passengers who had kissed or even made love, right there on the back seat? And how had he noticed such a subtlety or nuance as this attempt to kiss, or rather a desire to kiss, accompanied by an unseen impediment that prevented it?

The frustrated analysts recalled the saying that a fool may throw a stone into a well which a hundred wise men cannot pull out, and noted in the margin that unless it was the old excuse of a driver recognising a passenger as his former wife or lover, which young taxi drivers often produced, having heard it passed down by older colleagues, this must be a genuine psychotic case and not worth the trouble of dealing with.

Meanwhile, any connection between the driver and the woman in his cab, an Albanian citizen, was ruled out, and a medical report described his psychological condition as entirely normal.

Three months later, the archivist could not hide his astonishment when the governments of two Balkan countries, one after another, asked to inspect the file on the accident at kilometre marker 17. How could the states of this quarrelsome peninsula, after committing every possible abomination known to this world – murdering, bombing, setting entire populations at each other's throats and then deporting them – find the time, now that the madness was over, instead of making reparations, to enter into such minor matters as unusual car accidents?

There was no way of knowing why the state of Serbia and Montenegro should take an interest in the accident, but it soon became clear that this country had kept the two victims under surveillance for a long time.

The discovery of this connection was enough to spark the Albanian secret service into action too. Suspicions of a political murder, the kind of allegation fashionable to ridicule since the fall of communism, as a typical symptom of communist paranoia, suddenly revived in grim earnest.

As usual, the Albanian intelligence officers took a long time to reach a position which the others had already abandoned. However, through contacts with their compatriots in the Albanian communities abroad, they managed to assemble a good deal of material relating to the victims. There were parts of letters, photographs, airline tickets, hotel addresses and bills which, although only the first fruits of their harvest, provided a mass of information about the couple. The photographs, taken mainly in hotels, at pavement cafés, and a few in a bath, left the nature of their relationship in no doubt. The hotel bills were clear evidence that they had met in different European cities, where this woman's friend had happened to go for his work: Strasbourg, Vienna, Rome, Luxembourg.

The photographs confirmed the locations, and the cities were also mentioned in letters, mainly written by the young woman, who liked deciding in which of them she had felt happiest.

The intelligence officers placed their main hope of solving the riddle in these letters, but after reading them they were at first disappointed, then disoriented and finally totally bewildered.

The blatant contradictions led them to interrupt their investigations to interview hotel receptionists, chambermaids, waiters in late-night bars, a girlfriend of the woman, called Shpresa, an Albanian living in Switzerland who the letters stated "knew the truth" and, finally, the taxi driver.

Their testimonies more or less coincided: usually when they met, the couple seemed cheerful, but on occasion the woman had appeared despondent, and once had been seen silently weeping while he had gone out to make a phone call. He too had sometimes looked sad, and then she would try to comfort him, stroking and kissing his hand.

The interviewers put the question: was something on their minds ... a decision they had to take but couldn't, some regret, uncertainty, threat? The waiters could not answer this. To their eyes it all seemed normal. Most couples in late-night bars passed from ebullience to silence, and sometimes dejection, and then suddenly brightened up again.

The woman became very beautiful at these times. Her eyes, which until then had idly followed her cigarette smoke, lit up with emotion. Her cheeks too. She acquired an alarming, devastating charm.

Devastating? What could that mean?

“I don’t know how to explain it. I was trying to say the kind of beauty that knocks you flat, as people say. The man also seemed to revive, and would order another whisky. Then they would talk again in their own language until after midnight, and stand up to go upstairs to their room.

“From the way she rose to her feet with a sidelong glance and walked in front with her head slightly bowed, an old-fashioned picture of a beautiful, transgressing woman, you could tell that they were going to make love. These things provide late-night barmen with entertainment, especially at the end of their long hotel shifts.”

None of the other information, gathered in various places, helped the intelligence officers to pin down the facts at all. In the wake of the waiters' evidence, the dead couple's letters seemed even less coherent. Sometimes they read like the ordinary correspondence of lovers, even when she complained of his behaviour. Yet sometimes their tone was entirely different and the terse notes between them suggested that this was a purely routine relationship between a call girl and her client.

The officers could hardly believe their eyes when they read phrases of hers such as "Whatever happens, I will love you all my life," followed by notes from him on later dates giving his hotel address and adding, "Everything OK on the same terms as last time?"

This could be interpreted in two ways. He could be referring to the length of their stay, one, two or more nights – but it rather hinted at remuneration. Moreover, now and then the expression "call girl" appeared, and he seemed eager to use it, whether accurately or not.

In her earlier letters she would quote phrases of his that implied he had once written quite normally – about how he had missed her, was impatient to see her, and so forth. The change apparently took place during the final phase of their long association.

Careful calculation revealed that their relationship had lasted some twelve years, and that their estrangement had occurred only in the last fifty-two weeks. The expression "call girl" like some boundary marker, appeared forty weeks before their deaths.

"I admit that you have given me boundless happiness," she had written in one of her letters, "but just as often your cruel irritability has made my life a misery."

She had continually complained of this, and in a letter dated 2000 told him that the only time she had felt totally happy with him had been during the year of the Kosovo War, when he seemed to discharge his nervous tension in an entirely different direction.

"After Serbia was defeated you didn't seem to know what to do with yourself and you turned on me again."

This final phrase led the Albanian intelligence officers to believe that they had solved one of the mysteries: the reason for Besfort Y.'s surveillance by the Serbian and Montenegrin secret service. With his many contacts in Strasbourg and Brussels, and inside most of the international human rights organisations, Besfort Y. was naturally the kind of person to be a thorn in the side of Yugoslavia, and might in a way be deemed responsible for its bombing.

It was easy to deduce why this surveillance began at such a late stage, after the war was over. Just at this time, a kind of remorse at the punishment and dismemberment of Yugoslavia led to attempts to revise the facts. Thousands of people were either elated or thrown into despair at the prospect of the bombing being called a mistake.

As the tide of this campaign swelled, it became normal to sling mud at people like Besfort Y. and all those who had worked for the demise of Yugoslavia. His girlfriend's letter could be interpreted to show that this man, driven by a kind of perverse fury, would not rest in peace until this neighbouring state was crushed, and that his girlfriend, perhaps his inspiration, was just an ordinary hooker.

Reluctant though they were to admit it, the Albanian intelligence officers suspected that there was an element of truth in what the Serbs said, especially about Besfort Y.'s girlfriend. In an attempt to prove the opposite, the interviewers did their rounds again, visiting the

travel agencies, bars, hotel swimming pools and the small apartment where some of the dead woman's cardboard boxes were still in the cellar.

This did nothing to dispel the confusion in their minds. They began to genuinely suspect that there had been not one but two women whose identities they had mixed up.

Or so they would have liked to believe, but to their despair they became more and more convinced that this young woman of such disturbing loveliness, whom they now knew so well from her letters, the testimonies of others and especially from private photographs, merely concealed within herself a second nature.

The appearance on the scene of the pianist Liza Blumberg, Rovena's friend, revived the suspicion of murder.

Any involvement of the Serbian secret service had been ruled out at an early stage. Conceivably, Besfort Y. had been eliminated as someone damaging to Yugoslavia, and with him his girlfriend, who happened to be present at the fatal moment. But it was against all logic for this to happen at such a late date. Besfort Y.'s disappearance would have been useful at the proper time but it served no one's purpose now that the war was over.

The rewriting of events required Besfort Y. not to be killed but discredited. His death would not do this, and would even make it more difficult. It is a known fact that it is easier to defame the living than the dead. Besfort Y. could be no exception, still less his girlfriend.

What was new and surprising in the evidence of Lulu Blumb, as the pianist was known to her circle of friends, was that she linked Rovena's death not to the Serbian secret service but to her partner. She said that recently there had been a tendency to disguise murders as mishaps, and she firmly believed that Besfort Y. had been determined to get rid of his girlfriend by means of an accident, even if he himself shared her fate.

At this point every interviewer interrupted the pianist and, with unconcealed sarcasm, said that it was hard to accuse one of these two of murdering the other when they had somersaulted into the gully together, unless one imagined that Besfort Y., as they fell, had seized this moment of confusion to commit the crime!

"Wait, don't laugh too soon," said Lulu Blumb. "I'm not so crazy as to think that." Then she put forward her own version.

She was convinced that Besfort Y. had killed his girlfriend. Rovena herself had told her this a few months previously, when they were in Albania and B.Y. had taken her to a shadowy motel, she had been frightened for her life. Lulu preferred not to go into the reasons why. The intelligence officers were in a better position to discover these. She was a pianist and knew nothing about the dark underside of politics. Besfort Y. had been a complex person. Rovena had once told Lulu about some mysterious phone calls that had come in the small hours. They were about some quarrel with Israel, or over Israel, she couldn't quite remember. As she said, she had no wish to be involved in arguments of this kind. Even if she had been opposed to the bombing of Yugoslavia, this was not out of firm political conviction but simply a general aversion to war. Meanwhile, the discovery of the nature of the relationship between Rovena and the pianist damaged the latter's credibility. It was not hard to see, and indeed Lulu herself did not hide it, that the two had been involved in a lengthy affair, which naturally made the pianist jealous of Besfort Y.

This was the reason why, even after Blumberg's intervention, the investigators paid little heed to her surmises, and especially not to the later episode, the most bewildering of all, which the pianist first mentioned a large doll torn apart by dogs and then told them not to take any notice of what she said, because she was tired. The interviewers of course came back to the doll, but the pianist said that she had read about it in reports of the deaths, that she was really very tired, and that the only thing she could tell them was that she was sure it had not been Rovena St. but a totally different woman in the cab.

Most reports underlined this last phrase, but the interviewers would have refused to

believe her and might not have come back to this point, or even to the suspicion of murder general, if they had not stumbled upon other evidence – this time from “his” side.

This testimony, apparently the only one of its kind, came from an old college friend of Besfort Y., with whom he had had a conversation on the first floor of the Davidoff Bar in Tirana, one autumn day, a few months before his death.

According to the witness, Besfort had been in a sombre mood. Asked what the matter was, he at first answered vaguely. He had problems. Later he came back of his own accord to his incomplete reply. He had got badly mixed up ... with a young woman.

Knowing the sort of man he was, the witness had not asked any more questions. Besfort, unusually for him, volunteered a little more. He thought he had made a mistake. The witness had the impression that Besfort considered any relationship with this woman to be a mistake. To his surprise, he used the word “fear”, though whether he was scared of the relationship or of the woman herself, the witness could not tell.

After a long silence, he repeated that he had gone wrong somewhere. He offered no further explanation, but said that he would try to get out of this mess. He could do it. He became less and less coherent. He believed that when the time came – that is, at the right moment – he would know what to do.

The tone of his conversation brooked no interruption. Facial expression? Manner? Colour? “Oh no, not like a murderer at all. I would just say cold. Pitiless.”

The interviewers went back to the suspicions of Liza Blumb, and even to her almost delirious words about a doll found in the bushes, torn by dogs, but the pianist, erratic as ever or stricken by remorse at having talked so much, refused to cooperate further.

This did not stop the inquiry proceeding. In fact, now that the pianist was out of the picture, the intelligence officers unexpectedly became all the more keen. Not often had a suspicion of murder led them to examine such minute details to the point that they would forget what they were looking for.

The analysts sifted through all the information, including the new material gathered during the latest research, with a dedication beyond the call of duty.

They returned to the first two statements given by the Dutch couple and the driver of the Euromobil truck. Initially they seemed to agree (the taxi’s open doors, the bodies thrown out), but a careful examination showed this not to be the case. According to the couple, the bodies of the victims were still together as they fell through the air, their arms round each other’s necks, as if trying to hold tight to one another. But the truck driver insisted that the bodies were apart as they fell.

But the evidence of Rovena’s friend Shpresa in Switzerland, who recalled cryptic remarks on the phone, also pointed towards murder.

Yet this explanation was hardly tenable. Other stubborn facts, mysterious scattered phrases and cryptic remarks on the phone, according to the evidence of Rovena’s friend in Switzerland, roused suspicions of another kind.

In a letter written less than a year previously, Rovena had said, “You seem so calm now. I preferred your old irritability, that short temper which brought me such unhappiness, to this terrifying reticence.”

In another note, apparently written quite some time afterwards, she recalled a phone call of the previous evening: “What you said to me last night may have been superficially kind

but was essentially, I don't know how to put it, frightening, destructive, as cold as outer space."

At about the same time she admitted to Shpresa that she was extremely unhappy.

"Because of 'him'?" asked her friend.

"Yes," she said, "but I can't tell you on the phone. It's very hard to explain. Perhaps impossible. I'll try when we meet."

But they never met again, and two months later the accident happened.

Asked by the intelligence officers whether she nevertheless had any particular suspicion Shpresa replied only after a long silence. Of course she had partly worked it out, if only vaguely. "I've got problems with Besfort," Rovena had said on several other occasions, just generally, as anybody might open a conversation of this kind. When asked what sort of problems, she had replied that they were not easy to explain, and added after a silence: "But trying to persuade me we don't need each other any more."

"What sort of talk is that?" Shpresa had asked. When Rovena said nothing, her friend persisted. "And so? Does he want you to split up?"

"No," the other woman had said.

"Then I don't understand. What does he want?"

"Something else," she had replied, taking a different tack.

"I don't understand you," her friend said. "I haven't understood you for a long time. The friend of yours has always been beyond me, but now you are too."

"Perhaps this is something to talk about when we meet again," Rovena responded, "like we did a few weeks ago."

The officers were able to connect the victim's diary notes and various phrases jotted down for future letters to this enigmatic conversation between the two women.

"Hope of resurrection?" she noted on a piece of paper with no date. "You are pretending to give me hope that you will again be the person you once were. You write that everything that rises again must first die, as if this were some sort of reassurance. But it just leads me deeper into darkness."

On the telephone pad, three months before the accident, she had written alongside the address of a hotel: "Our first meeting ... after the void. Strange! He seems to have infected me with his own madness."

The intelligence officers could not make anything of this.

One week before the accident, there was a similar note in her pocket diary: "Friday, Miramax Hotel, our third *post-mortem* meeting."

As if to cling to something tangible and concrete, the officers kept reverting to the late evening in the late-night bar of the Miramax Hotel, reconstructing it hour by hour on the evidence given by the waiters. Their huddled conversation in the dim corner. Her loosened hair. They left after midnight, but he returned after an hour, with that expression of exhausted quiescence worn by men who come back down to the bar after making love, giving their partners time to rest alone.

Then, at quite a different tempo, there came the glass of Irish whisky, morning, the order for the taxi and the driver's cruelly stilted phrase: *Sie versuchten gerade, sich zu küssen.*

Everywhere in the world events flow noisily on the surface, while their deep currents pulse silently, but nowhere is this contrast so striking as in the Balkans.

Gales sweep the mountains, lashing the tall firs and mighty oaks, and the whole peninsula appears demented.

Yet what happens deep below in the world of rumours and undercover investigations may also be taken for madness, often of an even more serious kind.

Or that is what an external observer might have thought of the two secret services as they zealously followed the trail of this case, which was becoming more like a ghost story.

It was the Serbian agents who showed the first signs of flagging. Their Albanian counterparts, although reluctant to admit it, felt that they had become entangled in this case simply in order not to fall behind their rivals, and could hardly wait to give it up.

It was some time later, when least expected, that a researcher's careful hand delved once again into the deep recesses of the archives. The delicacy of this hand with its long, thin, elegant fingers drew attention to the many marks left on the arm by anxious nurses struggling to find a vein to take blood. The researcher unearthed not only the files of the two victims but also hundreds of other statements by witnesses, known and unknown. And so, month by month and year by year, an astonishingly variegated mosaic took shape. Where the secret services of two states had failed, this single researcher almost succeeded in solving the riddle of kilometre marker 17. He did this without funds or resources or powers of constraint, indeed without any motivation of duty or profit, but solely under the pressure of a personal concern never revealed to anybody.

Just as a galaxy may, from a distance, appear immobile, but to a close observer reveals the terrible convulsions and explosions of light roaring in its depths, so the file of this researcher whose name was never divulged, displayed, apparently at random, but in fact in an esoteric order, the myriad tiny fragments making up the mosaic. Of course, all the old data was there, mostly enriched with new details. There were the names of hotels, even the numbers of the rooms in which the couple had slept, the evidence of cleaners and barmen. There were bills of all kinds, charges for phone calls, fitness centres, driving lessons, visits to the doctor and prescription receipts. This was not all. There were Besfort Y.'s two dreams, told directly in Rovena, one with a transparent meaning and the other totally impenetrable. Again there were fragments of letters, diaries, subsequent reconstructions of phone conversations, mostly accompanied by suppositions and deductions that at first seemed contradictory but could later be reconciled, only to diverge and merge again in ever more startling ways.

The woman had grouped together days of happiness with a precision that recalled the weather reports on the evening news, comparing one hotel to another, the intensity of pleasure and the degree of excitement. All these notes were matched to the testimonies of the female staff, who remembered the kind of perfume the young woman wore, the lingerie carelessly discarded at the foot of the bed and the stains on the sheets showing that the couple never took precautions. Equally precise were her records of hours of despondence after angry phone conversations, her complaints and her despair. Between these two states there was a third, perhaps harder to describe, a grey zone, as if shrouded in mist.

She used this very word "zone" in one of the rare letters she had sent to Shpresa

Switzerland.

“Our meetings are now in a new zone. It’s no exaggeration to say a different planet. Rules by different laws. It has a chilly quality, frightening of course, but still I must admit that has its strange and attractive side ... I know that this will surprise you, but I hope to explain when we meet.”

“But as you know we never saw each other again,” said her correspondent.

Another letter, still less coherent, was written two weeks before the accident.

“I feel numb again. He still exerts a hypnotic power over me. The things that at first seemed the most ridiculous to me are now the ones I accept most easily. Last night he said that all this confusion and misunderstanding between us recently was caused by the soul. Now that we have put that aside, we might say we have been saved. It is easier to understand each other through the body. I’m sure you’ll think I’m crazy. I thought so at first. But not later. Anyway, we’ll meet soon and you will see then that I’m right.”

The researcher worked patiently through this maze for hours on end. It was the soul that caused misunderstanding. The meeting before their death, called *post-mortem*. Other abstruse phrases. Each one of them in turn seemed the key to unlocking the truth, or sometimes the key that shut it away for ever.

It was this very meeting, just before their deaths, that was called *post*. Apart from the extraordinary paradox, the final letter or note written by Besfort Y. and found in the young woman’s handbag on the day of the accident, which began disconcertingly with the words “OK on the same terms as last time?” and was the very message that had prompted the secret services to step up their investigations into him, related to this same last meeting at the Miramax Hotel.

There was a cryptic phone conversation with her friend in Switzerland, which Shpresa had not wanted to talk about at all. She was persuaded to do so after reading what the report called the “cynical note”, which gave this phone call an intelligible meaning.

“You say I shouldn’t worry. You tell me these things are unimportant compared to the happiness he brings me. But if I tell you he treats me almost like a prostitute?”

“He dares to treat you like a prostitute? Do you understand what this means? What am I supposed to make of it?”

“Of course I know what this means. I’ll say it again. He uses the phrase ‘call girl’, not prostitute, but that’s how he treats me, like a whore.”

“And you put up with this?”

“... Yes ...”

“This is beyond me, and to tell the truth you’re driving me crazy more than he is.”

“You’re right. But you don’t understand the whole truth. Perhaps it’s my fault for trying to explain on the phone. I hope, when we meet ...”

“Listen, Rovena. It’s not hard to understand that if he treats you like a whore, he has his reasons. He wants to humiliate you in every way he can.”

“Of course he does, but still ...”

“No buts. Humiliation is humiliation.”

“I was trying to say, perhaps it’s more complicated than that. Do you remember that film we talked about, *La Dame aux Camélias*? Where that character genuinely loves the woman but, in a flash of anger, to insult her, he leaves a wad of banknotes under her pillow?”

“Has he gone that far?”

“No ... but wait ... this is the sort of thing that happens in love.”

“Rovena, you’re talking nonsense. People in love have quarrels and lose their temper. But as far as I can gather, he does this on purpose, deliberately.”

“It’s true. That’s how he behaves. Why?”

“Why? That’s exactly what I can’t make out. Perhaps he resents you in some way. Perhaps he wants to get his own back. Perhaps ... I don’t know what to say.”

“No, he’s not that sort of person. Unlike me. Sometimes I can barely control myself. But he’s not like that.”

“He wants to degrade you. He wants to crush you, destroy you morally. Not to say physically ... Don’t you see?”

“But why? Why should he need to do that?”

“He alone knows. You told me you’re frightened of him. Perhaps he’s frightened of you.”

“Frightened of what?”

“I don’t know. You’re both frightened of each other. Not just frightened but scared witless ... never mind. Rovena, darling, think hard about this business. I don’t want you to worry, but look after yourself! I have an uncanny feeling ...”

It was hard to tell which results of the inquiry the secret services had found useful in building up their portrait of Besfort Y. Sometimes it may have been the names of the hotels, especially when these hotels, or the cities where they were located, were also mentioned in the files of “Albanian terrorists”, as the Yugoslavs called the insurgent leaders when they travelled to these places. However, they had also probably relied on the more ingenious interpretations of Besfort’s behaviour as “psychotic”, based mainly on the evidence of Rovena St.’s conversations with her friends. To one friend, Rovena had recounted Besfort’s dreams of receiving summons to The Hague. Then there were Shpresa’s parting words on the phone: “look after yourself! I have an uncanny feeling ...”

Meanwhile, Besfort Y.’s final message, now known as the “cynical note”, was translated into most of the working languages of the Council of Europe, sometimes with cautious annotations: “Is this translation accurate? Do the words ‘conditions’ and ‘OK’ have the same connotations in the Albanian original?” These were quoted alongside the Serbian commentaries which were eager to show that the analyst Besfort Y. was a dangerous schizophrenic, or worse.

On the list of twenty-nine personalities whose comments and reporting, according to the Serbian intelligence services, had succeeded in bamboozling the governments of the West, Besfort Y. was a lesser light when set against stars of the first magnitude such as Bill Clinton, Wesley Clark, Madeleine Albright and the rest. However, when it came to obscure impulses, often of a personal origin, which had turned these leading figures against poor Yugoslavia, then Besfort Y. was the only one whose commitment could be compared to that of the American president. The latter’s affair with Monica Lewinsky was like a harmless idyll when set against the poisonous fury of this Albanian analyst, to whom destroying a state seemed to offer the same satisfaction as possessing, or rather subjugating, a woman. The reported phrase “after Serbia was defeated, you turned on me again” left no doubt that this analyst’s political passions had affected his love life.

The unidentified researcher explained more lucidly than any of his predecessors why the secret services became even more keen after the drama was over. It was true that the curtain had fallen and the Hague Tribunal now had the former Serbian leader on trial, but there was no stemming the flood of Europe’s remorse. The entire conflict was being reassessed, and shouts of “Send them to The Hague!” grew ever more strident, and this time not for the vanquished, but for the victors. As one historian wrote, Serbia hoped to recover her lost Kosovo not by force of arms but with the help of pathos and pity for her ruin.

As if compensating for the obscure and enigmatic parts, this section of the inquiry was of exemplary clarity, with endless names, dates, newspaper headlines, quotations from the news, statements and rebuttals. Personalities with totally contrary opinions jostled together: Alain Ducelier, William Walker, Tony Blair, Günter Grass, Noam Chomsky, André Glucksmann, Harold Pinter, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Paul Garde, Peter Handke, Pascal Bruckner, Mother Teresa, Ibrahim Dominik Rugova, Seamus Heaney, Pope John Paul II, Patrick Besson, Gabriel Keller, Ismail Kadare, Claude Durand, Bernard Kouchner, Régis Debray, Jacques Chirac Pontifex (defender of the bridges of Belgrade), Bogdan Bogdanovi? Ponticras (architect and ideologist of the destruction of these same bridges), the Dalai Lama, Cardinal

Ratzinger, and so on.

According to the unnamed researcher, both the Serbs' gratitude to their defenders and the hatred for their destroyers, which Balkan custom suggested would persist for centuries, had unexpectedly begun to fade. The new geopolitics of the peninsula, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe and the queue at the gates of Europe as these stubborn states, whether allies or enemies yesterday, waited together to join the family of their dreams, had achieved the impossible. Their vows of revenge, their rage and whining of the past were now recalled with more curiosity than pain.

Certain rumours at the time were slower to fade, such as the persistent claim that Mother Teresa had been the moving spirit behind the bombing of Yugoslavia, with her midnight phone call to the American president, "My son, do something for my Albanians, punish Serbia," while a song about the punitive president went round the bars:

Take Monica away
And the Serbs will pay.
If you miss getting laid
Give it to Belgrade ...

Now the researcher himself, always detached and impartial, suddenly seemed to be in a hurry to set aside this epic conclusion of events, and to follow an entirely different track.

The inquiry now resembled a plane which, after flying across a clear sky, re-enters a patch of turbulence. Dark surmises, grave suspicions, ambiguous phrases, obscure scraps of dialogue drawn from half-remembered phone conversations loomed out of the fog and vanished again. Besfort had written: "In your last letter you mentioned defeating me. Did you really dream of such a thing, even for a moment? Don't you realise that I might be more dangerous than defeat?" Her reply: "Believe me, this misunderstanding between us has worn me down." His answer: "Don't worry about a thing like that. This sort of anxiety comes from the body, not the soul."

Then Rovena talked to her friend Shpresa.

"He told me yesterday that I should keep to the pact between us."

"What pact? This is the first time you've mentioned such a thing."

"Really?"

"If I'm really your friend, you must be more honest."

"I know, but do you think this is easy for me?"

"This story just gets more obscure."

"Have you heard of Empedocles?"

"Hm, I think I've heard the name, but I'm not sure."

"He was new to me too. He's an ancient philosopher. Out of curiosity to see what a human eye had seen before, he threw himself into the crater of Etna."

"So? What's he got to do with you?"

"Not me, the two of us."

"I still don't understand."

"Well, one day he said to me that we would try something totally unfamiliar, and he mentioned this famous man Empedocles."

"Rovena, I don't understand you. Are you going to throw yourself off a cliff because some crazy character did so five thousand years ago?"

"Slow down. I'm not as far gone as that. It was just a comparison. What we were taught in school to call a metaphor. But still, just imagining it makes me scared."

"Of course it's scary. Just your talking about it makes my skin crawl. Someone jumping into the lava out of curiosity ... a funny sort of curiosity!"

"Is that how you imagined the crater? Active?"

"What?"

"I was asking if you imagined the crater with molten lava or not?"

"Is that important? When you mentioned a volcano, I thought of lava."

"But I imagined it extinct, black, desolate. And like that it's twice as frightening. Wait, he said that this was what falling into a black hole would be like, coming out into another dimension ..."

"Listen, Rova, and don't misunderstand me. It would be good if you came here as soon as you can. Take a few days' rest. This Alpine air will do you good. We'll have a good time together, like in the old days. We'll remember all those jokes from university. Remember that doggerel by the guy from Durrës in the other seminar group?"

Rova is an antibiotic
Short for Rovamycin
But Rovena is hypnotic
Elegant and enticing.

The researcher used the young woman's words "I'm scared", repeated over and over again as the starting point for his questioning of the taxi driver.

"She said, 'I'm scared, but I don't know why. I pretend not to be frightened of him. He also pretends not to frighten me any more. But none of this is true.' Why were you so shaken by what you saw, or thought you saw, in the mirror?"

This question, although lifted from the written record, had lost none of its ominous weight. "Did it remind you of anything? Even dimly, or indirectly? Some kind of obstacle, a taboo, something that should never happen?"

"I don't know what to say. I'm not sure."

"Were you scared?"

"Yes."

Everybody in this story was scared, with or without reason. They were scared of one other, of themselves or of someone, no one could tell who.

Some part of this fear had been conveyed through the mirror in the taxi. But where had the rest come from?

The researcher finally succeeded in meeting Lulu Blumb, getting her to talk and ensuring her continued cooperation. Her suspicion of murder was difficult to dismiss, but also hard to confirm.

She almost exploded with rage. "Are you blind, or just pretending? You could tell a mile off that he was the murderous kind. That dream of his, or rather his nightmare, about the Hague Tribunal showed that."

The researcher wanted to butt in to say that these days a lot of people were scared of The Hague – Serbs, Croats, Albanians, Montenegrins. You might say that the whole Balkans were in fear and trembling. But he restrained himself.

Lulu Blumb went on to say that neither the dream about the court summons nor the second one, which people generally called inexplicable, enigmatic and so forth, held any mystery for her. She said that the researcher no doubt knew about the funeral building, a cross between a mausoleum and a motel, at which a person knocks and looks for someone, who later turns out to be a young woman who is locked inside, turned to stone or murdered by some means.

The inquiry stated that Besfort Y. had had this dream one week before his death. Logically, he should have had this dream later, after killing Rovena. But as the researcher might be aware (and might well know better than she did) such displacements are quite common in dreams. The dream showed most of all that Besfort had already resolved to kill Rovena.

The researcher listened to the pianist with the same calm curiosity, both when he believed her and when he didn't. This woman had a special talent, perhaps granted to her by music, for evoking the atmosphere of events, especially imagined events. For instance, whenever she described the final dream, she never forgot to mention the building's midnight glow, which was a reflection of the plaster, or perhaps of despair.

Her description of the other incident on the morning of 17 May caused in the researcher's mind an intoxicating frisson, whenever she mentioned it, that he could never shake off.

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