

First Steps

The volvox doesn't glow in the dark

The happy and dead

Short Stories by Sven Popović

## First steps

“You said, when all is possible,  
nothing is real.”

- S. Mraović

She took her first steps in the snow. They melted away. As if she left no trace on the ground. She is twenty-one now and isn't really there. I don't mean to say that she's distant, but she simply has this feeling that everything that happens to her isn't real. As if it is happening to someone else. And she's just an observer. Because she felt like nothing was real, she sometimes had to touch certain objects or people to make sure that they were there and wouldn't dissolve like dreams do when you open your eyes.

It's been some twenty years since she took her first steps in the snow. It appears to her sometimes that the days too have dissolved like dreams do when you open your eyes. No sequences, no logical series. Only cracks in Technicolor. It even seemed to her that it was all just a dream. In summer, she would lie in her bed and smoke. So heavily that her room would get foggy. At her side always some novel. A Dostoyevsky, a Kafka, a Murakami, a Kamov. She didn't bother reading poetry. Sometimes she would just lie there, brown hair flowing all around and beneath her. She would close her eyes and think of oceans and words that sounded

like eternity. She wouldn't go out until the Sun dropped. In winter, she would go to cafés. She would sit by herself. Smoke an entire pack. That amounted to some hundred and fifty pages and two or three cups of coffee.

She met him mid-fall at her university. He was tall, with a bit of a slouch, much too smug. Loud. Always in the center of attention. Nonetheless he disagreed with most people and had difficulty fitting in despite his charm. In his own way, he sometimes wasn't there either. He insisted that he was constantly surrounded with wondrous occurrences, but still it sometimes seemed that he clung to romantic illusions about the past. She would see him hanging out with his friends. Always laughing. Charming punks. The word was they listened to nothing but LPs together and only saw movies in old theaters. They were constantly starring in their own movies with witty dialogues and the perfect music background. He wanted to be a rebel. She thought he was completely insufferable. They hooked up at a house party thrown by a mutual friend. He caught her by surprise, using the most idiotic line she had ever heard.

Have you ever kissed to a Smiths song?

That night she did. It was Bigmouth Strikes Again. He later confessed that he's fed up with them. He wanted to pour gasoline all over Morrissey and set him on fire.

I think you're overreacting, she told him.

Come on, the guy left the stage at some show because he spotted a grill somewhere in the distance. He's like this sworn

vegetarian, Meat is Murder.

You're still overreacting.

Fine, I wouldn't exactly set him on fire, but I would certainly throw meatballs at him.

How old are you?

I'm twenty. I think. Why?

Sometimes you sound like you're six.

And how does that make you look? Your boyfriend is a six-year-old.

You're not my boyfriend.

I'm not?

No.

We kissed to a Smiths song.

What does that have to do with anything?

A lot. It's, what-they-call-it... romance.

What do you do?

Don't try to change the subject.

What do you do, Elias?

I write.

What do you write?

Stories.

What about?

Love.

She frowned. Romances?

No. Short stories about love.

I see.

Do you fall in love a lot?

I don't think I've ever met a woman I didn't fall in love with.

Ugh, that's such an obnoxious cliché.

Fine, a beautiful woman then. One that listens to good music.

And watches good movies. And she has to read.

What do you read?

Cortázar.

What else?

Poetry.

What kind of poetry?

Love poetry. He laughed. His laugh was loud.

And what about you, what do you read, Andrea?

Don't call me by my name.

How else should I call you?

I don't know. I don't like my name.

Why?

It's plain.

What is a plain name?

She shrugged her shoulders.

Fine, what do you read?

Large books.

And right now?

2666.

Bolaño?

Si.

He nodded. I'm gonna change the song. The Velvet Underground. Venus in Furs.

What's wrong with Velvet Underground? She asked.

Nothing, but they're not exactly party music.

Her friend was the one who put them on. She wasn't all that happy with him playing the Strokes instead. He switched from New Yorkers to younger New Yorkers.

So what, anyway? he said. The Strokes are just as arty as

Velvet Underground, but they're much more suited for parties.  
You designers and architects always put pose above music.  
What a hideous stereotype, she told him.  
Sometimes you have to apply them.  
But you told me you can't stand stereotypes.  
Stereotypes are fun as long as they're not about me.  
That's a bit hypocritical.  
It's extremely hypocritical.  
You're a strange guy, full of contradictions.  
That's Zen.  
That has nothing to do with Zen.  
I like to believe that it does.  
Are you lying to yourself?  
I am naïve enough to believe the things that are clearly not true.  
I'm not sure if that's good or bad.  
Me neither.  
I think the world might be a better place if we were all a bit dumb. But I'm not sure that I could pull that off.  
Me neither.  
You know what?  
I don't.  
These times weren't made for you.  
He laughed.  
Let's get out of here, she said.  
Where to?  
My place. I have a bottle of wine at home. You can play the Strokes.  
Deal.

~

They got out. The moon was a tiny notch against the night sky. He told her that.

How do people forget about the Moon? About all of its forms? I don't know. – she said. I like it when I can see its face. You know, like it's howling or at least shocked with all that it sees. Like it's saying: "Why the hell are you making everything so complicated?"

It seems indifferent to me.

Oh, so you don't think the Moon would mind if I kissed you right now?

That's right.

You know, I'm like the Moon sometimes. I observe and I'm indifferent.

I know that feeling. I know this might sound ridiculous, but I'm trying to make my life more like a novel or a movie.

Well now, these topics go better with some wine and music.

Where do you live?

Not far away. We can walk.

Deal.

~

The first time they made love, they were measuring each other's strength. It wasn't as much about sex as it was about proving skill. It was still dark when he woke up. The street light was crushing against the window and dispersing all around her tiny bedroom. There was a Modesty Blaise poster above her bed. On her night stand Murakami's Norwegian Wood and Bolaño's 2666.

He got up, put on his pants and his shirt. Tied his shoes. Took his coat and got ready to leave. Standard practice. He stopped. She was still asleep, her arms embraced around the vacant space where his body lay a moment ago. He picked up her mobile phone and put his number in it. He silently left the room and sent her a text.

Oh ... sweetness, sweetnees, I was only joking  
When I said by rights you should be  
Bludgeoned in your bed.

~

So, you made love? he lit a cigarette with a match. They were standing in front of a diner and the rain was pouring.  
Made love? Buddy, I might be a romantic, but I don't think I've ever made love to anyone. He lit a cigarette using his.  
Fine, did you penetrate?  
Elias blew the smoke away.  
Well?  
A gentleman never tells.  
We're no gentlemen. You're an idiot and I'm a bum. But I'm also your best friend.  
My best friend? He raised his eyebrow.  
Yes.  
What are we, in kindergarten?  
Fine, you don't need to tell me, I don't give a fuck. But you're not coming to my birthday.  
He laughed. Fine, yes, we did.  
Cool.



Cool.

Let's get inside, he tossed away his cigarette.

Let's.

They sat back at their table. Their coffee had gone cold. Elias took a sip.

Yuck.

Yeah, it's not much better when it's hot either.

They were sitting quietly. Elias was nervously tapping his fingers on the table. Little finger, ring finger, middle finger, index finger. It sounded like a gallop.

I'm gonna go. I didn't get much sleep these days and this phone call of yours in the middle of the night was of no help.

Sorry.

Don't sweat it. I'll see you around.

See you around, Maroje.

Don't call me by my name. That's what she told him. He remembered the poster in her bedroom. Modesty Blaise. Yes, that's what he could call her. Modesty.

They were like two lines that took an eternity to touch, a moment to live out the eternity, and a moment to disappear, uncertain of the possibility of another intersection. Two accidents waiting to occur.

And so he sat in the diner under the arrhythmic trembling of the neon lights, the only thing tying him to her was the pattering of rain on the window. He was nervously tapping his fingers on the table. Little finger, ring finger, middle finger, index finger. It sounded like a gallop. And she was sleeping.

Dreaming of walking barefoot in the snow. On a field of snow where the sky is white and as frozen as the ground. The Sun frail and distant. Almost as if...

## The volvox doesn't glow in the dark

She insisted that I wasn't listening to her or something like that. There was nothing wrong about it, she wasn't upset, but merely determined that I have trouble focusing. The sun was emerging, the water for coffee was just starting to boil, the waves were murmuring as they caressed the sand. The sound was making me want to take a piss. The sun was emerging and she insisted that I wasn't listening to her. I went to take a piss.

I could hear the spoon clanging against the cup. – Have you decided? On what? Whether you're going home or not. Should I stay or should I go? She's talking again, I can't hear her through the stream. I yell. – What? I said: I knew you would find me.

I can feel her warm breath on my ear. We're at a night club, electro blasting and I can't hear her very well. I answer by taking a sip of my beer. Ever since we met in that record store, I can't get her out of my head. A miniature hurricane that claimed to go by Megi.

Who did you come with? I ask. My brother. The one that collects LPs? What? she can't hear me. The one that collects LPs? I yell out in her ear. She's wearing a subtle perfume. I like that. Wanna get out of here?

Sure, I say. I need to take a piss, wait for me outside. She nods. I go to the can. No line in the men's room. I'm done fast. I close my zipper and get out. She is sipping coffee. She is handing me my cup. The sun is advancing fast. It's no longer a crimson newborn.

I said you didn't have to go.

I answer by taking a sip of my coffee. I ask her if she wants to

come with me to the beach. She says she doesn't. She'll be drinking coffee on the terrace, doing crosswords and Sudoku. I grab a towel and a book, Hemingway's short stories, and I take a seat at the table.

You like to spend time at the beach when there's practically no one around. I don't like the noise, the children screaming. I like the sound of children playing.

I shrug my shoulders and finish my coffee. I kiss her on the cheek. – I won't be too long, I say. I get out and walk towards the beach about a hundred feet away from her house. I spread my towel, and lay the Hemingway on it. I enter the sea. It's cold and I'm getting a chill down my spine, my body instinctively wants to get out. I dived in and decided to swim towards the buoys. There I turned over to my back and let the waves cradle me. No point in writhing, just close your eyes. Peacefully.

I wasn't sure how long the kiss went on. Perhaps only for a second, but perhaps it's been a couple of hours, and the sun is now dawning.

I like you, you're a good kisser. I like Marica from the second grade better. Her socks don't fall down to her ankles like yours do. Is she as good a kisser as I am? I haven't heard that verb in quite a while, "to kiss". People normally use these gross phrases. Like what? To make out, it sounds so mechanical. So is Marica as good a kisser as I am? Who's Marica?

She lets out a laugh, turns on her heel and walks towards the club. I follow her and get in. Megi is still doing her crosswords. I leave my book at the table. – I'm going to take a shower.

The hot water's out. – she yells. Doesn't matter. I get into the shower and let the water run, lukewarm water, like summer rain. That sounds like a cliché. Summer rain! Anyway, it feels

good. Salt dissolved in the shower water is running down my body in snakelike curves.

Rain is pouring all over us and we run to the nearest doorway. I press her against the wall. I can taste the rain on her lips, the filthy rain. I tell her that. In return, she slams me against the opposite wall. She says it's a good thing her brother can't see us. He can't stand anyone touching his little sister.

I'm a rebel, I do whatever I want. Prove it to me.

I contemplate, and eye the surnames on the intercom. I slide my finger pressing each buzzer. I wink at her and run to the next doorway. I repeat the action. We are running down the street. The lights in the apartments are going on; people are looking out their windows. The streets are empty. All they hear is laughter.

We're taking a walk in a Mediterranean small town. We summoned the courage to hold hands. It's a bit strange since she's much shorter than me. We are quiet. The comfortable silence. In fact, that too is a type of communication. Everything's fine, you don't have to tell me, I know it. We are walking, we soon come back to her house, and I tell her I'm going to the beach for a short while. She'll be waiting.

I promised to drop by her place and now I'm climbing towards the Upper Town. I see the city spreading below me, the windows are shimmering like the volvox or whatever-they're-called do on the sea surface. The moon is already so close I could grab it by its horn. I reached out my hand and closed my eyes.

Are you going to spend the night here? Megi takes a seat next to me, hugging her legs, shaking. No. The sand is not as warm as you are. Then get inside. I'm going to stay for a few more days, I tell her, I get up, and I kiss her. The sea lies

behind me, almost pitch black. On its surface you can see the shimmering volvox or whatever-they're-called. The moon is so close I could grab it by its horn.

## The happy and dead

That morning Andrej Kalovski determined he was dead. He was still breathing, his pulse throbbing, his entire body going like clockwork, but fuck it, he was a dead man. He was drinking coffee and using his free hand to tie his tie, a skill that he had acquired over the years, working in a grey firm with grey hallways, where everyone wore grey suits, drank tasteless coffee, and ate free lunches that tasted sort of grey. In addition to the skill of one-handed tie tying, he had also developed a sense of apathy towards each and every aspect of his life. The understanding that he was dead came to him with no shock whatsoever, and he continued to sip his coffee, having already managed to tie his tie. On his way out from the apartment, his wife reminded him to take out the garbage.

The outside greeted him with early morning cold and quiet, there was hardly anyone on the streets. He headed for the bus stop, which is where each day at 7:22 AM he takes the bus to work. Every morning he meets the same set of people on the bus stop, dressed in the same set of clothes, standing in the same spots. Today, however, he spotted a new person on the bus stop. A short girl with ruffled short black hair reaching chin length. He could distinctly make out the traces of smudged make-up around her big black eyes and the somewhat paler eye circles. She was wearing an oversized black shirt and tight jeans, looking right at him and smiling as if they knew each other. He saw her lips move, but he couldn't hear what she was saying.

I'm sorry, I can't hear you.

I wasn't talking/saying anything.

Oh, I thought...

... I was just moving my lips.

I can't read lips.

I'll teach you. Try again.

Andrej observed as she moved her lips, carefully shaping each muffled syllable. Do-you-ha-ve-a-smo-ke?

I don't.

There you go! It wasn't that hard. Besides, I don't smoke.

Why would a lady who doesn't smoke need a cigarette?

Lose the lady.

Excuse me?

Why would YOU need a cigarette, she says, stressing the "you".

Oh, right. Why would YOU need a cigarette? He asks, equally stressing the "you".

To start up a conversation.

The bus arrives, Andrej gets on, and the girl stays on the bus stop.

Hey, aren't you getting on?

No, it's too crowded, I'll take the next one.

But...

The doors close. The girl is further and further away. Andrej kept thinking about her for the rest of the day. While they were waiting for the bus in the evening, he looked up at his colleague. Do-you-ha-ve-a-smo-ke?

What?

I wasn't talking, I was only moving my lips.

The colleague gave him a puzzled look. Andrej, you're



working too hard.

Yes, perhaps.

He got home. Had supper. Didn't fuck the wife. Before falling asleep, he thought about the strange girl from the bus station. Maybe he'll see her in the morning.

Morning. He was drinking coffee and using his free hand to tie his tie, a skill that he had acquired over the years, working in a grey firm with grey hallways, where everyone wore grey suits, drank tasteless coffee, and ate free lunches that tasted sort of grey. On his way out from the apartment, his wife reminded him to take out the garbage.

There she was! She was tying the shoelace on her sneaker while hopping on one leg. The people on the bus stop paid no attention to her.

Hello! he approached her.

She took one look at him and went back to tying her shoelace.

My colleagues can't read lips either.

She finishes tying her shoelace. She crosses her arms and starts reading the timetable.

What is it, don't you remember? I'm the one you asked for a cigarette yesterday, even though you don't smoke.

She's still not saying a word. The bus arrives. He looks at her, gets in, and sits down resignedly. Yesterday must have been just a fun pastime for her. The doors close, she enters at the last moment. She walks up to him.

I dreamt that I was taking a bungee jump from outer space towards the planet.

What?

Yes. It felt amazing.

I mean, why wouldn't you talk to me on the bus stop?

I did yesterday.

So?

But I didn't get on the bus with you.

I still don't get it.

This way I'm creating a sense of coherence. I didn't talk to you out there, but now I will in here. There you go.

And tomorrow?

What?

What are going to do tomorrow?

What is tomorrow?

The day after today.

I find that concept a bit blurred. I'm not capable of looking so far ahead.

Oh. So bungee, you say?

Yes! The planet was getting closer and closer, and the second before I hit the ground, the rope pulled me back up again.

I never dream about anything interesting.

I don't believe you.

No, really. I only dream about my exams, the worst ones, from back when I was in college.

So change something.

I don't know how to change things in my dreams.

You don't need to. Change something in your life.

What should I do?

Quit your job.

Yeah sure, should I also leave my wife while I'm at it?

Why not? Do you love her?

I do, too!

So much that it rhymes, I see. This is where I get off, bye.

She jumps off the bus. For the next couple of minutes, Andrej

is confused. So confused that he almost forgets to get off at his stop. Change something. Sounds really nice. Magical, yet simple. But it also takes a lot of courage. While he was coming home from work, he looked for the girl. At the bus stop. On the bus. In other people. The next morning he asked for her name.

Megi.

Is that your real name?

What is a real name?

What does your ID say?

Why would a piece of plastic know my real name?

Well how did your parent name you?

And why would they know my real name?

Fine then, I will call you Megi. Hi, I'm Andrej.

He extends his hand, and they share a hearty handshake.

Did you quit your job?

No.

I assume you're still married.

Yes.

What have you changed then?

Nothing.

You're a coward.

I know, but...

... but but but but! She covered her ears with her hands. Start with little things then. Squeeze your toothpaste from the middle.

How did you know that I squeeze it from the end?

I know everything. Angels and prophets whisper to me.

In your dreams?

No. On the streets.

How come I never see them?

You don't have to see them. You only need to listen. This is where I get off, bye! She jumps off the bus.

You got out on a different bus stop yesterday, he yells after her.

She shrugs her shoulders, but today this one's my stop. The doors close. She waves at him. He spends his whole day at work thinking about this miniature hurricane. In the evening, he squeezes his toothpaste from the middle of the tube. Over the night, he dreams about an exam. But he is not scared.

Misty morning. He was drinking coffee and using his free hand to tie his tie, a skill that he had acquired over the years, working in a grey firm with grey hallways, where everyone wore grey suits, drank tasteless coffee, and ate free lunches that tasted sort of grey. On his way out from the apartment, his wife reminds him to take out the garbage.

Do you read? Megi asks him at the bus stop.

I read the newspapers.

I find newspapers too difficult to read.

What do you mean?

All those news about the accidents, the embezzlements, the murders, the spectacles. It makes me sick.

What do you read?

Poetry.

What kind?

She shrugged her shoulders. All kinds.

I haven't read poetry in a long time.

Come with me to a poetry reading tonight.

Where? And who's reading?

My friends are reading, in their apartment.

Does that qualify as a poetry reading?

Why wouldn't it?

Well, it's not official.

What is official? she chuckled.

Ok, I get it. When?

Whenever you get off from work.

Around seven, eight.

Would you like me to wait for you here at the bus stop at half past eight?

Agreed.

The bus arrived. They got in and continued their conversation. About the fall and the chestnuts. About the morning fog. About the expanding universe. At least that's what she says. Andrej believes it will shrink in the end. The reverse Big Bang. At half past eight they meet on the bus stop. To his question whether the apartment is far away, she answers that it isn't. After five minutes of walking, they get to the apartment.

Fourteenth floor. It's not a big place. A room and a bathroom. There were books and candles all over the place, and Andrej had to be very careful not to topple any of the piles of books or stashed vinyl records. There was music coming from the phonograph (from the speaker, actually, but they only explained this to him later on). He didn't know the band because he never listened to music. Megi told him it was the Gang of Four, and that she felt like they're a little bit overrated. Megi's friends were drinking wine.

Who's the fellow, sis? one of them asks. Tall, lean, with black

hair. He looks like he smiles a lot.

Andrej, he says and extends his hand. His name is Pavel. The other boy's name is Ješu. He's a bit shorter, with brown hair and green eyes.

Hana is late, as usual, Pavel declares. But I think we can begin.

Ješu reaches for a book with yellowed pages. I saw the best minds of my generation... he opens.

Wait, you can't always do Ginsberg, Pavel protests. You read Sunflower Sutra last time.

I read America last time.

Irrelevant, you never let go of the Americans, Megi interferes. The discussion continues, a lot of names are coming up, and Andrej is listening, feeling lost amid all the names. Someone rings the doorbell.

That's Hana, Ješu says. Hana is a tall girl with black hair. She makes the announcement that she has a new poem.

Let's hear it, Pavel is pouring more wine for himself.

Sometimes

halfway through my automated actions

I stop

I look back

as if I'm telling myself

it's okay

as if I'm telling myself

everything is going to be fine

you're still here

you're still in the game something inside me can still alter my

direction  
one day when you're no longer here  
you won't even know about it  
    even ask about it  
    even look back

That's true, Andrej speaks out for the first time. Nothing ever alters my direction. I never look back. I never ask. I fit perfectly into the machine. I don't even need maintenance. And the more I talk to Megi, the more it is becoming clear to me that there are choices, but they can frighten a man, that's why taking the well-traveled road of routine is the easiest way out.

Silence took over. The record reached its end and the amplifier was letting out a humming sound. Pavel took another sip of his wine. You know, he began, your situation is not as bad as you may think. There are people who get through their entire lives without making that realization. And then there are people who live their entire lives thinking they're free, when they're really slaves to things irrelevant. At the end, all that you need is already in you. That's hard to grasp. I've known that sentence for years, and I still can't wrap my head around it. My friend had a dream once about the greedy god of all things mediocre and unremarkable, who devoured humans. And some of them had ideas, some of them wanted to change the world, but they sold out their present for a safe future. They got into a bitter race with time. And all of those people, they were happy. Happy and dead.

A moth is circling frantically around the candlelight until it finally

flies through the flame. It doesn't die, doesn't fall to the ground, and doesn't quiver its tiny legs. It circles on with its wings on fire. Burning. Glowing. Megi opens the window and it disappears into the darkness of the night, turning into an orange spot. For a brief moment, it looks like it might set the dark on fire.