

Saša STANISIĆ
Extract from a novel

What goes on behind God's feet, why Kiko picks up the cigarette, where Hollywood is, and how Mickey Mouse learns to answer

At 14.22 hours they radioed a ceasefire through to the Territorial Defence trenches. The third this month. At 14.28 hours the ball rose from the Serbian trench on the northern outskirts of the forest and flew through the air, tracing a high arc, towards the clearing that separated the opposing positions by about two hundred metres. The ball bounced twice and rolled in the direction of the two spruce trees, now shot to pieces, that had served as goalposts before when hostilities were suspended.

The commander of the Territorials, Dino Safirović, nicknamed Dino Zoff, jumped up on the edge of the trench, cupped his hands around his mouth as a megaphone and bent his torso back as he shouted to the other side: how about it, Chetniks, want another hiding? He reached for his crotch and thrust his hips back and forth, back and forth, then went a few metres in the direction of the ball, to the place where Ćora lay with a huge hole in his head.

Mujaheddin cunts, we already fucked your mothers' arses twice, roared a hoarse voice from the Serbian trench, while Kiko – Kiko number nine, Kiko of the prodigious headers, Kiko the iron brow of the gentle river Drina – joined Dino Zoff, took Ćora by the ankles and dragged him behind the trench. He covered him up with his coat and put the bloodstained strands of hair back from his forehead, oh, look at you now, friend Ćora, he whispered, grass and earth everywhere.

Beside him, Meho clicked his tongue, dug the red and white Red Star Belgrade shirt out of his rucksack and put it on over his jacket. He ceremoniously emptied his jacket pockets: a Swiss army knife, a lighter, two hand grenades, an opened can of meat paste. He kissed Audrey Hepburn's photo several times, enraptured, and then put it away again. He grinned in reply to Dino Zoff's enquiring gaze, said: we all have our lucky charms, did you know about Maradona's underpants ... and then he noticed Kiko and Ćora's dead body and stopped short. He shouldn't have gone out, never mind how dark it was, began Meho, both apologetic and accusing, but then he met Kiko's eyes, sighed, and offered him a packet of Drinas. Everyone in the troop knew Meho still had cigarettes, there were even rumours that the packet was half full. Kiko took the last but one. He passed it over his upper lip and breathed in the fragrance

Mirabelles, he murmured, closing his eyes, Hanifa's throat when she's brought me home from training, coffee, real Turkish coffee. That's the way of the world, friend Ćora, you've snuffed it and I get a cigarette. Kiko passed his fingertips over Ćora's eyelids and put the cigarette behind his ear. For after the game, he said with his head bowed.

The Serbs had won the last two ceasefires five-two and two-one. A man called Milan Jevrić, nicknamed Mickey Mouse, shot three of their five goals in the first match. Mickey Mouse was a farmer's boy aged twenty, two metres six tall and weighing a hundred kilos, maybe as many as thirty of them in the great rock of a head with its projecting nose and few sparse tufts of hair that he carried on his bull-like neck. He was really an inside

defender, and surprised himself more than anyone by his goal-scoring prowess when he stormed ahead at the beginning of the second half of that match, shot from a distance of thirty metres and hit Dino Zoff right in the face. Dino didn't come round until Marko, one of the Serbian forwards, held some schnapps under his nose, and for the next two hours he spoke nothing but fluent Latin, quoting several Ciceronian maxims. After that direct hit Mickey Mouse played as a midfield attacker, hammering the ball away from every conceivable position. When he fired off one of his right-footed shots and the ball made for the goal like a bullet, Dino Zoff regularly threw himself not fearlessly but bravely into its flight path, and was just as regularly floored, lying there dazed or with his face twisting in pain. Probably because there was no other way of keeping out Mickey Mouse's mighty shots, or perhaps in hopes of the return of Marko's schnapps. There was no art in Mickey Mouse's shots, they didn't spin or come off the outside of his foot, and after the first time they no longer took anyone by surprise. In their lack of finesse they reflected Mickey Mouse's straightforward thinking, which he seldom expressed in words; they were simply physical effort for which the big man was praised and feared, so he kept on doing the same thing again and again with gusto, like a child.

There was just one drawback to the force of Mickey Mouse's right foot, and the Territorials mercilessly exploited it. After every shot the giant gave vent to his delight in his strength with a shout that, in musical terms, was somewhere between a bull's rutting cry and the sound of a twenty-five-ton truck and trailer braking on a steep downhill slope. Monika Seleš to the life! cried Kozica with the goatee beard, the Territorials' outside left, after one such cry of exultation had rung out over hill and vale, and he roared with laughter.

Hey, is Monika playing with you today? Dino Zoff's men would mock the Serbs after that, or: Monika, Monika, come play on my harmonica! And they groaned out loud whenever Mickey Mouse got the ball. This great mountain of a man, so large that no uniform fitted him and he had to wear his enormous dungarees from home, was thrown off balance by these digs. In the second game he toned down his shouts, and promptly his long-distance shots too became less decisive, causing Dino Zoff no more headaches. If an opposing player yodelled near him, Mickey Mouse would jump, his massive head would rock on his comparatively slight shoulders, and his narrow brow was furrowed with thought. If only he'd been given a little more time, Mickey Mouse would have liked to say what he was thinking, but then play shifted to the other side of the field and his tormentor ran off.

Today, as before, Kozica yelled at the Serbian side during warming up: what a shame Miss Graf couldn't come to Mount Igman! She's in Wimbledon but she sends Monika her best wishes, it's OK about the nail varnish. Ho, ho, ho, cried Kozica, and his companions joined in.

Two halves of forty minutes each, a Territorial ref for the first half, a Serbian ref for the second – if there was going to be any sharp practice it would be fairly distributed. Mickey Mouse tied a rope between the goalposts on the southern outskirts of the clearing to serve as a cross bar. The other goal consisted of remains of the fence that used to stand beside one of the two cart tracks. They crossed in the clearing. The wire netting between the fence posts had been cut and the posts extended by boards to two and a half metres high. Whoever had control of those cart tracks could reach the mountain more rapidly, no need to forge a path through dense, poorly mapped forests with more mines in the ground than mushrooms. That was what it had been all about here for the last two months: two cart tracks. Lower down the valley one of them turned into a paved road leading to

Sarajevo. In normal times, flies flew here in square formation over dried cowpats, but there were no fresh cowpats to dry off now. The farm cattle that hadn't been driven higher up the mountains had been slaughtered long ago, and humans buried their own shit. These days the flies circled above corpses that couldn't always be got into the earth at once.

At sixteen hours the teams met somewhere roughly in the middle of the football pitch, the rest of the soldiers sat down in long rows on the grass to form live touchlines. No one was visibly carrying weapons; there were some guns propped against trees. The players passed the ball to each other, warming up in silence. The Serbs won the toss for choice of ends.

Standing a little way from the others, Kiko and Mickey Mouse gave each other a friendly hug. They knew one another from school, where they'd both had to stay down twice in the eighth year, which was unusual. It was even more unusual for someone to have had to stay down twice in the first year as well, and then in the fourth year and the sixth year. Once, in the middle of a maths test, the boy with the ever-open mouth had asked how exactly you set about learning things. His fellow pupils considered him a quiet, kindly colossus who, when asked the date of Columbus's discovery of America looked out of the window and replied, 'Colorado beetle.' Kiko, on the other hand, though only just seventeen, was among the country's most promising footballers. While the first-division clubs were vying with each other to recruit Kiko, Mickey Mouse was toiling day and night on his parents' farm, and there was nothing to suggest that better days and better nights would ever come for him.

But come they did – with the war. Where's the war? Mickey Mouse asked. His mother said: still far away, thank God. Good, he said, whose side are we on? You're a Serb, his father told him. So next day there was Mickey Mouse standing in the doorway with a rucksack that, on his broad back, looked like a make-up bag. He told his father, his father's ten fried eggs, the pale blue tiled kitchen, the notched cherry-wood table, the dusty yard, the stink of muck from the cowsheds, the plough that had strengthened the muscles in his back, and the countless sacks of maize that he kicked hard night after night because he was angry with his father, with the ten fried eggs his father ate every morning, with the table into which he had carved his name when he had to sleep under it once for two weeks, with the yard where his father knocked him down in the dust and kicked him, with the muck through which he'd waded all his life, with the plough because he wasn't an ox – goodbye, he told them all, goodbye, I'm going right away, I'm going to war.

Mickey Mouse's father chewed his mouthful, drank his cauliflower juice and mopped his mouth with the tea towel. He pushed his chair back, but froze when he heard his son's determined voice saying: if you stand up, if you take a single step, I'll wring your neck like a chicken's, I'm going right away. Mickey Mouse walked for five days, asking his way and saying he was Serbian, until he was given a gun. Can I go shooting now? he asked, and he learned how to load the gun and take the safety catch off. He was sent to Mount Igman, where the Serbian troops were preparing for the siege of Sarajevo. Mickey Mouse never complained. He liked these remote places better than his home, although his comrades said God had abandoned and forgotten them long ago, and a God like that doesn't turn back again. This place lies behind God's feet, they said.

Mickey Mouse didn't mind his nickname. I like the duck and the dog too, he said, though Pluto is rather clumsy. He hadn't been called Mickey Mouse yet at school, and Kiko still called him Milan.

Milan, said Kiko, putting his hand on Mickey Mouse's upper arm, your lot fucking well killed Ćora last night.

By way of answer Mickey Mouse raised his eyebrows, ducked his head and took a deep breath. His face lost any kind of symmetry. It looked like unhewn stone, pale and scarred with acne. Kiko was waiting for some kind of response, but Mickey Mouse just breathed out and closed his ever-open mouth, pressing his lips together the way other people might lower their eyes.

A shrill whistle signalled the end of warming up.

Mickey Mouse took Kiko's hand off his arm. Kiko, they told me: Mickey Mouse, you're playing in defence again, they said.

Mickey Mouse didn't add that he was the only man who had fired a shot that night. A heavy bird flew up from the woods, and the big man went back to the defenders.

Gavro, the key player on the Serbian side, a black-haired, curly-headed man with a raven tattooed on his shoulder, whistled as the bird flew away. Gavro never stopped whistling or humming tunes except to talk or eat. Even in his sleep he would snore a resonant 'Blue Danube' through his moustache. The bird flew over the clearing and soared south towards the valley beyond the trees. Gavro picked up the ball and went over to the ref, who was gazing at his watch as if spellbound.

Fuck the sun, man, what are you waiting for, a sign from Allah? We don't have all day!

The man thus addressed didn't deign to give him a glance, but went on looking at the second hand, so Gavro kicked the ball up in the air with his toe, kept it there with his left and right hands by turn, balanced it on his forehead, let it drop to his thigh and stopped it with his instep. As he did so he whistled 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow' in such loud and musical tones that heads turned to look at him. The men blinked at this combination of afternoon sunlight, skilful ball control and tuneful melodies, shifted from foot to foot or simply stood around with their hands on their hips. It had been quiet on Mount Igman more frequently over the last few months, particularly at night when the guns in the clearing and the valley fell silent. But there hadn't been such peace and quiet here behind God's feet for a long time as there was now, before kick-off, at the sound of Gavro's memories of maybe Glenn Miller.

General Mikado, commander of the Serbian unit, slapped the back of the whistling man's head with the flat of his hand, took the ball away from his foot, whistled shrilly through his own fingers and made the first pass. You can whistle for the end of play seven seconds early, called the sturdy commander with the slanting eyes to which he owed his nickname. He raced past the ref and swerved to the right wing, where he was to set up a score of one-nil score to the Serbs less than two minutes later – a ball centred to the head of the whistling Gavro.

In the early eighties Dejan Gavrilović Gavro had given up a career as a clarinetist to turn professional footballer. He spent five years trying to avoid relegation to the second division, and then he tore a ligament. During his convalescence he took up the clarinet again, and at the end of the eighties he and his brother were performing in Belgrade jazz clubs. They recorded a disc that caused quite a sensation. In November ninety-one his brother was called up and died four days later in the Croatian provinces. Gavro put his clarinet away again, this time to become a soldier. He fought in the same provinces, was in Croatia at the end of the war there, and when asked if he fancied taking further revenge for his brother, for instance in Sarajevo, he just inquired whether he could take a quick shower first, and was there was any prospect of clean towels?

Mickey Mouse made it two-nil with one of his mighty shots. He captured the ball near the corner flag – a gun rammed into the ground – and forged through the enemy

ranks accompanied by shouts of derision, but no one tackled him hard enough. He didn't seem to mind the insults this time. He was still in his own half when he aimed for Dino Zoff, his mouth wide open as always. A one-two, a feint, the shot at goal, *uh!*, and Dino Zoff couldn't deflect the ball properly. After kicking the ball Mickey Mouse stopped abruptly and watched it sail through the air with his arm raised in greeting, as if waving goodbye to an old friend off on a long journey.

The Territorials had their one good chance of a goal at the end of the first half, when Kiko finished a solo run through the opposing defenders with a shot that hit the woodwork of the spruce goalpost. Gavro countered this shot by passing to Marko, who was spearheading the attack, but Meho got to the ball just a tad faster and hammered it with all his might out of the penalty area, off the playing field, out of the clearing and into the forest.

Oh, fuck the forest fairy, said Meho, shaking his head and crouching down as if to throw up. The referee whistled and pointed first at Meho, then at the forest – a gesture unlikely to be seen in any other football game in the world, meaning: Meho bungled this one, so he has to fetch it back. But no one could give him a plan of just where the mines were planted, and presumably no such thing existed. The mines, however, most certainly did exist. Even before the front lines was entrenched around the clearing, the Serbs had lost two men in the forest during an attempt to come up on the Territorials from behind, and a third man had lost a leg. That's right, they'd shouted from the Territorial positions at the time, take 'em all back like good lads and don't leave anyone lying around, shame about the goats.

Dino Zoff took Meho under his arms. For God's sake, Meho, he whispered, haven't we been over this a thousand times already? A good defender doesn't knock the ball away! Good clearance behind, short passes, it can't be that difficult.

Can't be that difficult, Meho whispered to himself as he arrived on the outskirts of the forest with two paramedics in attendance and looked around. All the players and both touchlines were looking his way. Someone waved and Meho waved back. The ball lay about twenty metres inside the forest, lying peacefully on a bed of moss under a reddish fern. The sun was flooding the woodland with bright light that slanted through the leaves, falling on the slight rise of the forest floor which concealed dozens of mines from the trembling man in the Red Star shirt. The shirt! In panic, Meho took off the red and white strip of his favourite team, kissed the star, folded it carefully and laid it on the ground.

Hang on, Meho! Marko had followed his opposite number up the slight slope. Here, it's for the ball, said the Serbian striker, winking, and he handed Meho a bullet-proof vest, wrap it up well before you bring it back.

Meho stared at the black bullet-proof vest.

Hey, tell us, Meho, what's the idea? Marko picked up Meho's shirt and shook his head. They're from Belgrade, right?

Meho's chin was quivering. The Red-and-Whites for ever! he growled, wiping the sweat from his brow. He put Marko's bullet-proof vest on, said, his voice trembling: you better go back, and then, as he took a step into the wood, added in English without a trace of accent: this could get fucking dangerous!

Marko went back to the others, carrying Meho's shirt. They were all sitting on the grass talking, looking at the trees even after Meho had disappeared under the shade of their canopy. Gavro was scraping dirt out from under his toenails with a wooden splinter, whistling a playful tune. The full tones of his whistling floated past the bare chests of the Serbian eleven and danced before the Territorials' tense faces. A klezmer tune, and they

were all listening to the same song, some of them tapping the grass or their thighs in time to it, some not, but that was the only difference. Watching the trees become forest, they listened and waited – for Meho, for another song, or for a big bang.

There was a bang when General Mikado hit the back of Gavro's head again. He stopped whistling, and the general asked in a loud voice, emphasising every syllable as if speaking on stage: so just what are we going to do if we lose the ball because of that idiot?

No one replied. The general scratched the hairy back of his neck.

The two paramedics on the outskirts of the forest were munching bread and looking at the trees. They wanted to follow Meho's progress as closely as possible so that they could follow his trail and spring into action at once if he was blown up.

But Meho wasn't blown up, he just crapped in his trousers, it would wash out. His own side and some of the Serbians applauded as he stalked back into the clearing with the ball under his arm and his head still on his shoulders, looking as if at the very least he'd just scored in extra time in the final against Brazil, making it one-nil, and was on his way to the terraces to acknowledge the cheers. At close quarters, his pride looked more like anger, at close quarters the arm with the ball under it was trembling, at close quarters Meho's face was grey, a thick blue vein stood out in the middle of his forehead, and he stank to high heaven. At close quarters, he said: here's the ball, OK, let's carry on with the game, I have to get changed but that's all. And he added, to Marko, now we'll swap shirts again, bullet-proof vest for Red Star Belgrade, and let me tell you something, I don't care where the team I back comes from, the lads are only playing football. When I was that big, said Meho, pointing to somewhere level with his waist, they were my heroes. The final against Marseille in ninety-one! That win! That penalty shoot-out! I don't mind you being Serbian either. Just so long as you don't shoot me or sleep with my wife, who cares?

Meho put his shirt on and stalked back to the trench, which was empty except for Sejo the fat radio operator dozing in the sunlight and three wounded men playing dominoes. My God, look at the garbage lying around! Someone ought to clear this place up, how the hell do we manage to live here? He frowned and looked around at the rubbish in the trench as if coming upon it for the first time. Right in front of him there was an empty can of sausage licked so clean that not a single fly took any interest in it. He chucked it out of the trench. Then he washed himself thoroughly with water from a white plastic container, rinsed his arse well and scrubbed the inside of his thigh with the clean trouser-leg.

And as I stood there, rather bow-legged, in that rubbish bin of a trench, friend Ćora, as I stood behind God's fungus-infected feet, my poor friend Ćora, pouring water over my fingers, I kept thinking all the time: don't waste too much water, Meho, use grass and leaves if you must, and when I was wiping away brown drops from between my little hairs, honestly, I suddenly had to weep buckets, I wept buckets, friend Ćora, I thought the tears weren't flowing down my cheeks but bursting straight from my eyes in a jet, I really did. Oh, friend Ćora, what a bloody awful day, and I hope you'll understand if I borrow your trousers now, you'll be OK, it's not cold out here, the sun's shining, it showed me just where to tread in the forest, it really did, shining down on the ground! I can't beat the Chetniks naked anyway, we're two-nil down, like I said, a bloody awful day, Ćora, but who am I telling? Meho stroked the dead man's hair and undid his camouflage trousers, just until the end of the game, Ćora, he said, you'll get them back afterwards, Pioneer's word of honour!

Meho crossed the fifty metres or so back to the pitch at a run. Over the last ten metres he realised that his bloody awful day was far from over. His unit was lined up level

with the spruce-tree goalposts, many of them with their hands behind their heads. Some ten Serbs were standing in front of them in a semi-circle with machine guns at the ready, others were running around the clearing gathering up the remaining weapons. No one was taking any notice of the ball, which lay to one side in the tall grass looking more like a stone there. Meho blinked and soundlessly moved his lips.

General Mikado sketched an embrace. Ah, he cried, that was the perfect perfume for a Muslim!

While Meho was searched for weapons and then driven over to join the others, a gun at his back, artillery fire could be heard far off. Sporadic salvos, filtered by distance and the sun to a muted, rather weary sound. Fat Sejo the Territorials' radio operator was blundering about on the edge of the trench with a panic-stricken expression on his face, but before he could announce that the ceasefire was over, as everyone had by now deduced from the noise of fighting, the Serbian goalie fired several shots at him. Sejo collapsed, first to one knee, then right over sideways, and lay there in a curiously distorted position with his knee still braced on the ground.

You fucking bastard, shouted Dino Zoff through the first shots, breaking away from the group of prisoners and imploringly raising his hands in their goalie's gloves, we're surrendering, for God's sake, we're not defending ourselves, we're not ... But he got no further. General Mikado caught up with him and put a pistol first to the back of his head and then, pushing him to the ground, against the side of his neck.

That's not the way I see it, you ape! His spit fell on Dino Zoff's cheek and mouth. The way I see it, you lot are fighting back ferociously, the way I see it you're going to fight to the last man! Sad, very sad to say, however, I don't see a single one of you Mujaheddin who's going to survive to tell the tale of your last, glorious battle. General Mikado pushed Dino away and aimed the pistol at his chest. His soldiers were in position in front of the prisoners, a firing squad thirty strong.

OK! Dino flung his arm up above his head. OK, then we *will* fight back, let's go on with the football game!

What? General Mikado made a disgusted face.

You want to shoot down unarmed men? OK, I can believe even worse of you, I don't know how I'd have held my own lads back if we'd been quicker getting to our weapons. But the game isn't finished yet! Saliva was collecting in Dino's mouth. There's the second half still to come! If you're enough of a footballer let's go on playing. And if we turn the game around, and you're still man enough, then no one here gets executed, no one! And if your lot win ... he said, looking round at his men and straightening up, then you'll be a fucking miserable murderer all your life!

And Dino Safirović, who had been chucked out of school because Latin and the classics are important in the education of the young but hard drinking is not, pulled his gloves more firmly over his fingers. And Dino Safirović, the lover of Cicero, who had volunteered because he thought alcohol wouldn't be so readily available at the front and he really did want to dry out, clapped his hands so hard that the dust flew. And Dino Safirović, nicknamed Dino Zoff, the cat of Trebević, looked General Mikado in the eye and spat: come on, then, come on!

Kiko made it two-one with a header in the fourth minute of the second half, just as there was a considerable explosion in the valley. He scored with another header five minutes later, but this goal, like its predecessor, was disallowed for allegedly being offside. This head of mine, said Kiko, slapping the back of it, was damn well not offside.

But it was no use. General Mikado had accepted Dino Zoff's challenge with some amusement, on condition that he himself didn't just play but also acted as referee. I don't have any yellow cards on me, he said, so there's only a bullet waiting for anyone who complains.

An obvious foul on the goalkeeper preceded the score of three-nil to General Mikado's team. Dino Zoff was charged in the air as the ball was centred and fell to the ground. As a team, the Serbs were playing with such fierce determination that you might have thought their lives and not their opponents' depended on the result.

Kozica made it three-one with a long shot that sent the ball straight into the goal. A minute later Kozica was being carried off the field with an open wound on his forehead, having been first knocked off his legs by one of the touchline soldiers and then beaten with the man's rifle butt. After that the Territorials stopped attacking down the wings.

In the sixtieth minute Mickey Mouse and Kiko collided. They both fell to the ground and the game went on. The sun was resting on the tree-tops to the west, the midges were hovering as twilight began to fall. Since Mickey Mouse, two metres six tall, had been marking the Territorials' best man after Kiko's two disallowed goals, Kiko hadn't had a chance of another header. After the collision they both stayed sitting there, gingerly feeling their chests. Kiko made a face: lucky thing we have ribs, he said, and Mickey Mouse nodded: yes, ribs come in useful. His eyes wandered uneasily over Kiko's face, he took a deep breath and let it out again. The big man was about to stand up, pushing off from the ground with his fist, but Kiko grabbed hold of it and whispered: that's right, Milan, stand up, don't stay down again, just don't stay down any more.

No? said Mickey Mouse in surprise, opening his mouth wide, and when Kiko next headed the ball he didn't stay sitting there but stood as if rooted to the ground, he didn't leap into the air, the ball bounced and it was three-two.

After this successful shot, which left the Territorials only one down, General Mikado managed to foil all their efforts to get anywhere near his team's goal. Every tackle was said to be a foul, the whistle blew every time there was an attacking pass, every throw-in went to his team, even for obvious clearing kicks that landed out of play.

Two minutes before the end of play Kiko forced his way through on the inside left, avoiding any kind of physical contact so as to give General Mikado no excuse to blow the whistle for a foul, he swerved, he dodged, he leaped. With the last of his strength he centred the ball in front of the Serbian goal – a harmless shot at the goal-post, but the Serbian defender on the right kicked the air, Mickey Mouse missed it on the bounce, the rest of them, friend and foe alike, either slid past the ball or were too surprised to react, and it rolled to Meho's feet. Meho had done nothing during the second half but wander around the pitch, lost in thought, muttering to himself as if hypnotised: it can't be so difficult, Audrey darling, it can't be so difficult. He had been sent off because he was getting in his own team's way, but after three more players had to go off because of injury – either from fouls or beaten up by the touchline soldiers – he was brought on again.

So there lay the ball at his feet, but Meho didn't even look at it, he was staring eastward, enraptured. The sound of heavy artillery fire came from the valley, metallic, hollow. Moving in slow motion like an action replay on TV, as if none of his movements had anything to do with him, he shifted his weight to the left and easily clipped the ball into the goal with his right leg, kicking it round the back of the leg he was standing on. This is for you, he murmured, reaching under his shirt, a goal for you. Eyes shining, he put the photo of Audrey Hepburn to his lips, whispered: hey, real Hollywood stuff, Audrey love, oh, fuck me, what a happy ending!

Meho had been in the States in 1986, the only time he had ever been to the west. He'd saved his wages as a brickie for five years, living with his father and never spending money unnecessarily. Evening after evening he watched American films, mostly thrillers, horror movies, and films featuring Audrey Hepburn. He learned to swear in English and could order coffee without any Bosnian accent.

After scoring his goal Meho wandered over the field with his head tilted back. The game went on, the ball hit him in the back once, but Meho wasn't interested in that, he was interested in the sky. Someone shouted his name. We are the champions, replied Meho in English. Arriving at his team's penalty area he stopped and put out his hand to see if it was raining. Wrinkling his nose, he crossed his arms over his chest, as if rain really were falling and it was cold. Someone fell at his feet, there was excitement, uproar, a whistle, a salvo of gunfire.

Why are my fingernails always dirty? I'd love to phone, call someone on the phone again. Meho talked to the sky out loud, getting in other people's way, was pushed and shoved, staggered.

A group of players had gathered around General Mikado. Only when someone fired into the air did the men scatter. Penalty! shouted the general, taking the ball. Dino Zoff shook his head, that was never a foul! he protested, and gazed at the ball that was now lying at the requisite point. General Mikado stepped up to take the penalty after he himself had mimed the foul and blown the whistle.

You shut your stupid mouth! the Serbian goalie snapped at Dino Zoff from one side. He had run all the way across the pitch from his own penalty area after the alleged foul, got one of the touchline soldiers to give him a pistol, and was now aiming it at Dino from the left-hand spruce tree. Maybe you can stop the penalty, he said, squinting along the pistol, but can you stop a bullet too?

General Mikado grinned, jerked his thumb in his goalie's direction, and took a run up.

Meho had turned his back to the penalty kick by this time and moved away from the penalty area, and he didn't look back. Perhaps they're just shooting in high spirits down there, he told his Audrey, perhaps it's because the filthy war is over and they're celebrating. Audrey looked like a boy with her short hair. She was wearing black and leaning against a white wall. Meho looked up from the photo and glanced absently at the place where some beech trees grew on the edge of the plateau, and the cart track described a sharp curve to the left around a rock before beginning the steep descent into the valley. The wind rose in the east and grew stronger. Meho, already near the trees, could see the wind making the leaves tremble. Meho was trembling too, even more than he had trembled in the forest when surrounded by mines. The gust of wind cooled Meho's face amidst the tears that came after a shot rang out from the Serbian goalie's pistol behind his back, followed by a sharp sound like a very loud slap. His tears came not in torrents this time, but they were considerable all the same. Oh, fuck these bloody waterworks, muttered Meho, rubbing his eyes, but they wouldn't stop.

The crowd was murmuring behind him, then there was a shout of glee, then sounds and cries which the weary Meho probably didn't hear at all, and he could hardly have made any sense of it, just as he couldn't have told Serbian from Bosnian jubilation, people cheered in much the same way in this country. And even if he had seen the goal that was greeted with such cheering he couldn't have said for certain from this distance whether the ball had flown sixty, seventy or even eighty metres before going into the Serbian goal. For any moment now Meho would have reached the beeches at the far end of

the clearing. He would look down into the valley, although from a height of over a thousand metres it's as difficult to tell war from peace as it is to tell the words and laughter of your friends from the laughter of your enemies. But the view was impressive: indescribably beautiful, Meho whispered to Audrey seconds before he was shot down. The bullets hit the number ten on the red and white shirt. It had been worn by Dejan Savićević on 29 May 1991 when Red Star beat the French champions Olympique Marseille in a penalty shoot-out in the final of the European Cup. Meho had watched the game with his father. Reception was poor. Meho's father had to hold the aerial in a certain position above his head for the whole ninety minutes to keep the picture from going fuzzy. He didn't even dare put it down at half-time, so Meho made him meat sandwiches and fed them to him. Next day Meho bought the Number Ten shirt for himself and a new TV set for his father.

The Serbian goalie had driven tears to Meho's eyes with his first shot and two bullets into his back with two more shots. The first shot was meant for Dino Zoff, but it missed him by a few centimetres and hit one of the spruce-tree goalposts. The goalie had fired too soon, the noise took General Mikado's mind off his run-up, his penalty shot crashed into the right-hand spruce tree and the ball rebounded straight into the arms of the motionless Dino Zoff. He looked incredulously from one dismayed marksman to the other, then from one goalpost to the other, and last of all at the abandoned goal at the far end of the pitch. Then he kicked the ball with all his might.

Well, hurricanes fuck me! Meho would have greeted the lurching trajectory of the ball that scored this goal in those or similar words. It may even be that one and the same gust of wind first dried his tears and then gave Dino Zoff's shot the impetus it needed for the ball to end up in the Serbian goal. General Mikado froze rigid amidst the cheering of the Territorials, and he hesitated, clearly not sure what to do now.

Our ball! Goal-kick! he said. No one heard him, so loud were the jubilations over the three-four score. Goal-kick, that was no goal! He whistled through his fingers, but only when the Serbian goalkeeper's second two bullets hit Meho did all fall silent around him. The general pointed at the Serbian end. No goal! No goal!

Gavro's clarinet would still be lying, wrapped in its burgundy velvet cloth, where he had left it before he went to war: in the living-room cupboard in his parents' house, which smelled of lavender even in winter, even after his brother's death. Here and now, behind God's feet, Gavro didn't need any instrument to earn an encore: he joined in with Mikado's shrill whistling, extended it, raised it to the key of F major, linked it to a series of light, catchy, childish tunes, unexpectedly turned it into a waltz, then suddenly, over its playful six-eight time, launched into a wild csárdás – and while his composition gained in colour and speed Dejan Gavrilović, known as Gavro, that outstanding Belgrade clarinetist, sat down on the grass.

The csárdás stung Mickey Mouse into action. Don't sit there, he growled at his team-mate who had fetched the ball out of the goal. Mickey Mouse took it from him and marched across the pitch. Don't sit there, he called rather louder. Two more Serbian players sat down on the grass next to Gavro and, like him, gave no sign of wanting to play on.

General Mikado's throat was flushed red with fury, and when the general, who was in fact a lieutenant, had spent most of his life laying tiles, and was married with four daughters whose first names all began 'Ma', took aim to hit Gavro on the back of the head for the third time that day, the clarinetist's hand seized the tiler's wrist. The csárdás swung into Spanish dance music, don't you ever do that again, said Gavro's eyes, and the

flamenco sang the refrain. Gavro whistled, Mickey Mouse marched on, and Marko knocked his own goalie over and took the pistol away from him.

Well, fuck me if it isn't Muhammad Ali! would have been Meho's praise for Marko's simple left hook. As it was, General Mikado was the only one to curse – fuck it all, what the hell's going on? – when his goalie hit the ground and his striker shook the pain out of his hand. What's the idea? shouted the general, biting Gavro's fingers as they held tight to his wrist, what do you lot want? he roared with the clarinettist's blood on his teeth, looking round. Goal-kick! he ordered Mickey Mouse, who was carrying the ball to the middle of the field.

One by one his players sat down. So it's mutiny, is it? laughed the general. Deserters! And he lashed out. Defectors! I'll have you court-martialled! The men on the touch-lines sat down too, although some of the soldiers got their guns ready, not sure whether they ought to aim at their own side too.

Most of the Serbian soldiers just looked at the ground, not as if they were afraid of their commander but as if they were embarrassed by this angry man with his hairy back. As if they were ashamed of something, as if they had just been asked a very simple question and they didn't know the answer. General Mikado shouted himself into a fury, his entire neck was one large red patch, shoot them all down! he shouted, give me my fucking gun! He stepped back and spun round. No one stopped him, no one answered the very simple question. The Territorials stood around too, as if they were merely props on this stage where a short, powerful man with a bare torso was ranting and raging.

No one could find an answer to the very simple question – except for Mickey Mouse. Most questions had been too hard for him in school, at home his father had beaten exclamation marks into his back with his leather belt, and here behind God's feet there were no questions, only orders. Milan Jevrić, nicknamed Mickey Mouse, put the ball roughly on the kick-off position, placed his foot on it, and thundered the answer at maximum volume above the soldiers' heads, above General Mikado, who had got hold of a gun but hesitated to use it, above the field, above the trenches, above Meho's dead body, above the beech trees, above the wind and above the valley, he answered it in as loud and clear a voice as if, with this one great shout, he was going to give all the answers to all the questions he had never been able to answer before: It's four-three to them, replied Milan Jevrić, nicknamed Mickey Mouse, answering the simple question. They're leading, he pointed out, but maybe we can turn it around in extra time, said Mickey Mouse, thrusting out his lower lip, maybe we can still score.

His words got the Serbian defenders to their feet, the Serbian midfield players rose too, and the Serbian striker poured plum brandy not on his Ali-like fist, which hurt him, but down his own throat in such quantities that Dino Zoff looked longingly at him.

Mickey Mouse did the defending by himself, all the rest attacked. Gavro, as the new umpire, gave them eight minutes' injury time. The Territorials defended with ten men and whacked every ball back into the Serbian half. Not too hard because of the mines. The balls promptly came back again, Mickey Mouse persistently kicked them long and high back to the attackers. In the last minute the Territorials counter-attacked, Kiko failed to get past Mickey Mouse, who was everywhere now, even in goal. Mickey Mouse's answer instantly followed, for Mickey Mouse had learnt the trick of giving answers. He snapped up the ball and dribbled through the Territorial ranks as if he'd grown up with Maradona instead of a muck-fork. The veins on his throat were bulging, he pressed his lips together, he simply ran down two Bosnian defenders and kicked the ball towards Dino Zoff's goal from a good thirty metres away. The gigantic man put all his power into this one shot, and

the cry he uttered after it sent dozens of birds flying up from the forest. And the ball, that dirty, poorly mended ball, flew across the clearing towards Dino Zoff's goal.

Gavro whistled for the end of play at 17.55 hours. Mickey Mouse's shot was the last in the game. The players dropped to the grass, exhausted. The echo of the whistle died away. No one clapped. No one cheered. Heavy silence welled up from the valley to the plateau. Weapons were quietly picked up. Marko tilted the schnapps bottle over Dino Zoff's mouth until a few drops moistened his lips, mingling with the blood on them. Ah, slivovitzum bonum deorum donum! Did I keep it out? lisped Dino Zoff, handing Marko a tooth. The sun cast the long shadows of trees on the clearing behind God's feet, behind God's feet in military boots, behind God's feet with the blisters coming up on them, behind God's dribbling feet.

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell

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