

SEMEZDIN MEHMEDINOVIĆ

The Devil and the Rose

Translated by Jim Hicks

I BROUGHT INTO TOWN A BAG FULL OF FAKE TATTOOS—stickers with roses and eagles. I sold the whole lot, bag included, except one. That night I stuck the last one on myself, but it was so strong it burned and cut into my skin. Eventually, after really working at it, I rubbed the eagle off my shoulder.

Then I went back to my job. I haven't mentioned that yet—I work in the state archives, filming cadavers. I'm supposed to record the place where the death occurred, but I find that hard to bear. So I go to the morgue—there nobody cries. After that I film the funeral service and then the archival record for the deceased is complete.

Film is my great love, but before this I didn't have much luck. Every director in the world would be jealous of what I'm doing now. Trouble is, by the time I was given this chance, I'd already lost my belief in art, in make-believe—all that metaphysical kitsch. I often used to put my hand down on the forehead of the dead, expecting something, some sign that yesterday this body stood upright, making it human, an unbelievable creature that could open its mouth and say "I!" Ego! There was nothing. Cold to the touch, as if nothing was there even before the instant of death, just sheer vanity. Compared to man, obviously, the shape of stone is more perfect, and plastic even more so. My visits to the morgue would actually be useful if they could help me get past this healthy disgust for the human body...

In the morgue, I'd meet foreign reporters who had come smelling stories with blood in them. I took advantage of those encounters—you have to live on something—and from time to time I would write an article or two myself. Mostly I just made it up, because I hate going back, finding out things about when the corpse was alive. Making it up is much easier and, anyway, the lives of men don't have all that many possibilities...

When J__ was brought in—someone I had written about—the corpse was already swollen up from gas poisoning. It had been lying dead for ten days already in a studio apartment before it was discovered. In that state, he wasn't the guy I used to know from his youth in Belgrade—a handsome boy with a curler in his hair who unavoidably grew up into a homo. He came with his lover to Sarajevo and the war was waiting for him. But now I've started retelling his story, and that wasn't my idea. Anyway, filming him dead I looked down and felt nothing. Another unfamiliar body. But knowing

it was *his* death made me remember a scene from events long ago, from one of those crazy nights. On the chair next to me, J___ sat with his hands behind his head. When I realized he was sleeping, I took out my Zippo and put the flame under the hair of his armpit. He jumped around and flapped his arms like people do when they imitate roosters. And now that image is linked with his death—in it I recognize him. His death is a cock-a-doodle-doo. I don't fully understand it, but that doesn't matter to me.

I think our senses prevent us from having any experience whatsoever of death.

The head of the morgue shows me the photos taken when I was gone from the city. So I realize smart editors have been sending him female reporters to cheer him up, and that's news. He points with his finger: "She's a Belgian journalist!" "She's German!"

After I've seen them, he asks me, "What do these photographs have in common?" Three tries and I still haven't guessed, so he impatiently shows me that they're all preparing dinner: "Look, potatoes!" In the background of every photo, it's true, they're all cooking potatoes. Since then I've refused to eat them. There's something weird when an undertaker has that level of affection for potatoes, but I didn't tell him that. Still, to this day, for me death has the taste of cooked potatoes. I know it's nonsense, but even so I won't be eating them anytime soon . . .

Then it happened—the thing that made me get started on this story. In the morgue, with my camera on me, I walked up to her, stretched out on the table. How can I describe it? She was the sort to make you believe again in the beauty of the human body. Nothing else comes to mind. When I reached her, I saw that the shell had destroyed half of her face. Even so, that didn't fill me with shivers. I began to shudder when I noticed on her neck a rose tattoo—my fake tattoo. She had my mark on her, like an imaginary kiss. My presence in her death sent real shivers down my spine. But from radiance, not fear. A soft tremor in the lungs, as if my mind had transmitted the image of tattooed petals trembling, a metaphysical whisper.

For the first time in a long time, I had managed to be surprised. Like a ranger who marks tree trunks with a hammer, or a meat inspector who puts his stamp on live meat . . . I used these sorts of comparisons to drive away bouts of self-pity. As if I trusted again in the world. And the people in this world.

And then Ulrike came by, a tiny little reporter with a Prince Valiant haircut. She has the bad habit of smiling even when there's no reason for it. When I told her about the neck and the tattoos, traveling through the whole of Europe before ending up here, in this heart of darkness, in Sarajevo . . . She was hunting for a story and pushing money at me. I tried to refuse, it's true, but I already had the cash in my hand. And I had the moral already in mind:

comparing the rose tattoo to the roses that shells cut into the asphalt—what a killer story! So I agreed. To finish it off, I knew I'd need to get a photo of the girl, one from when she was still alive.

Other than that, some new bodies helped get me past the initial shock I'd experienced meeting that girl on the table. These were more than two years old, fully dead. I filmed in silence, while the chief, wearing rubber gloves, prepared the identification. He took a watch off one decomposed wrist and said to himself, loudly, "A Rolex!" He wound the spring a couple times, then said, "It works!"

The job I'd prepared for went badly from the start. While I was filming the funeral, a hand suddenly came into the frame and, on the wire surrounding the graveyard, a black, man's umbrella was hanging. Just after that, a hand again appeared in the frame and, next to the first umbrella, there was a second, a woman's. Like a prearranged artistic composition. My first thought was "These umbrellas are a bad sign." In any case, after finishing the shots, I put down my camera and went up to the group gathered around the gravesite. I approached her brother, expressed my sympathy, and then went straight to the point. I explained what my job was and said that her photograph would be needed for the archives. He looked at me with indifference, then leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Fuck off!"

Trying to persuade him made no sense, so I turned away from her grave. I didn't feel humiliated, I felt no shame at what he had said. As if there were a rose in my heart and an ugly thorn had risen up inside it, such was the self-pity I felt. I am no different from this world in which there is no pity. When I meet a man who has real compassion for another, I will feel differently.

Slowly I made my way through the dense field of graves. Afterwards I took a handful of fresh snow and rubbed it vigorously between my palms . . .