

Dušan  
**KOVAČEVIĆ**



The  
**PROFESSIONAL**  
AND OTHER PLAYS

Translated from the Serbian by  
*Randall A. Major*

■ Laguna ■

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## FOREWORD

Dušan Kovačević (1948) is Serbia's best-known playwright and screenwriter. One of his plays, *The Professional*, which has been running in Belgrade since 1989, was staged by Circle Repertory Company in New York in 1995, and his film *Underground* won the Palme d'Or at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival. As then "The New York Times" correspondent Chris Hedges noticed, Dušan's movies and plays have achieved cult status within the former Yugoslavia. Also, the often cynical new generation, which has paid in blood for the nationalist dreams of its leaders, recites lines from his work like mantras. "Don't let them kill you until we've won," taken from the play *Radovan III*, is, like dozens of other lines, part of the vocabulary in Serbia.\*

Showing of *The Professional*, his 12<sup>th</sup> play, in the United States and London in 1995 turned considerable attention toward Dušan Kovačević in the U.S. The Sundance Institute invited Mr. Kovačević as a guest to a seminar for screenplay writers. In an article for "Sundance Screenwriters Lab" in January 1995, Robert Redford hailed *The Professional* as a story which can be

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\* Chris Hedges, *Scathing 'Conscience' of Balkans Spares No One*, "The New York Times International", February 8, 1996.

the heart of any medium: “Even though the piece is politically oriented, it has a solid, wonderful story. The story of two people, two wills, two souls which carry within themselves tragedy, humor, hopelessness and humanness is a universal theme”.

In *The Professional*, Kovačević strikes a familiar theme. The two main characters differ in age, ideology, ethnicity and social circumstances. Teja was a dissident who is now flourishing following the collapse of communism. Luka, a former secret service agent who spied on Teja, has had to deal with the destruction of a world that gave him meaning. He now drives a cab. The two are brought together by their past relationship, although they have now changed roles. The oppressed has become the oppressor, and the new power structure is as corrupt and immoral as the old. And like Louis-Ferdinand Celine and Edward Albee, Mr. Kovačević insists on plunging into the depths of human despair and depravity with his dark humor. It is humor, he says, that best points out the incongruity of a people living in economic and political decline but clutching at fantastic myths of past glory and achievement.

*Marathoners Run a Victory Lap* is a farce about five generations of a family of undertakers – with characters between 25 and 125 years old – in which a rebellion and conflict over dominance erupt after the death of their oldest member. By reselling coffins that a rival company digs out from the local graveyard, the Topalović family comes into conflict with the world of the living. A timeless look at human greed and folly at a time of constant turmoil in the Balkans.

*The Balkan Spy* is a story about a self-proclaimed protector of state security, a paranoid spy-like citizen who sees in his innocent tenant a threat and danger to society. With the help of his equally uncompromising brother, he makes unbearable not only the life of the tenant but also the lives of his own family members by trying to ruin the tenant’s plans, which exist only in this Balkan spy’s head.

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*Springtime in January* is a piece that served as a screenplay for the film *Underground*. Aided by a war profiteer and adventurer, a group of people produce arms and ammunition for resistance to Nazi authorities in the secret underground of a family house during WW2. The business lasts for 15 years after the end of the war and the profiteer, using all kinds of disinformation, makes the people living underground believe that the war is still going. When the heavily armed leader of the underground group finds a secret exit to the outer world, he starts shooting and killing the actors and the film crew that are making a film about WW2.

In *Dress Rehearsal for a Suicide*, where life and theatre overlap, three eccentric businessmen try to prevent a disillusioned actor and desperate debtor from committing suicide by jumping off a bridge. If that were to happen, their illegal business activities, including sailing the river, marina construction and fishing, would be uncovered. In the end, it is unveiled that the actor's intention to commit suicide was just a dress rehearsal for a suicide in a theatre play.

*Love in the Time of Hypnosis* is a fantasy about limits and alienation in the contemporary world. A family is living in the mountain wilderness, far from urban society, and while the parents don't want to abandon the illusions of their own reality and dreams, their daughter wants to leave them and go into the unknown. Young people are leaving their hearths, but natural beauty and human warmth remain intact somewhere in an authentic world that is slowly disappearing.

In an interview, Mr. Kovačević stated: "We suffer from primitive capitalism and this means we also suffer from primitive art. It all reminds me of Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway*, where petty mobsters have been handed control of everything from our factories to our cultural life. The war that never ends is the war between the parent and the child, the father and the son. The only solution is love and compassion. In

our families we have fought too often over ideologies. Private wars have led to real wars. This is our fate.”

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Dušan Kovačević graduated from the Academy for Theatre, Film and Television in the Serbian capital Belgrade, worked as an assistant professor at the Academy and as a dramaturge for TV Belgrade’s drama program. He served as Serbian ambassador to Portugal in 2005 and 2006.

Kovačević is the author of 21 plays (the 6 most popular and awarded plays were translated in this book into English), 10 screenplays, two novels and two books of short stories. He is the author of several radio dramas and TV series, and has also directed many theatre plays and films based on his own written works.

He has received many domestic and international awards, including the Grand Prix for best screenplay at the International Film Festival in Montreal, Canada twice (for the movies *The Balkan Spy* and *The Professional*), awards for best film and best screenplay at the International film festival in Viareggio, Italy, the FIPRESCI award by the international jury of film critics for *The Professional*, the Chaplin Award in Vevey, Switzerland for the film *Who’s Singin’ Over There?* and many other awards at film festivals in Valencia, Vienna, Marseille, etc. The film website IMDb has put the film *Underground* in 223<sup>rd</sup> place among the best 300 movies of all time.

His plays have been translated into 27 languages and staged in the U.S., Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Greece, Cyprus, Germany, Austria, France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Argentina, Russia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Turkey, Albania, Iran, Israel, Japan and countries of former Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

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“The main theme of all of my work is the insecurity of the individual before the system,” Kovačević says. “It does not matter what the system is called, what ideology it embraces, the distortion done to the individual, the violence carried out by the system against the individual, is always the same and so is the result.”

He is a permanent member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and has been the manager of the “Zvezdara Theatre” in Belgrade since 1998.

*Dejan Mihailović*

# **THE PROFESSIONAL**

A woeful comedy, according to Luka

## **CHARACTERS:**

**I** – Teodor “Teja” Kraj

**LUKA LABAN** – the Professional

**MARTA** – Teodor’s secretary

And one, quite sane, **LUNATIC**

*My name is Teodor Kraj. My mother called me 'Teja'. My friends did also... while I still had some. My name, most likely, tells you nothing. I am a writer... At least I hope I am... I'm forty-five years-old. So far I've published two books.*

*A book of poetry and a book of short stories. That's slightly depressing! And I look like I've written twenty novels. Magnificently bad.*

#### *WHERE ARE MY UNWRITTEN BOOKS?*

*The following story is unbelievable, but it's true. And it's an answer to that unsettling question.*

*I'm writing this manuscript all at one time, right on the typewriter, just as everything played itself out. The encounter with that man changed my entire former life. Is it possible for someone to change your entire former life? It is! How could that be? Easy, if you're as fortunate and smart as I am.*

*I was sitting in my office and leafing through some submitted manuscripts. Poetry collections, short story collections, collections of novels, collections of travelogues, collections of memoirs... Most of that scribbling had also been offered to other publishing houses. I knew all of the content by heart because*

*the drunken writers told it to me in various taverns. Since the day I became the Editor-in-Chief, I have never managed to eat supper without also “consuming” a fresh, ingenious work... And the telephone just kept ringing. I didn’t want to pick up, because I knew that one of the graphomaniacs was calling. I thought, at least today, on this very day, I don’t have to get upset. However, the telephone rang incessantly. And it would have rung all day had I not answered it.*

I: Hello? Yes... Yes...

*(I was, of course, right. A writer whom I deeply despise and whose very name nauseated me was calling me. About his books, I thought, spoke, and wrote only the worst things... But now, at this job, I was no longer my private “I”, here I was now Someone whom Somebody appointed instead of Someone Else to worry about and take care of Something. And despite my indescribable revulsion, I tried to keep the conversation cool. However...)*

I: Yes... Yes, that’s me... Well, how can you possibly be asking me this again? Your book was rejected before I took over this job. I’ve been here, as you know, for not quite two months, and your book was rejected, as you also know, six months ago... I beg your pardon? Why am I using the word “rejected”? You find it offensive... Oh, okay, your book is not in our publishing plan or schedule during the next year. Does that sound better? I’m impertinent? I’m impertinent? And think about it, how could I have read a book which was returned to you six months ago? It wasn’t returned? Well, who did you give it to? All right, go ahead and ask him for it... He said I have it? He is lying. Tell him he’s lying...

*(And as I listened to the hysterical, pre-cardiac-arrest voice, preparing myself to answer in like manner and slam down the receiver so that his encrusted eardrum would burst, an*

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*overly loud song was heard from the office next door. The former editor, replaced because of his catastrophic business practices, had warned me and the whole publishing house that he was alive and that he would, sooner or later, take his revenge on us. I went over to the wall and slammed my fist into it. The song grew a little quieter, but the madman continued screaming from the telephone receiver. To make things worse, enter my secretary Marta. She came into the office and spoke to me conspiratorially, looking back at the door as if being pursued by someone.)*

MARTA: There's a man looking for you.

*(I nodded and indicated that he should wait, and then, choking down a curse, I finished the telephone quarrel.)*

I: Please talk to the person you gave the manuscript to, to whoever read it, and whoever rejected it!

*(I intentionally emphasized the word "rejected" and slammed down the phone. Marta observed me with a pitying, lovely, and affectionate countenance. I was sorry because she felt sorry. She waited for me to calm down a bit and to wipe the sweat from my brow.)*

MARTA: Do you know how high your blood pressure is?

I: I know, Marta... but how am I supposed to talk to a man who is... incorrigible, rude, crude, and primitive! And, and, how am I to explain things to this idiot who terrorizes us with his music...

MARTA: Please try to calm down.

*(She came over to me, put her hand on my shoulder, looked at me, and smiled.)*

MARTA: You promised me that, today, you would not allow yourself to get irritated... At least not today.

I: Yeah... How is your daughter?

MARTA: Well, so-so...

I: She'll be all right, you'll see... Shall we go to lunch? Reserve us a place in a nice restaurant. Wherever your heart desires.

MARTA: I don't know... I don't feel much like going to lunch.

I: You promised me.

MARTA: Yes... What do I tell this guy?

I: Who?

MARTA: Well, I told you, there's a man looking for you.

I: What man?

MARTA: I don't know who he is. I've never seen him before. He looks a bit odd. I don't think he's a writer.

I: Oh, he's a writer. He's surely a writer, Marta. Nowadays everyone is a writer, and no one looks like a writer anymore.

The less he looks like a writer, the more books he's written...

MARTA: Don't get upset.

I: Yes... Please, tell him I'm not here.

MARTA: I already did, but he said he knew that you're not here, but you should see him anyway.

*(I thought I didn't hear her well.)*

I: He told you what?

MARTA: That you should see him regardless of the fact that you're not here... He said he's not here on his own personal business.

I: Then who is he here for?

MARTA: I don't know... He's carrying a satchel and a rather large black suitcase.

I: A satchel and a large black suitcase?

MARTA: Yes.

I: Till now they always brought manuscripts in file folders.

MARTA: He looks like someone who just came in on a train... Maybe he's a relative of yours.

*(I looked at her and immediately grew angry, because she obviously wasn't aware of what she'd said.)*

I: A relative of mine?

MARTA: Yes...

I: He looks a bit odd, is carrying a satchel and a rather large black suitcase? That, according to you, could be a relative of mine?

MARTA: You didn't understand what I was saying...

I: I understood you, Marta, I got it. You were just saying what everyone thinks. A guy can live in this city for a hundred years and there's still always someone around who will talk about where he really came from. Whatever good you did here, everything bad—you brought it with you from...

MARTA: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that.

I: People hide their thoughts in words. I don't know who said that, but I've felt it on my own shoulders! Why would some sort of madman be my cousin?

MARTA: Well, he asked me, "Is Teja here?" And you told me that's what your mother called you.

I: He asked you if Teja was here?

MARTA: Yes.

I: Someone told him that is what my mother used to call me... Let him in and, please, call me out for some sort of emergency meeting... And, please don't be angry. This crazy fellow is pissing me off.

*(I kissed her hand, she smiled, pirouetted like a ballerina, and slipped out with an elegant stride. I raised my arms above my head to stretch out my back and my soul... And then an elderly man came in, in relatively good shape, wearing a long brown raincoat, with carefully combed hair, clean-shaven, carrying a satchel in one hand, and a rather large black suitcase in the other. He stopped, looked at me and gave me a friendly smile.)*

MAN: Hello.

I: Hello.

*(He looked at me like a childhood friend or a close relative who hadn't seen me for a while. Marta was right. He did look like a relative who had just come in on a train. I stood there, trying to remember who he was... I have at least two thousand relatives. I hadn't seen most of them for twenty years and more. And all of them are taking note of things, writing, scribbling things down.)*

I: Can I help you?

*(The man watched me in silence, and then shrugged as if he were sorry that I had greeted him like that. I tried to return his smile, however, it was too late. He grew despondent and asked me quietly.)*

MAN: You don't know who I am?

I: No ...

*(His smile fell onto the green office carpet. And I felt sorry for him, I don't know why.)*

MAN: You don't know?

I: I don't know... I'm really sorry, but...

MAN: Can I put my suitcase down?

I: Of course, no need to ask. Would you like to sit down?

MAN: No.

*(He put down the rather large and obviously rather heavy suitcase, and then he looked me straight in the eye. Instantly, I realized that he wasn't a childhood friend, or a forgotten relative.)*

MAN: I was sure you would "know" me, at least after the last two years... At least that much... However, now I can see...

I: Aren't you perhaps...

MAN: An old army buddy?

*(He gave a laugh, and suddenly became more formal.)*

MAN: Do you remember that story of yours: *Old Army Buddy*?

I: My story, *Old Army Buddy*?

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MAN: Yes. About the fellow who came up to you in the street, hugged you, kissed you on the cheek, and asked, “Do you see our pals?” And you stood there, just like now, and asked yourself: What pals? The man grew despondent, like I just did, and said: “You know, our pals from the army.” And you were relieved, you were happy, because at least you had something to go on. To make the poor guy happy, you said with certainty and alacrity: Our army pals? “I do see them, of course I see them! How could I not?” And the guy believed you, hugged you, patted you on the shoulder—he was happy you hadn’t forgotten it all, and he asked you: “And who do you see most often?” And... and then you, just like now, stood there and tried to remember at least one name. And you remembered Corporal Marko Kostić. And, greatly relieved, you said: “I often see Corporal Marko Kostić.” And the fellow just looked at you, dropped his gaze and whispered: “I am Corporal Marko Kostić.”

*(And then he smiled again. I smiled too, although I didn’t much feel like it.)*

I: Nice story, but, unfortunately, it’s not mine.

MAN: Yes, it is yours. So, if you please, don’t ask me if we are old army buddies... We’re not.

I: I’m sorry, what was your name again?

MAN: My name is Luka Laban... Luka Laban... My name, most likely, tells you nothing?

*(I had never heard of him. The man gave me a steely, calm stare. I started losing my temper, which isn’t difficult for me.)*

I: Comrade Luka, perhaps you’ve made some sort of mistake? In this building there are several people named Teodor...

LUKA: I know. But there’s only one Teodor “Teja” Kraj... I won’t keep you long. I know you’re going out to lunch with Marta...

I: How do you know that?

LUKA: Well, isn't today your forty-fifth birthday?

I: It is.

*(I looked at him in amazement. But then he went over to the desk, put down his leather satchel and, one after another, took out four bound books with prominent titles, like those usually done by street-side bookbinders. The covers were four different colors: black, blue, green, and white. He stacked them one atop the other, and then placed his hand on them, like a man showing off valuable goods or finishing off a price negotiation... I was relieved. A lot of things had crossed my mind. But it turned out, after all, that he was an everyday graphomaniac who had just made his arrival mysterious. I relaxed, guffawed, and returned to my chair. I leaned back and asked routinely, like a doctor who knows what a case is really all about.)*

I: Comrade Luka, those books are manuscripts, prepared for printing?

LUKA: Yes.

I: And you had them bound by a local bookbinder?

LUKA: No, my son Miloš bound them, and I just used a stencil to write out the titles. I didn't dare give them to a bookbinder.

I: Because it happens that they often lose or destroy a manuscript?

LUKA: Yes, but not just because of that...

I: And they're known, so I've heard, to report it to the police if there's something... awkward, problematic.

LUKA: They do, they do.

*(I was ever more certain and relaxed. A classic case of a paranoid graphomaniac.)*

I: Instead of the police working for the people, the people are working for the police... Do you mind if I have a look?

LUKA: Of course not. That's why I brought them here.

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*(I picked up the manuscript bound in blue and read the title out loud.)*

I: Orations about... What are the orations about?

LUKA: About everything.

I: Aha... All four books are *Orations about...*?

LUKA: No. The green book is a collection of short stories: *Stories from a Lost Homeland*. The third is a collection of urban stories, and so its title is: *Short, Urban Stories*. Something like Chekhov's anecdote-stories...

*(I looked at him. He was laying out the books calmly and reasonably, not the usual practice of such "writers". He picked up the fourth book, and instead of an explanation, he read the title aloud:)*

LUKA: *Encounters and Conversations*.

I: Nice, Comrade Luka...

LUKA: And in the satchel, there's also a play. For the theater.

I: A theater play?

LUKA: Yes. Yes, a one-act play. The working title is: *A Woeful Comedy*.

I: *A Woeful Comedy*?

LUKA: Yes. It may not be the best title, but it is surely the most truthful. And insofar as I understood Aristotle, in his art a writer dare not make mistakes in terms of the truth.

I: You've read Aristotle?

*(He and Aristotle? I looked at him as if he were a specter. He, this guy, had read Aristotle. I repeated the question because he hadn't answered.)*

I: You've read Aristotle?

LUKA: Read a bit, listened a lot more.

I: You listened?

LUKA: Yes... the truth is the truth.

I: You listened to Aristotle?

(Luka looked at me and said quietly,)

LUKA: If you please, you don't have to insult me.

I: Beg your pardon, but...

LUKA: It was more that I listened to things about Aristotle. In *Orations*, there's a lecture about Aristotle.

I: Don't get angry, Comrade Luka, but I have a question to ask. You're not a writer by profession?

LUKA: No.

I: You don't make your living by writing?

LUKA: No.

I: And you did all of this along with your daytime job?

LUKA: Yes.

I: Two books of stories, a book of *Orations*, a book called *Encounters and Conversations*, a theater play...

LUKA: And I have several hundred pages at home that still need to be rearranged and worked into a book.

I: My congratulations, Comrade Luka. Until two months ago, I was just a writer, and do you know how much I've written so far? Two books. Just two books. And you, while doing your regular job, have brought me your collected works.

LUKA: I really worked hard. I always tried to be a professional.

I: That's obvious, Comrade Luka. Really obvious... And there are more manuscripts in the suitcase?

LUKA: No. There is a variety of things in the suitcase.

I: A variety of things? What kind of things?

LUKA: Umbrellas, gloves, lighters, glasses, caps...

I: Caps?

LUKA: Yes.

I: Are there a lot of them?

LUKA: Well, yes, I guess a dozen or so... I mean, eleven.

I: You like caps?

LUKA: No. I never wore caps... These caps, I collected.

I: You collected caps?

LUKA: Yes. Caps... and a lot of other stuff.

*(Where is Marta now to get me out of here for that meeting? I began to grow angry with myself. This man was not to be blamed, he is what he is, but my passion for picking the brains of people beyond space and time bordered on mental illness. I looked at the clock, clapped my hands like someone bringing a matter to an end, and spoke the sentence with which I usually end such conversations. If only I had paid attention to intelligent folks earlier, as much as to the halfwits and lunatics, I might have done something smarter!)*

I: Comrade Luka, I'm really happy to have met you. I will read all of this carefully, and you drop by in ten days or so. Somewhere, here at the end of the month...

LUKA: I'm sorry, I can't.

I: Why can't you? You're from out of town?

LUKA: I am indeed, but I'm about to undergo surgery.

I: You're having surgery done?

LUKA: Yes.

I: Is it serious?

LUKA: It's not—if I survive.

I: Well...what should I do with these books of yours?

LUKA: With my books? Those are not my books.

I: They're not yours?

LUKA: No.

I: Then whose are they?

LUKA: Yours.

I: Whose?

LUKA: Yours, sir. Yours, my friend.

I: Mine?

LUKA: Yes.

I: Mine?

LUKA: Yes, those are your books.

I: What do you mean mine, Comrade Luka? What are you trying to say?

*(I laughed feebly.)*

LUKA: Please don't laugh, sir...

I: How can I not laugh? I had just started thinking you were serious, and then you give me "my" books. Whose books are these?

LUKA: Yours, sir... I am Luka Laban, a retired police agent.

I: Police agent?

LUKA: Yes... For many years, you were my official case. I was assigned to your life and work. These are your *Orations*, your stories, and your *Encounters and Conversations*. All of this is yours.

I: Mine?

LUKA: Yes.

I: All of this is mine? And how could all of this be mine?

LUKA: Easily. I just recorded everything and copied it down from the tapes.

*(I stood there holding onto the back of the chair. My gaze moved back and forth from the man in the raincoat to "my" books on the desk. He was watching me calmly, in a congenial way.)*

LUKA: We've known each other for eighteen years. Or rather, I have known you for eighteen years. In my official capacity for sixteen years, and two more years privately, because of my son.

I: Because of your son?

LUKA: Yes, because of my son Miloš. When they forced me to retire, two years ago, he asked me to go on looking after you.

I: To go on looking after me?

LUKA: Yes.

I: To keep following me?

LUKA: Yes... And to gather up everything you did.

I: So your son also works for the police?

LUKA: My son is a teacher of literature. Actually, he taught

literature, up until they fired him... Because of you.

I: Because of me?

LUKA: Yes, because of you.

*(Marta came into the office. She looked at the stranger dubiously. She announced what we had agreed.)*

MARTA: I'm sorry, they're demanding your presence at an emergency session of the Publishing Council.

I: Tell them, please, that I'll be a little late...

MARTA: You're not feeling well?

I: Could you be so kind as to have two cups of coffee brought in.

MARTA: You're not feeling well? What's wrong?

I: I'm all right...

MARTA: No you're not. You're awfully pale...

*(From the office next door, like a wave, a tide of choral song crashed in.)*

I: Please, Marta, go tell that idiot to quiet down a little, because if I have to go in there...

MARTA: He's an incredible low-life. I told him, and he said they were getting together to celebrate your birthday. They brought in food and drink from the hotel.

I: To celebrate my birthday?

MARTA: All of those people you reassigned to the printing house are in there. I argued with them... They insulted me...

*(She listlessly shrugged and went out... Luka was standing by the window, observing the hotel across the street.)*

LUKA: That woman respects you... and loves you. You know what happened to her husband?

I: I do.

LUKA: He died from leukemia?

I: Yes.

LUKA: No, he didn't.

I: He didn't?

LUKA: No, he didn't.

I: Well, she told me that he... So, what did he die of?

LUKA: Of himself.

I: Of himself?

LUKA: Yes. He hanged himself in the hospital... He got sick of himself, and he cured himself.

I: I didn't know.

LUKA: Since then, her daughter has fallen seriously ill... Poor woman.

*(He turned around and looked at me, somehow strangely, as if warning me.)*

I: I didn't know.

LUKA: That's why I told you... May I sit down? My back is killing me.

I: Yes, please...

*(I waved to a spot on the leather sofa, but he refused it, justifying himself with a smile.)*

LUKA: I can't sit on soft things. When I still could, I didn't have anywhere to sit. Now when I can—I don't dare. May I sit in your chair?

I: Yes, of course.

*(He went around the desk, pulled up the hem of his raincoat and sat in my chair, and I returned in front of the desk. Momentarily I found myself in the place where I belonged.)*

I: Comrade Luka, why was your son fired, because of me?

LUKA: Not because of you.

I: But you just said...

LUKA: Because of your books. More precisely, because of two of your books that he introduced into the curriculum.

I: And which of my books are so "problematic"?

LUKA: These here...

*(And he picked up the manuscripts bound in blue and white.)*

LUKA: *Orations about...* and *Encounters and Conversations*.

I: He was fired because of them?

LUKA: Yes.

I: *Orations about...* What are those *Orations* about, Comrade Luka? What are my books about, please tell me?

LUKA: Well, here... Have a look...

*(I circled the desk and leaned over the bound manuscript. He carefully turned the pages and explained things to me like a teacher explaining things to a remedial student.)*

LUKA: Miloš gave them all titles. I'm not versed in literature, a lot of it is unclear to me, but there are stories I like, there are sentences I've memorized, here and there is a truth that is close to my heart. So, *Orations about...* is a collection of your speeches in various places at various times, and about various matters. Mostly, all of those *Orations* are about communists and communism... I apologize for speaking so plainly, Miloš can talk like you speak and write, he's a teacher and I just work for the police.

I: Just go on talking the way you feel comfortable.

LUKA: Can I do it the way it's most truthful to me? Your first speech was also my first encounter with you. Eighteen years ago, at the Faculty of Philosophy, in the courtyard beneath the lindens, you gave a speech about freedom. I was there among the students. On assignment. That was when we started tracking you as a young and exceptionally dangerous man. I clandestinely recorded the speech, retyped it in my office, turned in two copies, and took one copy home. I wanted to read it slowly, to get to know you better, because I was told that you would be my assignment for quite some time. I perused it at home and concluded that you should

be killed. Simple job, the first time you get drunk, run over you with a car like a dog. Like the worst kind of stray.

I: Run over me like a stray?

LUKA: The next day, I proposed that very thing to my boss, but he said: Let's not dirty up the streets, Luka.

*(I looked at him like a monster, and he went on sitting there calmly.)*

I: You wanted to run over me? To kill me?

LUKA: Yes.

I: Are you joking, Comrade Luka?

LUKA: No. Had he told me then, "Run over him!" —you'd be dead. Not the first time or the last... There have been so many accidents.

I: But why, good Lord?

LUKA: What do you mean "why"? Why, at that time I was a communist down to the marrow in my bones, and in *On Liberty* you began with the words: "Nature needed a million years to make man out of a chimp, and communism needed just half a century to return man among the animals..."

I: I said that?

LUKA: You shouted it. Here, have a look. It's all here, word for word... I kept that speech at my house, in my folder, not knowing that the very same day I was opening a literary dossier in addition to the one at the police.

I: A literary dossier?

LUKA: That's how my son Miloš defines it. He re-christened your speeches as *Orations*, because he thought the titles should be literary, and not in law-enforcement style.

I: But they were in law-enforcement style?

LUKA: My title, for the whole book, was: *Public Appearances*.

*(The telephone rang again. I didn't pick up. Luka took out a rather large handkerchief and wiped his sweaty brow. I watched him, hoping that all of this was just a very bad joke.)*