

No, no, and no, no matter how hard he tried, no matter what he did, Mileta Micić could not accept the notion that the world would go on being there after his death. The thought that the very next morning after he died the sun would rise again in the east, that newspaper kiosks and grocery stores would open and city buses would rumble down shady streets, children would go to school and adults to work, that this would be a day, in a word, like any other, this thought cast him into despair. No, no, and no, he repeated to himself, everything cannot simply come to an end in such a way, that he would leave almost by stealth from the great world stage, as if we are nothing more than extras in our own lives, extras who slip out of a hidden side door, while on stage creatures remain cocooned, mummified, which suddenly claim to know all there is to know about us, in more detail and better than we know ourselves.

No, no, and no, Mileta Micić refused to accept this and nothing could sway him. There was also nothing, of course, that might confirm the possibility that he was right after all, no statement by any witness had been preserved anywhere, a statement to confirm, for instance, that someone, anyone, had come back to the stage, regardless of which door he'd left by. If there was someone who had been in the other world and had come back from there—not counting, of course, the heroes of myth—then the one, this one who did come back, had either forgotten it all, or had been banned from speaking of it. Mileta Micić immediately dismissed the latter possibility because a ban means nothing to members of the human race. He had seen countless times that the more vigorously a ban was imposed, the greater the likelihood it would be violated. Forgetting was something else and he could imagine visitors from the other world, the world of the dead, or rather those who had been permitted to return to the first world, the world of the living, crossing through a scanner of sorts at the border which would erase their memories, especially those having to do with their time spent in the other world.

No, no, and no, Mileta Micić fretted, it could not be so simple.

Life is more tangled than that, after all, and it does not resolve by simply crossing a border. Besides, who ever said there was a border zone between this here and that there, anyway? And what if these worlds are actually intermingled and partially overlap, so that there are dead among the living and vice versa? Seen from that angle, Mileta Micić mused that maybe his dilemmas were pointless, perhaps he had already been dead for a long time? If he was dead, how to be sure? Pinch himself? He pinched himself and yelped with pain. Good, he thought, he was alive. If he'd been dead, it wouldn't have hurt, for sure, and he also probably wouldn't have yelped. If the dead speak, he thought, they speak in deep voices. Even children who died prematurely, whose voices hadn't changed yet, even they spoke in deep voices.

No, no, and no, Mileta Micić warned himself, things can't possibly be like that! What was he thinking, he wondered, and where did he get this idea about life being like a horror movie? Life is more beautiful than that. Much more beautiful; with this assertion he would always agree, regardless of the fact that agreeing with it brought him so much pain and anxiety. If life were not beautiful, and the world were not beautiful, everything would be much easier. All it took was the thought of the magnificent structure of nature, the animal and plant kingdom, and then imagining that he would never see this ever again, and everything came tumbling down around him, he even tumbled down inside himself out of pure despair, out of his inability to influence things in any way. He could always, of course, wonder about the meaning of life, but no, no, and no, he said to himself a thousand times that he would not make such ridiculous mistakes. To wonder about the meaning of life is absurd while a person is living, since meaning surely lies in part in the very act of living. In other words, the meaning of life is life itself, or, should he want to be more precise, the meaning of life is in restoring death. One lives to die. That did not have the ring of a slogan likely to enjoy widespread popularity, thought Mileta Micić, but—if this is any comfort—the truth is never popular, is it?

Recently, Mileta Micić recalled, he had read a short story by a fellow writer from our part of the world in which the writer said

that the meaning of life was contained in love. How stupid, what a measure of credulity! Because, if there is something incapable of serving as a vehicle for the meaning of life, that would be love. How could such an unreliable emotion, so fickle and subject to the most varied influences, be banner-bearer in the caravan of meaning? No, no, and no, Mileta's entire organism rebelled, there is no place here for love, never has been, never will be. Love is transient, shamelessly selfish and easily replaceable, and therefore it cannot be what spurs a person not to believe in an end to life, the moment after which a person is no longer the way he was until that moment, a moment when we all become something else, no one knows exactly what, just as no one knows what happens at the very beginning, how a person becomes a person, where consciousness comes from and whether it later disappears to or has—as Mileta Micić had long been sensing—a manifold role, i.e. arriving with one person, leaving with that person, then coming back with another, without a word about where it had been and where it might go again.

No, no, and no, Mileta Micić smacked his right fist onto the open palm of his left hand, he would not give up so easily, he would not allow life to leave him to the mercy and mercilessness of death and he would show life who's in charge here, even though—when he had thought about it—it wasn't clear why he had it in for death when all death was seeking was whatever life had already done. It's not the arrival of death that makes a person die, but the departure of life, right? It's all life's fault, the birthing and the dying, the mocking duration after it has used you and discarded you like a plastic bag with a hole in it. He liked the image and he could clearly envision himself walking along, his legs far apart because of the largish hole on the plastic bag he was wearing. The bag was large and hung on him, and through the hole at the bottom his pendulum could be seen swinging in all four directions, exactly as he had once read in *Till Eulenspiegel*. He smiled wistfully when he remembered the books he had read in his erstwhile youth, but the melancholy brought him no relief, because at the same moment he thought of how people would be reading those same books when he was no longer there and he felt fury, and even ground his teeth.



No, no, and no, he cautioned himself again, he mustn't allow anger to gain the upper hand. A calm mind sleeps longer, he recited to himself and then asked himself what it was, really, that angered him in this fury of his. If all people go peacefully to their death, why would he think he deserved a different fate? Where did he get the right to demand eternal life? The person or people who came up with all this could have come up with the notion of eternal life—if they had been so inclined—but, evidently, they hadn't been and now it was too late to lodge a complaint. All the deadlines had passed many centuries before, and there were no indications of a revision in the offing. That could mean, thought Mileta Micić, that the only thing left to him was to raise his head and walk calmly where all had gone before while the chimes were tolling for eternal repose. But that image gave him no comfort either. It was easy to imagine the funeral scene—people at the cemetery, the excavated grave, the gravediggers with perspiring brows, women in black, men with crooked ties, snot-nosed children—and feel a part of the quivering emotions, but then followed the question of what they would all be doing the next day. Not what he would be doing, because for him it was clear: he would be lying in his coffin, while all the others went on living at their regular rhythms, as if Mileta Micić had never existed. Injustice, whispered Mileta Micić though he couldn't say why his departure to the other world would be “injustice,” and then it occurred to him that with his departure in fact the whole world would be departing, because didn't certain philosophers claim that the world is only an external image of our inner world? When we are gone, they said, then there is no world, there is nothing, you came from emptiness and to emptiness you return. But, is that the truth? Mileta Micić wondered, and how to test the validity of the statement? Because, if I am the one who is imagining the whole world, then I am imagining others who are, supposedly, imagining their worlds. No, no, and no, this whole story is overwrought, the world is either one, integral, or it does not exist at all. His departure changes nothing. The sun comes up in the east, sets in the west, it hides somewhere at night from the moon and the stars, and red clouds at night, if he remembered correctly, predicted windy weather with longer or

shorter spells of precipitation, of which there wouldn't be much, two millimeters tops, but only one millimeter was enough to drown a person. And of course, if he is already dead, the depth of the water is of no consequence whatsoever to him, this needs to be said since there are always the curious types who, intentionally or otherwise, either way, examine everything and ask hundreds of pointless questions, despite that fact that there is only a small number of truly important questions that need answering, or at least need a stab at an answer, during a lifetime. Though, thought Mileta Micić, this, too, is an exaggeration, because if a person already knows his fate, then no question matters—except one which might change that fate. In other words, there is no point to worrying and despairing, because whatever he tries, whatever answer he finds, nothing will be changed by it. At the end of everything, after all the questions and answers, after all the words and procedures, after all the trying and giving up, the same thing always remains—old, creaking, icy death. Which means, thought Mileta Micić, that one should never go into death without a sweater, just as one always takes a sweater along in the summertime, at the seaside, when going for a walk, because sea air is fickle, chilly at first, then damp, hot for a spell, then refreshing.

No, no, and no, Mileta Micić fretted, the answer to his question is not hidden in a sweater. The secret of life or death cannot be intertwined with knitting, though, on the other hand, he had to admit that knitting had always seemed a mystical act to him, the creation of a tangled structure that a person pulled onto himself and so, probably, became an unwilling accessory to the person who knitted him the sweater. There, instead of thinking about how to evade death, he was thinking of patterns and techniques for knitting. Knitting or crocheting, wondered Mileta Micić, suddenly uncertain of which is the more complicated and magical: two crisscrossed needles which seem to spar, or the crochet hook which, like a dentist's tool that is always inflicting pain, is forever hooking loops it has made itself, as if it wants to snare itself once and for all? He thought about this for a long time, and then he decided to lie down. The day had already stretched on beyond all measure, which was Mileta Micić's fault, he had to admit, as was his stubborn refusal to find meaning in the

absence of meaning, which had never been something those far wiser than he was had had in hand. He stared at his hands as if he might get an answer from them. However, the hands merely fidgeted in his lap and kept their silence. Only the right thumb, frozen, pointed upwards at the ceiling lamp, so Mileta Micić's gaze followed it up. The lamp was large, old-fashioned, and dusty. The bottom of the lowest glass globe was littered with dead bugs and moths, among them, visibly apart, was the black, desiccated shell of a cockroach. How did the cockroach get up there into the lamp globe, Mileta Micić wondered, what is this supposed to mean? Maybe the cockroach tried to get close to the light source, the terrifying glow that propelled even the boldest members of its kind into a race into shadow and darkness? Perhaps, in other words, it was looking for the same thing Mileta Micić was feverishly trying to discover. And all I have managed to learn, Mileta Micić sighed, is that I am not so different from a cockroach and that the same end surely awaits me. He stared at the dusty sediment of death on the bottom of the glass globe of the old-fashioned ceiling lamp, but there was nothing moving there, nothing offered unexpected hope, dust is only dust, just as death is always only death, and all that was left for him to do was to close his eyes, everything else would play out on its own, as it had so many times before, as it was doing here, this instant, now, when, any minute, there, now!