

*Dust in the Hourglass* by Arno Jundze

Translated by Žanete Vēvere - Pasqualini

THE WATCHMAN'S MOBILE HOME DISAPPEARS INTO THE NIGHT

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It's well past midnight. The sky is heavily overcast and the blue van – the watchman's mobile home in the middle of an up-market building site – has merged into the total darkness. If it wasn't for a pale light flickering in its window, shielded just by a blind, the optical illusion that there was in fact no such van would be complete.

He is standing stock still in the dark, smoking. The darkness has taken over everything, turning the ordinary landscape into something nonexistent. Glancing at the scene from afar, it might look as though the glowing spot of his cigarette as he inhales the smoke, along with the window, are the only sources of light in the entire universe covered by darkness. Under the heavy clouds, it's not even possible to make out the nearby metropolis, usually given away at night by the yellowish reflection in the sky coming from countless street lights, shopfronts, signs, windows and the lights of vehicles in motion. It's almost as if some fairytale giant had covered the surroundings with an enormous, thick blanket. The first spring cyclone brought from the nearby sea on a breeze blows gently over his head. The darkness and the total, warm silence feel like an unspoken promise from nature, confirming that the winter cold and unpleasant chill of melting snow are things of the past and the bubbling growth of spring will soon take over everything in its path.

The man is at a loss, although these words fail to convey the complicated, stream of conscience signals that he obstinately tries to ignore or even deny. They pour into his brain, as unstoppable as the warm flood of spring air in the black April sky. The bundle of notes he found in the house to be demolished has awoken a storm of long forgotten emotions.

For some years now, the man has led a very simple, modest life. A life where there is no place for complicated and intellectual “whys”. It turns out one can live quite well without them, miserable as that life might be. In his mind he avoids using a certain word that he once used to spit in contempt. But, every so often, it creeps up into his conscience like a horrid, fearless mouse somewhere under the floor. The word isn’t even Latvian. It began its march to victory around the time when the Soviet Union first started heading towards its downfall, swiftly ousting the previous and linguistically correct term, “wanderer”. Up until then, people of the sort referred to hadn’t existed as a class, but suddenly they appeared overnight. Ragged, stinking, drunk people of the gutter living anywhere they could, on dumping sites, in basements, attics and unlocked entrances. Flea and lice- ridden, sick. The Soviet police, *militia*, had been the first to come up with a common noun to describe this new human species and in the early days had even tried to fight these people, sunk as they were in rubbish. The term emerged from the standard protocol phrase in Russian, *bez opregelonovo mesta zitelstvo*, person of no fixed abode. Even if the Russian slang word stood for exactly the same thing, the acronym *BOMZ* soon took the place of the Latvian word for wanderer.

He lives almost like a *BOMZ*. No, not quite so badly, the mobile home has got all the conveniences, also his job on the building site is paid well enough, two sets of uniform, a warm jacket and footwear. His only expenses are food, cigarettes, cheap vodka and the previously mentioned Marina. Besides, he has his extra income from selling whatever sells here. He hardly spends anything from his watchman’s wages. Really, what has he got to complain about? It is not so bad after all. Any real *BOMZ* would be envious of him. And not only *BOMZ*. Here on the city outskirts there are countless people living in tiny homes, earning a lot less than him, doing jobs they hate and working their fingers to the bone.

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All the same. There is a rather thin line between the man's life here, on the building site, and that of a homeless person. He has no apartment of his own, no family, nor personal belongings except a small locked metal box with a plastic handle. No family – at least no family that had ever shown the slightest interest in him. No, to tell the truth, he does have some belongings: a couple of years ago when he found himself kicked out on to the street, he had left a bag of clothes – good clothes – with his former colleague, the old Fela. Among them, there had even been a *Hugo Boss* suit. What would he need it for now? Besides, it was highly likely that even kind-hearted Fela, tired of waiting for its owner, had already thrown the bag away. The man has thought of it sometimes. What would happen if he died? No, he isn't even forty yet. Although, the way he has been living all these years – alcohol of unknown provenance that sometimes smells so bad it is hard to swallow, endless bad cigarettes and cheap food – only a fool would fail to realize you can easily poison yourself on those home brewed vodkas and end up meeting your maker. And there would be no one to mourn him. He would be buried in a pauper's grave, a stick with a number on it marking his grave.

It scares him, but his existence in the twilight zone between the real world and the wanderers' brotherhood is an undeniable fact. As plain to see as the thin, cracking layer of ice that just a few days ago still covered the puddles on the frosty April mornings. In this much simplified life, in which reality is avoided and the will to be accountable for anything is totally lacking, there is no space for thoughts that go any further than – *I am running out of cigarettes, I should go and buy a stick of Marlboro tomorrow*; or – *a client wants used bricks*. Thinking can be hazardous. He is well aware of this and for some years now he hasn't allowed anything into his brain that even resembles the embryos of thought.

Despite this, tonight a cyclone of endless questions, hypotheses and assumptions spiral through his mind. It's quite clear that the carrier bag stuffed with papers had been hidden under the

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floorboards in the attic for a reason. Who might have hidden them there? They aren't just a pile of printouts, put there to be taken away or burnt. It was no material for a fire! A4 office paper is extremely difficult to burn, it is much thicker than standard paper and gives off acrid smoke.

No, all right. Anything is possible. Drawing up a version of the accidental nature of the documents' storage, you might hit upon something after all. It's logical, understandable from a human point of view, and no conspiracy theories are involved. It's possible that the documents had been placed there by accident, as they say, in case they were ever needed. As a back-up, in case the computer should fail all of a sudden. They don't take up much space. Let them stay there! What if they should need them one day?

Or on the other hand – maybe the heap of documents has been printed out from a worn-out computer destined for the dump. Printed out within no particular order to save everything stored on the hard disk, just in case it was needed one day. Makes sense, doesn't it? The owner prints out everything he can from an old computer, deletes all files from its memory and then throws the used apparatus out with the rubbish. It's obvious he doesn't really need these documents, so he throws them somewhere in the back of beyond, out of sight, so they don't take up any space on the shelves.

Thinking it over, in the past people held on for a lifetime to all sorts of correspondence and documents. Not only the former nobility and famous writers. They stored bills, old contracts, telegrams, postcards, even meaningless letters from long-forgotten acquaintances they hadn't seen for years. Nowadays, normal people don't act like that- unless the owner of the bundle had been one of those odd, senile types and, to put it nicely, aware of the value of the epistolary genre. That might also explain why, when selling the house, the owner had left it right there where it was. He had hoped that it might have been useful, but it wasn't. So he just left it there. Seems logical.

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To hell with it! What kind of logic is that? Complete nonsense, not logic! Who on earth would hide a sack of useless papers as if it were the greatest treasure somewhere under the attic floor? It would make more sense to simply fling it into a corner of the attic to gather dust and leave it at that. Or to put the papers in a folder and store them on a well-arranged bookshelf, if he was so pedantic and obnoxiously meticulous. There is something wrong with this sack of documents! That much is plain. He feels it with one of his long forgotten senses that has suddenly re-awoken and had once been... Yes, better not to remember what was “once”. Let sleeping dogs lie. It is all long gone, forgotten and dead. Consciously drowned in vodka.

However, that sack of documents is weird. Damned weird. Testament to some secret and probably illegal affairs, without a doubt. Even at a first glance it screams out: look, there has been some totally illegal spying going on, the only thing missing from those documents as proof that someone has secretly been kept tabs on would be scraps of used toilet paper.

Although the documents have no dates at all, the printouts mostly carry a date from the end of the Nineties. How on earth could a mortal have got hold of extracts from mobile phone messages back then?! It's no bloody Hollywood movie with Tom Cruise as the good spy, chasing a traitor and using all manner of unseen modems and scanners. Or a TV series about a girl called Nikita.

- Oh, stop raving, you've seen too much rubbish on television! Yet you can remember perfectly well mobile phone connections in Latvia at that time, at the end of the Nineties, how expensive it was and who could afford it. It was an exclusive toy for the *nouveau riche* ! – the watchman says to himself aloud.

The first prepaid card cost about thirty *lats* a month, but back then the monthly wages for most people was hardly more than a hundred *lats* before tax. Besides, think of the phone itself! A brick with buttons! It was the Stone Age of mobile service providers and the telephone models

themselves. No wonder those mobile phones were later dubbed house bricks. But that wasn't until much later. Use your common sense! A mobile connection was an extremely costly extra. And how would it have been possible to print anything at all from those ancient devices? Getting printed messages from those things when Bluetooth technology or the now outdated infrared wireless connections or anything like them were still a long way off – it all seemed a bit like science fiction. It was another matter if someone had used technologies meant for espionage. That would explain why the computer held these things.

He lights his third cigarette in a row. He has managed to convince himself that he has no past as it hurts too much and has been removed from his conscience with great care. Yet even with his past excluded, the man still remembers the Nineties' scandals involving the tapped conversations of politicians, government officials and entrepreneurs, the shocking and cruel murders and the people who went missing and were never heard of again.

How could anyone forget that! Damn! He himself, once the chief editor of the scandal magazine "Through the Keyhole", used to print sensational material just like this in his magazine.

*Spied-on entrepreneur commits suicide – transcripts from tapped phone calls reveal he was gay and faced bankruptcy.*

*Blown up banker! The press has phone call recordings revealing that the murdered banker supplied arms to Chechen rebels.*

*The owner of a SUPERMARKET chain has murdered his wife out of jealousy after tapping her telephone conversations and discovering she was intimately involved with several men.*

It might seem cynical, but material like that was really in vogue in the media back then, to such an extent that over a period of one year it turned a former government newspaper into the most sought after magazine in the whole country.

But really, bloody hell! How can you forget something like the state visit of US President Bill Clinton to Latvia, throughout which the American secret services didn't even attempt to hide the fact that they had every intention of listening to all telephone conversations in Latvia, employing espionage airplanes equipped with AVAC technologies. Well, as to all those conversations – there might have been some exaggeration. What on earth might the notorious CIA dig up, listening to several million telephone conversations in Russian and, and worse still, in Latvian – a language no one knows, and that in America must be more foreign than the famous Indian tribal dialects used by USA military transmitters during the Second World War. But certain people's mobile connections were regularly tapped into by anyone with the interest and means to do so. Even his own telephone calls had been tapped. Several times! There were plenty of wealthy companies running dodgy deals, often headed by men from the former State Security Committee. Those guys, even if they had switched to the business world, didn't forget their old ways. The former comrades – the present bosses - liked to think they still had a hold on the country and business. Whether they really did or not is another matter – most of them having trotted off to the cemetery, even if they had been in the very bloom of life, as was often mentioned in their obituaries.

The man lights his fourth cigarette and continues to stare at the blackened sky, as if hoping for a sign to confirm his guesswork. The sky makes no reply. He is still lost in thought. A short while ago he had gone through page after page and noticed with increasing tension that the telephone call transcriptions in that heap of paper were totally in keeping with the Nineties.

Such compromising material usually fell into their hands printed out on the so-called needle printer that, instead of the ink cartridge, used old fashioned colored ribbons – almost like a typewriter's. While printing out they squeaked and squealed, creating that unmistakable sound of a busy office atmosphere. It's crystal clear that professionals, like those employed in the Nineties by the new money-spinning business and criminal operations after the dismissal of the State Security Committee, are involved here.

And yet on the other hand, what should he care about it all – if the paper package was left untaken in the house to be demolished, evidently its owners didn't hold it in too high regard. But why was the parcel hidden in the ceiling? Maybe the person who hid it had already met a grizzly end and the documents survived the person who had ordered the espionage. If so, maybe the bundle was not as innocent and harmless as it seemed at first glance. These questions won't leave his idle, rusty brain in peace. Oh, damn his discovery! It would have been better if it hadn't fallen from the ceiling! In the man's head it has provoked the same reaction as a light suddenly being turned on in a dark room. Long lost thoughts have suddenly returned.

Once, his brain was considered brilliant. The flatterers used to say he was a genius. He was admired by the public. An opinion leader – as they would say in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although such a phrase hadn't been coined back then. The brilliant author of two novels, translated into several languages and published abroad. It would be hard to believe now, but the watchman that leered as couples made love in their cars in the nearby forest, had once been the new and only promise on the Latvian literary scene back in the distant crisis years of the Nineties. He had been wise enough not to enter the swamp of politics. Not to mix with political parties or the *Saema* (parliament\*). Even if he would certainly have been elected and several parties had wanted him as their pre-election driving force. The man turned down all such offers as he chose to establish



his own business. Perhaps he shouldn't have, maybe now he would have been sitting in the *Saema*. But his restless and dynamic brain was not made for sitting on a deputy member of parliament's chair.

Having officially privatized a virtually unread former state newspaper, the man turned it into a scandalous and highly sought-after gossip magazine. Afterwards, all that emerged in the re-established state media market was in fact a diluted version of the magazine "Through the Keyhole" which he had created. His wife, besides being the daughter of an influential businessman, was a real beauty. A true example of a society couple. The proud father of two wonderful kids.

But it all came to an end. Not that it ended overnight. But something like that. He suddenly discovered that in his business, where success was determined by your ability to invent and be arrogant, he could no longer come up with something new, unheard of. He had been working for the third year on his third novel, expected impatiently by both his publisher and readers. Over the course of those three years he had only been able to complete fifteen pages, and re-reading them he realized they were empty and lifeless. It was like a nightmare, paralyses, sinking in a mire of mud. His genius-like brain which he relied so much upon and about which he even boasted at times, suddenly failed to offer anything worthy of consideration. No, things still happened. At the beginning, he comforted himself with an excuse that he had done enough and that he needed a break. But this break dragged on too long. It didn't come to an end. His brain let him down at that fatal moment when everybody was expecting him to come up with some brilliant plan on how to save the magazine at a time when one bank crisis followed another and neighboring Russia's default had a huge negative impact on the buying capacity of

his readers. He couldn't think of anything and made a terrible decision. Even if there must have been some way out. And he knew it.

His brain! He hadn't used it for five years now. For a while the thought embryos were soaked in alcohol. Luckily for him, back then when he had reeled down the steep steps of the hierarchy ladder, he had no money for drugs. Otherwise he would have long since been addicted to the heroin needle, or more likely still, would have keeled over from an overdose in some gutter. All the time his head had still been working all right, he took great care to protect his brain from different poisons as he couldn't even take strong liquor well. It was his big secret. Turning to wine and stronger liquor had begun when his brain showed its first sign of deserting him. It helped to ease his growing despair. Luckily, he had the reputation of being quite restrained – nobody offered him heroin or the much more expensive cocaine. Later, when everything was lost, there was no space for narcotics any more. Cheap vodka, diluted spirits and other potions, anything as long as it would stop him thinking. One might say he drank with method and according to a plan. Because when he was drunk he didn't have to think.

Who knows how it would all have ended if not for that accident. Thanks to that, he had ended up here and got this job as a watchman.

His instinct for self-preservation overrode the program of self-destruction which he himself had initiated.

Now, while sitting in the watchman's mobile home going through the sack of documents from the condemned house, packed with care into a huge bag of thin cellophane and crossed with painter's tape, he underwent incredible changes.

“Oh, God, if only my brain would start working like it used to!” he had prayed at the beginning of his downfall. That time, God hadn’t listened to him.

Now, when he didn’t pray for anything and, like a coward, he had reconciled himself with his losses and surrendered himself to his fate, lightness of thought and inspiration suddenly came back to him along with the bundle of documents. His brain, which for years had acted feebly, as if in a lethargic sleep or trance, all of a sudden woke up. The questions, leaping into in his mind like tennis balls, created chains of logical and illogical assumptions – more assumptions, more questions. There was no denying he got a kick out of the thinking process itself. It used to be his main pleasure in life.

But for now he was torn, undecided what to do with all of it. Yes, it was undeniable: the heap of documents which had literally fallen from the ceiling had set his imagination off and his brain worked as sharply as in the old days. Now he was scared of something else – will this outburst of activity be temporary? In a few days, will his head turn back into the soft, grey, indifferent cotton that made him just like a big, useless teddy-bear?

And there was more. The man was not ready to admit to himself that some of the papers bore deeply private and intimate correspondence which in places was even as pathetically sentimental as in old romance novels. For now it was not even clear how many people had gone into making it up. However, the correspondence carried a certain charm, inspiration of the sort he had been seeking so desperately all those years since he got stuck with the fifteen dull pages of his third novel. It offered the temptation of an emerging text that is only understood by those that have ever dealt with writing.

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The letters exerted a fascinating attraction. Every one of them creating a small, closed universe which, regardless of how laconic it was, expressed something unique. Such as this message written, despite being full of grammatical mistakes.

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*It's only illusion that we are in control of situation There will always be somebody who will introduce last minute changes to current events. This going with the flow when you don't know what's going to happen next gets on my nerves*

“It's only an illusion that we are in control of the situation There will always be somebody who will introduce his last minute changes to current events”. He stops at this sentence. Because it's about him too.

On the horizon the dawn is breaking, it's time to stop poring over these documents, they will definitely need many more nights. So be it! It is going to be so exciting!