

DOWN THE ROAD TO HELL – AND THE FIRST CROSSING ON THE LEFT

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translated from the Bulgarian by Miriana Minkova

He got to some place where Hitler was alive. Though very old, he was smouldering in a boring but terribly resistant and endless senility, probably because of his crazy fear that he was ill with all the illnesses that existed in the world, and his having injections three times per day. And everyone down there knew him as a terrible murmurer.

From morning until evening he was walking up and down between the tables with some old rubber galoshes that he had from his village, he was cursing reedily and he was always finding something about which to argue with Elvis Presley. However Elvis Presley did not pay any attention to him, at every brickbat he replied: "That ain'ta word!" and most of the time he was playing backgammon with a guy from Yambol. The man also cursed, but in another manner. He cursed the backgammoner's curse, and Elvis Presley was dying of laughter when that guy was telling him he was gonna put that contrabass in his ass.

"Y'll see now when I put that contrabass in your ass, you fassy...!"

That's what the guy from Yambol was telling him, and Elvis Presley didn't know what "fassy" was because that was only a Yambol word, and he was laughing even harder.

"And if you put it there," he was saying, "So what?"

"You will look like a gondola!"

The guy was saying "Don't laugh like a mo fo but play...! And drink if yer gonna drink!" while handing him a bottle of grappa. This bottle had most probably been left at his grave by some of his friends.

There wasn't any contrabass and everything looked like some confusing dream, but it was not. So, when he was hired at the National Theater he became really worried. He didn't know what he was going to do at the National Theater, and this National Theater was in not any way like that National Theater. At this one they gathered them on the very first day and they told them that in three days everyone must submit some programme. He didn't understand what these

programmes these people were talking about were, and he felt himself turning pale. He went to Elvis Presley to ask him but he didn't know either and the guy from Yambol told him straight:

"Well, if you don't know what programmes they mean, then where do you go? There, Elvis Presley will tell you the same! Tell him, heavens' booty!" he wheezed out, "Don't just laugh!"

Elvis Presley knew what "heavens" was, but he seemed not to understand what "booty" was, because these were also Yambol things. Nonetheless, he suddenly became serious and said with conviction: "When your voice falls, the first thing to do is to look around to find where it has fallen! After that it's easy!"

The man from Yambol giggled and slapped his knees. "You are king, shithead!" he said.

He hissed bitterly: "Oh, you two are a big help! Thank you very much!"

"That's what friends are for!" the man from Yambol replied, "A friend in need is a friend indeed!"

"Yes!" Elvis Presley smiled heartily, "Big need, big friend!"

He didn't know why but that place smelled like grated horseradish and vinegar, and like rotten parquet. The air around it was full of dapper, arrogant angels, discreet devils with bat wings and police badges, witches from the neighborhoods beyond the decaying river of this place, three quarrelsome dwarfs and a few hawkers of kitchen knives and sets of fake "Tefal" with very shiny packaging. There were also three astronauts. The astronauts were perpetually drunk. They started each morning with a water glass of vodka from a one dollar and sixty three cent bottle, and a lettuce leaf.

Witches came here only for the young security soldiers of the invisible airport beyond the grey fields. When they were allowed on leave the witches carried them away behind the brushwood of the old park on this side of the river, and afterwards from there up to here one could hear desperate snorts, fierce moans, and all types of victorious snickers. After that the angels brought in their money and shared it with the devils, who slapped the witches several times and got them sacked to mount their brooms and get back into the neighborhood, while Hitler was angrily yelling "This country is not going too well." Everyone thought the women

were Gypsies because they barked throatily. But they were not Gypsies. Only their language was army.

The guy from Yambol told Elvis Presley not to wander. Then he blew in his hand, made as if to throw the dice, but suddenly stopped, saying: "A tank crewman and a poetess were to..., well ok, to be together, to make offspring, to have babies, and you know what they had?"

"A turtle with a machine-gun?" bravely asked Elvis Presley.

"No." the other one replied. "They had a samovar. But it was because she, the poetess, was a Russian. The tank crewman was a Russian too, and he used to say he had two peepees and at least three nails on the big toe of his left foot. They were like fans and he could hardly pare them. I know him very well!"

"How horrible" Elvis Presley noted politely. "And if they were twins?"

"If they were twins," the man from Yambol stressed, "They would have been a couple of pots with a remote control, and they would have routed you in Vietnam" he added.

"Says you!" exclaimed Elvis Presley. "What year is it now, why don't you say?"

"The two thousand and fifth," the other said. "So what?"

"What?" Elvis Presley shrugged his shoulders "This means, it is exactly forty years since we were in Vietnam. Not that I care but why do you think the Russians haven't routed us yet?"

"How would I know?" the guy wheezed out. "I suppose, it's along the same reason as your letting them bash themselves in Afghanistan, I don't know. And that guy I heard had invented a textile, but it was so stiff it would break every last sewing machine in the world. And you know what? He was personally summoned by Stalin, and he told him, now why do you waste yourself on such trumpery? Who would want a textile from which you can't sew a thing? At first our guy became very scared that Stalin was going to cut his head off, but instead Stalin gave him people, gave him money, and sent him to invent other things. And you know what he invented? He invented a plane with a steam engine. Like a flying mogul."

He blew in his hand once more and he summarized: "Generally it's all pretty daft, but let's move along now. There were strong and weak ones; Colt leveled all."

"That's right!" Elvis Presley agreed. "And the jeans and Coca-Cola equalized them."

"And McDonalds," the man from Yambol wheezed. "Well," he wheezed more, "We live well but there ain't no way." He said that and reached for the bottle. He lifted it thoughtfully against the window and he mumbled: "I will have to go down for another one. The guys should have left one for the peace of our souls."

He threw the dice, he moved the pieces with a victorious rattle and he said contentedly: "Yesterday, if you please."

Elvis Presley started guiltily: "I dreamt some very crackpot job."

"Oh, you did?" the man from Yambol looked at him with wonder. "And what was it?"

"I dreamt, if you please," sighed Elvis Presley, "that some Boeings bumped into the Twins in New York!"

"Where did they bump?" his friend arched his eyebrows.

"Into the World Trade Center." Elvis sighed again. "You know it is two skyscrapers side by side and the Boeings clanked there. First into the first one and then into the other."

"That's it!" the man from Yambol grinned. "And then what?"

"Well, I am telling you, a crackpot job!" Elvis Presley shrugged his shoulders. "The twins collapsed. I sat there on some mound, I think it was the Bakadzhik, and at the other side there was New York, and from the Bakadzhik I was watching those planes circling wide and then crashing into the skyscrapers. Darn things, I'm telling you."

The man from Yambol looked at him for a moment or two. Then he laughed and thought, Jeez, what a case. "And when did this happen?" the Yambol man asked.

Elvis Presley suddenly became worried. "Ah, that's the strangest thing. On September eleventh two thousand one. I remember that because you know that the twins look like an eleven when you look at them from far off. And now we're supposed to be in two thousand five. I just don't understand anything."

"Fuck it!" the man from Yambol calmed him bluntly. "I don't believe in such nonsense. Dreams mean nothing! C'mon play now."

At that very moment Hitler appeared from somewhere. He looked like Charley Chaplin grown old. He was wearing a shopping bag and he started squabbling with Elvis Presley. The

man from Yambol turned to Hitler and asked him why he didn't go do that himself? Didn't he know that he smelled like a grave when he was annoying people? "Now go for your injection," he told him, "And stop wrangling with the man, put the shit back in your ignorant mouth!"

Hitler became enraged and he would have probably begun quarrelling with him, but the man from Yambol had already turned his back on him. "And you!" he said to Elvis Presley. "Why don't you answer back to him?"

"Ha!" Elvis Presley replied in surprise, "And what shall I say?"

"What shall I say?" the other flared up. "You will say for example, 'I don't take advice from a taxidermed man!' Why didn't you tell him what he deserves? You were silent?!"

"I'm supposed to be taxidermed too, how would I tell him? In this limbo everyone is taxidermed. How would I say, 'I don't take advice from a taxidermed man?' when I am taxidermed too, damn it?"

"Well that's right!" the other one shouted. "That's what you'll tell him and you'll make him shut up. Why do the mingaroos in Yambol tell each other 'I don't take advice from a mingaro!' And that's it! I don't take advice from a dirty mingaro!' and immediately they start thrashing with the stakes!"

Elvis Presley didn't understand what a mingaro was and he somehow smiled.

"When," the man from Yambol continued, "In sixty two I was sent to a pioneers' camp in Poland we had an interpreter with a number tattooed right here, on the inner side of her wrist. It was from the concentration camp. She had been in a concentration camp and the number was still with her. I think these people didn't remove the numbers of the concentration camps from their hands on purpose, don't you think so? She seemed to me to be very old, but now I guess that she couldn't have been older than forty." He glanced at Hitler who was again to the side, enraged, and he added, "However I have noticed another thing. I have noticed that when a woman grows old she becomes just an old lady. But when a gay person is growing old, he becomes an old queer! Well, I don't understand some people and that's it! Why live at all if you don't enjoy living?!"

Again he thought of the programme he had to present at the National Theater in three days time, and he felt he was growing faint. "Okay," he said, "What shall I do now with that programme?"

The man from Yambol and Elvis Presley looked at him with surprise and they asked what programme he was talking about. He explained nervously that the National Theater had informed him that in three days time he had to submit a programme and were they deaf or what and they, even more astonished, said what the heck is he doing in that National Theater...

"Well, I took part in a competition..." he said in confusion. "Drat! You seem not to listen to what I say! What kind of people are you, I don't know...?! I took part and I won it but they said a programme must be submitted, and I have no idea what programme I can work out for them... And now because of one programme I might remain jobless... Now tell me what to do, you are supposed to be my friends!"

"And why did you avail yourself of taking part in a competition?!" the man from Yambol couldn't stop wondering. "Why some time don't you try thinking before doing something and than let's see what happens!"

"And not be obsessed with being hungry, should I?!" he snarled too, finally.

"And now you have a job, so what?" the other did not stop.

"Now he has a job" Elvis Presley laughed, "And he will most probably start looking like a gondola!"

"Anyway," the man from Yambol took up viciously, "I can give you good advice...! You write their programme and then you take to your heels out of there!"

...He swore at them peevishly and he sat crouching in the chair.

"This programmes job" said Elvis Presley carelessly, "Seems to me much like wooing a woman. You can do it just great but you don't actually know what the woman wants exactly."

"That's right," the man from Yambol nodded. "But what do you care about it..."

"That's right," Elvis Presley insisted, "But I want to say here that what the man assumes the woman expects almost never meets the reality that comes to pass but this does not necessarily end badly in all cases."

"Ha!" the other one goggled. "Man! I'll give you five bucks if say that thing again!"

"Excuse me?" Elvis Presley looked at him.

"You've got five bucks from me if you manage to say that same thing a second time, I will pay up immediately!" the man from Yambol emphasized.

"This thing that the man assumes the woman expects almost never meets the reality that comes to pass but this does not necessarily end badly in all cases," Elvis Presley repeated.

And he sighed: "You mean that you discredited yourself and so on."

The other one gazed long at him, then he clicked his tongue and said: "You know, old chap, when exactly did I find out that we, men, are good for nothing indeed? I'll tell you and you, I know, will understand... Only one time in my whole life have I discredited myself with a woman and you know how it happened? I just wanted to caress a woman and all night just to hold her hand and do nothing else... To caress her, you know, then to kiss her goodnight – things like that. But instead, I fucked her like crazy! Like for the last time, darn it... At one time somebody started pounding on the wall. From the other room, I mean. Some angry bitch, I don't know... And she shouted: 'In nome di Dio! In nome di Dio! What are you doing to that woman?!' I don't know what it means exactly..."

"What are you doing to that woman," Elvis Presley said.

"I got her the same way" the man nodded. "Are you killing that woman there or what are you doing to her!! Leave the woman alone finally, you stinker...!"

"Why?" Elvis Presley interrupted him. "Where did this happen?"

"In a hotel, where..." the man from Yambol waved his hand. He stayed silent for a while..., then he sighed and he concluded: "By the way, let me tell you, she got up by herself in the middle of the night and she went and bought Viagra."

"Is that right!" Elvis Presley looked at him.

"Just so, man!" the other one sighed again. "Just so. She jumped out of the bed, I'm telling you, she went and bought Viagra. Tremendous job. And that woman would knock at the wall, imagine it! I was going to kill her... And you know what?! I was not drunk or anything! That's what I call big discredit! Anyway," he said, "I will never find out what she wanted to tell me with that Viagra."

"Well..." Elvis Presley hesitated. "Rock and roll" he said "is dead."

"Well..." the man from Yambol said with a matter-of-fact tone, "You're right, there."

He looked now at the first one, now at the other and they were both so real, there at that dirty table with the backgammon and with the roily bottle next to them, that it seemed he was not dreaming them.

Then the dwarfs on the other side nagged at the angels sitting at the near-by table for something – they started cursing at each other and springing from the chairs. Hitler at his side immediately raged against them for their shamelessness and for having no manners; the cosmonauts cried ferociously that whatever they say – everything was mind and matter! – and they knew that, because every night they used to travel among the stars; the devils looked from aside nervously while the witches started turning around and started flashing with their yellow eyes of Gypsies, and these two in front of him surely didn't hear a thing of all that hullabaloo nor even cared for the rising scandal.

In the end they looked in that direction however..., but they only shrugged their shoulders squeamishly and then the man from Yambol raised the empty bottle, he mumbled quietly that he was going to go down for another one in a short while. Then he looked to the windows where, beyond the green bars, the poisonous clouds wreathed closer and closer to the earth and they nearly hid the transparent border between the dream and that place already..., he clicked his tongue and he said to Elvis Presley:

"It's your turn."