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Lada Žigo – Croatia

Rulet (2010)

Roulette

Publishing House **SysPrint**

Biography

Lada Žigo is a Croatian writer born in 1970 in Zagreb and graduated in Comparative Literature and Philosophy. She has written literary reviews and essays for many newspapers and cultural and literary magazines and she runs a literary panel for the Croatian Writers' Association. Her first book, *People and News People* (*Ljudi i novinari*, SysPrint 2007) was shortlisted for two prestigious awards – Ksaver Šandor Gjalski and Kiklop. Her second novel, *Bitches* (*Babetine*, SysPrint, 2009), sets itself against the “women’s writing” then in vogue. In 2010, Ms Žigo published *Roulette* (*Rulet*, SysPrint), a novel exploring how gambling can become the only hope for people in a transitional society who have no better prospects. In 2011, she published *Healer* (*Iscjelitelj*, Alfa), a novel in which she targets another phenomenon not unknown in transitional societies – false healers and fortune-tellers who manipulate people and take their last hopes. Ms Lada Žigo is a member of the Croatian Writers' Association and Croatian Freelance Artists Organisation. She lives and works in Zagreb.

Synopsis

Roulette describes post-war Croatia in a way which differs from the stereotype that has been fed to European readers for over 20 years. This description is based on several factors: more than a billion Kunas are spent every year on gambling and there are about 50,000 chronic gamblers in Croatia. There are more betting and gambling outlets in Croatia than there are in London. The sale of Croatian banks, businesses and firms to foreign investors and companies is just one aspect of the brutal capitalism which led to exploitation on all levels. Metaphorically speaking, human beings become like roulette balls in a game in which only powerful croupiers take the winnings. The main character of this novel is a disillusioned soldier who starts to gamble after he finds out that powerful Serbian and Croatian leaders are united in crime. At the same time, the Americanisation of the culture and language is further annulling the sovereignty of this “small country”. Disappointed and disillusioned, the main character in Žigo’s novel indulges in playing roulette, a game that becomes one of destiny in which one can win or lose all.

Organized as a series of adventurous episodes, the novel also introduces a plethora of side characters who tell their own tragic stories of life on the margins of society.

Rulet

Lada Žigo

Ilica je bila opet pusta. Bilo je oko tri u noći. Hodali su prema Zagrebačkoj pivovari. Ante je gledao u beton. Profesor je gledao u nebo. Ali, kao da su im pogledi bili u istoj ravnini.

»Gospon profesor«, zastane odjednom Ante, uhvati se za željeznu ogradu i zagleda se u stablo. »Večeras sam ucijenio jednoga gada. Mislite li da je to moralan čin?« upita i potegne šipku, kao da će je iščupati.

»Nema morala. Moral ne postoji«, ogovori profesor smireno. Zastane, nakašlje se i nastavi:

»Živimo u društvu bez morala, gospon Ante. Postoji pitanje prava i pitanje moći. Jedno mora ići s drugim, a obično nije tako. Postoji moć bez ikakva prava, a to su politika, korupcija...«

Ante zastane. »Znam«, reče tiho i nastavi polagano hodati.

»Ali postoji i pravo bez moći. Mi imamo svoja ljudska prava – pravo na stan, na posao, na mirovinu, ali nemamo moć. Pravo bez moći – to je smijurija. Tako je govorio veliki Pascal.«

»Noćas sam ucijenio gada. Uzeo sam mu novac. Uzeo sam prljavi novac čovjeku koji me je bacio na cestu. Majku mu ljubim! Jesam li trebao prasnuti ili trpjeti? Što mislite o tome, profesore?«

»Kada se čovjek poziva na pravo, a nema moć«, započne profesor i podigne kažiprst, »onda pobijesni na one koji imaju moć, a nemaju prava. I osveta je logična. Osveta je uglavnom motivirana izvana, rijetko kada iznutra. Psihopata je malo. Luđaci su obično najobičniji ljudi, žrtve društva.«

»Pojednostavnite, profesore! A mržnja... je li mržnja logična posljedica onoga koji je težio pravdi?« upita Ante zanesen, kao da noćas nije ucjenjivao nego meditirao.

»Znate li kako nastaje pesimist?« upita profesor i uhvati Antu za ruku. Pogleda ga ravno u oči. »Tako što idealist pretpri nekoliko razočaranja.«

»I nekoliko, i još, i još...«, doda Ante i iskesi se.

»A onda... onda kada idealist shvati da nema idealizma, svijet mu se postavi naopačke«, nastavi profesor, pogladi bradu i ponovno zastane.

»Kada shvatite da život vodi slučaj, a ne neki sisitem ili logika, a ako ste još uvijek pobornik sistema, onda vas alogičnost posve izbací iz takta.«

Ante je držao ruke u džepovima i gledao profesorovu žučkastu bradu pod svjetlom ulične lampe. Prvi put je vidio da je žučkasta – prljava, neuredna, kao i sve oko njega.

»Onda se lako postane kockar. A kada u kocki vidite filozofsko opravdanje, onda ste duboko zagrezli u taj porok, mladiću.«

Ante je zurio u pod. Razumio je profesora. I on je imao sistem koji su narušili, razlog da odgovori. Imao je samo ideju, a zapravo nije imao ništa.

»A zašto ste se vi razočarali?« upita Ante i stavi mu ruku oko ramena. Lipa je u dvorištu nasuprot zašuštala. Ante je osjetio dah hladnog vjetra.

»He, he, verde quatro verde... propast je najbolje opjevati... Ali, svaka pjesma ima i svoju prozu, svoju životnu priču. Vidite, gospon Ante, imao sam sina...«

Profesor odjednom promijeni boju glasa – Ante se učinilo da iz njega počinje curiti život... onakav kakav je bio.

Profesor zastane, tužno zašmrcne, a onda uhvati Antu pod ruku i lagano krene.

»Bio je narkoman. Žena mi je zbog njega umrla... sirota... od moždanog udara. Mislim, jadnica je izdahnula zbog onih... zbog utjerivača dugova. Nedužna moja žena. Vrijedna krojačica. Vidite ovu košulju na meni? Šila ju je one noći kad su se kamatari prvi pu pojavili na vratima. Šila i jecala. Zna li kako je teško patiti i pritom nešto stvarati, krojiti jednu običnu košulju, ubadati iglom u platno dok vam nož siječe srce?«

Ante je i dalje gledao u pod i hvatao korak s profesorom. Kao da mu istim ritmom koraka želi biti saveznik.

»I onda, mladiću moj, jedne noći, malo nakon pokopa, došle su nabildane sotone na vrata. Tražile su od mene dvadeset tisuća kuna. Ako ih ne dam, zapalit će mi stan. Da, jedan je imao usko čelo kao tanka letva, duboke bore, guste obrve i baš je taj rekao da će mi zapaliti stan. Ostali su stajali pored njega... Bog da mi prosti, kao gavrani. Da, može biti da su imali i kljunove, a ne usta. Može biti... A moja žena još se nije bila ni ohladila u grobu. Sutradan sam ih išao prijaviti policiji. No, dobio sam odgovor da se ne petljam. Pola godine poslije jednog od utjerivača vidio sam u društvu načelnika policijske uprave. Zbilja – u kavani Matoš, sjedili su njih dvojica, u odijelima, a kladim se, mladiću, da su to bili oni, kladim se u milijun... Kakva slučajnost, he, he.«

»A sin?« upita Ante iako je očekivao odgovor.

»Pobjegao. Ni danas ne znam gdje je. Vodi se pod nestale osobe. Sanjao sam noćas da je u zatvoru s načelnikom, sanjao sam da su obojica mrtvi – pjani, da su origijali u ćeliji, a onda je došao gospon ministar, lijepo platio... Ma, znate... snovi...«

»I tako, iduće noći, nakon što mi je policija odbila zaštitu«, nastavi profesor, sada malo promuklim glasom, »spustio sam se u grad. Dva sata u noći, nigdje ni žive duše. Nigdje nade, nigdje spasa. U meni samo odjekuju glasovi: 'sutra do podne, ili si gotov, čiča!'. Uska varoš, muk, u daljini huk, he, he...«

Profesor opet naglo zastane. Pogleda u nebo. Raširi ruke i zapjevuši: »I tako sam otišao u kaazinno...« Nakašlje se, ubrza korak i nastavi ozbiljnim tonom:

»Nigdje ništa otvoreno. Kao ni danas. Vrata pakla uvijek su samo jedna i nevidljiva... ali daju tračak svjetla. Mladiću, te noći, iz meni nejasnih razloga, odlučio sam uložiti mirovinu na rulet. Iz meni nejasnih razloga. Nešto se u meni zainatilo. Život se već bio raspao, razumijete? Ostao je samo rizik – ili ću dobiti ili će mi zapaliti stan. A izgubiti nisam mogao ništa. To je bila jedina logika.«

»Razumijem vas. I ja imam svoju logiku. Kada društvo sve otkoči, onda stavite papučicu na gas. Iz sve snage. Pa što bude! Možda se zabijete u zid, a možda i skrenete negdje, možda se nađete na nekoj drugoj, široj cesti. Obecavajućoj. Znete li da sam ja propali branitelj? Vi kockate iz viših motiva, ja imam dijagnozu. PTSP. Svatko ima svoje motive!«

»Svatko ima motiv za osvetu. Ali ljudi olako osuđuju osvetu, ne gledaju motiv. Devedeset posto ljudi slijepo je kod zdravih očiju.«

»I što je bilo te noći. Mislim, u kazinu?«, presječe ga Ante.

»Sada smo kod fasinantnog slučaja«, usklikne profesor i udari dlanom o dlan. »Uložio sam sve na nulu. Jer je sve u meni bilo prazno. Prazna vreća ne može se više isprazniti. Može se samo napuniti.«

»I?« upita Ante s osmijehom, iako je slutio...

»Pala je nula. U prvom krugu! Zamislite, zaradio sam sedamdeset i dvije tisuće kuna. Trideset i šest mirovina! Jedno nisam znao razlučiti – je li to bio poklon Boga ili Vraga. U svakom slučaju, tada mi je odjednom sivi pejsaž života postao zelen. Gotovo fluorescentno zelen.«

Profesor se nasmije. Bio je to užasno sarkastičan smijeh.

»Stan je bio spašen. Tada zbilja nije bilo važno je li spasitelj Svjetlo ili Mrak«, odgovori Ante.

»Nula me je spasila, nije to više bila nula nego pozitivan broj, broj spasa, razumijete li me, bio sam u debelom plusu.«

»Shvaćam, profesore, možda ne morate dalje. Onda ste ponovno zaigrali na nulu i sve izgubili.«

»Ooo, varate se, mladiću. Nisam igrao nakon toga pet godina. Nisam ni razmišljao o ruletu. Sve dok nisam poželio postati pisac.«

»Pisac? Pa kako su vas to slova odvela do brojki?«

»Da, slova od kojih ne možete preživjeti, slova koja ne možete plasirati gotovo svakog pisca dovode do svojevrzne opsesije brojka. Zato mislim, mladiću dragi, da su književnost i matematika na neki način prožete. Kada shvatite da pamet uzalud bacate u vjetar, nije problem otvoriti jednoga dana i lisnicu i... prepustiti i ono malo što imate pukom slučaju brojki. Počinjete vjerovati, naime, da će na jednom ruletu, na jednom đavoljem krugu, biti možda više logike i sreće nego li u kaosu ideja od kojih doista nemate ništa osim bezvremene neimaštine.«

»Meni su, profesore, brojke na ruletu simboli ljudskih života. Životi su puka slučajnost, bačeni smo u ovaj svijet protiv svoje volje, zašto se se bismo igrali? Borio sam se u ratu... Izgubiti novac i život gotovo je isto mentalnom invalidu kao što sam ja.«

»Vi ste se borili u ratu, ja sam se borio u miru. Za mali cilj. Ali, naoružanje je bilo posvuda. Mislim na one nevidljive kalašnjikove bešćutnih poduzetnika... Naime, napisao sam knjigu. O hrvatskoj poeziji, o iskri božanskog u hrvatskoj poeziji. Trebalo je čitati i čitati, tražiti te iskre. Pisao sam je godinama, desetljećima. Ali, svi su me izdavači odbili. Oni nisu vidjeli nikakve iskre. Iskre koje vidi nas nekoliko nisu unosne. Poezija nije profitabilna, to su govorili, a neki su mi se unosili i u lice, da se odmaknem. Tjerali su me iz ureda kao štakora. Znete li vi kako je bijedno biti pjesnik u moru memoarskog štiva s kičastim naslovnim stranicama? Znete li kako je gadno u propaljoj zemlji biti autsajder koji je u sebi pokopao svoju ideju?«

Profesor je opet zastao. Pljunuo je na pod. »Mediokriteti. Invazija mediokriteta. Žutih mrava. Navrli su i u kulturu. Množe se kao gamad. Skorojevići, buržuji, oni kojima pamet izlazi na dupe! Hrvatska kultura uvijek je bila na samrti, a u kapitalizmu je izdahnula. Trebalo bi joj upriličiti dostojan pogreb. Uz limenu glazbu. He, he. Razumijete li, mladiću? Gangsteri imaju pogrebe. Političari imaju pogrebe. Grobovi ništarija prepuni su cvijeća. Je li hrvatska kultura zaslužila grob?«

Profesor stane, počne puhati u šake, a onda poskoči.

»Eto vraga, skok na skok, he, he. Mladiću, pa ova je zemlja groblje. Većina živih, onih poduzetnih, zapravo su zombiji.« Naglo uhvati Antu za rame i unese mu se u lice.

»Ono malo ljudskih bića klatara se naokolo i donose nekakvu luč. Uzaludno. Opiru se ti dobrohotni ljudi, nude svoju maštu, ideje, bacaju pregršt blaga pod noge zombija, no znate što oni rade? Priđu im, nacere im se u lice, kažu da su staromodni

anđeli i isisaju im krv. Kreativni ljudi ovdje nemaju šanse. I znate što onda učine? Počinju se rugati svemu. I sebi. I onda odu u kazino. Sve ili ništa. Posljednji prasak sreće ili mrtvilo. Sredine nema. Ionako je sve sredina. Prosjek, fuj, taj ljigavi prosjek – to vam je groblje. Na groblju nema mirisa, okusa, nema definicije osjećaja.«

»Neka, profesore, neka ste se prokockali! Pokažite žutim mravima da živite, da znate živjeti, pa makar kao autsajder. Luđaci imaju slobodu. Njima je svako rješenje moguće. Mi smo propalice, ali nitko na nas ne računa. Postigli smo tu slobodu da ovisimo sami o sebi.«

Roulette

Lada Žigo

Translated from the Croatian by Tamara Budimir

Ilica Street was once again deserted. It was three in the morning. They were walking towards the Zagreb Brewery. Ante was looking down at the asphalt. The professor was looking up at the sky. But they seemed to be gazing at the same plane.

“Professor”, said Ante halting suddenly and holding onto the metal fence whilst gazing at a tree. “This evening I blackmailed a lowlife. Do you think this is a moral act?” he asked, pulling at the metal rod of the railing, as if he wanted to pull it out.

“There are no morals. Morals do not exist”, answered the professor calmly. He stopped, coughed and then continued:

“We live in a society without morals, Ante, my young man. It’s a question of rights and power. One needs must go with the other, but often this is not so. There is power without rights, like politics, corruption...”

Ante hesitated. “I know”, he said quietly and slowly continued walking.

“But there are rights without power. We have our human rights – the right to a flat, to a job, to retirement, but we lack power. Rights without power – what a laugh. So said the great Pascal.”

“Last night I blackmailed a lowlife. I took his money. I took sullied money off a man who threw me onto the street. God

damn it! Should I have lashed out or simply taken it? What do you think about that, professor?”

“When a man claims his rights by law, but does not have the power”, began the professor raising his forefinger, “then he lashes out at those who wield the power, but do not have the right to do so. And revenge is logical. Revenge is mostly motivated from without, rarely from within. There are very few psychopaths. Madmen are usually ordinary people, who have fallen victim to society.”

“Explain, professor! What about hate... is hate a logical result of one who tends towards what is right?” asked Ante in a fluster, as if he had not blackmailed someone the night before but simply been meditating.

“Do you know how a pessimist is born?” asked the professor taking Ante by the hand. He looked him straight in the eyes. “When an idealist experiences a number of setbacks.”

“And then others, and others, and others...”, added Ante and smirked.

“And then... once the idealist realises that ideals do not exist, then his world is turned upside-down”, continued the professor, stroking his beard and then stopped again.

“Once you realise that life is run by coincidence, and not by a system or logic, and if you still favour systems, then the illogical throws you out of joint.”

Ante kept his hands in his pockets and regarded the professor’s yellowish beard in the streetlamp. This was the first time he saw that it was yellowish – dirty, unkempt, as was everything else about him.

“Then it’s easy to become a gambler. And once you see a philosophical justification to gambling, then you’re already deep in the grips of this vice, young man.”

Ante stared at the ground. He understood the professor. He too had a system that had been disturbed, a reason to reply. He only had an idea, and he actually had nothing.

“So why are you disillusioned?” asked Ante laying an arm around his shoulder. The lime tree in the courtyard opposite rustled. Ante felt the hint of a cold wind.

“He, he, verde quatro verde... it’s best to sing about calamity... But, every song has its underlying prose, its life story. You see, Ante, my young man, I had a son...”

The professor’s voice suddenly changed timbre – to Ante it seemed as if life had begun to seep out of him... life as it had once been.

The professor stopped, snivelled sadly, and then took Ante by the arm and slowly moved on.

“He was a drug addict. My wife died because of him... bless her soul... from a stroke. I mean, the poor woman died because of those... because of the debt collecting henchmen. My innocent wife. A hard-working seamstress. Do you see this shirt on me? She was sewing it the night when the loan sharks first appeared at our door. Sewing and weeping. Do you know how difficult it is to suffer whilst creating something, sewing an ordinary shirt, applying the needle to the linen whilst a knife is piercing your heart?”

Ante continued staring at the ground and kept pace with the professor. As if by keeping step with him he wished to be his ally.

“And then, young man, one night, just after the funeral, some muscled up devils came to our door. They asked for twenty thousand Kuna. If I didn’t give it to them, they’d set the flat on fire. Yes, one of them had a forehead as narrow as a plank, deep furrows, thick eyebrows, and it was he who said that they would set fire to my flat. The rest stood by... God forgive me, like ravens. Yes, perhaps they even had beaks, and not mouths. Quite possibly... and my wife was barely cold in her grave. The following day I went and reported it to the police. But I was told not to meddle. Half a year later I saw one of the henchmen with the head of police. I did – at the Matoš Café, the two of them sitting there, in suits, and I’d swear, young man, that it was them, I’d swear by... What a coincidence, he, he.”

“And your son?” asked Ante although he already half-expected the answer.

“Fled. I don’t know where he is to this day. He’s being treated as a missing person. I dreamt last night that he was in lock-up with the head of police, I dreamt they were both dead – drunk, wreaking havoc in the cell, and then came the minister, and nicely paid... Anyway... dreams...”

“And so, the following night, after the police had refused to offer me protection”, continued the professor in a voice that was beginning to sound hoarse, “I went down to the city centre. And at two in the morning, not a soul in sight. No hope, no salvation. The voices echoed within me: ‘tomorrow by noon, old man, or you’re done for!’. Small town, silence, a bustling in the distance, he, he...”¹

The professor halted suddenly again. He looked up at the skies. He spread his arms out and began to softly sing: “And

1. Allusion to a poem from Antun Gustav Matoš, a Croatian poet.

so I went to the caasinoo...” He coughed, quickened his step and continued in an earnest tone:

“Nothing open anywhere. Just like today. There is only one door to hell and it’s invisible... but they let off a glimmer of light. Young man, that night, for reasons unbeknown to me, I decided to stake my pension on roulette. For reasons unbeknown to me. I felt defiance well up in me. My life had fallen apart, do you understand? All that was left was risk – either I would win or they would burn down my flat. I had nothing to lose. That was my only logic.”

“I understand. I also had my logic. When society let’s lose of all reins, then you put your foot on the pedal. You floor it. Whatever the consequences! Perhaps you end up smashing into a wall, and maybe you veer off somewhere, maybe you find yourself on a broader path. A more promising path. Did you know that I’m a down-and-out homeland defender? You have your motives for gambling, I have a diagnosis. PTSD. We all have our motives!”

“Every one of us has his own motive for revenge. But people are quick to condemn revenge, they don’t look at the motive. Ninety percent of all people are blind, although they have perfect vision.”

“So what happened that night. I mean, at the casino?”, interrupted Ante.

“This is where we light upon a fascinating case of chance”, exclaimed the professor and clapped his hands. “I placed everything I had on the zero. As everything within me was null and void. I was an empty sack. All you could do was fill it.”

“And?” asked Ante with a smile on his face, although he already sensed he knew...

“The ball fell upon the zero. In the first spin! Imagine, I had won seventy-two thousand Kuna. Thirty-six of my pensions! The only thing I couldn’t discern was whether this was a gift from God or from the Devil. Suddenly my drab existence began to take on a green sheen. Almost a fluorescent green sheen.”

The professor laughed. A sarcastic laugh.

“The flat was secured. At that point it really wasn’t important whether the saviour was Light or Darkness”, replied Ante.

“Zero had saved me, it was no longer a zero but a positive number, a saving number, do you understand, I was well into the plus.”

“I understand, professor, perhaps you needn’t go on. Then you placed your bet on the zero again and lost everything.”

“Ooh, you’re mistaken, young man. I didn’t play for the next five years. I didn’t even think about roulette. Until I decided to become a writer.”

“A writer? So how did letters lead you off to numbers?”

“Yes, letters that do not allow you to have a livelihood, letters that cannot be marketed force almost every writer to obsess over numbers.

This is why, my dear young man, I believe that literature and mathematics are intertwined. Once you realise that you’re wasting your breath and mind, then you don’t see any reason for not taking your wallet out and... taking a chance on random numbers. Namely, you start believing that one game of roulette, one spin of the devilish wheel, will afford more logic and luck than the ideas that bring you nothing more than enduring poverty.”

“For me, professor, the numbers on the roulette table are symbols of human lives. Lives are pure coincidence, we are thrown into this world against our will, why should we not play? I fought in the War... Losing money or your life is almost the same to a mental invalid like me.”

“You fought a war, I fought in peace. For a small goal. But, armament was everywhere. I’m talking about the invisible Kalashnikovs of callous entrepreneurs... Namely, I wrote a book. On Croatian poetry, on the divine embers in Croatian poetry. I read and read, looking for these divine embers. I spent years, decades writing it. But the editors refused my book. They didn’t see any embers. The embers that only a number of us see are not profitable. Poetry isn’t profitable, that’s what they said, and some got into my face, asked me to back off. They threw me out of their offices like a rat. Do you know how low you feel being a poet in a sea of memoirs with kitschy front covers? Do you know how demeaning it is to be an outsider who has buried his idea within himself within a fallen state?”

The professor stopped again. He spat on the ground. “Mediocrities. An invasion of mediocrities. Yellow ants. They’ve taken over culture. They’re multiplying like vermin. Upstarts, bourgeoisie, those whose intellect comes from out of their arses! Croatian culture was always on the decline, and it took its dying breathe during capitalism. It needs to be given a decent burial. With music supplied by a brass band. He, he. Do you understand what I’m saying, young man? Gangsters have funerals. Politicians have funerals. The graves of the no-goods have flowers. Does not Croatian culture deserve a grave?”

The professor stopped, blew into his fists and then jumped.

“The devil comes knocking, he, he.² Young man, this country is a cemetery. Those who are still alive, those who can still undertake something, are actually zombies.” He suddenly grabbed Ante by the shoulder and stared him straight in the face.

“The few humans remaining are wandering around trying to throw some light on things. To no avail. These well-intentioned people are trying to resist, they offer their imagination, their ideas, throw a trove of treasures before the feet of the zombies; but do you know what they do? They come up to them, smirk in their faces, say that they are old-fashioned angels and suck their blood. Creative people don’t stand a chance here. And do you know what they do then? They start ridiculing everything. Themselves. And then they go to the casino. All or nothing. A last shot of luck or nothingness. There’s nothing in between. It’s all somewhere in between anyway. The average, how terrible, a terrible average – it takes you to your grave. And the cemetery has no smell, no taste, no definition of emotions.”

“No matter, professor, no matter that you’re a gambler! Show the yellow ants that you’re alive, that you know how to live, even if it means living as an outsider. Madmen have their freedom. For them any solution is possible. We are the downbeats, but nobody counts on us. We have attained the freedom to rely on ourselves.”

2. Another allusion to Antun Gustav Matoš.



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