

THE WHITE AGAINST THE BLACK

Excerpt translated by Julija Gulbinovič

One morning, I received a call. The man introduced himself as a relative. A relative? Yes, yes, Dalia my dear, your relative Zenon Vaibzdys, from your mother's side... Vaibzdys? Vaibzdys?! Oh, I didn't mean to frighten you, NOT THAT Vaibzdys, not Genezijas, calm down, I'm from the later generation of Vaibzdyses, my relationship with my old man is such that one could say – there is NONE. He and I are like oil and water. No longer even relatives! If you wish, we could have a frank conversation... Yes, yes, you and I are COMPLETE strangers. But we will get to know each other. Dalia my dear, I have some news for you. Oh, I'll only be able to reveal it when we meet in person, not on the phone. It's an urgent matter that requires immediate attention, so we should meet as soon as possible! Ok, so in the beer garden of Griūk negyvas? His tone was that of a self-confident person in the habit of commanding others, yet his voice sounded soft.

God knows why I agreed to meet that son of 'not our' Vaibzdys. To dispel the slightest doubt about our status as non-relations and prove to myself that being on the opposite side of the fence gives me a sweet feeling of superiority? Or was it simple lack of resolve and will to refuse? (It does happen that I spend a good fifteen minutes being pushed into a corner by a smooth talker pontificating about food supplements, having informed me that, besides, she is recording this conversation, until I finally summon my strength to shout "No!!!"). Intrigue? Curiosity? No, it was probably that "urgent matter that requires immediate attention" – you never know...

He was already waiting for me in the beer garden of Griūk negyvas overgrown with climbers. Come autumn, those climbers turn blood-red and come to evoke a sense of longing akin to dull tooth ache, later changing into dark blue, the colour of bruises, but now they were still filtering the shimmering late summer sunlight. The green plastic chairs around small round tables, each with a tiny vase of purple asters, were empty: four o'clock, not a popular time for customers.

Large, fleshy, squashed as if stuck between the chair and the table, he pushed out another chair with his foot – oh, what a cheap, pitiful piece of plastic! - and got up to his full height, arms outstretched like those of a football goalkeeper. He was smiling broadly, so broadly it gave me a fright: he was about to grab me into a familial bear hug and squeeze me, but luckily something held him back.

Around forty five. Trimmed – not untamed – longish russet beard. He could have been a young-generation Orthodox priest – there was something missionary in his face. Cleverly disguised balding at the back of the head. Unbuttoned suit jacket and, as is frequently the case with men of his age, the flaccid, over-fermented dough of his stomach spilling over his belt. No tie, the top button of the shirt undone. Plump hands with tapering fingers, on one wrist a white gold Cartier Love bracelet that had rolled into the wrist

line, on the other a Rolex. Only when you lock your hand with that deceitfully soft bun of his palm you discover how powerful its muscle actually is ...

“Oh, what wonderfully familiar features! Grandpa Vaibzdys’s lips... The chin.. The eyebrow line... The cheekbones... All grandpa’s, my grandpa’s long-lost brother’s, for whom he longed so much but was never to see again... The eyes... My God, those exact eyes! ...”

He welled up, emitted a sort of snort, and rolled his eyes to the sky, as if his speech was suddenly abandoning him, but in a moment – a real virtuoso of shifting gears – he stood in front of me completely composed again, so that it even crossed my mind: here’s what it means to be able to control your emotions. Pleasant and soft, he set off with a panegyric of me, praising my fifty-year-old beauty: it’s at this age that beauty turns into mature fine wine - matured in no less than barrels of oak from France, from the woods of Nevers, Vosges, Tronçais. Wine as fine as Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Emmanuel Rouget or Domaine Armand Rousseau, or even... Wines of the highest quality – oh, Burgundy! – dark, velvety. He’s a wine connoisseur, and I am worthy of every one of them!

But the instant a young woman in a little pleated skirt and apron appeared by our table, notepad ready in her hands, he, like a gemstone, suddenly revealed another facet. His smile disappeared as if covered by a cloud. Suddenly I saw how finicky he could be, someone who would tyrannise waiters because of an olive, which at present appears to be looking rather sad on his plate – has it perhaps, kindly tell me, had the misfortune of losing both its parents recently?, and where are those capers we were promised?, there’s no sign of them, equally unknown are the whereabouts of the salad sprinkle, and may I advise you not to test my patience because if I don’t get what I’m paying for, I’ll raise hell and send the plate back to the chef, and be so kind, DO ME A FAVOUR, bring another plate!

“I would have liked to order some wine for myself and the lady, but I see that you don’t have anything suitable here...” Zenon was poking the menu with his fingers, his facial expression that of a sulking child. “No... No... Do you call this wine? It’s just swill that’s never even come near oak. Dalia my dear, they can’t push this on us, our palate doesn’t deserve such punishment, in general, wine-growing in Lithuania, you know, I needn’t waste my words...” The young waitress, a high-schooler or university student, was kneading her notepad, hot in the face. “That’s why they import such, excuse my language, slop - those hicks from a third-world country will drain it anyway... Shouldn’t the two of us perhaps just have coffee? I do hope at least they don’t cock that up here. What do you say? Nothing?... Sweetheart, we’d like some good, strong, REAL coffee. And I trust you keep your beans out of the reach of cockroaches?”

The girl, as if scalded, disappeared backstage through the climbers.

“So, you... Perhaps you don’t mind that we – as relatives – drop the register a notch... Communicate on a first-name basis, so to say. You don’t? Really? Oh, wonderful, wonderful, how quickly we seem to find a common language!” He was already cheerfully getting into the saddle. “Firstly, you would probably be interested to know who I am...”

I would, Zenon, I won’t lie, I would...

“Great.” He tried to conceal his satisfaction – modesty adorns a person – and, having held a pause for intrigue, began introducing himself. Oh, that really needed a

deep breath: an expert in human behaviour, business coach, public speaker, business consultant, change management consultant, special education specialist, strategy consultant, business organisational change consultant, working in thirty countries around the world, but translated into human language, if we were to introduce ourselves in one word, simply a coach, of course, if I know what that means... Oh, I'm sorry, things happen, it's not unheard of people seeing the sea for the first time only in their old age... He found my puzzlement charming, that is exactly what he said with a smile: he can see this as material he will be able to work with, ya, to roll up his sleeves, as the fellow says, all the while openly piercing me with his gaze: "I observe people closely, Dalia my dear, three minutes is all I need to tell what my future client has going on in their head – it's a professional habit, no need to be so self-conscious. Let's loosen up. He doesn't want to brag, but for now, he is the only practitioner of such calibre in the country. "So where should I begin", he shifted and the pitiful plastic cheapie creaked under him.

So, first and foremost, he, Zenon Vaibzdys, practises freedom. Complete and utter freedom. In his country house near Trakai he always walks barefooted, because bare feet are a wonderful way to ground yourself, they connect you to the universe, open your chakras. He could easily walk barefoot in Vilnius too, front panels of his Calvin Klein jacket flapping in the air, he'd see no shame in that! He doesn't follow any conventions. Any restrictions. Even at large-scale events he takes off his shoes in front of everyone and walks around in just his socks - he doesn't give a toss about what they think, he sets the tone. Let's remove our blocks! Let's breathe freely! Let's be rid of our manacles - us, descendants of serfs!

It was all so unexpected that I found myself becoming more and more bewildered, as if sinking into dreamlike cotton wool, while Zenon the silver tongue was unstoppable, gradually metamorphosing into his public speaking persona, which he had clearly mastered in assembly halls and stadiums, simultaneously entering the state of trance. Thank God he didn't ask me anything, only occasionally, when his gaze paused on my face, as if a golden fish floated through his mind and his nostrils quivered sensually... "I don't want to brag, Dalia my dear, but once, as my wife and I were about to set off for Harrods, you know, for some shopping – you haven't had a chance to visit it, I suppose? Oh, one shouldn't give in to an inferiority complex, anyone can go there, like to a museum, even just to look! - I received a call from Imrid Rudgerin's assistant. Have I ever heard Rudgerin speak? I haven't? How is that possible?! Oh, he's simply God! Absolute God!.. So, his assistant's voice asked me whether I had requested Mr Rudgerin's consultation. Of course, yes, I replied immediately. Only, Dalia my dear, a swarm of bees was buzzing in my head: how unexpected, what unfortunate timing, my Lydia, our plans... Deep inside I even growled in frustration... So today at 6 p.m., said the assistant, a slot has become available, the fee for an hour's consultation is £3,000. She made a pause, you know, a meaningful pause. Am I willing to proceed with the consultation? Hello, hello? I held my breath, as electric shock ran through me all the way to my feet, not because of the cash, of course, such a sum is child's play for me, I earn between five and six, sometimes seven and eight per hour. Seven and eight what? Thousand, Dalia my dear, hello, what are you on?! But that meant that my wife and I would need to forgo the pleasant pastime that we'd planned, and I knew that my Lydia would be disappointed, very disappointed, because the two of

us were looking to spend some serious cash... Nonetheless, without even thinking, I answered: sure! Such a chance comes around once in a lifetime. I called off Harrods immediately, Lydia, of course, got disappointed, but only briefly, without a scene, she's a reasonable woman, I'll make sure to introduce you two. And you know, Dalia my dear, I didn't regret that decision for a second... Rudgerin's perceptive questions – absolutely all on point - followed by advice that can't be overrated... I'm telling you, he's God. For example, how many hours do I spend in the office and how much money does it generate for me? In the presence of the maestro I finally properly evaluated myself. I identified gigs that don't bring me a single euro. Yopshikmat, not a penny! It turned out, I had as many such gigs as lice, I was covered in it! Bank transfers. Pointless business meetings. Futile wheel running that doesn't generate a single euro. Zero! I've got to toss it all out, pasholvon from my life. Delegate to others. To those whose purpose on this planet is different. My work must bring exclusively actual money. You know, Dalia my dear, that consultation was such an eye-opener for me that I didn't sleep at night - when I came home, I circled the entire Žvėrynas quarter three times and made a decision to attend Rudgerin's course, and even become his official representative in Lithuania. I don't want to brag but I am now a certified human behaviour specialist and organise transformative weekends titled Break Through The Ceiling... My work is not what it is to others, because I DON'T WORK. I LIVE work. I BREATHE work. Morning till evening, seven days a week, and that, believe me, is a completely different quality. That's why I don't even need holidays. Holidays are needed by all those miserable churchmice who keep running in their hamster-wheel and never have the courage to do what they like. I, on the other hand, want to do the world a service. Yes, yes, a service! And for that I need a not unreasonable sum: two billion, no more. Scary? You see, I have a mission... I crave to give people back their lives that were snatched from them by the government, the media, by all sorts of crafty crooks, vultures, or even by themselves, descendants of serfs!

I sat there in stupor, I could even say, no longer fully present, while his words flowed endlessly... I only learn from the best, Dalia my dear. I transform creatively. I take from the world and give straight back to it. I'd like you to be able to understand me... Life has bestowed on me amazing gifts – nearly insurmountable situations that I actually managed to come through, emerge on the other side, and now I want to share that experience, share it... share... As Zenon was growing increasingly ecstatic, his eyes rolled back and he began making conductor's gestures with his plump, Love-adorned arm, humming something. Just two sweet little billion... billion... sweet billion... He gets into such a trance every time he speaks to those thousands-strong audiences, I thought, when they start droning, swaying as they stand shoulder to shoulder and howling in unison like wolves of Wall Street.

Suddenly I felt like a glass of wine. It could be of the worst kind, the kind that's never even come near oak, made from pressed apples, or rhubarb. It could even be made from tree bark. Or an ankle boot! I scanned the menu just for form's sake and ordered the first wine my eyes landed on. I noticed Zenon, who by then had come round (he slid in and out of his persona as smoothly as an eel), becoming horrified. Am I betraying your company? Not my company, Dalia my dear, you're betraying good taste! You're betraying yourself. And that's much worse! I can already discern what was done to you. Oh, we'll have plenty

to do together, believe me... I'd like you to be able to understand it. I'm explaining to you as to a complete beginner. Recently I was in Macau where I had a lot of work, many live sessions. One day, I popped into one marvellously designed building for a coffee and a dessert. So what, you'd ask? Let me tell you that, as I was eating that dessert, Dalia my dear, suddenly my chakras opened and tears of gratitude welled up in my eyes because the thing I was eating was nothing short of a miracle – that dessert was simply divine. Its every bite. Every atom. I would like you to understand what REAL things are. For example, I carry a Louis Vuitton handbag, I don shoes bespoke-made for me in London, I casually swathe myself in Calvin Klein, accessorise with Cartier and Rolex, likewise, everything my Lydia owns is exclusively Chanel as she cannot tolerate anything else, cannot tolerate it physically, do you understand, because 'else' makes her break out in a rash. Rash! Do you think we are like that just because we made it? No! Because we support only the best, because only the best can change the world! I know that when I wear £5,000 shoes, I'll reach 5 million people, that's a hard fact. It's been proven! But I digress... I often have to repeat to people: your every minute which is wasted through being not with me, causes irreversible damage, so think about it... Of course, you might find yourself wondering - and it's a very reasonable question - don't I ever get tired? I get asked this in every auditorium – small or large. You see, I belong to that modest percentage of people who know what they want in life – what they REALLY want. And who tirelessly follow that. No, I haven't yet made the rich list, but it includes a number of my clients, and they are as settled there as Sosnowsky's hogweed. I don't want to brag but, if I wanted to, I could stop working entirely. Send work packing, nachui, Dalia my dear. My monthly fee of 60,000 euro that was made public in the press by some dolt is purely symbolic. The goal of my work is to make people confident and help them stop telling themselves 'no'. Help them reach their inner 'me'. Help them peel their inner 'me' like an onion! For that, people must change their relationships with others and their behaviour, but, most importantly, they must restructure their value system. Yes, yes, they must raise their self-esteem. And stop pissing their pants. I've always said, and I don't tire of repeating: stop telling yourselves 'no'! You miserable dirtbags, you padla, just stop that! Remove your blocks. Only: "I can". Only: "I will go". Only: "I will do". Only: "I will make it". So I help people make that true – I do it quickly, effectively and precisely, like a laser. And that – without a general anaesthetic. I'm a surgeon's scalpel! Without a scalpel there's no chance: you know, Lithuanians simply have to be incised and bled a litre of blood before they finally prick their ears and start thinking, because from time immemorial Lithuanians are idlers and sluggards, and on top of that, serfs, here's the Lithuanian spirit for you, yopshikmat! I don't want to brag, but, Dalia my dear, I like it when people start thinking about the price of them not getting my advice. That price is very high: it's their entire unaccumulated wealth. Their entire unearned earnings. So, my invoice is what helps you pay your bills. And it's in the interest of my business clients to interest me in working with them. And that's when the time comes for me to put my package on the table...

I ordered another glass of wine. I should just get up from this chair and leave. Walk away into the imminent autumn. But, God is my witness, I just sat there flabbergasted...

...Of the same slop? Dalia my dear, you're in serious need of my help. Oh, dear child, I will absolutely work on you. Because the way things are now simply cannot continue!

The two of us will run the marathon of reviewing your value system together. We will activate this thing called 'life accelerator' – it was developed based on my latest method – and I will help you find out who you are. Finally, you will understand WHO YOU ARE. Dalia, yopshikmat! I will be your wake-up call. My coaching sells across the world, and sells for a lot of money, but for you it will be for free. Your brain will be rewired through neuroplasticity. I will simplify complex things for you, and you will be able to celebrate your rebirth. You'll come to feel comfortable with yourself.

Before I had a chance to blink, he suddenly bellowed in the beer garden of Griük negyvas, as, I assumed, he did in those full to the brim halls and stadiums: "Do you feel comfortable with yourself?" And those wolves, to be more precise, the sheep of Wall Street reply from every direction: "Nooooo!"

But he had digressed again... So, I make a fair deal with a client: a verbal agreement – I don't need anything in writing – and a percentage of profit. I can end the relationship at any time - in such cases I raise hell and the client knows that I'm done with them... Failure? What failure are you talking about, Dalia dear? In my line of work, failure is almost nonexistent. Failure would be completely illogical. Some hack from Vakaró žinios accused me of selling fresh air. Can you imagine! I, Zenon Vaibzdys! Later, I explained to that halfwit in a corner by the bogs at one restaurant opening: "My clients see the results of my work in their bank accounts, capish?" That's it. As for me, I must see at least five-fold profit – if it's not happening, I don't mark time. I'm not a donkey. I raise hell and bye-bye. As the Holy Bible says: "In the beginning was the word, and" – I'm paraphrasing here – "after the word was dough, and after that – more dough". He giggled into his fist like a pickpocket who had managed to nick an old lady's handbag in a church. "So, I find all the answers in the Holy Book and pass them onto my clients. At the moment, I have one hundred twenty four satellites, my customers, orbiting me. Also, though I don't want to brag, I've already acquired numerous followers. I should tell you that someone being at your heels is quite nice actually – it forces you to push on. And the money... The money is like fish: it swims where it likes it best."

"But why did you want to meet me?"

"Why? Why?! Do you still need to ask? Because we are relatives, yomayo! Don't you feel anything like that? No vibe? Nothing?! But I do! For me, kinship is of great value. You know, blood relations and so on. Genes..." He emitted a snort again, as if about to get tearful once more, but in the last moment figured that it would be a bit over the top. God knows, he deserved an Oscar for the best actor – never for the best supporting role, naturally, as even a nomination for that would be below him. "A blood relation in this mad fluctuating world is - do you know what, Dalia dear? It's stability, stabiliziec. And I'm not a recluse. Not a mankurt. Besides, I can see it in your eyes that we have a lot in common. We just do. It's there. And all those lawyers, those small-minded dimwits, they should go and tear their... balls off. The two of us could use our inheritance for something big... You know, I'm working to stir up the world, to shake it awake... I want to do the world a service it deserves... And speaking of Luxembourg, isn't it so low-lying it's practically in a pit? Divided into cantons? Have you been there? Had you met that grandpa... He was a factory owner, if I'm not mistaken? Had a cork factory? Not cork? How many factories, did you say, he had? Where? Italy and France? Not in

Poland? What? Wh..at?! A n...urse? Are you saying that our grandpa was a ca-re-giver?! Yopshikmat, what are you on... talking about, Dalia dear? Certainly, I must have misheard? Got hold of the wrong end of the stick? Wh..at? No?! So, are you saying that our grandpa emptied potties?! Changed adult nappies? Scrubbed hospital rooms? Dalia darling, don't joke like that with me! Dalia darling...

Just as the smile that was glued to his round, sweaty face seemed about to come unstuck, and fall down painfully, suddenly there appeared He. Lulled into trance by Zenon's coaching, I hadn't noticed that all the tables around us were now buzzing, fusing and bubbling were the best cocktails in town, green and orange, which were said to knock you out so you fell backwards and only came round 24 hours later, and beer was foaming past the brim of pints, as students, so fond of this place, had densely huddled around the tables. The man emerged from the depths of the climbers. Bearded, in denim overalls, with a Che Guevara face and tattooed blacksmith's arms with large, red fists - only a wrench and a hammer were missing - he walked straight up to Zenon:

"So I see you've moved your chirping here, you bullshitting lark?" The buzz suddenly subsided and the next moment died down completely, as the Leviathan voice resounded through the beer garden, portending no less than the Third World War. "Quick to forget, are you, you parasite, how you showed us a clean pair of heels leaving Bočiai? Must've forgotten to settle your bill, have you? Thought you could just walk out like nothing happened? And what about the festival at The Three Kings? And your little function at the Marriott for three hundred bullshitters like you? And that conference at the Ambertone? And your forum at the Forum Palace? And the snail festival at The Philippines? You reckon those snails slid down your throat for free, do you?!"

Oh, what a great scene it is people raising hell! My coach jumped off the chair - how incredibly gracefully he managed to avoid the snare of his position by the table this time! - wearing a guiltless expression, a presumption of innocence etched on his face and, his torso suddenly wooden and only his little legs moving, but in a panic moving fast like those of a centipede, rushing ahead of the brain, he made for the exit. Before I could blink, the front panels of his Calvin Klein were already flapping in the wind down the street. Catch him if you can... The bearded man, leaning forward, was intently listening to his inner voice: should he or shouldn't he chase after him, eventually settling on, screw it, all the while twisting an invisible wrench in his arm and looking around ferociously, as if expecting support from the public, but the carefree buzz had already begun to resume: students are an absent-minded audience. Then suddenly his eyes landed on me and his glare pierced me. Resentfully, as if I was Zenon's accomplice. I wanted to quickly tell him that between me, The Philippines and snails there really wasn't any connection at all, that the world of snails in his sense of the word was completely alien to me! I only know (and swear by!) grape snails as they slide, after the rain has fallen, down a well-trodden path along the river or up a burdock leaf, and, when touched on their little antennae, retract into their tiny shell, like microns of microns in our boundless universe, and in it, have their incontestable place! He swayed back and forth for a moment, then finally spat and went off, leaving me with my rhubarb wine, disappearing just as he appeared - through an opening in the climbers. Had I just seen a ghost? Was it all a vision? Still dazed from the hypnosis, I was left to pay for Zenon's coffee.