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A Buddy Is a Buddy

Jim Timony, my social worker, left for Nebraska to finish his doctorate, and so the whole of next week I did not have to do my obligatory script of contrition and blabbing such lies that no one in his right mind would swallow: "Have you ever beaten anyone?", "Who? Me? Who do you think I am?" "Did your father beat you up when you were little?" "Yes, he used to beat the hell out me." (That excuse always works, even if I would have slaughtered two people in broad daylight in the middle of the street. They would pat me on the shoulder with understanding and send me home, to work, clean johns, flip hamburgers, wash dishes, pack fucking shirts—which all boils down to the same thing, which is, work to pay taxes. But, only provided I am an American such as it is) The Christmas madness comes to an end, and at the plant where I am working there is no more work for seasonal workers—I am on standby. Last month I had a gang of overtime working hours, plus I received a Christmas bonus in the amount of my weekly pay—I could hang for a while. Last night I got a phone call from a friend in Florida, Mujo. He was drunk as a monkey and sick of it all: "Today, at the supermarket, I am loading groceries into the car of some asshole. All of a sudden, I see he has Wisconsin plates. I tell him I have a pal, Daco, in Wisconsin, and he looks at me as if I am scum and says: 'Boy, I don't have a whole day.' Hey, listen to him, 'Boy'—I am old enough to be his father. I cannot stand it anymore, Daco—I am fed up with it all." "Are you working this weekend?" "I could, but I won't." "I'll swing by." "Are you fucking with me?" "I've not licked anyone in rummy for a long time" Off-season, a round-trip ticket for a Greyhound bus is only fifty-six dollars, and the trip to Tampa takes two days. As I already have experience with fascist drivers who do forbid any kind of alcohol, I pour whiskey in a one-liter bottle of Coca-Cola and go to see my friend, who saw me off in Sarajevo almost five years ago; that was the last time we saw each other.

I am sitting in Coral Bar in Tampa, in Florida, and everybody is staring at me as if I am a crazy because I have boots on my feet, corduroy trousers, a shirt, and a heavy jacket (Canadian) lies on the back of my chair, and it is in over-thirty-degree weather outside. Mujo said he would pick me up in half an hour, but I am having my third beer, he is not here, and the kind barmaid hands me the phone again Dubravka, Mujo's wife, tells me that he left half an hour ago and he, being the moron he is, is probably lost On the other side of the bar is an old, shabby sot, and I know (because I am a magnet for these fools) that he will address me sooner or later ... "I'm sick of most human beings; I've fucked about 2,500 women, bet on 12,500 races, drunk a whole Lake Michigan of alcohol, published twelve books...and, what have you, you little

pussy, done with your life?" The barmaid says: "Hey, Charles, that's enough," but I am interrupting her: "Everything's O.K. Give the man a drink (whiskey with water), it's on me," because on that unshaved face, full of deep wrinkles that only pain could have caused, uncombed gray hair, keen, blue eyes, I recognize something—Vratnik, Bistrik, Marindvor, Korzo and Istra, bife San, Šetalište, Plavi podrum and Hamam-bar, Gradina and Marinkova bar¹--in a word: a buddy. "Cheers, asshole," I say to him, "I have missed out on 2,500 women, have fucked 12,500 horses, have stolen hundreds of books, have two children—there, that's what I have done with my life." There was laughter sparkling in his eyes: "Sandy, give to the little pussy a drink on me." "Thank you, old pussy." "You know," he started, but I cut him off: "I don't know ... but stop bothering me, for God's sake." (I begin to worry why Mujo, the imbecile, was not coming—not because something might have happened to him but because I would have to shell out the money for a cab to his home.) At that moment, Mujo comes in: same as always, only with a sun tan now, like he spent two summer-vacation shifts in Ulcinj. "Well, what's up, you little Ustasha²! You've been in town for less than half an hour and you already know the biggest drunks." We hug and kiss each other, drool and weep on each other while the small audience of Americans in the bar is confused with the cacophony of the Bosnian language: "Well, well, you motherfucker, fuck your father, you faggot, crazy monkey, idiotic moron, you old pimp ... fuck your mother"—all our warm expressions of love and endearment. When we regain our breath, I say: "Sandy, give us a drink--Mujo, what do you want?--and to Charles too." Mujo said: "Don't, Dubravka will be worrying" "Don't worry, I've already called her ... Sandy, would you kindly hand me the telephone again?" Mujo calls his wife and says that we will have a drink and come home; I hear Dubravka's voice, full of happiness: "O.K., but don't tell me that you'll stay with Daco just for a little bit because it's impossible to stay with him 'just for a little bit.'" Charles wants, at any price, to finish the thought that popped up in his head half an hour ago: "Ya know" "Go ahead, say it!" "Ya know, Boy, you should consider writing." "Thank you, Charles. I'll think about that."

After the fifth drink, Mujo and I leave the bar and I ask him: "How come you, such a moron, found such a wife like Dubravka?" Mujo looks at me, totally not getting it: "Dubravka is not my wife—she's a buddy."

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