

Author

Zoran Živković was born in Belgrade, former Yugoslavia, in 1948. In 1973 he graduated from the Department of General Literature, the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade; he received his master's degree in 1979 and his doctorate in 1982 from the same school, where he is currently a professor of creative writing.

Živković is the author of eighteen works of fiction: *The Fourth Circle* (1993), *Time Gifts* (1997), *The Writer* (1998), *The Book* (1999), *Impossible Encounters* (2000), *Seven Touches of Music* (2001), *The Library* (2002), *Steps through the Mist* (2003), *Hidden Camera* (2003), *Compartments* (2004), *Four Stories till the End* (2004), *Twelve Collections and the Teashop* (2005), *The Bridge* (2006), *Miss Tamara, The Reader* (2006), *Amarcord* (2007), *The Last Book* (2007), *Escher's Loops* (2008) and *The Ghostwriter* (2009).

Živković has won numerous literary awards, including the World Fantasy Award (2003) for his mosaic-novel *The Library*.

He lives in Belgrade, Serbia, with his wife Mia, their twin sons Uroš and Andreja, and their three cats.

Translator

Alice Copple-Tosić (1948) was born and raised in San Jose, California, and moved to Belgrade, Serbia (former Yugoslavia) in 1975. She has a master's in French and has been translating from Serbo-Croatian into English since 1978. She taught English language and translation for fifteen years at the University of Belgrade and is currently a translation reviser at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague, Netherlands.

I went out the back door of the sanatorium. Before me stretched a flat lawn bordered by a tall hedge. The early autumn sun had turned the tops of the linden trees more golden than green. Dressed in identical light robes, the patients standing or sitting on benches resembled blue statues dotted about an open-air exhibit. Nothing moved, like in a movie still.

Disrupting this tranquility, I headed across the lawn toward the farthest bench on the left. The patient I wanted to see was always sequestered there. But even if I didn't know where he was, I could easily spot him by his shock of pure white, yet still-luxuriant hair.

He didn't look at me right away when I stopped in front of the bench. He kept his eyes on the hedge, seeming to see through it to something that brought a smile to his lips. His hands were resting on an old-fashioned book in his lap.

I stood there for some time in silence before addressing him.

"What a beautiful day."

His head turned toward me slowly. The smile didn't disappear, but it softened.

"Yes, beautiful."

"How are you?"

"Fine, thank you. How about you?"

"I'm fine, too, thank you."

"Have you come out to the park for a bit of sun too?"

"No. I've come to see you."

"Me? Do we know each other?"

"Yes." I indicated the space next to him on the bench. "May I?"

"Certainly, please sit down. How strange. I can't remember having met you before. How awkward to have to ask, but would you mind telling me where we met?"

"Six-and-a-half years ago, when you came to our sanatorium. I am your doctor."

"Have I been in the sanatorium that long? Why? Is there something wrong with my health?"

"Your health is fine. But not your memory."

His smile evaporated. "Come again?"

"You haven't been able to remember anything for a long time. And even what you remembered before has been almost completely forgotten."

"Why, that's terrible. Is there a cure? A person can't live without memories."

"Yes, they can. You've been doing it for years. And quite successfully, one might say. Actually, I know lots of people who'd give everything they have to be in your place. To be able to forget the past."

"But I have no reason to forget it." He paused a moment. "At least I hope not. Do you happen to know any details about my past?" he asked hesitantly. "Is there something dreadful in it?"

"Listen, we have this same conversation almost every day. For you it's new every time, while I am like an actor who's been playing in the same show for a very long time. When we get to this place, I shrug my shoulders helplessly and reply that I know even less about your past than you do. We haven't been able to find a single one of your friends or relatives, someone who knew you before you came to the sanatorium. But today the show will take a new turn."

"Did you find someone from my past?"

"No. But we found your past."

"Where?"

"Where it had been mislaid."

"How can a past be mislaid?"

"The human brain doesn't always act like we expect it to. In your case, there isn't anything where the memory is most often registered. To put it in computer terms, all the files there have been erased. But we accidentally found a backup copy in a totally unexpected place."

His face lit up again. "So that means I'll get my memory back?"

I didn't answer right away. We looked at each other in silence as his smile started to fade.

"It's not quite that simple. If we were dealing with a computer, it would be an easy matter. Unfortunately, the mechanisms of remembering are damaged in your brain. We could bring back your memory, but it wouldn't be permanent. The very next day you will have forgotten everything. It wouldn't be worth the effort to do it every day, either, because the procedure is complex and not completely without risk."

"Well, then it's like you didn't even find my past," he said dejectedly.

"Not exactly. You won't be able to have all of your memory any longer, but we think we can revive one part permanently. A very small part. Perhaps only one day."

We sank into silence again.

"Something's better than nothing, I suppose," he said at last.

Now I was the one who smiled. "I'm glad you think so. All that's left is to choose the day you most want to remember. And this is where we run into a new obstacle."

He looked at me in bewilderment, and then he got it. "How can I know which day I most want to remember when I can't remember any of them?"

"That's it. But that's where I might be able to help."

"You? How?"

"I saw your past all the way up to your arrival at the sanatorium. It's clearly registered on the backup copy. I know you, actually, as well as you once used to know yourself."

"That's . . ." he started, but seemed at a loss for words, ". . . very unusual. What kind of a man was I?"

Before I had time to answer, he spoke again.

"No, don't say a word. What's the use in finding out when I'll soon forget it anyway. Which day would you recommend?"

"That's not a simple question. There are many days in your past that are worth remembering. I might make a mistake."

"That's an unavoidable risk, I'm afraid."

"I suppose so. Well, all right. You know, there's something in your case that's intrigued me all these years. Something seemingly unimportant I haven't been able to explain."

"What's that?"

"The book," I said, pointing at it.

He raised it a little from his lap. "*Sentimental Education*."

"Yes. That's the only personal item you brought with you to the sanatorium. I tried to work out why it was so important to you, but kept running into a wall of oblivion. The most logical explanation was that you brought it because it was your favorite book, but not once have I seen you read it."

He put the book back on his lap. "I don't remember having read it."

"You haven't. I know that now. Not only here, but even before you joined us. You bought it just before you came to the sanatorium, when you already knew that your memory was failing irreparably."

"Why?"

"I wondered the same thing. When we discovered your memory, I hoped for a moment that it would be easy to find out. But it wasn't easy at all. Even after carefully examining the backup copy, there didn't seem to be a trace of the book. I had already lost hope, when I finally found it in your memory. This same edition."

"Where?"

"It's no wonder it was hard to find. You had seen it only once before. Briefly. Very long ago. Just after you turned nineteen. It was a beautiful day just like this one. A girl was sitting on a bench in the park reading *Sentimental Education*. You walked past her and then sat on another bench nearby even though you were in a hurry. When she got up and walked away not long thereafter, you wanted to follow her with all your heart, but you couldn't pluck up the courage."

His eyes glazed over.

"Was she pretty?"

"Very. There are many women in your memory, but you found none more beautiful than her. She was wearing a summer dress."

I stopped because he'd mumbled something. I hadn't caught it.

"Excuse me?"

His voice was softer than a whisper when he repeated, "Light blue."

He placed his hands on the book in his lap, then turned his head away from me towards the hedge. The smile returned to his lips and so did the look in his eyes that saw through the dense foliage. Through the sediments of time. Through his dead memory.

I stood up and headed back across the lawn to the sanatorium. I had nothing more to do there. He'd given me the answer I wanted.

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