

Sascha Macht

The War in the Garden of the King of the Dead

Der Krieg im Garten des Königs der Toten

A Novel, 269 pp.

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English sample translation © Amanda DeMarco

Excerpt pp.1-28

DUMONT

“A man from Skagafjörður dreamed he came into a great house where two women were rocking.
They were covered with blood, and blood rained on the windows.”
Eliot Weinberger, “An Archeology of Dreams”

The island where I was born rose from the cold, somber depths of the ocean in the 1940s. Volcanic activity and tectonic tremors caused by U.S. nuclear arms testing suddenly brought forth a new nation in a forgotten corner of the globe: blazing peaks, barren steppes, whispering bluffs, and colorful swamps. Grasses thrived, little trees twisted skyward, shrubbery spread. The island was already inhabited by white bees, carnivorous flightless birds, and natatory mammals when the first human set foot on it, perhaps a modern pirate, an ornithologist come unhinged, an awol soldier, or a scion of the European oligarchy wandering the seas in his yacht. An ancient and peculiar fragment of earth had emerged from the waters which had swallowed it millions of years earlier, a threadbare republic was born and then annihilated, the wind swept over the beach, a fruit bat shrieked, someone reached for someone else’s hand.

In the days when my island once again faced perdition, I had just turned seventeen and had decided to dedicate my little scrap of future solely and completely to those horror films that took my breath away and inexorably robbed me of my sleep as well as my reason. I was a great admirer of Marcel Kúrten’s slender body of works, a terrifying sequence of films in which animals, plants, and objects take on human form under the influence of cosmic forces and wreak havoc on their surroundings. I was also mad about the works of Israeli director Jael Guldenburg, which all took place in forbidding locations: on the floor of the Dead Sea, on a distant, darksome planet made of smoothly polished metal, in the labyrinthine cellar system of a skyscraper in the middle of the desert, on a cruise ship adrift forever in the endlessness of the Pacific Ocean, on the fringe of an icy terrain inhabited by fur-covered giants with red eyes, or in

the inflamed abdominal cavity of a dying man. Roberto Madrigal's short flicks made me downright dizzy, reinterpretations of Japanese ghost stories in which groups of simple people converged by chance and had to ward off uncanny figures that had molted from the husk of an age-old nature, emerging from singing streams, dense underbrush, the hollow interior of a green hill, or a dank trench in the earth.

I owned all of these films and many more. I'd arranged the VHS tapes on a shelf and I looked at them again and again, after getting up in the morning, at lunch, on hot afternoons, and in the deep of the night when I couldn't sleep. Now and again, I paid a visit to Handsome Hans, proprietor of a tiny shop operated under the Beauty & Hope franchise. Along with personal hygiene products from Soviet reserves, trench coats, Bulgarian cigarettes, cans of tinned food, old TV guides, and hairpieces, he also sold video cassettes: Hollywood classics, pornos, Latin American TV series, anime, and horror films. Trucks from western relief agencies drove the goods across the island, armed bandits from the surrounding hills and forests ambushed the convoys and hawked the goods to people like Handsome Hans, who stocked his shop with them. Mostly he just gave me the films I wanted for free. I was the only one interested in them anyway.

Bruno, he would say, take that crap and go, I don't want it on my shelves anymore.

The village where I grew up was called Kajagoogoo. It was founded in 1989, as the sallow candlelight of communism began to wane in the rest of the world, by my parents and a handful of their friends as a sort of New Age refuge at the end of history. Those were the days when the governments on my island lasted half a year, the nationalists ousted by the socialists, the socialists by the liberals, the liberals by the last communists, and the last communists by the nationalists once again. No one in the nearby provincial capital of Savannah or the more distant national capital cared one whit that somewhere in the wilderness, a village had been founded, which is how my parents managed to go on largely unchecked at the edge of the Great Savanna, the dead eye of a hurricane that the politicians of our island whipped into a frenzy in the years that followed.

When I was fourteen, my father gave me a camcorder that he'd stolen from a Norwegian backpacker who'd passed through our village. It was a simple thing with a flat, hinged screen and mini-cassettes that I could only play back on our television after a special video recorder

DUMONT

appeared in Hans's shop, which he gave to me after I'd done drudge work in his shop for a year. I could edit the films after another tourist, a Spaniard, Chilene, or Argentine (no one really knew) spent a lonely night in our village and was forced to continue on without his laptop. From then on nothing could hold me back: I filmed the landscape around the village, the sunrises and sunsets, the wind that shook the brush, the cattle in the pastures, the rabbits and deer in the forests, the fish in the river, and the swallows in the sky. I recorded the inhabitants of the village at their work, the cars that drove along the federal road in the distance, the heaps of trash piled up everywhere, and the rats that rummaged in them. At night, I superimposed my voice on the images using the laptop, recounting whatever had happened to me lately, without it having anything to do with what I'd filmed. Later I left the sound out entirely, because the images seemed increasingly foreign and inscrutable, and I was uncertain if they really depicted what I'd seen, although it did seem to be daily life in our village that they showed. So really, I was keeping a film diary more than I was practicing filmmaking. I didn't develop my fascination with horror until after my parents had disappeared.

The night my parents didn't return to Kajagoogoo was the night before my sixteenth birthday. Now and then the two of them took the bus to the provincial capital in the morning to take care of something or other, clear their heads, or spend time together, but they always came back early in the evening with a little gift for me. That day, nothing indicated that they wouldn't return: my mother prepared the provisions for the journey while my father told me I should round up the chickens when it got dark, but they would probably be back long before that. I filmed them as they left our house and set out down the road to the bus stop, my mother in her long gray dress, my father with a straw hat on his head and a shopping bag in his hand as they walked down the dusty, sunlit street past the fountain, Handsome Hans's shop, and the caravan park. When I couldn't see them anymore, I went back into the house, laid down in my bed, and recorded myself while masturbating for the first time, a strange, nervous feeling, composed of curiosity, braggadocio, and shame. I spent the rest of the day filming in the house, and in the evening I sat in front of the laptop and didn't recognize any of the images flickering on the display. I went to bed around two, excited about my birthday and surprised that my parents weren't back yet. That morning I didn't find any trace of them in the house either. The chickens weren't there either, because I'd forgotten to lock them behind their gate. I ate a banana for breakfast, drank coffee, and stared out the window. A few villagers were out and about, clearing away clutter, sweeping their doorsteps, or standing stiffly at the edge of the street looking at the

ground. I filmed them through the dirty windowpane, then went down into the village to ask about the whereabouts of the last bus.

It drove on yesterday, said Handsome Hans, even on time for a change.

I explained that my parents hadn't come home.

Handsome Hans shrugged his shoulders and said I should relax, my parents were dauntless hippies in the depths of their very souls, and surely they were lying somewhere arm-in-arm with a couple of other naked people in a big bed, sleeping off their high.

I asked Hans if he could repeat that, and if I could film him doing it, but he chased me off.

The months that followed passed in a flash: people left the village to seek their fortunes elsewhere, a few old people died, a few children were born, sometimes the weather was bad, but often the sun simply shone and nothing happened. Just after my parents' disappearance, I occupied myself with news from other parts of the island, listened to the radio, or read the daily anarchist newspaper, *Chinese Lantern*. That's how I learned of the overthrow of the twelve-year-old chief of state Immanuel Sullus by his vice president Emmy Jaeger, who had managed to draw the military to her side; of the surprising declaration of independence on the part of the northwestern mountain province, which wasn't recognized by the central government; and of the crumbling of our republican society, which really wasn't a crumbling anymore, but rather a full-blown collapse, as some commentators were convinced. Not only did the republic seem to be home to rich people, of whom there were never many, there were also very many poor people whose numbers were skyrocketing; and along with these poor and rich people, there were a few renegade governors who were in league with criminal syndicates in the countryside and had seized command of small parts of the various provinces like crazed warlords. When I heard one day that Ex-President Sullus had also disappeared without a trace, I gave up on following the malevolent politics of my island because I had come to understand that my parents' disappearance and Ex-President Sullus's disappearance were akin to a black lagoon whose bottom can't be seen for the sole reason that the revolutionaries from the mountains, the republican politicians, the gangster bosses in the blighted villages, or whoever had dumped thousands upon thousands of tons of shit into its water. In addition, I stopped filming my surroundings and ornamenting them with my silence because I no longer had any desire to depict reality without comment—it was far too vain and opaque for that. If I wanted to continue

filming, and I did, more than anything else, then I had to find a way to come to grips with this reality, to put it in its place, to hurl all of the hatred and rage of my youthful existence at it in the hope that it would shatter and something would emerge from behind it. I was miserable as a dog, couldn't sleep, sobbed and shrieked alone in the house, and smashed the furniture. If I hadn't stumbled upon the horror films of Marcel K urten, Jael Guldenburg, Roberto Madrigal, Natalia van Vijfeijken, Jim Wu, Alejandro Filippo Zeissiger, Ferenc Lima, and Terrence Nadongo in Hans's shop, then who knows, sooner or later maybe I would have taken the final freight elevator to the stars, as my mother would have put it.

Handsome Hans kept the video cassettes in a box toward the back of his store. They'd come in a goods donation from Europe, a shipping container full of all sorts of stuff. The bandits that he bought the donation from insisted that he take everything, not just the things he was sure to be able to sell in the village. During one of my forays in search of clothing and edible items, he called me over from afar, led me into the storeroom, and showed me the box.

Take a look, maybe there's something for you in there? he asked.

We kneeled and rummaged through the box.

What's that? I asked and looked at Hans with my reddened eyes.

Just movies, weird stuff. *The Dead University. The Cockroaches of Phrygia, the Rats of Dalmatia. 3 Short Films: Contrabassist—Leather Men—Hewers of Flesh. Bulbin the Demolisher. SS Standarte Zombie II.* And so on. Heard of any of it?

No.

Me neither. Looks pretty bottom-of-the-barrel. You can have it, if you want. I'll be getting more in soon, I'm afraid.

I nodded, picked up the box, and carried it outside.

Listen, Bruno, said Hans.

Mhm?

Nothing. Don't worry about it.

I spent the next day screening the material. All of it was appallingly bad, the sound incomprehensible, the images shaky, the effects cheap, and the actors beastly. Quite a few of them seemed to be acute alcoholics, or to be acting under the influence of hard drugs. Mostly the films were black-and-white. Some simply stopped in the middle of a sentence without any narrative justification, though I suspected that the directors had simply run out of money. And

yet they made a deep impression on me, a sort of perspective into an alien and threatening world, independent of but not infinitely far from my daily reality of looking for food, brooding for hours, needing to sleep, and dreaming brief, gruesome dreams; a black, shattered mirror that showed everything that wasn't, everything that had been long, long ago, or would only be in the future. I was particularly taken with *Leather Men* by Marcel Kürten, I must have watched it thirty times: a solar flare caused all leather items on earth to take on human proportions, becoming beings with creased, quadratic heads, zippered mouths, and long arms that ended in sharp hooks; suddenly they're everywhere, hiding in dark corners, standing motionless in the street, or creeping through the forest, but no one can talk to them or understand what they have to say. They're not dangerous, nearly pitiable in their thick-wittedness, but the people still decide to revert the beings to their original forms in huge factories, to make them into handbags, wallets, shoes, saddles, jackets, gloves, and soccer balls again; an enormous slaughter begins, at the end of which the leather men gain the upper hand and and, in turn, they transform the bodies of the human population into everyday items: chairs, tables, cupboards, houses, and decorative elements.

In the time that followed, I thought about many important things: What would my future be like? Would I stay in Kajagoogoo forever? What had happened to Marcel Kürten, Alejandro Filippo Zeissiger, Roberto Madrigal, and all the others? Besides me, was there anyone else in the world who watched their films? What effects would the ongoing consumption of this dreadful, overwhelmingly nauseating, cynical, fascistic drivel wreak on my young soul? At that moment, I couldn't answer a single one of my questions, and so I procured four new chickens from old Madame Ilyuschina's barnyard, in order to have fresh eggs each morning.

Soon Handsome Hans gave me another box of films from a ship's cargo that had been transported hundreds of kilometers inland only to fall into the hands of bandits just before reaching its destination. It included a few sequels, Zeissinger's *Return to the Dead University*, Nadongo's *Bulbin Mows Them All Down!*, and Lima's *SS Standarte Zombie, Parts III–VII*, but also films by a few directors still unfamiliar to me: Junior Galante, Donata Michalczuk, Sabine Oslov, Eddie from Outer Space, Buster Lee, the Bulli siblings, and X Wohlf. It was hard for me to tell when the films had been made, often they were so simple and dilettantish that they could well have had seventy or eighty years under their belts, or been quickly filmed yesterday. It also occurred to me to watch something different for a change, maybe something like *When Harry Met Sally...*, *Gladiator*, *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, *The Bodyguard*, or *Rain Man*, all of

which stood at the very front of Hans's video stand in their original packaging. I watched them all, but soon I returned to my agonizing drivel, which seemed to be able to provide me with something that none of the big productions could: that sense of speechless wonder that is sometimes borne of financial as well as intellectual limitation.

Incidentally, for the first time in my life, I began to take conscious note of the people around me: sometimes I had long conversations with Handsome Hans, whom I'd known for as long as I could remember but had never taken an interest in. I learned that he'd lived for a few years in the capital of the republic and had moved to the countryside to be safe after he was forced to learn the hard way about the secret service's intrigues.

I've caused a lot of people a lot of pain, and a lot of people have caused me a lot of pain, he said and stared for a long time at a point in the distance. After that, he didn't want to talk about it anymore.

Madame Ilyuschina taught me to care for animals. Although I still only had my four chickens, she explained to me how to help a cow birth its calf, how to teach an ape to steal, how to train a falcon to dive at other people on command, how to correctly kill a goat in such a way as to spill the least blood possible, what pigs eat (not everything, but a little of everything), the conditions that promote the well-being of armadillos, and how to make swans do what you require of them. Her granddaughter Lissa was my age, and we slept together twice, once on the floor of my room and the other time in a dry creek bed outside of Kajagoogoo, but I quickly lost interest in her and she in me.

There was another boy in the village, Perry Hartwig, who I spent my free time with, and I had plenty of it. I mostly watched him fire his air pistol, or listened to his jokes, which he invented himself: short, boring stories or just punchlines. Perry tore off screaming after we'd watched the first fifteen minutes of Ferenc Lima's *Sweet Slaughterhouse, Mon Amour*. Later he apologized to me, he had a weak stomach but as a matter of principle he was open to all forms of art. After that, I showed him Donata Michalczuk's *Lovely Bodies, Red Nights, Blind Worms* and had to call his parents over to push Perry's unconscious body home in a wheelbarrow.

I began to carry out renovations on the house. I replaced the gutters, oiled the hinges on the front door, sanded the boards of the veranda smooth, patched the decrepit water heater with burnt rice porridge, and got the garden in ship-shape again. In the forest, I found a few pieces of furniture in good condition: two chairs, a guest bed, a dresser, and a kitchen table, and I distributed them through the rooms of my house. What's more, at the edge of the savanna, I

DUMONT

found a small green car that I broke into and hot wired. At first I wanted to drive it into the ground, but instead I parked it in the driveway so that maybe someday I could finally get out of here.

I began to film again tentatively. I concentrated on details, recorded my breakfast eggs bursting in boiling water, a chicken shitting, the skin under my chin where stubble was beginning to sprout, filth that accumulated in the corners of rooms, the faucet dripping in the kitchen, a mosquito entangled in a spiderweb. The certainty that I would someday have to make my own horror film to keep from going crazy hung at the back of my mind like a leery, black gossamer cocoon.

One night I sat around for a long time in the living room, and since I couldn't sleep, I turned on the national television station. The news at two-thirty in the morning consisted of a montage of former grade school teacher and current President Emmy Jaeger's vacation memories, how she went for walks on the beach with her family, how she smiled tiredly as she shoved a gourd into the mouth of an aged elephant, how she rambled like a masked phantom through the ruins of a multi-family residence destroyed in a terror attack, how she silently and severely pointed at the gray sea with an outstretched arm, toward the sunset, as if something were hidden out there that must be found, a ship lost in a storm, a mythical monstrosity capable of swallowing all of the enemies of the republic together, or a small island inhabited only by a herd of silent apes who sat, day in, day out, in the shadow of a sandalwood tree observing the motion of the waves.

I received the third box just before Christmas, a quarter of a year after my parents' disappearance. At first Handsome Hans refused to give it to me. He'd become concerned that the films were drawing me inexorably downward into a whirlpool of insanity, and he didn't want to hand them over anymore. I explained to him in a serious tone that I had long been swimming for my life at the edge of that whirlpool, and that these films were the only thing that kept me from giving up. Hans replied that one shouldn't confuse the whirlpool of insanity with the whirlpool of false hope, though both led inevitably to the floor of the very same hushed, empty ocean, from which there was no escape. But then we both were forced to admit that we had wandered carelessly into a thicket of sanctimonious metaphors, and Hans handed me the box shaking his head. This time there were many films I already knew and possessed in my collection, along with a few sequels and three cassettes whose ribbons I thought were

damaged, as they only showed a black expanse with points of lights in it, streaked with perfectly straight white lines that sometimes drifted across the screen from bottom to top, sometimes from top to bottom. Only the film *Sun Hours* by Adelaide Turner left me paralyzed before the television for days, a five-hour-long ordeal that took place in near total darkness, in which hundreds of figures, unrecognizable either as people or as something else, searched for a mysterious object, which in their shrill conversations, they sometimes designated as *Escape Stone*, sometimes as *Sour Nectar of Hermeneutics*, sometimes as *Unfamiliar Gender*. After I had watched the film for the fourth time, I jumped around in the house, laughed, screamed, and drummed around on the furniture, because I was struck by the sudden, forceful realization that I had fallen in love for the first time. It didn't matter to me, though, that I didn't know if I had fallen in love with the director Adelaide Turner, with her film, with the clumsy, babbling, helpless but nonetheless murderous creatures that appeared in it, or with the eternal darkness that surrounded them. Probably all of it together. I imagined that Marcel Kürten and Adelaide Turner got married and came to visit me in Kajagoogoo in order to adopt me, go for walks with me on the endless savanna, and sing me to sleep at night with their ice-cold voices.

I spent the first hours of the Christmas holiday alone, then went to Madame Ilyuschina's barnyard later. The people on my island had very particular ideas about Christmas Eve, which consisted in spending two whole days three sheets to the wind, shooting fireworks into the sky, and setting the trash heaps on fire, which is why in Kajagoogoo it was generally referred to as *Night of the Burning Rats*.

In spring I discovered the joys and marvels of the internet when Handsome Hans showed me his new computer one day, the only one in the whole village with internet access. He wanted to establish a second source of income by converting half of his shop into an internet cafe, the future belonged to the new technology after all, every bonehead knew that. Several times per week I now hung around at Hans's, looking at horror film sites, rifling through horror film forums, and reading horror film reviews, and after a while I became rather well-informed about the biographies of my directors as well as their oeuvres, and I felt confirmed in the belief that I was really the only one who could actually enjoy these works. I also began preparations for my first feature film, *The Apprehension*, whose screenplay I had written over the winter, just five loose sheets, though I believed that they contained everything that was near to my heart at that time. I wanted to shoot the entire film on the savanna, just the sky and a narrow horizon of grass in the distance as a background. The constant murmuring of water would be audible

DUMONT

throughout the entire length of the film, because the protagonists, a cannibal child, a cannibal teenager, a middle-aged cannibal, and a very, very old cannibal, would be completely convinced that they lived in a world that consisted only of miles-high waterfalls, rushing cascades, and boundless rapids on whose narrow rock ledges and under constant threat of obliteration, tiny pockets of infinitesimally few people had established their dwellings. I told Perry about my plans, but he couldn't understand why I was determined to shoot the film on the savanna and not by a river or lake or, for all he cared, at the edge of a big puddle.

Because it's a film about delusions, I explained. The cannibals believe that they're living in a world that doesn't really exist; and they also believe that they are individual people of various ages and various mindsets, although all four of them are merely the likeness of a single person, and that person is me, Bruno Hidalgo.

Perry thought I was crazy, but promised to help me with the filming, though he himself had no desire to be in front of the camera.

And so I found myself confronted with the great problem of finding actors for my project, not suitable actors, but anyone, really, who would be prepared to perform. I would be able to talk Handsome Hans into it, of that I had no doubt. Perry persisted in his dogged refusal. I could cast Madame Ilyuschina as the old cannibal, if I could convince her to conceal her long straw-colored hair under an enormous hat. I myself didn't want to perform, in the final sequence at most, when the tired eyes of the four cannibals become my own eyes, in which the savanna's blood red sea of grass is mirrored. Lissa would have been good as the teenaged cannibal, but I didn't know how she felt about me at that point; I had long believed that she fervently hated my obsessive passion, and since I hadn't stopped watching films, she had come to hate me too. In one of the caravans there lived a gaunt, bald-headed man by the name of E.T. the Extraterrestrial who could have played one of the older cannibals, but word in the village was that he was unpredictable and could be overcome by bloodlust at any second, which no one could quell. Perry's father Ignacio was the only other person who came to mind, but he was in a wheelchair because he had lost both legs during a brief stay at the detention center in the provincial capital. I didn't know any of the other residents of Kajagoogoo well enough, or I considered them to be yellow-bellied rednecks who would rather die than act in a poetic cannibal film.

Soon summer hoisted its flag, and my project gradually went into the weeds. On top of that, my parents' savings, which I'd hidden in a shoebox in the bedroom, were slowly dwindling.

DUMONT

I asked Handsome Hans if I could help him out for a while, but he said that business had been so bad lately that he was seriously considering burning his shop down to at least to cash in on the small insurance payment from the Republican Cooperative. Since I couldn't think of any other way to support myself, I set up camp at the fountain, where I put my own furniture up for sale. Once I nearly managed to complete a transaction with E.T. the Extraterrestrial, but after he turned a vase wrathfully in his hands for a minute, staring and snorting into its dark mouth, I gave him the vessel for free and thanked him for his patronage. Three days later I brought everything back home because in the village no one gave a damn about me and the things that my parents had used before their disappearance. At night I sat at the kitchen table and wracked my little brain about how I could come into a large sum of money as quickly as possible without ruining the rest of my life. But it was no use: like so many other young people, I would have to drive my car to the provincial capital, Savannah, to try my luck.

Translated by Amanda DeMarco