

# Edju 8 and 9

by RW Spryszak

8.

I went back up the broken concrete steps to the high street, away from the mass of men and their stinking river. I returned to my apartment and retrieved my pistol. The mystery of blue steel. My beautiful Nagant M1895. With a dark brown serrated grip. Scent of light oil. I would kill anyone who got in the way of my bringing Alice back to my radiator. And if I was going down there again, I wasn't going back unarmed. Not with death so near and helmets everywhere.

So I loaded my pistol with its 7.62 mm, Type R and cried. The ammunition was hard to find. A harmless bullet, cool to the touch. Ice in the veins. Ice turning molten and cutting through muscle and bone.

It was the gun used by the Bolshevik secret police. The Cheka. And it has been out of production for so long. A muzzle velocity of 900 feet per second. Accurate up to 55 yards when fired with a steady hand. Indestructible, they say. Able to kill fascists even in the worst weather. Never jams, they tell me. I dare not admit these thoughts to the gentle world. So I keep them inside like rare animals hidden in basement cages.

Sometimes it was hard to load a bullet with all the tears in my eyes. Poor Alice, I thought. What are they doing to her, and what is she feeling?

I should have thought about Alice's feelings long ago, when she was alive. If only I hadn't been such a fool. If only I would have laughed when she teased me instead of getting furious with her. Like a little boy. Like a spoiled brat. I'll kill anyone who harms her, I suppose I said aloud to no one. But was I more angry with them or myself — I couldn't tell.

Poor Alice. What she must be thinking, somewhere, wherever you go when it's over.

But she was a strong woman, and I respected that. She carried on with her life, after all. And wouldn't it be funny if she'd forgotten all about me anyway. Here I am loading my Nagant and she doesn't even remember me. What if I'm making too much of my affect on her? Maybe I had no affect. Maybe I tossed her aside and she was sad for twelve seconds and went on with life. What about that? Well alright then. All the more reason to love her.

I imagine she liked horses when she was a girl and was unafraid of the bats living in the stable lofts. Other girls ran and worried the bats would get tangled in their hair like the legends said. But Alice wasn't the type to worry about unproven old tales like that. That was why she looked so beautiful in her high necked chainmail. And why her mind smelled of the rarest flower on Earth. Funny, I remember thinking as I put the pistol in my belt and made my way out the door, her corpse didn't smell. It never did.

This was my mission. I couldn't stop. I flew out the door. And when I heard the screen door slam behind me and the cash register tinkle I was a child again. I was looking through the tall slanted glass at the shelves of penny candy. Each kind in dishes while the old man with white hair waited feigning patience. It was always so cold inside the store. Newspapers stacked beside the comic books. The short freezer where the ice cream bars and cones were all stuck together. The wall of cigarette packs in beautiful colors behind the high counter. The paperback books on a revolving wire tower. The soft drink bottles stacked in handled cardboard packs beyond. The scowl and spit of the old broken veterans, cursing my youth and sneering at me. I didn't care about the danger of abuse they presented while my parents weren't looking. I could run faster than they could.

I would buy a rubber ball and pitch it against the brick wall of the school. Paint window frames with fresh mud and dirty sticks. Steal glass bottles from porches and sell them for candy. Then have someone older say, no — you never did that. All my memories invalid. Nothing like that ever happened. I didn't have a Nagant then. Only toy guns. Sometimes I filled them with soda pop so the

victim would not only be wet but sticky as well. But that didn't happen either. I sat near the window and yearned to join the boys but always had a fever. No one knew me. I read poetry and dog stories. Shuffled from room to room. Never went inside that store after all. They bought me strange games. Games meant for children twice my age, and I would play with them, alone, making up my own rules. I never minded being alone. It was my favorite thing.

Then, sixty years later, I am a crooked old man in a tall black coat walking on the sidewalk between the snow piles. And the boys make snowballs and throw them at my back. The balls break hard and puff apart, and they laugh and I turn and wave my arms and grunt because I am sick and old. There goes Edju, they scream and laugh. It's Edju, run. They don't know my life. They don't know where I've been. They don't know what I went through to find Alice. I am just a scary old man with a brick face and an angular black coat. A perfect target for snowballs. And laughter. And fear. And derision. Because my mind is gone and I can't speak and they think I am a monster. My arms and my grunting make me Frankenstein's creation in the snow. They are afraid and laugh and run. I go home and heat my leftover soup. Sitting in a rocker with old socks and a wet coat. Unable to speak. Sure it was a useless life.

But it's not then. And it's not the future. It's now, between those times, and I have a pistol. And I will kill anyone who stands in the way of finding my sack of Alice. Gray or brown. I can't remember.

9.

Humans sit before their food on a plate. Things they pulled out of the ground. The dirt of ages hanging to the roots. The skin hanging from bones of hapless creatures, burned or otherwise fired. And they eat it. They eat it all. In the vastness of the universe there is matter and there is other matter. Compared to the flavor of the sun food is tasteless. But humans push their faces into piles of it, and swallow it in sickening gobs through animal maws. Bellies like garbage cans. Then their guts roar and churn and suck out whatever the body can use for itself. A kind of stealing. Killing and stealing

and dominance. And when they finish, they deposit odorous bricks of remnant all over the ground. And each human manufactures tons upon tons of this through the course of a lifetime. Tens of thousands of people's lifetimes. Millions of people. Billions, since time began. All making countless megatons of this refuse. The world has made the effort to keep your stink off the streets. How will you repay the world for its trouble? So they say — Each Man Must Justify His Pile.

And then, what human bodies make of poor, pure, simple water.

But I, too, am part of this horror. The horror of eating. The horror of sucking and separating minerals from what is useless. The execution of the cycle. I am also responsible.

I am old fashioned. I shake hands. I tip my hat. If I see a dead woman in the streets, I put her in a sack so the ghouls won't take advantage of her. I try to be positive. Think good thoughts. Help old people. Be kind to little animals. Though I am at war with ants.

It's my one fault. I have been at war with ants since I was a boy. My mission, I used to believe, was to kill every ant on the planet. The failure of this plan is not a matter of desire, but a matter of logistics. I cannot get to Brazil. I cannot stay in Australia long enough. I would take my war quadrant by quadrant across the entire map of the world. But I lack the support of the Congress and the Parliament. I get no backing from the Unicameral Assembly. So I cannot get the funding. I use my foot and do what I can.

I will succeed, I swear by the saints who live in the summer mansions in heaven. Because the collective heart of man has a great hunger for killing. We can't turn away. Nor do we want to.

That is why these young men gather down by the river. It is violence that attracts them. And I go among them. Down the weaving steps to the broken quay where they line the river like martinets. Shoulder to shoulder. Skinny. Their faces pocked with pimples. Their voices cracking with the changing of their age. No longer boys. Not yet men. Lost in brute fantasy.

I am not a violent man. I prostrated myself before the statues of all the saints and begged them to help. It did no good. Not ever, in all my life. Despite the sweet scent of hoy oil. Forget the animated

cleanliness of holy water. The holy sky. The holy walls. The holy chairs. The holy floor. Especially the holy floor. Forget it all. The feet of the statues are set at impossible angles. Nobody can stand that way. The sculptors think we are fools. But I have my Nagant M1895, and I wave it like the firesword of the angel Michael, god of war. I stand beside the stinking river and demand a boat.

You don't have to steal a boat, they laugh. You can just go, they say. But I trust no one now.

I am not a violent man, and all the children know this, I reply. They smirk at me with their sharp angled haircuts and pointy little teeth. Their short pants still brushed with the chalk from the ancient stones they've copulated.

And I would have killed them all if I had to, though I am not a violent man. Laughing, they led me to a rowboat and I put my gun away. They wanted no money. No name on a slip of paper. They seemed glad to let me have the boat. Ten years from now I will still be able to say that their laughter never got to me. They are little fascist children in short pants. Their opinions meant nothing to me. So their laughter meant even less.

I get in.

The boat does not bump into the wood like boats will do because there is no current in the river. The rope that ties the bow to the pier hangs like a wet shirt. There are spider webs hanging from it. The green water is cast with a pallid film. A man at the edge of the dock extends a hand. I give him the pomegranate seeds and he hands me the oars. Crossed like spears and I must separate them from the tin foil holding them together. The boys in uniform slap their thighs and know better. No one has tried to cross this river in a hundred years, they taunt. I must follow the daughter of the saint, I shout back. She has stolen something from me.

You will never find her, they laugh louder. Marta Vansimmerant is too smart for you. I ignore them for potatoes. Potato faces. I climb into the boat that does not wobble in the water like boats will do. I set the oars in their mounts on either side as the laughter carries on. The man with the hand pulls a slender chord of the tie and the rope

falls useless. I am free. He puts a foot on the edge of the boat and pushes hard with a strong leg. I am shrouded in fog. The laughter ends. I put the oars in the water to the sound of breaking glass. I dodge the figure skater in a death mask. It is all much too depressing. But I row anyway. It is the only answer.

Only then do I wonder if Marta Vansimmerant took Alice back to Rome with her. The glass coffin processional was only in our town for two more days. Have two days past since last I was there? I row hard. Furious. Each time the oars dip in the water there is a faraway sound like bat wings. I am not sure my oars are in water at all. I cannot tell if I am moving. But I must not stop.

If I pull the oars hard.

If I pull the oars hard despite the splinters breaking off into my skin.

If I bleed on the oars, when the pain goes away I will feel good. It's why I enjoy pain.

