

Magritte

# SHEZLEZ

## THE SELF-PROCLAIMED



MARKO VIGNJEVIĆ

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Shezlez the Self-Proclaimed  
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# Preface

**SHEZLEZ THE SELF-PROCLAIMED** came about as a result of frustration with how slow elites react to change in society. While, on the face of it, they are experts in their respective fields, this novella explores what happens to a society in which those same elites care more about keeping their positions intact by resorting to politicking. This inevitably leads to the suffering of the individual.

It also proves the old adage that all power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely. The tale of Shezlez delves into what happens to an individual who finds his way out of misfortune through those same elites, becoming a part of the system himself.

All men are created equal; some are simply more equal than others. Oftentimes this is precisely what moves an individual into action. But, more often than not, he firstly has to be tested by the powers that be in order for them to gauge his suitability for joining the upper echelons of society.

As Goethe said, “There is no greater slave than a man who thinks he is free.” And it is precisely wherein lays the problem—in

the waiting. For when we are given a promise, more often than not, we tend to hold on to it in a greater degree of zeal than the ones who made the promise.

Marko Vignjević  
Belgrade, Serbia, July 2020



# 1

WORD WENT AROUND town that the authorities were organising the issuing of family tree information to interested persons, free-of-charge.

This sparked Shezlez’s interest for he was born out of wedlock, and only after his birth did his parents marry. Meditating on the notion that he would learn something about his ancestors, Shezlez quickly found himself in a queue at the municipality headquarters, among countless others, where chaos reigned unchallenged by any kind of neighbourly solidarity.

Of late he had found it even harder to spend his time at home, despite it being the dead of winter. Queuing at the municipality headquarters, Shezlez felt his spine cringe from the cold. The woman at the counter window yelled “next” at his turn, and he took the last step towards the counter and handed over his ID card. The clerk stood up from her work station and disappeared behind her superior’s office door. After that brief pause, she returned and asked Shezlez to follow her back to her superior’s office. Following this course of events, and himself not knowing why—for Shezlez didn’t ask any questions—he quietly followed

the woman to a plain-looking door on which she proceeded to knock.

–You may go, Irma– said the man to the clerk, and gestured to Shezlez to sit down. The conversation was short. The man informed Shezlez that they had not managed to find any information regarding his family. Furthermore, the man added that there was no trace of any of his ancestors in their system; it was as if Shezlez didn't exist.

The man returned Shezlez's ID card and kept on apologising until the rather confused Shezlez left his office.

On his way out of the building, Shezlez kept thinking about what had just transpired. He couldn't believe that they were unable to find any trace of his ancestors. Truth be told, it made him somewhat angry, and it was in this fit of anger that a deviant thought crossed his mind in a hertz.

As he headed back home—the long way around for he wanted to walk—he began noticing homeless people around him, and he thought about what it would be like to end up alone, with no one to take care of him. This he imagined in the distant future of when he would grow old, but still. Walking through the snow, Shezlez realised that he was an unknown quantity, that he could make of himself whatever he wished and proceed from there anew.

Ominous clouds began to gather overhead so he rushed home. If anything, he found out that—as far as the system was concerned—he didn't exist. All that he had was his ID card and

it was the only document by which the authorities could identify him if need be. Wanting to test this theory, Shezlez made an about-turn at the entrance of his building and went on his way to the police station.

It began to snow so he quickened his pace. The sidewalks were slippery, but that didn't slow him down. Unlike the municipality headquarters, there was no crowd at the police station. The building seemed completely vacant. A policeman asked him what he wanted, to which Shezlez replied that his ID card had expired, and that he had to renew it. The officer directed him to a door and told him to wait.

Shezlez waited once again, but this time it was for a new cause, one not concerning his family tree and his ancestors; rather it was a cause which interested only him. He knocked on the door and was told to come in. There were two women working inside and Shezlez approached the one who ushered him in. He gave her his ID card, but as was the case before, she wasn't able to get a complete readout from the document—namely, his birthdate was missing so she gave him a printed form which he needed to fill out.

Himself not knowing why, Shezlez wrote the wrong date of birth and made himself three years younger. He handed in the form to her and she began to transcribe it onto his file. Once everything was done, Shezlez quickly vacated the police station.

He was growing hungry, but in his mind there was no time

to waste. There were so many things he wanted to do. He wasn't sure whether this was a new kind of freedom that he acquired or a kind of servitude that was yet to materialise. Either way he was sure of one thing: this was a new beginning for him.

Shezlez had many plans for how to spend this new-found freedom. He knew that—as far as the system was concerned—he had rewritten his date of birth. It was still snowing when he returned home. He couldn't help but notice how everything in his apartment seemed new. He managed to migrate without ever leaving his country. This was his second life, and Shezlez was determined to make it count. New ambitions grew in him. He began making promises to himself, promises such as not wasting his life as he had up to that point.

He found himself in the bedroom where he kept the family tree his grandfather had made. It wasn't much, just a piece of paper rolled up. Shezlez unfurled the paper and read his grandfather's writing. He was amazed by how big his family was, and at the same time he secretly hoped that none of them would try to seek him out. Along the shelves in his apartment were photographs of his mother and father and they too, were in his grandfather's family tree. There were also photo albums containing pictures of his relatives, the majority of whom he had long forgotten. But as he turned page after page of his albums, Shezlez realised that he looked nothing like the members of both his immediate and extended family.

He briefly reprimanded himself for not taking the family tree with him to the municipality headquarters as proof of the existence of his ancestors and therefore his good name. However, those were fleeting sentiments before he collected himself.

It was the looking through of the family albums that made Shezlez more resolved than ever to make something of himself, to attire himself in a new, more comfortable skin. As usual, he slept alone that night. His shadow—brought on by the moon—lay motionless on the wall of his bedroom. By then the snow had stopped falling and the streets were covered in a blanket of white. The cool air tried to get inside Shezlez's bedroom but did so unsuccessfully, untouched him in the warmth. Shezlez slept peacefully with no dreams to recall. It was as if all of the unknowns of his future life were slowly coming to fruition without him even raising a finger.

The next morning, he was woken up by a sparrow colliding into his bedroom window and falling lifeless onto the sidewalk below. It was time for Shezlez to get out of bed but it seemed his body was irreverent to that notion. His neighbour was shovelling snow and making a passage for pedestrians, and it was this sound—the sound of the shovel scraping the pavement—that finally woke Shezlez up.

By the time the sun had risen, Shezlez was already poised to start his day, and start it he did with a cup of coffee. Once having done away with this libation, he got dressed and went outside



where he saw the dead sparrow on the ground. Shezlez was still unsure about what to do with his newly found anonymity; a commodity he knew was rare in these times. According to his plan as long as he remained inconspicuous, everything else would fall into place.

He decided to make his way to the Threshing Floor—an improvised stage from which anyone who wanted to could voice their grievances and opinions. Surrounding the Threshing Floor were the homeless and the pensioners feeding pigeons with whatever they had.

It was there that Shezlez saw Irma again. The clerk from the municipality headquarters was standing in front of the stage waiting to listen to one man speak. Shezlez immediately noticed Irma and situated himself next to her. Both were surprised to see each other. She asked him what he was doing there, to which he replied he was on his way to the Farmers' Market. Irma reached into her pocket and got out her cigarettes, offering one to Shezlez which he refused.

The man Irma waited for got onto the stage and began. He couldn't stick to one particular topic, making his speech more of a rant than anything else. Regardless, Shezlez decided to stay, at least until Irma finished her cigarette.

Shezlez was amazed by the number of people who came to listen to the man on the Threshing Floor. He wondered whether he too could try something like that. But all those thoughts

were of a fleeting nature, now that his stomach began to growl. Halfway through the man's rant, Shezlez told Irma he had to go, and before they parted ways, Irma told him that the man on stage was her father.

At the Farmers' Market and as Shezlez browsed through the stalls, he began to formulate an idea which was still inchoate in his mind but which concerned his position in society, especially now that he was handed a second chance, a new beginning. He imagined himself on stage giving speeches to a crowd of unknowns who clung onto his every word, much like Irma's father. He could easily imagine himself in front of the microphone; he didn't suffer from stage fright, he just had to come up with something to say.

By the time Shezlez made his way back to the Threshing Floor, Irma and her father were nowhere to be seen, much to his dismay. Instead, there was a gipsy brass band playing on stage. The memory of Irma stayed with him long after he had left the municipality headquarters. His feelings towards Irma were new to him and it was something to ponder.

Away went the snow with the push of a plough, making way for traffic—pedestrian and motorised—leaving the soot behind. Making his way home, Shezlez turned the corner, and in the distance, right in front of his apartment building he saw a small dot lying on the snow bank. As he approached, the dot gathered a recognisable shape. He neared and stepped over the dead sparrow.

## About the author

MARKO VIGNJEVIĆ was born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 1978 and lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia. He began writing poetry while in high school and graduated to fiction in 2005. In 2011, he began to write in English and translated two of his books into English which went on to be published. His first Serbian-language novel, *Father's Milk* (Očevo mleko), is the winner of the 2017 Arete's Book Contest of the Year and was praised as a modern classic of Serbian literature.

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