

"Solzhenitsyn and Conan Doyle meet in the middle of nowhere."



László Csabai: Sinbad in Siberia

Literary detective fiction, 593 pages
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"This odd country, this drunken and morose giant, has only one thing larger than its power, its army and hunger to rule, and that's its brutal wound and unceasing pain."

Sinbad is a detective in the Hungarian Police who finds himself a prisoner of the Soviet Army in the Second World War. He is transported to a labour camp where he endures the everyday suffering of life in the lager – a daily struggle to survive starvation.

But fortune favours him in a mysterious manner when the camp commandant has a valuable sniper's rifle stolen. Much to the surprise of the guards in attendance, Sinbad quickly pieces the parts of the puzzle together and points to the perpetrator.

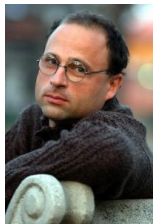
A lack of suitable staff at the local police station means that Sinbad is soon asked to tag along and finds himself saved from certain death to run real investigatory police work.

He and his colleagues have to handle everything from a local punch-up to missing children but the number of more mysterious incidents appears to increase as the murder rate rockets, until all the elements fall into place.

László Csabai depicts Siberia under Stalin's terror with such realism and elementary strength that the reader may well begin to suspect that he lived through those years in person...

László Csabai

László Csabai was born in Nyíregyháza, Hungary in 1969 and spent time in Szeged and Zwickau before returning to the town of his birth where he now works as librarian and language teacher in a local technical college.



His work has been published in a number of literary journals with an adaptation of his short story, *The Conquered (A legyőzött)*, broadcast by Hungarian Radio. His earlier work: *The Hyena's Breakfast (A hiéna reggelije)* - short stories, 2006

Works published by Magvető:

Sinbad the Detective (Szindbád, a detektív - 2010), *Sinbad in Siberia (Szindbád Szibériában - 2013)*

**History, politics, destiny, and the finest traditions of detective novels...
Literary fiction at its best!**

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Quotes from the novel

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This odd country, this drunken and morose giant, has only one thing larger than its power, its army and hunger to rule, and that's its brutal wound and unceasing pain.

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Marmots squeak as the three policemen trot towards town. Sinbad's head is still spinning from what he has just witnessed and it's tough to cut a path through all of this to make space to concentrate on the case still at hand.

"You Buryats are built out of rugged stuff," he says to Bayar. "I got frozen just nipping from one yurt to another while one of you actually spent the whole night outside."

"Who?"

"I didn't catch sight of his face. He was wearing a black fur coat.

"That was Rudolph... the bear. That fur coat was real. He comes down to the camp sometimes and eats whatever leftovers he can find. And if he finds even the tiniest hole in the side of a yurt, he huddles up there. It's the warm air."

Sinbad stops his horse.

"And doesn't that disturb any of you?!"

"Why would it? He doesn't snore!"

Excerpt from the novel

Vassiliev comes in somewhere around midnight.

"The comrade commandant wants to see you," he tells Sinbad. "Come with me!"

The adjutant escorts Sinbad into the commandant's office. He sits him down on a chair in the middle of the room.

An inmate is not normally allowed to sit in the presence of an officer. And Vasiliev was unusually polite when he woke the dozing detective. Something is definitely out of place.

The expression on Gretzky's face leaves him in even less doubt. It's not stiff and soulless like it usually is. And it's not pumped with fury like the last time. It's more inquisitive. A man dressed in civvies is sitting next to the commandant. Sinbad glances at him and instantly knows that he's from the local force. Police can sense each other, like hounds, even if neither speaks. The man in smart civilian attire appears tense as he smokes his cigarette.

A bottle of vodka is placed on the desk in front of the two Russians. It's a particularly ornate bottle. The vodka in question is called Rodnyik and made from the flowing waters of the Volga. It is the Samara (now known as Kuybyshev) king of vodkas. Szalics and the Russians drink imaginary vodka in the evenings in the hope that the numbing effect of the alcohol will return with its memory as they mutter the word "Rodnyik" with such sweet recollection before they go on to damn the war and the fact that the distillery is now forced to manufacture munitions. So this bottle is a survivor from peacetime. And that is a minor miracle.

Gretzky catches sight of Sinbad glancing at the vodka and gives a pitying grin just so that the other party doesn't get any ideas. Then he begins:

“You obviously have some notion of why we’ve brought you here. Detective Ink (*he points to the tall fellow with a thin face and dressed in a civilian suit*) and we are curious to discover if you can deduce who stole my gun.”

“I have to say that I don’t think an inmate did it. Yes, that’s what I think. And now that I have spent some time in the camp infirmary, I might be able to find the culprit. That’s if I’m given time to go through the circumstances and events.”

“Then begin!”

Sinbad takes a deep breath of air. This causes his diaphragm to twinge but the aromatic tobacco smoke does a good job of dulling the pain.

Feldman’s tobacconist’s opposite the Korona in Nyárliget was a tobacco Eldorado. Connoisseurs of fine tobacco would gather there to try out the very latest pipe-fillers from England and Holland. If the detective’s path ever crossed Pázmány Square, not even a fleeting period of nicotine abstinence could dissuade him from stopping for a second by its plate-glass window. And there he would take a lungful of the latest arrival in the time it took him to lift his hat in congenial greeting.

The war hit English imports first and then the Dutch and finally Feldman’s.

Sweetly scented smoke rose from hookahs on the terrace of the Bagdad Coffeehouse, softened into tobacco vapour by the water they contained. But neither Nyárliget nor the alluring odours wafting out of the Bagdad could in any way compete with the scintillating simplicity of the smell of burning tobacco that now filled the room. “It’s no good kidding ourselves. Comparing Mahorka to proper tobacco is like comparing ripe rotting fruit to the finest schnapps!”

“The cabinet door hasn’t been forced open,” Sinbad begins. “And the padlock has been neither sawn off nor smashed. In other words, it was opened with the use of a key. Does anyone else have a key to your gun cabinet?”

“No one.”

“And yet the perpetrator still appeared to possess one.”

“That’s not so difficult to see,” Gretzky says and fidgets impatiently.

“Quite so. The key could have been copied by pushing it into putty when you weren’t looking and then replaced. Such a mould would have enabled the copying of the key. Then all our man had to do was wait for the appropriate moment... Yes. That’s what could have happened but it’s not very likely.”

“And why not?” Ink asks with genuine interest.

“Where can you have keys cut locally?”

“At the cooperative in town.”

“They’d know right away that you were up to no good. A respectable person takes a key to be copied and not a putty imprint.”

“There’s still a little way to go before we see an end to lawlessness in the region,” Ink adds. “There are places in Perviyplan and around where they’ll cut a key for you illegally and then keep quiet about it afterwards.”

“But that would require the individual to get his hands on an imprint and then go out into the town. Can you imagine a camp inmate breaking out and then *breaking back* into the camp? It sounds a little strange. A guard could easily go to a key cutter’s but getting a mould of the said key would be just as dangerous as stealing the Mauser itself. It would be a superfluous act. But I can also imagine the gun theft taking place without any keys being manufactured. I would like to ask to borrow something, Comrade Commandant. A torch if you would be so kind. Thank you. Could I ask you to follow me out around to the side of the building?”

Sinbad points the faint beam from the windup dynamo torch onto the muddy snow.

“Do you see the footprints?”

“Yes,” Ink replies after a thorough inspection of the scene. “I’m sure you’re thinking that he jumped in here. I have to admit that I thought much the same but there are too many unclear prints. Perhaps you are able to decipher how many of them are

pointing towards the wall and how many away, how many boots they come from and the size of their soles.”

“If we were to find prints that definitely pointed towards the window, it still wouldn’t definitely mean that the owner entered the building at this point. We came here to exclude that possibility. And now we have. I expected no more. I’d like to ask you to take a look around. What is it that you see?”

The two Russians keenly scan the surrounding area.

“Not a great deal,” the policeman eventually says. “The garage is over there and that’s the corner of the last staff hut. Then, of course, there’s the wall to the commandant’s building and the planning office on either side.

“Take a more thorough look. Are you sure that you can’t see any more camp buildings? Look up and down and in all directions!”

“What the hell could we possibly see?” Gretzky grumbles. “It’s no more than an alleyway!”

Back in the office, the first thing that occurs to Sinbad is whether or not cigarettes and vodka have already been offered and that if he pauses for a moment, it might occur to them. But it doesn’t so he carries on.

“It appears to me that someone jumped in through the window, took the key out of your pocket, opened the cabinet, removed the rifle, closed the cabinet again, placed the key back into your pocket and either jumped out of the window with the gun or put it into some kind of bag and walked out with it right in front of you, or left it under the window and came back to collect it later.”

“Have you lost your mind? I keep the key about my person at all times! It’s here in my inside pocket and I don’t even take my tunic off to go to sleep at night.”

“You must take it off sometimes.”

“Never!”

“And if you have a wash?”

“Well, yes, if I wash. But then I keep it close by. And Vasiliev is always here in the office.”

“You’ve removed it at least twice today when someone could have taken the key out of the pocket and neither you nor your adjutant would have seen,” Sinbad says and straightens up. This sends a shooting pain right through his belly. “I came here to clean this morning and you threw your tunic down on Comrade Vasiliev’s desk. Then you went into your sleeping quarters and when you saw that I could see you washing your feet, you shut the door behind you. Vasiliev is normally here in the adjacent room but happened to be absent from his post at that exact moment. There was no one else there but me. *(He says this with sharp assurance to further goad Gretzky’s outrage.)* May I ask for the key?”

Sinbad takes the key from the commandant and unlocks the padlock on the cabinet door. The click is hardly audible. Then he goes and opens the window, and the noise that this makes is much louder.

“But I clearly recall the window being open this afternoon,” he adds. “That would mean that I am the obvious suspect,” Sinbad says like a man rushing with a smile to his certain demise.

“And so the prints in the snow are not because someone jumped in through the window but because I went to pick it up after I’d finished the cleaning. But that’s not the solution because I know I wasn’t the one who committed the crime. So that means we have to consider a second possibility and that’s when you left your tunic unguarded.” Gretzky shakes his head. “But that’s how you left it, Comrade Commandant, believe me. An argument erupted about who had been given how much food for their lunch and you broke it up with practiced skill. I clearly recall how you ran out naked above the waist with shaving lather dripping from your chin. And Comrade Vasiliev was also in the courtyard. That provided the perfect opportunity for our thief. He jumped in through the window.”

The vodka bottle is now open. The two Russians are drinking. Sinbad isn't. He's biting a biscuit. He doesn't look the least upset; in fact he appears more than satisfied. He's been given a whole handful. This has to be happiness. But his stomach's still troubling him. The pain feels as if it has been concentrated into a single knotted nerve.

"You said that it was out of the question for a camp inmate to have committed the crime. How do you know that?" Ink asks.

"There are several reasons. The tunic was left unattended at lunchtime. You can barely imagine what food means to the men incarcerated in this camp!"

"I am fully aware of its significance. (*A dark shadow slithers across his face.*) Do you think the thief wouldn't be willing to sacrifice a meal in order to get his hands on a gun?"

"If it was only him waiting, yes, but if he had to pass it on to his billycan partner, the other bloke would never agree."

"I usually have a shave before lunch," Gretzky says. "Isn't it suspicious to you that the row broke out at the same time? They've been watching my movements and timed the two to coincide."

"Such a thing might occur to a criminal inmate. There is a chance but it's very slight. But there's no way anyone could have predicted whether you would run out with your tunic on or off. I for one was rather surprised when you appeared in your vest. Then it was as a result of the scuffle that the food ended up getting spilt, and food is sacred to your average inmate. But even if the criminal element should cook up such a plan, they'd be sure to spill the hot gruel on a 58-er. But it was an inmate who got scolded today at noon. What man would willingly volunteer to hold his head under a stream of piping hot slop? And there is another reason that the rifle thief couldn't have been a convict. He couldn't have been a convict or a 58-er. The only way to get into the commandant's hut is either through the window or through the door. No one could have gone in through the door because you and Vasiliev were there all along and you would have seen them. When the fight broke out, it was you who used a hose to stop the inmates from getting away and even those working in the planning and administration offices came out. An inmate would have had to slip past all of these people unnoticed and the only viable entrance into the building was through the window. That would have meant approaching from the rear from the direction of the warehouse and the staff huts. And that happens to be a zone out of bounds to all inmates unless accompanied by a guard!" Sinbad announces and bites so hard on the next biscuit that it makes a loud crunching noise and scatters crumbs all over the floor making him really annoyed with himself. "The risk that a guard could pass at any time and the whole place being watched from a total of four guard towers means that it is strictly out of bounds to all unauthorised personnel. This no man's land and the barbed wire perimeter fence are the places the guards keep their very closest eye on."

Gretzky pours a glass for himself and Ink in silence. Sinbad stares at the bottle with such overt craving that it very nearly starts to move towards him.

"For the sake of argument, let's just say for a moment," Ink interjects, "that it was a camp inmate who chose to ignore the fact that it was feeding time and hid behind one of the warehouse buildings. But hunger got the better of him and he made his way back. Then he heard the kerfuffle and was so surprised that he momentarily forgot himself and walked through the restricted zone where he saw the open window, saw his chance and jumped in."

"That sounds unlikely," Sinbad says. "There's one guard to every five inmates and that makes 'disappearing' a virtual impossibility. It would have been much easier to vanish in the crowd gathered outside the kitchen. But when did they start dishing out the food? A couple of minutes before the pot got tipped over and the gun stolen. In other words, our man would have had to hurry here, make the most of the opportunity and steal the rifle, then run back but somehow manage to hide the Mauser in the meantime or give it to an accomplice. He gets a mate to help him

when he doesn't even know he'll be presented with such a golden opportunity? No. I really don't think so. I am sure you have questioned the tower guards as to whether or not they saw a convict loitering around the hut. If they had seen a man then he would be your prime suspect but being as I have said that a convict wasn't the culprit, I would have been proven wrong and then what would have been the point of ordering me here?"

"You're right," Gretzky agrees. "None of the guards saw a convict anywhere near my office. But they didn't see anything else either. How do explain that?"

"But they did see something."

"I've just told you that they didn't! Did they perhaps lie to us?"

"No one lied but they still saw something. Would you allow me to tell you a story? (Sinbad suddenly recalls having once given a similar talk back in Hungary.) A series of murders were committed in London around the turn of the century. A man entered the homes of lonely women in the broad light of day, strangled them and made off with their valuables. The police interviewed every tenement caretaker in the area and warned them of the dangers. It eventually turned out that it was the postman. The caretakers forgot to mention him in their interviews because he was such a familiar fixture in their lives. They were too busy trying to recall a *suspicious stranger* they might have spotted. This case is very similar. The guards keep a close eye on the restricted area but they pay no attention to their own because they are passing through all the time and there is nothing faintly unusual about that fact.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that..." Gretzky begins but Ink interrupts.

"He's right. I've seen the same thing happen before now."

"Very well, but you're not telling me that they wouldn't have noticed someone jumping in through the window!"

"Do you remember what I asked you to do when we were standing outside? To take look around. Did you see a guard tower? No. Because it's like an alleyway just like you said. The camp has a couple of corners like this that can't be seen from any of the towers. There's no point in exploring other avenues: one of the guards came out of the staff hut, heard the commotion, walked over, passed the open window and saw his chance... It had to be someone who knew that you kept an expensive weapon. Although that could be true of virtually anybody because I know that you often go out shooting on the steppe.

Gretzky and Ink exchange looks.

"You still haven't got to the point!" Ink intercedes. "Who did it?"

"Hmm... Let me think for a minute. There are eleven huts packed with convicts with twenty in each one. The strictest rule in the camp is that one guard can only escort a maximum of five inmates at any one time. I've never come across anyone who managed to break this rule. And if one of them was to ever leave his post, he'd be forced to leave his men with another guard and news would get out in an instant. This would be the easiest thing to check and by far the easiest to expose. Nine huts went to the building site this morning with a total of thirty-six guards. They were later joined by five men from my hut and Mikál. Korovoy went into the culture centre with another five. That adds up to thirty-eight guards on duty. None of them could have been at the critical scene at the critical time because they were all around the front of the building overseeing the food being dished out to the inmates. Ishmael and Zopenko took ten men to work in the woods. So that makes forty guards we can count out. Six further guards set off to Irkutsk with a hut's worth of inmates so that eliminates them because they weren't physically here. So now we're at forty-six. Let's look at the guards who were given no specific duties that day like Lisenok. But I saw him clambering up from the ground and he was soaked to the bone. And it couldn't have been the Buryat or Comrade Vasiliev because I saw you giving them orders, Comrade Commandant, after you'd managed to quieten the crowd down. Neither could it have been Hovsepian. Although it is true that he was seen taking a kitbag out of the camp and he could have had something hidden in it, but..."

"That bag," Gretzky interrupts, "had official documents in it to be taken to the local town hall. I put them in myself."

"He could have easily stuffed a Mauser in with them but this all happened a good while before the fight broke out. He was the one who let off a round of machinegun fire when it all kicked off. Abdulamidov was standing next to him so that takes him out of the picture, too. The only one left is Batuskin, who was seen walking out of the camp with a mirror..."

"It cracked and they took off in a truck to be mended yesterday but the roads were so bad that it cracked again on the way back and so that's why Batuskin was carrying it on foot."

"I saw Batuskin walking out of the infirmary just as I was coming over here in the late afternoon. He had a fresh bandage on his hand and was looking to see if it was bleeding. So it would appear that he didn't do too well with the mirror either. I doubt that he got back to the camp before lunch because why would he have waited so long to have his wrist seen to? And carrying a mirror is not the kind of thing that a man does at the sprint. It couldn't have been any of the civilian staff because I saw them all standing outside the two offices and staring at the goings-on. It's quite possible that I didn't spot the fact that someone was missing from the crowd. But how likely is it that one of these staff slipped off at the height of the fight because he thought he just might find a window open then hide the gun somewhere before hurrying back and no one notice?"

"They were all concentrating on the commotion and no one saw him go."

"Hmm. I suppose that it's just about plausible but, unlike the officers and guards, the civilian staff are regularly frisked at the gate! And it couldn't have been the camp cook or either of the inmates who work in the kitchen because they were busy dishing up. Neither could it have been the patients in the infirmary because only three men reported there today. I know because the doctor and the corpsman told me when I was laid up there. And who were they? Batuskin, whom I've already mentioned, me, and the convict who had the scolding slop spilt on him. And it couldn't have been the doctor or the corpsman either. They're civilians, too. Then there's the political officer who comes in from the town every day but I saw him standing with the other civilian staff. Lisenok, the Buryat, Vasiliev, Hovsepien, Abdulamidov, Batuskin, the cook. That's seven more of the military staff. Forty-six and seven makes fifty-three. Who's left? The guards at the gate? An officer on gate duty is always accompanied by two guards on twenty-four-hour shifts. And all three were on the gate as they should be so that means they're in the clear. The other gate officer wasn't in the camp because, like most of the other officers, he lives in the town. So it couldn't have been him either. Fifty-three and the two gate guards makes fifty-five. There are seven huts in the camp for the guards. They each have eight or nine bunks. How many military staff work in the camp in total?"

"Fifty-eight."

"So that means we have three men still unaccounted for at the time in question," Sinbad said, carrying his audience still closer to the unavoidable realisation. "Was anyone given a gate pass today?"

"Yes, there were two. One was Jakubov. He finished gate duty at five in the afternoon. He only asked for a pass after that. And who was the other one?"

"Volopec. He requested his earlier in the day."

"So it was Volopec! Shouldn't he have been looking after the inmates today?"

"No, he's one of the three we couldn't account for at the time of the burglary."

"I suppose Jakubov has returned by now."

"Quite right. Volopec hasn't come back yet though."

"And he's not likely to! He's our man!"

Sinbad enjoys a couple more of his biscuits. Then he tentatively asks if he might be given something to drink. Gretzky nods and pours vodka for himself and Ink, water for Sinbad.

“Herr Schiffer, was waren Sie eigentlich von Beruf?” Gretzky asks rather unexpectedly, suddenly curious to learn about Sinbad’s life outside the camp but for some reason chooses to express this in perfect German. He doesn’t even look up at the prisoner. Sinbad is just swallowing a mouthful of water that sticks in his throat and this gives him the chance to think for a couple of seconds. It’s a divine gift that stops him rushing headlong into a suicidal response.

Sinbad now realises that he has walked right into their trap. If he answers instantly in German, they will hold him as a German and that definitely won’t mean an improvement. If, on the other hand, he answers in Russian, they will think that he is a German trying to disguise his true identity. So the best appears to be to answer in German with a strong Hungarian accent and a few grammatical slips.

“Detektiv war ich.”

“I knew that you were a policeman,” Ink responds with the faintest trace of friendliness in his voice.

“I was... (*more quietly*) I am.”

“In Hungary?”

“Yes.”

“In the town where you were apprehended?”

“Yes, in Nyárliget.”

“They call you Sinbad here but your court papers have the name Árpád Schiffer. And the same name also appears on the staff roster at the police station in Nyárliget.”

Sinbad’s mouth drops open. Now it’s clear that there actually was a court hearing and he was sent here as a “proper” convict. This is quite a lot to take in. But the fact that they were capable of working out exactly who he was back in another life and another world entirely is really quite fantastical. He suddenly feels that he has been watched by living and lifeless eyes right from his arrest, the collection camp, the crippling discomfort of the train journey, all the way through life in the lager including this interview and that perhaps he is still being scrutinised by more than this one pair of eyes.

“Sinbad’s a nickname. But that’s what they call me at the station as do my mother – a Hungarian woman called Júlia Pelsőczy (*as a pre-empt to the next question*), and my father – a Hungarian surgeon by the name of Ervin Schiffer. One of my distant ancestors came from Switzerland to Hungary somewhere around two hundred years ago. That’s where the Schiffer name comes from.

Ink smiles and it’s obvious that he wouldn’t put good money on what Sinbad says but he’s amused by Sinbad’s quick wit.

“You speak much better Russian than the other men who arrived with you. How’s that possible?” Gretzky says as he turns to face him.

“Everyone speaks two languages in my town. Or if they don’t then they at least understand. Hungarian and... And there’s an ethnic group there who speak a language very similar to Russian.”

“Well now! Ukrainians?”

Rusnyaks live in Nyárliget who consider themselves as neither Russian nor Ukrainian but as Rusins, which is almost identical to the way Russians describe themselves so it would cause a misunderstanding if he were to answer yes. This is going to require a little explanation.

“No, there are no Ukrainians.”

“Poles?” Ink asks and wrinkles his forehead.

“Oh, no! They speak... (Nyárliget locals refer to themselves as Tirpaks but that won’t say anything to them.) They speak Slovak in my town.”

Satisfied nods at a suitable response.

“What party did you back before the war?”

Another trap. He can’t lie and say the Communists because they wouldn’t believe that for a minute, it would be risky to say the Social Democrats because people who have named an ideology as their own find flexibility harder to handle than front-on confrontation. Neither would it be wise to name the Peasant Party because

(according to the papers back home and what he's heard the inmates say) the Soviet leadership has initiated an extermination campaign against the kulaks. And if he says the government who allied themselves to Hitler... Neither can he say that he always tried to listen to his conscience because people who have named an ideology as their own wouldn't even begin to understand.

"As a policeman, I was never able to hold a view on the government or the party that stood behind it. I mean, I had to serve them. That's what I did. But when I saw what they had reduced the country to, I lost whatever faith in them I might have had," Sinbad forms his words with care but shocks himself with the realisation that he's speaking the truth.

The Russians nod again and seem to understand. The commandant produces a third vodka glass.

Sinbad staggers in and slumps onto his bunk. His collapse brings the rest of the hut to its feet. It's not the crack of the timbers but the stench of booze that wakes them. The smell of vodka is even more mouth-wateringly wonderful than the aroma of onions.

Popescu, Szalics and Sild stoop over him. He's lucky because the others would eat him alive. "Vodka! The bastard's been drinking vodka!" "And no common-or-garden crap either! It's the pucker stuff! Rodnyik! I can smell it! Oh, Rodnyik!" they shout. One fellow even bursts into tears while another starts to frantically run around until his is pushed over. All Sinbad can do is to hiccup and that only increases the vodka content of the air.

"I'm gonna work... for... police..."

"What the hell are you saying, man?" Szalics thunders and shakes him by the shoulders. "You're a prisoner, pal!"

"What? Yeah that's it, they're letting me out and I'll live in the town. They're gonna give me an ufinorm and food. I'm not gonna be (*hiccup*) an inmate (*glowing grin*) no more! And I'm gonna ingestivate... I mean investigate..."

Translated by Ralph Berkin