



**Old
Bridge,**

**Black
House**

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TONY FABIJANČIĆ

 **AU PRESS**

I bear equally with you
the black permanent separation.
Why are you crying? Rather give me
your hand,
promise to come again in a dream.
You and I are like two mountains . . .
You and I will never meet on this earth.
If only you could send me, at midnight,
a greeting through the stars.

ANNA AKHMATOVA, "In a Dream"

I have destroyed the ring of the horizon
and got out of the circle of objects.

KAZIMIR MALEVICH



Part One

BEFORE DAWN, the mother roused her nine-year-old son from his sleep and got him to sit, still sleepy, at the table, where she had prepared a few slices of bread and cheese and a cup of milk, fresh from the evening before. Word had come to her and to the rest of the village that the Turks had been on the move recently and had arrived unannounced in a nearby settlement, as they always did when they rounded up boys of age and removed them from their homes and took them to the east where they would grow up, serve in the Turkish armies or, in other cases, so she had heard tell, be educated and rise through the ranks and become important figures in the colonies. The rider who had informed them of the presence of the Turks was not sure where they would go, whether they would show up here tomorrow or the next day, or whether they would even come. But he thought that they should know. Even if there was not much they could do.

The mother of the boy had heard these stories before. She had grown up in this village, in a valley between grey mountains on the Turkish frontier and had listened to men describe the arrival of the Turks. The stories had taken life in her imagination. She imagined the feelings of misery and doom among the people as the riders swept into the

villages on their dark horses and dragged the boys out of their houses, fighting their way out with sticks and whips and throwing the boys onto the wagons as the mothers clutched the boys' hands, as the grandmothers cried out in dismay and fear and, farther back, the men stood stiffly motionless, watching the events unfold. She saw the younger boys crying; she saw others who were tearful but quiet, as if resigned to this day, while a few of the older boys looked sullen and detached, almost indignant, as though contemptuous of this womanish display of feeling. She saw the soldiers' horses prodded into motion, lunging forward and then trotting beside the swaying rattling wagons that moved down the stony road outside the village. Some of the horsemen, she thought, must have come from these very parts, must have remembered a similar day in their own lives, remembered the raw fear on the day of their capture, even though that did not stop them from carrying out their orders now.

The mother had decided, long ago, never to allow them to take her son. A hardness had grown within her against the men who would come for her boy, a hardness that surprised even herself, knowing her own character well enough. She would do what she could to keep him safe, to keep him with her, even if it meant leaving the village behind and escaping into the mountains for a time until the danger had passed. She could freely make these decisions, she had decided, now that her husband, the father of the boy, had died. Even if her husband had still been alive, he would have been too weak and indecisive to prevent her from leaving, to lay a hard law down on her. The

old woman who lived with her and her son, her husband's mother, was incapable of a coherent thought any longer, and the others in the village, family of hers and her husband's, would not know of her escape until it was too late.

There was little time, however. Although the morning was still dark, dawn was near. Already she could detect a lightening of the sky. She had gathered some things in a bag — food and water and extra clothes — and she whispered to the boy, urging him to finish; she wanted him to have something in his belly before they started out. He was tired and he wanted to go back to bed. He wondered why they were up so early and where they were going. She did not know what he had heard, if he had heard the rumours about the Turks or if he understood what it all meant. He was no longer an infant; that was true. But she decided not to tell him anything now. Instead, she said, We are going to collect some *bazga*. You like that, don't you? We have done it before, remember? Anyway, she went on more sternly, I want you to finish now so we can get moving.

She stood over him while he ate the last piece of bread. Yes, it was true; they *had* collected *bazga* before, not long after her husband had died. She cast her thoughts back to the last time they had done so, when they had gone to the desolate area beyond the village where they would be going now. She saw herself and her son again picking the delicate flowers — a swarm of white on swaying stems. Sweet juice in jars lasted them all summer.

Her boy had been five then. His colt-like strides had roped down the field in wild patterns. Soft brown curls, grey-green eyes like the sea before a storm.

He could not sit still. He chased butterflies, then freed them from cupped hands. He threw rocks at swallows that skimmed low over the grass. Calming down, he built a tower of flat stones while she filled the basket.

Mama, he had called, come see. Two small rocks in the shape of menhirs topped the little pile.

Beautiful! she cried. Like a monster with horns or a tower where the Turks live.

No, mother, he laughed. It's just a pile of stones. And he kicked it over.

Now what did you do that for? she asked, cuffing him gently on the head. Come help me fill the basket. But instead, he ran away to a copse of trees on the edge of the field where something had caught his eye.

Later, when she was done, she called him to help carry the basket home. He insisted on carrying it by himself. But the handles were too far apart for him to reach comfortably. He kept bumping the basket with his knees until, looking up at her, he said a little sheepishly, You better take it Mama. He was five then. Her beautiful boy.

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Maja Lončarić awoke to the daylight slanting through the wooden louvres of her bedroom. She had been dreaming, and now, as she cast her eyes around the space, she returned to her apartment and to her familiar world. On the far wall of her bedroom was the small rectangle, a shade darker than the white paint, where for years a picture of the Virgin Mary had hung. Beside the door leading

out to the rest of the apartment was a crinkled poster of a painting by Gustav Klimt and, from the ceiling, on a thin wire, hung a single light bulb. Outside, below Maja's window, a shop owner was sweeping the sidewalk and greeting people who went by. Life in Mostar was going on as usual.

But it was not a usual day in the city. It was November 9. There would probably be some event to mark the occasion, Maja thought. Hadn't there been a commemoration every year since the announcement had been made about the construction of the new bridge? She thought she'd seen a ceremony on tv once, though she'd never attended in person. The date was one she preferred to forget. Even now when she remembered it, she tried to push it from her mind.

She climbed out of bed, went to the window and looked through the shutters towards the east where she could see, partly visible from her vantage point, the work being done on the new bridge. She saw the scaffolding and the yellow crane and two big abutments on either side of the river that looked like headstones. This wasn't the bridge that had stood in Mostar for more than four hundred years. That one had been destroyed by the Croats in 1993. She could picture it still. She remembered the special hue of the pockmarked stone at different times of the day; she remembered how divers used to plunge into the green river on hot summer afternoons, how young couples met by its walls in the evenings, how men coming out of cafés lurched home at night, as they had since the beginning. In school she'd learned of all the people throughout

history who had used the bridge: the *gusle* singers who crossed the bridge on their way home after an evening performance; the peasants who plodded to the market with their produce on their backs; the priests leading processions to church or cemetery; soldiers on the march; proud *beys* carried in splendid sedans; Turkish cavalrymen policing the banks; all had crossed the bridge. Then four years to the day after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, fifty-five after Kristallnacht, four centuries ended when another howitzer smashed the bridge into the water. November 9, 1993.

Maja left the bedroom and went to the kitchen. In the fridge was a leftover *burek* from last night. She wasn't especially hungry, but she felt that she should try to eat something before she set out. She had decided that she would make the trip today. After having put it off for so long, she felt that she was finally ready. And, as she knew about herself, once she had decided on something, she always followed through with it. This committed nature of hers wasn't what anyone could call a failing, but to her, on this day, it felt like one. Did she always have to be so true to her word, she asked herself?

Though not normally a habit of hers to breakfast on food from the night before, she unwrapped the *burek* from the foil and began to eat it cold, the flakes of the pastry whirling to the floor. When she was done, she threw the wrapper into the garbage and returned to her room. She sat on the bed, listening to the noises from the street and looking out her window at the work being done on the bridge.

She would have to pass the construction site once she set out, then cross the river on the temporary bridge from where she would be able to see how far the work had progressed. Once she got to the other side, she would walk through the narrow streets of the old town and towards the city's outskirts. It wasn't a long walk, really, not more than a few kilometres, but it had taken her years to start out on it, and it would feel like years to do it in reality, she imagined. She hadn't been in that part of town for quite some time, but she guessed that not much had changed. There would still be a fair amount of damage from the war, buildings without roofs or pockmarked by bullet holes. A wasteland that belonged to another time. Without her wishing it, an image of the black house floated out of the darkness and hovered before her eyes. Cool air seemed to settle on her skin. The black house was an abandoned building outside Mostar that had been built by the Austrians during their occupation. Later it became a command centre for the Partisans during the Second World War and, finally, years later, a cinema. It was set on fire during the last war and was now a blackened shell where teenagers hung out. Maja didn't know anyone who still went to the black house now, but she guessed that some kids spent time there even though the war was over. There must be places just like it in every town in the world, she thought, a place for young people to break the rules of their parents, to do whatever they wanted inside its walls, to know they wouldn't face any consequences, or just to live out some fantasies they had, however wild or bad or unacceptable.

The mother of the boy led him out of the house into the darkness. They left the village behind and walked down the road. No one had seen them leave, the woman was sure. She had told him to be quiet, which made him give her a quick, puzzled look. He was about to say something, but her tone warned him to obey her, and so, silently, side by side, they walked on.

The paths off the road through the stony meadows led into the hills and then up towards the mountains. She had travelled these paths often throughout her life, sometimes with a flock of sheep and goats that she and her family had tended. But never had she gone very far from her village. In the plan she had made hastily the night before, she and her son would have to walk half the day just to reach the lower slopes of the hills. The first stage was the most dangerous. They would be in the open, near the road, where anyone would be able to see them. That was why she wanted to leave in the dark. But she did not want to leave when it was so dark that she would not know where she was going later. The timing was important, and she thought she had managed it all properly. They had gotten away; no one had seen them and the men on their black horses raiding the villages in the area would miss them.

Her mood was high. She took her son's hand and looked around at the flat stony country just starting to become visible in the dawn. On a path like this one, in another life

it seemed to her, she and her boy had walked home with their basket of *bazga*. When they had come back to the house, she had freed the *bazga* flowers from their stalks and dropped them into a pot of water. The boy wanted to help, so she showed him how to clip the flowers with his thumb and forefinger.

But I don't want to do it with my hands, he said petulantly. I want a knife.

You don't need a knife, she answered. A knife is for a grown man, and you're still a boy.

He stopped to consider her words.

But you use a knife and you're not a grown man, he said, scowling.

She didn't answer, hoping he would forget, but instead of forgetting he got angry. As usual when he became angry, he furrowed his eyebrows and snorted like a bull. Such a temper was ridiculous in a five-year-old, and she tried not to laugh. But his explosiveness worried her too because she knew it could only cause him trouble as he grew older. For once she wished he had inherited his father's meek temperament rather than her own. But, of course, he was young and would probably change.

There he was in front of her now, his fists clenched, his eyes rolled up in his head. He was so happy all afternoon, and it pained her that he would spoil it for himself, for them both. She gave in to him (only this one time, she promised herself), found a knife and showed him how to snip the stems on a board.

The memory left the woman with a warm feeling, if only because his childish temper had not hardened into a

permanent part of his character. Nevertheless, this morning, he was not happy to be out there with her. He was still angry after having been woken up. Where are we going, Mama? he demanded. There is no *bazga* here.

She squeezed his hand again. A little farther now, she said. She did not want to alarm him, and she debated whether to tell him the truth. He was not the young child of her memory any longer. However, she put off revealing the reasons for their trip, as though to preserve the warm feeling of her memory and of their escape.

But the feeling was not to last. A soft rumble in the earth caused her to look over her shoulder and to see, behind them, on the path they had just travelled, a black cloud rising from the surface of the land. With cold certainty she knew it was moving towards them. Standing there, still holding her son's hand, she could make out the horses and the riders. She was locked in place, unable to move. She knew the moment intimately because she had already lived through it, imagined it all in horrible detail, felt it blow cold through her insides. Now it had come upon her. Combined with the horror she felt at the arrival of the men was the conviction that someone in the village had betrayed the two of them.

There was no point in running any longer because the men had found them. A feeling filled her son's face as they stood waiting for the riders. What do they want, Mama? Who are they and what do they want?

Half pushed, half dragged, they were led back to the main road where the others were waiting. More riders on horses and some wagons in which the boys were caged.

The woman recognized a few boys from the village but saw others who looked unfamiliar. The men ripped her son from her arms and tried to throw him into a wagon, but she struck out at them, hit them in the faces, scratched at them, screamed at them to leave them alone, bastard Turks that they were. A man among them took notice of her and dismounted from his horse and walked over to them. A menacing figure who seemed to have come out of her nightmares, he was tall and thin, had dark hollow eyes and a gaunt face with a scar that ran down his bony cheek. He swung his arm and stuck her to the ground, then stepped onto her chest and motioned to the men to seize the boy. When they had done so, the man lifted his foot from her and returned to his horse and ordered the riders to move on. Her boy sat among the others with his arms over the wagon's edge, reaching out to her. As the wagons began to move, the woman staggered to her feet and stumbled along beside them. Once the horses picked up speed, she was forced to let go of her son's hand. He was beyond her now. His hands hung over the edge of the rail, the wind mussing his chestnut hair. That was her final picture of him.

The woman looked down the road that led both to the east and back to her village. She could not make herself begin the long walk home. There was no home now. It might just as well have been razed to the ground, all its people turned into ghosts. She picked up a rock and smashed it on the stony ground again and again as the hooves of approaching horses beat out the rhythm of her heart.

Maja sat on her bed as an anemic light entered the room from the grey day outside. There was really nothing left to do but set out on her journey. She had made the commitment to herself, after all, so she forced herself to stand up and dress.

It was still cold in the apartment. It would take a while to heat up. Sometimes the radiators didn't come on at all because the building was old and decrepit and had a dilapidated boiler. The apartment wasn't her first choice. She'd thought many times of selling it and moving elsewhere, but the security she'd finally built in her life — a job and friends and a sort of emotional stability — had always stopped her. The apartment had passed to her after her aunt had died — the sister of her mother, a kind woman without children who had offered Maja a place to stay when she had nowhere else to go. Maja's mother had given birth to her when she was very young and had never taken care of her because she had always been too immature and irresponsible and selfish, even when she was a grown woman. Maja had lost touch with her and had moved here before the war when she was just eighteen and when she concluded that there was no other choice. She thought now, looking back, that she'd made exactly the wrong decision. But, of course, that decision was not entirely in her own hands, and hindsight was always 20/20.

Maja thought back to her life before arriving in Mostar and moving into the apartment. She'd grown up in a village with a peasant couple who were not her parents. Her grandmother, who had taken care of her for three years after her mother had given her up, had left Maja when she had become sick, and had gone to spend her last days with her son in Neum. That first day in the village was seared into Maja's memory. Even though she was only four years old at the time, she remembered her first sight of the cows — two colossal beasts that roared when they were hungry — and a black horse called Ceza who towered over her and stabbed at the stable walls with its angry hooves. More than anything, she remembered the people themselves. They smelled of the barn and the earth, and their hands were heavy and rough. In those first days she went quiet, refusing to speak, retreating within herself. A photo from that time showed a pale child with dark eyes and a closed expression like a bolted door.

One sultry July afternoon when Maja was eleven, her birth mother paid an unexpected visit after a two-year absence. A woman with dark hair and cold violet eyes, she gripped Maja's arms and, through her tears, said Maja was the only person she had ever loved. Her voice travelled out of the yard, hoarse and strident, pleading with everyone to understand her. Maja felt her mother's hands squeezing her arms and she smelled her stale, unfamiliar breath. But just as her mother's attention was intense, so too was it brief, as though she had spent all her strength in her first outburst, and she fell into the chair under the trees, her face flushed, her hard, bright eyes shifting around sharply.

Maja's foster father brought out a glass of red wine, which her mother drank in one quick gulp. Even though he filled her glass again, she didn't touch it. Instead, she visited the washroom four or five times through the afternoon, her purse clutched to her side, her speech more slurred as the day went by.

Maja's foster father had stood beside her, his short arms hanging stiffly at his side like two pieces of lumber nailed hastily to his shoulders. He watched Maja's mother with a quiet bovine interest. When she asked him why he didn't sit, he answered, "Because I'm taller this way," the joke cracking lines into his brown Roma-like face.

A hot wind blew through the leaves. Maja stood a few feet away from her mother, as if at the edge of a cursed circle. Then she snuck into the barn and climbed into the loft and closed her eyes against the bright shafts that shone through the chinks of wood. When they called her to say goodbye, she pretended not to hear.



In her apartment, dressed now, Maja got up off the bed and left her bedroom. Her legs felt unsteady as she took her first steps. At the door, her eyes fell upon the poster of the painting by Gustav Klimt that she had bought at the end of the war and had tacked in the living room then eventually moved to the bedroom. The painting had become such a familiar part of the apartment that it had become invisible. But now, for the second time today, it revealed itself again — Judith's dark beauty, her half-closed and enraptured eyes, her hands on the decapitated head of

the man in the bottom corner. A beautiful image, but a brutal one too.

At the front door of the apartment, coat and shoes on, Maja stopped. She took a last look around to see that everything was in its place. She'd spent a few hours last night tidying up so that all would be in order. Now that was done. It was a relief to her that it was done. As she was about to step outside, she put her hand inside her right coat pocket and fingered the pistol. She felt it there against her thigh, weighing down one side of her coat. She wondered whether people would notice the bulge in her pocket when they passed her in the street. Would they ask themselves what she had there? She brushed the question aside, opened the door and went out into the day.

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The *bura* whistled between grey mountains towards the sea. A few stones, dislodged by the horses' hooves, tumbled to a river far below while, high above, the grey peaks soared in and out of shredded clouds. The sun was setting and the *bura* continued to blow, cold and unrelenting.

She was riding horseback with six men, three of whom were in front of her and three behind. She had made no attempt to flee. From the beginning, she had given in to the will of the men, to her new situation, and had accepted the journey that was taking her far from her home.

Finally the riders stopped, dismounted, and readied themselves for the night. They warmed themselves around a fire, passed around a hock of smoked meat and a flask of

wine and a few bits of conversation while she continued to sit on the horse. Her proud refusal. An hour later, cold and tired, she relented, dismounted stiffly and walked slowly to the fire, sullenly accepting the men's laughter.

After she ate, one of them approached her and placed a leather bag on the ground beside her. She tilted the bag towards the fire and, when she saw the bag's contents, threw it to the side. Inside were six or seven noses, trophies from the last ambush. The men laughed again.

The one who had brought her the bag tied it to his saddle and returned with a blanket. Here, he said, handing it to her. They settled down for the night. The tail end of the *bura* whistled through the trees. She watched the men as they fell asleep, but she remained awake, alert, looking up at the starless sky and feeling her heart in the silence.



Maja stepped onto the street and walked towards the temporary bridge that spanned the Neretva. She lived on the western side of the city, the mainly Croatian side, and didn't know the exact distance to the bridge, but knew it would only take her a few minutes to get there.

When she neared the construction site, she saw the work progressing. There was metal scaffolding across the river, a crane turning slowly with a block of white stone on a long chain, and some workers guiding it into its place. Other men standing beside measuring instruments were discussing something. There were shouts from one side of the river to the other. She stood there for a few minutes,

observing the work. When she got to the middle of the temporary bridge, she stopped, let some people pass, and looked down at the river. It was not the bright green of the summer, but a darker jade, almost grey, like the grey November day itself. Some objects floated downstream — a plastic bottle, an empty cigarette pack.

It wasn't far from here that Maja had once been on the set of a film production, one of the Yugo-era films about the history of the country. It had been her last year of high school, though her first in Mostar after leaving her village. Her high school art teacher had decided to take them to the location. Maja had stood there with the rest of the class watching the goings on, which amounted to a lot of people in costume standing around doing nothing. She had no interest in history and couldn't care less about the film. Her knowledge of history was poor, by her own admission. She'd paid little attention to it in school, almost as little as she did to politics, so that she confused historical figures with each other, couldn't tell you who did what to whom, muddled one famous bridge with another.

Her new friend Marija was with her that day. They were the same age, though Marija was further along in some ways. She'd had several boyfriends by then. Or guys she'd had sex with. Even when they were standing on the film set, she pointed out the men who caught her eye. See that one over there, she told Maja, he has nice hair and that one over there, look at his shoulders. That sort of thing. Marija already had a reputation by then, Maja discovered, which made them opposites immediately.

Maja was new to the school and had no reputation whatsoever. And she'd had none of the experiences that Marija had had. So it was strange that they hit it off right away. Maybe Marija had few options by then. The new girl wouldn't be predisposed against her, wouldn't hate her because of the stories. Whatever the case, they spent most of the year together and ended up working on a project for their art class based on their experiences on the film set — some drawings showing the construction of the bridge in stages. Maja remembered doing most of the work — she wasn't untalented when it came to drawing — while Marija did most of the talking. Still, Maja wasn't resentful because she was grateful to have a friend that year, and she well understood Marija's apathy for schoolwork, which really wasn't very different from her own. That was what the teachers over the years had always told her, that if she would just apply herself, she could really make something of herself. She could become a teacher like them, or a lawyer, something, and the whole world would open up to her. Well, it was still possible, she told herself. She wasn't that old, really. The jobs in retail weren't what she envisioned for herself. But she'd been sidetracked in her life, hadn't really pulled herself together since the war.

Maja turned her eyes from the water to the other side of the river. She wondered what she would find there. Would the man be watching her still? Would he even be around? Maja hadn't seen him in a while, a good while, but today she would be on the lookout for him. Of all days, this was a day when he would be around, she thought. This was the

man who had shown up after the war, often in the company of veterans from a local Muslim unit, whose *nom de guerre* she'd learned as she walked by a café once, when one of the men had said "Hey Slim, tell us how you got your dick sucked in the black house. Tell us, man, the little girl wants to know."

Slim, as the soldier was called, had sat there, a little to the side, mysterious and silent. She had managed to get a closer look at his face as she went past. It was the face of a prisoner — run down and stretched, with a scar travelling from left ear to left cheekbone. His eyes were dark and his nose bore the signs of an old fracture. This was the nearest she had come to him. In the months and years afterwards, she only saw him at a distance. He wore army fatigues at first, then dark, nondescript clothes that hung loosely off his thin shoulders. There were times she thought she had seen him even before the war, in a group much like the one he'd been with at the café, lazing away summer afternoons in narrow back streets or taking his turn leaping off the bridge. Often, she wondered whether she was being paranoid, whether their paths had crossed accidentally because they happened to live in the same town. At other times she was sure his was a meaningful intrusion in her life after the war, a persistent reminder of Bosnia's ugly past that she was meant to recall. For a long time, he seemed to be familiar to her and in her dark moments, usually when she was awake at night, unable to sleep, when her thoughts went back to the years of the war, she became more and more convinced she knew him. With time, that belief grew into a hardened conviction.

A dragonfly flashed across the frame and a rooster wrung a crow from the hot spent afternoon. Along the banks of the green river, men were labouring in the heat, ringing hard hammer blows on white stone. Under the fierce sun they moved slowly, lethargically, as though under water. Some of the workers had taken off their shirts, and their shoulders were white from the dust.

Into the frame stepped a man in a round cap, his face sun-darkened, his feet shod in leather *opanci*. From a tent nearby, he observed the workers beside the river. He stood there for a time not moving, his expression distant and empty, like that of someone whose thoughts had drifted off somewhere. In his dreams he had often seen a white bridge rising from the rock and closing across the water, a tidal flow of lives treading stone to a polish, a town spreading along the river. But in his wide-awake moments, like this one now, he doubted any of this would come to pass. When the work was done his bridge would not stand — he still felt the roaring of his heart at the Sultan's warning — and when the bridge fell the men would hunt him down. They would know where he was going even before he himself did.

But the bridgebuilder ran anyway. Despite their long reach, he raced along the river in the night until he could see enough to take on the rock fields, the chasms and the woods. The surer he was of his fate, the harder he pressed on, the more he tried to hide from the sun that followed him all day, exposing him to his pursuers.

He could hear the river whisper to him still. It wound beside him through the stony country, and he saw himself carried by its currents to a distant, strange land. There, on a wall in some space where the river led him, he saw his adopted city — the mess of shanties piled on top of each other, white needles aimed at the sky, the domes of mosques glinting in the sun. Among a crowd of faces at a market were people he had known in his former life long before he had been wrested from his home, some who must still be alive, others who had returned from the dead to greet him. From the crowd he picked out his family, whom he had not seen in years. He saw his mother, a tall woman with dark eyes and hair who fiercely shielded him from the dangers of the world. He saw his father, a tall thin man stooped like a windblown reed, his face narrow and serious, sallow, a little yellow with age.

As the bridgebuilder ran, he wondered whether the face of his father revealed a feeling he himself had started to have, a dull bloodless presence so sly in the way it took over, so incremental and sourceless, that he had never really resisted it. In time, he had sunk under its heaviness and accepted it as part of him. There was nothing especially dangerous about it that he could identify, yet he sensed it was the most dangerous thing he had ever known. It had eaten its way into his thoughts and his feelings and into all matters of his life. Through its influence, the purest designs, the keen perfections of the greatest structures, could not stir him as they had. And strangely, while he himself could not feel, he felt the presence of men around him more acutely than ever. In their dealings they became calculating and dangerous,

and wherever he went, whispers followed him, and the sun intruded on the shadows where he had found comfort.

Yet, little by little as he ran, he began to detect a much older feeling as well, a familiar vibrant pulse in his body that awoke him to the person he once had been. From his fear and cowardice and desperation he unravelled a message to the deepest part of himself — that the greatest threats lay very close, inside the skin and in the secret places of the mind. He knew that if he wanted to reclaim the person he used to be, he would have to be more vigilant about himself, about the poisons inside. And he was sure he could begin because he had escaped. He had saved himself and he would live.

For two hours his happiness carried him through his exhaustion and burned off all his grim thoughts. Bright yellow birds flitted past, the smell of cypresses filled the air and he felt himself surrounded and protected by the hum of cicadas.

But his mood was not to last. When he saw the *stećci* on the summit of a hill, he came to a sudden stop. A coldness blew through his insides. When just before the barren and skeletal land had seemed to signal his freedom, now it presaged his isolation and his vulnerability. He looked at the stones for a time. Then he clambered through a gully to the field and stood in front of them. He saw that they were his height and bore no inscription; only their large engravings hinted at the people buried there. The man's arms were raised in victory, a sword in his right hand, and the woman's long hair was bound by a slim band across her forehead. The *stećci* leaned towards each other, as though

in secret conversation. They seemed to warn him that wherever he would go, whatever illusions he would have, however many roads he would travel, his destiny would be decided. He looked towards the horizon where the road threaded the distance, leading the men here. It was only, he knew then, a matter of time.

In the stones' shadows he began to hack at the dry earth, slashing at it, pulling the earth upon himself. He pried rocks from their sealed beds as the light started to fail, and his own body began to dissolve in the dusk. Soon he had dug a narrow trench, his heart beating heavily in his thin chest. Throwing the knife aside, he lay down in the earth.

— 8 —

It was winter. The grey mountains had turned white with the snow that swept in from the north. Down in the valley the houses hunkered against the cold and a dog bayed into the dusk. A woman, heavily bundled, walked from a barn to a house at the centre of the village.

Inside, she warmed herself beside a fire. The flames flickered across her face, revealing her wide-set violet eyes and her dark hair that had fallen out of her loosened kerchief.

She turned to a man sitting at a table. Even when he was sitting, she saw how tall and strong he was, a different man than her first husband. This was the man who had found her in the mountains and who had wrestled with her on the empty road and had lifted her onto his horse to take her from the village of her birth. It seemed a lifetime ago now. He was no longer a stranger to her, but she was still

astonished to find herself here, as though she had dropped suddenly from the sky and as though time had not passed as it normally does, without transition from one moment to the next.

He pulled her onto his lap and looked her over, his right hand on the small of her back. Laughing, he said, I see you have been in the loft again. I swear by St. Sava himself that if I catch the man, I will cut off his balls. He made a cutting motion with his right hand.

She brushed a few blades of dried grass off her shoulder, said, smiling, But there will always be another to take his place! Then he too will face my knife!

Wind creaked the frame of the house and whistled in the chimney. A log collapsed in the fire. She looked at him more seriously now. She paused before she began to speak, then when she spoke, her words were slow and methodical, careful and tentative, as though she were unsure of them. But, in fact, she had worked on them for many days, arranging them in the proper order so that they carried the right weight. She knew they had to have the right weight if she was to plant this idea, this seed.

You are a great man, she said. You are a man unlike the others, a real leader. You have done great things, but soon the time will come when you must mark your stay in this place. The time will come when —

He was not laughing any longer. Yes, the time will come, but I am not there yet, am I? Not yet. They can say what they want, but I am not there yet. He looked at her more closely. All right, I see you have something to say, but it is late and I am tired; you can tell me more tomorrow.

He got up and walked towards the bed. Then he turned around. Bring me the *rakija*, would you?

On his back, boots over the edge of the bed, he took a drink, laid the flask beside him and listened to the sounds from the main room — the spitting fire, the bowls being stacked, then her steps on the floor of the room. He felt her tug on his feet and heard the boots land. He felt her body pressed against his own, then her warm breath against his cheek, and he felt himself begin to drift.

Some months after, late spring by then, in the same half-lit room of the house in which the fire was still burning, the smoke hanging low and eddying out through the open door, he was sitting at the table in conversation with a man who stood in the room.

Do you know what I want? he asked.

Yes, I think I understand, the man answered.

You *think* you understand? He struck the table with his fist. I'll cut your head off and feed it to the dogs. Understand *that*?

The man nodded. He had taken off his cap when he had entered the house, and his hands squeezed it tightly now as though he were wringing it of water.

Right, get out then. You have ten days. Ten days, do you hear me? If not . . . He dismissed the man with a wave and sank back into his chair and closed his eyes. The fire cast a dull orange light against his face. There was no sound other than an occasional hissing and cracking of wood.

A hand behind him touched his shoulder, and he heard her voice, heard her voice before he heard the words, or understood them.

You're too harsh, she said. It would be better if you let him be.

Better if you let him be, he repeated. He began to cough — a rough hacking that made him bend over and heave his shoulders from the strain. When he recovered, he wiped his mouth clean with a rag and lifted it to show her. There is no time to let him be, as you put it. No time to find another master.

She said nothing at first. The time left to all of us, she said slowly, is uncertain. You can still get better. In Dalmatia the sea air could —

In Dalmatia, he repeated, shaking his head. You are dreaming if you think the sea air will make a difference. He stood up. I'm going to check the site. I should return before dark. He went to the door, then looked back at her. Keep an eye on him, will you?

Later, when she went to the spot where the two white slabs had been delivered on a wagon — it had taken eight men to unload them — she saw the mason sitting on one of the stones smoking, his eyes closed and his body rocking to some silent rhythm of words or music. A boy squatted on the other stone with an apple between his teeth, then leapt to the ground. Fortunately, her husband had not been there to see. She decided to give the mason more time before speaking to him, so she passed by and walked out of the village.

Walking alone, she thought back to herself and her son, as she often did, when they had wended along a tread-worn path much like this one, through witch-grass meadows and spinneys of stunted willows. They were making their way home with the basket of *bazga*. The molten sun still burned through the blue afternoon, sending their long, crooked shadows before them. The air was fragrant with bay laurel, sweet basil and thyme.

Back home, satisfied, a tear still on his cheek, her son set to work, humming to himself. They waited a day until the syrup was ready. Mixed with water, it made a sweet clear drink that tasted of flowers and summer sunshine. The taste had become part of the picture — of her boy with a cup of *bazga*, his brown lashes over his grey-green eyes, his eyes as sharp and clear as glass, intelligent, alive. Her beautiful boy.

When she returned to check on the mason, the cool air of the morning had dissipated as the sun burned through a film of white clouds. Around the *stećak* the ground was white with flakes, and out of the flat, inert surface a body had started to emerge.

The mason stood back when he saw her, his cap in his hands again. The pale dome of his large hairless head contrasted starkly with his brown face.

My husband will be pleased with your work, she assured the mason. He bowed slightly.

You have orders for the other *stećak*, she went on. A warrior in the image of my husband. If you make

him broad in the shoulders, a young man, you will flatter him.

She stopped, her eyes turning from his face to the ground.

She pulled a flower out of her apron. These grew near the village where I was born. To remember my place there, I want it engraved on both stones. The design can be small; the size isn't important. My husband understands the flower's meaning to me.

The mason eyed her carefully, took the plant and examined it. Small and white, it clung to a long stem. After a moment, he asked: Why should the head of the Čeka *zadruga* have this flower on his headstone?

Her throat tightened. She came closer to him and said, quietly, He asked me to tell you myself. If the work is not done, you will have to face him alone. *Alone*, she repeated, adding weight to the word. I will not be able to help you. No one will help you. She turned her back to him decisively and walked towards the house, but she could feel her heart beating heavily as she stepped inside.

A week later, when her husband stood before the completed *stećci*, his eyes looking over them, he noticed the emblem in the corners of each stone, and he turned to face the mason. He walked around the man in slow circles, then flung the leather bag of money to the ground. The mason's shocked face turned to her, but she met it calmly and without feeling. Sensing the crowd around him, the mason went silent. He nudged his boy, who began to run down the road that led out of the village.

Having crossed the river, Maja walked through the old town, past the stalls selling copper pots and carpets and items from the Yugo years: laminated dinars and bullet casings and photos of Josip Broz. She felt the pistol against her right thigh. It hung there, a heavy weight. She'd passed two cafés already, one of which was empty, the other full of high school students who had been let out for the afternoon. A few of them sat outside, even though it was a cool day, while the rest were inside smoking and drinking sodas. She didn't bother to go inside. The other cafés were farther along the street nearer to the edge of town, not far from the black house. It was in one of them that she expected to find him. She'd seen him there before a few times, once when she'd been in the area to pick up a dress for a wedding from a seamstress who lived nearby. On that occasion, he'd been on the terrace, right there in the open. A year ago, or maybe it was two. Maja didn't make a point of coming here often, obviously. It didn't matter to her whether he was inside or outside, though it would be easier if he were outside.

She kept walking down the street. The day seemed to have gotten darker even though it was still afternoon. She couldn't help the images that came to her then. She'd always tried to block them from her mind, but they returned to her the closer she got. There had been periods, long periods, when she hardly saw them anymore, when they seemed to have disappeared, when they seemed to have left her for

good, but they had never disappeared really, and she knew they would return after she'd decided to make the trip. It was one of the few things she could count on.

Her thoughts went back to the night, years ago, when she and a group of her friends had been walking home from someone's house after a party. It was at the end of the war when a ceasefire had been called and the horror was finally coming to an end and they all had wanted to get out and enjoy life a little. When, for a week or so, things seemed to be getting back to normal. But it was also a time when the normal rules of living hadn't come back into place. It was November 9. From a side street ahead of them suddenly appeared a group of men who were returning from somewhere as well, probably a bar. A few of them were soldiers. They stood at the end of the street, blocking the way. Her friend Marija was all for joining up with them — what could be the harm — but the others thought it best to avoid them altogether, so after a brief whispered discussion they went down the side street beside them instead. At first, they thought they'd avoided the men, but then they heard the men calling out to them, their voices growing louder, ordering them back, yelling at them, then cursing at them drunkenly (she thought) and she and her friends had run in a panic in the opposite direction and had become separated. Maja found herself alone on the edge of town where the street turned into an unlit road.

In a gutted room of the black house, where she'd thought she could hide, the men came for her. At first, she lied to save herself. I'm not a Croat, she screamed, I'm

not a Croat. A soldier, a kid, judging from his face in the flashlight's shifting beam, pleaded with them: What the fuck is the difference anyway? We haven't had any pussy for six months so let's do what we came here to do. Someone told him to shut up; there are consequences to such actions, and anyway he'd never had any pussy, ever, so what was this crap about six months? Shut up and go outside. Then this guy asked her for her ID, as if that would determine the legality of their operation one way or the other. If it was the wrong name, if her name wasn't Anela or Sabija, then they could just go ahead. A hand from the dark snatched at her legs, her pockets. In running she had tossed her bag aside, and it lay back there some place. A voice told the guy to drop the subject so they could get the hell out of there before they did something stupid. There was some arguing and shuffling. One of the men, maybe the kid, said, She's a liar, come on. They dragged her out of the corner by her legs . . .

She had thrown up on the way home and for days afterwards had tried to rid herself of the memory. But the scene played itself repeatedly in her mind, always with the same desperate attempt to escape, the same agonizing discussion in the dark, the same result. She lay in bed pretending to be sick with a fever, and when her aunt forced her to eat a meal, she couldn't keep it down. To escape her thoughts, she tried to sleep but instead drifted for hours through strange veils of light and dark.

Her anguish lasted for months. The light was especially bright then — the cruel sun, the painful neon in stores. Hypersensitive to the shine and gloss on the surface of

things everywhere, she was thankful to come home every day, go to bed, and close her eyes. There were days when she wanted to escape. There were days when she wanted to die. For a long while the lasting image on her eyes was of a thin shadowed face — a dim composite of the bastards who had been there that night.

The child, too, had it been born, would have had a version of this face, and she would never have accepted it as she knew a mother must, with its own unique personality and identity. Slim's face always would have appeared. She could not be sure that even if the boy had lived, she would not have left him with others or even done something desperate. That was why she had gone through with the abortion. The pain stayed with her as time passed. She knew she had tried to avenge herself on them, to release the anger at the expense of the child. Worst of all, images continued to visit her, images of a little boy taking his first steps, uttering his first words. Always a little boy, growing up, turning into a decent man. She had suffered in silence.

— 10 —

The huts of the village hung off its main street like beads on a string. At the village summit, backed against the shank of the lower slope of the mountain, was a grey stone building with a broad terrace and roof. Inside the arched opening was a stone slab on which a body lay. It was a strong body, still seemingly vibrant, ready to leap up and take some action. But the bearded face was pale, the eyes closed, and the man's hands folded across his chest.

Among the mourners who had gathered around the catafalque was the woman, dressed in black, standing motionless for a time until she crossed herself and turned away and walked down the street to the house in the centre of the village. Bats wheeled through the darkening air. There was a slackening of sound and activity in the village, a final rooster's crow and the last cries of children.

Out of the last rays of the crumbling daylight, a man appeared on horseback. His greying beard was wound in long unwashed strands, and his brown woollen cloak was wrapped tightly around him. He dismounted, tethered the animal to some bushes, and stepped to the door of the house. This was the man from a nearby village she had sent to learn about the empire's young janissaries who had been born near her valley, a four-days' journey through hard mountainous land. Only the second to return, he had brought news worth the money she had slipped him behind her husband's back.

Two hours, perhaps more, passed. It was dark by then, and she reappeared at the door and looked up towards the stone building; when she was sure, she walked up to the hall carrying a bottle. She handed it to the guard. He smiled and thanked her, they talked briefly, and then she returned to the house. The moon slid farther across the cloudless night. When she looked outside her door again, she saw the empty chair by the hall door and the guard lying on his back.

This was the moment. She knew there was no time to hesitate. Her heart began to race. She felt as though she were in a dream, that she was not herself as she stepped

out of the house and led the man up the winding lane and looked warily left and right because of the sound of the horse's hooves on the stones. But no doors opened. No one stepped outside. Once she and the man reached the terrace, she climbed the final steps and looked closely at the guard, peered down into his still face and confirmed that his eyes were closed.

Moonlight through the rectangular slit shone upon the corpse of her husband on the pale stone catafalque. An awkward load — body jackknifed at the hips as though it were trying to dive over the horse, legs stiff and akimbo like pieces of lumber — the man secured it with ropes lashed around the horse's belly.

Leading the horse out of the village, he disappeared into the night. She entered her house and sat beside the fire, the embers still glowing, the sound of her breathing filling the room.



In the first hesitant light of morning the man knelt beside the naked body, whispering, hissing to himself as he worked, Do not think they will find you, they will never find you. I will cut you, cut you into pieces . . . They will never, ever find you where birds . . .

By a river that wound into the darkness, he hacked at an object between his knees and flung pieces of it into the water. Then by its grey hairs he lifted a faceless head, regarded it for a moment, then tossed it aside. The head bobbed and turned over as the river tugged at it lazily, carrying it southward towards the sea. Then he began

working on the left arm, his boot pressed on the torso for leverage, the heavy stone smashing down on the blade before the pale limb came free. He tossed it into the river, then his soiled tunic as well. He put the bag of coins into his pants and clambered onto his horse and rode in the direction of the rising sun.

— 11 —

Maja stepped into the last of the cafés on the road to the black house; she found only a young couple in the back and an old man reading a newspaper and having a coffee at a table by the window. There was no one else inside, except for the waiter. Now, late in the afternoon, the light outside was fading. She sat near the door and waved the waiter over and ordered a glass of *šljivovica*. She must have seemed like a novice to him because he gave her a quizzical look before he went back to the bar and brought her the drink.

She took a sip of the brandy, felt it warm her pleasantly. In the back of the room, the lovers were in quiet conversation, their heads leaning together. The old man was finished with his paper. He had noticed her by then, had folded his paper, and was preparing to leave. He was looking over at her. *What do you want, old man*, Maja thought, *just move on*. The man stood up, wrapped his scarf around his neck and put on his hat before going to the door. As he did, he stopped and looked down at her, his eyes taking her in, sympathetic somehow; then his right hand touched her gently on the shoulder. His hand rested there for a moment, then he opened the door and left the café.

Maja sat for a while longer, the touch of the old man lingering after he'd gone. The feelings that rose inside her were all jumbled and full of sadness. She knew the world could never be the same for them again, for her and for this old man, nor could they ever be what they once were. All had changed. She could never undo what had happened. She was going to have to kill off those memories and learn to live again. But now she was in this situation, in this moment, with things to do that she had committed herself to. She was committed to her plan. There was no backing out now. However, it was getting darker outside, she noticed. There wasn't much daylight left and no one else was coming to the café now, she decided. There would be no one else for a few hours yet, when the evening crowd showed up. Maja drank the rest of the brandy, left the café and walked down the street.

Not long after, she came to an abandoned shop at the edge of the city where the street turned into a road and where she stopped and leaned up against the wall. A drone of a plane sounded high above, and tiredness crept over her. For a while she gave in to it, her eyes closed against the darkening day. She felt that if she kept them closed a little longer, she might fall asleep.

When Maja opened her eyes again, she noticed a man sitting in front of a building across the road. His face looked like he had just woken up too. It seemed vacant, the eyes dark and deep set, solemn, she thought. For a while neither she nor the man moved. Silence settled around them as the sounds of the city grew distant.

Then, impelled to motion, she walked across the road and stood in front of him. For a moment, they looked at each other without a word. In his eyes she thought she could see her own face reflected, a curve of roofs, a tiny whorl of cloud schooning on the wind. She could feel her legs underneath her. They held her up, but they didn't feel steady. So, this was it, after all this time. *You've finally come to it*, she told herself. Her trembling hand went into the right pocket. She pulled out the pistol and aimed it at him.

"You, thin man, stand up."

He looked at her without speaking.

"Did you hear me?" she said, her voice rising, "Stand up!"

The man stood up, tall and wavering. In his soiled clothes and broken boots, he seemed to have travelled from some other time and some distant place and to have stopped here to rest. His hands were in the air, but he didn't speak to her. He obeyed her motion with the pistol, stepped away from the building and began walking down the road ahead of her. There was no one around. She thought she was fortunate for once, fortunate that no one could see her pointing a gun at a man as they walked down the road. Then again, Maja thought, what would people do if they saw her? What exactly could they do? There was nothing they could do. Not a damn thing! She was the one holding the gun.

They were near the black house on the edge of the city. It rose ahead of them in the dwindling light. The man made no attempt to escape, nor any sound. He just listened to her directions and continued down the road, then climbed the stairs and stepped into the building.

It was darker inside than on the road. A faint light came through a broken window. Graffiti was scrawled on one wall and there was garbage in a corner. Otherwise, the room was empty, smelling of old, wet stone.

She told him to stop and turn around.

“Get on your knees,” she ordered. “And put your hands behind your back,” she added, as an afterthought. Wasn’t this what she was supposed to make him do? Weren’t they all on their knees with their hands tied behind their backs? Pictures from the history books they’d studied in high school returned to her. She wasn’t sure exactly, and obviously she’d never been in this situation before, but she thought this was what she should get him to do. After all the times she had imagined this scenario, playing it out in her mind, she had never really gone through these final moments.

She pointed the gun straight at him, her hands no longer trembling. “I think you know why you’re here,” she said. “You know who I am, don’t you? You know what happened here. But you don’t know what I went through, what it was like for me. You took something from me I can never get back. You robbed me. You changed me forever. But now you are here, we are here, and I am the one with the gun. And there’s no one else. No one to help you or to see us. I can put a bullet through you, fucker, and watch you die. I can make it go slow, if that’s what I want to do, or I can end it now. I can end it right now.” The gun waved up and down in rhythm to her words.

She held it there, pointed at him, as different feelings flooded her. They were like nothing she had experienced

until then. Like nothing she had ever known. She was silent for a moment. She just let the sensations pour through her as she looked at him — a man on his knees in a darkened room of a broken building. A pathetic, weak figure. Wavering a little from side to side. It almost looked as though he was no longer there, as though he'd left himself already, the spirit departed from him. His body was there but the rest of him was gone. What must it be like to be there in body, but have your spirit already gone? Was it like what she had already experienced herself? How a part of her had left her body behind. She kept the gun trained on him as she looked him over, feeling her power over him, feeling his weakness. Then she lowered the gun.

No, no, she decided. There would be no point in the end, no difference to her story. She could never get her time back, nor her old self. They were gone, long gone. She couldn't make herself do it. She put the pistol back into her pocket and told him he could get up and go out. He could carry on with his life. Nothing would make her happier, she said, than if all the black houses were blasted to the ground, the walls fallen in and the stones heaped onto trucks. But that would take time, and for now it was enough that this one here, as it once had been for her, was destroyed. She knew that another black house could always be built in this country, even in her lifetime, and she knew that new dreams could be projected onto its walls so that men would be fascinated again. But before that happened, she would be at peace.

She left him there, turned for the door and set out on the walk back.

She began to climb the hill towards the *stećci*. A path between the rocks opened up as she picked her way to the summit. The warmth of the summer morning filtered down into the shade. The blue sky had washed away the black star-flecked heavens and, there in the distance, like a grey thread snaking to the east, was a road. Like the one, she imagined, that was to take the bridgebuilder away.

The stones were tall and white. No cracks fissured their sides; no other signs of age marked their surfaces. Still, because of the stresses of the earth upon them, they leaned towards each other. Coming closer, she noticed the engraved flowers on each lower right corner.

In that moment, after years of waiting, the earth went silent. A pause, a space where nothing could intrude, protected her from the commotions of the wind and the steady thrumming of cicadas. She couldn't tell if the silver leaves of distant trees moved at all, or whether the birds tilting above were in fact crossing the sky. She stood unsteadily, a strange new person. The rhythm of her heart and the cadence of her breathing suddenly caught her attention.

She pulled off her black kerchief and took the last steps to the top. She noticed the ground, the scramble of rocks and dry earth. A ratchetted knife drew her attention, then the man, who turned towards her. He was on his knees, raw hands in his lap. His gaze, when it left her, shot up at the fierce blue sky. He was older, of course, and boyish no more, but the grey-green eyes still distinguished him.

She could see in him the boy of old who threw missiles at swallows and raced back and forth across the fields.

In silence, wind whispering around them, she stood by him. Then she stepped forward and delivered the news, that the bridge had stood, that it had not collapsed, that it was still standing. On her knees, she touched his cheek tenderly. She took his gaunt frame into her arms.

He watched her, saw the long hair and high cheeks and narrow eyes, though if he recognized her, he did not show it. Even when they lifted him up for the journey back, he showed no sign of having left the ground or of moving down the grey road. Outside himself and the world, beyond all reach of the mighty, he soared beyond the sun.

Part Two



At 5:00 a.m. Maja Lončarić roused her four-year-old son Neven from his sleep, got him dressed and sat him still drowsy at the kitchen table where she had prepared for him a scrambled egg, a slice of white bread with plum jam, and a cup of milk because she wanted him to have something in his belly before they started out. She herself had been up all night cleaning the house, keeping the fire going in the wood stove, the lights on throughout the house, though she made sure to close the shutters. She wanted the house at least to be tidy before they left. It took a great deal of strength. Only once had she gone to the bathroom, clutching the plastic bag and closing the door behind her, even though she knew he was asleep and couldn't see her. She hadn't looked at herself in the mirror. She hadn't looked at herself for days now.

The house was a wooden peasant structure built in the 1950s, just a kitchen and a bedroom to which her foster father had added a bathroom with a tub and a toilet. Two years of complaining to him when she was entering her teens and had by then got her period, broke him down finally and made him go ahead with the construction. The bathroom, when you saw it from outside, was a leaning structure of uneven brick that looked like it had been

built by someone who had had too much to drink. The veranda addition at the front had the same appearance. Her father was an uneducated peasant, an illiterate son of the Berković clan who lived across the road. He'd never done any bricklaying before he began the additions to the house. But what he lacked in knowhow or skill he made up with confidence. There wasn't anything he couldn't do. And no amount of derision from neighbours could shake him. They'd mocked him for his barn, a massive structure five times the size of the house. "Your horse lives in a mansion but you live in a shack," they told him. "It should be the other way around." A big smile cracked open the lines of his broad handsome face, brown from the summer sun. He took the ribbing well. He liked his horse, wasn't embarrassed about his house or his barn. Maja accepted and even respected his blind stubbornness at first. However, as she got older, she grew embarrassed about the house and the place in general, the place where she'd arrived as a child. She knew what other kids said about it and what they said about the whole clan to which she came to belong.

Her foster parents were illiterate peasants who had been given money by the Yugoslav government to care for her. This after her fifteen-year-old mother had given her up to her own mother, Maja's grandmother, who had raised her for three years until she moved to her son's home in Rijeka. Her grandmother's reasons for doing so weren't ever clear to Maja. Maybe she felt she was getting too old to raise a little girl, even if it was her own grandchild. She'd had some health issues, true, and her son in Rijeka had two boys of his own, and didn't have space for more kids,

or didn't want more, or didn't have money for more. Maja didn't know all the reasons. She could only be sure of her own memories. She remembered her fear and loneliness in the first weeks when she was dropped off, abandoned with these strange new people with their callused hands and strange smell, the smell of the barn and of unwashed flesh. They spoke in a dialect she wasn't familiar with, had never heard before, though she could understand them well enough. Even though her mother had been born in Sveti Martin, Maja had lived the first years of her life in an apartment in Zagreb and knew nothing about this world. Of course, after all this time, having gotten used to her life here, she saw the place differently, saw the place and the people with fondness, with a sort of ambivalent fondness because she knew what their faults had been, their weaknesses, and she had forgiven them long ago.

Maja peered through the lowered shutters of the kitchen window. The sun was rising out of a dark fog. The ride would be cold at first, she knew, but by the time they got to Sveti Martin the sun would burn off the fog and warm the day. They had jackets. She would make sure he had mitts. She wanted him to be comfortable. She wasn't worried about herself. She was used to the cold. She had ridden her bike a hundred times on cold mornings just like this one.

"Mama," Neven called.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I don't want no more. I had enough."

"One more bite. Take one last bite of the bread. You always leave something on your plate."

"Oh Mama."

“One more bite. Here,” she picked up the bread and put it to his mouth, but he turned his head to the side.

“Oh you,” she said. “Okay, just this one time. Now let’s go to the bathroom and brush our teeth.”

“Where are we going, Mama?”

“Just a little ride.”

“But where, Mama?”

“Just to Sveti Martin. You like it there, remember?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well you do, and you like to ride your bicycle, don’t you?”

“Yes.” The boy thought for a moment. “But it’s still dark out.”

“Neven, it will be an adventure, it’s our adventure. Come on now.”

After she had brushed his teeth and done the dishes, she took a final look around to see if she had missed anything. Nothing caught her eye. The house looked fine. This was how she wanted it. Now that was done. She had managed to get it all done. She let out a breath. Her fatigue caught up to her then for just a moment; her legs went slack and rubbery as though she’d already made the journey. The job was done here. She didn’t have to look back. Now there was only the task ahead. Her thoughts started to go in different directions. She recognized that about herself, and she tried to stave off her thoughts as she had staved them off during the night by throwing herself into the work.

Maja got Neven into his jacket, zipped him up and then went out into the yard. She locked the front door and hung the key on a nail that stuck out of the brick. Her mother,

her foster mother, had many times left the key there for Maja when she had gone to Zagreb and had come home late at night. Maja had even returned at this hour and in these conditions, parking her bike against the wall for her father to put away, then slipping into the house before they got up. She imagined the ghost of herself coming back out of the fog. Now she was the ghost going in the opposite direction.

They got their bikes from the barn and set out down the road.

— 2 —

Maja's first boyfriend lived in a big house owned by the father, a lawyer in town. The boy, Ivica Šeketa, or "Johnny" as he became known, had had a crush on her for years, a silent but sweet attention she noticed whenever they moved in the same orbit during the school day. They had been in the same class since elementary school. Once, when they were thirteen, he'd tried to talk to her outside her house while she was skipping rope with her neighbour friend. He'd driven past on his bike and had recognized her. In school, now and again, they'd been put in the same group for a project of some kind and had talked about the project, and had exchanged a few words not about the project, pleasant enough to Maja, but of no real meaning. Another time, she remembered, he had even told Darko Ložnjak to shut up when he was remarking about Maja's father, repeating stupidly what he'd probably heard at home, that her father had been seen stealing apricots in an orchard near his house. Now, however, Johnny's

arrival on his bike, accidental though it seemed, embarrassed her. She was embarrassed about the house, the smallness and shabbiness of it, the muddy scraggly grass yard, all of it, so that she ignored him completely, didn't acknowledge his greeting and went on playing with her friend as though he weren't even there. But he *was* there, and he was trying to connect the friendly girl he knew in school with the one he saw today. Maja didn't care about him or his feelings. It was her own embarrassment she wanted to do away with.

Two years went by before they were in a situation like the last one — a school dance at the gymnasium in the fall — when he again approached her and said something to her. What it was she couldn't remember anymore. To her neighbour friend, Marina, and some other girls, Maja mocked him when he had left by making the “four eyes” sign for his glasses. A month later she was at his father's house along with much of the class for Johnny's fifteenth birthday. Her house was, obviously, very different from his parents' house, and she saw him differently from then on. He became a figure from a world she'd never been a part of. Not just the world represented by the physical house, but the family he belonged to, the stability of the family, the solidity of it, and the security and comfort of knowing who he was and to whom he belonged. She'd had none of those things.

Marina said, “You should go out with him. You never know where it could lead.”

“Don't be stupid,” she'd answered.

“I'm not stupid.”

“You’re very stupid. I love you anyway, but you’re very stupid. But here, come here and let me hug you anyway, you stupid.”

She couldn’t remember how she and Johnny went on their first date, if that was the word, so forgettable was the event and so flat were her feelings for him at the time. They went to a movie, then for ice cream afterwards. Returning, he walked with her up to the fork in the road two hundred metres from her house, at which point she told him to go home. She could manage on her own; she told him it wasn’t very far, though she guessed he probably knew that she was ashamed. It didn’t make any difference to him. He wasn’t a snob like some others.

After that she and Johnny went somewhere every day, usually on walks in the hills above the villages, along the crest of the hills or down the alleys between the weekend houses. It was spring then; the cherry and apricot blossoms coloured the newly green country pink and white. She and Johnny held hands for the first time, after dark, a little surreptitiously at first, his hand reaching out for hers, causing a fluttering in her chest she hadn’t known before. Everything between them was light and pleasant, though the feeling that cracked something inside her was scary too. She had no control over it. It had just come to her.

Johnny’s father became aware of her two months later. That was at the height of the summer when he, Johnny, had asked her over for the first time and they’d sat in the yard drinking lemonade at the table under a gazebo of grapes. The father, a tall man with cropped greying hair and a square jaw, eyed her up and down, assessing her,

the summer tart his son had brought home, wearing cut-offs and a t-shirt, her breasts just starting to fill out. Maja neither liked him nor his look. He looked at her, she felt, the way he thought or presumed or had decided his son was looking at her too, the way he must be considering her — just a summer bitch a young guy like him had happened upon as he sowed his seeds wherever he could before he got serious and settled down. The father's assessment was directly proportionate to the unseriousness he assumed his son was taking with this girl. Yet he was polite to her, spoke with a stiff friendly formality that made him seem awkward; his seemingly jovial questions about her father, whom he seemed to know, came over as patronizing instead. Maja disliked him immediately. Typical for her (she knew this about herself) she would have an impossible job of rehabilitating him in her own mind. There was never any going back. Once she'd made up her mind about a person she stuck to her first impression. She had settled on an opinion of the father and reacted to him similarly from then on whenever he came upon them outside, her face cold and inexpressive, even haughty, a "who the fuck are you" look in the man's own home.

Johnny didn't care about his father's opinion about Maja. However, as the summer went on, and it dawned on the old man that his son wasn't about to ditch the girl and move onto another one, he cornered Johnny and told him that Maja was wrong for him, that she came from nowhere, wasn't good enough for him. The more he talked and the angrier he became, the more Johnny retreated into himself. He told Maja none of this until she began to question him.

She'd seen the father ask his son into the house to talk with him. It was August by then. She and Johnny had been outside. He came back after ten minutes, ten minutes during which she had to wait by the front gate because Johnny's brother and his friends were sitting at the gazebo, had to wait by the gate, walking back and forth, Johnny coming back after ten minutes in a different mood, a sombre mood, which wasn't like him, wasn't the boy she knew anyway.

So she started to question him, growing increasingly worked up because of his evasiveness. He said his father had told him to do some chores around the house, that was all. He was lying. She could tell he was lying. His eyes didn't meet hers. She wouldn't let him get away with it. "You have to tell me the truth, tell me what he said." Her voice rose as they walked from the house. He was embarrassed, tried to keep her quiet. The more he tried to silence her the more agitated she became. She started to yell. "You're hiding something from me. I want you to tell me. It had something to do with me, didn't it? Say it! I can tell; it had something to do with me!" He was faced with a choice between letting her continue to yell, which the people in their yards could hear and, on the other hand, quieting her by telling her what his father had said, which Johnny knew was serious, telling her, so serious it made him scared.

He decided to tell her. As she listened, a sick feeling washed over her because she knew all too well the attitude of the old man. He wasn't the first. And he wouldn't be the last. With Johnny she thought she'd escaped it; he didn't care where she was from or who her family was.

He saw through all that. He was wiser than his father even though he was just sixteen. Or, and this was another way of looking at it, he hadn't thought through all the adult consequences of being with her, what it meant for him long term.

As they walked up the lane, Johnny took her hand, trying to calm her down. But she wasn't calming down. She said, "Are you going to let him talk about me like that? Are you? Aren't you going to do something about it? You have to decide. You have to tell him what I mean to you. It's me or your father. Which is it going to be?"

And he, in dismay, replied, "It's not like that. It's not you or him. You're overreacting. I'll talk to him. He'll get to know you."

But that wasn't what she wanted to hear. She wanted him to tell the father, "I will choose the person I want to be with. I will do what I want. I will make my own choices. You don't run my life." But he couldn't do it. He was a good boy. A loyal son. And he was afraid of the old man. Not physically afraid of him, but afraid of his words, the rise of his voice, his anger and disappointment. Johnny was too young to stand up to his father, to put his foot down, set markers for his life.

So that was why he wanted to inscribe her on himself forever, on his body, to prove what she meant to him. To circumvent the authority of the father. His father couldn't control everything. The decision came to him in a rush, one night, when he couldn't sleep and was wrestling over everything. A few weeks had gone by since the day he and Maja had argued leaving the house. He didn't tell her of his plan and waited to show her.

They were inside the old, abandoned mill near Maja's house. It was a long structure of concrete blocks that had no windows anymore and had been burned black on one end. The kids who had played soccer there earlier that day were gone. It was dark. Only a streetlight shone through the busted windows. He pulled her towards him and opened his shirt and displayed her name on him, on his left chest, in flowing script, *Maja*. The light through the broken window was bright enough for her to make out her name.

A gust of feeling went through her then, a combination of a pleasurable tingling thrill along with something else, which, in the first instant, was dismay and apprehension together. She couldn't explain to herself the meaning of the second feeling. It hung there like a bad spectre. She had the urge to turn away. The two conflicting emotions warred with each other momentarily until she gave in to the first, the pleasurable one, sinking into it like someone sinking into the enveloping warmth of a bath. She touched the name on his chest in the dark.

He knew he had proven himself to her. He was sure of it. Her hand on his chest running over the name, the touch of her fingers, then her body against his, surrendering against his, confirmed it without any words. A foreign heat was there between them suddenly, but it felt familiar to him as well. He must have gone over the moment a hundred times as he lay in the dark of his room, played it out in different variations, imagined it in different places.

But it was their first time, in fact. In the half-light he fumbled with the condom, put it on the wrong way around,

and tore it. "Never mind," she told him. "Keep going, it will be fine," thinking she had timed it right, but in truth not exactly knowing and in this wildness of their first time and the emotions from the tattoo, not caring.

When they left through the broken door under the streetlight and onto the street, a neighbour, a woman on bicycle going to her job at the bakery in Sveta Nedelja, saw them coming out. This must have been how the rumours about her started.

More than a month went by after her missed period before she went to the doctor and then scheduled her procedure at the hospital in Zagreb.

— 3 —

As he rode ahead of her, Neven appeared in the pools of light from the streetlamps then disappeared again in the foggy dark. They were going slowly. It was cold. Maja's hands felt cold, and she was glad she'd given him mitts.

At the crossroads they passed under another lamp, and she saw a death notice on the wooden post. She didn't recognize the man, nor the name, but she noticed the date of his death, November 8. Yesterday. She didn't know what this would mean at the cemetery, whether this man's family would be holding the service there or in Sveta Nedelja. If any preparations would get underway this morning, or if the funeral were to be held in Sveti Martin at all, she didn't know. Probably the funeral would be in a few days. That didn't mean there wouldn't be another one today. However, it was early yet. The sun hadn't risen. The place

would be quiet. That was why she'd chosen to go so early. Besides other things. She didn't want to consider the other things now. She focused on the road, making sure he didn't wander into the middle, kept talking to him, encouraging him. No cars passed yet. There were some lights on in houses and she saw someone through the window of a barn pitchforking hay. Otherwise, no sign of life.

The trip to the cemetery wasn't long, not more than three kilometres, so she was sure he could make it. He'd biked that distance and more each day all summer. There was only that one hill from Molvice that waited for them. They were almost there. It was steep and impossible to ride so when they got to the foot of it, she told him to get off his bike and push it instead. She knew he was going to complain.

"This is hard, Mama! Why are we going here?"

"You can do it," she told him. "You have strong legs. Show me how strong you are."

Herself, she could feel the thing coming over her again as she reached the top of the hill ahead of Neven, the familiar feeling that poured through her, burned and tingled the surface of her body during one of its moods, its wicked returns, which she couldn't ward off on her own. The first signs of it coming were there. She recognized it, distinguished it from the tiredness of climbing the hill. It washed over her, as inevitable as an anesthetic before an operation, uninvited, like a stranger to her home. She would take something for it later, when the boy wasn't looking; she knew she had to keep the thing in balance, keep herself together the rest of the day.

Once at the top they rested. The cemetery in Sveti Martin wasn't far now. Another few minutes along the crest of the hill, then down into the next valley; she couldn't exactly remember because she had only been there once, six years ago.

She got Neven to climb onto his bike again and soon they were spinning down a hill where, to their left, the valley from which they had just ascended was covered by a cold grey fog. The orange of the tiled roofs was hardly discernible. Thin strands of smoke from chimneys rose wispily and became part of the fog. She could smell the smoke, hear the chopping of wood somewhere.

A few metres farther on, by a bus stop, a fat woman in a shawl holding a bag watched them go past. Her mouth opened when she saw them. She seemed about to say something, then stopped herself. *That's right, old woman, what business is it of yours?* thought Maja. The woman was the first person who had seen them. Maja was certain the lady didn't know them. Maja certainly didn't recognize her. She wasn't worried because the bus would soon take the woman far enough from here and she wouldn't affect their plans.

Five minutes later they came to the turn-off for the cemetery. There was an ochre-coloured chapel at the entry with a statue of Mary holding a baby Jesus behind a glass door. Maja didn't believe in any of it but crossed herself as they passed. The road turned to gravel. She could hear the gravel under their tires. Neven was tired; she could see him weave left and right. He had done well to get here. So well. She was proud of how well he had done; she couldn't have asked him to do more.

The gate to the cemetery was up ahead. She led Neven in by the hand. The cemetery was positioned on an elevated point of land so that they could see, once they stepped inside, the valley around with its string of grey road and terracotta roofs. The fog from earlier had started to dissipate. The sun was starting to come into the day. No one was around.

Part of the cemetery was a fertility of untended graves and dead knee-high grass. Some of the graves had headstones of marble or granite, but many had wooden crosses with the names of the dead nailed on a piece of tin. Leading Neven by the hand, she walked back and forth down the rows of graves. Somewhere near the bottom end, that much she remembered. After ten minutes she found it. A small wooden tablet among dead weeds and grass, leaning back slightly from the stress of the earth, but otherwise intact. The name was carved into the wood, "Višnja Lončarić." A finial on each corner was in the form of a flower.

"What is this, Mama?" Neven asked.

"This is your grandmother's grave," Maja told him.

"What's a grave?" he asked.

"It's where we go when we die."

"Oh," he said. His eyes looked up at her. The early morning light lit his eyes now, grey-green, shining like glass. She could tell by his expression that he didn't quite understand her.

"Here," she said, "help me with these weeds."

So, they began to clear the grave of the dead weeds and grass, piling them in the narrow space between the plots. No one had visited the grave for a few years, it seemed. And because Maja's grandmother was dead now, and the

grandfather who had purchased this plot was long dead, there was no one left to come as far as she knew. Her mother's partner, a man considerably older than her who had taken her in and had loved her from all Maja could tell, though she knew almost nothing about their relationship other than his steadfast existence in her life, whom her mother always mentioned when she visited Maja at her step-parents' house once a year, must be dead as well. Otherwise, Maja thought, he would have tended to the grave. Maja came to this conclusion when she remembered the man's face at her mother's funeral. Etched on it were the marks of deep pain that Maja could only wonder at, so different from her own lack of feeling as the woman who was her mother was lowered into the ground. It only occurred to Maja now that the man who had been her mother's partner had paid for the funeral. Where else would the money have come from? Now she couldn't even remember his name. She only remembered his deeply engraved face full of feeling — pity or even horror — a haunting dismay like that of a parent who has lost a child. No one consoled him; there were few mourners there other than the two of them, Maja's foster parents, an elderly aunt, the priest, and two workers with spades who stood at a distance waiting to finish the job. She had said little to him, couldn't even remember what she had said, wanted to leave, get out of this situation because she was embarrassed for having no feeling. That was the last she saw of him.

Now here she was, all these years later, on this day of all days, coming to her mother's grave and doing the work of the man who had loved her once.

Maja took a last look at the grave, the hills around, then led Neven by the hand out of the cemetery, past the bikes they had left in the grass under the trees, and down to the bus stop to wait for the bus that would take them to the city.

— 4 —

Maja's next relationship was with the son of Yugoslav *Gastarbeiter* who had moved out of the country in the 1970s but still owned a house in the area that they visited during the summer. That was how she first met Ivek Deak. She'd gone to a dance with her next-door neighbour girlfriend, Marina, and this Ivek, back in the country for the summer, had seen Maja sitting at a table and had approached her and asked her to dance.

With his round silver glasses and laconic phrasing, the words at first having to be tugged out of him as though he were very shy, he seemed a harmless intellectual, or at least a studious, straightlaced boy, the opposite of the young guys his age who were just off to the military or back from the military. He was very polite. However, he did steal a moment for himself, or so she suspected, when he pressed himself against her while dancing and pulled her to him with his hand on her lower back, too far down her lower back. She had a temper, as everyone who knew her knew, and she shoved him away and returned angrily to the table. Ivek followed her, sat beside them again, affecting such sincere confusion and miscomprehension that she began to believe him. He had a sweet smile when he wanted to smile, which amplified his normally under-expressive

face so that he was charming and apologetic without ever admitting verbally he had done anything wrong. Maja didn't know him well enough to doubt his sincerity, and Marina kept whispering into her ear, "He's cute" and "He's so nice." Maja's natural, first reaction became subsumed under his presence, the halation around his person and character that hid him from her for the first few weeks.

It was just the two of them during that period. His parents were far off in Germany, still working before their vacation back home, and his old grandmother who still lived in the house, kept mainly to herself. He had no job and still lived off his parents (he was twenty-six at the time). At first Maja was grateful the parents were out of the picture, at least for now, because she still had a stinging memory of the interference and contempt of Johnny's father and the boy's weakness, just because she'd been raised by the Berkovići. Her worry about Ivek's parents was misplaced, it turned out, because their reaction to her was the opposite of Johnny's father's. They were oblivious about the Berkovići, didn't ask about her family except in vague terms. They were so glad, they said, that Maja had come into their son's life. She was exactly what their son needed, and she had arrived just at the right moment. It was perfect timing for him. The mother couldn't keep her hands off Maja at the start, kept touching her hair and holding her hands as they talked. This was the second or third time Maja met the parents at the house after they'd arrived for their yearly holiday.

Ivek was the only man who ever paid Maja for sex. After only three days, he was pressuring her to go all the way.

What was she waiting for, he asked. Didn't she see the connection they had? "Look, I can see that you're proper. You're trying to be proper. You're not one of these sluts from around here. I know that. But don't you see how nice it could be? Just imagine. Just imagine the feeling. We can try just a little. Let's try it just a little, we don't have to do it for very long. And you're so beautiful. I wouldn't ask you if you weren't so beautiful."

Maja laughed at him for how hard he was trying. There was a boyish desperation she found cute and charming, because he looked like such a harmless nerd with his silver glasses. She could tell he was playing a role on purpose, which made the whole thing a kind of game. But what she liked in his words, she was convinced, was honestly held. He believed them. She *was* beautiful, and she wasn't one of those sluts around here who would go with guys in the army who had arrived from the other republics and weren't sticking around.

Maja tossed him a bone those early days by taking him in the hand and massaging him until he came against the wall of the building they were in. It was the same building where she'd been with Johnny — the abandoned sawmill across the street from her foster parents' house, which had broken windows and no doors anymore and was empty inside now and the blackened walls in one corner spray-painted by someone. When he was finished, head pressed against her neck, his breathing began to wane. He got a hold of himself and pulled back. He did so abruptly, as though offended. Through the broken window, the street-lamp shone on his now cold and expressionless face.

He zipped himself up. He reached inside his wallet. "Here," he said, handing her a thousand-dinar bill. "This is for you. Just a gift. I wanted to give it to you earlier, but I forgot. I wanted you to buy yourself something nice. Here. Take it."

Maja looked at the bill. It hung down limply from his hand where it had been folded. She knew, but didn't see in the half-light, the image on the front side of the bill, the peasant woman in a kerchief, the wheat and corn. For a second, she did nothing. Then she slapped his hand away. Ivek shoved the bill into her jean pocket. Then he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her out of the building.

Later that summer, two years since she'd been with Johnny, Ivek Deak dared Maja to steal a package of chewing gum from the corner store in the village, just to slip it into her pocket and walk out. He hadn't arrived at the dare out of the blue, an idea he'd just hit on one afternoon, but after a number of other heists and larks, like knocking on the door of one old woman's house and then running off, or opening the gate of someone's yard to let the chickens and turkeys out into the road, which seemed stupid to her at the time, but fun and harmless also. This chewing gum thing was an escalation and put her on the spot for the first time after having been a participant observer up to then. His small brown eyes looked at her from behind his round steel glasses, gauging her reaction. She'd laughed at him at first, told him he was a fool, mainly because she thought he was joking. But he wasn't joking, or rather, the conspiratorial jokiness he'd shown before

was now mixed in with a hardness she couldn't quite get the measure of.

"It will be a thrill. And it's such a small thing. No one will miss it. Do it for me, Maja. More importantly, do it for yourself! Don't be a fool who pays for a useless chewing gum."

An hour of wrangling and discussion and pleading went by. Then Maja went into the store, heart beating hard, the store crowded and no one paying her any attention, just as he'd said, and picked up a red package of something — she couldn't tell what until later — and put the package into her jean pocket and walked stone-faced out the door and then ran around the corner with Ivek beside her punching his fist in the air and letting go a barbaric yawp down the alley.

The relationship with Ivek came to a head the following spring when his parents were in Germany, and he was alone in the house with the old grandmother. Ivek hadn't worked the entire time she knew him, lived off his parents' good intentions and hope that he'd eventually come around. He'd convinced them he needed more time before getting serious about a job or school. They put money into his account at Samoborska Banka.

She wanted to leave him. She'd returned to her foster parents' house, but he'd followed her in his father's car. He ended up sitting out front in the yard under the plum trees while her parents waited on him, bringing him food and wine, chatting with him as though he were their son, their son-in-law, as though Maja and him were already married or on the road to being married. That's what a good catch

he seemed to be, and how stupid she was to leave him. Couldn't she see what a mistake that was? A boy from a good family, a rich family. She could do worse.

Maja sat on a chair watching the scene happen in front of her. Half sick, half wrapped up in the enthusiasm of the two old people. She wasn't sure anymore of the reasons she'd left him in the first place and began to doubt herself. Maybe she'd made it all up. Everything was fine. The problem was with her, not him. That was how, later that day, she found herself in the car with him driving back to his parents' house, even at one point holding his right hand, but feeling weirdly disconnected from herself, feeling that it wasn't her driving with him, just a part of her, the other part somewhere else, back at the old house, even if she knew the people there weren't exactly in her corner, not on purpose exactly, but out of ignorance and naïveté.

But that same evening things changed again. Ivek didn't want her to go to university in Zagreb. She'd applied to the Academy of Dramatic Art in film and somehow was accepted. She had done well in high school in disciplines like English and art despite her upbringing with illiterate parents, had applied casually on the encouragement of a teacher, but had no especial drive one way or another when it came to school. But on this evening, after the events of the afternoon, a vague future of classes at university crystallized for her into a more solid or confirmed reality and direction. Ivek noticed the difference immediately.

He said, "What is this about university? Since when were you so keen about that?"

“What do you know,” she answered. “I’ve always enjoyed movies, ever since I was a little girl.”

“You don’t care about school. You know it’s true. And now suddenly you pretend you do. You don’t have the discipline. You’re going to do poorly. You’re going to fail; I have no doubt.” He always could hit the weak spot with her, sensed it like a bloodhound. She had never been a particularly good student, in the sense of a dedicated and disciplined one. She’d told him that at one point, and now he was using her own words against her. He pushed his face towards her, a smirk of derision on his mouth, which made him ugly, made the otherwise handsome face ugly; it was inside him the ugliness, she thought, and his physical features couldn’t stop it from coming out.

“Fail, fail, fail!”

“Shut up, you idiot, you should see how you look,” she yelled.

He was familiar with that escalation in her voice. He pulled back and tried a different tack. His voice softened; he spoke quietly, stepped closer to her conspiratorially.

“You know we had plans. We were going to go to Germany with my parents. You know how much they like you. You could get work. With your working we could get a place. This university stuff is just talk. It’s not for you. You’re not made for that. That intellectual stuff. What do you care about the mind when you have this?” and he gestured with his open palm towards her body. “That’s what you are, what you’re best at, you know it’s true. You were made for using your body. That mouth, those thighs, that beautiful ass!”

He had said these things before, so his words weren't new to her, nor exactly were they a put-down, more a backhanded compliment. At some other time, when she and Ivek were new together, and when she enjoyed her own body, yes it was true, she felt praised more than dirtied. But now, here, with the afternoon at her parents' place behind her, and her sudden seeing the ugliness in his face that came from inside him, Maja came around to the other side of his words and saw them as though they'd been directed at another person, to a stranger, a person who had no value, who could be spoken to that way because she had no value to the person talking. She pushed him aside and moved towards the door. He pushed her back, placed himself back in the way, said "Where exactly are you going? We're not going to do this all over again."

"Get out of my way."

"You're going to stop now. Calm down. Just go sit over there. You'll feel better once you sit over there and calm down."

"I don't need to calm down. I need to get out of here, you idiot!"

"You're not going out of here." Then they were wrestling in front of the door. She kicked him in the groin, he slapped her face, she slapped him back, then he had her on the ground, then the gun that appeared in his right hand out of somewhere was pressed against her head, against her left temple, and he was screaming, "What are you going to do now, what are you going to do now, huh? Come on, tell me, where do you think you're going now?"

Maja stopped moving. She felt cold terror course through her body, followed almost immediately by an opposite sensation of rage, pouring up from somewhere inside her, which made her look at him in the face, tears rolling down her cheeks, and say, hiss, “Go ahead you bastard, you cowardly dirty bastard, go do it, let’s see you do it. You don’t have the courage because you’re a coward, you’re just a fucking pussy.” With her left hand she reached between his legs and squeezed him fiercely, which made him cry out sharply and roll off her and lie back on the floor, his arm over his eyes, whimpering. The gun lay on the floor. Maja got up, stepped over him and went out the door.

— 5 —

They sat in the bus on the road to the city. Outwardly she tried to be calm for Neven, but inwardly her heart beat a mad, hard rhythm.

A woman had watched them enter the bus. When they had found a seat a few rows down, she had bent over to her neighbour and whispered something. In his seat, Neven swung his feet back and forth, then snuggled up against Maja, sleepy. There was not much time left. They weren’t going to the city, not exactly, but to a new business section where her bank was located, where the bank she had worked at was located. Had worked until two weeks ago, Friday. She still had a duplicate key in her right jean pocket.

But the key wasn’t the reason the men had come by yesterday afternoon. A cold frisson came back to her on

remembering the sight of the vehicle parked outside the gate. The tall men in black stepping out. The memory of her and Neven lying on the floor in the dark waiting for the knocking to stop. The loud voices. The pounding of her heart.

The bus was approaching the bridge over the Sava. Neven was asleep against her. The woman at the front of the bus continued to watch them. When they reached the river, Maja looked to her right at the sand banks where in the summer the fishermen sat on their chairs waiting for a catch. Now there was no one and the river looked grey and muddy. The bus crossed the bridge. Their stop was approaching, so she nudged Neven to wake him. He woke up, looked up at her and smiled, a sweet smile. It cracked her open inside, his smile. Her hands trembled and she took hold of his mittened hand to calm the trembling. She was sweating but was cold and clammy at the same time.

The woman who had watched them step onto the bus, a non-descript woman in a dark kerchief holding a bag, got up then and came towards them. Even though she'd been sitting near the front of the bus, on one of those seats that face the aisle rather than the front of the bus, she was exiting through the back door. Those were the rules for people getting off, Maja knew, but the woman's decision seemed calculated. Maja knew they'd caught the woman's attention, that she was going to stop, maybe even say something. *Leave, old woman*, Maja thought, *just leave us*. But on her trip to the back, while the bus was still moving, the woman stopped beside Maja, who was sitting in the aisle seat, stopped and put her left hand on Maja's shoulder and

looked down at her with a serious expression. The light of the day was fading, so the woman's eyes looked black, looked somehow into Maja's soul. Then the woman lifted her hand from Maja's shoulder and continued to the rear of the bus. The touch was light and brief, but comforting and emphatic, lingering after she'd already moved down the aisle and stepped through the open door and out into the street.

"What's wrong, Mama?" Neven asked. He was gazing up at her.

The bus lurched forward and started moving again. Maja pulled him up by the hand and they moved to the exit.

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After the incident with Ivek and the gun, the fog that settled over Maja's mind lasted for weeks, through empty days during which she didn't do much but watch TV and keep the fire burning in the kitchen and help her mother with odd chores.

When Ivek came again, knocking loudly on the door, she warned her parents with hissing words to ignore him, not to open the door, never to open the door again to him, as she sat in the dark of the bedroom waiting for him to be gone.

During this period, she also spent time with Marina. They went for walks in the hills. They did a lot of talking; Marina was trying to convince Maja to start again, her mind always seeming to circle around the men she knew.

There was a party coming up at so and so's place; she mentioned a name of someone. Marina knew a lot of guys. It wasn't something she was ashamed of or kept secret. She told Maja everything, mostly everything. She'd been with fifty guys by the time she was eighteen. Now she was working at a nightclub near the highway, in some capacity or other. Maja never asked what that capacity was. Maja was going to get onto that subject, the direction the girl's life was going, but she was still managing her own situation, was still lost in it. The conversations the two of them had as they walked in the hills were centred totally on Maja, on Maja's new life, the new life she was going to have, her friend trying to help her through this period, the two of them talking as they walked in the hills above their houses.

Maja went with Marina to one of those parties at Mirko Somebody's family house, a factotum or hanger-on with a local pop singer. That was where she met Žon Birković ("John" as his name was pronounced). He was tall, black-haired, handsome. He wore a leather jacket and rode a motorbike. She'd caught his eye, obviously, because he made his way across the room through the throng of partiers and stood in front of her and Marina, not affecting shyness and under-confidence as Ivek had done that first day, but just the opposite. He seemed to know exactly who and what he was. To Maja, he looked like a parody of a Brando-ish tough guy from the fifties, though she knew that he and others like him at this stage of the new country and among his generation of young men had no clue about Brando. He was just there, Maja would learn, at the end of his professional handball career with some

team in the first division and had possessed that athlete's confidence in his body, which then came out in his personality. She, contrariwise, didn't feel good about herself, had no special comfort in her own skin, even though men as usual noticed her when she came in, as she knew they always had, maybe because of the wild black curls in combination with her pale skin and large eyes, which she knew how to close mysteriously or cruelly, cattishly. She wore no makeup at all on that night, a pale blue jean jacket and jeans, those white canvas runners with white ankle-high socks, altogether in appearance like a high-schooler anywhere in the world at the time. Maja knew from what others had told her that her default expression was a haughty affectless "Fuck you" but despite that, now she had drawn the attention of Žon from across the room.

Again, as with Ivek, Marina had whispered encouragement to Maja about the prospect, the excellent possibility, standing right in front of her, telling her "This guy is hot. He's older too. Maybe he has money." Then adding coarsely, "It looks like he has a big dick, exactly what you need now." But Maja felt a sinking feeling inside that stayed there as she and the Žon guy began talking, having to lean forward to hear each other above the music and the people. She could feel his stubble brush against her cheek. He asked her about herself; she couldn't remember any longer how much she said, how far she went into it all. Only a little later did he tell her about himself, volunteered it, because she hadn't bothered to ask. That was how she learned about the handball and how she made the connection, through the smoke and noise and her own apathy, between

him and the group of tall guys on the other side of the room. He said he didn't have a father; he'd never been part of his life. So, there was an incidental connection there. Said his mother raised him, with the help of his older sister, that he lived with them still in their large house in Galgovo. He didn't mention work, what he did now, what he was going to do. From what she could discern he was older than she was, five or so years older; in retrospect, she was conscious of that difference between them, how they must have looked standing there together, even what Žon was already processing about her, or had already divined, or thought he'd divined, this man of experience and the girl fresh out of high school, green as could be, maybe even a virgin, who knows, with some trouble in the past he could be a solution to, be the star she could hitch her wagon to.

After a while, the highball Marina had given her started to taste overly sweet and heavy, and Marina had disappeared, as had the classmate who had given them a ride in his Yugo. So there she was alone with a guy she'd just met. She put the glass down and leaned against the wall. A pain had started at the back of her head, the familiar onset of a migraine. She was planning on seeing the doctor about it. Maybe there was something she could take. Something to make her life a little easier. Even in the half-light Žon noticed the change in her. "You've gone pale. You look like you've seen a ghost," he laughed. "Come on, I can drive you home." Then had added politely, "Unless your ride is still around, I mean." Looking around, hands in the air. When no one came out of the crowd, and with no answer from Maja, he led her by the arm out of the house.

Just like that she was seated on his bike, his helmet swimming on her head, clutching his middle as he sped down the empty country roads. The night was warm, the August corn standing head-high, and a smell of cut hay all around them. When they came to Kerestinec, she pointed him down the long straightaway through big open fields and to the village of Mala Gorica that then became a winding road to her village. The thought did come to her, even as she pointed the way, that she was leading him right to the little house she'd always been ashamed of, hadn't wanted Johnny to see that first time, because she suspected he would see her differently, the family she belonged to, where she was from, though he and everyone else already knew. But now she didn't think she was abasing herself in front of this guy by showing him her home, maybe because she'd grown separate from it, or because she didn't care what he thought of it, or of her, since she would never see him again anyway, and just wanted to get home and go to sleep to escape her worsening headache.

But being dropped off there at night, which she probably didn't think through carefully enough, led to him starting to show up there at the gate. She couldn't disappear obviously, had nowhere to go; he knew where she would be, which led to him surprising her a few times so that she relented and talked to him outside on the bench under the plum trees, and then eventually, on the same bike, agreed to go with him to one of the cafés in Sveta Nedelja. Maja had zero interest in this handball guy, though she did admit to Marina, almost to make Marina feel good, not disappoint her in what she, Marina, wanted

for her, that he was good-looking, had striking slate green eyes and a nice mouth, and was tall, which she liked, was sort of securely 'there,' solid, a potential protector, which might be exactly the thing Maja needed after Ivek. And didn't he say something about his family having money, the grandfather having been a Communist Party boss in the region and their owning a house in Galgovo, and also another "weekend" place on the island of Cres, or was it Rab? The point was he didn't belong to a family of nobodies like her people here, some who couldn't even read or write, like Maja's foster parents.

So, with misgiving, Maja lurched into another relationship, in the same period when classes in the film and dramatic arts program began. As always seemed to be the case with her and school, her own intelligence was in inverse proportion to her discipline or work ethic or focus, something one or two teachers who paid attention to her over the years, who knew her life situation, pointed out to her, not always in kindly tones, tried to help her with, and which caused her to miss the first week of lectures. It was by accident that she opened the package in the mail from the university and saw the dates. Her reaction was a strange combination of dismay followed almost immediately by a familiar apathy that cancelled the first reaction. What did it matter if she missed a week? Where was this university thing going to lead anyway? The voice of her foster father came to her "You're going to hurt your brain with all this thinking." But, of course, this advice came from an illiterate peasant who was neither intelligent, nor far-seeing. Still, he was sowing in a fertile field when it came

to Maja and school. Even though she put up a pretense of disagreeing with his stupid attitude (they always argued, mostly in good fun, and she would kiss him on the cheek when they were done), she deep down fell under his influence and thought he was right after all. She would never finish, and she would never do anything with this useless degree. Plus, someone would always be better than her.

Nevertheless, Maja went to the lectures for most of the first semester, leaving the house at six every morning when it was still dark and walking the two kilometres to the bus stop, from where she took the tram to the city centre and the main building for the dramatic arts across from a park lined by plane trees. By the time she got to the first lecture, usually sitting near the back of the room, and began to warm up from the cold walk, she would nod off, pencil dropped from her hand onto the notebook, as the drowsy voice from the front of the class droned on. That first course had something to do with semiotics and the cinema and was mainly a lecture with screenings in class and in the evenings during the semester. Never having heard of semiotics before, her learning curve was steep. And having missed the first week of lectures, she had missed the introductory classes on Saussure, which she had trouble recovering from. The language, the concepts, were weirdly foreign for someone educated in the Yugoslav school system. And the professor, who droned on idiotically, drew her contempt from the start — a small pale guy with long hair and small hands in an untucked shirt and blazer, affecting some kind of bohemian intellectual style that Maja had always despised and mocked.

One of the screenings, however, the only one Maja attended because they were all scheduled at night in the city, was a series of socialist-realist films from Yugoslavia that stayed with her long after. She watched the films through the lens of her own childhood, not the lectures of the course itself. She didn't care about them. She thought the spirit of the films was lost with this false theoretical exercise. One scene especially haunted her thoughts. She even dreamed of it. It showed an Orthodox village some place, maybe in Bosnia or Montenegro, overrun by the Ottoman Turks who were harvesting boys from the village (the *devşirme* program), and sending them to the capital where they would serve in the military or, in some cases, climb the ranks of the establishment. In the scene, men on horses with sticks and swords beat back desperate screaming women who tried to stop the herding of their sons onto carts. Village dogs snapped at the legs of the horses and the men in the saddles swung their sticks at the dogs. The camera was inside the commotion at the ground level, and Maja could see arms flailing across the frame and now and then the faces of village women in distress. The scene stayed with Maja because of what it showed, not how it showed it, and she wasn't conscious of all the film stuff the professor went on about in class, the absence of what he called "extra-diegetic" material like music, which the scene and the film in general lacked; she was just inside the moment of it. Watching that scene highlighted her basic problem with and distance from the analytical material she had to learn and write about and be interested in in this film and drama program. How she saw the scene and

how she was supposed to see the scene were separated by a big chasm, across which there was no bridge for her.

The “philosophical” problem, and the lack of work motivation, were combined with the pressure of this new thing with Žon. Every day, after coming home from the city, after the same tram and bus rides, the same walk along village roads, tired, with only a bun and a hot tea in her stomach all day, he showed up at the house, first on the bike, then with the colder weather in a ten-year-old black BMW that had belonged to his father and had been passed onto him. He never came inside. He sat in the car waiting for her. Once or twice he had spoken to her parents. That was when he had come on the bike and one of them had left the house or passed through the yard doing something. Her foster mother’s curiosity about him made her pop out and stand there and yell something stupid about the weather, inviting him once to sit on the bench under the plum trees where Ivek himself had sat not long ago. Žon had sat there talking to her mother politely, smiling and charming as he could be, and she, Maja’s mother, became sycophantic as she tended to be with strangers, especially those of a different class, as though Žon were Josip Broz himself.

But his contact with her parents had been limited to those few times. She had said, “You don’t have to come in. I’ll come out when I see you.” From then on, he waited on the bike or, later in the fall, in the black BMW. When he arrived he always honked once, then waited for her — not long, because she’d watched for him out the front window and saw him arrive through the screen of plum trees and

the grape trellis on the side of the house, watched for him because she didn't want him to wait too long and then maybe come to the door and come inside. He would be waiting for her when he arrived in the BMW, listening to music on the radio or on the cassette, and in the first few weeks, turn to her as she sat down and compliment her about her appearance ("You have incredible hair, did you know that?"), and smile, his eyes looking into hers, making contact with hers. He was very good at that, making you feel you were the most important person in the world. That was a way he had. And when he looked at her like that, she felt for a moment as though she *were* the most important person in the world. The experience made her feel warm. She smiled back. That was a way she had, too. She didn't smile much; people told her she looked angry or stern most of the time, so when she did smile people took note. It made an impression. She was prettier when she smiled, one of her teachers had told her. But now in the car with him, even as he looked directly at her before driving off and smiling at her in that "you are the centre of the world" way, the thought arrived to her that it was all just a show. He did this with everyone; it was fraudulent, and it wasn't going to last. She had already observed him with his friends when they came to the bar, or when he talked to the bargirl. That same smile. It drew people to him. She guessed he had learned early in his life that it made people like him. They were on his side from the beginning. He would come in and wave a cassette to the bargirl and she would take out what was already playing and replace it with his, that sort of little

thing. And once he had won you over, it was hard to extricate yourself. That was just how it was with people generally, Maja thought. You don't want to be unpleasant or start something unpleasant, even disagree about something, when you and the other person were already on a friendly basis.

"Hi there," he said when she'd sat down and closed the door.

"Hi there back at you," she said. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"Man, you have incredible hair," he marvelled.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, but warming to his compliment.

"The curls are incredible, and your eyes."

"You're such a charmer, aren't you? I bet you do this with all the girls."

"No, just you."

"Sure, only me," laughing. "Just stop. I'm not a fool you know," but still warmed by his compliments.

The smile fell from his face. His feelings seemed to be hurt.

"Where are we going, then?" she asked, redirecting the conversation. Trying to help him get back his mood.

"Some of the boys are in Sveta Nedelja," he told her. "I thought we'd meet them there."

The boys were the group of young men she'd first seen at the party. The handball group he kept in touch with, though none of them played any longer. They were cut from the same cloth, tall and lean with crew cuts. Handsome all of them, handling the banter of the locker room

deftly, a skill that came from years of practice sharing each other's backstories, knowing the codes. Maja was on the outside of it all, like some of the other girls, unless they'd been around long enough, were partnered up long enough to know the stories and the history. Maja wasn't sure there was a single one she could say that about. One of Žon's friends was a guy called Marko, a bullnecked fellow, shorter than the others and going to fat now, but smart actually, studying engineering, who was polite to Maja, almost exaggeratedly so, pulling out a chair for her when she would arrive as though she were royalty (and so she wasn't sure he wasn't joking with her and the others slyly). But he seemed sincere, and he made her feel welcome.

"Ahhh, the beautiful Maja has arrived. How did you end up with someone like this?" he'd say, flinging his arm out in Žon's direction. "Watch yourself. If he does anything wrong, let me know. I'll deal with him like I've always dealt with him."

He was serious, his face was serious, but Žon was smiling and they hugged each other, laughing. From what Maja saw, Marko was the only one who didn't smoke. And he was the joker of the group. He'd once leaped onto the bar and aped a gorilla walk along its length, knocking glasses onto the floor, which the girl had to sweep up (Maja thought he handed the girl money at the evening's end to cover the damage).

If he was the joker of the group, there was no mistake that Žon was its centre. They all gravitated to him. When he said something, they listened. He had a good voice,

a nice tenor, Maja thought, and he usually had an opinion about whatever they were discussing. The more she heard, the more Maja thought he wasn't intelligent so much as he was shrewd. It wasn't that he was slow, no, but he wasn't the smartest either, not from her point of view, being intelligent herself and wickedly cynical of the low intelligence of others. The gravitas with which he opined on politics, which admittedly she knew nothing about, what the HDZ — the Croatian Democratic Union — were doing, how Franjo Tuđman was going to handle the Krajina Serbs, wasn't especially insightful. But no one seemed to notice. The others gravitated to him. He was handsome; that was part of it. He could be fun to be around. Old people liked him, old ladies especially. Even dogs liked him. He had a way with dogs. He had two of them at home, or at least, his mother did, two black labs that bounded around the yard that was closed off by an iron gate, and that he took on walks along the road.

That was really the only thing they had in common, Maja decided. This love of dogs, of animals. From the time she was a little girl she'd had pets. When she was very young she had adopted one of the chicks from the cardboard box of thirty or so that had been in the house under a lamp, and had cared for it during the summer until it had begun following her around the yard, her foster mother letting her be — she was just a child — but mocking her to the neighbours. No one around there thought of animals like Maja did. Later, in the fall, when her chicken, along with all the other chickens, just disappeared, the three-year-old Maja was inconsolable for

days. Then there were the cats she befriended or took care of, like the orange one she called Ginger who showed up from nowhere as a kitten, maybe from another farm, and whom she fed and even brought secretly to bed, though her mother eventually found out and threw it outside and thrashed Maja with a branch. She had the orange cat for five years until it disappeared one day and never returned. Maja suspected, but could never prove, that her mother had poisoned it with the rat poison she sprinkled around the barn and in the attic, poisoned it accidentally, and dispatched of it when she discovered it in the yard before Maja saw it. Then Maja had a dog, a mongrel with what might have been German shepherd in it that her father had found one morning as a pup on the side of the road, the one that he had a soft spot for and that Maja loved too, a female she called Renata who bonded with Maja like no dog had before, as far as her mother was concerned. Her mother was indifferent to these pets, but became amazed at the magic Maja possessed, spoke about it to the neighbours, boasted about it, even though she didn't care about the dog itself and resented the scraps they had to give up to feed it. Renata lived with them for six years until she too, one day, became bloated and threw up blood, which Maja, just about to finish high school, blamed on her mother and her careless strewing of the poison around the place. They found it in the yard one day, in its last hours, in a quiet corner, and Maja had tried to ease its pain as best she could by bringing it water and a blanket, lying beside it and stroking its head. The dog died a few hours later.

So this affection for animals was the one wholly redeeming aspect of Žon's character, Maja decided. His solidity of presence, his big body and handsome face, those features, yes, were also somewhat redeeming aspects. Or what she liked or found acceptable. But beyond that, he was another unexceptional guy of his generation and circle whom she just happened to be involved with, to whom she developed gradually an attachment. It was an attachment that she knew, especially in clear-seeing moments, was tenuous and not well-considered on her part, but that became established in her life, seemingly permanently embedded within it. She even became used to those evenings at the bars. They took over her life for a while. She would come home so late that she couldn't manage to wake in time for the bus to the city and her classes the next morning. Towards the end of the semester, she stopped going altogether. Almost every evening followed the same pattern as the first, his holding court with the boys, getting progressively drunker as she sat with one of the girls and had to shout over the music to be heard until she started to tire of it all — the noise and the smoke and just the general situation. She finally got him out of there, yelling at him to get off his ass and take her home, which he finally agreed to do, but not before they did it in the back seat of the car in the hills some place because that was what he wanted, what he expected from her, so that when she came home she had to washed him out of her and then wash the smoke out of her hair before she could finally go to sleep.

A perfect storm of bad luck blew through her life around Christmas when she learned she was pregnant

and her foster father discovered he had cancer. The second discovery certainly influenced her decision about the first. In fact, she learned of his illness before she found out she was pregnant. She decided to have the baby because the idea of an abortion at the same time as the impending death of her father, as the cancer began to waste his body day by day, as he lay on the couch in the kitchen coughing up blood, seemingly a healthy man only weeks before, was too grotesque. For Maja, two deaths would be too much to bear. And the memory of her abortion at sixteen was still with her. She told Žon the news and told him what she was going to do, without expecting him to agree or influence her decision one way or the other, his response muted at first and then surprisingly positive, pleasantly agreeable, in fact. After a stunned pause, he suggested that she should come to live with him in his mother's house in Galgovo. There was room there for her and the baby. His mother would for sure welcome the possibility since for years she had wanted her son to settle down and begin a family and stop the life he was living, the life of a wild bachelor. Now this new child would surely produce this reformation.

Two months to the day after her father died, lying on the couch in the kitchen and coughing up the last bloody chunks of his lungs on her as she cradled his head in her lap, she gave birth in the hospital in Zagreb. With one life expiring, another came to be. So she called him Neven. An everlasting flower. A marigold.

The feeling of the woman's hand on her shoulder was still with her as they exited the bus. They stepped onto the street and the bus trundled off. No one was around. It was still early.

On the last stage of their journey to the city, she remembered another trip a few months ago at this early time of the day. She had gone to meet the man for whom she had made the duplicate key. She had stood waiting for him near the square in Samobor, in the alley leading to the market, the market empty of people and produce and the nearby stalls with the clothing shut as well because it was Sunday. He was a slim man with a scar running down one side of his gaunt cheek. His eyes were dark, and his nose bore the signs of an old fracture. From his greasy black jacket and torn pants, the sole of his right boot that was coming apart from the leather, she could tell he was poor, which is why no doubt he had slid a narrow slab of smoked bacon into the folds of his oversized black jacket and slipped out of the grocery store that was across from the bank where Maja had worked, and where she'd gone for coffee during her lunch break. No one else had seen him and, in those days, there were no security cameras in stores anywhere. She followed him out onto the sidewalk as he walked around the corner of the building and down the street. He whirled around angrily to face her when she spoke, but looked scared also, she could tell. "What do you have there?" she asked. She wasn't even sure why she addressed

him; it might have been better had she just let him go, but she made the decision to talk to him, which meant that she was accusing him with her question, threatening him even, before she had any time to unravel the consequences of her words or the danger to herself if there was any danger in the middle of the street in the middle of the day, or before she thought through any other human aspects of the situation, his obvious poverty or possible shame or fear and her superiority and power over him. It was a decision she might not have made had she gone over these things. Sometimes she was impetuous. This was especially true of her mouth more than it was of her actions, though the relationship with Žon, her caving into his desires in the back seat of the car, were examples of rashness as well. The thin man stared at her for a moment before she smiled and told him his secret was safe with her, and she wouldn't in any case have reported him — what was this store to her anyway — and he could count on her discretion. He just looked at her. His eyes were dark, and she thought she could see her own face reflected in them, a curve of roofs, a tiny whorl of cloud schooling on the wind. She thought he knew he could trust her. They had an unspoken understanding immediately, which was never voiced or identified; in fact, he hardly said a word throughout the time she knew him, and their trust came after her very first words outside the store when she had caught him stealing.

Over the next few months, if she saw him again outside the store on one of her lunch breaks, she handed him change, whatever she had at hand, with the expectation that he would buy himself a *perec* or some other snack,

something. She had no idea what he did with the money because she never saw him go directly into the store afterwards, and in any case, she was already returning to the bank when he perhaps did. She also never considered whether he lived alone or had a family. Her relationship was solely with him, because that other part of him, if it existed, was separate. And so this is why a year later, when she knew there was no other way, when things had taken such a turn, she decided to slip him the duplicate key with directions about where he could find the envelope she had left behind in the afternoon before the bank's closing under the cushion of the chair of the clerk next to her. He had arrived in the night when it was still dark with the mop and pail as cover and then had slipped the envelope into his jacket pocket and had left the building.

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After the funeral of her father, a month before she gave birth, Maja moved into the house belonging to Žon's mother. The mother, a stout middle-aged woman with dyed auburn hair and an overbearing manner, whom Maja had never met before since Žon had never introduced her to his family, never brought her home to meet them, said to her, "Welcome to our house. Of course, this is not what I dreamed for my son, you understand, but now that you are here, in this condition, let me tell you, let me be very clear, that I will do anything for his child, of that you can be sure." Žon's sister, a sloe-eyed woman of thirty with a sluggish, syrupy way of talking, parroted her mother's

words, adding, “Yes, we will do everything we can for this child.” This was Maja’s introduction to the house and the people in it the day she arrived. The dynamic between the two women, which Maja thought she understood immediately — the mother leading and the daughter dutifully following — turned in fact to be reversed, as Maja gleaned from observing the younger woman on one occasion speak quiet hissing words to her mother before Maja stepped into the room, her stockinged footsteps on the tiled floor not loud enough for them to hear her. She heard snatches of the sister’s words, low and intense, cajoling, “Have you even seen the house, have you, do you know anything at all about it, about them? *Do you?*” then breaking off when she saw Maja coming in. With these few interactions, Maja sensed all the old biases against the family she had inherited, and attitudes about herself, now wrapped up into familiar attitudes about women like her, even though she was with their beloved son and brother, though they slandered him too, especially the mother, calling him more than once in the snippets Maja heard through the walls, a fool and skirt-chaser who now, finally, got himself into trouble, something she had been warning him of for years.

For his part, Žon continued as though nothing had changed. He went out with the boys every night or every second night, leaving her behind as he drove off in the black BMW, driving to the same cafés she was familiar with, but also to ones in neighbouring villages and to ones in the city, which made him come home in the middle of the night, smelling of the bars, the cigarettes and the liquor, and some other foreign smells later on that she couldn’t

place at first, all of which got into the sheets and smelled up the room horribly so that she had to wash them and open the windows even in the winter, which became a cause of more strife and tension in the house between her and the women. With her he was still the same, still showered praise on her for her looks, her new appearance, her glowing appearance in pregnancy, admiring her pink hue of face and her now even more beautiful breasts which he touched with a perfunctory pass of the hand. But the words she had doubted at first, which secretly gave her pleasure before, were now more formulaic than they were sincere; this she had a sharp sense of, and it surprised her that it bothered her. He was drifting away, even as they were supposed to be starting some kind of life together. Never had they, of course, sat down for a serious discussion about their future life. It was impossible with him; he was still too immature. Too much the handball player who liked his freedoms. He had never got beyond that stage. But she was getting used to the idea of the two of them. She had started to count on a life with him, possibly even in this house, if it came to that, if she could make peace with the women. But now that he was drifting from her, leaving every night or every second night and returning smelling of the cigarettes and the booze and possibly the women he was meeting on the sly, though she had no practical evidence of it, just her growing suspicions. She started to challenge him. Tore a strip off him before he left, sometimes when he came back, if she woke up to him arriving unable to walk straight with the smells on him, the stench of the bars on him, tore a strip off of him

even in the night, her voice rising, not caring whether she woke anyone, or whether during the day her voice carried outside the house because it was spring then and the windows were open.

“What kind of a man are you? What am I even saying? You’re not a man at all, not a real man, not like Marko, not someone who knows his responsibilities, who understands what it means to be a real man, not a boy like you, a teenager who lives only for himself, cares only for himself, empty and superficial, with not much going for him. You don’t have much going for you, you know that, not really. You’re a failure at everything you have done, even the handball you weren’t so good at. You would still be playing if you were. And when you have a chance to be a real man, you squander it with this behaviour, by leaving me and your child. This isn’t going to go on forever. I’m not going to let it happen. I don’t care if I go back in shame. I don’t care. Think about that. Think about what you are doing, you idiot!!”

Some variant of this conversation, this criticism of him, as he was about to leave the house or when he came home in the middle of the night or even the next morning, loud enough for everyone to hear, occurred over and over again, and always with the same result. His attempts to mollify her took much the same form each time — some calming words, the assurance he was wholly committed to her, or some excuses, the need to go out this time because he was meeting so and so and had a business arrangement that had to be dealt with, something, followed finally at the end by him shouting back at her, telling her to leave

him the fuck alone, no one controlled him let alone her, his hands thrown up in the air as he turned violently away from her and left the house, the door slamming shut behind him and the BMW revving loudly and then fading in the distance.

When she gave birth at three in the morning on a hot night in the middle of August, he was nowhere to be found. Swinging between dismay and anger, she stewed for hours in the hospital bed through the waves of her labour. She vowed that once she was able, no matter what the costs to herself, she would leave him. Even the mother sided with her, calling him an idiot, even at one point taking Maja by the hand. She would have a talk with him, the fool, she would definitely talk to him. The sister was at the hospital too, for a time, pacing back and forth outside her room and peering in slyly from time to time to look at her. At the end, after the sudden episiotomy with the razor that caused Maja to shriek, after they sewed her up and brought the swaddled bundle to her and she was able to see her son's face for the first time, all the bad feelings from before washed away from her, fell from her as though they had happened to someone else, and she was a new person, a mother now, and the things from before that had seemed so important had all been rearranged in a different order, positioned lower on her scale of importance.

When Žon showed up at the hospital the next day before she was released, arriving with a hangdog expression, asking her to forgive him for not having been there the day before at the moment of his son's birth, stroking her hair, so peacefully talking to her that she couldn't doubt

his sincerity, and when he was so attentive in the days that followed, bringing her what she needed, changing the baby's diapers, and staying home for three straight days, she relented a little in her convictions to leave him as soon as she was able to do so. She imagined again a sort of life with him and the child. She imagined a life that was normal and unexceptional, but stable for her and her son. She would have a family supporting her even if they were strange, the sister a crazy bitch to be honest, but she would finally have a family she had never really had before, and all the feelings she imagined that went along with that, the end of shame and embarrassment about where she lived and who she was.

But no sooner had she allowed herself these thoughts, these fancies of a life to come, than he reverted, recidivist that he was, to his old ways. He was gone for five straight evenings. Then he started taking the baby with him. Without her being aware of it the first time, he took Neven from the crib as she was napping and disappeared with him in the car somewhere — to Marko's he said when he came back, except that the blankets smelled of smoke and Neven's wispy blond hair smelled of smoke and his eyes seemed to be watering, which turned her into a rage because she assumed he had taken him to some bar to show him off, which she could entirely imagine knowing his character, his need to show off and be the centre of things, showing the baby as though he were a trophy. He drove off with Neven again a few weeks later, without her once more, ignoring her shouts and warding her off and promising to be back in an hour, putting Neven in his

basket and pulling the back seatbelt across it in a makeshift way and then driving off.

Two hours later she got a call on the house's mainline from Marko's girlfriend that Žon had driven off without Neven, who was still in his basket at the café. It was lucky they were still there. They thought Žon had gone into the wc, but after ten minutes they realized he had left, that his car was no longer in the lot. Then Maja got a second call telling her he had returned, a little shamefaced and laughing and drunk of course, said he had been so wrapped up in the business he had to attend to, the place where he was going and the person he was meeting – the girlfriend didn't say whom – that he had just forgotten the baby. It was a mistake anyone could make, he said. The girlfriend made sure to tell Maja this. She thought it her duty. He was on his way back now and would surely be there soon. But she thought Maja should know. If there was anything she could do, just call her. That mistake of his sent Maja into a frenzy when he came home, the baby squalling from hunger, Maja holding him close to her, rocking him back and forth to calm him, even as she screamed at Žon, causing the baby to shriek at the top of his lungs, the two other women joining with Maja for the first time in condemning him.

"What kind of father are you?" Maja shouted. "What kind of a man are you? How could you forget your child? You've just confirmed everything I thought about you. I thought I could change you. I thought maybe there was some decency in you, but there is no decency in you. You're a piece of shit. A complete piece of garbage. And

where were you going that you left your child behind? Who were you going to see that was so important? Why aren't you answering, huh? You always have something to say. Why aren't you answering, you coward?"

Only later when she examined Neven more closely did she notice a stain on the back of his pajamas and then a pool of what was coffee in the bottom of the bassinet and pink burn marks on his back, which led her to confront Žon all over again, screaming at him with Neven in her arms, and the women joining in, and Žon denying knowledge of any of it.

Two days later, despite the seeming détente between her and the women, something happened that returned the dynamics in the house right back to where they had been before. Neven had been unsettled and fussy most of the afternoon, even after he'd breastfed and slept, alternating for hours between whimpering and crying. Nothing Maja did made a difference. She had come from upstairs down to the kitchen. The two women hovered over her and the baby, trying to distract him with stuffed toys and rattles and odd cooing noises, idiotically repeating them to no effect, leaning over Maja as she held him close and as he looked up at them with bafflement. Without warning, the mother snatched Neven from Maja's arms and walked with him out of the kitchen and into the living room, saying loudly, not trying to lower her voice, "Grandma is here, grandma is finally here. Now everything will be fine. You can stop crying now. Grandma is here to make it all better." Maja sat in her chair in the kitchen while the two women in the other room tried to calm her boy, cooing

and burbling over him, in between which were snatches of the mother's remarks again, "Grandma is here now, my boy, my dear boy, grandma is here now my boy, grandma will make it all better, make it all better, oh yes, make it better, who is the one to make it better?" Maja felt a hot flash rise to her head, a strange waspish prickling inside her temples. She felt separated and distant from what was happening and felt that even though the women were in the next room they might as well have been in another country or in a separate dimension. The boy, who was her own boy, had been taken from her and transported into another dimension. That was the feeling she had. For a second or two it was not Maja herself who got up out of the chair but another woman entirely, another person she observed stand up and walk into the living room where the women had the baby, observe them for a minute until she reached down and wrested the baby from the old woman's arms and cradled him against herself and went with him to her room upstairs.

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They were approaching the bank. It was still early so no one was yet on the streets. Maja was leading Neven along the sidewalk towards the building, a hundred metres farther on, still holding his mittened hand. It helped her to hold his hand. The thing was coming on again. But now it was coming on in a different form, stronger, more vicious, which made her think it wasn't the thing any longer but something new, something she had no way of stopping

and could never control. It was starting to flow through her like nothing else she had known before, across the surface of her skin and inside the nerves somehow and inside the beating of her heart, because she knew, with a finality, that she was going into the bank.

The building was four stories high, cladded on the main level with black granite. There were panes of dark glass in between the black granite. Maja stopped to look. A woman was peering out at her from inside the building! In the first instant of her looking, Maja was astonished. What was the woman doing there? How did she get inside? Maja was sure she herself was the only one with a key who would be here today. Then within a half second of seeing the woman, other rapid impressions and thoughts came to Maja, one tumbling after the other in flashes, the first being the shock of the woman's appearance, her long black hair that looked wet but was actually greasy and unkempt and knotted and falling out in places, then her sombre expression, more sad than sombre, Maja thought, in despair she thought, and then something odd on the skin of the woman's face that Maja saw with revulsion — red scabs or sores over her forehead and cheeks, which seemed pussy in places. And when Maja felt her own hand reach up to her face in an inadvertent reaction to the sight, touching the skin of her own face, she suddenly had the haunting sense of recognition that the woman was not there, and the window was not a window but a mirror, and the woman she saw looking out at her was in fact herself.

Two months after Maja went home with baby Neven, her foster mother had a fall and broke her hip and then succumbed three weeks later to an infection after the operation. Even though her mother's family covered most of the costs for the funeral, Maja paid out much of what little remained to her. She had to apply for social assistance. In the delay of waiting, without her mother's pension, and no other money coming, other than what Žon gave her every few weeks after much shaming and haranguing on her part over the phone, he showing up purely to hand her money, some of it probably the mother's, before taking a brief look at the baby and then driving off, Maja's axe fell into the honey and she got the position at the bank. Žon's friend Marko, the joker who always greeted her with much politeness when she came to the bar, knew of her situation, and had a contact in the office there, a former athlete friend, who liked her right away and was impressed with her high school transcript and took a flier on her.

Maja stopped asking Žon for cash and he stopped coming. She had a neighbour who had an eight-year-old daughter and who agreed to take Neven during the week. Things were looking good. Her life was more stable now. There was even a sort of satisfaction in the work at the bank after the period of training, the boring work of a teller, but also the assistance she gave and the natural easy kindness she had, especially for the confused, elderly and often-illiterate people who came in with their meagre

pensions every month. She felt she was doing some good. She got to know some of them. They approached her from the line with a smile; she was a friendly face. Many of these retirees lived alone and had no contact with anyone other than the mailman or someone at the store or someone like herself at the bank. Her own foster mother had been like them. A place of business had become a place of friendly transaction.

Once the first court case had ended and Žon had been given formal visitation rights, at least for the following six months, then afterwards had been permitted to take Neven for four hours at a time three times a week, with the forecast of longer periods in a year or so, Maja thought the last of whatever troubles she had had with him were over. Yes, true, the system had failed her completely. The state social worker who had been assigned to her sided with Žon and was more concerned with upholding his rights regardless of how careless and even how dangerous he was to the child, disregarding it all, everything Maja already told her, every bit of it. Seemingly swayed by his charms, the social worker woman had conceded every condition to him — why, Maja could only guess — but she assumed that the mother and sister had gotten to her and that they were behind him also, pushing him on, since he never would have done so on his own, indifferent and careless as he was, and they having the resources and very probably the father's old connections. Maja obviously couldn't prove any of it but intuited that she should have used a real lawyer to handle her case, someone more aggressive, and more expensive. Still, despite everything, she thought she was free.

A few months later, however, her situation took a turn. The documents were delivered one afternoon after she'd come home from work. Her dismay and shock on reading them, the cold legalese concerning full custody, caused her to sink into the couch in the kitchen as Neven, who had only started to speak, came to her and clutched her knees and whimpered, "Mama, Mama," knowing something was wrong. They clung to each other in the little kitchen as the light faded from the day. She held him tight as Neven stroked her hair. A picture of what was going to happen, how her world with her son could change forever, that she was going to lose him, that she would be left with nothing, overwhelmed her. She swore at herself for putting Žon's name on the birth certificate. What a fool she had been! So naïve. She'd thought it was important for her child to have a father, just as she herself had never had one, a real one, but now her idealism was going to lose him to her. When it was dark finally and she'd spent herself crying, she hardened against them all. The old familiar anger rose inside her. She vowed to stand against them, no matter the costs.

So that is why her conscience was free when she began secreting away some of the deposits her elderly clients handed her, those who still received their pension money in hard cash from the mailman, and who didn't keep it in an envelope at home any longer as her mother did, but had evolved to a more sophisticated level of banking and had set up accounts for themselves, or whose children had done it for them. In those days, because the system hadn't been digitalized, reliance on analogue records of transactions had led over the years to widespread corruption.

There were always rumours of mailmen who had fleeced villagers and then had been removed from their posts, though the stories of course never made it onto the pages of newspapers because they couldn't be said to exist. That was what they said happened to their mailman Ivek a few years back. So Maja, prudent at first, did some test runs of a few dozen *kuna*, the new currency after the war, on one of those occasions using the teller code of her colleague Mirijana, which she'd learned at some point when Mirijana had taken her break and there was no one else around in the main room. The first batch she secreted out of the building herself. The next she left in an envelope under the seat cushion of her co-worker and had her man remove in the night. No one seemed to notice. And what were a few dozen *kuna*, really, Maja thought, when push comes to shove; there was always money leaking out, which is probably why party members had always been the ones getting rich, and nothing had really changed in the new country.

So she felt safe. Nothing would touch her. Three months had gone by, after all. But she also knew that the few thousand *kuna* she had siphoned off would hardly cover her legal fees. That became clear when she met her new lawyer for the first time. A rakish young man with a handsome face, he took the liberty, at the end of their first meeting, to touch her arm upon leaving. A friendly gesture on her way out. Perhaps he did it with all his clients. But other thoughts came to her too, the possibility of an invitation to something; what that was she wasn't exactly sure, though she had an idea. It was something to keep in reserve. On leaving the outer office, the secretary handed her an

itemized list of bills that would accrue for the lawyer's services and that she would be responsible for. A quick glance over the numbers stopped her in her tracks. She felt crushed as she made her way back home. All evening, she ran over the possibilities of future action. What she had to do, what she was willing to do, the ugly eventualities her plans were leading towards, all ran through her mind.

That was what led her to meet her man again, who had some contacts with others, the money men, who could help her. It was her man, also, who'd slipped her the plastic bag a while back, in that period when her migraines had worsened again, and she'd found herself more and more often lying in the dark holding onto herself and trying to ward off the pain, unable to sleep.

Several weeks after she'd received the custody documents, Maja got a call from Marko's girlfriend Zdenka who had phoned from time to time over the past few months, always whispering to her, which told her that Zdenka probably wasn't home alone, that Marko didn't agree with her telling Maja what she was about to tell her. She said she'd heard something that Maja ought to know. The last few times Žon had taken Neven on one of his "excursions," he'd gone to his new girlfriend's apartment — Zdenka wasn't sure if it was the same woman from before, when Žon had left Neven behind in the bar — and at this apartment they'd done it in the bedroom with Neven just walking around the place. They had just fucked right there and then like teenagers who couldn't control themselves, the woman a slut of some kind, as Neven wandered around the apartment and finally settled in front of the TV where they had

put him in the first place. Žon hadn't exactly wanted it to happen, but he wasn't exactly ashamed of it either. Nor was it the first time, according to what Zdenka told Maja, whispering to her, saying she thought Maja ought to know.

On the first day of the custody case, the lawyer Žon's mother had hired argued in his opening that Maja's behaviour and character were a present physical and moral threat to the well-being of the boy. He then called a first witness to offer testimony, a woman Maja recalled vaguely as a neighbour down the road who had seen her and Johnny years ago emerge from the mill early in the morning. The woman said Maja was known to have sold herself for money. Everyone knew that about her. It had brought shame to her family. Her adoptive parents, rest their souls, did not deserve the shame. The woman then pointed at the person sitting beside Maja, her friend Marina, who was in court that day supporting her, and made the claim that Marina worked evenings in the massage parlour down by the highway, a bar called the Fontana, and that she was a known prostitute and also best friend of the mother, all of which Maja's lawyer objected to, yes, true, but that planted a seed in the judge's mind regardless. Her character and person were assailed, as were those of the people around her. The very things she had confided in Žon about her relationship with Ivek, like the incident with the gun, her lowest moment, were dragged out of her past.

The criminal charges came later, around the same time the bank cleaned house and the women attacked her in the street as she was leaving. This was followed soon after by a visit from the money men, led to her shocked dismay

by her own man, dark and stern and unsmiling, a thin and menacing spectre bearing down on her, who told her they would begin by breaking her left hand if she could not come up with the cash by next week; then they would cut up her face and then, after they were done with her, they would take her son.

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They were inside the bank now. There was a commotion outside somewhere. All of what was happening out there was beyond them now. The boy was beside her, still holding her hand. She was aware that he looked up at her and that he said something, but she didn't answer. The rhythm of her heart and the unfamiliar cadences of her breathing suddenly caught her attention. Her heart was beating a strange rhythm that didn't seem to be her own. She couldn't remember if she had ever felt exactly like that before, but she tried to master the new feeling and continue on. She had to continue. There were no more choices now. The main room was as she remembered it, with a grey steel door she had opened once, out of curiosity, and that led up some stairs to other empty office spaces. She had known this for some time. The stairs wound up four flights to the top, where there was a door to the roof. As they climbed the stairs, she could hear, unmistakable now, the sound of sirens somewhere in the distance. The higher she and Neven climbed, the louder the sound. There was some kind of crashing going on below. Through the last heavy door, she and the boy stepped out on to the open

roof. She had to grip the boy's hand hard because he had begun to squirm away from her, and she held him to herself and whispered soft words of comfort to him, which took all her strength to do. From the rooftop, to the west, she looked towards the horizon where the road threaded the distance, leading them here. They seemed to have known, even before she did, where she was going. But she had beaten them here. They had come too late. As she and the boy stood there, the wintry wind pushing clouds across a grey cold sky, she could hear someone calling to them. But outside themselves and the world, beyond all reach of the mighty, they soared beyond the sun.

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