CROATIAN LITERATURE

Zoran Ferić

Zoran Ferić was born in 1961 in Zagreb. He is among the most widely read of contemporary Croatian writers. His work has received numerous prizes, including the Ksaver Šandor Gjalski Prize in 2000 and the Jutarnji List Award for the best work of prose fiction in 2001 and then again in 2011.

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MAIN WORKS:

Mišolovka Walta Disneya (*Walt Disney's Mousetrap*)

Quattro stagioni (*Four Seasons*; in co-operation with Miroslav Kiš, Robert Mlinarec and Boris Perić)

Anđeo u ofsajdu (*An Angel in Offside*)

Smrt djevojčice sa žigicama (*Death of the Little Match Girl*)

Otpusno pismo (*Letter of Discharge*)

Djeca Patrasa (*The Children of Patras*)

Simetrija čuda (*The Symmetry of the Miracle*)

Kalendar Maja (*The Maya Calendar*)

Zoran Ferić
Saliva

1

When she could no longer walk, they took my mother to theVinograd Hospital, and I was given a serious duty: I had to deliver an ashtray and a large bouquet of flowers to an address on Mose Pijade Street. My father said: "When you get there, pay your respects and hand it all over from the doorway, you hear me? If you're offered anything, say you're in a hurry. You understand? Just make the delivery." Flower deliveries were very expensive back then. I figured that this was why my father entrusted this job to me. The night before I was supposed to make the delivery, I couldn't sleep. I had to do it in the morning, around ten, before I went to school, but that evening my father had said: "Don't take your schoolbag, understand? Make the delivery first. Then come home and get your bag and get ready for school. Do you understand? You'll have to leave early, but not too early, understand? It isn't polite to visit people too early, so plan on getting there around ten. You'll need ten minutes to get to Kvatric, and then the tram to Draskovic will take about five minutes, if it isn't crowded. From there you'll get the number fourteen and get out at Dure Dakovic's house. Then you'll have about a five-minute walk to Mose Pijade. So you should leave at nine thirty at the latest. You understand?"

"Yes!" I said.

I did understand, but I couldn't sleep. I thought it would be obvious that I was my father's son, not the deliveryman, and it was unclear to me what would happen when they realized this. Best not to say anything, I thought. Greet them, hand over the flowers, and leave. But my father hadn't mentioned what I should do if they asked me anything. And how would I find the house? Did they have a dog? What if, let's say, they did have a dog, and the bell in front of the yard didn't work? Or, let's say, the bouquet gets smashed while I'm on the bus? The night was long, but there were enough questions to fill it up completely.

2

In the morning I boarded the number 11 at Kvatric on time, and I caught the number 14 on time as well. It all went fine, except that in the crowded tram I was constantly tickling someone with the upper part of the bouquet, where anthuriums and prickly green asparagus peeped out of the white paper. I knew the flower because my mother had shown it to me before she'd gone to the hospital.

"You see this flower?" she'd said. "It's called *anthurium*, but it's also called *Adam*."

Then she looked at me knowingly. "Are you not going to ask me why?"

"Why, Mama?"

"Because of the little dick in the middle. Can you see it? That's where the pistil and stamen are located."

I was embarrassed. Since becoming ill, my mother had changed; she had become much more unrestrained, telling rude jokes and trying to show me that which, until a few months ago, she had avoided by saying: "You'll find that out when you grow up."

And now, all at once, I had grown up.

When I got out of the tram at the place where Dure Dakovic used to live and set off on the footpath next to the tumbledown villas, panic took hold of me again. The people to whom I was delivering the flowers and the ashtray, which was now wrapped up like a present, would realize that something was wrong. They would think that my father, even though he received high wages, could not pay for the delivery—that we were short on money now that my mother was in the hospital.

And so what? I thought. Let them find out. What do I care? I had never seen these people in my life before, and goodness knows I would never see them again. Why should I be embarrassed? I looked carefully at the addresses of the villas as I passed them. Their gardens were neglected, their facades gray, their metal fences rusted. My father had written the correct address on a piece of paper that morning and left it underneath my breakfast plate. I kept walking.

My friends and I used to do all sorts of things to people we didn't know: ring doorbells and then run away, write rude things on the windows of cars. Lately we'd been spitting on the heads of passersby from the heights of Davor Zebic's fifth-floor apartment in Maksimir. A neighbor shouted at us, once, over the balcony—"Shame on you!" she

said—but she never told our parents. Maybe she liked the way we spat on people. Maybe the person to whom I was bringing the flowers had been walking on Maksimir Street a week ago, and maybe that very day, while we were skipping school, we had spat on his head. I could see by the house numbers that I was getting close.

That's it, I thought. What do I care about strangers? And to punctuate this thought, I spat on the asphalt. The phlegm burst on the ground, an uneven star of foaming liquid. I stopped and turned around. There was no one on the street. No one had seen me. I gazed at that fluid, which was congealing in the dust, like a loathsome flower, and immediately I felt disgusted. I felt nauseous even though just a few seconds ago the spit had been in my mouth. While it was inside me, I thought, it was called *saliva*; but when it came out, it turned into *spit*. Why should something that had been inside me, a part of my body, be so revolting when it came out?

I kept walking. I imagined spitting in my soup spoon at some restaurant, filling it up with saliva. I'd watch the bubbles diminish, like small lives extinguishing themselves, and then I'd sip it from the spoon like it was white veal stew. The thought made my stomach turn. Was it possible, I thought, for a person to become completely disgusted with his own physical self?

3

The house had a relatively new facade; it was the only one that did in that row of nationalized villas, all built before the war. I stood in front of the green fence, trying to collect myself. All the gardens were growing luxuriantly, and the leaves of the trees were turning red and brown. The house itself was plain yellow and two stories tall. There was a flight of stone steps leading up to a small enclosed porch. My mother would have called it "Maria Teresa yellow."

I rang the bell, but nothing could be heard. For a few seconds my heart was in my mouth, like my stomach had been just moments before. Surely I wouldn't have to go alone into a strange yard. And then an old woman with gray hair appeared on the porch.

She was dressed in a gray cloth skirt and a black polo-neck shirt, on which could be seen a string of false pearls. "What can I do for you?" she said sternly, as though I had interrupted something important.

"I have to deliver some flowers," I said.

"Well, open the door!"

It did not escape my notice that she had addressed me with the familiar "*ti.*"

The door buzzed open and I walked through the yard. When I got close to the woman, I saw that the pearls were almost the same color as her hair.

"Come in!" she said.

"I'm only delivering," I said, speaking the sentence that I had been turning around in my mouth all night.

"Never mind that. Come in!"

The porch was full of indoor plants: philodendrons, rubber plants, palms in wooden flowerpots. The woman walked into the house, and I followed her with the flowers and the ashtray wrapped in cellophane.

"Put on the slippers!" she said when I'd come inside, and placed a pair of unmatched slippers on the floor in front of me. I wanted to repeat that I could not stay, that I was only making a delivery, but she had already taken the bouquet and disappeared. For a moment I hesitated, but then I took off my shoes, put on the slippers, and went into a huge sitting room. Looking at the outside of the house, you would never have been able to imagine that such a big room could fit inside it. The furniture was old but well polished: a chest of drawers with a marble top—very similar to a piece of furniture in my grandmother's house on Medulic Street—a dark brown upright piano, a set of leather upholstered chairs, and a small round table on which sat a lovely porcelain bulldog.

"This is Biedermeier," my mother would have said, referring to the chest of drawers. "And the table is Secession, walnut."

The walls were full of pictures. I recognized a Stancic that one of my mother's friends also possessed, and that as a child I used to copy when we visited. I placed the ashtray on the table and sat down in the armchair. I could hear trams passing by outside, even though the windows were shut.

The old lady came back with the flowers in a vase. She put them on the table and then said:

"Would you like some juice?"

"All right."

She went out again and I heard her in the kitchen, running water. When she returned she was carrying a glass of raspberry juice on a small tray. She put it down in front of me, the glass making a clinking sound when it touched the porcelain.

"Be careful you don't spill it!"

My father would certainly be angry about all this. I should have just turned around and left, I thought.

The old woman was unwrapping the ashtray now. She untied the ribbon and put it aside; the cellophane she took off and crumpled into a ball. It was a cheap copper thing, with a picture of a boy urinating on the bottom, the towers of a cathedral behind him. I had known for a long time what *kitsch* meant, and was sure that this was a prime example.

There was a small white envelope taped to the ashtray. The woman took the envelope and left the room. She came back quickly, in twenty seconds. She didn't count it, I thought.

"Is the raspberry juice good?" she asked.

"Yes." I said, even though I hadn't tasted it. And then, so that everything would be finished more quickly, I gulped it all down. I almost choked. It was tasteless. Then we both looked at the ashtray for a while longer. The situation was becoming more and more uncomfortable. I am here for my mother, I thought.

At last the old woman said:

"It's best you take that home."

She handed me the ashtray. My face must have become very red, because the woman looked up and examined me closely for a moment.

"Give my regards to your father!" she said as I left, ashtray in hand. Somewhere near the bus station I threw it in a trash can.

4

That same day, in the evening, we were supposed to go to the hospital, but my father phoned: "I can't go today, I have a meeting. You go if you want to."

I caught the number 11 and set off for the hospital. I got off at the station in front of the barracks and walked down Vinograd Street. In my head I repeated what my father always said:

"See, my son, there, where there used to be vineyards, today they cure people from alcoholism." And then with a smile he would mention Doctor Hudolin. That was his way of making things easier.

"They're not curing Mama of alcoholism," I always wanted to say to him.

She was waiting for me lying down, with the usual question.

"Did you have lunch?"

"Leek and minced meat," I lied. When I'd returned home from the delivery there hadn't been time to eat anything before school. I noticed that there was now a triangle made of metal tubes hanging over my mother's bed. It hadn't been there the last time. I didn't know what it was for, but I didn't want to upset her with unnecessary questions.

"How was school?"

"We didn't write anything."

"Did you correct your history paper?"

"Yes, I did," I lied, but it was not an outrageous lie, because I had agreed with the professor that I would correct it the next day. Today or tomorrow, it's all the same.

My mother tried to get herself into a sitting position. She took hold of the triangle and slowly sat up.

"Fix my pillow for me."

Her voice was hoarse, and her hands shook from the effort. I placed the pillow so that she could sit properly, and then helped her lean back slowly.

"That's it, now I can see you better. Why didn't Tata come?"

"He has a meeting."

She was quiet for a little while.

"Look after him," she said. "It's not easy for him."

I asked myself why the three of us constantly lied to one another. My father pretended that nothing serious was happening; my mother pretended to forgive him for not coming to the hospital; and I tried hard to pretend that things were getting better. But one day I would tell my father that he was a coward, that he was not brave enough to face the truth—he who'd boasted of charging Batina Skela and breaching the Srijemski Front with the Russians, when only one out of every five men survived.

"That's exactly why he isn't brave," my mother would explain, if I'd told her what was troubling me. Instead she looked at me lovingly and asked again if I had a girlfriend.

"No, what would I want with a girlfriend?"

"You've turned fifteen. It's the time when certain needs appear."

I blushed, like I always did when my mother talked about stuff like this.

"That prostitute on our street, the one they call Pig Head..." she went on.

"What are you talking about, Mama?" I said through clenched teeth. My voice sounded more like squeaking than human speech.

"Soon she'll be trying to tempt all you young boys!"

"Mama, she's a repulsive old woman."

"Never mind that. All I want to say is that human desire is the most elastic thing that exists, you understand? Bodily pleasure can be wonderful, but it can also become something terribly revolting. And I won't be there to advise you."

"Stop, Mama!" I squealed. I couldn't admit to my mother that, for months already, I had been masturbating to the sight of that old prostitute and her fat bottom—the way she climbed up our street from the square, wearing a short skirt, carrying a shopping bag full of vegetables her clients had bought for her.

"But I want you to know," she said, her voice becoming stronger and more determined, "you're the one who decides whether what will happen is wonderful or revolting. Just don't do something you regret for the rest of your life."

"Mama!"

"All right, there you are. That's all I wanted to say." Her voice became weak again, as though she had finished a decisive battle. Her own personal Batina Skela. "I asked the doctor today and he promised to let me go home," she said. "I miss home so much—did you know that?"

"I know," I said.

"They said that the nurse will come to our house every day to give me painkillers and dress me. And Aunt Rada will help too—you and your father won't have to do anything." She paused. "Now go home so you have time to study for tomorrow."

5

But they didn't let my mother go home the next week. And on Thursday I once again set off for the house on Mose Pijade Street.

This time there were neither flowers nor an ashtray to deliver, only an envelope. An ordinary white envelope, with a surname typed on the front. hudolin. I got on the tram at Kvatric on time, and caught the number 14 on time again, and arrived at the house even earlier than before. I won't go inside today, I thought. I'll just hand the envelope to the old lady from the doorway and leave. I won't put the slippers on. I won't drink any juice. I didn't want anything to do with them.

I rang the bell three times. Two brief rings and one long one. It seemed like the old woman came out onto the porch faster this time. She was wearing the same black blouse, with a white kitchen apron over it.

"Push the door," she said, but in a friendlier tone.

I climbed the steps. I greeted the old woman and offered her the envelope. She seemed embarrassed.

"We can't do this in the doorway," she said. "Come inside. I've baked cakes."

There was something commanding in her tone, and I gave in. The slippers were already waiting for me in the entryway, and the old woman was there beside me while I took off my shoes. On the round table in the sitting room was a crystal bowl full of vanilla crescents: biscuits dusted with powdered sugar. The woman disappeared again and came back carrying the tray with its glass of raspberry juice. The porcelain and glass clinked together, just like the last time. She put it down in front of me and sat in the armchair, looking at me with a smile.

"Please, help yourself. I made it for you."

I took a biscuit and put my hand under my mouth to stop crumbs from falling on the carpet.

"Jesus, I'm so forgetful," she said, and went again into the kitchen. She returned with an empty plate, which she set in front of me. She watched me while I ate.

"How's school?"

"Good," I said, my mouth full.

"Do you go to high school?"

"Up on the Salati," I said. Now my mouth was emptier, and I could answer her.

"What mark do you have for mathematics?"

I paused before answering. I had lied to my mother about this, but that didn't mean I had to lie to everyone. But why was this woman being so polite? What did she get out of it?

"One," I said, with a note of triumph in my voice.

"That's no good. Mathematics is the most important. Without mathematics you can't do anything."

"It's not the most important. I go to the language school. For us, languages are the most important."

I tried the raspberry juice. It seemed to me that there was more syrup mixed in with the water this time.

"Have another biscuit."

I took one. Why was she worried about my mark in mathematics? It had nothing to do with her.

"If you have any problems, you can come to me. I worked as a mathematics professor."

I raised my head and looked at her in astonishment.

"I'm retired now, but I still give instruction."

"I can manage by myself."

"That's what everyone says, and then all of a sudden you have too many ones, and it's too late. It would be better to start—"

"I can manage," I said, cutting her short.

She smiled. It was as though she hadn't noticed the impertinence in my answer.

"You wouldn't have to pay," she said finally, in a softer voice.

She's embarrassed, I thought, so she wants to redeem herself. She wants to redeem her horrible son, the doctor.

I calmly took one more biscuit and dispensed of it politely, holding the small plate under my chin. I washed it down with the rest of the juice. Then I said:

"Tata has sent this to you." I put the envelope on the table in front of me. I remembered how last time she had taken it into the other room without counting it. So, in front of her, I tore open the envelope.

"You don't have to do that," she said, with noticeable discomfort in her voice.

Out of the torn envelope I extracted a bundle of bank notes and began to count them, putting them on the table next to the tray. One, two, three... There were ten red hundred-dinar notes and five blue fifties. The old woman watched me counting, her face changing color, turning light purple.

"Tata told me to count it."

My father had not told me to do this, but I wasn't worried about my father, that coward. The face of the old lady looked as though it would burst. The whole time she was silent, watching me. Then, finally, she gasped.

"The money isn't for Rudy, if that's what you think." Her voice shook. "It's for the nurses who are looking after your mother in the hospital."

"So why am I bringing the money to you?" I wanted to ask. But I didn't.

6

On Friday evening, when I returned from school, my father and I sat down at the table to eat. He had warmed some goulash that Aunt Rada had made, and I had made a green salad. My father said that the goulash was good, and that it was very kind of Aunt Rada to make it for us, because otherwise we would be hungry. Only when we'd finished eating did I say:

"Are we going to the hospital today?"

My father cleaned the dishes and said nothing. He scraped the leftovers into the rubbish bin, and then he rinsed the plates in the sink.

"You go," he said, still occupied with the plates. "I brought some blueprints home."

My father had not been to the hospital since my mother had gotten worse, about a month ago. He could not be persuaded to go.

"It's all right," I said. "They're going to let her come home soon anyway."

He stopped what he was doing and turned around, as though he hadn't heard me properly.

"Who told you that?"

"What do you mean who? Mama told me. She asked the doctors to let her go home and they told her she could, and that a field nurse would come twice a day to give her an injection against the pain and to help her change her clothes."

"This is the first I've heard of it."

"Well, it's the truth. She also said she wouldn't inconvenience us at all, that the nurse would do everything."

My old man buried the plates he had already washed under hot water, mumbling, and then tipped half a container of Vim over them.

That evening he ended up coming along after all. When we turned onto Vinograd Street, my father, strangely, did not mention the vineyards or Doctor Hudolin. It was after seven when we passed through the main entrance and turned left, toward the building where my mother lay. The sky was still light but darkness had fallen on the ground, and the weak hospital lights were lit. Even though it was not the time for visits, the ward let us in. The nurses were collecting plates from dinner, their trolley squeaking along the hallway. From some of the rooms we could hear music coming from the patients' radios. In the sitting room, the women who could walk had gathered to watch the news.

My mother was surprised when she saw my father.

"You came?" she said in a weak voice. My father sat beside the bed and seemed unsettled. He didn't know what to do with his hands.

"You need something to read," he said finally.

She just smiled; she hadn't been able to read for a long time.

My father turned to me. "Son, go and buy the newspaper down at the kiosk!" he said.

He took out his wallet and handed me five dinars. I took the money and left the room. I walked slowly; I was not in a hurry, now that my father was finally there with my mother. I went down to the kiosk, drank a can of Dvojni C, and stayed there for a time with the drunks who had escaped from the alcoholism ward. They were all annihilating little bottles of cognac. I knew my father wanted the newspaper so he could kill time while he sat beside my mother's bed; it was not my mother, who was unable to read, who needed it. So I took my time.

When I had bought the *Evening News* and was again in front of my mother's room, I could hear raised voices from within. They were arguing again. Through the door I could hear my mother's words, the ends of her sentences spoken in a deep tone, the same way she had sounded when she spoke to me about Pig Head.

"...because I want to kick the bucket at home!"

My old man was silent.

When we left the hospital I asked my father:

"Did they tell you when they would let her go?"

He frowned as he unlocked the door of the Skoda.

"They won't let her go."

"But she wants to come home!"

"And I want to fly to the moon," he said, and then added, "What would we do with her at home? We can't look after ourselves, much less her."

7

A few days after that conversation in front of the hospital, my father told me I would be going once again to Mose Pijade Street.

"You don't have to eat cakes this time, or talk to the old woman, do you hear? Just give her the envelope and come home. They are not related to us in any way, and even if they were, fuck people like that who live on the backs of other people. You understand? Just give her the envelope and leave."

He had found out everything, I thought. Maybe it would be better to just leave the envelopes in the mailbox from now on, like any other letters. I thought seriously about this, but then it occurred to me that there was a lot of money at stake. Someone could follow me and steal it.

And so, that night, as I had done every night, I brooded over the whole thing. I hadn't known how to behave, last time, when the old lady was bursting with anger. How could I deliver the money without seeing her? And why, in the end, did I have to be polite to such people? Why put the money into an envelope and not count it out into their hands?

And then I suddenly realized what was going on. I remembered the conversation he'd had with my mother, the argument in the hospital. He was paying to keep her there until the end. The doctors would have let her go—it was her last wish, after all, and they always grant last wishes, even for murderers. My old man was paying them to keep her there. Hatred overwhelmed me. My hands curled into fists.

I squeezed them so hard that I broke the skin on my palms. That revolting old vomit-covered coward. It would be a pity to waste my saliva on him. I thought of his closely shaved double chin, the little soft cushions of his fingers. He disgusted me.

"I fell in love with his hands," my mother used to say.

Now those hands were lumps of fat, from which came pudgy sausages with nails.

8

In the morning, as usual, I found a small plate with a fresh roll on the table. Underneath the round porcelain with the worn gold rim was a white envelope. The name and surname had been typed on it with our electric Olympic typewriter. Again hatred took away my breath. I picked up the envelope and put it inside my jacket pocket.

"When you take money onto the tram," my father had said the night before, "you must put it away safely in an inside pocket. You understand? Trams are full of pickpockets. You can't tell who they are, and you won't feel anything when they put their hand into your pocket, nothing. They practice with dolls that have bells on them."

I did not touch the roll. My father's attempt to be considerate revolted me. He was always like that: he pretended to be good because it made things easier for him. Stinking, revolting coward. When I'd first delivered the money, I had thought that I was doing it so that those in the hospital would take better care of my mother and lessen her pain as much as they could. When I was there she pretended she felt fine, but I had seen how she clenched her teeth, how her whole body cramped. One time, to the nurse who was getting her injection ready, she'd mumbled something like, "Kill me, I beg you in the name of God." I'd heard her say it. At the age of fifteen I was brave enough to hear her say that. If I had not been brave enough, the words would have been unintelligible—my ears would have heard them but they would have been stopped before they reached my brain.

I arrived at the Kvatric station. I didn't see the point in it anymore, but the tram arrived on time, so I got on. It would have been stupid not to do it. My mother's words followed me the whole way down Draskovic street, and continued with me toward the Dakovic house: "Kill me, I beg you in the name of God!" The people who saw me in the last cab of the number 14 would have seen a thin fifteen-year-old with straight, fair hair murmuring nonsensical things to himself. They were not brave enough to

hear what I was saying.

"Kill me, in the name of God!"

"Kill me, in the name of God!"

"Kill me, in the name of God!"

And then, when I got to the hospital, when I appeared at her bedside, she would ask:

"Did you do your homework?"

I could see it all, I could hear it all, not one detail escaped me, and meanwhile my old man ran away to his meetings, wandering around town aimlessly. Once I saw him at the West Station, and then again staggering down Vodnik Street, completely lost. He couldn't sit down beside his wife, take her hand, and say:

"It hurts me too, it hurts me..."

I got off the tram near the building where I had been accepted as a Young Pioneer and continued on toward the old woman's house. With each step, my hatred for my father grew. Instead of paying for care and help, my father was paying to keep my mother locked up until she died. When I got close to the house, I spat on the same place I had spat on the first time, gazing with disgust as the spittle bubbled on the tarmac.

"Dear Tata," I murmured, "I wouldn't even waste saliva on you."

A moment later I raised my hand to ring the bell, and then paused. To a bystander it may have looked like a greeting. But it was a decision. If my swine of a father was paying the doctor to keep my mother in the hospital, what would happen if the money never reached that other swine?

I had never in my whole life stolen anything from anyone. Especially my parents. When they sent me to the shop, I brought back the change to the last little coin. Even when my parents began to steal from shops themselves, I never joined them. I would have rather committed murder.

But now I turned from the door and ran across the street. I didn't care where I went—I just wanted to get far away from the old woman, from her slippers and raspberry juice. The money that was keeping my mother in the hospital was still in my inside pocket.

9

And so the money traveled farther away from the yellow house. It went across Nova Ves, began moving uphill, and then, unexpectedly, came back downhill, passing Medvedgrad, passing the shoe factory, and then hurried

down Tkalcic Street. For a long time it went by ruined shacks smelling of cheap stewed vegetables and damp, and then, unexpectedly, it climbed up to Dolac by way of Skalinska Street, straight in front of Petric Kerempuh and the bronze people dangling there.

I found myself at the marketplace. The decision, which had come to life in my legs, had now made its way to my head. If the money did not get to the doctor, there was a chance my mother's last wish would be fulfilled. Around the statue of the old peasant lady, vendors were selling autumn flowers, roses and gerberas. And chrysanthemums, too. I went down those few wooden steps and, all at once, it felt as if the crowded market was embracing me. There, on the ten or so wooden stairs leading down to the lower level of the marketplace, I decided not to go to school that day. A child whose mother is dying has the right to play truant. Before the enormity of death, school was a tiny marble—something that could be lost in the sand. And, in that way, I lost myself in the crowd.

Near the fish shop I saw Pig Head. Actually, first I saw her backside in a short red woollen skirt, her huge bottom bulging out of the stretchy knitted fabric. I looked at her fat, heavy calves, her black high heels covered in mud. She walked along, pointing at items in the stands. An old man with a hat, a peasant, walked behind her and bought whatever she ordered. I went after them, cautiously. We were like a strange little procession. Her outrageously fat bottom gave me an erection, but I was not embarrassed at all. A strange feeling of freedom had overcome me. Previously, when I'd met the gaze of Pig Head in the street, I would lower my eyes, blush, hide in a stranger's garden until she went past. Now I followed her bottom like a dog looking for a mate.

When they stopped at certain stands, Pig Head would put her hand on the fly of the old man and he would stop dead, as though he were trying to prolong the moment for as long as possible. Then she would quickly move her hand away and they would continue walking.

While my mother was still healthy, whenever Pig Head would pass her, she would comment quietly:

"Jesus, how repulsive she is!"

When I masturbated in the bathroom I would whisper: "She's repulsive! She's repulsive! She's repulsive!" and then I would become hard, just because of that word, *repulsive*. I'd promised myself that I would never go near her, even after my mother died.

But I could go down to the Vartek's alleyway, where the prostitutes stood, and watch them for a while.

10

All kinds of things are permitted a boy whose mother is dying. But I just wanted to look. I went down Bakacev Street in order to get to the alley next to Vartek's department store, so that no one who knew me could see me from Republic Square. When a man of a certain age went into that alley, everyone knew what he was looking for. Old, badly dressed prostitutes stood back there, tempting the soldiers that wandered by. Some of them wore very short skirts that showed fatty thighs full of veins. The alley smelled of urine.

Two women stood at the end of the alley, ten meters or so from me, while I pretended to look at men's suits in a shop window. I could feel my heart in my mouth, as though my Adam's apple had begun to beat. I stared at the shop window and did not dare to lift my gaze. But I also wanted to be able to see them better, so I could keep them in my memory as long as possible. I was looking at a male mannequin in a gray suit. The mannequin had a shirt and tie like a very proper person in a terribly improper place.

Soon I heard high heels tip-tapping toward me. I'll just look at her once, I thought. I'll look at her from top to bottom and then I'll leave. I'll fly away from this terrible place—even though my swine of a father deserved for me to spend all of his money there, so that not even one little yellow coin, small as the button on my pajamas, remained.

I turned around and looked. Fat legs in white high heels; a denim miniskirt that was too tight and betrayed the folds of fat on her legs; a light blue cotton blouse hiding huge breasts; a wide face. She looked like Pig Face. Her bright red lips moved:

"What do you want, boy?"

"Nothing," I answered. I was surprised I answered at all. And now I will turn around and leave, I thought. I had seen enough.

But then a second woman arrived. A thin Gypsy woman in jeans, with dark curly hair and a cigarette held in the corner of her mouth. She was squinting because of the smoke.

"He doesn't have any money, he's just looking," said the fat one to the Gypsy.

"They look and then they go home and jerk it," said the Gypsy, smiling.

I blushed, like I had when the old woman gave me back the ashtray.

"I do too have money," I said defiantly.

I'll show them, I thought, and then I'll turn around and leave. I took out the envelope and opened the edge of it with my finger, as I had in front of the old lady. I gave them some time to look at it, and then I put the envelope away and started to leave.

"Wait, where are you going?" shouted the fat one, and hurried after me. "I was just joking, you know. We should talk."

She stood in front of me and took my fly in her hand. My erection grew, and I was frozen. The fat one squeezed my balls and my stiff member.

"For two hundred you can get the lot. I do different positions, front and back."

I stood there quietly, concentrating, like the old peasant with the hat. I wanted nothing more in the world than for her touch to continue. I stared into her eyes: she was a little shorter than me and at least twenty years older. She smiled back at me.

"There, you see, that's better. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"And how long does it last?" I croaked. She was still holding me down there. She was afraid I would bail.

"Until you finish," she said gently.

I took out the envelope and gave her two red notes.

"Give me a little more for luck!"

I gave her a blue one too.

"You want it here or in the room?"

I turned around. People were passing quite close to us. Some had stopped and were looking down the alley.

"In the room," I said.

"That's a different price."

"Okay."

She was still caressing me down there with her left hand while, with her right hand, she put away the notes.

"Come with me. It's over there, on Vlaska."

She walked first, and I followed, ten meters behind her, looking around to make sure no one could see me. I thought about turning and running. That would be the best thing to do, I thought, but then I remembered my father saying:

"Always finish what you start. Do you hear me? Never leave a job unfinished. That's a sign of a weak character."

My father had the gall to talk about weak character.

In the next moment, finally, I decided to leave. And then, in the very next second, gazing at the buttocks in the worn denim skirt rolling on top of her short legs, I changed my mind again. I'll look at her a little longer and then I'll leave, I thought. It was as though she had tied an invisible cord to my member and was now leading me like a poodle.

We walked into the entryway of a run-down house on Old Vlaska Street. She climbed up a wooden staircase in the dark, and slowly I followed her.

"Be careful you don't fall," she said. "Someone stole the lightbulbs."

She led me out onto a wooden verandah on the first floor. On the right I could see a row of doors.

"Give me the money for the room."

I gave her one more blue note.

"Wait for me here," she said, and went through the last doorway. She was inside for some time, long enough for me to think she had tricked me, that she had disappeared and was now running along Palmotic Street. In a way it was a relief. I'll wait another few moments and if she doesn't appear, I'll go back downstairs, I thought. But then a boy, pimply-faced and a bit younger than me, came out of the room and stood near the wooden railing, staring into the yard. Behind the boy the fat woman appeared and motioned for me to come inside. I didn't know whether to acknowledge the boy or not. He had new jeans and torn slippers on his feet. In the end I slipped past him and went through the door.

The room was overcrowded: there was a cooking stove, a double bed, and a desk with books. The fat woman covered the window with a dark curtain.

"Do you need to wash?"

"I don't know."

She undid my belt, took down my underpants and trousers in one movement, bent over, and smelled between my legs.

"You're okay," she said.

Then she took off her skirt and panties, but left the blouse on. She spread her legs and widened her private parts with her fingers, as though airing it out. I could detect a smell. First I got rid of my jacket, then my underpants and trousers. I took off my shoes too, and when I made a movement to take off my sweater, she said:

"You don't have to take off anything up there."

So I still had on my sweater and my socks. My mother had bought me the sweater two years ago in a department store, and we had bought the socks together in Nami. She had looked for the socks with the least amount of synthetic material.

"Son, when you buy socks, make sure they're not synthetic, otherwise your skin isn't able to breathe. Do you understand?"

She was already sick when she told me that. We bought lots of socks that day.

The fat woman was lying with her legs spread out. She took out a condom, bit off the plastic cover, and put it on me. Then she pulled me on top of her and, with her hand, helped me enter her. The thing I had never imagined would happen that day was happening. I went up and down on her and thought of myself like a blacksmith's bellows, filling with air and then emptying. I supported myself with my palms and the tips of my toes, as though I were doing push-ups. I lasted a long time, and she became impatient. She gazed at my face, looking for a trace of something that showed no signs of happening. Finally she said:

"Hey, maybe you finished already?"

She made me pull out and then she looked suspiciously at the tip of the condom. She found nothing there, so she took the condom off, wiped my member with a towel, and then lay down again.

"Come on, I'll give you head."

I got on my knees and approached her. She flicked the tip of me with her tongue, and held my balls with her hands. When she pushed her finger into my anus, I began to come. She pulled me out of her mouth and spat everything out. The surge caught her on the cheek.

I left her the envelope with the rest of the money. I didn't know what to do with it. If I took it home again, my revenge would not be complete. I no longer felt revulsion toward my father, which had been choking me until half an hour ago. I let her wipe me with a damp handkerchief, got dressed in a hurry, and went out onto the verandah. I found the boy with the pimply face in the same pose in which I'd left him, staring blankly into the yard. The kid had retreated completely into his own mind and was living in there. I hurried out of the damp entryway, into the brilliant October sunlight, and tried to escape from that repulsive place, from those things that happen by instinct. That morning I found out how easily a person can disgust himself, just as though he were saliva against the wall of a house. I'm still running away from that, even though fourteen years have passed.

Translated from Croatian by Coral Petkovich