Zoran Ferić
Alone by the Sea
Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

The Snows of Kilimanjaro

1

Nonna always kept a packed suitcase in her room. It was an old-fashioned leather suitcase, made of sturdy cardboard, metal-framed, covered in travel stickers. When she and Aunt would get into a fight, Nonna would put on her finest gray suit, take the suitcase, and place it by the main door.
"Mother, what's that for?" Aunt would ask her.
"I'm leaving, I know I'm not wanted."
Aunt would then rush out of the room in protest, lock herself in her bedroom and cry.
"Dad, why are Mom and Nonna fighting?" Boris would ask.
"Because they're the same," Uncle would reply. "Don't bother, they'll cool down."
And when Boris would ask Nonna, who was sitting on the suitcase, in her going-away suit and outdated brown buckles resembling orthopedic shoes, "Nonna, where are you going?" she would reply, "I'm going to Makueni."
The word evoked images of straw huts of the Wakamba tribe and magnificent stone palaces of Mombasa, colorful turbans and dancing cobras; the sounds of the flute overlapped with the howling of jackals and hyenas, and later on it brought scenes of charred corpses floating in the muddy river and lepers' rags.
Makueni was the colorful surface of the stickers—when seen from a distance so much like an oriental carpet—on the sides of the suitcase. When he was little, Boris would look at those stickers and pretend to be an explorer: he fought against the Berbers riding their lean camels and wielding their Damascus blades, against black savages dressed in leopard hides, against mysterious beasts, gigantic armadillos, and balls upon balls of magic cobras.
After his mother had died, when he was thirteen, Luka started spending his summers on the island, he'd stay there for three months at a time, and the two of them no longer played with the going-away suitcase and its stickers; instead they ran from one beach to another looking for girls. They spent most of the summer alone with Nonna, while Aunt and Uncle would come to spend just fifteen or twenty days on the island, depending how long their summer vacation lasted.
Nonna's going-away suit was made of finest wool and at a couple of places moths had gotten to it.
"Beasts know quality when they see one," Nonna used to say.
Sometimes, on Fridays, when the sun went down, she would put it on and go to say her prayers at her relatives who lived above Hotel Continental.
One Friday, it was 1976, early July, Aunt and Uncle hadn't yet come, Nonna took a bath, washed her hair, and put on that suit of hers getting ready for her Saturday prayers. She sat down in the living room to rest a little before making the walk that was becoming more and more difficult. She needed to pass along the seafront all the way to the town and then up the steep alley above Hotel Continental to her relatives' house on the hill. She'd forgotten her Bible and by mistake taken the one with no notes in it. She sent Boris to get her the right one.
"Look in the suitcase," she shouted after him from the living room.

And Boris politely brought back the Bible, kissed Nonna on the cheek, and then she, waddling slightly, went along the paved path through the garden and towards the promenade. Now the two of them were left alone in the house, they loved it when this happened. They would go from one room to another, dig through the drawers and cupboards in search of Uncle's stash of alcohol. And that's how Boris found an envelope in Nonna's suitcase: there were photographs in it. They sat down on the bed and went through them. That's when they discovered something strange: Nonna had two different wedding photos. More precisely, photographs with two different husbands. In one of the photos, they could recognize their Nonno, he was a much younger man, but it was nonetheless him. But they'd never seen the other man. It was also strange that in one of her wedding photos Nonna wore glasses, while in the other she didn't. Boris and Luka realized one whole, exciting world was hiding there, but they knew none of the details.

2

Nonna was born on May 8, 1898, Franz Joseph was still alive, as was his heir, Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Looking at one of the yellowed sepia photographs from the time, one is surprised there are no brontosaurus or ichthyosaurus peeking behind the shoulders of mustachioed men in Austro-Hungarian uniforms. That's how long ago this was. She was baptized as Graciela Monika Ribarić, but her whole life everyone called her Ela. Nonna Ela.

Nonna's father and mother got married at the Church of Saint Justine and barely a week after their wedding there was a steamship waiting for them in Rijeka and taking them to Marseille where they boarded a liner that took them on a thirty-six-day-long voyage to New York. Nevertheless, Nonna's family didn't stay in America for long, just over seven years, in Pittsburgh, Pasadena and Battle Creek. Nonna was five when they came back and she still remembers some of the scenes from the journey. She remembers, for example, motion sickness, bedbugs cracking under her fingernails, and the captain's long beard. With what they'd saved in America, Nonna Ela's family brought back just enough money to buy a small fishing boat, named Dolin II, and some land in Kampor and Mundanije. They also brought their faith. Nonna's father was one of the first missionaries of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the Monarchy.

When she was little, Nonna was very pious, as was the rest of her family. On a daily basis, they said God's name three times more often than the Catholics from these lands whose every fifth word was God. Even more when they fought. In his prayers, her father remembered the founders of their church, Bates and Ellen White, and every Friday evening, he studied the Bible with his wife and children. Nonna Ela grew up into an exceptionally pretty girl, later on into a beautiful young woman, but in all of her growing up she never once tasted pork, or shrimp, or squid, none of the foods the Bible says not to eat. The locals thought they were strange as this kind of food fed most of the island. Similarly, Dolin II never fished for squid, or shrimp, or octopus, only fish, sardines, herrings, sea bass and such, which Nonna's mother sold at the fish market.

When Nonna, an exceptionally beautiful young woman, walked along Srednja Street, or along the town's quay, women, wearing their fashionable dresses, whispered among themselves: "What a shame!"

They thought she would never find a boy of her own faith, because there were none on the island, and a Catholic marrying an Adventist, that was just out of the question. However, it didn't take long and Dane Krstinić, one of the handsomest young men of his generation, fell in love with her and the women who

whisper among themselves had to admit, “Love is a special kind of faith.” Or: “A woman’s ass is stronger than God.”

3

Nonna began wearing glasses as a sixteen-year-old girl. The tortoise-shell frames took more than two months to arrive all the way from Battle Creek, via New York, Marseille, and Trieste. They fitted them with lenses in Rijeka and one Saturday evening Nonna showed up in town and became a walking sensation.

“A woman wearing glasses on the promenade, that’s a shame and a sensation,” said the women who whisper among themselves.

An even bigger sensation took place when on that very Sunday Dane Krstinić informed his parents he’d fallen in love with Ela Ribarić. Yes, of those Ribarićs, yes, the one wearing glasses on the quay, and yes, he intended to marry her. His mother burst into tears. “My dear boy, have you gone crazy?” she cried. “A Sabbath girl and blind to boot!”

For the next couple of months, Nonna’s future mother-in-law gnawed her knuckles every time someone mentioned “glasses.” She felt monocles and spectacles on people’s faces were mocking her.

And love first turned into longing, then into angry words, into threats to deprive Dane of what little they had, into cursing God in the name of God, into Don Šime, the town’s priest, trying to talk him out of it, into his mother’s incessant tears, his father’s silence, and the words, “I’ve spoken my mind.”

Dane’s mother said, “To let the little Sabbath girl be mistress of what little we have!”

And this little they had consisted of a house in the town, a house in Banjol, a large vineyard in Barbat, a barn and a small house in Mundanije, a more than a decent boat with a fishing light, and two rich fields in the middle of the island.

In Nonna’s family things were a bit more favorable. Her parents were aware that she didn’t have a man of her own faith on the island as well as in its close proximity and that one day she would most likely marry a Catholic. But, they never thought it would happen so soon.

“Are you going to be happy, my dear child?” her mother said, concerned.

At that time, when they talked about marriages, no one spoke about happiness: about the land, the vineyards, the sheep, and the donkeys—yes, about the boats and the pigsties—yes, but about happiness—no. It was thought that happiness entered a person with time and that it was helped along by prosciutto, sausages, wine and lamb feast twice a year.

In the six months of hiding, exchanging letters through messengers, and stealing longing glances in the town and in front of the church, in the middle of shortage and fear caused by the war, what women who whisper had predicted finally happened: love won over faith, a woman’s ass won over God. His parents finally agreed. But, God had made his plans too. In July 1915, Dane Krstinić, together with sixteen other young men from the island, went to the Soča. As they boarded a small steamboat in front of the Doge’s Palace, crying mothers and girlfriends saw them off, as well as the town’s brass band which, in case they weren’t exceptionally fortunate, would see them off into the ground too. On the steamboat’s deck, Dane Krstinić blew one last kiss to his fiancé who was standing on the shore, away from his parents, and this kiss got stuck to her lip. Later on she developed herpes at that same spot.

4

The conflict at the Soča lasted from June 1915 until October 1917 and it is estimated it took the lives of around a million men. Mostly Italians, Slovenians, and Croats, but there were also Russians, Hungarians, and Germans. The front ran from Gorizia, Kobarid, Sabotino to Oslavia and Trieste, which was defended by the elite Austrian forces. In this period, a fast ship from the Pula Engineering Battalion stopped by the island several times to bring a metal casket with a dead body in it. Dropping anchor in front of the Doge's Palace, the ship didn't stay long on the island, just enough to do the paperwork and unload the coffin, and then it would sail on, to the south, carrying other coffins to other islands. Those were the few lucky ones whose bodies were delivered to their families. Others still lie at the idyllic cemeteries in the Alpine region along the Soča and the Piave.

However, the coffin with Dane Krstinić's body did not come to the island, and neither did an Austrian officer with an official notice of death, a medal, and a thank you letter from the Monarchy. Still, Dane Krstinić never showed up either. In the summer of 1918, when the armistice was signed, all of the boys who'd made it through the war had disembarked, together with two more coffins of those who'd gotten killed at the last moment. Dane wasn't among them. His last letter to Nonna is dated May 16, 1917. Dane appeared a little after the island got annexed to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. She ran into him in the town, at the Piazzetta that would soon be called the Liberty Square, and she almost fainted.

"When did you come?" she asked, her voice rattling as if a bayonet had sliced her throat.

"Three days ago."

"Why didn't you come see me? I was so worried about you, I almost died!"

"I don't know," Dane said and stood in front of her all slouched, wearing his old clothes that were now too big for him.

"Where have you been? Why didn't you come before?"

"I caught typhus."

"It doesn't matter," she said and took both of his hands. "As long as you're alive, as long as you're finally here, thank you, dear Lord, for bringing him back." And she would've kissed him, right there on the square, in front of everyone, hadn't shame prevailed after all.

Dane took Nonna Ela from the Piazzetta to the rocks below the monastery, where there was no one and the only sound they could hear was the quiet murmur of the Benedictine nuns whispering their prayers by the open window.

There, at the rocks, she asked him if he still loved her, she told him that if he'd changed his mind she would be devastated, but that she respected his wish and freed him of his commitment. If he'd fallen in love back there, in Italy, so be it. God had wanted it to be so and she only cared that he was alive, that he'd gone through the typhus fever, and that now he had his whole life in front of him. Dane listened to her, pale, skinny, his cheekbones showing through his skin, dark circles under his eyes on his lime-white face.

"You don't know a thing," he told her, slowly, pulling his words out like pulling weeds. "I'm still an animal. Wait until I become a man again… But I know one thing…"

And then he went quiet, he came to a wall behind which there were words, as well as a beautiful green valley, with dark-green pines and a turquoise river winding through mountains, with emerald lakes one sees in picture books, with pines, wild roses, sorrels and yarrows, but also with small army cemeteries with identical iron crosses arranged in perfect lines: the dead forming ranks underground.

"I no longer believe in God," he said, and Nonna Ela listened to him with her eyes wide open.

"Justice is to be won here, on earth, do you understand?" he went on.

Nonna Ela listened to him, thought her own, and then listened to him again, and finally said, “It doesn’t matter.” And then she added, “But, you don’t have to say that to my parents.”
Love did not only win over god, but over his fiercest enemy: atheism.

5

Dane, nevertheless, had yet another thing he had to admit to Nonna Ela, the thing that shook her young soul as hard as atheism: on one beautiful evening, after he’d already recovered and had been slowly becoming a man again, he told her his name was not Dane, but Gojdan.
“Gojdan?” Nonna Ela asked, shocked, looking at him through her tortoise-shell glasses. “What kind of a name is that?”
“It’s a stupid name,” Dane said, “but it’s mine.”
Nonna Ela, however, got lost in her thoughts as if weighing whether she should marry Gojdan or not.
“It is the way it is,” she finally said in a tone that seemed to offer comfort to both him and her. “But, just so you know, you’ll always be Dane to me.”
But the troubles with their possible marriage were not over yet; on the contrary, they were just beginning. Before the war, when they’d finally agreed to their marriage, which from time to time changed the tone and depth of their voices like a fishbone stuck in their throats, Dane’s parents had had one important demand: Nonna Ela had to accept her husband’s faith. In this matter, his mother, through a messenger that was Bepa Ribarić, who was, on her husband’s side, related to the Krstinić family that lived in the town, sent a long letter to “those Ribarićs” who lived in Banjol. Nonna’s father, who’d been baptized by the name of Anton Tonči Ribarić in 1903 in Battle Creek, and who’d later become one of the first missionaries of the new faith, sent a letter full of respect back to Madam Krstinić saying that they, all of them, were brothers in Christ, that the faith he preached and his daughter professed was a Christian faith, that they too believed in Jesus Christ who had died on the cross for all of us, who had descended to the dead and risen again on the third day and then ascended into heaven. He explained some of the foundations of his faith as well as pointed to the fact that his family followed and studied the Bible like no other family on the island and that his daughter’s piety could stand before any man of a pure heart as a proud testament to Madam Krstinić’s family too. All these were the reasons why he thought his daughter, Gracijela Ribarić, need not convert to the Catholic faith, but that both of them could profess their own faiths in their holy marriage with the same devotedness as the rest of the people on the island. The ceremony could take place in the Catholic church and in that respect he proposed the Church of Saint Justine where he and his wife had married before they accepted the Adventist faith in America. He also said that the fear and slander against their faith that were spreading around the island were caused by ignorance and malice.
Dane’s mother responded with a short letter in which she thanked him on his prompt and polite reply from which she’d learned a lot about her future daughter-in-law’s religion and, besides the letter, she had Bepa deliver him and his family a modest gift of what they could spare from their humble possessions: a couple of sausages and a slab of pancetta that was just dry enough to be eaten. Tonči Ribarić had to reply with a longer letter in which he thanked her on her short letter and said that the kindness and promptness with which she’d replied, he hoped, meant something for their future agreement. He, his wife and daughter were very thankful for the gift, but they had to send it back because they did not eat pork just like all other Adventists who lived by the Holy Scripture.

At home, when Bepa brought back the package just as it'd been delivered, untouched, Dane's mother said to her son in anger: "I knew they were Jews."
"They're not Jews, Mother, but Christians who don't eat pigs."
"What kinds of Christians don't eat pigs?"
And so the negotiations came to a stall, which lasted a couple of weeks, until Madam Krstinić recovered from the insult and the confirmation of her fears. And, had she dared, she would've told her son, "They're Jews, my son. They're lying to you! They killed Christ, how could they believe in him!"
While they were negotiating the wedding and religious policy within the marriage—in that important interim period—Italian units withdrew from the island and it was annexed to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; to commemorate the occasion, a holm oak was planted on the Liberty Square. Once again, Dane had to urge his mother to make the first step, and Bepa delivered yet another letter from Nonna's father in which he politely expressed his surprise that Madam Krstinić had stopped writing, especially after they had engaged in such a nice exchange. In the letter, he suggested that they should no longer communicate through an intermediary, but that they needed to meet and talk face to face so all issues, if there were any left, could, praise the Lord, be resolved. He finished the letter by writing, "We pray for you, your husband and you son." Dane's mother sent back a short letter in which she wrote that they too prayed for the Ribarićs and the rest of their family and agreed to meet and talk in person. She suggested this happened on a neutral ground, in the house of their intermediary, Bepa Ribarić, in Kampor.
Dane had not yet confessed to his parents he no longer believed in God.
And so they started writing back and forth to arrange the meeting. First the Krstinićs suggested they meet on a Saturday, however, the Ribarićs replied that they welcomed the proposal, but that they, unfortunately, could not meet on a Saturday afternoon because this was their holy day, so they suggested they meet on a Sunday afternoon. The proposal would've suited the Krstinićs completely if the Ribarićs hadn't refused them before, so Madam Krstinić, sending her apologies, wrote back saying that Sunday was their holy day and they could not meet then. Friday was out of the question because it brought bad luck, and they all worked during the rest of the week. Arranging a meeting at which they would make all arrangements took three months.

6

Meanwhile, Dane admitted a third thing to Nonna Ela, a thing that shook Nonna's young soul even harder than atheism and the name of Gojdan. He told her that, when he'd been recovering from typhus fever in Italy, a girl had nursed him. She'd been a nun, a beautiful nun in white who at first had fed him with a spoon, as if he'd been a child, and she a mother. He told Nonna that he sometimes dreamed of the nun. As he no longer believed in God and couldn't confess all this to a priest because he thought it pointless, he was now confessing it all to her, his fiancé, and he considered it appropriate. He had no other sins. Nonna Ela got lost in her thoughts, just as she'd had the first two times this had happened, and then told him she forgave him everything. However, when she was alone, sweeping the yard, or doing the laundry, or salting fish, sometimes, not always, she imagined how nice it would've been if she'd been the nun and if she'd nursed such a handsome young man whose life was hanging on a thread. Cannons booming in the distance, armies marching past the hospital, November fogs dragging along the Soča valley, death everywhere, everything perishing, nature as well as people, and the young man with a beautiful face every day takes one more spoon of potato soup, one more spoon of beans,

with a couple of pieces of bacon she's fished out of a large caldron just for him; from one day to another, slowly, he recovers, and she spends nights waking by his bed reading the Book of Ruth, the Book of Daniel, or even the Book of Esther.

One Thursday in April, Tonči Ribarić washed fish blood and guts off the deck of Dolin II and, later in the afternoon, Nonna Ela and her mother boarded the boat wearing their Sunday dresses that island women had never seen before. Ela was beautiful, elegant, a real city girl, but she was still wearing her glasses.

"They've agreed," the women who whisper among themselves commented when they saw them getting into the boat.

The negotiations at Bepa's house above the bay lasted for seven hours, but they just couldn't come to an agreement. Meanwhile, Nonna Ela and Dane sat on a rock by the sea, being silent for a while, then talking for a while. They took pleasure in both. Before then they had only met at secret places, just like this one, but now their future looked full of promise.

"I'll finally be able to walk with you along the quay," Nonna said. "Now, that we're engaged."

But as their parents' negotiations dragged on, Dane was becoming more and more nervous. For the first two hours, they had a nice time, there by the sea, they were alone, they could steal a touch or two, he took her hand and kissed it, she took his and kissed it back. It seemed their lungs would jump out of their chests, both hers and his, they got into each other's arms and danced, hoy-la li, hoy-la li. The Polka. The epidemic of Spanish fever was raging at the time, thousands died, but the two of them cared nothing about it. However, as the night fell, she got worried too, Dane went quiet, and their parents just couldn't agree.

In the house, over the remains of beef prosciutto—acquired in Rijeka just for the occasion—fish, cheese and wine, over leftovers of Rab cake and carob biscuit, things were far from a final agreement. In the end, the parents were so tired they resorted to one last, desperate measure: they would ask the children. Bepa called them into the house, but in her voice there was no joy. And when the children came and when they presented them with the problem, which was theological, sociological and psychological in nature, Nonna Ela cut the thing short: "No problem, I'll convert to Catholicism."

But by then Dane was very upset, and the three shots of brandy they'd drunk the moment they'd come in made things even worse.

"You know what I think about all this," he said in a voice that was firm and deep and that already had the strength of a future orator.

"Dane, don't!" Nonna cried.

"There is no God!" Dane boomed above their heads and fish bones and half-empty, greasy glasses, and all of them stopped, all of them froze. "I don't believe in any of gods, I don't give a rat's ass about God, I could care less if there's one or three, believing in God is like a fog that's getting into people's eyes and that's stopping them from seeing so they walk around the world blind…"

And Nonna's father, a composed and calm man, somehow holy when he talked, asked him, "So, son, what do you believe in, if there is no God?"

"I believe in the gun," Dane said. "And comrade Mauser. After everything I'd seen at the Soča, the only thing I believe in is the gun, and we're getting married, one way or another, it doesn't matter. To please you and not to make a scandal, we'll get married at Saint Justine's and that's that."

“The little Sabbath girl has won the lottery,” the women who whisper murmured among themselves. The date was set for early June, when it was no longer too hot so the suits could be worn and the rains hadn’t yet come so the reception could be held out in the open, at the terrace of Hotel Grand. Nonna Ela’s house bustled with motion and commotion never seen before. Women’s hands embroidered beddings, stitched initials into pillowcases, every now and then a pierced finger ended up in someone’s mouth, accompanied by cheerful laughter, in the kitchen they salted beef—brought from the mainland in ice-boxes—and smoked it with rosemary and sage. Nonna’s cousins milled around the house, giggling and fidgeting, the whole wider family took part in the preparations, as if besides the wedding, they were celebrating the return of this renegade family back to the ranks of the Catholic faith that had been professed here for more than a millennium and a half and that until now had never caused a lump in anyone’s throat.

Only when the night fell, when everything had calmed down, quiet sobs could be heard from Nonna’s parents’ room. That was Nonna’s mother who, as the preparations progressed, had a hard time accepting the fact that her only daughter was marrying a heathen who would like nothing more than turning the whole island into Lenin’s Russia. And so it went on like that, cheerful girly giggles during the day, preparations and work, and in the evening, tears and sadness far away from other people’s eyes.

“Lend him your support,” Nonna’s father said in that holy voice of his. “Now you must believe for both him and for you.”

The first time she tried on her wedding gown, which she’d gotten from one of her cousins from the island of Pag so it needed to be narrowed down in the waist and shortened because it dragged along the floor, her mother cried while holding pins in her mouth so Nonna Ela got scared she might swallow a pin or two and end up in hospital. That would postpone the wedding. At that very moment, the old Ela, Nonna Ela’s grandmother, who was very pious and who swore a lot, made it through the cordon of young women and girls. She caught sight of her granddaughter trying on her wedding dress; she was so young, so beautiful, with the breasts rising on her chest, with the buttocks that had won over God and atheism, and on her nose—her tortoise-shell glasses.

“You’re not gonna wear glasses on your wedding?” she said, just for the sake of it, to justify her untimely intrusion and her nosiness, typical of old women, to see something against the protocol. She never suspected her granddaughter would reply, “I am, Nonna!”

This outraged her completely and did something to her lips and the root of her nose. “Tell her, Pjerina!” Nonna’s nonna said, her voice rattling.

Nonna’s mother cried even harder and said with those pins in her mouth, “I cam’t tell er amythimg amymore.” And then she sighed again.

“He loves me the way I am, Nonna, glasses and all,” Nonna Ela said.

“It’s a shame, my dear,” Nonna’s nonna said.

“It’s not a shame, it’s fashion, Nonna, these are modern times.”

And Nonna’s nonna went quiet for a while, observed her granddaughter all pretty and tall, dressed in white, and she would’ve liked nothing more than to curse God for allowing man to invent glasses, so she pulled out her last argument.

“It brings bad luck,” Nonna’s nonna said.

“Ah, Nonna, you and your bad luck,” Nonna Ela said.

“Listen to me, it’s bad luck, and lots of it, enough for a whole life of misery.”

Nonna's nonna left the room in protest, and Nonna Ela and her first cousin who helped her said that nonna was superstitious, that she always spat when she saw cats, that she never put her shoes on the table, that she crossed herself and spat whenever she saw a nun, and she smiled when she saw two of them because an odd number of nuns meant bad luck, and an even number of nuns meant good luck, that she was afraid of an owl hooting, that she made sure to never pass under the ladder, that, if someone got injured or sick, she never used her own body to show where, that she never used number thirteen, not even when calculating how much money she made selling chards, potatoes and carrots, it was better her calculation were wrong than her children coming down with a big cough...

8

The end of May brought final preparations and yet another offensive on the side of Nonna's nonna. She came one evening, two days before the wedding, and said once again that getting married with one's glasses on their face brought bad luck. When her granddaughter replied that she was exaggerating, that bad luck didn't depend on glasses, but on God's will, and asked how could she as a firm believer be so superstitious, Nonna's nonna said: "Armin, from the Španjol family, got married wearing his glasses and sank with his ship in Argentina, Stipe Barišić, who went to school with me, got married wearing his glasses in Rijeka and pneumonia took him, Ana Padovan, not long ago, got married wearing her glasses and her child died of diphtheria... Need I say more?"
Then Nonna's nonna went silent and waited to see what effect her words had on her granddaughter, and although it wasn't much of an effect, it wasn't none either. Her granddaughter listened to her carefully so nonna pulled out yet another argument for which she was certain it would be accepted: "I know it's modern," she said, "but the photographer can use ink to draw the glasses on your photo, that's how you do it. He can draw any kind of glasses you please, and you, my dear child, have only this one pair."
"Nonna," Nonna Ela said, "why should he draw glasses, when I've got a pair of my own and they're pretty, and modern, and Dane loves them."
Nonna looked at her, crossed herself, and stormed out of the room. She uttered under her breath, "You'll see, bad luck..."

9

The groom and the rest of the wedding party came to Nonna's house with the intention of taking her away, but they had to stop at the entrance because one of Nonna's uncles—the fat Pere whose nickname was Bones—got in their way. He offered them a shot of brandy, they all had to down it from one and the same glass so it took a while, and after they'd finished, he asked them why they came.
"We heard there was a pretty girl living here and we came to get her," the best man said.
"Is this her?" Bones asked. An old woman covered with a white crocheted shawl came out of a house. The wedding party laughed.
"That's one fine lady," the best man said, "but she's not the one we came for." And the same thing took place three times more and every time out came an even older woman. Bones listed their virtues, youth, beauty, charm, and all of them laughed heartily. Then Nonna came out. She was dressed in her white wedding gown with lace collar, white shoes and a long white lace veil that hid her face, but not so much that the tortoise-shell glasses wouldn't be seen on her nose.

“Bad luck!” Nonna’s nonna muttered, and her daughter snapped at her, “Mom, stop it!”
And now, when the bride, the gown and the glasses were revealed to the world, the wedding party could take a seat in the yard, have another glass of brandy or two, eat some dried figs, beef prosciutto, cheese and cookies. However, Dane’s mother kept urging them on, “Let’s go, hurry up, we need to see the photographer, we’re going to be late.”
If the bride was not to her liking, let at least the wedding pass without a scandal. That’s what she’d been praying for to the Blessed Virgin during the last couple of weeks: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, let there be no scandal, let everything turn out well!”
And so the bride and the groom set off on foot along the seafront towards the town. Dane was handsome, all dressed up, wearing his dark suit and a slim tie, like a thin black snake coiled around his neck. His black hair was smoothed back, his narrow face and his blue eyes showed no trace of typhus, and he kept smiling as Nonna Ela fell behind, unable to keep up with his long stride: the two of them just couldn’t sync up their steps. Along the way, people who were just passing by, or who came to see, stopped to have a look, and there were many. Everyone from Banjol came to see the newlyweds off, and it seemed people from Barbat and Mundanije came down too, all of them curious to see the little Sabbath girl marrying the handsomest boy of his generation. The girls of her age who they met along the way grinned and giggled, elbowing one another and pointing at the groom, their eyes devouring him. And when they passed the bay and the harbor and went up toward Srednja Street, accompanied by the brass band and the cheers of joy, the flag waving, there were even more girls. Young ladies from the town, dressed in fancy outfits, from Trieste or Venice, the young women and girls who cooled themselves with their fans and flirted with the groomsmen, more than anything with the groom who was still trying to sync up his step with Nonna’s. And as they rolled like waves, all of them, the whole wedding party, Nonna, as she would later tell, felt strange. She saw women devouring her future husband with their eyes, she saw envious old hags and women who whisper among themselves and she knew what they were saying: “The little Sabbath girl’s sitting pretty!”
Never before had she walked with him along the quay, never before had she seen all this: at secret places he was only hers.
Before they reached the Church of Saint Justine—its nave decorated with forty white lilies, according to the number of days Jesus spent in the desert, tempted by Satan, hungry and thirsty—where the ceremony was to take place, the wedding party turned into Srednja Street where the photographer kept his shop. Dane’s mother had insisted they had their photos taken before the wedding, when women’s faces were still fresh, when tears had not yet ruined the makeup, and the hairdos had not come undone. And so they walked into the shop that stood close to the middle of Srednja Street, at the same distance from the pharmacy and the town’s Loggia.
And Nonna’s nonna kept muttering, “Dear Lord, save us! Christ, protect us!”
“Mom, stop it,” her daughter said.
“Tell her to at least remove the glasses while she’s having her picture taken!” Nonna’s nonna said.
The shop’s owner met them with a scene already prepared. They had to stand on a small platform, and on the wall behind them there was a drawing showing a huge white heart made of lace. The pattern resembled lacework from the island of Pag, so in this composition the newlyweds looked like those caramel figurines on top of a wedding cake. His camera set on a tripod, the old Španjol took one photo, and the ignited magnesium ribbon flashed into their faces. For the second photo, he set them up for a nice semi-profile, so that it seemed they were looking somewhere into a bright future, into children, into building a new house, into baptisms and birthdays. In the meanwhile, the wedding party crammed

at the door and giggled. The photographer asked the bride to pull the lace veil back so her face would show and so she did. It took a while until the people noticed something strange was taking place. The bride, all pretty, jubilant, gazed at something on the wall through her tortoise-shell glasses and her face took on an unusually blissful expression. This something stood on the wall five or six meters away from her, but she just kept staring at it. Then the magnesium ribbon flashed in the half-darkened shop, but this did not stop Nonna Ela from gazing at that thing on the wall. The old Španjol then told them to change the position, to face one another and look into each other's eyes and to put all of their love into that look because the photo would hang above their wedding bed. However, Nonna Ela did not respond. The groom turned to face her, but she, as if hypnotized, just kept staring at the thing on the wall. Her mother called out to her, "Ela! Ela! Look at him!"
Nonna did not respond. Only the tears appeared under her eyeglasses.
"Hey, pay attention!" her mother shouted.
"Ela, look into your husband's eyes!" his mother shouted.
Restlessness spread among the wedding party like a small wave of movement; someone scratched his nose, someone adjusted his tie, women checked their hairdos, and all of this happened in silence that slowly made even those movements freeze.

10

That night Nonna dreamed a pig had given birth to her. She was lying in bed, shaking with cold, even though she was hot and her nightdress was drenched in sweat. They changed her clothes and rubbed her body with pomace brandy every couple of hours, but it didn't help. Her mother wetted her chapped lips, and early in the afternoon the doctor finally arrived. Nonna's mother had called him in the morning, when the fever had just started, yet he came now. He wasn't alone, Doctor Havelka from Sušak, a pulmonologist, was with him. Nonna's father and mother met them in their front yard. Father stepped in front of them to block their way, but the doctor told him, "Tonči, come on, let us at least see her."
"All my trust lies in God," Nonna's father said, but he didn't prevent them from entering the house. He had his Bible with him. He carried it around all day long, as if it were his spare underpants.
Nonna's mother led them inside, while her father stayed out on the terrace. And when the doctor from the island and the pulmonologist from Sušak reached her bedroom door, which were closed so that the draft would not hurt the patient, both of them covered their noses and mouths with gauze masks. When Nonna's mother saw this, she burst into tears and started praying.
"Spanish flu has reached our shores too," said the women who whisper among themselves.
The doctors examined Nonna, took her temperature, asked her how she felt and, in the end, removed their masks.
"Thank God, it's not Spanish flu," Doctor Havelka said.
The other doctor concluded that Nonna suffered from nerves and that it was no wonder considering everything that had happened. The day before, Nonna spent an undetermined amount of time gazing at something on the wall, nothing they did couldn't wake her up from her trance. And then her future mother-in-law rubbed her temples with lavender oil, and Nonna seemed to come to, she looked around the wedding party, gazed at every face, and smacked her lips a couple of times.
"That's from excitement," the women who whisper said.
But it wasn't.

When she regained consciousness somewhat, she came down from the platform among the people in the shop, then she walked out onto the worn-out stone slabs of the street and, her voice tired yet filled with certainty, she said: “God has called upon me to serve him, not my husband!”
And again there was silence. This whole Romance, then Gothic, then Renaissance town went silent. Chance passers-by went silent too, as did the women standing on their house windows. Some older women were already crossing themselves because Nonna’s face seemed as if not from this world.
“God called upon me,” she said. “The Blessed Virgin smiled at me from the wall. She smiled at me… I saw her clearly.”
Her father stared at her in shock.
“We don’t believe in the Blessed Virgin,” he said.
“How come you don’t believe in the Mother of God?” Dane’s mother said in even greater shock. “Cursed am I for being born, cursed is my mother who gave birth to me, cursed is the womb from which I crawled…”
And as it was dead quiet, her curses could be heard well.
“I’m not going to marry because a call from God is stronger that a call from man,” Nonna said and went back into the shop, glanced at the wall, and then walked out again. “The Blessed Virgin is still smiling.”
Her father walked inside after her, shocked, angry, his armpits smelly.
“She’s not smiling,” he said when he came out. “It’s just a picture.”
“Rare are occasions when God gives us a sign,” Nonna Ela said, and her voice sounded strange, learned. “God walks in front of me, naked and barefoot.”
“What has she said?” people whispered among themselves. “That he’s naked and barefoot?”
By now there were more and more of those who crossed themselves.
“I’m not going to marry because this marriage would not please the Lord.”
“Like hell you aren’t!” his mother said.
“Don’t say hell!” her mother said.
And Dane stared at her as if a thick black fog was coming out of her mouth.

11

Nonna recovered relatively quickly, in a matter of days, the nervous fever eased up, and her father, disappointed with her, but not shaken in his faith, wrote a long letter to his friend from Battle Creek who was now a missionary in British East Africa. He thanked God for his health and all the gifts, both bitter and sweet, and wrote to his friend that a young girl whom God had called upon to serve him would be arriving soon after this letter, so let her serve him in Africa where God tested people on a daily basis, and “You, dear brother, write in your letters of these trials like they are gifts from God.” And she would be far away from the shame she had caused herself. According to his rough estimate, the girl would arrive a couple of weeks after the letter and he should meet her like his sister for she was kind and pious and, on top of everything, his only daughter.
And so one Sunday morning, Nonna took her new suitcase made of cardboard and leather, that had been bought specially for this occasion on Sušak, and boarded the boat to Rijeka, and then, via Trieste and Cyprus, arrived to Alexandria. From there she took all kinds of transportation to reach Mombasa. The journey lasted well over two months. Only in Mombasa, after she’d disembarked, did she become aware how different were the world to which she had arrived. On the journey, in the ship’s cabin and on the train, she could still sense Europe, people and scents she was used to. And now suddenly everything

changed. Mombasa was a mass of mud houses, whitewashed, their roofs made of straw. In the narrow alleys, next to swarms of flies that sat like smallpox on every living creature larger than themselves, leopard hides were sold along with objects made of ivory, rhino horns and stuffed heads of animals. Further away, she could see people in long white tunics grilling meat or baking thin flour pitas in the middle of the street, surrounded by flies and dust. By the sea, however, she saw stone palaces built in Arabic style, with cast iron bars on windows and huge teak doors. A well-mannered man, wearing a fez and a long djellabah made of camel hair, gave her directions to the train station. His English was almost unintelligible, so much different from her mother tongue from Battle Creek.

The journey along the narrow-gauge rail line from Mombasa to Nairobi took around eighteen hours. First the train passed through the tropical jungle and Nonna just couldn't fall asleep, even though she was as tired as an animal. The drops of sweat trickling down her face and body tickled her. And the mosquitoes were unbearable too, luckily, she had enough quinine in her suitcase. At every station, naked-breasted black women offered bananas, oranges, and lemons. During the night, just before morning, when it became cooler, she managed to fall a sleep for a couple of hours, and when she woke up, the train had already reached the central plateau offering the view of enormous grass plain with herds upon herds of grazing wild animals.

In Nairobi, where they'd arrived around noon, she was met by her father's friend and her brother in faith, Stan McAdams, a born Scotsman. And he took her in his truck, along the unique dusty road, to Makueni, where they took an oxcart, driven by Tuci, an older member of the Wakamba tribe, to the mission of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. The whole mission comprised of just four small wooden buildings that had different functions: a sleeping house, a school, a kitchen, and a small hospital. The structures made an irregular rectangle in the middle of savanna, and in its center stood a dusty patch of land with no grass and, right in the middle of it, a covered well. That's where she met Sister Hunter who was in charge of the mission.

"You're going to be a teacher, a nurse and a cook," Sister Hunter told her. "Welcome!"

12

The strangest things about Africa were its sounds. Especially the ones that could be heard during the night, when everything in the mission went quiet. During the day she could hear people talking, children singing, cows mooing, mostly the sounds she was used to. At night, on the other hand, all kinds of cries, calls, crackles, and clicks could be heard from the savanna. With time, she learned to tell them apart. Mangabey monkeys made high-frequency cries that came in clusters, so much like cats caterwauling in February; grey parrots sounded like tiny machineguns; hyenas laughed, and then, immediately after, cried; vultures communicated over long distances using choppy clicks; wild dogs howled... But all of this happened in the distance, deep in the bush, only the mosquitoes kept buzzing around her head, the nets doing nothing to stop them.

In the beginning, her job was to look after the children who came to the mission's school, those without parents also slept at the mission, while some came from nearby villages where the Wakamba people lived; in order to make them send their children to school, they had to give food and other supplies to their parents. Three days a week she worked in the kitchen.

"When will I get to work at the infirmary?" she asked Sister Hunter after a couple of months had passed.

"When you learn your way around here a bit more?" Sister Hunter replied. "There's time."

“I want to help people!”
“Don’t worry, you’re helping.”
And it seemed to Nonna that for some reason Sister Hunter did not want her in the infirmary.
Already at five o’clock in the morning it was too hot to sleep, Equatorial Africa was an oven, giant and relentless. That’s why Nonna always got up at the time marked by the lavish twittering of African nightingales, larks, and all kinds of small parrots. She would spend an hour in her room, which only a curtain separated from the classroom, preparing her lessons, and then the holy service would begin out in the open. The service and the readings from the Bible were led by Sister Hunter, only occasionally by John McAdams, if he came from Nairobi. And after the breakfast, which most often consisted of unleavened bread, milk and tropical fruit, the school would begin.
After three months, when she’d already gotten to know all the people who worked at the mission or who visited it occasionally, she again asked Sister Hunter when she would work at the infirmary, and Sister Hunter told her to be patient, she told her there was time. And then she added, more to herself, “There’s always time for that.”
She also noticed that few people entered the infirmary. Those were McAdams sisters, Brother John’s daughters, and Taia, a Wakamba girl who wore a white robe of a nurse and helped with the patients. And in all that time at the mission, she never saw any of the patients leaving the infirmary. When a child would get hurt, they would help it in the clinic, whose door was always open.

13

Sporadic screams that could sometimes be heard at night, or loud mumbling that came from the infirmary joined the strange noises of Africa. The screams melted into the cries of the savanna, they sounded like the calling of Mangabey monkeys, only deeper, and they didn’t come in clusters, but were isolated. And they were close. After one such night, filled with screams, she asked Sister Hunter what was going on in the infirmary and told her that she had come here, first and foremost, to help people. Sister Hunter looked at her, her gaze deep and penetrating, and then she said, “So it seems it’s time you see the infirmary.”
After the morning service and breakfast, she took her to the infirmary. They remained inside for about forty minutes, nothing could be heard outside and the children peacefully sat on the little benches under the palm trees and waited for the morning class. They saw her when she came out, in the company of Sister Hunter who had to hold her up because at one moment Nonna lost her step. Then she ran up to the scrawny palm tree and started vomiting while Sister Hunter held her hair back.
With time she also learned that Swahili sounded different depending on whether a man or a woman spoke it. And this didn’t depend on the depth of someone’s voice, it was that female and male consonants had a different sound. However, Swahili, when spoken by children, didn’t sound different when boys or girls used it, it sounded like one language. It’s a *lingua franca* of British East Africa, spoken by different tribes in Kenya, just as in Tanzania, and so Nonna made it her task to learn it. Biblical texts were read in English, but some children replied in Swahili or their tribal languages. With time, she slowly started to understand Swahili, even when spoken in the Wakamba dialect. She began with key words that were frequently repeated: *mbwa, mbwa* children used to shout when a head of a wild dog who came here to feed on the leftovers appeared behind the dining hall. When she opened the Bible, the children would say *kitabu*, and they used *Mama wa Mungu* for the Blessed Virgin. When, at

the end of the day, they said goodbye to their friends who went back to their villages, they would hug and say, *Upendo*. For a long time she thought it meant “goodbye”, but it actually meant “love”.
A year had already passed since she’d come to Makueni, two times a week she helped in the kitchen and two times a week she worked at the infirmary, and she taught every day from six in the morning until noon, when she realized why Swahili sounded different when spoken by men and women of the Wakamba people. She connected it with the fact that the men, especially young men, had their teeth, while their wives seriously lacked them. Sister Hunter explained that this happened because they lacked calcium when they were pregnant. “Babies eat their teeth up,” Sister Hunter said.

14

All of this took place in a vast bush area where there were no people; from the bush and low, thorny brush the giant Kilimanjaro rose with its white cap of snow. It was strange to see snow in Africa, with winter temperature of thirty-five degrees Centigrade, and remember that she’d seen her last big snow back in Pittsburgh, when she’d been five years old, and that she needed to travel all the way to Africa to see it again. Sister Hunter told her that the snow never melted and that it was at least a thousand years old.
In the winter of 1921, Nonna had lived in Africa for almost two years, when Sister Hunter asked for her help: her cousin, John Hunter, who’d been living in Kenya as a white hunter for twenty-some years, needed someone to take care of the food during a big hunting expedition. This John Hunter, with his black bearers, a tent, sleeping mats, and a small charcoal cooker, came from Nairobi in an old army truck. Sister Hunter and Nonna took yet another tent and supplies, such as flour, lard, pasta, and rice. They would take care of the fruit and meat along the way.
At that time, John Hunter, who would later write a book about his adventures as a white hunter, was a grizzled forty-year-old man, tall, his stomach showing. He had a wife and four children back in Nairobi. Every day, he and his bearers went from their improvised camp at the foot of Kilimanjaro into the bush. He didn’t wear a pith helmet, like most of the Brits in Kenya, but a cloth hat the color of sand with a couple of large peacock feathers. He looked like an elderly dandy, one of many snobs from Europe who, in those years, often came to Kenya on safari. Only later did he tell her that for some reason the rhinos did not stand the fluttering of the feathers in the wind and immediately attacked. That’s how, actually, they revealed their position so it was easier to shoot them. Otherwise, they were very clever, and hiding in the bush.
A couple of days later, they left Taisi, their Wakamba helper, in the camp to cook the antelope stew, and the two of them went into the bush with John Hunter and his bearers. They went to hunt the rhinos. And then she saw it. The native chasers taunted the rhinos by waving their feathers and shouting, while John Hunter stood in a clearing, some fifty meters from the edge of the brush. Behind him there were two bearers with loaded guns and another one who carried the ammunition. The hunter, an unlit pipe in his mouth, waited for the charging rhinos. He would then take down the animal with an accurate shot, and when the rhino fell, rising the dust, he would remove the hat and wipe the sweat from his head while the Wakambas cheered happily. This is where she saw that the whites had not conquered Africa by using military force, but by employing hunters who made a pact against nature with the natives. A killer rhino presented a huge problem for one of the Wakamba villages.
And the whole day he just kept shooting: shouting, then rhino grunting and charging, a shot, dust rising. And again: shouting, grunting, the running that made the ground shake, a shot, dust. And again.

And again. The two of them sat in the shade of a lonely eucalyptus tree, under the mosquito net, in some kind of an improvised camp: it was surreal. The sky turned purple, the rhinos kept falling one after another, and Sister Hunter read the Bible.
She was surprised to see that the bullet wound was barely visible on such a large body, which on the ground looked like a pile of grey dung, yet the terrible wound on their faces, a bloody hole where the horn had been sawed off, screamed into the heavens. John Hunter's Wakambas, who usually transported rifles and tusks, now took their blades, similar to the ones the Massai carried, and dug the horns out of their large heads. The vultures gathered, and the hyenas laughed in the bush. The Wakambas shot at them with their poisoned arrows. The bearers were covered in rhinos' blood and, on their black bodies, the blood took on a horrible color. She witnessed that historic moment: in a single day, February 6th, 1921, John Hunter killed one hundred and two rhinos and all of them, their horns dug out, were lying in front of him. What a normal person in Europe thought impossible, God tolerated in Africa.