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The Hotel Tito
Translated from Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać

My grandpa used to drink a lot. Long ago, back when he was young, he fell off a motorbike and banged his head. Something in him went out of joint then, and he started drinking. That was the official version. He kept on his feet, more or less steadily, and would get home on his own. Those who stayed in town told us stories of how he rode his motorcycle drunk and took shrapnel in the ass. They'd retell the story and laugh. Only once I also heard that some Chetniks let him drink brandy and that he made friends with them. But even if he had some intention behind his actions, it made no difference, because in the end he also signed the house over to them. Sometimes I pretended not to know him. When I saw him come towards me, I'd swerve toward the fire escape and run off. There was always a flock of kids running after him because his pockets were full of bonbons that he would share. He liked to mess with them, and they could be quite cruel to him. It went on until one day when Dražen's dad said that he'd kill him if he saw him again near the kid- him, an old drunken mule. From then on I avoided him even more in the hallways, but some afternoons I'd go to their room. Most of the time Grandpa slept, and when he saw me there he'd melt and hand me some toy made of wire and screws. He'd give me a little money to get him a beer from the bar and then to keep the change. It seemed as if it would be best for everyone if he'd just close his eyes.
Once as I was hanging around the reception area, I met Ivan and Zoki. They said they were going to follow Grandpa when he went behind the Political School, like every day at the same time before dinner. They wanted to know what he was doing; maybe he was hiding some dough. I didn't know what I should do. If he was doing something really horrible, I'd better not be there, but then again I had this impulse not to leave him on his own. We started after him. We were some fifteen meters behind, but Grandpa never turned around. We passed the big field behind the building and came to the part where there's a slight upward slope. A big bare rock jutted out of the grass and Grandpa knelt in front of it. We couldn't see what he was doing, and since no one was really afraid of him, Zoki went to him and said, "Grandpa, where did ya hide the treasure?" A few moments later Zoki turned around and came back. He said Grandpa was crazy. He was kneeling in front of a rock that someone had chalked a cross on. But I was relieved. He was just crazy, nothing worse, and we silently returned to the building.

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Zoki was my age. He was one of those kids who always picked fights, spat at other children and usually when you saw him you knew he was up to no good. His cousin told me that when he was a baby his dad threw him stark naked out on the front lawn into the snow, because he wouldn't stop crying. His twin sister Zorica was in my class at school. On the last day of school, on the road back to the Political School, Marina, Zorica and I found a little scabby kitten. It was really exciting. He was so tiny that he fit into our two palms put together. His hair was patchy, but he moved and meowed softly. We decided to save him. I took out the pouch that I carried my school slippers in and put him in it. We took him to the hill behind the Political School. We got a box and some clothes from Caritas and wrapped him in it. We agreed we'd steal a syringe from the doctor's office to feed him with. We took turns bringing him breakfast since we had to get up before seven. When it was Zorica's turn, she overslept. We didn't tell

her, but soon we moved him to another location and started avoiding her. One day on our way to the hill we noticed her following us, so we turned around and went back. Zorica came to me and said, “I hope to God your father never returns.” I spat at her but she dodged it and ran off. I told everyone what she’d said and virtually nobody hung out with her anymore. A few days later the kitten disappeared from the box. We searched the hill up and down, but we never saw him again. The summer went by and Zorica and I still hadn’t made up. She mostly hung around on her own or with her cousin Nataša whom everyone called Clank and who was a borderline case for the special school. One afternoon I met Nataša and asked her to tell Zorica that I wanted to make up. A few minutes later Zorica came running up to me, from the distance I could see her smile. She offered me her hand and said she hadn’t really meant it. I didn’t offer her mine, but I said the whole thing about making up had been a joke. I turned around and left.

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Nataša had several nicknames. Clank, Saddo and Beatles, because of her wiry hair and the hairstyle that her mom used to do for her because you couldn’t do anything else with it. She pronounced it “beet-loos”, which made her even more pathetic. Her older sister Kristina had beautiful waist-long, dark hair. She was about to graduate from the high school of economics and was engaged to a guy from Zagorje. Their room was clinically clean, but filled with all sorts of trinkets. I know it because sometimes I’d go to Nataša’s place when there was absolutely no one else to hang around the hotel with. Every day she’d call me and she often followed me just because I was sometimes nice to her. When I came to her place, she’d show me everything that was there, especially what she wasn’t supposed to, like her sister’s stuff. Once she took out Kristina’s sanitary pads, pretending she knew what they were for and said she’d give me one if I promised to come the next day. Her mom and dad lived in the next room. Her mom was a quiet, little woman who did nothing but clean and tidy up all the time, and her dad was a real lady-killer, at least he thought so. Everyone knew he had a thing going on with the woman from Zagorje who worked at the reception desk.

At this time I’d created a dance group and was picking the girls who’d be in it. I composed the dances and decided which songs we’d dance to and what we’d be wearing. They even gave us the room number four to practice in – the one used for kindergarten in the mornings. When we’d perfected our dance routine, we’d put up notices around the reception area and invite people to come see us in the gym. It was mostly old people and small children who’d flock to the stands, and we had the impression that everyone wanted to be like us. All this time Clank followed us, wanting to be in the group. We agreed she had no chance. We’d perfected a dance routine to the song ‘It’s Only 12 O’clock’, and I thought we could use a boy who’d rap along as we danced, but there was no such boy around. The day before the show a great commotion broke out on the first floor, women were shouting and there was sighing and sobbing. Clank stood on the fire escape, all red in the face. I asked her what was going on. “He ran off with that whore from Zagorje.” I think everybody’s biggest problem was the fact she was from Zagorje. I told Nataša if she wanted to, she could dress in black, put on a baseball cap and come to the gym the next day. She could stand beside us and pretend to be a boy. She said she’d come, but the next day her mom wouldn’t let her.

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Room number seven was the most popular spot in the whole Political School. The management let the young people use it to celebrate New Year's, play Ludo, cards, and just to spend time there. Everyone between the ages of thirteen and seventeen hung around there. I was a bit younger, but I knew what Seven was like because I'd sneak out on the nearby fire escape and peep in every time the door was left ajar. All of us who were soon to be initiated into Seven did it, and whenever one of the people inside noticed, they'd slam the door on us, leaving us in a cloud of smoke. There were several armchairs in the room, a couch with its insides spilling out because it had been stabbed with a knife, and several low tables. The middle of the room was taken by a ping-pong table. And that was all. The walls were decorated with colorful post-its with quotations uttered by the less popular members of the company. Most of them were by Clank, but she visited so rarely that she couldn't even get mad because of it. My first visit to Seven was when the good Doctor from Vukovar came to see us in our temporary home for the displaced and gave everyone at the hotel a carton of Marlboro reds – and by this I don't mean only grown ups, but literally every living and walking creature. Two men unloaded the cigarettes from a truck parked in front of the hotel and then stood by the truck holding a list of rooms and numbers of the occupants. I waited in line to get our cartons. Half an hour later and with three cartons, I headed back to the hotel. I decided to tell mom they'd given me only two, for her and brother. I knocked on Seven's door. There was no sound from inside, so I sat on the wooden bench, hiding the cartons behind my legs in case someone I knew passed by. Soon, from the darkness of the room, Miro popped out and said, "What's up? Whad'ya want?" "I brought you cigarettes," I said softly. He took the carton out of my hands and slammed the door behind himself. Suddenly, Dragan was behind me. He opened the door again and, standing at it, said, "Whatcha doin' here?" "I brought you cigarettes," I repeated. He started to laugh and baring his yellow teeth said, "Wanna come in?" "D'ya know what they're doin'?" he grinned. I peeked over his shoulder, but it was almost completely dark, and I could only see some shadows on the couch. I heard the voices of Miro and some girl. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Playing dare games in the dark!" Miro called out. "Now scram, and come back on New Year's Eve," Dragan said, and shut the door. I shouldn't have given them the cigarettes, I kept telling myself as I climbed the stairs. I came into the room and gave mom two cartons. "That's all they gave me," I said. "I'm not surprised that they'd stint us in this too. At least I'll smoke less," she sighed. I was relieved she hadn't caught on so I sat on her lap and hugged her. From then on Miro always said hi to me in the hallway. My girlfriends kept asking what the deal was with him saying hello, and I pretended not to have a clue. By New Year's I was wearing a softcup bra, and I managed to get Marina and Jelena into the party. Room number one was used as the doctor's office. The nurse Ružica and doctor Piggy worked there. The nurse sometimes gave us plastic syringes, bandages and empty pill boxes to play with. We often hung around outside One. There was an improvised waiting room there which was actually a big hallway between the stairway and the ground floor. Against the wall, opposite the door, stood about a dozen chairs which were always filled during the office hours, up to the last one. In fact, the waiting room was always filled with old people. And left of this crowd, near the end of the hallway, we'd be skipping rubber bands. There were loads of places in the hotel, more spacious and vacant, where no one would have been in our way, but here something was always going on, much like everywhere else in the world where people were lamenting, nagging others and arguing, which made it interesting to us. We were very aware that we were getting on people's nerves, but this didn't bother us at all. We figured out who were the regular patients and which ones couldn't stand children at all, to them we were particularly cruel. Daily, they played an inevitable part in our twisted games. Grandma Punđara lived alone, she had no one, not even distant relatives, and she visited the doctor's office every day. Her only friend was

Grandma Milica, who was diabetic and a little crazy and, every time she passed by us she'd halt, lean on her elbow and sing, "See the Slavonian lass a-goin', look at her pussy a-showin', Grandpa says cover it up, Grandma says fuck her now," she'd then burst out laughing and go on her way. She was a loony, but she didn't hate us. One of Grandma Punđara's legs was thick and lumpy, and the other one was normal. She had quite a limp, but when she ran after us, she'd catch up with us at an incredible speed. When she caught someone, she'd squeeze them between her huge tits which were hanging down to her waist. It reeked so much between them that it made you dizzy. We'd stretch out the rubber band right in front of her, or tie it to the chair next to hers, and then start skipping it like elephants, as wildly and as rowdily as we could. A few moments later Grandma Punđara would get up and try to rip the rubber band up, yelling agitatedly, "Get lost, you little vermin!" Once she managed to grab little Ivana by her pony tail and pulled out a strand of her hair. That's when we decided that we were going to have our revenge on her. We followed her and found out which room she lived in. You just had to add up the room numbers to a hundred and you'd get her telephone number. We hoped she had a telephone. We went to Marina's room since she was alone there with her sister, and we dialed the number. "Hello?" a voice croaked on the other side. We were silent. "Hello? Who's there?" asked the voice again. I took the receiver from Marina and started blowing into it. I'd seen this in a movie. "You motherfuckin' fuckers, you bastards! Piss off, you pests!" the voice thundered from the receiver so that those far from it could hear. We grew solemn. No one said anything and then Marina hung up, picked up the receiver again and redialed the number. We sat in silence, looking at each other. "Hello?" the same voice answered. Jelena blew into the receiver. "O, you vermin, you cursed demons! May worms feast on your innards, and crabs drag you down the street, and your mothers poison you! You rotten vermin...," this time I hung up. We were all silent. We were stunned by the curses we'd just heard and we didn't want to hear any more of Grandma Punđara's horrendous swearing, yet at the same time it was very exciting. That afternoon we didn't call her anymore, but we gave her number to Zoki, Ivan and the other boys. They liked it even more and thought it was really funny, so they called her all the time, sometimes even at night. From then on, whenever we met Grandma Punđara, we'd greet her loudly and keep smiling. We didn't skip rubber bands in front of her anymore. Only sometimes, very rarely, when there was no other way to kill boredom, we'd dial her up, put the receiver face down next to the phone, wait a minute or two, and then hang up. A few years later Grandma Punđara got cancer and died. She didn't live to return home for she was buried there, on a small mound, and she had no one of her own to transport her home later. About a hundred of us started elementary school in the village. Most of us were from the Political School, and there were some Hillies, people from Vukovar who lived in the hotel on the hill, thus the name. They were placed there some time before us - theirs was a real hotel which was one part underground and once used for tourists and various conferences. We joined forces in the war against the Piggies, which was our favorite nickname for the people from Zagorje – and the war broke out immediately. It was cruel and long, with rare truces and few real friendships. We were all more or less the same age, almost equally poor, but we came from a town, a real one, with a town square, Baroque buildings, a Town Café and a Nobel prize winner. Whereas they had only a crappy cake shop and a lousy Communist President who'd cooked this whole thing up. Our arguments were irrefutable. Not to mention the less important ones like that they reeked of pigs, had mud up to their knees, or that there were drunken pupils in the higher grades and an occasional pregnant girl. A smaller number of Piggies were from a village that had a school and street lighting, while the others came from the scattered hamlets too small to have a name of their own so they had a single name: the Village of Zagorje. We couldn't understand a word of what those Piggies were saying; to us it sounded like a mixture of Shiptar

and Slovenian. We called them social cases, although we were all on the state pay roll, only they were on it of their own choosing or simply because they were stupid and lazy, while we were on it because of the Serbs. We hated them as much as they did us; we fought them individually or in groups. To them we were intruders and a threat, displaced persons with hefty pensions and video recorders, living in the hotel, where everything was served up to us. They'd give a cow to live like that for a week. On the other hand, we didn't know whether or not a cow had horns, so they made fun of us. They couldn't understand that this didn't hurt us at all. Clank, Vesna from Vukovar – a Hillie who would later become a very good friend of mine – and Ivan, who stopped going to school after a year, were in my class, so only three of us displaced were left in the class in the end. At first we sneered at most of the classmates, while we kept diplomatic relations with the cleaner ones and those with better grades. Perhaps because we could understand what they were saying, we could copy their work during exams, or simply because we didn't want to be lonely. As years went by, some of these relationships became almost friendships, but somehow we always remained us, and they something different. But such people were rare. The majority were typical offspring of the Zagorje villages. The brothers Ivek and Marijan walked five kilometers to the bus stop where the bus picked them up at six and took them back at four in the afternoon, following a long tour of the surrounding hills.

Marijan was a C student, quiet and shy, and was missing a front tooth. Ivek was mildly retarded, but far more than our Clank, and he knew the calendar of saints by heart. It was in fact the only thing he knew. He sat with Zdenko, who was horribly fat and plain stupid, and once, after a Croatian exam, two identical tests came up with Zdenko's first and last name written on them. The other one was Ivek's. Both managed to make it to the eighth grade. Yellow sat in the last, loser's row; he was small and mean. He often came to school drunk because he ate bread and wine for breakfast. He lived with his granny who told him that little Jesus also ate this stuff, and he told us the same thing. He also made it through elementary school. In front of me sat Veronika, who always reeked of pigs, had greasy hair and bulging blue eyes. Everybody's last name was Antolić, Županić or Broz. I didn't talk to Veronika for a long time, but then my Grandpa became friends with her dad, who also liked to drink and gave him the Caritas stuff that none of us wanted, like UN shampoos and tooth paste that Veronika said smelt real good and foamed, so she became very nice to me. Still, we didn't have much to talk about since she was convinced that there was an American city called Chickago, but she kept badgering us and inviting us over to look at the little bunny rabbits that had just been born. One spring afternoon we did go over. She lived in a miniature house on the hill with innumerable brothers and sisters who were all small and dirty. They had only two rooms; one was for cooking and eating, and they slept in the other one. We had only one room, but we figured they were poorer than us. The bunnies were behind the house in a wooden barn. As soon as we got in, an acid smell washed over us and it took a few minutes for our eyes to get adjusted to the darkness. On the ground was a cardboard box with furry balls in it. "Here's the bunnies," said Veronika excitedly. "They're so small! They're so cute!" Marina and I exclaimed. I'd never seen such small rabbits. I was thrilled out of my mind and decided that climbing up the hill in that heat had been worth it after all. "Can I hold one?" I asked. "My mom won't let me, but you can hold one, just be careful," she said. They were all so beautiful, most of them were sleeping, and even in their sleep they moved their little muzzles. I chose the white one. Once I saw my grandpa carry a rabbit by the ears. I grabbed him by the ears firmly and lifted him up. Something cracked. "Not by the ears! Not by the ears!" Veronika yelled. Swiftly I put him down, but the muzzle wasn't moving anymore. "Mom will kill me, what've you done?" "I didn't do anything, I barely lifted him," I was defending myself. "Can't you see he's croaked, you retard!" she yelled at me. "But you don't mind our shampoos, stinky!" said

Marina, because she'd also given her a few bottles. "Let's go," I said to Marina and went to the door. We were blinded by the sun and surprised by Veronika's dad at the entrance to the barn. "Hey ho, town girls! How'dya like them bunnies?" he bared his rotten teeth. We didn't answer; we just hurried toward the gate. When we got out we started running downhill. Tomorrow at school Veronika didn't say hello to me, neither did I to her. She didn't talk to anybody. She just kept pulling a strand of greasy hair across her left eye.

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The last class on Friday was catechism. If we could have, we would all have taken a double math class instead, but there was no way to avoid it, and at the time we didn't know how to play hooky. At the time we all had to take the class because if you loved Croatia, you loved God; and only Aida from the neighboring class went home earlier. Reverend Juranić came to class before the bell went off, and as soon as it did, he'd start praying - not just Our Lord, like other religious teachers would, but also Hail Mary, all of the Creeds, and sometimes - if he was inspired - a round of the Rosary. He'd glare at us, one by one, he'd circle around the class, lean over to hear, and if he caught someone mumbling, he'd silence everyone else and the pupil would have to continue on his own. If he didn't know the prayer, the pupil would usually get an F and a slap on the back of the head. Reverend would then return to his desk and there'd be silence. He'd sit there and from his black bag he'd take out a juice box with a straw and a couple of chocolate bars, Mars, Snickers or something of the sort. We watched him eat and drink, and we drooled down to the floor. If he heard someone talk in the back, he'd throw a piece of chalk at them, or something else that was around. He called us dimwits, idiots, slobs. It seemed that the hardest mission in life was to collect the stamps for confirmation. None of us thought we'd fail catechism, but the fear and the uncertainty which Juranić spread around him with the help of God was so great that some literally trembled before him. Sometimes he'd take groups of pupils on the pilgrimage to Marija Bistrica and then, in unusually good spirits, he'd place one of the girls with waist-long braids onto his lap. Her cheeks would flush and throughout the trip she wouldn't say a word, she'd just stare at the floor. We felt that he hated Vukovar people, although he treated us no differently, but we'd already gotten used to enemies, so we were constantly looking for the signs. He was as equally disdainful to us as he was to others; he just had a different set of questions: "So, Vukovarians... Do you know how to clean the stables?" and then he'd provide the answer himself: "You're too classy for it, but these little peasants are closer to God because Jesus slept in the stables, not in a hotel," he chortled. Once he asked Dragan, an eighth-grader, something about the Holy Trinity, and when Dragan replied, "I've got no idea," the reverend gave him an F. Then Dragan asked him:
"D'ya know what the Pope says when he goes to the john?" The reverend's face boiled and he grabbed the gradebook to throw it at him, but Dragan got up from his desk and threw himself at the reverend shouting: "Holy shit! Holy shit!" The reverend roared and Dragan ran out of the classroom. He ended up at the pedagogue's office but nothing serious happened to him. The reverend grew more morose, but he stopped throwing things at us.
As Christmas neared, for catechism homework we had to write a composition entitled "My Christmas". The best ones would be read at the school celebration. I fervently believed in God and composition writing was my favorite of all school assignments. I wasn't facing a very tough competition in the class, except for one Piggy, Željka, who was good at grammar and whose sentences were filled with epithets. I put all of my effort into write the best composition I could because I was dying to read at the school

celebration, I knew it would get mom out of the room, and perhaps for this occasion she'd wear something dark blue. The reverend and the Croatian teacher selected Željka and me. I was out of my mind with happiness because before the reading I'd also perform a dance number with my friend Ivana to the choreography that I made up to the song 'Paloma nera'. I hadn't let mom read the composition because I wanted to surprise her, I was hoping that way she'd get more than she'd expected. She knew I was good at writing, but I thought this time I'd outdone myself. I got on stage the second time that evening. I changed from a navy pattern shirt and ripped hot pants into a white shirt and a checkered pleated skirt. I was serious and stood upright as I waited for everyone to quiet down for my composition so that it would get the silence that it deserved. I started reading. I invested all the air from my lungs into each sentence so very soon my breath went shallow and I was left without air. I hoped no one would notice if I read louder, so soon I was shouting out words and the parts of sentences which I believed were the most important. Mainly, it was about a sad twig hanging from a Christmas tree, a missing dad, mom's black garments, a brother who has no money to buy a soda, and just one wish, to go home... When I finished reading, people started clapping, some clapped hard, some not so much. Some women from the Political School were dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs. Željka climbed on stage immediately, she stood next to me and started reading. I thought people must have wanted to clap some more, but they couldn't because she was reading and they wouldn't hear her. Confused, I kept standing next to her. I felt a little dizzy, my head was ringing with words: turkey with mlinci, a midnight Mass, fresh air that tickles the nostrils, little Jesus, sleighs... When she finished reading she bowed to the audience so deep that her long hair fell over her flushed cheeks. She was very beautiful. People stood up and clapped like crazy. It was in fact the closing of the ceremony and the applause was for all of us. The music started playing; it was time for dance. Pupils and parents scattered across the hall and the stage and I couldn't see my mom anywhere. I pushed hard through the crowd of faces lit up with happiness, small and big, presuming she'd already left. When I finally reached the door, I saw her through the glass pane standing in front of the school, smoking. She had on a black coat with white shoulders, and her locks were covered with large snowflakes. I nearly knocked her down as I ran to hug her around her waist, yelling: "How was I, huh? How was I?!" "Where's your jacket? Do you want to catch cold?" she said, hugging me. "It's in the changing room... Come on, tell me!" I persisted. Her chin trembled, like a child's who's about to cry and I felt sorry. I realized I should have written about something else. I was stupid not to see this would make her sad. Just like when I gave a birthday card two weeks before with an engraving of a king and a queen, and her eyes filled with tears because she must have remembered dad. From then on I was going to write for the grade only. I swung my arms around her neck and said, "Don't cry, mom. You know that our dear God whips the most those he loves best." She let out a strange sigh and wiping her face she said, "And you got a bag full of sweets from Uncle Grgo." I was happy. I left the dance floor behind and returned with my mom to our warm room. It was a nice Christmas Eve, we lay holding each other, watching good movies about Jesus, with the bag next to the bed. The only bad thing was that I threw up and my stomach hurt a little the next day.