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The City in the Mirror
Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

Family Notturno

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A large house in L, a two-storey building made of cut stone, was inherited by my father as the oldest and the only of eight children to whom his father Mato, my grandfather, in his will left a legacy to continue the family tradition, just as he had inherited the trade of his father, and become "a mule trader", as they used to call cattle merchants; most often they only bought and resold cattle, because the vicinity of Primorje, the coastal lands, was fitting for trading livestock, meats, calf skins, wool, hairs, etc.
County books listed everything my grandfather Mato had earned in his lifetime, there was no contract of his undeposited at the notary's office, he paid all the taxes, so when I first peaked into those books, those land and tax files, I thought that each document could be of use to a writer or chronicler because, no matter how meager or minute the record may be, it could give him a firm ground to stand on, yet as I wrote I pressed and pushed into this ground as hard as I could in order to distance myself from my family and any kind of heritage, and in order to succeed, I also had to write about my kin (hmm, my kin) because after so many years and dealings with others I wanted to descend deep, into darker chambers of my childhood, and say something about myself, not because I think it might be of interest to someone, but because the urge to write, just as self-admiration perhaps, pulled me into a period I had written about before, sometimes with irony or mockery
toward history and tradition, and now I was to do it seriously, from a distance and from today's position, like some kind of autobiographer, with all suspicion in the genre, but I needed to try and descend into the glory of writing to its very bottom and gather images I remember, images that reached me from somebody else's stories, more than anything my father's, and thus this manuscript will see characters from my immediate and more distant family; most of them seem like apparitions to me, and someone said long ago, I think it was Poe, that true writers are only those who "fight against their apparitions" while the rest are mere "clerks of literature" who from it make a living.
This manuscript spent a lot of time hidden in the drawer, although I intended to publish it when I first thought it was finished. I made the last corrections and fixed some mistakes, I even cut two sheets, or six to seven chapters, and then the night before printing I had a dream as clear as a vision, which actually turned into nightmare. I dreamed that the book came out and that they invited me to the printing house to have a look at the first copies. I held the book in my hands, I was happy with its wonderful design, but I had no one to share my happiness with, around me there were only print workers, faces completely unknown to me. They watched and waited for me to take the book into my hands, to take a peak and leaf through it, which I did, but then something dreadful happened, something that saddened me and appalled me at the same time, because as I leafed through the book, its pages started coming off, spilling all around me, and the workers just stood there, laughing and enjoying their prank. I took another copy, and another and so on, but each of them fell apart in my hands; only the covers remained like skeletons, and then one of the printers told me, "You wrote a crumbling book." I went down to my knees and picked up a couple of pages, wanting to read a line or two, but I couldn't pronounce a single world, my own voice had given up on me; I was so astounded

because the book was printed in a script I didn't understand, in the letters I didn't know; the only thing I understood was that on each page there was my name. I woke up with a start, all sweaty and out of breath, and so under the influence of all that the next day I withdrew the manuscript from the press; perhaps that was naive and rash, but I interpreted that disquieting dream as a ban to publish the book, a ban issued by some internal censor of mine because I was not ready to once again go through all those trials and traumas as I did with my last book, which was destroyed and cut into waste paper. When I called the editor and told him I was taking the book from print, he asked for an explanation for such a decision. "Every writer needs one unfinished manuscript on which to work and which to correct at all times because writing is intimacy, an act of adultery, so I will kept this one to fornicate on for the next couple of years," I said. It has been twenty or so years since then, all the fornication is long gone, the book was finally published under completely different circumstances, its version polished to perfection, so if someone decides to peek into it, if something, anything, leads him to "the vice of reading", it might seem to him that in these pages I gave too much room to my father, and that he lacks substance for a character role in this book, but I introduced him into this book, just as I did with other members of my family and many other unimportant persons whom I barely touched upon, in order to shine more light onto my own position, and not to show some special affection for them. I was already sick and tired of riding the narrow tracks of my family train, riding it for so long and then finally realizing that I was still at the same station I embarked on, because there's no person among us who has a permanent city, despite the fact that we are constantly trying to prove that this where we are is exactly where we belong, besides wasn't it Pierre-Jean Jouve who sang so nicely, "we are there where we are not". I'll say it without beating around the bush — I grew tired of writing different versions of always the same events, that's why on many occasions I gave up on an already finished book; I would've done it now too, hadn't I realized that I am accepting all of the contradictions with peace, without regret and without nostalgia, and that my story talks only about the events that are vivid in my memory, sticking to the exact instruction of one of the best story-tellers of our time — he is so famous that his name need not be mentioned – who said, "what matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it."
If this stone chiseling work is finished, I wish to add that while writing I allowed myself "the luxury of digressions" because present forced me to do so, more than anything because going back to the old manuscript requires a new look at it, and among all other things, present is so painful that going back to past became a true pleasure.

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Father sneaked up to the still warm, stone wall of the house and entered through the servant's door. He paused for a moment and watched the dining room whose interior was already disappearing under the cover of the first darkness; the only trace of all but extinguished daylight came through the window, while on the western side the redness from only a moment ago now thickened into a dark, packed layer; actually, all that was left of the crimson shine and fire of sunset was the horizon that now appeared as something petrified and eternal. What was that, no sound off bells from the church tower? They went silent a long time ago, on the second year into the war, when they were removed and turned into cannonballs. An owl hooted somewhere, and near the main door, from the magnolia bush, a bird fluttered. A horse neighed in the barn, my father had put it there and went looking for a handful of oats or anything else he could feed him on. Everything smelled of home, and behind the carob tree's large top

you could see the moon, still pale; it could not shine without its ally, complete darkness that thickened more and more, silently conquering the landscape. My father saw his mother leaning over the petroleum lamp, she removed the cklo, as we called the lamp's glass shade, lifted the wick, struck a match, lit the lamp, placed down the glass shade and adjusted the wick, reducing the flame so that now it barely smoldered under the cap. The lamp stood on a table, while his mother sat on the floor, next to a cradle, the same cradle in which she'd rocked my father. It was a nice cradle, carved, bought somewhere in Dalmatinska Zagora; "all of the children were breastfed" in it, even the ones who had died, and as they were born one after another, one year apart, in this big family they inherited not only the cradle but also the rags, diapers, baby bottles, clothes, rattlers, toys, what not. For those living in the house this was always a crib or a cot, but if someone visited the house and wanted to talk about children and their upbringing, then everyone used what they thought was a more refined word such as cradle. And as Vukava rocked the cradle and hummed a lullaby through her nose, my father stood at the entrance, in the shadow, and then voiced his presence, but carefully, not to frighten his mother.
"I come bearing the news that in a day or two your eldest son will arrive, and for this good fortune I ask for a place to stay."
Vukava opened the wick and the light flooded the room, she got up with a lamp in her hand, raised it above her head to better see the stranger, the intruder.
"Oh, praise the merciful God," she cried, "but I think my son is already home." She then burst into tears and threw herself into her son's arms. It was more by intuition that she recognized him than by his appearance; the weak light and my father in the shadow of the first darkness made her doubt for only a second, although it would not have been strange that had she not recognized him at all, because he spent those years when young people suddenly change and quickly mature far away from her. "You left home a child, and here you come a man," said his mother the moment she collected herself. My father didn't know whose was the newborn in the cradle, and when he heard that was his brother, at first he winced because at that age one no longer gives birth, and then he took him in his arms and lifted him high above his head. So much misfortune fell on my father's mother Vukava in that war that even this birth she saw as a bad omen, this was the only male child no one was looking forward too; his father, my grandfather Mato, was interned to Austria, and on the day the child was born, a telegram arrived saying that he died in the camp in Gmünd and that he was buried at a camp cemetery under a number that would be delivered to the family. During the war my father's two twin sisters died of the Spanish flu that ravaged the county and the whole region, while his third sister, Mila, not yet of age, ran away with a Hungarian stable boy serving with the First Battalion that was part of Trebinje Regiment; this tarnished the name of this respectable family whose head was imprisoned by the enemy, so, along all other misfortunes, stories and guessing started on whether this baby was a bastard, although all calculations indicated that it could have been conceived at least a couple of days before its father was interned. People suspected that Vukava may have conceived with Ivo, my father's hunchbacked uncle, who named the child Anđelko, and only a week after the baptism the hunchback cut his own throat with a razor,which only supported rumors and doubts, because only by dying he could right his sins.
The eldest daughter Vesela, first female child after Nikola, was so ugly that she rarely came out of a small farm building intended for curing shed, that was a corner set for her lodging, and whenever she came out, she always had to wear a veil over her face, because that's what her father had ordered, her ugly face made him sick; that unfortunate girl never sat at the table and ate with her family, her mother left food for her on a little table next to her bed. Once my grandfather Mato caught her in front of the house without a veil, he yelled at her, and she buried her face into her hands and ran away. She didn't

know how to read or write, she spoke little and seldom, she never laughed, and when she was outside, in the daylight, she always ran into the shadow and shade, and in the house she'd crawl into some dark corner, if ever they let her in.

"Such as yourself are a burden, they live the longest because God awards those whose life is of no use to anyone, of no happiness, no fortune, with long living," my grandfather Mato used to say scolding the poor daughter who was not guilty of turning like that from the same seed. On that first night my father stayed up late with his mother; they went over many things together, and truly, it was not easy to take all those losses calmly, so on several occasions they cried together, more than anything when my grandfather Mato was mentioned, "because no one knew where his grave lay," as both of them said more than once. Just as my father I thought, and I still do, that the memory of the departed is more painful if we don't know where their grave is, because in our imagination we conjure up some inexplicable and abstract images, we often wonder how can it be that the destiny so patiently weaved its thread and who knows when it decided that my grandfather, who "cared about his hearth so dearly", and loved his homeland as if it were "the holy land", who dreamt about building a large family tomb, perhaps even a mausoleum on a hill above his house in L, ended up in some small town in Austria, at a camp cemetery.

Having heard the man's voice in the house, my father's ugly sister, aunt Vesela, crawled out of her burrow, snuck up to the window and took her time watching a man whose large shadow on the wall, in the lamp's reflection, darkened the corner with framed family photos; she was the only one who had no picture there because she was never recognized as the family's living member. My father adjusted the wick and lit his cigarette on the flame, and then, while smoking, he walked around the room and talked as his shadow broke from one wall to another or danced at the ceiling like some giant figure.

The croaking of frogs came through the open window under which aunt Vesela was hiding, and my father came nearer and nearer to the window, pausing to breathe "the air that cures the soul", as he used to say. His sister got up and said something, it was indistinct and said under her breath, and then my father told her to come in and greet her brother. Vesela ran in, joyfully grabbed my father's hand and showered it with kisses. It was a big thing for her, she stayed there with her brother and mother, sat near the cradle and watched her youngest brother Anđelko, whom my grandmother Vukava called "her little angel" because that child never cried. He laughed and cooed, waved his tiny hands and smacked his lips, happily threw his legs around while his mother was changing his diapers, sucked on his little fingers, but the little angle never shed a tear. That poor aunt, ugly as a dog, could stare at that child for hours, she could rock the cradle and do her chores, but what would her brother, my father, say, because now he was the head of the family, his word would be listened to, although he never cared about it nor he ever took advantage of his authority, if he ever had one. He had his own, somewhat confusing ideas, it was difficult to agree with him; personally, I don't think they were good or true, but I never managed to convince him that his philosophy could not stand. In front of other people he always talked about war as something evil, but intimately he really believed, and on several occasions talked about it with me, that wars are the main moving force of progress, that they bring great changes and give birth to new civilizations. It is true that wars destroy a lot of good, but also a lot of bad things, people change, the world moves forward, old customs die, emancipation reaches the most remote villages. And so on that first evening upon his arrival, in the name of the new era, he decided to free his sister of the obligation to cover her face, to remove all those senseless patriarchal constrains that lacked reason and that turned an innocent creature into a slave. "Now that we've lost our father, you no longer have to hide," my father told his sister. "He's gone and his time is gone with him. We, as a human kind,

should be ashamed because of the evil we are doing and not because we are beautiful or ugly. The old age will ruin us anyway, if we ever see it come. So are we all going to need a hijab when we grew old? Take off your veil," he said. "My father ordered me to cover myself and I'll do that for as long as I live," my father's sister Vesela said. "Changing habits is most difficult," said my father when he told me how he tried to free his sister from the slavery which she did not enjoy, but which she coped with just fine. "In the end, the chains go rusty too," added my father, "so even the poor woman caved at the age of twenty-three. Not only did she remove her cover, but she bared herself naked without shame," he said. I loved watching the ugly face of that outcast, my aunt Vesela, although I never knew why it attracted me, but I would sneak into her room and always bring her a candy or some other sweet thing, she loved rahat-lokoum, and then stay with her and stare at her face, talking all kinds of crazy things and lies. She enjoyed my company so she let me touch bumps on her arms, and rub all those warts and growths on her face with my fingers, pluck the hairs that grew out of her moles. Once I talked her into showing me her breasts; I was eleven then, and she was already deep in her middle years. I kissed her many times, that would get to her, and she would bend her head and cry. There's no doubt I was the only of her kin who had ever kissed her. I don't know if in those feelings I had from my aunt, in those pleasures in ugliness, there were any perverted instincts, I really don't know, and I don't know who could explain that to me, but I think that I had pity for her, pity that, without me being aware of it, bordered on perversity. My poor aunt, I'll say a bit more about her later.

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When I first saw Selim, my father's friend, he could barely move his fingers; they were covered in some stinky black tar. He never married. Whenever my father's travels took him somewhere far from home, he got various medicines, ointments and teas for him, and I took them to his house and I would always, even if for a short while, sit down with him. To whoever stopped by to see him, and those were mostly people grateful for nice gravestones he made for them, he talked only about the stone and the armature made of stone, about nishans, bashluks, turbahs, and all other ornaments and decorations. The new Muslim cemetery, built after the First World War, was Selim's doing. From the outside it seemed all of his headstones were the same, but in truth each was different; nishans for women, the front and back ones, he mostly decorated with branches, flowers and leaves, and sometimes he'd carve a figure of a finjan, an ibrik, a surahia, and all other household items a woman might use in her lifetime, while on male stones he carved the lines from Koran, tespihs, sabers, spears, maces, clubs, swords, muskets, bows and arrows, and other weapons, and on each of the headstones, at a special place, he carved a crescent moon with its tips upwards as his signature.

I honestly believed and hoped that I would find Selim alive and well, when in the mid seventies, I dare not say what year it was because I might be wrong, but I know it was the end of summer, a particularly dry summer, for the first time after twenty years plus I drove into L, hiding behind by my sunglasses and a light summer jute hat, sometime around noon in order to be as inconspicuous as possible, because in those years "holy men of home" again wanted to crucify me as a "traitor of his hearth", and all that because of a novel in which with dark shades and irony I pained everything they, "the progenies of famed heroes" bragged about; I truly mocked their false myths, and in return they banned me from coming back to the village of my home.

Yet I got there secretly and I choose noon, "when the sun is scorching", because at that time of day the villagers withdrew into shade, although I think that those simple and ignorant people knew nothing

about me and my writing, they could have maybe heard something from somewhere; things were run by half-intellectuals from the province, together with politicians the worst kind of people. I arrived from Dubrovnik, where preparations for filming a movie after my script were well underway, they only waited for the end of the tourist season to “start shooting”, so I used this to find Selim because I was planning to write a script for a short film about a nishan carver, which would be some sort of a sequel to an already made short film called Tombstone Blacksmiths. Selim’s hands covered in tar — an image from my childhood — almost became my memory’s permanent possession; no dream about my home, no thought about the old house, could pass without them. In addition to all this I wanted to check whether my memories were still firmly grounded or whether they had turned into a fairytale. There were few things I recognized, the place was now completely different, it took me some time to find my bearing so I stood by the road and watched the water, the river that was now turned into a lake. I knew that the center of L, together with several surrounding villages and farming fields, and even my grandfather’s old, rickety watering cart, were flooded after the dam was built and the river redirected, but I could not believe what everything looked like now; there was no trace left of my memories, as if my whole childhood had been erased. Where the center of the village once stood now only the minaret’s point could be seen sticking out of the water, and further away, above the road, I could see our house in the distance; I would not dare go there, and I didn’t know who was living in the house now.

Even the things that I did recognize in these new surroundings seemed so foreign and I thought it would be best not to take in these new images, so I closed my eyes in order to see and remember as little as possible. My “proto-images” surpassed reality, and in that clash of the two worlds, the imaginary seemed more real than what I was seeing before me, and the only thing that got to me and made me fragile and sensitive was nostalgia. I dropped to the ground to collect myself a little, and after the “respite and sigh”, my mother always put these two words together, I got back in the car, turned it around on the road, and went back to the old bridge, and from there I followed a narrow, washed out road to the first houses. I couldn’t recognize anything, neither a house nor some old tree, and in this village there used to be so many treetops giving a thick shade; wasn’t it that my father sat so many times in their shadow drinking his “fildjan” of coffee and smoking with his friends. Where is all that now, can it be that all of it is flooded? I stopped at the side of the road and walked to the first house. I was lucky, I ran into an old man; his face was unshaven, cheeks hollow, he was dressed in rags and smoked from a long chibuk, when I approached him, he took it out of his mouth and spat on the ground. He watched me without returning my greeting, it seemed he would not say one word, and I immediately thought he’d recognized me, although I knew that was impossible, but paranoia slowly conquered my psyche, although I fought against it. “I’m looking for Selim,” I said. “Selim who?”

“Selim the mason,” I said. “I hope he’s alive.”

“Follow me,” said the old man and despite his age jumped to his feet with ease.

He was barefoot, a living skeleton, still I barely managed to keep up him, as if he were an Olympics medal winner in walking. We hurried in silence; without knowing why, I was ashamed to slow down, catch my breath, and fall behind this old man that was at least twice my age; his bare feet skillfully jumped from one rock to another, then we quickly passed between small, rundown houses, climbed up a gentle slope, and then finally my guide brought me to a low, shabby house; he put his hand on the closed door, actually he slapped the door, as if in this way he wanted to put a stamp on his voiceless claim that this was Selim’s house. But this took a while, he held his hand on the door for some time, listening to something, and then a sound echoed from the inside. “This house’s been echoing for thirty years,” said my guide. He opened the door and we walked into a small room. One light curtain, made of

something like gauze, covered the small window above the settee on which Selim was lying. I wouldn't have recognized him, no one who had seen him twenty years ago could have recognized him. Although inside it was hot, he was covered to his chin with a rough blanket on which his two huge, swollen fists were resting, they were completely black, as if from back when I last saw him he did not remove the black tar from his hands. I sat down on a settee next to his feet, and my guide stood by the door waiting to hear who I was and why I was here. I took Selim's hand into mine, it was heavy, hideous, as if it were filled with some hard, lumpy mass, some wild meat piled up all to his wrists. "Nothing can help me," he said. "I pleaded with the doctors to cut them off."

"Why don't you cut them off yourself," said my guide and snickered. Selim goggled his eyes at his neighbor, then slowly lifted his heavy hand and moved his fat, dwarfish fingers a couple of times, a sign for my guide to leave, which he did, but his bleating could be still heard from the outside. It was completely clear to me that there was no point in bringing up the story about a film, I was no longer sure that Selim would have understood anything, so my idea about him and his skill turned into a film fell through; now I needed to leave as soon as possible; something else that may have brought me here, perhaps that eternal doubt and wish to what was left of my memories. I was no longer hiding who I was and whom I belonged to, I mentioned my father several times, I even said that the two of them had been friends, but he didn't respond, although he did listen to me like a man who doesn't understand the person he is talking to. After a short silence he laid his heavy hand onto mine and asked me: "What good brought you here?" "I wanted to see Selim's nishans once again," I said.

"They're under water," he said. "Even before they started building the dam, experts from some government office came here and said that those nishans had no value and that they needed not be moved, and if anyone wanted, they could take the bones of their close ones to the new cemetery. Now the nishans can be seen when the water is low, those stone turbans come out of water like flowers. When I get the strength to stand, I go down and watch them every day until the water comes back again. But I have heard from people who would not say a lie that during Bairam, when the moon is young, my nishans rise from the water and sway like stalks, this doesn't last long, but it repeats often. Could these be souls and do they have a shape, I don't know. But it is something, otherwise people would not talk about it. When I was still able to carve stone, while I was making the nishans, I talked to the dead and did what they wished. I never carved what I wanted, but what pleased the dead." "You knew how to talk to the dead?" I asked him, but he did not hear my question or he did not wish to answer it.

"Maybe that's why my headstones, as those people from the government's office said, have no value for our culture," he went on. "They think that dead mouth cannot speak, but it is not so, and for the one who knows how to listen, they speak in their own tongue and in their own way. Had I rejected their wishes with arrogance and did as I wished, today those headstones would've been our heritage, and I would've been famous, and not like this, a forgotten ogre, with punished hands, the only thing about me and my life that was worth anything. I wish to God I was deaf, and the only thing comforting me now is that my work, my nishans under water will become more and more valuable. It always turns out that way, what we discover and dig out is better and more valuable than what we see every day," his voice was getting quieter, and then he paused and looked at me as if this was the first time he had noticed my presence. "You can spend the night here, if you are staying," he said. "I have to go," I said and got to my feet, and as I said my goodbye I held those two huge, monstrous fists. I stayed there longer than I planned. When I walked out of his house, I saw swimmers by the lake, and close by, just under the road, there were several fishermen busying themselves with their fishing rods. One of them, suddenly yanked

to feet by his rod, stood up and started fighting against something heavy, something that pulled him so hard that he had to put all his strength to fight it, he was happy because of his catch, but he was also facing the danger of being pulled to bottom. His fishing rod was bending and straining, as if every second it would break. I had not time to wait and see his catch; I left the fisherman in his struggle with that “underwater beast” that got caught onto his hook.

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In my grandmother Jelica’s house there was one nice antique mirror that stood out among other furniture, not only by its luxury but also by its history as well as many mystical and strange stories that were weaved and told about it. My grandfather Tomo knew a lot of things about the mirror, which came to L as a dowry; his mother Petruša was “a bride from Konavle, from the Radonjići family”; her ancestors, from some ancient times, were glaziers of good reputation, but they all perished by the “black death”, so it took half a century before the family trade was revived again. Petruša used to say that even today their glassworks could be found in richer houses, they were sold all the way to Constantinople, and the mirror she got as her dowry was registered in the notary’s office in Dubrovnik as a work of one of her ancestors. When Petruša was lying on her deathbed at the age of ninety-eight, I was by her side. Just before she died, she told me to sprinkle her with water from a small crystal pail. That mirror must have attracted other beautiful things that later came to the house. Those were mostly bottles of different shapes and forms, plump transparent shells, slim, drop-like decorative bottles, wicker-covered or simple round bottles we called tikva, buklija and demižana. New words came with the bottles, such as patrine, ingastare, karafe and so on, just as a breath of some different world came with my great grandmother, a simple, illiterate woman. It marked her children too so that line gave many learned and talented men, artists, doctors, scientists that went all over the world and some even ended up serving as high officers in American army.

My grandfather Tomo knew many stories about that mirror; I believed to all he said and listened to his stories gladly, although his mother Petruša often said he was making up things and lying, but he was really convincing and certain of what he was saying. No one listened to him as attentively as I did; my grandfather knew this and that’s why he often took me to the field or to the spring and then talked that mirrors were living things just like water and that they also flow and get cloudy, like rivers do.

When he was a child, he more than once heard a rumble just like that of a waterfall, it came from the mirror and put him to sleep. There were moments when no one could look himself in the mirror or when only parts of some foreign faces could be seen in it. But what attracted me the most was a story about a late afternoon when from the highest point in L, for only a second, exactly when the sun touches the edge of the western hills, contours of Dubrovnik could be seen in the mirror; this hovering scene disappeared the moment the sun went behind the hill. A mirror remembers anything that reflects in it, and it offers a little of that plenty only to the “spiritual eye”. It is a giant collection of captured reflections. I had to see that fleeting flash of Dubrovnik, so I spent hours staring at the mirror, waiting for the sun to touch the horizon, and then excitement and shivers would overcome me, the rays would blind me for a moment and the mirror would light up like a forest fire, but at that moment I saw the contours of the famed city, it walls, towers, and the Orlando’s Column would rise up behind the walls, show itself to me and then go down to its place again. When I told my grandfather about my vision, he looked at me with suspicion and disbelief, as if he caught me telling a lie or stealing, as if I took his

magic and called it mine, and then he carefully looked into my eyes and said puzzlingly: “I too can see its glimpse in your eyes.”

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After the school bell rang and marked the end of the last period, the teacher whispered into my ear that the two of us were going to spend Sunday in the country by the river, and that we would go there by bicycles and take a basket with food for lunch. When I heard this, I ran home, I jumped happily around and arrived home quickly thinking that I would be the first one to say this to my mother, but she already knew it, she had even agreed with the teacher that she would make donuts for our fieldtrip. I immediately started working on my old bicycle, I greased the chain and the gears, and spent the whole afternoon mending tires. Whoever talked to me that day could clearly see that I was overcome with happiness. And I truly did show my happiness in many ways, I had no control and sometimes I would go completely wild and shout and walk on my hands; I could have walked about a hundred meters like that. But that day seemed so long to me; time had never passed more slowly. The night was long too; I fell asleep late and woke up early. My mother was up before me, she made the donuts, covered them with a kitchen towel and placed them into a wicker basket. She also poured me a bottle of mead, which was my favourite drink. On one occasion, when I was ten, I got drunk from it and entertained some big gathering, and one gentleman, a distinguished actor and director, whose monodrama was playing in our town, at our Culture Hall, patted me on the head and told me that there was a fine comedian growing in me. Since then I drank mead with measure, one or only half a glass at a time, and I never wanted more. I put the basket on the left end of the wheel, while on the right one there was a bell, which I often used, when needed and when not. I got on the bicycle; my one foot was on the pedal, while with the other I stood on the ground. My mother was seeing me off, she stood by my side tidying my clothes and hair, and I resisted that and pushed her away. I would eat myself alive whenever I did something like that to her, something rough. I rang the bell several times and announced my departure, and for the first fifty meters or so I rode without hands, sitting straight on my seat. After I put my hands back on the wheel, I looked back and saw my mother in front of the house; she seemed somewhat low, sad, depressed and she waved at me as if I were going on a long, uncertain journey. The teacher waited for me in front of her school apartment, she was standing next to her new bicycle. She wore light clothes, a dress with flowery pattern, low, linen shoes, and short, white socks. There was a very nice scarf, also with flowers on it, around her shoulders, and on here face she had sunglasses; not many people had such elegant and expensive glasses. When she mounted her girl’s bicycle, she lifted her skirt and bared her knees. She was not like our girls who constantly pulled at her dresses and covered bare parts of their body; her behavior was completely opposite, she often pulled her skirt higher, sometimes all the way to the middle of her thighs. Before she sat on her bicycle, she looked back again to check if the food basket was tightly tied on the back of her bicycle. We rode toward the Dubrovnik Gets and on our way ran into the city’s brass band, which, accompanied by a bunch of unruly kids, played their music and walked down a wide street. Without getting off our bicycles, we stopped and watched the orchestra until it disappeared around the corner. Then we continued along the dusty road; we rode our bicycles fast and for some two or three kilometers the gravel sputtered from under us, the pebbles flew up from under our tires as if fired from a slingshot, they’d hit a rock or a tree and then whizz back by us. When we passed by the last of houses at the edge of the city, we turned up the narrow path toward the river. To the right there were tiny patches of grass littered with rocks, macchia, and low brush. As

we came closer to the river, gradually we entered the area of tall grasses and lush clovers, and then we were met by the croaking of frogs. Stands of osiers leaned over the river; we rode past weeping willows' backs following the course of the river. We went around monk's peppers and tamaris bushes and then rode through the tall grass to the damp area where poplars grew.

The teacher found a place near a spring of fresh water; she had come here before, so she suddenly stopped and looked around to make sure this was the place she had known from one of her previous visits. Rich grasses and colorful flowers grew all over the place. We put our bicycles in the shade, placed our baskets with food in one of the bushes and covered them with leaves and branches. It was obvious that we were both happy so we took a deep breath of air around us, glanced at each other and smiled. Her breasts went up and danced under her dress; this was so exciting that I stared at her bosom thus making it unnecessary for her to wait and hope to catch my lustful gaze; it was so obvious. Her breasts got tense under her shirt as she went down and then up again in a couple of nice gymnastic moves, especially when she lifted her leg, as if she were a ballet dancer, and held onto her toes with her hand; she didn't care that her dress went up all the way and revealed her thigh. "Our people are so primitive," she said. "If they knew I was not wearing a bra today, they would hold it against me, because they, poor things, don't know that everything in nature has to breathe freely." Seeing large blue, white and yellow flowers, Jozipa ran to them, while I just stood there and watched her jump around, fall and stand up, as if catching and grabbing something with her hands. These were some odd jumps from this very swift, long legged young woman.

She shouted, sometimes in panic it seemed, as if something was running away from her. I thought she was trying to take and steel as much as she could from the nature and that all of that was filling her with some special will to live. At one moment she sunk into the flowers; I could no longer see her. As if she fell through into an abyss that suddenly opened up under her. I got scared, but I did not move. No voice could be heard, only the crickets chirped and filled the space with their uniform music. I dared not call her, because what would I do if she didn't answer? And my voice could give up on my; my heart was beating right under my chin. After a lengthy pause I made a few steps toward the place where she'd sunk, but I stopped because my knees were buckling and shivers went down my spine. No twig of grass swayed there where she was lying. I decided to let out a scream, a scream of panic, in order to make her come back to me, but this time my voice betrayed me, like in that nightmare I had. What did happen to me, what did paralyze me at that moment, with almost no cause whatsoever, because it was completely normal that sometimes a person lies down and takes a short nap in the grass, especially if this person were, like Jozipa, so eager of nature. But when I think about it today, then it must have been fear that Jozipa died in the field, among the flowers, and that every excessive happiness, such as was mine because of that trip with my teacher, was actually an introduction to death. Along all this, there was so much talk about her death and her illness, everyone told at least one story about it, and among these were some really gruesome ones, so all of this must have etched it way into my consciousness like some ill-omened idea that I would personally find her dead and that it was destined to me to be by her side at the moment of her dying. When I pulled myself together and cautiously approached the place where Jozipa had sunk into the grass, I saw a scene, which still, after all those years, I remember as if I saw and experienced it yesterday. Jozipa was lying on her back, with her thighs completely naked, while on her chest a beautiful big bright butterfly was flapping its wings, its flapping grew slower and slower and it seemed it was not trying to fly away. As if it was caught against her dress. Jozipa had taken the scarf off her head, and when I came close and kneeled down next to her, I could hear her breathing and I could see her breasts moving ever so slightly. The butterfly on her chests was pierced with a needle and

actually attached to her dress; it still occasionally waved its wings, but it was obviously losing strength. What cheered me up and made my day was a realization that Jozipa's head was not completely smooth and bald like it had been before, but now there were short hairs, soft and dense, growing out of it, so I gently patted her hair with my hand and almost choked from pleasure. I stared at her naked thighs and caught sight of her really beautiful knees. I watched her toes too, because she took off her linen shoes, which she placed on the side and within reach. That was one of the most beautiful days in my life. Never again have I experienced anything like it, nor have I had an opportunity to observe a woman in that way, so intimately, with so much emotion, in the field and among the flowers. Jozipa opened her eyes and saw me kneeling by her side, overcome with happiness; as if under a spell I was still holding my hand on her head and caressed those soft hairs. She took my hand and realized my heart was beating fast.

"You're excited and happy because my hair is growing, right?" she asked. Although I was afraid that my voice might give up on me, it had done it before, I managed to utter several stuttering words of pleasure, and there were shivers in my stomach. I thought that happiness took over you in a much quieter and painless way, but now I know that it is a great thing to chase away an image of death, which I never managed to separate from her person. And to be perfectly honest, I was convinced that that beautiful dress which we decorated and embroidered together she was preparing for her burial dress. Now I was relieved; my life changed and became dear to me. Jozipa removed the butterfly from her dress; it no longer showed signs of life. It was a beautiful butterfly; I seldom saw such bright colors, such artistic plenty that no brush in a hand of a skillful painter could render. Many years later, when I learned a thing or two about butterflies and became somewhat enchanted with lepidopterology, I was sure that Jozipa had then come into possession of a faunistically valuable and in our region very rare example of a butterfly called the Purple Tiger, which most often feeds on the swamp spurge and marsh marigold. I will come back to butterflies again a few times, but only briefly, because that's less important part of my story, although I have to say that my love for writing and my interest in entomology came from my teacher Jozipa, even though these are not the only things she was responsible for; she did much more, she developed my sense of resisting banal, she refined my taste and developed resistance for kitsch, she nurtured many of my virtues and discretely showed me that the order in which we live limits our freedoms and stifles our individuality, that it is violent and unnatural, and more than anything, that's what I think today, she showed me what love is.

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The train from L to N took some two to three hours, depending on the schedule of passenger and freight trains, and at Bileća Station it stopped for at least half an hour because that was where one track ended; the engine had to be turned in the opposite direction — I liked to stand next to a turntable and watch — and then it took the sidetrack to the front where it hooked with the car that was until then the last in the composition. And until this was done, we had enough time to pour ourselves a bottle of water at the station fountain or buy a drink, in most cases lukewarm soda-water, an odd fizzy mixture of sugar and water we called the klaker, an orangeade, or something else from the soda vendor's who pushed his cart along the platform, and at the newsstand we could buy newspapers and cigarettes and then queue up in front of a small fruit stand and get some seasonal fruits.

My mother sat in a compartment next to a half-lowered window and watched as I ran up and down the platform; I was clever and quick, I filled my bottle with water at the fountain before everyone else and

bought my mother a bag of juicy cherries. Many stared at my nice, chubby bottle that could hold two liters and that when filled with water turned bluish. I quickly returned back to sit next to my mother and watch her eat the cherries and share them with me. The weather was humid and heavy, and the warm wind threw dust into the car's window; I rubbed my eyes because my eyelids itched and the little pieces of dust irritated my eyes, although my mother smacked my arm every time I did it because I could have caught some kind of infection from my dirty hands. As always during summer droughts, macchia growing next to the tracks caught fire from the sparks from the locomotive's smokestack so now there was smoke on both sides of the railway. As the train slowly started from Bileća Station, first following the track we had taken only half an hour ago to get there and then separating from it and leaving it in the distance, from the window we could still see the fire and the thick smoke.

When the train passed through the deserted Koravlica Station, marked only by a small graveled plateau and a sign attached to two iron posts, my mother went into labor, and all I could do was watch her face turn pale as the sweat appeared on her forehead and ran down her chin. She opened her mouth gasping for air; it seemed she would suffocate, and I didn't know how to help her and ease her pain; what else could I do but to cling to her and hold her wet hands. I gave her a sip of lukewarm water and wiped the sweat off her face with a handkerchief. The passengers, mainly seasonal workers, crammed against each other on the benches in the compartment, were also caught by surprise, they weren't exactly sure whether these were only passing pains or whether "the head was about to pop out", as one of them, a particularly crass person, said and winked at others to what they started giggling and snickering, as if giving birth was something one should be ashamed of, they even went on to tell their cheap, vulgar jokes about pregnant women and making babies, and they teased the green fellow saying that he was about to see "the devil's thing" between the woman's thighs; they laughed so hard they could no longer control themselves. I did not stand up against them, even though I felt the sickening stench of that foul world and their primitivism; I never entered duels with fools, not even later in my life, nor I ever had any desire to correct someone's faults; sometimes I felt sorry for not giving such people what they deserved, but I found excuse in the thought that no outburst of mine could change something that's twisted and would instead turn me into a bitter man and that's not what I wanted to be.

It often happened that someone more resolute and daring did what I was supposed or what I wanted to do, but I had neither will nor courage, and this time two younger men, who stopped by our compartment in passing and spent a moment or two listening to those uncivil and heartless workers' jokes, yelled at them so sharply and bravely that I envied those foreigners on their authority and compassion. My mother did not see those things the way I did because the pains howled in her stomach ever more agonizingly. One of those young man, shorter and more fearless, talked wisely with his eloquent words and Montenegrin accent, and called those workers beasts, he even said that beasts had more reason than them, that they had more emotion, that they knew how to embrace their young and offer it protection, "while you are making a mockery of birth, cracking jokes with what is holy, you don't respect the mother and the woman." That's how they silenced our fellow travelers, who immediately went quiet, but I still think that those snooty men felt no shame. Yes, the skin on those faces is as thick as a bottom of a boot, as my father would say.

My mother had to go to a toilet, "I have to go," she said; those bold young men helped her to stand up and pass between the feet of our fellow passengers. They took her out into the aisle holding her under her armpits, because my mother hugged her stomach with her arms; it was a pregnant woman's instinct to protect the baby in her womb. "I wasn't expecting it yet," she said apologizing to the two dear young men who jumped to help us. "This is too early," she said. "Everything will be fine," one of them

said, then turned to me and added, “Take your things, boy.” What were our helpers’ intentions? I took our bag from the luggage rack and went after them. I grew bold so I turned around to the seasonal workers and stuck my tongue out at them. My mother’s walk was insecure and difficult and she stopped every second waiting for the cramps to pass. We carefully crossed from one car to another, and at small moving iron ramps between the cars we had to hold her firmly; that’s how we arrived to the compartment on whose door there was a sign: Private: Staff Only. The curtains at the windows were drawn. Train conductor was lying on a wooden bench and when he saw the two young men he quickly jumped to his feet and stood in front of them like a soldier waiting for his orders. “We’re turning this compartment into a maternity ward,” said the shorter one, who only a second ago lectured those workers.

The conductor sprung to his feet; I can still see the glow in his eyes, those eager and obliging gestures of a loyal man.

“We’re in luck, we have a midwife on the train!” he shouted with joy. “I’ll go get her, let the woman give birth as God commands.” He was quick, full of life; he hopped down the aisle, and the other fellow, the silent one, unlocked the door of a toilet reserved for staff only, helped my mother in and waited in front of the door, while I stood in the aisle and watched what was going on; I could barely comprehend all that goodness coming from those strangers, our rescuers. My mother came out of the toilet, she was relieved and her contractions eased up a bit; she smiled and said that this toilet, unlike other ones on the train, was clean and tidy, and then thanked the young men, “I don’t know what I did to deserve your help and care,” she said. “And I don’t know how to pay you back.” It was incredible with how much kindness and gentleness they tended to us, I can’t remember seeing such compassion ever in my life before or after, even when behind me there were years of travels and encounters with all kinds of people. This is the first time I’m writing about it, I’m not particularly good with kindness, there’s not much of it in my books, although all us have tasted a drop or two of that potion; I really don’t know why I avoided to mention something good, was it because maybe I was afraid that no one would trust me. Or am I fed up with evil, so now kindness seems more mystical to me. What I have definitely noticed, in all these years that I’ve been writing, is that kindness has no followers, while evil does. Perhaps that’s the answer to some of my doubts. I should not loose my thread, so I’ll go back to the two young men who put my mother in the compartment and gave us the key to the toilet. At that moment the conductor came back with an old nun in her black and white attire. She carried a doctor’s bag with her.

“This is our frequent passenger, sister Marija, a Franciscan from Cetinje,” said the conductor. The young men kindly said goodbye and left. The nun entered the compartment and patted my mother and then unbuttoned her blouse and undid buckles on her vest to free her breasts. She untied the belt on my mother’s wide skirt and pulled it down. She lifted the blouse and revealed her smooth stomach, she began massaging and gently pressing it, and then she went down and said into my mother’s navel, “Hey, you! Do you want to go out or are you waiting to get to the hospital?” I laughed at the nun’s magic; my mother quietly giggled as well. Sister Marija gave me a stern look and said, “It’s not funny. The child in the womb hears and understands. It answered to my question, but I am deaf.”

My mother broke out in sweat again, her teeth started shivering. I told the nun that towels and sheets were in our bag. The nun dipped the small towel in water from our bottle and started wiping my mother’s face. “Don’t worry, dear,” she said quietly almost into my mother’s mouth. “You’re in good hands. We’re not alone and we’re not abandoned. There’s always someone with us, someone is watching over everything we do.” She helped my mother lie down on the bench and then took out a small crucifix from her bag and placed it on a small hook above my mother’s head. Then she turned to

me and watched me for quite a while as if questioning me. “What do you think of God?” she asked. “I don’t know,” I replied. “He knows,” she said. “God knows exactly what you think. Now leave, you’re not supposed to see this.” She closed the door and pulled the curtains. I stood in the aisle in front of the compartment, pressed my ear against the door and listened, but all I could hear was the clanging of the car and the monotonous rhythm of its wheels. The locomotive whistled every time the train entered a cutting in the track. All around, by the railroad, there were remnants of fire; black rocks, burned grass and charred skeletons of rare trees. As it entered Petrovići Station, the train, its brakes squeaking, started slowing down already at the switch; the engine stopped exactly under the water crane. When the train stopped, and the clanging of steel went quiet, there was such silence and some general state of laziness in which every voice could be heard clearly; the locomotive released steam with a hiss, and the conductor walked through the cars saying that the train would stop here for at least fifteen minutes because it was waiting for the freight train from N to pass. Whenever I traveled, I regularly jumped out at every station even before the train came to a stop, now, however, I stayed in front of the compartment’s door, by my mother’s side, waiting for her to give birth. I pressed my forehead against the glass, and at one moment I managed to peek into the compartment; the curtain moved a little so I could see part of what was going on inside; I did this secretly, fearing that the nun might notice me and kick me out of the aisle. Her back was turned to me as she busied herself around the mother. She pressed that chubby bottle of ours onto my mother’s lips and made her blow into it. She’d yell strictly, like some commander, her voice was sharp, biting: “Blow into the bottle, I want to see it fly up like a balloon.” I saw my mother’s strained face, her goggled eyes and puffy cheeks; she tried as hard as she could and blew into that bottle with so much strength that it seemed to me the bottle was filling up with air, changing its form, becoming egg-shaped, expanding to the point when it had to burst. And then suddenly, in all that silence, in all that expectation, my mother screamed loudly and I saw the bottle burst into thousands of small crystal pellets, that explosion, that illumination blinded me and it seemed that silver and gold rain was falling on my mother and the nun. Rays came out of those pellets and in a second they weaved floating wreaths and aureoles around my mother’s head. In that fire of birth a child cried. Then I opened the compartment door and saw sister Marija, she was holding a child in her arms, it was all wrinkled and bloody, and from its navel a bowel was hanging; the whole scene seemed disgusting, I was shocked and I thought the worst, that a freak was born. My mother was exhausted, her hair completely wet, and there was sweat running down the nun’s face, her breathing was paced and she licked her dry lips. “You have a brother,” said sister Marija. “The child is healthy and well,” she said, and then turned toward the crucifix above my mother’s head, thankful Jesus, nailed and bent on the cross, for giving her the strength and knowledge to bring a life into this world.

Sister Marija brought the child to its mother and gently placed it into her arms; her hands shivered so she clenched her fists to calm them down and restrain the shivers, and then she pulled the bloodied sheets from under my mother and put them in the bag. At a folding table under the window there was our chubby bottle and next to it my mother’s comb. The bottle burst into pieces only in my vision, so the nun took it and shoved it into my hands: “Run to the fountain and bring us some water!” The chubby bottle, one of the most beautiful ones in my mother’s parents’ collection, always had a special place on the shelves, and my grandfather used it to serve wine only when some refined and distinguished guests came to the house. Now that bottle in my hands seemed like some precious object, like the most expensive of crystals, so I pressed it close to my chest and loved it as if it were a living being; it got a great meaning on the day of my mother giving birth. And as I walked toward the fountain, along the Petrovići Station platform, I made it know to the passengers that my mother gave birth to a baby boy.

The newborn's crying echoed in the silence, and the engineer sounded his siren to declare the birth; those were happy and short whistles, everyone found a symbolism of joy in them. Train staff and many passengers, who stuck their heads out the windows or stood on the platform next to the train, were truly overjoyed, although they knew nothing about the mother, but sometimes kindness bursts out of people just like anger, hatred or envy. Many praised the mother, many shouted: "aferim," "hats off to the mother," "may it be blessed," but there were also malicious comments such as: "whose is it," "does it have a father," and so on. The conductor wanted to give some higher meaning to it all, so he said: "a new passenger is born," and "his life began on the wheels, he'll get far." One had to admit that the man truly had honest intentions when he publicly said that God had already determined the nature of this little person that had just come to the world. Not many people expected such a spiritual position toward birth from a conductor. He knew that God delivered all of us and that "his seed is our life," and that was a very profound thought. So few people are like that, only once more in my life did I meet a man similar to him; he was a tinsmith and he spoke with much wisdom about many concepts that are so vague to us; he spoke just as wisely as the conductor. A postman from Knut Hamsun's novel The Women at the Pump was similar to them. He went on and on about God and afterlife in his discussion with the consul, but he also said so beautifully: "We come to this world in order to amend our own destiny." Doesn't this thought touch upon the birth of my brother at Petrovići Station? When the train started again, my mother was feeling much better, she took several sips of water to wet her lips and she appeared much livelier; it seemed as if her tiredness had passed on to sister Marija. She lay down on the bench; her eyelids were heavy and her rosary slipped from her hands several times so I picked it up from the floor and placed it back onto her palm. He fingers went numb, she couldn't say the rosary, and so she just helplessly stared at the crucifix above my mother's head. The baby was wrapped in a sheet, my mother put it on her breasts, gently patted its tiny hairless head, while on her face there was a gentle, wistful smile. We had a special treatment, we had a compartment only to ourselves; could we anywhere else in our country, from our people, get such comfort and such sympathy for the mother? No one complained about the baby's crying; on the contrary, all of the faces were beaming with joy, each and every person intimately celebrated the new child's birth. Finally we learned that the two young men who rescued us from the company of those rude and coarse people and placed us into this compartment — the conductor called them "the giants of generosity" – were actually the officers of the Security Service. People talked about them with admiration, they called them "the heroes of new age", and only a week ago they had killed a suspect on this very train. Everyone approved of that murder.

"Here, on the floor, where your feet are resting now, the body of that fiend lay," said the conductor, and then went on to tell us about a fly that had its mind set on the corpse's half-open, bloody mouth. Many passengers came to the door of our compartment to see the woman who had given birth on the train more closely, and some barren woman sat next to the nun and started crying and complaining that she hadn't been able to see four pregnancy to an end, and that the last time she was with child she had touched death, but no one offered her comfort or showed sympathy, as if we were all superstitious because after giving birth every woman still floats between life and death, so it wasn't pleasant to listen to her story, and we didn't even offer her to sit with us, she did it on her own and brought fear into the compartment. We all shied away from her, and when she said she would like to hold the baby, my mother didn't allow her and she pressed the child against her breasts even more firmly. Were we really superstitious or was that woman truly a sign of death testing us at that moment? I really don't know, she appeared honest and her intentions seemed good, but sometimes our instincts are better that what we perceive with our reason. The poor woman left and we talked about her even later when the boy

grew and developed nicely into a healthy child, we often regretted our arrogance toward that innocent woman who suffered for being unable to have a child. And just as she disappeared into the next car, a history teacher from Trebinje came to the compartment's door and said he knew my father. Politely he congratulated us on a successful delivery and kept his gaze on the crucifix above my mother's head. "I'm not happy to see the child was born under this crucifix. That's a Catholic cross," he said. "That's our, Christian cross," said sister Marija. "And why do you, sir, worry about this. It's not your child, is it?"
"No it's not, but I know its father," said the teacher. "He wouldn't like to see that. We have our Orthodox cross, sister."
"The mother doesn't mind our holy Catholic cross," said the Franciscan nun.
"I have no interest in the mother, I speak on behalf of the child's father," he said. "He would throw this foreign cross out the window, because he has his own."
"Here is his wife, sir. If anyone has the right to speak on his behalf, then that's she, and not you," said the nun. "Great evils were done under this cross, you know that very well, sister! Remove it and put it in your bag. If you don't do that, I'll throw it out the window," shouted the teacher, his voice shaking and his face completely deformed.
Sister Marija did what he'd said, calmly and rationally she took off the crucifix and put it in her bag. The teacher left. We were shocked by this stranger's incident and surprised with this hysteria, and Marija had too much experience to fight such people, while my mother and I understood very little, there was no such bitterness in us, in our family there were no such quarrels nor we had any prejudices of that kind. My great grandmother Petruša died under the same cross, that stood on the wall above her pillow. I couldn't say under with kind of symbols my ancestors were born and died. And why would I look into that? Had I had my present day experience, I would've protected sister Marija. Later I too ran into obsessed and sick people like that unknown teacher. I think I treated them the same way sister Marija did; calmly, rationally, and with a cool head. There's always someone to cast a shadow over joyful events.