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Water, Spider's Web

Water as a Prologue

Rumours started going round that the waters were rising in Slovenia, and those who were more cautious listened more attentively to their elders, who warned that the Sava had once already nearly washed away half of Zagreb. There were those who went to the riverbank and came back disquieted by the sight of logs, borne downstream by the threatening waters, disappearing under the bridge with lightning speed, but since no one takes people who go to check on rivers seriously, for four weeks it all came down to the inhabitants of the southern parts of town wading in mud in the unpaved lanes, while those in the city centre irritably opened their umbrellas and worried about their raincoats.

In the early sixties the authorities usually did their best to calm people down when they should have raised the alarm, and to raise the alarm about things that should not have been a cause for concern, so that people knew all about Lumumba and the fate of the Congolese children, they wept for Kennedy, the sad end of the unfortunate Laika haunted the dreams of the citizens of Zagreb, but up until the evening news on the 25th of October 1964, not a word could be heard on the radio about the floodwaters a heartbeat away from Zagreb. Even then, however, when they finally announced that there was a possibility of subterranean waters welling up in cellars on the outskirts of town, people were more concerned about the intermittent power shortages which made it more than certain that in the community centres and the rare homes that already owned television sets they would not be able to watch the next episode of *Bonanza*.

That night, the Trešnjevka neighbourhood did not sink into darkness, for the simple reason that since the quarter began to spring up it had never emerged from darkness. The unlit streetlamps and the guttering of the petroleum lamps that had luckily never been thrown away served only to augment the feeling of damp and cold, so the inhabitants of the neighbourhood snuggled under blankets and quilts pulled up to their noses.

In the hours leading up to midnight, nothing could be heard from the street. The mud swallowed up both sounds and footprints.

At two a.m., the chained dogs were furiously rattling their chains, straining to get away, while those that were free were hurling themselves at the fences; someone went outside in the rain and wailed into the night, someone knocked on his neighbour's door, someone called for his mother, someone cursed both Trešnjevka and the darkness. The blue light of a police car cut through the darkness from the direction of the Ljubljana motorway and a voice was heard saying something unintelligible through a loudspeaker. Had the voice been more distinct, people would have learned that as a precautionary measure, residents are requested to leave basement and ground floor rooms; as it was, they registered in confusion the distant siren raising the alarm and only a few of the more elderly stopped for a moment to consider how surprisingly and unjustifiably quickly one forgets the purpose and the meaning of that unnatural sound.

The only thing not heard were the church bells that had always, ever since the world and Zagreb began, rung the alarm whenever there was a flood. Maybe a hand did reach for the rope, only to stop short, either intimidated by the strict regulations on the ringing of church bells, or unable to believe that a great deluge would come down upon the city of Zagreb, endangering the lives and property of the entire flock.

Ana Firman sat up in bed and, putting her feet down, felt for her slippers. Even had there been a light, she would not have been able to see her feet for her belly. For more than a month now she had given up trying. Her husband was not awake and his wife half-turned to shake him by the shoulder. He jumped up.

— Has it started?

— What? No. Something's happening outside. Go and see what it is.

Zdravko Fiman pulled on his trousers over his pyjamas and, out in the corridor, threw a coat over his shoulders. He made no response to his wife's calling out:

— Umbrella!

Ana heard her husband exchanging brief, hurried sentences with the neighbours, she also heard a curse not addressed to anyone in particular and a yell which, though it mentioned no names, was addressed to her alone.

— Get up, get up! She did not respond at once with her outer body, but with her other, inner body she gauged the exact amount of danger by the intonation of his voice.

And Katarina, her inner body, lay quite still in her belly, lying low. The husband was shouting at his wife from the door:

— Ana, get dressed, let's go! The Sava has broken through the embankment! It's coming at us! Hurry up! His wife lowered her arms and, still sitting, started twisting her nightdress round so she could pull up it over her head.

— Ana, put on whatever you can over your nightie, there's no time. I'll hold the flashlight for you so you can see.

Blinded by the beam of light she bowed her head, holding the ends of her nightdress in her hands. Her feet barely touched the floor, her belly lay on her knees, and her head, which seemed to have no neck, lay on top of her belly. It seemed to her husband that he had been scolding a shy, overweight child.

Overcome with an unfamiliar feeling of compassion, he walked over to her and caressed her hair. He put down the flashlight.

Don't be afraid. Just put your coat on.

I'm not afraid. She lifted her head.

— Shine the torch on my hospital bag. It's by the bedside cabinet.

She stood up quite confidently and grabbed the bag with her left hand. Briefly annoyed by the nervous movements of the beam of light, she squinted and surveyed the room. Everything, absolutely everything in that room was indispensable for the life of the family, especially the child that was to be born at any moment now, and nothing, absolutely nothing, could be allowed to get wet, so, feeling that it did not really matter what she would salvage first, Ana Firman reached over to the bedside cabinet and picked up the glass figurine of an accordion player with which she would leave her home.

Her husband was already standing on the threshold, someone was yelling at him to the left, Zdravko, fuck it, shine the torch to the left and the beam of light left the corridor in hysterical jerks. There was a mingling of furious voices; someone was calling Viilim, Viilim; the crying of a child was heard and the sound, instead of awakening pity, introduced panic; Ana heard a woman's voice admonishing the good Lord that it was high time he did something to help and the curse of a man who was banging on a front door with his fists, trying to rouse the hard-of-hearing, evil-minded Mr and Mrs Zgorelec, to whom none of the neighbours had spoken a word for a decade. It was when she heard their name being called out that Ana finally panicked, but not to the extent of letting go of the glass figurine. She transferred it to her left hand, with which she was holding her bag, raised her right hand toward the clothes rack and

felt the clothes hanging there in the dark; her trembling hand did not have time to check what it was it had hold of. She dared not put the bag down on the floor, but slung whatever she had first grabbed hold of over one shoulder, unable to reach the other. She carefully transferred the glass figurine back to her right hand.

She reached the threshold in a single step. Stretching out her hand, she managed to touch her husband. She came over to him and lowered her left shoulder for him to pull her coat up over it. As if afraid of frightening her still more, he did not even put his arms round her; instead, he firmly held on to the soft lapel of her coat.

– I've arranged everything. You're going with the Ožbolts. I'll just take some of our stuff up to the attic, then I'll follow you.

– And where am I going?

– First somewhere dry, then they'll take you to Petrova Hospital, to the maternityward, that's where you'll be safest. I'll follow you there.

– Don't take long.

She did not cry out, she did not whisper I'm not going without you, she did not even look back. She was absolutely sure he would not let her down. Her husband was already shouting to Ožbolt:

– Slavek, leave the Zgorelecs, I'll smash their door in with an axe a bit later, come take care of Ana!

The woman gingerly stepped out of the house and trod into shallow water. Had she been able to see her slipped foot, she would have seen the water moving, encircling her leg like something animate, sniffing at it, washing it clean before devouring it.

She came down the step, that single step characteristic of Trešnjevka houses, never really meant to assist anyone in entering or exiting from the single-storey house, but put there as a sign that, having lifted your foot, you had left the outside world and walked into the protection of the house, or that, having descended that one step, you were at the mercy of the street. The step seemed higher than her leg remembered it, wider than it had been, and so Ana Firman trusted the step not to let her down, either. It would hold the water back.

Not knowing what she was wearing, she had left her house not in her coat, but in the dust coat she wore to work thrown over her nightdress, clutching a glass figurine of an accordion player in her right hand and carrying in her left a brand-new checked bag bought in the Trešnjevka branch of the Nama department store chain, into which, preparing for maternity hospital, she had packed two brand-new nightdresses, a pink nylon quilted dressing gown smuggled over from Italy and bought under the table, a bar of soap in a pale blue plastic box, a toothbrush with a red see-through handle in a matching box, a tube of strawberry-flavoured toothpaste, a green comb, a small jar of Solea universal cream, two new towels and a baby kit.

All her other things, those she left in her room and in her house, did not get wet; they vanished without a trace in the waters of the Sava which, in the night of 25th to 26th October 1964, flooded the southern parts of Zagreb, which had 180,000 inhabitants, razed to the ground or damaged 8676 houses and took the lives of 17 of our fellow citizens.

Among them that of the father of Katarina Firman, whose married name later in life was Hodak.

Ana never managed to recall afterwards whether she had turned back toward the house and looked at her husband or simply joined the column of people who had left their houses, streets, and native neighbourhood in the pitch darkness, on foot, with or without umbrellas, pushing overloaded bicycles, carrying cardboard suitcases and shopping bags randomly stuffed with belongings, or completely empty-handed. The owners of the few cars that existed in Trešnjevka had been cautious and wise

enough to leave the neighbourhood a few hours before, so nothing could be heard but cries and the unfamiliar, unsympathetic and perfidious sound of water rushing in from all directions; as if a wild beast had opened its jaws wide and was roaring, roaring, roaring endlessly.

Ana recalled letting two of the neighbours lead her along by the garden fences through familiar streets they were used to treading in the dark, so now they did not find it hard to move through the water which first came up to their ankles, then up to their knees, and then, in places, dangerously close to their hips. She knew she had followed the voices, don't look, when they were passing by the potholes in Gvozdanska street where they could hear whirlpools in the terrible darkness. They knew the potholes so well that even in the dark, by the meagre light of torches, they avoided them skilfully. She knew she had heard a desperate voice reaching them from the direction of Hreljinska street begging someone called Joža to climb up onto the roof and catch hold of Granny, and how she had felt by the panicky squeeze of Ožbolt's hand that he, too, realized that Granny would not make it. She recalled that in Končareva Street, which is somewhat more elevated than Nehajska Street, the water again came only up to their ankles, that they had lifted her up and put her on a truck crowded with elderly people, women and children, that the atmosphere on the truck had been lively, that you could even hear laughter, and that it was precisely this laughter that had made her come to her senses and that she had wanted to, but did not, call out the name of Katarina's father. She thought she had opened her mouth but stopped short when the truck began to move.

Katarina was placidly sucking the warmth out of the body protecting her; she could not have cared less that because of this the parturient woman carrying her was shivering, that her teeth were chattering and that her hands and feet were perished with cold. She did not care where the belly which was her home would lie down and she gave a clear signal that she wanted room, a place where she could devote several hours to herself. Ana, Katarina's mother, moaned and there was a commotion among the women on the truck, who started pounding on the driver's cabin with their fists and yelling, her water has broken, her water has broken; the driver panicked on hearing a word having to do with water and, fearful that he would not reach the maternity hospital in Petrova Street in time, tuned off toward another hospital, the one in Vinogradska Street, which was closer at hand. He could hardly wait to get rid of the pregnant woman. The women on the truck understood.

Offended that on this last day she had not been left in peace to listen to the beating of her own and her mother's heart, Katarina switched off all external stimuli; ignoring the screams and making focused use of the sudden rush of extra blood sent to her by her mother's veins, the precious oxygen and the contractions of Ana's body, she inched her way toward the outer world. She did a good job, a difficult one, relatively fast. She cried briefly and soon went to sleep. She was fed up with everything.

By the time Katarina left her mother's body dawn had already broken, so that those who had the opportunity to climb to the top of the few five-storey buildings or the unfinished Vjesnik tower were able survey Trešnjevka and Trnje, bearing witness to the nameless lake from which wet roofs peeped out. The watery expanse looked as if it had been there since time immemorial. On the radio, which could be heard neither in Trešnjevka nor in Trnje, they said that a catastrophic flood had hit the capital of Croatia, that the army, police, fire brigade and volunteers were making superhuman efforts to rescue people and salvage property, that representatives of the city and the Republic had visited the disaster scene, that the material damage was still being assessed, that the first to offer aid to Zagreb were its twin cities in all the socialist republics, that the Red Cross had already despatched the first shipment of aid, that all the hotels, schools and gyms had opened their doors to take in the victims, that the hospitals had been fully prepared and had admitted and taken care of the injured, that sufficient quantities of all

kinds of vaccines were available, that an emergency session of the Cabinet had been called and that aid was expected from abroad, and, finally, that in the Vinogradska Hospital, as a sign of renewal and the indestructibility of life, the first little girl from Trešnjevka had been born and that mother and baby were doing well. They also said that telegrams of condolence and support were arriving from all quarters and that the Yugoslav national football team had lost a friendly match with Hungary at the Nep Stadium in Budapest 2 to 1.

Ana looked at her little girl and wondered how she could ever have wished for a son.

They wheeled her back from the delivery room and put her on an auxiliary bed.

She waited.

Sleep tried to overcome her, but she would not let it.

She waited.

Finally she plucked up the courage to try and explain to the duty nurse that due to the sudden onset of labour she had been brought to the Vinogradska Hospital, that she should have been taken to the Petrova Hospital, that her husband must be looking for her by now and did the nurse know whether he had called.

The nurse did not know.

She could not talk to the other women in the room.

Several times more she asked passing nurses whether anyone had asked after her, because they must be looking for her... Then she stopped asking.

Breakfast was brought in. She could not eat.

She waited.

The sounds in the hospital became regular, daily sounds. The other women in the room were already mothers and carried on the usual conversations about childbirth. They spoke badly about the duty nurse. None of them came from Trnje or Trešnjevka, so their curiosity about and interest in the extent of the flooding were short-lived.

At about eleven o'clock they moved Ana from the auxiliary bed to a real hospital bed. She calmed down a little.

She waited.

A little before noon a doctor came in, approached her bed and asked her how she was feeling. He measured her blood pressure. The other women fell silent.

When the duty nurse, walking round the doctor, approached her, and her alone, carrying an orange on a small plate, Katarina's mother realized that she need not wait any longer. She did not even shed a tear, she only threw back her head and screamed as she had not screamed once during the delivery. To the other women in the room, too, her scream sounded different from the screams they had let out when giving birth. They all shrieked and burst into tears.

At that moment:

A helicopter was flying over the intersection of the motorway and Savska Street; from the roof of the Students' Hall of Residence in Cvjetno Naselje and the unfinished Vjesnik tower, people were waving at it cheerfully.

The hard-of-hearing Zagorelecs, securely tied to avoid falling, were sitting on the rafter of their house clutching axes, ready to defend their property from potential looters.

In Modruška Street a red patent pump was floating on the water, tapping with its perfect toe against a green kitchen dresser. Lying on a mat in the gym of the secondary school in the Upper Town, a secondary school graduate evacuated from Trešnjevka was crying over it.

In the music room of the Trešnjevka secondary school in Dobojska Street, the black, polished body of a pianoforte could be discerned through the muddy water.

In Drežnička Street, a wet family of hens perched in a tidy row on top of a garden fence which was resisting the flood were miserably looking at the water flowing through their shattered henhouse.

In the five-storey block on Savska Street, house numbers 95 to 101a, the word was spreading among the pupils of the Kata Dumbović Primary School that the attendance registers and other school records had been submerged and two seventh-grade pupils were breaking into song, drawing out the words: You are my destiny...

In the Red Cross shelter an old man was crying after his missing dog.

On one of the roofs of the single-story houses, among the people still awaiting evacuation, a fourteen-year old girl was shivering, watching the approach of a floating door on which rats shifted about nervously. Her lips, which had turned blue, no longer had the strength to close and the little girl was neither calling out, nor shouting, nor screaming, but only emitting a guttural sound. The man squatting next to her raised himself a little and pushed away the rats' raft with a stick. Later the people were taken from the roof and accommodated in the corridors of the Vinogradska Hospital.

A boat was coming down Savska Street. A solemn-looking man was sitting in it, rowing.

At the Student Centre the flood had lost its force, but the water was licking at its prey, licking the tram rails as far as the Mladost bookshop on Marshal Tito Square. The sandbag barrier behind the underpass at Crnatkova Street, near Vodnikova Street, had managed to stop most of the water. On this thin line made of sandbags, where the peripheral world of poverty stopped and the urban world of the town began, people were standing looking at the water. They were smiling, someone was taking a photograph.

Not far from them, a seven-year-old hunchbacked boy was standing with his pockets full of pebbles, flinging one pebble after another into the water at regular intervals. In those places where the water was already still, he was able to observe circles forming, rings of wavelets spreading out, spreading...