

**Slavenka Drakulić**

***Accused***

“I made you and I can break you.”

A hot summer afternoon. Little Girl is playing on the balcony with her doll. She notices a red convertible gliding down the street and recognizes the man at the wheel. It's Daddy, she whispers to her doll, glancing worriedly at the balcony door, as if scared that somebody might hear her. All the same, when the car pulls over she decides to give him a timid wave through the balcony railing. A tall handsome young man steps out of the car, humming a tune, but he does not look up and takes no notice of Little Girl waving at him.

Little Girl sees Mommy come out of the building in a short white dress. She opens her mouth to call out to her, but changes her mind. Mommy has her sunglasses on and a wide-brimmed red hat on her head. She is wearing bright red lipstick, which is how Little Girl knows that she'll be left on her own for a while, at least until Grandma comes back from her afternoon shift. Mommy looks up at the balcony and frowns. She waves her inside. Then she steps into the car, removing her hat. The breeze ruffles her dark wavy hair. Daddy puts his arm around her bare shoulders. She tosses back her head, laughing. Little Girl watches them drive off, lost in her own thoughts. She knows that she should go back to her room and lie down. Every time Mommy goes away with Daddy, she says: When you are home alone, you've got to go to your bed and stay put. You can play with your doll, but don't make any noise.

Her doll is her best friend. Little Girl tells her the kind of secrets that she can't confide to anybody else. Mommy's secrets. She says to her doll: See? I told you this morning that Mommy would be seeing Daddy today, but Grandma mustn't know. The doll nods her head. Little Girl knows she won't say anything. Any other girl in the neighborhood would immediately blurt out something like that. They don't know that grown-ups' secrets are different from children's and that you must never ever give them away, not even if they lock you up in a dark pantry or the cellar. Or beat you with a belt. She cradles her doll, sings to her some more and then goes to her room.

Let's go, the stocky policewoman said, shoving me into the official car, as if expecting me to put up a fight, or maybe even try to get away. Sick of the stale air in my cell, I had stopped on the sidewalk in front of the prison to breathe in the sweet smell of spring. I could feel my lungs happily expand and I went slightly dizzy from the rush of oxygen. The women's wing, like the rest of the prison, probably reeks of dank and the combined smells of body odor, sweat, floor cleaning products and the guards' cheap deodorants. Spring hasn't yet reached us deep down in the stone belly of the old prison building, and who knows if it ever will. Will it ever be able to squeeze through those small barred windows or will we get just the remnants of spring, those shards of sunlight strewn on the gray concrete floor like fragments of gold?

The courtroom reminds me of my classroom in high school, and it's not that much bigger either. The same white, dusty walls, the same plywood furniture, even the raised tables. All that's missing is a big blackboard on the wall behind the judge, who looks like the school principal. Despite the flickering daylight pushing its way through the open windows, the neon lighting casts a pall over the crowded courtroom. Everybody looks ashen, as if they have got some sort of disease - from the police to the judge, from the prosecutor and my defense attorney to members of the trial chamber, the witnesses and reporters. My face probably looks the same. Maybe everybody simply feels sick at the very sight of me? I

can feel their eyes sliding over me like the clammy tentacles of some blind, curious creature. For months the press wrote extensively about my case and the dilemmas it posed. It painstakingly reported the police reconstruction of the crime, providing evocative descriptions, so that readers could devour every detail of the scene of the crime and trajectory of the bullets, and scour the photographs for signs of evil on my face over their morning coffee. But in the courtroom I try to keep the same expression on my face. They're probably trying to figure out if it is indifference, disinterest or lack of passion. The only thing I want them to see is a blank mask. If only they new how much practice it took for me to slip it on.

I try not to let my eyes scan the courtroom for familiar faces because that might stoke my real feelings of fear and helplessness. I'm on my own at this trial, and I've decided not to ask for anybody's help. I do not want my father to testify for the defense. Or my ex-husband, who when I walk in throws a worried look my way, then furrows his brow and tries to read my mood, his almost boyish-looking face suddenly looking old. I asked him not to come, to stay at home with our young daughter, but he wants to show everybody that he is standing by me.

Out of the corner of my eye I see an older woman suddenly get up from her aisle seat and leave the courtroom, head bowed. Maybe she knows me from somewhere? But why is she here then? She must have known, everybody in the courtroom knows, what I am on trial for. They have come to hear for themselves, every detail - the charges, witness testimonies and arguments. Standing between us are piles of newspaper articles, heaps of words and stacks of files, their contempt, maybe even hatred, and my own stubborn silence. Where have you all been until now? I think, as the policewoman shows me to my seat, the one reserved for the accused. So now I interest them, but where were they when I was little and needed help, Little Girl crouching in her inner prison with nobody to hear her screams.

"The Accused - A Cold-Blooded Murder or an Accidental Killing?" screamed the headline announcing today's trial. What the public in the courtroom wants to know is how I am going to behave and will I break my stubborn silence and speak out in my own defense. But they won't hear a word from me, not a single word! From the very start I told my court-appointed lawyer that I would not speak. So your defense is silence? she asked. No, I said, I won't defend myself at all. But why not? she asked in surprise. The prosecutor commented, not without a hint of sympathy, that I was condemning myself in advance. I don't think that they are all malicious in their quest for answers; I understand that they want to hear me explain my actions.

Why did I shoot? Why won't I defend myself?

I remember vividly how the inspector, when he first questioned me, asked why I had done it. Because my little girl was crying so hard, I told him, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. I was afraid for my child, I tried to explain. He looked at me in disbelief. And that's all? Yes, I replied, though, it wasn't all, of course, but I couldn't tell him that.

That day last fall, she had been lying dead on the floor for some time. Somebody kept ringing the doorbell. I was afraid that the noise would wake the child up and I had only just managed to get her to sleep, so I opened the door. Two policemen were standing in the doorway. The younger one asked me if everything was alright because the neighbors had reported gunshots. I nodded my head. I did it out of habit. I had been taught that if somebody asked me how I was I should always say: Fine, thank you. People don't care how you are, Mom would say. When I came to school all black and blue and somebody asked if I was ok, or if a neighbor asked how I was, I always had to say I am fine. The same policeman asked me if there was anybody else in the apartment. I don't really know why I nodded toward the

living room.

Of course I was aware of what I did, though in a strange way, as if it was happening to somebody else. Maybe this event finally put some order in my life .

A different, deeper sense of order, one that the police officer would not be able to understand. But how to explain that to the man in uniform who opened the living room door, took a horrified look at the corpse, and then at me? He was pale, about to faint. I could see dark stains of sweat spreading under his arms, even though the room was cold. He took out his phone, made a call, speaking nervously – a woman...on the floor...dead, yes, yes, I checked. His voice raised, he was shaken, maybe this was the first time he had to deal with such a situation. I was standing in the hallway, afraid that all this noise would wake up my little girl asleep in the other room. She was all I was thinking about, I didn't care about the commotion, the doors suddenly opening and closing, more people coming in, crawling all over the place, while I stood there, dispossessed.

Then they phoned my husband to come and pick up the child. They told him that I was being arrested, that I was a murder suspect. We waited for him to arrive and then the police took me to the station. As we left, the door next to mine cracked open. It was the neighbor I had been talking to a little earlier, she peered out through the dark, like a cockroach irresistibly drawn to the smell of death.

Little Girl and her mommy move into Grandma and Grandpa's apartment and Mommy's old room. It isn't big; it has two narrow beds and a big closet. It holds Mommy's old high school books and there are posters of bands glued to the inside of its doors. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones – Little Girl reads their names, proud that she already knows how. There is also a dressing table with a big mirror, which Grandma and Grandpa moved to the room when they bought themselves a new bedroom set. When she stands in front of it, Little Girl can see only half of herself. The upper half. When she was much smaller and they were living with her daddy, she was confused because she couldn't see her legs in a similar mirror that Granny, her other grandma, had. Look Mommy, I have no feet, she would say, pointing at herself in the mirror. It made her mommy smile and Little Girl would repeat it like a parrot just to hear her ringing laugh. Her mommy still laughed a lot then, her deep throaty laughter would fill the house, every room, floating above Little Girl like a white fluffy cloud.

Mommy always takes a long time to get ready when she is going out with Daddy. Little Girl sits on the bed, watching her try on her clothes. As usual, she can't make up her mind. What looks better, the red, knee-length dress or the white short dress with straps? she asks Little Girl. But really she is just talking to herself, to the person she sees in the mirror. I think Daddy will like this white one better, she says, quickly slipping the dress over her head and wriggling her naked body into it. Then she sits on the bed to let Little Girl zip her up. The child watches the zipper slowly slide up over the smooth, bronzed skin and inhales her warm smell, Mommy's smell.

Little Girl likes the flowery dress best, the one her mommy sometimes wears to work or when she has to take her to the hospital for a check-up. That dress makes her look more like the other mommies in the playground and on the street. Their third floor neighbor has a dress like that. But she dresses like a peasant, she knows nothing about fashion, Mommy says.

It is stuffy in the courtroom. The air is heavy, the room is packed because the district attorney will read out the charges today.

Facing the judges from the dock, I have to hold on tight to the wooden railing, with both hands. The air from the half-open window barely reaches me and I can feel beads of sweat forming on my temples and above my lip. I try to listen carefully. There is a succession of people taking the floor in front of me. I

wish I didn't have to listen to all of this again.

The district attorney reads out the monotonous text in a flat voice. I miss some of the words; he seems to swallow them.

“As per article 41, paragraph 2, item 3 of the Law on Criminal Procedure,.....,a student, married, mother of a minor, currently being held for trial...,did on.... in apartment..., fire two shots at the victim from a 9 millimeter....pistol, one from a distance of 90 centimeters and the other with the pistol pressed against the body..., internal organs...inflicting a lethal gunshot wound causing instantaneous death...the accused declared...I quote: ‘I tried to get to the child, I was to afraid for her life. My mother was aggressive.’ ”

You are mine and mine only. I made you and I can break you.

The first bullet didn't bring Mom down, she didn't give in. She even managed to spit out the words: You misery! She mustered the strength to hurt me even as she was dying. I shut my eyes. I stepped closer and fired again. She dropped to her knees, then leaned against the couch. When she finally fell silent I remember that the pistol in my hands suddenly felt heavy.