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***Tunnel At The End Of The Light***
**Translated from Croatian by the author**

Part One: Something Is Rotten

1.

I immediately knew something was wrong. People always say that when terrible things happen, everyone is so smart in the aftermath, but I did have a bad feeling while getting off the bus, a drilling sensation in my gut. I remember rustling my plastic bag and looking at the greasy shards of puff pastry inside. Cynics would call it nausea, not intuition. But I know the pastry was not to blame. I have been buying it at the same place for years now, every time I am on my way home from the night shift.

I crossed the street and spotted a police car parked on the sidewalk. Had it been an ambulance, I would not have blinked. There are so many old people in our skyscraper that not a week goes by without someone having a major medical problem and once a month there is some poor bastard's death notice, God rest their souls. But a patrol car is something completely different. What happened, I wondered as I entered the skyscraper, not through the main door, but the one on the left, with the trash containers. I breathed through my mouth as I opened one of the lids and threw away the bag. I have dozens of paper bags at home and I always tell myself not to take another one, but canvas bags are never at hand when I need them. I have a couple of those too.

I climbed the stairs to the first floor. I like our staircase better than the ones in other buildings because it is open and there is a kind of small terrace on every floor, providing enough air and light. Only the one on the first floor is ugly, with two rusty fire-escape ladders, totally useless because they are blocked by a steel fence closed with a padlock. Through the fence I could see commotion on the piece of lawn that seemed to be cut into the skyscraper. On three sides fifteen stories of concrete loomed over the grass. A lawn with more garbage than grass. God forgive me, but people are sometimes worse than animals. The only open side of the lawn was closed off with a police line. A camera was clicking with occasional flashes as two men squatted and moved their rubber-gloved fingers on the ground. Then I spotted the legs. The concrete

fence and the two squatting men obscured everything else. Just legs in pale blue jeans and a pair of sneakers. They did not move.

I felt something touch my ankle and almost screamed. I saw a black and white kitten, which I would, under normal circumstances, probably find adorable. But now the damn creature almost gave me a heart attack. It looked at me coldly, like the face of absolute evil in the guise of something soft and cute. The only downside of open staircases is that stray animals can crawl inside. I turned around and rushed up the stairs. My pulse quickened, what with all the running, what with the shock. All along a voice whispered inside me: look at the lawn, take a peep, just for a second. I did not want to stick my nose into other people's affairs. I was afraid the policemen might yell at me – I do not like to be yelled at. Mind your own business, Davorka, I told myself. But a part of me wondered who was lying down there, on the filthy blend of ground and pieces of garbage. What happened? A part of me wanted to know. A part of me needed to know.

There was no steel fence on the second floor, just the chest-high concrete fence. Bit by bit I came closer to the edge that kept me away from a scene that would give me bad dreams in the following days. From up here the view was perfect. The clicking of the camera reminded me of publicity events, only the main star did not wave. It just lay motionless in – you could see it now – an unnatural position. The right arm turned in an impossible way and the left leg was obviously broken. How did I not notice it sooner? The boy was young, at high school age, just like my son Tomislav. At that point I became dizzy. The blood pounding in my ears, I had to hold onto the fence. After a couple of deep breaths I looked down once more. It could not be him, could it? Tomislav is at school. A stupid thought, I know. But he has a shirt of similar color and always wears jeans. I squinted in order to make out the face. Despite the swellings and the blood it still had a shape. I sighed. It was not Tomislav. Although I will not be completely at ease until he comes back from school, until I hug him in that strong way that he cannot stand, I felt relieved. One mother will not be, I realized. I could almost hear her screams. However, empathy has its limits. At that moment it only mattered that the devastated mother was not me. The dead boy did not seem familiar, which surprised me since I know most of the neighbors here and am good at remembering faces. Eyes wide open, he was looking upwards. At first I thought he was staring at me, as if condemning me for feeling relieved that it was him lying on the grass, not a member of my own family. Then I realized he could not see me. His eyes were pointing at the sky, somewhere above the light. Stiff and dead, it is absurd to say they were looking at anything.

"Would you please step away?" yelled a young policeman in uniform.

I ran away before he spoke again. I do not like to be yelled at.

2.

“Erm… it is not uncomman that… erm… that is, in a homogenous electric field… erm…”
No freaking way. There, I tried and it really ain’t possible. My mom can’t give me shit that I didn’t do my best. I tried to listen to the teacher and it just ain’t possible.
“A charged particle…”
Charged particle my ass. The human brain ain’t programmed to listen to such a dull voice for more than two minutes. Even that’s too much. Vili would totally agree. But his seat is empty and I have no one to play cards with. In the row in front of me Marta is lost in her thoughts while Iva is manically writing things down. Why does she give a shit?
Not much to do. I could count how many times the teacher will say *erm*, but that’s lame. Her all time record is 127 and who cares if she can top it? They say that time flies, but I swear, in the physics class it stands still. It is by itself a physics phenomenon they will use to molest high school students in the future.
Mihael had, of course, switched off his phone so I have to use the medieval method. I rip a piece of paper from my notebook and write: WHERE’S VILI? I crumple it into a little ball and throw it towards the first row in the middle. Ha! Mihael could be sitting in the teacher’s lap, his notes wouldn’t be any better. The missile lands on his temple. At first he’s puzzled, then he sees my diabolical grin. He unfolds the paper and reads it. He looks towards me. I smile and move my eyebrows up and down. He smiles back and scrawls something on the paper, folds it and sends it back. The paper changes hands and finds its way back to me. I HAVE NO CLUE. WAS ABOUT TO ASK YOU THE SAME THING.
“Kovačević, throw that away.”
The teacher is looking at me, so I can’t act the fool. I get up and throw the paper into the bin. I managed to hit it from three yards away, but no one is clapping or cheering. I get back to my seat and look at the teacher eagerly, waiting for another *erm*.
“Let us see how that works… erm… in an experiment.” She makes a racket with some obsolete equipment that reminds me of electroshock devices. “Erm… Oh dear. This doesn’t seem to work. But if it worked, you would see…”
Man, it’s always the same. I turn my notebook to the last few pages and look at my band’s logo. I designed it last Friday during the chemistry class. It sucks ass, I can’t even look at it. I rip the

page and crumple it. I leave the paper ball on the table. By the end of the class it will hit somebody's head, I just have to decide which.

Discipline, Pero, discipline. Time to get down to business. So, the new logo. It has to be mean and powerful like the music it stands for. Let's try some pointy lines. STILL. I notice that my tongue is sticking out of my mouth, like I'm retarded. I pull it back in and keep working. Not bad. Scribble, scribble, scribble. BORN. This is definitely acceptable. Now continue in the same vein. UNI. This N turned out a bit different than the first one. But I like it even better this way. CORN. There. I look at the logo of the band that, if there is any cosmic justice, just has to make it one day, not just in Croatia, but worldwide. It just has to. Is this the logo that I want to see on the billboards? STILLBORN UNICORN.

It sucks. Looks like a dyslexic logo of some shitty black metal band. I cross it out and close the notebook. I shut my eyes and see myself playing bass in a crowded venue. We are opening for Rush, but loads of people are here for us. Almost no one's really into Rush in my hometown and they would never play in such a small club, but never mind, it's just imaginary anyway. People are jumping and banging their heads. Awesome. I pick with my finger, which I can't really do yet, but I'll learn it by that show. I see a good looking goth girl clinging onto the fence, not letting the crowd push her away from the first row. Although Fićo is playing the guitar solo, she's looking at me. Smiling. I smile back and come a step closer. It's our last song, that monster of a song that still lacks the chorus. The gig ain't even over and I've already found my first groupie. And a gorgeous one too! Although the song ain't funky, I slap the strings 'cause it looks cool.

Someone kicks me in the shin. I raise my head and see Iva who has turned to face me. Behind her I can see the teacher with the open grade book.

"I am glad Petar is with us again", she says. "Erm... we have our volunteer."

Half the class is sneering as if the woman has said something terribly funny. I look at my watch. Only five minutes left.

"Vili was supposed to have the oral exam today."

"Yes. But Vilim is not here."

"Could be sick", I ramble, trying to gain time. "On Saturday he went hiking in the woods. You think he could've caught a rat-bite fever?"

"Vilim will explain everything when he gets back. Let's go", says the teacher and points towards the blackboard.

"Please", I stall her, "I already had an oral in English."

“Excellent. That means you’re properly warmed up. Erm… here’s a piece of chalk. So then, two point charges… erm… ten to the minus eight Coulombs and two times ten to the minus nine Coulombs… erm… are in the air, thirty centimeters apart. At which point between them… erm… is the charge Q3 in balance?”

Holy shit, are we even speaking the same language here? I’m waiting for the teacher to turn into a llama to be sure this is just a bad dream. Unfortunately, it seems to be real. I press the chalk as hard as I can and produce that awful squeal most people can’t stand, myself included. The chalk breaks. I bend down and reach for the broken piece.

“Never mind that, Kovačević. Just solve the problem.”

Let’s see. Q. It’s my cue. As I stare stupidly at the blackboard it comes to mind what Vili would say in a situation like this. If *v* is 40 and *s* is 43, determine the saltiness of popcorn.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing”, I reply and start scrawling something that is hopefully vague enough to be taken as the right answer. Where’s the fucking bell?

“Petar, which formula do we need?”

I’m searching for a formula, but there’s only chaos in my head.

“We need…” The bell! How true. We need the bell.

I grin, but the teacher flunks me and says: “You can repeat it with Vilim next week.”

Fuck. My first F and it’s only Monday. Mihael shrugs compassionately. I look at the bright side. I already had two orals today so I can’t have one in the history class. A blessing in disguise.

I get out into the hall and take out my cell. I call Vili again. It’s ringing. And ringing.

“The person you have dialed is unavailable right now”, says the idiotic mechanical voice.

Thanks, Sherlock. I’d never have come to that conclusion.

Maybe he didn’t hear it ring. But how? He listens to music on his smartphone and, like all normal people, he always has it on him, even in the bathroom. He seems to be in the sulk mode. To be honest, he’s probably right. I was an asshole for posting that thing on Instagram. After school I’m going to his place to apologize. No, wait. It’s better to give him some time to cool off, I conclude as I join the torrent of bodies moving down the stairs towards the canteen.

## 3.

There was hardly any connection between the office desk and the person sitting behind it. A vast pile of papers, as if something had exploded, and his figure, so slow and dull. How can you

expect him to find missing persons when he cannot even find a pen in this mess? Not young enough to have any ambition and not old enough to give up on everything. He was so calm and reserved that I wanted to grab him by the lapels and start shaking him, get into his face and yell at him. My daughter is missing, you idiot! How can you sit so still? How can you show so openly that you do not give a shit? At least fake some concern and compassion! I know that this is your job. I know that you go through this every single day. I know you need a defense mechanism in order to stay intact. I know all of that and I do not care. I want you to find my girl and your indifference does not inspire confidence. Not at all.

“First things first”, said upper police inspector Ivan Margetić. “What did you say her name was?”

“Katarina Ančić.”

Mira pressed my hand firmly. I pressed hers back, but did not look at her.

“Father’s name?”

“Željko.”

“Identification number?”

“It’s right there. Beside the photo.” It turned out louder than necessary, but I don’t care. He should start doing something. Who cares about the identification number? Will a numerological analysis help him find my child?

“The girl is sixteen. Which means she’s still a minor.”

We are dealing with a genius. I feel like crying, but the last thing I want is this jackass hugging and comforting me. I feel an unpleasant tickling in my throat.

“Has she run away from home before?”

“No”, I reply. “And I don’t think she ran away. If she had, she would have left a note.”

“Not necessarily”, says Margetić and suddenly raises his gaze. “Were there any problems at home?” This has to be some standard trick, because his cold blue eyes seem to pierce right through me. The guy is much more intelligent than he lets on. He has completely taken me aback so Mira is the first one to answer.

“Katarina is in puberty, you know how it is. We had some small disagreements but...”

“Nothing special”, I finish my wife’s sentence. The tickling in my throat turns into a coughing fit. It is infuriating that I cannot stop it.

“You want me to open the window?” asks the inspector.

“Please.”

The air is stuffy and dry and the walls seem to radiate an unpleasant kind of heat. Margetić opens the window. The light breeze gives me goose bumps. Or did I have those before?

“What school did you say she goes to?”

“Hotel and tourism school”, I answer calmly. I have to find a way to answer politely and yet pick up the pace which is still unbearably slow. Where are the patrols? Where are the bloodhounds?

“Any problems at school?”

Mira looks at me hesitantly. Nothing could have been a more obvious confirmation that our daughter is a lowlife.

“Look”, I intervene, “she’s no excellent student, but she isn’t the worst in her class either.”

“Which grade is that?”

“Second.”

“And her grades are…”

“She gets all sorts of grades”, I reply. “Okay, she flunked some tests, but she’ll pass them eventually.”

“Mhm”, murmurs Margetić and scribbles into his small black notebook. “What about discipline?”

Mira is pushing it again, with her bovine look. „She was sent to the principal’s office, but wasn’t disciplined.”

“Was it truancy?” asks Margetić. “My son kept doing that. The daughter didn’t, she was a good girl.”

“She didn’t play truant”, I reply. “Not more than the rest of the class. She was sent to the principal because she had a fist fight.”

“When was that?”

“Last week. But don’t you think she’s some kind of a troublemaker. The other girl provoked her.”

“How?”

“She called her names. Look, I taught Katarina to defend herself if others attack her, otherwise she’d be a victim her whole life.”

“How do you know who attacked whom? Calling someone names is not the same thing as assault.”

“They are not”, I say. “Words can be much crueler. And for your information, the other girl gave the first blow.”

“Are there any witnesses?”

“My daughter is the only witness I need. She may be difficult, but she never lies.”

“We raised her Christian”, Mira has to add.

“Turn the other cheek, that kind of thing”, murmurs Margetić. Is he making fun of our values? You lazy ape, I will smack both your cheeks if you keep making stupid remarks.

As if noticing he has gone too far, he quickly changes the subject. “Who’d she hang out with?”

I look at Mira. She is faster: “The girl she fought with was her best friend.”

“Did they make up?”

Mira shakes her head.

“What about other friends?”

“Look”, I say, “Katarina was always a little introverted. She knew Matea back from primary school. She didn’t get on very well with her new classmates.”

“So she was an outsider?”

“That would be an overstatement.”

“Where does she usually go out?”

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

“I didn’t mean that. You know how kids are. I bet she wasn’t at home on a Saturday night, was she?”

“Saturdays and Sundays she had her religious education and parish gatherings”, stutters Mira. “The chaplain said she had left at about ten. But she never come home.”

Her eyes fill with tears and my throat gets tighter.

“I was on duty at the hospital”, I say to fill the eerie emptiness in the air.

“Mhm”, mumbles Margetić. “And she never went out to, how should I put it, secular places?”

“She’d go to these rock concerts every now and then”, I say and Mira feels obliged to add: “She always wore black. I kept telling her she was prettier in lively colors.”

“Emo? Goth?” asks Margetić.

“It’s just a phase”, I say. “She’s not depressed if that’s what you mean.”

“She doesn’t listen to Satanic bands”, Mira points out.

“Did she use any drugs?”

I look at him with such disbelief that he feels the need to explain: “I don’t mean hard drugs. Weed for example.”

“To me all drugs are equally bad”, I say firmly. “And no, Katarina did not take any substances.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I’m telling you she didn’t smoke pot. We know what it smells like, for God’s sake. And besides, my Katarina would never do that.”

I would beat her black and blue, I almost say out loud.

“O-kay“, chirps the inspector and scrawls into his notebook. “Did she take any money or valuables?”

“No”, I say exchanging glances with Mira. “We didn’t notice anything missing.”

“How much pocket money did she get?”

“Five hundred kunas a month, not counting the school lunch money”, I say. “More than enough.”

“If she didn’t go out”, Margetić continues, “she could have saved enough for a bus ticket or something like that.”

“She didn’t know anyone in other cities”, I say and Mira adds: “We have some relatives on the coast, but we’re not very close.”

Margetić nods. As he stares at his desk, it seems like he is looking right through it, into a void interesting to him alone.

“When was this taken?” he asks pointing at the photographs.

Mira bends over the desk. “The first one during Easter holidays, the other one last fall.”

“This is her natural hair color?”

“Yes”, says Mira with a smile. “Isn’t it beautiful? Like honey. She wanted to paint it black, but I told her it would look awful. You see how pale her skin is.”

“Does she have any other piercings?”

“That’s her first and last one”, I say. “This stupid metal thing gave her a runny nose all winter long. But she begged me to let her have it and I couldn’t say no. Although I should have.”

“Any other peculiarities?”

“She doesn’t eat meat”, says Mira. Margetić smiles because we look like complete idiots. This information will surely help the search. He can eliminate all burger houses and butcher shops.

“All right, Mr and Mrs Ančić”, concludes the inspector. “I will pass her description to all patrols. Most runaway minors return within forty eight hours.”

What about the rest, I thought. Margetić looked at me as if reading my mind. For a second I seemed to read his as well. *You do not want to know what happens with the rest.*

“We’ll send her picture to the media. As soon as she shows up, we’ll know.”

“What if she doesn’t show up?” Mira whispers.

“She will”, Margetić and I say in unison. That is one thing we agree on. Of course she will show up.

4.

I am sexually aroused by children. There, I said it and I do not feel lighter at all. Problematic as it may be, young bodies still light me up like signal rockets falling on a pine wood. Those who have not experienced it cannot know what I am talking about. Am I sick? Even if I am, there is no cure, except maybe a bullet in the head. But however disgusted I get by myself, I never find enough determination for such a radical step. Like a dog licking the remains off a plate, I lie to myself that I want to keep on living, that I like all those permitted sources of contentment: books, films and music, but it is all bland and desultory. I feel like a bottle of champagne which is being stirred its entire life and the true meaning never pops out. No emptying to bring the fulfillment. I just sit and shake, like a time bomb, for which no one knows when it will go off. Sometimes, as I walk by the local elementary school in the morning, I wonder awkwardly if anyone has noticed my boner. As far as I know, there is no conventional symbol for people like me. I suggest the following: just like Nazis had taken over the ancient swastika, we should do something similar to create the symbol of pedophilia, take something basic and innocent, for example a flower, as it is drawn by school children. And it would make perfect sense: something you are only allowed to look at, maybe smell, but if you pluck it, it will wither and die.

Half the time I hate myself for feeling what I feel. The rest of the time I see nothing controversial in the longing itself – there are far worse things in the world. Of course I would never rape a child, that much self control I do have. Not that I had not thought about it. Not as rape, of course, but as a magical moment born in the safe haven of imagination, where a young perfect being approaches me and says with its innocent voice: “I want it too.” It is a good things thoughts are still free. All those who would castrate me or burn me at the stake can sleep assured: it is only in my head. There is no sex in my life, not the kind I would want anyway. That is, not the kind that would want me, it is not that I am willingly choosing this. A desire that must never be fulfilled, a hunger that must never be stilled. Not that my whole life revolves around sex, but there are moments when all I crave for is a child’s pussy. I guess the mitigating circumstance is that I am at least sort of heterosexual. I do not like faggots, maybe because I am jealous that they have certain rights. When will people like me get the right to be happy?

Of course, it could always be worse. At least I am not interested in girls younger than ten – or maybe I just like round numbers. I could defend myself by reminding of the times when girls used to get married at the age of eleven and claim I am almost normal. But that would be fooling myself. What is essential is that certain innocence that you cannot find in adults. When

I see a glimpse of maturity in a girl's eyes, my desire is put out, like embers under a truckload of sand. I know what I want and I know I should not get it. To touch that gentle young meat (there, the very thought gave me a brutal erection), to transfer my trauma to someone else. Even explicit pornography is off limits. As I wait for someone to use animation where people – and we are people too – really need it, all I have left are pictures of half-naked girls in selfies that they put online. And then there is, of course, my imagination, wonderful and wild. A place where no one gets hurt but me because after I jerk off (which I am doing right now), I feel empty and cold. The pictures in my head cannot hold me tight. Here it comes, the emptiness. Every time the desire ebbs away and I have not committed a felony, a part of me expects a pat on the back, as If I had done a heroic deed. I am far from considering myself a hero, but I would like someone to understand me. I would like to have someone or something other than fear. I am afraid that the suppressed hunger will one day grow stronger and break out of control, like bacteria after you stop using the antibiotics too soon. What if thoughts get worn out, what if they become weak and useless? What if one day I will not have any choice but too seek out the real touch?

At the moment the animal is safely locked up. As I watch it nervously walk around the cage, I love it and hate it at the same time. I keep it on a diet, feed it only with thoughts and in return it tortures me by existing. My Mr. Hyde is hiding and while he is raging within me, I observe him and root for him. When he falls asleep, he leaves behind him a desolate ground I could somehow cope with if I could sleep as well. Is there a connection between pedophilia and insomnia? Maybe, but that other trauma of mine is responsible for the lack of sleep and I do not want to think about it now. I should give up thinking altogether, shut down for just a moment. In my case it is not possible without the fruits of pharmacy, the blessed pills like a cure for motion sickness during inner roller coaster rides. Unfortunately, it comes at a cost. The hangovers are almost just as bad as the insomnia I am trying beat. This is why I am always looking for a balance between night and day. A quiet night for an unpleasant day. The daytime sanity for a sleepless night. There is no victory here, only damage control.

I wonder if anyone will finally invent something against memory because everything would be easier if we would not remember things. If a memory is painful, it creates trauma. If it is pleasant, it creates melancholy because the moment is forever lost, as if it had been lived by someone else.

As if I do not have enough bad memories already, this morning I collected an especially terrible one. Was it all my fault? In a way. If it had not been for me, that kid would not have come to that damn skyscraper. Could I have protected him? Probably so. That is the only truth and the

pills cannot drown it. The fact remains that I know something others do not, something I should tell the police who will probably overlook the most important part. Yet, there is this self-preserving instinct that keeps me from attracting their attention, which is why I sit and wait. Maybe there will be some other way to clear the conscience that has never brought me anything good.

Excuses are wonderful. Whatever it is you are trying to avoid, you do not even have to look for them. They will find you.

5.

It is near. The moment I wonder why I keep doing this job. Night shifts are no big deal, neither is arguing with drunken people and I have even become insensitive to corpses like this broken kid who is being photographed like a celebrity, which he may even be for the next couple of days. The dead are no problem at all. They do not move, nor talk, nor cry. You just have to tell yourself you are looking at inanimate matter, something like a shop-window dummy. You have to focus on colors and shapes until the connection between the picture and its meaning vanishes. Sooner or later the body bag appears, which is happening right now, there is a rustle of plastic and the buzz of the zipper. And it is all over. What was once a human being is now an abstract sculpture you never have to behold again.

No, the corpses are not the worst part, I tell myself while inhaling the cigarette smoke. My stomach is shaking when I think of the inevitable. How long has it been? We identified him half an hour ago. Zovko called the mother and said something had happened, told her to come to Božidara Magovca street number 111 as soon as possible. Incompetent little shit. He missed the chance to tell her over the phone, which may be less humane, but is much easier. And now he is hiding behind the coroner, leaving me in the front lines. Any time now I will have to do what he was incapable of.

I spot a dark stain on my uniform. I have no idea how it got there. I rub it with my finger, but it refuses to go away. I blow out a smoke and suddenly I can see the mother. Who else could be this hysterical woman running towards us? You could not really call it running, she is too heavy for that, but she is giving it all she's got. Her hair is disheveled, her face sweaty, her lips trembling. The Titanic going for the iceberg, full speed. I throw away the cigarette stub and go towards her.

"Mrs Ivanjek?"

“What happened? Tell me!”

“Madam, calm down”, is the unconvincing bullshit I say. If I were her, I would slap the jerk trying to stop me from being justifiably out of my mind.

“Not something with the kids”, she hopes.

This really isn’t your day, I think. Although I have done this countless times, I cannot say it has got any easier.

“Your son Vilim...”

“What about him?”

Nothing. There is nothing about him at all.

“Is he in trouble?”

On the contrary, he will never be in trouble again.

“Madam, calm down and let me speak.” The woman’s shaking chin reminds of a scared bunny.

“It’s hard to say this... Your son Vilim is dead. I’m sorry.”

“It must be a mistake”, she utters shaking her head. “My Vili is at school.”

“Your son wasn’t at school today.”

“Oh God”, she says and buries her face in her palms. Through the cracks between the fingers the truth slowly creeps in, like toxic gas. The woman starts to wail. Loud, like a wounded animal. The panic sobs raise her chest and I wonder if I should embrace her. Of course I should, but I can’t. Irrational as it may be, I do not want to touch this woman, just like I never want to touch the bereaved family members, as if sorrow were an infective disease.

Zovko comes closer and gives her a paper tissue. I feel a strong urge to smack him on the back of his head. I refrain from it out of the respect to the wailing woman.

“What... How?” These are probably the words she utters, her nose blocked by snot.

Zovko opens his mouth and I silence him with a stern look. You caused all of this, asshole. Now shut up and move aside.

“Your son was found dead”, I say. “He fell from this skyscraper.”

“What?” She stares at me with gleaming eyes. As if that invisible spike did not entirely penetrate her heart, but is waiting for my words to push it deeper. “What... was he doing here?”

Although we both know the answer to that, we remain silent. I know what she is thinking. I would ask myself the same thing. If my child has jumped off a building, what kind of parent am I?

“He fell from the twelfth floor”, says Zovko. “We found his cell phone up there on the fence. That’s how we identified him.”

“Did he... jump?”

“We don’t know that, ma’am”, I calm her down, “nobody saw what happened.”
“The circumstances are unclear”, Zovko adds.
“Could have been an accident”, I say while I look to the side. “These things happen.”
“I want to see him”, says the woman while wiping her eyes with her sleeves. She has smudged the mascara and looks like a panda. I do not feel like laughing though, everything is still painful and dark.
I show her the body bag. I squat and perfunctorily pull the zipper open. I do my best to prevent even my peripheral vision from catching the dead kid’s eyes. It is only inanimate matter, I repeat to myself.
As could be expected, the woman’s despair deepens. Soon she is on her knees, pulling out tufts of her hair and screaming. Zovko tries to calm her down as I close the bag. Since I cannot switch the channel, I am at least trying to find the mute button in my head. It even works to a certain point. My ears are buzzing like after a loud concert.
The photographer lady saves the day, taking the mother in her arms. What a shitty week and it’s only Monday. I turn towards the skyscraper and look up, at the concrete fence, where less than an hour ago had stood a blond freckled teenager. Although I did not go up there, I could imagine the view eleven stories above the ground. Whenever I tried to jump into the sea from a big height, I would hesitate and look like a complete wimp. Some self-preserving instinct would not let me step into the void. Although I knew I would fall on the water and that these five or six meters of altitude would not hurt my in any way. Only if I managed to move my thoughts to a different direction, my legs would move and I would find myself mid air. In that split second I would still have time for a thought (“This was not a good idea.”) and the realization that there was no going back. The gravity would pull me down without mercy. What could have gone through that kid’s head? Did I really want to know? Of course not. If that jump was the only way to end his story, it was a story I did not want to read.
The woman fell silent. Her shoulders shook in mute sobs. Zovko kept staring at her, as if he could somehow ease her pain if only he tried hard enough. Idiot. Lighting a cigarette, I looked up once more. Unclear circumstances my ass. The kid had jumped and we all knew it.