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Selected short prose

Translated from Croatian by Ira Martinović

It's all life, I guess

When they put makeup on my dead cheeks, I want it to be Chanel. Who knows how that's pronounced, though. But still. If I had died yesterday, I never would have known what a miracle that foundation was. Or if I hadn't lost mine. I still don't know where it went. I blame Drago for whatever happened to it.

Not many people died yesterday; I only had to call dr. Sanja once. I try not to bother her too much. She works in both parts of the hospital; the one for the living and the one for the dead. She never complains, but lately her eyes have been a bit more dull. She's been looking dead tired. Her skin is pale, her cheeks sunken, her hands bony. I must tell her to start taking better care of herself. After all, I am her *official partner and assistant in determining the cause of death*.

That's how I described my job to Janica when she started school last fall. Before that she had only known her dad worked in a hospital. She told her classmates about it, in science class. They were both impressed and envious. Two of them, boys, offered to walk her home after school that day. They kept peeking through the half-open door, whispering, "That's him" into each other's s ear. I was wearing a suit, because I'd just come from a funeral. An old lady had died the day before, up in Oncology. They sent her to me in the afternoon, and the first thing I did was phone them, to make sure they informed her family. Sure, it's the protocol, but protocols fly through the window come end of the shift. Then I made her look lovely: I don't like ugly bodies. I always try to cover all signs of bad living and bad dying on their faces. I ask the nurses to give me their old makeup, especially foundations. Foundation is essential for sending them to their last journey beautiful and dignified. I always send them off with a nice complexion. Men, I shave carefully and camouflage traces of haematoma or visible injuries. Women, I put some blush on. Women need to be beautiful. Sometimes I even use some light eye shadow, if death has turned their eye lids purplish. When I put clothes on them, dress them nicely, I always feel satisfied with my work. Doesn't that look better? When I die, I don't want to look dead, either.

I washed the granny's face with a sponge, put some foundation on, and just a touch of blush. I combed her thin hair with a thin comb. It was feathery, and knotted from the pillow. The windows of the morgue were opened, as they always are when hydrangeas are in bloom. I love my dead to gaze through the window as I'm dressing them and applying makeup – I always think they'll be happy to look at my lush, colorful shrubs. And more peaceful. Maybe they'll be amazed by that one flower that leans inside through the window. There's always one or two like that, every season. I guess they peek inside, intrigued by fear, and then they can't tear themselves from it. Same thing happened when I read scary stories to Janica, ones about parents abandoning their children. She'd always beg me to read them once more the second we reached the final line. I have to cut the flower: it's showering petals all over the floor and making a mess.

I covered the granny with a sheet, and then dr. Sanja walked in to tell me the hospital administration hadn't been successful in location the granny's family. "It looks like she was all alone." The following day, in the afternoon, I put on my white shirt and the black suit I'd bought for Marija's funeral. I'd worn it two months later, at Janica's christening ceremony. And now I'm wearing it to send the granny off. The priest gave a lovely speech. He put a lot of thought into it. *We shall be judged by love, not by sin; by mercy and not by justice...* He did beautifully. Especially since he was so young. Maybe he was practicing for a future funeral, a more important one. He seemed like the kind of person who is good at everything he does. I gave him a bottle of my homemade brandy after it was all said and done. As I was giving it to him, I turned the bottle to display the white label with a red border and red letters: *Janica*. Below the name, two plums. Dr. Sanja told me she thought the label was lovely. The priest was delighted with the gift, but still I returned home feeling down. But then Janica came home from school, bringing those two classmates with her. One look at my daughter and my heart swells. Even more so when I can tell she's proud of me. As they were saying hi to me from the hall – as if they didn't dare enter – I was glad I still had the suit on. I looked like a genuine *official partner and assistant in determining the cause of death*. There's no need for Janica to know half of the hospital mocks me by calling me *chief Žgela*. The rest of them call me *The Undertaker*. I know they mean no harm, but I don't want Janica to ever feel ashamed of me. She doesn't know I only finished elementary school, or that ever since I've become an *official partner and assistant in determining the cause of death*I've been more interested in growing my hydrangeas under the window of the morgue and autopsy room. One year I plant blue ones, the following year pink ones. This year I've planted sky blue shrubs.

Yesterday I watered them, as I always do at the end of the shift, and then sat in the shade on the bench near the building and watched them for a long time. Tomorrow I'll tell dr. Sanja to take a break. She needs rest. She has unused vacation days, anyway. The evening was warm and quiet; the final moments of a quiet day. Not many deaths. I barely needed foundation – they were so young. That's what angelsmust look like after a bike crash. The girl had chipped nail polish on her short, small nails. There was barely any left on her left pinky. I removed it all with acetone, then cleaned under her nails and repainted them pearly white. The boy barely needed any work. He was beautiful. My mind went to that old biker whose family hadn't brought clean pants for the funeral, and his beige ones, the ones he'd been wearing under the leather, had three blood stains on them. I washed them, then dried them on the radiator. Nobody should be buried in bloodied pants. What was his family thinking? The boy's family had brought a necktie, so I tied it carefully around his neck, beautifully, like for a wedding. I took a final look to make sure everything was fine. Carefully wiped the tear stain from the knot. There, you two beautiful children: you're taking your final journey together, and looking your best. I spread a single sheet over their bodies. I'm never careless like Drago, who once left six bodies uncovered for dr. Sanja to find. I always make sure the bodies are covered: when I'm done with a body, I cover it with a white sheet, and only then move on to the next one. I know dr. Sanja feels more comfortable that way, and it's more humane. But yesterday, as I was working on the boy, I left the girl uncovered. I wanted to cover them with the same sheet, at least until their families get there. I thought of them crying their eyes out somewhere out there. Another tear stain. This time, luckily, on the sheet.

I'm certain Drago is to blame for my missing foundation, as well. He must have tossed it in the trash, he's careless like that. He thinks himself above it all; this world and beyond. Sure, I make deals with funeral homes, too; that's inevitable. Besides, Janica has been asking me for a new phone lately. But I make sure everything stays proper. I once caught Drago counting money in front of a grieving family. Luckily, we never work on the same bodies. Those few times we had to, I was close to throwing him out of the room. He uncovered a man, saying, "This one looks fine to me. Well, except for the dead part." Dr. Sanja even laughed. I was upset. What a dimwit he is! Later, she said to me, "Don't be mad at him, Pero. We all have our coping mechanisms." Still, he rubs me the wrong way. He doesn't even try. Old Kovačić would scold him for sure. "Drago, where's your dedication?", he'd say. You see, Drago is the kind to say, "Doctor, there's an old cut from the breastbone to the pubis", instead "There's a pre-existing incision from the xiphoid process to the pubic bone." I always tell Janica to ask as many times as it takes. "Ask until you understand," I say. "Even if it takes a hundred times." I must

have asked dr. Sanja, “What is it called in Latin?” at least two hundred times. That’s probably why lab technicians call me chief Žgela. Or maybe because I do my best to be clean and shaved at all times, and keep my lab coat whiter than theirs. But dr. Sanja only calls me by my name and I know she prefers to work with me than with Drago. She told me once, “Pero, you make us all, both the families and me, feel better. You have the confidence of a top class surgeon. What a shame you haven’t graduated high school. You’re a great organizer and always try so hard. You do everything you can to make the family pleased, and take the load off me. You arrange all the papers on my desk, put them in order and even make sure I don’t have to take any unnecessary steps. Somebody else wouldn’t take time to learn how I do things, or to adapt. I can’t tell you how grateful I am for all your help. Such a shame about that high school.”

But would I have met dr. Sanja had I graduated high school? Suddenly I saw my plum orchard in full bloom. I stood there, fidgeting, thinking how to hide my face, realizing too late that not only are my hands raw and pink, but my hairless head as well. I blushed, not knowing where to hide my hands, either. Dr. Sanja laughed, saying, “Listening to your words of comfort, seeing you so organized and decisive, hearing you advise families how to bypass the administration or, like yesterday, to throw that priest off balance to make sure the ceremony runs late and give the nephews time to arrive from Slovenia in time… makes me feel like, come time, I’d be well taken care of in your hands, in a best-for-value casket of your choice.”

“Don’t say things like that, dr. Sanja”, I said.

“I’m just joking, Pero. Still, it’s easier to navigate through this life and death storm with you.”

There was a swing hanging from a plum tree in that orchard. I was ten years old and flew toward the sky, toward the white lace of flowers.

I said, “I did try to get a GED, doctor. I tried night school in the late ‘80s, but I just couldn’t do it. History was my biggest foe. I was already working back then, in Regeneracija Zabok, and in a repair shop. I was making good money, had a lot of wild fun.” I shouldn’t have said that, I thought. She’ll think me flimsy and irresponsible. “That was before I met Janica’s mom,”I added. But what if the doctor thinks that was my first and only woman? “I was popular with the ladies,” I said with a serious expression.

Dr. Sanja was still smiling. “I can tell the Punic Wars and Ancient Greece were just standing in your way, Pero,” she said.

“Exactly,” I said, having no clue what she was talking about. I knew she was right, though. She always is. “Professor Kovačić failed me twice,” I said. “The second time, her said, *Pero, Pero, Pero.*

Another fail. Historia est magistra vitae, you know." That exam cost me a month's pay, so I decided it wasn't worth it. And so I quit night school and became and undertaker, dr. Sanja."

Two years ago, professor Kovačić came to us on a gurney, under a white sheet. His path on this earth ended on my table. He had Klatskin's tumor, one of the most lethal types of cancer. It reminded me a bit of the Punic Wars. Dr. Sanja usually never helps with dressing the dead, but that time she just came over without a word. Together, we put a shirt on professor Kovačić. She buttoned him up, as I was putting trousers on him. She was crying, but I didn't dare ask why. I pretended not to see her tears, but it was a painful scene. I focused on the professors' cheeks; old and ruddy from keratosis. I covered the marks with foundation very carefully. When I was done, I sad to him, "Dear sir, I know you wanted what was best for me, but I just couldn't master all that history. If I had graduated, though, who would be taking care of you now?" Dr. Sanja buttoned the final button and left in a hurry. I stood there, foundation in hand.

And now I have no idea where the foundation is, and the dead are on their way. Dr. Sanja isn't here, either. She's probably going to walk in any moment now, smile and say, "Pero, what's with the long face? I haven't seen you this upset since your hydrangeas died." It pains me to even think about that, but dr. Sanja means no harm. I know she only mentions it to say, "There, you've survived."

Last year was disastrous for hydrangeas. One shrub dried up for no apparent reason, and when the Samobor funeral home hearse backed into the other one, I felt as if it had backed into my lower abdomen. I have no idea for how long I was out. When I came to, I saw dr. Sanja's face above me. Her sky blue eyes and pink blush. I felt her familiar scent. It made me wonder why I never thought to put perfume on my dead. Yes, I'll have to ask nurses to bring me some of their perfumes. They'll probably be cloying, though. Not like dr. Sanja's perfume: like a breeze from the plum orchard. That's what I was thinking about while watching her, nose wrinkled with worry, a bit shiny as it always is by the end of the day. But then I noticed Drago's shaggy head behind her. He said, "Doctor, he seems OK to me... Well, except he's been hit by tragedy worse than we were that time we didn't have enough freezers for all those Czech tourists from the interstate accident." And then he laughed. What a dimwit! But dr. Sanja didn't laugh. She touched my cheek and said, "It's OK, Pero. You fainted, but you're fine."

Dr. Sanja has a big heart and a beautiful soul. Even down here, alone with the dead, we get a few laughs. Like that time we got a grandpa seventy-eight years old, and his wife kept crying and wailing, "He's my hero!" We felt sorry for her, but when we uncovered her husband, we laughed: he had two tattoos on his stiff body. One was typical, *Youth relay 1957*, but the other one, above his long

shriveled privates, said, *Ladies only*. Dr. Sanja's eyes widened in surprise, and she said, "Well, that explains it. What do you think makes him the hero, though? The relay or this?". And her honeyed laugh reminded me of bees in the orchard; I could taste the sweetness, and in that moment missed those bees and their honey so much I couldn't turn my eyes way from her. My heart ached. Dr. Sanja is the only lady I know. I laughed long and hard, and then felt tears on my cheeks. That's all life, I guess.

And now she's not here. Her laughter has become pained lately. When she returns, I'll have to tell her to finally take that vacation. To travel somewhere far away. If she wants, she can come visit my orchard. There is no place more beautiful. I'll tell her she can stay for as long as she likes. But then I thought, *You fool, why would she go to your parents' old house? What would she do there without even a TV? Can you even imagine her on that moldy kitchen linoelum barely sticking to the floorboards? Impossible.* But I could imagine her there: dr. Sanja walking around the only room in the house in her big white clogs, carefully, not to disturb anything. Then I remembered the outdoor toilet and the bed I slept on as a boy, and decided she must never go there, so I just kept waiting for her to appear in the Pathology hallway.

But it was Drago who appeared in the hallway. He walked over to me, not in his usual strut. He walked more slowly, dragged his feet. I turned my back to him; I wanted to escape and didn't care about my missing foundation any more, but he called after me. "Pero, wait!" When he came over, I noticed the weird expression on his face. *I can take it*, I thought. "What do you want?", I asked, but he just kept staring straight into my eyes. Seconds passed. He'd never looked me in the eyes before. I realized his were sad. He must have stood there for at least half a minute. I didn't know how much more of it I could take: I had no idea his eyes were that sad. "This is for you, Pero", he said.

He gave me a folded piece of paper and two bottles of foundation. Ha! My foundation! I knew it! That dimwit. But still he kept looking at me with those said dog eyes. It made me feel uneasy, so I turned my attention to the foundation. *Chanel*, it said. I had no idea how to pronounce that. Still, I didn't ask *him*. How would Drago know? He doesn't even know what the xiphoid process is. So I asked, "What's that?" instead. "From dr. Sanja. There's a note, too." I unfolded the paper.

Dear Pero,

Forgive me for mistakenly taking your foundation yesterday. My brain was foggy all day. I return it to you, and give you my own. I know how often you use it, and I have too much makeup, anyway. I

will not be seeing you for a while, but I will be thinking of you. I'm sending Janica a kiss, and to you a tender hug.

Your friend Sanja.

I couldn't understand. I looked at Drago, who was shaking. Then he burst in tears and collapsed into my arms, wailing like Janica did when I had to leave her in the school on her first day. I just stood there, not knowing what to do with my arms. So I hugged him back. Where did all his muscles go? His entire body hung from my arms like the white coat he was wearing. "Pero, my Pero. What will I do now?" Still, I didn't understand a thing. His wailing kept getting louder, and my patience was wearing thin. The last thing I needed was for someone to see us hugging like that. "Drago, what happened?" I grabbed him by the shoulders. "What happened, tell me!"

He sobbed the answer. "Dr. Sanja... has inoperable... pancreatic cancer. It metastasized into... her liver. We'll lose her... in a couple of months. Maybe sooner. What am I gonna do, Pero? What am I gonna do without her?"

I took care of three bodies with Nada, dressed them up and all. I found Drago sleeping where I had left him. He had drunk half a bottle of my plum brandy and fell asleep on the bench near my hydrangeas. I barely managed to carry him inside and lay him down on the nearest gurney. I pulled a sheet up to his chin, careful not to wake him. Like dr. Sanja did to me.

In the toilet, I opened the *Chanel*. Who knows how that's pronounced. I'll have to ask Nada. I smelled the little sponge that came with the foundation. It smelled of dr. Sanja. I noticed my face in the mirror, wet with tears. And then I took the sponge to my cheek. What a miracle, that foundation.

THE FIR

Dad planted the fir when I was nine, after it was done more or less successfully pretending to be our Christmas tree. Sure, it was a tree; just a puny one. The smallest Christmas tree in the world. Our next-door neighbors had a potted tree, as well. Their daughter was a friend of mine, so I remember it very well: she was always better than me in every possible way, including that one. If I could have picked my own Christmas gift – to put under a tree, mind you – it would have been *her* tree. Ours was slightly disappointing, nothing like its illustrious predecessors that needed trimming on the top to fit into our living room after mounting. We didn't even need to whittle the top to put the ornament on it – we knew we'd plant it in the garden later, and dad said whittling might damage the bark irreparably. So on top of being absurdly small, our tree wasn't even decorated properly: the shiny, spiky topper didn't fit. The emperor was naked, but I kept my mouth shut. Someone's gotta be a grownup, after all.

When we took the decorations off, dad planted the fir by the backyard wall; into a raised garden bed with cement frame, filled with fresh soil dug up in the nearby woods. Years went by and the fir, as trees sneakily do, grew without anyone noticing. We only took notice after it grew taller than the house and started leaning on the backyard wall. It leaned on me, as well; as I witnessed the ever-growing disproportion between the magnificent fir and the space we offered to it long ago, failing to peek into its future, and which it used to the fullest, having no other choice. I'd turn my head away from the fir, from the uncomfortable knowledge it has spent its entire life suppressing its roots in the shallow soil. But then, with the corner of my eye, I'd notice its mighty top towering over our three-story house by a third of its height, and think that maybe the fir decided to ignore the laws of nature – as above, so below – and write its own laws. Maybe it poured its heart and soul into the trunk and leaves. Negative gravitropism. *What if it falls down?*, sometimes I wondered.

The fir next door dried out and died after only a few years in the backyard.

Another day I saw an old man trudging up the hill to our house. He stopped by the low brick wall surrounding the first front yard on our street, leaned on it to rest, and even from afar I could see he was shaking with fatigue. The scene made me sad, something cold grabbed a hold of my heart and I thought I should go and see if the man needed any help. Then I realized the man was my dad. My eyesight isn't as good as it used to be, but as I always say, only from up close. From afar, it's perfect. The thing is, the first house on our street may be far from ours, but I'm too close to my dad to see things as they are. Up close and personal.

I simply could not recognize him.

Up until yesterday, our fir was and old tree. Even I'm tiptoeing toward the middle age now. My dad, the man who built the wall around the yard, built the frame of the raised bed and filled it with soil he pushed up the hill in a wheelbarrow, is now a sickly old man. He's been *taking care of things* these past few months: I can see that, but I can't ask him about it, can't talk about it at all. I just feel the cold grip around my heart tighten.

We've all been worried the fir might topple over and damage the roof, but I'm not a doer, just a worrier and a complicator.

Dad, however, called in some help yesterday. *Landscape professionals*. Guys with chainsaws. The fir was cut down, chopped into pieces and gifted to a neighbor for kindling. When I parked my car in the yard yesterday, that cold grip got even tighter. I kept my mouth shut, though. I didn't want to burden dad with my emotional issues, especially since obviously he's trying his best to *take care of things* and let me live carefree. I didn't complain to mom, either: my pain is her pain, that's inevitable. Kids and their parents are like roots and treetops: if one is blue, so is the other.

Instead I went for a jog, found shade and solace in deciduous woods nearby. In the evening, I went to pick up my daughter from her dance class. When we parked in the front yard, I dropped the heartbreak on her casually. *Grandpa had the fir cut down.* She took a knife through the heart and I could see it written all over her face. She took one look at the empty garden bed and started wailing bitterly, painfully loud. *Why, why, why... why did you do that?*, she kept saying over and over again. And I hit a different kind of wall.

I hugged her, leaning over the gear shift and the handbrake. Helped her out of the car as if she were wounded, and hugged her again in the shade of the now gone fir. We stood like that until the dark. She was still crying when we went in. *I did some wrongs I wouldn't dare to right.* In the end we managed to wake up my mom; she came down from her floor. *Why is Nina crying?*, she asked. *The fir.*, I just said. She shot me a look. *Me too.*, she admitted quietly. *All day.*

And then dad joined us; a fragile old man in trousers much too wide for his frame, with hearing so bad now he needs everything repeated at least once. His voice shaking, barely audible, he threatened, *Let's hear it; who's made my little girl cry?*, and I replied as loudly as I could, as if taking a peek under a bandage on a fresh wound that'll some day inevitably be an old one I'm used to. *Nina is sad about the fir.* Dad teared up. I'd only seen him cry once before, and it almost killed me. It was somehow easier the second time round.

I stood there and watched their tear-stained faces. I didn't cry. Someone's gotta be a grownup.

Later, I promised Nina the branches we kept would grow into new firs. I lied. I told her we'd plant them the next day, together. She asked me how long it would take for them to grow, and I said ten years. Lied again; told a tale as tall as the fir. Ten years, she yelped. And tears trickled down her cheeks once more. She's twelve. Ten years are basically her entire life, as she remembers it.

Her trunk and leaves.

This morning I went to the backyard to scout the location to fake-plant the saved branches. My mom was already there. She said, *It's all dead and dusty now, the soil around the stump. We should have had it cut down in the fall and planted something in its place. Now we'll just stare at this empty space all summer long.* Her voice was really low; dad was still asleep. The cold grip around my heart struck again, but I didn't cry.

Someone's gotta be a grownup, mom.

DO NOT LEAN OUT OF THE WINDOW

I am forty-five years old and I can safely say I've never had a good night's sleep outside of a train.
I am eight, nine... fourteen years old, it's summer and I'm traveling to see my father. Even in my sleep, I'm counting crossties; all night. I say *traveling*, but actually I'm going back. My life is right where it should be right now, but the beginning is at the other end of a 3D movie that every morning starts rolling in front of my eyes as soon as I wake up in the bunk bed and peek through the pushed down window – ignoring my mom's words that echo the warning on the glass: DO NOT LEAN OUT OF THE WINDOW. The beginning is with my desire to feel the world with my eyes, my cheeks, my eyelids; in that faraway spot that scares me at first, but then hypnotizes me; distant and unreachable. That spot where the tracks merge is perfect, there are no tragedies there, no crashes; the Tower of Babel is still standing, the languages are one and I can still understand myself speak.
In the beginning was the word. There's always been *the word*. Even before the first word, there was a word.
I'm seven, and my mom is telling everyone, 'We're back for schools. For the language.' They understand. The language of me says, 'Mom came back, dad stayed there, I was forced to leave. By train, into the country that was there before *my* country; to speak in what they call my mother tongue. Dad's words, dad's jokes, dad-speak stayed with him in the other country, the one I was born in. And I stopped loving it. I stopped loving it so passionately, so fervently I forgot its language, as well.

...

Language is a hard thing to lose. The complete language of your thoughts and dreams; the language you had in your head and had to let loose. The language of your puns, of your slang; two things I had to re-learn fast in my so-called mother tongue: my mother taught me no puns, no slang and I hard-landed into *her* mother tongue at the age of seven. What was worse? The fact I was seven when I first said *telly* in my mother tongue, or the fact that words all seemed like a lie, like an act: I wanted to sound *cool* and *fly*, to invent a better me – or at least a *me* more like the others. I *kicked butt* and felt bold, sassy and free. I planted my banner firmly into the slang, struck a pose, then all of that *noch einmal* and gave myself a *high five* for a mission well done.

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All I can say in my defense today is *Your Honor, I'm guilty as charged. I showed off my newly acquired word-wealth. I'm guilty as hell, as I've used and abused words I haven't lived, just learned. The words that ran parallel to my tracks.*

I kicked no butt. My bold, sassy and free were nothing but fonts.

...

When Iva was seven, she asked me what a signalman was. I have no idea why, but the question stopped me in my tracks. For a second I thought she meant something other than the obvious, I thought that she'd somehow realized I'd been living my life on at least two tracks, but then I felt like an answer wouldn't do: what she needed was an apology.

An apology for all that bilingualism, for parallel worlds running into opposing directions, for railway junctions; for wanting to have a family and stay myself at the same time, for loving her dad, only not enough, for not loving others despite their obvious appeal, for arrivals I felt were departures, for departures that for me were arrivals... I wanted to tell her life needn't be a single-track road – one can travel several roads at the same time and still get somewhere. But I didn't. I realized she might already know I got somewhere, I got places, but not in one piece. She might have realized I can't really operate a switch, and every time I grab that lever, I cut off the road I've just traveled, leaving behind trains I'd barely managed to catch: love, marriage, jobs. Maybe she'd seen my switching for what it was: panicked lane changes without waiting for others, with no respect for the time-table; letting the engine run like crazy toward the horizon, leaving the wagons behind and watching them slow down and finally stop in the middle of nowhere, between stations.

...

When Josip was seven, I got him a model railroad. Soon, his dad got left behind a boom barrier. We moved into a small apartment near the tracks, and Josip got another train for his model. Iva wasn't that easy: even then things were not her thing; she preferred to play with words and already knew some things *just happen*.

The model railroad... For me it was a train surrounded by scenery, never anything else. In my mind, those miniature hills and tunnels – much too large for our small new living room, and obviously too expensive – that sprawling green bought to fill the hole inside the boy, were mere wallpaper. I only saw the little train: I'd lock onto it and watch it go round and round, hypnotized; for ages.

The train kept going around our living room, our lives kept going around the train: we'd trip on the shunter, pass books over the tunnel, watch movies sitting next to the sponge hills lit by bluish *telly* light.

...

When they were both ten, the *telly* led us to *Ana Karenina*. Josip walked into the room several times, found us lost in the movie, shook his head and left. Until he couldn't keep quiet any more. 'I can't understand why you're watching a movie with nothing going on', he said, and I peeled myself away from Iva to go after him.

I hugged him, fully aware he'd never know my gentle hug was telling him *thank you for not understanding*.

...

My life's always been at its the most dramatic with nothing going on.

...

My express train keeps going even after they fall asleep. I'm still counting crossties; on paper now, but the rhythm is the same. I lay railways long into the night, plant exclamation marks and stretch power lines between them. I get a buzz out of it. It takes me places. The hum of my fingers on the keyboard melts with the crosstie drumming; the enter key becomes the switch, every new page is a new station. The model railway grows into the real one, outside my window. And I finally fall asleep.

...

I'm seven, eight. I'm forty-five years old and I still count crossties in my sleep. I still don't *kick butt*. I still don't live those words. They're still a second language; learned, but not felt. Google-translated. I'm still an early bird, leaning out of the window to catch a whiff of the world. With my cheeks, my eyelids, my hair.

I was never even close to falling out of the window. I never left the top bunk.

...

Sometimes I feel like my whole life is on the tip of my tongue. Like I myself am the word that escapes me. When I was a kid, I boldly showed off my fresh words, acquired at the expense of my first language lost. It slipped through my fingers as I lay awake – as my mother's dreams of me catching up were sitting on my chest like a succubus – while everyone else in the house, already all caught up, was sound asleep.

...

This needs to be said: forgetting and remembering are two very different processes. Memory can be trained, oblivion... just *is*. There is no recall from oblivion. Still. I was seven when I stopped playing with both trains and words. I started taking them both very seriously. I remember my very first decision to forget: like endless crossties of my inner rail tracks, my heart and mind drummed the

words *I-will-for-get-you* round and round. I forgot overnight all the words of a language that used to be mine. All but 'My name is Ana.'

...

They saw through me. Pushed me back onto the right track, desperate: 'You mustn't forget! Your education and your memories are the only things no one can take away from you!". To correct the mistake, I took up new languages – with dedication, perseverance and idealism. Today I can say 'I'm a translator' in four languages, accent-free. Not guilt free, though.

My first language is not my first. Not mine. It lacks wit, heart. It isn't whole. Whenever my life got stopped in its tracks, I'd always hear something calling me. I'd turn my head toward the sound, wake up before the alarm went off. I kept longing for trains: trains to give me a push through the day, to bring me back, to take me to another oblivion. *Noch einmal.* And then again.

My attempts at translation were frantic: I kept leaning out of the window, too afraid to lean back in. I stuffed myself with other people's words, false memories; fed the mother-tongue-shaped hole inside me with debris. Still. The hole echoed, deep and steep, impossible to fill.

...

There are holes like that: hopelessly hollow. We edge along them averting our eyes, shovel and shovel to fill them up, and only manage to make the echo louder. Until we realize the only way to handle them is to turn them inside out, own them, wear them like a glove ready to throw into our own face.

The only thing louder than that echo is one's own language. So now I'm leaning in. Living words.

...

I never could understand over-sharers you meet on trains, people who feel the fact you're sitting next to them makes you the perfect audience for their life story. I just can't understand that. Except for... that's what I'm doing on paper. Telling you the whole truth and something but the truth about me just because you'll never see me again.

STORY ONE

When she was seventeen, there was a boy in her class. He was crazy about trains, about railroad tracks. He'd draw engines; buy books about trains. She'd paint her eyes black and read Tolstoy. Later, in college, as she – as perfect as a spring day – was waiting for her boy of summer to arrive, she met him *at the train station. She asked him what he was doing there. He said he'd come to walk along the tracks. 'I haven't seen them in snow for the longest time', he said. She was confused; she thought he*

was one strange guy. Forgot all about him until... Last winter she went to the train station, to walk along the tracks. She hadn't seen them in snow for the longest time.

STORY TWO

A long time ago, he waited for her at the small train station in his small town, in the cold; flowers jammed into a bag to keep them from freezing. Two hours and severals trains later, he went home, frozen to the bone. He threw the frozen flowers into her face several years later, with all the other insults that rear their head when assets are split and divorce papers signed. They landed between the tracks and stayed there forever.

Story three, story four, story five. Crossties.

When you write about yourself, you kick oblivion's butt in advance. There is no night dark enough to swallow those words. Every crosstie counts. There's always one more: a story ends and another one takes the stage. They're all still going round and round, alive – not just scenery.

When I was seven years old, I managed for the first and last time to cut off a piece of me and forget I ever had it. My name is Ana in every language in the world.

...

Yesterday the snow finally melted away, and I took a long walk along the tracks; the same ones I traveled so many times. I spread my arms and skipped left and right. I didn't need to count the crossties: I know them all by heart. A train zoomed by.

...

I need new tracks, new railways stations. Not like Karenina needed them: like trains do.