

Andrija Škare

**The Games We Play**  
(Društvene igre)

Stories

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović



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ANDRIJA ŠKARE, born in 1981 in Zagreb, graduated in Journalism from the Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb. He used to work at Croatian National Television as a screenwriter, journalist and a host. He is active as a versatile promotor of writing, reading and literature hosting many different events connected to literature. He is one of the founders of eventualism literary movement and therefore four of his stories were included in *Zbornik eventualizma – Nagni se kroz prozor* (2006). He has published *S više mlijeka, molim* (*With More Milk, Please*, 2008), a book of literary non-fiction on coffee houses and cafés of Zagreb, a collection of short stories *Život svijeta koji će doći* (*The Life of the World To Come*, 2014), a book about meeting points of music and literature *Slušaj me* (*Listen to Me*, 2016) and another short story collection *Društvene igre* (*The Games We Play*, 2017). His story *Goalkeeper* from *The Games We Play* inspired an eponymous comic made by Croatian visual artist Stipan Tadić and was awarded as best comic with the The International Festival of Comics and Games in Lodz 2018.



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AWARDS

International Festival of Comics and Games in Lodz 2018 for the comic based on the story *Goalkeeper (The Games We Play)*

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Škare's literary eye for details lifts the dust away from the delicate threads of everyday life. His ordinary characters will pull off some feats that will bring them a big-small victories and great joy. But beneath the surface of quiet lives of somewhat scratched people simmer neuroses, and every victory at the same time implies some kind of loss. All characters are sensitive personalities, not quite capable to adapt to harsh reality that is unsympathetic towards one's dreams and strivings. Škare's anti-heroes of all generations are too weak to carry out concrete actions that will change their life. They struggle to fulfill their small dreams, their desire to lead normal, non-spectacular lives: to find a job, find a decent partner, make enough money, find their place under the sun. All these goals are self-explanatory but sometimes (most of the time) hard to achieve. But all of them, like the thirteen-year-old boy Toni who saves the ball although his father might lose a promised job or Bobo that makes a graffiti on the future legendary Hendrix bridge, are rebels against the system on their unique micro level.

Mostly sprouted from urban scenery and spiced up with the music references, Škare's often humorous stories are unromantically romantic. Petite rebellious acts and details are the very marrow of life for Andrija Škare, emersed in the struggles familiar to anyone who is breathing the air of twenty-first century.

PRAISE

“With this book Andrija Škare went past of being the young promising author, becoming the writer who fulfilled his promises.”

- Jagna Pogačnik, *HRT*

“Storyteller is in alignment with the rhythm and joviality of the prose: vivid, joyous and playful, prone to peculiarity and unusual comments and comparisons. The stories are lively and realistic. There is a notable seed of reality, sprouted from the plant of fiction. Characters are recognizable, and the situation contain some of hearsay anecdotes from the bar. The characters have vivid, humorous and harmless outsmarting conversations.”

- Bonislav Kamenjašević, *Artist*

# The Goalkeeper

1

Every morning the neighbor's rooster wakes him up, more accurate and more merciless than any alarm clock. He's a light sleeper, like his mother. His father falls asleep the moment his head hits the pillow, and nothing can wake him up except if someone starts shaking him like a madman. Or if a bomb explodes in the yard, perhaps.

That morning he woke up before the rooster. Actually, he hadn't even gone to sleep. It was the first time in the thirteen years of his life that he stayed up the whole night. He'd tried to fall asleep, but he couldn't, the great excitement had kept him awake. The excitement and the question. Is he allowed to save the shot?

He's the best goalkeeper in his class, many will say he's the best in the school, in the whole town. There's a Slavko from the eighth grade who might be better, but that one's not a goalie, he's a madman. He's not afraid of anything, he'll throw himself on his head, on his back and on his chest, it often seems he cares more about diving than defending his goal. And when he takes the goal kick, he doesn't even look where his players are, he just kicks the ball with all he's got. On a couple of occasions, he kicked the ball outside of their run-down playground, out into the street.

They couldn't pick Slavko, so they picked him. It's a logical choice. With Slavko they don't know what to expect, with him they do. He's a good kid, a B average student, often close to A, but he always lacks two or three grades to make the A. Always combed and neat. The teachers neither love nor do not love him. Unnoticeable, except on the football pitch. He lives for football, for the matches and for the practice. He lives for penalties, for that one moment when he needs to decide which side to throw himself at, for that feeling that spreads all over his body when he chooses the right side. He lives for that moment when his whole

body closes over the ball that's still alive and then he feels it calm down under him, knowing it won't go anywhere else, only there where he directs it.

He walks into the kitchen and gets surprised that both of them are up, his mom and dad. His jersey is ironed, neatly placed over the chair. He sleeps with his gloves anyhow, they're under his pillow. For years he slept with the plush elephant his father had brought from one of his trips to Zagreb, a long time ago, but two years ago, the elephant moved to the shelf. The gloves calm him down and offer him comfort, with them football is close to him even when he sleeps.

"Son, sit down," his father says gently, and he brings the chair and sits down at the table. He looks up at the kitchen clock and sees there's a good half hour left before he needs to leave for school. His mother puts a cup of cocoa and a slice of bread with butter and plum jam, the one from the jar with the red and white checkered lid. Usually he puts butter and jam on his bread on his own, but today is his big day, today it is allowed to break the routine.

"Toni, listen," his father begins calmly although Toni can see that under his tranquil surface something is brewing. "I know you know today's a big day. An important day. It happens only once in your lifetime."

"I know, dad."

"I've been wanting to ask you. When the principle told you that you'll be at the goal, did he tell you to save the shot or not?"

"He said nothing. We've already talked about it."

"You sure? A hundred percent sure?"

"Yes."

"And what'll you do? Save it or not?"

"If I can get to the ball, I will."

"Of course, good. But if the principle comes to you and whispers into your ear you should let the ball into the goal, what'll you do then?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know," his father's voice rises a little. "It can happen, easily!"

"I don't know. That would be cheating. In a way, that's cheating."

"Toni," his mother joins in, quietly, "listen to your father. And listen to your principle. Do whatever he tells you, you know you should listen to your elders."

"I know, but..."

"Listen," his father's voice goes back to its normal tone, "you're still a kid and there are things you neither know nor should know. And thank God it's so. Politics, for example, is one of those things. I can't explain it to you now, I've got hard time understanding it myself. The only thing I know is that you have to do as

the principle says. You just have to. You're a smart kid and you know I wouldn't be telling you all this for nothing, right?"

"Yes, dad, but..."

"Are you fucking listening, there's no but! If he tells you to let the ball in, you let the ball in!"

"Okay, dad. I will."

2

They watched him as he walked out, their eyes on his back. She inherited this from her mother, Toni's grandmother, this habit to watch someone leave the house. In the beginning, this annoyed Marko. When they just got married, he felt it as some kind of a burden, as if her eyes pressed onto his back and he would feel a bit lighter only after he turned the corner. Later he got used to it, so he would always stop after a couple of steps, turn around and wave at her, sometimes even blow a kiss into the air. This only happened if he was in a really good mood and if he was sure none of the neighbors were watching.

When Toni disappeared around the corner, Marko lit a cigarette.

"Fuck," he muttered, more to himself.

"Don't swear. It's all right. He'll listen."

"And why the fuck did the minister have to come down right now and why in hell did that fucking gym need to be opened, you tell me, huh?"

"Don't swear. I asked you nicely."

"I'm sorry, fuck, I can't help it, all this..."

"I know, yes, but it'll be all right. I know it will. It's not that your job depends on that shot. That would be deranged."

"You know how it is, everything is deranged. I wouldn't be surprised."

"But he promised it to you, didn't he?"

"He did."

"Well, then?"

"Ah, I don't know, when you see these damn politicians switching sides and breaking promises, I wouldn't be surprised, not surprised at all, if the ones here at the local level did the same. Imagine this. The minister and the principle belong to the same party, everything's clear. And now if the kid saves the shot, the principle could go fucking nuts. Or the minister could go fucking nuts and take it out on the principle. And he's gonna fuck up our deal because how else would he punish me?"

"He can tell the other teachers to lower the boy's average."

“What the fuck are you talking about! Who cares about school! The minister will fuck him up, and he’ll lower the kid’s grades? Do you hear yourself? The minister will fuck the local politician up, and then he, pissed off as he is, will lower the boy’s average because he got him in this mess in the first place! Right! Fuck that! He’s gonna screw me up and break our fucking deal.”

“Or both.”

“Or both, that’s more likely. We’re sucking big time, no matter which way you turn it. If the kid saves the shot.”

“Ah, who knows, maybe the minister is not like that. Maybe he’s not vain. Maybe he doesn’t care if he scores the goal or not.”

“In front of all those people, in front of the journalists? Of course he wants to score. I’d want it too, everyone would.”

“But Toni’s the best goalie, he’s playing for Hajduk. Why would he be angry if the most promising player in the whole village saved his shot.”

“Anica, for God’s sake, he’s thirteen. Thirteen.”

“Fourteen in a month.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s still a child. He’ll go nuts if he doesn’t score on him. He’ll go nuts, mark my words.”

“All right, so what, maybe he scores the goal, maybe we’re worrying about nothing.”

“He, scoring a goal on him?! With those curls on his head. With those glasses. That one hasn’t scored a goal in his life, it’ll be a miracle if he doesn’t miss the whole thing.”

3

The anthill vibrates and buzzes. Toni pushes a stick into it, turns it around, lost in thought. In ten minutes he has to be in the gym. Half an hour later, the Minister of Science, Education and Sport will arrive to open the new school gym, he will take a penalty against him, not from the twelve-yard mark but from seven-and-a-half, because the new goals are small, they are handball goals. He knows it would be better if he didn’t save the shot, he knows this would make everything fine and his father would get a job as the school janitor. This would be his first job after the war finished, ever since Toni can remember his dad hasn’t worked. He stays home the whole day, watches TV and does crossword puzzles. He looks after their olive trees, but there’s not much work around the olives. They don’t have a vineyard, they have nothing, except for those hundred or so olive trees up there, on the hill.

But maybe the principle gives my dad a job even if I save the shot, Toni thinks.



Maybe it doesn't matter, why would it? Maybe the minister misses the whole goal? And how many times is he going to take it anyhow? Once, twice, thrice? Toni doesn't know the details, but he's becoming less and less happy that it was he who was chosen to represent the school at the grand opening of the school's gym. He thinks whether he should let the damn ball into the goal or not, but the more he thinks about it, the more it seems he can't do it. Everyone would see he did it on purpose, everyone knows how good a goalkeeper he is. And what if his coach comes, and he said he would? What if that goal crushes his dreams and he never becomes a real goalkeeper? Each question opens up two more, and no answer is good enough.

Jure runs up to him. Jure is his best friend, a boy with a round face and unusually adult movements, that just cannot be linked with such a tiny body and childish face. On his back, there is a cloth bag in which there is a football. Jure also plays and loves football, but he's not good at it, the FC Hajduk Youth School rejected him. He's slow and not motivated enough, they said.

"Toni! What are you doing here? Let's go to the gym!"

"There's time. Five more minutes."

"What's wrong? You're being strange," Jure says and comes closer and then he too gazes into the anthill. He collects saliva and spits onto the frenzied insects that are shocked, but only for a moment, by the abundant fluid that has appeared out of nowhere. The order is soon restored again.

"Ah, nothing," Toni replies and then spits onto the anthill too. His mouth is dry, there's less saliva and it's thicker.

"Mhm, who are you kidding, I can see something's up. You'll stand at the goal in front of the whole school, and here you go sulking and screwing around with ants."

"It's nothing, I've told you."

"You know you can tell me everything," Jure isn't giving up.

"Everything's fine, we'll talk after this is done, some crap, that's what's up," Toni's resistance is yielding.

"Listen. I'm here for you, whatever you need."

"Thanks, let's go now."

"Ah, thanks, for what! It's not like everyone's best friend is the future number one for Hajduk!"

The clamor in the school gym is so loud that it turns into a separate tone, all those countless voices merge into one, and the quieting down does not happen all at

once, one part of the gym gets silenced after another, as the students notice that the distinguished guests have stepped on the brightly polished hardwood floor. There are the mayor, the governor, the minister, and the principle. All four of them wear black pants and shoes, while over their long-sleeved shirts and ties they have put yellow t-shirts bearing the school's logo.

The audience is seated on the retractable bleachers, while the lower section of the gym is filled with about a hundred folding chairs. It's packed, it's hot. There are the students, the teachers, distinguished citizens, local politicians, a very diverse crowd. There are two metal posts set on the seven-and-a-half-yard line connected by a ribbon in the color of the Croatian flag. The minister is going to cut the ribbon and with this symbolic act officially open the gym.

The school choir performs the anthem. After the anthem, of course, an applause. The Croatian teacher is appalled, but her colleague who stands by her side claps so briskly and with so much dedication that she soon realizes this is a lost battle. After the anthem, it's time for speeches. First, the mayor, dry; then, the principle, animated; the governor, short; and finally, the minister, ecstatic and almost euphoric.

The minister finally approaches the posts, next to each of the posts there is a girl dressed in a majorette uniform, the scissors somehow end up in his hand, he takes the ribbon with his left hand, cuts it, and an applause spreads through the gym.

The ball is already waiting at the penalty kick line, Toni stands at the goal line in his white jersey and blue shorts, he's ready. The principle, the mayor and the minister whisper something to one another, the governor is gone, maybe he's gone to the restroom, at his age, prostate problems are common. The principle comes up to Toni and tells him the minister will take three penalty kicks. His voice is loud, he can be heard in the first rows of the auditorium even though the clamor has come back, with much less intensity than before the ceremony began, but it is nevertheless noticeable. The principle puts his hand on Toni's shoulder and whispers into his ear that two out of three shots should be goals. He says this with a smile, in a friendly manner, as if there's nothing wrong with it.

The minister takes his position two yards from the ball. He doesn't seem like an athletic type, but he doesn't look like a politician either. He has long curly hair and round shaped glasses with metal frames. He even seems likable. The noise stops again, everyone is aware of the moment's importance. Two cameramen stand by the sidelines, four photographers are there too. The minister runs up, reaches the ball, kicks it with his right foot, and it whizzes past the post. The stands burst into an applause for which no one can tell whether it is the applause

of support or irony, but the minister will not let this rattle him. He smiles gently and modestly. Once again, he sets the ball at the penalty mark.

Once again, he runs up to the ball, once again, he kicks it. The ball flies to the same side, but this time the shot is more accurate. Toni estimates its trajectory well and instinctively extends his leg, he saves the shot. He didn't even have to stretch too much. Applause once again, even louder than before. Now it is clear that the bleachers are applauding Toni.

Blood is rushing through his head. His ears are buzzing and he can feel he is shaking on the inside. On the outside he seems calm, composed. He tries to look into the minister's eyes, but he can't see them behind the glasses. He catches the principle's eyes and pauses. The principle opens his mouth and even though Toni can't hear what he says, he can clearly read, "Let this one in," from his lips, followed by a gesture in which the index finger stands out, threatening.

The minister runs up to the ball for the third time. The shot is the most powerful yet and the ball flies up nicely, for the first couple of inches its flight is wavering, but then it surges towards the upper right corner. It is a shot only the best football players can make. Or amateurs, if they get lucky.

Despite its unpredictable path, Toni knows immediately where the ball will go, he simply feels it. It's pure instinct. This time he has to jump, to stretch. Time slows down for him and he sees everything in slow motion, frame after frame. He understands he can let the ball into the goal, he understands it would not be suspicious at all. He understands that his father's destiny, and, consequently, his own, is packed in that shot. He's aware of everything this means. With the tips of his fingers he deflects the ball clear.

As the bleachers go wild, Toni catches the minister's eyes that seem completely disinterested. He also sees the principle who is red in the face, but says nothing, he no longer gives instructions to him, he gives him no sign.

5

The walk from school to home is short, but Toni and Jure take the longer route, they pass by the field with the anthill and the large mulberry tree at its edge where they used to sit and where they smoked their first, banned cigarettes. They reach the neglected local football pitch, it seems even more pathetic than before. The grass is dried up, even completely gone in some places, the dirt is showing, dry and brown. The goalposts used to be white, but now they have rusted through, the paint has peeled off. Only the nets are still holding, the boys from the village

patch them together when they get torn, there's no pleasure in playing football with the goal without the net.

"My dad's gonna kill me," Toni says.

"Ah, come on. You don't know that. Maybe it's not that bad. Maybe he'll get the job anyway."

"Have you seen the principle? Fuck."

"Later him and the minister were hugging. True, he was angry when you saved the shot, but it doesn't seem like much of a problem to me. I mean, you're playing for Hajduk!"

"Who knows if that'll go on."

"Why, because you saved the shot? That doesn't make sense."

"It's politics, it just doesn't make sense."

"Come on, what do you know about fuckin' politics."

"Same as you. Nothing. Except that it can fuck us all up."

"Ah, forget that, let's shoot some penalties. Just one series."

"I don't feel like it, Jure. For real."

"Come on, just one series. Five shots."

"All right, I'll let you have it."

Toni and Jure often played "penalties." Toni was always at the goal, while Jure took the shots. They would switch only after a few series when both of them got bored. Even though Jure got better with time, he still managed to score only ten percent of the time. In two series, only one ball would end up behind Toni's back and most often it was the one Jure kicked without aiming or thinking where to kick it.

Jure took the ball out of his bag and set it down on a barren piece of grass, which marked the penalty spot. Toni took his position between the posts.

"Ready?" Jure asked.

"Fire away!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the moment we've been waiting for the whole evening. Jure Peruzović is taking a penalty shot at the Champions League finals. The score is nil-nil, and if Peruzović makes the shot, Hajduk will take the lead. Real Madrid will have hard time catching," he imitated the voice of a football commentator.

He ran up to the ball and kicked it with all he got. For the first couple of inches the ball wavered through the air and then it surged towards the upper right corner. Toni felt where the ball would go and threw himself to reach it, but all he could do was watch as it flew past him. It rolled in the net behind his back.

## Seats 33 and 34

### 1

The anthill vibrates and buzzes. It's nervous, shivery. The sun keeps scorching, persistently, brutally, the heat is relentless. The anthill seems like any other anthill, but in this one the ants are the people. And the people are the ants, of course.

The anthill is called Split, and its thick, swollen heart is called Central Bus Station. That's where the crowd is the greatest, the trajectories of the participants the least predictable, and, so it seems, completely illogical. The nervousness can be heard, seen and smelled, it's not the dominant feeling, it is the only feeling; like the darkest of all dark holes it has sucked everything else in.

As each bus arrives, it becomes the center of that sizzling center for a moment: people start fidgeting around it, they are trying to get on it even before they have checked if this really is their bus, everyone has a question for the driver, this one wants his luggage, that one wants to send a package, this one doesn't speak Croatian, that one doesn't speak English, that one over there knows nothing, but he just loves standing in a crowd. Children are crying, men are violent, women are hysterical. Women are violent, men are hysterical. Children are crying. Each and every one rude, each and every one sweaty.

It is most difficult for those who have hard time dealing with the crowds anyhow. And the heat. Josip is one of them. More than anything, he values his own comfort and the fact that the civilization has advanced so much that people touch each other only when given mutual consent. By definition. He doesn't like masses, he dreads crowds, he avoids even concerts he would like to see because he abhors the idea of someone else's body parts touching his body parts, he abhors the impossibility to avoid it. Also, there's claustrophobia. A mild one, but nevertheless.

The moment the bus he assumes is his appears, his nerves are completely shot. A million question, a billion doubts. What if someone takes his seat, what if his luggage gets lost, what if he'll have to stand all the way to Zagreb, what if some fat, sweaty, smelly guy sits next to him, what if he gets in the wrong bus after all, what if he'll have to go to the restroom before the stop, what if the roads are so crowded that he will be late and then hungry, what if, what if. It's not easy to over-analyze things and at that be a shy, modest introvert. It's not easy, but someone has to do that too.

The bus pulls over and in Josip's mind the next two minutes pass like in a film scene of ninja fighting. He practically throws his large backpack into the hold, in two motions he resolutely breaks through the get-in-the-way-people, jumps over a couple of indecisive ones, gets into the bus that is air-conditioned after all, and without major problems finds his seat. It's empty. He sits down. Content. For the higher purpose, he managed to subsume his reserved character, after all, these two minutes of crazy action took forty-five minutes of preparation, which is how long before he arrived at the bus station afraid he might be late.

The number of fears has reduced, but the largest of all is still here. Who is going to sit down next to him? As people get in, he uses his mental strength to try and repel them, or, much less frequently, to attract them. An old hag dressed in mourning, twenty-kilos-overweight, two swollen nylon bags in each hand, oh dear God, no. She passes by, moving on. Thank you. A bald forty-year-old who spends all of his free time at the gym, oh please, please God, no. He passes by too. A mother with a pair of twins, according to the estimate seven or eight years old, they seem dangerous, they seem ready for anything. One is, naturally, going to sit next to her, but the other one? No, no, oh, nightmare, don't come true, not today! They walk by too.

He feels slightly relieved after each of them have passed, but paranoia would not leave him alone, he's convinced that the next passenger is going to be the worst and the most fucked up and that he's going to sit down right next to him. The irony of life is a mighty force, that's what he believes in the most, that's what he fears the most. He doesn't even know what he's imagining, but what he is imagining is not good. Maybe a cross between a man, a mammoth and an orangutan feeding on hazelnuts exclusively, wanting to talk, chewing bubblegum loudly, burping, and taking up a half of someone else's seat. As he speaks, he touches the listener. Please no, please no.

A girl climbs in. She's not yet thirty, but she's neither far from it, that's an estimate. She seems polite, slightly lost, but somehow oddly reasonable. She's skinny. She's got brown hair, of average length, and a regular, but unobtrusive face. In fact, she seems like a lady from some other time. That's how she moves,

that's how she checks the number of the seat that matches the one on her ticket. It seems like she smells nice. All of these are impressions and conclusions Josip needs only five seconds to make; in those five seconds, parallel to every new realization, he prays to and pleads all the saints and all the deities that she sits next to him. And the miracle comes true! She approaches him, glances at the seat, then at the ticket, then once again at the seat, she smiles with the gentleness usually not shared with strangers, and says, "Excuse me, I think I have the window." He moves to let her pass, happily.

Several nervous, hot minutes pass. Shouting, complaining, commotion. They were supposed to leave, but they haven't, of course they haven't. At the front of the bus there is an argument about a seat, the mother is trying to control the twins who are fighting over a bag of chips, sweat trickles down the driver's neck and waters his shirt while he explains to the huge guy in a tight black T-shirt that there simply is no room for his package, it is too big.

Being late does not bother Josip, it does not bother him as much as it usually would. His inner control freak, susceptible to paranoia and suffering from a mild case of obsessive-compulsive disorder is quite displeased, he wants them to get going as soon as possible in order to bring the departure from the timetable to a minimum, but Josip can't hear him, for the first time after a long while his voice is silenced. At the corner of his eyes he is trying to observe the young woman who took the seat next to him, but he fails at it. He doesn't want to be forward, and it's difficult to look at the person sitting next to you in a bus if you are not forward. Or if you don't possess some special social skills that could mask your gaze, make it less strange, allow it to fit into some broader communication image. Josip does not possess any special social skills.

## 2

The wheels start turning, the large vehicle gets in motion, it's happening, finally. They're making the busy streets of Split even more crowded, they're making their way through slowly, very slowly, they're ones of hundreds and thousands of those who want to get somewhere, now, right now. The bus is cumbersome, too large for these streets, but the impression is that there is some elegance in their movement after all. The driver is skillful, thanks to the air-conditioning unit, his shirt is no longer wet.

Josip found a solution to his problem so he's pretending to be looking through the window across his fellow-passenger, while in fact he's looking at her. He's trying to examine her, he's trying to observe her.

Nevertheless, his want not to be forward is too strong so he doesn't manage to see as much as he would want to, but what he sees is enough to conclude: a) he was damn lucky that she got a seat next to him and that no one took her spot, b) he likes her, c) he likes her a lot. The moment this thought makes itself clear in his mind, he feels the pangs of guilty conscious because up there, in the cold Zagreb, which is now actually the hot Zagreb, the girl he loves is waiting for him and in just five hours he will be with her. Five hours!

This brings him down a bit and he realizes he's got no time to waste. He doesn't know what he is supposed to do in this time, but he knows that, if he is planning to do something, he's got to do it now. Right away! He rationalizes and explains to himself that he's so nervous because he has recognized the young woman's energy, which is compatible to his. She's not just some pretty girl, the two of them could be something big, he can feel it, he is certain of it! Josip, for the record, hates the word *energy*.

He takes a deep breath, as one usually does in a situation such as this one, calls onto himself all of the relaxedness and immediateness he has ever had, and says, "Off to see Zagreb, huh?"

An Oscar-winning sentence! Creativity, originality, humor, charm; everything in one place. All packed in those five words no one has ever uttered in this combination. Bravo!

"Ah, yes, the summer's over," she replies with a mixture of melancholy and optimism that is real news for Josip.

"Yes, the whole year I wait to visit the seaside, it's maybe the only thing that I sincerely look forward to, and it passes so quickly. And the day of return is always the worst day of the year." This is a bit better. With any luck, the small-talk will continue.

"There are positives here too. You see people you haven't seen in a while. You listen to your friends' stories, their adventures. Besides, Zagreb is nice in the fall."

"True, Zagreb is the prettiest when it rains. But, you know what, the fall's not exactly around the corner. There should be a law against later summers in Zagreb, it's by far the most disgusting time of the year. Ambrosia, heat..."

"You're allergic?" she interrupts him gently.

"Yes. Since forever."

"Me too!" she almost shrieks, sweetly.

Such reaction seems to have burst the barrier between the two of them. Or at least a part of the barrier. It took just a moment to stop being chance fellow-travelers and become something more, maybe not partners or conspirators, but at least two people traveling together, a duo whose double seat has begun to separate



itself from the rest of the bus and to turn into an isolated enclave. Both of them have felt it.

3

She: Valerija, 32 years of age. An art historian. Makes ends meet by occasionally writing for magazines. Barely makes ends meet by occasionally writing for magazines. Spends her money on bare essentials so she more often than not buys her clothes at a flea market or at second hand stores. Out of the necessity, not style. She learned to retailor her mother's old clothes so that at first sight no one could see they were garments several decades old. She lives with Goran, her boyfriend since she was eighteen years old. She has never even kissed another man, lately she's been questioning if this is such a positive thing as she has believed up until now. They're supposed to marry next spring, they've been waiting to save up some money. It helps that they are living in an apartment Goran inherited from his late grandmother, so they don't have to pay rent. Nevertheless, sometimes they have hard time finding money to pay the utilities.

Valerija loves books, birds, Egon Schiele, pepper, skyscrapers, antihistamines, parks, iced water, Ian McEwan and Elfride Jelinek, post-its, pencil skirts, rain without thunder, and wormwood liqueur. More than anything she hates talking to the people she doesn't know.

He: Josip, 37 years of age. An architect. Employed at a small architectural office that gets decent jobs, in the past five years he has mostly designed urban villas with swimming pools, in all parts of Croatia. He lives with Tea, his girlfriend, they've known each other for a long time, but began their relationship two years ago, spontaneously, roughly at the same time when they broke up with their old partners and the new spark ignited between them. They love each other but have no intention of legalizing their relationship. They do not believe in the institution of marriage, they consider it outdated and, at most cynical of moments, dangerous. Especially since organizations for the preservation of traditional values have hooked up on it. They do not cheat on each other, they have decided to spend the rest of their lives together, in a near future they would even consider a child, he finds the idea more attractive than she.

Josip loves beer, chess, music, cigarettes, antihistamines, days with lots of sunshine, The Clash and The Ramones, dive bars, table tennis, and cherries. More than anything he hates talking to the people he doesn't know.

The bus stops at the rest stop at Janjče. At the time before the highway, the rest stop was the good, old “Macola”, now every bus company has a deal or even a contract with some other gas station, rest stop, restaurant.

Valerija and Josip get off the bus together, he walks out first and offers her his hand. Even though she is agile, and she doesn’t require this kind of assistance, she nevertheless takes his hands.

She goes to the restroom, while he lights his cigarette, his plan is to smoke at least two during this twenty-minute stop.

Valerija comes back and asks if he wants something from the store, and he says he doesn’t need anything, he’s still got enough cold water, and he hasn’t even touched the sandwich he took for the road. He realizes that with her by his side he hasn’t even thought about hunger and thirst.

“You know, I’m a bit sad that the buses no longer stop at Macola. I used to love that fox and other miniature forest animals playing cards. That scene always reminded me of The Smashing Pumpkins and their album “Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness.” Have you ever listened to The Smashing Pumpkins?” Josip asks, and she doubles up laughing. She’s laughing with her whole face, but she makes no sound, she just squeals a little, barely audibly.

“What happened? What’s so funny?” he asks, getting worried.

“Have you just used the syntagm “miniature forest animals?””

“Yes. So what?”

“Nothing. It’s wonderful, I like it. I think I love miniature forest animals.”

“I like that you used the word “syntagm”. I rarely hear it.”

“Come on, who do you hang out with?”

“Architects, designers, punks. They’re not stupid or uneducated, it’s just that this isn’t their language. But, you haven’t said anything about the Pumpkins.”

“I listened to them, of course. We all did.”

“So, does the scene from Macola remind you of the “Mellon Collie” cover?”

“I don’t know what the cover looks like. I didn’t own the album, a friend from high school made me a tape with all of their best songs. I’d listen to it from time to time.”

“The albums are really worth listening. The first five are a must, while the rest are trials and errors. But, have you maybe heard of the book *The State I Am In?*”

“No, I haven’t heard of *The State I Am In*,” Valerija says and laughs. “Why do you ask? Is it good? Was I supposed to hear about it?”

“When I was younger, I used to be very religious, I often went to confession.

The priest who heard my confession had photographic memory, he put all of my sins together and turned them into this book...”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Not at all. I’m serious.”

“But what kind of sins could you have had as a teenager to make enough material for a book?”

“Check it out at the library and you’ll see.”

“Why are you lighting another cigarette, you have such a strong craving for nicotine?” Valerija asks, but Josip doesn’t have an impression she’s trying to change the subject because she isn’t comfortable talking about music or his wild youth. She more sounds like his smoking really bothers her, as if she’s worried about him. She sounds a little like... Tea.

“I love cigarettes...” he replies dryly because at that moment he doesn’t feel like explaining his attachment to tobacco, but at that moment he realizes something very peculiar has happened. With Valerija by his side, he has suddenly become exactly what he is, he isn’t acting, he isn’t pretending. He’s being himself. This level of ease, from his experience, usually happens a couple of months into a relationship.

“Do you know that Mark Twain said a cigarette is an object with fire at one end and a fool at the other?”

“That’s not Mark Twain, he said that giving up smoking is the easiest thing in the world, that he’s done it thousands of times.”

“Okay, that’s not the point. Maybe he said both of these things. He was funny. And often contradictory. You know, of course, that cigarettes are not good for you. So why do you do it?”

“Wait, is this our first fight?” Josip asks, and she smiles, but then instantly blushes, he gets red in the face too, although he’s completely relaxed and has surprised himself with this sentence which comes as a seal on what’s happening to them. They can pretend it’s not happening, they can express their liking towards one another, and nevertheless be protected by the undeniable truth that they don’t know each other, but once the situation has been verbalized, there’s no way back. Now they, both of them, know where they stand.

Zagreb, 40 kilometers. That’s what it says on the sign they’ve just passed, and both of them have noticed it. Josip is sad. He has an agreement with Tea to be completely honest with each other, they tell each other everything. They

concluded that it would've been much worse if one of them found out about a possible affair from the third party, so they expanded the pact to all aspects of life. When she went out with her girlfriends and when someone caught her eye, she reported back to him in detail. Even if someone hit on her, everything. She even admitted that once, when she got drunk, she kissed some Chinese guy, when she was at the seaside, in Tisno. He felt a pang of pain in his chest, but she explained that it was just one drunken kiss, not kissing. The moment their lips touched, she sobered up and got away from him, went on dancing. No tongue, no passion; a kiss as a side effect of the moment. He knows he won't be able to tell her anything about Valerija. What would he tell her anyhow? A lovely girl he talked to on the bus, all the way to Zagreb, she laughed at his jokes and he laughed at hers, a good-looking girl that made him wish she didn't have a boyfriend and he didn't have a girlfriend? A lovely girl who finds him attractive too? No, you don't say such things. Despite sincerity. Besides, he actually has nothing to say. They haven't touched, getting off the bus doesn't count, he would've offered his hand to any lady.

"Twenty more minutes to Zagreb, right?" Valerija asks.

"Something like that, I guess. It said forty kilometers. If we're doing eighty kilometers per hour, that's half an hour, but I think we're going faster, yes."

"Is your girlfriend going to meet you at the station?"

"No, she's at home. I'll catch a taxi and go to her place. She's made dinner. Is your boyfriend going to be there?"

"Yes, he always picks me up. It's been like that since we got together and we stick to it still."

"Nice."

"Yes."

They go silent. Josip feels his heart pounding, he's getting slightly dizzy too. He wants to kiss her, but he sees no sense in it. And everything, every last thing around them is inappropriate and wrong. Even this bus, even this trip, even their long, stable relationships, even the fact that we as human beings agreed to monogamy. He almost regrets the mother with twins did not sit next to him, then he would've seen Viktorija in the distance and he most certainly wouldn't have seen what an ideal couple they'd make if only the circumstances were different, if only the cosmic cards were dealt differently.

"Valerija," he starts, it's the first time he says her name out loud, "I like you so much. I think we'd make a great couple. I'm not the kind of guy who says such things easily, but if I haven't said it now, I think it would've tortured me my whole life."

"I like you too. A lot."

“So what are we going to do?”

“What can we do? Nothing. You’re going back to your girlfriend, I’m going back to my boyfriend.”

“Are we going to see each other again?” he knows the question is stupid the moment it leaves his lips.

“And why? What are we going to do, drink coffee together? Or become lovers, become cheaters? That’s not for me, I don’t think I could do that.”

“Are you on Facebook, can I send you a friend request?”

“I’m not. I don’t use social networks.”

“How about your number, can you give me your phone number?”

“I can, but why? I don’t want to text you, I don’t want to talk to you, it would only make things harder. I’m afraid this ride is the only thing we had.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“I know, I know it all, but at least it was nice. This was most certainly the nicest bus ride in my life,” she says and takes his hand. She looks into his eyes and feels a lump growing inside her throat, she feels adrenaline rushing through her whole body, but she pulls herself together, faces the window, lets go of his hand, and brushes away a tear that has appeared at the corner of her eye.

6

They pass the roundabout at the entrance into the city, but do not turn into Dubrovnik Avenue because it is closed for roadworks and head towards Savska Street instead. On their right, lit up nicely, in its eccentric turquoise color, shines the bridge on which someone wrote the name of the best guitar player of all times.

“So, this is it?” Josip tries one more time.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“And what if I leave my girlfriend, you leave your boyfriend, and we run away together?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“Or we don’t run away, we stay in Zagreb.”

“You’re sweet, but it’s not going to happen.”

He forces himself to smile and he keeps the smile frozen on his face for the next seven minutes which is how long it takes them to reach Central Bus Station.

The passengers leave the bus, they swarm around the luggage hold. Josip tries not to watch Valerija hugged by some tall, skinny guy with round glasses. He hates him.

He collects his bag and tries not to pass by them, but with all those people

around, that's impossible. He doesn't want to eavesdrop on them, he doesn't want to hear what they say to each other, and more than anything he doesn't want to witness some expression of romance, however, a sentence brushes against his ear: "Val, I have a confession to make."

He walks on, towards the taxis. He doesn't look back.

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## A Plan for Both

### 1

Even though almost the whole morning the rain was thick and strong, at moments even wild and fierce, in the afternoon the road was already dry. They reached Zagreb without any problems, Opel Astra nicely conquered the highway, the bends were as smooth as the Viennese waltz. The weekend had flown by in a second, as it usually goes with the weekends; from the peaceful, pleasantly boring, and almost idyllic Istrian life they were going back to the one of Zagreb, nervous and shivery, chaotic. They were near the center when Mladen called Irena, his cellphone connected via Bluetooth. He liked having both hands on the wheel, after all there was a child in his car.

“Hallo?” she answered after it rang for way too long.

“Hey, it’s me. We’re here, in five minutes we’re in Vončinina. Will you meet us in front of the building?”

“Uh, I’m not at home. I’ll be back in an hour or so. Mom took Izzy and Pizzy for a walk in Ribnjak so she’ll take Karla from you.”

“But there’s no parking at Ribnjak.”

Mladen hated it when plans got complicated. It was simple, extremely simple, but Irena somehow always managed to ruin the perfect construction of his plan. It all seemed to him like frying an egg, sunny side up, the recipe in which you just couldn’t go wrong, but she was the reason why in the end the yolk always spilled.

“Please call my mom, maybe she’s back from the walk so you can leave her in Vončinina. Work everything out with her.”

“All right,” Mladen squeezed through his teeth and hung up. He didn’t like communicating with Mrs. Krmpotić.

Mrs. Krmpotić was forty-eight years old, but she tried to look twenty years younger, which more often than not she managed to pull. At that she often looked

inappropriate, even cheap, but she didn't let that bother her, she loved having men turning around after her in the street. She had never worked, never had a job, not even for a day, she had married Marinko when she was eighteen, gave birth to two daughters, Ines and Irma, and her duties stopped at that, that's how she saw it. She didn't feel like working around the house either, most of the errands and chores were done by her mother, and lately her daughters took over, she had all the time in the world to watch TV, walk Izzy and Pizzy, drink coffee with her girlfriends, and dress up to keep herself attractive and sexy.

In the end, Mladen had to park at the public garage at Lang Square because Mrs. Krmpotić had just arrived to Ribnjak and she didn't feel like going home. It was a pleasant summer evening, the heat had finally eased up after the morning rain, and he could understand she was enjoying her walk with her two Maltese puppies, but as the departure from the original agreement grew bigger, he was getting more and more agitated. And he had to pay four kunas for parking even though he'd stay at the garage for not even ten minutes! It wasn't about money, who gives a crap about four kunas, it was a matter of principle.

He saw her the moment they walked into the park. She wore a miniskirt, way too short, and lacquered high heels, a shirt with a deep cleavage, too much makeup on her face: too much powder, too much lipstick, too much mascara, too much of everything. In one hand, she held a leash on whose other end Izzy and Pizzy were running, and in the other she held a lit cigarette, which didn't seem like it had been lit in order to be smoked but to serve as a stage prop, as if, for some reason, she wanted to make herself look even more like a caricature.

"Hi there, Mladen," she said the moment she saw him and then went down to Karla's height. "Karla, come to nana!"

The expression on the girl's face was a combination of fear and disgust, but Mladen encouraged her: "It's Nana Verica, you like Nana Verica, don't you?" he whispered into her ear, but the kid didn't buy it, she just tightened her grip around his hand. She did love both of her grandmothers, 4-year-olds usually love everyone in their family as long as they don't bother them too much, if they don't bore them or ban them things, but every time they spent a weekend with Mladen's parents in Pazin, Karla was reluctant to return to her everyday life. She was reluctant to go back to their large, old apartment in Vončinina Street. Her great grandmother ruled over the place, she was the boss. Karla didn't like her old people's smell, even though she liked the old woman, she showed a lot of kindness towards her great granddaughter and, unlike her grandmother, never pressed her too hard when giving her a kiss or a hug. With her great grandmother and grandmother, her mother, her aunty Ines and Grandpa Marinko also lived in the apartment, even though she saw him rarely because he worked a lot.



“Karla, sweetie,” Mladen tried to coax her, “daddy has to go now, I’ll see you again in a couple of days. Okay?”

“Okay,” Karla said half-heartedly and accepted her grandmother’s hand from which a cigarette had disappeared in the meantime.

“Give daddy a kiss.”

The little girl hugged and kissed him, and he kissed her back, three times: on her cheek, her forehead, and her hair. He handed her over to Mrs. Krmpotić and hurried out of the park because he couldn’t stand long goodbyes, they often brought him on the verge of tears.

He lit a cigarette the moment he walked out of the park. He had forty-five minutes left on his meter, but he didn’t know what to do with this time. He got into his car and just sat there for a while and smoked in silence.

“Fuck, how can I leave my daughter with such people,” he said out loud, threw the cigarette out the window, started the car and went.

2

Two years had passed from the breakup when Mladen finally managed to describe his relationship with Irena and Karla in a single sentence. “It’s obvious Karla is my great accomplishment, and Irena my great fail,” he used to say to himself, and then he shared the thought with those few close friends who knew about his situation.

If outside circumstances, visible to average onlookers, were to be taken into consideration, when he’d met Irena, he was a fully situated man. He was thirty years old, had his own apartment and his own car, a steady job, more than a solid salary. The catch is that the average onlookers would not see the broader image, they wouldn’t see the end of an exhausting, long-lasting relationship filled with love and passion as much as with bitterness, hostility, sadness and misunderstanding. They wouldn’t see all the searching and wandering, occasional promiscuous episodes, the balancing between short-timed pleasures and periods filled with apathy. They wouldn’t see that Mladen, although already greying and balding, was actually still a kid; responsible, smart and capable, but still a kid. It was only later that he realized he’d grown up, for real, after he’d broken up with his ex-girlfriend Margareta, but this *later* was too late, because Irena had already happened.

He fell in love with her: madly, mindlessly, like a real teenager. Or at least he thought he did. Later he assigned it to hormones, spring or summer, the first rays of sun that stir up the emotions and dull the sharp edges of the world that are so

visible in winter; he assigned it to the yearning to be loved and to feel desirable as well as the constant need to prove to himself that the breakup with Margareta had not crushed him, that he was still strong and tough, that he was capable of loving and getting attached, capable of giving and looking after, but all of it came later, and as it happened, he didn't need this kind of rationalization, he didn't even think of it, he was too excited and infatuated, he believed that this was the good, old and completely old-fashioned - love.

It all happened very quickly. They met at some party and they sparked immediately, without delay, he, despite his thinning gray hair, was still a good-looking, attractive, young man, he'd kept his boyish charm, and she was sweet and seemed so innocent, like a little girl just discovering the world, many were in love with her, mostly unhappily.

They seemed like a perfect couple. Both of them were good-looking and seemingly unburdened, they had similar taste in music, they went out to similar places. They laughed a lot. Shiny future lay ahead of them, life full of promises lay ahead of them.

Karla came unexpectedly, without a real plan. Even though Mladen used to claim that they'd stopped using protection and that they hadn't planned on having a child, yet had never dismissed the possibility, the real truth was that they got drunk at the Antentat concert, went to his place and had drunken sex, passionately, without protection. From there on, things took an expected turn. Even though they'd been a couple for only three months, they began living together, Irena gave birth, and suddenly, Mladen found himself in a situation where he had a family. Out of the blue. At the time he used to pause and think, wonder how it all happened so suddenly, how it was possible that life changed at such a speed, but he didn't have too much time to think, he had to work and make a living, everything was exciting and dynamic: his life looked like Zagreb compared to Pazin.

Mladen was born in Pazin, and he came to Zagreb to study civil engineering and then stayed. He had solid grades, and right after he'd graduated, an acquaintance from Istria hired him to work for his firm. His parents had bought him an apartment in Zagreb and a car back when he was still a student - he was an only child and there wasn't anything they wouldn't do for him, but he knew what they'd had to go through to give all that to him and he tried hard to give back to them, he had good work ethics, given to him when he'd still been a child, he was hard-working and honest, those were the values he'd brought from home. Whenever he could he used his weekends to run away and stay with them in Pazin, staying at the heart of Istria always offered a much-needed reset after the fast-paced Zagreb rhythms. He'd have his coffee at Bunker, then walk to Zarečki Krov,

spend time with his high-school friends; it thrilled him that the life in his hometown still had its slow and easy-going pace, he dreamed to return to it one day because he didn't care much about the crazy Zagreb rhythm. He didn't care about it, but, on a certain level, it appealed to him. His job was going well, he received promotions, and the opportunities the life in a metropolis offered made themselves evident on a daily basis, it turned out all you had to do was dedicate yourself to your job and everything would come on its own, both money and opportunities, and he liked both money and opportunities, he took pleasure in the drive.

The first differences with Irena appeared just around Karla's first birthday. That's when he began to understand she had no intention of finding a job, just like her mother. Irena studied art history, but she dropped out one-year in. For her, there was too much history, and not enough art, that's what she claimed. Then she got into a business school, even though everyone knew nothing would come out of it. She didn't even know why she got into that school in the first place, probably so she could say she did study something. She held on for three semesters, she even took and passed some exams, but the business school was simply too businessy for her. The third time's charm was supposed to be journalism, but she didn't find herself there either, there was too much politics and, surprise, surprise, too much journalism for her so she already made peace with never graduating from any kind of college.

This annoyed Mladen beyond measure. No matter how relaxed and informal he may have been, his life, from the very beginning, had direction, he knew what he wanted, he knew what he strived for and how to get there. He couldn't stand that his life partner, the mother of his child, had no intention of making anything out of her life, that she satisfied herself with being a mother and a housewife. A good mother and a lousy housewife, most often in that order.

He also had a hard time accepting the fact that suddenly he had to start making money for three persons instead of one. The money was less and less, the needs were higher and higher. His parents helped, hers didn't. They fought more and more often, it would start as it usually starts, with something insignificant, she would talk on the phone, shouting and laughing, while he was trying to make up for what he hadn't had time to finish at work, or he would, according to her standard, stay out too late, but all of these were just the tips of the iceberg of the misunderstanding, discord and non-love. It would begin with the banal, continue with accusations, and most often escalate in tears and shouting, so typical and cliché, which did not make it any less painful.

For a long time, he contemplated ending this relationship which led nowhere, but every time he rejected the idea because of Karla. He simply adored the kid, didn't know how he'd go on without her, but he slowly began to understand that

his life had turned into an unhealthy whirlpool. He looked forward to coming home to the two of them, but every day, without exception, Irena would've met him with something that spoiled his mood, a complaint, an inkling of a fight, a demand. She never understood he needed to catch a break, that actually he worked for two. On Fridays, he used to go out with his friends, nothing ambitious, most often just a drink or two in the neighborhood, he needed the break only alcohol could offer, but neither there would she leave him alone, she regularly called around midnight to ask where he was and when he was coming home, there was just no respite.

He pondered and weighed for a long time, but finally he decided it made no sense. He decided they needed to break up. When he told her this, she suddenly changed. All of a sudden, everything became idyllic, but the idyll didn't last long, and when it ended, things were even worse than before. They finally broke up, Irena and Karla moved to the large apartment in Vončinina Street where Irena's parents, her grandmother and sister lived, while Mladen stayed on his own in his apartment in Novi Zagreb.

Sometimes, in the evening, sitting in front of the TV, he would drink the whole bottle of wine, just to relax. Then he'd walk around the apartment and smoke and think how different the place got from the time when he'd still been a student and how different he was from the Mladen from that time, he thought about how things had changed and how much of it was the result of his own doing, and how much was just destiny, just the inertia. He reached no clever conclusion.

3

"Fucking hell, her old man invited me to go on a cruise with him."

"What? What's up with that?"

"I spent the whole day yesterday with the kid. I dropped her off at their place and there they were, the whole clan. And her old man tells me, like, everything's fine, he'd like me to join him and his crew on a cruise this summer."

"Jesus."

"Yeah, I don't get it. I even thought for a second to accept the invitation, just to see what's it all about."

"Don't be crazy. What are you gonna do with her old man and his crew? And who knows what's that all about, maybe he wants to talk you into coming back to her. Or he'll throw you overboard and say it was an accident. Fuck, who knows what's going on in their heads?!"

"They're all nuts, the whole family's crazy."

As time went by, Mladen saw more and more clearly that distancing himself from Irena's family was a good thing. He liked to talk about it with Gordan, one of his best friends from Zagreb. He wasn't sharing his inmost thoughts with everyone, even though he was open and laid-back by nature, only a small circle of his closest friends knew about everything he was going through. The scene with the cruise was not an isolated incident, it often happened that he came over to their place to drop off his daughter, and they invited him to lunch with them or asked him to help around the house, if Marinko wasn't there, they asked him to do what they considered to be a "man's" chore, change a lightbulb, replace a valve on a leaking faucet, such things. Mladen refused all this, politely, but he nevertheless refused, and from time to time it occurred to him that they did it on purpose, went around breaking things down, so they could have a reason to ask for his help, and out of the whole family, Madam Verica, Irena's mother and Karla's grandmother, annoyed him the most, her la-di-da manner and her constant attempts to look younger than her real age appalled him, he loathed her dilapidated coquettishness and he felt a little ashamed that she actually sometimes went out to places where people of her own generation could never be found, her misplaced, forced lightheartedness disturbed him; whenever he recognized a glimpse of her in Irena, his stomach turned.

"You know," he complained to Gordan that Friday evening while they, tired from the week behind them, talking over their glasses of wine, tried to make their conversation entertaining and avoid yawning. "They annoy me beyond measure. I'm not used to this. They're feigning all the time, it's awful, so pretentious, there's no honesty in them."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Well, last week the same thing. I came over, brought Karla to drop her off with them, and the old nana, Irena's grandmother, Karla's great grandmother, you know," Mladen explained, "well, she asked me, 'Mladen, my dear, would you like some cabbage rolls, look how nice they turned out!' Oh, fuck you and your cabbage rolls. How can't you understand that I don't want your cabbage rolls, or your cakes, or your lunch, or changing your fucking lightbulbs."

"Hahaha," Gordan laughed because, even though he was sincere, there was a hint of acting, a speck of exaggeration in Mladen's anger.

"You don't even know, man. Fuck, it's always something. I can't take it anymore. I left your daughter, I thought about it well and hard, and broke up with her. I wouldn't be here if your granddaughter is not my daughter. Fuck it. When Karla grows up, I'm never gonna see them again. I hope."

"Fourteen more years, give or take a few. Then you'll meet her at the bar, not me. We're not gonna see each other at all," Gordan said, comforting him.

“You know, man, when I’m at their place, I sometimes feel as if I walked into a parallel reality, as if Irena hasn’t even told them we broke up but that I, for some reason, decided to live alone again for a while and all of this is temporary, and I will come back to her and everything will be fine. The other day, her mother, and I’ve told you how disgusted I am by her, anyhow, the other day she approached me and told me I was a great dad and that the kid adored me. I thought, fuck, I know I’m a superdad and the kid adores me, but when she tells me this I just can’t not think I’m doing something wrong.”

“Listen, you know, it seems to me they’re living in denial. They think it’s going to be easier if they don’t admit to themselves the two of you broke up for real. It’s a classic story, you know, like when you’re a kid and your parents find your stash and turn everything into a drama, chaos, that kind of crap. And then, a month later, they ask if you’ve ever smoked pot, but they’re not acting, they’re genuinely interested. They completely erase what doesn’t suit them, completely. It happened to a friend of mine.”

“Maybe you’re right, it just dawned on me. Fuck, yes, they refuse to admit to themselves...” Mladen said and got lost in thought for a second.

“I mean, denial is one of the most basic psychological tricks. There’s nothing wrong in it. What I’m trying to say, it doesn’t mean that this makes them bad people, they’re just trying to make it easier on themselves.”

“Yeah, right, they are bad people no matter what.”

The two of them liked spending time together. During the last couple of months, they saw each other less and less often, only on Fridays, but not every week. Both of them had their jobs, they were spending most of their time at work, and when they got home, they were so tired and drained out, it never even crossed their minds to go out, they were simply too tired. On Fridays, they somehow made themselves go out, more out of almost childish desire to while Friday evening away than out of real passion to go out. Besides, their night out was most often brought down to sitting at always the same bar, half way from their homes, drinking wine and talking, like two retired old men.

“It’s unhealthy, man, all of it is,” Mladen went on with his story. Most often this didn’t bother Gordan, almost always it was the first thing they talked about. Almost never the last and only.

“Maybe unhealthy is a bit too strong,” Gordan was always considerate, he tried to take his friend’s side, but he nevertheless wanted to remain more or less objective and to point at some moments Mladen perhaps failed to see because he was in it too deep.

“Come one. The kid lives there with four hags. All right, Irena, she’s her

mother. Ines. Irena's mother and grandmother, so, her grandmother and great grandmother. You can't even imagine what that's like."

"Ines still does nothing?"

"Nothing at all. None of the four of them have to get up in the morning and be somewhere. Not in the morning, not ever. Okay, let's be fair, Ines could finish school, she's reached senior year and for the past year hasn't lifted a finger, but the whole time the kid is surrounded by four women who shuffle around house and watch TV. Horrible."

"Where does the money come from? What do they live off?"

"What the old man makes, that's it."

"I get it. Irena got used to the model she saw at home and decided to apply it in her own life too. Well, fuck, you can't blame her for this. She simply didn't know any better."

"I know, but I tried to explain it to her a thousand times. A million. Nothing. It's simply easier this way, you do nothing, you make no effort, you break no sweat, you do not toil. No getting up early in the morning. And then again, you miss nothing, someone's going to take care of everything. Fuck, I'm convinced that before she met me, she thought the toilet paper magically appeared on that fucking holder in the bathroom."

"Hahahaha, you're exaggerating."

"No, for real, she's such a child. Unbelievable. She's immature. You know, what would fuck me up the most was when I came home from work and found the two of them playing. It often didn't seem as if they were a mother and a daughter playing together, but as if they were two children at play. You understand what I mean?"

"I do. It's fucked up."

"Fucked up, yes. And the worst thing is that they actually think they're rich, that's their story, that's what they've gotten into their heads. And actually, the only wealth they have is that apartment of theirs, it's huge, but what are you gonna do with it? They can't sell it because there are four generations living in it," Mladen paused for a second and then went on. "Fuck, really, if you include Karla, that's four generations. The apartment is, like, supposed to be a real asset. I mean, it is, but it's dead capital. Nothing's gonna come out of it. And they all think so highly of themselves, like, we're the downtown nobility, we're better than anyone else, they keep their noses up high and so on, we're real town people, and not these dregs from Novi Zagreb, or, even worse, the scum that moved here from Istria, Zagorje, Dalmatia, Međimurje, it doesn't matter where from."

"Well, I haven't noticed this with Irena, she seemed normal."

“She’d never let it show, because she’s smart. She’s not a classic snob like the rest of them, she’s not stupid, but she carries it in her. If it’s not luxury, it’s no good. Horror, trust me.”

“Shit, yes. But tell me, what’s going on with that kid from work? What was it, she has a strange name, Krešimira, Tomislava?”

“Yeah, yeah, Tomislava. Ah, it’s fine, getting along somehow. The woman’s crazy, completely crazy, but in a good way. There’s no pressure of any kind, and that’s what I need now, I can’t deal with some heavy stuff now, you know, just keep it casual and that’s it.”

“Have you fucked her?” Gordan asked, not in the least embarrassed. They talked to one another the way most male friends in this world talk: nothing was taboo, and the profanities and sexual allusions grew as the amount of alcohol in their blood increased.

“I have,” Mladen said and smiled. “She’s wild. I mean, you know I’ve slept with a lot of women, but this is something else.”

“Come on! How come, tell me.”

“I don’t know how to explain it. She fucks like a porn actress, but not like when the chick keeps sighing and moaning the whole time, it’s as if the whole time she’s completely aware of herself and of me, of the moment and the situation. It’s terribly exciting, but it’s also a bit, just a tiny bit artificial.”

“It sounds good.”

“It is good.”

4

And it was good.

Women always found Mladen attractive, and he had many affairs and relationships, some superficial and unimportant, even one-night stands, but there were also a few that were important and serious. He approached women without fear of being rejected, easily and naturally. By the time he reached twenty, no woman had rejected him, so he had no reason to bring his charm into question. There were only two breakups in his life that seriously hurt him: the one with Margareta, because this was his first real love relationship, his first true love, the love that took up most of his twenties, the relationship that marked the time when he felt best in his own skin. The second painful breakup was the one with Irena; not because of her but because of Karla who at the time was three years old and was beginning to understand things on a level higher than eat-sleep-poop. He realized he’d never actually loved Irena and that the relationship with her



was an attempt to relive the part of his youth that had gotten stuck with Margareta. If it weren't for Karla, this breakup would've been completely painless.

Despite all this, he rejected any thought of getting into a new relationship before a year passed from the breakup and before Karla turned four. In this he was guided by vague morals saying that it would be slightly inappropriate to find a new girlfriend too quickly, that this would mean he had destroyed his family on account of his sexual or emotional demands, and it really wasn't so. Even though he sometimes felt tempted, this wasn't something he had a hard time dealing with.

From time to time, he and Gordan would happen to party a bit harder and on a couple of occasions, drunk and at the time that was no longer night, but could neither be called morning, he found himself making out with the girls that happened to be at the same club as the two of them, but it was something hardly worth mentioning. The first real relationship he allowed himself to get into was with Tomislava, the woman from his work.

She was an intern, and he'd been at the company for a long time, so he was her mentor. No matter how much he tried not to get into this cliché of a situation, her appeal was stronger. It was also stronger than his decision to strictly separate business and private relations, he simply couldn't resist her. She was petite, but extremely trim. If she were to be proportionately enhanced to the size closer to that of an adult woman than of a child, she would be considered a wet dream to a large number of men, yet, in her present size, she was almost a materialized fetish for all of those who like little sweeties. She was barely one meter fifty-five centimeters tall, but all of her other female attributes were prominent, she was a beautiful adult woman even though from a distance one could actually think she were a child. But, this image would vanish after ten sentences with her - she was teasing, she had an impish smile, her eyes were of a color that was difficult to determine, in fact a combination of a number colors that spilled into one another, from the light brown, to the shrieking gray and the maddening green. She wore a platinum bob that fitted her face phenomenally, she emphasized her already full lips using a bright red lipstick, and her teeth seemed to come out an American toothpaste commercial - immaculately white and perfectly straight. She had a tiny, discrete piercing in her left nostril, and this detail, or so it seemed to Mladen, said she wasn't just an ambitious young business woman, but that her life thrived in all fields, this miniature piece of jewelry made him conclude she was spirited, open-minded and cheerful. He was aware that such attempt of psychological profiling was lame, but it turned out he was right.

Traditionally, on Fridays, all of the people from his office went out for drinks after the workweek, and when it happened that for the third time in a row the

two of them were the last to stay, one thing inevitably led to another. They made out, and the next day they met to talk about what had happened and how it would affect their work relationship. The talk ended up in bed. They concluded that they wouldn't say anything to anyone from work until and if their relationship grew into something bigger.

As time went by, Mladen realized he had a weak spot for her. He wasn't in love, but he was drawn to her. And it suited him that she was clever and fast-tongued, he could talk to her about anything. Even though he'd been in many relationships, he'd slept with thirty-some women in his life, she was the first woman he could openly talk to about sex and what he wanted from it, it seemed she understood everything and had a real answer to his every question. Whenever he talked about sex before her, there was always a hint of embarrassment followed by humor that was supposed to ease up the situation, and he blamed conservative Catholic morals for it, the morals ingrained in the upbringing of the whole generation, the whole nation. He didn't know he missed it until he experienced it. He admitted to her that having a threesome was his only unfulfilled sexual fantasy. With two women, of course, but he wouldn't mind trying it with her and another man, however, for the first time it would have to be her and another woman. He was certain of his own heterosexuality, but not that certain.

She managed to talk him into all kinds of things. Her proposals were always spontaneous, and she delivered them with that sweet impulsiveness of hers, so he didn't know how to tell her no, even though he wasn't entirely sure they were doing the right thing, but most often it would turn out she was right and they would have a nice time despite his skepticism. So, on one occasion, they spent the whole day pretending to be tourists visiting Zagreb, they walked around sites and souvenir shops and tagged along with groups of tourists and their guides, and in the evening they had crazy sex in Hotel Jadran and spent the night there even though both of them had an empty apartment while on another occasion they took MDMA together and danced all night long and despite the fact that he had left experimenting with drugs back in the gentle days of his adolescence, this last experience was far more sparkly and vivid than any before.

He was most surprised with himself when she managed to talk him into dressing up for carnival. He didn't like dressing up even back at elementary school when most of the kids had a blast with it, and at the adult age he persistently avoided both the carnival and the Halloween, but during the last few days of October she told him that she knew of a great bar not many people knew about and that the costumed party was always awesome there and that she begged him to come with her because they are guaranteed to have a wonderful time. The only

condition, of course, was that they both wore masks. He didn't even know how, but he agreed, enchanted by her, and before going to the party they met at his place in Novi Zagreb, opened a bottle of wine and set down to dress up for the party. She had a plan for both of them.

Somewhat predictably, she turned him into a pirate. A red bandana on his head, a patch over his eye. A wide-sleeved shirt, tight black pants. She put makeup on his eyes and lips and as he observed himself in the mirror, he was pleased and surprised with what he saw, it showed him why people loved dressing up so much, he couldn't recognize himself in his own reflection even though this was undeniably he, when he moved his arm, the reflection did the same. Tomislava did a great job. She turned herself into a prostitute as portrayed by the 1920s Hollywood directors. Smearred makeup and disheveled hair. A white shirt with one too many buttons undone and a black lace bra showing nicely through the gap. A black miniskirt and torn nylons, scratched up nail polish on her fingernails. She seemed plausible.

They opened another bottle of wine, finished that one too and then called a taxi. Mladen never drank and drove, and if the going out included alcohol, he relied on taxis. He noticed the driver watched Tomislava in the rearview mirror, he thought that if it weren't Halloween and if she weren't in the company of a one-eyed pirate, he might truly believe he was driving a prostitute.

They soon arrived at the bar Mladen had never been to before even though he knew the Zagreb bar scene more than well, he was going out on a regular basis ever since he'd arrived at college, he changed favorite locations, clubs, cafés and bars and had at least heard of the ones he had never visited, but he didn't know Fox even existed. A sizeable basement space at the eastern part of the city, somewhere between Peščenica and Volovčica, the space they entered after Tomislava had shouted a couple of words into the ear of a buffed-up bouncer dressed in a black, tight tank top. He crossed out something on a piece of paper and motioned his hand to let them in.

Besides the bouncer, everyone else was dressed up, without exception. The waiters and the guests, everyone. And the masks were quite elaborate, no one wore some cheap paper mask bought at a bookstore or a cardboard box stuck on their head pretending to be a TV set, and even the first glance revealed a couple of memorable characters - Peter Pan dressed in green tights for whom it was unclear whether it was a man or a woman, an extremely sexy witch dressed in leather who seemed as if she had just walked out of a porn flick, a cowboy and his squaw whose motions flowed nicely to the sound of house music pouring out of the speakers. Tomislava and Mladen made their way through the place that

wasn't too crowded yet, through all those colorful creatures, through the thick good mood. She was showing him around the place, it was obvious she'd been here before. To begin with, they installed themselves at the bar and ordered a double shot of Pelinkovac.

"How come I've never heard of this place?" Mladen shouted into her ear, the music was too loud for a normal conversation.

"It's a club, members only," she replied, "like, say, KSET. Or Medika."

The noise made them communicate using short sentences.

"All right, but how come I don't know about it? I know all the clubs in Zagreb."

"I don't know. It's kind of underground. No need to expand. You like it?"

"It's cool. We were on a list?"

"Uh-huh. It's the list only."

"Cool."

They drank and danced. Mladen was a bit worried about the fact that he had already mixed wine and hard liquor and he sensed that the next day the hangover would be relentless, but at one moment he realized that he was having a good time and that he shouldn't bother himself with possible, probable, even certain consequences, but that he should try and enjoy the moment. It is not wise to think about tomorrow, one should ride the wave of intoxication for as long as it goes, keep it going and feed it, one should try to extend that bright color that has appeared for just a moment onto tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, to the whole life. If the drinks keep coming in the right order and intensity, this can even seem possible.

Tomislava was in a great mood, she kept smiling, she danced around Mladen who allowed the euphoria to get to him too, he stopped resisting, he finally relaxed. They kept going to the bar to get new shots of Pelinkovac, and then, at one moment, she pulled him towards the restrooms. They first kissed for a while, with passion and drunkenness, wobbly, and then, Mladen didn't know how or where from, two thin lines of white powder appeared on the water tank.

"Come on," Tomislav said. "Take a hit!"

"What is it?" Mladen asked. He was quite drunk. An alarm went off in his head, he wasn't planning to start doing drugs with thirty-five on his back, but the alarm was successfully silenced by the momentary drunkenness and the memory of the last fantastic experience. Well, nothing's gonna happen if he tries it once, right?

"It's speed. It's good. It picks you up slowly, and then it sends you into the orbit, you'll see."

She sounded like a dealer selling her goods, but she was incredibly sweet at

the same time. And when she leaned forward to snort up one of the lines and when one of her breasts in black lace occupied his field of vision, there was no doubt left in his mind.

He took a hit too. It was bitter and prickly, but not entirely unpleasant. Almost that very instant, he felt his heart pound faster. He wasn't sure if he was only imagining it, but it seemed his heart began to sync with the pounding of the bass that, muffled, made its way through the closed restroom door.

They went back to the dance floor where he felt his body follow the rhythm, he had to put no effort or thought into it. The dance and the music were a part of him, just as real and tangible as his arms and legs, just as alive and pulsating as his heart and lungs. He felt attraction and gentleness for all the people around him, that colorful mass was close and dear to him, for a moment he wanted to put his arms around them all, tell them that he loved them, that they were great.

Tomislava disappeared, but this did not worry him. Soon, there was a good fairy in a transparent white dress dancing next to him, and in the next second they were joined by a Viking, a buff young man, naked to his waist, with a horned helmet on his head. As if some invisible thread connected all three of them, it seemed to Mladen they were all one and the same puppet, and their movements were orchestrated by someone up there, somewhere up there. He felt fantastic.

When she came back, Tomislava was not alone. A Little Red Riding Hood was with her. The two of them held hands and danced differently from him and his newly found gang, they fluttered, bending subtly, gently. At one moment they kissed, and almost the same instant Mladen felt an erection, but it wasn't plain sexual arousal, it was a physical manifestation of ecstasy.

"Let's get a taxi, we're going home," Tomislava shouted into his ear.

"Now? Why? It's awesome here," said Mladen, clueless.

"The three of us are going, we're going to make your wish come true," Tomislava said and with the last letter she pronounced she licked his ear a little. His erection stiffened instantly.

He walked through the club behind the two of them who still held hands. They parted the cheerful, delighted, dancing crowd that opened up in front of Mladen like when Moses parted the Red Sea. Is this happening, he wondered, is he finally going to have a threesome?! He was extremely excited, tense, pumped up. Adrenaline surged through his body and, as if through a fog, he remembered some old biology lessons and imagined his adrenal glands happily spraying the healing hormone.

Only after they reached the exit, he remembered he hadn't even looked at the Little Red Riding Hood. I hope she's not a guy, he told himself and laughed. His

spirits were so high that not even this could ruin his mood. All right, he'd probably not be so sexually aroused, but he would still be happy, prepared for anything.

The cold October air splashed over them, only after they'd gotten out, they realized how stuffy the club was. The freshness sobered Mladen up a bit, but only for a second, only on the surface, inside of him everything still bristled and clicked. The taxi arrived in a second, Tomislava must've called it using her app. He took the passenger seat, while the two of them sat in the back. They laughed along the way, the driver was smiling, they brought the ball of good mood into the car. It seemed to Mladen he recognized the Little Red Riding Hood's laughter, but he didn't even try to remember where he knew it from, he was aware he was too fucked up for such a complicated endeavor; besides there was a good chance he was hallucinating, and all of this made no sense whatsoever.

They got into the building, called the elevator, pressed the button for the eighth floor. The foreplay began immediately, while they were still in the elevator. They kissed, all three of them, and Mladen's erection came back again. He grabbed the Little Red Riding Hood's behind, fondled her breasts, he was now sure she was a woman, he felt relieved.

They headed for the bedroom right away. He fought the urge to wash his hands, something he always did when he walked into his apartment, but he didn't feel like breaking the spell either for the two of them or for himself. The two of them jumped into bed and started kissing, one by one, the pieces of their costumes ended up on the floor next to the bed, while Mladen watched them from the bedroom door and removed his bandana, removed his eyepatch. It was interesting to watch all this. Exciting, but first and foremost interesting.

As they got rid of their clothes, the image became clearer, as if someone had wiped the dusty pane with a wet cloth, as if the pieces of the puzzle came to their place.

"Wait," the Little Red Riding Hood suddenly said, her voice serious. "I've got to use the bathroom."

She untangled herself from the sheets and passed by the astonished Mladen who at that moment realized that he hadn't only recognized the laughter because now he recognized the voice too. There was no doubt, it was true, it was creepy. The Little Red Riding Hood was Verica Krmpotić, his ex-girlfriend's mother and his only daughter's grandmother.

His stomach turned, he shivered and shook, he needed a cigarette badly. Pain, unbearable pain shot through his head. He felt weak at his knees and he had to take a hold of the doorway not to collapse to the ground.

"Mladen, baby, come here, what are you waiting for?" Tomislava beckoned to

him, her voice coy, but he, stunned, not knowing what to do or what he was supposed to do, tried to remove his right shoe with his left foot. When he succeeded, he did the same with his other foot. Delirious, he stepped towards the bed and Tomislava, and his exhausted consciousness managed to bring the maddening whirlpool of everything he was feeling and going through to a single sentence: “Motherfucker, who’s looking after my child!”

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