

Igor Štiks
Cuts and Scars
(Rezalište)

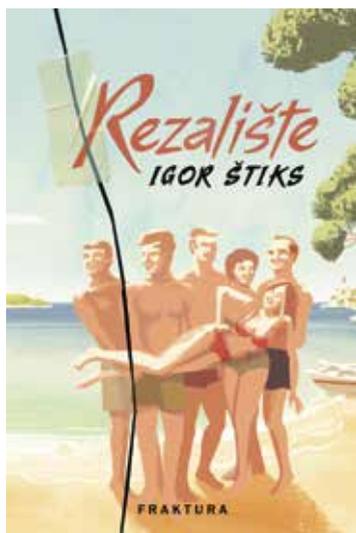
Novel

Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursac



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IGOR ŠTIKS was born in Sarajevo in 1977 and has lived in Zagreb, Paris, Chicago, Edinburgh, and Belgrade. His first novel, *A Castle in Romagna*, won the Slavić prize for best first novel in Croatia and was nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for 2006. It was translated into English (recently re-published by AmazonCrossing, 2018), German, Spanish, and Turkish. His novel *The Judgment of Richard Richter* (AmazonCrossing, 2017), originally published as *Elijah's Chair*, won the Gjalski and Kiklop Awards for the best novel in Croatia and has been translated into fifteen languages. Earning his PhD at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris and Northwestern University, Štiks later published a monograph, *Nations and Citizens in Yugoslavia and the Post-Yugoslav States: One Hundred Years of Citizenship* (Bloomsbury, 2015). In addition to winning the Grand Prix of the 2011 Belgrade International Theatre Festival for the stage adaptation of *Elijah's Chair*, Štiks was honoured with the prestigious French distinction Chevalier des arts et des lettres for his literary and intellectual achievements.



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One warm evening, after 25 years, the time has come for a family to reunite in a town in the Balkans, which the sons had abandoned long ago, a town once bursting with happiness and prosperity and now overshadowed by the consequences of a recent war. The oldest son Vladimir, a prominent economy professor in the United States, daughter-in-law Helena and grandson David unexpectedly return from Chicago; grandmother Nadia and grandfather Klement cannot wait to finally see them. Another unexpected guest at this family dinner will be the other son Igor, a war reporter, a rootless man who blames himself for the family tragedy.

In the meantime, over the course of 25 years, everything has changed: the city, the country, the population, streets, faces, politics, but the trauma remains and it cannot be deleted neither by the passage of time nor by changing a geographic location. It has become an outlook, a way of thinking, a pattern of behaviour, and getting over it painful and full of uncertainty. And this is precisely what the characters have to do in order to get through the night. Like any night, this one also ends with a dawn, but we do not know if it brings a new beginning or only a new separation, just like we cannot know our destiny.

The novel is structured like a 'menu'. Throughout the course of a single night, from aperitif, appetiser, main dish, cheese, cake to digestive, Igor Štiks leads us through a thrilling family history which is inevitably burdened by the politics of the 20th and 21st century. Old conflicts, ideological and emotional, as well as old loves are lived again. A night unveils long repressed secrets and proves that the past cannot be restored but that humanity and closeness can nevertheless escape its claws. Igor Štiks's new novel penetrates all the cuts and wounds

inflicted on people by the war and mutual injuries, it delves into the matters of emotions and the impossibility to cut out the past and other people with scissors. *Rezalište* in Croatian refers to a place where old ships are sent to be cut and discarded but it can also be understood as a metaphor of history and its impact on human lives. It refers to real cuts and scars; and every cut and every scar, external or internal, has a story to tell.

PRAISE

“Reading *Cuts and Scars*, a novel thickly woven of elements of melodrama, political thriller and existential scream of alienation, you will find yourself literally imagining your own version of Štiks’s story, your own explanation of jet-lagged vision. Only the greatest writers can engage you in that kind of partnership.”

Davor Špišić, *Jutarnji list daily*

“*Cuts and Scars* is a wonderful novel, dense and rich, quite the little concentrated masterpiece, which lingers in your thoughts for quite some time, once you reach the last page. With his novel Igor Štiks confirmed his extraordinary literary talent once again. You will want to copy his stylistically perfect phrases and read the novel over and over again.”

Ilina Cenov, *Journal.hr*

“Štiks is detailed and precise writer, he fine-tuned the language insomuch that not one written word seems redundant. His characters are vivid and dynamic, at first sight ordinary, but very complex, and the narrator knows precisely how much of their thoughts and intentions will reveal to the reader.”

Magdalena Blažević, *Glif.rs*

The Starter

“Ah yes, Mama, your soup,” exclaimed Vladimir as Nadia brought out the soup.

“Wait your turn! David first.”

Nadia ladled it out with care. “Carrots?” David nodded.

“So, what are your plans going forward?” Helena and Vladimir exchanged glances, each leaving the other the chance to start. Klement awaited their answer impatiently. “Well?”

“First we’ll need to settle in here again and then we’ll see. There’s plenty of work all through the whole—what do they call it now?—region,” volunteered Vladimir. “Thank you, Mother! We’ve already enrolled David in the international school. It starts next week. He’s not exactly thrilled about it. Eh, David?”

David scowled and went on eating his soup.

“Not thrilled at all,” added Helena, glancing at David. “He’ll settle in. He has no choice.”

David glanced over at her. With a scowl. You’ll settle in, she repeated to herself.

“And you?” asked Nadia. “Will you? It has been some...”

The intercom interrupted them.

“Who is this now, God help us!” exclaimed Naida, freezing, the soup ladle mid-air over her bowl.

“Is somebody else invited to dinner?” asked Klement, startled.

The intercom. Again.

“Go see, Nadia. Must be a mistake.”

“I’ll do it, Mama!”

Just like old times, he thought. Someone is popping by and I’m answering the intercom. And he, too, was the same, except now he was a crotchety codger. Still he was somehow comforted that old intercom worked despite everything. A feeling of home. After all these years.

“Who’s there?” he asked brightly. He could hear rustling.

“Sorry. Who?”

Rustling again. Then the creak of the door. Somebody had entered the building. Vladimir shrugged and went back to the table.

“Who was it?” asked Nadia.

“Nobody.”

Klement dismissed this with a wave and returned to the conversation. “Fine, so the kid starts school, you’ll come up with something. With your experience that shouldn’t be a problem. A professor, for God’s sake! From Chicago no less!”

“And I’ll be on the lookout...” added Helena. “I hope they still need librarians.”

“We’ll definitely find something,” Vladimir laid his hand reassuringly over hers. She slipped hers out from under his.

“In the States I worked at the library of Northwestern University. The *Africana* collection, one of the most important in the world for the history of Africa,” she sighed. “I was given the job thanks to Vladimir, as the professor’s wife. Still, I showed them I wasn’t just a spouse. I advanced quickly and learned a thing or two about Africa along the way!”

“Africa, you say. Well, that’s nice... Sure, you’ll manage somehow. Patience,” said Klement, fumbled, sipping the soup.

“Any return is going to have its ups and downs, right?” added Vladimir, glancing at Helena.

“The library, you know, was such a labyrinth,” she continued. “They say Umberto Eco used its towers as inspiration for the library in *The Name of the Rose*, guarded by blind Jorge of Burgos.”

Klement looked over at her, his curiosity piqued, waiting for her point.

“I often thought the day might come when I wouldn’t be able to find my way out. I’d simply vanish among all those books.”

“Apparently not,” Vladimir tried testily to nudge her to wind up her story.

The bell again.

This time at the front door.

They all turned toward the door and then exchanged astonished glances. Klement glared sternly at Nadia, as if she were hiding something. Nadia shrugged, vindicating herself. Vladimir tossed a dish towel onto the table and took a deep breath. He got up, sourly this time, and made his way slowly over to the door.

“Who’s there?” he said loudly. There was no answer. He opened it anyway. The stairwell was dark.

“Good evening,” he said to the stranger standing there before him. The man didn’t answer. He eyed Vladimir, silently, from the dark.

“Can I help you? Are you looking for someone?” repeated Vladimir, now more

assertive. He craned his neck, as if trying to see the silent stranger better, and let the man know he was being a bother.

Silence.

“Who is it?” barked Klement. Vladimir turned to them and shrugged.

“If you don’t know who it is, shut the door!”

“Can I help you? If not, we’re at dinner...” Vladimir bowed and shut the door.

“But who was it?” asked Nadia.

“Wait...” gasped Vladimir suddenly, as a shock flashed through him. Impossible, he thought. He must be seeing things. Because I’m here, at home.

“Wait...” he turned and opened the door again. The stranger was standing quietly in the same place. Vladimir slapped his hand to his mouth and staggered back a step. The beard? The eyes. Could be.

“Is that...” That arrogant, superior, self-confident bearing. Could be! “...you?”

“I can’t hear,” called Klement again. “Who, *you?*”

“Is it? It really is! I didn’t recognize you. Must be the beard.”

Klement shot to his feet. “Who are you talking to?”

The name stuck in Vladimir’s throat. He turned. They stared at him, incredulous. Except Helena. She was looking fixedly at the table. She went ashen, or so it seemed to David.

“To...”, Vladimir coughed and softly said, “...Igor.”

Nadia leaped from her chair which tipped over and crashed loudly to the floor. David was startled by her vigor. And eyes. Helena didn’t move her gaze from her plate, as if she were still thinking about all the knowledge of Africa she’d amassed for years, about countries she’d never visit, about the Timbuktu manuscripts, about the ones that were often at local flea markets as well as the ones preserved at the Ahmad Baba Institute, about Ahmad Baba himself, the great scholar, about the attempts to discover the source of the White Nile, about how Stanley had set off in search of Livingstone and found him at the city of Ujiji, by Lake Tanganyika, among ivory smugglers, about the main routes of the Atlantic slave trade from Luanda to Salvador, Recife, Rio, and all the way to Buenos Aires... She knew more about all those things than about the world she had come back to today.

Klement froze. His lips pressed tight. Only his jaw moved left-right. He ground his teeth. David could hear them, the teeth. Klement’s scar flashed red. He looked better, now that the blood had rushed to his head.

“Igor?”

Nadia asked as if trying to convince herself that Vladimir had, indeed, said that name. She turned slowly toward the door, with apprehension. She’d halt, trying to see the bearded man whose neck was sunken behind an Asian scarf. She still couldn’t recognize him. He melted in with the darkness. She turned to

the side, came closer. Like a cat with its fur on end, thought David, except she didn't pounce.

"Who?" Nobody answered him. "Vladimir, who is this?"

"Igor," repeated Vladimir, looking at the floor.

David looked first at Helena who was staring at her empty plate, then at Vladimir who was staring at his shoes.

"Who the fuck is Igor?"

Igor stepped over the threshold into the light. He sighed deeply. After so many years.

"Son!"

Nadia flung herself on him. He held back from sobs as he felt her arms around him and that soft face against his beard. A quarter of a century without those arms and that face. And kisses. A quarter century!

"Whoa, you're choking me!" he forced himself to laugh out loud.

"Let me have a look at you!"

His mother held his face in her hands and kissed him. He'd thought he'd never hug her again. He felt he could have sobbed, if he'd had any tears left. It was as if he'd used all the tears up given to him for life. They seldom appeared, lured out by wind and sand.

"It's really me, Mama," he kept laughing. "No, I'm not a ghost."

"But who could ever recognize you with that beard!"

David saw several big tears splash from Nadia's cheeks to the floor. He looked at Igor in his worn leather jacket from which a hood flopped, in washed-out jeans and army-style boots. A worn leather back pack with many pockets hung over his shoulder.

"Son? So he is my..."

"He's your uncle, David," said Vladimir. "Your *stric*."

David laughed aloud with derision. Helena glared at him. So, it was true, He is my uncle. David strode over to Igor.

"Wow! Cool. I have an uncle I didn't know about... How crazy is that, man! Hey, I'm David. I'm your nephew, if you didn't know. Nice to meet you... wherever you came from!"

"Glad to meet you at last, young man!" Igor extended his hand. David clasped it. Solemnly. He didn't let it go. He turned to all of them.

'Hey folks, I have an uncle!'

"Don't pay attention to him. He's at the worst possible age," punted Vladimir.

David finally released his hand and went back, angrily, to the table, as if this bizarre situation had only wasted valuable time, he pulled out his phone and tucked in his earbuds.

“Close the door, why don’t you! What are you standing there for? Sit down!” Klement finally spoke as if the clench of his teeth had only just then released.

“Sit down, son, sit down. Here, by your mother. You must be starving.”

Igor hesitated. Klement only shot him a sideways glance. Helena finally looked him in the eyes. Nadia was still waiting for him to sit down by her. She patted the chair, twice.

* * *

On the crumbling façade which had long ago been a bright yellow, there were still traces of bullets and shrapnel. Some of the holes had been plugged with cement, others yawned. The venerable building, despite everything, was still standing. Only the tenants’ last names had, some of them, been changed. That was how it was after the *first war* and then the *second war*, and now this war of *ours*. Some of the old neighbors were still here, judging by the intercom. Or someone was minding their apartment for them? Some old-time names could just be made out under new ones. Some had been erased forever. Only wires were left for a few. Ripped out. Ripped-out people.

He ran his finger over his last name. He wondered whether the intercom was still functional. The front door of the building was open anyway. The intercom obviously no longer had any purpose. Still, better to ring, to announce his arrival in his own home. Several moments of silence passed and then he heard Vladimir’s voice, just like in the old days, in their childhood, when he was a teenager, over the wire of this very same intercom. He shivered, though he knew, of course, that they were already in the apartment. He’d seen them, while hiding in the entrance to the building across the way, when they arrived. They got out of the cab, bickering. David didn’t want to go in. They remonstrated with him, first one and then the other. Then both. He couldn’t quite hear them. Only an occasional word in English. In the end David agreed to go in with them, to his grandmother and grandfather. They went in. Igor lit one more cigarette.

His earlier feeling of superiority that he’d surprise them by his arrival now mingled with anger, but also anxiety. *Who’s there?* What to say? Your brother? Your son? Your brother-in-law? Your uncle? Each answer would be correct. He preferred stepping into the old entranceway without a word. Into the building where he was born, where they brought him from the hospital. The smell of the cellar. Always the same. The ceramic tiles on the walls. The same. Some had fallen off, but not the signature of the craftsman: *Armin Schreiner*. And Armin and almost his entire family had disappeared, Igor later learned the secret behind the name, which he’d used to practice reading on when he was little. Other rules applied

for reading that name. Klement explained that *sch* was read like *š*, and *ei* was pronounced *ay*. Only one of the Schreiners survived. All the rest ended up in the camps of Jasenovac, Pag, Jadovno, Stara Gradiška, Auschwitz. The tiles still held on. And names remain in the land even after people have been *ripped out*. Where did I inscribe myself? In something firm that will testify about me. Nothing is left of all my ups and downs on these stairs. I ripped myself out.

* * *

“So, how was the trip?” she finally mustered the courage to say something.

Helena’s voice. Different from what he remembered. Now he could connect the Helena who was staring in front of her to the one in his memory. Time is pulverizing even you, he thought, staring brashly at her. Even you. She didn’t look away. She looked him right in the eyes.

“Paris is not far,” he answered with a forced smile and swept his gaze over the walls.

“It isn’t. And yet it took you twenty-five years!”

Klement scowled askance at him. Igor had expected it.

“How wonderful that you’re here!” smiled Nadia at him, with a piercing look. She was trying to glean as much as she could from his appearance alone. She imagined him without the tousled beard. What was his face like today? Gray hairs were scattered through his hair and beard. Who knows what he saw in that world he traversed, writing about people in suffering, poverty, misfortune and war. His smile was still the same.

“You knew we were here, right?” David queried from across the living room. They all turned toward him. “How come?”

“Yes, you weren’t surprised when you saw us. How did you know you’d find us here?” Vladimir went on, astonished. “You couldn’t have been passing by on a whim, on this very day.”

“Yes, I knew,” Igor looked at Helena.

“I let him know we’d be coming back today and that we’d be here for dinner at Klement and Nadia’s.”

Vladimir froze. He tried to say something but he couldn’t get out the words.

“Don’t you think it was time?” she said to him.

He tried to stay calm. But he couldn’t look at her. “I don’t know whether it was time, but this certainly was not the way.”

“How much time has passed?”

“I know how to count, Helena. I remember every day since we left.”

“So how many more? Another twenty-five? Till we die?” Helena wouldn’t relent. Vladimir struggled visibly to regain control.

“It has been time for a while,” they were interrupted by Nadia, looking at Klement, Igor, and Vladimir one by one. “If you were different.”

“Nadia, please,” Klement huffed and turned to the side.

“Come now, eat your dinner. Your soup is getting cold,” ordered Nadia, distracted.

Vladimir came back to the table. He signaled to David to do the same. “Leave the phone, at least while you’re eating.”

David put his phone and earphones down on the sideboard. Klement kept looking to the side and clenching his teeth. Spoons circled in soup bowls. Several mouthfuls. Igor coughed.

“So why did you move back, if I might ask?”

Vladimir kept eating, staring into his bowl.

“What was it, America wasn’t to your liking anymore?”

“Things are a little *slower* there now, as the saying goes,” Vladimir responded after all.

“Slower?” Klement spun around. “When fifty million people are living on food stamps, then they call that *slower*. Nobody went hungry here!”

“Enough!” snapped Nadia, and then she said, calmly, to Igor, “You see some things haven’t changed, despite everything.”

“So, what are your plans?”

Vladimir smiled. “Like father like son.”

“Sorry?”

“We’re in no particular rush with our plans. We’ll see. We only just got here. There are a number of possibilities.”

“So, how are you...?” Igor asked Klement and Nadia. Klement pounced on this as if he’d been holding his breath, waiting for the moment.

“What was that? How are we? Can I possibly be hearing those words?” Klement stared at him, unblinking several seconds, feigning surprise. “Did you hear that, Nadia? Why, he asked how we’re doing. Who knew we’d live to see the day!”

“Thank you for asking, we’re fine, son,” Nadia answered distantly.

“What, fine, Nadia? Splendid!” Klement said. “You could have been in touch now and then. That, at least, is not difficult. The phone number hasn’t changed, for the record.”

Klement again looked to the side. He mumbled something into his chin. David eyed Helena. She was nervous. She tried to say something. She ran her hand through her hair and shot a glance at Igor.

“And you? Still, you came.”

“I have been in touch for a long time now with some young activists here. They read what I wrote about recent revolutions, unrest, movements from Egypt, Syria, Brazil, New York, to Hong Kong. They’ve invited me to come several times now. You haven’t been back to the city for so long, they said...”

“So long?” scoffed Klement.

“...so, when I received your message, I thought...”

“A mere twenty odd years, so why not!” snickered Klement.

“... maybe it’s time now.”

Klement wagged his head, repeating Igor’s words. “...*maybe it’s time now.*”

Klement was not one for clemency, despite his name. Never had been. Some things don’t ever change, thought Igor.

“And you, you have been communicating over email? You’re in touch?” asked Vladimir softly, raising his eyebrows as he went on eating. “For a long time?”

“No. I sent him one email. He didn’t respond. I didn’t know whether the address was right.”

“Apparently it was,” Vladimir tossed his spoon into the bowl and stood up. He went over to the window. Helena watched him go.

“It was time,” she shot back. Vladimir didn’t answer.

“So, do tell...” needled Klement, turning to face Igor, “...you never tire of wars, conflict, rebellion? You are always where heads are rolling.”

“That’s my job. I inform people about what is happening in the world.”

“And what is happening? Do tell. Anything new under the sun? Just the dead. Everywhere. Mountains of bones! What more can there be said about that?”

“That’s my job.”

“You call that a job? And what are you going to say to your—what did you call them—activists? Eh? Zapatistas, separatists, Sandinistas? Kurds? Turks? The whatthefuckers? Campesinos, Naxalites, East, or, perchance, West Timor? If there is such a place no doubt you were there! What’s next? Eh? The Pakistanis, Palestinians, Sudanese, north and south? Shiites, Sunnis, Alawites, Maronites? Chechens? Cheyennes?... Good God, you’ve been everywhere under the sun but home! You’ve written about everything but home!”

As he spoke he slowly rose to his feet. In the end he was howling and pounding the table with his fist. Igor stared straight ahead, lips pressed tight, as if riding out a storm. David noticed that Igor’s lips pressed the same way Klement’s did. Exactly. Then the two of them, barely audibly, ground their teeth.

“You really went to all those places? What do you do? Special forces?”

“I am a reporter.”

“Hey, old man, now that we’re on the subject, I had no idea you are so fluent with French!” Klement waved away Vladimir’s interjection and sat back in his chair. “So you have been following his articles, like we have?”

French. Yes, he knew a smattering. He’d handled himself well back then on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. The suit had looked good on him. Then. Now it hung on him like a sack on a scarecrow. Ridiculous. He undid the top button on the shirt and loosened his tie.

“We find everything on the internet,” explained Nadia.

“She installed that wonder for us, so what was I to do? I peruse it now and then.”

“Dad reads your articles,” she said to Igor. “With a dictionary! He retells them to me afterwards. It’s hard for me to hear about the places you’ve gone to.”

“Bigtime reporter! Oh please!” Klement was talking to the wall again.

“Enough!” Nadia raised her voice with a threatening quaver. “Let us at least eat in peace!”

“I’ve eaten already,” snapped Klement. “I’m waiting for what comes next.”

* * *

While he ate slowly, downing bite by bite and struggling with each, Igor felt Nadia watch him closely. Whenever he looked at her, she smiled gently. Helena was staring at the table. She wasn’t eating. David was also eyeing him without a blink. My nephew. All this time since I heard of him, he has been just an announcement, a fact from their life. Now here he is. Already grown. His beard is starting. Who does he look the most like?

“Forgive me for not notifying you in advance.”

“Missed that. What did you say?” Klement was still waiting to pounce, and he immediately grabbed the chance to get even. Like before when the stakes were smaller, and roles simpler. This jousting couldn’t win. Even back there was no beating him. “Was that for ‘not notifying you in advance’ or for ‘never calling at all’? Which should we forgive you for of those two?”

“This is your home, son,” Nadia said, scolding him in her own familiar way. That, too, had stayed the same. “What can I say? You found us alive. We haven’t died without seeing you. And that’s something, isn’t it?”

“Have you forgotten how old we are?” Klement’s patience was fraying. “Your mother can hardly walk. She is seventy-four years old. She hasn’t slept for twenty-five years. My heart is giving out. And what do you think, just waltzing in here like this? That everything is fine? That nothing happened?”

“Forgive me. I should never have come. This was clearly a mistake.” Igor rose to his feet in protest. “You are right, Father. This won’t work. Not after so many years.”

“Off you go, just you run away again. That’s all you know. But let me tell you one thing...” again he got up and pointed at Igor, “...that bullet you’ve been looking for will find you sooner or later!”

“That’s enough, Klement!” shouted Nadia. “Sit down!”

Igor pushed hard against the table. Nadia grabbed his hand. Was it possible that she had such strength, he thought in surprise. She jerked him back, sharply, so his shoulder twinged.

“And you.”

Igor looked at her, astonished. “You aren’t going anywhere!” Then she added, almost sweetly, but not relaxing her grip. “Come on, sit down. Sit here. Obey your mother.”

Igor sat down obediently. The grip did not relax. The pain in his hand was growing so fierce that he had to clench his teeth. He didn’t dare pull his hand away.

“Twenty some odd years I have been living in silence. I do not wish in silence to die.”

She looked at them all, one by one, and then with her other hand she sharply smacked the table. “Just so that is clear to each and every one of you!”

Then suddenly, as if nothing had happened, she exclaimed:

“The chicken! I almost forgot! It must be roasted by now!”

She finally released Igor’s hand and went into the kitchen. If she hadn’t done that he’d have screamed with pain. He sneaked a glance at his palm under the table. His mother’s fingernails had left deep gouges. She’d nearly drawn blood.

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The Cheese

“Now that’s a scar!” he said. “I can only imagine the story behind it.”

She turned slowly. He was standing by her table. She’d seen him when he came into the café with his friends. His voice had long been known to her. She had listened to him, filled with admiration, as he stood up to the teachers. He was an older colleague, a student in his last year of the study of literature. She was only at the beginning of the same course of study. She often listened to the older students in the cafés around the university showing off their smarts, quoting obscure references, inaccessible books. But he was different. A city kid. A young writer with promise, a journalist, radio announcer, the voice of his generation with no real enemies and with no clear idea of himself and his future. At his side there was always, as there was that day, a good-looking blonde in a short leather jacket. She, too, was a generational legend in her own right. An art student. Given to outbursts, provocative performances, even scandals that the whole city talked about and in which the police took an interest. He toted her around with him like an accessory. Or she him.

She managed to hide the elation she felt when he spoke to her. Slowly she raised her eyes from her book. Borges. *Aleph*. An ID badge of sorts for younger literature students. She didn’t tug her skirt down though she realized almost her whole leg was showing. The bare leg is what had stopped him and called out an almost daring flirtation.

“Dad went through the windshield. Mom was pinned and crushed on the seat by the front of the car. I learned only months later that they were dead when I came out of my coma. I tore up all the photographs. This is my memento of my parents. All I have left. I can only imagine what you were imagining.

He cringed. The grin vanished from his face. Mr. Cool was thrown off balance. Speechless. He went dark. He walked away. Helena went on reading her book and taking notes. She didn’t pull her short skirt down over the scar. She knew he was still looking at her from across the café, even over the shoulder of the young artist

whose laughter echoed now and then around the room. When she got up to go, he ran out after her.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m Igor.”

He offered her his hand which she didn’t take. She went on walking. He followed her.

“I know.”

“And you?”

“What, me?”

“What’s your name?”

She didn’t turn or answer. He stopped following her. She congratulated herself on this success, on her victory, fearing at the same time that he’d never speak to her again. She caught sight of him after that at lectures. He’d indicate he’d seen her. He’d give a slight nod in her direction. Still solemn. She’d respond with a quick nod, indifferent. She was afraid of looking at him too often, of giving herself away. After a few weeks she thought it was silly of her to lose the opportunity, that her pride had cost her dearly, that he probably thought she was a little odd. Then one day as she was leaving the university building, she heard, from behind her, “Helena!”

She blushed. He followed her out without a question. They walked for a long time that day and many days after that around town. She was surprised that he never once tried to kiss her. She was ready. His interest in her was confusing. He wanted *friendship*, as he called it, quoting French philosophers. She accepted this, with disappointment, this friendship.

Her first year of study was drawing to a close. He invited her home to have dinner with his parents and brothers. Vladimir was serious, quiet, and, as she’d discover, reliable. Boris was about to graduate from high school. He hugged her straight away. He prattled on with charm. Klement, always impeccably dressed, came across as the witty patriarch. Nadia’s sternness and gentility confused, but also attracted her.

After that she came to dinner every weekend. She was welcome in their home. The dinners stretched into evenings. Endless conversations. Card games. New movies on videocassettes. She’d stay until late. Afterwards Igor would see her home. But he still hadn’t kissed her. She thought maybe it was that he needed a sister, what with his two brothers. Still, she was pleased when he confided in her and now everybody knew they were close.

Once the semester was over, they invited her to go with them to the seaside, to an island where they had a house. Klement explained to her grandmother the importance of rest and relaxation for the successful student. At first her grandmother wouldn’t hear of letting Helena go, but Klement’s name was enough for

her to agree. The fact that he called her personally was an honor. The only thing she, like Helena, wasn't clear about, was what was going on between her granddaughter and his son.

Now, so many years later, she made no effort pull down her dress while she ran after Igor down the empty street.

“Stop!”

He stopped. At the end of the street there was a small park. Her high heels clattered with an irritating ring down the street. What a scene, she thought. A half-dressed woman chasing a man. She only slightly pulled down her dress. She nearly fell. She stopped. She took off her shoes and ran on, barefoot. He watched her approach him, shoes, like daggers, in hand. Klement was right. He'd left long ago. But he hadn't known where he was going. Not then. Not this evening.

* * *

She caught sight of him as soon as the boat entered the deep harbor. He was waiting for her at the end of a long wharf. He was alone. She waved her hat to him. And he waved to her, with both arms, tan, barefoot, wearing only shorts. He'd already spent a few weeks on the island and the locks of his hair were tangled with salt. I am not your sister, thought Helena, as she watched him from the deck. The smile evaporated from her face and that confused him. He lowered his arms. When the boat landed, the others stepped out of the shade. Boris came running over to greet her. Vladimir pushed the cart with her luggage. Klement and Nadia were walking slowly, arm in arm, and waved to her. They hugged and kissed her affectionately, as if she were all they'd been missing to complete their island idyll. In the end Igor hugged her, too, and gave her a kiss on the cheek, still surprised by her restraint.

Boris, while telling her in a jumble about everything she'd do while she was on the island, rested his hand on her shoulder. They set out in front of all the rest. Vladimir trundled along with the luggage cart and corrected Boris when he exaggerated. Their little boat was not in perfect shape; he'd see to the diving equipment, but it wasn't all quite as simple as Boris was telling it... Klement asked after her grandmother. He talked about the island. He was to be thanked that the island had received running water, but only in the 1970s.

“You can't imagine what the island looked like when we came here the first time!” added Nada. Everybody had been surprised when they bought a ruin on the little, faraway island. While they walked through town, the local people greeted them with warmth. This was their second home, Nadia announced proudly.

After lunch they ran off to swim. Then took a spin in the boat. Swimming in the blue, sandy coves where pine branches almost touched the sea. The sun slowly burnt her unaccustomed skin. Dinner awaited them when they returned. Freshly caught octopus which Igor had pulled from the sea. The local wine quickly went to her head and she was happy for that. Then they ran out once more for a night swim, in front of the house. She'd never seen so many stars. Igor was quiet throughout that whole perfect day. When he asked her a question, it was about the exams she'd be taking in the autumn. He was concerned about whether she'd begun studying or not. She let him know that the topic of exams interested her not in the least. She chatted with Boris about the island disco, about an excursion to a nearby little island inhabited only by donkeys, about the girls he was hanging out with and dating a little. Or she'd ask Vladimir about the fish swimming around them, smiling indulgently at his detailed explanations.

When they finally decided to go in to bed, he saw her to her room. He tried to say something. He had no chance. "I'm not your sister," she said and slapped him. She slammed the door in his astounded face. He came back a half hour later as if it had taken him that long to figure it out. She pulled him in. They made love for the first time, wordless, almost breathless, so the others wouldn't hear them. In the morning they came down to breakfast together. They were holding hands. Nobody was surprised. That had been a truly perfect day and perfect night. Like the other days and nights on the island, in the familial utopia to which she now belonged.

That summer it was as if there was no end to happiness. And then, as they were getting ready to leave, Klement came back, very upset. His scar was red. On the terrace of a local wine cellar where he usually joined into a card game, a young man he'd never seen before told him rudely that Klement's time was up.

"He told me, *time's up for you, old man*. That is what he said. *Old man*."

Klement rose to his feet, in shock. He couldn't even muster a response to such impudence. He was especially hurt that nobody said a word in his defence among all the people he'd known for decades. As he was leaving, he heard someone mutter, under their breath, "Klement? Strange name." In a foul mood he left the island. Never again would any of them return. The utopia hadn't lasted long. The next summer the war began.

* * *

He stood before her, the opposite of the young man who'd come to her room that night on the island: hunched over, tangled in his beard, graying, and weary.

"*Sister-in-law*—is what they say in English for a brother's wife?" he laughed,

invoking their first night. “*Belle-soeur*, in French. So you became my sister after all. Of a sort. Exactly what you didn’t want to be.”

“Yes, I became your brother’s wife, and, thereby, your sister in the eyes of the law.”

“For me you’ve always been my woman.”

“Your woman?” she snorted. Igor looked at her, hurt.

“What’s so funny?”

“You are. Both of you. Men. You know, in South Africa a clash erupted between the colonizers and the Zulu.”

“So?”

The colonizers to whom the Zulus had conceded territory assumed that everything on that territory belonged to them, including the people. The Zulus didn’t get this. They felt the people belonged to the King of the Zulus, regardless of where they happened to be, regardless of who held the territory, anywhere on earth.”

“Whatever does that have to do with the fact that you married my brother?”

“You’re the same. Your brother, like the colonizers, assumes that I belong to him because I married him. You, like the King of the Zulus, assume that I belong to you no matter where I am and whom I’ve been with, only because I was yours first. That is what you said, after twenty-five years that I’m *your woman*, although you were the one who ditched me.”

“I didn’t ditch you, Helena.”

“Fair enough. But you never came to fetch me when I waited for you exactly where you told me to wait.”

The siege hadn’t yet begun. Barricades, skirmishes in the suburbs, the first shelling of the center of town, the first casualties... yet still there was hope it would end quickly. Helena was already living with Igor in his room. After they returned from their summer vacation, at the end of the autumn exam period, her grandmother died. In her sleep. Klement and Nadia organized the funeral after inviting her to live with them. Vladimir went off to do his obligatory year of service in the army. After that, there was the time she called Nadia ‘Mama’ just as Boris did. “I’ll get it, Mama,” she said and jumped up to answer the phone. Nadia stopped for a moment and then smiled. The tragedy was unfolding all around them, but this home, at least for Helena, was a safe haven amid the crazed world about which she didn’t want to know much. Only Klement, it seemed, was not immune to its influence. He often shook his head, confused by the new times which, clearly, were no longer *his*. He stopped sleeping well, always had an ear glued to his transistor radio and was forever switching stations, following the ever more horrible reports from crisis areas. He fretted over Vladimir. He spent more and more time alone. Old friends changed over night, saying things that

would have been unimaginable only months before, especially, about their shared past.

Then Vladimir came back. Suffering from burns. At night he groaned in pain. Nadia changed the dressing on his wounds daily. Near where he'd been stationed, clashes broke out. Then they came closer and closer. When they reached the city, a decision was taken. Time to leave, go to a safe place, to a city where there was no fighting. Helena agreed after Igor promised he'd come after her in two weeks at most if the situation didn't subside. If the situation did subside, Helena would come back. Boris said he'd stay with Igor; he'd begun going along on the journalist jaunts. Vladimir was quiet and withdrawn. He repeated that we should all get out of there as soon as possible. Klement was adamant: "The only way I'm leaving here is if you carry me out when I die. Alive, never!"

Helena left on one of the buses packed with children and women who "evacuated" during those days. She came to a city where things were 'peaceful,' although the battlefields weren't very far away. She found a room where she spent her days listening to the news, just as Klement had been doing, waiting for Igor with her papers all filled out for a French visa. When she could no longer bear the worsening news, she'd go out for long walks through the unfamiliar city. Aside from the refugees, who were easy to spot, the other people seemed to her to be leading their lives unperturbed. Couples kissed at the afternoon movie showings. She envied them. Highschool students celebrated their last days of school, spraying each other with flour and pelting each other with raw eggs. She envied them, too.

The two weeks passed. Igor didn't come. He said he'd come as soon as he could. He couldn't. The city was under siege. Only rarely could she hear his voice over lines that had been set up by ham radio operators. He said that everyone was well and he'd get there as soon as the city was *deblocked*. That would be soon, or so he claimed.

After a month Vladimir appeared at her door. They hugged and cried. He told there'd been one seat available on a convoy out. He said he'd be moving on. She said she'd stick around to wait for Igor (maybe there'd be more convoys with seats for two) and then they'd all go away somewhere. Vladimir submitted the paperwork the next morning for the United States.

Igor called now and then. In the middle of the night. Once in ten days. Foreign journalists or UN staffers whom he worked with as a guide used to let him call over their satellite phones. Short sentences, a minute or two. His parents were well. He and Boris were fine. Then he stopped calling.

Now he was sitting on a bench, in front of her, twenty-five years later.
"Why did you write?"

“It was time.”

“Only fools think time changes anything.”

“I’m that fool.”

“I’m the fool who came this evening.”

“Don’t turn your back on us again,” she put her hand on his shoulder.

He got up, angrily pushing away her hand. “I turned my back on *you*? I on *you*? What were you thinking? That I’d be best man at your wedding? Whose, then? Yours? Or his?”

Helena and Vladimir did everything they could to keep in touch. The Red Cross finally found a way to get letters through. They wrote every day. No answer. When they heard of the arrival of another “convoy,” they’d run to the bus station. Neither Igor nor Boris were there. And then one day on a bus which had just arrived packed with women and children, Vladimir spotted a colleague from the university. They ran to one another. She hugged him, overjoyed to see a familiar face. Then her expression grew solemn, as if she’d forgotten herself for a moment.

“I’m so sorry, Vladimir, please accept my sincere condolences.”

She saw the shock on their faces.

“Oh my god, you don’t know?”

“We don’t know... what?” said Vladimir, grabbing her by the shoulder.

“Your brother was killed.”

“Which one?” asked Vladimir, his voice, barely audible, through his grimace of pain. Helena couldn’t say a word.

“Forgive me, please. I thought you knew.” she halted, realizing she was the one to break the news. “Boris. Boris was killed. A sniper. Igor was with him. Luckily, he survived.”

Vladimir turned, and, as if sleepwalking, he staggered away from the bus. Helena ran after him. She followed, saying nothing. He walked that way, without stopping, headlong, for nearly an hour. Then he stopped as if he’d woken up. He turned. He looked around, lost. Helena was right there. He finally showed that he recognized her. She hugged him. He began to shake. She held him tight, close. His abundance of tears found their way to her neck and then one by one they slid down her back.

* * *

“After Boris’s death you didn’t write to me anymore. How come?”

He shrugged and turned away.

“Stay for a minute.”

She went over to him again and grabbed him by the shoulder. "What really happened? Tell me. For years I've been waiting for this conversation."

So what did, actually, happen?

The war didn't end. His girl had left, she was in a safe place. Then his brother went there, too. His younger brother died in his arms. After Boris's death he stopped all contact with her and with his parents. He left home. Wars don't end, even when they finish. Till today.

Didn't he long to be in touch with her? With at least a single word? What happened to their love?

What was there to write about? About the dead, the bombs, the destruction, a world disappearing forever that was only still recognizable in a chance encounter on a street with a familiar, dear, but now distant figure, forever changed like him? Or, perhaps, the look in his father's eyes when they met at the morgue? Boris's dried blood was still on his hands. Klement didn't embrace him. They wept, each for himself.

Was he supposed to write about how he couldn't muster the strength to go to Boris's funeral? No, he never came home. He kept on at his job. That was all that was left for him and all he knew: do the job, if it even is a job, like Klement said. Bringing bad news to good people, as he did then to his father. In a nutshell, for twenty-five years.

She kept on waiting for him, for months afterwards. In that city she had only his brother.

"Ah they had no one but each other," sneered Igor.

Yes, they had no one but each other. The city was streaming with refugees and soldiers. Vladimir was afraid they'd arrest him or conscript him by force. She didn't know how she'd survive without him. One day they informed him he was received his visa for America. Joy and sorrow. His departure. Loneliness. The radio and the occasional calls from America for which she lived. Vladimir sent her money. He said, come, we'll be able to help them more from here.

She went on waiting for Igor. Doggedly. She waited for a single word from him that might make the wait easier and reach on into the future indefinitely.

Then one day she submitted her own paperwork to the American consulate. She went on sending him packages. And his parents.

"The most wonderful packages in the world! What joy there was in the newsroom when Klement left a package at the main desk of the television station!" crowed Igor.

He didn't write to her, but the consulate did. Soon she was on a plane to Chicago, with a suitcase packed with unnecessary things. Most of her possessions she'd thrown away, but not the Borges. Not *Aleph*. It was proof that at one time,

somewhere, she'd had a life when she was a student of literature and was loved by a boy. She fainted in the arms of his brother, out of grief and out of joy. In the suitcase there were still seashells from the island. She'd kept them, too. And a photograph.

Bars, McDonald's, warehouses, restaurants, trucks, construction sites... the both of them worked all day every day to scrape together enough to cover their rent, food, the packages. When they ran into each other in the little apartment by the lake, they'd take out everything they'd earned that day. What joy! Another day they'd survived! They even treated themselves to a movie after they sent a package. Then came the guilt about the movie, the popcorn. Without saying another word, they'd shut themselves up each in their room. Then they realized the war wasn't likely to end and they'd be staying in the States for a while. They went back to school. She decided to finish her degree in literature. Then she enrolled in a master's degree in library science. He began his doctorate. He'd get up early. By the time she got up there'd be breakfast on the table.

"How marvelous," snorted Igor.

"Despite the guilt I felt, I came to love your brother."

"And so it was that she fell in love with one, and stopped loving the other! Oh that's all OK! What matters is that everything, as in every good bourgeois home, stays—in the family!"

"I just told you how it happened, hoping you'd understand."

"Understand? That's what you're asking me to do? Do you comprehend what you did? Out of all the people in this world and all the men in the city of Chicago, you chose *my* brother! That asshole!"

Helena kned him in the gut. He bent over, surprised, and then he began to laugh uncontrollably.

"First she fucks one brother, then another. If the third had survived, she'd probably have had a go at him, too!"

She punched him in the face. This surprised even her. Igor dropped to his knees and then rolled over on his side, still laughing.

"You piece of shit! You rotten piece of shit!" now she kicked him with her bare feet. And then she pulled her dress up over her hips and rolled her stockings down to her knees.

"So you forgot about this?" She grabbed him by the hair, lifted his head and pushed his face into her long scar. He didn't protest.

"You forgot I was an orphan!"

Her strength sapped, she sank to her knees next to him. She sobbed.

"I had nobody in the world. But you!"

She raised her arm as if she meant to pummel him once more, but then her

arms dropped softly onto his head. She hugged him. He pushed her away and stood up.

“I haven’t forgotten. You were an orphan, Helena, who made me an orphan. You took my brother. You bore him a child. You took away from me part of my family and after the reshuffling there was no longer any place left for me. You can’t have all of us.”

“We are together again. It is possible.”

“Yes, all was going well until I showed up! What did you think would happen when you wrote?”

“I thought you would have come to understand after all these years that all we have is each other.”

“You have been lying to your own son since he was born! And now I am supposed to go along with your lies?”

He raged. She didn’t budge. Infuriated he grabbed her by the hair. He looked down at her from above. “So you’ve assigned me my role, have you?” She stayed quiet. He yanked at a handful of her hair. “Did you?”

“Let me go!”

He let her go. She plunked down onto the path in the park, her stockings half-rolled down, her skirt askew, barefoot. When he saw her like that he seemed to pull himself together. He slipped out of his jacket and draped it over her. He sat, beat, on a bench. Helena slowly rose. She pulled up her stockings and straightened her dress. She sat down next to him.

“We didn’t want to burden David. We wanted him to grow up freely. Free of our past.”

“How did you manage to erase me and Boris from that picture?”

“With scissors,” she said coldly. Igor shuddered and looked over at her in surprise. She explained that when she was leaving she took her favorite photograph.

“The one from the island?”

They didn’t know who’d taken it. Maybe one of the swimmers on the town beach. On it, Helena, looking like a mermaid fresh from the sea, is being held by Boris, Igor, Vladimir, Nadia and Klement all in a row. Helena, in a bikini, posing jauntily with elbow akimbo and a rascally grin for the camera. A moment of pure joy captured on celluloid.

That day when they heard the news of Boris’s death, Vladimir and Helena wandered through the city for a long time. When they came back to their room and Vladimir fell asleep, as usual, on the thin mattress on the floor, she took out the picture, this now painful memento of days gone by. She found her scissors and snipped out Boris.

“At the airport, when I was on my way to Chicago, I cut out you, too. I tossed you into a wastebasket. For the child you two didn’t exist.”

Igor kept staring at her, thunderstruck. “Even after all these years, Helena, you never cease to surprise me.”

“We wanted the best for him.”

“You are not the first parents who ruined their child because they wanted the *best* for him.”

“We didn’t lie, like you said.”

“No. You just failed to mention the skeletons in the closet.”

“The skeletons were best left in the closet. Or outside the picture.”

“So why bring them out of the closet now?”

“Some stories have a shelf life. This story that we have been living for all of David’s life was used up.”

“How can stories be *used up*? Explain that to me.”

“When they no longer serve their function. When there isn’t anyone left in them who is good. When it’s time for a change.”

“How did you come to the realization that your perfect lie, sorry, your half-truth, was no longer enough?”

“When the child grew up. When he began asking questions in all sorts of ways. When there began to be problems in school. When our house, our two cars, our vacations in Mexico were no longer enough. And then when Vladimir lost his position that tipped the scale. I left my job as head of the rare manuscripts collection and said my goodbyes to Africa where I’d been living too long anyway. I said, we’re going back.”

“And you think you’ll have a better time of it here? Here of all places?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why didn’t you replace one illusion with another?”

“Because the time had come for the truth.”

“What is it you want? I have been trying to understand that ever since I got your message.”

“I wanted my child to have a grandmother and grandfather. For them to come and visit us. And we visit them, like we did this evening. I wrote to you because I wanted my boy to have an uncle, and for brother to have brother. The time as come for me to put you back into the picture.”

“From the waste basket?” Igor shook his head, amazed. “So your former lover could finally become your brother? *Brother-in-law!* So you could dust off the skeletons and put them back into the closet.”

“Not back into the closer,” answered Helena calmly. “But in the grave.”

“Some skeletons cannot be buried! Here you are all wrong.”

Again he stood, upset, and strode off a ways to the edge of the park. There he stopped.

“We are a family. We only have each other.”

“No, *you* have each other!” he came back and wagged his finger at her as if he finally wanted to teach her a lesson. “I am the one who ruins everything. Why can’t you see. I’m the odd man out.”

“No, you’re what is missing.”

He pulled back his finger with a grunt and set off to walk through the park. She ran after him. She barred his way. He almost knocked her down, but she refused to budge.

“Let me leave once and for all, Helena.”

“You didn’t hear me. I fell in love with your brother, but I never stopped loving you.”

“Is that why you wrote to me?”

“Is that why you came?”

He took her face in his hands. She didn’t protest. He told her that in his apartment in Paris he, too, had kept that picture from the island. The only thing that was left with all of them together. Next to the picture he still had a cluster of rose of Jericho. Tesurrection plant. The easiest plant to maintain. When he was away for months at a time, it would hunker down and wait for him. All that was needed, when he came home, was a little water for it to blossom and come alive again. It dried up but never died.

“The house is still there,” she said. Igor gasped.

“It has been waiting for us, all these years.”

“What?”

“I called the town council. The roof caved in. Some of the things were carted off. There are leaves to clear.”

“No, no, I can’t...” He truly could not believe what he was hearing. Again she surprised him.

“It wouldn’t take much for us to fix it.”

“Good god, Helena.”

She went over to him. She hugged him.

“It was always you and still is. I have been around the world. I have never found death or another life from which I could have cut you out. You, Boris, that damned island. Happiness always meant the two of us strolling along the windy boulevards about which we used to dream. Starting again. Far away from everything.”

She pulled back from him. She took his face in her hands.

“Look at me. look at me now at last. Look at me as I am, barefoot, with smudged

make-up and a ruined hair-do, torn stockings and a dress that is too close-fitting for my age.”

He tried to pull his head free of her grasp. He couldn't.

I am not the woman you loved, the woman you've dreamed about all these years. You're strolling around on those imaginary streets with someone else. That girl of twenty years ago is not the woman who wrote to you to tell you she'd come back to our city and was waiting for you, it was this woman who is standing here in front of you, this woman whom I want you to finally see as she is, who is past forty-five and the mother of a boy who is almost a man!”

“My brother's wife.”

“Yes! I am your brother's wife! I know, when I ask you for us to get to know each other I am not asking for something small. Again. I want to know you as you are today and I want you to get to know me as the woman I have become.”

They fell silent, both of them. They looked at each other, without the strength to say or do any more.

“Igor!”

Nadia's voice rang down the street.

“Helena!”

Nadia was standing not far off, leaning against the building. She couldn't take another step. Both of them, terrified, ran over to her.

“What happened?”

“He's gone!”

“Who, mama?”

“David! David's gone!”

“Oh, my god!” cried Helena. “What happened?”

“I don't know. He just disappeared.”

“We'll find him. Don't worry,” Igor put his left arm around Nadia and hugged her. “Let's go home.”

He threw his other arm over Helena's shoulders.

He realized that on either side were the two most important women in his life. He drew them closer. As they approached the building he looked up. He went numb. David was watching them, sitting on the very edge of the roof. Like a gargoyle on a cathedral.

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