

**KRISTIAN NOVAK**

**GYPSY, BUT THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL**

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1.

OIKOPHOBIA, FEAR OF THE KNOWN

## 1. M / Unstable ground

There are only two primal fears, did you know that? We're born with the fear of loud noises and the fear of falling. Seriously, you can look it up online. We pick up hundreds of other phobias from those closest to us. Some phobias keep danger at bay, sure. But most of them exist solely to crack jokes at our expense.

For example, I can tell you're tense. You'd like to wrap up the interview as soon as possible, and we haven't even started. You're worried I might quit. You think I want to run away from it all.

Because, what's the deal? A story of so much sorrow. My name dragged through the mud so many times. A story of dying. One in which I lose the precious few things I care about. You've been taught that any normal person would run away from it. To me, it's the only thing that really matters, you see. For a long time now, my choice hasn't revolved around happiness and misery, my choice has been between misery and nothing. I choose the former, so shoot me.

Your colleagues visit or call almost every day now, asking if I think it's over and if they could take my picture in front of the house, just one photo, Milena, over here, and have I met the families of the people who were killed, and do I know where they were from... What the hell am I supposed to say to that?

It doesn't bother me they're not interested in the whole truth. It bothers me they expect me to help them feel better now. They want to know how to be compassionate. They all think it's their business, so it's awkward for them now. They need an optimistic punchline to end any gruesome discussion on the matter.

What do you think, Milena, hm, what's your take on it, Milena, ha, c'mon, just a few words, Milena, a snippet, what do you say? What do I say? Every time I speak my mind, I gain a friend and a foe, both for entirely the wrong reasons. That's what I say. Go to hell, the lot of you.

That said, you approached me in a different way, you know? You said you wanted to hear me talk about it as if I was talking to myself. That's the one, I thought to myself. I can work with this kid. No rush, though, we'll take our time. I expect you to hold your end of the deal, to not interrupt me. I expect you to keep certain things just between us. Human lives are at stake. Look at me, it's really important you understand that. If you're not up for it, tell me

right now. I don't want to waste my time. Okay. Take off your jacket, your shoes, make yourself comfortable, take off your bracelet and your rings, too, I'll pour us a glass of red. You can smoke, I will, too. There is no other way to talk about sorrow. It's like a homecoming for someone you hold dear.

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To truly understand what happened, you have to know something seemingly unimportant. The soil around the village is unstable, as if it had been sliding little by little all along. Underground, there are miles of mines and not a living soul knows where they lead. The mines collapse when there's too much rain or when someone ploughs too deep, so people fall into a pit occasionally, you know, in the middle of their own garden, and feel embarrassed when the fire fighters have to pluck them out.

Coal, the classic tale of Međimurje. There was too little of it, and it was of too poor a quality to break your back over. People toil, but the land only taketh, it giveth not. They closed the mines after the 1964 tragedy, when five miners were trapped in the 5<sup>th</sup> May Pit. Nowadays, people don't know why the pit was called that, but they all remember what it devoured.

It happened at dawn, they say, the rumble spread far across the hill and hit people right in the gut. Everyone left their houses without washing their faces and walked across the field as if following an unspoken command. On the spot which they thought, god knows why, was right above where the boys had been trapped underground, some people stood petrified, some cried, some cursed or wanted to kill someone, some people put their ear to the ground, and others...started digging. I mean, digging. With shovels, buckets, tin cups, their bare hands, their eyes glazed over, half alive, like sleepwalkers, they looked possessed. It was hours before anyone dared tell them they might as well dig forever and never find the buried men, and that, if the mines hadn't already suffocated them, they probably drowned, the Mura River coming to claim its own.

It was only at dusk the following day that the last diggers went home. But, you see, they weren't the same people anymore. Five people were gone and the rest of us divided forever.

Divided into those who gave way to despair, those who shrugged it off, those who craved revenge and those who dug. There isn't a single person in Sabolščak who doesn't fall in one of those categories.

The Sabolščak folk are a tough bunch, you know, I often picture a stone covered in leather. They don't fuss over the little things. They know a hole in the ground can suddenly swallow their loved ones. And, on the other hand, they know strangers might turn up. It's as if they...it's as if we are still holding onto a glimmer of hope that those five men got out safely somewhere on the other end, in the forest, or maybe further north, and that they'll come back one night like shadows, knock on the door of their homes, wash their hands, take off their boots, find peace. From time to time, someone will say they have seen figures walking through the village again, either at night or in the early morning. Hush, quiet now.

People disappear and appear in Sabolščak just like that, you must understand that. Those who have too much life in them, might disappear, and those who have too little life in them might appear. In a way, that's what happened to me.

When I came back to Sabolščak after fifteen years, it was from somewhere far worse. A foreign place, that's what the others would say. For me, it was giving up and it was a foreign object. I carry it around with me like a piercing spike in my gut, every time I forget about it. It's been years since I laughed or bent all the way, imagine that? A through and through Sabolščak woman.

Right.

Now that we've started, it's a relief, you know? There must be a hundred reasons why I should never tell this story. And only one reason why I should: maybe I get some of it off my chest.

Once you say something along these lines, you know your life is pure ecstasy.

## 2. N / Kings overthrown

- What's he saying?

- ...

- What's he saying?

- Never mind. He's ranting.

- We're not paying you to tell us to never mind, you're here to translate.

- He says: "I don't remember his voice. I'd give anything to remember."

He means his son. There. I told you it wasn't important.

- Now, you listen. You'll translate every fucking word if I say so. Every beep, every stutter. If he burps, you'll burp in Croatian. Got that?

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- He says: "I see him in a dream, he's calling out to me. He's jumping on the bed asking me to look at him. But, the voice is of another person, I can't remember his. I am lost, I can't go anywhere." That's what he keeps saying over and over. He's also talking about a... stone bull. Two male names, Bervan and Dara, and another name, a woman's, I think. I can't make it out yet.

- Ask him if they were with him. Ask him if they are still hiding somewhere.

- No. I'm sure he's talking about his family. They're not with him. He says it's too late now and... Look, there's no point in this. He's spewing nonsense, the man is a mess. If you want to get anything out of him... Now's the time. Offer him a deal and he'll confess.

- No, hold on. Try to calm him down. Tell him we want to know everything, from the beginning, how he got here. Stall. I have to go, I'll be back in two hours tops. We're recording everything; check from time to time to see if it's all in order. Do not switch it off even if your life depended on it.

- Wait a minute, wait. He's asking, how did you bury Azad? How did you bury the man called Azad? Do you know who he's talking about?

- Ask him who Azad is.

- A friend, he says. He's going to cry again.
- They're so full of self-pity. They turn into a bunch of weeping sissies as soon as they're caught.
- Do you think he is...
- I'm not sure. Maybe. Although they say murderers feel sorry for themselves like overthrown kings. This one is not like that.



### 3. M / A break from pushing back

I don't know how much you've seen. Sabolščak is a road with four forks to the north, with about a kilometre of swampy dots separating it from the Mura River. From a bird's eye view, it must look like a skinny bitch that's drank the Mura water and dropped dead with its legs stretched towards the river. A church in the middle, a few monumental columns, the post office, two pubs. Three, if we include the little grocery store which they call the pit stop. Then there's the place at the village entrance, with a plastic table whose regular decor consists of beer bottles and the occasional taciturn old man. Moving south, there are hills across several kilometres of cultivated fields. Lovely colourful patches for the holes in the ground. It would be a perfect plain if it wasn't for the five or six forest-covered hills, evenly spread, you've seen them. That's mullock from the mines, stockpiles. Those used to be the pit entrances, my grandfather told me. You can't plant anything there anymore, it goes to waste. So much about trying to forget.

After the mines, people went back to farming, wine making, some cattle farming, opened a sawmill, even. But, half a century of coal mining turned Sabolščak into a coal mining village. A taciturn, crooked and endlessly spiteful place. Even the municipal buildings are made of coal, and oversized, so now they wait for the village to grow into them and justify their existence, and then there's... Bukov Dol.

I don't know if you knew this, it was a part of Sabolščak, where Slovenian miners and a handful of Hungarian ones used to live. At first, there weren't that many among us who were keen on going underground. Christ almighty, you can be sure I'm not goin' down there 'less I'm a goner. So, for as long as we could remember, Bukov Dol was where foreigners lived. But, those who started out as foreigners turned into someone else, you see. They either went back home or fused with the rest of us in Sabolščak. And there it is. The first Gypsies settled in the mid-seventies. The Roma. Gypsies. When I say Roma, I see the word written down. When I say Gypsy, I see a person. I mean, back then, not even the Gypsies knew they were Roma, but every time I say the former, I feel a pang. Now everyone says it's awfully offensive, as if all the fury could simmer down if we just agreed to call them Roma. You of all people should know I am the first person who really couldn't care less one way or another, I have nothing against them.

They say the family was small. A father, a mother and two children. Exiled from hell knows where for violating one of their mysterious rules, who knows. After a while, two more families turned up. Thirty years later, Dol is all Gypsies. And the place keeps growing, there's more to it than old one-storey houses along the road. The village has expanded, but steered clear of Sabolščak, they simply wouldn't. A few kilometres of road still stand between the two villages, a curve, a grove and, lest I forget, a stockpile of things unforgiven.

You see, the problem is that they were forever meant to be the ones who had settled into the void left after the mines. Only, no one told them that was the case, so they disobeyed. You can imagine how the locals, whose only motto is please, don't hold it against us, feel watching people shut doors so rudely and carelessly time and time again, continuously proving that life goes on even when you cross every imaginary boundary. They say what they want, take what they can, they're not afraid either of falling or of loud sounds, while we become more and more bitter and sicker. And we are afraid. Not just of one of our own getting stabbed or suffering injustice from someone who will not show any signs of remorse... I mean, yes, that too. But, the thing we fear the most is that they are so much like us, despite everything. If you look at them for too long, you might notice something familiar, something yours. Imagine the horror. We're not the same, mind you, don't get me wrong. But the biggest difference does not lie in what we can see; it's in what we hide.

Sabolščak folk learn early on how to adjust their blind spots when it comes to Gypsies. Children from Dol do not go to school in Sabolščak, they attend the school in Vugrinovec, that's how it's always been, even though that place is further away. And little Sabolščak kids do not mention Dol in their schoolwork, imagine that. Decades of writing essays about everything under the sun, from faraway lands and half the universe, to the smallest wave on the Mura River, but no one has ever written that the fastest way to the river is through Dol. People who are not from around here can't fathom that it's not because the children hate Gypsies. They simply don't know how to write about them without being offensive or lying. As if those were the only options. Bonkers, right?

Being taught to look the other way since childhood means your memory is stitched together with details only. The Gypsies riding their bicycles or driving their rattletrap cars. Once a week the women cycle door to door and beg. Golden hoop earrings behind a curtain of greasy black hair. Fancy black dress shoes with a buckle, crusted with mud, resting on the bike

pedal. A picnic on the grassy patch between the Parish House and the Shopping Centre. Moustaches on dark skin. Asking whether they can take the old tin plates they've seen in your yard. And the small, invisible whirlwind left in the air after you don't say hello to someone. There's no talking to the Gypsies. There's either bickering or laughing at their nonsense. That's it.

The Sabolščak folk know the people from Dol, some of them even by name. But they never mix. Except for me and a few women whose families have had their fair share of issues. Two or three of those women ended up in Dol. You can see them on their way to the rubbish dump, slapping their children, tearing them away from a toyless playtime in front of rusty car scraps. They have reached the point of no return, in our mind, they've turned into something even worse than... In our mind, in our mind. I speak such vile things.

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What are we like? Taciturn, reserved. The people from neighbouring villages find us weird. Sabolščak folk, eh, eh, Sabolščak folk, eh, eh. That's what they say. Think us strangely serious. We don't even say hello the normal way.

Goin' nowheear, knowin nowheear, says the first person. The other one replies: As soon as you go anywheear, you have a drink or two, 'n that's a zero to your head. Or if someone asks: Still runnin'? You say: I'm just a small fish inna rat race.

We've been trying to outwit one another our whole lives, and the one who cracks first, loses. No winners so far.

What else? We hide our kindness. No one could figure out who was leaving bags of food for the Bosnian refugees on the door handles every morning. It's hard to explain, it's something between not wanting to show off and trying to keep our door firmly shut.

And, perhaps most importantly, even though all of us might not get along, we stick together. That, at least, is easier to explain. It's the fear of not having anyone to dig when the ground sucks you in, no matter how hopeless the outcome. It's the strongest bond there is.

So, we're taciturn, serious, quite reserved. That's why everyone was so taken aback when the violence broke out.

I don't know which version you've heard, but here's mine. In the spring of 2014, a year ago, two nurses from Sabolščak were scheduled to give health and hygiene lectures at the new Culture Hall in Dol. The lecture was only attended by women at first, you know? The men only got involved when news broke out that the topics also included contraception and planned pregnancy. So, on the night, about a dozen men blocked the ambulance vehicle from entering the village. Allegedly, the only thing they did was tell the nurses to go back where they came from, but the vehicle sped towards the hall and hit the thirty-year old Željko Kalanjoš so hard that he flew into a ditch. Some claimed that you could clearly hear one of the nurses say:

- Those fuckin' gypsy bastards. They otta be exterminated.

They stopped in front of the hall, Katica Tkalčec pulled herself out of the passenger's seat, while the younger woman, Tanja Jambrožić, was blocked from the outside. Close to thirty people hurtled towards them. Men shouted, asking who gave them the right to talk their women into getting abortions and taking pills. Katica started to argue with them. Some say that she screamed enough was enough, the only thing the Gypsy knew how to do was drink and breed like rabbits. At one point, Romano Kalanjoš, the fifteen-year old son of the Željko who flew into the ditch, took a swing at Katica and hit her on the head. She dropped to her knees. It was later established the blow pierced her eardrum. Tanja Jambrožić crawled to the passenger's seat and got out of the car. After Romano slapped her twice and kicked her in the stomach, the village chief Milorad Bogdan jumped in and ordered them to let the women go. While the two women were walking down the main road, wiping spit out of their hair, Bogdan drove up to them a few minutes later in their vehicle and told them his people felt betrayed and that it would be best if they never came back, he couldn't guarantee their safety.

Then word got around Sabolščak that Martin Jambrožić, Tanja's husband, didn't utter a single word when he heard what had happened. And I know how those things go. He listened to the voices that had been piling up inside of him for years.

- They otta burn. I'm nivva gonna pay no taxes, I'd ratha tuck t' brass straight into a gypsy's pocket! – Marica Šukova yelled hoarsely. Last year, someone snatched a ton of potatoes from her while Martin was putting on his motorcycle riding suit.

- I'm gonna 'it a lampost or summat. Are we supposed ta play dumb all t' time? We don' wanna step on anyone's toes, that's t' thin, our real spirit – rumbled Imbro when he was drunk. They nicked a bird cannon from his vineyard. That voice nested so close to Martin's ear, he

could barely hear his friend, the police officer, who was telling him over the phone where Željko Kalanjoš' house was.

- A real bloke takes care o' 'is business. Call t' police 'n you'll 'ave plenty o' waitin – that was the voice of Martin's old man, who, truth be told, wasn't wronged in any way, but had been spewing hatred for years because people only paid attention to what he had to say when he was infuriated.

- If ya don't snap outta o' it, you'll spen' your whole life sufferin' – roared a disembodied voice which only Martin knew, a deep voice residing in the dark pit of his stomach ever since a drunkard called Tanja a fat pig and pushed her over the chair at a New Year's party. Martin tried to smooth things over, get an apology out of the man at least, then got his arse kicked in front of half the village youth.

That night around half past four, he showed up in Dol with three other men. Two of them wore motorcycle helmets, while the other two put on baseball caps and winter scarves over their mouths. Iron bars and crowbars. They left the car on the main road, crashed a house which they recognised by the sagging sofa in front, which had already been through a few dozen wet and dry spells, and straight out of the gate, they charged at the people in the house.

The aftermath of that night was the subject of many a discussion in Sabolščak, tinted with a mixture of disapproval and satisfaction. Biblijana Oršuš, a fifty-year old woman, had eight of her teeth knocked out. Milan Kalanjoš, her out-of-wedlock husband and ten years her junior, dawned ten stitches on his head and a cracked rib. Thirteen-year old Valentino Oršuš suffered a hematoma due to a kick in the testicles and broke his collarbone when he slammed against the door while trying to escape to the bathroom. His twin brother Renato fell into a coma before the ambulance arrived due to heavy trauma caused by a blow to the temple and only woke up ten days later. Sisters Milana, Darinka, Josipa and Ljubica were also in the house, but they were spared. Martin was the only one who showed his face. He took off his helmet and used it to hit people, and before they fumbled out of the house, he spit on the floor and introduced himself by stating his full name, so the police came knocking on his door at dawn, a mere hour later. They say he opened the door, neatly dressed and said: "Shall we? Did your work for ya, didn't I?. Let's go."

When they told him he got the wrong address because Romano Kalanjoš, the one who slapped Tanja, was still sleeping like a baby two houses down, he remained expressionless.

While he was being detained, he didn't want to snitch on the others, so the police went around and paid visits to his friends and cousins for a week. Nothing. Sabolščak folk are great at keeping secrets.

Everyone knew nothing would be the same after that. Fury started spilling over from one person to the next and it didn't matter anymore who was involved or not. It was everyone's business. Evil is a strange creature, I think about this a lot. When it hides, you can't prove it exists. When it reveals itself, it appears with its own gravity. Something was set in motion a long time before we ever came to be, and we keep pushing it back silently, pushing back our whole lives. We know it's the right thing to do, so we teach our children to keep pushing back after we are gone. But, it's tiresome, because peace is not our natural state. Have you ever felt a strange kind of release after a burst of violence? You have? I think I know why. It's because we can take a break from all the pushing back. We might even think that violence will clear a few things out. And then it spills over, like it did in Sabolščak.

I hoped that my coming home in disgrace would go unnoticed because of everything that was going on. And that I could slow down and stop myself from falling. But, I had no choice. No one did. If only people could understand that, maybe we would be able to forgive each other.

You must choose a side here, it's as clear as day. You can side with those who have given into despair and bitterness, or those who seek revenge, those who wave it off, or those who dig. Fuck me if I know, but it seems to me that the ones who simply wanted to live have never set foot in this place. They'll probably be the last ones to arrive.

#### 4. N / Hatamah

He says he went away... *rabii athani*, that would be... let me write it down, April 2014, I'll have to check that later. He's thirty-five years old. A bricklayer, he says, works in a museum, too. You shouldn't take that at face value. They lie so that they are granted asylum more easily. They say they are doctors, architects, physicists.

He's sitting still, finally. He was pacing up and down the room for such a long time, settling in. Asked for a glass of water, then a cigarette. He doesn't handle closed spaces very well. His name is Nuzat, that might not be true either. He's Maslavi, he says, that's... he's from Mosul. His last name tells me he's probably Kurdish, not Arab. He can barely speak. Every other sentence is about his wife and sons and then he falls apart again.

The man who helped him escape is called Hasan al-Hamdani. That might be another lie.

They were sitting in the kitchen, his wife Dilara was in the bedroom with their children. His heart stopped when he took out a plastic box from the drawer with his whole life savings; big enough to fit into a small plastic cheese box.

Hasan says: "It's good you're leaving. Anyone who can, should.

*Theki*, that's what he says about Hasan. It means a smart arse, someone who treats others condescendingly.

They know each other from before, they've worked together. And the smart arse is trying to persuade him, as if both were perfectly oblivious to the fact that there were no second chances for a thirty-five-year old man, not in Mosul, not when he is accused of being on the wrong side.

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I give him all my savings; my hand is so heavy, so heavy, brother. Someone has just taken out naan from the oven, turned the whole neighbourhood into their living room. The grainy smell of grease, flour and homecomings, it's comforting, you know. And I just sit there, coming to terms with the fact I won't taste any of it any time soon.

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I ask him why he had to leave. He's delirious. Mentions a few names. Says it was a childhood friend, they used to sharpen knives together around the village, invited him to a meeting. He's speaking incoherently. Says he doesn't know anything about any weapons, didn't see anything, it's the last thing he needs. That evening, men broke into his house and searched the place without taking off their shoes, Dilara cried holding the boys. They didn't find anything, so they took Nuzat.

He doesn't say explicitly, but I guess the Kurds tried to organise themselves when they heard about the Daesh. I don't know how much of a background you need, I'll send you a few links, here's the short version. It goes something like this. Americans overthrow Saddam, and an army of a few hundred thousand men is dissolved. They expect them to, I don't know, shrug it all off and become bakers, waiters and farmers. They shrug it off all right and set their sights on the nearest war they can find. They know where to hide, where the weapons are, they are organised. They spare no one, and, being predominantly Sunni, the rest of the world believes their behaviour is rooted in their religion. And it's not. Kurds are also Sunni, but they target them regardless and blame them for everything. Kurds have a bit of autonomy up north, an army and everything, but Mosul is not part of that. Mosul is mostly Arabic.

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Hasan tells me how great Europe is.

- Soon, you'll be far away from here and after a year or two, you'll come back for what is yours like a real gentleman, like a rich Frenchman in white trousers. The only thing you can do here is lose your job – that's what he told me. – The ones who've been working you to the bone will step all over you, brother, until there's nothing left of you. Is money really that important when your life is on the line?

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He's angry, keeps talking about that man. Arabs are such wise arses, *theki, theki*. But everyone was so condescending around that time, it was hurtful, he says, everyone talked to him as if he was a child.

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News immediately spread around the neighbourhood that they captured me and stuffed me in a car like a dog. I only managed to yell out to Dilara to take the boys to her brother's.

We drove westward and stopped near an old poultry farm. A basement and a chair were waiting for me there. The first blow knocked the air out of me, the second made me soil myself. I didn't understand what they were asking me, something about the last time a man named Saman was in town, when he was coming back and whether we were expecting a delivery soon. I didn't know what to say.

After that, my neighbours disappeared day after day, but more and more councillors showed up. They whispered benevolently it would be best if I took to the wind. Suddenly, I was no longer Maslavi, I was not Muslim, I wasn't even a bricklayer who had laid at least one brick in almost every street in east Mosul. Suddenly, I was Kurdish first and foremost. That meant I was in trouble.

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He's talking too fast, I can't translate all of it. Basically, the following day, he heard that his friend, the one who invited him to the meeting, had been killed in front of his daughters, then they killed his brother, just like that, right there in the street.

He keeps saying half of Mosul knows he's a bricklayer. He's probably exaggerating.

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I tell Hasan I don't really know who beat me. He sighs, curses the Aafari for settling in the suburbs in recent years. He says something big is about to happen. He's not looking forward to it, though it has little to do with him, but it has everything to do with me, because I am who I

am. Sadiki, ahi – that's how Hasan used to finish his sentences: my friend, brother. When an Arab calls you brother, you can be sure you're in trouble.

- Just because they took your papers doesn't mean they don't want you to leave. Do you understand? You and your... family. Mosul will never be like your towns in the north. I hold nothing against you, I've known you since we were kids...

I raised my hand, I was furious. Didn't say anything. Took the money out of the box, counted 5,800,000 dinars to a T and shoved them in front of him.

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Side note: that's around five thousand euro. I'll check that later.

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He counts the money, takes half. The other half is for me, for the border crossings. I put the rest in the box, Hasan tells me that for two million more I can get special treatment, all the way to France: I'd be the first one to eat, I'd get to pick a bed. I just have to say Hasan al-Hamdani sent me. I tell him I must leave some money for my older son's shoes. He's a good kid, he doesn't deserve to walk around with holes in his shoes.

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He's crying again. He says he doesn't deserve this. Everyone knows he's a good worker, he's built houses in Kazah and Kulan Tapah, he's listing a few other places, probably near Mosul, we can check the tape after.

He talks about *jahannam*, but there's another word he uses for hell, *hatamah*. That means... something like... that which breaks. That which breaks to pieces.

He's really upset, I have to sit close, so he doesn't smash his head against the wall.

He repeats another word, *tafakek*. It fell apart. I ask him what fell apart. He says two images in his mind fell apart. The image of the place he left. And the image of where he was going. A man is not lost, he says, when he has at least one of those images.

I ask him if he wants me to call a doctor, if he would like something to calm him down. But he pulls himself together, he's angry at the Hasan guy.

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- If you get caught, you have to say it was your idea. You don't know me.

- That's a threat, he doesn't even have to look towards the bedroom.

- I've arranged so that you don't have to go through Albania – he adds but realises I don't know what that means.

- That's where people go missing, Nuzat, they kill them and sell their organs to the rich, sick farangis.

- Just promise me one more time I'm going by land – I'm scared of drowning, big, black waves in the night. I've only seen the sea in nightmares and on TV.

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Same story, he says he doesn't deserve this, Alah, Bervan, Dara, all good kids, Dilara's a good wife.

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Hasan leaves, I stay sitting in the kitchen, I don't have the strength to call out to Dilara and the boys. I hear the same Ayad Husain song through the back window for the third time that evening. He is singing about the faraway black hills and the simple people.

My thoughts are scattered. It's always raining in France and everyone has clean shoes. The hills are the waves of the earth.

I haven't even left, and the image already begins to shatter. The green waves on the River Tigris are fading, along with the sparkly walls of the Al-Nuri Grand Mosque. Poor, swarthy people looking through the windowless panes, arguing at the market before closing time, they have piped down as well. Dilara's scent, too, all of it floats into a warm, distant oblivion.

Only Bervan's and Dara's faces are perfectly clear. Until the moment they wake up and realise my bitter and stupid betrayal and spit on the memory of me.

Images gone, scents gone, caresses and sounds all gone. I am not sharing my memories with you, these are hollow words, everything that was alive and real has been sucked out of them.

Distance be damned, for making me forget like this.

## 5. M / Hiccups of time

So, something else was at the centre of attention, but I still had to face the music when I came back to Sabolščak. Milena Muriša, maiden name Lovrek, born in 1975, married a man from Mihovljan, spent twelve years in a childless marriage, was under an investigation a year ago and sacked from her job at the bank.

Juicy stuff, country folk like it when white-collars fall flat on their face. It didn't matter it wasn't *me* who was under investigation, that it wasn't *me* who approved those loans. I was the one who collaborated with the investigators, but that didn't matter either because a story spread about how I knew about the whole scheme all along or that I was merely trying to save my arse. Instead of keeping my mouth shut and keeping my head down, I sued the bank for damages and settled for compensation. After that... I can't tell you how fast people started disappearing. The colleagues who were doing deals under the table, they were the first who stopped calling me. Others didn't want to be seen with me. People forgot that for forty years, I was either well-behaved or unimportant. And when you are either well-behaved or unimportant, you can get away with anything. Even if you have no choice.

Somewhere along the way, I also ended my marriage, which was more like an unheated casserole made of someone else's expectations and our own loathing, an anxious non-aggression pact of sorts. Don't expect anything from me, so I won't nag at you, something like that. I'll be honest: I was deeply hurt he was perfectly ready to call it quits, even though I was the one who asked for divorce. What can I say, I stopped loving him a long time ago, but it still hurt. He could've said: c'mon, t' world can go fuk itself in the arse, we'll weytha this storm togetha, 'un way or anothe, cum what may. But no, he didn't say that. Well, fuck him.

Word also got around the village that I had attacked my ex's new girlfriend in broad daylight, which was completely untrue. And that I was coming back to Sabolščak because I had been kicked out of my studio flat in Čakovec for not paying my rent, which was completely true.

And word also got around that I was a complete slut. You know the petrol station, outside of Čakovec on the road to Šenkovec, the Mobenz one? Well, I forgot you were only supposed to bring things to a close there, never start them. The last Friday at the office, I

started drinking at the petrol station and woke up on Monday in bed with some guy who couldn't wait to brag about how he scored.

But, you see, the layoff, divorce, alcohol and sex with strangers, it's all normal in our fair Međimurje. It's not scandalous and no one says anything about it too loudly if you stand upright and pretend not to care. But I couldn't do that.

That final morning, my landlord showed up with a bouncer who worked at a club. We nodded to each other: What's up? It's strange seeing a bouncer in broad daylight. They look bloodless and old. The old cow decided to evict me. Since I hadn't even unpacked properly in the six months I was there, it seemed I was ready to leave. The funniest thing was, I had the rent money, but I didn't want to pay her. I paid the first rent on time, she had to remind me to pay the second one. She treated me like an idiot and somehow... from that moment on... the thought of paying her didn't even cross my mind unless she apologised first. But that never happened, so I never paid.

She was the one who probably called my brother as well, because he turned up right when our frightful bickering at the doorstep had completely lost point and the only thing going through my mind was how badly I wanted to bash her righteous face in. I haven't hit anyone since primary school, I mean, really hit someone. She was well worth summoning my inner warrior.

My brother was taking out bags of my clothes stooping. He pretended to whistle, hissing an indistinct tune. Unspoken apologies and shame curled up inside of him. I felt anxious when I realised he was being apologetic towards me, not to the witnesses of my final demise. He had a plan, and I could tell it had something to do with our old house in Sabolščak.

By the way, what do you think of our garden? Isn't it great? When ideas run out, you just cover everything in flagstones. You don't have to mow the grass, and besides, it creates the illusion that the ground is much more solid than it is in our little village. There is always a nice shade because the garden is surrounded with concrete walls on three sides. Like the old patrician houses with three wings. Someone was incredibly optimistic when they pictured all of us living here together as one big happy family. My brother put my things back in the right wing, the elongated three-storey house where I had spent most of my childhood. Right in front of it, there was a one-storey building whose function was forgotten, so we used it as a

warehouse. And I was surprised to find out that the old-fashioned house in the left wing was, as if that would still surprise me, occupied by Japica. My grandfather Rudolf.

My brother and his wife had to take care of Japica because they stayed in Sabolščak. For years, I had hoped the situation would handle itself before anyone asked me to help, how despicable is that? However, as the local saying goes: every arse needs a loo, meaning we all have to settle our scores eventually.

My brother did not speak until we reached the town sign, then inhaled deeply and busted out the whole plan in one breath. I was to live there until they finish renovating the houses. I'd make sure Japica has enough food and that his place is more or less clean. And I'd oversee the renovations. Flooring, brick layering, water, gas, roofing, it sounded like a long-term gig. But it was the only one with me in mind, so I didn't complain. When it's all done, we'll sell the houses, put Japica in a home for the elderly, and I can go and live wherever I want with my share of the money.

That's what he said. Nip on whereva theur want.

Just don't stay in Sabolščak, I am ashamed of you – that was what I heard.

- Japica 'as 'is place, ya 'ave yours. You cook for 'im, clean up 'n that's it'. Live your life, who cares – he said, as if I could still change my mind somehow.

- 'Ow is 'e?? – I asked.

- 'E's chased away three 'andymen. 'E calls 'em a bunch o' stinkin' stealin' motherfuckas. Threw a pot at one of t' bricklayers. We're having our walls painted on Monday. Milena, I 'ave the brass, but you 'ave ta make sure errythin' runs smoothly, y'know? Japica likes ya, 'we'll listen ta ya.

I couldn't help but laugh at the last thing he said. Japica was always the man. He was always a tough guy, a miner, but treated us children kindly. He could whip up a nasty knock-knock joke at you at any time! He babysat while my parents were at work, my brother at school, and granny had already passed away from a stroke. And he was wonderful. Sure, I collected a lifetime's worth of stained, dirty posters hanging in men's toilets and stories told by his beer-smelling friends, but all that made me into...

If there is any strength in me, it's from him. I was a spiteful kid, you couldn't fuck with me. I'll show you one of my kindergarten photos, let me find it. I'm the little lad with the hair pin. My hair is short, sticks out like antennas, but it was clean, I'm wearing my brother's jeans which

were several sizes too big for me and I have an enormous scab on my elbow. A scar earned in battle between me and the asphalt. I'm looking at someone behind the camera and I'm ready to shout. Here I am, world, I'm the kid who teaches other kids to curse, in case you were wondering. Because my Japica is the man.

He rarely called me by my name because he knew it only sometimes. He used to call me Wolfie because of the pattern on my pyjamas. Which doesn't mean he didn't care about me, on the contrary. We were close until his brother, whom he hadn't spoken with half his life, died. I was already in secondary school. He took it harder than when granny died or when later, he'd lose his son, my old man. Japica was out of it and he'd only check in occasionally from wherever his mind had gone. When that happened, he'd be the good old Japica, but he'd turn into this inexplicably furious man in a blink of an eye. In the end, there were two grandpas. One of them was suspicious and remembered everything with detail.

- I trusted ya and ya fucked me over. Even sold my vineyard. Might 'ave cut my neck neck wide open while ya were at it.

The other grandpa was peace-loving and kind. And full of remorse, somehow, even though he couldn't remember anything that had happened in the last ten years.

- I only want to be on speakin' terms wi' erryone and make peace. Twenty-fi' years wiya speaking to my brother. And then 'e dies.

He had let himself go, shaved only once every two weeks, wore the same clothes for five days and stank. He had poor eyesight but refused to put on his glasses. He only put them on when he thought no one could see him. He could pretend to be reading the papers for hours in front of us without the glasses. Who knows what news he made up for himself?

- Theur can't gaffa 'im aroun' – we gave up among ourselves and shifted the blame. The two of us became strangers to each other. The love was still there, but I only loved the Japica I knew as a child. I realised that the moment I saw grandpa while we were pulling in the driveway and admitted to myself I wasn't even remotely able to cope with Japica's multiplicity.

He was sitting on the stairs and smoking. A tiny, sleepy, plucked chicken aged ninety. You can see inside through his yellowish skin, everything flowing randomly in a plastic bag. Cartilage, veins and tendons creak, skip a beat and slush as he moves. He nods in our direction and withdraws himself silently while we take the stuff out of the car.



Brother hooks up the TV, checks to see if it's okay, promises to set up the Internet in a few days. He tinkers with the bathroom boiler for another half hour, and then announces that I can take a shower and cook now. The fridge is already buzzing; my brother's wife has stocked it up with perishable goods. She couldn't wait for someone to take Japica off her back.

Before he left, I ask him who was coming over on Monday.

- Drago Štoplinof, the wall painter, ya know 'im. And Sandi, 'e works wi' Drago.

- Wheear is this Sandi guy fra?– I ask. You know, if I have to strike up a conversation, to have something to go on instead of sounding like an idiot.

- Fra Bukov Dol – my brother replies. – But, 'e is a great lad, not li' the other gypsies. 'E worked as a car mechanic and for Campi's bricklayerin' firm.

That was the first time I heard of him, sweetie. Funny feeling, I remember. Time sometimes hiccups so, for a moment, you feel what's about to happen. As if someone wants to tell you: soon, your whole world will spin off its axis.

Fuck, you're the last thing I need, I thought, half-desperate, half-excited. Excited as if he was a part of me already, desperate as if he was lying in front of me in a pool of blood.

## 6. N / A malleable place

He's been singing for the last ten minutes. It would be tough to bear even if he wasn't tone-deaf. He can't talk about his feelings, that's not the way it goes where he's from. Maybe that's why he's singing; there is no other way he can address his pain.

The songs are a real drag. Most of the time, they beg the mother not to cry or ask a father to forgive his insubordinate son. We live in dangerous times, villages are burning, young men are killed, young women join the mothers and weep.

The singer is a pigeon looking at his darling from above, her body is gorgeous, her eyes are black, she wears a ribbon in her hair. Or the singer is a candle, burning all night long next to its loved one. In the morning, the candle burns out and, with the last whiff of smoke whispers, "Goodbye. "

There is never any mention of sex. The singer is in agony because another man lay his head in his darling's lap. All night long. Pa le le and vej vej, he says that over and over. He walks down the street screaming her name. Anyone can see he's gone mad, asking his poor mother and furious father to forgive him. In the songs, God is saban, the giver. The world is bad because people punish themselves for nonsense, for love.

I offer him a cigarette and reassure him once again he's safe here. I try to interrupt him a few times and get him to talk. I finally catch a break when I ask him what he took with him when he was planning to go half way across the world.

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At first, I had two bags, a smaller and a bigger one. Two litres of water, almonds in a glass jar, razors, didn't take any shaving cream. I also packed as many shirts as I could, put the best one on the bottom so that I could have a clean shirt once I arrived at my uncle's in Calais. Two pairs of trousers, my underwear and socks stuffed on the side. Three or four tins of food on top, a dozen chocolate bars, mosquito spray.

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He also packed a cloth to clean his shoes with. He's shaking with laughter and coughing. What was he thinking? Everyone in France has clean shoes.

I ask him what else he thought about France. He says the idea of the place he was going to kept changing. Before he left, he could only see himself dropping the bags on the ground to hug his uncle, always in the evening. That's it. He didn't think highly of the place, it was cold and foreign. People often eat alone there.

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I'd never gone further than Tikrit, what did I know about Europe?

Everyone is employed, they all work in offices. I could never figure out who was building their houses if everyone worked in offices. Women also work, same as men, and dress provocatively. They do not start a family. They do not have children. Many of them take pills. They have several kinds of sadness and a pill to fight off each one. When you can't fall asleep, you take a pill, when you can't be happy, you take another pill. And they don't like foreigners, a lot of people have said that to me, and they especially don't like Muslims. They'll make a pill for that as well.

But the place where I wanted to go, in the beginning I saw it as... my bags on the ground, it's night-time, a long hug, I'm wearing a clean shirt. Somehow, the rest of a world was going to sprout out of those details, I thought.

I sneaked out of the house without a goodbye that night. Dilara would explain everything to the boys. I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was awake and could see me go. Not Dilara, not the boys... The whole house seemed to have tipped a little, like a raft after a jump, when it creaks and goes back to its original state. You were here temporarily, it warns you. Imagine the sadness. Leaving those who are dearest to you while it seems you were redundant all along.

The colourful Al-Jadida. Mostly Arabs live in my street, with the recent addition of me, the Kurd and Dilara, who is Turkmen and another Kurdish family. We have each other's back most of the time. I carry my neighbourhood in my stomach until we turn a corner in Hasan's car towards Al Karama. We drive by Al-Jakuta, the town centre with the shops. I look at the ads, that night, they seem to be speaking only to me. There is a runner in one of them, his track

disappears into a desert. Captions in Arabic and English: There is no finish line. I read this out loud, Hasan looks at me bewildered.

The place where I wanted to go has a wooden staircase now, I'm sitting on it, not bothering anyone, placing a call home. My words come to no one as a surprise, no one can hear my lies.

We turn right behind the petrol station on Karaahia. An open-air inn, concrete floor, chairs stacked in the corner. Clothes hung out to dry above the tables, socks and two kid-size football uniforms. Vodafone and UNICEF glean from the dark, I know those are good football teams. I say goodbye to Hasan, I'm alone now. I can't see anyone, and I start to panic thinking he's crossed me. My eyes soon adjust to the dark and I see two men sitting and smoking. One of them waves his hand at me: sit down, wait your turn.

Two women arrive next and remain standing a dozen metres away from me, then a man, then another woman with a child, two young men after that. Some twenty people gather in half an hour. Mostly men my age or younger. We keep our distance, if only to avoid making up stories about why we are running away. You can tell we have never travelled. If we had, we wouldn't waste our energy on trying to stand upright. And we'd be more skilled at handling our bags.

One of the men stands up from the dark, says the vans are coming, tells us we should only hold on to our water bottles and hide anything shiny, especially when we walk across to Turkey.

- It's best you get rid of your travel documents. If they don't know where you're from, they don't know where to extradite you. If you get caught, give them a fake name.

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He insists his name is Nuzat Barzani. As far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't trust him as far as I can throw him, even when he says he's Kurdish. Maybe he thinks Westerners are more understanding towards the Kurdish.

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I strike up a conversation with a young Arab man, he's studying to be a dentist. He says France and Germany hand out a thousand euro to each immigrant.

- I think that doesn't apply to bricklayers – I tell him. – And I'd make a great bricklayer. A French or an Iraqi house, how much of a difference can there be?

- A French or an Iraqi tooth, same thing – says the young man.

We sit side by side in the van. I tell him why I'm running away. He says he's sorry and angry on my behalf. He thinks about it for a while and says:

- I'm going to change how I live. You're going to change how you die.

- You're no dentist, you're a sage! – I laugh. The place where I want to go has a young dentistry student now, we take care of one another. If I have that, I can make do without the wooden staircase and a clean shirt.

I tell him I am going to my uncle's. I don't tell him my uncle is the only kin I have after the massacre, after al-Anfal. Maslavi don't know about it or they don't want to know. I just tell him my uncle found me through a French company, which looks for people around the world. He called me some five years ago and asked what had happened to the others, I also asked him what had happened to the others, which stopped the conversation in its tracks, so we talked about the children. In the end, we just kept listing names. Nuzat, Keko, Nuzat, Keko. He told me to come over, bring my family. Life is good here, Nuzat. And I waited, and waited, until the city branded me and turned its back on me. It was only then that I called him, when I had nowhere else to go. I told him I was coming, apologised and said I wouldn't get in his way for too long. He yelped and told me everyone was waiting for me eagerly, and the only thing I could think about was that we had only seen each other once before. No one waits for a stranger eagerly.

The dentist asks me why I'm not going to Kurdistan or the Kurdish refugee camp in Kavergosk on the way to Arbil. He's heard nice things about it, they have filtered water, a doctor, a dentist, a hairdresser. You'd be among your people, he says. He doesn't mean any harm, I know, but I am enraged. What do I have to do with them, I ask. You want me to have my hair cut, get fed and then sent off to war? I'm getting angrier and start making fun of the Kurdish, the way they speak and how uneducated they are. I'm embarrassed, but a lot of Kurds in Mosul say things like that. There are two types of Kurds. The ones who know everything about Kurdish history and dream of the great Kurdish state and the ones who, like me, live comparatively longer.

We change the subject and start talking about how bad Europe is. He talks a bit, I talk for a bit. Anyone who listened in on our conversation could tell we had no idea where we were going. I tell him about Ramadan, the Muslims in the West treat it more and more like Christmas, they've gone soft. He tells me he can't understand why people kiss their dogs and sleep with them in their beds. Dogs are a replacement for children. Also, people are unhappy and lead unfulfilled lives. Then I say that is why they drink, men and women alike. They do it after work, in the evening, sometimes even during the day. They don't respect their elders. He tells me their children are spoilt brats who grow up to be greedy, godless men. That's why they have no respect for others and when they grow up, they bring their weapons to faraway countries and take what isn't theirs. They teach their children to fight and we teach our children to respect their elders. And therein lies the problem.

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He's talking a lot, loudly, I'm not going to interrupt him.

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The driver and the front seat passenger occasionally turned around to see who could be talking so much about a land they had never seen. I knew everything there was to know. Someone will attack your woman in the street as soon as they see she's covered up. It drives them crazy when they see our women preserving their own dignity and ours, too. Their women are out of control. Even the women who are married dress inappropriately, almost invitingly. Who dresses like that if they have a great life and a happy family, I ask you? A never-ending back-and-forth.

Now I get it. While we were talking, the young dentist and I, an Arab and a Kurd, we were on the same side. As soon as we fell silent, all that changed.

In the evening, they dropped us off near the Turkish border and said they were going to pick us up within an hour, then disappeared with the vans. We were high up in the hills, nothing but forest, wind and the crackling cold. Through the dusk, a little stone house emerged in the distance. It had a lorry bonnet covered in oil company stickers for a door. This is where the shepherds live, that I knew. I lived in a house like that as a child. The sight made me... it

was nothing, really... it's just that, for a while, I couldn't think of the place I wanted to go to. I'd close my eyes, merely empty darkness.

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