

The Pit

Ivana Bodrožić

Hands

*Finger a fold on the silken skirt
let the fingernail rip to pain*

now (autumn, 2010)

"It hits you the hardest when you see the door has no lock on the inside," were the first words she said. Then she stared at the floor covered in gray linoleum and spent a long time picking at the cuticle around a fingernail, her red elbows planted on the school desk. On two fingers of her left hand, her pinkie and ring finger, she still wore artificial nails, so she hadn't been here long. There were moments when the expression on her face was bemused as if she'd appeared, mystified, from another time, but soon this faded to rigidity and a dull gaze. Nora had no idea how to begin the conversation, and even less how to get close to this woman who for weeks had been filling the newspapers with salacious, tragic, twisted, pedophilic stories. The last thing she'd expected to see in the prison visitors' lounge was this plump blonde with light eyes. This was a woman to whom she'd have gladly entrusted her child, if she'd had a child, for just a sec while she ran an errand. She pored over the face for ages on the photographs peddled to the tabloids by shocked relatives and people who'd until recently been her friends: wrapped in a sarong with her husband on the river island, squinting at the sun and smiling at someone behind the camera, then another picture of her, head bowed, in a jacket down over her wrists, being escorted out of the building while the little old ladies peered out their windows, elbows propped on colorful pillows, and, finally, as she stood, contrite, in the small courtroom of the county court. In that last picture, published the previous week on the front page (she may have just imagined this) she thought she saw a jeer playing in the lines around the tightly pressed lips. "A story about a monster lady is a plum you don't get every day," said the editor of the paper to convince her to take the job, but somewhere beneath his persuasive veneer as he encouraged her, she sniffed sleaze that smelled a lot like the sleaze of the system where she lived and worked. The editor was unabashedly supportive of her male colleagues, and even when they were younger than she he spoke to them with

courtesy and respect while he'd send Nora, who was better-read and more thorough, for coffee whenever anyone dropped by the office. He occasionally said he admired the slick criminals in politics, and those who paraded their reputation as war criminals strutting around in folk costumes, because they were *badass*, though he didn't share their ideological views. This made Nora sick. She'd rather be writing about other things, she ached to have a go at the people at the top, to take the system to pieces, it stank from the head down, and she'd prefer to keep away from desperate housewives who had a breakdown and then killed their husbands. She was vying with a colleague to reveal the real story behind the mayor offering a bribe to a town councilor from the opposing party who recorded their conversation and publicized the recording, but instead Nora ended up with the monster lady. Everybody already knew the facts—they'd been chewed over in several daily papers. Professor K. G., a teacher at a coed high school in the City had gotten involved with or maybe seduced D. V., a seventeen-year-old high-school student. After they'd been together a few months, the teacher talked the boy into killing her husband. Three shots to the chest and head, copious blood, the neighbors heard the screams, all true loves are so sad. At first the alibi was a break-in, then self-defense, but the lovers quickly confessed to the murder. Due to a lack of proof that he'd pulled the trigger, the boy was released from jail under the condition that he be committed for many years to treatment at a facility. K. G. had offered no comment. And now, the door has no lock on the inside. And that turns out to be the logical sequel to the story.

"I am not recording this, I came to visit you, as you've probably figured, I'm a reporter, I'd like to hear your side of the story, that's all" she blurted clumsily in a rush, hoping she'd move the woman to speak. What a cliché.

"Are you married?" Kristina asked her in a tired voice, never looking up from her nails.

Nora hesitated, weighing whether it would be more expedient to marry herself off that very minute, but chose sincerity instead. "No, I'm not. I was with someone..." then she stopped, wondering what it was about this woman, this moment, this mood, that she nearly began to confess to a woman who'd been convicted of murder.

"What point is there, then, in telling you?"

"Gee, I don't know, how did it all begin?" She tried, knowing she wouldn't have another chance.

"How did what begin?" Kristina laughed and shook her head. Nora could see that once something like that happens in a person's life, people no longer speak the same language. One of them, or so it seemed, was locked up and sentenced, while the other was free and on her own. But the former could allow herself everything because she had nothing left to lose. The latter could still lose everything, in every sense. The interview, her freedom, her job, her health, her solitude. That's why the former laughed and the latter kept her mouth shut. And weighed each word she'd use to address the former, as well as everyone else. Somewhere, beneath the surface of the conventional, the ordinary, the trite, it was possible that prison could free you. The pressure that rose from Nora's chest to her throat every evening was freed, strangely, through Kristina's harsh, loud laughter, yet freed nevertheless.

"I wanted him dead, oh yes. Definitely... Ever since we moved back here. I had it down to a science, in the evening when he came home and I heard the key in the lock. Whether he was drunk or not. He'd turn the key differently. And when it turned, hop to it, girl, god help us. Leap out of bed, it's even worse if you pretend to be sleeping. I jumped up to the roof without him so much as lifting a finger. Never once in fifteen years, ha! So dance me a jig! Sing me the anthem, swear, swear to me up and down that you've no idea where your dad is. Till he dropped off to sleep in my lap before dawn, slobbering, drenched, a mess. You're all I have, he'd sob. Motherfucker." Here Kristina stopped. Here where she'd only just begun, but for Nora the images were shimmying before her eyes and she couldn't gauge how to build on this with any sort of reasonable question. She didn't dare take up paper and pencil, all of it had to be committed to memory.

"So, your husband abused you?" and after she'd said this she knew it was stupid, wrong, way off base, and extremely insulting, even to a woman who'd just been convicted of murder. But she knew she mustn't tell the story the same way all the right-wing tabloids and minority papers had been telling it, as most of the local papers except the official press had done. Their fangs were bared, the blood dripping down their chin, especially at

the news that Kristina was a Croatian-language teacher for students who were ethnic Serbs, a Croatian woman who was married to a man who was a Croat, a veteran, a camp internee, a war invalid. Her teenage lover was Dejan, born in 1993 in the City while it was occupied by Serbs. Dejan's grandfather was one of the leaders of the Serb territorial defense, the Chetniks, who all scuttled off like cockroaches after the region they'd occupied was reintegrated peacefully into Croatia some three years post-war. But Kristina was speaking now of a time long before Dejan, when he was still six or seven, when she and her husband had only just moved back to the City, so what did the jig and Kristina's lost father have to do with any of this... In response to her question about abuse, Kristina shot Nora a sharp glare that could be easily translated: "Stupid woman, so what if I have all the time in the world? Don't waste it."

They stopped speaking. Nora sweated, she could tell her forehead shone and felt the hairs sticking to her neck, she felt, like so many times before, that she didn't have what it took to do this properly so instead she shut her eyes, wondering how much longer things would go on like this. She longed to do the story right; she couldn't bear the sight of herself as one more in the procession of those smearing shit all over this woman, writing a text and going right on living as if nothing had happened. She often felt that way, actually, when faced with almost any story involving people. She didn't have the stomach to push things far enough, hold her nose and dig down into half-rotten human flesh. She'd so much rather have knelt down and covered the flesh with something. Maybe it was obvious from an airplane that she didn't have the backbone for the stories she aspired to. She'd pull back just when she should have been plunging in and slogging on through, when the defense of ideas took precedence over people; this was all that mattered for sensationalism. When she reached that point she'd usually shut her eyes, even when they were still open, and take herself off to the banks of the Drava River of her childhood. She, her father, her mother. The smell of their gray terrier's wet hair and the roasting corn, all the shades of green of the river in August. Arching over the river, the bridge that spanned the two banks, at which everything stopped. Cut.

Kristina with her gnawed hangnails caked in droplets of blood. Time was up and on the other side it was condensing to a point when Nora would have to rise and walk out of the Požega women's correctional facility. The policewoman had already gotten up

from her chair and was pacing nervously back and forth around the room, glancing at her watch. Nora realized that Kristina would say nothing more, that she'd lost all interest in re-telling *her* story.

"That's fine, thanks for your time," Nora managed to say. "Take care," she added.

Kristina only looked at her, and then went back, absently, to her nails. She tried to re-attach one of the ones that had come loose, licking it and pressing down hard. This was the last image Nora took away with her from the prison visitors' lounge. She hoped, naïvely, that this one visit would suffice for her to write something coherent, that she'd extract several sturdy, logically grounded facts which would then allow her to get something down on paper and to polish the story for style. She'd hoped she wouldn't have to go into the City or, if she did, that she wouldn't have to stay there long, to talk to witnesses and well-meaning acquaintances. They'd already said everything there was to say, anyway, they'd been waiting in line all the last weeks of the investigation to say something. People like that always know everything. Of course from what she'd gleaned in the two hours spent over torn fingernails there was a story here, a story about silence and pain, but it didn't interest anyone, least of all her editor. However even without this, there was something that drew Nora to the whole thing more than she'd expected. The incoherent sentences she jotted down in her notebook as soon as she left. The images sashayed around her head: Kristina leaping from bed in her nightgown, the tune of the anthem melting into a jig, the nighttime howls, the drunken squeal of the key in the lock. Kristina's laughing, round face, her eyes closed, the tall, gangly boy above Kristina's pale fleshy body. She shut her eyes tight, shook her head and decided to see when there was a bus from Požega to the City this afternoon.

Forget This City

And forget this city

forget this city

forget this city, take off and fly

She spent a summer, years before, in this City and made friends with a girl who'd lived there. They met at the pool, they were both eleven. She remembered how, one evening, after a whole day they'd spent together, their shoulders sunburned and eyes swollen from the chlorine, they'd traded addresses, hugged for a long time in their wet swimsuits, then for a few months they'd written each other regularly. That same last day, part of what brought them together, a boy had gone missing from the City pool. They remembered him, too, or at least they talked each other into believing he'd been swimming with friends right near them, and when the pool began to empty out as kids left to go home, Dražen was nowhere to be found. His towel, wristwatch, and gnawed peach pits were still there by the railing, the life guards quickly emptied the Olympic-size pool, thinking he'd drowned, but they didn't find a body. It was only weeks later, entirely by chance, in the river swollen with autumn rains, when a rock slid out from the noose someone had tied around his neck, that the corpse, all bloated, had risen to the surface. The Danube disgorged him.

That summer, children began disappearing from the City as never before. A story made the rounds about a white van parked out in front of the school, a beautiful woman who got out of the van and offered candy, about people walking through the streets at night dressed in black, looking for children, about the hearts and kidneys they cut from them. The two of them wrote to each other about all these things, sometimes sending along little articles they'd clipped, triangular napkins that weren't so easy to purchase anywhere, snapshots. They crafted their own detective story and believed they were the only ones who could solve the mystery. The last letter Nora wrote her friend was when the war had already begun—about shoes with heels that looked a lot like boots, the heel maybe an inch high, she'd bought them at the Novska open market for 500 Croatian dinars—and it was returned to her undelivered. She never heard from her friend again, or from many of the others she'd known back then, some of them close friends. As the bus pulled into the station she now remembered that her friend's father had worked at what was, at the time, the only hotel in town, Hotel Danube. She hoped it was still open. By then it was eight p.m. and she knew she wouldn't be able to find anyone for a conversation tonight except a random passerby, if there even were any of those. She needed a little peace of mind and quiet so she could put together a plan for the next day

and, if nothing else, find the relatives and acquaintances who still had doubts, from a list she'd been given by colleagues from the other newspapers.

There was almost no one at the bus station, this was, probably, the last bus to pull in this evening, with Nora and three other passengers who weren't being met by anyone. She eyed the two peeling station benches. A drunk was nodding off on one, cracking open an eye every so often, while by Platform #1 a man stood suddenly up from the other bench and started striding toward her. He seemed ordinary enough, in jeans and a leather jacket, a dark expression on his face, in his early forties. He had no obvious reason to be heading straight for her. When he was only two steps away she veered to sidestep around him with her small suitcase in one hand and a backpack on her back, but he stood in front of her and gave no ground, set on getting her attention. Their eyes met for a second. He was taller and heavier than she, his hands in his pockets, blocking her view of the City which she was trying to retrieve in her childhood memory to get her bearings.

"Taxi," was all he said, his voice clean and dark.

"Ah," sighed Nora, shaking her head, "I'm not going far, thanks."

He merely nodded and continued over to his car; he'd probably been waiting for the last passengers to disembark. Nora watched him go, unlock an old white Opel Corso that had no taxi sign on the roof, but, despite the rusty holes here and there, it was well-maintained. He stubbed his cigarette as he got into the car, put the key in the ignition, and shifted into reverse; only then did it occur to Nora that she could have asked him something. Taxi drivers, if they're anything like Mel Gibson, are in the know. I've stooped low, very low, she admitted solemnly to herself and tried to guess which way it was to the hotel. Hotel Danube was no longer the only hotel in town, but it was the only one where she knew she'd find a room that her editor would sign off on. The newer Hotel Lav, several hundred feet away, where the kind of people stayed whom Nora wished she could pursue, boasted four stars and was facing bankruptcy like the rest of the country. Government ministers came here for anniversaries as did the occasional businessmen, potential investors who chose to drag themselves all the way here. It was a hard sell. Why make the trip to this inland Danube city when they could go to charming Istria? Everything had dropped into a black hole here. Money, people, hotels, children, ideas, and projects. For months there'd been predictions of a turning point and a rosy future for

the City having to do with billions that were supposed to materialize from a mysterious Chinese investor who'd invest in building a new port and a canal to run between the Danube and Sava rivers. They spun tales about a tariff-free zone that would revitalize the defunct economy. For several decades now at the port zone—serving both of the countries to which the City belonged—mournful, rusty tugboats were moored by towering cranes that mostly went unused, although Luka Co. was one of the few local businesses that was not losing money. Every twenty to thirty years a bona fide head of state would show up at the port, wave from the deck of the good ship *Golubica*, drop off a relay-race baton, declare the end to a war, or offer a formal apology for one of the regular bloody sprees in this gentle place. Hotel Danube looked shabby on that autumn evening but the price was right. Nora preferred not to dwell on its past, what exactly happened there during the war or who'd stayed there, all she cared about was having a place to sleep so that the next day, as early as possible, she could arrange for interviews. She had to focus, aside from everything that interested her, on this love story with its tragic ending.

Leaden Years

*With my back I scratch
the chair back
with moist fingers
leaden pages, leaden years*

then (spring, 2010)

"Run, run, children, Satan's coming!" called Granny Anđa, shooing the children off the road and into the yard. Never before had she seen a dark-skinned man though there'd been people from back home in Herzegovina who spoke, when they visited from Germany, of all sorts of men, and women, too, who walked freely about the streets, black-skinned, yellow-skinned, tattooed, by themselves and even couples, black and white together. Josip crouched by the iron gate, hiding behind his grandmother's skirts, and when Satan—in a hat and a long leather coat—walked by their house, Josip scurried out and flung a stone at him, striking him in the ankle. The granny shouted, "Devil take ye, Josip, get back here!" and the dust-smearred children who had run up from the depths of the yard shouted: "Yaaaaa!"

Satan turned only once, already accustomed to all sorts of slights during his brief stay in the Vojvodina village and he looked with sadness into the eyes of the little boy who'd thrown the stone at him. The child stared back at him unblinking, defiant, and in his eyes there was nothing but a pure desire for destruction. Josip Ilinčić had arrived on a resettlement train with no timetable in Plavno, Vojvodina as a tiny bundle a decade after the end of the Second World War with his granny Anđa and his mother Iva. His father stayed on to work in Germany and as soon as Josip finished eighth grade he was sent to a seminary in Herzegovina where his uncle lived. He was the middle child of five brothers and sisters, bright and not particularly attached to anyone, cold and incisive; he showed

the potential to be a good friar. One summer, not long before he would turn eighteen and commit to the life that was chosen for him, he came to visit his mother, granny, and younger sisters. At a village church fair he caught sight of Mariška who was all black eyes and rosy cheeks. At night, after breathing near her boots and tanned neck bedecked with golden ducats, burning up with fever by an open window, his eyes stinging and his whole body aching, he made up his mind to approach her. Dreadfully scrawny, tall, never cracking a smile, when he found himself near free-flowing sensuality he floundered completely. The snub was not the worst thing that ever happened to him, her derisive laughter and the jeers of the older boys and girls around her he never forgot. After him they shouted *Reverend* and *Hail Mary*, while he, with measured step, walked away from the lewd jibes that tore at his ears. When night fell, he waited for the darkest moment before dawn and went to Mariška's house. From the street below he tossed a flaming rock wrapped in gasoline-soaked gauze. When the first hungry flames licked the wooden rafters, home he walked with the same measured step. He did not return to the seminary; with the help of one of his uncle's friends he enrolled in the law school in Osijek.

The outbreak of war found him there. He was on the verge of starting a new movement for Croatia, fervid with excitement at the very thought of all the weapons rattling around him. His heart quivered at the sounds of the detonations in the distance, the external state of imminent chaos had finally linked to his inner life, which hardly anybody understood. He sniffed out the right people for the change that was on its way. Up onto the stage he climbed, spat all over the microphone, pumped his fist in the air. Every time when someone said *sir* in a god-fearing voice, he knew for a certainty that this referred to him. The best thing that happened to him and his boys was the auspicious twist that the country where they lived and which—as they told everyone—they were building anew was now under attack. The best thing to happen to them was that he and his boys had to rally to the country's defense. This was their only edge of superiority over the crimes committed by the other side, and it defined them for a long time as national heroes. When the collective madness began, the puzzle for the shrewder among them was a simple one to solve. What they needed was a climate of fear, countless media articles about attacks, the Chetniks, the enemies in our midst, and if the enemy failed to measure up they would manufacture the discord themselves. The occasional critical voices could

be silenced easily enough by blackmail and threats; the exceptions to this were rare. Special police officer Kirin, who was sent to negotiate, began speaking out about the deliberate acts to incite strife, about attacks against Serb civilians, about Croatian guns trained on Croatian villages. The more Ilinčić and his boys strove to persuade Kirin that his behavior was not in *our* interest, the more intransigent Kirin became, until he was burned one day to death in a "car accident" in his car, blazing as it plunged off a bridge. The driver of the car that had forced him off the road was never found; the police were busy just then pursuing *real* criminals. Now Ilinčić and his boys found they had more room to maneuver, Kirin's death left his widow and a twelve-year-old daughter who were given well-meaning warnings to accept the condolences, a flag and a medal, and then, at least for a time, leave Osijek. Everything else went smoothly, according to plan. By then enough people had been killed that Josip and his boys came across as protectors of the people. The fact that the battles, bloodshed, and the sacrifice of an entire city had been concocted underground with enemy representatives didn't have to be trumpeted all over the news, all those common, dimwitted folk would never have understood how wars are really won anyway. Each warring party was led by a player of equal prowess. One of the parties had Ilinčić. The sun rose and set in Eastern Slavonia at Ilinčić's behest, and by his side Ilinčić kept the kid Schweppes, a bodyguard at the time, only nineteen, a murderer and criminal who'd come of age in the gambling establishments of the capital city. He was quick, able, and invisible. Behind him trailed a whole string of unsolved crimes, including one elegant car accident when, fancying himself the tough guy in a Hollywood movie, running on white-powder confidence, he forced the target and his car into a ravine. He shadowed Ilinčić's every step. While the other party had Stanko Velimirović.

In November 1991 the esteemed Dr. Velimirović pushed aside everything else in his career as he stood before the cameras of the international television crews, determined to bringing down the *last bastion of the Ustashas*, the municipal general hospital full of civilians and the wounded. Under his watchful eye, drunken paramilitaries did what they did as if sober: they murdered the wounded, dumped the bodies in pits, and raped all the women left in the City. Velimirović had Marko shadow his every step. Marko was an eighteen-year-old reservist, the sharpest sniper of his generation, loyal, silent, and smart. He was recruited straight from the regular Yugoslav People's Army, a boy with no father

who was living with his ailing mother. Velimirović, who trusted Marko implicitly, ordered him, during the night the City fell to the Serbs, to organize security for one of the mass graves. The next night Marko showed up before dawn in Velimirović's bedroom. He made the man's wife kneel on the floor, bound her hands, taped her face; Velimirović woke only when he felt a pistol muzzle between his teeth. Then he felt a blow to the temple; he couldn't see in the dark, all he could hear was a hoarse whisper. Marko's.

"Don't you ever again come looking for me. I'm dead for you. If you try, I have all the evidence, you know, the locations, the photographs, everything you did, in a safe place. And as you know, these times will, one day, be behind us. I've protected myself and if anything happens to me or my mother you're finished." Then he jammed the pistol muzzle to the roof of Velimirović's mouth and without a sound he left as he'd come. Velimirović didn't fear violence, what he feared was a sharp mind, and he had no doubts about Marko's. After that night he pretended the two didn't know each other, although both of them continued living in the same city and ran into each other sometimes. Velimirović stepped into the role of leader of the Serb side during peaceful reintegration as Croats began moving back to the City. He was complicit enough in war crimes that his electorate believed he wouldn't be able to turn his back altogether on their interests. He was also eloquent enough to stand in front of television cameras and before the municipal government. Since the end of the war there'd been no moment as lucrative as this: the commotion over the imposition of municipal signs in the Cyrillic alphabet and the enraged response of others defiantly smashing the signs. The story behind the signs was simple. The law requiring that signs be installed on all municipal buildings in both the alphabet used by Croats and the alphabet used by Serbs had been passed some ten years after the Croats moved back, at a moment when the Croatian rightwing party was running the government. At its head was an obsequious bureaucrat while almighty Josip Ilinčić hovered, powerful, in the shadows. When the government began to wobble after corruption scandals, the vanishing of renovation funds, the hiring of family and friends, it became clear that the rightwing was about to lose the next election to more liberal Croatian parties. This is when they devised their cunning plan: they'd cook up a coalition of the Croatian rightwingers and the Serb minority party whose ranks still included former members of wartime paramilitary groups. The Serbs demanded concessions and

the rightwing was in no position to refuse. One was that if the number of Serbs living in the city ever topped thirty-three percent of the population, Cyrillic signs would be put up on the municipal buildings. This gave voters the impression that an important battle had been won, while the right wing had no intention of ever implementing it.

Of course neither of the brilliant coalition partners anticipated that a day would come when the law would have to be applied. And when it did, and when demonstrations erupted, again, Velimirović and Ilinčić found ways to profit. The entire city was seething and the Mayor wasn't handling this well, distracted as he was by buying support for his imminent mandate.

This was a gift from heaven that had fallen into their laps. The national government was looking for a way to distract attention from a third year of recession so they spiced things up with the time-tested formula of inciting inter-ethnic unrest. Every morning when he opened his newspapers and news portals, Velimirović rubbed his hands with glee at the multitude of possible political manipulations opening up. When he and Ilinčić met during those days in the hallways of the City Council building, their nods to each were like silent high-fives. After so many people had been killed in and around the City it wouldn't be easy to stoke the situation to the white heat of conflict, hmmm, or would it? The most recent flashpoint Velimirović knew of was the kerfuffle over the Croatian-language teacher who'd supposedly threatened school children on Facebook. This reminded him to call his media expert, a promising young editor at *Izbor*, the local minority newspaper, funded by the state budget but run directly from Velimirović's desk.

"Hello, Nikola, how goes it?"

"Brilliant, boss, I'm working on the new issue, we'll be in layout tomorrow. And you?"

"Fine, Nikola, fine! Thanks for asking... Any news about that teacher?"

"Teacher? Oh, the one with the Facebook mess? Sure, a little, but to tell you the truth, I think there's nothing there."

"Nikola, my boy, if you write a strong text, something will be there. Get my drift?"

"Sure. You think I ought to?"

"I do."

"Fine, I'll look into it."

"There you go, my boy, we don't want our children falling victim in the classrooms, too," chuckled Velimirović and Nikola got the drift. The last text to be laid out the next day had the title: *Street Spills Over into Classroom*.

Honey-Colored Eyes

*a knife I shove between my teeth**shape-changing like an otter**strapping a saber to my thigh*

now (autumn, 2010)

Not a single light was on, the windows were like black holes on the shabby hotel. He stared at them so long they seemed to be spreading and growing, overspilling their edges. Nora's room obviously faced the water, the sandy island in the middle of the river that couldn't be discerned in the dark. If she ever did turn on the light. The mass of water, rumbling through the riverbed at a pace that only looked slow, was not easy to see but it could be sensed. Marko stood there for a time in front of the hotel, and then, hesitating, set out for his apartment, his head turned away from the water. Back in the beginning, long, long ago, when the war was like a movie and a big adventure, one of the early mornings when the mist over the river was milky and at its thickest, he looked out over the water on his way back from sentry duty and wondered who'd logged so much lumber and how it was possible that all the logs were floating down the river like that, en masse. The scene drew him and down he went along the quay to have a closer look. The logs were moving slowly enough for him to see that they were clothed in torn T-shirts and pants, around some of them swirled cylindrical ribbons of dangling white intestines that, floating, bumped, tangled, met and pushed off, as if practicing a synchronized dance number. All of them were men, strong, big, brawny, but lifeless. Ever since then he'd never swum in the Danube, although only the previous summer he'd been one of the boys who just had to swim across it at the end of the school year. He'd felt the river was a part of him, he'd identified with it, gulped it down, let it sweep him along, he lost himself in the river's depths. While he was a boy, Uncle Jovica, whose house looked out over the same courtyard as his, took him fishing, only him from the whole neighborhood. All because he had the patience for it; he could sit for hours in silence and watch the little shifts in nature around him, it was never boring, he found the river much more engrossing

than snapping the tails off lizards. Marko's father died young, he collapsed in the garden while picking cherries. Bees swarmed his face, covered his eyes, he lay in the grass, his mouth slightly open, his head tossed back, the cloud of bees guzzled the sweet juice until the seven-year-old boy came to summon him to dinner. The autopsy showed he'd had a heart defect, a minor thickening of the cardiac muscle that had waited until that summer afternoon to re-shape their lives. Marko's mother was warned at the time that the defect was congenital and she should take the boy to see a doctor. His short life split into before the bees and after the bees. A brief time of warmth and something indefinably sweet, and then his first clear memory of a visit to Belgrade not long after his father's death. His worried mother took him to the Military Medical Academy for an ultrasound of his heart, the place was all vast and cold, and the doctor's diagnosis confirmed the local doctor's suspicions. Still, the big tin soldier, who looked nothing like a doctor to Marko, pinched him on the chin with icy fingers while announcing that there was good news after all: the boy would live. His little organism oddly fused in a cardiac counter-offensive which in the years to come he'd rely on as a kind of life principle, but, just like in the fairy tales, the soldier-doctor must have cast a curse on him when, wagging the boy's jaw between thumb and forefinger, he said: "You'll be back when the time comes for you to serve, one of these days, as a soldier. We'll meet again! Take care, boy!" When the time came, in 1990, for his service, coinciding as it did with the start of the war, Marko did his damndest to evade the army because of his heart defect, but nothing worked that year. Not the certificate issued by the university showing he was enrolled in the study of Slavic languages and literature, nor his mother's terrified pleas to chop off just one finger, which he couldn't agree to because of playing the guitar. At the time he'd rather die than agree to a life without music. He came home only twice from his year serving in the navy in the town of Tivat on the Montenegrin coast, and his mother visited him once. Over four months, the longest he went without seeing her, she seemed to have aged at least fifteen years; on one of the rare photographs there was a brisk wind blowing at her back while she stood on the waterfront, and she looked as if, weighing barely more than a hundred pounds, she was about to be swept up by the wind. Marko had his arm around her and he looked as if he was holding her down, he was young, with too serious a gaze full of a prescient sense of something imminent and horrible. He returned from the navy in the

summer of 1991 and tried, again, to enroll as a student. His efforts resulted in little more than a trip to chaotic Belgrade for the entrance exam when posters with Slobodan Milošević's image had already been plastered everywhere for a some time. Marko sold his comic book collection so he could at least attend a music festival while he was there that once. When he came home he discovered his mother's sudden aging was due to bone cancer, she could no longer stand at her station at the factory. She took sick leave and never went back to work. For the next months Marko stayed with her and never got around to enrolling. Meanwhile he was recruited for a unit that was a cross between the regular army and territorial defense, something that never officially existed, nor were there documents or a commander to prove its existence; it functioned, in fact, as a link between the Yugoslav People's Army and the unruly Serb territorial defense units. The unit was made up of mercenaries and young reservists who hadn't seen what was coming fast enough, mustered by calls that played on their sense of patriotism, the duty they'd sworn to uphold, fueled by their youth, inexperience, and a pervasive sense of no way forward. They were all promised financial reward at a time when nobody had jobs, and, as soon as this is over, *once we've crushed the Ustashas in a week or two at most*, the finest medical care possible will be available to Marko's mother at the Belgrade Military Medical Academy.

The half-hearted gestures toward a truce and the negotiations which Marko attended as Velimirović's bodyguard and security, the musty cellar where he had to listen to the lewd jokes of the officers, generals, and politicians, and their perverse laughter, while he and Schweppes—a bodyguard, just his age, who worked for Ilinčić—patrolled, fully armed, by the door that was not quite closed. They exchanged glances over their gun sights, wincing at some of what they were hearing. Here for the first time, through the smoke and feeble light, the name Kirin came up. Only years later did he realize what they were talking about then and what it was that Velimirović was congratulating Ilinčić about. Then, without anyone ever knowing he'd done it, he saved Schweppes's life and the lives of a several others: he overheard plans among Serbs for an ambush of the Croats and with word of the putsch drumming in his ears he persuaded the team of Croatian negotiators to travel by a different route. Years later he received a message of thanks over the Spanish mobile-phone network to which he never replied and then he found a

package by the door to his apartment and in it, a bottle of Glenlivet. Months of hell followed, Marko began distancing himself from his fellow fighters in the unit and kept as low a profile as he could manage. His mother was finding it difficult to get out of bed; without his help she couldn't even reach the improvised toilet facilities in the corner of the basement. For days and nights she lay on a narrow folding cot, waiting for Marko to come home and lift her. The most cherished item, the best thing he ever received in return for his service in the paramilitary unit, was a package of diapers from Belgrade through someone he knew; all the local suppliers had run out. Whenever he had to leave for an assignment that would take him away for a whole day or night, he'd rinse his mother with water from a bottle over a washbasin in the basement to ease her bedsores. They were all maddened by the siege, the shooting, the lack of sleep, the stench of burning buildings, the feces, the blood, and the corpses. There was no longer any clear transition between day and night, the whole place lived to the unnatural rhythm of the shelling, bombing, dying, drinking. No one was able to leave or enter the City. The evil was bound to implode. Then Marko was ordered to organize backhoes to excavate pits for mass graves in fields just outside of town and make arrangements for trucks to bring in the people who'd do the digging. He didn't fire a single shot the night of the massacre, but the next night he broke into his boss Velimirović's bedroom and defiantly jammed his pistol up into the roof of the man's mouth. The first night after what the Serb forces called the *liberation*, which Marko and his mother were hoping to spend up in their apartment after three months crouching in the basement, he went down to carry his sleeping mother upstairs to her bed. He slipped an arm under her tiny, frail body and felt the rigid, icy resistance of her thighs. All he could hear after that was the buzzing of bees. In late 1991 he went through a long bout of depression that he didn't pull out of until '97. After that he never left the City, feeling he deserved to live there amid everything that there was and had survived inside him, that he had to stay here for the rest of his life, feeling guilty for each and every victim. From that time to the present he worked only at physical jobs and drove a taxi, reading everything he could get his hands on. Recently he'd been able to obtain almost everything over the internet. This was the only thing that did him good, for a spell, helped him feel alive and gradually pulled him up out of his deep abyss. As did music sometimes, mostly dark, dark jazz. Until this evening, when, while circling around

town, he met Nora. He nearly drowned in her eyes. He knew her so well, she was everything this part of the world was that could never be explained to anybody from somewhere else. The river water which compelled him though he couldn't bear to look at it, and the honey, and the bees, and the gardens, and all the blood that had soaked deep into the ground for miles around, knives shoved in teeth, sabers strapped to thighs. He knew everything, and he saw that she, too, sensed some of it, but what she sensed didn't come close to the unspeakable things he knew. He felt like standing out in front of the hotel till the end of his days, kneeling at her bedside just in case she opened her eyes. He stepped into the little elevator in his building, and, deep in thoughts about the warm place under his arm where he still felt the heat of her hand, he chanced to look at the mirror in the neon light. With a surge of nausea he quickly looked away.

22.

She's Tired

Relax me, release me

bring me, take me

set me down, leave me,

leave me, leave me

now (autumn, 2010)

When he shut the door behind him she knew where he was going. Without a goodbye. He'd been texting before he left, perched on the edge of the bed while the whole time under the skin of his face his jaw was tightening and releasing. She saw herself go over to him and touch his hair, tuck her knee between his legs and take away his cell phone. She saw herself from the chair where she was sitting but she did nothing, she didn't move from the spot, though she knew that only one gentle movement would be enough for the earth to start spinning in a different orbit. She didn't have the strength for it even if in her deepest self she wished she did. She had to keep her grip and do nothing, that was the easier way out, let him go so far away that he'd never come back. Once she was alone she made the bed, tied the desk, and washed the dishes. Dawn. She folded his clothes and buried her nose in his shirt sleeves. For a long time she inhaled his scent, it took her back to a street, years ago, where chestnut trees bloomed, the smell of the gray terrier's wet hair and roasting corn, all the shades of green of the river in August. In a flash she could see herself lying on a sofa in that same shirt, while outside a soft dark was settling and his hand was resting on her belly which was slowly starting to grow. It was unbearable to risk so much. She'd have to take on the entire world. Sooner or later something would happen to someone, and then the rest of her life would be reduced to remembering and waiting. Plan B was more bearable, she'd chosen Plan B herself in advance. Then all she'd have to do would be to live out the remainder in a blur, and an end would, inevitably, come. The amount of pain in life was always in proportion to the amount of earlier happiness; for happiness one needed courage, a touch of madness, and at least a small well of faith, which she had long since spent. She took a shower and dressed,

opened his laptop and went online. On YouTube she typed in "Ekaterina Velika, *Love*" pressed pause, and watched the words scroll up on the screen: *I've always slept/with your name on my lips/you've always slept/with my name on your lips/And wherever I go/your hand is in my hand/and when I want to speak/I say we*. Out of the apartment she went. Slowly, to the police station. The city was stirring, children were walking in separate groups to their separate Serbian and Croatian schools, nuns were gathering out in front of the hospital, meanwhile up on the second floor the doctors were disinfecting their instruments, on the bench at the bus station a drunk was dozing. Everything was the same as ever. At the entrance to the police station Inspector Grgić bumped into her, nearly knocking her down. When he saw it was she, he seemed to wake up.

"You, again!" he snapped. "Not now, I'm in a rush, I've had a report of a murder! Come back this afternoon." She stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

"I know," she said, looking straight at him.

"Look, I've no time for nonsense right now!" he was irritated.

"I didn't come with nonsense," she said quietly.

"Ma'am, the laptop can wait, meanwhile it seems like everybody in this city is getting killed!" he shouted.

"Ilinčić. I know."

"What? What do you know? How?" he asked.

"May we step inside for a moment so I can tell you?" she asked softly.

"Ohhh.... wait." He took his cell phone from his pocket and spun around away from her. "Go ahead to the hotel, I'll be there in ten minutes." Then he turned back:

"Right this way, but please, quick and to the point. I beg you." He was at his wit's end. Nora nodded. While they passed through the station waiting area, Melanija shot up out of one of the plastic chairs as soon as she spotted them.

"Excuse me! Excuse me!" she shouted while the two of them hurried toward the office. Grgić did not slow down, he just rolled his eyes and hissed:

"This woman is going to be the death of me..." Melanija would not relent; she kept calling after him:

"I don't think I told you everything! I've more proof! I saw..." her voice faded as Grgić shut the door behind them. He practically pushed Nora into the chair across from him. With his left hand he rubbed his eyes.

"Quick and to the point," he repeated. Nora nodded.

"I ordered Ilinčić's murder," she said, articulating each word clearly. Grgić froze. His eyebrows knit, his mouth sagged open.

"Come again?"

"I ordered Ilinčić's murder," she said with the same quiet.

For a time Grgić stared at the floor, then he sighed and looked up.

"Why?"

"Because he killed my father," she answered with a cool and complete control.

"Good god..."

Nora sank into the chair and let all the tiredness of the world wash over her.

* * *

Boy from the Water

Water falls on your honey-colored eyes

I am a boy from the water

The building of the bridge, which was celebrated with pork cracklings, brandy, and a circle dance on the muddy ground, had begun six years before; the ground was broken by the communications minister at the time who announced that this was a vital traffic artery and a crucial part of the government's plan for accelerated construction of a network of ring roads and interchanges between the state roads, highways, cities, airports, and commercial zones throughout Croatia in an effort to give the country a competitive edge. Three years later the work finished on a 1000-foot-long two-lane colossus. The builders could only access it on ladders right up to their last day on the job. The bridge had not yet been opened to traffic because there no access roads led to it. As if somebody from outer

space had plunked it down to span the river, hedged in by meadows and brambles, as precise as a blunder. Fifty million kunas had been poured into the concrete frame, and if it were to make any sense, if the roads leading to it and away from it were to be built, then they'd need five times that amount. No one had a clue whether there were plans for the future. Meanwhile, where the access road had been planned, new things began to happen, tons of construction waste were dumped there, mainly asphalt but also rubble. The vital project had turned into a scrap heap and nobody came there any more except scavengers: a few years back they'd yanked up all the drainage grids and the copper grounding wire. The people living nearby complained that their houses had been flooded three times that year because of the bridge. The back story to the bridge leading nowhere included, among others things, the *Golubica* restaurant, owned by Ilinčić's sister, since the highway exit ramp was supposed to be near there, as well as a neighborhood where Ilinčić had a vacation home, all of it part of the plan for a modern artery that would connect them to the Zagreb highway. The work was stopped because a new minister took office, the investor ran short of funds, and the bridge was abandoned, suspended somewhere there magically between the heavens and the earth.

He left the car, with the key in the ignition, on the path by the meadow. Night was falling as Marko made his way through the brambles. His feet were soaked and he tripped into holes in the soggy soil, while the bridge kept looking farther and farther away. After a half-hour trudge he finally reached gravel, stepping around large chunks of rubble. He clambered onto the bridge over which no car had ever driven, onto asphalt that shone in the moonlight, mirroring the dark, star-studded sky. Partway across the span he sat and lit a cigarette, stared into the black water beneath him, and remembered a summer's day at the pool many years before. He recalled his friend and his friend's younger brother Dražen who went missing that day. The first day of the end of the world. He suddenly saw the figure of the scrawny little boy that muggy afternoon; all that was left behind were his wristwatch on the towel and his gnawed peach pits. They searched for him until morning, pumping the pool dry, they split into groups and for days they scoured all possible locations around the city, the suburbs, the woods. He was also at his friend's house when the police came to the door a few days later, and their mother's cries rang out from the living room. Something was crushed in them then. Individually, as a generation,

universally. They looked at each other, helpless to understand life. Every warm and carefree image of their shared childhood was burned from the community and their innocence was lost forever. Not long afterwards the war began. Then an endless nothing. And then Nora, and a past that never is passed, then Ekaterina Velika, then love, one more magnificent ruse of life after his existence in the safe haven he'd built by giving up. And in the end, the black, black water, like the beginning and end of everything. Like a circle. He stubbed out the ember among the thousands of grains of sand encased in the bridge leading nowhere, he breathed deeply once more, thought about the boy, then about himself, then about her, and dropped into the water.

Translator's note:

The image of "hole" pervades this political thriller. The city of Vukovar, referred to only as the City throughout the novel, is one such hole; the pits into which massacred bodies were thrown during the city's 87-day siege are another, as are the wounds of the people of Vukovar.

Vukovar was first besieged during the autumn of 1991, then occupied by a Serbian territorial authority until 1998, during what was referred to as the peaceful reintegration, when the local Croats moved back. In the years that follow, the government has wallowed in corruption, caught in a balancing act between the local Croats and Serbs, and governed post-war by those who'd been players during the war.

An emotional symbolic flashpoint for all of Croatia, Vukovar, as Bodrožić describes it, situated as it is at Croatia's farthest periphery, was essentially abandoned to the proclivities of people who have manipulated the city's fate to their own ends. Nora and Marko take on these power struggles that have held the people and the city captive for the twenty-five years since the siege.

The novel provoked a raging controversy after it came out in 2016 because it exposes the venality, the cynicism, and the tragedy of Vukovar today, a tragedy that can no longer be ascribed to an outside enemy. For readers less familiar with the context and symbolism of Vukovar the novel is a political thriller, a powerful love story, and a glimpse into what happens in the decades following a war to communities that have been ripped apart as Vukovar was.

Every chapter title is the title of a song by the Yugoslav band Ekatarina Velika (also known as EKV). EKV is one of the last Yugoslav bands and they articulated the very finest of the art and rock music of a shattered world destroyed by the war—offering a rebellion of conscience, a defiance of mediocrity and the right to one's own opinion. Their songs are a precious poetic document for the generation that was lost in the vortex

of the war, displacement, emigration and hopelessness—and have served as a signpost and portrait for individuals who refused to acquiesce to indifference. There are occasional quotes from EKV's songs in the text but more than any specific wording, the titles furnish the novel with a generational soundtrack. We considered using titles of songs from a band like R.E.M., also widely popular with that same generation in Croatia and Serbia, to preserve the soundtrack effect for readers of English but ultimately chose instead to furnish each title with a few lines from the song in order to suggest the atmosphere for the chapter.

Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursac