

Ante Tomić

**The Miracle in Viper's Glen**

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## Chapter One

*About a dozen different ways one can cook cornmeal porridge, laundry mistakes and soup out of an ashtray. Two men almost get killed, one wants to get married, and you don't know who to feel sorry for more*

High up in the mountains is where Viper's Glen is nested. A hidden place hard to find, protected like a fortress, with only one access road through a winding gorge which suddenly gives way to a small, barely two hundred meters long karst valley at the foot of a high, almost sheer cliff. The rocky, rarely sunlit soil bears few crops: several fields of clover, several rows of potatoes and chick-peas, two beds of onion wrested with great difficulty from the wilderness of brambles, ashes and hornbeams. Orange pumpkin flowers blaze on a small patch of cleared land enclosed by a dry-stone wall.

In the shadow of the cliff at the end of the valley a hamlet is huddled; a dozen rickety stone houses overgrown with weeds, low barns with broken roof tiles and, amidst the abandoned ruins, the flamboyant, white three-storey house of Jozo Viper, the only one who has remained with his sons on the native ground of his scattered tribe. The Vipers have long left their native soil, settled in distant cities, found jobs, put their children through schools and forgotten both their ancestral land and their centuries long history of outlaws.

They were a proud, headstrong tribe of brigands and smugglers. Masked in sheep skins, with curved blade knives in their hands, they slit the throats of Turkish tax collectors, Austrian land surveyors, Yugoslav gendarmes, socialist policemen and postmen. The parish chroniclers diligently recorded many occasions when a civil servant would overestimate his authority and dare to come to Viper's Glen, only to disappear without a trace. Days later, shepherds would find him in a gully, gnawed to the bone by the beasts. The poor devil would be recognizable only by the gold-embroidered uniform he used to parade in when he was alive.

But that is all ancient history now. The Vipers left, embraced urban rules and customs, and lost the wild, rebellious nature that had made their name the terror of the region, something to be mentioned only in careful whispers and with a curse on the lips. Only Jozo has stayed, to the horror of his wife Zora who died a year ago.

While she still thought it might be of some avail, Zora begged Jozo to take her and their sons away from that rocky wasteland, mountain gloom and the deep, impenetrable darkness of winter nights, when the distant howls of the wolves reaching your twitching ears were the only sign you were not lying dead in a cold grave. She begged him to move somewhere where there was lots of sunshine, music and laughter, maybe somewhere near the sea, where they would live among other people, close to a grocery store, pub, post office, surgery and school, and have a phone line and running water.

„Just think how much easier our life would be“, she would whisper imploringly, nudging him with her foot as they lay in their bed in the dead of the night.

„To hell with you, woman!“ Jozo would reply and roll to his side, turning his back to her. „If I ever went down there, I'd have to register my car.“

„So what? Everybody does it. It's the law, for God's sake!“

„Well, I won't register mine! It's nobody's business what I have and what I drive.“

Zora would sigh sobbingly and tears would roll down her cheeks. She cried and begged almost the whole first decade of their marriage, and then she ran out of tears. One day she just fell silent and never again addressed a word to her husband till the day she died. She ladled his soup and fixed the collar of his shirt as mute as a fish; they went to their marital bed without a word and got up from it without even saying good morning to each other. They even performed their marital duties in complete silence. For more than thirty years. As if she had taken a vow of silence, Zora was mum until she found herself on her deathbed, when she gave one last, tender look at her life companion and whispered feebly:

„You are but a piece of shit.“

Then she died, leaving Jozo with four grown-up but hostile sons: Krešimir, Branimir, Zvonimir and Domagoj.

The old Viper is a hot-headed, sullen man, who has never said a kind word or showed any affection to anyone in his life. He has never kissed anybody. If someone had tried to kiss him, they would have probably found themselves killed on the spot. Even when he likes somebody, he never shows it, and the problem with his sons is their height. They are all taller than him. The short, thickset father could tolerate them when they were younger, but as soon as they turned thirteen or fourteen and became taller than him, he came to hate them and couldn't stand the sight of them. Taking after their mother's family, the four boys grew into broad-shouldered giants, and their pygmy father could only scowl at them from a worm's-eye view and think twice before deciding to smack any of them. Truth to be told, he is a little afraid of them. The pain in his bones when weather changes still reminds him of a fight with Krešimir twenty years ago.

Krešimir couldn't have been older than seventeen then. He accidentally broke the axe handle, and Jozo smacked him without thinking. The boy paid him back in the same coin. He grabbed him by the chest and pelted him with blows. He would have kept hitting him to this day, if Jozo hadn't resorted to unfair means and kned him hard in the groin. The boy doubled up and fell to his knees. All set to finish him off, Jozo kicked him twice in the ribs, but before he could kick him the third time, the boy grabbed his leg, knocked him down, straddled him and started banging his head against the ground. Half conscious, Jozo managed to wriggle one hand free, dig his fingers into Krešo's eyes, wrestle free from his grip and run away.

They chased each other up and down the rocky slopes for the rest of the afternoon, they ambushed and attacked each other with wooden poles and stones, until Jozo remained lying half-alive under a field maple, with a broken shin, nose and two ribs. At sunset, he finally dragged himself on all fours to the

house, where Zora silently waited for him with a malicious smile on her face. The bloody woman, the Satan's bride, didn't even try to hide her glee.

„Just go ahead and gloat now, but I promise you'll cry when you see the other guy“, Jozo said spitting blood.

His promise was not just an empty threat, because his eldest son didn't escape unhurt, either. He had a cracked upper arm, a cut eye and two teeth less than before, but the general opinion was that Jozo had lost the match. From that moment on his career went downhill. Despite numerous consequent hand to hand fights with Krešimir and the rest of his offspring, he never regained the championship belt.

Since his wife died, Jozo is forced to talk with his sons more often than he wants. He stays in the house most of the time and enjoys his recently found passion for cooking, experimenting with food and inventing new recipes. For cornmeal porridge, for example. The variety of ways one can prepare polenta never ceases to amaze him. He brings the salted water to boil, pours polenta in and whisks it constantly until there are no lumps. He stirs it and stirs it, and then, just before it gets thick, he adds grated cheese or fried bacon and onions, liver paste or peeled potatoes, pureed carrots or ground walnuts, cinnamon, honey, apricot jam, fruit yogurt... The old man brightens up every time he finds something new to add to their porridge; it makes his day even when his sons are not too happy about it, fearing it would give them the trots like those they had after eating their father's polenta with cocoa powder. But small mishaps like that are not enough to discourage Jozo. He could eat cornmeal porridge every day.

And they do eat it every day.

„Bloody hell, it tastes like shit? What have you put in it this time?“ one of his sons sometimes asks, pushing the mushy porridge of an incredible brownish colour around on his plate with disgust.

„Mustard.“

„You are a nutcase.“

„If you don't like it, the kitchen is all yours.“ That's what Jozo says to such comments, brusquely waving at the cooking stove.

And it is enough to stifle the rebellion at the kitchen table, because nobody else wants to cook. They all stop complaining like they all stopped complaining after the death of their beloved wife and mother, when Domagoj, the youngest among them, took upon himself to wash their clothes. Without a word of objection, they all walked around in pink underwear, until Domagoj finally realized that white and coloured clothes should be washed separately.

„Coo-coo! Coo-Coo!“

Soft coos coming through the young leaves disturbed the quiet of the sunny spring morning in the rocky glen. Until then it seemed like heaven on earth, where everyone was friendly to everyone else. A gray buzzard calmly perched on the top of the oak tree, and snakes on the rocks basked in the sun lazily. Even the wind stopped blowing and dew glittered on the silver threads of cobweb. Then a dove suddenly cried, and a strange tension spread through Viper's Glen.

„Coo-coo!“ the dove cried again, and Jozo lifted his gaze from the newspapers on the kitchen table and pricked up his ears, Krešimir stiffened in the garage where he was changing the rotten exhaust pipe, and Branimir and Domagoj, who were chopping wood in the front yard, stopped with their axes poised above their heads.

„Coo-coo! Coo-coo“, the invisible bird cried the third time, and the young men abandoned what they were doing and ran to the closet under the ground-floor stairs.

Less than a kilometre away, a white Lada Niva of the power-supply company bounced on the bumpy road through the gorge.

„Since nineteen eighty four“, said the bony man in early twenties on the passenger seat, leafing through some documents.

„You're kidding!“ The chubby driver, barely older than his passenger, was genuinely astounded. „They haven't been paying their electricity bills since nineteen eighty four?!“

„As far as we know“, answered the young man in the passenger seat. „The records for earlier years are filed away in the basement.“

„I can't believe it. They should have had their power cut off ages ago. Have you asked someone why they didn't?“

„Nobody knows about them.“

„That's not possible.“

„Nobody in the company has ever heard of Viper's Glen. Except perhaps Nediljko, the limping old man who'll retire after the New Year. He may know something. When I asked him, he gave me a frightened look, but not a word of explanation.“

„Strange.“

„He just said: 'Stay out of it if you know what's good for you.' 'But why?' I asked. 'What's going on? In situations like this power is always cut off until the bills are paid.' 'Kid, I've told you everything you need to know', he said. 'Leave Viper's Glen alone. Forget you've ever heard about it.'“

„It sounds to me he was just pulling your leg“, the driver concluded. „Have you checked if anyone still lives in that glen?“

The skinny young man was about to say that judging by the significant power consumption somebody undoubtedly still lived there, but he was spared the trouble of answering, for a proof of life in Viper's Glen popped up on the right side of the road in front of them, pointing the barrel of his semi-automatic rifle at their windscreen. Another popped up from behind a bush on the left side, with a pistol in his hand.

„What the...!“ whispered the skinny power company worker with surprise. His colleague wasted no time on being weirded out. He cursed the Maker of heaven and earth, put the car in reverse and stepped on the gas. But then a third man appeared on the road behind them, with a bazooka on his shoulder. The two fieldworkers of the power company were trapped.

„Turn off the ignition and put your hands on the wheel! Keep your hands where I can see them!“ Krešimir ordered, squinting through the scope of his rifle as he carefully approached the car.

The driver cut the engine, and the two intruders raised their hands slowly, timidly, to show they had come unarmed, with peaceful intentions. The three Vipers quickly surrounded the car.

„E-lec-tric...“ Branimir struggled to read the inscription above the yellow lightning bolt on the door.

„Electric power-supply“, Domagoj helped him.

„Get out of the car!“ Krešimir knocked the tip of his barrel against Lada's window. „Both of you. Get out!“

„We've come to check the power“, the driver dared to say, getting out of the car with his hands up.

„We have some questions about your bills“, his colleague added.

„We have no questions about your bills“, the driver corrected him. „We've just come to see if there's...“

„Who has sent you?“ Krešimir interrupted him.

„Well...“ The driver was confused. „We've come to check the power.“

„Stupid ox, didn't you hear what he asked?!“ Branimir shouted angrily, pushed his way between his brothers and pressed the barrel of his pistol into the chubby cheek of the power-supply company worker. „Answer the question, you asshole! Who has sent you?!“

„We... we've come to check the power“, the poor man repeated in a shaky voice. „No-nobody has sent us. It's our job.“

„Krešo, let me kill him“, Branimir pleaded with his older brother. „When we kill one of them, the other will spill the beans.“

Krešimir briefly considered his brother's suggestion and then shook his head.

„Take them to the house. Father will know what to do with them.“

The two power-supply company workers in blue overalls were kneeling with their hands tied on their backs under the mulberry tree in the front yard, while old Jozo strolled menacingly around them with a short machine gun in his hand, and Krešimir, Branimir and Domagoj stood aside, watching them with curiosity.

„Ratko, you say“, Jozo turned to the driver.

„No, sir, I'm Nenad. He is Ratko“, the driver answered nodding at his colleague.

„Nenad“, Jozo corrected himself. „You're doing a bad thing, Nenad. And you know it, I'm sure you know it.“

Nenad bowed his head and nodded shamefacedly, because he didn't want to offend the older, armed man.

„You're probably a good kid“, Jozo continued musingly. „I can see it on your face. You are not a bad person, but you've been led astray. You got in with a bad crowd. You collect debts for electricity. Has it ever occurred to you that the person you are robbing could be your father? Or your mother? Do your parents know what you're doing? Is that how they raised you, to charge people for electricity? Do they know their son is a thug? Do they know where you are now?“

With his chin on his chest, Nenad burst out into bitter tears, and Jozo thought that it was his words, his mentioning of Nenad's parents and their shame because of their son's moral decline, that had touched a raw nerve in the young man. He was moved. The young man's tears touched his heart. How could they not when he himself is a parent?

„Tell me“, he whispered to Nenad a little less sharply than before. „Tell me who has sent you and maybe... I can't promise, but maybe I'll let you live.“

„Nobody has sent us, sir. We've come here of our own accord“, Ratko offered.

„Father, please let me kill him“, Branimir shouted. „Let me kill one of them, and you'll see that the other will...“

Jozo stopped him with a movement of his hand, and bent close to the ear of the power-supply company worker.

„Don't lie, son. It's not nice to lie“, he advised him patiently. „I know someone has sent you, and I know who that someone is. Nediljko!“

When he uttered that name, he looked in Ratko's eyes and smiled, seeing that he had guessed right.

„Krešo, do you remember Nediljko?“ Jozo pulled himself up and asked his oldest son. „You won't remember him, you were but a little child when that vulture came here to collect the money for electricity bills. I fixed him good, don't worry, I fixed him once and for all, and it never entered his stupid head to come here again. So, how's *comrade* Nediljko?“ Jozo turned to the two power-supply company workers again. „Complaining of the pain in his knee?“

„He has a limp“, Ratko answered.

„A limp“, Jozo repeated sentimentally. „He was lucky. I just broke his leg. He got away with both ears on his stupid head.“ Jozo turned to his oldest son again. „I was just about to cut one of them off, when your mother stopped me. 'Jozo, don't, don't do it in front of the child', she said. She still talked to me then. And look what's happened! I've lived to regret my kindness“, the old man

continued discontentedly, looking at his prisoners again. „You let the man go, you spare his life expecting that the bastard would be grateful. And this is your reward! You let one slime ball walk away, and two others come. Live and learn! Oh, no, I won't make the same mistake again!“ Jozo shook his head, loaded his gun and aimed it at the two workers. „Nobody will mess around with Jozo Viper ever again.“

„Sir, don't! Mister Viper, please! We didn't mean to offend you! We are sorry, terribly sorry, we'll never do it again! Have mercy! In the name of God, don't shoot!“ the two desperate workers in blue overalls implored, but Jozo had already lifted his old machine gun and pulled his head away from the barrel because it smoked.

„Coo-coo! Coo-coo!“ the hidden dove cried again, and the old man stopped. Krešimir, Branimir and Domagoj pricked up their ears.

„Coo-coo! Coo-coo!“

„More of them are coming!“ Jozo shouted. „Krešimir, Branimir, Domagoj, take up your positions!“

The three brothers readily ran towards the road, but then a dry whistle resounded through Viper's Den, and Zvonimir, who was manning the observation post since the early morning, pulled himself up from the stone slab above the gorge and waved at his father and brothers.

„False alarm!“ he shouted. „It's only Father Stipan!“

A minute or two later, the blue VW Passat of the parish priest pulled up in the front yard. One of his unrewarding duties was to check on the souls in the godforsaken glen.

„Praised the Lord“, greeted the shepherd of souls getting out of his car.

„Praise Him“, the Vipers murmured humbly.

„How are you, good men?“

„We're getting along, one day at a time, Father Stipan“, Jozo replied.

Krešimir waved towards the priest's car and said:

„The engine sounds starved.“

„You have a good ear“, the priest agreed. „I noticed it myself the other day. It sounds like it's choking.“

„I'd say it's the fuel pump.“

„Do me a favour and take a look at it, will you?“ said the priest holding the car keys out to Krešimir. Then he asked about the two tied men kneeling under the mulberry tree. „Who are those two?“

„Bandits, Father“, the head of the house replied. „Debt collectors. Charging people for electricity. Robbing decent folk. Had you come five minutes later, you wouldn't have found them alive.“

„Jozo, you know that murder is a sin.“

„To you everything is a sin.“

„It's a sin, Jozo. A deadly sin. If they have offended you, let them go. I'm sure it won't happen again.“

„But it does, Father Stipan. This is the second time in thirty years that they want to charge me for electricity. I'm not putting up with it any longer!“

„Mister Viper, this has obviously been a misunderstanding. You have my word, we'll never come here again“, Nenad tried to intervene, but his promise fell on deaf ears.

„Jozo, listen to me“, the priest said, carefully approaching the two prisoners. „It is Christian to forgive“, he added, placed his hand on Jozo's gun and lowered the barrel to the ground. „Let these men go.“

Jozo shook his head and heaved a sigh watching his prisoners.

„Dammit, you two are lucky bastards“, he finally said discontentedly and then turned to his sons. „Take them to the cellar.“

„Jozo, don't. Let them go“, the priest repeated pleadingly.

„You can't have it both ways“, Jozo replied. „I've agreed to spare their lives. You shouldn't ask for more than that. They are my prisoners.“

Father Stipan looked at him with reproof, but Jozo was implacable.

„You're not going to let them go?“

„No.“

„All right then“, the priest said.

„Are you hungry? There is some corn porridge left over from breakfast. With cherries.“

„I'm fine, thanks “, Father Stipan replied warily, lowering himself on a chair at the kitchen table.

„You don't know what you're missing. What can I get you then? A beer, a shot of brandy, a cup of coffee?“

„A cup of coffee will be fine. And a glass of a juice, if you have any.“

„You name it, we have it, my friend. Tell me, what brings you here?“

„The memorial mass for your late wife. Next Thursday it will have been a year since she died.“

„Really!?“ Jozo was surprised. „My, how time flies! Who paid for the mass?“

„She did, before she died. She paid for ten masses in advance. 'I know my husband and sons will not remember to do it', she said and she was right. Your late wife was a pious soul.“

„I'll take your word for it, you knew her better than me“, Jozo replied.

„In times of adversity, she put her faith in Our Lord and Saviour.”

„Well, it’s easy to fall for a false prophet.

The priest stopped for a second, unsure how to understand that remark. Looking around the kitchen in which Domagoj was making coffee for him, he noticed that the wall calendar above the fridge showed the month of February, although it was April. In the picture frame hanging askew next to the calendar, a visibly younger Krešo Poskok was standing in the middle of a group of men in masked uniforms, with his arm over the shoulder of a tall, smiling youth with a Kalashnikov in his hand and the rakishly slanted cap on his head. The priest pulled a disgusted face when he saw the sink overflowing with dirty, mouldy dishes. The stove top was scarred with burnt-on grease and spills, and the wall above it was spattered with food stains.

„They don't want to do the dishes“, Jozo said when he noticed what the priest was looking at. He nodded at Branimir, who joined them at the table. „The other day this ape here was too lazy to wash a plate, so he ate out of an ashtray.“

„Ashtray?!“ father Stipan was utterly surprised.

„A big, cut-glass ashtray. There wasn't a single clean plate in the cupboard, and this smart-ass ate ladled his soup into the ashtray.“

Branimir grinned complacently at his own resourcefulness.

„See, he thinks it's funny“, his father said with discontent. „Kids like my sons are a holy terror! One spends all their life trying to teach them some manners, but they are beyond hope. All of them always leave their dirty underwear on the floor. It would hurt their dignity to make their beds, let alone wash their dirty clothes. When one washes his shirt and puts it to dry, the other steals it from the clothes line and they come to blows.“

„It's difficult without a woman in the house“, Father Stipan concluded and took a sip of the coffee Domagoj had just placed on the table in front of him.

„You are wrong“, Jozo said and patted his belly with both hands. „Look at me, I have put on six kilos.“

„On someone short like you, such weight gain is impossible to pass unnoticed.”

Jozo Viper winced and squinted at the priest with hatred. If anyone else had dared say something like that about his height, they'd get smacked without a warning. Well aware of their father's sore spot, Branimir beamed in expectation of his angry outburst, and Domagoj took a frightened step back. It took some time for Father Stipan to notice a different, colder air in the room, but when he finally did, Krešimir saved the day entering the kitchen, as if on cue.

„Like I said, it's the fuel pump“, he said, throwing the Passat's keys onto the table.

„Is it serious?“

„Not too serious. It's easy to change it“, the oldest son replied sitting at the table. „But you have to buy a new pump, and it costs two hundred Euros. How old is your car?“

„It's practically new, I bought it less than a year and a half ago.“

„Then it's still under warranty?“

„I think so.“

„In that case you'll have it changed free of charge. But don't wait for too long. The car is still roadworthy, but it won't be for much longer. So, what else is new with you?“ Krešimir asked interlocking his fingers on the table.

„Nothing much. I just came to tell you about your mother's memorial mass next Thursday.“

Krešimir bowed his head a little and nodded seriously, which is the proper thing to do when a dead person is mentioned.

„I asked your father how you were managing without her, and he said you were doing just fine“, Father Stipan continued. „I'm glad to hear that.“

„Fine my ass, Father Stipan“, Krešo retorted. „Nothing is fine.“

„Look who’s talking“, Jozo said. „What's your beef?“

„Everything“, Krešimir replied bitterly. „Nothing is the way it should be. Let me give you just an example, Father Stipan. Our pants. The elastic bands in all of them are so loose that our pants are this wide“, he spread his arms to show, and he spread them indeed. „Pardon my French, but when I want to take a piss, they drop by themselves to my ankles.“

„Oh, the pants are a problem“, Jozo smirked at his oldest son.

„It's not just the pants!“ Krešimir replied angrily. „Look at Domagoj's shirt.“

„What's wrong with my shirt?“ Domagoj asked.

„A button fell off and he replaced it with a purple one from our mother's old jacket. He could have at least tried to find a button of the same size.“

Blushingly, Domagoj covered the button with his hand. What his brother had said was true: the purple button the size of a coin stood out like a sore thumb on the blue and white chequered shirt.

„And look at Branimir. He hasn’t changed these black wool trousers since the mother's funeral.“

„They are nice trousers“, Jozo said placatingly.

„The same pair of trousers, Father“, Krešimir emphasized. „You can't wear the same pair of trousers for a whole year.“

„You have a point there, son“, Jozo agreed and turned to Branimir. „Your brother is right. For the love of God, Branko, why haven’t you changed your trousers?“

„Since Mother has been gone, nothing in this house is at it should be“, Krešimir continued with irritation. „We are crumpled, dirty and unshaved like beasts.“

„I think we've got your point. There's no need to insult us“, his father said quietly.

An uneasy silence fell over the table in the kitchen of old Jozo Viper. His oldest son had obviously said aloud something that had long been bothering them all, but were ashamed to admit.

„Khm!“ Father Stipan cleared his throat and said in a learned voice: „I'm afraid there's only one way out. One of you should get married. If just one of you brought a wife into the house, it would be easier for you all.“

The Vipers exchanged an alarmed look, dumbfounded from the shock and disbelief. Branimir barked a nervous laugh, but quickly fell silent when he saw that nobody else felt like laughing. None of them expected something unspeakable like that what the priest had said. None, it seemed, except from Krešimir, who absent-mindedly collected the crumbs on the kitchen table with his fingertips.

„To be honest, Father Stipan, I share your opinion“, he finally said.

„Krešo, my son...“ Jozo cut in imploringly.

„I didn't think I'd ever say it“, Krešimir continued ignoring his father, „but maybe it really is the time to bring a bride into this house. We can't go on like this, Father Stipan. We can't live without a woman to take care of us.“

Father Stipan just nodded with approval.

„Krešo, my son, just think about it“, his father warned him. „Think twice before you do the same mistake I did.“

Krešimir nodded pensively at his father's words, but it already seemed that he had made a difficult decision and was determined to stick to it.

„I didn't want to mention it before because I wasn't sure myself“, he said, „but for a while now I've been thinking about going down to the town and finding myself a wife.“

His father and brothers were struck dumb. Only Domagoj, the youngest and most sensitive among them, their late mother's favourite child and the one who was raised almost like a girl since the Lord hadn't blessed her with a daughter, hid his face in the dirty curtain and started to sob inconsolably.

Zvonimir sat up in bed when he heard the noise in the bathroom, followed by the footsteps in the hallway, the creaking of the door and the dry coughing of his oldest brother. He thought he was the only one who had heard him, but his twin brother Branimir was also awake in the adjacent bed.

„He's leaving“, Branko whispered.

„Yes“, Zvone agreed and suddenly felt a burden on his chest, as if someone had just sat on it.

„If he finds a wife, he may never come back.“

„He'll be back.“

„You think?“

„I'm sure“, Zvone replied, although he wasn't sure at all.

The sun was about to emerge from behind the rugged mountain peaks, casting its pinkish glow over the rocky wasteland, but the two imprisoned bill collectors just stared through the bars on the cellar window, oblivious of the beauty around them. A goldfinch broke out into a song in the grove above the house when Krešimir put his bag into the car. He closed the trunk and looked at the village in which he had spent the best part of his whole life. Thirty eight years. With the exception of his war days, he had hardly ever spent a night outside Viper's Glen. The light went on in the kitchen, and his father appeared at the window. Seeing his sullen gaze, Krešimir was about to greet him, but the moment he raised his arm, Jozo moved away from the window and pulled the curtain huffily. Krešo felt stupid with his hand raised above his head, so he smoothed the mane on the back of his head. Then he sat in their Golf, started the engine and set off with uneasy heart.

„Good luck, Krešo my brother!“ Domagoj shouted after him from his vantage point above the gorge, and Krešo waved without looking back. It was mid April, and the hillsides were purple with sage flowers.

When he got to the main road and stopped at the crossing with the remains of an inn from which a wild fig was growing, it was already broad daylight. The field in front of him looked like a patchwork quilt made of diamonds of brown plough-fields, green meadows, yellow grain, striped snippets of vineyards. A tiny tractor crawled down the dirt road between the fields. The rain puddles glittered like melted gold, and everything quivered in the early morning haze.

The aunt hugged him firmly and burst into tears, and the uncle took his jacket and brought him a pair of slippers. His statement that he was not hungry was ignored without a second thought, as usual. Before he knew it, Krešimir found himself devouring the greasy ham and eggs at the kitchen table, under the loving gazes of his aunt and uncle.

„It's not easy to get married these days“, uncle Ive said when Krešo told him why he had come. „The women are in short supply, both here and in the town. I watch the young lads today, and they are all single.“

„It isn't all doom and gloom“, aunt Rosa said encouragingly, stroking Krešo's hair. „He may still find an older model at a discount.“