

Ivana Bodrožić

100% COTTON

- An Excerpt -

Translated from Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać

1. 100% Cotton

First the itch began down there. Stifling heat waves hit that summer and she'd hardly worn anything but her skin-tight jeans, ever since, a few years back, her then boyfriend, now husband, was fascinated by the taut look of the Levis over her ass. It felt worst on the crowded train, on her way home from work around five, the windows wouldn't open, the bodies sweltered, and if she was lucky enough to nab a seat she'd settle her large leather purse on her lap and breathe a sigh of relief that she'd at least wriggle the sweaty fabric away from her crotch.

Then she noticed the discharge. Yellow.

She slipped away to the restroom every two hours for a quick rinse with cold water and respite for a minute from all those beyond the door who were forever expecting something from her.

It was high time Ema went to see her gynecologist; she'd been putting it off for too long, ever since her last pregnancy when she'd been there at least once a month, and after every visit she'd tell herself she really ought to switch doctors. This one was terse and sweaty, there was always a half-liter beer mug on the table filled with a brown liquid that she assumed was a weight-loss tea or the like. He was brusque and quick, which she minded less, but he never failed to comment on her enviable figure, not once, not even as she was maneuvering her vast belly to clamber up on to the torture device. But what mattered most was that everything had gone well and she'd put up with it and focused on the gray clusters on the ultra-sound monitor. Adorable.

"Come closer. Hmm, yes. Not so good. I'm not pleased."

What did he have to be displeased about, I'm not here to please him. This shot through her mind while she waited for the terse diagnosis from the fleshy lips topped by a mole.

"But what is it, an infection?" she asked, on her back, staring at the peeling ceiling.

"This? Maybe an infection, for now it's yeast. I am not pleased."

"Where did I pick it up?"

"Where? Anywhere."

“Oh, I see.”

Slightly disturbed by the condition he'd seen down there, he jotted down a prescription in edgy silence and added:

“And do stop wearing those tight jeans in this heat. No panties at night. Much better. Commando wherever possible.” As he said this a corner of his mouth twitched into a smirk.

“Ah. I see.” Afterwards she wondered whether she really had—seen, and whether his comments overstepped medical ethical bounds. No, probably not, but that smirk. She could have...

What at first had resembled spit-out chewed gum on the ultra-sound screen was now in its, or rather their, bedroom—there were already two—asleep at last by 9:30 in the evening. After the incident while they dressed that morning, the hysterical fit of wailing in the car during the drive to day care because it was Friday and on Friday they were allowed to bring a toy but she'd forgotten to pack the toys that morning because she'd still been correcting her students' homework; after the fierce brother-sister tussles in the park over 'no, that's mine'; after managing to limit the idiotic Japanese cartoon to an hour though not without rebellion and jabs, 'maybe you're not my real mother'; after crocodile tears over a lost Power Rangers leg; after countless more 'I want, I wants'... finally, silence.

Only the dishes, only waiting for the laundry to finish, only once more him asking:

“So what's for me for dinner?”

“Dunno.” Only that and the yeast infection treatment, and then, bed.

When she'd showered, she picked her clean panties up off the washing machine and then, remembering what Terse-and-Sweaty'd said, she hesitated briefly and dropped them into a bedroom drawer. And lay down. Just like that. From the kitchen the rattling of pots and the piling of dishes and silverware into the sink, the sound of the clatter but not the sound of rinsing water, and she thought: of course.

A few minutes later the light went off, her husband flopped onto the bed beside her, ran a hand over her and stopped on her bare hip.

“Nice! How come? A little action, eh?” he asked, gleeful.

“It means I have a yeast infection so I have to sleep without panties on,” she answered informatively.

“Oh, wow, so where did you pick that up?” he asked, only slightly disgusted.

“Anywhere,” she answered coldly.

She was even a little grateful, tonight, for the yeast infection, because for a time, well OK, for a while now, she couldn't remember how long ago it had been since the days when she'd show up unannounced at his student apartment near the university in a break between classes, hoping his roommate was out and he'd still be in his narrow bed although it was nearly noon, his face creased from the pillow. She'd slip in, find him under the covers and everything would go from there. She wouldn't take off her panties, and he'd smile, his eyes closed, and afterwards she'd make coffee in the kitchen with the two-burner hotplate. She loved pleasuring him that way, the days were long, many breaks, many coffees, many big-little conversations, many new things. She was so tired these days, and as a Croatian teacher she was right at the Croatian thirteen-minute average, one of the forty percent of women who don't climax every time.

Not even every other time. Only some times.

“Good night,” he said.

She said nothing.

The next morning he left first for work, she was teaching in the afternoon shift, and before he came out of the bathroom she'd prepared the backpacks for day care in the hall.

“Hey, if you could drop them off this morning, I have a lot to do to get ready for class.”

“But I haven't even eaten breakfast yet...”

“Pick up a roll on your way in,” she settled his new problem with tidy logic, making no mention of his bowl of ultra-crunchy flakes with sesame and toasted almonds and his half hour afterwards in the bathroom.

“Well, OK, if you really can't I will,” he said magnanimously.

Exactly twenty minutes after the brushed heads and freshly scrubbed faces left the apartment, her cell phone rang. He was frantic.

“Do you know what they did?”

“What, dearest?” He couldn’t see her smile.

“For five minutes she clung to the door frame and howled because Miss Anita wasn’t there and she refused to set foot inside the room, and in the car on the way he pooped and it oozed out everywhere and my car reeks, and there’s a stain now and his, what’s her name, the blonde, just glared at me like I’d brought him straight from bed with shitty diapers!”

“Oh, I’m soooo sorry, they are always up to something,” she said serenely.

“OK, I’m off.”

“Bye, bye, dear!”

She really ought to be feeling sorry for him, the man was on his way to work and so distraught. Poor thing. But was he the one who suffered through the two children adapting to day care? While they gasped with sobs as soon as you said, “Time to go,” and you feared they might, heaven forbid, choke on the back seat and then they clung to you like koalas in a trance until someone pulled them from your arms and you heard the howls even after you were miles away. And then, after four hours during which you didn’t know what to do with all your time and your rewarding life, they grab hold of your legs and won’t let go until the end of the day, whimpering all the while. And in the morning it starts all over again.

Oh, poor thing.

She slipped out of the pajamas she’d pulled on in the morning before they all woke and felt a little thrill when she remembered she had nothing on underneath; after she dressed in a light tunic that came down to just above the knees she still was bare-bottomed. The notebooks with the sloppy summaries of the great works of world literature were still scattered around the desk but instead of starting in to work on them, before she pulled her hair back in a ponytail, she went over to the CD tower. Tracy Chapman. The queen. “Give me one reason.” What a song, only one. She turned up the volume a little higher than usual. A notch more, and then she was dancing. By the open windows and raised blinds. The air flowed in from all sides. It flowed from below, too, where she could especially feel it in a place she rarely felt anything but what went on in the dark. And once, on an island, many years before, when she’d gone skinny-dipping. And one day when she

sunned topless on a beach. In front of everyone. There was something special about that day, and today. The time was passing more quickly, some would be glad she hadn't corrected their work yet, but the grades from reading were mainly good. In general they were good. She'd leave them for tomorrow, but before she went to work she'd dash to the store. She wouldn't be cooking today.

She scooped up the change from the counter, pulled the key from the lock and only when she'd stepped out into the hallway did she realize she still hadn't put them on. Since last night. She turned to go back in and then changed her mind, what of it, as if anyone would know or notice. Only if someone were to decide to rape her in broad daylight on the way to the store only a few steps from her building. Boy would he be surprised. Fat chance. She laughed at the thought. Lookee there, a woman going commando, beware. At the entrance to the building she ran into a neighbor, a friend of her husband's, they played basketball together, he was always smiling and congenial enough, but she hadn't forgotten the one time. The time he'd commented on her breasts. It was out of place and uncalled-for.

"Looking fine today, especially up top, a real stand out," he'd said slyly.

That was when she'd gone out for the first time five months after the baby was born, she'd put on a dress, the only one she could fit into, used make-up to hide how tired she was, and her breasts were bulging and aching from nursing and milk. What an asshole, she thought to herself, but all she said, sheepish, was:

"Thank you."

He was coming home today from his night shift, and unexpectedly she blurted:

"I have to say that was so stupid, what you said about my breasts. In fact it's pretty stupid for you to comment on them at all, understand?"

He looked at her as if she'd grown a horn and not as if she were going commando, though there was no way he could know.

"You're messing with me, what's this about?"

"That's the saddest thing of all, you're clueless," she shot back to him with a smile.

She felt even better in the air-conditioned store. Unsurpassed. Better than she had for ages. Unbe-fucking-lievable. That went through her mind.

“Half a loaf of half-white bread and five ounces of Poli salami, please”

The woman behind the deli counter reached silently for the bread and threw herself, sighing, into the rhythmic slicing of the salami. She tossed a piece of wax paper lazily onto the scales and asked:

“Eight OK?” and started wrapping the salami.

“No, I said five,” she answered politely.

It took a few seconds for this to penetrate the saleswoman’s brain, and then she stopped and looked at her as if seeing her for the first time after all these years of not returning pennies, rolled her eyes and began nervously removing slice by slice until the scales showed just over five ounces, and then she said:

“That will be fine.”

She did not expect a goodbye, nor such a rush of satisfaction.

She ambled back to the building, relishing every step, catching every stray glance, smiling absently. She felt the air flowing and the ripple of the light cotton of the tunic over her bare behind. She threw back her shoulders when she saw her reflection in the glass door. It was too warm outside, too much sun drawing attention to details, there was the smell of skin in the air those April days. Her spirits sank with each step as she ascended through the cold and dark stairwell, and it could be said that she’d hit bottom by the time she reached the apartment and took her ironed white shirt and gray knee-length skirt off the hangers. First she put on the uniform, and only later, after making up her face and brushing her hair, did she pull on panties.

And since today was one of those April days—she felt it with every step and especially where she was going, reluctantly, the epicenter being the high school—she had never said out loud that kids between the ages of fifteen and eighteen ought to be kept in isolation, they weren’t human, they were walking-talking hormones, and, furthermore, incoherent. There was reason to believe that the biometeorological forecast would have its effect. When she walked into the classroom, it was as if she hadn’t. She thought of scratching her nails across the blackboard. Then she sat and

waited. She wasn't exactly pitiful as far as authority was concerned, but there was no one muttering her name under their breath.

"So, d'you bring us back our homework?" finally a pimply fellow from the third row, voice cracking, noticed her presence.

"Is that how you ask your teacher a question in Croatian class? In high school?" answering his question with a question.

"What'd I say?" there he sat, in possession of an entire brain, from a good family, but the poor boy could not grasp her question.

She gave up and asked for quiet. To begin. When she spotted eyes rolling she felt her cheeks flush with heat, as if she were no older or more powerful than these kids, as if she didn't have it in her to shout any more, she felt as if she were shrinking like Alice after eating the mushrooms.

She walked out of the classroom and into the restroom. She looked at herself in the mirror, though she knew this was a poor idea when she was at such a low ebb of confidence. Breathe, deep breaths, nothing better occurred to her, though she'd be breathing anyway. The day had begun so splendidly and now it was all caving in. No, actually this was just like any other day, it just felt as if it were caving in, everything had begun so well, but days don't begin like that. She glimpsed her profile in the mirror, preferring it to en face, lifted her chin, and then someone slipped a hand under her skirt and pulled off her panties. A moment shrinks refer to as trance, and the rest of us as madness. The panty thief didn't know where to stow them, they couldn't be brought back to the classroom in her hand, she had no pockets, and then she noticed a little window under the ceiling (this was the sort of solution she was capable of) and quickly stuffed them into the corner on the outer sill.

Back she went into the classroom without a word. She sat at the desk, with her sudden departure she'd attracted attention and a modicum of silence. She wasn't thinking ahead. She watched the irritating and the arrogant. She'd had it. She went over to a student who'd started smirking when he figured he could get away with it, thrust her face into his, and said:

“I’ve got my eye on you.”

“What?” asked the ape in a deep voice, aghast.

“See the check here by your name? Nose to the grindstone, I mean it. Your daddy can’t save you now.”

He gawked, dumbstruck.

“Up to the blackboard with you, the reading.”

The student rose sluggishly, a head taller than she, hitched up his pants, the crotch down to his knees, a last glance at his phone, then he shuffled over to the board.

“*Madame Bovary*, your summary. And this is the third time I’ve asked you this semester; you must have learned something. If you say you haven’t read it, you fail. Understand?”

The student first smacked his lips, gazed out the window, scratched himself, grinned at someone in the last row, and then spoke:

“She was with this hopeless dude for his money, and she had these two other dudes.”

Laughter. He was smug.

“Ah. And these dudes were called?” she asked politely.

“Charlie and...”

“Charlie, you said?”

“... and Leo, yes.”

“Yes, and wasn’t there a third?”

“Uh, yeah, like at the end.”

“Do tell, what did you, like, take away from the novel?”

“Well, you know, women are never satisfied and they’re, like, always depressed.”

“Interesting. And how does it end?”

“Well, you know, they all kill themselves in the end.”

“They kill themselves? All of them?”

“Well the main ones do, don’t they?”

“Fine. Take your seat.”

“I can?” asked the mule, overjoyed.

“You can, you can. You’ll be right back here next year once you’ve done the reading.”

“So I failed?” he barked aggressively.

Without trying to iron out the situation, or to avoid damaging the fragile ego of the tender young man, or to avoid using failure as motivation, Ema thrust her face again into his, and said, “You didn’t just fail, you were nowhere to start with, and you’ve nowhere to go but down. Now you’re all the way underground and I don’t know who is going to pull you out. From today I am grading on performance; you are no longer my problem. Text your daddy.”

Silence.

Ema was not giving way. There were fifteen more minutes to the end of class and she sat back and savored the silence and the moist quivering. She sat there and gazed out the window, and when the bell sliced through the sweaty air, she smiled gently and said:

“Bye now.”

By the end of the fifth period she’d failed another three, before her was a tangle of wires in several colors, her treasured collection of mp3s. She’d let her hair down in the meanwhile and cranked up the volume.

Never even once did she check the time and she was already in the little park, her short-cut to the train station, twilight was densely pulsing and she was beginning to feel she might forget where to turn, where the short-cut ended and the path began, her path. She could no longer count on her arms and legs as they moved, but more than ever she was counting on herself. This came up once more on a stretch of the walk when she tore out six ads for loan sharks, the obits, who cares.

The train was, as usual, crowded, but before it pulled in to her stop, the last one, the crowds had thinned. The panties thief, anti-racketeer, cat woman made her way with a spring in her step to a place where she might be able to stand. The train started abruptly and then stopped and in the jolt she stepped on the foot of the man standing next to her.

“Sorry,” she said politely.

“Do it again why not,” he said, cagily.

Locate, paralyze, penetrate, flashed in the murky blue eyes.

“No, thanks,” she snapped.

He looked decent enough, but he was taking up more space than he needed, one of those. With his damp breath he insulted everything below the level of his gaze, everything that demonstrated a more nuanced movement of the hips. As the train slowly emptied, two seats opened up in front of them. They sat, one across from the other.

The limbic brain began to overheat.

“If you are truly sorry, I can think of a way you might persuade me to forgive you,” he advanced.

“Shall we go for coffee?” she asked coyly.

“Yes, yes,” his saliva glands began secreting overtime.

“Or should we cut to the chase and I show you now?” she tilted her head with charm.

A smile still hovered on his lips, but her confusing signals knit his brow.

While he was saying “show me whatever you like” her long legs slowly spread, up rose her skirt, the pale hue of her thighs was already glowing, and the black, endless universe between lurked to swallow him whole.

Ema bit her lip and dangled from its marvelous ledge a full second, eyes half-shut.

“What a fucking crazy lady!” was the last she heard as she crossed her legs, and when she opened her eyes, across from her the seat was empty. The space of freedom.

2. Crack

I watch as you clear the butter dish from the table. Every day you use the same moves, you spread thinly sliced pats on the bread, have some for breakfast, sometimes for lunch as well with vegetable stew. The butter dish is new, clear, I bought it the other day, you never commented, though for years I've been thinking it stupid that the butter was always knocking around in the refrigerator in the same old wrapper, bits of the paper tore off, and at times it disgusted me, the paper so greasy and crumpled, picturing it down my gullet.

You put on the lid, and then, to clear the table faster, with a single trip to the kitchen, you pile another dish on top of it, the one with the feta cheese floating in brine, and the brine dribbles over, especially if the lid to the box doesn't close properly. I watch you, and the liquid sloshes all over the clear butter dish, the new one, already a little stained, you swear softly, still you carry them to the kitchen, although along the way it's dripping onto the floor, you wipe, sloppily, only a few of the droplets because you're supposed to, but it's over, the butter dish is no longer new or clean. Soon, once the light inside the refrigerator goes out, the stains will cake on, dry, and pale streaks will remain, and you'll forget them, if you ever even thought about them.

On the way to the refrigerator you'll tread on the kitchen tiles. The one in the middle cracked first. At first the crack wasn't so visible because the tiles are white streaked with gray, they're cheap, they came with the apartment, we inherited them from the previous owners who also left us crusty squirrel droppings. They left us white patches on the walls, too, when they painted the living room a peach color and didn't first take down the paintings or the mirror so the ovals and rectangles were left like holes in the walls. The day they vacated the premises I felt their leaving was like a passage to other worlds, I never said anything, I kept it to myself. After the middle tile, the first to the left cracked, the middle one came loose, and then the one to the right chipped, the kids began first crawling then galloping in and out, and they dropped plates, toys, stuff. I don't know whether you noticed, but we had moments in life when the tiles were steady, they didn't shift, that's because I bought glue for metal-wood-plastic, but it didn't hold long, still there were days when I could forget about them. Then we were given a rug, your sister brought it

from Hungary and we were kinder, I was kinder. One morning when one of the children shook a pound of Cedevida juice crystals out onto it I asked you to shake it out the window, and when you came back to the living room you stood there for a minute, and then asked, where does it go?

That whole day I was silent. And now they're loose again, they click dully, I hear them even under the rug, they're broken, you can pick them out with your fingers, and underneath, I know this, you don't, there are stains from the metal-wood-plastic glue, like cat pee, dry, dark, unerasable.

You open the refrigerator, I wonder whether you see the pooling water, whether you and I see the same amount of water, I sop it up each day with a sponge, it always drips when you pull out the vegetable drawer, something is melting somewhere, where I don't know, back there, the refrigerator is big and loud, it was a wedding present, it rumbles at night, the instructions say it may make odd noises and they aren't dangerous. But the water pours in through a hole in the back. The hole is so big you can poke a finger through it, and around it is a ring of mold. To see the ring you'd need to crouch down because it's behind the lowest shelf, the ring keeps coming back faster, I sometimes clean it with a Q-tip dipped in disinfectant, I think it's a site for infection, where do these black organisms come from, elsewhere, a metaphysical point. Because how can black goo come out of nothing? All the food we've been eating for years that went bad, that we never used, the dinners from yesterday and the day before, dinners made of silence, of an ache to escape, of fear, as you put it, of being trapped inside your own life. And it's true that you've never defrosted it, or listened, you never even re-mounted the door so it would open on the other side; for years we've been stuck, squeezing by between the counter and the door, bumping into each other, bruising; you promised you would.

For a time we had a lamb's head in the freezer; your mother brought it for us to use for soup. The head disgusted me and as you didn't open the freezer for almost a year, I tossed it out. I never told you, I'm full of secrets. But you didn't notice. The head wasn't the only thing I threw away, I tossed your late grandfather's blazer too, I'm reasonably sure it had moths, besides I thought it was ugly, it took up too much space, maybe not so much space, but that was when I went berserk after the rod snapped in the wardrobe, all the clothes fell down, one of the kids, a baby at the time, began to howl, you dressed and left for work, I'm not blaming you, it wasn't

deliberate, but you shut the door and off you went. That was how things were. I was left with the howls, the runny noses, the mindless weeping, the heap of the clothes from our two bodies, and your grandfather's blazer which I'd never liked, which also fell and stank of mothballs, I left the baby in the apartment, I never told you that part, and took the jacket down to the trash bins, I left the baby, all red and tearstained, only for a moment and when I came back the baby was calm, I was calm. I threw things away whenever you left on a trip, and when you came back you never noticed any of it.

There are still breadcrumbs on the table, you come back, with a sweep you scoop up the bigger crumbs, stretch in a straddle for the sink and brush them from your hand with the gesture of a job done, the clap of your hands, finished. Under the T-shirt your muscles ripple, you're handsome, after all this time, the lactic acid in your body is nicely distributed, I know this although I don't feel you, touch you. You start to take your seat at the table. As you're sitting, you remember an unnecessary light, a small lightbulb on under the hood over the range and you turn it off. If you were to lean down to below the level of your eyes, you'd see condensed droplets of grease on the metal netting, through which the steaming, greasy air is sucked in. What about them? Nothing. In another story they might resemble amber necklace beads, no one would call them the end of the world, that who knows what they're hiding. When you remove them, there are sponges in there for the white-colored filter, but now they have brown rectangular lines across them, they also have uneven edges which I used to cut off because they weren't the right size, when I was still making an effort, when I came into the apartment sniffing to see what the air was like at our place, you know how each apartment has its own air and I wanted ours to smell like fabric softener. The therapist said this was because there was a war, I grew up in a single room, and the room was all my mother had control over because outside everything was so awful, she had to keep it clean and tidy, the only point of control in her world. Then I downloaded her behavior the way apps are downloaded and built it into my system. You were happy about this, this little, at first glance insignificant, yet firm and unwavering evidence of my obsession with keeping our living space in order. In contrast to your freedom and the peace you've made with a world that is

not under your control, a world that is collapsing, disintegrating, rotting, awry, and as such comes into me.

You are cold, your skin is tight with goose bumps, a hundred rainy days one after another, and when you open your laptop with a few breadcrumbs still under it, you get up and go to our bedroom to find a sweatshirt. There is no longer a working light in our bedroom. We had a fancy ceiling lamp, once when we had extra money we bought three designer lamps which I'd wipe clean with a soft cloth and polish, the one in the bedroom picked up the most dust because it had a hole in the middle, it's easy to forget to be regular about it, you stop noticing, and then the dust bakes on and the lamp looks as if it had always been yellow. Everything was fine until the lightbulb burned out. It was one of those long-lasting bulbs and it did last for years, but recently it began to blink, then made little sounds, buzzed, and finally died. I asked you to change it, you asked me to help, I didn't, I answered my text message. After a time you did take it down, it's not simple, I know that, it's in the shape of a hoop, there were all sorts of bits to unscrew and rescrew, your body odor intensified. Then you set it on the kitchen counter, the hole was still in the lamp, I put it in the trunk of the car after two weeks, it rode around with us for at least another two weeks, and then I reminded you to buy a new one, you did, and left it in the pantry. After another two weeks, when I said to myself: enough, I stood on the bed, my feet on your Bolaño, mounted it; it worked for all of ten days. Inexplicably it died. Since then we've been without a light. This doesn't bother you, as for myself I count the dark days, still, a little light does come through what used to be our balcony where I have my study, there is a lightbulb there, bare, we never bought a proper lamp for it. We used to have plans. You come back, more warmly dressed, to the table, pick up your laptop and go off to the bathroom. The door to the bathroom doesn't close properly. The same goes for all the doors in our apartment. The locks are broken, and the former owners for whatever reason took with them all the keys for the inside doors, so there is no locking. And we no longer go there except in extreme need. Water has been leaking under the bidet for at least a month. When I wash the children's feet in the evening, under the hose I spread a rag, then I wring it out, and by the next evening it's dry. I hate the thought of calling the plumber, he smells bad and he's cranky, he always leaves a mess behind, I already know his freckled forehead well, I have

looked down on it so many times, so many of our pipes have gone to hell. Once the cat clawed at a bag of sand you'd left on the washbasin when you were in a rush and the sand spilled down the drain and plugged it up because it sucks up moisture and then swells and hardens, that is what it's for. The next day you bought a bottle of liquid for unclogging drains and poured the whole bottle down the drain. Nothing. For days the level of the liquid was the same and when I asked you to do something about it you found a piece of plywood and laid it across the washbasin so the cat wouldn't be poisoned. It lay there for days until I called the smelly plumber. He helped that time. But when the bathtub began leaking, he brought gray caulk and it ended up all over the place. I don't know whether you noticed, but at the bottom of the toilet bowl, the smear that looks as if someone didn't flush properly or use the toilet brush is actually a glob of caulk and I hate it when our guests use that toilet. Maybe you don't see this either, but I wonder whether when you stand over the toilet the glob ever attracts your attention, probably not.

You flush the toilet, wash your hands, come back to the living room. I'm still sitting where I was, now I have a little time, it'll be an hour before the children come back and I know what you'll say, if someone doesn't call you.

You don't love me any more. Or maybe, people will laugh at you when you tell them you broke up with me over a lightbulb. Or, I know how every time when you go on a trip you meet up with him and I can only imagine what you do. I have heard it all before in one version or another. I say nothing or I defend myself clumsily, I have never been as adept with words as you. Your sister said your father read you King Lear when you were six, we didn't have many books at home. You know a lot of things I don't know. Our daddy's so smart, said our daughter, he knows all about the universe, and Greek myths, and dinosaurs, and books, but you, Mama, you know a lot too, all about kids, about cooking and cleaning. Once she asked me, who cleans all the fingernail clippings after you trim them for us? When I told her, she said, overjoyed, that I could be a real live cleaning lady. That is amusing and I'm not angry, but tell me, you ask, what does love have to do with it?

Now you're silent and staring. Do you miss me? You miss me. I'm somewhere else. True, it has been a long time since I've packed up my box with tools, my wood-plastic-metal glue, my

improvisations to stem the drips, the leaks, the cracks, the rust, and moved on. And I have nothing real, nothing genuine, I have no one by my side in my everyday life who helps me mend things. Oddly our potential is sometimes more valuable than what's real. What could be is truer than what is. What you feel is what exists. The cracks, for instance, they're everywhere, one person sees them, another doesn't. My silence currently has no cracks in it, it's as compact and round as an egg, as being, as the essence of me.

But, from the inside, what's a crack but how the light gets in.

3. No Room

It was built back in the nineteenth century. So obviously there's no parking, who could have foreseen the need then? People went by carriage, or walked, I guess. Who had a carriage anyway? Were there horse-drawn trams? Maybe, but this is out in the sticks. Well, not anymore, but then, in the nineteenth century. It was just all lepers, the gravely ill, in any case, the outskirts.

“Hopeless, hop out here and I'll circle till I find a spot and then I'll come and find you.”

“OK.”

There's the side entrance, you go through the kitchen. At seven in the morning two cooks are standing on the steps out front, rain drizzling from the sagging green eaves, they laugh, bitterly. I catch:

“Fuck'em,” says one.

“Look, did I find my ass out on the street?”

What could they be talking about. Husbands. I'd put my hand in the fire.

The sauerkraut stinks. Kraut with noodles or stuffed cabbage, in any case, it's Thursday, cabbage day. And Thursday, that Thursday, there was cabbage, though the nurses from the ward said “no.” It bloats. But served it anyway. Good thing there were chocolate cookies, you need sweets at such moments. Good.

But no nausea today. Gone. A mystery. Maybe the rest is gone, too.

When they look, they'll say, what's wrong, there's nothing here, who told you? There's nothing to see. Yes, nothing.

The waiting room is crowded. There are all sorts of women here, old, young, and a few men too. Different problems. How long does it take, the first waiting. That's for sure. The one by the wall is really good-looking, you know, fashionable, tight jeans, not in a dress like this, though you probably have to take everything off anyway, they didn't say. They never do.

“Wait. Your blood group.”

“O positive.”

“I need it on paper.”

“I haven’t got it on paper.”

“Are you from Mars?”

“No,” that much is obvious but I’m supposed to give the staffer an answer.

“God help us, you’re not here to pull a tooth.”

But Marina said it exactly like this:

“Come on, cut the shit, it’s nothing, there’s nothing there, nothing I can see, a crumb.

A tiny crumb.

“They didn’t tell me.”

“You got the paper when you paid.”

“Nope.”

Needless to say she rolled her eyes.

“In the basement, the infirmary, straight then right, room 308, pick up your blood group, come back. I’ll see you in. Of course you still have to pay.”

“Of course. I’ll pay. Obviously I don’t expect this to be for free.”

“R-E-S-P-E-C-T,” sings Aretha from the cell phone, and then:

“Oof, I can’t find a single place to park, I’m going crazy here.”

“That’s OK, no point in coming to find me, they’ll call me in soon. I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

“Chin up!”

“Chin up.”

In the room there are already three. Beauty is over there, on a bed by another empty bed. She’s in a silk kimono and put her hair up in a ponytail. Her nearness is reassuring. So this happens to the

beautiful, too. A chubby little woman by the wall, between them, a woman from Bosnia. You can hear it in her accent:

“Hey.”

They’re in nightgowns.

“Did they tell you bring a nightgown?” I ask.

“Sure thing, hon, they said nothing to you?” asks the Bosnian woman.

“Nope.”

“They’re, well, they’ll have something, just you ask.”

Little Chubs says:

“I thought I’d be stuck here all alone, is this how it goes? An assembly line?”

A flicker of conversation. A nurse comes in, young, tender.

“Sorry, I haven’t brought anything...”

“Are you the one with no blood group?”

“Yup.”

“Come with me.”

There’s a little bathroom off the four-bed room. From a massive wad of unsightly green gowns she pulls a bulky item of clothing. A slit down the back, little bows.

“Here you go, nothing special but it’ll do.”

Next to Beauty I don’t look like much, beautiful people aren’t issued nightgowns like this.

We lie there in silence.

“Does it hurt,” asks Beauty at one point.

“Yeah, it hurts. Hurts and then it’s over, like everything,” says the Bosnian woman.

“I hear it hurts real bad,” says Little Chubs.

“Hey, none of us want to be here,” says someone from my bed.

I’d never say such a thing, peer pressure, must be.

“Just landed a job,” says Beauty. “The boss trusts me.”

“When I wanted to, I couldn’t, now I can’t, we’re building a house,” says Little Chubs.

“I can’t do a fourth, honest I can’t.”

It's my turn, looks like. But I have nothing to say so the Bosnian woman keeps talking and saves me.

"You know how big my last one was, huge, never seen the like. Says the midwife, good thing he didn't kill you when you pushed him out. Many go that way."

"If a person knew where he'd fall, my grandma used to say, he'd sit." Again someone chiming in from my bed.

"Maybe it won't hurt so bad," says Beauty.

One door goes to the infirmary from the room, the other to another room. A nurse brings someone else in now and then. Two old women go in. I mean, you know, not old old, but going on sixty. They do those things? Hey, cut it out.

We wait. You can tell by how we all sat up on the beds at first, crossed our legs, bare legs, they started feeling the cold so we tucked them under the blanket, and by now we're lying down, deep into pillows, covered up to the chin. It's not warm.

"So when? Why'd they tell us be here at eight."

Little Chubs is like that, she keeps complaining about something and nothing sits right with her, she'd like to go out and have a cigarette. The woman from Bosnia, she's the voice of reason. Sound country reason.

Beauty is, well, she really is beautiful and the most concerned about how bad this will hurt. And how her boyfriend will have to pay for parking all day downtown because he parked where he works and thought he'd come back quick to pick her up. Now he's really getting jumpy. He called a fourth time.

I'm me.

Finally, they summoned Little Chubs.

All of us perk up, the end is in sight. We announce the time so we can see how long this will actually take.

"Fifteen minutes max," guesses the woman from Bosnia.

"A little longer, the anesthesia has to kick in," that from me, I read it somewhere.

“I’ll ask for general anesthesia,” says Beauty.

I don’t want to alarm her, but that’s not how it goes. I, too, know a little something.

We’re focused on the door, there aren’t many other thoughts. Except a few. Where is that damned nausea, maybe this really is all a mistake.

Forty-five minutes. At the door we see Little Chubs, out of my subconscious swims a scene from war movies whenever I see someone clinging to a person’s shoulder, pale, wounded.

Little Chubs is tucked in, I’d like to kiss her on the brow. We wait politely for her to show signs of consciousness so we can ask our questions. The Bosnian woman has already gone in, and Little Chubs is moaning softly.

“Uuh, uuh,” is all we can hear from under the covers.

Again, another forty-five-minute stretch, like a class period at school. Three hours, all told, if in the meanwhile they don’t slip in another of those older women. Croatian class, art class, phys ed, in a blink. Or maybe math, physics, chemistry, they take time. This takes more time. Little Chubs starts coming round, the nurse brings back the woman from Bosnia, changed, and the Beauty gives me a long glance, sits up, but the nurse says:

“You’ll have to wait a little longer.”

An older woman passes through our room, she strides bravely, well not exactly bravely, but you, know, she’s wiser.

Halfway there, we’re tied.

“Do you think I’ll be able to go to work on Monday?” Beauty asks me.

“Definitely,” I answer.

“You don’t work?”

“No.”

I can’t give anything. I can’t take anything. There must remain no toehold between us, if we run into each other in this city there must be no room for questions. We mustn't know anything about each other. A conspiracy of silence. If we recognize each other, that will be all. Already I know too much. That she's leery of pain. She knows almost nothing about me. I said

nothing. Although we do know this, something even our mothers don't know, only the men who are paying for parking.

The older woman comes back. As if it were nothing. A tooth.

"It hurts, they don't give you a general."

Little Chubs is mean. She knows Beauty's afraid, but still she says it. Or maybe it's just that she's so miserable. Or maybe it really does hurt.

In two hours, it will all be over.

When you get married, you won't even remember. That's what Mama used say for everything when I was little. When you get married. Beauty's nearly done. I already know what she'll look like when they bring her in. There, just like that.

My turn.

Inside they're all young. Their whole life is ahead of them. The nurses, doctors, anesthesiologists. They are all successful women, they have no pangs of conscience. Nor do I.

They are very kind. They ask no unpleasant questions.

And it doesn't even hurt that much.

My whole life, ahead of me.

4. Hand

My mother's hand is not looking well. Like mass-produced frozen puff pastry dough with little holes on the surface, pale and raw but much, much softer. Under the light cast by the chandelier over the dining room table the skin above her elbow wobbles as she shakes the chunks of fried squid from the paper bag onto her plate. This thing with her hand, it happened over night. She called last night and said there's a trip we need to take. She said: "The cemetery beckons."

In her wardrobe on the lowest shelf there are two neatly arranged piles of pajamas, one pile is new pajamas, the ones for the hospital, and the other pile is for wearing at home. When she moves them, she tells me each time I visit where they are now. So I won't need to go looking for them and digging around when the time comes. Her newest set is on top, buttoned down the front in case she has a stroke. That's what the nurses asked for when her mother was in the hospital, to ease the insertion of the tube. A clear plastic bag is tucked by the new pajamas, holding soft, fluffy slippers for the hospital.

My mother doesn't enjoy food, the squid come from the local market, sodden with oil they crunch under her teeth, teeth which are not, actually, hers, she eats hastily, out of necessity.

"A person has to eat," she tells the walls as she takes her plate to the sink. Meanwhile, as she disappears into the depths of the kitchen, I dump my portion from the plate back into the paper bag, ball it up and take it over to the trash can.

"Done so soon? You are such a pain when it comes to food."

"I ate, they're not bad."

She sits down and lights a cigarette. In a single puff nearly half the paper burns down. I hear her lungs crackle. While she holds the cigarette in one hand, she moves her fingers absently in a gesture I remember from childhood. She presses in sequence the tip of each finger with the tip of her thumb, starting with her pinky, and then back again.

“What’s with all the pajamas?” even as I raise the silly, pointless question I know I’m embarking on a battle that is lost before it’s begun, I see her anguished face light up, prepared to prove me wrong.

“What do you mean, all? Do you remember what it was like when she was at the hospital? They weren’t going to wash her every minute, if she’d wet herself or soiled her bedclothes they’d dress her in one of those horrid green gowns, as if they cared. Poor thing, everything hung so loose on her. So I brought her pajamas, every day. How much could she have weighed, hardly more than 90 pounds, and clean as a little girl. I brushed her hair, moistened her lips with lip balm, she was as fragrant as a flower, those nurses couldn’t get over it. And I’d iron each one, both sides. And if I hadn’t prepared all that, what would have happened then, like those poor oldsters no one cares about any more. I hope you’ll bring me clean pajamas.

“Of course I will,” I say and I accept a pair of clean, fragrant pajamas, changed daily as the ultimate form of care for one’s nearest and dearest.

While we digest the big molecules of fat in silence, my gaze wanders around the walls. The walls are olive green because that’s a color that doesn’t show the dirt, though her mother, while she was still alive, would declare at least once a week that we are not Hungarian, and it was obvious she meant the walls. On them hang framed photographs of the children, only the children, myself as a child, my brother as a child, my children, his children, and one more child caught by chance in the frame, behind one of mine. With children it all functions. The children are obedient and at your side, children love you and children accept you, accept whatever you tell them, as long as they’re children. With adults, now that’s a different story.

I know how to be a child, perhaps that’s why out of the whole family I’m the only one who still visits my mother, just as I visited her mother. I even visited her with my kids, with my son who was a baby with a big head, I brought him wrapped in a bunting so she could touch him; she could no longer get out of bed. She leaned over the edge and said:

“Lucky thing you pushed him out. Such a big one. Many’s a woman died that way.”

I stood with him in my arms a little longer over her bed, silently absorbing her uncharitable expression of concern about dying.

“So be it, may God give us children. They’re the only thing that’s worthwhile.”

I don’t know when it was that I stopped calling her Grandma, maybe when I secretly grew up, and after that I avoided calling her anything whenever I could, it wasn’t often anyway, maybe it was enough to say *Hey*, and when I’d mention her when in conversation with others, she was my mother’s mother. Now nothing is left of her any more, except a bill which comes from the city cemetery, an obligation I have taken upon myself to pay, in order to unburden my mother, her daughter. The gesture feels right to me, although my mother is not poor, but she enjoys buying things, especially pajamas, dish towels, you can buy a lot of them for not too much money, as well as things for the kids, and sometimes even for me. Most of those things are for the house.

“I bought you something,” she often says, but without the joy like people feel when they buy a gift, more like when you pick something up you know someone needs, you know better than they do, maybe they won’t even like it, but only because they don’t know what’s good for them. I always feign surprise, a child’s amazement.

“Really, oh you shouldn’t have!?”

“Oh, I know, but, still, I did.”

“What did you get?”

From her treasure trove, her big bedroom, the mausoleum of a distant past life, into which the children mustn’t go, from the unappealing and a little alarming semi-dark suffused with the fragrance of lavender, my mama brings out a box. So I’ll see it’s new. And out of the unpacked and then carefully re-glued box she pulls a pillow.

“It’s anatomical. It was on sale, I saved up the points for it and got it half-price. Try lying on it, you’ll see, it is so restful.”

With firm grip she steers me over to the sofa, arranges the pillow under my head and presses down on my forehead so I’ll sink into its synthetic belly.

“See, I told you. You need rest. And at night when you lie down you can imagine that you’re in my arms.”

We look at each other for an eternal second, I imagine myself on the wide bed, big and cumbersome, in my mother's arms. We hug like that, she and I, we gaze at each other, and she says:

“When I married, every evening I'd imagine my mother's hand resting on my face, no one touches you like that in your life.”

We keep hugging, my hug grows stronger, hers weakens until her body goes limp.

I get up abruptly, shove the pillow back into the box, along with my thoughts about the hug.

“Is it time for us to go? So we waste no time.” My mother doesn't waste time, she never has, even now when she's taken early retirement, when she no longer has obligations, she does wastes no time. She takes her silverware out of the drawers, her crystal glasses from the breakfront, washes her quilted mattress pads more often than anyone else, with Q-tips and baby oil she cleans the grout between the bathroom tiles. She finds it increasingly difficult to get up from kneeling. “One day you'll find me like that,” she says.

We get into the car.

Into the trunk I load the lanterns and artificial flowers with plastic chunks on the petals imitating dewdrops.

“I'm really interested to see whether they've fixed that chipped headstone. What are we paying them for every year anyway, they are obliged to, but of course nobody attends to their obligations these days.”

The chipped headstone comes up every time as a topic requiring detailed rumination, as do the people who are obliged to attend to cemetery upkeep but do not, who never discard the burned-out lanterns, don't sweep up the dried leaves that have fallen on the grave, followed by comments about the grave to the left and the grave to the right, obviously no one is tending to them, as well as passing remarks aimed at me about the lack of brushes in the trunk, just in case. She wraps up her first round on obligations, my standing being only so-so.

I, however, do not have the mindset for the chipped headstone. Although I know about the jagged-edged stone slab which has been disturbing graveyard order ever since they lowered her into it two years ago, my thoughts always dive in. To the grave.

“Grandmaaaaa, go down sloooooow!”

I’m lying under feather quilts in the old-fashioned double bed and call to Grandma with that sentence every morning when I wake. For years I have been saying it without a thought to what it really means until I start going to school, and by then I’m not sleeping at Grandma’s, I forget about it and only recently does it come back to me and I shudder. From one visit to the next, twice a year on average, while I stand by my mother’s bent back and watch her shoulder blades flex as she sweeps, my thoughts dive into the grave even when I’d rather they didn’t, I think about what is underway in the deep darkness. First there was a lot, then less, then even less, so now how much is left? And what is left of her, in there, or out here? She and I.

I close my eyes and on all sides clearly see shallow drilled pits, a mile or so around on the earth’s surface, as if via x-ray, like bee hives they bear no first or last name, they are not decorated with cheap colored plastic ornaments, they function in two dimensions, empty—full, zero—one, we’re up, they’re down, we stand like pimples on the faces of teenagers, and then we’re turned into a shallow scar. On the earth’s surface and in someone’s life.

The tombstone gleams. Clean swept and wiped down with a moist cloth, the unnatural hues of the flowers blaze again as the x-ray fades, the new beads of the rosary click against the pot belly of the stone vase, the flame in the lantern wavers as it illuminates its given circle, Mama stands up and crosses herself. Her lips move, her eyes half-closed, now commences that special silence, the high point of our trip after which there will be a moment when we’ll be able to say, without words: we’ve done the grave. At that point Mama usually says: “There.” Then with a lighter step we go to the wide gate and along the way we usually run into people we don’t know, but the gazes and muted greetings we exchange on that spot show we have understood each other, we know each other down deep, and we’d never have greeted them anywhere else, these unfamiliar, alien people. But here at the cemetery we become somehow miraculously born to one another. Mother collects the things in plastic bags and gets ready to walk toward the path that leads from our plot, but this

time I stand there as if, myself, buried. Only when she has walked a few steps does she realize I am not following.

“Are we going? Why are you standing there?”

“Hey, come back for a sec.” Mama looks, surprised, frozen mid-twist.

“Please,” I add.

“What’s up? Is there another chip?” She came back, peering at all the corners of the headstone, and when she didn’t spot any new damage, she looked at my face, seeking an answer.

“Say something to her.”

“To whom?” she looked at me, startled.

“To your mother. Say something to her now that you’re here.”

“What? What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know, she’s your mother. Tell her she never understood you, tell her you’re ashamed for her sake that she struck you with her sneaker when you didn’t know how to do your arithmetic, tell her how you washed her shit for two years and she never thanked you. Tell her you hated her at times, so clean, beautiful, pure, like precious few in life. And you were relieved when she died and hated yourself for it. And on that day you became she, her spirit entered you,” tumbled out of me in one breath.

“You’re crazy,” she’d flee toward the path, gallop and claw, but she stands there.

“Tell her you’re afraid of dying, that the fear of the place where she is lying paralyzes you and that’s why you’re so fussy about the fucking headstone. Tell her your life went by too fast and you spent too much of it on her and you think it isn’t normal that you never in your whole life spoke with her as if she were a friend. This is the place for a frank conversation, Mama. And she can’t talk back.”

My mother doesn’t know me. I’ve lost her gaze, she no longer sees me as her child, she sees a twisted monster who’d been hiding for years behind her daughter’s face and has now she ambushed her at her mother’s graveside.

She turns, her eyes bugging, and the wind brings me, “I’ll be by the exit.”

I know it's autumn because the rays of the sun are shining at a slant into my eyes. They beam through the halo of steam rising high above the tops of the poplars and blaze through my lashes. I'm dragging my feet along the unpaved road toward the gate, I can't see a living being nearby, only the body of my mother which is bent over and looks as if the earth might swallow it. When I pass it by, the body rises and walks behind me. It gets into the car after me and sits on the seat next to mine. The motor roars louder and louder until it reaches its peak a mile after the highway turn-off. I'm no longer driving, I'm afloat, squashed into the ten inches of space above the heads of the two women and below the upholstered metal ceiling of the car interior. I can clearly see our whole journey from the moment when one emerged from the other, I see a doubling of silverware, duvets, anatomical pillows, worries, hatred, and unhappiness. The last thing I see is an unusually large metal fence, stains from flies on the cube-shaped headlights into which I'm peering, amazed, very close up, inside which, if I stare hard enough, I seem to see a glistening set of curving stairs. Then I don't see anything anymore, because I'm suddenly no longer squashed into those ten inches but back again in this scrunched 5'7" and 126 pounds from which something pours out of several ducts. After a thousand years of silence and the great distance we've traversed, I see the eyes of my mother. When I look more closely, in them there is so much happening, a life that wants out, I could gaze into them for hours, but the light seems slowly to be dying, like those dimmers I used to entertain my child with. With one hand I'd change his diaper and with the other I'd rotate the dimmer. With the voice of a wizard I'd intone: "If you're good I'll turn the light uuuuup, if you're bad, I'll turn it doooooown," just to keep him from squirming, so he'd lie still for those few minutes, stunned into silence by the looming and ebbing of the world.

And I see one more thing. The safety belt across her neck under which she has slipped her tiny shoulder is keeping her from breathing, but I cannot move my arm. I want to, but I can't, or I can, but I don't want to. I have only one clear thought in my mind, *I'll fix the headstone*, that will be the first thing when I extricate myself from here.