Kristian Novak

Gypsy, but the Fairest of Them All

Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursać

6. N / Border Crossing

For the first time Dilara said she's scared when I called her from Ipsala, near the border. That's all she said, nothing more: I'm scared. Do you know what this does to a man? God forbid you should ever learn.

She confessed she was thinking about escaping. She's scared because nobody knows what's really going on. Some say Christians are being taxed, others say they aren't. A friend, a Shiite, said nobody's been threatening him. Some talk of rape, a jihadist has the right to force himself on a woman. The *takfirs* are on the lookout.

***

A *takfir* is... a person who informs on other Muslims, claims they're infidels. Sunnis probably rat out Shiites.

***

They released hundreds of people from prison, and now these folks, suddenly the righteous of the righteous, are swelling their ranks. They've imposed a curfew. Cucumbers are banned because they can be fermented for making alcohol. If they see you smoking a cigarette or a hookah they chop your fingers off. Every family has to give an adult member to Daesh. They offer to pay eight hundred dollars per month and provide marriage for the bachelors. They finance themselves in all sorts of ways, taking from people, collecting taxes, they have taken over the manufacture of cement. Dilara sounds so frail and behind her I can clearly hear a deep voice booming from inside the house, saying: you abandoned us.

We were waiting to ford a river. Several hundred people had gathered, and I wished they hadn't. We were dripping with sweat and everything reeked of urine and bad meat. Why are you doing this to me? There isn't enough room for all of us in Europe. Most are asleep in the bushes. Their fists are clenched so they look like angry corpses. In one hand is usually a cell phone, in the other, their money. The phone ties them to home, the money to their destination. Black men with long thin legs sit on squares of plastic and chew on toothpicks. They have occupied the greenest area. I couldn't take my eyes off them. They sit there on their plastic squares, their legs akimbo, they spit on the ground and eye the women. Because of them it'll be harder for me to enter Europe, me who wants to work and who will be put to death if I go home. They are calm and aloof, they're waiting, they waste no energy, they brush a fly from their eyes every so often and then back to lethargy.

The largest among them says not a word, leafs through a book with the word IDEA on the cover, drinks water from clear plastic bags. My Lamassu would scatter them like wooden figurines.

The local vultures make the rounds, offer to sell us water, blankets, and mattresses. When clouds pile up in the sky they bring umbrellas and tarps bearing the logo of an American bank out of their vans. I tell Azad:

"You can't take those things with you over there. So you leave them on the beach, and the same guys come along, retrieve them, and sell them all over again."

"People aren't buying them to leave them behind," says Azad to me.

"No?"

"Pay attention. They are hoping the venders will let them ford the river first. But the venders selling umbrellas have nothing to do with who goes first. And there's nobody to explain this so the venders rake in the riches.

Azad was artless, but he had a good grasp of the shadowlands of the world. I was disturbed by the amount of fascination and ease with which he talked about this. I wondered how much he actually needed my help. He found making friends and arranging things a breeze. He managed to convince a guy from Morocco to trade a half-pack of cigarettes for a bottle of the water we had. The Morrocan showed us a picture of his brother, who had already been in Germany for two years and was on a B-League soccer team. The brother was about to cross over into France, to the Zenedien football club.

***

I assume that's St. Etienne.

***

Azad asks him why his brother didn't buy him a plane ticket so he could travel with dignity. The Moroccan says they'd banned his brother from doing that as soon as he arrived at the club.

Word flew around that we were about to move and folks perked up. The Africans began dancing, clapping and singing. Within a few hours vans arrived, and then began the bartering and shouting. The smugglers seemed to fear nothing. One of the black men wanted to get into a van, the driver pushed him back and yelled at him. Nobody understands anyone, and, again, I'm panic-stricken. Azad quiets me: nobody will be left behind. And sure enough, we all get in. We each give $100 for a half-hour drive to the place where we'll cross the border. Along the way we're stopped

by people in civilian clothing, they talk with the driver and let us through. And this was all the risk they took. Bring the people to the water's edge, fill the boats, push them off and back you go for the next round.

Everyone seals their cell phones in plastic bags on the riverbank. The first ones to cross are the ones who paid another $50.00 for the boat. Some of them don't know how to row, they run aground on a shoal mid-river. Push off. On that spot there are the concrete ruins of a bridge. Azad eyes the ruins, then looks at the people who brought us here, then again at the ruins. And says:

"Hey, look. How do you get rich? Somebody blows up a bridge."

My throat tightens as I look at the water. More and more often, as clearly as a prophet, I see the accidents that might happen. This time I see Azad, me and two of the black men pulled out of the river, tied to each other by a length of rope. Azad is the only one who's alive, and he calls out that the rest of us didn't know how to swim.

He sees I am anxious and tells me the river is shallow. Most of the others have already crossed and vanished into the underbrush, and I am hoping, in vain, that some of the boats will come back empty to our side. I see all the things discarded on the beach. An incredible number of photographs, as I recall. People prefer to leave them behind instead of letting them get wet.

Azad finally lashes two plastic canisters together with some rope, and I throw my arms over the rope, like this, so the upper part of my body stays above water, and I can paddle with my arms. Around my waist he ties a black plastic bag in which, aside from my things, there is another empty plastic bottle, to keep the bag above water, too. I think: I don't even know the name of the river I'll be drowning in. If by some chance I survive, I'll ditch this Azad, bye bye, friend, it's because of you that I'm in this mess. Azad goes first, he stands halfway across the river, turns to me and gestures: the water is only up to his waist. He turns and dives in, floats downstream to the left. On the surface all I can see are the canisters. I notice a car with a rotating light on the roof across the river and I freeze. A man in dark glasses watches me—me tied to a black plastic bag and a decorative canister necklace. I'm the only one of the people on the move who is still mid-river. I take a deep breath and dive. I gulp down water, die of terror, but the canisters carry me across. As soon as you touch the other side, you're supposed to get away from the towers. There is no time to stop until you find a good hiding place. I scramble out, grab my bag. Azad is waiting for me, crouching a little further on in the bushes, every so often I straighten up to see him, and then crouch again. All I can hear are the thudding of feet, the rustling of plastic bags, and heavy

breathing. People are dropping things, but nobody is leaning down to retrieve them. I don't think of stopping as long as Azad is running. Out of the corner of my eye I see a fight going on in a ditch. One man is punching someone in the head, another is holding the head by the hair and pressing it down. The body attached to the head is already dangling, limp. We have to get off the road several times because of the police, but in the city itself there aren't problems. There are Chinese people, Africans, and many Arabs. There are local people who greet us and offer us things for sale. Water, blankets, a jacket or pants, bakers bring fresh bread in vans, two euros or three dollars a loaf. Before morning some unarmed men in yellow uniforms take us in a van to a warehouse, near an agricultural airport. Hundreds of people again, and I hate them.

***

I ask him what their plan was and how much money they were carrying. because once he said they'd run out of cash, and then suddenly, again, they had cash. He answers that he wasn't sure himself. He'd scrounged a little more from his backpack. Azad brought some to Istanbul. He fell quiet, lit a cigarette. He said he told Azad they wouldn't be friends any more if Azad stole again, even if that meant them going hungry.

***

The camp was a warehouse, a tennis air dome, a few tents. People slept in the warehouse, and ate and were given medical care in the tents. This was the worst place I'd seen until then. At least two hundred people were sleeping in that one warehouse hall. Once a day the local people came through with food and the police, and only then did you see how little humanity remained in those of us who were sleeping there. Every day at least ten ugly interactions. In the food line. Over water. By the greasy blankets and the heap of unnecessary little things stored next to the cot you can tell who had been here longer. I didn't look straight at them, I was afraid they'd infect me. I longed to take a break, but not there. At night it was worst, there was no supervision.

When we arrived, a war between two bands of Africans was wrapping up. The smaller but better-armed group was defeated by the larger one. These others now took the weapons from the first, robbed them and raped them. The strongest and largest had better spots and enough room with their friends. The rest of us were packed in together around the edges.

With three Pakistani families, Azad and I squeezed into a room on the side. We were so crowded there that it was only through the good will of others that you were able to move at all.

For you to move your foot, someone else had to move their head. I saw the air the old man talked about on the bus. It turns into particles and infiltrates you. At night we tried not to hear what is happening in the big hall. Music, laughter, screams. The children in our room asked what's going on, their fathers hushed them. I thought of Bervan and Dara and that made me feel even worse.

An African was asking for 20 euros for you to call on his cell phone anywhere you like. I remember I instantly thought I could lie in wait for him somewhere outside the hall, smash him over the head and snatch his phone. Every second morning they doled out big bags of canned food, whole packages of shoes and clothes. It was strange to be wearing something clean, which hadn't drunk deep of my body. Someone said Christians wash away their sins like that. Someone else said that those same people put bad meat or *khinzir*, pork, in our food on purpose. The black people were first in line, elbowed others, demanded more. Every day I thought I should speak to them about this. But this was a place where someone could kill you without a blink. And Azad handled all this brilliantly. There was no stopping him, I could barely keep track of his whereabouts. He laughed with some people who had started trimming children's hair. He helped a person cut a mattress in two, then he whispered something to a cop, then he was gone for an hour. Later I saw him talking with the people who bring the clothing and canned food. He helped them move boxes. He took a lighter and cigarettes from the van, I couldn't tell whether he had asked permission. Somewhere he'd have a run-in with one of the big black guys, someone would punch him in the face, and I'd have to save him again. I waved to him to come over and sit down, to calm down, but he got more and more agitated. As if he didn't see where he was. As if he'd forgotten what I did for him. For a moment I found myself wishing they would beat him up, just so I could tell him: told you so!

In the evening he came back to the cot, brought chocolate and juice, tried telling me about something or other. And all I could think of was how best to hit home.

"They'll catch you. You're playing dangerous games," I finally said.

"What's this now?"

"Don't think I don't see. Don't think others don't see. I won't be able to save your skin next time."

He smirked, rolled his eyes.

"You weren't smirking when I saved your life!" I grabbed his hand.

"Yes, you did save me. And I'm doing what I can to make the best of what you saved. For the two of us."

"Don't go prancing around as if you're sharper than you are. You'll get us in even deeper."

He shot me a deep, piercing look, and said:

"That's not what you're scared of, Nuzat."

"What is it that I'm scared of?"

"You're scared of me going off without you. Ending up all on your lonesome."

"At first I thought it's just that you don't speak Arabic very well, but now I see you're stupid."

"You told me you were saving yourself when you saved me. Because you want to be clean before God. If that's so, then leave me to do what I do. For the both of us."

I wanted to make him feel pain, when the whole, cruel world hadn't put him yet in his place.

"You're headed in the wrong direction, this is where you and I part ways. Best of luck," I said.

The next morning he came to make up. He wanted to jolly me along, brought food and drink. Joking, he said that one day I'd apologize for being like this. *Hat shouf, hat shouf,* you'll see. He told me he was creating alliances and both of us would profit from them. Lighten up, he said. Those are not your friends, I told him, they're sharks.

The next day he was gone again and I quarreled with two men from Libya and one of their wives. Don't ask, I have no idea how. All I know is I was hit on the head. I stepped out of the line and ran into Azad at the door. From a distance he said: "I have great news!"

"Not interested, I have to get out of here. I can't bear this for another single day. Go ahead on your own."

He rolled his eyes and said there I was all edgy again and we'd see each other later. That did it for me:

"Some people were going to thrash me! Where were you, you shithead? Where are you when I need you?"

"I came to tell you we're leaving this place and we'll never come back. We're off to make money for what comes next."

"Where were you when they almost killed me?"

"Nuzat, never again will we be separated. Pack up your things, they're coming to pick us up in the morning."

I was so thin I had to tie my pants, already the pants of a very thin man, with a piece of rope. What else could I do, I wondered. Azad tossed me a cell phone and said I could call home from it, but that I shouldn't take it from my pocket until we'd left the camp.

We were going north to Kalabaka, we'd work on a strawberry farm there, and that was all we knew. I was the only one besides the driver who was awake, I stared at the cell phone and couldn't bring myself to turn it on. I put off calling. I couldn't bear to call home any more.

8. M / Hamer

I calmed down by imagining myself exposing all the dirty secrets of Sabolščak, but what was the point. My words couldn't hurt anyone, crystal clear. But my presence was an insult among them, one of those which cannot be avoided. When you are one of them, you're a reflection of the whole. And there's their fear that thus reflection won't show them what they want to see, that they have no idea how twisted they are.

I'm not sure how much the two of us would have been able to keep going. We pretended everything was the same, but it was clear from our words how painful this was, it was clear that the two of us were seeking a way out of the conversation before something hurtful was said.

Maybe another week, or a little more... and then we would have started repeating to one another every sad story. He: how about this was getting more difficult, me: how despite everything we could make a go of this. And secretly we'd be hoping the other one had already given up. Actually what I thought was that one day he wouldn't show. When he said he'd be away for a few days because a friend just back from prison was getting married—I thought: this is it.

I was already starting to feel the void that comes after the end, the attempts at consolation. Maybe someone who isn't Sandi reaches out to me over Facebook. Međimurje men usually dive in head first, most of them prefer a citified turn of phrase so they can make a cultured impression. You are a beautiful woman. Available for a date? I would like for us to get a drink. Let's go for a drink.

But he did come back after all, there's tons of courage in that kid. He was tickled by how surprised I was. He asked:

"If you knew that, like, you were seeing me today for the very last time, that I'd never return, what would you say to me?"

I said nothing. Sucked in smoke.

"I'll keep coming back, as long as it takes for you to give me an answer."

But the moments of craziness happened less often. The situation filled us with fear and left scant room for much else. After that, the silence tiptoed in. After that came the end.

Sandi did what he'd come to do, I'd see him smoking and staring out at the street before he knocked at the door, and every day he knocked and I opened it and told him he needn't knock. He'd shower, stow his extra things in a plastic bag that he tied in a knot and left by the front door. We had dinner in the kitchen, playing the same old playlist. We watched television, had sex, carefully and wordlessly, until his anger got the better of him. Then he'd take me rough, wanted me to remember him as strong, not servile. This was becoming borderline and I began to be scared of him. He was turning into a phantom groping in vain for peace. And you give him himself every night so he can try again, but in vain. The younger Fanika told me over the phone how sorry she was about everything. I'm grateful to her for that. We kept interrupting each other, and then telling the other to go ahead. I told her I won't be at the beauty parlor for a few days. She said nothing. Now she seemed the grateful one. At the end of the conversation she hissed:

"I don't get why you gotta do this, why would…"

"Why what? Spit it out!" I yelled, but she didn't finish the sentence. Friendship between women is the nicest of all the things that aren't there.

I couldn't tell what would come first, my brother insisting Sandi and I break it off once and for all, someone in Sandi's face at night, or one day him simply staying away. He knew I wouldn't come to Dol looking for him. He knew. All the futures were suddenly hanging over us, swaying back and forth and bumping into each other. To tell the truth, I wasn't so surprised when one rainy night, around midnight, Marijan Hamer knocked at the door.

I knew it wasn't Pappy and I prayed to God it wasn't someone drunk and armed. I opened up and saw the lower part of his face. This was the first time I'd stood so close to him, and maybe that's why I stepped right back, as if allowing him to enter against my better judgment. I saw he wasn't as big as he'd always seemed. Portly, broad, a vast bulk in a hooded jacket. The legs of his sweats were wet almost to the knees, and the stink of damp from his tennis shoes reached all the way to my nose. His hands were stuffed into his pockets, and I wished he might never take them out. It could have been 11:30 at night, very dark, and I couldn't see whether he was alone. The word caught in my throat. I stood there, mid-breath.

"Is Sandi here? I need him for something." He didn't say hello, didn't use my name.

"Upstairs. About to go home."

"Call him down for a minute?"

"He'll be going home, okay. What's he done to you?"

"Just call him, Milena. Nothing to be afraid of. Do what I say."

I am such a coward. The world has never seen such a piece of shit of a woman. I go up, get my cell phone so I can call the police. Sandi is lying on the sofa. Blue and gray scenes from the television screen flash across his face. He pretends he is still following what's on the screen, as if nobody at this ungodly hour has knocked at the door and as if everything between us hasn't just ended. He wants just five more seconds of that something. Inside me I pray Hamer will be decent about it, that he'll leave the kid a little dignity, that he doesn't wipe the floor with him, let him just tell him not to come any more and let him leave. He and I cannot be guilty at fault, this is one we can't win.

Sandi finally sighed, got up, pulled on his teeshirt, ran his fingers through his hair, walked around me and went down. I closed my eyes and stood there, frozen, grateful that he didn't touch me as he passed. I braced myself for hearing a blow, maybe two loud shouts, then another blow, then threats to me and him.

All I heard was muttering, more of Hamer's grumbles, a few of Sandi's words, Hamer's grumbles again. And the door closed. I peeked out through the window into the dark. Equally reflected in every drop of water on the window glass: the same scene, them walking away. In each droplet Hamer was walking two steps in front of Sandi, Sandi was following him, they turned left and went around the corner. I sat on the floor, crossed my legs, and stared numbly at his bag with the knot in it.

***

I didn't call the police. Besides, what would I have said? Nobody forced anyone to do anything, there were no threats.

I couldn't be sure how much time passed, it seemed nearly dawn when someone knocked and walked right in. I was sitting in the same position, staring at the floor. Sandi walked behind me without a word.

9. N / He Was a Kafir

They told us the place we're going is called Kalabaka and that we'll be picking strawberries. They promised to feed us three times a day. Twenty-two euros salary per day, not bad. And they'd connect us to a man called Arvanitos who helps people continue on the move. The whole way I was holding the cell phone, turning it on, then giving up. The batteries would soon be gone and then the chance would be lost.

Finally I punched in a phone number, the professor's. He picked up after the first ring, breathless, there was white noise in the background, as if a television set were running with no program on. He recognized my voice immediately. I asked him how he was doing. And he asked me why I left without first consulting with him. There was no time, I said. I called the professor because I could handle his fear, and I wouldn't be able to see through his lies. But he told me everything. And he knew more than Dilara, she's a woman, she doesn't see much of the world outside the house. At first he seemed angry about things that don't matter. They'd cut back on professors' salaries, they said they had other things to worry about now than the university. Classes had been canceled for the foreseeable future, said the professor, and then he went quiet for a time.

"They are sowing fear among all those who aren't on their side. The Shiites have fled, and the Yazidis will slaughter everyone. Those are poor souls, they have nowhere to go. For them it's said that they revere the devil. They behave the best to Christians if the Christans pay their taxes. Their houses are marked with an N, for *Nasarweh*.

***

Nasarweh means Christian.

***

Do you remember how things were before, Nuzat? When no one knew who was a Shiite or a Sunni? When you went to the mosque to be with people and Allah? Now we go to hear how we must behave if we want to live. They declared a fatwa so children with deformations and Down syndrome can be given an easy death. Allah so desires. Imagine the fools. And you can't tell who is worse. Our hosts or the others who are moving now into the homes of those who have fled. Uighurs from China, many fighters from Bosnia, from Morocco. They make cell-phone movies of how they kill and smash, scream into the camera that God is Great. One had himself filmed while eating a liver. They watch decent people to see whether they're smoking cigarettes, shaving. They are good-for-nothings and thieves, criminals, alcoholics. If you look at someone the wrong way, they condemn you to death and your family has to pay for your dead body. They arrest young men who are wearing shorts. And it's hot in the city, everyone is riding bicycles, there hasn't been any fuel for weeks. But at least Asiacell started working. Do you call home often? How are the boys?

I want to shake him up. He is talking like he's given up. I ask him carefully whether Mosul has made its peace.

"You know what sort of a city this is."

"No, not anymore."

"There is a resistance movement. There are just a few of them in it, but they're fools. They kidnap, light fires. Yesterday they killed three jihadists and then ran off. And that's how it has been every few days."

"You don't sound happy about it," I say.

"What's there to be happy about? When Daesh leaves, these are the ones who will have the right to rule."

"But at least they're doing something," I say, and I hear him inhale. The conversation is near its end.

"You know what kind of a city this is. There's no consensus. If there were, Daesh wouldn't have had a chance. Mosul can't decide who they want to have save them. The Peshmergas? No chance, Kurdish crap. That would only mean another invasion. The Turks? Iran? No way. The Americans? Please, not those savages. The army? They were here and then they ran away. Most of Mosul is against the jihadists. But nobody can agree on who should save us."

"I am worried about my family, Professor. What should my wife do?" I ask.

"I don't know. Some are leaving the city. Nothing can be done. Maybe in time the folks running this show will collapse under their own weight. I hear the locals are squabbling with the foreigners. Probably over money. I don't know. Best to wait."

The cell phone soon died and I breathed a sigh of relief.

We arrived before dawn and everything was totally peaceful. The sun hadn't yet risen and the land looked as if it were a vast field of green and red light. In the middle of the field stood barracks, five of them, and a building. I didn't know how far we were from a town, all I saw was the sea in the distance.

After that farm, you know, nothing would ever be the same. The two of us may have cursed ourselves forever while we were there. It wasn't such a bad place. Things were lively, morning to night, and good will reigned. Twice there were fights in the food line, and once somebody stabbed someone else with a little knife while the person was sleeping. And that was it. The place wasn't what made us bad, the tables were now turned. We picked up the germ of evil somewhere else and brought it with us. The farm was run by a man who was about thirty, and with him were his younger brother, their wives, and their grandfather. There were another five Greeks here, they were the foremen and they were mean. Everyone feared them, and people thought twice before picking a fight. Azad, two men from Morocco and I worked on loading, and we spent mornings with the grandfather in the kitchen. We got up early, made breakfast, cleaned up.

They brought supper in from town in caldrons, and bread in big baskets. We ate before the others, the pickers came in from the field around seven. The evenings were laid-back and nice. Some played music, some kicked a ball around, but most of us sat out in front of the barracks and smoked. Azad made a whole passel of friends that first week, and often disappeared. I was often waiting for him. But at the farm I found this easier to deal with than I had at the camp.

With the grandfather we got along fine, he didn't let the foremen go after us. He told us to call him Papous. A Moroccan and I hung around after breakfast to talk with him sometimes, I have no idea how we managed as we had no knowledge of each others' languages. With my body I told him what my sons are like. Bervan was entranced by the things a person could drink water from, and was happiest drinking from plastic boxes, watermelon rinds, or anything other than a glass. Every two weeks he had diarrhea. I showed him how they quarreled and then how I'd pick Dara up and carry him off and he'd lick my shoulder. That much I was able to tell him without using words.

But while I was gradually regaining my strength at the farm, Azad continued to carry inside himself the restlessness that told him he'd be done for if he stopped moving and he should keep going. By the second week he realized loading wasn't hard work and the four of us were kicking back a lot. He didn't feel like lolling around with us in the shade. He suggested I could work off some of his hours, too, just a few, enough so he could see to something and make it worth my while. He wasn't at dinner that day, but came later and tucked cash in my hand. This happened several times, until Papous came by to see us where we were loading and noticed Azad was missing. I lied that he wasn't feeling well, that he'd been vomiting all night, but Papous wouldn't hear of it. They found Azad in one of the barracks, the foreman brought him out, and that could have been the end of it. But Papous told his son that Azad should be put in with the berry-pickers because he was stealing. I wasn't there so I don't know exactly what happened. Azad probably stood up to Papous and was badly beaten by the boss. He looked as if a giant bee had stung him. Before I'd recovered from the shock he told me:

"Let's have a word with Papous, he's partial to you. Tell him to let me back onto loading. I'll be more careful."

"You don't have it in you be more careful. I'll tell him, but you'll have to work with us."

I knew Papous got up earlier than the rest of us who were on the breakfast crew, so I woke Azad and took him to the main building where the old man had his apartment.

It's hard to recollect who said what. I know I first asked nicely, but Papous, still groggy from sleep, whacked Azad on the head. He slapped him on the back of his head as if Azad were a kid. I stood between

them and clasped my hands in front of Papous, half-kneeling. He punched Azad once again right over my head and shouted, gesturing to Azad to go out to the field. He was about to punch him again, but I grabbed him first by one hand. Then the other. Papous was furious and the more he flailed, the more I thought of my home in Mosul and who might be banging on the front door but I offered no resistance, and let him pummel me. Crazy old man. Finally I thought of Bervan, who knows, maybe I was imagining him holding Dilara, dead, and I jabbed the old man in the neck. It wasn't a proper blow, I put my fist under his chin and pushed back a little harder. Papous slumped to the floor and mumbled. He'd be getting up and would go after me. I turned, I breathed in deep because I didn't know why I'd done what I did. That's how it happened, more or less. I don't remember exactly.

But I do remember clearly that it took me a minute to realize that Azad was killing the old man. He knocked him down, straddled his chest and hammered him in the head. Then in walked the Moroccan. He watched, aghast, he crouched in horror, covered his eyes, and then his ears because he realized ears have no earlids the way eyes have eyelids and can't shut themselves off. It was him, Azad, the grandfather and me. I stood right there, and watched, frozen, as Azad punched him as hard as he could. Slowly, because the old man wasn't fighting back, and at first, instead, in an incredibly calm voice over and over he kept saying: *parakalo, parakalo*. Like: hold it, why so angry, we can work this out. Every blow hit harder, always with the same reciprocal jerk of the old man's head, he looked able to get right up, if only the blows stopped. He didn't want to die. Azad pulled out a knife. I was standing three feet from them, my legs shook, I stood there and did nothing. And had I been able to move, I would have helped Azad, not the old man, all the old man had to do was die, but he wouldn't.

***

I thought I should tell him not to speak of this.

***

He punched him once more hard in the head. One eye pulled away, filled with blood, and flopped off to the side, while the other, alert, stared straight at his murderer. And after that one to the neck. The fingers of a hand clutched in a spasm and released. Papous had been a baby a long, long time ago, I could see that clearly.

He shoved the knife into his belly and the old man's body went stiff. He groaned, moaned deeply as if pushing away a huge burden, he wanted to eject the alien body that had plunged in too deep. He couldn't see a thing and wanted at least to hear the voice of himself alive. He knocked his head a few times against the floor as if to put himself out of his misery. And then went still.

I wasn't thinking clearly, I went about mopping up all the blood. Pointlessly.

I told the Moroccan to step back, he was standing in blood. Azad was still hammering Papous's body, brutally mauling him, muttering about keys and a car.

"We have to go," I said.

Within a few minutes we were out the door, and the Moroccan was with us. We left all our belongings behind at the farm.

We ran across low, open ground, there was nothing to duck behind.

"Why did you have to kill him?" asked the Moroccan. He was on the verge of madness, his whole world had tipped upside down, even more than ours. Azad turned to him: look at my face, look what they did to me. And when neither the Moroccan nor I changed our expression, he said:

"He was a *kafir*."

***

An infidel.

***

"That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Why did you have to kill him?" I screamed.

"An infidel. Besides I saved your life. Now we're even."

"You did not save my life. The old man couldn't have done anything."

"That's not how I see it. I saved your skin."

"Fine, okay, now get away from me, you shithead."

We walk, he and I and the Moroccan, I walk, me and my Lamassu, him all around me, I feel the membrane, how it dries in the air, at dawn, at that distance. All remorse and guilt remain outside it. Every fear, for my home, for Azad, for myself, no longer reaches me, they are no more than a new notch in the relief. I see Dilara raped, the boys mute, they go along with me farther until it's time to stop. We are alive, the membrane around us, rock-solid and firm.

***

I cannot understand why he has admitted to this. He says clearly that he did nothing to stop it. I want to warn him he should admit to nothing without an attorney present, then I remember this is not my problem.

I ask him only whether he feels better having confessed.

***

I don't know whether I feel better.

***

He is silent for a time, asks for water. I look at the clock, I'll soon have to summon the investigator.

***

The place I ran to became… well, a lot like this place.

Somewhere where I answered for what I'd done.

The evening of that same day we found shelter in the vestibule of a church. I took Azad's cell phone and, I remember, called home without hesitation. I didn't get through. I called the professor, too, but the lines were down. Finally I managed to reach Selim, Dilara's brother. They were outside Mosul, in Duhok, a safe place, Dilara and the boys were with them.

Her voice quavered, she said how she'd left everything behind, she couldn't even take our money from the bank, she talked about the people who would squat in our house now. And who would evict them later? And I didn't interrupt her because I had nothing to say. She and I no longer shared our lives. She knew nothing about my journey, nor did I know about hers. She didn't understand what this was now, Kalabaka and the strawberries. Dara had learned to tie his shoes. I started crying because I couldn't imagine this, I was embarrassed to cry in front of the Moroccan.

11. M / What Drags Us Down

The next day Sandi only showed up at lunchtime. Afterwards he sat, lit cigarette after cigarette and stared out at the road while Pappy droned on and on about North Korea. When Hamer finally pulled up with the van out in front, Sandi jumped in like he was crazy.

That day, just like that, everything turned upside-down for us. Incredible, how ordinary events change lives. All I know is that they were working at something for an hour on Mladen's weekend cottage, and then they sat down to have wine spritzers at the store. The two of them. Sat down together for a glass of wine. Sandi and Hamer. Apparently even Padolek joined them briefly, you know the gentleman.

***

I have no idea whether they were pals or not, but they were certainly acquainted. And besides, in the village it's normal for you to join someone's table and have a drink. More natural than sitting by yourself. Maybe for half an hour, maybe less, Sandi probably didn't say a word, but the consequences were huge. Fanika called me right away that very evening to ask whether I could come work at the parlor on the weekend because she had two brides coming in. The women at the store were suddenly obliging, one mentioned that the vacuum-packed hotdogs were better, and almost everyone who passed by the house at least nodded in

Sandi's direction. Hamer's wife didn't but who cares. The next day my brother came by and stupidly praised how Sandi had done this or that. I could hardly push him out the door. On the way out, he said:

"Marijan and Sandi are working together."

I didn't know what to say to that. "So?"

"Nothing, just saying."

I couldn't figure out how it was physically possible for information to spread so fast. This was no coincidence, I knew, Hamer was masterful at playing people. But why he took Sandi under his wing, this mystified me. A few days later he came for Sandi again, this time in the evening, they went to help a hauler from Črečan. After that every two or three days, mostly in the evening. Sometimes Hamer'd bring him back at, I don't know, three a.m. I didn't ask anything, try to understand. This could be good for all of us, for the situation, so people'd calm down, for the people from Dol, to see what happens if just a little effort's made...

Of course, everything has its price. We couldn't plan anything.

Sometimes Hamer'd give him only fifteen minutes notice. And Sandi would jump up, change his clothes and race out, a half-eaten crepe hanging out of his mouth, the jam filling dripping down onto the pavement, and I'd be left behind with the dinner leftovers on the table. There were times when this bugged me, but, look, I'm not crazy to make trouble after all we'd been through.

Most of the time I didn't know where he was and when he'd be back, but I trusted him. I told him, teasing:

"So Gypsyman I slit your throat if I get wind of you with another woman, hear me?"

"I'll have a long life then," he replied and jumped on me.

I asked him maybe twice what they did and where they went. The answers were... too hurried and too detailed, now I know. Hamer had a friend in Palinovec who needed to pack up all his things overnight because they were going off for sale in the morning, and none of his workers were willing to do it. They wanted time and a half and a free day, and that was asking way too much. Since the war, Hamer had suffered from a sleep disorder and rumor had it that he worked nights and was paid well for it. So what was there for me to ask?

He often had muddy tennis shoes, was smeared with motor oil because they'd repaired the Trgocentar van, which went out into the field early in the morning. Things like that. How do things look from here?

***

Who gives a fuck, what this looks like to you. People are always so smart after the fact! I know what all this looks like, I accept that. But you have to see I was living in a truly unbelievable story anyway. Yes, I also thought they were up to something... People said of Hamer that he was forever up to something. Foreign currency, smuggling, to say something... about someone who is powerful. Yes, I thought of that, especially because Sandi suddenly had all this money. But it was: zip it and enjoy. Besides, you have to know, people in Sabolščak didn't talk much about what they did. An odd combination. The ideal job for someone from Sabolšćak was something that happened far from the street. So nobody could see how easy it was. Or hard. So nobody would know how much money you made, so you wouldn't be an object of jealousy or hit up by everyone who needed a loan. It was preferable for you to take money from folks who weren't from the village because folks from Sabolščak preferred working for each other for free. They hadn't worked out a way to pay a neighbor and still be a person of integrity, so instead they sulked. The fact that Sandi didn't want to talk was more or less consistent with local culture, nothing strange. Within two weeks we had become so relaxed that Sandi started going to the store himself and hanging out there for half an hour, because he'd get tosx talking to someone out on the road.

To avengers he probably became a surrogate for revenge.

To diggers he started looking like someone who'd testify for them in silence.

The miserable saw him as kin.

To the cynics the two of us were fodder for ridicule and masturbation, but that sort of thing is not a problem for anyone who desires to live. Quite to the contrary. Reminders that he was a gypsy came from outside of Sabolščak. He'd go to Martinščak for a pizza and come back emptyhanded: no pizza, no explanation. But not a single cross word came from the folks in Sabolščak. If this had lasted a little longer, maybe everything between Dol and Sabolščak could have been put back to the way things used to be. I had the feeling that's what people wanted. Rage is infectious, but it does wear a person down. That is why they all saw Sandi as being much better than he was and said that the people from Dol had simmered down because Sandi told them to. To be fair, I don't know whether thiss had anything to do with him. He was spending less and less time down there in Dol. And... he was more critical of his village than I was of mine. He spoke of Dol with an air of resignation. They're selfish, rude, there's no talking with them. If you're not with them, you're the enemy.

But, look, at the time I wouldn't have said to the armpit choir: You are so wrong, it's not Sandi who placated the folks from Dol. From the woman who'd give her all just to worm out the dirty little secrets

lurking behind glowing Sabolščak façades, I'd become a woman prepared to bite her tongue and join the chorus of silence, like a prayer.

***

No, Sandi no longer saw to things around the house, instead he began organizing. He called in the tradesmen, paid out of pocket for repair of the gutters. My brother told him he'd reimburse him when the house sold, but Sandi said: forget it, peanuts. After that my brother became sickeningly decent and jolly with him. He'd do stupid stunts, then go on and on explaining them, and Sandi would make himself roar with laughter. Afterward Pappy, sarcastically, would ape my brother, the way he repeated the punchline, and we'd double over, laughing.

Pappy. He was the only one who loved the kid more than me. They often sat in silence on the front steps, Sandi smoking, and Granddad shelling walnuts or a hazelnut, that was enough for them. I saw Pappy one night move away from the window once he saw Sandi on his way back. I am sure he could only sleep soundly when the kid was in the house. And he was jealous. One whole day he wouldn't speak with us when my brother invited Sandi and me to his cottage on a Saturday.

"We'll grill up a little something tasty." That's what they'd say in the village, and then they'd grill not a little but a great deal. He invited a few friends with their wives, the ones he probably figured could handle it. Sandi managed nicely, didn't say much most of the time, occasionally asked a good question, laughed when everybody else laughed, picked up the daily internal phrase that always creeps into a conversation near the beginning of a party and then sticks around forever. This time the phrase was "love and haute couture." Melita, a math teacher who'd moved to the village from lower Međimurje stopped by early on. She talked about how she'd been in Italy with her husband, and declared Milan a city of love and haute couture.

"...a city of luuuurve and haute coutuuure," with that very accent.

After she left, everyone began mocking what she'd said.

"Where did you find these ćevaps? Scrumptious. Luuurve and haute coutuuure ćevaps."

"Do make me a luuurve and haute coutuuure white wine spritzer, please. Here's my glass."

My brother's friend Boris, known by us as Boris PVC-Carpentry, said how the veterans had played a game that morning. "I tripped him up with one to the knee so bad, they had to carry him off the field." Sandi interjected: "A luuurve and haute coutuuure foul," and everybody howled with laughter. Boris said: "Ah ha! So that's why they say luuurve hurts!"

Only my brother's wife ignored Sandi, but that was just a new twist to the same stuckupedness she used to strongarm her husband. My brother was very lively, and needlessly protective of Sandi. He kept saying what a fabulous job Sandi was doing, how capable he was. Nobody had said anything to the contrary so my brother sounded silly, as if arguing with himself. I found this insulting, and I suspect Sandi did, too, but he grinned and sipped his spritzer while the others got drunk. Finally, probably not able to wait another minute for someone to say that there was a gypsy among us, my brother said so himself. All I remember is that at one point he shouted:

"Look, any one of us could have been born a gypsy. Me and you and you and you," and he pointed at each of the men there, except Sandi. "It ain't his fault he was born a gypsy. What matters is being a decent person."

I. Felt. So. Awkward. Across the room I shot Sandi glances full of gratitude for putting up with this. He winked at me. My brother was a dickhead. Sandi was strong. We lived.

Of course I'd be lying if I said that suddenly everything was then fine and dandy. It wasn't just the amount of time he spent away that drove me around the bend. He was always buying clothes and colognes for me and him. In the fall he bought a Golf 4 with aluminum rims, on the sides he stuck on decals. Tongues of flame appeared to be blazing out of the wheels. He bought a second cell phone. I'm thinking, why the second phone? I teased him when he told me he didn't want to mix business and private numbers, and he said I was free to check his messages if I liked. Insulted, I refused, but then one night I went ahead and peeked anyway. Nothing suspicious, when and where to meet, nothing more. But it bugged me that he never left it lying around. When we went to bed, he put it in his slipper.

There were other things too. He was out of control, imitating the folks around him. A an echo-person. I think he wanted to look like Sabolščak folks. He spit to the side just like they did, sighed and ran his hand behind his ear, put on airs when someone asked him for a favor. He brought his cigarette to his lips between his index finger and middle finger, and held it with index finger and thumb. A cowboy. He imitated Hamer's turns of phrase, for instance. He started leaning heavily into a Međimurje accent.

***

Darko got in touch, after we hadn't heard for months. He wasn't angry, that's not his way. Instead he brooded. He plays the victim when things don't go his way. That is how it was when he called me. I had just changed the sheets. I sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the way he couldn't put together a single coherent sentence. So come on, man, tell me what it is that doesn't sit with you, not that I'll change anything, but at least we can have a normal conversation. But when the nitwit started in with his drivel:

you are still officially my wife, why are you doing this to me, such a disgrace… He was so miserable he couldn't even spit it out that what bugged him was the Sandi is a gypsy. All he did was prattle on about the difference in our ages and other nonsense. I turned the tables on him and giggled because I was amused to hear just how far from here the news had spread about the two of us. Wow, we sure can fuck. It must be crazy, out of this world, sin squared. I know this was the juiciest part because Fanika. with a sparkle in her eyes, asked:

"So how's Mr. Gypsyman hanging?"

At my every sentence she'd clap her hands like a little kid, with horror and delight, and murmur, "Eh, Milena, don't, don't. No good. Damn you Sandi. No good at all."

"It's not particularly long, but it sure is beefy, and black as black. Sprays like a fireman's hose. I need an umbrella."

"So down there he has, like, a penis-hose?"

When I told her we do it without a condom, disgust took over. Somewhere in our sub-conscious they are perceived as bearing disease. They can fertilize us; because of them we become something else. When I was in high school word had it that Tkalčec, who came back from working abroad in Germany and never married, used to go to his weekend cottage with two girls from Dol. Brenda and Lambada, those were their names. But that was something altogether different. When one of ours fucks one of theirs, all of Sabolščak fucks. When one of theirs fucks one of ours, all of Sabolščak receives him. If you consider that position… People were suddenly prepared to ignore even that, for the sake of peace.

***

No, not exactly socialized—we hardly hung out with anyone, not in Sabolščak. One defiant Roma couple, Biserko and Tamara, we were with them at their place two-three times in Čakovec. I didn't catch where Sandi knew Biserko from. The two of them were from Zadoščak, not Dol, they married without her old man's permission and he threatened he'd come and kill Biserko. Sandi told me about this on our way to their place and said I should avoid mentioning it. She is an assistant teacher, and he helps at the technical inspection station, cleaning cars. At dinner Sandi and Biserko talked for an hour and a half about used cars, cell phones and television sets. Later they went out on the balcony to smoke, and Tamara washed up and told me how they had barely been able to find an apartment, that they had to pay nine months in advance while everyone else had to pay for a half year up front. Their neighbors complained about every little thing. She stopped talking when Biserko came back. A heavy sort of silence ensued so I asked Biserko how things were for him at work.

“Fine,” he said. He listed all the jobs they’d offered him at the employment bureau. Listen to this. The guy who goes door to door to remind people to pay their television subscription. A parking attendant. Reading meters for the electric power company. I mean are they insane? As soon as you start a sentence, you know it ends either as a joke, or in the obits. Gypsy Muji comes to read the electric meter. While Biserko complained, Tamara dropped the saucer from a coffee cup and it smashed. She kept washing as if nothing happened, and we didn’t say a word. We learned that the name on the door was theirs, Perčić.

Biserko Perčić says:

“That’s the only way we get a mortgage.”

Tamara Perčić adds:

“Like they have trouble finding us.”

They never visited us. Maybe I should have invited them over, but I’d thought Sandi would. None of his folks, you see, had ever been to my house, as if he was holding them at arm's length. Even Mirza and Tompo. He referred to them as his best friends, that he'd grown up with them and they were always with him, but he sent them packing in no time flat when they came into the yard, he probably didn't want anything untoward to happen in Sabolščak. Once he said:

“They’re fresh out of prison. They have no clue that going around Sabolščak like that is a bad idea.”

This was when he said a little more about them. I was surprised to hear him say they were his age, the two of them seemed older, maybe because they were heavier set. He said he’d help them out, give them money, so they wouldn’t end up back there again. Mirza’s mother was really sick, he said, but that might not be true. It sounded like a good answer, the kind you don’t feel comfortable asking more about. Sandi wasn’t interested in talking with me about money or work. I saw this as, well, a macho gypsy thing and went along with it. The next few weeks, this was already late autumn, I could see he was worried. He was working more, nearly every night, and I was sure this was because of the two of them. Once, out of the blue, he muttered something the gist of which was, “whenever it happens that one of ours manages to pull himself out, something comes along to drag him straight back down.” I’m not entirely certain even today whether he was thinking of himself when he said that, or of them.

One evening, after he sent them off for a third time, he sat there silent into emptiness for half an hour. Then he said he was going to handle something down in Dol and I shouldn’t wait up. He came back at two in the morning, dead drunk, ran his Golf into the first post of Pappy’s house, puked all over the bed.

The next morning he told me some story about how there was nobody there to look after his mother in Dol. Seems to me Gypsies often talk about their mothers, usually when they’re lying. He said he

had to help Mirza and Tompo because they were protecting his mother in Dol from her boorish neighbors. The two weren't in touch with him for the next two weeks. Actually, until that night.

12. N / A victory for you, a defeat for me

We stayed in an unfinished house for a few days because I'd stepped on a rusty nail and it tore up half my foot. The Moroccan urged me to pee on the wound so I wouldn't be poisoned. I told him I refused, so he wanted to. There was goodness in him. He was the only one with money, he bought food and water for the three of us.

We were more than tired. Ours was the kind of exhaustion that comes over you like an invisible weight, it keeps you from pulling yourself together, walking straight. The exhaustion beckons to you from the other side, you see all the dead and Papous, last in line.

I kept my eyes on Azad, I was exasperated by his nonchalance. He was focused on nothing but sleeping and eating, as if fully entitled. I was thinking the very worst of him, I repeated to myself what a cheat he was, a liar, no one stole his money, he used me. I worked up a real insult for him and waited for the moment when we'd finally open our hearts to each other. The moment came when he was the first to suggest stealing. It was clear to us all that we had no other way to get money, but still I blew up. I'm a hypocrite, I know.

"Yes? And will we kill someone along the way?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

It's difficult to attack a man you've seen kill another man with his bare hands, but I couldn't stop myself. I told him that every evil thing we did would come back to haunt us, that Allah would punish us both for what he did. And what gave him the right to live like that? I felt I was tumbling downward at a dizzying speed. Everything around me went dark, I saw only Azad's face; the Moroccan went off to a different room. Azad stood there, calmly, in place, looked me in the eyes, and nodded. He waited for me to finish, and said: "That's how you see it. You know, I see things differently. After all we've been through, Allah has given us the right to fight for our lives."

"You haven't fought for anyone's life!"

"Oh yes I have," he said softly. "For myself and you. Now we're even." I was three inches from his expressionless face and shouted. My words were supposed to go into him and stop his from coming out. "You didn't kill him because of me! Tell me that you understand that!"

He pulled back, rolled his eyes, and said in his poor Arabic, with a smooth disquiet, that he hated always being the one who had to give the unpleasant truth:

"Look at me, Nuzet. I don't owe you a thing anymore, as of this moment that all ends. I can't do this anymore. You don't know how it is to live as I do. To watch every day as you sink because of me. Thinking I am destroying your life. I see your nightmare, at how you're losing your mind because of your family at home and I try to convince myself I can fix everything, and that keeps me going for a few days. But I can't, you can see I can't. Whatever I do, whenever I bring back to you what you did, it ends up in disaster. That man is on my soul, I know what I did. But can you see what you're doing, Nuzet? You're trying to make me into a child you'll look after. You don't want me to even our score, you want me to be owing you forever. But I won't have any part of it. I played along with the game for your sake, because I saw: you needed it to keep you from losing your mind. But I can't do it any more, you can see that for yourself. At the Turkish border you said you helped me because you desired to be a good Muslim, a human being, you keep retelling that silly story about purity and how we don't deserve this or that because we're defiled. Let me tell you something. Take a look around: the defiled are in charge, they don't ask anyone whether they deserve it! And the ones who try to be pure live off of the food they scavenge from trash cans and pierce their bloody blisters so they can keep running. I decided, I'd rather not live like that anymore."

He stopped for a moment, looking like a person who has smacked an unruly child on the bottom and now he's sorry. He gave me a chance to speak, but there was nothing left inside me.

"Things will be easier for us now that we've cleared the air. I am going to find some money to keep us going. Why are you staring at me? Yes, I'm going to steal, have you forgotten how we made it this far? You think I was born like this? That I enjoy it? I'll do it for both of us, take it or leave it. You can stick with me, Nuzat, but you needn't. You're a good man, I wish you well, but if you aren't man enough to look after yourself, leave that to me. Just don't get in my way. Understand?"

He waited, and saw I wasn't saying anything, so he went about packing his bags. Regardless of everything, I saw no other way but for us to proceed together. We needed to cross a border as soon as possible, and that's difficult to do when one's alone. A state border, I mean. We crossed all the others long ago. That night on the road near an ATM machine we took almost 700 euros off a man and a woman. The next day we went by taxi into Thessaloniki. While Azad and the Moroccan slept at the train station on their bags, I approached some people who had the look of Arabs, they were selling sunglasses and deodorants on cardboard boxes out on the street. I spoke first to one of the older ones, I said I was looking for someone who could take us over the border. He pushed me away. When I refused to step back, he picked up his

things and left. Another jumped in with more patience, he said that sentence has been repeated a thousand times, they are always watching us, every day someone comes over to us with his bags like you and a pouch and threadbare shoes and asks for help. Stay away from us, there's no place for us here, either.

Thessaloniki was not an friendly city for travelers. We stumbled on young men with cudgels, and the only thing that saved us was that there were ten times as many of us involuntary travelers. I wanted to get out of this country as quickly as possible. I didn't care whether the next one would be any better.

This is where we lost the Moroccan. In the morning he said he was going to buy bread and didn't come back. By afternoon we realized he'd taken with him all his things. Azad and I found a garage to shelter in, and lit a fire in it because the night was chilly. Fall was paying its respects and compelling us onward. The next night was colder still so we had to find a hotel. At the front desk they asked for passports, but we had none, Azad wanted to fight over it, I grabbed him from behind and pulled him away. We found another, a few further on. On it shone the name Kalinihta, in brightly colored letters. They didn't ask us for anything, just to pay in advance and that was that. The guy was black and big and our guarantee that we wouldn't steal anything and we'd be quiet. At the hotel café in the evening there were whores and we managed to find our way to an Albanian there who would drive us over the border for a thousand euros.

We went through the town of Kilkis. At the border with Macedonia I saw a man who had ripped all the seats out of his car, dressed up in a slipcover and pretended he was a car seat. But most of the others didn't go quite so far as all that. We, too, waited and proceeded when the Albanian was told there'd be a congenial police shift on duty. He left us in a hotel in southern Serbia, gave us tickets which we were supposed to show the police if they stopped us, I think I still have mine somewhere in my bag. He told us that all we needed now was to cross the border into Hungary. In Belgrade there was an army of people working at this, it wasn't expensive, there'd be no problems.

We stayed a week, slept in real beds, ate well. At first we didn't talk about further plans. We had enough money to cross the last border, so we were relaxed. All day long I lay around and watched television. Every day there was this show about a man who went to places with extreme weather, and threw himself into the water and then explained what you need to do to survive: eat worms and the liver of wild animals. He deliberately put himself in extreme situations, looked straight at the camera, was careful to make sure they were filming.

I hadn't called home for ten days. The stone membrane was hardening. I was already inured to my nightmares. I dealt so easily with violence in my dreams that they no longer woke me. You accept it like back pain, and besides you can't uproot it.

What's wrong, Azad asked me every so often, as if we hadn't already said everything there was to be said. Why are you always so quiet? I told him I was quiet because I was angry and sad. Why sad? asks a voice of something vast and eternal. As Allah doesn't speak to me, I know a smaller god must be addressing me. I'm sad, my Lamassu, because now I know I can never go back. The place I left is no longer there, it's gone for good, for me that place is rubble. And for that place, I am rubble.

Maybe I didn't want to go back any more. I'd bring my family after me, I know. Running away like I have been is infectious like disease, especially catching for those who used to love you.

Azad liked being out, so I left him to make the rest of the arrangements. He came one evening and said we wouldn't be going through Belgrade, but through Bosnia. He found a good option—you pay everything, and all you have to do is ride like a king. With the price he arranged, each of us would still be left with three hundred euros. When he was in a good mood, he kept saying he was guilty for this or that little thing or how clumsy he was. He'd wait for my permission to laugh aloud and be in a good mood. Which was not forthcoming.

"When we cross the last border, I don't want to see you ever again," I told him before we went to sleep the last night at the hotel.

"I see in every glance of yours how much you despise me. I hope that will cease one day. Maybe you'll remember me and our journey in a better light some day."

"In which better light would that be?"

"We survived. For me that's a victory."

"But we did not remain human beings. For me that's a defeat."

Azad turned off the bedside lamp. A minute later he spoke through the dark. His voice bounced off the walls and seemed to come to me from several angles at once.

"I know that at night you dream you're tumbling down and you can't stop. I see how you thrash in your sleep. You can think the worst of me, but let me tell you this. You won't stop falling when you deserve to stop, but when you decide to stop. If you still believe in deserving, then you have my pity. You'll always tumble and resent everyone around you, just as you resent me. You dream you're falling because you're holding off to see what will happen, whether anyone will understand what they owe you because you're falling. You'll stop tumbling down once you decide. Take responsibility for your life. Accept that you have a choice."

"Maybe you do, Azad. I never have. My family is…"

"You always do. You say you don't, but that only means you have chosen to let fate trample you underfoot. That allows you to deny feeling responsible for anything. Is that it? That's why you played the game of looking after me. Thank you for all you did. Just please accept that this was your choice. My choice was not to take part."

"You don't always have a choice. You can't choose how you'll die."

"Death? No, that is a choice you don't have. Although… if you are strong enough, you can decide that, too."

13. P / Exit Varaždin

"No, keep going straight. The exit is Prelog. We still have to cross the Drava."

"Come on, repeat for me what we know, so it doesn't look like we're from Mars."

"But we are. There. The report was received at the police station at 7:03, at the county state attorney's office at 7:48, you took your time, boys, and further action as ordered in accordance with blah blah. The coroner arrived at blah blah. If rain was pouring like it was in Zagreb, everything was probably good and drenched by the time they got there. Mmm, mmhm, good, Sandokan Ignac was identified immediately, age twenty, from Bukov Dol, taken in critical condition to the County Hospital in Čakovec, blah blah, doctors fighting for his life, fiddle faddle. Multiple fractures, crushed skull. Mmhm, okay, sure. The coroner has declared dead two unidentified… in … Wait a sec. Unidentified?"

"Maybe no documents were found."

"The investigation showed… Male… Meter 85, the other man shorter, meter 70, between 20 and 50 years of age… Mhm… Oh, great. Brilliant. You fucker."

"What?"

"No documents were found, one pre-paid cell phone, no recorded numbers. Only incoming calls. The victims were fingerprinted, sent to the lab, everything fine, but missing is what matters most."

"What?"

"Faces. They were shot from close up, likely a home-made firearm. We have three victims, one hanging on by a thread, and two of them with porridge for faces."

"Fine. Doesn't matter."

"How could it not matter, Plančić?"

"Well let's go see who is missing among the living. I bet we'll have a clearer picture even before the weirdos from the lab get back to us. Let's go grab us some ćevaps."