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The Lizard's Tail

(Gušterov rep)

Stories

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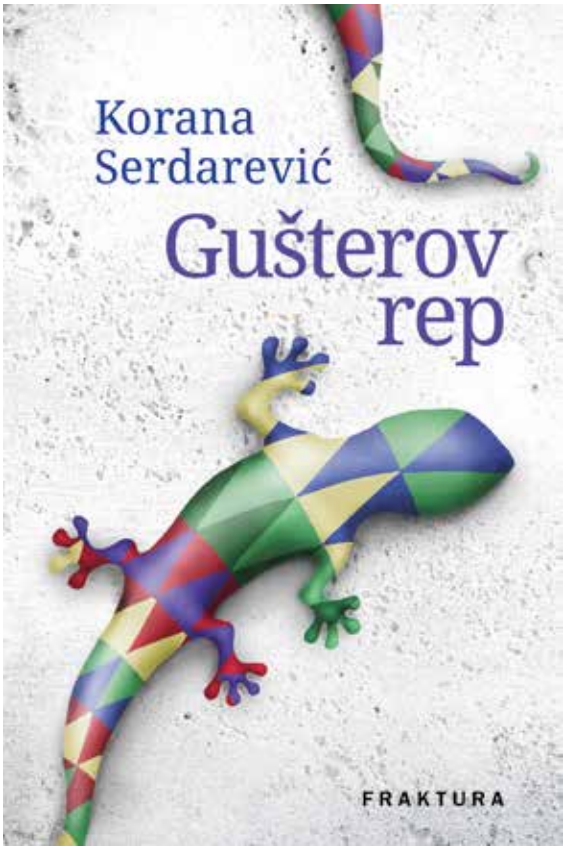

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Mr. Lucky Charm

Mother and I read our fortunes from coffee grounds every Friday. I brew the coffee after lunch once I've done the dishes and Mother has had a little lie-down. While she's resting, I am not to talk to her, her lips are a sharp-pointed arrow shooting from the middle of her face across the whole room, zapping straight to below my bellybutton and there it stings—as if I was the one giving birth, years ago, to her. The images on the television screen flash by one after another, and under the window blossom Don Juan roses. When I say that name it fills my mouth. When the summer comes so close that Mother's bed before dawn is damp from sweat, the Don Juan roses open like the legs of a girl, tenderly and shyly, and in them: velvet, blood, and pollen.

Mother and I drink our coffee in silence until the grounds are on our tongues. Then we use the saucers like lids to cover the cups so we can flip them over; the black liquid spills over the white porcelain. Black like Mother's insomnia that dirties my dawns and has been dripping for years into my life. For a long time I've been filled to the brim.

For ten minutes the cups sit there, upside down, stuck, plugged, they'll chart our destinies.

We live in sludge, Mother and I. We swim slowly and breathe with effort, but we're still alive. At least she is, I know she is, because sometimes in the evening when she dozes off under the window, her mouth half-open, her eyelids drooping, I come so close to her that her breath crawls across my face. From her mouth comes the smell of the attic and clothes that were stored there a long time ago so I think she'll die, like everyone dies, but so far she never has.

Hers is the first and only cup I open. If the grounds haven't fully drained, I quickly put the cup back down so Mother doesn't see, and doesn't get angry at me for jinxing the reading. I say something like: "Oops, forgot to latch the front door." Mother's lips twist in mistrust, her head bobs, and the next day she tells our first neighbor: "That girl of mine's always forgetting to latch the door, but telling her

is such a waste of time. What all that kid has forgotten, left half-finished, cracked, she's got a bone through her brain." That's what she says, I hear her.

In her coffee cup I see a scraggly cat, stretching, it's missing a leg and its ears look like they're clipped. Mother's eyes squint, and she decides: "That must be you, Leila, with those stunted hands of yours, and your fingernails all black from the paint. And the ears, Leila, because you're deaf, you never hear me when I call, you sit there in your room and muck around with those oily canvases of yours. It's all you, Leila, look at your slouch, you're strung out like a string of spit, ha-ha, ha-ha." We laugh together: look at me! I'm having such a glorious time with Mom!

On the other side of the coffee cup I see two men. One of them I ignore. He's Dad, the one who stayed behind in Bosnia and he's all silence and penury. Mother walked out on the sloth, the wastrel, the jackass who'd seduced her when she was just a kid. "Sure you'll do that, sure you will," said Dad complacently whenever she threatened to leave, when she spat and clawed at him. And then one Sunday after dinner she reached for my sister and me and her suitcase. She grabbed us by the necks and out she walked. She sure did. "Well now is this Boris? I see him laughing," I skip over the first one and jump to the other, and tell her, and she goes all tender. "Laughing, is he?" she draws out the words and rests her hands on the sacks that used to be her breasts. Boris is Mother's second husband: the man, Mr. Lucky Charm. She met him in Zagreb, and then she left me and my sister on our own in this house which looked to everyone as if it were built on a slant, tilted to the side, and we always say: indoors, I swear on my sainted mother, you don't notice a thing. Everything's flat, flat as the Pannonian plains, just the way we like it.

By the time Mother moved out we were already grown, my sister and me. Aiša was over twenty and she married pretty soon. Everything's fine with her, thanks be to God. She arranged her life so it's like a huge pile of stuff and every day she's frantically tending to it, she dashes around, she's always late, calls but never has the time to talk. She's so sorry, Aiša is, that she can't stop by more often. I was still a student when I started living by myself and the whole kitchen was full of my drying canvases. And a few years later, when Boris, Mr. Lucky Charm, left on a business trip, Mother came back to our slanty house as if she'd never left. It has been seven years now since Boris left on his business trip, and the two of us, Mother and I, are waiting.

"Is he close?" she asks me while I describe the rest of the images to her. I already told her all sorts of other things, but she wasn't listening. Thoughts inside her lodge in her throat and catch.

"Who, Mama?" I'm genuinely surprised, but shouldn't be.

"Who? Fuck it all, what do you mean, who? What do you mean, Leila? Fuck

you!" While she shouts, her pupil goes sharp, a full circle amid her yellowish eyeball, and the sinews in her neck are so tense that one of these days they look to me as if she'll let loose the arrow, she'll draw it tight, and somewhere it will snap; her eyes will zap me right in the center of my face. This is how much my mother hates me, she aims with words at my bare life.

"Boris is close, he's close," I repeat softly.

Bullshit he's close.

After dinner, a little before Mother drops off to sleep and I lock the door to her room, I feel my breath deepen, but her curse stays right there lying on the saucer, it gives off steam and waits for me to bite. I hear through the wall: Mother snores, then tosses and turns, then she gets up, bangs on the door, shouts something, curses then prays, threatens first me then God, and then she tires out and falls back onto the bed. She doesn't remember in the morning but she does feel. She feels that she despises me, me and my canvases that I smear all night. And this has gone on the same way for years, it's how they advised me. Her life I save by day, and mine by night.

I hold the paint brush like a knife blade. Aiša sells the paintings abroad, people say they're good. They're dark, but still there must be beauty, it's just that I don't see it. I paint like I'm operating. Across from my bed there's a canvas of Don Juan roses that I left unfinished some time ago. I stare at it. I have to remember what made me so soft that I was able to paint the roses. When I do remember, that will surely save me. But more and more often, now, while I lie in bed and look at them, they look like moldering bloody cunts.

I know what people are saying. Such a shame—my life. So young, and I never packed up my things and left. I'm no refugee, I don't leave, that's not who I am, I'm better than that. There will be a way.

And then one day the letters began to arrive.

My dear wife,

I heard you were ill! Zehra, my distant sun, don't succumb! Don't let it get to you, stay strong! I cannot tell you how awful I felt when I heard, I haven't been sleeping now for nights. I blame myself, Zehra, who else can I blame? They say they took you to the hospital, why didn't anyone let me know? If I'd known, I'd have come, you know that, I'd have dropped everything just to see you, hold you in my arms. But now that you're recovering, they say you're back with Leila. All bad things come to an end, and Leila, bless her, may she care for you until I return. Hold on a little longer, Zehra my love, a month or two until this contract that is keeping us apart runs out. A little longer, be well, hold on. Soon!

With all my love, as always, your Boris.

I read this to her, she sobbed, she kissed my hair, slobbered all over my face. Afterward she dictated the answer, choppy sentences, jerky like a tail shed by a lizard fleeing to save its skin. I wrote down what she said, licked the envelope, and sent off the letter the next day. A letter arrived every other day. I'd bring it in to her in the morning with the bread from the bakery. Mother listened to me read the letters, then she'd pore over them all day long, from the first to the last. More and more came, enough for the morning and into the afternoon. She smiled, combed her hair. Our Mr. Lucky Charm could do no wrong. He rescued my days, and Mother slept more soundly at night. Maybe she was dreaming, too, chock full of medicine and lies.

Nearly nine months passed and then one evening, early autumn pulling on jackets and sweaters, when someone rang the doorbell. Aiša hadn't said she was coming over. Relatives only stopped by now and then on weekends. Mother jumped to her feet. I did not.

When she opened the door, she sank to the slanting wall. At the door, straight-backed and fat, stood Boris. In a black suit, with an faggy knapsack slung over his shoulder, he wanted to smile.

"Good evening, Zehra," he said. She said nothing. I leaped up and grabbed her around the waist, pulled her back inside, locked her in the house. I punched him wherever I could, pushed him out of the yard, spitting, cursing. "She owes me money for treatment," he shouted. Screw your mother's blood, you two-faced creep, you louse. May a dog crap on your grave. I howled and wailed, I pummeled him hand and foot, and he threw his fat fingers up to cover his blotchy red face, he staggered in that suit like a big fat penguin, he tried to punch me back but I dodged him. I'm the scrawny cat from the mud puddle, I'm the invalid of Mother's life, but my three legs bounced me up high into the air, I ducked, I scratched deeply. "Both of you are crazy, sick cows," sniveled the penguin, and I knew he was scared. The woman he's with was waiting for him out in the car, I saw her through the windshield, covering her mouth with her hand, her blue eyes aghast. She was shocked, horrified, and the bitch who stole my mother's happiness—maybe even her mind—was cringing on her seat, dry and skinny like a shriveled-up old piece of shit. He got into the car, cursing me, Mother, and God, and turned the key in the ignition. I pelted them with two rocks from the road. One for Mother, one for me—Mother's little dear.

I found her on the floor, by the wall, serene. She asked me who that was and what I was on about. Nothing, Mother, just some crackpot. "That's what I thought," she said, "a stranger."

We sat ourselves down along the wall of our house, aslant. Above us the blue sky swirled into denseness and streamed down the chimney, plunging in deep.

That was what I was waiting to see: the entire universe wrapping itself around us. And we leaned in, pressing against each other. We have everything. There's nothing good, Mother, to be had from giving up on our happiness. Tomorrow I'll write another letter. I, the man, Mr. Lucky Charm.

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The Cleaning Lady

I don't bring my own, but any old rags will do," she said, slipped off her shoes and set her big pocketbook on the floor. It had no zipper so it gaped indifferently and displayed its messy insides. Mrs. Z. hastily looked away—it's unseemly to look inside. The new cleaning lady stood barefoot in the roomy hallway and smiled. The sun through the holes in the window blinds spewed restless white splotches all over the wall and the whole apartment trembled with morning. Behind the head of the petite woman, who was stepping across the threshold of this large apartment on the outskirts of the city for the first time in her life, the green leaf of the house palm spread like a halo. "Like a little saint," thought Mrs. Z. and returned the smile. She seemed so sweet, fragile, with her unmade-up face and her short curls. But this time there was no empathy or intimacy. If she remembered rightly, the lady standing before her was the twelfth cleaning lady who had come into the apartment that year. For each one Mrs. Z. had mustered in herself a dose of understanding, treated each with warmth and respect, but she hadn't succeeded in retaining a single one of them. They left quietly, without warning, quickly coming up with an explanation.

"Let me find you a pair of slippers," murmured Mrs. Z., and went through the shoe cupboard. Behind her the cleaning lady had already pulled a sack with some things out of her pocketbook. "Thanks, no need," she said and tucked her bare feet into plastic clogs. Then she put on a white apron and tied it in a bow behind her back and asked the owner whether there was anything in the house she should be especially careful with. Mrs. Z. remembered her friend who, over coffee, had dictated the name and phone number of this small woman the week before. "She saved my life," she said.

Yes, yes, there are a few small things that do require special care.

The two women skated across the parquet floor of the roomy apartment in their slippers, went into rooms and opened closets. The tall woman with the silky hair led the way, pulled up the blinds on the windows, pointed with her long

fingernail at the furniture and things, spoke. The smaller woman was quiet, nodded, and figured in her head how much time she'd need to get the job done right. This was the fifth apartment for her this week, but she was here for the first time and there was no allowance for mistakes. The women finally stopped before large oaken doors—the only room left unopened.

"This is my husband's room. I think he is still sleeping so we won't bother him. Later he'll probably work so do this room last. Don't worry, he knows you're here. If he doesn't come out, feel free to knock." The cleaning lady wondered whether she should put off vacuuming the whole apartment until later, but decided not to pester with more questions. She'd adapt to the situation on her own.

Mrs. Z. stood in her black high heels, clinked her car keys, her red lips pursed in a farewell, and the door shut behind her. The owner never stayed in the apartment while it was being cleaned. The cleaning lady left the vacuuming until later. Still, she started with the floors: from the bottom up, always, that's the rule. She swept and then got down on her knees, soaked the rags, rubbed, scrubbed, reached into the corners. She was speedy and thorough. Over the last twenty years she had cleaned countless other people's homes. Under the sofa she'd found babies' pacifiers, pornographic videos, food heaved at someone in passion or rage, books that were never read to the end, and crumpled school notebooks. She'd approach everything with care and deference. The vases and framed photographs she'd put tenderly back in their places, she'd straightened rows of books and polished the little bottles of musty perfumes in the bathrooms. Today she cleaned the fingerprints of strangers from the shining surfaces of the modern kitchen with equal care. Her hand had already become one with the sponges and rags she dipped in the water, squeezed out, and carefully smoothed, the way some women smoothe children's clothes before they iron them. She'd never had children. She wasn't raising a family. That was why she sometimes dreamed that the apartments she cleaned were places where someone dear to her lived, as if they were her children who'd left the muddy tracks of their tennis shoes they'd run with across the playgrounds at school, she'd imagine that what she was scrubbing off the stove was left from last night's family dinner, loud and rich.

Around noon she finished the vacuuming. There wasn't a sound from the only closed room, and no one had come out. She went over to the door three times and silently pressed her ear to it, the last time a little impatiently. Once she'd surveyed the rooms again and finished polishing all the glass surfaces, she knocked. Nothing. She said, "Pardon me, cleaner here," and knocked once more. Nothing. Should she leave the whole room untouched? Maybe the gentleman had left while she was at work in the bathroom? Did something happen to him? At that last thought she felt a stab of unease. She didn't fear ordinary messes as long as they were

someone else's. Still, maybe it wasn't too late for this gentleman, and she'd be the only person able to help him. Several possible scenes played out before her eyes and her heart began to beat faster, her breath quickened. She pressed the door handle and in she went.

A television set, a cupboard, a wall covered with shelves of books and a desk with scattered papers were in the room. On the right, along the wall, on the bed, a man's back rose and fell. Facing the wall, curled up in a fetal position, slept the man. His head was a bald and bumpy globe—it reminded the cleaning lady of a clenched fist. She shivered from an instinctual wince deep inside her and felt relieved that she couldn't see his face. Let him sleep. She'd be quick and quiet. The vacuuming she'd skip.

She silently opened a window. Droplets of the window cleaner sprayed across the glass. She caught each one with the rag before it sped to the bottom. Then she turned to the desk and noticed a half-empty bottle. It reeked, brandy. She left it there. She dusted the desk, carefully lifting the pile of papers, messily scribbled by hand, crossed-out, amended. She arranged them in a pile with the title page on top. Neatly stacked, the pages sagged in her hands with weight. Memoirs. Some lives are weightier than others and maybe they have to be poured out onto paper for the person to survive, she thought. Maybe that's why this man drinks and sleeps so late.

On the shelves she inched the books over by two fingers, then wiped the dust and brought them back into line. She didn't read the titles, she wasn't interested in how thick they were or the colors of the spines. On the lowest shelf, right next to the rug, a framed photograph was lying there, face upward. Maybe it had fallen long ago, forgotten. If she hadn't recognized the contours of her native town on the colorful photograph, the cleaning lady probably wouldn't have noticed it. But now, pained by the reminder of the town where she'd spent her childhood, she examined the faces of the man and woman who were standing in front of the town's walls, smiling brightly, relaxed. Their arms around each other. Maybe they were on vacation in the little town by the sea that she'd long since walked away from. There weren't many tourists then, but passersby always came through. On the face of the man in the picture something drew her eye and she looked more closely: deep-seated dark eyes, prominent cheekbones, a memorable gap between his front teeth. The cleaning lady's dust rag dropped to the floor. On the arm with which the man was warmly hugging the woman, his hand was missing a thumb. The cleaning lady began to cry soundlessly.

Three of them. They came when her mother was out of the house, they didn't knock. They were dirty and sweaty. They stank of drink. They spoke loudly, swore and laughed. Each of them leaned over her, each of them hawked a gob of white

spit into her mouth, which they forced open. She didn't shout, but she did say something at a whisper. A prayer, maybe. It wasn't a swear, that came years later. She sobbed and pushed at their chests. The first gave her a slap that shut her eye, the second knocked out a tooth and changed her face. The last one pressed his hand over her mouth. While he was jamming in, he slammed her head to the wall and she felt sweet, thick blood in her throat. His hand was now on her forehead and she clearly felt the stump where his thumb had been.

Later, when they left, she didn't lie there and she didn't cry. She dragged herself to the bathroom, spat blood, bit the towel, and began to clean herself. First she threw away all that was bloody, torn and broken, and then she scrubbed the kitchen, covered the sofa with a blanket, swept the floor. All that was beaten and flayed on her body would only heal years later, in the house she'd clean last.

The cleaning lady crouched on the floor, photograph in hand. The man was sound asleep behind her. She put it back and finally at peace, took care of the last little things. Quiet and unnoticeable, she knew what she was doing. It was late and time for her to leave this house. Time for the war to be over. She got up and moved around the bed. The sheets were smooth, and the white pillow was so stuffed with feathers that it looked as if any minute it might burst.

She lay the thick stack of hand-written pages in the middle of the room and soaked it in the brandy. From her pocketbook she took her cigarette lighter. The first to burn was the title. A single word—Memoirs. Then she left the room, locked the door, dropped the key into her pocket and set off down the road. The flames were already peeking out the window. The cleaning lady thought of Mrs. Z. and her red lips. She took a deep breath and smiled. She'd saved her life.

pp. 61-67

The Lizard's Tail

Delicious," says Damir. In his mouth he places the last piece of meat from his plate. He watches me while he extracts the fork, clamping down on the metal with his front teeth. I've never told him this irritates me. It's Sunday, we're all around the table. The four of us. Beti is in her high chair, smearing the leftover spinach in her plastic bowl. Every so often she coos or shouts. She swigs from her water bottle, throwing back her head.

Renči already stuffed as much into herself as she could fit and knew she was expected to eat, and then she asked, as usual, if she could leave a few mouthfuls of food untouched on her plate. And again she locked horns with her father over this.

"This is a habit you'll have to break, I've told you a million times," he snapped.

"I can't, I can't eat another bite, you're making me eat when I'm all full, you're not fair, you're not fair!" she shouted, and then her eyes went red and her voice thinned. No. I would not listen to crying today. So I jumped in and told her to leave the food on the plate, but she couldn't leave the table. Damir hates it when I meddle. Because of me he hasn't had the chance to break her in, though I didn't say that. I didn't look at him.

From the table Renči watches a cartoon on the television in the living room with the sound off. I know how much she wants to go and lie down on the sofa, but I need her here, nearby, with us. The table is the magnet I set to hold us together. With Renči forced to sit there, we imitate the people in ads, people who chuckle, romp with their children who race through the halls in muddy shoes, these people gaily stir-fry vegetables, dance while putting the meal on the table, clink their glasses, kiss each other on the cheeks. I do all I can. I say that I want all of us to finally be together around the table. I don't say they could sit for twenty fucking minutes at least over food I spent half the goddamn morning preparing. Sorry, Mama didn't mean to swear, I'd have had to add if I said that.

I don't understand women who say they don't find it difficult to take care of their family. It is difficult. I do it anyway.

On Sunday I always bake a cake. I don't remember when I began or why. Maybe someone told me I should, so the family could satisfy their sweet tooth. Maybe my mother, or even Damir. Today I made tiramisu. I take it out of the refrigerator, Damir pours himself a glass of wine.

"Pour me a little more, too," I say, and point to my empty glass. I feel on edge and force it down my throat with one big gulp. The surface of the dessert looks like a brown bedspread drawn up over sheets. First I slice into it with the tip of the knife and sketch equal-sized squares and then I plunge the blade into the middle. It offers no resistance.

"Would you like me to cut the pieces?" asks Damir.

The children eat theirs. Beti is given only the topping, I'm afraid the coffee and rum might be bad for her. They might keep her from falling asleep and that would be a catastrophe. Then I really might lose my mind. How many times over this year and a half have I wished this sweet little girl would fall asleep quickly, lift her soft little arms above her head, close her eyes and breathe peacefully? How many times? About five hundred days, about five hundred times in her short life, her mother longed for her consciousness to be elsewhere. I think this is unfair to Beti, I'm sure I could be a better mother, but I'm too tired. That's why I don't chide myself for it.

We've had our wine, Renči is finally on the couch, and Beti in her bed is clutching a stuffie and calling quietly to me: "Mommyyyy, Mommyyyy." She already knows she should be going to sleep on her own, but she can't give me up. Damir says it's crazy that I put her to sleep every day, and how long will this go on. I explain that this last year I found it easier to lie down with her than listen to her howl. Damir whispers: "You don't have to keep reminding me what it was like for you while you were on your own, I get it. And besides, what was Renči up to while you were lolling around with the baby?"

I put the dishes in the dishwasher and every few minutes I go to the children's bedroom to say something to her so she can hear me. Mama's here, don't you worry now. After the fifth time I've left and come back, Beti settles down, and when I peek in, I see her face completely relaxed, a tear caught in the corner of her eye.

"There, see, that works," says Damir. He stares at his cell phone. Every so often his mouth crooks into a grin. I sat down next to him and I wait.

"What's so funny?" I ask him when I tire of this.

"Oh, a friend's texting something. You don't know him."

"Ah ha, so I don't know him." Silence, then I add, "A friend from prison?"

We look at each other with, like, hatred, though that's not true. Look what I did. Singlehandedly I fucked up my day. I wonder why I said that. Prison is no longer mentioned in our house, it mustn't be. Damir clearly said that it's best if we don't say anything about it, the year and three months, because every reminder of the pain holds us back from living. We've paid our debt, he says. It's time for us to move on, forget what happened. I agree: yes, you're right. We've paid our debt.

A year and a half ago, on his way home late one night, Damir ran over a man who was working on construction on the street. Damir wasn't hurt, he sobered suddenly and the four beers he'd had with his colleagues flew out of his stomach as soon as he opened the car door. The road worker, surrounded by all the necessary signs, had, a minute before, been repairing tram tracks. Damir said he hadn't seen him and he'd lost control of the car in the curve. After the car hit him the worker was no longer a worker. The lower part of his spine was permanently injured. Even after the operation he couldn't stand on his own and was given a wheelchair. His name is Mario.

"Forgive me, I don't know what came over me," I say. "I'm really sorry. I just wanted us to talk a little." He looks at me and says nothing and then he pats me on the hair as if he's my father, and not Damir. "Do you want us to watch a movie while she sleeps?" he whispers.

Renči draws and sings. She's not a baby anymore. The other day she turned six. We invited her friends from nursery school, I gave them all cake, and then we hung out in the park by our apartment building. The children and a few of the parents, the ones who wanted to stay so we could have coffee at the café. Or have a look at Damir to see how well he's doing, how he's managing, what he's talking about. In the end we didn't hire a clown, though Renči wanted one, because clowns are more than our family budget can bear. Maybe next year. Renči accepted the explanation calmly. She didn't protest and that saddened me. I thought, she's getting used to this, maybe she even understands some of this. I hope she hasn't understood all of it.

"Dad's away working," I told her over the year and three months. "He had to go, but he'll be back soon. He'll write you all the time and we'll write him."

"But how come we don't have any money, Mama? Mara's dad works in Germany, and he sends her money."

While Damir was in prison, I found job at an accounting firm. For the first time I had my own salary, but never have I had less money. I had no time or strength. My strength was sapped by six in the afternoon and at that point I was done; until the end of the day my movements were all effort and pain. Every day

Renči went to nursery school, and from nine to five Beti was looked after by a sitter to whom I gave half my salary. Sundays I went to visit Damir, and the girls stayed with my sister. Whenever I went for the prison visits, I cried all the way there in the car. But I did it anyway.

We watch television, and Damir dozes. Renči changes the channel to kids' shows as soon as she sees his half-open mouth and the occasional rumble that escapes through them. That's how we know he's with us. I stroke my daughter's hair, it's like silk. We're quiet. Beyond the door of our apartment on this Sunday afternoon I feel us on the map of the city as if we're at the center of a dart board. As soon as Renči gets up and walks away, I slip outside the circle and feel my anxiety mount. It comes from somewhere low to the ground, like a snake, slithers into my windpipe and there it yawns. I keep feeling like I didn't swallow something right, something's stuck. I drink water but it doesn't go down.

"Did you rest?" I ask Damir when he starts awake from his nap. "You missed the adventures of a golden retriever who saves the world," I say and point to the children's movie.

Damir laughs, and answer, "Yes I did, I was feeling a little tired."

He pulls Renči into his lap and wants to tickle her, but she resists: "Come on, Dad, leave me alone. That tugs at my hair. It hurts! Daddy!" He laughs and doesn't relent, but stands up and swings her high up into the air over his head. He has won her over, now she, too, giggles.

Damir is strong. In prison for that year and three months he worked out every day, drank a lot of water, ate enough but not as much as he usually did. Now he looks trimmer than me. I have fat on my belly, and my face has started sagging somehow. My sister says I stopped laughing and that's why I'm drooping. "And you're missing sex, though I'm missing it too, and I'm still youthful-looking." My sister lives alone and she laughs all the time, for whatever reason. She is surrounded by people, but most of all by her laughter. She laughs for the joy of living, like a child. I don't know how to do that anymore.

Beti wakes up.

"Do you want to change her and bring her out to us?" I ask Damir.

He's staring at the TV, he doesn't hear me. I look at the screen, some men are breaking into a person's abandoned storage unit. They don't know what's behind the door, but they've already paid a lot of money for whatever it is. I get up and go. The baby girl reaches her arms up to me and laughs. When she wakes up she's like a child from an ad. I change her diaper and the pretty ad begins to smell pretty bad.

"It's nearly five, time for a walk!" I call out.

Renči goes to bring her scooter from her room, and Damir comes out of the

bathroom and says we can go, he'll stay home and write. No need for us to wait for him.

Ever since he came out, Damir has been back at work at his company, but he doesn't have enough to do. They all know he was in prison though nobody ever talks about it in front of him. As he has more time, he has been retreating into himself more. He decided to finish his doctoral thesis, most of which he wrote in prison. He used to teach classes at a private university as a guest professor, he published a few articles and won two awards, and was planning to apply for a regular teaching position as soon as the opportunity arose. I didn't ask him whether that was what he really wanted; was that how he saw himself? As a university professor? We never talked about it. I used to think that making jewelry was what I did. I enjoyed doing it. I ordered the materials online and made earrings, chains, pins. I gave them to my girlfriends, cousins, and before my second pregnancy I'd done the paperwork for my own business and selling online. People seemed to like them. When he was leaving for prison, Damir told me: "Time to slow things down with that hobby of yours. I'm sorry, love, but you'll have to find a real job, we'll need the money because of this whole situation. I don't need to explain this to you, do I?"

I never asked him where he'd gotten the money from to pay for his doctoral studies. I'm guessing his mother lent a hand. I never asked him either, because when the idea of working on his doctorate came up after his first few months in prison, I was overjoyed. He'd finally pulled himself together, come out of his depression. It had been rough watching him, consumed by guilt. For months he couldn't sleep because of the worker whose legs had been paralyzed. Before prison he began seeing a therapist. That is why I thought: if he wants to start work on a thesis now, it's a sign that he's getting better, that's wonderful. Why should he just waste his time while he's in prison, if he can spend it reading and writing? Two years, the length of his initial sentence, would be just what he needed. That's why I handled his enrolment, why I found and brought him books, saw to the documents he needed and went to see his mentor with the questions he'd written out for me. I didn't have the time or the strength, but I did it anyway.

Outdoors it's June and everything's in leaf, fragrant. We live in a nice neighborhood. Everything's convenient: school, nursery school, stores, the post office, banks, the produce market, the park. I am able to take care of all my daily tasks without covering many kilometers, I have never had to sit in a car like Damir, who needed to drive more than 15 minutes to where he works. It's much easier for me, I don't have to deal with the traffic jams.

"You go pick up Renči, I went to the produce market," he told me when I came home from work.

To reach the park we pass by a building at the intersection that is faced in big mirrors. I love that building because it reflects the neighborhood. Because of it everything's in focus and it's as if the building is pointing its finger at the world. It shows us ourselves. I stand at the intersection and wait for the green light, and on the building I see: a plump lady who is standing at the intersection waiting for the green light. She has a baby in a stroller, and by her side is a child on a scooter. That woman there, that's me. I try to smile so the image will be prettier.

Renči asks: "Who are you smiling at, Mama?"

We came home before seven. "So fast," said Damir and kissed Renči. "Did you have a nice ride?" His eyes just brushed past Beti, she's still too small for him to hang out with her. I moved her onto the floor so I could make supper. I saw the TV was on.

"I didn't feel like writing," he says. "Anyway it's Sunday."

Through the balcony door I hear the bells of a nearby church. The bells sound as if they're rousing someone. Damir attended mass a few times after the accident. We prayed to God to forgive us that because it's Damir's fault that Mario is an invalid. Damir was a true penitent, he always cried and people came over and patted him on the shoulder.

"This must be so hard for you, Sir."

"Don't go blaming yourself, Sir, it was fate, no one can escape that."

"A pure accident. Whoever says they haven't ever had a little something to drink and then sat behind the wheel and driven—is lying."

I watch as he sits calmly in front of the television set and watches an old sitcom. Now and then he laughs aloud and his shoulders jump. He's never been handsomer. Like when a lizard sheds its tail so it can escape an assailant, only to grow a new one, bigger and better, while it hides in the underbrush. That's the way my husband recovered. His tail, the memories he shed, is still twitching. It looks alive to me, and that's why I don't forget it.

A month ago I heard that Mario has started walking again. I laughed, I wept, I felt huge relief for the first time in two years. How did I hear? His wife called me, we'd gotten to know each other because I went to help her out with her kids many times while Mario was still in the hospital and they were moved to an apartment adapted for invalids, donated to them by the city. After our first awkward encounter we got along well.

"Well it wasn't you who fucked him up, so why keep saying you're sorry?" she said.

Damir was okay with me going to help her, but he asked me not to say much about them. His therapist advised the same thing. It was important to look forward, so he could find his feet again. When I heard that Mario was back on his

feet, that his injuries were not so bad and all the physical therapy had paid off, I didn't tell Damir. He may never hear. And when the church bell chimes like it did today and the scar left by the tail he shed begins to itch, he'll have to look closely at himself. This is how I comfort myself; I believe it. I tell myself: this is when Damir will think—I'm fine and I can walk quickly, that's why I go to pick up my child, I go to the store, I take the kid to the park, I go to the produce market with my wife to buy the fucking flowers. He'll get back on his feet, he'll walk.

I know that maybe this isn't fair of me. To hide something like this from him. But I do it anyway.

pp. 107-117

My Tuscany

Again, no yogurt in the fridge. I've told him a million times: Miki, yogurt is vital for your digestion. Vi-tal! He gives this a dismissive wave, blows it off with a shrug. Sometimes not even that. But he still doesn't buy yogurt. What else can he do but have me buy it for him? I buy it, deliver it, leave it on the shelf in the fridge. And do I find it there the next time I check? No yogurt. The yogurt's been eaten. Nobody mentions it, nobody asks: where did that yogurt come from? But I know what happens. He thinks, poor kid, that his wife is buying them for him. He thinks she was listening, one of those million times, he thinks she heard what I said. He thinks she is concerned about the wellbeing of his intestines and buys the yogurt, and he doesn't comment on it, just gratefully laps it up. He doesn't want to tell her: how nice that you did what my mother said and bought what helps me. It never occurs to him to do that because he knows she'd rather croak, she'd rather keel over dead than admit that she'd done what I said. And what does the young lady think when she spots the yogurt in the fridge? Nothing. She doesn't see the yogurt in the fridge because she doesn't know where the fridge is. She has only the vaguest idea of where the kitchen is, and that only because she stores her wine in one of the cabinets. Her stove is as clean as when she bought it. That is obviously not because she scrubs it. And the pots they were given? Pots that are still in the packaging on the floor! Once I tried to unpack them. I was embarrassed, they'd been married for so many months, guests came to visit and they thought: what are these pots doing here. That's why I thought to put them away, to help, to extricate my son from trouble. That is why I stayed on a little longer than usual, and Miki came home before I left. He yelled at me. Not because of the pots, I know he wouldn't raise his voice to his mother because she was touching his wife's pots. He's not like that. Miki is an admirable young man. Everyone says so. He yelled at me because of my illness, he was crazy with worry after he saw me leaning over to lift one of those heavy pots.

It is no small matter to survive bladder cancer. They removed everything and

now I'm empty inside. But I'm fine, I'm surviving. I live on. True, I seldom leave the house. I only go over to Miki's. That's why I bought him that apartment so close to mine. I never go anywhere, I take care of myself. I'm responsible and grateful that life has given me another chance so I take no risks. I don't go along with the frivolous things my girlfriends invite me to. I've no intention of going to the movies where there are so many people and the seats are hard, and where, when a person needs to go to the restroom, that means sneaking out in secret, like a thief. In total darkness. I could fall, fracture something. I won't be swimming this summer, out of the question. When they tell me I'll be fine if I just change out of my wet suit and put on a dry one as soon as I get out of the water, I feel like never calling them again. I can't even bear to pick up the phone. That's how much they irritate me. They cannot grasp what I have been through, only Miki knows because he was there by my side. He saw with his own eyes that death is always only a step away from me. That's why it doesn't occur to him to call me when he goes off with that woman of his to the beach.

Miki and I know each other well, and that is why he often leaves me alone. We have been through so much and he knows how badly I need a sense of security. That's why when he urged me last year to join that trip to Tuscany with my girlfriends, I immediately had to assume that his wife put him up to it. She probably wanted me out of town so she could be alone with him and take advantage of him somehow, get her hands on his money or make an ape of him. He is not stupid, but he is a pushover. I know, he wants a warm body next to him in bed, that's normal. Men are simple, they have their needs and that's all there is to it, but she manipulates that. As if I don't know. Right in front of Miki she advised me to go to Tuscany in that cloying voice of hers, so I could relax and rest, and finally forget my ailments and other worries. As if worries can be neatly packed up and stowed in a drawer, and while you're off traveling they're beyond reach or resolution. You don't allow them to spill all over your life if you pack up your suitcases. You rest your brain, like, what a load of hogwash. Of course maybe she can do that, when her only worry is that pit of a club which she opened, as they said in the newspaper, for the alternative scene. She is concerned about the culture of the city. It's pitiful—this culture of hers. People used to know what art is. But now, now art is an excuse for all those who don't know what to do with themselves. She's forever hanging out at that club of hers with her quasi-artists, while Miki works night and day and earns the real money. And he even helps her around the house on top of everything, of course, so he won't come across as a cad. She did set this up neatly. Cunning.

What my son's wife couldn't know is that I wanted to see Tuscany even when I was a girl. I leafed through magazines with pictures of the landscapes and

dreamed I was there, counting hill upon hill from a hillside, while cypresses shot up all over the place from the meadows. Like arrows poking at the sky. The sun behind a hill. Under it green, all green. The Tuscany paradise as I imagined it, glasses of white wine, pasta with tomatoes, laughter and a thin scarf flung over the shoulder when evening fell. When we married, I thought that Dragan would take me there, but he died. So that's how it was just me and Miki. He was still a little boy, where we used to live. A place that was the polar opposite of Tuscany, if you ask me. An unforgiving plain stretching to unforgiving mountains. And then the war began, and I remember exactly when Mijo, our neighbor, came to us, he flew into the house like a fury, and said: take the child and run, and I did. We left. With nothing. To my sister who lived alone in an apartment in a city on the coast. Thank god for that, and that my sister, though pitifully disabled, had the presence of mind to stuff the pillows full of the money from her late husband. She might just as well have buried it in a garden, and nobody would ever have found it again. Living with her those next years was hell. She did all sorts of things, but we were always there for her. Once she even tried to hang herself, she wrapped the electric cord from the iron around her neck, but she wasn't spry enough to find a sturdy place to hook it over. We held back her arms to keep her from scratching herself, her legs to keep her from running away. My boy Miki and I. When she finally ended up in the hospital, Miki found the pillows. They were the little, square kind, the throw pillows used for decoration rather than for resting your head. He brought me one, I remember that day so well, ripped it open across the middle and there it divulged its contents before me like a pomegranate. Money spilled all over the tiles. Miki was twice as pale as the kitchen floor, poor kid. He thought he'd lost his mind, he'd inherited his aunt's madness and was seeing things. Because things like this never happened to us: finding pillows stuffed with dollars. Who has things like that happen to them? But we must have deserved it after all we'd been through. And so there, I bought him an apartment because that's what he wanted, and I furnished it for him with taste. His wife's parents only bought the living room and kitchen furniture, so nobody could say they hadn't done their part. Oh, right, and they bought that black car for them, too, that's true. As if they need a car in such a small town.

When you want to go somewhere, you're better off taking a bus. We took a bus to Tuscany, my three friends and I. We paid for the package through a travel agency, Silvija was the one who handled it, I didn't want to lose any sleep. I just chimed in now and then with advice for how to handle things. What seats to ask for on the bus, what kind of rooms we wanted, to ask about the food at the hotel. All the things she'd never think of asking, just because she was never sick. She told me I was sweating the small stuff, we almost fought over it. I'd bet that all

the *small stuff* ended up meaning a lot to her during the trip, but she never said so.

Nobody ever says I'm right, but I don't doubt myself. I know I'm right because I'm still alive.

When my leg started hurting, we had just pulled into a parking lot in Trieste. Everybody left for a short stroll through town, but I could see that I couldn't go. I felt a shot of pain as soon as I tried to stand, I thought at first that I was just a little stiff. It was as if I had an electric wire running from my lower back to the sole of my foot; it ran straight down my leg. There, I knew travel wasn't a good idea. A person has to know what their limits are and not take on the unknown, not show off, not act ridiculous. I tried to walk, but the pain stopped me. Had I kept that up, it probably would have spread to my other leg, and over-exertion could have resulted in permanent damage. It would have gone on hurting forever. And I needed to keep everything firmly in mind: the fact that I was sickly and not like other people, that my life was over-full of dreadful moments and I constantly need to relax so things didn't snap inside me, and some new disease could break out from the suffering and fear, start to sprout within me. My Miki must have a mother who is strong and able, who can follow his life. He deserves no less. So I sat down on a bench and said that I wasn't going to go any further. The three of them first urged me to try to take a few more steps, and then one of them told me there was probably nothing wrong and it was all in my head. The things people dare to say to someone's face. I told her: I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore. True, Silvija offered to stay there with me on the bench. She called the guide to come back, and a few of the other passengers from the bus hovered around and tried to boost my spirits, offering me pain pills.

Of course all of them already knew about my health problems, I had told them right away during our first rest stop. It's important that they knew, so they could help me if I needed help. That's what responsible patients do. And besides, they told us all to introduce ourselves.

I wasn't sorry that I didn't make it to Tuscany. Maybe I was even a tad relieved, there, I admit it. For people like me who have been through so many harrowing moments, clearly real life is not in Tuscany, anyway. And so I stood at the bus station in Trieste while I was waiting for my ride to return home, and the bus with my girlfriends trundled on toward the hills and the cypresses. Better, I thought, after all Miki is all alone, and whenever he's alone, I'm uneasy. Travel is a passing illusion. The worries always lurk in the drawers, and can't be buried under souvenirs. That's why I am always aware of my illness. Like those people who pay money for the fancy graves and the gaudy white angels that they use to hide the fact that under them lies the decaying body of their loved ones, that's

how I look at people who shell out for excursions and travel, expensive dinners and stays at one of those recreation centers. They pretend not to see that they have no idea what this is about. I do, I am knowledgeable of death.

The morning before I went under the knife, Miki sat next to me and held my hand. I looked at it and remembered those fingers while they were still tender, white, and small. How they curled around my index finger, how the hands of my child were always seeking me. Now he was a big, grown-up young man. He sat with that neatly trimmed beard and haircut, wearing the shirt his wife bought him only a few weeks before—too large in the shoulders. He gave me a pleading look, and outside the rain was pouring down and the wind gusting. Maybe this wind will blow me away today, and the rain will wash me out of the world, I said. He squeezed my hand hard, as if he'd crush it. I cried out. Obviously he wanted to snap me out of my mood. He knew what I needed. Nobody knows anybody the way we two know each other. We were always on our own, the two of us. What if he's left behind, only a half of what we are? How will he make his way through life, an invalid, and he only just stood on his own two feet, he only just broke through the crust and the world is roiling under him like hot pudding. Who will tell him not to hurry? Not to lurch? That's why I pulled myself together quickly and before they took me in to the operation, I told him: Son, as soon as I get my strength back, we'll buy you a nicer shirt.

I didn't call him when I came home from Trieste. I didn't want him worrying, and besides my leg had stopped hurting. I took the weight off in the nick of time. Home I went, dropped off the bag, and went straight over to his place to surprise him. I was feeling a burst of energy, I could hardly wait for him to open the door. But he didn't. I rang, no one answered. I unlocked the door and went in, I was alarmed. What if she were out again and something had happened to him? I felt a nasty twinge of conscience for leaving on the trip. But Miki wasn't home, although it was after ten o'clock at night. The bedding was rumpled, there were dirty dishes, bottles, overflowing ashtrays on the dining room table. I knew she smoked in the apartment, though she always denied it. She did a good job of hiding the smell, who knows what else she was hiding.

And then they came in. Miki and a girl I'd never seen before. They were laughing, in high spirits, holding hands. I stood there in the middle of the room, I admit I was caught off guard. But not as much as Miki. Faced with me, Miki went as pale as when he found those plush throw pillows. What had he found after rummaging through the cupboard? What had my little buddy boy dragged home? I thought. The girl was young, she had round eyes and the whites of her eyes were wide and shiny. Like two egg yolks. I asked Miki where his wife was, although I knew she was back at the club, of course. I also asked who the wide-eyed girl was,

but he didn't answer. Over and over he kept asking what I was doing there. Why was I in the apartment? Why was I back? The surprise at seeing me made him a little curter, his nerves were frayed and he was probably showing off for the girl, who in no time turned tail and skedaddled. A doe. Miki sat on the sofa and burst into tears, he was suddenly so unhappy. I smoothed his hair, but I couldn't console him. It's terrible how much anguish that boy carries around, how much he worries and struggles. More than anything in the world, I'm afraid he'll make himself sick. And if he should get just a little sick, I'd be able to constantly be by his side, but what if he gets really sick? That is why I always tell him to calm down and no matter what he wants from me, I promise it to him right away. No matter how childish, unreasonable and pigheaded, I say: Fine. And afterwards I do what I was planning to do anyway. I know better than my child, don't I?

To Miki's wife I never breathed a word about the girl he brought with him to the apartment. Everyone knows that men have their needs, and I know that Miki can't get from his wife what he needs and when he needs it. She's forever in that damned club of hers, hanging out with foreigners instead of her husband. She pours wine into the glasses of random passersby, whispering about her quasi-art with strangers, people with tangled hair and shaggy beards. When I ask her why she does this, why she's never home, she just laughs stupidly. As if she gets something I don't get. And she asks me if I want to come by and see all the amazing things young people are doing. Right, young people sure do all sorts of things, all sorts! Ha-ha! I think to myself, laugh and enjoy it. And my Miki, all focused on me, trembles. Now we have a secret, my Miki and me. We never speak of it. When I think of what I saw, all I have to do is look at him. And he's like when he was a kid: powerless, pleading, tear-stained. I protect and defend him, I give him all he needs. There, now I've left another two yogurts for him, I have enough time to check through the closet and take the unironed clothes and head slowly home. Every day I do the same, it's enough to stretch my legs and walk home, satisfied. My Tuscany is only two blocks away.

pp. 117-127

Hostages

She was still asleep, but I opened the window, swung first one leg then the other over the sill, hopped down quietly, and took off at a run. Nothing in me was stronger than the need to run as far away as I could go, to put an end to my overlong imprisonment, to betray all those whom I'd promised I'd stay, I'd endure. My legs were weak from all the sitting and standing in place and I couldn't run fast, my feet stung and it was hard, all the gasping for air. But I moved further and further away.

Now it's summer and the sun has no mercy. It is here to warm and bake, the skin darkens and dries and the wrinkles arrange themselves in cracked rays. Nothing moves and everything's a weight. In front of me—shriveled leaves and singed grass. Still, if I lean closer to the earth it's fragrant, it buzzes and chirps.

Today I promise myself I'll simply bury the remembering that's pressing down upon me in my thoughts and forcing me to relive the moments. I'll cut it out of me and it will pass, because everything passes, this I know; leaves in the heat curl around their center, dry and drop off. And after they're gone, sooner or later they bud again, come spring.

Who could even recall what brought me to this juncture. With her. I probably agreed to someone else's plans, hoping for an easy future, with no idea that what looked like a random step could so complicate the trajectory. I embraced my role conscientiously and without much thought. And there. I barely had the time to figure out what was going on, when suddenly I was alone with the woman, in a house on the edge of town. They saddled me with responsibility, gave me my brief instructions, and disappeared. I was on task.

She sat on the sofa in the big room, tightly wound and clenched like a fist. Every time I moved to shift my position or stretch a little, she'd draw in her bare feet even more tightly, to make the distance from me seem even just a little greater and everything she had she pulled into this invisible hole she'd dug for herself. I don't know how long I guarded her, there were moments when it felt

like days, months. Mainly I stood leaning on the doorframe, physically preventing passage, and there I waited. Nobody showed up. I was alone.

When she needed to pee, she'd wriggle out of her position like a lazy cat and go slowly to the bathroom, dragging her feet and her soft, tousled hair behind her. I didn't allow her to shut the door, I always had to keep my eyes on her, at least on part of her. She'd pull down her pants and sit on the toilet seat, the wall prevented me from seeing all of her, but if I leaned forward a little I'd see one leg, her pants wrinkled a little above the knees, a white thigh. The hot urine splashed and sluiced, mixed with the water, and then the spray thinned, until finally a few last droplets plunked in the end, and between my legs blazed fire. She got up from the toilet, pulled up her panties, washed her hands for a long time, turned toward me with the leaden face of a stranger, and on her way back to her seat she never looked me in the eye.

My legs were aching from standing there and I kept wishing I could lie down, or at least sit. With time, this grew into an obsession: why shouldn't a person do what his body is telling him to do, allow himself a little creature comfort?! I decided to do so in an offhandish sort of way, and finally I drew a chair over and sat down. The woman looked at me with such scorn that I was instantly ashamed. I disgusted her. She probably thought the task they'd assigned me was too hard, that my character was too spineless to hold my tall frame upright. I wasn't even capable of doing that: standing there and keeping watch over her as the good Lord commands. This thought of hers provoked me, I felt a surge in my belly of rage and vicious malice. At that instant I could hate her, spit on her, maybe even hit her.

We were constantly hungry. There was drinking water, I filled the glasses and placed one near me and the other on the cupboard by the sofa, near her. She drank like a child, her lips loose along the rim of the glass, and several drops always dribbled down her chin. The first time I saw this, I thought maybe it was out of fear and a sense of pity washed through me. I told her she didn't have to be afraid, I was only there to look after her so she wouldn't run away, and soon everything would be different, she'll probably be able to go wherever she wanted, when she wanted. Nobody intended to hurt her. She was aware of everything that had brought her to this house, which she was now forced to share with me. Sometimes I thought about the moment when she first put her feet up on the sofa, about the day when she first coiled into her mute chill and slammed the brakes on all possibilities. I didn't see when that happened, I came later into the room. Women are usually the first to isolate themselves—someone told me and closed the door behind them.

We were alone. Alone and hungry. Nobody thinks about hunger until they

feel it. Once they feel it, that's all they can think about. By the windows facing the yard there was a small kitchen, so small that there was only room there for a single person. Or two if they were lovers. I raised the blinds, they thundered and light came blasting into the house. She started, maybe even exclaimed. For an instant she became pure agitation and tension, she eyed me like an animal, first I only stood for a time by the window, pretending I was checking out whether there was anybody in the vicinity. Nobody was out there, both of us had known that. When I felt she'd grown accustomed to a clearer sense of where we were, when she'd relaxed again, I slowly went about opening the kitchen cabinets, to look for stale bread, zwieback, anything. I was even prepared to cook if need be. For the both of us. I found something on a plate wrapped in a paper bag in the dish cabinet. I picked it up and pulled out its innards: a stale donut, who knows how long it had been there, sugar-coated and greasy. If someone had asked me: what would I like to eat, I'd have said that the question, at a moment of such privation, was borderline indecent. But despite the hunger, while I stood there staring at the donut in my hand, a wave of disgust rose inside me toward the yellow, hardened crust, the sugar sprinkled over its pitiful cap. The bun, this piece of air-filled, sweet-sweet dough which once some time ago had puffed up in the heat of an oven, and fingers sprinkled it, fragrant and juicy, with sugar that fell snow-like, soft, white. The thing drooling here, dead in my hand, was no longer that delicacy, nobody would ever bite into it again with delight, no one would ever desire it, this was the only thing that we, the two of us, she the woman and I the man, had to eat. Almost huffily I tore the donut into two, and from its core, to my surprise, oozed orange marmalade, fresh and liquid, like new. The sight astonished me, I stood before it a little cowed, beaten down. The donut was still alive, I thought and then sneered at myself, while at the same time stuffing the right half, all at once, into my mouth. However much of it fits, I'll chew it and swallow it. I'll endure this guard duty, the wait.

That half-donut had only just started down my throat when she knocked me to the ground. She leaped onto me from behind like a lioness, wrapped her legs around my waist, plunged her nails into my shoulders and bit me on the neck. I froze with the pain, and what was left unchewed of the dough flew from my mouth. I lay face-down on the ground, stabbed by the sharp pain in the neck, and instinctively grabbed her by the throat with my right hand, yanked her off of me as if she were a tick and flung her to the side. She hit the corner of the kitchen with her back and the air around us thickened with her cries. Only then did I realize how strong she could be, how vocal. She scrunched up and remained like that for a brief moment—long enough for me to jump away and grab her arm, to hold her immobilized in place. Her left hand was tightly clenched, I threw

myself on her to see what she was hiding, to force open the sinewy fist. When I finally succeeded, pressing her up against the wall with my knees and prying her fingers open with mine, when her hand finally opened, it was already too late. The dough she'd been clutching was completely squished and smeared all over her skin like dry excrement. Only the marmalade was left, oozing through our fingers. All we could do was to lick it.

The dark wasn't falling then, it was rising, swelling up from the floors, the earth under the foundations of the house, bringing with it the chill of underground waters, black caves and damp rocks. The woman lay on the sofa and shivered. And never once, not one single time, did I skip the thought that it would be good to hold her.

She fell asleep these last nights earlier than usual. Both of us were worn out by the march of days that were strung out on end, each of them as long and short as a blink. I sat at the table and tried to force my thoughts to travel on, to move away from this woman and the house, to recall the open, fresh world outside. So much time had passed. Through the window I saw only the empty yard and the tops of the tall, mighty trees. The lights of the city were on the other side, I could sense their vitality behind our backs and I was angered more and more often by the impossibility of turning around, stopping, walking away. The woman coughed and rolled over on her hip, the covers slid off of her, warming only one of her legs, bent at the knee. I went over to her slowly to pull them up. This was the only thing I could do: pull the covers up over her whole body. She was already much thinner, I realized that when I touched her back and felt the sharp edge of her shoulder blade. And then the hair, the silk before my face, made me come closer, inhale straight into it. I closed my eyes and stepped into brief serenity. When I snapped out of this, the woman's eyes were open. She looked me right in the eye, and I remembered how she'd looked that way once long before at another man. He couldn't have been me. She pulled me to her, took my hand and slid it between her legs. With one finger I sank into her and she curled right up, came to life, wriggling, dancing. She was smoldering under the skin, in her middle there were fires blazing, my hostage, this tiny, frightened woman, my woman. My spouse.

Before dawn, my body lay next to hers, like it used to, uncovered and naked. I got up to get a glass of water, and then my attention was drawn to something under the window. The yard was still empty, but the gate was wide open and a gray tom cat, fat and slow, lazily sauntered out onto the road. He, who could have gone anywhere, at any time, settled down by the side of the road, turned his head and looked back at our house calmly, indifferently, as if nobody had ever been inside it.

Now, when all this is merely a memory, fewer and fewer people come who know that I was once in the house on the edge of town with the woman with the soft hair. It's summer, but soon the September rains will fall, they'll wash away all traces, soak the fields, sweep clean the doorsteps. Far from me, in the kitchen of a house, a woman will take a baking pan out of the oven full of fragrant, warm donuts. "Don't eat them yet, they'll burn your mouth," she'll say to someone there with her, and throw open the window.

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