

Robert Međurečan

Birdcage

Translated by Vesna Marić

Katarina Juric had always been a sensitive child. This was a character flaw for those growing up in the Bosnian mountains. Had her father Stipan not been the richest man in Suha Mahala and the surrounding area, she would have always been seen as nothing but a clumsy fool. As it was, the village had to tolerate this strange child who wept when they slaughtered pigs or when drunken men broke out in loud song.

- Send her to me, to Germany - Stipan's brother Ivan kept telling him. - Let her get educated, she'll waste away here among these peasants.

But Stipan couldn't separate from his daughter, and she too was overly attached to her father.

- Since my wife died, Kata is everything to me.

- Don't be selfish, God will punish you! Think of her future!

When things got heated between the Croats and the Muslims, Stipan went to the Hodzic family in Malopoljsko, a neighbouring Muslim village.

- Neighbours won't attack each other. You have my word, Stipan! - said Mehmed Hodzic, an heir of an old noble family. - May everyone look after their own village and not bother others. Deal?

One night, the Muslim army entered Malopoljska. There were also foreigners who spoke of Allah and the holy war. Mehmed and two of his eldest sons did not see the light of the next day. Osman became the head of the family. He was the youngest son, not yet eighteen. There was a story going around Malopoljska that the Hodzic family was killed by the Croats from Suha Mahala. The attack on Suha Mahala was short and hard. Katarina managed to escape into the woods at the last moment, the woods that stretched behind the house and the storeroom. Hidden there, she watched as her father was arrested along with other villagers, and she saw the village robbed and burned down. In the forest, she ran into Bozo, an old neighbour. Frightened, he gripped a hunting gun, expecting the enemy to appear at any moment.

- Let's go to Mostar over the mountain, Kata. We will need three to four days.

- I am not going anywhere without my dad.

- Don't be silly, child - he dragged her by the hand.

- I am not going without him! - she became hysterical, pulled her hand away, and Bozo crossed himself, mumbling 'fuck you, mad cow' and left.

Katarina hid in the woods around Malopoljska, watching the house where Stipan and the rest were held captive for days - she had lost sense of time. She slept under the open sky, foraged on forest fruits or stole fruit from gardens and orchards, drank the water from the stream, possessed by the thoughts of how she could

save her father. What could a thirteen year old girl do? The mountain was empty. Even the animals had ran away before the madness of humanity. She felt alone in the world. Fear gripped her tiny body, because she knew what might happen if she was found. I must persist, she said to herself, something good will happen. Must happen. Malopoljska was brewing with soldiers. Mostly strangers. She only recognised Osman Hodzic and another village man. One night, Osman took Stipan out of the house with a group of soldiers and started walking down the mountain. Katarina panicked, it looked as if they were going to execute him. She followed them all night. They arrived at a steep and misty crevasse just before dawn. She could hardly make them out, and then they suddenly turned back and started walking the way they came. They passed her at barely twenty metres, her hiding in a bush. A bearded soldier held a knife on Stipan's throat, and Osman was convincing him that there would be an exchange, that one should not rush into executions.

- Petar Toma wouldn't fuck us over! - Osman was repeating, like a mantra.
- Petar Toma is lying! There is no exchange! - the soldier with the knife growled.
- Abdul, listen to me! We are going uphill to the old sawmill, it's not far. We can camp out there, and I'll go back to the Croats and check what has happened to Petar.

Abdul nodded after thinking shortly and the line of people moved uphill. Katarina walked too. They soon reached a clearing around a wooden ruin, surrounded by rotting logs. Katarina cowered on the edge of the forest. Osman took Stipan to the iron reservoir behind the building.

- They took it off a steam engine and stuck it here as a water reservoir - Osman explained to Abdul while taking off Stipan's lock and chains. - Get in, Stipan! - he told him to climb up and get inside the reservoir. He lowered the lid, securing it with a lock.
- You don't trust me, Osman, that I don't kill Stipan? - Abdul was offended. Osman said nothing, lowered his head and went on. - Osman you never be a good Muslim! You live too long with Christians! You bad apple, Osman... - he pointed his gun at Osman, but instead of a shot there was the sound of a shell, whistling as it fell. An explosion sounded. A grenade fell right in front of Abdul and tore him to pieces. Osman screamed, gripped his wounded leg. Two people dragged him into a sheltered area.
- They have us on a plate here! Let's get out! - someone shouted.
- What shall we do with Stipan? - another asked as they tended to Osman's wound.
- Nothing, his own people will kill him. Fucking hell, no money again! Let's get out! - Osman stood up on his good leg with difficulty and the whole group was then lost in the forest.

The shelling lasted for a short time. As soon as it was quiet, Katarina ran to the reservoir and started knocking madly, pushing her fingers through the fresh shrapnel holes.

- Daddy! Daddy! Are you ok, daddy?
- Kata! - came from the reservoir. - Jesus... What are you doing here? Run!

The girl wept with joy, and stroked the iron. She felt her father's finger through a hole.

- I am not going anywhere without you daddy.
- Where are Osman and the rest?
- They ran off...

Katarina climbed on the reservoir. There was a lock on it.

- Find a piece of iron and break the lock - Stipan said, trying to stay calm.

Katarina had no energy for queasiness, so she decisively looked through Abdul's bloody remains and pulled out a broken shotgun, climbed up on the reservoir and hit the lock, but her strikes were too flimsy.

- This was once the place where they sawed wood. Find something sharp - her father said.

Another grenade whistled and fell near the reservoir. Katarina screamed. The detonation threw her off the reservoir, and a sharp pain pierced her shoulder. She lost consciousness. She came to in the evening, felt the night freshness on her cheeks and a fire in her shoulder. Her arm hung limply. She got up, holding her wounded arm and approached the reservoir.

- Daddy - she could hardly speak.

A nervous rustle came from inside.

- My dear child! You're alive - Stipan cried. - Run, child! Save yourself!
- I'm not going anywhere without you - Katarina moaned, and wrapped up her arm with a ripped shirt. - Don't cry daddy. I'm OK.
- Kata I am very thirsty...
- I'll bring you water daddy, don't worry.
- How are you going to give me water, I'm locked up in here?
- I'll pour it through the shrapnel holes...

She remembered that there had been a stream a few hundred metres down the road, she had crossed it that morning. She found Abdul's water bottle, full of holes. It will do for a few sips, she thought and walked into the darkness. The night is never as dark and thick as it is in a forest, and she was weak. Her wound burned. She fell several times before reaching the stream. She went back, got lost. Came out onto the road that curved around, slipped and fell, and dropped the water bottle. The water bottle rolled into the darkness. Katarina started the cry. She was overwhelmed by lethargy. She lay on the road, weak. Heaving. Her legs were full of cuts from the falls, and her wound was bleeding again. She tried to stay awake, but her body did not obey. It was starting to get light. As soon as it was light, she'd find the water bottle and take water to her father and set him free. But now she needed to rest a little. Just a little... She lost consciousness again. The headlights on the military jeep were covered with black tape so that they only reached a metre ahead, and the driver, whose reflexes were devilishly good, stopped just inches away from Katarina's body. A soldier jumped out, lifted

Katarina and took her inside the jeep. She squinted. The last thing she saw before completely passing out was the scar on his cheek.

When she opened her eyes, she was blinded by the whiteness of the walls. Am I in heaven? Katarina looked around the room. She was lying in bed, next to her were children with bound arms and legs. Her shoulder was dressed and bound, there was no pain. It was not heaven, it was a hospital. A thought cut through her mind: dad!

- Daddy!! - she shouted with all her might, causing a commotion. Frightened children started to cry. Doctors and nurses gathered around her, trying to calm her down. Katarina screamed and screamed, and was given a sedative. She then stopped screaming and fell asleep. When she awoke, she was tied to the bed. There was a nurse at the other end of the room, tending to a boy's head dressing.

- Where is my daddy? - Katarina cried.

The nurse went up to her, touched her forehead.

- It's ok. The fever is down.

- Where is my daddy?

- I don't know. Maybe the doctor knows.

- Call him then - Katarina shouted.

The nurse stopped smiling, left the room in silence. A doctor came in, a tubby old man with some fluffy hair around his ears. Katarina bombarded him with questions.

- Wait a minute, girl. We don't even know your name.

- Katarina Juric from Suha Mahala - the words poured out of her. - Where is my dad? He's not still in that reservoir, is he? He'll die of thirst.

- Take it easy, Katarina - the doctor was calming her. - The soldiers who found you in the mountain found some other people too. You daddy must be among them.

- And where are they now?

- In various hospitals. You're in the Mostar hospital. Don't worry, everything will be fine. Now all that matters is that you get better.

- Where are the soldiers who brought me here?

- They'll come, don't worry. They'll explain everything.

The doctor's calm tone convinced her that the soldiers had found her father.

Another ten days passed. Katarina was better, and could get up and walk around the ward. They planned to move her to Split. During one of the walks down the corridor, she peeked through the cracked door of the

doctor's office and saw the soldier with the scar on his cheek. That's the one who saved me and daddy!, she was giddy. She wanted to jump into his arms and kiss him, but paused to hear what they were saying.

- Doctor, I've seen a lot of things during the war, but this was horrific - the soldier spoke, sighing heavily.
- We pushed the Muslims back from Cvrsnica mountain towards Jablanica, when just by the old sawmill, which had been no man's land, we found a man locked up in a reservoir. He'd died of thirst. Who knows how long he had been in there. Dried up like a mummy. But that's not the worst of it. He had bitten his own arms, his mouth was full of blood. He looked like a dead vampire, it was disgusting.
- To die of thirst is the most infernal of deaths - said the doctor. - Three to five hellish days, which is how long an average person can survive without water. On the second day you drink your own urine as if it were champagne. The third day you stop sweating, lose your tears, your eyes drop inside your skull, you start to resemble a corpse. The fourth day you have no more urine, your organs start working, the brain too. In that state of mind, you gnaw on yourself in case you might find a drop of blood, the only liquid you can find... Hey little girl, what are you doing here? - he saw Katarina standing petrified outside the door.
- You lied to me doctor - she said quietly, ran at him and started hitting him madly. - You lied to me! You all lied to me! - she shouted.

The doctor, amazed by her force, tried to defend himself, to calm her down. The soldier got a hold of her, but she pulled away and ran onto the corridor.

- What was that? - asked the soldier, shocked.
- That was a big a mess! She's the one you brought in, wounded, from the mountain. It seems that the man who had died of thirst was her father, the one she's been talking about the whole time.

They both ran after Katarina. She was already out of sight, they could hear her sobs.

- Daddy, daddy, they lied to me... She climbed onto the staircase handrail, stopped crying, became serious. - I told you daddy, either we both go, or neither. - She whispered and flew into the abyss. The soldier had managed to just touch her pyjamas as he tried to catch her.

She was awoken again by the whiteness of the walls. This time it's different, she thought, I am definitely in heaven now. And then she felt the pain, the worst ever. Her entire body was enveloped in a plaster cast, like a cocoon. She had been transferred to Split first, then to Zagreb. That is where her uncle Ivan met her, from Germany.

- Her clavicle is broken as well as her pelvic bone, both arms, she has a cracked vertebrae - the doctor recited.
 - She is young, she will recover. But, she'll need time. Especially for her psychological state. The tissue will mend, the bones will heal, but a broken soul is a stubborn patient.
- When can I move her to Munich? - asked her uncle.

- When her vertebrae have healed and we remove the plaster cast.

When she cut her wrists for the third time in the next two years, uncle Ivan had had enough. He wanted to send her to a sanatorium so that she could get treatment there, even if it meant spending all his money on it.

- Katarina is seriously ill - Dr Butina told the desperate Ivan, and absentmindedly nibbled on the handle of his glasses. Butina was Ivan's old friend. He ran a private psychiatric hospital in Munich. - The reality and past events are in a constant struggle inside her. Her psyche is as fragmented as Picasso's paintings. The various parts need to be gathered and pieced together. I'll warn you now Ivan, we will never manage to patch her up entirely, many cracks will remain, and along the cracks that we stick together, there will be visible and painful scars. It will take a lot of time and effort.

- My friend, do what you need to do. I will pay anything. Katarina is all the family I have left.

- OK. We shall start with the truth. If there is anything you know about her father, but have failed to disclose, now is the time to confess. Lying is a mortal sin for her.

- I had to slit my wrists - calmly said the fifteen-year-old Katarina Juric, her wrists bound up with gauze. - It was my fault that my father had died in such a terrible way. I was not strong enough, good enough to stay awake and show the soldiers where he was imprisoned - she took a sip from a plastic bottle. - As punishment, I cut my wrists and drank my blood.

Her uncle burst into tears.

- It's not your fault, Kata. It's my fault. I didn't tell you about it, but I see you won't stop until you kill yourself... I'll tell you the truth. When Stipan was imprisoned, a young man came to see me, here in Munich. He said his name was Petar Toma. He showed me a video of Stipan, imprisoned, and said that he could free him for a lot of money. I still have the video. I asked about you, he knew nothing. Even though I didn't trust him, I agreed, but on the condition that I travel to Bosnia with him for the prisoner exchange. He agreed. We hid the money and the gold in my Mercedes and crossed the borders without a problem all the way to Croatia. And then, somewhere around midnight, in the middle of nowhere on the road, Petar pointed a gun at me and threw me out of the car. Of course I reported him and the theft, tried to find out about him through some friends in parliament. Nothing. No one knew anything, and I could not give the real reason for the theft. 'It's wartime, sir. There are more important things to think about than your car,' was the answer I always got. The only thing I found was the parts of my car on one of the dumps. Petar Toma disappeared from the face of the earth together with the money and the gold. I was mad with worry. I knew that Stipan was going to die. And then they told me that you were in the Mostar hospital. It was my light in all that darkness. You, Kata, alive...

(Second extract - present day - Inspector Lukač is trying to find more about the mysterious Petar Toma, after a ministerial order).

Vid Lukač parked his old car in front a charming wooden cabin on the shore of River Kupa. He found Inspector Farkaš on the lawn behind the house, sitting back in a folding chair and watching the river. He had a beer in his hand. Farkaš saw Lukač but didn't stir.

- Kupa is at its most beautiful at this time of the year, early summer. Who would have thought that this was once the front line and that instead of fishermen and bathers Kupa was brimming with dead bodies - Farkaš said calmly. - Sit down, Lukač. There's beer in the fridge.

Lukač brought a chair and sat next to Farkaš, looks at the bruise on his forehead.

- Sorry about the beating.
- Part of the call of duty, kid.
- I called you this morning at work. They said you took sick leave. Your wife said you were here. Wasn't hard to find you.
- I wasn't trying to hide - Farkaš didn't lose his cool. He sipped his beer. - Go on, ask. That's what you came for, isn't it?
- Who's Petar Toma?

Farkaš laughed wearily.

- When I was young I studied theology. I gave up because I met my wife, but also because up at the monastery I became a fervent atheist. Weird, isn't it? The war destroyed the last bits of faith in me. But, even though I don't believe in God, I am afraid of him. That's how it is with Petar Toma. I never met him, I don't know anyone who has met him, but when he asked us to do a job, we did everything perfectly, so afraid were we not to mess things up. Because if you messed up, you paid with your life.
- Petar Toma asked you to follow me?
- Yes. My phone rang and an automated voice recited the order. Luckily I was sitting down, otherwise my legs would have given way. He hasn't been in touch since the war - Farkaš sighed, his forehead frowning, his eyebrows knitted together. - I thought we were rid of him.
- I don't understand.
- You can't. You're too young. You don't know, kid, what kind of shit we had to swallow. I was an informant during the war. Tons of shit... You don't form a state out of poets, but out of people without scruples who are happy to bathe in blood, if you get my meaning. Then we were transferred to the police department. As in, the war is finished, we need to work on reinforcing the civil state. In fact they downgraded us because of the horrific stuff we did as part of Petar's orders.
- Wait a minute - Lukač interrupted him. - You mean that no one has ever seen Petar Toma, but you were happy to do everything he asked?

Farkaš stared at Lukač.

- When you find a colleague and his whole family with their throats slit, you do what you're told. You don't know shit, kid. No one knew Petar Toma but we all clearly felt his tentacles. He's everywhere, might be even here, right now. No one knows who works for him - that's why anyone might be working for him. Maybe even you?
- Are you sure he even exists?
- The devil's greatest achievement was when he convinced humanity that he didn't exist - said Farkaš with a sigh.

(Third extract - Andrija Tomaš, an ex convict on charges of war crimes, comes back to Croatia during the 2018 World Cup Tournament, and clashes with Dinko, who had put him to prison and who turns out to be the mysterious Petar Toma from the dark war times)

There were a lot of people at the stadium. A concert took place on the wooden stage that was anchored in the lake. Traditional boiled meat and cotton candy. A little further, the screaming of children at the fairground. Dinko dove into the crowd. Andrija was behind him, hopelessly wandering the length of the lake, bumping into people. Dinko had disappeared into thin air. Andrija was livid and climbed onto the mound by the river. There were young men preparing fireworks and shining large torch lights. One of the lights accidentally shone on a bush near the mound. Dinko stood in the middle of the bush, caught by the light like a runaway prisoner. Andrija saw him and ran towards him. And Dinko saw Andrija and ran towards Jakuševac. Andrija was faster and was catching up with Dinko. Dinko was visibly losing ground. They went under the Youth Bridge, towards the barges. Even though the Sava river isn't navigable in Zagreb, they had somehow managed to bring barges and left them to rot by the bridge, making them an ideal refuge for the homeless, junkies and quick sex seekers. Andrija was some twenty metres from Dinko. Dinko had no more energy left. He dragged himself onto a barge. Andrija jumped over the boards, got close to Dinko by a few steps, and then lost the ground beneath his feet. Both of them stood on a large lid that covered a storage hole. Neither of them had noticed that the lid was rotting and would not support their weight. Both fell inside the barge. Andrija fell on his feet, managed to break his fall. He grappled around in the darkness, could only make out the starry sky above. He shone his phone torch. He'd fallen onto the bottom of the barge, from a three or four metre height and it was a real miracle that he hadn't broken anything. He looked for Dinko, but he was nowhere to be found. He was sure that he'd fallen in too. And then he heard a knocking on the wall.

- Andrija, can you hear me? You've really fucked me up this time! I thought I'd use you but the whole time you played the bait and got me into a trap. I taught you that - Dinko was pounding from the other side, everything echoed.

They had fallen into different parts of the barge, separated by an iron wall. Andrija shone his phone torch on the wall that stretched all the way up to the opening. He looked for a way to climb up. The belly of the barge was empty, the opening was too high up. How was he going to get out?

- You fucked up Dinko, when you got back in touch with uncle Ivan and asked for money. That's when I knew you were still alive.
- What can you do, Andrija, everyone makes mistakes. I needed money. I had to have urgent surgery and didn't want to wait in public hospitals... it's like lying down in a coffin and waiting for death. Here we are back at the beginning Andrija - Dinko said with shortened breath. - Huh, I don't remember when I last ran this far.
- Are you all right?
- I'm far from all right, dear Andrija. My health is fucked. While I was a man of faith, I'd have said I was being punished by God for all the bad things I have done... Luckily I no longer believe, so I can say it's stress at work.
- I thought there were no atheists in the trenches.
- No, but when the cannons go quiet, then the priest also gladly goes to Black mass. This is silly, isn't it Andrija? We can't see each other over this wall, each closed into his own cage like lab mice. We can't run away or harm each other. We can just talk. Like old lovers - even though his voice echoed through the spaces, Dinko's voice was thin, weak. - You're lucky that I spent all my bullets at the roof up there. Paranoia sometimes hits the target. In fact I saw you coming out of the minister's house. I knew you were coming to me.
- You were there? - Andria was surprised.
- Of course, I follow the minister as much as I can. I saw you when you went to her house and realised that you were a team. I should have shot you both right there and then, but my sugar levels get fucked up by shock so I had to run to get something sweet from the shop! My time is over. I could sit in waiting for days once upon a time, but now... The heat kills me. I had to go to the shopping centre to cool down, put my head in the fridge with the yoghurts because my air con at home doesn't work. And that fucker Farkaš forgot to bring me more ammunition. That's why you got away, Andrija.
- You know Farkaš?
- We worked together for years. The greedy Fucker only wanted money.
- Farkaš tried to frame me - said Andrija.

- Petar Toma sent him to frame you with the story of raping an underage girl, and when Petar Toma orders something, it gets done or it is off with your head.
- And you're Petar Toma, Dinko? You stole the ransom money for Katarina's father?

Dinko sniggered.

- Mostly me... Actually, Petar Toma isn't anyone in particular. You know who he actually was? A little known Romanian vampire from 19th century stories. Of course, it's difficult to be better known than his country fellow Dracula, he he he. Do you get the symbolism? When you work in certain sectors, you have to be cruel sometimes. You're forced to do terrible things even though your stomach turns. Many could not suffocate the human inside in those inhuman times, we were losing the war, people had to be shaken up... And then Šoštarić, my mentor, an old secret service guy, made up Petar Toma as an evil spirit that kills even his own people if they don't execute every, even the most brutal, order. I think Peter Toma was an important wheel in our victory, Andrija.
- I can't believe what you're saying. I simply cannot. - Andrija was shocked. Dinko just sniggered.
- You were always naive, Andrija. You remind me of a dog that got hit by a car. You're angry at the whole world and that's why you're limping, howling, why me why me. You're the perfect receptacle for preserving hatred. You'd make a wonderful Petar Toma.
- Excuse me?
- From the beginning of civilisation, justice and revenge were seen as sisters. First it was an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. When someone killed your family, you took a sword and cut the perpetrator's head off. Full stop - justice was done. Then the Romans thought that the state should be in charge of justice. The second rate Greek goddess of revenge, Nemesis, was shorn of her wings, given a sword and some scales, they tied her eyes, named her Justice and, thus blind, pronounced her the greatest achievement of civilisation. A cold bargaining instead of hot revenge. But why is the state wanting to keep hold of such bloody, bad work? What for? Think about it, Andrija. If you'd found yourself in a situation, are you sure you'd kill the killer of someone you loved? You might. Might! But if they brought the killer to some average, frightened little man and said: here, this person killed your loved one, do what you want to him, you have the right to it - few people would kill and even fewer would do all the stuff they'd dreamed of doing. Well, that's what those in power are afraid of - forgiveness. Why should some stupid ordinary individual forgive? Who is he to destroy illusions with his forgiveness? His job is to keep the status quo with hatred. Because hatred and fear are the engine of the world. That's why they made up Petar Toma - to make some shitty little frightened man, if necessary, behead his own children and later sleep like a baby. All under the motto: 'Not your fault, shitty man, but Petar Toma's. You just did your job.'

(Fourth excerpt - minister Katarina Dežman finally kidnaps Dinko, i.e. Petar Toma and executes her long planned revenge - death by dehydration.)

What's the day today? Monday or Tuesday?, thought Katarina Dežman. Tuesday, day three. The sun beat mercilessly for three days... Sweaty and dirty, she stood outside the door of a ramshackle, roofless house. The house stood alone above Korana, surrounded by forests and fields. The former owner, a refugee from Bosnia, had started to renovate it, fixed the basement, put in electricity, and then gave up. He got his visa to emigrate to Canada and sold it cheaply to the first buyer. Katarina Dežman. The basement was damp and stuffy. A steam engine. The sweet smell of mould irritated the nostrils. A weak lightbulb barely lit the bare walls. The narrow windows were barred. One of the walls had shackles for wrists and ankles on the walls, hanging off short chains. Dinko was inside the shackles. A heretic in the inquisition's nest. Katarina was enjoying the light breeze, drank from a bottle of water. The heat wave wasn't easing up. The basement had turned into an oven. His mind darkened and half conscious, Dinko sat in his own excrement, leaning against the wall. His arms hung from the shackles. Pale, his eyes sunken, he occasionally woke up, screamed, whispered, moaned, coughed. His legs cramped up. When the cramping spread to the whole body, Katarina took out an injection of sedatives from the fridge and the cramping would stop. Then she gave him a dose of cardiac, so that his heart would not stop working. At least another hour... There was a camera in front of Dinko on a stand, filming every moment of his incarceration. On the first day, without water in the boiling basement, Dinko had fallen into a diabetic hypoglycaemia. But Katarina was ready for everything. She had insulin capsules in the fridge. She also gave him blood plasma, glucose and saline liquid in order for him to live longer and suffer longer. At the end of the second day he begged her to let him drink his own urine. The third day he had nothing left to urinate. In alternating attacks of rage and desperation he confessed to everything he had done in the last twenty years, giving her the details of all the dark secrets for which journalists would have sold their own children. Some secrets bordered on the unreal, made one sick. For his honesty, she rewarded him with a few drops of water that she spilled onto his forearms. Dinko sucked on them greedily, bruising his own skin. On the evening of day three, Dinko was completely disoriented. He had tried to sing nursery rhymes, then screamed 'Don't beat me! I'll be good, I'll do anything you say!' He fought the ghosts of his childhood that had risen from long buried memories. Katarina made him bite his forearms and suck his own blood. She felt her father's presence the whole time. A fresh breeze in the hell of the basement. He encouraged her, whispered in her ear. Soon there were others whose lives were taken by Dinko - or Petar Toma. Shadows filled the basement. The jury from the grave was sharpening its knives. She was their hope. And she felt a joy that she had not experienced since childhood. She smelled the apple tree that grew behind her house in Suha Mahala, the buzzing of insects and the church bell. The house is whole and the church is whole and... there had been no war. The sounds of children playing and the call to prayer came from Malopoljska. Her father's hands were on her cheeks. Rough and gentle. And she was a girl who ran through the forest in the night, carrying the bottle

of water to her thirsty father. This time she wouldn't lose her way. Katarina sat down on the stairs, exhausted, and fell asleep. She awoke in the middle of the night, rushed to Dinko, shone a torch light on him. He was dead. A bloody mouth and teeth sneered into the torchlight. The vampire dies when he drinks his own blood. Katarina cried from the sadness that he had not lived a little longer.

(Excerpt five - Andrija Tomaš goes to Vukovar to look for the woman he loved, but ends up accidentally in the house of a Serb soldier whose death had sent him to prison. All this is happening at the time when all of Croatia is welcoming the footballers from the World Cup.)

There are two realities in Vukovar, that flow simultaneously, never meeting. The Croatian and Serb realities. A person didn't know what his next door neighbour was doing and vice versa, nor was he interested. Everyone had their life path. Only external events disturbed this order. Miloš's neighbour Jozo, disabled in the war, sat watching the tournament welcoming ceremony when he noticed Andrija Tomaš going into the Miloš courtyard. He recognised him and wondered what a Croatian war hero was doing in a Serb nationalist's house. He called his neighbour Marijan immediately, a legendary tank destroyer during the town siege, and Marijan called other people. Neighbour Dragan caught sight of Andrija's face through the window and was afraid that a war criminal was in front of Miloš's house, called Jovo and other neighbours. At the end, they all poured into the Vasiljević courtyard and started to fight. The police was like the cherry on top of a cake, stuffing them in the police van and taking them to the police station. Andrija too. They put everyone in separate cells. Andrija was in a cell where a fat sixty-year old man was sobering up. He could hear threats and shouting from the neighbouring cells, the policemen were dark and official, 'everything was under control.'

- Are you that guy? - Andrija's cell mate lay on a bench, peering over his inflated belly.
- Which guy?
- You know which guy, don't play dumb.
- Are you sorry I'm that guy? - Andrija accepted his game, hoping he might disperse the horror of being back behind bars.
- Are you sorry to be that guy? - the drunk said. - I'm sorry I'm the guy who's in prison with you. And what for? Because I was thirsty in this heat. And I wanted to celebrate that we won silver at football. But the wife is like a grinder, won't stop nagging. 'How much did you drink, how much did you drink?' I had to calm her down. And now they call it 'domestic violence'! And all because I was thirsty! When it's meant to be, that's it. There's no way of changing what is meant to be.

Andrija curled up next to the bars. He felt feverish, rubbed his eyes. He saw a boy from a refugee camp in Myanmar kneeling on the other side, offering him tinned fish.

'I'm giving it back Andrija, I don't need it anymore.'

‘What, so they can kill me too?’

‘Death is just a word until you believe in it, Andrija.’

The corridor was thundering with patriotic Croatian songs. ‘Silence! We really need these kinds of incidents! So that we get the reputation of a troubled town. What was this Tomaš looking for here anyway? We can’t have cowboy business like back in 1991! We’re in the EU now. Culture and all that, for fuck’s sake.’

‘Mandžukiiii!’ came from the office next door, while the policemen watched the welcoming ceremony and talked loudly. ‘The other day my youngest daughter caught an ant on the wall of the house and drew a circle around it. And you know what happened? As soon as it reached the line, the ant stopped. Didn’t move! Can’t go over, but can, what a moron! A kid trapped him with a simple drawing of a circle. There it is, still on the wall. It’ll die, but can’t cross the line. Psychology, fucking hell!’ ‘Everyone can go to hell, Croatia is on top of the world!’

We are birds trying to take flight, Andrija whispered, suffocated by the walls like when he first went to prison so many years ago. Birds engraved in the golden coins of Katarina’s necklace, staring at one another in a standoff, and under us are explosives. Waiting for the right moment to go off. More patriotic songs. ‘There was no way that he can get out with a simple charge. He is the ringleader, a convicted war criminal. This is more serious than smashing signs written in Cyrillic. Two to three years, as an example to others! We live in a free democratic society - you have no choice but to be free!’ More patriotic songs. The best player of the World Cup: Lukaaaa Modriiii!!!’ Andrija covered his eyes with his hands not to look at the walls closing in on him. And Katarina Dežman peered from around the corner, pulled his ears, called up Dinko from the depths of the corridor. Stop fighting your demons - go over to their side, she whispered, a mantra. Demons don’t die with you, they are left to the future generations, like inheritance. Cut the hundred-year thread, go over the line, don’t be a trapped ant, resist. Resist. The key word of a miserable life is that you cannot change. I am a clay pigeon and I believe in fake bullets, amen, Andrija screamed inside. And Dinko walked up and down the corridor with an open Croatian flag in his hands. The colour on the red and white check had bled, the red squares looked like blood sprayed on the snow. Someone had lost their life again for their homeland. Another patriotic song, about dying for the homeland.

A-ha. Petar Toma awaits.