

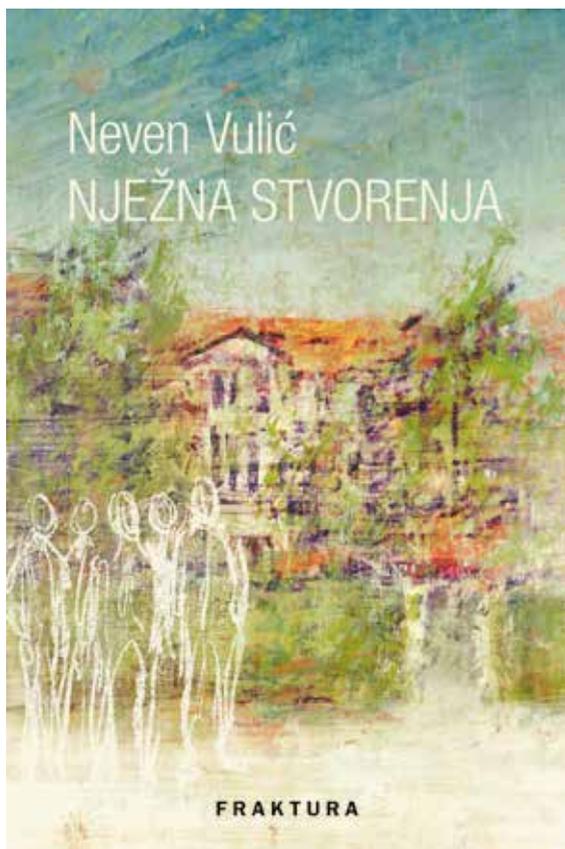
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A Tender Creature

(Nježna stvorenja)

Novel

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I.

The old man generally avoided the climb up to his son's apartment, but there was no one home. The lives of others didn't interest him like they would a spy or a sleuth. No, he came to the upper floor for them, possessed with a strange and impulsive love, intentionally when they weren't there. He came to drink in their air, the happenstance whereabouts of objects left behind. He wanted to rub up against their living space when they wouldn't know about it.

He peered out the window. Clouds were breaking up and exposed the blue sky, and there was no one on the street. The neighborhood, sprayed with sudden drops, glittered. The sun appeared over the November mist and broke into the apartment. The world was reborn in blinding light.

He loved his family most from a distance. He didn't get along with them as easily as he did with the space they lived in. If they had been there, they would have plied him with questions. They would have tried to suck him into conversation, and he would have had to acrobatically evade their words, tossed like hooks, and recently he hadn't been in the mood for that. He had had enough of company and empty conversations. Rather, he wanted more and more frequently to be invisible.

No grandchildren, a working son. His daughter-in-law had just left for work and would be absent for some time. The air was clear for a short change of perspective.

He walked around the empty space, squinted and uncovered the faded traces of their bodies. Tiny folds on the fabric of the couch, a crumpled rag by the sink, crumbs on the kitchen floor. But what in the space was of note, and what wasn't, was difficult for the old man to know. He gazed at the abandoned cup of coffee on the table, the handle pointed right at him, and then went back to the window. There was still no one outside the house.

He went downstairs, went into his shutter-darkened room and closed the door. The new tenant had moved in about a month ago, he thought. He never

seemed to even stick his nose out the door, let alone go out anywhere. It was always silent upstairs, which could not have been said for the previous tenant. His granddaughter was probably at college. Or with that strange boyfriend of hers.

He sat on the couch, breathing deeply with difficulty. A gentle uneasiness circled in his chest. Sometimes he would get properly worked up and then for a long time wouldn't be able to calm down. Not without reason. Intrusive scenes from his life would come calling, for him to reassemble. He wasn't sure if his son could put up with him at all. He had already long since been granted the title of grandfather, but as a father he certainly hadn't proved himself. But he didn't like to think about that.

The old man would feel better thinking that, after him, someone would remain. Those few people represented one or two surviving Christmas lights on the line where all others had burned out. The infinite darkness became insignificant as he watched their laconic glimmer, their light becoming the center of the world. He loved his granddaughter. He often found himself missing that. A hard point that wouldn't fade or fall quiet anytime soon. Which is why he went up to their apartment, to feel them. But he did it seldom. He couldn't gather himself together enough for them, their thoughts were exhausting.

He turned on the television, straight to a piece about a man who had given a friend his firm and gone to live in the woods. They showed an aging beauty from an old sitcom: her new fiancé had run off. She hadn't generally been lucky in love, and the media again picked her apart like vultures.

Maybe he should to get his eye seen to, he thought, and squinted. He switched to a program about models. Most of the time he looked at the screen with just one eye. His vision out of the other eye was blurry sometimes, and everything would go hazy. It had started a few weeks ago. The eye clicked here and there, which threw him completely out of step. His head would hurt mercilessly and then he had to rest.

An indigestible weight nests within the old man again. With every blink the pressure in his head grows. His head boils with discomfort as he squints into the troubling images, and then tears begin on their own to flow. He should probably go to a doctor about that damn eye.

II.

The usual group had collected around the conference table. The assistant director watched the predictable symphony of unusual facial expressions and strange movements. The toothy, the long-legged, and the short were waiting for the boss.

Next to him sat the director of sales. The appearance of that narrow face, as though copied from a cartoon about a foolish prairie animal, hid her true abilities. Her subordinates were terrified of her natural cold-bloodedness: she strove to be more ruthless than her male colleagues, although she sometimes appeared quite likeable like when, let's say, she turned off for a moment and stared blankly at the flowers on the table.

An employee opened the frosted glass door abruptly and entered the spacious hall clutching papers in her arms. She often giggled like a little girl, sometimes blanched excessively at the mention of sex, although in her forties she changed paramours like socks using dating apps. For years already she'd been jubilant and would start daydreaming, just to find herself again in two or three weeks again in the same situation, again on the hunt for happiness. Sometimes she spoke of herself using male pronouns.

She produced a page from the riot of photocopies and placed it in front of the assistant director:

"Here, he brought it!" She probably thought she was being cute, and after the lark said, "He hasn't quite finished." But the assistant director didn't even look at her. He was off in a whole other direction. With enjoyment he recalled the first few years of marriage, his first job, and his first encounter with erectile issues. Sometimes he couldn't breathe from all the accumulated stress. Sometimes he couldn't relax even in bed: a horror-carousel of work obligations spun relentlessly, the possessed corpses of his colleagues attacking him like ping pong balls blazing in the dark, and his wife would devote herself to him and long with her mouth

attempt to revive him. With a lot of patience and love he would forget everything, surrender himself and be resurrected.

The current problems were of a different nature. The penis was in order, but it was as though the libido didn't even exist. There weren't many people left who he could put into his fantasies. It was comical to fantasize about this giggling colleague with papers, and it made sense to dismiss any possibility of intimate contact with her in the future. The director of sales, who resembled a rodent, was difficult to push into a sexual sphere, and he was nauseated at the very thought of such a base lifestyle.

Dolefully he recalled the time when his dick remained in his mind where it really belonged—in a woman's sure hands. He was pleased that he wasn't one of those people who traipsed all over strange places till late at night. Worst for him was leaving his family, especially at the start of his career. When he was in a unfamiliar city after day-long meetings and having finally fulfilled all his obligations, he just wanted to get home as quickly as possible. Without his wife and child, all alone on a business trip, after the working dinner he would walk and look at stone monuments, wander through greenhouses and gnash his teeth. As soon as he got home, he would lay his head in her warm lap, happy and calmed that they were finally together. Her warm palm laid on his face was a memory of a moment of bliss. But everything is subject to change, especially a relationship with a wife, a relationship with a child.

His daughter already thought she was all grown up. The once sweet little girl who had called for him and had always been asking him something with her honey voice spoke today in a serious tone that subtly let you know that you had no choice when she wanted something from you. There was a stronger timbre in her voice which was unmistakably reminiscent of her mother. She had found a boyfriend who it was best not to think about, healthier to keep quiet about it and save your nerves. You just had to wait for them to put an end to it.

The news from the big meeting had spilled over into the departments. Falling profits had affected the whole company and for some time already nobody knew what to expect. The employees were wondering whether it would come to a radical restructuring, in the form of massive layoffs.

The decision then came that everybody's salary would be cut. They couldn't do anything anyway, the orders came from the higher-ups, from abroad. In a few months the big boss would come. They were on a post-recession or a pre-recession tour. They were preventatively visiting all the branches, from the peripheries to the large centers, but the exact date of arrival hadn't yet been set.

The assistant director decided to show solidarity with the employees after the stressful day. Really, what he wanted was to have a drink as soon as the oppor-

tunity presented itself. He had some several hundred workers beneath him, and just one boss above him. As luck would have it, a good friend who had brought him with him from his previous firm, and who he worked extremely well with.

He dropped in for a drink with them at a place near the office. It seemed routine to a few of them, to the rest the visit seemed a sort of obligation. Really they were just glad that they had just docked their pay, and there was no talk yet of layoffs. The night disarmed him in short order.

When he came into the place, he saw a row of coworkers. A somewhat larger employee was situated in the corner of a large table by the entrance. He couldn't remember precisely where she sat in the building, but she sorted through spreadsheets like a machine, at least eight hours a day. There was always a smile playing on her round face, sincere and a little sad. She never left work early, she always tried to do the best she could. She never argued, always addressed everyone politely and obediently followed orders. Nothing bothered her even after more than four years.

In passing he politely said,
"I hope you haven't been hit too hard."

For a moment she looked at him, confused, and fell silent.

"Oh, you mean the pay cuts."

"Yeah."

"No, it doesn't really concern me," she smiled and looked at him as though that said it all. "I came through an agency, they had already reduced my pay as much as they could," she added.

She was a practicing believer, she went to a congregation that most considered a cult. Short and round, she emanated an apologetic simplicity. She never wore makeup, with her wide face and brittle, thin hair clenched with hairpins around her round skull, she had found her answers and for that she could, to some extent, be envied. Her eyes didn't shine from within so much as they reflected the world around her, the world where not everyone believed in her version of God.

She didn't much like meeting the young, slimmer student from the call center who belonged to a competing religious group. She believed in something too, but it wasn't precisely the same God, they had realized during an exchange of thoughts. Initially they had avoided one other.

Their intolerance from the first disagreement sorted itself out, but the true gods still worked against them, more or less. The apologetic colleague worked practically for minimum wage, and the student had already worked three years through the agency, though they continually hinted that they would offer her a permanent position. And so their true lord, the corporation, reaped the benefits.

It turned out that a mystery woman at the end of the bar was a new employee,

an assistant or perhaps someone's secretary. From a distance she seemed youthful, but closer up the first signs of aging could be seen. The shallow wrinkles etched into her pretty face. The assistant director looked at her even teeth, the touch of aging skin, a playful look and large breasts hidden under a thick cardigan: they struggled, awaiting a future moment to fall out just for him, already she was playing with them.

He watched her discreetly for a good part of the evening. In her elegant skirt and tight-fitting cardigan she exuded something totally different, something strange and alluring. He loved when stilettos irresistibly followed the lines of women's feet, like a mold.

She had just come back from abroad, she explained to him later that evening, but she didn't explain the few years of her absence in any greater detail. That city of high culture was *suuuuuch a thrill*, she appraised, and he would think that she didn't just mean a thrill in terms of culture. She would tell him everything, from her childhood in a village to her love for dark chocolate, maybe with some unexpected addition like chili.

She spilled her drink on his thigh when they clinked glasses. She seemed quite tipsy, and when they toasted again, she struck his glass too hard and broke her own. The twisted, sharp shards of glass fell into her honey-colored drink. The whole time she tapped her cigarette ashes onto his leg, completely unaware of what she was doing. He loved it.

In the end everything melted away under the winter rain. As a child he knew how to run deliberately out under the menacing black sky where lightning would flash before the storm. The wind would push everything out before it. He would wait for the first big drops and their blows onto the shingles and his bare skin. Heaven and earth would merge in the late summer deluge, unexpectedly cool. In a fitful sprint, he would dash to his grandfather's house.

But now none of that occurred to him. No more playful running through the rain. He took care of his new shoes. Once they get wet, they stink.

III.

The yellow table on the newly built apartment building listed phone and email contact information for people interested in buying a home. The price per square foot was not listed, but whatever it was, it certainly was not the most affordable. Lit-up windows were scattered through the whole building, probably not all of the apartments sold yet. There weren't many cars in the parking lot, either.

The giant ads shone with promise, some people's new lives would start soon in those apartments, but not his. He dreamed that a place like that could be his.

He often looked at real estate ads, looked through the pictures of the interiors and dreamed of the moment of transaction: tangible proof of his buying power and the handing-over of money into someone else's hands. He imagined how he'd leaf through and sign the important papers, then hand over a pile of bills and be left alone in his apartment, a stunning view from the terrace shooting across half the city landscape.

Of course, this was impossible since he usually didn't even have enough for coffee. Money, especially in such large amounts, was an abstract idea in the life of a student who felt that he was falling behind. He had enrolled in his second year of college, his second attempt. Several of his classmates had excelled in their exams and still blushed just as much as he did. When he flunked the year, he was plagued by the weight of missed opportunities. That shook him even more. Time goes by so quickly, he thought constantly, but I'm stuck in the same place.

He went to his mother's office and looked at the accumulated riches of the world, the single-unit houses between which apartment buildings defiantly reared up. He stared at the churches with their bells and the glazed terraces of the cafes, at the bars and business spaces not yet rented out. So much awaited him that was unattainable, shallowly beaten into the asphalt surface of his neighborhood.

He wouldn't have been able to feed himself with his student work without

his mother, let alone afford something like this sometime. How to get his own apartment, he asked himself, or a car? How to get any status to make it easier to get girls?

He often got carried away by this train of thought even though he wasn't single anymore, since he'd recently found a girlfriend. They were supposed to meet up later, but first he went to his mother's, who had promised to buy him new sneakers.

The elevator in the building where his mother worked had always been hard to find. There was a scraping of old metal as it descended unbearably slowly from the second floor. An older gentleman walked out. Ridiculous to use an elevator that steals time like that, damn thief, someone'll die in there someday, it's so slow, the old man muttered as he passed, no wonder nothing gets done in this building.

His mother worked in administration and always had time to step away from work. It was never a problem for her to disappear from the office, go with him to the doctor or hairdresser. And now she would take him shopping, which he was of course pleased by.

But in their life together and their relationship as parent and child, there was something missing. For starters, it wasn't as nice at home as he might have hoped for. Like at his friends' places. The cramped apartment was, of course, his mother's, and the ancient things in it had outlived their natural lives. For the greater part of his childhood he had been fatherless, so no one had taught him how long things last, how to replace them with his own hands. So everything at home looked unbearably worn out.

Even from the entrance to the building, the front door to their place looked desperate. In winter there was an awful draft, so they had to shove towels under it. The peephole didn't work since the lens had slanted when it fell from its socket. Only the warped outlines of the corridor could be made out through it.

His mother slept in the living room. From there one entered his room, where he felt cornered. When he needed to go to the bathroom, he had to pass by her. Wherever he needed to go, she was always there. A strategically terrible position.

The floor of the tiny hallway was covered in old linoleum with a floral pattern which had been torn off by the wall, where concrete showed through. His mother camouflaged that section with a little red carpet where she kept her shoes.

On the kitchen counter made from laminated plywood there was dirt that could no longer be scrubbed away. More and more cracks appeared each day on the kitchen tiles. Larger or smaller bits of broken ceramic fell out periodically. The stovetop was twenty years old, the fridge only ten because the old one had broken down, but the door of this one was already hard to open.

The parquet floor in the living room under his mother's bed had rotted a long time ago, and the center of the carpet was worn down to the grey threads that held it together. In that spot lay a new, smaller carpet. The ancient television was still in the kitchen cabinet. It hadn't given up in decades. When it was turned on, the screen crackled, and the quiet hum of the cathode ray tube turned became a constant sound in the background. It produced noises like an electrical substation, and when the volume was muted, the tense static of its work could be heard clearly. Both TVs were usually on. The flat screen had been bought not long ago on sale, as soon as the old one gave up the ghost.

His mother wasn't really on top of things when it came up upkeep, although she liked to do some chores each day, always starting from the very beginning. Either she'd wipe down the same kitchen surface or she'd vacuum to make it seem that she had done something. She'd be engrossed in these repetitive, almost religious rituals. She diligently monitored and, in a frenzy, polished her favorite spots in each room, while ignoring the others as though she didn't even notice them, so that filth would gather there you could write in with your finger.

Sometimes an imperceptible longing would take hold of her son, a dull yearning to disappear from the face of the earth when he saw her cooking. His mother was a bad cook, not paying attention to the details. She'd watch television and let dough disintegrate because she'd forgotten to take it out of the wild whirlpool of water, put in too little salt, and never used any spices besides pepper. The notion of the lack of dill killed him.

He considered himself poor, and the thought annoyed him, but he never spoke about it with her. Mostly it bothered him when he couldn't afford the expensive things almost everything around him had.

He enrolled in social studies despite the fact that his friends with smarter parents were enrolling in scientific and technical studies, as they had advised him to do, as well. He comforted himself thinking that at least he'd have loads of girlfriends, but that still had yet to come true. Given the speed he was heading toward that vital goal, it seemed to him he'd only posthumously take the new, sweet panties off of dead student girls in heaven.

He returned home satisfied that day, with a bag that swung with each step, occasionally bumping against his thigh. The rocking of the bag calmed him, inside was a box with new sneakers. In passing he sized up a hot girl, her nonchalant movements. He concluded that it was probably money that granted a man the necessary dose of confidence and possibility to access her world. Someone like him would never have a chance. Material gain is my goal, he thought. Physically attractive girls, displays with the newest electronics and elegant cars would gnaw at him in passing, budding tangible desires. He had convinced himself that

affluence was necessary for him, but he was aware of how much was far off and inaccessible for him.

His girlfriend was a freshman two years younger than him, with both parents and a beautiful house they all lived in together. Well, her grandfather lived on his own on the ground floor, and the half-senile grandmother was sometimes with them on the weekends. Then she would be off on her own, since they were in a two-floor apartment, you almost didn't realize she was there. They even had tenants, that's how many places they had. When he would come from his less-than-presentable apartment into the warmth and order of her home, it seemed to him that he'd changed dimensions entirely.

The whiteness and the stern glint of chrome, the sharp contrast of metal surfaces and white grouting inspired him to start cooking himself. The huge refrigerator gleamed and the door slid, there was no need to hold it for a few seconds for it to latch and stay closed. With this girl he had found a breath of security: a normalcy that was now difficult to give up.

He noticed the grey background of his life less and less, the backdrop that was imperceptibly crumbling and decaying. Especially at her place. But in the focus of his attention there squirmed completely different things. Not college, though he occasionally went to lectures. Not friends or going out, though they often got together. Not even his girlfriend, though he was glad to undress her.

When he got home, he did not first reach for food, even when he was famished. He didn't go to the bathroom, though he terribly had to piss. First he had to set at least one new porn video to download. He wouldn't call his girlfriend, look through his emails, check his messages or read the news. No, he was totally preoccupied with what he was always thinking about. While he was walking the streets and studying people as they passed, while he listened to music. He often dreamed about it. From time to time he found an undreamed-of comfort in it: he would sit in front of the monitor and search for new wild girls ready for anything.

He liked to watch them because they weren't demanding, and they gave so much in return. They distracted him so that he would forget about his current problems and life that so clearly lacked any brilliance. He dreamed of round asses and thick hair, of faces flushed from arousal, of a space filled with complete indulgence in male desires. In it he found an oasis of peace where he would hide away.

He adored the raw sex and the hypnotic spectacles of women, and he would feel powerful. He would come to life inside. He would ride an unfaltering wave of excitement, a tsunami that would wipe out everything ahead of itself: failure, poverty, and problems. He was terrified by the thought of a sudden electrical

outage, or the internet being disconnected. He would choke at the thought. It was the blackest scenario, a true apocalypse.

Outstretched and smiling women called for him with unbridled force. He rested in their shadow. He soaked up the subjugation of their sensual bodies, and the rest of the day it radiated, trembled before his eyes. They would stay with him, like guidelines for future movements.

IV.

He heard the same scene playing out as when he had first come to his rented apartment.

The train in the distance is always passing by. It's terribly long. It could be a recording playing on repeat. Cars brake and accelerate. Something unidentified cracks in the shadows. The world is veiled in black. Airplane signals rend the night sky. The leaves are rustling in the wind. You shudder at the beauty. Then tension is revealed in those sounds. The city before him grunts like a wild, exhausted beast. The boundary of the imagined world is palpable. Everything outside eye reach vanishes. There, the world collapses into nothing.

He opened his eyes in the dark. A line of dim light sliced across his face.

The tenant was sitting in the closet, one of the doors couldn't be completely closed from the inside. His gaze fell through the thin slit of a dark shadow on the inner wall, a pattern of light formed by the fabric of the blinds and curtains. Strange outlines that hid people and animals.

In the evening, he had tossed things out of the almost empty closet. He sat in it, closed the first door. The second door had swung a little and gotten stuck, from the inside there was no handle to pull it shut. There's the smell of wood and old dust in the closet. The smell is comfortable, hollow. Like a walk on a wooded path littered with dry pinecones. But the darkness isn't absolute and, like this, it's difficult to surrender to it.

He stumbled out of the closet into the room like an old man and went out onto the terrace. Proper winter nibbled at his feet, spread through his flesh like a dull pain. A bird tossed itself like a suicide from the neighboring building and plunged into the abyss with folded wings. It spread them at the last moment, swerved, and disappeared somewhere near the ground. It seemed to him that summer was still raging when he had just arrived. Everything had been so unreal.

Immediately on moving in, he realized that it was most beautiful on the open terrace. Behind the chimney of the heating plant, everything from the green

slopes of the roofs curved off into the distance. From their locations and clefts it was possible to make out how the streets intersected the new scenery. The balconies of the floors opposite were largely empty, and evenings were lit up by the tittering lights of screens. It would be worth it to stay there, he thought, because no one was there.

He spent the first nights in the rented apartment there, high up beside the sloped roof. Intoxicated, he leaned silently over the deep abyss and slowly rocked. He stood on the wall, cold-bloodedly hung over the 30-foot drop to the garden, always with the quiet feeling that he shouldn't trouble anyone, better to leave people in peace, who would need to know about you at all?

He had arrived with a few things in a hiking bag. He would come back here late after lonely outings, cautious like an intruder who doesn't want to wake anyone, quietly pushing the old key into the lock to the front door. Then he would gently close the already-latched handles. Carefully he would sneak up to the second floor, to the small terrace overlooking the rear courtyard of the connected houses. Below was a lawn, dark and fenced-in, and the grass was laid out and cut low with posts with wire. It looked like a thick rainforest when you looked at it from a great height.

At first, the tenant did nothing. He lay down for a long, long time, as long as his body wouldn't hurt. He would often put a pillow between his legs, lying on his side. When the discomfort from not moving became unbearable, he would shift to his other side. What he was waiting for, he didn't know. Probably for the moment when everything would become clear and the heavens and air would open, but that never happened. Only his cash slowly disappeared. The drugs were running out, too, he would remember now and again and worry for a moment.

He used to go to the park nearby and watch people. Walking their dogs, children and parents, neighbors and strollers who took shortcuts in unison with their own unconscious plans. Always a little too far, always a little too late, that's how one flushed girls skipped rope, it was just a question of time when she'd completely lose her rhythm. The rope would strike her leg on the sixth, seventh, eighth skip, but she didn't give up. She fought with the rope for about ten minutes, just her own frozen breath keeping her company. The lonely miniature came from absent models that should have told her something. They would certainly instill in her the standard maxim of a good upbringing: Never deviate from our rules. He had never wanted to deviate, but somehow it had imposed itself all on its own. He tried to fulfill his duties, step by step, day by day, but it depressed him, maybe it had even led him to this.

He sat in that nearby park, people like a young mother with her child disrupted his thinking. Messy hair and a tired face. Her heels pierced the grass as she

shortened her path to the trash bin. The newborn baby in the stroller wildly waved its hands. He watched the scene from a crouch, seeking relief from the unpleasantly hard bench. The bones of rear end pierced his skin, he had lost weight.

He watched the heels' work in front of him, her return from the grass to the stone path, and remembered that once upon a time he had dreamed of an uninterested girl, no matter how she refused him, and in fact he didn't know why he had even wanted to be with her in the first place. He supposed he had lost his mind, her angelic image had swept it away, though his idiotic persistence had paid off somewhat: he once took her to a cozy, popular place with a marble bar top, tables made of solid wood, and leather-covered chairs. As soon as they sat down, he noticed her admiring gaze. But it wasn't directed at him. He turned to see who she had noticed: a tall student with a groomed beard leaned over the bar. He was struck by her momentary fascination with the young man, how she barely restrained herself from trailing behind him. Odd. Everything that he wanted her to do to him, what he'd bleed for, she would readily do to somebody else, just like that. It's not like in the movies, he thought, fidgeting on the bench as children rode their bikes down the hill, pushed them back up, and went on like that without end.

It wasn't like in the romantic scenes where the girl and the boy held hands as the wind carried her hair full of moonlight, ignited by a pale fire. The breeze blows and then they find themselves for a moment in the midst of so much beauty that you wish to love someone that much from childhood on. But in real life, there was no one for that sort of love.

A little further off, two girls chatted disinterestedly over cigarettes. In the distance, at the other end of the part, an older father didn't score a goal on his fat son, though he had been sluggishly defending. The son followed the ball with an uninterested look, it whizzed far away from the goalposts.

As he came back, he was overwhelmed with a feeling of joy at another day having passed. The smells in the staircase caught him unawares and left him a little stunned. They were cooking dinner at the landlords' place. He passed the thick security doors of their apartment, looked at the daughter's turquoise sneakers left outside, and went, hungry, up the stairs to his attic apartment. The intoxicating smell of roasting meat followed his footsteps.

V.

After the heart attack, he was afraid to lock his door. If something like that happened again, he was afraid that no one would be able to reach him.

His heart failure had caught him occupied with one of his old recordings. His whole being had been sucked into the recording of a long-ago pleasure, he had shone with happiness when he looked at it again. He remembered everything, the slap that she had given him as he pulled her hair and licked her face. Making love again with your own past, with long-ago companions, with your own much younger self. He returned to that past moment, a special thing at his age. The viewing would often pass without any effect, but this time it had swept him away.

He laughed naked, stark naked, on the sofa in front of the screen, and then the time bomb went off. He doubled up, trying again to reach the pleasure of back then, as his hand grew tired and started to shake. Suddenly he was breathing hard. He was swallowed up by forceful waves of heat.

His breath grew more and more shallow, unable to ignore the spasm in his chest. When the panic gripped him, he turned off the video and carefully stood up. At first he didn't know what was happening, the pressure didn't let up. Snow tittered on the screen. An unusual weakness overcame him.

As though through a thick fog, he went to the door, wondering if this was it. He unlocked the door for fear of being left alone if he would need saving. His erection subsided as abruptly as it had come. He barely gathered the strength to pull on his trousers and weakly called out,

“Hey! Somebody, anybody, here!” But no one was there.

He lay a long time, or at least it seemed that way to him, until an older woman in black arrived. The daughter-in-law's mother had come downstairs, she was spending the weekend with them. The smell of gasoline spread like a wraith.

The old man whispered to her, “Call an ambulance. I can't move.”

In silence she watched him as he puffed loudly on the sofa, pressing his palm

to his chest as though to stop bleeding. She stood a long time, and then she just left. He was upset, thinking that she had left him to die, but a minute later his son came down and called the ambulance. The older father attempted to act in front of his middle-aged son as though it was nothing, he had just gotten a little sick, everything would be fine, though at times he couldn't see how.

He didn't lock his door for a while after that. Now out of fear he would check to see if the key was still in the lock when he did lock it. The key needed to be in the lock, he decided. If he had managed to unlock it the last time, the old man assured himself, he would manage to make it if there was a next time.

The daughter-in-law's mother tried to get into his apartment when she visited them, so after the heart attack he didn't have a choice whether or not to turn the key, at least at the weekends. He would listen wearily as the doorknob turned. On Sundays she would go up and down a few times a day. Was she worried about him, he asked himself, or maybe just out of her mind?

A few years had passed since then and he had forgotten almost all about it. And his son's wife's mother visited more and more rarely, and had stopped messing with the doorknob. Before, she would always come down to the ground floor and try to come in. The last time she had happened to get in, she had looked at him blankly and immediately left.

Even without her, a total disinterest had for some time overcome the old man. He would remember his granddaughter, once a small, sweet girl who had for the most part grown up and not long ago started college, but all emotion would soon subside. What had been torn away, was torn away, he thought, engrossed in his own past. His resume in that arena was impressive. He hadn't raised his own child, but left him to his parents. He had no stable relationships in his life, though he adored women, but who knows, maybe he actually despised them. And when at the beginning of his life he had wanted to care for someone, she had disappeared, which had marked him forever. After that he hadn't been able to worry about anything, not even his son.

He had been somewhat aware of the consequences, he thought, and he didn't try to explain why he had acted that way. He didn't listen to anyone besides himself. Indomitable like a badly trained bear dismembering its trainer in front of an audience, capricious like a tiger tearing off the hand of an overzealous visitor. Something comes to them suddenly, overwhelmed by restlessness, and, unaware of the damage they inflict, they bite as hard as they can, enough to break bones, and when they become unable to do that, they die.

He never mentioned the incidents from his son's childhood. No, he had left him to his parents, tried to forget everything somehow, and his son fortunately realized that he wouldn't be able to expect anything more from his father: he

learned to solve his own problems himself, perhaps from the feeling that it would go badly for him if he let go. If, God forbid, his son ever decided to hang himself, he would save him at the last moment if he found himself in the same room. He would remove the noose, but that's all he would do. He would save him however many times as circumstance would allow, because the old man had always been a man of the moment, without a clear plan. For a long time the old man hadn't realized that there had even been a problem between him and his son. That had only recently begun to torment him. He remembered his absence.

He also remembered his greatest failure. His wife had disappeared half a century ago, at the start of their life together. He was in love, full of strength, they had had a child, a son, and then she just disappeared. The first night, he was sure that she had had to go somewhere, she had just forgotten to call, just like she always used to forget. The next day, an indescribable fear gripped him. After he registered her disappearance, a rumor surfaced that someone had seen her somewhere. But that had just been someone's imaginings. She never came back, they never found her.

For a time he waited for her, his parents immediately took in the son, and then the young widower started seducing anyone who came along. He felt better that way. That was how he was able to bear his growing rage. He was never able to find out what had actually happened to his wife. He tried to forget about that part of the story, hard as it was. He thought about her just when he wanted to avoid doing so.

At the time of her disappearance, he wasn't yet twenty-five years old. He worked for his father, who left him a newly finished house. Afterwards, he didn't know precisely what to do with his son, nor with those white walls and that empty space they were meant to live in together. And everything went as it did.

Eventually, when the spasm of anger subsided and sadness let up a bit, he could imagine her happy somewhere far away, in the middle of a spacious dining room in a villa with a pool. Or in a wooden house, at the edge of the woods, with a new husband. He just wanted her to be somewhere, alive.

She disappeared, left only photos behind. The young couple had taken a lot of photos. They had tried out some new things. The ritual of shooting pictures still gave him a special comfort.

As soon as he could get a new camera, he would buy it. He wanted to save intimate moments together. His wife waited on slightly bleached papers, her only somewhat tangible memento, he thought, and later she was joined by many others, more or less undressed, with whom he had spent a little time.

His approach was spontaneous and amateur in principle, intimate above all else. The sensual material was not a product to be shared or sold, but rather

a warm memory and documentation of time that had been created, sometimes almost impenetrable because it was more and more difficult for him to determine when and with whom a photograph had been taken.

For a good portion of the photographic records, he used to be able to say precisely how and when they had been made, but a certain number resisted recognition or more concrete placement on the timeline. They sailed like free radicals on the sea of faded memory, however important they had once been to him. Those women would probably have been forgotten if they hadn't been preserved in his historical documents. And later on he had made videos, too.

The ritual of pushing the small, already obsolete cassette, on which practically nothing could be made out, just faded silhouettes on the bed, had always awakened a tangible delight in him. Mostly out of focus and sometimes rather poorly centered, because at the time he hadn't really known how to position the camera, the videos were clearly amateur. That first camera had been terrible. Maybe there had been something wrong with it.

When he wanted to feel that magic, the old man would play half an hour of material with a woman unrecognizable even if you had known her. He knew every detail by heart, from the opening frame of the dimmed room where the outlines emerged from the darkness of furniture and the contours of objects on them, to the scene filmed through the window, where the light changes abruptly: the picture from the deep dark strong lighting, to the highest brightness, so that the sunlit lawn abruptly appeared on the screen, what was today the paved driveway to the house.

The street stretched out splendidly, wide and full of trees, without the row of houses that had been built since then. The view of that time cheered him up: the cars back then had shone cubishly and proud, the houses had stood young and full of verve, and the world was shown as though in a dream, gently hazy and dusty, a tender Impressionist painting.

The recording is quiet and full of static, interrupted now and again by bursts of high frequency tones and a odd whistling, but the trees are a soothing green and sway in the spring wind. Then the camera focuses on a red rose along the edge of the garden that bends back and forth, slowly and peacefully. By the rose, a thin lawn plant stands totally still, as though there's no wind and someone is just pulling the rose by an invisible string.

Through the eye of the apparatus, the cameraman voyeuristically crosses through the neighboring courtyards and windows, in a continuous close-up, as though to show that there was almost no one there.

The image is quite sharp for a moment, but then the lens returns and moves away from the open blinds it is filming through, a stark contrast between the

outside glare and the inside darkness is again the forefront. Without a more powerful light source this camera couldn't film properly, but he hadn't been aware of that at the time. Positioned on the low table, it captured the faint reflections of natural light from the shutters, set too far away from the main actors.

The willowy feminine figure in the frame stands upright on the bed, then leaps into the air, naked and with outstretched arms. Suddenly it throws itself onto its back on the bed, bounces once off the mattress and then becomes totally still. The camera was now fixed, the cameraman from the background moves to the woman and their pale outlines merge on the bed. It is easy to recognize what is happening, though nothing concrete can be made out.

She at last gets up, touches her hand between her legs as though checking something, then sits on the bed. It could have been any woman in the world. The dark and grainy image skillfully conceals her.

The old man collected his heap of photos and rows of cassettes in different formats. Some videos were better, made with newer cameras where all the faces could be made out. The archive was stored in the dresser, with a key. He didn't want to see the rest of the recordings when overcome with such a feverish, dreamy sense of loss, those special days when memories roll about in shallow graves. The young woman in the video rolled over on the bed. The tinny sound of laughter could be heard, and then an unsettling hissing.

The girl in the video had really looked like his wife. That's why he had noticed her. He hadn't been able to get her out of his head. When he had been with her, for a moment he had had the feeling that his wife had returned to him. Much later, when he watched her on the screen. It was so easy to mix them up. Somehow, they would melt into one happy memory.

He never mentioned this recording to his granddaughter's boyfriend, nor many others. And he never played explicit content for him, just a few with hints of nudity. He had shared a few photos with him that successfully straddled the line between art and pornography. And when his own granddaughter's boyfriend had played a few of his own more intimate recordings, well, that had happened quite by accident.

The old man had thought that he was alone in the house, as did his granddaughter's boyfriend who had naked girls up on the big screen in the living room. The summer was hot, the son and daughter-in-law were on a weekend family visit with the grandmother, so of course the student imagined that it was totally safe to peruse some new porn while he waited for his girlfriend.

The old man was already mad with hunger, and didn't have anything to eat. He did what he almost never did, went up to the fridge on the upper floor, thinking that there was no one but him home. He opened the door and realized there was

somebody inside. He crept in, and the granddaughter's boyfriend was jerking off in front of a wondrously crisp image over sixty inches of two women and a man intertwined.

After a few seconds the young student looked back and was horrified by the presence of someone else. The kid started apologizing profusely and turned everything off in record time, disgustedly hiding his own nakedness. That's how they met for maybe the third time. His girlfriend's grandfather didn't care at all that he had caught him masturbating.

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