

Magdalena Blažević

Festival
(Svetkovina)

Stories

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Death's Hour

The woodpeckers gnaw at the guts of the lumber. Beneath its smooth surface lies a labyrinth of narrow channels. Crisscrossed by black columns. The birds' amorous knocking portends the imminent death of Anka Kujadin, wife to Žarko the carpenter. From the slender trenches spills a fine sawdust along the dirt floor. Larvae have occupied the wood since the summer, the day Anka took ill and collapsed in bed.

It's long past midnight and the fire sputters out. Above it stretches a rope with limp, damp children's shirts. From the top of the cupboard, a lamp coated in soot casts long shadows across the cramped kitchen. In the middle sits a table. Ornate chairs arranged underneath. Along the wall, below a black crucifix, a row of cots. Children's bodies sprawl as if on small scaffolds, each a foot longer than the last. Everyone is sleeping except Mara, the eldest daughter. Next to her is an empty cot with no pillow. Mara watches and listens through the night. To Mother's doleful moaning from the next room, and the intolerable knocking on the window frames and roof. Her prayers can't drown them out.

The door opens, and the shadows' trembling intensifies. A cloud of pungent, muggy air spreads through the house. Žarko's head is in the doorway. His hair is a glistening black crow. An ordinary oblong face with a soggy moustache. Under his arm, heavy oak boards he's just carried from the train station. His brother Nikola, a railwayman, didn't notice anything tonight either. He throws the boards under the window. Closes the door and lowers the latch. He looks around for something to cover them, but finds nothing.

He opens the furnace and blows hard into the graying embers. A flurry of ash swirls. The wood glows spitefully, like eyes. He tosses in kindling. It burns out. The log is dry, it sparks. Žarko's face shines hot. He gets up and undresses in the middle of the kitchen. He flings his coat into the corner. His filthy pants and sweaty, blood-stained shirt on the floor. His shirt goes into the furnace first, then

his pants. The fire is smothered for a moment before igniting in wild flames. The mouth of the furnace is red-hot. It roars mercilessly.

Black smoke billows from Žarko Kujadin's chimney in the middle of the night. The sky is starry. Were a soul awake in the village, they would see that something odd was going on at the house. But Žarko's movements are followed only by the half-open eyes of Mara. Her thoughts are etched in the walls. In twisted quivering silhouettes.

Žarko takes the lamp from the cupboard and snuffs it out. The shadows are swallowed by darkness. Mara crosses herself.

Anka's room is much colder. She sleeps on her back under a warm quilt. She's calm tonight, but for the occasional wretched exhale. Žarko crawls silently into bed. He looms over her like a devastating storm.

He covers her mouth firmly with his hand. Anka's eyes widen in horror. With his other hand, he lifts her nightgown and spreads her thighs. Her body curls into itself, like a worm. Decrepit and dry. It breaks like glass under his weight. Drops of bloody sweat fall from Žarko's face into her eyes. Then warm, thick semen floods her insides. His body relaxes, dripping onto hers. Anka groans in pain. She's shaking. She wipes her rheumy eyes with her sleeve. Žarko slumps onto his side of the bed and is instantly asleep. Anka lowers her nightgown, wiping her groin with its hem. There is a bitter smell under the quilt. She rolls onto her side with great difficulty. Under her pillow sits a cold sickle. Sharpened. Barbed. She grips the handle and closes her eyes.

Daybreak. The furnace is completely out. The first frost has fallen on the white chrysanthemums in the yard. Mara stands at a window lined with ice crystals. She stares across the waters of the Lužnice at the Arambašić house. In front of it huddles a cluster of women's heads. Crying and keening.

Mara is in the plum orchard below the house. She sits under a tree, her head against the rough bark. Branches straining above her. Buckling. They're supported by tall, thin stakes. Around them sit buckets full of succulent fruit. She's wearing a summer dress over a blackened apron. Bare legs and feet. Her fingers are bruised from fresh wounds. Her face is turned towards the sun. Eyes closed. Bees and butterflies alight on her black hair. The same yellow butterflies that followed her last summer.

Her eyes are restless beneath their brows. She races down the hill with Ana. Large baskets on their backs. They drag rakes behind them. The grass is high, revealing only their scrawny chests. Braided hair. Echoing laughter. Ferns at the bottom of the slope. Sinister and hissing. The baskets are spilling their contents. Ana's knee is white, taut. She presses down on the rustling stuff. The snake's

fangs are slim and sharp. They leave two bloody, bluish spots on the knee. The girls climb back uphill slowly. Hand in hand. Yellow butterflies flutter on their white dresses and their hair. Ana is sluggish. She tumbles over in the yellowed grass. The butterflies rise and disperse. Later they returned and perched on a wooden cross.

Aaaaaaaaa!!!

She recognizes the voice of Vranjka Arambašić.

Mara opens her eyes.

Aaaaaaaaa!!!

The branches sway from a sudden gust of wind. Some fruit drops to the ground and rolls downhill. The sun briefly disappears and Mara's eyes darken. They follow Vranjka as she clambers along the Lužnice on her way to the springs. Holding her dresses and an expertly carved washing paddle. An old poplar tree. Her shoulders are broad, her hips shamelessly wide.

Mara gets up and comes to a halt beneath the open window. Smoke and children's cries are wafting out. She clings to the wall like a cat. Peers around the corner at her father's workshop. Žarko stands at the door, beaming. In his hand, a small glass of rakija. He gulps it down. He looks over his shoulder a few times, then takes off after Vranjka into the forest dark.

Dry grass pricks at Mara's feet. Stings. Her dress is above her knees. Her legs gangly. Goatlike.

The Lužnica's burble grows louder in the forest. Only the birds' chirping disturbs it. A clear, clean stream. The cold air scatters its tiny droplets.

The freezing spring glistens. Drops run along the hairs on her arms. They're thick with the forest and its birds. She sees neither her father nor Vranjka, but can hear their voices. The hag's laughter mixes with the roar of the rapids. Mara's step is soft, catlike. Vranjka's wrap dress is gathered below her neck. Her breasts are clenched in Žarko's calloused fists. Patches of sour sweat spreading in his armpits. Plump white legs crossed at his back. Blood-red welts on her thighs. Žarko's head plunges into her neck. A bloodthirsty bat. Vranjka chokes back her animal cries, but the leaves beneath them rustle duplicitously in a steady rhythm.

Mara flees down the forest path. Bits of dust and thorn stick in her wounds. Blood pounds in her ears. She sits down in the grass, clutching the garden fence. Her gaze lands on worm-eaten tomatoes. Dry, speckled leaves. The gate stands open. Chickens feast on the scraps.

Children's howls from the house. Mara runs.

The child is in a wooden baby chair, his arms sticking straight up. Tears and saliva soak his cheeks. His feet slosh in the urine that's seeped from his diaper.

Soup is boiling over on the stove. At the bottom of the pot there's a bit of water

left, and two yellow chicken legs with severed claws. Mara transfers the pot from the fire to a damp board. It smokes and groans. She gathers the child in her arms, and the crying subsides.

Anka lies in bed, her forehead flushed. She is shaking feverishly. Eyes wide. Skin sticky. Fists in a frozen grip. Mara glances around in panic, still clutching the child. She runs out of the house and sees her father coming down the hill. She waves to him.

Nightfall. Anka's body calms. The sky blackens. Lightning lances the forest. The ground shudders at the thunder.

Vranjka descends from the springs holding up her wet dresses. She passes by the Kujadin house. The door is ajar. The house is dark. The lamps are not yet lit. Vranjka knocks and enters.

"How is your mother?" she asks Mara, lowering her dresses. Mara doesn't respond. She peers at Anka, shielding her with her shadow. Lightning flashes on Vranjka's face. Her eyes shine.

Your time has come, Vranjka. I can't see you from the window, but I know you're dragging yourself behind the casket. You couldn't wait for the snow to thaw. You see that the hills are mottled, that there's still ice beneath the forest canopy. The wild orchids haven't yet sprouted. A torrent of stinking mud flowed from the gorge into the Lužnice. It nearly washed away the bridge.

What did old Rosa tell you when you left, did anyone bless you at the threshold? Does your son know you don't plan to come back, did he cry? Father won't have someone else's child under his roof.

I knew misfortune would befall us from the moment you began circling the house, like a dog in heat. How cunningly you summoned him. He followed you wherever you went. I saw everything, Vranjka. I trailed you like a shadow. You moaned and groaned underneath him like a cow. And later you entered our house like death. You were just waiting for Mother to die. With your disgusting buckets of milk. You should know I dumped it in the toilet as soon as you left.

You didn't have to wait long for Mother to die. Do you remember how it snowed that day. The acacia pods shriveled in the frigid air. Shrunken like mother's body. Do you know you can rot on the inside, and be dry as a plum on the outside. When you heard the news of her death, you shrieked with joy. People heard you. There were already two wooden boxes leaning against the wall of father's workshop. The first, a casket, for Mother, and the other, a bridal chest, for you and your junk.

They could barely lay Mother in the casket, they had to break her arms and legs. And then, as now, you walked behind the wooden box. Father and three of his brothers carried the casket. Just like they're carrying your chest to our house.

And do you know, Vranjka, from what your chest is made? From the same boards he used to smash your husband's head at the train. That board is blood-soaked. You can't wash wood. Did you know that your husband wouldn't come home that night, or were you waiting for him at the window?

Father burned his clothes, I saw it all. Flames roared from the oven as if from hell. In this house, Vranjka, everything falls apart. It's hollow like a rotten tooth. My fingers get stuck in the window frames. There's no more knocking, only quiet. It's just a matter of days before the roof caves in on us. Everything is rancid, still stinks of disease. That smell can't be driven out. We open the windows in vain.

What are you going to do with all these children huddled by the stove? I don't know what you're going to feed them. All the money went to the casks for rakija. If you could just see how big they are, big enough to live in. Welcome, Vranjka. We made your marital bed. Under your pillow sits a sharpened sickle.

pp. 9-15

Festival

Darling, my days are bleak. Morning began with the miserable south wind. The street was desolate, just wet leaves and plastic bags. The barren park was drowning in rain. The windows across the way were asleep. Only one glowed yellow at the top of the building, bisected by a laundry line. A woman's inky silhouette, arms held high. Spiky antennae pierced the ceiling.

The room is choked with alcoholic fumes. I've left no imprint on the cold bed. He sleeps on his back. A black, half-opened mouth.

My head is throbbing.

The pill is bitter, the water stale.

Nights are silent festivals. You always come at the same hour. Solemn like this one. I close my eyes and the rain thrums. Copper light flickers in the crystal flowers. You're in the armchair taking sharp drags on your cigarette. A slight spasm on your face. Its shallow, delicate lines deepen and darken. You blow terrible shadows into the air. Your muscles slowly relax and only then you look at me. Lust is compressed in the coruscating.

Light quickens my steps. On the table, French toast and cups of milk. A half-empty jar of marmalade. Windows flung open, curtains swinging. The scent of crumbs on the children's fingers. In the morning his body is sluggish and clumsy. His eyes bleary and bloodshot. A fire returns to them when he starts teasing me with pet names. Freak, he calls me.

The door slams. The clock chimes and the dishes clink. The clench in my chest loosens, and the water sprays warm.

Look around, and you'll see that nothing here is yours. In the dish under the mirror, keys and a leather wallet. In the hallway, untied shoes. Always in the same place. In the closet, some ironed shirts. They smell of laundry detergent.

Everything of yours I carry with me.

At your touch, the radio loudly sputters to life. I frown and cover my ears. You laugh and twirl the black dial in a sound kaleidoscope. Soft music seeps out,

fragile like madness. It sweeps over our bodies. The crystal stalk above us makes a streaked swirl.

During the day things get arrogant and garish, and I flatten and rot. The steel wool is sharp on my skin. Like frost and brambles. My nails are jagged. I've arranged a bouquet of flowers on the dining table. From yellow to red. I bought them today at the market. The woman's face was gray, her fingers ruddy.

They'll last you the whole week, she said. You won't regret it.

The paper rustled in my hand. The white shopping bag bulged. Wrapped in nylon, two large pomegranates. Healthy and ripe. Fresh meat. In my other hand, the child's hand squirmed. She responded to my grip with scratches, razor-thin.

I picked up a newspaper too. Menacing headlines fanned out on the table.

How nice it was today when we met by the department store. My heart went berserk. Trembling. The sleeves of our coats touched at one point. I don't know if you noticed.

The child cried anxiously. I sat on a bench and watched you fade from view. Your collar turned up against the wind. Hands in pockets. You turned left at Radnička Street. Your apartment is at building number 53, on the third floor. I waited for you to return, but you didn't. I'll be there again tomorrow.

I hurried home. The child's feet could barely keep up with me.

In the vestibule, the scent of roux mixed with the current of cold, musty air from the basement. I never go down there, but from the top of the stairs I look down at the broken banister like it's an alluring river whirlpool. One would just need to lean over enough. My neck would surely snap, my shoes fall off. I'd lie there with my eyes closed. Hair disheveled. Apartment doors would creak open, women would scream. And what would you say?

Nothing from you in the mailbox. Only long envelopes with bills.

Late afternoon dusk. From the parking lot in front of the building, a familiar sound. The car engine is cut, the door slammed. Pots are boiling. Pasta is overcooking. Lids piping hot. Spoons glimmer on the table. In the smoke, bits of fat stick to the walls. From the window I see his black coat and a cloud, whitish and rising from the parking lot towards me. Thin like the smoke from your cigarette.

His kisses are slimy. I wipe them with my sleeve. He lifts the child into the air. Loud shrieking. A spasm of horror on his face.

There's still a long way to go until night.

The glasses on the table sit empty before us. The tapping on the tin windowsill dies down. We go to bed and pull the comforter over our heads. Do you feel the gloom?

Your breath is sweet, your skin woven with silk thread.

Your fingers find me.

My steps grow more hushed with the dark. My voice is a lullaby. I stay stretched out in the children's room, in the dark. I don't need to wait long to hear his harsh breathing. Tattered like a rag.

My steps are light.

I sit at the mirror and comb my hair for a long time. In the reflection, his suit thrown over a chair. Limp limbs. I dare not move it.

I say goodbye at daybreak. I've swallowed my tears. Go, you mustn't be here in my mournful hour.

If we meet today, perhaps we'll talk. I'll ask you if you dreamt anything. You'll place a hand on my shoulder while speaking. Your eyes will be like brass.

If you're not there, I'll greet the stillness and patiently wait for night.

pp. 27-31

The Willow Trees

The school's hallways are old, empty pipes. The air reeks of subterranean damp and darkness. Of rotting wood floors and mice. The walls are painted to shoulder height in a greasy, greenish color. Above that, graying plaster. The school doors closed a long time ago, silencing the murmur. Beneath the stairs, a celestial gloom. Late spring rustles the torn tarp on the windows. It casts flickering rays and the shadows of tall pines on bare skin. I don't close my eyes. I want to remember everything. The dim light that dilutes the dark, Marko's dry lips and warm breath. His fast panting is loud and echoes through the empty space. I let him lean on me. The weight is exhilarating. He unbuttons my pants and slips in his hand. It's colder than my skin. Smooth. Bees are buzzing in my ears. Honey flows in my mouth.

"I'll get you naked one day, you'll see."

At this my stomach fills with stones. My throat runs out of air. The scent of dewberry and wild roses. He pulls out his dripping, glistening fingers and sniffs them.

Sharp teeth on my tongue.

A warm wind blows through the holes in the tarp. It announces the evening.

Flow, willow sap

For heaven's sake

I mutter a prayer. I smack the willow branch with a stick. Slice it with a knife. The thin bark peels off easily. Slick snakeskin. The bare branch is a winding white bone. It leaves my fingers dripping and glistening. I climb high into the treetops and blow into a reed. The sound travels over the roofs. The village looks different from up here. Foreign and faraway. And I'm untouchable.

The rain turned the creek's burbling into a roar. Mother told me to pluck three willow branches this time. They can't be too thin. They are pliable and strong

like leather stockwhips. No matter how hard you hit, they won't break. I go up to Mother's room first. Always the same scent, of worn dresses and morning breath. I leave the branches in front of the mirror on the credenza. There are six now. I take off my pants and wait. I hear the rattling of pots downstairs, and water splashing from the faucet.

Silence reigns.

Mother's steps are harsh and heavy on the staircase. Close the door and windows tightly. So no one can hear. In the mirror my legs are winding white bones. Mother says she'll leave her mark on them. That's how she'll drive the devil from me. Father leaves the house now. He walks down the road and smokes. The first blow hurts the most. The skin aches and stings. I don't cry. So Mother hits harder. The bruises are invisible at first, but they quickly turn into freshly stuffed blood sausages. I bend down and rub them with my palm. The willow branch is a razor. It cuts my cheek and shuts my eye.

Mother pauses. She hurls down the branches and grabs me by the head. Turns me toward the window to see the damage, then runs down the stairs. The sound of water spraying the bathroom. The room is warm, but my teeth are chattering. My body shakes. Mother puts a wet towel on my face. Which intensifies the pain. I lie down on the bed and Mother covers me. The quilt is as icy as the creek beneath the willow tree. The towel on my face is a downpour.

Mother closes the door behind her. As she leaves, her footsteps are soundless.

The bruise on my face is the color of overripe sloe. I hide it with my hair. The same shade as the head of my aunt's baby. Mother says she choked on the umbilical cord while she was still in Auntie's stomach. They named her Elena. Her coffin is small. Open on the kitchen table. The baby is tiny even though they say she was born big. Two silk cords from the baby's cap bind her under the chin.

The door to Auntie's room is open. She lies on the bed, covered up to her stomach. It swells just as it did before the birth. Her cheeks and eyes bulge, froglike. Mother helps her express the accumulating milk. She squeezes her breasts, and it gushes forth from her large black nipples. Like a garden sprinkler. Mother mops it up with a towel.

Auntie doesn't go to the funeral. She won't get up for forty days. Mother says the birth was difficult and they just barely pulled the baby out of her. There are long, winding wounds between her legs. Black like my bruises.

Father and Uncle are in front of the house. Waiting. Smoking.

On summer evenings no one can find me. I'm not even in the willow tree. It's as empty as a dry creek bed. Mother calls for me in vain. And when she stops, her

voice echoes in my ears. I flee to the fields. Disappear behind a row of white hawthorn bushes. A celestial darkness there, like under the school stairs. I lie in the grass. It's as dusky and soft as forest moss. As Marko's eyes.

"I told you I'd get you naked one day," he says in my ear.

I bristle at this. My skin is a translucent dandelion. I unbutton myself. Red primrose blooms on my breasts. It grows in Marko's mouth.

A deaf darkness envelops the field, quickly and imperceptibly. The air is cold and damp. The lights from the village don't reach us here. Marko's eyes have vanished in the night. I feel a squeeze on my upper arms and the warmth of his body. I don't even recognize his voice. It's distorted. A locomotive roar above me. The grass is sharp now, it pokes at my back. Rips at my skin. I grit my teeth.

I'm sitting high up in the willow tree. My legs bear the marks resembling freshly stuffed blood sausages. My stomach has swelled. Sprouted.

I will tie a cord around the baby's neck.

I climb to the top. Where the branches are thin and young. So the crash will be harder.

Flow, willow sap

For heaven's sake

pp. 59-63

Rope

I'm wearing a blue dress with a stiff belt. The one I wear when I go out somewhere. I put my hair up and show my white neck. I darken my lashes, and my eyes turn greener than the forest. When I go out like that, all the heads turn my way, and the window curtains swing.

My legs are bare, and my impatient feet tap the floor. In the weak lamplight their movements make an awful shadow play on the wall. I hear the snapping of twigs and a light knocking at the window. I spring to my feet and unlatch the door. Petar bears the scent of sweat and strong cologne, which permeates my skin and hair. He wastes no time before clumsily unbuttoning me.

"Wait, the children will hear," I say softly.

I see his half-closed eyes and hear him repeat something through his fast breathing. He pushes me toward the pantry in the dark, and pins me to the wall. His damp forehead reminds me of my husband's forehead while he lay in his sickbed. The lung disease developed quickly, and every day he watered it with rakija. Though he suffered a long time, his illness failed to mar his beauty: his skin remained fair, his eyes, clear. While he waited for death, he'd survey the room with a weary look and implore, "Don't get married, Kata." I would then sit on his iron bed and kiss his clammy brow.

I feel Petar's movement slowing, and my breast is released from his firm grip. I lower my dress back over my knees and try to smooth the deep creases.

"I'll do it today," he says. "As soon as the sun comes up."

He kisses me one more time and disappears into the warm night, as if he'd never been here.

I check on the children. They're sleeping next to one another. Their limbs are long and bony, it's as if they were made entirely of legs and head. I undress and wash in the basin. It's already dawn, soon the mist will clear and I'll see Petar's house, just down the hill from mine. He lives there with his wife and five children. That sad woman's thighs swelled after the first birth, she's slowly losing her

teeth, and her headscarf makes her face look even rounder. Even while my husband was still alive, Petar could not control his lust for me. He'd turn up often and look for any opportunity to find me alone. Later, when I became a widow, I knew it would be easy with Petar. He's older than my husband, and as his closest relative he's obligated to help me with the wood and cattle. If I knew he was coming by to see me, I'd unbutton my dress and wash over the basin. When he'd enter the house, I'd pretend to cover myself and hide in the other room. He could no longer be saved. He followed me wherever I went, most often to the woods to gather kindling, and in the hushed shade all that could be heard was the rustling of the leaves underneath us. When his wife saw us returning from the woods together, she'd yell and malign me for everyone to hear. Then he'd drag her into the house and silence her with obscenities and beatings. I'd hear her crying and the children screaming. I'd be afraid to go out into the yard. I couldn't walk through the village without facing looks of contempt and loud insults. I was cursed by all the women's lips.

Just as I've gotten dressed, I hear a commotion. Through the window I see Petar waving his arms and shouting. In front of him stands a woman in an ample dress, and behind her are gathered heads wrapped in colorful scarves. I shudder, afraid they'll come to my door too. I lay low until the tumult passes.

Once everything has quieted down, I hear the creak of a door. I see Petar with a suitcase in his hand. His face is tired, but he's smiling. He grabs me at the waist and pushes me onto the bed. He delights in my body over and over again, as if seeing it for the first time. He is strong and heavy, and next to him I am tiny, like a child. He leaves marks on my neck and breasts, and my thighs redden from his grip. A cool, salty sweat drips off his face from the heat and effort. I can feel it in my mouth when he kisses me. A blue vein bulges from his forehead. His body grows heavier. He slumps onto the bed beside me. I let him sleep and get up to prepare lunch.

I go out into the yard and make for the chicken coop. I set my sights on a red hen, approach her slowly, and grab her in one swift motion. She starts to wriggle, trying to spread her wings against my fingers. Her clucking disturbs the whole coop, and the air fills with feathers and dust. Once I get her out, I twist her neck. I can feel her go limp. Then I chop off her head with a small ax. Hot blood splatters my dress. I let the hen bleed out and then put it in the kettle by the coop. I pluck it in the hot water. I'm used to the heat, my skin barely feels it. The kettle is filled with feathers, and in my hands, like a gold coin, rests a yellow chicken body. I carve it up and remove the entrails. I save the heart, stomach, and liver, and throw the intestines in the creek.

I go back inside the house and light the stove. Once it heats up, I place the

entrails in a large pot, fill it with water, cover it halfway, and leave it to cook. I go back out to clean the kettle and wash the blood from my dress. It clings to my back, and my face is covered in beads of sweat. As soon as I finish, I look up to see Petar's wife heading in my direction. In her arms she clutches a grubby little girl, her youngest child.

"You will burn in hell, you whore! Your husband is turning in his grave!"

She storms up to me and grabs my hair. I feel a sharp pain. There's a lock of black hair in her hand.

"You're the shame of the human race! Let your children see what kind of mother they have! You slept with the first one that wanted you!"

As she screams, her face contorts and drops fly out of her mouth. I push her away, and she staggers. The girl is already howling with all her might, her cheeks wet with saliva and tears. The noise awakens Petar. He emerges in his undershirt, his hair disheveled. I watch him purse his lips into a straight white line. He orders me inside with a point of his finger, grabs her by the arm, and stomps across the yard. I enter my house and watch from the window as she cries and struggles to free herself from his grip. He drags her along and she can barely keep up with him.

I clean myself off and comb my hair in front of the mirror. My face is covered in scratches. The whole house smells of chicken soup. I lift the lid on the pot and see the entrails floating on the oily yellow surface.

I take off my wet dress. It's torn at the chest. I leave it soaking in the basin. As soon as I've finished freshening up, Petar returns. Still angry, he swears softly and takes a seat at the table. His undershirt has turned gray and torn in places from washing, and under his armpits clusters damp black hair. I stand at the window, looking at Petar's house. I feel him approach me from behind. He lifts my dress with one hand and grips my neck with the other. The soup pot hisses on the stove. Through the window I see Petar's wife leaving her house. Encircling her arm like a snake, a coil of rope.

pp. 73-77

The Doll

Danja has the face of my old doll, Ninka. Big black eyes, a tiny nose, and a puckered mouth. The same dark, curly hair. Only her smell is different.

I'm awake before dawn. Shadows distort the objects in my room. They extend their outstretched arms toward me. I feel their cold skin and sharp nails. Through the window I hear cats howling. They're mating by the stream. A baby is crying in my ear. Beneath me it's cold and wet. My sister is sleeping. I uncover her and take off her underwear. Hers are dry. I put mine on her and move her to where I was sleeping. Wipe myself with a towel in the bathroom. The window is always open in there and the cats are even louder. I put on my sister's underwear. Mother won't notice. The kitchen door is open. More and more light fills the house. There are presents on the table. Candy, a pinball machine, and a black-eyed doll. Ninka. I fell asleep last night waiting for my father to come home from his trip. He loves to drink. Mother gets up every hour and peeks behind the curtain into the pitch-black night.

She lives in a house below the forest, in cold shadows, and smells of cellar and old well. The water pouring down turned the once-white house into a fungus. Yellow slime mold. Rambling roses grow up the side. They've reached all the way to the roof, to the attic window. The ground-floor door is always open because the wood swelled from the moisture and gets stuck on the concrete. The ground floor once served as a pantry, and now it's a garbage dump. Rags black with mold and dust hang from the open cabinets. Wheat sprouts from the damp couch. Mice scattered it from a plastic barrel. Cobwebs envelop everything. The windows are always flung open, but the stench won't leave.

Ninka has a burgundy velvet dress. Mother embroidered her name and a star on it with pink thread. I arrange the cookies in a blue plastic basket. They're still warm and smell of honey. Ninka and I sit by a haystack in front of Grandma's barn. The hay is soggy and black. It smells of sour wool. Grandpa's bottles are in there. When Grandpa doesn't come home at night, Grandma locks him out. She doesn't peek behind the curtain.

Summertime, and Danja is wearing a dress. It's blue and hangs to her knees. Her mother sews all her clothes. Her skin is dark, her breasts enormous, and she

barely buttons up. Grandma says she's just like her mother, a real cow. And that soon her boobs will reach past her belly button. Danja never lets me into her house. Even when I knock, the door opens just enough for her to stick her head out. She invited me over for the first time today because she needs to show me something. We take off our shoes in front of the door. It's rickety, with filthy glass, and not worth locking. The odor in the house is the same as on the ground floor, but much milder. The floorboards creak under our bare feet. An ancient dust sticks to them. Dirty dishes are piled in the kitchen. They nearly collapse. Flies buzz around, fast and loud. There are stretched canvasses in the room, and on the floor, remnants of fabric and thread. She says they pick up the needles from the floor with a magnet. Danja opens the pantry. It's dark because the window is covered with a thick curtain. Wooden steps lead from the pantry to the attic. That's where Danja spends her days. She calls the attic her chambers. It's all made of wood. On the floor sits a mattress with a blanket. Books are strewn among the pillows. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. *Jane Eyre*. Paper birds with black eyes dangle from the low beams. In the corner, a cage with a white rabbit. He's so fat I can't tell how he gets out of the cage. There's a sniper rifle below the window. Danja says it's her father's and they haven't surrendered it yet. There are bombs in boxes against the wall. When my mother and father aren't home, I sneak into their room. There are dirty magazines under their mattress, and, in their closet, two rifles and ammunition. Foreign soldiers come to the door to collect weapons, but no one ever hands over anything. Danja looks through the rifle sight at Jovana's house. They fled at the beginning of the war, but she sent us a letter saying everyone was alive and well. Strangers have lived there ever since. They come and go. Now Igor has moved in. He's all by himself, and must be over 18 because he doesn't go to school. No one knows where he came from or who his parents are. See for yourself, she says, you've never seen one like this before.

Ninka's hair smells of raspberry juice and Bazooka gum. Mother brings them home from work in a bag. At first she says she's got a big surprise for me, but then later when she unpacks the bags in the kitchen, she pulls out the gum. I'm waiting for her in the yard. In red shorts and a t-shirt. Grandma takes care of me, even though she doesn't enjoy it. She lets me go outside and do whatever I want. Grandpa is sober and chopping wood in the yard. His sweat tumbles to the ground with the tiny scraps of wood. I never go near Grandpa. When I run past him, he calls me Dunja-Dunjuška. I hide with Ninka under our house. Draw with chalk on the concrete. A nice little house, sun and trees. Mother takes me home by the hand. She's fuming because Grandma didn't change me, and proceeds to pour powder over my legs. All the children in our village have scabies. In the evening I stand on the balcony with bare legs. They're white with ointment and powder. That's the best way to dry out the

rash. There's a noise in the yard. Grandma is barefoot on the road. Grandpa runs after her with an ax in his hand. Father catches up to him.

"He taught all the girls in the village how to kiss. The older ones are already fucking him."

Danja purses her lips. I think about how uncommonly beautiful she is. I'm jealous.

We're coming down from the attic. Danja says her father will be back soon. He never drinks. He gets up at the crack of dawn and showers in cold water by the open window. There's nothing healthier than that. Then he goes out to the forest and hugs the trees for a long time. Danja closes the door behind me. I run home. I think about Igor, how he fucks girls from the village. And this makes me jealous too. I'm under the covers. It's hot from my breath.

A baby chick cheeps in my hand. I don't feel any weight, just its cold claws. There's water in the barrel. I soak it all the way to its head. To make it clean. I add some soap. Ninka sits on the front steps and watches us. The chick shrinks. I blow it dry. Yellow fluff in the air. I leave it in a shoebox and take Ninka. I sit under Grandma's apple tree and pretend the bench is a bus. Ninka and I are traveling far away. The chick falls asleep in the shoebox.

Dusk falls in the village. The windows in the distance are fireflies. I used to catch them in jars. They were tough and would bump against the glass walls. I would take one out and press it against my skin, dragging my hand. It left a neon smear. I knock on Danja's door. No one opens. Darkness in the attic window. I run down the road. My heart is pounding. I can feel it in my head. Jovana's house is next to the railroad tracks. Solitary. Under a big walnut tree. It outgrew the house a long time ago. Sitting beneath the branches is Igor. His hands are up Danja's dress. It's torn at the chest. Danja howls like a cat by the stream.

I can't find Ninka anywhere. I left her at Grandma's barn. By the haystack. I'm crying. Running around. In the garden there's a headless body. Someone's taken off her dress. Boys on bicycles are coming down the road. They're loud and fast. Attached to one of their handlebars is the head of pretty Ninka.

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