BEDBUGS

Martina Vidaić

Translation: Ellen Elias-Bursać

Excerpt 1, pp, 13-34

Then the successful architect's cell phone rings. How does she react? you might ask. How can this woman deal with a ringing phone when she hasn't responded to a single phone call for months? This time I did pick up, I'm telling you, the way people do when their cell phone rings, swiping the finger reflexively across the screen where the unknown number is pulsing and holding the phone casually to the ear. But as soon as I heard the woman's voice at the other end, I knew I shouldn't have. Not that I recognized her voice, but something about it rocked the stability of the day, a little like the hurtling roller coaster train at amusement parks that trundles steadily along over the level stretches of track, going either up or down, but on the curves it does that abrupt, out-of-control jolt that tricks you into thinking the whole train is about to veer off and plunge—an impression that lingers for a few seconds above the heads of those who are watching the whole thing from the ground, though obviously there will be no plunge. The jolt was already there in the word *evening* in the phrase *Good evening*, and when the woman asked whether she was speaking with Gorana Hrabrov, there was a jolt for me in this name that supposedly was still mine. With the mixture of pride and insult typical of the widows of Yugoslav People's Army officers, she announced her name, firmly fixed in palatals that she spat out as if hammering in nails with the air from her mouth, and when she explained, after a brief pause, that she was Sergej's mother, the jolt was there in Sergej's name. Hladna, you may remember Sergej, my, like, husband. "We have not had the opportunity to meet," said Sergej's mother, but Sergej told me so much about you over the

phone during the brief time you were together, and he said only the nicest things." She declared this quite seriously, without a trace of irony, but the jolts gave the words a feel of unreliability. I felt a surge of icy unease, as I always did when someone's intentions made no sense to me. "And then that terrible accident," she said, "*that* terrible, terrible accident that took him from us." She stopped. Shaken, I closed my eyes for a moment and listened in the dark to her muted sniffling. I tried to picture her, but into my mind's eye instead came Sergej's saintly visage, as if composed of triangles cut from a nonliving substance—wax or pale plastic—and with his too lively, nearly impossible eyes, blue in such a violent way that the skin around them took on a lasting martyr's dark-gray hue. Only his head of unruly black hair was elusive, from which a lock would escape at times like a shy little snake. The way his mother was present on the phone, firmly held together by her outdated sense of safety, summoned Sergej to that dark space and now it was suddenly he—neatly combed, his hair tamed with oil and parted down the middle—who was sitting there, with the phone to his ear, sobbing softly, with dignity. "I do hope he didn't suffer," said this Sergej. "I just hope he didn't suffer," said Sergej again. How could I respond? What could I say, when I no longer even knew for sure that my name was my name? I clearly remembered our brief relationship, how we met at the symposium, the high-speed wedding and the crazy drive we called our honeymoon along the Brotherhood and Unity Highway, and then our return along the same road up to a few minutes before the accident in Lika on the 19th of February, 2019, at seven o'clock in the morning, in dry weather. I remembered it all—his pointy snakeskin shoes and our ring from a chocolate Kinder egg, and the fat saleslady at the petrol station in Ilok—but I didn't know what it all meant. Who had Sergej been to me? I was tempted to tell his mother that I hadn't seen Sergej dead, and often a person cannot know what another person really means to them until the person's crushed skull tells them, but I managed to control myself and

said I couldn't remember the accident and was still searching for answers, and I, too, certainly hoped he didn't suffer. This last I said so unconvincingly, with the emphasis all wrong on *certainly*, which gave the sentence an almost ironic twist, that she was quiet for a moment and I thought she'd hung up. Instead, she sobbed again, now a little louder. I don't know how to deal with people when they cry, it always makes me feel as if I am coming toward them with a frying pan full of hot oil and the warmth may save them but I have to take care that no tears drop into the oil and spray back onto one of our faces. I felt my cell phone sliding from my hand, slippery with sweat. Sergej's mother talked about what he was like when he was younger. "He was always a rebel but I never held that against him. I don't hold anything against you kids," she said with conviction, but as she passed through the jolt of *kids*, the dislocation was glaring. By no means were we kids, as could be felt in what she said; we were two loonies who drove straight into death. I gave a fake little laugh, quick and creepy. "Sergej must have been bright as a kid," I hazarded. She was hooked. Her voice gently warmed. Oh, so bright, he knew his multiplication tables even before he started school. He learned to write when he was four. At five he read the newspaper with his grandfather. "Aha," I said. At ten he was reading books on political economics by Kardelj and debating self-management socialism with his father. In spirit he was a democrat. At twelve, a punk rocker. "Aha," I said. At the age of six he criticized his grandmother for the nutritional poverty of her cooking. He knew all the capital cities of the world, all the rivers, even the smallest ones. He had read Shakespeare, Dostoevsky and Krleža before he finished primary school. "Aha," I said. There were no jolts or dislocations in what she was saying, it sounded as if the amusement park train of Sergej's early achievements would trundle on and on and on; instead the jolts had moved into the final 'a' in each *aha* I said and the whole composition of our conversation was rocking dangerously. She must have felt this, because she stopped

speaking. What followed was an awkward but welcome pause. "I'm afraid I have to go, work is calling," I said with relief. "Yes, yes, of course dear, of course," she replied, shaken, with only a little of her initial confidence, in the tone of an elderly woman who will be left alone in dark silence. That is how we finished. But you know how it goes, some conversations don't end where they end. I tried sitting back down on my pristine sofa, nibbling at chocolate and listening to Miles Davis, but in vain. The sofa had two tiny holes on the armrest, there were a few drops of red wine on the upholstered legs that I couldn't scrub off. The ceiling had ever so slightly yellowed in the corners, the household plants were dotted with dry leaves, and there was nothing left to be done about the tassels on the rug. I grabbed my laptop and Googled obsessively for an hour, not sure, myself, of what I was after. Everything the internet could tell me about Sergej and his family I already knew. An only child in a Belgrade officer's family, a singer in several punk bands, a degree in theology, an amateur painter. And two hours later, the same things: an only child, a singer, a theologian, a painter. And again around midnight. And at two o'clock in the morning. At four o'clock I suddenly thought, for no particular reason, of the mornings when I was a little girl and got up before first light to go out with my parents and work in the fields, planting or harvesting potatoes or onions. Getting up from bed was like wriggling out from under a heavy stone slab, and in the evening the exhaustion was also slab-like, and sleep came on like a quick swoon. Such a sound, dreamless sleep is probably the closest thing I've known to death, but perhaps because the nights were like death, the days pulsed with unadulterated life, ready in its immediacy. The soil offered a friendly resistance when I pressed the potatoes in, the birds sincerely demonstrated their intention to work against us, and my father's hands—his old, peasant fingers with nails that could no longer be scrubbed clean, greasy from the bacon he sliced and fed me during our lunch breaks—were truly parental hands. You might say, Hladna, that I

should have been glad my ability to experience was finally coming back. Maybe it was, but this made me very anxious. I sat on the rented sofa at four in the morning, exhausted from the hours of pointless Googling, and the weariness I felt was not like the weight of a stone slab but like an annoying cataract clouding my vision. There was no difference between heavy and light, can you understand that? My feeling of exhaustion was nothing but an annoying, calloused indifference. Why am I spending my life like this, why don't I do something, I pestered myself with questions, without any real intention of answering them. A fitful sleep only overtook me at around five. When I woke up at noon and noticed the first bedbug bite, I couldn't make myself feel worried. Something had been bound to happen, so why not this. I still hadn't realized that this was an invasion of bedbugs; the red spot on the middle finger of my right hand, slightly swollen and painful, could easily have passed for an ordinary mosquito bite, though right away I had an inkling this might be something different. There had been no buzzing of mosquitoes for several days after the most recent spraying, and this bite was more painful and itchy. Only that evening, when identical red dots appeared on all the fingers of the same hand but the thumb, now forming a straight line, did I have to admit that no mosquito had ever bitten me there. This was clearly some other sort of bite: on the red swells I could see something slightly darker, a tiny point, the place where the proboscis had pierced the skin. If they weren't mosquitoes, what were they? Once more I asked Google, and Google said: bedbugs. And not only that. Google said: once they get into an apartment, bedbugs are very difficult to get rid of. They do not react to regular household cleansers but only to very high temperatures. They lodge in the joints of furniture and the cracks in the parquet flooring, where they lay eggs that sometimes survive even the most thorough treatments. Professional pest control is needed to eradicate them, and sometimes even that won't be enough. Evacuation may be required. Furniture may have to be replaced. A

complete renovation of the apartment may be in order. For the first time I felt something like panic. This was not a moment when I could afford professional pest control, and the idea that I should ask my landlord to pay for this was doubly unacceptable: apparently I had somehow introduced these bedbugs to the apartment, and the last thing I wanted was for my landlord—a young businessman with a cell phone glued to his ear about whom what I liked most of all was that I never saw him—to start hanging around. And besides, regardless of the money, I quaked at the very idea of having to move out. The six months I had been there were my sole emotional history and I could not bear to have strangers set foot in it. And besides, where would I go? A call to the very people I'd been refusing to see for months felt like madness, as if I were stopping a random passerby and asking to be allowed to stay with them over the holidays. I was forced to deal with this on my own. The next morning I threw myself into an energetic vacuuming of the whole apartment, focusing on the sofa and the bed, which I finished, following Google's instructions, by throwing the vacuum bags into the trash and taking the trash bag out to the dumpster. I dissembled the sofa and bed and heated each part with my hair dryer. I spent three days washing and drying my clothes, and vacuum-packed the delicate items for a three-week quarantine. Only when I'd finished with all of this did I start to feel pain radiating through my muscles and bones and an unfamiliar creaking in my spine. For the first time in my life I caught myself thinking I'm getting old. My right hand still itched unbearably, especially at night, and was constantly swollen, but there had been no new red dots. My fingers looked disgusting, like fat yellow worms, because, as I had no antibiotics, I had smeared them with a paste made of turmeric and water. There were moments when I wondered what would happen if the condition became so acute that I'd need medical help, but I did my best to quickly suppress those thoughts. I knew, of course, that I'd lost my health coverage after Igor fired me and hadn't yet registered for unemployment, but

this fact only now found its way into my body, transforming it into a precious, fragile being with whose care I had been entrusted and whose mysterious whims might be life-threatening. With each thought of the doctors I could no longer turn to, the medical terms we use to talk about our bodies fled from me and this loss led me down into a dangerous extralinguistic darkness, loneliness in its most absolute form. On the other hand, the apartment was experiencing a transformation of a different sort. There were no visible signs of the presence of the bedbugs, maybe because in an earlier cleaning, before Sergej's mother called, I had inadvertently removed all possible traces of their dot-shaped feces and had laundered sheets that might have had bloody stains on them. No, there was no proof, no sweetish smell exuding from the sofa and bed, but the process of transforming the space, begun right after Sergej's mother's call, now intensified. There were so many cracks in the parquet flooring and on the wooden furniture which had seemed, at first glance, to be simple. The sofa feigned a beige gentility only to conceal the inner decrepitude of its springs. And the pictures on the wall, how they watched me with their quasi-innocent pale flowers, long since caked with dust. The apartment, now I knew this, was in cahoots with the bedbugs, permitting them to move in by offering no resistance. From one day to the next, while all the while the condition of my right hand remained unchanged, I found this treachery increasingly difficult to tolerate. I began wandering off for long, aimless evening walks. I went to New Zagreb, Jarun, Vrapče, Mirogoj or Maksimir, seeking the fringes of the city where my thoughts could be out in the open air. But when the first early-September nocturnal chill set in, frequenting the parts of town where the buildings and passersby were more sparse left me feeling alone with my aching fingers. This sent me back to the neighborhoods where the city was denser, and the heavy, sooty facades and passersby settled agreeably upon my mind, thanks to the trams that seemed to be threatening to slice across the street at any moment and fold it over like a sheet

of paper. I loved observing the city, the way it is forever irreversibly changing. Always different people in always different places. This soothed me: bedbugs are transient too, aren't they? I was gladdened when I noticed details I hadn't spotted before, a tree growing on a balcony, an orange light in a tailor's shop or the sign in the window of a boutique. Perhaps there are good architectural designs out there, I thought, they just haven't yet been picked up. I particularly liked looking at the windows on houses. My favorites were the old wooden double windows, the ones with both an outside window and an inside window, and between them—a wide sill. With them the stodgy, dark security of Austro-Hungarian buildings allowed itself a moment of vulnerability, by being both transparent and concealing. The outer window brought their vulnerability out in the open, while the inner one, half hidden behind flowers or curtains, suggested something more—and together they allowed for an openly stated truth while also questioning that same truth. If ever I design houses again, I thought, my first house will have old-fashioned double windows like those. Yes, the architect in me must be stirring and engaging face-to-face with the city. But whenever I crept into the courtyard of my building on Medveščeak, the two PVC windows on the second floor looked down at me with their dark panes, blinkered and impenetrable, the blinds slightly lowered as if my presence irked them, and I'd feel as if I were returning to the wrong apartment where I would have to spend yet another night with the bedbugs. Still, I slept well on those nights, too well perhaps. Only occasionally did I wake up before morning, turn on the lamp and start searching for them. Never a single one. The boats on one of the pictures seemed unnaturally frozen, as if they'd only come to shore a moment before, yet were pretending they'd been there all along. The half-naked woman on the other picture turned her profile to me, refusing to say where the bedbugs were taking my blood. Never a single shred of evidence. But a week after the first bites, there appeared a new line of red dots, this time on the fingers of my

left hand. I forced myself not to panic, but part of the ease with which I managed this included a gradual surrender. Yes, again I went through the cleaning, heating and washing but not half as thoroughly as I had the first time. It seemed pointless to waste my last stores of detergents so this time I washed only the clothes I'd touched or worn in the meanwhile, and only scrubbed the outer surfaces of the sofa and bed, because I ran too quickly out of stamina. I felt silly, as if there were this big Bedbug in the sky, looking down from above and mocking my efforts, and the walls and pictures and wardrobe and sofa and bed and all my clothes were slyly colluding in its mockery. After all that, there could no longer be any satisfaction in a job well done—only rage and powerlessness giving rise to a reflexive urge to weep with sobs like hacking coughs. I was on the verge of banging my head against the wall. So I called Marija. Have I told you about Marija, my older sister? You might point out that all my sisters are older. Indeed they are, but she is the oldest—she's over sixty. You know her, she's the one who married Omer and had to move to Ljubljana so the inaptness of their names could balance out. I don't know why I called her, of all people, I hadn't spoken with her since New Year's and hadn't seen her in over two years. There was something, I guess, in the rage and powerlessness and the urge to sob that reminded me of her. Maybe it had to do with the time when I was five and a tall blond boy, the village bully, explained, in a tone so serious that it was alarming, that my mother was much too old to be my mother—with a crowd of local kids smirking behind him—while my nephews and nieces, all of them around my age, said not a word and kicked around pebbles with their toes until Marija came over and explained to everyone that I was way better than they were because I was the only one who had nephews and nieces, and then she sent us all home, not forgetting to wink to me in passing. The teasing from kids her age must have filled that little girl with rage and powerlessness, right? Or did the rage and powerlessness come later, after Marija's intervention, because I couldn't bear it

that my sister was treating me like her child? Now, while I listened to how she greeted me over the phone as if we chatted daily, I tried to remember how I saw the tall blond boy after he was sent home. I remember him leering at me as he left, but what did his leer mean to me? If I found him to be confused and ashamed, defeated, perhaps I loved Marija all the more for that and now was calling her in search of comfort. But if I had seen his leer as a kind of riddle, out of my reach, someone who knew more about me than I knew about myself, then maybe that moment shaped my view of myself and I called Marija so seldom because she had been permanently tagged in my subconscious as someone who had chosen to console me with a lie. I trembled at this, thinking how to explain to her why I was calling. Luckily, she didn't ask. As if she were talking to herself, for minutes, hours, days, she rattled on about Omer, Martina, Rina and Sara and a few of her women friends. Omer was spending his days puttering on model ships, what else could he do, he'd given his heart and soul to his job at Elektra. Martina was still working as a lawyer at Social Security, not that she couldn't have done better, but she had to stick with it for the kids. Rina was living in a commune, whatever that was, on a vegan farm near Ljubljana and was all involved with Zen Buddhism. Sara, isn't this just like Sara, was racing from one sport to another, from one university department to another. It felt good to let Marija prattle on, just as it had felt good to watch the passersby. Though she found something bigger or smaller to criticize about everything, Marija didn't actually sound snide or grumpy. Her over-bright, high-pitched voice was not capable of producing credible malaise; she turned everything into a jolly, bouncy comedy. At first I enjoyed this. But in time her voice created a light-filled space and anything seriously dark was impossible to introduce or keep up with longer than the time needed to get the words out, certainly not long enough to hold her attention. It was impossible for me to say to her: "Sister dear, the bedbugs are going to eat me alive if you don't help." I felt a surge of bile. I recalled

how Marija, as far back as I could remember, spoke with others in our family as if she always had the Slovenian language in her ear, interfering with her Croatian, and she felt protected by her small yet key lack of understanding. Might she be using the same ploy with me now? Maybe the way she used her high-pitched voice was a deliberate conceit. Maybe she actually knew I was floundering and was trying to keep my state of mind from becoming so glaring that she would be unable to ignore it. Having thought that, I was consumed by a desire to mock her. I repeated every word she was saying, changing them ever so slightly to add irony. But, swayed, I guess, by the same overpowering brightness that her voice introduced, my voice took on a cheery, impenetrable tone, without the dark chasm required by irony, like what a tightrope walker requires to be believable. Everything I said sounded as if I were overjoyed. My joy was so compelling that by the end of our conversation I had actually begun feeling glad. My life was problem-free. And after we finished, the giddy feeling of glee still kept its hold on me until it began its transition to sheer stupor. It was as if I couldn't remember how I'd gotten there and what I needed to do. To do something for myself, I took a book off the shelf, sat at the desk, and tried to read. The book was by Hawking on the popular theory of physics, one of the few I'd read over the last half year, but now I couldn't get beyond the first sentence. I switched on the lamp, the smaller one that stood on the chest of drawers next to my desk. True, there was still some daylight, a late September afternoon, but the sky, the generous slice of it I could see among the rooftops, was dark-gray with clouds. I switched off the lamp. It is still daytime, I thought, but the shadow of the sky crept in, and the sky loomed darker than before. I reached again for the switch, pressed it—and recoiled when, after a brief flash, there was a popping sound and the light did not turn on. Incredulous, I pressed the switch quickly several times. Nothing. Just the dark lampshade. The insidious betrayal of the lightbulb. You are the only one who won't laugh, Hladna, when I tell you that

there can be no worse treachery. That instant I knew what I'd do, but first, with all my might, I kicked the iron desk leg several times and then, deliberately, almost solemnly, I yanked the lamp cord out of the plug in a fury and threw it into the middle of the room. There, now that was true joy. Did you notice, Hladna, that in true joy there is always a little something vile? Do you think this is because there can be no real joy without real freedom? Well this was freedom, that's for sure. I got up and stomped first one foot then the other, one foot then the other, one foot then the other, on the rectangular lampshade, which, in the fall, had pulled apart from its base, until all that was left of it was the warped metal frame and tiny brown shreds of cloth, like crumbles of chocolate. That's what these old lamps are like, I thought, they never give up on their task of being attractive, even when it's all over. The thought filled me with shame. I stopped the stomping, pulled back and sat on the sofa, surveying what I'd done. From the apartment below I couldn't hear the usual nasal voices, the old man's voice that stretched like chewing gum, the old woman's voice like the sloshing of liquid in a barrel, or the puppy-like whimpers of their grandchildren; they must have all stopped talking when they heard the racket. The whole room looked as if it were shaking, but when the shaking feeling subsided, the objects acquired a terrible, petrified air of reproach. The blue-gray sky pressed in through the window. I staggered over to the desk and in the drawer I found matches and the stub of a half-burned yellow candle that resembled a disembodied thumb. I lit the wick. Was I aware at that moment of what I was about to do? Or did I really think after all this that I'd go on reading theoretical physics? Hard to say, Hladna. I think I wasn't capable of thinking. I let everything progress with a dull automatism. When the flame had melted enough wax, I dribbled some on the first sheet of paper I found and glued the candle to the paper. And I did continue trying to read the book, but reading was even more pointless than it had been the first time around. Behind my back lay the remains of the lamp; a mute

presence began to grow that reminded me of the way my dead father had been present, more than twenty years before, while we held our nocturnal vigil in our home. I may have imagined this, the feeling, yet now I understood far better why it is that the dead are never left alone in a room. The corpse of the lamp was something I didn't dare look at, but whose presence I had to keep track of so it wouldn't creep up on me. The time was about five o'clock in the afternoon, and the day looked as though it could no longer be budged from the spot. The dark sky sat in the window of the facing building and stared at me, motionlessly, with no less reproach than the items in the apartment. Even the plants on the windowsill had something judgmental about them. My fingers hurt as I leafed through the pages and from one minute to the next they itched more and more. They looked silly, all swollen and red like plump little sausages. The more I scratched them, the more they itched, and the more the itchiness spread to other parts of my body. At that point I changed into other clothes. I swear, Hladna, my only intention was to have on my skin something lighter and cooler, something like rayon. The temperatures were, after all, still summery. But, you'll ask, why did I then choose that particular dress, which I had never worn around the apartment? Where was I thinking of going? I don't know, I'm telling you, everything happened because it seemed preordained to happen that way. I believe I had in mind that I needed to vacuum up the small bits of the lamp, and for that I needed new vacuum bags, so I took my purse with my wallet, slipped on my sneakers and headed for the door. At first I forgot all about the candle. But then I stopped by the front door, turned, and I must have seen it through the partly open door between the kitchen and the living room. The gust of fresh air from the open hallway must have flickered the flame. I must have noticed that, right? I think I did, but there still wasn't anything deliberate about what I was doing. I simply looked at the erect burning thumb, as if seeing the gas, off, or a lightbulb, off, or a spigot, off. As if this were exactly as it was

supposed to be when I was leaving the apartment. The same confusing automatism led me to step back in and tuck the underpants that had been drying on the windowsill into my purse. Only when I slammed the door behind me and remembered that my keys for the special anti-theft lock which, of course, cannot be opened from the outside, were left in the apartment, I knew I would not be returning. It did occur to me that I could call the landlord and request a reserve key, but that very idea felt far too complicated, something almost impossible to deal with in reality. And besides, all my communication devices were in there. I stood a few more minutes by the door, listening, I'm not even sure what I was listening for. And then I simply—left. Have you ever done anything totally unacceptable, Hladna? Smash a valuable vintage lamp to pieces, kill someone, set someone else's apartment on fire? They say that in such moments a person feels alive as they have never felt before. True, but not like you might imagine. Not the way people feel who have evaded death by a hair: powerful as if their body had been given back for them to rule it with greater sovereignty. No, there was no awareness here about the body. I felt—how can I put this—like an animal. By saying this I am not thinking of a form of remorse or self-reproach. I did not feel like a human being thinking: I am an animal. No, I actually *was* an animal. An animal in flight and there were witnesses to my flight lurking at every window that faced the inner courtyard. One of the neighbors, a good-natured older man with whom I'd occasionally exchanged a few words, ran into me as he was leaving his storage unit. "Oh, neighbor," he said, "where are you off to in such a rush?" My animal ear caught the minute cooling of tone in the last word of his question. Had he picked up on something? "Might rain, what do you think?" he went on, and his smile, because of a half-drooping eyelid, seemed sly. I noticed he had beads of sweat on his upper lip. I tried walking around him, mumbling a response. "But at least it's warm, there's that," he said through a chuckle that now resembled rolling gravel. He was burying me. The old man

in his tattered undershirt from which hung his seal-like arms, only seemed at first glance to be inert. I wanted to push him away. "How do they say it where you're from in Dalmatia..." In one of the apartments someone was brewing coffee, there was the smell of freshly washed laundry on the balconies. People were existing. And they had eyes and ears and noses. I felt as if at any moment I'd start to smell paper burning. When he opened his mouth to say something more, I cut him off abruptly and fled toward the courtyard door. He was probably left standing there in surprise, muttering something that I heard him mumble, but I no longer turned around. Behind every wall, there were witnesses lurking. I walked faster than I ever had in my life, nearly at a run, all the way to the main square, and then, with no plan at all, I ran into a department store. Did I tell you I love those old-fashioned department stores? There is something about them that reminds me of the New York of the movies in the 1990s. The wealth of choices so well presented that you feel as if there could be no other choices, and yet there's no pressure. The tenderness of the escalator. The aging salesmen and salesladies who are waiting for their pensions or death. As soon as I went in, I felt like a human being again, or, at least, no longer like an animal. I briefly surveyed the cosmetics and shoes on the ground floor and then took the escalator to Women's Wear. I had no plan at all, like I said, I just was savoring being in this space that exuded safety, sifting, as I wandered through clothing that I did not, actually, find at all appealing. I noticed a saleslady with her eye on me. I didn't like the way she was looking at me, furtively, over racks of clothes, out of the corner of her eye, with an interest in which I felt some recognition. I became aware that my dress with its tiny pale blue and yellow flowers looked like a nightgown on me, untanned as I was. I began looking through the dark-colored dresses tailored with starker lines. I felt the saleslady move closer. The way she was doing this, silently and slowly, made me nervous. And when she said, "May I help you?" her soft voice, nearly at a whisper, shy and brimming with excessive

respect, gave me the chills. Confused, I stammered something. This encouraged her. She came a step closer and gestured to dresses I hadn't yet had a look at. "Might these interest you?" she asked. Her voice became colder, lending her excessive tone of respect a false veneer. Actually she despised me. I saw this in her gray eyes, deeply inset in her pallid, doughy face. I'm telling you, Hladna, that woman knew who I was. I wanted to tell her I wasn't what she thought I was, there were circumstances I didn't entirely recall or couldn't fully explain, and they had brought me to a point when my life was coming to an end. But instead I broke out in a cold sweat and blushed crimson and readily agreed, the way a child accepts its punishment, to every dress she offered me. What was it that I so desperately wanted this woman to think of me? That I am a good girl? That I'm not what I looked like to her? I felt awkward about leaving the dressing room when a dress didn't suit me. I agreed to try even those I'd never buy in a million years. Perhaps this wasn't about the saleslady at all. Maybe I simply had this momentary chance to feel what it is like when you are back among people, when something is expected of you. I finally purchased a simple knee-length black dress with three-quarter-length sleeves. When I asked her to remove the tag because I would be wearing the dress out of the store, she looked at me *like that* but said not a word. She simply passed the cold scissors over the seam between the back and the neck, snipped the thread and took my payment. I was about to say something, to justify myself somehow, but she had already moved on to the next customer. Sheepish, I went down to Shoes and bought a pair of the simplest black flats and stuffed my dirty white sneakers into the shopping bag with the old dress. On my way out, I dropped the bag into a trash bin. Then I went into the adjacent drug store. This was one of those places where you can be made up for free if you buy what they're selling, so right away I sat in the chair and the makeup artist—a young woman whose unnaturally black hair was so painfully pulled back in a ponytail that her face

looked like a rubber mask—began, wordlessly, to apply liquid powder to my face. She was expressionless, slightly invidious in her manner, not at all nervous, slow, really, but a glance at her eyebrows, symmetrically drawn like swallows' wings in a children's drawing, filled me with angst. There were thousands of women in town whose eyebrows were drawn like these and some of them were sure to be passing by the window of the drug store at that very moment. I could see them through the glass as they went down the street, heading either west or east, and some were going all the way to Medveščak, passing by the big heavy wooden door that led into the courtyard of my apartment building. How long had I been at the department store? I mused. By now the candle stub, short as it was, might have burned down. If it caught the paper, the wooden desk was already burning. In a flash the curtains would go up in flames. Then the neighbors would notice. Or not. Evening had come and outside it was dark. The fire might attract attention. But around that courtyard the neighbors seldom noticed the things that mattered. Once the curtain rod falls, the apartment will be done for. The flames will engulf the rug, then the sofa, the parquet floor, the door, and there will be no turning back. And hundreds of young women with brows drawn like hers will go to the left and to the right, they will pass by fire stations and police stations, by insurance companies and my landlord's home on Srebrnjak. I fidgeted in the chair, struggling to breathe – what with the particles of eyeshadow and powder that were floating around in the air and with those only barely tolerable floral perfumes – torn between the urge to flee that minute and to start pestering the young woman with all sorts of requests to make the session last and last. The trams kept trundling by and the streetlamps were already going on, and she was applying foundation for this and foundation for that, then this powder and that powder, then a lip pencil and an eye pencil, then two kinds of lipstick, then three shades of rouge, then five shades of eyeshadow, then who knows how many layers of mascara, but when she brought

me the mirror to have a look, the process seemed all too quick. The final result did astonish me. I did not look at all like myself. It's not that I looked bad, but under such heavy makeup I could see too little of myself to be able to say whether I was beautiful. Unsure, I got down from the seat and took a few tentative steps around the premises that glittered before my eyes, and only then did I remember to buy something in compensation for the makeup job. After brief consideration, I settled on red lipstick and nail polish in the same shade. When I went out into the street, I was at a loss for a full half-minute about where to take myself. No matter which direction I looked in, there were too many eyes, ears and noses. The tapping of thousands of high heels, the rustle of shirts, the restless shimmy of dresses. Hubbub interrupted by the squeal of trams. Laughter. Beggars with no legs. A woman begging with children. Cell phones. Shouts. The smell of pizza. Merchandise in the windows which in the early dark, under lights, acquired an air of sanctity. I set out, heading south, but people were coming toward me, they kept coming toward me. Hladna, if only you'd seen those faces. Their hairdos and eyeglasses in different colored plastic. The way they kept their hands in their pockets. None of them had ever done anything bad. I heard a siren, far away at first, but no matter how much I turned this way or that way to evade it, I kept miscalculating and the sound grew only louder. They might have been firemen, or police, or even an ambulance, I had never been good at telling the sirens apart. It must have passed by quite close, because at one point the sound became alarmingly loud, yet I couldn't see them. Then the siren's wail grew weaker, as if it were headed toward Medveščak. I didn't dare turn to see whether there was smoke billowing above the roofs. Instead I walked and walked. Only when I happened upon a small restaurant where, in my past life, I had sometimes dined with Igor, did I feel as if I'd arrived at a destination. I entered without a second thought. This was a good place to hide because most of the dining area wasn't visible from the street. Although the hour was

suppertime, there weren't many guests. A family of three, a middle-aged man who looked as if he were waiting for someone, two young men. I was seated at a small table in the corner, at the very back, where I could watch everything that was happening while still preserving my feeling of being out of sight. The waiter, a boy so young and thin that his white shirt and bow tie seemed unconvincing, appeared at the table before I'd had a chance to have a look at the menu, so in my desire to avoid attracting attention, I gave him the same order Igor and I had enjoyed before: sardines, swiss chard and white wine, with fish pate for the appetizer. This was one of those restaurants that went for the warm, homey atmosphere. Walls of red brick, simple upholstered chairs, massive wooden tables. Tile stoves in the corners and antique irons on the shelves. The music was playing so softly that you couldn't place the genre. I leaned against the wall, exhausted. My cheeks were blazing and my body shook with an agreeable tremor, something like relief. But the problem, Hladna, was that in places like that, and elsewhere, a person mustn't be alone for too long. Whoever is too alone begins to feel the inner fragility of things. The trickiness of impressions. The artificiality of the atmosphere. The fact that someone spent a whole day at the Hrelić flea market to find that antique iron for the shelf. In this corner we'll build a tile stove, said the then proprietor, people will feel at home here and order more meat dishes, better wine, they won't be able to resist the dessert. Everything was a performance with lousy stage sets. The middle-aged man by the window who wore his glasses halfway down his nose and had spread open his newspaper—was he waiting for someone to join him, or had he assumed that silly, old-fashioned pose for some other reason? The young men sitting by the entrance whispered to each other the whole time and showed each other things on their cell phones. Both had bangs, so with each move they had to brush the hair away from their eyes and kept flicking their heads. Was one of them glancing my way? And the family in the middle, where did the kid in the tracksuit come from

with the grownups who were both wearing shirts and trousers? At least I could have been given a more convincing waiter, I thought, watching the skinny kid who was racing around as if the dining room were full to overflowing, while his clothing, older and slower than he was, stuck to his body, and though he did glance over at me from time to time, as if surprised that I was still here, he did not bring me my food.

Excerpt 2, pp, 59-66

"I was hit by tragedy," I said. He turned briefly. "I heard," he said, not without sympathy, then went on, as if offering his excuse: "Anica called the hospital a couple of times, but they said you were under sedation." He turned once more, eyeing me carefully. "A lot of time has passed since the accident, Gorana." Again that tone of the brother, two years older, lording it over me: maybe you were the first to learn to write, master the theory of relativity and logarithms, earn your doctoral degree, but I lost my first tooth before you did, I fell in love first and was the first to drink a beer, so everything you have ever experienced, good and bad, I've already been through. "What are you cooking?" I asked just to change the subject. "Quinoa," he said, pronouncing the word distinctly, patronizingly, as if I had just arrived from an island after thirty-five years in isolation and had never heard of this miracle food. I gave him that. Let him go ahead and list amaranth, bulgur, spelt, adzuki and mungo beans, white and borlotti beans, tapioca, millet and all kinds of legumes, let him lose himself in all the flour ground from almonds, buckwheat, rye, oats, chickpeas, coconut, in the algae and sprouts, as long as he doesn't ask me what I have been doing these last six months. He sat at the table with his gruel and checked me out warily between bites. "So where's your suitcase?" he asked. "I left it in a locker at the station," I said without blinking an eye, "I didn't like the look of the taxi drivers so I decided to come on foot. And you know my bags never have

those little wheels." He chuckled. He thought of me as silly in an eccentric sort of way, and he liked it when I reinforced this in what I said. Then it hit him. "The station? Why didn't you come by car?" Can you believe it, Hladna, that I only remembered in that very moment that I actually have a car? A red Ford Puma, permanently parked in an underground garage near my apartment. Only a year old, scarcely ever driven. It's worth, I thought, at least 100,000 kunas, at the very least, 70,000. I would agree to 50,000. I started digging through my bag, looking for the keys. How could I have been so stupid all this time, I fumed to myself, as to have so much money right there in front of my nose and not take it. Jere watched me, waiting for an answer. "It's in for repair," I said, unconvincingly. I knew he'd already seen my confusion and the red blush flushing my cheeks. The keys, of course, were not in my purse; they'd been left in my apartment. I forced myself to keep my gaze focused on the spoon that was traveling from the bowl of gruel to Jere's mouth. "And you could make me a little something," I said, intentionally sternly, "a cup of coffee, at least, with heaps of sugar." He was quiet, watching me with his always slightly startled eyes. "You know where it's kept," he answered at last. I felt a surge of relief. This meant that now he'd subject me to a long lecture on the damaging effects of sugar and I sat back in the chair and dozed with my eyes open, nestling into the gentle tones of Jere's voice like into a soft pillow. How that man went on, my Hladna. He jumped from the theme of a healthy life to his work in the nursery school, from the nursery school to the theory and history of punk, and from punk to a detailed description of Milka's care. The former punk rockers were the worst, they felt compelled to unite things with the same fervor they'd once smashed things apart; even if the puzzle were missing a piece, they'd force any old thing into the space, just to make the picture whole. I noticed he had recently decided to grow out his hair and a beard: brown whiskers had started appearing in places, unsightly on his light skin like the liver spots that come with old age. Now, when he sat, the

natural sturdiness of his body took second place to his small head on his fledgling neck, his sweaty forehead, touching in its fragility like an egg, and his flat nose that gave him a conciliatory look. I grew more willing to listen to him, or at least to watch him while he talked. As he spoke of Milka's condition, he piled on the nasty details. He was trying to get under my skin, I knew this, I could see it clearly in his burning eyes and the faint smirk. He boxed my ears with Milka's flaccid limbs, stuffed my nose with her shit and urine, humiliated me, me, the daughter who'd abandoned her mother, but when he paused between sentences and rested his eyes on Milka's prone body, he grew solemn, a darkness welled in his eyes, as if something heavy had sunk into dark water, and I knew he was actually saying: "Lucky you, you left, but I had to go back to our folks when my girlfriend broke up with me, and now I'm deep in Milka porridge, like quicksand." Did the kitchen darken a little more just then? Or had the diminishing light of the advancing day, as the little windows indirectly suggested, accentuated the semi-dark? The stairs creaked as Katarina came down in her pajamas, her face puffy from sleep. She glanced at me with curiosity. "Kate! Since when have you been wearing glasses?" I asked brightly, teasing her. "Since last autumn," she said. What made me so sad about her words? Was it the way she said them, too polite, too reticent, as if talking with an older family friend or relative she was meeting for the first time? Or that she looked right at me while she said them? If she had looked over at Milka or Jere, or if she'd reached for the coffee pot while we were talking, if she'd ignored me the way we ignore those who matter to us, I'd have felt better. I'd know: she has thought of me now and then over the last two years. Yet it was as if she'd never been the little girl who grew up by my side, who spied on me and read my diary in secret, the girl I bought Snjeguljica popsicles and puc-puc candy fizz for, brought her dresses and books from Zagreb. "What would you like to eat?" Jere asked her while she poured herself coffee. "Nothing, just coffee," she said. He shook his

head, but he didn't send me any sort of look. "You've got to eat something," he said, "come on, make eggs for yourself and Gorana, or that oatmeal with cocoa you like." He said my name as if signaling to her, look, this strange lady architect is sitting here, she just got in from Zagreb so why should she have to know you have an eating disorder. She sighed but did what he said. She put water on and then sat at the foot of Milka's bed and tenderly rubbed her grandmother's feet under the covers. A touch that was both condescending and full of a granddaughter's need for her grandmother's attention. Milka shifted her position for the first time. Did she really smile or had a shadow over her face tricked me into thinking she had? I thought about what to say, they were so close to me. Katarina's smell – fresh, earthy, warm, like newly mown grass on which the sun was drying the dew – tenderly masked the unpleasant fact of Milka's dying, and I felt I should somehow prove that I recognized her, but before I managed to come up with how, she got up, put eggs in the water and leaned on the stove, watching the back of Jere's head and listening very closely to what he was saying, though she had undoubtedly heard it all many times before. When she moved, I could see she had already picked up some of her mother Anica's slow gentleness, something soft-skinned and well-intentioned in her hands and tired in her hips, but now, as Katarina stood there, I could see she was lacking what flowed with pride and substance from Anica's full head of curly hair to her breasts and the soles of her feet: even as a woman, Anica had the air of assurance that some little girls have. Katarina had a reduced version of the curly hair in our family, hers a very light brown, and her prominent chin and lower lip were more pronounced, as if she were holding something painful back in her jaw, something difficult to say, and when she glanced for a moment to the side, her sleepy lashes revealed she wasn't really listening to Jere. The eggs boiled and I counted off the seconds to myself. One hundred. One hundred fifty, two hundred. If only she'd take the eggs out in the next thirty seconds, I

thought. Two hundred twenty. Two hundred twenty-five. Two hundred forty. If I were to take them out now, I thought, she and I would be saved. It still wasn't too late for them to be soft enough, if I were to say: "Do you remember that time during Carnival week..." And she'd flush red, brighten up, and admit: "Of course!" And then Jere, snarky but well-meaning, might add: "Ah, you two..." And then together we'd laugh and take the time to retell how once Kate, not wanting to destroy perfectly good egg yolks and whites during the Carnival the way the other kids did, brought with her hard-boiled eggs to throw at houses, with the plan of going back later and picking them up when nobody was looking, bringing them home and eating them, but then she cooked them for too short a time so when she pelted the house with them they were soft and the egg yolks smeared all over the house. That was our Kate: always striving to be perfect and always suffering with the consequences. Or was my memory playing tricks on me? I watched her as she took her seat at the table, bringing a dish full of eggs and two small plates with silverware. She seemed in sync with her own movements and the space around her, as if she weren't at all sorry she'd given up her studies and come back to her folks. I pulled up my chair. The eggs were hard hard-boiled. I peeled them, broke them into pieces and salted them. I looked at the cheese and tomatoes she was putting on the table. Hladna, you cannot imagine how thin she was while she was studying medicine in Zagreb. Why did I see her only twice in those three years? Why didn't I look after her better? I remembered that we got together, both times, on the grounds of the student dormitory on the Sava River, She was like a little bird in the snow in her thick white coat and oversized cap, but I couldn't remember why I was prepared to abandon her there to expire in the cold. Out of fear? Or simply neglect? I devoured the eggs the way the hungry gobble down food, but the chunks of egg had trouble going down my throat. The cheese was fragrant. Its white color perfectly matched the color of the dish it was sitting on, so the cheese

looked like a vulnerable spot on the dish, a soft hump exposing the fake compactness of the ceramics. Droplets of water, momentarily tense, burst and slid along the unnaturally regular skin of the tomatoes. And the other people across the table from me, I could hear how the seeds crunched under their teeth and dropped down their throats into their gut, only to come out again later. All this was so stupid, so pointless. So horrible, Hladna. I put down my fork and covered my eyes with my hands. "What's up?" asked Jere. "Nothing," I said. I put my hands down. "It is a fucking furnace in here," I said, trying to sound upbeat. They looked at me, more surprised than worried. I got up, thinking for a moment that I should collect my things and go, but then I said: "I have to pee." I locked myself in the bathroom, sat on the toilet and tried to pull myself together. "Remember why you're here," I whispered. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't convince myself that there had ever been a clear goal for me to achieve. I set my apartment on fire, then teenagers were partying around the "mosque," and then I went to the bus station and bought a ticket. That's how it was. What lay beneath this, what logic I was following was beyond me. The police would find me, regardless, and even if I were to muster the courage to ask for some, there was no money in this house anyway for me to cadge. Why was I here, then? I counted the number of toothbrushes in the glass. Five. Not four. Jere's son was living with them now, too. His mother had delivered him here from Kosovo five-six years ago and left the boy with his father who had never met him until then. I tried to figure out which of the toothbrushes was his, but they were identical except Dragan's which looked as if it had been used for years but now was not being used any more. I was consoled: one of the four brushes might be mine. I scanned the room. Everything looked as it always had. Reddish-brown tiles below, light-blue above. The peeling bathtub. The sink that was too small. The mineral stains on the faucet. The mirror that was missing a piece, yet nobody could remember how it had been broken. The claustrophobic sense of

safety of a room with no windows, whose narrow shape always reminded me of the interior of a ship container. While I sat on the toilet, I always felt as if I were on a journey, and that when I came out, I'd be arriving somewhere different. I got up and stood in front of the mirror. My makeup hadn't smeared, but by now I could see it couldn't contain the face that was pushing its way out. I found some cotton balls, soaked them in lotion and stripped away the powder, rouge and lipstick. I moved up toward my left eye to wipe off the mascara and eyeshadow, but then I stopped. I knew what my unadorned eye would look like: exposed in all its vulnerable warmth, without the help of the mask of threatening blackness. If I stripped the makeup from my eyes, I knew I'd be tired and sad; I wouldn't be able to get through the day ahead. I tossed the dirty cotton balls in the wastebasket, drank a glass of water and came out. Jere was cooking another pot of gruel; Katarina was gone. The table was already clean. "I threw out the rest of your egg," he said, aiming to sound indifferent. "Where is Kate?" I asked. "She went to take an exam, she is a student again," he said, a little anxious, and added, with a faint scoff: "Culture and Tourism." "Oh, what the hell..." I said. "Better that than working in retail," he said, and then straightened up a little as if he'd just woken up, turned off the burner on the stove and moved the gruel to the table. "I'm going out for a smoke. You'll know how to feed Granny the grits, won't you?" He didn't sound as if he was mocking me, but still I replied with anger: "She is my mother, isn't she?" He shut the door behind him and I sat down again by the head of Milka's bed. The grits were cooling on the table. If they hardened, this would be much trickier. I cautiously pulled the pot closer and stirred the grits. How difficult could this be? Scoop up some on the tip of the spoon and coax it into her mouth. As if feeding a child. It didn't look challenging. But when I spooned the first mouthful between the half-open jaws, it dropped into her oral cavity like sand falling into a pit, and she didn't budge. "Come on, Mother," I said in a whisper, "swallow." "Come on, Milka hon."

"Swallow it, Milky-way." I jostled her shoulder, too gently for her to recoil as she did, inhaling sharply and wheezing, as if the grits had plugged her airways. I was scared. For a moment I thought of calling Jere or Dragan, but my old vanity kicked in. Dying is so difficult, Hladna. There is no longer the vitality of movement to shift pain onto other beings and things, and the blessed liberation from the material world hasn't happened yet. Pain makes itself at home in the body, and to everyone who tries to budge it, it says: I am stronger.

Excerpt 3, pp. 84-93

Cars seldom passed me, but each one that drove by raised such a hot cloud that I could barely breathe. A marvel of dust caked my sweaty skin. I was thirsty. My arms itched from the traces of the bedbug bites. You'll understand, then, why I was so overjoyed to see my brother's hideous house, a building of red blocks, Frankenstein rooms annexed to the existing structure with the birth of each child, never completed, no roof or windows on the upper floor. On the concrete front path sat a boy of about ten, playing with pebbles and talking to himself. I crouched down beside him. "What are you making?" I asked. I couldn't remember his name. I knew he was their third, their youngest, but I had only seen him in photographs. He looked at me and blushed. He had blue eyes like his mother's but not as big, cold, or dependent on what they were reflecting, like a reflecting water surface. Instead, his were like something precious buried in sand, two firm points on his face, a face that was changing from one second to the next, unsure of whether to introduce itself with its freckles, curly hair, round chin, pink lips or big ears. "It's a shopping center," he said, a little hurt, averting his eyes. Gracija came to the threshold with a kitchen towel in her hand. "Who's that you're talking to, Davor?" she asked. The question voiced surprise at seeing me, but her face remained entirely impassive. "Gorana," she said, "where did you come from?" And then,

without waiting for an answer, she added, "The gentleman of the house, your brother, is at the table. The man required a little rest after dinner." Her lips barely moved when she spoke and everything she was saying sounded as if she had to yank it with effort from between her jaws, or straight from the bone, from her squarish rock-hard chin. She was even skinnier than I remembered, but she had acquired a new toughness that, despite signs of age—her salt-and-pepper hair and wrinkled neck—gave her a suppler, younger look. She went back in and I followed her. We crossed the front hall in two steps and entered the kitchen, the first door to the right, just as I remembered. "There, have a look at him," she said, nodding at my brother, Ivan— always Kiddo for me—who was sitting at the table, a cigarette in one hand and a glass in the other, staring blankly into space. He glanced over at me, then took a drag on his cigarette. He had adopted our father Mate's smoking style but lacked Father's authenticity. Mate used to honor his cigarette by bringing it to his lips, always with an air of dissatisfaction, and while Kiddo's gesture was identical, the smoke took control in the end, as if taunting him about his habit; this made his weak physique seem weaker yet. Here, too, the difference was in their eyes: Father's small black eyes were naturally planted in his robust face, while on Kiddo they looked unconvincing, as if on the basis of his borrowed eyes someone had haphazardly, last minute, slapped together this son of his. Hence his every movement came across as a badly learned lesson. "Have a seat, Gorana," said Gracija. Even that simple sentence sounded like a reproach aimed at Kiddo. I took the nearest chair, to my brother's left. The kitchen was much as I'd remembered it. The work area behind the bar, tongue-and-groove siding in the dining area, the national coat-of-arms as the only picture. The dank smell of the damp and walls stained black with mildew. Not a single plant, no magnets on the refrigerator. Gracija went over to the sink and continued briskly washing dishes. "So you've come, have you?" remarked Kiddo. Then he did that half-circle thing with

his eyes and his unique shrug of the shoulders, conveying: "You just show up here as if nothing happened so what have I got to say to you now." "Oh, fuck this," he said, inhaling the words with the smoke, as if to himself. I decided to let him talk. Davor sat down across from us, watching me with curiosity. In his eyes there was a compassionate tenderness that I clung to, assuming the stance of remorse, while I listened to Kiddo accuse me of the demise of the family, the fall of the house of Hrabrov. Did I not take the roof off the house and abandon the place to ruin? I did. Did I behave as if the legacy were mine when it was supposed to be his? I did. Was I always dissatisfied? I was. Had I pretended to be smarter than I really was? I had. I knew that, if patient enough, I'd surely find a way to steer us to Zoran and my Ford Puma. Kiddo was like that: he strove to sound tough and wise like Father, but he wasn't nimble enough to complete his thoughts. He was always bogged down in contradictions; he'd begin by mentioning people and events that had nothing to do with his central idea and ultimately he'd simmer down, embrace his drink and leave others to take the conversation wherever they liked. And already he was showing the weakening of his resolve, he expanded the story about my childhood to include the story of his friends back then and their lives today, but before I managed to find an opportune gap in the conversation into which I could insert Zoran, a tall, good-looking girl barged into the room, and, paying no attention to me, stretched her hand out to Kiddo and said, more as a statement than a question: "Hey, old man, got a smoke?" This had to be Maša, whom I'd last seen at Irma's funeral when she was a girl in early puberty. She still had some of her then sporty physique, but she'd filled out in an appealing way. Her face was longer and her full lips gave greater emphasis to her expression of all-powerful superiority. "Who's this?" she asked, nodding toward me. "Aunt Gorana. Don't you recognize her?" said Kiddo, giving her a look of paternal tenderness and pride while she licked the cigarette and lit it. "A ha," she said, exhaling her first puff of smoke, "the one from

Zagreb?" Her eyes, quite cold until then, sparked interest. "How is it you say shit?" she asked. I was thrown off. She grinned, exposing bad teeth. "I'm fucking with you," she said. She sat across from Kiddo to my left and put her feet up on the table edge. "Maša," protested Gracija, while rinsing the dishes. How did she manage to make everything she said sound like a reproach aimed at Kiddo? "What now?" snapped the girl edgily. Then she turned to me. "Married?" she asked. "Nope," I said. "Boyfriend?" I shook my head. "No traffic, eh? So what do you do all day?" "I work," I said, "I'm an architect." "Wait, are those the guys who go digging around in bones?" It irritated me that she was pushing me to sound superior. "No," I said as neutrally as I possibly could, "those are archeologists. Architects make the drawings that engineers and builders use to build buildings, like houses or schools or hospitals." "If only you architects hadn't done the drawings for my school building," she said, shooting Kiddo a conspiratorial grin, "maybe then I wouldn't have flunked out of second grade." "Gorana is a doctor of architecture," said Kiddo with the same sort of grin, emphasizing the word "doctor" as if making light of it. "You don't say, a doctor! Know any famous docs, like House or McDreamy?" "No," I said patiently, "I'm not that kind of doctor. I wrote a doctoral thesis about the influence of Le Corbusier on Yugoslav postwar architecture." "Ah, I'm fucking with you," she said a little wearily and exhaled smoke, as if I was the one who didn't get it. Lounging in her chair, she pulled up her top and started picking at the piercing on her belly button, giving Kiddo the floor, and watching me from a new distance, as if trying to suss me out. Kiddo grumbled on about the house on the island. What he could have done but for my reckless behavior. He could have been going there every weekend. Cultivating the olive grove and producing olive oil for sale. Looking after the boat. Having a peaceful place to retire to. "Cut it out, Old Man, you're so full of shit," interrupted Maša. "What do you mean, olives." She took her feet off the table and shot him a sharp glance, not so much with

her eyes as with her pencil-thin eyebrows. "You should be building vacation apartments, that's where the money's at," she said, rapping the table a few times with the fingers that were holding her cigarette. Gracija snarked from the kitchen sink, "This gentleman has retirement on the brain but he has, like, twenty more years of work to go. And how will he earn his pension when his work is mainly under the table... When he does work." He didn't say a word. He took a sip of his drink and stared blankly, his face showing more wrinkles. There was something immeasurably sad in his hair. Although it had thinned, he was still combing it back in "Italian" style, like he'd done in the 1990s. I thought: I should mention Zoran, now, now when he's weaker. Now is the time. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't tear my eyes away from my brother's dirty fingernails, fingers that trembled ever so slightly with every move he made, and the words in my throat felt like butterflies that were fluttering, dry and miserable and condemned to die. "What are you up to these days, Kiddo?" I asked. He was quiet. After a pause he replied: "Body work on cars, like always." "Here in my garage," he added. Turning to Gracija, Maša went on to explain why building vacation apartments was important, but soon she was interrupted by a gangly, stooped young man with a doltish arrogant expression, who strolled into the kitchen, paying attention to no one, went over the girl, whispered something in her ear and showed her his smartphone screen. She became solemn, put her cigarette in the ashtray and went off with him to the corner of the kitchen farthest from us, and engaged in a confidential conversation. I looked over at Kiddo with a questioning raise of my eyebrows. "Mate Junior," he said faintly mocking but not without pride. "Don't you recognize your nephews?" he sneered. His strength was coming back. He launched back into talk of the legacy. Hladna, that man could flog the subject without end. Ivan "Landless" the Kid. He had spent his whole life at this table with a drink and a cigarette, talking about the imagined riches that would one day be his. I tried looking at little Davor, his

angelic eyes and freckled face, sweetly solemn while trying to soak up his father's every word, but the boy would look over at me from time to time and, for no reason, he'd shoot me a big grin, and the half-moon of his teeth would exude a premature badness, and his expression would transform into the flushed face of the most ordinary of street urchins, stripping me of my defenses when facing off against my brother's quiet aggression. And the two knuckleheads in the corner. Did they have to be talking that way as if something is there, beneath the surface, that cannot make its way out? A person has to despise teenagers at least a little, I'm sure you'll agree, Hladna. Kiddo spun tales about distant family history, about Grandad Mate, Mate's father, who returned from fighting with the Partisans in the war without one of his legs, yet he was still able, when playing boccia, to hit the jack, the bulin as we call it, from thirty meters away, about Granny Palma whose five children died, but she was still able to dance on tables during village festivals and weddings, about the other grandfather and grandmother, about Mate's sudden death and Milka's imminent demise. Their pain was all my fault, I had hurt them with my unreasonable urge to act like a man. Me and only me. Don't laugh, Hladna, if I say that my throat was as parched as if it were filled with dead butterflies. I don't know how else to describe for you the dreadful dryness his quiet words sprayed me with. Everything became so fragile. The plastic flowers on the tablecloth crumbled under my fingers, I heard the sawdust a worm was making inside the tongue-and-groove siding and the paper wings of flies flapping in flight. The disintegrating threads in the fabric, the floury peeling of skin, the wooden eyelash that dropped from my face to the floor. "Coffee, Gorana?" asked Gracija. Her voice sounded scattered. Surrounded by the black-stained walls, she looked as if she were battling soot that was about to bury her. Only her eyes flashed like wells. "Water," I croaked. "A glass of water, please." Mate Junior left without a goodbye and Maša came back to the table, but our conversation no longer held any

interest for her. She put her feet back up and fiddled with her piercing, saying "shit," softly, over and over and laughing to herself, but when she took a drag on her cigarette, her face went stiff with solemnity, the source of which, as was visible, was far from everything surrounding her just then. I felt this was the ultimate moment to inquire about Zoran, but first I had to extricate myself from the sand the floor was turning into, and my glass of water was not forthcoming. "Father was a Gothic cathedral," I said out of the blue, flinching from the something, monumental and terrifyingly sharp, that I had raised among us. Kiddo protested. "Yes," I said, tentatively and implacably as if walking right up to the door of Notre Dame, "Mate was like a Gothic cathedral. A person can fail to believe in god, like me, yet still admire the conviction with which the Gothic cathedral asserts that god exists. There is something gorgeously honest in the absolute trust with which the builders approached the stone and glass, the confidence with which they expressed their illusion. Mate was like that." Kiddo said nothing, instead squinting out from the double bags under his eyes. "And you," I went on, now more sure of myself, "you are like the neo-Gothic. There can be a modicum of success in form, but the neo-Gothic does not exert power over people through what it is, but through the indirect aggression of how it leans toward what it aspires to be. The neo-Gothic church does not believe in god, but strives to convince the faithful that god exists." "How can one fail to despise such buildings," I added coldly. There was a hush. Gracija arranged the pots and did not bring me my glass of water. "There were times when I was afraid of Father, but mine was the fear of being faced with a force of nature: there was always a safe space to which I could retreat. You know that he was barely literate, and there was so much that was beyond his ken. Here, in the realm that was beyond the reach of his thinking was where I used to hide." Silence. Sand in mouth. The clatter of pots sharp and painful like the afternoon sun. "And you, you did not behave with the innocence of a natural disaster, out of your own

strength that had no need to fear others, no, your need to act the stern father for me comes from weakness. You needed my fear so you could grow up. You thought I didn't know how you dogged my every step, like a genuine Big Brother, when I moved to the city. How you frightened Milka with even my most harmless of choices. You made every street in that city a source of anxiety for me. At every window there was somebody who might accuse me." Then I added, speaking in the local dialect to make it hurt more, "When Papa died, they told me he succumbed. I remember, I came back that afternoon from school and outside the front door stood Aunt Mara and that other aunt, the one with the double chin, and that is exactly what they told me: 'Yer pops he succumbed.' I can't say there was no relief in this for me, that the horizon didn't seem suddenly freed, but how can a person not be overwhelmed by a terrible sadness, despair, really, when a Gothic cathedral collapses? When you die—and you won't for years to come—everyone will say you keeled over." I felt a hush settle over us, the kind of silence that develops around someone who has died. Maša looked at me as if she were seeing me for the first time, someone to be approached with a healthy dose of trepidation. Gracija came over to the bar to see me better. Davor sent each of us, one by one, a questioning look. If only Kiddo had raised his voice then. If he'd interjected something poisonous about my brief stint with my Serbian husband or my lack of care for Mother. But no, he clenched into himself even more tightly in his pitiful yellowed shirt and said very softly, as if to himself: "So I guess..." I wanted to tell him: quit it. He was no victim, indeed he was not. Let him save that story for his buddies at the betting shop. Oh, Hladna my friend, if you could have seen the way he turned to Davor, smiled woefully and said, "Hear this, child?" you'd understand why there was nothing left for me to say. Maša said something to Gracija, Gracija asked Davor a question. Nobody looked at me any more, but in each of their words there was an inner warmth and external chill, as if they were raising their shields in

front of me. What I had said remained dangling mid-air, falling slowly and crumbling, and believing it to be true was getting more and more difficult. Hadn't I myself been unsure of my own affective memory? Wasn't I speaking out of despair because of my own inability to find my way to Zoran and the Ford Puma? My throat was achingly parched. I grabbed the bottle of wine that was on the table and downed a long gulp. Nobody told me to go, but clearly their hospitality was done. Maša stubbed out her cigarette and without saying goodbye she left the room, Gracija went out, muttering that she had to start a load of laundry and did not come back, and Kiddo put down his drink and cigarette, leaned back, crossed his hands behind his head, looked up at the ceiling and softly hummed a song I didn't recognize. I rose to my feet. "I'll be off, then," I said. He shrugged, as if to say: your call. I turned and walked out through the open kitchen door and the open front door. Only Davor saw me out. After two-three steps along the concrete path I stopped, laid my hand on his shoulder and leaned over to him confidentially. "Do you know who our cousin Zoran is, Davor? Irma's boy Zoran?" I asked softly. "Irma died," he said, a little worried. "Yes, I know she died," I said, "but do you know her son, Zoran, the big, muscular guy?" He was quiet for a moment, then said: "Daddy says that clown is either crazy or nuts. Either crazy or nuts. And Mama, uh Mama, uh Mama says: 'Don't let him in the house if he stops by.'" The fleshy parts of his ears burned and his lips were slick with spit. He had the feeling we were doing something bad. "Has he been to visit you here?" "No." "Have your Mama or Daddy or Maše or Mate said they ran into him in town?" "No." "Good," I said, trying to sound as if I were talking with a grown-up. "Thank you for your help." I turned to go, but stopped when I realized there was still something tickling in his throat. "Daddy says," he said and grinned. "Daddy says: Jakovčević and god only know where Zoran is." And he hooted with laughter. Gracija came to the door. "Ah, Gorana, still here," she said, every bit as impassively as when she'd greeted me. "Davor,

come inside." The boy scampered over to her, leaned the back of his head on her chest and looked at me from the safe distance, protected by his mother's arms that she'd wrapped around his shoulders. He was a bit too red in the face and Gracija looked at me warily, as if I were a bad influence and she didn't want me near her boy. I quickly said my goodbyes. Before I set off down the street, I heard the door shutting behind me. Where to now?

EUPL/ FEP-FEE – Chaussée d'Ixelles 29-35, box 4, 1050 Brussels – T. + 32 (02) 770.11.10 –
info@euprizeliterature.eu - www.euprizeliterature.eu