Olja Savičević, *Summers with Marija*

Translated by Celia Hawkesworth

Sentimental Education
1986

A little women's circle was a central part of family gatherings on holiday days, Sundays and birthdays. This was where stories really were handed down from one generation to another, from 'knee' to 'knee' as the saying goes – or that's how it seemed to her. Knees that were thin, pointed or round, tanned or in nylons, fine black or skin-coloured, plump, bony and smooth, knocked into one another, touching, as they sat at the round table on the second-floor terrace of the house on Fallen Fighters Street. Marijola associated the name of the street with the revolutionary songs she and her fellow pupils sang at full volume in the school choir: 'The little Partisan girl' and her favourite – 'Forests, forests, all thanks to you'. She liked it when at concerts they all bellowed them out from the cinema stage, in front of the whole town, her own voice carried by those of the other girls sailing freely through the wall-papered cinema hall and beyond, no one would notice if she hit a wrong note and she was finally able to let rip and sing at the top of her voice. In a way the circle was like that.

When someone in the family gathering called out 'Marija', several women would respond, provoking explosive laughter. The Marijas didn't giggle stupidly, or slyly, or madly, or mysteriously, they chortled and laughed whole-heartedly, their wing-like upper arms wobbling and jewellry tinkling, which Marijola never found gross, but just very cheerful and rather charming. The Marijas also sometimes wept together, no one knew exactly why, but no one pried; and so Marijola, at about twelve years-old, hearing them blow loudly into their ironed handkerchiefs, became aware that both laughter and tears were for things that could not be expressed in words, for which no words had yet been found. Those words, if they ever did come into being, had to be natural and precise, to communicate - like music, for instance, she thought.

This business with having the same name, they told her, had nothing to do with tradition, at least not in the usual sense of tradition as a secular temple for the norms of a given community, broader than the family or a group of good friends, nor did it have anything to do with religion, they told her. Apart from great-grandmother Marija, who attended church regularly and was a little more loyal to God than to the National Liberation Struggle and the Party, Marijola's family was not religious.

The reasons for the recurring name were simple, of a sentimental nature, they explained. It was hard to deny that Marija was a very nice name and widespread, while their Marijas had, at least for some time, liked or at least respected each other, with a deep trust, naïve or wise, which was almost the same thing, therefore hard to distinguish, they told her. Just as in most families, at least in this part of the world, a male name is transmitted from one generation to the next, so it was with the name Marija in theirs, with all its different variations and nicknames: Mara, Mare, Marijeta, Meri, Merica, Marica, Marijica, Marjuča,

Maša, Little Marija, Big Marija, Merry Marija, Great-Granny Marija, Auntie Marija, Great-Aunt Marija, they said. As their Marijas were prone to divorce and early death, several of them had different surnames, not the same as their children's, and the name Marija was, in a very particular way, what connected them more than their surname, which was in any case a men's thing, they told her, which she had already worked out.

After lunch, which represents a little celebratory performance in several acts, opening with sweet Dalmatian wine and concluding with coffee and a cigarette or pipe, the men go and lie down or take a walk somewhere outside the women's circle, and this is the moment for turning to oral family history, a special form of intimate parrhesia, gentle in approach but biting in its exposure of uncomfortable truths which in fact everyone wants to express, but no one wants to hear.

This is how women who are close converse when they're alone, Marijola observed, when there are no husbands, sons or brothers, generally not a single man in sight. Perhaps it's also because the great bulk of uncomfortable truths the women discuss concern their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers, she observed. The women all sing in that choir, each with her own parallel part.

Marijola's mother, the one they call Maša, despises the widespread custom of women 'moaning about their husbands'. You bad-mouth him, then you get into bed with him, what's the point of that, it only demeans you, she said. But the others either said nothing or complained loudly, it was all known, everything was always known and nothing could ever be done about it: all the women had of a social life was just their story, just gossip, it was a collective séance, a primitive form of group therapy, and they would emerge from it, cured without sedatives, blinded by their own tongues and tears and a little glass or two of Maraschino or Amaro.

The women's conversation runs like a river, through the middle of the room. It's a torrent, whose current does, eventually, come to an end, but which in fact flows uninterruptedly among them, soaking them, steeping them so that they do not become dry and bitter. The family and other women know stories that can completely fill the dining room and dispel their hunger for story-telling, they are assemblages of emotion, melodies of language from different parts of the country, coast and mountain, the conserved scents and colours of summer that waft out from under the lids of jars of preserves, a lilt and specific timbre of speech, but also the mentality and atmosphere of their homelands, both distant and close.

Marijola is too young to have her own stories, but a few years earlier, she had discovered that she had poetry, which, unlike story-telling, is accessible even if it is beyond our own experience, and its language is magical and mysterious, like laughter and tears it reaches inexpressible things: that is her way of being involved in the adult women's conversation, a possibility of participation, but also sharing. She senses that her being is finding its feet and changing and that the over-sensitive inner force that drives her against her will to either fury or whining and nudges her towards something she does not understand, outside her youthful experience, and she doesn't know whether it comes from outside or whether it's an echo reaching her from some inner well. But in any case, she senses that it's far stronger than her everyday energy and it could redirect her entirely, transform her into a savage, throw her off course, even destroy her. Over-lively children are let out to run and jump so as to use up their excess energy, but all she can do with the excess allotted her is vigorously fill the emptiness of paper.

At moments when the conversation stalled or became too wearisome, one of the adult guests would say: Well, Marijola darling, have you written a new little poem for us?

When she was younger, not feigning reluctance, she would gladly climb onto a chair and declaim, while the Marijas and other women would get out their little ironed linen handkerchiefs and sniffle in unison or gush: 'that was lovely'.

To start with, when she was younger, Marijola loved it and would wait impatiently for the women's attention to turn away from domestic duties, family mysteries and dark secrets, funerals, weddings, problems in the kitchen or in bed, from historical, marital, celebrity or political issues - to her and her poetry, which was not usually the most urgent topic, because the women's circle met also over more urgent, collective problems. If the collective problem was a shortage of coffee, they got together in their house in Fallen Fighters Street, because Marijola's mother worked in the local supermarket next to the cinema, in the textile and cosmetics department, on the floor above the groceries, and on the days of shortages she was able to help out. But not always, she said.

In winter, behind the stove or in summer on the sideboard, there would always be a big bunch of green bananas ripening and, as she had been told that it was a particular pleasure to secure those bananas in good time because of the customers who snatched them as soon as they arrived, Marijola thought herself very fortunate. But the adult women were anxious and mournful, as though the coffee they were drinking was their last, she observed.

A pressure-cooker of boiled milk was hissing on the cooker, the women had each lit a Partner or Lord cigarette: they didn't notice her dunk sugar lumps in their cups. Unprepared for open revolt, Marijola ran out of patience, and then also of the hope that she would be performing that afternoon. And when she was entirely suffused with woe, because some of the women were already on their feet getting ready to leave, she grabbed a big green vase from the table and dropped it onto the floor where it shattered into a hundred pieces. They did notice that.

They noticed me, thought Marijola, crossing her arms over her chest to stop herself crying. The adult women were astonished, appalled, but they no longer let the poet wait too long.

Those childhood days passed quickly and almost overnight and for no apparent reason there was a significant change: poetic performance in front of the family became a source of embarrassment and horror, and she began to avoid it. She realised that the worst thing that could happen to anyone who writes was that their family should read their work. Sometimes, if she was in a good mood, Tonka, her younger sister, would come to her rescue by performing a dance routine to a popular song, but the Marijas and other women in the family did not give up easily. If she refused, they would look a bit offended.

When she confided in one of her father's relatives, Auntie Herci, who was after all an artist, a former ballerina, Herci told her that's how it was, every serious artist was alienated from people by their art, but not from the past they shared with those people. Unfortunately, said Herci, looking at her with her romantic dark eyes, I'm not serious and I still drag them all around with me, instead of telling them to get lost and just dancing.

As a young ballerina from Sarajevo, who had often spent the summer with her relatives in Dalmatia, Auntie Herci had fallen in love with the handsome and wealthy owner of the local bakery, one of the first to have a red speedboat. I married into the family, she used to say, coquettishly shaking her saucer-eyed head. Bakers and butchers were the only private shopkeepers in the days of socialism, but Marijola assumed that, because of the

nature of their business, butchers were less desirable, while bakers, like military personnel, say, rated highly with women, at least in Marijola's family, she observed. Other private shopkeepers were also confectioners like the Albanian Zef and Hungarian János, but they had wives from their own countries, wives who made cream tarts and ice-cream in the background and sometimes peered out with a remark in the unknown language of their unknown country.

In the family stories, Marijola felt that sadness was elemental and profound, while joy was a kind of unfiltered spontaneity, an unspoken need for humour and making things better, and that their dark, hard to comprehend misfortunes were an experience that outstripped people – a surplus of destiny. Too much destiny, the Marijas told her, sighing. Too much destiny for one family.

Chronic sentimentality, and an occasional coarseness in their speech, would sometimes bother her, she would get indignant, ashamed and choke on their tears, at once too salty and too sweet.

People are on the whole stiff, cold and restrained, said Auntie Herci on that occasion. Falsely pleasant, some are even emotionless, she said. You may be indignant now, but you'll miss this, she added in her syrupy and seductive way, blowing out two pirouettes of cigarette smoke across the table. Marijola said that she would never miss it, that they embarrassed her, that they were whingers – but on the other hand, if you're nurtured on clear and very sensual broth, you're done for, the outside world seems to you largely a boiled bone.

After the Sunday lunches, the men would go out to play cards or chat, but Marijola's father Little Vjeko would sometimes prefer to stay with the women, if it was possible for him to lay his large, whiskered head on his mother's, Granny Meri's, lap and start snoring. From time to time Meri would stroke her eldest son's hair, setting up a little jingling lullaby with her rings and bracelets. The women would talk around the sleeping man in lowered voices, but might also shout out in unison if something excited them, which didn't in fact bother him. Dana Žungulova, Granny Meri's best friend, would then quietly mention her only son, a great football hope who had scampered off to America. He was Marijola's special non-god brother, and even if she didn't quite understand, she liked the idea of having a god-brother in America. Although he had abandoned our country, and shouldn't have, the women didn't hold it against him – if they loved someone, all was forgiven. She observed.

On one occasion Marijola and Tonka accidentally knocked the decorated Christmas tree over onto their father: they were horrified, but Little Vjeko went on calmly snoring, spreading himself over the couch.

He would often wake up with an idea, and it was always an idea that didn't appeal to his wife. For like the majority of those who have ideas, Marijola's father needed people to carry them out: he would realise on waking that something had to be done or brought or they had to go somewhere. Often something he had read in a book or newspaper would come into his mind and he'd send his daughters to the floor below, for the evidence. Even into their parents' room. The children weren't allowed in their parents' room, but not strictly forbidden to enter it. Only, unless they were expressly asked, they must not touch anything. And that's how it was with most things to do with the grown-ups' world and just about everything in Marijola's and other childhoods, roughly: do what you like, but mind you don't get caught.

On the day when she went again to the forbidden room, Marijola was already knee-deep in prohibitions. At the beach she had trodden on a sea-urchin, she had tried peeing on her heel in the bath, but half the spines had stayed in her foot, which she didn't dare confess because she had already started school, and after school started sea-bathing was not allowed. (Allegedly so as not to get a chill, although it was still blisteringly hot.) She put up with the pain going downstairs, when she had to press more on her heel. Her father had sent her down to get a book out of the locked cupboard. The book was called *Genealogical and other relationships*, he said. After that, after Marijola had broken the secret code: the keys to the chest-of-drawers and corner cupboard, the wardrobes and cabinets were still kept hidden, but Marijola and Tonka knew where to find them, they would just bide their time; Maša was right to call her daughters weasels. Weasel, weasel, weasel, she'd say, pinching their little tummies. Inside, in the cabinet, there was a real treasure-trove: from a small silver box containing gold, imported cosmetics and old photos and letters from their parents' former life to a few erotic books and magazines in a special closed box. The sisters liked nothing better than to get hold of the key and take a quick look at those mysterious riches.

They included a book entitled *The Carnal Prayer Mat* by a certain Li Yu, a nineteenth-century Japanese writer, which Marijola studied sentence by sentence with great interest and even greater secrecy, taking care always to put it back in its place quickly, without any trace. What she found most disturbing was the fact the back cover contained an explanation by Li Yu himself, stating that he had described all his main character's obscene exploits with the honourable intention – of deterring his readers from debauchery and teaching them what they should never on any account ever do. She was surprised, too young not to believe the lie, she accepted Li Yu's disclaimer as his honest if impossible intention. She imagined him as naïve, perhaps dull-witted. But, if that was the price for Li Yu to avoid losing his life and his book never seeing the light of day, it was not impossible to justify him. What particularly interested Marijola was that through all his numerous erotic adventures with different women she could never identify with Li Yu's character but nor with any of his love partners. It would be far more natural to identify with the adventurer who hopped from one mat for carnal prayer to another, particularly in a genre in which it didn't occur to anyone to pose any philosophical or moral questions (apart from those notorious lies in the afterword), she would conclude, only later. She had already read a version of the *1001 Nights* reduced to a very slim volume, but there she had at least found Sheherezade. Apart from princesses and the occasional young woman Partisan who had thrown grenades and lost her life, even in other existential genres little girls did not have many heroines with whom they could identify. There were only women as objects and women as constructs, she would conclude, only later. Real women in families, in the neighbourhood and their stories were the only ones who bore witness to the fact that women's lives were not two-dimensional or devoid of rebellion or adventure or eroticism, even if those adventures took place in domestic interiors. It was in recipe books stained with rum, with chocolate fingerprints, on the backs of photographs and in letters and postcards, autograph books and dictionaries, in locked cabinets, drawers and cupboards that she found the seeds and crumbs of the great, unwritten private history of the world.

In summer, the streets of her early girlhood, those tomboy years in a little girl's life, smelled of sun, tourism, soap and sex, and although she was not aware of it then, she felt and lived

the freedom produced by such an unconstrained environment. But in the world towards which she was hurrying, which people called the world of art, what she missed most was reality, her own reality. The books and films that were accessible did not address that exactly, they encompassed only one point of view, towards which the world was then gently inclining: exceptionally little, almost nothing, could be found about the real life of women. Their time was less reserved, it was easier to breathe, but all that ostensible freedom of love and sexuality in socialist days was a freedom to the measure of men, there was a barrier there.

Secrets and unfathomable things, those beyond the barrier, were what Marijola's young life was woven around. And, perhaps more than the allure of those longings, fear of them and the need for them to be fully revealed, while preserving their unintrusive magic.

As far as the secrets of love went, there was never a question of Catholic or any other kind of guilt: growing up in a small Dalmatian town in the nineteen seventies and eighties was filled with the obscene jokes of both adults and children. Such unbridled vulgarities angered and humiliated her, but more often made her laugh, with their cheerful and unburdened, healthily natural attitude to the pleasures of life. Those wanton expressions contained less eroticism but more prurience than books, they were titillating rather than stimulating, but the stories that surrounded her, the first hints of erotic experience that reached her through language, for years before she actually entered that world, contained crackling humour. Educated and well-read people never joke in that way, at least not in public. In their humour there is no place for sex, or perhaps it was the other way round, she would conclude somewhat later. As though education did not liberate us, but rather starched us, she would say to Tonka, somewhat later.

So, one Sunday afternoon, that summer, just before Marijola's thirteenth birthday, her father woke from his sleep with the idea that he must show Herci a book from her parents' room. That book, it would turn out, was significant for quite different reasons than Li Yu's, which she came across quite by chance on that occasion. It was a kind of genealogy, a white volume with a red title printed in Cyrillic. It had arrived by post, through a distant relative on the Montenegrin side of the family. Montenegrins took such things seriously.

What genealogy was, she didn't know, what national identity was her mother had explained not long after she was out of nappies and started using a potty. She had some childish problems with her digestion at that time, which a paediatrician declared to be laziness, so her mother kept watch over her stools, encouraging every plop that echoed in the toilet bowl: Bravo, a Dalmatian! Bravo, a Montenegrin! There we are, a Bosnian! Hey, a Croat! And here's a Serb! Her mother encouraged her daughter's little turds, an integral but also dispensable part of every human being. No one, either before or since, better explained national or patriotic allegiance.

At this point it might be good to say that she rather pitied those children who had to do it all in one go. But how could she know how other children did it.

The genealogy followed the widespread and fertile male line which, pursuing various professions, military, bureaucratic, even ministerial, moved from Greece, through Doclea, Yugoslavia, the whole world and was interrupted by women's names. In their case it was the names of the sisters Marija and Tonka. And so their names, along with other women's names, remained recorded and conserved in an eternal state of daughterhood. Their

forebear-daughters, about whom all that was known was their names and who were their male forebears, never grew up, they never had professions, they never married or had children they never went or travelled anywhere, nor did they ever die. They existed only as children, while, as women, they were erased from history, not only the history of the family, but history altogether.

Herci commented, in quiet revolt, that she was not in that book. There, you see, she said. Her mother Rumica had picked up a rifle and gone to the battle of Sutjeska as a Partisan. Her legs were full of shrapnel and bullet wounds. A national heroine, but her daughters weren't in the book. Where had you been and what had you done, if you hadn't borne a son.

Marijola's father, Little Vjeko, tapped his diminutive relative's shoulder with his huge hand, a smile in his fine red moustache: Was that why we fought?! Overtly, he was always on the side of women, but like all men of his and previous generations, in daily life he didn't give his wife space to breathe.

Marijola had once seen Auntie Rumica's legs, or she might have dreamed them, that was at Auntie Herci's parents' holiday house in the little town of Rastoke. She carried a walking stick and had a croaky voice, deep and hoarse from smoking, which exaggerated her proud Montenegrin accent, only her eyes were large and benign, with thick lashes like those of her daughter, her sensuous and warm Auntie Herci.

As for *Genealogy and other relationships* and the position of girls and women in it, Marijola realised that it wasn't at all unusual since no one got excited about it, apart from Auntie Herci who always got excited in a way which, seen from outside, was not disagreeable.

But apart from Li Yu and his soft pornography, this strange book, the trimmed family tree, was the one that drove Marijola for the first time to think of herself as a woman, and, however she looked at it – she didn't like it.

That's terribly stupid, it's got nothing to do with the brain, said Marijola.

That's how things are, sonny, they said.

I'm no one's sonny. That's ridiculous.

It's just a common expression like 'dear'.

And do you say 'daughter' to a son?

Oh, come on, Marijola. It's just a saying. We didn't invent it, said the Marijas and other women from the family.

But why not invent something! I could invent a book about you, solely about women, said Marijola. So mind how you behave.

Why don't you, you've got plenty of material. For three novels, they agreed.

Don't think that women aren't important! Little Vjeko, the theoretician, joined in.

The *Genealogy* was shoved into the household bookcase temporarily housed in Marijola's childhood bedroom for many years and soon quite forgotten, it would surface from time to time, here and there, meaning nothing to anyone, and later, in the nineteen-nineties – when the scenery changed and when the wallpaper came off, along with the woodcuts of Lenin and comrade Tito – it too disappeared into the locked cupboard in her parents' room. She didn't check, but something told her that the contradictory sex-fiend Li Yu was also still there.

The baking tin

1965

When Marija, Maša, came back to the mountains from the town where she had spent part of the summer with one of her brothers, she found the wooden gate in the fence wide open and the house empty. She found her mother in the plum orchard, silent and anxious. After they had embraced and knocked back a bit of brandy on an empty stomach toasting health and good luck, there, among the plums, the girl asked about her sisters, and her mother covered her face with her small palms and for a while it wasn't clear what she was doing, was she going to cry or wondering what to say. Marija was alarmed, and it turned out that she had good reason. Last spring, her middle sister, whom they called Koka, whom Marija loved, sweet and gentle, exceptionally skilled with her hands, had married a man called Mile, who had begun to hit her even before the summer. Both he and his mother thumped her and, yesterday, Koka had run away, over the fields, to her family home. She had bruises like the black earth, said her mother in the plum orchard. Marija's brothers were in other towns, they didn't know, but her oldest sister, Tomka, Toma, who was often rude and loud, who had played the role of their missing father during the war, that sister had simply gone crazy. She shrieked as she strode briskly from one room to another, creaking through all three rooms of their wooden house, as though her thoughts were gnawing at her brain and chasing her, she said that leaving one's husband was a disgrace and that their middle sister would land them all in the shit, her mother told Marija. The older sister had allowed her middle sister to stay the night, because it wasn't sensible to walk through the woods at night, she locked the door of her room and this morning had taken her back to her husband, swearing in the most horrible way and castigating both her and him all the way.

Marija emptied her bag of the things her brother in town had sent their mother, shoved some clothes into it, just in case, and a bottle of water, washed and brushed her hair at the well and hurried off to the neighbouring village, where her middle sister had married. Suspecting where she was going, her mother called: Maša, come back, you're hungry! Don't go there! But Marija, although she really was hungry, already had one foot on the hill and the other in the wood.

Where the track came to an end, she set off through corn and tall grass, armed with a stick against snakes. In her shoe, beside her ankle, she carried a knife. The heavens opened. It was St Elijah's Day and if there is thunder on that day, the old countrywomen say that Elijah, the Thunderer, is attacking devils and that you should cross yourself. She didn't believe such things, but once, when she was quite small, she went into the fields on St Elijah's Day and crossed herself like crazy to conjour up the saint and the devils. Later she discovered that in the village down the hill a woman had been struck by lightning and for a while she felt guilty but also afraid that she would be found out and sent to prison.

She could have drawn the path she was following with her eyes closed: it was about twenty kilometres from the last bus-stop in Odžak to the house, over meadows and through the wood, she walked it easily and enjoyably, she knew where to find shade or shelter, food

and water. She would walk those kilometres in her thoughts, even years later, every bush and stone, metre by metre, whenever she had the energy to imagine it.

In the winter, when the roads were blocked with snow, she would go home by train, that path from the station, on foot, through snowdrifts, was thirty kilometres long. In summer she went through three villages and a bit of forest, she found blueberries, raspberries, cornelian cherries, or rested a while in the corn, nibbling on wild peas, she'd drive a mouse from a bird's nest in a field, put her fingers in her mouth and whistle loudly, scaring sheep, and herself be scared by a dog, snagging her skirt on brambles. Behind her were the towns and dormitories in which she lived in her schooldays, while before her rose a mountain just as it had been at the beginning of the world.

Marija used to come home like this for holidays. While she was in the dorm, she often skimped on food, sending it by post to Odžak for her mother and sisters: tinned food and apples. Oh, there was everything in abundance in the dorm! Boarders like her spent the summers in Dalmatia, in Split and on the islands, while in some years their contemporaries secretly sucked sheep's milk out of hunger. The children of dead fathers had everything: books, food, clothes, summer holidays and health care. No one asked which side your dead father had perished on, although people knew, but nevertheless, they all slept and ate and sang and played together and they were all wounded.

It's a summer's day and I'm coming home to you, mother, sang Marija in the late, ripe summer. She sang against the evil eye and to drive the hunger from her stomach, she sang for her sorrowing heart to keep cheerful, because, although she was eighteen, she already knew that if you let bitterness in, it would pollute you.

Outside the village there was a spring on the plateau, wide and shallow, different from other springs and wells. There was a tap too. There she was greeted by women: Here's Maša, here's our scholar! How are you, Marija, Maša dear? But she just said a quick good morning and hurried on. Well, fuck you all, thought Maša, you know the whole thing, you saw them, they just came past, now you're just holding me up.

She reached Mile's fence, pushed the gate open and dashed through the alarmed chickens and into the house. The summer was scorching so the door was open. The three of them were inside, in the dark, astounded: Mile, his mother and Toma. Koka, the middle sister, Marija's pet, whose hands had washed old sheets and sewed all her little blouses and skirts, knitted her wonderful multi-coloured caps, seeing her younger sister, she covered her face with those hands, just as her mother had done a little time before, in the plum orchard.

Why are you hiding, Koka, Marija shouted from the door.

Shouldn't someone else be hiding, she wanted to say, but the words didn't emerge. Her energy had given out at the door.

Have a seat, Maša! Welcome, there's some pie, look, it might have been baked in the sun, said Trivuna, Mile's mother, honey dripping from her lips.

Marija was hungry, she hadn't eaten since the day before, and the pie was steaming and golden in its black baking tin. A rare sight on an ordinary day. For a moment the aroma made Marija dizzy and she nearly forgot why she had come.

Come on, Koka, cut them some pie, said her sister's mother-in-law, Mile's mother, but Koka didn't stir. Mile, a great bear of a man, sat on a sofa in the corner, one foot under his backside, rolling a cigarette. Her older sister Toma said nothing, flashing her grey eyes: have you come for me?

Marija nodded towards her middle sister: I've come for Koka.

Mile laughed in the corner. Woops, he said. It was morning and he was already tipsy.

Come on, Mile, don't play the fool, Trivuna reprimanded him, her thick grey plaits laid over her huge breasts. He had a bit to drink, and Koka was a bit rude, you know how stubborn she is. Besides, it's not for the younger sister, just a kid, to come between husband and wife. That's the way things are, a husband's word has come first from the beginning of time.

And last, it would seem, said Marija. Aren't those times behind us, comrade Trivuna?

Mile defended himself. I've said I'm sorry and it won't happen again. What more can I do? Kill myself?

Why not? Marija responded.

And what do you say, Koka, she asked her sister.

A husband has the first and last word, Koka repeated, smiling faintly as though it was some kind of joke.

There never was and never will be a time for the quiet and gentle, but weak, they are the worst. Marija frowned.

And what about you, Maša, Trivuna wasn't giving up. Have you finished your teacher training?

Yes, but I've changed to commerce.

Why's that?

They've extended teacher training to six years. I can't stay that long in the dorm! Now I've matriculated, I'm in Banjaluka, staying with my brother till I get sorted. I've just registered on the Higher Economics course, and I'm helping in a shop.

Maša talked to gain some time.

I want to be my own person, to earn my own money, move to a big city or to Dalmatia and send some money to Mother and Toma.

Well, well, said Mile's mother.

Toma muttered that she didn't need her sister's money,

Koka smiled, looking away. Mile on the sofa smoked and grinned. He was a mess, he stank of drink – and just the year before, on this day, the girls had said he was the best-looking lad in all the villages for miles around.

Let's go then, said Marija to Toma. You were right. She's in good hands, she says so herself. Apologies for the misunderstanding.

The women made for the door, and Koka scurried after them.

From the sofa Mile tripped her up and she fell flat on her face onto the floor.

From down there, on the floor, Koka said: Won't you have a bit of pie?

That was a joke, said Mile and put out his hand to help her up. Then he hiccupped. Koka didn't see it, that hand, she just roared, bristling.

While he was still bent down, Toma grabbed the hot baking tin full of pie and with all her strength walloped him over the head with it. The bear collapsed without a sound. You said you'd never raise a finger to her again, damn your eyes!

Damn your eyes, shouted Marija as well, at the top of her voice. Damn you!

His mother, Trivuna, seeing the three young witches screaming, ran out of the house, calling for help: They've killed my Mile!

Let's run, fuck you both as well, shouted Toma to her sisters. And they ran without catching their breath until they reached the wood.

There Marija clasped Koka to her and carefully took the black baking tin out of her bag.

You stole the pie, Maša! exclaimed Toma.

I was hungry, said Marija, tucking in. A shame half of it fell out of the tin when you clobbered him.

I'm the one who made it in any case, remarked Koka.

Right! Koka made it in any case, so it's ours, Marija agreed.

A shame half of it fell out, Toma repeated. It's a shame to waste pie on that idiot.

The sisters began to giggle and eat with their fingers, in the wood above the village, in deep shade.

What do we do if Mile comes to our house, asked Marija, with her mouth full.

Just let him come, I can't wait, he knows that I'd take a rolling pin to him, as soon as he's through the door, said Toma seriously. She was thin and sharp, her face black, her teeth white, while her eyes were azure sparks.

We've got three brothers, she added. He wouldn't dare.

He wouldn't dare, but you'll be going to Travnik, as soon as I get organised. I've got a friend there, from when I was in the dorm. We'll look for a job for you there, in the shoe factory, they need women, and later maybe we'll move to Split, said Marija.

Dalmatia is a holy land, added Toma. She had never been further than the neighbouring village, but the whole of Bosnia knew that about Dalmatia.

Go on, take me as well, I'd like to bathe in the sea too, laughed the oldest sister.

But Koka said nothing, her lip was split and her fingers battered. Then she said: Rain. And soon large drops started dripping on the sisters through the hazel leaves. They hurried home, three young forest witches, over the familiar, unmarked paths.

Down below, in the plum orchard, their mother was waiting, delighted to see her daughters, but surprised by the baking tray. She turned it round in her hands for a long time, examining the dent in the centre.

In the evening, in their room, the middle sister and Marija lay under the same sheet, looking, one at the painted wall and the other at the full moon that had appeared in the window after the rain, Koka whispered:

I've got to tell you something, Maša.

Go on.

I'm pregnant.

How much?

Too much. When Toma hears, what do you think, will she send me back to Mile?

No, she won't, not a chance.

Marija turned her back on the moon and laid one hand on her sister's head, the other on her belly.

Her sister was little, warm, round.

They wept together in each other's arms until nearly dawn, and then, before sunrise, without saying anything to anyone, they stole silently out of the house and set off on foot to Odžak, then by bus to Travnik. The driver, Alija, looked them both over briefly. Up early. Straight from an assignation? Didn't you go home for Ilija, St Elijah's Day just yesterday, my dear?

Ilija in the afternoon, Alija in the morning, laughed Marija, giving Koka a little nudge.

They found seats away from the driver. The bus bounced over the road, and above the rear-view mirror swayed a little plastic photo of Marilyn Monroe.

Calm Sea

2001

Marijola sits on the edge of a boat with her feet in the sea, and, leaning over the rail, cleans her teeth with paste and water from a plastic cup, then rinses it sparingly and mixes milk and chocolate powder in it. She notices that during the night two more boats, a German speedboat and an Italian sailing boat have pushed into the narrow inlet, which they had reached the previous afternoon, but their crews are asleep, so Marijola doesn't bother to put on her swimsuit. When she has eaten her breakfast, she lowers herself into the still water, together with the cup and teaspoon. She is pregnant, so she doesn't dare jump off the side. In the sea she washes the things that float round her. She puts the cup upside down on the prow to drain and swims to the end of the inlet and back. Peeing, showering and exercise, all in one, she tells her young husband. She swims towards the shore until the seaweed in the silty shallows touches her collar bone, then she goes slowly back.

Her husband, Miho, has put on his trunks and spread a chart over the cockpit, his fingertips move over the handbook strategically, while his ear is tuned to the weather forecast on the radio. The day is perfect, he tells his young wife. Maestral. The sea is rippled and there's a good breeze without a big swell. It would be good to go with the maestral, we'll raise the anchor after breakfast so, please, get a move on, he says.

Marijola and Miho are cruising through the islands. If a three-day sail on an Elan 19 sailing boat round a local archipelago can be called cruising, says Miho. Of course it can, there's nothing better than sailing on a little boat, as that's the only way you can sail dangling one hand and foot in the sea while the other holds the tiller, says Marijola.

When he's not in a hurry, Miho likes Marija's childlike performances such as her nudist gymnastics and chocolate breakfast out of her tooth mug, there's something entertaining in all those rituals – in the consecutive repetition of similar actions, every slight deviation from the expected comes as a surprise. In the end, they have only a canister of water on board the Murtilica and an improvised shower 'out of a plastic bag' if she really wants to wash the salt out of her hair, as she usually does.

Hurry up, my little seal!

'Seal' means that they're close, thinks Marija. One could almost say that they know one another, insofar as a husband and wife can know each other, she thinks. Before she met him, she believed that she would never get married, she had told him. But in the end, she was the first to marry, as soon as she graduated, like a real little bourgeoise, she told her women friends. Observing all those couples from close to, she said, at best they seemed like colleagues, almost never like lovers. People say that love and being in love are not the same thing, and so on, but she had never imagined love as something lukewarm. If fish and birds and other creatures can travel half the world because of the power of attraction, it's crazy to think that can't influence us. An actress once told her that would be like not believing in gravity, she said.

On the other hand, it is unusual. On Monday you don't know someone, he's a complete stranger, and on Friday he's more important to you than your family and friends. Do you think that's good or bad, she asks him.

Neither. But for me it's good, and I hope that it's not all that bad for you, says Miho, emerging from inside the boat with two mugs of coffee. A life in which there's hot coffee on a boat can't be bad, he adds.

She's got two hearts beating inside her now, thinks her husband. He watches her drinking her coffee and chews the tip of his thumb, so that she doesn't see. Her belly swelled quickly, almost at once. Although it's summer, they are both already together in the depths of winter: when winter comes, so will the child, conceived the previous spring in the clouds, on the top of a Split skyscraper, in the former archive of an architectural company, in that little room into which one leapt straight into bed from the doorway.

You haven't given birth to a sugar tail, Mezzomarinero.

Sorry?

Your coffee's bitter, Miho.

Wrapped in a sleeping bag, stiff with salt, his wife is gazing at the fish hanging about by the boat: at the giltheads and black bream circling beside the keel around the remains of the chocolate pudding just below the surface, you could catch them with a net or your hand. When I was a child, I would occasionally catch a fish, a prawn, or a small octopus with my bare hand or an ordinary plastic net, she said. But the rapidly rising sun today is making her sluggish, she says. She's a lazy pregnant woman, but bream are also very spiky.

The sea is still, like oil. It's hot and late, we have to get going, says Miho too, once again. He dives into the sea, unties the hawser from its rock, then draws in the anchor and stows it away in the hold under the prow. Meanwhile she folds the ropes into blue and white mandalas, so that they don't get tangled. She likes the fact that the boat carries its anchor in its insides. People have made everything in their own image, haven't they, Miho?

People have been sailing for a very long time, he says, it's possible that we've copied some things from ships and the wind.

She likes her husband more when they're on the island, in his natural surroundings, especially on the boat and on the sea. The southern islander's melody of his speech, in which even standard Croatian sounds sexy, and the way he shins up the mast when the boat is becalmed, remind her that little girls used to love boys madly, as their first real heroes, until one day, not that much later, they disappointed their admirers.

Although he is a few years older than her, Marijola thinks of Miho as a man-child like that. On the whole it seems that everything about him is simple. That everything inside him is as harmonious as his outer appearance. Without having to touch it, she knows that even on such a hot day as this his skin is cool. Before she discovered that they were real little thugs or cowards, she had liked just this kind of boy, with dark skin, a firm torso and generally harmonious appearance, but they would soon bore her; as soon as they seemed to her fearful and immature, she would leave almost indifferently, without much looking back.

Where the young husband and wife have set off to this morning, towards a green spot on the south side of the peninsula, there are some ancient beaches of either small or large round pebbles, smoothed rather than hewn under the steep incline, but which can be reached only from the sea, and only in a little boat with a shallow draft. Round among the sharpness, a soft form built into an inaccessible landscape, everything in that place is just as

it was in the ancient youth of the world. Towards those untouched, antique beaches, they set a course, slipping along on a sunny breeze.

But, after they have been sailing out of the inlet for just a few miles, the wind drops, the sails flop and sway drunkenly from one side of the boat to the other. After a few attempts at catching the maestral in the foresail, they accept their fate, give up and start the outboard motor. Murtilica gives a brief, ladylike stutter, then starts to purr and dig into the oily glaze of the sea.

We're close, says Miho, as though apologising. As though it was his fault that there was no wind. Why is he always apologising, thinks Marijola. Maybe it's my fault, because I took so long over breakfast, she says. Besides, she can see clearly that they aren't close.

Her husband is a bit disappointed at the way things have turned out and the inaccuracy of meteorology, but the noise of the boat doesn't bother his wife, she says, although she despises loud engines, and she hardly thinks of boats that pursue them as boats, just as she doesn't consider cannibals as real people, she says. They're antipeople or antiboats. She's inclined to absolute truths that she will exchange for new ones the next day, thinks her husband.

But that's not my problem, Marijola shouts down wind. My problem, she shouts from the prow, is that, as soon as the motor starts, I feel sleepy.

You can't sleep again now, who'll take the tiller while I fold the sails, Miho laughs.

Just be careful. Don't fall into the sea, they say to each other at the same time, over the Yamaha's farting.

The day resolved itself into two blues, it was yellow, it was white, it was azure – the red-hot flag of summer. And then the motor stopped too.

Tokyo

1973

Before take-off, she had told herself that everything was quite normal, as though she flew every day. And Dana, with whom she often spent time, said that flying was nothing special. For some reason, women tell each other this about various events, that it's nothing special or nothing terrible, for example giving birth, but Meri wouldn't lie about it, because a first flight, at least for her, was a real miracle. She was delighted by the sea seen from the air and the ground plans of houses and vineyards, and most of all by the clouds which reminded her of floating island puddings, and for a second she was embarrassed by her banality for the sake of her husband, although he was miles away. When they took off from the runway she felt excitement in the pit of her stomach, but not fear, which surprised her. But, then, what did she have to be afraid of? The day before she had her forty-fourth birthday. She'd been through everything already. War. And hunger. And children, marriage, divorce, all those people … illness, it would have been ridiculous to be afraid, she thought, crossing her legs in their stockings and breathing out loudly. Maybe a bit too loudly, because the woman beside her looked at her and sent her a courteous smile. She was a very tastefully dressed lady, whose husband worked at the Sports Council, she would tell Meri later.

Meri had her hair done the day before, early in the morning, for her birthday lunch, she had got to the hairdresser's at seven. And she had been packing for days: her toiletry bag, with her make-up, little bottles and powders, cotton and silk underwear, a new slip, a raincoat, because in Scotland, where she was going, it could be cold and damp, even in September, little boots for rain and sandals, extra shoes with heels and little soft slippers, a few dresses, not too many, it was only for ten days.

She had planned the trip in detail and, following her plan, as soon as she had fastened her seat belt, she took out her book and tried to read *Wuthering Heights*, but found that she was too excited. There were some of our people in the plane, so she didn't feel too strange, some were smoking so she lit up as well, some were drinking spirits so she took an Amaro: although she had drunk one the night before as well, and two in rapid succession was a bit too much. People were chattering about this and that, so Meri, relaxed, told her neighbour that at her birthday lunch the previous day she had seen her former husband, who had come from Montenegro and whom she had not seen for some twenty years, and here she was flying to her second husband who was in Scotland at the moment, playing chess. The only woman with two husbands she knew, apart from herself, was Dana Žungulova, while it turned out that this lady from the seat next to her was in her third marriage. Dana's son Slave was a footballer, maybe the lady had heard of him given that her husband was involved in sport, she wouldn't be surprised if he played for the national team one day. It's strange that you say all kinds of things to strangers that you'd never say to your

family, thought Meri. As she spoke, she did her best to avoid the dialect, as far as she was able, because the fine lady also shunned it.

Why did she leave her first husband, that Montenegrin, her companion asked her, being more interested in relations between the sexes than sport. I was young, he was having a correspondence with an actress from Dubrovnik, said Meri, surprising herself by saying it so simply, she even laughed. But it was good that I left, she said, because after the actress he had other women. Many women pretend they don't know or that they don't mind if their officer husband has a squadron, but there are other cases, like one lady from Mostar, who didn't hide the fact that it got on her nerves, so she called those other women a squadron. It did bother Meri, she went ballistic, fell into despair, her heart was broken, she confessed, still surprised that she was able to say all this, as though it wasn't about her, but the woman listened with interest, seriously and sympathetically, without judging. Besides, that way of life, from one base to another – Mostar OK, but Montenegro, because they sent him home for political reasons – she had found that difficult. Then she moved closer to the confidential ear of her companion: he was only saved from being sent to the prison island of Goli Otok by his brothers, because they were generals. And he'd done nothing wrong, he had never been in favour of Stalin, but who asks you, she whispered. He got through it, but as a couple we didn't. Montenegro, she said to her companion, it's different there, it's beautiful, but hard, everyone there's like they were in the army, especially the women, she would never have got used to it. Although, he was gentle, very gentle and loving, sweet. He painted a bit as well, he really wasn't suited to the army. In Mostar he organised a cultural programme, singing, folk dancing, that's where he was happiest – that's how he met the actress, I never blame the women, only him. So I took my sons by the hand and went home, to my father and mother. He, my ex-husband, Vasko, was demoted and became a civil servant, they sent him to an office in Titograd, working in a prison, which is after all better than being sent to prison himself. He got his just deserts, I'm not sorry for him, said Meri in dialect. We've both got our deserts, come to think of it, she said, nevertheless wiping away two tears with a hand-embroidered handkerchief.

My dad didn't drive me away from the door, said Meri. If other women had somewhere to go, they'd all leave. Almost all of them. But between their husband and father they choose the lesser evil, she said.

The lady, whose name she had somehow forgotten on landing and whose new, third husband worked in the Sports Council of Yugoslavia had agreed with Meri, and then, confidentially added that her first husband had been a musician and a sex-symbol, but with time a normal woman gets bored with that, if it's all that's on offer.

Meri said that her first, Vasko, the pilot, had now been a widower for several years. He hadn't married the actress from Dubrovnik, but an ordinary woman, Montentegrin, and had three children with her. And she felt a bit sorry for him. So I invited him to lunch, she said, so that her companion should not imagine that she had invited him because he was a sex-symbol. Mind you, perhaps he could once have been described that way, thought Meri indifferently and a little bitterly, but she didn't mention any of that. He was visiting our son in Split, she went on, and I told my son and daughter-in-law to bring him to lunch. I called Ante, that's my second husband, the one I'm travelling to see in Glasgow, and told hm, Ante, just so you know, Vasko's coming to lunch. That was the right thing to do. I couldn't presumably let him sit there, in the town, at my son and daughter-in-law's place, while everyone was at mine for my birthday – I live in that new estate, Plokite, if you know Split. To be honest, I was a little curious, inquisitive. I wanted to see him again, to see what was

left of him. And there wasn't much. He's a complete stranger to me now. But we have two sons together, and, for the moment, one granddaughter, why would I not invite him to my birthday. Yes, I'm a real old lady, looks can be deceptive, she sighed. But, there, I do what I can to stay presentable.

Here she let another tear fall, that had never been a problem for her. Then her companion said that the hardest thing for a woman was when she began to lose her looks. We can deceive ourselves, but that's how it is, if you had looks then lost them, that can never be replaced. That's why you have to look after yourself.

That's what saved me, the fact that I looked OK, but, who knows, maybe that was my downfall, said Meri, and her companion agreed. But, Meri, for the time being you've got nothing to worry about, said her companion kindly.

She had met her second husband in the Split council, he was a military desk officer and she a secretary, Meri told her. They liked each other and got married, that was better than burying herself alive like some. Her contemporaries at home, she said, when their husbands died, they put on black headscarves and sat in front of their houses and they'd go on sitting there till their dying day. In the evening they took their stool indoors, in the morning they took it back out in front of their door.

The lady had not been horrified by this, although she came from a big city, because that's what our people are like, especially the womenfolk, but she added that in India there were yogis, although we know too little about them over here, who sit like that for whole days and it's believed to be a liberating experience. She didn't know why for our own women it looked like the opposite of eastern philosophy – the complete abandonment of freedom. Because those women in front of their houses, aren't they for the first time in their lives financially and in every other way independent, and of all the wonders of this world they choose sitting in front of heir house. Wouldn't it be more fun to go dancing, maybe find a new husband, why not, a lover, or just simply enjoy themselves. But perhaps that absence of any needs was the whole point. So said the stylish lady.

Meri cautiously added that her husband hadn't liked her working as a secretary in the council office, so she gave in her notice. Did the lady think that her husband was jealous? At first it had suited her to stay at home and be a housewife, but now she was sometimes bored, there was never a speck of dust in her house, and that's not a good sign. Most people had locally made cars, while her husband drove a new Opel with red plush seats, and she no longer needed to work as a secretary in the council office. She was aware that this was many other women's dream, but she felt empty. She had liked getting ready for work, going down Balkanska street, along the Waterfront, she always took care over her appearance and she had enjoyed every outing, she liked talking to people, and working, although that rather less. They had a flat, three rooms in a new building, ground floor – Dana called it *piano nobile*, although everything was modest, but solid, as was appropriate for communists. They hadn't broken into other people's houses and villas the way some had. The building was decent, surrounded by greenery, on a green hill with Agaves on the slope, and on the other side a new petrol station, a hairdresser, a small market. Besides, she was used to modesty and clearly, she had survived the war, and this was comfortably modest. On Sundays she cooked lunch, very good, abundant, once or twice a month they invited the children. Yesterday they had all come, on the menu was: soup with dumplings, rabbit with gnocchi, which turned out great, and a cake made with rum. Everyone likes that. Five kilos of gnocchi vanished in five minutes. Can her companion believe it? Enough for ten Serbs, she laughed. Her people aren't Serbs, apart from her husband Ante, who's in Glasgow

in any case, she said brightly, but still, there were five men, three sons, father, former husband; her people were all big, tall, they eat a lot, that's how they are. Sometimes they gorge themselves, she said seriously, yes, sometimes she feels that they only know how to eat and drink, but that's when she's out of sorts, when she has high blood pressure. Only the wives are slim, but that needn't be a bad thing for them.

And he did remember, he remembered that it was her birthday. Vlasko did. He brought her earrings, small, with a green stone, old gold. She won't wear them, but she'll keep them for their granddaughter. The woman in the next seat giggled and gently nudged her shoulder and then Meri felt that she would be able to tell this woman, whom she had only just met, even what she had skirted around during the whole flight, prattling on so eloquently. She felt like opening the true heart of her story up to this stranger.

Unfortunately, she then realised that her companion had fallen asleep. She had folded her arms over her belly, taught in a light silk blouse and was resting with her mouth wide open. It was only then that Meri noticed that the fine lady was wearing – sneakers. Meri had been annoyed that her sons wore crocs and flipflops all summer, even the freshly married ones, around the house, on the beach and for evening outings, she despised that, but then they were still young. This discovery of the inappropriate footwear of her companion shocked her a bit, and disappointed her, as though she had just been confiding in a frivolous person, who was laughing at her. That's why she hurried off the plane, not waiting for the woman beside her to wake up to say goodbye to her.

But when they had to get their suitcases, she didn't see her again and she felt betrayed and isolated all over again.

The airport in London where she landed looked far larger and more unpredictable than anything she had ever come across before, certainly larger than Split airport – she was surprised by the breadth and inaccessibility of it all, but she tried not to let that show. She simply stood in one place, waiting for her suitcase.

And what incredibly bad luck – her very first flight and an immediate fiasco: her brand new leather case had disappeared. She began to panic. How was it remotely possible to find a lost suitcase in a place like this. In two hours' time she was supposed to be on her train to Glasgow, but here she was, sitting in the airport lost property office, trying to get hold of Ante, who was there, in Glasgow at his chess tournament, puffing on his pipe and moving his bishop onto G5. No one spoke Croatian, and she felt dumb. Deaf and dumb in fact. She would have liked to tug someone by the sleeve, but what would she say. Everything she had was in that case, and all she had with her now was a little handbag with a rose on it and a small mirror and cotton handkerchief and her hand-luggage into which she had put some of the food left over from the birthday, for Ante.

She imagined him, her present husband, not in Scotland, but like every day in Split, in the little bathroom, because their flat had two bathrooms: she heard the tap running, and him blowing his nose, splashing, washing, putting lacquer on his hair, combing it over his head. Sometimes she watched, as that hair floated away from his head, swaying, swaying, right down to his shoulders, like a curtain, a little blind of slender tassels. And then she would say, look at you, my little curtain, look at you, and pat that hair back into place.

But her heart was somehow porous, everything leaked out of that heart, she thought. It's the greatest delusion that it gets stronger with time. A person may harden outwardly, grow crusty, a piece of old meat, while inwardly they overboil, fall apart. She had known for some time already about her second husband's other woman, the one he sometimes called, increasingly often. And the day before she had decided she wouldn't go

to Glasgow, but seeing that first husband of hers at the table, she was no longer angry with him, she was completely indifferent to him, it occurred to her that she had burned herself out. She had burned up everything that she dared to do in this life and even if she had the energy, she would not be forgiven a second time. It was good that she hadn't said any of this to that lady in the sneakers, although she'd wanted to. It was a real piece of luck that she hadn't, in fact, or she would now be feeling embarrassed on top of everything else.

She tried to call her sons from the office at the airport, then Dana Žungulova, her real, true friend, but the line kept breaking up and then breaking altogether. If someone at least knew Italian, so that she could ask about *la valigia*, she no longer cared what had happened in the war, in this situation she would have talked to Mussolini.

She took *Wuthering Heights* out again, not to read it, but to hide in the book.

The airport staff came and went, no one took any notice of her any longer. After almost an hour the door was opened by a woman in an official uniform who said: Yugoslavia?

Split – Yugoslavia, cried Meri, jumping to her feet.

They managed to understand each other, they put her into a taxi and onto her train, but without her suitcase. The suitcase had flown to Tokyo by mistake, and got back to Split about a month later, long after her and her husband.

Later, Meri enjoyed telling this story, with new details every time, she cried a bit, and giggled a bit. It contained some drama and intrigue.

Later, they drank, she and her granddaughter, the older one coffee, the younger one milk and honey out of big glass cups the colour of milk and honey, in The Santini Brothers' Street in Split, accompanied by the sound of the afternoon cicadas and the spin drier.

'How did Marica as a girl wash clothes in the sea if the soap didn't foam?'

'In the stagnant water. Tallow, caustic soda, alkali. Alchemy. That's how Marica the girl rinsed laundry, darling, for hundreds, thousands of years. The real revolution in this world was in 1965, when the washing machine arrived.'

White flags of panties and bras fluttered on the balcony, in the fridge little phials of insulin of various colours tinkled, the linoleum was polished, the days smelled of Ante's pipe tobacco and shoe polish, and the nights of petrol and the city and her blue perfume with a little pump.

As the end of this story, she would sometimes add: If only the suitcase had gone to Glasgow and I'd gone to Tokyo. But you go to Tokyo, darling. And then, by the way: in Glasgow I bought a whole new wardrobe.