

## Staša Aras

**Staša Aras** (Stanislava Nikolić Aras; Trogir, 1972) is a high school teacher of Croatian language and literature, author, and a prominent figure in culture – from organizing different literary events (such as Kalibar literary festival), to being a moderator, and an editor of Art Workshop Lazareti in Dubrovnik. She first started with the poetry collections, transitioning into short stories for which she received Vranac Award (Odakle zovem Festival, 2015/2016), and Mate Raos Award. Her latest work is a novel *Horror vacui*, awarded with Treći Trg & Belgrade Poetry and Book Festival Prize for the best unpublished debut novel.



### Works:

*These Things Happen to People* (*Takve se stvari događaju ljudima*, Algoritam, 2014), poetry collection

*Inappropriate and worth mentioning* (*Nedolično i vrijedno spomena*, Durieux, 2015), poetry collection

*Soft Borders* (*Meke granice*, Algoritam, 2015), short story collection

*Close to Everything* (*Blizina svega*, Fraktura, 2019), novel

*Relocations* (*Premještanja*, Hena com, 2020), poetry collection

*12 in front of a Wall* (*12 pred zidom*, Sandorf, 2020), short story collection

*Horror vacui* (*Horror vacui*, Hena com, 2021), novel

## HORROR VACUI

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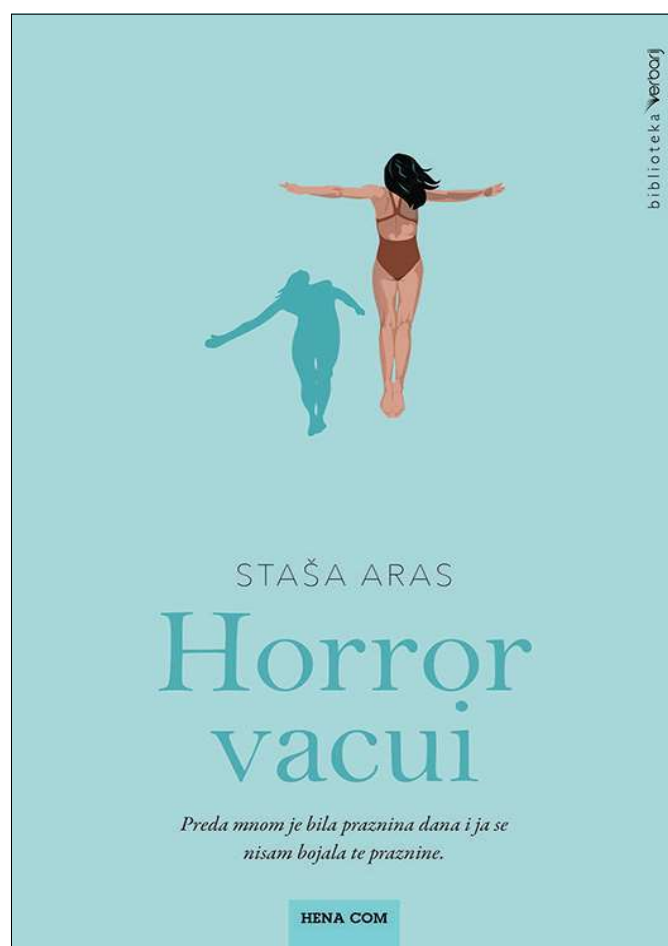
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### About the novel:

Everything disappeared between Peter and her. All that remains now is to have an abortion – she won't even tell him about it – and to go, jobless, moneyless, to her *horror vacui*. We follow her life almost daily, her mostly internal monologues during the European football championship and the government crisis. We read her fine reflections on life, on monasteries, on food, on herbs and on the sea, on smells and colors, with all the encompassing sensations. We will visit the places of her past, her birthplace... Staša Aras's novel is refreshingly atypical, despite the initial anxiety it opens with. In it, emotion and life sparkle in the abyss.



Staša Aras

## **Horror vacui**

*Translated from the Croatian by Mirna Čubranić*



## CATALOGUE OF CROATIAN PROSE

My mind is made up: I'm leaving tomorrow in the quiet of the dawn. I've arranged the transport through an online application and all I have to do now is pack my things and hope that Petar will return from the joint match viewing in a good mood and just crash into bed. The Croatian national football team should better win.

I wish it was night. I want its warm dark wings and its muffled sounds. The rustling of the leaves in the treetops and of the birds in their nests, the gentle evaporation of pollen. People are getting ready for the football matches again; they are playing fan songs and hauling huge plastic bottles of beer and family packs of potato chips with the national emblem printed on them. Petar is going to Zagreb after all. He messaged me: "I've decided to go tomorrow." So, he has decided.

People generally hesitate out of fear. I guess they think that every step could be a mistake. We face mistakes all the time; every now and then a mistake we have made comes home to roost. Even certain hits turn into misses over time.

### Croatia - Spain

Croatia mocks, it rushes and swears, then makes mistakes, apologizes and curses. It has been several days since I last saw the real life. Everything is covered by oblivion, and new habits are arrogantly taking over. Tomorrow I will feel the sea on my skin; tomorrow I will open the windows of my old house, where mice and birds build their nests.

The soft-winged night has finally descended. At 9:45 PM, a goal was scored. Lying in the attic room in plain white panties, I am listening to the outcome of the night, the match, my life. The sounds are now traveling through space. Bursts of fireworks, sirens, agitated seagulls, all of them together in a harmonious outcry. Since I removed the Sicilian Madonna, Saint Sebastian's body pierced by arrows gazes at me from the wall above the bed. The perfect body of a saint that Mishima wrote about in his *Confessions of a Mask*. That novel is one of the peaks of literature. The explosions and shouts do not stop. Until a moment ago, the night was soft-winged, warm and gentle. Now everything has intensified; suddenly there is a loud music and chaos. People love chaos. They love noise and commotion. Why am I not among them? That is the question. I am sure that there are many people who just don't care about football, or they don't care enough, or simply don't enjoy watching it.

The phone hasn't rung once all day.

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The Croatian national team has defeated the European champions in Bordeaux (2:1). The scorers for one of Croatia's greatest victories in major tournaments were Nikola Kalinić and Ivan Perišić. Danijel Subašić saved a penalty from Sergio Ramos in the 72<sup>nd</sup> minute. With this win, Croatia topped the group ahead of Spain and advanced to the Round of 16 in Lens. That is why the atmosphere was so incandescent. The hearts of the Croats were filled with pride. I didn't hear Petar when he came in. All cafés in the city were undoubtedly crowded, and it is absolutely normal that he stayed out with his friends. Tatjana told me that one of her girlfriends was disappointed because she had planned a boat trip with her husband for the Anti-Fascist Struggle Day, but he informed her he was spending the holiday on a boat trip with his mates. And a live lamb they intended to bring along.

"Do you think they will teach it to swim?" I asked Tatjana. She laughed and nodded: "Don't say that, you think they will slaughter it?" "I can hardly imagine them skinning it alive before they eat it. I think that men have something that helps them kill more easily than women. Some kind of gene, that enables them to slaughter, skin and devour. Just imagine that scene. It will be almost mythical, like from an ancient drama!"

Suddenly, we were both giggling, amused by what we could imagine.

"Imagine a small group of men", I continued, "all of them employed and cultured, some of them maybe bankers, going on a boat trip and bringing along a cute little lamb. Why the lamb's legs are tied, we don't know."

"That happens", Tatjana said.

"Yes, that happens, and you know what else? It is not so uncommon that we should be surprised." I didn't tell Tatjana what else had crossed my mind regarding that mythical scene, because I didn't know her that well and I didn't want her to think I was a weirdo. I stubbornly stick to the belief that I am the normal one; if anyone is normal, that someone is me. Last night Croatia heroically overcame the hooliganism and all other problems, carrying the victory with a touch of pathos. Of course they will slaughter a lamb, and of course that no one will think of the mythical relationship between the sheep and the man. Or more precisely, in the majority of documented cases, between the goat and the man. Only my mind can vividly imagine a group of bankers enjoying themselves on a deserted island. Women are excluded from such relationships; the sorceress Medea may be an exception, but in a broader context, when she kills her children to punish Jason. Poor Jason, poor children, poor lamb, poor all of us.

The night is dark, warm, gentle, fragrant and moist. The eastern light will soon ripple the shadows over the city. I used to get up very early to catch that moment. Forty-five minutes before sunrise, I used to watch the city from my window. The first movements of the birds, the wind whispering in the treetops, an occasional

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pedestrian caught by dawn on his return from the nocturnal wanderings, and the stars that held out till the very end of the night; sometimes even the Moon over the sea, and the moonlight, of course, for the moonlight is as important as the Moon itself. Because the Moon is He, and the moonlight is She: silver, mystical, all-encompassing. Those things still undoubtedly belong to the real life. Maybe some of those men will go to a village to get a lamb at dawn or during the night, under the moonlight. I am romantic. Chances are that a simple peasant will bring it in the trunk of his car, with its legs tied with a black adhesive tape or a rope. Cruel acts are a part of nature, and it seems they will never diminish. Animal sacrifices or sacrifices in general are an integral part of our lives. Soul advocates mention sacrifice too often to be accidental. But I tend to think that it often serves as an excuse for the inherent human need to commit evil and violent acts. Something must be sacrificed. There is nothing we can do about it, it is simply a part of the game. If nothing is important and if everything is a game, sacrifice isn't burdensome. Where do tears come from, then, and the heartache and lifelong traumas? Why does a person remember for a lifetime the small white rabbit with red eyes, that mysteriously disappeared from its cage one day, the little furry paw with which their grandmother used to tickle their cheeks and the festive lunch with guests? Why?

The dawn is a deep space. The air is still thick with the night, the convent is quiet, but I feel the lizards stretching themselves and whispering prayers inside. I leave a small terracotta pot with basil in the convent courtyard. The nuns will at least water it; Petar would forget. Plants can survive almost everything. I like those poor nuns, even though they are a little mean.

The light of the day has come. The sky is like a silk blue scarf, as someone once described it. Petar got up to go to the bathroom and on his way there, he said to me: "You could have washed the dishes last night."

"Wait! Don't kill him right away; be smart, kill him slowly," Annunziata said in my head.

"I washed the bathtub," I replied, defending myself.

I felt his mind snap like a whip: "God, you're so stupid." I was certain that was what he thought, but I didn't care. I did wash the bathtub, and if dirty dishes bothered him, he should have washed them. But those were childish things. I would have gladly washed those dishes and then spurted out my ink like a cuttlefish and disappeared. The same way we tremble before youth. Before a young boy or a girl in their tender years, knowing we must let them go and protect them without holding them tight. The same goes for everything that is precious to us in our lives. We must know how to let go. To care and to let go. Like, they say, the wild horses are caught in a meadow. With an apple in hand. Everything that is done or not done should be done and not done willingly. If only I had the will to love. But I don't have the will to love Petar, and there is no law

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that can help with that. Marques said something similar: "When a woman wants to leave, there is no fence to stop her."

Or perhaps we just delude ourselves when we think we are that powerful, that important. As long as we care for someone or something. Once we don't, there is nothing left. The fear of emptiness disappears. It vanishes into thin air. Like a gas. The day has fully dawned. The driver informs me he will be late. Petar is nervous.

"You are not the only one who is leaving today, you know," he tells me irritably. He is actually aggressive. His aggression is bottled up, compressed under the heavy weight of polite behaviour, but thus pressed it grows stronger and leaks out of every sentence he utters. Some people always think somebody else is the reason for their sullenness. Looking back at my life with Petar, it seems to me that I have always been trying to find a way to protect myself from him. From the laser of his eyes, which scanned me constantly, searching for the cause of his discontent. The mere thought of not being around him fills me with deep relief. Good will and evil will. A spirit and an evil spirit. What an unusual word. A word that puts an end to things. Just when we think that everything will go smoothly, there it is: evil. Brief, swift, irreversible. That is what we are afraid of! We are afraid our attention will fade. That is what we pray for. "But deliver us from evil. Amen."

### **Hungary – Portugal**

Summer welcomes me. The lush greenery in the garden that has almost run wild. My house submerged in darkness and quiet solitude, enveloped by a basement-like atmosphere. Children playing in the street, the airplanes flying overhead every few minutes. When I watch the world from this house, all its outlines soften. I knew that. I have come here to become soft. When I arrive, like shedding a skin, I shed the feeling of sharpness and hurt. My anxiety disappears into a cloud. First I grab the broom. Broom is undoubtedly the most important object in a house. I clean my yard. When I was a child, I swept that yard almost every day, and now it yields, it curls and extends under my strokes. My house purrs. It purrs beneath my hand, and I feel its breath on my back with gratitude. Passersby briefly stop, just to make sure everything is alright, and then continue on their way. Stone houses and towers slumber like elephants. This place is ancient. Petar hasn't called me. I'll call him after I have my coffee. How not to repeat myself? How? The discontent in me has reared its ugly head and it stands in my way. Have I taken a step back? After all, I can return to him the first thing tomorrow morning. I can also join a volunteer organization and note progress. The element of space wants to be filled. It fears emptiness.

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The atmosphere of the football championship reigns in this little town as well. Large plasma screens are set up in front of the cafés, and the commentator's voice buzzes through open windows and doors.

### **Hungary - Portugal**

Summer is finally here to stay. I am on the beach, dazzled by the sun. The sea is fragrant and warm. This is the real life. Everything I do here will be the real life. Like that book by Marguerite Duras.

I hear the bells tolling. News reports say there is a growing possibility of local showers. Like before, the tourists have filled this small stone town, and like before, I choose quieter spots and corners. Sometimes I have bad dreams. Even when I am doing the things I want, I dream about difficult places and spaces where I can't breathe. Then I wake up with a vague feeling that something isn't right with my choice and condition, and the distinct impression that I have made a mistake, even though throughout my waking hours I am sure that my life has taken the right direction. I still think there are good paths and bad paths, and that everything revolves around the belief that what we do makes sense. And that the process and efforts are not in vain. I wake up to the living room of my now deceased parents. I feel draught; the wind howled all night long. Although it is summer, the wind found its way into the hollows between the houses and whistled through the naturally formed pipes throughout the night, crawled through the little holes into the old houses and circled around me as I slept. I was at its mercy, with nowhere to hide. The old houses are different from the new ones. They have porous, hollow bones and they preserve a hidden life of untamed elements. They were built a long time ago. Mine was erected in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. And it is irascible like an old woman, but it puts up with me because I am its child.

I wake up with a distinct sense of worry. It is like a spectre sitting on my body and feeding on my spirit. Worry is a parasite of the mind. That is why people say "to hell with worries". Worries should be left to the shadows, where they belong. But I nevertheless have the feeling of heaviness and futility. Petar is in Zagreb, he hasn't called me, and I am here, with frostbitten fingers in this draughty old house, listening to emptiness. When they are poor, people become like dogs. They look around with strained attention, ready to react quickly. Men are definitely like that, but women are probably no different either. That thought haunts me, and I find it horribly ugly. What a person cannot hide and what I began to notice at a certain age. Human dirtiness, hunger, discontent, the malice of envy. Envy is usually the ugliest, followed by selfishness and the fear of hunger. These shadows surface and become dominant in human appearances. They walk in front of the body. They fill

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the aura. Then you see envy walking in front of its poor host's body. More and more often I see the bodies that have been taken over by their flaws. Or perhaps I'm just losing my mind. It would be better for me to shatter this thought with humour and love for all people, instead of sitting like a witch in this cave from the twelfth century and observing the shadows of others. Today I will let the sun into the house. I will let it warm the walls. Water and broom and air and cleaning. The sunrays illuminate the dust like gentle spotlights. The light caresses and heals. I feel that everything should slow down. I am protected here. This house has always held me tight. I can feel it on my back. I have no need to go out at all. But I also know that this can't last long. The sun has awakened dormant butterflies. Instead of cars, I hear the slow hum of the old pieces of furniture and myself as I move through the space which is thick with staleness. Like a melody with seashells and bells. The mundane daily routines have taken on a different meaning. I feel myself sweating from physical labour and with every passing moment I feel stronger and more carefree. Physical work dispels worry. Feeling the gusts of the warm wind blowing down the street, I watch the thick white clouds, which look like the gauze compresses lifted from the forehead of a feverish person.

"Aunt Jele, where is this wind coming from?" I ask the old neighbour who is sitting in a chair on the sidewalk in front of her house, probably waiting for lunch or to die, or for someone to address her in any way.

"From the devil, my dear," she replies and continues to take shallow breaths as she scans the street with her turtle-like face. Framed by the black headscarf against the wall of the house, her face looks like a picture of an ancient harmony. Or like an obituary. Maybe the stone is a face, or the face is a stone. I take a deep breath, deep down into my solar plexus, and I feel tingles throughout my body. Everything is alright, I am alive, and this wind is from Africa. It is that crazy *scirocco* that sometimes brings along the dry desert sand and sprinkles it over us, as if all of us on the earth and the sky above us were one big hourglass. I eat my lunch sitting on the doorstep, using my fingers to bring the tomatoes and the couscous on my plate to my mouth, and while I eat, I watch the white hibiscus blossoms in the yard. After lunch, I call Petar; he is still in Zagreb.

"How was P. J.?" I ask.

"She was lovely," he replies.

That is more or less everything we say to each other. Until today I never heard him call anything or anyone "lovely". That is something entirely new. The word "lovely" is usually not in his vocabulary; not even in mine. I may say that a dress is lovely. His reply hurts me. I feel it like a thorn stuck between us.

"When are you going home?" I ask.

"Maybe this afternoon."

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He doesn't ask me anything.

I dust the floors and the shelves. Then I turn on the small television set to watch the news. In this house even the TV set looks like the real life. It is like a music box, just another possible backdrop, nothing that would dominate, nothing that would threaten the humanity.

The United Kingdom is having a referendum about leaving the European Union. Croatia almost doesn't seem like a country at all. This morning the temperature was 32 degrees Celsius. The scorching sun has been beating down through the clouds, so I haven't gone out or talked to anyone. Around five in the afternoon I make myself some coffee and pour it into a light blue mug, then sit on the doorstep again, watching the hibiscus bush. The silence sounds different through the stone, like the muffled murmuring of Tibetan monks.

Around six in the afternoon I take off my clothes and put on my swimsuit. I pack a towel, a pareo and a book in a straw bag. I head to the beach down the quiet street rippled by the wind. I swim for a while, slowly and rhythmically. I am calm, like a hand can be calm when it is writing down a steady thought. The rocks are already in the shade, and the sun is enjoying a moment of rest before it sets on the opposite side of the bay. In some places the greenery descends all the way to the shore, like a doe lowering its head to drink. I watch that idyllic sunset scene for a while, before I get bored and return home. There I sit on the doorstep again, eating watermelon and gazing at the hibiscus, whose branches sway with the occasional gusts of the wind. Children run along the street. At ten o'clock I lock the front door, lay down on the couch and turn on the TV. There is no football match tonight. Silence and darkness make me feel uneasy. I am afraid to be alone, but I cannot bear the thought of being near other people.

There is draught again, and I get up and close the door, but the wind slips underneath the windowsills and through the cervices. It whistles again through the narrow hollows and passages. Looking from the street, one would say that the houses here are all connected, leaning against each other. But they are not. Each has its own four walls and it is separated from the wall of the neighbouring house by a narrow alley. When I was a child, I used to hide there while playing hide-and-seek. The spaces between the walls of the adjacent houses are just big enough for a child to huddle there. We used to curl up in those passages like little, big-eyed wild creatures accustomed to the humans. Like dormice. Or guinea-pigs. Guinea-pigs arrived in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These houses are older than that. The entire place has the shape of a fortress.

Hiding. Another phenomenon of the mind. Have I come here to hide? Subconsciously. From what?

Tomorrow I will go to the city. And to the market. Where there are other people. I will visit an exhibition. Wander the streets. Sit in a café and watch the passersby. Can distance be imagined? Is there something like

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distance if we don't want it? Or closeness? If we don't want it. The United Kingdom has decided to leave the European Union.

The nighttime temperature in this little town is 32 degrees Celsius. The wind is still blowing. I dream I am feeding someone who has entered my house and wants to take my bowl of food. Early in the morning, still puffy from sleep, I go to the market, feeling a slight pain below my navel. I buy a fish, some salad and a half of a watermelon. I return home by bus. In the end I don't feel like staying in the city and observing people. Their faces have nothing to attract me. An illusion. The things I see—this old furniture, the old houses with their inhabitants, the sea, the sky, the hibiscus branches. An illusion. My relationship with Petar, which grows thinner with each passing day, an illusion. A place for me under the sun, an illusion. If I were to disappear now, would anyone notice? I deliberately remove all labels from myself; I want to be alone as much as possible, outside of any concept in life. But I am not discouraged into thinking I will never encounter something new. Something that will captivate me completely and change me from within. Certain thoughts often come to me for no reason. Reactions to the environment, memories, fantasies. I feel discomfort in my body today. Maybe I shouldn't have swum yesterday afternoon. The small of my back and the lower part of my abdomen feel tight, as if wrapped by a cold scarf. I am lying on the couch covered with a blanket, aware that somewhere outside this house time is flying never to return. The drivers are honking their horns, summer is melting the sizzling asphalt, the annual report cards are being distributed, contracts are being signed, husbands are cheating on their wives, people are stealing, traveling, chewing, smuggling, sitting in the shade, fanning themselves. I am lying in my house covered with a blanket, as if in a catacomb, and I am neither sad nor lonely.

Why did England want to leave the Union? Does it have a plan, a will, a vision of its future? Could I be seriously ill, self-absorbed, depressed and bored? Selfish, because I don't want to do anything for anyone except myself, and even that is questionable. With no plans, no ideas, no inspiration. No God. Isn't this the state of mind that the wise people strive to achieve? I knew I would bring myself to this. Is this the so-called self-obliteration? Well, it can't be achieved that easily and not exactly by one's choice. People seek purpose in their lives, so they work, drink or take care of their children, and thus fulfil their purpose. Purpose, another word. What is the purpose? From above. I have no idea what is above. I don't want a purpose from above. Today is another day without a football match. Tomorrow is another holiday. Something is something again. The street in front of my house is deserted; it is only from time to time that an elderly person passes by; even the birds are silent. At noon I go to the sea to clean the fish I have bought. When I was a child, we all cleaned our fish in the sea. There are steps leading down the rocky shore to the sea. The town women used to take them to clean their fish. The

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steps are still there, but the area around them has turned into a parking lot. My descent down those steps will probably cause some surprise, if anyone notices me. Holding a plastic bag with the mullet, I manage to squeeze myself between a Peugeot and a Golf. Slowly, because I don't want to lose my footing, I hold onto the rocks as I descend to the sea. I crouch and inhale its smell. It is murky, but it splashes under my feet as if laughing. I take the fish out of the bag and scrape its scales off with a knife. From this perspective, the little town above me looks different. Softer and nicer. This is the real life. The sea splashes, pleasantly warm. The scent of the seaweed mixes with the scents of oil, asphalt and iodine. With a single knife stroke, I cut the fish from the gills to the gut and pull its intestines into the daylight. I throw them far away into the sea, for other fishes or seagulls. Another head appears above mine and stares at me. A cat. Meowing at me with narrowed pupils.

Sorry, little one, but this fish is mine. "Go away," I shoo the cat. Then I wash the fish and my hands in the sea and put the cleaned mullet back into the bag. I climb up the few steps to the waterfront and once again squeeze myself between the parked cars, making my way to the shaded street. Slowly, shifting from one foot to the other, I walk towards home. Time has snagged on the clothesline stretched above the street and it sways back and forth. Always the same. Back and forth, for hundreds of years. At least in this little town, in this street, in the minds of the residents of these houses, where salted fish, dried meat, wine, and petrol are kept in the cellars.

Mrs. Jele has moved her chair into the shade and she is now sitting at the corner of the street.

"It's scorching hot today," I say to her as I pass by, and she just raises her hand in response, probably unable to answer loudly to such an obvious and silly statement.

The heat has reached 34 degrees in the shade today. The pressure in the air is low. That is Dalmatia for you. Cats are lying in the dust, bells are melting in the church-towers. Swallows are just yawning under the eaves. Sweltering heat. My stomach still feels tight, so I don't go swimming. I know that women like Mrs. Jele, who spends her days sitting on the sidewalk in front of her house, have never gone swimming in the sea in their entire lives. Dressed in mourning, they spend their lives in their houses and their fifty-meter-long streets. The streets which are shorter than the range of a gunshot. They inhabit their stone dwellings, cook every day, raise children and turn into dry vines. When I was a child, I used to sit in the street with them, waiting for my parents to return from work. Monkey see, monkey do. Maybe it was then that the need to just sit and do nothing wormed its way into my bones.

I live like a wall. A living wall. I don't mind it; all primitive civilizations crouched in the dust, cleared the woods and threw beans on the ground to tell their fortune.

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When I enter the house, I realize I have to close the windows and their wooden shutters to keep the rooms cool. But I leave the front door open, just as we always left it. Our front door was closed only during the night and in winter, to keep the cold out. In the morning, as soon as someone got up, the first thing we did was to open the front door.

I heat some oil in a pan and lower the salted mullet into it. Its tail immediately curls up. Leaning above the stove and watching the fish as it cooks, what I really feel is that I want this moment to last forever. The painting I would paint throughout my life would be called *A Woman Frying Fish*, and it would show a woman in profile watching a fish frying in a pan. The title would be ambiguous, as if the woman was frying the fish with her gaze. My mother often stood by the stove and fried both the fish and herself, watching it and occasionally waving her hand if the oil awakened a flame. I stand over the fish and cry. Tears fall onto my T-shirt. The mullet's eye turns white.

Can I live a privileged, uneventful life like this one, without becoming something like a protégée? A protégée of a church order, or of a wealthy lover, or a political doctrine. A protégée. One of the Fates.

If I walk the same road every day or repeat the same action, I slowly begin to understand what it truly is. The road that my mother and I walked every day to my grandmother's house was a plain, dull, dusty highway with cars speeding by. We crossed that same short distance seven days a week. Sometimes I found it unbearable, because I was sick and tired of taking that same road day after day, but now I feel I know every inch of it and I think it holds something important for me. My legs move down that road by themselves. I even dreamt about it last night. Tonight, when the sun sets, I think I will take that road to the cemetery where the two of them lie. I will walk to the cypress tree under which my grandmother's and my mother's names are engraved.

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There are three night butterflies on the wall in front of me. The dark triangles of their wings are glued to the white cold surface. They will remain there all day. I feel rested; my body itches with the need for movement; my strength is returning. I've put the kettle on and I drink a lemonade with cinnamon. My spice pharmacy is always with me, giving me a sense of security. Ginger, chili, turmeric, cinnamon, nigari, neem, curry, and a few more mixtures of spices are always with me. When you believe in something from a young age and easily, it is not difficult to turn it into a routine and an art. It has never crossed my mind to eat meat or drink alcohol. I could never forget to take a carefully chosen book with me on a trip. I spend a few hours every day reading. And

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exercising. No special effort is needed to do what you want to do. The problem is that people with different needs live together, and it is very difficult for them to understand each other's needs.

When I open the door, three cats run up to my feet and start meowing, but I don't have anything to give to them. I will have to buy some cat food, or they will think I am selfish, and because of me they could get a wrong impression about the whole human race, which would be a pity.

I haven't talked to anyone in three days. Today I will call Petar. I would like to avoid the sentence "I want to talk to you", because I don't want to talk to him. I could talk honestly only about the flowers and the clouds, but I couldn't stand a conversation about human relationships, the quality of behaviour, the capacity for understanding.

As usual, Mrs. Jele is sitting on the sidewalk this morning, but today she is disfigured, her face is swollen, with large bags under her closed eyes.

"Aunt Jele," I approach her with concern, "what's wrong?"

The old woman raises her head towards my voice. Her head looks boiled.

"You have a serious infection, you must see a doctor," I speak loudly and slowly, emphasizing every word. "A doctor, a physician. You need to see a doctor."

The old woman doesn't reply, she just lowers her head feebly. A muggy haze hangs over the town. I knock on the door of her house to check if any family members are inside, and since no one answers, I slowly press the doorknob and cautiously push the door open. A horrible stench hits my nostrils; I can't enter, it makes me nauseous. I go back to the old woman, who sits like a monster with her back against the wall of her house.

"Aunt Jele, is anyone of your family members at home? You need to see a doctor, you're sick," I tell her again, speaking loudly so she could understand me.

"Who are you?" the old woman replies with a question.

"I'm your neighbour, I'm going to call an ambulance."

When the ambulance arrives, the old woman doesn't move, even though I have been trying to engage her attention the whole time we waited. She just sits in her chair like petrified, swollen as if stung by a swarm of bees.

"Are you the one who has called us?" the paramedic asks me.

"Yes," I confirm.

"What are you to her?" he nods at the monster sitting on the sidewalk.

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"I'm her neighbour, but I've only been here for a few days, so I don't really know who takes care of her. I haven't seen anyone from her household."

"What's your name?" the paramedic asks. I can't believe that filling out a form with the information about who called for the ambulance is more important than helping a disfigured old woman.

"What's my name?" I repeat with astonishment. "My name is Marta."

"Marta what?" The dimwit writes it down.

"Marta Tadeski." I regret I haven't prepared a better alias. The paramedic jots down the name and finally helps the doctor lead the old woman to the ambulance. Jele immediately stands up and, unaccustomed to walking, impossibly slowly but obediently walks with them to the vehicle. Her hips are unbelievably wide. I watch the two men, the two slim figures in white, supporting an unnaturally wide figure in black, which sways like a ship on the waves. A heavy ship. The dimwit turns to me one more time and tells me from a distance:

"Let us know her details during the day, we'll need her health-insurance card number. Or you can send a family member to the hospital."

"I will!" I wave to him to show that I have understood and at the same time I think "I will not". I'm not the only witness; several other women are standing in the street with their arms crossed over their chests, observing the scene and chatting among themselves. Some nod their heads, while others shake them left and right. Tonka, a woman I remember from my childhood, says to me: "I'll call her son Šime." I smile and nod with gratitude, then slip into my courtyard and close the gate. In this old little town nodding represents a significant part of communication, and it can mean all sorts of things. From disapproval to irony, acceptance, understanding, greeting; depending on the situation.

In terms of enjoyment, not many things can compare with lying on a beach with a breeze tickling your skin and the voices of other people reaching your ears like through a foam. You can feel the warmth of the sun on your belly, back and shoulders, intense and gentle at the same time. People are soaking up the warmth on the rocks by the sea, and I am right there with them. We are sunbathing. Nearly naked, sprawled under the ultraviolet and infrared rays of the star, our skin is gradually changing its colour. Three girls have been swimming in place for hours, laughing heartily. The whole bay resonates with their voices. Several foreign women wade into the sea with makeup on their faces, looking glamorous in expensive swimsuits. I turn on the rocks, happy that my strength has returned and that I want to be a fragment of this scene. The sea is truly healing, and so is the summer. At least for me. I think about the old lady from my street and the thoughts going through her head, if she has any thoughts at all. A girl on the beach is praying a rosary. She has a white swimsuit and a white

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rosary. I have seen her swimming with the rosary around her neck. If there are people with rosaries hanging from their rearview mirrors, it is perfectly understandable that there are people who swim with them around their necks. Maybe I am the only one who finds it odd. I feel awkward staring at her, so I pretend to be looking around for someone, keeping her in my eyesight. She has a petite body with almost no breasts, short muscular legs and straight hair cut below the ears. On the towel next to her there is a book. The cover reads *Jesus Christ*.

Jesus Christ, I think to myself and I find it funny, but I cannot laugh. Instead, I look towards the sea, and the whole situation becomes increasingly amusing. I feel uncomfortable. I think of my sweet Annunziata and I turn my gaze away from the young believer.

I go home with determined steps, full of strength and enthusiasm. The old lady is not on the sidewalk. I try the door of her house. It is locked. Her son has obviously heard what had happened. I remember the stench in her house and I quickly turn my attention to my own tasks. In front of the café down the street, the tables are being arranged. I am embarrassed to ask who is playing tonight, so I just casually remark to the waitress as I pass by: "Getting ready for tonight, are you?" And I raise my chin questioningly.

"Uh-huh," she nods instead of saying that she is sick and tired of everything; the football games, the customers, the work and the European championship. Then she rolls her eyes to let me know she is sick and tired of me as well.

The two syllables she has uttered, the nodding of her head and the rolling of her eyes do not tell me who is playing today. So I stop in front of the big, empty garden and look hard at it, hoping to figure it out. Nothing. The waterfront is melting under the scorching, indifferent sun. I remember that I have a TV and that I can easily find out who is playing; I have the internet, too. Suddenly I am in a good mood. I take out my mobile from my bag and I call Petar. He answers after the third ring.

"It's me," I say cheerfully.