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Unterstadt

Novel

I.

I don't know why on that Friday, having returned home from work around three p.m., I started to pack hurriedly, throwing my clothes at random into the suitcase on wheels, which had been sitting in the dust under the window sill since my last visit to Vienna. I don't know why I finally decided to take that train from Zagreb to Osijek, which leaves from platform one at exactly five-oh-five, according to the age-long timetable. Only an hour, an hour and half earlier, I was attending to a plumpy, doll-like baroque angel from a parish church in Zagorje, I was glueing its fallen, thin skin which was peeling on all sides and revealing the wooden base that irresistibly reminded me of the dried muscles of mummies. While I was caressing its round, plump buttocks, my Mum and Osijek didn't even cross my mind, not for a second. Really, I don't know why I finally did it. Just as I didn't know why, some ten years ago, I popped a handful of sleeping pills down my throat. I do, however, remember the mild and calm, almost effeminate doctor Risjak, who was leaning into my face as if I were a small, irascible child, and urging me repeatedly to open up to him and tell him what was wrong. "Nothing is wrong", I repeated, turning my head away. I felt I had a bad breath, I didn't want to puff into his face. I was ashamed and I wanted to cry: "You haven't rinsed out my stomach properly!" But he kept leaning into my face, as if his huge nose

were deprived of the sense of smell, and he kept saying that “nothing” can make a man leave forever and never come back. In the end, I stared straight into his eyes and said: “I was bored.”

But I was not bored on that Friday. Instead of running to catch the train, I could have sat at my drawing table and spent the whole weekend scrawling, or I could have taken a book and spent three days in horizontal position, I could have closed the windows, turned the fan on and not listen to the world, crawling into myself like into a thick, cardboard box.

I don't know why I took that train. I don't believe in paranormal, although I used to be genuinely scared by ghosts who were visiting my grandmother in her little room for almost a whole year before she died. Still, I don't think I sensed anything, I don't think that an unearthly voice whispered in my ear that Mum would die while I was sitting in the train, somewhere near Koprivnica, when ignorant passengers thought they were returning from where they had set off.

But Mum really died on that Friday afternoon, while I was sitting in a stuffy compartment of the train clattering from Zagreb to Osijek for four hours. I was sitting in the compartment and my bum was getting numb, with a crossword puzzle lying in my lap, and I was filling in the empty fields with uneven letters. Because of the train and its constant shaking. Because of the summer which, in that 1999, decided to take spring by surprise and made my palms sweat and the pen slip between my fingers. I was casting occasional, furtive glances at an old man who was dozing on the seat opposite mine, with his head against the dirty, yellowish curtain which was swaying, off and on covering his face. His mouth was open and he was drooling. He was yellow and bony, and his hair was combed back, greasy and grizzled. I thought of Breugel and the wretched souls scattered on his paintings. He seemed so miserable and stinking. That's why I was tucking my legs under my seat, not wanting

them to be touched by the tips of his shabby, probably never shined shoes. Next to me, a seat away, was an old woman who constantly contorted her mouth and ran her tongue over the dentures, producing a clicking sound. I would occasionally look at her out of the corner of my eye. I was dying to tell her: “Lady, please, stop it! You’re annoying me! I’ll pluck your dentures and throw them out of the window!” But I didn’t say a word. I just felt my lower jaw contract and my lips set into a straight, rigid line. At one moment, our eyes met. My God! The faces of old people crease with age like waxpaper, I thought. I stared at her blue eyes. The old woman, who would later introduce herself as grandma Marica, smiled at me. And her eyes sparkled; for a moment they looked at least thirty years younger than the rest of her stooped, wrinkled body. In a single blink, the nonsense about the ice-cold, calculatingly-intelligent blue eyes crossed my mind. Both my grandmother and my mother had blue eyes, of almost the same shade, but at the same time they differed as day and night. You could read everything in Grandma’s eyes. The sorrow would draw grey curtains upon them, and the anger would light bright blue bulbs. If the eyes are windows to our soul, then Grandma’s soul, always leaning on an elbow like a curious woman, kept vigil above its always wide open windows. Unlike her, it seemed that Mum had no soul at all. Her eyes were always watery, dully blue. As if that God of my Grandma exaggerated with my mother’s eyes, made their slits a bit too wide, thus making them pop-eyed, blank, indifferent to everything. I briefly closed my eyes and in my mind’s eye, in the dark behind my closed lids, I saw the indifferent, slightly dull gaze of my mother, looking at everything and everyone blankly, like somebody who is checking from the window if he or she should take an umbrella. Who notices the world only if the water is pouring down from the vault of heaven.

Thinking that I wanted to strike a conversation, grandma Marica introduced herself and started complaining about the weather

which was too hot, about the drought which was raiding her garden in Retfala, about her grandchildren in Zagreb and her daughter who hadn't come back home after studies, but married a man from Zagreb, from a nice family, of course.

I was getting more and more nervous, but not because of my Mum. I didn't know she was dying. I didn't feel anything at seven twenty-five p.m. Anything at all. And that's when she died. Actually, I was annoyed by that discreet thrusting in my face, by the pointing at the fact that I had come into the backwoods, that I was returning to it. I was annoyed by that damned, slow, four-hour-long bumping in the train which stank badly, which stopped at "every white house", as our grandmothers used to say, which seemed to want to show me how far I was from everything.

I remembered myself at almost nineteen, getting off the train at the main station in Zagreb, seeing in front of myself the wide arm of Lenuci's horse-shoe and thinking, God, everybody here sees I'm a foreigner! I was almost ashamed that I chewed my words like chewing-gums, that I dragged myself down the streets, as if crawling through the sticky, plowed black soil. It passed. I forgot that first feeling, that impression that the "backwoods" was screaming from my forehead. But then, on that train, I remembered it all again and I got nervous. No, my Mum never entered my mind.

I was convinced that Jozefina exaggerated in her old woman's illiterate letter, written in ornate handwriting. I say old woman's illiterate letter because it seems that with time old people forget the punctuation marks, and their sentences, deprived of all full-stops and commas, melt into one another, become incomprehensible, written higgledy-piggledy, just like the old people's thoughts. I know I laughed at that letter of hers, at her characters of uneven size which resembled the young, rugged potatoes, and I thought, Good Lord, I hope I won't become like her one day. Old people exaggerate with courtesies, as if incessantly apologizing, because they already see themselves in coffins, because they don't want

anyone to talk ill about them one day when they are gone, when they would live on only in the words the living utter about them. Occasionally, when by some miracle they cross their minds. Unless they forget them.

I was imagining the stooped frau Jozefine with her aquiline nose, shriveled and wrinkled old woman whose father had told her, some twenty years ago, shortly before he died, that she would outlive us all. That she would bury us all. He was joking. Though he could no longer laugh, because cancer was already devouring all air from his lungs. I was picturing her struggling with the pen, contorting her lips, frowning, trying to summon me with her letter, trying to soften me, to lure me home, to Mum. I was picturing her nodding her head with satisfaction, like a plush dog on the head rest of the back seat of a car, writing that ornate, in my opinion excessive words: "Your dear mother is dying my dear my little Katarinica my little Keti". Writing that avalanche of words without a single comma, without a single full stop. I was picturing her knobby fingers trying in every possible way to grab the pen which was resisting, slipping, trembling on the paper and writing the funny, uneven letters. Though tragical, the fact that on that train I never even thought of my Mum is funny. I was thinking about frau Jozefina, frau Fine Lady, as my Dad used to call her for fun.

When, after nine in the evening, with my bum numb, I finally got off the train, the sky was already black. There were no stars. Everything above me looked like thick black plush which, illuminated by the streetlights, glistened like the fur of a black baskerville dog. I was flooded by the sickly sweet smell of early May. I felt the scent of hyacinths and I smiled. I remembered my grandma and her hyacinths, which looked like processions dotted along the brick path in front of the main door to our house. I smiled involuntarily, as if seeing a dear, kind-hearted passer-by approaching me with a grin. And I did not recognize the city which for a moment smiled at me with its hyacinths. Everything was somehow differ-

ent, slightly changed, as if slightly shifted aside. Near the station, there was no longer the supermarket in which football fans and students drowned their beers before leaving for college or returning home, and then staggered and vomited in the trains. Although I had seen it burning on the TV, hit by multiple rocket launcher I guess, I was still stunned by the void, by the absence of something that used to be there. I stopped for a moment, laid my suitcase down on the cobble pavement made from the yellow, smooth bricks and stared at that void in the space. I think my mouth was slightly opened, in wonder. I think I forgot to breathe for a while. I took a pack of cigarettes from my pocket and lit one. I was wrapped by a bluish cloud that made it impossible for me to smell the city. I thought about my grandma, grandma Klara, who would certainly snatch the cigarette out of my mouth, throw it away, crush it and say: "Nice girls don't smoke!" She would certainly blab something about Greta, the black sheep in grandma's fine family, who started to wear trousers and smoke cigarettes in a cigarette-holder just before the war broke out. I smiled at the grandma, who forgot to breathe twenty years ago and dreamt away into death. I'll paint her one day, on the plywood, in oil, I thought. The painting must be solid and reliable like grandma, who, even in her white, laced nightgowns, always looked as if her Almighty had carved her out of granite.

First I thought to walk down the Radićeva Street to the tram stop and then take the tram to the Lower Town, but then it occurred to me that Mum was in hospital, the house was empty and I didn't have the key. I remembered that Mum was at work when I went to Zagreb eighteen years ago, that I angrily left the key under the mat. I pointedly wanted to show to my mother, who was not there to see me going away, that I had forever slammed the door of that house, the house which remained empty. Clean, but empty. So I headed towards Divaltova Street, towards a back,

wretched house in which Jozefina wrote her uneven letters and sentences without punctuation marks.

I dragged myself down the dark, never properly illuminated street which stretched along the railroad track all the way to Klajnova Street. I thought: nothing has changed, this street still scares me. I thought how the war had come and gone, how everything had actually remained the same, how the city had continued its own way like a stubborn old man, how it had returned to the old habits. But then I noticed that some of the darkened houses still had the poorly glued nylon instead of the window glass. I stared at those war scars from the point of view of the poor: some families have grown out of the war into dynasties and empires, and some, probably unresourceful, even after eight years have no money to replace the nylons with glass. I saw the starlike scars on the facades, penetrated by the humidity of the sky which is merciless in autumn. Through the broken basement panes, the houses panted at me mouldily. I thought that someone or something from that deeper, mouldy darkness would grab me by the legs, so I hurried up, got winded. I almost ran all the way to Divaltova Street.

Through the vehicular entrance, now a slightly rotten, but once probably proud wooden gate which could no longer be closed due to the rot and rusty hinges, I entered the brick-paved courtyard which Jozefina shared with four or five more families. The courtyard was the same – the eyesore of cobbled-up houses, surrounded by flower gardens, roses, hyacinths and daisies, the colorful things with which people try to hide the misery. Really, everything was the same, the darkness and the sounds coming from the houses, the creaking of the furniture and clanking of the dishes being washed in the basin. Just some more junk heaped up in the back of that darkness in the meantime, a whole mountain of cracked wash-basins, toilet seats, battered cooking pots, bent bicycles and old prams which had long forgotten their purpose. I smiled at that

heap of unnecessary, long-dead things from which old people at the edge of life built three-dimensional still lifes and repeated “It might come in handy”. I stopped in front of Jozefina’s little house which was wrapped in darkness. I already thought that she had gone someplace, roaming in the dark, that she had lost her mind in her old age and no longer behaved as befitted her, and then I remembered that Jozefina always drew a thick, dark green linen over her only window, so that people wouldn’t stare into her room, and that she never switched on more than one bulb. For economy. I remembered that her house was dark because she had closed her one eye, blurred by cataract. I knocked, but nobody answered. I pressed the knob and the door silently opened by itself. As if pushed by draught. Or a shoulder of someone I couldn’t see. I quietly slipped through the foyer, narrow as a cube, and entered the only, tiny room which served both as Jozefina’s kitchen and her living room. Next to the lamp resembling a mushroom made of milky glass, Jozefina was bent in the armchair covered by crocheted black blanket, staring at the wall. At Grandma’s Virgin Mary, which Mum had given to her against my will after the death of grandma Klara. As I was peering from the dark of the little room first at Jozefina reduced to a question mark, and then at the picture of Virgin Mary with clasped hands staring at something in the distance, I remembered how angry I was at Mum because that picture had moved from our attic into the dampness of Jozefina’s room. It seemed to me then that Mum was hastily trying to get rid of Grandma forever, that she was trying to throw her out of the house once and for all like some shabby, worn-out piece of furniture, to lock her into something outside my reach, as she had done with Grandma’s photographs, which she had thrown into a cardboard box and hidden somewhere.

I frowned and felt my cheeks burn, my anger returning like a red-hot wind which lunges and withdraws in tidal waves. The squeeze of my hand on the brass knob abated and the knob

creaked. Jozefina jumped in her armchair and looked at me. Her face was damp, it glistened, illuminated by the light of that shining mushroom. She looked as if she had run into the house fleeing from the storm which had caught her in the back of the courtyard.

“Good evening, frau Jozefina”, I just stuttered like a little child.

“Katarina”, slurred the teethless Jozefina. She sounded as if she were struggling with a huge semolina dumpling which had stuck in her throat and didn’t let her breathe.

“What’s up?” I blabbed stupidly in one breath, putting my suitcase on the floor.

Jozefina was sniffing. She took a handkerchief out of the pocket of her apron and started to wipe her nose. I always wondered why frau Fine Lady, whenever she cried, wiped her nose instead of her eyes. That almost made me laugh even then, almost made me burst out laughing.

“Ma-ri-ja”, bitterly weeping, she broke my mother’s name into syllables. “Mum is... dead. Katarina, Mum is gone!”

She threw the last sentences out of herself like an avalanche, yelling. As if she were freeing herself. I was watching her aghast. I know that my eyes were big, huge. I thought of those stupid, pathetic hippie-movies in which finally liberated protagonists ran naked towards the wild wind, spread their arms and shouted. As if they were free. As if the nakedness and the shouting have finally made them free and happy. Jozefina was upset, and I just asked: “When, when did she die?”

* * *

Snježana's parents were at "temporary work" in West Germany, so her courtyard and her house were full of bright toys from the "rotten capitalism". She had a hula hoop, a tractor with pedals, a plastic swing, a huge pram for her dolls, an awful lot of dolls, houses for the dolls, richly colored notebooks, dresses and stockings in the colors I never dreamt of. And she also had Tito, on the TV set in the living room. A small plaster bust covered in bronze or something that looked like bronze. When I first saw Tito, I genuinely thought he was some saint. I remember correctly, we entered the courtyard, and her "grampa", that's how she called him, grampa Dragan, met us at the house door. A big, potbellied man with grey, but thick and bristly hair and heavy beard. With his hands on his hips, dressed in the greasy, dark-blue working trousers and a white undershirt soiled by unidentified stains, he was standing at the door staring at us and then he laughed gutturally. I was frightened by that big-voiced, loud man who seemed to be winking incessantly with his right eye so that I never ever knew if he actually meant what he was saying, or was just teasing me.

"You, girl, I bet you put stones in your pockets", he shouted towards me and lifted his chin. His double chin trembled like jelly. "Ha?"

"N-no!" I shook my head. I wanted to run out of that courtyard

which always reeked of smoked meat and freshly made plum brandy.

“Then your grandmother certainly ties a rope around your neck”, he laughed and his belly trembled. “Ha?”

“N-no!” I bleated, my palms sweating.

“Look how scrawny you are! Trust me, you wouldn’t be like that if you were with me! Oh no, you wouldn’t!” he roared, and I had the impression that those stunted black cherries and the pear tree were bending from his voice, that the trees were afraid of him so they couldn’t grow properly.

“Are you from that Pavković family, ha?” he was lifting his fat chin towards me again, and Snježana was pulling me by the hand. We were slowly approaching him. I just nodded. Yes, I am from “that” Pavković family.

“Your grandmother is a dangerous old hog, kid. Do you know that, ha?”

I wanted to say “I don’t know which hog you mean!”, but I didn’t, I just stared at him without a word.

“Come inside, girls! Have a bite, I don’t want this kid starve on me...” he muttered. “Come on, what are you waiting for, ha?”

I was just bleakly watching that fat yellowish man in an undershirt, and I was wondering how he wasn’t cold, how it could occur to anyone to get out of the house in February, dressed only in an undershirt.

He took us into the living room and seated us on the ottoman. On the wall behind our backs, a mumbo-jumbo, grim tapestry was nailed, with yellowish-brown deers and does by the brook, with the forest, a silver moon and birds above them. A bit of everything. A forest idyll. In front of us, the glistening of the greenish-grey, convex screen of the turned-off TV, and on the TV: an indoor antenna and Tito on a small, crocheted doily.

“Who’s that?” I quietly asked Snježana when the two of us

remained alone. Her grampa went to kitchen to fetch some blood sausages, cracklings and bread.

Snježana popped her eyes and started to laugh hysterically, gutturally. At that moment, grampa entered the room. He stopped at the door with a soup plate in his hand and stared at us.

“Grampa, grampa, listen, Katarina doesn’t know who Tito is!” she cried. My ears were buzzing. I wanted to vanish and cry. I was ashamed, although I didn’t know why I should be ashamed.

“Why are you surprised, ha?!” grampa waved his hand. “But we are here, we’ll explain everything to her, ha!”

And for the following half an hour, or an hour, Snježana’s grampa talked about partisans, about Tito on a white horse, about the Fifth Lika Division, about Kordun, from which he moved to Slavonian mud, about the forests and the mountains, the occupiers and the fifth-columnists. I didn’t understand almost anything. Snježana was gnawing sausages and cracklings, she was just munching noisily and nodding her head in approval. Then grampa fell silent, looked at the plate, then at me and said:

“Go ahead, have a bite, kid!”

“Thank you, but I can’t, I’m not hungry” I put my hand on my belly.

“What’s wrong, the blood sausage is not good enough for you? You Pavkovićs eat finer shit, ha?” he laughed, and I didn’t know what he meant by that. Whether he was joking or painfully serious.

Snježana and I went out into the courtyard. We drove the dolls down the bumpy brick path in the prams I could only dream of. It was already getting dark when my grandmother appeared at the gate. Quietly, but strictly, she said through the clenched teeth:

“Katarina, home!”

Just then, grampa showed up at the door.

“Come inside, old hag, you might eat something as well. See

how skinny you are, ha!?” he laughed like crazy and his eyes sparkled. I could clearly see the sparks spurting from his eyes.

Grandma stopped as if struck by lightning, but just for a moment. Then she waved her hand dismissively and walked away.

I quickly dashed out of the courtyard after my grandma, who was almost running. Although she always complained about her knees. I didn't understand what it was all about.

Grandma was terribly angry, I think I've never seen her angry like that. When we entered our courtyard, she just muttered in a bleating, subdued voice:

“Don't you ever go into that house again!”

I was shocked, so I just nodded obediently. I was so appalled by Grandma's cold behaviour and her anger ringing like a stainless steel, that it was only the following day I dared to ask:

“Why don't we have Tito in our house?”

It was Sunday and we were all sitting at the table when I asked that utterly shocking question which shrouded the kitchen in silence. Dad choked on his coffee and spat the damned sip which got “stuck” in his gullet into his cup, not to suffocate. Mum's cup remained in midair, and Grandma first turned white, and then red, as if with a sun-stroke.

“Why don't we have that... that... Tito?” It was the first and the last time that my grandmother pierced me with her gaze. I was cold, I felt a chill down my spine. “Because, because of...” Grandma was spelling the words louder and louder, as if she were going to burst, like a pressure-cooker...

But she didn't finish the sentence and I never found out what she had wanted to say, since Mum jumped up as if on a spring. She noisily placed her cup on the table, widened her eyes and stared at Grandma. Slightly stammering (I thought then that she was stammering because she was embarrassed we didn't have Tito in the house...), she finished Grandma's sentence, and Dad looked

at her flabbergasted, holding the cup of coffee with the floating foamy spit.

“Because, because they don’t sell Tito in any of the stores here”, she sighed. “We would certainly buy him, if we could find a store selling Tito.”

They didn’t even ask me if I knew who Tito was and how I knew it. They all tried to act normal. Dad started to talk about trimming and grafting of fruit-trees, about the gate he needed to oil, about various things. And I believed them. I bought the nonsense about the store. I found it so convincing that three years later I brought a small Tito’s bust back from the school-trip to Kumrovec. Grandma didn’t even want to take it in her hands. Of course, with the excuse that her hands were muddy and wet from the fresh field-lettuce that she was rinsing in the sink when I entered the house. Later, my Mum (she was carrying that bust between her fingertips, as if carrying a piece of shit) laid Tito away in the china cabinet, among crystal, into the dark in which he was barely discernible.