

Korana Serdarević

Irena Tot's Experiment
(Eksperiment Irene Tot)

Novel

Translated by Ellen Elias-Bursać



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KORANA SERDAREVIĆ was born in Zadar in 1982. She graduated in Croatian language and literature and comparative literature from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. She worked as a journalist in culture for the *Večernji list* daily and the weekly *Forum*, among others. Since 2013 she has been working as a high school teacher and part-time English translator. She won two first prizes for her short stories in 2013 (Ranko Marinković award for her story *Krivosas* (*Four-lined Snake*) and Zlatko Tomičić Award for *Ptice* (*Birds*)) and also published her prose in all relevant literary magazines and Third Programme of the Croatian Radio. Her first book *Nema se što učiniti* (*Nothing Can Be Done*) was published in 2015. Some of her stories are translated into English, German, Italian, Macedonian, Slovenian and Ukrainian. Her last novel *Eksperiment Irene Tot* (*Irena Tot's Experiment*, 2017) was shortlisted for the prestigious T-portal award.



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AWARDS

shortlisted for T-portal award

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How not to hide behind lukewarm, fusty day-to-day life because we are afraid of what the change may bring? Korana Serdarević explores the story of the female protagonist Irena Tot, whose coatings she will gradually unfold like the onion layers. Irena will get a different form, physically and mentally. As an intensely self-aware individual in her thirties, the uncompromising heroine puts her life decisions into question. She refuses to consent to the traditional path anticipated for a woman, determined to perform an experiment – to change herself completely. She rejects the so called ideal life in rural environment with a sweet man, feeling captured like a roe deer in an animal trap. She constantly puts herself in unfamiliar situations, like getting involved with lesbian relationship or renting a room to a complete stranger. Irena opts for brutal honesty with herself and chooses the more difficult pathway, making sure the renowned ground below her feet slips away. And although she slips out from her traditional role, she can't escape from being in a complicated relationships with her depressive brother, cold mother and soft father.

Beautifully written, women's writing of Korana Serdarević is a strong subversive critic of patriarchal (Croatian) society. In the genuine heroine Irena Tot we can find a remarkable female representation, universally relatable and persuasive to every potential reader.

PRAISE

“The story is perfectly balanced, the novel is interesting, free-flowing and sharp, because [Korana Serdarević] constantly keeps accelerating its rhythm, up to a point of catharsis that heroine has to go through on her path of change.”

- Denis Derk, *Večernji list daily*

“*Irena Tot's Experiment* is a truly good novel. The final rating would be: must read, as much as because of pure enjoying in the text as because of the its theme that concerns us all, like it or not.”

- Vesna Solar, *Moderna vremena*

Irena Tot's Experiment

I.

Change must be possible. The decision made by others to resist it, to remain the same, hold on to the same look, occupation, and attitudes, was, as far as I was concerned, weakness, cowardice when faced with embracing a different *I* able to see their life. Metamorphosis is not what people expect. What they do expect is a gradual aging, the loosening of the skin around the eyes and down the neck, a wrinkle or two on the brow, thinning hair, a more mature gaze. That wasn't me. One year I dared, all at once, to change.

A few years ago I was on board a train. The compartment was full. Six live, warm bodies filled the moving space with their smelly human discomfort. I sat in the middle spot between two older women. I bumped shins with the girl sitting across from me. The distance was decent, but still a bit close for total strangers. Christmas was near and we were all wrapped up in clothes. As usual, I thought a few times about someone else's skin under the jeans and warm socks. When I'm too close to people I don't know, thoughts like these soothe me. I'm reminded that our bodies, at least, are made up of the same stuff and our membership in humanity is enough for us to be chosen, for no reason at all, to be in the same place at the same time, shoulder to shoulder.

It was late afternoon. In winter these hours are already as still as evenings, people retreat into themselves and breathe more deeply, as if getting ready for bed. The girl across from me squirmed like a scrappy critter, she kept slipping down in the seat and prodded the two men on either side of her with her pointy elbows. They looked askance but were still quiet. She was pretty. Her lips, actually, were too full for such a small face and straightaway I found myself wondering what kissing her would be like. Still, the thought ricochets off me—hers were not lips like that. She was, it could be said, brashly pretty: nothing gentle or subtle in her movements, almost recklessly indifferent to the world around her.

Sometimes she'd stare openly at me with no restraint or a grudging courtesy. She eyed me with curiosity like a child. She was probably studying my hair or clothes. I don't believe she found me attractive, but I interested her in the way one finds an exotic body intriguing for its difference. She was in her twenties, and I was maybe ten years older. Everything about us was different: her hair was long, dark, and silken, mine barely reached my shoulders and I did nothing to tuck away the wispy strands over my forehead. She wore make-up, her nails were pointy and unnaturally white, they screamed in the compartment like the snow that still glared through the train window. I cut my fingernails short and straight. No polish. For some time now I hadn't been doing myself up, I was tired. A little more and I'd be worried that I was giving up.

I was on my way to visit my grandmother. I hadn't seen her for months, since I was last in the village for my grandfather's burial. Every week she'd been calling. "I can't fall asleep at night so I sit in the kitchen," she said in a plaintive voice. I finally relented. I had several days free and decided to face the empty places there, the places where my grandfather used to dwell so graciously with his warmth.

I am traveling with a large hand bag and a cloth bag into which I've piled books for myself and a crossword puzzle for Grandma. She is nearly ninety but she still cooks, she'll make us a little supper and then we'll sit in front of the television set in silence. Later I'll put on my pajamas which have been stowed away in the cupboard at the house for years in a neat pile with underwear and a track suit. That's all I ever need there. Tomorrow I'll sit in the kitchen all day, I'll go with Grandma to the grave and visit one of the neighbors, I'll answer questions, in the evening we'll watch a series on TV, and then I'll switch off the light for the fish in Grandpa's aquarium.

The dark deepened, and the train slid away from the city, it rocked and warmed us. The women on either side of me huddled in their seats and closed their eyes, drew into themselves like shellfish, while the man by the window was still gazing out. He'd tucked gray ear buds into his ears, from time to time his head would bob to the rhythm. The man by the door, a balding gentleman in a striped sweater, was still stiffly eyeing the movements of the girl with the full lips. I had to stare at those lips. At one point the girl shoved her hand into her bag, pulled out a long bread roll and nibbled off its overdone tip. While she was chewing, her lips traveled around on her face, twisting her cheeks and climbing to her petite nostrils. She didn't open her mouth, she kept pressing her lips together and this seemed a challenge, with so much of the pursed pink flesh wrinkling and warping. When she finally swallowed it, the mouthful obediently slid down her throat. I followed it as if it were a living creature beneath her skin. She was covered in tattoos peeking out from her sleeves and low-cut top. They were all letters with sharp,

stylized edges, and when she lifted an arm to do up her pony tail, I could read the words running from her dainty ear to her collar bone. It said: *I am other people*.

I had long been thinking about other people. A mite fixated on their differences, I observed them in secret from my window or in passing, while I'd be waiting for a light to turn green at an intersection, in cafés, restaurants, or clubs. The possibility of their happiness intrigued me—like this from afar, they seemed to fill their days more ably than I and there were times when I dreamed I was slipping into their skin and living their lives. It was only a game, but it compelled me more and more. To be different, to come back to life, make a sideways feint, jump to my feet somewhere else. I wasn't wanting this because I was unhappy. My life was good, but I felt I was spinning in circles. Not because of the daily routine I'd fallen into, usually by intention and with no trace of resistance, but because of those same, ever-unfinished circles of thought. In the morning, for instance, I'd be caught up by the possibility of fleeing to the woods, planting something or changing my address, but by the afternoon I was the same old person, in sync with only one reality which, it seems, had spread like weeds and was now gobbling up all other lives. I had not the slightest chance of a choice, I thought and gave up. And then the next day, hour, or month, when I grew arrogant again and thought I had the right to make a change, I'd hang a greeting on my exit door which I'd take down when I came home from work, if the wind hadn't by then blown it away. This was my inner lake and I splashed around in it as if I didn't know how to swim. At least so it seemed.

The train was approaching my station when an older man struck up a conversation with the girl. She simpered at him, answered his questions with a Dalmatian twang and interjected commentaries. I never knew how to chat up strangers with ease. That sort of banter filled me with anxiety and watching the two of them across from me I was afraid they'd want to draw me into the conversation. I closed my eyes.

When I woke up, we'd passed my stop. I knew all the villages coming after Grandma's by heart, but I didn't know how I was going to get back to her station. Winter, darkness. Snow which even among the trees was knee-deep. There wouldn't be any more trains that night. I would have to make this work. We stopped in a town that was known for its improvised disco where I'd gone a few times when I was in high school. By now, I didn't know anybody from around here. I was the only one to get off the train. While I walked by the compartments, I felt the eyes of the girl with the full lips on me. I turned. Her gaze was open and clear. She was thinking: where are you going? I was thinking: you still believe you know where you're going.

A gaze reflects one's experience—everything a person has ever seen is there,

and can't be hidden, dolled up, masked. I could never play the role of this girl who is looking my way. My gaze has in it a whole assortment of lurking over-and-dones: my mother, when she slammed the door in my father's face, my father, sobbing, bent over, at Grandpa's funeral, my younger brother, who goes around taping "Looking for Alf, a cat" signs on streetlamps around town, and more than all of them—me, my hours wasted at the pharmaceutical company lab, as I peered through the lens of the microscope for the nth time and noted down the changes. All those images, the impressions of my then self and the people who made me, cemented me at the train station in the middle of nowhere, because of the gaze of an unknown girl who was traveling abroad. God only knows why she was the one, but the scrappy tattooed twenty-year-old proved that I was, then and there, a pathetically complete person. I, with my smoldering desire to change yet never change, I, with my habit of watching others yet never introducing myself, I, with my desire for the new and my fear of the new, I stood at the train station in the middle of nowhere, the dirty snow underfoot, while above me white letters threatened the name of a place that was listed only on the most detailed maps. I felt as if I were seeing myself from above, and that the name of that cold, remote village was all about me, and that I was standing here, actually, forever.

The train pulled out. As if hypnotized I watched the glowing compartments of the metal serpent pass me, when briefly appeared the rectangle where I had been sitting only minutes before. And then a person came to the window and two full lips pressed against the cold glass.

For a long time that image remained in my memory: the kiss of the beautiful unknown girl on the dirty window of the a train that was going across the border. I felt equal parts shame and entitlement. Snared by a moment of someone else's spontaneous tenderness, I didn't know what I'd done to deserve it.

I'd love to have waved to her.

I called Grandma. I told her not to worry and that I'd be there soon. She was still talking when I hung up. She had a million impracticable suggestions. She was worried. She was waiting. I had to find a way to get going.

"If you need a ride, I'm going toward town," said someone behind my back. A tall man wearing a knitted cap pulled down to his eyebrows, dressed as if it were much colder than it was. He had a beard covering his face and I couldn't gauge how old he was.

"If that's not a problem for you, that would be amazing. I only need to go as far as Raskrižje," I said. Unexpectedly, I wasn't frightened.

"Fine."

I sat in his car. It was clean, though on the back seat there was a heap of clothes, rumpled bags, and tools. In advance I was feeling awkward about the

conversation that would follow. We had already gone a kilometer or two, however, and he had said not a word. I looked at his hands. Attractive, slender fingers wrapped around the wheel. Skin that showed up close that he was young, younger, maybe, than I. He was solemn. Slightly frowning. He pulled out a cigarette, ran the edge of his tongue along it, lit it.

“Mind if I smoke?”

“No, of course not.”

Again he was quiet. There were tall trees on all sides. Their branches bent down along the straight trunks, everything was slumping under the thick load of snow and I felt my shoulders slump in sympathy as they took on the weight. Calmly and with no fanfare, I stopped caring where we were headed and when we’d get there. Outside nothing could be seen but the bits of the world lit briefly by the car’s headlights. Enough. The road unwound after each bend in the road like an apparently endless arc over a cold surface. We could have been anywhere. While we sat there, the two of us, total strangers, I felt as if we were on that road alone and our non-conversation was not an awkward silence, but a stillness pact. Silence. I was aware of his bearing and his decision not to ask anything or give away anything and I began to wonder why. Is he silent because I’m boring and tightly wound? Is he usually of so few words? What does this person do? Has he a family? Did he come here for work or is he running from something? Nobody under the age of seventy lives in these parts just because.

“If you need a ride while you’re here, I often go back and forth,” he said as if he heard my thoughts, and blew the smoke toward the narrow crack of open window. I turned and we looked at each other openly. He smiled. A good-looking man wearing a lot of clothes. Under the jacket, thick sweater, tee shirt, his chest rose and fell. Under his skin and bones a strong heart pumped dark-red blood through his veins and into all the parts of his body that move, breathe, heat. He was alive and composed. His serenity was almost touchable, and to me, a person always engaged in an encounter with edginess—my own and that of others—that seemed pure freshness.

“What are you doing here, if it’s no secret?” I asked and pressed my handbag to my lap, my only baggage, where it nestled like a tame creature.

“I’m working. I’m a forester. Matko,” he extended his hand. It was warm. A half-smoked cigarette smoldered between his lips. I gave my name and shrank even more into the seat. The flakes of snow in the headlights looked like swarms of frightened bugs. In a minute we’d be in Raskrižje.

When we pulled up to Grandma’s yard, the village looked as if there was no one left alive. In only a few houses there was a soft yellow light—maybe somebody reading by a bedside lamp. The fresh snow squeaked under my feet when I got

out of the car, which then pulled away slowly, departing, scribbling its lights across the narrow street. In my bag still glowed my cell phone into which I'd entered Matko's number.

The door to the house is always unlocked. In the front hall are lying Grandpa's slippers. Empty. I feel the emptiness, it spreads from my belly to my breast and throat. Another step and I'll be indoors, like the old maid from childhood picture books, a quiet woman in a place that used to ring with noisy joy and love, leaving in its wake only rooms and things.

When she heard the hallway door creak, Grandma rose to her feet and switched off the television set. She hugged me. She was by then so tiny and thin that I could have lifted her up in my arms with no effort. I wanted to kiss her on the cheek, but her face stayed pressed fast against my shoulder. He who was missing pressed her body to mine and brooked no stilted kisses or greetings. Our shoulders shook. In spontaneous agreement both of us nourished the pain we were each feeling inside.

"How did you manage?" she asked and brushed the tears off her face. I told her about Matko, the forester. She didn't know who he was. "Anica might know," she said and I thought about how by tomorrow lunch she'd know all there was to know about the forester who'd delivered me to the door of Grandma's house.

"Come on in, I'll give you supper. Twice I warmed it up already."

I sat. From the middle of the table Grandpa's photograph watched me. He was grinning with his whole face. At the head of the table, where he used to sit, there was no longer a chair. On the shelf under the window his ficus plant wasn't there anymore. In the glass kitchen cabinet lay the coffee cups he'd bring out each time my brother and I, all grown up, came to visit. "Well this is a special occasion indeed," he'd say and rattle the ceramic cups in his hands. Now all the cups were face down, sealed shut by their saucers. Quiet.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come," said Grandma and put a dish of red paprikash in front of me. Steam and fragrance rose from it.

"Where are the fish?" I asked. Grandma didn't look at me when she answered. It was as if she were ashamed, as if her own answer made her uncomfortable.

"I gave them away. You know, the food is expensive. And besides I didn't have what it took to look after them."

While she sat there across from me, she peppered me with questions about my brother, work, life, my dad. I answered between bites. We emptied everything out, we shook out the news as if it were things from a sack. Now they lay on the floor in front of us and expected us to do something with them. Grandma refrained from commenting, maybe she didn't have what it took. She sighed a few times.

"In town everything is mainly just like always," I concluded my report and

wiped my mouth with a flowery napkin. No need to have said that, Grandma had no idea what ‘just like always’ meant in town because for many years she’d seldom been to visit, and the last few times all she saw were the walls of the hospital where Grandpa went for observation and examinations. She’d liked the city as a place to go on a trip, but she didn’t entirely understand how a person could live there every day. How do you get up in the morning and dive into the noise, the crowds, the constant restlessness you can never be rid of even at night, when you’re going to bed? You can’t see peoples’ faces there, how can you decide whom to talk to when you’re on your way to the grocery store? With so many places to go, how do you choose? That’s why she spent a long time trying to convince my brother to come and live in the village, to pull himself together and out of the depression that had been crushing and grinding him for years. He felt that off there in the village, among the chickens and cows, always looking out over the open fields, he might really kill himself. He told her so once. “Oh come now, I’d load you up with far too much work for such nonsense ever to occur to you,” said Grandma, scowling sternly, without a hint of wit. She truly believed that physical labor cured all problems of the psyche, that when the body tires there is no more room for spiritual pain. And so, when Grandpa died, she categorically refused to move to live with Dad in the city. “If anybody wants to come visit, they are welcome,” she said. “But while I can do my washing and cooking at home, I’ll be where I belong.”

She didn’t allow me to take my dish to the sink. She washed it, swept the crumbs into her hand from the tabletop with her dishtowel and sent me to the room to change. I did what she said. I am an obedient, grown-up child. Probably Grandma, like me, at that moment wanted me to still be small, so she could look after me, that she didn’t have to talk with a grown-up who is hoping while she visits to hide her own loneliness for a time. It would be much easier to get a child ready for bed, close the day, expect an equally elderly tomorrow.

My room was close and quiet. I looked at the bed and wanted to lie down. But it was early yet and I hadn’t come to close the door. The clothes were in the cupboard, neatly folded, freshly laundered and ironed. I put them on. While I stood in front of the smooth sheets, I had the feeling that I’d come for medical treatment. I wouldn’t resist. This is a good time for the old track suit and the room in which, the older I was, the closer the white walls to one another.

When I came back, Grandma offered me a cup of hot tea. We sat together in front of the television set in silence. Behind our backs Grandpa’s photograph was in the dark.

V.

People always expect they'll know where they're going. They need to have a whole plan out in front of them, a map with all the streets and traffic signs drawn in. Illness and death are the only things they can't blame for ruining plans. No objection holds for illness and death. Perhaps somewhere there are people who allow themselves to rely on surprise. Maybe they aren't so obsessed with knowing themselves and instead sit back and await their changes. When the changes happen, this other *me*, a brave new creature, will most likely desire something altogether different. Change must be possible.

I stayed in town one evening. At first I wandered around for a while, thinking I'd sit on a bus and go home. And then I ran into Janko.

"Ireeeeene, Christ almighty, what's up with you?" I adore Janko. I haven't seen him for years, and still he comes right over as if we'd been staggering around drunk together the night before. I laugh and plant a kiss on his cheek. Darling Janko. A boy in a grown man's body with a round little head, a round belly. We were neighbors and friends from our street. "Heeeeeeey Janko," I'd call out in front of his house, "come ouuuuut!" He'd be down in five seconds, a twenty-kuna note for a beer in his wallet and the weed for a joint in his pocket. Janko, a headlong consumer of life. When he was held back a grade, his parents, against his will, signed him up for the seminary, and he became the laughingstock of the town. "Don Jankoko, where'd yer banana go!" kids called after him from the basketball court. Janko never made it to 'don,' he fled the seminary at the beginning of his last year there, but a banana cost him. He had a roommate who'd been giving him grief, prancing naked around the room, wagging his hairy balls in Janko's face, and once Janko woke up to find the guy's stiff organ right between his eyes. Janko was no softie, he could put up with a boatload of aggravation, but this was too much even for him. When he reported on the guy, his roomie left him a

drawerful of shit in the bedside table. After that Janko dropped quietly out of the seminary and called me to help him transfer to another school. That same day we were at the office of the principal of the local high school. The shit stayed behind in the drawer.

“Take me out for a beer,” I told him and flung an arm gallantly across his shoulder. There are night buses, I’ll manage. I’m not scared any more.

A Dalmatian city is like an old person: it lives to reminisce. Every street chafed some part of my innards where I’d stowed something away years ago, stirring in me an ache that can no longer be tied to any one event or person. And the ache, the edginess is all the more compelling because it can no longer name its source. Evening is upon us, a weekend night, people are noisily cranking it up on the narrow streets. Janko stops every five feet, says hi, laughs, introduces me around. “My best friend ever,” he says. For the first time since I came here, I feel I’m back. I tell him as much using simple words, I thank him for bumping into me. I plant a kiss on his forehead.

“Now you’ll see where your boy Janko goes for beer,” he says and takes me by the hand. People are converging on a stone-paved courtyard, we step into a little café crisscrossed by booths. The waitress waves to Janko, blows him kisses, the kid at the bar comes over to us singing the song blaring from the loudspeakers. He pumps his arm into the air, arches his neck and belts it out. Janko joins in, but he’s small and rotund and his arms only reach the other kid’s elbow. I laugh, but I stand to the side, skulking in my clothes, skin, face. I can’t seem to shake myself free.

“Hey, hey, Ireeeene, why so shy: *You’re like a four-leafed clover, there’s room for you, come over...*” wails Janko and snatches me around the waist.

“I’m off to get me a beer,” I say and only just manage to wriggle free from the manic trio. Men are lined up along the bar, I tuck in among them and call to the waitress. While I wait, I feel two men stare at me and make ready to move. Vultures. I smile. I guess they allowed me to push my way in, and I was polite.

“Gotta say, Janko has one cute date tonight,” says one with a goat beard and pastes on a witless grin. I would love it if men had it easier, if they could step back for moment from their crotch. But even when they make the effort, when they’re thinking of other things, the snake king foists its logic. I smile, that’s what he’s waiting for, permission—thinks the little brain in the ripped blue jeans of the boy with the goat beard. I grab my bottles. I turn to go back to Janko, but he is not where I left him. I circle, no trace. I’ll drink the beer, wait. He’ll be back.

“So where d’ I know ya from?”

At first I don’t recognize her, how could I, I’d seen her only the once. She’s cute. Teeny. She looks at me, her eyes wide like a kid’s. From her low-cut top poke

her little mashed tits. Tattoos everywhere. Above the collarbone: *I am other people*.

“The girl from the train,” I say softly.

“Heeeyyy, right you are! Choo-choooo! Ha-ha-ha-ha! See how I spotted you? Huh? Ha-ha-ha-hah-ha-ha,” she flaunts her tits even more and rests her hand on my shoulder. “I’m Luiza,” she says, and her lips in the middle of the name pucker up in a long kiss, a lot like the one she pressed to the windowpane as the train pulled out. Luuuuiza. Pink, moist lips on a train headed for the border.

A few times in my life I’ve had dreams about a city. I’m pretty sure it doesn’t exist. From the last time I dreamt it I remember flashes. I was in a big room lined in stone: heavy gray stone across the floor, the walls. In the middle of the room stood an empty stone tub, deep, with rounded edges. There were other women in the room, and one of them, who seemed familiar, stood right up next to me, the two of us scrolling through photographs on a black camera. “Have somebody take our picture,” said the woman next to me and handed the camera to the others. We linked arms, cheek to cheek, and posed. Click. Cut. We’re strolling around town, that same place I always dream of, the two of us. All the buildings are big and sturdy, the streets are wide, it’s warm, but there’s nobody around. Twilight. We arrive at a square with a church, it seems as if we’ll be walking forever because the square is vast, empty, endless. On the shoulder of the girl swings the same camera and I say: I never saw how that picture came out. She switches it on, we look. We say nothing. Like darkness, fear envelops us. On the photograph are the two of us, embracing, looking a lot alike, and the stone tub is behind us full of water and, plain to see: in it lounges a girl with long dark hair who is looking straight at the camera and sending a kiss.

You were in my dream, Luiza.

She pulls me off among her friends. Four students, tipsy, sweaty, whole bodies shaking with raucous laughter. I don’t fit in, but their youth draws me, I stay to watch. They sashay around the table, down sweet liquor, gyrate as they dance, blow off flirtatious puffs of cigarette smoke with their eyes closed. The men approach, they sway, they’re a bevy, they toss out jokes, they rebuff and then invite back. They play and alcohol shuffles the deck. I’m standing nearby, and Luiza keeps pulling me close. It doesn’t matter that Janko hasn’t come back. I want to be one of them. I want to catch the bug. I go off for another beer. And then another. Luiza makes me dance with her. She stands right by me and sways, and then shimmies down low along my body and shimmies up again, weaves, hugs me around the waist. Her lips from close up are even fuller, they swell with warm blood. Sweet, sticky smells.

“Wanna lick?” she asks and knits her fingers through the hair on the back of

my head. “Cool hairdo. I want one like that, but I’m scared.” On she goes as if all her sentences are the same, ordinary.

In high school, back when alcohol mixed up craziness and courage for the first time, when there was still so much newness you could scoop up with both hands, I made out once with a girl. We were sitting in front of a store, there were a lot of us, the bottles of cheap wine were empty, someone was retching, someone was sleeping with their head leaning up against the stone wall. I don’t remember how the kiss happened, there was no romance to it, no beginning or end, I folded everything into that long kiss. Slobbering. The girl opened her mouth too wide, her tongue went down my throat too deep and I nearly choked. Still, I felt the difference of female warmth, the slide of skin works better and bodies, so similar, recognize each other easily.

I didn’t kiss Luiza because I wanted a reprise of the teen experiment. I’m no scientist. I’m short-haired Irena who crumbled up her life like the dry leaves in Mama’s bouquet of dead flowers. I do have: 33 half-empty years of life. I don’t have: job-husband-child-dog. Only years of life. Before me, behind me. At the point where I am now, rolling in alcohol, noise and smoke, my life is Luiza. “Luuuuuiza,” I whisper into her half-open mouth. Luiza. Sweet, soft Luiza with lips on which a person would, gladly, die.

She leads me by the hand to the ladies’ through the crowd under a ceiling of muted lights and loud music. Her silhouette floats to me. If I’d tripped, if I’d fallen, she’d have pulled me along behind her across the floor. If only there’s still time, while we’re hot, latch ourselves into the filthy cubicle and leave others to bang on the door. She shoots me a lewd look, dips her hand into her bra and pulls up a breast. Luiza. I push her against the tile wall, someone wrote in red marker “I still love you, dork.” I cut the thought and again see Luiza’s lips, they fill my whole vista, spread across her face. I lean to kiss her, she’s a head shorter, she’s petite, lithe and pliable. Luiza. When I dip my fingers in, it’s wet and hot. Luiza breathes faster, with my other hand I reach for her neck and lift her chin to me, nip, she shrieks and licks the blood from her lips, then laughs. Breathes into my mouth. “Almost, almost,” whispers Luiza. She moans. Her body arches, taut, then shivers. Then she slings both arms around my neck and slumps limp with all her weight.

“Boy oh boy, you did me good,” she says. She laughs like crazy.

As soon as we open the door, faces burst in and someone calls me by name. No matter where I go, they’re always calling me, looking for me, naming me to my face with a word I did not choose for myself, a word I’ve never grown fully accustomed to. I’ll change my name. Good idea: tomorrow, the day after, I’ll already be giving people a different one. I’m summoned again, this time more urgently. The boy from the start of the evening, Janko’s buddy, is standing by the

door of the men's room, his face in a twist. "Well lookie here, sure did yourself proud tonight," says Luiza, grinned and smacks him twice across the face.

"Blow me, Luiza," he says and shoves her.

"Hey, little boy, cut it out," I say. I'll shield her, my soft creature. "What's up, you OK?"

"Wanna to see how little this boy is? Janko's asking for you."

"Where is he?"

"He'll have stepped outside."

"Let's go," I say and take Luiza by the hand. She's docile, sweet. If ever I have a daughter, I'll call her Luiza.

Janko was on the ground in the corner, sitting in his own vomit. I came over and tried to pull him up. He looked at me, ashen, and closed his eyes again. Janko is a grown man. He can do what he likes. Lie in his vomit.

"He does this lots," said Luiza and lit a cigarette.

"Help me take him home?"

"Are you nuts? He weighs a ton, just look at him. Who'll lift him up? The fucker!"

"Just to the curb, I'll call a cab."

"Well, OK. I don't know who'll be taking him home tomorrow when he gets sloshed again."

pp. 51-59

XII.

I can do anything. On the stairs to my building I run into Ana, a neighbor who recently had a baby, she's married and has a good job. She always says hi with her hands full, the child squirming free of her fingers, overflowing grocery bags hanging from the stroller, her husband works long hours and comes home late, she doesn't get much sleep, but this will pass, it's a phase, a child is a blessing. Ana cannot do anything, she has to do exactly this. I have it better than Ana. I am Irena. I refused to be Ana and I've changed so much that people I used to know don't say hi to me on the street any more. Almost nobody recognizes me. Now that I'm already dark-haired, skinny and dark-complexioned, because of my work for a foreign company I've become shorter than I was. I'm shrinking, free like this and on my own. I've still got money left. I can go anywhere I like. I don't know where I'd like to go. Sometimes I think of Raskrižje, I miss my grandad. Grandad is the security I reach back to, my grandad who's now gone. I haven't seen my grandmother for six months, though she sounds OK over the phone, and Dad says she doing well. I'm scared that if I go see her she won't recognize me and I'll have to tell her who I am. From a distance all she sees is what's on the outside, so she does the same thing Dad does. When someone asks after me, she says: "Things are tricky with her, if you know what I mean, but she's alive and well." For months people have been finding it hard to talk about me, everything around me is about negation, everything I don't have, but could have had. Every decision I've made over the last six months or more I pulled from the deepest part of myself, from a cellar into which nobody normal ever ventures. My freedom, to which I've condemned myself, which I haven't regretted for a single moment, is tricky to explain. I don't have to do anything, not even the things I'd like to do. I am Irena, my friends call me Ireeeene, I looked different before, I was always

the same and on the same path, but I dared to step off the mapped route, to change. And? What's wrong?

I didn't usher in the new year, it elbowed its way in like a nagging Jehovah's witness or a pushy insurance salesman, it knocked until I opened the door, and then in it came, snarling at me and nervously pacing around the rooms. It forced me to peer into the bedroom, rummage through the sheets and pillow cases, I refolded my clothes, discarded what I'm not wearing. In the kitchen, surrounded by moths, it puffed into little heaps of flour and spices and laughed at the cookbooks I never open. The moths on the wall are heartshaped, when I press them with a finger all that's left is brown dust. The new year turned to dust everything that was past, moldering, yellowed. It flung open drawers, jettisoned old paper, bills and reminders, hiccuped as if someone were remembering it. The new year abruptly, brusquely, sat me down at my desk and switched on the light. What now? *Admit* what's missing. Admit what's missing. Admit what's missing.

Truth to tell, all the changes were wearing me down. The peace of mind I'd created was rooted in a constant race with the new and the unknown. Peace of mind, actually, was what I was supposed to avoid. Impermissible thoughts such as "this isn't me" stabbed me from behind when I wasn't looking, and I began to suspect that my decisions had been rooted in spite instead of in a true desire to be somebody else, to do something different, to take an interest in things I'd never been interested in before. A different woman was looking at me from the mirror and I began to feel afraid: I had no clue what to do next. I thought about traveling off to a faraway land. Taking all my things and going somewhere where there'd be new people to greet me, new friends and lovers, new families. There'd be nobody to greet me. The new year, which thumped its chest at the possibility of the new, all the things I wanted to delight in, puked all over me.

After two weeks I woke to the fact that I'm living on my sofa. In a madcap, unplanned moment, the fifteenth day of the month of January, I placed an ad on several web sites: room available for rent in a furnished apartment, greater city center, view of trees.

"Irene my dear, if you'd like to, you come to our place every day," said Aldenita, setting a cup of home-brewed Turkish coffee in front of me. After Sunday dinner we were sitting in the sunlit living room. Aldenita had done it up with an old-fashioned feel, adding in the odd crystal vase and crocheted doily behind the sliding glass doors of the sideboard. The books on the shelves were mainly encyclopedias and travel books which she gobbled with a voracious appetite. Aldenita had never been interested in actually traveling to the places she read about. When I once asked her if she'd like to see New Guinea, a country she was so fascinated by that she was always talking about their unusual customs and the food people ate

there, she stared at me in amazement. “Dear God, whatever would I do there?” she giggled. These places for her were every bit as real as Oz or the Shire, and she was blissful just imagining them. Life was something else.

Father sat in his big yellow armchair and leafed through the newspaper. He looked like a chick in an egg shell, I thought, and gulped back my malice. Although he was quiet and happy, Father had brought nothing of who he was into that apartment. Never once did he defy the knickknacks. Dad nestled into the nest of comfy Ms. Šnajder and let complacency grow his belly and his beard. He never brooked the thought that he’d been, yet again, browbeaten, that he’d never really changed. His escape was futile, I thought. Yes, Mother may have been harsh and nasty, overbearing and selfish, and he toed the line for years the way she wanted him to. Yes, Aldenita Šnajder was hardworking and caring, her manipulations were unconscious and justified by the vision of a beautiful, unselfish life she believed in with her whole heart, and in which her adored husband lived precisely the way she wanted him to. Again I had idea how Dad would have lived if he hadn’t had a wife.

“Come over here...” he said softly and looked at me over the edge of the newspaper, over the rims of his reading glasses.

“No way, not me,” I answered. I thought he was going to offer me something, spoonfeed me, fill my clothes with squishy flesh to spill over the waistband of my pants while I sat there. So I’d have food, at least, I’d have a father and a step-mother, I’d have somebody watching over me.

“You’ll never be a bother to us, we’d be glad to see you if you came...” Aldenita wouldn’t let up.

“I don’t want to come here every day, thanks anyway.”

“You don’t like it here with us?” Dad folded the paper in his lap. His gesture anchored even more in the conversation, something was cooking, though we’d already dined, and the hour I’d spent at their place after getting up from the table was supposed to pass in a languid chat about what was on TV.

“You know, Filip told us you’re looking for a tenant, so we thought maybe you’re feeling starved for company.” Brilliant. Thanks, bro.

“Did it occur to you that I might be needing a little cahs?” I said and loudly slurped my coffee. They stopped. It’s not nice to speak of money. Aldenita is always glad to lend anyone a hand, welcome them to her home, do the ironing, cooking, visiting, arrive with oranges, but money is money. Money is for security and the dark days lying ahead. Hers, theirs.

“Dad, I’m fine, but I have my own life and I don’t need to spend each and every day with you,” I said, emphasizing each word, with a smile.

“But of cooourse you have your life,” jumped in Aldenita and took me by the

arm. Her round brown eyes drilled into me without a blink. Impossible that she was mocking me. Impossible that she'd emphasized life. I sipped a little more coffee. *Everything will be fine.*

"Well for God's sake, Irena," Father's thin lips moved under his graying whiskers, "presumably you'll start working somewhere and earn a salary." He was on edge. "Fine, so this didn't work, let's keep moving, I don't like this thing with a tenant. Who knows who this person will be who'd be moving in with you."

"Dad. The person who moves into my place will be the person I choose. I'll do that if and when I decide to." I crossed my arms. The coffee was growing cold in the pink porcelain. Dad rolled his eyes. My freedom was really getting on his nerves. Actually, he wasn't so very different from Mama. He'd paid me lip service for half a year, waiting for me to get over my crisis, grow out my hair, start wearing make-up, find another job I know I can do. My situation, indeterminate and wobbly, chafed him like one of those badly cut labels on the inside of the collar on a shirt and he already wanted to yank it out. I don't think he was actually worried, maybe Aldenita was making him worry.

"Your Dad is very worried, you know," said Aldenita. As if Dad weren't even there in the room, like so many other times, she was taking over his body and his thoughts. "What if it's a man who answers the ad, God forgive me..."

"Like the man who came to you?" I said and smiled. "And that turned out OK, didn't it?" I saw Aldenita momentarily melt like a sugar cube with tenderness and she poured Dad a little more fresh coffee into his already full cup. He glanced over at her gratefully and patted his sagging belly. I wanted to open the window, let a little fresh chill into the apartment.

"Irena, we only hope you're not lonely," said Dad with a mildness that wrapped around me like a warm blanket. I didn't even know I'd been cold.

"All this will pass," said good woman Aldenita Šnajder. She was repeating what Grandad had whispered to me so many times when I was growing up, when my knees were scraped, when I was hurting from love or bad friendships, when my mother punished me, when my father forgot me. It'll pass.

Students and retirees were mainly the people who responded to my ad. I made up reasons; I couldn't bear interviewing them. And then one day a man called (from the start there were certain contradictions: his voice was velvety, but syllables angular), who said he was from Germany and needed a room only until April or May. That sounded like an ideal condition for me, in my desire for plans that would no longer be long-term. I invited him over for an interview and a tour of the apartment one afternoon. January was counting its last days, and around us everything was in cold repose. The fidget of unrest at the thought of a foreigner coming lit a few sparks and cracked the ice in which I'd encased myself.

He arrived on time, he wasn't even a single minute late. He was ugly and I felt relief. Early 50s, a half a head taller than I, he had a belly which he hid with several tee shirts pulled on at the last minute, as if by chance, thinning hair that would be completely gray in an other few years. When he came in it didn't occur to him to inquire whether he should take off his shoes, even though outside the rain was sleeting with the first snow of the winter. We shook hands. Thomas Krupp. Irena. Two smiles, one a nervous clench. He followed right after me into the room. He liked it, he said softly as he eyed the clean pillow cases and polished parquet floor. On the desk, which I'd bought a few days before, he leaned with both palms, as if checking to see if it was steady, and he bent down to look through out the window. Trees, as promised.

"*Lipe*," he said. He whispered, "Lindens,"

"Excellent, this is excellent," he pivoted. He enunciated the final syllable in words with difficulty, his tongue tripping. He looked at me as if I were a child whose efforts ought to be praised for unexpectedly satisfactory work. His eyes were small, gray, his gaze was stern and long. I smiled, I felt uncomfortable.

"The cupboard is really spacious and you have a bureau too which can hold things," I said. I listened to my own voice. It had been a long time since someone had said words here out loud. I was trying to chat in a relaxed way with a foreigner who had come here at my invitation, using the skill of a former sales rep. The man nodded absentmindedly.

I had the feeling that he wasn't listening to me at all, that his decision was entirely independent of anything I could say.

"There, that's the room. We'll share the bathroom." I opened the door, inside the white tiles and fittings glistened. He coughed. We stood at the door, neither of us could imagine stepping into the intimate premises in front of the other.

"That's fine. I won't be at the apartment so much. All I need is quiet. In the evening," he added.

"I am quiet," I said.

The stranger from a strange land, some fifteen years older than I, sat at my table, with his feet on my parquet floor, in his shoes with the dirty soles. I offered him coffee or tea. He'd like a glass of red wine, if I had any. I poured the alcohol into a glass. Once long before, in another life, I'd served brandy to an unknown man in my grandad's house. One of these days, in another life, I'd cry myself free of that brandy.

"Ah so, I am Thomas Krupp, I come to Croatia as a journalist." The words rattled around in his oral cavity, tripping over the consonants, stretching the wrong length for the syllables.

"Ah, I see. You're here on assignment?"

“Yes. About a half year I last,” he said, unaware of how welcome his bumbles in language were for me. That is an perfect amount of lasting, Mr. Krupp. Perfect.

“Yes, yes,” I smiled.

“I work for Deutsche Auge. Have you heard of Deutsche Auge?”

“I have not, actually, I don’t follow the foreign media very much. You know, we here provide quite enough frustration for ourselves,” I smiled. He stared at me, utterly serious, he didn’t move.

“What areas does the agency work on? Is it a news agency?”

He took a breath and, as if dragging his feet, began: “Deutsche Auge is a German media house which broadcasts its programs worldwide in thirty languages.” He accented the syllables in the wrong places and I had to pay close attention to follow what he was saying. “It used to be mostly about broadcasting to the countries behind the so-called iron curtain, but today it is mostly about topics of significance for the European Union.”

“Ah, now I see.” I was dying of boredom. I became more and more obviously nervy, I took another glass, poured myself wine. I can handle just about anything but imposed boredom, the kind of boredom I can’t argue my way out of so I have to put up with it, to clench my teeth and wait for it to pass. *You are spoiled, Irena.*

He went on speaking, I felt my time was running out, life was passing me by while I stared at someone else’s lips that wouldn’t stop moving, I even felt anger, but I waited because I’m polite. I am not so wacky, I hope, that I’d tell the man he’s boring. IF he asks whether he’s boring, of course I’ll say he isn’t. Or will I? My rebellion spread from my brain to my fingers that were spinning the wine glass, fiddling with a piece of paper on the table. Is it too late for me to say: thank you, I’ll be in touch? The renter is the one who gets to say “thank you, I’ll be in touch.” However he’d already said that he really likes it here. He wants a room in my apartment. He wants to share my bathroom. My stomach heats up terribly and I take a big gulp of the wine. It’s tart, it puckers my mouth, I pool the liquid on my tongue.

“And you, what do you do?” I hear him. Seconds walk out on to the stage, they bow to the audience and then coil the rope and begin to tighten it around my throat. I can barely swallow the mouthful. “I don’t do anything,” I say. What now? Lookee how my nothing and your European Union eye each other, Mr. Krupp! So handily, significantly, with their big, cute eyes. Shall I tell you a joke? A Croatian woman and a German man sit at a table, and he asks her —do you have a job? It’s not that I’m not working, sir, I am working at kneading this boredom, awkwardness and nervousness into cynicism. Like most of the intellectuals here, every day in my little room I knead my thoughts into sharp, empty sentences, there. Indeed, I’m quite a master of the trade!

“I’ve taken a break from earning a living,” I add.

“Sounds interesting. But I asked what you do, not whether you have a job at the moment.”

He was still solemn, his accent still fled from him and he struggled with the syllables, but I understood him just fine. He was looking at me from above, but that no longer bothered me. I could see. This man across from me understood something. He was not chatting with me.

“By training I’m a chemist. But I want to change, I believe I can. So, there you have it, I’m working on myself.” For the first time I’d set out what my dad was calling my little identity crisis into sentences and served them up to a German reporter. He is a good reporter. He knows how to pose questions, get the right answer. There is no babble at my table today.

“Sounds good,” he said again and for the first time he smiled. His whole face lost its stiffness, relaxed, became different, and there was something familiar in his eyes. I looked down, smiled at the surface of the table. I’m small, I know. Thomas came that day make the acquaintance of his future landlady, and before him saw a little girl in her early thirties. And from his questions, gaze, and that sole smile which softened the entire apartment, I could clearly see the truth. I was horrified by my loneliness. If I understand, again I needed somebody else.

pp. 125-135

XVI.

I sidled into one of the back rows. I was alert and spry, I touched nobody as I slipped in and the people perched on the wooden pews went on sitting, motionless. I was quiet, they may not have heard me coming. I can say that I couldn't hear my own footsteps. As I was sitting at the end of the pew, I looked down at my feet and took a step back: something gooey and pink was stuck to the sole of my shoe. I planted my feet firmly on the floor—at church it's especially important to remain grounded, to ignore the illusions. I sat at the end of the next to last row, around me there was room, it was empty, despite the multitude of the faithful who had come to mass and had lined themselves up. We were lowly, no more than silt at the foot of something lavishly ornate and vast, the ceiling was high above us and the pillars were massive, sturdy feet giving rise to towers, belfries and golden crosses. The melody of the organ poked into my back, it had too many fingers, it unfurled like a bedsheet and undulated over all the heads. The priest shuffled toward the altar, hands clasped and robes fluttering, and behind him a boy swung a censer. The gray smoke swirled before the face of the ministrant, everything was in a wave and fragrant harmony. The incense insinuated into my nostrils and lungs like a gentle, benevolent thief creeping in while whispering: relax, dearie, I'll replace no more than a thought or two of yours, nothing you can't do without. I felt a quiver in my gut, something in my throat hummed pleasantly, relaxed my limbs and sent me to a quiet corner. I could have dropped off to sleep for a moment, so pleasant was the hum beneath my lungs, when an odd idea jolted me. In the name of the father and son and holy spirit, I'm purring! So, you sneaked into the church after all, Alf, you sly old fag, you! My too-soft tread, my cautious maneuver, and this pleasant rumbling in my throat and lungs—the big cat must have sneaked into my thoughts, my body, and now he's sitting in the next to last row of the cathedral and watching the priest gesticulate with

abandon before the masses. Through me the cat is defiantly sticking out its tongue at human prohibitions: God didn't stand before me on the threshold of this church, the heavens didn't join in damning my animal soul, these two-legged creatures who work all day to live are in no way better than I, a cat, with my long tail and green eyes flashing through the night, through the darkness in which people slither, drunken and slobbering, eternal sinners, penitents, and beggars. I am a cat, better yet—a tom cat, my meow in February is more raucous than your prayer and the females of our kind caterwaul in pain and lust. Your sin, your sin, your sin, your outsized sin is not rooted in you by birth or species; you cultivated it in the arrogant furrows of superiority, you allowed your own life to overwhelm you, and you are spending your best years on your knees, you pretend you're the faithful, you act as if you're atheists, materialists, exorcists. Meow, oh how important you are, you are the only one of the species to live eternally! Come on, admit it, you are completely woven of fear. I know what you are: you're the greasy sludge on the bottom of the Catholic pressure cooker! As soon as you enter, you mumble words from an ancient recipe, you never try anything new, you don't dare lift the lid, you heat and boil, and then you swim out onto the surface, superficially cleaner and lighter, rinsed of your natural drives, animal vitamins, joy. You are without freedom, and I am an animal which you leash, you feed daily, who sleeps on your bed and is warmed by electric power it will never pay for. I am a tom cat, I am Satan, I am God. I am whatever I care to be. I slunk into these pews because I'm faster and quieter, but I, as is perfectly clear—admit to being an animal and that I have no sin, this sounds so appealing and cheery, I am only an animal and it doesn't occur to me to pay anybody's debts, eastern or western.

The mass proceeds, the priest spreads open his arms, then he folds them over his chest, he turns the pages of a heavy book, he reads and repeats. People rise and they sit, they kneel, then they cross themselves, and chant words like a counting rhyme. A woman gets up to read, she stands before us like God's prophet and reads the fourth passage from the Book of Revelations, she lights seven blazing torches, lets loose creatures with the face of a lion, an eagle, a bull, a creature with the face of a man. I'm enjoying this, I hadn't expected anything of the sort. I strip away layers of metaphors from the text, dissolve images, peel it like a pomegranate, and from it drop the sweet, nutritious seeds that stick to the teeth if one tries to chew them completely, grind them into pure nothingness. Dust. Dust you were and to dust you shall return, from your Genesis to our Revelations: this is a truth to which I'll happily bow, both alpha and omega. The book skates along on its theme without a hitch, it doesn't squim and it doesn't stick, it is all beauty and horror. The lake of people before me is silent. From each of their movements a cloaked fear screams poignantly, they are afraid of the creature

with the face of a man, whose body is covered inside and out with eyes, they fear the mouths that never stop saying: holy, holy, holy. The text is pure poetry, its power transports me. Word, word, word. The woman reads with dignity and ease, from a podium to the right of the altar and behind her the priest dozes off for a second time. When she ends, everyone is quiet for a moment, and then the reader orders them to repeat the words from the refrain. Holy, holy, holy, God's creatures repeat. The woman standing next to me had already grown two eyes on her shoulders, I see the pupils as they lick at my hair, my demonically swarthy complexion shivering under the tongue of sweet Luiza, my neck nibbled so many times by my spurned fiancé. In front of me, the eye on the back of an older man unglues its lid and peruses me with a questioning, knowing gaze. His body is full of juices and his member swells while he stares at my mouth. He didn't want that. It wasn't deliberate. In his shorts, as always, the same snake. The eye stares at me with loathing, my vagina is to blame for his evil thoughts. My uterus contracts in disgust, I think of Thomas who is standing by the door in a military posture, waiting to protect me. The wife of the man, a woman with neatly blow-dried hair and an orange mouth, breaks her eyes out slowly, neatly. The eyes peak out from everywhere on her, but her first eye appears on her lips. Whatever the lady sees, the eye immediately declares, I see her eye has a tongue and voice box but no brain, no impulse. I cannot contain my amazement: throughout the cathedral eyeballs have sprouted on the bodies of the people, just as they did on the creatures in Revelations, and they all repeat the words, they bow and sway, their voices unfurl like the incense in the hands of the boy. Holy, holy, holy. The faces are still human, there are no eagles or lions, man will suffice. This part of the Gospels remains the same, literal, and is transmitted to the masses as if someone had traced it out over carbon paper. Me and my species study each other, creature-like, we open our mouths and emit sounds. Holy, holy, holy. The eyes procrastinate while the body bows, the eyes strain over details, supervise, and speak. After several minutes of the masses it all gets too much for me, I think I'll soon be sucked up in a serious panic and I withdraw from the group madness, I turn my eyes to the walls. The statues don't move, the paintings of saints uplift their wounds and illuminate the sacrifices. They all suffer. Hearts, hands, and feet bleed. The cat inside me moves away and licks the one scar in its heart. Alf, you were in love, I know. And you became a believer, for God is love, I'm sure of that. Love is the only inevitable religion, Alf, you dear beast. Believe! The only true religion, inexplicable yet tangible, there is no escape or succor from its sufferings and fevers. We will genuflect to it together, you and I, tom cat and woman. Love, and nothing else. World, world, world.

The priest read the parable about the cruel lord, a debt owed, and bad servants.

I didn't understand it all, I found it difficult and confusing, and thought it worthwhile to investigate whether it was understandable to the flock. I was here, after all, on assignment.

"Forgive me," I whispered to the woman next to me. Her eyes were tired and drowsy, she looked as if she weren't really there. "Forgive me for the intrusion, but I'm interested in whether you understood the story?"

"Excuse me?" she leaned her ear toward my lips. The priest allowed us to take our seats.

"This parable the priest read. I didn't understand it," I said and smiled. She looked at me for a second or two very solemnly and calmly, her lips pressed tight. I thought the woman would surely know how to explain it well, if she didn't insult me first.

"Madam," she began in a soft voice. "Listen to the sermon, and maybe you'll find it makes more sense after that."

I apologized. I need to listen to the sermon, that's right, first the priest, and then the followers of the faith. If I still don't understand it I'll ask her again. Thomas was expecting statements and I wouldn't leave until I'd obtained them. I sharpened my ears.

I understood the sermon fine. The man who spoke was in his late forties, sleepy, with a potbelly, balding, a wobbling cleanshaven chin and bushy eyebrows, dressed in a long white tunic with a red scarf draped down his chest. A servant of God, a believer with university degree. He didn't speak about the parable he'd just read, that was clear right away, as far as I'd understood that bare text from the Gospel according to Luke. As if ladling, he scooped from it motifs and concocted a simple dish for his audience. He served up a full bowl of it to our faces, just as the stern and cruel lord had done with the money, and then he said: who doesn't eat what has been served to him is welcome to leave the Kingdom of God. If our master gave us a sexual organ created for the purpose of making babies, then we had to make babies, he said. If we have the option of bearing life, it is incumbent upon us to bear it, he pressed. The conditions are sometimes challenging, but our duty is to suffer with them, just as he suffered, he cried. I listened and I suffered a growing fury. I have suffered pain, sorrow, nerves, my changes and traumas, a lack of money, friends, love, a lack of mother, a lack of my beloved grandad. I did not suffer the lack of a child in my own womb and I felt compelled to say so. I raised my hand without a second thought, it was already high in the air when I wondered whether anybody had ever done such a thing and what would happen next. Nothing ever actually happens, I reassured myself. The priest didn't even look my way at first, but I kept waving and several times I called out: "Excuse me, may I ask something?" The woman who was next to me poked me

with her elbow, she whispered to say this was not done, she flapped her lips in my direction, and all the heads began to turn and people whispered. The priest had to stop, he looked over at me, his cheeks flushing a mild red, with his scarf in the shape of the mathematical symbol for an unknown. He was crossed out across his midriff, appearing voluntarily invalidated.

“Madam, this is the sermon. What do you want?” he lit into me. I rose to my feet.

“I apologize for interrupting the sermon. I wanted to say that I do not wish to bear children,” I explained. It was important for me to say this, to confess aloud and before everyone, so I could be heard.

“How can I respond,” he said with a nervous inflection and drew his bushy eyebrows together in a thick line over his eyes. I remembered Frida Kahlo, her suffering and her paintings, much better than the ones on the walls of the cathedral. That thought soothed me. Still, the priest was baffled and angry, people were staring at me on all sides and I felt the skin exposed by my low-cut neckline burn, and my cheeks caught by a traitorous blush. The priest, too, was crimson, we had that in common. Still, he looked at me coldly and I felt he was no brother or a sister of mine. I had to explain myself quickly. Nobody had made me speak.

“I apologize once more for interrupting you in the middle of what you do. I didn’t like what you said, it sounded as if you were saying that God would expel me if I didn’t use the uterus he made inside me,” I explained. I was standing while everyone else sat, I may have sounded strong and bold, but I was already cursing my changes and resolve. This was no rebellion for these people, it was stupidity and lunacy.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I thought,” he grew suddenly firm and steady. “Selfishness is the greatest sin of our time. People are egocentric, they are not tolerant and they are not thinking of their progeny, their homeland. People used to make sacrifices for their homeland, now they are not even forming families!” he cried. Several heads around me nodded, someone even gave voice to their approval. The priest smoothed his robes, he was pleased. He knew the people in his congregation, he sensed their sympathy and their support. I was the exception, the weed. The lost sheep who did not want to return to the flock, destined to roam. And so bade God.

“So does this mean that before God I have no freedom of choice?” I asked once more. I had to hear him out, now that I’d initiated the game, when so many people had become convinced I was crazy, rude. That I did not love God or my homeland. That I don’t sacrifice myself.

“Please come to see me at my office if you wish to pursue this. Or, better yet,

come to confession,” he said, turned over a sheet of paper on the pulpit in front of him and continued his sermon. He spoke of the tasks that are given to us and our obligation to fulfil them, but I could no longer listen.

Several more heads in the pews swiveled in my direction, and Alf raised his head, his fur stood on end down his spine and he laid back his ears, prepared to offer a menacing huff, a snarl, when I swallowed him back into the shadow. I was no longer in the mood for confrontation, I felt their loathing and resistance. There is no point in fighting in this place. When the last heads had turned away, the only eyes left looking in my direction were those thousand eyes from the biblical bodies in the Book of Revelations, tiny and all-present pupils that are eternally cold and do not take sides, they see all and know all. It seemed to me that those gazes were much gentler and warmer, and if I hadn’t imagined them, the universe was certainly showing mercy this way for my wayward behavior. Somewhat later, when the priest asked all to extend a hand of peace, two hands were there, waiting, in front of my body. A woman from the middle of my pew extended me a hand, she was already old, and a drab young woman standing a little in front of me, embarrassed that she’d done so and waffling. I was touched that they’d accepted me, touched almost to tears. *Pull yourself together, Irena.* Had I wept, that would probably have been because of all the accumulated rage, shame and loneliness. It wouldn’t have been because of their understanding, I didn’t trust it.

“You are very brave, you remind me of myself when I was young,” said the older woman when the mass ended and people began wriggling free of the pews like fish from a ripped net. Again she proffered me her hand, wrinkled and flecked with spots, and her smile creased her face all the way to her eyes.

“I wasn’t looking to be brave, I needed an explanation,” I answered her.

“So why did you come to church, if that wasn’t clear to you?” the old woman kept smiling in her roomy, brown fur coat. I remembered Thomas and his request, so I decided at the last moment to have another go at completing my assignment, at learning something and not leaving here pointlessly mortified, different.

“I was interested in what the sermons were like and whether people understand what the *Bible* recommends,” I whispered into the lady’s ear. I am tired. Although she is old, she is taller and more robust than I.

“People understand what they want to understand, and the sermons are good if the priest is good, my dear. I heard between the lines that the woman thought I’m ill, that I’m surely deranged in some way. This was not, actually, a lie, my order had long been disorder and I’d deliberately insisted on that. The lady responded to my question out of compassion. She didn’t feel close to me nor to my

question. She was different, more like the people who were blundering out the grand doors of the city cathedral, but she wanted to offer me a hand, forgive in the name of someone else, in whom she believed. She was a good woman.

“You are very good, thank you,” I said and hugged her. She was surprised but she rested a hand on my back. God is love, meowed Alf, with irony, in my ear, wagged his behind and quietly slipped out into the air.

When I came hurtling out of the church, I saw Thomas opening the door to a café across the street. I ran over to him.

“It was that bad?” he asked.

“Lordie, we made a real mess of that one, Thomas,” I grinned and stroked Alf’s back. He lifted his whiskers in my direction and I could swear that he gave me a knowing smile. Dear, sage little beast.

Before we left to go home, I looked back at the door of the cathedral. Maybe I’d espy him leaving last, wrapped in a thick scarf, wearing a cap, his thinning hair scraggling out from under it. But there was nobody around. Jesus hadn’t set foot in the mass. He didn’t even sneak in, secretly, like me; ever since that day I’ve always walked a little more gingerly, as if soft cats’ slippers are still on my feet. I could take anyone by surprise from behind, I knew how to vanish silently, slip out of a room, evade greetings and questions. I had the sense I was even partway, no less, to another species.

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