

Robert Perišić

The big cheese; Lover; Bailiffs; The Party Was On Its Was Up

Translated from Croatian by Vesna Marić

THE BIG CHEESE

The town changed in the dark.

Fuuuu. Martina crouched.

Boom!!!

Somewhere behind.

She has heard about it: if you hear *bijou*, you should throw yourself on the ground. No thinking!

Because it flies at your direction; it could fall on your head or a kilometre behind. It is better not to wait for the result on your feet like you are playing darts. Vice versa. Look around, look at this plain - everything is a darts target that you are walking across carrying your bag like ant's cargo. Put it in that stupid head of yours.

- And me, crouching like a hen.

She takes her bag and walks like in a fasten movie.

Anyway, like she's winning. In some way. Like she has spared something. One throwing. See, it wasn't close - she would have thrown herself without reason. Let's say, you throw yourself and it hit far away. The same as when you buy a ticket in tram thinking: there will be a control for sure. And there is not. Of course you are sorry that there isn't one. It will come another time when you have no ticket. So, when you throw yourself... like you are calling the real danger. So, she stole rides. And she didn't do it cool, standing... but half a way.

She has been new in war.

It is stupid to lye on the road now. The single point in the dark. Elegant girl, in new CK clothes... is jumping along the road?

She was always trying to come home in the best shape. Because of hers. Because of everybody.

Calvin Klein is great, Europe and America are unanimous.

There is nobody who could have seen that. She should have lied on the road!

She thinks fast and she walks fast. She is already in her street. Like she is safe now. Neither one bomb has fallen in the street of Stanko Vraz. The greatest panic was when the neighbour's house was mined so their glasses broke.

- And it won't fall!

She is approaching.

- It won't!

She is ringing at the door. She is looking from beneath in a complete darkness. The yellowish walls are memories.

- Hello!

- Hi?!

A break.

- Hi! Why haven't you called?!

- I know you would have told me not to come.

Martina's mother is always so reasonable.

- Why have you come?

- 'cause I'm crazy.

Martina's mother is reasonable and Martina is always so crazy.

They are coming upstairs. They have those turning, spiral stairs in the house. Like in a cafe bar.

Father is upstairs watching television. They are staring at TV so cool? They are proving themselves in front of bombs? What dose of pills are they on? What are they waiting for? News?

Father. Always that invisible shamefacedness and suppressed tenderness on both sides. Daughter. Like they are embracing.

Martina is sitting at the table. Mother is looking at the father.

- I thought you were on Cres.

- Well, all right, I'll explain it you later... - she says showing that she is tired from the journey.

Stress and 21 lies about the skin.

- Haven't you gone to Cres with Tomislav a week ago?

Martina is searching something through her bag.

- OK, leave her to have some rest now - says father like he is quitting something. It was armistice.

- I've brought you something.

With both hands she is taking the cheese out of her bag like she is taking out the joy. It is huge, rounded.

Martina hasn't been used to bring food from Zagreb.

- Shall we cut it - she is asking enthusiastically.

- Well, it is the alarm - mother is saying.

What's that got to do with it?

- Come on, just taste it a bit.

Mother is giving a glance to the father.

- We will tomorrow! Isn't that the same thing?

Martina smiles like somebody whose present has been refused.

Boom!!! Tremble. Close.

- Uau!

- Let's go down.

They are tripping downstairs. Down there are two old sofas.

Let Martina and here mother sit there.

He will sit in his room.

He is sitting in the room alone.

He is scared, he is terribly scared... He mustn't show it in front of his daughter.

She knows that. There are no more romantic heroes.

Defence and self-protection.

Under the stairs two sofas stand side by side like seats in the car. Two of them are looking at the wall like in a car glass.

Silence. The light of battery.

- Can I go to get some juice?

- You can't.

- Why can't I? - She is smiling pitifully. She is twenty five... She can't go to get some juice.

- Because! 'cause you are not normal!

They are silent. They are looking at the wall like they are looking at car glass. Like they are driving to somewhere. Twenty five ways how to stop smoking.

- All right, tell me where is Tomislav.

- On Cres.

- Come on, tell me what happened. - Her voice becomes silent.

- I think it is about cheese.

- About cheese? - She is turning towards her, lightening her face. - What is that with you?

- I bought that cheese ten days ago. We should have brought something to eat. - She is frowning towards the wall. She is fastening the drive.

- And? - A question from opposite direction.

- And, when we came there I asked every morning: "Could we cut the cheese?" But, they had already something in plan, not this big cheese. I shouldn't have bought so big cheese for summer holidays, should I? I'm not some of a lady, really, I'm watching on every detail and I oversee all that big cheese! The same as you! Have you seen it? All the others were carrying little things, or nothing. Mm... - she is slowing down - no matter. He was forcing some hanging, and me, those boys and girls were getting on my nerves, screwy persons, told him I was going.

- He wasn't stopping you? - mother is asking, remembering.

The same as I am?

- He said: "You are not getting on my way" then I caught a boat for Krk that day - she continues like she is counting something. - Jelena sells pictures there. All the time at the boat I was thinking what to do with that cheese. I am thinking about that cheese all the time! - She hears her voice in silence.

- I am looking down the water from the boat thinking: "I will throw it away!" Then, I walk on the road on that sun of theirs, I bring the cheese in rucksack behind and I think how it is after me, that cheese is after me! I leave it. I think on the sun. I go around. And then I get off... But I turn around after some 50 meters and watch. Some strange feeling: my cheese is lying at the rim of the road. Then I came back and carried it further.

Mother opened her mouth to ask something, but she fast went on.

- I slept over at Jelena's and tomorrow went to Zagreb. I watched television for two days. When I was getting off here, at the station, I remembered the cheese, and went back to get it: it is a war here anywhere so we will eat and that cheese of mine.

The far-away firing.

- Mum, can I go upstairs to drink some juice, I am thirsty from the journey. Seriously.

- Don't.

- You see, there is nothing.

- Go on than, but fast.

She is going up with battery, mother is following a light with her eyes. And she fixes her eyes upon shelves, up, above the place she is sitting. She looks, although she doesn't see anything any more.

She stares: above is a house bar, shelves full with bottles.

Bottles!

She is sitting here from the beginning, and she hasn't remembered at all. Jesus?! All that bottles will fall on her head. All that glass!

So, this is the most dangerous spot in the house!!!

She is shouting to Martina to come back.

Glass.

- Come back downstairs!!! - she is screaming from beneath. But she is not moving from the spot.
Detonations. She is paralysed.

Upstairs, Martina has choked drinking the juice. A picture comes in her mind.

But it is *not* funny!

It was on television. Her town, this town. The girl was speaking how she was sitting with her mother and her father in front of the house.

Maybe, for that, I have come here?

The girl said that they were always sitting in front of the house like that. Then she went to get some juice. She was drinking juice in the house. Just like I am drinking the juice.

When she stepped out nobody was there.

Everything was exploded around the garden and fruit trees.

- Come back down!!!

Trembling. Strange smile.

Booom!!!

Mother's shouting disappears in deafeningly kick. I am the little girl. The remnants of the glass at the floor. She is moving towards the stairs. Now it is peaceful. Silence.

One stair after another. The spiral. When somebody says dizzy, he always thinks of this; stairs. She is going downstairs. She is looking at her mother.

She is in one piece.

She is beginning to laugh. This one is staring paralysed.

- What's funny?

She tells the thing about juice. How she thought they were finished.

Mother peer at her savagely.

- Look, where I am sitting! - she points up at the bottles.

- I am sitting here from the beginning, and nothing!!! - She screams with laughing. They are both screaming. Laughing. It echoes. Under the glass. They cannot stop. The ground is trembling.

Father is coming out of the room.

Bottles are clanking.

They can hardly catch a breathe. "This one is alive, too" mother with funny and teary eyes is pointing upon him. Martina is nodding, she is having a bellyache, she cannot breathe.

Father is staring at them, he is looking at the walls.

LOVER

I met Rozana in town. She's telling me that she works on a kind of a help line, she is volunteering. It's about people in trouble and similar stuff.

I didn't really get it. But I didn't ask for her reasons. I always fear there's unhappiness behind volunteering. Anyway, I won't find out.

The help line, what's that really? - I ask her while we're having a coffee. We always have a coffee when we meet.

It's good stuff - she laughs.

Which kind of people are they? - I ask.

You mean the one who phone or...?

Well, all together, I say. I didn't really know what's all about.

That's, like, psychological help for children and youngsters - she says - but oldsters are phoning as well. We don't reject anyone.

Huh, my face turned into pure wonder and admiration.

She doesn't like silence. She starts talking: - Chats are anonymous and you can hear everything. Just listen to this story! This woman called again this morning. She has been phoning at least once a week over last few months. Listen to this, please, the woman phones from Sibenik, she's married, has two children and a lover.

I like meeting Rozana in town. She has always something interesting to say!

- And the woman phones the teens help line?

- Yes. She has maybe seen out number in "Mila". She must be in her forties!

- And what's her problem?

- She spoke to a colleague of mine, but you know you overhear everything. Anyway, she's been phoning for ages. My colleague already told us about her. The woman, you know, has a lover, and there are always some complications about it. You know, she feels guilty, she is married... What should she do? How should she behave? That kind of things.

But, this colleague of mine wasn't really convinced. I think, about her unsettled story. Nothing particular.

Pure confusion! This colleague of mine didn't understand anything.

That's why she asked her: this lover of yours, you know, which kind of relationship are you really in?

What do you mean? She asked.

I mean did you have sexual intercourse?

Oh, no - she was almost offended by this question. I'm a married woman, she said.

- That's good! - I laughed. Rozana as well, and she continues.

She says she works in a shop with a bar. She works behind the bar. He works in the same building,

but in another company. And he is coming in the bar for coffees. She says: in the mornings the two of them are strangers, and in the afternoon friends.

- How could that be? - I've interrupted her speech. I'm having a beer now.

I don't know, maybe at work they have different chats. Business chats. But he comes in also in the afternoon. Then they're friends. You get that?

- No, but it doesn't matter.

It's not important...- Rozana says.

She says he buys her drinks. He talks to her.

- But, they didn't nothing more, than...?

It seems they didn't. And it's going on for months. We noticed that before she was always phone in the morning from work, just after he'd left. She was always very mysterious and all "oh!" style.

She is not unhappy. She is more distrustful. But, now she phones from home. She is off work. And she says how much she misses him. And it's even St Valentine's Day today.

- Yes - I smile. A little confused. Silly story, stupid thoughts are occurring to me.

All together, she doesn't have so nice chats with her husband, he never ask her out for a drink.

Nothing. But the lover...

- Does she really call him her lover?

- Yes... I think. This colleague of mine doesn't know what to do with her. And, I don't know why, I got involved in their chat today. I'm sick of her story! I don't know what happened to me, but I was actually trying to persuade her to sleep with her lover. Everyone was staring at me in wonder. You know, we should be putting things in order, not...

- I think you did the right thing. Why not?

- ...And I asked then if she never discussed serious things with him.

Oh, she says, many hard words were said...

- What does she mean with that? - I really want to know everything...

She says that he told her once: "there are so many nice places I could go, but, you know, I would prefer going into you!"

The woman was completely won over. He said it in such a nice way, she says.

But, I say to her, you should go a little further, in serious talks.

I would like to talk to him, she said suddenly, like she just remembered it.

Well, why don't you invite him for a coffee? After the work. Somewhere where you could talk?- I said to her.

Oh, but he's a man, he should invite me first, she says.

She's not going to do anything, she's a married women. And, of course, he's married too. She said that he once even complained about his wife. That time he had brought her a chocolate as well.

Anyway, she thinks that his wife is not good. And that he doesn't really love her. Who knows, maybe he got bored with her; maybe she's put a lot of weight, she was guessing on the phone. She likes scrawling all over the subject. She is always trying to guess something. She is not sure in anything. And she phones from Sibenik...

And, she is now off work. And, anyway, she says, he doesn't come so often anymore.

Actually, she's worried that he might leave her, she said it almost whispering.

Huh, I was really contemplating at this point.

She's worried that he might leave her, and I'm not even sure if the guy knows about her. I think,

maybe nothing's really going on, whispers Rozana bent over the table.

Yes, maybe, I say.

She stops speaking. She gives me a look.

As if I have to understand something.

And then I think, maybe Rozana fancies me. I think – like that. Sometimes things like these occur to me. Stupid things.

I never know if they are true. Only occasionally I'd checked them up.

But, not with her. I was always too shy to pull. Somehow we are good friends. We have nice talks.

And, if we've started something – we couldn't probably chat like this with a coffee in front of us.

I'm hopping in the rhythm of music. I'm also married. I sip down some beer and light a cigarette.

Maybe I should tell her something. Or grab her hand. It seems to me that she was waiting for it.

I put my hand on hers, out of the blue.

Stupidly. She pulls out hers, frightened.

- What's wrong with you?

- Sorry. It wasn't on purpose... - I say turning red.

She nervously takes a cigarette. It falls on the floor. She lifts it up. Then she noticed it's dirty.

- Huh – She says. She takes another one. I'm lightening it; she stares at my hand and shivers.

I'm contemplating what to say. To get myself out of this.

- And, what are your predictions? – Now I'm pretending that nothing has happened.

She glances at me.

- I haven't the foggiest – She says looking at something behind me, as if she's forgotten where I'm sitting.

- Ha! I don't think something'll happen.

I don't know what else to say. The silence settles in. My brain sometimes fails completely.

- But, the woman will probably phone again... - I drop out finally, but Rozana is leaving.

- Let me know what happens – I say quickly.

She stands and looks at me like she's going to slap me.

- Why? So you can talk around about it?

- No, I really didn't have such an intention...

She puts her coat on, takes her umbrella and goes to the door.

I have the impression that she's walking somehow too upright.

I yet turn around, just to see if someone's seen us.

BAILIFFS

Braco had long forgotten how he and Joško debated about which car they'd own when they grew up. Sanja had also forgotten, even though she had been the only witness of that conversation.

- I'll have a varburg! - said Braco. His father had a Wartburg.

Despite the fact that Joško's father had an ancient sky-blue Volkswagen, nicknamed Beatly, he said:

- When I grow up I'll drive a BMW!

Braco thought this impossible and said: - Who'll pay for that?!

Joško said: - If my dad has a Beatly, I'll have a BMW!

Braco found this very odd. He was convinced that Joško was only saying this for Sanja's sake, so that she would fall in love with him, and so that they could get married when they grew up. Sanja was Braco's cousin, but he was still jealous.

- How do you mean? - Sanja asked Joško. Joško said: - My granddad didn't own a car at all, and my dad has one. We always have more. So I'll definitely have a BMW, and even an airplane. Because I'll have more than my dad. The new kids always have bigger things.

This got Braco thinking, and for the first time he felt pleased to be little, because they were these 'new kids'.

- Then I'll have a Mercedes! - said Braco. His world had changed. In a moment.

- And I'll have a big baby doll with a pram, and a skyscraper! - Sanja said.

Then Joško suggested: - Let's get naked!

- Hm... OK! - Braco agreed.

Sanja ran away, she didn't want to. A pity. Perhaps because she was a year older.

But she must have spied on them. And it was probably her that called Braco's mum, who found them naked, them, the new kids, and spanked Braco so badly he forgot the entire episode.

Joško was spanked by his mum, and Sanja by hers, because she had been looking at the boys. And everyone forgot everything. Or so it was thought.

So, Braco doesn't remember this, and he also has no idea about the way kids today think. It's a difficult thing to know, how can anyone know it? He doesn't know what his little boy is looking at, what he sees. Sometimes he thinks the kid gets it, but says nothing, although he was supposed to start talking by now. He says a word here and there, as if he gets it. Sometimes he does get it, you can tell. But it's as if he's not there.

- So why doesn't he talk yet? - he asked his wife.

- Why are you asking me? - she said.

- How old is he now? - he kept forgetting.

- Almost three.

- Shit. - said Braco.

The boy glanced at him as if he understood.

These are different times, who knows what he might know? Maybe the boy understands that Joško didn't buy an airplane, or a BMW. Maybe he knows that Joško had been driving his old

man's Yugo - which he'd bought when the Beatly fell apart - until he was recruited into the army mid-war, and until he overdosed the first night he was let out on a visit home. This counted as if he'd died in the war, and so his unit paid for a large obituary dedicated to him to be printed in the local newspaper every year.

Braco had not been friends with Joško for a long time by then, perhaps because he had carried on thinking about cars. And Joško had turned into a rocker and had friends in town.

And Sanja - believe it or not: Braco had never forgiven her, even though he'd forgotten it all, for not seeing her naked and for the fact that she'd given them away that time. They behaved as if they hadn't grown up together, never mentioned a thing from their shared past. She married Stipe Leko, who is approaching right now, while Braco is lying under a car.

- What's wrong with it? - he asks.

- I don't know, it suddenly starts shuddering, as if it's running out of petrol... - said Braco.

- You should get rid of it! - Leko said.

- It's OK. Just need to get the electrics sorted.

Leko lit his cigarette suspiciously.

- Yeah, it's just the electrics. Nothing else. But there are no real fucking mechanics left.

- Yeah, no one wants to take the fucking time - said Leko, blowing out smoke. He smoked strong cigarettes and wore dark sunglasses. Sometimes he beat Sanja. She once stammered something about it, but Braco had just watched her numbly.

- No real mechanics left - says Braco. He liked those kinds of statements, passed on by the elders.

- No one wants to fucking bother! - said Leko. He literally translated statements like these.

- I went over to Burić. I watched how he works, he's screwing it on by hand, can you believe it?! I didn't want to say anything. I got in the car and wanted to see whether it would work. By the time I got home it had started spluttering. You get it, he's fixing the electrics with one hand and in the other he's holding a fag!

- No one has the energy to bother anymore - said Leko. He had an almost new black BMW.

- I told him later: this isn't how it's done, man! No one will come back, I told him. I won't come back! - Braco said.

- What'd he say? - Leko asked with scorn.

- Give me a smoke! - Braco said after wiping his hands on his trousers. He lit up.

- He? Nothing, as if I'd said nothing. You know what mechanics are like, you can't talk to them - he said to Leko.

- Yup - Leko responded.

- They're always looking elsewhere, then turn around and leave as if you're not there at all! For fuck's sake, I said to this Burić. For fuck's sake!

Leko squinted: - And he?

- Went to the till. Gave me a fiver and went to wash his hands.

- No one wants to fucking bother, I tell you.

- Yeah, I heard you already! - said Braco. He put the bonnet down.

- Let's go! - said Leko.

- Hang on, let me wash my hands! - he said and spread the grease removing paste on his hands.

Later, while they were driving towards Opuzen, after a long silence, Leko laughed and said:
- Hey, don't get cross, but I heard, I mean, I don't know if it's true, that the only thing your kid can say is Tudjman.

- What?!

- That he can't say mummy, or daddy, just Tudjman.

- Who told you that?

- Oh, I just heard.

- People talk a load of crap!

- Don't get cross! It doesn't matter!

They drove in the black BMW and listened to Severina. Braco looked around. His thoughts spun and shook this way and that, just like the Croatian highway. At some point he found himself wondering whom Severina was fucking. Severina was hot. Then he thought of his wife. His wife, realistically speaking - young, good looking; but somehow she has just evaporated to him. That's what it seemed like to him, as if she didn't exist anymore. As if she had ceased to exist in that important manner. He tried to recall what it had been like until she had evaporated. He remembered, yes, that she talked loudly and laughed, that her body felt real under his hand and that she had inspired a kind of will in him, a will to move, to really go somewhere without thinking. That might even be what he did. She still talks in a loud voice, and he tries not to get irritated. And every time he remembers that, that will, the only thing he can think of is that word - evaporated. They had reached a certain point, and he now felt alone and angry, like after Hajduk lost an important match, long ago. Even that's gone. Important matches. Just boredom and irritability.

Plus, he had no idea whom Severina was fucking.

- What do you think, would Severina evaporate if you were married to her? - he asked Leko.

- Eh? - Leko was startled.

- You know? Like, you see through her, you don't see her.

- Yeah, of course she would - said Leko.

Braco fixed on a random spot ahead, as if checking how far it was to Opuzen.

- Hm, I don't know... - he said.

- Don't talk shit! - said Leko.

They didn't talk for the rest of the drive. Leko changed the music. Put on an old crooner.

Leko was one of those people who drove sitting up firmly. He had a golden chain around his neck, with a cross upon which a small golden Jesus was dying, and on his forearm, the part where the skin was white and soft, was written 4th BRIGADE. Braco, who had really fixated on this word, though that there was a shadow of the old army emblem underneath, the Yugoslav army, which had been incorporated in the new tattoo, it had a different, paler, older look.

Leko looked over at Braco, but Braco had already averted his gaze.

They found the man. Leko had told him what was going on, who the guy was. The guy was an owner of something, a firm fifty.

No, no, not fifty firms, fifty years old, you get it?

He had small eyes and a big belly. They stood in the corridor of his flat, and the guy stood in front of them and blinked. He was a big guy, but he was crapping himself, looking at Leko's gun.

It had to begin. In that narrow, wood-panelled corridor with fuzzy lighting, Braco was thinking about how it had to begin, you had to reach out, hold on to something, while an indecisive clock ticks inside your head, like in those moments when you're sitting in a wood-panelled booth with fuzzy lighting, and opposite you is a girl that you're still unsure if she's up for it or not, so you have to finally reach out for fuck's sake, grab her by the forearm, the first time, you have to do it.

That ticking clock of indecision in your head, that's the present moment.

In the corridor. Braco took the fatso's arm and twisted it forcefully. The guy squealed.

Then Leko put his gun in his belt and slapped the fatso.

And again.

And so on, and so on, and they agreed they'd come back in five days.

Five days later, Leko again found Braco messing around the car. He didn't say hello. Braco spoke while spreading the grease removing paste on his hands: - My wife's not home.

- And so? - said Leko.

- There's no one to look after the kid.

- Where the fuck has she gone??

- To work.

- Why didn't you let me know? I'd have looked for someone else.

- I forgot. I only just realised she's not here.

- Well, bring the kid.

- Eh?

- There's loads of space on the back seat.

- Eh?

- He's coming with us! - said Leko.

The kid was saying something like: 'Woooooo. Tooooo. Woooooo.' In fact, written like that it looks weaker than it is, but which sounds can convey that hissing? Hissing. That's better. Hissing. Whoooo. Leko was annoyed. He was silent. Braco was enraged. He didn't know at what. At his wife? At Leko? At whom?

The kid was saying something like: 'Vootoo, vootoo, vootoo.'

What car will he drive?

They drove, and he looked around, hissing and spitting on everything.

They left the boy to play in the car.

The guy was expecting them. He still had small eyes and a big belly. This time he also had money. They stood in the corridor of his flat, and he invited them to sit. He was a big guy, a real boss. He was in a very good mood. He gave them the money and even asked them to work for him.

Braco said: 'What?'

Leko said: 'We'll be in touch!'

They stopped for a drink on their way back. They also snorted some of Leko's coke. Their mood improved, all in all. Leko gave him his part of the money. They sat in an empty bar by the road and drank.

Braco asked: 'What about the kid's part?'

Leko said: 'What?'

'Money.'

Leko bared his teeth. That was a smile.

'The kid was with us, too.'

Leko found this very funny. So did Braco, but he kept on.

'He was with us, was he not?'

The boy was looking up, his eyes wide, from his chair, like a clever little dog. Braco thought he was getting it.

'OK... if he says', and Leko looked up at the ceiling, his mouth agape. As if considering whether to laugh.

'What? What's he supposed to say?'

'Tudjman, if he says Tudjman, he gets his share', he said and looked down, his cheeks slightly puffed up.

Braco didn't get cross. It seemed like a fair deal. Surprisingly, he found it quite amusing. He was in a terribly good mood. He was high.

'Go on, say: Tudjman', Braco said to his son.

The boy just looked at him.

'Tuuu-djman, Tuuudj-man, Tudj-tudj-maaan', Braco repeated in some ridiculous mimicry of child speech, so that the boy would get it.

Nothing.

The boy was opening his mouth, but was not interested in making a sound, just moving the muscles.

'Tuuuuuudj-maaaaan...'

Leko couldn't help himself, he burst out laughing.

Braco looked at him and thought something like 'the world has gone mad'.

'Tuuuuuuuudj-maaaaan', Leko himself was repeating, bending over on the chair. He laughing hysterically.

'That's it! Just like Uncle Leko says!' - Braco whispered to his son.

'Tuuuuuudj' - Leko was saying, pouting his lips, then relaxing his jaw into - 'maaaaaan.'

He was staring at the boy. The boy appeared to be confused.

Then Leko raised his face sneering, wondering why this was amusing him so much, and how he and Braco understand each other so well in that laughter, like they had never understood each other before, it's really fucking strange, he thought.

An orgy.

The waitress watched them from the bar, and she was finding it funny, although she had no idea what the joke was.

Now both of them were howling before the child who had opened his eyes wide, eyes framed with long, curled eyelashes, and watched these two creatures smelling of car fumes, opening their mouths: 'Tuuuuuudj-maaaaaan. Tuuuuuudj-maaaaan.'

'Tuuuuuudj' - they made a slight pause, and carried on - 'maaaaaan...'

And the child started smiling, heh, laughing, heh, heh, but did not speak. As if newly awoken, shaking his head and his entire body, in a sudden euphoria of eyes, little teeth, and the hearty laughter of children, with a flutter of his gentle hands, he started waving his arms, but it was clear he would never fly.

THE PARTY WAS ON ITS WAY UP

Blanca and I got each other straight away, instinctively. It was mutual. She moved her things over to my place, we didn't even need to discuss it, that's how normal it had become for us to be together.

And it's working, you know, three years, pretty okay, except for the regular, as they say, disagreements. You know: she'd like to watch a movie, I'd rather see football, she wants techno, I want rock, or, if I'm really honest: I'd rather have nothing. Some time out, if possible.

Because, to be honest, I'm getting tired of these techno nights at The Aquarius, and if Blanca wasn't such a hot chick, such a smart woman, if we weren't living together, and if I wasn't intending on marrying her and having children with her, once things are sorted, I mean, I'd fucking stop going to the techno nights.

At first I was thinking: all right, I am already a bit off the whole scene, like some old communist, I need to try to get with it, you know, reform myself, I mean, if she's having fun, I could be having fun too. You know, positive thinking. One needs to move on with the times, move with the rhythm of techno music, one needs to accept democratic changes.

But it didn't work.

Then I decided to tolerate this techno shit in the most dignified, gentlemanly manner I could. I mean, there's a bar, fuck it, I can entertain myself.

And so, every night I wait for the morning.

That night I had ordered my fifth beer and offered a drink to the waiter. I can see the guy's all right, one of the old crowd, completely clean. He's not hopping at all.

The two of us are observers, old school. You know, when we were younger, which was not that long ago, you didn't have to be so hyper, so into the whole thing, I mean, so fucking deeply into the scene. I mean, so in that you're constantly hopping and it must never ever get boring. It cannot get boring. It's wonderful. A wonder. A miracle. I don't know what else to say. It used to be different. We might have hopped every now and then, but we also knew how to take a break.

Actually, maybe I am imagining it, maybe I was the one that couldn't get bored by it. But still I think that you could have been an observer then, you could be a tired or a grumpy person. You know, you're watching the dance floor but you're not dancing. That doesn't exist anymore.

It was just me and the waiter. The only ones at the bar. I can see him, I've been watching him for months. He gets it. But the sound beats us like an air attack beats a line of retreating civilians, so we have never managed to talk.

I ordered my sixth beer and told him to have a drink on me. By the way, just for clarification: these are small beers. One needs to be objective. These are small Mexican beers. Those with a wedge of lemon hooked onto the bottle neck. Some things deserve to be described in a precise, realistic way.

And so, he brings the sixth beer, but refuses to have one himself. In fact, he doesn't refuse. He says nothing and just goes back to his corner, like a boxing coach, like an old coach with a towel around his neck and a bad fighter in the ring.

And I suppose I am the fighter, like, my footwork is like shit. These techno-gymnasts would easily beat me.

Oh, their moves are great... but they are not aggressive, which is admirable.

I mean, I am not particularly aggressive either. I'm just a bit groggy and I listen to the counting in no one's corner. I'm like an old fart, with cauliflower ears from all the beatings, and even my own coach hates me and has nothing to say to me. Just waits to throw in the towel. The match seems set up. Imagine when the only person who is meant to be on your side feels nothing but contempt for you. Imagine that feeling.

Perhaps the guy's worked out that I'm a sell-out.

Of course, he thinks I'm one of them. What else should he think when I'm hanging out here every night and hop only when Blanka comes up sweating and out of breath, to give me a kiss, and I give her a Red Bull and shout in her ear: 'Doll, I'm still alive, I'm good.'

The guy must think I'm one of them, but that there must be something odd about me. Since I'm not dancing. Footwork, zero. He probably thinks I'm simply enjoying the music. He must be thinking: wow, who knew, there are people like that.

Or it's obvious that I'm an asshole.

I'm overthinking this, I realise. OK, who cares. The guy doesn't want a beer? Doesn't want a small Mexican beer? OK, more for me.

It's true that you can end up embarrassing yourself here if you want to buy someone a drink. Only the desperate ones want to communicate.

Blanka says I need to push the lemon wedge inside the bottle, that it gives the beer a special taste. But I take it out and bite into it. The skin I put on my teeth like a mouthguard and stay in the corner, arms down. But I'm still holding out, waiting for this to pass. Because, fuck it, this too shall pass! The war has passed, techno must pass too.

It will pass, man, so long as they don't go to Slovenia!

I'm afraid of Slovenia. Because, in the so-called chillout time, they frequently go to Slovenia. Chillout is complicated. The whole thing can go over an entire weekend. We get home at 5am on a Monday, and I have to be up at seven, to go to work. You see, on top of all this, I have a regular job.

I mean, I admit it, I am moaning, I've become a boring asshole, the whole story is a pain. For real. This is why I say nothing.

And I feel I am constantly at a crossroads.

I am constantly about to turn off somewhere, I'm thinking, indicating, I have no idea where I am going but, you know, I'm thinking, hold on just a little longer man, life is ahead of you, now you're at a crossroads, keep your basic guard up.

And at 7am there I am putting Visine eye drops into my eyes, because that freshens up the capillaries, then I shave and try to switch into work-mode, I become someone else, and there's a great number of the different ways to be me. Then I try to wake up Blanka, but she just can't get up.

And so her jobs fall through, and I'm still holding on, paying the rent and driving a company car, an old white diesel Golf VW, the old model, GTD, with sharp edges. It's not particularly cool, but it's good for going to Slovenia. Because, of course, we're going.

The GTD is going. I can't be such an asshole to go to bed while the party is still on, and over there in someone's house there'll be loads of beer and three of the best DJs. I go for the beer and for Blanka.

Man, I'm still young; I'm a party guy with a reputation, and you know, I'm not alone in this world - I have to think of others. And so, I drove for quite a long time to this house somewhere after Dobova, to a village, to a hill behind the village, and it was snowing, proper virgin snow in the morning, and we touched it first, like some astronauts, searching for new techno colonies. Four cars in a line. In the Golf: me, Blanka and three DJs crushed in the back seat. One of them has his knees in the back of my seat, and I can see the white head of the other who has such a long neck that he resembles a Gothic Virgin.

And so, they are talking to Blanka from the back seat, about techno, raves, other DJs and other parties. I am driving and I say: 'The landscape is beautiful.' Then I think, for fuck's sake, this is what you've become, a man who comments on the landscape.

'Yeah, it's great,' they agree.

We arrive.

I look for beer.

I go to the living room. Talk to people here and there. They're OK. They explain stuff to me. I don't want to tell them that I feel lost, that I just want to chat a bit, to be sociable.

I realise that everyone has a toothbrush on them. This is not promising. Then, some guy shows me a weird thing. In his pocket, rolled up like an enormous joint, he has a pair of floppy slippers, which he has brought so that he doesn't have to be barefoot when he goes to the bathroom if he stays the night in one of these houses in the middle of nowhere, where he can brush his teeth with his own toothbrush. He poignantly shows me the joint-slippers. I thought of it as wearing civilian clothing when serving the army. I found it really sad, but I wasn't going to get cocky with him. Those slippers contained experience, complete enlightenment, zen, environmental consciousness, everything.

I was drinking my beer.

Time was passing. The party was on its way up.

I was drinking my beer and waiting. I was thinking: this what life is about, in general. You're drinking beer and waiting. And you're thinking about life while you're at it. I think about having to remember this thought; not a bad thought.

And so, there we are, time passes: boom-boom. It's all cool, after all. Boom-boom. It's much worse for others! Boom-boom. My generation, for example, boom-boom. Fucking hell, they're all stuck at home like geriatrics, boom-boom, or they're fucked up from the war and drugs, boom-boom. You don't know what's worse. Boom-boom. I mean, I'm OK. I'm working, partying. Boom-boom. And Blanka's here too. Boom-boom. Fucking hell, all my friends are going out with some middle aged hags. Boom-boom. I mean, unbearable, you can't go around to anyone's house. It's bad... I was amusing myself with these thoughts, my brain was working fast, and then I thought a bit about that too.

At some point I told Blanka to come outside the door. I am looking at her and thinking: Blanka, you're really good looking, but there's a problem.

I say: - Blanka, there's a problem.

- Yes? - she says.

- Listen - I say - they bought non-alcoholic beer.

- Hm - she looks at me. She is jumpy, can't stand still. That's what ecstasy does, which is why I don't take it.

- Fuck it - I say - they bought non-alcoholic beer! Some shit's written here but I don't speak German. Anyway, doesn't matter.

She is just waiting for me to finish.

- Yes, I was trying to work out what was written on this thing, but there's no need. I have had ten beers now and I am more sober than ever.

I say: - Come down from that high and let's go.

She says, hopping: - But we said we'd give those guys a lift back!

- Yes, and they said they'd buy beer!

I threw the can into the snow. I know, it's not environmentally friendly.

- Apart from that - I say - people here have toothbrushes and slippers with them, I mean, what am I doing here? They have everything they need to spend a long weekend in the country.

- Take a pill, you'll feel good! - she says.

- It makes me too nervous, affects my prostate - I say.

- Come on, at least wait a little longer - she says.

- OK - I say.

I wait.

Then I start to dance, although slightly ironically. But there is a celebration, it looks as if everyone is celebrating for me - baptism by fire, or they are taking the piss. Blanka kisses me. Tongues, lip biting, a really long kiss. And man, again the two of us, almost like in the old days. Euphoria. Footwork. Techno. We fucked in some back room. Quite quick, footwork. And hard. Perhaps even rough. She was screaming, and I was moaning through my teeth like an old boxer. I thought she was crying at some point. We lay on some mattress and I was touching her hair. We love each other, I thought, and we have no idea where we are. She curled up against me and breathed on my neck, and I was kissing her her cheek, forehead and nose.

We came home at 5am on Monday.

She said: - Wake me up at seven thirty.

- OK - I said - but you won't want to wake up.

- No, wake me up any way you can.

- I am always waking you up, but you never get up.

- No, seriously. I am babysitting a kid.

- OK, no worries - I say.

- Seriously. I got a permanent contract. Get me out of bed any way you can!

She fell asleep and I could not. It was too late for a sedative. If I took one then, things would be even harder. All I could do was look at the window from my pillow, like some crazy bird, closing my eyes, counting to one hundred, slowing down my breathing, relaxing my muscles, thinking of pornography, and so on. I might have been half-asleep when the alarm rang.

I shaved, dressed, put eyedrops in my eyes, took an aspirin, made coffee, I did everything.

I went up to her. - Blanka, wake up!

Nothing.

- Blanka, get up!

- Blanka! Open your eyes and get up, for fuck's sake!

- Come on, you're babysitting a kid, you've got a permanent contract! - I was telling her.

I was getting her out of bed, shouting: - WAKEY, WAKES!

- Leave me alone - she murmured.

- WAKE UP! KID! BABYSITTING! WAKE UP TIME! - I was shouting in her ear and shaking her.

She opened her eyes, frightened.

Then she said: - You're annoying! - and closed her eyes again.

- I'll throw you out of bed! - I said, took her by the legs and started to drag her.

She was kicking her legs and hit the side of the bed.

Pushing her face in the pillow which she was gripping with some desperation, she moaned:

- Jesus, what an idiot!

And again she went to bed.

Then I grabbed her by the underarms and took her to the bath. She was swearing under her breath. Maybe she banged her foot. Then I ran the shower.

- Leave me alone! - she pleaded.

I was showering her, holding her by the neck, until she tore away and started waving her arms and wanting to hit me. She scratched my face and I pushed her away against the wall. She stayed there, in a corner, surrounded by white tiles, sliding down.

She was staring like someone who'd suddenly died. The morning light was coming through the window, onto the wet walls and mirror.

I stopped the shower, there was a silence. We were looking at each other.

Then she looked aside, at nothing.

- You have ten minutes. I am leaving in ten minutes max - I said.

She came out of the bath and took off the soaked night dress, the wet underwear. Then she dried herself, put on her knickers, slid a t-shirt on over her bare breasts, got into her trousers and a hooded jacket.

We took the lift.

We got in the car.

When we got to the area where she was babysitting, she said left, there. I dropped her off near a block of flats, by a green, where the sun was sliding on the morning frost. She said nothing when she left the car, and walked down the path along the frosted grass. She walked into the shade, then inside the block.

It all looks weird when you're watching it from the inside of the white company Golf VW. I stayed in the car, which was still running. I looked up and saw birds on the power line. I remember thinking that it would be great to have a cigarette there, sitting in the car, to take a deep breath and think about everything. I thought about the diesel car rumbling under people's windows and I thought about turning it off, or leaving. I lit a cigarette.

The smoke swirled listlessly in the sunlight.

Frozen under the sun, the green of the grass is blinding. I moved the rear view mirror and took a look at myself. I looked for the bottle in my pockets and put a few more eyedrops in. The car was shivering, roaring, everything was shaking, I was missing, the drops were going in my eyes and everywhere else. Then I reversed, turned the car and drove off. Going down Dubrovnik Avenue, I repeated to myself: I am an old rocker, I am an old rocker, I am an old rocker...

First gear, second gear, third gear, traffic light.

Sometimes I see that waiter; he's been working in a cafe in the centre of town for a while now. Whenever I go in, it's like he knows me, but can't place me.

I don't know why I come here. The space is pastel and marble, the tables dark. I sit and I feel trapped, just like inside the company car.

The company car got stolen, it just wasn't there one day. My bosses didn't believe it, said who'd steal a piece of shit like that.

If I'd had any more information about it, I'd have given it.

Now I work here, nearby, and sometimes I go into that cafe. I have a coffee or a beer, read newspapers that I don't care about and look around. The walls are decorated with paintings of the city in the mist, horses, splattery abstract scenes. Someone must have put a lot of money in this place, but it doesn't have any identity.

A FAREWELL TO ARMS

Hot days, hot nights. Summer time, Dalmatia.

The small town was magically deserted, as if someone had left it there just for us.

We were eating a lasagna by candlelight, in a romantic spot. She was beautiful. Dark eyes, dark hair, white t-shirt. She was looking at me, in love.

I was having beer after beer. I had no appetite. It was the third night in a row that I had taken the bus to come in to town. Paying for the ticket. There were fewer passengers each night.

She said: - You know what? One can survive anything. If one has to.

Yes, I said.

Relax, what are you afraid of?

Nothing.

I used to imagine what it might look like. I always thought I wouldn't be afraid.

Me too.

Now I know. There is nothing I cannot survive. If they come. I will be able to remain polite, I will be able to talk to them, I will be able to be marvellous, you know. And go out with them, if necessary, I could do that too. I could sleep with them. Cook for them... But I'd be putting poison in their food! - she said. - Little by little, slowly but surely. I could do it all with them because I hate them so. That's why I am not afraid of them. They can't do anything to me.

It sounded like she was talking about men.

I know it sounds bad, but I hate them, she said... I hate Serbs.

Aha... - I said, relieved. Me too...

No, you don't hate them, she said.

I have no idea how she worked it out. Generally, I thought my chances were better if I hated Serbs. But you can't always pretend.

Imagine: an invasion, she said.

She was imagining it pretty romantically, I could see it in her eyes. It's the fault of the heroics portrayed in historical tales and movies.

Yes, I say. We don't have much time. Shall we go to your place?

She showed me the keys. Swinging on the keyring.

We walked along the seafront, alone, under a gentle moon. I was holding her lightly by the waist. I whispered in her ear about how beautiful she was, as if it were a secret. The sea and her hair were fragrant.

I could do it all with them because I hate them so. It's strange when a woman you're about to go to bed with tells you that. Strange times. Every night is different.

We walked into the flat and she lit a candle by the bedside. As I said: romantic. There was a radio there too. I also have it by the bed at home. I turn it on so it drowns the sounds of an orgasm.

A religious painting hung above the bed. And on the wall opposite, a picture of her grandparents. Grandma is dead and I should move out of my parents', she says.

Great, I said.

Don't say that, she said.

Oh, sorry, I said.

I gave her a serious look and kissed her. We were on the bed. She had enchanting breasts.

I was looking for a radio station with music. There were just news.

She said: - Leave it on!

Come on, we're not going to listen to...

Leave it on! They're talking about us.

Us?

Shush! - she shouts.

Are you nuts?!

They were mentioning a warship and they were mentioning us...

Us?

Yes, but I can't hear it because you keep talking over it!

Suddenly an air raid siren howled.

Shit! - I said.

It was my first air raid siren ever. And hers. She blew against the candle's flame and it went out. What now?

Come on, lie down! - I said.

On the floor?

Anywhere... There's no time to lose.

But she got up and looked out of the window through a hole in the curtains.

I said: - You can look out freely, we're in utter darkness.

You think they don't see in the dark - she said. She thought I was naive.

Who?

You idiot, the ship is there! - she hissed. - Something flashed at sea.

Don't be angry... - I said.

Don't be so loud!

I went up to the window. I couldn't see a thing. I wanted to open the balcony door.

Jesus, no! No! - she wailed. She dragged me back and I fell on the bed.

You see! - she whispered.

Something flashed at sea.

I said: - We're done for. Let's make love, now or never!

But something else happened: she started to cry. I embraced her. I whispered: - It's OK, OK, everything will be OK.

I was having a tough time. My dick was getting hard and soft in that hot dark night, under an air raid alert.

OK, it's OK, everything will be OK...

If I had managed to go out onto the balcony and seen what was up, it would have been easier, but like this - I was starting to freak out from the world outside, and I curled up against her. I wondered if I loved her. I was wondering how it was going to end, where this was going. My dick was getting hard and soft in the dark. This was not improving matters.

She was crying. There was no way of stopping her. When it flashed again, she yelped and ran into the bathroom. I went after her and knocked something down on the way. She was sitting in the dark. I closed the door and turned on the light because there was no window in the bathroom.

I looked at her. Her make up was all over her face.

We're safe here, I said. I hugged her tight.

I wish I was miles away from here, I thought. Still, I was right there, shut inside a bathroom. And now I really didn't know what was going on outside. Maybe they're really attacking, I thought. I was imagining them wordlessly surrounding the building. I had seen too many movies. She was trembling.

I looked at her like a man, wanted to say something calming, but she looked strange, her face was twisted, her eyebrows, eyes... Hysteria. I was frightened by it. The war had started. In that windowless bathroom. I hugged her again and repeated constantly: All right all right, calm down...

She was talking about her mother through her tears. Her mother, who has sacrificed everything for her without a word, never complaining, her good old mother, and where is she, what is she doing? She was crying and talking, and she seemed to be looking for the door with her eyes... She has come here to have sex with me, rather than being home at a time like this. Her mother will be beside herself with worry! She will be the death of her own mother! She has already killed her. Oh, mother! She was finished.

We have to go to their house now, now, urgently, we have to go!

Jesus God, forgive me please! - she wailed through her tears.

I didn't know what to do.

Jesus, where will I go?! - I said.

Jesus said nothing.

She was trying to unlock the door. She kept missing the keyhole, making a racket in that ghostly silence. This was not helping my nerves.

Jesus, forgive me! - she pleaded.

I grabbed her firmly and turned her towards me. I put my palms on her cheeks and hissed: Shut up! Calm down!

CALM DOWN!

She calmed down. She just sobbed every now and then, resting her head on my chest. We stood like that for a moment or two, as if on a stage. I forgot, or I possibly didn't know, that I should speak. He who speaks more, wins. One needed to charge forth.

But I forgot to speak.

And she suddenly pushed me away. As if I were the enemy.

OPEN THE DOOR OR I WILL SCREAM! - she was screaming.

I opened the door. She ran out.

And so I stood like that, at the door for someone else's flat in utter darkness, my dick limp.

I closed the door.

I went into the bedroom, looked outside. The beach, pine trees, the darkness of the sea. I sat on the bed. Everything was shut, the room smells of old furniture. That thing I knocked down was the radio. Patriotic songs were fuzzily coming through from somewhere on the floor. Over there in the dark hung the picture of her grandfather and grandmother, the grandma being the last to die, probably here, on this bed where I was sitting. I was sweating.

I got up and walked to the kitchen. I opened the fridge and the inside light came on. There was no beer or alcohol of any sort, just light. I was gripped by terror.

I ran out of the flat and down the stairs.

You could see things outside. The trees swayed in the wind.

Something flashed again.

I ran. The silence was absolute. Only my running was audible, and my breathing. After two hundred metres, I spotted her. She was walking like someone who was terribly afraid.

She turned and saw me.

I walked quickly towards her.

I was following her, breathless, like some pervert.

Forgive me! - I said, not really knowing why.

She was quiet and looked ahead. We walked side by side.

Hey! - I said.

What do you want? - she said.

I didn't want anything to happen to you...

Don't worry - she said.

What have I done? - I said.

Nothing - she said. - It's my fault... Because I am getting involved with a kid.

She stopped. - No, it's not your fault. - she looked at me with pity.

I was silent and looked down. I might not have played this game normally, but I had nowhere to sleep that night. And those ships were flashing. And anyway, where was my mother at that moment?

I hobbled after her, humble.

We reached her parents' house.

She said she'd sneak me into her bedroom. Apparently her parents never entered her room.

Are you sure? - I said.

Don't worry - she said. I kissed her dramatically.

She took me inside, we sneaked up the stairs, she led me into her room and left me there.

She was going to let them know she was home.

I stood in the dark.

A few minutes passed.

I was standing and waiting, thinking: what if someone else comes in? I didn't give a shit about the ships, planes, Serbs, but I was tiptoeing and breathing without making any noise. I hid in

a corner behind the wardrobe, in the dark. I thought, if her mother came in she would scream, and the dad would run up thinking I was an enemy agent... or at least that I was a drug addict and a tramp who has nowhere to go at a troubled time, because I have no respect towards a home, his or my own, or generally towards parents or God; in any case it would be clear I was a stranger, a suspicious element by all accounts - a thief, a criminal in the dark behind the wardrobe, a murderer, an enemy, an invader, an aggressive individual who wants to get his daughter into bed. He'd be thinking all this at the same time. There would be some truth in it. And he'd squash me in that corner like a spider.

Ten minutes had passed. In the dark behind the wardrobe, I really felt like a secret agent.

Now I was not afraid only of her dad. After all, I thought that special police forces could come into the house and conduct a search. This seemed logical. If only they knew I was there. Because I am the worst. The head of the household would be tortured until he gave me away. Possibly the rest of the family too.

But, they wouldn't get anything from them.

Except if they caught her and tortured her.

It was dangerous for everybody.

Someone opened the door.

I stepped out with my hands in the air. I couldn't see a thing.

She hugged me, started to kiss me and threw me on the bed.

She said: - The ship, it's ours! Ours! Our soldiers took it!

She was singing with delight.

Thank god - I said. We unzipped in a hurry.

It's better that he came in then than a little later. But he came in then. Her dad with a torch. And pointed it at us. At me.

Everyone was shocked. A silence.

Listen... - I said, embarrassed. I was ready to confess all.

This is my friend, she said, and said my name.

Silence again.

Aha - the father said.

He was a mountain of a man.

But he was not aggressive. He was shy. You could see he'd rather he hadn't come in. He was especially embarrassed by me. Or at least that's how it seemed. He turned off the torch.

I thought about saying: 'Everything is all right'; but I thought I'd better stay quiet.

He walked to the window and looked out. He said sadly: - I wanted to show you something...

We zipped up in a hurry.

Look outside - he said in a fatherly manner. He was also talking to me, which made me feel better.

We went up to the window. I strained my eyes. I really wanted to see something, so that I would honour this trust he'd shown me. To say something like 'aha!' or 'there!'. And then we could all say something about it. And make contact that way. Because war is for everyone.

And actually, there was something moving on the road.

Our soldiers have liberated an army barracks in Ploce. - he said. - These are lorries full of weapons.

We were as quiet as children.

Aha - I remembered.

I was going out, to have a look. I wanted to show you - he said to his daughter, sadly.

I thought: he be happier if I left and so liberated his daughter than if the army liberated another ten barracks. It seemed like his greatest desire, and I wanted to please him.

I said: - Can I come along... To have a look...

Let's - he said, tired.

She wanted to come along too.

He said: - No, please, I can't allow it. You see what's happening out there.

I said, bye, see you.

He and I went down the stairwell. The torch lit the way. We said nothing. We walked in the courtyard in complete darkness. The gate squealed. We reached the road. The lorries crawled very, very slowly.

Look at them - he said.

Yes - I said. - It's madness...

Madness - he repeated, as if the word had struck him as important.

I went in the other direction. I did not sneak off, but walked with my back straight. Then I bumped into a bench, and sat on it. I was sitting erect, like a blind man.

Minutes passed. I thought about lighting a cigarette, but then thought to myself: better not.

Weapons are passing along. Now you have to have a reason. For everything. For sitting on a bench, for lighting a cigarette. Everything is a sign. I sat there, inconspicuous.

A dog started barking at me. I walked inside the house. Sandra and her sister were sitting there. Two other guys came in and sat down. Sandra was saying something. Then her face vanished. It went out, there was nothing on it.

The guy noticed it too.

It was uncomfortable, horrible, some cubes were lit up instead of her face. She was still talking.

I don't know who said it, but someone did: What's going on with your face, for God's sake?

She was startled, as if she knew, as if it wasn't the first time this happened. She ran to the bathroom.

Hopefully things will be better, I thought.

Her face is all over the place - her sister said. She was crying. She'll never get married.

Sandra came back from the bathroom. Her face was still a mess. But now you could see how. Everything was loose. She smiled at me, hopeless and horrified, as if saying: it's over, this is how it will be from now on.

The barking woke me up. I was cold. I drove the dog away. I felt crumpled. People passing by glanced at me, but rushed past. They didn't want to meddle.

