

**Tanja Mravak**

***Our Wife***

**Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić**

He never swept me off my feet, not really. But he could be funny, and every time he made me laugh, I thought I was in love. I'd burst out laughing and thought it was love. I mean, one can be high on serotonin, dopamine or whatever, and laugh like crazy thinking they're in love. Fancy that. And he fell in love with me every time I laughed. He kissed the lines around my eyes, whispering „Nobody laughs at my jokes like you“. I indulged his ego, that's what it was. He thought it was something special, he thought I was something special. He didn't get the chemistry, the rush in the veins that people often mistake for love. I once flew in a tandem paraglider and felt the surge of fear and excitement that made me think I was in love with the instructor. Nonsense. No, he was not the man of my dreams, not even close to it. He is as down to earth as they get. Allegedly doing something at work and then idling on the couch at home. No gym or travels, no trips or going to cinema, no walks or bodily exercise of any kind, no hobby or passion in life. My ex was a man of a hundred interests. He free climbed every pitch, watched every film at every cinema, swam two kilometres every day every summer, had a thousand excuses for whoring around, a smooth son of a bitch. A stinking piece of shit. That's enough, I said to myself when I finally came to my senses: never again will you fall in love with a man who sweeps you off your feet. Such a man will trample your heart and crush you beneath the heel of his boot for good measure. Never again will you fall for a man, I swore to myself. No more falling; from now on you will slowly slide into a relationship with someone who doesn't make you weak in the knees. For the record, I found exactly what I was looking for. Mirko Bunja, that's his name, is a guy who goes to work in the morning (he is employed at a road maintenance company), returns home in the afternoon, eats the lunch his wife has prepared, checks if his children are alive and sprawls himself on the red couch for the rest of the day. A man like that will never cheat on you, my dear ladies. The only extracurricular activity in his life was to send me two text messages a day. I didn't need more than that. I can't stand sweet nothings. Once a week he visited his old mother and then dropped by at my place. We saw each other when he went for a haircut as well. A guy like that, my dear ladies, will never cheat on you.

And then one day, out of the blue – I couldn't believe my eyes and had to double check to make sure it was really him – he sent me the message that read: *Will you come to my place, my family is in the countryside*. First, I had no desire to set my foot in that skyscraper apartment. And second, I didn't understand why he couldn't come to my place. I mean, I have an apartment of my own, I bought it with my hard-earned money. To tell you the truth, all I cared about was a little cuddling after the weekly sex. But I thought okay, let's see that miracle, let's see Poppy, as he used to call his couch. He answered the door dressed in a black sleeveless T-shirt with three little holes on his bulging belly and the old tracksuit trousers with several grease stains. What was even worse, he completed the look with a pair of black

leather slippers like the ones my father uses when he goes to a health spa. To be honest, if I didn't know a little something about the chemistry between people, I would have found him repulsive. Come in, he said with a quick glance down both sides of the hall, and I entered.

- Care for a drink? he asked.
- A special occasion like this calls for a toast – I said.
- You silly girl, that's why I love you.

He hugged me, but I hesitated before hugging him back. Then he pulled away from me, still holding his hands on my shoulders.

- I can't believe that my girlfriend has come over to my place when I'm home alone.
- Once our relationship gets more serious, I'll come when your family is here.
- You silly woman – said Mirko Bunja, the man I was not in love with, before he headed to the kitchen to get us the beers.

It was no big deal for me, an apartment like any other; I remained standing only because I didn't know if I should sit at the big table, or the guests were invited to make themselves comfortable on the sofa set with a glass coffee table. I was standing not because I didn't know what to do with myself, but because I was waiting for instructions.

- Shall we drain these babies standing in the doorway, or you'd rather sit down? Mirko nodded at the table.

I took out my cigarettes, because there is nothing better than a smoke with a cold beer.

- How about we take our drinks out on the balcony? – suggested Mirko, although he smoked everywhere in my apartment, including the bedroom.

So we went out onto the balcony.

- We'd better go back inside.

So we went back and sat at the kitchen table. Thank God we did, 'cause all that shifting from one place to another was starting to annoy me. He opened the balcony door and the windows in the kitchen and the living room, and helped himself to one of my cigarettes. What a stud, I thought, his wife doesn't know he smokes. I liked it: a man like that would never cheat on you. I was the greatest accomplishment in his life; he could smoke freely with me. And the crown proof – we flicked the ash

into a saucer. I don't know the exact formula of that compound, I don't know its Latin name either, but I felt a rush of something that made me feel fantastic.

- So, that's your Poppy? – I looked at the couch.
- Sorry, I forgot to introduce you. Come.

He took me by the hand, led me to the couch and seated me in the hollow his lazy ass had been diligently wearing for years.

- Poppy, this is Julijana, I've told you about her. Julijana, meet Poppy.

I offered my hand to the backrest of the couch and said „nice to meet you“. He sat next to me and asked Poppy to close its eyes. Mirko Bunja is obsessed with ears. With men, foreplay usually includes some French kissing, some neck and ear smooching, some sucking and licking of your nipples, and that's more or less it. But Mirko is an ear specialist. Once I told him he was an otologist, and it made him horny like hell. You know, he is the guy who slowly runs the tip of his forefinger down your helix and then, when he comes to the lobe, adds his thumb and squeezes it gently, as if rolling a small piece of marzipan into a tiny ball. Then he taps his little finger against the fleshy projection at the entrance of your ear, and when that's done, moves on to the backside and explores the groove between the ear and the skull. And all the while he watches your ear from a close distance and in the end gently blows in it, for you to feel his breath. With Mirko Bunja you must always have clean ears. Anyway, that's what he was doing to me when Poppy closed its eyes. Let's get this straight, he is definitely not my type of guy. The fact that I felt goose bumps all over my body proves nothing. It can be scientifically explained. But there was no way I was going to have a roll in the sack with him on that couch, no chance in the world that I was going to take off my new blouse or touch the old rags he was wearing; that was definitely out of the question. Yes, I came to his apartment when he invited me, I saw where he lived (as if that mattered to him), I met Poppy, one of the three *persons* he sprawled himself on, but I decided to keep my dignity. I'm not a slut for God's sake. I'm a bank adviser, a highly respected professional. I have a nametag which reads *Julijana Sutlić, senior adviser*, and my clients are owners of construction companies and similar big shots, hey. So I sat up to finish my beer.

- What's wrong? he asked.

There was a time when that question would have driven me up the wall, but I've come to appreciate the men who don't analyze, who don't recognize the moment, who have no idea what I do or do not feel. And that's amazing, it's such a freedom.

- Just think of it as our couch.

On the shelf by the TV opposite our couch I saw a framed photograph of his suited son with a First Communion candle in his hands, his little sister beside him and his serious parents behind them: my guy Mirko, who looked awkward in his suit, and his wife, who looked just fine in a white blouse and a black skirt.

- And that – I asked – is that our wife?

If there was anything I liked about Mirko Bunja, then it was the freedom to say things like that without any fear. I really don't need any drama in my life.

- Yes, that's our wife, and that boy is not ours but *ours*. And the girl, you can have her if you want, she's more like you than us. That little brat will be our ruin with her talking back to everything we say.

We lit up a cigarette.

- Have I told you I've installed this laminate flooring by myself?
- Good for you.
- And the framing strips.
- Great.
- Yes. Are you hungry?

- No, I'm not, but I need to use the bathroom, and you can get me another beer while I'm there.

Our wife was one of those women who scrubbed every inch of the bathroom with a toothbrush. I mean, I didn't care if she was tidy or not, I couldn't care less, but her obsession with cleanliness was not normal. The woman was obviously compulsively clean. Every little thing in the bathroom glistened like a diamond, including the face cream containers. There I finally lowered my panties and acted as if it were our toilet bowl. When I looked down, I noticed a small dustbin next to the bowl. But our wife didn't put a garbage bag in it; instead she put a transparent, empty plastic packaging of toilet paper. Nothing should go to waste or whatever, I don't get it. Is there anything in the world cheaper than the small garbage bags for the small bathroom dustbins?! But that 's where she disposed her used sanitary pads, and our Mirko his used cotton swabs. She even neatly cut the packaging bag. To look nicer I guess. I was surprised she hadn't stitched the handles on it. I peed watching the evidence of her frugality,

flushed the toilet and wiped the seat of the bowl with the toilet paper. I admit I feel lost in the rooms which are so clean and tidy; my hair brushes are always full of hair and I clean them only when I'm on holiday. That's simply how I am, I don't know how to clean thoroughly. But our wife was born for deep cleaning. When I turned around, I saw a bra hanging on the door. To be precise, it was not a bra but a parachute. I lifted it off the hook to check the size on the label. But the label was worn off. The whole bra was worn out, with slack straps and cups in the shape of her breasts. I snapped out of it and put the bra back on the hook on the door. What the hell was I doing? I hoped I had left it the way I found it, because a woman who scrubbed and shined her shampoo bottles knew exactly how she had left her bra. Don't get me wrong, I'm not unhappy with my boobs; they may be small, but they are perky and shapely, and when I'm in PMS, I sometimes show my cleavage. I really didn't mind our wife having big tits, because the minute I saw that photograph in the living room, I knew where the rub was. Small ears. That was the problem. She may be melon breasted, but her ears are small, so small that after three sessions there was nothing left to explore. Her makeup bag. She left it behind. I took a little peek, I admit; I mean, we are women, we want to know what makeup the other woman uses, there's always something new to discover. Well, I discovered the smallest eye pencil I'd ever seen. I throw mine away once it has been sharpened down to half its original size, but she sharpened hers down to a stub. A set of old eye shadows with the lid taped with electrical tape. I bet Mirko taped it for her; after all, he installed the laminate flooring by himself. And a lipstick. Our wife had one lipstick. In a neutral, safe colour. And something else, not less important: her makeup bag was on the washing machine, on top of the perfectly clean and ironed crocheted doily, if you've ever wondered what happened to doilies. Mirko's jacket was in the clothes basket, its pockets turned upside down, waiting to be washed. In addition to not knowing that he smoked, I was sure that his wife had no idea he wore a torn T-shirt and stained trousers. His family was away, and that man who never swept me off my feet allowed himself to loosen up a little.

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The mother's day, that's what we called our weekly encounters. I had the feeling his mother knew he was coming to me after their catch-ups over a cup of coffee; she was too clever to believe he shaved for her sake. For a while I considered calling her *our* mother, but my mother would have never forgiven me an insult like that, even though she knew nothing about that other mother. His mother went on trips and dances organized for senior citizens. She had a friend, that's what she called him, and I thought it was really cool. She'd had enough of mending socks and ironing shirts. The woman was simply awesome. She had a friend, of course she did. She had a life and that's why she knew. She knew her son

was seeing me, she knew I opened my door to him, but what she didn't know was that I did it dressed in my business suit, so he could unbutton my shirt when he was finished with my ears. I'm a traditional woman. Pulling a T-shirt over my head is not my thing, I don't find it photogenic. I want it to look classy, sophisticated, with sleeves sliding down my shoulders, leaving me half naked. To let my hair down in front of him for the so-called intimacy? No way. To fart or burp when he was there, or pee with the bathroom door open and let him smell my poop? Are you out of your mind? That kind of intimacy is a threat to every relationship, especially a sexual one. And our relationship was intact in that respect. If Mirko Bunja ever swept me off my feet, it was after my shirt slid down my shoulders. He'd trip me up and I'd stumble, and then he'd caught me in his arms and carry me away. If you want to do it with class, that's how you should do it. I mean, it took me several days to forget his homely appearance when he greeted me at the door of his apartment, but I forgave him. Actually, since I was not really in love with him, I quickly forgot his greasy trousers and his old man's slippers. But I couldn't forget that eye pencil sharpened down to a stub. Our wife deserved better. She deserved better than Mirko Bunja, but that was not my business. I couldn't get her a new husband, but maybe I could find a way to get her a new, expensive eye pencil. Maybe I could hide it in the pocket of Mirko's jacket, for her to find it when she turned the pockets inside out before putting the jacket to wash. Stupid. Or I could buy a new pencil, so expensive that it came in a packaging box, wrap it as a present and put it in Mirko's pocket. Even more stupid. I could send it to her anonymously. I racked my brain to find a solution, but the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that there were so many other things she needed, and I sighed. Isn't it odd how our bodies react? I actually sighed. Let's face it, that woman took care of my man, with all his virtues and flaws; she washed his jackets, ironed his shirts, put his socks to soak and delivered him to me as a finished product. And I'm not ungrateful, I return the favours and pay my debts. I'm a financial adviser, for Christ's sake, and debt is a cancer changing one's financial DNA. That's why I was all excited about my little project. I went to the new shopping centre, bought a gift card in the highest amount and waited for an opportunity. It presented itself on a mother's day, once we were done with the ear and the shirt. Mirko was lying on the right side of my bed. He reached for a cigarette. It was a sign I could go and pee. It is important for a woman to pee right after an intercourse, because of Escherichia. Barefoot and naked I tiptoed across the corridor, took the gift card out of my purse and put it in the pocket of Mirko's jacket. From what I could gather, it was the jacket washing week. Having prevented a bacterial infection, I returned to the bedroom for the weekly dose of cuddling.

- Here's my little Escherichia, here's my little coli – cooed Mirko Bunja.

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I couldn't remember the last time I waited for Mirko so impatiently as that week after I hid the gift card in his pocket. I unbuttoned the sleeves of my shirt myself; they were always a bitch to unbutton and they were not particularly important. I even took off my panties before he rang the doorbell, just to get it done and over with as soon as possible. True, I did it purely out of technical reasons, but when he saw I wasn't wearing panties, it all ended before it really started. *It's no big deal, it happens to everyone*, I comforted him, but he was ashamed and thrilled at the same time, and wanted to do it again right away. Sorry, Escherichia couldn't wait. My knees were trembling as I slid my hand in the inner pocket of his jacket and my fingers closed around a piece of paper I found inside. Was it possible that she had changed her washing routine? No, that was simply not possible. I took the paper out of the pocket and saw a long supermarket receipt. A bottle of milk, a pack of strudel dough, mixed soup vegetables, a head of cabbage, fruit yogurts, a bag of Flips, a bottle of sunflower seed oil, a jar of mixed marmalade, a cheese spread... She even got a discount for the next purchase. I took the receipt into the bathroom and read all the items listed on it, while Escherichia disappeared in the depths of the sewer system. Then I put the receipt in my jewellery box, for I felt it wouldn't be right to just ball it and throw it away. It was like a letter or something. Besides, it was a receipt, and receipts must be kept. I returned to Mirko Bunja totally confused, and he interpreted it as a sign I was ready for another round. Mirko Bunja is simply brilliant, he doesn't get anything. Every woman should have a Bunja in her life.

- You know what your titties are like?

- Tell me.

- Just the right size to fit into a coffee cup. And just for the record, I don't mean a cup for espresso, but a cup for cappuccino.

That's what he says as he nibbles your nipples.

- Oh, there's something I wanted to tell you – he left that announcement for the ear part of the foreplay.

- Then tell me.

- Remember I mentioned my colleague Sergio?

He asked that as he ran his forefinger down my helix.

- Yes – I said, although the name didn't ring any bells.

- Today when he painted a STOP sign on the pavement, he mixed the letters up and now it reads SPOT.

He brought his lips to my auricle.

- Which is why we now call him Dislexia.

Although the right word for what he was talking about was dysgraphia, I still climaxed. Then it hit me. Our wife had spent less than the amount on the gift card! I jumped up and out of the bedroom, followed by his shouts of „hurry up, Escherichia strikes back“, and rummaged through the pockets of his jacket. Nothing, not even a tissue. I could hardly wait for his next visit.

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Let's get something straight: I'm not a big humanitarian or anything like that. Yes, I dialled a few times when money was being collected for floods and a children's hospital, you know, when singers and politicians answer the phone. I don't want to brag, but when a colleague of mine found herself in a financial pit, I slipped an envelope with about a thousand and a half Euros under her door and never told her it was me who did it. I didn't need the burden of her gratitude, her love and the feeling of being indebted to me, her inviting me for lunches and introducing me to her kids. I didn't need all that hassle. What I needed was peace at work and I bought it. And what I urgently needed now was that our wife was beautiful. It was important for me that she had self-respect, so I decided to send her a voucher for a beauty parlour as well. It is a fact that women who put more care into their appearance have more self-confidence. Self-confidence is sexy. The last thing I needed was Mirko Bunja who wanted to divorce from his wife because she was plain and dull. I was afraid to even think about it. But what did she do? She just bought vegetables for soup! She bought a six-pack of milk! I simply couldn't understand it. They were not that poor. That was not what I had given her the money for. I mean, hat's off for her, she's a great woman. But she should know better than that. She should know that men are simply blind to the impeccably clean, glittering shampoo bottles. Next time when Mirko came, if I didn't find a receipt for makeup in the pocket of his jacket, she would get a gift card from a perfume shop. Then she would get the message.

- A new jacket?!

I may have overreacted when he showed at my door on the following mother's day.

- A present from my wife, can you imagine?

I'm sure you know the old trick, it's no longer a secret, you can find it on the Internet portals in articles about what every woman should know about sex: when you're in a hurry to get it over with, or when he takes a long time to come, just let him take you doggy style. Well, that's what I did because I was in a hurry. I haven't mentioned that Mirko Bunja is a rather sturdy man. No, he's not fat, he is just broad-shouldered and strong-armed, but yes, he is paunchy. He wears shirts like tunics, never tucked in. So the XL sing proudly displayed on the label of his jacket made by an anonymous brand was no surprise. The receipt was in our secret place, in the inner pocket, and it came from a second hand shop. It was handwritten, like the ones in three copies with carbon paper on the back. It read *male jacket*. I put it in my jewellery box.

- Escherichia, you've forgotten to flush Escherichia down the toilet – he said when I returned and put my leg over his belly.

So Mirko Bunja did hear me when I peed. Gross. I slapped my forehead and ran into the bathroom. I was careful to urinate as silently as possible. I flushed the toilet. When I returned into his arms, he caressed my hair.

- Would you like me to stay overnight sometime? – That question caught me by surprise.  
– So we can drink a bottle of wine together.

I snore, now is the time to admit it. When my neighbours greet me with a laugh in the summer, I think they have heard me snoring and are laughing at me. *Good morning, neighbour*, they say, but what they are actually saying is that I snore like an old cat. Oh, no, there was no way I'd let Mirko Bunja hear me snore.

- That would be great! But impossible, right?
- I'd like to see you when you wake up.

I learnt that lesson a long time ago: when you feel a rush of something in your body, take your time before you react. The body is stupid, it reacts even when someone says they would like to wake up next to you. Your face contorts and the other party may think you've smiled. No, I didn't say yes because I was touched or something. I was not in love with Mirko Bunja at all. I said yes because it was not the right moment to jeopardize our relationship. It was high time our wife started taking care of herself. He saw me laugh and pressed me against his paunch.

- We could watch a movie together.

Ten sings that a man loves you. One of them is definitely watching a movie together. Well, it didn't matter one way or another; I didn't love him. So what the hell.

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A perfume shop is where Chanel, Dior, Lancome and Givenchy products are. I was not going to get her a gift card from a drugstore which sells everything from makeup to toilet paper, from chia seeds to lubricants and baby food. In a drugstore our wife would not resist the temptation and she would buy a mop and baking paper. Oh, no, she would go to a shop where salesgirls dressed in black are all pretty, elegant and beautifully made-up, where they can describe a perfume and suggest the perfect foundation for your skin type. That's what she needed. A hundred Euros. Why not make it a hundred and fifty, for an eye pencil, a lipstick and maybe a small bottle of a perfume. Since I was there, I treated myself to a body lotion silkier than a silk worm. After all, Mirko was going to stay overnight and I felt the occasion deserved it. I bought a piece of cheese, a can of ham, some olives and a chocolate mousse. Bunja brought a bottle of decent wine. I was about to uncork it, when he stopped me.

- Hold it, a corkscrew is a tool.

What a sweet man Mirko Bunja is; he'd been in my apartment a few hours longer than usual and he was already reaching for the tools. All right, let him have it his way. We ate, he walked around barefoot, spent a long time in the bathroom. I washed the dishes and the cutting board. I even put an apron on.

- Don't take it off!

That's what he cried when I started to untie the apron, and then he came up to me, hugged me, turned me around, lifted my hair and greeted my ear. Doing it with an apron on was definitely beneath me, but what the hell, he was cute, he used the tools. It was only when I went to the bathroom to deal with the omni-threatening Escherichia that I took off both the apron and my business suit.

- You have shaken me out of my rut, you have brought me back to life. I thought I was going to sleep till the day I died. You know it, don't you? When you look at me, I feel like a power plant set in motion. I just hum with the energy for thousands of households.

After sex, Mirko Bunja babbled like a woman. The only difference was that women don't talk about electricity. He was lying on his right side with his right arm bent and his palm beneath his head.

- I can hardly wait to fall asleep next to you and then wake up to see you all crumpled and dishevelled and everything.

You're wrong, so wrong, my dear Mirko Bunja, I thought. You're not here because of that; you're here because I use a body lotion and an anti wrinkle cream, because I've had my hair done and my bikini waxed. I pulled a face, feigning to be angry at him, and dishevelled my hair.

- Here you are, we don't have to wait till morning.

He kissed my pouted lips, my neck, my everything.

- You're damn right – he murmured.

After the second time, he fell asleep like a log, a hundred percent male. It was the time for his jacket pocket, the time for the gift card. In the morning, none the wiser, he carried it away saying that it had been a long time since he'd slept through the night. I changed the bed linens.

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- Something's wrong.

With his hair freshly trimmed, Bunja entered my apartment visibly worried. I knew he shouldn't have stayed overnight, I just knew it. He had never been worried before, he needed my shirt, my ear, my obsession with Escherichia. Now he sat at the table. He took one of my cigarettes. A slim one. It looked like a tiny bird bone between his sturdy fingers. I took out a bottle of whisky; dramatic situations call for hard liquor. I felt stupid in my suit, like someone who hadn't been informed that the masked ball was off.

- She has felt a lump.

He rarely spoke about his wife and never said her name. He once blurted it out and was embarrassed.

- Žarka?

- Yes.

He took a sip of his drink, a puff of his cigarette.

- Take off your jacket, it's hot.
- It's all right, I won't be staying long.
- Take it off, you'll be cold when you go outside.

I hanged his jacket in the corridor.

- Will you pour me a drink? I shouted.

I quickly shoved my hand into the inner pocket and took out a copy of an ultrasound picture. The gift card from the perfume shop was not there.

- She needs surgery. She gave me a gift card to buy a perfume for the doctor. But that's not what bothers me, I know what to get for the doctor. What bothers me is that I have no idea what groceries to buy. You tell me, how much flour does a household need per week? How much salami should I buy for two schoolchildren? It feels stupid to ask her that. Everything feels stupid now. Even this.

I let him drink up his whiskey, opened a pack of normal cigarettes for him and brought him the receipt with the list of groceries that I had been keeping among the rings in my jewellery box for weeks.

