

The Neighbour

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Translated from Croatian by Vesna Marić

What was the point of having a situation worthy of fiction if the protagonist didn't behave as he would have done in a book?

Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*

A quarter past seven in the morning, that's our time. I lock the door at seven-fourteen, and descend the stairs from the fourth floor. You lock the door of your second-floor flat half a minute later. You catch up with me on the first or ground floor, at seven-fifteen.

Sometimes you're the first to say *Good morning*. I prefer it that way, but I occasionally do it first, so that you don't think me unfriendly. Mostly you hold the door for me, and sometimes I catch the handle first and turn around a bit to make sure that you're holding the door and that it won't shut in your face. Now that would really not be nice. But this is

nice. You and me, alone in the building hall in the morning. The footsteps we recognise. An encounter we have repeated more than a hundred times in the last six months, which is when you moved in.

You're usually very punctual, but it has happened several times that I had to slow down when I didn't hear the sound of you locking your door, or of your footsteps. Then I would go back to the third floor, where I would wait to hear it, and then I'd hurry down as if I too were running late that morning. I don't know if you thought about how funny it was that we ran late on the same day.

When we walk out onto the street, you go right and I go left. The parking lot is on the right, the bus stop on the left. While I wait for the bus, I watch out of the corner of my eye the way you enter your car and drive off. I don't know where you go, just like you don't know where I go. When I manage to grab a seat on the bus, I will close my eyes and imagine that I am sitting on the passenger seat of your car. I don't mind that you're silent. That's probably how all couples sit, in silence, as they drive to work in the morning.

Even though we always leave at the same time, we return at different times. Or rather, you always return at a different time. It's impossible to work out your schedule. Sometimes I spend a lot more time at the window than I would like to, but if I miss your arrival, for the rest of the day I feel as if something has been taken away from me.

Your flat is exactly under mine so I can't look at your windows. If it wasn't for that one flat between us, I could lean down a bit to see at least if your lights are on at least, but I fear that this might be too dangerous.

The best moment is when I see your car arriving from the kitchen window, which looks onto the parking lot. That's when I can catch you twice. Once from the kitchen window, while you cross the parking lot and disappear around the corner, and the second time from the living room window, where I can see you enter the building. If I were living on the second floor, and you on the fourth, I would get a third glance, through the spy hole on the door. This wouldn't have occurred to me had I not, as I passed your door, thought so

many times that you might be watching me through your key hole as I go up and down the stairs.

While you walk across the car park - sometimes with a shopping bag, but mostly empty-handed - you walk quite slowly. As if you're in no rush to reach your empty flat. This is also how you climb the stairs. I know this because quite a bit of time passes before, with my ear against my door, I hear you turn the key in your lock. I suppose that no one is waiting for you at home - in these last six months I'd have worked it out otherwise. As far as I remember, I've only seen you with another person five or six times, and that was never anyone who might be your wife or girlfriend. The only woman who, according to my records, ever entered your flat, was an older lady who - judging by the age difference - could have been your mother. From what I could see from the window, you looked a bit alike, and you held her by the elbow, the way a person might hold a mother they don't often see.

Sometimes I think I should tell you how grateful I am to you. Because, you see, I used to hate my job. I hated the Centre. It was horrible to encounter all those people every day, turning up with the hope of getting a job, only to leave disappointed. Maybe they've lost hope, I don't know. Maybe they turn up because they think they ought to, because they promised to someone at home that they'd check if there were any new jobs. Thanks to you, I have regained hope. Not that I wish this for you, but nowadays one can lose their job overnight. I never used to pay attention to the people who approached the counters, but now it's different. I never thought that it might be important that I am among the first to know about job vacancies, but now I think that it's not bad at all to be at the source of such information at times like these, when everyone, including you, can end up at the Job Centre.

But even without this possibility, I feel that getting up and going to work now have meaning, at seven-fifteen in the morning, because I know I will meet you at least once in a day.

Kovač. That's written on your door. I hope that's your surname. I don't think you're renting, but it might be the case. When you were moving in, furniture was being carried inside, but people rent unfurnished flats too.

Unfortunately, there are two Kovač surnames in the phone book listed under our address. The surname is common, and the building is large. Twelve flats on each floor. Forty-eight flats in total, two with the surname Kovač. Ozren and Darko. I checked on the internet while Tereza was on her break. I would like you to be Ozren. Ozren and Katarina, it sounds the best. Well... Darko's not bad too, but Ozren is still more special. When one day we meet each other - which might even be tomorrow at a quarter past seven - and when you say, *Ozren, nice to meet you*, I don't know how I'll hide that *I knew it!* look on my face. Well, I'll work it out somehow. Maybe I'll just comment that you have a lovely name, as if I'd never heard it before.

Now is a good moment to tell you that I have a bit of a name fetish. Just so you know. I don't mean a real fetish, but more like, a silly one. When a man has a horrible name, I don't think it's a good sign. For example, my ex. Zvonko. I could have known straight away that something was off. You can't count on a man whose name is Zvonko. Zvonimir - yes, but Zvonko is really a name that makes a man seem immature, even if he were the most mature man in the world.

I think you'd like my name. I really love it. It sounds... a bit regal. Noble. It's a name that makes you at least a bit interesting, even if you're the most ordinary person in the world. That's how it seems to me, anyway. I wouldn't like you to abbreviate it. When people at work call me *Kate*, I really go mad. I've told them a million times not to call me that, but nothing. As if they are bothered by *Katarina*. As if they are doing it on purpose. Especially Franjo. See - Franjo! The very name says it all, I don't have to explain anything.

Today he was, for example, on his break for half an hour over his break time. Just like that. He doesn't care that Tereza and I have to take on his clients during that time, and explain to the people that came to see him that we just compile a list of the unemployed and that we can't make decisions about jobs. He doesn't care at all. About the jobless people, or about our discomfort.

I won't talk about Franjo. I get worked up, and for what? There are so many lovely things that one can think about. For example, today was a good day. Just as I put the soup water to boil, keeping an eye through the window not to miss you, I saw your car enter the car park. Basically, I didn't have to keep vigil at the window after lunch. When you opened the boot of your car, I thought you might have visitors today. Three shopping bags, filled to the brim. If you do normally bring shopping home, it's usually in one, two bags tops. You rarely open the boot of the car. Of course it doesn't have to mean anything. Maybe you just did a bit more shopping than usual. I ask myself often what you eat at home, with so few supplies. OK, maybe you go out later or in the afternoon, or in the evening, only I don't see it. There are more shops working late nowadays, and I can't keep watch at the window all the time either.

I have to admit that I did sense some relief when no visitors arrived. I don't know if you noticed, but the sound insulation in our building is so bad that you can always hear buzzers in other people's flats through the ventilation pipes. Maybe not if you turn the radio on or turn the TV up, but if your flat is quiet and you prick up your ears, you can hear everything. From those who did ring, no one came to you. I went out to water the plants outside the door, which is how I know. I was happy to see that you stocked up the fridge for yourself, so now I don't have to worry about what you'll have for dinner for a few days.

You have no idea how happy I am that we have the same flat. I mean, the same layout. I don't know how yours is furnished, of course, but I know how the rooms are distributed. When, for example, I sit on the sofa and watch TV, I always think that you probably have your sofa in the same spot. There aren't many possibilities in a living room

like this one. One wall is taken by a large window, another by a door that leads to the corridor, the third by the kitchen door. Only one wall is free for the sofa so we most probably sit in the same spot, maybe even at the same time. I sometimes, as a joke, call that our common dimension. We have several actually. The bath, for example. Our baths are definitely in the same spot. And the toilet, and the wash basin. OK, we don't have to talk about the toilet, but if we leave at the same time in the morning, then we must clean our teeth at the same time too, which means we are in the same spot. The beds must be in the same position, because the bedroom is really tiny.

You'd probably think I am being over the top now, but that's what us women are like. Get used to it. We turn absolutely everything into romance. Even an ordinary thing like a bath, not to mention a bed.

I'm not impatient. OK, it's true that I sometimes think that it's a shame that you're alone downstairs, and me up here. That we're so vertical, rather than horizontal. It's not as if it couldn't be nicer for us. We could have dinner together, watch a movie, scrub each other's backs. OK, I mentioned the thing with the backs for fun - you don't need to worry. But I'd really love to make dinner for you. Just so you know.

Sometimes I really get carried away when I'm cooking, as if I'm doing it for two. I mean, I try harder, the way I might cook for guests. On Saturdays, when I go to the market, I try to guess what you might like so I choose the ingredients as if you were coming over for lunch. Today I bought veal, for example. I rarely buy it, but the Christmas catalogue, that I found in my letter box, had a great recipe. You must have found the catalogue too, and you might have also noticed the meal.

When I come back from the market, I think how lovely it would be if you passed by. I don't think you'd let me carry all those shopping bags up the stairs. I used to be annoyed

that we didn't have a lift, but now I'm glad we don't. These two floors and the staircase are always an opportunity.

But... veal. I've never prepared it like this before, but I was really inspired. It's much simpler than it seems. You put a layer of spinach over the veal cut, roll it up, tie it with string and then, covered with foil, let it sit in the oven for about an hour. When you cut it up into rings, it looks incredible. I served the mashed potato just like on the photograph in the recipe - I made two small islets with cake moulds. I really felt like ringing your doorbell and saying *Neighbour, come over for lunch, I made something that needs to be shared*, that's how good it looked. But I didn't, of course. There's time. I can always make it again, now that I've tried out the recipe.

You see, I can also be grateful to you for that. I am discovering the joys of cooking in my thirty-seventh year. Because, you know, I grew up on broths. Now Tereza would probably correct me and say, *It's stews, not broths*. She likes to speak properly. I understand that. She got pregnant when she was in the second year of her literature degree, and never went back to study. She's like our editor at the Centre. I don't mean officially, but like that, when we say something incorrect. You can't be an editor without a degree. She often tells me that I'm her best student, that I have improved a lot since I have taken her tips. I don't know if it's true, but I know that I watch my words much more since she has pointed out some errors.

Mum always made broths. OK ... stews. Green bean stew, cabbage stew, kale stew, leek stew, even cucumber stew. And beans of course. She taught me too. If she has taught me anything, she's taught me that. But let's not talk about her. All I wanted to say was - if you like stews, you have nothing to worry about.

You probably eat at work. I have reached this conclusion because you never bring shopping back during the week, and because you always come back after working hours are long finished. It's too late for lunch by then. Who knows, maybe you have to do overtime.

You often seem tired when you come back. Not in the morning. In the morning when we meet in the building, you're always fresh and seem rested.

You could be an architect. Although... architects probably live in better areas. I'm not saying our area is bad, but it's still on the outskirts. You're probably not an architect, but you could be a designer. I don't know why, but every time I picture you at work I have this image - of you drawing at a large desk. You know those slightly angular desks with tall lamps attached? Well, that. That really suits you somehow. I'm not saying I'm right. You could be anything, though I am sure that you're not, for example, a car mechanic or a builder. You have hands that don't do anything hard or dirty. Beautiful, gentle hands. A person might think that you're a musician, but I have rejected that possibility because I've never seen you carry an instrument, and I'd have heard some playing through the draughty ventilation pipes by now.

Anyway... I don't know what you do, but I know a lot of what don't do. I already have a whole list. A list in my head, just so you don't think I'm writing it all down. You're not an architect, musician, you're not a car mechanic or a builder. You're definitely not a doctor, or you'd be on duty and night shifts. You're not a lawyer, I'm sure of that too. I've never seen you in a suit, and you'd have to put it on at least to go to court. You're not a professor, they work shorter hours. Because of your working hours I know you're also not a waiter, tram driver, shopkeeper, door man, or an artist. Painters, sculptors, actors, writers - they don't leave the house at seven-fifteen, and I'd have probably seen you in the papers or on TV by now. You see how much one can deduce by the method of elimination.

Maybe you're a clerk at a state company, like me. Maybe it's just a different sort of centre. The centre for statistics, for example. Although... I really don't mind. Every job is doable. I'm not bothered by those things - diplomas and other formalities. You have a job, and that's the most important thing. Even if you didn't, we'd work something out. When it comes to employment, I'm at the source of information. Just so you know.

I used to like weekends. Not that I used them very wisely, but I was happy not to have to go to the Centre for a couple of days. Now the weekend seems long. I try out a new recipe, watch TV, tidy up, things like that. I look out to see if your car is parked. If it's there, I'm calmer. If it isn't, I start to worry.

Like today, for example. I got up around eight and just before I made coffee I noticed your car wasn't there. Where can one go on a Sunday before eight in the morning? It's not really the weather for excursions, it's cold and smells like it might snow. Maybe you went to visit your mother, this would be the most logical explanation. OK, you probably also have friends that you sometimes meet on Sundays.

I was having my coffee in the kitchen, looked out of the window and thought a bit about you. OK, it's not like I don't otherwise think of you, but this morning I went back to the beginning. I tried to remember when I started talking to you like this. It wasn't when you first moved in. I saw the removal van and realised someone was moving in, but I didn't think it'd be important. If only I had. I could have, for example, paid attention to the furniture, the things they were bringing up to the second floor. I could have now known what kind of a sofa you have rather than imagining something nondescript. I could have caught any number of details if I'd known I'd need them.

And when we started meeting in the stairwell, I didn't get it right away. Normally I don't pay attention to neighbours at all. OK, I do say hello when I see them, but I avoid meetings, socialising and all that. They are mainly family people or old people whose children come to visit on Sundays and on holidays. They then bring their children, husbands, wives and there's always a racket in the corridor. It's too much for me. I don't think we have anything in common except for our address, so what's the point of getting to know each other? But the two of us are a different story. We're alone, and almost no one comes to visit us. Only after the fifth or sixth *Good morning* did I think that it wasn't a coincidence that we meet in the stairwell every morning. Only then did I pay attention to

you and little by little I worked out that you also live alone. OK, there are other loners in our building, but they're all either a lot older or a lot younger. We are, as Tereza would say, *the same age group*. You could be forty, forty-five tops. You're three to seven years older than me, as far as I can tell just by looking at you. If you've ever thought that was too much, forget it. I think it's just right. Just so you know.

Perhaps you've been married, but you definitely don't have children. Our colleague Elvira is divorced and her children go to see their dad every other weekend. That's what the court decided. You don't have any children visiting. I prefer it that you don't have children. Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against children, but you'd have to be in contact with your ex wife because of them, which can be complicated. Not to mention how complicated it is for children to accept a new woman in their father's life. A stepmother. The word itself sounds horrible. I wouldn't like to be anyone's stepmother, although... a person can get used to anything.

The fact that you don't have children can mean that you want them, but that you haven't yet found a woman who you might have them with. I mean... I know I'm not in the flower of my youth, but it's normal nowadays to have your first child at my age, even later. It's also a wish of mine, just so you know.

You didn't return until the evening. I cleaned all the windows. I hadn't planned it, but that way I had the feeling that while I was waiting, I was doing something useful. I also washed the curtains. I have curtains that don't need ironing so I put them back on the rods as soon as the spinning cycle was finished. It's not good if they stay in the washing machine because they get crumpled if you don't hang them up straight away. OK, you're probably not interested in this because you don't have curtains. When I enter the building, I always glance up at your window on the second floor. The blinds are up at that time of the day and you can tell that there are no curtains behind them. You probably shut the blinds in the evening, otherwise the people from the building opposite could see into your living room as soon as the lights are on. No one likes to be watched like that. Although... I have to admit

that I wished several times to live right there, in the building opposite, from where I'd have a good view of your window. Only then I wouldn't bump into you at the stairwell so that wouldn't be very useful.

It's good that the windows of our living rooms have built-in clothes hanging racks. That's also, so to speak, a window into your life. I suppose that you have a clothes drying rack in your flat because you rarely hang anything on the outside rack, but it happens here and there - probably when you wash a greater amount of clothes and there's not enough space for everything inside. The other day you hung up two pairs of jeans, three t-shirts and several pairs of socks. You see, I have noticed that you hide your underwear from others. I also do that. I would be uncomfortable if the entire neighbourhood had a view of my knickers and bras so I hang those up on the rack above the bath.

Your jeans and t-shirts hung outside for three days. I don't believe it's due to a lack of care, but probably only because everything dries so much more slowly at this time of the year. You probably touched the clothes several times in those three days to see they were dry, but I missed that. At such low temperatures it isn't smart to keep watch by an open window.

Today nothing is drying on your rack. There are no signs of life from downstairs.

I don't know where you spent the whole of Sunday, but I hope you had a good time. I'm not one of those women who thinks that a man should be always at home. Let him have his hobbies, friends, things he enjoys without me. The important thing is that he comes home. Just like you today.

Everything was off this morning. Because of the snow. You left the house earlier than normal, and I, stupid cow, forgot that you had to clean the snow off the car and left at the usual time. This is our first snow together so I got confused in these new circumstances. I don't know about you, but I find change difficult.

Then I stayed up on the third floor even longer, thinking you were running late. When I finally went out, I spotted you at the car park as you, slightly annoyed, dug out your car from the snow, but you didn't see me. Maybe you'd have at least waved at me if you had, although I am not sure. I missed your *Good morning*, especially after two days of abstinence.

When the bus arrived, you were still snowed in. I was worried that you'd be late for work, but if I hadn't got on that bus, I'd have been late. And even if I had stayed, what could I have done? I can't just offer you help like that, you'd think I'd gone mad.

I knew straight away that the day would be awful. I knew it already at seven-fifteen, and especially at seven-twenty five. I hated the snow and the people who were pushing on the bus, and most of all, myself. I hated my mother too who laughed at me when I told her I should get a driver's licence. Because, you see, I could have had my own car there at the car park.

Yes, you heard it right - she laughed at me. *They'll introduce a new road sign: Caution, Katarina on the road!* That's what she said when I was eighteen, when I wanted to enrol on a driving course. I believed her, like I believed everything else she said. I don't know what her problem was with me. I know that dad left when she was pregnant with me, but what have I got to do with that? How could that be my fault when I hadn't even come into the world yet? But it's clear that something was my fault, because my sister - now that's a whole different story. She passed her driving test. And got a university degree. She didn't mention new road signs to her, nor did she tell her *University isn't for you, my dear*. But I won't talk about her. I only mention her because I remembered this on the bus this morning. That's how it works when a day starts off wrong.

It got worse when I got to work. Some woman spent half an hour trying to convince me that she was the ideal candidate for a job in an agency which is looking for a specialised man/woman for finances and accounting. I don't know if you new, but under the new rules we always have to say man/woman for any new work place. If you write only 'person',

you're breaking the Gender Equality Law and the ad can be nullified because of it. Tereza used to complain about this before, and now she's in her element.

Anyway... the woman was on my case as if I was responsible for what was written on the ad and as if I decide about who gets a job. As if I can rub out *BA, MA, academy, PhD* and make it read *secondary school qualifications*. I was really trying to remain calm, although I was annoyed by everyone from seven-fifteen in the morning. *Call your boss!* she yelled at me while I tried to explain that I made no decisions, but that she'd be wasting her time applying for that job. I felt like saying *Except if you get a fake diploma*, but I, of course, can't say that. Of course I didn't say that, it would have been meaningless. In the end, I had to ask Franjo to pretend to be the boss. We do this in similar situations because our real boss would go mad if we called her to deal with such lunatics. And when I have to ask Franjo a favour, you can imagine how I feel. Afterwards he always acts as if I owe him. I'm sure that he'll go on his extended lunch break tomorrow and ask me to cover for him.

I'm sorry to bother you with all this nonsense, but I had to have a moan to someone. It's easier when a person has someone to talk to in times of trouble. OK, it's not as if I've really told you my troubles - I've thought about what I might tell you if you were here. I'm really at my safest with my thoughts. While they're inside my head, they have shape and make sense. They sound like a nice letter. If I spoke, half of them would probably tumble out of my sentences.

Who knows what your day has been like. I saw the way it started - not that well. It can't be fun to be in such cold weather early in the morning, cleaning the snow off a car. Just so you know, I am a good listener. I'd never get tired if you told me about your day, even if it had been the worst day in the world. I don't believe you can be like Zvonko. He was always complaining about something and everything was always someone else's fault, mostly mine. I wonder how I managed to stay with him for five years. Five years of torture, and in the end, he left me!

But OK, I'm not complaining. I consider myself lucky that he left me because who needs such a man in their life. Sometimes the wrong people leave us so that the right ones can enter our lives. They make space for them. Since you moved in to our building, my belief in the fact that things happen for a reason is even stronger.

It was so great to hear your *Good morning* after a three day break. I'm glad you don't say *Good morning, neighbour*. A neighbour is anyone, so it would sound like you didn't care. When you say just *Good morning*, it sounds as if you want to know my name, that you'd like to add it to your greeting.

I have, in fact, made things easier for you. You just need climb up to the fourth floor to know my surname. Owners normally only stick their surnames to the door, but I added my name just in case. Although I hate my surname. Fearwell. It really doesn't sound encouraging. Trust me, when I wish to be married, it is always because of my surname. I'd so love to get rid of it. Katarina Kovač - it sounds so good. Don't get worried now, I'm just trying it out for fun. I don't need marriage or papers. I don't say that it wouldn't be nice to get married and officially be someone's wife, but, as I already mentioned, I'm not into formalities.

I'm sure you've noticed me at the window from time to time, so you must know that I'm two floors above. If you'd been interested, you could have climbed two floors above and seen my name. The landlord doesn't know that I stuck my name over his. I did it recently. He doesn't have to know. The bills come to the post box anyway, and he never comes to the flat. He only cares that I pay the two hundred euros into his account on the fifteenth of the month.

Yes, I rent too. I moved in two years ago, after Zvonko and I split up. OK, when he left me. I lived in his flat for five years. When I had to leave, I went back to my mother briefly, but that was... it's better if I don't tell you. My sister had just had the baby then and

mum decided to invite her and her husband to come and live with her with the baby.

There's no way you'll be crowded up in that tiny flat of yours with a baby, she told them.

The child has to have its own room. And you see, the room that the child needs to have is actually the room I could have had. But never mind, I'm not complaining. That month at my mum's was too much anyway. Truth be told, I was a bit upset when my sister's husband rented out his flat to a friend from work and didn't even consider that I might... Oh never mind. Let's not talk about that.

It's good to have your own place, but you can be yourself in a different person's place. Like me. What more could I want? I pay my rent, bills, and not much is left over, but at least no one bothers me. I have my peace of mind. No one asks me, for example, what I'm doing by the window. I don't have to explain to anyone why I feel like eating veal rolled in spinach. If you ask me, two hundred euros is nothing for what I get in return.

OK, it's not that I like the landlord's furniture. It's huge and a bit scruffy, but it's just stuff anyway. Actually the one thing that does bother me is that the bed squeaks terribly. I can't turn at night without it making a noise. If you lived in the flat right beneath, you'd probably hear my bed on a quiet night, if I was feeling restless. Then it might bother me less. Luckily I don't have a lover. Because if I did, my neighbours would know my sexual timetable according to the noises of my bed. OK, that was a joke, about having a lover. I'm not a woman for lovers. Just so you know. If someone is to get access to my bed, he has to be really special.

I don't think I'm wrong when I think you're like me. I mean, that you're mostly alone and that you don't like crowds. OK, you probably have family somewhere and some friends, but I can see that your home is your castle. In our building there are lots of people who always have visitors. You're not one of those. For example, next door to me is Mr Matas. You must know him, he's always in a track suit jogging around the neighbourhood. He also lives alone, but his house is a promenade. It's either his son with his wife and children, or the cleaner, and sometimes it happens that he doesn't come home alone at

night and his guest stays over. There was one, a bit short and blonde, who came round every two or three days at some point, but then she stopped. After her there was a redhead, quite a bit younger than him. The man loves company, but he loves to change it too. I don't mind, each to his own. I'm glad you're not like that. You see, he's a lot older than you, but you live a much quieter life.

When we greeted this morning, I thought that you too were glad that it hadn't snowed again, that you could leave at your usual time and that we met. It seems you don't like change either.

Where are you all day, Ozren? I'm worried. It's past ten, and you're not back yet. Everything was as usual this morning. You said your *Good morning*, and I said it back, went right to the car park and went to work. I got on the bus just when you turned the left indicator on and came out onto the road, and I saw your profile once more because I caught a seat on the left side of the bus.

That profile came in handy because I could keep it fresh in my mind and close my eyes on the bus and again imagine that we were driving to work together. I never worry what people on the bus might think because most of them also have their eyes closed. OK, the others probably close their eyes because they're trying to sleep a bit more on their way to work, and not like me, because of an image that I long to keep. But no one knows this apart from me anyway.

When I got home from work, I warmed up the bean stew, had lunch, and then sat at the kitchen table gluing some old pictures into an album that have been sitting in a box since I moved in. My kitchen table is right by the window, so that seemed the handiest. I sat there the whole afternoon and evening. I missed my favourite series at eight, but that's not important.

The thing is that I'm just worried that something's happened to you. Are you in a hospital, without anyone to bring you your pyjamas, toothbrush and things like that? I really hope you're OK.

Maybe you've gone to the cinema. I like cinema, but I haven't been in ages. I used to go with Elvira, when she was newly separated, but I don't feel like going out lately. I feel better at home, especially if I know you're downstairs too. There are good films on the TV too. And I can't afford to go out, if we'll be honest.

My mind is full of thoughts that make me want to cry. Maybe I shouldn't have arranged those photographs today. I found the one I have of my dad, with mum and Kristina. I wasn't born yet. Kristina is one on it. I know because of the candle on the cake. She at least had that one birthday with dad, I didn't even have that.

I won't bother you with sad things. You must have your own worries. I am not a complainer, I just feel a bit sensitive today. I can't help it, but I keep thinking you might be with a woman now. I understand that this might happen. You're an attractive man, at your best. I mean, I find you attractive. I actually like bold men, I don't know why. I didn't even realise this until I met you. There must be plenty of other women who like it too, and you must come across them. I don't think about this normally, but when you're out this late, it springs to mind. Then it makes no sense that you're alone.

I know that this will sound awful, but I'd find it more difficult to know that you're with another woman now than if you were in a hospital. Of course, under the condition that you're in a hospital because of something minor, that will get better soon.

I'm terrible, I know, and it's a good thing you can't hear me. What can I do when you got under my skin.

When I got sad because of the photographs, I started to think that I should leave a letter in your post box. That I should let you know that I like you, before another woman gets her hands on you. Then I remembered that we have two Kovačs and that I might give

the letter to the wrong one. Only when I realised that I could push the letter under your door, I started to think about what I might actually write in it.

Darling Ozren! You see I'll have to ask Tereza if I should say Dear or Darling, not to make a mistake. *I am Katarina and I live on the fourth floor.* No, that's no good. First of all, I have no idea if you're actually Ozren. If you're Darko, you will think that the letter isn't for you. But, even if I knew that was your name, what would I write in that letter? If I wrote what I felt, you'd think I was mad, that I was a lunatic who will leave a boiled bunny in your kitchen, like the mistress in that movie. I'd just frighten you. I don't know, maybe that's not the case. Maybe you're waiting for my letter. Maybe you're checking your post box in hope of finding it. Then, a letter would really make sense. But I know that's not the case. You'd have said more that *Good morning* by now. You'd have added a sentence. For example, *It's cold today, isn't it?* Or *Do your radiators heat as poorly as mine?* Ok, you could be shy. Maybe you're waiting for the woman to make the first move. That's why I sometimes think about that letter.

Maybe I could just write *Greetings from the neighbour on the fourth floor.* I don't have to sign. You could then ask me the next morning *Was that you?* I'd accept even looking like a fool in front of you now, just for you to come back home. Just to see your car in the car park.

This also happened to us two months ago, remember? I was mad with worry. When I woke up in the morning, if I had slept at all, your car still wasn't there. God knows where you had stayed the night. You came back only the next day after work. Never mind, it didn't happen again. Until today. But then, two months ago, I actually understood that I felt something for you, because I had never been so worried about someone. That's when I understood that you're not just a neighbour to me, someone I meet on the stairwell and that there was something deeper and bigger between us. It's even harder today and I am even more worried. Tomorrow is a working day, and neither of us will be getting any sleep.

I have no idea what time you came home last night, but I know that you slept at home at least for a while. The car was in its spot this morning. I feel lucky that you have the sort of car that's easily recognised. I don't know anything about cars, but I can spot a golden Twingo from a mile off. There's only one other golden car at the car park, but that one is a lot bigger so I can never get confused.

I waited a bit at the landing between the second and third floor to hear the key turn in your door, and I was behind you on the stairs between the second and ground floor. Two floors with you, after you said *Good morning*. I should arrange it like that more often.

After that I immediately started to think that everything will be OK between us.

I prefer walking behind you, I'd feel a bit uncomfortable if you had me in full view for two floors. I'm not sure if you like my coat. Maybe I should buy a new one. This one is a bit out of fashion. I think I need a brighter colour. Perhaps red. It's hard not to notice a woman in red. Yes, I'll buy a red coat. It's true that the one I have could last another few winters, but you only live once. I have a credit card, I'll pay in instalments. I don't have to explain anything to anyone.

You're always dressed well. You look good in that grey puffy jacket and jeans. You always wear jeans, and I like them. I like wearing jeans too, but the ones I have don't fit me anymore. And it's Zvonko's fault that I don't wear jeans as I used to. He always used to tell me that a woman in jeans was like a man in a skirt. *A woman must look like a woman*, he used to repeat, and I am a woman who likes to make her man feel good. Stupid cow. Don't get me wrong, please. I don't think I'm a stupid cow because I wanted to make a man feel good, but because I wanted to make *him* feel good. Just so you know. He didn't deserve it.

He wasn't like that in the beginning, so I started off wrong. He pretended to be a gentleman in the beginning, he even used to buy me flowers. In fact, let's be real, not flowers exactly, but cacti. OK, I admit, I pretended to like them although I actually hate cacti. Plants that you can only get prickled by are not my favourite, but he liked cacti for

some inexplicable reason so he thought that others must like them too. It was nice to get a gift, of any kind, so I didn't complain. He used to surprise me. For example, he took me to the cinema and to restaurants. I was thirty and thought *Here's the man I will settle down with*. Yeah, right.

I'm sorry, I know it's not nice to talk about exes, especially not to badmouth them, but it would be hard to say something nice about Zvonko after all that's happened.

Your exes must say nice things about you. That's simply how you are, I can see it. A good person. My kind of guy. You have soft and gentle features and a calm posture. There's not an inch of roughness about you. You see, today when you came back from work, and you came back much earlier than normal, just after me, I saw the way you stopped and watched that half frozen cat that jumped off the bins and ran across the road. Rough guys don't do that. They don't care about stray cats. I don't remember Zvonko ever paying attention to a cat. He liked pitbulls, those ugly dogs that might devour you out of the blue.

Let's get back to jeans. Perhaps I should get a bigger size. Although, let's be real, I should lose weight. I know, I know, I am ten kilos overweight, perhaps a bit more, but I'll sort it out. Zvonko played a part in that too. *You have to have something to hold onto on a woman*, he used to say when he wanted to let me know I lacked curves. I was quite slim when I first met him. I don't get it. He thought I was beautiful at first, but afterwards he always found something to complain about. When I had long hair, he liked it short, when I cut it off, he said I looked better with long hair. That's how it was when I put weight on, although he had complained when I was slim. I know, I could have lost the weight in these past two years - but instead I have put more on. I just wasn't motivated, I let myself go. But I'll sort it out, don't worry. Elvira has recommended not mixing carbs with protein, she lost ten kilos like that, no problem. All you need to make sure is not to combine meat, fish and eggs with bread, rice, potatoes and pasta, but only with vegetables. It doesn't seem hard at all, I just have to make a plan and start.

You don't need that. You're really... slim. It's no wonder when you eat so little. The meal you eat at work is probably your only one. OK, perhaps you have some pate or a frankfurter at home, or something like that. You probably don't eat on the sofa, like me when I'm watching a series. That's really a terrible habit, but when a person lives alone, you stop worrying about things like that.

It would be so nice if we could go for a walk together, that's also good for slimming down. I think we could both do with some exercise. We could do with a lot more, but one can't have everything one wants. I am used to that. I am used to you too, and I really like it.