

Zoran Ferić

**THE CHILDREN OF PATRAS**

- Excerpt -

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

## 01. The Healer

Man invented the wheel to get away from himself as fast as possible, but then history happened to him. Some of us, besides the general history, have our own, just as terrible history that we keep running away from in vain all our lives. That's why the entrance into the house I grew up in has always seemed like a trap. When someone opened the massive oak door with squares of frosted glass, like on an ambulance, they'd run into a mirror the size of a person that stood right opposite the door. So when they visited our house, the guests first saw themselves because the person who opened the door had to step aside. And the first thing they saw on their faces was a smile meant for someone else. In this way, smiling at other people, they were meeting themselves. That's how I smiled too, fourteen years ago, when air-raid sirens started going off in Zagreb. My father was still alive, but almost immobile because his right leg had been amputated on account of his high blood sugar and frostbite he'd endured during the Second World War. When the siren would go off, I'd put him on my back and carry him into the basement. On my back, my father looked no bigger than an average rucksack, and, every time we passed by the mirror, I'd smile and wave at the image. Father would smile back. For years, I thought he did it to make himself lighter. As if smiling could neutralize gravity. It stayed like that until a couple of years after his death when I decided to transfer all of the family videos shot by the Russian Super 8 on VCR. Only then did I get a chance to see a different picture: my father carrying me on his back, smiling and waving at the camera most likely held by my mother. It was Mt. Pohorje, Slovenia, 1966. I was five years old and on his back I did not seem larger than a hiking backpack. For me, history was not a circle, but a mirror.

Behind the wall with that reflecting glass surface stood the house with all of its rooms: a living room with a kitchen and a pantry and an office on the upper level, and a staircase leading onto the lower floor, where there were two bedrooms and a bathroom. The plot on which it was built was very steep, and so the architect, sixty years ago, decided to put the living room on the upper floor, with a nicer view and more light, and the bedrooms on the ground level. That's why the entrance was not built from the street, but from a spacious garden that could be reached by a long stone staircase and from where the building looked as if it had only one level.

We met that mirror again last year, in mid-October, after the last of our tenants had left: two Austrian women who worked at Hypo Bank. I was supposed to take some old books from the dresser in the front room, where they had been standing for fourteen years after my father's death, the period during which I had rented the house. Lately it had become difficult to get good rent for this dilapidated house in a residential neighborhood so we had decided to sell it. It had been a while since we started living at Trešnjevka, in a three-bedroom apartment, and we were happy with our neighborhood. I kept my wife away from the house and most often went to meet and negotiate with the new tenants alone.

She once asked, "Why don't you want me to come along?"

"No reason," I replied, "I'm just gonna show them the house and I'm back."

"That's not what I asked," she said. "What are you hiding there?"

“Nothing,” I said, but it didn’t seem convincing. Back then, at the beginning of our marriage, it would’ve been difficult to explain what was hiding in the house. When we entered, she startled catching our reflection in the mirror. The space was stuffy, the blinds letting in only narrow strips of light, and the two of us looked like someone else.

“God, I don’t look like myself,” she said as she stepped to the mirror and squeezed a tiny pimple on her chin. As I was taking out the volumes of *The German Encyclopedia of Natural History*, Ines stepped into the space behind the mirror. I think that was fatal. That very moment she stepped inside.

I went after her. She paused there, in the middle of the living room, in that stripped light, and observed the Biedermeier dresser, the large dining table seating twelve people, the aged armchairs bitten by moths, and the coffee table with a round lacework under the dusty glass. She seemed as if seeing all this for the very first time.

“Let’s go!” I said.

“I’ve never realized how beautiful it actually is.” She walked over to the window and pulled up the blinds. “You can see the whole city.”

“Not a chance,” I said.

“We could at least think about it.”

“I’ve told you I didn’t want to live here.”

I knew houses could be as dangerous as people. They simply take a hold of you and won’t let go.

“There’s not a chance. I’m not gonna live here,” I repeated.

It was mid-October. By early November we had already rented out apartment at Trešnjevka to a young married couple, while Ines took the bare essentials and moved to her parent’s place.

“It’s just until the house is finished,” she said. “You know I can’t do without a bathroom.”

I, on the other hand, stayed in the house and slowly worked on it. We had to gut the bathroom and the kitchen, replace the wiring and the plumbing, fit new windows, remove the plaster and put a new one. After work I oversaw the contractors and slept on a living room couch. I didn’t have a kitchen, or a toilet or a bathroom. I peed and crapped in the garden, when it got dark, I ate canned food heated in a microwave, and I showered twice a week, at my mother-in-law’s. By Christmas, most of the work had been done. We were making good progress and all that was left was to paint the walls and put tiles in the bathroom. I’d decided to do that myself because we were running out of money. At the time we were somehow apart, as if dating again. After Ines left, we would spend hours talking on the phone and this was somehow more serious and more open than

when we were together. During the day, we most often talked about practical matters: where this or that kitchen appliance would stand, how we would arrange the furniture or where we would put the bath. During our late-night phone calls, we didn't worry about such trivialities. We more talked about ourselves. As if getting to know each other all over again.

The night before Christmas Eve, I put in some long hours and I was almost done painting the living room whose large windows opened up onto the garden. My wife's parents called me over for dinner.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'm dead tired. I'll grab a bite in the neighborhood."

And so, after many years, I found myself at Two Pigeons, a well-known restaurant at Kvaternik Square. There were no available tables so the waiter asked me to wait at the bar. There, however, there was a man, leaning against the counter; it was obvious he was already very drunk. Well-dressed, yet drunk, the kind you often see right around Christmas. And very bald. I don't know why this—his baldness—caught my attention. There was something else about him. It seemed as if he had grown old very suddenly. Like one of those young looking types whose face hides age for decades, and then at one moment all that time comes rumbling down their face like an avalanche. The bartender came up to me and asked if I wanted a drink.

"No, thank you," I said. "I'm waiting for a table."

At that very moment, the bald guy shuffled up to me. He didn't smell of alcohol, but of some high-quality perfume. The smell, the clothes and the face somehow didn't go together. It happens to men when they reach my age. That's what I often thought about myself when I stood in front of the mirror getting dressed: *The only thing still good about me is my clothes.*

"You'd better order something," he said. "I'm also waiting for a table. It's been half an hour."

I allowed him to buy me a shot of Jagermeister. And then we spent some time sipping our drinks in silence until he stared at me. His gaze was attentive and long and it soon made me uncomfortable. Then he finally said, "Berni, is that you?"

I turned to look at him. No one had called me by that name in a long time.

"Do we know each other?"

"Back from high school. We sat together. You, Mac, Rule, Srđan, myself. We were the only guys in the class, you don't remember?"

I tried to remember. And then it became clear why I'd thought his face had aged so suddenly. Some of his features were familiar, but they seemed to have been camouflaged and mixed with layer upon layer deposited over years of something I had not participated in. Besides that, on his bald head there was a scar that used to be covered by hair. I knew its origin: sometime at the beginning of our freshman year, Rule had pushed him by accident and he banged his head

against the radiator. He had ended up with a deep cut that had taken sixteen stitches and a month off school. We'd had to get used to him all over again once he'd finally come back to school. And, what had been the worst, he hadn't been one of us anymore. It had stayed like that until we graduated. Actually, he'd never managed to blend in, and I'd been living in a conviction it was because of that cut. Even when his hair had grown back and definitely covered his wound. Now the scar showed itself again.

Almirović Igor, who had just removed the mask of a chance passer-by, was now hugging me and I was hugging him back. I was forcing myself to feel something for him, but the only thing I really felt was the barely noticeable smell of alcohol on his neck. Now, when we shared memory of our school and classmates who graduated in the 1978/1979 academic year, we no longer needed football or politics. We'd had three more shots of Jegermaister before the waiter informed that there were still no tables available.

"You know what," Almir said. "Let's take a cod stew to go and we'll eat it at our place. You'll meet my wife."

"I don't know," I said. "It's getting late. I'm tired."

"Cut the crap," he said, made a short phone call, and called the waiter. He ordered four stews to go.

It turned out that my father's house at Horvatovac stood right next to theirs, which they had bought a couple of years before, and that we were first door neighbors. At one moment it seemed that, together with the house, I'd gotten an old classmate who hadn't been a close friend of mine in school, but who could now become one. Before they packed our food, we ordered two half-liters of merlot. We talked about high school and reminisced about all the stupid things we'd done and what we'd looked like back then. Each of us saw in another's face his own deformations. However, after so much wine, it became clear that our memories were different, not shared, and that each of us had his own. Here and there, our memories overlapped, for the most part at least. In the end, when we walked out of the restaurant, Almir was very drunk. He missed his step in front of the restaurant a couple of times and I thought he would fall down. In one hand I carried a bag containing a plastic box filled with the cod stew, and with the other I helped Almir. We headed north along Domjanićeva Street. It wasn't that late in the evening and we could see people in the streets on their way back from shopping. Balconies were decorated by Christmas lights that kept going off and on following their own rhythm. The same flickering could be seen inside the houses. However, what gave this usually busy street some strangely solemn feel was silence. Completely odd for this time of year. Silence, as if something important was about to happen. I supported Almir and dragged him up the street, but every couple of steps he paused to explain something to me.

"This is where you buy your meat," he said, "and here you get your haircut. Just stay clear of the pastry shop."

"Why? The cakes are no good?" I asked and pulled him along.

“The cakes are fine,” he slurred his words, “but their cook has a burn mark on her face.”

We moved along, making some progress for a while, but then he paused again. He stared into my eyes, as if trying to recognize me again, and then said, “Where do you stand with the disabled people?”

Once again I pulled his arm gently so we would move on. I didn’t know what to answer. But he dug his heels in. “Really, what do you think about the disabled?”

He was looking straight into my eyes. The balance was not his friend and he had to hold onto the wall.

“Did you know I heal people?”

“Cut the crap. Let’s go!”

“I’m fucking serious, I heal people.”

He pointed at some little Gypsies who’d spread out about the street, some fifty meters apart, and begged for money. One of the girls had a strange twitch, another one showed her amputated arm. They looked strange in that solemn silence. We were just passing by a young boy who sat on the pavement displaying his legs. He was barefoot, his legs were oddly twisted and red from cold, yet he kept showing them, sitting on a piece of cardboard and giving out a monotonous, unintelligible sound.

“I’ll heal him!” Almir said.

“Leave the kid alone,” I told him. “It’s late. I’ve gotta work tomorrow.”

But Almir was already standing above the kid, swaying on his feet. “Get ready for a miracle!”

I helplessly stood next to him with the cod stew getting cold. He took out a fifty-kuna note and showed it to the boy with twisted legs. The boy warily glanced first at him, then at the note.

“I’ll give you fifty kunas if your legs become straight again.”

“God help you, mister,” the kid said and snatched the money out of his hand. Then he glanced left and right, as if checking if someone was looking, and then his twisted legs went back to the normal position.

Almir took out another fifty-kuna note and showed it to the kid. “Now walk!”

“No can do, mister,” the boy said, staring at the money. “If they see me, I’ll get fucked.”

“Walk! I heal you,” Almir shouted, swaying on his feet and waving the note in front of the boy’s face.

The boy cautiously stood up and made a few uneasy steps. His little legs had gone numb, but he nevertheless walked along the cold asphalt, carefully, as if walking on water and as if any second he could sink. And the way he walked, the silence that had settled on the street and the decorated balconies, all of it seemed somehow magnificent. The boy made a small circle on the pavement and went back to his cardboard. Almir dropped the note in front of him. He almost fell. I had to catch him.

“Have you seen it?” he said. “I healed him.”

We walked the rest of the way in silence. I couldn’t forget the image of that child getting to his frozen feet and walking slowly with all those lights around us. Now we were passing by some nice houses with well-kept yards. Almir regained his step and no longer needed my support, as if in a way he’d healed himself from alcohol. I’d decided I would walk him to his house and leave because I had no intention of having dinner with his family with him in this condition. We passed by the entrance into my house and stopped in front of the house next door. A smiling, very young-looking woman answered the door, she looked so young that at one moment it crossed my mind that she might be a student, working as his housemaid. She looked at us and addressed me as if this was something completely normal.

“Daddy’s gotten a little drunk, huh?” she said and let us in. “I’m Sonja,” she said, taking the bag with the cod stew out of my hands.

She didn’t offer me her hand as if formalities didn’t interest her. Almir took off his coat and put it on a hanger. He even helped me with mine. Then we walked into a large living room, which, just like mine, had a large glass wall opening up onto the terrace in the backyard. The houses had a similar layout and they’d been built at the same time. However, something was wrong with this living room. It didn’t seem like living rooms in other houses.

“Come in, make yourself at home,” Sonja told me from the kitchen, opening the box with the cod stew.

I sat down at a large Bali-style teak table that stood in the middle of the room, while Almir messed about with the glasses. The TV was on. There were several expensive paintings on the wall. It didn’t take long for Sonja to come back and first set straw placemats on the table and then lay three plates on them. All of this seemed somehow Asian. Almir came back with a bottle of pinot noir and three glasses. It was a real miracle that he managed to hold all this in his hands.

“I’ll do it,” Sonja said, set the glasses by the plates and poured some wine for all of us. We clinked our glasses.

“I’m Berni,” I said. “Almir and I were schoolmates. And now we’re neighbors.”

“Thank god,” Almir said. “Those hags from the bank were partying all the time.”

I wrecked my brain trying to see why this living room seemed different. Something was there, in plain sight, but I just couldn't figure out what. Sonja caught my eyes gazing about the room.

"Has he been healing Gypsies again?" she suddenly asked.

"Just one."

"Good, then he hasn't spent much. Sometimes he heals the whole street. Don't you, daddy?"

"Jesus is the best guy I know," Almir said.

Sonja took a sip of her wine and smiled. "Igor, you're a Muslim. Besides, you don't know him because he died two thousand years ago."

"She always screws up my faith," Almir replied. "But, you're a Jew, right?! Bernstein is a Jewish name, isn't it?"

"It is," I said, "but I've got no connection to them."

Sonja went back to kitchen to take the bowl with the cod stew out of the microwave. In her childish animal-shaped slippers, her step was completely silent. And then I figured out what was wrong with the room. There was no living room furniture. No armchairs, no sofas, no coffee tables, nothing. Only this huge dining table made of teak and empty space around it. There was no carpet either.

She filled our plates with cod stew and we started eating. We ate in silence, and from time to time one of us would wipe his or her lips with a napkin and take a sip of wine. I had to control myself from digging into the food because I was as hungry as an animal.

"I think I saw your wife," Sonja said. "She was working in the garden."

At that moment, a loud scream could be heard from somewhere in the house. It sounded like: Mamaaaaaaa!

"Jesus," Sonja said, "I promised to give her some food. Excuse me, I'll go feed her and then change her."

"Is that your daughter?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How old is she?"

"Seventeen!" Almir said and put some more cod stew into his plate. "Her name's Marta."



He seemed like he really enjoyed the food. As we ate, we could hear Sonja and their daughter talk in the other room. Something was wrong with the girl's voice. The door to the room was left ajar, but for some reason I was afraid to look. When we finished, Almir said, "If you want, we can have a cigarette out on the terrace."

We walked out on the terrace, even though I usually didn't smoke. The night was cold and clear, and the lights on the pine trees in the surrounding gardens looked like shiny tears. The northerly brought the sharp air that smelled of snow. We kept quiet and smoked, but I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened in the room. Then Almir said, "Can you see your house?"

And really, under their garden, there stood my house. From the edge of Almir's terrace one could see through the glass wall straight into my living room. I heard Sonja's voice as she called Almir and he went back inside. Before this he threw the cigarette into the grass. I walked all the way to the edge of the terrace and leaned forward to look into my living room. It surprised me. The light was on. At one moment I caught myself fearing that I might actually see my father waving at me and carrying a child not larger than a hiking rucksack. I'd obviously forgotten to turn off the light. In the middle of the room there were a white ladder, like a large letter A, and there was actually someone standing next to it. I froze. It took me a while to realize that these were my working clothes hanging from one of the nails at the top of the ladder. It seemed as if at any moment the empty sleeve could wave at me. It was strange and a little eerie to secretly look into a life that had yet to happen in that living room. I don't know how long I stood like that when in one of the neighboring gardens the fireworks went off. Shiny rockets exploded right above us. It came out of nowhere, the explosions and colorful lights disturbed the silence. And as the rockets kept bursting, they illuminated the space around me with red, green and yellow lights, making it look surreal. No sounds could be heard from the house, no commotion or hurriedness, and then Sonja and their daughter finally came out on the terrace. Sonja pushed her in the wheelchair. The girl wore a white feather jacket with a fur collar and had a thick sleeping bag thrown over her legs. From that pile of plastic and fabric, only the wheels could be seen. One very shiny rocket split the sky open and illuminated the space below. The girl had one of the most beautiful faces I'd ever seen in person. She was surreal in that light and it seemed she was completely separated from the wheels on which she was moving.

## 02. Hair at a Gallop

In the spring, when the tulips and pansies Ines had planted in the garden had blossomed and the work in the house had more or less finished, we sometimes sat on the terrace and watched Marta as she practiced walking. Her mother would push her to the middle of the yard and lock the brakes on the wheelchair. First she'd do something with the footplates and then, one by one, lower her legs to the ground. My wife would wave at her, and Sonja would return the greeting with a smile. It seemed as if that movement of the hand and that smile had come out of the mirror in the hallway and could no longer go back. Sonja would then put her hands under Marta's arms and slowly pick her up. She did this for days, until Marta finally managed to stand on her own. This was already a huge success. Later, she'd stand behind her, holding her under her arms, and gently push her feet with her own. And that's how they walked together. Slowly, but they nevertheless walked. One morning, the spring had already been in full bloom, Ines had gone to work and I was having breakfast on the terrace. Suddenly, Sonja made a wrong move, tripped and dropped her. Marta folded to the ground like when someone drops a piece of fabric: gently and almost nimbly. I ran up to help them and for the first time had a chance to touch Marta's body. It was neither stiff nor wooden, as I'd imagined it. Just relaxed. Like I was carrying a sleeping person. I put her healthy arm around my neck and picked her up putting my hand on the back of her thighs and her waist. Holding her in my arms, I carried her into the house, while Sonja pushed the wheelchair behind us. It crossed my mind that this was how I would've carried her after the wedding. And then something happened: I set her down on the bed in her room, but she kept clinging to my neck with her one healthy arm. Frantically. I slowly took her wrist and calmly removed her arm from my neck. Her mother watched the scene. She was looking at this thing going on between us and our eyes met.

After she'd taken care of Marta and tucked her in, she came to the living room after me. I was sitting at the table, reading the papers.

"Wanna Coke?" she said and took out the can without waiting for my answer. She stood there in the middle of the room with an unopened can in her hand and began crying. It was just a moment, some passing grimace that very quickly turned into a regular expression of her face. I approached her, put my hand on her shoulder to calm her down, and took the Coke out of her hand.

"This is the first time I've seen her hug a man," she said.

From then on I just couldn't get that frantic grip with which Marta had held me out of my head.

It was already mid-March when I noticed something strange. Whenever Ines went to the toilet to move her bowels, I would completely forget about her. Otherwise we got along fine and we tried to sync our habits with the new house: having our morning coffee out on the terrace, frequent use of the corner bathtub in the newly decorated bathroom, a nice view of the garden. And we loved each other. And this is exactly why this detail surprised me. Whenever she stayed in the bathroom for a bit longer, I would forget about her as if she had never even been born. And when I heard her pull the water, I would be shocked that she even existed and that she leisurely came out of the toilet. We'd been married for eleven years, a quarter of my life. I had no idea what

was that supposed to mean. Was this what those tiny cracks looked like before they expanded into a ravine from whose steep sides we were going to shout at each other in the years to come? And Marta was making good progress. One evening, I think this was the time when we saw her walk on her own for the first time after the accident, Ines said, "I want a baby!"

We were sitting on the terrace, it was evening, and the neighbor's daughter, for the first time, all by herself, twitching oddly, made a few steps from her wheelchair to the large pear tree in the corner of our backyards. And Ines said: "I want a baby!" After ten years of condoms, after pills and diaphragms, all it took were a couple of clumsy steps for the decision to be made. At that moment, Marta must have seemed to her like a child learning to walk. But a child whose one leg and one arm were permanently paralyzed.

On Friday, and it was the last weekend in March, Ines came back from work in the evening, she was hopping around and seemed unusually happy.

"We're going on a daytrip tomorrow with Almir and Sonja," she said.

"Where?"

"You'll see," she chirped removing her shoes and, barefoot, ran to the bathroom. After this she dragged me to our bedroom.

On the next morning, when I woke up, I saw Almir in front of the house opening the trunk to his Toyota and putting the wheelchair in it. Marta's going too, I thought and was glad because of it. Nothing more, I was just glad. I was still pondering that frantic grip and the fact that it must have looked very sad. Ines barged into the room already dressed and read for the trip. "Hurry up, they're ready to go."

I wondered what it must have looked like when her mother prepared Marta for the trip; first she had to help her get out of the bed and take her to a chair that stood in the shower, then she had to dry that light hair that fluttered about as if made of silk, thin and gentle like dandelion fluff. She had to dress her too, because Marta couldn't move one of her arms. Her speech had improved a little, but she still spoke slowly, incoherently, and she sometimes had trouble articulating words. I quickly dressed and when I wanted to take my car keys that stood on a dresser by the mirror in the hallway, Ines told me, "No, we're all going together!"

"Is Almir driving?"

"Yes, why?" she asked.

"He's never sober," I replied.

Soon we all got into their car and hit the road. Marta sat in the backseat between Ines and I. There was no room and I tried, as much as I could, not to touch her, but from time to time, when the car entered the curve, my knee would touch her leg. I felt uneasy until I remembered she had

no feeling in that leg. And then I pressed my leg, the full length of it, against Marta's. It was pleasant to feel that freedom.

"How come you didn't live in the house before? Why did you wait all this time?" Sonja asked.

"Ask my husband," Ines replied. "He's hiding something."

"What am I hiding?" I said. "Have you seen anything weird in the house?"

"Not now," she said, "but I wonder what happened before."

"Two old dykes from Hypo Bank, they were the last thing that happened," Almir said. "They were here when we moved in."

"I didn't mean them," Ines said.

Marta was quiet. When we were all together, she was reluctant to speak.

We reached Kumrovec and were just passing by the house in which Tito was born, when Sonja told Marta, "That's Tito's house. See the statue!"

Marta turned her head to look at the house and the monument and lashed my face with her hair. For a moment, it seemed as if I'd dipped my head into silky water. We left the village behind us, turned left and found ourselves at a small border crossing.

"It's in Slovenia," Sonja said. "You'll see, you'll like it."

I still didn't know what I was supposed to like, but I let them enjoy the expectation they produced.

After we'd crossed the border, we drove for another half hour, until we reached a large field on which twenty or so cars were parked. There was also a small river, a very big wooden house with blossoming begonias in the windows, and a playground for children. I saw horses in the distance. Almir drove the car across the field, towards the horses. The animals stood in a very large area fenced by wooden planks. Next to the fence there were many empty wheelchairs, which, I don't know why, stood in a regular line.

"Here we are, guys! Isn't it pretty?" Sonja said.

Almir opened the door, took Marta's wheelchair out of the trunk and started to open it. The two of us got out, each on our own side, and then Sonja helped Marta wiggle out of the backseat. She stood by the car and watched horses.

"And now Marta's gonna ride," Sonja said.

“Mama, come on, please,” Marta said in that twitchy voice of hers.

“You’ve never ridden before?” my wife asked her.

“No!”

It seemed she was angry. She made a couple of steps on the grass covered in molehills while Sonja supported her. And then, just in case, they put her in the wheelchair and Almir pushed her towards the fence where there were a couple of horses without riders.

“They have special saddles,” Sonja said. “They fasten them completely so they can’t fall down.”

“How about it?” Ines said. For some reason, she was thrilled.

“Nice,” I said.

“It was my idea,” she whispered.

Meanwhile, Almir had pushed Marta to the fence and he was now talking to a man who held the reins of a well-groomed horse with an exceptionally shiny hair. The animal was completely calm. Almir and Sonja tried to get Marta on the horse. The man held the reins and whispered into the horse’s ear. It all seemed like a scene from a fairytale. Then the man pulled the reins and the horse obediently followed him. At first, Marta was stiff, but by the next lap she seemed much more relaxed. A smile appeared on her face and her beauty showed itself in all of its glory. Ines and I stood by the fence and watched Marta ride. At one moment, the man who led the horse put the reins into Marta’s healthy hand and she rode on her own. She was still going very slowly and the man kept saying something to her. Most likely he was giving her instructions how to control the horse that behaved like a machine. It was absolutely compliant. At the end of each circle, the guide led her to her parents and she told them something. Most likely she told them how she felt. What I remember most clearly from the scene are the expression of her face and the calm eye of the horse. It crossed my mind that she was to the horse what I’d been to my father, and then my father had been to me: an unnecessary yet dear burden.

“What do you think,” I asked my wife, “can she, the way she is, find a boyfriend?”

“Why wouldn’t she?” she snapped and glared at me.

Nearby were some makeshift bleachers on which sat people who had brought their immobile ones to the riding center. I headed there. I was just passing by a man in a wheelchair. He was very fat, dressed in shorts, his legs were swollen. Just as I reached him, he, as cool as a cucumber, got up to his feet and went in front of me. There was nothing wrong with his legs and he’d obviously stopped here to have a rest in someone else’s wheelchair. Now he climbed to the bleachers and sat down next to a young woman. I watched him and wondered what kind of a man could try on someone else’s wheelchair with such clam. There was something about him that reminded me of my father, in the days before amputation, when he still had his weight. The more I

watched him, the more he looked like my old man, as if my gaze was giving him someone else's features. I fixed him with my eyes, but he just calmly watched the riders. And then I noticed that the girl by his side was looking back at me. She thought I was staring at her. I lowered my eyes because I was embarrassed, but then I looked back at them. She also looked familiar and all of it seemed like some great conspiracy we had become a part of the moment we had stepped into the house. However, she smiled at me. She had a long black hair with a hairpin shaped like a large bright red flower and she wore a red blouse with a laced collar. She appeared like some beauty from a movie from fifty years before. The only thing connecting her with this time was a discrete piercing on her nose. She got up and walked toward me, smiling. It seemed she dragged one foot, but otherwise her step was normal. I knew her from the school. Occasionally I would run into her in the hallway as I hurried towards the classroom and she always smiled. She was a junior. I wasn't her teacher and our communication consisted only of that smile and the greeting. Now she approached me in a very friendly manner, as if we'd known each other for a long time.

"Mr. Bernstein, what brings you here?" she said and stood by me. The fatso saw her off with indifference in his eyes.

"I'm here with a neighbor," I said. "She was in a traffic accident."

"Ah, I see..." she said. "I thought that was your child. I don't now why I thought that." She pointed at a grey horse gently led by a man holding the reins. On the horse's back was a boy, fastened securely, who couldn't have been more than ten. Some kind of a stainless steel rod was sticking out of the saddle and the boy's shoulders were attached to it. The rod served as the boy's spine.

"Luckily, no," I said. Maybe it wasn't polite to say "luckily", but that's the way it was. The expression on her face changed slightly.

"It's good I've run into you," she said. "I've been wanting to see you."

"Yes?"

"I've written a novel. I wanted you to have a look and tell me what you think."

I was used to this. Kids from school kept bringing their manuscripts to me.

"I'll be happy to," I replied as always. "I'm at school on Monday so come see me."

"Great, I knew it, thank you so much, Mr. Bernstein."

And then she stroked my shoulder. It was completely innocent and friendly, not a frenzied grip, but a touch I barely felt. At that moment, Marta was passing by trotting slowly. She was holding the reins with one hand and seemed surprisingly confident. As she passed, she smiled at me, and whoever saw her like that could have thought that everything was all right with her. The girl from my school looked at her, then at me. She was rather curious.

“That’s my neighbor,” I explained.

However, someone called her name and she turned around to leave.

“I have to work on it some more,” she said, “then I’ll bring it to you.”

She glanced at me across her shoulder and it was a rather coquettish look, completely different from when she’d approached me. As if at the moment when she passed by us, Marta started something serious and dangerous. I observed her as she mounted the horse. She did it with skill, as if she’d been riding for a long time. There was some strange connection between that healthy guy who sat in the wheelchair and looked like my father, and this girl who was healthy yet who got on a horse with a saddle for the disabled and chased it into a gallop. Probably in her family she had someone with a disability so she began riding too. That’s how I’d remember her: galloping past the empty wheelchairs, her black hair fluttering behind her.

### 03. The Novel about the Horses

I'm forty-four and I'm nowhere better aware of this fact than in the school hallway. I'm exactly eleven years older than Christ when he got crucified and barely a little younger than Winston Churchill when he said, "If you're not a communist when you're young, you have no heart, and if you're not a conservative when you're an adult, you have no brain." These are the people who did something with their lives. And they knew when to do it. And what am I doing right now? As I'm walking towards the staffroom, a grade book under my arm, I'm looking for the girl who on Saturday approached me at the disabled peoples' riding center. I just can't forget the expression on her face when she turned around to look at me once again and as galloped by the empty wheelchairs. The fourth period has already finished and I still haven't seen her. By now this should've already happened because most of the junior classrooms are located on this floor and when you're looking for someone, it's easy to find them. I've known this for twenty-nine years now, ever since I started my freshman year at this school. Back then I watched girls and their asses in tight jeans, just as I'm watching them now. And they were as unattainable then as they are now. Thirty odd years stand between these two gazes. The life span of a Neanderthal.

When the fifth period began, I realized she probably wasn't at school because I would've surely noticed her by then, and during the recess between fifth and sixth periods, the principle told us not to scatter after the final class because we were going to have a meeting.

"It won't take long," he said, "we have an annual exams request."

It was supposed to be yet another formal, short and quick meeting we often had on account of students' request or complaints. That's what it was supposed to be, I say, but it turned into something else. The young history teacher, in charge of the juniors, opened the meeting by reading a request written by the mother of one of our students, Marina Brek, or that's what it sounded like, who due to neurological problems and frequent absence asked to take annual exams from certain subjects. The doctor's file the teacher read from suggested that she had a problem with her eyes. It seemed she had lost her sight, but after a while it came back. Then someone said, "It's not only her eyes, she has problems with her motor skills." I think it was the PE teacher. That's when it dawned on me. She wasn't a school, the foot she was dragging, the expression on her face when I said that the boy with a metal support for his spine luckily wasn't mine. The biology teacher, whose husband worked as a neurologist at Rebro Hospital, explained the situation and said that the diagnosis was not final, but that in Marina's case they suspected of multiple sclerosis. What I felt at that moment is difficult to describe. It was some gentleness that concerned Marina and her child. If someone made her pregnant, I thought, she would breastfeed the baby in her wheelchair. I don't know why I thought this, it came to me more like an image of a large empty room with a glass wall opening onto a garden and Marina who, sitting in her wheelchair, nursed the baby to sleep. A scene God would've loved.

I always fell in love with misery. I had first such relationship on the island of Rab, during summer, with a woman fourteen years older than me. I saw her on the backseat of a car with Belgian license plates that entered the town in a line of vehicles slowly disembarking the ferry. With her short dark hair, her narrow and skinny face, she looked like Françoise Sagan. I offered her an oleander flower through the open window of her car. Her excitement did not fit the situation: it seemed as if that wilting flower and I were the only nice thing that had happened to



her in a long time. We started going out. She told me she was here on vacation with her brother and his family and that she'd left her children back home in Belgium. Less than a year before, her husband had died in a stupid car accident—it was like someone drowning in a foot of water. He'd left two children behind: a boy and a girl. The girl was older and it showed nicely in the photos.

I took her to restaurants and taverns. She paid for everything, of course. Afterwards, we walked the empty streets and parks. I could tell the sadness was slowly abandoning her. The Mediterranean, together with the year that had just passed, contributed to it. It was easy to have nature as your ally in such sensitive issues. When we were in bed, she cramped and twisted as if all of her sadness had packed into that one moment and taken on another quality. However, two things marked our relationship: her misery and her ugliness. The misery attracted me, and the ugliness wasn't unequivocal. Sometimes, and from certain angles, she looked well and one would just start to think that there was some special, refined beauty hiding in her when Marie would clumsily turn around and show her other side. In profile, for example, she was exceptionally ugly because her oddly shaped head and slouchiness, as if she carried some heavy burden on her back, made themselves evident. And so that ugliness and beauty kept fighting within me for a good part of that summer. When I talked to my friends about her, I didn't say what she was like, pretty, ugly or sexy, I only mentioned that she'd lost her husband in a car accident. As if I'd fallen in love with her misery. But love towards miseries is even more volatile than love towards people. That's why I stopped loving her while we were still together. Ugliness helped me. As her holidays were coming to an end, she told me that she was ready to come back to the island in a couple of weeks, that she cared about me, that she would leave her children with her mother and come back to me. She asked if that's what I wanted. I said yes, but actually, I couldn't wait for her to leave. I didn't care what would happen later. Maybe I also didn't take her seriously.

When she did come back, I ran into her at Hotel Imperial, at the hotel's terrace, and I pretended I didn't know who she was. That was the best tactic I couldn't have come up with. She was with a friend, even more ugly than she. With the help of that friend, whose ugliness was undeniable, the ugly in Marie's case definitely won over everything else. She just stood there, at the terrace, at first surprised, she must have thought I hadn't seen her, but then shock, grief and anger settled in. Sadness came back, metastasized for a short while, and Marie locked herself in her hotel room intending to mourn both me and herself and her husband, and in the second run, the island and the Mediterranean, and, finally, the whole world. Eventually, however, she married a man from the island. They started dating ten days later. She moved to the island with her children so every summer since then, at the market and on the main street, I was forced to witness my scandal in person. We didn't greet or talk to each other. I developed a series of tactics of avoiding her, yet I was also somewhat jealous because she'd replaced me so quickly. Then I realized she'd fallen in love with the island. I'd fallen in love with misery, she'd fallen in love with the island. After all, the island was so much bigger and more handsome than me.

After the meeting, that first image of a child and its mother in wheelchair released its grip on me, and in the next days, as I didn't see Marina in the school hallway, I completely forgot about it. She came back much later, inconspicuously. She wasn't wearing anything flashy, like she had at the riding center, just jeans and a simple grey shirt. Someone stood in front of her so all I could see was some black hair and a round, bulging behind. I didn't recognize her until the girl who covered her moved a little. She was talking to some boy and vigorously gestured with her arms. I couldn't see her whole arms, only her forearms moving. I pretended I hadn't noticed her and locked myself

into the safety of the classroom. I saw her for the second time that day after the school finished, in front of the school, through the window. She was standing in a group of girls, laughing, and when she looked up towards the window, I quickly stepped back. Once again one of the girls stood in front of her so all I could see where her head, her hair and her shoulders. However, the same happened at home too. Besides forgetting my wife while she was on the toilet, there was something else: I began seeing her as if in film frames. For example, a part of the leg sticking under the table while she sat in the living room, and I watched from the hallway, or just her torso and her legs as she leaned through the window and I approached her from behind so it seemed as if someone had chopped off her head and shoulders. Or, at one moment, just a head sticking above the wardrobe door that she had just opened to take out her bra. I never looked at her like that, she was always whole. And now her wholeness began to disappear, as if she was being taken to pieces. At the same time, at school, it seemed as if Marina was being put together from similar pieces.

She approached me first thing on Monday. I was just walking down the hallway on my way to the staffroom looking left and right in search of some larger part of Marina, when she, on her own, all of a sudden, approached me from behind showing herself in one nice large piece. She was dressed like Frida Kahlo trying to paint herself and her walk was completely normal.

“Mr. Bernstein,” she said, “here it is. I hope you remember?”

She smiled at me like she had at the riding center and took the manuscript out of her bag.

“I’ll let you know after I read it,” I said, and she looked back, glanced at me once again across her shoulder and got lost among the children. First I thought I would just read the manuscript, tell her I like it and explain the situation briefly in the hallway. And then I remembered that on Friday Ines was going to her sister’s place in Pula to spend the weekend. I could invite Marina over to my place to get the manuscript. It was nothing strange, I kept telling myself, I had gone to my teacher’s place too. When I went to school, this was completely normal. I read the manuscript that very night. It was a novel about horses. About a family of four horses in which the father had gone on a long journey, and the mother and two young mares faced numerous dangers. As I read it, Ines turned into a piece of shoulder and a lock of hair on a pillow next to me. The next day, I told the girl she had written an interesting novel, but that we needed to talk about it some more. I really meant it.

“Why don’t you come over to my place on Friday evening,” I said, trying to make my voice sound as nonchalant as possible. “You’re know you need to work on it some more.”

“Great!” she said happily.

I took a piece of paper to write down my address, but she said, “No need. I know where you live.”

#### 04. Animals from the Crossword Puzzle

Life shaped like a stalking cat passed by me. I cut a piece of a sausage with my knife and threw it into the grass. I'd decided to participate. The animal paused, its muscles tense, as if preying the sausage that had disturbed the leaves of grass. We were having lunch on the terrace, in silence, all that could be heard were knives and forks scraping the porcelain. I saw Ines in front of me and her upper half, her torso, arms and head, which moved as she chewed, and on the opposite side of the table she most likely saw a man who was becoming less and less familiar. Ever since that thing with Marina had started happening, I was rather absent. She even asked me once: "Is it about the house?"

"No," I replied. "Why would you think that?"

"I don't know what happened here, but if you want us to go back..."

"No," I snapped at her and she backed down.

Then she quickly finished her meal, took her plate and the empty salad bowl and carried them to the kitchen. When she came back, she sprawled on a deckchair. The cat was now chewing that piece of my lunch completely immersed in its food, while my wife was lying on the deckchair doing a crossword puzzle.

"The sacred animal of ancient Egypt. Three letters?" she said.

I knew she wasn't expecting an answer. She needed this to keep me present. But, was it possible that things coincided in such a way and that the animal from the garden suddenly moved into a crossword puzzle and vice versa? The cat made a couple of steps, reached the hedge, and dropped its feces. As if it wanted to give that piece of the sausage back to me and move on into other backyards unperturbed, without debt. Sonja appeared on the terrace of the house next door carrying a cat bowl. Ines waved at her and Sonja happily returned the greeting.

"Come over for coffee!" she shouted.

"I can't," Ines replied. "I'm going to my sister's this afternoon. I haven't packed yet."

For a while we watched Sonja put food in the cat bowl and the cat as it ate. When she retreated into the house, Ines said quietly, "Did you know Almir used to wear a wig?"

"Almir," I said, "a wig?"

"Well, a hairpiece. He couldn't stand being bald. The neighbors laughed at him, but he didn't know it. And then that thing with Marta happened."

I said nothing.

“Can you even imagine it, Sonja said that once the wind took it off his head and he ran around the street chasing it.”

I imagined him, drunk in the street, chasing his hairpiece that keeps escaping right at the moment he reaches it, and the whole neighborhood grinning behind the curtains. How could that handsome and successful man manage to keep the status he had back in school: a local fool? And then, when Marta’s accident took place, he forgot about the wig, and the tragedy was strong enough to free him of comedy. I suppose he no longer was “that guy with the wig”, but “that guy whose daughter got injured.”

“What do you think,” I said, “are those two things connected?”

“What things?”

“The accident and the wig.”

Ines said nothing for a while as if the words she’d just heard somehow got lost in the swirls of her ears. “You’re sick,” she finally said. “You are really sick. I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately.”

Then she suddenly jumped from the deckchair and tossed the magazine with the crossword puzzle on the table. “It’s five already. I’m going to be late.”

She ran to the bedroom and I could hear the closet door open. I stayed on the terrace, sitting over the empty pate. This haste seemed out of place. We had an hour before I had to take her to the bus station. Never before had she started getting ready this early. I went inside after her to tell her something. I didn’t know what exactly, but something nice. I walked down the stairs and reached the empty window of the ground floor room. Her grey Samsonite suitcase stood open on the floor of the small room in which we kept our clothes and laundry, and which Ines sometimes jokingly called a “nursery”. She absentmindedly threw her things into the bag, without folding them. This definitely wasn’t like her. She packed her winter sweater even though it was spring, and then she threw some socks and underwear on it, and finally, as if she’d remembered something at the last moment, she took the sweater out and put it back into the closet. She hadn’t noticed me. Most likely, she hadn’t been expecting me on this side. Then she stood in front of the open closet for a while and looked at my shirts. She took one, sniffed the collar and put it back into the closet. Then she took another shirt and sniffed its collar too. I froze. I didn’t want her to notice me now as I watched her sniff my shirts. The window frame cut the lower part of her body off, and she stood there, immersed in her thoughts, with one shirt in her hand. And then she came to, put it back into the closet and went on packing her suitcase. She threw her clothes into the suitcase as if punching it, as if it were guilty of something. I don’t know when she noticed me, but at one moment she said, “You don’t have to drive me. I’ll take a taxi.”

In the car, however, we said nothing. I was driving, she was looking through the window. I didn’t like any of it. Actually, I’d never seen her jealous. When we arrived at the platform, while I was putting her suitcase into the trunk and paying the driver, she’d already gotten into the bus and taken her seat. She’d never done this before. She would always wait until we kissed, and I would

wait until the bus left. That's what happened every time in these eleven years of our marriage during which, at least once a month, on Friday, I took her to catch a bus for Pula. Only after she'd seen I was waiting, did she come down and stand beside me. She must have felt my anxiety because for the first time in my life I wanted the bus to leave as soon as possible. That is to say that there was an hour between the bus' departure and Marina's arrival, and I still wanted to buy some wine and groceries for a Mexican dinner. I hopped on my feet and stood there in front of my wife, until she said, "It's stupid that you wait. Go home!" She then kissed me and got on the bus. I waited for a moment or two until she took her seat, waved, and ran up the stairs. I should've held myself back, but it was done. It became clear that Ines now clearly felt that I wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible and that there was a burst of energy within me when she allowed me to leave. I felt sad. I slowed down, but it was too late because she could no longer see it. I walked up into the waiting area thinking about those eleven years of our marriage, about the child that just wouldn't be born and about the fact that this would be one sad old age even in the case both of us managed to grow old. In the waiting room, there was an exhibition of nude photographs. And that's how in front of me I saw the photographer's version of a woman in tears. It was a cramped figure of a naked woman squatting by a stucco wall and burying her face into her hands. She wasn't just crying, it was condensed despair. At that moment, desperation burst out of me too. I turned around and ran towards the bus. Suddenly I felt this terrible urge to kiss Ines once again and leave her to travel in peace. I ran down the stairs and saw that the bus was still standing at the platform. And then I paused for a moment. Ines was getting out of the bus accompanied by the driver. The driver opened the trunk for her, she took her suitcase, turned left and right, and slowly moved away from the clumsy vehicle that was just leaving the station. I stood there, shocked. It took me a moment to recover, and then, slowly, at a safe distance, I went after her. Suddenly it became clear why she didn't want me to drive her to the station, why she hurried me to leave. Things were, obviously, more serious than I could've even imagined. I followed her until she walked into a taxi that drove her away.

Where was she going? And what was she up to? I had to think fast. The only logical thing was jealousy. Sniffing shirts, acting oddly, her absentmindedness while she packed. It was obvious she wanted to bring everything out into the open. Most likely she intended to hide somewhere, perhaps at her parents' place, and then barge into the house when I felt safe.