

Renato Baretic

Tell Me About Her

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TELL ME ABOUT HER

She was the last to come out of a relatively small courtroom and leaned her shoulder against the wall three steps away from the door, crossing her arms and staring straight to his face. He noticed her and gave her a few more looks, but old Stamenković, a client he had just won a preliminary verdict in the second instance, was trying hard to capture his entire attention. The old man was shaking his hand as if he'd like to tear it off and take it home to place it on his TV instead of a plastic gondola or a vase.

– Mister Tomo... – Stamenković kept repeating with tears in his eyes. – Mister Tomo, I don't know how to thank you... I hoped, and my wife hoped, the kids are far away, but we couldn't believe this is actually possible... You can't imagine how grateful we are... You have to come to our place on Čiovo when all this is sorted, you... You'll see the real brodetto!

Tomo kept nodding, with an awkward smile.

– My home is your home, my table is your table, whatever you wish... – Stamenković kept going euphorically, wiping the sweaty dots on his forehead with a tissue. – You and your entire family, whoever...

He stopped and cringed, and Tomo's whole face blazed in a faked smile.

– I'm sorry. You get my point...

– I get your point – said Tomo at last, casting a short pleading glance towards the young woman leaning against the wall behind the old man and watching them mysteriously, as though she was enjoying the scene. – But let's wait for the Supreme Court, these guys will surely appeal again...

– Well they can appeal all they want – replied Stamenković and grasped his hand even harder, with extra encouragement after the faux pas. – There's no such court...

– Mister Kriste? – she finally interrupted, detaching from the wall and taking a step towards them with her hand stretched out. Tomo quickly pulled his hand out of Stamenković's clasp and directed it towards the approaching saviour.

– Anita Čelan of *Novo doba*, crime section... – she introduced herself.

– I know – said Tomo. – From the papers and here, from the court. My favourite reporter. No, seriously, don't laugh. At least you're honest and unbiased. And more literate than most of your fellow reporters. Do tell.

– Oh it's nothing, I don't want to bother you, you just...

– No, no, quite the contrary, I was just saying goodbye to my client... Let's talk soon, mister Stamenković, now we have to wait fifteen days, they'll surely appeal as soon as tomorrow, but we'll thrash them in Supreme Court, too. It'll all be fine. Goodbye, talk soon.

The old man nods, baffled, waves and rolls down the empty hallway, looking back and smiling.

- Anita Čelan, *Novo doba*... Thank you, Anita Čelan.

- Oh dear me, I really didn't mean to...

- I don't know if you meant it or not, but thank you. He almost tore my hand off, poor guy. Do tell, what do you want to know? - asks Tomo, lifting his briefcase from the floor.

- Can I ask you something... you know? I mean, not for the papers, for me, personally...

- Aries, married, father to a big eight-year-old girl...

- Not that, no... I know all that from before, either from the café downstairs, or from papers, or from TV. I'm not interested in this stuff, but... See, I've been watching you the whole year every now and then and I can't understand - how can you?! They wrecked everything for you, your home, your family, your life, and it's like you specialised in defending them, of all people. And what's worse, you defend them successfully!

Tomo gives her a murky look:

- Do you go to church?

Anita is puzzled. If she had known he would immediately jump back at her with such a hazy question, she would have probably never spoken to him in the first place.

- Well, not really, but what's that got...

Tomo interrupts her brusquely:

- Me neither, but I do go for brunch every day, that's what they taught me here. Care to join me?

- There, let's make a deal, I'll tell you everything, I'll tell you where the fire scenes were... Surely you remember this, you had to learn it by heart in school... Everything, everything, but first you need to tell me one thing I'm terribly vexed by. Tell me a secret.

- Yes?

- Yes. How about it?

- I don't know what you mean by secret... Divorced, no kids, Scorpio, the ascendant who knows, hypochondriac...

- Oh not that, something totally private!

Anita freezes halfway through a motion, takes a sip and looks into his eyes brazenly:

- Let's give it a go, do let's... I'm dying to know what is it that you want to know about me and didn't dare ask in this quarter of an hour.

- See, now this is incredible to me. True, I am from Slavonia, I'm not from here and all that, but how can you order a Coke with your smelts? How can you?! To me this is, I don't know, a bigger mystery than Immaculate Conception. Like fruit yoghurt with, I don't know, fish stew! You try and explain that...

She laughed with relief, for the first time in the past ten days:

- Well, it is a bit, you know... OK, I'll take some wine and water too.

- Vinko, another clean glass! But make it clean, not like the one you gave me - Tomo shouts over his shoulder, then leans on the table and peers curiously at Anita:

- Let's hear it. You're interested to know how I can defend Serbs, right?

- Well...

- I don't defend Serbs. My opinion about them is no better than yours. You'd be surprised to hear what I really think.

- No, not at all, I...

- Steady on. I only defend people who are trying to save what's theirs by law. Now, of course there is always a chance, and not only theoretical one, that a relative of theirs is roasting a pig in my living room on fire made of floorboards as we speak. Right? If you ask me, I'd be the death of him, I paid and laid those floorboards, but it's not the fault of these guys here. If it was, they'd be up there with their relatives, or anywhere, but not here. It's easier for me to represent those who defend their own than those who want what's not theirs. And that's the whole story.

- So you, so to say, just like your job, right?

- Not particularly, I just do it the best I can. Do you like your job?

Anita remains silent for a few seconds.

- Depends on the day. Less and less every week, to be honest.

The waiter listlessly brings a glass, too warm, dried and warmed up on the coffee maker, and drags his feet back to the bar.

- There, you see, that's the whole story - Tomo continues in a lower voice, pouring her wine and casting a glance on Vinko - a great boss, but obviously having a bad day. You can be fed up with your job on any given day, but tomorrow you'll go back to it. I work with what I got. And it doesn't make me all that sick. Again, it's much easier to defend those who want to keep what belongs to them than those who want to usurp what doesn't belong to them. It's how I comfort myself in moments of crisis...

- Well, yes... Yeah, sounds logical...

- Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't...

Tomo throws two small fish in his mouth and a bit of bread, then smiles, chewing. Anita raises her glass for a toast:

- Well then, to all the good people who every now and then grow sick of their jobs.

They clink glasses, she takes a sip, then raises her glass to the waiter flipping through newspapers behind the bar.

- What's the matter, Vinko? -Tomo shouts over his shoulder. - No rush today?

- Still too early, they'll be on soon...

- There, here they come... - Anita mumbles, suddenly in a bad mood.

- What is it?

- It's nothing... That jerk of my boss...

Tomo looks to the door, through which two men just entered. One of them, balding and with a dark moustache, goes straight to their table.

- Well well now, a working brunch this is? - he asks Anita. - I could have been on the beach with my kids if the court reports had come on time...

- Why, haven't you heard of the earthquake? The whole court building, dust and ashes... Zvone, let me introduce you, Tomo Kriste, attorney... Zvonko Skračić, my editor...

- How do you do... I'm sorry, I didn't recognise you immediately... Like this, in counterlight...

- How do you do - Tomo replies, lifting up. - It's okay, nothing to recognise...

- You just keep doing what you're doing - Skračić again turns to Anita - but make it all done by one or half past... Pleased to meet you, carry on, bon appetit...

- Let's have coffee later, but someplace else - Anita says quietly when Skračić leaned against the counter.

- Deal.

- Well the, did my answers disappoint you? - he asked her when they got out of the café into the street.

- No, it was what I expected, something like this... Sorry to be such a nuisance.

- Not at all. A proper official interview would be a nuisance, it's where I lose my nerves.

- Why yes, I didn't ask you that. I only know you blew *Novo doba* off at least twice for an interview, I thought it was because of us, but then I heard you blew others off too... Like, I know it's difficult for you, but still...

Tomo stops and points to a shop window across the street. Inside, in two rows, six TVs blazed, all broadcasting the same channel. Six faded screens listed the names of the cities where general emergency has just been declared, but the screens were visibly filled with them.

- There you go, in any of those places you have at least a thousand people better for an interview than me. Why do you need me? What would anyone ask me? About my wife? Everything you need or need not know about her is already known. What you don't know, I don't know. You know what I'm going to tell you? I don't know what to answer and, believe me, you just think you know what to ask. There you have her, if we find her alive, God willing, you can ask her when she comes. I'm just... I don't know, just industrial waste.

- Oh come on!

- Well what else? I took part in making her a hero, an icon of sorts. No one asked me if I really wanted that, but it doesn't matter, I took part and that's it. I can't even tell if she is a hero or they just made her that, how it turned out to be, with my help. Now it is what it is, the reality is only what they did... What you helped them do, you reporters. What's anyone of you got to ask me, when you know best what is and what isn't and what will or won't come tomorrow?

- You seem to think I'm a clairvoyant...

- Not you personally, you as in Anita Čelan, but all of you. And you're not... You're no prophets or clairvoyants, most of you can't tell your ass from your elbow.

- Whoa, hold your horses! - Anita interrupts him. - What's with the attitude? I neither work for anyone, nor I'm anyone's puppet, I took no part in anything, or helped anyone, what you said, nothing...

Tomo finally takes his eyes off the TVs across the street and stares at his new acquaintance. - ... and I'm sick and tired of all those who are now blaming it all on the newspapers - she continued, heating up. - Isn't that what you fucking wanted, freedom of speech? Yes. And there you go now, freedom of speech, there it is, but you again have a problem with it! I write today the same way I've always written, in the local section, in the home section, and now...

- I apologise - Tomo interrupts her. - Really, this has nothing to do with you, or anything, for that matter, you just struck a chord and I just lashed out...

- You struck mine too, mister Kriste. The finest chord, mind you! What is it that you want? To be everyone's friend, to save Serbs from evictions, to be a widower of our most famous war reporter, and at the same time live in an ivory tower or something, huh? Where no one will ask you anything or tell you anything, what, is that how you see yourself?

- Anita... - he speaks in a conciliatory tone.

- Sorry... I just blurted the widower thing. I didn't mean it, it just...

- Mirjana, look at that lady!

Tomo unequivocally points his outstretched hand at an elderly woman a few steps away. Two plastic bags full of groceries were hanging in her hands, she was standing curiously in the same spot for over half a minute now and seeing Tomo's pointing index figure now made her look for an alibi.

- There, you see? - Tomo continues, imitating the Split accent - people here stop to eavesdrop because they understand the problem. Sooner or later everyone becomes important. So what? No one asks and

why is he impotent, why can't he get it up anymore? These are the things to be sorted out together, Mirjana, together, privately, not in the street, not like this! There, madam, can your kind gentleman get it up? There, you see her running away, look! Look!

The woman storms past them and disappears around the corner, to the bus stop in front of the theatre. Tomo waits a few seconds and then chases her and stops at the corner:

– What is it? You take the onions without paying, eh? Evenings at the theatre, Turandot, Swan Lake, and mornings you steal onion! There she is! Guys!

Anita was standing and waiting for him to return, smiling at his typical Split-like humour and utterly bad imitation of the Split accent.

– The sneaky trollop! – he hissed, feigning rage, when he stopped in front of her.

– Mr Tomo...

– Wait, I'll go first. How about another coffee and then we part in peace?

– I can't, I have to write what happened, Stamenković and all that.

– One drink? A sip? Just a tiny drop? This is all wrong, we said so much and again we said nothing.

Across the street, all the six screens began broadcasting the music video of the *Hrvatine* song.

– I can't, you saw that editor prick yourself. I really, really should be going now.

– Okay then. See you around.

– Yeah. Trifunović is on the 22nd, that's next Thursday, right? There, if not before...

– Okay. See you in court – Tomo concludes, pointing his finger at her in a threatening gesture.

Of all the things in the world, Ivan was clear about only one thing: no one had the vaguest idea how he really felt. There were people who lost a son in the war, there were those whose entire families were slaughtered or exiled, many houses and parents, women and husbands burnt, many still can't find out if any of this really happened or not, but neither one of them could truly know how he, Ivan, felt. Simply because no one except him had Ivana, a daughter like this. Lovely and stubborn, irresistible and intolerable, grown up and girlish at the same time. All until the war no one noticed Ivan's obsession with Ivana. He loved her, of course, as much as a father can love his daughter, he rejoiced over the achievements in school and in the university, he was secretly proud of her bravery and carefully watched, as far as he could, that the kid didn't swerve off course. Outside of his home he never even mentioned her that much, unless someone expressly asked about her. A bystander could easily be led to conclude that Ivan, as a true patriarchal Mediterranean, pays far more paternal attention, love and pride to Vedran, the son Ružica brought into this world two years after Ivana.

However, the war, as wars are meant to do, changed everything. That summer day when Ivana and her husband Tomo returned to Slavonia, leaving six-year-old Tea with her grandparents in Split, Ivan

became a different man. He used to spend hours at night sitting next to his little granddaughter and watching her sleep, and during the day they barely saw the house: he took her swimming on every beach from Split to Omiš, he took her to Marjan, to Mosor, to Sinj for the hippodrome and to Resnik for the airport, to football and basketball games... The little magpie babbler with irresistible blue eyes was the happiest though when she chatted with grandpa's pensioners along the coastal promenade. At first she didn't know a single one of them or their grandchildren, but her brightness and imposing talkativeness in a mere five minutes outshined and diluted all the illusions grandpa's friends secretly fostered about their own offspring. Ivan just smiled.

When the war, late in the summer, heated up in the north to frightening proportions, Ivan bought a pocket radio. On the hour, wherever he was, he listened to the news broadcast by the state radio, reported more and more often by Ivana. Shortly after marrying Tomo, she moved from Zagreb to his town; she was six exams short of graduating in political studies, but she never took them: as soon as she came, she was offered a job at the local radio station, and then she became pregnant.

The more the town grew besieged, the more often her father heard her voice. Phone lines were cut off since mid-August, but Ivan nevertheless kept dialling blank numbers every day for a few times, although he could hear his daughter only on the radio.

And soon not even there.

The town, drenched in autumn rain and blood, grew heavy and fell. Rows and rows of greyed refugees crawled out of the ruins, along with their stories of even longer rows of prisoners, taken god knows where.

Two days and two nights Ivan couldn't breathe a word because he couldn't form a single coherent thought. He knew he was supposed to call someone and then pay them a visit as soon as possible, but whom and where remained unclear. On the fourth day came news that Tomo was in Zagreb, in the military hospital, heavily wounded and miraculously saved at the nick of time. Ivan jumped and immediately started packing in a chaos, and it took Ružica three attempts to persuade him that Vedran was up there since the day before yesterday and explain that there was no need to go after him.

The statistics soon listed Ivana among the "imprisoned and missing". And although her reports from the besieged town were often subjected to clumsily ruthless wartime censorship, all of a sudden, after she was officially declared captured or missing, the public started to present her as an archetypal heroine. Woman, mother, Croatian veteran and victim, and besides completely silent, unattainable – to the hands of propaganda quacks she fell prey as an ideal symbol of unification. Now you treat her as dead, now you treat her as alive and only missing, depending on the daily situation in the battlefields.

This lasted almost two whole years, and then, recently, it suddenly just died.

Dear D!

I just counted: I already have 1620 Croation dinars from granpa for the bet on Mum. I dont understand him. I dont think granma understands him either. Dad saw me counting today but he sayd nothing. Its hard for him. If he was less nervously he'd be the bestest Dad in the world. But he is the best anyways.

We have lunch tomorrow. I like lunch and being there but I don't like it cause granpa is different when there's many of us. Dad too. That's why they're quiet most the time so that they don't argue.

An A today in science and English. A B in Croation. Swimtime!!!

– The cheek, he never learned to be here on time – Ružica said quietly, putting down a large china soup bowl in the middle of the table.

– He'll be here as always, when everything cools down – said Ivan and slowly turned the ladle along the rim of the bowl with two fingers, stopping in front of Tea:

– Ivana sweetie pie, you take first, from the above, you don't like minestrone.

– Tea – says Tomo.

– What? – the girl replies to her father, as though she doesn't understand what this is about.

– I wasn't talking to you, but to your grandfather. My daughter and your granddaughter's name is Tea. Ivana is your daughter and my wife. A big difference.

– Oh you know I'm always mixing them up... One day you'll be my age too and you'll see.

– Possibly. But I hope I'll have someone younger by my side to tell me off every now and then...

Ružica left the dining room and went to the kitchen. She started opening drawers and cabinet doors as if she was searching for something important, only to have louder noises around her so that she wouldn't hear the two of them. She didn't know which was worse, their pointless arguments or long silences that followed immediately after the dispute. The only thing worse was the days without any argument, just dead silence throughout the afternoon, interrupted only by apathetic answers to Tea's questions.

– God bless electricity reduction! – Vedran huffed loudly from the hall, closing the front door, and continued puffing:

– Fuck, old man, you couldn't ask the company to give you an apartment on the top floor instead of the sixth? I was just getting into the swing of things, if you know what I mean...

Vedran stops, takes a step into the kitchen, hugs his mother energetically with one arm and gives her a loud kiss on the cheek:

– Ciao, bellissima! Tell me you made your own noodles for the soup, tell me, tell me, pretty pleaaaaaaase...

Ružica, smiling quietly, nods a few times.

– That's the spirit – Vedran continues, then steps into the dining room and sits at the table, in the seat that has always belonged to him:

- Just when you get focused, my thoughts are my steps, like, I'm isolated, switched off, there's nothin' but me and my steps, and I'm just about to go into a trance and climb all the way to heavens, and then what, nothin', all done, sixth floor, mother's minestrone smellin' at the door and - welcome to reality! If only you took an apartment on the seventh, I'd be floating in like ommmm, ommmm, and I wouldn't be gabblin' the way I'm gabblin' right now... Hey guys, and do you know why I'm gabblin'? Today I took myself, in fact let's say I bought, the third biggest carwash in this town! The third biggest and the first by location! How's that? Ommmm....

Everyone is silent. Father was taking soup from the bowl, Tomo was helping Tea unfold the napkin, and mother was in the kitchen waiting for her eyes to dry.

- Howdy there, little princess girl - Vedran turns to Tea - another straight A year like last year?

- Wanna bet?

- No, I'm not crazy, I know you're a master better.

- You didn't wash your hands when you came in - Ivan finally speaks.

- Don't worry, I won't touch you. You or your food.

- You better not, god knows whom you touched and shook hands with.

Silence commenced and Ružica finally joined the table.

- Listen, you must be aware that your new buddy is not exactly popular in this town - said Skračić after turning twice and making sure no one could hear him.

When he silently motioned her to his desk, Anita couldn't have imagined the conversation would start like this. It has been over half a year since his last outburst of jealousy, and only a day less since the moment she decided to terminate this pointless and unnecessary relationship once and for all. It was her, who kept repeating to everyone "she's never get involved with anyone at work", that had an affair with the married man Skračić, a father of two sons, a man who during those four month together looked attractive and interesting only once, only the first time. Each next encounter was a copy-paste of their office relationship - he was the boss, he gave tasks, he set conversation topics, he waved his hand at anything he found to be unimportant. She managed to wiggle her way out of this cobweb only on her fourth try, only when she, dead serious, cool, calm and collected, told him in the hallway to get the fuck out of her life or she tell all about them to his wife and the whole office ("urbi et whore-be!" she said and remembered it with pride) all about them and even more about him.

Such an introduction, by the sense and tone of Skračić's voice, threw her six months back. She replied with a silent gesture, got up and went to her desk to get cigarettes.

- Number one - she said, as she came back and blew off the first smoke - he is no buddy of mine, if Kriste is who you mean, and number two, in this town no one is exactly popular, at least you should know that.

- What, what am I supposed to know? What's your point?
- Nothing. Just that you're the editor of city and crime pages and that it's your duty to know better than anyone how things are in this town, whether you want it or not. Who's popular and who's not.
- Fuck the newspaper with the same editor for city and crime pages! - Skračić repeats his corny statement, over which his fellow reporters long time ago secretly nicknamed him "Fucktheman".
- There's only one city and one newspaper where this makes perfect sense - Anita replies with a blank face.

Skračić looks at her grimly and continues after a brief moment of silence:

- Anyways... It wouldn't be bad to find a bit of dirt on your buddy. Doesn't have to be god knows what, but just a little bit, you know, to smack him from the side... There must be something, everyone's got something, anything.
- Yeah? And may I know why?
- Oh for fuck sake, we're all fed up with his Serbs, the way he started he'd soon be...
- He's not a judge.
- What judge?
- He doesn't judge, my man, he's not the one writing verdicts! You of all people should know who the judges are and what they're like and who appointed them. If they could, they'd fuck him over in the blink of an eye, him and his Serbs. But they got nothing. They either can't or don't know how. It's not that I particularly like it, you know, let's make it clear, you know me well, but the man simply sticks to valid laws. It's how it fuckin' is, not even here you can just steal things and get away with it.
- Laws, laws... Will the laws bring him his wife back, build his house anew? The Serbs wrecked his entire life and he, like, pretends to be a saint, or what?
- The fuck's wrong with you, man?
- With me?
- No, with me! It's like listening to Tito: no need to stick to the law like it's written in stone... And that coming from you, you who undermined the same Tito and the Party from inside harder than anyone!
- Listen, babe, stop fuckin' with me and go do what you're told.
- Let's try again. Number one, don't ever call me babe, I told you that on New Year's, right! And number two, if there's any cause, you know I'll thrash him, no need to ask. But don't think for a second that I'd be looking for causes or making them up, no way.

It seemed as though half the town decided to invade the Marjanska vrata that afternoon and take a walk by the sea, around the hill or at least to the Bene beach. It was early June, but since dawn the day blazed

as if it was high summer. Tomo was nervous since they arrived, he kept peeking if someone he knows would turn up, someone who might recognise him, but Tea was more cheerful than ever. He smiled at him mischievously, determined in her intention to see her plan through, to make her father go all the way to Bene. And back.

- Is this enough for you? - he asked her when he tumbled down on a bench. He threw his head back over the backrest, less out of fatigue and much more out of irrational fear of being recognised.

- Enough, what's the matter with you? We're not even halfway there!

- Come on...

- A deal is a deal. You lost the bet, didn't you? Is that why you have to rollerblade with me all the way to Bene? Yes. You said so yourself, so...

- I did lose the bet, but you could lose your father, you know? Did you see me, I almost...

- Don't make jokes about these things - Tea interrupts him, suddenly serious.

- Okay, I won't, sorry, it just came out... - her father replies, sits up and tries to hide his feet in rollerblades under the bench.

- But what I mean is: did I skate? I did. Did you see me suck at it? You did. Well then...

- We said, all the way to Bene. I said so and you said yes!

- But I don't even know where this Bene is! How many kilometres more, how many nautical miles? My feet hurt, these rollerblades pinch me!

- Well they always pinch a tad the first time you wear them, but later you get used to it. You just need to relax your knees and it's all good. You'll see, by tonight you'll be fine and dandy, no doubt about it!

- Now you listen, you little signorina, you started talking like a real Split girl!

- And what else, I'm not gonna talk like some peasant, right? - the girl laughs. Tomo gives her a hug.

All of a sudden, Anita hauls by the bench, gently scratching the tarmac with her rollerblade's heel. Tomo gives her a brief look: sweaty, in a too wide tracksuit, her hair in a small pony tail, both more repulsive and lovelier than the other day.

- And what are you doing here? I haven't seen you here before.

- My dear Tea... - Tomo feigns despair. - There you see where this got us. Tomorrow you'll be seeing a title on the front page: "Tomo Kriste, Worst Rollerskater Ever!"

- Will there be a photo too? - asks Tea, realising immediately that this is a joke.

- Yes - Anita replies. - A normal and an X-ray, from the ER, as far as I can tell.

Tomo smiles: - Tea, this is Anita, the lady reporter... And this is Tea, my rollerblading teacher.

Tea and Anita shake hands, smiling at each other broadly.

- How do you do, and I'm not a lady, just Anita. I'm here to lose weight, how about you?

- We had a bet, I lost and now I have to make Tea's wish come true... I didn't know this would be it.

- Great, and what was the bet about?

Tomo nervously scratches his neck and waves his hand as though it was something meaningless.

- I said uncle Andrija was surely killed straight away and Dad said he wasn't, no way. And then last night on the news they said they did, they said they dug him out and brought him for a corpse exchange.

Anita grows serious, throws her head back, then suddenly makes a cheerful face:

- How about we all go get some ice cream? My treat!

- Do let's, if it's back in town - Tomo readily replies.

- It's not, it's right here, ahead, not even a kilometre, just before Bene...

- You go, I'll catch up...

- Come on! - Tea pretends to be angry. Anita gives her a hand and drags her to the middle of the road. They start spinning around each other, playing ballerinas and figure skaters, so skilfully and attuned as though they've been rehearsing this for days. A few walkers stopped to stare at them as if they were street performers. Tomo felt his temperature rising.

- Go-go To-mo! Go-go Tomo! - Anita starts calling him from the other side of the road, clapping rhythmically like at a sports match in between two cheers. Tea immediately joins her.

The audience started to grow and Tomo realised he only had two options, neither of which he particularly liked. He'll either stay on the bench and risk being recognised, or he'll get up, stand on these cursed eight wheels and again risk being recognised. He pondered for a few more seconds, then got up on his staggering feet. This way he'll only be recognised as a wretched poor devil, and if he stays on the bench he'll be both a poor devil and a coward. He takes a step and rises up and Tea and Anita grab him by the hands and drag him to this ice cream in Bene.

Sundays were always the same: the starched white tablecloth, better plates and, as a centrepiece, two china bowls. The deep one with soup, the shallow one with pieces of cooked veal surrounded by carrots and potatoes. The only difference between the Sundays was the salad. Grandpa and grandma sat, as always, at the narrower sides of the table, him in front of the window, her closer to the kitchen door, should anybody need anything, and Tomo and Tea at the wider sides, one by the other, facing the wall, the chest of drawers and Vedran's empty spot. When they already started eating without him, Vedran, as usual, called to say he wouldn't be able to come, over work, there, on a Sunday, can't help it...

Tomo more tolerated than loved his brother-in-law, but this Sunday he really missed him. His broad, athletic shoulders always blocked Tomo's view on a big portion of the chest of drawers across him, decorated two years ago edge to edge by their old man with Ivana's photos from all the life stages, from leaving the hospital as a newborn to their picture together from the last summer in Split. Searching for standing picture frames has in the meantime become one of Ivan's obsessions: whenever he found a frame he liked in town, he bought it and spent the entire day arranging his daughter's photos and trying out which one fits the new frame best.

Tomo was always trying not to see this row, this photo comic with hints of an impromptu shrine. On working days, when he came over for lunch, he fought for Vedran's seat, with this wretched chest and photos behind his back. And on Sundays he always, with long rehearsed tiny, unnoticeable moves, together with his chair and plate, even before the first bite, moved closer to Ružica, so that only three or four photos from the beginning of the row, those from Ivana's childhood, would be within his sight while he chewed and peered ahead. All the newer ones, high school onwards, would be clouded by Vedran's torso.

Vedran couldn't come today. He called when Tomo was already halfway through his usual route.

- What, you're not saying anything... - Ivan calls out, slowly rubbing the angle of the batiste napkin with his thumb and index finger.

- About what? - Tea immediately retorts.

- The frames. Two brand new. I bet you won't guess which two!

- Kranjska Gora and graduation... - Tomo replies listlessly instead of his daughter.

- Oh come on! - Tea jumps, displeased. - You just robbed me off!

In the hallway the phone again rings.

It was not the wife's photos lined up on the chest that got on Tomo's nerves. Quite the contrary, if he remained alone in the dining room, he would gladly stare at them, any of them, gently probing his eyes into Ivana's, piercing time and space with his pupils, questioning her silently, seeking for a landmark, a sign to tell him where to go and what to do. Like so many times face to face... He was certain the old man did something similar every day, he'd even get sentimental imagining such a scene, but anger would immediately overwhelm him. He was bothered by the fact that the old man was building one shrine of Ivana in the dining room and the other in the former kids' room, and that he was doing absolutely nothing but changing these frames, even though since he knew him, the man had been bragging about his connections, influential acquaintances and imaginary importance 'in this town'. Finally, Tomo was terribly vexed by the fact that her parents had dozens of her photos, whereas he was left with none. They were all burned, in the house, all the photos and all the albums. Just like everything else.

- Tomo, it's for you - said Ružica, coming back from the hall. - Some Anita woman, from the papers...

Tea jumps joyfully. Tomo gives her a dubious look, then he slowly gets up and arrives to the phone. In less than a minute he is at the door again, stretching the phone wire:

- Tea, auntie Anita is asking if you'd like to go rollerblading around five.

Tea quickly nods.

- Is homework done? - grandpa asks seriously.

- Yeah!

- And the bag ready? All the books and notebooks for tomorrow?

- Wanna bet?

They ate lunch in silence. Tomo was looking at his plate and when he looked up, the only photo of Ivana that attracting his gaze was the one with an octopus. He was told about this occasion a million times: on Šolta, around sundown, after the last swim, Ivana was sitting at the edge of a pier and waving her legs in the sea. All of a sudden, an octopus stuck to her left foot with all its tentacles. She roused, jumped terrified on the pier and pulled out the bizarre prey on her foot. Ivan, they say, smashed his glasses and sprang his ankle running to the car to get the new 'Praktica'. He came back just when the crying girl managed to shake off the octopus from her foot by insanely jerking it. The photo shows a crying little girl standing on one foot and a few tentacle ends belonging to a flying octopus, blurry, in the corner of the frame.

The ice cream was watery and almost tasteless.

- Come on, don't feel bad, idiots will be idiots even when you tell them they're idiots three times - said Tomo, glancing at Tea who was rehearsing something like a dance act on rollerblades with two other girls near the bench.

- They've got nothing on me, nor the reason why... Big deal, I fucked them over to take five apartments and they took five hundred.

- And that document story, facsimiles, back from the war?

- Come on, that's ludicrous. They came to question me at the hospital, as soon as I opened my eyes, there they were... What facsimiles, for the love of God, I haven't seen my wife in seven days, let alone took over some papers!

Anita peered at the sea through slanting pine trees tops.

- It was something like half a million German marks, somethin' like that? - she asked after a brief moment of silence.

- The hell's wrong with you? Hey! Listen... I've repeated this too many times and I thought we were done with this. I'm telling this one more time and afterwards you can ask our dear institutions, whomever you like. They recorded it all, they took notes, I told them the same I'm telling you now. I was on the platoon to fuck up tanks and tank drivers. I can tell you how many tanks we fucked up and how many bandits and poor devils we killed in them, and there's nothing else I know. Ivana was in the

shelter for a month, day and night, playing the same songs and reading the news, as long as anyone would supply them to her. When the news stopped coming, she read what she wrote herself, her despair and the despair of ten other people in that shelter. How could she have known of any money, arms or smuggling? Enough about it, I feel like a parrot among you parrots! If you too... You and your freedom of speech, if you want to pin anything on me based on this, go for it, make my day. Pin it on me, that's what we fought for!

- Sorry! God, it was only a question, by the way, for me personally. I don't mean...

- And another thing - Tomo interrupts her. - Something that's really bugging me... You're down here rollerblading with my kid and I'm thinking... I'm thinking how much she likes you. For reals. Those two kids over there with her, if you asked her whom she'd choose for a friend, them or you, I'm certain she'd go for you. So you listen to me, Anita... If you... If you're playing a double game, if you rollerblade us in the end, me and the kid, trust me, you'll never rollerblade again, I guarantee you. People, skates, nothing, understand?

Anita gets up and tries to break the tension with a joke:

- First you need to catch me!

Tomo swiftly grabs her wrist and pulls her back on the bench.

- I'm serious. Serious as hell.

Her arm hurt, the hip she bumped the edge of the bench hurt. Her eyes became brighter and brighter.

- Counsel Kriste - she said quietly - Are you afraid of me? Of me?!

- You and all the others. That way it's easier for me to be fearless, you see, when I'm afraid of you and everything else... Will you forgive me?

Anita rubs her wrist.

- You're fuckin' crazy... I was expecting a 'thank you' or something like that, but I'll settle for 'I'm sorry'. Take care, Tomo Kriste, take care of the girl and call me when she teaches you how to rollerblade...

She gets up quickly and rushes away from him.

Tomo spent a few seconds trying to pull himself together, and when he realised it was pointless, he shouted:

- Tea, let's go home!

- Already?!

Dear D!

Its so lame that they argued. Dont even know why. She could of been a cool friend to both me and dad. She funny and all. So lame.

The restaurant terrace was completely empty. Regardless of that fact, Tomo and Vedran took a seat at the table farthest away, by the railing, a dozen meters above the sea.

- Wait, only one thing matters. Is there something they could grab you by the balls for? Is there something they could pin on you and what would they in the first place? - Vedran asks, waiting impatiently for the waiter to return to the bar.

- There's nothing, absolutely nothing - Tomo replies. - There's no... Fuckin' nothing, as far as I know... No idea, nothing comes to mind.

- You sure?

- How the hell would I know, I'm sure, I don't screw around, I don't spy on people, I don't know what else there could possibly be.

- Okay, bullshit, but okay... Listen, you know me, I've nothing to do with politics, the only papers I read are sports pages and in the sports pages I read only about football, but I'll tell you what I think. This was a war, the first war in history not allowed to have its heroes. All the heroes, all the commanders and soldiers, everyone is destroyed, you get me? The only one to have a name is the one who died first, and no one else. No one, except my crazy sister and... And those reports of hers, the voice and... You get my point? She's gone, sorry Tomo, but she's gone and now it's just you and the girl, they took advantage of you and now it's over, you're just in the way. You got your awards, honours, the shit, you got a state-owned apartment to be your private property and now just be fuckin' quiet, understand?

- But I am quiet, I'm not even here, man! Apart from work, I don't exist.

- Oh yeah? And what are you doing with that work?

- What am I doing? I'm fucking implementing the laws of the Republic of Croatia and asking others to implement them too. Am I breaking another law of the Republic of Croatia by doing it, some invisible law?

- And what is it that you're doin'? You're fucking with them, you're blowin' their brains and kickin' their asses. You're a troublemaker, you show them what pricks they are, the lot of them... And another thing, you're fucking with them under the table... They fuckin' gave you everything, a place to live, a status, they made your wife a turbo diesel injection hero and is that your way of sayin' thanks? Saving some Serbs, Serbs shmerbs... You're selling them morality and they need something more substantial to feed a few junior clerks. Go fuck yourself and your morality!

The waiter, staring across them to the sea, serves them beer they didn't order and sticks the bill under the ashtray.

- So, what you're saying - Tomo continues once they are alone again - is that I should drop this eviction shit and no one would bother me?

- What else?! You want me to spell it out for you?

- Listen, law by definition is nothing more than passing and implementing laws. Nothing more or less. Im-ple-men-tation. Spin it whatever you like, I neither imagined, or wrote of proposed or adopted these laws. And now it's my fault that they're idiots and can't think of a good law? I'm here to implement and to ask others to implement them, and...

- Whoa, my man! Only idiots die for ideals, remember the song?

- Listen - Tomo replies after inhaling and exhaling deeply - if anyone knows it's so, then it's you and me, my daughter and your folks.

Vedran nods and raises his palms to Tomo, admitting a faux pas.

- And another thing... Imagine it was the other way around, if I was telling you to drop this or that. Let's forget for a second the fact that neither you nor me know what it is that you're actually doing... Wouldn't you tell me to fuck off?

- Steady on, my man, whoa! - Vedran is flustered. - Now we're fucking each other off? Remember, less than an hour you called and asked for my advice. Right? You said it seemed like someone is tryin' to pin somethin' on you and asked me what I thought. And I told you what I think. Done deal. Like you fuckin' couldn't remember yourself what might be the reason! And another thing, don't you worry about my work. In a year or two, both me and you and the kid and the folks will have a better time because of it.

- Thanks, I'll pass.

- Now you look at him, it's like listening to my sister! Speaking of her, perhaps it's time to cut this crap, huh? Anything new on sis?

- No... You?

- Oh come on! You're the one with the best fuckin' connections, you know people, phones, you're the boss in that department. I just jump in, you know that, the best I can whenever the need arises.

- No, I don't know... There's nothing. Yesterday it was three weeks that I haven't heard from anyone, neither from Zagreb, nor from the army.

- Oh fuck... But you know what, mark my words: we'll find her and get her out and bring her home. And then we'll motherfuckin' kick ass. We'll make a chain of carwashes with bars, I'll run the business, sis will do marketing, you'll be our legal consigliere. And baby Tea...

- Vedran - Tomo laughs and opens his arms helplessly - now I really need to tell you to go fuck yourself, big time!

They both stay silent for a minute, and then Vedran speaks:

- Now tell me one thing. But look, I'm serious as I can possibly be. Okay?

- Okay.

- Okay, now... When was the last time you got laid?

- Oh please! - Tomo snaps.

- No, wait, I'm serious. Actually, no! Let's put it this way: did it ever happen to you that a broad came along, you know, out of this world and you were both immediately clear what you wanted?

Tomo continues to look at him over the edge of his sunglasses, then gestures him to go on.

- And then - Vedran continues, taking a sip of beer - when it's all crystal clear and the only thing left for you is to think of where you'll take her to do the deed, she figures out who you are and what you are, and then she freezes and petrifies. Like the most frigid penguin in the world?

Tomo lightly swings his head from left to right, it's hard to deny the scenario. It was known to happen.

- It was bound to fuckin' happen, I know it had to in these two years. You're not unlovable, you're still young, still in good shape... And I bet it happened the other way around too: the broad is well aware of who you are and what you are, but she's unimpressed, she just wants to get laid. And then you choke, right?

- What of it? You have some sort of theory about it?

- I have a theory, you have practice. With the first broad, it was you who said: "I'm Tomo Kriste, the husband of Ivana Kriste, the heroine of this war, you must have heard of her." Well, perhaps not with these exact words, forget the subtleties, either way the broad was scared shitless and retreated, ran away. And with the second broad, the one who didn't care, your cock called up and said, to you, not to her: "Howdy, man, do you know who I am? I'm the cock of Tomo Kriste, the husband of Ivana Kriste, and you know damn well who Ivana Kriste is, whoa, what you doin' there? No fuckin' chance!" You get me?

- No - says Tomo, on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

- You have a nice defence mechanism that works like clockwork. No fuckin' chance it goes down and wreaks havoc. So, the only thing you need is to set it up a bit, synchronise it to work not only with pussies but also with pricks. You get me now?

- Listen, you Poljud Freud, enough with the claptrap. Even Freud would find you unbearable.

- Well then, fuck.

Vedran gets up and waves to the bar door:

- Oi! Check please...

He pulls out a bundle of bills from his pocket, then turns to Tomo who is gazing across the terrace railing:

- Two things. First, ordinary folks feel tremendous respect for you because of the war, because of Ivana and all. And this is blacklisted in this country. Only one has the right to be the motherfuckin' boss, may he live a hundred years... Even if you didn't defend the Serbs, you'd be, how you say it, a factor of disturbance. 'Cause you're their product, a disposable thing, who's now starting to last too long. And

they just want you off the market, that's the whole story. And another thing, drop the fuckin' Serbs and their eviction suits, and the pricks will give you a year or two, and by that time they'll forget about you. That's the whole story, the whole philosophy. Tactics. Ask Tomislav Ivić the football coach if you don't know what tactics is.