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**The Life of a Working-class
Woman at the End of the
Twentieth Century in
Southeastern Europe**

(Život radnice na kraju dvadesetog
stoljeća u jugoistočnoj Europi)

Novel

Translated by Christina Pribichevich Zorić

1975. When the days start getting longer, the store extends its opening times by a whole hour. That hour is the most desolate part of the day. People walk in as if it were their own house. Women wear nothing under their summer dresses. Men's nipples show through their undershirts. Flip-flops flap like fish. The floors are wet from washing. They are slow to dry in the humid heat of May. Somebody could slip and break their neck during that extended hour. By the end of the day it's the floors, counters and money that are the dirtiest. The floors, counters and refrigerator with the salamis have to be washed, and the money counted and put away in the safe. Washing the floor and the counters is part of the sales assistant's job description. The sales assistant does not count the money. The cashier counts the money. The sales assistant uses the formal *Vi* when addressing the saleswoman. The saleswoman uses the informal *ti* when speaking to the sales assistant. Wash the floor, wash the counter, wash the fridge, clean the bread shelves. She's the sales assistant. So she cleaned the bread shelves, mopped the floor and washed down the counter. She wiped the outside of the refrigerator where the cold cuts are kept, and restocked the shelves. Some things sell better than others. It depends on the time of year, the customer's needs, the price and their economic standing. It does not depend on what the customer wants. She has done her all to make sure that the morning shift can start serving customers as soon as the store opens. She's ticked off everything listed in the job description of a sales assistant, just to be able to leave work a little early. The boss isn't in. She has to fix it with her workmates. Without speaking to any of the women directly, she announces that she will be leaving work early today. There's no reaction. She says, ok, so now you know, and goes to the dressing room. The women ignore her. She takes off her ergonomic *Borosana* work shoes and slips on her regular shoes. She walks through the store. Her tapping heels are a message to the women that she is leaving early, whatever they may think about it. She leans against the refrigerator and starts counting. It's a twenty-minute fast walk

to get home. Then another twenty minutes to get herself ready. The bus leaves at eight-thirty. If she misses the bus, she won't make it to the party. On the first Monday after Whitsuntide, someone in the village always organizes a party. The tables brought out into the courtyard are laid with tablecloths. A record-player is placed on one of the tables. A cord with a lightbulb hung over the low branches of the walnut tree makes it possible to see everything and everyone around the table. But a few steps away, it is already dark. You're not supposed to come before dark. She says, you shouldn't come to a party too early, but not too late either. The women in her shift don't respond. Her desire to leave work early makes the phosphorescent tubes on the ceiling start to fizzle. The women from the afternoon shift are standing by the door. They don't dare step outside. They fidget and greet passers-by. They don't hide their restiveness. It's May and unseasonably warm. Sales assistants are more prone to fantasise than others. They are impatient. They notice every man who passes by. They giggle to camouflage their fear of winding up unnoticed and unloved. They share her desire to flout working hours and run off, to stay away for some years until they've had enough of fucking. She sees them as birds with big feet and a leonine mane. The feathered sales assistants in this damp jungle of desire and uncertainty focus on luring over the passers-by and ignore her plan to leave early. She decides that she doesn't need anybody's approval and shouts out, I'm off. That too goes unnoticed because a young man with a wild head of hair stops on his bike in front of the store. She recognizes him as the shoe factory worker who has taken an interest in one of the sales assistants. The women at the door start flirting, their bodies moving from a genuine stance of impatience to a pretend pose of indifference. She peels herself off the refrigerator, walks past the dozing cashier and disappears behind the dressing room cupboards. She changes quickly in the semi-darkness so that nobody notices. As she has no time to comb her hair, she just runs her fingers through it. She swings her spring jacket over her shoulder. She takes firm hold of her bag as if to defend herself with it and heads for the front door. The sound of her heels on the concrete floor jerks awake the cashier. The cashier casts her voice like a hook, saying it's not yet eight, and it pierces her tense muscles. She breaks free and without stopping pushes her way through the women at the door, taking care not to leave behind her jacket, her bag or her determination. At ten minutes to eight she steps out of the store. She catches the eye of the young shoe factory worker who is balancing himself on the bicycle frame with his feet. She feels like pushing him off so that he falls but is stopped by the women's silence in response to her decision to leave without asking. I'm off, she says. They can't believe their eyes as they watch her leave. She runs, disappears around the corner and escapes the women's wrath. But her departure will not go unhindered.

Waiting for her at the service entrance is the blue-smocked cashier. Standing with one foot in the store and the other outside, as if the store were a ship that might sail away, she signals her to stop. The cashier is the captain and can forbid her from abandoning ship. She can't avoid her. Sunset is in half an hour. The bus leaves at half past eight. She has to get ready and dress. The cashier pulls a soft pack of cigarettes out of her pocket, taps one out on the index finger of her other hand, puts it in her mouth and reaches for a lighter. She knows that the cashier's first drag is always the longest and she should take advantage of it to get away. The cigarette in the cashier's mouth sputters, crying out for more! more! more! The cashier takes the longest drag in the world. Even she is surprised by her uncontrolled desire. It could suck in what's left until closing time, the money from the till, the store and her herself, all in one go. Passing by the cashier who is pulling on her cigarette she says that this is the last time she'll leave early, it will never happen again. The cashier opens her mouth like a surprised child, releasing a cloud of smoke that at first just hangs in the air doing nothing and then breaks into the store. She exploits the brazen smoke to run off, reaches the shade of the hundred-year-old chestnut tree and proceeds to walk on, without looking back. Tuesday will be a day of recrimination, self-justification and punishment. She shoulders the strap of her bag and starts walking faster. She doesn't slow down until she is out of the range of vision of anybody who might have something against her leaving. Her determined walk is shaken by the feeling that she made it onto the street too early. The sky is still light. She's sure that word has already spread that she left work early. It's not yet eight and she's already outside. How dare she; it's disgraceful. The young working class woman has to serve as an example to other working class women. This has consequences. It doesn't matter that she washed the floor, the counters and the refrigerator. It is impertinent not to abide by the working hours. In front of the stadium she runs into a group of boys with wet hair; they have just finished their training session and are sharing their surplus of adrenaline by gently slapping each other on the head and grabbing themselves by the balls. The racket they make is like a bush you can hide behind and she uses it to escape notice. Passers-by turn around to look at the boys. She hides behind the still unmutated voices until she reaches the northern gate of the stadium which is used less for football and more for dog shows. The grass is trampled and bald. The most exposed part of the walk now lies ahead. The path goes past high-gated courtyards. The people standing behind the gates are watching, not talking. Sometimes they nod impulsively or grin, revealing false teeth. Any eye contact that might elicit a well-intentioned reaction from the people behind the gates or from those coming towards her on the road is to be avoided. Good intentions always leave behind either a problem or a corpse.

She stares fixedly ahead. She ignores the cars that slow down. She does not peer through the open windows of the houses. She looks away from the courtyards. She has to remain unnoticed for another kilometre-and-a-half, until she reaches the wild banana trees that mark the entrance to the barracks complex. After that it's not so dangerous. She reverts to walking at her former pace. She doesn't look up and doesn't look around. She gets used to the colour of the concrete wall, the hedges and bricks. In spite of the mimicking of dusk and her efforts to remain invisible and get home unhindered, somebody has recognized her. She hears a car behind her slow down and follow her own rhythm. She knows it is slowing down with good intentions, but rather than turn around she doggedly walks on. The car and its driver are not ready to abandon their good intentions just like that. They recognized her as the newcomer and want to give her a lift. If they haven't done so before, the driver and the car now want to welcome her and get to know her better. The car speeds up and then pulls over by the roadside. The door next to the driver's seat opens and a hand reaches out, beckoning her to step in and sit down. She stops and makes a small mistake by looking in to see whom the hand belongs to. A sweaty face greets her, blinking, saliva showing behind his smile. She first recognizes the pig ears and tails in the white plastic bag on the seat next to him, and only then the neighbour who works at the slaughterhouse. The neighbour's face is always full of nicks from shaving. Every week he brings Hothead pigs' ears and tails for his dog. She shakes her head, indicating that she will walk. The neighbour's grimace of a smile turns into a grimace of insistence. The offer has to be accepted because of its good intentions. She doesn't say anything, she merely nods him a thank you and walks on, leaving the car behind her. The impossibility of avoiding this situation makes her sweat. The neighbour doesn't give up and moves the bag with the pigs' ears and tails onto the back seat. He makes room for her even though she doesn't want it. The neighbour's good intentions slip out of control like a slap. She could cry out or throw a rock at the car. The neighbour slaps his hand on the seat next to him as if he can achieve what he wants by gesture if not speech. It is such a quiet evening that every gesture leaves a scar. Before collecting what is left of his good intentions and returning them to the car, the neighbour wipes off the pus and blood from the seat next to him and pulls shut the car door. She hears the car suddenly pick up speed, burning up not just the fuel but also the driver's embarrassment, and she waits for it to hit her from behind. When the car passes straight by, she is startled, looks up and glances at the driver. The neighbour does not turn his head. He'll pretend that nothing happened, that he didn't recognize her, that he didn't stop, that he didn't offer her a lift, that she didn't turn him down. The smell of the car's exhaust fumes gives way to that of food coming from the army kitchen.

She's hungry. The barracks are close by. She moves her bag to her other shoulder. A bunch of young soldiers is walking towards her. It's the hour when soldiers have leave to go out into town. They go in groups. The smell of cheap cologne, leather and cigarettes lingers behind them. She breathes out of her nose and gets ready to inhale the group coming her way. As they approach, they crowd together and pass by as if they're afraid she'll bite them. She takes a deep breath. Cheap cologne, leather, cigarettes and sperm. Sperm hidden in the pocket, between the fingers, in the belly button, behind the ear. The closer she gets to the barracks, the stronger the smell. Standing in front of the gatehouse are soldiers, requesting leave to go into town. She hears the sound of one hard object evenly banging against another. Whatever operation is producing it clearly isn't working, because it is taking too long. It is a sign of either persistence or of an order being carried out. Perhaps it is an exercise in perseverance, without any particular aim. She scans the parking lot for the second lieutenant's car. The car is the same colour as the soldiers' uniforms. It is hard to find. Everything in and around the barracks is the same colour. She will recognize the second lieutenant's car by the little red-starred football flag hanging from its rear-view mirror. The little flag reveals the passion he shares with other men. It swings even when the car is standing still. The previous autumn he had invited her for a ride. He was waiting for her in front of the store at the end of her morning shift. As she stepped into the car, the girls from the afternoon shift peered out of the store windows. She did not wave at them. They headed for the drenched hills on the outskirts of town. They drove across the railroad tracks and turned off the main street onto an asphalt road leading to the coal mine. The windshield wipers groaned as if making fun of them. During the ride he talked about the mine. It was virtually depleted of coal and would soon be shut down. Because of the poor terrain, the entire extraction process was done manually. They thought the vein was richer than it was. Water started seeping into the mine. The full stops at the end of his sentences kept escaping him, but she said nothing. The road was narrow and kept veering to the right, making their bodies lean to the left. Her thigh touched his elbow as he rested his hand on the gear shift. It's nice here, she said, although the only feeling she ever had in the damp forest was one of drowsiness and misjudgement. He said he wasn't going all the way to the mine and that he knew a good place. After a brief silence he said that it was going to rain for another three days. She said she didn't care. He drove the car deep into the woods and stopped. As they sat in the car, parked in the autumn mud, the drops of rain became bigger but fewer and farther between, pinging off the car roof like a counting machine. He left the engine running for the heating. The engine's vibrations turned into a kind of nervousness. She said he could turn off the engine. He turned it off without

saying a word. The car relaxed its muscles as tiny explosions from its cooling system joined the drumbeat of the rain. He undid his safety belt, turned towards her and grabbed her by the arms. She raised her right hand and said she had broken her little finger while she was still in school and that it hadn't healed properly. He took it and kissed it. She said it was too late now and that it would always remain shrivelled like that. With one invisible hand he undid her safety belt. With the other visible one he moved her bag off her lap and made room for his head. Fighting back a scream, she clenched her stomach muscles and held her breath. He dove down, she held her breath, and the rain counted the seconds. They sank down along with the car. He held her arms against the seat. He ignored the absence of any desire on her part. When she took another breath, he sat up, raised himself up off the seat and, unbuttoning his trousers, said, ok, it's your turn now. She pretended not to hear him. She ignored what he said, trying to buy time. She'd never seen a cock before. It poked out of the seat, disembodied somehow, and she didn't know what to do with it. She reached out, put her hand around it and began rubbing it up and down. Spit, he said, spit into your hand. She raised her hand to her mouth, spit a bit of saliva into it and continued to pleasure him. The cock seemed less angry, happier than before. He lifted up his shirt to reveal his chest. Lick my nipples, he said. She realized that she mustn't compare this second request of his with her own absence of desire. Leaning towards his chest, she started to suck his right nipple, trying to find in this situation a place for her own desire. That desire was sitting alone on the back seat, watching the scene in front with no intention of joining in. He moved her hand from his cock to his left nipple and said, you can be rough. Taking his cock into his left hand he continued to masturbate, so furiously now that he wound up hitting her in the shoulders and face. She thought it was her job to calm the body that wanted more than it could achieve, to calm the body that did not know how to waste time. She put her hand over his which was squeezing the head of his cock. The tension released through his nose was a mixture of tiny barks and laughter. As he achieved orgasm, he lowered her head onto his cock with one hand, and with the other began pummeling the little flag hanging from the rear-view mirror. At first her head resisted, but then it succumbed, falling onto his cold stomach, where it remained. He gathered the sperm off her cheek with his boxing hand, and, holding it between his index finger and thumb, put it into his mouth and ate it. He slurped it, eating himself, his hand twitching as if burping. Raising her head, she saw that the flag was askew. Not bad, he said, pressing his feet against the floor to lift his body off the seat and pull up his trousers. She pulled down her skirt with a wriggle, clicked the safety belt back on and realized that the car was leaning to one side. He pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and offered it to her. She shook

her head. Watching him smoke, she thought that in future she might be able to find a little love for him, and then, maybe, also for herself. They barely managed to extricate the car from the sucking mud. He had to get out and place some dry branches under the wheels. She stayed in the car, trying to decide if she was disappointed or happy and whether any part of her body hurt. When he returned to the car, he was wet, smelling like a woodsman. It rained for the next ten days. It is now spring again. There's a car in the barracks parking lot that looks like his, but it doesn't have the little flag hanging from the rear-view mirror. Maybe it fell off from all that pummelling. She stepped into the parking lot and walked over to the car. She peered in. There was nothing that she could recognize there. It could have been that car that she'd been in but it could just as well be have been some other. Being unable to recognize anything makes her want to sit down among the parked cars and wait for nightfall. She hears somebody behind her say something unintelligible. She turns around and sees a soldier wearing a cap. He is nibbling at the skin on his thumb and so only his thumb can understand what he is saying. She goes up to him and moves his hand away from his mouth. The soldier lowers his arm and asks if he can be of any help, is she looking for somebody? She decides to ignore his questions. If she mentioned the second lieutenant, it might look as if they were in a relationship. The best thing is to walk away without a word. She turns around and walks towards the exit of the parking lot. At first, the soldier watches her go, but then he follows her, repeating his questions. The parking lot is part of the barracks, the soldier says, and civilians are not allowed to hang around the complex. The soldier's words are like tiny insect bites and she runs off, waving him away. She steps onto the pavement and disappears behind the two-metre high hedge encircling the barracks. Through the balding hedge, she can see the soldier returning to the gatehouse, his thumb in his mouth. Just before entering, there is a blind spot where he can't see her, so she runs across the parking lot and sits down unseen next to the car she wants to recognize as the second lieutenant's. But what she remembers is not enough to clinch it. She pulls a pencil out of her bag. She needs a piece of paper but there's none in her bag. Checking her pockets, she finds an old bill from a customer who had wanted to prove that he had paid for his goods. The bill is the size of a match box. The date and amount are barely legible. She takes her bank book out of her bag to write on. There's room for only a few words on the scrap of paper. She writes in tiny script so as to fit everything in. What she writes are her plans for the evening. Set out like this they seem ambitious and full of anticipation. She invites him to the party. The village is not too far away. He won't have trouble finding the courtyard. She will be there. There's no room on the scrap of paper to express too much affection or hope. She stands up and sticks the piece of paper under the

windshield wiper. It's worth the risk only if this really is his car, she thinks, and, putting everything back into her bag, she straightens her skirt and heads for the exit of the parking lot, knowing that she's spent more time on it than she'd planned. She's prepared to play dumb to make up for lost time. Spotting her where he doesn't expect to see her, the soldier in the gatehouse stands up and stares at her as if he were seeing a ghost. She ignores his show of surprise, and that's enough to stop his reaction from leaving the gatehouse. The soldier shakes his head and his eyes follow her until the moment that neither is in danger of the other. She picks up her pace, murmuring to the trees and the dogs and the courtyards and the houses that they are little, very little, oh so little, hoping that this will shorten the remainder of her walk. But it is the same walk she takes every day and it requires the same number of steps, the same amount of sweat and slightly fewer hellos, because the evening news is still on and the courtyards are practically deserted. The few people not watching the news are standing in the middle of their courtyards, their eyes following her as she passes by. She avoids the looks coming her way. Nearing home, she can feel her leg muscles go numb. As the street veers slightly to the right, she spots the bus parked across the road from the house. She checks her watch. If nobody and nothing gets in the way, she'll have time to change. She walks into the courtyard, and then into the house but before she can even say Good Evening, she's warned to be quiet. Hothead's wife is waiting like a grasshopper, shushing anybody who walks in. Hothead has passed out on the couch, drunk. His alcoholic snoring is spreading evidence of his weakness at the start of the week. He knocks himself out with alcohol on Mondays and Fridays. The waste bin contains broken glasses and plates. A discarded fork lies under the table. The presenter of the evening news is speaking but there's no sound. Judging by the expression on his face, the news both at home and abroad is bad, if not unexpected. Hothead had smashed, his wife had cried. It's best not to argue with him but just let him wear himself out and fall asleep. It's a shame about the plates. She goes to her room. She starts cooling down as soon as she takes off her blouse. There's no time for her to wash. She dries herself with a towel. She picks up the dress laid out on her bed and steps into it. The viscose fabric clings to her body. She buttons it up without any help. She slips on a pair of sandals even though the night could turn cold. If the second lieutenant shows up, I can always sit in the car and get warm. She pulls out a banknote from the leaves of a book on the shelf and stows it in her bag. She combs her hair without a mirror. Hothead's wife is no longer in the kitchen. He is still snoring. She looks at his upside-down face. He smells of tanned leather. She swears softly. She gives the couch a hard kick and runs out of the room. She hears him groan, frightened by the intrusion of reality. She shuts the door behind her as she leaves. Stepping

onto the street from the courtyard she hears women's voices. Some girls are standing in front of the bus. She knows them all. She searches for the three that she likes. They hug with sweaty armpits. The girls smell of the lemon juice they rub under their arms. She sees her own reflection in the glass of the bus door. The smell of tanned leather comes from her face. She looks tired. One of the girls sees the disappointment on her face and says, you've been working all day but you don't look tired. She nods and turns her back on herself. The driver takes a few more drags on his cigarette, steps onto the bus and starts the engine. The solo girls sit down in the bus. The solo boys will come by car. She sits behind the driver and dozes off. She's awoken by somebody touching her hand. The scar of an unplanned nap sticks to her face. The girls laugh at her. She rubs her cheek. Waking up suddenly is like a change in the weather that the body still hasn't adapted to. Nothing is the same anymore. She peers out into the dusk. She'll cope with this unfamiliar situation if she just follows those for whom this isn't the first time. She's the last to get off the bus. Parked cars line the road. The young men have already arrived. She looks for the second lieutenant's car. Dusk has transformed the world into a grey picture where every object looks like the one she is searching for. She doesn't find the car. In the courtyard it is noisy. A tin lampshade that looks like a plate slices off the light from the lightbulb, making it look as if the young men are standing under the roof. They pay just enough attention to every girl that walks over to make them feel noticed, but not more than that. The record player is on the table. The owner of the record player is standing next to the table, holding a vinyl record, gently swaying his hips, sharing the beat with the clusters of people. The young men in black suits and white shirts don't know what to do with their elbows and keep shifting their weight from one foot to the other. They're wearing wide ties. Some are sporting sunglasses. They look as if they need someone to help them move, but they remain true to their decision to make the night even darker. The girls fix their short, tightly arranged hairdos. Whenever they raise an arm it lifts their dress, revealing their knees. The girls dance together. The boys watch them and after a while walk over, separate them and choose one to dance with. The girl left partnerless briefly dances on her own and then stops, trying to catch somebody's eye. The dance is simple because it is irrelevant. The moves entail touching but it's inconsequential. She stands in the safety zone of the light, surrounded by the girls she came with. She's already feeling cold. Every time somebody bumps into the table the needle jumps off the record, erasing the lyrics of love, of a girl's dark hair, of streams, of birds, of landscapes and beginnings. Every time the needle jumps, the couples dancing let out a little cry of dismay, and then laugh. Some of the girls shake their heads and put their hand over their mouth to hide their laughter. Others laugh

open-mouthed, tossing their heads back. It's not nice but it's seductive. They are the ones the boys tend to approach. The other girls innocently counteract this by saying ugly things about the open-mouthed girls who toss back their heads. The relationships are simple, as is the choice of beverage. Beer and juice. Somebody sent over drinks to the girls she's with. Four bottles of dark fizzy liquid. The girls look to see whose eyes are following the bottles. Some boys are standing by the wall of the house. There are four of them. One of them waves. She thinks he's waving at her. One of the girls says, it's you he's waving at. In a panic, she looks down and starts reading the bottle label. A refreshing nonalcoholic beverage made of herbal extracts without caffeine or orthophosphoric acids. She feels too exhausted and drained to flirt, and yet she wants to know everything about everybody. She wants to know about the boy who waved at her. What his armpit smells like. The shape of his thumbnails. How low he wears the waistband of his underpants. She could wave back, signalling that he's free to come over to her. She could step away from the group, head for the toilette and invite him to follow her. She does nothing. She's decided to wait for the second lieutenant who could yet appear. Wanting to escape the gaze of the people around her, she turns her back on everything interesting. She pretends that she's not interested in what the girls around her are saying. They talk about the boys as if they were talking about rabbits. They pull them by the ears and massage their shoulders. They scratch their asses. Sniff their anuses. Turn their names into diminutives and tell them that they're cute and nice. They're not sure whether they'd rather kill them, skin them and eat them up or go to bed with them and let them slip in between their legs. The boys seem irresistible if you think of them as rabbits. They surrender to the girls' petting. They nibble around, ready to jump on them and empty themselves in a few quick moves only if the girls turn away from them. Each of the girls has her favourite rabbit and tosses carrots, a lettuce leaf or a look at him. The rabbits pretend to love carrots and lettuce leaves more than anything else in the world and nibble on them for as long as the girls toss them their way. With each new lettuce leaf, the rabbits come a bit closer. Which is why the girls have each other's back. Without the rabbits and having each other's back, the spring parties would be boring. The dance moves conceal from the adults the game being played by the girls and the rabbits. What looks like a dance is actually a battle. She has her back turned to the rabbit that has taken an interest in her. She doesn't let him come close because she doesn't want anyone to take the place that she's keeping for the second lieutenant. She sneaks a look at her watch, not wanting anyone to notice and misinterpret her anticipation for boredom. After a while, the anticipation will give way to disappointment, but the time for that has not yet come, time she has to fill. She places the full bottle of

refreshing beverage on the table, pulls one of the girls by the arm and says let's dance. The girl finishes off her bottle and allows herself to be led to the dance floor located between the illuminated and darker part of the yard. Decisions are less firm and bodies more relaxed in the dark. The girls can dance to the music either close together or apart. When it's close together, it is harder for the boys to break them apart, so they tend not to approach them. If the girls dance apart, the boys can take that as an invitation to come over. The two girls dance close together even though the music is urging their bodies to break free. Swaying awkwardly to the double beat, each pulls the other in the opposite direction. She's cold and would rather stay in the light but her dance partner prefers the darker part of the courtyard. If she goes there, then the second lieutenant won't see her, he'll think that she left and will go back into town. The tugging between the visible and invisible area lasts until the end of the song. Her dance partner fills the silence between songs by singing. Her eyes closed, she gives it her all, as if she has only now discovered her own voice. She observes this unseeing face for a bit and then takes advantage of the moment to slip out of her partner's embrace and go solo for the next song. The girl stops singing, lights a cigarette, exhales a puff of smoke and waves away some mosquitos and a couple of boys making their way to her. She continues to dance on her own, long enough and wildly enough to feel the heat return to her cheeks and limbs. She knows they're looking at her, so she turns away from everyone. She touches her hair the way women do when caught between concern for themselves and desire for somebody else. A gesture of indecision. During the silences while the records are being changed, silences filled only with murmurs and giggles, she still continues to dance. She opens her eyes and sneaks another look at her watch. Maybe she left the message on the wrong car. The girl she was dancing with has disappeared into the dark with some boy. She's alone, exposed to the stares of the rabbits. If she keeps dancing on her own she can hold on to her freedom for a little longer and save a place for the second lieutenant. She closes her eyes. Holding out her arms with her eyes closed, she is fending off the world and buying time for the second lieutenant to appear. She dances to the song of disappointment with its long vowels and words that trail off into minor chords and wailing laments. The singer must have gone through the self-same experience, left to wait while the voices all around turn into whispers and the occasional giggle. Her eyes closed, she catches an intense whiff of cologne, with strong tones of impatience stubbornness, nervousness and uncertainty, and a softer undertone of sadness, tenderness and inferiority. She sniffs at it a little longer, then opens her eyes and sees before her a young man with dark, thinning hair, long sideburns and smiling eyes that draw attention away from his tiny teeth. She knows him. He's Rac's elder son from number

40. Before deciding whether he's good looking, she turns around and walks off into the dark. Beyond the artificial lights, the night is having a party of its own. The moonlight reveals those who want to hide. Couples are lying on the grass that stretches all the way to the potato and bean fields. The dark distant strip of land could be a low-hanging hill, but it's probably a forest. The girls are sitting on the synthetic fabric jackets that the boys laid down on the damp earth. The darkness completes all the silences that fall when they have exhausted the subjects of their conversation. The boys and girls are negotiating the possibilities of a joint future. They set out their terms. They are trying to recognize the risks. The time for negotiation is short. Youth is blackmailed by the brief time that the body is still fresh and new, and it quickly loses its dowry. She stands there seeking out the faces of her girls. She wants to go home. The bus leaves in half an hour. If she misses it, she'll have to hitch a ride with one of the boys. She hugs her shoulders to keep warm. The scent of the cologne again reminds her of the attention she ran away from. A young man buttoning up his jacket stands next to her. It's not grey in the moonlight, it's petroleum green. She notices it first and says, that's a nice colour. He says he wanted to buy a black one, but they didn't have one off-the-shelf in his size so he bought a green one. She finds it strange that he says off-the-shelf. Only tailors and salespeople say that. He says he's one of Rac's boys, holds out his hand and says his name. He has the name of the first martyred saint who was stoned. She says the colour isn't entirely green, holds out her hand and says her name. It's neither the name of a saint nor of a martyr. A diminutive. It means someone who is sweet. It's cold, she says. He unbuttons his jacket, takes it off and holds it out for her to put around her shoulders. The synthetic fabric transfers the warmth of his body to her shoulders. After a brief silence, he asks where she works. She answers and asks him the same question, even though she's not at all interested. He apprenticed with a tailor, but gave it up. He trained to be an upholsterer. Dressing people and armchairs is almost the same thing, he says, without any clear intention, and so she doesn't react. Maybe he meant it to be funny. He says that he worked the second shift today which is why he came to the party a bit later, otherwise he would have come sooner because his favourite party in the whole year is the Monday after Whitsuntide when it's already warm but not yet hot. She repeats after him, it's already warm but not yet hot, adding that she likes spring. She finds that the elongated vowels at the beginning of his words smell. She listens to him with half an ear until the moment that he asks her if she comes from around here. Glancing at her watch she says no. Where are you from, he asks. She tells him, he says he's never been there and asks if it's far away. She says it's more than two, maybe even three hours away if you want to stop for some roast lamb. He says lamb has a smell and takes a step

back. She says she loves lamb once it cools down, thinking how nobody has ever paid so much attention to her. He steps closer, pulls a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, but doesn't offer her one. The same brand that the second lieutenant smokes, though she's not expecting him anymore this evening. As he lights his cigarette, she can see the balding crown of his head. Exhaling his first puff, he says that's from the helmet. She nods as if she understands, but she doesn't. In the army, your head gets boiling hot under the helmet and your hair starts falling out, he says. That's the first time she's heard of it. That's the first time I've heard of it, she says. He says it's true. She could ask him where he served in the army, for how long, and was it hard, but she's not interested in any of that. He tells her that he ran away from the barracks once and crossed the railway bridge over the river in the dead of night, it was so dark he couldn't even see his own hand in front of him, he could have fallen between the railway tracks, he doesn't know what he would have done if a train had appeared. She realizes that the story about crossing the bridge could easily cross the bridge and reach the limit of her patience, so she stops him by asking, did you drive here? He nods his head and says he left his car a bit further away where he could find a place to park. She says they came by bus. He asks, who's they? She points to the silhouettes in the dark. The bus has left, he says. She turns around and looks at the row of parked cars. The spot where the bus was standing is empty. She thinks of an extracted tooth. She decides to pretend that everything is under control and says she knows that the bus has left, which is why she has to go with him. He asks what about her girlfriends. She replies that they'll find their own way. He says that he'll drive her only if they can dance first. She doesn't feel like dancing, but the situation doesn't favour what she wants. She'd love to throw the polyester jacket at him and his synthetic blackmail, punch him, surprise him with a left and a right, then push him onto the road and wait for a car to pass by. She'd watch the ensuing accident without enjoying it but with a feeling of utter liberation when it was over. His petty blackmail is still flickering in the evening air, but she has to get home somehow. She forces herself to look at his profile, decides that he's good-looking and that she could bear dancing with him. He looks like somebody's son, like somebody's brother, but not at all like somebody's husband. There's no relationship with a hold on his bod. Nobody is waiting for him to come back. Nobody is waiting for his attention. He can spend the night in the car. He doesn't have to think about his underwear. He can go to work in the same shirt. After work he can simply lie in bed and chain smoke. There's nobody to disappoint, because nobody expects anything of him. He moves his handsome profile and looks at her, one eye squinting from the cigarette smoke. He keeps one hand in his pocket, pretending he's not cold. She knows that the invitation to dance won't disappear if she ignores

him, so she says, we can dance for a bit. He asks what her favourite song is. She replies she doesn't have one, she likes all songs. He tosses his cigarette butt away, walks over to the owner of the record-player and says something to him. The owner of the record-player nods and starts rifling through the records, looking for a particular one. Before that song starts playing, he removes the jacket from her shoulders and tosses it over the back of a chair. She recognizes the tune he's chosen but doesn't understand the lyrics because they're in English. He starts dancing, contorting his body so that he looks as if he might fall over. Although there's a method to his dancing, she thinks it looks funny. If she bursts out laughing, she risks losing a ride home. So she joins him, following his repetitive moves. They dance like two people who are simultaneously talking about different things and who do not for a second intend to listen to each other. Still dancing, he starts singing along with the voice that's coming out of the speaker, introducing a third voice of chaos between them. His voice trails off into the high octaves of a bad falsetto. He is wailing rather than singing. The voice coming out of the speaker repeats the same words, turning them into the non-existent words of a non-existent language. She watches the invented language spill out of his mouth and moves closer to ask what the song is about. At first, he pretends not to have heard her and keeps trying to win her over with an invented language camouflaged by a piercing falsetto. She thinks that somebody should have told him by now that it's too high an octave for him and that it sounds bad. To stop him singing, she again asks him what the song is about. He slows down, says yes, yes, and resumes his jerky dance moves. She stops following his moves, making him do the same. Then she asks him again. At first he doesn't say anything, listening to the song as if it will help him understand the lyrics, and then he says that it must be about love, all songs are about love, and then he goes back to his jerky dance moves, hoping to spare himself the embarrassment of showing his ignorance. She'd tell him he's lying except this, like any such statement, is completely pointless compared to the fact that he has a car. He's right, even though he hasn't a clue. The night lying ahead of her looks endless, full of sexual juices and the dandruff of dashed expectations that tickle the nose and bring tears to the eyes. She signals that she wants to tell him something. He comes closer, his hips still gyrating, to hear what she wants. She says she wants to go home. He nods that he understands and keeps on dancing. The song he chose ended a long time ago, but he continues, with equal enthusiasm, to invent non-existent lyrics in a non-existent language for the songs that follow. The fact that he insists on persisting with this absurdity might be seen by some as an expression of freedom, but really it is simply stubborn self-confidence which will only grow as his hair-line recedes. She says again that she's cold. She can't ignore the cold. He keeps on

dancing. I'd like to go, she says. He stops dancing and says, looking at the soft spot on her neck, we can't be the first to leave. She says some people have already left. He says we can't be the first to leave, if others can stay so can we for a bit. She looks to see who those others are. He takes his jacket off the back of the chair and puts it over her shoulders. She removes it. He says, you can sit in the car and wait for me if you like, and then he moves away to resume dancing, searching for something in the pockets of his jacket. She'd like to tell him all the things that are wrong with that sentence, but she doesn't say anything. She feels as if she's known him for a thousand years, and that they have been exhausting each other for at least five hundred of them. She made a mistake and she can't correct it anymore tonight, so she looks around for some sign that this might all soon be over. Empty bottles. Empty packs of cigarettes. Smearred make-up on greasy faces. Shirts hanging loose from their belts. Slumped bodies. Sleeping birds. Men's flies bulging with semi-erections. The owner of the record-player, his hand propping up his head, staring at the spot where the needle touches the record. The one person who could have stopped her from making a mistake hasn't appeared and will not appear. A missed opportunity has been replaced by a new, less exciting, very predictable one. She sees nothing to indicate that there is an end to this evening and its consequences. The content and character of this night belong to the future. If she looks closely, she will see it, she will see the inescapable future. She will see them leave the party and sit in the car, she cold, he proud, then drive to town without saying a word. She will see the end of spring and the beginning of summer. She will see herself getting engaged in Hothead's house. She will see herself agreeing to be obedient. She will see herself giving up any idea of fighting it. She will see herself waiting for somebody else to make the decisions. She will see her quiet surrender gradually turn into a melancholy that she will carry like the colour of her skin.

1978. By January, by the beginning of the year, by the first snow, by the first time the temperature dropped to below zero, by the first Orthodox Christmas, all the wounds visible to the naked eye had healed. The women she shares her shift with lift the crates of beer and water in her stead, they drag over the sacks of cattle feed and carry over the bread baskets. She would prefer to do it herself, but the women won't have it. They protect her from the misapprehension of what a scarred body can and can't do. You've had an incision, they keep saying as if her body had been cut in half and put back together again. She says, they didn't cut me in half, they just made an incision, and every incision heals. The women say, sometimes they do and sometimes they don't, and ask her to show them the scar. Show us so that we can see where they cut you, the women say. They hustle her into the kitchen like a flock of geese and ask her to undo her skirt, pull up her undershirt, roll down her girdle and the waistband of her underpants. They look at it, touch it, keep asking if it hurts. Does it hurt, asks the childless woman touching her. She says, it's been six months already, it's healed, and no it doesn't hurt, I can do everything myself. One of her other workmates says, it's not just an external incision it's an internal incision as well and things inside are slower to heal, you shouldn't do any heavy lifting yet. Another says, after all, it was a C-section. The others nod their heads, but none of them mention the child she lost. She wants to get away from their attention and advice, and pretends that a customer has just walked in. A customer has walked in, she says. The women listen and run out of the kitchen. She fixes her girdle, pulls the waistband of her skirt back over the incision, buttons it closed, walks out of the kitchen and stands in her place by the refrigerator. The edge of the work surface is level with the incision on her abdomen. As soon as she returned to work, she discovered this coincidence and the pleasure it gave her. Rubbing it down is like an invisible hand in her underpants. Something between an injury and pleasure. She wishes she could rub away the scar, or at least turn it into something

decorative. She rubs herself when no one is looking. She rubs herself just the way he does when he's watching television with his hand down his pants. She has to order some more salami for next week. The women eat more in the winter. She especially has to order more Tyrolean salami. The factory women prefer it to baloney, even though it's more expensive. She always tells those who try to hide their poverty by acting as if they can't make up their mind and then opt for the cheaper salami, that a good part of the Tyrolian salami consists of high-quality pork and beef. As if high-quality pork and beef will make a difference to poverty and its choice of baloney. Tyrolean salami takes its name from the Tyrol, where there's always snow and people ski from one place to another. The workers say Tyrolean as if they've been there. When she's in a good mood, she tells them, it's as if you're from the Tyrol. Some of them ignore her and simply repeat their order, one hundred grams of Tyrolean and a quarter loaf of black bread. A hundred grams of Tyrolean is enough for a worker's sandwich. Other workers say, we're not from the Tyrol, and opt for the cheaper salami. She asks the workers if they've ever been to the Tyrol and they say, we haven't been anywhere, and we won't be going anywhere, only the well-heeled go to the Tyrol. Some workers finish their sandwich in three big bites, without chewing. They gobble them down to make time for a smoke. She checks next week's salami order and touches the gap in her upper gums with her tongue. There's nothing there where her incisor used to be. The tooth fell out a few days before the C-section, having given no sign that she could lose it. They were eating sauerkraut with some smoked leg of pork. A leg of pork isn't like a catfish, but still, it can surprise you with a few tiny bones of its own. When she felt bone against bone in her mouth, she swore at the pig. It was only after her tongue pried loose the chip of bone and she spat it out into the palm of her hand that she saw that what she had thought belonged to the pig, actually belonged to her, realizing that the tongue doesn't differentiate between a human and a pig. Her tongue found the spot where she was missing a tooth. The third upper left incisor. Hyperdontia. Even with one incisor less, all her teeth are accounted for, but she's still toothless. She placed the tooth next to her plate as if it were a piece of the pig's bone. Nobody at the table even noticed, until she spoke up. Caught off-guard by the looks she received from around the table, she covered her mouth with her hand and it was to become a habit. She took the fallen-out tooth as a sign. While rinsing the dishes, she said - I'll get a gold tooth. He replied, get two. Two cost too much, she said. As you like, he said. They had to grind down her canine tooth so that it could hold the gold one. The canine is strong enough to bear both itself and another one. It takes seven days to make the new tooth. This is the last day she has to cover her mouth with her hand when she talks. She'll have to get used to not doing it every time she opens her mouth. She checks

to see that the salami knife is clean, then takes the order sheet and heads for the boss's office. In the morning, he will check the items on the order sheet and the amounts. She orders what she thinks is needed. He always makes some corrections to the amount, and sometimes even crosses out certain items, even if they are short on them, just to show who's boss around here. That means that the next time she has to order twice the amount of those particular items. She puts the order sheet for the salamis next to the phone, the boss looks at it and nods his head. She points at the hospital, wanting to catch the boss's attention before saying, I have to phone and see if my new teeth are ready. The boss nods okay, says, and where did your old teeth go, and starts laughing, slamming the edge of the table with his hand. She would have liked to remind him that her old tooth fell out a few days after losing the baby, but that could turn his joke into pointless babbling and create an awkward situation which she would then have to puncture with a needle like a blister. The boss resumes entering the numbers into his accounting book, shaking his head, the joke still ringing in his ears. She takes from her pocket a scrap of paper with the phone number on it and dials it, moving as far away as the cord will stretch. At the first ring, somebody answers. She introduces herself and asks about the new teeth, taking care not to use the same phrasing a second time. The voice at the other end is perfectly clear. The teeth are ready. You can come right away. She says thank you and puts down the receiver. The receiver's elastic cord starts to retract, crumpling the order sheet for the salami. She lifts up the cord and smooths out the sheet of paper underneath. She takes off her smock and puts on her jacket. She puts on her boots, slips on her coat and closes the cupboard, the boss looks up and says: Христос се роди*. Christ is born. She's taken aback, covers her mouth with her hand but doesn't say anything, she just nods. The boss goes on talking, saying: they'll be a celebration. She realizes that his sentence is a question, not a statement, and she shakes her head. Nobody's coming, she says, covering her mouth with her hand. Family is the most important thing, says the boss, squeezing his eyes to indicate the importance of his statement. She says that there's too much snow to travel. The boss doesn't know that despite all the snow, she's prepared everything as if there weren't any snow and there would be guests. She made head cheese and a soup, stuffed cabbage and some roast lamb, and cream puffs to finish with. The boss looks out the window at the mounds of snow outside and, without looking at her, waves her away. Go, go, says the boss. She says, good-bye boss, without waiting

* Christ is born, greeting used for the Serbian Orthodox Christmas.

for a reply. Her colleagues are standing at the front door, holding a present enfolded in cheap wrapping paper imprinted with pine branches and the women are laughing, pleased with their own thoughtfulness. She pretends to be surprised. Presenting her with the gift, the women take the opportunity to keep repeating, as if they've never said it before, Христос се роди, Христос се роди, Христос се роди. She nods a few times, saying, you shouldn't have. She leaves the store holding the present and then puts it in her shopping bag, on top of the yogurt and loaf of white bread. She doesn't look back. The street to the dental clinic has been cleared of snow but the slush has turned into ice. The dental clinic is a prefabricated one-story building with a portico. The pulmonary and internal medicine departments are the tallest buildings. The dental clinic is the lowest. The morgue is taller than the dental clinic. Bicycles are parked under the portico. Plastic covers have been put over their seats even though they are parked under the portico. After briefly struggling with the frozen door, she walks in. The waiting room is empty. She stands there and waits, as if this will make her be noticed sooner. A glass partition separates the waiting room from the room with the medical records. Sand-blazed onto the glass is a drawing of a bird that looks like a peacock with its tail lowered. The empty chairs lining the walls compel her to sit down without removing her coat. She puts her things on the chair beside her. She finds her medical card in her bag, along with a clear plastic folder containing several dental X-rays. She grips it between her teeth while she closes her bag, and then moves it to her coat pocket. She takes the present out of the shopping bag, places it on her knees and unwraps only the top part. The pine branches imprinted on the wrapping paper look like dried chicken feet. The package contains something hard and something soft. She peeks inside and recognizes clothes that are sold in the store. A bar of milk chocolate and two hundred grams of ground coffee. The dental technician comes out of the room with the medical records, glances at the package of coffee in her hands and without asking, having drawn the wrong conclusion, turns it into a present meant for her. In order to rescue the remaining gifts, she offers her the package of ground coffee with one hand while folding the bar of chocolate into the wrapping paper with the other. The dental technician says, you shouldn't have. She puts the rescued chocolate back into the plastic shopping bag. The loaf of bread peeks out of the bag and leans on her hand. The dental technician waits for a second, looks at her and then pushes open the door to the surgery, letting it bang it against something. The dentist greets her with the sentence, twenty carats, purity eight-three-three, and shows her a plastic box containing two false teeth. The teeth look like the remnants of someone who has been blown up by a bomb, leaving nothing that can be reused except for the teeth. She runs her tongue over her gums and says, they look like somebody's

teeth. The dentist looks at the teeth as if seeing them for the first time and indicates that she should sit down in the dentist's chair. The dentist describes everything he is doing, while the nurse, standing behind him, keeps rolling her eyes to show how boring he is. His chattiness doesn't help her overcome her reflex to vomit, and several times when she swallows it back the dentist moves his hand away as if afraid of losing his fingers. Fitting the new teeth takes as long as the walk home. The nurse yawns a few times. The dentist says, it is cemented down, enunciating every syllable. The nurse rolls her eyes. She runs her tongue over the previously empty spot and encounters an alien body there. The dentist says it will take her a bit of time to get used to a golden smile. The nurse rolls her eyes. The dentist hands her a mirror. She looks at herself, stretches wide her lips, but doesn't allow herself to react. I'm satisfied, she says, although she's not sure about the smile she sees. She looks older. She says thank you too many times. The dentist and nurse start talking between themselves. She leaves without saying good-bye. There's a boy sitting in the waiting room. He looks at her and asks if it hurt. She says that getting your teeth fixed doesn't hurt. She feels a need to comfort him, even though she doesn't know him.



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