

Drago Glamuzina

The Second Law of Thermodynamics

A Novel

Excerpts translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović

Drago Glamuzina was born in Vrgorac in 1967. He graduated in comparative literature and philosophy from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. He worked as a journalist and executive editor at Vjesnik Daily and then executive editor and editor-in-chief at Nacional News Magazine. From 2003 to 2011, he worked as the editor-in-chief at Profil Publishing, while since 2011 he has been working as the editor-in-chief at VBZ. Drago Glamuzina is the creative director of vRisak – Rijeka-based bookfair and authors' festival.

His publications include *Mesari* (Butchers, poetry, Naklada MD, Zagreb, 2001), *Tri* (Three, a novel, Profil, Zagreb, 2008), *Je li to sve* (Is That All, poetry, VBZ, Zagreb, 2009), a book of selected poems called *Sami u toj šumi* accompanied by photographs by Stanko Abadžić (Alone in Those Woods, Bibliofil, Zagreb, 2011), *Everest* (poetry, Fraktura, Zagreb, 2016), and *Drugi zakon termodinamike* (The Second Law of Thermodynamics, a novel, VBZ, 2021).

Mesari won the Vladimir Nazor Book of the Year Award and the Kvirin Prize for the best book of poetry, and was translated into German (Wieser Verlag, Klagenfurt, 2008), Macedonian (Makedonska reč, Skopje, 2004), and Slovenian (Litera, Maribor, 2001). In 2009, *Mesari* was published in Serbia by Profil Publishing Belgrade. *Je li to sve* (Makedonska reč, 2010) and *Everest* (Makedonika litera, 2016) were also translated into Macedonian, while *Waiting for the Frogs to Fall* brings a book-long selection of Glamuzina's poems translated into English (HDP, 2017). *Tri* won the 2008 T-Portal Award for the best Croatian novel, and, besides Croatia, it was published in Serbia (Rende, Belgrade, 2009), Macedonia (Makedonska reč, 2009), and Slovenia (Beletrina, 2013).

I

I unlock the door and walk in. A quick glance to the left, then to the right. Everything familiar and close. Even now. In the hallway, I look around, hesitating, and then I head towards the living room. A comforter thrown over the sofa. An ashtray on the coffee table, filled with cigarette butts, twenty or so, maybe more. In the kitchen, on the floor, a line of empty wine bottles. More cigarette butts in the garbage sack. Last night she had a party, I think. I open the fridge, then close it. It's almost empty. As always, she didn't bother herself with food. Even if she had any, some cold cuts perhaps – she used to buy those – they ate it all last night. The kitchen is slightly elevated, a step higher than the rest of the apartment, and from it I can take in the whole living room in one glance. Our photo is no longer on the shelf. It's the one in which, our faces pressed close together, we flip our middle fingers to anyone who resented us being together. She developed and framed it for one of my birthdays. Once, when I was leaving, and that happened often, she stuffed it into my bag and wrote that I would never understand anything at the back of the frame. When I returned, we put it back on the shelf again. The last time, when I stopped by to pick up some books, it was still there. Who knows where she hid it now? I open the drawer with my documents. It's not there. Maybe she threw it away.

I stand in the middle of the room and look around searching for a remote. I remove the comforter and pick up the small pillows scattered over the sofa. When I find it, I turn on the TV and lean back on the couch. I flip through the channels. All fifty of them, then again. For a moment I stop at a leopard attacking a crocodile, then I move on, into a new circle. I finally settle on some Second World War documentary. After ten minutes or so, it occurs to me I could make some coffee and light a cigarette, but then I glance at the clock and decide not to.

I walk to the bedroom instead. The clothes she wore in the past few days are thrown over the armchair and on the top of the heap lie my boxer shorts. She loved to sleep in my underwear. We often laughed at those large underpants that flapped around her. When I left, several pairs remained in the laundry basket. She hid our photo, but she still sleeps in my boxers, I think and my lips part into something resembling a smile.

I flop to bed and shut my eyes. Then I roll over to the edge, lean over and open the nightstand drawer. A tube of Durex gel we sometimes used for lubricating is still there. And it seems the amount is the same as before, no one has touched it since I left. There are several books on the nightstand. I pick up the one on the top and leaf through it. Chimamanda, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. She still hasn't read it, there's some thirty pages left. Olanna reminds me of her. I once told her this, and when she laughed, I said I thought a character like Olanna's sister would deal with our situation much better. She said nothing, at that point we had all but stopped talking, because every conversation, every single one, led to a fight. There were too many things between us, and we had a good time only when we didn't talk about what was happening to us.

Then I glance at the hole in the closet door I made when I tried to hit her with my cellphone. From the bed, when she was dressing. BlackBerry has a sharp, metal edge and it cut into it like a blade. It was back when we still loved each other a lot, before we gave up on talking. And even though she's an obsessive-compulsive type driven mad by every irregularity, she never once mentioned the door should be replaced. Maybe she thought I should fix it without

her telling me to do so. So, the hole stayed with us. And it's still here. I get up, walk over to the closet, and push my finger into the hole. I play with the thought of calling someone to replace this piece of plywood, for a moment, I visualize her astonished face, but the whole time I know it's just a thought, I'm not going to do it. In the closet, on the top of a small pile of underwear, I find another pair of male boxer shorts. But these are not mine. There are little red devils on them, screwing in all possible positions. Perhaps her friends got her these for her birthday, just as once they bought her a giant black dildo. It's a neat present, one of those that makes everyone laugh once the paper is torn. But they don't look new. It's obvious they were used. It's obvious she slept in them. It crosses my mind I should take them and throw them away. But I don't do that either.

I go through the closet looking for some of my t-shirts, swimming trunks, summer shirts. That's all that's left. And a suit. But I wear it so rarely that it occurs to me I could leave it hanging in her closet. "It has a good thing going here," I say under my breath and then ask myself what the fuck is wrong with me. Those papers in the living room, I remember, I need to take them too. And then I take out a black garbage bag out of my pocket and cram the shirts and the suit into it. Then I glance at her clothes too, the dresses hanging on the hangers, I recognize the one she wore to some wedding and I took a picture of her while she was getting ready. I took dozens of photos that now lie hidden in the dark corners of my computer. I recognize others, of course, but then I shake my head and slam the closet door. I don't need this now. I've come here on other business.

I'm back in the living room, digging through "my" drawer, taking out folders with my documents and all kinds of papers. From time to time, I glance at what I wrote down on them and then crumble what I don't need and throw it away. I keep only a few of the papers and insert them in the empty folder. When I'm done, I get up and walk towards the exit.

At the door, when I've already put my hand on the handle, I pause, then just stand there for a while, I can't say what's going through my head at that moment, but then I turn around and walk down the hall to the bathroom. Inside, I step in front of a large mirror covering the whole wall. Then I slowly remove my clothes, sit down into the empty, cold bathtub and let the water run. As the tub fills, I stare at the mirror. Beaten, completely beaten, that's what comes to my mind, and then I lie back into the hot water. Which slowly climbs towards my neck.

It's so hot it hurts, but both the heat and the pain feel nice. At one moment I can't take it anymore, so I draw some cold water. Then I stretch, lean my head against the warm plastic, and close my eyes. After a couple of minutes, I feel I'm falling asleep, so I snap awake and sit up. I look around the bathroom. On one of the hooks attached to the door there is a wooden necklace we bought in Istanbul, but there are other things other people bought for her: she collects memories, she thinks such mementos make her life richer. Some of those keepsakes, well, ended up in the bathroom. On one of the shelves there is a small box with her jewelry, bracelets and earrings. On it rests a woven bracelet, a present from her girlfriend that always went on my nerves. Here are three yellow duckies, one large and two small ones, also a gift from her friends, and I drop them in the water. They float between my knees. A large blue towel hangs from the radiator. I bought it when we went to the seaside without a towel, at a store above the beach. It had resin stains on it for a long time. We slept on it at a camp on the Island of Cres while the deer walked around the tent. She heard some rustling and went out

to check. A second later, she came back to get me. "Someone's here, in the bushes," she said and pulled me out. We went towards the noise, through the bay bushes, a little scared because there were no tents nearby, and then on a small clearing right in front of us we saw two bucks. Young bucks, their antlers barely showing. We froze and stared at them. And they stared back at us. The only sound were our breaths and the waves splashing against the shore. Then the larger buck stepped towards her, and she took a step towards it, then we just stood like that, tense and ready to escape into the rest of our lives at the very next second.

The doorbell startles me. What am I going to say when she finds me in the bathtub? But then I remember she wouldn't ring the bell, she would just unlock the door and walk in. After a while the doorbell goes off again. This one's persistent, I think nervously, but remain lying in the tub. My trousers lie on the floor next to the tub. I lean down and pull the cellphone out of my pocket. It's half past three. Even if this isn't her, she'll be home soon. And I'm already expected at Ferić's.

I get out of the tub and step on the floor tiles. I take the blue towel and dry myself. There are no traces of resin on it anymore, but there are traces of her mascara. When I'm done drying myself, I let the towel drop to the floor, bend down and pull out the trimmer from under the sink. I snap on a 3 mm attachment, shave my beard, rinse the bathtub, wipe the floor, take the towel to the spare room and toss it into the laundry basket. Then I put on my clothes, walk down to the bedroom once again, and stand on the digital scale. 95,7 kilograms. I tidy up the bed, pull up the blinds to let in as much light into the room as possible, and quickly head for the door. I leave the apartment key on the side table in the hall. For months, whenever I walked around the town, I've been feeling it in my pocket. After this I pick up the black garbage bag and walk out. The door clicks when I close it.

II

Jonathan Franzen was sitting on the deck looking somewhere into the garden, watching a white, well-groomed cat as it cautiously walked along the edge of the pool. The pool had been emptied and covered by a plastic blue cover, but the recent snow had piled on the deck, so we moved it out of the way and shoveled it into the pool, filling it almost to the top, and then jumped into it. Meanwhile, the snow had melted so under the cover there were almost two feet of water. A couple of birds skipped over the cover.

“Look, a blue thrush,” Franzen told me. He’d flown in a couple of hours ago from Albania where he’d been bird watching, so now he wanted to write a piece about it for *National Geographic*. “I supposed blue thrushes no longer lived here,” he added quietly. “I thought they’d fled the war.”

“I don’t know anything about the blue thrushes,” I whispered back at him because in the meanwhile he put his finger to his lips.

A that moment, the cat came all the way to the edge of the pool, and it was obvious it was getting ready to jump at the birds. I stood up, but Franzen grabbed my arm and once again gestured to keep quiet and not disturb the scene. I pointed at the pool trying to explain there was water under the cover and the cat would drown if it jumped in. He wasn’t looking at me. He was completely focused on the cat and the birds. The cat carefully moved along the edge, inching towards its prey.

“Jonathan, the pool’s full of water,” I finally said, and he looked at me in surprise. “Under the cover, the pool’s not empty.”

Franzen then jumped up and squeaked, “Shoo! Shoo!” And he even clapped his hands a couple of times. The cat turned around and carefully looked at us. Then it once again focused its attention on the birds, so I hit it with a piece of bread I’d squashed into a nice lump. When it left, we felt relieved and could once again lean back in the deckchairs.

“You weren’t bothered that the cat would eat the birds, but you got all scared when you realized it might drown. I thought you were on the birds’ side,” I said after a brief silence.

“Cats eat birds, that’s the natural order of things and we needn’t get involved if natural balance is not disturbed. But it’s not right if the cat drowns in the pool. Especially if we were the ones who covered it and hid the water.”

“The hunter must adapt to hunting conditions. It could just as easily fall into a hole in nature. It has to take chances in order to survive. If it’s okay it ate the bird, then it would be just fine if it drowned,” I replied.

“But this cat is not really a hunter, see how fat and well-groomed it is. I was watching a pet overcome by instincts, I wanted to see how it stalked its prey, but I was sure it wouldn’t catch the bird. It would’ve fluttered away. You don’t know the blue thrushes.”

At that moment, a young woman who had taken part in Ferić's creative writing workshop and even won the award for the best short story joined us at the deck. The publisher who organized Franzen's visit had sponsored the workshop and part of the young writer's award was the meeting with the famous writer at Ferić's deck. A couple of journalists and photographers who were meant to document the meeting of the great and the up-and-coming writer came along, and after they left, we were once again alone on the deck. To break the uncomfortable silence, I described the scene we'd just witnessed, and then the girl said she had recently walked around the frozen Lake Budek and saw the swans fighting the ice. The image of the swans in the frozen lake disturbed her deeply. The ice inching along and seizing the swans.

"It was so claustrophobic I wanted to come up to them and slap them around," she said. "The swans, that is."

We said nothing, and she just went on, "It was on the day Angelina landed in Sarajevo. This also disturbed me. Perhaps more than the swans. I don't like her in general, but her arrival here, all that she does, the children she saved, everything the newspapers wrote about, all of it was terribly disturbing. I almost cried, but then I got angry with myself because of it."

Franzen said Angelina was okay, but that e-book was not. And he hoped it would never catch on. Ferić briefly peeped from the kitchen and shouted, "Death to e-books!"

We all rose our glasses, cheering a death, and then once again sunk into silence. And Ferić once again retreated into the kitchen. "You just talk, I'm gonna finish the dinner," he said.

Then I remembered a disturbing scene on a frozen lake I once wrote a poem about, so I told them what happened. It didn't take place at Lake Budek but at Lake Jarun. The dog was running over the ice, leaping about, having a really good time sliding and chasing the birds, but then suddenly the ice broke, and the dog ended up in the water. It tried to pull out, but the moment it put its front paws on the ice, the ice broke. Then the dog would make another attempt and fall through the ice once again. A lot of people gathered on the bank, but no one could help the dog. They were afraid to walk out on the ice. They just stood and watched, hoping it would get out, cheering and shouting at the dog, "Come on, jump, you can do it. Come on, just a bit more."

I was there with my children, and I didn't want them to watch this dog fight for its life, so I pulled them away from the scene into a coffee shop for some hot chocolate. There we talked about all kinds of things, about a car my brother was planning to buy, and we pretended we hadn't seen what we'd seen, and then, at the end, just as we were getting ready to leave, I asked my wife, "What do you think? Did the dog make it?"

"And?" Franzen asked.

“What?”

“Did it make it?”

“We never found out. But the poem was good. And if it died, it didn’t die in vain.”

Franzen stared at me sharply, but he decided not to say anything, and I, on the other hand, didn’t feel like explaining I wasn’t exactly serious. Then the editor he’d been corresponding with for the past ten years showed up and took him into the night. Before he tried Feri’s shark. And the young writer tagged along with them.

III

When the doorbell rang, the party was just picking up steam, no one talked about literature anymore or discussed Feri's new story, which he had read after a lot of pleading and only after Andrej had told us that it was just this kind of get-togethers where Bulgakov had read the whole of *The Master and Margarita* to his friends. And he had even thrown in the claim that at least at these adverse times the writers should not reach after the argument that what they were about to read was going to be boring. Franzen and his friend hadn't returned, even though they had promised they would, but their serving of the shark was still waiting in the oven, and the company, mostly made up of writers and editors, that had gathered to hang out with the American writer, was quite lively and impatient.

"He's here," Franka said, jumped out of her armchair and ran to open the door, yet this wasn't Franzen, but Sven, who had just arrived from Ljubljana. He'd called me earlier that afternoon and said he'd just gotten on the train and was on his way, but in all the commotion I forgot about it. Even though I was looking forward to seeing him after so many months. He made his way past Franka without saying hello and just waved at the people – like trying to say, don't worry about me – threw his old army bag in the middle of the room, unzipped it, and, after digging through it for a while, pulled out a nylon bag with a joint in it.

"You won't believe what he did to me," Magdalena went on with her story, raising her voice a bit to once again draw the party's attention. "To this day, whenever I hear this song, my stomach cramps up," she added, watching Sven who was, a credit card in his hand, already cutting up the lines of speed on the table. He was slicing the little batches, spreading the stuff out, splitting and mixing it again, then cutting it up once again using both sides of the credit card. Eight lines, one a bit shorter than the rest.

"The shortest one's for you, just to taste it," he told Magdalena who, as soon as he'd taken out the dope, asked to be left out.

"I gave you the credit card and that's it, I'm not taking part in this."

"All right, all right, I had to try. Well, we'll add it to Andrej's line, he's a big man, he needs a bit more," Sven replied, laughing, but at the very next moment he once again mixed all of the stuff together and this time cut up seven lines. There were thirteen people in the room, but he apparently thought seven lines were enough.

"So... go on, tell us, what did he do?" Sven asked, rolling the 20 kuna bill into a small cone.

"When he emailed me this song, I fell to pieces, and the next day he went back to his wife," Magdalena said, wiping her credit card against a plastic tablecloth with a large female portrait made by Lovro Artuković. The woman in the portrait had a painful expression on her face and a gaze that was hard to evade, especially for those who found themselves at that table for the first time.

"For real, no, you didn't?!" Franka squealed as she turned around to Andrej.

“He lasted only two days in that hotel,” Magdalena added.

Her husband was quiet, but then Sven jumped in, taking up the role of a chorus leader who had to make sure the atmosphere was always in the right mode, and was already picking what to play next, switching from Cohen to some Icelandic electro, pouring alcohol for Magdalena, and lining up a whole set of uppers and downers along the table. Among us, he was like a ferret in a chicken coop. “Well-equipped”, he’d arrived among the inexperienced and the green straight from Ljubljana, and he was ready to party.

“Come on, Maggi, that’s not the reason to cross out a song from your list, especially this one, *I’m You Man* is a classic, besides, you see he meant what he said, how long has it been, and not only did he leave his wife but he’s still with you.”

“He forever ruined this song for me,” Magdalena wasn’t ready to give up.

“And you haven’t ruined anything for me?”

“Hey, let’s not do that, let’s not spoil the mood,” Sven quickly added, wiping his nostrils with his fingers and patting Andrej on his shoulder with his other hand. “You’re not gonna get into a fight, all of this is for us and tonight we’re gonna have a great time,” he said and started rolling a joint.

With Sven, an upper was always followed by a downer, so you didn’t get too high, or by something to straighten you out. When he finished rolling the joint, he lit it and handed it to Tanja, then put his shades on his nose, moved over to his laptop, picked up two songs from YouTube and asked everyone to listen to his mix. At the very next second, he was shaking his head in the middle of the room, under a large, naked light bulb.

VIII

“You all know I got divorced just a couple of months after I gave birth. Of course, everyone thought it was strange, many people asked me what had happened, some of you have recently asked me the same question, but I would always just shake my head and say I didn’t feel like talking about it. I’ve never told the whole story to anyone, not even to my parents, or my sister. I let Damir take the blame and kept silent about what I had done.”

She once again took a drag of her cigarette, squashed it in the ashtray, and then went on, “I’d been with Damir for six years when at some study visit, I fell in love with a tour guide. He was a Tsintsar from Poreč, and although this is what they call the Aromanians, almost everyone thought he was an Albanian. He showed us around the Brijuni Islands, took us to archaeological sites, while the whole time my mentor was hitting on me. But I didn’t like him, so I kept giving him a cold shoulder. After a while, he noticed I was spending a lot of time in the company of the young Dževdžet, so one day he sat at my table as I was having lunch and told me, “Don’t tell me you’re falling for that filthy Shquiptar. Better get away from him because people are gonna start talking.” I was appalled and as I looked at him, I wondered what people would talk about. Without a moment’s hesitation, as if this was self-explanatory, he blurted out, “A professor from the University of Zagreb messing around with a tour guide who’s at least ten years younger than she and a Shquiptar to boot.”

I just stood up, took my plate and went over to Dževdžet’s table. The professor got all red in the face and until we returned to Zagreb, the steam kept hissing from his ears.

Franka applauded, Andrej whistled, but Dora paid no attention to any of this, she just calmly went on, “I no longer left Dževdžet’s side. We fell in love and in the next six months, I used every opportunity to travel to Istria. I don’t know what drew me to him, but perhaps it had something to do with the story of his origin. He had a need to tell me everything about it, in detail. It clearly bothered him a great deal, so the first couple of times we saw each other I was mostly listening. His family came from Moscopole, a town in the Albanian mountains. In the 18th century, the Ottoman Turks sacked it on two occasions. Before the first destruction, Moscopole had sixty thousand inhabitants, it was the largest Tsintsar center and the second largest city in the Balkans, right after Istanbul. When the city was destroyed, most of the Tsintsars fled, yet his family stayed in what was left of the city, now surrounded by the Albanians, and it was probably then that they Albanized their last name.

“Some hundred years later, they moved to Bitola, North Macedonia. Within their own community, they spoke their language, but the language of culture and worship was Greek. That’s why the Tsintsars who later settled in different parts of Austria-Hungary opened Greek schools and temples. Even to this day we think that Dimitrija Demeter and Branko Gavella, the greats of our culture, were Greek, when in fact they were both Tsintsars.”

Andrej started rocking in his chair, faster and faster, and Dora took this as a sign of protest, so she put her finger in the air and showed him to keep his mouth shut.

“I’ll go back to Dževdžet, Andrej, but let me tell his family story first, it was really important to me, back then everything Dževdžet told me was important to me. In Bitola, his grandfather knew the Manaki brothers, the photography and cinema pioneers of the Balkan

Peninsula, who were also Tsintsars, and he often went to their movie theatre. Later, when I found Milton Manaki's letter in which he mentions Dževdžet's grandfather, you couldn't say who was happier – him or me.

“During the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, four languages were spoken in their house – they talked about everyday things in Tsintsar, they prayed in Greek, and when they had visitors and around town, they used Macedonian or Serbian. Later, Dževdžet's grandfather joined the partisans and became a member of the Communist Party so he no longer prayed; that's how they lost Greek.

“When he was still a young man, Dževdžet's father married an Albanian, despite both his and her families' objections, then he became the officer in the Yugoslav National Army and left Macedonia. They lived all over Yugoslavia, so Dževdžet was born in Zadar. For a long time, he knew nothing about any of this, not even that he was a Tsintsar. His father declared himself a Yugoslav, but it made no difference to him, nor did they talk about it in their family until his father died. This was by the end of the eighties. With all the trouble brewing in Yugoslavia, especially the tensions between the Albanians and the Serbs in Kosovo, the children from his building, mostly his father's colleagues' sons, soon started calling him a Shqiptar, probably because of his name, and refused to play with him. When he asked his mother if he were a Shqiptar, she told him he was a Tsintsar, and that was the first time he heard this word. After this, he told everyone he was a Tsintsar, but the Tsintsars were in fact the Vlachs, and most of the Croatians, because the Tsintsars are Orthodox Christians, saw them as the Serbs, so he became a Serb too. He tried to explain he was not a Serb but a Vlach, but this didn't get him too far. It was the time of war or just after it, so it wasn't exactly pleasant to be a Serb in Zadar, especially one whose father was the colonel at the Yugoslav National Army.

“This is when he began looking into it, trying to learn who exactly these Tsintsars were, and the more he read, the more he got drawn into the story, so every time after we had sex, he would spend hours telling me what he had learned about these Khazars of the Balkans, who were in fact the Romanized Illyrians and Thracians who used an Eastern variant of one of Latin vernaculars, very similar to Romanian. And so he dragged me into the story. I was soon searching for texts and taking them to him.

“The Tsintsars were always bilingual, they kept moving around the Balkans, and, along with their language, they spoke the language of the community in which they assimilated. They had an important role in the national revival of almost all Balkan nations. In Serbia, the Tsintsars were Nikola Pašić and Colonel Apis, who was the leader of the Black Hand, a secret military society, then Jovan Sterija Popović, Branislav Nušić, Koča Popović, and many others; given that after the disaster in Moscopole, many Tsintsars fled to Romania, which was the closest in terms of language, they were the leaders of the Romanian National Movement, but the Romanians no longer recognize them as Tsintsars and see them as Romanians instead; in Macedonia, Pitu Guli, himself a Tsintsar, led the Ilinden Uprising against the Ottomans; in Croatia, the prominent members of the Croatian National Revival were Dimitrija Demeter and Josip Runjanin... The Tsintsars helped create Romania, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, but they never managed to establish their own state. ‘Just like the Khazars,’ Dževdžet kept saying. ‘Great but gone.’ Everyone turned to their own nations, and the people were once again discovering who they were, yet he found out he was a

member of a disappearing nation, and he liked it, and I liked it too. Now I think that it was this story that made me fall for him, it brought us together and gave us this shared world outside the bed.

“Once we went to the island of Krk to try to find the traces of the Vlachs that the Frankopans had brought there, we compared their dialect, in fact a combination of the local Krk dialect and Romanian, spoken around Punat, with the Veglian dialect spoken in the town of Krk. Dževdžet hurried to learn the Tsintsar language, and he kept listening to Toše Proeski and his Tsintsar songs. As an ethnologist, I was able to help him, so we researched the customs of all these peoples, and we even went to visit the Čiče people who live in the Čičarija mountains, listened to their stories and tried to find out how well they remembered their past.

“In short, it all went so far that at the last census he officially declared himself a Vlach. He was one of the twelve Vlachs registered in Croatia at the time. And I even began writing a paper about the Vlachs in Croatia and used it as an excuse to visit Istria every chance I got. But he was married with two small children, so things were getting complicated. Just before that first visit to Istria where I met Dževdžet, Damir and I had been planning a wedding. It was something everyone expected, our friends, our parents, even ourselves saw it just as a formality that needed to be done. And then I started weighing my options. I’d been with Damir for ages, we’d gone through a lot together, we’d even found ourselves in those difficult situations that bring you close together, and I still felt nice with him, nevertheless, every evening I’d fall asleep thinking of Dževdžet. I felt disgusting because I was planning my wedding and the whole time thinking about someone else. I tried to tell myself that it would pass, that this thing between Dževdžet and me simply couldn’t work out. The man lived in Istria, he was almost ten years younger than me, he was already married... I kept repeating this to myself like some mantra that was supposed to set me free, but it didn’t make it any easier. Dževdžet was also in love and in his messages he kept saying he’d get a divorce, but I didn’t take him seriously.

“Anyhow, it was a real nightmare. As the wedding came closer, I was becoming more and more miserable and nervous. I’d snap at everyone who tried to talk to me, so everyone started to notice something was wrong. I knew that this would ruin my life and that I had to put an end to it, so one day I got on a bus, went to Dževdžet, and after we’d had sex, I told him I didn’t want to see or hear him anymore because I was soon to be married. I went back to Zagreb and went on with my everyday torture. I didn’t answer any of Dževdžet’s calls or messages; first he was angry, then he stopped trying to get in touch. To confirm and reinforce my decision, I told Damir I wanted a child. And soon after I was pregnant.

“We got married a couple of months later, and then the baby came along. When Kaja was just two months old, Damir woke me up in the middle of the night and told me he had to talk to me. He fell in love. Unbelievable, fucking unbelievable! He fell in love before the wedding, all of a sudden, it was love at first sight, but he didn’t want to say anything until I gave birth. He didn’t want me to get upset or to have complications while I was pregnant. Now the baby was here, we both loved our baby girl, but he no longer loved me and he was leaving. He didn’t even try to sugarcoat it. Perhaps there’s no other way to do it, perhaps that’s for the best, right in the face. Or the heart.”

This is where she fell silent and lit another cigarette – it seemed she was once again weighing what she'd just told us – and then she shook her head, as if trying to chase away a thought that didn't agree with her, and hurried to finish her story.

“I agree with Slaven, when someone tells you they no longer love you, you can't ask them to stay with you, unless you are a lunatic or a tyrant. I tried to talk to him, but he didn't feel like listening to me begging, so he just took his stuff and left.”

Then she quickly glanced across the room and said, “What's killing me is that the whole time I was trying to convince myself I had to live with him, he already knew he would leave. I stroked my growing stomach telling myself I was doing the right thing, and he was just crossing out the dates, waiting for the right moment.”

She once again paused, it seemed she was waiting for us to say something, but no one said anything, so, after hesitating for a moment, she went on, “We thought that after six or seven years of relationship we knew each other, but both of us created a parallel world the other one had not even the slightest idea about. Screw it. And then followed a paradox that took everyone by surprise, even me. When he left, I was devastated, I missed him so much. Until yesterday I'd been trying so hard to make myself believe I still loved him, and now I thought I couldn't go on living without him. I kept telling myself that this feeling was not real – it was only because I got hurt, I didn't love him either... – but the pain was real. I'd imagine I saw him in the street and, for months, whenever I heard a doorbell, my first thought was that he came back. That crap just wouldn't let go of me.”

IX

It was, I think, just after Dora finished her story that we realized what we'd gotten ourselves into. Until then it all seemed like just another frivolous, idle game that was supposed to lift our spirits while we were waiting for Franzen. But we soon pulled ourselves together and, after a couple of moments of complete silence, we jumped right at it all at the same time. Some were full of understanding, others judged both Dora and Slaven and Dževdžet, others still just coldly analyzed the situation, and then Sven put an end to the general racket by asserting his authority and saying he banned any commentary because it would water the story down and drag it on and on and we would never see the end of it. "When one story is told, another follows, and it goes on like that until we've all had our turn," he said. "After that you can discuss and comment as much as you like." Andrej didn't like this, so he said, "We're not robots, you're killing all spontaneity." But Sven was firm, "If we don't do this, I'm sure that in half an hour we're all gonna be fighting and screaming at each other. Trust me and listen to me and we're all gonna have a great time. Who's next?"

Stanko raised his hand. Stanko is a writer and an editor, although probably more of an editor, because in the past fifteen years he hasn't published a book, even though he's always saying his new book is just about to come out, so on that evening too he told us what his new book would be about.

"I'm gonna tell you about something from my childhood", Stanko began. "Maybe it's not important, but maybe it does say something about me, or about people in general. I don't know, you be the judges. Just take into account I've never said a word of it to anyone, not even Kaća, and I hope that means something. But after I'm done, don't ask me to tell you more about it, and don't write about it; if it needs to come out, there's someone who can tell this story. Although, who am I talking to, you're all priests," he said, then laughed and quickly corrected himself. "I meant petty thieves. A slip of the tongue, I guess it's because of all this confessing."

This slip brought a smile to my lips too, and it was then it first occurred to me that, should the stories be good, this evening could turn into a book. Stanko went on, "This is a story of courage, and daring curiosity. I was about ten, I think I must've been in the fourth grade or something. I had school in the afternoon, I'm sure of that, because otherwise this story wouldn't be possible, and all of those in the fifth grade or older were having their classes in the morning. Usually, I'd eat my breakfast then run outside and hang around my building, but as almost all my friends were at school, the morning would be rather empty, so I'd walk back into my building, jump over the railing in the hall and climb all the way to the top of the staircase, stepping right on the edge of the stairs sticking out from under the railing. I'd hold onto the railing and balance above the void that ended all the way down in the darkness of the basement. In one of the empty storerooms in the basement we set up a hideout and filled it with cardboard mats, but I'd soon grow tired of just lying in the semi-darkness; for a while, I'd listen to the mice rummaging around other storerooms, or I'd pick up the knives we hid there and throw them at the target, or I'd fantasize about the girls we sometimes managed to talk into coming to our hideout, but none of these could keep me occupied for long. I had much more fun during the weekend when we'd bring in the captives, the boys who lived in

the nearby buildings, then tie them up against the water pipes and torture them, or at least pretend we tortured them. I can't remember what the worst punishment was, but I'm sure I didn't come up with it, because I was one of the youngest in the gang, the rest of them, as I've already said, were in higher grades. I only remember that once we caught some boy, brought him there, pulled down his pants and left him like that in the dark basement, his pants and underpants around his ankles. It was getting dark and, if he didn't want to spend the night there, he would have to call for help, but then the adults would come and find him naked. I don't know how it ended, but I'm sure he came out just a couple of hours later. On a couple of occasions, of course, we also captured the girls. We never got them naked, but we would cop a feel in the darkness. We made fun of the boys who lived in their buildings and asked why they didn't come to their rescue. I was a messenger, a runner, because I was the youngest and the fastest. I would take the message to the nearby building, find some boy in front of it, and then, from a safe distance, state our terms. If you want us to let her go, you have one hour to bring us a pack of cigarettes, and such things.

"But in the morning, the building would be empty. I'd be all by myself and so, after climbing the stairs on the outside, I would jump up on the round metal railing and slide all the way down, disregarding the fact that I could lose balance and crash into the basement. I think someone fell once, but it was from the railing on the first floor, so there were no serious consequences. And I'd slide down from the fourth floor, all the way to the bottom of the stairs, counting as I went, to see if I managed to break the fast-sliding record. After I'd broken the record for the umpteenth time, during one of the plunges, I jumped off the railing somewhere halfway to the bottom and found myself in front of an apartment door. I don't know what made me do it and why I did it right there, maybe it was nothing, maybe I simply lost my balance and then tipped over to the safe side, but all of this occurred to me only after I stood up in front of the door. Anyhow, I just stared at the door for a couple of minutes, then bent down and peeked through the keyhole. Back then the locks still had those big keyholes you could look through. I knew no one was home, because all the adults were at work, and my friend who lived there was at school, but I nevertheless peeked in, just to make sure it was empty. Then I knelt down and searched for the key under the doormat. I knew where it was because I'd watched my friend many times come from school and take the key from there. I looked around and quickly inserted it in the keyhole, and when the lock clicked, I pressed the door handle and entered. I don't know why, but the silence in the apartment caught me by surprise. It was somewhat eerie, I knew no one was home, but I moved slowly, as if each step could be deadly, as if the floor was rotten and I could fall through it if I didn't watch where I was going.

"I'd been in the apartment many times, but now it looked different. I had time, because my friend was coming back from school at half past one, but I lived in a small town, where someone could run home from work to pick up something they'd forgotten, so maybe that's why I kept glancing at the front door. I first walked into the kitchen, then the living room, then the bedrooms, and finally the bathroom. I didn't touch anything, I didn't take anything, I just walked through the apartment, entering the rooms where other people lived, where they ate, slept, took showers, watched TV... I even opened some of the closets and looked at the clothes, neatly folded or just crammed all over the shelves. I checked the nightstands, next to his parents' bed, and in one of the drawers I saw a used condom. I knew what it was because we used to blow them up and play with them in the basement, but this one was still slimy, so I thought, 'This has just come out of a pussy, a real pussy.' I stood above the

nightstand completely taken aback, I just couldn't wrap my head around it, I was so close to something that had been in a woman. I was just a fourth grader, but, in the basement, we always talked about women and their pussies. Actually, I never talked about it, I just listened, but this didn't stop my imagination. When I walked down the street, I pretended I had x-ray vision and could see through the pants and dresses of women walking towards me. And in the evening, in my bed, I would try to visualize the pussies of all the women I knew. Now I stood above something that touched one of them and my heart was pounding, but it wasn't just that, I was afraid someone might come in, so I quickly tore myself away from the nightstand and continued my tour.

“Actually, it wasn't fear, more like some kind of unease. I remember the excitement, but not the panic, although today I can't even imagine myself doing anything like it. I would choke with fear. This probably comes when you become aware of the consequences. I get terrified every time I think about what would've happened had they caught me in the apartment, how I would've explained it and what hiding I would've gotten from my parents, and I think other people would've looked at me differently. But I remember, I remember those steps, that child, the silence, and the beating heart. From excitement, not from fear, as I said. It's hard to describe what I thought and felt, but I think it was the first time I got a sense of what kind of a mystery life is. All those lives taking place side by side. In parallel, along the way, never converging... As if I peeked into something that, whenever I came to their place and just sat there, remained veiled.

“When I was ready to leave, I pressed my ear against the door to check if there was someone in the hall, and then quickly got out and locked the door. I did it again, a couple more times, at some other apartments, but it wasn't as magical.”

“Something similar happened to me today,” I said almost at the very moment Stanko finished his story. “At the same time, it was completely different, but today I walked around someone else’s empty apartment and I completely understand what you’re saying.”

When Stanko was telling his story, of course, I remembered that some ten hours ago I’d also been opening closets, drawers, picking through someone else’s laundry basket. I actually went there to return the key to the woman I’d tried to live with after I’d abandoned my family, I thought I’d just get inside, leave the key on the side table in the hallway and leave, but that’s not what happened. Somewhere underneath it all maybe I experienced some of Stanko’s feeling of walking through someone else’s life, but until yesterday that life had also been mine, and the things I saw there made me question the decision I’d made. At one moment, as I was lying on that bed, I thought I shouldn’t even get up, I should wait there until she came from work, but all I did was tease my already agitated brain. Regardless of all the decisions, I admit, I went through the apartment searching for a sign of someone else, wondering if a new life had maybe already started there. At that, as I walked through the apartment, I was at the same time very distanced – like a camera pushed along a set of tracks while it films the scene – and deeply distressed.

I squirmed in that memory, and then decided it was best I told them this story and be done with it, so I announced it, almost like a proclamation: “Today, I definitely broke up with the woman that made me fuck up my life and get a divorce. That’s why I’m not myself. I’m a bit fucked up, to tell the truth.” And then I told them the story about my afternoon walk through Anja’s apartment.

Some of the people in the room knew that we’d broken up some ten months ago and that I’d rented an apartment; they even knew I was paying my ex-wife’s mortgage for a house in which she still lived with our children. And they knew I’d recently taken on another mortgage to buy an apartment in which I would live, but now I didn’t have enough money to renovate it. I confided in a couple of them on a regular basis. First they consoled me because I was having a hard time on account of my children, then I went to them with all the problems that kept springing up as Anja and I tried living together, and I gave them an exhaustive report of the last break-up. But none of them knew we kept seeing each other occasionally. I still had the key to Anja’s apartment and I would sometimes spend the night there, even when she wasn’t at home. But I didn’t tell anything about any of this to any of them, I was ashamed after breaking up with her and getting back together all over again so many times. All of them had long told us to give up and stop torturing each other, but we didn’t know how to let go, probably because we had invested so much into it. So, we kept going back to each other only to hurt each other all over again, and in the end, we kept it a secret from both her friends and mine. Now we hadn’t seen each other for three months, or talked to each other, but that key was always with me, so sometimes I would take it into my palm as I walked around with my hands in my pockets. And I would feel relieved.

When I told them what I’d done in her apartment earlier that afternoon, I tried to explain my behavior in the past year, even the sobbing on her kitchen floor as she was standing right above me, in shock, watching me weep, I tried to make them understand how difficult it was to accept that the relationship that had made me throw away everything I had in my life

wasn't working. I wanted to tell them I'd almost died because of it. But I didn't because, as I was telling them this story, I realized it sounded banal. Then I thought that it sounded banal because it actually was banal, it happened all the time, to many people. So, I told them that.

"Sure, but, fuck, this doesn't mean it hurts any less," Sven replied.

"But then even death is banal," Andrej jumped in, always ready for a new debate.

"It depends on the perspective, death is not banal for the one who's dying," said Sven.

"But today I finally went to her apartment and returned the key. And that's why all of you have to be very interesting so that I don't have to destroy myself with booze and dope. Your stories better get me high," I said and laughed.

“My husband told you something that seems sticky, but it actually isn’t, and then he also wrapped it up nicely in cellophane,” Katarina began. “Maybe he’s just a voyeur and there’s no mystery in this. He still loves to stare through the window and gaze into other people’s apartments. He even wanted to write a novel about it, about the people from those apartments, he’d start with what he sees from our room, as he sits there in the darkness, and then write up their lives that take place side by side, without them having a clue about it, which had fascinated him, as he already told you, ever since his childhood. And he sees them all, he sees an older man, whose wife has left the apartment, watching porn and masturbating, and a couple having a fight in the apartment above his, and the man above them, who is always alone, no one ever comes to visit him. He even got the binoculars, so he could research for his book, and my shins were covered in bruises because I couldn’t turn on the light when I entered the room because the neighbors would see him, so I kept bumping into bed. But after he read Grytten’s *Song of the Beehive*, he gave up on it and he got really disappointed someone had stolen his idea. Then it crossed his mind he could write a story about us who live on this side of the binoculars, about a husband who watches his neighbors through the window and writes about them and a wife who sits in the dark and talks to him, warning him they are slowly falling apart. Maybe you’ll read it once, after he’s done revising.

“Unlike him, I’m going to tell you a story from this time, a story that got me in trouble. I got hurt,” Katarina pointed out, “because I revealed something I had kept secret for years. And that’s why this game is so difficult for me, the whole time I listened to your stories, I couldn’t decide if I should tell you this story or make something up. I guess others will make something up too. Just a second ago I wanted to tell you a story about a couple who tried to rape me when I was just a girl, they gave me a lift and then wouldn’t let me out of the car, but, well, this other story simply wants to get out of me. But, at the same time, it doesn’t, you’ve got it easy, speed loosens your tongue, and I’m not on anything, neither speed nor booze.”

“Yeah, right, you fell into the cauldron of meth back when you were still a child, like Obelix. And that’s why you don’t have to take anything for as long as you live,” Magdalena interrupted her cheerfully, maybe because she thought Katarina’s introduction was too glum.

“Yes, I could’ve told you that too, but some of you have already heard it. It’s nothing serious, Sven, when I was just a couple years old, I found some lollipops in my parents’ bedroom, and they panicked when they saw me licking one of the lollipops. It’s just a family myth, but my friends bring it up every time I do something strange, that is, when they think what I do is strange. For example, when I attack a dumb hulk beating up a woman in the middle of the street. What I’m going to tell you is much more serious, actually, I’m going to tell you two stories. Can I do two, Sven?”

“Yeah, suuuureee,” Sven dragged on, with some strange grimace on his lips, as if his tongue was pricked by a thorn as he was licking a new joint.

“You all know Stanko and I have been together for more than ten years. I met him at some meeting where a room full of people had been waiting for him for half an hour, but I liked the way he walked in and just sat down. He apologized without saying a single word, his smile and his face were enough, and he simply filled the room. I’m still trying to teach him not to be late, but if he hadn’t been late, maybe we wouldn’t have gotten together. This tiny little thing was enough and something inside of me moved. His marriage had just collapsed, so I tried really hard to get him back to his feet. But I didn’t mind, I fell in love with him, and I would’ve done anything for him. I found him an apartment to rent because he was too desperate to do it on his own, and after a year, when he realized he hated the place, I found him another apartment, a better one, which he liked. And things got better for both of us too. It seemed that for the first time in many, many years I finally had someone who understood everything. Someone who wouldn’t get anything wrong. Someone I could tell something even when I didn’t have the right words and be sure that he would find them. I took a long time to explain why my marriage had collapsed, what it had been missing. And he also told me about his marriage, so we had something in common. And we had a lot of understanding for each other.”

“I’m not sure I like where this is going,” Stanko interrupted her. “I don’t think other people should be dragged into our problems. You’re abusing the situation.”

“I’m not abusing anything. What a disgusting word. It’s so... official. And, just as we were asked, I’m about to tell two stories I’ve never told anyone, actually, I’ve told one of them to you, and only you, but this other one, I’ve never told anyone.”

“All right, then tell your stories, don’t analyze our relationship.”

“Stanko, let her speak,” Sven cut him short, looking very lively. “Tonight, we cross all boundaries. And we all know nothing is for free. And that it has to hurt a bit. But you’re a big boy and you’ll take whatever she says. If you want it, I’ll roll one just for you.”

“Oh, she can speak about whatever she wants, I’ve no idea what she’s going to say, but I can tell where it’s going, and I don’t feel like picking at the wounds.”

“I’ve got to say some things, so that people could understand. Besides, I haven’t said anything bad,” Katarina quickly replied and went on, “We spent so many nights together, just talking and making love. After we had sex, we would lie on the bed naked and relaxed, and I’d talk about whatever came to my mind. And not only was he a good listener, but he was also terribly curious, he kept asking question after question until he pulled everything out of me, even the smallest thing. He said he wanted to know what made me who I was, even the tiniest detail, he wanted to feel as if he went through it together with me. I also told him about a sick relationship I’d gotten into back in college, I’m still ashamed of it. I told him everything about it. I was embarrassed I allowed it to go that far, but he understood it. A couple of years passed, we were already living together, when I decided to tell him the most important story of my life. The one I had never told anyone. It seemed he wouldn’t know the real me without this story, and I wanted to show him how much I trusted him and how much I loved him. But it wasn’t easy. All of us here went to more or less the same schools, we studied something in the humanities and social sciences, so we’re suspicious towards such stories. I knew that this story, regardless of who I told it to, would provoke skepticism and

surprise. What I had gone through was so extreme most people would think I was lying or I wasn't right in the head. I thought I had no reason to prove to anyone this really happened, and that it was better not to even bring it up. The other reason was superstition. It seemed that talking about it would somehow belittle, defile what had happened to me."

Katarina suddenly went silent and then, after a couple of seconds, went on, in a hushed voice, "All right, I've got to say it, somewhere at the back of my mind I was afraid that saying all of this out loud could somehow make it disappear, as if it had never happened.

"These were the reasons that made me realize that it was best not to talk about this to anyone, to keep it a secret. But, well, Stanko happened to me, and I briefly dropped my guard, I thought I had to tell him because I couldn't hide such an important part of me from a man who loved me. And I was sure he would understand.

"So, I told him. I still remember every detail of that day. We were sitting at some café at the Flower Square in Zagreb. He leaned toward me, holding my hand under the table, and I took a deep breath and began, 'I've never told you I was very sick. It was a long time ago, back in college. I was at the seaside and I felt terribly weak, I thought I must have picked up a bug or something, but when I returned to Zagreb, the weakness and fatigue just wouldn't go away. I went to see my doctor who he sent me to do some tests, and then the next day he called me to come see him again. He said they must have done something wrong. They had to repeat the tests. I went to the lab, and they ran my blood work. In the afternoon they told me I had cancer.'

"When he heard this, he was completely stunned, he started stuttering, but I showed him to be patient and allow me to continue."

"How, what happened," Franka said. She just couldn't wait to hear the rest of the story.

"Hold on, I'll tell you what I told him," Katarina laughed and went on. "I started my chemo, but it didn't make me feel any better. On the contrary, I was becoming weaker and weaker and soon I couldn't even lift my arm. My parents encouraged me. 'You're young,' they said, 'strong, you'll pull through this.' But I was so weak I no longer had enough strength to open my eyes. After the chemo, I went to my doctor's, and he told me that unfortunately the treatment hadn't been successful and that the results were worse than before. I asked him, 'How long I've got?' And he said, 'Three months. At the most.'

"When I got home, I was completely devastated. I didn't want to start another round of chemo because the first one only made it worse. I was lying in my bed, getting worse by the day. I'd just started college and I couldn't accept that soon everything would be over, but the fatigue in my body was horrible. Sometimes it was so awful I only wanted it to go away, so whatever happened, happened. The whole time Zigi, my dog, was right next to my bed, for months on end, he just wouldn't leave that stinking room in which everything was impregnated with the smell of medications, sweat, illness. I think I read somewhere dogs can smell cancer. I don't know what he smelled, but I know he kept fighting together with me. And when I became delirious, ranting and moaning, he would start barking and warn my parents. Of course, my parents were always there, but it seemed that it was this dog that was holding me in his mouth above a black hole and not allowing me to disappear. And then one

night, maybe it was just a dream or delirium, maybe I was running a fever, I saw my room fill with light.

“The room was filled with white light and from it slowly emerged a figure of a man. It gestured to come to him, and so I got up and walked towards him. I wasn’t thinking, I wasn’t scared, I just kept walking into the light. When I came up to him, he embraced me and said, ‘Don’t worry, everything is going to be all right.’

“And, the next morning, when I woke up, I felt much better, as if all that weakness and exhaustion had simply disappeared. I got dressed and told my parents I was going out. They just couldn’t believe it. They wanted to come with me, and I barely managed to convince them that I was all right and that everything would be fine. As if I had never been ill, that’s how I felt. And so, I decided to act as if this were true, I started going out once again, I met with people, partied, but I just wouldn’t make myself go back to the hospital and do the tests again. I was afraid they would tell me that it was only temporary, that the illness was still there. My parents were both amazed, and happy, and afraid, all at the same time. And they kept telling me I should go have a checkup. They said I had to. And so, one day I went to the hospital. I can’t describe how scared I was. And when the test results came back, the doctor told me he didn’t know what had happened, but that the illness was gone.

“There, I’d never told anyone about that night visit. Neither to my parents nor to my doctor. But I felt I had to tell you,” Katarina said and turned towards Stanko, and then once again she directed her eyes somewhere in front of her.

“When I told him my story, he hugged me and just held me in his arms, kissing my hair, and then, after a couple of minutes of silence, he asked, ‘Who was that man that embraced you, did you recognize him?’

‘Jesus,’ I replied. ‘It was Jesus.’

‘Did he say anything else?’ he asked.

‘No, he didn’t say anything, but he showed me. I saw it all, the way everything is organized, the way everything exists, both the past and the future, simultaneously, both what happened and what didn’t happen. It was just one look, just one moment in which it seemed to me I saw everything, I knew everything, I understood everything, that one look changed the way I see the world.’”

“Hey, that’s what I saw too,” Sven couldn’t hold out anymore. “Almost exactly the same, when I took DMT in Ljubljana. Everything becomes crystal clear, you just fucking get the world. No other drug does this.”

This time we were the ones who had to shut Sven up, and then someone asked what else Stanko had said when Katarina had told him all this.

“He asked many questions, he wanted to hear more, he wanted me to describe what and how I saw, but it’s so hard to describe. Anyhow, he was interested. He was curious. He wasn’t cynical or ironic. And I felt somehow relieved I finally told someone about this.”

“All right, so where’s the problem?”

“I didn’t see the problem at first either. Far from it, I was happy I’d confided in him, but I gradually came to realize his attitude towards me changed. And when we came to the end – now you all know it, we recently filed for divorce – so, when I began asking myself what and when had gone wrong, I realized it had been that moment.”

“What?! Really?! But why, where did it come from?” Magdalena asked, completely shocked, and I thought I’d long had a feeling something between them hadn’t been right. But the feeling wasn’t strong enough to share it with anyone.

“I don’t know, we never talked about it, this is the first time he’s heard of it, but I’m almost certain I’m right. I think he wanted to believe me, but the rational atheist in him just couldn’t accept it. And if he had doubts about the story my whole life was built on, then everything else I had told him lost credibility. I think he struggled with it, he tried to convince himself he was open enough to accept it as a possibility, but the germ of doubt within him kept growing. He couldn’t try and convince me it didn’t happen, because the thing was simply too big, and I had the test results that showed my condition before and after it had happened, so he then tried to somehow build it into his system – to hear me out, but not to accept it, to respect it, but not to draw a conclusion out of it that would change what he believed it. Or he concluded that it was perhaps an autosuggestion, that something else made my cancer disappear... I know all kinds of thoughts went through his head. But the fact is that when I told him this story, I never asked anything from him, least that he changed, I just wanted him to know, to get to the bottom of who I am. But I think that, even though he fought against it, after this story, he began doubting everything I told him. It was a worm that bit into everything. Maybe that’s why he became suspicious of that couple that wanted to rape me. And of my parents’ lollipops... And I’m convinced this is what caused everything to fall apart. The fact that I loved him more than ever didn’t help either. In every way possible he tried to fend himself from my love. It took years, everything was falling apart, and I tried to do everything I could to stop it, but I couldn’t unsay what I’d said. That’s why I decided to tell it again. Maybe now, after it has been told again, the story will have a different effect. Maybe it’ll be liberating.”

When Katarina fell silent, we all turned towards Stanko. But he remained silent.

“Say something,” Sven said. “I know we agreed we wouldn’t discuss each other’s stories, but this one is not finished without your reply.”

“I’m not going to say anything. And I don’t think that the story had anything to do with our relationship falling apart. Besides, she filed for divorce, not me. And this is not the place to analyze our relationship, I’m not going to do it.”

“Yes, I filed for divorce, but only after I saw that you had given up on us and that there was nothing I could do to save us. You were just waiting until I gave up on us too.”

“I don’t want to have this discussion in front of them,” Stanko replied silently, and then he suddenly got up to his feet and lowered his head towards hers until their hair touched.

“The second law of thermodynamics,” Andrej blurted out all of a sudden. While Katarina was telling her story, his eyes were closed, so I thought he was asleep. After a couple of us yelled out, “What?!” he replied, “Every ordered system tends towards entropy, even the smallest shift is enough to cause chaos. If this is true for the whole universe, then it’s true for human relations too.”