

Zoran Ferić

AS YOU'RE CROSSING THE RIVER

(excerpts)

Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović

Birth

1

Of all the births in my life, this one's the strangest. It more hurts me than the woman giving me birth. You know all kinds of women have given birth to me, among them the one who did it first and never regretted it. Ever since she passed away, forty years ago, I've been wondering about it. Other women have given me birth too, and it hurt, but not like this. This pain perhaps stems from the fact that it has nothing to do with this world. You are twenty-two, actually twenty-one and a half, but twenty-two sounds better. You are twenty-two years old and you're giving birth to me who is fifty-three. That's why this birth is so difficult.

You gave birth to me when we slept in bed for the first time. A real bed, not a car or a bench in a park. With sweet-smelling sheets that had something purple on them. That's the color of death. But you are an aesthete, and you didn't immediately recognize this death. That's when you told me to hit you. First we fucked, then we made love, and I slapped you, and you said, Harder, you can do it harder, I'm afraid I'll go too far, I said, wondering how come your nipples haven't hardened yet, and you said, You can't go too far. And so I kept hitting you until my hands began to hurt, but you still weren't in enough pain to tell me to stop. Back then I didn't know that these were birthing pains, that every slap while you rode me was a contraction pushing me out, pushing me, a fifty-year-old man, out of you together with my diabetes and clogged veins, together with my congenital heart defect, and every rare thing that has ever brought me happiness. You're young and, luckily, you still don't know what it means to be born at fifty-three, after fifty-three birthdays, exactly two days after one of those birthdays.

"You're my best present," I whisper as you sit on me, but you are somewhere far away. You don't want to hear the sound of those words, you'd rather I called you a slave, a whore, you'd rather I gave you to other old men who buy you at the market, tied with wire. You are my mother who liked nothing better than to be tied. With wire. Or my father's old ties.

But back then I didn't understand that pain, not yet, I say, either yours or mine. And when it ended, and it ended suddenly, as if cut in half, as if someone cut that wire you were tied with, your arms and legs, and when you rolled over from me, curling up in a position of a raped woman. You said nothing, I didn't feel labored breathing either. You just curled up, raped, after a difficult birth.

And my head was full of images, such as the white mulberries I ate with my first mother in Dramalj that summer before she died. The images of Easter when I got my first tennis racket. And all those images were there to distance me from what I saw beside me: you raped, you who had just given birth, you seriously beaten but without a single bruise because I had hit you with an open palm.

The next day, after you left, when I, around four in the morning, just born but still having problems with my prostate, had to get up and visit the toilet, I read your message: "I cut myself. There's a lot of blood. It's my punishment."

The message had been sent at one past midnight; now it was four. You could've already been dead, like the first woman who gave birth to me. The constellations of that bluish morning, with birds chirping, morning trams whining, told me I'd once again become an orphan. And then the newborn in me thought that he should call a hospital, but which hospital, that he should rush to your student dorm and pick you up from the bathroom floor, and take you, all covered in blood, blood dripping from your wrist and onto the bright nightgown, to the Traumatology Hospital and just hope. And in those early hours, the building that was once a tobacco factory and that was later converted into a hospital would be quiet and indifferent to a newly born fifty-year-old; only the faint moans from the burn ward might be heard in that beautiful June morning, resembling the chirping of birds.

But I didn't. The message was sent at one past midnight, and I only saw it at four, by now, they either saved you, or you were already dead. I drove to your pavilion and didn't see any ambulances or police cars or those other vehicles, black ones, that always followed me in life. Undertakers follow me like spies.

2

What had been split, what stood severed for years, on the night you gave birth to me somehow began to come together. Those hookers in the courtyards in Gajeva Street, near the funeral parlors, those buttocks that glisten and that horror and thrill of paying for their service, the money being torn from your hand and into hers and then dropped into purse, that motion, your open hand, an honest transaction, and hers, quick, as if she's hiding it, or pretending that money is something unimportant. I've seen that movement in most of those women, money is something they take just so, casually, as if they won't get slapped or kicked or beaten, if they don't take it. That casual movement brings excitement, it drives me mad, and at the same time, it's as if everyone is watching me, Grandma Dobrila and Grandpa Ilija, Grandpa Stjepan, Mom and Dad, and all my school friends who smirk, He must pay for whores, and that's precisely why my hand is open. Screw you, bastards, look, look at that whore, at that fat ass, that filth, look at those Roma girls, bought and sold and bought again, bought ten times a day, the girls who are always eighteen, never seventeen or nineteen, look at that conglomerate, that menagerie that explains the origin of species and their differences, grandmothers of fifty and girls of sixteen, all in one place, and it was right there, in the street specialized for funeral parlors, that the first half of the fifty-three-year-old life began to merge with the other life; with Arijana, whose fragile beauty would have broken apart and shattered if you as much as touched her, with that girl who carried her cello, larger than herself, to school because she always came directly from her music lesson, with that girl all of us boys were in love with, myself included, myself who dreamed that she was my sister, that we slept in the same room, but didn't kiss, I loved her to the bones, to the marrow, but this love seemingly stopped at the surface, at the skin, even though I saw her naked too, when she

came from the shower, but I didn't want to touch her. And I watched her from my window as she went to Pavao Markovac Music School, hauling her cello, and my love for her filled the air and the clear blue skies at Eastertime. There is no greater love than the love for such sister, that love is almost Christian, love from above, super-love, the love that birds might feel before falling into cat's claws.

And there were such sisters in my life, and such loves, in the warm winter, when we walked around Šalata, one of those little sisters and I, holding hands, and the streets, Vramčeva, offering a strange view of the cathedral, or Gajdekova, or... I'm forgetting their names now. We slept together and only kissed, my little sister and I, and only occasionally, even less often than that, we engaged in intercourse, and I entered the sacred place, the very core of temples, where the history of love relationships with both people and gods resides. We did it to maintain the semblance of a normal relationship, my distant little sister; we fucked so that we could not-fuck more peacefully, not make love, but love each other. And at parting, instead of kissing, my little sister, you just touch the tip of your sneaker to my shoe, and that gesture can move the gods.

But on that night when you first gave birth to me, then cut yourself, and when in the morning, I frantically called your cellphone, sent you a hundred messages, tried to reach your girlfriends, on that night, my parts came together into a whole, and from that whole, I cried watching that procession of invalids, the crippled, the blind, the legless, and the armless, the madmen from psychiatric asylums at Vrapče and Rebro who were all me. You finally gave birth to me, to a healthy child, and that's how I cried.

And when I finally reached you, around ten in the morning, you sent me a message: Why did you get so scared? It's just a scratch.

And that's when I realized that this was just a misunderstanding, that you injured yourself while cutting sheet metal for your sculpture, that there was no connection between those slaps, the pose of a raped woman, and the blood that flowed from your palm, and that your guilt came out of your painful involvement in someone else's marriage: not by making love, but by giving birth. As if you knew, intuitively, only a birth can hurt so much.

But it was already over. In those few hours, from six to ten, I was first born, and then fell in love as never before. As a newborn, crying, out of fear for your life and horror at my past life, I fell in love with the danger, with the pain, with the abnormal, with the scandal, with the girl who first gasps with pleasure while being slapped and then cuts herself. I'm just over fifty, you're twenty-two. It's the love the gods laugh at. And waiters, hotel receptionists, or taxi drivers don't fall behind.

3

I'm texting you some pictures from when I was a child. So you can see how I've grown. Here I am with my first mother, somewhere by the sea, she's wearing her one-piece swimsuit, a sad

item of clothing that's supposed to hide as much as possible, while I'm wearing only diapers. A little creature that's already walking and babbling, yet still shitting in his diapers. And you say, How sweet you are, and yes, I am, I am sweet, blond, my nose has not yet been broken, I don't look like a boxer. Or a photo from my grandma's apartment where I'm holding a ball bigger than myself, I'm sending you all this to give you a better idea of who you gave birth to. But maybe that's something I want to hide from myself too, to give you a chance to see me younger, a thousand times younger, than what you see in reality, right here, at Jarun Lake, at our restaurant, as I bring my glass of wine to yours, slowly, discreetly, so that the waiter doesn't see it, so that the people around us who think you're my daughter don't see it, I touch your glass and say, Cheers, darling, while you read those inspirational messages from the bottle of Jana Water: "Love to embrace the world." Or... something.

But I don't have a feeling my current age scares you. On the contrary, you find pleasure in the scandal, in those piercing eyes I encounter when I accidentally forget myself and take your hand. Sometimes, usually after a few drinks, you look at the waiter or whoever's watching us, lean over the table and kiss me, and then you look back at that stranger and smile, satisfied. You've spat in the face of the world's hypocrisy.

But then again, sometimes you're ashamed of me. You're restrained, almost angry, and almost always this happens when it's cloudy and when you're sober. Your confidence curls up in the dirt, you're an angry girl once more, and everything around you starts getting on your nerves, even me, an old man and a child in one, and all the people watching us, and I feel you just want to disappear. Disappear, disappear, my darling, my cursed soul, my almost skinless soul, so sensitive, so chronically hurt, chronically grumpy. And that's when your face grows older, it's a face I'm afraid to look at, and that's when long silences settle between us, conversation stalls, and we need a drink, urgently.

The Fourth Sixteen Years

1

I first turned sixteen long before my sixteenth birthday. I'd just turned fourteen and I was in the 8th grade, my mother was dying, and I fell in love with a certain Edith, to whom I lied I was sixteen. And I'm probably sixteen for the last time right now when I'm fifty-three. Math is a strange discipline when a metaphor gets in the way.

We sit on a bench in the Upper Town, at Strossmayer Promenade, right below the Meteorological Institute, and the weather is good and mild. Summer is about to begin, and two days have passed since my fifty-third birthday. You're sitting in my lap, we're watching the city below us that's also waiting for its *Summertime*, and I pull my hand under your skirt, you sigh, and I feel your sacred water. And I tell you I could fall terribly in love with you, and, for some reason, I don't know why, in my head, there's an image of an executioner with an axe and a hood on his head, I tell you I could fall in love like never before, and then, if that happens, I'll be sixteen again. I don't even remember which time in my life I will be sixteen again, and you look at me and you don't understand anything. But you're afraid to say you don't understand. You're still shy, you're still playing your role of a little girl, and I'm playing that of an elderly gentleman whom you must listen to. The benches along the promenade evoking so many fond memories listen to me too, as does the statue of Antun Gustav Matoš, that poet sitting on a bench some three hundred meters away, and even that dark Meteorological Institute listens, where measurements are conducted of which the two of us have no clue.

And the people at the Institute, who measure humidity, pressure, and the effects of southern winds, they will know before we do that one morning, one seemingly perfect morning in Graz, at one of the castle's towers and over coffee, we will get into a nasty fight, and two hours later, we won't even know why we fought and we'll cry together in our hotel room with a large bathtub by the window, watching the muddy Mura spin its lace of eddies.

As you sigh in that beautiful evening, and the air around us should be full of the scent of linden blossoms, the air around us should smell like cough syrup, I feel fear gathering in the tips of my lungs and descending into my legs, and my legs buckle even though I'm sitting, even though you're sitting on them, in my lap, while our entire atmosphere rests on you, all the air that we breathe, and, finally, I must ask if you expect us to make love right there on that bench, and I ask this with fear, and you feel that fear, you feel my trembling knees, you feel the wavering in my hand that continues to explore beneath your cheap skirt, a student's skirt because you have no money, and you say you don't expect it, and you kiss me sympathetically, now sympathetically, not like before, and that's how you would kiss me in a coffin, in the mortuary chapel at Mirogoj Cemetery, me, an elderly gentleman, an executioner with a hood and an axe, now helpless, a wax figure of an executioner, such a kiss it would be, like kissing an executioner.

And finally, I told you, in a restaurant above the city, while Zagreb glimmered down below us, and its illuminated houses and streetlamps looked like stars in that night, the inverse sky, and you were wearing your new dress, and you'll always remember the dress you wore when I told you, There, I'm sixteen all over again and please forgive me in advance for everything I'll say and do, and you held my hand so as not to allow those sixteen years to somehow escape from me, so as not to dry up. That evening, I invited you to come to Vienna with me for a reading from a book that still had nothing to do with you, but all the following ones will, and that stuck with you. Your dress, the inverse sky, stars, Vienna. You feel good in high places, in the hills above Zagreb offering a wonderful view of the city at night, and you said, I love the hills and this view. And that's why, from then on, I always took you to the hills. We drove for hours on end through the narrow streets of Šestine, Gračani, Markuševac, and all other hills above our city, exploring, it was usually around two after midnight, and, in place of cats, foxes darted across in our headlights. Their bushy tails flickered in the beam of light, making them look like they were flying. We liked the wilderness, we liked the idea that they were perhaps rabid, yet we were safe, the two of us, a newly born sixteen-year-old boy and a twenty-two-year-old girl. And during one of those rides, I told you I was born on the evening when we first slept together in a bed, and when you cut yourself, when I thought you died, and you said I had grown up quickly, I had turned sixteen in an instant.

And so we began to think about time.

God created heaven and earth, the sea and the clouds, plants and animals, man and woman, and then he created time for all of this to die or decay, which wasn't exactly generous. That's how we spoke about time. You loved Prévert, and since I was sixteen, I could love him again too. And I told you that one day you would come to Brest with someone you loved, someone untouched by time, and I would see you from across the street, you, the imagined Barbara from my first sixteenth year, but now I would be sixty, and I would catch sight of you on the other side of the street with that man, you happy and joyful, and behind you, the portal of the Russian Orthodox Church. It would be a magnificent moment, and I would love you in that magnificent moment without jealousy, without constraint, without any other need but to have you so distant and smiling, on the other side of the street. And it would all be sentimental, childlike, garnished with your illogical love for the French New Wave, which goes back to your high school days, when on weekdays you watched French films from the sixties and on Saturday nights you pretended to be having a good time at folk clubs. You had to fit in, you who are an old soul, older than me now, and who, within herself, made that strange synthesis between Jean-Luc Godard and Jelena Karleuša, a fusion of the French film director and the Serbian folk singer, an amalgam that would never be possible in the days of my dismissive youth.

Sometimes I see something childish in you, and I'm left surprised, I'm surprised by how well you remember your prom and what dress you wore on your prom night, and you, even though your mom couldn't afford an expensive dress, you found a cheap and quirky one. My sweet Cinderella. And when I think about your early days, growing up without a real family, only with your mom, I feel pain in the tips of my lungs. It's the pain of everything you lacked as a little girl, it's the pain of your childhood photos where you're not smiling, it's the pain of what happened to you at an early age, after your father left, but also later on, so you

turned that pain into pleasure in bed. Into slapping, into belt spanking, into something unthinkable, into choking you with a tie, into a desire to rape you.

You, my darling, are something unimaginable. How to make peace between your self-confidence of a young woman, your maturity, your brain, and the squealing of a beaten-up heap of meat I keep lunging at, raping it, and then, when it's finally over, I roll over from you and stare at the ceiling, wanting to die. And you once again curl up into the position of a raped woman, and when you do that, for a while, I'm not allowed to touch you, to kiss you, to caress you with as much as a breeze from my mouth. You just can't stand me in those first few minutes, and I feel so bad, so bad, I'm about to burst into tears, I've raped a little girl, I've beaten a little girl up, and then, you jump at me and shower me with kisses because you feel my pain and you console me because I raped you.

3

We're driving along the Sljeme road, winding around serpentines, greedily staring at the vistas that open before us whenever we climb up a little higher, yet your hunger of a little girl from the plains just can't be fed. It's summer already, it came suddenly, between the slaps on your face, and now we're going to the top of the hill, to the hotel, to the Snow Queen Hotel, there will be more slaps, and there will be love and champagne that will be served to our room by a young waiter who is polite, as every waiter should be, yet, in his gaze, I feel the devastating effect of time on my face, in the rare grays in my hair, in the looming shadow of old age, those fifty-three years, and in your face that looks younger than your twenty-two years of age. Something horrible has found its way between us and the waiter bringing us champagne in an ice bucket looks at this horror with a gaze reserved for winter. Perhaps not an entirely devastated winter, because there's some snow on the ground, along bare branches and crows and gray skies and gray houses and gray streets. Shades of gray, the waiter perhaps thinks. He doesn't accept the tip, he says it's not customary, this is more of a mountain house than a hotel, but they, well, like most Zagreb hotels, also offer day use of their rooms. I've never met a waiter who didn't accept the tip. Something shows on his face. It's not disgust, but professional tolerance that's making him feel superior in his own eyes as well as ours. The waiter's grand pride.

But before all this, a beautiful scene needs to be offered at the altar of your education. You brought your books because your exam is approaching. The History of Modern Sculpture requires some sacrifice too, and that's why we're sitting in the hotel garden, it's June, the exam season, and there's a thick reader between us, full of modern sculptors, Calder and kinetic sculpture, Matisse and his degenerated anatomy, Lipchitz's dismembered bodies, all nice in black and white, and while we're waiting for our lunch, I quiz you. You describe Lipchitz's arabesques, bodies that belong neither to Auschwitz inmates nor aliens, and you're smiling, and Matisse and Lipchitz suddenly become a lovely foreplay, and I at sixteen and you at twenty-two are now students, in love, it's a teenage love, we study together, and somewhere in the background, far in the woods, the accordion is heard, some French melody. Your dress seems old-fashioned, and as I watch that dress of yours and its

symmetrical pattern, I feel like crying, that's how much pain your past life brings me, that poverty, that lack, yet Calder and Matisse console me because you speak so nicely about them. So nicely and so accurately, you've learned everything, and you won't accept anything less than an A, you have straight A's. B's are not enough, they are forty-year-old women in glasses, such as your literature teacher who could never believe who you're sleeping with now, who's slapping you gently as you sigh, spanking you softly yet firmly, sending smacks that are tender when they leave my arm, my shoulder, but that somehow gain momentum in the air, and when they land on your cheeks, they are remarkably strong, shockingly echoes that clap, that loud convergence of my flesh and yours in the silence of the day. This love is heard.

In a later stage, you cry. You always cry when we first fuck and then make love. I open my hand, preparing a slap, but I first tell you, I tell you what's going to happen, what's next, and you, when you hear it, you cry, you tense up, expecting a blow, your lips puckered, you're waiting, and down there, when I finally slap you, I feel contractions, I feel those muscles tighten. Up there you're crying and down there you're contracting, and I say, chew on it with your pussy, you whore, chew on it with your pussy, then slap, then chew, then slap, then chew... And as I do this, everything in me tightens too, before my eyes a procession of images of slaves from my *Illustrated Bible* on which I jerked off when I was a kid, a procession of all the women I ever slapped, some of them my friends' lovers, a procession of all those little whores from the German *Laufhausen* I slapped only in my imagination, and at the same time, whenever I slap you, it feels like I slapped myself, it hurts me more than you, and I feel like crying, but I mustn't. I must remain a strict gentleman who likes physical abuse, I must tie you with my late father's tie, I tie your hands and you, bound with that tie, a colorful snake, get down on your knees. Your knees are always scratched, and the thought crosses my mind, who knows who else you do this with. This both brings pain and excitement. It brings pain to the upper half of my body, it brings excitement to the lower part, like I'm cut in half. Some horrible God, to whom temples and churches are dedicated, has cut me in half, and now my two halves are shouting at each other, yet with each passing moment, they understand each other less and less.

Then I remove my belt and I say again what's going to happen next.

I make you smell the belt, and you take it with your hands bound and bring it to your nose, and then you lick it. I let you lick the belt, greedily, like a kid goat licking a clump of salt, you lick it, and I throw you on the bed and watch you as you, all tensed up, a child waiting for an injection, wait for that smack on your naked ass. And it comes. Smacks always come. Several smacks, you cry and say, Harder, harder, then you cry again, and I slap you under those great heavens, under and after everything I've gone through in life, and outside is a clear summer day, fresh here in the mountain, with a yellow sun, so yellow, streaming through the blinds and into our room.

And later, much later, after two bottles of champagne and many more slaps, you rest your head on my chest and say, It's nice. I show you one on my old photos on my cellphone, I'm wearing a suit, a young man of twenty or so, somewhere in Karlovac, just before one of my college friend's wedding. I'm young and I gaze into the camera mischievously. My tie looks like something Edo Murtić may have painted. A nice tie, you say.

Here I'm waiting for you to be born, I say.

4

I tell you I waited for years for you to be born. In the moment when the open shutter of the colleague I brought to the wedding caught me, I wondered, right at that moment, I wondered what the woman I would eventually love would look like. And who would love me back. I tell you I loved you even as I waited for you to be born, and you were born thirty-one years later, much too late, but there, I say, my wait is over. And you press against me like ivy, like an octopus, embracing me tightly, so tightly that you might strangle me. And now you, instead of that tie, become a giant snake, a girl who has an angry face in all her childhood photos.

I tell you about the women with whom I waited for you to be born and who occasionally gave birth to me, just like you did in the beginning. Edith was a Romanian, it was a long time ago, on the island of Rab, and she told me how she and her parents, one cold, rainy night, escaped from Romania to Yugoslavia and then to Germany. She could hear the border patrol's dogs barking, but they never sniffed them out because of the rain. Or maybe because her father bribed the guards, who knows why, and now she arrived to Rab as a German tourist and we loved each other because of Romania and because of Germany and because she looked like a Spanish woman, and we sat on a bench and watched the red sun impale itself on the tallest bell tower in town, that of St. Mary's, and we were in love, but she was already looking forward to the following summer and her trip to Spain, to Costa Brava. The name Costa Brava echoed in me and Edith suddenly expanded the world I watched before me. Some kind of blending happened, the outline of the city with all of its four bell towers becomes slowly infused with the poorly taken photos of Costa Brava published in an issue of *Wochenend* we kept at my uncle's house in Banjol.

And that's exactly how those few women with whom I waited for you to be born are now blending into you, lying on my chest, finally born, born late, so that those thirty-one of my birthdays spent waiting for you hurt both you and me.

It's not my fault I was born late, you say, and you also say you love that you're now born, and you love you gave birth to me on that evening, which was already a month ago. And then you suddenly jump out of the bed, springing off it like a little girl, and you say, It's our first month. We don't have time to celebrate anniversaries, we'll celebrate monthlies. Our first monthly comes shortly after your actual monthly cycle, which you're having a hard time with, but you're glad it came because we never used protection. And you say, Get another one, we should celebrate. Reluctantly, I call the reception, and the waiter arrives with the third bottle of champagne. He smiles ironically.

I tell you that my relationship with my friend's lover continued until my birthday party where we, my friend and I, and she between us, sat at the table in the darkness, among a large group of friends, while my wife chatted with her friends. And both of us held one of her hands under the table. I wanted her to be mine, just mine, if not her, then someone else

who hadn't come along yet. Just as long as she was only mine. When we walked her home, he and I, I wanted to die. Perhaps as badly as I wanted to die when I first met my wife and, instead of killing myself, I sent her flowers and it all resulted in thirty years of marriage, which for a long time was the most significant miracle of my life. Two days after my birthday, I met you.

We lie in bed, holding the bases of champagne glasses on our chests, they are pleasantly cool, and you say, "You're one whole Kafka older than me!"

"Well, not quite," I say, "Kafka lived to be forty-one. But I am Antun Branko Šimić older than you." Given that we met at a literary promotion, the remark is somewhat fitting.

That's how time acquires its faces.

The Demon of the Islets of Langerhans

1

And it began long before that mythical evening, an evening now fossilized in our memory, when, at the end of a long and drunken conversation after yet another literary evening we both went to, this time the guest was an American short story writer, I hugged you and couldn't let go. You said you were attracted to older men, and I replied that it wasn't wise, I talked to you about it, wanting to save you, I told you about my ex, who married a man twenty-five years older than her and who had a good life with him, they loved each other, yes, and they had a child together, but then she spent ten years caring for him after his stroke. For ten years, she pushed him around in a wheelchair, saying, Careful, here's the curb, or, Watch out for the gravel, the wheels get stuck, and he wanted a swift and smooth ride, always impatient, near the end already senile, sometimes forgetting he couldn't walk, and sometimes, miraculously, he'd even make a few wobbly steps, and when he did manage to make those few steps before toppling down in the living room, she cried. She took care of him and their child, but their son grew and eventually learned to walk, while he struggled to sit in his wheelchair, and in the end, he wasn't able to do that either, she massaged him to prevent bedsores, that's what I told you wanting to save you, she was so young, nothing sacred in her eyes, a living pale icon, and in the end, in the end, she breathed a sigh of relief when he died. No, it's not worth it, I told you, it's not worth tying yourself to someone older, so much older that you find him attractive. I noticed that look in your eyes when I talked about the tragedy of older men.

But an hour and a couple of drinks later, both of us functionally drunk, you hugged me, you belong to a generation of huggers, and when I felt your breasts against mine, when I felt the firmness of the arms capable of hugging so tightly that it actually means something, I hugged you back. Until that moment, it never occurred to me something could be cooked up out of this, some strange roux, some stunning mishmash, I was desperate and I was lost, that much was true, but it never crossed my mind. I would've never thought that I would put my arms around someone and not be able to let go. A spasm, a stone statue of two people as one. You couldn't let go of me either, so we just stood there, hugging, in the middle of a bar full of young people, the two of us with a thirty-one-year gap between us, many must have been disgusted by it, up to the point of incredulity, Japanese pornography, the spasm packed full of the years of my desperation. And when I kissed you, I caught the terrifying gaze of the waiter who was removing beer bottles from our table. And I often think about the eons that stand between those two gazes: mine from ecstasy and his from the hell of everyday repulsion.

And that's when I took you by the hand and led you to the Upper Town.

2

It all began, as you know, a couple of months before that June evening, almost a year before, actually, it all began with a case of illogical hatred and an attempted murder. My wife and I were on Jurišićeva Street, right by the old post office, she was sliding along merrily, carrying a package with her new sweater, good value for money, bought on a generous discount, the sad joy of mundane existence, and every step we took seemed projected; a hundred steps to the tram, four more to enter, then standing by the window, familiar old scenes passing by on the opposite side, the city that never changes, which is why I sometimes love it, and why I sometimes hate it, nothing interesting happening on the tram, nothing worth anyone's attention, fewer and fewer things deserving our attention, then exiting the tram, the crisp mid-October air, perhaps the scent of roasted chestnuts from somewhere, the sound of tram doors opening and closing, then three hundred steps to our house. Predictable, astonishingly boring, unbearably boring, suffocating with the same images we will feel in our throats, the streets narrowing strangely, as if the houses are closing in, and the sky a dark strip, getting thinner and thinner, people getting closer, just as boring. Everything seeping out of life like from a cut aorta, the weight of the same future days, all that.

But?!

Some woman, young, hysterical, poorly dressed, tried to go around us, but we were massive slalom poles that move unexpectedly, and she couldn't go around us, so she angrily shoved my wife, slammed her in the shoulder, which made her almost topple down to the pavement in front of the post office. I'm walking here, you dumb fuck! she was in such a hurry. To whom? To what?

And suddenly, in that unthinkable fraction of a second, the fraction known only to professional skiers and sprinters, in that tenth or a hundredth of a second, I pounced after her to kill her. I was ready to kill, out of my mind, her anger had overflowed into me and multiplied a million times over, I lunged, but she was walking fast, and it took me some time to catch up with her. And in my head, it pounded: kill kill kill! It was so clear the bitch did not deserve to live, and while my wife was calling out to me in panic, I was hurling after that unknown woman, figuring out a way to kill her. She stopped at a crosswalk where Jurišićeva intersects with Palmotićeva, her light was red, and the tram coming from the direction of Draškovićeveva was picking up speed. I stopped right behind her, kill, kill, kill, I had already raised my arm to push her under the tram, but she saw me with that intuitive eye we sometimes have at the back of our heads, she sensed her death was imminent, and when she turned, she ran, in panic, in terror, but it wasn't enough, she wasn't terrified enough, she was unaware that at that moment I came so close to killing someone. Closer even than on that fateful night when I stabbed my schoolmate in the stomach or when I struck one drunken German with a beer bottle that shattered in my hand. And that woman escaped death with small, silly steps in her elevated heels.

At home, I developed a fever and lost eighteen pounds in the next seven days. I simply shrunk, unbelievably quickly, and when I saw that it couldn't be just a flu, that it was quite possible, I went to my doctor's in Laginjina Street, but none of my pants would stay on me. Not even the belt helped, I had to walk towards the health center and hold my pants with one hand so that they wouldn't slip.

The diagnosis was clear. Blood sugar at thirty, caused by an atypical kidney inflammation that caused severe ketoacidosis, which, in an incredibly short time, consumed a good portion of my fat.

3

In the next month I spent at the Infectious Diseases Hospital, I lost another twenty pounds. I didn't even know I was fighting for my life with large doses of insulin, IV drips of antibiotics, severe kidney pain, food that wasn't really food, a slice of dark bread and half a boiled egg, then IV drip again, the gentle hands of the nurse stabbing injections into my stomach, painful urination that was so much like contractions, the attending doctor making rounds twice a day, night and day blending illogically into one thanks to large dosages of Valium, and outside it was a sunny and golden fall, a fall from kitschy wallpapers, surreal like everything else in this hospital room. A hospital season. And every night, throughout that whole month, someone, always the same voice, in the room next to mine, was crying in pain.

The kind doctor, as beautiful as a nun whose beauty comes out of her sacrifice, explained what was happening to me. We had no choice, she said, large doses of insulin were our only option, the sugar wouldn't budge, the Diabetes God held firm, but we managed, ketoacidosis is a dangerous condition, ketoacidosis can kill because the body is eating itself; I was eating myself without even knowing it, they had to feed me artificially, and there was a risk, if the sugar didn't drop, I would end up eating myself in an absolutely un-gourmet way. Always devoted to food, a gourmet, a man who remembered people through food, cooked zucchini, heavenly salsa, good gorgonzola under the glass bell of the cheese box, five or six dishes only for lunch, that kind of person, I was now consuming myself. A logical end for a gourmet, revenge of the devoured calves, lambs, and despised chickens, let's not forget deer and pheasants. A serial killer, and it was only just that at one moment, a very specific autumnal moment, he ate himself. And so, the lady doctor, whose hand, already eaten into by old age, I would so love to kiss, talked about by condition now, when the danger had already passed. We managed, she said, addressing me, and if we hadn't, she would've addressed my widow, so, we managed. We were chatting at her office, she said she'd read some of my books, and I wanted to believe her because, truth be told, some did concern the medical profession, and they did concern this hospital too, in which I now lay, drinking bitter coffee, laughing, opening my soul. I almost killed a woman, I said, in Jurišićeva, I almost pushed her under the tram, I was out of my mind, but I remember the madness. Sugar will do that to you, the beautiful doctor said, sugar can drive you crazy, all the glands are affected, the pituitary is acting up, and the amygdala goes crazy, you weren't yourself, she said, and I saw a hint of fear in her eyes, she believed I had tried to kill someone. Luckily, she said, you didn't, it wouldn't have been you, but the sugar, the demon from the pancreas, but the demon is hard to prove in court, luckily you didn't, the demon is even harder to prove to yourself. The she asked me, purely scientifically, medicinally, endocrinologically, and psychiatrically, even though she's a pulmonologist, if I would feel sorry for the woman if I had killed her. And I said yes, of course.

The doctor was satisfied, she had saved two lives. Mine and someone else's, someone who might have accidentally run into me in the acute stage of my ketoacidosis. And everything was strange, like in a dream. I had diabetes and kidney inflammation, yet I lay in the pulmonology department, at the infectious diseases hospital that didn't primarily deal with sugars.

Towards the end of the treatment, I didn't recognize myself in the mirror. By then it only hurt when I peed, I was prepared for contractions, but I liked what I saw in the mirror. The scale showed almost forty pounds less, my young face, a face of a teenager, emerged from somewhere in the past, and whatever happened next would happen to that face.

4

By morning, the pain had eased off a bit, I had made it through the night, and after the doctor had completed her rounds, satisfied with my condition, after breakfast and the insulin right after breakfast, I was resting peacefully, gazing through the window at the forest next to the small botanical garden of the School of Science, where we occasionally played as children. The forest, along with the realization that I had once been a child, made me calm, and that former child somehow nursed me back to health. But I was still on the side of death, lingering in that liminal zone, now fully conscious.

Suddenly, a friend arrived with his mistress, a young pharmacist, twenty years his junior, and she brought me lunch, a stuffed tenderloin steak from a restaurant on Ksaver, and, all smiles, she said she'd heard I complained about hospital food, and as she was familiar with hospital cuisine, having worked in many hospitals, including this one, she felt I deserved something nice, but without bread, the meat wouldn't hurt, she heard I was doing better. And so, she unwrapped the lunch and placed it on a plate she borrowed from the kitchen, her movements were skillful, she was beautiful in parts, her hair, face, tiny nose, lips, breasts, slender legs, but also as a whole, all in all one attractive whole, a whole most men wouldn't be able to resist, and so I watched her as I ate, politely, slowly, savoring every bite. Appetite was something I had almost forgotten. And then, SOMETHING happened.

I watched her, she sat on a chair next to my bed, her short skirt riding up a bit, she positioned her legs politely, she hadn't crossed them, and from time to time, she tossed her flowing blond hair, smiling at both my friend and me, and it crossed my mind she was seducing us both, she was seducing everyone, even my hospital roommate, a twenty-year-old kid with severe mononucleosis, but also the nurses who occasionally came in, as well as the beds, the TV set, even the bedpans under our beds. She had a radar for beauty. She emitted her beauty towards everyone, and they sent it back to her as admiration, compliments, something. But her beauty was ordinary to someone, a well-cared-for beauty of a woman who knew how to handle her hair, how to make her breasts look bigger with a push-up bra, how to tan her skin discreetly. Yet, for me, at that precise moment, that beauty was completely unattainable. Not unattainable in that earthly way, like beautiful women we run into in the street, or at the beach, women who simply brush against our lives, she wasn't

unattainable like a high school girl would be to an elementary school boy whose hormones had just begun to stir, this was a different kind of unattainability, more thorough, more final. Because I was already on the other side of the Styx, and from that gray death of mine, I observed her as a beautiful earthly woman. And then it struck me, she was unattainable to me because she was alive.

And on that late morning, cloudier than the rest, something happened. I found myself faced with a choice, as if that elderly gentleman with a long beard from high above said, Choose, life or death. It's up to you, he said, and the dilemma seemed to come from the depths of *new age* and the decade before last. However, for me, at that very moment, it couldn't be more real, Make a choice, decide, to live or not. And as I looked at her, that pharmacist, the magician of medicine, hair, and slender legs, I chose life.

5

That fall, in the hospital, when I chose life, I couldn't have imagined that come spring, which turned out to be a real spring with real primroses and real crocuses, pussy willows and forsythias, I would make love with her in an apartment in Kranjska Gora. We were chatting on the terrace of that apartment overlooking the slopes of Mangart, she, my friend's lover, her name was Nina, my friend, his wife, and his wife's lover. Suddenly, in front of everyone, my friend said that having to pay for it got me excited, but then it turned out Ninotchka also got excited when she got paid for it, during her college years, she had worked at a massage parlor, handjobs only, nothing more, although nothing was alien to her, she was an open person, and, most importantly, getting paid for it excited her. True, it didn't excite her during the act itself, but it did later when she went shopping for shoes and purses, knowing how she earned the money. That's what got her excited. We agreed on a price, and the life I chose in the hospital, in the anteroom of death, so to speak, now manifested itself in the strangest of ways, and Ninotchka set the price fairly, giving me a friendly discount. I saw a skirt, she said, and shoes, loafers, for everyday wear, and then she added it all up and came up with a fair price.

And as she was making love to me, we didn't fuck, we actually made love, as if she was genuinely in love with me, something awakened in me that made you possible. Were it not for Ninotchka, there wouldn't be you, just so you know. And even though we hadn't yet met, three months would pass before we did and ended up on a bench under the Meteorological Institute, Ninotchka paved the way.

She prepared me for you, demummified me.

The Square

1

All of this tells me how deprived of love you were as a child. Dad loved death more than he loved you. And Mom? She had a purpose, she had no time for love. Boiled eggs, stews, polenta, spaghetti Bolognese, Sunday strudel, that's where her love went. But all the love that you missed back then, you now have for others. All of it and more.

This past week in Kranjska Gora, meant as a return to the beginnings, a romantic getaway in the mountains, is slowly transforming into something else. I don't know what, but just as every moment had clear skies in the beginning, just as every vista was interesting, even a simple walk around cemetery when I introduced you to my dead ones, now everything is a disappointment, our every conversation turns into a misunderstanding. Our apartment, in an idyllic house on the banks of a wide mountain stream, a small river actually, looked so charming in internet photos, while in reality, it is cold and damp. The house is practically surrounded by that stream, like it's built on a peninsula. In the evening, when we lie in bed, we hear it murmur. I have no doubt that it would've been a pleasing sound before, that it would've gone together nicely with Brel and Aznavour echoing from the laptop speakers, but now, it's so irritating. Both to me and to you. When we lie in bed, we hug and keep each other warm more than we make love, and then we fall asleep. We both fear that the other one might start something, but neither you nor I do. The apartment is cursed, the bedding smells of dampness, and the walls are screaming with kitschy paintings of mountain landscapes with ponds and cows.

What do you think, I ask, do shepherds fuck their cows? You roll your eyes, you have no strength to respond. But when we have lunch in a picturesque inn just below our apartment, where cycling teams usually gather, mostly Slovenians and Italians, you flirt with the boys. They probably think I'm your father, so they flirt back. Some of them are much younger than you, kids almost. And there's no doubt that one of these evenings you will ask me to talk about those young boys while you sit on top of me, riding me and getting slapped, to tell you I'm giving you to them, one by one: Matjaž, Miho, Mario... And all the while, I'll wonder if he is among them tonight. Your future one.

More and more often I imagine that young man who will come like in some nice book I might read, not something sentimental, but important, a book heralding the arrival of the one who will save us. In my imagination, I write a palimpsest over the Gospels, love, purity, righteousness. And when the Messiah finally appears, in a long white robe, his hair falling to his shoulder, his beard neat, or perhaps in ripped jeans, All-Stars on his feet, and a neat beard, when it finally happens, he will take you by the hand and lead you away.

I imagine this romance, and he, still non-existent, becomes my friend, my accomplice, the man who will cleanse my sins. And I must admit, I look forward to the arrival of that young man and the time when I'll simply be your father, nothing more. I tell you all this as we sit at a table in front of a mountain house in Kranjska Gora, you're sketching your drawings, I'm working on my novel. And when I say that the handsome Fruk

could be that man, that I'm no longer jealous, and that something like friendship is born here, one-sided, though, but friendship nevertheless, you reply, So, that's your exit strategy, we're getting rid of the ballast and going back to the wifey.

We find ourselves not understanding each other like this more and more often, and this misunderstanding takes on various forms. As we climb towards the Tamar Mountain House at the foot of Jalovec, where they have excellent blueberry strudel, you walk ahead of me as if you don't want us to go together. This is your way of showing that you are so much younger and stronger, and that you don't need this old grandpa and his dream. When I reproach you, saying that if something happened to me, if I had a heart attack or broke my ankle, you would leave me in the woods, you respond, No, I would never leave you, but you're too slow, I need the work-out, I'll wait for you up there.

But then I find you at a wooden table in the courtyard of the mountain house, munching on your strudel, and all smiling, happy, text-messaging someone on your phone. And when you see me trudging towards you, you say, I'm sorry, I couldn't wait for you, I was hungry. Who are you texting? I ask. Sanja, you chirp, she came to Zagreb, and I need to see her when I come back. But when I try to sneak a peek at your phone, you hide it and place it upside down on the table. You always do this with your phone. But why does it bother me now?

2

You're not romantic, you don't believe in such Gospels, you are an explorer. First, back in Zagreb, after one of our fights, you confess you slept with some guy, you ran into him by accident, at an exhibition. You didn't like him at first, it was just some boy, an ordinary kid, with a beard, a freshman, younger than you. We agree not to see each other for a while. I must give a chance to that ordinary boy who is, you say, very fragile. You know how I become, you say, when I sense fragility in a man. And I do know. I know how it went too, it couldn't have happened without alcohol, you needed it to get past the initial disagreement with yourself, and then you say he's really smart, thoughtful, his works are very interesting. I feel sick to my stomach when you say this, but at the same time, I hope he's the one. He's of the same profession, you could understand each other. However, you're an explorer, and your refined nerve never rests. Our agreement not to see each other anymore lasts barely a week. You send me funny photos and memes, and I do the same to you, but then we meet again and drive through the sleepy norther part of the city at night. And you tell me all the details. You don't slap my face, but it hurts as if you do, as if you're paying me back for all those belt strikes on your bare bottom, it was you who bought the belt, for my birthday though, but it wasn't clear whose gift it was.

And when I want to kiss you, once again up there at the Ashtray, which remembers all kinds of kisses, both ours and someone else's, you don't allow it. The Ashtray is one of the strangest places in Zagreb, a place where the contradictions of its inhabitants come together in the most dramatic fashion. During the day, it remembers the pain of those who come to

bid farewell to their loved ones, who, dressed in mourning, a vacant look in their eyes, some perhaps in tears, park their cars there and slowly pull themselves out. I've noticed this, the ones in mourning, those genuinely sad, get out of their cars much more slowly than others. As if trying to delay something. During the day, the Ashtray sees a lot of tears. And when night falls and couples pull up in their cars, it sees countless kisses, it remembers other juices too, and other sounds. Sobbing, farewells, and quiet expressions of condolence during the day, sobbing of a different etiology, panting, and promises at night.

We once fell asleep in the car here, a year ago, after one of our fights, of which not even a trace remained by morning. And when I looked out the window, a very young girl was learning to drive in this large parking lot, and her father, graying but youthful looking, took her hand that held the steering wheel and helped her. And you said, When will you teach me to drive? You always say you will, but you never do. So we stepped out of the car and into the crisp air of the fall morning and switched places. And you started slowly, it was your first time behind the wheel. Excited, uncertain, eager, and I calmly placed my hand on yours, and we turned the steering wheel together.

Anyhow, you're explaining to me now that a kiss on the mouth is a sign of a relationship, and the two of us are not in a relationship, we never were, who am I, some stranger, the one for whom Maria Schneider said, after she shot him, A stranger, no one. And you say that from now on, we'll kiss differently, not on the mouth, and I lift your shirt and kiss your breasts, and you sit quietly, looking straight ahead, your hands resting on your knees.

And afterwards, you talk and talk, and you can't calm down, your voice raised. You describe the details. He's not rough during intercourse, but he is firm. When I ask how firm, you say you feel the firmness, it's not physical, there's no hesitation in his touch, but control, he makes love to you as if he owns you, a touch is enough and you're already wet, and, you don't know how to put it, it's less wild, but it lasts longer. You still struggle to climax, but you managed once, Good for you, I say, Thanks, you reply, with him, you discover things you didn't with me, even though you discovered many things with me, quite a lot, but, a new person, you say, brings new discoveries. Yes, discoveries, precisely that. You've just discovered Lake Victoria, you've discovered the majestic waterfalls on the Zambezi, thousands and thousands of tons of silver and white water plunging into the abyss, you'll discover Tanganyika and Kilimanjaro too. You're particularly interested in the peaks, Kilimanjaro, Annapurna, Mount Everest.

And I feel pain in my gut, this is hara-kiri. A ritual short sword thrust into the epigastrium, traveling left, sliding beneath the left rib arch, where I imagine the pancreas lies. And it all somehow began with it. If it weren't for the pancreas and the Islets of Langerhans, there would be no pharmacist, and there would be no you.

About a week later, I don't know how long it was, I don't remember because time seems to stretch and contract, like the gut, as we drive towards the ruins of Tito's villa in Plitvice, you confess about another one. Once again cheerful, chirpy, unaware of someone else's pain, like a child poking a stick into a rabbit's eye, this one is older, a professor from your university, he promised to get you a solo exhibition, but that's not why you're with him. How old is he, I ask, and you say, Almost as old as you, then add, but younger. There's something arrogant about him, yet gentle, the oscillations are strong, but you get along well. And then you say the most important thing, He draws me. He draws you, I ask, somehow surprised, though I shouldn't be. That's how it started, you say, I didn't want to sleep with him, I promise, I didn't mean that, but then he told me he'd like me to pose for him, he said I was beautiful, but not in the usual way, and I didn't know if it was a compliment or a euphemism, and so, little by little, as he positioned me, as he made sketches, we drank some brandy, and it happened. It happened? I ask. Actually, in a way, I was the one who started it, at the Academy, in his studio. He's got a bed there, to rest a bit when he's painting, and sometimes for his models, although he usually draws his models in a chair, sitting down, or standing up. And how did he draw you? I ask. Lying down, you say, he said I reminded him of *The Naked Maja*. Does he beat you? I ask, and you say you don't get that urge with him, and this bothers me, I thought that it was a pattern, that's how you were with everyone. Obviously not, you say, and it seems like you're actually saying: he's man enough not to beat me.

And we meet like that for months, we've established a pattern, first a light dinner and enough wine to loosen up, to untie the knots on our tongues and in our stomachs, then a drive across the green hills and all kinds of confessions. Like a father and daughter meeting once a week, sharing news. But the news is still a bit strange, for example, the nuances of having sex on MDMA, the way the drug opens you up, sharpens the senses, intensifies the pain. The professor doesn't beat you, but he does sometimes squeeze a bit harder, and this suits you. You say you couldn't imagine someone beating you again, it seems you're done with that.

I confess that I'm falling in love with my wife again, that I find pleasure again in all the things we used to do together. Going to exhibitions, having friends over, hiking... And, by some stroke of good or bad luck, you're no longer jealous. You say, I'm happy for you, and my suitcase from our trip to Vienna comes to your mind, you remember how neatly and lovingly it was packed.

Yet, once again, we go away for the weekend together, to Poreč, all that happened between us cannot just disappear, some evolution in its disappearance is needed. We share the room, even though we know there will be no more slapping, no belt licking, no making love, no crying, no pose of a raped woman. You still sleep with your head on my chest, but the old reaction is gone. Once, as you get up to get dressed, you even hide your breasts. When you realize I saw that gesture, you turn around and show yourself to me naked. It's silly to hide, yet there's nothing you'd rather do.

On the trip, you confess about the third one, my friend whose books you liked when you were in puberty. And later. He's one of those I pretended to be giving you to a year ago while we were in bed together, and you writhed at the mention of their names. One by one, one by one, they will all have their turn. Both your exes and my friends. And as I was giving

you to them, it was exciting, of course, always more for you than for me, but still exciting. Why is it suddenly so dull now?

4

He writes you poems, as do I. And... whose are better, I ask, and you don't know, you say they're different, some make you happy, others hurt. You, of course, prefer the ones that hurt. What I fantasized about a year ago is now real, and no wonder the human race has created millions of ways to run away from reality: religion, drugs, art, jogging... And I must admit, between all three of them, my friend is the one that hurts me the most, even though I can't, for the life of me, explain why.

Like most fathers, I have imagined a romantic story for you, my sweet daughter, a tale about a young man to whom I will give you away, a baton in a rally race, almost like in a church, and now, suddenly, I must come to terms with the eschatological realization that it is not just one, but three. But they don't share the same status, their status is changeable. The first young man is somehow the most important because he is slowly becoming the official boyfriend, the professor appears occasionally with his brushes and lines of blow, and my friend occupies those exciting moments you both steal, you from your boyfriend, he from his wife, the friend is an intermezzo and therefore irreplaceable. And you feel you're kind of falling in love with him, probably because of the poems, you say, and because he reminds you of me. Yes, I say, you're falling for him because he reminds you of me, whom you no longer love. I know, it's strange, you say, but that's the way it is.

When you talk about it, I still sense shame in your words, so you don't say anal, but "from behind," and you don't say we fucked in his studio, but "we were together." And then you mention the professor keeps a chamber pot under his bed. You knew of it, but you've never seen this object before, you who were born in the mid-nineties, and you asked him if he used it when he needed to tinkle and didn't want to interrupt his painting process by trudging to the toilet at the other end of the Academy, and he said it wasn't for that, but for the "games." Some of your provincial restraint still lives in your language. The small town in the plain just can't seem to leave you. But those three men you're "seeing," they are there, all three seemingly different, yet parallel, all three of them somehow the same. Admirers, much like me. I have a thing for admiration, you say and smile. You have the talent to turn tragedy into a smile, while I, in my books, turn tragedy into a clown's grin, we're so much alike, monogamists in theory, even though monogamous love stays in the realm of fantasy for us, it's an ideal, while in reality, this love is always somehow divided among several people. The wantonness you saw in me at the beginning scared you only because you sensed it in yourself. And what is, after all, a love relationship if not a triangle? A straight line? A line segment bounded by two unhappy individuals? Boring, even in geometry.

But you have an inclination towards other geometric shapes too. The square, for example, in black and white. That Malevich in you is strange, you're drawn to extremes, evil as well as good, night as well as day, yin and yang, swine and saints, preferably all in one.

You explore all of this with the passion of the first explorers, you're Columbus from Đorđe Balašević's song, you set out to sea without a compass and motor, yet you stumbled upon America. For you, every man is terra incognita, except that with some you stop right at the start, in the steppe, not making your way into the rainforest. The passion of recompense.

And can my love somehow outgrow, upstage those men? That love, so big because I was born in it once again. No, it cannot, because I'm not that tree I wanted to be, neither so great nor so firm. And your desire for different kinds of adoration is stronger than what you feel for me, just as your body alone is not enough to quench the thirst I feel for the beings of the Galapagos, even when you lick the belt. A whoremonger and a nymphomaniac. That's who we are.