

**Zoran Ferić**

**TRAVELLING THEATRE**

(excerpts)

*Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović*

## Shadows

### *Prologue*

“Stepping into a hanged man’s shadow brings good luck!” someone said when we were in the seventh grade and when, for the first time, we saw our history book photo of a man hanged at Terazije in Belgrade. The hanged man’s shadow is not seen in the photograph, yet there’s a crowd of people beneath him. Were they trying to step into his shadow? That’s what we thought back then. Today it is clear they were brought there by force to witness the hanging, and there was more than that one person at the gallows. A civilized nation from the heart of Europe brought back to life, to the joy of many it seems, an institution of public execution. The person in the history book photograph hangs perfectly still, with a hat on his head, wearing a suit and tie, as if he’d dressed himself up for the occasion.

But what’s particularly odd about the photo is that the hat has not fallen from his head, which stands tilted because his neck has snapped. And everything about the photo is somehow askew: a tilted hat on a tilted head, and the hanged man, it seems, does not hang entirely straight. A man is like a plumb line, that’s what I thought back then, and even when he hangs straight, for some reason, he follows the curve of the Earth’s axis. No wonder everything on this planet is tilted and somewhat crooked.

The hanged man’s name is Svetislav Milin, he worked at a shoe factory and was put up on a lamppost on August 17, 1941, together with four other members of the resistance movement: Ratko Jevtić, Milorad Pokrajac, Velimir Jovanović, and Jovan Janković. And those standing beneath Svetislav Milin, peering up the legs of his trousers or staring at the soles of his shoes, may have unknowingly stepped into his shadow. Later, we will encounter this photo many times, in encyclopedias, at exhibitions, in books that speak of the resistance movement in Belgrade back in 1941. People hanging from the lampposts should perhaps provoke shock, but when the perspective is expanded, when the history book is stepped out of, there are electric streetcars passing along Terazije, there are people strolling by on their way to bars where they will listen to some foxtrot, and some are even sitting at cafés not far from the hanged, sipping coffee, and exchanging pleasantries.

“A nice day, neighbor!”

And the neighbor wipes the sweat off the back of his neck. “Nice my butt, the humidity is killing me.”

When we first saw the hanged Milin’s photo, we couldn’t have known that he, together with his comrades hanging right next to him, had first been summarily shot at the Gestapo headquarters at 5 King Alexander Street, only to be hanged, already dead, on the lampposts. Milin was twenty-six years old at the time.

It is said some people have more than one life, like cats. They are the ones who get out of impossible situations and somehow survive. Less often talked about are those who have more than one death. Milin and his comrades are among those whom death visited more than once. Shot, then hanged. And had some of them somehow survived the shooting, and in every war, there are such individuals, who make the most reliable witnesses, they wouldn't have survived the hanging. Death twice came to Belgrade to claim Svetislav and his comrades, although it might have been all in vain because it apparently did its job well in the prison courtyard.

But what about the suit, the shirt, and the tie? Historical sources say all five of them were first tortured at the Gestapo headquarters, only to be shot. But the photographs, despite being somewhat hazy and grainy, show no bloody shirts nor traces of torture. Milin actually looks like he dressed up for a wedding and then took the wrong turn, mistakenly ending up on a lamppost at Terazije. As far as it can be made up, the rest are dressed well too. Were they hanged in the same suits they were tortured and shot in? Most likely not. The Chief of Belgrade Gestapo, Karl Kraus, and the Army Commander for Serbia, Heinrich Danckelmann, had it not in their interest to hang heaps of thrashed meat on Belgrade's main avenue but people. With their own dignity, with the humanness that was posthumously given back to them before the hanging, only to be publicly taken away from them again during the hanging. But then, who washed and dressed them? Did they hire an undertaker? And who brought the suits? The simplest solution, it seems, would be to call in the parents and relatives to bring their Sunday suits and dress them right there on the spot. It is easy to imagine Svetislav Milin's mother, all in tears, dressed in mourning, accompanied by two other women, washing his naked, butchered body. She kisses him on the forehead, kisses his lifeless skinny hands, resembling more the hands of a boy than a man working with his hands, and then those two other women sit him up, and she lovingly puts on first one, then the other sleeve of the clean white shirt. Then they lift the lower part of his body to put on his underwear and trousers, his mother puts on his tie, dresses him in his jacket, and ties his shoes, whose worn-out soles the citizens of Belgrade will gaze upon at one of the most tragic moments in their history. And one of them might say, "The cobbler always wears the worst shoes."

On the other hand, Tošo Dabac's most beautiful photos from the 1940s show how important the shadows are for the black and white photography and how on photographic paper the world is suddenly transformed into a play of light and dark surfaces. Whenever I imagine the World War II Zagreb, I always start with those photos. Unlike the people hanged at Terazije, Tošo Dabac's people have no names. They are passers-by caught in Ilica or at Ban Jelašić Square, or at Dolac Farmers Market, and there's one good thing about them: you can imagine they are still alive. But most of them have their shadows too; short and compact at noon, elongated and deformed in the late afternoon, not resembling their owners. And those shadows, that darker alter ego fixes them into the photograph like a kind of foundation, or a root tying them to the ground. Light figures in the sun and dark shadows crawling after them in the photos. And those shadows wave at us from sidewalks or walls: it's sunny, and the city is calm, some tranquility permeates the scene, but, the shadows say, dear friend, we're here, and it's 1941...

That's why the shadows are important when my mom, who is twelve at the time, walks to her school on Savska Street, to the building that is today the Teacher's College, right across the jail. I always see her in black and white, with those shadows. Skinny, wearing a light trench coat, books under her arm. She walks across an empty corridor where the sun creates irregular light surfaces on the floor, and my mom's shadow grows long as she passes. It's a thin shadow of a little

girl they call Dry Sirocco. Her skinniness quickly turned into a disrespectful nickname. Just like the bread with honey she carried in her lunchbox every day for school.

Her life came closer to reality when, for some reason, a St. Petersburg surgeon, a Russian émigré to France, dragged himself from Paris to Zagreb and impregnated a nurse from a beekeeper's family ravaged by tuberculosis. However, for her life to truly become reality, a series of misunderstandings had to be cleared – misunderstanding that accompanied the relationship between Grandma Ivka and the said surgeon, who was listed in his Yugoslav papers sometimes as Benjamin, sometimes as Venjamin, while his Medical Association ID issued by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, as well as my mom's wedding certificate, call him Venijan.

So, just like his name, prone to both its eastern and western versions, such as Benjamin or Venjamin, in the hands of incompetent typists who made inexcusable mistakes in documents and then stubbornly copied the same mistakes in the years to come, his last name was neither firm nor unequivocal. In documents, it appears in two variants: in my mother's birth certificate, it says Bernstein, while the later version says Bernštajn, in phonetic script. However, the same surname exists in a version with an added "e", Berenstein or Berenštajn. This name can be found on my parents' wedding certificate and Grandma Ivka's grave, where the name on the black marble tombstone reads Berenstein. This confusion with the language is just a reflection of complete uncertainty around Grandpa Benjamin. Nothing about that grandfather is certain, except for one thing: he was replaced by a man about whom you could be a hundred percent sure about everything.

The photographs are often the only thing left to children who lost their parents at an early age. In my mom's case, that's particularly complicated. The only photo showing her father and mother together is a square piece of photographic paper bearing the stamp of Tomee Photo Studio, somewhat crumpled and made of an unusually thin piece of paper. The photo was taken during some surgery, and on its back, it says: "Mom and Dad, Vinogradska Hospital, 1928." The note on the back of the photo is necessary because both the nurse and the doctor wear masks over the lower part of their faces, so they cannot be recognized, and the note only somewhat helps because it suggests that one of the two masked persons is her father, and the other her mother. The upper, central part of the photograph is dominated by a strong surgical lamp, like a small sun, adding a certain haze to the whole scene. It prevents making up who of them is the mother, who the father, and the only person not wearing a mask is the patient who is being operated on. His eyes are open and he – the look in his eyes could be called curious – observes his open abdomen.

The problem with the photograph also lies in the fact that, when she missed her father, she didn't know if she should look at the left or the right figure, just like when she missed her mother, she couldn't be sure if she was standing to the left or to the right. She could've guessed because the left person is somewhat shorter.

Perhaps she first focused on the right figure, yearning for her father, while the house with her uncles and aunt hummed – laughing, quarreling, whispering filling the air while she stood in the corner, thinking about her father who cut into people to make them better. How long did it last? The summer passed, then the fall, then the winter, yet her father, made of flesh and bone, who lived in Zagreb and still worked at the same place, was nowhere to be seen. He seldom came to see his daughter.

But not even the existence of his only photograph is so simple. I remember it, so it seems, since I was a boy in the lower grades of elementary school. It was among our family photographs that were kept in an album whose covers were made of red velvet framed with silver vines. I also remember the stamp, red, saying "Tomee Photo, Zagreb, Ilica 129", and that text in the back is stuck before my eyes, already faded, written in pencil and my mom's recognizable hand in which her "r", when observed isolated from the rest of the letters, looks like gallows, and the handwritten "m" seems to revert to its original Egyptian form of a wave. It should also be said that it was precisely that photograph that somehow inspired these writings; there's enough of everything it in to become the center of the story about Grandpa Benjamin.

And only recently, at one of the Hungarian film retrospectives, I saw István Szabó's *Father*. It's one of his early films, from that black-and-white period. The film's main character is a boy, later a young man, who lost his father during the war and who now tells different stories about him. First, the father is a doctor saving lives, then he's a hero of the resistance movement, later still, a prominent politician, a Hungarian patriot... All in all, it is the father whose absence transforms into various characters, stirring the young man's imagination. I didn't find the film particularly exciting, it seemed drawn out and somewhat naïve, like almost all old movies when we watch them now. Until one scene. That boy, the scene takes place in his friend's apartment, shows his friends, boys and one girl, a small photo, quite crumpled, depicting three doctors, surgical masks on their faces, taken during surgery. And in this photo, he points at his father.

Is it possible I made all this up? The hazy photograph, Tomee Studio's red stamp, even my mom's handwriting on the back? I went through all the albums and all the photos I found in the albums and scattered around various boxes, but I never found the said photograph with the two masked figures. I never found the Tomee Photo Studio on Ilica either. The place is now Vukas Eye Clinic.

But I'm not ready to give up. I remember that some ten years ago, when I was going through some family photos, I came across that photo, took it out and stored it somewhere safe because even back then I intended to write something about Benjamin Bernstein. I probably stored it so well that now I cannot find it. Yet, how likely is it that in my fifty-six years of age, I never saw István Szabó's *Father*? Sometime, on the TV, in the late hours, as part of one of the many cycles of the new Hungarian film, barely awake? And maybe that's how the scene from the boy's friend's apartment entered directly into my subconscious.

I still hope to find it somewhere, and then everything I write about here is going to be even more true.

The tuberculosis is like a flower or grass – it awakes in the spring. After all, the hyacinth on Ivka's forearm announced it too, and with it grew the fear that with warmer days and the first primroses, Ivka's tuberculosis, dormant during the winter, would wake up again. But in the early spring of 1929, there was no trace of her tuberculosis. Ivka's cough had completely gone, she regained some strength and appetite, and were it not for the large belly restricting her movements, she would've been as good as healthy. Nevertheless, severe thinness still bothered her, and no matter how nicely round her belly had gotten, the rest of her body, the one that belonged only to her, was growing thinner and thinner. At the time, Ivka's baby was entering its eighth month, while the 6 January Dictatorship was much younger, just over two and a half months old. Still, the dictatorship was talked about in that small house on Zlatarska Street much more than the baby on the way. The death of Stjepan Radić first brought great grief, then rage, while the dictatorship and King Alexander I provoked only rage. And once again people gathered in kitchens and rooms around Trešnjevka and other Zagreb neighborhoods and talked under their breaths how they had first killed our greatest leader, then used it as a pretext to abolish the parliament and strip us away of what little rights we'd had in that country. Even then, on January 6, 1929, King Alexander I was dead, but he didn't yet know it, so he lingered like some sort of ghost or vampire until 1934, when a bullet caught up with him in Marseille, hitting his neck, while, supposedly, he shouted: "Look after Yugoslavia for me." It's needless to say his funeral procession was long. Perhaps not as long as Radić's, but it was long enough and in it was enough resentment and rage to poison the future.

However, it seemed the dictatorship couldn't touch Ivka and Benjamin who led a peaceful life, seemingly immune to everything around them. While the quarantine had eased up somewhat, the strict regime of airing the house and all the rooms in it was still obeyed because fresh air was the best medicine for this illness.

Once, when Benjamin came home from work, he found Ivka in the kitchen, sitting in her blue housedress, picking beans and humming:

*And on the branch, as if something's humming,  
These are tiny nightingales' a-drumming.*

She was singing a lullaby.

In that kitchen and in that blue dress, her hair tied in a bun, with kitchen tiles and electrical installations sticking out of stucco in the background, he made her portrait in crayon that still hangs in our living room. At the time, when he still lived with them, he also made a portrait of himself. This picture, hanging in the living room alongside Grandma's portrait, shows that at least one wall of the large room of the house on Zlatarska was dark-pink and on it stood a painting framed in aged gold. I often tried to figure out why he painted Grandma in profile, and himself in a half en-face. Now it seems one of the reasons was her shocking emaciation. The profile somewhat concealed the illness that had nevertheless advanced, however imperceptibly, and with that portrait Benjamin almost bowed before this gravely ill woman. Yet, it seems some things could not be escaped from: he painted Grandma in the kitchen, himself in the room with that wall as a backdrop; she in a housedress, he in a suit and tie. There's also that pencil portrait of her that was made when they lived in Dalmatinska Street, in which she seems to be knitting using thin

brushes instead of needles. Grandma Ivka is here sketched in a semi-profile, her face only gently shaded. The kitchen portrait perhaps shows fear, while the one in pencil shows respect.

Still, one of Grandma's most visible traits in both pictures is her modesty, somehow concentrated in her simple bun, the absence of makeup or decorations, as well as in her posture: sloped shoulders and the gaze of a rabbit or marmot. From her mother, she inherited some of that nun-like appearance and some vague "Arabian" features that, perhaps, carried a hint of eroticism, which the painter had to find in her by first cutting through all those layers of modesty flourishing in that apiary on the city's periphery. Operating and painting, he did the same thing: he was cutting.

In that unexpected honeymoon between his arrival and my mother's birth, Benjamin tried to teach Ivka to paint. Until then, the only things she'd painted were bedding patterns, yet now her husband, who had finally become a real husband, not just a last name in four different versions, slowly opened the world of art for her.

Every day in the afternoon, when it was sunny, he would sit in the orchard with her so that she could be out in the fresh air. "Fresh air is best for the illness," he would say, no longer mentioning words such as tuberculosis of Koch's bacillus, let alone caverns or thoracoplasty. She would knit, this time using real needles and real wool, while he painted: her, trees, beehives, the house. And he talked a lot.

"See, Ivka, in nature," he said in his distinctive Russian accent, "the tree holds to the root, the root the bond to the soil, the feeding system, but the foundation also, so the wind not knock it over. The tree in the painting, you see, holds to its shadow. The shadow the tree's painting root, bond to the surroundings, to the light..."

And so, he painted the trees in their orchard, which once again wore their limewash boots, as well as the long afternoon shadows in the grass.

"Come, you try!" he urged her, offering her paper and crayons. But she stuck to her knitting.

And so, in the garden on Zlatarska Street, when the 6 January Dictatorship was just two and a half months old, this spring idyll lasted. Ivka, with a giant ball of her belly, sat and knitted, while he sat across from her, drawing one of her portraits as an expectant mother.

But now the neighborhood saw the same idyll, and the problem was they were not used to it. They were used to seeing and hearing coughing, spitting up blood, and dying; twice before, four men had carried cheap wooden coffins out of the little house on Zlatarska Street, and to take the coffin through the garden, they had to stumble along the uneven path until finally bringing it to the street and laying it on the funeral carriage. Now the neighborhood watched the young woman with consumption in her lungs, a baby in her large belly, and four last names, asking about the husband, feigning interest, when, in fact, they were laughing behind her back.

"Did you hear? She doesn't even know her last name!"

And now, suddenly, they saw some happiness here, and it did not belong in that yard, among those beehives. Gendarme had a sixth sense for the neighborhood, located in the hairs on his arms. When they stood on end, nothing good was around the corner. And the happiness in their yard, the fruit trees about to blossom, Ivka getting ready to give birth and no longer coughing, the doctor drawing beehives, all of it so irked the neighborhood that nothing good could come out of it. The neighborhood gossiped about the Jew who ate pork because his eating habits had somehow reached that same neighborhood too; yet the presence of another red commie at Trešnjevka, which was already red enough, was not something that would alarm anyone, and it could not satisfy the neighborhood's appetites. Soon, even worse chatter threatened Gendarme dignity of Ivka's father. The pleasure of finally being able to show the neighborhood the living source of Ivka's four last names was short-lived and it gave way to suspicion: some good-for-nothing she married, he doesn't have a house to call his own, a roof over his head, not even a place to shack up from the rain, like the worst riffraff. Instead of taking this young woman to his own place, he moved in here with them. There's a name for the likes of him, a *domazet*, a home-grubber, and it's not used politely among our people. What kind of a man is he, supposedly a doctor? A doctor, right, just scribbling those pictures of his and hiding under his wife's apron.

The neighborhood just could not stand the idyll in its vicinity, so they started gobbling Gendarme's liver, and in turn Gendarme slowly began pecking at his wife's liver. So much so that, after a while, when the idyl was dangerously abloom, Maman had to ask Ivka if they were intending to move out or not. And Ivka, who had already unpacked her suitcases, explained to Maman nicely that Benjamin had lost that apartment on Dalmatinska Street because there was no way for him to call from Tangier and pay the rent. Now he was waiting to get paid at the hospital, and he would most certainly rent a place soon, but not before she gave birth. He also said that, due to her pregnancy and her illness, she would be at risk if left alone while he was at work. It was much safer here in Zlatarska, with her folks. Still, Maman's question was of such nature that Ivka had to ask back: "Maman, don't you want us here?" And Maman had to blush.



My grandfather Benjamin, just like Svetislav Milin, belongs to the few whom death struck more than once. The man with four last names, logically, had more than one death.

In the spring of 1941, the bees were swarming well, the fruit trees were in bloom, and the year promised an abundance of honey, but then, one morning, on a wooden electrical pole in Zlatarska Street, a poster appeared. Passers-by began to gather around the poster. Someone on their way to work in the town, as every morning, stopped by the poster that just could not go unnoticed. The next person who came along paused because the first one did and was still staring at the columns with names on the poster. Then another neighbor stopped on her way to the farmer's market, then another and another. The poster stood right across from the yard of the little house in Zlatarska Street in whose garden Gendarme was busying himself with the bees, just like he always did, every day busy with the bees. But more and more people swarmed around the poster, so much so that now even his neighbors came out of their yards and approached the poster, patiently waiting for those in front to finish reading and walk away in silence, leaving room for them to read it too. Gendarme came out too, as did Dušan, who was getting ready for work. Silence settled around the pole, the neighbors just nodding at each other in greeting and staring at the names on the poster.

Maman, who had gone to heavenly pastures just after Ivka, was lucky because she didn't have to read these posters, of which this was the first. As he read that first poster, Gendarme, who had longed for discipline his whole life, felt this was too much discipline even for him, while Dušan, troubled by rage that had turned into a quiet underground stream in his veins, which were back in those days overflowing with something black and not all that pretty, just lowered his head in silence and went to work. His name and that rage could just not come to terms.

After the first one, posters occasionally appeared on the pole across from their house, and sometimes familiar names could be read on them. In May 1942, a poster with the following content dawned on the pole.

#### NOTICE

*On May 14, 1942, a group of communist agitators and Jews who had defied racial laws attempted to escape from the detention center in Savska Street, killing the 32-year-old law enforcement officer Josip Čuljak, a father of two, and seriously injuring officers Mijo Maček and Ljudevit Tabak, who are in critical condition at the Vinogradska Hospital. All the perpetrators of this cowardly act are either arrested or killed during their escape. Investigation showed that the crime was planned by the communist agitators who were later joined by the Jews who refused to wear the prescribed markings. All the arrested individuals were sentenced to death by the rules of the Summary Court, and they are, by name:*

*Jakov Degen, 28 years of age, born in Zagreb  
Milan Mayer, 45 years of age, born in Slavonski Brod  
Stane Prevc, 31 years of age, born in Zagreb  
Dr. Venijan Bernštajn, 46 years of age, born in Maribor*

*Miroslav Killman, 26 years of age, born in Zagreb*  
*Stanko Obradović, 28 years of age, born in Novi Sad*  
*Milutin Štokić Milović, 40 years of age, place of birth unknown*

*The sentence of the Summary Court was executed on May 21, 1941, by a firing squad.*

*In Zagreb, May 22, 1942*

*On behalf of the Ministry of Internal Affairs*  
*Vladimir Sruk, First Lieutenant*

This was the first time Dr. Bernštajn's name appeared on the poster. Gendarme and Dušan saw it first, but they never mentioned it to my mother because the list stated Maribor as his place of birth, while their Venijan, or Benjamin, was most certainly not born in Maribor. However, even though they didn't say anything, my mom saw her last name on the pole, and then the name of her father, but she too thought it must be another person, someone actually born in Maribor. It never crossed their minds that he might've had fake documents, which, one has to admit, would be odd because then he would've first changed his first and last name and not the place of birth. My mother also never considered that perhaps someone made a mistake while copying the names of the executed, and that Stane Prevc was actually born in Maribor, and that Benjamin's papers stated Zagreb as his place of birth, which was most likely some earlier administrative error.

Still, his name kept appearing on such posters, in different versions, until the end of the war, with Zagreb most often listed as his place of birth. And so, after his death, Benjamin finally stopped being a foreigner.

After the mass hanging in Dubrava, in December 1943, lists of the hanged started appearing on the posters more and more frequently. One of the later posters stated that Benjamin had been hanged in Maksimir with some other people whose names raised suspicion – he was executed because he was in cahoots with the communists and because he treated wounded illegals.

There's no doubt that during the war they shot and hanged all four of his last names and three first names, which undoubtedly turned him into the mythical hero from my mother's memories.

## The House at Šalata

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After surviving the initial shock of the move, my mother, like every seedling, took root in Novakova Street, and this root, for a while at least, sustained her in this new world without the bees in the gardens. Yet, the bees were there, of course they were, in the thoughts, in the language, in everyday communication, in the gestures. The neighbors buzzed around her like they served the same queen, inviting her over for hot chocolate, bringing her candy and gingerbread cookies – “Poor thing, look how thin she is,” they whispered – and when my mother’s slender shadow strolled around their apartments, pausing before decorative dolls in their bedrooms or gazing at oils adorning the walls of their dining rooms, or when she asked why their candelabra had holes for seven candles, they saw behind the shadow of her uncle, who served as procurator and who, besides being handsome and noble, was also a remarkably resourceful individual. But all the questions about the candlestick did not make too much sense. Especially given her last name.

But the sad fame of a slender-shadowed orphan, which my mom acquired in her new building, and in some of the neighboring ones, just like the history that came along it, and her father who came and went, in the spring of 1941, took on a new dimension. Just a few days after the proclamation of the new state, some of the old neighbors began to leave and new ones, some even dressed in uniforms, began to move in. And these new neighbors, polite as they were, had a custom of getting to know the old residents, my mother included.

“Hey little girl, what’s your name?”

“Vera.” There wasn’t a thing in the world that would make her admit they called her Dry Sirocco at school.

“And your last name?” a kind gentleman from the first floor asked.

“And your last name?” his kind wife asked.

It went on like that; Vera... Veronika... Verica... depending on who wanted to know, yet there was always that question: And your last name?

Uncle Stjepan, even more concerned because this reached him so suddenly, confused, frightened, kept repeating to my mother: “When they ask what religion you belong to, always say Roman Catholic. It’s important you say Roman Catholic, you understand?”

And my mom, even though she was already twelve, did not quite understand what he meant. She was a Catholic, had her baptism and the first communion, she went to church every week and she attended Sunday school, Nada and she even had the same prayer book... Why did she have to say out loud what was already understood? And why did it have to be Roman Catholic? At that time, he even bought her a new prayer book. He gave it to her unwrapped, not like a present, but like something else. “Always have it with you! Keep it in your bag! You understand?”

“Yes.”

The prayerbook was exquisite; it had ivory covers with a silver filigree cross set right in the middle, while each of the corners bore yet another set of decorations with a mother-of-pearl flower at their center. It also had a silver clasp, and the page edges were gilded. On the first page, within a vine-like frame, the word “Memento” stood, followed by several thin red lines for a dedication, but nothing was written. Uncle Stjepan insisted that it shouldn’t be a gift. Still, my mom carried it with her at all times, even when it was no longer allowed.

Perhaps it is not strange that the prayerbook she got at the time begins with capital red letters:

*A ROAD TO HEAVEN*

*A prayerbook  
for  
the refined Catholic folk.*

*Composed by  
Rev. Vladimir Bakotić*

*With permission from  
the Most Holy and Illustrious Episcopal Ordinariate of Split.*

*Winterberg.  
Published and printed by  
J. Steinbrener.*

In addition to the usual prayers, such as the Morning Prayer, or Our Father’s prayer now following the rules of the new orthography so it read “Otče naš koji jesi na nebesih,” or Hail Mary, there is also “the Prayer with which you surrender to the will of God, composed after Jelisava, Elizabeth of Bosnia, by the grace of God Queen of Hungary, Dalmatia, and Croatia,” which begins as follows:

*What will happen to me today, my Lord – that I do not know, but I do know that nothing will transpire that has not been decided by You in eternity. I need nothing more, my Lord, nothing more. I surrender to your eternal, unfathomable world. I willingly submit, with all my heart, for the sake of Your love, content in everything, embracing all, and aligning my sacrifice with that of Jesus, my divine Savior. In His name and His deeds, I implore You, grant me patience in adversity and complete surrender to Your will in all things You desire and permit...*

One needs to ask why Uncle Stjepan, who could by no means be called a splurge, spent a small fortune on the prayerbook. Even more so since my mother already owned one. Was its beauty in the service of pragmatism? Knowing him, it must have been. Twelve-year-old girls love beautiful things, they carry them with joy and never separate from them.

But it seems he overlooked one small detail. On one of the first pages, it says: "His Holiness, our happily reigning Holy Father Pope Leo XIII, in his breve issued on January 27, 1889, graciously bestowed the knighthood of the Order of St. Sylvester upon the publisher of this book, thus acknowledging his countless merits in service to our Holy Faith through publication and dissemination of Catholic literature." The publisher, J. Steinbrener, shared the same undesirable last name as my mother. Or perhaps this was the intention?

The prayerbook had kept my mother safe until the end of the winter of 1941, but then, after the structure of the residents in Novakova Street had fundamentally changed, it was no longer a guarantee of anything. That's why, after an incident in Maksimir Park, Uncle Stjepan packed my mother – she had more stuff and suitcases than when she came here – put her in a taxi that took her to Zlatarska. There, the circumstances were much better than in Novakova. At Trešnjevka, all of the neighbors stayed the same.

Among the documents preserved in Uncle Stjepan's dresser, alongside plans for the house at Zelenjak, his business documents, such as his shares in Spectrum, and, later, Staklo companies, there are also letters signed by Ada Weiss. But they were not addressed to Uncle Stjepan, but to the Police Directorate in Zagreb. The pages of yellowed typing paper, bearing the Spectrum Company letterhead, as well as its address, Vlaška 83, Zagreb, actually hold draft letters written in pencil, with some of the words erased or crossed out. Interestingly, the handwriting of the drafts and the signature are completely different. The one on the drafts evidently belongs to Stjepan, while the signature is someone else's and it's easy to imagine Ada Weiss personally signed each draft. The letters were obviously composed and edited together. They wrote them at his place in Novakova Street; the drafts remained among his papers, and he preserved them – a document of their time and a memory of the two of them, as the cathedral clock strikes ten, then eleven, working desperately on a noble endeavor. But why did Ada personally sign each draft that Stjepan wrote and edited? Did he demand it of her? Or did she simply sign the edited letters that Uncle Stjepan would send the next day via official factory mail? Is it possible that, on that occasion, in the apartment on Novakova Street, the situation was reversed from their usual work dynamics where Ada composed and edited the letters before typing them on her machine, and Stjepan just initialed the final versions? They applied the business pattern of their relationship here, alone in the vast apartment. Was this a way for them to enter their own glass cages and, from those cages, feel more freedom to converse, drink coffee, choose their words, protected by the thick bulletproof glass? The time they lived in certainly justifies the metaphor of a cage, as well as that of glass, which, in those years, broke more often than usual.

Still, did Ada Weiss ever spend the night at his place? Let's say they got engrossed in their letters, composing and editing, and the cathedral suddenly announced the curfew had set in? After all, Little Antun – Ada's son, who had fortunately been baptized in the Roman Catholic faith, taking the name of Stjepan in honor of the man who had helped them more than their closest kin, even more than the Kopistas, who contributed only a small sum for the house at Jagodnjak – was safe at home, cared for by the girl who slept at their place at Jagodnjak. If this ever happened, it must have looked like this: Uncle Stjepan slowly rises from the table, straightens his back, sore from prolonged sitting, and says: "Mrs. Ada, it's time!"

Anxiously waiting to hear those words, she says, "I'm going to go! I have to!"

"That's madness..." or "Don't be mad..." that's what Uncle Stjepan says, in a voice of a boss who's strict for her own good. And perhaps that's what she's been waiting for: the voice that is strict for her own good, the deep voice that, if it grew louder, could make the glass reverberate.

"All right," Ada says, submitting to the higher power of her boss, of the curfew, of God... of the first, the second, and the third.

And Uncle Stjepan tells her, "The bedding is in the wardrobe, downstairs."

"Oh no, I'll stay here," says Ada Weiss, "I can't kick you out of your bedroom."

“No worries,” Uncle Stjepan replies, “I’ll take Vera’s room. That’s where I sleep now anyhow, that bed’s too big for me. Vera may no longer live here, but her room is always ready. And the bed is made.”

And so they sleep, each in their own room, in their glass cage, or, in this case, perhaps it would be better to say they “keep vigil,” each in their own room. Do they think about each other? And do their thoughts ever meet during these vigils, perhaps when pondering America, a transatlantic liner, a favorable sales agreement...

Uncle Stjepan was convinced my father just didn't know how to handle money, so he taught me to count from an early age. Most often, we counted during our walks, tallying things we saw along the way: houses, poplar trees, cars. Uncle Stjepan always said houses and trees were easier to count because they politely stood in one place, while cars were tricky. You might count them – two or three or four in the parking lot – only for one of them to leave, throwing off the count. He couldn't stand it when the numbers didn't add up. That's why he encouraged me to count things that didn't move.

“Grandpa, can I count birds?”

“It's hard to count birds, Zoran. Only a true master can do that... Come, let's see, how many houses are there until the end of Zelenjak?”

And I would start, “Uncle Turk's house, Ivančica's house, neighbor Blue's house...”

“How many is that?”

“Three.”

“Well done. But you don't have say who lives there, just tell me the number...”

And I would tell him the numbers.

Then he would ask, “How many steps are there down to the stream? But be careful, you might fall!”

And I would count the steps: one, two, three...

However, the count never matched. Once there were fifty, then forty-nine, once as many as fifty-two. Those steps of pounded dirt, supported by increasingly rotten wooden planks, were just like birds or cars: unreliable and rude.

Then he would ask again, “How many houses are on Jagodnjak, on the left side of the street?”

And I would count them. Yet, we used Jagodnjak to try something new. A row of small semidetached houses, two in each set, lined the sides of the street, so my uncle said, “Let's see if you can count them two by two... two, four, six, eight...”

At Mirogoj Cemetery, we counted our dead. On our fingers.

“One,” I said, sticking out my thumb, and Uncle Stjepan nodded, “That's your grandma Ivka.”

“Two,” my index finger went up.



“My wife Terezija. We called her Rezika.”

“Three.”

“My brother Milan...”

“Four.”

“My brother Antun...”

“Five.”

“My sister Marica... Now, use the other hand.”

“Six.”

“Your great-grandfather Janko...”

“Seven.”

“That’s Maman Jelica, your great-grandma.”

After Terezija’s death, all of them had been exhumed from their old grave and moved into this one, a new one. Now all of them rested in one place, just as they had lived together in Zlatarska.

And later, we lit seven candles for the seven of them, which was three and a half dead per candle, which, of course, I didn’t know back then, but today, I find it somewhat funny because, frankly, we could’ve lit only one. But Uncle Stjepan must’ve thought there were too many dead for one candle, it was a double grave, after all, but then again seven would be too much.

After this, we visited another grave and lit another candle, for a small boy who died of an illness; he was Mrs. Ada’s son and would’ve been thirty-one at the time. He got a whole candle for himself. I asked Uncle Stjepan if the boy was all alone in that grave, and he said he was. Then I asked, “Does he have a father?”

“He used to,” Uncle Stjepan explained. And then said his father had passed away too.

“Why isn’t he in the grave with him?”

I thought the little boy hated being alone in the grave, but my uncle explained no one knew where the boy’s father’s grave was, just like no one knew where my grandpa Benjamin’s or uncle Dušan’s graves were.

“Is then their grave everywhere?”

Uncle Stjepan paused to think, as if weighing whether to tell me the secret or not, and then he finally made up his mind. "Yes," he said, most likely completely oblivious of what would happen on our way back.

And on our way back, along the cemetery's arcades, I asked all the logical questions. When we passed by the wall made of yellow decorative brick overgrown with reddish vines, I asked, "Is this their grave?"

And after a short deliberation, Uncle Stjepan said it was.

Then we saw a flower stand.

"Is this their grave too?"

"Yes," he said.

When we got to Jagodnjak and stopped in front of Mrs. Ada's house, I asked again, "Is this their grave?"

"Hush," he whispered, "that's enough of that."

We went to Mrs. Ada's home for some schaumrolle and custard slice. Uncle Stjepan was always practical: first, he visited his dead wife's grave and lit a candle, and then he dropped by for some coffee at his living wife's.

During her lifetime, Mom was determined to wage a battle against her femininity. It would be more precise to say it was actually a series of small-scale attacks launched against painted nails, both on her hands and feet, against eye makeup, mascara, false eyelashes, face and body lotions, as well as against costumes, pants, and handbags that came from Trieste or Graz. Whenever her friends, Ksenija or Lidija, suggested she should get some of these, she'd say, "I'm not a floozie. That's not for me."

Other things bothered her too. The passion of talking behind someone's back, endless coffee sessions, and large gatherings of women, especially those who didn't work, left a genuinely bad impression on her. She was convinced these actions draw women away from what was truly important. She carefully chose her clothes, rejecting anything that made her stand out as a woman. The clothes needed to be warm, affordable, simple, and a reflection of one's character. Her costumes, with their modest design and fine fabrics, served her as a particular kind of mirror. This mirror was foggy, or even covered by a thin layer of gauze. These clothes, she felt, were a kind of non-clothes, a form of nudity in which a particularly interested and clever observer could find the essence of her being. It wasn't the nudity of the skin, but of the soul: she hung out her soul on the rags she wrapped around her. She felt particular sympathy towards the virtue of modesty. Only by the end of her life, she used to say, "I was raised by men. I never knew how to be a woman."

This trait of hers provoked in me a strong desire for the opposite: a desire for my mother to be pretty and, more than anything, to be a woman. Mothers from better-off houses on Šalata, that included a well-known actress and a prominent art critic's wife, came to our teacher-parent conferences at my elementary school wearing pants and mini-skirts, boots that reached over their knees, and I could, perhaps even too convincingly, imagine my mother saying, "You wouldn't catch me dead in this!" Throughout a good portion of my childhood I yearned to see my mother dressed in pants, but she never once surrendered to this desire of mine. "Pants don't fit me," she used to say, "because my bum is too big." This yearning climaxed in the Studio Cinemas on Vlačka Street, during the screening of *101 Dalmatians*, the cartoon version. I noticed that every time Cruella appeared on the screen with her long cigarette holder, a long fur coat, and a dress with a deep slit, I felt an erection. With a kind of sweet horror at allowing myself such fantasies, I imagined my mom as Cruella, a cigarette holder in her hand, a slit in her dress reaching all the way to her buttocks, getting into a white 1928 Rolls Royce Phantom, whose photo stood on my favorite set of cards featuring pictures of cars. I wanted my classmates to drool over my mother just as I drooled over the actress and the wife of the art critic.

Or, when she was seventeen and learning to swim on the Island of Brač. The war had ended, and the school took them to Brač. She didn't know how to swim, she'd never been to the seaside, and the feeling that she'd only just survived the war was all too fresh. And instead of learning to swim in secret, instead of hiding her shame, she threw a lifebuoy, which at the time was used instead of a floatie, over her shoulder and headed straight through the center of the village. The local boys, of course, cracked jokes about her not knowing to swim.

"Why don't you come here, signorina?! I'll teach you to swim..."

Or: "Lemme push you over the pier, where it's deep, and you'll swim in no time."

I imagine this scene, and the pain on account of some mean young men humiliating my mother gives way to a kind of anger, or a feeling of tragedy: Could it be she really didn't know they were flirting with her?

She expected my father to discover her secret being, to lift that gauze from the mirror, to truly look at her and peer into her soul, and not only did she not know how to be a wife to her husband, but she also didn't know how to be woman for her son.

My father, on the other hand, had no affinity for essence, for the important, for priorities: he exhausted himself on the superficial. His suits always had to be made according to the prevailing fashion, the collar of his shirts always seemed to be peeking out from the suits found in Austrian and Italian men's fashion magazines: once a Russian collar, then pointy, sometimes discrete, with buttons at its top. Still, the collar always had to be crafted in such a way that that a man could turn around in the street when his silhouette passed in a shop window. That's exactly how I see him, walking down Petrova Street on his way to work. A light summer suit made of linen, a light-blue shirt, gilded cuff buttons, a hunter's tie the color of rotten cherry with a deer printed on it. The shirt matches his blue eyes, the color of his shoes complements his tie, the clasps on his briefcase match the cuff buttons of his shirt. Sometimes, he is smoking a pipe, and the scent of perfumed Clan tobacco lingers in the air long after he's passed.

My mom's greatest marital disappointment lay in the fact that he couldn't grasp her essence, her insight into the tragedy of life, and he simply tapped on the surface. Her whole life, she dreaded kitsch, and he, unfortunately, was all kitsch. Prone to depression, he sought something that could offer him support, and that something was always a bit crazy. He developed an attachment to objects because you could move them from one wall to another, you could hang them in the wardrobe and then take them out. Shirts, he thought, are grateful when you put them on. Just like suit jackets and ties. And they show their gratitude by hanging peacefully.

Soon, a rather unpleasant word appeared in my mother's dictionary: a fop. And at our house, it would be mentioned more and more often.

## Ay, Carmela

8

The lost paradise hiding behind Mom's cancer had a dual nature. In the silence that settled when she stopped playing her mandolin, switched to philosophy, which is much quieter, and left us to the mercy of clocks, while she and he retreated to the spaces of their childhood. His vision of that paradise was tragicomic because many violent things happened in paradise, yet even that could bring back fond memories for him. Still, it must be said, they weren't equal in this. She could go back only to Zlatarska, to a constant yearning for her father, to dying from tuberculosis followed by the unnecessary strictness of the Austro-Hungarian gendarme, to Novakova where she hid from the wives of Ustasha officers. She had her wartime Zagreb, grim and often foggy, and he had a village on the banks of the Una he idealized.

From Novakova, the road went down and left along Medveščak to Vlaška Street, then straight to Kvaternik Square, and from there, down Maksimirska Street all the way to the monumental gates of Maksimir Park. It's winter 1941, around Christmas, and even though piles of mucky snow line the edges of the sidewalk, this is a spell of unexpectedly warm weather. She's as skinny as a creature who walks and breathes normally can be. She looks as if she's already in a concentration camp; actually, all these streets, the whole city, have become the camp's somber antechamber. However, back then, she was more concerned about being called Dry Sirocco in school. Because when she looked at herself in the mirror attached to the inner side of the wardrobe in her bedroom, she could see that the nickname, however mean, was actually justified. But now she wore a thick layer of clothes: a skirt made of checkered tweed, woolen socks, a rollneck sweater, and a black coat that looked gray in certain light. At least that's how the photos from that time show her. There's no yellow star on that coat, and in her pocket, there's a prayerbook that protects her from the people who are just too interested in her last name. There's something else keeping her safe: her skates laced with strings and slung over her shoulder, just like all girls used to carry them back then. She smiles as she walks, and no matter if Uncle Stjepan thinks the prayerbook for the *refined Catholic folk* is keeping her safe, she is convinced that the smile on her face and those skates bobbing up and down on her shoulder are protecting her even more.

For those who saw her that afternoon in Vlaška, Maksimirska, or right at the entrance to Maksimir Park, she was a cheerful girl on her way to an ice rink. And so, she passed by police patrols, smiling at them, even though there was a cramp in her stomach. Uncle Stjepan forbade her from leaving the apartment alone, except when going to school, and even then she had to be careful. Before opening the door, she had to listen very carefully and check if someone in the apartment above, or even below, had opened the door. It's not good to meet people in the staircase, it's not good to remind them you exist. See, they could say, that little Bernstein still lives here, even though her kind is banished from here... You should walk carefully around the apartment so that those below don't complain about the noise; coughing too loudly is not good either, which, given her chronic bronchitis, is particularly difficult in these winter months; taking a tram or being in a crowd of people on the street should be avoided too. If she sees a patrol from a distance, she must decide whether she can go around without them noticing, or she must buckle

up, smile, and pass right by them. Uncle assumes they are not looking for her, because she's from a mixed marriage and a Catholic, but he cannot be sure. The street is a constant danger.

Still, on that afternoon, when the sudden surge of warm weather brought by the southern wind discreetly announced itself in the gurgling of melting snow in the gutters and the faster and faster dripping of icicles, when the sun made the houses, the streets, and the cathedral towers somehow harmless and seemingly friendly, she became bold, grabbed her skates, and left the apartment. She hoped to return before Uncle Stjepan came home from work, at least that's what she said when she told this story, whose versions didn't always match: in the first version, it was something like a rebellion against constant fear that pushed her out of the apartment, in the second, it was that sunny early afternoon that drew her out, and in the third version, she saw her skates in the closet and simply wished to skate.

And the closer she got to her goal, the third Maksimir lake, which had been solid frozen for the past twenty days and therefore ideal for children to skate on, she picked up her pace. Upon entering the park, she was almost running. However, when she turned left through the woods at the belvedere and reached an elevated embankment, which was actually the lake's shore, she heard the screams of children, and through those screams, the warning shouts of adults. On the shore, right next to the water, there was a crowd of gray or brown tweed coats and brightly colored woolen hats for children.

And when she reached the very edge of the lake's left shore, slightly elevated so it offered a good view, among those coats and colorful children's hats, she saw people in green uniforms. Quite a few people in green uniforms, cheering on the children skating on the lake. Among those in green uniforms, she saw some in black. And the black ones looked like the green one that had been burned, like trees in the woods after a fire. That's exactly how she put it when she told us this story in the little room before bedtime: "Trees in the woods after a fire." That's when, she said, she got scared. The smile disappeared from her face. She moved away from the crowd dotting the southern shore and, on the lake's eastern side, found that frozen stump where she sat, took off her shoes, put on her skates, and tied the laces of her boots together, just as she'd done with the skates, and hung them around her neck.

She waited a moment, and when she saw none of the green and the black uniforms paid attention to her, she glided out onto the ice. Most of the children were skating along the shore. The parents formed one half of a gray-green-brown circle on the southern shore, while the children formed its other half, brightly colored and spread along the ice right by the shore. She, on the other hand, headed towards the very center of the lake, where there were no skaters. At the time, she said, she was already a good skater and was interested in figure skating, which, in her youth, was just starting to become popular in Zagreb. She knew how to do a forward and backward spin, she could even do a pirouette, and when she felt particularly brave and confident, she would jump and perform something that resembled an axel jump.

However, the sun that had lured her out of the apartment and the warm southern wind that had been blowing since the morning had weakened the ice, so now it cracked beneath her. Yet, she was less afraid of the weakening ice than the people in green and black uniforms. And so, she wasn't hiding her excitement when she told us this, unexpectedly, she felt safe. This was the safest she felt since the madness of hiding and persecution began. She watched those uniforms that had

gathered near the shore, and it became clear to her that for an average-sized adult, it would be quite risky to come all the way there, to the middle of the lake, and catch her. Perhaps she was pleased that she was so light, that she was Dry Sirocco, and she was sure the ice would hold her. She could skate freely, they could watch her, but they couldn't catch her.

That feeling of freedom, that absence of fear, was her lost paradise. And she skated, it seemed, better than ever before; she executed her pirouettes well, and even managed an axel. She focused on her backward spin, making sure she did it correctly, and her long dress didn't bother her because she had made a slit in it that wasn't visible when she walked but that allowed her to move her legs freely on the ice. Dry Sirocco, who had no friends in school, who had to hide in the hallway from the Ustasha officers' and officials' wives, who had in her life witnessed much more death than a child should, who had not seen her father for a long time and who didn't know what happened to him, now, completely unexpectedly and against her will, became a star. And as she glided along the ice, focused on her figures, on the position of her legs, on everything Coach Kolarius had taught her, suddenly, pausing to rest and leaning on her knees, out of breath, in a bent position, she realized that everyone on the shore, both the adults and the children, was staring at her. While she was skating, she hadn't noticed the usual clamor of the children had stopped. They all stood watching her in silence.

And she watched them back from her safety in the middle of the lake. After taking a short rest, she began again, this time fully aware that she was being watched, that children looked up to her, that her clothes concealed her skinniness, that her face was partially hidden by her rabbit-fur hat. And she once again performed her dance above the creaking ice. Another pirouette, two more pirouettes, then an axel, and another axel. She'd never skated like that before, and it seemed to her, that's what she said, this was her way of avenging her father whose whereabouts were unknown but who must have gone into hiding after Ada Kottek's husband ended up in a concentration camp. Look, just look at her, this is the daughter of a man in hiding, a half-breed, a partial Israelite, take a closer look, you can see the unmistakable nose too...

Suddenly, a rather large boy fell through the ice. Panic spread among the onlookers on the shore, people began shouting, several men cautiously stepped on the ice and fortunately managed to pull the boy out because he fell through right at the edge of the lake, up to his waist. And as they pulled him out, and she, out of breath, watched them, one of his skates kept snagging against the ice, so it seemed they were yanking him out of the water, and the steely gray water just wouldn't let go, as if it had sunk its invisible teeth into him. And when they finally managed to drag him out to safety, one of the men took off his overcoat and began removing the wet clothes from the boy, most likely his son. It shouldn't be forgotten that penicillin was not in wide use back then, and everyone was mortified by pneumonia and galloping tuberculosis.

And after they took the boy away, now wrapped in that overcoat and almost naked, she kept skating, certain that the ice beneath her wouldn't break. Her skating no longer inspired awe among the onlookers gathered on the shore, both those in green and those in black uniforms, as well as everyone else, of course; her pirouettes had suddenly become something very, very dangerous. The entire shore watched the little girl who, in mortal danger, stubbornly performed her backward spins and pirouettes on the cracking ice, the ice that, after that boy had fallen through, was evidently no longer safe. And she noticed that panic spread among the women first. The mothers. And she attributed this to the fact that there was no yellow star on her coat. It was

nice to suddenly feel solidarity, not just fear. On that afternoon, the little girl without parents experienced the entire southern shore of the third Maksimir lake fearing for her.



## The Death He Lived For

14

When the scent of linden blossoms fills the air, I feel magnificent. Even though there's one nuance in that fragrance, a tiny but noticeable note that reminds me of the Four Aces parquet wax, which has, for decades now, always meant the scent of death. But I know it's not death, it's linden blossom, and that scent only partially reminds me of death, and when I smell it, I'm certain no one will depart to the other world. Neither someone close nor distant. For me, this is simply the scent of birth. That's why I love June: I was born at the beginning of that month, and all those birthdays, the childhood ones with orange cakes and plastic rifles, as well as the adult ones with house robes and books wrapped in subtly patterned paper, have preserved that good feeling, like sedimentary rocks of polar ice.

Still, for years it eluded me why I also loved September. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that I was never good at math. And math says that if I was born on June 2, I must have been conceived in early September. Is it a coincidence that I love the months in which I was conceived and born? When I was a child, all the good things I hoped would happen to me, and usually they didn't, I imagined in June or September. Later, many of my stories would take place at the end of summer, or during an Indian summer, in September. Quite spontaneously. And that's when my dad also took his summer vacation: the first part in June, when summer was just a promise, and the second in September, when it gradually moved into memory. Did this evoke fond memories for him too? And if so, was I among those memories? In his lifetime, he never showed it, but the date of his death perhaps says otherwise.

Just before New Year's Eve of 1992, my dad's kidneys started to fail. Creatinine and urea levels in his blood had reached critical levels. He refused to go to the hospital, but when he fainted, I called the ambulance. As he was a diabetic, they admitted him to the Vuk Vrhovec Hospital, below the Zajčeva Hospital whose roof we could also see from our living room window. They had managed to bring him out of a comma several times before, and it seemed they would do it this time too.

But the death that had set out from Dubica in 1941, walked through Banija, travelled with them all the way to Mitrovica, came so near him it could almost kiss him at Batina, and continued to follow him with the 12<sup>th</sup> Vojvodina Brigade, perhaps took the form of a nurse and attached him to an IV drip after the doctor had examined him. It was New Year's Eve, and the hospital was decorated with artificial Christmas trees and twinkling lights. The nurse said something comforting, something like, "Don't you worry," or "It'll be all right," and then went to the nurses' room where on a small table stood a platter with roasted piglet and French salad. The nurses were cheerful, drinking red wine from plastic cups, because it was New Year's Eve, and you need to have some fun. Music was playing, domestic hits, Goran Karan, Mladen Grdović, Jasmin Stavros, Danijela... one of them, a bit fuller, twirled her hips to the rhythm and made the others laugh. That's how I left them, my father falling in and out of consciousness, them dancing to the music.

During the night, the one death had gotten into didn't her the bell from the patient's room. Dad twitched and jerked as he was dying, pulling out the IV needle, and the blood dripped onto his best blue pajamas.

There's a photograph I stored somewhere safe, along with the one of my mom's parents in the operating room, but I still haven't found it. In that small black and white photo, Mom and Dad are peeking through the window of a Dalmatian stone house. They are smiling and unwaveringly gazing straight ahead. The window frames their heads, so they look like they're in a photo within the photo. It slightly resembles those wedding pictures, always retouched, that used to hang in old-fashioned bedrooms. There was one such photo in the room where they vacationed in Bol on the Island of Brač. And if some completely unknown people saw them in that picture, they would all say they are happy.

In our house, the words "Bol" and "Brač" were always spoken under one's breath, softer than others. Or with a quiver in one's voice that was hiding an entire album of fond memories. Perhaps even love? Surely love. But a love whose expiration date was shorter than that of Gavrilović cold cuts they brought on their vacation.

In that picture, Dad is dressed a sailor's shirt, and Mom is wearing in a light dress. His clothes, undoubtedly, had to match the ambiance, and beneath the window, there's a man in traditional clothes leading a donkey. There's something staged about that photograph, as if it's a scene for a nostalgic vaudeville set in a small Dalmatian village. It's September 1960, and they aren't married yet. This is their first vacation together, and they sense something grand lies ahead, but each of them has their own idea of this grandness. They are ready to leave their former lives behind, knowing that the future should bring many happy years.

Even now, decades after their death, I sometimes see them like that: happy young people whom I know only from that photograph, not from reality. I imagine them having a romantic dinner with some tasty fish and good red wine. Knowing how gallant Dad was, they didn't eat only cold cuts. After dinner, they take a walk by the sea, gazing at the stars, at their own tiny piece of the universe.

And after the walk, my late mom is the first to enter the rented room. She places her handbag on a wooden stool and opens the window to let in the evening cool. My late dad comes in behind her, having let her go first, like a true gentleman, proud of his manners, which trace their origin back to the long-gone owner of a travelling theatre; he then places his pipe, tobacco, and his pipe tamper on the wooden table. And after that my late mom approaches him, not the other way around because, no matter how violent, aggressive, perhaps even crazy he may be in dealing with people, when it comes to making love, he is shy, concerned, and accommodating. Then, my late mom kisses him, movie-style, and the retouched parents of Mrs. Mladineo, the owner of the house where they spent their vacation, smile at them from the wall. After this, my late mom and dad kiss by the open window, taking their time, so swallows can look at them from the nearby roof, and seagulls from the sea, and maybe even someone from the house next door, reminded by that kiss of something beautiful they experienced. Or, unfortunately, something they didn't. My late mom then takes off her light blouse and her bra. Even though it's still quite warm, my late mom always wears a bra, so as not to seem vulgar. After that, she sits down on the bed and takes off one of her socks. Then the other. Slowly. She wears her socks for the same reason, so as not to seem vulgar, but perhaps also so that, at a certain moment, she can slowly take them off. My late mom has a red mark from garters on her thighs. This excites my late dad the most,

that mark left by the garters. I know this because that's what I inherited from him. I was born on June 2, 1961, and my official horoscope sign is Gemini. But I was born under the sign of a garter. Under the sign of that red-pink mark on the thighs that reminds of a rope mark.

And after this, slowly, very slowly, my late mom allows my late dad into herself. There are those who say that that's the beginning of my life, while others claim that my life began at that moment in the maternity ward at Petrova Hospital, at dawn – the moment that probably inspired my name – when my late mom, in a bout of painful contractions, cried out for the first time. And soon after, the sides of her birth canal tear, the head passes through... and there I am.

The doctor delivering my mother says, "There's our little Gagarin!"

And this is how my late mom knows I'm a boy.

It's impossible to memorize time. Moments are all we remember. And if in nature, time, or human consciousness, there is any kind of equilibrium, that moment is happier, more important, perhaps even longer than the many years that happen later in our lives.

At that moment when it fully dawned, and when Mom held to her chest the child whom that morning had already given his name, and Dad held her hand, young and dressed in a new, light suit, time had to show its elasticity. Clocks stopped, the melody of the mandolin fell silent, the balalaika grew quiet too, and the years, past and future, compressed into something resembling a cosmic egg. That woman, that man, and their child were left forever smiling. And if every moment is a window into all time, I want to remember precisely this moment which I'm not able to recall.