

**“THE CABINET OF TRIVIAL
SENTIMENTAL LITERATURE”**

A novel by Sanja Lovrenčić

(excerpts)

Translated by Una Dimitrijević

COVER TEXT

“Procrastination is not time well spent—one is constantly aware of what one is trying to temporarily forget.” With this thought, the old curator of the Cabinet of Trivial Sentimental Literature, a man with half an artificial heart, enters the final phase of choosing his successor. With a clumsily worded recruitment notice—“We’re more interested in your story than in your qualifications!”—he puts out a call for interested candidates. Among all the applicants, he has selected ten people who each show up for an interview—and bring him a story. These stories intertwine with the monologue of this weary man, touching on wide-ranging themes: love, social responsibility, magic, feminism, artistic interventions, artificial intelligence, fairies and elves, the relationship between art and capital. Thus, a whole spectrum of colours gradually emerges, sketching out the context and imaginary of the Cabinet, a place beyond time, but also the context of the present, a time that belongs to the curator, and thereby to us too.

But should all these images intertwined with personal destinies be preserved, or are they better left to a sort of lyricism of decay? When the tenth and final story forever severs the novel from the world, it will, in some way, become a perfect repository, a monument to an era of putting off the inevitable, an almost trivially sentimental oblivion. But before that happens, the reader will encounter a series of bizarre characters, enigmatic occurrences and foreign worlds, eventually realizing that even fatigue produces a specific kind of curiosity and sense of humour.

(Adrian Pelc, ed)

<https://www.mala-zvona.hr/en/product/the-cabinet-for-sentimental-trivial-literature/>
<https://www.sanja-lovrencic.com/en/>

I.

September 8

Dear Roza,

I've been thinking for a long time about how much I'd like to write to you. But only now, facing the usual chaos in the office—no, it hasn't lessened over time!—have I almost inadvertently written down the date and these first words. And as one word leads to another, I'll go on: dear Roza, you took care of the Cabinet (and me) as best you could, everything still runs according to your wishes, but you see, things wear out, in many ways, some unpredictable. Like when a storm comes along and damages the roof. In the days of my youth, of our youth, storms didn't tear down trees or blow off the roof tiles, but now apparently they do. And our pipes burst, even though they aren't old enough—or are they? You replaced them when you bought this house, but that time may be long ago now. *That long-ago year, nineteen-seventy-something*, says the voice on the radio announcing old hits. Your floral wallpaper has greyed, and the plaster has turned brittle somehow, half-turned to dust. And your young assistant shies away from the date of his birth and must live very cautiously if he hopes to live long, of which he isn't quite sure. Still, I won't write to you about my health, but rather about that of the Cabinet.

It's simple: we urgently need an additional cash injection—yes, that's a good word, “injection”, it makes the matter clearer, less vulgar. But, besides money, the Cabinet also needs a new caretaker, which may be an even greater problem. I have to find someone whom I trust enough to hand over your world without worry. Not immediately. But still, rather soon. After a transitional period. Everything needs to be taken care of in time, you used to say that as if talking to yourself, but maybe also as a warning to me. In time, then—in other words, now—, I must find someone who I'm confident will protect the Cabinet as I have protected it, as I still protect it, and I hope to continue protecting it, at least in part, as long as I'm still here. That is, if I manage to keep a little space on the ground floor and justify my retired presence by organising your apartment, organising the archives, some sort of organising—except that it won't be the same and will require some getting used to...

And so, my anxious thoughts about the Cabinet turn in circles, along with other anxious thoughts. You must make the decision to leave, and then you'll leave, you used to say, as if somewhat bored of stating such obvious facts. But it's also a fact that I don't like making decisions. I like the security of small habits, however they came about, and I feel I can endure anything if my day begins with coffee at this table. I don't like leaving either, just as it seems human beings generally don't like leaving places they consider theirs for whatever reason. But the Cabinet is more important than me, and it's my duty to—

Still September 8

I had to stop. Miha came to inspect the damage on the roof, and now he's hovering above me. I barely managed to convince him to come—he's old, he's had enough of everything, he can't promise me anything, he's determined not take on any more big jobs, and it'll be a big job. If I'd gone with him to the attic, he would have continued explaining this to me, getting more and more worked up without even looking at the damage. But, as you know, I'm a man with a weak heart, and I can't climb so many ladders. And in the end, he might still determine that a smaller repair will suffice, at least temporarily—that's the best we can hope for.

But long-term...

Long-term, I think I might need legal advice. You wouldn't believe how much each of us here has needed legal advice lately.

Actually, I'd like to know something else: my successor—would you perhaps prefer it to be a woman? Back then, at the very beginning, when I returned repentant after one of my failed attempts to leave, you said: "Well, I suppose the stars have decided thus." And you sighed, somewhat disappointed—or did it just sound that way to me? I recently remembered that moment and decided to follow your example: I will choose the person sent to me by the stars, which in this specific situation means that we won't ask around and search for someone reasonable through friends and acquaintances; instead, we'll open a call for applications. That's what I proposed to the board, I convened a meeting for that sole purpose. Everyone agreed, so we immediately drafted the text and published it practically the next day. Many people applied, as could be expected. And now I'm quickly reviewing the applications, sorting them into two piles: those I will interview and those I won't. Ten candidates, I've decided, that's how many I'll invite for an interview. A nice round number, not too large nor too small, allowing me to choose without expending too much energy. But I wonder if they should all be women. No, I don't think they should—aren't I proof of that? Of course, more women applied, but also some men—perhaps I should keep the same ratio? Yes, that would make things simpler.

Although, in principle, the quality of the application has nothing to do with gender—that is, it shouldn't—or should it, in this case? I don't know, I wonder, I get all tangled up, but I shouldn't get tangled up, I should hurry. Because all of this will take time in any case. Because I can't interview more than two candidates per week. Because a man with half an artificial heart can't endure stress day after day. Because, because, because. Mere excuses, I can hear you scoff at my justifications, at my naive postponement of the inevitable! But you can't say that I haven't planned and scheduled everything nicely: the selection process will be completed by November 1st, followed by a six-month probation period, and then, if everything goes well, I will retire, and the chosen person will take over your kingdom. And who could possibly object to that?

(...)

September 21

Dear Roza,

It was only this morning, as I entered the Cabinet, that I noticed two bags on the stairs filled with notebooks from the bathtub. That woman must have counted on my inability to throw them away. Or perhaps, despite the risk, she had to seize the moment to part with them. Or she simply wanted to get rid of them in a guiltless way, so she could then embark on a new life, unburdened by old words. We might almost envy her for that. But I don't understand how I didn't notice them yesterday. In any case, I took them down to the large cellar, our crypt, our mass grave of words.

When I walked into the office, the phone was already ringing, urgently as if it were reproaching me. It was our accountant; she was sorry, but she had to raise her fee since the business activities were becoming increasingly complicated. I hadn't noticed that our business activities had changed, I said, but of course, it's not impossible; we'll discuss it at the board meeting, she should just write a brief note, keeping in mind that we're not accountants and that everything needs to be explained to us in detail. Hopefully, this will take some time, since most people tend to postpone any writing indefinitely. Still, the conversation with her stirred a wave of anxiety in me (the kind that every additional expense, no matter how small, causes me these days), and I almost forgot that it was Thursday and that the fourth candidate for my successor was coming. As a result, I hadn't even read her resume before she appeared. It's true that reading her resume wouldn't have prepared me for such a vibrant presence, but at least her opening sentence wouldn't have confused me so much.

"I won't repeat what I wrote in the application," she said.

"Why not?" I asked, which was a little inappropriate, I admit.

"Well, because I wrote it."

"But I'd like to hear it from you," I started to justify myself, "you wouldn't believe how much you can learn from the way people present themselves in person." I might have mentioned it already, dear Roza, but sometimes I feel compelled to say such nonsense!

She has short hair and completely ordinary clothing, yet her presence can be described as vibrant—sparks fly from her words as she lists the organisations she's worked for and the jobs she's done. But no, she doesn't throw emotions around; she's not like her mother, who's always terribly appalled or moved to tears and who gave her that silly, pathetic name, "Oh Karmela!". She's a practical person, she doesn't devise slogans or speak for others, but always strives to do something concrete. Although she knows that the poet's grave says: "DON'T TRY", she'd be more inclined to follow the opposite advice: "ALWAYS KEEP TRYING". But the truth is, one gets tired of trying, especially when one sees that other people are—successfully!—trying something completely different, something that doesn't make the world better, more beautiful, or wiser. And so now she'd

like a little peace and a steady income; it's not that she's all that concerned about money, she's just tired of labouring for passion alone. A single sentence of hers contains an array of colours: from an orange flash to a leaden blue gloom. I'm trying to display my usual politeness while at the same time wondering whether I could share space with a being of such intensity. Yet perhaps she is indeed the most suitable person for this place, where something of substance truly needs to be done.

"Do you really have trivial sentimental literature here?" she suddenly asks me.

"Like what, for example?"

"Well, maybe a story about two young people who were supposed to spend their lives together but didn't, and so nothing could ever turn out well. Or about a woman who longed only for impossible lovers, while she could only live with men she didn't want. Or about another who was so fascinated by the adjective 'last' that she wanted to be someone's last flame before eternal darkness, not considering that it could happen the other way around."

"Where do you get all that from?" I asked, somewhat taken aback.

"From family stories, of course."

"And I thought you were an activist."

"Well, I'm not going to deal with sentimental affairs, am I? I deal with tangible things, the misery people inflict on each other in the material world, not in the realm of the heart."

"Fair enough," I said, awkwardly trying to quell her anger, seeing how uncomfortable I am with that emotion. I am, as you know, dear Roza, only an expert in quiet spaces filled with stale and subdued passions and dramas devoid of noise. I have no idea why I then allowed myself an indiscretion.

"Do you live alone?" I asked, and immediately began to apologise: "Sorry, it's just curiosity; sometimes I say the first thing that comes to mind." A brief equipoise in her expression: will she disdain me, get up and leave, or burst into laughter?

"My boyfriend is a mathematician," she states factually. But what will I think if she now tells me that she had a girlfriend with whom she shared her greatest joys, along with her hardest, sometimes perilous moments?

"For better or for worse," I say, thinking more about my life than hers. But the question arises of where the worse lies—within or without.

"Quite," she confirms but doesn't elaborate.

“Why did you stop working for that humanitarian organisation?”

“Mainly because they cut our funding. But... But that’s not a good enough reason,” she confirms my unspoken thought. “That shouldn’t be enough for someone committed to a noble cause to give up; the more difficult it is, the greater the challenge, the greater the merit, right? Only another question arises.”

“And that is?” I ask, although I feel the conversation has drifted too far from the Cabinet and should be brought back somehow.

“Shouldn’t we share the fate of those we’re trying to help? Isn’t living any other way hypocritical?”

“I hope you don’t think you should give up your home because others are homeless.”

“The world should be organised so that there are no homeless people,” she responds confidently, “but giving up your own house is not the right approach, and neither is giving up altogether.”

“So then what about the Cabinet in all this?” I finally ask.

“Well,” she smiles, “since I can’t solve society’s problems, I’d solve the Cabinet’s problems instead, hopefully with more success. I have some experience with writing proposals,” she adds, “I know two foreign languages.”

“Roza spoke French and German,” I say, “but she never mastered English well.”

I’m trying—I’m trying!—to talk to her about you, and she’s trying to mask her impatience with a smile. She asks what her chances are, and I give the usual answer: good, but I need to talk to the remaining candidates. She could set the Cabinet on fire, she could raise it from the ashes. Of course, I don’t say that; I just take the story she suddenly pulls from her bag and hands to me with an almost commanding gesture. She almost forgot about it, how come I didn’t ask if she brought it?

“You’ve got me a bit flustered,” I say, and she extends her hand with a smile, as if to make amends.

“You have a soft grip,” she says instead of a goodbye. She leaves briskly, and I sit for a while, staring into space, waiting for my fragile peace of mind to be restored.

*

Karmela's Story: BEFORE THE FORTRESS

He spoke so touchingly, yet in a measured and dignified way.

"We do not come as beggars, extending a mute hand for you to give or not to give, armed with petty lies and toothless smiles." He would say such things, and immediately I saw it all: what we are not, and what we are. "We have come to talk," he said, "even though you did not invite us. But not every conversation has to start with an invitation from you. We invite you to a conversation and do not intend to leave until you respond. No, none of us intend to leave, I see it all around me."

As more and more people gather, the number of guards in front of the Fortress also grows. I don't know if they come from inside, at night; I don't know if it's even possible to exit through those doors, so impenetrable and tightly shut they are. Perhaps they come from the town, or from one of the barracks on the other side of the river; they assemble in front of the entrance, densely packed, protecting the open space, only their eyes visible. But they should be able to see us well, and to hear the man who speaks, having climbed onto the boards we set up this morning opposite the doors.

He finished, stepped down from the platform, but the people did not disperse. Only as evening approached did some begin to head home, saying they would return the next day, bringing family and neighbours. Everything was fine, everything was peaceful, faces illuminated, bathed in the last light of the day. And whenever anger was heard in a voice, another voice would immediately rise, conciliatory and bright. "For we will surely succeed, as all those on the side of truth and justice do," the speaker said. "Open your eyes and see us," he said, "we no longer wish to be invisible."

In fact, only a few left at nightfall; most of us are still here. Shelters and small fires have cropped up around the Fortress. A woman and her sons have started bringing water. Where there is fire and water, one can live. A family that runs a tavern in town set up a whole field kitchen in the course of a morning. "We'll cook for everyone, free of charge," they said, "but if you can help with some money for supplies, we'll last longer."

"That won't be necessary," I said, as I was there helping to secure the canvas that protected them from the sun. "We won't be here long."

"You can't know that," said the head of the family. "Sieges can last."

"Is this a siege?" I laughed. "We've only come to talk." He smiled too, but with a hint of worry. Only later did I find out that he was the speaker's brother. It didn't surprise me that he'd been among the first to join in, together with his whole family. The speaker's words had brought tears to all our eyes, but we did not lower our gaze like those who had surrendered or were ashamed.

The machine is housed in the only solid structure in front of the Fortress. It's a small guardhouse, I don't know if we drove out the guards or if it was already abandoned; no one can tell me, and it's not important. Inside, there's nothing except our machine and what it needs. It's protected from the rain—which won't fall for a long time, since the sky is watching over us—and from well-meaning people with overly-inquisitive fingers.

I would so, so much like to speak! I want to climb up onto those boards and release all the words swirling inside me. I watch the speaker descend and feel like taking his place while everyone else is still standing around, still thirsty for words, only I don't dare. Yet our workshop is something like a silent podium; we also produce words.

I'm with Maria and Barbara. All three of us have some experience, which others find surprising since printing is not traditionally a women's job. But here it's not so hard to circumvent the rules we've already successfully bypassed elsewhere. Barbara sets the type and Maria applies the ink and operates the press. I pull out the paper. That's how we've produced hundreds of leaflets calling people to join us. That feverish evening when we crafted the words of our summons already seems so distant. Many gathered in front of our guardhouse then, all shouting over each other until Maria said she would write down one sentence at a time, but it had to be whole. It quickly became clear how few whole sentences people are able to come up with.

I don't know where the machine came from, but it's quite different from those in our town. Now that I think about it, even the people who brought it must have assumed that the gates of the Fortress wouldn't open so quickly and easily. In any case, there will be many more leaflets. We must spread the word about what's happening here or someone else will, someone who might say there's only a handful of us and declare us thugs or lunatics. And perhaps it's no coincidence that the Fortress is so far from town, in this remote place beyond the usual routes, a place with no witnesses. But we are here, many of us, ordinary, simple people armed with words.

The guards might not hear well under their helmets, and perhaps those inside the thick walls can't hear well either, but surely they're still looking through the slits in their helmets and the small openings high up in the walls.

Because of all these people who have eyes, we began making large signs, painting directly on wooden boards with brushes. I don't know who came up with the idea in one of those moments when so many are speaking at once, nor who brought that pile of boards, probably intended for some kitchen fire. But Maria, Barbara and I continued to write, since "we're good at it." We wrote about what we came for, what we want to talk about. "Freedom, equality!" read the first board, and I must say even Maria's steady hand trembled as she placed the first brushstroke. "No wall is eternal," wrote my hand. "Justice is life," wrote Barbara. But these words belonged to everyone; any one of us could have uttered them. When someone proposes something clear and indisputable, we all accept it as our own.

"The sun will shine on our street too," said the red-haired young man who brought us a new supply of paint, and Maria and I thought it fitting.

“Where did those words come from?” Barbara asked, and he just shrugged. “I feel like I’ve seen or heard them somewhere before,” she added, but he was already leaving. Then she and Maria debated what those words actually meant, but the issue was something else.

“If none of us carries that slogan,” Maria said, “and you’ve heard or seen it somewhere else, it means someone else must have created it, somewhere else, and now the question is who, where, and for what purpose.” Their discussion unsettled me, so I took a new piece of wood and wrote “Solidarity is Strength,” which was neither especially beautiful nor especially clever, but it seemed like a good conclusion.

One day, a woman climbed up onto the boards and began to speak. I envied her courage, and perhaps because of that envy, I didn’t initially want to listen. I headed towards the workshop, but something stopped me. She spoke as if she didn’t care whether people dispersed or not—though many, like me, had started to leave. She spoke to those behind the walls about simple things: how every human being, even the lowest of the low, should be able to have a home, fire, water, shelter and food. Then she spoke about people whose greed leaves others with nothing, who are like that because they fear death, yet death still comes for them and takes them away from all they have hoarded behind walls. “It takes them away,” she said, and I don’t know if I was the only one to discern a threat in her voice in that moment. “We don’t fear death, but we don’t like it either and we don’t want it to administer justice on its own,” she said with a strange smile. “That’s why the moment is approaching when our plea and proposition will become a demand.” Almost all those who had intended to leave listened in a tense silence until she finished speaking.

Some among us have taken it upon themselves to visit the guards. They try to get as close as possible and explain our request, despite the spearheads raised against anyone approaching. They press upon the guards that they are really on our side, though they may not realise it yet, but will eventually, when they can no longer carry out their duties. They share their personal stories and expand upon the words written on the boards, whose meaning is perhaps too abstract for some. One afternoon, when I was not busy in the workshop, I went along for one such visit. I explained, to a man who was looking past me through a slit in his helmet, why we had come to the Fortress; I talked about my work and my love for that big machine. I asked him why he had chosen to be on the other side of the spear and whether he’d like to talk. But the words just bounced off his armour, my voice sounded hollow, and I quickly gave up.

We had printed the latest large batch of leaflets and were exhausted. But since we’re the only ones sleeping under a solid roof, on something resembling a bed, we have no right to complain. We didn’t complain that evening either, when a group of people arrived with drums and rattles. “We need more things like this,” they said and asked if we could make them.

“We can, if someone supplies us with the materials,” said Maria.

“We can, if someone helps us, since we have other work to do,” said Barbara.

“There’s not much space here,” I added, apparently too quietly as it seemed no one heard me. And so, there are now six of us, and it’s very cramped in the workshop. We bind pieces of wood and rejoice at every scrap of metal. The machine serves merely as a storage place for finished items, which don’t stay there for long.

“Banging’s better than whistling,” said one of the newcomers.

“We should split up into shifts,” said the young man who had come with her, still almost a child (perhaps that’s why they sent him to us).

“Some should make noise while others rest, and so on until the doors open!” Maria gave him a motherly smile, and a new girl elaborated on his idea.

“Yes,” she said, “I see how the noise drives them out of the Fortress like a flood carrying fallen branches away.” They continued talking, but to me it seemed that only one thing was clear: we were shifting our approach, moving from words to noise. Yet some still climb onto the boards in front of the Fortress to proclaim: here’s how we could better organise the world.

In the evening, the area around the Fortress is so calm and beautiful. Small fires flicker and voices grow quieter. There have been no incidents since we’ve been here; anyone who came to cause trouble was stopped in time. Calm and beautiful, yes, even under the lights that reach us from the high windows of the Fortress. I walk on the grass, stretching my arms after a whole day hunched over work, and sometimes I see stars. Barbara says she used to see her own shadow in starlight, but I still don’t think that could have been possible here. Once, I lay in the grass, gazing at the sky; the world seemed like a kind and friendly place, when a couple came by. They stopped near me, clearly seeking solitude. Engrossed in their conversation, they didn’t notice me. The woman earnestly repeated that nothing would ever change if no one did anything about it. The man spoke, very restrained, about how things always change on their own and how each should just do their job. “Stick to your job,” he kept repeating.

“But what is your job?” the woman asked, “and is it really yours?” It was clear that he intended to leave and that she wanted to stay. It was clear they couldn’t understand each other, and that seemed even sadder than the stubbornly locked Fortress.

Later I suggested that we make another batch of leaflets. So we did. “Every door must eventually open,” we wrote. “Be part of the change to come,” we called out, but the faces around us didn’t glow as brightly as they had at the start. These days, we’ve been hearing news about people destroying our leaflets, attacking those who carry them and taking them away to unknown places. The red-haired young man who brings us supplies says it’s a sign: the leaflets must have some power if they provoke such fear. He says we should build a flying machine and throw our beautiful papers from it—and he immediately starts drawing. Barbara curiously watches over his hand, we can tell she’s interested in everything he does. And when larger pieces of wood and metal begin piling up around our little hut, our first thought is that Josip has actually decided to build his flying ship.

Each day at noon, the speakers persistently climb onto the boards, but as autumn advances, their faces seem to wither and their voices fade. The woman who once spoke with such passion no longer addresses those in the Fortress. Instead, she moves through the encampment, urging us to hesitate no longer; with the first heavy rain, people will start to disperse, and it will be worse than ever. The men have cut down nearby trees, and we are now producing clubs as tools for attack. The workshop has expanded around the guardhouse, and more and more people are coming to help. There are so many of them that Maria, Barbara and I could go back to our real work, but we're not sure we have the right words for this moment.

*

The speaker, the one who first climbed onto the boards, gave his final speech. For the last time, he repeated how we came in peace, tried to initiate a conversation, and presented our grievances and feasible proposals. How we patiently waited for weeks for a response. How truth and justice are on our side, along with established charters and good customs. How not a single one of our questions was ever answered. Yet we need an answer of some kind, we need to bring about some change, even if by force. We have thus decided to open the doors ourselves, doors that do not open when we knock politely. Once more, for the last time, he called upon the lords of the Fortress to open the gates. Then he simply stood there and waited. We all stood and waited, both us and the guards. It felt like an entire day, an entire year, an entire lifetime passed. Then we moved. And the guards stepped aside.

The doors fell with the first blow of a massive log. We surged into the Fortress, scattered through the stairways, running from room to room—but we found no one except a few terrified women in something resembling a scriptorium. Nothing happened to them, but the destruction couldn't be stopped.

But then, as precious glass shattered and expensive furniture tumbled down the stairs, a piercing voice rang out: "They found them! They found them! They've found the real headquarters of the general administration!" A man was waving a map, answering questions between shouts, sharing fragments of the story. "They found the real Fortress!" he yelled. "Now we must go, all together, you'll hear the details later!" And while some were just coming to terms with the fact that the fortress was empty, others were already rushing towards the new siege.

When I returned to the workshop, they were disassembling the machine. "Don't damage it," Maria was saying, closely supervising their every move.

(...)

September 22

Zlatko called and asked why I haven't been in touch. He hasn't forgotten our conversation and got me the number of the "girls" from Terpsichore (how self-important he sounds when he says that name!). I should call them right away because his "mate" already mentioned me to them two days ago. I'd rather delay that call until Monday, but I know he'll chide me over coffee tomorrow. So, I made a deal with myself: I'll call them right away, but I'll postpone the call to that advisor at the ministry—the one whose name has been glaring at me from my to-do list every day—until further notice.

I heard a lovely voice on the line. Of course, she knows exactly what it's about; I don't need to explain anything. She speaks to me like I'm a child: "You'll come here, you'll see how nice it is, and the first consultation is completely free!" Slightly bewildered by her use of "completely," I hardly dare suggest that perhaps someone from their side should come to my office and see the situation firsthand. "Oh, that's no problem at all," she exclaims, and I can't help but think I detect a hint of annoyance in her voice. "Lorena will come; Monday is slightly hectic for us, she can be there on Tuesday at noon."

"Alright," I say, noting it down, and I wonder what exactly constitutes "slightly hectic." But what I should really do is prepare, because—

(...)

Well, I guess the answer came to me on its own, you could say a "slightly hectic" moment just occurred.

"I heard you're looking for someone to work here," said my first visitor of the day.

"Yes, but the application process is closed," I reply, perhaps in an overly defensive tone, adding that we don't take late applications.

"Oh, no worries," he says, "I just came to have a look around." I mumble something resembling an apology, sell him a discounted ticket (yes, dear Roza, all our tickets are still "discounted"), and everything seems normal. The quiet presence of a visitor is enough to create a sense of purpose and meaning, a sort of balance. And so I start thinking about the relationship between the curator and visitor, its neatly set boundaries and unwritten rules, when I hear his voice emerge from the room with the novels. I realise that silence, or a thematically and acoustically limited conversation, holds an important place in our unwritten rulebook. My visitor isn't being loud exactly, but I can clearly hear him reading out a passage.

"Instead of heading straight home... he took a detour, searching for the source of the sound... when, finding himself in front of the market, he spotted a girl with a flute and a hunchbacked boy with a little drum... More captivated than he would like to admit, even

to himself, he moved closer... But as he passed by, his eyes met hers, and then, in that brief moment...

I was about to head towards the room with the novels, but wisely held back. If the man enjoys reading aloud, why interrupt him? He's not causing any harm, and there's no one around who might be disturbed by his recitation. Although I'm curious about what he's reading, I can always ask him later which book he took from the shelf—if I can't resist the temptation to find out. And so he reads on, and I sit at the reception desk, writing my own notes. He stops reading, quietly prowls around the Cabinet, reads something else aloud, and then comes back to me.

“That job here,” he asks, “can it be done without a computer? Don't worry,” he adds with a wink, “I'm just asking out of curiosity.”

“Why without a computer?” I respond.

“Well, it would be like everything else here; it's still entirely analogue, you're not on any network, you don't have any apps, and I see you even issue tickets the old-fashioned way.”

“I'm not sure we could be that resistant to change,” I say. “We're in the process of archiving our materials,”—doesn't that sound nice, Roza?—“and that's hard to do without a computer these days.”

“Oh, you're quite wrong,” he says. “Computers today have turned into trash cans. I don't understand how people can keep anything they care about in them.” I consider asking him where he keeps the things he cares about, but I stop myself (it now seems like an inappropriate question). “Card catalogues are a wonderful thing,” he says, thanks me for my patience, and leaves.

And now a new guest enters, asking if we could take on a family library—this would be the fourth or fifth such request this year. She's younger than me, with a spark of curiosity in her eyes that prevents me from adopting an unequivocally negative stance, so I allow her to launch into her pitch. The last members of the generation born in the twenties are slowly fading away, which is natural and inevitable, and with them, their libraries—certainly something of which I'm well aware.

“Oh yes, I'm very well aware,” I respond. (At one point, another woman enters the Cabinet, briefly interrupting our conversation and glancing around your treasures.) My guest understands that the books in this collection, individually speaking, may not have much value. She also knows that there's nothing very original in all this, that many very similar home libraries exist, though fewer over time. Nevertheless, it would be a shame to simply destroy this library; if preserved in its entirety, such a collection says a lot about an era, a way of life, an attitude towards culture and education—things of that sort. Of course, I should have interrupted her, clearly and loudly stating that we have no room,

but I let her speak, getting absorbed in her story, not even sure why—I suppose I like the melody of her voice. No, it's not her collection; it belonged to her neighbours, both of whom recently passed away. They worked in technical professions but had a love for literature and read in several languages. Oh, how those words flourished—that music, like sprigs in springtime, rustling: here we are, we're here, life is good! Look at what I found in the book store, the husband would say. Look at what I brought back from my trip, said the wife. These weren't rare or expensive editions, often paperback, often with glued spines, pages falling out after a second reading, and needing to be gathered and cared for. Still, they were treasures.

Take them if you want, the indifferent heir had said from his threadbare blue armchair, tired of dismantling old furniture. To him, they're worthless, worn-out things, aged household pets without an owner. Their funeral is being prepared, they'll be thrown out onto the asphalt, buried in the city noise, wiped away without regret—all those long evenings with a sci-fi novel in the blue armchair under the lamp that's now discarded by the building entrance, the small dog that no longer exists, those gatherings with friends over meals from the large, shiny French cookbook, discussions about the universe, social justice, the limits to growth, debates about some public controversy, a performance, a newspaper article—yet, she simply has nowhere to put all these words.

I understand, I say, and I'm sorry, but we have no space either.

“It's such a shame! Someone should still make sure that every trace of that almost forgotten way of life, that almost forgotten world view, doesn't disappear!”

“You're right,” I say, “and it's true that here we do a similar kind of rescuing, but we simply can't be custodians of everything.” The heir had given her only ten days to find a home for those books. All we'd need is a reasonably-sized space, she says, describing this non-existent room in such a way that for a moment it feels impossible not to agree with her vision. But then I collect myself and repeat how very sorry I am, but we simply can't, people offer us so many things, almost every day.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” she says, sensing my hesitation, “I have until the end of the month.”

I escorted her to the door, said something appropriate about the weather and these times, and she walked off, leaving me with an uncomfortable feeling that I had disappointed her and hadn't handled the situation well—I would have liked to call her back before she'd gone too far. At that moment, wavering by the front desk, I noticed that the guest book had been left open, as if that little devil who brazenly exposes its delicate pages to various ruinous possibilities had been up to his tricks again. I went to close it and found another cryptic note inside.