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“RED DOVES”

A novel by Sanja Lovrenčić

(three excerpts)

Translation by Una Dimitrijević

COVER TEXT

The story begins with an arrival on an unnamed island, just at the right time. Inheriting a small house in an almost deserted village, the heroine finds an escape, if only for a few days, from her daily material struggles and the recent trauma of her mother's death. The landscape that greets her is an idyll laced with nostalgia—crumbling stone houses, wild capers, local cheese, sun, wind and rain shape this Mediterranean world. Everything suggests that here, away from people, work and routine, she will find space for introspection, a chance to face her past, her desires and hopes.

Only Toni, her deceased relative, also kept doves. Our heroine releases the birds from their dovecotes, unaware that they are messengers and will soon return, and this time with a rather colourful entourage. The doves bring Toni's old friends back to the island. They organise a three-day wake and recount fragments of a shared past. Were they an ageing theatre troupe that wandered the Mediterranean or had they been active participants in anarchist upheaval? The stories they offer make it hard to discern the truth. As they leave, this odd bunch explains the real nature of her newfound inheritance: along with the house, she has inherited a duty to tell their story, a story she has not fully grasped.

And so, the Mediterranean idyll comes to an end, to be replaced with an exploration of 1970s international terrorism, the birth of a personal revolt against glaring wealth inequality, growing sensitivity to environmental devastation, cyber-subversion, virtual utopian spaces, surveillance, fear and escape. In response to the fragmented stories of her guests, our heroine will offer her own which, when the whirlwind that carried her subsides, will almost unintentionally be passed on to a new generation—her daughter, for further attempts.

(Adrian Pelc, ed)

<https://www.sanja-lovrencic.com/en/>

<https://www.mala-zvona.hr/en/product/red-doves/>

(1)
A WAKE FOR TONI

(arrival)

It was the olive-picking season, the octopus hunting had begun, the last glimmers of summer were fading, and I certainly wouldn't have gone back there, only you can't go back to somewhere you've never been. No, I guess I would never have visited that village deep within the island had I not received an unexpected inheritance. It had been a year of blows; my small world, which until then had seemed so solid, was falling apart. Admittedly, that's maybe only how it seemed in hindsight—despite my standard strategies of denial, a deep anxiety had long been simmering, and there were warnings of tectonic shifts ahead. Toni's death hadn't been a shock, I merely felt a quiet sorrow at the passing of another relative. Even that is going too far, since Toni hadn't exactly been a close relative, unlike my mother who'd died three months before. You don't know anything about her, or him, or that island where changes always come to pass. You don't know anything about who I am even though you do know me, even though for you I have a face that may not be entirely mine, yet still more mine than many others that I've seen in countless mirrors. I'm glad that now I also have a voice.

I hadn't expected anything from Toni, and not just because he wasn't a real blood relative of mine, much like nothing else about him was real either it seems. Not even his name. He was named after a great god of Antiquity, and changed it to the most ordinary name he could find: Toni, Ant, Tonko, anything would do. But there are people out there who are his blood relatives, in one way or another, and who could have expected an inheritance after his death. There are reasons for which he didn't choose them, and reasons for which they didn't insist. Everything was written, notarised, stamped—but I won't go into the details of the inheritance proceedings which I didn't attend. I was represented by the same lawyer who helped Toni draft his last uncontested message to the world.

I didn't go visit him, I wasn't in contact with him at all. I only remember a few scenes from my childhood, although it's generally not a period I like to recall. "That means you're still young", my mother once commented, swallowing down the shock that visibly washed over her whenever I said something like that. Perhaps she wanted to say that even bad things can turn to good once enough time passes. When I say the words "my childhood", I picture a wind rose: big gusts could come from any direction, carry me off somewhere, but windbreaks pop up one by one and finally, far too quickly, each direction becomes an impossibility, and I'm left there in my solitude. Nobody promised you would fly, the voices whisper at night, but they couldn't possibly be right, how could somebody not destined to fly even think about flight, and so persistently?—At least think about it, if nothing else.

Uncle Toni, that's what I called him as a little girl. I'm sitting in his lap, we're pretending that I'm driving a cart that's being pulled by a donkey along a bumpy island track: one pothole after another, and another, and another... I'm laughing, screaming with laughter as I fall into the crevice that suddenly appears between his knees, always somewhat unexpectedly, since his potholes don't follow a predictable rhythm. Toni's laughing too and saying, "that's life, bump, bump... bump!"

He wasn't my mother's brother by birth, he was adopted. After all, a family with four daughters needs a male child too. He was the son of a young couple from the neighbouring village, too young to be parents. "What crazy customs", I said to my mother when I first heard the story. She'd waited until I was very much grown up before telling me, and even then she could barely suppress a sort of discomfort. "That's our family", she said in response to my outcry, and it wasn't clear whether that was an explanation, an expression of indignation, or maybe her resignation to something that couldn't be changed; or even the reason why facts were accepted without comment. No, Toni hadn't been my mother's biological brother, and it was merely a bizarre coincidence that they had died from the same rare illness.

The message was clear and simple: his village home in the heart of the island, the dovecote next to it, the birds and "everything else that comes with it" were to be passed on to me. All of his other property, including part of the house in the seaside town, had been sold off long ago. He'd spent most of the proceeds, and what was left over he'd also left to me, enough to cover the taxes, the lawyer, the minor repairs to the house and a few other expenses. There were no conditions attached to the money he left me, but I was not allowed to sell the house.

"What if I want to sell it?"

"Then it goes straight to the next heir."

"And can they sell it?"

"They have no restrictions."

I wondered what mystery lay behind all of this and replied that I would first have to go and see the property, that I couldn't make a decision just like that about a place I'd never seen. Toni's lawyer agreed and said I should come to the island as soon as possible, because of the doves.

I don't think I'd ever been to that mountain village, not even as a little girl when I'd been dragged around on trips that only left me with a memory of being carsick. Untainted by the past, every place can evoke curiosity and daydreams. But not now, in that moment there was no daydreaming, only the thought that I might step outside of my own existence, that terrible inner tension through which I'd experienced my mother's last days and the months following her death. A brief relief from the grief, or something of that sort.

Oh, what a trip to remember! Only ten people in the passenger lounge and a storm outside. The large, empty ferry calmly ploughed through the waves, and I would go out onto the deck every now and then, quickly returning, wet from the rain and sea spray. If only we never docked anywhere! A few people were playing cards in the lounge, a man was reading a newspaper, and a young woman huddled close to her boyfriend, shivering from the cold. We were all aware of each other, yet comfortably separated, a silent community of adventurers. It felt as if the ship had embraced us all equally and was carrying us, light as feathers, toward an unknown continent. Layers of my past life were peeling off and falling away, drifting off with the waves, letting me become someone new—or they would, were the journey long enough.

I arrive in the small coastal town late at night and sleep in a rented room, having declined the curt offer to stay with relatives. And then, it's already day, a brilliant morning with

puddles lining the waterfront, the last trace of the storm that had carried me to the island. I wander the streets, trying to hold on to the excitement from the ferry, drinking coffee and waiting for Frano to finish work and drive me to the mountain village. I know he'll ask why I still haven't started driving again, and I know he won't like anything I might say in response—what am I even imagining, being alone up there in the village? I'd better not expect him to come every day; he didn't do that even for Toni.

Frano is my second cousin, and of course, you don't know anything about him either, nor is there anything worth knowing. I hadn't heard from him or seen him in years, just like the others. I've frankly always been somewhat intimidated by these loud people who claim to know what their God commands and repeat how this or that person did well, how nothing can be achieved without connections and money, and how everything else is just empty talk. I sensed aggression in those words long before I realised they had to do with my mother, with her indifference towards acquiring wealth and property, with her divorce, and her move abroad—perhaps with some events from her youth. The fact that none of them reached out to her during her years of illness, not even at the very end, did nothing to improve my opinion of them. My mother believed she owed them some loyalty; I owed them nothing.

Frano was the first to call me after the probate hearing, which was expedited (because of the doves, the lawyer kept saying), and asked whether I would accept the property because if I didn't, he was the next in line to inherit it. "It's a ruin", he added, "nothing but hassle, no real use". I told him I'd come and take a look, and he offered to drive me. And so here we were, driving uphill, along a narrow, winding road into the rocky interior. Both island and mountain, yet neither island nor mountain: there's no sea in this village, the sea is far below, out of sight; and there are no peaks in this mountain, they are farther up, with no road leading to them. An almost deserted cluster of houses, halfway between here and there.

"There's only three of them left there", Frano says, "two failed painters and that shepherd with his flocks and dogs who claimed ownership of all the surrounding land, likely with Toni's help—he was a local official. That shepherd's even set up a cheese dairy in some ruin." At some point, the other villagers decided to move to the coast together, so fed up they were with the centuries-old peasant life that they even took their dead with them and made a new cemetery beside their balustrade-fronted gaudy pink homes. Frano doesn't tell it like that, that's me translating his words into my own language. Compared to the newer mansions, those are modest pink abodes. "You won't know what to do with any of it anyway", he mutters at some point, half to himself.

But it seems that, in the intervening time, when most of the inhabitants had already left but the village wasn't completely deserted, some people showed up and tried to do various things. Restless Sisyphus-like folk, doomed to failure from the start: brothers who made sails using an old technique, soaking them in unpleasant wax and oil until their workshop caught fire; a weaver with her flock of silk sheep; a stonemason who extracted rocks from the heart of the island—all dying trades. A singer in search of good acoustics and medicinal herbs for her weakening voice. The painter couple, Frida and Pablo, must have been among them. They were the last to arrive—and no, those weren't their real names. But at the moment I'm recounting, those names didn't exist for me yet. I'm being driven along the old worn-out road travelled by nobody but us, the day is fading, and I feel this journey is taking much too long.

I'm nauseous from the drive, almost as carsick as when I was a child. Frano goes on about Toni's death among the doves, giving a detailed account of something no one witnessed. Then come the discouraging words: no, I won't be comfortable there. No, there's no water supply—there never was. The cistern? It's probably in bad shape. The wiring is old. If the fridge works, nothing else does.

“What else? What is there that might not work?”

“Nothing. There's absolutely nothing there.”

Yet I know there must be something—the house had been inhabited until recently.

Toni distrusted his own family so much that only Jakša, the shepherd, was given a copy of his key. The other key, the one the lawyer used to lock up the house after the coroner's formalities were over, was with me. Night had already fallen when I unlocked the door, and instead of the damp smell that so often clings to old island houses, I was merely met with an ordinary chill. We brought in my things, and I expected Frano to leave immediately—I wanted him to go and let me face this place alone, with its solitude and a sudden feeling of connection to the space that overcame me as soon as I opened the door. He seemed to be waiting for my decision, right then and there—yes or no, say no so I can activate Plan B! I took a deep breath and bid him goodnight, trying to make it sound like a command.

The house is still the same today: a single room on the ground floor, slightly raised, an attic accessed via an outside staircase, and a backyard enclosed on all sides, resembling a room without a roof. It's bordered by the wall of the house, a separate bathroom and summer kitchen that Toni built himself using flat stones and no mortar, another wall from some abandoned building, and a partly dilapidated garden partition hiding a small courtyard among the ruins. When I first went out through the back door, I was greeted by the smell of lavender from the other courtyard; but most of that space was taken over not by plants but by a large dovecote. This was the sum of my inheritance: a house with a double courtyard in an abandoned village—a small, seemingly tame beast. There was no danger of it collapsing, they told me, the roof had been repaired four years ago.

The doves were asleep and the moon rose over the village. Everything was fine, I concluded, and retreated inside, leaving the door to the courtyard open, though the cold from the hillside was seeping in with the darkness. It would have been nice if someone had lit a welcoming fire in the old stove, if there were a bowl of soup on its iron rings, if at least the birds were awake... But the bed was unexpectedly comfortable, and the blanket smelled of washed wool and lavender. The island was sinking into deep silence, with only an occasional light gust of wind fluttering between the houses like a shudder.

At that time, my world was still just stone, clay and crystals, silent elements of the Earth. Yet nothing in this world is wholly silent. In the space between wakefulness and sleep, I was suddenly surrounded by murmuring: “Tell me who you are! Tell me who you are!”. “Tell me who you are,” I retorted like an echo, though I knew the answer. These were the voices of the stones, the living stones on which the house stands, from which the village was built. “She doesn't know who she is”, they muttered, “hiding her face, hiding her name, another one who's come to hide. She doesn't know yet, but she will. She doesn't know her weight; it will be measured here. She doesn't know her own face; it will reveal itself here—”

A crash cut them short. The water pot I'd left on the stove rolled across the stone tiles. Out of nowhere, a cat landed on my bed.

(doves)

In the morning, everything looked perfectly ordinary: the neglect of my temporary abode was visible—dust, grey ash around the stove, desolate clothes that had lost their owner. A cracked blue basin stuck together with silver tape, rubber slippers, and worn-out shoes that should be taken someplace, though I'm not sure where.

Outside, the world was washed clean by the wind, brimming with colour. The sun shone with renewed vigour and every detail appeared with painful clarity. The spaces inside and outdoors felt overwhelming; I turned away from them and stepped into the aviary.

It was just a large wire cage, partly overgrown with vines, with a few wooden nesting boxes for the birds. But the word “aviary” sounds much nicer, it evokes the idea of flight. And birds are supposed to fly, aren't they? That was my first thought as I entered their space—but perhaps it's not so simple, maybe there are rules concerning their flight, just as there must be a reason why Toni kept them in this enclosure. At that moment, I knew nothing about them at all.

Later, I learned quite a bit about doves, lived in daily contact with them, and even dared to write about them occasionally, despite my rule to only write about inanimate nature. Without the doves, there would be no story, and in this very moment, its ending depends on one of them. I often stayed close to these birds in the months that followed, observing them and thinking about them, but the confusion I felt during my first encounter with them never entirely left me: their repulsive otherness, the harshness of their gaze, the incomprehensible force of their small, sudden movements—or was that all just me and my anxiety?

They cautiously backed away from me, even though I had approached slowly. I sat on a stone bench in the aviary and waited. Toni must have often sat on that polished stone; once he sat there for the first time, like I did that morning, with some reason, some plan, at the beginning of a story—or at the end? I waited to see what would happen, what response we might provoke in each other. The birds waited too, until one of them came a little closer.

Do you know that elemental, childlike pleasure of feeding animals and establishing a closeness and feeling like a benevolent deity? Their touching trust and fragility as you spread your large protective wings over them... Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to do, but I spent my first days on the island feeding and observing the doves. It felt as if not only had all the problems of the real world been postponed, but time itself was at a standstill. Slowly, my eyes began to open to the diversity among these birds that we always call by the same name. Not just the varying feather patterns in shades from white to black, and not just the different intensity of greens and purples on their necks—but also their disparate gazes and movements, their levels of trust and apparent arrogance. I watched them and watched them, and I don't know at what point I began to view their movements as signs, as an unknown language that needed to be deciphered to resolve other puzzles, perhaps every unanswered question. It's hard to interpret signs that are constantly shifting and changing. Photographs might help me see things more clearly, I thought, and after an initial hesitation and reluctance to place the device between my eye and the birds, I started

taking pictures. I rarely managed to capture the movement I was aiming for; instead, I caught others...

Now, looking back on it, it seems that my time on the island began as a grand retreat into stillness and silence, a great relief that I was allowed this respite for a moment. But the feeling that something might happen and that life would never be the same again never quite fades away.

At the end of the first day, the shepherd Jakša stopped by and asked if I needed anything. I don't know why, but I had expected an old man; he wasn't old but lean and sun-darkened—ageless.

"I have nothing for the cat," I said.

"She can have cream like always, she'll take care of the rest herself."

"I didn't know there were still mice in the village."

"There are birds," he said with a wink.

"I'd like to buy some milk for myself too, and cheese if that's possible."

"Of course it's possible. I can also bake some bread for you if you'd like."

I didn't tell him anything about myself, sensing that he already knew all that he needed to. Besides, he hadn't asked me anything.

"Toni was a good man," he said at the end, in place of a goodbye. "Better than most."

The remaining two villagers first came to me as a duet. It was evening, and sounds once again formed images on the brink of slumber. Gusts of wind, the patter of small paws in the attic, the creaking of the house, a bird persistently singing in the dark—although it didn't sound much like a song, more an attempt to express something that couldn't be precisely uttered, only stated more or less inadequately, over and over. Two human voices were woven into this tapestry of sound, at first barely audible. They came with the wind, in surges, bursting out and then fading away. When you strain to hear something, it feels like your ears are growing from the effort of listening, like the world is getting louder and louder—do you know that sensation? I listened and heard more clearly: a woman's voice would begin a song and the man's voice would join in, soaring above it before fading off... I couldn't recognise the melodies.

Then the others joined in, voices from the fringes. "Look at her, look how many pictures she's taken, but she doesn't know what to do with them!" The windows and doors of abandoned houses were opening around me, wheels turned joyfully, across the narrow street slid clotheslines on which hung my photographs of doves, now as large as banners. I climbed a path of smooth uneven stones, suddenly becoming weightless, as fragmented movements of birds assembled above the former street, on the verge of forming a thought, a message... a blow: the wind began to pound against my window just as it seemed that a sharp and supernatural clarity was about to take over the world. The man and woman were still singing in the distance. They seemed to have sung all night.

The next morning, I set the birds free.

A few days later, Marisa appeared.

(...)

THE JOY OF ACTION

A bit of autonomy's better than none, after all.
(Hakim Bey, *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*)

(shifts and quotations)

Despite the stones and books in my suitcase, I returned from the trip lighter than when I left. Meeting Marisa seemed to free me from every obligation—or at least from the rigid thinking about obligations.

We were rushing into yet another summer. Hana was discovering speleology, while I was having dreams of untangling. They came over me both at night and by day, even when I briefly closed my eyes from screen fatigue. There was always some clothing restricting my movement, clothes with countless buttons, clasps and ribbons. Then it suddenly seemed simple: ribbons had to be untied, buttons undone, telling apart the real from the fake, freeing the contents of sewn-up pockets... I have the feeling that my initial actions somehow stemmed from this untangling. Or perhaps the decisive element was a woman in the café.

It was crowded on the small terrace that morning. She asked if she could sit at my table, needing coffee and promising not to say a word. She pulled out a notebook; I was working on my laptop. We were as far apart as you can be sitting at the same table, each lost in her own thoughts. But then I found myself in one of those moments when I pause, falter, suddenly can't finish a sentence, start fidgeting, searching for a way out. I look up and say something like, "I'd love to know what you're writing." A sullen grey-purple gaze lifts from the paper: "Just some stories." I'm surprised by my own indiscretion; feeling embarrassed about breaking our agreed-upon silence, I ask no more. After a while, she adds, "Revenge stories." What colour is my gaze then, when I lift it towards her, slightly bewildered?

"Don't you have vengeful thoughts?" she asks.

"Do I? Only a few seedlings, which I don't allow to grow."

"Why not? It's just fiction. No harm will come to anyone, and it feels good, you know."

For a moment, I feel like I understand, like I could know.

"See?" she smiles, reclining in the small armchair.

"And what happens in your stories?" I ask timidly.

"Oh, various awful things. Readers love that, they respond to the authentic emotion behind the events. They think the characters are fictional, but they're mistaken. The characters are real and can recognise themselves in the stories. Well, if they read the text, and they usually do. The revenge is fictional—fictional but realistic, because the motive is realistic, and so are my characters' fears."

"So these stories... you publish them?"

"Of course. What's the point of writing otherwise? Literary revenge might not be of much use, but it has one advantage: a long shelf life. Those books live on."

“Any examples?”

Her lips press firmly together as she smiles. I don’t think she’ll say any more.

“Oh, well, everyone has something they absolutely don’t want to lose”, she finally says, “and some people can be subjected to a more or less painful re-education.”

But no, neither loss nor pain of any kind are on the agenda yet. Just the idea of text as a tool for action.

Start by doing something small. I read that advice somewhere once and often came back to it. So now, to start off with, something small? A tiny subversive sentence slipped into a harmless article? Like the one I’m working on at that moment: cosmetics, interesting facts about nephrite therapy, an ancient practice using green stones that my clients have turned into the latest, highly expensive treatment. Nephrite paste will, among other benefits, bring you closer to nature, make you question the state of the flora in your immediate environment and take action to improve it, even if that means an open conflict with the construction mafia turning green land in your neighbourhood into—no, not so obvious. Those were just my initial reveries.

During my daily routines, I started coming up with extended ad copies like that. In an article about quartz pseudomorphs for a semi-precious stone store, I mention “tiger’s eye” and “hawk’s eye”—but hey, where are the animals that gave their names to these stones? Are there any tigers out there with those dark, mysterious eyes? How many steppe hawks are there even left? Can we find out, show concern, take action? And that lustrous muscovite, so easily processed into flexible tiles that can be turned into magical heat-resistant panes—how do you like the idea of shattering it within its deep hiding place with huge quantities of water pumped under high-pressure, water tainted with poisons, so that we can source a little more energy? Mightn’t you try living with a little less energy, with fewer things that need so much energy to be produced? Righteous little lectures on imagination—I think you’ll have no trouble understanding.

My first real action was very timid. I inserted a critical sentence into an article about mineral fertilisers in gardening—I had otherwise drafted that article in a very lyrical, even rather saccharine tone—and then promptly sank into anxiety. I was risking my job—my livelihood!—and for what?! But one can’t remain silent forever, and if I can help just one person to start thinking differently...

Such thoughts frequently preoccupied me. I anxiously awaited the client’s reaction, but the payment arrived without comment, and nothing significant happened afterwards. I checked: my sentence remained exactly as I had written it and where I had placed it. Perhaps no one, not even the client, reads the entire text.

A series of these small “shifts and interventions”, as I called them, followed. There was still no reaction. Then, I started receiving praise for my work! My subversion was taken to be an original marketing touch, and more of it was requested. Oh, how hard it is to produce a subversive text when what you write is no longer subversive! But abandoning the idea of real subversion was now almost impossible.

It was hot that summer. Evening would fall, and I would announce to myself that I had done enough work. Through the open windows, the city and its lights stretched out before me, graced by a gentle breeze at last. I would go out and wander the neighbourhood, hoping that the walk would ground me in material reality and restore my ability to sleep.

But during those short, warm nights, it seemed there wasn't enough space or darkness for sleep. Returning home, I would slip back into the expanses beyond my screen... even the virtual world isn't experienced the same way at different times of the day, is it?

There must be someone out there, I thought to myself, someone who sees the same things I do, feels the same things I do, without needing the nudge of a subversive line at the bottom of some ad copy. They want to say what they see, provoke some reaction in others, but they don't know how. Or at least, they know how to do it technically, but they don't handle words as well as I do.

"You need to have a clear idea first", the editor of one of my school magazines once told me. "You can say whatever you want, but first you have to come up with something original, something of your own. Think you can come up with anything?" Back then, it seemed to me that all words reflected the same story. In all of them, I heard a single voice, saw the same face, and I couldn't be part of that team from which invention-initiative was expected. I had no initiative, only endless romantic longing and an inevitable ending: our move to another city. But that was a long time ago. Now things are different, quite different; now there could be a whatever-I-want of my own. And look, the magazine is no longer that tiny space of four stapled sheets, limited by school education and adult censorship. Now the magazine is a boundless beast, with countless heads that can bite and leave marks, even small and very temporary ones, something that burns and moves. Yes, yes, that's all very well, but I lack the technical skills—those that someone on the other side of the screen has. During one of the brief stops I made as I drifted through young adult life, I learned programming languages and spent time with open-source code enthusiasts, an intriguing novelty at the time. I didn't gain any particularly deep knowledge, but enough to make the world of programmers seem less foreign and incomprehensible. I knew I wouldn't impress anyone with my skills, but I decided to knock on that door anyway. So, I sought out hacker forums, and for the first time, I masked my own address. It was the dead of night, when conspiracies are best forged and the chains of reality begin to melt away.

I had to invent another self for those wanderings, and I did so without haste, believing that I needed to know much more about my alter ego than I would ever reveal, that without the numerous details of an imagined biography, I simply wouldn't be able to give her a voice. I made her very bold and gave her a striking name, that of one of the doves, paired with a red-winged illustration that attracts without revealing anything. I bought her a separate home—a new tablet just for her—and carefully protected her, learning to cover my tracks. Are you smiling? There it is, I let myself play that game in the only space where I'd always felt free. I was new and light in that persona, and it only seemed natural that I gave my red shadow a birth year much later than my own.

She no longer exists, but for a time, she lived a joyful life. She entered closed spaces and asked, "Who wants to play explosive games with me?" There were always candidates, but she had to select those who were skilled and trustworthy, and with a sense of humour. But that dove had a keen nose and even sharper reflexes, and she chose quite well. She existed in another language, the one everybody happily dabbles in; maybe that's why she had the succinct boldness, the nonchalance of a cartoon character. I kept all the hesitations and reservations for myself—for the rest of myself—while I gifted her the knowledge of 70s' rebels, along with all those horrifying photographs of suffering creatures we see today.

(...)

CAMERA EYE: HANA (4)

A small room with a bed covered by a blue and white striped blanket. On the wall, a bamboo board with notes, reminders and photographs of plants; next to it, a slightly worn world map dotted with red stickers. Below the window, a shelf filled with books and board games; alongside it, a stand holding lush ferns and a chair piled with clothes. Hanging on the wardrobe handle, a bra and tank top with the same polka-dot pattern.

The desk is in the middle of the room. Next to it, on the floor, there's a pile of books with several sheets of sturdy grid paper, the size of a small notebook, resting on top. A simple green ergonomic chair is pushed back as if it was just vacated. The only objects on the desk are an open laptop with a dove-themed screen-saver and a separate green keyboard. The room is lit by an antique eight-branch chandelier made of smoky, frosted glass.

A girl enters the room wearing soft grey-blue pyjamas with a Nordic pattern and carrying a large mug of coffee. She moves with great care, as the mug is filled to the brim. She places it on the desk, leaves the room, and soon returns with a Himalayan salt crystal lamp. She turns on the lamp, switches off the main light, and now the room is lit only by the lamp's dim glow and the computer screen. The girl sits at the desk and picks up the papers from the pile on the floor. They are covered in neat, curvy handwriting. She reads through them until she gets to the last, half-filled sheet. She takes a deep breath and continues writing.

"Are you asleep?" a message appears on the screen.

"No."

"Do you want to talk for a bit?"

The screen now shows a bluish female face, framed by light curls.

"How are you, Mum?" the girl asks. "You look tired."

"I had workshops all day." The woman smiles, and the girl returns the smile.

"That means people showed up."

"Not everyone who signed up, but yes, they came. I'm not sure if the salon will continue as planned, everything's getting cancelled here."

"Same here. There's talk that classes might be cancelled from Monday."

"For real?"

"I don't know, I guess."

"Should I come back right away then?"

"No, you've just started, it'd be a shame to waste all that work."

"Just five more days..."

"The world won't end in five days."

"Are you sure?" They both smile. "Are you okay? It's not too hard being alone?"

"No, no, everything's fine. This is nothing—compared to when you got the idea to go sailing in early spring, for example."

"It wasn't early spring, it was spring."

"Depends where." More smiles.

"You've got everything you need?"

"You know I do, you stocked me up for a prolonged siege. And the doves too."

"They're doing okay?"

“The doves are exactly the same as they were on Tuesday.”

“Alright, sweetheart, we’ll talk tomorrow or the day after in the evening, if you’re not out.”

“I’ll be home, I’ve got work to do.”

“Invite some friends over, you don’t have to study alone. And don’t stare at that screen for too long, okay?”

“Look who’s talking!”

They both smile, this time as a goodbye. The woman’s face on the screen is replaced by pictures of birds.

The room is the same, except now there’s a bowl of almonds and a partially eaten apple on the desk. It’s not quite night yet; outside the window, there’s only a thick blue dusk. A pen moves across the paper, pauses, crosses something out, pauses, then moves again. A message pops up on the screen.

“Wanna go out?”

“No.”

“Can I come over?”

“Not now.”

“Whatcha doing?”

“Writing that story.”

“Which story?”

“The one from yesterday.”

“For the sci-fi contest?”

“Yeah.”

“And how far are you?”

“I don’t know. At every step, I’ve got several possible versions.”

“Will you show me?”

“I can’t, I’m writing it on paper.”

“Why?”

“That way it doesn’t exist yet.”

The same room, late evening. A dark-skinned young man sits cross-legged on the striped covers of the bed, while the girl in Nordic pyjamas slowly walks between the window and the desk, where sheets of scrawled paper are scattered around the laptop.

“Let’s start again,” she says. “They’ve concluded that there’s too big a gap between the wealthiest and the poorest and that the source of all the world’s problems is greed.”

“Alright. Who are ‘they’?”

“A group of programmers on the deep web.”

“The Dark Web?”

“No. Neither light nor dark. Something on the side. Their own thing.”

“Okay. And then?”

“Then they decided ... to reduce the gap. To cut down on greed, or rather, the fruits of greed, and see what happens. To create a tool for redistribution, a major cleanup, a cold weapon to introduce a bit of decency into reality.”

“Concretely?”

“Concretely, it would be just one, powerful move. It needs extensive preparation, a large network, many small nodes for recycling discarded technology that will be put back into operation at some point. And people—those unfortunate underpaid souls who train artificial intelligence for search engines, but now have an additional, secret, and better-paid job.”

“Paid how?”

“That’s not an issue. Ransomware or silent theft, a little from everywhere, going unnoticed. The preparations take some time, but they mustn’t last too long. In a handbook it says: secrecy must be maintained long enough to gather supporters and establish a network.”

“In a handbook?”

“Yes. It doesn’t matter.”

“Okay, and then?”

“A simultaneous takeover of all the selected corporations and the elimination of the assets of the wealthiest.”

“Only their assets, or them too?”

“Well, the thing is... I don’t know yet.”

“That’s because you’re too nice. You want everything to be polite and bloodless. But your characters in the shadows might not be so nice. Maybe they shouldn’t be.”

“Hmm, yeah... Actually, in one version, I imagined that it would be, let’s say Christmas, everyone’s relishing in their favourite luxuries—and then all the latest electronic gadgets around them go haywire.”

“Boilers, ovens, radiators...”

“Doors, blinds, taps...”

“Taps?”

“Yes, jacuzzis, showers, pools, saunas...”

“Ah. You mean to boil and drown them. Or set them on fire.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“I don’t. That’s a very good idea. So, we’re talking about the owners of major corporations?”

“Yes, and here’s my problem: it’s not enough. Corporations, hedge funds, banks... But there’s also things like the military and the Church.”

“You’re not gonna attack the Pope with a jacuzzi, are you?”

“Please, be serious! The issue is that the events in the story shouldn’t be too general, otherwise they’re not convincing. And if I get tangled up in solving the details... well, then I get tangled up.”

“There’s artificial intelligence.”

“Yes, and?”

“It only looks at the state of the account, no matter whose it is.”

“Hmm... let’s say that’s a solution.”

“And what next?”

“Next, I’m not sure—maybe even my characters aren’t sure—should it be done so that it’s visible to everyone, like some kind of revolution, or go completely unnoticed, so that some things suddenly no longer exist as if they had never existed at all?”

“For that, you’d need some kind of collective hypnosis.”

“No, you just need the media. Everything looks the same, there’s news and other sensational events, an overwhelming amount of content, except that some things—some

people—no longer exist.”

“So where’s the money gone?”

“It’s gone, it doesn’t exist. Money is largely a fiction anyway.”

“Such change can’t go unnoticed.”

“It can be neutralised. Declared a fiction, a conspiracy theory. Have ready-made content that proves everything is fine: the rich are richer and the poor are poorer. Fake news, right?”

“Yes, yes, very good. And then what?”

“Then, it turns out that one step isn’t enough. That people need to be systematically prevented from engaging in certain activities because they’re simply harmful. Because they’re very, very harmful to everyone. That the freedom of some is very harmful to all, to people, animals, plants—even stones! And this is where we come to the hardest problem of all: the question of freedom.”

“Ugh!”

“Who can be granted the power to control the sphere of freedom in the name of security? So far no laws have managed to do that successfully.”

“But you—your characters—aren’t concerned with all forms of freedom, it seems: sexual freedom, freedom of worldview, and so on.”

“Right, what they call ‘taming humanity’ mainly relates to greed. Maybe exclusively to greed? Although there are other human traits that—”

“Exclusively, that makes it clearer. If you start expanding, it won’t end well.”

“Alright. They conclude: if we want to limit greed, we must limit freedom. Let’s say that’s acceptable to all my characters. But there’s a crucial difference between what’s ongoing and what’s accomplished. At some point, they realise that greed can’t be reduced, only restrained. Permanently. Until the absence of greed becomes a habit, which might take quite some time. They also conclude that this permanent form of action is only possible with the help of artificial intelligence, since without it there’s no consistency. Because no group of people is capable of it, or impartial enough. And that’s where the arguments start.”

“Between your characters?”

“Let’s call it a debate. They question whether their idea is a reasonable plan or an attempt to betray the human species. Hold on, let me read this bit to you:

‘Entrusting algorithms to control humanity—are you out of your minds?’

‘What if it’s a way to avoid destroying others, to prevent wars?’

‘Don’t you see the logical conclusion to this story? Isn’t it easier to kill a bug than to teach it not to eat potatoes?’

‘That’s the human logic of extermination! AI won’t follow the same path.’

‘Human logic? And who created these programmes?’

‘We did, not just anyone. They’ll follow our logic.’

‘And we’re saints, are we?’

Ugh, it sounds stupid to me now.”

“No, it’s not stupid.”

“One of them should say that it’s like a complex medical operation being performed for the first time: it requires extraordinary skill and the best equipment, it involves a high risk, but the disease is so severe that the patient-world will die if the procedure fails. Someone else wonders if it’s even possible to desire the success of an action that gives

such immense power to something non-human. Another person warns that it could be misappropriated.”

“But they’ll start up their infernal machine anyway?”

“I’m not sure...”

“People never invent something and then leave it unused.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I’m not—but let’s say it’s true, for the purpose of the story.”

“So, you think they’ll decide to permanently ‘restrain humanity’?”

“I think it won’t be without retaliation.”

“But the story contest ends tomorrow!”

“You can have an open ending—in real life, that’s how it is. But... do you think it would actually be possible to carry out something like that in real life?”