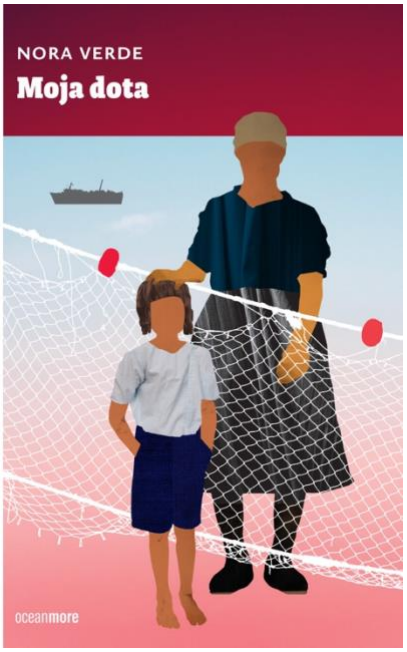

CONTEMPORARY FICTION
TITLE: My Dowry
AUTHOR: Nora Verde
PAGES: 176
PUBLICATION DATE: OceanMore, May 2021
RIGHTS HOLDER: author
contact: antonelamarui@gmail.com

*Shortlisted for the Tportal Literary Award for the best Croatian novel in 2021
*One of the books chosen for the regional "Štefica Cvek" Award in 2022

RIGHTS SOLD: Germany (Edition Converso)

Nora Verde's *Moja dota* ("My Dowry") follows the story of a defiant little girl at the beginning of the 1980s. It is a story of a girl with a Prince Valiant-inspired haircut and yellow shorts travelling from Split to Vela Luka with a bag full of Martin Mystery comics to spend the summer every year with her beloved grandmother. The idyll of days passed with grandma, days filled with chores, songs and storytelling, is broken by the threatening presence of the girl's uncle. With every passing year, the girl is burdened more and more by the feeling of not belonging to her working-class, hard-working family. Torn between city and island life, the standard language and the dialect, female and male gender expression, she finds her way to freedom and independence through education and writing.
Subtly reminding of the works by Annie Ernaux and Édouard Louis, *My Dowry* tells a touching and painfully striking story about an adolescence overshadowed by class shame, anger and the exploration of sexual orientation; it enriches the existing literary corpus that focuses on growing up on the islands, and brings an indispensable class and gender perspective to it.

SELECTED REVIEWS:

"What Nora Verde is best at in this book is storytelling: describing the small things, people and objects that make up a childhood, that make it idyllically happy and deeply unhappy at the same time."
Dunja Ilić, Booksa.hr

“Nora Verde’s *My Dowry*, is an intimate narrative about growing up in a triangle of strong women who are both markedly present and absent at the same time. It broaches the subjects of underprivilege, social exclusion and emancipation in an insular Mediterranean context. This is the kind of book that settles the score, that fights the darkness of patriarchy and that, finally, deserves its position in the contemporary Croatian corpus for its literary contribution.”
Vanja Kulaš, HDP Kritika

“*My Dowry* is a novel about growing up, about a more or less carefree socialist childhood, when social divisions between people were still, to a certain degree, civilized and decent. It is also about a warm relationship between a granddaughter and a grandmother, a relationship with cracks in it like any other relationship between human beings. *My Dowry* is an ode to all island-dwelling (and other) grandmothers who receive their granddaughters with patience and gentleness, and teach them how to live off the fruit of their own labour.”
Denis Derk, Večernji list

“With her textual practice, Nora Verde materializes exactly what Marge Piercy called ‘unlearning to not speak’. The author/narrator’s insecurity and anxiety around writing is expressed literally (‘I keep going back to what I typed to change it. The fear of what is written is too strong’) and should not be understood only as a problem of facing trauma and class shame in public or as an issue of self-censorship. In the same way that female predecessors are important for writing in order to soften the ‘anxiety of authorship’ and to overcome marginalization within the androcentric matrix, this ambiguous apprehension can be understood in the context of tracing a new gender and class lineage in literature dealing with regional and island life that seems not to have forerunners.”
Ivana Maksić, komunalinks.com

Nora Verde

My Dowry

Translated from Croatian by Will Firth

> "Her shame mounted steadily. She hated herself, hated everything. Panic-stricken, she would have liked to run away from everything, strip herself of everything (…)."
>
> Marguerite Duras, *The Sea Wall*[1]

PART ONE

That afternoon, I got my first thrashing from my uncle.

Now I was squatting under the living-room table, crying and gripping my knees, and I made a terrible plan: I'd become a writer, and I'd show them! I imagined the liberation that would come when I wrote and was able to call myself a writer. Oh, how great that would be, I told myself in raptures and mused.

But those were dreams of the future. Now I was just a snotty-nosed little girl whose mother cast her out to an island every summer and who was shaking all over with the desire for vengeance.

I was still at the beginning of my righteous mission, in the year of 1981. I was seven, and in the autumn I'd start first class at Veljko Vlahović Primary School in Split.

*

Uncle came home from work angry.

"'E's in a foul mood – best ya not say anythin'," Grandma whispered to me.

[1] Faber and Faber, 1986. Translated by Herma Briffault.

She usually met him in front of the house or on the road, and she came to warn me before he came in. I heard him swearing at the top of his voice because the courtyard gate creaked: we'd forgotten to oil it, so he had to do everything himself, bloody hell! It was a hot day just before noon, and his face was red and sweaty. He kicked everything in his path, and when the tripped over one of Grandma's flowerpots he launched into another tirade of abuse. I tried to hide, but I always seemed to end up in his way. Even if he didn't see me he called out, he yelled and shouted my name, and I had to answer because he never gave up. I went out of the living room into the courtyard.

"Come 'ere. Are you deaf?"

He thrust two plastic bags into my hands. They were heavy and I almost dropped them.

"Take these to the smoke kitchen. Don't dawdle… For cryin' out loud, you're gonna break 'em," he barked.

I carried them to the smoke kitchen, with him walking behind me, and put them down.

"Get a move on, come and 'elp me wash!" he snapped, while Grandma brought him a towel that he threw over his shoulder.

A few steps and Uncle was at the other end of the yard. Water from the cistern stood ready in a metal bucket, and I tipped a little into his palms. He rubbed an enormous piece of yellow soap with quick, nervous movements, and I had to pour the water slowly and try not to spill too much. Water was expensive on the island, he and Grandma reminded me every day. He washed himself, and drops of dirty water from his face splashed onto me. It was revolting, but I didn't dare show it because he'd say again I was "actin' like a fancy tart".

I went into the kitchen and took my place at the table: a wooden bench against the wall. Grandma sat opposite, and he was at the head of the table. He cleared his throat loudly, and again.

Grandma brought a saucepan of barley and ladled it out onto the plates. Uncle growled again:

"That damn Tino – 'e left all the picks and shovels in the 'otel garden and took off. Whadda berk."

He told the story about lackadaisical Tino all over again, before scooping up a spoonful of barley.

"It's 'ot, let it cool a bit," Grandma warned.

“Leave off, I’m ’ungry as a bear,” he grumbled and started eating.

I stirred the barley on my plate and blew so it would cool down. Suddenly Uncle raised his spoon and inspected it.

“What kinda spoon is this, ’uh?” he snarled and looked at me.

He didn’t like shallow, new spoons. He preferred the old ones, even though they were worn out; being rounder and deeper, more food fitted on them when you dug in. The trouble was that we only had a few of those left, and I often had to rummage through the whole cutlery drawer to find one. Uncle didn’t have time for eating with shallow spoons. He was always in a hurry – so many things still needed doing around the house. Women didn’t understand that.

Grandma got up, went to the drawer, took out one of the old spoons and handed it to him.

“Ya put this one ’ere for me, and she ’as to get up,” he griped and pushed the spoon towards me. “Is it so ’ard to find summat sensible to do? It’s easier to paw through comics all day and muck about in the yard!”

This was a reference to my attempt to grow flowers and basil. He forbade me from playing with flowerpots and soil several times, but I did it so he wouldn’t see; then I tipped the soil back into the garden, swept the remnants from the floor with a small besom, and pushed the empty pot under the table in the dark of the cellar among the buckets of salted sardines.

I wasn’t hungry any more, I turned my barley over and over, bit into a slice of bread and swallowed almost without chewing. I felt the unchewed mouthful slide down my throat and scratch my spine. I would have liked to get up and go.

“Why aren’t you eatin’? Been at the paté and sausage again, and spoiled your appetite?”

“No,” I objected and stuck a spoonful of barley into my mouth, but I almost burnt my mouth and had to spit half of it back onto the spoon. I looked at him:

“It’s still too hot.”

“That’s enough talk. Shut up and eat, or you’ve got summat comin’ for you!”

Grandma glanced at me, and I saw her eyes narrow. I felt the heat rising to my head.

“I didn’t do anything wrong today. I helped Grandma with cooking the barley, swept the yard and fed the chickens,” I recounted and got up from the table.

“Yes, Kuzma, she was a good ’elp...” Grandma confirmed, but Uncle interrupted her.

“Strewth, where are yer manners? Stay at the table and eat what’s on yer plate!”

“I won’t,” I protested and took a few steps to go round him and leave the room.

He landed me a slap. Grandma jumped up and grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Nela, dear – sit down and do as yer uncle says.”

“No, I won’t!” I shouted at her, but looked at him.

I dashed between the cupboard and Uncle’s chair, hoping to get to the gate and run out to the road, and then down to the waterfront and the ferry stop, but Uncle was there blocking my way before I reached the gate. He shook me by the shoulders. Then he took off his belt and started hitting me on the legs with it.

“Ya blasted blinko, I’ll teach ya some respect.”

I held my hands over my head and face. I wanted to call Grandma to help, but I didn’t have time. His hands were heavy and fast, and when he swung the belt it felt as if all my skin was burning where he hit, and I could hardly catch my breath. Then he stopped abruptly, and I saw Grandma behind him saying something. I couldn’t hear the words because my head was buzzing like when I turned the dial on the radio, searching for a station.

Uncle left me and was gone. My whole body stung. Grandma wanted to give me a hug, but I ran away from her, into the living room, and slammed the door. There I crawled under the table. The tablecloth hung a long way down and created a soothing semi-darkness. Now that I was alone, I started to cry. I choked on my tears and wiped them away, and I rubbed my wet hands on my T-shirt.

*

If I raised my head a little, the top of it pushed against a tabletop and almost lifted it. I was too big now to sit under the table, but I’d managed to squeeze in and was determined to stay there for as long as I could. I tried to calm my breathing and find the most comfortable position. Just then, that square metre of space under the wooden table in the living toom was my tower and loophole – a safe place for a single person, wounded but uncompromising, alone against all the rest.

Grandma came to sit on the couch in front of me, took something in her hands and turned it over and over, talking to herself all the while. I only half-listened as I

looked at her black leather slippers and the loose skin on her thin legs. She spoke a long string of words in a low voice. I wasn't interested in what she was saying – I'd heard it so many times before.

Fifteen or twenty years later I'd realise that this river of words was her way of dealing with the situation. Grandma's voice seemed strange to me, and it reminded me of the old women I'd see in a TV series after the news, where they seemed to be wailing while they spoke. But they weren't really crying, just speaking in whining voices, and each of them said something different, yet similar at the same time. It was as though they were talking to ghosts that only they could see. I didn't understand why they never stopped, and soon I found it awkward listening even if I was alone at home. That's why grandma's logorrhoea on the couch was so irksome, and I wished she wasn't there in the living room, so I could be alone.

At one point she fell silent and gave a deep sigh.

"Come 'ere," she called and patted the divan next to her. "Come on and sit 'ere with me. I'll give ya an 'ead rub just the way ya like it."

I still pretended not to see or hear her, and I concentrated on the ticking of the clock on the wall. I'd wait until my knees started to hurt from squatting. First I'd go across the yard to the bathroom to wash myself and do a wee. Then I'd come back to the living room, sit down next to Grandma and put my head in her lap, and she'd pamper me all afternoon. She wouldn't go to wash the dishes, take the leftovers to the chickens or do any of the other things she normally did at that time of day. She'd come up with fascinating stories I'd never heard before. She'd talk, and I'd ask her a question here and there. Our old routine would gradually return to the house.

I remembered everything again the next day when I woke up and saw the welts from the belt on my arms and legs. They looked like grains of sand that I ought to see a sign in before the waves erased the traces at dusk.

That morning, Grandma came back from the market and took a small cardboard box out of the shopping bag. Inside, in a wrapper of fine white paper, was a plastic container of yellow ointment. In the bedroom after lunch, she rubbed it on the reddened areas.

"They'll go away quicker and sting less."

*

The following days, Uncle avoided me and only spoke to me when absolutely necessary. I didn't look him in the eyes – not out of fear but because my disgust was stronger than anything else I'd felt in my seven years. Grandma now set the dinner table as a rule, and I was relieved of the task for the time being. Instead, she let me water the garden with a thin black rubber hose every evening when the heat subsided. She taught me to hold the hose low or just put it down next to the tomato, cucumber and zucchini stems until the soil around them was soaked. In time, she also sent me to the garden with a plastic basin to pick ripe vegetables.

Whenever a passer-by or one of the neighbours saw me working in the garden, I'd pretend not to see them and plunge deep into the thicket of zucchini plants. They formed such a dense bush that I could barely see the light green zucchinis just right for picking, "before they get giant", as Grandma used to say. I picked as many as I could carry and ran across the road, bumped open the gate with my elbow and lugged the full basin into the kitchen.

I was happy to be the good grandchild again, who did the right thing by helping Grandma. I was good and strong. Better than Uncle. And smarter.

*

Uncle's beatings were my professional orientation course. From that day on, snotty-nosed and angry, I tempered myself for the vocation of a pen-wielding avenger.

Ten years later, I wasn't troubled by doubts about what to study at university like many of my peers. The school library was my living room, and I went there every day and pestered the ladies who worked there with my questions. I even made friends with one of them, and she'd write excuse notes for me when I skived off from boring classes. I looked for books about the sad and unfortunate. I'd cram them into my bag with excitement, and she'd ask me what we were reading for class at that time. I'd tell her a few things and leave out others. I'd talk about whatever suited me: Maxim Gorky, the novels of Petar Šegedin, the plays of Marijan Matković and the poems of Tonči Petrasov Marović, which I didn't understand, but I read them over and over again until I'd cut a sinuous path through the verses to a world that belonged to me alone, which this family would never set foot in. I was safe from them there, I thought back then, but I had no idea how wrong I was.

We were walking over the hot asphalt of Split's ferry port, heavily laden. My shoulders ached and the plastic bags cut into my hands. Mother ran in to buy a ticket at the Jadrolinija counter while I waited outside. I sat on a smooth stone bench to mind the luggage. It was crowded, and Mother always feared something would get stolen, but it never did. As if we had anything they'd want, I thought, but I didn't dare say it out loud because she'd yell at me for never looking after my things and call me a pudden-head.

The *Lastovo* was moored at the furthest quay, down near the lighthouse. To me, the ferry looked like a big white beast with its tongue sticking out, and trucks, tankers, cars and motorbikes drove in over it with a clatter and banging.

I was frightened by that noise and the shouting of the stevedores, sailors and truckers. To cope with that chaos, I hurried up the narrow iron stairs and along the corridors leading to the deck and the lounge.

"Look after the things, always remember where we put them, and go and check every now and then," Mother told me over and over. She'd packed me several bags full of summer clothing and food. There was dried mutton for Uncle, and cheese, chocolate and wax candles for Grandma.

Mother always sent me to Korčula alone in the summer, several days after school ended in June. She stayed in Split to work evening shifts at the restaurant. It was peak tourist season, and she could only get a few days off in September.

Mother asked one her acquaintances from Vela Luka, who were returning home from Split, to keep an eye on me during the trip. He got on the ferry with me and helped carry what I couldn't manage by myself. The whole time she spelled out: "Do what Grandma says and help her wherever you can; do what Uncle says, and don't argue with him; wash your own clothes; don't spend money on the boat." After repeating all that several times, she rushed to leave the ferry so it wouldn't cast off with her on board.

*

I liked to sit on the brown leather couches in the ferry's lounge. You could see all kinds of people there in the summer: foreigners speaking strange languages and getting out foods I'd never seen before to put on the wooden tables. The bar in the lounge was always occupied by elderly men from Korčula who were going back to their towns after shopping or a doctor's appointment in Split. They sipped coffee and greenish-yellow herb brandy in small glasses or drank beer from bottles. They talked at the top their

voices in the local dialects of Vela Luka, Blato, Smokvica and Lumbarda. If you watched them, it would seem they were shouting or quarrelling with each other. Foreigners therefore went up to the bar warily, as though ashamed, quickly paid, and took away their cup of coffee, carton of juice or sandwich.

I ambled around the lounge and looked through the bar's glass display at the open sandwiches – thick hunks of bread with prosciutto and cheese, wrapped in serviettes. I got hungry even though I'd had a big meal of schnitzel and chard at home before leaving. I had two sandwiches in my rucksack that Mother made me for the trip, but the urge to buy the food behind the glass was stronger.

“It used to be a sin to sit around doin’ nothin’,” Grandma said. “Even the sick and wretched had to do a bitta work.”

It made me embarrassed when she talked like that because there was no greater pleasure for me than lying on the bed or sitting on the small bench in the courtyard and reading a comic or a book, and letting my thoughts take me away. Grandma knew this, so she let me play as much as I wanted.

*

It was past two in the afternoon. The sun beat down strongest now. Lying in the bedroom with Grandma bored me, so I tiptoed out and sat down on the bench by the cistern, where it was coolest. I thought I could feel a slight breeze. I closed my eyes and saw colours beneath my eyelids: mainly yellow, orange and pink. After a while I got bored again, so I opened my eyes and looked for something to do.

I lifted the wooden lid of the cistern, slowly and carefully, so the noise of the wood on the stone wouldn’t wake Grandma. I leaned the lid against the side of the cistern and slowly lowered the chain with the bucket: I held it tight so it wouldn’t slip through my fingers again. My head was in the dark of the cistern, and I saw it reflected in the rainwater below. I heard a splash: the bucket had fallen into the water again. I swung the chain left and right – I needed to tip the bucket so it would start to fill with water, and then, when I felt it was heavy, to gently pull it up.

I’d tried drawing water myself a few times. Grandma showed me how to do it, but the bucket always fell into the cistern. My hands got sweaty, and the chain with the bucket on the end was heavy and slipped. I have small, weak hands, “as thin as a table leg”, Uncle says.

“She’s dropped the bucket in the cistern again, can you believe it? Butterfingers!” Grandma nagged. I didn’t like it when she talked about me as though I wasn’t there.

She got angry because she had to fish the bucket out of the cistern. For that purpose, there was a long wooden stick with a hook at the end. She fetched it and searched for the bucket in the cistern, and then she pulled it up, brimming full, and water spilled over the edge.

"Now ya gotta learn to draw water by yerself!" she kept telling me, but no matter how hard I tried I could only haul up half a bucket, never a full one. And now it was like that again – I pulled the chain nervously to see how much water was inside.

I liked the water from the cistern. I washed myself with it to cool down, and I wet everything around me: I took off my flip-flops and spread the water around the yard with my feet so it would dry by the time Grandma got up and she wouldn't see I'd been at the cistern again. My feet were grubby, and I'd wash them in the basin at the end.

*

Whenever Uncle walked past me in the courtyard, I jumped to find something to do, just to pretend to be busy. If he caught me unawares, he'd drag me along to hold a beam for him or to hand him tools. I didn't see the point in most of those jobs – he could have done them just as well without me.

His voice trembled as if he was about to thump me for not doing it exactly as he wanted:

"What the… You blasted blinko, you're 'opeless!"

A moment later he'd grip my arm and direct me. His hand was heavy and as rough as sandpaper, so I could hardly wait for him to remove it.

I was tired after those tasks and went to hide in Grandma's bedroom. I curled up on the bed, my heart pounding with anger. I listened to the sounds in the yard and heard the stomp of his workboots. I wondered why Uncle hated me so much and why he never praised me when he saw I'd done a good job. He didn't hit his own children but just yelled at them sometimes. They'd stop talking and quickly do what he wanted.

*

Grandma was forever on the move, not like my friends' grandmothers in Split, who were mostly retired. They cooked, tidied their flats or looked after their grandchildren, watched TV series and strolled around town, sat on the waterfront or in a park and enjoyed the sun. They dressed like ladies, in fine clothes, had their hair done at least once a month, and went with their friends to cafés and to the cinema. They had a slow and elegant gait, not like Grandma, who always seemed to be in a rush.

She got up before everyone else in the house and was in action from early morning. After a quick cup of warm milk, which she crumbled a rusk into, she set to work: she swept the courtyard, fed the chickens, did the laundry by hand, wrung it out and hung it up to dry. Then she rushed to the supermarket, bought bread and other essentials, cooked lunch, weeded the garden and the allotment, hauled water from the cistern, watered the flowers and basil, picked greens, ironed the clothes...

I found it irksome and wished Grandma were a lady too.

*

We were sitting at the small wooden table in the smoke kitchen. Next to us on the floor stood a bucket full of young peas, which Grandma had picked the day before in our allotment in Hoćaglavica. Now she taught me how to "pop peas": you tear open the top of the pod with your thumb and forefinger, pull the string all the way down the side, and then use your thumb to push out the peas into a plastic bowl.

"Grandma, why don't you going to the field?" I asked.

She raised her head and gave me a confused look.

"For God's sake, why would I stop?"

"Because. You're old, so you should take it easy and rest."

"Goodness me, where would our food come from? Who'd work in my place? Uncle can't do everythin' by 'imself. Everythin' would be overgrown under the olive trees, we'd 'ave to buy oil and wine, we wouldn't even 'ave kale or cabbage, and we'd 'ave to go to the shop for everythin', darlin'."

"Grandma…"

"Yes, darlin'?"

"Why don't we have money like the others?"

"Which others, my love?"

"The other kids in my class, in Split."

Grandma stopped and all the lines on her face sharpened. Her skin looked like in a linocut image – full of deep incisions.

Before she could say anything, I listed all the things my classmates had:

"They go away for the winter holidays, have tennis, swimming and ballet lessons, play the guitar or the piano, have cars and flats of their own. They buy all sorts of stuff during recess, most of which they don't eat but chuck..."

Grandma turned her head and looked at me, but she kept shelling the peas.

"And they don't have to do chores around the house like me. Mother keeps pressuring me. I can't hang out on the waterfront with the others after school but have to go straight home," I complained and stopped shelling the peas. I wiped my hands on my T-shirt and put them on my knees.

"You and yer mother are by yerselves. The others all 'ave a dad or other family at 'ome. You need to 'elp 'er, darlin'."

"I know," I admitted and shifted uncomfortably on my chair.

Grandma sighed. It was rare for her to be at a loss for words like that. I regretted having said anything. I can't hold my tongue – that's how I am.

*

Mother always told me I talk too much. When I came home from school, I'd tell her everything that happened that day in class, during the lunch break and while we were walking home. She'd try to escape from me by moving to another room, but the flat was small and that made it hard because I'd follow her and talk without end. I hoped something in my story would rouse her and she'd turn around. I longed for her to say a few nice and special words to me, so I'd do my best to make my tale as entertaining as possible. Sometimes I'd start laughing myself when I had a witty idea, but she kept walking around the flat, folding her clothes, sweeping the floor or washing the dishes. Then she'd interrupt me in the middle of a sentence: "Please be quiet, I've got a headache." She often had headaches. I think it was because she worked a lot and came home late at night, and mornings she had to go to the supermarket, to the market, wash and iron her uniform, and make lunch before I got home.

There were so many things that bothered me, and I had no one to ask. And when I managed to stop myself from talking, I felt even worse, as though my head was about to explode. Tears came to my eyes. I went behind the building and hurled a plastic ball against the wall as hard as I could, to make it echo louder than loud, until I was drenched in sweat. But that didn't help either – it just tired me out, and my cheeks turned red and hot.

"Is that why they give ya nasty looks?" Grandma asked after a while.

I didn't answer.

“Our family didn’t leave us money or gold, or big ’ouses and lots of good land. But that’s no reason to be un’appy in life, child. There’ll always be rich folk around, and you’ll ’ave to work ’ard like me. Just like my mother and father, sisters and brother all worked.”

Grandma saw that I wasn’t content with her explanation, that I felt bad and didn’t want to shell peas any more.

“Go and sit on the divan in the livin’ room, and I’ll come too,” she said to placate me, and I sat on the creaky old couch with the faded rose-and-moss pattern.

Grandma gave me a head rub and ran her fingers through my hair. It calmed me, and she knew how much I liked it. I closed my eyes and imagined Mum, Dad are I were a real family. On weekends, we’d go on an excursion or to a restaurant. We’d order a big oval platter of mixed meat, and we’d all eat our fill. Afterwards we’d go for a walk, play badminton or kick around a real leather football.

“You’ve got beautiful, ’ealthy ’air – thick and black, like all girls in our family,” Grandma’s voice roused me. I was the same shy girl again, afraid to raise her hand in class even when I was the only one who knew the answer to the teacher’s question, because then everyone would look at me: I’d break out in a hot sweat, and they’d see I was blushing. So I kept quiet and wrote the answers in my exercise book, while the teacher leafed through the record book and asked other students.

A boy from 5B asked me during the lunch break if my parents were divorced. I lied that they weren’t and then ran away to the wall behind the school. I stood there for a while amid the discarded paper bags and drink cartons, and when I felt a bit better I went back.

I noticed that Grandma fell silent whenever I mentioned my father. I’d ask her why Mum left Dad. She didn’t want to talk about it at all or got very nervous if I broached the topic.

I tried not to talk about Dad in front of Uncle because I knew he’d say something harsh. He couldn’t wait to repeat the story about the time Mum and Dad had a tiff in Split, when I was very little, and Dad hopped on the ferry and came to Vela Luka by himself, to Grandma and Grandpa’s. Uncle enjoyed telling the bit about how my father then went to a tavern and drank himself silly with brandy and wine.

“Blotto ’e was. They ’ad to come and take him ’ome to bed,” he chuckled, and started enumerating all the other things that happened that day.

Grandma got angry and cut him short:

"Whadda you know about 'im? Put a sock in it, why don't ya!"

He stopped talking, but he laughed so hard that his shoulders shook.

I always liked it when Grandma made Uncle shut up like that. If I could, I'd find something to hit him over the head with. He was short, but stocky and strong, like one of the black toy jeeps with shock absorbers that a boy from the street lower down played with: you just push it forward energetically and let go, and it races off and crashes into a wall far away. When I grew up, I'd definitely be bigger than him and I'd be able to pay him back for everything he did to me. The only thing was that I still had a long time to wait – many years needed to pass before he'd be old and weak, and me skilled and strong. Things were as they were now, but the days would fly by, *Life is but a dream*, Grandma hummed, and I fast-forwarded time, making the pictures spin like crazy from the acceleration, till all you could see was a white line, an optical trick of light that the mind drives on and on, into the future.

*

Thirty years later, Uncle and I met again in the old smoke kitchen, where they no longer fried potatoes in the big black pan that was God knows how old. It smelled of rancid oil and onions inside, with a hint of the grass my cousin rolled into elegant long joints.

It was early in the morning, and they woke me up just so I'd say hello – to "show respect". I didn't feel like arguing.

Uncle was old, but still the same. The wooden benches we sat on, while he talked about the neighbour's dog whose barking annoyed him, were also from Grandma's time.

"I chucked stones at it, and that sure stopped the barkin'," he bragged.

Targets like me have long been beyond his range, leaving only small neighbourhood animals like dogs and cats.

We'd been battling each other for years: me armed with words, him with brute force. He always won, but never fully; he always had to come back and strike again. It looked like he never finished the job.

I sat and watched him, searching for similarities between his body and mine. Was there a wrinkle on his face that had resulted from my spite and defiance? I got lost in the lines on his skin like in the narrow alleys of Split's ghetto, where I loved learning to walk alone as a teenager and practice my grin of defiance.

“Gawd, not again,” Uncle yelped as soon as Grandma mentioned El Shatt. He laughed at her, but she pretended not to hear, turned towards me and began the story. All the elder Padretovićs know the tale of how Grandma escaped to Egypt during the Second World War off by heart.

I was interested in everything, in every single detail. Grandma’s memories were so vivid and real that I felt it all happened just a few years ago, not forty. I think a film should be made about Grandma’s El Shatt, with her in the lead role. For me, her story was more tension-packed than Indiana Jones. I loved him too, but he wasn’t a relation, and I didn’t believe everything in comics was true. Grandma wouldn’t lie to me – I knew that a hundred pro.

Anything can remind Grandma of El Shatt: one time it’s the oppressive heat in July, another time she hears a foreigner speaking English in town, or she sees camels and the desert on TV, and then she remembers the delicious dates she ate there for the first time.

Grandma fled a few months after the capitulation of Italy with her sons, who were four and six at the time. Grandpa had joined the Partisans months before, and she was alone in the house with the children. After Italian carabinieri shot her eldest brother Frano at the wall of the Vela Luka cemetery, Grandma and all the townspeople were even more afraid of the Germans.

“The poor lad never hurt a fly,” she sighed, and I felt she was about to cry. That’s why Grandma didn’t like Italians to that day, even though I told her I learned at school that they were Partisans too.

“I don’t like ’em, and that’s that,” she explained and shook her head, and then I didn’t try to defend them any more.

*

“Grab a pen!” Grandma said, and I ran to the bedroom and came back with a notebook and a biro. I sat down on the bench and opened at a new, blank page.

“I remember it was the twenty-fourth of the fourth, forty-four. They told us we’d be leavin’ at four in the mornin’.”

I wrote this number down. It looked strange, so full of fours, but I didn’t have time to think about it, or to ask, because she went on with the story.

She hurried to pack the most necessary things: a blanket, a bottle of water, a pair of shoes each, and the few clothes they had. The hardest thing for her was to leave behind the house, the garden, the chickens and the old donkey they had before Šokica. They boarded ships that took them to the south of Italy.

"But why did you have to leave, Grandma?"

"I went 'cos everyone else did, and there was a famine in Luka back then. At first, we ate wild plants, barley and wheat, and 'ere and there an egg, but soon it got much worse. The fishin' was bad, too – no catch!"

I jotted in the notebook: "First night: refugees."

"We got onto that big, filthy ship. We were sittin' one on top of another, as if there was a right city inside. It stank terribly. People 'ad to poo on pieces of cardboard, which piled up, and later the Partisans pushed 'em overboard."

I wrote down her words quickly and in messy handwriting. I'd transcribe them later, but now I didn't have time because I needed to listen and write what happened next.

"They didn't wanna to tell us where we were goin' at first. They just said we 'ad to leave quick 'cos the Germans would kill us all."

She paused briefly, as if to remember a detail, and then continued.

"When we got to Bari, they shaved us. To the very skin, darlin'. Men and women, old and young alike. They went over my 'ead with buzzing razors. I 'ad beautiful black 'air as a young woman, but it grew back again, thank God."

Here Grandma stopped again and thought about something. I waited.

"They put us on a train, and I didn't 'ave the faintest what that was. Whadda a din and racket! 'Ardly anyone 'ad been on the railway before. I think that was the biggest fright of my life, and my two little ones didn't even cringe any more, but just clung to me and trembled."

All the hairs on my arms stood on end with fear as she said that.

"We still didn't know where we were 'eadin'. Some of our people just told us we were bein' taken to safety. You could believe it or die of fear. Then we arrived in Tuturano, with wooden barracks, and we stopped there for a week, I remember. We were dirty and 'ungry. Anyone weak was in danger – children and old folk died of all kinds of diseases."

Before long, they had to get on the train again.

“There were big warehouses, with straw spread on the floor so we could lie down. They gave us some wormy cheese, but I didn’t let Kuzma and Vince eat none – they could’ve got food poisonin’. I remember they also gave us cabbage, potatoes and apples, so we ate that.”

Grandma tucked her hair behind her ear and smoothed it down, and I had time to turn a new page.

“When it was night, they came and told us a film was to be shown outside the ’all. Some went out to see what it would be, but I stayed lyin’ inside with the kids. Then I ’eard the screechin’ of cars and people yellin’ outside. I grabbed the kids and went out. On the wall, I saw a car drivin’ straight at us and a man turnin’ the wheel. Our people flung ’emselves aside, screamin’, and some ran back into the ’all. I lay down on the floor with the kids again. I almost died of fright.”

Rumours circulated among the refugees that they were soon to set off on a new journey.

“I didn’t know who to believe any more. They started sayin’ we were gonna leave for Africa on a big ship.”

One day, a man from the refugees’ committee came and told them to get ready because a ship was waiting for them that night.

“We boarded that big ship, followin’ each other in the dark, and ya could ’ardly see yer own ’and in fronta yer face. Lights ’ad to be off ’cos the English were afraid the Germans might see and bomb us.”

There were over a thousand people on the ship, Grandma said, and people had to lie on top of each other.

“Soldiers went round the ship with torches, tellin’ us to be quiet and to sleep. Who can sleep when you’re frightened like that?!”

Only when it dawned did they see what a huge the ship they were on – a British cargo ship, rapidly converted for the transport of troops and refugees. Other ships were sailing with them, and Allied planes flew overhead to protect them from attacks by German bombers.

They realised very soon on the way to El Shatt that the English weren’t to be trifled with – all their orders had to be obeyed.

“They didn’t let us walk round the ship much. We needed to lie in the ’old without budgin’. They were awfully strict and sullen, as if they ’ad summat against us.”

After four days' and nights' journey, the ship docked in Port Said, a large harbour city at the northern entrance to the Suez Canal. They went ashore and viewed the palaces and the mosques with their minarets.

Grandma laughed a little for the first time: "Port Said was nice. Many of us hoped we'd stay there."

They were soon told they had to move on.

"When I 'eard they were takin' us to another train, I wanted to jump into that black sea in the port," Grandma said, and I hurried to write in the notebook in big letters: "Railway again."

The trip in the cattle wagon took hours because the train was very slow. Allied soldiers along the way told them they were going to a proper camp being set up just for them. They were transferred from the train to trucks.

"Ya looked through the truck's tarpaulin, and the desert stretched as far as ya could see. We thought we were just travellin' through it to some other place, but what did we see when we got out? Just tents and endless sand. We were pissed off at the English, but also at our own people who'd lied that we were bein' taken to safety. Men shouted at each other, and some got into fights – it was wild and 'ectic."

Grandma paused again. I thought she wanted to say something more about that, but nothing came, and I didn't feel like asking.

"So we slept in those tents that night. And in the mornin', darlin', the Ghibli started to blow. The sand rose up and the wind carried it everywhere. It got in your eyes, ears, 'air and clothes, and all through the tents. You can't see the ground in front of you, only that swirlin' sand, as if it was the end of the world – that's what I thought. We ran and 'id inside the few brick 'ouses until it blew over."

After a whole day of panic, the wind gradually abated. Everyone began cleaning the sand out of their things.

"I ate the rice they gave us, and it was all gritty."

The hardest thing for them at first was getting used to the intense heat during the day and the low temperatures that made them freeze at night.

"We 'ad to cover ourselves with the single blanket I brought from Luka, but later the English brought us lovely thick ones."

Many adults and children came down with pneumonia, the flu and other illnesses.

“One crazy Englishwoman poured cold water on a child with ’igh fever and it died, poor thin’,” Grandma shook her head.

Grandma and my uncles coped with the desert climate well at first, but sometime in June 1944 the younger of the two fell ill. He came down with a severe intestinal infection, so they were moved to the neighbouring camp of Tolumbat. Life was easier there. The northern part adjoined the sea, and the climate was more like ours.

“Vince couldn’t eat, and ’e got terribly weak. Everythin’ they fed ’im – ’e brought it back up. I’d go there every day and beg our doctor to tell me what was wrong with ’im. I feared ’e might have summat serious and die there, my poor child. I’d pray all day. But one night, ’e got up in the medical tent and, famished as ’e was, went into the neighbours’ where people were sleepin’, took a big chunk of cheese, and ate it all up. They hopped outa bed and started yellin’ at him: what was he doin’, whose child was he... until they realised it was Vince, and then they started laughin’!”

Grandma liked to talk about the Arabs. She called them Blacks.

“The Blacks came in those white robes of theirs. They didn’t say a word but ’eld out their ’ands and pointed to their mouths. That meant they were ’ungry and would take anythin’ we’d give ’em. There was an ’andsome young man, as thin as a rake. Whenever ’e turned up, we ’urried to give ’im some ’ome-made bread, cheese or whatever else we ’ad, before the English saw. One day, ’e brought us a lot of figs in the folds of his clothes.”

The English punished the Arabs for begging, and Grandma and the other refugees found that hard to accept.

“The English would get on their motorbikes, hunt ’em down, and then flog ’em bloody. It was painful to watch. The poor people were ’ungry, that’s all. The English shouldn’t’ve done that.”

As Grandma talked about the English and the Arabs, I tried to distinguish goodies and baddies. One time it seemed the Arabs were good, but another time it was the English. I couldn’t make head or tail of it.

First, she said a Black stole a woman’s dress from her tent, but another Black saved the life of a refugee woman. In one story, the English whipped the Blacks they found begging on the other side of the fence, yet one of them carried a sick child in his arms to the medical tent. I asked Grandma if the English were good or bad, and she took her time answering. I persisted and kept pestering her, and she admitted in the end that it wasn’t clear to her either.

“The English were very good to us, but they didn’t like the Blacks at all, and we couldn’t understand that. We would’ve died there if it weren’t for the English, but the Blacks ’elped us many times, too.”

Blacks did most of the dirty work at the camp for low pay. One of their jobs was to cart away the rubbish that was collected in huge bins. Grandma added that they often worked extra slowly so they could watch the women.

“One of ’em would turn to you and say *Yahala bibi a zi ze, yahala bibi a zi ze*, and then laugh, and you’d see ’is big white teeth. We didn’t know what that meant to begin with.”

The Blacks kept repeating that strange phrase to the women, and everyone at the camp learned it by heart. Our people asked around what it meant, and finally they heard from an Englishman who spoke Arabic that it was: “I love you, girl!”

At first, the refugees were short of food in El Shatt, but aid packages soon began to arrive. Although it wasn’t the kind of food Dalmatians were used to, in time they learned to cook a meal from what they had and even to make a dessert.

“We ate oodles of bananas in El Shatt, good Lord. And I didn’t mind ’em, to tell the truth. But it was so ’ot that we longed for real fruit like grapes, melons, figs, medlars...”

In El Shatt, Grandma missed the food from home: vegetables, chard and Adriatic fish. Most of the packages contained tinned meat, cheese, rice, “Truman’s eggs” – powdered – and jam. The women baked bread, and sometimes they’d make fritters and Dalmatian *pogače* loaves with olive oil.

“They weren’t like we used to make at ’ome, but we’d start feastin’ and singin’ anyhow. Life goes on.”

Grandma was always worried about family members who’d stayed in the old country. She didn’t know what had become of Grandpa in the navy, her brothers with the Partisans, and the house and garden she’d left behind. Through the Allies, the refugees received news of Partisan offensives and successes, but also of high casualties.

“There were times you cried all day, times you didn’t say a word, and times you just worked and worked to distract you from thinkin’.

“We weren’t allowed to leave the camp. If our guards or the English caught ya, they reported ya straight to the district chief. But there were times we just needed a break from those tents. I missed the sea so much. When we got there, we found steep sharp rocks. We wanted to swim, but it was impossible, so we soon went back.”

Their absence had been noticed at the camp, so after their return they were taken before an English officer, who gave them a talking-to.

Grandma met other Blacks in Tolumbat, too. Some at the camp served as soldiers in the British Army. Grandma and the other refugees were confused to see Blacks in military uniforms because they were so used to them being on the other side of the wire. The Dalmatian women befriended some of them.

"A woman from Blato got married and didn't wanna come with us when we returned. People didn't 'ave much understandin', and nasty things were said about 'er. It's not for me to judge others, I don't know."

Most of the refugees in El Shatt went to mass on a regular basis.

"We made churches in tents. Children took communion, were confirmed, and couples married in our church. Nobody minded. Not like later, back in Luka."

After the news of Germany's capitulation reached El Shatt, the refugees celebrated together with the Allied soldiers. But outbreaks of smallpox and other diseases, and the demanding organisation of the journey, meant their return was slow. They left in groups one after another, several weeks apart.

"When our ships arrived in Split harbour, we got a royal welcome. The sirens were wailin', and people waved flags and sang. At one point, we heard 'Marjane, Marjane' from some of our friends on the ship, others joined in, and soon everyone on board. Young and old alike were singin', and the song spread to the waterfront. Everyone cried for joy, and just thinkin' of that now brings on the tears."

Grandma was proud of her time as a refugee and glad for me to be asking her so many questions.

"If we'd've stayed, the Germans would've shot us, or worse. We 'ad to leave – there was no choice. It's alright that we went there, and we sure saw some weird and wonderful things. I'd like to go there again and lay flowers on the graves of our people who died there."

*

In my eyes, Grandma was a real woman of the world: she'd lived in Africa, seen Blacks and camels, knew so many strange foreign names of cities I'll never go to, and returned home alive after it all with my uncles, Kuzma and Vince. Almost all the women in Grandma's family were in El Shatt, but she alone was able to talk like that about their

days as refugees. At a family celebration, after they'd recalled some event in Egypt, Grandma's sister said to me: "You know, only your grandmother can make such a lovely tale of it. I just remember the unpleasant things."

*

That pride in Grandma's El Shatt has been a lasting treasure for me – Grandma's dowry that I carry with me through the years, but which occupies ever less space in my memory. While I was absorbing Grandma's words and writing all her stories in my notebook, I felt I'd never forget them. The naive belief that I'd remember those stories for the rest of my life dissipated, and all that remain are fragments of shells that surfaced long ago; I venture to put my ear to one of them, and I think I can hear Grandma's cheerful, singsong voice.

Soon a fitting image emerges, with surprising clarity:

Me and Grandma singing "Marjane, Marjane" as we leave the allotment, each with a sprig of rosemary or basil tucked behind our ears. The sun beats down on my hat, but I'm not hot and thirsty like I usually am on the way home.