

DRAGO GLAMUZINA

THE NIGHT PORTER

Sample Translation

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I'm reading, but every now and then I'm distracted by a sound coming through the wall. I'm not sure if this is someone on the other side of the wall, in the apartment next door, turning over in their bed, or if this is the metal rod squeaking, the one that runs through the roof and holds the antennas. I stop reading a couple of times and strain my ears, then close the YouTube channel whose music has been murmuring in the background. Now the room is completely silent, but I still can't make out the source of the faint squeak seeping through the wall.

There are new tenants in that apartment, but I haven't seen them yet, and maybe I won't for a long while, or never. It's because their apartment has a different entrance than mine, so it's entirely possible we'll never meet, or that we will, but I won't know it's them. Those noises and muffled voices seeping through the wall over this past month are the only way they enter my life. But I do have some image of them: they're men, two or three of them, probably students, because every weekend they throw parties, and then music seeps through the wall together with the buzz of voices.

I've lived in this building since it was built, fifteen years now (on and off, though), but I know only the neighbors from my own entrance. And even them not well – *Hello, how are you*, in the hallway, and that's it. I've never been inside anyone's apartment, and no one has ever been inside mine.

There's something else disrupting my reading, a thought I'm trying to quiet, as much as I can. Today my dermatologist told me the growth on my eyelid looked suspicious and that I should have an ophthalmologist check it. There's a type of tumor, she said, that looks like a small cyst.

But the text I'm reading calms everything inside me. Like Valium, it crosses my mind. It's put everything inside me in order. So I pick up my phone and send a message to the author: *Your book is like a medicine, my friend*. Then I open a blank document and write a few sentences before bed. I want to make use of this good feeling.

It's only half past three, and rain is running down the large window in my attic room, blurring the city lights I can just make out in the darkness. I've had enough of plowing through the manuscript I'm editing, so I pick up a book of poems we published recently and start to read. Lately, I reach for it regularly during breaks: I read a poem or two, think about them for a while, and then carry on into the night. Before bed, another book waits for me: the one that contains transcripts of conversations among German soldiers during the Second World War. They had no idea they someone was listening, and what they said about killing Jews, about Hitler, rape, the Russians... feels more authentic than anything else I've read about that war.

The book lies on the nightstand beside my bed, because I usually read it before going to sleep, but the light bothers the woman who's recently started sleeping with me, so I have to tiptoe into the bedroom and take it. I settle on the couch and wrap myself in a blanket; it's freezing outside, and the radiators don't work at night. I'm don't feel like climbing back upstairs to my study, where the AC has kept it warm all night. The thing is, when sleep comes over me, I can simply set the book aside, turn onto my side, and fall asleep. At some moment, when the first sleep lets up, half-awake, I can move to the bed. Or not.

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The book I'm just reading (the one that puts everything inside me in order) takes me back into the past. I remember the large black bookcase my father gave me as a present when we moved into our first apartment. He designed and built it himself, and it covered the largest wall in the apartment, from floor to ceiling. It was deeper than an ordinary bookshelf, and in the middle, there was a space for a TV set, and in the right-hand corner for a desk. Those two surfaces jutted out ten inches from the shelving into the room. The height and width of each shelf were different. I wanted it to look playful, not dull, my father told me when he had it brought to Zagreb by truck. For years I lugged boxes of books from one rented apartment to another, and, without a doubt, this was the piece of furniture that made me happier than anything else. At first, though, I thought it would've been better if all the shelves were the same, regular lines would've given me a sense of calm, and the book spines would've been enough to make every glance at it interesting.

But I didn't tell him that. To this day I'm glad I didn't, because, years later, and especially after his death, whenever I looked at that bookcase, I would feel the love with which it had been made and remember his smiling, happy eyes when we fixed it to the wall.

When we moved to a new apartment, we had to leave it behind because it had been made to fit the old place, and I felt a little sorry because I knew it wouldn't mean to the new tenants what it meant to me. Maybe it wouldn't have any meaning for them at all, maybe it would bother them, and they would want to replace it by a dresser or some other piece of furniture. They wouldn't know anything about the bond it established between my father and me.

But, in the end, we sold the apartment to some relatives, and sometimes I'd go there. Of course, when this happened, I never thought about the bookcase, but I always noticed it, and that quick thought would pass through my head: my bookshelf.

Then they moved away too, and now strangers live in that apartment. A few months ago, I found myself in that neighborhood and I walked to the building we once lived in. From the sidewalk, I looked in through the window on the second floor and saw that the bookcase was gone. From now on it will exist only in this text.

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It's interesting, this thing with the space and how we adopt it and make it our own. Or how it makes us its own people. When we first moved into this apartment, right here, in this attic study, whose shelves I'd designed myself, I was finishing my first novel. The moment I came home from work, I'd run up the stairs and shut myself into the space where, at that moment, I felt best. The novel I'd worked on for years was close to its end, that is, almost the whole structure was already there, so I feverishly edited and worked on it. I knew what still needed to be done, what to cut, what to make more complicated; all I had to do was to sit and write and watch the solid architecture of the novel emerge from what had until recently been a chaotic text. When I lifted my eyes from the screen, through the window I could see the Sava and the streetlights

reflected on the rippling water. On the other side of the river, Novi Zagreb glistened, trams, lit from within, rolled over the bridge.

A few years after I finished the novel, I divorced and moved out of this apartment. Then I lived in various houses, with a new partner or as a tenant, until, after six years, I came back: in this new arrangement, my son lived with me, while my ex-wife and daughter moved to a new apartment in Soboština. In the meantime, my son had taken over my study, which he called the library. He studied there for his exams and tried to write his first stories. I settled on the couch in the living room. From it, I watched TV and on it, once I'd turn everything off, with a laptop on my lap, I wrote. That's where I wrote my second novel.

But even when my son moved in with his girlfriend, I stayed on the couch. I was alone in the apartment and had no reason to go upstairs. I used only the living room, I often fell asleep on that couch, and I went up there only a few times, for instance, to check if the earthquake had damaged the walls. Sometimes I wonder whether the difference between the two spaces where I wrote shows up in my novels. Does a room with a view of the Sava and thousands of books in the shelves affect my sentences differently than a large living room with the blinds down and the TV on, while a pile of dirty dishes, newspapers, books, and discarded clothes grows around me? Next to the arm of the couch, there's a wide radiator on which, while I was writing, I kept coffee mugs. Every time I go on a trip, I bring back a mug with motifs of that place, so I had many, but I only put them in the dishwasher when the last one was dirty, and by then the first ones had long given in to mold. Sometimes those colorful mugs, lined up on the radiator, looked beautiful, like an ornament, a colorful installation, but whoever came over, was appalled. But no, it wasn't depression, I simply had no time for anything except what I interested me. Everything else could wait because it didn't bother anyone.

Since recently, I'm back in the study again, I feel good in it again, I'm writing again, and I'm trying to figure out why I avoided it for two years.

Tonight, the neighbors in the apartment on the other side of the wall are loud, it's well past two and loud laughter is still coming through the wall. The woman who sleeps in my room can't sleep, that is, she keeps waking up. Earplugs don't help either. This upsets me and I feel the need to protect her, so at about three in the morning I bang on the wall. After a few moments, there's a reply from the other side, four, five bangs, in quick succession. It seems angry, but after a few moments the voices fall silent and are not heard again. The little neighborhood war is over.

But I'm angry with myself because I only started writing at around four-thirty, and now I'm already tired even though there are a couple more things I want to write down. Something about all the directions this book might take. But the morning trams are already clattering along the bridge over the Sava, and I know I'll leave that for tomorrow. A few more pages read on the couch, when I get down, and then bed. I undress in the hall and slip into the room without switching on the light. Before I lie down, I feel through the darkness looking for the cover. Then I draw her close to my stomach.

6

People don't like to talk about their own death. Even soldiers in wars don't mention it, although it hangs over them daily. So says the historian who read more than a hundred and fifty thousand pages of transcripts of German soldiers' conversations.

They're probably afraid they might summon it. Perhaps I'm no different, though I'd never assign such power to words – the power to summon death. Still, I used to imagine, driving on the highway, how just one small movement, a jerk of the wheel, would be enough, and everything would be over, changed forever, for me and for all those around me. Not that I ever wanted to do it, but I was fascinated by the abyss I stood over, the closeness of ruin. Or I'd imagine what people's reactions would be after they heard about it. It didn't scare me. It felt like it belonged to another sphere, one that doesn't summon death.

But, today two people I know died of heart attacks, and the thought of death cannot be avoided. It wasn't so much of a shock but the bewilderment of having spoken with one of them on the

street a few days ago and now he's gone. Though he had seemed full of life. And plans. My friend, who often writes about death, keeps reminding me that when making any life decision I should always factor death into the equation. When, for instance, you're deciding whether to live with someone or not, you shouldn't think about what that life will be like ten years from now, but only about what it is like today. But I'm not sure what it is like today.

All this got to me, and I couldn't focus, so I went to bed early, around three. After half an hour of tossing and turning under the comforter, I realized it was still too early, so I switched on the night lamp, bent it down as much as I could so the circle of light would be small, and reached for Andrić's biography on the nightstand. But maybe a couple minutes passed before the woman who sleeps with me complained that the light bothered her and that I'd woken her. She is extremely sensitive to sound and light stimuli, for years she has slept with earplugs because even the smallest sound bothers her, and when she came to my apartment, the first thing she did was removed the battery from the wall clock so it wouldn't tick.

I didn't feel like getting up and moving to the living room, so I turned the light off and thought about this text. About all the things I should let into it. For now, I know these will be tired entries, because I'll write them at night, from three to six in the morning, after I've read and written everything I had to for work. That's when the guard drops, boundaries are more permeable, a tired brain is less inhibited. But the sentences will probably sometimes be messier. So they'll need to be revised. These entries will touch on the books I read, but in such a way that I always go from them back to myself, to what happened to me, to what is happening to me now. I'm not yet sure which events from my daily life I'll choose: those that at the end of the day still feel alive in me, whatever they are, or will I stick to a single set of themes and events. Or maybe I'll mostly write about the woman who's recently started sleeping with me. Perhaps, in the end, everything turns into a novel about an attempt to be with someone again. After all that's happened to me in the last ten years, I'm very careful and somewhat skeptical, but since recently, well, she's in my room. In any case, this time I will skip anything that might hurt someone. Or perhaps I'll have to... Because... When my thoughts began to tangle, I turned toward her and pressed myself against her back, and she brushed her hair away with her hand so it wouldn't tickle my face.

Today at Lidl, I was looking for a pair of reading glasses with tiny built-in lamps on the frames – as you read, the glasses shine a narrow beam of light on that page, leaving the rest of the room in darkness. A colleague at work told me about them after I'd complained how hard it was to give up a habit I'd had since high school – reading in bed for half an hour to an hour before going to sleep. He claimed that everything in the room stayed dark except for that one page, so I set out full of hope to find them. I imagined her surprise when I put them on and switched on the lights. And the laughter that would follow. But they didn't have them, at least not in my neighborhood. So tonight, I'll be back on the couch before bed again. But she must have heard me coming down the stairs and, a few minutes later, she came looking for me.

My problem is that I can't read in bed, and hers that we don't go to bed at the same time. She believes that going to bed together is a ritual that shows and builds intimacy, and it's hard to replace with anything else.

Tonight, I went with my daughter to see Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at the Croatian National Theatre. In the parking lot, when we got out of the car, she didn't want to put on her coat, instead, she just slung it over her arm, even though it was barely three or four degrees outside. She was wearing only a thin turtleneck under a sweater.

"I know you're never cold, but look around, everyone's bundled up, wearing hats and scarves," I said. But she was stubborn. She said she knew whether she was cold or not. Luckily, we weren't far, and we were inside the theatre while our argument was still going.

When she was little, before she started school, she obsessively watched a puppet-theatre version of *The Magic Flute* on the DVD player. I know it sounds strange, even like an exaggeration, but she must've watched it more than fifty times, and we were amazed at her delight in the music and the story. Ten years have passed, and now she was seeing it in the theatre for the first time.

I sat beside her, glancing over every so often to see her wide-eyed, relishing every moment of the three-hour performance, softly singing along to almost all the arias. I was glad to see she could enjoy something so completely. I sat beside my child who was happy. It's hard to imagine a better feeling, and I tried to soak it in as much as I could.

On the way back to the car, it was the same story, her coat over her arm, except that now it was even colder. She was so elated with the show that I didn't want to nag or spoil the moment. I just picked up my step to reach the car as soon as we can.

9

Morning visit to the ophthalmologist. The doctor said she thought it was just a cyst, but that we'd remove it anyway, and she scheduled me for the procedure in two weeks. I hadn't been particularly anxious while waiting for the appointment, but it's interesting that the growth on my lower eyelid had never bothered me, I hadn't even felt it, yet ever since I'd been told it looked suspicious, it started to itch.

In the afternoon, my publisher called to say he was looking at summer as the release date for a book that would contain all three of my poetry collections, along with several poems that hadn't been included in any of them, and maybe even some new ones, and that he'd soon like to have the full manuscript. It's always seemed that those three books, though written over a span of twenty years, complement one another and actually work as a single text about love, infidelity, and the demise of a marriage. That's why I'm curious to see what they'll look like together, but I'm also in a dilemma – should I rewrite the poems, which I now see a little differently than when I wrote them or leave everything as it was first published. It's impossible to re-enter the emotional state I was in back then, but the distance, and the life and writing experience that's built up in the meantime, could help them. I might gain something, but also probably lose something too. I know that feeling when you shift just one tiny bit and it's as if the whole building tilts, but despite the danger that lurks along the way, I think there's always room for improvement, and I'm not against rewriting. On the contrary, I love tinkering with a text (whether it's been published or not), and I enjoy that feeling when a small shift suddenly opens

a crack that allows us to see deeper beneath the surface. But this time I feel a kind of inner resistance because I don't want to re-enter that story that lasted so long, that was so difficult, and that I barely managed to close. I want to start with a new story, along a new cycle of life, why not in this *Night Book* I've just begun. And this working title, which it's just received, is an important step in that direction.

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A friend of mine has published a new collection of short stories, so I'm reading the stories and the first review at the same time. And I'm angry. The review is positive, but it seems the critic has missed the point entirely. He sees infidelity, by default, as something unambiguously and inherently wrong. As far as I can tell, in his system of values, it stands almost on the same plane as murder. Something that can only ever be wrong.

I try to imagine a world without infidelity. A world in which no one has enough courage to cross a boundary, no one ever doubts their choices, a world without temptation, where people never change, where they can't love more than one person at once, and where no one is ever willing to give up everything they have for love. People who never succumb to their impulses and weaknesses. Regardless of all the pain infidelity brings, and the tragedies it sometimes causes, that would be a dead, stagnant world, the world I wouldn't want to live in.

I type something like that in a message and send it to my writer friend. Just so he knows I'm reading his book, and that I care. It's four in the morning, so I don't expect a reply, but maybe it will cheer him up when he wakes up.

Then I notice that I haven't heard anything from the apartment next door for several days. And last week – because she can't sleep through the constant noise – we called in a contractor and arranged to have an extra layer of drywall, with glass wool and gold foil, added to the bedroom wall. When I called them, I was thinking of the cork lining in Proust's room, but they told me there are better materials now, gold and wool.

I decided not to add insulation to the attic study, because that would mean removing all the bookshelves bolted to the wall. Besides, the neighbors usually don't spend much time upstairs, or they only come up to sleep. The problem is their living room, where they hang out and entertain friends, which stands right against our bedroom. I tried to convince her the noise wasn't that bad – even though everyone agrees the insulation in the building is awful, I don't know anyone who's actually done anything about it – but it started to get to me too, so I didn't resist for long.

I listen again and knock on the wall a few times, but no one answers.

11

I drive to work using a shortcut across the rail yard, even though it's forbidden, because it cuts the trip from thirty minutes to ten, so every day I risk a fine. Even if the police stop me, let's say once a year, I've figured, one ticket is a fair price for all the time I save.

Just before entering the yard, I pass the Porin Hotel, where refugees are housed while they wait for permission to enter Europe. I watch them walking along the road near the hotel and try to imagine their lives, imagine them for a moment in that other world, Syria, Afghanistan, imagine their journey to Croatia, and then their lives together in that fenced-in hotel, how they came together from who knows where at this one point, and now they're waiting. How many fates are tangled up in that hotel where they hang out, hate one another, love, fuck, struggle... before they disperse again. I glance at their faces as I drive past, trying to feel what they feel. And sometimes I wave to them. Or I remember how I too spent a couple of nights in that hotel when I first left home. I was lying in bed, staring into the dark, wrestling with the feeling of guilt that tore at me.

But today, while the barrier at the crossing was down, one of them came up to me and asked if he could borrow my phone to call someone back home on Facebook. It was urgent, he pleaded, and I finally, with a hint of fear, handed my phone out the car window. A minute later, he brought the phone back and thanked me, and I hurried to work. When I arrived at my office, I saw he'd forgotten to log out, his account was still open. So I took a brief look into his world: the posts

were in Arabic, but some of the messages were in English. I saw him hitting on a girl, I gathered she was also at Porin, though not from his country, and I looked at photos of his family in Syria, his children, and at that moment, I felt a black hole of one life open up in front of me, and then I left abruptly, and, having logged him out, shook my head, as if that could push him away from me for good.

12

Problems with the wall. The drywall guy comes and concludes the extra sheet can't be added because the window is too close to the wall. We're a bit disappointed, but not ready to give up. We call another contractor, who assures us that nowadays there's nothing that can't be done. But he isn't sure when he'll be available – after the earthquake he's been very busy.

After that she goes to sleep at her rented apartment. She's been here for a while, but still hasn't cancelled it. I urged her not to, so we'd have a fallback position, because I was afraid of what our life together might look like, and in the end, I was glad when she agreed.

Tonight, for the first time, she's back there, and the whole time I keep turning around and listening. It seems like there's a little more air in the apartment, as if I'd lost a couple of pounds.

I call her to wish her goodnight and tell her that, using those exact words, and she laughs. It crosses my mind she doesn't take me seriously, but that's her standard reaction. I've known her a long time, and I know she's never made a scene when someone told her what they felt, even if it didn't work in her favor. I like that about her, but I've never quite understood whether it's a defense mechanism or if she's simply aware that no one can control their feelings, and that we can't hold it against them. Or maybe she just doesn't care enough.

"I'm not surprised you feel relieved. I just wonder if you'll miss me tomorrow," she finally says and hangs up.

I sent the first ten pages of this manuscript to a writer friend so he could see the direction I'd taken, the tone of the text, and tell me what he thought.

He calls around midnight – that's our usual time to talk. I explain how I've envisioned the book, and we discuss all the directions it could still take.

We talk about a common narrative thread that would run through the whole manuscript and what other fragments could be attached to, something like a story the reader could follow within a text that has a diary structure, and at one point, I say that I have a few ideas, but that I don't want to hurt anyone with this book.

"Screw a book that isn't a social suicide, at least in part," he says, choking with laughter.

"But I've already socially killed myself so many times in my writing. I can't do it anymore," I groan, then laugh too.

This morning, I was at the Vinogradska Hospital for a small surgical procedure. They removed that cyst from my eyelid. When she opened it, the doctor first said it was just a simple cyst – "It's nothing, I won't even send it for pathology" – but later, while cleaning the area, she came across something she didn't like, so she changed her mind: "We'll send this little piece after all, but there's nothing to worry about." They put a bandage over my eye and told me to come back tomorrow to change it.

Walking around like that took some time to get used to. I know people who lose an eye adapt quickly and manage without much trouble, but to me it felt strangely complicated, as if vision

had lost some of its three-dimensionality, so things weren't quite where they seemed to be. I somehow stumbled out of the hospital and made it to the car, but I felt pretty unsure when I sat behind the wheel. Bravely, I pulled out of the parking lot and into the perpetual traffic jam in front of the hospital, and right at that moment the anesthesia wore off and the pain hit hard. As I merged into the roundabout, my phone rang. She wanted to hear how it had gone, but the pain kept getting worse and I was nervous, so we fell out almost immediately.

"I call to check on you, and you growl at me."

"No, it's just that it really hurts, and I don't feel like talking. I can't see a thing, and I'm driving. I'll call you when I get home."

Luckily, the pain in my eye eased soon after, and the rest of the day was brought down to a kind of quiet meditation on what the world looked like through one eye. And in the evening, she came back too, carrying a bag full of things from her apartment, so we laughed together at the clumsy Cyclops blundering around the rooms.

I thought I wouldn't be able to read or write, but when she went to bed, I nevertheless went upstairs. To see what it felt like to write with one eye. It wasn't easy. I only wear contacts when I go out, while at home, I always use glasses to read and write. But because of the thick bandage on my bad eye, I could barely fit them on my nose, and they kept sliding off. I managed to write something anyway. All the while, I felt anxiety humming beneath everything I did.

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Today I went back to the hospital to have my bandage changed. The histopathological report wasn't ready yet, but I hoped they'd remove the bandage. I couldn't wait for it – I'd been so fed up with that limited field of vision and not being able to see clearly that. And indeed, as soon as they took off the bandage, I felt relieved. Even though I was wearing a contact lens in my good eye and none in the injured one, so I still couldn't see on it, I felt as if someone had set me free.

When I got into the car, I took the contact lens out of my good eye, grabbed my glasses from the glove compartment, and the world returned to normal.

But not for long. After midnight, when I went upstairs to my study, I first scrolled quickly through the news on a few sites, and then, after five or six days away from it, I opened Facebook. That's where I saw that the dog my ex-wife had gotten after the second time I left had died earlier today. He was meant to replace me in that house, and he did it well. His devotion and loyalty were unquestionable. Over the years, his love only grew, it never faded. In the end, I had grown fond of him myself. Even though I mostly saw him only when I came to pick up my daughter, and in those few moments, while I waited, he always pushed his muzzle under my hand, asking to be petted. I called my son, sure he was still up, and asked what had happened. But he could barely speak – even though he's usually cynical and a bit cruel when talking about people's emotions and weaknesses. When he collected himself, he said Zlatko's death had hit him harder than the death of some people close to him, and he didn't know what to make of that.

As soon as we hung up, I sent a message to my ex-wife saying I'd heard and would call her tomorrow. Then I tried to imagine my daughter's reaction. When she's faced with something difficult, she tends to run away from it, push it away, repress it. Maybe that's what she did today. I know that's not good, but still, I hope that's how she gets through this. Finally, I sent her a message. I wrote: *I love you. And: I'll call you as soon as I wake up.*

We didn't give up until we found a crew that could install an extra soundproof wall in the bedroom. They arrived this morning, at half past eight, which meant I'd slept only a couple of hours. First, they put up the metal frame, then the glass wool, then a diamond sheet ("Diamond is better than gold, it's the latest thing."), then a *tescundo* sheet, and another diamond sheet on top.

While they worked, I sat on my couch reading Singer's *Shadows on the Hudson*. "That's it," the foreman said as he was leaving. "Just the plaster and paint, but we'll take care of that tomorrow." The room is now eight centimeters narrower, but I can't wait for the neighbors to come home to test the wall. In the evening, the woman who had initiated all this came home from work, full of both anxiety and expectation. We had a quick meal, then kept turning the TV down and listening. Nothing. Not a sound. Then we'd look at each other and give a thumbs-up, meaning – *all's well*.

But then, around eleven, muffled sounds rolled in, and we rushed to the bedroom.

"They must've just gotten home," she said, disappointed.

"But it's better than before, listen," I tried to salvage the situation.

"Maybe a little," she muttered.

"We knew we'd still hear something, but the sound's much softer now. Once you put in your earplugs, you won't hear a thing."

She didn't look convinced, so I added, "And tomorrow comes the plaster and three coats of paint. Maybe that'll help too."

In the end, we agreed that it was a little better and that the wall hadn't been a waste of money after all.

Then I went upstairs and back to Singer. When I finally turned off the computer, dawn had already lit the river, barely visible through the strands of dense winter fog.

Today the workers only did the plaster. They'll come again tomorrow morning, once it dries, and then they'll paint. I'm not happy about it because it completely changes my day-and-night regime, even though I knew right from the start there was no way to finish everything in just two days. That's why I forced myself to go to bed a little earlier. Around four, I came down to the small room where I sleep while the bedroom's being worked on, and she sleeps on the living room couch. Then I turned on the lamp (what a pleasure), picked up Ivo Andrić's biography, and reread the chapter about how, as Yugoslavia's ambassador in Berlin, he took part in signing the Tripartite Pact. And how he tried desperately to persuade Ribbentrop to urge Hitler not to punish Yugoslavia after the coup that overthrew the government that had signed it. Then I tried to imagine what his novel set in wartime Berlin would've been like. Anyhow, I meant to read only ten minutes, but I turned off the light around five.

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The workers finally finished the wall. It doesn't look bad, the little edge by the window is barely noticeable, but I woke up at seven-thirty and was barely functional for the rest of the day. After they left, I rushed to work, but I couldn't wait to get home and hit the bed. Three sleepless nights had taken their toll. And that's exactly what kills me about staying up at night. Everything's fine when the day follows my routine – getting up at eleven, coffee, pastry, and the papers at the café, then off to work around half past twelve; three or four hours of meetings with other editors and authors, then home around five or six; evenings for friends, the kids, and her; and after midnight, upstairs again: a quick scroll through the news, then reading, writing, and editing until five or six in the morning. But when something unplanned happens, such as workers showing up at eight, and I have to get through a whole day on two hours' sleep, I'm done. That's when the woman I sleep with recognizes her moment, so she tells me that I'm stubborn and irrational, that I'm torturing myself and ruining my health, that I'm not young anymore and have to change my biorhythm before I get sick. "Once you start going to bed when I do, you'll be a new man!" she concludes.

As I'd expected, she spent the whole day waiting for the right moment to continue last night's conversation. But I skillfully avoided it, until around one o'clock when she came upstairs to my study to say goodnight. She asked what I was doing, and when I listed all the things I had to get done before morning, she said, "But you can't live like this. Out of step with the rest of the world."

Me: But I've been living like this for thirty years. Why should I stop now?

Her: Because it's not good for you, you don't sleep enough, you push yourself over your limits, sometimes you don't see the sun for days. You're pale, jaundiced. You're going to ruin your health. It's not good for your work either, what if something urgent comes up in the morning while you're still asleep, your phone is on silent, and no one can reach you. I don't know how the people you work with tolerate it for so many years.

Me: I don't feel it's bad for me. After all these years, I'm so used to this rhythm I think the change would be bad for me. And the people at work probably know why they tolerate it. They must have their reasons. Otherwise they wouldn't, right? Besides, this rhythm is ideal for what I do. My job is to read books, and for that I need peace and quiet, which I have at night. I have my meetings during the day. I don't see what's illogical or strange about that.

Her: You're as stubborn as a mule. How can't you see it's not good for us? You go to bed when I wake up. What kind of relationship is that? Shouldn't people who love each other sleep together? We can't live out of sync.

Me: But I spend the whole time you can be with me with you. It's true I don't get up at eight like you do, but you leave for work half an hour later anyway. And we both come home from work around six. I'm with you until you go to bed, so we spend all your free time together. And when you go to bed, I go and work. So, even if I got up at the same time as you, we wouldn't spend more time together. I really don't know what you're complaining about. Besides the fact that I'm out of step with the world.

Her: But it matters to me, it matters that we go to bed together, that we hug before falling asleep, that's actually the nicest thing about us living together.

Me: But we can do that anyway: I lie down with you and get up when you fall asleep.

Her: But that's not the same. How come you don't understand that it's important and beautiful to feel someone sleeping beside you?

Me: I understand. But I can't just change it. I write at night, I work at night. That's very important to me.

She fell silent and turned to the window. She watched the huge billboard on the bridge flashing advertisements, even though there was no one on the bridge at one in the morning. And she said nothing. I sipped the ginger tea she'd brought me before the conversation started, waiting for her to say, "So I'm not important to you, then."

But she didn't say it. She turned, asked if the tea was good, and then suggested that at least on weekends we go to bed together.

"I'll go a little later than usual, you a little earlier, and that's it."

I wanted to say I couldn't go to bed around two because then I wouldn't actually get anything done, but I didn't. I just smiled and nodded to what she ran her hand through my hair a few times.

"Okay, then go work, don't waste time," she said over her shoulder as she went downstairs.

I got off work early, picked up my son, and went straight to Sljeme. I often do this when I'm under pressure, and I know from experience it helps. We started our hike from Kraljičin Zdenac toward the Brestovac Sanatorium. I had never been there before, but I knew the romantic story about the tuberculosis sanatorium whose construction was commissioned at the beginning of

the twentieth century by Milivoj Dežman, a writer and physician hopelessly in love with the actress Ljerka Šram. When she fell ill with tuberculosis, he went to everyone he knew to help him build a specialized hospital near Sljeme's peak. He was looking for a better air for her cavernous lungs. The sanatorium was built, but Ljerka died a few years later, in that very hospital, with Milivoj holding her hand. That's all that remains of a story larger than life, just these few lines, but it still made me want to see the sanatorium complex, which the forest has been reclaiming for over half a century. I had meant to go for years, but it was out of the main trails, and I always left it for some other occasion.

Unlike the popular trails, usually crowded, this one had no one on it, so I enjoyed the feeling of being alone in the forest. We wandered aimlessly between the trees looking for the spring indicated by a sign, and once we found it, we filled our water bottles, talked at some length about the story Goran is currently writing, all the while slowly making our way uphill. The trail wasn't well-marked, so we strayed a couple of times. When, after making our way through an almost impassable undergrowth, we finally reached a clearly marked trail heading straight toward the sanatorium, we heard rustling in the gully below. We saw nothing, but the rustling was loud, and for the next fifty meters, we kept hearing the sound moving in the same direction as us. Then, a loud snort. Right behind us. As we turned, we saw a wild boar, a fairly large one, running across the trail five or six yards away. We weren't scared, but Goran bent down and picked up a thick, dried branch. We glanced at each other, exchanged nervous smiles, and continued toward the sanatorium. The rustling kept following us from the left for a while, so my son threw the branch only when we reached the hospital.

The impressive building I'd known from old photos had turned into an impressive ruin. Parts of the walls were broken, parts overgrown, roofs also partially collapsed, but it was still possible to enter and explore. I headed to the entrance, then froze as I saw a shadow rush past a large window. Soon after, another one. Then we heard a howl, and then, suddenly, a scream.

"What the fuck is this?" I whispered, and then, after exchanging a few astonished looks with Goran, I realized we had stumbled upon a group of paintball "warriors" fighting inside the ruins of the hospital.

In the next moment, a huge, rather fat man, his helmet on, wearing a large windbreaker and tights, ran out the main entrance and sprinted around the building, only to enter again through a side window. We moved back to a fallen tree, sat down, and watched from a safe distance as grown men ran through the hallways shooting at each other.

I groaned about not being able to go inside, then told Goran that we should check the side buildings. They were mostly filled with junk, except for one room on the ground floor, the only one with the door, where we saw a bed and stove, though everything was dirty and full of all kinds of boards, so it was unlikely anyone had slept there recently. And just as we were about to leave, we noticed the warriors moving to another location. In the end, we got into the main building after all.

We climbed from the ground floor to the second floor, passed through rooms without doors or windows, walked out onto balconies, and I saw all those people come out on the balconies to breathe in the north wind rolling gently down Sljeme, licking the sanatorium from east and west, then descending all the way to the Sava plain. Or they sat by large windows, warming in the sun and gazing longingly at the city in the valley. Down there their lives waited for them, which they were fighting for here. I tried to identify the library, the lounge, the dining room, but there was none of the furniture or any sign that would help me. Only fresh paint stains on the walls that followed us everywhere. We passed through something resembling a long, covered promenade leading to the neighboring building. Looking at old photos now, I see it was glazed, at least on one side, perhaps this is where the patients walked when it was too cold outside.

Then Goran warned me it was getting dark.

“We’ve spent too much time waiting for them to leave,” I said, checking the time on my phone.

We had to decide whether to return the same way or cut west toward a path descending from Sljeme into Šestine. We chose west because the unknown seemed more interesting, but also because it felt like a more direct route. We quickly realized we’d made a mistake. The trail was narrow, it followed the very edge of the hill, and, most importantly, it was very muddy. We slogged through, careful not to slide down the hill; we had to go slow, yet we needed to hurry up because twilight was getting thicker. This wouldn’t have been a problem as I’d climbed Sljeme

at night before, but Goran had left his phone in the car, and mine was at five percent, so we wouldn't be able to turn on a light if it got too dark. I estimated it would take us another thirty minutes to reach Kraljičin Zdenac, by which time there'd still be some light, but at some point, we had to leave the trail descending toward Šestine and turn right toward Kraljičin Zdenac, along the same path we had taken up. But, when we entered the forest, the markers could not be made out anymore, the path too, only slope and trees, so it was hard to spot the intersection where we were supposed to turn.

"Are we close?" Goran asked, and I confidently replied, "We're almost there," trying to mask the nervousness creeping in.

I looked around but could see only darkness thickening and leaning onto us. After a while, it seemed we had gone too far down and missed the path we'd been looking for, so we just turned right, hoping to hit another trail leading in that direction. After making our way through the woods, following our hunch, we finally ran into a path, but it quickly ended in impenetrable brush. We had to go back.

That's when it occurred to me we might be in trouble. I thought, in the worst-case scenario, we could go straight down to Šestine and ask someone to take us back to the parking lot below Kraljičin Zdenac where we'd left our car. But the whole time I worried whether we'd have enough light. And as I did my calculations, pretending everything was under control, Goran spotted another path about ten yards below, winding to the right. The moment we reached it, I realized it was the trail we had been looking for and that we had turned too early, that we hadn't gone too low. We hurried along it, and within fifteen minutes, with the last traces of light, we passed Kraljičin Zdenac.

Soon we were at Lugareva Kuća. It was so hot inside it seemed the place was steaming, which felt good because I was wet and cold. A sign on the wall warned guests not to dry clothes in the room, but there was no one else there but us, so I changed my soaking shirt and hung it to dry in front of the large stove. We ordered beans with sauerkraut and sausages. We ate our beans and drank our beer, giggling and happily reliving our adventure. We were in it together.

...

The night's nearly gone, and I'm once again ill at ease. I should be working, the printout of Singer's novel waits on my desk, and my own manuscript still needs to be finished and sent, but after writing down everything that happened today, I keep browsing the internet, looking at old photos, and reading everything I can find about the Sljeme sanatorium.

21

Today I got a call from a woman I had completely forgotten. It's not a metaphor, I had truly forgotten she existed. In the last ten years, I hadn't thought of her once, and I'm sure I never would've remembered her if she hadn't called today. But she did, and now, having finished everything I'd planned for the night, my thoughts keep flying back to her.

When a colleague from work gave me her name and number, I didn't have the faintest idea who she was; something clicked only when they told me she'd introduced herself as my former real estate agent, and it took me a while to reconstruct the basic facts. She'd been my cousin's friend and had helped me rent out the old apartment when we took out a loan and bought the one I now live in. The plan was to rent it until we found a good buyer, which took a while. I remembered liking her name, Sabina (after Sabina from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, who's always been close to my heart), and that we'd had coffee a couple of times during that process. I didn't remember what we had talked about (probably the usual half-business, half-personal small talk between two people brought together by chance), her face was a blur, but I was sure we wouldn't have met more than once if there hadn't been a hint of mutual sympathy. Before calling her back, I tried to remember how I felt about her, or a conversation we had over coffee, and even now, as I write this, I'm still trying to dig up what had once been there yet what at some point vanished completely. And some things do come back: for instance, that the man to whom she rented my apartment used to stub out cigarettes on the nightstand, he'd just press the burning butt into the wood. There were so many scorch marks on the polished wood that he must've smoked and stubbed out at least a full pack of cigarettes, and she excused it by saying he was desperate because his wife had left him, and probably drunk.

I try to force myself to recall another detail or two, but all I can summon is Cavafy's poem *Remember, Body*. I dig through the shelves and boxes in search of his book and that poem. *Body, remember not only how much you were loved, not only the beds where you lay, but also those desires for you, shining clearly in eyes and trembling in a voice – and some chance obstacle thwarted them*, says the sage from Alexandria.

Earlier today, when we finally got in touch and exchanged the usual pleasantries for such occasions, I asked about her work. *As always, lots of problems, but everything will be fine*, said Sabina, and then added, *If God wills*.

I didn't think much of that phrase, even though it felt out of place, but a minute later everything became clear. Sabina had converted to Islam; divorced; her ex-husband blamed her sister for taking her to an exhibition at a mosque; her children were full of understanding for her decision; she'd moved to Germany and now returned; she'd lost all contacts and was now looking for my cousin's number to reconnect; she'd seen my interview in the newspaper and found out where I worked...

As she told me all this, she repeated several times that she was finally happy, that her faith had fulfilled her life, and that she regretted nothing. Nothing I said, of course, questioned that, but her need to put such an emphasis on it clearly stood out.

Before ending the call, we arranged to meet for coffee. I thought it would be interesting to hear more about the metamorphosis she'd undergone, though I'm sure those flashes in her eyes, still alive somewhere in the body and in forgetfulness, also played a role. Finally, I saved her number in my phone and made her present in my life again. I couldn't remember her last name, so I wrote – Sabina Islam.

I'm upstairs in my room, but it's already two, and I'm tired. I watched a horrifying documentary about the famine in Bessarabia in 1946–47, when a fifth of the population died. People ate

corpses en masse, and there were many cases of parents sacrificing their youngest child to feed the others, or their elderly parents. Or they hunted and ate other people's children from the village. In the end, one woman, after she and her husband had eaten all their children, killed and ate him too. And then you see an eighty-year-old man, a child back then, crying as he tells how that woman had once been beautiful and kind, always giving the neighborhood children fruit and candy when they played near her house. You try to understand, but all you can do is stare, hypnotized, into that hole inside us that nothing we've ever invented can fill. Despite civilization, culture, religion, laws, and customs, it swallows us whole the moment circumstances change and collective control over our instincts slips.

I try to shake it off and work on my manuscript, but everything distracts and irritates me. Iva has once again left the window open in my study – and that's something I never do – because it needed airing. But now it's almost three in the morning, the radiators have been off for four hours, and it's below zero outside. I've told her so many times not to do that in my study, that I prefer stuffy to cold, but she's done it again. I turn on the AC and set the thermostat to thirty degrees, but it's still cold, so I wrap myself in a blanket. In the end, I put on some music, turn off the lights, and watch the headlights as cars speed across the bridge, which, for some reason, is in darkness. It's Friday, the night is in full swing, and their whips of light have something hypnotic about them.

23

Once again on Sljeme with Goran. We want to check out the trails where we got lost last time, figure out where we took the wrong turn, and take our time to explore the area and some other paths that cross it. Since we're not going all the way to Brestovac, we pick up the pace to make the most of the trek. We talk the whole way, among other things, about Sabina. I tell him what I've written about her, and he asks if I'll meet her for coffee.

“Probably not.”

“So, this won’t serve as Chekhov’s gun then?”

“Maybe the gun doesn’t have to go off in my diary,” I say.

“I still think you should meet her. For the sake of the text,” he concludes.

Soon we reach the steepest stretch and stop talking. We pant and push uphill as if racing to see who’ll conquer it first. After the climb, everything quickly falls into place: we find the spot where we took the wrong turn, trace the path where motorbikes cut through the forest – which also threw us off on our last hike – examine the area around the wooden cross where the trail to Brestovac meets the one from Šestine up to the summit, and after about two hours, we’re back down at Lugarova Kuća.

We hoped for the same ending to our hike as last time, since we had such a good time, but the place is closed, so I suggest we head down to Šestinski Lagvić for a proper dinner and, when we’re at it, to celebrate Goran’s graduation. It’s been almost twenty days since then, and we still haven’t managed to meet up at a restaurant.

“But we’re all muddy? They won’t let us in.”

“I don’t think they’ll mind. Lunch is over, and it’s still early for dinner. The place should be empty.”

And sure enough, the waiter greets us cheerfully and seats us by a window overlooking the city. Young lamb, a bottle of wine, pancakes in wine sauce, and a conversation about his thesis, Jhumpa Lahiri and her stories, about his story that will soon appear in *Republika*, my diary, his girlfriend, my girlfriend, basketball...

And below us, the city hums darkly, waiting for us, though up here we can’t hear it.

Yesterday, the war in Ukraine began. I woke up, checked my phone, and saw missed calls and messages. Iva and my ex-wife had both sent the same one: *The war in Ukraine has started*. My ex added another: *We need to think about the kids, send them to Australia to my relatives if need be*. I replied with some reassuring messages, even though this troubled me deeply.

After nearly eighty years of peace (the war in Yugoslavia is its own story), one European country has attacked another, wanting to occupy it, and that country has six thousand nuclear warheads and a dictator whose level of sanity – or madness – no one can gauge. We can't and won't for a long time fully understand the consequences of all this. I spent the day feverishly following the news, but all I know now is that I want to pull myself out of that whirlpool as soon as possible, and I don't want to write about it here.

But it won't be easy to resist the horror. Because it's not only terrifying but also seductive, and it's coming at us from all sides. Today is my birthday, and the woman who was the subject of a few of my poems and a novel brought me *A History of Modern Russia* as a gift. And she reminded me that two years ago, on my birthday, Croatia recorded its first case of the coronavirus. "And now, look at that, a war breaks out the day before. Nothing but cataclysms on your birthday," she said, laughing.

We sat outside, because of Omicron, freezing, drinking tea, smiling, and glancing at each other. The conversation kept stalling, and while we still tried get it going, I was thinking about the feelings I still had for her, but that I mustn't show.

In the evening, Iva asked, "So, did all your exes get in touch?"

"Some did," I said.

"You need to cut all contact with them if you want peace. For your sake, and for theirs. How can't you see that?"

"But I still love them. All of them. And there's plenty of room in my heart," I said, ready for a fight.

Luckily, we quickly went back to the war in Ukraine, and things calmed down.

I sent the first half of Singer's novel, with my notes, to the translator and then stopped by the office to pick up a big box of manuscripts submitted to the VBZ contest for the best unpublished novel. It's been running for years, always around this time, and I have mixed feelings about it. I still get excited when I see that pile of texts on my desk, because maybe, among them, there's one waiting to be discovered, awarded, and shared with the world simply because it deserves to be read, but at the same time, I know there will be at least fifteen that will just wear me down, they'll lie scattered around my apartment for months, on the living room table, in the study, next to one bed and the other, in the bathroom, and I'll take some on trips, always feeling them as an obligation waiting for me no matter what else I do.

This year too, more than a hundred manuscripts have arrived, and since there are five of us on the jury, each of us gets about twenty. After we sift through our batches and select the ones worth sharing with the rest of the jury, we end up with around twenty manuscripts that we all read. When I add up all the texts from the first and second piles, it turns out I need to read forty to fifty anonymous texts every year. And diving into manuscripts without knowing who wrote them truly is a small adventure. It's incredible how much that missing name at the beginning means and how your reading changes when there's no expectation, when all you have is a text stripped of any additional information.

Now I'm pulling them out of the box, leafing through and sorting them into piles: the messy ones, where it's clear that the author didn't care much, or that are barely literate, go into one pile, I'll go through them first just to reduce that daunting number ahead of me; the interesting but short ones, around a hundred pages, go in another pile; and the longer manuscripts (some are five or six hundred pages long) I leave for last, I'll be wrestling with them for days or weeks. And as I flip through them, I try to get a sense of what kind of year this will be. I'm just flipping through, stopping at a page here or there, but I can already tell it'll take all night. After a while, I search for a klezmer concert on YouTube (*The Chicago Klezmer Ensemble: Sweet Home Bukovina*), so at least the musical background comes from Singer's world.

After dinner, we stay at the table for a long time, sipping wine and talking. When I finally head upstairs to work, she follows me. She wants to have a cigarette before bed, and my study is the only room in the house where smoking's allowed. (Because the smoke bothers her now that she quit two years ago, she only puffs on her cigarette, occasionally, as she puts it, she doesn't smoke.) But as soon as we get to the study, we somehow circle back to the conversation from the other night, about my exes, and one cigarette turns into five or six.

At one point, I tell her how today I spoke with an ex-girlfriend I haven't heard from in ages, who no longer lives in Croatia, and how she asked for her photo.

"And what did she say when she got it?"

"That she can tell you know what you want."

"Was that meant as something good or bad?"

"I don't know. Maybe both."

"And did you ask her for a photo?"

"Yes. We exchanged a few. We haven't seen each other in a long time."

"Can I see them?"

"Sure," I say, click on the pictures she sent me, and turn the laptop toward her.

"She's pretty," she says, then asks me to show her what I was working on last night.

When I open the file, she nods in approval, then asks, "Did you enjoy yourself last night while writing? You've already written quite a lot."

“I don’t know if that’s the right word, but yes, I did. Last night I really enjoyed it,” I say. “I didn’t write anything new, just went over what I’d already put down in this diary and did some editing. That’s my favorite part of the process. I love working on existing sentences, trying to pull something more out of them.”

She puts out her cigarette, kisses me, and heads for the door. But before leaving, she turns and says, “You always take your exes’ side when we talk about them. Why are you never on mine?”

“You should be glad. That’s how I’ll defend you too, when I’m with someone new who’ll attack you just to put you down,” I say. She smiles ironically and leaves.

When she’s gone, I pause to think about what I said, because I’m fully aware she’s the least likely of all the women I’ve ever been with to put other women down. And even when she attacks them, there’s a kind of respect for them in it, or understanding. She never gets irrational in such conversations, and that’s exactly what drew me to her, she’s easygoing and relaxed, and never makes a jealous scene. So how did we end up in such a conversation?

27

It’s the weekend. Iva has gone to her apartment, and my daughter is staying with me, so we went to the movies. We saw the new *Batman*. When we came out of the theatre, it was past midnight, and there were only a few cars left in the garage. The lights were off, except for the dim green emergency ones, and that vast, dark, empty space suddenly filled me with unease. But the moment we drove out into the street, where we were met by rain and puddles reflecting the glow of streetlights, I felt better. Lucija immediately took out her phone and searched for the main theme from the film, Nirvana’s *Something in the Way*, then turned on her Bluetooth, connected her phone to the car’s audio system, and played the song. Just as it fit the film, it fit the empty, wet streets, the car gliding forward, water spraying on all sides.

“Just like in the movie,” Lucija said. “Did you notice it rains in every scene?”

I nodded.

“I love driving around at night when the city’s empty,” she said.

“Let’s go then,” I said and took the lane that led us away from our neighborhood. “You play the music, and I’ll drive.”

We cruised through the city all the way to Gračani and Markuševac, and as we drove past Dotrščina, after I told her what had happened in that forest, Lucija said, “You know you have a twitch?”

“What do you mean? What twitch?”

“When you drive. You keep turning your head to the left.”

“I know. Goran told me years ago, back when he was in high school. I used to drive him and his friends to practice three times a week, and one day, all worried, he told me his friends had asked him why his dad keeps jerking his head like that while driving.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“That it’s not a twitch. I just like to see every place we pass.”

“Uh-huh. Well, it looks like a twitch.”

“You’ll see,” I said, smiling. “I won’t look left once until we get home.”

She laughed too, then turned toward me and watched me all the way home without taking her eyes off me.