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THE LAST DAY OF PEACE

Translated from Croatian by Mima Simić

Villa Giulia, Rome

The spouses are dead. They lie on their sides, stretched out on a divan, toasting their guests. She nestles in his embrace, taking the wine vessel from him. He rests his right hand on her shoulder. In it, he holds an egg, a symbol of new life, which the centuries have understandably crushed to dust. The symbols of the afterlife and eternity have vanished from her busy hands, too. The guests from the funeral feast have vanished as well. There is no one in the room with the sarcophagus. Villa Giulia houses the most significant artefacts of Etruscan culture, yet the building is half-empty. Only occasionally do I hear your footsteps as you explore the other rooms. We wander through the graveyard of chipped vases and mutilated statues. Heads without noses. Torsos without arms. We examine frescoes depicting birds, leopards, and benevolent goddesses who would guide the spouses to the better side of death.

I walk around the glass display case holding the sarcophagus. The avatars of the husband and wife were sculpted in terracotta. They found them shattered into hundreds of pieces. They had to be glued back together. Now they smile again their archaic smiles, reclining casually on cushions, dressed in their finest robes. Long braids adorned with pearls cascade down their backs. This is their feast, and though all the guests are dead and the platters empty, they would never be this happy again.

Behind me, I hear your footsteps again, approaching through the building's inner gallery. The floor is marble. The door is open. The noise of city traffic and the cries of seagulls drift in from the distant background. Your footsteps grow closer. Suddenly, you're standing behind me. I see your reflection in the glass of the display case.

The dead spouses are watching us.

We're watching them. But also watching ourselves.
In that moment, there's no resemblance.

DO YOU REMEMBER?

on the way to the house

We've been driving for hours. The dog is asleep in the back seat. We've turned off the radio, but I'm not even sure you're listening to me. I'm telling you about the Etruscan tumuli in Banditaccia, where the sarcophagus from Villa Giulia was found. You've forgotten everything. The frescoes on the tumuli walls reproduce the interior of a home. The goddess Vanth is depicted with bare breasts, spread out wings, and armed with a torch to light the way to the afterlife, which begins right there, with passage through a door painted on the wall. Vanth holds the key. Until she opens the passage through the impossible, souls remain trapped in bodies decaying on the stage of tombs.

You slow the car down.

We pass a convoy of military vehicles being transported toward the border. Olive-green jeeps and anti-aircraft guns are crammed onto flatbed trucks. Everything is ready.

You squeeze my hand quickly then put it back on the steering wheel. "Go on."

I don't know if the scene in Rome will open or close the book, but it's crucial that I keep going. It's crucial that we both keep going. We must move on.
Through the wall too.

We are driving to an old house located "in the middle of nowhere," according to the directions given by our friend. Three times we had to turn off the road, each time taking a narrower and bumpier path. The dog was woken up by the rocking over the rutted gravel and didn't stop barking until we pulled into the yard. He leaped out, ran a circle, then lifted his leg to relieve himself. You parked under a tree where the car would be least visible, then we carried our luggage onto the veranda and took a walk around the house.

HERE WE ARE.

We tread carefully through the tufts of grass, but our shoes still sink into the mud. You grab my arm to steady me, so we walk even slower, trying to work out the story behind the objects scattered across the yard.

A rusty lawnmower stands frozen before a patch of nettles, signalling the long absence of anyone to push it on.
Several garden chairs had rolled to the edge of the large pond, their backs submerged as if drowning.
Black apples lay scattered beneath the stunted fruit tree, and rainwater had pooled on the tarp over the woodpile, into a puddle filled with decaying leaves.
The plastic clothesline had snapped from its posts and lay coiled on the ground. I mistook it for a snake.

"There are no snakes here," you say, fastening the line back to the posts to keep it from coming to life again.

The house isn't actually in the middle of nowhere; it's on the line where marshy land turns into a dense beech forest. A small farm lies along the macadam road leading here - and we would avoid it. Strangely, we hadn't noticed it on our way in, but now it's clear the dog was upset by the flock of sheep grazing in the fenced pasture. We let him sniff around the yard, and we enter. We take off our muddy shoes and open the living room door.

"This is ours until this shitshow ends," you declare solemnly, though this shitshow could go on for years. What you really mean is that we've at least managed to find a place. For now.
We step inside.

Cobwebs and a few tattered birthday decorations hang from the ceiling beams; the walls are adorned with paintings of rural scenes and a clock showing winter time, even though spring has long since arrived. The air smells of ash. We had been warned that the chimney draws poorly, especially in southerly winds. We could be poisoned by carbon monoxide.

"We'll open the window," you say.

The floor is cold, and dried mud clings to our feet, its sharp edges pricking my soles. I sense that the house would resist us and stubbornly reject our presence. But I say nothing. We walk

silently through the rooms as if through a museum, pretending not to notice the message inscribed in objects that don’t belong to us.

IT COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE.

I’ll settle in the front room, with a view of the yard and the overgrown fields. I should continue working on my book there, but the desk is too low and rests on my knees.

"Don’t write about where the house is located," you say as soon as you enter the room.
You find me trying to tuck my legs under the desk.
"You need a lower seat," you add, pointing to a small backless stool in the corner. You sit on it to test it out.
"Don’t reveal any names. Promise?"

Of course I won’t reveal anything, I think to myself.

We came from somewhere, through something, and arrived at nothing.
"What should I write, then?" I ask.

You look right through me, smiling absently.

Why did we even come here? Are we fleeing war, a new epidemic, or should I invent something completely different? Have we simply become paranoid and mistaken an old rope for a snake?

You don’t answer.

May I write that we are, in fact, covering up the disappearance of our son, who defied the mobilization order? We packed two small suitcases to make it look like we were just going away for the weekend, and fled the apartment. We always told him, "This is your country, this is your home," until overnight we changed the script to: "You’ve got to know when to leave."

He left last week.

"He’s a smart boy. He’ll manage."

You've been repeating this ever since, but haven't managed to comfort me.

Perhaps I should also omit the fact that we got the keys to this house from our friends? It was meant to be their refuge in old age, but they chose to seize the chance to leave the country while they still could. Most people, like us, had nowhere to go. We stayed. But, we started avoiding each other. And then, we started fearing each other. It happened sooner than we'd expected.

"May I write down the year?"

You sit in the corner, with your back against the wall, and the same vacant smile resembling a mask for which the face beneath has no reason at all, and thus clings to it so stubbornly.

"Are you even listening?"

"We should unpack," you finally say, rising to your feet. For a moment or two, you stand in the middle of the room like someone who could even burst into tears. But then you bring me the chair and leave. I sit on the hard, uncomfortable seat. My back straightens involuntarily. The house seems to have its own idea of how we should adapt both our bodies and our sentences to it.

WIFE, HUSBAND, DOG.

FROM SOMEWHERE, THROUGH SOMETHING, INTO NOTHING.
ONCE UPON A TIME.

I find you on the opposite side of the house, in a glass-enclosed niche facing the road. Fields stretch out to the left; a forest rises to the right. The niche is surrounded by large windows. You've drawn back the curtains and arranged several books on the wide windowsill. A pair of binoculars lies there. You put them around your neck and peer into the distance.

"There are birds," you say. "Cranes, or something like that."

I know you're not looking at birds.

I lay my hand on your hair. It's as soft as a child's, but completely white.

I try to commit this evening, this moment, to memory; how we arrive at the house that's becoming my book. I think about how I'll describe it. I watch a ladybug crawl across the windowpane and make a mental note:

Don't forget that it's spring, even though it's not getting any warmer. That could be a bad sign.

Don't forget that convoys are heading toward the border. Tomorrow or the day after, they'll declare war.

Don't forget you two are not from here. You came from somewhere else, through nothing.
End of mental note.
I'm still stroking your hair, watching the smoke billow from the farm's chimney.
"Where's the dog?" you ask.

You call to him several times, and the dog rushes into the house. He darts around the living room, sniffs the armrests of the chairs, pokes his nose into the fireplace and the box of old newspapers, then jumps onto the couch, turns around a few times, and settles down.

For a moment, everyone has their place.

I revise that sentence into a following mental note:

Don't forget that no place is truly yours. It only seems that way.

As if you've heard me, you get up and walk to the bedroom, opening the suitcase by the bed. I know what you're looking for. You pull out your toiletry bag, go into the bathroom, and close the door. I know exactly what you're doing, even when I can't see you. You turn on the faucet. You let the water run. From the bag, you take a small pillbox and remove a tranquilizer. You put it in your mouth. You cup some water in your hand. You drink it down. You pause briefly. You take another pill. As I said, I know you. In half an hour, you will have become a child.

You come back and hug me. The hug lasts four seconds.

One. Two. Three. Four.

On the dot. You can't surprise me anymore.

You sit back down in the armchair, bring the binoculars to your eyes, and say nothing. I know perfectly well you're not looking at the cranes.
LOCK THE DOOR.

The woman survives the precarious journeys from somewhere, through something, to nothing; she manages, she starts from scratch, step by step, she learns the language, gets down to work, always a little better than the others but always paid less; she resigns herself to daily injustices, starts a family, and ages with dignity; surviving year after year, she survives life, she even survives death; she crumbles into shards of terracotta, but then they piece her back together. So how could she not survive a night in a village house? It is in her nature to survive everything, and then to suppress it. This ability to suppress is what makes her a woman, much like her ability to bleed once a month and bear children.

This is only the first night.
This is only the beginning.
A day or two before it begins.

We've settled between the ladybug on the window, the too-low table in the so-called study, and the damp bed where I now lie beside your sedated body, listening to the attic boards creak and telling myself it's just the wind… it's just mice… over and over, and I hate you for leaving me alone. Hate is a strong word. By morning, I'll start loving you again anyway.

I fix the blanket covering you, get out of bed, put on a jumper and thick socks, and tiptoe to the room where I should be writing; I draw the curtains over the window opposite the desk, and turn on the lamp. Illuminated by the bulb, the sounds of the house seem even more real. I keep telling myself it's just the wind… it's just mice… and forgive you again for never knowing what

it’s like to live through the first sleepless night. Then I sit down on the uncomfortable stool. My back straightens once more, involuntarily.

I’m starting with new notes:

I hate this house.

I hate the mud in the yard. And the fields surrounding it. And the tractor tracks across them.

I hate the man on the tractor and the way he looks at me. Equally, he hates the way I look at him.

It is an old hatred, from a time before I could read or write.

once upon a time

The village has only two streets. Standing on the first street are the church, a general store, a cinema, a veterinary clinic, a fire station, and a café. The second street has the sawmill. The two streets meet at an intersection without traffic lights. On one side of the intersection lies a meadow, dusted in white from the unpaved road, and a livestock scale resembling a small outdoor stage. The scale is surrounded by a metal railing, where villagers often stop to chat. It was here that the news spread: a girl had arrived at her grandmother’s house. She would spend the entire summer in the village before her parents took her back to the city.

"Look, look and remember," Grandma tells me as we cross the intersection, pointing to the green countryside as if knowing I would one day want to recall every detail.

I look around, memorizing the details and the relative size of things.

Grandma seems enormous, the village roads endless, and the distant hills as tall as mountains. Their size speak of my own smallness. In the meadow behind the livestock scales, two cows rest, while a group of men with beers in hand crowd against the fence. I recognize only one neighbour, who works at the sawmill. His wife often sits in Grandma’s kitchen with the baby at her breast. When the baby cries, she lifts her shirt and shoves her nipple into its mouth. Grandma doesn’t look away. She brings plastic bowls to the table, and

together they husk corn

or separate peas from their pods. In Grandma's household, everything revolves around work and maintenance, because, as she says, she's the only man in the house. Meanwhile, the neighbour drinks at the crossroads with the real men from the sawmill. The sun beats down on their foreheads. They've rolled up the sleeves of their worn shirts. Their backs and armpits are soaked with sweat. They stink. But you can't say it, it's rude.

"Don't mind them fools," Grandma says, hurrying ahead as I struggle to keep up. But the neighbour beckons us over, and Grandma stops reluctantly.

"Bring the little cow over to be weighed!" he yells. "There's the little cow from the big city," he explains, pointing at me.

Everyone follows the direction of his finger. Sure enough, they see a little cow.

"A sickly thing, they brought her to the countryside to recover. Fresh air!" The neighbour chuckles to himself, pulling the little cow closer. The stench from his armpits fills my nose and mouth.

"How much can you get for her?" he asks Grandma, who is suddenly so small that any real man can easily block her path. "She worth anything?" The neighbour shrewdly pinches the little cow's belly and legs, holding her firmly by the neck to prevent her escape. "Lookie, lookie, she's already put on a few pounds!"

"Leave the child alone!" Grandma interrupts nervously, wishing she were Grandpa or at least had a hoe handy to strike the sweaty back before her. But Grandpa had been gone for a long time, and the hoe lay somewhere in the garden.

"Eaaaaasy..." the neighbour gestures for her to wait. The little cow is now in his hands. "Lookie, lookie," he keeps saying, grabbing the little cow by the rump and pinching it harder, searching for fat to pinch.

"Maybe her titties have grown too?" the others join in the laughter. "From fresh air!"
"Feel it, feel it!" Now everyone's pinching the little cow, keeping Grandma at bay.

"Where are those titties hiding?!"

"Let go of my child!" Grandma roars, striking them with her fists wherever she can and tugging at their shirts to push them away. The men finally back off. I stand in the middle, trying to pull up the stretched-out straps of my shirt. Grandma curses at the top of her lungs. Drunken bastards! The neighbour looks surprised. As if he's only just realized the little cow isn't a little cow after all. There's no malice in his eyes, only boredom, the sun, the sawmill, and alcohol.

"Shame on you!" Grandma spits at him, pulling me firmly after her. She is enormous again, the village paths endless, and the hills towering, though they're only a blur through my tears.

"Come now, come now, don't you cry. It's nothing, you're fine," Grandma says as we continue down the endless road home. I walk silently beside her. My shirt hangs off my shoulders like a tattered flag. Beneath it, the burns from the man's large hands sting.

"You're fine," Grandma repeats. "They were just tickling you." IT IS DAWN.

in the middle of nowhere

In the morning, the house is the epicentre of cold. Frost spreads from it across the landscape, crackling under the dog's paws. A thick, light-grey mist, gathered among the trees of the forest, spills over the fields, yard, and house. From the fog emerge a pair of grey-black cranes. They walk with high-stepping strides, turning to face each other as if about to dance. They tap in a circle, wings spread, then softly leap into the air, hovering for a second or two before landing. After bowing several times, they stretch their necks skyward, and resonant cries flood the surroundings. The volume of their voices comes from deep within their chests, where their trachea descends like a trumpet. The duet is not in unison; a high-pitched trumpet call is answered by a lower tone, and a sustained note is complemented by an intermittent, rattling sound.

Each time they sound, the fields expand like lungs.

I stand on the veranda with my eyes closed, inhaling the mist that billows from the forest. I breathe in the frost under the dog's paws. I breathe in your body, which has slept peacefully through the night, sedated. I sense you moving clumsily deep inside the house. Your steps are still drowsy. You search for dry firewood. You grab old newspapers coated in dust. You crumple them, and shove them deep into the fireplace. You stack a few dry logs on top. You light the paper. The chimney draws poorly. You keep the fireplace door open to let the draft fan the flames. You kneel before the opening, poker in hand, and gently rearrange the burning wood. The flames cast a reddish glow across your face. You've grown old. Sometimes it happens suddenly, like this morning. You shove more papers into the fire. Then I can't see you anymore because the whole room fills with thick smoke.

I run back into the house. I push the heavy front door. Five steps through the hall. I open the door to the smoke-filled room. The acrid stench of ash burns my nostrils. You're lying on the couch, one leg propped on the floor. Your hands covering your face. Five more steps to the first window. I swing both panes wide open. Two steps to the second window. I open that one too. Then four steps to the couch. To you. I pull your hands away from your face. You smile at me.

"You idiot, you'll suffocate," I say. "I'm not an idiot," you reply.
"This isn't funny."

I help you up, and we step outside while the smoke clears from the room. Under the veranda's overhang, there's a bench and a metal tub where rainwater drains from the gutters. A bright green film covers the water's surface. Everything around us seems poisonous. We sit wrapped in our coats. Shoulder to shoulder. We watch the dog wander untroubled through the yard. His white fur occasionally blurs against the pale landscape. Morning will soon ripen, and the space around the house will no longer look pale, endless, or empty. We'll have to face that.

Soon enough, the fog lifts.
We emerge into the light.

AWAKENING.

The spouses are huddled together. Slowed by the residues of insomnia and pharmacological fog, they don't yet know how to begin the day. Soon, however, they will need to move, at least to rummage through their food bag and find something for breakfast. The pale expanse of morning rapidly fades before their eyes. Light intensifies, together with the sputtering roar of a car arriving from the woods. It grows louder. Tense, they track its movement behind them, from the other side of the house. An unfamiliar car rolls out of the forest, wheels bumping over the muddy, potholed road. Slowly, it approaches the house. It finds the wide-open windows. It stops. It sniffs the smoke-saturated curtains. It reads the titles of books arranged on the windowsill. Some in a foreign language. It rummages through the pills in the toiletry bag. It discovers the woman's presence in the half-unpacked suitcases. It sticks a finger into her soft lingerie. She presses her thighs together. There's nothing she can do.

The spouses remain seated, stunned by the morning as if caught in a spotlight. They squeeze each other's hand, signalling not to move. On the other side of the house, the car's engine starts again, and the driver revs it. The wheels spin several times, spraying mud, then the vehicle lurches forward. At that moment, the dog darts across the yard, barking furiously as he races onto the road, chasing the muddy bumper of the unfamiliar car. "Stupid mutt!" the husband roars after the dog. The wife runs onto the road. A loud gunshot rings out. Everything stops.

WHO HAS BEEN SHOT?

My eyes scan my body, the rest of me frozen. Only my eyeballs move, searching for a hole. I sweep my gaze across my chest, my abdomen, my arms... Nothing. Slowly, very slowly, I turn my head toward the bench where I left you just seconds ago. Within that tiny movement, I invent a god and pray to him to spare your life. Please, God, please, please, please...

...you're alive.

You have stood up, eyes wide with fright. You, too, are searching for the hole left by the gunshot. Your eyes welled-up, because the hole has to be somewhere. We both turn toward the dog, but he stands in the middle of the road, wagging his tail uncertainly. We exhale in relief, yet neither of us moves. We keep searching for the hole. Our eyes scan the windows,

the cranes

in the field, the bark on the trees, thoroughly examining every corner of the landscape. Where is it? Where is it...? Meanwhile, the unfamiliar car stops at the farm. A man in rubber boots steps out, planting his feet wide, turns toward us, hands on his hips, staring. He stares and does not move. I call the dog, turn my back to the man in boots, and walk back toward the yard. I can feel my knees trembling. We retreat inside. From that moment on, we brace ourselves for a second gunshot.

THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING, I REPEAT.

I closed the windows and drew the curtains, but you protest, saying we can't live like this, we can't bury ourselves alive. Your exact words. We're not moles. You fling the curtains open again, and a gloomy light floods the room.

We have to keep going.

You boil water for tea. I take out food and dishes. We sit down at the table. The chimney draws better now, but we're still in our coats. I spread butter on bread. Then jam on top. I drink the hot tea. You peel an apple and share it with the dog. We chew in silence.

"I'm not hungry at all," I say.
"You have to eat."
"Yes."

"You should also get some sleep." "I can't."
"Try."

"I'm scared."

"Those were hunters."

"You think so?"
"For sure."
"Why did they shoot?"
"Probably an accident."
"We should listen to the news."
"You think it's started?"
"I don't know."

"Get some sleep first. When you wake up, it'll be warmer too..... What is it?"

"Do you really think he'll be okay?"
"Don't worry. He's a smart kid."
YOU HAVEN'T CONVINCED ME.
At first, there is nothing in the dream. I sink into the damp hollow of an inner cave, my heart echoing restlessly in its darkness. I do not reach out my hands. I do not try to stand. I simply lie there. I think I see a faint light advancing from the depths of the earth. An old woman approaches, holding a small torch. She helps me up and leads me into the darkness. Her palm is wet and icy, but I have nothing else to hold onto. We come to a wide rock face, but she steps forward as if it were a door about to open. I follow her

into Grandma's garden

"It's not the earth that's poisoned, but the people," Grandma says.

She no longer holds a torch, but a potato and a carrot. I stand by her side like a small dog, nodding dutifully at everything she says.

"These carrots and potatoes are my children," Grandma declares meaningfully to the visitors from the Sewerage and Water Department, who are making their third inspection of her hillside garden. They show her the results of soil tests and chemical analyses, while she shoves potatoes in their faces. Wastewater from her kitchen and bathroom is allegedly polluting the entire hillside and seeping down to the bottom of the hill, onto another owner's land.

"The sludge comes down from your property!" the visitors insist.

But Grandma will have none of it. Every time they mention that the inspection confirmed the septic tank is leaking, she raises her voice, insisting it's not true, that it cannot be. It cannot be! She built this house with her late husband, and engineers oversaw every decision. Where the house would stand, where the septic tank would be dug, and where the garden would be planted. She points to the apple, cherry, and pear trees, then names the neatly organized vegetable beds: here are the tomatoes, there's the endive, those are the pole beans, over there the peppers, and beyond that, the potatoes. And here, of course, are the parsley and carrots - she strives to prove that her property is managed by a capable and rational hand.

"In this house, we've always eaten only what comes from this garden," Grandma concludes, handing me a carrot. I eagerly bite off the tip and chew it with gusto.

What are they trying to say? That she's poisoning her own family? Grandma stands defiantly before the visitors, stroking my hair, pleased with my cooperation.

"Carrots are good for your eyes," she says, gesturing for me to widen my eyes and show off my sight. Grandma and I are acting in the same play. The key is to pretend that what's happening isn't happening, and that what is, isn't really. As long as we follow these simple instructions, the test results can't touch us.

The officials are silent, exchanging glances as they flip through the papers that unequivocally prove the land is toxic, so they insist on remediation and negotiating compensation for damages to the neighbouring property.

"Evidence is evidence," one of them says.

"What evidence?!" Grandma snaps. Do they think her late husband was some fool who built haphazardly? How many times must she tell them:

DON'T TOUCH MY HOUSE!
DON'T TOUCH MY GARDEN!
Not waiting for the visitors to leave, Grandma walks down into the garden, picks tomatoes, digs up carrots and potatoes, drags me along back to the house, goes into the kitchen, peels and chops the vegetables, and throws them all into a pot, defying their evidence.
A little salt and a little pepper, and that's it. All that is needed. Two hours later, the stew is in our bowls.

"Eat while you can," Grandma says to me. "The vegetables in the city are plastic."

Obediently, I eat, imagining hard potatoes, carrots, and peppers made of plastic. I've never seen them, but I trust Grandma's word.

"Have some more," she offers, filling my plate again. Her gaze follows every spoonful as it disappears into my mouth, then tracks the gulp as it slides down my throat. When I step outside into the yard, Grandma doesn't let me out of her sight. Through the small kitchen window, she closely observes my every move, as if I might collapse and die at any moment.

DARK CLOUDS GATHER ABOVE THE HOUSE.
SUDDENLY, A DOWNPOUR.

It really is raining. I open my eyes and listen to the gentle patter of raindrops against the windows. The room indeed feels warmer, and the sound of the rain creates a comforting sense that the house is here to protect us. Through the open door, I see the dog dozing on the couch while you sit at the table, reading on your phone. This arrangement of bodies feels so familiar.

I expect our son’s elongated silhouette to step into the scene and complete the picture. But it’s better not to even think about that.

For a while, I simply listen, letting the sounds of nature transform into images. Cranes have taken shelter beneath the canopy, where wet spring leaves glisten. Water overflows from the metal tub on the veranda. Puddles in the soft fields swell. The rain soaks the yard, where, among nature’s unintentional creations, dangerous plants might be sprouting. Perhaps we’ll pick them by mistake? Perhaps our dog will eat them? We have no guarantees. This forest, these fields, this yard, and even this house are all part of the same cold-blooded landscape, one that neither cares for us nor protects us. I say your name several times.

"You didn’t sleep long," you say as I walk over.

"What’s going on?" I ask, pointing to the phone in your hand.

"They’re saying people are hoarding supplies. We should buy enough food before the stores empty out. I’ll have to drive down to the village."

I notice you avoiding eye contact. You busily head to the kitchen, emptying the bag of fridge leftovers we’d brought along. You act as if you have a plan and everything is under control, but your exaggerated nonchalance betrays you. You’ve already found several candles, canned goods, flour, oil, salt, and a bottle of port in the kitchen cabinets.

"What else do we need?"

I dictate a list of groceries you need to buy in the nearby village:

"Pasta. Potatoes. Tomato juice. For us. Rice. Carrots. Apples. For the dog.
More candles and another lighter. Just in case.

You still avoid looking at me. You tuck the list into your pocket, put on your coat, toss a log into the fireplace to keep the fire burning, grab the empty bag, and briefly stick your hand out the window. The rain has stopped.

"I'm off. I'll be back soon."

Then you hug me. One, two, three, four. And it's over.
Everything happens so quickly, it feels like we've rehearsed it.
I remember those four seconds and the damp, earthy scent of nature at the doorway. I also remember the fifth second, when your coat slips from my fingers.
I remember the worry in your eyes as you glance around. I remember every lie you use to try to calm me down.

I stand at the door and watch you dash to the car, your back hunched over as if the rain hadn't really stopped. The invisible downpour is your excuse for fearing the open space. You glance back quickly again, unlock the car, throw yourself into the seat, start the engine, and step on the gas. You're still hunched, as if someone might start shooting at any moment. Your head is tucked between your shoulders. Through the fogged-up car windows, I see you gesturing for me to go inside.

Can't I see it's raining?

Of course I can.

Then go inside!

I accept the lie and step back under the doorway as you drive out onto the rutted road. Cranes perched in the treetops watch you leave. Sheep grazing in the pasture also notice the car bouncing down the gravel road. So do the puppies tethered to a wooden post in the farmyard. I hear them barking. The dog raises his ears and bristles his neck. I signal for him to calm down. Then I close the door, pressing my knee against it to ensure it latches properly, and turn the key twice. I rattle the handle to check if it's locked.

It's locked.

I sit down on the uncomfortable stool and note the time. At this very moment, our son would be leaving school.

12:30 PM.

I wait for him to emerge among the children spilling out of the building like beans tumbling down the stairs. I am separating out the bean that belongs to me. As always, at first I can't make a distinction one bean from another, so I scan the hundred or so similar heads in motion, trying to recall what colour shirt he wore this morning. White? Red?

Then I hear him call out to me in the language we speak at home, and that single sentence shatters the illusion of equivalence. Suddenly, something's off with the harmonious rolling of the beans outside the school. One bean is simply bouncing differently. Do the others notice? I quickly grab his hand and lead him away, lest we disrupt the scene where every bean must appear identical.

Who knows if they're watching us?

Who knows what they're saying about us? They're all the same. Something like that. Could they even hate us?

I never turn around to see what their glances are telling us, but at night, as we lie in bed speaking in your language, I confess that sometimes I fear my own: it won't be hidden, blended in, or lightened, and after years in exile, its accent still betrays the foreigner living beneath my skin.

"Nonsense," you always tell me. "The language doesn't care who speaks it." "That's what you think," I reply.
"Language is just a tool. You use them all the same." "Language is destiny," I answer tersely.
We've had this conversation countless times. You pull me close and whisper, "Shhhhhhh." I should learn to make a distinction between imagination and fact. Between "maybe" and "certainly." I press myself against you, even though you understand nothing. You understand nothing. You understand nothing, and there's no point in explaining again. You didn't come from a place it's too late to return to, and you didn't build your home on a welcome that might

have been just a one-time gesture of goodwill, and instead of leaving long ago, you stayed by mistake.

"Shhhh, it's all in your head."

You take my hand, place it between your legs, and close your eyes. "Sleep. We have to get up early tomorrow."

And so the years pass, until today. 12:45 PM

I force myself to stay seated on the stool that keeps taking me back to Grandma's garden. I focus on the bacteria coursing through my body, bringing stabbing abdominal pain and diarrhoea. I don't tell anyone about the sludge oozing from my body, afraid it's connected to the sludge at the bottom of the hill. Could this all be my fault? Fortunately, I still believe that what is, in fact, isn't; that it will disappear if I pretend it doesn't exist. Shortly after the second bowl of stew, cramps begin to grip me. They come in waves, cresting higher and higher, each more intense than the last, until, at their peak, they completely paralyze me. I lock myself in the bathroom, crouch in the bathtub, clench my small fists, and uneasily wait for the wave of shit to splatter the enamel beneath my buttocks. I turn on the faucet and wait for the next wave. Then I wait for the stench to leave through the bathroom window. It takes forever. Afterward, I rinse the bathtub, then myself, but no matter how much I scrub, I can't seem to wash it away. The wave sometimes catches me off guard, impossible to control. Leaving brown stains on my underwear. Then I bury the evidence behind a bush. Grandma wonders where my undies keep disappearing and why the sun never seems to tan my cheeks, which grow paler and more flushed by the day. Surely it must be anaemia? That's what she tells my parents when they come to take me home at the end of summer.

"She lacks iron."

1:00 PM

I get up to stretch and walk around the room. For the first time, I notice the spines of children's comic books on the lower shelves of the bookcase. The pages are yellowed, their corners bent, as if they've been flipped through countless times. This small collection reveals traces of childhood in the house. Someone grew up here, gradually rearranging the bookcase, pushing the slim children's books to the bottom while moving the serious, thick ones within reach. Over the years, the rooms likely adapted to the bodies that inhabited them until room and person became one, inseparable. That's why the stool I'm writing on senses I don't belong here. That's why it protests. Chairs, like dogs, recognize their master.

I think about the striped armchair in Alice Neel's paintings, documenting - in the background - the walls and furniture of her New York apartment, where she spent most of her life, and where her children grew up. For years, different people posed in that blue-striped armchair. In an early portrait, Robert Graham (1968) rests his hand on the chair's back. Donald Goss (1968) leans back comfortably, crossing his legs. An unknown girl (1979) curls up in its seat. William D. Paul Jr. (1975) provocatively drapes his leg over the armrest. Dave Gordon (1972) even took off his shoes. Alice sometimes moved the striped armchair closer to the couch or footstool to fit more people into the frame. In a group portrait (1970), Gregory Battcock sits in the armchair while David Bourdon poses beside him on a footstool, wearing only underwear and orange socks. Jan and Mary feature in the same composition, in a portrait from 1971. Their fingers are intertwined over the armchair's back. In the portrait of Benny and Mary Allen Andrews (1972), the armchair touches the couch, as it does in the Robinson family portrait (1974). The armchair moved around, accommodating new models over the years, until Alice finally sat in it herself. She undressed, put on her glasses, picked up a brush and cloth, and began to paint. In her 1980 self-portrait, she is eighty years old. Her shoulders hunch forward, her half-empty breasts hang low. Her soft belly rests on her wide hips. The body's contours, shaped like a large teardrop, are drawn in the same blue as the armchair's stripes.

1:15 PM

I sit down and stand up again, sit down and stand up, until finally I give up the struggle with the chair. I walk to the front door and peer through the peephole at the muddy courtyard. The spot under the tree where you parked is still empty. For nearly an hour now, I've been alone in this house that doesn't belong to me. Nothing in it resembles Alice Neel's striped armchair; nothing resembles our own. Everything chafes, everything feels foreign. I try to mentally map

its floor plan to make it feel more familiar. The hall is tiled in brown, likely to better conceal mud. Several pairs of rubber boots stand on newspapers, and a large broom leans against the wall on the right. The first door on the left leads to the room where I write. The second door on the left opens into the living room, with its broken fireplace and the couch where the dog now sleeps. Near the kitchen entrance stands a small table scattered with breakfast crumbs. Across from it, a doorway leads to the niche with ladybugs crawling across the glass. To the right lies the bedroom, connecting to the bathroom. Every room has windows, making the house transparent.

I walk through the floor plan and draw the curtains closed.

I'm searching for words to describe it, words that won't frighten me. Once I find them, I'll write a book about the last day of peace and the little things that make it. I'll begin far from here, with the sarcophagus in Villa Giulia, which will gradually become a symbol of our imprisonment in this house. I look around, searching for those words, just as Vanth searches for the door that will open the tomb's wall.

What do I notice
first? Your absence.
What do I notice second?

The cell phone you left on the table.

I pick it up, walk to the niche, and sit in the armchair where you sat yesterday. The books and binoculars still lie on the windowsill, only there are more ladybugs today. I clutch the phone between my palms, press the power button, and a photo of our son as a boy appears on the screen. I swipe the photo away, tap the messages icon, and open the conversation with his name.

"How are you?" you wrote to him on the first day.
"Is everything okay?" you texted on the second day. "Text when you can," you wrote on the third day. "We're worried," fourth.
"We love you," fifth.

"We're going to the house," sixth.

"We're here," seventh.

The messages are unread. I mustn't think about why.

1:30 PM.

I put down your phone and wait for the pressure in my chest to ease. Deliberately, I suppress every dangerous thought. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. He's a smart boy. I look in the direction you drove off, through the invisible downpour, you waved goodbye and turned on the wipers to make the rain seem more convincing. I focus on the gas pedal you're pressing down as you force the car over the potholes, then on the clutch and brake, and finally on the turn signal you use to pull onto the main road and turn left. You switch off the wipers and finally poke your head out from the hollow between your shoulders. You follow the signs for the nearby village until you reach a line of cars blocking the road. You stop. At first, you think there's been an accident, but then you notice the turnoff to the shopping centre, where they've set up an improvised barrier. Two employees manage the flow of cars into the crowded parking lot. As soon as one car leaves, another is allowed in. You're searching your pockets for your phone to let me know you might be delayed. No; you're searching your pockets for your phone to check if there's a message from him. You want to read that he's managing, and reassure him that everything is fine on our end too. "We're okay. Your mom's a bit on edge because she didn't sleep well, and it's raining too. But everything will be better when the weather clears up." So, you search your coat pockets, feel around the passenger seat, but can't find your phone. Luckily, the line is inching forward, and you can already see the eyes of the employees at the entrance. They see your eyes too. And they see your license plate. It's different from all the others here. It's a capital city plate, the place where public funds are squandered on concepts and utopias imported from who knows where. You've read it so many times: that's where all problems come from, and where everything revolves around foreigners, faggots, and an intellectual elite swimming in privilege, yet ashamed of their own country and traditions, indifferent to the folks' lives.
You slowly realize that you are now surrounded by the folks.

Cars come and go, and finally you find yourself right at the barrier; that is, opposite the rope stretched across the entrance. The two men raising and lowering the rope point at you. You

forget about your phone and watch what's happening. Another car leaves the parking lot, so you gently turn the key to start the engine, but the guards signal you to stay put and wave the car behind you forward instead. You release the key. The first car passes you, then the second. Hey!? You bang on your window. Hey!? It was your turn!
You want to get out and talk to those people. But don't. Don't. They're just waiting for you to make a scene. Be reasonable. Do the opposite. Stay seated. Turn on the radio. Find a classical music station. Don't lend yourself to provocation. You are outnumbered.

MAURICE RAVEL: STRING QUARTET IN F MAJOR.

Your hands resting on your knees, you listen to the music. The first movement, in sonata form, contrasts two lyrical themes. You stare ahead as if there were a stage with an orchestra in front of you, wondering how much longer you'll have to listen. The next car passes. Don't think about it. Just breathe. You're aware of the oxygen entering your nostrils and filling your lungs, just as you're aware of what's happening around you. The second movement begins with a brief pizzicato, then returns to the theme from the first movement, playing with its dynamics. Here comes another car, but just keep listening. One of the guards taps on your roof as he walks by. You turn up the volume and ignore him. As the cellos introduce a new mournful theme, another car slowly exits the parking lot. This time, the driver behind you flashes their lights, urging you to move. Move! You move. Slowly, you drive toward the rope. The two guards give up their game and let you pass. You squeeze between their bellies, allowing them to tap your roof again, and find an empty parking spot just as the second movement ends with a sharp, accented chord. You park the car. You turn off the radio. The engine noise is replaced by the grating sound of shopping carts scraping back and forth across the rough asphalt outside the store. Through the glass doors, you can see a large crowd. You pat the seat again, searching for your phone. You move the seat forward and feel around on the floor. You open the glove compartment. You check the door pocket. You bend down, and only then do you find what we'd been searching for in vain this morning:

A HOLE.

Two holes, in fact. The first hole in the driver's door is almost parallel to the second hole in the passenger's door. A perfect line passes through them, leading straight to the hand that fired the bullet. This line, however, is stretched through the air. You can't see it with the naked eye, nor

can you follow it. In that sense, the line reveals nothing - except that the air makes you vulnerable and exposed, just as it keeps the shooter hidden and therefore innocent. The shooter knows this too. The immaculate birth of the hole establishes the difference between imagination and fact, between "maybe" and "certainly." You've just crossed that line.

Thump! Thump! Thump! That's the first thing you hear!
Thump! Thump! Thump! Where's that noise coming from?!
Thump! Thump! Thump! What is that?!

It's your heart, reacting to the fact called a bullet. It thunders in your chest cavity. Your thick coat barely muffles the pounding. You stumble out of the car. You want to escape the noise inside, but you still hear it. You drop to your knees and curl around your heart. You try to quiet its frantic beating, in vain. The bullet hole in the door is now at the level of your right temple. Get up! Pull yourself together! Think, think! You must make a distinction between the hole and the wound, between the bullet that was fired and the bullet that killed. Do you hear me?

You suddenly lift your head and notice a woman standing before you, a heavily laden shopping cart at her side.

"Are you alright?"

You stand up, your hands still pressed against your chest as if the panic attack had transformed into a heart attack. She watches you with alarm.

"Your heart?"

You return her gaze silently, struggling to pry your hands from your chest.

"I'm fine," you finally utter, but she has already released the cart and is running toward the store entrance.

"I'll get my husband!"

You look after her, helplessly. You don’t want to meet her husband. You don’t want them to discover that your heart attack was fake, but the hole is real. After all, maybe this is a trap? You must remain invisible, despite the panic, the license plate, and the damage to the car.

Think, think! Why are you even here?

The news said that shortages were expected and quotas would be introduced for basic necessities like oil, flour, and toilet paper.

That’s it!

Your gaze sweeps over the groceries the woman left in the cart next to her car, and you try to remember where you put our shopping list and what was on it. In the overflowing cart, you spot a bag of potatoes. Potatoes must have been on the list. Grab what you can and run! Swiftly, you snatch the bag, yank open the car door, and slide into the driver’s seat. You toss the bag onto the floor at the passenger seat, start the engine, and back out of the parking space.

Hurry up, hurry up...

It’s just potatoes, you tell yourself. She won’t even notice.
And even if she does...

You drive toward the parking lot exit. In the rear-view mirror, you see the woman. She’s rushing out of the store with two men. One pushes a shopping cart, the other holds a phone to his ear. A detail catches your eye: all three are middle-aged. You haven’t seen any young people in the parking lot. In fact, you haven’t seen any young people for quite some time. They’ve simply vanished. They’re not in the stores. They’re not on the streets. They’re not even at home. Like our son, they’re not even online.

You step on the gas.

The bag of potatoes bounces beside your feet like a small corpse.
It’s just potatoes, you repeat. Potatoes.

It’s not like you killed someone.

In about ten minutes, you’ll park under the tree in the yard, but right now it feels like an eternity. Sweat glistens on your temples as you struggle to steer the car. You roll down the window and take a deep breath of the damp air that hits your face. It feels like a panic attack, but it’s something else entirely. The moment you sat back down in the seat, you felt a sharp pain in your lower ribs. For a fleeting moment, your imagination pierced the veil of reality again, and the invisible line connecting the two bullet holes in the door seemed to pass right through your body.

IT’S STILL 1:30 PM.

THE CLOCK ON THE WALL HAS STOPPED ENTIRELY.
TOMORROW CEASES TO EXIST TODAY.

Yet the dog patiently waits by the door. The fire in the fireplace has gone out, but the tiles lining it still radiate warmth. I’m still holding your phone, gazing at our son’s face on the screen. In the photo, he looks about five years old. He’s peeking out from a wardrobe like a raccoon caught stealing. We’re playing hide-and-seek. He has sneaked into the closet, buried himself under dresses and shirts, shouting:

"Find me!"

We let him sit in the closet while we search for him in the most absurd places: in boots, in drawers, in boxes, in pots, in glasses, in pockets... His laughter gushes from the closet. If we find him, the game starts all over again. He’ll retreat to the same closet, chuckling because we can’t locate him.

"Check the shoe!" I say to you, most seriously. You peer into the shoe.

"He’s not here," you reply. Laughter erupts from the closet. "Look in the vase!" You look in the vase. You turn it upside down, tapping the bottom as if someone might actually fall out.

"He’s not here either," you say, disappointed, laughter bursts again from the closet. "He’s not here, not here, not here," you keep repeating, until a new idea strikes me.

"I know where he is!" I exclaim, but I don’t open the closet.
"Where?"
"In the book! The thick one!"

Suddenly, the closet falls silent. I take the world atlas and open it to Scandinavia. Pointing to northern Norway, I pretend to trace my finger across the Varanger Peninsula’s tundra, along an empty road slick with sleet, on the way from Vardø to Hamningberg.

"There he is!" I exclaim. "Look, you can even see his tracks in the snow!"

Our five-year-old’s curious head peeks out from the closet, his hair dishevelled and eyes wide. You’ll snap a photo.

Nearly fifteen years later, I return your phone with that photo to the table where you’d left it and play the same game.

I peer into a breakfast
cup. I lift the plate.
I look under the table.

He’s not there.

THEN, A PREMONITION.
IT CAN ONLY BE YOU.

I open the curtains and, sure enough, I see a car winding its way through the fields at the top of the rutted road leading to the main road. It passes the farm, once again disturbing the flock of sheep and the puppies tied to a stake, before finally pulling up to the house. The dog rises at the sound of the engine, confirming with an excited whine that it’s you.

Shhhhhh.

Sit!

A moment before I open the door, I realize that anything is now possible. Ever since the bullet tore through the yard, there's no point in hiding. No point in running. There's nowhere left to go. This was as far as we could get to stay invisible, and still they found us.

It's time to face the facts. We are folks too. This is our land as well. Hence, these potatoes are ours too.

I open the door.

The dog rushes out to greet you. I slip on my shoes and follow him. You lock the car. You're holding a sack of potatoes and a bag of canned goods. You lift your meagre haul into the air.

"That's all I could find. I went to three different stores," you say, shrugging and showing me the cans of tomatoes and beans.

"I'll try again tomorrow. The shopkeeper said they should get some fresh vegetables by then."
You keep walking toward the house, leaving me standing in the middle of the yard.
"Did you manage to get any work done?"

I don't answer. I'm confused by your calmness, by the canned goods, the made-up conversation with the shopkeeper, and the fresh vegetables that imply there will be a tomorrow. I had imagined you differently.

You stop at the threshold and wipe your shoes. Your back reveals nothing.
"You left your phone on the table," I say.
"Didn't even notice," your back replies.

"Did you write to the kid?" I ask it.
"The kid? No. Didn’t we agree not to?" "Yes, you’re right."
"He’ll get in touch eventually," your back reassures me, still standing in the doorway. "Don’t worry."