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THE WOLF'S HOUSE AND OTHER STORIES

(an extract, selected stories)

Translated from Croatian by Anđelka Raguž

The Wolf's House

In a house at the end of the village, there lived a ballerina called Danja. She wore a thin, white dress, as white as a lily. She would pirouette and leap so high, her hand would brush the forest treetops...

This is how my mother would begin the tale, a real, true fairy tale with a happy ending. I've tried to imagine a different house from this one, but I couldn't. In my mind, I was still on tiptoe, walking through the dark hallway, entering the pantry piled high with sacks of flour and sugar, pots of lard, and jars of pickled vegetables, jam, and quince preserves, then climbing the wooden steps to the attic, in the kind of silence that befits a ballerina. Plants from the overgrown garden have followed me into the house and taken it over—climbing roses have crept up to the top of the wall, crossed over to the roof and turned it red, snuck through the small attic window and stretched their thorny branches across the wooden roof beams from which now hang, upside down, dried bouquets of sunflowers, poppies, roses, and azaleas that should have been taken down long ago because when the wind blows, tiny bits of dry leaves, and sometimes even whole petals, fall from above, transforming the wooden attic floor into autumn under a canopy. My mother had planted roses everywhere, and my father, whenever he got caught on one, would swear and rip it out by the roots. The prettiest ones are the pink roses, which bloom along the steps leading to the front door of the house. Their blossoms are no longer mutilated as they had been when my mother passed by, tore off their petals, and placed them on her tongue like a communion wafer. I've tried chewing the velvety petals a few times, but all that remained in my mouth after I had swallowed them was bitterness. The blossoms are fragile, but sometimes I can't resist squeezing them in my fist just to feel their softness. When I open my hand, I'm left with a fist full, as if I had stuck my hand into a feather pillow. The creepers, ivy, and honeysuckle have taken over the top wall of the house, weaving through the cracks under the roof and the broken windows. Initially, I would peel their young shoots off the walls, rip them off, and throw them outside like snakes, but they would find their way back overnight. The forest has moved closer to our yard, and now the wolf can descend into the village unnoticed. My father had refused to have the trees cut down or the thicket cleared. He had

loved the forest: he would get up at dawn, shower with cold water, and hug the trees for a long time, drawing on their strength.

“He’s mad!”

Mother would watch him through the window while drinking her coffee and smoking her first cigarette of the day.

“Your brother takes after your father; you take after me.”

She grabbed me by the hand and took me to the mirror in her bedroom.

“Can't you see that we're the same! But you'll really be a ballerina. I would've been one too had I not got married. Once you've spread your legs, it's just one trial after another.”

We undressed and threw our clothes onto the floor next to her sewing machine, which she always kept tidy. Every piece of fabric was folded up on the shelf along the wall, because she knew exactly which creation she would use it for later.

“Your body's a spindle. It's destiny.”

We stood in our underwear in front of a lacquered wooden wardrobe, on the doors of which a picture of Isadora Duncan was taped with Sellotape. She was on a coast, in an elegant leap. She was wearing a tunic as thin as breath, her head tilted, and her face hidden by her raised hands.

“She strangled herself with her own scarf! In a real movie scene! Can you imagine that, Danjuša?!”

Her eyes sparkled as they did whenever she heard Swan Lake on the old record player that my father had brought back from the front line. At such times, she would not let anyone make a single sound in the house.

“Lock the kitchen door!”

Even if my brother had been howling in his bed, we wouldn't have heard him. We were standing on a stage somewhere, feeling as if the music were making us float. She opened a wardrobe full of dresses she had made herself. She sewed to order for the women in the village, most often skirts of dark blue and grey tweed, and black and brown coats. In her notebook, she had every woman's measurements like a doctor had patients' records. She was infallible; she insisted that fittings were unnecessary, and she had never once sewn an article of clothing that was too small or too large for someone. In the evenings, when she'd finished the custom orders, she'd sew dresses out of satin, chiffon, muslin, and tulle, but she never wore them anywhere except at home, because she only went out to the market and to church. She opened the wardrobe and took out a bright red dress for herself, above the knee and completely backless, and a ballerina tutu and real ballet shoes for me. They were second-hand; I don't know where

she'd got them, but I was happy. She helped me put on the tutu, tied the satin ribbons of the ballet shoes around my calves, and then put on her red dress.

"I don't need ballet shoes. I always dance barefoot!"

As soon as she put on one of her dresses, her body would adopt a different posture, waiting for the music to move it. She opened the record player, the stylus touched the record, and music, as solemn as our dresses, began to play. We spun around, dancing with serious faces until we were tired and fell to the floor, our bodies hot and breathless. We hugged each other, and my mother cried long and quietly until she heard my father calling for her.

"Kaćaaa?! Oh, Kaćaaa?!"

We got up, quickly took off our dresses, and put them back in the wardrobe. My mother went out to find my father, and I remained standing in front of the wardrobe, observing the slender body of the young Isadora Duncan. One day I might meet a poet. He'd write verses just for me.

My brother came into the room. He grabbed me by the neck and pinned me against the wall.

"You're a little slut. I saw you fucking. Everyone saw you fucking."

He roared and began beating his chest with his fists, and I sat down on the floor and hid my head in my hands. My mother could no longer handle him on her own, so my father spent more and more time in the house, and my brother hardly ever left it. Earlier, after such episodes, he would lie down on the bed in the kitchen and moan as if his last hour had come. My mother would give him medication, and he would sleep for hours and days. But this time, he had continued assaulting the two of them, the kitchen windows and the walls until my father came up behind him, knocked him to the floor, and bound his arms. They lifted him onto the bed and let him calm down on his own. He continued thrashing like a fish in mud, cursing and swearing at them. I had remained in the bedroom until my mother came for me. She had a bag and put everything that was left of my things on the ground floor inside it, tying the top with a piece of ribbon.

"I'll take you to your grandmother. It'll be easier for us."

I wouldn't hear of it. I didn't mind moving to the attic. I called it my chambers, just like the court ladies called their bedrooms in Marija Jurić Zagorka's novels. My things were already there—an old mattress with bedding, a small bookshelf, a cage with a white rabbit, and in the darkest corner of the attic, weapons: a few bombs and three rifles. A sniper rifle and two hunting rifles. When a foreign soldier had come to the door after the war and asked us to hand over any

weapons we might have had in the house, my mother had gone into the kitchen and brought back two bullets. He had taken them and asked:

“No guns?”

Mother and I had shaken our heads.

He had asked for some water, and we had given him a glass of warm mineral water because there had been no running water again due to water restrictions. We had stood at the window and watched him as he made his way down the road. We had collapsed to the floor laughing. The houses in the village were full of weapons, but no one was turning them in. We didn't trust anyone, least of all foreign soldiers. The weapons are still in the corner of the attic, but the sniper rifle remains under the window. I moved it there the day Antonio, a young man who had just finished high school and now works in construction in town, had moved into a Serbian house. I kept track of what time he came home from work and which girls from the village visited him in the evenings. It was only later that we met in person, when we were both walking back from town. He caught up to me near his house.

“I've seen you in town.”

I extended my hand to him. “Danja.”

He moved closer to me and smiled.

“You're a dark-haired Brigitte Bardot.”

“Ah, no. I'm not going to be an actress but a dancer.” He laughed out loud.

“Really? And when are you going to show me how you dance?” We were already standing at the turn-off for his house.

“Drop by. You know where I live.”

He left, and I hurried home, and without greeting my grandmother, I ran to the attic. All I could think about was Antonio's smile, his light hair and olive skin. I lay on the mattress with my hand between my legs and felt the warmth spreading through my body. I wanted to feel his weight on me. I continued watching him through the sniper rifle's scope and hoped to meet him again on the way home or on the bus in the mornings, but he wouldn't be there. So, for days, I went into the fields, taking the path that passed by his house, and my heart pounded every time I heard a door creak or saw an open window. I would walk along the willow grove in the field or sit by the railway tracks just so I could take the same path back. It had already been getting dark when I found him sitting on a chair under a walnut tree. He waved at me, and

the tip of his cigarette flew through the air like a firefly. I stood in front of him, waiting for him to say something first.

He motioned with his hand for me to sit on his lap.

Hot soil and sweat.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” I lied.

He slid his hand under my dress, touched the inner side of my thighs with his fingertips, then my crotch over my underwear.

“Sweet, young Brigitte!”

He took the cigarette out of his mouth and put it in mine, and I took a drag without coughing.

“You're right. You do have a dancer's legs.”

Just then, I heard my grandmother's voice on the road, calling my name through tears. I had completely forgotten that I was supposed to be home by now. I got up and ran. She grabbed my hand, but I broke free and hurried ahead of her.

“Now you're messing around with that hooligan. Your mother would be so proud.”

Ever since I was left alone, I've been sleeping at my grandmother's house. I call it my grandmother's house even though my grandfather also lives there, but everything he owns is on the tool shelves in the workshop and in a single suitcase under the marital bed. My grandmother sleeps in a velvet armchair next to my bed and watches over me. We're both afraid of the forest and the wolf. As soon as darkness descends, she stands on the porch and shouts my name:

“Danjaaaa! Jadrankaaaa!”

Then I come down from the attic, lock the house, and hurry to her. She sends me inside, but she stands on the porch, watching the slope and the forest above the village. She makes the sign of the cross at every sound that comes from there, whether she hears a bird of prey or an owl. When she comes inside, she locks the door, props a chair against it, and darkens the windows as if that could save us from the wolf's teeth. She spreads bread with butter and jam for me and gives me a cup of warm milk, making sure I eat everything. Until we nod off, we watch a TV show. My grandmother records episodes of Esmeralda during the day so we can watch them together in the evening. She isn't like other grandmothers in the village; she understands everything—home appliances, maths, she reads books, and she doesn't tie a scarf around her head. She wears makeup and puts on a different, clean dress every single morning, tying a belt tightly around her still-thin waist. Before she settles into the armchair, she wipes

the lipstick off her lips, and then she looks a bit like a woman on her deathbed. Lately, Grandpa has been in the room constantly. In the morning when I get up, I see him, thin and shrivelled under the quilt. The wound on his forehead is wrapped in a white bandage, with a red blot on the right side. A few days have passed since he went to the hospital to have a lump on his forehead — which he'd had since birth — removed. When he returned, he didn't recognise my grandmother. He packed his things in a suitcase and set off up the hill to the house where he had grown up, but on the way, he stopped by the barber's and asked him to style his bald head with the hairstyle he'd had in his youth. He refused to show up on the threshold looking different. When he left, my grandmother didn't get upset; she just let him go. And when they brought him back in the evening, tired and lost, she gave him something to eat and put him to bed. From the shed, she brought out nails and a hammer, nailed the bedroom window shut, and finally locked the room.

We quickly got used to the fact that we could no longer rely on my grandfather, and it was as if all our shared memories had vanished with the loss of his. The only one that remains clearly etched in my mind was the time our dog broke loose from its chain. It was raging and snarling as if it didn't know us. My grandfather and I were sitting on the porch, even though it was the dead of winter, watching my father come out of the house angry.

"Give me your hand."

I placed my left hand on his palm; my thumbnail was black. A few days earlier, a door had crushed it.

"Turn around."

I turned around, and he ripped the nail off my thumb. He took a bottle of rakija, drank a few gulps, then poured it over the wound. My grandmother brought a bandage and wrapped my finger.

Just then, Father kicked the dog in the stomach and pulled it by the collar. It whimpered until it felt the weight of the chain around its neck. That was when it recognised us.

In the mornings, when I get up to get ready for school, my grandmother follows me out onto the porch, and the cats in the basket lift their heads slightly without getting up because they know she isn't going to feed them yet. My grandmother walks behind me to the front door because she's afraid that the wolf might be waiting in ambush for me upstairs. When she sees that there's no one in front of the house and the doors are locked, she heads back inside. On the porch, she inspects her red geraniums, pulls off the dry blossoms and waters them a bit. The cats only jump up when she goes into the house and opens the fridge and takes out milk and leftover cold cuts. She's careful that no one sees her so unkempt, and before she sees me off to

school, she puts on her makeup. She wears lipstick as red as the geraniums, even now when we're in mourning. My mother used to say that my grandmother would never have married my grandfather because they were not a good match. She had been pregnant, and my grandfather had been the only man in the village willing to save her from shame. She had returned pregnant from one of the trips she regularly went on, and she had not even known who the man had been that had got her pregnant. My grandmother never mentioned him, but my mother said she had fallen in love in Italy and that her entire life, she had loved the dark-haired man with blue eyes, which my father and brother had inherited. My grandmother and grandfather don't have any children together. She hadn't wanted any, nor had my grandfather.

My mother would climb up to the attic before dawn, lie down next to me on the mattress and cry:

"I dreamt of the black dog again. It was following me while I was holding a baby in my arms. It wasn't mine; I don't know whose it was. I wanted to run away but I didn't know where, so I hid in the first house with an unlocked door. The dog raged outside the door, snarling and howling. I was afraid its teeth would knock the door down. I carried the baby in my arms until the barking stopped, and only when I was sure it was gone did I go outside. In front of the door, I saw a puppy that had just opened its eyes. I was certain it was the same black dog. I didn't waver. I took a big stone from the road and crushed its head. I ran with the baby in my arms without looking back, but I could still hear the black dog howling and whimpering."

She would lie across my chest as if she were my child, then suddenly she would flinch, wipe her face with her nightgown, and go downstairs. Although I was isolated from the rest of the house, varied sounds still reached me from early morning—crying, music, my brother's screaming, and my father's curses alternated. I would lie motionless on the mattress and stroke the white rabbit's fur. I remember it well. It was Shrove Tuesday, and as soon as my mother had descended from the attic, I heard the sizzling of hot oil on the stove, which was enough for me to smell the aroma of hot donuts rolled in sugar. She was slow; it took her a long time to fry eggs, let alone to knead and fry doughnuts. My stomach was rumbling, and I could hardly wait for her to tap the attic trapdoor with the broom handle. I opened it and saw a plate on the steps with four doughnuts dusted with sugar. I ate by the small window, and the rabbit sniffed around next to me, pulled out old cabbage leaves from somewhere, chomped them with its teeth, and chewed loudly. I stayed in the attic all day because I could hear my brother's voice downstairs, and my mother left plates of food for me on the steps several times that day.

It was already getting dark, and from the window, lights, hazy and soft like late-summer fog, could be seen in the houses. We quickly got used to lights when the power had come back on

after a year of darkness, and the house hummed with refrigerators, freezers, and light bulbs. My brother and I would turn on the TV and flip through the channels with the remote, even though we knew we wouldn't find any. The action movie Bloodsport was still in the VCR, because we had not got around to returning it to the video store before the war. We'd watch it again and again. My brother would stand in the middle of the room and imitate Van Damme until my arms and legs turned blue.

It was time to get ready. I put on the ballerina tutu, slipped on the ballet shoes, and went down to the ground floor. The kitchen door was closed, and I tiptoed out into the yard. My mother was already standing outside, wrapped in her coat. When she saw me, her mouth opened in surprise. She crossed her arms over her chest. She quickly became serious and proudly lifted her head.

"Arabesque, Danja!"

She was pretending to be a ballet teacher. I grabbed a handful of ash from the pile at the edge of the garden and obediently spread my arms and lifted my leg high. A white lily!

Turn, two, three...

Ash spilled from my hands. I loosened my grip, and the last grey flakes flew through the air. Let them drive away the forest beasts! They'll eat me, I thought, and tomorrow the church bells will ring.

I walked through the village with a basket in my hands, ringing doorbells and twirling on one leg in front of the doors. The basket was filled with wrinkled apples, cold doughnuts, yellow coins, and hard sweets. The ballet shoes were wet and dirty, my legs numb from the cold. Later, in the attic, I sat with my back against the hot chimney, my feet wrapped in a blanket. The rabbit circled me and finally nestled on my feet. As the cold eased up, the skin on my feet began to prickle and hurt. The shoes hung from the beam, completely ruined.

The lights in the houses started going out, and the window suddenly plunged into complete darkness.

Nothing could be heard from the ground floor anymore.

I lay down on the mattress and fell asleep in my ballerina costume. Enchanted Odette.

This morning, I got up as quietly as possible and went out of the house barefoot so my grandmother wouldn't wake up. She was sleeping so soundly that the click of the lock and the creak of the door didn't startle her awake. She would force me to eat, and I had neither the will nor the time for that this morning. Only when I stepped outside did I realise that my slippers were still next to the sofa, but I couldn't go back in. I ran barefoot along the path, which was

wet with dew. Mud and dry grass stuck to my feet. The morning was calm, the forest silent; neither birds nor the wolf could be heard. I had more important things to worry about than the forest. I went into the garden and felt my feet sink into the soft, moist soil. Snails were sliding over the vegetables, feeding on the juicy leaves because my grandmother refused to use pesticides on the vegetables. I pulled two carrots out of the ground and tore off a small head of cabbage. I took the key from the doorframe and unlocked the house. I put the vegetables on the freezer and first went to the bathroom. The water in the toilet cistern constantly gurgles and leaks into the toilet bowl, so the cistern tries to fill up in vain. It was dark inside because what little light would have come through the window was blocked by rose branches. I found another fallen tile in the rusty bathtub. The house, both inside and out, looks more dilapidated than the other houses in the village that were built before ours, all because of the cold forest water that feeds its foundations and walls. I took off my nightgown, hung it on the door hanger, and turned on the water in the bathtub. I took off my underwear and left it on the floor. I got into the bathtub to wash my feet. I turned the faucet to hot water, but it still ran cold. I washed my feet and had a quick shower. As I had forgotten to bring a towel, I dried myself with my nightgown. I turned on the vanity light on the mirror cabinet, took out lip gloss and mascara, and put on my makeup. I untied my hair and brushed it. I liked how it looked and let it fall down my back. It was as thick as the forest, and sometimes when my mother brushed it, she would say that blackbirds, jackdaws, and crows lived in it. She would lift my hair with both hands and fan it out, making it look like two large wings, and imitate bird calls. It might turn into a bird and fly out the window at any moment.

I went into my mother's bedroom, naked, and stood in front of the mirror. I could see her standing beside me, saying:

"Look at us! We're the same, Danjuša!"

I keep her room tidy and rarely go in, but this morning I had to. I pulled on my mother's underwear and tried on her bra. They fit my body, just as they had fit hers. All daughters eventually turn into their mothers whether they want to or not. On the top shelf, above the folded blouses, there was a perfume bottle, almost completely empty, but there was still enough for a few more applications. I sprayed a little on my neck and wrists. Nina Ricci. I opened the other side of the wardrobe and found the dress she'd worn when she'd go to town—a blue one with pale poppy flowers. It was a little wide at the waist, but I found a belt and cinched it. I closed the wardrobe and looked at myself one more time. I stood on my toes and twirled.

"You'll be a real dancer!"

The young Isadora Duncan danced with me.

I took the vegetables off the freezer and went up to the attic, where the rabbit was waiting for me. It had heard me enter the house. I kissed it between the ears, then tore off a few cabbage leaves and broke the carrot into pieces. I picked up the old, dry ones and threw them into the bin. I wiped my hands on the bedsheet because I was afraid that I might get the dress dirty. While I was getting my school bag ready, I heard it nibbling loudly. Before I went down the stairs, I took a summer scarf from the beam and wrapped it around my neck. My mother had bought several, each one woven with silver threads.

"Ajša came by. She brought a whole bag of scarves. Look at how they shimmer in the sun!"

Our eyes also shimmered in the sun with the silver threads.

I went down to the pantry and had a few slices of dried apples and two spoons of plum jam. I had two more left. I put on my trainers even though they didn't go with the dress, but I didn't have anything else. I locked the house and went down to the yard, where my grandmother was already waiting for me. She was angry that I hadn't woken her up when I got up.

"Where do you think you're going in that dress?! You'll freeze..."

She had made me a sandwich and gave me a few coins. My grandmother always has money because she buys and sells gold. When someone in the village is getting married, they come to her to buy jewellery. She used to bring gold back from her trips, hiding it in margarine tubs at the border. Her fingers are decked with rings; she wears earrings and two necklaces, and the most valuable thing she has—a gold watch she never takes off—she will leave to me when she dies.

The morning was foggy, but the bench and the bus shelter on the lay-by were visible from the road. The bus stop had newly been opened right before the war, and that day a good atmosphere had prevailed in the village. There had been music playing, piglets roasting on the spit, and we'd had cakes. Only my mother hadn't wanted to take part. She'd said that kitsch disgusted her, but my brother and I had gone with our father to the yard of the house next to the bus stop and spent the whole day eating and watching circle dances. We had only gone home when it had got dark and our stomachs had started hurting from all the sugar. I had not been able to tell my mother that I liked the kitsch.

Antonio's house was dark, which meant he had either already left or was still sleeping. I wanted to go up to his door to wake him up, but I continued on my way. I didn't want people to see me and tell my grandmother. In the morning, a packed bus passes through the village, and sometimes it's uncertain whether we'll all be able to squeeze in. I usually stand on the steps and hold on tight to the railing, so I don't fall out onto the road at the first bend. I let everyone get in, hoping to see Antonio arriving at the bus stop at the last minute, and I actually saw him

pull up behind the bus in a car right before I tried to squeeze inside. I didn't know he'd bought a car. I was still standing by the bus door when he yelled to me through the half-open window. "Come on! Hop in! What are you waiting for?"

I ran without a second thought, no longer caring what people would say. I sat down next to him and threw my school bag onto the back seat.

"You're looking good, Brigitte."

"Do you like it?"

"I swear, like an actress."

The bus had already left, but he put his foot on the accelerator and passed it in an instant. He continued driving fast, even on the bends, so I gripped the edges of my seat in fear. He noticed I was scared.

"Don't worry!"

He held the steering wheel with his left hand and slid his right hand under my dress and gave my knee a squeeze. He opened the window and turned up the radio:

You know well why I lose my head

It's simply the urge to kiss you instead...

I wanted it to last forever. For us to be alone and for no one to know where we were. Not even my grandmother.

In town, he didn't stop at the school. Instead, he sped down the road leading out of town. I knew where we were going, and the heat inside me flared up again. He glanced at me and winked. The view from the illegal dump extended over the entire town and the surrounding mountains. He stopped the car on the edge of the ravine, and I feared the car might plunge down.

We reclined the seats and looked at each other as if we were lying on pillows, in a bed. I slipped off my trainers and removed my dress. Antonio also undressed and positioned me to lie in the middle, between the two seats. I liked it better when he was kissing me than when he took off his underwear and entered me, but he finished quickly, so we could kiss again.

"Come with me, Brigitte. I got a job on the coast. I'll work and you can dance!"

We lay naked on the reclined seats, and the only thing we had eaten all day was my grandmother's sandwich. I didn't want to go back home or to school, I wanted to lie naked with Antonio every day, and to look at the sea instead of this dump and the town. I would dance on

the shore just like Isadora Duncan! My mother would be happy! I wanted to get up at that very moment, twirl on my toes, and do a few turns.

It was time to go back. We calculated when my last class ended, got dressed, and headed home. This time, he drove slowly and in silence. I told him to drop me off at the bus stop so my grandmother wouldn't see me getting out of his car. As I was getting out, I blew him a kiss and hurried down the road. I went to my grandmother's to eat, even though I was not hungry, but I had to get her off my back. I answered a few of her questions about school and headed to my own house. The cats on the porch meowed after me, like they do when something annoys them. Antonio's voice echoed in my head:

"Come with me, Brigitte! Come with me..."

I unlocked the house and left the front door open. In my mother's room, I opened the record player. It had been a long time since music was heard in the house. I took my mother's red dress with the open back out of the wardrobe and put it on. It was much prettier than the blue one with the poppies. I had grown into it, too. I did a few turns in the hallway and found myself in front of the kitchen door. I had not opened it since that day. The air was heavy like my brother's breath. The hospital bed was still there under the window, a dirty pillow on it. On the table, there was a pile of dishes; on the floor, four chairs lay overturned. The kitchen cabinets stood open; everything had fallen out and scattered across the countertop and floor. I went inside and opened the door to my mother and father's bedroom. It was dark and empty. The double bed had no mattress or bedsheets. There was no rug on the floor. My grandmother had cleaned the whole room by herself, and my grandfather had burned the bloody mattress and pillows behind the house. He had waited until everything had burnt down to ash, then he had gathered the blackened springs and taken them to the rubbish heap. My grandmother had taken a long bath after cleaning, and when she had come out of the bathroom, she had acted as if nothing had happened.

That evening had been quiet until, in the middle of the night, my brother had found himself in the pantry. He had already suspected I was hiding in the attic. He had quietly climbed up to the attic, taking advantage of the opportunity when I had forgotten to fasten the latch on the trapdoor. He had padded with his wolf paws, snarling and trying to sniff out my flesh. I had sat motionless among the rifles and bombs, listening to his rapid breathing. He had padded and padded, but he hadn't been able to find me. He had whimpered like a wounded beast. Tears had come to my eyes, and I had felt sorry for him because I had nothing to feed him.

Since then, I have always kept the latch fastened, even during the day. He hadn't given up that night. I'd heard him striking the trapdoor with an axe, but he had been unable to break it. I sat

in the corner among the weapons just like last time, waiting to hear my mother and father remove him from the steps.

The rabbit had been agitated; it would not come to me. It snorted and snarled like a mad dog. Lights were visible through the window, and the banging had stopped. I had crawled out of the corner and looked out the window. Lights were on in my grandmother's house and in all the other houses nearby; people were shouting, calling out to each other. Just then, my grandmother had pounded on the attic trapdoor and taken me outside. She had held me tight and dragged me barefoot down the road to her house. She had locked us in and said they couldn't find my brother anywhere.

"He has nowhere to go but the forest, but he won't fare well in such a winter."

Since that day, we've regularly heard howling from the forest.

The music is getting louder and louder; the walls are going to crack from the noise. The garden plants are growing, rushing into the darkness of the house. They have completely imprisoned me.

"Arabesque, Danja!"

I'm dancing. I'm spinning and spinning...

In a house at the end of the village there lived a ballerina named Danja.

Dul-pita¹

In our town, they call my husband Dragon because he's elusive and only speaks the language of fire. The town is small, with no traffic lights, and only one newly renamed hero street. We fly over the town together; not even the wind can keep up with us.

"Don't be afraid, little girl, nothing bad can happen to you when you're with me.

Hold me tighter!"

The noise of the engine cuts through the starry night. When we're on the road, no one else is.

He came for me during biology. He burst into the classroom and grabbed my hand. He didn't let me take my schoolbag.

"You won't be needing it anymore."

The teacher didn't even make a sound; she remained standing in front of the blackboard until we left the classroom. As we were going down the stairs, we heard her heels clicking down the corridor and her shouting:

"Help! Help!"

But it was too late. We had already taken off.

In the parking lot in front of the old Austro-Hungarian building, he thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a handful of gold rings.

"Choose one."

One after another, I took them out of the palm of his hand and put them on the ring finger of my right hand, but each one was bigger than the last. My hands were the problem; I was too thin. Finally, I left one on my finger, taking care that it wouldn't slip off.

"We have to show the ring to my parents."

"I've already been to see them. They're overjoyed. Now come and see how lovely our flat is."

We went up to the second floor, to a door with a broken lock and a torn-off nameplate.

"Come in! All of this is yours now."

¹ Dul-pita is a traditional Bosnian dessert, often translated as a type of sweet pastry or baklava-

like dessert, usually with walnuts and a lot of syrup.

We stood in a hall with a large mirror and massive wooden furniture. He opened the glass door, and we entered a large sitting room with a dining area.

On the wall next to the balcony door was a large red stain, surrounded by a million tiny droplets.

“There's a plastic bowl and brush in the bathroom. Scrub the wall.”

I didn't move, so he grabbed my upper arm and pushed me toward the bathroom door. I found the plastic bowl, brush, and cloth under the basin and filled the bowl with cold water. Blood is washed off with cold water. I tried to wipe down the wall with the cloth, but it didn't work, so I took the brush and started scrubbing. Up-down, left-right. I soaked the brush in the water and scrubbed harder and harder. The paint, the entire surface layer of the wall, came off the wall with the red stain, revealing the grey of the plaster.

“Harder! Harder!”

When my husband breathed fire, a blue vein would pop out on his neck. I would bite it hard at night as he arched above me.

“My vampire! Bite harder!”

The longer I scrubbed, the deeper the hole in the wall became. “All of it, all of it... You still have a few droplets left up there.”

I poured bowl after bowl of pinkish water into the toilet bowl and scrubbed until I had removed the last red spot from the wall.

I washed my hands in the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. My face was spattered with red droplets. I washed my face and dried it with the towel hanging on the hook next to the basin. It was soft and smelt nice.

I returned to the sitting room and found him slouched in an armchair, smoking and flicking ashes onto the rug. He motioned for me to sit on his lap. He put his arm around my waist, resting my head on his chest. Beneath my cheek lay the crucified Saviour. I gazed in wonder at the wooden display cabinet with starched crocheted doilies, crystal glasses and vases, sugar bowls, and ceramic figurines. On the walls were oil paintings—a nude on a riverbank, an idyllic winter night, bouquets of daffodils, a bowl of fruit.

He lifted me off his lap and stood me in front of him.

“Come on, take off your clothes, little girl! Let's see how much you've grown. Let your hair down.”

I took off my clothes piece by piece and threw them around the room—trainers, jeans, shirt, bra, and undies. I untied my hair, which fell down my back like night over a forest.

I spun around in the middle of the room and felt the softness of the Persian rug beneath my feet, as if my soles had sunk into sheep's fleece.

"Dance! Dance! Bravo! Bravo!"

He clapped his hands, a cigarette dangling in the corner of his mouth. "Woo, woo, woo, woo!"

The whole room was spinning, and he caught me in his arms.

"And now to dress you."

He carried me into the bedroom and threw me onto a nicely made bed, with clean, white linen. In front of us stood a large wardrobe with neatly folded clothes and a row of shirts, coats, and fur coats on hangers. He opened a drawer and tossed a pile of women's underwear on me—undies, bras, sheer tights. Everything you could wish for! Silk blouses and knee-length skirts tumbled out of the wardrobe. Everything was too big for my body.

I put on a beige skirt and a white blouse and draped a fur coat over them.

"Real rabbit fur!"

He sprayed perfume above me. We were in a heavy cloud of blue jasmine.

We opened the jewellery box.

"Put on whatever you like. All of this is yours now, my little vampire!"

I layered a strand of heavy pearls three times around my neck. They were cold on my skin as if they'd just been taken out of the sea. A hairpin in my neatly combed hair, and a small clutch bag. In the hall, I chose a pair of shoes from the cabinet.

"I don't want the heels too high. I'm not used to them."

They were half a size too big. They'd do.

On the way out of the flat, he wrote DRAGON on the door with a permanent marker.

This way, he was sure no one would enter the flat.

As I followed him down the stairs, I heard the heels clicking and the pearls clinking against each other.

I had to hike up my skirt as we sped towards the church on the motorbike. It was midnight, and we were the only light visible in the town. I squeezed my feet so my shoes wouldn't slip off the sheer tights, and my right fist so the engagement ring wouldn't slip off.

We rode down the hero's street and turned right twice. In front of the rectory, he revved the engine a few times and shouted the priest's name. I shouted with him. I kept striking the concrete with my heel.

The light came on in the rectory, and the priest came out. He hurried down the steps and unlocked the church.

"We're in a real hurry, otherwise we wouldn't have woken you up in the middle of the night."

The priest was already in the sacristy putting on his liturgical vestments. He lit the candles on the altar, and the two of us stood in front of it holding hands. The priest stood behind the altar and began:

"Dearly beloved, you have come together into the house of the Church, so that in the presence of the Church's minister and the community your intention to enter into Marriage may be strengthened by the Lord with a sacred seal..."

"Cut it short! We're in a hurry."

"... join your right hands and declare your consent before God and His Church..."

He once again thrust his hand into his pocket and selected two wedding rings from among the other rings.

"... I take you to be my husband, I will love and respect you all the days of my life..." "You may kiss the bride"

My husband bent down, grabbed me around the waist, and lifted me. My shoes instantly slipped off my feet. He kissed me, my mouth full of tongue.

"The bride has lost her shoes!"

We laughed. My husband laughed, I laughed, and the priest held his stomach.

He once again reached into his pocket and put a wad of banknotes into the priest's hands.
"No, no, no!"

The priest waved his hand dismissively, but my husband scorched him with a look.

We stepped out of the church, and he fired a few shots into the air. I climbed on behind him, and we soared over the town once again.

All of this is ours now!

He carried me up the stairs in his arms.

"It's traditional to carry the bride over the threshold!"

My shoes fell off again and were left somewhere on the stairs. He put me down in the hall and took off his boots. He took off his jacket and shirt, then sat down at the dining table.

"Heat up our dinner."

I threw the fur coat and clutch onto the sofa and went into the kitchen. I moved around as if I'd always lived in the flat. I peeked under the lid—meatballs with vegetables. Lunch made that morning. I turned on the stove and took out white, gold-rimmed plates from the cupboard. “Wow, Czech porcelain. Nice, nice! And look at the cutlery!”

The meatballs were boiling on too high a heat. A million hot, red drops splattered my white blouse.

Two ladles for him, one for me.

We hadn't eaten all day. We tore off chunks of bread, chewed. We poured sauce over everything, the soft meatballs melted. And the dessert! Look!

Dul-pita on dessert plates.

There was too much sugar in our mouths, as was fitting for a honeymoon.

My husband only speaks the language of fire.

I fly on his back.