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THE LEAGUE OF FISHERMEN

Translated from Croatian by Vesna Marić

THE WRITER

Mother always said I was born after three contractions, unlike my much older brothers and sisters who had made her and themselves suffer. The first jab, legs up in the air, the first contraction, second, third, and out I came. She also said she had dreaded getting pregnant in her forties, that I'd fucked her over, just like the menopause had, and her ovarian cyst had, like her whole life, in fact. She also said that I was the most beautiful baby on the ward, with fat cheeks, thick black hair, flat tummy, arms and legs in proportion, clean and (this she always accentuated) with beautiful fingers and long nails. She also said that she already knew back then, while she breastfed me at the maternity ward and examined my hands, that I would not be like the other children from our village, that I was made for beautiful and elegant things and that I would live a comfortable life. Just as you did at birth, you'll manage to slip out of problems (she slides one palm against the other), but your brothers and sisters... they'll have to earn each kuna three times over. She never told me, nor did I dare ask, if that was why she didn't spare me, if that was why she exposed me to hardship more often and more openly than she did my siblings, and if that was why, finally, she loved me less. But still, when she read one of my stories, which I had brought in a galley proof before the book was printed, and she read at the living room window where she had enough light, and when I asked her how she felt now that she could see all of her efforts collected into a story, she said: I regret that I couldn't have done more for you.

'I'll be good, I'll be good!' screams your four-year-old heroine while her father takes his rage out on her with his thick belt, you describe that belt as an 'eight-fingers-thick belt, grandad's legacy to father, together with an evil temper'. That's the beginning of the most important story in your first and many-a-prize-winning short collection titled *The League of Fishermen*. It seems that this very pleading tone has enabled a different reading of the rest of the stories in the collection all of which, essentially, deal with the topic of poverty and cross over into an almost fantastical narrative. I mean, the *average* reader is so stunned, they wonder: 'Is this true?'

Is what true, I wonder but this is not how I answer the question. Is this true in which context? Literature? Genre? Auto-fiction? Biography? Fiction? Life? The desire to experience immortality, when earthly life transforms to written word, because the supernatural was lost in the screams of 'I'll be good, I'll be good!' not just when father beat me, but also when partners cheated on me, lied, deceived, used me for money, favours and free counselling service, and I didn't want to, I couldn't, think of myself as - should I not surrender myself - selfish, mean, egocentric, (self) reliant, sharp, direct, solid, strong, and because of all this: bad?

'I'll be good, I'll be good!', oh how many arguments and hard conversations I interrupted with this promise, quietly, breaking something inside myself with the eight-fingers-thick belt,

you should have seen father and how he worshipped this belt, how he polished it and took care of it, you should have seen all my fathers and the glint in their eyes when I pleaded, uttered something, but all that could be heard was 'I'll be good, I'll be good!'.

I write: Excuse me, can you rephrase this question, does it imply that you or that my reader is average, while I believe, firmly, that my reader, of any gender, is something else entirely.

At first only father and I came to Kopilica. A shabby house, half-shack, half-garage, a tool shed. Father was a handy man and knew how to make things so he quickly turned it into a decent place to live. He patched up the walls, found new window frames on an old, deserted house and fitted them to our windows, brought drying racks from town, as well as doors for the garage and the main entrance, they were made of iron and reinforced glass, but we covered them from the inside with a thick curtain. With time and help from my brothers and his work colleagues, he enclosed the L-shaped floor plan completely, and added an extra floor. Mother arrived from the village then too, having resisted coming to live in the city until she took disability retirement due to a back injury at work. Father wasn't getting any younger either, he was already nearly 60 when I turned 13, and by the time he stopped working on the house and briefly enjoyed living in it, some five years had passed. Still, he did not lose courage to start again, at least for a while. Kopilica was an exchange for a piece of good, fertile land in the village, he often said that it was a divine curse, our inheritance, and if we were smart, by the time city folk remembered this desert, it would pay for itself several times over. The most difficult thing to get used to were the trains, the noise, the squealing, the dirt, diesel all over. I missed the village. In the city, in those first years when he and I were alone, me often at the cooker or at the drying rack with a basket full of laundry, when he'd lose it, when the devil would possess him and look for a way out by beating me, I had no way of escaping and nowhere to run. I couldn't find refuge in childhood, because I didn't have one, or youth, because it wasn't a promising one, or under a train, because not even eternity would have saved me from that misery of ours.

I was angry at everyone. At mother, father, brothers, sisters, teachers, professors, my friends' mothers and the mothers of my enemies, rich friends, poor friends, those who were making it despite their prospects and those who couldn't take it anymore despite their prospects working in their favour. The ones who made me most angry were those who only in their thirties, by which age I had hardened significantly, started to experience life's ordinary misfortunes (getting fired, moving, the death of a grandmother or uncle, the illness of a father or mother), saw them as tragedies, immersed themselves in grief, fine tuned their grief until it turned into anxiety and

depression, suffered until they snuffed out all beauty in themselves and their relationships. They were the ones that really got to me. At first I helped them, then I ran away from them. Still, I was angry even in my escape. I was overwhelmed by anger the way some people are overwhelmed by lust, greed, power. It overwhelmed my entire body, reddened my face, numbed my hands, burned my heels, awakened the scars between my legs which I would rub, in moments of desperation, like the one across my belly, massage them and then sob over them, enraged, just so they'd disappear. My eyes would get so exhausted by tears that the whole world appeared deformed, objects more distant, the walls whiter, the body preserved, young, small, with a second chance. A priest asked me at confession, a long time ago, what I thought about God, could he help me if I surrendered to him. I was quiet. Thinking. Inappropriately long for confession. He coughed to hurry me up. Several times. When I finally spoke, I told him: How can I be helped by the very person who created something this big and helpless?

We'll find a way, mother said. I'll ask around. She'll ask around. I wanted to go to evening school, there was a spring in my step at the thought, something in my heel would prop me into a jump from the idea that I could go to university after finishing high school! study!, write!, be a teacher of Croatian and English language! Mother wanted to swap her pension plan to father's, his was almost double because of some six or seven years of work in Germany, which he had done as a young janitor at an airport before returning to the village, to his wife and children. And I also needed to be propelled into the future. Then she remembered a girl who had received her father's pension all the way until the end of her degree. But how could I go to university with three years of high school? Without evening classes it would be impossible. And evening classes cost money. Mother complained to one of the law teachers for whom she tailored trousers out of thick fabric and coats from foreign magazines every season. Why doesn't she enrol in evening classes and a regular high school, that would be free. She can enrol in high school after three years of middle school, she said trying on the newly tailored clothes, looking at herself in the mirror. Simultaneously? Of course, she can go to evening classes and be eligible for the retirement money by attending the high school, some 70% of the retirement money. When she finishes evening school she can enrol at a university and just carry on receiving money until she's 26 or until she finishes her studies. And that's what we did, and my brothers and sisters left me alone, I had a purpose now. With time I found work in a boutique, as an ad-hoc assistant in emergencies, and they appreciated this and paid me well. I couldn't wait to go to my evening classes, from 7pm to 9pm every week day and Saturdays too. I didn't have to attend lectures at the high school, and I put away the university registration document in the same drawer as my employment register booklet. I used my canteen voucher, unburdened my mother from cooking, released myself from

duties and a desire for food. And that's how it started. That's how I started. On four fronts. I was simultaneously a high school student, a university student, worker and pensioner.

Aside from violence, it was the fear that was unbearable. I was afraid of the dark, the sounds in the silence of the night, I was afraid of my fast and agile peers, I was afraid of anyone witty and wise, I was afraid of father, he used to drink, loving the bottle the way life had never loved him, or us in turn, he even went to bed with it, put it on the night stand, it was a sacred object. I was afraid of him sober too, he was unpredictable, he would quickly turn from joker to executioner, no one in the village whipped off their belt as fast as he did, and when he beat me, the beating became his *being*. He'd sigh like a beast above me, whipping me until his spent shoulder warned him it could work no more, he'd sit, light a cigarette, wipe his leather whip on a kitchen cloth, before the blood crusted up, stub out his cigarette, leave the room. Only then could I get up off the floor, without moaning, and carry on whatever it was I'd been doing before. I was afraid of my brothers too, they were already grown up and had taken after dad, even if he'd beaten them too. Sometimes he'd just take off his belt, throw it to one of them and say: Hit. I was afraid of him when he was sorry and put a plate of food before me and said eat, when else are you going to eat, dad was hungry for everything at your age, whenever someone would offer a crumb... Who chooses love over a full belly! I was afraid of myself too. Whenever the cutlery drawer got stuck in the chest, and the knives fell out from my pulling and shaking, I had the idea of how every one of the executioners would die, but in reality I didn't make anyone bleed but myself, with the smaller knife, before the Sunday wash, between my legs, because while they did beat me, that was a place they'd never never dare to look.

I had always known that something was wrong with me, because ever since I was small I had an indescribable need to return to the places and people who had harmed me. It may be because no one had managed to penetrate our enchanted circle, someone wiser, someone with a lens that might zoom in on each of the wounds that we made invisible through daily life. When my city friends would ask me how it was to live with my family, how it was to grow up in the village, I'd tell them: It was hard, but there were moments we tried to catch hopelessly, like pots under a leaking roof, but we remembered those moments, held onto them relentlessly. For example, the smell of freshly baked bread, the rolling out of dough on a round wooden table, the blessing of houses, village saints, the birthing of apples, peaches, walnuts, bathing in the river, the smell of soap in the window pane, above the tin pan, the breeze across a bare back as you're washing your face, armpits, the veranda pergola full of grapes, record-breaking sized pumpkins, mother resting in the late afternoon on the western side of the house, the sun washing over her and

making invisible her destroyed face, hands, and even heart, the birds were singing, masking our screams and cries, our poverty. And sometimes, when pain would threaten to surge out of me, but it needed to be hidden, I spoke as if I had been witness to the creation of the world: You know when I was growing up, there was still no domestic violence, there was no feminism, class politics, inequality, if you like, there was no literature or poetry either.

After graduating I went to buy my employment register booklet. It stood on a shelf next to empty student registration booklets, the paper was the same colour and thickness, the covers had the same smell, and even though the employment booklet was significantly smaller, the future that came with it was palpably heavier. I took job applications wherever my family told me to, my brother had heard that a bakery chain was branching out and looking for workers, my brother-in-law would follow up with they'll take you, it's 100% sure, all I needed to do is take my CV to the new department store, ask for so-and-so, and the rest would take care of itself. Mother would cross herself and say: God willing, god willing. Curriculum Vitae. CV. Tse Ve. That's now how you say it, ha-ha. You say see-vee. I had my name and surname on my Curriculum Vitae, completed high school, places where I had done work experience and the places I'd had summer jobs. There wasn't much, but if they'd added up every day I had worked, I'd have had a year and a half of work time in total. Father often said that a worker had only one task: to do what they're told. I followed his instructions, but... My obedience under the lights of shopping centres, as opposed to his as a town square welder, was lacking, useless. I needed to be smiling, good-natured, jolly, white-toothed, slim, hot, feminine. You, with that size you're not fit for a shop, you take up too much space, you're fit for a warehouse, you're stronger than Goca at the forklift, and Goca is, he raised his hands into the air, hugged the air, massive, one man told me and threw my CV into the bin.

Father had always had problems, health and life problems, and he had, perhaps by mistake, perhaps by professional default, perhaps via some internal logic and its electrical circuits, made them eternal. He grew up in poverty, worked abroad for a time, learned the craft of welding, brought his craft to the village and worked as a welder until retiring. He was by far the best in his field, was sought after and sometimes paid double, but what good did that do when he drank it all away. Wine. His moustache always splattered with red drops, he'd lick his lips only when he'd finished the bottle, gathered under his nose what he'd saved for the end. That man didn't do a day's work sober, he was precise and cautious, which is why his death took us by surprise.

Or maybe, deep inside, it did not. He welded without a shield sometimes, which was the secret to his excellence and consequent weak eyesight. He couldn't judge the length of a road, as he used to say, everything seemed to be moved to one side, whereas it was right in front of him. He didn't accept glasses, and every now and then he'd get a pair on the national health, which he would throw against the wall with great pleasure, as soon as one of us would annoy him. He finished the last pair a few days before his death. And he died the same way he'd lived - cruelly. A freight train chopped him up slowly, with the tn tn tn sound of each carriage, the train also interrupting our TV signal, we were annoyed that it was ruining our signal and taking so long to pass just as we were watching a series, only late that night did we find out that father had been lying under it, dead, drunk.

Oh, how I loved to read! TO READ. When books started to be sold alongside daily newspapers, I collected them one by one, brought them home, bought some, others I marked as damaged when they taught me about returning goods, some I got as gifts from colleagues or bosses, or from press delivery workers. People looked at me with those books on my lunch breaks at work placements, and no one ever mocked me. I got better at school too, my Croatian teacher noticed that my language was more polished in my essays and that I had few grammar mistakes, she also noticed that I correctly separated a word at the end of the line, by syllable, moving it to the next, asked me where I'd seen this and who had taught me to do it (she couldn't have taught me because no one taught us grammar and syntax, only literature), so I showed off the list of books I'd read and the sample I'd made with all the end-of-line word separations. My speech had improved too, I spoke more clearly, in an educated manner, I got a note of sophistication that was rarely heard in the school playground. The teacher signed me up to a competition at the Society of Croatian Authors. The task was to write a fictionalised account of the life of the poet Tin Ujević. I didn't get the prize. But I got praise. And a trip to Zagreb paid by the school. It may have been exactly then, at the Zagreb station into whose gaping mouth the moon was entering like a fat, rounded tongue, among the Society's books, on a walk around the Upper Town, encountering Zagorka, Zagorka and Goranka face to face, that I first came into contact with a life far greater than the one that was meant for me. Where else could I have got this desire to one day become a writer? And to return home with this intention, to our shabby shack in Kopilica, delivering the news to father who was already nodding off, neighed to mother through gritted teeth: You take care of this, shame for a dad to give a thrashing to such a big girl.

I hadn't slept a wink in three months. The GP gave me a repeat prescription for Lekotam, but I only took it once. I started the pack and threw it in the rubbish. I stared at the night ceiling, criss-crossed with tree shadows, wept harder only when the freight wagons from the nearby railway

rattled the air, got the entire neighbourhood out of bed, sent me to the bathroom to wash the infected and puss-filled scar. First year of primary: 48kg. Fifth year of primary: 103kg. Eighth year of primary: 145kg. First year of high school: even the scales have their limits. Bread, give me bread with lard, butter cream, big corn crisps, give me oily, burnt food, food with too much sugar, give me more, more flavour. And then it flipped, in my first year of university on a visit to an endocrinologist because I'd grown a beard from one sideburn to the next, I had polycystic ovaries, high blood pressure... and I desired to be desired. Waking up from anaesthesia was hard, my belly was wrapped, and the promised 70cm long scar was there instead of skin which, unlike the weight, could not be discarded. There was another thing. An error. Something done wrong. Because I could no longer feel the abdomen under my bellybutton, or see my cunt, there was just a swelling from which, when I stretched it like dough, protruded my clitoris, a prolapse in between my legs, into madness. The plastic surgeon refused to take responsibility, did not mention the bribe he took through connections, to operate on me before other patients, that he'd made up a fake diagnosis for me, that I was a bit of cash on the side. When I asked for a second opinion he sent me to his colleagues who claimed he was a good surgeon, and I was insane. No one would see me or hear me out. I did not sleep for three months, I hid even from my brothers, sisters, mother who wanted nothing to do with me anymore, because she couldn't help me and everything else was an embarrassment. Especially my request that the doctor admit his mistake, to do something, when I dragged him out into the waiting room of the emergency room, took my pants down in front of everyone and shouted: Is this what they train you for? You're a butcher, not a doctor! How will we ever recover from this? I sat at the university assistant's office, I'd come to cancel an exam registration, my brain was no longer working, it had been conquered by pain. She asked me what was wrong and I couldn't tell her, perhaps I was ashamed because where I come from surgery only happens before death or when your spine is spent, or perhaps it was my endless heaving in tears, my face drowning in a horrific grimace as she touched my shoulder and said: It's OK, it's OK, it'll all be fine, just let it all out.

How are you doing, Reader?, a Writer asked me at the counter, between the jolts of the salami cutter and pushing my heart underground, under the fridges, between the fans, no one would dare get it, terrified, from under there. I shut the book. Took it out of the shop hidden under my shirt buttons like a secret, anxious at a question that was simultaneously so intimate and direct, before going to sleep, in bed, having already gone over my face with a cleanser and acne-prone cream, my hands covered in cream for mature, dry and cracked skin.

How am I doing, Writer?, I'd reply without any real intention of getting into a proper response or finishing the book, I didn't want to discover anything about myself, in case I scared myself, because I have met many who got scared of themselves, clammed up or went totally wild.

How am I doing, Writer?, I asked him, you tell me, and when you tell me, be gentle, be considerate, because where I am at, in order to even see me, you'd need to raise your head, kneel, forgive oneself.

How are you doing, Reader?, the Writer asked me twenty years later, in my small rented flat, a cramped kitchen that did not speak kindly of me. How are you doing, Reader, eh?, he insisted.

Like this. A warrior. Strong. Gentle. Solid. Stubborn. Big. When I finally dared and scared myself, taught myself about myself, I too went totally wild. I entered love, intimacy, my body.

How am I doing, you ask me now Writer, as I prepare to turn over a new leaf. I'll tell you, without any constraints or secrets: I'm no longer in pain. And I'm not afraid of anyone. I'm alive.

BIG HELVETIA

Keep it, that's what Suzy told her when she showed her a bum bag full of cash. Keep it, fucking hell, are you nuts, you can live off that for three months. Or take us all to a resort, she was getting into it. Let's go to Tenerife, you wanted to go there before you wasted all your cash on some stupid shit, or to Greece somewhere to some Eros or Thanatos, we can live like queens for two weeks, she shrieked with a cigarette between her fingers.

I can't, Kata snapped at her, but in her head she had already decided; I can't. I'll go to the police. I just need to pull myself together first, she procrastinated while fingering the bank notes, like a proper mechanical counter.

I'll resent you for it, Suzy said with a threatening smile on her face. Or I won't, she suddenly got serious, do what you have to do, she blew smoke upwards and the fan returned it straight to her face. I'd give it back too, she said squinting, of course I would, being decent is the most important thing, so that you can walk with your head high wherever you go. Robi would do the same, Suzy added, and Kata took this as a signal to move. Some months ago he borrowed her car for a couple of days and returned it a month later, without even saying thanks or giving a gift that might signal gratitude. How she got to work, don't even ask. And for the First of May, when she managed, unexpectedly, to get three days off, they crashed her dad's friends' countryside house, made a mess that Kata had to clean while they had coffee by the river and texted her that she'd be late to the barbecue. To which they didn't invite her. We nearly left without you, that's what they said and kept repeating it.

She told them everything. That she'd finished her shift at the motorway petrol station, that she was rushing home and bursting for a piss as soon as she came out onto the motorway with her Twingo and how she really, but really, couldn't hold it in until she got home, or god forbid, until reaching the motorway from the Klis Fort and then racing downhill with a full bladder. And how she stopped by some bushes at the entry to the motorway, close to Kurtovići, a bit behind the metal ramps, did her business, and in the dried up weeds, as if in the heart of some living room bowl packed with nick knacks, spotted the white bum bag. Her heart pounded, but none of the three men in charge minded, not the one in uniform, or the two plainclothes policemen. They even brought her coffee from the machine, a bag of Kiki sweeties, as she had requested, but only if possible. They counted the money, didn't tell her how much there was, marked the notes and agreed when they might publish the news on the Police webpage, Facebook and tell that journalist to put it in the papers. And that they didn't think anyone would turn up in a hurry, it was very likely that the money belonged to the local mafiosos, up there is where they fight, have their arguments, do their bone breaking, make agreements, have their siestas, the youngest officer added, you're the last thing on their mind - a hero. Kata chuckled at sarcasm coming from a uniform.

But, let me ask you one thing, this is how Kata finished her work at the station, how does someone not notice that they lost this much money, my backpack feels like an empty sack on my shoulder now...

Miss, you'd be surprised at the kind of stuff people lose and never think of again, he pointed his chin to a huge pinboard filled with missing people.

Kata felt a flood of mixed feelings, deep horror and freedom and, thus unburdened, ran down the stairs, pausing at the bottom and looking left to right, as if choosing a direction for the first time in her life.

And that's how I got here, she said to a girl on the lounger next to hers, the owner paid for this.

Interesting, the girl replied and started packing her things away.

Sorry if I bored you, Kata became worried and got up, but the girl reassured her, it was really not about her, she had some chores of her own to do now.

Kata suddenly felt small and rather than throw herself in the pool or walk to the nearby resort S beach, she held out via sheer willpower, understanding that her willpower never actually held strong when she exercised and that overall, willpower was her weakest spot. She dug out her phone from her backpack and turned off airplane mode. She felt sick, and lunged back onto the lounger. Still, she managed to go through dozens of messages, notifications about tagged posts, mentions on Facebook and Instagram. She got several messages notifying her that two numbers, which she immediately recognised, had tried to reach her one, two, three... Too many times. Shivers went down her spine. Goose bumps darted out of her like hundreds of tiny shuriken. She leaned deep into the lounger, pressed her skin with the thickly woven towel, pushing the goose bumps towards her throat and belly. She shrank even further, and out of the corner of her eye, still held hostage by her own desperation, noticed the girl who had been

sunbathing with her by the pool, wearing a perfectly ironed and tailored suit with a three-colour badge on her breast. A concierge. A female concierge, Kata yelped internally. The realisation that she hadn't been abandoned because of herself, but that the girl had work to do, pumped air back into her lungs.

And the long blonde hair pulled back into a bun at the bottom of the long neck, how it resisted against the silk collar of the white shirt and the summer crimson jacket of the, the, the, for God's sake!, female concierge!, she admitted and went a little wild inside. One of the shuriken burst out of her belly and threw her into the soft waters of the aquamarine pool.

Hey, she started composing a message to Suzy, I was going to get in touch... She deleted everything. She went back to Facebook and saw that her and Robi had shared the article about the found money which had been successfully returned to its wealthy owner. There were no details about the amount, location, identity of the owner, where he was going with the money, it just said *honest woman from Split* when it came to Kata's identity, and underneath there was a questionnaire: Would you return this amount of money? Answers: a) yes, b) maybe, c) no, d) never. But those two idiots had tagged her and shoved her name in a bunch of gardenias, roses, sunflowers and suns and sea waves, and now everyone was asking: Is it Kata, well done Kata, someone even wrote Congratulations, Kata, as if she'd been working on something non stop and was now reaping major rewards for her hard work, and someone lovingly added: Hope she'll take us out too, which Robi had replied to with a hands-in-prayer emoji. Suzy too, yes, Suzy too. She sighed. She messaged her family group that she was on holidays and that they shouldn't worry about her. They knew her location if there was an emergency, she thought, they could find her any time. Mother sent her a photo of her record-breaking-sized cabbage heads and courgettes from the small garden, and father had changed the family group photo into one of himself, so that now his head was sticking out of a hole in a garage as he fixed cars. He was smiling. It's fine, Kata thought, we are all fine. She wanted to look at the muted conversation that she'd ignored for months, but... Above her head, on the sunny beach, flew a fat airplane and she took this as a sign. She pressed the icon and disappeared behind a straw hat.

And what are you reading, she shielded her eyes from the sunlight and saw the female concierge.

A book, she replied briefly, putting it down on her chest.

Yeah I know, but which one, what is it about, the female concierge insisted.

Big Swiss, she underlined the title with her finger, about a woman, Greta is her name, who falls in love with another woman, married, the woman from the title, her real name is Flavia, and then she spies on her via her therapist's transcripts.

Do they hook up, the female concierge finally released her hands from behind her back.

They hook up, Kata replied.

They both then gazed somewhere into the distance. Kata worried that the female concierge would leave so she quickly broke off a larger piece of herself than she normally would.

I'd translate it, she said to her, I think it could be a bestseller, she added.

I thought you worked at a petrol station and picked money from the surrounding fields, the female concierge was suspicious.

That's where I regularly experience identity crises, Kata was being witty, but normally I translate. And you?

I'm consistently what I am, the female concierge concluded and tapped the little tag on her breast, underlining her title. This hardness reminded Kata of the conflict-avoidant Swiss woman from the novel and she wanted to tell her, but the female concierge interrupted the flow of her thoughts. You'll have trouble translating that title, she remarked and went off about her business.

That's right, kick me, thought Kata, as if I hadn't thought about it myself. She shifted the book from her chest to the top of her head, got up, looked around, and when the female concierge disappeared fully inside the hotel lobby, she wrote down the name she'd seen on her name tag onto the top of the page.

Who am I? Who am I? Who am I, really? That's what we all wonder. Not you of course, you'd never ask yourself this question, look at yourself, you look like the embodiment of Sara Jo hospitality and hotel-world, as soon as you blink I think that you are putting enough effort into me, Kata thought to herself. You're so desperate, she quickly changed her mind, this time addressing herself, what's wrong with you, this is literally a hotel official who said hi to you twice and exchanged a few words with you. But did she really, she spiralled again, did she really? Are you really... No, for real, she did only approach you and you alone. At least it's what you noticed. Because god knows, you weren't paying attention to much these days, except what was right in front of you, a scene large enough to hide you. Everything is somehow a metre away from me. The pool, the beach, the solitude. Where are the people? Is social anxiety on trend again, a little depression? Where are you, for real, a scream burst out of Kata.

She was in her hotel room on a Saturday night, she was alone with herself and a muted TV and several mini bottles of wine, the smallest person in the world, as big as a bobbin, not even her own demons could find her. She crawled to the book, looked at the cover and turned it face down. *A Falling Woman*. Or maybe *A Woman in Fall*. The similarity is obvious, Kata thought and fell asleep with her head buried in the pillows, mouth wide open so that she would not accidentally suffocate.

The female concierge knocked, listened, unlocked the door and looked inside, and told the cleaner that everything was OK and that's she'd take care of everything. She drew open the curtains, turned on the shower and woke up Kata. Half asleep Kata said mama, mama, to her but

the female concierge never broke into a smile as she dragged her out of bed and guided her towards the cold stream of water.

Oh it's you, Kata's head cleared up after she turned off the shower and squeezed the water out of her hair, is everything OK? Do I have to leave? Are you throwing me out? Is my siesta over? Is it because I had the AC on too high and you want to save money?

Do you always talk this much when you wake up, the female concierge asked her seriously.

I'm a morning type, Kata replied.

It's two in the afternoon, the female concierge flashed her phone at her.

Well, shit, I'm... a mysterious type then, Kata took the towel from the female concierge's hand and wrapped it around herself. She squeezed out the water from her hair once more, above the sink. Why are you looking at me like that, Kata noticed the woman's impatience.

Two people are waiting for you in the lobby, a young woman and what looks like her boyfriend, apparently you invited them to join you, and they're a bit impatient, the female concierge explained.

Kata felt a wave of queasiness rise up from her heels to the back of her neck. Jesus God, she yelled, what are they doing here. She ran to the bed to get her phone and screamed. Airplane mode off, online chat with Suzy active, she had sent her a picture of herself in bed with Jen and a mini bottle of wine, and a range of all the classic spectacular moments of the destination: a bit of the bay, the sunrise and the sea that still owed nothing to anyone. Everything was signed off with the location and a rant about how she doesn't remember that anyone had ever written such a good novel about not only one, but two lesbians, or even a bunch, and imagine the ooproar (she spelled it like that!) by the *puritans* and the hands in the pants of the *allies* when they understand the real lit where women actually fuck and live elaborate lives, and not just suffer and think about stuff in private and inside social mental institutions. And she added: And imagine if it was translated. SF!

Suzi wrote nothing in reply, but suggested that her and Robi might join her at the resort.

That's where she, she imagined, blacked out. Ah no, no, she registered on LinkedIn too, and made a fake profile for a Silvija Berlusconi via which she thoroughly spied on the female concierge. She had found out plenty about her, or at least about her academic past. She had attended tourism school, had a bachelor's in tourism and culture, yes, she remembered everything, and a master's in psychology, then four years in Spain, then something about cruise ships... She wouldn't mention it, as if she blamed her for everything, not really, but almost, because if she didn't do this thing with sudden departures and if they'd exchanged numbers, and if she'd had a public Instagram profile or if they'd added each other on Facebook, and if she'd said like, you're really hot, she'd have sent all the photos to her instead, with an invitation to her room to raid the mini bar and undressing with their teeth. Basically as it was, she had to COMPENSATE. She smiled, amused at herself, but was quickly flooded by panic at the thirteen missed calls in the last hour. Save me, any way you can, please, get rid of them, I can't, I can't, she looked at the female concierge and finally collapsed inside herself.

I did this because it's part of my job, but when you leave here, you'll have to take care of these things yourself. As far as they're concerned, the female concierge explained, you're on a two-day excursion in the mountains, in some special hotel arrangement, OK? I came up with this mountain-and-sea tourism thing last minute. I didn't believe it myself. But they left as soon as I told them, she undid the knot on her silk shirt and let it slip onto her cleavage. She let her hair down too, combed it with her fingers, and it fell neatly around her face.

Kata examined her face properly for the first time in the sunlight of the resort beach bar, supported by a hydrating drink. She noticed that her high cheekbones lifted her sunglasses as she spoke. Laughter completely raised them up off her face, and with them probably the foundation and blusher. She felt pressure in her chest, as if she'd swallowed a ton of cotton candy and now couldn't burp it out. She pressed the spot she thought was her diaphragm several times.

The female concierge looked at her and sighed.

No, no, no, I am listening, Kata tuned into the conversation for a moment, thank you! I couldn't have done it myself... And my head is all over the place still. As if someone has been playing ping pong with it all night. And thanks for dragging me outside, I'd have made a bunker in the room for myself again.

Aha, the female concierge turned to face her, the proximity of the sea reflecting in her glasses, the soft waves and the carefully laid C-shaped row of sun loungers on the beach.

Kata watched two women a bit further out at sea. One kept trying to climb the other's shoulders, and the one below kept sinking. And however many times she showed her or told her she couldn't breathe, to get off her, the other one kept climbing. First they screamed at each other, splashing water, giggling, and it didn't look serious. Then everything happened again and the one that kept being sunk screamed, chasing off the other one farther towards the open sea. The other one started swimming back to the shore. She was done. The other one was still swimming in circles, chasing her own tail. Fin. Whatever.

Kata felt that she was tensing up again and that her skin was bubbling up.

Do you think people can just disappear without anyone noticing, not even themselves, Kata seriously asked the female concierge.

How do you mean, the female concierge asked for clarification.

You know, that they can change so much they would no longer be recognisable, Kata explained.

I don't know, anything is possible, the female concierge said curtly. Why, why do you care?

Because I have serious doubts that I have disappeared, Kata thought. It happened so slowly, definitely more slowly than life, that I didn't even notice. Like an empty sack over my shoulder.

You know what I'm wondering, the female concierge interrupted the silence, I was thinking about the title of that book, you've really got me thinking. It's really going to be a real problem to adapt it, everything sounds stupid. *Big Swiss Woman, Large Swiss Woman...*

Oh yes? You need to read it, Kata added, for better insight.

I have, I found it on epub, it's great so far, the female concierge said.

Really!? Then we have to meet to COMPARE NOTES, Kata was hooked. For sure, before I leave.

For sure, the female concierge responded.

I'm here until the end of next week, Kata reminded her, in case you didn't know.

I know how long you're here for, the female concierge replied briefly, snuffing out any possible reaction by Kata.

Do you have anyone in the hotel who could transcribe what I've translated into my notebooks and get it onto a USB? Could print it out so I could see what it looks like. I don't have my laptop with me, Kata pleaded.

We do. Leave it at the reception when you're done. And please, in the meantime, use these five stars, the female concierge circled around the resort with her hand. It's pointless if you just go between your room and the pool.

Had I not disappeared, were I still here, Kata thought, definitely. As it is, I have to organise a little search party. Besides, Kata thought, I don't remember that I could ever enjoy the things I hadn't earned. But that's not the topic now, shoo, shoo.

Cool, cool, Kata added resentfully, I'll think about it.

Think about it, the female concierge started collecting her things.

And where are you going, Kata asked.

Believe it or not, I have a whole rota of those like yourself, the female concierge put her chair back.

You mean to say I'm part of your job, Kata hadn't had enough and gently pressed her.

You'd be surprised, the female concierge said in a double entendre and left. She tied her hair swiftly into a bun, and tied back the knot on her shirt just before the hotel entrance.

These departures! For god's sake! Kata bit her lower lip. She's really made them her *thing*. She looked at her phone and saw several new messages by Suzy, but also dozens from the muted chats. She decided to address those, but not now. She took out the notebook and pen from her summer bag, and for the first time in several months wrote in it. Noted the time and place under the words. She thought for a moment that she'd started, out of nothing, to see traces of herself.

How is a person created? How to return to oneself? Maybe the way a story is created. Some incredible event gets things going. Most often a hero, or a heroine, sums up the courage to go onto a real and/or symbolic journey. On that journey our hero(one) meets help or hindrance, which can come in the form of their own self or other people and/or circumstances. This is where

narrative rules are affected by genre, so if the heroine's opponent is a meteor, it's an action type genre, especially if she wants to save her loved ones (she will save herself from many other things, normally the action genre loves those who are mostly dead inside, while appearing like classical gods from the outside, and now I wonder sporadically if this is helpful to the stereotype that people with smooth and lean muscles are seen as a little slow; questions for further discussion: how to also exercise the spirit in the action genre?; what about fat people; food for thought!!!).

If the heroine has firmly decided to end her life, then the meteor is her helper (in some bizarre way), and the work becomes a type of (anti) social, existential drama. On this journey the heroine comes across many obstacles, which she overcomes either alone or with the help or the hindrance of others, but mostly she is a hindrance to herself. But never, ever will anything happen if the heroine doesn't travel, if she doesn't move, if she doesn't experience and see the world. The world must be seen. And the world, like the story, like a person, in fact, is created when someone is excited about it, when someone is curious about it and its potential (these are not my words, but I firmly believe this).

The writer sits and writes, at night she closes her eyes and imagines, moves things, moves the story, the heroine, the same way the Earth moves: searching for light, a big eye that sees its better, ever-bright side. And she almost always goes against the rules, because rules can blind the curious eye, and that eye will never be able to create entirely what it has imagined, and we are talking about the world here, if it isn't able to see the entirety. If it doesn't orbit the world on its own.

Heroine: me. Antagonists: Suzy and Robi, but only in appearances, in fact it's me, but actually the real, the realest antagonists, male and female, are totally in the background with their cruel little faces, doing everything they can to pervert this wellness reality check. These two are just a bit dumb and self obsessed, but not evil. I love to be the god of my things! Journey: finding money, holidays at a resort, but really much deeper, farther, earlier, escaping the city, escaping the flat, escaping my own life and metamorphosing into a ruler of large valleys and a motorway petrol station. Can a journey begin with an escape? It can. But I don't want to be a coward, I don't want to regress, look back, roll back or go around in a circle. Is this why I am hiding? Maybe it would be better if I kept moving, as the female concierge said, a little farther than my usual trajectory of room-pool-lounger. Helper: the female concierge. And what a helper!

I haven't slept for days because of her, and I am really raiding the minibar. She's at my door constantly, trying to get in, but I don't let her. Then we both somehow remember that she has keys, and it becomes inevitable. I have something to confess!, that's how I start, like a frightened teenager. We are both afraid, mostly of broken hearts and loneliness, but she doesn't show it, even though she behaves as I do: as if it would be the first time for us both. Suddenly, lust isn't the place of liberation, but an abyss that whoever turns out to be faster, nimbler, more decisive, pushes the other one into. And so we tackle one another, teeth sinking into thighs, teeth sinking into nipples, teeth sinking into the soft skin of the neck, into unwitting flossing, until a fragment of reality, for example the smell of wine on the lips or the taste of cigarettes, for god's sake, her blonde hair that scratches like goat hair and tits that defy gravity to such an extent that

NASA wants them for a case study!!!, paradoxically, pushes us into the real abyss - reality. And this is where we really go wild! In fact, we become ordinary, because we're suddenly curious. I am curious. I want to inhale through my lips every bit of her skin. She doesn't resist, it's not part of her job. After that, my tongue on her face, my tongue on her neck, my tongue on her tits, my tongue on her clitoris as if it were the last sweetie in an unwieldy wrapper, until I have tossed it about completely into a thigh clench. It does not show any mercy, I gasp for air, now I die a hero! Full journey. Full stop. (Resort S, 23.7.23., K. K.)

Hi Silvija, the female concierge addressed her with a firm voice. She sat at the edge of her bed. Kata tightened the towel that she'd wrapped around herself after the shower. Her hair was still dripping down her shoulder and into the crack between her tits.

Silvija?, Kata said in surprise.

I brought your transcribed translations, the female concierge replied. And a few pages of... Ah, I don't know what to call it, diary? Of a desperate person? A dreamer? Soft porn? Lesbian lit masquerading as narrative theory?

Kata noticed the pages next to her skirt, bundled into a small shirt with a metal fastener. Her insides turned, her brain worked overtime, and she was having flash visions of being slapped by sweeties in unwieldy wrappers. Sweeties, for god's sake! She blinked almost instinctively, but didn't move. Now, now I die!, she thought.

You know what I despise the most in stories, the female concierge continued, when characters are reduced to their job description or nationality or a characteristic that they would not use to define themselves if they had three lives to live. Too much function, too little agency. Is that how you might phrase it?

Aha, ok, yes, Kata whimpered.

That's why *Big Swiss Woman* is such a stupid title. Stupid. I mean, rushed, she concluded calmly. You can be as progressive as you like, but still... You hold onto obvious stuff.

Yeeeess, Kata said, squirming.

My suggestion is, now that we're comparing notes, he-he, *Big Helvetia*, the female concierge said gravely. Imagine Flavija, with a spear, a wreath, a cape, all in white, the colour of surrender, as she says herself, you can't get away from her.

Fuck, Kata was truly impressed. Her hearth was coming out of her thorax, but she didn't move.

You won't ask my name then, the female concierge changed the subject, your FEMALE CONCIERGE.

Yes, I will, Kata leaned towards her a little and lowered her eyebrows, and let out a tiny bit of air through her teeth. She'd love to say: I know it, it's written on your breast, you know about Silvija too, but...

Come on then, do it nicely, the female concierge wasn't letting up.

I want to know what your name is, Kata proudly raised her chin, feeling braver.

Lucija, she replied, the light of your life.

Lucija, Kata repeated.

No, no, now you ask: Lucija, what do we do now?, Lucija pressed her palms into the soft duvet.

I ask?, Kata relaxed a little, seeing where the story might be heading.

You ask, Lucija replied, and you loosen that towel.

And then, Kata was pierced by curiosity and the flannel opened before her.

Then I reply, Lucija pulled at the knot on her shirt, now we will do everything that is not part of my job.

No, now, now I die a hero. Full journey. Full stop.