

**DRY STONE WALL**

**Staša Aras**

*Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić*

Meek before force, the woman put her signature on the document that stripped her of her property. Why hadn't she refused? The idea seemed to have crossed her mind, or she thought it might cross her mind, but it didn't. It simply didn't.

Only a fool would think of rebellion in a place where dread was embraced in a kiss with the genuine horror.

"The house in the town?" she continued in the same tone, as if dictating.

"The house in the town is yours," replied the official with a scar the colour of wine.

With a single signature, Mila gave up her vineyards, barrels, water tanks, presses, wardrobes, chests, books on trade, export and transport, on ships and routes. She gave them up to the dead. The summers, the pergolas, the gloves. The grapes, the wasps and the afternoon dreams. The crickets, the figs and the laughter. Let the dead rest in peace. They didn't care anyway. Or did they? Who could know? She stepped out of the room into the hallway. The hinges creaked. She crossed the threshold of her home.

In the fields, the vineyards were paved over with sheets of metal. The vines had been shoved into the earth, hidden, returning to dust. The Vugava grape was now a subterranean river.

When they left the house, Lidija lifted her head. Her hair fluttered on the north wind, and she brushed it from her face in one fluid motion of her hand before embracing Mila.

"Let's go back. They've dispossessed me on the spot." Mila paused. "Or rather, let's not go back. Let's go and see the miracle. Let's meet the Allies. Maybe they'll give us some chocolate."

"Bitter chocolate?"

"Bitter, what other."

Rage, house, uniform, ship. A deafening noise and dust, and the trees bending in the wind. Beyond the last houses on the slopes, the view extended to the valley on the east. The field had been turned into a silver runway. Mila pulled her hands out of her coat pockets, stunned by the sight. Can things really change so rapidly? For hundreds of years, nothing happened in the corners of the world forgotten by God and men alike, and then the finger of Fate touched a small spot on the map and changed it overnight. Lidija stood next to her new friend, feeling Mila's silence rising like tide up the inner walls of her being.

"Let's go this way."

They walked down a goat path by a grove of ash trees and bramble bushes, past the drystone walls behind which the grey, gnarled branches of the old, now leafless fig trees writhed on the backdrop of grey sky. The north wind rushed against them, clinging to their skin. The woollen coats were of little help.

"This is the bora wind," Lidija said.

"It sure is. The dark, fierce bora."

They carefully made their way down to the main road and then followed the road towards the runway.

"Do you know where we are going?"

"There," Mila pointed. "We're going to see what's happening."

After a hundred meters, they encountered a barrier manned by an American soldier. Mila addressed him in English, but he didn't let them pass; instead, he told them to go to the headquarters.

"We've just been there," Lidija replied.

The soldier, a young man of about twenty, watched them with his shoulders raised, as if to say that he could not help them, that what they wanted was above his rank.

He was freezing, guarding that barrier.

He lifted the barrier for a jeep coming out of the military zone of the new airfield. Two officers inside the vehicle glanced at Mila and Lidija. The guard briefly explained to them that the two young women were curious about the airfield, that one of them claimed the airfield had been built on her land, and that they had come to see the vineyard.

The officer in the passenger seat stepped out and introduced himself.

Mila extended her hand and showed him the document she had signed half an hour earlier. The officer looked at it and with a slight nod of his head showed her that he understood. Then he turned, went back to the car and pulled his seat forward. Mila and Lidija got in the Jeep behind the two officers.

They drove downhill, away from the field and back towards the harbour. Mila watched the houses which were now occupied by soldiers.

"Let's go back to the town," she had said to Lidija. "We'll talk to Jerko and figure out our next step. There's nothing we can do here."

Several girls were walking down the path from the upper houses. Mila waved to them, and they waved back. She knew them from before.

When those refugees had first arrived on the island with their expensive suitcases different from the shabby suitcases of other refugees, and when they stood on the pier with those suitcases and their hair dishevelled, but still different from the hair of other refugees, they exuded the smell of powder. That scent floated in Mila's memory, sweet and undefined. Now everything reeked of smoke and kerosene.

Unexpectedly, a new smell hit Mila and Lidija's nostrils. Did they become light-headed all of a sudden because of the smell of the soldiers' shirts, or fear, lice and lye soap had made them lose their minds?

"This feels good, doesn't it?"

Mila nodded at the nape of the soldier in front of her and winked at her friend. She raised her fingers to her nose, rubbed them together, let something invisible slip from her empty hands and blew into her open palms.

"You are here one moment and gone the next. It's called magic."

"What did you say?" Lidija shouted over the clatter of the engine and the stones crunching beneath the tyres.

"Nothing!" Mila yelled back. "Nothing!"

The open sea burst into the view in front of them. For a moment it seemed they would fly from the island up into the sky. Mila laughed at the speed and the roaring engine. They bounced and jolted along the road, and the two girls felt a rush of irrational joy, an unexpected surge of exhilaration. Lidija also laughed, sitting next to Mila. The soldier in the passenger seat turned around. Seeing the girls' eyes glistening with the tears caused by the wind, he laughed

too, and for a second, just for a second, in a different context, that moment could mean something else, something completely different.

And maybe it did.

Why not? It was possible, it could happen that something non-existing, something woven entirely from imagination, shone in our lives like a lighthouse in the open sea. In that one moment, the four of them were happy, utterly free of the past and the future.

“The New Year is around the corner,” the soldier said.

“What’s your name?” Lidija shouted, gripping the seat, trying to steady her bouncing body. She planted her feet against the floor.

“Name, what’s your name?”

“Ralph.”

“Ralph from the RAF!” fired back Mila, and Lidija elbowed her in the ribs to calm her down; but the hoop that had held the heavy chain of obligations and fear already snapped, and Mila suddenly felt very light.

“Nice to meet you,” she said to the officer on the passenger seat, then reached out and touched the driver’s shoulder.

“And you? What’s your name?”

“This is David,” Ralph replied, and all four of them briefly shook hands, with their arms crisscrossing, as David held on the steering wheel, and the jeep rolled downhill towards the harbour, teeming with people, uniforms, mules and bundles.

Mila just smiled. Lidija caressed her hand with friendly concern.

“I’m fine.”

“No wonder you’ve lost it a little.”

“Have I?” Mila laughed mischievously and threw back her head, catching the cold wind with her face. “I guess I have. I guess we are all a little unhinged.”

The engine became quieter as they slowed down to let a cart pass. Ralph glanced at the two girls.

“We’ve all... lost it a little, as Lidija says.”

“It’s the only way to stay sane.”

“See? The man makes a good point. In crazy times, you have to... act a little crazy.”

“We’ll get out here,” Mila said as they neared the first houses.

“You’d better not be seen with us.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. Actually, it does, but we are past caring. It’s only that we don’t want to make our lives any harder than they already are.”

The girls fixed their hair. Mila opened a hairpin with her teeth and clipped her hair back behind her ear. Lidija simply smoothed hers down with her hand and wiped her damp face.

It was four in the afternoon, and the sky above the bay was clear and crimson as if it were spring. Dark clouds had been carried away by the wind, out to the open sea.

Beyond the small chapel at the corner of the street, the two girls entered the stone heart of the town. The narrow streets met and parted, some ending in the dead-end staircases that led nowhere, as if someone had changed their mind halfway through the building or was distracted by a more pressing task. Perhaps death. Some streets intertwined and branched off again, circling around the fishermen’s houses and the slightly larger captains’ residences which, nestled in the

embrace of the grey stone, hid gardens with water wells and wine cellars. Most houses were three stories high, and their windows were mostly shut. But their doors were open, and there was always someone going in or out. A small crowd had gathered in front of Tonka's shop.

The women were buying flour and barley coffee with rationing coupons.

Behind the counter, Marta was counting small packages, moving them from one side of the shelf to another.

"Your aunt is here," Tonka said to Marta when she saw Mila and Lidija at the door. "Did you go there?" she asked Mila.

Mila nodded with a smile.

"And?"

"And nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"How can there be anything, when everything is gone? The vineyard has been destroyed, and now the RAF planes are landing there. The house has been turned into the headquarters, 'cleansed', as a man with the glasses has put it."

Tonka just stared at her, waiting for more.

"There's nothing to tell you. It is what it is."

"They can't just take one's property like that... They can't!"

"You see they can."

They fell silent, as if ashamed of their own powerlessness, not knowing what to say in the face of something so final.

"Come on, love, let's go home."

Marta left the bars of soap wrapped in a dark blue paper and took Mila's hand.

"Put this on, it's cold," Mila said, pulling a cap from the pocket of her coat and putting it on the little girl's head. She squeezed her hand in hers. She had the feeling she was holding a bird. Warm and dry, Marta's small fist settled into Mila's, and moving in step with one another, they walked out of Tonka's shop and headed home.

Lidija followed them. The unexpected joy that had filled her and Mila as they rode down the hill suddenly vanished. They didn't ask themselves what had caused it; they knew. The scent of security, of strength, of power. Something solid and reliable that had radiated from those soldiers. Now their faces disappeared again in the greyness of the stone and the darkness of the house that awaited them with its familiar smells of soap, mint and dampness. Holding Marta's hand, Mila thought of Melita and felt a silent abyss in her chest. A void. She was now sure that Melita was gone.

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"That's not going to happen," Jerko said.

"What do you mean, it's not going to happen?" Mila was sitting on a wooden chair, pulling her scarf over her shoulders and then taking it off again, as if she couldn't decide whether she was hot or cold, or what to do with her hands.

"What I said. It's not going to happen. No matter what you think about it, things can't just be taken away. When I say things, I mean the house, the land."

“Oh, come on, you are suddenly talking as if all this made any sense. All this,” she jerked her chin towards the window, referring to the chaos of people that had been growing in the harbour over the past few days.

“Listen,” she reached out across the table, “look me in the eye and try to understand, but really understand. Everything we knew until now, about the world, about ourselves, about the land, about this island,” she moved her fingertips over the smooth surface of the table as if creating a new map of the world, “everything we knew...”

Jerko calmly listened to her.

“It no longer exists.” She erased the invisible map with her palm. “Those who are saying they will establish a new order, they’ve already established it. You and I, and the little girl sleeping on the couch over there, we are a part of it, there cannot be anything *new* without us. We are the new order. Yesterday I found out I had lost everything I had. Someone, and I really don’t care who, simply signed a piece of paper and decided it was the law. Who am I to disprove it and can I disprove it? I can’t. One has to know their limits.”

She leaned back in her chair and lifted her shoulders, watching him with her eyebrows slightly raised. Her beautiful face was something Jerko thought he would probably remember for as long as he lived: the face of a woman who had lost everything and was completely calm about it, as if she were somehow content.

“I’m a free woman,” Mila said in a softer voice. “Free,” she repeated and lowered her head closer to the table, before she reached out to touch Jerko’s hand. “Listen to me, we have to be smart.” She laughed conspiratorially and continued in almost a whisper. “You know yours, I know mine, and nobody else except us needs to know it. We had an outside world, we had our land, our hands, a life, and then someone came and destroyed it, took it all away, and now it’s gone. But there is something else, something that nobody knows. Maybe we don’t know what it is either, but we’ll find out. There has to be something.”

“You sound like you’ve lost your mind.”

“Wait, hear me out,” she squeezes his hand again. “I told you to listen to me carefully. This is the new order of things. *Niente, nada*, nothing. But it can’t be that there is really nothing, because there is always something, and all we have to do now is watch and keep our mouths shut. The man in the headquarters has said that the house is still ours.”

They were both silent for several moments, before Mila continued.

“That woman, Lidija, she’s good. I like her. She’s like me.”

“Nobody is like you.”

“Really? Are you trying to seduce me?”

Jerko laughed. “You can’t be seduced. Anyway...” He laughed again and raised an eyebrow in a way that made him look like a young man on the verge of rushing into a romantic adventure.

“What?” Mila laughed flirtatiously. “Tell me. Anyway, what?”

“You know that women are safe with me.”

“Safe?”

“I mean, I’m not interested in them.”

“What a surprise!”

Mila laughed so hard that her back hit against the back of her chair. Then she beamed at Jerko, and he put a finger to his lips.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

“I’m not saying anything. Have I said something?”

Laughter burst out of them, high-pitched and strident like a flame.

“Keep it down! Someone will hear us and think we’ve lost our minds,” Jerko warned her.

“I’ll tell you something. We don’t belong here.”

“Good morning, Columbus!”

“Look at this misery. Everything so dull and grey and pitiful, the lice, the medicines, the wretches with their beggars’ bags.”

She stood up, placed her hands on her hips and swayed gently.

“Come, we’ll dance to a silent music. The music one cannot hear in the darkness in which one cannot see, in a land that doesn’t exist. You and I, who don’t know where we stand. Isn’t that wonderful? Look how happy we are without any decorations, nameless, uncertain, unmoored, cast aside, unregistered, undocumented, and yet, here we are! Look at our arms, legs, heads, smiles! Come! There is nothing to stop us from being alive and what we are, if we know what we are, and we are something, because we exist, we are two individuals without a shelter and label, who live illegal, nonaligned lives. There,” she pointed towards the shelf with plates, “there is the orchestra. The musicians are all in suits and white shirts, wearing cologne. And there,” she pointed at the couch where Marta was sleeping, “there is the bar with bubbling drinks in sparkling glasses, the people sitting at round tables, the young ladies in shimmering gowns. It’s the New Year’s Eve of 1943. Come! No one knows what future will bring, life thrives without a label, we are an unknown seed that will sprout one day and populate the world, grow into trees, into a new species. Maybe this is only the beginning. Maybe we have only just been born. We have just been freed from everything that was. The old world has left and abandoned us. Goodbye and farewell, my native shore. Adieu, adieu.”

Jerko laughed; he was slender and suddenly as charming as a ribbon, a silk scarf that could be draped over one’s shoulders and give one the air of glamour.

They danced. Quietly, on their tiptoes, not to wake Marta, to the music of a silent waltz, Radetzky March or something similar, and the night outside gaped at them, dark and dry. The black nothingness without time and space, the blackness that swallowed everything and having nothing left to consume, just gaped soundlessly, emptily; a bottomless night, the war and the sorrow that would never be satiated, the mouths that would always be hungry, the land that would always be barren, the sea that would always be desolate. The stupid darkness stared at the two laughing people, while Mila hummed under her breath and tapped her tongue against the roof of her mouth in the rhythm of the waltz.

“Melita is dead,” Jerko whispered in her ear.

“I know. I knew it yesterday.”

They danced on, both aware and unaware, calm and resigned, as if the box step of the waltz helped them to accept that news. To seduce reality. To tame the horror, uncertainty and poverty.

Marta stirred in her sleep and opened her eyes. She watched her aunt and Jerko dance, then closed her eyes and lowered her flushed cheek back onto the pillow.

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The winter took hold, grey and impermeable. The house was sleeping, motionless and hypnotized with its blue shutters. Three windows in a row on the upper floor, and just as many on the lower one. Neat, level, solid, secure. The alleys hosted warehouses and the piles of pipes, rags, boxes, cloth and ropes. As if the world could be saved by the rags of the poor. As if they could tie the beast's hands, pull a sack over its head. The newcomers were still arriving, roaming around the island. Nobody counted them any longer and nobody was surprised. The only thing left to marvel at was the resilience of the human body and the speed with which people adapted to new circumstances. It was astonishing how everyone strived to maintain a system as it was, even when its flaws made a normal life impossible. Then the clock hand moved, the hour struck, and thousands of phoenixes rubbed their eyes and laughed into the future. The time for a change was ripe. The dead and the ashes remained, the lice-ridden blankets and dried blood, the maimed and the abandoned, the ravaged earth, the dust and the smoke. And suddenly, the fish were in the sea, the birds were in the air, and the humans walked on two legs and loved their neighbour. Just like that.

Don't think that there is a magic wand, that things will be fixed by some higher miracle. That's impossible, Lidija's father used to say. Do not believe it, he seemed to be telling her. But she believed.

Lying in bed next to Vera, she believed that by some miracle everything would be better when tomorrow, the first of January 1944, dawned.

I'm ready, she told herself.

Vera slept restlessly, twitching her legs, turning suddenly, tossing in the bed. She was in a half-sleep, awake when she thought she was sleeping, asleep when she thought she was awake. Vera was afraid, she still lived by habit. Grief had crushed her, and crushed by grief, she slept beneath the darkness as if beneath a stone.

Anka had her arms crossed over her chest, above her belly; she was blessed. She spent the entire day making bandages. At one point, she started to sing. She said "let's sing, comrades", and they all sang inside the thick walls of the Tower, as they turned the piles of rags into the rolls of bandages. That was what women did. Their hands transformed straw into gold. Like Rumpelstiltskin's. A smile escaped Anka's lips in her sleep.

In her sleep, Marta was riding across the fields on a wooden horse. She was going to her mother, and her mother was laughing. She and her mother would travel by train. They would board the train in Split, leave the sea behind, and sitting side by side in that train, they would watch the houses, barren fields and clouds rush past the window.

Melita. She was gone. Melita had left an empty space behind. Melita had shrunk the world so much that it had become unbearable. Unbearable, but possible. One keeps on, people say. One survives. Life is a narrow, dark tunnel; have we ever really emerged from the birth canal?

*The walls close in, and at the end, a trap awaits you. You just have to change the direction, says the cat in the story, before it eats the mouse.*

*Stories always run parallel; the only thing that matters is to know which one you should give priority to, which one should be told. The one that isn't is the one that interests me. I want to know how much a story insists on being told, how much it forces you to tell it. They say one*

*should write about what leaves them speechless. Don't write about what you know, write about what you don't know. Does it really matter what colour Melita's skirt was, whether the dawn that rose over her stiffened body was the colour of military cloth? You just have to change the direction.*

*You just have to change the direction. That's what Mila was thinking as she walked her fields. Dispossessed. That is our collective theme. All those who lose their land with a single signature. The landless. Nationality? Landless! Ethnicity? Vagrant!*

Churches, towers, committees and warehouses packed with people and ammunition merged into a single scene, in which despair soon transformed into hope. Movement. Rumours began to spread that the ships in the harbour were sailing away. Steamships and sailing vessels, which had been unloading their cargo on the waterfront every day, now stood empty, waiting to take on new passengers. At first, that rumour spread hesitantly, like a whisper or an intuition, and the people were not sure what exactly they had heard; then it became more certain, until the words of the decree took shape. The island was overpopulated, and its inhabitants would be evacuated. The airplanes landing on the field had become more frequent; soldiers, the wounded, deserters from the enemy army, fighters and recruits were organized into new units. Women, children and the elderly - the eternal classification of those who seem to be a burden in every war, but are actually the ballast that in the end saves the day. It is always them that the stray bullets find. Perhaps the world would have been long destroyed, if it weren't for women, children and the elderly. They were the ones who now slept in the homes of the landowners.

Having kissed Mila after their dance without music, Jerko walked through the dark hallway out onto the street, raised the collar of his coarse uniform, tightened his belt and adjusted his hat to cover his left ear. He tucked his hair in need of a haircut under his cocked hat. He liked it that way; it gave him a refined look, or so he thought. He was tall and slim, having shot up like a beanstalk, and his high boots made him look even taller. Sometimes it seemed to him that his uniform was his new body, a body that can stretch. He headed down the street towards the sea, trying to silence his footsteps on the cobblestones. With a cigarette in his mouth, he stopped and looked at the harbour. The ships were resting in the moonlight. The clouds were clearly visible in the night light. He loved Mila and Anka, and their house full of women attracted him as if they were his family. He had no family of his own. His parents died before the war, their names were written next to the other names beneath the cypresses at the cemetery on the hill, and their names were the same as the names of many other islanders. Three names and three surnames in different combinations on the gravestones seemed to demonstrate that on their island everything had always been the same, and that the people with the same names always had the same fates, stretched between the vineyards and the sea. With their feet in the sea, and their heads in the olives. A small assortment of biblical names on the grave markers beneath the cypresses of the small church with a rosette above the entrance. Jerko would like to see a bonfire like the ones they used to lit in winter, when they would drag tree stumps and the remains of the dried-out fishing boats in front of the church, and watch the sparks sputter into the pitch dark night. They would sit around the fire with flushed faces, drink wine and inhale the smell of resin and smoke. The sky above his head was dark now. Feeling the tenderness in his waist and back,

the tenderness of his own body, he walked on towards the east. As he passed by the municipal building, he saw a guard smoking a cigarette under the crown of a palm tree, and stopped.

He wished the guard would head towards him and in that wish he recognized his long-embedded desire for an embrace with a lean-bodied young man who would approach him for no apparent reason. He had that desire since he was a child. He never asked himself why; it seemed to him that if such things were ever questioned, they would soon turn out to be the evidence of madness or perversion. What warmed him from within was the truth without a doubt; his desire was clear, and he never questioned it. His inner light were the hands of a young man touching his lips, the breath of that man on his skin, the smell of his neck, his white arms wrapped around him. Whenever he thought about it, an inner light illuminated him, and only then, connecting with that inner light, Jerko felt his true self, the pith of his being; everything else, the everyday life, was his bark. Like a branch of a fruit tree in spring, which released its green-smelling, sticky sap when you stripped its pink bark with your nail, he longed for the fresh dampness of a stripped branch. Jerko felt he was getting hard, he felt his pulse in his loins, and that moment became a celebration in the moonlight. He watched the young guard smoking and waited for him to head towards him. But the waiting lasted too long. Jerko retreated; he didn't step out for the young soldier to see him, but returned down the street, hid in the dark shadows behind a giant heap of boxes wrapped in canvas and unbuttoned his military trousers. In the moonlight, under the starlit sky, enveloped by the smell of oil and fish scales, he imagined the young soldier walking towards him, gentle in the winter air. His nostrils flared, and the rhythm of his excitement, the versification of pleasure in his hand, the arsis and thesis of love, flowed towards the swarm of the stars that now seethed along his spine. He ejaculated on the taut waxed canvas close to the wall. He laughed, tilted his head like a fawn listening to the breeze in the young branches of the birch trees, and wiped his hands on his hair.

Then he lit a cigarette and, almost dancing, covered the distance of some thirty steps that separated him from the young soldier. He greeted him, and the soldier returned his greeting.

"A good way to welcome the New Year," Jerko said to the young man.

"The best," the young man replied.

"What's your name, guard?" Jerko pulled out his cigarette case and offered the young soldier a cigarette. "Help yourself, it's Herzegovinian tobacco."

The young man took a cigarette and put it in his chest pocket. "For later, I've just finished one." He pointed to where he had thrown the cigarette butt. "My name is Roko."

Jerko extended his hand, which was still warm from his encounter with the stars. They shook hands, but Roko didn't let go of Jerko's hand, and Jerko didn't do it either. They just stood there holding hands. Roko couldn't be older than seventeen, he was but a boy with peach fuzz above his full, upper lip. One of those faces from the Dalmatian hinterland, which were born on the rocky ground, but possessed a mysterious fragility. A budding face of a young man, effeminate, one might say. Jerko smiled warmly, conspiratorially, as if he had recognized the tenderness in the young man's big, moist eyes. Roko smiled as well.

"Where are you from, Roko? How long have you been here?" They finally, awkwardly, let go of each other's hand.

"I came here a few days ago." Roko turned his head and pointed over his shoulder to the building behind him, which served as a barracks for the soldiers who had come to the island with

the wounded from other islands, from which the inhabitants had been evacuated before the German occupation.

They talked about the Italian prisoners and the period between the liberation from the Italians and the German occupation, which had lasted less than a month, but had changed the islanders, overwhelmed them with fear, stirred them, shaken them and made them join new ranks.

“Were there any executions by firing squad?” Jerko asked.

“No, we’ve brought all the prisoners along. They have been transferred over there,” he nodded towards an island in the dark expanse of the sea. Its silhouette was visible in the moonlight; it looked like a whale that had surfaced and would soon dive again. Jerko glanced at the island and remembered Melita and Veljko.

“From there, they’ll be transferred to Italy”, Roko added.

“You think?”

Jerko asked it in a friendly tone, as if they had known each other for years, perhaps sensing that they were connected in a way that allowed them to speak freely. Maybe because of what had just happened, he had the feeling they were close, intimate; and they were. Roko looked at him and shrugged, keeping his eyes on Jerko’s, searching them for the answer to that question. The mystery of death and its secrets, the executions, the murders, the removal from the face of the earth, all the lethal stuff that was called “summary procedure” stood unspoken between them. In the night.

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“This is what you have to say, Vera, do you hear me?” Lidija shook the fragile shoulder blade of her friend, who was sleeping too long. “You have to say: I will be cheerful! That’s what we should tell ourselves every day. Your sadness is becoming too big a problem, it’s draining your strength. And when it takes all of your strength, and it will, it will move on to the others. Come on, get up, soldier!”

Vera turned her face from the pillow to her friend.

“Lidija, my dear, you know me. I would like to get up, but something inside me doesn’t let me do it.”

“That’s grief, love! We know it, we know that grief stays with us forever. I’m so sorry, my darling, but you have to get up. Come on,” she pulled the covers off Vera, and Vera stirred in protest. “Come on, get up! It’s a new day. I was with Mila up in the fields yesterday morning. They are full of American and British soldiers. Mila signed the paper that deprived her of her house, her land, everything. Actually, this whole island used to be hers. And Anka’s. But now she’s downstairs, fumbling with teacups. War takes from us, it sucks us dry. But we are alive. Do you understand, my dear?” Lidija went to the window in her nightgown, stretched out her arms and started doing exercises. “A healthy mind in a healthy body. Left hand, right foot; right hand, left foot. The thing is, my little philosopher, that while the bomber planes are destroying cities and the tanks are crushing houses, while the bombs are falling, somebody somewhere is walking, reading newspapers, making tea, doing exercises. What I’m doing now is the only way to survive, because,” she paused for a moment, putting her hands on her waist and spreading her legs wide

to stretch her hips, “if some sow death, others must sow life. It’s a hand-to-hand combat. Defiance.” She jumped, brought her feet together and repeated: “Defiance! Come, be defiant and don’t give up. Grief will pass, don’t let it defeat you. Carry your sorrow inside, but wear dignity on the outside. Get up and remember what your mother used to say. A little hat on your head, gloves on your hands, and off we go; a new day, a new battle.”

Vera got out of her bed and laughed.

“That’s the spirit, beautiful. You know, this island is free, and Mila and I easily made our way to the fields, it is possible. We came back in a jeep with two soldiers. We are free. Today we are going out again, but you are coming with us, or you will go with Anka to work in the tower. You can’t just lie around at home any longer. There is no more red, blue or white bourgeoisie, no more idling the hours away with the game of patience. This is a time for action. And it is the New Year’s Day.”

In the kitchen, porcelain dishes clinked softly. Anka was sitting beside little Marta, dictating to her: “The time has come, comma, and the old man...”

Marta’s little head was bowed against her arm, as she was slowly writing in her notebook with a pen.

“Lift your head! Is there something wrong with your eyesight? And relax your hand,” Anka said, taking the pen from Marta’s hand and adjusting it between the little girl’s fingers the way she thought it should be held. Then she cupped Marta’s hand in hers, stood behind the little girl as if she were about to teach her to dance and she needed her whole body to do it, and guided her hand across the paper. A bumpy trail of letters remained in their wake.

“... invited his grandchildren and the whole village...”

With her large body, Anka guided Marta’s small one, holding her hand as they wrote the ungainly little letters in the sentence.

“See how wonderful it is? You are writing. Isn’t that amazing? You’ve learned to write.”

“I haven’t yet,” the child mumbled through her teeth.

“Oh, but you have! That’s all there is to it, just relax and practice.”

Mila set out the teacups, humming to herself. She looked happy, watching a sliver of blue sky that could be seen through the window.

“What a beautiful New Year’s morning,” she said, pulling her sleeve over her hand to open the small stove door and toss in a piece of firewood. The scent of smoke and sage tea filled the air.

Vera and Lidija peeked into the kitchen and then timidly stepped inside with smiles on their faces and wished everyone a Happy New Year. Mila, Anka and Marta turned their smiling faces towards them. Mila spread her arms and moved towards Lidija, while Vera went to hug Anka. Marta put down her pen and climbed onto a chair to be as tall as the young women, and Vera and Lidija approached her as if she were on a little stage and embraced her tightly. Marta shook hands with them and received their kisses on her forehead and cheeks.

*If we imagine the situation around us as a proscenium on which everybody present is an actor and everything that is going on is only a scene in a theatre play, we easily slip into that make-believe and quickly become its participants. We enter the spirit of the game, fully aware that a game is just a game, that nothing in it is real, and that awareness gives us the feeling of*

*lightness, because playing roles is just playing, which means we are having fun, and different rules apply than in the serious, real life; the rules that allow the people - actors, participants, to suddenly unleash their creative impulses and play, just play. Afterwards we wonder at someone's ability to play so freely, for so long, and with such an ease.*

"Please be seated." Mila placed the teacups in front of Vera and Lidija. "Today is a special day, and we'll have breakfast." She opened the oven door and pulled out a tray with the freshly baked, golden cornmeal hoecake.

"Are you learning to write, Marta?" Vera asked the little girl, pulled her chair closer to her and leaned over her notebook.

"Now that we've cut her hair, she can," Anka joked, ruffling the short hair on Vera and Marta's head. "Look at them, they are like two little boys. You seem to be in a good mood," she said, turning to Mila.

"Do I have a choice? Look how beautiful the day is, who knows what it will bring us."

She hadn't even finished that sentence, when a small bell connected by a rope to a hook on the front door rang. Mila cracked open the window and peeked down at the street. Jerko was standing at the door.

"Happy New Year, comrade," he said quietly, with a smile on his face.

"Wait." Mila tossed him the key.

"Don't break my head. I've dodged a bullet and I don't intend to die from the key of your wine cellar."

When he entered the kitchen tall and slender like a fir tree, Jerko placed the bundle in his arms onto the cupboard behind the door and then kissed the girls one by one.

"I don't think I've kissed this many girls in my entire life."

Marta had climbed onto her chair again and was standing at attention, so Jerko would kiss her, too.

"Look what I have for you, comrade Marta," Jerko said, reaching into his breast pocket and pulling out a small bar wrapped in silver foil.

"Wow!" all the girls clapped their hands. "It's chocolate!"

"Admit where you got it."

"Chocolate is another name for the Allies, isn't it?"

"Something has eased up, hasn't it?" Mila said. "Can you feel it? It is as if this evil were coming to an end. That's my impression this morning."

With her large body against the cupboard, Anka eyed the bundle Jerko had placed on its top.

"And that?"

"Oh, that's nothing, just some food."

"You've brought some food and you call it nothing."

"Food, nothing. But I have something to tell you, now that Mila has said that things had eased up."

Everyone looked at him.

"We have received the order to evacuate the island. The population, which means us, has to leave."

"What do you mean, leave?" Lidija asked.

“Where are we supposed to go? Do they expect us to drown in the sea?”

“You’ve seen the ships taking the people away.”

“The devil has seen them,” Anka muttered.

Mila put her hands on her hips, as if she were about to hear something that would make her burst out in anger. Her soft, round face sharpened, her lips pursed as if she needed to blow on something with all her might, her nostrils flared, and she just stared at Jerko, waiting for him to continue.

“Spit it out!”

Jerko pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and read the decree.

“The island has been proclaimed a military zone. All inhabitants, both local population and the newcomers, will be transported by ship to Italy.”

“To Italy?”

“Isn’t Italy...?”

They were all silent for a moment. On the other side of the window, a horse neighed and its hooves echoed on the cobbled street.

Vera hugged Marta and said: “All right then, we’re going on a trip, aren’t we, sweetie? It’s not so bad. Maybe it’s time for us to leave this island.”

With that, she shattered the iceberg of silence that had kept them petrified. Everyone laughed, hesitantly, cautiously. Lidija stared at the floor. Vera and she were in a better position. It seemed that only Mila truly understood what was really going on.

“Wait, let me see,” Mila said as she approached Jerko and took the paper from his hand.

At the top, there was a stamp with a five-pointed star.

“It looks like someone just puts a stamp on these things without a second thought,” she said, turning the paper in her hands as if she were searching for something else, the small print that would exclude them from that decree. “They take everything you have and kick you in the ass. End of story. That’s it? What about the right to complain?”

Jerko laughed placatingly and raised his thick eyebrows. He pulled his chair closer to the table. “Let’s figure out what to do now. Maybe not today, but all the inhabitants will be soon evacuated. The Allied bases in Italy will take you in.”

“Us? And you?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see. Everyone is supposed to go, not just the women and children. You have to understand that it’s voluntary.”

“Voluntary, but forced,” Mila replied.

“Like everything so far. The only question is until when.”

“I think we should put our things away,” Anka said. For the first time since everything had swirled up beyond recognition, she had said something concerning the practical matters at hand; until now she had moved through the circumstances around her like an animal, tamely following the orders, humming to herself and completing her tasks, caressing children and cutting bandages, as if she were trying to reduce the void that the cruelty of the war constantly created with the sheer presence of her large body. Now, with this sentence, she drew a line under this new turn of events. “We’ll do it today.”

“What things?” Mila turned to her sister.

“All of them. We’ll pack our clothes, our books, our dishes. We’ll put them in the wine cellar and lock the door.”

“That will just make things easier for whoever comes here after we leave.”

“Wait, wait,” Jerko raised his hands. “No one is coming here. The new state guarantees that the property will be preserved.”

Mila laughed. Her laughter darted into the air like a startled bird, trilling with her contempt for everything that had happened so far.

“That’s enough,” she said. “Anka is right; we have to put our things away. You two will help us,” she looked at Lidija, then at Vera, who was still sitting next to Marta. “And just so there is no misunderstanding,” she turned first to Jerko and then to the two newcomers, „it’s not about the things. It’s about leaving the order behind. Even in a war. It has nothing to do with the war or the world, with the property or with anyone else; it has to do with who we are. We and nobody else. We are going to bury them.” Mila looked at everyone at the table.

Marta laughed. “A funeral, we are going to have a funeral!” She clapped her hands.

“Shush, don’t be silly.”

Before the war, a funeral in their town was something like a ceremony, a theatre performance. A silent procession would pass along the street, following the coffin which rattled on the cobbles towards the cemetery on the hill. People would meekly walk behind the priest and the grieving family, and the mournful music would play. The bell would toll, its clapper would produce a bronze sound that hit against the walls of the houses and remained there. Marta and Blaga watched the funerals from the window, transfixed by the solemnity of the moment, by the sudden transformation of the town. Marta loved funerals and when she heard the hubbub of voices of the people gathering outside the deceased person’s home, she used to bring a pillow to the window and make herself comfortable as if she were sitting in a theatre box. Afterwards she would bury her toys, pacing up and down the dark hallway of the house, humming a mournful tune. She set up a small graveyard in the corner of her room, between the wardrobe and the window, where she buried her little treasures between the chairs, only to dig them up and bury them again in her favourite game, which she could calmly enjoy for hours. In the hallway upstairs, under a wardrobe covered by a heavy curtain, in which her aunts kept their trunks with straw hats and other things Marta wasn’t allowed to touch, she set up another small cemetery, where she put her big and small boxes, her paraphernalia of toys and trinkets, burying and unburying them according to her little girl’s logic.

Lidija and Vera smiled. “You can bury your lists as well.”

The girls nodded.

“Let’s eat now. Who knows when we’ll eat again.”

They ate. Jerko ate with them.

“I’m blessed among the women,” he said, tearing off a piece of hoecake and washing it down with some tea.

“Wait”, Mila suddenly exclaimed. “I have an idea. Anka, come with me.”

They climbed to the second floor and entered the closed study.

“Hold this,” Mila said to her sister, taking the porcelain teacups delicate as a seashell out from the china cabinet.

Anka chuckled. “These cups?”

“Yes, these ones.”

“I agree. What should we save them for?”

They went back downstairs and distributed the teacups to everyone. Marta beamed. “Give us the saucers as well!”

Soon they were all gathered in the closed room, touching the porcelain plates with intricate borders, the delicate Czech porcelain coffee cups with golden handles, soup tureens and serving trays.

“You’re looking for trouble, Marta,” Mila said when she saw Marta placing a lace tablecloth on her head.

“Look at my hair,” Marta replied, tilting her head back, so her long, lace hair cascaded down to her waist. Then she began to sing. Jerko was standing at the door, with his back against the doorframe, watching the little performance that started to unfold in the room full of massive furniture, which was until then solemn like a grand hall.

One by one, the girls entered the makeshift stage, while Marta, in the manner of all children from time immemorial, danced and sang like a little bridesmaid with a lace veil on her head. Human beings would probably dance and sing even while being tortured. What else were the five of them doing now? That thought seemed to have passed through Anka’s head.

She lifted Marta onto her feet and began waltzing with her. Only Vera stood apart from the rest of them, frozen, lost.

“Lidija, bring your violin.”

“Are you all crazy? Someone will hear us and think we have lost our minds. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Why should we care? If you can’t cry, sing.”

“Our struggle demands that we die singing.” They burst into laughter. “Besides, the Americans throw parties every night. They have dragged the piano from the theatre up to the field. If they can celebrate something every night, so can we, who’s to stop us. This is a new order, and maybe something new is celebrated in it.”

Skipping two steps at a time, Lidija dashed upstairs and returned with a black, leather violin case.

“Now we are going to have a concert as well.”

“Concert!” Marta cheered.

“But play something lively, something we can dance to. We want to waltz.”

“Better yet, play some jazz, or swing.” Jerko bent down, touched his knees and started dancing. Marta squealed happily and imitated him.

“What do you want, jazz or waltz?”

“Jazz and waltz and polka. Anything but a wheel dance. We don’t want any folk dances or country step dances. Give us a minuet, a quadrille, a Charleston, a tango.”

Lidija tuned her violin. “I know what you want. This is both jazz and waltz.”

She started playing the Second Waltz by Dmitri Shostakovich. She stumbled through it at first, struggling to catch it, but little by little they all caught it with her in their loose, swaying net, grounding it into their circling around the room.

There was no doubt any more; this was the beginning of a new year, the year that might bring something new to everyone. Vera buried her face in her hands and wept.

“Don’t cry, you silly girl.” Anka hugged her and pulled her into a dance.

Mila danced with Jerko and Marta, swaying in a small circle. The parquet floor creaked beneath their feet, as they all cried and laughed at the same time. Wasn’t that what New Years were for!?

“You are all crying,” Mila said, looking at the people around her.

“I’m not,” Jerko replied. “Neither is Marta, right?” He lifted the little girl into his arms and spun her around the room. Mila pushed the table towards the window to make more space.

“Blessed Virgin, how much longer is this going to last,” she whispered almost to herself.

“It seems this is just the beginning,” Anka replied.

Lidija played the violin, and they all danced.

“Russian waltzes are fine, aren’t they? If the army comes to our door, we can say we are preparing for the new political system.”

“This is brilliant, fantastic!” Jerko exclaimed, drawing everyone’s attention to himself. Still dancing with Marta, he kept repeating “this is brilliant, just brilliant”, as if in that frantic spinning around the room ingenious ideas kept popping into his mind, and he suddenly beamed. Lidija played with an ecstatic smile on her lips, hardly believing what she had brought into this house with her music, with those intoxicating, melodious sounds from another world, from the grand, glittering halls, and she wondered if what they were doing was a transgression of some kind.

“What? What?” Mila followed Jerko and Marta. “What is brilliant?”

“You know what?” Jerko suddenly stopped, breathing hard.

“Take a breath and tell us.”

“Down at the headquarters, among the people who have come and are going to Italy, is a master orchestra conductor.”

“A conductor?”

Everyone looked at him.

“Yes!” He slapped his forehead. “How could I be so stupid? A conductor and a painter and several writers, a whole cultural mission!”

“So what?”

“What do you mean, so what? We are going away with them, we are a part of the cultural mission!”

“We are?”

“Of course we are!”

“I suppose we are,” Mila shrugged.

“We are a part of the cultural mission. Which means that we are taking our sheet music with us into the exile.”

“Yes, we are taking our sheet music and books, notebooks and our easel.”

Mila threw herself into the armchair covered with a white sheet, then pulled the sheet from beneath her and tossed it onto the floor.

“No more saving things for the future. This is the future. This! We save and preserve something our whole lives, and then a war comes and destroys our homes. No more saving, we’ll use everything we have, spend everything, live to the fullest while we still can.”

“For the future! For us! For living to the fullest!”

All the girls and Jerko joined in that toast, drinking their tea.

“Don’t break the cups!” Mila shouted.

The room bedewed with laughter.

When the music stopped, and everyone regained their composure and began to look around at the gleaming furniture, books and porcelain, they all knew what came next.

“And the things? What are we going to do with the things?” Anka asked.

“What things?”

“Mother’s things. And all that bed linen.”

“We’ll take the linen to the church of Our Lady of the Pirates. We should have done that already.”

“Sure, we’ll use lace to bandage the wounds of the injured.”

“Better to use it to bandage the wounds, than to keep it here in a wardrobe.”

“Are you planning to get married? Anka, do you need a dowry?”

“In the new state, no one will need a dowry.”

“I agree,” said Lidija.

“Look where their dowry is.” Vera made a sweeping motion with her hand, as if everything around them was exploding.

“You see? A bomb falls, and there’s no dowry. So we’d better save what we can.”

“Jerko, you should invite that conductor and his cultural mission for a dinner in our house. We’ll have a repeat performance of the New Year’s show. And don’t forget to bring your dinner.”

She raised her eyebrows and swept her serious gaze over them all. Everyone just lowered their heads, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Can I invite someone else?”

“Do you need a dowry?”

Now they were all grinning again.

“Go ahead, make fun of me.”

“Of course you can invite whoever you want. Who’s stopping you? We are fighting for freedom!”

“Seriously, I’m sure you can see how everything is slowly falling into place, coming true.”

Marta watched her aunts and expected her mother to walk through the door at any moment, because everything suggested she would. It was the New Year’s Day, and Mum would come. The baby Jesus, the angels and the conductor would bring her. As if reading her thoughts, Mila lifted her into her lap.

“Who is my favourite little girl in the whole world?”

Marta leaned against her aunt and lifted the shirt off her chest to bring it to her lips and put it over her mouth. Mila gently lowered it, smoothed it down and kissed Marta on the cheek.

“We won’t be sad. You’ll help me pack up, won’t you? Everyone, let’s see what to do with all these things. We’re packing up. We can hide our possessions behind the Bacchus’ niche and in the cistern. You are right, if we could store our wine there, we can store these things too. But you know what? We won’t hide anything. They can take it all. Let’s gather the linens for the women in the church, and as for the dishes, we’ll keep only these,” Mila said, opening the

cupboard and pulling out two silver pitchers, one in each hand. Lifting the larger one, she added: "Milk?" Then the smaller: "Coffee?"

"Horror is so close, isn't it?" Vera slumped onto Lidija's shoulder.

"Vera, my darling, my dearest Vera, don't think about it." Lidija kissed her on the forehead, and everyone in the room could see that Vera had something fluid and wavering like a sea creature, like seaweed. Was it from the tears that filled her entirely, melting everything solid inside her like a wax, turning it sticky like a tear, like mucus, like the sea in the shallows, but Vera simply couldn't pull herself upright.

*She longed for Split, for her green Vis Island Street and the doves beneath the windows. The morning light in the shallow bay. Or Mila's house in the field, stripped bare after it had expelled its tenants. That house, hard and cruel, sleepy and unyielding, relentless in the field of thorny bushes and the crickets that chirped at the stars on summer nights. The house, which was merciful only to the grapes, the golden Vugava that the farm hands unloaded from wooden barrels. Then it would soften, drunk on the must and children's voices, on the autumn sun gazing from the west over the fields of fennel gone to seed. The house which let lizards, spiders and scorpions hide in its small niches, from which the saintly images and oil lamps had been plucked.*

When people leave a theatre, the voices from the stage of war still echo in their ears for a while, the thunder of cannons lingers in their memory. Onstage, the used scenery remains: the overturned furniture, a half-eaten meal. The actors quickly run away, flee from their own scenes, retreat with their hands raised, leave their weapons on the ground. What happens to the places we abandon? Does anything remain, once life has withdrawn? An empty house. Darkness and silence inside. A desert.

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People won't miss the chance to remind you that you are a stranger. That you are different, that you are not from here. That you are you, and they are we. Them and us. Is there a worse kind of division? That is war. That is them over there, and this is us here.

Where does that come from?

Shall we wish a Merry Christmas, this one or that one?

Do we say it like this or like that?

We say it like this.

And you say it like that.

But we understand each other, don't we?

We do, but that's not the point. The point is that we say it like this, and you say it like that.

Flies don't mind the war. Fat, black flies buzz freely in wartime and peacetime alike. They crash into the windowpanes and military trucks, they seek warm places on the winter windowsills, to soak up warmth; they shit on wounds, on fruit. Now they swarmed the kitchen.

"How do they gather like this?" Anka muttered, trying to catch one in the corner of the window with a kitchen towel. "They never die, damn them."

Vera was sitting with her fingers curled around a cup of tea, to warm them. Her long, pale, bony fingers were wrapped around a white porcelain cup, as she abstractedly watched

Anka, who crept towards the fly in order to kill it. One would say that Vera was absent. Present in body, absent in spirit. But her spirit was not going to any particular place; it was simply retreating, sneaking into a hidden hole, shrinking over the tip of the pen she would lick with her tongue and then hover over her list of memories, letting the ink dry up again. And again. Her tongue was purple from licking the pen.

They call it the spirit or the soul, don't they? That something which grows big in certain situations, wakes up, gets stronger, rises and fights, rebels and wins, or shrinks, disappears, fades, hesitates, vanishes, sleeps, waits, dies. Vera was thinking; she was sure that she was not here, even though she sometimes snapped out of her thoughts at the sound of an airplane, wind or Marta's voice. Lidija knew her and she left her alone; she was waiting. Vera's fiancé Vjeko was hanged one dawn. The news ambushed Vera the night before; she had known it even before she read the announcement pinned to the tree trunk in front of the hotel. It was night, and she looked through the tree tops at the moonlight, thinking about Vjeko and his hands, his breath and his smile. She couldn't stop thinking about his smile. It refused to leave her mind. Then she knew that he had stayed with her after he died, and if she now told Lidija that she still felt his smile on her, and that it was becoming heavier, Lidija would tell her she was heading for destruction, eating herself up from the inside, but what if it wasn't that? He clung to her smiling and serene, he remained caught in a stroke of spirit, trapped between the two worlds. On a beach in the late autumn, beneath the waves that sprayed all the way to the tangled tamarisk trees, half-turned towards the city, half towards her, in a grey coat with raised lapels and rolled-up sleeves, he was funny, clumsy, harmless and playful, and then a gurgling laugh escaped from somewhere deep inside him. In the silence of an air raid, as the troops withdrew and the people traded their hair for eggs, Vjeko and Vera laughed, while the sea crashed against the rocks and covered the beach in rustling foam. The foam along the shore was like a veil, and now, as she watched Anka carefully biding her time to kill the fleshy, ugly fly, it occurred to Vera that it had been their wedding without witnesses, before the tamarisk trees tangled with the seaweed that the waves had rolled to their feet. The wind rushed at their faces and nostrils, carrying the smell of algae and seashells, small marine organisms lifted from the mud. The heavy scent of the seabed and southern wind entered their pores. Vera absorbed the sea together with Vjeko's breath and the taste of his salty, warm, fragrant body. They were only half aware of everything around them, of the shore of the island in front of them and of the bay, which was only a hundred meters wide. Hidden in the half-darkness, they clung to one another like two branches entangled by the wind. Their minds and their bodies were relaxed in that embrace. Kissing him, she thought that he smelled like boiled Swiss chard. She had never before felt that taste, and she would never feel it again. The taste of saliva, skin and breath. That memory had stayed with her, and sometimes it swept her like a wave, and she surrendered to it, reliving it once again. The feelings of weight and lightness alternated, and she seemed to be dashing through an endless, solid space. That was why she was now absent from reality, for as she gazed through the branches at the moonlight that evening, that last image of their embrace became heavier, settling on her back. As if she had known she would never see him again.

Vjeko was hanged at dawn, on the road leading to the hills. Everyone entering the town could see his limp body.

“I got you!” Anka opened the window and shook the crumpled kitchen towel out onto the street.

“Are you ready, dear?”

Vera nodded and drank the remainder of her tea in the cup she had been gripping as if it were the handrail that kept her connected to this kitchen, this house she would soon leave. This house, the last lighthouse whose light was keeping her alive. The pen had dried again.

It was a mercy that she always compared the real things with the images they could become. A house as a lighthouse, a beach as a wedding she could unfurl inside herself like a flag whenever she wanted, and wrap herself with it, warm herself up, hide in it, drown in it. Was she broken-hearted? It didn't matter. She could do whatever she wanted with the props inside herself. After all, she was an actress and she carried her props with her. The hat and the bag, the coat and the shoes.

“I have everything,” she told Anka. “The hat and the bag, the suitcase and the shoes. I'm ready. We can leave.”