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Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

IV. Son, If You Love Your Mother, Do Not Go Through That Door

1

Đula's Balcony stood a few houses further north and it was the most beautiful balcony in the entire street. The flowers on it were arranged to bloom from early spring to late fall, each plant taking its turn, like in a jazz composition. For example, petunias blossomed from spring to early fall, usually in two colors, white and purple, and this configuration would be broken up by yellow and pink geraniums. But there were also tulips and hyacinths that grew in pots hanging from the railing, which came out with the first beautiful spring days, together with a bush of forsythia that would, come spring, soak up the color of the sun and save it for cloudy days, while in September and October the autumn climbing roses shone, sadder than their summer counterparts, but somehow more beautiful.

No one knows who first called it that, just as no one usually knows who first comes up with a nickname or a joke. Words simply appear, as if out of nowhere, the various residents of our narrow, steep street could testify whom they heard it from first, it spread like an infection, but no one knew who patient zero was. To me, the name Đula's Balcony always seemed like a strange mixture of Đula's Abyss in Ogulin, where poor, heartbroken Đula met her end, and Juliet's Balcony in Verona. It would be interesting to know in whose synapses it was born. It's not common to give nicknames to balconies, but this one certainly deserved it. Our street thus had its own small peculiarity, because I don't know of any other street in Zagreb with a balcony that has a nickname.

Of course, it was mostly women who admired Đula's balcony: "Beautiful, inventive, so much effort, but it's worth it." Or: "She works it, and we enjoy it."

But, with time, two seasons had already passed, different comments could be heard: "She could change it a bit, enough with the geraniums." And also: "I'd get rid of the forsythia and plant gladioli. They're prettier."

In any case, Đula's Balcony, whether praised or criticized, never stopped attracting interest.

The old lady who tended it we called Aunt Đula. After the balcony. She had moved in relatively recently and kept her distance, so it was only later that we learned her real name wasn't Đula but Mrs. Maca, which was short for Marijana. And it was somehow logical that she, too, was named after a flower, the cica-maca, the pussy willow.

2

Some of the fame of Đula's Balcony rubbed off on Mrs. Maca as well. You could tell the neighbors respected her, especially because she was polite, though she never engaged in longer conversations with anyone. None of the older women from the neighborhood ever came over for coffee, nor did Mrs. Maca visit anyone. So, although the general impression of her among the neighbors was positive, there were also comments like: "She's acting all high and mighty." Or: "She's so stuck up. Who does she think she is? A countess?!"

It was just before summer, I think it was 2003, when I ran into her at the bend where our street branches off from Horvatovac. She was standing there catching her breath after the steep climb from Kvaternik Square, holding a crutch in one hand and a small bag of fruit and green beans in the other.

"Jesus, what happened?" I asked, since she normally didn't use a crutch and walked just fine.

"Oh, what happened, I fell off the stool," she said.

I took the bag from her, she took my arm, and we slowly headed toward her house. She was fairly quiet, but at one point she explained that she had osteoporosis, that she'd had to climb on a stool to water the flowers arranged in metal baskets on the wall of her balcony, and that she hadn't exactly fallen, she'd landed on her feet, but her left leg had fractured.

"No displacement, though, they said." "So that's why we haven't seen you." "Yes, I was at the baths. For my therapy."

And so, mostly silent, looking at the houses and gardens I had been looking at for over fifty years, and she for only two, we reached her house.

She paused, said thank you, and took the bag from my hand.

“I can carry it upstairs for you, it’s no trouble.”

“No need, I’ve bothered you enough already.”

It was clear she really didn’t want me to walk her up to the apartment on the second floor of that old house with the high ceilings. A polite woman, she wants to spare me the stairs, I thought. But then again, as I was walking back down toward my own house, it struck me as odd that a woman who tended her balcony with such care would so easily pass up the opportunity to show it off up close. It was a little strange, but nothing more than that.

3

Summer bloomed, spread its leaves, filled the air with its scents, and grew dangerously hot. Even younger people had a hard time trudging up our street. During that time, on two or three more occasions, I helped Mrs. Maca carry her shopping bags from the market, always something small. She was still using her crutch, but she never allowed me to walk her all the way to her apartment.

“Mrs. Maca, if you need anything from the market or the store, just let me know, I can bring it by car. Here, I’ll give you my number.”

“Ah, no, that would be too much trouble. What little I need I can bring myself. Besides, the doctor told me I needed to exercise.”

But then I’m exercising along with you, in this heat, I thought, and immediately felt ashamed. That was a mean thing to think about a decent woman.

Once, as we were trudging up toward her house, me carrying her bag with a few onions and two or three potatoes, and her tapping the hot asphalt with her crutch, she said, “I can tell you’re a good man, I have to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“But I wouldn’t want you to think I’m taking advantage...” “Of course not, Mrs. Maca. What is it?”

“I heard you have a pool in your garden.” “Yes, we do. A small one.”

“The doctor at the baths told me the best exercise for my leg is walking in water, and then do some exercises under water.”

Well, that was unexpected.

“Just half an hour a day, it would help a lot.”

I thought for a moment, and then... well, why not. “No problem,” I said.

“If it’s at all inconvenient... just say so.”

And so, every day around noon, she came to exercise in our pool. It usually lasted not half an hour but a full hour. First, she would walk along the bottom, the pressure of about 20 psi gave her a light lymph drainage. Then she would grab the edge and kick her legs. And, in the end, she would swim a little.

I told Višnja that around noon, while she was at work, our old neighbor came by to exercise in the pool, because of her leg, and Višnja said, “That’s so kind of you.”

And I got the feeling she really meant it.

“Just don’t tell her what we’re doing in it.”

On her second visit, or maybe it was the third, I brought Mrs. Maca a glass of lemonade and set it by the pool for her.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have,” she said, and repeated that same line every time I brought her a dewy glass with ice and a straw.

I never swam in the pool when she was there, so as not to get in her way, and I thought it might be awkward for both of us anyway. Besides, the neighbors, who had surely seen some other kinds of activity here, might think my affinities had changed.

4

On one of those days, while Mrs. Maca was diligently exercising in our pool, a childhood friend of mine called to say he’d like to drop by. It was Žarko, we called him Žac, and he used to live in the neighborhood. As kids, we’d formed a detective gang in the Preacher’s courtyard, modeled after Alan Ford and the TNT; our secret line was “Ham on rye,” and “With mustard” was the reply. That was our calling card. When we started high school, he and his parents moved to Radnički Dol, but we stayed in touch.

He called a little after noon.

“I’m in the neighborhood. You home?” “Yeah, drop by for a beer.”

Not even ten minutes later, he showed up at my door. He hadn’t planned on swimming, but I offered him a suit, like to any good friend.

“I don’t know, I don’t have much time,” he said and walked out on the terrace.

Then he saw Mrs. Maca in the pool, stretched out like a mermaid, bending one leg and then the other slowly, in her own rhythm.

“What’s this, you set me up with a chick?” he said with a grin.

He stepped a bit closer to get a better look, then jumped back as if stung. He darted inside, back into the living room, before Mrs. Maca could turn around. But he had recognized her.

“What’s up with you, man?” I asked. “She doesn’t bite.”

He put his index finger to his lips to tell me to be quiet, and we moved deeper into the room, out of reach of elderly hearing.

I opened a beer and we split the bottle. We inquired about our health, I asked about his now grown-up kids, and he said he didn't really know how they were because he didn't see them much: his daughter was in Poland doing postgraduate studies, and his son ran some café.

Then I asked, "What was that? Why did you run away from the lady?"

But he was already on his feet, checking his watch. "I've gotta go. No time now, but I'll tell you later. Her family are my neighbors in Radnički Dol, and I've been friends with her son for over twenty years. Anyway, watch yourself around her," he said on his way out.

"Why?"

"She might rob you!"

5

The exercises helped Mrs. Maca: she was walking much better. And every Saturday, when Višnja didn't have to go to work (I was on school vacation), my wife and she would have coffee on the terrace after Mrs. Maca finished her exercises. Mrs. Maca was more open with Višnja than with me, they didn't just talk about her injury, but also about flowers, her meagre pension, city politics, garbage collection, and insolent people who didn't pick up their dogs' mess from the street... yet even through all this, Višnja never really learned anything about her. Neither if she'd been married, if she had children, or why she'd moved to our street, nothing of real importance. One Saturday, it was already late July, Višnja mentioned that we'd soon be going to the seaside, for two weeks, but that Mrs. Maca was welcome to use our pool while we were away. She also said that the Preacher and Alma had a key to our apartment and that they came by in the evenings for a swim, and that our garden, in the summer months, was something of a riviera for our friends. She even suggested that we could give her a spare key, in case she wanted to make herself a cup of coffee or needed to use the bathroom. I was signaling Višnja frantically behind Maca's back to stop, but she just looked at me in confusion.

When Maca left, I told her what Žac had said.

“Nonsense, he’s making it all up, he’s always been like that,” said Višnja. “Besides, you’re the one who let her swim here. What if she needs to use the toilet? She’s not going to pee in the pool.”

That was a solid argument.

Nonetheless, that evening I called Žac and told him what my wife had offered the neighbor.

“Not even if her life depends on it,” muttered Žac into the phone. “I’ll come by tomorrow. When she leaves. Let me know.”

6

We couldn’t meet the next day because I had a summer writing workshop in Ogulin that lasted two days. While I was there, I often caught myself thinking about what Žac wanted to tell me about our old neighbor. The thought of it just wouldn’t leave me, even though I was very busy, as we had sessions in the morning and afternoon, and in between I was grading elementary school students’ assignments on the topic of Ivana Brlić Mažuranić’s *Stribor’s Forest*. I was trying to explain to the kids that the tension of the fairy tale lies in two key scenes: the terrifying one, when the daughter-in-law kicks the old woman out of the house in the middle of winter, leaving her to freeze to death, and the cathartic one, when everyone realizes the daughter-in-law is in fact a snake. I tried to show how essential the demonic power of the antagonist is to the story. But the kids, in a sort of *Transformers* way, were more fascinated by the transformation itself, from snake to woman and woman to snake. But the idea that someone could put their misfortune above all the happiness in the world – none of them understood that. I even heard one of them say, “Jesus, how stupid that old woman is.”

And so it was on Wednesday, three days after our first meeting, that Žac came over for a beer, after Mrs. Maca had finished with our pool and gone off by tram for her magnet and electrotherapy at the Traumatology Clinic. I offered him swimming trunks again, it was really hot, but he refused.

“I don’t feel like getting wet,” he said.

That’s why we sat under the grapevine. I brought us a couple of beers, and, for a while we just drank in silence.

“Uh, I was so thirsty I thought I’d die,” he said, wiping the foam from his mouth after finishing his mug.

“Alright, so what’s the deal with my neighbor? Višnja says you’re making it all up.”

“That’s what *you* think, actually,” he said. “How would Višnja know that? She doesn’t know me that well.”

“Okay, maybe I mentioned something.”

“You mentioned it? Listen, what I’m about to tell you is absolute truth. It’s not made up. I used to hang out at their place all the time when we were kids. Borna, that’s her older son, has been my best friend for over twenty years. Believe me, I know.”

“And there’s a younger one too?”

“It would’ve been better if there wasn’t. I don’t know the details, but I spent a lot of time talking to Borna whenever he’d lose it, trying to calm him down, you know. But how did *you* get mixed up with her?”

“For fuck’s sake, I didn’t get mixed up with her! I just saw her limping up the street, and I helped her carry her bags from the market. Then she asked if she could use our pool to do her water aerobics, said it was good for her leg. She fell while watering her flowers.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“What do you mean she didn’t? That’s what she said.” “Her son beat her.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“The younger one. His name’s Nenad. Neno, Nenek, that’s what he goes by. He’s been on smack since he was seventeen years old. A total psycho. And that between the two of them... that’s some twisted, monkey love. First, she refused to believe the kid was using. Borna and I kept telling her, but she just wouldn’t listen. She drove Borna crazy. And when it became obvious, she still defended him, like, ‘He’s not to blame, poor thing, he fell in with bad company, they led him astray, they’re the devils,’ but, for fuck’s sake, if you’re his mother, why are you there, how come you didn’t see who he hung out with, where that was heading? All those big shots’ kids from Jurjevska and Tuškanac, not even kids, men in their fucking twenties. That’s how old Nenek was when it finally came out. Then he, like, tried to kick it, and she helped him, but making him go on rehab, a real rehab, that was out of the question. She tried to get him off dope herself, at home, she made him soup while he was locked in his room, and his buddies passed him dope through the window. Around that time Borna got married and had kids, first a girl, then a boy. They lived upstairs, and the mother and Nenek were downstairs. Their father had died young, some kind of cancer. He wasn’t a good man. Nenek takes after him.”

“That’s not easy, facing the fact that your child’s an addict.”

“No, it’s not, but you have to. That’s why you’re the parent. Especially when you’ve got another son and grandchildren. Nenek had meningitis when he was a kid, it was bad, they thought he’d die, but he pulled through. It took a toll on him, but no lasting effects. And that’s when she started treating him like a god, she allowed him everything, he could do whatever the fuck he wanted. With the older one, with Borna, they were strict, kept him in line. After the meningitis, Nenek always needed help, even back in kindergarten he was afraid of everything, the dark, dogs, later illness, always centered only on himself, a baby even in his twenties, but with strong arms. ‘And no brain,’ that’s what Borna used to say when he’d lose it, though he loved him, he was his brother, after all. And Borna’s wife, Ada, she never said a bad word about Nenek. Always held her tongue. The old woman kept an eye on her to see if the daughter-in-law would dare say anything against her younger son, but she never did. ‘She’s sly,’ she used to say, ‘she’s biding her time, waiting for the right moment.’ But no, that’s not what it was, Ada didn’t have anything against Nenek, she even liked him, she was just scared for her kids. It’s not easy living under the same roof with a junkie. Things kept disappearing. Borna noticed that his mother’s gold locket, the one she’d worn since she was young, was missing. And when he asked about it, she said, ‘I must’ve misplaced it, it’ll turn up.’ And the right

moment finally came, or so Maca thought, when Nenek went off to a rehab community somewhere in Italy, that was his second time. They packed up his things in the trunk, and Borna drove him all the way to Rimini. Maca couldn't go with them, she waved to them from the street, all in tears. And the kid was out of it, completely, that's what Ada told me later, he set off for Italy in his slippers, Borna had to tell him, 'At least put on some sneakers!' Ada felt so sorry for him that she started crying too."

7

I brought out some cold cuts, kulen and sausage, and cheese, and opened two more beers. Stories like these make you thirsty even if you're only listening. And then he said the real hell broke loose when Borna came back from Italy.

"Ada made a good lunch, all the things Maca liked, meatloaf with eggs and French potatoes, and they invited the dear old mom over to their place. Borna asked me to join them, I was practically family, and Maca liked me. For a while, she even hoped I could convince the kid to give up dope. And so, at that lunch, Maca was in a good mood, after all, the rehab was a step forward. And when we finished lunch and the kids went to their rooms to play on their computers or whatever, Borna said, 'Mom, we need to talk.'

"She knew it wasn't gonna be good.

"Anyway, Borna told her they had his children to think about too. 'You have to think about your grandchildren, Mom,' that's what he said. 'God forbid something happens to you. We need to be ready. Nenek's gonna sell his share right away, and who knows to whom. Besides, he's up to his neck in debt, we'll have mafiosi moving in the house Dad spent ten years building. We need to sign a life-care agreement. He already sold your gold, you know he did, he owes everyone, they're after him, they wanna kill him, you know that.' And Maca, completely unfazed, told him Nenek would get treated in Italy and he'd get married like his brother, and he'd need a place for his wife and kids. 'Dad built this for all of us, for him too, just so we're clear, and now he's turning in his grave up there at Mirogoj.'

"Mom, listen to me, I don't want to steal from my brother. Or from you. But he'll sell it all, you can bet your life on it. It's a disease, that's how it goes.'

“‘You go ahead and bet on whatever you want, but I’m not signing anything against him.’

“‘Wait, you think I’d throw my brother out on the street?!’

“‘Maybe you wouldn’t,’ said Maca, and then looked at Ada, ‘but that bitch would. She’s the one who talked you into this.’

“That’s when Ada reacted, even though she never meddled in their fights and always kept away from it.

“‘These are your grandchildren too,’ Ada said. ‘If not for us, do it for them. We don’t need anything from you.’”

“And did she sign it?” I ask.

“Not a chance in hell. She got angry and went to her apartment. Two-three weeks later, Borna came to see me, totally beside himself, and said Nenek had run off from the rehab community in Rimini. ‘I don’t know what to do,’ he said. ‘Help me talk to her, I need to make her see.’ I didn’t wanna get involved, but he begged and begged so I went. And then the three of us, Borna, Ada and I, went to the old woman, and Borna said, ‘Mom, Nenek’s run off from the rehab!’ ‘No, he didn’t, what are you talking about?! We talked on the phone yesterday and he said everything’s fine.’ ‘Mom, let’s call Father Jakov in Italy, let him tell you.’ ‘That’s expensive, why waste money?!’ Maca wouldn’t budge. ‘All of this is her doing. She’s the one who talked you into this,’ she said, and looked at Ada like she was about to gouge her eyes out. ‘Mom, listen, listen to me,’ Borna said, picking up the receiver. ‘I’ll call the priest, let him tell you.’ And she jumped up and ripped the receiver from his hand, so he couldn’t make the call, and slammed it down on the phone. Borna then took out his cell, dialed the number, and put it on speaker, and in that silence, you could hear it ring, like an air raid siren, that’s how it sounded, while Maca was cracking her knuckles.”

“That kind of love knows no reality,” I said.

“Madness knows no reality,” said Žac. “And then Father Jakov answered and said Nenek had unfortunately run off and he didn’t know how he’d get back to Zagreb because he had no money. Maca listened and listened, and then she said, ‘The old bastard’s lying!’ Now Ada already felt sorry for everyone, both Borna and me and her, and she told her, ‘Mom, you have

to face it. It's time.' Not batting an eye at her daughter-in-law, Maca turned to her son and said, 'Borna, this snake will not call me "mom."' Borna then asked if she saw what was going on, and she replied, with spite, 'I'm not!' And she stared him in the eye. 'Mom,' Borna wouldn't let go, "he ran away from the rehab, he won't get cured." 'The priest is lying,' she replied. We all just looked at each other. 'Mom, Jesus, you know Father Jakov, you know him. He didn't lie even when he was a kid, he's never lied in his life.' And she just replied, 'You're all in on it, you talked him into this.' That's when Borna lost it, he grabbed an ashtray, a cheap one because Nenek sold all the crystal, and hurled it at the wall. 'And you think we all conspired to rob Nenek, our brother,' he said. 'Even Cain killed Abel,' she replied. 'The snake talked you into it.'"

"Love knows no bounds," I said.

"It's a disease, not love. And so Borna started smashing things, screaming at her, 'Get out of the house.' He was yelling and screaming, and it was spring, the windows were open, and the neighbors could hear it all, 'Get out, get out, get out...' Ada tried to calm him down, but there was no stopping him, and now that was the voice of love, but the hurt, disappointed kind of love, 'What makes him better than me, what makes him deserve more than me who was good, who finished school, graduated, got married, I feed you, you stupid cow, because your little baby boy shoots your whole pension into his veins, you're in debt because of him.' And she just calmly told him, 'Son, you're kicking your own mother out of her home.'"

8

"But, a couple of days later, she was back at their apartment. And she said, 'Son, I found him.' 'Oh yeah?' Borna said. 'Is that why you took money from our wallets, huh? You took from me and from Ada, and, God, we thought it was the kids. Now you're stealing for him.' 'I'm not stealing, I'll give it back.' 'How? Where the hell are you gonna get the money?' Borna yelled at her. 'I don't want it back. You were a lot of things, Mom, but you were never a thief.' 'Have you got any idea what he's doing?' said Maca. 'I was there.' 'Where?! Where were you, Mom?' 'At the Hole,' she said. 'That café in Trešnjevka, that's what they call it.' 'Jesus,' Borna said. 'I saw them. Him too. He's there... waiting.' 'Waiting for what, dope?' 'No,' the mother said, 'waiting to get fucked in the ass. That's what he's waiting for. So I gave him money so they

wouldn't fuck him in the ass.' At that point, Borna almost collapsed, it got to him, and he just broke... you know, Ada had to sit him down on the couch, kissing him, trying to calm him down. And then he said, 'You went there? You gave him our money?' 'Nobody saw it.' 'But they saw you at the Hole! Do you know that older women go to find young guys? Do you know that?' 'I do,' said Maca. 'That's why I gave him the money, so he wouldn't get fucked by old hags and disgusting fat men.' 'You're crazy. Completely crazy.' And Maca said to that, 'He looked like an angel.' And when she said that, Borna told me, he couldn't be angry at her anymore. All the hatred, jealousy, it was all gone. He said it was like she'd crossed a threshold or something, and it came to him: It takes tons and tons of love for that kind of madness. Psychiatrists say that's not love. They haven't got a fucking clue. It is, it's love, monkey love, super-monkey love, not even the Holy Mother loved little Jesus like that."

9

"A few days later, Borna barged into my house again. We were painting, total chaos, plastic all over the floor, kids rolling in the plaster dust from the walls, my wife complaining because the fucking painters messed everything up, so she had to clean it, and I thought, You couldn't've come at a better time. But when I saw his face, I knew it wasn't good, it had all gone to hell. 'Come quick,' he said, 'I need your help.' We ran over to his mom's apartment and found her in the bedroom, lying on the bed, all beaten up, whimpering. Her nose was all busted up, bloodstains on the sheets, red bruises on her face, not blue yet, bruises on her arms too, from where he'd grabbed her, and the whole place was a mess, like burglars had been there. Clothes pulled out of the closet, one slipper on her foot, the other under the bed. 'He was looking for money, or for gold,' Borna said. 'And when she didn't have any, he beat the shit out of her. Come, help me carry her upstairs. I'm gonna keep her at our place.' 'Did you call an ambulance?' I asked. 'And the cops?' 'She doesn't want it,' said Borna. 'Mom, we've got to go to the hospital, maybe you broke something. You may be bleeding inside.' And as we lifted her up, she kept saying, 'You're hurting me, easy... easy, what am I, a bag of cement?!' And when Nenek used you as a punching bag, it crossed my mind, you didn't complain. 'Mom, we're taking you to the ER. Right now,' Borna yelled at her. And she said, 'But why? It's nothing. Don't make a fuss. It'll pass. I'm fine.' 'You're not fine. I'm calling the cops.' That's when she freaked out, even though she was weak, beaten, and she said, 'If you call the police, you're not my son anymore.' And she even added, 'I'll kill myself.'"

“And? Did he call the cops?”

“Fuck no. We dragged her upstairs, put her onto the couch in the living room, so he couldn’t get to her anymore. As we carried her upstairs, her legs dragged on the floor, she couldn’t even stand. I saw Ada take the kids into the bedroom. The way she looked at me, man, I can’t even tell you what was in that look. If someone asked me, I’d say just one word: everything. And Borna whispered to me, ‘She’s threatening to leave me. Says she can’t take it anymore.’

“Anyway, then Borna told his mom it couldn’t go on like this, that she had to move, and that Nenek mustn’t know about it, or where, so he couldn’t get to her. And, surprisingly, she agreed. They put up an ad for her apartment right away, even priced it cheap, just to rent it as fast as they could. But, screw it, she wouldn’t go without her furniture. The Biedermeier dresser with the marble top and mirror, she inherited that from her family, the bedroom set her late husband and she had ordered, custom-made by Štefančić down on Maksimirska, cherry wood, she always said the guy was the Rolls Royce of carpenters, then the kitchen cabinets, also from her grandmother. So Borna had no choice but to rent this apartment here, and a moving truck. They brought her over fast.”

“And what about Nenek? Where was he staying?”

“No one knows. He moved from one apartment to another, probably even squatted for a while, lived on the streets, who knows.”

“At least she got rid of him.”

“Nah. She didn’t.”

10

“Every Sunday, Borna went to her place to pick her up, then drove the dear old mom to their place for lunch, and then took her back here again. She told him, ‘I can take the tram, son,’ but he insisted, he didn’t want Nenek to run into her somewhere. The kid didn’t know where his mother was. A couple of times, they saw him in front of their house, staring at his old apartment

where some new people now lived, also with two kids. What was going through his head as he watched some strangers in the place where he'd grown up, I don't know."

"It must've been hard for him. I'd lose it, I know I would."

"Yeah, it was, but I think it wasn't because of his mom or memories, the guy's a psychopath. He came over and hung around the house only when he was broke and desperate to score, he was just looking for something he could steal. Or squeeze the last money out of the old witch. Fuck if I know. But I do know one thing: Borna once told me his daughter came home from the park or the playground, whatever she'd been, and asked him, 'Daddy, why is Uncle Nenek crying?'

"That was all they heard about him.

"And just as it seemed like everything had settled, their mom moved into the new place, started buying plants, settled in, one Sunday morning the phone rang at Borna's place. He picked up, and the person on the other end said, 'Borna, please accept my sincere condolences.' Borna froze. He said he was sure it was Nenek, that was to be expected, and then he remembered how, back when they were kids, it was Nenek's first day of school, the kid slipped and fell into shit, and Borna cleaned him up in the toilet like he was his mother so he could go back to class. He remembered all that and got really, really sad. But suddenly he also felt kind of light, like he could fly, peel off the face of the earth, that's how he described it to me. But then he asked the man where this happened and how he found out, it was some guy from his work, not the police, and this one said he didn't know anything, he just saw a death notice on a pole. He even added, 'She wasn't that old, seventy-six.' 'Who?' Borna shouted. 'Who wasn't old?' 'Your mother,' the man said. 'I saw the notice: Marijana Barač passed away peacefully, resting in the Lord, at the age of seventy-six...' And Borna simply broke, he split in two, like an axe had hit him from above. He was just getting ready to go get his mom and bring her over to their place for Sunday lunch, and now his heart nearly burst. He'd had heart problems, a couple of years before they'd replaced his aortic valve with a pig valve. After the surgery he joked, 'Now, if I eat prosciutto, I'm in fact a cannibal.' But then he pulled himself together, stopped, thought about it for a second, yes, first he lost it, but then he thought it through and realized it was impossible, he and Ada'd be the first to know, so he told the guy that that some idiot must've been screwing around, that his mother hadn't died, that she was fine, and he was just going over to her place

and then bringing her at his place for lunch. And he even called her, and she answered like always and said she hadn't started getting ready yet and to come at twelve."

"Oh, fuck, and did they find out how that happened?"

"Yeah, but wait, he pulled up at her place, and there she was waiting outside the house, all dressed up, her hair done, wearing her Sunday best. 'How long have you been waiting here, Mom?' he asked. 'Not long, a couple of minutes.' 'I could've come up, like always,' he said, but she told him she liked it better outside, in the air. So they went to lunch.

"But when he brought her back, she didn't want him to go up to the apartment. Before she used to show him everything, how she'd arranged the living room, the bedroom, the balcony, the roses, the forsythia, the pansies... 'Go home, I'll go for a little walk.' But then she got dizzy and had to hold onto the car so she wouldn't fall. Borna told her, 'No way you're going for a walk. I'll take you up. What if you fall on the stairs.' 'No, I'm fine, son, I can manage,' she insisted. He wouldn't have any of it, so he took her arm and they got inside. And as they went up the stairs, that's what Borna told me, you could see every step got harder and harder for her, and as they neared the door, she started to shake. When they reached the door, she, already crying and trembling, said, 'Son, if you love your mother, don't go through that door!'"

11

"And?? Did he get in?" "No."

"I can't believe it. After everything that happened... he didn't go in?"

"He chickened out. And she unlocked the door and slipped inside so he wouldn't see."

"Okay, but I just don't get it. I would've kicked the door in."

"He said it shocked him so much he couldn't move. By the time he snapped out of it, it was already too late, she slammed the door in his face. Besides, he was sure Nenek was inside, he thought she was hiding him, and that's why he didn't go in. Because if he'd found him there,

together with his mom, I think he would've killed him. Yeah, he would've killed him. No question about it. And that's why he got away – not to kill his brother. He went down the stairs, that's what he said, harder than how she'd climbed up. He was out of his mind, completely, but somehow he couldn't be angry at her.

“And when he got home and told Ada what had happened, she started yelling at him and told him he was crazy, he should've gotten in, because if Nenek was there, he could kill her, he wasn't right in the head. ‘What should I do? Tell me,’ Borna said. Poor bastard, he was completely beside himself. And she said, ‘Listen, get Žac and the two of you go there together, in case he gets violent, and call the cops. Call them right away.’ So we went back to Maca's place, rang the bell, waited at the door. She came to the hallway and looked through the peephole, we heard her shuffling around, but she didn't answer or open the door. Then Borna leaned on the buzzer, nearly pushed it into the wall together with the casing, he banged on the door, he was gonna get the whole house out. ‘Mom, open the door,’ he shouted, ‘I know you're here!’ But she still wouldn't open. Then I said, ‘Mrs. Maca, it's me, Žac, if you don't open, Borna will call the police and the firefighters to break the door down.’

“And so, after a while longer, I heard the keys, and she slowly unlocked the door. Disheveled, in her pajamas, pale. When you take the makeup off an old woman, when her face loosens, I guess she was sleeping... it was scary how she looked. She cracked the door, and when she saw us, she said, ‘Boys, pray for me!’ Borna just shoved the door, almost knocked her over, and we rushed in. And there...”

Žac's voice even trembled a little.

“What?” I asked.

He was silent, the images must have come back to him.

“I need another beer,” he said.

And what was I supposed to do, I went to the kitchen to get him another beer, and he just sat there, lost in thought, staring at the pool, at the water and the ripples the pump made.

And when I came back, he filled his glass and gulped it down in one go.

“So, what was inside?” “Nothing,”
he said.
“What do you mean – nothing?”

“Well, that’s the thing, there was nothing there, a vacuum, a cosmic egg. An empty fucking space. We got in, Borna went first, switched on the living room light, and there was nothing there. No furniture, no carpet, not even the parlor lamp she loved, not even a chandelier, just a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. No paintings, only dusty squares on the wall where they’d hung. We just stood there and stared at the empty place. You couldn’t believe it. I don’t know if you’ve ever had that experience of being inside something and not believing it. I’ve had it twice, in the Holocaust Museum in Berlin and then there, in Maca’s apartment. The only thing left was a single kitchen stool. It just stood there, by the wall. Then Borna stormed into the bedroom, and there was nothing there either, I mean, not what should have been there. No bed, only two mattresses on the floor, no wardrobe, just piles of clothes on one mattress, and you could still see a cobweb on the wall where the wardrobe had stood. No chandeliers there either, and all her stuff was original, Biedermeier and such. And then Borna went through the apartment like a sleepwalker, not in a straight line but veering left and right, that’s what it looked like, as if avoiding furniture that wasn’t there, armchairs, coffee table, dresser. Then he stopped in the middle of the living room and just stared at his mother standing there in her nightgown, half naked and disheveled, like they had just taken her baby boy off the cross. She looked at Borna and said, ‘Son, kill me!’

“And he just hugged her, so tiny and thin. He held her in his arms, yet to me it seemed he was about to crush her. I can’t describe it, he held her gently, then squeezed her as if wanting to break her bones. When we finally pulled ourselves together, them together with me, I could clearly see the balcony in full bloom, all the plants and flowers she watered twice a day, some even from that single little stool. You can’t imagine the picture: empty walls in every room and the balcony brimming with flowers. Then Borna asked her, ‘Mom, what happened? How is this even possible?’ She said nothing, just went to the bedroom and under a pile of papers pulled out a death notice, a real death notice, a black frame, white interior, a cross and the words: Marijana Barač, passed away peacefully, resting in the Lord...”

“I don’t get it. If he’d already sold the furniture, why a death notice?”

“She told us what’d happened. She was sitting on that little stool, and we stood beside her. There was nowhere to sit. Borna leaned against the wall like he was drunk. Nenek came over, that’s what she said, desperate, sweating and shaking, but he didn’t beat her. Not this time. Maybe because he couldn’t. He asked for money, and for gold, but she had nothing. And then, she was shaking when she told us this, Nenek stopped in the middle of the room, pulled his pants and underwear down, and showed her his bloody ass. And then he knelt before her, like before the Virgin Mary, and said he couldn’t go on, his asshole hurt, and he was about to climb a skyscraper and jump. He even knew which one. And she said, ‘What am I supposed to do, son, what am I to do?’ And he shot right back at her, ‘Sell the furniture.’ ‘How? Who would buy it, son?’ she said. ‘How do I sell it? Do I post an ad? I don’t know how.’ ‘I know how,’ he said. Some former junkies of his, the ones that got clean, collected old things and furniture, or whatever people were willing to donate, and then sold it to fund their association and help other addicts. They even had a small truck. ‘But I don’t know,’ said Nenek, ‘what to tell them about where it came from. They’re not stupid, they’ll figure it out.’ ‘Tell them I died.’ And so he sold them the story that his mother had died and that he’d been left with an apartment full of old things. But they didn’t believe him, someone even told them he was lying, so he swore on his mother’s grave he wasn’t. He even had a friend print a death notice. To convince them.”

“Who would’ve bought that?! That’s so stupid. You can check that easily.”

“Of course it was stupid. But those guys were scum, they needed something to cover their asses. Any proof would do. And whether they did or didn’t buy it, I mean, of course they didn’t, but who gives a fuck?! How are you gonna prove that? If it went sour, they were deceived, the junkie fucked them over. And so he posted the notice on a pole in front of her house, that same day they were supposed to come get her stuff. And they showed up with their truck, snapped a photo of the notice, and cleared out the apartment.”

“All right, I get it. But what about her? Where was she when they were taking her stuff?”

“Right across the street. She just stood there and watched them carry her things out.” “That’s like watching your own funeral.”

“But the kitchen was the worst. There were no cabinets, no sink, no stove, no dishwasher, no microwave, no fridge, just an old electric hotplate with two rings, it stood there on the floor,

and next to it a single pot, a small one at that. The only thing left was a small sideboard. And it used to be a good kitchen. When he saw this, Borna simply flipped and said, 'Mom, the kitchen wasn't yours, it came with the apartment.' And she just said quietly, 'I know.' 'Are you fucking crazy?! How are we going to pay for it? Jesus! I could really kill you.' 'Well, you can't,' she said. 'I'm already dead. Nenek has killed me. Besides, they promised they wouldn't touch the kitchen.' 'Jesus Christ!' that's all Borna said and then he went to the little cupboard and opened it. Inside, there was a sack of flour, already open, half a bottle of oil, some coffee, and cans of dog food. Lots of cans with pictures of cocker spaniels, retrievers and beagles, all cute and cheerful. It looked like they were smiling. And that's where broke down, simply fell to the floor, right next to those cans, and started sobbing like a little child.

"And then we left. I drove, he was silent, and then I said, 'At least he'll leave her alone now. There's nothing left to take.' Yeah right, two months later, the fucker came over to steal her pension and broke her leg. He even claimed she hadn't given him everything."

12

Even after hearing that story, we still went to the seaside, because Mrs. Maca said she wouldn't be coming while we were away. That put us at ease.

When we returned, she came over to exercise a couple more times, but it didn't last long. And she always seemed well. "See, I don't need a crutch anymore," she told me once. Still, besides a glass of lemonade, every noon I would now also make a big cheese and ham sandwich and put it on a table for her.

"Oh, that's something new," she said. "You really shouldn't have."

And then she'd eat the sandwich. I watched her from the living room where she couldn't see me. She ate slowly, with pleasure, chewing carefully, probably because of her dentures, and she always left a small piece on the plate.

Of course, I told Višnja the whole story.

“She’s given up,” said Višnja. “I can’t imagine what it’s like to watch them carry out your furniture so your son can kill himself. Some people really aren’t meant to be parents.”

“Love!” I said. “The mother from that fairy tale. You can’t cure a psychopath. You can only make it easier for him.”

“A spoiled junkie brat, that’s what I think.”

“Dope is secondary. It’s a consequence, not a cause. Psychopaths are born even in the most stable of families.”

“What, have you fallen in love with her or something? Why are you defending that old hag?”

“I’m not defending her, I’m just saying.”

“Besides,” said Višnja, “something’s off. Why hasn’t anyone heard about it? Nobody’s said anything, and the neighbors always know everything. Just like you did. The death notice on the post, the furniture being carried out, and even that balcony, that’s just crazy, someone would’ve heard something.”

“I don’t know. She’s very careful, she knows how to hide it. She carries herself well, she’s polite, but she doesn’t open up to anyone. What do we really know about the people next to us? Nothing. That thing about everyone knowing everything... that’s just not true. Everyone minds their own business. And you often know nothing even about those closest to you.”

“You’re right,” she said with irony. “There are some things I didn’t know about you either. But in the end, things always come out.”

A couple days after that conversation, when we were jogging up our usual route toward the Mirogoj Cemetery, we saw a death notice on the post in front of Maca’s house.

“Look,” I said.

But Višnja was looking up, at the autumn roses on the balcony. Only then did she lower her gaze and approach the post.

“This is something else.”

And then we looked closer.

Borna Barač passed away peacefully, resting in the Lord, after a short and serious illness. He is mourned by his mother Marijana, brother Nenad, wife Ada, children Sonja and Dino.

“Oh God!” gasped Višnja, her hand over her mouth.

“God really doesn’t know when enough is enough,” I said.

“You idiot!”

I immediately called Žac, and after the answering machine picked up a few times, he finally said, “You heard, right? What a disaster. I don’t know what to say. It happened so suddenly, he lay down on the couch after lunch, said he wasn’t feeling well, and then he just rolled down to the floor. I’ll drop by one day, when things settle down a bit. This really fucked me up.”

13

The water in the pool was full of dry leaves, as were the chairs and the table under the gazebo, but, for me, autumn is most beautiful on the water. Monet and Renoir knew that too. Then one afternoon, Žac called.

“I’ve got a favor to ask. You home?”

“Yeah, I worked in the morning.” “All right, see you in a bit.”

And he came over, much slimmer, wearing a black T-shirt with *Pink Floyd* written on it in pink letters.

“It’s Borna’s shirt,” he said. “Makes it easier for me. His heart gave out, that’s clear now, right there on his couch. He just couldn’t take it anymore, poor guy, all that with his mother and brother was just too much for him. Ada called me, I came right over, the ambulance and the coroner were already there. He was lying in the bedroom, they dressed him in the suit he wore for his wedding, but it was a bit tight around the belly, so they pinned it with safety pins, and

he looked almost alive, didn't even have that dead color, I don't know how that's possible, but that's how it was. The relatives gathered, neighbors, friends, the kids were in the next room with their friends, who knows what they were talking about, but I even heard them laughing. One of the neighbors kept going in to calm them down, and I told her, 'Let them be, they're kids, they won't be laughing much longer.' Ada told me Borna had to take out a loan to buy a new kitchen, otherwise the landlady would've gone berserk, and they pulled it off by saying they'd leave the kitchen when his mom moved out. And the landlady agreed, she didn't get what had gone down, or maybe she did, but she went along with it. And all of that got to him, so... you see. And then Ada told me to go get Maca, she couldn't stand her, but still, it was his mother. So I drove her over. She walked like a robot, for real, and she didn't even look sad or desperate, just mechanical, you know, like a fucking piece of metal. She just hugged her grandkids and paid no attention to anyone else, I guess she was afraid to look them in the eye. And then she went into the room where Borna lay and just sat there by the bed. Ada asked her, 'Mom, do you want something to eat, maybe a glass of cognac?' but she just kept shaking her head. That's what it was like.

"We were in the living room talking about him, remembering old times, like how we played in the yards when we were kids, the stupid things Borna did, how once he stole a bicycle, a *Pony Express*, chopped it to pieces and kept it in my basement, too scared the cops would find it. He never even rode it, just left it there to rust, and we finally threw it out as scrap metal. That's what we talked about, old stories and stuff, while Maca sat alone in the next room with her dead son. Then, I don't know what time it was, late, I guess, little Sonja went to see her dad. Ada told her not to, but she went in anyway. We all froze, stopped talking, what would the child do when she saw her dead father? And all kinds of thoughts went through my head, crazy stuff, you know how a person gets in that situation, fucked up shit: what if she comes out with him alive, holding his hand, like he hasn't really died but just fallen into a really deep sleep or some shit; he can't walk right in that suit held with safety pins, it's too tight, and she leading him out by the hand – alive. That's what I imagined, how we'd all run away in fear. But the girl ran out quickly, terrified, and she whispered something into her mother's ear. We all saw it, it was dead quiet, and we all looked at each other, but we couldn't hear what she said. Ada listened, staring off somewhere into the distance, you couldn't tell where, then suddenly she turned and rushed into the room. She dragged Maca out, holding her by the arm, and the old woman could barely walk, stumbling, the robot had broken, and they stopped there in the middle of the living room, while everyone sat or stood around, watching, and Ada said, 'She

stole from him. She stole from her dead son. She took money out of his wallet.’ And Ada looked at her as if ready to pour gasoline on her and set her on fire. The whole room fell silent. People just stared, not believing what they’d heard, glancing at each other, no one daring to say a thing. ‘Don’t you dare come to the funeral,’ Ada told her, and Maca just stood there, stooped, as if this wasn’t her body. Ada pulled her toward the door and said to me, ‘Take her home.’

“She cried the whole time in the car. I said nothing, you never know what to say in a situation like that, but when we passed Britanac, when we got into Nazorova, still far from her house, she said, ‘I didn’t steal. I don’t know if you can believe me, but I didn’t take his money. Borna kept his wallet in the nightstand, and he kept a photo in it. That’s what I wanted to take – to remember them. But Sonja came in and saw me take it out of the wallet.’ I was silent for a while, but then I said, ‘I believe you, Mrs. Maca.’ And I did believe her, she couldn’t have faked that. And when we reached Cmrok, I stopped the car and asked her, ‘Why didn’t you tell her?’ ‘What?’ said Maca. ‘Why didn’t you tell Ada when she accused you?’ ‘Can’t you see she’s beside herself with grief,’ said Maca quietly. ‘After all, I killed him.’ Then we just sat there in silence. I watched people walking their dogs in the evening, dogs running happily, their tongues sticking out, just like on those damn cans. At some moment, she took out that photo. Old, black-and-white, jagged edges: snow, Borna and Nenek sitting on a sled while she’s pulling them. Both of them smiling, wearing funny hats, smiling under those hats. ‘It was the first snow,’ she said, ‘end of November, and we took them sledding, right here, on Cmrok. Funny coincidence. My husband took the picture, and whenever I felt bad, because of Nenek, I’d remember this photo. Look, doesn’t he look like an angel?’ His curly blond hair sticking out from that silly hat. His face always looked like a girl’s, but you could tell he was a boy, something right in between, the way angels are. And when I saw the photo, I completely believed her.

“When I got back, the people had already gone, Borna had been taken away, only Ada and her friend Andrea, she was her maid of honor, were still there. And that’s when Ada told me what had happened. When little Sonja went into the room, Maca was rummaging through the nightstand and she took money out of the wallet. ‘Not money,’ I said. ‘The photo.’ Ada hesitated for a moment, then said, ‘I don’t believe a thing she says. She killed him.’ She bit her lip till it bled and she said, ‘She killed her son. And all because, believe me, that boy nearly died of meningitis when he was a kid.’”

“Actually, he did,” I said to Žac. “He did die. It just took longer.”

“I have a favor to ask,” said Žac. “Ada and the kids are not doing well, there’s no money, Ada works in a store, you know what that pays, Borna’s gone and with him what little he managed to make on the side, plus there’s the kitchen loan still to pay off. That’s why I offered to help... Don’t take this the wrong way, but I told Ada we, Borna’s friends, would pull some money together, whatever we can, and we agreed on about two thousand each, just for the time being, to get them through. I know you didn’t really know Borna or Nenek, it doesn’t have to be a lot, but if you can give something, whatever you can, I hope you understand.”

14

Even in autumn, Đula’s balcony was full of color. Autumn pansies spilled over the railing, instead of the purple geraniums that had withered, now here were anemones, and instead of early spring forsythia, the false summer suns kept the sunlight alive on cloudy days with their gentle orange blossoms. The autumn roses had already faded, turning into brownish clusters as the wind scattered their petals. But the most abundant, it had to be said, were chrysanthemums. Both yellow and white. When Višnja and I went on our run toward the Mirogoj Cemetery, we would see Mrs. Maca pruning the dead rose stems, watering some thujas, which were a new addition to her balcony, as well as a small Chilean pine. But she gave most of her attention to the chrysanthemums. We would wave to her, and she would wave back.

Once Višnja stopped and asked, “How’s your leg?” “Thank God, better,” Maca shouted back.

And when she climbed up on the little stool, hidden behind all those flowers, it looked as if she were floating.