

A hand holding a wooden bow against a dark background. The bow is made of light-colored wood with a dark string. The hand is wearing a yellow sleeve. The background is dark and textured, with some faint lines and a light blue horizontal band at the bottom.

To Family With Love

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Today, I am reaching level fourteen in this game we call life. Dude, level fourteen, and if I ever live to see level forty, I'll have myself executed alive and kicking in the main square, as a shining example in favor of painless euthanasia. It's not right for living corpses to roam the city. Come on, why would anyone at such a late age have any reason to live whatsoever? I will gladly suggest the same to my old folks as well, because what reason do they have to keep the ball rolling after forty? None. Thank God, they brought me up, I don't need them anymore, and who else could have any use for them now?

Maybe I'm a little grumpy and maybe all of this is a little harsh? Well, I'll allow this: the limit may be lifted to, say, forty-two and a half for women and forty-one for men, because women, according to all statistical indicators, live longer than men. But it's not actually a matter of statistics, it's more of a *joie de vivre* kind of thing, it has to do with all the biology that radiates from them – and it was in biology that I managed to get a D the day before yesterday, a D as straight as a die, which is why I have such a firm and professional knowledge of these data.

It is very likely that some will come to the conclusion that I am a bit resentful of my parents, or worse, that, God forbid, I am angry with them. It's not true, everything is A-Okay, all of this only has to do with bare and undeniable facts. I hope you will forgive me for some difficult words or confusion, for it is not easy to write with your hands under the desk while making sure that no one sees you, and still look the professor in the eye feigning

interest as he yaps on and on about something they'd taught him long ago, with the sole purpose of getting his hands on his salary. Well, if you're not an experienced student, like me, for example, and you gawk at your professor as I gawk at my Marina, he immediately gets a strong need to demonstratively include you in his lecture. That's why school is an uphill battle, because it's hard to find the balance when it comes to focused gawking, so my professors would often interrupt me while I was writing this, mistaking my creative enthusiasm for interest in their lecture, getting me into all sorts of situations that humored the rest of the class.

So, today is a big day for our household, perhaps the biggest one of all; the day my family marks the holiday celebrating their only child's birthday. My only task is to dress nicely and receive gifts – they take care of everything else. They deal with the cake and relatives and so on. I can say that it works perfectly that way. The organization includes such trifles and details that every year everyone gets me identical gifts, which is very likely closely related to the Chinese horoscope. Two years ago was the year of The Brave Adventures of Hlapitch¹, last year was the year of the soccer ball, and this, I hope to God, will be the year of the dog. Even a thoroughbred would be okay. Man, fourteen full turns around the Sun! Isn't that a lot? Almost half of my life has passed, which is not easy having in mind that I was not a regular only child, but the family's absolute only child, such as, for example, the only unknown, only proprietor, only winner and the like, which is to say that you have absolutely no right to a brother or sister, let alone pets. Even when I was given that right,

¹ A 1913 novel by Croatian children's author Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić (Croatian: *Čudnovate zgodbe šegrta Hlapića*)

I unfortunately did not use it well, although I tried my best. God is my witness.

* * *

Gugi the dog, my first attempt, whom I brought home from a nearby neighborhood, didn't have a clue about house rules or hygiene. That is the differential characteristic of stray dogs, the thing that distinguishes them from pets, for whose purchase I never had enough money. Without any inhibitions whatsoever, Gugi would piss and shit all over the apartment as if I had brought him to a field, not a nice family home on the fourth floor. Since he would empty his bladder and bowels much faster than I was able to clean, I called it quits pretty soon, so it all smelled to high heaven from the very beginning, as if there even was anything heavenly about that love that was bound to end.

Then, in the end, to add salt to injury, my old lady puffed up her chest:

– It's either him or me!!

So, in order to decide what to do with ma, my old man and I quickly organized a referendum and a secret ballot by way of summary procedure, which resulted in two votes in favor of keeping the old lady and one dissenting vote. We are still bearing the consequences of that ballot, and the old lady has been persistently investigating who had been the scoundrel behind that dissenting vote, although no one has any idea, because what kind of a secret ballot would it be if everyone knew it was me?

By that ugly democratic act, Gugi was denied many rights: the right to adaptation, the right to a family, the right to a hot meal and a warm home, the right to a collar and a leash, and he was left with the right to fleas and freedom, which he would later exercise for several months, until he was caught by dogcatchers.

Although, allegedly, case law treats complicity like murder itself, nothing happened to my folks. Nothing – there wasn't even

remorse. I guess I would have noticed if there had been any, even though I wasn't home all the time, as I occasionally had to go to school.

Later on, I tried my hand with three other unfortunate dogs, but the story always ended the same way and only affected my emotional development by stuffing it with sadness and crying, so when I fully developed in that area, I finally gave up.

I have never even tried with cats because of their innate aversion to me caused by my unreasonable love for dogs, and also because they adore birds, especially canaries, and they tend to sneak up on them and devour their flesh. Kiki was thus my only pet that lasted more than a month.

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– Hey there, I see that you are closely following and writing down everything I am talking about today, so please read us your assignment!

As Pythagoras caught my attention while I was 2,786 km away from math, wandering carefree among pets, I quickly concentrated as a tomato sauce and, cool as a cucumber, made up a task with three unknowns:

– If Ante has three daughters, and the first one, Melita, is 2 and $117/415$ years older than Višnja, who is slightly younger than her identical twin Vera, what's the x ? The correct answer is also the age of my Kiki.

– Interesting and very imaginative. Too bad we're interrupted by the bell. Solve this for homework! And who is Kiki?!

The task was difficult enough to perplex just about all the nerds in my class, and I could never even solve it myself – even Pythagoras himself would have to rack his brains. Then, I remembered two twins, a brother and a sister from class 7 b, and I raced to meet them in order to solve that equation with three unknowns, all with the aim of finding out the exact answer. After

the exchange of two chewing gums and a thorough discussion on the current political situation, the x in their case turned out to be exactly ten months and thirty-six days.

– Thanks and bye, you’ve helped me a lot.

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The next day in math class, after I had raised my hand, Pythagoras publicly humiliated me in front of the blackboard and the entire class by stating that my result was inaccurate. He told me that the twins weren’t even twins to begin with, let alone identical, and that the brother had failed the 5th grade because he couldn’t pass his math exam. He said that as if it were a good thing, because the brother, having temporarily sacrificed his academic progress, could now walk his sister to school, since their schedules were in sync. So, it turned out that if you want to solve one lousy math assignment, you have to know biology like the back of your hand, so I stood there in front of the blackboard with my mouth shut, not wanting to risk my biology grade, too.

– Professor, what do you mean an F?!? Okay, my calculations might have been wrong, but I was the only one in class who knew the answer to the question who Kiki was.

That is correct, he said, but such profound knowledge doesn’t get you an A, but rather a Nobel Prize, and he was not authorized to award me one.

* * *

So, that Kiki of mine, who was responsible for all that mess, lasted exactly four weeks and eight days, which you’ve probably already calculated yourself. Please don’t give yourself a hard time if you got a different result, because this is typical of mathematics: the problem always offers countless correct solutions.

Basically, after that date, Kiki just changed his residence, without any remorse or a goodbye.

It was a long time ago, so I don't remember everything that well anymore, and since I don't feel like lying, I'll only tell you the truth and nothing but the truth.

I was in the middle of studying, and when you study, you don't have time to look after canaries or any other feathered game. We didn't keep dogs anymore anyway, even though there's this breed among them called the pointer, which is just ideal for keeping canaries in line. I think that my Gugi would have been a great fit for that job, but now that doesn't matter anymore and it's just making me feel sadder. At that point in time, I believe, I was on level nine or ten point five three of this game we call life, and I was, God bless my soul, very small and irrelevant, so I had to learn a lot in terms of training for life and getting acquainted with the overall fund of world knowledge, because if you don't study, your ass is cooked, you're suddenly fourteen years old, and then you have to survive with what you've got. After that, you're on your own. Dude, level fourteen! Later in life there's no musts, only wills or won'ts. Compulsory education is a thing of the past. Eighth grade and toodle-oo.

When my ma, for example, went to school (even though she never presented me with any written document in that regard, I guess she must have used it to get her hands on my old man), people would always study with the windows wide open in order to create draft. That increased amount of hydrogen ($2O$), or oxygen (X), I don't know exactly, implies their excessive consumption by the brain, and that's why the windows must be opened, because that chemistry seems to depend on the draft, so our windows would be open even in the middle of winter, and I was not allowed to study if we wanted to heat the apartment. Back then, I didn't know all of this so accurately and with all the formulas as I do now that I've prepared for my chemistry test. And your

brain serves you to learn new things, while the things you already know are a given. I am writing this down so meticulously so younger schoolchildren could also understand me in the future.

When Kiki, also known as Yellow, which was his nickname because he was all yellow due to his feathers (which is a very common characteristic of canaries), once saw that the windows were wide open – and since he was not in his cage but was, as usual, stomping on my learned head, so much that his feet must’ve hurt from all the info oozing out of it – he flew out without blinking an eye for the purpose of breaking free, directly into a group of sparrows on the nearby poplar, in spite of the fact that we were on the fourth floor. I forgot to mention that Kiki was wearing his wings defensively because of all the floors, so rushing out the window from the fourth floor by no means implied courage on his part, and I was left feeling grief and sorrow for yet another lost pet. Courage, on the other hand, was my crazy attempt at flying out with an umbrella, which my folks immediately and forever forbade and got out of my head, and every attempt at getting something out of one’s head begins with kicking one’s ass, because it was a brand-new umbrella, the likes of which were held in high regard at the time. Are you crazy, son?!

* * *

– Get up, please, and would you be so kind as to summarize what I have been saying so far!?

I bravely got up, displeased at the fact that I was being asked questions non-stop as if I were the only one in class, and started talking about the joy that the sparrows experienced when a yellow sparrow, a bird they’d previously only seen in television cartoons, dove off into them out of nowhere. It’s impossible

to imagine that, unless the whole class agreed to chirp around 1,365,426 times for the next fifteen hours and eleven minutes.

I immediately went on to tell the well-known tale of the anther, pestle and pollen, and after that I talked about new species, because it was the very interbreeding of my Kiki and the sparrows that resulted in the creation of tits. My story was not at all met with enthusiasm; on the contrary, everyone gawked at me with their mouths wide open, like what's this guy babbling about, as if what I was saying was impossible. It almost seemed like I was lying and that I had made it all up.

– Perhaps to you, Madam Professor, it is impossible. You have known everything for a long time now and you have learned everything, so you have no reason to continue learning or opening the windows to let the draft in, so of course it seems impossible to you that a canary could fly out the window and become the great-grandfather of a tit. But in my home, the drafts are just like those on a sailboat. My folks are airing the hell out of our apartment. They are always hot, and I even caught them sleeping naked at night a few times. I don't think it has anything to do with what you're thinking now, that they did it for the sake of creating new species, because after all, they are past their prime, and besides, four years have passed since then, and I am still completely alone, I don't have a brother, a sister or a pet. That being said, I ask you, where did the tits come from? Do you have a better story about the origin of tits?

– No, dear child, but you will have to ask that question in biology class, not here in chemistry class.

* * *

I could hardly wait for biology class, and after we'd established with certainty that my question was definitely a matter of biology, in order to avoid any further confusion or misunderstandings, I started presenting my theory and asked, on behalf of

Kiki, the sparrows, tits and the whole class, for the matter to be set straight once and for all.

My biology professor said that I and my theory were already a hot topic in the teachers' lounge and that the school psychologist had also shown interest in me. She then went on to tell a far-fetched story, the one you've all heard in your schools, in which my Kiki takes no part at all, and where the key role is played by a certain Darwin – to add salt to injury, the story doesn't even make it possible to tell which bird genus the guy belongs to.

I kindly thanked her, completely dissatisfied with the answer and even more with the fact that she interrupted me. It was absolutely clear that anyone who wanted to write shouldn't go to school, so I mostly continued writing at home, in order to finally finish the story of how and why I remained an only child in peace. Here I will list only the reasons I know you will remember, not ramble on as they do at school. The first reason was that my folks no longer wanted children, not even their own, because they were pretty and unnecessarily surprised by me; the second reason was that pets were leaving us in short order, either by choice or by chance, all for the purpose of training and showing me how sad, difficult and horrible it is to live alone.

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Supposedly I, too, have almost suffered the same fate as the pets, all of which happened when I was about halfway to four ($4:2=2$; see, I never miss an opportunity to practice some math), but I have no knowledge or written information about it, because it was an age darker than the Middle Ages, and because I was living in total ignorance at that time. I was apparently still shitting and pissing all over the apartment without any order or warning when my folks decided to give me to someone somewhere in the country, so I would be in good hands, but they changed their

minds due to parental love, which for some reason doesn't allow you to quit on your kid while you're still a parent.

So, apart from me, the only permanent residents of our apartment were my ma and my old man, and that is, as the locals say, all that can be seen when the doors of our family open.

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But our building, now that's really something special and there's a lot to show. Twelve floors, all one above the other, you can barely believe your own eyes. When you're a kid, you have to lie on your back to see its top floor. If you go up to the twelfth floor and open the window, you will gaze in wonder as planes, helicopters and birds fly below you, with clouds swarming around them, producing rain and storms while you're enjoying the sun and the view from above. And the view, the view relentlessly overlooks everything far and wide, so I used to climb to the very top many a time and spend whole afternoons and evenings there, bursting with joy in all directions come sunset. It is the tallest skyscraper in the neighborhood, and it's enough just to mention that you're from the Giraffe and everyone immediately looks at you differently and knows exactly where you live. No more explanations are needed: the second street to the left, the third to the right... If you mention the Giraffe, everyone knows where it is. We also gave it a couple of nicknames, such as Gigi, Raff and the like. Some of our cities have half the population of our Raff – there are so many of us in that building that you can't even get to know everyone. Despite that, I managed to peek into a fair share of the apartments, and I can only say one thing: when you see one apartment, you've seen them all. They are all similar and almost all suffer from overcrowding, chronic constipation and chronic pet shortage. All of them have floor-to-ceiling shelves, beds that come down from built-in closets or are pulled out of the most peculiar places imaginable, and balconies full of

garden furniture and barbecues. Each apartment, like ours, for some reason boasts a shoebox-like room, which is always called a children's or regular bedroom, and strangely enough none of these have a window. All who come to visit us are always amazed at how we came up with such a great idea. Since no one ever asks that in front of me, I still have no idea what exactly that question is all about, and I don't know the correct answer to that remark.

Anyways, our jam-packed Gigi groans under the weight of all these things and adaptations, and when I make my way into construction, I will build skyscrapers that will lie down instead of standing up, so as to ease all that inner weight and torment that they endure reinforcedly and stoically every day because of us. If I happen to be happy, content and proud of something, then it's for a reason and above all because of my skyscraper.

We, as you already know, are located on the fourth floor, which is almost an ideal position if you are taking the elevator down from the twelfth floor. Otherwise, it sucks ass. If you start out from above, you'll reach the outside sooner than the inside, and if there's no electricity, then you just walk up to the fourth floor while all those from the fifth floor and up, due to the inability to reach their habitats caused by the negative impact of the health system, scatter and displace all over the lower floors while the elevator's out.

As the elevator would break down often, one man, a student by profession, lived in our Raff for four years by moving from one apartment to another as was mentioned above, until he graduated from some university or whatever, without anyone figuring him out.

Afterwards, he disappeared without a trace, so there's no need for you to think about him anymore. Here, I won't either.

The elevator is a great invention in general, especially for children. As soon as you get tired of TV, you rush into the hallway, head for the elevator, and ride it 1135 times from the ground

floor to the twelfth floor, until you get tired of riding it so much that TV becomes interesting to you again. It is practically impossible for you to find any time for studying in between so many engaging activities. For that reason, I guess, we go to school.

– You rascal, I’ll tell on you to your parents! You’ve been riding the elevator all day long, so I had to walk all the way to the fifth floor with all these bags, old and sick as I am.

– It’s not true, Mrs. Ljubica, bless your heart, I just brought one kilogram and three hundred and fifty grams of bananas to that poor woman in the wheelchair from the ninth floor.

* * *

By now, you should’ve figured out that all sorts of people live here – the place is teeming with friends, as well as some enemies. My best friend moved in a long time ago, to the twelfth floor, just before a now historic barbecue that we will surely remember for all our lives, maybe even longer.

As the chicken wings were starting to change their appearance, color and edibleness, getting all bronzed up and crunchy, and the afternoon was slowly and lazily extinguished and dissolved into the evening calm, us boys continued to chase the ball with undiminished zeal across the field, and the girls were jumping rope. We were all eagerly waiting to hear that diner was ready!!!, so that we could rush to eat like a stampede.

In the midst of that idyll, suddenly, unexpectedly, like a wounded beast, Zagreb plunged, shook and roared wildly from all its city sirens to put on a red alert, announcing a disastrous war that would change and take so many lives, a war that immediately started with savage destruction – when we got out of the shelter two hours later, we saw that the meat on the grill was completely destroyed. Even stray dogs didn’t want it anymore.

Anyway, as the city roared as if the devil himself was chasing it, I shat my pants like a turtledove out of fear and panic. And

while others were running off towards the basement, my family rushed me to the fourth floor to change my spare parts and deal with the emerging damage. This may be funny to people now, but back then I had only seen nine turns around the sun, man, nine, and that was my first war.

It was silent in the basement, some were praying, some were softly crying, and my intestines and stomach were churning as if I had swallowed a World Cup Soccer or as if I was waiting in a dental waiting room for an oral exam in math. Even in such a mood and state I, at all costs, had to rush off to the fourth floor every now and then because of my digestion and its poor adjustment in terms of frequency. As I was the only one constantly going in and out of the shelter, during those first alarms I was also the only link to the outside world, the only source of information, or at least the sum of it I could gather by peeking through the window from the fourth floor. Basically, after each of my reports, the atmosphere would get gloomier and more onerous, the children were bawling and the old women were wailing, because the paratroopers' airdrop on Upper Town was no joke, and neither was the fact that the whole north was on fire, and that people dead from snipers were lying all around. I also informed them that someone from the sixth floor forgot to close the window, while someone from the eighth floor left the laundry on the balcony. I even exaggerated a bit as I became wide-eyed with fear, so my old man went to see what was really going on outside and how come there was relentless hand-to-hand combat in front of our Gigi, and nothing could be heard in the building.

Afterwards, no one asked me anything anymore – they were not at all impressed by my courage regarding me risking my life due to indigestion, and climbing four floors with superhuman effort.

* * *

That best friend of mine, the one who moved in right before the war, had no idea that, in addition to his tenant-right, he'd

also get a long and warm friendship, so he initially cared more about how to get his things into his apartment on the twelfth floor without anybody stealing or breaking everything along the way.

It was an apartment abandoned due to property and legal relations; you see, a dead person resided in it for two months and fourteen days, so it smelled to high heaven all the way down to the third floor, and no one realized what was going on. So, it was impossible to find out whose apartment it was, because the dead don't answer questions. In the end, my friend got it, and justly so, and he only got it because he'd lost his sight, which is a big advantage when they dispense apartments hand over fist, especially on the twelfth floor. He has nothing to fear when he looks down from that height, as he doesn't see anything whether he's looking up or down. He doesn't know which way he's looking anyway.

Blindness is a grand and difficult vice that manifests itself in difficulties pertaining to orientation and movement in space, so a blind person, as they don't use sight, moves through space and time exclusively by relying on hearing and touch. There, they have an enormous advantage over others, as they had these senses sharpened to their full extent and developed to unimaginable proportions. They also use their feet. Their sense of touch is extended by means of a long white cane, which is even officially called a white cane. It is a stick that pulls into itself in times of unnecessity, or when it does not serve its purpose, so you can put it in a bag if you haven't forgotten it at home. When it appears in other colors, it is used for fishing, which has absolutely nothing to do with the blind, because they are not sensitive to colors. In fact, they rest their eyes all the time and save them for sleep as they have no use for them during the day.

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Blindy – that friend of mine – and I became friends by accident and in a flash only a few weeks later – those are the best friendships. It happened when he made me laugh in the store by knocking down everything that was standing in his way, just like

Pythagoras the professor knocks down everyone who dares to try and pass his tests. As I couldn't control my laughter, I didn't want to approach him right away and make him feel inferior (something handicapped people are prone to feeling), so I waited for him to dilly-dally to the sidewalk.

– Sir, can I help you somehow, may I take you across the road?

– You're a sweetheart, boy.

And so, with these very words, our friendship began.

Later on, I grew to love crossing the road with him almost as much as I loved football – once we would step onto the road, everyone would hit the brakes like crazy, and they weren't even allowed to blow the horn because it was absolutely clear that I was doing charity. Sometimes, when I would leave him alone on a park bench, I would snatch his cane and then perform various bravadoes in traffic, which the drivers calmly endured out of compassion and understanding for my age and white cane. There was only this one fool from the seventh grade, who knows me like the back of his hand and is clueless when it comes to traffic signs, who ruthlessly ran me over with his bike, so later we added up the losses, and I can say that the moment I saw what happened to the cane, fear would have frozen the blood in my veins, had it not, so warm and sticky, been flowing profusely and disinterestedly from the wound on my leg.

When I came back, Blindy pretended not to realize what had happened to his cane, thus attaining my undying love right then and there. With that act, at that place and at that moment, we cemented our friendship, which later only continued to grow stronger on the solid foundation of candy and chocolate. And I can say that, apart from a few blind people, because nothing brings people so close as common torment, I was the only one who hung out with him, and we were true friends.

The war was raging more and more every day. The city had shouted itself hoarse from the frequent roaring and howling, and all that was starting to resemble frog croaking, or maybe we had just gotten too used to all the sounds. I didn't really care what sounds my city used to scare the enemies, because that croaking, as well as the roaring, would force me to heedlessly rush to the fourth floor ever so often at all costs, and my life was turning into a race that involved frantically jumping over 108 steps. What's even worse, sometimes my intestinal rapid fire would start on the third floor, and I would get to the apartment all shitty and out of breath and I wonder: why on earth were you running like hell? I know it could happen to anyone, but why, as luck would have it, did it always happen to me?

Now that I am a fourteen-year-old stud who'd put up with all that without a hitch, the war is over. It's easy to torture someone when they are small and weak and only ten, eleven or twelve years old.

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During those red alerts and air strikes, our skyscraper suffered significant losses, but not so much in manpower as it did materially. After each strike, some apartments would be left without valuables people were mostly saving for a rainy day, and since those days were in fact quite rainy, the loss was even greater. We would call the police, and the policemen would kindly respond, but only to improve their own morale in front of us

scaredy-cats. Then, as true despondent big shots that had to return to the battlefield, they would forget about our case, because fighting the enemy was a much more important job than solving such nonsense. As the enemy was sending bandits, thieves and convicts to attack us, we'd greet them with the police, which they feared the most.

My family had nothing to fear in this suddenly created detective story because we had no valuables. The only thing that was really precious to us were the memories of happy days, which were so repressed at the time that we barely remembered them ourselves, so we really didn't have a single reason to worry.

And those happy days, they are the sun of my memory. My folks holding hands on the way home from the store; my old man proud as a peacock while his poker buddies were calling him a wuss and testing his endurance with additional reprimands; my ma beaming with happiness with tube mayo and ice cream cones peeking from the bag in her hand; me running around them freely and without a leash until my ma would remember I exist and take my hand because the traffic was crazy. If a movie about that were made now, it would surely make people cry for more reasons than just the war. Now, having seen fourteen turns around the Sun, all of that is clear as day to me, and back then, can you imagine, it all seemed irrelevant, and I was even a little ashamed, or as some would say embarrassed, of my folks. The nerve of the people that old walking together, hand in hand nonetheless. So lame.

Or when my old lady would wade among the flowerbeds, which are a surface excavation of a layer of the Earth's crust, where only weeds and perhaps some vegetables can grow, with my old man on the front line of the fence, on the garden bench chugging spritzers and beating his friends at belote. I would inexorably enjoy that happiness from a safe outpost, making sure that ma doesn't notice me and make me pull out weeds. My old man had a belote name, they called him Jack, which, considering he

was no jack of all trades, was such a joke, yet in belote it was an honor, because that is the high card. That's a true general officer, maybe even a non-commissioned officer, or whatever the chief in belote is called.

I also remember wandering around the apartment not knowing what to do, and then autumn would come and my ma would start roasting chestnuts right away, all of which would give in to the fire, because it's better to bend than break, and I would catch my old man carelessly relaxing and persuade him to dock and drop the anchor at the card table. Outside, the wind was whistling and the leaves were flying, but our apartment and souls were filled with warmth and joy. Dad didn't play Old Maid and I didn't know how to play belote, because my hands were too small for so many cards, so we would usually play schnapps. As soon as the chestnuts were roasted, and the whole skyscraper was alerted by smoke and smell to what we had done, we would deal a hand to my ma as well. I would cheat here and there, so I would call twenty with the Queen of Hearts and King of Diamonds, or vice versa, or I would try my hand with the King and Jack of the same color, and my old man would pretend not to see, while my ma really had no clue, so she would have to shuffle again and again, and there was no turning a blind eye since the rules of card games are strict and cruel.

– Reshuffle mom, reshuffle, you didn't go by the color!

The one who loses, shuffles, and that's it. Afterwards, my old man and I, without any remorse, would fart contentedly and very enthusiastically using chestnuts as fuel, because on the one hand, we were the winners, and winners can do as they please, and on the other, we had already warned the skyscraper with the smoke and the smell of roasted chestnuts, thus preparing them for everything.

But no one warned or prepared us for this damn war.

Then, I would crawl into bed in the evening, and my folks would compete over which one of them would wish me a better

night and tell me a nicer story. There were some stories after which I didn't dare close my eyes for two nights in a row. And the goodnight kisses. There really are certain moments that make you wish you would stay little forever. Even now that I'm past my prime, it makes my eyes water when I think about that. It's a good thing that I'm looking forward to my B-day today, otherwise I would have pushed the red alert button in my heart with all my strength at least once.

* * *

No one paid too much attention to my emotional state, and the war was relentlessly running its immitigable historical course, with the roaring and croaking of the city and with the race of my life with my digestive tract and my highly set goal on the fourth floor. The only bright moments of those days were when, after the race, having been serviced, changed and cleaned, I'd sit in front of the TV and shout for two or three hours straight and at the top of my lungs to Đuka Čaić's Hrvatine². It was a triumphal song from the very beginnings of the war and our greatest war success at the time, a song I knew by heart and would sing on every winning occasion. You would sing that song until you were captured by the winning morale, or stopped by your parents who were already sick and tired of mine and Đuka's singing. After a while, I didn't even need Đuka anymore, that's how well I was doing. The loudest I sang it was at school, in math class, when Pythagoras announced that I had managed to soar to D minus on my test, which, as that was a time of war, was a success equal to a feat. Pythagoras sent me to the principal's office stating that you can't yowl in class, not even in math class, but the real reason was that he just couldn't stand someone being successful. The principal also knew Đuka's song by heart, so he interrupted me after the second stanza, just when the guidance counselor burst

² A patriotic song (1991)

into the office without knocking or any consideration; she was afraid that someone was beating up the principal, so he first had to calm her down and only then give his full attention to pedagogy and other sciences which the school and teachers use to defend themselves from students and their attacks of insolence and ignorance. In the end, after I had laid out my defense, he was bewildered that, within the framework of such a fine profession as mathematics, someone would even dare give the students their opinion on music.

Maybe one day I'll be a principal of sorts.

The war was becoming more and more frantic, but despite the war, all of us, and especially me, continued to be victims of the school system. It didn't occur to anyone to, say, close the schools while the war was going on, and I personally brought that matter to the principal's attention when he caught me smoking in the toilet, but the teachers still continued to drill us as if we were on the front line of defense, meaning that my proposal went unanswered. And so, while others were learning, I had to, often against my will, wander all around and look for friends in high places to support my proposal, with the sole aim of somehow getting us out of school captivity, but it was all in vain and to no avail as I didn't find any. To this day, I have no idea where they might be, but I see that the same goes for my old man as well, for he has no clue either.

Although my school was very close to our skyscraper, that did no good to me, so even with record-breaking outreach, I would never manage to get to the fourth floor in time. When the howl would catch me at school and shake it to the ground – because a siren, the very one that sounded the loudest throughout the whole city, was placed in it – I'd often shit my pants down at Gigi's entrance or on the second floor at best. War is a very ugly thing, and it's completely wrong to think that it is only for people with strong nerves, or that it is a war of nerves. It's not about nerves in the slightest, weak or strong, but the key issue is diges-

tion. War is only for people with strong digestion, and above all a strong stomach that can handle it all.

So, my war was conquering the fourth floor at all costs, and there, or somewhere along the way, I would relieve myself so often that I became skinny as a rake, which went very nicely with the number on my goalkeeper's jersey.

The doctor, to whom ma had taken me in the meantime, told my mother that she was worrying for no reason, that everything was fine with me, that the whole deal with digestion was normal, and that it would stop on its own lickety-split once the war was over, so the only thing he prescribed me was peace.

Blindy had no problem with those alerts and would never go down to the bomb shelter since it was prohibited to use the elevator at times of emergency as per the orders of the general staff, which I had violated multiple times until I was discovered. Due to the darkness caused by his permanent loss of vision, by the time he'd schlep to the basement, the war would have probably already ended, so he would just look funny going to the shelter with the war, praise the Lord, having stopped long ago. So, he would stay in his apartment, and I'd tell him everything that was happening in the shelter in great detail, which he would just eat all up like I eat candy and chocolate that one should always have stored somewhere when they hope their best friend will drop by. So, we would sit in the park after the alerts, and I would tell him everything that he wanted to know precisely and using numbers, as long as he had chocolate and candy in his pockets, of course, because otherwise there would be no trade-off at all. And as for the numbers, I'm like a Swiss watch. That innate numerical precision of mine unfortunately has nothing to do with mathematics, which happens to be even more precise than me. And so, while I

was submitting yet another basement report to him, my ma suddenly started yelling from the fourth floor:

– Come home right away, your dad has gone mad!!!

Why does the whole neighborhood always have to hear about every success of ours?

I left in an instant, although there was still some liquorice toffees left in my friend's pockets.

I ran for the hills by elevator, and when I stormed into the apartment, I couldn't believe my eyes: my old man was in a denim suit, sneakers on his feet, sunglasses on his nose, a rosary around his neck and a Kalashnikov over his shoulder.

– Is there a call for Clint Eastwood's stunt doubles somewhere?

– No, that's him going to war!!!

– Dad, are you nuts? You never even served in the army! You have no idea whatsoever how to use that thing on your shoulder.

– I assume he knows, because he spent all our savings on it.

My old man just stood there proudly as a triumphant warrior, just like so many other warriors who had gone to war before him, and who, before their departure, also had to say a dignified farewell to their families, who probably took it just as zealously and enthusiastically as my ma.

– You idiot, are you even aware of what you're doing to us; what will happen to us if you get hurt; you think anyone will ask questions if you don't come back; at least think of our child, since you obviously don't care about me!!

Consoled by those warm words of support, my old man just kept quiet, and ma told me that he had made a pact with those crazy card game buddies of his, because allegedly they could no longer squat in holes like rats and helplessly watch the enemy conquer and destroy our villages and cities, and thought that anyone who cared at least a tiny bit for their homeland should go

and fight for it. Very few people at that time cared about their homeland that much – people were mostly inclined to leave the caring to others.

My heart sank, and I'd surely have wept like a sad willow at just ten years, two months and eleven days old had I not seen a deck of cards sticking out of his denim jacket pocket, so it immediately became clear to me that my old man had pulled one more stunt or played a trick on my ma so that he could play belote with his friends, the so-called deadbeats, somewhere in peace over the weekend. So, I just slowly retreated to the toilet and, just in case, and out of sheer precaution, sang my ass off with Đuka.

Later, it turned out that it was no joke and that our old man was among the first ones to go to war, just as until recently he had been among the first ones to rush to the shelter at every alert. Nothing concerned him anymore: not his job, not my school, not who would raise me. Well, I still had my ma and the streets, but also my mom's problems. It turned out that he had a strong defensive instinct and that he suddenly had to go, end of discussion. Homeland mania got the best of him, and we couldn't keep him from going no matter how much we cried. Ma and I really didn't shy away from crying, but nothing helped, my old man remained steadfast – he hugged me and quietly said:

– Take care of your mom, son!

He left in tears and fear; he scurried to take it all out on the enemy. Our war, I can personally attest, really wasn't won by heroes.

* * *

Later on, I started hanging out with Blindy, my best friend, even more than before, since by then I could tell him a lot about my old man's war feats, his friends, weapons, little successes and significant failures, because every beginning is difficult, and my stories made Blindy very happy and content in his darkness.

Despite spending a lot of time with Blindy, I missed my old man so badly that I started to stutter, which everyone was starting to notice, although it's not like I had spoken fluently, clearly and by the book ever before. I could speak my way to a C minus tops.

Anyhow, stuttering is significantly more convenient than blindness, for it only comes into play when you speak. When you are silent, it's completely off, while blindness is a non-stop deal, it's there even at night, so you don't even see in your dreams. And while pop's departure hit my ma and me pretty hard and threw us out of gear, it didn't even slightly worry the enemy, let alone intimidate them.

Sometimes it's hard to be ten years old and carry the weight of your mom's problems on your shoulders, especially if those problems have to do with you.

In those difficult times, I built a hideout under the stairs by the other entrance, and not a single soul knew about it, except for me, Blindy, and stray dogs. In times of distress, I would crawl into my hideout and write on and off, and I finished a solid part of this book there, as well as cuddled with stray dogs, who never made fun of me for stuttering. There, I would also sing Hrvatine out loud. Those were the days when everything was going downhill for me, both in school and in my family, everything except for stuttering, at which I was only getting better. The only occasions when I wouldn't stutter was when I would sing or write, and somehow even when I would report to my friend Blindy on the developments of war joy, if there even is such a thing in war. It may be that nature simply didn't want to mock him even more by making him listen to me stutter. Perhaps his vision could miraculously come back in my company, considering that my stuttering would go away whenever I talked to him.

Normally, stuttering, unlike blindness, causes general joy and delight. As soon as a stutterer says something, there is always the possibility that the masses will have a good laugh, and

that was especially true in my class whenever I would open my mouth to respond to something. If you're already a stutterer, it would be quite nice to be blind, too, so you wouldn't see everyone laughing at you.

They crack up the most when a stutterer is telling a joke about stuttering, so I also often had to tell one, and it was so bitterly and closely connected to my personal war.

– M m m ay I I I be ex ex cused!, and then Dino from the second rows would ask:

– And what for, sonny?

– I I nn nnne nneed to g g go t t t to the t t t...

– You need to go to the toilet?

– Th th th thaa nnn kss thanks, n n n n ow ow oow now I d d d on onn onn don't ne nee need to g g go an an any mo mo moore, I'm d d d d on on one done.

Then, the whole class would burst into laughter, because the joke was hilarious, and I would shit my pants every so often anyway. It didn't matter that there was actually a war going on and the situation wasn't funny at all. After that mockery, I would always run to my hideout to see my stray pals and sing Hrvatine to them until my tears stopped flowing.

I will no longer be writing in the language of the stutterers, because that would prolong our book indefinitely, and as you already know, when I write, I do not stutter.

So, I would often find myself in the hideout, and I was still looking for those friends in high places with the aim of closing the schools during the war, but my absences and efforts were getting noticed, and whenever someone would notice something about me, that would immediately be brought to my ma's attention: her son gallivants all day long, he hasn't been to school in two days, and so on. Since my mom had no idea about that and didn't really know how to respond, we went to the doctor's once again. The doctor told my mother that she was worrying for no

reason, that everything was fine with me, that my wandering and gallivanting were completely normal since my dad had gone to war so suddenly, and that it would stop on its own lickety-split once he came back, so that was essentially the only thing he prescribed me.

* * *

Pythagoras continued to torment me with mathematics just as zealously as he had done before I started stuttering, and he was always inventing some unsolvable tasks and making me try and solve them first, since he didn't know how to do it himself, so that he could show off around school and before other students.

For those times and for my age, I knew an awful lot, for example, about canaries, the blind, elevators, football and schnapps, but that didn't come in handy often as so little of it was test material, unlike mathematics. And that damn draft, which my ma still insisted on constantly and persistently, turned out to be of no great use and not helpful at all in terms of studying. On the contrary, it was actually almost not useful at all, except when it came to drying the laundry without even taking it out of the washer. But the bastard had already made itself at home in our apartment, and it seemed to have settled in my noggin as well. And when the draft gives you sawdust for brains, all you have in mind is whistling, so you whistle everything down the wind.

This is what I was talking about, here we go again:

– If a car is speeding at 140 km/h, how much time will it take for it to cross 42 km?

Each question more difficult than the last. Firstly, because Pythagoras was very well aware that we didn't own a car, and

if we had one, it certainly wouldn't be able to go 140 km/h, and secondly and most importantly, because it was a math problem.

– Let's hear it!

– Exactly 38 min.

– Kids, did anyone else do the math? Marta, let me hear what you have to say!

– 18 min.

– Correct! And how did you, smartass, conclude it was 38 minutes?

– Because when you add 20 to 18, you get exactly 38.

– Do explain, why should one add 20 minutes to 18?

– Because it took those poor souls exactly that much time to change their flat tire and wash their hands. The tire, funnily enough, got punctured while you were asking the question.

He said that was not nearly enough for a D. Makes you wanna slit your wrists.

* * *

My old man would come home from the battlefield every other weekend to have a good wash and get some sleep, but that wasn't nearly enough to cure my stuttering.

– What in God's name is this – on top of everything, our boy started stuttering, too?

My old man was bewildered when I said h h hh hii to him.

– What do you mean? The kid stutters whatever he utters!

– Why on earth is that?

– Because he doesn't speak in a flowing manner! Here you go, read this!

So, my ma took out the prescriptions and everything else which made it clear she was right to beg him to come home, and if not for her, because of me and my stuttering. Allegedly, at least that's what my old man claimed, it is possible to go to war voluntarily, but it is not possible to return from it voluntarily, otherwise

he, cross his heart, would have come home on the third day. And that's when our first family fights began. My ma claimed that, while the fools were at war, others were strolling around the city making big money. She unleashed a myriad of similar irrefutable arguments on my father, so the fight was getting louder and louder, and I would have heard a lot of things not appropriate for a kid my age had I not rushed to my hideout at the speed of light. When I came back, the mood was grim, and my old man had nothing to say that would point to any great success, except that they'd been playing belote, walking on Velebit, and eating well, and my ma added that, as far as she could see, there must have also been an abundant supply of drinks.

It was as if she had hit a nerve.

I could never face my friend Blindy with such a report, so I decided to embellish the story as one does with a Christmas tree, hanging all sorts of adventures and misadventures on it. I decided not to say a word about playing cards because it would have made the war seem like a belote tournament, it would have seemed like that was why my old man was so important to them that they still needed him even after a month had passed.

It'd just embarrass me in front of my friend Blindy.

Farewells were still the worst part of that war, so every time my old man was leaving, I would sneak off into the toilet or my hideout and sing Hrvatine at the top of my lungs.

* * *

As for the alerts, they became quite common, and apart from my frantic rush to the fourth floor, everything else changed beyond recognition. The shelter operated in departments. We had the Department of Table Tennis, the Chess Department, the Literature Department, the Mixed Choir, the Jumping Rope Department, the Darts Department, the Department of Cards and the TV Department. But most important of all were the two staffs for the

monitoring, support and participation in war operations, one in charge of the air force and the other of the infantry. The largest number of people got involved in the latter because its system was well organized and well run.

The Air Force Staff was led by old Joža, who spent all of his life, almost all the way to his retirement, working for a beekeeping cooperative, and towards the very end of his working days, they rewarded him with a position at the Central Association of Bee-Keepers. When it came to the air force, he knew everything there was to know. I don't know if you've heard, but bees don't go to work on foot, they fly, and that was the main basis, source and reason behind old Joža's knowledge about flying. Take bumblebees, for example. No one understands how bumblebees fly. According to all the laws of physics and aerodynamics, a bumblebee shouldn't be able to fly at all. And yet it does. Most likely because it has never heard of the laws of physics or aerodynamics, because otherwise it would crash to the ground like a log, failing just as I very likely will on my physics test due to my ignorance of its laws. Scientists barely managed to figure out how a queen bee flies – only one Chinese physicist was successful at obtaining accurate results. He decided to get involved in politics instead of sticking to physics, so he had to keep bees as a punishment. One day, out of sheer boredom, he personally solved this enigma for the queen bee so they'd both have something to remember each other by when thinking of the time they had spent together in her kingdom. When it comes to the drone, a sloth whose only duty is to be madly in love with the queen when the time for some lovin' comes, there was no need to figure out anything, because it is common knowledge that when someone is madly in love, they are ready to do whatever it takes for their better half. Similarly, very often, those who were unlucky in love would fly off our Gigi. As soon as we would hear someone shout-

ing “B E W A R E E E E E !” through their balcony door, my ma would just make this casual remark from the kitchen:

– Another one bites the dust.

BOOM!!!!

That’s why planes are never given names like Bumblebee, Ladybug, Drone, Suicide Squad or Cockchafer, but rather the names of real flyers and masters of heights, such as Falcon, Seagull, MiG 30, Eagle, Canary, Tupolev, Albatross, B-52 or other birds.

I was less interested in the Infantry Command Staff because it was led by a retired mailman who mostly gave priority to the physical fitness of the infantry, so people would do exercises in the shelter all the damn time, and he also suggested that it would be best if the infantry delivered mail around the city as there was a need for that. Once we had all the knowledge and facts, it was necessary to come up with the best warfare strategy possible. After a lengthy discussion, which I was kicked out of three times because of my proposals, they finally decided upon a warfare strategy, which was practically based on all of my rejected proposals.

Since the enemy was undeniably superior when it came to technique and armament, it was necessary for us to use our wits to the fullest. In doing so, we used our comparative advantages, and these were our innate ingenuity and our skyline that has one of the most indented cloud systems in the world.

The plan was this: we were to sneak in and hide with our dipterans and hymenopterans in a bay below the clouds, set up an ambush, and wait for the enemy planes to fly into it with their superior equipment and weapons, to then jump out and take them on with anti-hail rockets, hot water boilers, knickerbockers, slings – fearing they’d take mine, I immediately hid it under my coat, and denied that I had one just like St. Peter denied Jesus – and, of course, Molotov cocktails. Whatever was left of them

after our attack, we'd catch with lassos. And as the pilots and their planes are falling to the ground like dominoes, they will be greeted by the postal regiment that will catch them like flies and beat them like mules. The sound of the siren announcing the end of the air threat was often the only thing preventing us from bringing the war to an end.

And then, full of pride because of these great successes, you go up to your apartment and realize that those nincompoops and wusses on TV news lost and ruined everything that we had won so brilliantly in the basement. Since that would happen nearly every day, I began to lose interest in the kind of entertainment that was available in the shelters, and I preferred wandering all around the skyscraper.

* * *

When there were no alerts raging, which was a rare thing, we were doing everything in our power to return life to normal, despite the war, and you could also say to spite the war, for we couldn't allow it to, on top of destroying our villages, towns and childhoods, also destroy and defeat our sense of morality by turning us into beasts. I wasn't even allowed to keep pets in the house, so where would they have sent me if I had become a beast? Speaking of morality, we didn't want to give in even the tiniest bit, because Croats deem morality sacred and the greatest value of all, and without it you are no longer a Croat, but an ordinary man. On top of everything that was happening, we really couldn't afford to have our spirit broken and destroyed, so as to become worthless, and that is exactly why we tried so hard to be funny, and laughed and grinned both when that was and wasn't appropriate. We did it all in the name of victory of spirit and morality.

To make everything look normal, as if there was no war at all and everything was A-okay, we also organized sports contests

in five-a-side football and sang Croatian patriotic songs, as well as some other songs, although by then we were allowed to sing them, so it wasn't exactly an act of rebellion. Truth be told, we would rarely get to finish a match because the sirens would often start howling like hungry wolves.

Arrangements around those matches would keep the whole school busy and in a frenzied state, and they were the only thing that we would talk about for days on end. We were living for those encounters and would prepare for them so meticulously that we would lose all interest in tests and grading, unlike our teachers, who would always give it their full attention, to the point that they even decided to write a note to my old man on the battlefield.

We were split into two teams. My team consisted of all the kids whose parents had gone to war, while the other team included everyone else. Our team barely had enough players because the parents didn't go to war according to the criterion of whose child would make which team, so there were soldiers who left a daughter behind instead of a son, and girls can't bring you a guarantee of success in football, even if it's just five-a-side football. There were also parents who didn't go anywhere, let alone to war, so our left-wing position went to little Cico from the third grade, who could barely speak, let alone play, and our goalkeeper was a stutterer, so I knew that things wouldn't turn out great for us if we ever had to voice our concerns about the results. The other team, on the other hand, had three players for each position. The deal was that we would play until the sirens sounded the end. We set up the nets as in a real match, and even the girls came to cheer us on, so I jumped all around the goal like crazy in all directions, regardless of whether the ball was heading my way or not, but rather in line with Marina's gaze. We lost the match by 12:4, but even though we lost, I won Marina's attention to the extent that she summoned enough courage to approach me and ask

me why I was the only one to play dodgeball, skillfully jumping around and dodging every ball. I was wise enough to just remain silent. I saw that I had made her quite happy as a goalkeeper – I didn't need to make her laugh by stuttering, too.

I rushed into my hideout like the wind, started howling Hrvatine loudly, and let my dear stray dogs lick my bloody knees and elbows, while complete sadness overflowed my endurance.

Later, in the park, I was comforted by my friend Blindy's candy. For the first time, he didn't ask me anything about what had happened because he had also attended the game, and although there had been nothing to see, there had certainly been a lot to hear.

We would lose more often than not, no matter what I did at the goal post, because the other team had a significant advantage when it came to energy resources, as most of them were sitting on the bench, which allowed them to switch players quite often. Even when we would start cringing like beaten dogs, they would still be running like crazy. That is a textbook example of three vs. one, as was the case in our war. As if they didn't already have everything going for them, their center forward was Dado, who played for Lokomotiva and was unstoppable in terms of attitude, as well as merciless in terms of scoring goals, respecting my age and my relationship with Marina. Since I instantly noticed, because as a goalkeeper you have the best view, that there would be no hope whatsoever as long as that bastard played for them, it became obvious to me that something needed to be done right away. So, I did everything that I could think of to make his old man enlist in the army, since he hadn't done that voluntarily. I wrote and sent his father a conscription letter, and even used my pop's staff-command-military connections so he would be sent away to Lika, Vukovar, Dubrovnik or anywhere where military or any other uniforms were worn, all with the aim of realizing the transfer of his son to our five-a-side football team. Yet, all

that effort and struggle was to no avail. He continued playing for them and wiping the floor with us.

* * *

This is a time of war and I have no intention of writing a romance novel, as much as I love my Marina, because unfortunately for me, she doesn't stutter, so we can't stutter in each other's arms. Instead, I stutter for both of us, and she goo-goes with Dado. Stuttering overshadows all your inner beauty so no one can reach it, because no one's got so much time and such strong nerves to wait for me to stutter all that beauty and charm out in the open. My external beauty, which is visible at first sight, is not much, but it is framed by my beautiful red hair and covered with tiny spots in the form of freckles, so those who often see me around, but have never heard me speak call me Spotted Cod, instead of the Stutterer.

As logic would have it, I went to the park to look for Blindy, the friend who I would always go to in this type of crisis, because I was in need of some warm words and sweet candy, and mostly because of that stupid Marina. I was hoping to find him there, because whenever there was no alert, Blindy would take the elevator to our hanging spot.

I've never been to his apartment. He never wanted to have me over, he said that there was nothing to see – he carried the things I was most interested in in his pockets anyway, and besides, those things had to be brought from the store, not from the apartment. The only ones to sometimes come by his place were his blind friends – unlike them, I would, due to my excessive liveliness, which I mostly expressed through my movements (let us not forget what I'd done to his stick), wreak havoc on his apartment and furniture, I'd turn his place upside down, which would make it difficult for Blindy to move to the extent that he would just sit there bewildered and not dare get up, as things

do not make any noise to express their grief when they are displaced, and he, just like all the blind, and as I've already pointed out multiple times, uses sound to move around.

I found him in our usual spot, and once we recognized each other and expressed how happy we were to see (or at least hear) each other, I dug into the candy. Afterwards, I rushed to the stray dogs in my hideout, as the comfort I was given was insufficient – the candy was the hard and spicy mint kind that I didn't like very much. My ma was making dinner at home and was worried about where I was, as she would always be when it was dinner time, but she really had no reason to because I was right there, and the real question was where our old man was.

* * *

Valuables continued to disappear from our apartments during each alert, and the police were annoyed by our nagging to the point that they no longer wanted to pick up the phone when we called. In the end, they disconnected the line completely, so like it or not, we had to organize, i.e. self-organize when it came to the search for the missing items without any material compensation, and try to catch that thief at all costs. I suggested that the homeowner's association get a dog that would, for starters, be staying at our apartment, because my ma had nothing against that proposal since she had no idea about it in the first place, and since my old man was at war, so there was more room in the skyscraper at the time, and especially in our apartment. As it was obvious that our thief was wicked and insolent, a dog smaller than a St. Bernard, or a pointer, or perhaps both, was out of the picture. A pointer would have been a great choice because, as I warned the tenants, magpies, birds of prey, steal valuables at every possible opportunity and take them to their nests, to then adorn themselves with borrowed plumes. Or I could stop by the dog pound and get Gugi, if they were still keeping him for me

– he would surely be ready to take on all those duties and responsibilities, no questions asked. By the time I managed to stutter it all out, they'd already decided on the guards and their shifts so that Raff and its valuables would be watched over day and night, at all costs, and my proposal vanished into thin air.

As soon as one of the bombs would drop somewhere nearby, our brave guards would flee their meticulously established positions, like mice chased by a cat, or cats chased by a dog (and a dog, I'll tell you that, wouldn't ever flee, no matter who chased it), so our thief had no choice but to freely continue collecting our valuables, for my proposal involving a dog had been rejected and mocked. The only consolation was that we were slowly but surely running out of those valuables, so our chances of success in getting rid of the thief were getting better.

I gloated a bit because everything would've been different had we decided on my plan, and I also did a little investigating on the side, wandering around Raff while the others were hiding in the shelters. One evening, during one of my expeditions, I ran into my Blindy, who probably got lost on the fifth floor for the same reason, as he was trying to unlock the wrong door and enter a completely wrong apartment.

– Blindy, for God's sake, you're completely lost. This is neither your apartment nor your floor.

I didn't want to reproach him additionally, even though he somehow managed to miss the door, too.

Oh, how grateful he was to me for finding him. He got completely disoriented, he went out without his cane, which I immediately strictly forbade him to do ever again, and he could not find his way back to his apartment. He didn't even want to do it without his means of orientation, so he decided to wander around other people's apartments instead. A blind man without his cane

as his means of orientation is the same as a regular man without his sight.

– And don't leave the apartment again while the elevator's out during the alert, because on top of everything else, the thief uses that time to loot our apartments in search of valuables, and it would be extremely dangerous to run into such a bloodthirsty guy.

– And what do you think, my boy, is the reason I embarked on a tour of our building?

– In that case, the thief must already be trembling with fear. His vile quest will soon be over, because as soon as the blind man gets to him, the stutterer will immediately call for help. We really look like a legit special operations and anti-terrorism battalion. The only thing our patrol lacks is a highly trained stuffed dog so that the thief never dares set foot in our city, let alone our building.

– Mock all you want. Everyone must do whatever they can to prevent evil. And this must be a crazy and dangerous guy, so it's smarter for you not to snoop around the building anymore. After all, it's a matter for adults, even if they are blind.

He offered me caramels and, before retreating, took a watch out of his pocket and gave it to me for no reason or occasion, which I pointed out to him. After he gently waved off my remark, I kept the watch. And what else could I have done? I guess I didn't want to offend him, too, on top of everything else. In the end, he thanked me for taking him to his apartment. In return, and with no remorse, he left me alone in front of his door at the mercy of the thief. Sometimes he was a little strange, which I would always forgive him with a heavy heart, only because at the end of the day, although he was so very nice, he was still an adult. And frankly, let's not forget that he gave me a watch just moments ago. I rushed eight floors down to my apartment since they would lock the elevator during the alerts, careful not to run

into the thief, who was most likely armed to the teeth. When I stormed into the apartment, I locked the door twice and didn't know what to fear more, the alert or the thief, who just got a very good reason for stealing from us – my new watch. That time, howling Đuka's song on the toilet was of no use, and I also locked the bathroom door twice just in case. I was still out of breath and gasping for air – those caramels must have been of the ordinary sort, not the ones that help you breathe.

My ma wasn't home again because the people from the city's alert association would sound the sirens at their own discretion and without any musical background, not taking any account whatsoever of whether the citizens had returned from work, so people would often be scattered around city shelters regardless of their place of residence. And because of such bad organization based on intimidation and confusion, I was left without dinner. I also spent a great deal of the night in the toilet, until my ma, freaked out because she didn't have a clue as to where I was, accidentally found me and woke me up at exactly three hours, eleven minutes and fifty-nine seconds am, when she had to go to the toilet. I have to tell you that this watch is a true chronometer, it runs on its own and doesn't ask any questions, and it also lights your way in the dark.

My old man was coming home less and less often. He was transferred to a battlefield around Dubrovnik and he would rarely visit us, but I would have preferred if he hadn't at all. There was nothing left of the dad I had once known. He didn't want to play cards anymore, not even with me. He would usually be away all day, mostly in pubs, and even when he was home, it was nothing but radio silence from him. As silent as he was during the day, he'd shout like a baboon all night. As soon as he'd doze off, he'd let out such a howl that I would immediately rush to the toilet, and the neighbors from nearby floors would rush to the shelter. It was as if he had swallowed a siren from my school. And all that because of some funny dream, one and the same, which he would always have, and which would definitely never scare me.

He was the only one of the four deadbeats who went to war together who was still fully functional. One ended up handicapped, and the other two were dead. And as it turned out, playing cards was what got them killed. The first time, the four of them were playing belote, and when the time came to go on guard duty, they each picked a card, so whoever got the highest one had to go first. Cobra got a Jack of Clubs and left, falling directly into the enemy's ambush and getting shot like a dog.

After that, they played preferans because that's a game for three. They would still pick cards in order to decide who would carry out military orders, such as who would go to a nearby village to get some brandy, who would deliver the mail, who would go to pee, who would blow up a tank and so on, until one after-

noon Tyke got a Jack of Clubs and, as he was bringing lunch packs back for the crew, wandered into a minefield and lost his sight and both legs, while the boys were left without any lunch.

They didn't take it as a sign, a warning, an eye-opener – my old man and Bobby continued to play schnapps for two with equal zeal, still picking cards to decide who would get various military duties and orders done. The King of Hearts – you take off, shoot some enemies and come back; the Ace of Spades – you steal a lamb on no man's land for the cooks to roast; the Queen of Clubs – you go on leave; the Ten of Diamonds – you go chop some wood and bring it to the kitchen. They would do that for every task, until one evening Bobby got a Jack of Clubs, left and never came back. And only then did it hit my old man that they were being systematically and thoroughly exterminated by The Jack of Clubs. From that moment on, he would only play solitaire with a deck from which he threw away all Jacks of Clubs, and he would never pick a card. Never ever.

But all of that was in vain, because every night, as soon as he would fall asleep, he would dream of playing belote with Bobby, Tyke and Cobra. In the dream, they have all already picked out their respective Jacks of Clubs, and it's his turn to pick, and he knows what awaits him, but he can't say no to them and he's sweating all over, he's in agony. With a savage howl, he picks out the Jack of Clubs, who grins in his face and calls him with his finger to join them. The howl, which would wake him up from that nightmare, would also wake up half the skyscraper and make them rush to the shelter, and me to the toilet.

– Dad, Daddy, you were just dreaming your stupid dreams. It's nothing. Do you want me to tell you some colorful, beautiful story, about the most colorful tropical fish or the most colorful tropical birds, so you'll dream bright colorful dreams, instead of

those gloomy, gray and scary ones of yours? Or maybe a wonderful one about dogs?

– Don't bother, son, stories are for the living, and it seems that this damn war killed me a long time ago.

– That's not true, Dad, it's not true, you just mustn't play cards, and the war is as good as over. Here, our units are soon to reach Novi Sad, Belgrade and Niš.

But he wouldn't listen to a thing anymore, and he wouldn't even talk anymore, although, in the meantime, my story had led our army all the way to Moscow, Tokyo and Beijing. As it turned out, the more I went on, the more his spirits lowered.

There was little use of my ma, she was just crying inconsolably, so as I saw that my old man didn't need me anymore, I turned to her to help her at least a little. We just hugged and cried, because in those moments we couldn't find any reason for joy whatsoever.

Whenever it was time to say goodbye, things would get even worse. My old man would always use the same trick, which my ma would fall for every single time. Just before the parting, he would pick up a fight with ma – always about the same issues, to which he would add a few new ones each time, such as the money issue, so all hell would break loose, and since home and family had no place in that hell, he would leave almost joyfully to go and continue fighting his war. Had he not been doing that, I believe he would never have been able to leave at all. I would always rush to my hideout under the stairs to my dear stray dogs before all of that because I didn't understand adults very well at the time, and I had no idea as to why they were doing all of that to me. To somehow calm down and comfort myself, I would measure my height to see how much I had grown since the last time, because despite all the hardships, when it came to growing, thank God, I was still making great progress. One meter sixty-nine centimeters and eleven millimeters. Jesus and Mary, on

top of all these torments, I'm also getting shorter. I'm two millimeters shorter than yesterday. It's damn true that misery loves company. Here I am shrinking before their very eyes, and the two of them aren't even bothered by that, they'd rather continue arguing about money, as if money can buy me height.

And we always had plenty of money. Not exactly enough to buy a car or go for ice cream every day, but we were well provided for, so we never really had to argue about it. Somehow, we would always find enough other issues to fight about, and most of the time the thing on the agenda would be my school. When we couldn't think of anything else, it was enough for my pop or mom to ask how school was going and voila, there you have it, a good reason to argue. Money was never the reason.

My old man has golden hands that I will hopefully inherit from him once he dies, because for now I only have two left hands. There's a saying: The eye sees, but the hand can reach, which I never mention in front of Blindy, because you always have to be careful about what you say, lest it result in a series of severe insults at someone else's expense, regardless of your good intentions. Before my old man went to war, we would go around the neighborhood and constantly fix something. Our neighborhood was a terribly perishable commodity, you see, and every godforsaken thing would stop working every now and then. From cars to everything else, appliances, tools, services, and there were even a lot of people that needed fixing, which my ma would very often warn me about, but we never got into fixing them. And for such a neighborhood, a pair of golden hands was a gift from the heavens. We would even make a pretty penny on those endeavors. I was my old man's right-hand man in that, in spite of me having two left hands, and an invaluable one nonetheless. I was certainly the best handyman in the whole neighborhood, and my job was called: fetch, take, prepare, hold, bring, take out, clean up. Since I was the best, my old man worked exclusively with

me. The more things there were to fix in the neighborhood, the more work we had, ergo we earned more, and that's how my old man taught me to earn and appreciate money.

Here's the story of how I came to know the value of money.

We were repairing some door with a faulty lock and, given some complications that are an integral part of every job, it dragged on indefinitely. We worked all day like dogs, and my old man needed me so much that he called for my help a million times. In the end – even though the owner started losing his temper, wondering why I wasn't faster, for it probably seemed to him that the job would never be finished – we still managed to get everything done properly and on time. And then the best part – the time to collect our earnings. When my old man said two hundred kunas, I felt dizzy, but the owner, so eager to finally get rid of us, paid him that fortune without blinking an eye, shook hands with both of us and asked if he could recommend us to others if a similar problem happens to them, but to me it all seemed far more like mockery than a compliment, especially in the end, when he added:

– Please, artisan, don't forget to pay your diligent apprentice!

– Sure, sir, he'll get his half.

– Wait, dad, according to Pythagoras, that'd be one hundred kunas straight!?!

– Exactly. And not only that, but since we've been working all day, the two of us are now going for a pizza.

And pizza is like pure gold to us kids from the neighborhood. Especially capricciosa. The large one even more so. Don't even get me started on capricciosa with extra olives. We each chomped down a large capricciosa with extra olives. I washed mine down with some Fanta juice, while my old man washed his down with some beer, and then asked me if I wanted more. Of

course I did. So, if I want more, then what am I waiting for? I'm waiting for the waiter, who's never there when you need him.

– One capricciosa, one Fanta and one beer.

That was no dinner, it was a struggle between life and death. In the end, it was no longer clear if I was eating the pizza or if the pizza was eating me. It was a typical example of when your eyes are bigger than your stomach. Fortunately, my old man helped me out at the most difficult moment, which, after all, is the whole purpose of parents. It was the most splendid day. A whole day with my old man, and to top it all off, I earned so much money that I could buy new sneakers, or a jersey, or a flashlight, plus that evening banquet as a cherry on top. And while I was taking my last sips of Fanta, my old man called the waiter to get the check.

– Three large capricciosas, two beers, three Fantas. Here you go, the total is 96 kunas and 20 lipas.

– The check is not for me, sir. The young gentleman will pay!

– Wait, dad, why me?!?

– Because today you've earned just as much as I did, and you have enough money to treat me to a meal, just like I always treat you.

Oh, how hard it was for me to pay for that, especially with the money I had earned with my sweat and blood, but in the end, I made peace with it because I had no other option, since my old man showed no willingness to pay, and the waiter seemed stronger than me. So I agreed to do it, because I guess anyone who makes money by working hard pays their costs with a heavy

heart, and probably only those who make easy money don't think twice when spending it.

That's what I mean when I say that I came to know the value of money.

Now, my old man and I don't fix things around the neighborhood anymore, and they don't call me when he's not around for obvious reasons, so my folks have to argue about petty things such as money.

And so, my old man took off to war again without leaving me any praiseworthy material for my report to my friend Blindy, or for feeding my classmates bullshit, so I was forced to come up with everything and make up stories on my own. Before I would tell Blindy my stories, I'd first make sure to tell my classmates everything, and if they would buy the story, then surely anyone would, except for my ma. And for someone to listen to a stutterer to the end, the story has to be hella interesting.

* * *

Here's what I cooked up for them that time. And it was all word for word exactly as follows, all exactly the same.

My old man reported for guard duty, because most of the other soldiers were novices; they'd just arrived on the front line, and they were all covered in cold sweat after hearing the stories that the older soldiers told them, so it was more than obvious they couldn't pull off guard duty at night and in such weather. The heavy rain knocked the sky down to the ground, which is very common in Lika, because Lika is nothing but Velebit, and Velebit is a huge mountain that heedlessly reaches for the sky through the clouds, so such weather wasn't a rare thing for the area, but part of a well-known geographical phenomenon of general importance that you could read about in any fourth-grade textbook. That alone could have somehow been endured, I mean that merger between the sky and ground, if it hadn't also been raining cats and dogs, and if there hadn't been so many lightning

bolts that like to prey on solitary people. Since it had been raining continuously for over four months, the area was so waterlogged that we were eventually forced to withdraw our air force from combat operations, and we had to attack and bomb the enemy from submarines instead. However, all of that didn't bother my old man at all, because since he had been waterproofed and impregnated with alcohol for a long time, and was also deaf as a doorknob to everything that didn't concern him, guard duty was sheer pleasure for him, and a break for his nerves. While wandering around, he came across a group of frightened people walking on those roads in search of their kin for the second day in a row. My old man, amicable as nature and dear God intended, immediately took them to brigade headquarters, where electric light was shed on the fact that he had just captured a platoon of notorious White Eagles, Chetnik motherfuckers. After all, one could read about that heroic feat in the newspapers, of course, provided that you read anything other than magazines for kids. After that, my old man later had to give interviews left and right, but, for the sake of popularity and viewership, it was necessary to add two or three more dozen of dead and wounded people to the story.

After the Chetniks were thoroughly questioned and searched by the brigade, fourteen out of twenty of them passed inspection, but six got stuck on those tests, and my old man was supposed to take those fourteen to Zagreb as a reward, it seems, so they would receive further education and go through additional examination. In addition to all that, he also got a real Jeep SUV to keep for himself after using it to transport the Chetniks to Zagreb, and he was assigned that task without even being asked if he could drive.

– So, did he know how to drive?

– No, but one of the Chetniks taught him along the way.

– Congratulations to your old man. Well, apart from Đuka Čaić, he's the only real hero I know, if he really caught all those Chetniks and brought them to Zagreb.

– Well, he didn't actually bring them all. Three of them, who turned out to be tied loosely, fell out of the Jeep right at

the very beginning, while he was still learning how to drive. He exchanged the one who acted as his driving instructor and two more along the way for two packs of Marlboros. Another three had a change of heart and concluded that the war was not their war after all, and they no longer wanted to be Chetniks no matter what, so my old man let them go home. He couldn't get rid of the last three, because they had never been to Zagreb, and since they were from Donji Lapac, God knows if they would ever get such a good opportunity again.

– And where are those three now?

– Probably in Donji Lapac, because when they entered Zagreb and a tram rushed past them, they got so frightened that they jumped out of the Jeep and ran away in fear. In the end, not a single one of them was left to at least help us clean our house or write my homework for me. The only thing left of it is the beautiful SUV in front of our building.

Of course, all of the boys immediately rushed out of school to see my old man's spoils of war, so Pythagoras, when he entered the classroom, had to teach mathematics only to the girls. A dark blue Mitsubishi SUV with chrome bumpers was glowing in the sun in front of our building, to the point that you couldn't look straight at it. It was just waiting for my squad there, waiting to arouse their envy and jealousy to unimaginable proportions. One could argue that was my greatest war triumph.

And triumph, unfortunately, doesn't last long in my family.

Since I didn't have the keys to that car, those colleagues of mine started climbing it as if it had yielded fruit, and just as fat Ivica hung his body on the side-view mirror, the Jeep rolled its eyes, started blinking, blazing and howling as if planes were overhead, and I, rushing to the toilet, was wondering what the hell was going on with my city and family that every single thing except for the fridge had to roar and howl and make me run to the fourth floor. My ma would scream during the day, my old man

would howl at night, the TV and radio would howl as soon as you turned them on, the school and the city would do so whenever they felt like it, the door would whine and send shivers down your spine, and now even that car started howling out of sheer spite, as if it was being slaughtered, and it showed no intention of stopping anytime soon. All of my mates scrambled and hid wherever they could, and the whole school rushed to the windows to see who was stealing cars in broad daylight. Who? The same person who was stealing valuables.

Afterwards, I convinced the gang that the incident had occurred because the Jeep still didn't know me well enough, that it was a bit frightened and wild, what with being alone in a foreign city and all, and that maybe we were also partly to blame since we had come out of nowhere and started climbing all over it. Who wouldn't be scared? You'll see tomorrow, when I come with the keys.

The next day, in front of my entire gang threatening him with the police if he continued to tinker around with someone else's car, a gentleman loaded his Jeep, put his family in it and continued his journey from Herzegovina to Austria without even dignifying my squad with a look, so I was forced to admit with a heavy heart that I'd had to sell the car to the guy the night before, because the Jeep couldn't be subdued, tamed and wouldn't get used to me. They didn't believe me all too much.

* * *

Luckily, I still had Blindy. We ran into each other again at the store. I was drowning my defeat in ice cream, and Blindy was roaming around the flashlights. I was sure he was buying one for me, because, pardon my French, what the hell would he do with a flashlight, so I approached him to advise him on his purchase, because I guess I know better than anyone which one would suit me best. We chose the strongest one. It shone brighter during the

day than all of mine together did at night, and just when I started drooling all over it, it turned out that the flashlight was for him: he was to turn it on and off when it was pitch-black at night and direct the light towards one eye and then the other, repeatedly. That way he would be able to check if perhaps he regained at least a bit of his sight, because he has not always been blind, and he would like to be the first one to know if he would see again, and not hear it from someone else. And that's why the light had to be so strong, because his vision would return as soon as the test showed positive results. As we chatted about how we see the world, the sirens made a sudden attack on my digestive tract, and I took off to deal with my torment with a clear conscience, because I knew that with a flashlight like that, even a blind man could find his way to the twelfth floor. I just believe that, if I had been the one to make that purchase, I would have certainly gotten a small flashlight for my friend, too, but, you see, that's only my personal opinion, and it's not binding on anyone.

– Hrvatinnee, Hrvatinnee!

My old man acted more and more as if he only cared about his homeland, and little or next to nothing about his family. Sometimes, when he would call, I'd pick up the phone, and there would only be silence on the other end.

– Dad, is that you?

Not a single word, and I would always know that my old man was calling, because I could hear Dubrovnik pounding, moaning and panting behind his back and into the phone. He would keep silent like that for a while and then suddenly click, and you would only hear tu, tutu, tu, tutu... You see, even our phones stuttered. That would always just make me sad. Why the hell doesn't he call at night, when he has the urge to shout like a baboon, but during the day when his lips are sealed up tight as a drum? Maybe the call is much cheaper when he just keeps quiet?! My ma decided not to answer his calls at all until he comes home again, although he would try and convince her that it was not up to him at all, that the cards would make the call. My ma, I could testify to that in court, was as mad at my old man as a hornet. I wasn't even allowed to mention his name. Unless the matter was of utmost importance, we wouldn't talk about my old man or the school at home at all. Worst of all, I knew my ma was mostly right, and I was also a little angry at my old man myself. What reason could he have had to go to Dubrovnik in the war-time, if he hadn't even visited it once in times of peace? So that's the kind of person my old man was. Everything was upside down

with him, and it was normal for me to be a little angry with him given the circumstances.

* * *

My entire family's mood was in my hands, which only meant that it had sunk very low, and I tried my best to raise it to a decent level, mostly to achieve victory of the spirit, which was so important in this war. I've already written about that, and it's easiest to lose your spirit around family, especially if you can't get everyone in one place, as was the case with me and my folks, since my ma was spending less and less time at home because she was always squatting in other people's houses due to the alerts, and my old man was in Dubrovnik on vacation, and I in the toilet, where, I can assure you, spirit does not set foot even when it needs to go. Yesterday, I dragged two A's all the way from school just to cheer up my ma, yet to no avail: front flip – A; back flip – A minus. She didn't even laugh. I could have hoofed and rolled over like a clown as much as I liked, nothing of that had any effect on my mom's mood. My old man, on the other hand, after a year and a half spent in Lika, Velebit and hanging out with bears, seemed to have been hit so hard by hibernation, connectivity issues and sulking over his arguments with my ma that he simply vanished into thin air.

* * *

I poured my poor heart out to Blindy.

– I'm afraid there's something wrong with my old man. I'm not saying he's gone completely mad, that he's not playing with a full deck, but he's not in his right mind. He just keeps quiet or rambles on incoherently about cards, he argues with my ma about money, and even when he drinks, that doesn't seem to cheer him up, and he drinks all the time. My ma even stated that he'd changed beyond recognition, which is an out-and-out lie

and bullshit, because if something hasn't changed, it's his recognizability, and I can still easily recognize him even at a distance of five hundred and twenty-six meters. My ma asks him difficult questions, the most difficult one being why he went to war when he didn't have to and why he drinks like a fish. My ma always keeps these questions up her sleeve and saves them for the very end, and then the havoc begins, but before it does, I always rush to my hideout to my stray dogs with their warm and big tongues – they truly get me, because they have much bigger problems considering there are dog pounds all around. Then we cuddle, eat dry bread, and they push their heads as close as they can to my pocket, just like I do with yours when it's filled with candy, while sadness eats away at my lungs.

– I know, little one, that things aren't easy for you and that life is often unfair, cruel and incomprehensible. Life's dealt me a bad hand, too. I lost my parents very early on in life, right after I went blind. And nothing can be done about it. The same goes for you. This war that is bothering you so much is not your fault, but it will pass, and everything will be as it was. Dad will come back, perhaps as a winner, and mom will be happy, even proud of dad, who went to war to defend his homeland when so many didn't. And that is the duty of everyone who loves their people. There are some difficult times when you really have to forget about everything, even about your home and family, and even, if push comes to shove, sacrifice your own life in the name of your people. Because if you don't belong anywhere, to anyone, if you don't feel like a part of your nation, then you're nothing and nobody, just a blade of grass in the wind that can be bent at every gush of air or trampled by every foot. Therefore, when such times come, you should do everything in your power for your people, their freedom and dignity, so that, once everything

is over, you can look at yourself in the mirror without feeling ashamed...

From there, his adult thoughts took him even further, but since he was no longer praising my old man, but speaking as if I were in history class or Sunday school, I stopped listening to him, but I still had that nice and warm feeling in my soul, and I just continued mourning and sucking on candy with dignity.

That evening, I still felt like a monument.

And then, out of the blue, and for no solid reason at all, my ma suddenly changed 180 degrees. She was in good spirits, she hummed all the time, smelled almost like a walking deodorant, I stopped getting on her nerves, we would always cuddle and kiss, and school was no longer a problem. At least for her. For me, unfortunately, it still was. I couldn't believe my own two eyes when I saw what a hot babe my ma had suddenly turned into. She put on nail polish for the first time in two years, got highlights, and you wouldn't believe what flashy red lipstick she put on her lips.

She must have reconciled with my old man. He probably called her at work, and they straightened everything out. My old man is as stubborn as a mule, but he still knows where to draw the line.

Those were the months of pure joy despite the alerts and the overall shitty situation. True, my ma would work long hours quite often, and she even had to go on some business trips, but she would always come back even happier. When she was home, she was on cloud nine, and every now and then she would also buy me gifts. In addition to reconciling with my old man, I figured that she must have found out we would soon win the war, because only that could be the cause of such great happiness and contentment. I also discussed that a bit with my friend Blindy, but he, since he hadn't been thoroughly briefed about the situation,

started expressing some doubts, and he just spoiled it for me and ruined my good mood, so I avoided him for two or three weeks.

My ma was in seventh heaven, and I simply adored her for it. At least as much as a thirteen-year-old can adore his mom. She was more beautiful than my arts and crafts teacher, and even the numskulls from my squad confirmed that, because I couldn't resist asking them. But as I was already quite old, I knew that all good things come to an end.

And so, one Sunday during lunch, out of nowhere, my ma asked me:

– Listen, kiddo, what do you say we replace Dad? Would you mind?

– Depends on the thing you plan to replace him with. There are some things that'd make me think long and hard – say a St. Bernard, a bicycle, a kayak...

– No, I meant we could replace him with a nice gentleman.

– Wait, mom, our Dad already is a nice gentleman, especially when he gets dressed up for church.

– I don't mean that. What would you say if Mom brought home a new dad who would love you more than the one you have now?

When I started gawking at ma, her fork fell out of her hand. What on earth is she blabbering about?!? As if it's not enough having a crazy pop, now my ma has gone nuts too?! He just keeps quiet, and she just chirps and talks nonsense. Who in the world could lead them back to each other anymore? They set out on their separate journeys to madness, and I was the only normal person left at the crossroads of war, family and insanity, but I was only thirteen, and my teachers were breathing down my neck. In just two seconds, my life fell apart once again, getting even worse. Is my old lady trying to tell me that she found a guy and that they are already dating?!? And without any regard for me or

my old man, who was still alive and kicking? This really is the end.

Of course, I rushed to my hideout like the wind, but even the dogs were sick and tired of me by then, they were fed up with our family's shit, so they ran away as soon as I came. What's even worse, the song Hrvatine was already worn and torn from excessive use, and I couldn't face Blindy after firing all sorts of insults at him when he tried telling me the truth about my ma three weeks earlier. A blind man saw three times better than I and my whole squad did with healthy eyes. That was the second night I spent in hiding.

When I returned, my ma wasn't there, so I rummaged through the fridge and its cans and jars, because that was the only thing left to eat, and there was a letter on the table that was just impossible to read.

Dearest Son!

I'm sorry I hurt you, and maybe I was wrong to tell you all that at lunch and in that way. I thought you were already big enough to understand everything. Mom and Dad have been at odds for a long time, and Dad doesn't care about you or me at all. Time is just passing by, I am still young, and like it or not, I have the right, despite the fact that I have a family (if I even do anymore) and despite the war, to a better and nicer life. If I am happy, you'll be happier, too, as you have been these past couple of weeks. If two people don't get along, why would they live together and make each other's lives miserable? That's not good for you either. As soon as Dad comes back, we'll discuss everything like adults.

Love, Mom

Luckily, the alert went off at that exact moment, just like everything that was raging inside me came to a boil, so I had an extra reason to let it all out from both ends in the toilet. And so, all that stench and vomit marked the beginning of the second war

of my lifetime. The first war was being bravely fought by my old man for the sake of our homeland, and the second was to be fought by myself with all my heart and zeal for the sake of our family.

* * *

My situation at school got a little worse, but that had nothing to do with what was going on at home, it only had to do with the results I got on the latest tests and exams.

But despite all those grand feats, we wholeheartedly continued to organize and play football matches that would last until the first alert. We were still losing, Dado was still playing against us, and I was defending the goal against his shots like crazy, because he was still dating my Marina. However, it would often be a squeaker, and the games were becoming more and more uncertain, because by then, our team had significantly increased in numbers. So, we also had unimaginable amounts of human energy packs on the bench, and we could switch players and run across the field just like the other team. We only had a little problem with the lack of coordination since our team was almost completely made up of newbies. In the meantime, our competition turned into a real tournament, because a third team also joined in, a team we all dreaded to enter, regardless of the fact that they were the best and were constantly defeating us, because it was composed of students whose folks were killed or disappeared in the war. They were the hardest to beat, and we never gained edge over them, as they would always beat and trip us as if we were the ones to blame for their parents' deaths, but throughout that tournament, the judge never gave them a single red card. Only three throw-ins and one corner kick. Even Dado couldn't help us there. And so, that organization of football matches, all for the purpose of lifting our spirits and morale, turned out to be a complete and utter failure, because we, losing game after game, only

managed to lift the spirits and morale of the opposing teams, but totally and irreversibly plunged our own.

* * *

As for people's valuables, about which I haven't written a word for a long time, so it might look like I'm a ruthless and heartless guy who doesn't care about other people's hardships, they were still the subject of great interest to our thief and his hobby, but I didn't have time to get into that whole thing anymore.

* * *

One's love life in times of war, about which I am forced to write at least something, is total crap. War itself yields so much torment, pain and suffering that you no longer have any need to invoke any additional torment, pain and suffering through love. That's why it's best to steer clear of it, and this advice could be used all the same in the times of peace, unless you're in love. The only two happy love stories that I had the opportunity to witness during the war were the one between my ma and her guy and Marina's love story. My ma and that jerk, and my Marina and that Dado guy. My old man, thank God, had no clue about any of it, and he would, according to the law of communicating vessels and the law of cause and effect, find out last, but I, on the other hand, knew everything, and according to an Eskimo proverb, he who possesses knowledge possesses the whole world. I spit on that world. That Dado guy struts with Marina before my very eyes every day during every break, and now even my ma's jerk of a boyfriend, encouraged by such developments, started giving my ma rides home, and she, instead of slapping him across the face, always chitchats with him in the car for at least an hour.

And the car, dude, that's no car, it's a marvel of technology: rims, winter tires for all occasions and conditions, and a

carburetor so perfect that it doesn't seem to need any additional parts at all, there's no rust, there's all this short-trimmed lamb inside, wipers with two speeds and, the thing that the jerk likes to point out the most, great leather seats and shock absorbers, plus a bunch of other wonders that I've never even heard of, but they must exist, because the whip really moves well down the road. Yes, I hate the jerk from the bottom of my heart, but I adore his whip. I could forgive and forget and cut him some slack if he'd only take me for a ride in his whip a few times in front of my Marina and my school. Since he never did, I had to be cold-blooded and ruthless. When my ma would get home, she'd charge through the door to ask me:

- So, what do you think?

- It's nothing special. I don't like the green color, it lacks 17 cubic centimeters, 9 horsepower, acceleration to a hundred, but I hear that it has leather seats and good shock absorbers.

- I don't understand a word you're saying. I didn't ask you about school, but what you thought about my friend.

- Oh, that? He would be really cool and the best of the best had I not already met my Dad. This way, so as not to insult Dad by comparing him to this clown, I have to say he's just a nobody.

But my ma knew that I was lying through my teeth and that the jerk was prettier, richer, and maybe even younger than dad, if it is even possible to talk about youth when it comes to corpses who are older than thirty. In reality, I liked him a bit, too. As it turns out, we are all supposed to go on a trip to Zagorje next Saturday, to the spa, if the day doesn't start with alerts. I loved trips, and at my age, going to the spa will surely take the edge off.

- You know, he's going to come clean to his wife on Monday. There's no reason for them to have a nasty breakup and stop talking to each other when they have children together. He has

two kids just a little younger than you, so at least you'll have someone new to hang out with, besides that blind man.

Supposedly, he has a dog and a canary at home, his house is full of flowers and fruit trees, and we will move in with him, while his wife will return to her parents' house because she is disabled, and there is no one to take care of her anymore. They'll split the kids in half, which made my blood run cold at the thought of getting the same treatment. I told my ma that, since everything was so wonderful and ideal, at least one of those kids had to be a stutterer, and they should definitely keep that one, and throw the other one out with the disabled mom so that my ma wouldn't be ashamed when I speak. Well, unfortunately, no one in that household stutters.

– Then I'm afraid we won't be moving after all.

* * *

I really loved my ma in those moments. She was full of joie de vivre and serenity that dispersed in all directions and overflowed all obstacles and dams, no holding back, and we rejoiced as we rarely did. Also, the end of each day marked one day closer to the trip. But I loved my old man too, even though I had almost forgotten about that. And something had to be done about that ASAP. The matter was so urgent that I started taking action no later than the next day.

The next day at school, I asked Marina if she could spare half an hour and seven minutes for me because I had to ask her something, to consult with her, and I needed her help solving a big life problem, right on the threshold of my adulthood, in order to be able to take the right path and assume the right attitude. The consequences could be disastrous for a large number of people and for a long period of time should the first move be wrong, which would then cause a domino effect, knocking many destinies down into the abyss of loneliness and hopelessness. She

agreed right away. She loved big words and long sentences that seemed smart and that she didn't understand, and this was a sentence no one understood and the longest one I ever came up with, and it even looked three times longer as I stuttered it. At least some good came out of stuttering. In addition, her female intuition led her to the conclusion that all of that was some kind of juicy gossip, and we all know how girls like people spilling the beans. Her eyes shone with happiness and excitement when she realized she would find out some sort of secret, which would make her practice crossing her heart and swearing to God and what not, without any real intention of keeping it to herself. Cross my heart is the nonsense you say before you find out something, but afterwards, you are bound to break your word by spilling the beans to everyone.

– What happened?

– My old lady is screwing around.

– Dear Lord, I can't believe it, how is that possible? And what now?

– Now we're going to scare off that jerk of hers so bad that he'll forget about my ma forever.

– And how do you think you and I can scare him?

– By writing him a threatening letter that will scare him stiff.

– And how do you know he'll get scared of the letter?

– Because he's a total wuss. He talks about the war all the time and how he would sort it all out in one afternoon if they let him or if they asked him to, but they aren't letting him and they aren't asking him anything, and I know that he pulled all sorts of strings and bribed everyone there was to bribe so as not to be drafted into the army. And besides, according to my ma, it seems that he suffers from letterophobia, and he probably got that vicious disease from dirty hands when he was messing around with some letters. It was back in the old days when everyone lived

happily and contentedly, when problems didn't exist, when wars took place in other people's homelands, when only the things that would make people's lives easier got invented, things that would make them happy and help them. And so, they came up with a very useful game for adults, where the only thing you had to do was send two or three letters to an unknown address, writing your own address on the back and sticking 10 marks in the letter, and after that, the mailman would bring money to your address from all these different parts of the world. But then, one chilly morning, when the mailman realized that he had been towing letters like a dray horse for months and that his spine was bent to the floor, and only because my step-jerk was playing a game, he slapped him across the face so hard right at the door that the jerk shits his pants even now when he receives a postcard. And that is why, my ma tells me, such diseases are referred to as very infectious in medical terminology.

– So, what do you need me for?

– First, I need you to help me compose the letter, and second, I don't have a computer, and the letter must look professional and top notch, and only you can help me with that.

– And what are you going to do with that letter afterwards?

– I'm going to send it by mail to his home address and workplace, and put it under his windshield wiper and into his car through a half-open window. It will be one broad and comprehensive operation.

She pecked me on the cheek and told me that she would have her text ready by the next morning, but that I should come up with one too, and only then would we write the letter on the computer.

* * *

That night, I didn't sleep a wink, both because of the text and because of the peck, and in the morning, I noticed that Ma-

rina'd had a sleepless night as well. We skipped the first period, crawled into the basement and started working on the threatening letter. She couldn't even read her letter out loud, that's how threatening and terrible it was, so I had to read it for her:

If you're truly in love
You have the blessing from above
And if it's just a scam
Take your stuff and scam

Romeo and Juliet

I was so touched that I shed a tear, because I knew she had actually written it for me, but it was clear to me that jerk wasn't exactly that big of a coward so as to get scared of something like that. I told her that so nicely and carefully, making sure not to hurt her feelings, that I ended up making her cry. Then we hugged and cried in each other's arms for about twenty-three minutes and seventeen seconds, and we ended up completely forgetting about the threat. Luckily, she remembered it just when I was about to kiss her.

– What do we do now? What did you write?

My pocket was filled with pieces of paper full of illegible rubbish, the only clear thing being that I'd spend the whole night trying to come up with something. There were canaries, children, a disabled woman and the word death written in all possible writing system, from cuneiform to hieroglyphics and Chinese. I didn't show her any of that. A piece of paper fell out of my pocket. It said:

Key the car
Knife through the tire
Die, bastard

The Car Ripper

I quickly shoved it back into my pocket, but Marina managed to read just enough of it to praise my great writing, which encouraged me to the extent that I was tempted to show her the

other nonsense I had come up with too, but, fortunately, she immediately added:

– We have no choice but to get to work. So, we skipped another five periods, until we finally put together a terribly frightening note that we were afraid to read out loud, that’s how scary it was.

Stop with your buffoonery and tricks
To dishonor other people’s wives
I’ll be coming for you with knives
Wherever you try to hide
Zorro the Death Rider

We cried again for fifteen or sixteen minutes and fourteen seconds, and then Marina ran home to write it all on the computer, and we agreed to meet at five o’clock in the afternoon in the same place. She also opened up to me about how she never cried with Dado.

* * *

She arrived at exactly four minutes and thirty-nine seconds past five with a folder full of threatening letters. The text was quite a masterpiece, as if it had been written by Pythagoras himself, that’s how precise and neat it was, and the background had a giant skull with two crossed bones, which I think were taken out of some part of the leg. I couldn’t believe my own two eyes when I saw what that computer of Marina’s could do. Freakin’ wow. If that threatening letter doesn’t kill the jerk right on the spot, I’ll be forced to send Marina’s computer to finish him off instead.

As soon as he drove up with my ma, he rushed to the store to get some cigarettes since I wasn’t around to fetch them for him as usual. Marina and I were hiding in the bushes, holding our breaths in fear of the job that awaited us. I used the fear and hiding to try and feel up Marina a bit, and she used them to slap me, which was a godsend, since I had forgotten all about

the jerk as I would usually forget homework. And while the jerk was combing his hair before entering the store and while he was flirting with the saleswomen after getting inside, we covered his car with letters, and it looked like a no-posters-allowed kind of place. After we had also mailed him a certain number of letters, we had forty-seven of them left, which we, so as not to slack around, distributed around the neighborhood, putting them in mailboxes. When we finished the job, I treated Marina to some ice cream with the money that the jerk had given me the last time I saw him. We were happy and content after doing such an important and dangerous job without any casualties or complications whatsoever. We were looking at each other happily and fondly, and Marina's beauty was, only seemingly, tarnished by the melting chocolate from her ice cream, which was dripping down her fingers, as well as from her mouth over her chin and down her neck. My cheek still ached, reminding me of the size and the power of Marina's love, because – with no fighting, there's no kiss and make up.

I think Marina and I are dating again.

* * *

That night I slept like a baby, I had wonderful dreams, and I could hardly wait for the morning to see my Marina again. The bathroom procedure kept me so occupied and engaged and I spent so much time there that I ended up being late and arrived in front of the school last – but still early enough to hear the whole school buzzing about my ma screwing some jerk – and, sadly, early enough to see my Marina holding hands with Dado.

I had the biggest lump in my throat yet, perhaps even bigger than the one I had when my old man suddenly took off to war. I turned on my heel in front of the whole school plus the teachers' council with my heart sinking into my boots, the heat that until recently was so buffed, shiny and polished, and headed to my

Blindly to the twelfth floor, the floor of hope and consolation. I had to ring the bell three times for him to answer.

- Who is it?
- And who could it be at this odd hour?
- Didn't I tell you not to come up here?!
- But it's very important!
- Nothing is that important!!

After that, the door went silent. A mute black hole formed on the twelfth floor in apartment number 24, with no sign of life, and no matter how much I begged, nothing more could be heard, except a barely audible sob which crept into all corners of the universe, a sob of a boy rejected by everyone just because he loved with his whole heart.

These idiots called adults understand nothing, they're good for nothing, and I will think long and hard before I ever grow up. I had to go down twelve thousand floors with that stupid bag on my back to reach my nest under the stairs, where I stayed like a lone wolf until it was thirty-seven minutes and two seconds past eleven, because not even my stray dogs were home at the time, as they would chase garbage men around the neighborhood on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays around that hour. I didn't understand a thing, love or friendship, war or peace, because I'd only been thirteen years old for a month and two days, so in that solitary hideout of mine, I just further polished the sad look in my eyes full of tears and a burden as heavy as a stone on my heart valve.

* * *

When my ma accidentally saw my eyes that afternoon, she was shocked how someone that age could have such bloodshot eyes, unless they were an albino rabbit or had been underwater for more than two days, so she took me to our doctor – and by then also a friend – who told her that there was no reason to wor-

ry, that everything was fine with me, and that the redness in my eyes was normal and it would stop on its own lickety-split, we just had to start avoiding the draft, and she had to stop airing me out like prosciutto, so that was the only thing he prescribed me.

My ma was not very happy that he dared question her precious draft, so she grumbled something about how even medicine was starting to fall behind in the health department if it was so afraid of the draft, but nothing could ruin her mood, which had been the best of the best for six weeks straight. I was still in such a bad mood that I would have gladly jumped from the top of our Raff without an umbrella if I hadn't been falsely comforting myself with the Saturday trip to the spa, although I believed that the jerk might have already dropped dead like the Dead Sea.

* * *

As luck would have it, he didn't drop dead at all. Nothing at all happened to him. And the next evening, just like every evening, he arrived with my ma all cheerful and hearty, and I could not detect even a single glimpse of deadness on him. On the contrary, he gleefully reminded me about the next day's trip, which, to be honest, pulled me out of deep schizophrenia so well that I, as a disgrace to my ma, just rushed home excitedly, without saying goodbye, in order to look for my trunks. And later that evening, when my ma and I were walking around the grocery store, and as I was allowed to put almost everything I thought we might need on the trip into the cart, I felt as happy, sublime, and dignified as before, when I still had reasons for that. I was just like, how do you say it, a knight in shining armor or the king of the castle. At the checkout, the only things my ma took out of the cart were the fire extinguisher, a small flashlight, a pair of ice skates and the saleswoman's son, whom they hadn't accepted into kindergarten, so customers would carry him in their carts until his mother would finish her shift. Mom said we wouldn't

need any of that stuff at the spa. The only thing we agreed on not needing was the kid, but she still wouldn't let me put the rest of the stuff back into the cart. At home, we spent ten hours and fifty-four minutes making sandwiches and baking cakes. We decided that nothing was going to stop us from going on that trip the next day, not even a red alert, because after so many war years, my digestive system had aged so much that it was already a little deaf and could no longer hear every siren, so I was no longer callously running up our skyscraper's stairwell at every whistle. Anyway, just in case, we packed an extra pair of clothing for the area down south along with the food.

As I went to bed that night, I was overwhelmed by all the joy that had been hidden in all the corners of my body since the last disappointment in love and the last betrayal by a friend, and all I could think about was the next day's trip, the car ride and swimming in pools, and I tried my best not to think about my old man so as not to completely ruin everything. I was looking forward to the pools and swimming so much that I didn't even bother to wonder if I still knew how to swim.

* * *

In the morning, as agreed, step-jerk came to pick us up. We barely squeezed in all the things we had packed – it was enough to just take a quick look at that pile to immediately realize that we were swimming in abundance. There was no way for us to find out exactly what the temperature of the water in the spa was, so we were forced to take several swimsuits in case we got cold. My ma also took water shoes to protect herself against sea urchins, because you never know what the people from Zagorje could pull on us; they are ready to do anything just to make money off of you.

In order to substantiate the theory on what the people from Zagorje are like, I mentioned our last visit to the spa, when we

were still a family and when my old man took us there, my father and your husband, and the people from Zagorje had just introduced a levy on the use of pools also known as tickets. We evaded the levy by going round the entrance, but, after crawling under the fence, we were full of tar, because the cunning people from Zagorje coated the fence all over with it. Later, black as coal, we had to go for a swim in a nearby stream into which the pools poured because they didn't want to let us in like that anymore, not even with tickets. For two full days after returning to Zagreb, we were still the main attraction, until we somehow managed to remove all that tar off our skin with a thinner, Vim, some scrub brushes and a soldering iron.

– Do you remember that, mommy?

My ma turned red in front of the step-jerk, as if she was returning from the spa sunburned, and not as if we were only just getting there.

Unfortunately, the trip started way too early for any of my scoundrels to see a liveried driver wearing shorts and a T-shirt personally picking up the goalkeeper of their first team. Now I know exactly how celebrities feel and I can only say this – it's a shame you don't get to see what that feels like, too. It didn't even help when I pushed my head through the half-open window as soon as we got in the car and waved at whomever I could like a drowning man. None of my people in sight. We only ran into some friends of my step-jerk, the whole town was full of them, and every now and then someone would shout after us:

– Look at the jerk in that car!!

The wind was blowing so hard in my ma's face that she was forced to pull up the window in self-defense, and as she didn't notice me airing out my ears at the window, she would have definitely choked me had I not made an unnatural, high-frequency

guttural sound at the last second, which almost set us crashing into a stupidly placed overpass.

By then, even the step-jerk had started to lose his temper because of us, so he began shouting inappropriately loudly (for such a small space as the inside of a car) at my ma and me, asking us if we had gone nuts, which my ma had to endure because I was her son. He also added that we had to refuel the car at the first gas station outside the city, while my ma still had some money to pay for it before I spent it all at the spa.

As we were waiting in line, step-jerk was yapping about how someone was sending him threatening letters, and since my ma showed such great interest in that, he had to tell us all the details. From what exactly the letters say, to what he would do about it.

I pricked up my ears.

In short, the threats had Chetniks' and Kosovars' fingerprints all over them, because he has always been a Croat and because he has almost been imprisoned for it, and it seems like there are more and more people who have a problem with Croatia and the real Croats, so they want to scare them off and drive them away from their centuries-old hearths, but in his case they messed with a tough nut because he knows what to do with the likes of them and only prays to God he will run into them so that he can strangle them like kittens with his bare hands. And as if it wasn't enough for them to insult his Ustasha dignity, the scum also demanded that they be paid seven hundred thousand marks.

– Seven hundred thousand marks?!

– Yes, why are you so shocked? As you know, I made my first serious money thanks to those letters, and then, not wasting a breath, I doubled that money by investing it in a savings and loans cooperative with very high interest rates. The money multiplied like unwashed dishes, and I would wake up every morning a few thousands heavier. And while some fools and doubting

Thomases – just listen to this – now that we have our own state and are not oppressed by foreigners, withdrew their money, I just kept on investing. So now, when I add up all that interest and the principal amount, it turns out that I have seven hundred thousand marks which, truth be told, I am not currently able to withdraw due to the war and other objective circumstances. And as the scent of wealth tends to spread around like children’s wishes in a toy store, the bandit scum immediately sniffed me out, and now they’re asking me for seven hundred thousand convertible marks, in twenty and fifty mark bills nonetheless, and they also want a Darwil watch just like your mother’s.

Of course, he won’t give them the money, although he could, but he’s not crazy. He will not inform the police because something tells him that someone from the police could be involved in all that, but he will go to the appointed place alone, so that he can finally put an end to that gang.

– Does it really say that?

– Word for word!

My old lady stared at him intensely, marveling at his courage and sighing anxiously.

I fell silent, and then it hit me that we had lost my old man irretrievably and forever, because against that kind of liar the truth was a rusty and small weapon, and I had no ace up my sleeve. But then, little by little, mom began expressing doubt in the story, especially in the amount and even more so his courage, so it seemed like their relationship had hit its first bump in the road, seemingly opening up the possibility of my old man getting back in the picture.

At that exact moment, the salesman said:

– Okay, please pay up!

My ma and I threw ourselves under the seats at the same time, looking for at least one good reason not to pay on the car floor, and since we searched for it for quite a long time, we even-

tually found it – you see, my step-jerk ended up having to pay instead because the salesman went crazy and lost his temper due to all the waiting. Winning that doubles match, my ma and I proved ourselves to be an absolutely invincible duo.

Step-jerk got so fidgety rummaging through documents and offering countless ways to pay, some of which I had never heard of in my life, from some checks, foreign currencies, vouchers, to, listen to this, plastic cards, which puzzled and surprised me greatly because I had a rather careless attitude towards plastic, and I would kick around plastic bags and bottles all across the neighborhood, but I had no idea I was wasting money by doing that.

In the end, the salesman fell for my step-jerk's act and, instead of making him pay in cash, he allowed himself to be fooled and just let him sign a piece of paper. Adults tend to be naive and stupid just like little kids sometimes. He had no idea who he was dealing with.

And so, after the vicissitudes at the gas station, we finally headed towards the spa. But shortly after the second traffic light, I noticed a blue car trying to catch up to us and giving us signals to stop.

– Looks like that blue car, the one behind us to the left, is trying to catch up to us.

– Really, look at the idiot chasing us. Not only that, but he seems to be threatening me with his fist. JESUS AND MARY, COULD THIS BE ONE OF THOSE SCOUNDRELS WHO WROTE THE THREATENING LETTERS?!?!

– I think so. I think that he is holding something black in his hand. Looks like it's a bomb!!

– Step on it, he'll kill us in cold blood!!

And so began a life-and-death chase throughout the whole town. We speeded, and he was constantly on our tail, running red lights and driving though pedestrian zones and in the opposite

direction. We would hide in dead ends, yards, alleyways, and at pedestrian crossings, but all in vain, because he was right behind us the entire time. We turned our heads and looked in the opposite direction, sang Hrvatine, and also some Serbian songs just in case, but nothing and no one could help us. Least of all the police, because this book has already clearly demonstrated that they didn't deal with life-or-death situations, so when it came to them, the blue car had nothing to worry about. He became a shadow of sorts. You could already smell the stench of death in the air, and my ma and I had already come to terms with the bitter truth that there would be nothing of our swimming adventure that day. Once we reached the next bridge, when it was already obvious that the blue car would catch up to us, step-jerk suddenly hit the brakes, opened the car door, rushed out like a bullet and "splash", threw himself into the Sava River. Unlike us, that guy had no intention of missing his opportunity for a swim.

– Sorry ma'am, I barely caught up to you, your husband left his documents behind at the gas station.

– Thank you, sir, and goodbye!

– Oh, you moronic moron!

My ma was yelling angrily under the bridge at the step-jerk who had dropped out of sight. He disappeared as if he had jumped into hydrochloric acid, and left us with the car and all that stuff without any instructions whatsoever, so she yelled under the bridge, which had been blessed by a century-old undisturbed peace up until that moment, with the exception of a few pensive fishermen who had been soaking their fishing floats there since the times of Austria-Hungary. The cars honked like crazy as we were taking our things out of the car, and then headed for the tram stop loaded down like mules. So that our trip wouldn't be a total disaster, we hopped on tram number five and circled around the city until I wolfed down all the food. During all that time, my ma couldn't get over herself: what the hell did she see in that jerk,

and where could my old man's water shoes have gotten lost, and by the way, she could call my old man to hear what he was up to since they haven't talked in a long time... Really, she could.

And I just softly hummed:

Stop with your buffoonery and tricks
To dishonor other people's wives
I'll be coming for you with knives
Wherever you try to hide

* * *

That was the nicest trip of my life, although not a single soul in the tram could guess, no matter how hard they tried, where we were headed. Then, I sat on my mother's lap as big as I was and started telling her the most beautiful stories about my father, a hero and a paragon of virtue, who went to war without having to, who did everything he could to protect us, defend us and restore our dignity. But then again, when it came to dignity, we felt like shitty pigeons, because while we were sitting opposite each other, and at the same time opposite recent events and unpleasant facts, we suddenly became ashamed of all our actions: how quickly and lightly we renounced dad, and how we traded him for a few colorful illusions, for car rides, false promises, a pointless trip, and a fictional fake life without any obligations or duties. We fell for a lie, and it was three times harder and worse for us when we realized, especially mom, just how big of a jerk the guy feeding us all that bullshit was. We became aware of what kind of crap we got dragged into, because the truth is usually shitty and very often hurts terribly. In the end, we held onto each other as two death row inmates, which was not appropriate for our respective ages, but it was acceptable given our situation, all for the purpose of going through the pain together right then and there, the pain that was in the phase of a multiplication operation. At this point, I can only add that people are insensitive bastards

because the ticket inspector kicked us out of the tram, and he also wrote down my ma's info, claiming that the tickets are valid for two, not six hours.

When we got home, for the first time in a long time I didn't run to my hideout to my stray dogs, but crawled into my mom's bed, and we kept making promises to each other till eleven minutes and thirty-six seconds past two in the morning.

* * *

The next morning, the jerk had the nerve to, imagine, call my ma on the phone, which forced me to turn into a wiretap. He said that he'd managed to escape with his life and he was very glad that we were okay as well, and he asked if my ma could lend him two hundred thousand convertible marks because he had lost his two hundred thousand in the Sava, and if she could give him that Darwil watch, you know, because of that threat he told us about, if we remember.

– Go to hell, you jerk, and leave me alone, I never want to see you or hear from you again!

And bam, she slammed down the phone.

God, how proud I was of my ma. She's real cool and hot, and if I may – which, truth be told, you don't normally say in occasions like this one, especially about persons of the fairer sex – my ma's got balls.

I won my war, there was no longer any doubt; now my old man has to win his, so that we can patch up our family again.

Sleep well, dad, I'm watching over mom.

* * *

Even school didn't seem so awful or difficult to me anymore. My grades were visibly improving, which again had nothing to do with the situation at home, but only with the results I got in tests and exams.

Blindy began acting strange, but it no longer hurt me as much as when he chased me away from the twelfth floor.

Supposedly, he will go somewhere where they appreciate the blind more, because he was a little disappointed with the people here, and I think he mentioned Sweden, Finland or the North Pole – I just know that where he’s going, there are over six months of night, so for half a year it’s the same if you’re blind or not, because even those with the gift of sight can’t see a thing in that darkness. And the actual blind people, who do nothing but prepare and practice for such a situation all their lives, are a perfect fit for a life up there, and they have a huge advantage over other disabled people precisely because their night mode is constantly ON, so there, they work exclusively as tourist guides. I genuinely felt bad about him leaving me, but there was nothing I could do about it, so I just wished him a pleasant journey. As if I could have wished, God forbid, for him to regain his eyesight now that he had finally met all the requirements to be at an advantage over all these northerners precisely because of his handicap. If he doesn’t know what to do with the flashlight, he might as well leave it to me, so it won’t be alone and so I’ll constantly remind it of him. He ended up saying he would keep it, because he still hoped to regain his eyesight some day.

Then why the hell is he heading north?

* * *

The sirens howled less and less, the war had been banished far away from my city, and in the meantime, they sent my old

man back, even though we had no clue about that, to the vicinity of Zadar. Man, he sure knows how to enjoy himself, he's at the seaside all the time, and we, fortunately, didn't even manage to get to a spa.

We would still play football until the sound of the first siren or until a team would score six goals, because some days there would be no howls at all. Those days, even the fortunes of war turned in our favor. We beat Dado and his squad 6-5, and the final game was such a squeaker that some of the audience left the playground because they could no longer bear to watch it. And then I sent a ball all the way forward, in front of the opponent's goal, and it landed right on the head of little Cico, who, while no one paid attention or kept an eye on him, made it all the way to sixth grade and was no longer as small as he was in the third grade, and, of course, he used that head to score a goal. So, they headed towards the center line, and then the sirens sounded the end of the game. And that's exactly what I meant when I said that the fortunes of war turned in our favor.

The next morning, the police suddenly appeared in the neighborhood. We were sure that they were finally fed up with the thief who was still feasting on our valuables, but they were not interested in that at all, but rather in an inexplicable increase in the number of cases of domestic violence in our neighborhood and an unusually large number of applications for divorce. Looks like some idiot put some stupid and provocative poem in mailboxes. Now that's exactly what they're investigating.

So, it turned out that my ma wasn't the only one fooling around and that her case wasn't a tad bit special, but rather a widespread phenomenon. It seems like in this neighborhood of ours so many have skeletons in their closets that no one will dare

say a word to my old man about the relationship between that long-forgotten jerk and my sinful ma.

* * *

Ever since we mopped the floor with Dado and his klutzes and won the finals, and since the police started scurrying around our neighborhood trying to break the case of blackmail and threats, for which you can get up to five years in the joint, Marina has been using every possible opportunity to catch my eye, or, what's even cuter, catch me with my guard down. But now that I'm an old experienced stud, both when it comes to blackmail and threats and pure and unadulterated love, I won't just fall for any trick. Where was she and what was she thinking before, when I was handing myself to her on a silver platter? Back then, she still might've stood a chance.

C'est la vie, baby.

* * *

The phone rang.

– Hello!

– Hello, it's Dad reporting.

– Hi Dad, you have no idea how happy you made me and how glad I am to hear from you!

– I'm free next weekend, so I'm thinking of coming home on Sunday.

– Then why don't you come and stay the whole weekend?

– I'm still screaming and waking up at night.

– Well, it doesn't matter. I'm still stuttering, yet Mom hasn't kicked me out. You have no idea how glad Mom will be. Do you want to talk to her?

– No, it's you I wanted to hear.

Shit. Just when it seemed like our home was reviving, at least from our point of view.

- Who was that?
- Dad called. He's coming home for the weekend and is really looking forward to seeing us again.
- Did he ask about me?
- We didn't even talk about anything else.
- Then why do you look so worried?

* * *

And then the weekend came. I lied my ass off to ma, saying that my old man called again to tell us that he couldn't come for the whole weekend, but that he would definitely try to come on Sunday. My ma was excited, tidying up and getting all dressed up just like in the era of the jerk, if not more so – she had even more highlights done this time. She didn't seem to have slept a wink all night before Sunday, though I hadn't heard her howling like a baboon.

* * *

The phone's ringing again. Just a sec.

It was Marina. She was wondering if it was my birthday and if the police had discovered anything about us. Yes, today is my birthday, and this, mind you, is my fourteenth birthday, and I'm just wondering where she has been on my first thirteen birthdays. I told her she didn't have to worry about the police. They were lazy, war-made slackers.

If people keep on interrupting me, I'll never finish writing this. Anyway, even if it has nothing to do with this book, I have to tell you that today I am hoping for a purebred dog and some custard slices.

* * *

My old man arrived at about seventeen past ten and left at about twenty-two past five. It was one of the coldest days of August (+ 25.70C), so the ice between my ma and pop didn't melt

at all. My old man was as thin as a hyena, he had dark circles under his eyes like an owl, and he was unshaven like a terrier; in other words, he was totally disheveled, and if he hadn't smelled of distillate, he would have been a better fit for my stray dogs than humans. My ma, well-groomed as she was, looked like a beauty in an almshouse next to us. You see, I didn't shave my lil' mustache yet either.

The silence between them was so palpable that I had to pick up the baton, so I babbled on behalf of all three of us and with so much zeal and desire to somehow get them to speak as well, that I stopped stuttering. My ma only noticed that the next day after breakfast, that's how little attention anyone paid to me that day – both of them chose to sulk instead, each in their own cul-de-sac.

It wasn't until I started talking about Blindy that my old man livened up like a sloth in the midday heat. I had to tell him everything about our get-togethers and our conversations, about buying the flashlight, and how he'd chased me away, not letting me into his apartment, and why he had done that, and whether he hanged out with other people. Was he so insanely jealous of my friend Blindy? Is he deaf and so absent in spirit that he asks me this now after I've been talking for an hour or so about nothing but a wonderful and warm friendship? Why is he asking me if anyone else comes by his place, if he hangs out with anyone other than me, where he goes and when? Well, as far as our neighborhood goes, he was the only blind man and I was the only stutterer, so we were the only two members of the local association of disabled people, and as such we hung out, with the exception of a few poor blind fellas who would come to check up on Blindy, and then they'd exchange some miraculous medicines and prescriptions which would supposedly make even those who were blinder than them see again, and laugh and rejoice as if their sight had already returned, although it hadn't. He asked when he

would go to north, and I had no idea, except that it would happen soon.

I'm afraid that my old man is only getting worse and worse and that his night madness has already clawed its way deep into the day. He almost left without saying goodbye, and I tried to lift my ma's spirits with a proven method of colorful lies, but my ma is already coated with two anti-jerk coatings, so she no longer falls for balloons, clowns, the circus and cheerful drafts. Once you get burned, you only eat raw and bloody meat, and then you wonder why you are angry, grumpy and wicked.

The way things are going, I'd say that in the end I might even mourn the loss my step-jerk.

* * *

The fame we had gained went straight to our heads, so my low-lives from school and I didn't want to play football anymore, which drove our opponents crazy, because we were supposed to give them a rematch in the name of some sort of fair play. After four years of sucking ass at football in a row, we didn't owe anyone anything, not even a rematch. After all, if they were smart, they would have thought of that when they were losing, instead of talking shit about us all around the school now. After all, whoever loses has the right to be angry. It's always been that way. I'm not telling you this rashly and for no reason, I speak from a place of a lot of experience in losing.

* * *

We are all slowly but surely sinking back into the good old schizophrenia. My ma has let herself go – the highlights are gone; Marina won't even look at me anymore, she's just strutting around school with that loser Dado again; Blindy just talks nonsense, everything grinds his gears and he complains all the time, as if he's losing and not winning the war. Even the alerts are back

at it again. Now they are shooting at us directly from Bosnia. I'm full of fleas once again and hope to start stuttering again soon. The situation is under control only at school because no teacher has asked me a single question for a long time. Not even Pythagoras. The fact that I am being asked questions every day by the guidance counselor and school psychologist is nothing to be taken seriously because those questions can't end up reaching the gradebook.

And so, one ordinary war Wednesday, instead of going to school, I went to play pinball and video games and spent the last five kunas I had in life in a minute and two seconds. I stayed for another five hours and twenty-six minutes and hit and kicked the pinball machine with all my might every time the owner turned away to show it who the boss was, so it'd remember, once and for all, that money should be earned and not stolen.

Suddenly, as I was sauntering to the hideout, military police and special operations forces swarmed from all directions towards our Raff, and I would have cut off my right arm right then and there to prove that our building was completely innocent, as God is my witness. How easy it is for a man to be wrong. When they surrounded it so that it would have nowhere to go, they started throwing themselves into its gut, a helicopter landed on its head, and out of it, it turned out, my old man stumbled forward. I couldn't believe my useless eyes because they always had to be opened by a blind man so far, so I tested them in terms of proximity and velocity with a method called how many fingers do you see? That made things even more confusing: either I am dreaming, or they are shooting a movie? Anyway, I rushed to Raff, not caring if they would have to reshoot the scene because of me, to tell Blindy this unusual and exciting news. As I slowly and carefully pulled myself out of the elevator on the twelfth floor like mist, I was so surprised that my heart almost stopped beating. The door to Blindy's apartment was torn down, and the apartment was full of special forces. Blindy was lying subdued

on the floor with handcuffs on his hands and a sad blind look in my direction as my old man was giving orders.

– Dad, for God’s sake, leave this poor man be, he wouldn’t even hurt a fly. Guys, this is a big misunderstanding. What can a blind person be guilty of, has it come to the point that we are afraid of the blind as well?

And I see that everything and everyone is crazy, not just my old man, the crows have drained their brains, and that damn war, alcohol and cards were very likely also partially responsible for their madness, and no one wanted to laugh it all off as a joke, they were all still deadly serious and really strange, and my old man was the strangest one of all, yet it seems to me that he was also the leader of all that disgrace:

– Come on, Son, go back to school, it would be better for you not to see this. You’re always sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.

When I heard that the ever normal, calm and good Blindy had started to talk nonsense as well, I was sure that I had boarded a ship of fools, not an elevator to the twelfth floor of my Raff:

– Listen to your Dad. Dad is just doing his job like I did mine. Remember I told you that a man must do everything he can for his people. Besides, it’s not all that bad. I regained my eyesight in front of you just like you stopped stuttering in front of me.

I rushed to my stray dogs in the hideout under the stairs of the other entrance, terrified and desperate, not understanding anything in that world of adults. Is it possible for someone so good to be bad? Either us children see everything the wrong way and upside down – and if so, how can good be distinguished from evil at all – or the differences are actually so small that you have to grow up to be able to see them, and does that mean you can never have friends because you can’t tell them apart from enemies? Looks like the only choice is to turn to animals. It was all so

terrible and by far the worst of all things so far in that long shitty war life of mine, and I thought it would certainly never be harder because I would never be that little again, and it must've been the devil himself who dragged me to the twelfth floor to hear my old man telling his fighters that his son had told him everything in detail, so I looked like a traitor and a spy in front of Blindy, which I never imagined I would become, so everything was a hundred times worse for me. Considering how everything was going, I wouldn't have been surprised if they had taken my mom away the next day as well. I didn't understand anything anymore.

It's terribly and unbearably difficult on you when you betray a friend, even if he was actually your enemy.

And to whom should I turn now, to whom should I talk about it; to the assholes from my class, to Marina who would tell the entire school everything, to my ma who can barely handle her own problems, or maybe to my old man who was responsible for all that? The stray dogs didn't have the strength of character to endure that because they often had to wag their tails to survive, so they ran away while I was crying, not even waiting for me to sing Hrvatine, which now sounded hollow and stupid, and didn't help me at all because it was just a plain war song, and I was overwhelmed by sadness and crushed by high treason, and such occasions called for an opera or a symphony, and I could not remember any because such songs couldn't be heard in my home.

I rushed to church, crawled into the confessional and didn't leave it for three days, so the nuns had to bring me soup and juice every now and then. On the third day, they brought me a whole lunch, so they kind of bothered me and the reverend while I was confessing. Only when I was somewhat patched up was I able to, with God's help, hear the truth to the end, no matter how painful it was.

* * *

Strangely enough, my old man stayed home all that time, waiting for me to return and turn from a religious fanatic into an ordinary one, appropriate for my age – which was a little too demanding an expectation after everything that had happened – so that he could personally explain everything to me in detail. Right after I walked through the door, I noticed that the iceberg between my old man and my ma wasn't there anymore, the iceberg I'd left to cool our apartment in the summer heat, which would have even made the Titanic sink. I felt that much warmer winds were already blowing, despite the draft.

In short, for a while, dad and his men had been on the trail of a dangerous and cunning spy who was sending a lot of important information about the situation in Zagreb, the mood among the people, the combat readiness of many of our troops, especially dad's, the training and composition of units, their progress, as well as war successes and positions, which he found out in a very cunning way.

– Very often he used you because you memorize numbers like a Xerox machine, and you showered him with figures about weapons, altitudes, people and other things like a groom showers his betrothed with promises, unconsciously absorbing all that information like a sponge while I talked to some of my fellow soldiers, and you had no idea what it was all about. When I finally started having doubts about your friend, I sent a false message through you that only he could send to our enemies, and when that message reached the enemy and they acted exactly as expected, it was clear to us that we were on the trail of a very large fish. We followed him a little more, and then took action. But all that is nothing compared to the fact that he personally organized and led a spy-commando network through those so-called blind people, and that you sometimes conveyed messages to them without having a clue that he was deeply involved in the

explosions in Zagreb, and that one of our first offensives ended ingloriously because he had informed the enemy of everything long before we even set out. I have to tell you, he was also that cunning and elusive thief who stole valuables from apartments at night with the help of that powerful flashlight, not because he needed to, I mean he's a colonel of the Counterintelligence Service with an excellent income, but rather to create chaos, dissatisfaction, and distrust in the police and state structures. Everything that had been stolen has been found in his apartment, along with lots of electronic wiretapping equipment, powerful transmitters, weapons, and explosives for various diversions. That was also the reason why you weren't allowed into his apartment.

* * *

Just like my old man once ended up in the newspapers and on television a long time ago, the same thing happened to me now, but I still didn't understand adults, and that's why I'm looking forward to that fourteenth birthday so much. At school, when I saved a penalty back when sports and entertainment served the purpose of moral elevation, no one even shook my hand, and now that I betrayed a friend, I have become a hero and a moral role model. I still don't get it. He was my friend, and that's clear as day, he was just employed as an enemy. I sold our friendship down the river, and he was just going the extra mile at his job like many others at theirs, so who is the bigger bastard then? Although, on the other hand, I can't help but wonder, what kind of a man do you have to be to have such a terrible job? And whom did I even actually know? Or maybe people are not people when they work, take my old man as a shining example, but only when they are children, unemployed or disabled? In the end, I'm afraid that I will go crazy after all this, but before I go crazy, I must say that I am the biggest hero in my Raff, and especially for the apartments where valuables are back in their place.

* * *

Life went back to normal. I stopped being a hero after a while, and Pythagoras started throwing math problems my way again, and even that stupid history teacher of ours dared give me an oral exam in front of the whole class – even though I was the one who helped create history. The way this is going, even my physics teacher could decide to give me one, even though he knows all too well that he has nothing to ask me. These teachers really have a narrow-minded job. In fact, everyone has already forgotten about my successes, and I'm so glad that they are so oblivious because I'm not as ashamed of any of my failures as I am of this greatest success of mine, and I'm the only one who can't seem to forget it and stop thinking about it. And this damn watch; I told everyone I found it, so no one knows who I got it from, and it drives me up the wall and keeps me up at night. It shows me enemy time, it is wickedly accurate, and it makes me wonder: can a hero wear an enemy watch, even if it is a gift from a friend?

* * *

At home, my folks forgave each other everything, both the infidelity my old man had heard about back in Dubrovnik, and my dad's defection from the family to the war, but real warmth is still returning to our family rather slowly, all because of that damn iceberg and its chemical composition and state of matter, and a bit also because of the airing out of the apartment, since everything now is as it once used to be, and my ma airs out even more than before, as if our happiness depended on that, and as if we all had to study, and not just me.

And then, one ordinary Monday, suddenly and out of nowhere, the step-jerk, whom we now called colleague from work, tried to crawl his way back, and as my ma blew him off, he clung to me like a sea urchin does to a foot. He kept calling me, and I couldn't get rid of him that easily, because, to be honest, we hung out for a long time and spent a series of happy moments together, and now he seems to want to repay me in some way. He picked up on some rumor somewhere in some ministry that soldiers like my old man might soon be able to buy a car without paying any taxes, so it would be a real shame not to seize that opportunity just because we are currently out of money. So, he's offering his help, and that is exactly why he is calling so much, to urge us to take this opportunity, so that it doesn't go to waste, and even though he would drive it, the car would be in my old man's name. What's more, he would be willing to make the same sacrifice for Tyke, that's how kind he is, because you see, he, unlike many, hasn't forgotten about our handicapped people.

– Do you remember how we raced around the city and how we were constantly ahead of that blue car? That poor fella would have never reached us if I hadn't had to jump under the bridge to check if the enemy was preparing another blasting or any similar sabotage.

It all came back to me, too. How he can lie his ass off, and what a jerk he is, but I kept quiet, because it was clear to me that I would never get my old man a car with pure truth. After we'd been hanging out on the phone like that for a few weeks, I sum-

moned enough courage to tell my old man what I had promised the colleague from work regarding that opportunity that simply could not be missed.

My old man listened to me carefully, took an interest in the case, praised my care and ingenuity, and asked me for his phone number so that he could personally settle all the details with him. He just clenched his teeth in pleasure.

What exactly they were talking about, I can't tell you for sure because the conversation went in the wrong direction right from the beginning, so I just rushed to one of my dog training classes, to my bloodthirsty strays, rather than witnessing another one of my old man's reckless rants.

When I returned, I didn't ask any questions, and why would I, because it was obvious right away that Mr. Jerk had given up his intention to buy my dad a car. He disappeared again without a trace until another convenient time, to be on hand again if we needed any similar help.

In the end, we kicked the Serbs' asses like we did to no other enemy before within just two months, eleven days and nine hours, which has also never been done before in the history of mankind. We liberated our homeland so brilliantly that history teachers not only in our country, but also in others, now use that to bother students. Now everything seems simple and everyone is captain hindsight – it seems like the enemy was doomed from the very beginning because they were led to their targets by a blind man, my friend nonetheless, and mostly because my old man was in the card team from the very beginning.

The price we paid for all that was terrible, even though rumor has it that freedom has no price. We are left with ruins on all sides, and most of all in our hearts, souls, and my family. My old man, truth be told, drinks less. He also promised he would quit, and he wakes up less often at night and howls more quietly. My ma lost her nerve in the war, and I lost my faith in adults, but as peace is creeping into all corners of my beautiful homeland, I am just waiting for the moment it reaches my family, so that unity, warmth and harmony can reign again. There's some kind of reconstruction going on, so they immediately formed the Ministry of Reconstruction, and I will, so help me God, hang out there every day just to reconstruct my family.

* * *

Of course, I understand that all of that takes time, but now time is no longer a problem – we have broken its shackles by

means of war. If anything, at least we have plenty of time to spare. Or at least my old man does. He was demobilized, he lost his job because he didn't show up for days, and now he doesn't know what to do with himself. He's not playing card games anymore, not even solitaire, because he made a vow he'd stop if he ever made it through the war. He rummages around the garden a bit, then phones the guys from his unit, goes to pick up Tyke, changes Tyke's clothes if he pisses or shits himself, and then pushes the poor eyeless and legless guy around in a wheelchair all day up and down the neighborhood and all the way to the garden, where they rejoice in war memories, and where Tyke begs him to put an end to his misery. And my old man doesn't want to hear of it.

– Have you gone mad?! You want me to kill you now that we have our flag, coat of arms, our state, our army and police, now that everything is over and you are just about to start receiving your pension?? And since you're on a roll, you might also get a disability allowance. And what are you gonna do with so much money anyway?! If only I had wandered into that minefield instead of you so that I could live in high cotton instead of being out of work and having to take care of my family! Also, Bobby and Cobra would never forgive me for that. Instead of singing with joy, you just keep making a fuss!

But neither the flag, nor the coats of arms, nor the state could cheer up Tyke; to hell with them, and the Jack of Clubs as well, he says. I can't help but wonder why that guy even went to war in the first place.

And don't even get me started on my old man. He goes to see Tyke every day, and instead of finding comfort in the fact that the army has not discharged him and sent him home in such a state, he is only becoming more and more downhearted and is even afraid of the night. Then why the hell does he go to see him every day? That's probably also the reason why he goes to some stupid therapy in the health center, although they allegedly

discovered in the laboratory that it was needed due to his war traumas, and they told him they would be there for him on even days in the afternoon and on odd days in the morning.

– Remember, it’s very simple. Even days: afternoon – E-A. Odd days: morning –O-M. Roger that? And feel free to drop by, don’t hesitate.

None of that has helped him; he still howls like a coyote.

* * *

I don’t stutter anymore, except when I get really angry. And why would I stutter? School’s almost over, my folks are both at home, my birthday is on June 15th, there’ll be gifts and cakes – I’m even a little afraid of the great happiness that is headed my way.

Dude, I have reached level 14 in this game we call life, and even though it’s almost been a day, no one remembered except for that stupid Marina who called me on the phone. No one. It’s already evening, and I can’t smell any cakes or hear any sweet squeals or barks from any basket. Nothing. I’m afraid the celebration found its way around me this time. Okay, it’s not like I’m Napoleon or some other great painter, or what not, it’s not like the whole world should celebrate my birthday because of my virtue and glory, but then again, I’m not a nobody either, at least not on the fourth floor, yet my old man is staring into space and my ma into the television, and my birthday is eluding their feelings and attention, while gifts are eluding my hands. By Jove, I’d rather it wasn’t my birthday at all today, at least not my fourteenth birthday, because now I’m an old horse and I can’t even run to my stray dogs anymore. Now, in the end, when I’m all grown up, I can say this with certainty: it’s not easy being big,

just as it wasn't easy being little. Life is simply not easy, even if it's your birthday every day.

Dude, level fourteen, and if I ever live to see level forty, I'll have myself executed alive and kicking in the main square, as a shining example in favor of painless euthanasia. It's not right for living corpses to roam the city. Come on, why would anyone at such a late age have any reason to live whatsoever? I will gladly suggest the same to my old folks as well, because what reason do they have to keep the ball rolling?

About the Autor

Darko Orešković, born on May 6, 1951 in Pakrac, Croatia, grew up in Krapina, where he finished elementary school and high school. He is a writer whose main occupation is somewhat atypical compared to other writers: he is a veterinarian, a doctor of science, and has worked all his life as a scientist at the Ruđer Bošković Institute in Zagreb. He is an expert in neurophysiology, with over fifty very notable studies published in renowned scientific journals worldwide, winner of the State Science Award, and also an author of a number of published literary texts, including four novels, *Odrastanje*³ (1999), *Obitelji s ljubavlju*⁴ (2001) *U potrazi za izgubljenim satom*⁵ (2009) and *Anđeo smrti/Roman o snajperistu*⁶ (2019). His scientific discussions are top-notch, and so are his novels, but the latter is a little harder to prove. However, taking into account that he has been included in the Croatian Literary Encyclopedia, that there is considerable interest from the audience, and that there are published reviews of his works by eminent critics (R. Perišić, J. Pintarić, S. Primorac, V. Visković), one may say that Orešković thrives both as a scientist and as a novelist. (jp)

³ Growing Up

⁴ To Family with Love

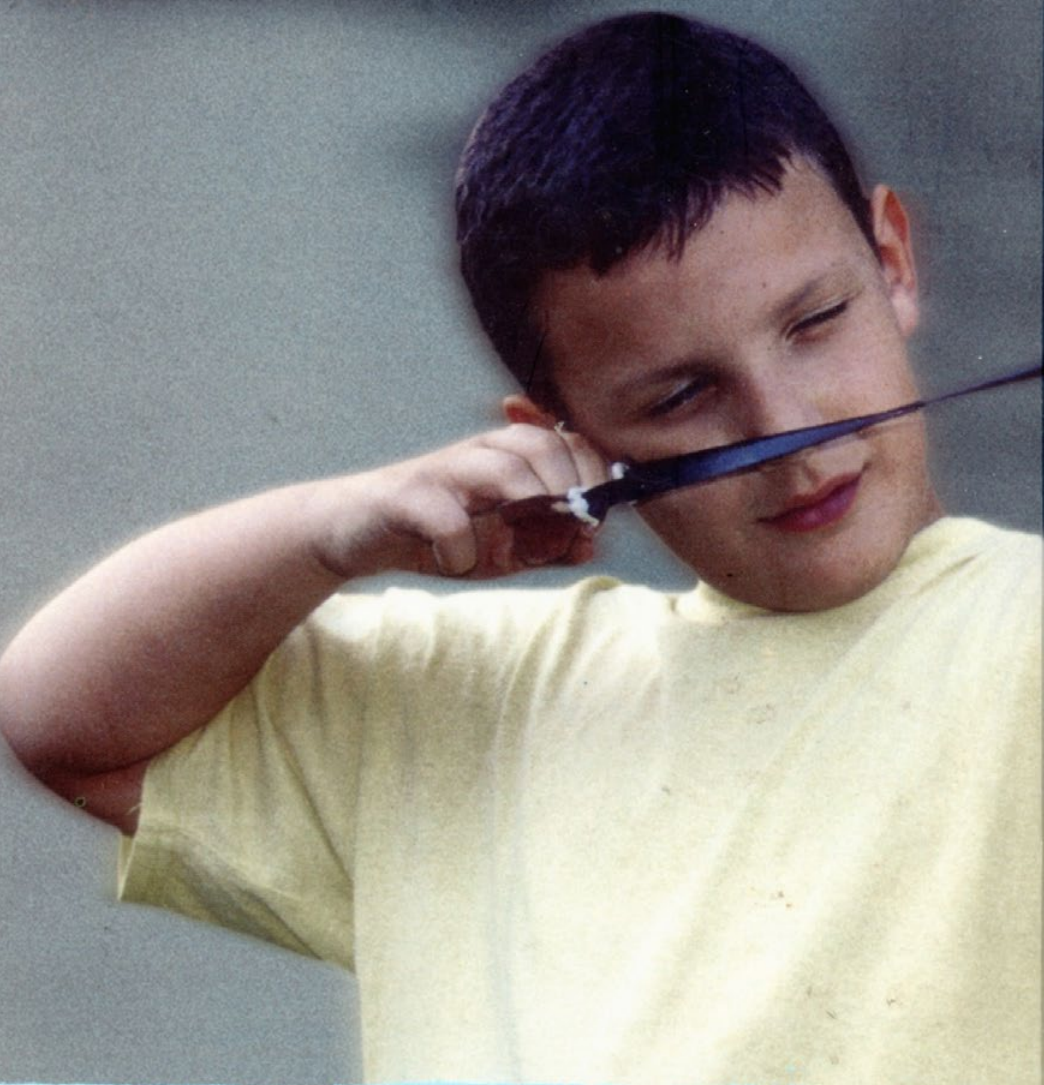
⁵ In Search of the Lost Clock

⁶ The Angel of Death/A Novel about a Sniper

About the Translator

Perina Kulić is a young, yet experienced translator from Croatia who reads, writes and translates literary works. By now, she has worked with several promising authors, and she enjoyed every cooperation given her love for discovering new ways to convey different aspects of people's mindsets into other cultures. She is also a psychotherapy student with a keen eye for hidden meanings that lie behind words, which serves her well in her area(s) of expertise.

The translation of this book was proofread by Paula Jakus, translator and owner of the translation agency LingoStar from Split, Croatia.




konzor