
Ana Ilic, ID 0824973

The Red River: Writing and Re-living the Traumatic Past

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ava Jic".

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Abstract

The Red River is envisaged to be a novel that explores trauma – an event so shocking that it shatters the victim and his or her world view –its impact and legacy. It unfolds the fictional lives of people living in poor, war-torn Serbia, all carrying the baggage of their own suffering. Through this novel, I explore the following questions: How does one overcome trauma from the past? Is redemption in an oppressed society possible? Do people need to leave their family, or escape their country, to forget the unforgettable?

The exegesis is strategically placed after the thesis to examine the process of writing the novel. Without marking this thesis as “traumatic literature” or a “magic realist novel”, I discuss these two contemporary literature modes and provide an overview of the novels – whose common thread is traumatic experience – which influenced my writing. After reading Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* – and immigrating to New Zealand to escape the memories of the wars, hunger, and repression – I had no other choice but to set my novel in the milieu of the mysterious and ordinary, the nauseating and gentle, the dream-like and real.

Perhaps, I – with the characters from *The Red River* – live in a hyper-reality, a missed, silenced – but at the same time re-livable – reality. It might be the only reality in which one can remember trauma in order to forget. And writing might just do the trick.

Writing “The Red River”: Re-living the Traumatic Past

Introduction

Over the past two decades many artists and scholars have had a growing interest in trauma defined as the intense response to catastrophic events which leave lasting psychological damage (Vickroy, 2002). Traumatic events, as Vickroy (2002) contends in her book *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, have made a compelling and potentially far-reaching topic for writing fiction, to the extent that there could be said to be a genre of contemporary fiction which the author labels "trauma narratives".

The Red River has been written as a family story about survival in Serbia, and the theories on writing about trauma and about magic realist techniques greatly helped me to articulate my thoughts and ideas.

It describes how the root of an idea grows into the plant of a story, watered by the methodology of heuristic research. To better understand the complexities of writing about trauma, I have used three sources: 1) literature review, 2) my notes about my thoughts, senses and reflections, and 3) novels that articulate traumatic events. Material from these sources have illuminated the cultural aspects that shape the identity formation, behaviour, social interactions, and possibilities and ways of articulating traumatic experience – and helped me to build characters and plot.

The exegesis begins with the synopsis of “The Red River” to elucidate how the novel progresses. The next section elaborates upon research methodology used in this project, followed by defining trauma and discussing “traumatic narratives,” as Vickroy (2002) conceptualises them. Some of the novels that influenced my writing are also mentioned here, followed by my personal reflections on writing, and re-living, the traumatic past. Finally, as concluding remarks, this exegesis raises questions about the legacy of trauma and possible redemption.

Novel Synopsis

With a mark resembling the Yugoslavian map developing under his armpit, Vuk is born in the communist fifties, in a small village in Serbia on the banks of the Morava River. He grows up in a family with common characteristics for Serbia: a family with traumatic memories, compulsive passions, and clandestine illnesses. On Vuk's fifth birthday, his mother Jovana is taken to prison accused of poisoning his grandmother.

Later, Nadia, Vuk's daughter, with her younger brother Emil, lives in a city close to the Morava River, carrying on through the nineties' in the horror of war-torn Serbia under sanctions. But she bears another trauma: surviving the suicide of her father when she was 14 years old and questing for the reasons of his abandonment. Will Nadia find strength to put the past where it belongs – behind her – and leave Serbia with her daughter Liberty, to meet her love in New Zealand?

This novel shows that sometimes living with trauma is more bearable than surviving and keeping the dead and the madness in memory. Vuk's grandfather, a high-ranked communist, cannot cope with the killings he committed during the Second World War. Likewise, Jovana has nightmares about her mother being raped and slaughtered by the communist partisans in the same war.

The Morava occasionally turns red from the blood of the people it has swallowed. It remains witness to unspeakable events, whispering its odd stories to fishermen, stories discernable from the splish-splash sounds of water by only a few.

Growing Idea Roots: Research Methodology Behind “The Red River”

Aiming to better understand the process and techniques of writing about traumatic past, I used heuristic research, enriched with a literary review of topics found to be important through the heuristic inquiry. Heuristic research (from the Greek *heuriskein* which means to discover or find) refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience, and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis (Moustakas, 1990, 1994). The stages of heuristic inquiry set out by Moustakas (1990) are: engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. They echo the creative process of writing, which usually reflects on images, senses, intuition, dreams, etc.

This research method attracts researchers interested in exploring the essence of the person in experience, and it begins with a quest and/or a problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate (Moustakas, 1990). This problem is usually one that has been a personal challenge in the search to understand one’s self and society (Moustakas, 1990). As Moustakas (1990) points out, the heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with every question that matters personally there is also a social – and even universal – significance. The result of this process is increased understanding of the phenomenon of interest and an experience of growing self-awareness and self-knowledge (Sullivan, P. & Porter, 1993).

As part of my heuristic research in this project, I gathered my observations, thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and brought together my personal notes and self-reflective writings. Along with this, I conducted a review of available literature on: 1) theories on trauma; 2) writing about traumatic events; and 3) magic realism as a narrative mode and its use in writing about trauma. I also returned to the novels with a common thread of traumatic experiences to improve my understanding of the ways of representing this topic in contemporary fiction.

What is Trauma?

In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Leys (2000) traces the origins of the understanding of trauma to observations made about survivors of railway accidents the 1860s in England. Since then, many leading scientists, such as Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet, have written about the subject of trauma. Trauma is generally defined as personal response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional and/or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruptions (Vickroy, 2002). Caruth (1995) offers one of the most cited definitions of trauma:

“In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearances of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena [...] The pathology consists [...] solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”

Apart from the traumatic event, Caruth's definition encompasses the post-event: as difficult as the event itself, the after-effects are often incredibly powerful and persistent, described by Caruth (1995) as haunting the individual, returning until the event can be assimilated or put to rest.

Writing About Trauma

Acknowledging the "therapeutic and testimonial value" of other literary texts covering trauma, Vickroy (2002) insists that the "trauma narratives" category of fiction has important distinguishing features from the many trauma texts of popular culture. As readers become increasingly sensitive to the ways trauma can manifest in narrative, Vickroy (2002) argues that contemporary writers' development of formal techniques

becomes crucial for conveying traumatic experiences. Therefore, it is important to explore which literary forms and techniques are best suited to trauma writing.

Vickroy (2002) challenges trauma theorists who believe that legitimate trauma stories are only those provided by the direct testimony of survivors through the first-person point of view. While direct traumatic testimony is characterised by hesitations and silences that are polished over by consistent narratives, "trauma narratives" frequently use experimental and/or innovative literary techniques to integrate the processes, rhythms, and ambiguities of trauma within their consciousness and structures (Vickroy, 2002). These techniques – including the use of multiple and unresolved perspectives – are able to provoke in the reader a response of what Dominick LaCapra (2001) calls "empathetic unsettlement." Because traumatised people are often voiceless, "trauma narrative" as Vickroy (2002) defines it, helps readers realise and even involve themselves in a terrifying experience. Informed and disturbed, the reader can critically evaluate the forces that provoke trauma. Therefore, as Vickroy (2002) argues, these trauma narratives are ethical in their desire to use literary techniques to engage the reader's critical thinking and empathy.

While precursors of postmodernism, such as Virginia Woolf and Jerzy Kosinski, employ modernist techniques to write about trauma (e.g., interior monologue and surrealism), the postmodern period provides further means to express traumatic experience (e.g., fragmentation of narrative and identity characteristics). For example, Marguerite Duras and Tony Morrison incorporate dissociative symptoms and fragmented identity and memory into their narratives, depicting how social dispossession, following upon colonialism, slavery and racism, destroys mothers' ability to nurture, which commonly leaves a painful impact on the identities of their children.

Larry Heinemann – a writer who served in the Vietnam War from 1967 to 1968 – writes in *Paco's Story* about the post-war experiences of a protagonist haunted by the ghosts of dead war-time friends. Heinemann was amongst the first novelists to convey traumatic effects through writing about protagonists haunted so by the past. Since then, there has been lots of writing about ghosts of those who died possessing others who survived. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the protagonist is haunted by the

ghost of her murdered daughter. In *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee presents a South African scene of post-election violence through the eyes of Professor Lurie, who has dreams of his raped daughter and imagined personas of past violations, reconfigured through ghostly bodies. In her *Regeneration* trilogy, Pat Barker explores the history of the First World War through a haunting, the main character having nightmares about the ghost of his brother and the unresolved effects of his death.

A common literary technique for writing about trauma in postmodernism is departure from conventional linear sequence. Another writer, Joseph Heller, himself a bombardier during the Second World War, writes in *Catch 22* about the US Army bombardier Yossarian whose main traumatic experience was the death of his friend Snowden. The reader is confronted with flashes of the event, though Snowden's death is never recollected in its full horror.

Both the theorists and writers discussed in this exegesis see trauma as the ultimate consequence of destructive social environments. In the novels discussed above, the writers articulate the lives of marginal people in complex social relations, thus providing a way to theorise how trauma can be conveyed and made comprehensible in such environments. Finally, these novels provide a rich platform for me, helping me depict the traumatic events in *The Red River*.

Those Magic Wor(I)ds: Magical Tale in Writing about Trauma

Before I turned to reading theories about magic realism, I had already – though on a more intuitive and unconscious level – used some of the narrative forms generally described as “magic realist.” My favourite writers have always been those belonging to this literary species (Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, and Isabel Allende), and when reading their novels I have felt exactly what I later found described by Arva, E. L. (2008): “Readers of magical realist fiction must look beyond the realistic detail and accept the dual ontological structure of the text, in which the natural and the supernatural, the explainable and the miraculous, coexist side by

side in a kaleidoscopic reality, whose apparently random angles are deliberately left to the audience's discretion.”

The term “magic realism” originated in Europe in the 1920s when it was applied to painting. Painters such as Carl Grossberg, Christian Schad, Alexander Kanoldt, Georg Schrimpf, Carlo Mense and Franz Radziwill, prescribed a return to the representation of reality, but under a new light. The world of objects was to be approached in a new way, as if the artist was discovering it for the first time. Magic realism, as it was then understood, was not a mixture of reality and fantasy but a way to uncover the mystery hidden in ordinary objects and everyday reality.

However, magic realism is commonly associated with Latin American literature, where it forms part of a more general trend reflecting a thematic and formal preoccupation with the strange, the uncanny and the grotesque, and with violence, deformity and exaggeration. This tendency is apparent in writers as diverse as Andrade, Arreola, Asturias, Borges, Cabrera Infante, Carpentier, Cortazar, Fuentes, Garcia Marquez, Lezama Lima, Marechal, Onetti, Puig, Roa Bastos, Rulfo, Sabato and Vargas Llosa.

Some of the examples of the magic realism literature that articulates trauma, categorised in topics are:

- Slavery (Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*, Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*);
- Colonialism (Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*); and
- The Holocaust (Joseph Skibell's *A Blessing on the Moon*, Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*).

Magical realist images are rich in sensory details, but they often rely on metaphors suggesting the horror of the events experienced by individual characters and lack any specific words denoting physical violence. For example, Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* writes about the far-reaching effects of violent events

even when experienced from a distance. Jose Arcadio, Ursula's son, is shot in his bedroom, and a drop of blood comes out under the door and travels through the entire village until it reaches Ursula's kitchen. The blood flows out of his right ear, and the absence of any wound on Jose Arcadio's body or of any murder weapon represents the lack of concrete details that usually characterises a traumatic memory. The symbol that survives Jose Arcadio's death is the smell of gunpowder impossible to remove from the corpse, yet another symbol of the invisibility and persistence of trauma.

In its attempt to grasp the metaphysical, religious, and mythical ontological background of worldly objects, magic realism enriches or undermines empirical reality (Arva, E. L., 2008). Hence, it creates new reality, the hyper-reality, in which writers, characters and readers together (re)live the traumatic events, trying to find redemption.

The Past is a Foreign Country: Personal Reflections on Writing “The Red River”

The Red River results from an idea that grew during the nineties as I experienced the deaths of friends in the Yugoslavian and Kosovo wars, social oppression under the dictator regime, poverty and claustrophobia from sanctions, and survival of the NATO bombings. During this time I was seeking for a way to communicate the legacy of trauma, the ways past traumatic events influence the present, and to determine whether there is a possibility to reach redemption in oppressed societies.

The path I chose was to depict lives stretching through three generations in Serbia. The historic periods – communist post-war Yugoslavia in the fifties and Serbia during the 1991-1999 wars – I chose due to the deep traumatic scars these periods left in the lives of the people of my home country.

The novel is still unfinished; it is still a first draft and some chapters are yet to be written. However, while reflecting on my writing journey and using the knowledge I gained through the literature review, a few points worth discussing here arose.

One is the role of the red river in the novel. First, the river has a strong metaphoric function, encapsulating a number of discursive issues. In the novel, I took the approach suggested by Vickroy (2002), that narratives about trauma may not be written through a first-person point of view. Therefore, I chose the river as my narrator, as people who suffer are not able to communicate their traumas because the pressure of the initial event blocked its complete registration and further narrativisation. The unknowability of the past is evident through characters unable to understand and represent their traumatic past, except through the distancing and fairy-tale-like river talk. As Leys (2000) argues, the experience of trauma, frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present. The novel, in order to design shifts across time and space, is structured in chapters which represent the stories of the Great Morava River and the West Morava River. The red river is also a metaphor for bloodlines, and the legacy of trauma, the way we inherit the traumas of our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on.

Another point is in the building of characters and their coping mechanisms in the face of trauma. Post-traumatic symptoms mentioned by Leys (2000) – flashbacks, nightmares, emotional numbing, depression, guilt, and autonomic arousal – are used to build characters in the novel. In “The Red River”, Vuk’s mother Jovana, after witnessing her mother – proclaimed as a white witch – being raped and slaughtered by partisans, has chronic nightmares, so strong and “real” that over the years her mother ages in her dreams, even giving birth to a child from the rape, although she was “really” dead. The appearance of Jovana’s half brother in her dreams reminds readers of the powerful consequences that the rape and murder had.

Conclusion: Is Redemption Possible in Damaged Societies?

Since traumatised people cannot change their past – as Vad der Kolk and Mc Farlane point out in *Traumatic Stress* – they must reconstruct their experiences in a personally meaningful way. But is this possible? How can people find meaning in bombing, massacre, and the rape and killing of women and children in wars? How can people who stay in socially and culturally damaged societies achieve redemption?

Now, as I live thousands of miles from my home country, these are the questions I have explored to try to find a meaning for my characters, but also to try to find a meaning for my past. And the questions remain unanswered. Instead, they are replaced with new questions, all over again.

Therefore, instead of a conclusion, I finish this exegesis with the dilemmas posed by Vickroy (2002):

“What does one generation pass on to another? Do they pass on oppression, constrictive coping mechanisms, or methods of resistance? What is the consequence of a destructive past to both individuals and the culture at large if historical traumas are not sufficiently acknowledged or submitted to a working-through or critical re-evaluation process? Or is there even a possibility of legacy if families are damaged or destroyed by unrelenting oppression or dispossession?”

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Thesis:

The Red River

By Ana Ilic

In the day's first and last light, molten bronze flows in Morava, the largest and the most meandering river in Serbia. When the sun hangs high in the sky the river emits golden glow, while the moon covers the riverbed with silvery sheets.

Some days, the Morava turns red, drenching the soil so deep that pale roses and lilies in nearby gardens drink to a deep blush. Rain take on a scarlet tone and the water in wells becomes the colour of rust. On such "crimson days" people along the river banks collect water from wells in midnight, their eyes closed, believing that whatever force possessed the river, it can't pass onto them that way.

During these days, fishermen plundering the waters – either those of the Great Morava or its feeders, the Southern and Western Morava – come home with no catchments as the river becomes so warm that catfish and carp often float cooked. They bring empty sacks but mouths full of stories.

"The damn river can talk!" The oldest of them said to his wife, his pale face merging into white hair.

He tried to repeat what he had heard from the river, his hands shaking. While his wife didn't understand a single word of the story, she made sure that soon enough everyone in the village knew about the river's magic.

"The river talks about the stories of some people that used to live here."

"The river carries the history of this place."

"The river knows the secrets of this village."

Collective apathy of the locals, that reflected river's lethargy, was broken for a moment: everybody gushed to the spot where the old fisherman kept his boat and leaned their heads above the water, but the river's undertone was discernible only to a few of the more aurally sensitive souls.

Two hundred metres wide in some parts and as much as 10 metres deep, the river, notorious for its flooding, undulates like a side-winding snake. It has changed its course many times, swallowing crops and entire households, and leaving behind abandoned river bends which become small lakes, Moravišta.

After World War II, communist politicians decided to discipline this giant water-snake. Hard work in the mid-'60s on all three streams created a series of reservoirs and cut through many meanderings, straightening and shortening the river's course. The Morava would stop flooding, flow more quickly, and become navigable, politicians promised. But it didn't.

Today, the Morava is only navigable for three kilometres near its mouth. It floods regularly and its bed is still elevated. And some people still hear stories when fishing where the waters meet. While listening to the stories, some fishermen forget to eat and drink; they remain in their vessels for days, their ears tuned to the water, their eyes wide. They are often returning to the river, feeling their way through silence to catch the river's tales. Craving the Morava's sounds like numb people, they are sure it is the same for all living in Serbia: it is stories that keep them going.

Today, on 30 May 2000, a figure was standing on the bridge over the Morava and slowly moving his left foot towards the edge. He had a book in his right hand, his left hand glued to his torso. He needed to write a paragraph about his life. The bridge seemed the best place for that.

"The writer was born in Varvarin and finished high school in Krusevac." Was that enough material for his first novel? He did not want to reveal anything else from his life. He did not think that he had a proper life for biography.

Leaning a book over his knees, he wrote on the first page:

“I have not given consent to being born. Nobody asked me if I wanted this life. It was given to me in the way membership in the communist party was given to people: misleadingly promising good times.

I have not given consent to my name, Vuk. Orthodox religion. Dream-void, eyes-opened sleeping. Foretelling through colours. Pale skin. A mark under my right armpit.

I have not given consent to her dead body visiting me.

I have not given consent to him dieing.

I have not given consent to Morava turning red.”

Leaving the book next to his right foot, he looked at the River below him. It turned red. His left foot was in the air. The River whispered again, whispered what could be summarized as Vuk’s biography. If only someone could squeeze it in a paragraph.

It has been widely known in Varvarin, a small village in the south of Serbia, that Vuk was born contrasting the ordinary flow of the village life. The legs of his mother Jovana opened to give him a way out when all other villagers closed their shutters against the evening chill. It was not only this unfortunate timing of his birth – being in twilight when dying seemed a more natural thing to do – that signalled Vuk's dissonance with everything that surrounded him. Motionless and quiet, he hid the signs of a long and difficult birth, as if his body did not come out of a torn sack of Jovana's body. His neat and calm face did not belong to the bloated, freckled face of his mother, streaked with sweat and bordered with limp, greasy hair.

A conflict between Vuk and the world rose over time, the dough sprinkled by the yeast of mutual incomprehension. The more he tried to resemble his family, the village people and the whole communist society of Yugoslavia, his difference became more visible. The only pale-skinned in Aleksic family, he would spend days basking in the sun on Morava's coast, but he would only manage to get complexion of an apricot with freckles. In that suntanned society, Vuk's pale skin reminded people of their country's aristocratic past and their noble neighbours from the west, both of which they now wanted to forget. And he still differed.

The vastness of his village – the vulgarly flamboyant flowers, the fields excessively loaded with crops, the too large river – just emphasised Vuk's short and thin figure.

Destined to be named Vuk – which meant Wolf – even before he was born, he inhaled all that came with that animal namesake in his first lungful of air. So Vuk came with an abnormally strong hearing and sense of smell.

The three women allowed in the room – the midwife, Jovana's mother-in-law, and her best friend Zora – circled bunches of basil dipped in holy water above his forehead three times, making the sign of the cross, to bring him good luck and courage. However, despite these good wishes and the serene aroma of basil that lingered in the bedroom, in the months to come Vuk could not sleep. Squeezed between his parents, he felt their breathing rhythms: Jovana's shallow, fast and uneven breast movements contrasted with Petar's monotonous and long inhales and exhales.

One night, when Jovana's breathing became steady, Vuk concentrated his mind to return to his mother's womb, trying to decompose his cells and inject himself into that soft, secluded place of his former life. He continued this every night, until his powers became uncontrollable and his bored mind, unable to rest, colonised his mother's dreams with monstrous pictures of the half-animal and half-human Vuk. On such nights, Jovana woke frequently, sweating and shaking, to touch his head, hands and fingers in the darkness. "Nothing is wrong with you, honey," Jovana whispered in his ears, but Vuk already accepted his strangeness.

Over time, Vuk tried to compensate for his nightly torturous effect on his mother with angelic daily manners. Realising that a mark, which appeared under his left armpit on his first birthday, worried Jovana, he raised his left arm only when she was not looking at him, keeping it glued to his torso whenever his mother was near. This eventually became a habit so strong that he kept his left hand in a pocket for the rest of his life. And as he refused to use his left arm, it grew thinner and weaker than the right and hung from his shoulder like the dehydrated branch of a tree. On his first day in school, he was given the nickname Lefthander. His schoolmates used whatever they could to make him use the hand, from burning his arm with a lighter, to pricking it with their mathematical compasses. But no matter what they did, no matter how extreme the pain was, Vuk the Lefthander never lifted his hand: it always remained in his pocket, a lifeless part of his body.

His spirit, his mind, his heart, his soul, everything in him grotesquely projected itself into Jovana's dreams for three years. On the night before his third birthday he eventually drifted to sleep. His first dream was of a starless night sky, an endless, blinding black expanse. His hearing was so strong that his ears easily caught the slothful flow of the Morava River a few kilometres down the road and the wind-charm-like tinkling of the leaves in the orchard behind the house.

He woke happy: he had gained control over his mind and knew that his ugly visions would not stalk his mother anymore. But he did not know that in dreams, a sky devoid of stars means death. And if it was the end, then the beginning was in 1950, when his mother Jovana arrived in Petar's village by the train that was always late.

*

As the train whistled into the last day of summer, Petar looked at his silver pocket watch. "We are on time, love," he said to Jovana, sitting opposite him. "You nervous?"

"A little bit," she said, hiding her eyes behind a black lace fan. Jovana's silence was a sudden deviance from her previous vigorous chat: she had entertained people in the carriage satirizing a former Stalinist, the protagonist of Kovačević's new play *The Balkan Spy*; she debated whether the recently inaugurated system of workers' self-management presented an ideological challenge to Soviet-type real-socialism; she talked about the comeback of a little black dress to a fashion stage. A red pocket mirror in her hands caught her complexion, ashen beneath the heavily applied blusher.

"My father recorded the time of the train's arrival every day since the beginning of this year," said Petar.

"And?"

"If his calculations are correct, in these eight months from the beginning of 1950, the Belgrade–Stalać train was on average overdue by 28 minutes and 36 seconds."

"You two have too much time on your hands," Jovana said. "I'm not feeling well." She put her head through the half-opened window and into the rushing air.

The summer warmth had faded a little, leaving the air crisp and full of sound: the croaking of frogs, the singing of peasants, and the distant squeaks of pigs. The rails curved away from the Great Morava River to cut through furrows. Sunflowers' heads leaned towards Jovana and ripe pumpkins stood between corn stalks. In the maize fields, peasants bent under wicker baskets; they tore corn from between razor-sharp leaves and threw it in the baskets, their heads hidden in straw hats. Now and then, Jovana saw old bronzed women sitting in piles of white beans, opening pods and pulling out the little hearts. A few workers in the field stood up as the train passed, eyes shielded from the sun with their palms. Some waved to acquaintances. Nobody knew the woman with the black lace fan.

As they passed a sign for Varvarin, which means 'barbarian' – a legacy of the Turks who had burnt all the houses and killed everyone in the village – Jovana became even paler. She hugged the suitcase inherited from her mother, wishing to further compress the 20 kilos of her life. Her entire baggage consisted of a black silk dress with white strips, a dozen shirts and skirts, red sandals with thin heels, a few woolly turtlenecks, a hounds-tooth coat, a crocheted tablecloth, and a wrinkled letter written by someone who had decided to serve God in the Holy Mother monastery because she was marrying another man. At her left side, her Singer sewing machine click-clacked softly.

In contrast to the 100 kilometres of beige and barren hills above her village in the north, this place had a barbaric richness: the flowers were vulgarly flamboyant, the fields excessively loaded with crops, and the river too large.

The train slowed then settled beside a small pool of people on the station platform. Out of the carriage, Jovana realised how Petar stood out from the crowd: he took his hat off with the elegance of a sovereign rather than a railway controller, and waved it towards a skinny man with a black moustache.

“This is Jovana, my fiancé. Mirko is my father’s assistant, his grand help. You are, Mirko, aren’t you?” Petar slapped him on the back, smiling.

“The mayor is capable of doing everything on his own. I just help him with small things.”

“Petar told me good things about you, Mirko. It is a pleasure meeting you.”

“The pleasure is mine, comrade Jovana. Now give me your bags. The house is 10 minutes walk,” Mirko said.

Leaving the station, Jovana, Petar and Mirko ran into a quintet of gypsies bearing three trumpets and two kettledrums. On Petar’s nod they began playing folk music. Players’ cheeks distended into brown balloons, bloated lips vibrated against instruments’ mouthpieces and the gold of the trumpets intensified the glistening of white shirts against the musicians’ dark skin. The little band jiggled behind the three people as they walked along the gravel path – a short silhouette caught between two taller, trailing stretched shadows.

Varvarin village, appended by a bridge to a small town of the same name, was a cluster of houses squeezed between the Great Morava River and the railway, the big houses as white as goose eggs. It was a universe complete and enclosed – a school; a doctor’s clinic; a shop that sold rat poison, detergent and KLN fertilizer; a church and the House of Culture, where people gathered to sing and dance. It was dusty these days, the air polluted by “post-war construction and revitalisation” – the big words often used with little idea of meaning. The restorative dust swirled through the whole country and covered its face, now washed of filthy aristocracy, with the candid powder of proletariat work. And people, in mimicry with their surroundings, became dust themselves, grey under the sun and invisible during night.

When Petar’s house appeared on the horizon, asphalt took over from gravel, smooth and shining like the lard on Jovana’s childhood bread. The road was absolutely clear to Jovana; the two people standing in front of the gate were hazy. She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, everything was outlined in sharp detail. The music stopped. She took a deep breath and focused, slowly moving her eyes upwards from the ground beneath her in-laws, counting as she went.

One. Bogomir’s enormous feet in slippers. Later, she would hear the local anecdote about Bogomir the partisan who had been shot in a toe by Germans. He had cut the toe off with a pocket knife, rolled it in a piece of his shirt, and returned to the battleground. *Two.* Emilia’s right foot covered by mud and strands of straw. *Three.* The old woman’s wrinkled legs protruding from a coffee-brown skirt. *Four.* Bogomir’s belt dark with wear, buckled into the last hole. *Five.* His hands, which matched the size of the feet. Sharp edges of a grey shirt, big shoulders. *Six.* On the globe of Emilia’s face, framed by a skirt-matching scarf, the crooked mountain of her nose, the melancholy lakes of her eyes, and the deep streams of her wrinkles. *Seven.* Thick brown moustache with several grey hairs. *Eight.* A sharp nose, dominant in Bogomir’s narrow face. *Nine.* His eyes. Shallow, flat, plain. The pupils tiny, almost invisible. *Ten.* Her heart racing.

After she stepped inside the yard, scenes shifted rapidly before Jovana’s eyes, as if on a movie track: smiling – hand shaking – three kisses on each cheek – the welcoming –

dipping a piece of bread in salt – drinking quince *rakija* and toasting the couple's health and future children – gypsies playing music – dancing in the yard – another shot of brandy – hands in the air – scarf and hat on the ground.

A black cat, Pepito, lay on the scarf, while chickens and geese ran around the sweaty people and jumped on their feet. Neighbours crowded around the house, clapping calloused palms and singing stridently, adding to the cacophony of poultry and musicians. Two gypsies leapt onto the table, the rest onto chairs while the villagers formed a circle, their hands joined, and danced the *kolo*. Motionless above the waist, her legs moving two steps forwards and one step back, Emilia danced with great virtuosity and yelled: "Ai, ai, ai, my son's getting married!" as the wheel of human bodies circled faster and faster.

Mirko drank another glass of *rakija* and smashed the glass against the house. Pieces of glass scattered. A shard sliced into the comb of a rooster, cutting it in two. The rooster blinked, motionless, as blood dripped over its eyes; it didn't move while the cat played with the piece of comb, not stirring even when the cat ate the bloody morsel. The neighbours ran away, yelling "Bad sign, bad sign," but Petar's father calmly put a pile of money in the largest trumpet, directed the band towards the gate with his index finger, hugged Jovana and said: "Welcome to your new home."

Inside, Petar took Jovana on a tour of the house, repeating after they had looked into each room: "It's all yours now, sweetheart, it's all yours."

In the first room, where they would sleep, a bed stood close to the window, by a table big enough to sit six people. In the corner was a small desk where they put her sewing machine. Jovana took the crocheted tablecloth made by her grandmother and put it on the big table; she had always loved its pattern of grapes and vine leaves. Next, they visited Petar's parents' room and the rooms for children and guests – each spacious.

"Two more families can easily live here. Who cleans all these rooms?" Jovana asked.

"Don't worry, it will not be you. My mother wakes up at five, she can't sleep longer, and she cleans the house every morning. We'll just clean our room."

The biggest was the living room on the ground floor. Above the fireplace hung a pristine portrait of Marshal Tito, which did not surprise Jovana, as almost every household was watched over by a photograph of the father of new Yugoslavia in a light-blue greatcoat or a white uniform, his luminous eyes fixed on the horizon. What surprised her was that the tribute to her father-in-law was *above* Tito's picture, adding significance to the already loaded letters inscribed with black ink on burgundy paper: *Bogomir Aleksić, Mayor of Varvarin, Honourable Member of the Communist Party of SFR Yugoslavia, September 1948.*

"In my father's years of office, a part of the village was given asphalt and electricity. He managed it despite the party's discharge from the Cominform for opposing the Soviet policy," Petar said.

The tour of the house, the *rakijas* and the surrealism of the whole day combined to make Jovana dizzy; she had barely slept the night before. She lay down for a while. She did not dream so much as enter a trance in which her family appeared. The face of her father, who everybody called Tsintsar because of his wife's origins, emerged from the white cloud of his hair; her six-year-old half-brother Ugly with his hands full of marbles; her mother Lepa, which meant Gorgeous, came naked, her grey hair in a bun, the triangle between her legs sprouting a bush which filled the room and blocked the window. Many nights, when she was dreaming, Jovana went to her parent's house, returning to that smashed world of her childhood, and her family themselves often came to her, but this was the first time they had visited her in this house, and she got up, sweaty and shivering. She quickly changed her clothes, peeling off the lurid dream as she stripped off her dress, and went downstairs.

On the ground floor, a door slightly ajar pricked her curiosity. When she peeped in, she found a storeroom full of preserves for the winter – multicoloured jams, marmalades, *slatko* and *ajvar*, and tomato juice in bottles. Cucumber and cauliflower pickles were in large jars; yellow, red and green capsicums in small ones. A sack full of white kidney beans hung above a plastic barrel of *turšija*. Herbs, arranged with a great attention to colour and grain – yellow St John wort flowers, crushed bay leaves, dry parsley, pepper and ground paprika – emitted the smells of her childhood home. On the shelf below this carnival of colours, next to a jar with white powder marked by a skull and crossbones, plain jars with the names Marin Aleksić, Milan Aleksić and Dobrila Jurin on labels stood in a solemn line. Jovana closed the door and went into the yard.

On the lawn in front of the house, the three Aleksićs were drinking Turkish coffee and talking quietly.

“Come on, Jovana! We’re waiting for you,” Bogomir beckoned her.

“The coffee’s still warm,” said Emilia.

“We’re finalising the wedding plans,” Petar added.

Jovana sat at the table, sipped from the cup of coffee, and said: “Well, what have the three wise heads come up with?”

She smiled, despite feeling that the whole day had fallen on her like an unexpected shower. Inhaling the coffee aroma and the smell of Bogomir’s cigarettes, she also tried to breathe this place in and make it part of her.

While the fingers of her father-in-law, whom she would call Papa from now on, moved as swiftly and sensuously as the mayor himself, playing with everything in the vicinity, Emilia’s shaking hands took a piece of chocolate cake from a plate on the table. Smashing it between her fingers, letting the crumbs fall, she sang: “Oh my sweet cake, life is fake, my sweet cake. My divine dust makes it honest, my divine dust.” The sudden strength of her voice was amplified by the void of her eyes; she lifted her head towards the sky.

Was this how the old woman changed? Jovana wondered, recalling the rumours about Petar’s mother she had heard a long time ago, the tales about transformations in which Emilia entered the world of the insects, sharpening her sensory organs with the assimilation of the eyes of bees and antennae of grasshoppers.

“Take her inside!” Bogomir said to his son, punching the table with his fist. “And lock the door behind her!”

“Come on, Mum, you are going to take a nap.” Petar took the stiff body in his arms, which grew wet from the saliva leaking from his mother.

Jovana did not say a word; she collected the dishes from the table as fast as she could, thinking about the injustice of her father-in-law’s name, which meant One Who Is At Peace With God. It was obvious to her that this atheist’s aversion to his own name was nothing compared to his disgust with God himself and with the people whose faith had endured until they died. Death had only one face, Jovana read it from his eyes, and it was not the one that acknowledged Jesus, Mohammed, or Buddha, or whoever was up in the sky. It was the blank face that One Who Isn’t At Peace With God saw on his fellow partisans, chetniks, and the Germans that died during the war. The mayor did not recognise the celestial rays that shone from the faces of these people, Jovana thought, while right now, only a few metres away in the locked room, his wife was probably searching for the very source of those rays.

Later that night, as the young couple shared a bed for the first time, Jovana asked: “What’s the jar with the white powder in the storeroom? Some kind of a poison?”

"It's arsenic. Last year, we found more than 10 rats in the attic. We keep it there in case they molest us again." Petar hugged Jovana and added: "Hush, hush, let's sleep now, today was a long day."

But her heart pounding was loud and quick and she asked again:

"Who's Dobrila? And Marin and Milan? I saw their names in..."

"In the storeroom, I know. Marin was my parents' first son, who died when two years old. Milan was my grandfather, he died a couple of years previously, and Dobrila was Emilia's mother who passed when she gave birth to Emilia. May God keep them in his holy kingdom."

"But why in the room with the food?"

"My mother spends some time talking with the dead every day. She thought their souls needed to eat too, and we didn't argue. It was easier just to put the ashes there."

Silence fell, louder than the gypsies' trumpets.

*

During the year after her first night in the house, Jovana's family did not appear either in her dreams or in her memory. She took pleasure in sewing, crocheting and ordinary household activities. However, on her 21st birthday, after the married couple had retreated to their room and Petar had fallen asleep, Jovana's breathing became erratic, her body shaking. Nightmares had haunted her for seven years, yet over time she had learnt to forget them before she woke.

This time, as always, the night the 13-year-old Jovana saw her mother for the last time played out again in her dream. A pot with potato stew was cooking on the wood stove; Jovana and her father waited for her mother, who had gone to the river. Every Sunday night, in a remnant of her Tsintsar origins, Lepa practised white magic naked in the river. Shrewd businessmen, Tsintsars were generally wealthy, and Lepa had brought huge financial capital to her husband along with her enchanting skills. She came from the Vlach minority, concentrated on the border with Romania but, although she knew Vlachian, she communicated in Serbian. She claimed that she was able to see if someone had lost the future or past; she could "unlock" an infertile man's sperm and make a couple conceive children; she could make a thief admit to the crime. "Corn grains, bean seeds, or a thread from the garment worn by a person would help to peep at his or her future," she used to say. She did not demand payment and helped anyone who needed her services.

In Jovana's dream, Lepa the white witch went to the river carrying a bag, the length of nine nails, made of goat hair; in the bag were nine barley grains, nine corn grains, nine threads from the nine kinds of fibre, and one silver coin. She took her chestnut wand and cut water with it. In Vlachian, she listed the things she had brought in the bag, and added: "As many drops of water splash, as many devils destroyed."

Jovana's mother was brought back to the house naked, carried by two partisans. As the stew boiled, the two men took turns with her; while one penetrated Lepa the quiet witch, the other pointed a rifle at Jovana and her father.

"Your Tsintsar whore fucks well," the soldier with the rifle said to Jovana's father. "You are lucky Germans didn't take her. You also Tsintsar? Wanna suck it?"

"No, I am a Serb, I don't have Tsintsar blood," he trembled.

By the time the soldiers had given their spermatozoa compliments to the Vlach witch, thick smoke and the smell of burnt potatoes were filling the room. The red trail that came

from Lepa's naked body became visible only after the soldiers had left and the house aired; it reached Jovana's bare feet via the herringbone parquet lines, soaking oak squares and turning them into mahogany, designing a new mosaic in the floor. During her life, the white witch spoke about vampires as if they were a common phenomenon, but she did not have much to say about the devil, only that it was some sort of power, a fear, which was not necessarily evil, but could do much harm.

That scene with the burning stew had repeated in Jovana's dreams so vividly that she could not breathe, suffocated by the smoke and the smell of burning potatoes, but she had never dreamt how her father had been taken to the mental institution, how their property had been nationalised, and how she had moved in with her grandmother.

It seemed that Jovana's dream had a calendar of its own: the events were the same, but her parents aged as time passed and Lepa continued to live on in her nights. Even her half-brother, whom she called Ugly, was born nine months after that night and grew up in her dreamscape.

Jovana's family vanished with the short, sharp scream which wrenched her eyes open. Petar's eyes remained closed, his breathing rhythmic, while her sweat formed an image on the sheet in the shape of her body.

*

The scream of his wife appeared to Petar as the sound of a distant train approaching the station. His eyes closed, he felt along Jovana's wet, vibrating body – the delicate and sophisticated tremor of the rails below the train of his body. Sliding on her, his locomotive accelerated, sturdily pulsating from the rush of blood, penetrating the station of Jovana, who let out another scream, this time lower and smothered.

When he was a child, Petar, son of the railway controller Bogomir Aleksić, experienced train departures as the pain of leaving his mother's womb. The train arrivals were like a return. When he was 14, he ejaculated for the first time in the toilet of the railway station, while standing on the wooden chair he had taken from the hallway to watch through a window the arrival of the train from France. It was the enchanting potency of the trains, those first sexual memories, and most of all, the influence of his father, which resulted in Petar's inheritance of Bogomir's job.

Now, with his wife, it happened again: their child was conceived from his train-fantasy ejaculation, and he wondered whether his passion for trains was infused into the baby's heart through coitus. After he had released his juices, Petar lay empty, unable to fall asleep for hours. In his mind, he was checking the wagon inventory: how many passengers arrived by the Belgrade-Stalać train; what luggage they carried; who waited for whom at the station; who came alone, nervously reading newspapers, looking busy with some bold column in the politics section, so as not to reveal that nobody was there to meet them.

*

One morning, while the men were at work, the two women drank Turkish coffee in the courtyard, the younger complaining to Emilia, whom she now called Mummy, about her frightening hallucinations.

"I'll show you something," Jovana whispered as she took Vuk in her arms. "I can't stand it anymore. Didn't close my eyes the whole night. I had these nightmares about my little sweetheart, and now look at this!" She pointed to the baby's left armpit. A stain had emerged, the size and the colour of a walnut.

Emilia fetched olive-green binoculars from the house, the ones Bogomir had taken from a German captive, and they took turns inspecting the mark through its magnifiers. Then Jovana brought out a crinkled map of Yugoslavia from the wall in her bedroom, put it on the table, and placed the sleeping Vuk aside it.

"That's it! My baby was born with a map of our country under his arm! Look at this head, it is Slovenia, and this, this belly – Bosnia and Herzegovina – here we are, here is Kosovo, here is Macedonia."

She placed Vuk on the white apron Mirko had bought in Belgrade. A white linen umbrella, also bought by Mirko, shielded the baby boy from the sun.

"It's a premonition, my dear. Let me take a look at your cup," said Emilia, as she watched the river through the binoculars. "It's going to flood us again. Morava. It's rising."

Jovana, the white witch's daughter, who did not possess the gift or curse of special sight, took the last sip of coffee, leaving behind the sediment. She covered the cup with the saucer, turned it upside-down and towards herself, and swirled the cup around three times. They were quiet for a while, allowing the coffee grounds to dry.

Jovana put her baby to her breast and, while feeding him, thought about the difficulties of adapting to life in this house of secrets, in this village barbarically devoid of acceptance. Whatever she wore crossed a line the village women lacked the courage to approach. Although they longed for frivolity and desirable clothes that did not look like a military uniform, they didn't dare be different. Many wore plain beige hemp dresses, some had grotty singlets and skirts, others dressed neatly but without imagination – in white blouses and dark blue zigzagged skirts.

Jovana's cuisine also stood out, as some of the meals she prepared nobody around the Morava River had tasted before. The first and only time she served goat's cheese soaked in honey with sour cherries, only her Mummy and two pigs were able to eat it. When a neighbour nervously put a piece of the cheese in her mouth, she had run to the courtyard to vomit. Since that unfortunate incident, Bogomir had forbidden the making of "claptrap" meals and forced Jovana to return to traditional Yugoslavian food, such as bean stew and steamed cabbage with pork fat.

During her three years in the village, Jovana the seamstress set herself up as a doyenne of foreign influences with the first issue of the *Burda Fashion* magazine and several *Vogue* magazines Bogomir obtained through his communist networks. From these magazines the village women learned about fashion trends and new cosmetics in the Western world, although mascara, lipstick and foundation had not been a part of their daily lives. From Jovana, whose red lipstick, they gossiped, gave her the appearance of a prostitute, they heard about the German company Nivea, which had launched a new facial cream in a blue package. This news triggered the Varvarin women to attach the name of the company to that of the seamstress; her creamy skin and a rumour that her father had collaborated with Germans confirmed the nickname's suitability, and she was often called Nivea the seamstress, or just Nivea.

Even when her husband's surname and her sewing skills eventually opened all doors to her, she still felt suffocated by the pettiness and prudery of the village women, who came

to Nivea as customers, but never as friends. Her only friend was Zora, Mirko's fiancé, but Jovana was never sure whether her closeness was genuine or driven by the force of Mirko's loyalty to her new Papa.

Jovana moved the baby from one elevated crimson nipple to another, while Emilia sat with her eyes closed, her hands on her bosom, saliva slipping through her lips. She was aware of Emilia's isolated world, in which Pepito the cat – green with invisible wings – fled to other villages and cities, even once travelling to another country, coming back months later with viruses and bacteria, and the smells and tastes of strange people. She heard from her mother-in-law about the language of animals: from the numb words of this language, Emilia had learnt about a thunderstorm that was going to hit the village. A pigeon had recently come from the south and told her about an earthquake due in Montenegro in a year, so strong it would divide the Adriatic Sea from the Mediterranean and crumble the mountains into sand. Emilia wrote a letter in her own language, burned it in the fireplace, and set the words free to fly towards the Adriatic Sea, to find her alter ego who lived among the rocks of Montenegro and who would understand and beg nature to have mercy.

Jovana too believed that Emilia's words travelled through space and time, and trusted that in the year to come no earthquake would hit Montenegro. She also knew that it was not difficult for Emilia to learn the language, as the words revealed themselves to her: when the old woman saw cats, for example, she saw the letters *morokos* in their fur, while *kuku* was written on the rooster's feathers. On the leaves of the plum trees in the orchard behind the house she saw *sokolo* and the name *risili* hung from the walnut trees.

Jovana yearned for her own sanctuary like Emilia's, where she could speak a secret language and follow her own private rules of living. But it wasn't to be and she woke Emilia, gave her a handkerchief and the coffee cup.

"Mummy, we have to hurry up, it's almost noon! Wipe your face, you drooled again. You okay?"

"I just have some slight pain in my stomach, but don't worry, I'm well. Now, let's see what's happening with you," Emilia said.

The two women leaned towards each other and the coffee reader said: "I see a reversed mushroom. Frustration."

"I'm frustrated every night when this little troublemaker cries his eyes out. Is there something on Petar's side of the cup?"

Jovana's husband's future spread before the coffee reader's eyes, divided by two rivers that flowed from the monkey's eye, which was explained as a coming separation caused by a deception.

"There's a road, but it begins from the coffin. Not good, tch-tch-tch-tch-tch. Let me see your heart now."

Jovana was asked to "open the heart", so she placed her right thumb at the bottom of the cup and twisted it slightly clockwise, leaving an impression the coffee reader interpreted as trouble in her near future.

"There are one, two... four," – Emilia pointed out white circles in the cup as she counted – "seven... eight... 12 pearls hanging above your head, my dear, from your broken necklace. It means loss that lasts for 12 days, months or years."

Jovana's spine straightened, flowing with the electricity of these words, so strong that it might pulverise her bones. It was the rhythm, the tum-tum beat of the old woman's words that made her believe in their prophetic power.

"Komo miriskata domilina stora," Emilia asked birds for help. She listened to the chirping and saw in it a warning that Jovana should be aware of a huge male figure and that she should not give her baby to anybody.

“There’s no way somebody will take him from me.” Jovana stood up and collected the coffee cups. “Let’s go inside. We have to prepare lunch.”

So many jobs had to be done before the men came home from their work. Jovana also had to finish a wedding dress for Zora: the rehearsal was scheduled for the next morning. So she forgot about the separating rivers and the threatening man; she put the baby to bed, turned the radio to low, and ran behind the house to pick young carrots and spinach for lunch. On the way back, she saw Emilia sitting in the front of the house, her eyes again at the binoculars.

The day was calm and the animals were quiet. “This river will flood us again,” Emilia said to Pepito, stroking him in her arms. “We have to do something about this.” Then she whispered into the cat’s ear, the cat meowed and the old woman nodded, accepting the wisdom.

Placing Vuk on her breasts, Jovana felt time fragments to move in tiny chunks, smaller than seconds. Then for an instant it all stopped – Bogomir sat motionless in his office five kilometres from the house, his mouth open to dictate a letter to Mirko, a wax figure, pen in one hand, a notebook in the other. Petar stood frozen, the whistle between his lips giving silent permission to a train straining to leave the station. Emilia, her arms wide open, her teeth peeping from her mouth, her single soundless note an ode to ants and other insects, perched like a statue in the courtyard. Birds hung motionless above permanent flowers – to allow Jovana to hug her offspring, and let him suck life from her bosoms. Then Vuk gulped and it all moved again.

*

During Jovana’s pregnancy and in the years after their son was born, the routine of Petar’s railway job became unbearable. He eagerly waited for 3 o’clock to run home and immerse himself in the new world of parenthood – not so much as a father to Vuk as to his other newborn, a novel. The more his writing progressed, the less he felt the need for contact with his own blood; his sense of family became fragile, easily broken by the breeze of words.

The passion for words and the idea to eternalise his mother’s life in a book had been growing in Petar for a long time; he acquired an Imperial typewriter, model 58. Once he began writing, Petar Aleksić could not stop; euphoric blush covered him every time he approached the typewriter and words flooded the page.

A week before Vuk’s third birthday, a torrent of thoughts gave Petar the inspiration he needed to make a start on the book. He left his job before closing time, and caught a bus to visit a library in Kruševac.

Twenty kilometres away, it was the closest library to his house. Friendship with the blonde librarian, a recent graduate from the Russian literature department of a faculty of philology, was a ticket for taking more books than allowed and prolonging the due date for return. The librarian’s daring reminded him of his mother and a sophistication she wore with her good looks reminded him of his wife. She could be only a couple of years younger than the Emilia of his earliest memories, barely a few years older than Jovana when they married.

She was the only one, apart from his wife, who knew about the Frankenstein-like nature of his novel. Although Blonde, as he called the librarian whose real name was Elena, thought the eclecticism of his composition bizarre, they spent hours together searching the shelves for just the right books.

Jovana told him once that his words were cancer-like metastasis fed by the healthy tissues of selected novels. He created his Frankenstein, the book monster, by appropriating sentences, and sometimes even paragraphs, from various novels, and implanting them into his book; the changes were limited to characters' specifics and geographical facts. The multi-headed dragon of his novel reflected the styles of many writers: the existentialist Camus, the Italian semiotician Eco, a wide array of Russian writers – Tolstoy, Gorky and Nabokov. What to the untrained eye of a casual reader seemed to be long Kafkaque sentences that delivered an unexpected impact just before the full stop, were indeed Kafka's originals adapted for Emilia's story.

"This is a breach of copyright, using sentences from other books," Jovana reacted when he told her about the project.

"Well, first, I'm not a writer, I don't have the skills," Petar said defensively.

"Tch-tch-tch-tch. *I don't have the skills.* Excuses, excuses."

"And second, um, don't you think that everything has already been written? All the words have been used at least a billion times before. Why should I do everything from the beginning, when the real masters have done the job already?"

"Who are you but the shadow of the writer? And where's the satisfaction then?" Jovana's voice grew strident.

"It will come from doing a montage; that's an art in itself, like making a mosaic of small broken pieces of mirrors, the mirrors of illusory lives that could be reflected in my mother's."

"The mirrors? The illusory lives? What are you talking about, Petar?"

"It's like being a God who creates a perfect creature, taking DNA from the best representatives. Understand?"

"Yes."

An affirmation and a nod from Jovana was enough to finish the conversation. It was not a genuine acceptance, but Petar managed to extract encouragement from it, which gave him confidence to carry on.

He believed that writing a story was the same as directing trains. The departure, the arrival spots, and the main intersections were defined, the traffic signs were respected, but yet the voyage itself was a surprise. It was unknown whether the day would be sunny or wet, whether the nondescript life of some Karenina-inspired woman would end smashed by the speeding train. Thus the book was structured in four chapters that covered the episodes of Emilia's life: her birth and childhood, married life, the children dead and living, and the history of her condition. Her daily habits, the infectious love she spread, a faith too strong for her tiny body, were left to be written about later. By day, as his public son grew, his private child, the novel, formed its spine, eyes, legs and arms.

The Book, a title indicating his ambition to create the book of all books, began with a family tree spread over his mother's ancestors. He used the opening from Nabokov's *Ada*, "All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike," a deliberate misquoting of the famous first line of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Petar ended his book with Tolstoy's original: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," as if a distorting lens was slipped between the first and the last sentences of his novel.

Even excerpts from *Roots* by Ćosić, a writer close to Petar through place of birth and a love for communism, found their places on pages that talked about his mother's childhood. Many years later, when Ćosić's intimacy with Tito led to his short presidency of Yugoslavia, Petar thought about the appropriateness of using his work to depict Emilia's life. His doubts rose during the late nineties; he despised Ćosić's political endurance and the praise all ruling

parties bestowed on him. However, that was the risk inherent in the writing – the nailed words were the worst witnesses that could speak against the writer – and Petar was willing to pay the price of being remarkable.

Emilia's character was mainly based on Anna Karenina: a confident, intelligent, empathetic beauty, a paragon of all things good. Petar knew his mother also had Karenina's only blemish – the millstone of an unresponsive husband married to his government job. He hoped Emilia Aleksić would be interpreted by readers, like her literary precedent, as a parable of the difficulty of being honest to oneself while society accepted nothing but falsity.

The day he left work early, he got an idea how to fill gaps that Karenina had left in Emilia's character. He entered the square, grey library, its facade suggesting a prison rather than a collection of literature. It was empty, as it almost always was: Petar had met nobody but a querulous old man whose family had been killed by chetniks in the war. It seemed to him that people, busy with rebuilding the country and tired from their post-war burdens, were not willing to read about others' destinies. He himself did not read the fictional lives of others out of interest, but only to create the replica of his mother's life on paper.

"What are you after, Petar?" Blonde mechanically took his library card, although she knew his identification number, seven-zero-four-six-five, by heart.

"Hesse's *Glass Bead Game*. This morning, it came to me. I must find a description of the game. I think my mother was playing her own game while we all thought she was mad."

"Hm, interesting. Okay, mister writer, Hesse it is."

This time Petar waited for Blonde in the reading area. He liked the structure of this building, which satisfied the basic principles of a well-organised library: a clear division of the key functional groups and a quick transfer of material to the user. The library space was divided into stock and reading areas linked by aisles. The book stock was categorised into domestic and foreign literature, then by genre and publishing period.

Elena appeared with an old copy of *The Glass Bead Game*, the dusty covers enveloped with a melon-coloured paper and, as Petar swiftly scanned its pages, she asked: "I don't understand, why you don't take her to a doctor? I mean, your mother."

"She's not sick. It's more that she has these short periods when she disappears. And she has an odd language of her own, but she doesn't use it all the time. Sometimes she sings and talks about bizarre things. At times she laughs or cries without reason, from time to time her eyes spin and her tongue stiffens. But apart from a recent minor stomach pain, she is all right," Petar said.

"You've just described symptoms that need a doctor."

"No, my father would kill me if I took her to a doctor. It's our secret," Petar said, reading the book.

Suddenly, his eyes widened, and he pointed at a paragraph.

"Yes, as I suspected! My mother plays the game to be closer to God, in the same way as people from Castalia play their game. The glass bead game may describe my mother's state. It's so similar to what she's doing. I can use it in my book."

Blonde and Petar read some parts of the novel together, she with the book on her lap, he taking notes occasionally. According to the plot, the glass bead game required years of hard study of music, mathematics, and history. Essentially the game was an abstract synthesis of all arts and erudition. Players made deep connections between seemingly unrelated topics; associations often also made by Emilia. As Hesse revealed the limitations of the game – its elitism, hubris, stagnation, and sterility – the railway controller, born half a century later and two countries further south, discovered another use for it – an explanation of his mother's attempts to experience existence beyond the material. Petar knew how dangerous it was to use the rules of the game to depict his mother. What would happen to

him if his father read that he thought Emilia was not mad but was instead drawing closer to God? It was easier for Bogomir, the *One Who is at Peace with God*, to live with a crazy wife who carried bad genes and was mentally ruined when she gave birth to their son, than to accept that she believed in God and that God believed in her.

He noted that in its infancy, the game had been played with delicate glass beads, later discarded as being too real.

"In the orthodox world," Petar said, "prayer beads serve as keys to transcendence. In Hesse's world, these beads are lost, so the abstract game is a stairway to God. In my mother's world, the beads were replaced by her secret language, the one that only she and her God understand."

What he told Blonde was not an absolute truth. He had studied and notated Emilia's made-up language carefully. His book's appendix would reveal the concealed language just as a tourist dictionary offered the most frequently used words of a foreign country. Common words, easy to decode as they represented material things such as house, glass, tree and goose, would fill out the dictionary like black stones in a glass vase. Now and then, the sharp white rocks of words difficult to interpret would attract the attention of a reader, words such as void, credence, worship, bless, and enchantment.

He realised he had forgotten to include a word his mother had used a couple of days previously: *murumuru*. The big clock on the library wall showed four o'clock. Hurriedly he closed *The Glass Bead Game* and stood up. As he left, Elena yelled behind him: "Take care, you mad thing, and take her to a doctor secretly!"

"See you soon, Blonde, I have to run now!" Petar closed the door behind him, wondering about the possible meaning of *murumuru*. He remembered how Emilia looked at Vuk when she said it, smiling.

*

Jovana used her husband's habit to write at night as a shield against the village women's queries about having another child. "My husband is a writer; we don't have time for another baby," Nivea the seamstress would say to her customers. When she stayed alone with Zora, Jovana confessed: "We haven't had sex since he bought that damn machine. He spends more time in the library than at home."

While she dreamt about her multi-headed son with the map of Yugoslavia in his armpit, or about Lepa, Tsintsar and her half-brother, Petar enjoyed the private company of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, Camus' *The Stranger*, and the fire of Nabokov's loins, Lo-lee-ta. She did not inherit any powers from her mother the white witch, but she remembered what Lepa did to "unlock" a man's sperm.

In the morning of Vuk's third birthday celebration, from the second floor of Aleksić's house, the sounds of the cumbersome Imperial came in waves, brokenly, juxtaposed against the monotonous yet confident flippity-floppity-tippity-topppity of Jovana's sewing machine. The Imperial and the Singer took turns in the first years of Vuk's life. From time to time, they occurred simultaneously, competing in intensity, but mostly the daytime entertainment of the sewing machine was replaced by the nightly disturbance of the typewriter's staccato. The two sounds were constants in Vuk's early childhood, a genetic code inscribed in his cells, a systolic and diastolic rhythm in his soul, disturbed now and then by the clatter of the rails and chug and whistle of the train that passed through the village.

The aroma of old books and newspapers infiltrated ironed fabric; Vuk's small fingers felt the delicacy of damask, the furry structure of velvet, and the hard surface of paper. Many years later, when his parents became more pallid shadows in his life, his memory, unable to hold all such echoes at once, juggled them, so that some hung in the air in danger of being dropped. When he created his own family, these fragments of his childhood become quiescent, to materialise again on the night Bogomir lay dying.

But when he was three years old, the sounds were real and muscular: the solitary ricochets of his father's machine, the Singer's whirr accompanied by the high-pitched voices of women, complaining about their husbands and exchanging recipes for preserves and cakes.

In the evening, after Vuk's birthday party, while washing the dishes with Zora, Jovana said:

"I put my pubic curl under his pillow, and a drip of my menstrual blood on his underwear. We'll see what happens tonight."

"I'll lend you my negligee, the black one you made for my first wedding night. You're the same size as I was then," Zora whispered. "I haven't been able to wear it for a couple of months, look at me!" She pointed to her round belly.

It was nine o'clock and the guests had already left. Jovana was tired; she and Emilia had been preparing food for a week: more than 30 people had attended the party. They had roasted two lambs and three pigs; cooked a big pot of cabbage *podvarak* with bacon; made ten plates of *mezze* and a few pots of vine leaves *dolma*. Zora had brought five cakes and helped them set the tables. Wooden tables in the courtyard, covered with white damask tableclothes, had been spread with marigold petals and each place marked by a beige serviette crotched by Jovana.

"Nivea, it was a great party," Zora said, wiping the glasses.

"Oh, dear, I'm so relieved it all went well," said Jovana. "Vuk played with the kids, Petar and Papa laughed, and Emilia, she was so normal! I've never seen her so relaxed! And the present she gave to Vuk... All this time she had secretly knitted a sweater and socks for him, can you imagine?"

She took the clean glasses from Zora, checked them against the light bulb, and arranged them in the triangle in the cupboard. After they cleaned the house, they sat on the sofa in the living room. Zora lifted her legs onto a chair, embracing her big stomach with her hands, while Jovana brought out the seven bags of gifts for her son: a wooden tractor; brown trousers with suspenders; a plastic model of the most recent orange dredger made by the 'Fourteen October' factory. Jovana re-examined the gifts, read the letters of good wishes to Zora for the third time, and imagined her son wearing the clothes and playing with the toys. Petar and Bogomir had gone to the pub for a beer, Emilia and Vuk were asleep, so she could finally take a break and enjoy her success. She lifted Emilia's gift from its wrinkled wrapping. The light blue jumper was sprinkled with indigo snowflakes, the same colour as the hood. As she held the piece of clothing out at arm's length, Jovana realised that the snowflakes formed letters: The word *murū* appeared on both the front and back. The same pattern was on the socks; she recognised the miniature signs based on the jumper's letters.

"Muru-muru," Jovana whispered, sniffing lavender on the wool. *What does it mean? If I only knew her mind*, she thought.

"Why don't you make a coffee for us and I'll go home to grab the negligee for you? Here in 20 minutes." Zora ran out despite Jovana's suggestion that she should be taking more rest in her sixth month of pregnancy.

Memories of her own pregnancy brought a smile to Jovana's face: the care her husband had shown, the pride in Bogomir's eyes every time he had looked at her, Emilia's

wide smile when touching her stomach. *Those were the days*, she thought folding the jumper. She placed the bags of gifts, which also contained a toy soldier set, a Frisbee, a small green board and chalk, and lots of clothes, on the couch, laid the muru-muru sweater over them, and went to the kitchen to make coffee.

It was a big day. A small man turned three. Emilia became an ordinary grandmother who entertained the guests. Her mother's magic would soon make her desired by her husband and they would conceive their daughter, whom they would call Lepa.

She put two full teaspoons of Turkish coffee in boiling water, removing the coffee-pot from the stove, when she heard door creaking.

"Mummy, come over here, I'm making coffee for us," she said, but Emilia did not appear. The doors creaked again. Clip-clop. Clip-clop. *Somebody needed to lubricate bloody door hinges*, Jovana thought, wiping her hands with her apron.

She moved steadily towards the room with preserves, her back straight and her head held high. Beneath a round mirror in the foyer stood a rocking chair made of cherry wood, and Emilia lay next to it, her hands holding the chair legs. Her crimson sparkling eyes were wide opened, her jaw wet with saliva. The mirror reflected the open doors and the storeroom floor covered with white beans. Jovana peeped into the room, with the same curiosity she had the first time she had seen it, her heart now pounding faster and louder. The bean bag was torn; the jar with arsenic without a lid; Dobrila's urn was turned upside down its ashes all over the beans.

Time and motion slowed as she took Emilia in her arms: the shuddering of the old woman who vomited yellow liquid, the waving of curtains against the open windows, even her own movements took an eternity as she placed the tiny body on the sofa. Vuk cried from the upstairs room as she went to fetch milk and a wet cloth. She closed her eyes and heard Emilia's harsh voice: "Vuk, my murumuru, my sweet murumuru."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Jovana yelled.

When she returned to the living room, she saw a huge splash of yellow liquid marked with spots of crimson across the sofa, the woollen jumper with *muru* on each side in Emilia's hands, and the body of her new Mummy, Emilia Aleksić, a devoted wife and mother, a communicator with birds and cats, a prophet and a coffee reader, motionless and soaked in the darkening pungent puddle. Emilia's eyes were void, her bruised legs and arms rigid against her stiff body; her appearance reminded Jovana more of a dead rat than of the woman she knew.

Vuk came downstairs and Jovana told him to go back to the room as nanny was sick. She took the wet cloth, prepared for Emilia, and wiped away the yellow trail that led to the rocking chair from the storeroom. Then, sweating and red faced, she cleaned the beans and put them back in the bag, closed Dobrila's urn – now without ashes – and the arsenic jar, half empty. *It was full when I arrived at the house and no rats have come since then*, Jovana thought.

On a knocking at the door, Jovana closed her eyes. The room became dark, filled with the smell of burning potatoes. The knocking grew louder, the room smoky, but she did not open her eyes. A key turned in the lock.

She could have saved Emilia and had not done so. There had been signs. She had seen the old woman with her hands around her stomach, saliva leaking from her mouth. But it was not a matter for her to take care of these things; it was not her place to save her. She was just the daughter-in-law. It was her place to sit perfectly still when the door opened. It was important to go on sitting. It was a big day: a small man was three years old, Emilia was an ordinary woman, and right now her husband said: "Darling, open up, it's us."

This was not a matter for her. Opening her eyes, she saw Petar and Bogomir. Zora appeared seconds later, the black negligee falling from her hands when she entered. Vuk came downstairs again. They all stood in a line, their eyes going from Emilia's grey rat-body to Jovana's pale face.

Jovana was still, but in her fragmented mind, she walked up and down, her hands open in her fruitless effort to fly away; beating the air, her bird-body ran around Bogomir, Petar, Vuk and Zora, around Emilia, seeking for the sky, for the infinite space she could not reach, but which filled her eyes. She tumbled backwards away from them, taking Vuk, somersaulting away, back and back, firmly holding Vuk in her hands.

*

It was almost midnight when Vuk woke, sweated from his first dream. He was not sure if it was a dream, or if his mind finally left him to take rest, spreading a black screen before his eyes, a screen he mistakenly interpreted as a starless sky.

A strange sequence of events flitted through his mind: his sick grandmother Emilia lying in a yellow pool, his mother pale and shaking, and then his father's screams and tears.

"You whore, you killed her!" Vuk heard his grandfather yelling at Jovana.

Then orphans of words, pulled out of context came to his ear: "the daughter of the witch... the fascist ... the whore of the Vlachs... the poisoner." Many years later, Vuk would understand the meaning of these words, and he would even agree with them. But that morning on his third birthday, the words and events were foreign.

Lying on his left side as he always did to press down his arm with his body weight, he looked through the window to a sky not black as in his dream but blue with purple strips, cloudless and flat. He focused to hear what was happening downstairs, but found only silence. From the backyard, however, rose the squeaks of the pigs, Pepito's meows and the tweets of sparrows. He heard the sprouting of the plum and apricot trees, the falling of the strawberry petals and emergence of the small green fruit. The scents of flowers filled his nostrils as he crawled along the hallway and then downstairs to the living room.

There was his grandmother's motionless body lying on the sofa, and there was his mother's frozen body facing the three figures. It was all static as if captured in a painting, a painting that would linger in his dreams for the rest of his life.

Many years later, trying to understand the facts behind the picture he dreamt, attempting to approach Emilia's death from an analytical angle without the sentiment and illogicality of that morning's silence, Vuk would read all the books and articles he could find about cyanide poisoning. When cyanide is eaten it may produce a pungent, burning taste in the mouth he learnt and sometimes numbness and tightness in the throat and stiffness in the lower jaw. The toxicology book he borrowed from the old, blonde librarian in Krusevac library confirmed that salivation, nausea and vomiting often follows and an odour of bitter almonds may be on the breath or vomit.

Elena, the librarian, cried whenever he visited the library searching for new information. Face pale and hands shaking, she read to him how those poisoned may also experience an irregular heartbeat and tightness in the chest. And that in severe cases breathing becomes rapid and deep and then becomes slow and gasping, that fluid may fill the lungs and interfere with breathing, that convulsions and death can quickly follow depending on the degree of exposure. The strange blonde woman took Vuk's hands in hers, and whispered, "Your father loved Emilia very much." Her bosoms rose and fell to the

breathing symptoms of cyanide poisoning, colouring her pink face. “Don’t die on me,” Vuk tried to joke, but it didn’t work on the librarian. She hid her wet flat eyes in her palms, whispering “I loved him, I loved your father.”

And when he returned the book, Vuk knew he would never again visit the library. “Everybody has their own painting,” he mouthed as he left. “My starless sky is hard enough for me. I don’t need your pain. I don’t need your painting.”

For the first time this year, Vuk left school earlier. Unlike his best friend Luka, who once eat a bag of raw potatoes to cause fever and avoid school, Vuk Aleksić has never tried to escape any class. He attended school even when seriously ill. When he had chickenpox, he pulled a military gas-mask, a remnant of his grandfather’s army days, over his head and sat alone taking notes in the furthest spot in the classroom. During a break between lessons, when everybody else left the classroom, he removed the mask and scratched his face and hands with chalk. His teacher, who suddenly appeared, looked at him horrified and – with a handkerchief over her strawberry face – cried: “Vuk! Your grandfather at my office, tomorrow morning before the classes! And put the mask back on your face, you little monster!”

When he looked back through the door in the classroom, Vuk was sure that he belonged there, to those lifeless beige chunks of school furniture, to those wrecked chairs and destroyed windows, to that rotten wooden floor. Because they reflected the pieces, broken and perished, within him.

He also knew that there were certainties in life. Like his grandfather Bogomir, whose name meant One Who is in Piece With God, who believed in routines and schedules, waiting for him and Luka on a schoolyard bench, with a notebook in his hands, as he always did.

“How was your day?” Bogomir asked, scribbling something in his notebook. “Any new marks?”

“No, but I’m having a history test next week,” Vuk said.

“You’ll get an F again,” Luka laughed, standing on the bench. The only F he has got was when he had said that communism was bad and capitalism good. Vuk was not laughing, recalling these days when Bogomir grounded him for saying this, when he was locked in a room for whole day without water and food. “This is nothing comparing to Partisans’ suffering in the war,” grandfather said opening the door, “you need to learn to respect them who fought for your freedom.”

“Kids, hurry up, it’s almost one o’clock. Zora’s expecting us.”

It was a seven years anniversary of Emilia’s death and Zora was waiting for them to bake a cake together. It was custom, leaving a cake on cemetery for dead people.

Three of them walked towards an apartment where Zora and Mirko lived. It was across the main farmers’ market in Varvarin, in the four-storey block called the United Nations. Built by the Yugoslavian Community Army for its workers, the building was in an industrial part of the village, between the hills where Vuk lived and the Great Morava River. A half an hour walking distance between it and Vuk’s house made a huge difference in the landscape; the journey from the lifeless chunks of concrete to verdant courtyards speckled with ornamental houses in which everything sparkled with cheer spoke of the discrepancies in the village’s living standards.

An orange house with the banner *Handyman Boris takes care of your car hygiene; full tyre facilities and wheel alignment* in black spray paint was a boundary marker between the two areas. Vuk has once seen the white cones of Mount Kopaonik reflected in the workshop’s greasy windows but now the snowy peaks were hidden in the mist.

In front of the workshop, Boris the handyman was drinking beer with a few older men; their heads turned when they saw Bogomir.

“Good afternoon Comrade Mayor,” Boris said. “How are you today?”

“I’ve seen better days. Tomorrow is seven years since my wife was killed. Come to the cemetery to share the cake and sorrow with us,” he replied and speeded up.

“Okay kids, let’s count the smoking chimneys along the way,” said Bogomir.

On their left hand side, blocks of raw red-brick buildings stretched, contrasting a chain of houses with unfinished facades on their right. Bogomir explained to Vuk that the incompleteness meant “people didn’t have to pay tax on their real estate”, but it did not mean a lot to him. Only a few households had central heating and this game quickly stopped being exciting. “Why don’t you count stray dogs instead?” Bogomir said, but the boys have lost interest in the counting game.

The United Nations block had no similarity to its famous New York namesake: it was not blue and it was not peaceful. It was rather a mixture of olive-green and grey. “I don’t mind the lack of the space, but I hate the traffic,” Vuk heard Zora confessing to Bogomir once. “Those hooligans are driving their cars as mad things! One day I will become deaf from the squealing of their tyres and horns. Honestly, I would rather live by a graveyard.” The only similarity this building block had with the international organisation was its unity: the amalgamation of all its residents into one abstract proletariat.

As they entered the building’s lobby, strong smell of pickled cabbage entered Vuk’s nostrils. It was the season when winter’s leftover supplies were being thrown away and the emptied barrels washed with *rakija*. Bogomir pulled his shirt over his mouth and pressed the

door bell. Stooped and flabby, Zora opened the door, her hair loosely rolled around yellow and red hair rollers.

The apartment did not have a lobby; it opened into a small room which Zora used as both a kitchen and a living room, which smelled of herbal tinctures, perspiration and staleness. The smell hit him in the centre of his skull, strong and nauseating. Greasy saucepans in the sink covered with layers of rotten vegetables and meat, cloths with yellow stains and a pile of used tea bags on the stove all provoked nausea. Vuk concentrated on the shelves stocked with herbs – yarrow, thorny thistle, marigold, mint and basil, parsley, rosemary, nettle and verbena, then lemon balm and chamomile, St. John's wort, flax and walnut, wild rose and coltsfoot – immersing himself in the neatly arranged world of colours and trying to remember the strange vocabulary for these herbs that Zora picked up from Emilia. The names of Emilia's herbs all ended in *grass*: yarrow was moon-grass, marigold was yellow-grass but despite all his efforts, Vuk could never find the common name for the Morava grass.

Two doors off this room led to the bathroom and the bedroom.

"Everything is ready," Zora said as she brought a white apron from her bedroom.

Vuk and Luka were settled at the table and given watermelon *slatko* and water, Vera was given a pot and a food-mixer. In this annual ritual, the secrecy that surrounded the cake making, the hiding from her father that grandmother was involved and the concealment of visiting Jovana had once excited Nadia, but not anymore.

"Why does daddy hates granny?" Vuk once asked Zora.

"He doesn't hate her, but they have some issues."

"Issues? What do you mean?"

"Honey, on your third birthday, your mom did something and your grandfather can't forgive her for it."

"What did she do?"

"I will tell you all about it one day, darling. When you grow up."

And that was it. The secrecy carefully sewn into her mother's words, words that could mean anything and everything. The only meaning that she managed to extract was that something horrible must had happened between them, sometime before she was born, and she then stopped fantasising about what went before: it was another life anyway. In this life, Vuk despised Jovana while she made birthday cakes for his every birthday.

Vuk took the cookbook and read the recipe out loud: two tablespoons light rum, one cup chopped oranges, one cup chopped pineapple, one cup chopped bananas, two tablespoons lemon juice, two cups white flour, half a teaspoon baking powder, half a teaspoon of molasses, eight tablespoons butter, two eggs, two tablespoons milk, half a cup of chocolate chips.

Nobody listened. Over the years, Zora perfected the measurements for this cake, weighing the fruit in hands which moved as swiftly as roosters in a cockfight.

"Have you heard about this *Kremna prophecy* book?" Zora asked Bogomir. "They may be illiterate peasants, the Tarabić prophets, but they saw the future. I mean, they died before 1900, how possibly could they had known what was going to happen!"

Zora sniffed the fruit, her eyes closed before soaking it in the rum. "Well," she said, "Europe under the rule of the crooked cross was an accurate prognosis." She whisked the flour, baking powder and cinnamon, and then leaked juice from the lemon between her palms onto the dough.

"Vuk, get me the book from the cupboard," Zora said. "Open it and read for us the part that I underlined." Then she turned to Bogomir and said: "Listen to this, exact description of Tito!"

Vuk read: "Serbia will prosper best while the man with blue eyes on a white horse governs, one who will bring some kind of a new religion. Strong and healthy, he will live close to one hundred years. He will like to hunt, and one time while hunting he will fall from his horse and lose his leg. From this wound he will die, not because of old age."

"Indeed it is Tito." Bogomir took the book from Vuk's hands. "May I borrow it for a week? Tito cannot die from one small wound! Impossible!"

"Well, read the book. They foresaw everything, the prophets. Yugoslavia is under the curse. Many Serbs will be killed soon. Brother will slaughter brother. Best friends will murder each other. People will rape their cousins. Black days are coming – I hope I die before them."

"That must mean something else. Who's gonna do that in Yugoslavia? We are not that kind of people." Bogomir put the book in his jacket and remained quiet.

All the time, Vuk quietly played with the leftovers of fabric left messily on the chair – cotton, silk, velvet in all colours and patterns. Next to the chair, a dusty Singer sewing machine was covered by fashion magazines. He took scissors and cut models from the magazines. It was the only thing left from his mother, the sewing machine, and Zora took it. He gently touched the machine, trying to recall a smell of his mom, but the only smell that came to his nostrils was the smell of a cake. Last time he saw his mother was on his third birthday, but he did not remember her face, her skin, her smell.

Determined to excel in the spring test, Vuk took out his history school book and with his fingers in his ears and moving lips, read about the start of the First World War. The Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated in front of him and his blood splattered over the lemons on the table. In Sarajevo, the Black Hand, a Serbian secret society, had decided the Archduke's destiny. In the kitchen, in the United States in Varvarin, two wrinkled hands put a cake into the oven. Watching his grandfather's hands darken under his gaze, Vuk could almost see them stroked by the black fingers of the past – in the way the master touches the servant or the soldier his captive. When Bogomir's hands lit a cigarette, the shadows of the history vanished without trace.

Vuk looked away, his gaze passing through the window to the faces going to and from the street. He thought each and every one, rising out of grey clothes, grew dim, but he knew this too was an illusion. Thinking it was possible to recognise in the faces of his fellow countrymen the nation's long history, its calamities, lost glory, melancholy and agony, he searched them for the clues. But the clues on the faces on the street – as those on the faces of Zora and Bogomir – did not point to a shared defeat, a shared shame and suffering; they told of other secrets that lingered in the stale air, as preserved as the pickles, *ajvar* and *tursija* that Zora made every winter for them.

Vuk grew tired. By the time the cake was done, Franz Ferdinand had died, Austria-Hungary had declared war on Yugoslavia and Russia had mobilised its army to defend the Yugoslavs. Germany had viewed that as an act of hostility and France, bound by a treaty to Russia, found itself at war with the German-Austrian-Hungarian alliance. The war began. The cake was on the table. But they could not try it: it had to wait for the next day, Emilia's death anniversary.

"All right, off we go now, kids." Bogomir reached for Vuk's and Luka's hands.

*

For his tenth's birthday, Vuk found a perfect rock behind their house: blue and smooth. He wrapped it in a violet serviette and hid it in his desk drawer, beneath the school books. All the light was on his dead grandmother on this day and nobody remembered it was his birthday, so Vuk learned to make presents for himself, and hid them to accidentally discover them in the evening. All the presents had a small note attached to them: *Love you forever, your mom*. Every time, he was surprised and happy taking the present, thinking how it ended up there, how his mom came inside and hid it in his room.

These seven years, Vuk has never got a birthday cake. He has not had any birthday party. That day they eat the cake at the cemetery, on Emilia's grave.

At the funeral, Bogomir and Zora, as was the custom, placed a first piece on the grave, and then the ritual continued on the first Saturday after the funeral and forty days later, when Emilia's soul left. Six months after that, again they placed a cake on her grave and then once a year, on the *Day of the Dead*, and so on, until the seventh year after her burial. This was the last piece of a cake that will be placed to feed Emilia. Perhaps ghosts are not hungry anymore, Vuk thought.

In the beginning, the cemetery cats and dogs feasted on the cake. Sometimes gypsies were faster, eating the rich morsels quickly, mumbling "yummy" while circling their hands around their stomachs. Years later, as the cemetery grew and the cats, dogs and gypsies migrated to more promising graves with roasted chicken, pork and filo pastry pies, Emilia's piece of cake lay on her grave for days, falling apart, ultimately ruined as spring rain drizzled into its texture and pigeons and sparrows pecked at it, crumb by crumb.

At his grandmother's funeral, after Vuk ate the first piece of a cake, his mouth took the appearance of a squashed plum and his tongue became as stiff as his grandfather's stick. This change would later become visible and strong, but at that moment it was so faint that nobody noticed how his eyelids became heavier, his eyes flatter, and his jaw more curved, and his features resembled a picture by Picasso.

Other effects were more startling. The old man who maintained the cemetery swore he saw the cats and the dogs going mad after they had licked the cake.

"Their eyes went red, their hair fell, and they ran to the surrounding forest never to come again," he said to Bogomir once. "After one pigeon pecked the cake last year, it couldn't fly anymore. Its legs became swollen and red. I still see it walking around, pecking the leftovers of the food on the graves."

The old man thought the decline in the animals had something to do with the spring fever, or with the sudden increase of iron in the tapped water giving it an illusion of blood, or ultimately with the shelf life of the eggs and the milk in the cake. But Vuk knew that Emilia was a friend with animals and that she spoke their language. That was probably the way the animals mourned.

*

The first thing that struck Nadia when she met Johnny was the silver necklace which hung on his chest like a dog-tag. She closed her eyes to see if he would disappear, but when she opened them again he was still standing on the other side of the coffin, behind the people passing with their respects and goodbyes for Vuk.

Looking at his blue eyes, red hair and pale skin, Nadia knew immediately that he was British.

His development was initially regarded by critics as part of the wave of modern art that emanated from the Royal College of Art, although a significant change in his approach occurred after his move to Paris. Canvas, palette and brushes were part of the baggage he carted with him on his many travels and he became famous for painting in bizarre places, such as public toilets, railway tunnels and Catholic churches. According to a rumour, the controversial oil, *The Cat That Ate Its Paws*, for which he was accused of metaphorically encouraging hatred against Muslims, had been painted while he was riding a horse, deep in rural Switzerland.

A short old woman, her head in a black scarf, came to the left corner of the coffin and leaned over Vuk, her tears, dropping over his body, making a tup-tup-tup sound that overpowered all others. It was same as when the tap on the sink broke and the monotonous, continuous sound had pierced her brain. From the tears of that woman – who Nadia didn't even know though she wondered why she cried so much – a small pool soaked into Vuk's blue cotton shirt and left a dark stain. As the old woman passed Johnny, she glanced up but looked through him, her gaze falling on the trees in the distance.

When it was Nadia and Emil's turn to farewell to Vuk, Johnny put his arms across the coffin and covered Nadia's hands as she touched the motionless, dry body. It was the form that she – the female and the miniature version of Vuk Aleksic – had inherited from her father. The sharp jawline, those soft, full lips and greenish eyes. The wide forehead, the long neck. Emil got his straight pose, tallness and strong legs with their rough hairs. After the funeral, they would often stand in front of a mirror, looking for the parts of their bodies inherited from their father.

Emil said nothing else until after the funeral, when Jovana asked him where he had put the rest of the candles. And when he answered her, Nadia was sure it was not her brother anymore, as this other boy had a Gaudi-like face and spoke as if he had a stone in his mouth, a stone so solid it could break all the windows in the city. The stone that Nadia would see later that day in Johnny's painting.

When they went home after the funeral, Johnny stood in her room, leaning against the window holding a rolled canvas in his hands. When he opened the canvas, light filled the room.

Nadia Aleksic, the fourteen-year-old girl who had never missed any classes, and who had accepted her mother's belief in schedules and routines, learnt that day that there were no straight roads in the traffic of life. That there were curves, cul-de-sacs, and broken bridges. And that a piece of cake, made by women in pain, could become the stiffest of substances in one's mouth.

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Two snakes were coiled around the golden stick of Hermes' caduceus, Vuk remembered from his history class. Strawberry, the teacher, also told them that *two* was the first number that deviated from the unit, as some French philosopher had said, and because of that it symbolised sin. That the soul was attached to the body by *two* silver cords – one behind the head linked to the centre of the brain, and the other linked to the astral body near the solar plexus – she heard from Vera after her father's funeral.

Two men – Vuk and his grandfather, Bogomir – died close to each other on the same day, thus erasing the distance that had grown between them as the years had passed. *Two* was a symbol of duality, opposition, separation and antagonism – as Nadia heard from her mother – but in Vuk and Bogomir's case it meant the unity found in their deaths.

A slight contentment filled Nadia when she heard of Bogomir's death, and she could not resist smiling. It was the way the Universe arranged things that the old man would not bury Vuk.

"So, Bogomir is dead," she said to her mum and Jovana after hanging up the phone. "Mirko called, he'll arrange the funeral."

"There is justice," Jovana said, making the sign of the cross over her chest. And then her laughter interrupted by short screams and deep inhalations filled the room. "Thank you, God," she added, her eyes sweeping the view through the window as if to find God there and commemorate the end of the One Who Was Not at Peace with God.

Nadia felt no loathing for Bogomir; actually she did not feel much of anything, but she liked the fact that something else bad had happened on *that* day, that someone else's life had ended, and she wished that all fathers would die and all children could stay alone.

Bogomir's funeral took place a few hours before and some metres away from her father's. The old man died in his house which if seen from Krusevac was to the right of the Morava bank where her father committed suicide. Apparently he stopped breathing not many hours after Vuk did.

But there was no logic in death, Nadia thought, instead there was absence of laws and rules. When she first saw the two dead bodies, it struck her that there was something calming in the way everything shut down and sharp edges blurred. There was something mysterious about a dead body, the way it became void, light as a helium balloon made of cold, gummy skin that smelled of a sour lack of existence.

This smell Nadia had first found on her great-grandfather's army coat that her father kept in the wardrobe she hid in when playing hide-and-seek with Emil. The instinct to vomit had driven her out of the closet to reveal herself to her brother, whose face shone from an easy victory in the game. But it was another victory that gave that mouse-grey coat its smell. It was the victory by the partisan unit led by her great grandfather Bogomir that resulted in the river of blood of the chetniks, their wives and children. The imprints of those people's ghosts on the coat emitted the smell that soaked into the neatly arranged shirts and trousers in her father's wardrobe and into Nadia's nostrils, all the way down to her stomach. The same nausea struck her abdomen as she leaned over her father's body: as if miniature drops of blood from the chetniks killed by Bogomir's hand had evaporated from his coat and infused the still figure of Vuk. The scent of death will never vanish, Nadia thought, it just leaves one object to settle in another.

It was the smell of over-ripened tomato, or a mould on bread, or dried lavender. It was definitely the aroma of frankincense and basil. A whiff of frozen fish from the fridge or of the bone from the sheep her grandfather slaughtered for Christmas. Chicken legs they used for soup. Swine fat her great-grandfather boiled to make soap.

Perhaps it was all of these together, mixed with the scent of the buds on the poplar trees surrounding the cemetery that Nadia smelled when kissing her father's forehead for the last time. The poplar flowers, when Nadia would next visit her father's grave, would be in full bloom, red and long, drooping from cup-shaped disks as if the trees were bleeding. But now the poplars looked naked, their smooth bark and long, thin trunks reminding her of Vuk's legs; the buds were like thousands of his eyes. As the poplar branches bowed and wobbled in the breeze and the trees twinkled, she was sure that her father was all around her, moving as he done when dancing during the previous – and his last – New Year's eve.

That particular smell of the deceased she would come across again later and her nostrils would become sensitive to it. An hour before Jovana died the rotten leftovers of the apple she ate would release that particular odour. And Nadia would recognise it in the wind over Belgrade during protests against Milosevic in the nineties. By then, she would be able

to forecast death by the odour that preceded it. And she would never forgive herself for not warning Emil, when she one day found the smell around him.

The scent was but one of the signs she would learn to read – another was colour – but she did not recognise the signs at the two funerals. Only later, when recalling that day, she thought that if the arrival of Johnny the painter was foreshadowed by the yellowness of Jovana's urine, it was a sick joke of art and the way it played with humans.

The morning before going to the cemetery, Nadia put her face under cold water from the tap in the toilet, hoping that it would freeze her senses, when Jovana came and hastily said: "Close the door and hold it with your body."

"But, granny..."

"Don't tell me *but*, just do what I say."

Blocking the door with her weak body, Nadia watched the wrinkled legs emerging as Jovana lifted her skirt. The pale, greasy body of her grandmother jumped into the bathtub and removed enormous white cotton underwear, torn and with holes. Jovana took from her bag an empty Coca-Cola bottle, thrust a blue plastic funnel into the bottleneck, and, straddling the bottle, let the reeking stream of her urine fill it. After the yellow fluid came to a dribbling end, Jovana pulled up her underwear and, smiling wickedly, put an index finger on her lips to confirm that it was a secret – again – so many secrets already in Nadia's life. The old woman screwed the lid on the hot bottle, placed it back in her bag, and said: "Let's go, honey."

Nadia remembered how her parents took their urine in the little glass bottles she or her brother had drunk apricot or peach juice from to a medical examination every six months to prove to their companies that they were indeed healthy. But Jovana did not work and her bottle was enormous – Nadia wondered what her grandmother was going to do with it.

It was not long before Jovana's bitter intention was revealed. After Bogomir was buried and the graveyard abandoned by his mourners, the old woman took Nadia to the grave. She opened the bottle, her face pale from sleepless nights, and poured the stinking fluid over the grave in the shape of a cross, as people traditionally did with red wine to help the soul of the departed rest in peace. She did it with the same faith and care, but instead of reciting the usual "In the name of the Holy Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost," she muttered, "You can't beat the feeling."

Then she looked at the black-and-white graveyard photo of Bogomir's authoritative face, with its thick strong eyebrows, sharp eyes and moustaches covering his upper lip, and spat at it so that the saliva spread over his eyes and slid down the photo, making Bogomir look as if he was crying.

"I promised I would piss on your grave, you garbage. I promised I would be having the last laugh, and I'll have it as your bones are soaked in my Coke."

Whether it was the acrid smell of urine, the grotesque sarcasm of the new Coca-Cola slogan that Jovana used instead of the holy words, or the wickedness, Nadia couldn't say, but for a long time afterwards she had a reflex, like a Pavlovian dog, that made her gall rise whenever somebody drank Coca-Cola before her.

Nadia would not tell anyone about the incident with her grandmother, leaving it buried with the rotting body of the one who had never been in peace with God. Until one night, during the NATO bombing, when Emil got an order for mobilisation to the Kosovo war, she would confess everything him.

"So that was the first omen of Johnny's arrival: the yellow colour of Jovana's piss," Nadia would say to Emil. "The other one was the red of the poplar flowers and the white of the lilies that turned into crimson when we put them on daddy's coffin."

"Whhhh-at about tttt-he black ooo-f mum's sssss-carrrr-f?"

“Yes, the black. We all wore black scarves. Remember how daddy’s eyes became jade green before they put him in the ground?”

“Yeee-ss.”

“So there was that nuance of green that Johnny sent me before his arrival.”

“Ss-o then Jjjj-ohhny aa-pee-ared?”

“Yes, just after the green, he sent us the grey through the pigeon feather that fell on my palm. And after all these colours indicated his arrival, Johnny emerged. There was no doubt he was a painter. It was too obvious with all those omens.”

And on the day the two bodies were put in the ground to become history, Nadia’s class had a history test that she missed. But it wasn’t that class examination that put her to the test – she was prepared for the brutal history of the First World War, having learnt the dates of every battle and the account of every wound – it was rather the subtle record of art coming from the developed world that she – like her country – was not yet ready for.

When they met, from curved candles that burnt for Vuk’s soul behind his coffin, three hearts of melted wax dripped on the sand. Air brought a whiff of gunpowder and the river, and then it became thicker and concentrated in the area above Nadia’s father, and it looked as if a billion tiny flies flew in the circle. Then the air became solid and tangible, getting a shape, a colour, a smell: a meaning. He came out of the coffin, and said “I’m Jonathan Arthur Flinch. But you can call me Johnny.”

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Although only a kilometre long, it was one of the longest walks Bogomir has ever taken. He stopped at every street corner to light another cigarette, even turning off to return home before quickly inhaling more nicotine and finally turning back to Vuk’s school. He did not look at his watch, but it must have taken him two hours to arrive at the school, passing by the newly opened village convenience store, going around Mirko’s maize fields and crossing the football field where Vuk played with his friends after school.

On the thought that his grandson has recently turned ten his lips grew into a slight smile and he loudly exhaled, for a moment forgetting the reason for his walk to meet the school Principal. “A child that grows without his parents has to have some problems.” Bogomir was finding excuses for Vuk’s latest incident at school, although blaming Jovana and Petar was a case of finding excuses for himself rather than for the child.

It was almost four o’clock when Bogomir reached the school door, glad that he has not met anyone on his way; he knew people would ask him for Vuk’s marks and the D in mathematics was not something he would be proud to share.

The school Principal, furious and red in face, opened the door to his office, and, waving a piece of a paper in Bogomir’s face, said, “Comrade Bogomir, you are an honourable member of our community. You have done so much for this village, I know that, and you have done so much for this school too. That’s why I called you today.”

The former Mayor, now retired, knew where this conversation led. The principal would either ask him for money to forget about Vuk’s bad mark or he would improve the mark in front of him, letting him know that the principal was doing a favour for the ex-Mayor and that a favour was to be remembered.

But he was mistaken. Instead, the principal continued, “I know that you must be disappointed with Vuk’s mathematics test results. I called you so that you can cut the cob

from maize in time, when it's still green. If he did this now when ten years old, what will he do when he is older?"

The test paper hung in the air. It seemed to Bogomir like an eternity passed before the principal slowly placed it in his hands and, as the paper travelled that insignificant distance, the principal's nose grew wider and redder, as if it was about to explode.

At the upper left corner of Vuk's mathematics test, five words formed a life-threatening statement: *two and two equals five*. Bogomir sank into the beige leather chair, put his glasses on, and lit another cigarette. Below this line, a paragraph of scribbled handwritten text read "Under certain conditions, two has only one significant digit, which means it represents a measurement with a margin of error of 0.5, which means the actual value may lie between 1.50 and 2.50. When adding such measurements together, the margins of error are also added, so two and two equals five for large values of two and small values of five."

Looking at the paper, at the red pencil that crossed the equation, Bogomir could not agree more with the Principal. Yes, it was not only the test. It was the sign that Vuk could be a great disappointment for the Party. His grandson did not believe in one truth; he did not understand the importance of the equality, the main principle of communism. One could not have five, while others had two plus two, the whole could not be bigger than its parts. Vuk was a dangerous element and Bogomir realised that he had to do something about it.

"Why didn't he inherit my sense of exactness?" Bogomir mumbled, more for himself than directed to the Principal, enjoying for a moment his superior ability to measure everything. His notebook, in which he illustrated railway productivity so neatly, emerged before his eyes, and he felt sorry that he has not shared that notebook with Vuk – perhaps it would have changed his views about correctness and strictness. The notebook had hard green covers and was entitled *Railway Schedule Fulfilment in Varvarin Municipality (1953 – 1963)*. It had three parts. The first was filled with the exact times of train arrivals at the Varvarin station followed by the driver's name. Bogomir still remembered the first few entries:

Monday, 1 March 1953 – 1:28 pm – Varvarin – Mika Arsic

Tuesday, 2 March 1953 – 1:07 pm – Varvarin – Petar Golobradic

Wednesday, 3 March 1953 – 1:48 pm – Varvarin – Petar Golobradic

Thursday, 4 March 1953 – 1:31 pm – Varvarin – Mika Arsic

Every day of the last ten years had been inscribed in the notebook. Even today, he postponed the meeting with the school Principal to be able to record the train's arrival. It was the last year, 1963, of his ten-year period of calculating railway productivity, and it was important that he did not miss a single entry.

Every day the Mayor Bogomir sat in his office between midday and 2pm, waiting for the train whistle, with his watch, notebook and a pen ready to record exactly when the train passed. His watch has never been inaccurate. It was not allowed to be inaccurate; the destiny of the railways depended on his watch's precision. The time when the train was supposed to be in the station, according to the railway schedule, and nobody could question the correctness of the timetable, was 1:19pm. Bogomir would, with a tidiness nobody inherited from him to his huge disappointment, note the actual time and then torture the data to find the truth.

The second part of the notebook, extremely important to the Party, consisted of monthly, quarterly, annual, five-year and ten-year extrapolations. One could see, from his notebook, for example, that the biggest gap between the planned and actual times of the train's arrival was on 6 June 1957 – plus 23 minutes – while 1955 was the blackest year for the railway industry, with trains disrespecting the schedule by 32 minutes on average.

But he did not stop there. Once a month he went to the main station in Stalac and collected the names of the train drivers, entered them in his notebook and made the calculations for all the seven drivers. Mika Arsic was the worst offender against the schedule with the shameful result of a 27-minute average difference. When Mika drove, the train was always late into the station. Many years later, when Bogomir heard that Mika, crossing an intersection a few seconds after the light had turned red, died in a traffic accident, he could not help but feel pleased. He was hugely contented at the justice of the man's death for being late.

That spring day, when sitting in the office of the school Principal, though, he realised that he had been too lenient with his grandson. He needed drastic measures to put Vuk back on the right track, as the boy showed the same disrespect to the main principles of the Universe and the Party that Mika, the train driver, had.

"I'll deal with this, Comrade Principal," Bogomir said, after a long, silent break.

"You can be sure that Vuk will never again write down this horror stuff. I don't even know how he could have these thoughts. He's been raised by me to follow the rules, and mathematics has been his favourite since I taught him to count chickens in the yard."

After he learned of his grandson's infidelity with the basic idea of communism, Bogomir headed to Mirko's house with a plan in mind. The implication that there might be more truths than one, the idea that Vuk presented in his mathematics exam, was terrifying. It led to a world in which people were unable to control not only the future but also the past. This prospect frightened Bogomir more than Germans and the bombs, and he had no choice but to tell everything to Mirko.

"You have to go to Belgrade's national library to further investigate this issue in books. The library in Krusevac doesn't have enough resources. This many-truths thing has to be investigated thoroughly. Bloody disproportion, bloody two and two are five! What is it with the youth today? Aren't they afraid of the Universe?"

For a couple of days, while Mirko read everything that he could find on inequality, truth and mathematics – going through the stacks of scratched classics, drama and thrillers, and newspapers pegged along the shelves – Bogomir paced his backyard not speaking to Vuk about this incident. When Mirko returned, he brought many pages that spoke about the vicious idea of multiple truths that Vuk used in his maths test.

During a thorough examination of Mirko's notes, Bogomir realised that there was enough proof that Vuk was not alone in denying the existence of one truth. Together, Bogomir and Mirko spent many hours reading the notes to find the clue, the line that connected the claim to people and events. It was obvious that there was a secret society that worshiped the idea of the whole being bigger than its parts, and Bogomir was disgusted how many eminent writers were members of the cult.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, the protagonist implicitly supports the idea of two plus two making five, several paragraphs are spent considering the implications of rejecting the statement 'two times two makes four'. He proposes that it is the free will to choose or reject the logical as well as the illogical that makes mankind human. Mirko noted that Dostoevsky had been sentenced to death for his participation in a liberal intellectual discussion group, which, Bogomir concluded, had to be the secret society. Another member of this dangerous society, according to Mirko's investigation, was George Orwell, loudly propagating inequality in his two novels *Nineteen Eighty Four* and *Animal Farm*. A paragraph in Mirko's notebook was dedicated to these books and Bogomir read it out loud:

"The former novel, describing life under a futuristic totalitarian regime in the year 1984, tells the story of a functionary at the Ministry of Truth, whose work consists of editing

historical accounts to fit the government's policies. *Animal Farm*, published in 1945, reflects events leading up to and during the Stalinist era before the Second World War." Mirko said that Orwell, a member of the Independent Labour Party for many years, was highly suspicious of Stalinism.

Bogomir was particularly struck by a line in Mirko's notebook that read: "Two plus two equals five was a slogan used by Stalin's government to predict that the five-year plan would be completed in four years." Although in a positive context, Stalin did use this idea and it was possible that he was a member of this cult, Bogomir thought.

After this discovery, Bogomir looked into the eyes of his betraying grandson and was horrified that Vuk had pretended he was not aware of the existence of other people who believed in his idea; he had pretended that he was just curious to find the way mathematics would better reflect a life that has never been black and white.

From that moment, their lives would go in different directions, and the grandfather and the grandson would become quiet when close to each other, knowing that nothing connected them anymore. Bogomir, the One Who Is in Peace with God, would find his peace in extrapolating the truth about railway production, calculating the ten-year average schedule fulfilment, writing letters to the railway supervision and even to the high Party representatives in Belgrade about possible ways of productivity improvement. He was glad when they fired all the employees who did not respect the accuracy rule of the Universe, and he was especially content with the way he finished his report, using logic that nobody could deny:

"For what would happen if the earth was late in rotating around the sun, and if the moon orbited more slowly? The trains might not be as significant as the planets, but the mechanism behind them is the same: if the rules are not obeyed, the whole planet would fall apart."

He was sure that he did the right thing, not allowing Vuk to get off track, and not allowing the railway employees to continue destroying the communist idea. Only from time to time, when sitting alone in his chair in the backyard, smoking cigarettes and watching his neighbours playing with their kids, Bogomir the ex-Mayor would feel sorry for the decisions he made. He would feel sorry for Vuk, who – forbidden to repeat his idea about many truths anymore – withdrew into himself, barely speaking for days at a time, except during football games after school. And as everyone in the village noticed that something in Vuk has changed – although he had been quiet since Jovana's imprisonment, his new silence added a frightening dimension – and stopped visiting their house, Bogomir thought how different everything would have been if he had just pretended the mathematics test did not happen. But then again, he knew that he was not an ordinary man in the village, that Vuk's destiny was not to be an ordinary child who makes mistakes, and he swallowed the bitter saliva and kept silent, while the distance between them grew greater every day.

“Honey”, Vuk whispered into tiny holes on red handset in his hand. “I can’t make it to home tonight. Bogomir is really sick this time. I’ll sleep over at old man’s.”

Crunching tones of telephone lines mixed with Vuk’s voice and Vera’s silence.

“I’ll be at home early in the morning. Wouldn’t miss my birthday cake for anything in the world.”

The murmur of One Who is in Piece with God in the background rushed Vuk to finish the conversation.

“Water, water”, the old man whispered, shaking under the blanket. His lips were cracked and dry as the soil in his property, neglected by his and Vuk’s irrigation and forgotten by the God of rain.

The fields covered by strawberry hearts, and raspberry and blackberry plants neatly spread and connected by wires, looked tired and sad this spring. They have been, together with the plum and sour cherry orchards, outlined by six enormous old walnut trees, Vuk’s favourite sanctuary. He played there with a few of friends he had when he was a kid, or worked in the orchards alone when he grew up. In all ages, he loved to climb on his walnut tree and sit there for hours, watching the houses on the other side of the road, the river and the nearby furrows. The harmonised closeness with the neighbouring houses and the river, and the distance from other people that the richness of walnut leaves gave him, provided him the ability to observe other people unnoticed and with a perfect excuse to spend long afternoons there.

He was the first to see the bloom of the fruit, the first to notice when the fruit was ripened, the first to eat it and squeeze the soft pulp of strawberries and plums into his mouth. He was the first to witness the rot of the fruit and the death of the leaves, going yellow and red and brown.

This spring, he had not visited the garden yet.

There he was, sitting with his Big Granddad, a scary figure of this village that now lay in the bed, his eyes half opened, his hands shivering, and his voice low. It was difficult for Vuk to accept the old man’s vulnerability. Bogomir Aleksic set up the rules, Bogomir Aleksic made exceptions from the rules, Bogomir Aleksic decided whether life was going to be ended and how it was going to end.

Water was ice-cold, as Vuk took it from the courtyard’s well. Its chilliness vanished as the glass was leaned against Bogomir’s burning face.

“Is the old train still passing here at 1:19 pm, granddad?”

A nod.

The only constant here were trains, they would forever go on the same rails, Vuk was thinking. Trains would always leave sharp whistles when departing stations. Every day, at 1:19pm, Vuk was growing with a thought of travelling in the trains, of being a passenger that goes to Europe, far away, where people drank exotic drinks and led bigger lives. He would go first to Paris and then to Rome, leaving Barcelona for the last spot of the voyage. But the train was going only to Belgrade and White City didn’t sound as exotic as other metropolises.

Vuk took a bottle of rakija that he made with Bogomir the last autumn. Plum harvest was good that year, fulfilling expectations for the first-rate brandy. After boiling rakija in a tea-pot, Vuk soaked four cloths in sweltering brandy, and then covered Bogomir’s throat and feet; he also put one cloth in the old man’s chests. From time to time, he drank short and quick sips of rakija from the tea-pot. The rest of hot rakija Vuk put on his hands and massaged his granddad.

As Vuk massaged Bogomir’s bony legs, TV was turned on, with news reporter saying: “His name at that time shone brightly on the political arena of the entire federal

Yugoslavia... And many people saw him as a person who would be finally able to make things move, to get things going”.

“Is this Milosevic person any good? He must be very clever, so many people applauded him. He’ll keep our Yugoslavia whole. He’s the one”.

Vuk pretended not to hear his granddad’s question. As the reporter spoke about the anti-bureaucratic revolutions, the Yogurt revolution in Vojvodina and the recent one in Montenegro, Bogomir lost air and coughed. Vuk put some water, lemon, honey and rakija, in this order, to his lips and again massaged his body with rakija.

“Hm, Vuk... I’ll maybe die this night. There is something important I have to tell you”.

For the greater part of his life, Bogomir had been burrowing; a man under wraps, his exposed the secrecy of others while shielding his own – as a Mayor, a Party functionary, or as Bogomir Aleksic, a husband and a parent. A thin camouflage layer that covered him had become a part of his physiology, a snakeskin ready for shedding.

“Hush, granddad. Don’t tempt bad luck, talking about death. Take your time, I’ll sleep over here”.

Vuk lay down next to Bogomir and watched TV. Samsung, colour. He bought it for Bogomir’s seventieth birthday, and since then they have watched weekly news report on Sundays together. But Bogomir watched morning and evening news everyday, compressing the words and ideas in his mind for the whole week and waiting for his grandson to come and exchange the opinions with him. The views on Yogurt Revolution in the northern province of Serbia had already been discussed many times in his home, but the recent Montenegrin revolution and widening of Milosevic influence in Yugoslavian parliament were still to come on the agenda.

Bogomir’s old habit from his presidency in the local community was to be well informed and to put the pieces of apparently unrelated information in a mosaic of the political causes and effects, which decided upon destiny of the nation and the idea of communism. He couldn’t miss even a small piece of political event, afraid something huge would happen and he would not be a part of it. Anything could happen and Bogomir could not miss the small fragments of information; he had to put his fingers on the pulse of the progress of the communist idea.

“The clock of my life is ticking away”, Bogomir said. “And many things are yet to happen. The Wall could fall. Germany could reunify. Soviets could enter Afghanistan again. Ceauşescu’s house-of-cards might collapse”.

In global dimensions, he foretold the emergence of the era with the presidency of the writers in some countries, his foreseeing powers limited from seeing their names, Vaclav and Arpad. Within the national boundaries, he envisaged that the structures he had helped to build in Yugoslavia would linger in the coming epoch. A fragile faith that the new world built by the hands of Milosevic would be better than the one that would die with him, sparkled in his eyes, begging for assurance. The assurance was given by Vuk – his compassion for the old man was stronger than his bitterness towards the idea of communism. Both disapproving the American hegemony, the older man believed the communist countries were its counterweight, while the younger one disapproved Cold War and hoped that the new Europe, unchained from Soviet threat, would curdle the new America and opened-up China and India. However disapproving the idea of communism, Vuk wouldn’t be against it in front of his granddad. He knew it would have destroyed him.

He turned off TV. Too much politics these days, so much news about new President.

“Are you hungry, granddad? I’ll make some dinner for us”, he said and went to the garden, not waiting the answer from Bogomir.

The plants and trees in the garden were motionless. There had been no wind for a month, just the cloudless sky and the land burnt down by the drought. The first vegetable sprouted its head from the soil and Vuk picked couple of baby carrots, parsley, and some nettle that grew on the edges of the garden. It was dark outside and he was careful not to be scorched by nettle. Nettle was Emilia's favourite herb, often ingredient in their meals. He mixed all the vegetables, and added some of the potatoes left from the previous year in the stew.

"It's healthy, Bogomir", he said putting a spoonful of hot stew on Bogomir's lips.

But Bogomir pushed away his hand and spilled stew over the blanket. Barely supported by his elbows, the old man said: "Go to my sleeping room". He took something from his pocket, and added: "This is the key of my drawer. Bring a wooden box down. It's for you. It's about time we had a talk".

Night was coming and the old man obviously wanted to take some burden from his back before he would fall asleep. There was not a point to procrastinate this conversation anymore, Vuk realised, and took the box, unaware of a demon that would be released shortly.

The box was made of rose wood; dusty and old, it was light although full of bits and pieces. The first thing to see, there was a blue box of Nivea cream, ironically containing Jovana's wedding ring and earrings bought from Bogomir. Vuk's mother had left the jewellery at home before she was imprisoned and she had never come back to take it. The point had been lost as Petar got divorced from her and as her fingers became swallowed during the years in prison. These two pieces of jewellery were the only things left from her in this home – everything else had been carefully packed and sent to her parents, in the same suitcase she had brought her luggage in. Garment that Jovana tailored for herself was packed in few bags and tied with a string to the suitcase. The fashion magazines she collected were burnt in the first winter after Emilia had been buried. Some of them, printed on thick and fine paper, Bogomir used to cover the floor where the pigs slept, and later threw them away together with the pigs' shit and urine, letting Italian and France fashion tips and photo models whirl in the sewage of Varvarin. But the ring and the earrings in the shape of anchor were in the Nivea box, which Vuk took out and quickly put it in his pocket. Bogomir anyway couldn't see well without glasses, he thought. The earrings reminded him on the key ring he had got from mom: a heart, symbolising love; a criss-cross that represented faith; and an anchor, which meant hope.

Apart from the blue Nivea box which cream had been applied to somebody's skin long time ago, the other remains of the past found shelter there: an old book with yellow papers and indigo covers.

Light was thick as if someone had spilled ink along the horizon. The Morava River stretched its banks forwards and backwards in a rhythm, as it was inhaling and exhaling. Vuk thought about the ease of disappearance in the muddy water, but every time he looked, rubbish remains were sitting at the same place, spitted up by the river, unable to digest it. He lay down on the bank and closed his eyes, and the sound of the river became a dream, replaced by the sound of Singer sewing machine biting chunks of patterned, soft fabric flesh, and the sound of the Belgrade-Varvarin train, heralding the arrival of new guests, or the comeback of the locals, the comeback for good or bad. The two sounds drummed in his mind as the river kept inhaling and exhaling, its water becoming dark red.

