

English Translation of the Short Story "Tabernakul" by Jurica Pavičić

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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2021

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:474703>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-18**



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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

**English Translation of the Short Story “Tabernakul” by Jurica
Pavičić**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English
Language and Literature and German Language and Literature at the
University of Rijeka

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September 2021

Abstract

This BA thesis aims to translate a piece of Croatian literature into the English language. Using the translation of the short story “Tabernakul” by Jurica Pavičić, the thesis addresses the process of translating a rather culturally marked piece, more specifically, the issues regarding the translation of a literary work which incorporates elements of a variant of colloquial Croatian spoken in and around the city of Split. After a brief introduction to Pavičić and the context of in which the short story was published, I will provide the theoretical underpinnings of the implemented translation strategies. After the translation itself, an analytical commentary will be given, dealing with specific issues encountered during the translation process. Finally, a conclusion will be given, summarising the main points of the thesis and the process of its creation.

Sažetak

Ovaj završni rad bavi se književnim prijevodom s hrvatskog na engleski jezik. Na primjeru prijevoda kratke priče “Tabernakul” autora Jurice Pavičića promatra se proces prijevoda djela koje koristi dijalektalizme specifične splitskom području, kao i problematika prijevoda termina koji su usko vezani za određenu kulturu. Nakon kratkog uvoda o liku i djelu autora, iznosi se pregled teorije relevantne za prijevodne strategije koje su korištene prilikom procesa prevodjenja. Sam prijevod je popraćen poglavljem koje se bavi analizom pojedinih problema s kojima se prevoditeljica susrela tijekom procesa prijevoda. Naposljetku slijedi zaključak, koji sažima najbitnije točke rada i procesa stvaranja istog.

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1. Introduction

This thesis is focused on the issues arising out of literary translation. Throughout the process of translating “Tabernakul”, a short story by Jurica Pavičić, I will be addressing specific issues pertaining to the translation of a literary piece which makes use of dialects and mentions various culturally specific items. After a brief introduction to the author and his work, the thesis will provide an overview of the theory behind translation solutions that will be used in the translation of the piece itself. This will be followed by the translation proper and a commentary section, which will offer an analysis of specific issues which arose during the translation process, and provide an explanation as to why certain translation solutions were decided on.

1.1. An introduction to the literary text itself

“Tabernakul” is a short story written by the Croatian novelist, journalist, screenwriter and author of numerous short stories, Jurica Pavičić. It was published in his 2013 collection *Brod u dvorištu* (*A Boat in the Front Garden*) alongside eight other short stories. The short stories in the collection all have a common denominator: they are all set in or near Split, in a time period somewhere between the end of the War of Independence and the period just before they were published (the early 2010s) – a setting which feels rather ethereal, as if it were simultaneously long gone and very present. The stories incorporate topics that, at first, might seem banal: familial relationships and everyday situations, life and death on the Dalmatian coast and everything that happens in between. However, through a critical lens Pavičić picks apart the Dalmatian “ordinary”, touching upon different matters relating to partnerships, parenthood, honesty and morality, all delicately woven through with a fine hint of darkness. His focus is often on the hardships of working-class life on the coast, especially in relation to the profound impact that the War of Independence has had on that area .

2. Theoretical underpinnings

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, to translate means “to express the meaning of speech or writing in a different language” – which is easy for a layman to misinterpret as finding a lexical item or unit’s equivalent in another language. That might not be all too difficult on the level of individual lexemes – should you want a simple, one-to-one match for a certain word, a good dictionary could suffice, provided that the relevant context was given. However, as the linguistic structure of the text for translation becomes more complex, finding a close equivalent becomes increasingly difficult. Even if one were to find equivalent items in the target language (TL), the meaning that might be produced in such a manner might range from a funny kind of wrong to downright non-existent. The results of such mistranslations might be, for example, found anywhere along the Croatian coast by those with a keen eye: for example, a gift shop offering the service of engraving a name of one’s choosing onto a bracelet, but translating “ime po želji” as “name by wish”. Upon seeing a few signs advertising wine (“vino”) as “wino” and *burek* with cabbage filling (“burek sa zeljem”) as “burek with wishes”, one realizes that the line between lexical equivalence and translating the sense of a word is not such a fine one after all. Therefore, translating each singular element separately is very far from translating the sense itself in a meaningful way – and that raises the question of what can (or should) be intervened into during the translation process, as very few languages allow for translation that does not affect either the meaning of the text or its form in some way or another (unless the languages are very closely related, as is exemplified by Hatim and Munday (2004) when comparing Spanish and Catalan).

The most common approach is to alter the form where possible in order to preserve the content. An example given by Hatim and Munday (2004) is the translation of names in the Harry Potter books:

In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, one of the evil characters goes by the name of Tom Marvolo Riddle, yet this name is itself a riddle, since it is an anagram of ‘I am Lord Voldemort’ and reveals the character’s true identity. (...) in French, the name becomes ‘Tom Elvis Jedusor’ which gives ‘Je suis Voldemort’ as well as suggesting an

enigmatic fate with the use of the name Elvis and the play on words 'jeudusor' or 'jeu du sort', meaning 'game of fate'. (Hatim and Munday 2004)

Within "Tabernakul", the content does not rely on the form itself, but there are numerous lexical items that facilitate a certain mood – for the readers of Croatian, the Dalmatian colloquialisms used throughout the story help paint a picture and uniquely define the time, place and people in it. However, trying to conserve those very same colloquialisms could possibly make the translated text less comprehensible, so only a small degree of foreignization seemed like the most reasonable way to create a translation that is as comprehensible and palatable as possible to a foreign readership, while also retaining at least some of the authenticity of the source text.

Venuti makes the point that mainstream translations (particularly in the Anglophone world) tend to pander to the target audience, in that they are as domesticated as possible, using contemporary language and being "imprinted with values specific to the target-language culture" (Venuti 1995). Such a translation is more likely to become a bestseller – one that "is not so foreign as to upset the domestic status quo" (Venuti 1998), skilfully adapted in such a way that it seems to have been originally written in English. At the same time, the more foreignized translations, those which "[resist] dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text" (Venuti 1995) do not allow for an equally easy identification of the (Anglophone) reader with the contents of the text. Consequently, they make the translation itself less appealing since they prevents the readers' from leisurely engaging with the text; this makes such translations worse off in terms of their marketability and ability to generate profit.

As much as heavy domestication is more likely to produce a bestseller, I find that some texts would lose an important part of their essence if they were to be wholly adapted to their TC – and Pavičić's "Tabernakul" is certainly one of them. Split and its cultural peculiarities are inextricably a vital part of the short story, and I feel that expunging every trace of Dalmatia from the translation would be a disservice to the author as well as the text itself. Of course, the plot would not have suffered gravely had Bašić drunk another type of herbal spirit instead of *travarica*, or had Niko's lunch been another kind of savoury pastry instead of *burek*, but seeing how the language could not be faithfully rendered into English, I felt that a certain degree of

foreignness needed to be preserved in order to prevent the translation from becoming too distant from its source setting and, as such, entirely unrepresentative of it.

Bearing that in mind, two strategies were employed: some of the most culturally specific items have been foreignized to a certain extent, meaning, they were kept in the original; in cases where there were no direct equivalents in the TL, an interpretative translation was introduced (cf. Ivir 1978). As a result, the finished translation could be said to lean in the direction of what Venuti (1995) critiques as the “invisibility” of the translator – translating the source text (ST) in such a way that the finished result seems indubitably “native” to the TL:

A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original.” (Venuti 1995:1)

However, during the translation of this short story, the “invisibility” that is often desired by the Anglophone public and literary critics was not entirely pursued: some elements of the original dialect were retained in order to provide a more authentic setting to the story and not to interfere with the ease of reading by adding a number of explanations in footnotes or parentheses.

3. The short story and its translation

Tabernakul

Bašić ga je tog jutra nazvao rano, već iza sedam.

Bila je jesenja subota, kroz škure je prodiralo olovnosivo svjetlo, a Niko je mirovao u krevetu, moren nesanicom, i promatrao Majino tijelo kako se pod poplunom nadima u ritmu izdisaja. Promatrao je svjetlost koja osvaja uglove sobe, kad je tišinu prekinulo zvono telefona. Dovukao se do aparata i s druge strane začuo hrapavi starački bariton. „Bašić ovdje“.

Nije se odmah dosjetio s kim razgovara. Stajao je u hodniku, bosonog, sa slušalicom u ruci, i prebirao po memoriji ne bi li ime koje je čuo povezao s glasom i licem. „Bašić, vaš bivši susjed“, dometnuo je naposljetku čovjek s druge strane žice, kao da je shvatio što se zbiva. „Oprostite što vas zovem ovako rano, ali mislim da biste morali doći ovamo, u Ćiril i Metodovu.“ Tog trena Niko je glas iz žice povezao s licem koje je izronilo iz prošlosti. Znao je tko je Bašić. I znao zašto zove.

Odvratio je da dolazi i zaklopio slušalicu. Otišao je u kuhinju, pristavio tursku kavu i dugo, bezizražajno gledao kako neveselo jesensko svjetlo oplakuje ulicu, parkiralište i drvodred. Vratio se u sobu, navukao čarape i ogrnuo džemper. Dok se odijevao, Maja je izvirila ispod deke i pogledala ga. „Di ćeš? Šta je bilo?“ upitala je.

„Zvao je susjed, iz Ćiril i Metodove“, odgovorio je. „Izgleda da je gotovo.“ „Gotovo šta?“ upitala je Maja, dok je Niko navlačio cipele.

„Znaš šta“, odgovorio je. „Gotovo je ono sa stanom.“

.....

Prošlo je desetak godina otkad je posljednji put bio u stubištu Ćiril i Metodove 16. U tih deset godina njegov je bivši portun još oronuo, i odavao je dojam nepovratne propasti.

Kovana ograda s fjoriturama, nekoć ponos neznanog zanatlije, bila je izjedena rdjom, otkrnutih i otupljenih vršaka. Stakla svjetlarnika bila su razbijena, a žbuka unakažena vodovima klima-uređaja i kabelske TV. Gdje god si pogledao portun je bio prošaran tragovima vodilica i ukopanih kablova presvučenih slojem cementnog mlijeka.

Niko se uspeo do drugog kata. Na okretištu stuba ugledao je Bašića. Imao je dvadeset godina i dvadeset kila više nego kad ga je posljednji put vidio. Stajao je pred kućnim vratima, posramljujuće pretio, neobrijan, odjeven u maju na špaline. Iz pazuha mu je zaudarao znoj. Bašić mu pruži ruku, a Niko je prihvati, susprežući odbojnost.

-Zvali ste me – reče. - Što se dogodilo?

Bašić pokaže na vrata stana : – Vujnovića nema. Nisam ga čuo ni vidio danima.

-To ne znači ništa. Možda je kod rodbine?

-Koje?

-Možda je u bolnici.

-Sumnjam.

-Zašto?

-Osluhnite unutra.

Približio je uho vratima. Isprva nije čuo ništa. No kad je uspio isključiti sve vanjske šumove i buku, u uhu mu je ostao tek jedan jedini monotoni šum. Iznutra je potihlo i ustrajno dopiralo romorenje vode. U stanu je curila špina.

-Koliko se dugo ovo čuje?- upita.

-Drugi dan bez prestanka.

-Čini mi se da ćemo morati provaliti.

-Nema potrebe. Vujnović mi je dao ključ, baš za ovakve prilike.

-Pa onda otključajte.

-Volio bih ako biste otključali Vi- odgovori Bašić. – Na kraju krajeva, ipak je to Vaše.

Bašić mu pruži ključ, a Niko ga uzme na dlan i načas zastane, kao da ga odvaguje. Promatrao je u vlastitoj šaci plosnati, majušni predmet, ruzinav po rubovima, i osjećao čudnu smjesu strepnje i olakšanja. Desetljeće i pol proveo je u borbi da se tog ključa domogne. Petnaest godina njegovog života posisali su zahtjevi za povrat, sastanci s odvjetnicima, ročišta, molbe, žalbe, niže i više instance.

Sad mu je ključ napokon u ruci, i jedino što treba učiniti to je gurnuti ga u bravu, otvoriti vrata. I biti sretan zbog onog što će unutra naći.

.....

Okrenuo je ključ, a vrata su se otvorila. Po sjećanju je napipao sklopku i upalio svjetlo.

Tijekom godina stan se promijenio. Pokućstvo je bilo drukčije, kao i luster u hodniku. Zidovi su bili prebojeni u drugu boju, asketski svjetliju. Ali, ispod te politure promjena Niko je prepoznavao mjesto na kojem je odrastao. Ista razvodna kutija od mrkog drva. Iste zidne dezin s pticama i pupoljcima prebojen valjkom. Ista vrata od mutnog žućkastog stakla. I isti miris: miris

nečeg pregorenog, guste pirjane smjese, miris koji je uvijek dopirao s onu stranu sustanarovih vrata. Tako je i onda uvijek vonjalo iz Vujnovićeva dijela stana: oštri vonj kupusa, tripica, šufiganog povrća, jetrice dolče garbo. Ti mirisi dopirali su iza membrane, iz zabranjene polutke u kojoj je stanovao prisilni stanar.

Šjor Vujnović je, što se Nike tiče, u stanu u Ćiril i Metodovoj bio oduvijek. Oduvijek, to znači da je u stan uselio prije Nikina rođenja. U stan ga je uveo Narodni odbor Federativne Narodne Republike netom nakon rata. Vujnović je stigao odnekud iz južne Dalmacije kao činovnik brodogradilišta. Narodni odbor za njega je ekspropirao služinsku sobu s pogledom na dvorište, čajnu kuhinju i pomoćni nužnik. U vrijeme kojeg se Niko mogao sjećati, Vujnović je imao oko šezdeset, no Niki se činio beskrajno starim - siv, suh i kornat poput salamandra. To je bilo prije četrdeset godina. Sada je morao imati gotovo sto. Nadživio je sve u ovoj kući, nadživio babu i dida Armanda, nadživio oca i mater, te na kraju ostao u stanu sam, kao pobjednik iznurujućeg maratona.

Petnaest godina borili su se s Vujnovićem oko stana u Ćiril i Metodovoj. Nastojali su iz stana istjerati starca koji je na svako ročište stizao sve pogrbljeniji i stariji, ali jednako ustrajan, žilavo uporan, neodstranjiv poput priljepka. Petnaest su se godina s njim parničili oko povrata – prvo mater, pa on, pa Maja. Maja je bila posljednja, najustrajnija. „Misli na svoje dite“, ponavljala je, „to je kapital - sto kvadrata, pet minuta od centra, u zoni turizma. Urediš u apartmane i daš ditetu kriv“. Tako je Maja govorila dok bi klamericom na kuhinjskom stolu spajala dokumente, obijala advokate i pisala pritužbe. A onda se u travnju nula sedme Maja jednog popodneva s ročišta vratila uspuhana od bijesa. Niko je tek došao s posla, uz špaher je podgrijavao juhu, i upitao je kako je bilo na sudu. „Zaštićeni stanar - eto kako je bilo“, promrsila je. On je upitao što to znači, a ona mu je rekla da će u stan ući tek onda kad Vujnović umre.

Tek kad umre domoći će se svojeg. Tek kad ga jednog jutra netko nazove, recimo Bašić, i priopći mu da je čekanje završeno.

Ušao je u hodnik i osvrnuo se.

Stan je bio tih i bez znakova života. Jedini zvuk koji se čuo bilo je uporno rominjanje vode iza kupaoničkih vrata. U kupaonici je gorjelo svjetlo. Prišao je vratima i zgrabio kvaku, s gropom u želucu, preplašen onim što bi unutra mogao vidjeti.

Ali, u kupaonici nije bilo nikog. Bila je osvijetljene i prazna, a iz špine je tekao tanki trak vode. Zavrnuo je špinu. Stan je utonuo u tišinu.

Vratio se u hodnik. Opipao je prva vrata, ali bila su zaključana. Prišao je drugim vratima, vratima bivše Vujnovićeve sobe. Bila su prtvorena, a kroz žučkasto se staklo naziralo svjetlo. Otvorio ih je.

I ugledao tijelo.

Vujnović je ležao na podu, bez znaka života. Starčev mršavi torzo bio je ogrnut čupavim džemperom na kopčanje ispod kojeg je provirivala pidžama. Bio je bos. Ležao je prsima na tlu, čudno iskežen, a naočale su mu sklznule s beživotnih očiju.

Za Nikom je u sobu ušao Bašić. Nadvio se nad tijelo i džepnim zrcalom mrtvacu provjerio dah. Kad se uvjerio da je starac mrtav, otišao je u kuhinju i iz nje donio nekakvu krpu. Obavio je oko Vujnovičeve brade i vezao na tjemenu čvor, premda to nije imalo smisla, jer je tijelo već zahvatio rigor mortis. Bašić je mrtvacu potom zgrabio pod pazuh i Niki kimnuo da uhvati noge. Niko je šćepao starčeve potkoljenice, tako hladne da mu se činilo da je dotakao zmiiju. „Na tri“, rekao je Bašić. Podigli su ga i prenijeli na kauč. Mrtvi, suhi čovjek sad je ležao na kauču, miran i spokojan. S ponjavom oko obraza, činio se poput nekog koga muči zubobolja.

Kad su završili, Bašić je otišao u kuhinju i natočio vode. S lica mu je liptio znoj. „Hoćete da ja nazovem mrtvozornike?“, upita, i odloži čašu.

-Molio bih vas – odgovori Niko.

-Hoćete da još nekog zovem?

-Je li imao familiju?

-Samo jednu rodicu, u Muenchenu - reče Bašić.- I nju ću zvati. Vi ostanite tu i pričekajte ih.

-Koga?

-Mrtvozornike, naravno – odgovori Bašić i iziđe, ostavljajući ga samog.

....

Niko sjedi uz Vujnovičevo uzglavlje, u praznom stanu, i osluškuje. Čuje zvuk nečijeg tuširanja, klopot dotrajale kanalizacije, čuje razgovor s ulice i šum dalekog prometa. Kako su vrata Bašićeva stana otvorena, čuje i susjedov mukli bariton iz stana prijeko. Čuje kako Bašić razgovara s hitnom pomoći i diktira adresu. A onda čuje pištanje mobitela, zvuk nove poruke. Poruka je od Maje. JESI DOBIO KLJUČ!?!? čita na displeju, a Majini uskliknici strše oštro, kao da neko vrišti u zatvorenoj sobi.

Niko ustaje i stane se vrzmati po kući. Otvara služinsku sobu, pa malu kuhinju. Ulazi u veliku kuhinju, otvara kredencu i razgledava sadržaj. Proučava zaostavštinu samačkog života. Hrenovke. Načeti špageti. Poluprazna limenka čaja. Stare novine. Hrpe starih novina, posvuda, po otomanu, stolicama, kantunalu. Vraća se u hodnik. Otvara nužnik, pa ostavu. Na koncu stiže do modrih vrata, loše oličenih, s mjedenom kvakom koja se laštala od nebrojenih dodira. Ta vrata vode u drugo krilo stana, u dvije vezane sobe s ulične strane. Vode u sobe u kojima je proveo djetinjstvo.

„Imate višak kvadrata“ rekli su četrdeset i šeste dida Armandu ljudi iz Narodnog odbora. Dida Armando je bio liječnik s bečkom diplomom, priznanjem za podršku narodnoj borbi i stanom od sto kvadrata koji se izdašno širio čitavom katom Ćiril i Metodove. U vrijeme kad im Narodni odbor useljava sustanara dida je Armando još čitao rendgenske snimke u domu narodnog zdravlja, Nikin otac je još bio srednjoškolac, a baba još mlada. Grad je još bio velika ruševina,

pun kaverni od britanskih bombi. Zidale su se i obnavljale cementare, željezare i brodogradilišta, u njima su se otvarali nebrojeni novi poslovi, a u grad su sa svih strana pritjecali ljudi koje su ti poslovi mamili. Pristizali su s planina i s otoka, vlakom, biciklom i brodom, a Narodni odbor ih je trpao bez milosti na stan bogatijima, u njihove djevojačke sobe, biblioteke i špajze. Tako je stigao i Vujnović. Mlad činovnik, suh i visok, pristojan i suzdržan. Živio je svoj život iza vrata sa žutim mutnim staklom, vrata iza kojih su se nazirale tek žućkaste sjenke, i čuo zvuk papuča pod kojima pucketa suhi parket.

Imate višak prostora – rekao je didi Narodni odbor, ali taj višak ubrzo se pretvorio u manjak. U uličnu polovicu stana Nikin je otac sredinom pedesetih doveo mater. Dida, none, pape i mater stisnuli su se u dvije povezane sobe s pogledom na drvored. U onu dalju smjestio se mladi par, u onoj prolaznoj dida i none su podvečer razvlačili sklopivi kauč, a dida bi bogavao Odbor što im je na leđa naprtio Vujnovića. U te dvije sobe, rodio se Jerko, Nikin pokojni stariji brat. U njima je umro i dida Armando, naglo, od kapi, na kauču za rasklapanje, nakon večernje bevande. Na uličnoj se strani '59. se rodio i Niko. Na uličnoj strani mijenjalo se brojno stanje, umiralo i rađalo, bujao je i kljao neki nestalni i promjenjivi život. Na dvorišnoj je strani pak sve neprestano bilo isto. Šjor Vujnović bi ujutro u šest odlazio u škver i napuštao djevojačku sobu, u koju bi se vratio nakon tri. A onda bi, iza tri, hodnik zapahnuo miris hrane. Češnjak šufigan na ulju. Buzara. Jetrica. Riblja frigidura, oštar vonj gira ili trlji zavaljanih u brašno, prženih u tavi. Kad bi otac i mater rijetko sreli Vujnovića na hodniku, on bi ih pozdravio naklonom, a oni pristojno uzvratili. Mimo toga, jedva su komunicirali, kao da je i sam razgovor s uljezom neka vrsta predaje, potvrda da pristaju na uzurpaciju.

Tako je to bilo do sedamdeset i druge. A onda je otac otišao u općinski komitet požaliti se poznaniku. Rekao mu je da ovako više ne može, da su u tisno i da mu makne sustanara. Očev se poznanik javio nakon dva dana. Rekao mu je kako je Vujnović samac i da nema šanse da u škveru dospije na vrh stambene liste. S vama je druge stvar – dometnuo je. S materom vas je pet, a imate dodatne bodove na tvoj fakultet. Završava se novi blok u Splitu 3, odselite se tamo, pusti centar grada i onu starež tamo.

Otac i mater su dugo vijećali. Otac se nećkao: nije htio da se Vujnović raširi, nije htio izgubiti očevinu. Prelomila je mater. „Novo je doba“, rekla je, „konačno ćemo se moć raširit, moćemo disat.“ U listopadu iste godine dobili su ključeve trosobnog stana na jedanaestom katu stambenog bloka na Trsteniku. Niko jasno pamti trenutak kad je prvi put ušao u taj neboder, mjesto na kojem i sada živi. Fasada još nije bila oljuštena, lift nije škripao poput prezategnute cime, po zidovima nije bilo probodenih srdaca, kukastih križeva i stiliziranih kuraca. Prazan i bijel – novi je stan izgledao kao raj.

Koji dan potom, otac i on otišli su isprazniti stvari iz Ćiril i Metodove 16. Radnici firme za selidbe iznijeli su veliku kuhinju, spavaću sobu i kauč na kojem je dida umro. Iz stražnje su sobe iznijeli njegov radi stol, dječji krevet i stvari. U kartonske su kutije utrpali njegove metalne Matchbox autiče, školske knjige, dječju enciklopediju i knjigu Mi smo Titovi koju je dobio kao pohvaljeni odlikaš.

Kad su radnici sve iznijeli, otac i on obišli su dvije iseljene sobe. Zaključali su modra vrata prema hodniku i ključ predali šjor Vujnoviću. Primio ga je, ispratio ih do vrata i naklonio se ocu na pozdrav, bez rukovanja, bez zbogom, kao da će se vidjeti isto popodne, kao svako popodne. Otac više nikad nije vidio Vujnovića. Niko ga je vidio trideset godina kasnije, na jednom od prvih ročišta. Vidio ga je kako sjedi uz odvjetnika, jednako visok, jednako suh, samo još bjelji, papirne nezdrave puti. Usprkos tome, Niki je izgledao kao netko kome se nikad nije ništa dogodilo i neće se nikad ni dogoditi.

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Mrtvozornici su došli u rano popodne. Predvodila ih je mlada liječnica, gotovo zgodna, s doktorskom torbom i fasciklom punom nekih tuđih, papirnatih smrti. Uz nju su stigla i dvojica bolničara u narančastim odorama hitne pomoći. Liječnica je pregledala starčevo tijelo, provjerila bilo i dah, pa zasjela uz stol i izvadila snop formulara.

Postavljala je pitanja, a Bašić je odgovarao. Upisala je ime, prezime, adresu, ime oca. Pitala je godište preminulog, ali ga Bašić nije znao. Iz neke od ladica iskopali su pokojnikovu osobnu kartu. Prepisala je s nje mjesto rođenja, matični broj i godište. „Bože, devedeset i osam godina“, komentirala je i upisala u rubriku. Upitala je za mrtvačevu rodbinu. Bašić joj je rekao ime jedine nećakinje i minhensku adresu. Njemačka se rodica zvala Lucija. Lucija, to je rodbina koju je trebalo obavijestiti.

„Možemo ići“, rekla je liječnica i zatvorila spis. „Usko je za kovčeg“, kazao je jedan od mrtvozornike, „morat ćemo ga iznijeti u deki.“ Zamolio je Niku za pomoć. Mrtvo su tijelo prebacili na deku, uhvatili svaki svoj kraj i ponijeli tijelo niz skale.

Starac je bio neočekivano težak. Već od prvog polukata Niko je osjetio kako mu niz lopatice i čelo probija znoj. Kad su se spustili do prizemlja, zamolio je odmor i pustio deku. Položili su starca na pod. Omotan prostirkom, ležao je na cementnom dvorištu, kao pregažena mačka.

Podigli su ga opet i iznijeli na nogostup uz cestu. Tamo ih je, raskriljenih vrata, čekao furgon mrtvačnice. Mrtvozornici su iz njega izvukli metalni sanduk u obliku ljesa. Položili su starca u sanduk, pokrili ga poklopcem od lima i ukrcali u prtljažni prostor. Furgon je bio pun do vrha. U prostoru za teret stajali su, složeni u tri kata, isti takvi metalni ljesovi, uredno poredani poput brioša u pećnici, puni ili prazni, njih deseci. Furgon je nosio svoj teret, dnevnu žetvu splitskih mrtvih.

Stajao je tamo i promatrao taj prizor sve dok se furgon nije zatvorio, a kamion otišao. A onda, kad je kamion nestao s vidika, zapalio je cigaretu, otpuhao dim i odmah je bacio.

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Te noći, popio je dva normabela, ali je svejedno spavao loše. Dugo se prevrtao po krevetu i gnječio jastuk, ali san mu nije htio na oči, a um mu se nije mogao odlijepiti od te zloslutne slike: slike mrtvih koji leže u limenim kištrama, posloženi na police.

Ustao je i ogrnut dekom otišao u kuhinju. Ubacio je vrećicu filter kamilice u vodu i podgrijao je u mikrovalnoj peći. Dok je uz stol ispijao čaj, iz sobe je doteturala Maja. Sjela je do njega. Kratko je šutjela i promatrala ga prijekorno.

-Nemoj molim te – rekla je napokon – Nemoj mi samo reći da te grize savjest.

„Nisi to vidjela“ htio joj je odgovoriti Niko. Nisi vidjela očale spale s lica, voštane, hladne potkoljenice, nisi opipala rigor mortis, gledala nutrinu tog furgona koji će jedan dan odvesti i tebe i mene. Niko je sve to pomislio, ali nije izustio, jer to i nije bilo ono što ga stvarno muči. Mučio ga je onaj ključić koji mu je uručio Bašić, i taj ljepljivi osjećaj lagode koji ga je prozeo kad mu se mrtvačev ključ našao na dlanu.

-Nema te što gristi savjest – reče Maja – Zasjeo je na vaše i uživao pedeset godina. Raširio se lagodno, bez kredita, bez stanarine, na tvojoj didovini, na dida Armandovim trudima.

-Zamisli što bi bilo da ste taj stan sačuvali? - nastavila je, sad pomalo ljutito - Zamisli da ste ga cijelo vrijeme imali? Misliš da bi ti dida onako umro? Misliš da bi ti otac onako svisnuo, poslije Jerkove smrti? Misliš da bi Jerko otišao u Nigeriju na platformu, i onako glupo zaglavio?

Zastala je načas, kao da su zadihala, a onda nastavila tiradu, povišenog tona, kao da vrišti, ali još uvijek šaptom.

-Misliš li – rekla je – Misliš da bi ti dite sad bilo di je? Pet hiljada kilometara odavde, u Vancouveru? Misliš li da bi Darku trebao Vancouver da je imao sto kvadrata usred centra, pet minuta od katedrale? Misliš da bi sad s unukom priča preko Skypea? Sve ti je to taj Vujnović uzeo. Uzeo, i ni hvala ti nije rekao, ni tebi, ni ocu, ni didi. Uzeo je kao da mu je to bilo pravo.

Dok je govorila, Niko je promatrao. Bila je ljuta, i kao svaki put kad je Maja ljuta, zašiljila se, na sljepoočnicama su joj izbila tanke modre žilice kao da je svemirka. „Nemoj ga žaliti. Sebe žali. Svog oca žali“, ponavljala je, gnječila nervozno nekakvu kuhinjsku krpu, a njen ljuti monolog promicao je pokraj njega kao neugodni, monotoni šum. „Bog mu da pokoj. Ali drago mi je da je umro. Drago!“ rekla je naposljetku, pa ustala, a Niko je gledao za njom u prazni hodnik u koji je zamakla.

-Još nešto – dometnula mu je iz spavaće sobe – sutra će se pojaviti ta nekakva... Lucija. Rodica. Pusti je u kuću, to moraš. Nek uzme što hoće od starčevih stvari. I to je to. Da joj ne bi neke ideje pale na pamet.

Rekla je to i zaželjela mu laku noć. Niko je ostao oprati šalicu čaja, a onda pošao za njom. Dok je došao u spavaću sobu, Maja je već spavala, a umjesto žučljive ljutnje, lice joj je zračilo mir.

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Kad su sutra ujutro stigli u Ćiril i Metodovu, Bašić ih je sačekao. Stajao je pred vratima i pružio im papirić s porukom. „Vujnovićeva rodica“ rekao je, „dolazi sutra, na pogreb. Htjela bi pregledati barbine stvari. Moli da netko bude ovdje u deset.“

Otključali su stan, rastvorili prozore i upalili sva svjetla. Maja je šetala stanom ponašajući se kao kupac. Pootvarala je ormare i kredence, kritičkim pogledom promatrala pokućstvo, sagove i gomilu novina. Proučavala je pituru, parket, utičnice i kutne letve, vagala i analizirala mane.

-Ovdi će sve živo trebat pobacat – rekla je na koncu, zgađeno.

-Moramo pričekat tu rodicu. Možda će nju nešto zanimat.

-Koga bi ovo moglo zanimat?

Ušla je u hodnik i počela s reda otvarati sve prostorije. Pregledala je ostavu, manju kuhinju i nužnik, čije stanje je komentirala grimasom zabrinutog gađenja. A onda je došla do modrih vrata na sredini hodnika. Cimnula je kvaku, ali su vrata bila zaključana.

-Što je ovo? –upita.

-Vrata za ulične sobe. Tamo smo mi stanovali.

-Zaključano je.

-Tu negdje mora bit ključ.

Pregledali su ladice oba kantunala i škafetin kuhinjskog stola. Kopali su po starim vrpcama i rokelima, među kutijama žigica, pečatima od voska i baterijama iz kojih je davno iscurila kiselina. Naposljetku je Maja u pretincu četki za cipele pronašla bunt starih ključeva vezanih špagom. Oprobali su svaki, ali ni jedan nije ulazio u bravu modrih vrata.

Potražili su Bašića. Debeli starac dovukao se do predsoblja i sa čuđenjem pogledao modra vrata. „Dao sam vam sve što imam“, rekao je, „Ova vrata nosam nikad vidio otvorena. Mislio sam uvijek da je to neka ostava.“

„Pusti to“, rekla je Maja, „počnimo sređivat ovo smeće. Ključ se mora pojavit odnekud, u nekom trenutku.“ Otvorila je paket kesa za otpad, i počela u njih trpati najočitije smeće – novine, boce, stare krpe. Kad je napunila četiri kese, posložila ih je uz vrata na kup. Otvorila je kredencu i njoj spazila polupraznu kutiju filter čaja. „Baš mi ovo treba, da me dezinficira od ove šporkice“, rekla je, natočila vode u Vujnovićev čajnik i stavila da uzavri. Kad je čaj bio gotov, ulila ga je u šalice, pa jednu stavila pred Niku.

„Pij“ rekla je i sjela. Niko je stajao uz kuhinjski stol i gledao preda se - u Vujnovićev čaj u Vujnovićev šalici, šalici iz koje se k svodu uspinjala vruća para. Gledao je šalicu i znao da će u jednom trenutku morati svladati odvratnost, da će tu šalicu morati uzeti u ruke i otpiti prvi gutljaj.

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Prvih trinaest godina života, proveo je tamo. Proveo ih je u Ćiril i Metodovoj 16, drugi kat, u te dvije sobe s balkonom koje su se pružale s ulične strane dida Armandovog stana.

Spavao je na rasklopljenom kauču, u očevoj i materinoj sobi, uz nonin stolić za kartanje. Domaće je radove pisao na pisaćem stolu uz materin krevet, stolu u koji je s donje strane urezao Hajdukov sastav iz '71. Dane je provodio na balkonu koji je gledao na drvored murvi i kolnik. Ali – slobodno vrijeme, vrijeme igre – provodio je najviše na zajedničkom hodniku. Hodniku koji je bio ničiji, i upravo zato poluprazan i taman, ispražnjen od života, prolazni međusvijet u kojem se nitko nije zadržavao ni osjećao ugodno.

Niko ga je zato volio. Volio je čupavi tepih koji je u njegovoj uobrazilji lako postajao tex-mex granica, bojišnica u El Alameinu, bosanski kanjon u kojem partizanski bombaši sačekuju njemački konvoj. Volio je ornamentirani obrub tepiha, prugu taman toliko široku da se na njoj mimoiđu dva Polytoys autića, i da fingira prometnicu. Volio je polutamnu hodnika, oštre sjene po rubovima, neosvijetljene zakutke iz kojih su u njegovoj uobrazilji izvirivali Manjinjorgo i Krampus. A volio je i Vujnovićeva vrata od mliječnog žutog stakla, vrata kroz koja se naslućivalo taman toliko zvuka i slike da mu ono što je za vratima potpiri znatiželju.

U trinaest godina, u Vujnovićevoj je sobi bio jedva dvaput ili triput: obično kad bi ga tata ili none sustanaru poslali s porukom, dosljedni načelu da s njim komuniciraju tek koliko je nužno. Ipak, ako u Vujnovićevu sobu nije ulazio, ta je soba bila predmet njegovog predanog špijunskog proučavanja. Osluškiavao ju je iza vrata, proučavao kroz mutno staklo neodređene obrise i mrlje u pokretu, nastojeći iz tih apstraktnih zvukova i mača razabrati što se s onu stranu zbiva. Doušničku bi rabotu počeo nakon tri, kad bi se stari činovnik vratio s posla. Čuo bi iznutra zvukove friganja ili krčkanja šalše, osjetio miris pirjanog češnjaka i slušao monotoni glas spikera koji čita radijske vijesti. Rijetko – ali zaista rijetko – s one bi strane žutog stakla čuo glasove: češće muške, malo kad ženske.

A onda je, jedne subote tamo ranih sedamdesetih, Vujnovića posjetila neka žena. Kad je ušla u njegovu sobu, vrata je zatvorila nehajno pa je između vratnice i štoka ostao pun pedalj razmaka. Niko je čučao iza vrata i kroz taj pedalj pritvorenih vrata uhodio. Vujnović je sjedio uz kuhinjski stol sa šalicom kave. Njemu preko puta sjedila je žena srednjih godina, a njoj uz skute tamnokosa djevojčica. Vujnović i neznanka razgovarali su tiho, glasom koji se povremeno spuštao u šapat. Govorili su o politici, spominjali Jugoslaviju i Tita, Njemačku i neka njemačka imena koja su Niki zvučala kao iz partizanskog filma. A onda je Vujnović podigao glas i djevojčici rekao „Lucija, mišu, uzmi napolitanke“. Djevojčica je posegla rukom u staklenu frutjeru, zgrabila šaku napolitanki od bajama, i naglo se osvrnula. Dugim i indiferentnim pogledom zapiljila se u njega, koji je klečao na podu i kroz pedalj poluotvorenih vrata uhodio prizor. Djevojčica ga je osmotrila pogledom, kao da ga osvjetljava farom ručne lampe. Sasječen od straha, čekao je kad će upozoriti odrasle i raskrinkati njegovu špijunažu. Ali, djevojčica ga je gledala i gledala, a onda u jednom času naprosto izgubila interes, skrenula pogled i rekla „Mama, ja bi doma.“ „Sad ćemo, Lucija“, odgovorila je neznanka.

Lucija- tako se zvala. Djevojčica Lucija. A sada, četrdeset godina poslije, sjedi u istoj sobi u kojoj je sjedila ona, i čeka tu istu Luciju. Čeka da dođe iz Muenchena da obave primopredaju, da iz stana istjeraju sjenu njezinog barbe, kao da nije nikad postojao.

Niko stoji u Vujnovićevoj sobi. Otvorio je prozor da se stan dobro razrači, raskrilio ulazna vrata i sjeo uz stol dok uzvanica ne dođe. Dok je iščekuje, pogled mu pada na kauč, a na kauču na istu onu deku u kojoj je prekjučer nosio leš. Deko sada leži nehajno bačena na kauč, baš kao da ju je ostavio netko tko je otišao do frižidera po čašu mlijeka.

A onda je, točno u deset, Vujnovićeva nećakinja došla. Niko je začuo korake iz portuna i na vratima spazio ženu u crnini. Imala je ozbiljno, izduljeno lice i podočnjake od putovanja. Prepoznao je sličnost. Imala je istu garavu kosu i tugaljiv izraz.

Ušla je u stan i pristupila mu. Kratko se nećkala – kao da nije sigurna hoće li je prihvatiti – a onda mu pružila ruku.

-Dakle, gotovo je – rekla je – mora da vam je laknulo.

-Ne veselim se ničijoj smrti.

-Nemojte lagati. Nitko vam ne zamjera. I ja bih ga na vašem mjestu vjerojatno htjela istjerati.

-Ja sam samo htio što je moje.

-Znam. Ali, morate ga shvatiti. On je htio umrijeti na miru. Umrijeti gdje je proveo život.

Šutjeli su neko vrijeme, a onda Niko prekine tišinu.

-Ne bih vas htio remetiti u poslu. Izvolite, došli ste ovdje po stvari.

-Ne budite smiješni – odgovorila je. – Ni po kakve stvari nisam došla. Pa tu nema ništa. Ima nešto namještaja, koji ne vrijedi transportirati. Drugo je sve starež.

-Ali, zašto ste onda poručili da dođem?

-Došla sam vas pozvati na pogreb. Znam da inače ne biste, nakon tolikog sudovanja. Ali- ja vas molim da dođete.

Ustala je i opet mu pružila ruku. Krenula je prema vratima, ali prije nego što je izišla, Niko je zaustavi pitanjem.

-Recite mi – rekao je - Nemate li vi možda ključ od soba s ulične strane?

Pogledala ga je ispitivački.

-Nemam – rekla je. – Niti znam tko ima. Barba nikad nije tamo ulazio. Uvijek je bilo zaključano. Govorio je da to nije njegovo. Tako je govorio: da mu to ne pripada.

Rekla je to, i izišla, mahnuvši na pozdrav.

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Očekivao je da će Vujnovićev pogreb biti pogreb starog samca. Pet -šest ljudi iza kapsila, pokojni susjed ili škverski umirovljenik, te Lucija, sama, u crnini, kao bijedni nadomjestak rodbine.

Ali, kad je stigao na Lovrinac, iznenadio se. U najavljeni vrijeme – tri i četvrt – u grobljanskoj se kapeli svetog Roka skupilo pristojno mnoštvo. Iza odra je spazio Luciju kojoj su neznanci u defileu izražavali sućut. Spazio je i mladog svećenika, Bašića i par susjeda iz Ćiril i Metodove, starijih i pogrbljenijih nego posljednji put kad ih je vidio. Ali, osim njih, uz odar se skupio sve neki nepoznat svijet svih dobi, starih i djece, velikom većinom žena. Prelazio je pogledom preko te anonimne gomile i nastojao shvatiti što ih je vezivalo sa starcem – posao, familija, susjedstvo ili podrijetlo.

Tijekom pogreba držao se u pozadini i podalje. Iza tuđih tjemena nazirao je svećenika koji maše svetom vodicom, čuo molitvu, grebanje lopata i zvuk zemljanog slapa koji se stuštio preko lijesa od jasenovine. Nije bilo trubača, ni muzike, ni plača. Kad je grob zatrpan, masa se razišla u tišini, a on je prišao Luciji. Stegnuo joj je ruku na sućut. Uzvratila mu je stisak.

Nakon pogreba, zaputio se u Ćiril i Metodovu. Parkirao je kod županijskog suda, u pekari kupio burek za ručak i bunt plastičnih kesa za smeće. Kanio je u stanu ostati cijeli dan, i očistiti što više.

Počeo je od frižidera. Utrpao je u smeće svu zaostalu hranu, uključujući i načeti paket jaja, koji je nakon malo promišljanja hitnuo u kesu. U frižider je potom položio svoj ručak – burek i sok od breskve.

Potom se prihvatio robe. Na jednu stranu izdvojio je rublje, pidžame i dotrajale komade, i surgao ih u otpad. Ono malo odjeće što je donekle izgledalo dolično odvojio je u jutenu boršu da odnese u Caritas. Na koncu se prihvatio knjiga. Bilo ih je malo i bile su banalne: pokojni rječnik, nekoliko romana, Dumas, Stendhal, Gorki, Šenoa i Zagorka. Na stranu je odvojio frazeološki rječnik i nepotpuni komplet tehničke enciklopedije. Ostale je knjige izdvojio u zasebnu kesu, a onda zaključio da to nema smisla, pa i njih bacio u otpad.

A onda je u kese smeća počeo trpati sve ostalo, s reda- stare plastične posude i cjedila, štipaljke, baterije, budilnik, vrpce i obrube, škvorcane pjate, čaše mutne od kamenca i aljkavog pranja. Cijeli jedan život rastao je i rastao postajući planina beskorisna smeća. Nikakvo čudo da se Vujnović nije htio seliti, pomislio je.

Oko tri je ručao, pa nastavio raditi. Sredinom popodneva sagledao je svojih ruku djela: piramidu od desetak ili petnaest velikih crnih kesa, kesa u koje je spakirao Vujnovićev život da bi ga stuštio u kontejner. Oprao je ruke, prebrisao sa stola mrvice ručka i počeo kese iznositi do kontejnera, dvije po dvije.

A onda je, kad se nakon druge ili treće ture vraćao u stan praznih ruku, pokraj poluotvorenih ulaznih vrata spazio neznanku.

Stajala je točno pred vratima, plaho, kao da kani ući, ali se skanjuje. Bila je teško odredivih godina, između srednje dobi i starosti. Visoka i suhonjava, doimala se bezlično, jedno od onih lica koje zaboravite u hipu. Neznanka je u rukama držala dječjeg medvjedića u plavoj kecelji s nacrtanim mjesecima, i to je bilo jedino što je na njoj skretalo pažnju.

-Tražite nekog? – upitao ju je.

-Gospodin koji ovdje stanuje- njega nema?

-On je umro. Ja sam vlasnik stana. Mogu Vam pomoći?

Zbunjena novošću, stajala je na polukatu stepeništa i promatrala ga. Gledala ga je kako ulazi u stan praznih ruku i izlazi iz njega s nabreklih kesama. Promatrala ga je s čuđenjem, nepomično, kao da proučava nečiju bizarnu razbibrigu. Niko se dvojio načas smije li je ostaviti samu pred otvorenim stanom – ali, u stanu ionako nije bilo ničeg što bi vrijedilo ukrasti.

Kad se vratio, neznanke više nije bilo, a polukat je bio prazan. Nastavio je s radom i do večeri očistio kuhinju, ispraznio ostavu i iznio preostale kese. Na koncu se osvrnuo: sredina predsoblja, gdje je maloprije bilo gorje plastičnih kesa, bila je sad čista i prazna. Od Vujnovićeve ostavštine, preostalo je otpraviti samo još pokućstvo, i onda je gotovo.

Mrak je već padao. Izvadio je iz frižidera ostatke objeda, isključio ga iz struje, zaklopio škure i zatvorio prozore. Prije izlaska prešao je cijeli stan da pogasi svjetla. A onda je spazio nešto što do tog časa nije uočio.

Stajao je u hodniku, pokraj modrih zaključanih vrata, vrata ulične sobe. Na podu uz vrata uočio je nešto i sagnuo se da promotri. Uz modra vrata, nalazio se plišani medvjedić. Bio je iskrzan po rubovima, očito star. Imao je plavu kecelju po kojoj su bili narisani mjeseci.

Uzeo ga je u ruke, a potom zbunjen položio na pod, gdje ga je i našao.

.....

Idućeg ponedjeljka, radnici su odnijeli Vujnovićevo pokućstvo. Došli su rano ujutro s kamionom, uhvatili se posla i do polovice jutra u kombi utrpali sve.

Kad su završili, Niko im je platio i ispratio ih. Osvrnuo se. Vujnovićev dom bio je sad prazan, nevin i čist, pripravan za svijetlu turističku budućnost.

A opet- Niko je gledao uokolo i otkrivao tragove koji su se opirali zatiranju. Na zidovima je vidio četverokutne kolobare, tragove prijašnjih slika. U parket su bili utisnuti tragovi nogu pokućstva, friži od povlačenja stolice. Vidio je mrlje od proličenog vina i kvasine, bjeline pod iščezlih tepisima, mrlje na zidu, ogrebotine na vratima, naprsline na staklu. Gledao je sve te mače, sjene i friže, i pomislio kako sada slijedi nova faza borbe: u idućim tjednima nasrnut će na njih brusilicom, bojom i vodom, uložiti će truda i novca da ih sastruže, premaže i izbriše, da satre i te zadnje tragove prethodnog života.

Stajao je tako neko vrijeme, a onda se vratio u hodnik. Prišao je vratima ulične sobe. Sada je bilo posve jasno da ključa nema. Preostalo mu je tek obiti bravu i u ulični dio stana ući silom.

Uhvatio je mesinganu kvaku i zatresao je. Nije se dogodilo ništa. Zgrabio je čvršće i stao čupati. Kako nije išlo, otišao je do auta i vratio se oboružan polugom za mijenjanje gume. Zario je u štok i nalegao tijelom na nju. Brže nego što je očekivao, brava je škljocnula, a vrata se otvorila bez šuma.

Prva od dviju soba bila je prazna. Ničeg nije bilo u njoj: ni teške kredence, ni noninog stolića za kartanje, ni kauča u uglu na kojem je umro dida Armando. Samo su izgrebani parket i konture po zidovima ukazivali da je jednom, nekad netko tu živio. Soba je izgledala kao da Vujnović nije ni ušao u nju.

Od sedamdeset treće, od onog jutra kad ju je s ocem zaključao i Vujnoviću predao ključ, Niko nije bio u toj sobi. Ipak- kad je ušao u nju, sjećanja su podivljala. Sjetio se svega. Kalijeve peći u uglu, peći kojoj je sad jedini trag duplja dimnjaka u zidu; sjetio se stolića za karte zgaranog u kut, stolića na kojem je none pila popodne maraskino, čitala krimice na talijanskom i gledala kroz ponistru krošnje drveća u drvoredu; sjetio se balkona, s kojeg je promatrao svijet, i pljuvačkom ciljao prolaznike po nogostupu.

Izišao je na balkon. I on je bio netaknuto isti: ograda od ispupčenih oblih šipki, pod od češke žbuke i pogled na krošnje murvi.

U djetinjstvo je na balkonu provodio sate. Provukao bi glavu kroz rešetke ograde i promatrao bez kraja i konca tjemena prolaznika, rijetke automobile i ulično dovikivanje. S dna ulice bi čuo kolportere, s vrha mirisao vrući kruh iz Biškićeve pekare, a u jesen miris pečenih maruna koje su prodavali ispred kinematografa. Najraniji prizor kojeg se u životu sjeća odvijao se na tom balkonu. Sjeća se sebe kako po ljetnoj žegi sjedi na balkonskom podu, kako iz pištolja na vodu u obliku klauna šprica ulicu, škropi prolaznike. Moralo je biti jako vruće. Kako bi vodom iz klaunovih usta poškropio pod od cementne ligadine, voda bi isparila uz miris vodene pare. Moralo je to biti šezdeset četvrte, najdalje pete. Još nisu imali TV, zasigurno ni telefon, možda ni frižider. Bio je to posve drugi svijet, druga era- a opet, balkon je stajao pred njim posve nepromijenjen, isti, zagledan u isto tupo granje. Ni važ piture, ni čekić i brokva, ni ljudska noga nisu takli ovo mjesto otkad ga je njegov otac iselio. Ta su vrata uvijek bila zaključana, rekla je Lucija. Barba je govorio da to nije njegovo, rekla je. Da mu ne pripada.

Na obzoru iznad Marjana se crnilo. Spremala se kiša. Zatvorio je balkonska vrata i vratio se u sobu. Preostalo je još samo da otvori posljednju sobu, sobu svog oca i majke.

I ta posljednja, najdalja vrata bila su zaključana. Uzeo je polugu i prodrmao ih. Ova se vrata, međutim, nisu otvarala lako. Čupao je iz sve snage, sve dok nisu popustila. Začulo se krckanje jelovine koja se lomi, a onda je brava iskočila, a vrata se otvorila.

Pred njim se otvorila unutrašnjost sobe.

....

Prvo što je u polumraku vidio bilo je tinjanje mnoštva treperavih žižaka. Bile su to svijeće. Treperile su u polutama, desetine njih- neke uspravne i zdravog plamena, neke zagasite i bljede, u tinjanju pred konačno utruće. U tami sobe, iza zatvorenih škura, soba je blještala kao da je crkva.

Prišao je prozoru i otvorio škure. A onda je – kad je mlaz svjetlosti obasjao sobu- shvatio da svijeće nisu sve.

Pred zidom sobe počivali su položeni bokori cvijeća, plastičnog i stvarnog, suhog i svježeg, cvijeća u vazama, buketima i u košarama od navlažene spužve. Neki od buketa bili su očito svježiji. Neki su bili sasušeni, kao da su tu godinama.

Ali, ni cvijeće nije bilo sve. U toj hrpi cvijeća i svjetla, u mnoštvu natrulih gladiola i ruža, među progorenim plastičnim luminima i laticama od najlona, spazio je predmete- dječje igračke, odjeću, cipele. Stajali su oslonjeni ili okačeni o zid, posvuda – pleteni džemper, dječje majice, pelerine, babarini, dude, plišane životinje, plastične lutke upalih očiju i davno nestale kose. A u tom moru bižuterije, krunica, šterika, plastičnih latica, vidio je i slike. Fotografije – neke isprintane, neke na fotopapiru – fotografije djece, tinejdžera i majušnih beba. Sa zida su ga gledali deseci pari dječjih očiju.

Promatrao je prizor koji se sterao pred njim, susprežući se da ne vrisne. Promatrao je taj jezivi, naopaki tabernakul, pokušavajući pojmiti je li on djelo psihopata ili sveca, serijskog ubojice ili mističnog pustinjaka. Tko su ta djeca? Tko je ovo učinio? Je li Vujnović za ovo znao? I tko je on bio? – sva ta pitanja Niki su bubnjala u sljepoočnicama, dok je pred sobom gledao taj perverzni hram koji mu je ulijevao strah.

Pomno je zatvorio škure, zaključao prvo sobu, a potom i modra vrata uličnog dijela stana. Pogasio je sva svjetla i stan dobro zabravio izvana. Krenuo je portunom, a onda na polukatu zastao ispred Bašićevih vrata. Načas je pomislio zakucati, i upitati Bašića zna li što o onom što je vidio u sobi. A onda je odustao, spustio se niz skale i požurio kući.

Jedino u što je bio siguran bilo je to da Maji neće reći ništa.

....

U stan se vratio sutra ujutro, čim je Maja otišla na posao. Otključao je modra vrata, ušao u stražnju sobu i kleknuo pred zid, da prouči svetište.

Prvo je proučio slike. Neke su prikazivale bebe, neke veću djecu ili čak tinejdžere. Na nekim su slikama djeca bila sama. Na nekim su bila u naručju odraslih, u društvu majki, očeva, baka. Neke su fotografije bile isprintane, neke na fotopapiru ili čak polaroidu. Na nekima su se boje izobličile i postale drečave, kao na kolor pozitivu kojeg pohaba vrijeme.

Neki buketi bili su tako sasušeni da su se mrvili na opip. Neki su bili svježi. Poneko je cvijeće uza se imalo vrpču, ponekad i natpis. Vidio je ponegdje da piše MOLI ZA NAS, a drugdje pak samo imena, dječja imena – Dino, Teica, Tihana, Borna. Iznad svijeća, na zidu su grafitnom olovkom, gustim i sitnim slovima, bili ispisani zavjeti. Zid njegove dječje sobe, zid pod kojim je jednom davno bio njegov krevetić, od vrha je do dna bio prekriven molitvama neznanaca, neznanaca koji su od gluhog zida umoljavali zdravlje, sreću na ispitu, uspjeh operacije, dva iz matematike, zaštitu u ratu.

Osmotrio je još jednom odjevne predmete. Po njima i po fotografijama pokušao je razabrati koliko dugo ovo traje. Među ispisanim zavjetima, najstariji su bili stari dvadeset godina. Ali, po odjeći sa slika, po igračkama i robi činilo se da svetište postoji i dulje.

Izlazeći iz sobe, othrvao se porivu da se na vratima prekrsti. Zatvorio je prva, pa druga vrata i spustio se na polukat, do ulaza u Bašićev stan. Pritisnuo je tipku zvonca i pričekao. Pritisnuo je još jednom, pa iznutra začuo duge, teške korake u papučama.

Bašić ga je primio kao da ga očekuje. Otvorio mu je bez riječi i poveo ga niz hodnik do sobe. Kao i one večeri, bio je u sokolskoj majici. Kad je ušao u stan, shvatio je da ne vonja samo Bašić po znoju. Čitav stan vonjao je intenzivno onim mirisom koji odaje samce – mirisom neoprane robe, pišaline, amonijaka i užegle hrane.

Prvi je put bio u Bašićevom domu. Bio je pretrpan. Posvuda uokolo po policama ležali registratori, novine i pehari s natjecanja u dizanju utega. Sada je razumio Bašićevu neobičnu pretilost: starac je bio teški atleta koji se zapustio.

Sjeli su uz stol. Bašić ga je ponudio bičerin, a Niko ga odbio.

„Našli ste?“ rekao je na koncu Bašić, a Niko ga iznenađeno pogleda.

-Znali ste cijelo vrijeme? – upita.

-Čuo sam govorkanja. Ali nisam znao di je. Nisam bio siguran je li u stanu.

-Kad je to počelo?

-Ne znam. Ono što znam je da je osamdesetih bilo tu.

-Već tada?

-Da, ali to je bilo malo, u začetku. Pravo je počelo posli. S ratom.

Niko ga je promatrao. Starac je sjedio uz ovalni stol s kojeg se ljuštila politura. Popio je prvi bićerin travarice i natočio drugi. Ako se moglo suditi po mutnom pogledu i tromim pokretima, ni onaj mu prethodni nije bio prvi.

U početku – nastavi Bašić – ljudi su u Sobu donosili zavjete za djecu. Tako je krenula priča. Govorilo se da je neko dijete – jednom, ne zna se kad, ne zna se koje – Soba izliječila od limfoma. Tako se pričalo. Pričalo se da u Sobu moraš donit predmet koji pripada ditetu, i izmolit spasenje. Ljudi su počeli dolazit. Leukemije, menengitisi, mononukleoze, automobilske nesreće. Vujnović bi im otvarao vrata. Zvali su ga ključar- bar sam tako čuo. I dugo je tako išlo. A onda je došao rat.

-A tada?

-A tada više nije bilo samo tumora, limfoma, hepatitisa. Svačije dite je bilo u nevolji. Svako se bojavao za djecu.

-I?

-Počeli su zavjeti za mulariju u uniformi. Krunice. Slike s kalasšnjikovima. Tu se konačno proširio glas: ako kome daš zavjet u Sobi, čudesno izvuče glavu *tamo*. U Čepikućama, Kašiću, Čavoglavima.

-A kad je rat završio?

-Vratilo se u kolotečinu. Dica, bolesti. Medići, kaputići. Valjda ste vidjeli.

-Vi ste bili u sobi?

-Nikad. - odgovori Bašić. –Došao bih kod Vujnovića. Popričali bi, gledali TV Vijesti, prokomentirali politiku, popili bevandu. Ali, plava vrata su uvijek bila zaključana. Znao sam biti znatiželjan, pa bih to spomenuo. Vujnović bi mi rekao da iza vrata nema ništa. Da je to špajza.

-Ali, morali ste znati. Znae da su tamo sobe.

Bašić nije odgovorio. Samo je pustio bičerin iz šake i nezgrapno ustao iz stolice, vidno premalene za njega. Povlačio je po sobi teško tijelo sve dok nije došao do kredence. Otvorio je staklenu vitrinu i iz nje izvukao snop fotografija. Dogegao se do stola, sjeo, iz snopa izvukao jednu i pokazao mu je.

Fotografija je prikazivala crnokosog, naočitog momka. Bila je nesumnjivo izdvojena iz druge, veće, jer je fotografirani mladić oko ramena imao nečiju ruku, i grlio nekog tko je bio izvan okvira slike. Fotografija je očito prikazivala sportsku momčad, jer je mladić bio u dresu, a u nekoj ruci, ruci čiji je posjednik bio izvan kadra, vidjela se lopta. Neznamac sa slike gledao je ravno u objektiv, drsko i sretno, kao da je sav svijet njegov. Niko je dugo promatrao nepoznato lice, a onda, malo po malo, počeo uočavati detalje: svod obrva, oblik nosa, dugu boru koja se s obraza spuštala na podbradak.

-Vaš sin?- upita.

-Unuk – odgovori Bašić, i uzme sliku natrag. – Sedamdeset treće godište. Bio je brucoš DIF-a, odbojkaš. Poginuo je blizu Stona, odmah, u rujnu, čim je počeo rat. Nije se pošteno ni razgorilo, a njega je pogodilo.

Bašić je sjedio, gleda pred sebe u neku neodređenu točku, a oči su mu se najednom navlažile. – A meni je bilo pred nosom. Soba mi je bila pred nosom – rekao je, dok su mu niz obraze klizile krupne suzne kaplje.

Niko ga je bez riječi gledao. Gledao je starčevo izobličeno tijelo kako se nadima od plača, kako mu se mlohove nadlaktice klate, dok plače i plače, kad da Nike ni nema tu i kao da je njihov razgovor odavna završen.

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U idućih devet tjedana, Niko je uredio stan. Svako bi jutro došao u Ćiril Metodovu oko devet, rastvorio bi sve škure, otvorio sva vrata, i uhvatio se posla. Tijekom devet tjedana oličio je zidove, prebojio vrata, ostrugao progorene uglove, popravio kutne letve, lakirao parket. Bojom, brusom i lakom jurišao je na šest desetljeća taloga, nasrtao na mrlje, pukotine, rupe i grinje, i na koncu uspio. Početkom siječnja bio je gotov, stan je bio uređen, nevino nov, bez tragova ičeg prije.

Koncem prosinca, Maja je obišla nekoliko turističkih agencija i ponudila im stan. Za nekoliko tjedana, dobila je prve ponude. U siječnju su dovezli novo pokućstvo. Dok su radnici unosili ugradbene ormare, novi televizor i kuhinjski sklop, Maja je stan promatrala s gordošću novopečenog vlastelina. „Čoviče“ rekla je, „četiri zvjezdice, pet minuta od povijesnog centra. Agencije će se pojammit kad ovo vide.“

Prošetala je uznošito hodnikom, a onda otvorila modra vrata i ušla u dvorišnu sobu s balkonom. Promatrala je svježe prebrušeni parket i balkonska vrata kroz koja se vidio drvored magnolija i murvi. „Ovo je pravo“ ponavljala je „ovo je pravo.“

A onda je prišla najudaljenijim vratima, vratima krajnje sobe. Bila su sjajno prebojena, uglancana, ali zatvorena.

-A ovo? Zašto je ovo zatvoreno? – upitala je i cimnula kvaku. Niko je stajao uz nju i šutio.

-Može li se ovo otvoriti?- upitala je, i povukla vrata bez uspjeha.

-Može- odgovorio je Niko – Ali nema zašto. Tu nema ništa.

-Kako ništa?

-Tako. Ništa. To je samo ostava.

Maja nije dalje ustrajala. Okrenula se, vratila u predsoblje i s poslovođom otpočela raspravu oko izlazne jedinice za klimu. Niko je izišao na balkon i zapalio cigaretu. S vrha ulice, iz pekare, mirisao je vrući kruh.

Sredinom popodneva, meštari su dovršili posao. Platili su im je i ispratili ih do vrata. Gledao je novo, pristiglo pokućstvo- staklene stoliće, vitrine, Ikeine police i ugradbene ormare – nastojeći shvatiti da li mu se sviđaju. Stari je stan zasjao. Bio je lijep. Nestvarno i ledeno lijep, kao stan nekih dalekih, ravnodušnih bogataša.

„Ideš li?“ upitala ga je Maja, već odjevena u kaput, stojeći u predsoblju s ključevima. „Idi ti prva“ odgovorio joj je. „Ima još par sitnica koje moram obaviti.“

U potpunoj tišini, osluškivao je zvukove Majinog odlaska: ključ izlaznih vrata, pa stubišnih vrata, pa pisak auto alarma, pa zvuk Majinog *Citroena* kako se u rikverc izvlači iz dvorišta. A onda je portun Ćiril i Metodove opet potonuo u tišinu. Bio je sam. Ponovo na miru, uzeo je ključ i otvorio posljednju sobu.

U polumraku je nazirao tek žiške pokoje šterike, lumina ili baterijskog svijećnjaka. A onda je upalio svjetlo, i tabernakul mu se raskrillio pred očima – cvijeće, vrpce, najlon, te oči, nebrojene dječje oči koje pilje u njega kao čiode. Uzeo je jednu od novih, neraspakiranih stolica, i unio je u sobu. Sjeo je nasuprot zidu i promatrao. Promatrao je vosak koji treperi, lumine koji trnu i sva ta neznana lica, zamrznuta u neodređenoj prošlosti.

Sjedio je tako nasuprot zidu, a da ni sam nije znao koliko dugo. A onda ga je iz tuposti probudio zvuk koji je dopirao iz predsoblja. Na vrata sobe ušla je mlada žena, dobro odjevena, s izrazom lica kao da je upravo plakala. Ušla je bojažljivo u sobu i klimnula mu glavom na pozdrav. Prišla je zidu.

Stala je sučelice zidu i kleknula. Uz dno zida položila je šteriku, i zapalila je, spretno, prvom šibicom. Potom je iz torbe izvukla neki majušni žuti jastučić, koji je na licu imao ušiveno sunce. Naslonila je jastučić uz zid, odmakla se, i počela poluglasno mrmljati. Niko se postidi što je uopće tu.

Stajali su tako, dugo, šutke: žena stojeći uz zid, mrmljajući neku molitvenu formulu, a Niko u uglu sobe, na stolcu, kao da je muzejski čuvar. A onda se žena prene i odmakne od zida. Okrene se prema njemu i oslovi ga.

-Vi ste novi ključar? – upita.

Upitala ga je i zastala, iščekujući odgovor. A Niko je sjedio, pognuto glave, i šutio. Želio joj je odgovoriti, ali nije znao koji bi to odgovor bio.

Neznanka ga je promatrala šutke, sve dok nije shvatila da odgovor neće dobiti. Naposljetku je izišla iz sobe. Niko je slušao njene korake iz portuna, i čekao da zamru. A onda je izišao iz sobe, ugasio svjetlo i zaključao vrata.

The Tabernacle

Bašić called him early that morning, just after seven.

It was an autumn Saturday, a lead-grey light seeped in through the shutters, and Niko was idling in bed, troubled by sleeplessness, observing Maja's body move in tune with her breathing under the duvet. He was watching the light conquer the corners of the room when the ringing of the telephone broke the silence. He dragged himself over to the device and heard a raspy, elderly baritone from the other side. "Bašić speaking."

He didn't immediately work out who he was talking to. He stood in the hallway, barefoot, telephone in hand, sifting through his memory, hoping to connect the name he'd just heard to a voice and a face. "Bašić, your former neighbour", the man on the other side added, as if he'd realized what was going on. "Apologies for calling so early, but I think you should come over to *Ulica Ćirila i Metoda*¹." In that moment Niko connected the voice coming from the phone receiver to a face which surfaced from the past. He knew who Bašić was. And he knew exactly what he was calling about.

He replied that he was on his way and hung up the phone. He went to the kitchen, put a Turkish coffee on the boil and spent a good, long while staring blankly at the cheerless autumnal light washing over the street, the parking lot and the line of trees. He returned to the bedroom and put on his socks and a sweater. As he was getting dressed, Maja poked her head from under the blanket and looked at him.

"Where are you going? What happened?" she asked.

"A neighbour called, from *Ćirila i Metoda*.", he replied. "Looks like it's over."

"What's over?"

"You know", he responded. "The apartment thing is over."

...

¹ St Cyril and Methodius Street.

Some ten years have passed since he had last gone into the stairwell of 16 *Ćirila i Metoda*. In those ten years his former foyer had deteriorated even more and was giving off an air of irreversible ruin.

A wrought iron fence decorated with wrought flowers, once the pride of some unknown craftsman, was eaten away by rust, its tips chipped and blunted. The skylight glass was broken, and the plastered walls mangled by air conditioning and TV cables. Whichever way you looked, lines and cables marbled the foyer walls under a layer of cement wash.

Niko climbed to the second floor. He caught sight of Bašić at the landing. He was twenty years older and twenty kilos heavier than the last time he saw him. He was standing at his front door, embarrassingly overweight, unshaven, wearing a tank top. His armpits reeked of sweat. Bašić extended his hand, and Niko shook it, suppressing his repulsion.

“You called”, he said. “What happened?”

Bašić pointed towards the apartment door: “Vujnović is gone. Haven’t heard from or seen him in days.”

“That doesn’t mean a thing. Maybe he’s with his family.”

“What family?”

“Maybe he’s in the hospital.”

“Doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Listen closely.”

Niko put his ear to the door. At first, he heard nothing. But after he had managed to shut out all the external noises, one single monotonous sound remained. From within, quietly and steadily came the murmur of water. A tap was running in the apartment.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Two days, without a stop.”

“Seems like we’re gonna have to break in.”

“No need, Vujnović gave me the key, in case of an occasion just like this one.”

“Well, unlock it then.”

“I’d rather you unlocked the door”, Bašić replied. “It’s yours, after all.”

Bašić gave him the key, and Niko paused for a moment, as if weighing it. He observed the tiny, flat, rust-edged object lying in his palm, and experienced an odd blend of anxiety and relief. He had spent a decade and a half fighting for that key. Fifteen years of his life sucked up by recovery requests, meetings with lawyers, hearings, pleas, appeals to lower and higher authorities.

Now the key was finally in his hand, and the only thing left to do was to put it in the lock, and open the door. And be happy about what he was going to find inside.

...

He turned the key, and the door opened. He felt for the light switch from memory and turned the light on.

Throughout the years, the apartment changed. The furniture was different, as was the chandelier in the hallway. The walls were painted another colour, lighter, more ascetic. But underneath the surface layer of change, Niko recognized the place he grew up in. The same dark wooden fuse box. The same wallpaper with birds and flower buds on it, painted over with a roller. The same yellowish frosted glass doors. And the same smell: the smell of something burnt, a thick, braised mixture, a smell that always came from beyond his co-tenant’s door. The smell came from Vujnović’s side of the apartment back then, too: the pungent smell of cabbage, tripe, sautéed vegetables, liver fried in garlic. Those smells came from beyond the membrane, from the forbidden half of the flat inhabited by their compulsory co-tenant.

Šjor² Vujnović, as far as Niko was concerned, had always been in the flat in *Ćirila i Metoda*. Always, meaning he had moved into the apartment before Niko was born. He was brought in by the People's Committee of the Federal People's Republic just after the war. Vujnović came from somewhere in southern Dalmatia as a shipyard clerk. The People's Committee expropriated the servants' quarters to accommodate him: a room overlooking the yard, a kitchenette and an auxiliary bathroom. At the point in time Niko could remember, Vujnović was around sixty, but to Niko, he seemed infinitely older – grey, gaunt and spotted like a salamander. That was forty years ago. He must've been almost a hundred by now. He had outlived everyone in this house, he outlived both grandma and grandpa Armando, he outlived Niko's father and mother, and eventually stayed in the flat on his own, like the winner of an exhausting marathon.

They spent fifteen years fighting Vujnović for the flat in *Ćirila i Metoda*. They tried driving the old man out of the flat, and he came to each hearing more hunched over and older, but just as persistent, tenacious, irremovable as a limpet. For fifteen years they litigated the return – first Niko's mother, then Niko, then Maja. Maja was the last and most persistent one. "Think of our child," she'd repeat, "we're talking serious capital – a hundred square meters, five minutes away from the city centre, right where the tourists flock. You turn it into studios for rent and secure bread for your child." Maja would say that while sitting at the kitchen table stapling together documents, chasing up lawyers and drafting appeals. And then, in April 2007, Maja returned from a hearing so furious she was out of breath. Niko had just returned from work, he was heating up some soup on the stove, and asked her how it went at the court.

"A protected tenant – that's how it went", she muttered. He asked what that meant, and she told him they'd only regain entry to the flat when Vujnović died. Niko would only get hold of what's his when the old man passed away. Not until someone called him one morning, say Bašić for example, and informed him that the wait was over.

He entered the hallway and looked around.

The flat was silent and showed no signs of life. The only sound that could be heard was the persistent murmur of water behind the bathroom door. The light was on in the bathroom. He

² A title used when referring to adult men, equivalent to the English "sir" or "mister", used in parts of the Adriatic coast historically influenced by the Venetian dialect of the Italian language.

approached the bathroom door and grabbed the doorknob, his stomach in a knot, terrified of what he might see inside.

However, there was nobody in the bathroom. It was all lit up but empty, and only a thin trickle of water was running from the tap. He turned the tap off. The flat fell silent. He returned to the hallway. He felt the first door, and it was locked. He approached the second door, the one to Vujnović's former room. That one was ajar, and a light could be seen through the yellowish glass. He opened the door.

And then he saw the body.

Vujnović was lying on the floor, showing no signs of life. The old man's skinny torso was draped in a fuzzy cardigan, underneath which his pyjamas showed. He was barefoot. He was lying face-down, grinning strangely, and his glasses had slipped off his lifeless eyes.

Bašić followed Niko into the room. He stooped over the body and checked for the dead man's breath using a pocket mirror. When he made sure the old man was really dead, he went to the kitchen and brought some kind of a rag. He wrapped it around Vujnović's chin and knotted it at the crown of his head, although that didn't make sense since the rigor mortis had already set in. Then, Bašić grabbed the old man under his arms and nodded to Niko to get the legs. Niko seized the old man's shins, which were so cold he felt like he had touched a snake. "On the count of three", Bašić said. They picked him up and carried him over to the couch. The dried up dead man was now lying on the couch, peaceful and serene. With the rag framing his cheeks, he looked like someone suffering from a toothache.

When they were done, Bašić went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. Sweat was pouring down his face. "Would you like me to call for the coroners?", he asked and put down his glass.

"Please", Niko responded.

"Want me to call anyone else?"

"Has he got any family?"

"Just a niece, in Munich", Bašić said. "I'll phone her too. You stay here and wait for them."

“Wait for whom?”

“The coroners, of course”, said Bašić and went out, leaving Niko alone.

...

Niko is sitting by Vujnović’s bedside, in the empty flat, and listening. He can hear someone showering, the murmur of the worn-out sewage system, he can hear people talking in the street and the noise of distant traffic. Since the door to Bašić’s apartment is open, he can hear his neighbor’s low baritone from across the hall. He can hear Bašić talking to the EMTs and dictating the address. And then he hears the beep of his cell phone, the sound of a new text message. It’s from Maja. The screen reads DID YOU GET THE KEY!?!?, and Maja’s exclamation marks stick out sharply, like someone screaming in a closed room.

Niko gets up and starts shuffling around the flat. He opens the maid’s room and then the kitchenette. He enters the main kitchen, opens the credenza and inspects its contents. He studies the remnants of a bachelor’s life. Frankfurters. An open bag of spaghetti. A half-empty tin of tea. Old newspapers. Stacks of old newspapers, everywhere, on the sofa, the chair, the nightstand. He goes back into the hallway. He opens the lavatory, and then the pantry. He eventually reaches a blue door, poorly painted, with a brass doorknob polished by countless touches. That door leads into the other wing of the flat, the two interconnected rooms overlooking the street. It leads to the rooms he had spent his childhood in.

You have some square meterage to spare, the People’s Committee told grandpa Armando in ’46. Grandpa Armando was a doctor with a degree from Vienna, honours for his efforts in the People’s Liberation War and a 100-square-metre flat generously spreading across an entire floor of a residential building in *Ulica Ćirila i Metoda*. When the People’s Committee moved in their co-tenant, grandpa Armando was still reading x-rays in the People’s Health Centre, Niko’s father still attended high school, and his grandma was still young. The city was still a big wreck, full of caverns made by British bombs. Cement plants, ironworks and shipyards were being constructed

and reconstructed, countless new job opportunities were opening up, and people drawn in by those jobs were coming into town from all directions.

They came from the mountains and the islands, and the People's Committee mercilessly shoved them into the flats of the bourgeoisie, their maids' rooms, libraries and pantries. That's how Vujnović arrived. A young shipyard clerk, slim and tall, polite and reserved. He lived his life behind the yellowish frosted glass door, the door behind which you could only catch a glimpse of yellowish shadows and hear the shuffling of slippers and the crackling of the dry parquet flooring underneath them.

“You've got an excess of living space”, the People's Committee told Niko's grandfather, but the excess soon turned into a deficit. Niko's father brought his mother into the street-facing side of the flat. Grandpa, grandma, dad and mom squeezed into the two interconnected rooms overlooking the avenue of trees. The young couple had settled into the room further away, while grandpa and grandma would pull out the folding couch in the pass-through room in the evenings, and grandpa would curse the Committee that burdened them with Vujnović. In those two rooms, Niko's older brother Jerko was born. Grandpa Armando died there too, suddenly, of a heart attack, on the folding couch after his evening *bevanda*³. In the part of the flat facing the street, Niko himself was born in 1959. On that side, there were changes in numbers, deaths and births, an inconstant and fickle life burgeoned and thrived. On the side overlooking the courtyard, however, everything was consistently the same. *Šjor* Vujnović would leave the maids' room at six in the morning and go to the shipyard, returning after 3PM. And then, from 3pm onwards, the hallway would be hit by the smell of food. Garlic, fried in oil. *Buzara*⁴. Liver. Fried fish, the pungent odour of smelts or red mullets, coated in flour and fried in a pan.

Rarely, when Niko's father and mother would run into Vujnović in the hallway, he would greet them with a bow, and they would politely return the greeting. Besides that, they barely communicated, as if even talking to the intruder meant some kind of surrender, a confirmation that they complied with that usurpation.

That's how it went on until 1972. And then Niko's father went to the Local Council Committee to complain to an acquaintance. He said that it couldn't go on any longer, that they were cramped

³ A drink made by mixing wine with water.

⁴ An Adriatic dish, the main ingredients of which are shellfish (most popularly mussels, prawns, or shrimp).

together and asked for the removal of their co-tenant. The father's acquaintance got back to him in two days. He told him Vujnović was a bachelor, and there was no way he could get to the top of the housing list at the shipyard. "It's a whole other thing for you", he added. "There's five of you alongside your mother, and you have additional points due to your degree. A new residential block is about to be completed in Split⁵, move there, let go of the city centre and its old folk."

Father and mother deliberated for a long time. Father was reluctant: he didn't want Vujnović to get too comfortable, he didn't want to lose his patrimony. The mother eventually made the decision. "It's a new age", she said, "we'll finally be able to be at ease, we'll be able to breathe." In October that same year, they got the keys to a three-bedroom flat on the 11th floor of a residential block in Trstenik. Niko vividly remembers the moment he first entered that skyscraper, the place he was still living in. The façade wasn't peeling off, the elevator didn't creak like an overly taut ship cable, the walls weren't covered in hearts pierced by arrows, swastikas and stylised dicks. Empty and white, the new apartment looked like heaven.

A few days later, Niko and his father went to empty their belongings from 16 *Ćirila i Metoda*. The moving company workers carried out the kitchen units, bedroom furniture and the couch on which Niko's grandfather died. From the back room, they brought his desk, the children's bed and things. They put his *Matchbox* cars, schoolbooks, children's encyclopaedia, and a book entitled *Mi smo Titovi*⁶ into cardboard boxes. When the workers carried everything out, Niko and his father went around the two emptied rooms. They locked the blue door leading into the hallway and gave the key to *šjor* Vujnović. He accepted it, walked them to the front door and bowed to Niko's father instead of a goodbye, without handshakes or farewells, as if they were going to see each other again that same afternoon, just like every afternoon. Niko's father never saw Vujnović again. Niko saw him thirty years later, in one of the first hearings. He saw him sitting next to his lawyer, just as tall, just as gaunt, but even paler, with a sickly, paper-white complexion. Despite that, to Niko he looked like someone to whom nothing had ever happened, and nothing ever would.

⁵ A neighbourhood in Split, built from late 1960s until 1980s, world famous for its urban planning and brutalist style of architecture. See <http://architectuul.com/architecture/split-3>

⁶ *Mi smo Titovi* – "We are Tito's [Children]", a slogan from Yugoslav times.

...

The coroners came early in the afternoon. They were led by a young doctor, one you could almost describe as handsome, carrying a medical bag and a file folder full of some other people's paper deaths. Alongside her arrived the two paramedics wearing orange ambulance uniforms. The doctor examined the old man's body, checked for pulse and breath, then sat down at the table and pulled out a stack of forms.

She asked the questions, and Bašić answered them. She filled in the first and last name, address, the father's name. She asked for the deceased's year of birth, but Bašić didn't know it. They dug out the dead man's ID from one of the drawers. From it, she copied the year and place of birth and his identification number. "Good God, ninety-eight years old", she commented and put it down on the form. She asked about the dead man's relatives. Bašić gave her the name of the niece and an address in Munich. The German niece's name was Lucija. Lucija, that was the family that needed to be notified.

"We can go", the doctor said and closed her file folder. "It's too narrow for the casket", said one of the paramedics, "we'll have to carry him down in a blanket." He asked Niko for help. They moved the body onto a blanket, each man grabbed his end, and they took to carrying the body down the stairs. The old man was unexpectedly heavy. Niko already felt the sweat breaking out on his forehead and shoulders by the first landing. When they reached the ground floor, Niko asked for a break and let go of the blanket. They put the old man on the floor. Wrapped in bedding, he was lying on the yard's cement floor like roadkill.

They picked him up again and carried him onto the sidewalk. There, the mortuary van was waiting for them, with doors wide open. The coroners pulled a metal box in the shape of a coffin out of it. They put the old man in the box, covered it with a tin lid and loaded it into the cargo space. The van was full to the brim. In the cargo space, there were metal coffins just like it, stacked in three rows, neatly laid out like brioches in an oven, both occupied and vacant, dozens of them. The van was carrying its cargo, the daily harvest of Split's dead.

He stood there, observing the scene until the van doors closed and the van left. And then, when the van disappeared from his sight, he lit a cigarette, exhaled the smoke and immediately threw it away.

...

He took two Valium that night, but slept poorly anyway. He spent a long time tossing and turning and squeezing his pillow, but sleep wouldn't come to him, and his mind couldn't move past the ominous sight: the image of the dead, lying in tin boxes, stacked onto shelves.

He got up and went to the kitchen, draped in a blanket. He put a chamomile teabag in a cup of water and heated it up in the microwave. As he was sipping the tea at the kitchen table, Maja shuffled in from the bedroom. For a short while, she kept quiet and just looked at him reproachfully.

"Please, don't", she finally said. "Just don't tell me you're feeling guilty."

"You didn't see it", Niko wanted to tell her. You didn't see the glasses falling off his face, his waxy, cold shins, you didn't feel the *rigor mortis*, didn't look into the mortuary van that would one day take both you and me. Niko thought all that, but didn't say it, because that wasn't even what was really troubling him. He was bothered by the little key Bašić gave him, and the sticky feeling of ease that overcame him when the dead man's key was finally in his hand.

"You've nothing to feel guilty about", Maja said. "He settled into what's yours and enjoyed it for 50 years. He got comfortable, lived leisurely, with no loans, no rent to pay, on your inheritance, the fruits of grandpa Armando's labour. Imagine how it could've been, had you kept the flat?" she kept on, slightly angry. "Imagine you'd had it the entire time? Think your grandpa would have died like that? Think your father would've dwindled away like that after Jerko's death? Think Jerko would've gone to an oil rig in Nigeria and foolishly gotten into all that?"

She paused for a moment, as if she was out of breath, and then continued the tirade, her tone raised as if she were screaming, but whispering still. "Do you think", she said, "do you think your child would be where he is right now? Five thousand kilometres away, in Vancouver? Do

you think Darko would've needed Vancouver if only he'd had a hundred square metres right in the city centre, five minutes away from the cathedral? Think you'd only be talking to your grandson via Skype now? This Vujnović guy took all that away from you. Took it and didn't even say thank you, not to you, or to your father, or your grandfather. He took it like he had every right to it."

As she was talking, Niko was observing her. She was angry, and like every time Maja was angry, she was squinting, and thin blue veins surfaced on her temples as if she were an alien.

"Don't feel sorry for him. Feel sorry for yourself. Feel sorry for your father", she went on, nervously squeezing a dishcloth, and her angry monologue washed over Niko like an unpleasant, monotonous hum. "God rest his soul – but I'm glad he died. Glad!", she finally said and got up, and Niko stared after her down the empty hallway she'd disappeared into.

"And another thing", she added from the bedroom, "tomorrow that Lucija woman is gonna show up. The niece. Let her in, you have to do that. She can have whatever she wants of the old man's stuff. And that's it. Don't want her getting any ideas."

She said that and wished him goodnight. Niko stayed to rinse out his teacup and then followed after her. By the time he got to the bedroom Maja was fast asleep, and instead of bitter anger, her face was beaming with peace.

When they arrived to *Ćiril i Metodova* the following morning, Bašić greeted them. He was standing at the door and handed them a piece of paper with a note on it. "Vujnović's niece", he said, "she's coming to the funeral tomorrow. She'd like to go through her uncle's belongings. She asked for someone to be here at ten."

They unlocked the flat, opened the windows wide and turned all the lights on. Maja was walking around the flat acting like a buyer. She opened up the wardrobes and cupboards, observed the furniture, rugs and piles of newspapers with a keen eye. She studied the paint on the walls, the parquet flooring, the power sockets and skirting. She was carefully considering and analysing the flaws.

"Every single thing here needs to be chucked out", she concluded, visibly disgusted.

“We have to wait for the niece. Maybe she’ll be interested in something.”

“Who could be interested in this?”

She went into the hallway and took to opening every room in order. She examined the pantry, the kitchenette and the toilet, the condition of which she commented on with a facial expression of concerned disgust. And then she reached the blue door in the middle of the hall. She yanked the doorknob, but the door was locked.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“The door leading into the streetside rooms. That’s where we used to live.”

“It’s locked.”

“There’s gotta be a key around here somewhere.”

They went through the drawers of both cupboards and the one in the kitchen table. They rummaged through old ribbons and spools, matchboxes, wax seals and batteries long drained of their acid. Finally, in a compartment full of shoe brushes, Maja found a bundle of keys tied together with a string. They tried out each and every one, but none of them fit the lock on the blue door.

They sought out Bašić. The fat old man shuffled over to the foyer and looked at the blue door in disbelief. “I gave you everything I had”, he said. “I’ve never seen this door open. Always thought it was a pantry of some sort.”

“Leave it be”, said Maja, “let’s start dealing with this junk. The key’s got to show up somewhere at some point.” She opened up a packet of garbage bags and started filling them with the most obvious garbage – newspapers, bottles, old rags. When she’d filled up four of the bags, she piled them neatly by the front door. She opened a cupboard and noticed a half-empty box of teabags inside. “Just what I needed, to disinfect me from all this nastiness”, she said, poured some water into Vujnović’s kettle and let it boil. When the tea was ready, she poured it into cups and put one in front of Niko.

“Drink up”, she said and sat down. Niko was standing beside the kitchen table and looking straight ahead – looking at Vujnović’s tea, in Vujnović’s teacup, with hot steam rising from it

towards the ceiling. He was looking at the cup, knowing he'd eventually have to overcome the repulsion and take the first sip.

...

He had spent the first thirteen years of his life there. He had spent them at *Ulica Ćirila i Metoda*, number 16, second floor, in those two rooms with balcony access, on the side of grandpa Armando's flat overlooking the street.

Back then, he slept on the pull-out sofa bed in his father and mother's room, next to grandma's card-playing table. He used to write his homework at the desk by his mother's bed, a desk into which he'd carved the 1971 squad of *Hajduk*. He'd spend his days on the balcony which overlooked the mulberry tree avenue and the road. However, he would mostly spend his spare time, his playtime, in the common hallway. The hallway which belonged to nobody, half-empty and dark for that very reason, devoid of life, a passing interworld nobody would stick around or feel comfortable in.

That's why Niko loved it. He loved the fuzzy rug which would, in his imagination, become the Tex-Mex border, the El Alamein battlefield, a Bosnian canyon in which partisan bombers were to ambush a German convoy.

He liked the rug's ornamented trimming, a stripe just wide enough for two *Polytoys* cars to pass each other, to act as a make-believe road. He liked the penumbra of the hallway, the stark shadows lining it, unlit corners from which, in his imagination, Manjnjorgo⁷ and Krampus⁸ would show up. He also liked Vujnović's milky-yellow glass door through which he could hear and see just enough for whatever was behind it to fuel his imagination.

⁷ Manjnjorgo – a demonic figure appearing in local Adriatic as well as Italian folklore (Lozica 1995).

⁸ Krampus – a devil-like figure stemming from Germanic folklore (specifically the Alpine region), popularised as St Nicholas' counterpart, who punishes naughty children (Basu 2018).

Throughout those thirteen years he'd only been to Vujnović's room some two or three times: usually when his parents would send him to deliver a message to their co-tenant, consistent in their rule not to communicate with him unless necessary. However, although he wouldn't go into Vujnović's room, the room itself was the subject of dedicated, espionage-like observation. He'd eavesdrop from behind the door, observe the vague silhouettes and moving speckles through the frosted glass, trying to figure out what was going on on the other side using those abstract sounds and figures. He used to start with his spywork after 3 in the afternoon, when the old clerk would come home from work. From the inside, he could hear the sounds of frying or the simmering of salsa, feel the smell of sautéed garlic and listen to the monotonous voice of the radio news anchor. On rare occasions – really rare ones – he'd hear voices from the other side of the yellow glass: more often male, seldom female.

And then, one Saturday in the early 1970s, Vujnović was visited by a woman. When she entered his room, she closed the door rather carelessly, so a couple of inches of space remained between the door and its frame. Niko was crouching down and spying on them through the door left ajar. Vujnović was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. Across from him sat a middle-aged woman, at whose side was a dark-haired little girl. Vujnović and the stranger conversed quietly, occasionally lowering to a whisper. They talked about politics, mentioning Yugoslavia and Tito, Germany and German names which sounded straight out of a partisan film to Niko.

And then Vujnović raised his voice a bit and spoke to the little girl: "Lucija, honey, take some wafer biscuits." The girl reached into a glass bowl, grabbed a handful of almond wafers and suddenly turned around. She gazed at Niko for a long while, looking unfazed, as he was kneeling on the floor and spying on them through the space left behind the open door. She looked at him in a way that made him feel like she'd shined a lantern at him. Frozen in fear, Niko was just waiting for her to alert the adults and reveal his espionage efforts to them. But the girl stared on and on, and then all of a sudden just lost her interest, turned away and said, "Mom, I want to go home." "We're going in just a moment, Lucija."

Lucija – that was her name.

A little girl named Lucija. And now, forty years later, Niko was sitting in the very room she sat in back then, waiting for that very same Lucija. He's waiting for her to arrive from Munich so

they can proceed with the handover and banish the shadow of her uncle from the flat, as if he'd never existed.

Niko is standing in Vujnović's room. He'd opened the windows to air out the flat, opened the front door wide, and sat at the table until the arrival of his guest. As he's waiting, his gaze turns to the couch, to the very same blanket he used to carry the corpse out two days earlier. That blanket now lay nonchalantly strewn over the couch, as if it were left there by somebody who just went to the fridge to get themselves a glass of milk.

And then, at 10 o'clock sharp, Vujnović's niece arrived. Niko heard footsteps from the foyer and noticed a woman all in black at the door. She had a serious, elongated face and bags under her eyes due to travelling. He recognized the similarities. She had the same raven hair and mournful expression.

She entered the flat and approached him. She briefly hesitated – almost as if she were unsure whether he'd accept it – and then held out her hand.

“So, it's over”, she said, “you must be relieved.”

“I'm not happy about anyone's death.”

“Don't lie. No one is holding it against you. I'd probably want him out too if I were you.”

“I just wanted what's mine.”

“I know. But you have to understand him. He just wanted to die in peace. To die where he had lived.”

They fell quiet for a while, and then Niko broke the silence.

“I wouldn't want to disrupt you in doing what you came here to do. Please, you came to get some belongings.”

“Don't be ridiculous”, she responded. “I didn't come to get anything. There's nothing here. There's just some furniture, which isn't worth the transport fee. Everything else is old junk.”

“But why ask me to come then?”

“I came to invite you to the funeral. I know you wouldn’t come otherwise, after the whole court ordeal and all that. But – I implore you to come.”

She got up and held her hand out again. She headed for the door, but before she managed to exit, Niko stopped her with a question.

“Tell me”, he said, “you wouldn’t happen to have the key to the rooms that face the street?”

She gave him a quizzical look. “I don’t”, she said. “Nor do I know anyone who does. My uncle never went there. It was always locked. He used to say it wasn’t his. That’s what he’d say: that it didn’t belong to him.” She said that and left, waving goodbye.

....

He expected Vujnović’s funeral to be that of an old bachelor. Five or six people next to the casket, a few neighbours or shipyard retirees and Lucija, alone, dressed in black, a miserable substitute for family.

However, when he reached *Lovrinac*⁹, he was surprised. At the time previously announced, quarter past three, a decently sized crowd had gathered in the cemetery chapel of *Sveti Lovro*¹⁰. He noticed Lucija behind the catafalque, surrounded by a parade of strangers expressing their condolences. He also noticed the young priest, Bašić and several neighbours from *Ćiril i Metodova*, all older and more hunched over than the last time he’d seen them. But apart from them, around the catafalque was an unfamiliar crowd of people of all ages, the elderly as well as children, the vast majority of them women. He looked around the crowd, trying to figure out what tied them all to the old man – work, family, the neighbourhood, or their origin.

⁹ The city cemetery in Split.

¹⁰ Saint Laurence.

During the funeral Niko kept to the back of the crowd, further away. From behind other people's heads he could catch a glimpse of the priest sprinkling holy water onto the casket, hear the scratching of shovels and the sound of earth cascading over the ashwood casket. There were no buglers, no music, no crying. When the burial was completed, the crowd quietly dispersed, and he approached Lucija. He squeezed her hand in sympathy. She squeezed back.

After the funeral he headed to *Ćirila i Metoda*. He parked by the County court, got a *burek*¹¹ for lunch at the bakery and a bunch of plastic garbage bags. He intended to spend the entire day in the flat and clean out as much as possible.

He started with the fridge. He tossed all the leftover food, including an open carton of eggs, which he threw in the bag after a bit of deliberation. He then put his lunch – a *burek* and a carton of peach juice – into the fridge.

He then dealt with the clothes. He put the underwear, pyjamas and worn out pieces to one side and threw them away. He put what little clothes looked somewhat presentable into a burlap tote to be taken to *Caritas*. In the end, he turned his attention to the books. Those were few in number and banal: some dictionaries, a few novels, Dumas, Stendhal, Gorky, Šenoa and Zagorka. He singled out a phraseological dictionary and an incomplete technical encyclopaedia set. He put the others into a separate bag, but then decided that didn't make sense and threw those in the garbage, too.

And then he started throwing away everything in sight – old plastic containers and strainers, clothespins, batteries, alarm clock, ribbons and trimmings, cracked plates, glasses dulled by lime scale and sloppy washing. An entire life grew and grew into a pile of useless junk. No wonder Vujnović didn't want to move, Niko thought to himself.

He had his lunch around 3, and then continued working. Around mid-afternoon, he inspected the fruits of his labour: a pile of some ten or fifteen large black garbage bags, bags into which he had packed Vujnović's entire life to be thrown out. He washed his hands, wiped the crumbs off the kitchen table and started taking the bags out to the dumpster, two at a time.

¹¹ A type of savoury pastry of Ottoman (Turkish) origin, popular in the Balkans – usually made by alternating thin layers of dough and layers of filling (minced meat, cheese, spinach, cabbage etc.).

And then, as he was returning empty-handed from his second or third trip, he noticed a stranger by the front door which was left ajar.

She stood right in front of the door, timidly, as if she had intended to go in but hesitated. Her age was hard to tell, somewhere between middle-aged and elderly. Tall and skinny, she seemed featureless, like one of those faces you'd immediately forget. In the stranger's hands was a teddy bear in a blue apron with little moons on it, and that was the only eye-catching thing about her.

"Looking for someone?" Niko asked her.

"The gentleman living here – he's not around?"

"He died. I'm the owner of the flat. Can I help you?"

Confused by the news, she was standing on the landing and looking at him. She was watching him enter the flat empty-handed and exit with black bags full to the brim. She was observing in wonder, motionless, as if she were observing someone's bizarre pastime. For a moment, Niko questioned whether he should be leaving her alone in front of the unlocked flat – but there wasn't anything worth stealing in there anyway.

When he returned, the stranger was gone and the landing empty. He carried on working and cleaned the kitchen, emptied the pantry, and took out the remaining bags by nightfall. Finally, he looked around: the middle of the anteroom, where a mountain of plastic bags used to be just moments ago, was now empty and clean. Vujnović's only remaining legacy was the furniture that needed to be transported, and then it would be over.

It was already getting dark. Niko took his leftover lunch from the fridge, unplugged the fridge, shut the blinds and the windows. Before leaving, he went around the flat to turn all the lights off. And then he noticed something that had, up until that moment, eluded his gaze.

He stood in the hallway, by the locked blue door. He noticed something on the floor by the door and stooped down to have a better look. Next to the blue door was a teddy bear. It was worn out at the edges, visibly old. It had a blue apron with little moons drawn on it.

He picked it up, confused, and then put it back down where he'd found it.

....

The following Monday, the movers took away Vujnović's furniture. They came with their truck early in the morning, got to work and loaded everything into the truck by mid-morning.

When they had finished, Niko paid them and walked them to the door. He looked around. Vujnović's home was now empty, immaculate and clean, ready for its bright future in tourism.

And yet – Niko was looking around and discovering tracks that resisted being covered up. On the walls he could see rectangular halos, traces of pictures that used to be there. The parquet had indentations in places the furniture used to be, and scratch marks made by the pulling of chairs. He noticed stains made by spilled wine and vinegar, whiteness underneath the missing carpets, stains on the wall, scratches on the door, cracks on the glass. He was looking at all those spots, shadows and scratches, and thought to himself that yet another phase of the battle was ahead of him: in the coming weeks, he'll come at them with a sander, some paint and water, he'll put in the time and the effort to scrape them off, paint over them and erase them, obliterate those final traces of the flat's former life.

He stood like that for a while, and then returned to the hallway. He approached the door to the street-facing rooms. It was now absolutely clear there was no key. The only thing left was to pick the lock and forcefully enter that side of the flat.

He grabbed the brass doorknob and shook it. Nothing happened. He grabbed it tighter and tried pulling. When that failed too, he went out to his car and came back armed with a tire lever. He dug it into the doorframe and shifted his weight onto it. Sooner than he'd expected, the lock clicked and the door opened.

The first of the two rooms was empty. There was nothing in it: neither the heavy credenza, nor grandma's card table, nor the couch grandpa Armando died on in the corner. Only the scratched floor and the contours on the walls hinted at the fact that at one point someone used to live there. The room looked like Vujnović had never even gone in.

Niko hadn't been in that room since the morning he and his father locked it up and gave Vujnović the key back in 1973. However, when he walked in, memories ran wild. He

remembered everything. The tiled stove in the corner, whose only remaining trace was how a chimney cavity on the wall; he remembered the card table crammed in the corner, the table at which his grandma used to drink maraschino liqueur in the afternoons, read whodunits in Italian and looked at the treetops outside the window; he remembered the balcony from which he used to observe the world and spit at passers-by on the sidewalk.

He walked out onto the balcony. It was identically intact as well: the rounded, convex railing, the floor made of Czech plaster and a view of mulberry treetops.

As a child he'd spend hours on the balcony. He would squeeze his head through the railing and observe, for hours on end, the scalps of passers-by, the occasional car and the clamour down in the street. From the lower end of the street he could hear the paperboys, and from the upper end he'd smell fresh bread from Biškić's bakery, and in autumn, roasted chestnuts that were sold in front of the cinema as well. The earliest scene of his life that he could remember took place on that balcony. He could remember himself sitting on the balcony floor in summer heat, spraying the street with a clown-shaped water gun, sprinkling water onto people passing by. It must have been really hot. As he'd sprinkle the water from the clown's mouth onto the cement, the water would evaporate, leaving behind the smell of vapour. It must have been in 1964, or 1965 at the latest. They didn't yet own a TV, certainly not a telephone, maybe not even a refrigerator. It was a completely different world, another era – and yet, the balcony stood in front of him completely unaltered, identical, overlooking the same dull branches. Neither a can of paint, nor a hammer and nails, nor a human had crossed this threshold since his father moved out. That door had always been locked, Lucija said. Her uncle would say it wasn't his, she said. That it didn't belong to him.

The horizon above Marjan mountain was turning black. Rain was coming. He returned to the room and shut the balcony door. The only thing left to do was to open the final room, his parents' room.

The last, furthestmost door was locked too. Niko took his lever and gave the door a shake. This door, however, wouldn't yield as easily. He pulled with all his might until it gave in. There was a sound of firwood breaking, and then the lock popped out and the door opened.

The interior of the room spread out before him.

....

The first thing he saw in the dimly lit room was the glow of numerous flickering wicks. Candles. They were flickering in the darkness, dozens of them – some upright and burning bright, some dim and pale, smouldering before finally going out. In the darkness, behind closed blinds, the room was aglow like a church.

He approached the window and opened the blinds. And then – when a beam of light lit up the room – he realized it wasn't just the candles.

In front of the wall, flower arrangements were laid out, plastic as well as natural, dried out as well as fresh, in vases, bouquets, and floral foam blocks. Some bunches were visibly fresh. Some were dried up, as if they'd been there for years.

However, the flowers weren't all either. In that pile of flowers and light, in the abundance of rotting gladioli and roses, among the burnt-through plastic lanterns and nylon petals, he noticed objects – children's toys, clothes, shoes. They were leaning onto or hanging from the wall, everywhere – knitted jumpers, children's t-shirts, overcoats, bibs, pacifiers, plush animals, dolls with sunken eyes and long-gone hair. And in that sea of trinkets, rosaries, candles, plastic petals, he could see photos too – some printed out on regular paper, some glossy – photos of children, teenagers and tiny babies. Dozens of pairs of children's eyes were staring at him from the walls.

He was looking at the sight before him, trying not to scream. He was taking in that creepy, backwards tabernacle, trying to figure out whether it was the work of a psycho or a saint, a serial killer or a mysterious hermit. Who were those children? Who did all of that? Did Vujnović know about it? And who was he anyway? – all of those questions stormed through Niko's temples while he was looking at the perverse, fear-inducing shrine.

He carefully closed the shutters, locked the room and then the blue door leading into that part of the flat. He turned all the lights off and locked the front door tight while leaving. He went down the stairwell, but paused on the landing, in front of Bašić's door. For a moment he considered

asking Bašić whether he knew anything about what he'd seen in that room. But then he gave up on the idea, went down the stairs and hurried home.

The only thing he was certain of was that he wouldn't tell Maja a thing.

...

He returned to the flat the following morning, as soon as Maja left for work. He unlocked the blue door, entered the back room and knelt down in front of the wall to closer inspect the shrine.

First, he inspected the photographs. Some showed babies, some showed older kids or even adolescents. In some of the photos the children were alone. In some, they were held by adults, accompanied by mothers, fathers, grandmothers. Some were printed on regular paper, some on glossy paper or even polaroids. In some, the colours went off and became gaudy, like colour positives worn away by the passage of time.

Some flower arrangements were so dry they'd crumble upon slightest touch. Some were fresh. Some of the arrangements had a ribbon, some had an inscription. Here and there he could make out PRAY FOR US, others only had names, names of the children – Dino, Teica, Tihana, Borna. On the wall above the candles, prayers were written out in pencil, in tiny, densely packed handwriting. The wall of his childhood bedroom, the wall above where his bed used to be a long time ago, was now covered top to bottom in the prayers of strangers, praying at the deaf wall for health, luck in exams, successful surgeries, a D in maths, protection in the war.

He examined the articles of clothing once again. Using those and the photos, he tried to figure out how long the whole thing had been going on. The oldest of the handwritten prayers were some twenty years old. However, judging by the clothing in the photos and the toys and clothes in the room, the shrine seemed to have been around for longer.

While leaving the room, he fought off the urge to make the sign of the cross. He shut the first door, then the second one and descended to the landing, to the front door of Bašić's flat. He pressed the doorbell and waited. He pressed it again and heard long, heavy, slipper-laden footsteps from inside.

Bašić greeted Niko as if he'd been expecting him. He opened the door without saying a word and took him down the hall to the living room. Just like the other night, he was wearing an undershirt. When Niko entered the flat, he realized it wasn't just Bašić that stank of sweat. The whole flat reeked of the tell-tale odour of bachelors – the stench of unwashed laundry, piss, ammonia, and rancid food.

It was Niko's first time visiting Bašić's home. The place was entirely cluttered. Shelves all around were full of file folders, newspapers and weightlifting championship trophies. Niko finally understood Bašić's unusual corpulence: the old man was a devoted athlete who had let himself go.

They sat at the table. Bašić offered Niko a drink, and he turned it down.

"Found it?" Bašić finally spoke, and Niko looked at him in surprise.

"You've known about it the whole time?" he asked.

"I've heard rumours, but I didn't know where it was. Wasn't sure if it was in the flat at all."

"When did it start?"

"No idea. What I do know is that it was sometime in the 80s."

"Already?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't all that much in the beginning. It only really took off later. What with the war and all."

Niko was looking at him. The old man was sitting at an oval table, polish flaking off of it. He had downed the first shot of *travarica*¹² and poured himself another one. Judging by his absent look and sluggish movements, the previous one wasn't exactly his first.

"In the beginning", continued Bašić, "people would bring prayers for children into the Room. That's how the story started. Word was, a child – once, nobody knows when, nobody knows who it was – was cured of lymphoma thanks to the Room. That's what people would say. The story went, you had to bring an item belonging to the child into the Room and pray for salvation. People started pouring in. Leukaemia, meningitis, mononucleosis, car crashes. Vujnović would

¹² An aromatic herb-infused type of *rakija* (a spirit popular in Croatia, generally made of fruit or pomace brandy).

open the doors for them. They called him the keymaster – at least that’s what I’d heard. And that went on for a long time. And then the war came.”

“And then?”

“And then it wasn’t just tumours, lymphomas, hepatitis. Everyone’s child was in danger. Everybody feared for their kids.”

“So?”

“Prayers for kids in uniforms started coming in. Rosaries. Photos with Kalashnikovs. That’s when the word spread: if you pray for someone in the Room, they miraculously make it out of there. From the frontline in Čepikuće, Kašić, Čavoglave.”

“And after the war ended?”

“Same old. Kids, diseases, teddy bears, little overcoats. Suppose you’ve seen it.”

“You’ve been to the room?”

“Never”, Bašić replied. “I’d come over to Vujnović’s flat. We’d talk, watch the news on TV, discuss current affairs and politics, drink *bevanda*. But the blue door had always been locked. I used to get curious and bring it up. Vujnović would tell me there’s nothing behind that door. That it was just a pantry.”

“But you must’ve known. You knew there were rooms back there.”

Bašić didn’t respond. He just let go of his shot glass and clumsily got up from the chair which was visibly too small for him. He dragged his heavy body all the way to a cupboard across the room. He opened up the glass cabinet and pulled a stack of photos out of it. He waddled back to the table, sat down, picked a photo from the stack and showed it to Niko.

The photo was one of a black-haired, handsome lad. It was without a doubt extracted from another, larger image, as the young man in it had someone’s arm over his shoulder and seemed to be embracing someone beyond the confines of this photo. The image must’ve featured a sports team, as the young man was wearing a team jersey and in the hand whose owner was not in the frame, a ball could be seen. The stranger in the picture was looking straight ahead into the camera, bold and happy, as if the whole world belonged to him. Niko examined the unfamiliar

face for a while, and then little by little, started noticing his features: the curve of his eyebrows, the shape of his nose, the long wrinkle going from his cheek down to his chin.

“Your son?” asked Niko.

“Grandson”, Bašić replied and took the photo back. “Born in ’73. He was a DIF¹³ freshman, played volleyball. Died near Ston, right away, in September, as soon as the war broke out. Hadn’t even flared up properly, and he’d already been hit.” Bašić was sitting, staring out at some indeterminate point in front of him, and his eyes suddenly watered. “And it was right in front of me. The Room was right here all along”, he said, as large teardrops were making their way down his face.

Niko was looking at him, without a word. He was looking at the old man’s distorted body moving in rhythm with his weeping, his floppy upper arms swaying as he wept, and wept, as if Niko wasn’t there at all and their conversation had been long over.

....

Throughout the following nine weeks, Niko fixed the flat up. He would come to *Ulica Ćirila i Metoda* every morning around 9, open up all the shutters and get to work. During those nine weeks, he painted the walls, repainted the doors, filed down burnt-through corners, repaired the fixtures, lacquered the floors. He charged at six decades’ worth of sediment armed with paint, a sander and some polish, he attacked stains, cracks, holes and mites and finally succeeded. In early January he was all done, the flat was refurbished, pristinely new, without so much as a trace of what it used to be.

In late December Maja went around a few travel agencies and offered up the flat. In a few weeks’ time she got the first offers. In January they brought in the new furniture. As the workers

¹³ *DIF – Državni Institut za Fiskulturu* (State Institute of Physical Education), today known as the Faculty of Kinesiology.

were bringing in the fitted wardrobes, a new TV and kitchen units, Maja was looking around the flat as proud as a newly proclaimed baroness.

“Man”, she said, “four stars, five minutes’ walk from the historical city centre. The agencies are going to go wild over this”. She proudly walked down the hall, and then opened the blue door and went into the room with the balcony. She was taking in the freshly polished wood flooring and the balcony door offering a view of the magnolias and mulberry treetops. “This is the real deal”, she was saying over and over again. “This is it.”

And then she approached the furthest door, the one leading into the final room. That one was freshly painted and polished, but closed.

“What about this? Why is this closed?” she asked and yanked the doorknob. Niko was standing beside her, quiet.

“Can this be opened?” she asked and tugged at the door, to no avail.

“It can”, responded Niko. “But there’s no reason to do so. There’s nothing there.”

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“Just like that. Nothing. It’s just the pantry.”

Maja didn’t persist. She turned around, returned to the anteroom and started a discussion with the foreman regarding the external unit of the AC. Niko went out onto the balcony and lit a cigarette. He could smell the hot bread from the end of the street.

Sometime in the mid-afternoon the handymen were done working. Niko paid them and walked them out. He examined the newly delivered furniture – glass coffee tables, IKEA shelves and fitted wardrobes – trying to figure out whether he liked them. The old flat was aglow. It was beautiful. A surreal, ice-cold kind of beautiful, as if it belonged to some distant, apathetic rich folks.

“You going?” asked Maja, already wearing her coat, standing in the anteroom with the keys.

“You go on first”, he told her. “There’s a couple more things I’ve got to do.”

In complete silence, he was listening to the sounds of Maja’s departure: the key turning in the front door, then the main entrance to the stairwell, then the car alarm beep, then the sound of

Maja's Citroen reversing out of the courtyard. And then, *16 Ćirila i Metoda* fell silent again. He was on his own. Left alone once more, he took out a key and opened the final room. In the semidarkness, he could only see the wicks of the odd candle, or flameless, battery-operated lantern. And then he turned the light on, and the tabernacle spread out before him – flowers, ribbons, nylon and eyes, countless pin-like children's eyes staring right back at him. He took one of the new chairs, still in its original packaging, and brought it into the Room. He sat across from the wall and observed. He was observing the flickering wax, the dying lanterns and all those unfamiliar faces frozen in an indeterminate point in the past.

He sat like that across from the wall without really knowing for how long. And then a sound from the foyer snapped him out of that stupor. A young, well-dressed woman appeared at the door, her face looking like she had just been crying. She entered the room timidly and greeted Niko with a nod. She walked over to the wall.

She faced the wall and knelt down. She placed a candle at the foot of the wall and lit it, deftly, on the first try. Then she pulled a tiny yellow pillow with a little sun sewn onto it from her bag. She rested it against the wall, took a step back and began muttering in a low voice. Niko felt ashamed to even be there.

They remained like that for a long time, quietly: the woman, standing by the wall, muttering some formulaic prayer or another; and Niko, sitting on a chair in the corner like a museum guard. And then the woman jolted back and stepped away from the wall. She turned towards him and spoke.

“Are you the new keymaster?” she asked him.

She asked and paused, expecting a response. And Niko was sitting there, keeping his head down, in silence. He wanted to give her an answer, but he didn't know what that answer would be.

The stranger was looking at him in silence, until she realized she wouldn't be getting an answer. Eventually, she left the room. Niko was listening to her footsteps in the stairwell, and waiting for them to fade.

And then he exited the room, turned the light off and locked the door.

4. Analysis

Questions regarding the wording of particular translation solutions already arose in the very beginning of the text: is “već iza sedam” closer to “just past” or “right after” 7 AM? By the end of the first page, I would have had to make a decision on whether to domesticate or foreignize the proper names of the characters and locations. I decided to leave them as they were, since that is often the case when referring to foreign names and locations: one might, for example, leave *Place Charles de Gaulle* or *Speicherstadt* untranslated without compromising the general sense of a text, as those are officially recognized names at a(n inter)national level. Other than the proper names, however, I did not keep many elements of the original dialect: even though a certain kind of mood is set by the author’s use of dialect in the source text (ST), those items struck me as too confusing to a foreign reader – all the more so considering that many native Croatian speakers would also find many of these Split-specific expressions difficult to understand. However, I decided to keep some of the elements in their original form to try and preserve at least a hint of the original setting: the title *šjor*, for example, as well as the drinks and dishes specific to this geographical area, like *buzara*, *burek* or *travarica*, make it obvious to the reader that the story is set in a specific place and culture, instead of domesticating them to a particular variant of English and placing them into that particular cultural context. Those items also lack a good enough equivalent in English, considering that they are either not present in the Anglophone world, or that terms existing within the English language would describe something similar, but not exactly the same as those one would experience in Dalmatia (for example, *travarica* is neither brandy, *schnapps*, *eau de vie*, or a herb-infused *grappa*, but a spirit made with regionally specific herbs that might not be as familiar or widespread elsewhere).

However, to ensure that the translated text would be as comprehensible as possible to a foreign audience, most dialect words were translated into their closest extant English equivalent: “politura” became “polish”, “majica na špaline” a “tank top”, “šufigano” – “sautéed”. Some of the remaining culturally specific items were translated descriptively: for example, “fjoriture” as “wrought flowers”, or “jetrica *dolče garbo*” as “liver fried with garlic”.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the process of literary translation is a complex one, and in order to produce a translation which is comprehensible and satisfactory to its intended audience, various compromises inevitably have to be made. Depending on the translator's choice, a text has to either undergo foreignization to a certain degree or be marbled with explanations in footnotes or parentheses. Therefore, although it might have contributed to a different stylistic mood, I believe translating items that do have a close equivalent in English makes for a more comprehensible text than it would have been had I left more colloquial items from the ST untranslated, which would then need to be further explained in footnotes or endnotes. A large number of footnotes or endnotes would certainly slow down the "flow" of the finished translation, which is one of the main reasons why they are not customary in mainstream translation publishing practice – understandably so, I too would prefer not to have to constantly look down or flip pages, losing track of what I was reading while trying to understand what a particular word in a particular sentence means.

Due to the colloquial language endemic to Split used in the ST, this particular case was one that required a more careful translator intervention than would be needed had the ST not incorporated elements of the local dialect. Those interventions were made in a way that minimizes the "foreignness" of the short story and make it more appealing and easier to digest to an English speaker without any knowledge of Split's colloquialisms. The translation could have easily been even more domesticated – but considering that most of the dialectalisms were domesticated in favour of easily understandable contemporary English, I firmly believe that retaining at least some 'artifacts' of the ST prevents the translation from becoming entirely foreign to its author's source culture.

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