

# The Tabernacle

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## The Tabernacle

Bašić called him early that morning, just after seven.

It was an autumn Saturday, 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 Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street." In that moment, Niko connected the voice coming from the receiver with a face which surfaced from the past. He knew who Bašić was. And he knew exactly what he was calling about.

He replied he was on his way and hung up the phone. He went to the kitchen, put a pot of 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 my old neighbourhood," he replied. "Looks like it's over."

"What's over?"

"You know," he responded. "That thing with the apartment is over."

Some ten years have passed since he last entered the stairwell of 16 Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street. 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 units 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’s gone. Haven’t heard or seen him in days.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. 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 something like that.”

“Well, open it then.”

“I’d rather you did it,” Bašić replied. “It’s your apartment, 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.

Over the years, the apartment had 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 wall decorations of birds and flower buds, painted over with a roller. The same yellowish frosted glass doors. And the same smell: the smell of something overcooked, a thick, browned 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, stewed vegetables, liver braised in garlic and wine. Those smells came from beyond the membrane, from the forbidden half of the flat inhabited by their compulsory co-tenant.

Mister Vujnović, or Šjor Vujnović as they called him in the local dialect, as far as Niko was concerned, had always been in the flat in Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street. 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. To accommodate him, The People’s Committee expropriated the former servants’ quarters consisting of a room overlooking the yard, a kitchenette, and a toilet. 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. This 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 remained in the flat on his own, like the winner of some exhausting marathon.

They spent fifteen years fighting Vujnović for the flat in Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street. 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 for repossession – 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, rent them to tourists, and provide for your child." Maja used to say this, sitting at the kitchen table stapling together documents, chasing up lawyers and drafting appeals. And then, in April 2007, Maja returned from one of the hearings so furious she was literally steaming. Niko had just returned from work, he was heating up some soup on the stove, and asked her how it went.

"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 get hold of what was his only after the old man passed away. Only after someone called him one morning, say Bašić for example, and informed him the wait was over.

He entered the hallway and looked around.

The flat was silent, showing 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. His stomach in a knot, terrified of what he might see inside, he approached the bathroom door and grabbed the doorknob.

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 tried the first door, but 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 brought his pocket mirror to the old man's mouth to check if he was breathing. When he made sure the old man was dead, he went to the kitchen and brought some 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 took 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 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 run-down 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 low

baritone from across the hall. Bašić is talking to the EMTs and dictating the address. And then he hears the beep of his cellphone, 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 looking around the flat. He opens the maid's room and then the kitchenette. He enters the main kitchen, opens the cabinet, and inspects its contents. He studies the remnants of an old 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 footage to spare, the People's Committee told Grandpa Armando back in 1946. 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 Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street. 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 craters made by British bombs. Cement factories, iron and steel plants, and shipyards were being constructed and reconstructed, countless new job opportunities were opening up, and people drawn in by those jobs were coming to the city 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 creaking of the dry parquet flooring underneath them.

"You've got a surplus 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 settled into the room further away, while every night Grandpa and Grandma would pull out the folding couch in the connecting room in the evenings, and Grandpa would curse the Committee that had 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 glass of bevanda. In the part of the flat facing the street, Niko, too, 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 always stayed the same. Šjor Vujnović would leave the maids' room at six in the morning and go to the shipyard, returning after 3 p.m. And then, right after 3 p.m., the smell of cooking would flood the hallway. Garlic sautéed in olive oil. Stewed prawns and mussels. Pan-seared liver. The pungent odour of fish sprats or red mullet, coated in flour and fried in a pan.

Occasionally, when Niko's father and mother ran 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 his usurpation.

It stayed like that until 1972. That's when Niko's father went to the Local Council Committee to complain to an acquaintance. He said it couldn't go on any longer, they were cramped together, and so he 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. "Your family, you're a different matter altogether," he added. "There's five of you alongside your mother, and you get additional points because you graduated from college. A new residential block is about to be completed in Split 3<sup>[2]</sup> You should move there, forget the centre and its old folk."

Mom and Dad thought about it long and hard. Father hesitated: he didn't want Vujnović to get too comfortable, he didn't want to give up on his patrimony. It was Niko's mother who eventually made the call. "It's a new age," she said, "we'll finally have enough room for everyone, 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 remembered the moment he first entered that skyscraper,



the place he still lived 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 Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street. The moving company workers carried out the kitchen cabinets and appliances, 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 *We're Comrade Tito's Children* into cardboard boxes. When the workers took 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, at one of the first hearings. He saw him sitting next to his lawyer, just as tall, just as gaunt, but paler, with a sickly, paper-white complexion. Despite all this, to Niko he seemed like someone to whom nothing had ever happened, and nothing ever would.

Coroners came early in the afternoon. They were led by a young doctor, one you could almost describe as good-looking, carrying a medical bag and a folder full of some other people's paper deaths. Alongside her arrived two paramedics dressed in their orange 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 a bunch of questions, and Bašić answered. She filled in the first and last name, the address, the father's name. She asked about 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 and she copied the year and place of birth and his identification number. "Good God, ninety-eight years old," she said and put it down on the form. She asked about the dead man's next of kin. Bašić gave her the only niece's name and address. Her name was Lucija, and she lived in Germany, in Munich. Lucija, she was the family that needed to be notified.

“We’re done. Let’s go,” the doctor said and closed her 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, then each man grabbed his end, and they started 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 cement floor of the yard like roadkill.

They picked him up again and carried him onto the sidewalk. There, the mortuary van was waiting for them, its doors wide open. The coroners pulled a metal box in the shape of a coffin out of the van. 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.

Niko 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, you didn’t look into the mortuary van that would one day take both you and me. Niko thought all this, but he 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 took what's yours and enjoyed it for fifty years. He got comfortable, no loans, no mortgage, no rent to pay, he wallowed in your inheritance, in the fruits of Grandpa Armando's labour. Imagine what it would've been like, 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 withered away like that after Jerko's death? Think Jerko would've gone to that oil rig in Nigeria and gotten himself killed? That was such a stupid way to die."

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 on Skype now? This Vujnović guy took all that away from you. Took it and didn't even say thank you, not to you, not to your father, not to your grandfather. He took it like he had every right to it."

Niko observed her as she spoke. 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. I'm glad!" she finally said and got up, and Niko stared after her down the empty hallway she'd disappeared into.

"And one more thing," she added from the bedroom, "tomorrow that Lucija woman is gonna show up. The niece. Let her in, you have to. Let her go through the old man's stuff and take whatever she wants. And that's it. Don't want her getting any ideas."

And then she 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 at Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street the following morning, Bašić was there to greet them. He was standing in the doorway 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 on all the lights. Maja was walking around the flat acting like a buyer. With a keen eye, she opened the wardrobes and cupboards, observed the furniture, rugs and piles of newspapers. She studied the paint on the walls, the parquet floor, the power sockets, and the skirting boards, 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 one by one. 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 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 all the keys 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 get rid of this junk first. The key’s got to show up somewhere at some point.” She opened a packet of garbage bags and began 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. “Just what I need 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 and put a cup in front of Niko.

“Drink up,” she said and sat down. Niko stood beside the kitchen table, looking straight ahead – at Vujnović’s tea, in Vujnović’s teacup, with hot steam rising from it towards the ceiling. As he was looking at the cup, he knew that he’d eventually have to overcome the repulsion and take the first sip.

He spent the first thirteen years of his life there. He spent them at Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street, 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 his grandma’s card-playing table. He used to write his homework at the desk by his mother’s bed, the desk into which he’d carved the names of all the players of the 1971 Hajduk squad. He spent his days on the balcony overlooking the street and its line of mulberry trees. However, when it came to his spare time, the time he spent in play, he’d almost always go into the hallway his family shared with Vujnović. The hallway belonged to no one, 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 commandos were to ambush a Nazi German convoy. He liked the rug’s ornamental trimming, a stripe just wide enough for two Politoyo cars to pass each other, to act as a make-believe road. He liked the semi-darkness

of the hallway, the stark shadows lining it, unlit corners from which, in his imagination, Manjinjorgo<sup>[3]</sup> and Krampus<sup>[4]</sup> would emerge. He also liked Vujnović's milky-yellow glass door through which he could hear and see just enough of whatever was behind it to fuel his imagination.

Throughout those thirteen years, he'd only been to Vujnović's room 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 seldom went to 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. His spywork usually began after 3 in the afternoon, when the old clerk came 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 crouched down and spied on them through the crack. Vujnović was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. A middle-aged woman sat across from him, and beside her, a dark-haired little girl clung to her skirt. Vujnović and the stranger conversed quietly, occasionally lowering to a whisper. They talked about politics, mentioning Yugoslavia and Tito, Germany and German names which to Niko sounded like something straight out of a partisan film.

And then Vujnović raised his voice a bit and spoke to the little girl: "Lucija, sweetie, take some 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 crack created by the open door. She looked at him in a way that made him feel like she'd shone a lantern on 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 interest, turned away and said, “Mom, I want to go home.”

“In a moment, Lucija. Be patient,” the stranger said.

Lucija – that was her name. A little girl named Lucija.

And now, forty years later, Niko is sitting in the very room she sat in back then, waiting for that very same Lucija. She’s on her way 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 has opened the windows to air out the flat, opened the front door wide, and now he is sitting at the table and waiting for his guest to arrive. 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 lies nonchalantly spread over the couch, as if left there by somebody who has just run to the fridge to get themselves a glass of milk.

And then, at 10 o’clock sharp, Vujnović’s niece arrives. Niko hears footsteps from the foyer and notices a woman all in black at the door. She has a serious, elongated face and bags under her eyes due to travel. He recognizes her immediately. That same raven hair and mournful expression.

She enters the flat and approaches him. She briefly hesitates – almost as if she’s unsure if he’d accept it – and then holds out her hand.

“So, it’s over,” she says, “you must be relieved.”

“No one’s death brings me joy.”

“Don’t lie. I’m not holding it against you. No one would. 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 fall quiet for a while, and then Niko breaks the silence.

“I wouldn’t want to be in your way. Please, you came to get some belongings.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she responds. “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 junk. Old junk.”

“But you asked to meet me. Why?”

“Because I want you to come to his funeral. I know you wouldn’t come if I didn’t come here to ask you, after the whole court ordeal and all that. But – please, come.”

She gets up and holds her hand out again. She heads for the door, but before she manages to exit, Niko stops her with a question.

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

She gives him a quizzical look.

“I don’t,” she says. “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 says this and leaves, 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 the Lovrinac Cemetery, he was surprised. At the scheduled time, quarter past three, a decently sized crowd gathered in the chapel of St Lawrence, after which the cemetery was named. 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 Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street, 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.

During the funeral, Niko kept to himself, away from the crowd. 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 ash wood casket. There were no buglers, no music, no crying. After the burial, the crowd quietly dispersed, and he approached Lucija. He clasped her hand in a gesture of sympathy. She squeezed back.

After the funeral, he headed to Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street. He parked by the County Court, got a burek for lunch at the bakery, and he stopped by the store to buy a bunch of plastic garbage bags. He intended to spend the entire day in the flat and clean out as much as possible.

He began 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, and then he put his lunch – a burek and a carton of peach juice – back in their place.

He then dealt with the clothes. He separated the underwear, pyjamas, and the clothes that looked too worn-out to one side and threw it all away. Those few items that seemed somewhat presentable he packed into a burlap tote bag to be taken to Caritas. Finally, he turned his attention to books. They were few in number and mostly 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 rest into a separate bag, but then he decided it didn't make sense and threw everything away.

After that, everything in sight found its way into the garbage bags – 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 three, and then continued his work. 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 bins, two at a time.

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

She stood right at the door, timidly, as if she wanted to walk in but hesitated. Her age was hard to tell, somewhere between middle-aged and elderly. Tall and skinny, she seemed unremarkable, like

one of those faces you immediately forget. In the stranger's hands, there was a teddy bear in a blue apron with little moons on it, and that was the only thing about her that stood out.

"Looking for someone?" Niko asked.

"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 just stood on the landing staring at him. She watched as he entered the flat empty-handed only to come back with black bags full of junk. Stunned, motionless, she looked like someone observing some bizarre pastime. For a moment, Niko wondered if he should leave her alone in front of the unlocked flat – but there was nothing worth stealing anyway.

When he returned, the stranger was gone and the landing empty. He went on with his work and cleaned the kitchen, emptied the pantry, took out the remaining bags by nightfall. Finally, he looked around: the middle of the hall, where a mountain of plastic bags had been 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 done.

It was 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 and stooped down to have a better look. Next to the blue door there was a teddy bear. It was worn out at the seams, 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 early in the morning, got to work, and loaded everything into their truck by mid-morning.

When they 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, wherever Niko looked, he saw marks of something that resisted to be turned to oblivion. The walls still bore their rectangular halos, from pictures that used to hang there. The flooring had indentations in places where furniture used to stand, and scratch marks made by the pulling of chairs. Niko noticed stains of spilled wine and vinegar, whiteness underneath the vanished carpets, water stains on the walls, scratches on the door, cracks in the glass. Looking at all those spots, shadows and scratches, he realised yet another battle was ahead of him: in the coming weeks, he would have to come at them with a sander, some paint and water, he would put in the time and the effort to scrape them off, paint over them and erase them, obliterate the 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 room. 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 gripped it tighter and tried pulling. When that failed, 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 cupboard, nor his grandma's card table, nor the couch in the corner where Grandpa Armando had died. The scratched floor and the faded contours on the walls were the only hints of the fact that at one point someone lived there. The room looked like Vujnović had never even gone in.

Niko hadn't been in there since that morning back in 1973 when he and his father locked up the room and gave Vujnović the key. However, when he walked in, memories ran wild. He remembered everything. The tiled stove in the corner, whose only remaining trace was now 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 look at the treetops outside the window; he remembered the balcony from which he used to observe the world and spit at passers-by down on the sidewalk.

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

As a child, he'd spend hours on that 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. The earliest scene he could remember took place on that balcony. He remembered himself sitting on the balcony floor in the 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 steam. It must have been 1964, or 1965 at the latest. They didn't yet own a TV set, 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. It didn't belong to him.

The horizon above Marjan Park 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 last room, his parents'.

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 caved. There was a sound of pine wood breaking, and then the lock popped out and the door opened.

The room spread out before him.

The first thing he saw in the dimly lit room was the glow of countless wicks. Candles. They flickered 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. Leaning onto the wall or hanging from it, 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 also saw photos – 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 scene before him, trying not to scream. He was taking in that creepy, primitive 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 this? Did Vujnović know about it? And who was he anyway? – all those questions stormed through Niko's brain while he was looking at the perverse, fear-inducing shrine.

He carefully closed the shutters, then 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. 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 opened the blue door, entered the back room, and knelt in front of the wall to closer inspect the shrine.

First he studied the photographs. Some showed babies, some showed older kids or even adolescents. In some of the photos, the children were alone. In others, they were held by adults, accompanied by mothers, fathers, grandmothers. Some were printed on regular paper, some on glossy paper or even polaroids. Some had lost their colour and become hazy, like colour positives worn away by the passage of time.

Some flower arrangements were so dry they'd crumble at the slightest touch. Some were fresh. Some had ribbons, some had inscriptions. Here and there he could make out the sentence: PRAY FOR US. Others only had names, names of the children – Dino, Teica, Tihana, Borna. On the wall above the candles, prayers were written in pencil, in tiny, densely packed handwriting. The wall of his childhood bedroom, the wall above where, once, a long time ago, his bed used to stand 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 went back to the clothes and examined them more closely. Using the clothes and the photos, he tried to figure out how long the whole thing had been going on. The oldest of the prayers were some twenty years old. However, judging by the clothing in the photos and the toys and other things in the room, the shrine seemed to have been around for longer.

As he left the room, he fought off the urge to make the sign of the cross. He shut the first door, then the second, 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-muffled 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 at 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 had been 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, with polish flaking off it. He had downed the first shot of travarica and poured himself another one. Judging by his absent look and sluggish movements, the previous one wasn’t exactly his first.

“In the beginning,” Bašić went on, “people brought prayers for their children and left them in the Room. That’s how it all 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 said. 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 open the door 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 frontlines 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, share a carafe of bevanda. But the blue door had always been locked. I’d get curious and bring it up. Vujnović would tell me there’s nothing behind the door. Just a pantry.”

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

Bašić didn’t reply. 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 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 showed a black-haired, handsome young man. No doubt it was extracted from a larger image, given that the young man in it had someone’s arm over his shoulder and he seemed to be embracing someone beyond the confines of this photo. The image must’ve featured a sports team, because the young man was wearing a team jersey and in the hand of a person whose owner was not in the frame a ball could be seen. The stranger in the picture was looking straight into the camera, bold and happy, as if the whole world belonged to him. Niko examined the unfamiliar face, 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?” Niko asked.

“Grandson,” Bašić replied and took the photo back. “Born in ‘73. He studied physical education, had just enrolled in college, played volleyball. He died near Ston, right at the start, in September, just when the war broke out. It hadn’t even flared up properly, but the bullet found its way to him.”

Bašić just sat there, staring blankly ahead, and his eyes suddenly welled up. “And it was right in front of me. The Room was right here all along,” he said, as large teardrops trickled down his face.



Niko was looking at him, without saying a word. He was looking at the old man's distorted body moving up and down in sync with his weeping, his floppy upper arms quivering as he wept, and 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 up the flat. He would come to Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street every morning around 9, open all the shutters and get to work. During those nine weeks, he painted the walls, repainted the doors, scraped down burnt-through corners, repaired the fixtures, varnished the floors. He charged at six decades' worth of sediment armed with paint, a sander, and some polish, he attacked stains, cracks, holes, and dust 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 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 historic 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's this? Why is it locked?" 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 insist. She turned around, went back to the hall and engaged in a discussion with one of the workers regarding the placement of the external AC unit. 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 finally done. 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 coming?” Maja asked, already wearing her coat, standing in the anteroom with the keys. “You go. I’ll catch up,” he told her. “There’s a couple more things I’ve got to do.”

In complete silence, he listened to the sounds of Maja’s departure: the key turning in the front door, the clang of the heavy main door at the entrance into the building, the car alarm beep, the sound of Maja’s Citroën reversing out of the courtyard. And then, 16 Sts. Cyril and Methodius Street fell silent again. He was on his own. Left alone once more, he took his key and opened the final room. In the semidarkness, he could only see the wicks of an odd candle, or a flameless, battery-operated lantern. And when he turned on the light, the tabernacle spread out before him – flowers, ribbons, nylon, and those eyes, everywhere, 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 watched. He observed 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 it. A young, well-dressed woman appeared at the door, her face looking like she had 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. She placed a candle at the foot of the wall and lit it, deftly, on the first try. Then she pulled out 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.

She asked and paused, expecting a reply. 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 listened to her footsteps in the stairwell, waiting for them to fade.

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

[2] 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>

[3] Manjnjorgo – a demonic figure appearing in local Adriatic as well as Italian folklore.

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



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