

And Then, All Over Again

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Part 1

Goodbyes

Chapter 1

A Marble Headstone and a Van

1.

Undertakers had been standing for a long time over the coffin in the Brstina family home in Trebinje.

They studied it.

‘This is a hell of a coffin,’ said one of them.

When grandpa Milan and his brother Miloš entered the room, it became clear that it was time for action. They were supposed to raise the coffin containing great-grandfather Laza, their father, of course. It was the first time after ten years that Milan and Miloš were in the same room.

Meanwhile, grandma Mara and Nenad were standing in front of the house. Grandma was smoking and my fifteen-year-old father had undone a button on his shirt because it was a hot day. Suddenly, they heard a thump coming from the house. Nenad looked at his mother.

‘Milan?’ Mara shouted.

Milan did not respond, but various cries echoed from the house.

‘Push left... Left!’ said the familiar voices in the house.

‘It won’t go further, pull it back, back!’

‘Let go, come on,’ Milan’s voice said.

Their faces flushed, Milan, Miloš, and two undertakers came out of the house without the coffin. Mara and Nenad approached them. They all stood in front of the house window.

‘Milan, what’s going on?’ Mara asked.

‘It can’t... We can’t ramrod it through the hallway. It gets stuck on the corner, it won’t budge an inch forward or backward...’

All four looked at the window. Miloš raised both hands. He roughly measured the height of the window and turned to the undertakers triumphantly.

'It's 160 centimeters at most. You two stay here, and Milan and I are going to shove it through the window,' he said and looked at his brother, who couldn't help but smile. Miloš just kept shaking his head.

'Our father died and you're smiling,' said Miloš, a retired colonel at the time.

'I'm going to punch you in the head,' Milan threatened.

They sized up each other for a few moments and then peacefully went into the house. In the meantime, a lot of people had started gathering in the yard. Apart from Mara and Nenad, the nearest neighbors showed up, together with the surviving widows of a few miners, the former co-workers of grandpa, whose coffin had stuck so awkwardly.

'One, two, go!' boomed from the house.

The coffin appeared in the window, and then, behind it, came Milan and Miloš, who managed to raise it and deliver it to the undertakers.

'Hold it there, it's dropping, get it!' grandpa yelled at the undertakers.

Two ladies, who came to say goodbye to Laza, were looking at the coffin suspended from the window and shaking their heads.

'Poor old Laza, as in life, so in death... You've always left through the window,' said one lady to the other. The latter smiled wistfully and looked at her friend.

Their conversation did not escape my father and grandmother.

'What are these two talking about?' asked Nenad.

'About your grandfather being a ladies' man,' grandma answered.

2.

My grandfather buried his father in an oversized coffin, my father buried my grandfather in an undersized coffin. That's how it goes. Time swallows everything. Computers used to be as heavy as ships. Now they are smaller than a raindrop.

Grandfather was a big man, weighty and with piercing blue eyes. He loved a painting hung above his armchair, done by an anonymous Russian artist: an old man walking through the snow, leaning on a stick, his head wrapped in a shawl. Nothing around him, just a clearing; a white surface and snow, without an end or a beginning.

‘It’s a beautiful painting,’ he told me a year before he died, nodding. Apparently, he had explained something to himself.

I looked at the painting and noticed that the frame was slanted. Grandma came into the room and brought grandpa’s pills and a glass of water.

‘Bottoms up,’ she said loudly. ‘Just try not to choke. Remember how you hiccupped last night? I didn’t get a wink of sleep.’

‘It’s not that I like to hiccup,’ my grandfather protested.

He was hard of hearing, and his understanding was even worse. But he felt grandma’s presence and took the pills. She impatiently waited for him to finish.

The previous night, she crushed her fingers in a door, when the draft slammed it shut while she was leaning against the doorjamb to catch a breath. Her carotid arteries were 85 percent blocked, which caused frequent bouts of dizziness and buzzing in her ears. ‘I have a tenant in my head,’ she said. ‘It’s like he’s there all the time, and I’m not crazy.’ The regular *košava* wind started blowing and the whole city smelled of bad eggs. It started blowing and slammed the door, which wouldn’t have happened, it really wouldn’t, if she had remembered to close the front door. Her finger got swollen so much that she had to take off her wedding ring.

‘If it’s broken, it’s going to be awful,’ the doctor explained to her. But it seemed it wasn’t. At least that was what it looked like. The hospital was too crowded.

‘Look at his legs, blue as a plum. And his slippers are full of water. I pour at least three glasses out of them every night. But it seems the plants like it, this stale water. They perked up.’

‘Are you talking to me?’, my grandfather asked and looked vacantly at his wife. His Slavic blue eyes, in stark contrast to the black eyes of my grandmother – an ember after feeding the fire.

This look encompassed everything, from hatred to trust to gratitude.

Only old people can look at each other like that.

‘I’m talking to Andrej, don’t you worry about anything.’

When was that? Probably about six or seven years ago. My father wasn’t there, meaning they were already at each other’s throats. So, probably a year before his death. Father was probably there in fact, maybe he had just gone to the toilet? Diabetes had already taken hold unbeknownst to him, so he went to take a leak assuming it was just an enlarged prostate or some other age-related problem.

Maybe it was then? No, it had to be after their feud had already started. Otherwise, he would have set the picture frame right. He would be upset because it was slanted.

When sitting, as I remember him, grandpa looked like a mountain. But being dead now, however, he fitted into an urn 20 cm high, which then fitted into a columbarium 64 by 64 cm. Just for comparison, this isn't even as big as a rose bouquet or as wide as the laptop I'm typing on. My grandfather, a real hulk, dropped from 130 kilograms to less than 130 grams.

An urn is, apparently, a hermetically closed container made of a lasting material. It does not dissolve, it is rarely opened, and in the nineties, with the war and everything, it was a convenient hiding place to stash money.

All that is, I believe, utterly unimportant to my grandfather. I don't think he is planning to run away anywhere.

Nadja attended the funeral too and fainted when the urn was lowered into the ground. It was not the sorrow that got her, but the heat. It was July. A horrible month. I looked at my father, not knowing what to do.

'Go, always to the living,' he said, and I ran to see what was going on with Nadja.

She came to, and grandpa went under.

She was lucky it was a funeral, so nobody noticed the piss stain on her black pants.

Her muscles relaxed for a moment. The body was resting, letting go, letting out, waiting for the brain to say: 'Get up!'

Let's move on.

3.

At his grave, not so long ago, my father, grandma and I were standing. We were looking at his gravestone blankly, just like you look at graves. It was the anniversary of grandpa's death, July.

The fifth or the sixth? Could have been the seventh as well. Lena never met him, so it must have been before her. If Nadja fainted at the funeral, that means she met him. How long did I date her after that? Did Nadja meet Dara? Father brought Dara to his apartment shortly after my mother had met Zoran, and I met Zoran when mother and he picked up Lena and me at the bus station after the

front suspension on my car had failed. But Dara's arrival at my father's apartment coincided with Nadja's departure from my life.

I'm not sure anymore.

Everything overlapped.

Such turbulent times.

So, the fifth or sixth anniversary. Probably the sixth.

I don't want to ask my father, he would be upset because I can't remember when grandpa died.

A sparrow repeatedly perched on a nearby grave, and my grandmother kept an eye on it. My father kept an eye on grandma's gaze, and I kept an eye on his. The sparrow flew away, never to be seen again, and grandma kept looking at that grave.

'We should have chosen this golden lettering,' she said, just to say something. 'It sticks out nicely. You can clearly see his neighbor's name and surname, and there's nothing on our grave.'

I looked at the surnames on the gravestones, grandpa's neighborhood.

I am chronically afraid of death.

I tried to rationalize it.

His first neighbor, Samardžić, died in 2014. He was born in 1952. He lived 62 years. I didn't know how to rationalize, I kept counting. I just wanted to outlive him, that was my only thought. Not enough, too short. I am left-handed. Analyses from the nineties claimed that, on average, left-handed people lived nine years shorter than the right-handed. Such awful analyses!

I should be present. I was thinking about that word, *present*. Doesn't everybody say that? I want to be present. But what does that mean actually? I didn't have time to think about that as I heard my father's voice.

'Mum, the lettering is visible enough. Why is that important now?'

'It's just that I think it would be nice if the name and surname were visible, so that people know whose grave they visit. Nothing else.'

'Nobody visits his grave. Just you, Andrej, and me. And we know what Milan's name was. Not even his own son comes to visit him.'

'Okay, I'm going to be here one day. And Violeta, the officer lady neighbor, she gave her a rank, 'might come to visit me.'

'By the time you die, she'll have been long dead,' father said and nervously looked at the sky; dramatically even, as always when he spoke to his mother. As if

the answer was somewhere up there, above the ground, and not below or inside it. He shook his head, I shook mine. Not because of grandma, but because of him. He could get a grip, I thought but didn't say it. He spent every day with her, and I was there just recreationally. Grandma kept talking, not minding him at all. Years of experience: they were over 150 years old together.

'I'll call the office to ask them to install a little bench next to the grave. Just not made of metal, it gets cold in winter. Then I can come here and have some rest.'

'But, mum, when do you come here without me? What would you even do at the grave for so long?'

I was still googling. I could not take it anymore. *Do left-handed people live shorter?*

'Talk to him a bit, that's what,' she answered a little upset now. 'The shade is nice here. I could sit comfortably, bring some coffee, and tell him what's bothering me. Also, I could prepare for death.'

'Always the same,' he raised both arms helplessly. 'She always talks like this, and if they put a bench here, she'd never sit on it. Mark my words, never.'

'I'm not deaf yet, Nenad. Unfortunately, my noodle is still running at full power.'

There is some evidence that left-handers are more likely to have minor accidents, says Chris McManus, but it's pretty insubstantial and I doubt if it's affecting the mortality rate very much at all. I didn't read the whole article. I put the phone back into my pocket. I felt better.

'Alright, mum, do you want me to call the office and ask them to install this little bench?'

Suddenly, I found it funny when he uttered that phrase. *Little bench.* It didn't suit him. He was built like grandpa. Broad shoulders, big belly, narrow waist. But an attractive face. A mole on his right cheek, a grey beard, trimmed nicely. Medium-length hair, so that you couldn't say it was too neat or too messy. As Dara said, more like chic, but without any hair salves. He wore pants low like Albanians, as my other grandfather said, sagging around his ass. His belt had grown tired, it stretched, and stayed a few years behind, before Dara, when she didn't worry about his weight yet.

'Just say it, I want you to call the office to install a little bench. Don't beat around the bush and keep saying that you're going to call them. Whatever you

needed in life, I fixed that. Right? It's been thirty, no, more, forty years since I started fixing whatever you all want and I'll keep doing that, no problem. Just say it directly – I want you to tell them to put a little bench here and the little bench is coming.'

'Why is your father so nervous?' grandma asked me with a smile.

'Mum, I'm here, right next to you.'

'I can see you. What, I can't even joke with my grandson now? He's my greatest happiness.'

'Who gives a fuck about me,' father replied.

Not knowing what to say, I decided to wink at grandma, forming an unspoken pact with her. I was a grandson. I didn't need to possess any other quality to be someone's greatest happiness.

Our worlds diverged so much, and we were so distant from each other that we understood each other better than parents and children did. Looking at grandpa's grave, I didn't feel almost anything; actually, I didn't feel anything.

A piece of marble, not too fine, that's what it was. Underneath it, at least in theory, there was my blood, the man I used to know, but all I saw was a piece of hewn marble, with a pallidly written family name on its surface.

I turned to my father. A year before grandpa died, they had had a great fight, so my father had never stepped into their home again until grandpa died and being dead, lost all his arguments. Grandpa had gone crazy before he died, no doubt. That is, if he didn't go crazy if that was his truth, his pure being, then he was a great son of a bitch.

'We should go to Trebinje to prolong our family's tomb rent. It expires at the end of the year,' father told me, and grandma suddenly perked up and took over. She sank fast, but she rose even faster. You just needed to say what she wanted to hear. Herzegovina.

'Does it? That'd be nice, it's been a long time since I went to Herzegovina last time. Everything must have changed. I read they built a railway crossing in Bileća. There, at that crossing, a friend of mine, this Muslim... What was her name? Her father was a mufti. I learned to read from right to left because of her, they tried to kill him three times, they threw a grenade, he went out of the house, they shot, he bent to tie his shoes... Some people are just lucky no matter what, and some, like me, are doomed wherever they go.'

'Amela, mum. Amela was her name.'

'Amela, that's right. See how good your father is. He remembers everything! I've just read that a new railway crossing was built... What was I saying? I wish I could go there just one more time, to go to Klepce and see the church they built. Our whole family is there, the whole village, all the names on the frescos, at least fifteen of them, all killed, our whole family, we're all kin there, I don't know if they wrote it legibly if you can see it?'

'First, you didn't read that. Who'd even write about it in Novi Sad? It was me who told you when I went to the cemetery last time. Second, I invited you to go with me, but it was always too hot or too hard for you.'

'I'm an old woman, Nenad. I perfectly know what I'm saying.'

'Okay, mum. Want to go together?' he asked. Only when I noticed he was looking at me did I realize the question was for me.

'It sounds nice... But can't we phone them to prolong the rent or do it online?'

'Probably, but I need to settle a few more things. That's why I wanted us to go on a three-day trip, you and me. We haven't traveled for a long time.'

Then silence.

'There's time till then, we'll see. It's only July. Dragan is supposed to go to another club. I might need to fill in for him.'

Dragan was somewhere from Užice, my co-worker, a tennis coach. We'd been working together in the tennis club in Senjak for three years. I had no complaints about him. I was sad he was going. It was easy to talk to him. Once I thought he would definitely be a good father, but then he got married and it turned out he wasn't too interested in fatherhood. That's how it goes.

'Okay, son. Check your schedule. I'll fit in with it.'

I turned to father. How did we get to this moment, so abruptly?

'Did you get a new coaching group?' he asked just to break the silence.

At that moment, grandma patted the marble and lowered a few coffee beans onto the grave. We changed the flowers, fresh instead of old.

'So, until the next time... Goodbye,' she said to the marble tombstone.

'Mum, who are you talking to?'

'It's none of your business, I talk who I want to.'

We reached the car and agreed to drop grandma at her apartment, in a high-rise in Liman, where she had moved after grandpa's death and was surrounded by so many female neighbors. All of them were officer ladies, as she liked to call them, the widows of military officers who had all outlived their husbands.

Then straight to the garage which my mother had bought from a retired soccer coach. He pinched her cheeks and said: *Hey little girl*, to which she just walked faster, knowing how to handle local charmers.

After a month I spent without an apartment, wavering after the breakup with Lena, Darko told me one of his coworkers was renting a semi-furnished place in Višegradska Street. It had become all the same to me. I just wanted to find my own apartment. I crashed at Darko's for a month. Once I went for a walk from Kopitareva gradina to Vuk's Park at five in the morning, when he came back with some Montenegrin girl after a night out, and she kept grunting like a seal in bed.

I opened the car door for grandma, thinking she would want to sit on the passenger's seat, but she just waved it away.

'You two sit in front. I'm happy to see you together,' she said and put on her sunglasses. I looked at her. She looked like a mob boss from Naples.

And then she kept looking at us while my father was watching her in the rearview mirror. After a series of traffic lights, we arrived at her place; studies show that an individual with an average life expectancy spends a full six months waiting for the green light.

However, in Grandma's case, they didn't include the two years she spent in an Italian prison camp before liberation. This exclusion would decrease her average. Father told me quietly: 'See her off to the entrance, take care she doesn't stumble. I'll be waiting in the parking lot.'

So, we got out, hand in hand. The first step, the second, and the final, which was a little higher, the last to surmount. When I made sure there was nowhere else for her to stumble along the way, I told her I was leaving.

'I know your father ordered you to see me off, which is nice of him. But he cares too much about me. I'm sure it would be much easier for him if I was dead.'

'Come on, what are you talking about?' I asked her as vaguely as I could.

Would it have been easier for him? Possibly. Did he want it to be easier for him? Definitely not.

'Trust me, my pretty boy, I know everything. Every day I try to remember if anybody in our family was a suicide, but no one was! Imagine, no one. If only I had

that gene, I could end my suffering. I don't want to live anymore, but I'm telling this only to you because you're the only one who knows how to listen. You are a modern young man; your father gets angry as soon as I tell him something like that. That's why I don't even try to be honest any longer. When he asks how I am, I say fine, thanks for asking. I went to see a doctor on Tuesday, I went to one on Friday... They go on keeping me alive, but why? I'm telling you, if only someone in my family had been a suicide, I'd kill myself without thinking. But I don't have it in me and now I'm just waiting to die every day, nothing else.'

And then she looked at me, as if she had forgotten something.

'And for you to visit me, yes. I'm waiting for that too.'

'But if someone had been a suicide in your family, that would also mean in my family. Then I would have that gene. The suicidal gene,' I answered with a laugh, to take us both to the other, funny, side of death.

'God forbid! What are you talking about?'

'The same thing you're talking about!'

'But I've already been living for too long! It's become meaningless! Completely meaningless!'

'Don't worry, I'll come back soon. And then we're going to talk about everything,' I told her to calm her down.

What does it mean *to talk about everything*?

All that we can say to each other without changing our relationship. Maybe the boundaries of love don't exist, but other ones do: the boundaries of honesty. That is why you don't cross them. To avoid destroying a painstakingly built trust, a routine pattern of communication, clear exchange.

You give me experience, I give you youth; that is, you give me warmth and love, I give you the reason to push on.

Are you supposed to be honest then? We lose in both cases, and we win in both cases, it turns out. It all depends on what each person considers more important: comfort or openness. Comfort is not always false, just like openness is not always honest. And it all depends on the moment: is there a chance for something to change or the opportunity is gone forever?

But we are going to talk about everything, as much as we can, hoping to tacitly understand what certain silences and stutters mean. For example, just like when she said the very next moment:

‘I have so much on my mind, my heart aches when I see that my two sons don’t love each other. Did your father tell you anything?’

‘About Nikola? What’s wrong with them again?’

‘He’ll tell you, I’m sure. My soul aches, every inch of it, if the soul exists at all. And it does, trust me, because I feel it aching, right here. It’s not the old age or a disease. My soul is tired.’

5.

When you live in another town, everything fits into a day.

In the morning you go to the cemetery, you converse with the dead, you talk about a suicide, and then right after that, you go to pick up the van used to transport chemicals for pigs, which has more than once transported my things during my numerous moves.

Father helped me move house every time and even though the gap between the first one and this one, the last so far, was more than ten years, he never gave up on this idea of himself being a happy working mule.

Zoran was waiting for us in front of the garage. He was mum’s new partner – that sounds so arrogant! Unlike my father, Zoran was a sporty type, of slender build, but willing to help and prove himself to me, and to my father too.

‘Nataša pressed you into helping us?’ father asked him with a smile and extended his hand toward him.

‘You know how it goes,’ Zoran answered as if Nataša now was the same person as the one twenty-five years ago.

‘How do you cope with her? It’s over 20 degrees, which means she must be on the Strand Beach now. Does she still swim her laps? How do they go, from her beach hut to the bridge and back?’

‘What can I say, we swim together now. I might as well lose a bit of weight.’

‘You? Come on, get out of here. If you lose a bit of weight, you’ll lose your whole body. You’ll shrivel! You’re in great shape,’ father said and slapped him hard on his stomach. ‘That’s good, she finally found someone who matches her, who can follow her.’

‘It seems to me sometimes that all I ever do is follow her,’ Zoran dared to complain to my father, looking for advice. ‘The worst thing is I think she prefers swimming on her own because then she can count strokes and do it at her own pace. I feel totally useless.’

'It's always important how you take your stance at the beginning. Everything later stems from your starting position. If you're the one following from the start, tough titty. You can't complain later in the future when you're expected to do the same', answered Nenad, at ease, as if talking to his son and not to his ex-wife's partner.

Zoran unlocked the garage carefully to prevent the boxes from falling on us. The mess was horrible, he told us, as if he was partially to blame for it.

'I've been telling her for a year now that we have to get rid of these things, but she's attached to every single one. It doesn't matter if it's papers or children's clothes... If I threw away anything belonging to Andrej, I think that would be the end of us. Nothing could redeem me.'

'As far as I'm concerned, you can throw away whatever you like,' I interrupted him. 'I can't wear them anymore anyway.'

'She keeps dreaming how it would be if one of your kids wore them,' he told me, and I just nodded. I didn't want to continue our conversation on that topic. But my father did.

'It's too early for him. A man shouldn't have a child before he's thirty-something. What's he going to do with it? It's different for women, their lights start blinking around thirty already. I remember this one, her name was Dragana. Her period was normally like JAT's flights... Irregular and unreliable as hell. But I spent some time with her, of course, and, as usual, her alarm went off and we're talking about what to do, I'm desperate, begging her from the bottom of my heart to abort if she's pregnant, and she suddenly... She was sane before that, she suddenly says, no, I'll have it. It just dawned on her. Nature is amazing! Where will you have it, woman, I ask her. What are we going to do with it? Fortunately, not even half a day later she got her period. That's when we broke up.'

We were going through all the things in the garage and finally reached the desk. It was covered by loads of bags which we had to push aside.

'What a mess,' father remarked and then noticed a camcorder box. 'Could this be my box? It is, it must be. Would you look at that?'

He took a long look, as if he returned to another time. I thought for a moment that he wanted to say something sentimental, but he gave up and grabbed the desk. I kept forgetting it had used to be his life.

'This is as heavy as lead.'

All three of us got down to it and tried to carry the desk to the van. Zoran got in the vehicle to load it better, but as soon as he got in, he retched.

‘What’s this smell?’

Father laughed contentedly.

‘Zoran, my brother, are you so sensitive?’

‘What’s transported in this?’ asked Zoran shockingly.

‘Chemicals for pigs,’ my father responded, not without pride.

Zoran leaned against the building and started burping violently. He stuck his finger into his mouth.

At that moment, my freshly bathed mother was approaching us on her bicycle. She saw Zoran leaning against the building and shook her head.

‘What’s happened? Are you throwing up?’ she asked and looked at him compassionately. Then she hugged me.

‘The smell in the van made him sick,’ Nenad said.

Zoran stood up somehow and came to us.

‘Have you served in the army?’

‘Yes, in Slovenia,’ Zoran answered, completely pale, his lips bloodless.

‘You can tell. I was in Kosovo. The stench we smelled there, this one is fragrance,’ father boasted.

‘Should I help somehow?’ Nataša offered.

‘Women always arrive at the end when the job is done. No need, we’re a bunch of strong boys.’

‘I can see that,’ she added.

We all went quiet. While it was just the three of us, the conversation still worked somehow. After my mother had arrived, the situation became strange. Nenad felt that although he always acted as if he was insensitive, so he retreated to the van, saying he had to turn on the AC even though he always drove with the windows down. Mother hugged me and asked when I was going to come and stay longer.

‘I sent Lena a message. I didn’t want to throw her out of my life just like that.’

‘What did you do?’ I asked angrily. ‘Are you insane?’

She shrugged her shoulders and looked at me sadly.

‘Why the fuck did you interfere? It’s none of your business,’ I repeated.

'I didn't do anything, I just told her I didn't know what had happened with you, but that I like her, and I appreciate her strength and commitment to her job, and that I wished her all the best. I was just being decent! I know her mum was sick, and that's not easy. I know very well how it is to lose your mother when you're young and how it feels to wrestle with big shots at that job. It's not easy, believe it or not.'

'Whatever. But why did you have to do that?'

'I told her not to,' Zoran interrupted. 'But she wouldn't listen...'

'She responded and ended the message with a little heart. I was sad although I didn't like her as much as I liked Nadja, but that was because you two grew up together in a way. She was a child, it was always Andrej and Nadja... But anyway, even though you thought I was against your and Lena's relationship, I wasn't. She was dear to me, and I appreciated her as a person, and I wanted her to know that.'

'I really don't know what to say', I told her angrily, but peacefully.

'I knew you'd be angry, but I had to tell you. You shouldn't bottle things up. Stay longer next time, Relja really misses you. He wants to play tennis with you, and I miss you, but I don't have to tell you that.'

I waved to Zoran and got into the van next to father.

'It really stinks here', I told him.

'You get used to everything,' he answered.

He honked, and my mother and Zoran went on to Strand Beach, pushing their bicycles.

They were walking fast, as if they were not sure about each other.

As if they still didn't know where they were going.

6.

'Is Darko waiting for us in front of the building?' father asked while taking a turn to the university campus.

'I called him, he'll be there in an hour.'

'So, who broke up?' he finally asked me, after two months.

I looked at him. I didn't know what to say. If it had been me, the answer would be easier. If I said it had been mutual, I would just flatter my vanity, but it would be a lie. Lena drew the line, eventually. Who caused the end was another question. But that was not the question my father asked.

‘Actually, it’s really not important who broke up. You’re young. You’ll forget. It shall pass. Something new will come up. You’ll be hurt for a few days, maybe for a few weeks, maybe for several months. And then a year will pass, and you’ll remember that you lived in that apartment when you go by the building. Only after that will you remember who you lived with...’

‘It’s not the first time I broke up with someone,’ I told him.

‘Believe it or not, be sure it’s not the last one either. I reckon there’s another big breakup ahead of you. That age is great, when you can break up just like that. Without any baggage.’

We passed the rectorate building, reached the quay, stopped at the traffic light, went under the bridge – I know all of that, I know the road to Belgrade by heart, and all the places in your hometown always have a story, but those stories are never yours. They are stories you associate with your parents, with your childhood friends, they are experiences you gained when you were still there, enclosed on all sides. Later, everything you build seems yours. But the place where you started, the foundations on which you build further experiences, they are never yours.

‘What happened to grandma? She told me something happened to her.’

‘What did she tell you?’

‘Nothing, just that she was sad for some reason. What happened?’

‘Nikola with his same old shit. I’m paying for his shit again.’

Nikola was his brother. Their conflict started a long time ago, before I could find a reason for it. Nenad was like his mother, and Nikola took after his father or, to be more precise, after grandpa’s brother. Two opposed worlds, two opposed ideas. One can’t deal without people, the other can’t deal with people. When they were supposed to build the family house at the beginning of the nineties, Nikola said that he was a doctor and that he would not and should not dirty his hands; when they carried concrete blocks, Nikola had an exam; when it was time to put their parents into a hospital, despite being a doctor, Nikola had other patients and it was all up to my father, the older brother. Grandma once told me: ‘The older brothers always get fucked, remember this.’ History proves that her claim is not true. But no story is true.

I waved away a fly from my forehead. It was so boring that I wished it all the worst.

‘Every morning, as he goes to work, he calls mum and jerks her around. He asks if she went to *Lidl*, if she waited in line for cheap chicken. Imagine what kind of psycho you have to be to behave like that. He doesn’t even ask how she is, he just keeps giving her a hard time about Serbia every day. Like he is now unimaginably successful because he moved to Austria. And then he comes here, and you know what he does? He buys potatoes by the kilo! Right, that’s what he does here, this disgusting hillbilly. You know what he liked most when he was a kid? To run from one room to another like a buffalo and headbutt grandpa on the shoulder. Using all his strength. And now he calls mum every day to tell her how much money he’s spent on his cosmetics and facelifting, how many kilometers he’s run, and he’s fat like a pig. Then he tells her how much he works, how much he earns, and she asks him why he doesn’t give any money to his kid, but no, he’s a miser, just money, money, money, and he’s loaded, then he tells her how his blood sugar is high. Can you imagine me telling mum about my blood sugar? It’s two times higher than his. Two times! Why does she have to know that? Is her life better because of that? It’s not! He tells her everything, everything that’s happening to him, and then her blood pressure rises, and she calls me to complain, so my blood pressure rises, and so on. You think he did something about her heart problem? I look for doctors, and her son, who’s been sitting on his ass in Klagenfurt for two years and can’t come here, but he can go to congresses on the Caribbean islands and call me from there, not to ask me what I’m doing, but to tell me everything he’s seen on his boat tours, emphasizing every price like it’s an auction, that son of hers, a cardiologist, he doesn’t ask his own mother how her heart is. And then, when she tells him he never asks her how she is, and that I call her every day, he sulks like a little girl and says she should be ashamed for comparing him with me. As if I was less than that snob.’

I noticed he was blushing, which meant his blood pressure rose. We turned onto the highway, as best as we could.

‘And then, a few days ago, grandma... When did I talk to her, on Wednesday? So, on Wednesday, she finally had enough of that shit and she decided to leave the house to me because she knew he was going to give her a hard time about selling it. This means, I’ll sell the house the way I think I should, for the price I want, and split the money in half! Remember how he already did that when grandpa died? He couldn’t sign the papers for months. I called Kile, the lawyer, and we signed the contract. Of course, it’s out of the question, I’ll give half

the money to Nikola, it's just I don't want to see him ever again. I'm not the kind of man who would disgrace himself because of a dispute over money. Let him have his half and get the fuck away from me.'

'You think she was too hasty? I know she was mad at him and hurt, but you know, fuck all that.'

'I told her not to tell him what she did at any cost. At any cost! When she dies, I'll do it all. If he wants to sue me, let it be. It's only important to persist until she dies and not tell him anything now, because that would kill her.'

'I think being silent about it is killing her enough.'

'Trust me, it'll kill her much more when she sees what her own son is ready to do. You don't know Nikola. He was always especially nice to you, but he is ready to take his own mother to the court. She should just keep her mouth shut, and when she dies, I'll take over. If I hear a word from him, he'll regret it big time, I'll make his life a living hell and punch him with such an uppercut that he's going to think it's an earthquake. That divorce he went through is going to be a piece of cake when he falls out with me.'

'Whatever, but I don't think silence helps. It'll eat her away,' I said, not thinking about how much of our relationship was based on what we didn't say. If it wasn't like that, where would we be today?

'I'll fix everything, she just must stay strong and not tell him anything. Everything was always fine when I did things my way. He'll get half the money and he won't do a thing about selling.'

At the end and the beginning of everything, relationships come to that. Lena and I counted cups because, luckily, we didn't have our own apartment to count its square meters. One of the perks of being a tenant.

Nikola and Nenad were counting square meters, and if they hadn't had the apartment, they would have counted something else. I was looking at my father – they wouldn't reconcile. It was a done deal. Maybe there was no reason to. Some people just don't like each other. But it was sad. Not because they were supposed to reconcile, but because they were forced to share their lives. And that's how it is today.

A long time ago, my grandmother told me, the brothers were climbing the stairs in their building in Detelinara. They were five at most and late home. It was already dark, and they were supposed to come back home before dark. They pulled each other, kept holding the balustrade and complained in unison: Mum

won't beat us, our mum is good and pretty, right, brother? Our mum is good and pretty, she won't beat us. Mara was listening to all that, to this complaint of theirs. She was leaning against the door and laughing her head off.

She put them to bed, kissed them good night, and they kept whispering a little longer, proud of getting away with their song; they cackled quietly, and slowly, one by one, went to sleep.

7.

When we arrived in Belgrade, in Višegradska Street, we noticed Darko was standing on an empty parking spot and showing some strangers that they couldn't park there – he kept the place for us. In Belgrade, that means more than a hug. He had just lit a cigarette and was holding a plastic coffee cup. My father lightened up when he saw him.

'That's a good friend you have,' he told me. 'Take care of him. Such friends are rare.'

Darko gave us instructions on how to park best, and when we stopped in front of the building entrance, he opened the door for Nenad.

'I know this van, what was it, something with pigs?' Darko asked and smelled the air, immediately pulling his t-shirt over his nose.

'Yeah, it seems this smell is going to follow us whole life.'

'In twenty years, if you're still moving house, the only thing that'll change will be your driver because by then I plan to have been buried for a long time.'

'Come on, Neša, you're a tough young man. You just need to get rid of that belly a bit and you'll feel like new.'

'Sure, as soon as you stop smoking.'

They could chat like this for days. Amazing.

'How's your pop?'

'He's alright, keeping on. He's renovating his house, he perked up a bit.'

'Say hello for me,' my father told him.

We got down to work and grabbed the desk right where we needed to. Being much thinner than us, Darko kept panting all over the place.

'What is it, son? You should be ashamed because a sixty-five-year-old man, with all the concomitant disease the world has ever discovered, can carry more load than you,' my father told him.

‘It’s easy for you,’ Darko answered. ‘You have flesh to cushion the desk, and it’s digging right into my bone.’

We somehow pushed the desk into the apartment. When father saw the room that was supposed to be my new home, he just said: ‘I can see we’ll be moving your things soon again.’ I looked around, it was my apartment, my new place. Why not? There were so many possibilities in life, you had to make wrong choices too. There was a red couch in the middle of the room. Because of it, there was no room for pallets, and they were important for two reasons: first, I felt without a worry when I slept on them, and second, when I got a real bed, that would mean I got a real family too.

Before I had a real family, an imitation of a bed was enough.

‘What are we going to do with this couch?’ Darko asked.

We tried pushing it through the door, but we didn’t manage. It reminded me of my grandfather’s coffin and how it unfortunately got stuck in the window. We were sticky with sweat all over our bodies, as if we worked in a production plant. We stood in front of the couch, this unsolved mystery. How should we get it out?

‘Maybe we should break it in parts?’ I suggested.

We took off our t-shirts at that moment, and from somewhere in the apartment got an ax, hammers, and knives. We started swinging and hitting the couch. I hit it with the ax first, but when my father saw I was not making much progress, I would dare to say no progress at all, he took the tool from me and started bashing the couch like a neanderthal. I watched him in awe, and in exultation, I started punching it like a madman too.

Naked to the waist, we actually laughed, we laughed the way only stupid people could laugh, and after we finally broke it, after half an hour of choreographed smashing, we felt relief, a true childlike happiness of the moment when we left behind the roles of father and son for a short time.

Darko used his lighter to open three beers and there we were, the three of us, looking before us like hunters.

‘The meaning of life is to fuck around but also to be responsible. Those who only fuck around, they die young, and those who are only responsible, they die old and extremely unhappy. Those who find balance between these two things, they learn the meaning of life,’ father said.

We nodded our heads, alternately. Pure wisdom was coming out of our mouths.

I think we got melancholic, and then my father went into his van and drove to Novi Sad.

Chapter 2

Love Is Not Fair

1.

My grandmother stopped loving my grandfather on December 31, 1966.

That is the exact date.

In our family, grandma was a driver, and grandpa liked to be driven. That was the only instance where their given roles were reversed. Being a driver, she was sent on an errand, to go to Dunavska Street and collect their TV set from the repairman. Grandpa's father wanted them to watch TV together for New Year's Eve; that was an event they were looking forward to. She parked in front of the *Carigrad* patisserie and went to the TV technician's shop.

'It'll be done in an hour, comrade, it's crazy around here. Everybody suddenly remembered they wanted to watch the New Year's show. They've been announcing for a month now that Tozovac is going to sing *I Just Don't Want*. It's not news anymore,' the chubby repairman said, slightly annoyed.

Grandma decided to have a stroll in the park with her two sons. She lit a cigarette and sat down on a bench while the children kept coming up with new ways of entertainment. She must have been thinking about something as she was inhaling the cigarette smoke and sluggishly looking at the linden tree, which was more and more, from day to day, leaning against the gazebo. I can imagine everything, her sons burping awfully to entertain each other, the fashion followed and commented by female comrades, the smell of popcorn merging with the cigarette smoke, but the only thing I can't reconstruct is what was inside her head: what was my grandmother thinking about as she waited another New Year's Eve in her life?

She looked at her watch, she didn't even know it was three PM already. It was high time she collected the TV set, and she was supposed to finish some salads, which she put off for the very end of the day.

While she was setting up the channel, grandpa approached and jealously started asking her where she had been for so long. She answered that the TV technician had been very busy, she mentioned Tozovac's new song, and that she had sat in the park for a while. Grandpa did not take that as an answer. He told her she was lying, and he left the apartment furiously, as if he had been looking for a reason to argue with her so that he could leave.

New Year's Eve, however, couldn't wait. She started preparing salads, she put on her New Year's Eve dress, the one she got from him on the previous New Year's Day, and grandpa's father asked her to turn up the TV. She set the table. She washed the kids' faces. She served the soup to my great-grandfather at eight o'clock in the evening.

'Where's my son?' my great-grandfather asked.

When it became clear that grandpa was not coming back home that evening, my great-grandfather, this great womanizer from Trebinje, shook his head and kept repeating: 'This is not good, son, not good...'

She put the children to bed. At midnight, which they struggled to stay awake for, Mara and Laza watched Tozovac, shyly singing along with him, then they counted together, shook hands like war veterans, which my great-grandfather was, and wished each other all the best in New Year; New Year always came. The next morning grandpa returned home, bright, vigorous, and refreshed. As if nothing had happened. He looked at his sons and told them a few wise words. He kissed his wife and gave her a present, which she would wear exactly in a year; she thanked him and gave him his present: a single bowtie. She didn't ask him where he had been, and he never told her.

That was how my grandmother stopped loving my grandfather on December 31, 1966. They remained married until he died on July 21, 2016.

2.

Lena noticed all my flaws on time. I noticed hers too. I loved mocking them all the way. But she did it better. She told me I made her look crazy, even when I was right about facts. Facts are not important in relationships anyway. They look for the culprit in one person. Love is not impartial, and it is not fair either. Lena was not naïve, nor was I. We loved each other, brutally. We dug at each other, brutally. And we made each other uncertain. We loved each other, but that was not love.

I realized it was over when I returned from Sarajevo after three weeks, and our fingers stopped matching like before. I felt her ring scuffing my skin.

'I think I'm tired...' I told her.

'It's been a long drive,' she comforted me.

'It really was. The border was very crowded.'

'It's always crowded on the border,' she said and looked at me.

She smiled, and I looked at her forehead. Then into her eyes.

'You shaved,' I told her.

'Yeah. You don't like it?'

'For me or someone else?'

She sighed and got up. She went to the table, to light a cigarette. I liked how she did that, very femininely. She knew how to make a perfect line between her chin and neck as she inhaled the smoke. I really don't know how to explain that in a different way. She looked self-confident anyhow.

'I'm just saying. Your skin doesn't look chafed. And it would be if you had shaved. I mean, considering you haven't for a while. It would get irritated, at least around the crotch.'

'Are you crazy?'

I got up and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

'I don't have a clean towel. I'll use yours,' I yelled.

Silence.

'If you're not afraid to get a venereal disease,' she answered wryly as I was opening the bedroom window.

'Have you even once opened this window in the last three weeks?'

Her dog sensed something was going on, so he came up to her. Two on one, I thought. It was always like that if you dated a pooch pal, and it turned out they all had dogs nowadays.

I was mad because I wasn't happy to see her, that was all. I needed something, anything. Instead, I suggested we slept.

'We're tired,' I told her and kissed her back. 'Your skin smells great.'

She accepted my apology this time. She didn't go on. Nor did I. We were tired indeed.

Enough to fall asleep, not enough to sleep all night. Sometime around three AM, I felt she was looking at me. I turned over to her.

'It's noisy outside. You don't mind it?' she asked me when she saw I was awake.

'I was sleeping.'

'Well, yes. You see, I wasn't.'

She got up and closed the window.

'You know I can't sleep with the window closed,' I told her.

'I thought I had insomnia, but in the last three weeks I realized it's the noise that bothers me.'

‘Is that so?’ I said sarcastically.

‘Yes. If we lived in Novi Beograd, you could easily sleep with your windows open. But no. You wanted to live in the city center. Well, in the city center, you sleep with the windows closed.’

I was looking at her, and then I took my cover and pillow and carried them to the living room. I thought she would say something to stop me. We had not seen each other for three weeks, after all. We were supposed to miss each other. I turned to her, and she lay back and closed her eyes. She knew that would piss me off. I stretched on the couch in the living room, and then I got up and opened the window.

I was looking at the front yard and I was able to guess – it would not be mine for a long time. I was both sad and excited. I was so happy about everything that was to follow.

And then I lay down and cried, thinking about how much I loved her. I even liked her dog, which really annoyed me.

But what kind of love was that? Was it the love of one human being for another or the love for the time spent together? Was it the kind of love my parents still had for each other, despite everything?

When we first time separated for a few days, I couldn’t understand if I wanted to be with her or if I was just afraid she would meet someone else. Something off in our heads, caused by various chemical reactions, which makes us move on, and dig deeper and deeper, all the way to the bottom of humanity, to the very secret, which is only the beginning of another one.

I was thinking how so little was needed to part our ways forever, just one event, one interesting dinner with other people, a funny remark. The possessiveness which I fought hard and in vain in my head was stronger than reason. My wish to see her was stronger than reason. My wish for everything to be alright, to lie down next to her, to kiss her, to have breakfast with her, breakfast that had always been a sign that everything was alright – that wish was stronger than reason. I got into my car and told her I was coming to Bajina Bašta, where she performed at the Festival of Choreographic Miniatures. The following day we were going to return to Belgrade. I didn’t want to let someone else drive her over the hills around Valjevo, I was afraid something could happen, that someone could go into a bend too fast and then what? What would I do?

Is it possible that I find even such a dreadful thing as the death of my love to be only about myself: how would I survive her death?

But then again, I don't know if that's true. I don't know if I was afraid that she was going to die or I just used that to justify my fear that another person might take her. At the beginning of our relationship, it seemed to me I was able to choke a skeleton, to prevent it from resurrecting and charming her. As time passed, fortunately, or unfortunately, that feeling vanished.

After that crying fit, I felt anger. Because she always caused that feeling of powerlessness in me. Then I was angry at myself. Because I accepted that powerlessness. I realized I had been living in this anger for a year at least. This was not productive, revolutionary anger. This anger was sluggish. Despondent. Cowardly.

All this time I was imagining her sleeping sound while I was banging my head. I was restless so I got up and put my ear to the door to hear if she was snoring, but then I remembered Lena almost never snored. I didn't hear anything except for her dog's lapping. The dog was drinking water, like a pig, from that damn bowl. I thought: You don't mind that, do you? You mind the noise, but not the fucking dog lapping up water as it has just run a marathon. That fat cur with clumsy paws.

Then I lay down again, thinking I was actually jealous of her dog.

In such a state, I finally fell asleep.

3.

The next morning I woke up without an erection. While I was in Sarajevo, I had to masturbate at night whenever I even touched myself. Only after a week of separation, I felt a very strong sexual urge again. My step was lighter, I climbed stairs, communicated. It was easier to look people in the eyes.

Lena was just entering the apartment after she walked the dog. I was looking at her taking off her shoes and jacket, going to wash her hands. I suddenly found those seemingly simple actions that I had seen so many times in the previous two years sad and inexplicably slow. Like watching slow motion. I sat up in the bed and nodded when she got into the room. She went to the bedroom and stayed there for six minutes. Then she came to me.

She gave me a hot dog bun from the bakery.

'I went to the bakery,' she said. 'You have practices in the afternoon?'

I confirmed and kept looking at the hot dog bun, as if it meant something. I just could not understand what.

‘I feel like you’re not happy at all because I came back,’ I said, blaming her.

‘Of course I am,’ she answered.

Then we were quiet, for twenty seconds. I was chewing for a long time.

‘I feel horrible,’ she continued, with a certain amount of charm that she hadn’t had for me for some time. That completely unsettled me.

‘I want us to try and be happy,’ I blurted. I couldn’t understand where that came from. As soon as I said it, I felt I didn’t really mean it. But I held desperately to this sentence.

‘I think we need some time to get closer again. That’s all. We don’t spend enough time naked together. We don’t touch each other enough. Everything’s become official, what are you doing today, when do you come back home, do you need anything from the store, good night. We started living on autopilot of a sort. That’s all. Really. If we could become aware of this, if we touched more, if we started surprising each other again... It doesn’t have to be anything special, nothing spectacular, just little things. For example, we could make a note in our calendars – Thursday is for sexy Thursday. No onions that day, no strong cheese, we don’t get tired too much. I’ll rearrange my practice schedule. Every Thursday is our Thursday,’ I went on, very surprised and not knowing where my sentences came from.

‘But what you’re suggesting... That’s autopilot again, can’t you see?’ she answered.

‘I just think that...’ I wanted to say something, but I didn’t know what.

Actually, there was nothing to add. I didn’t want anything. I didn’t want to break up with her, and I didn’t want us to stay together. I wanted someone else to do all that instead of me.

‘Be honest, would you feel good without me?’ she asked.

I kept quiet, I didn’t want to be the first to admit anything.

‘OK, I’ll say it. I was happy without you,’ she said and started crying. ‘I feel terrible because it’s true. I swear I wish it wasn’t.’

I kept quiet and was looking straight ahead. I chose the remote controller to look at. If she had not started crying, I would have. Since she was crying, I felt I was dominating again. It was just that this time the domination didn’t lead anywhere.

'I don't know what to tell you,' I said calmly.

'I didn't have stomachache, I didn't feel any pressure or darkness,' she continued. 'I was able to fucking sleep. I started feeling good in my own skin. I didn't feel that buzzing, here, in my head, nobody fucked with my brains, and even when I had problems with the play, I solved them more easily. Because I didn't think about what you thought about it all. After two weeks I realized it felt good you weren't there. I feel terrible, really terrible to tell you this. It's not about love. We've tried everything. We really have. You've tried. I've tried...'

'But we haven't tried enough,' I said, scared.

'We have, Andrej! We've tried everything!' she screamed.

'Not enough!' I insisted.

'We have!'

She shrieked and became hysterical. She snapped at me, with that ominous look that annoyed me intensely because I never saw anything honest in it.

'Can't you see we're happy when we're not together? Why are you doing this to me? Why don't you let me go? You don't want to be with me. You want to fuck other girls, you've always wanted to. You told me that before we started our relationship. You told me, but I didn't listen then. You're unhappy, I'm unhappy.'

'No one's unhappy,' I was trying to prove to myself and her.

She tried to stand up, but I grabbed both of her arms, not letting her go.

'Fuck! Let go of me!' she said, and I started relaxing my grip.

'What do you mean just leaving in the middle of our conversation? Like you're entitled to the dynamics of this argument!' I was yelling now too. She was wriggling out of my hands as I loosened my grip for a moment. But she was wriggling so dramatically as if she had gotten caught in a bear trap.

'What did I tell you about this clutching? Didn't I tell you not to ever grab my hands like that!'

'Come on, be a victim, it's been a while,' I told her and got away from her.

'That's it! Exactly it! I don't want this anymore. I don't want us to compete all the time. To measure things. Who said what. Who did what. Who's to blame how much. I don't want any of this anymore. Do you hear me?' she asked.

'Why are you yelling at me?'

'Because you drive me crazy!'

'I drive you crazy?' I asked her. And then, to feel something else but numbness, I shouted at the top of my lungs: 'You drive me crazy!'

But I did not feel anger at that moment. I felt honest, unadulterated sorrow. I felt there was a whole ocean between us. I wanted her to comfort me. To snuggle with her, like we used to. I wanted her to stroke my back and squeeze out blackheads on my skin. But she was not my person anymore. I was not hers.

The problem was that we didn't have anyone else at that moment.

That was why we hugged and comforted each other.

'You know how much I love you?' I asked her.

She nodded.

'This has nothing to do with love,' she kept repeating.

4.

Of course, we didn't break up then. Nobody breaks up right away. It's a process. Breakups have several stages.

The first one is the basic stage, when you start a relationship. The breakup has already begun, in some way.

The second is when you are still not aware of this possibility, but everything you do leads to it. There is still hope at that moment, futile of course, that something is going to change, just like the hope that we could survive death.

The third is when you become aware that the breakup has started. You're just waiting for all the energy that existed to deplete and drain away. At this stage, the most important thing is to lose all the respect you have for your partner. The respect, of course, will return with time when the energy returns.

The fourth and last stage of breaking up is the very parting. Not the moment when you say you want to break up. Nor the moment when somebody moves out of the apartment. The final breakup happens when two people have nothing more to say to each other.

Our first stage started two years earlier, when I realized I had been thinking about her much more than it was acceptable for acquaintances. Whichever song I heard, I wanted to send it to her even though we didn't have a similar taste in music. Among other things, I think that finished us off. We grasped melancholy and happiness in two completely different ways. You could best feel that through a song.

The second stage started when we moved in. That was when we noticed all the differences between us, but we had already put in all our furniture and still had a great sexual life. And we were able to talk, not about us, but about other

people. That was fun. I started minding when her dog slept in our bed, and she was not happy when it did not sleep with us. I liked to have a ray of light coming off the street into the room, she liked pitch darkness. I am not even going to mention the window anymore. She wanted us to have a shared budget for groceries, which reminded me of very old people. She wanted a regular routine, I wanted something completely different. She had stomachaches, I had headaches. But we kept building our shared life, bumpily and persistently.

I have already described the third stage. The moment you realize you can live without this person. You don't want it, but you can. There's no going back from there, at least when you are on the verge of the thirties and still don't have much to lose. Except time.

The fourth stage is the shortest, but it seems like an eternity. Truth and lies, fear and thrill keep taking turns. We finally say to each other everything we harbor, we open up so much that it's almost meaningless, and then, afraid of what's to come, we retreat again. This period lasts between three weeks and a whole month. Until one person collapses completely and says:

'Let's get this done with. I can't do it anymore. I don't want to talk anymore. We've said everything.'

And the game stops, the struggle stops, and planning begins. What do we do with the apartment? What about our things? Are we ever going to fuck again?

Then you ask to see her pussy once again, you tell her not to be narrow-minded, you know every inch of her body anyway, which is true. She agrees eventually, and you lick her pussy and cry, so you're not sure if her pussy is wet with your tears or excitement.

Then you put on your clothes, and you look at each other one more time, for a while, as if you're trying to remember everything that has happened, to carve everything into the part of your brain where the deaths of close people, farewells, and missed opportunities are stored. After all, what is a breakup if not the death of a relationship?

Then, while she is in the living room, you noisily take only necessary things: a few t-shirts, pants, shirts, a towel, and several books.

And then you open the front door while she pretends to be speaking on the phone.

You stroke the dog.

And quietly, not to say goodbye by slamming the door, you leave the apartment.

Actually, I don't know, maybe it's just me.

Maybe none of this is true.