

The Tiger's Wife

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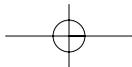
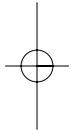
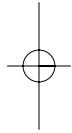
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For Štefan Obreht



*In my earliest memory, my grandfather is bald as a stone and he takes me to see the tigers. He puts on his hat, his big-buttoned raincoat, and I wear my lacquered shoes and velvet dress. It is autumn, and I am four years old. The certainty of this process: my grandfather's hand, the bright hiss of the trolley, the dampness of the morning, the crowded walk up the hill to the citadel park. Always in my grandfather's breast pocket: *The Jungle Book*, with its gold-leaf cover and old yellow pages. I am not allowed to hold it, but it will stay open on his knee all afternoon while he recites the passages to me. Even though my grandfather is not wearing his stethoscope or white coat, the lady at the ticket counter in the entrance shed calls him "Doctor."*

Then there is the popcorn cart, the umbrella stand, a small kiosk with postcards and pictures. Down the stairs and past the aviary where the sharp-eared owls sleep, through the garden that runs the length of the citadel wall, framed with cages. Once there was a king here, a sultan, his Janissaries. Now the cannon windows facing the street hold blocked-off troughs filled with tepid water. The cage bars curve out, rusted orange. In his free hand, my grandfather is carrying the blue bag my grandma has prepared for us. In it: six-day-old cabbage heads for the hippopotamus, carrots and celery for the sheep and deer and the bull

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moose, who is a kind of phenomenon. In his pocket, my grandfather has hidden some sugar cubes for the pony that pulls the park carriage. I will not remember this as sentimentality, but as greatness.

The tigers live in the outer moat of the fortress. We climb the castle stairs, past the waterbirds and the sweating windows of the monkey house, past the wolf growing his winter coat. We pass the bearded vultures and then the bears, asleep all day, smelling of damp earth and the death of something. My grandfather picks me up and props my feet against the handrail so I can look down and see the tigers in the moat.

My grandfather never refers to the tiger's wife by name. His arm is around me and my feet are on the handrail, and my grandfather might say, "I once knew a girl who loved tigers so much she almost became one herself." Because I am little, and my love of tigers comes directly from him, I believe he is talking about me, offering me a fairy tale in which I can imagine myself—and will, for years and years.

The cages face a courtyard, and we go down the stairs and walk slowly from cage to cage. There is a panther, too, ghost spots paling his oil-slick coat; a sleepy, bloated lion from Africa. But the tigers are awake and livid, bright with rancor. Stripe-lashed shoulders rolling, they flank one another up and down the narrow causeway of rock, and the smell of them is sour and warm and fills everything. It will stay with me the whole day, even after I have had my bath and gone to bed, and will return at random times: at school, at a friend's birthday party, even years later, at the pathology lab, or on the drive home from Galina.

I remember this, too: an altercation. A small group of people stand clustered around the tigers' cage. Among them: a boy with a parrot-shaped balloon, a woman in a purple coat, and a

bearded man who is wearing the brown uniform of a zookeeper. The man has a broom and a dustpan on a long handle, and he is sweeping the area between the cage and the outer railing. He walks up and down, sweeping up juice boxes and candy wrappers, bits of popcorn people have tried to throw at the tigers. The tigers walk up and down with him. The woman in purple is saying something and smiling, and he smiles back at her. She has brown hair. The dustpan keeper stops and leans against the handle of his broom, and as he does so, the big tiger sweeps by, rubbing against the bars of the cage, rumbling, and the keeper puts a hand through the bars and touches its flank. For a moment, nothing. And then pandemonium.

The tiger rounds on him and the woman shrieks, and suddenly the dustpan keeper's shoulder is between the bars, and he is twisting, twisting his head away and trying to reach for the outer railing so that he has something to hold on to. The tiger has the dustpan keeper's arm the way a dog holds a large bone: upright between his paws, gnawing on the top. Two men who have been standing by with children jump over the railing and grab the dustpan keeper's waist and flailing arm and try to pull him away. A third man jams his umbrella through the bars and pushes it over and over again into the tiger's ribs. An outraged scream from the tiger, and then it stands up on its hind legs and hugs the dustpan keeper's arm and shakes its head from side to side, like it's pulling on rope. Its ears are flattened, and it is making a noise like a locomotive. The dustpan keeper's face is white, and this entire time he hasn't made a sound.

Then suddenly, it's no longer worth it, and the tiger lets go. The three men fall away, and there is a splatter of blood. The tiger is lashing its tail, and the dustpan keeper is crawling under the outer railing and standing up. The woman in purple has van-

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ished. My grandfather has not turned away. I am four years old, but he has not turned me away, either. I see it all, and, later, there is the fact that he wants me to have seen.

Then the dustpan keeper is hurrying our way, winding a piece of torn shirt across his arm. He is red-faced and angry, on his way to the infirmary. At the time, I believe this is fear, but later I will know it as embarrassment, as shame. The tigers, agitated, are lunging back and forth across the grate. The keeper is leaving a dark trail on the gravel behind him. As he passes us, my grandfather says: "My God, you're a fool, aren't you?" and the man says something in reply, something I know not to repeat.

Instead, shrill and self-righteous in my lacquered boots, brave because my grandfather is holding my hand, I say: "He's a fool, isn't he, Grandpa?"

But my grandfather is already walking after the dustpan keeper, pulling me along, calling for the man to stop so he can help him.

1

THE COAST

THE FORTY DAYS OF THE SOUL BEGIN ON THE MORNING after death. That first night, before its forty days begin, the soul lies still against sweated-on pillows and watches the living fold the hands and close the eyes, choke the room with smoke and silence to keep the new soul from the doors and the windows and the cracks in the floor so that it does not run out of the house like a river. The living know that, at daybreak, the soul will leave them and make its way to the places of its past—the schools and dormitories of its youth, army barracks and tenements, houses razed to the ground and rebuilt, places that recall love and guilt, difficulties and unbridled happiness, optimism and ecstasy, memories of grace meaningless to anyone else—and sometimes this journey will carry it so far for so long that it will forget to come back. For this reason, the living bring their own rituals to a standstill: to welcome the newly loosed spirit, the living will not clean, will not wash or tidy, will not remove the soul's belongings for forty days, hoping that sentiment and longing will bring it home again, encourage it to return with a message, with a sign, or with forgiveness.

If it is properly enticed, the soul will return as the days go by, to rummage through drawers, peer inside cupboards, seek the tactile comfort of its living identity by reassessing the dish rack

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and the doorbell and the telephone, reminding itself of functionality, all the time touching things that produce sound and make its presence known to the inhabitants of the house.

Speaking quietly into the phone, my grandma reminded me of this after she told me of my grandfather's death. For her, the forty days were fact and common sense, knowledge left over from burying two parents and an older sister, assorted cousins and strangers from her hometown, a formula she had recited to comfort my grandfather whenever he lost a patient in whom he was particularly invested—a superstition, according to him, but something in which he had indulged her with less and less protest as old age had hardened her beliefs.

My grandma was shocked, angry because we had been robbed of my grandfather's forty days, reduced now to thirty-seven or thirty-eight by the circumstances of his death. He had died alone, on a trip away from home; she hadn't known that he was already dead when she ironed his clothes the day before, or washed the dishes that morning, and she couldn't account for the spiritual consequences of her ignorance. He had died in a clinic in an obscure town called Zdrevkov on the other side of the border; no one my grandma had spoken to knew where Zdrevkov was, and when she asked me, I told her the truth: I had no idea what he had been doing there.

"You're lying," she said.

"Bako, I'm not."

"He told us he was on his way to meet you."

"That can't be right," I said.

He had lied to her, I realized, and lied to me. He had taken advantage of my own cross-country trip to slip away—a week ago, she was saying, by bus, right after I had set out myself—and had gone off for some reason unknown to either of us. It had taken the Zdrevkov clinic staff three whole days to track my grandma

down after he died, to tell her and my mother that he was dead, arrange to send his body. It had arrived at the City morgue that morning, but by then, I was already four hundred miles from home, standing in the public bathroom at the last service station before the border, the pay phone against my ear, my pant legs rolled up, sandals in hand, bare feet slipping on the green tiles under the broken sink.

Somebody had fastened a bent hose onto the faucet, and it hung, nozzle down, from the boiler pipes, coughing thin streams of water onto the floor. It must have been going for hours: water was everywhere, flooding the tile grooves and pooling around the rims of the squat toilets, dripping over the doorstep and into the dried-up garden behind the shack. None of this fazed the bathroom attendant, a middle-aged woman with an orange scarf tied around her hair, whom I had found dozing in a corner chair and dismissed from the room with a handful of bills, afraid of what those seven missed beeper pages from my grandma meant before I even picked up the receiver.

I was furious with her for not having told me that my grandfather had left home. He had told her and my mother that he was worried about my goodwill mission, about the inoculations at the Brejevina orphanage, and that he was coming down to help. But I couldn't berate my grandma without giving myself away, because she would have told me if she had known about his illness, which my grandfather and I had hidden from her. So I let her talk, and said nothing about how I had been with him at the Military Academy of Medicine three months before when he had found out, or how the oncologist, a lifelong colleague of my grandfather's, had shown him the scans and my grandfather had put his hat down on his knee and said, "Fuck. You go looking for a gnat and you find a donkey."

I put two more coins into the slot, and the phone whirred.

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Sparrows were diving from the brick ledges of the bathroom walls, dropping into the puddles at my feet, shivering water over their backs. The sun outside had baked the early afternoon into stillness, and the hot, wet air stood in the room with me, shining in the doorway that led out to the road, where the cars at border control were packed in a tight line along the glazed tarmac. I could see our car, left side dented from a recent run-in with a tractor, and Zóra sitting in the driver's seat, door propped open, one long leg dragging along the ground, glances darting back toward the bathroom more and more often as she drew closer to the customs booth.

"They called last night," my grandma was saying, her voice louder. "And I thought, *they've made a mistake*. I didn't want to call you until we were sure, to worry you in case it wasn't him. But your mother went down to the morgue this morning." She was quiet, and then: "I don't understand, I don't understand any of it."

"I don't either, Bako," I said.

"He was going to meet you."

"I didn't know about it."

Then the tone of her voice changed. She was suspicious, my grandma, of why I wasn't crying, why I wasn't hysterical. For the first ten minutes of our conversation, she had probably allowed herself to believe that my calm was the result of my being in a foreign hospital, on assignment, surrounded, perhaps, by colleagues. She would have challenged me a lot sooner if she had known that I was hiding in the border-stop bathroom so that Zóra wouldn't overhear.

She said, "Haven't you got anything to say?"

"I just don't know, Bako. Why would he lie about coming to see me?"

II

"You haven't asked if it was an accident," she said. "Why haven't you asked that? Why haven't you asked how he died?"

"I didn't even know he had left home," I said. "I didn't know any of this was going on."

"You're not crying," she said.

"Neither are you."

"Your mother is heartbroken," she said to me. "He must have known. They said he was very ill—so he must have known, he must have told someone. Was it you?"

"If he had known, he wouldn't have gone anywhere," I said, with what I hoped was conviction. "He would have known better." There were white towels stacked neatly on a metal shelf above the mirror, and I wiped my face and neck with one, and then another, and the skin of my face and neck left gray smears on towel after towel until I had used up five. There was no laundry basket to put them in, so I left them in the sink. "Where is this place where they found him?" I said. "How far did he go?"

"I don't know," she said. "They didn't tell us. Somewhere on the other side."

"Maybe it was a specialty clinic," I said.

"He was on his way to see you."

"Did he leave a letter?"

He hadn't. My mother and grandma, I realized, had both probably seen his departure as part of his unwillingness to retire, like his relationship with a new housebound patient outside the City—a patient we had made up as a cover for his visits to the oncologist friend from the weekly doctors' luncheon, a man who gave injections of some formulas that were supposed to help with the pain. Colorful formulas, my grandfather said when he came home, as if he knew the whole time that the formulas were just water laced with food coloring, as if it didn't matter any-

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more. He had, at first, more or less retained his healthy cast, which made hiding his illness easier; but after seeing him come out of these sessions just once, I had threatened to tell my mother, and he said: "Don't you dare." And that was that.

My grandma was asking me: "Are you already in Brejevina?"

"We're at the border," I said. "We just came over on the ferry."

Outside, the line of cars was beginning to move again. I saw Zóra put her cigarette out on the ground, pull her leg back in and slam the door. A flurry of people who had assembled on the gravel shoulder to stretch and smoke, to check their tires and fill water bottles at the fountain, to look impatiently down the line, or dispose of pastries and sandwiches they had been attempting to smuggle, or urinate against the side of the bathroom, scrambled to get back to their vehicles.

My grandma was silent for a few moments. I could hear the line clicking, and then she said: "Your mother wants to have the funeral in the next few days. Couldn't Zóra go on to Brejevina by herself?"

If I had told Zóra about it, she would have made me go home immediately. She would have given me the car, taken the vaccine coolers, and hitchhiked across the border to make the University's good-faith delivery to the orphanage at Brejevina up the coast. But I said: "We're almost there, Bako, and a lot of kids are waiting on these shots."

She didn't ask me again. My grandma just gave me the date of the funeral, the time, the place, even though I already knew where it would be, up on Strmina, the hill overlooking the City, where Mother Vera, my great-great-grandmother, was buried. After she hung up, I ran the faucet with my elbow and filled the water bottles I had brought as my pretext for getting out of the car. On the gravel outside, I rinsed off my feet before putting my shoes back on; Zóra left the engine running and jumped out to

take her turn while I climbed into the driver's seat, pulled it forward to compensate for my height, and made sure our licenses and medication import documents were lined up in the correct order on the dashboard. Two cars in front of us, a customs official, green shirt clinging to his chest, was opening the hatchback of an elderly couple's car, leaning carefully into it, unzipping suitcases with a gloved hand.

When Zóra got back, I didn't tell her anything about my grandfather. It had already been a bleak year for us both. I had made the mistake of walking out with the nurses during the strike in January; rewarded for my efforts with an indefinite suspension from the Vojvodja clinic, I had been housebound for months—a blessing, in a way, because it meant I was around for my grandfather when the diagnosis came in. He was glad of it at first, but never passed up the opportunity to call me a gullible jackass for getting suspended. And then, as his illness wore on, he began spending less and less time at home, and suggested I do the same; he didn't want me hanging around, looking morose, scaring the hell out of him when he woke up without his glasses on to find me hovering over his bed in the middle of the night. My behavior, he said, was tipping my grandma off about his illness, making her suspicious of our silences and exchanges, and of the fact that my grandfather and I were busier than ever now that we were respectively retired and suspended. He wanted me to think about my specialization, too, about what I would do with myself once the suspension was lifted—he was not surprised that Srdjan, a professor of biochemical engineering with whom I had, according to my grandfather, “been tangling,” had failed to put in a good word for me with the suspension committee. At my grandfather's suggestion, I had gone back to volunteering with the University's United Clinics program, something I hadn't done since the end of the war.

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Zóra was using this volunteering mission as an excuse to get away from a blowup at the Military Academy of Medicine. Four years after getting her medical degree, she was still at the trauma center, hoping that exposure to a variety of surgical procedures would help her decide on a specialization. Unfortunately, she had spent the bulk of that time under a trauma director known throughout the City as Ironglove—a name he had earned during his days as chief of obstetrics, when he had failed to remove the silver bracelets he kept stacked on his wrist during pelvic examinations. Zóra was a woman of principle, an open atheist. At the age of thirteen, a priest had told her that animals had no souls, and she had said, “Well then, fuck you, Pops,” and walked out of church; four years of butting heads with Ironglove had culminated in an incident that Zóra, under the direction of the state prosecutor, was prohibited from discussing. Zóra’s silence on the subject extended even to me, but the scraps I had heard around hospital hallways centered around a railway worker, an accident, and a digital amputation during which Ironglove, who may or may not have been inebriated, had said something like: “Don’t worry, sir—it’s a lot easier to watch the second finger come off if you’re biting down on the first.”

Naturally, a lawsuit was in the works, and Zóra had been summoned back to testify against Ironglove. Despite his reputation, he was still well connected in the medical community, and now Zóra was torn between sticking it to a man she had despised for years, and risking a career and reputation she was just beginning to build for herself; for the first time no one—not me, not her father, not her latest boyfriend—could point her in the right direction. After setting out, we had spent a week at the United Clinics headquarters for our briefing and training, and all this time she had met both my curiosity and the state prosecutor’s incessant phone calls with the same determined silence. Then yesterday,

against all odds, she had admitted to wanting my grandfather's advice as soon as we got back to the City. She hadn't seen him around the hospital for the past month, hadn't seen his graying face, the way his skin was starting to loosen around his bones.

We watched the customs officer confiscate two jars of beach pebbles from the elderly couple, and wave the next car through; when he got to us, he spent twenty minutes looking over our passports and identity cards, our letters of certification from the University. He opened the medicine coolers and lined them up on the tarmac while Zóra towered over him, arms crossed, and then said, "You realize, of course, that the fact that it's in a cooler means it's temperature-sensitive—or don't they teach you about refrigeration at the village schoolhouse?" knowing that everything was in order, knowing that, realistically, he couldn't touch us. This challenge, however, prompted him to search the car for weapons, stowaways, shellfish, and uncertified pets for a further thirty minutes.

Twelve years ago, before the war, the people of Brejevina had been our people. The border had been a joke, an occasional formality, and you used to drive or fly or walk across as you pleased, by woodland, by water, by open plain. You used to offer the customs officials sandwiches or jars of pickled peppers as you went through. Nobody asked you your name—although, as it turned out, everyone had apparently been anxious about it all along, about how your name started and ended. Our assignment in Brejevina was intended to rebuild something. Our University wanted to collaborate with the local government in getting several orphanages on their feet, and to begin attracting young people from across the border back to the City. That was the long-term diplomatic objective of our journey—but in layman's terms Zóra and I were there to sanitize children orphaned by our own soldiers, to examine them for pneumonia and tuberculosis

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and lice, to inoculate them against measles, mumps, rubella, and other assorted diseases to which they had been subjected during the war and the years of destitution that followed it. Our contact in Brejevina, a Franciscan monk named Fra Antun, had been enthusiastic and hospitable, paging us to make sure our journey was unencumbered, and to assure us that his parents, conveniently enough, were looking forward to hosting us. His voice was always cheerful, especially for a man who had spent the last three years fighting to fund the establishment and construction of the first official orphanage on the coast, and who was, in the meantime, housing sixty orphaned children at a monastery intended to accommodate twenty monks.

Zóra and I were joining up for this charitable trip before our lives took us apart for the first time in the twenty-some-odd years we had known each other. We would wear our white doctors' coats even off duty in order to appear simultaneously trustworthy and disconcerting. We were formidable with our four supplies coolers loaded with vials of MMR-II and IPV, with boxes of candy we were bringing to stave off the crying and screaming we felt certain would ensue once the inoculation got going. We had an old map, which we kept in the car years after it had become completely inaccurate. We had used the map on every road trip we had ever taken, and it showed in the marker scribbling all over it: the crossed-out areas we were supposed to avoid on our way to some medical conference or other, the stick man holding crudely drawn skis on a mountain resort we had loved that was no longer a part of our country.

I couldn't find Zdrevkov, the place where my grandfather died, on that map. I couldn't find Brejevina either, but I had known in advance that it was missing, so we had drawn it in. It was a small seaside village forty kilometers east of the new border. We drove through red-roofed villages that clung to the lip of

the sea, past churches and horse pastures, past steep plains bright with purple bellflowers, past sunlit waterfalls that thrust out of the sheer rock-face above the road. Every so often we entered woodland, high pine forests dotted with olives and cypresses, the sea flashing like a knife where the forest fell away down the slope. Parts of the road were well paved, but there were places where it ripped up into ruts and stretches of gravel that hadn't been fixed in years.

The car was pitching up and down through the ruts on the shoulder, and I could hear the glass vials in the cooler shivering. Thirty kilometers out of Brejeвина, we started to see more signs for pensions and restaurants, tourist places that were slowly beginning to rely on the offshore islands for business again. We started seeing fruit and specialty food stands, signs for homemade pepper cookies and grape-leaf *rakija*, local honey, sour cherry and fig preserves. I had three missed pages from my grandmother, but Zóra had the mobile, and there was no way to call my grandma back with Zóra in the car. We pulled over at the next rest-stop with a pay phone, a roadside barbecue stand with a blue awning and an outhouse in the adjacent field.

There was a truck parked on the other side of the stand, and a long line of soldiers crowding at the barbecue counter. The men were in camouflage. They fanned themselves with their hats and waved when I got out of the car and headed for the phone booth. Some local gypsy kids, handing out pamphlets for a new nightclub in Brac, laughed at me through the glass. Then they ran to the side of the car to bum cigarettes from Zóra.

From the booth, I could see the army truck, with its dusty, folded tarp, and the grill of Boro's Beefs, where a large man, probably Boro himself, was flipping burger patties and veal shoulders and sausages with the flat part of an enormous knife. Behind the stand, a little way across the field, there was a funny-

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looking brown cow tied to a post in the ground—I suddenly got the feeling that Boro would routinely use that knife for the cow, and the butchering, and the flipping of the burgers, and the cutting of bread, which made me feel a little sorry for the soldier standing by the condiment counter, spooning diced onions all over his sandwich.

I hadn't noticed my headache while I had been driving, but now it hit me when my grandma picked up after the sixth ring, and her voice was followed by the sharp sound of her hearing aid lancing through the phone line and into the base of my skull. There were soft beeps as she turned it down. I could hear my mother's voice in the background, quiet but determined, talking with some other consoler who had come to pay a call.

My grandma was hysterical. "His things are gone."

I told her to calm down, asked her to explain.

"His things!" she said. "Your grandfather's things, they're—your mother went down to the morgue, and they had his suit and coat and shoes, but his *things*, Natalia—they're all gone, they're not there with him."

"What things?"

"Look, God—'what things!'" I heard her slap her hands together. "Do you hear me? I'm telling you his things are *gone*—those bastards at the clinic, they stole them, they stole his hat and umbrella, his wallet. Think—can you believe it? To steal things from a dead man."

I could believe it, having heard things about it at our own hospital. It happened, usually to the unclaimed dead, and often with very little reprimand. But I said, "Sometimes there's a mix-up. It can't have been a very big clinic, Bako. There might be a delay. Maybe they forgot to send them."

"His watch, Natalia."

"Please, Bako." I thought of his coat pocket, and of *The Jungle*

Book, and wanted to ask if it, too, was missing; but as far as I knew, my grandma had not cried yet, and I was terrified of saying something that would make her cry. I must have thought of the deathless man at this moment; but the thought was so far away I wouldn't find it again until later.

"His *watch*."

"Do you have the number of the clinic?" I said. "Have you called them?"

"I'm calling and calling," she said. "There's no answer. Nobody's there. They've taken his things. God, Natalia, his glasses—they're gone."

His glasses, I thought—the way he would clean them, put almost the whole lens in his mouth to blow on it before wiping it clean with the little silk cloth he kept in his pocket—and a cold stiffness crept into my ribs and stayed there.

"What kind of place is this, where he died?" my grandma was saying. Her voice, hoarse from shouting, was beginning to break.

"I don't know, Bako," I said. "I wish I had known he had gone."

"None of it would be like this—but you have to lie, the pair of you, always whispering about something. He's lying, you're lying." I heard my mother try to take the phone from her, and my grandma said, "No." I was watching Zóra get out of the car. She straightened up slowly and locked the car door, leaving the cooler on the floor of the passenger side. The gypsy kids were leaning against the back bumper, passing a cigarette back and forth. "You're sure he didn't leave a note?" My grandma asked me what kind of note, and I said, "Anything. Any kind of message."

"I'm telling you, I don't know," she said.

"What did he say when he left?"

"That he was coming to you."

It was my turn to be suspicious, to calculate who had known what, and how much of it no one had known at all. He had been

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counting on the pattern into which we had fallen as a family over the years, the tendency to lie about each other's physical condition and whereabouts to spare one another's feelings and fears; like the time my mother had broken her leg falling off the lakehouse garage at Verimovo, and we had told my grandparents that we were delaying our trip home because the house had flooded; or the time my grandmother had had open-heart surgery at a clinic in Strekovac while my mother and I, blissfully oblivious, vacationed in Venice, and my grandfather, lying into a telephone line that was too scrambled to be anything but our own, insisted that he had taken my grandma on an impromptu spa trip to Luzern.

"Let me have the phone number of that clinic in Zdrevkov," I said.

"Why?" my grandma said, still suspicious.

"Just let me have it." I had a wrinkled receipt in my coat pocket, and I propped it against the glass. The only pencil I had was worn to a stub; my grandfather's influence, the habit of using the same pencil until it couldn't fit between his fingers anymore. I wrote the number down.

Zóra was waving at me and pointing in the direction of Boro and his beefs, and the crowd at the counter, and I shook my head at her and looked on in desperation as she crossed the mud ruts on the shoulder and got in line behind a blue-eyed soldier who couldn't have been more than nineteen. I saw him look her up and down less than discreetly, and then Zóra said something I couldn't hear. The roar of laughter that erupted from the soldiers around the blue-eyed kid was audible even in the phone booth, however, and the kid's ears went red. Zóra gave me a satisfied look, and then continued to stand there with her arms across her chest, eyeing the chalkboard menu above a drawing of a cow

wearing a purple hat, which looked a lot like the cow tied up out back.

“Where are you girls now?” my grandma said.

“We’ll be in Brejevina by nightfall,” I said. “We’ll do the shots and come straight home. I promise I’ll try to be home by the day after tomorrow.” She didn’t say anything. “I’ll call the clinic in Zdrevkov,” I said, “and if it’s on the way home I’ll go by and get his things, Bako.”

“I still don’t know,” she finally said, “how none of us knew.” She was waiting for me to admit that I had known. “You’re lying to me,” she said.

“I don’t know anything, Bako.”

She wanted me to say that I had seen the symptoms but ignored them, or that I had spoken to him about it, anything to comfort her in her fear that, despite being with us, he had been totally alone with the knowledge of his own death.

“Then swear to me,” she said. “Swear to me on my life that you didn’t know.”

It was my turn to be silent. She listened for my oath, but when it didn’t come, she said: “It must be hot out there. Are you girls drinking plenty of water?”

“We’re fine.”

A pause. “If you eat meat, make sure it’s not pink in the middle.”

I told her I loved her, and she hung up without a word. I held the dead receiver against my head for a few more minutes, and then I called the clinic in Zdrevkov. You could always tell the backwater places because it would take forever to connect, and when it did, the sound was distant and muffled.

I let the line ring to silence twice, and then tried once more before hanging up and getting in line with Zóra, who had already

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locked horns with Boro trying to order what our city joints called a “strengthened burger,” with extra onions. Boro told her that this was Brejevina, and that she could have a double burger if she wanted, but he had never heard of a strengthened burger, and what the hell was that? The stand was cluttered with coolers of raw meat and cast-iron soup pots brimming with something brown and oily. Behind the counter, Boro was terse, and he wanted exact change, probably to stick it to us for that strengthened burger. Zóra held her sandwich in one hand and mine in the other while I went through her coat pockets for her wallet.

“You heard of a place called Zdrevkov?” I asked Boro, leaning over the counter with the pink and blue notes in my hand. “You know where it is?”

He didn’t.

At seven-thirty, the sun banking low into a distant cover of blue clouds, we came within sight of Brejevina and turned off the highway to follow the town road to the sea. The town was smaller than I had expected, with a palm-lined boardwalk that ran tight between the shore and the shops and restaurants that spilled out into our path, coffeehouse chairs and postcard stands in the middle of the road, kids on bicycles hitting the back of the car with open hands. It was too early for the tourist season to be in full swing, but, with the windows down, I could hear Polish and Italian as we rolled slowly past the convenience store and the post office, the monastery square where we would be setting up the free clinic for the orphanage.

Fra Antun had told us where to find his parents’ house. The place was tucked away in a white oleander grove at the farthest edge of town. It was a modest beachfront house with blue shuttered windows and a roof of faded shingles, sitting on top of a natural escarpment in the slope of the mountain, maybe fifty yards from the sea. There was a big olive tree with what looked

like a tire swing out front. There was a henhouse that had apparently collapsed at least once in the last few years, and been haphazardly reassembled and propped up against the low stone wall that ran along the southern edge of the property. A couple of chickens were milling around the door, and a rooster was sitting in one of the downstairs window boxes. The place looked leftover, but not defeated. There was something determined about the way the blue paint clung to the shutters and the door and the broken crate full of lavender that was leaning against the side of the house. Fra Antun's father, Barba Ivan, was a local fisherman. The moment we reached the top of the stairs that led up from the road, he was already hurrying through the garden. He wore brown suspenders and sandals, and a bright red vest that must have cost his wife a fortune at the yarn cart. At his side was a white dog with a square black head—it was a pointer, but its big-eyed, excited expression made it look about as useful as a panda.

Barba Ivan was saying, "Hey there, doctors! Welcome, welcome!" as he came toward us, and he tried to take all of our belongings at once. After some persuasion, we got him to settle for Zóra's suitcase, which he rolled up the cobbled pathway between the scrub and the roses. Barba Ivan's wife, Nada, was waiting at the door, smoking. She had thin white hair and green-river veins that ran down her neck and bare arms. She kissed our faces matter-of-factly, and then apologized for the state of the garden before putting out her cigarette and herding us inside.

Inside, the house was quiet and warm, bright despite the evening. The corridor where we left our shoes opened out into a small living room with blue-cushioned chairs, and a sofa and armchair that had obviously been upholstered long ago. Someone in the house was a painter: an easel, with an unfinished canvas of what looked like a hound, had been set up by the window, and paint-splattered newspapers were crowded around it on the

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floor. Framed watercolors were spaced carefully along the walls, and it took me a moment to realize that they were all of the same hound, that beautifully stupid black-headed dog from outside. The windows were all open, and with the outdoor heat came the electric evening song of the cicadas. Still apologizing for the mess, Nada led us through to the kitchen, while Barba Ivan took this opportunity to seize all our luggage—Zóra's suitcase, my duffel, our backpacks—and dart up the stairs at the end of the hall. Nada jostled us into the kitchen and showed us where the plates and glasses were kept, told us where the bread box was, opened the fridge and pointed out the milk and the juice and the pears and the bacon, and told us to have as much of everything as we wanted whenever we wanted, even the cola.

A red and yellow parrot sat in a tin cage between the kitchen window and another lopsided watercolor of the black-headed dog. The parrot had been looking suspiciously at Zóra since we had entered the kitchen, and he took that moment to screech out: "O! My God! Behold the wonderment!"—an outburst we at first took as a strikingly lecherous reaction to Zóra's bare arms and collarbones. But Nada apologized profusely and dropped a dishrag over the parrot's cage.

"He likes to recite poetry," Nada said, and then we both realized that the parrot had been trying to begin the prologue of an old epic poem. "I've tried to get him to say things like 'good morning' and 'I like bread and butter.' "

She showed us upstairs. Zóra and I would be sharing a room with two cots that had been made up with blue paisley quilts. There was a polished wooden dresser with a few broken drawers, and a small bathroom with an old-fashioned tub and a chain-pull toilet we were warned might or might not flush, depending on the time of day. More sketches of the dog under a fig tree, another of him sleeping on the downstairs sofa. Our window

looked out over the back of the property, the orange and lemon trees shivering behind it, and, above that, a sloping plain at the foot of the mountain, lined with rows of low, wind-ruffled vines. Men were digging among the vines; we could hear the distant crunch of their shovels, the sound of their voices as they shouted to one another.

“Our vineyard,” Nada said. “Don’t mind them,” she said about the diggers, and closed one of the shutters.

By the time we brought the coolers and the boxes in from the car and stacked them in a corner of our room, dinner was ready. Nada had fried up sardines and two squid, and grilled a few fish that were about the size of a man’s hand, and there was nothing to do but accept her hospitality and cluster around the square table in the kitchen while Barba Ivan poured us two mugs of homemade red wine, and the parrot, still under the cover of the dishrag, burred to himself and occasionally shrieked out “O! Hear you thunder? Is that the earth a-shaking?” and, every so often, in answer to his own question, “No! ’Tis not thunder! Nor the earth a-shaking!”

Nada served us black bread, chopped green peppers, boiled potatoes with chard and garlic. She had made a massive effort, arranged everything carefully on blue china that was chipped, but lovingly wiped down after probably spending years in a basement, hidden from looters. The cool evening air came in off the sea from the lower balcony; there were sardines piled high and caked with salt, two charred bass shining with olive oil—“From our own olives,” Barba Ivan said, tipping the bottle so that I could smell the lip. I could picture him sitting earlier that day in a small dinghy somewhere out in the rolling waters of the bay, the thin net pulling at his hands, the effort it would take for him to pick the fish out of the net with those big-jointed brown hands.

Barba Ivan and Nada did not ask us about our drive, about our

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work, or about our families. Instead, in order to avoid any potential political or religious tangents, the conversation turned to crops. The spring had been terrible: torrential rains, streams overflowing, floods that had flushed out the soil up and down the coast and destroyed lettuces and onions. Tomatoes had been late coming in, and you couldn't find spinach anywhere—I remembered my grandfather coming back from the market with dandelion leaves that a farmer had passed off as spinach, my grandma buttering the paper-thin dough for *zaljanica* and then pulling the coarse-leafed mass he had brought home out of the grocery bag and shouting, "What the hell is this?" It was the first time I had thought about my grandfather in several hours, and the suddenness of it pushed me into silence. I sat and listened, half-hearing, as Barba Ivan insisted that the summer, contrary to his expectations, had been incredible: the oranges and lemons plentiful, strawberries everywhere, the figs fat and ripe. Zóra was saying, *for us, too*, even though I'd never seen her eat a fig in her life.

We had scraped most of the flesh off our respective fishes, unwisely downed our mugs of red wine, tried to help the parrot with verses he had apparently committed to memory better than we ever could, when the child appeared. She was so small I suspect that none of us would have noticed her if she hadn't come in coughing—a thick, loud, productive cough that ripped through her on the balcony, and then there she was, tiny and round-bellied, standing in the doorway in mismatched shoes, her head a mass of tight brownish curls.

The child couldn't have been more than five or six, and she held on to the door frame, one hand tucked into the pocket of the yellow summer dress she was wearing. She was a little dusty, her eyes a little tired, and her entrance had caused a lull in the conversation, so that when her second cough came we were all already looking at her. Then she put a finger in her ear.

“Hello,” I said, “and who are you?”

“God knows,” Nada said, and stood up to clear the plates. “She’s one of *theirs*—those people up in the vineyard.” I hadn’t realized, until that moment, that they were staying here, too. To the little girl, Nada said, “Where’s your mother?” leaning forward, speaking very loudly. When the child said nothing, Nada told her, “Come in for a cookie.”

Barba Ivan leaned back in his chair and reached into the cupboard behind him. He emerged with a tin of pepper cookies, lifted the lid and held it out to the child. She didn’t move. Nada returned from the sink and tried to ply her with a glass of lemonade, but the child wouldn’t come in: a violet pouch had been tied around her neck with frayed ribbon, and this she was swinging with her free hand from one shoulder to the other, occasionally hitting herself in the chin, and sucking back the green streams of snot that were inching out of her nose. Outside, we could hear people returning from the vineyard, dust-hoarsed voices and the clink of shovels and spades dropping to the ground, feet on the downstairs patio. They were setting up to have their dinner outside, at the table under the big olive tree, and Nada said, “We’d better finish up here,” and started collecting our utensils. Zóra tried to stand and help, but Nada nudged her back into her seat. The commotion outside had roused the interest of Bis, the dog who charged out with his ridiculous, ear-swinging lope, nosed the child in the doorway with mild interest, and then got distracted by something in the garden.

Barba Ivan was still holding out the cookie box when a thin young woman swept by the door and swung the child into her arms. Nada went to the door and looked outside. When she turned around, she said, “They shouldn’t be here.”

“Sweets aren’t much good for children,” Barba Ivan said to Zóra, confidentially. “Bad habits before dinner, rots their teeth

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and such. But what else are we supposed to do? We can't eat all this ourselves."

"It was ridiculous to let them stay," Nada said, stacking the dirty plates on the edge of the table.

Barba Ivan was holding the cookie box out to me. "There was a time when I could eat a whole nut cake, by myself, just sitting around in the afternoon. But my doctor says, *careful!* I'm getting old, he says, I have to be careful."

"I said this would happen—didn't I?" Nada said, scraping the smeared leftovers of the potatoes and chard onto a plate, and lowering the plate to the floor. "Two or three days—it's been a week. Wandering in and out all hours of the night, coughing on my sheets."

"They've got all kinds of rules now," Barba Ivan was saying. "Don't eat butter, don't drink beer. This much fruit a day." He held his hands apart, indicating a small barrel. "Eat your vegetables."

"Each one sicker than the next." This Nada said loudly, leaning toward the door. "Those children should be in school, or at the hospital, or with people who can afford to put them in school or in the hospital."

"I tell him, listen. I eat my vegetables. Don't tell me about vegetables: you buy them at the market, I grow them at my house." Barba Ivan opened his hands and counted off tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, green onions, leeks. "I'm a man who knows vegetables—but also I've eaten bread every day of my life. My father, too, and he had red wine with every meal. Do you know what my doctor says?" I shook my head, fixing a smile.

Nada said: "I told you, and I told Antun, I don't want them here—and now the doctors have come, and they're still here, doing God knows what up there, overturning the whole damn vineyard. It's indecent."

“He says it’ll help me live longer. Look, God—why would I want that?”

“Tell me it’s not dangerous,” Nada said, touching Zóra’s shoulder. “Tell me, Doctor. Ten of them in two rooms—five to a bed, and all of them sick as dogs, every single one.”

“Why would I want to live longer if I have to eat—rice, and this—what do they call it? Prunes.”

“Not that I am suggesting everyone from up your way sleeps like that. Sleeps five a bed—I’m not saying that at all, Doctor.”

“The hell with your prunes.”

“Have you ever heard of such a thing?” Nada asked us both, wiping her hands on her apron. “Have you?”

“No,” said Zóra obligingly.

“It’s not right,” she said again. “And with those pouches stinking to high heaven. Whoever heard of such a thing—we Catholics don’t have it; the Muslims don’t have it.”

“But still, these people have it, and it’s not our business,” Barba Ivan said, suddenly serious, turning in his chair to look at her. “They’re staying here—it’s not my concern.”

“It’s my house,” Nada said. “My vineyard.”

“The real difficulty is the children,” Barba Ivan said to me, serious now. “They’re very ill. Getting worse.” He closed the cookie tin and put it back on the shelf. “I’m told they haven’t been to a doctor—I don’t know, of course.” He made a face, tapped a fist to his neck. “The bags certainly aren’t helping, and they’re foul.”

“Foul,” said Nada.

They might have continued like this if one of the diggers, a brown-haired, sunburned boy of about thirteen, hadn’t come in to ask for milk. He was shy about asking, and his presence took all the air out of Nada’s indignation, so that she didn’t go back to it even after he left.

After dinner, Barba Ivan took out his accordion to play us

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some old census songs he had learned from his grandfather. We cut him off at the pass by asking him when he'd last had a physical and offering to get one started for him, doing his auscultation and taking his temperature and blood pressure before bed.

Later on, upstairs, there were more pressing matters: the toilet didn't flush, and the water in the sink was cold. Their boiler wasn't working. Not one to be disadvantaged out of a shower, Zóra chanced it. Standing at the window, while Zóra yelped under the running water, I could no longer see the vineyard, but I could hear the clink of shovels starting up again, the high sound of voices that sounded like children. The cicadas were trilling from the oleander bush under the window, and swallows were swinging in high arcs just outside the range of the house lights. A speckled gray moth cowered in an outside corner of the mosquito net. Zóra came out of the bathroom and announced, with some triumph, that the purpose of the rusted pliers in the bathtub was to lift up the pin that turned the shower on. She put her wet hair in a ponytail and came to stand by the window. "Are they digging all night?" she said.

I had no idea. "They must be workers," I said. "The Barba must be keeping them here past the season for some kind of charity."

The state prosecutor had paged her twice while she was in the shower.

"You should call them back," I said.

She was having an evening smoke, holding an ashtray in her free hand and stirring the ashes with the bright tip of her cigarette. "As far as I'm concerned, I have nothing to say until I talk to your grandfather," Zóra said. She smiled at me, carefully blew the smoke out of the window, waved it out of my face with her hand.

She was on the cusp of asking me what was wrong, so I said, "We'll get them to come down to the clinic tomorrow," and

climbed into bed. Zóra finished her cigarette, but continued to hover, peering out the window. Then she checked the bedroom door.

“Do you suppose they lock up downstairs?”

“Probably not,” I said. “Doors are probably wide open, and blowing a breeze of paramilitary rapists.”

She turned out the light reluctantly, and for a long time there was silence. She was awake and staring at me, and I was waiting for her to drift off so I wouldn't have to think of something to say.

Downstairs, muffled by the towel covering his cage, the parrot said: “Wash the bones, bring the body, leave the heart behind.”