

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

GABRIELA BABNIK
BETWEEN HIS THIGHS
(EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL)

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“There was a moment in my late twenties when I admitted that my adventurousness had long since petered out.”

Julian Barnes: *The Sense of an Ending*, 2011

Small towns made Ivana cry. This is not about my own sentiments though, it’s not about what I want, she thought. Instead of sitting on an airplane, I should have been working on my dissertation in my tiny, gloomy room with a view over a concrete building wall across the street, over an abandoned playground that could be seen only if you leaned through the window, if it hadn’t been for a letter. A handwritten letter that came addressed with a Slovene equivalent of “dear” above the recipient’s name, as though it had not been sent to an English-speaking country.

With heavy and staggering gait, the Georgian landlord made it down the narrow hallway to her door. He told her, with a whirring voice, that he was there to bring news, which he suspected was bad. During study breaks, Ivana would sometimes step out into the hallway and light a cigarette, a behavior which, at first, she thought was inappropriate, but which she soon realized was perfect for her to blend in with other people in the house—the landlord constantly hosted his close and extended family members—and eavesdrop on her landlords’ awkward phrasing, which emerged from their mouths almost haltingly, as if to remind them that their country of origin was elsewhere. If they spoke too loud, she would throw her notes into a leather bag, pull up her hood and go out for a stroll, or visit a library.

Ivana found London increasingly exhausting. It was not so much the suffocating humidity in the underground which, in the height of the summer, was unbearable, or the Georgian landlords, as it was the trivia that bothered her: jostling on the escalators, the toilet in the foyer which she was doomed to share with other tenants, the officials in black with a child in a red parka with flower embroidery in their midst, seeming like an angel from heaven. Ivana grew conscious of her loneliness and impending seclusion on the tube, while staring at a young couple with a child. She wasn’t bothered that she had been alone when she had slipped and hit her head against the rim of the bathtub the other day, nor by the fact that she could not afford a doctor to examine her ever more prominent bruises. What bothered her was that the child in a red parka on the London underground behaved unnaturally. She looked through a window in which she inadvertently saw her own dim reflection, and thought of the notes which she had read that morning: even though the maps of Earth in Middle Ages were flat, Earth was still thought to be round. Ivana was mostly excited that the Arabs produced more realistic maps than their contemporary European inventor colleagues, though they did have a disputable habit of inverting south and north.

Ivana responded to the landlord's burring voice at the threshold of her room with disquiet. Late in paying her rent, Ivana took a deep breath, laid her hand on the doorknob and stood there, petrified, as if this was the last confrontation in her life. The overly-red and corpulent man seemed to hold an advantage over her, with his dirty-red brick house, which he had been able to afford mainly thanks to his London familial ties. Georgians always seemed to work hand-in-hand, Ivana thought.

"A letter, from home..." the Georgian muttered under his breath, as if he felt uncomfortable, or rather sorry for this petite brunette from Eastern Europe, who was ardent about medieval cartographic projections, and who often slept through the day—at least that's what he thought—buried under a mountain of instructions from *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, that read something like this: "If you wish to go from Rome to Jerusalem, go south and ask directions as you go." Ivana would explain to the Georgian couple, as they drank black coffee and tapped off the cigarette ashes into a crystal ashtray, how most medieval maps looked like modern-day maps of railway lines which, these days, are available for purchase at nearly every news stand. The man would gaze at Ivana, her round spectacles, her narrow shoulders, expecting her to burst out laughing. The corners of his mouth would quiver in attempt to stifle his laughter, but when he would see that Ivana wasn't amused, and that she took her doctoral research extremely seriously, he'd bang his hand against the table and shout a swear in Georgian.

"From home, a letter..." Ivana repeated his words, reached for the letter and silently slammed the door in his face. Then she threw herself on the bed and, because her room was a constellation of mutually-dependent things, the red lamp at the edge of the night stand fell to the ground. Ivana glanced at a nude lightbulb and hurriedly reached for the envelope. Having expected bad news or, in the best case, the landlord's warning about unpaid rent, she was suddenly riding a wave of happiness. Her body trembled, which not for the world would she admit. She had left her provincial town because she could no longer bear the weight of the love triangle between a post office, an inn and a local school. "You've got a high-end hotel right here in front of your nose, what do you need to go to England for?" her mother would often say, not grasping Ivana's dreamy fascination with maps and atlases, her lust for other cities, which arose from her belief that real life only happened in places other than your birthplace. To exit the family tree, which was largely dedicated to reproduction, must have meant that Ivana was tempting fate, thought her mother. And to make things even worse, not only did Ivana plan to travel to Timbuktu, Fort Alamo and the Amazon River, Casablanca and Mompracem when she grew up, she also promised herself to become a devoted student of astronomy, which Mother believed was the science of charlatans. But to accomplish that, she had to go abroad to either Italy or England. England seemed farther away from home.

A moment later, Ivana could no longer remember the details of the letter. All she knew was that the cream-colored envelope also contained a plane ticket that had been bought with the British Airways, the one and only, which still evoked the illusion of privilege, the notion that flying was more than just riding a bus, in contrast to budget airlines, which stripped off people's clothes

and opened their empty shampoo bottles in the name of safety and the fight against terrorism. She also recalled the handwriting. It was her father's—the mildly italic script with big and tall *l*, which made Ivana think that, despite his discomposure, her father was a gentle soul, nevertheless a soul who now brought sad news.

She wanted to pick up the lamp, perhaps open the door again and chase the landlord down the hallway, to tell him that medieval journeys were mainly imaginary, that medieval encyclopedias, such as *Imagines Mundi*, mainly aimed to entertain the idea of the magical through telling of inaccessible and distant lands, that since tradition mattered more than experience, such books were written by people who never traveled there, but she only fell back on the bed and closed her eyes. There was her father, dressed in a pair of workman overalls, pacing between the pantry and kitchen. A subtle, nearly invisible trail of flour, on bright-brown carpeting in the living room, implied that he was frying fish. The sound of egg whisking and sizzling oil echoed from the kitchen—by all means, her father was still devoted to the ocean, where he had allegedly spent the most wonderful years of his life as a Yugoslav soldier, thought Ivana to herself. This is why she found him gentle, not owing to the color-stained overalls, or her childhood image of him as he bowed over a plate of crumbs. This is why she thought that they might have something in common.

Her father, with whom she never conversed extensively, would normally sit at the table and stared silently into space. When he finally did say a word, which he had thoroughly contemplated, everybody would look at him anxiously, exchange glances and finally switch to a new subject. It was obvious that her father sought to stretch the boundaries of his own capabilities, but didn't know quite how. Moreover, his wife, Ivana's mother, stood firmly in the way of his futile attempts to better himself, dragging him even into regression, Ivana thought.

During her voluntary time in London, which she could very well call a life on the dark side, it soon dawned on her that what she had expected of life was a far cry from reality—the best approximation to the ocean or nature, something she enjoyed in abundance back home, was an occasional escape from the city. Thus she spent her savings on a one-way train ticket to Bristol. Like the London newspapers did of the Thames, the local newspapers would publish a timetable of the best times and vantage points to view the Severn River at its fullest. One evening, when she wasn't even certain about how she was going to return to London—though it was about her not wanting to go back, rather than not being able to—she leaned over a railing in Minsterworth, to watch the river as it merged with the ocean. While some people used flashlights to illuminate the water, Ivana relied on the intermittent light of the moon. She did not know what brought her to the riverside, and how the endlessly shuddering waters affected her; all she knew was that, even in spite of her authoritarian parents, especially her mother, she had felt more complete when she was a child. She had known how to love when she was a child. Atlases and maps, a boy on a street in her hometown, thin with mildly yellow bags under his eyes, who cried at the drop of a hat. A few years ago, she found out that he had died of an overdose. "It's a good thing this has come to an end," said Mother who, in reality, only reiterated what his father had said, but

took the freedom, unjustly so, to share his words with the rest of the world. Ivana always believed that her mother circulated somber stories that belonged to others, so as to dodge confrontation with her own tragedy.

The environment which Ivana had left, and to which she was now returning with some relief, due to father's unexpected letter—if nothing else, she would further avoid paying the rent and consulting with her supervisor, who urged her to submit her doctoral dissertation by the end of the year, "Ivana, this is your fifth year in London, it's time you finish your studies," she insisted relentlessly—was painted with some twenty houses, soaring from the edge of a windy road. The house numbers are completely random, thought Ivana while examining the interior of the plane and its passengers, the neighbor's house to our right is number 78B, while our house is number 1. She never understood the logic behind it, a question which never really tickled her interest but which, at the prospect of her home, suddenly became relevant.

Her true interest lay in ways to prove that the astronomies of Copernicus and Galileo were just supposition, considering their inaccuracy regarding the shapes of planetary orbits. Copernicus derived a heliocentric system, which had been proposed before by Aristarchus of Samos, who put the Earth into motion as early as in the third century BC, to explain the otherwise inexplicable astronomical phenomena. But his heliocentric hypothesis was rejected by Plutarch...

"Can I offer you a drink?" asked a woman in a dark blue uniform. Ivana suddenly woke to reality. Surprised that she wasn't flying with a low-cost carrier, which leaves their passengers' mouths to dry out, Ivana nodded and then asked for a glass of wine.

The woman in a uniform smiled and spun to a flawless, only seconds long, aerial performance. The lady next to Ivana ordered tomato juice and, when she pressed her lips against the rim of the glass, leaving behind a nearly invisible trace of her lipstick, Ivana grimly remembered her adolescent aspirations to become a flight attendant. Thinking that it would be prestigious to be on a reputable airline team, even if that was Slovenia's Adria Airways, she had even applied to their public tender, but she was quickly disqualified, due to her shortsightedness. If "our little Ivana" passes the first round, then we will make sure that she's the first applicant to be considered for the job, a friend of her father, a pilot, had once remarked, even though he knew about her lenses. Later, when she finally landed glasses, her career as a uniformed worker was never mentioned again which, in a way, she was grateful for. Had it not been for her mild handicap, her shortsightedness, she would have never learned about Tycho Brahe, an outstanding astronomer who had proposed an alternative theory: that the Sun revolved around the Earth, which was the center of the Universe, while the other planets revolved around the sun.

Ivana sighed, leaned against the headrest in attempt to smother the turbulence in her stomach. She was not a wine drinker, especially not red, nor was she fond of black coffee, but this time

the circumstances demanded otherwise. “Your heart is dead,” the Georgian landlady, strong stature, thick eyebrows and an apron always high above her hips, said to her, dramatically, not long ago. “I’ve been watching you, when you caressed our pets especially.” The Georgian couple had a dog and a cat, whose lack of trust in people rarely allowed Ivana to touch them. “You can caress them as much as you like, but it doesn’t mean anything,” she continued, while Ivana stared at a plastic table cloth, pretending she didn’t care much about her words. “At best, it shows you crave something. You can convince yourself that you belong here in London, and that you’re right about your hypotheses, as much as you want, but there’s still something cold about you.” Ivana took a sip of wine and stroked her temple hair. She might have been afraid of it, but she knew that the cold within her was something she needed to keep for herself.

Fortunate to be seated by a window, Ivana happily studied the clouds, as they moved past the airplane. She never thought her father could be friends with a pilot, considering he had never even so much as stepped on a plane. One afternoon, as they all sat by an elongated wooden table, religiously stooping over paper plates loaded with mirage-like roast meat, the pilot—Ivana later learned that he had transferred to an Austrian airline, and that her father and he slowly drifted apart because of it—took a seat next to Ivana, in retrospect a bit intrusively and too close for comfort, and told her that her father was one of few people he confided in.

Ivana opened a tray, laid on her glass and surreptitiously sized up her neighbor. She approved of her looks. If anything bothered her about life in London, other than being lonely, it had to be a fresh daily inflow of young girls and women who obsessed over their looks, which was a constant reminder of her own low market value, regardless of how well-educated she was. Decked in a chocolate brown suede jacket and golden brown sweater over a tall collared blouse, the lady looked as if she was attending the funeral, instead of Ivana. Ivana stared at her dark brown braid-patterned stockings and simple skirt, picturing herself accepting condolences in a similar outfit. Some relatives shake her hand, some hug her, others only flash their cellophane-wrapped candles from a distance—as if to say, it was time for Grandpa Tone to go, he was going mad from the disease and his concentration camp experience, out of which he had miraculously emerged alive—and nod, partially due to their age, and partially in approval of their own thoughts. Ever since Ivana had decided to study in London, ever since she had moved to the city of many races, garbage mounds, screaming lunatics, stores that are open late into the night, inexpensive restaurants, she was less a presence than an absence to them. Yet, even though she was practically gone, they still catalogued her as single.

“You’re pushing yourself too hard,” her mother will say to her at the funeral. “You should take a break, look around, get married, you can’t stay in that tiny room forever, my goodness, with that Georgian couple who got you into smoking.”

Mother will surely not say that my time is running out, thought Ivana. She is nothing like my supervisor, who would call my mobile phone if I was three minutes late for a meeting, who would then stare at a wall while I apologized about how packed the metro was, how I met a family with

a child who shouldn't have worn black, who shouldn't have been brought to such a suffocating maze of underground corridors—well, I would never say anything like that, because I wouldn't want to unveil how lonely and empty I was, though she would have had my number, one way or the other. Mother went about her business quietly, seemingly effortlessly, yet with a dark, deep sediment that never settled. She thought her husband was a mediocre, relatively badly-paid craftsman, which often shone through in her hissing remarks like, “you've had enough alcohol,” or “use a lid when you fry fish.” Still, her parents built themselves a big family home, despite their proletarian status, which led Mother to believe that Ivana's studies were bigger than her, that she had to guide her, which was no longer plausible, given that Ivana's presence, mental and physical, was elsewhere.

Ivana imagined herself staring at her mother, her unkempt hair in the middle of immaculate kitchen, despite the fact that they will have just returned from the funeral. The wind at the cemetery may have ruffled her shoulder-length hair—for as long as Ivana remembered, her hair had always been the same—but it was not the wind that was at fault for her gravely disheveled grayness. As if embarrassed by her mother's look, Ivana would look away, and ponder the arguments in opposition to the theory that the Earth revolves around the Sun. It didn't matter how illogical they may be in their dismissal of Earth's movement, she liked the *Argument of the Birds*, by a 17th century writer, Alessandro Tassoni. If nothing else, she thought it was poetic: *If the Earth moves, birds flying westward would never be able to keep up with its rotation, and would never go forward.*

Ivana's mother could not make it through two consecutive sentences on the subject of Descartes' Theory of Vortices or *tourbillons* (*Principia Philosophiae*, from 1664): for instance, without digressing to oven cleaning or vacation planning. Not being able to control Ivana's life in London drove her to call her daughter's PhD pleasantly charming, a vegetative existence, an escape from reality and, had she known that one evening, when Ivana was not occupied by the Severn River, or the idea of how perfect her childhood imagination was, she had knelt down between the thighs of a black man—he had sat on a toilet, and Ivana had yearned for him to stroke her hair—which was a gesture of pity, diluted with her vulnerability that had culminated in love-making, she would have said that Ivana was wasting her life. Another of her old-fashioned and wishful thoughts, which would have surfaced like the bruises on Ivana's forearm, the gently yellow patches on her forehead—she would have said that black men were not worthy of desire, let alone of building a life with.

“I don't know why I'm telling you this,” said Ivana to Alex, her legs resting against the back of a sofa, where they had made love until morning, after that meeting in Minsterworth. Ivana no longer thought about how she was going to make it back to London, she just pressed against the man who had withdrawn the flashlight from the disappearing river and pointed it onto her. Their first contact was neither an earthquake nor a tornado, still she felt content to follow Alex, the “subject to colonialism,” as he had ironically introduced himself, to his one bedroom ground floor apartment with a kitchenette and stone-flooded flooring. Originally from Nigeria, Alex

worked as a reporter for one of the biggest Nigerian newspapers. Ivana was baffled by his story, and was not sure whether to believe him—an African who reports back to Africa on the west—although this wasn't so much about her believing him, as it was about her lust. At first they met up only on the weekends, but it wasn't long before Ivana considered moving to Bristol. Throughout their relationship, she felt as though they were veiled in pink dust. She never thought that what they had was possible, which was the reason she sometimes stared at Alex's dark lilac gums, like a climber at a wall.

"Your mother told you what she wanted from you. That's her right, but let me just say that you should always follow your heart, because only you know where it wants to go," said Alex, lying on his side, gazing past her at the crumbling red paint on a wall. That must have been the cruelest thing that Ivana had ever heard. A statement that, in a way, acknowledged the Georgian's and Mother's sentiments: she could not commit to Alex, because she was not ready for a serious commitment, not to mention her cold-heartedness.

A few weeks after Alex had left, Ivana found out she was pregnant. Sharp abdominal pain was the first indication. As she stared at small, malleable drops of blood that escaped her, gelatinous lumps which might have been blood clots or pieces of the amniotic membrane, she realized that, while kneeling between his thighs, she had never felt ultimate vulnerability, ultimate devotion. That all she felt was a revulsion over her own body, which had arisen the moment the pilot touched her knee, well before this unsettling and shuddering suspicion that emotions were something physical. The pilot might have seen my father as a dreamer who subconsciously refused the idea of social reproduction, a dreamer who, in the face of Mother's realism, looked like a sad clown with a fish fork, thought Ivana, as she undid her shoelaces and took off her shoes—yet, their friendship had always been about him wanting to be close to me. Out of all stewardesses, he had to pick me!

Ivana never saw Alex again. She never told him about her sorrow, about her grief, anger and fear that invaded her, one after another. Though she couldn't have foreseen it, Ivana long held on to the thought that her miscarriage was bigger than leaving home for studies in England. *It was some sort of transition from safety to self-preservation.* Only after she had left Alex's rental apartment, which she was not able to afford anyway, only after she had returned to London, rented a room with the Georgian couple and began smoking, first in the hallway and then in their kitchen, did she realize, from the gaze of the woman with an apron high above her steppe hips, that she wouldn't have been ready to give birth, let alone to raise a child. Not because she wouldn't have been fit to do so, but because she lacked human touch. Maybe Alex shied away from my armor, because he recognized my ambitions before me, thought Ivana.

The woman in a uniform, a silver cart before her, arrived at the row that seated Ivana and her neighbor, an empty seat between them, and reached for their glasses. Ivana glanced at her neighbor and saw that she had drunk only half of her tomato juice. She thought it was unusual, the way she motionlessly stared at the seat before her, occasionally switching to the passengers

who swayed to the toilet and back, their hands open, as though they were stray birds. Maybe she is my clone, maybe she doesn't want contact with random acquaintances or people in general, maybe she knows that it is better to completely dedicate yourself to whatever it is that you do, than to balance between two worlds, Ivana considered.

"I don't recognize myself," she had said to Alex before he left, or did she leave first, she didn't know for sure, *"I always thought things would come together, work and life and my sex life, but I was wrong."* Alex, his tall muscular body, which would befit an athlete more than an editor of a newspaper's culture section—though Ivana never swore by men's raw physicality—sat silently next to her on a mustard-yellow sofa. He said nothing to try to appease her. He listened to her heartbeat, her buzzing head, and saw her fingers, that kept locking and unlocking over her knees. Suddenly, as if she was responding to his question, Ivana had said: "When I was a child, something bad happened to me. No, it has nothing to do with my parents, well, actually my father... My parents wanted to protect me so much that they even denied me a relationship with my grandparents, with my grandma and grandpa who lived next door, and were of different political bent, but... whatever, it just had to happen in the end..."

Alex responded to her words with a rather surprising act, an act that revealed his coping mechanism for loneliness, for abandonment, was different from Ivana's, perhaps even harmful: he rose, approached her, dug his face into her hair, slowly slipped down her neck to her breast, unbuttoned her blouse, pulled out her breast and took her nipple into his mouth. The next morning, after he had simply gathered his belongings and left, Ivana had found a handwritten letter on the kitchen counter. The letter that screamed out for attention was the letter g, yet despite its eccentricity, Ivana couldn't read into it the way she could read into her father's l: *"...it doesn't matter how, we all get hurt sometimes. What matters is how we respond to the pain, whether we accept it or deny it... Some acknowledge it... and then you have those who would do everything to never get hurt again..."*

It may very well be that Ivana, now standing in the middle of a dark green kitchen and having just returned from her grandfather's funeral, would never tell her mother, perhaps even because of what Alex had said, I lost a baby in London and, just because I lost a baby, it doesn't mean that I'm wasting my life; but she may confront her with words that have long burned in her subconscious, and that have terrified her more than what the Georgian had recognized as her cold-heartedness: "Why won't you let father fry his fish the way he likes it? Why won't you let him be what he wants to be?"

On the table, on the far side of the kitchen, which she always thought was impersonal, Ivana will notice cellophane-wrapped candles. Mother will have brought them home from the funeral, to store them for another occasion. In the face of this, Ivana will think that funerals are no longer what they used to be: a confrontation with the reality of death.

"Do you know what you're saying? Have you completely lost your mind?"

Ivana would yell at Mother or, at best, she would remark sarcastically that the hairdo which she had worn for her entire life doesn't look good on her. She once overheard a conversation between a hairdresser and an older lady in some cheap salon in London, that *women often make a mistake by holding on to the same hairdo they had when they were most attractive*, which means that they have either not moved on, or that they have lost control over their own lives and the lives of people around them. But that's when the phone in her purse will ring, and she will say nothing. An unknown number, which Ivana will ignore at first but then, driven by anger and the feeling of helplessness, she will swipe the red button. She will shortly listen to the voice of the Georgian, who will offer her condolences in broken English, as though they had never argued, quarreled over unpaid rent and threatened one another, as though the older woman with a greasy kitchen hood and a plastic table cloth on a wobbly wooden table never reminded Ivana, in the cruelest way, that she was all alone in this world, but then she will cut in, her voice dry and fake and suddenly strangely superior: "This is not a good time, please call later."

"Who was it?" Mother will ask with a nearly soothing voice, as though they hadn't just had a high-tension moment.

"Nobody," Ivana will reply, then look at Mother's gray hair and think to herself that it was actually her mother who wanted to live by herself all this time, and not Ivana. That everything she did was by mere coincidence: marrying her father, giving birth to a daughter, even organizing picnics for the family and other relatives. Could all of that have happened because Ivana was never the child her mother wanted, because she was the child who never had a close relationship with her, because that was just the way her mother was, Ivana will never know.

"I've been thinking, what's your life like up there?" Mother will say, after a brief pause.

"I have a life, what do you care?"

"I'm supposed to care, I'm your mother. Your father and I talked..."

"Wow, that's a novelty around here, you and father..."

"Ivana, look, this need of yours to explore and research is praiseworthy, really, but at the end of the day, it's still money that makes the world go around."

"Who would have thought, right?" Ivana will say ironically, rather stunned by Mother's unusually insightful comment.

"Your father and I thought we'd buy you an apartment. You can still study, but every once in a while, when you come back home..."

Ivana will wish to step out into the orchard with dwarf apple trees behind their family home and, above all, she will wish to better recall what Alex had said: they were usually silent for many hours after they had made love. Each occupied by their own thoughts—Ivana bowing over the

vortices of Descartes, over his assumption that the sky comprises liquid matter, that the sky is like the sea, spinning around and creating oceanic trenches (these vortices carry the planets in their paths, wherein one such vortex carries the Earth around the Sun, a heliocentric theory which Descartes was very wary about), Alex over their newspaper webpage—they would only smile to one another, and return to their worlds. One time, Alex broke the silence and told her about the funeral proceedings in western Nigeria. “When a Yoruba king passed away, he was buried together with his horse and all who served him throughout his life. But when the white masters arrived in the land, they said this ancient ritual was barbaric,” he said, and made Ivana think that she was quite an unusual choice for Alex, a petite brunette with a rather long nose, which had been made even less attractive when she had broken it, climbing a radiator. She knew that Africans idolized voluptuous, preferably blonde women. “They even incarcerated a slave to avoid a ritual killing. He committed suicide,” Alex continued enthusiastically, yet with fear in his eyes, as though he was worried that Ivana might judge him, or that he had long been rejected in his attempts to shed light on African mythology.

“We will be landing shortly, please buckle your seatbelts,” said a flight attendant determinately. Ivana slipped her feet back into her shoes, which she had taken off only moments ago, with shoelaces sprawled across the floor. Her head resounded with a single emotion, a regret that she had allowed Alex to forever walk out of her life. Especially since he had never said that he was tired of her, or that he had found somebody else, especially since it was she who had driven him away. And above all, a regret that she had never tried to break that cool and dark space within her.

“You know, women in novels always stare out the window, pondering how they should set themselves free,” said the woman adjacent to Ivana, suddenly. It was her neighbor, in the brown braid-patterned stockings.

“Excuse me?”

“Women in novels... ah, I’m sorry, as a writer I always...”

“A writer? That must be nice...” said Ivana, surprised by the foreign sound of her own words. It had been a while since she had last spoken Slovene.

“You’re on the prowl most of the time. Let me introduce myself, I’m Gabriela.”

“Gabriela... Are you known?”

“No, not at all. Writing in an exotic language has its advantages and disadvantages.”

“I can’t say I didn’t look at your glass of tomato juice, either. I never quite understood why anyone would order tomato juice on a plane...”

“Oh, I see I have serious competition. What do you do, if you don’t mind me asking? Wait, let me guess... Are you a doctor?”

“A scientist. I study medieval cartography. Well, there’s more than that, I’m also interested in Homer’s beliefs about the shape of the Earth, now that you mentioned being a writer...”

“Interesting. And what did Homer believe?”

Ivana felt that the lady couldn’t have chosen a more suitable question, which most likely was a cover-up for anxiety, now that they were landing, but she answered anyway. “Antique scholars believed that the Earth was flat, while Homer, for instance, imagined the Earth as a flat circular disk, surrounded by Ocean and covered by a vault of heaven.”

“I see you take your studies quite seriously. But isn’t it frustrating to study something that nobody is interested in anymore? Everybody lives for...”

“Hm...” Ivana felt as though the self-proclaimed writer was jeering at her, although she always quietly suspected that the Georgian’s swearing and scoffing at her must have been about her earnestness, with which she set out to do her studies that prevailed over her entire life, even her love life. Only once you’re financially secure, can you afford to study such a thing. At this point in her life, Ivana had to agree with her mother on that.

“What I wanted to say is that everybody lives for today.”

“Yes, but that’s their problem.”

“I am very sorry if I hurt your feelings. We’re about to land anyway. Pretend this conversation never happened.”

Ivana leaned her face against the window—the sky was bathing in shades of green and blue, the green must have dominated the blue—then pulled it back and breathed onto the window pane. She used her finger to draw a tiny man, who could very well be her father. Next, she added another figure that was nearly twice the size of the first one. That could be her parents, considering they didn’t hold hands. Mother and Father, who will be expecting Ivana in the airport arrival hall, who will hug her apathetically, as if they were only one-night stand lovers, who don’t talk about their pasts, and then take her to her grandfather’s funeral. With Alex on her mind, Ivana felt that this was the end of an era for her.