

SAMPLE  
TRANSLATION

JANJA VIDMAR  
TRIBE

PUBLISHED BY: MIŠ, 2009

TRANSLATED BY: TAMARA M. SOBAN

ORIGINAL TITLE: PLEME

NUMBER OF PAGES: 222

## Janja Vidmar: Tribe

The Founder possesses all rights and privileges of the Tribe. He has the power to dissolve the Tribe or change its name and the power to grant rights and privileges to its members. These rights should never be given lightly, for they can be used to disband the Tribe or to take away privileges.

### The Girl In The Hoodie

#### Customer Toilets on the Mobile Tech Floor

The place smelled of urine. Of scum. It had the smell of every public toilet in every shopping mall in the world. Her body was cold. Too cold to trigger the light sensors. The twilight around her had grown thick in the hue of clotted granulation tissue. Her breathing was shallow and jerky. Her head fell to her chest. For a moment, she was overcome by blankness or a slumberous stupor of some kind, or so it seemed.

She twitches and rubs her eyes. Exhales lightly. Takes in a whiff of air. This was as much dreaming as her lungs could afford to give her. She is holding a suicide note in her hand. All she has to do is get out of the mall first and record it. She wants to die in style. Only a frigging nerd would die miserably in a public toilet. Flickering fluorescent lights above her. Shadow spread out under the contours of her body sprawled alongside the toilet bowl. Her ass stuck to the ceramic floor tiles. It would take a scalpel to separate one from the other. Her entire body stubbornly resists the thought of being mauled like that. People end up broken-bodied, dangling from corrugated polypropylene canopy roofs. Or meet their end impaled on iron fence pickets. Or as pulp splattered in the middle of a deserted plaza in front of some hotel. Illuminated by intermittent beams of light flashing from cars that speed by. A rusted razor blade. Pills past their expiry date. A mix of dishwashing detergent and petrol. The pulp wins. Some are more susceptible to gravity. Virtually painlessly they toss themselves into the heart of things. They step out and linger on the doorstep for that singular moment as the town bows before them. A jumble of streets. Open crossings. Squares. Grey asphalt. All their experiences etched into it. Then they take the stairway to the roof of the only high rise in town. Cast a final glance beyond the pale. Then, after three seconds. That's how long the fall lasts. They morph. They imprint their atlas on the concrete forever. Every suicide is like a letter written in longhand, with calligraphic beauty at first, all four cylinders, but the strokes gradually descend into ugliness, all the way down to the last scribble.

She cracks the door open. A filament of light pierces the gloom, halving her face. Peering between the open swing doors, she tries to assess the traffic on the sales floor. A strip of white light lands on the bruise under her eye. Her swollen eyelids betray the emptiness imprinted on her retina. And she wears this emptiness as if it were a hood.

The doors creak and swing apart, deep into the washroom. A pair of stiletto heels with legs enmeshed in fine nylon stockings carrying a slight figure of a middle-aged woman advance into the washroom. Her gait hints that if she takes one more step, the bones in her feet will crumble. The double doors behind her continue flapping laboriously against each other and then come to a halt. The woman disappears inside the neighbouring cubicle. She has evidently triggered the sensor, and brightness floods the place.

She feels a smarting pain behind her eyes. She swallows with considerable difficulty. The pain in the ear has now spread to the throat. Clotted blood on her cracked cheekbone pulls the skin taut. The bruise has bared a tiny part of her soul. It stares out in plain sight like a frightened cub. The scent of the woman, whose breath has mixed with her own in this godforsaken pisshole, tickles her nostrils. She feels panic coming on. Just like she always does when O. turns into an o on the doorstep of her home. There is no way out. In a toilet cubicle at the end of the world she suddenly feels bilked. No deliverance. O. inhabits her like a dry lump of soil. O. = o, she tells herself. O. = o. What has become of the conviction that formerly sane, cool individuals, when they find themselves in the parenting phase, fail so miserably, becoming pitiful caricatures of their own selves? To be played by their own children? To bitch and whine and turn rheumy-eyed every time they hear their children snap at them, "I hate you," "Why don't you drop dead." O. is scrapped goods welded together by a god without any rhyme or reason. You open the familiar box and out he pops on a long and rusty coil, casting a looming shadow over her life.

Except for an occasional clank of the door latch, the adjacent cubicle was mostly puzzlingly quiet. She was waiting for the sound of a spurt hitting the ceramic bowl. Zilch. For the telling plop. Nothing. Just what was the woman in there up to? Was she playing with herself? What if she was sent by O.? Did he find out her whereabouts? He might have implanted a locator chip in her while she was sleeping.

Fear rose from deep in her gut. It tooted its horn. Swamped her stomach like thick black crude. What if she faced the woman? Slipped the HD Canon HR 10 video camera in her bag? Within O.'s system modules she was fast evolving into a master of the trade, the world's most ingenious sneak thief. As a matter of fact, she could hardly peg O. down as a scoundrel. But who could blame *her* for having jumped, head first, into all this mess? In a way, she didn't quite understand how she was able to land on her feet.

Something in the adjacent cubicle clanked. And then – the sound of shards grating under heels. Barely audible sobbing. Air choked with emotion. Something unnatural got trapped within those thin ribbed walls that separated the cubicles. The wait was getting to be a drag. She rolled a

crumpled sheet of toilet paper up and down between her palms. She was becoming paranoid. O. couldn't have had a clue how to find her! Tears, tears, and more tears, the fluid of wretchedness under her hood.

She clambers to her feet and pushes open the cubicle door. In the chipped mirrors above the sinks she sees a veritable garrison of identical reflections, misted over and split around the cracks in the glass. Water taps, encrusted with lime-scale veins, jutting out of the enamel. She can hardly recognise herself. Around her head a pirate-style bandanna patterned with tiny skulls and flower stems she added by hand to complement the original design. At a glance and from a distance the skulls could easily be mistaken for tiny flower buds. She is wearing a not entirely too short green dress. Her sockless feet are clad in toe-cap army boots. A Hello Kitty pendant with a This is Hazardous to Your Health note hangs from one. She readies the camera and removes the lens cap to capture freedom. She has become accustomed to living a fugitive's life. After two sleepless nights in the freight train yard, life reeks with such a colossal stench that she finds it quite worthwhile to stick her nose in it.

Something rubs against the wall panel in the other cubicle. A dull, smacking sound follows as that thing thumps to the floor. The latch in the metal notch shifts under the weight of the body, and a calf in a brass-buckled beige stiletto shoe jolts forward like a machine gun through the narrow gap under the door. The heel is jutting out in her direction like a pointed umbrella tip.

"Open up!" She kicks the door. She holds the camera ready so she can later feed the video to vultures on YouTube. "Open up or I'm calling security!"

Suppressed breathing slithers across the floor. Ever since she ran away, she has been on the lookout, her senses alert, vigilant – the sense of touch, above all, and intuition. She takes the camera from the canvas bag and begins twisting and turning it under the lights to create curvy, streaming streaks of light that follow the camera body and bounce off it like streaks of lightning. She hits the door with her shoulder.

"I can see your ass there on the floor, right there next to the toilet bowl, you hear? Open up or I'll videotape you!"

No reply. No, wait a second!

Correction: "Open up if you WANT me to videotape you!"

Still no reply. Odd. People were usually provoked to anger by the mere sound of her voice.

"I record suicides, in case you're interested. Don't have a business card yet, but I can give you my cell phone number!"

A faint snuffle escapes from the cubicle.

She pushes herself into the adjacent cubicle and lays the camera on the floor. Then she closes the toilet seat cover, climbs on it and looks over the cubicle wall. The woman's hair is strewn

across the toilet seat. She has collapsed in the corner. An upturned toilet brush rests in her lap. A heavy Strass bracelet hangs from her wrist. Beneath the short unbuttoned jacket of a good make – the rhinestone decorated tag and the golden chain reveal the Miss Selfridge logo – the woman's chest rises and falls lightly under the white tight-fitting tee-shirt. A hardly visible cut transverses her wrist, no wider than a scratch. Product tags and security pins dangle from her clothes. The woman is dressed to the nines, as for a banquet. A pair of nail scissors lies by her side.

Her radar turns on. What drove the woman to this absurd idea? Perhaps it was the same thing that pushes her to dump stolen goods in garbage containers all over town. When she crosses the finish line, the adrenalin subsides. The loot becomes as insignificant as a job that never happened. She tosses it into the nearest container. Leans over and feels it before letting go. Slightly, just enough to savour the triumph with her fingers one more time. All the passers-by seem to think she is mystically absorbed in combing through the refuse.

“Hey! Hey, are you awake? Come on, don't get off here!”

“Leave me be,” the woman whispers exhaustedly.

“You've no chance of bleeding to death with this scratch.” She shrugs. She pounds her fist on the wall panel a couple of times. A hollow sound reverberates through the cubicle. She hops off the toilet seat and dashes out. Then she throws herself against the closed door and pushes against it with her shoulder. The latch rattles like a denture. A jolt of electricity shocks her arm. There is no time to call for help. She tears the rickety towel holder out of the grip in the wall, rams the top between the door and the cubicle wall, applies her shoulders and pushes. The bolt flies off with a bang. The door creaks and gives in. The woman is still lying on the floor in the corner, between the toilet bowl and the wall, like a crumpled beverage carton.

From the corner of her eye she registers the bright red droplets on the woman's wrist. The woman is laying there in her expensive stolen rags. She really could have dropped her anchor on the mattress of some solitary bed somewhere else instead of here, in this stinking cubicle, where she would draw the attention of the entire quarter, the whole western residential district. And that's not even the least of it.

“Hey!” Upset, she grabs the woman by the shoulder and shakes her. “You mustn't fall asleep!” As if she were just trying to get some sleep, silly. She wanted to kill herself. She should probably call the emergency services and be out of there. How could she be such a moron to dare choose between the hate of this dolled-up idiot by NOT LETTING her die and the disapproval of society if she DID LET her die? And calling the cops was out of the question, at any rate. Because there is that funny thin line beyond which each of us starts fearing for our own life, even if we don't really give a piss about it. O. may have reported her as roaming the town again without permission. If the Social Services by CHANCE revived their interest in her case, her horizons would shrink to the view of the pigeon shed she sees from the window of her tiny room. To the view of rusting sheet metal, cans filled with turbid rainwater, corbels with pipes and wire mesh:

Pigeons shuffling about with wings tucked in, shifting their weight from one foot to another as they tilt their fat grey heads graced with rings of shimmering greenish plumage. O.'s life, which never knew any permanence other than her presence, was filled with the obsession that he would train birds as thieves to pilfer and carry off their loot through open windows. The reason behind this idea was that good stories always have an animal.

“Help!” She yells out in the direction of the swinging doors. “Help, somebody! Hello?”

Under the leather of the woman's handbag she senses the vibrating of a cell phone. Somebody was trying to get through to her. She is not going to steal anything. SHE IS DETERMINED NOT TO TOUCH A THING. Let the phone purr. She is going to call the emergency services. She will see to it that the woman's heart continues to tick away in a happy beat again. Keep the blood where it belongs. The first dark droplet lands on the floor. She rummages through the bag, feeling the contents with her fingers. A notebook. A ball-point pen. Lipstick. A compact. She nervously inhales the pungent air and stops to rub her numbed neck muscles. The woman continues to lie in a heap, calmly letting herself be robbed. The lights go out because they are both too low to the ground for the light sensors. She gets up to her feet and makes a little hop, as if to assure herself that she is still breathing, and bumps her elbow against something in the process. Dazzling bright light spills over the shards of a compact mirror taking up half the space under the bottom edge of the cubicle wall. A spider web stretches across the other half. At the bottom of the wall, paint flakes off in oily scales, leaving behind pale blotches.

An open wallet. She bites her lip. A sheaf of crisp fifty-pound notes. She rolls up two, slips her hand under her collar and tucks them into her bra. A photo of two little boys. A twinge of pain pierces her close to the breastbone. Something in her has condensed and tipped over for a moment. She breaks into sobs, like an ailing kitten. A sour scent of momentary despair wafts from the two bodies and fills the air. The woman's strength has failed her.

She pulls out the woman's phone. A first-rate Nokia E5 0 with a camera, USB, MP4, GPS, WLAN. The bright pink Nike check sign on the screen's black background indicates the unanswered call. She weighs her own small pile of life patched up with battered cardboard and Sellotape against this woman's life hanging in the balance.

She dials 113.

“No... Don't,” the woman groaned. A small ladder has appeared in one of her stockings. The running mascara is drawing tiny grooves on her cheeks.

And then she calls 112.

“No, wait... I don't want anyone to know.” Her eyelids flutter, beating across moist eyeballs. The cracked whites of her eyes are filling with fragments of glass.

Sorry, old girl. This is *my* emergency exit.

Where are you? In the basement, she misdirects the dispatcher. This is the only concession she is willing to make.

“You have fifteen, maybe twenty minutes to get here.”

In one go she tears the hem off her dress – just where did she get the strength to do it – and wraps both ends around the woman’s wrist. The green strip turns brown where the fabric covers the cut. Shit, she just needed a short break! A breather to put her mind back on track. She helps the woman sit up. With an awkward gesture she takes the woman’s hand. The dam bursts, the sobbing and moaning alternating with intense surges of crying. The girl in the hoodie lays her hand on the woman’s delicate shoulder, tensed up, stiffly, as if she were touching the surface of a counter top, and starts patting her mechanically. It has been a long time since she knew any warmth. Now she finds herself sharing this remarkable moment with a stranger drowning her in her own private pain. Her palm soaks up the feeling of aliveness from the trembling shoulder. She was a stealer all right.

“There, there...”

Steps start echoing along the corridor. Increasing numbers of them. Accelerating toward the door. She feels a surge of tension rush up between her buttocks and through her gut, all the way up to the lobes of her lungs. She withdraws her hand, on which a couple of blood drops have already started to clot.

“In here!” she yells, and then: “Help!”

“No,” the woman whimpers plaintively.

A train of tattered thoughts *about her fellow human beings – a decision made by many will prevail over the will of the few, when the need arises* – flits through her mind like a butterfly. Their Ethics teacher had told them as much about democracy.

The doors burst open with a crash and swing apart. As if after an explosion, the place is overrun with blue-and-white police uniforms and paramedics carrying long intricate cables and tubes attached to oxygen masks and infusion kits, a veritable symphony of plastics, electromagnetic shielding emergency equipment, walkie-talkies and first-aid bags. Injection needles spring up in the air, their plungers ready to push the soul back inside the body.

She let go of the woman’s cold, sticky hand and placed her own hand on her tummy to warm up. Death does take place before one becomes dead for a fact. Resting her palm on her tummy made her feel like she was drawing a cross-section of all her decisions, past and present. Clearly, no one can do her dying for her. She had to do it herself. But first she had to take care of her UNFINISHED BUSINESS.

The faces of the police officers and paramedics emerged in her field of vision, fusing together, their lines blurring into one another. The jumble of people and voices, their looks, ideas, orders, colours were coalescing into an envelope of oblivion around her. She was once again a cell in this pulsating micro-universe. She opened her empty wallet, as if to browse for her ID, and started to explain. Slipped up on her words. Went back to where she started. As if she were clicking through a menu that had been set to replay individual scenes in sequences.

“Please take another good look at the woman...”

“Does she seem familiar?”

“What were *you* doing here?”

“...lost some blood. In a worse case scenario, a sudden drop of blood pressure in the brain could cause a circulatory collapse.”

“Whose item is this, on the floor?”

The item had slipped from the woman’s hand when she missed the toilet seat and drew a half-circle around herself with her spiked heels, didn’t it? Having raided half of the women’s clothing department on the other side of the corridor, all she needed was a camera for a fashion show. Words tangoed on her tongue. I need help, can’t you see I’m BLEEDING? She sighed and the words blew back, down her throat. She was moving backwards, toward the exit. She had left the camera on the floor. The thin fabric of her dress was soaked with the salty sweat of her skin. A patch of cold shiver ran between her shoulder blades, like a small moon slithering down her back. Girls and women in black tee-shirts with the logo of a leading entertainment electronics corporation were running to and fro, up and down the corridor. Those gaping gawkers might as well be charged a fee for the spectacle. They were straining to catch a glimpse of the washroom, beyond the ceramic sinks, on the other side of the swinging doors that occasionally flashed open.

In the bizarre tousled crowd that converged from all directions and, along with her, mixed into a stream of bodies, she inconspicuously broke away to the exit. A voice on the speaker was promising pensioners a ten percent discount and a coupon for free coffee. The thick, foul air compressed the sound into pellets that jetted along the shelves with video game consoles, past the cameras and LCD TVs. Atomised against the viscosity of bodily fluids and gas kept under control, they returned to the sweat and bad breath of those vacant faces, and ended up lingering on the glutinous filaments of human curiosity. The sound tugged at her as if trying to throw her off course. She bumped against a shelf showing traces of brown Sellotape along the edge. She pushed past all those malignant lumps that swelled in her direction. She aced the fire escape staircase outside the building. With her small human footprint she had managed to shake up her world, unnoticeably yet more powerfully than a tectonic shift.

Just as she scrambled through the exit, she saw the security guard’s scruffy blue uniform in the corner of her eye. An unknown magnetic force pulled her into the alleyway where the wind tossed old trash up and down the deserted passage. The wind blew through the cracks in the



walls with a high shrill pitch, like someone whistling through a gap in their teeth. She sneaked under the bridge, to its metal underbelly. Closer to the tears accumulated by the city. From here, the opposite riverbank looked like the surface of an unfurled brain, dotted with pulsating car lights that buzzed through like thought impulses. The bridge above quivered in the rhythm of wheels that whizzed by. She snuggled against the cool concrete. Her body absorbed some of its cadenced release. Light on the other shore pulsated like an LED on an answering machine.

And there she was, running through the streets glistening wet from the rain. Puddles of light reflected from the street lamps lay on the wet asphalt. It must have been around eight-ish. Traffic to the centre was already becoming sparse. The greens and reds of neon advertisements bloomed off the pavement. The massive facades stood above her in a double row like guards of honour as she hurried past and kept going at a breathless pace. She stopped to rest by the bronze bust of a writer on whose pedestal someone had sprayed the words "I'm the best, fuck the rest." She glanced up to the sky above the rooftops that were wrapped in a dotted black cloak. The flat round moon in the background was spiked with antennas. She took out the woman's cell phone and adjusted the pixels. The phone made a shutter-like sound. Her hand trembled when she was finished taking pictures of the night sky. The river lay calm and still, almost mirror-like, in the riverbed. A sip of tears had gathered on her sleeve. She smiled blissfully at her relic. She used to appropriate other people's feelings and discard them long before they wilted. A thief preying on people and things. O. had trained her like a pigeon, all she needed was wings.

The streets were almost deserted now. The pavement was littered and smeared with splotches of oil. Dusk danced around her feet in the rhythm of her steps. The evening chill had already begun to sharpen the outlines of the indistinct corners under the arches of the art gallery she had just passed. An inhuman scream resounded somewhere in the distance. She sat down on the cool stairs by the iron fence that protected an island with a tall residential building and pretty playground equipment in a sandy square. Balconies with laundry ropes stretched across their length beckoned her like open palms to step in and relish a bit of this homey atmosphere. On the tails of a teenager wearing baggy pants with a real metal chain as the crotch seam, she slipped through the posh double PVC door with glass panes designed like a chessboard. The ground floor enjoyed the additional security of a door with rectangular glass panes as thick as the bottom of a beer bottle. She crossed the long corridor of hair salon windows with vertical blinds. A post-it note was rubbing shoulders with the elevator door. Poshness out of order. Behind another door – in the apartment facing south – she could hear cats meowing, and the rattling of pots and pans. In the corridor on the first floor, a classical symphony was bouncing off the walls undecided between vegging out and accustoming itself to emptiness. Strings were breaking under a relentless reminder of an unforgettable night of pain and pleasure. Steel beams and girders hopped and danced. The building's foundations were spinning, the water pipes braiding together. The freshly painted walls were playing the game of hips and the wood grain was scoffing at blotches on the plastic. The entire flawlessly designed first floor whined. Then suddenly everything went very quiet.

On each side there were two apartments, with a metal-rimmed garbage chute hatch halfway between them. She stopped to soak up those quaint islands of safety and clusters of blinking lights. She pressed close against the freshly painted balustrade. Rested her temples against the balls set at the mid-section of the crossbar carved with leafy ornaments. She had now reached the lowest point of her misery. Every perception and image in her memory was glazed with a thin coat of varnish that was the image of home. Dried crusts on rims of unwashed pots abandoned in the kitchen sink. The lifting edges of the kitchen linoleum, its innumerable cuts and cigarette burns. Crumbs and bits of food stuck in the spaces between the wooden floor boards. O's jacket, threadbare on the elbows and around the collar, hanging on the door like a bad omen. Friday the thirteenth, the black cat in whose company optimism becomes the most treacherous state of mind.

She got up and started climbing the stairs. It wasn't far to the top. She politely greeted the man wiping the milk glass which he had apparently just installed in a window frame. None of the doors looked beat up or scratched, they were glazed with smooth varnish. The air smelled like buckets of lime-scented disinfectant. Fuchsia plants with polished green leaves graced the corners. No speck of dust anywhere, no dried vomit. A woman in a strapped Indian nightgown was lighting incense sticks. Her head was wrapped in a towel that looked soft and fragrant like a baby's blanket.

"Evening."

The tenants did not seem bothered by a stranger wandering late at night through their small world composed of chrome fixtures, towels smelling of fabric softener, decorative flower pots, separated garbage, recycling bags and energy saving light bulbs, because all of those things kept them safe and shielded from the moth-eaten messed up real life.

Out there, police sirens howled. Brakes squealed, the noise of traffic on the overpass was breaking through the stone ribs of balcony passages and their clothes dryers. Lights from the ceiling pierced her cold, sweaty skin, the silk pad inside of which she had evolved from larva to chrysalis. With the tip of her index finger she rubbed her eyes dry until she felt a burning sensation, before she began ascending to the roof terrace. Occasional gusts of wind rushed at her and licked at her goose-bumped skin. She fixes her gaze on the infinite vastness of the sky, possessed by an inexplicable calm. From the dim structure of the urban jungle, a crane towers up through the scarlet belt of the evening glow, a hook dangling from its extended arm. Inside her pocket, the woman's cell phone starts to ring. Anguish spirals up around her chest as the phone continues to roar, shaking her pocket. The exorbitance of the blackest darkness, which has gathered in the corners of the attic and around the laundry-drying room, forces her to shrink far inside. A tidal wave swells up in her eyes. Beneath the wave, the neighbourhood undulates toward her like an octopus trying to encircle and squeeze her with its tentacles. God knows how long she would remain lying on the pavement, limbs twisted in a strange way, her face smashed, like over-ripe fruit, next to a pile of old newspapers or a garbage container. Or, better yet, behind

some discarded cardboard, with the day and the sky for a bedcover, before some passer-by stumbled on her.

Something stirs behind the concrete barrier, behind the pile of fire bricks, discarded oil-soaked rags, opened bags of potting soil, and there was something else that resembled a snake nest in the faint silvery moonlight. She makes a leap for the edge, as if out of mind. Her boot-clad feet press hard against the cold concrete as she runs. Down there, the canopies of the elegant ash trees stretched out their arms to catch and keep her in their ample bosoms, or perhaps to release her to the plot of concrete between their roots. She was going to defile that small temple of innocence, no one had jumped off that roof yet. It was high time that she blighted the building and ruined someone else's evening in turn. Perhaps even the morning of the following day. That was her asking price, the best she could get of a bad bargain and not one iota more.

She felt the air surge under her armpits and between her legs. Her right leg dropped into the void. The Hello Kitty pendant flitted to and fro as if in slow motion. The void was slashing the weight off her like a scalpel. The rush of cold air agitated the nerves in her body. At that very moment she crashed against the hard rough concrete. Its texture became embossed on her face and her jaw made a grating, hurting sound. The weight of an unknown body was pressing her into the ground.