

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

MIRIAM DREV
RESTLESS

PUBLISHED BY: MODRIJAN ZALOŽBA, 2014

TRANSLATED BY: JASON BLAKE

ORIGINAL TITLE: NEMIR

NUMBER OF PAGES: 260

Miriam Drev: Restless

EMA

Not far from the tree's trunk, on the trodden, half-frozen ground, I spy a few pears. Last week's half-inch layer of snow didn't hold. I kneel down, pick up a few of the woody fruits preserved from last year under the tufts of grass and the leaves, twirl them in my hand. The wind blew them down back in autumn and they're rock-hard under my fingers. But I'm desirous of gentleness, of a sweet fragrance.

Compote made from the mellowed fruit of unpruned trees. In my imagination I can already smell it.

But the earth is not so quick to warm.

Waking up at dawn, like some washed-out tent tarp, is becoming a habit for me. From morning into morning I wake up suddenly, in a thousandth of a second, as if a decisive hand had severed sleep with a knife. Before my closed eyelids two parallel scenarios load up with the speed of a quantum computer, with one of them prevailing. Day in, day out, they repeat themselves, and tiny differences would steer each one of them in a different direction. Simultaneously I feel the sheets underneath me, the seam of the cotton material that damply clings to my neck.

There's a comment from the background, actually from a reciting voice within me, that soothes me: "Take a breath. You've run a marathon." Yes, and there's another to run, I add ironically and open my eyes.

I'm getting to my feet.

My internal reserves are intact. I rise, fling off my pyjama top, drape it over the chair by the window to air, and put on my shirt, sweater, and sneakers. Quickly, quickly. But why the rush? The old inertia, from the time when I was divided, living a double life, and trying, with my knack for improvisation, to join both the pieces together, to stitch with large threads, although even then, when things were going best for me, I sensed that this method would not hold out. I would have to replace it or allow one of the halves to come unstitched.

I'm not cut out for drama. And yet, some part of my psyche wants precisely that. I resist. Being a professional journalist, not to speak of my own private situation, calls for matter-of-factness; facts in response to assignments, precise and pointed questions, in exchange for results.

I wade over the grass. From a neighbour's garden a rooster crows for that last time this morning; we're in the outskirts of town. In my sanctuary. It's only a bit past seven and already I've pulled out all my emotional stops: gratitude at being here, worries, the remnants of impotent anger overwhelmed by anticipation, and on top of that determination. I kick at a rotten pear and it flies in an arc, hitting the fence with a *thwack*.

As I've made my way along, there have been so many things I've put aside. Bracketed. But now I can see the patterns, for the most part understand them.

Behind me I hear the sound of windows being opened wide and of Anuška's voice calling out to me over last year's geraniums, which she's covered with a protective wrap. "Good morning, Ema. I've put the coffee on."

"I'll be right in."

Ana. Anuška. The grandma of my girls. And my ex-mother-in-law. As chaotic as my relationships may be, our camaraderie remains firm. I'd probably be better off, in any case things would be simpler, if I'd listened to her warning back when I confided in her after returning from the journey, back when I was caught up in the tempestuous currents of the new and unexpected. "Ema, watch out for him. He's divorced. That means he's inconstant. Unsettled. You won't be able to rely on him – he doesn't know how to see things through. What are you doing with a guy like that?"

For her, everything boiled down to this essential detail and not to the hundred little things about him I'm piling up inside me for later telling, and even if she was working on clichés rather than personal knowledge, in many points her words capture the course of events.

A man with two divorces behind him. And me?

After all, I'm single, and more than a year and a half after Dane and I broke up I've stayed behind in my inherited apartment, while he's renting a garret in the centre of town. And we've only just signed the official divorce papers. The divorce hurt Anuška. But she kept her feelings to herself. She spent most of the daylight hours outside in what was half a lawn and half a garden with a little orchard of currants, raspberries and gooseberries surrounded by a semicircle of wooden fence. It's near a heap of stones that looks like a Sardinian nuraghe in miniature – those Neolithic stone formations that puzzle the archaeologists, who can't agree whether they were temples or military fortifications. Dane and I visited Sardinia after my third year of studying journalism, walked through the dry interior, along the beaches with their fine sand, declaring it the very notion of pleasure. It was there, basic math tells me, that I got pregnant.

Before one little nuraghe the dark panicles cease and a path leads from the stones into a little wood, a suburban grove of tall poplars whose number has not yet come up to be appropriated

and covered in concrete by urban planners or private builders. By the stones Anuška has planted orange and yellow marigolds and nasturtiums that shine side by side in summer, while in fall the purple Mexican asters rise above them – “brittle stems, feathery petals when the colours awaken one last time before drying out and decaying,” I overheard her explaining to Valentina and Nana. Her granddaughters are allowed to pick her flowers and fill her vases, while she fills her granddaughters with abundant knowledge about nature, about the garden she shapes with her own hands.

She never ceases to surprise me, that word slinger Anuška. Now and then she blends political nonsense she has picked up from the radio and television into her principles, but not for long. When she speaks from the heart, instinctively, with vigour and like some sort of bearer of truth, she sometimes takes my breath away. “Keep that in mind for later,” she likes to tag onto the end. “Keep that in mind.”

Once she remarked, as if the idea had just struck her, “You know, the main events in a person’s life are triggered by an awakening of what he has had in him from the start. Time’s like a turbine that rotates and gently stirs those elements that are in us, so that they combine, connect with each other and fulfil themselves.”

“A turbine?” I asked, distracted. Sleep-deprived. Dane and I are in a crisis. How did my mother-in-law come up with that technical comparison?

“But what’s not been planted in you will never happen,” she adds.

In the period before the divorce I didn’t go to see her much, though, like before, I still took my daughters to her. She’d offered and I didn’t have any other option. Whenever my journalism had me working on the weekend or off on a story, or if I could see that during the week I’d be stuck morning till evening in front of the computer, both girls would stay over at her place. Early in the morning I’d honk the horn in front of her house and then take them off to school, Anuška waving from the doorstep. They’re attached to her, and I don’t want them to become strangers. I don’t even want to think about something like that. “We were with grandma, collecting seeds among the onions,” the older one informed me. “And among the flowers.”

When Dane told Anuška that his enterprise had become co-owner of a pharmaceutical company and that he’d signed a three-year contract to work in Sweden, with the possibility of an extension, she faced up to the fact that his decision was a turning point, and that only on paper were we still married. She was now spending more time than ever outside, if that was even possible, pottering about in the plants. The Saturday morning after the day I’d received, registered, the official decision of the local court in Ljubljana, the one beginning “Decision in the name of the people!” that knotted my throat with primal fear, as if I’d been sentenced to a

lynching, whose four pages laid out that we, Ema and Danijel Ferlan, had agreed to a divorce, for the first time in ages, I followed my daughters inside Anuška's house.

Through the two-leafed window whose slats divide it into four polished squares, with mouldings on each side, the strong autumn light cast sheaves over the top of the cupboard. On top of it stood rows of jars that had once contained store-bought mustard and ajvar that she'd scrubbed out for keeping seeds. The cotton swatches placed over the lids looked like miniature antique hats. Valentina had written the names of the plants on stickers, the decorative scribblings were Nana's.

Anuška, who is warm-blooded and always on the go, is still wearing a summer dress, over it a sweater unbuttoned at the neck and one of the perpetual aprons she sews herself. All her aprons have a big pocket in front and two smaller ones on the sides where she can stow her edging shears, trowel, dibber and twine of varying thicknesses.

I tell her about the court decision. She nods. No doubt she's silently blaming me for not being able to keep the family together. For her generation's faith, as for the faith of all previous generations, that was the wife's primary task. "I'm from another time, I guess," I heard her say. "But does that mean I should close my eyes to what goes on nowadays?"

She moves around the kitchen. Her steps falter, as if she's weighing out a decision. "Oh, well," she mumbles. Then she says, "You two were so young, too young, when you tied the knot."

I head towards the door, what else should I do?

"Come here," she says. Outstretched arms. "You're not going to have to go through this all by yourself."

*

It was while Tibor and I were straightening our necks and unpeeling our eyes from the domed glass ceiling of the British Museum's reading room, obviously both overwhelmed by the mix of the old and the modern, that we saw each other for the first time. At that moment we were standing alone in a rectangle of dispersed light, with the power of familiarizing gazes moving both of us into a mental notion, and it was as if we were in solitude, even though our surroundings teemed with people, mere figurines, in this giant space into which the early sunset was shining from over the Island.

Since my first visit the library, with its millions of books, its stores of journals, newspapers, maps, stamps, four-thousand-year-old manuscripts, had attracted me again and again. This museum enchanted me and each time I was mesmerized by something new, the way I'm mesmerized by a cloudy sky's shifting, inconstant, merging and dispersing images.

The man, who was not much taller than me, was wearing a beret and had a black scarf around his neck. We looked at each other, he gave a start, took off his beret, folded it and stuffed it into a pocket of his leather jacket. His face made an immediate impression on me because of the widely-spaced bright eyes under the shadow of distinctive eyebrows and features that weren't at home in this English environment. There was something in them I couldn't quite pin down. Perhaps something eastern, Asian. A mixture of foreign ingredients with a pinch of something from home. That bit from home might have been mutual inclination or deception, since we were from completely different realms. There was also more than a decade between us. Of course, I put together this analysis of our brief first encounter later, when the rational part of my psyche was cataloguing the past. His lips and the corners of his eyes smiled at me, as I, moving, looking at my watch and suddenly in a hurry, headed out for the brisk twenty-minute walk to the luxury hotel I wasn't staying at but where I was attending a gala international award ceremony for company innovation and industrial design – two kindred topics yoked into one. A Slovenian architectural firm specializing in lighting was among the prize recipients. My newspaper had sent me to the event. It wasn't exactly my area; I was replacing a co-worker who'd been grounded by the flu.

In the hotel lobby I fish the press badge out of my purse and fasten it to the lapel of my blazer as a confirmation of being one of the gang. A liveried employee directs me to the first floor. The organization is well-oiled yet understated in the English manner. In the foyer in front of the auditorium are tables with two types of catering: bottled water, juice, coffee, tea and sweets for the afternoon snack before the start, and, on the longer tables off in the corner, what appears to be wine for after, as well as covered glass trays which, if tradition holds, contain a cold buffet. Because I'll start my article with a description of my surroundings, I take stock of them. Ten minutes until the hour, until it starts. I pour myself a cup of coffee, treat myself to a chocolate scone and check out those who are arriving and those who are standing around, either singly or in groups. Some woman in a green outfit, I can hear from her loud explaining to the man next to her that she's German, has an unstitched hem running almost all the way around her skirt and dangling negligently over her calves. I swallow the urge to bring this to her attention.

At the door to the auditorium an employee gives me and each of the other guests a translucent folder with material. The auditorium, with its rising rows of seats could fit about three classes of pupils. The illuminated stage and the space are abloom with the inevitable flower arrangements, just that here they're not on the table, since that's been replaced by a speaker's lectern, but off to the left on a pillar. I sit down in the fifth row. I know from experience that I'm better equipped for long-winded and dreary speeches if I sit near the front. I take a stack of photocopies from the folder, skim them with a practiced eye, to avoid taking any unnecessary notes. One of the organizers steps on stage, honours us with a paragraph of introductory words, and the main presenter follows. From the background emerges a young woman who will assist in handing out the awards. The chatter dies down, the man babbles on about what an honour it is for the organizers to have us here tonight, innovative design means a new future both for the

production process and for quotidian comfort, these successes are breaking new ground, are a step forward for all of us. He spouts out the requisite, self-important phrases, now going on about luxury, then on about the virtues of the creative impulse again, but why so rushed? Between *and then* and *all-absorbing* he hiccups because he's not breathing properly. Speaking unfalteringly in public, pausing and emphasising in the right places, can be learned, and English culture is known for its leisurely, rhetorical irony. Maybe it's just not his day.

But then the man manages to catch his breath properly, starts calling the recipients on stage, providing a brief description of each of them or their valuable contribution. The award-winning products are arrayed on the projection screen. His helper in the tight-fitting luminescent knitted dress with the cut-out back hands each winner a plaque. As if in a documentary film detailing the scene faithfully, even while filtering out the incidental, my fleeting acquaintance from the reading room, now without his leather jacket, steps on stage in black trousers and a silky black turtleneck. The design scene generally spurns the male attire this type of ceremony calls for. Is it really him? Definitely. Flabbergasted at first, I shrug it off. Coincidences are sometimes odd, but they're not without their internal logic. Museums and galleries are a veritable lure, drawing a person in even if he's short on time.

The designer is from Austria. But based on his looks, and if one can believe the general stereotypes about common national physiognomies, I wouldn't have guessed. He's getting an award as a project member of some furniture company, AV, or maybe it's AG, Design, for a minimalistic, ergonomically-designed chair. He accepts his plaque, bows slightly to the two others on stage with him, then to the audience, and lithely slips off stage. I jot down a few notes and when I look up again, I see an old man, his cheeks and forehead splattered with liver spots, struggling up the three steps with the support of the German woman in the unstitched skirt, who's a head taller than him. I'm about to crack up, but out of respect for the old guy, who despite his advanced age is still innovative and in tune with the times, I stifle the laughter and compose myself.

His great innovation is a new type of snow guard for roofs, but I don't catch just what it is that makes this item an achievement. The presenter, as if my contradictory feelings have been telepathically transmitted to him, is again overcome by restlessness and rashness when he announces the name of the next winner, another designer. Are we running behind, has the hall been rented out for something else later in the evening? Is that why he's so jittery? In the future, the presenter intones, we will have to seek out, selectively invest in, the better choice, and the product, which you can see now before you, a bed made for the new millennium – but here he botches it, saying, instead of “single or matrimonial,” “single and matrimortal.”

The laughter doesn't envelop me like a tide; it washes over me like rainwater over rocks. I catch the splash, press it down into my belly, half coughing, half-spluttering. In the meantime the presenter has corrected himself, but for me it's too late. I don't have those precious few seconds

I need to recover, to merely chuckle, like some of the people around me. The linguistic slippage acts on me like a catalyst, and at this moment there's no chance of being able to dissect which suppressed feelings have erupted because I'm sitting powerless in the sixth seat from the aisle, among the elite of European designers and reporters and fighting rude laughter, tears running down my cheeks. I can feel them looking at me. What now? I get up, barge my way out of the row, press my folder to my chest, tuck my purse under my arm and, wiping the tears away with my fists, rush towards the exit. Long strides and a bowed head. Somebody notices, probably an employee, and tactfully opens one of the double doors.

Outside the auditorium, I lean against the wall on the far side of the foyer. Finally I can laugh freely, and eventually the outburst subsides. *Matrimortal*. The marriage bed, in this case even with the stamp *excellent design*, as that place where a deathly ill marriage bond withers away – how omniscient the presenter's slip was! I blindly open the zipper of my purse to blot my cheeks. Where are my hankies?

A hand brushes against my wrist, an accented voice asks me in English if everything's ok, and a piece of fabric is pushed into my hand.

He followed me out of the auditorium, convinced that I was crying uncontrollably, and, having realized that the tears I'm wiping away with his handkerchief spill from the same bucket as laughter, stared at me in amazement. I could tell from his changed expression that he was relieved. This stranger who, after we've twice found ourselves in the same little cross-section of a set in the middle of London's giant human mass, has crossed over into being an acquaintance. Would he have run after me even if we hadn't briefly looked at each other under the dome an hour earlier?

"This occasion calls for a drink," he said, or something of the sort. He took me by the arm – perhaps he allowed himself this liberty because I was clearly weeping and in need of support, although as we made our way to the bar I laughed again a few times – and sat me down at a table in the corner and ordered cognac for two.

*

Beyond a doubt this situation which caused our relationship was among the weirder kind of situations for possibilities of dark humour. To me, in spite of the significance of the linguistic coinage that, after all, had brought us together, it all seemed like a big coincidence. If it hadn't been for my being a woman in an emotional crisis time and if the atmosphere in the reading room before, and later in the hotel bar, hadn't had a touch of the unreal simply because I was abroad, and if he hadn't had the scent of something that I liked, I would have thanked him for his care and gone back into the auditorium. Period.

But, as I soon found out, he was convinced that fate had brought us together. He experienced most of his life in that way: “I say with no shame that these turning points in my life are destiny.”

“Explain.”

“The literal meaning is *preordained*.”

It was that powerful force that led us both, he claimed, to being in the British Museum at the same time and also to my not rejecting his invitation. As he walked me to my hotel that evening, the city revealed its seductive essence, a mixture of the cosmopolitan and of the tameness of old brick houses, with neither too many nor too few people on the streets, since the shops were now closed. The gusts of wind portending a shower cleared the streets of exhaust.

I pull myself together in order to properly describe him, Tibor. A description would have the strength of comfort and clarity. Order. Or light, morning light, after a night of constant rolling between the sheets. In spite of the hours and the days which we spent together and which would add up into something long-term, I can't get to the bottom of things. There's something essential missing here, something minor missing there, so it's not quite the ultimate prize. I wish I could do an MRI of him – not of his body, since that remains known to me even in his absence, I don't even have to close my eyes – so I'd have a process for, through the slices, shedding light on his psychological oscillations. I would enter his winding interior, investigate the disturbing cocoons that, tiny at first, multiply and grow, and I would scrape away at the knots.

In any case, I have the pieces before me. And I can always manage, even in my professional work, to combine scattered pieces into a whole.

In London, which we left the next day and which we never again visited together, he told me he was Hungarian. As a child he'd been caught up in the collective horror of post-war Hungary and then, a tender youth, fled from home and across the border to the West. He was educated at the Academy for Applied Arts. He became an interior designer, a career that allowed him a fair amount of freedom and flexibility.

Under the given circumstances he had to act quickly to coax his short-term goal out of me. In fact he acted like a hunter who, on seeing his prey peacefully grazing in the forest meadow, decides they are entering a tacit agreement. But I should not compare myself with a doe, with a timid victim. That would be too much posturing. I just want to say that in him, right under his outer layer of cosmopolitanism, right under those flawlessly acquired western ways and manners crucial for living an above-average life, lay an instinct to which he, at certain times he detected distinctly and with special concentration, subordinated all of his other reactions. Not on the surface, but deeper in him I felt his energy, something that I sometimes recognize in myself also – a pressure to heed my desire or need, then self-control, until the right moment appears to take action, and sometimes to atone.

His instinctual reactions were a means of self-preservation, and if nothing else worked, they were aggressive, but in social situations, when they were shimmering just below the surface, people interpreted them as vitality, vigour for making contact. In women, more specifically, in a certain type of women, he stirred up excitement, a thrill. If I count myself among that group, I see that at the same time he also summoned an opposite tendency, namely, to protect him. After we had traded those superficial but necessary words for getting to know each other – comments about general this-and-thats, entangling ourselves in the initial web of affection, before moving on to more personal information which gives you more tangible coordinates about a person – he blurted out:

“When I was fifteen and snuck across the border into a neighbouring country but nevertheless into a completely different world, I had only one thought: to know, to find out, what my life demanded of me. I wanted to accomplish something different than I could at home, this much I know. Mostly for me, and one piece, one piece of my pie, for Bartal.”

“For Bartal?”

“My brother.”

My question wasn't compulsory. I was paying more attention to the escape itself, to his precocious maturity, while segueing to my own connections, leaflets of past events and segments of life stories from years before my birth which I had heard over and over again and which had grown inside me like a living memory organ. Eventually the discussion would have wound back to him as a young refugee if we hadn't, in the meantime, arrived at the little, narrow street in the London district with a series of little hotels, mine among them.

Between us there was a trembling attraction, but I could have, in spite of the unusual haste with which we, strangers, had come into intimate conversation, written it off, sent it off into the rising wind and, as craftily as I am capable of being, taken leave and entered. I have slipped away from him, since Dane was still in my orbit and I was sensitive about the past. After some consideration, I figured it would be easier for our daughters if I still kept his surname.

But Tibor's story had touched me. The events had gathered steam, he might remark. He took out his cell phone, more of a rarity than a given back in the mid-90s, and with an agile gesture in front of the hotel, from which a bunch of guests were pouring out, pulled me a few steps to the side and asked for my number. I rattled it off for him, and he keyed in the number, minus the country and area codes, with a *tip tip tip, tip tip tip, tip*. He knew, however, that I was from Ljubljana.

I imagined things would be easy. A divorced man, a divorced woman. If nothing else, being together. If nothing else, a relationship. An adventure. I'm free again and I can choose, I told myself. It sounded confident. But it was, to be honest, more about me needing a counterbalance

for my low spirits that had been calling, tapping as if with a beak. The days were racing by, but this was mostly all about navigating everyday reality.

At night I wake up. I'm lying inert under a dark ceiling. A woman in a state of numbness.

I wasn't deluding myself; the area where I am without subterfuge or complacency, a creature with a desire for intimacy, for feeling pleasure, was deserted. That was no great revelation.

Dane and I failed on all levels, regretfully; of course I mostly blamed him for our disastrous battles, when he would rather indifferently – something he could allow himself, because I was usually the one to flip out – snipe at me that I was a dragon spewing fire and brimstone. Then he would correct himself: “Actually, a dragoness, the one from the Dragon's Bridge that peers down over Kapitelj Street, come to life.”

If Dane, let's say, had been less piercing and if I, before raging or before not even raising my voice, had taken the ten deep breaths those columns serving up relationship advice recommend impulsive natures to take, we would have survived. The family would have stayed together. We would live like this for years, with less and less physical contact. We would sit across from, and stare past, each other in that Mexican restaurant where we'd go for dinner. Maybe silently despising each other.

But maybe the good times would swing back, like a pendulum. We had a chance, and it was hot. We were sailing towards the middle of autumn, the leaves had turned, the outside temperature was just right – the weather was in that very pleasant balance between warmth and moistness – for painting the kitchen and its dining nook. The fresh paint would dry quickly in the open windows and the odour wouldn't linger for long. The space around the stove, with the broken range hood we hadn't replaced, was spotted yellow, in the corners and at the top of the wall above the radiator, in front of which the table stood, was the original, light coffee tone that had long ago faded into a murky grey. We didn't smoke but some of our friends did and we'd never thought to send them out to the balcony to have a butt. Wear slippers, hang your jackets on the hangers, don't talk with your mouth full, smoke outside – like in kindergarten.

We bought the paint right after coming back from a holiday on the coast, put it in storage and then, week after week, put off working. Each weekend something would “come up” – Dane's expression. Actually, I don't know why we didn't just go to the house painter Jaklič from the next street over. We weren't students anymore, no longer a young couple that, come the end of the month, was piling up the last coins to cover household expenses; we could easily pay for services.

On that October Saturday morning, after breakfast, we emptied the room, spread old newspapers over the floor, and I taped over the edges of the walls so the paint wouldn't drip over the wooden baseboards. The telephone rang in the hall. Dane picked up.

“You know what, first I’ll take the girls to grandma’s,” he said when he returned to the kitchen. That had been agreed on. “On the way back I’ll have a quick game of tennis with Fergi.”

“He who dodges once, is ever a dodger,” I said, rather appeasingly.

“See ya, Mommy,” the girls called out, and sent me two kisses from the threshold of the kitchen. I will tape over the sockets, then drink my coffee in comfort and browse through the Saturday paper. Just that, nothing else.

“I’ll be back in an hour, or, let’s say, an hour and a half.”

The tennis court was a kilometre from Anuška’s place, in the same direction, so I added the time needed to drive there and back. A two-hour gap.

At noon, when the air-raid sirens moan, I’ll pour the paint from the can into the bucket and start brushing around the edges, I decided towards the end of the morning, bored of waiting. I’d meant to leave most of the bigger surfaces to Dane. But in the end it doesn’t matter when the paintbrush moves, the day’s long enough.

Although my will and pleasure had waned, I forced myself to start. I got going, concentrated, forgot about the passing minutes. They’d mixed the right tone for us, Umbrian white, just like on the colour palette. Once the paint dried it would be a bit brighter, it would come out well. I heard the key scraping in the lock. “Here I am!” yelled Dane and threw his racket on the cupboard in the hall. He went to the bathroom to wash his hands. I heard him moving and the interrupted rush of water.

I looked at him as he stepped into the bright patch that the angling sun had drawn onto the floor through the window.

“Why are you looking so prickly?” he said. Unnecessarily. He could have said something like “Sorry I’m late.” Or “I screwed up, Ema” or at least “sor-sor,” like his older daughter.

And I could have waved my hand and said, “Forget about it.”

But instead I go for the counterattack. “If you’d come when you said you would, we’d be half done by now.”

“Hey, looks like you’re doing great on your own!”

That needling voice, that undertone he didn’t even have to work at to put me out of joint, the one that was just too frequent in his communicating. The same teasing that used to, dealt out with a pipette, seem charming. I make for him, the brush in my right hand, and punch him in the arm with my left. He traps both my arms. “Aha! You wanna fight?”

Our fights had always been just verbal, me screeching and him spewing cold venom.

I try to shake him off, but it’s clear that he’s stronger. Blood rushes to my face. As we struggle I accidentally run the brush over his shirt. The next second he yanks it out of my hand and chucks

it into the bucket, *splash!*, sinking it to the handle, puddles and drops everywhere. “Idiot!” I snap, but he suddenly grabs me, lifts me, pulls me forward a few steps and places me on the floor in the corner, right on the newspapers. It’s been a while. The sex is frantic and hurried, no lead-up, and it’s like nothing that’s ever happened between us. It’s our last time, according to my later analysis. We’re two sweaty beasts, goose bumps on the skin, and any loving touch in between is incidental.

“Wow,” he said afterwards. “You had nothing against that, did you?”

I say nothing. Something’s missing, some essential little detail, and yet the possibility of this something hangs in the air.

But we were already too far away from each other.

He takes his paint roller, what we call a *tom-cat* in Slovenian, and, inspired from the tennis, from our little episode, is immediately in the mood to work. By evening the kitchen is looking as fabulous as can be.

With the stranger, with Tibor, it will all be pretty straightforward. Precisely because he’s from a completely different world, from beyond the border, it all seems ideal to me. He’s beyond my circles of professionals, friends, and family. It’s a coming together where, no matter what happens, the parallel field lines will not vibrate. If he calls me, it will be like throwing a new stone into a pool, and the ripples will spread separately from the ones that, even if faintly, have not entirely died out between me and Dane. Not least, or primarily because, we have two daughters indirectly tying us to our former unity. I’m not ready for a new, binding relationship. On the other hand, as I said, in spite of my low spirits after the divorce, I miss physicality, the touch of skin on skin. I’ve never regarded sexuality as chemistry, the analogy seems too mechanical to me, like things clanging together. Whenever my man and I were transposed elsewhere, whatever we were doing at the time was pushed aside, and for me it meant the flattering of something slumbering, a descent into a humming beehive, then a reaching for high branches, for long-ripened fruit; it was a primal feeling, a juncture of warm kaleidoscopic surfaces, a primal energy. Now, in spite of the extra parental duties I’ve taken on because Dane is absent, sometimes in the middle of things I felt like I was disappearing. That, little by little, I as a woman was invisibly melting away.

If my London friend calls and suggests that we meet, I will.

Not long ago this border would have been a problem, an endless column on our side – a reptile wrapped into a bluish haze with little people moving impatiently in its bowels, headed for a business or a shopping trip, tourists, smugglers, adventurers, lovers and adulterers – and then the same thing on the way back, sometimes for hours, not just the tens of minutes of waiting in line on the Austrian side when you, for a nerve-racking, two, four, sometimes five kilometres, crept along in first gear towards customs.

Since we Slovenians became an independent state, barely three years ago, borders have become effortlessly transient, nothing compared to previous times. But for how long after independence did the white markings on Austrian highways directing drivers to Slovenia continue to show the old YU? My memory is fading. Half a year, at least. Every time I – returning from the occasional trip to an Austrian shopping centre in search of some little something or piece of furniture that was cheaper than at home and that, packed in pieces, went effortlessly into the trunk – signalled towards YU, I cursed our neighbours. But the snail's pace in the line-up and the vile burrowing of the customs officers is a thing of the past. Eventually, one fine day the roads were painted with SLO.

In our newly-minted country we learned to walk on our own. The Austrians, the former monarchy, will enter the European Union next year. Fast driving has always encouraged me to put together paragraphs that would work well for my articles: *the masses of collective action, which contained ethnic communities, countries, federations, except for when there are cataclysmic rifts, move almost imperceptibly. Only a few individuals deal with these movements...* I glance at the back seat of the car, from which the top box tipped onto the floor when I quickly braked before the toll station... *if we don't count those members of the elite who hold the strings in their hands.*

One of those amateur experts, as I found out, was also Tibor, who had been stamped by the dramatic events of his childhood.

And if the designer with the slicked-back, dark hair greying around the forehead doesn't call, I won't be disappointed. Take it or leave it; whatever will be, will be. Just because I liked him doesn't mean there was any emotional turmoil. The nights after returning from London I slept right through. In spite of a few sudden interruptions, I wrote up the article about the award ceremony, using the material they gave me and my notes, without any problems and when I handed it in I could put the whole incident in the past. In addition, a sceptical voice in my head, perhaps due to the fear of adjusting to a new partner, was convincing me not to get tangled up in the situation.

He called me on the fourth day.

"Things were a mess in my Graz lair," he says as we drive from our meeting-place on the outskirts of Maribor towards Graz.

Soon it will be dark. We set ourselves against these elusive moments, we breathe in the same rhythm in them. They delineate themselves in our relationship and will consolidate themselves in it as the most harmonious. The gap in the day. Afternoon is waning, evening is hesitating. The trees across the street are shedding their individuality. They're no longer maples, lindens, ash-trees but just trunks with crowns enfolding into themselves the last daylight. The roadside stops,

the most banal of places – a pair of wooden tables and benches, tin trash bins, sheds with toilets – appear like shaded shelters; thoughts sink for a moment into their contours, and then fly past. Even in the car, sharpness fades as the sfumato surroundings whooshing by subsume his profile, its narrow, pronounced nose, his hands at the wheel as his left, at least that time, on our first drive together, prudently hovers just above the indicator switch. In the foggy sunset, I can sense that we are more than just acquaintances. This feeling anticipates the reality. Already I can almost sensually perceive how the evening will progress after he parks and we exit; we'll climb to the top apartment in the old house the town planners describe as four-storeyed even though, thanks to the tall ground floor and the double sets of stairs, the building actually rises higher than the modern standard.

He holds the door for me, invites me in. Then he just lets it slam behind him. There is a round handle on the outside. "Welcome," he says. The word sounds solemn. We've found ourselves in front of equal variants. He will turn the switch, an antique bakelite knob, black on the striped wallpaper in the hallway, the light will call forth the furniture, and he'll show me around, offer me a drink. Or, when we're ghosts in the middle of the twilight and he steers me towards himself, fulfilled will be the looks and the touch from the Island, from the London that is foreign to both of us, and after that the hug in Maribor which, in keeping with the rules of social contact, was first and foremost polite. I'm standing one step in front of him, he takes me by the shoulder, but doesn't turn me to him right away. We're not in a film. We stand, embracing, and from behind he leans his head into the crevice between my neck and shoulder. We just listen to each other.

"We are preordained," he says.

Pre-? Is he thinking, "since always"?

The forms in the last light of day merge into one.

*