

Suzana Tratnik

A PONTOON BRIDGE

1. YOU NEED TO GET ANGRY!

It began just as she reached the Karlovška Avenue Bridge. A very inconvenient place, if any place was convenient for a panic attack. The bridge was still some way from the Rudnik post office, where she was headed, and almost equally as far from the town centre, where she had walked from. It made no sense for her to go back to the centre, where there was nowhere she could take refuge and would still have a long trip back to her flat in the Šiška district.

So she just stood on the bridge. Panicking. Nervously, she rummaged for tissues in her backpack, which possessed not a single inner pocket – although tissues were entirely useless. She didn't usually sweat enough for there to be anything to wipe, but at least they offered her a small chance of distraction.

A very small chance, but still.

Finding a tissue permeated with bits of tobacco and detritus, she scrubbed her nostrils, which were already dried out from her short, spasmodic breaths. Doggedly, she rubbed at her nose, forehead, neck and palms, although it was only her palms that were sweating. She tried to think about deep, regular breathing, the kind that calms you and can supposedly even change your outlook on life and the world – although she hadn't yet reached that point.

Inhale! First the abdomen, then the ribcage, and finally, ever so slightly, the collarbone too rises. Exhale! The collarbone lowers, the ribcage contracts and the abdominal muscles pull in. (Other sequences are also possible, depending on your school of breathing.) After two or three deep breaths she started feeling dizzy, which only aggravated her feeling of distress. Neither the tissues nor the deep breathing had been able to distract her. The pulsing thoughts of alarm were infinitely stronger than anything else. Even the most banal of them drowned out the noise of the cars in the road and latched itself on to her.

She knew very well how things would likely play out: she had to isolate the positive thoughts, prise them out somehow, sort them from the negative ones, and spur them on. But the moment she prised out some positive thought, it would prove to be nothing but the sorry mask of its negative twin. So she'd rather just leave her thoughts alone in the hope that they would leave her alone. But it's not easy bargaining with thoughts, especially when they're yours. As soon as they realized she was trying to pull a fast one on them – and they always realized this right away – some thought would present itself as life-saving and thus outsmart her in her trickery.

So it was that Wednesday afternoon, when she started panicking on the Karlovška Avenue Bridge, that she suddenly remembered that her old professor from the university lived

nearby. This professor had invited her over for coffee some five or six years ago when she needed a recommendation for the international summer school. As they drank coffee, smoked and gossiped about the cut-throat students in her class, she was amazed to discover that she'd be getting a recommendation from a person who was actually on her side. The woman had gone out of her way for her because she genuinely wanted to support underprivileged students. That was also when she realized with perfect clarity that she possessed no privilege at all, not even a little bit. If lack of privilege in itself is what gives you the privilege of a favourable recommendation, then you really are beyond help.

Fucking affirmative action. And yet you need it.

After that, having coffee with Tamara at her home had become one of her few customary visits, although it happened no more than two or three times a year. So in fact she'd be able to ring the professor's doorbell even unannounced – certainly in an emergency, the life-saving thought cajoled her – and tell her she wasn't feeling well. Or she could make something up, say she just happened to be in the neighbourhood. They'd have coffee and split a bottle of beer, and maybe then she'd feel easier. Afterwards, Tamara would ring her from time to time to ask if she was feeling better, if she was getting enough rest, if she still had anxiety attacks, if she wanted to talk to anyone. And then she could never visit her again, not even in the most dire emergency – she'd feel too ashamed. Lack of privilege and psychological problems, we all know where they lead. (The Road of No Return – sounds like a movie title.) Better to keep quiet; after all, who in their right mind would still stick up for a university dropout who had clearly abandoned her degree ages ago, despite being so damn clever? What would be her chances of getting any future recommendations from that professor (not that she'd still need them)? And what would happen to her herself, if she so frivolously wasted a chance for help in a truly critical emergency? That life-saving thought could not have been more deceptive.

It was best to walk on. The Rudnik post office couldn't be more than fifteen minutes away. And who knows when she would next leave her flat, and then it would be even harder to get to the post office – it would be a far longer journey than now because she would first have to go from Šiška to the centre; she would basically have to start from scratch, knowing there was more than 100 per cent probability of the attack repeating itself at this very spot. And most importantly, her thoughts didn't give a damn whether she stood here on the bridge or kept walking; the only difference was that if she kept walking she'd get to the post office today. A fairly significant difference! She stuffed the tissue in the pocket of her jeans, slipped on her backpack, and marched on determinedly, almost furiously. Now she was angry. Yes, anger was

a good thing; that's what everybody said. 'Jana, you need to get angry! You need to learn to express your anger!'

She walked and was angry. She was expressing herself. (She had won!) She walked fast, assigning points to the traffic in the road, like in a children's game: pedestrians, 0 points; bicycles, 0 points; small cars like Fičos, Katras and Fleas, 1 point each; Škodas, 2 points; Mercedes, 5 points; BMWs, 6 points; any car with a trailer, 8 points; vans, 10 points. Et cetera. By the time she gave 20 points to a lorry and won the game, she was already at the tiny commercial area in Rudnik with its useless shops, forgotten pubs, post office and bank. Walking so fast had made her hot, and waves of sweat had pasted her clothes to her skin. But this wasn't so bad since it meant the attack had passed. And she rarely had two attacks in one day. Maybe because the first one left her so shattered she had no strength for a second one. (Which was the only good thing about being left shattered.)

When she grabbed the handrail on the steps and looked up, she saw Ed and Son standing at the top. Incredible. They had come. They had not forgotten that she would need friendly support with her annoying errand. (It would have been even better if they had shown up sooner, on the Karlovška Avenue Bridge.) She could have burst into tears of relief, but all she managed was a pitiful smile.

Edvina. Big Ed shrugged her shoulders as if to say, we're here, and opened her arms in a warm-hearted hug. But Jana always froze awkwardly before Ed's hugs; she could never simply shut her eyes and surrender to those arms. She somehow suspected that her friend's open arms were merely showing how wide her affection was for charity cases, while she herself never dared hug her for real. If they ever did hug, it would be too much. Something would happen when the leather belts on their jeans collided. And this past year Jana had learned that reducing surprises of any sort also reduces stress.

Sonja. With her it was different. To look at, she was a bit skinny and cold, even aloof. Jana decided that she was, in a word, neurotic, since you had to have something to differentiate your friends by. Ed: large, affectionate and warm. Son: tiny, highly strung and almost perfect. About Son she'd hear people say, 'What a bitch she is!', that she was the kind who picked a girl up, banged her a while, then left. But Jana always defended her: Son doesn't mean anything bad by it, she just likes getting laid; she doesn't make any promises, the girls can take care of themselves. Jana herself, strangely enough, had never wanted to do it with Son – properly, in bed, have sex with her, then go on being friends and maybe do it again sometime. It should have been easy enough, but back when she had had her chance with Son, Jana was always thinking about Ed. If anyone.

She was roused from her unexpected musing about sex with warm, full-bodied Ed, with her long pony tail and shaved sides, by Son poking her beneath the ribs with a slender forefinger, then bringing her lips to Jana's ear and asking in a raspy whisper: 'Another attack, huh?'

Son laughed and adjusted her orangish red hair on the left side of the part, which always caught Jana's eye. Jana waved her arm as if to say, it's nothing new, then lit a cigarette in relief. Ed came over and touched her own unlit cigarette to Jana's flame. They took their first deep drags and winked at each other.

Minutes later, Jana was standing in queue at a window in the post office. One step at a time. You always had to deal with each thing separately, always one after another. Like exams at uni. You should never think about all ten of your exams at once – that's what one of her philosophy professors used to say, a man who cared about his students – only think about the one in front of you. Only think about one exam at a time, one errand, one woman, one problem at a time. Only about one part of yourself. Since she had to start somewhere, she had started with her mail. She had moved to Šiška months ago, but a number of letters were still going to her old Rudnik address. It was all very simple: she would have to tell the post office that she no longer lived in Rudnik, fill out a form, write down her past and present addresses and ask them to forward her mail from the old address to the new one. It was so easy it simply reeked of complications. But she had Ed and Son with her – cynical, mahogany Son with that part in her hair was standing outside the queue, while person-friendly, wheaten-haired Ed was right behind her, like a loving giant shield between her and the real world, which at the moment was a highly annoying world.

The man in front of Jana was going at it with the woman behind the window, because he couldn't pick up a registered package for his wife. He and the clerk had already parried a few insults back and forth, although it sounded more like a polite exchange of dry information, since neither of them wanted to be the first to raise their voice.

'Know what?' the man said calmly. 'My wife doesn't get off work until, for example, eight o'clock at night, so she can't pick up the package herself.'

'There's nothing I can do,' the woman said. 'For example.'

'But I've got her ID with me. Her per-son-al I-D!' The man slashed at the marble counter with the laminated card as if he was cutting nervous lines of coke.

'A personal document is not the same as a person.'

'You know why you're all so smart at this goddamn post office?'

'No, but I'm sure you'll tell me.'

'Cuz you got no competition.'

‘That’s true. We have no competition.’

The woman knew a thing or two.

The man left in a rage and Jana, quite unprepared, found herself eye to eye with the venomous clerk at this goddamn post office that had no competition.

‘How can I help you?’

Jana clutched at her ID card. To keep herself from rambling, she always liked to be holding some material evidence of what she was saying.

‘Good morning. May I help you with something, miss?’ The postal clerk’s sham display of patience was meant to encourage her.

If Ed and Son had not been with her, she would have bought the cheapest possible stamp and got the hell out of there.

‘I’d, umm . . . Good morning. I’d like to change my address. I mean, what I want to say is, I’d like to request that my mail be forwarded. See, it’s like this. I moved from Rudnik to Šiška. From Rudnik to Šiška, and I’d like to request that my mail be forwarded from the old address to the new one. That’s all. I’d like my mail forwarded from Rudnik to Šiška. You understand.’

The clerk said nothing. She placed a form on the counter and looked away, as if no one could possibly deserve her undivided attention. Jana dug out a pen. She glanced behind her nervously, and Ed gave her a soothing wink. A minute or two later she handed the clerk the filled-out form, along with her ID, and said, ‘Here you go.’ Then she felt stupid and servile. *Here you go, here you go.* People liked troublemakers. So why be so nice? Could it be because fifteen minutes ago she’d had a panic attack, which could happen again from mere superstition if she wasn’t nice to the postal clerk on the other side of the window, who, after all, hadn’t done anything wrong even if she was an annoying bitch? You don’t have to be nice and friendly to people, Son was always telling her, certainly not just to be polite. Jana turned part way around and looked over at Son; she was worried that maybe she had heard that disgusting, servile *here you go*. But by now Son was by the door on the other side of the room, paging quickly through the telephone books as if they contained something extremely exciting. She could never keep still; you always had to hold her in your thoughts or she’d soon escape you. Ed, on the other hand, was always somewhere nearby – and now, right behind her. When their eyes met, Ed nodded briefly and again gave her a congenial wink. It was always wonderful, thrilling, this conspiracy between the two of them, which never had any definable object.

‘What’s this then?’

Jana flinched at the woman’s brusque tone.

‘Which of these is your new address?’

OK, now the problems have started. She could feel herself trembling beneath her sweat-soaked clothes. She gulped down some sticky saliva. ‘One twenty-four. No, I’m sorry. One-twenty-six. It’s written right here.’

‘But there’s a different street on your ID card.’

‘Yes?’ Jana was trying to make herself taller on her side of the counter.

‘Yes nothing. It can’t be done. Your document says nothing about Celovška Avenue. It says 2 Društvena Street. So we can only forward your mail to Društvena.’

‘But I don’t live on Društvena Street. That’s just where I’m officially registered; I can’t get mail there. It’s not where I am.’

‘So things will just have to stay the way they are.’

‘They can’t stay the way they are. Because basically I’ve never lived on Društvena; I only have my official residence there. Understand? I don’t live there! They tore the building down.’ (A small, ineffective lie.)

‘Come back when you decide where you want us to forward your mail.’

The postal clerk handed back the ID and form to Jana, turned her head slightly to the side and, in an expressionless yet immensely satisfied voice, said to Ed:

‘Neeext, pleeeease!’

Jana stormed out of the post office, in a way that of course showed her anger, which was directed mainly at herself. She even swore: Fucking hell! She was enraged by her own weakness and swift defeat in this banal situation. She sat down at a table outside the first stupid pub she came to, short of breath from anger. *Jana, you need to get angry!* she thought to herself. That’s what her therapist told her. In fact she was so angry that she forgot about any possible panic attack, along with all the fucking schools of breathing in the world. Ed and Son joined her a few minutes later. She tried her best to silence the overpowering thoughts about her ineptitude and cheap surrender, but they were soon drowned out and crushed (thank God) by the words of her friends.

‘Like I always say: if you’re too normal and friendly, people just walk right over you! They suck your blood even at your local post office! It’s like some covert reality fiction. People suddenly end up in the loony bin and nobody knows the fuck why. Later everyone’s all surprised and shit, so they finally decide it has to be some chemical change in the brain. Well, fuck chemicals. Just think for a moment: how many times in life have these people been to the post office, the bank, city hall, and got a taste of that goddamn reality fiction!’ Son was furious. She crushed her cigarette in the ashtray and went on: ‘And to top it all, these people have mothers

and fathers and lovers and neighbours, and nobody even talks about that! They're social creatures – which means they're fucked-up creatures. After all this, if you're still normal – well, you're certainly not normal!'

The waitress arrived and Jana calmly ordered coffee, but then all at once Ed blew up at Son.

'It doesn't help Jana one bit to hear you ranting on about this. It only makes matters worse.'

'Gimme a break, Ed. Don't you be stupid too. What the fuck is the problem? All I'm trying to say is, if you're too soft, these mundane banalities will grind you up. Go yell at that bitch behind the counter, but don't take your shit out on me.'

There were only three options, Jana thought as her friends, now angry at each other, grew quiet and silently stirred the sugar in their coffee.

First option. You can be a long-suffering customer to whom all the worst things happen, as if you were walking through life with your back hunched, ready for the slings and arrows of this world. First you get an attack, then you can't get anything done.

The second option is aggression. You aggressively stand up for yourself at the counter and demand what's yours. (Son, for example: 'I'd wring that bitch's neck. Well, I wouldn't really, but I'd keep at it for so long people would start staring and that post office would do anything to be rid of me.')

Probably both these options, after years of persistent practice, will end up getting you institutionalized.

The third option is assertiveness. This was almost certainly the right option. If Jana could do her life over, she'd be assertive. That's what the handbooks say: How do you return damaged goods? Don't beg, don't apologize, don't shout at the saleswoman; you haven't done anything wrong. Simply tell her that when you got your new shirt home and looked at it under a bright light, there were some dark smudges, so you're returning it. Let the facts speak, not your feelings. You only need to inform them of your unrelenting presence. Your demand is law, the highest imperative. To paraphrase Kant, more or less. Facts, not feelings. Or rather, feelings can also be facts if you describe them clearly and coolly. For example: 'I am very angry because this happened.' But whenever Jana demanded something, it only led to problems. More or less. In fact, there were very few such options; it was a false choice, a choice without meaning. This would be an excellent topic for a column. How does one appropriately respond to an attack by a postal clerk? Although this hadn't been an attack, just arrogance—

'Hellooo? So what are you thinking about now? Cuz that's the problem – you go too deep into every little piece of crap,' Son said. She had become irritating. 'So tell me. I'm curious.'

Jana: 'Choosing is always a form of coercion, a false choice. And then it has no meaning.'

'Oh please, now she's philosophizing. Quite wrong.' Son shook her head gravely. But she had decided to keep her anger in check: what she had to say was too important to be diluted by rage. 'Quite wrong, my dear Jana. If you're standing at the counter in front of the postal clerk, right from the start there can be no discussion of any sort of meaning.'

'Choice. Not meaning.'

'Fine, choice, whatever. There at the counter, you ain't got no choice; all you got is a goal in front of you – get it? Your goal is clear, clear as crystal. You know what you came for or else you wouldn't be standing in a queue at the post office, would you? You've already made your damn choice. You understand what I'm saying?'

'True enough,' Jana said, feeling worn out. 'Otherwise I wouldn't have gone all that way to the post office, and I wouldn't have risked having an attack outside. In public, so to speak.'

'So then, my dear—'

'But this I am not – your dear, I mean.'

'No, not if you don't want to be. Just joking, a little joke, forget it! So if your goal is clear, you just need to reach it. And there you have it. That's all there is to it.'

'OK, but there's more than one path to the goal.'

'See? Already, you're going too deep. Take the shortest path and you're there!'

Ed: 'So now what are you two going on about?'

'Fine. We'll just drop it.' Son clicked her tongue in annoyance.

Now Jana, too, felt offended and flicked her hand, and the waitress, who had come over to remove the empty cups and glasses and replace the overflowing ashtray, eyed her suspiciously, doing a poor job of concealing her surprise.

'Did you say something? Would you like to order anything else?' There was a note of disdain in her voice, or maybe Jana only imagined it. She merely shook her head. A little more discretion really wouldn't hurt the woman, Jana thought; you'd think that after all these years of waiting tables she'd be a little better at feigning ignorance.

Jana rummaged through her pocketless backpack at the bus stop looking for coins. She had used up all her tokens, was too fatigued to walk, and didn't want to give any more money than she had to to the city transit system, which did not return change. Meanwhile, Ed and Son, still a bit cross with each other, were leaning against a news stand. To amuse herself, Son was checking out the covers of the porn magazines. Every so often she would tug at Ed's sleeve, but Ed was deliberately not turning her head to look. Son didn't usually fret very long about past arguments, but Ed tended to mull them over, almost like Jana. (And felt offended.)

'Actually, all-or-nothing scares me,' Jana said, addressing Son; she was still reflecting on their conversation at the table. 'That's why I dither around so much in life.'

'Quite right, too,' Son laughed, standing against the background of a randy brunette with an insatiable redhead, as the magazine cover described them, or rather, enticed with them, promising more hot chicks on pages 46 to 49. 'Only crazy people start at all-or-nothing. We dealt with this over coffee. Isn't that right, Ed? Edi?'

Ed rolled her eyes, sighed, and put out her cigarette under her shoe. 'There's no better diet than hanging out with you, dear Son. I've lost all appetite.'

Now Son stepped directly in front of Ed, examining her brazenly from head to toe, as if she was still perusing the naked bodies in the porn mags. Then, mischievously, she said: 'You don't look like it, hon. You're still *big* – and that makes me crazy happy. I hate hanging out with those average-sized girls who don't take up much personal space. But you've got almost enough for two, if you know what I mean.'

'Well, thank you both for coming! For your support . . .' Jana said with a laugh, and at last pulled out just the right change from the pocket of her jeans so the bus driver wouldn't have to guesstimate if it was enough for one ride. 'All right, girls, I'm heading home.'

The no. 3 was already pulling up to the stop.

'Had enough of us, eh? Hahaha. I left my car on the other side of town, in Moste. I'll just walk there,' Son said and blew them both air kisses.

'Oh, right. I came here by bike – trying to lose a little weight, you know?' Ed said into the air, barely hiding a smile. Then, turning to Jana: 'You got Trdina this week?'

'Yeah, yeah, tomorrow, Thursday as usual,' Jana tossed back as she hurried onto the bus. 'We'll talk later!'

Panting, she sat down on one of the hard wooden seats. Now she could be out of sorts again, now that she felt she was truly alone again. It was better that way. She liked to take comfort in the stupid cliché about how a person is always alone. (Blah-blah-blah . . .) This had become part of her natural habitat. There was a time when she wanted to arrange her living

environment to suit her own tastes and desires, as if she didn't know that *it* had shaped her a long time ago. Later, however, she anxiously asked herself why she was unable to cultivate at least a few healthy habits in herself, and why she wasn't living the kind of civilized life she felt she needed. It had been ages since she'd been to the theatre, she realized with disappointment, because she was afraid of the sudden darkness; she didn't run any more because being out of breath reminded her too much of panic; and she had stopped going to the sauna because she was terrified of sweating, of her heart pounding, and athlete's foot. The truth was that in all these cases she was terrified of having a panic attack, especially when doing sports, because that was most intrinsically connected to this damn body of hers, which so unrestrainedly manifested its anxiety – it sweated and shook, went weak in the knees, bent over in two, sent pins and needles through its limbs, and pinched and tormented its internal organs. And yearned so conspicuously for the closeness of unsuitable women. But she had read somewhere that more than 40 per cent of people (maybe as much as 60 per cent – the research varied) suffered acute panic attacks in airports, railway stations and bus terminals, in the crowded hustle and bustle of cities and other places too. But even so they still went on trips, walked, gave birth, ran, hit on people, operated businesses, read newspapers, and even had love affairs and sex, and every day they risked having an attack. Jana admired them; these 40 per cent were her refuge, which she ran to again and again in her very worst moments, in what you might call her dire emergencies. But deliberate, courageous risk-taking – the theatre, concerts, saunas and a regular salary – that was no longer part of her habitat. Instead there were the attacks, the compulsory risks, the unfinished degree, the daydreaming, the dark short-term memories, Son and Ed . . . (not so little, in fact!). Her natural habitat had never had any certified address, had never had any fucking house number. She had never lived where she was officially registered. And even now, she had trouble remembering whether it was 124 or 126 Celovška Avenue – these temporary house, or rather, apartment block numbers meant nothing to her.

When the bus stopped at an intersection, she found herself staring at a poster inviting her to attend 'the rave of the year', featuring a mass of unpronounceable names – 'the hottest DJs of the 90s'. Only last year she would have run to that party (*Rave on!*) with all the regular gang (*Just rave on!*) –

Suddenly she stood up and ran to the exit, as if she had forgotten her stop, before the no. 3 could turn onto the street to the Litostroj factory. Maybe there was still a chance to straighten things out stress-free. She was almost flying as she dashed across the street and hurried to what was now her second post office of the day. At times of unexpected euphoria she forgot about the unrelenting threat of the next anxiety attack. Yes, even when she was having

the warts on her skin burned off with that wonderful, freezing cold liquid nitrogen with its Frankensteinish smoke, even as her body writhed in pain and her mouth chatted casually with the female doctor, for a few minutes she completely forgot that she had chronic anxiety. A person's thoughts are like cascades: they flow very fast, falling from bad to worse. That's what her therapist said.

Ana! Why hadn't she thought of Ana before, who more than a year ago, she guessed it was, had been transferred to the Šiška post office? (Because she hadn't wanted to, that's why.) She hadn't seen her in months. She pushed open the door hoping she'd be there, hoping she'd give her a glass of water or at least help straighten out this unpleasant mess with her addresses; they'd talk for five minutes and she'd be calm enough to walk with less fear to her flat, which was nearby, where the rest of this gloomy day was waiting for her.

Ana was sitting behind the last window, where people lodged complaints, or, if there was a crowd, picked up registered parcels. She had *The Slovene News* spread out in front of her, her chin on one hand, while with the other she was scratching at her head, shoulder, chest and belly. Jana used to wonder how she might tell Ana, discreetly but clearly, that it would be good if she didn't scratch herself so much, at least not during work hours. But discreetness and clarity are rarely compatible.

'Hey there! Now tell me how surprised you are!'

Ana looked up with deadpan eyes, from which Jana had the ominous feeling that they were still focused on the newspaper, not her.

'Oh, Jana, it's you! For fuck's sake! Sorry, I didn't notice you. I was completely engrossed in this newspaper – man, people get up to all sorts!' Ana said a moment later, a little too overjoyed. 'So babe! What brings you here?' She stood up and extended her arms beneath the glass partition. They shook hands excitedly – with both hands.

'There's a thing I have to deal with. And I need your help,' Jana said, lowering her voice.

Ana sat back down. 'My help! Seriously? You, babe? You need Ana's help?'

Leaning towards the counter, Jana shifted closer to Ana, as a tactful way of letting her know that they shouldn't talk about this too loudly. But tact was by now just Jana's problem. So instead, she quickly pulled out her ID and, in an even lower yet urgent voice, began to explain. That she had moved to Šiška. – 'Oh, right. I heard. You're not with . . . well, with that little mouse any more.' – And now she had to arrange it so her mail would be forwarded to Šiška from her old address in Rudnik, because otherwise she wouldn't get mail at all. And she was expecting an important document from abroad, confirmation that she had completed a

research seminar, which not only would help her with the work she was doing at the moment, but without it there'd be no way she'd ever see regular employment. (Which, however, she really didn't want.) That's why it was so important to get these addresses straightened out – if it wasn't so important, she wouldn't be going around pestering friends for favours. And the address on her ID is, well, fake, because she—

'No prob, babe. I get it,' Ana said. 'So what's your address in Šiška? You're on Celovška? Me too. But you know that. Not that I'm inviting you to come over or anything. I'm not even gonna tell you my address, if you happened to have forgotten it – hahaha. Cuz anyway you probably wouldn't come over again, woudya? No, no, I don't need your ID. Boy, you surprised me. I was just reading that newspaper and you wouldn't believe the things they write! People are so stupid! OK, so I'll just fill out this form and send it over to Rudnik, because the rule is you're supposed to do this at your former post office. But don't worry, if I send them this form they'll take care of it all right. In three days, everything will be officially certified, and for the next three months all the mail you get at any of your old addresses in Ljubljana will go to the Celovška address!'

'And after that? What happens after three months?' Jana immediately wanted to know.

'After three months, you come back here,' Ana said. 'That way at least I'll get to see you again! I'm just joking with you. So who're you hanging out with now? Ever see anyone? Prophet, maybe?'

Jana shrugged as if she didn't know how to answer. 'Let's get together for coffee. My treat. Some day soon, I promise. But not today. Today I'm really not feeling very sociable. Besides, I'm totally knackered. Prophet? Is he even still alive?'

'Hey, no need. I'm just happy to help you. I'm glad I could. There's really no need even to get together. None at all. I know you've probably had it up to here with people like me.'

'Today I've had it up to here with everything. Everything. Especially people like me! This business I just took care of – it's the one good thing I've done all day. Maybe all month. Thanks a million for that.'

Jana picked up her backpack and nodded to Ana. She responded with a quick wave of her hand, the same hand on which she again rested her head.

'See you later, then,' Ana said as with her other hand she smoothed out the newspaper in front of her. 'But sooner than a year I hope. Don't go disappearing somewhere like our Prophet, who I heard is in Africa! Hahaha!'

Before Jana closed the door of the post office, she took another look at Ana, who had nodded off for a few seconds over *The Slovene News*, where people did some really crazy things.

excerpt from the novel translated by Rawley Grau