

Irena Svetek
BLACK PRINCE

*End of passion play,
crumbling away
I'm your source of self-destruction
Veins that pump with fear,
sucking darkest clear
Leading on your death's construction*

*Taste me you will see
More is all you need
Dedicated to
How I'm killing you*

(Metallica: Master of Puppets)

Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with, or resembling that associated with, actual or potential tissue damage.

(International Association for the Study of Pain – IASP)

*Castiglione di Sicilia, Italy
2013*

The sky above the valley of the river Alcantara was grey. Pilgrims could be seen on the path towards the top of the rocky protrusion on the northern slopes of the volcanic plateau, on their way to the Basilica Madonna della Catena. The Castello di Lauria or Castello del Leone, Lion Fortress, a medieval stronghold from the fourteenth century with a tower that was one stormy night struck by lightning and split in two, stood over them like a watchman. The narrow streets between the houses were packed with visitors. Late in the afternoon most of them stood outside the church where men in white and red cassocks began to descend the stone steps, followed, to the cheers of the enthusiastic crowd, by men bearing the statue of Madonna della Catena. Mary with Jesus slid slowly past the people, the melancholic sound of a trumpet floated through the air and the tiny lights inside the statue lit up. The image of the Holy Mother glowed, night fell upon the village of Castiglione di Sicilia and the sky was filled with colourful fireworks. Locals stood on the balconies of their houses, gazing with enchantment upon the Virgin surrounded with white flowers, as a woman's voice sang Ave Maria, the words *Santa Maria, Madre di Dio* released into the warm May air.

He stood on the balcony, his gaze searching for her. Below, a river of faces he didn't recognise, a blurry mass of people moving slowly towards Piazza Lauria. Suddenly, his heart

began pounding loudly, his lips uttered her name. Valentina Caruso. She was standing down below on the Via Edoardo Pantano in her white summer dress, her hair black as the darkest night, her cheeks pale as the brightest day, her lips as red as the wine he was drinking. Nothing could subdue his desire, she was the most beautiful being that had ever lived on this Mediterranean island, like an apparition, and he was bewitched. Every time he saw her, his body was overcome with a sense of pleasure that filled him with the desire to be able to touch her. At the very moment he was thinking about this, she looked up towards him, their gazes caught in the warm summer air, lingering, locked for a few moments. She smiled at him and he smiled back. The wind picked up, lifting her black hair. The overwhelming pang of desire was a volcano bubbling beneath his excited skin. He turned and pushed his way past his mother Andrea and aunt Giulia who were standing next to him on the small balcony, watching the procession.

Andrea gave him a surprised look and over the loud noise from the excited crowd he could hear her voice, *Cosa stai facendo?! Antonio?! But nothing in the world could stop him now. Antonio, dove stai andando?! Where are you going?! Antonio!!*

He rushed out of the house into the crowd on the street. The sky was dotted with stars, the air was warm, and he knew this was their evening. Mount Etna, rising above the village, stood solemnly, gazing into the future that would soon descend upon the inhabitants, immersing them in a darkness as black as the earth they were walking on.

The procession, accompanied by a brass band and a girls' choir, turned from Via Milazzo into the slightly wider Via Abate Coniglio and then along the narrower street named after Federico II, descended to Via Umberto where it stopped in front of a stone-built chapel. The girls stopped singing and the men in white and red cassocks raised their burning torches. A solo female voice sang again and the holy words rose towards Heaven. The light of the moon shone over the medieval village and the flames from the torches reflected in the eyes of the faithful surrounding the platform with the Madonna della Catena. A passion raged through Antonio's heart, ripping through his entire body. Valentina's lips were soft, her body firm, her skin so smooth... Nothing in the world could ruin this moment, he had waited for it for too long... When he united with her, he was overcome with ecstasy, raised his head and howled with joy, for he had never been this happy in his life. The bells of the Madonna Santissima del Carmelo were ringing loudly in his brain, then something cracked, as if both his eardrums had exploded simultaneously, and all of a sudden he heard Valentina's screams. She was lying under him, pushing him away with her hands, her white dress ripped. He lifted himself up from the cold tiled floor of the abandoned house that belonged to Rosa Vicento who had died at some point

in the winter, pulled and buttoned up his trousers. Valentina was lying on the floor, sobbing, her face wet with tears, blood on her thigh.

If you tell anyone, you're dead, capisci?

He turned around, slipped through the half-ajar door, stepped out into the street and got lost in the crowd. When he returned home, his aunt Giulia and his mother Andrea were sitting at the kitchen table. His mother turned to him.

Dove sei stato?! Where were you again?! Come fai ad andartene cosi?! She stared at his crumpled shirt with a red stain on its hem. Perché la tua camicia è stropicciata?! Ti ho chiesto una cosa! Antonio!

Forty-year-old Antonio, who still lived with his mother and her sister, staggered towards his room and lay on the bed. His head spinning, he saw the dark sky of the approaching storm and knew it would be bad. But despite everything, the moon was still shining, showering him with a warm, warm glow. Before him he saw the face of twelve-year-old Valentina Caruso and remembered the joy he felt when he united with her. It brought a smile to his face.

Eight years later

Andrea Torrisi lay in her room in the attic flat on the third floor of an old house opposite the Basilica Madonna della Catena. She was breathing slowly, the wheezing sound coming from her mouth rasping every so often. Her completely white hair was short, the skin on her skull shiny under the artificial light illuminating the room, she was as thin as a leaf and her wrinkled hands full of blue and purple capillary blotches. Her gaze was hazy, a cataract had formed on her left eye a year ago, entirely blurring her vision.

All of a sudden she saw before her the young girl with wavy hair and crow black eyes, saw the attic flat on Via Edoardo Pantano where she had lived with her widowed mother Accursia and her sister Giulia, three years her junior. They got on well, even though things weren't easy for their mother, she had two unmarried daughters who had never been interested in men and men were no longer interested in them, so they became *le vecchie vergini*, the old virgins. Castiglione di Sicilia was a village of traditional mentality and people were unable to understand why Andrea and Giulia Torrisi had not got married, for this was almost as bad as if an unmarried woman had got herself pregnant. The village in the extreme south of Italy endured a lot of gossip and the three women living in the old attic flat opposite the Basilica of the Holy Mary of Catena were subject to a great deal of it. Accursia saw how people looked at them, heard what they were saying, and felt sad. She could not understand what she had done for God

to punish her with such a sad fate, she prayed and prayed for a couple of men to appear from the heavens like angels and lead her daughters to the right path.

Andrea felt the sweat gathering on her chest. She opened her mouth and drew the dry air into her lungs. It made her feel dizzy, the walls of the room seemed to sway. She closed her eyes, her lungs rasped. Suddenly, out of the dark came the image of the big city she had set off for to buy medicine for her mother, stone paved streets, open piazzas and tall churches, she gazed upon the towering buildings rising around her and it felt as if she had arrived in a different world. Catania was a lively port, bustling with life, a thousand smells in the air, pleasant and unpleasant, the women walking past her in the street wore colourful dresses, were loud, and the men coming out of the inns staggered drunkenly.

Ma, che puttana...

She blushed up to her ears. When a drunken dock worker approached her and reached with his hand under her dress, she thought she would faint with terror right there in the street. She managed to cry out and all of a sudden *he* was next to her. He was tall and dark, his name was Isaak and he was from Malta, here to find work. He pushed the drunkard away and smiled at her. Then he held her hand and they walked through unknown streets, her heart pounding, and for the first time in her life she felt butterflies in her stomach. His skin smelled of cinnamon and sweat, his hands were strong and his muscles so firm. He lifted her up and placed her on the stone wall behind a secluded house, darkness fell upon Catania and stars twinkled brightly in the sky. Everything inside her opened up, the dam was breached, and it was as if she had been waiting for this moment all her life.

Come ti chiami? What's your name?

Andrea, Andrea! she gasped as his hips pressed against her.

Suddenly she felt a sharp pain and the following moment his manhood slid into her like a cunning eel, moving and twisting inside her, and Andrea began groaning loudly.

On the bus back to Castiglione di Sicilia she had a red flush on her face that never disappeared for the rest of her life. Nine months later she gave birth. Her mother Accursia, broken from the constant gossip and evil tongues, shut herself into her room and never came out again.

Now Andrea was lying in this same room, the sound of prayer quietly creeping into her brain. Her hazy gaze moved around the space with people standing around her.

Maria, piena di grazia, il Signore è con te ...

Next to her bed was the face of Padre Marco Messina, the priest. Here also was the tearful face of her younger sister Giulia, and there were other faces but she did not recognise

them... Andrea slowly turned her head towards the window. Her forty-eight-year-old son Antonio sat on a small chair in the corner, staring at her.

Santa Maria, Madre di Dio, prega per noi peccatori, adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte.

She raised her hand, the priest fell silent.

No... I have something... something to...

Padre Marco Messina approached and leaned close to her.

Tell me...

Mio figlio, my son Antonio ... She could see how he flinched when he heard his name.

Valentina Caruso ... Valen...tina ...

The priest was confused.

Valentina Caruso?

Sì...

He remembered the name. He had held Mass at the girl's funeral.

She died together with her baby during childbirth, seven years ago, barely thirteen years old...

Andrea nodded.

Sì...

Her son's gaze was fixed upon her.

Signora Andrea, what is it that you want to tell me?

Antonio, my son...

Antonio stood up from the chair.

Can't you see this is the end?! Why are you torturing her like this?!

Marco Messina lifted his palm towards Antonio. Then he turned to the dying woman.

You can tell me anything ... Andrea's eyes suddenly no longer saw, she was engulfed by total darkness. *Signora Andrea?*

Straining, she let out a rasping voice that with her final strength spoke for the dead girl.

Antonio... my Antonio raped her.

I.

New blood joins this Earth

*And quickly he's subdued
Through constant pain disgrace
The young boy learns their rules
With time the child draws in
This whipping boy done wrong
Deprived of all his thoughts
The young man struggles on and on he's known
A vow unto his own
That never from this day
His will they'll take away*

(Metallica: *Unforgiven*)

*Florence, Italy
2023*

You could feel the sweat in the air, bodies rubbing against each other, and he felt sick. *Pretty fucking good, huh? So we're all still having some fun here? We got some sweat going on out here, I fucking hope? We'd like to see some action going on! Who? Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's where we are, man. Don't forget it.*

His ears were ringing, flashing lights glared, red, green, red again, a distorted image of reality dancing into his field of vision, saliva gathering in his mouth that he had difficulty swallowing.

And, uh, you guys have been waiting for us, right? So, I'm glad you showed up to share this with us... Alright, alright, alright, OK, one more thing, man, real quick, OK? This show right here, all these lights and all this stuff, man... A lot of people work really hard to make this happen for you guys. And for us, every night. So join me in making a bunch of noise for the road crew...

The crowd roared, even more human sweat rose into the air.

Yeah, baby! Alright, thank you. Grazie. Let's have a good time tonight, man ... Thanks a lot!

Lights flashed, the sound of electric guitars cut into the warm autumn evening, drums began beating in an accelerated rhythm. There was a loud bang, coloured firecrackers flew from the stage, shattering into thousands of tiny particles of light. James Hetfield's blue eyes looked down from the big screen, his hair was short and grey, his arms in a sleeveless black t-shirt muscled and tattooed. The fingers of the fifty-nine-year-old from California slid across the

strings of his white guitar, creating a sound that brought joy to millions of people round the world.

My mother was a witch, she was burned alive, thankless little bitch, for the tears I cried, take her down now, don't want to see her face, blistered and burned, can't hide my disgrace.

The skies above Florence opened and rain poured on the crowd in the Visarno Arena. Mio Aurelli, standing a couple of hundred metres from the stage, holding a glass of whisky, was becoming wetter by the minute. Through the raindrops sliding from his forehead, he could see the face of Robert Trujillo and his lizard-like gestures, rising above the tens of thousands strong monster, strumming the bass guitar with three fingers, his plaits swinging across his shoulders. Lars Ulrich shone from the big screen, pounding his drums madly. The rain drizzled, droplets of water trickled down James Hetfield's skin and the wild crowd screamed: *Papa Het!!!* The mouth of the lead singer of one of the greatest bands of all time opened, releasing the heavy metal words into the air from the digital cubes suspended above the stage.

As I watched my mother die, I lost my head, revenge now I sought, to break with my bread, taking no chances, you came with me, I'll split you to the bone, help set you free. Am I evil? Yes, I am. Am I evil? I am man, yes I am.

The euphoric crowd screamed madly. Aurelli felt waves rising from his stomach, he opened his mouth and spewed the whisky all over the wet ground.

At eleven in the evening Florence was still lively. Restaurants in narrow streets were full of tourists enjoying local Italian specialties, talking loudly and pouring red wine down their throats while their laughter echoed from the walls and rolled out onto the street.

Aurelli was sitting on the worn-out backseat of a battered Punto, the taxi driver in the front kept turning round to check whether his drunken passenger was still conscious. His eyes only half-open, Aurelli peered out of the dirty window. How had he got here... In the land of his birth that he hadn't visited for so long... The old houses on the banks of the Arno running under famous bridges slid past his drunken eyes. Here in this land lived his family of which there was nothing left... His mother had left with a lover when he was fifteen... he had not seen her since... He had tried... tried to find her but Azra had erased all trace behind her, it was as if she had vanished into thin air... His father... Giovanni Aurelli... Ruined by alcohol, his liver finally gave up... And his sisters.... Michela and Virginia... Died in a car accident, the car driven by a completely drunk Giovanni... His third sister, the youngest... Where was Avionka? He had not seen her for over a year... Of course, she returned to that idiot... It had all fallen apart, all... His head was buzzing, the sound was becoming irritating... he reached out with his hand to try

to lower the window to get some fresh air. He pressed the button but nothing happened. Then he pulled the handle at the bottom and still nothing happened. The taxi driver peered at him in the rear-view mirror.

Lascia stare la finestra.

Why should I leave the window alone... I am trying to open it...

Once again Aurelli began pressing the button, he was desperate for some fresh air... He pulled the handle again. The taxi driver turned round.

Lascia la maniglia, he said in an irritated voice. Rovinerai tutto.

I am not going to break any...thing... I will just... o...pen the win...dow...

Aurelli grabbed the handle on the door and began pulling it.

Che cosa ti ho detto?! Lascia la maniglia!

Why was he shouting so much? Aurelli pulled on the handle again and a piece of plastic came off in his hand. Everything was falling apart... He threw it on the floor, leaned against the seat and closed his eyes. He was falling apart... The taxi driver's gaze showed his rage.

Se ti dico di lasciare stare la maniglia, allora lasciala!

Oh, shut up, Aurelli muttered. Stai zitto.

The man turned the steering wheel a few times and the car swerved. Aurelli opened his eyes and saw that the taxi driver had turned off the road. What was going on? He switched off the engine, opened the door and stepped out in a rage. Aurelli watched him from the window. What was he going to do now? The back door opened, the man grabbed him by his jacket and pulled him out of the taxi.

Esci dalla mia macchina, maledetto stronzo!

Let me go... Aurelli said drunkenly and tried to push him away.

Had the man gone mad?

Chi ti ha permesso di distruggere la maniglia della finestra?! He pulled Aurelli out of the taxi and pushed him onto the ground. Cretino!

Then he angrily got back into the car, slammed the door and drove off like a madman. The streetlight started flashing, everything in front of Aurelli's eyes swayed and he felt sick again. With difficulty he staggered to his feet, then stared at the approaching lights.

There were a few loud honks and a sports car came rushing past. Through the open window he could hear someone shouting, *Imbecille!*

Aurelli's inebriated brain had difficulties sending the message to the legs, it took them a few moments before reacting, waddling off the road and stepping onto the pavement.

Four-star Hotel Pritti Palace stands on the left bank of the river Arno, very close to the Ponte Vecchio, the most famous bridge in Florence, with jewellery shops, tourists from all over the world coming to have a look at its colourful houses with blue and green shutters, leaving their invisible steps on the stone paving. The sky was dark with the exception of a few stars scattered across it like breadcrumbs, the rain had stopped and the clock on the Palazzo Vecchio's Arnolfo Tower had just struck midnight. Leja Breznik stood at her third-floor hotel room window looking at the tower that rose above the rooftops together with Giotto's Campanile next to the Basilica of Santa Maria del Fiore. It occurred to her that, like her, they seem endlessly alone on this dark night. She closed her eyes. Then she moved away from the window and lay down in the empty double bed. Has it really been a year since that late autumn night when he, quite unexpectedly, appeared at her door? She had taken him into her arms and opened up to him, accepted him whenever he needed her, but still... How was it that, as a psychiatrist, she was still all this time unable to get under his skin? He was withdrawn, as if he had built a wall around himself, was attentive and loving towards her but still distant and to some degree even cold. His behaviour was more self-destructive by the day. She had been looking forward to the trip to Florence, thinking that they might rekindle their passion in the ancient town. Now she regretted having convinced him to bring her along, because he was not interested in her or Florence, he had only come for the Metallica concert. He didn't want to walk around medieval piazzas or look at the masterpieces of Michelangelo and Bandinelli, was not interested in Cellini's Perseus who has cut off Medusa's head, holding it up for all the strollers in the Piazza della Signoria to see, he didn't even want to go to the Uffizi or see any of the Renaissance, Baroque and Gothic churches, which seemed strange to her, as she knew his passion for history, and if there was ever a town that is like an open-air gallery, it was Florence. Wherever you look, history breathes through centuries old stones and the Renaissance godfathers, the Medici family, made sure than nobody visiting the town remained indifferent. Nobody, apart from Mio, who only displayed a little genuine joy when, during dinner in some restaurant, he discovered that there was a working poker machine in the back room.

Suddenly she heard banging at the door. Quickly she got out of bed and was into the hallway when Aurelli staggered in. He stank of alcohol and cigarette smoke, he was pale, his jacket was soaked. Leja switched on the light and noticed his bloodshot eyes, his dirty trousers and his completely muddy sneakers.

Mio... What happened?

He muttered something and disappeared into the bathroom. The half-broken moon appeared from behind the clouds and Leja felt that she was on a path that led nowhere but downwards.

He dreamed about James Hetfield. They were in his garage, James was mending the engine of an old 1953 Buick Skylark, talking about the sense of abandonment and abstinence from alcohol. Aurelli was looking at the guitars hanging on the walls and the cowboy hat Hetfield was wearing.

That's so crazy, man. The power of the mind... it's so strong... I understand, you're stripped to the bone and it hurts... But it can change, you can change... I'm on your side, man.

Aurelli turned in the bed, his skin hot and sweaty. Flashing through his brain were images with the face of his former wife Viola, he heard her laughter, saw the face of their son. James Hetfield lifted his gaze from the engine of the Buick, looked at Aurelli and, all of a sudden, verses came out of his mouth like butterflies.

I am the priest that feeds the beast, I am the blood, I am release, come make me pure, bleed me a cure... I'm bleeding me...

Aurelli felt his heart beat loudly, his mouth dried and he opened his eyes. All he could see through the window was the dark sky and a tiny part of the moon above Florence. For a moment he thought Viola was lying in the bed next to him. Leja moved, placed her hand over his arm, and reality once again gripped him in its steel embrace.

The sun peeked through the window, lighting up the room at the Pritti Palace Hotel, the smell of fresh coffee reached Mio Aurelli's nostrils. He opened his eyes. On the small side table was a tray with pastries and two cups of coffee next to it. Leja was standing by the wardrobe, taking a shirt off the hanger that she folded and put away in the open suitcase on the floor.

Hey... said Aurelli and smiled at her.

Leja didn't turn around. She took a jumper and some T-shirts from the shelf, bent down and placed them in the suitcase. When she straightened up, their gazes caught each other.

Why is it that you are with me?

Aurelli raised his eyebrows in surprise.

Because you are unpredictable and sometimes surprise me with a question I don't expect?

Leja stayed silent for a while, her eyes looked tired.

Why are you with me, Mio? Tell me.

Aurelli's face became serious, for a moment he closed his eyes.

So that I not alone, Leja.

Silence hung in the air. She stared at the man in front of her, his short hair was turning grey at the sides, his skin was fresh, despite looking a little pale, his body was for now in good shape. She wanted to say something but her throat was totally dry. During the night she had sat on the bed, watching him toss and turn in sweat. A year ago he had come to her and told her that Viola had left him. He had been honest and she decided she would accept him. She knew that he was suffering, but still... What did she expect would happen...? Aurelli's brown eyes were staring at her, displaying a speck of pain, but she was not entirely certain whether it was because he felt bad or due to the hangover that he must have after last night's drinking. He got up from the bed, went across to the window and opened it. He breathed in the fresh autumn air and looked out at the curved of Santa Maria del Fiore. Florence was awake, lively voices coming from the street below, the river under the Ponte Vecchio shimmered in the morning sun. He sensed Leja's eyes on him. He didn't want to talk with her, at least not now, and especially not about their relationship; he wasn't feeling his best, a result of the previous evening, most of which was a big blur in his mind... He turned round.

Shall we go to Gino's?

Leja suddenly saw her mother's face before her. She was eight, holding her by the hand as they walked down the street. It was snowing, she was wearing a red raincoat and colourful wellies. Mother's steps were long and swift, she was trying to keep up with her when they suddenly stopped at the door of an old town house. Mother had pressed one of the doorbells and a woman's voice came from the intercom.

Yes? Who is this?

Leja looked up to the sky, snowflakes were dancing through the cold winter air.

Tell your husband that his lover is waiting downstairs. The one he promised he would marry as soon as he separated from his wife.

Leja recalls the silence. It had wrapped both her and her mother in a gentle membrane and squeezed them into its cold embrace. The large door then suddenly opened and before them stood an elderly woman with glasses. When she saw how much younger her mother was, she opened her mouth in surprise. Leja felt sorry for her, she seemed so shocked, just standing there in that doorway, staring at her mother. As if the pain had totally paralysed her. Being the other woman. The second in line, playing second fiddle.

Leja? Aurelli stared at her, that playful smile once again appearing on his face. It was what made her fall in love with him the first time she saw him. It was snowing outside, it was

a cold winter day when he came to the psychiatric clinic and asked her about the file for Marjan Hinks, one of her patients. *Shall we go to Gino's?*

She looked into his brown eyes, once again with that sparkle. In truth she didn't want to go to Gino's, what she wanted was to return to Ljubljana as soon as possible and be alone.

She nodded and said, *Yes, let's go.*

Standing in the narrow Via de' Guicciardini was a small bakery with colourful sweets in the window. *Gino's Bakery*, said the sign. Aurelli and Leja walked into the narrow space which had on one side a display with freshly-baked goods, on the other was a narrow glass shelf where you could put your coffee and pastry. Sitting at the till was the shop owner who smiled at them when they entered.

Buongiorno.

Buongiorno, Gino, come va? said Aurelli, glancing over the cannoli, Sicilian pastries made of a light tube-shaped dough, filled with sweet ricotta and sprinkled with chopped pistachios.

Bene, bene, replied the older, grey-haired man wearing a black apron with *Gino's Bakery* written across it. *Do you like cannoli?* he asked when he saw what Aurelli was looking at.

Aurelli smiled.

Ma si, certo...

Then he turned to Leja.

Leave the gun, take the cannoli...

Leja rose her eyebrows in surprise.

What?

The owner of the bakery smiled.

Padrino, Clemenza.

Aurelli nodded.

Si, Padrino. The Godfather.

Then he looked at Leja again.

Do you remember the film Godfather when Clemenza hires Rocco to kill Pauli?

Leja shook her head.

No, I can't recall anything about that film.

Before they sit in the car, Clemenza's wife tells her husband not to forget to bring the cannoli. Clemenza buys them and when Rocco later liquidates Pauli in the car, Clemenza tells

him, Leave the gun, take the cannoli. Aurelli seems in a good mood, a smile appears on his face. *Don't mess with family and don't mess with cannoli.*

Smile lines appear around Leja's eyes. She remembered how Mio had found two bottles of coke in the tiny fridge under the writing desk in the hotel room and was as delighted as a little child.

Due cannoli al pistacchio, per favore, said Aurelli turning to Leja and winking at her.

They walked along the street, eating the Sicilian sweet pastry. Leja thought how nice it would be if everything was always this simple. Like their stroll across the Ponte Vecchio, like window shopping at the jewellery stores, like the warm sun shining down upon them. When Aurelli noticed she was about to throw the remnants of her cannoli in the bin, he turned towards her.

No, no, Leja, don't do that... You need to eat a cannoli to the end. Prova, try, he smiled. *Or give the rest of it to me.*

Florence smelled of late autumn and the air was suddenly full of hope.

Trbovlje, Slovenia
2023

The thirteenth century mining town, known for its quality coal and hard-working people, basked in the sun. The river Trboveljščica, normally a dirty green colour, today shimmered in the bright light, its surface taking on an even more vivid green. The tallest chimney in Europe past which it flowed, the three-hundred and sixty metre concrete structure built for the needs of the now defunct thermal power station, rose towards the sky like a proud solitary figure amidst the surrounding hills. On one of these hills surrounding the town lay the Trbovlje General Hospital which also has a surgery department. Under the sign above the entrance saying HOSPITAL was a white statue of a mother and child; just parking in front of it was an ambulance. The rear doors opened and medics carried out an unconscious man whose entire body was an open wound, as if someone had flayed his skin. Mario Hočevar, general surgeon and trauma specialist, had in his eighteen-year career seen all sorts of things but nothing like this. He knew he would need to make some quick decisions and immediately assessed that transporting the patient to a larger hospital would be too risky, that at this stage the man would not survive the journey. How could a person do something like this to a fellow human being? Dr Hočevar

chased away the thought because he had to remain calm and above all focused. He hurried to the operating room, hoping he would be up to the task that awaited him.

The flower shop on 1st June Street was closed. An older lady with a fur hat on her head and holding a Pomeranian in her arms approached the shop window. She put the dog down on the ground, then held her hands up against the glass to look inside. Everything looked as it usually did, flowers standing in wide vases, wreaths stacked on the right side of the counter and the silver bowl that her Beni usually drinks from was filled with water. Jelka Smrekar went back to the door and grabbed the handle. She could hear the little bell ring inside, but there was nobody around to come and open the door for her. She had intended to buy some fresh roses as the ones she had bought last week were already wilting. She had been coming to this flower shop for twelve years and not once did she find it shut in the middle of the week. This was strange, very strange. Matej Mazej was a conscientious man who would not just close shop or take a day off in the middle of the week, she thought to herself, he always looked after his customers and... All of a sudden it occurred to her. Yes, of course, how come she hadn't thought of it before... the poor man has probably fallen ill. Jelka Smrekar turned and looked at the small dog on its lead.

Our Matejko isn't here, she said to the dog using a voice adults sometimes use when they speak to children. She leaned down and picked up the brown Pomeranian who had just peed in the middle of the pavement. *Come on, Beni, let's go home.*

In the recovery room of the Trbovlje General Hospital lay an unknown man. His body was wrapped in bandages and all that could be seen through the openings were his mouth and his closed eyes. He reminded the nurse giving him a strong cocktail of painkillers through his intravenous drip of a mummy, like the costume her eight-year-old son had worn for Halloween. Poor man, she thought to herself, this must be very painful. She remembered her mother who often said to her, *Nedeljka, the world is a dangerous place to live in,* and she would just dismissively wave her off. She bent over to straighten the man's pillow when the man opened his eyes and coughed. Something familiar crept into her memory, the scent of flowers wafted through her brain. She looked at the patient lying on the bed and all of a sudden realised who the stranger hiding behind all the bandages was.

The morning had been misty. A thick cloud rose above the quarry, hiding from view the old house next to the dirt track. Unplastered façade, its wet red bricks standing out through the drizzle, the window looking out onto the road dirty. From afar the hum of an engine could be heard, cutting noisily into the air, rising above the treetops. A blue Aprilia appeared out of the mist, rode along the wet road and stopped a few metres further along. Feet in low-top trainers touched the ground and the engine was switched off. A young man stepped off the scooter, took off his helmet and made his way towards the house. He leaned against the solid wood door with his shoulder, pushing it open. The inside was dark, streaks of light coming in through the gaps in the wood that had been nailed across the windows, the walls were damp, and the place stank of urine. But at least here he had peace. There was no Zdenka Vrhovec who at the slightest thing she thought suspicious would hurry off and tell his parents. Ever since he had crashed into her fence with his motorbike and smashed her wretched garden gnome that had stood next to it, she watched him with an eagle eye, just waiting for an opportunity to tell on him. He had to make sure nobody saw him because if his father were to find out what he was doing, he would beat the living daylights out of him and then, despite his mother's tears, throw him out onto the street.

Seventeen-year-old Matic Remškar walked with a well-versed stride towards the dirty sofa and sat on it. The fabric was black and full of cigarette burn holes because every time he stuck a needle into his hand his brain buzzed and when the warm water began circulating through him, warming him from within like a pleasant lullaby, his hand holding a lit cigarette faltered and his eyes closed. He had to be careful because he had once already fallen asleep, causing the fabric on the sofa to catch fire and he was almost burned. He took off his winter jacket, reached under the sofa for his equipment: a plastic syringe, a bent spoon and a box of citric acid. In his pocket he found a plastic-wrapped needle, took off the packaging and placed it onto the syringe. Spreading out the cling film, he shook the drug into the spoon. He lit his lighter and the flame flicked against the metal. Rolling up his sleeve he clenched his fist a few times. The mere anticipation made him sweat, the muscles beneath his ribs throbbed with excitement. Then suddenly something dripped onto his forehead. With the back of his hand he wiped his skin and looked at it. A small stain smeared across his hand. He tilted his head and looked up at the ceiling. Another drip, this time onto his cheek. He wiped his face with his T-shirt, the light fabric became dirty with something dark. He was getting nervous, he needed this

shot, he would have his shot and investigate what was going on later. Finding the vein, he pushed in the needle, piercing the skin. In an instant, ecstasy rushed through his blood stream, he opened his mouth, leaned back in the sofa, and was taken off into space. His breathing slowed, he closed his eyes. A peal of thunder came from the outside, the wind lifted the dry leaves from the ground and it began to rain. The dripping from the ceiling increased and the face of the stoned teenager was becoming bloodier.

Ljubljana, Slovenia

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It was a dreary day. Tiny droplets of rain were falling from the grey sky and the wind scattered them in all directions. People standing at the bus stop next to the Drama Theatre seemed deep in thought, staring blankly out onto the road, isolated in a world of their own that had nothing to do with their immediate surroundings. A white off-road vehicle drove past, the grey label on its door emblazoned with the words, *Republic of Slovenia, District Court, Examining Magistrate*. It parked outside the wooden door on Erjavec Street number 4, opposite the main entrance to the Slovene National Theatre. Marko Vidic, an older gentleman of sporty physique, switched off the engine. He found his phone, pressed a few buttons, held it up to his ear.

Marko, are you here? said the voice on the phone.

Yes, I'm outside your door.

Matjaž Sinčič liked to rely on his inner voice which told him how he needed to look after himself. He was not egotistic, far from it, he was always very empathetic towards people, but he had become used to taking his own wishes into account because a life without a partner or children was a life without compromises. He had only himself to think about and had become used to indulging in his own pleasures that he didn't share with anyone. When his inner voice told him that he should move to the centre of town and improve the quality of his life, he, despite the extortionate rent, took a flat opposite the Drama Theatre and was in the end happy with his decision. The flat was light and modern, had high ceilings and, what was most important, possessed a good energy. His life was sailing on calm seas, everything was predictable and he liked that. Routine satisfied him, as did the job he did. All he wished for was to get even better

at doing what he did, which some of his colleagues resented, seeing him as an ambitious, career-minded person longing for promotion. But this did not affect him. Some men were simply jealous. Matjaž Sinčič was young, successful and attractive, his calm nature and youthful face liked by women, old and young. In the mornings he woke up at five, ran up to the castle and back, took a shower, had his coffee and walked to the courthouse. Moving along an established track without any unnecessary detours, just the predictable, straight route which made him happy. He was master of the fate he had chosen and was satisfied with it. Five weeks ago, however, his life had been turned upside down. In the middle of the night he received a confused call from his sister and as soon as he heard her voice, he had known something was seriously wrong. Because he didn't understand what she was saying, he called Andrej, the young assistant at the Civil Engineering Faculty, but there was no answer, then the ringing stopped and after that the number was unavailable. Sinčič sat in a taxi and went to Trnovo, to Vogelna number ten, where the couple lived.

Wait here, he said to the taxi driver when he stopped in the parking area in front of the building. *Even if I take a while, please wait.*

He rushed up the stairs to the main entrance to the block of flats. As he rang the doorbell with Sinčič Logar written on it, his heart was thumping loudly. Nothing happened, so he rang a few of the other doorbells until someone opened the door. He took the lift to the fifth floor, hurried to the flat and opened the front door without knocking or ringing.

Ajda! he called out. He went down the narrow corridor to the kitchen but it was empty. His sister's large grey cat sat on the bench, looking at him. *Ajda!* he called out again and went to the living room where he suddenly spotted her. She was lying on the floor holding the telephone. All around her were the broken remnants of a coffee cup, one of her eyes was open, the other closed. Saliva was dribbling from her mouth and when she saw him, she began to groan incomprehensibly. He leaned closer to her. *Oh, God... What happened to you...?*

He waited at the emergency department for six hours before a doctor came to speak to him.

Mr Sinčič?

Yes?

He stood up from the chair and when he saw that the man with his face covered in a blue mask lowered his gaze, he knew that what he was about to hear could not be good.

Your sister has received a heavy blow to the head. The eyes of the older man standing before him appeared tired. *We have conducted a brain scan and...* He sighed loudly as if exhaling could bring relief from the unpleasant news he needed to convey. *We found an extensive tumour on the left lower side.*

Sinčič felt a surge of pain, as if someone had punched him in the abdomen, his stomach gripped with pain and his head buzzed.

Malign or benign? were the only words he managed to utter.

We don't know yet, she needs to be operated on, and then the biopsy will show whether it is a cancerous growth.

Sinčič sat down on the plastic chair, bent over and for a moment held his head with both hands. Then he looked up at the doctor.

You said she had received a blow to the head... Did she fall and hit herself, or...? What did you mean?

The older man in a white gown cleared his throat.

We assume that someone hit her with some kind of object, as she has a contusion consistent with such an eventuality. This was why she lost her balance, fell to the floor and was unable to get up again. Of course, this is related to the tumour, the entire right side of her body is paralysed.

Sinčič's brain was processing what he had just been told. He leaned his head against the wall and for a moment closed his eyes. Then he looked at the doctor again.

This means that she would not yet have found out that she has a tumour had someone not hit her...

The man sighed.

No, certainly not for a while yet.

What an incredible game of fate, Sinčič thought to himself.

And when will she be operated on?

As soon as you sign the consent form.

Ajda stayed in hospital and he felt like a sleepwalker, stepping along the edge of the world in a kind of trance, it was as if reality mixed with fiction and nothing seemed real, nothing at all. From Zaloška Street he could hear the sound of an ambulance, the high concentration of carbon monoxide in the air causing smog. The temperature dropped to five degrees and darkness enveloped the town though it was only just after five in the afternoon.

Matjaž Sinčič put his phone back in his jacket pocket, stepped out into the corridor to put on the hiking boots he wore whenever he was on-call. He walked back down the corridor, knocked on the bedroom door and pushed it open. Ajda was lying in bed, her head bandaged, wearing pyjamas printed with teddy bears and, even though she was twenty-nine, she looked like a little girl.

Ajda, I need to go. I am on-call. She smiled at him and nodded. *If there is anything... anything at all,* he repeated, *just call me, right?* He walked up to her and kissed her on the cheek. Her blue eyes were bright, as if their colour had changed entirely. She was so fragile, so... He gulped and quickly left the room. *Bye!* he called from the front door as he closed it and then hurried down the stone stairs to the ground floor.

Parked outside was a white Volkswagen, leaning against it was Marko Vidic, court driver of many years, responsible for taking the investigating magistrate out to see crime scenes. When he saw Sinčič, he got rid of his cigarette, stepping on it to extinguish it.

Hello, he said as he opened the back door.

Hello Marko, said Sinčič and sat on the back seat.

Vidic walked round to the driver's door, sat down, pulled at his seatbelt as he closed the door.

What weather, eh?

Yes, Sinčič replied. *Dreary.*

The driver switched on the engine and drove off. Sinčič stared at the houses along Slovenska Street as the car turned left, past Križanke towards the river Ljubljana. At the traffic lights before Zois's Pyramid he leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. The results of the biopsy of his sister's tumour showed it was malignant and although it was excised entirely, there was new growth two weeks after the operation. To Sinčič it was as if he had found himself

in a nightmare, as if reality had completely swallowed him up with its ruthlessness. He went with Ajda to her chemotherapy sessions, held her hand, making sure she was not broken psychologically. She moved in with him, while the young assistant at the Civil Engineering faculty was charged with grievous bodily assault and Sinčič also made sure he was given a restraining order.

The vehicle turned from Karlovška Street to the road below Golovec Hill. Vidic turned up the hill where he stopped outside a modern house with the top floor in glass and a large terrace below with evergreen pine trees in huge pots, and below this a garage and stairs leading up to the main entrance. Standing at the door was district state prosecutor Mio Aurelli, smoking. When he saw the car, he extinguished the cigarette and came down the stairs.

He opened the back door and sat next to Sinčič.

Hello boys, he said smoothing his wet short hair with his hand. This is the third time we're going on site in the rain, isn't it Marko?

Marko looked in the rear-view mirror.

Yes, that's right...

Aurelli placed his hand on his shoulder. *How is Sonja? Did she pass the exam?*

We are both so proud of her, she got a nine.

Aurelli whistled.

A nine from professor Kambič... he smiled. That's no mean feat... Roman law is one of the most difficult exams, Marko... So, well done Sonja!

Sinčič thought about Aurelli's flair for getting close to others. He is always so genuine in his interest about others, always full of a kind of positive energy that he draws upon, God only knows from where... He could never be like that himself, talking to people like that, not unless it was necessary, but Aurelli... He would walk up to the Queen of England and ask her if she slept well last night... As if sensing that the young judge was looking at him, the state prosecutor turned to him.

How are you, Kiddo?

Sinčič nodded.

Alright, he said and stared out of the window.

The rain was intensifying, swirls of water forming on the glass. Aurelli opened a can of Coke he produced from his jacket pocket and took a few sips.

Where was it that they found the body?

Sinčič gazed across the fields through the misted window.

Above Sadinja Vas. In an old abandoned house near the quarry.

excerpt from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh