

**Ana Marwan**  
**COCOONED**

It took quite some time for the solitude surrounding Jež to permeate him and to almost completely push out the malevolence. He himself, in spite of the fact that it was no longer there, would still not admit that it was malevolence. Anger, hatred, Schadenfreude – those he would accept. But while those arise from resistance to human evil, there could be no talk of malevolence.

Whatever, between his four walls Jež once again became innocent, as innocent as a baby in the womb. It helped that he was silent. Usually, even during a working day, he never said more than hello, bon appétit, Mrs Lah, there you go, sorry, thank you, it's okay, please, allow me, cheers, goodbye. Only nice words.

Be that as it may, you can't live like that for long, like a foetus in the womb, in innocence. But why bang your head against a brick wall? He would go with the flow, he thought each day anew when he returned from work, changed into his dressing gown and read on the couch and then in bed until he fell asleep, or just stared through the window at the poplar tree, which sometimes trembled under his gaze.

Yes, it was a poplar. Long ago, at some stage of arboreal growth, Jež had said to his wife: "How quickly that tree is growing! It's rising towards the sky like a bird," and his wife replied "Poplars do grow quickly." From this, he had concluded that this tree was a poplar. Other trees remained trees. His mother had never taught him how to differentiate between trees, like small Eskimos are taught by their mothers to differentiate between kinds of snow. It did not seem to Jež's mother that trees were what surrounded them the most. Anything other than trees. (In first place, were probably human failings; at least, that is what you would think.) But his wife was an expert in differentiation, not only with regard to names, which seemed to her of marginal significance, but more importantly with regard to the feelings they supposedly evoked in her. He had learned a little from her about flowers. You shouldn't give her orchids, since they were a bow to petit bourgeois sentiments, while a rose was an empty cliché. There were countless dangers lying in wait in a bouquet. If he picked a bunch himself in a meadow, he normally didn't go wrong, but by the time he came to this realisation, his desire to pick anything had already passed. The more he knew, the less he felt like using his knowledge; for him, knowledge was attractive only in a state of inquisitiveness – a goal in itself and never a tool. He was so reluctant to reach for any tool, but he was still surprised when things began to fall apart.

Now that poplar, right by the window, completely obscured the view so that nothing else could be seen. But it wasn't a bother, quite the opposite – it hid things nicely. Besides which, no one could see Jež any longer, for through the same window that he looked at the world, the world looked at him.

It might still grow a storey higher, but probably no more than that – Jež was lucky not to live higher up. He was often lucky, he often began a sentence with “It's lucky that...”

But in spite of that, he still looked despondent.

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*They examined how I had begun Jež, and told me to continue. They didn't say whether it was a good beginning or a bad one, because they were sticking to their principles and avoiding value judgements. All that I know about myself from them is what I manage to overhear. Which is not difficult, since they often forget, they forget my presence. Probably because I am often silent and still, on the threshold of the world of things, with one foot already in it. They gave me the assignment called Jež, because they think that language is my anchor, and Jež the solid bottom where I can cast that anchor. And so, if everything goes well, my peace will be inner rather than outer. That's my summary, they don't express themselves like that, as far as possible they express themselves realistically. I am bothered by the common root of certain incompatible expressions. On the other hand, I know that everything originated in the same bang and so misunderstandings are unavoidable. I accept all their assignments, that is to say hand them in. That accepting and discharging assignments is the same thing, although the opposite, is another memory of the bang. I accepted the assignment Jež with greater enthusiasm than others, because I hoped it would save me from the fear that often gripped me – the fear of forgetting human language. This gripped me with such force between two silences that I kept exuding words in short exclamations, as different as possible. Which wasn't realistic. They also warned me to “resist the temptation to reflect”, because I am not a bottom as solid as Jež, since I will never get to the bottom, especially not with an anchor as short as language is. And I go, right at the beginning...*

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The last time Jež was in company was at Mrs Klammer's forty-eighth birthday party. He didn't want to go, but his wishes didn't have much influence on events. He could have learned that as a child; he hadn't missed out on that lesson, but at that time, as stubborn as he was, he thought that everything would be different when he grew up. However, it turned out that the more grown-up he got, the less he could wish for things. If things carried on like that, in the end he could wish for only one thing.

The invitation came by post four months before the event, written in ink, the handwriting fanciful, but it wasn't calligraphy, it was hard to read, it demanded attention and effort.

On one side was written:

"I'm already twenty-three, I've been working for years, my brains are drying up, I'm getting thin and old and ugly (...)" (*Chekhov, Three Sisters*)

And on the other:

*Although I will be twice as old, I would like to celebrate with you! You are warmly invited to dine in the circle of my closest friends on 16<sup>th</sup> March at 7 p.m.*

*Please confirm in writing if you are coming – I wouldn't like to wait for you in vain.*

*Looking forward to it!*

*Karolina Klammer*

The invitation represented Karolina Klammer better than any faultless portrait could, although a picture is a thousand words and an invitation only a few dozen.

"You talk as if that was something bad. I'd be happy if everything that I did represented me so faithfully," said his wife.

She did not support him in his rejection of Mrs Klammer. She also had a good side, she claimed, that no one's perfect and that she was a loyal friend.

Jež said something about loyalty as lack of choice and felt smart, without being aware of how far this little truth of his reached. Later, when he is regretting everything, then everything will annoy him, including the fact that on this day he said the word *loyal* twice in a row. He remembered this well. It can fall from your mouth once by mistake, but that must be followed by shame, remorse and caution in the future. Jež would have been spared many things if he did not have such a good memory.

As they were waiting for Karolina Klammer to answer the door, neither of them knew that this was the last time, and so they waited without any particular feeling. Now and then, Jež was spared some things for a moment. But everything is just a matter of time.

“Oh, welcome!” said Karolina Klammer theatrically. She was dressed in a lurid red dress and hugged his wife, so that the singular pushed out the plural in the greeting, and then she brought her left cheek close to Jež’s left cheek and her right cheek to his right cheek, there was no contact, but no one needed to know that. All those invited were gathered in the room, that Mrs Klammer would have to call a reception room, if the expression was to conform to its appearance and owner. It was furnished like a salon from the previous century. There was also a piano, although she didn’t know how to play. Now and then, someone would pressure her to play, but she resisted in embarrassment, saying that she knew nothing, absolutely nothing, knowing how valued in this world is everything unseen and unheard, and thus they all really were convinced that she could play extremely well and that modesty was preventing her from demonstrating this; and those are two qualities worth the price of a piano.

The guests were standing around, clutching their glasses. Among them was a man they did not know, which after fifteen years of the same crowd was unusual.

“This is my dear friend Agata Jež, public prosecutor, and her husband, Ivo Jež,” she introduced them.

“Bureaucrat,” added Jež, shaking hands with the new guest, Avgust Černe, gallery owner, and they all laughed out of unease – a bureaucrat at a social evening can spoil things, a bureaucrat has nothing to lose, a great deal of laughter is needed to negate the negative social effect of a bureaucrat.

And so by way of apology, his wife immediately gave her friend a birthday present and a card on which was written *Very best wishes from Agata and Ivo Jež*. A bland congratulation, which in no way betrayed the battle against Agata’s *To Moscow, to Moscow, to Moscow*, which Jež led with a force that always surprised him anew; in general, he was convinced that nothing could touch him, that he had become a solid rock, silently resisting everything, but in spite of that at the first opportunity he was willing to become embroiled in the most pointless discussions, stubbornly going against his wife. “No, no, no,” he said and clarified this, and in the end added that “besides, they would all write this in the end”, which made his wife laugh,

of course it did, and she gave in and wrote *Very best wishes from Agata and Ivo Jež*. She always gave in when he made her laugh. Never after his clarifications, always after her laughter: no victory was without stain, all had been granted him out of contrition.

“Oh, Ingeborg!” enthused Mrs Klammer when she unwrapped the parcel and saw her old acquaintance. She called all the great names of literature by their first name. Unlike philosophers, Jež noticed, for nothing escaped him, on guard as he constantly was. Heidegger was never Martin, Hegel was never Georg. Jež had found an appropriate, but mistaken explanation for this. This was an unfinished draft for a cycle of novels, explained his wife, and which book can you give to someone who has read everything? The kind that no one has read, she thought, beside which she did know how familiar Ingeborg was to her. “Wonderful, many thanks, to both of you,” said Mrs Klammer with a laugh, sending each of them a kiss through the air and putting the book on the coffee table, on the heap of other presents. “I’ll take it later to my *library*,” she added. A clear provocation aimed exclusively at Jež, he was convinced. “Are you from Carinthia?” The new guest misunderstood her familiarity with Bachmann. “I’m from Ljubljana...” Avgust Černe felt that he had made a mistake. “I think that you pronounce ‘r’ in such a charming way. When you first said hello, before I heard you speak, I was sure that you were French,” the newcomer awkwardly tried to extricate himself, naively building on his mistake, rather than shutting himself off from it, but beginner’s luck smiled on him: “French? Oh thank you,” said Karolina Klammer with a skittish laugh. Alongside this *Oh thank you*, Jež felt compelled to add, that he also found speech defects charming, just like a gap between the teeth, but these days they all get fixed, every child has metal in its mouth, it was such a shame. Once again, he had been gripped by malevolence and forced to add this comment, he was an innocent victim of pure malevolence. However hard he tried to sound pleasant, as soon as he crossed her threshold he became a violin in a beginner’s hands. At this point *Les sanglots longs des violons*, which he had often heard her recite when she wanted to show what a poetic language French was, came to his mind. Always the same lines and the obligatory rhetorical question: “Have you ever heard anything more melodic?”, which Jež did not respond to,

although he had once prepared a number of lines in other languages, but the last minute had realised that he would be descending to her level.

But he now fell even further into disfavour with Mrs Klammer, not only for uncovering her flaw, which made her seem like a foreigner, but because he had not let her enjoy the disguise that she enjoyed for its own sake – at least once or twice she would like to twirl in it before the mirror, before she took it off. “I did actually study French,” she would say and would probably add: “Solely for love of *Paul*, I have to confess,” and laugh in that way, her own way, that allowed no possibility that she was joking, or she would say: “I lived in Paris one summer”. He was certain that she would not say “I spent one summer in Paris,” since he had already once congratulated her for that. “Congratulations,” he had said, “spending the summer in Paris is not easy.” Some guests had laughed, probably to turn a taunt into a joke, but Karolina Klammer, pretending to be daydreaming, which was not easy considering her state of mind, replied: “It was wonderful,” but Jež would not stop: “In the summer all the Parisians flee to the coast,” which he didn’t know whether it was true or not, and Karolina Klammer had demurred: “That’s not true,” she said, but the doubt remained in the air and Mrs Klammer, who accepted ambiguity in the air around her, but never doubt, compressed her lips into a line of fury.

“In connection with Mrs Klammer, I cannot speak of flaws,” Černe continued gallantly.

“Oh, go on with you,” Karolina Klammer laughed again, “I have my share of flaws, but flaws add seasoning to life, don’t you agree?”

“They seem charming to me,” Jež again intervened, and his wife whispered sharply for him to rein himself in, and he – what did I say, I said *charming*. He would like to kick this between the bridle and the spurs.

“May I invite you all to the table?” said Mrs Klammer, spreading her arms wide.

Jež had been seated between his wife and some child, a friend of Mrs Klammer’s daughter. He knew that he had been planted here deliberately, to stop him burgeoning in any way. Everything that Karolina Klammer did was deliberate. It was going to be a long evening.

She would be going on again about Kant and St Augustine and others, he was sure of that. She would sound smart. But her quotations were empty, they were, thought Jež maliciously, like the curses of ordinary people, which emerge from their mouths out of habit, rather than from anger. They came out by habit, as he came to work every day, without any thought. In general,

he always saw Karolina Klammer as completely superficial, she didn't have any depth. When he first wanted to share his thought about her shallowness with his wife, he knew that he would encounter an obstacle: those who constantly talk about depth can easily run aground, it is easier to run aground in the shallows. The shallow do not emit contradictory signs, within them there is no room for inner conflict; or rather, whoever cheats is cautious, he takes care that misleading signs are unambiguous. And to be honest, it has to be admitted that Jež did not state his accusation skilfully, he should have prepared himself. The criticism that whatever came from her had come from outside her was too unformed, and the comparison with a dog, which is really teachable, but whose ability to differentiate between good and bad is dependent only on his master, whom he trusts blindly, did not even convince him. He forgot that a dog salivates at the sight of food, whether he is allowed it or not, and in Karolina Klammer he had seen no possibility for forbidden enjoyment, she was completely superficial. "Completely superficial," he had since then always condemned her to his wife, without ever trying to clarify what he meant.

"What's your name?" he asked the child while they were waiting for their food. It seemed to him that as an adult, out of politeness, he must confirm the girl's presence. Then he immediately felt that she was too old for such a question, that it was too childish, and he feared that he would get in reply a name, spoken with the contempt of a young woman, which would painfully resonate within him, but the fear immediately evaporated when the girl cleared her throat and said quietly "Julija", and then she hung her head and blushed. Oh yes, a shy girl, how nice, thought Jež. He felt pleased that his age and maturity had been officially confirmed. He didn't know that the blush had come from a lie: Rita's name was not Julija, she was wearing this new name awkwardly, like a new dress that was not her style, and she was embarrassed in front of her friend, even though she supported her, and not only from indifference – she understood that at the moment Rita must reject everything that her mother had given, offered or forced on her, beginning with her name, which had been from the start and in Rita's opinion, the source of all evil. But Jež took the credit for the blush, which is probably not unusual, that when we make contact with others we connect everything with ourselves, and in satisfaction he lengthened the conversation: How old was she?

"The same as Anja," replied the girl and pointed to her friend, the image of perfection, unchangeable, unblushable, in the hope that she would take over the conversation with the grown-up. And she really did, again she did one of those great favours that cost her nothing –



she remembered Jež from the time when she used to sit on his lap, as she had with all her mother's visitors, who would stroke her hair and say: "Oh, what a beautiful little girl!" As if she was a toy. She took over the conversation, answering this and that, and no, she still didn't know what she wanted *to be*, that she'd probably have to redo physics, because she didn't rock like Julija, but she hoped to be accepted at the art academy. Jež knew how talented she was, he expressed the conviction that she'd get into the academy without any difficulty and he wished her luck with the redo. When he said 'redo' he glanced at his wife, who either hadn't heard him or was pretending that she hadn't heard him – Jež was okay with both possibilities. But he felt satisfaction at the unrefined speech of Miss Klammer: she was growing up in opposition to her mother, she was his ally.

He thought that the girl was beautiful in a way that didn't need a sympathetic eye, her mother's or someone hungry for her love, everyone liked her. Her friend must feel clumsily immature beside her; while Anja was gradually becoming a young woman, without any hold-ups or great interruptions, she herself was evidently one of those kinds of women whose development, like a butterfly or a fly, was a *complete transformation*. Now she was still a *pupa*. Jež noticed the fluff on her upper lip. She had black hair, but the fluff was artificially lightened to fit with the whiteness of her skin. He found this strangely moving, this correction done by hand, inappropriately less artfully than Nature, which was used to bold creation. But perhaps she too would become a beautiful woman, anything was possible.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked her.

The girl froze.

"What profession," Jež quickly clarified.

"I don't know. I'm still looking," said Rita quietly.

In spite of that, it sounded verified, already uttered many times, unlike "Julija".

"She can't decide because she's so good at everything," Anja intervened louder.

Excellent in every domain. A nice as well as undeniable fact, safe from the judgement of others, because it was in black and white in the grade book. Her mother could also use these words to describe her daughter, when during her break she compared notes with her colleagues, and when she said them she could feel proud. These words nicely represent her daughter, they are good representatives, they bring her closer to her daughter, who always gains value in her

absence, for she is going through that difficult phase of growing up when presence is not an advantage, but she will change later and her mother is willing to give her time.

In the knowledge that excellent girls are fruitful ground that yearn for a lifeline, Jež said that he understood her. He himself had spent a long time searching. And that he had never had the feeling that he had found himself in anything – everywhere he had *managed* just like that. He'd had to manage. That young people who say they are searching still do not know that in everything they do they can only observe until they find what type they are. That we have come from seed and we all form a bud, and we can only wait for it to open. But we never see ourselves from the outside and it can happen that we are a violet that thinks it is a primrose.

He wasn't satisfied with his performance. Perhaps he should have said things out loud in solitude before he spoke them in company; ears are good critics, they can judge from outside impartially, while a person can only do so from within. He should have first written down his thesis, which in its essence was not wrong, and then learned it off by heart in purified form and spoken it as an exercise. He had said too much that was superfluous, there was much he could have left unsaid. What right, for example, the teenager might think, did someone have to talk who was searching here, there and everywhere. As if he lacked his own will. It was true that Jež had very little, but there was no need to broadcast it. Well, he'd know the next time. Everything is clear for next time, but allegedly it is only lucky the third time. On the other hand, it didn't really matter what he said. Her growth would continue in accordance with nature's will and she, the thinking violet, primrose, reed, will at some point realise: "Oh yes, that man was right then."

Or not. He didn't care. He had actually said it all more for his wife, who was still pretending that she wasn't listening to him. Or maybe she really wasn't.

"Above all, we need to accept that our reason and our eyes deceive us no less than the world," he concluded, and his wife finally looked at him.

And then drink and food and yes, Mrs Klammer had cooked it herself, she got the recipe from a Syrian refugee who worked in a restaurant where they employed Syrian refugees, a good restaurant in every way, especially its patrons! Today, tolerance is the most important value, she accepted everything with open arms, except for lactose, for the doctor had accused her of

intolerance (*laugh*), so that regrettably she must now drink her Vayt Rashn with soya milk (*laugh*).

His wife cooperated, the girls enjoyed themselves in their own way. They were giggling. Oh yes, girlish giggling. That was one of the things that made Jež feel regret, as did every inaccessible pleasure. He had never giggled. Not even in company.

He meant to leave something on his plate as a sign that it was not as good as it might be, a sliver or smidgen, but his appetite was too great. And the lamb had already been slaughtered, there would be no point sacrificing it.

The conversation flowed inappropriately faster than time.

Karolina Klammer's lipstick moved increasingly from her lips to her glass.

At some point Jež placed his hand on the back of the chair on which his wife was sitting and whispered to her conspiratorially: "I can't take any more," and she stroked his thigh, urgingly. He could still.

A person can always last to the end.

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*They are pleased with me. They are talking about unusual progress. They were amazed at coherence. "We're on the right track," they opine, and when they are satisfied with me they are satisfied with themselves, as we have a common source. They insist upon just one thing: Jež is the key. As much as possible about him, as little as possible about yourself. They do not acknowledge that Jež and I have a common source.*

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That which Jež would later refer to as the urging of his thigh, when in his solitude he began to address events and play with words, lay letters in patterns as he had once laid wooden bricks when he was waiting for his mother, was one of the gestures that he was unable to forgive.

Relieve me

leave me

deceive me

grieve me.

His eyes were closed.

“Are your eyes burning?” she knew how to ask in concern. He had great trouble with his eyes. They were always red and burning. The doctor gave him artificial tears and got rid of him. Which was completely useless, since his eyes produced tears on their own anyway. If he closed them when they were burning the most, two real tears trickled down the edge of his face, pouring from the outer corner of his eyes. People were unable to ignore this inflammation. They looked on him as an insomniac or a drinker, or as one of those dogs with a sad expression that you have to keep stroking, even though it was *that type*.

“Yes, they’re burning. I should be going home, in a minute.”

In a minute.

His wife was wearing high heels, oh so high. She had shoes that hurt her more than the bare ground would if she was barefoot; because women’s shoes are made for women who do not always understand why things are, that is, what their purpose is, a woman often has her own purpose which she then forces upon things, was Jež’s opinion at that moment. A person discovers, perfects, develops weapons of relief, but the woman always then goes a step further, beyond the limit, and relies on the male following her, at her speed, that is slowly. The man is deceived, this willing decision to suffer seems promising to him, he thinks that the woman would also easily tolerate the marital yoke, with a certain degree of elegance even, wearing it like jewellery, perhaps; he realises too late that she will eventually turn everything upside down and put an end to his comfort. In that moment Jež also forgot how much he liked his wife’s heels, if he observed them separate from the consequences, and that actually everything that we want comes in a package with something we don’t, in other words a consequence, and that this needs to be accepted, but he said nothing as he was already to a large extent reconciled.

When she could manage or wanted no more, a taxi was called. Her wish was granted immediately, without being stroked urgently first.

On the back seat of the taxi she then stretched out comfortably, the evening once again rose to her mouth and she began to chew it over. At some point she expressed the view that Jež’s stance against snobbery was exactly the same kind of zealous striving for a flattering self-categorisation of which he accused snobs. She really did say “zealous striving” and “flattering

self-categorisation”. The sentence had evidently been prepared in advance, well prepared, and Jež was silent in order to understand it and give it some thought, and his wife, who believed simply that if someone says nothing they are in agreement, from sheer delight that she had managed to hit the nail on the head, added playfully:

“By reproaching them, you’ve become like them.”

She had got him. Like giving a child a bitter sweet. But she was pleased with herself. After a while, Jež replied:

“I’m not reproaching them for ‘striving for flattering self-categorisation’ in itself, I am questioning the value of what seems flattering to them.”

“You mean that their friends are successful and that they read intellectual debates,” his wife steered into more concrete areas.

That was her regular manoeuvre – to move into the concrete.

“Exactly!” out of revenge Jež played dumb and looked aside, through the window into the good world of things whose concreteness was not their own questionable choice.

His wife was successful. He couldn’t deny it. She also knew how to express herself better than he. And although, for example, he had been learning Italian for years and years with ever new surges of eagerness that it finally came to the point that he read the whole of the *Divine Comedy*, although of course he omitted *Hell*, he let her ask for the bill when they were in Rome. She, who had never learned Italian, but only allowed it to flow into her ears, spoke increasingly more smoothly than him and he was forced to console himself with the thought that it was easier for her to choose words because her vocabulary was smaller. She was selecting from among hundreds, but he among thousands. Given time, he would also be able to ask for the bill, he had to reassure himself.

He heard her rummaging through her bag. Before she pulled her phone out, he glanced inside, which he couldn’t resist, he looked into every handbag and down every cleavage, and even, although he would never admit this, up the skirts of women on bikes. The flash of cotton or silk between their thighs brought him nothing, although it was what he was looking for. It was, it seemed, a simple instinctive response to the gaping cleft.

This time, things didn’t unfold as they usually did. That evening in the taxi, when he looked in his wife’s handbag, he spotted, completely clearly and sharply – a condom.

Sometimes night falls on earth suddenly, as if you have closed your eyes.

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*My room isn't without windows. But the window is so high that I cannot see out. When I say "out" I am pretty much aware that involves an unfounded assumption that my room borders the outside world and is not inside another, bigger room, or even next to a smaller one. I don't know, I cannot know, whether someone is looking through this window from the other side and longing for the breadth of my room. I cannot and do not want to exclude that.*

It would be the sweetest revenge if in the following weeks he made himself seductive, as far as he could, fixed his body, had his clothes repaired, improved his behaviour, so that she would have something to lose when he finally said to her forgive me, I'm cheating on you, yes, it's probably no secret, she's a secretary, I'm leaving you, forgive me. Perhaps. But from the revelation onwards it would be an impossible gesture that would only strengthen his wife's conviction that their love had run its course.

She herself was as she always was. She talked a lot, as usual, but now it seemed to Jež that the silence around words prevailed. His anger, which was growing from day to day, was becoming blind, as blind as love.

On the eighth day, she took her temperature and as usual announced that it was *time*. She was expecting that he would once again embrace her like a rabbit and slip into the hole, so that she would finally have a young one, because you must love someone and loving someone close to you as you love yourself was easier if that someone came from inside you, and then she would probably abandon her lover in favour of her little family – Ivo has his good points as well, he's a faithful husband and a wonderful father, she would say.

On the eighth day, Jež erupted and his anger had still not subsided even long after his wife had left.

She had stolen his best years, when he thought that she was giving hers to him. It also filled him with helpless fury that she had revealed so little, even her confession had only gone half-way. She didn't call things by their name, even though she knew that he always wanted to know *everything*. But he did squeeze some truth out of her, as bitter as gall. That's what he thought,

out of bad habit everything that was bitter he called the truth and everything sweet he looked on with mistrust.

He was also angry with himself, for always being as loyal as a dog. He still hadn't forgotten that woman in the Belvedere Hotel in Bologna, who had looked at him brazenly from the neighbouring balcony, when the need for a cigarette had struck them both at the same time. He had lit hers, she had held onto the hand that held the lighter. There was no need to say any more.

The neighbour's daughter had also been eyeing him up in the lift. But he thought to himself, what are you thinking girlie, that the world's your oyster just because you're young, and that he would immediately be available to her, just because he was a dusty bureaucrat, deprived of most pleasures, ossified among fat files of regulations, no, she couldn't have him, she'd have to learn she couldn't have everything she wanted, sometimes even something of lesser value.

The path from a look to bed seems short before you measure it with the first step.

But the beauty of missed opportunities is that there is nothing to stop us referring to them as opportunities.

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Even as a baby, Jež had displayed anger that seemed all-encompassing, unmeasurable. He would howl like an animal until he was no longer capable. "I'm taking Ivo to the baby pool," said his mother, for example, to a friend and he, two years old, unskilled at human speech (his sister was a great deal better), howled words that meant I am not a baby, and although his mother said, yes, I know, it's alright, I know you're not, he howled even more. But his mother loved him above all else, more than her daughter, who was skilled, an expert, who spoke too much. "I missed you mummy because it wasn't Vera looking after us in nursery but Mojca," said her daughter, while her son merely howled like an animal and missed her more. The little girl would burble and burble, and when a new nanny came and noticed in the kitchen a little book, nicely made at home, carefully bound in soft leather, she explained: "My mummy now always cooks following these recipes, she made the book herself, the recipes are from my granny, who died a long time ago." And it had been barely a month since and her mother took her son in her lap, hugged little Jež to her bosom, so as not to slap her daughter, who kept showing the recipe book to the nanny and babbling on and on, while little Jež *silently suffered*

*with her.* That's what the mother thought, she wanted to believe that her son shared her pain and then he really did, he divided it in two, although he felt nothing himself. That was really the only thing that as a child he knew how to do – to remain silent when he had nothing to say, in other words, when he wanted nothing and nothing was bothering him.

Now, when he had again been unfairly treated, the anger returned.

Somewhere (he wouldn't want to say where) he had read that anger was a defence against sadness. Between anger and sadness, he was convinced he would always choose anger, until he gradually had to admit that this sense of siege, of being always on guard, armed to the teeth, full of hatred, was increasingly tiring him. He gradually had to admit that he would like to surrender, he was ready to surrender to sadness, but he didn't know how. He had to be led by his instinct for survival, which could not be resisted, that seemed the only rational explanation.

His friends listened to his grumbling out of a sense of duty, resignedly, patiently, and at the end said something completely inappropriate, which in spite of the fact that it consoled no one, was strangely taken as a consolation – like valerian drops, which everyone recommends for insomnia, even though they have never helped anyone – such as “she didn't deserve you” or “there are plenty more fish in the sea”, while he began again and again, repeating and repeating, until one day no one had time to meet with him.

Then he decided to make a new friend, because everyone knows that a friend in need is a friend indeed, and he had long been thinking how a new friend would do him good, someone who would laugh at old stories, still unused, undamaged, above all made to measure, for in recent years, decades, his measurements had certainly changed. But he soon realised that making a friend in mature years is impossible, mature people don't need new friends, because they don't even have enough time for their old ones, because they don't actually need friends, because they are mature, and the fact that a desire for a new friend is proof of immaturity leads to shame that stops you from saying it out loud.

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*Sometimes I add things and make things up. They know that. They say it doesn't matter and to carry on. Their generosity in this regard surprises me. It seems strange that, in their opinion, “unreal and dizzying material, such as dreams are made of” does not shake the firmness of*



*the foundation that is Jež. It's okay with me and I continue. (I know that as long as I refer to them as they, I won't be one of them, but I can't help it, I feel the difference too strongly to be able to ignore it; in the continuing development of things and events, the common source is redundant, I have already arrived at that point).*

\*

When Jež was seven years old, he read a poem in a children's magazine: "I'm just a little puppet/ With a nice round head/ But oh this little puppet,/ Has feet of lead. /If you let me go/ When I am upside down/ All on my very own/ I'm soon the right way round." He liked it. He learned it by heart, not only because he had recently been given a little puppet like this, whose essence was so well captured in rhyme, but simply because at that time he remembered every short poem that rhymed.

Now, suddenly forty-five years later, in an anthology of Slovene poetry, he came across a poem by Janez Menart, which awoke in him, touchingly gently, the first eight lines and added four more that the children's magazine had kept quiet about: "That's where the misfortune is, / the permanence of naught, / everything would go to hell, / without a second thought."

Jež was astonished, simply elated. "What a beautiful variant," he thought and was grateful to the magazine for introducing the theme. Jež loved variations, repeating themes and coincidences, for they gave him a sense of meaning; they were a reflection of a higher force that saw and led and maybe even protected. He was also excited by the thought that with the years he had completed the poem, discovered an ending when it had matured for him. Maybe he would gradually, finally discover the last four lines of his marriage. And maybe it wasn't the end of the world and he would get himself on his feet again.

\*

And then one day it came, sadness over his wife, a late guest that he had already stopped expecting. He was dressing. The weather was colder than it had been for a long time. It clouded over. In his sock drawer he found a pair of warm socks that he didn't like to wear because they were woollen, which are not called rough for nothing, and when he opened the ball, which in his love of order he had neatly rolled them into, he found in the middle a small, white, silk sock.

He couldn't understand how it had ended up there. And he began to cry like he hadn't for a long time. And he couldn't understand how she could leave him, when after all, they had always been together, it seemed so impossible, like leaving your child or mother because they are not entirely to your taste, thinking you can find a replacement that will suit you better, which are more your cup of tea. And he sat on the edge of the bed with his head down, his hands on his knees, and cried; he cried for ten to fifteen minutes, until he had cried out all his sadness.

Over the following days he waited fearfully for the attack to repeat itself, he looked fearfully to see what she had left behind: her porcelain dog, her letter opener (both of which she had left behind because she didn't need them, which he had said to her when she bought them, and she erupted) – but they did not touch him. A month went by – there was no repeat attack.

\*

He had to tell his mother. He had to tell her over the phone, because it was a short piece of news and a visit to her would be inappropriately longer than the news item, because each visit was longer than a sentence. There would be no sense in dragging out this short news item for a quarter of an hour and then to talk of other things, which would of course be impossible.

Jež knew how to use hundreds of words to describe, for example, ephemeral images drawn in chalk on a pavement. He found a hundred reasons why *To Moscow, to Moscow, to Moscow* did not belong on a birthday card. But he would cram anything unmeasurable into short sentences. My sister died. My wife had another miscarriage. I'm divorced. Why, why, why? He forced himself to say that he and Agata were getting divorced, although it was hard to say her name. Then it went easier. His mother said ohmygod why, but he had nothing else. She cheated on me. She took her things and left. I don't know where.

“Oh my god,” said his mother and then with infinite sadness in her voice: “What will you do now?”

She made clear to

him the hopelessness of his situation.

It had long been the case that to all his burdens his mother had added her burden of concern and her burden of sadness. The days had long gone when she could say:

Where did you knock yourself?

A small sock.

No, no, I mean where does it hurt?

My heart.

Shall I blow on it? It'll be alright by the time of the wedding.

But that's how it is. Up to the wedding everything is good, after it everything is bad.

He could have ended the call quickly after that "What will you do now?" but his anger didn't last. He thought of her sitting by the phone with her head down, absently smoothing the joints on her fingers, which were the small, gnarled branches of an old tree. However much his mother managed to offend him, he couldn't help but feel sorry for her at the same time, at the very bottom of his soul so that it really shook him up, and then sediments began to rise from the bottom that made everything hazy and clouded judgement. His anger was never strong enough as a defence against the sadness transmitted by his mother. Natural instinct is no protection against a mother.

*excerpt from the novel translated by Maja Visenjak Limon*