

Irena Svetek

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

*My kill-hand is called E V I L
Wears a wedding band that's G O O D
'Tis a long-suffering shackle
Collaring all that rebel blood.*

*And the mercy seat is burning
And I think my head is glowing
And in a way I'm hoping
To be done with all this weighing up of truth.
An eye for an eye
And a tooth for a tooth
And I've got nothing left to lose
And I'm not afraid to die.*

(Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, The Mercy Seat)

1.

The service in the small church of Saint George in Surdulica was rather well attended that day. Anatolije Lazarević stood at the door shaking hands with worshippers. He was tired and had backache. He thought about how he should have started with the morning stretching exercises that his doctor had recommended, but he had been putting off even thinking about all that for days. He will be sixty-nine in March and standing all day certainly did not help reduce the pain he felt in his lower back. He shook hands with the last worshipper leaving the church.

May God bless every step in your life.

It was said that he conveyed tranquillity and peace to people and for this they were grateful to him. A kind word helps cleanse the soul, he thought to himself, and God knows that in times like this there are many souls who need help.

All the best, Father, said the young man before him.

Anatolije smiled and nodded.

God bless you.

The man nodded in return and made his way down the steps.

The priest watched the people slowly walking away from the church. It was cold outside, the temperature had dropped below zero. Snow was forecast. He was about to turn when he noticed that somebody was watching him, standing a short distance away, staring straight at him. With a hat on his head and the scarf wrapped round his neck covering his mouth and nose, all that was visible were his eyes. Their gazes met and the man raised his hand in greeting. Anatolije Lazarević nodded, the breath he exhaled forming a shimmering white cloud in front of him.

Good morning, said the man and stopped in front of him.

In his gaze the priest detected a guilty conscience. After years of experience with confessions, he could recognise it instantly.

Good morning. Can I help you in any way?

The man stared at the priest, his bright eyes glittering like a reflection on the surface of water.

Nobody can help me any longer.

God helps everyone, my son. All you have to do is ask for His mercy.

The man extended his arm. Anatolije Lazarević noticed he was holding out a notebook.

This is for you.

He handed it to Anatolije.

For me? he asked, looking once again straight into the man's eyes, which made him lower his gaze.

Read it, Father. Please.

Anatolije Lazarević sensed remorse, as if the pores on the skin of this stranger had opened, releasing traces of unpleasant emotion into the air.

Would you like to come inside the church with me?

The man raised his head.

Thank you, Father, but it is too late for me.

In the man's bright eyes Anatolije Lazarević noticed sadness. A deep sadness that leaves behind scars.

Through confession comes healing, my son.

The man shook his head, the scarf slipped from his face. His features were gentle, quite the opposite from his piercing eyes. He quickly adjusted the scarf, pulling it high above his nose. Anatolije Lazarević raised his hand and placed it on the stranger's shoulder. Their gazes locked, lingering in the cold November air. Silence floated between them and Anatolije's hand slipped off the man's shoulder.

What you will read... said the stranger, should stay between you and God.

He pulled a silver chain with a tiny locket from his pocket. He opened it, Anatolije Lazarević recognised the saint on the tiny image.

Saint Pantaleon.

You gave it to me, don't you remember, Father?

The old priest looked up at the stranger. A memory jogged his brain and suddenly he realised who the person standing before him was. He shuddered. The man reached out and pressed the chain and locket into the priest's hand. Anatolije opened his mouth to say something but the man merely turned round and left.

Anatolije was still staring at the back of the man walking away when he felt something wet on the tip of his nose. Raising his head, he looked at the sky. Tiny snowflakes flurried through the air. He took a deep breath, the cold hurt his lungs. He stepped back into the church of Saint George and closed the large door behind him. The air inside was cold and now he could feel it in his bones. He held three fingers together and made the sign of the cross.

Holy Father, give me strength and power. Amen.

Sitting in one of the pews, he opened the notebook and began reading.

1973

Donje Romanovce, Serbia

The house in which Snežana Radojković and her son lived stood next to the old cemetery, beyond the main road that followed the winding course of the Romanovska Reka stream as it descended from the nearby hills. The cemetery had many gravestones that nobody looked after, some had collapsed, some were entirely overgrown. He was always scared when they took the shortcut to fetch milk from their neighbour Živko. He clung onto his mother's hand and tried to keep his eyes shut so as not to see the overgrown stones and crosses poking from the ground. Come on, don't be such a baby, his mother would say and increase her pace as he tried hard not to look at the black and white faces staring at him from all directions. He was most afraid of the old man with a long moustache and beard. He could sense his gaze on his back, feel it piercing from behind, following him all the way to the end of the path. Only when they reached home did he once again feel safe.

He never knew his father, he had died even before he was born. Mother said it was better that way as Ljubiša Radojković was a bad person. All that was left behind, hanging on the kitchen wall, was a large black and white photograph of him and his brother Rajko. They stood under the tall oak tree in the garden, gazing serenely somewhere straight ahead. Uncle Rajko lived in a house a little further up towards the forest. Mother said he was as bad as his brother.

Whenever it rained outside, he would climb onto the bench underneath the window and play with the rosary. He would feel the wooden beads with his fingers, arrange them into a circle and fondle them in his palm while his mother poured flour and sugar into a large bowl, adding margarine, an egg, milk and honey.

Lale, do you know what I'm making? *He shook his head.* Your favourite.

Honey cake!

Mother smiled and nodded. Raindrops splashed on the window pane, his heart beat in a rhythm of pure joy

Help me, *Mother suggested.*

Yes, Mother.

He put the rosary down on the table and she showed him how to hold the dough, knead it and roll it out. He buried his fingers in the soft mixture and began rolling it around on the floured surface. It felt strange but at the same time still pleasant in a way. Mother smiled at him and he was proud that he was already big enough to help her.

Now go and wash your hands.

He climbed off the bench and went to the bathroom. He could hear the front door open. Peering through the gap in the door, he saw the edge of a coat with rain trickling from it.

He heard his mother say, Leave me alone, what is it with you?!

Then he heard a man's voice shout, Everyone knows what you're up to!!! Everyone is talking about you!!

He saw Mother run out of the house and the coat rush after her.

You whore! he could hear, coming from the yard.

Opening the bathroom door, he ran into the bedroom, climbed under the bed, and closed his eyes. A few moments later the door to the room slammed shut. Something heavy collapsed onto the bed above him. He held his breath.

Leave me alone!!!

Bitch, bitch, bitch!!!

The shallow breathing and voice of his mother, shouting, Stop it, stop, please stop!

The bed began creaking, he could hear heavy breathing and his mother began screaming. Her cries filled the room. Then all of a sudden everything fell silent. He could hear his heart thump, fear totally paralysing him. Something began dripping onto his forehead. He lay there for a long time, not daring to move, not daring to breathe. The bed creaked one more time and he saw feet stepping onto the floor, walking away to the door which opened and then closed. When he thought that enough time had passed, he crawled out from under the bed. What was lying on it was no longer his mother. He ran outside.

His face was wet with tears that mixed with the blood and trickled into his mouth. With his hands he moved leaves out of the way and ran through the darkness. Branches crackled under his feet, the higher ones scratched his face. He could feel his heart pumping in his neck and felt his veins were about to explode. The coppery taste slid towards his gullet and he spat out blood. Suddenly something wrapped itself around his foot and he tripped over. His knee ached badly. He stretched out his hand and felt a root and some moss on the ground in front of him. He could not shout. Stay quiet, quiet, quiet, his brain pounded as thousands of images invaded his consciousness, images he did not want to see. The scenes seized his neck, suffocating him, the bed above him was still creaking, blood trickling onto his face, soaking his hair. Fear paralysed him, shrinking his lungs entirely. All of a sudden he could hear someone wheezing. He closed his eyes, felt a trickle of urine down his leg. The moon appeared from behind the clouds and illuminated the leaves of the thorny bushes. Something warm touched his skin. He turned around and before he could scream, his body collapsed onto the ground. The coppery taste was replaced with the taste of damp earth.

1973

Ljubljana, Slovenia – Surdulica, Serbia

The dark skies suddenly brightened. Their hearts began to beat faster. She leaned towards the official, an older, rather stout woman sitting at the desk, staring through a pair of thick glasses straight at her almond eyes. Is this for real? The woman nodded and smiled. Everything had all already been arranged. Then she turned to her husband sitting next to her and affectionately

took hold of his hand. Had he heard? Had he also heard the news? Her voice trembled. Her husband embraced her and she noticed the tears in his eyes. Six years of waiting. Six long, difficult years, their relationship hanging on a thin thread that might have broken at any moment.

The journey was long and she felt cramps in her stomach, worrying that something would go wrong. She was sitting on the back seat of the borrowed car, the road was full of potholes, occasionally the asphalt reduced to an unsurfaced track. She held her husband's hand and could feel that his palms were sweaty too. The driver turned round and pointed with his finger towards a lake that appeared in front of them. She turned her head and looked outside. Suddenly the landscape and sky combined into the most amazing mirage. The beauty brought a pang of emotion to her heart. An invisible paintbrush was blending the glowing autumnal colours, mixing reds, yellows and browns in an embrace, gentle and silent birch trees moving in a synchronised dance with melancholy willows. Descending into her field of vision were floating green islands, drifting on the landscape that was as flat as polished glass, and the anxiety she felt began to dissolve. Now she felt certain. Because Nature, capable of stunning and in a single moment calming everything that for years and years had been unhappily festering under her skin, was about to give them what they had so long been waiting for.

Surdulica was a small town that had the Romanovska Reka running through it. Reka is the Slavic word for river but it was more like an urban stream with a narrow channel and the streets on its left and right banks built over to form a kind of concrete promenade. Along it moved a procession of wedding guests and musicians holding enormous trumpets, blowing into the mouthpieces with all the strength of their lungs, the music of endless brass instruments booming through the air. People were dressed in colourful clothes, the women's skin glistened, the bride and groom were laughing, banknotes were being stuffed into the pockets of sweaty shirts. Dark faces hid behind the tubas, cornets, trombones and horns. She stared at them wide eyed, trying to take in the diapason of life diffusing into all directions.

With her husband they stepped into the building in one of the side streets in Surdulica and walked up the stairs to the first floor. She was out of breath, excited, her heart pounding in her throat. She looked at the woman in a dark blue outfit.

Where is he?

Comrade Petrova has gone to get him.

All the saliva in her mouth dried up. Then the door opened and there he stood. She stared at his pale skin, his bright eyes and hair so light it looked almost white. She needed a few moments to compose herself. Smiling, she crouched down beside him and held his hand.

Do you know who we are?

The boy nodded.

My new parents.

She embraced him and felt all the fragility of the bones of a four-year-old. Comrade Petrova turned to her husband.

Have you been informed about what happened to him? *She felt a pain in her chest.* Just so you do not change your mind later... Once you sign, that's it. *She looked at the child.* Tell the lady and gentlemen what your name is.

The boy stared at them. His gaze was as deep as the lake they had driven past on their way here.

Lazar. But everyone calls me Lale.

She knew for certain that there was no going back.

I.

Kodeljevo

2.

It was snowing very hard, snowflakes swirled through the air. The snow beneath his boots squeaked as he approached the cash machine on the main street, illuminated with blue neon lighting. He pulled the blue hood of his waterproof Helly Hansen jacket over his head to prevent the snow wetting his face. Finding his wallet, he inserted the plastic card into the slot beneath the screen. The dial flashed at him and he lowered his gaze to the square buttons, typing in his pin number and choosing the 'other amount' option. Would one thousand eight hundred be enough? This would leave only five hundred in his bank account but he reckoned that should be enough until the fifth of December when he would be paid. Will one thousand eight hundred really be enough? He rounded the amount up to two thousand. The machine whirred and spat out the money. He put it away in his wallet, tucking it back into his pocket. The relentless snow was covering the roads in a white blanket and from afar he could see the lights of snow ploughs approaching the centre of town. There was hardly anyone at Bavarski Dvor, merely a few lonely souls standing at the bus stop, waiting for the last bus to take them home. He felt a pleasant excitement in his stomach, teasing his nerve ends that sent signals of joy to his brain, intoxicating him without having consumed a single drop of alcohol. It was a drug. The dopamine in his brain, the serotonin in his gut. Getting high as a dysfunctional way of solving problems and escaping reality. What has he been running away from all these years? The death of his son could no longer be an excuse, the loss of the woman he loved also not. There was only one answer left and this was the one he did not wish to hear. His will was weak, not because he could not summon a stronger one, it was weak simply because he did not want to stop his addiction even though it was eating away at him, was his mental illness that dragged itself into his intestines and was gnawing away internally. He was well aware that this was an addiction; it had become his chief means of balancing his emotional life, his behaviour was no longer a choice but a defence mechanism upon which his survival now depended. And all he wanted was to survive.

He approached the entrance on Kersnik Street number ten, unlocked the door and went across to the letterboxes against the wall. Opening the one with his name on it, he took his wallet from his pocket and removed all the credit cards it contained. He placed them at the bottom of the metal letterbox, locked it, then turned round and left the block of flats.

Crossing the main road beyond the pedestrian crossing, he continued along the opposite pavement. His shoes kicked the fresh snow before him and the closer he got to Miklošič Street, the faster his heart was beating. The palms of his hands began sweating, dopamine flooded his veins causing the adrenaline frenzy to hit his brain, overwhelming it a few hundred yards before the entrance to the casino that was inviting him with open arms. They had developed a love-hate relationship in which the illuminated sign CASINO RIO CENTRAL GAMING SALON always won. He felt that tonight was his night. His pockets were full of money and golden opportunities awaited him at the blackjack table. All he had to do was open the door and enter.

The lights from the ceiling glowed above the heads of the night punters. The air inside was rank, it stank of sweaty bodies and it did occur to him that there must be something wrong with the ventilation system. He sat at the blackjack table and watched the croupier dealing out the cards with swift skilful moves. An eight of hearts, then a five of hearts. The total... thirteen. He checked the croupier's face up card – five of diamonds. He touched the green surface of the playing table with two fingers and the short-haired man in the casino uniform gave him a card. Blood rushed to his brain. The ace of spades. He tapped the table again and the croupier pulled another card from the deck, placing it in front of him. Another damn ace! The young employee drew his second card, also an ace. He had lost. The dealer's fingers collected his tokens. From the pile in front of him he took two more to the value of two hundred euros and pushed them forward. He began biting his bottom lip. The croupier started dealing the cards, he could feel droplets of sweat forming on his brow. King of diamonds, croupier, nine of diamonds. The muscles beneath his ribcage accelerated, jumping from third gear to fifth. Two of spades. With his fingers he once again indicated he wanted another card. The croupier took one, turned it. Now he no longer breathed with his lungs but his stomach. Queen of spades. The sum... twenty-two. His stomach shrank. The croupier collected his tokens. The sweating moved along his upper lip. He picked up the two tokens with the number five hundred on them, his heart beating in his throat. He placed his bet. The croupier dealt out the cards. Ace of hearts, a seven of diamonds on the opposite side. He stared at the nimble fingers, long and manicured nails. Queen of clubs. On the middle finger a tattoo with thorns. The croupier turned his card. Under the artificial lighting the skin under his short hair was visible. For a moment he closed his eyes and held his breath. Then he looked at the card. A rustling sound charged through his brain, his blood an enormous wave crashing back into the sea surged through his veins. Eight of clubs. Blackjack! screamed his lungs, his heart and his brain in one. The symphony of the winning combination flooded his entire body and in an instant roused it like a hurricane. Adrenalin mixed with the serotonin and the dopamine joined in, he felt an ecstasy stronger and more abrupt than ever. Wins paid out at three to two odds. The croupier placed the new tokens before him. He picked up his glass of whiskey, took a sip, collected the tokens and put them into his pocket. Taking a deep breath, his heartbeat began to settle and he went to the bar to get another drink.

The casino was almost empty. The exception a few elderly ladies sitting at the slot machines, each clinging onto a pot of tokens. They were loud and spoke German with a strong Austrian accent. There were also a few regulars who were addicts like himself, each of them dragging along their own story, none of them actually interested in the other persons they keep seeing in this dump with its low ceiling and artificial lighting where banknotes vanish and the future of many families is destroyed. He approached the bar. The barman nodded at him and without him needing to ask, placed in front of him a glass of Jack Daniels with three ice cubes. He thanked him and immediately took a few sips. A pleasant burning sensation in the throat. He thought about the woman he had spent the night with. Kiara, a young intern at a law firm. Her loud sighs were still ringing in his head, in front of his eyes he could still see her sweaty body, twisting and turning under him. Was it wise to get involved with her? Did he have the faintest idea what kind of a woman she was? There was certainly something about her that attracted him. Still, he was not sure he wanted another relationship, after all these years of living the life of a bachelor, he had got used to listening exclusively to his own wishes and, as he knew from experience, women always want something more. Was he even capable of giving her more?

He drank up, paid the barman and made his way towards the loos. As he passed the ladies' room he noticed out of the corner of his eyes something that instantly made his brain send the signal to his legs to stop. Turning round, he stared at her through the wide gap in the half-open door. Her hands on the wash basin, her eyes closed. Though they lived in the same town, he could not remember when he had last seen her. It had been years... She was wearing a narrow black skirt that accentuated her figure well, a white blouse, just the right amount of cleavage, her skin still shiny and smooth. A pair of long silver-grey earrings hanging from her tiny ears, her eyes lined with shadow that turned upwards in the corners where the eyelid drops onto the eye, making it look as if the skin around the eyes was lifted, younger. Her eyes still closed, her lips slightly puckered, she held onto the wash basin, swaying backward and forward slightly. Then she opened her eyes. It took a few moments before their gazes met in the mirror above the sink.

She turned towards him and said, *Mio Aurelli...*

Now he could see that she was rather drunk. He stepped towards her and she threw her hands around his neck. He recognised the Dior perfume she wore and the scent instantly transposed him back to the time when they still lived together. She leaned on him with all her weight, lowering her face to his shoulder, then sliding further. He held her waist to keep her from falling.

Are you alright, Viola?

These... these.... da... damn...

She bent over and took off her shoes with a heel of at least three inches. Now she was much shorter than he and all of a sudden seemed like a helpless little girl who needed his assistance. She looked up at him.

Help me get home. Mio. Take me home.

She clearly did need help.

The lift in the block of flats on Streliška Street was out of order. He held her round the waist so she could walk up the stairs, pushing her slightly forward every time she lifted a foot. She was still barefoot, her one hand hanging from his neck as she leaned onto him, her other carrying the stilettos she had taken off again as soon as they entered the hallway. Their ascent lasted forever and when, out of breath, they reached the eleventh floor, Viola leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. He watched her and wished they could lie down in bed together and fall asleep. Only now did he realise how tired he was. Viola opened her eyes and began rummaging through her handbag. She found her keys, unlocked the door and opened it. She turned towards Mio.

Come in.

He wanted to stay with her.

Viola, I brought you home, now I must leave.

She came closer and held his hand. He did not resist. They entered the flat together and she shut the door with her foot.

They were lying on the bed. The scent of Viola's skin, her gaze fixed deeply on his own, he stroked her neck and his hand slid lower towards her breasts. She leaned over towards him and kissed him. He shuddered. Flashing before his eyes were scenes from when they made love on the deck of a sailing boat, the scorching sun above them, her, lying under him, sighing loudly. He remembered the seagull sitting on the cross mast, watching them. Suddenly his phone rang in his trouser pocket. He took it out, the screen had Kiara Lepoša displayed across it. He sat on the bed.

Kiara?

Did I wake you up?

You didn't.

Perhaps it's too early to say anything like this, but... She fell silent briefly. I miss you.

He was silent. Viola was still looking at him, their gazes now hanging somewhere mid-air. He did not know what to say. Suddenly he didn't feel well, he was tired, all he wanted was go home and fall asleep.

Speak to you tomorrow, he said, cutting the conversation short.

There was silence at the end of the line. Mio closed his eyes.

Call me, yes? Goodnight, Mio.

Goodnight, he said and hung up.

Then he picked up his trousers from the floor and began to dress.

Stay, said Viola.

He turned towards her. The features of her face were so familiar, it seemed impossible that so many years had passed... He sighed deeply.

I haven't changed, Viola.

She lowered her gaze.

You have a girlfriend, don't you?

Their past was buried, he had tried for years and years to erase it.

Would that change anything?

Did you also cheat on me?

Her eyes were suddenly filled with sadness.

Viola, I loved you, but what does it matter what really...

It does to me, she said quietly.

A stabbing pain in his stomach. He stared into her eyes, her mascara was smudged, tears gathered between her eyelashes. He sat on the edge of the bed.

What's up, Vivi? What's going on?

The tears rolled down her cheeks, he reached towards her, wiping them away with the palm of his hand. She smiled.

You called me Vivi... He stayed silent, looking into her eyes. *Only you ever called me that.*

And always will.

The snow had turned to rain and droplets of water slid across the window pane. He leaned towards her and kissed her on the lips, tasting her salty tears. It was incredible but even all these years later he felt he still loved her. He slowly removed her blouse and turned her onto her back. He kissed her once again, she closed her eyes. The rumble of snowploughs came from street, loud beeping. He kicked off his jeans and lay on top of her. The scent of her skin filled his nostrils, she sighed, and after all this time they were once again one. As if the timeline had bent over on itself and returned to the beginning.

*

3.

The morning threw streaks of winter greyness through the window, the moisture in the air seeped through the damp wall. To no avail he had smashed up the plaster a couple of times and tried to patch up the hole with levelling compound, smoothing it and applying fresh paint over it. Three months later it was all brown again and no amount of damp-proof coating helped. The house was old, over the years of decay the leaking roof had wrapped it into an unpleasant smell of stuffiness and mould. After Mother died the garden became overgrown, the rooms covered in cobwebs and, together with him, time wrapped itself into rotting transience. His life limited

itself to staying in the room where he had his bed, an electric cooker with two burners standing on a low cupboard, a TV on the floor and an extra mattress in the corner under the window, dirty and torn, used mostly by his dog, some breed of shepherd. It had followed him one day about a year ago all the way across town from the Waldorf School on Streliška Street to his home in Kodeljevo. They have never been apart since. They were both like rusty metal, a worn out, sad-looking pair. The dog followed him like a loyal, silent partner. When out walking, it never went further than a few metres away from him, he never needed to whistle or call him like most dog owners he would meet in the park in front of the Codelli Mansion. He joined his hands behind his back, stared at the ground beneath his feet and walked in silence, as if he would prefer life to simply slide past and not bother him with details that were, at least so it seemed to him, made for other people.

He most liked taking the dog for a walk early in the morning when there were fewer people around that he would have to move out of the way of or at least, as dog lovers do, nod to them in greeting and thus establish awkward eye contact. Even though he never used it, he would take the leash from the shelf on the wall. The dog, lying on the mattress, would raise its head, wag its tail, instantly jump up, ready and waiting. Neither of them minded that it was raining outside, that in weather like this they would come home soaked through and the dog's fur stank. Out of the window he could see the dreary November morning, the rain trickling across the glass, seeping inside through the badly sealed wooden frames. He stepped into the hallway, put on his raincoat, pulling the hood over his head. Then he leaned over, pulled on the old fisherman boots that his neighbour had once given him after he had helped him mow the grass in the garden. He had hoped the thank-you gift would be something he could eat but the boots had turned out to be very useful. He opened the door and the dog walked out. There was lots of mud in front of the house, the two-foot wooden plank that lead to the garden gate was almost covered in it. He locked the front door and walked over to the half demolished shed in which he kept his bike. In the darkness he felt with his fingers on the inside wall to find the small hook and hung the key onto it. A habit he kept from the times when he had lived in the house with his widowed mother. Even then he had thought that the worry that someone might steal something from their house was entirely unnecessary. He opened the small wooden gate and the dog hurried out onto the pavement. The rain was light but relentless. He noticed that the puddles he was stepping into were getting bigger. There were few cars on the road, the morning light was bleak and this did not look like a day when people might decide to stretch their legs this early. From the street he walked towards the park and after a few steps was already plodding through the mud soaked grass. There was no sign of any of the dog owners, and he was glad of that. The dog sniffed the grass at every tree, he calmly walked behind it. The rain had already soaked his trousers, water trickled from his nose down his neck and behind his collar. He didn't mind. The dog lifted its leg and peed. It was about to come back to him when it suddenly turned its head, raised its ears and tail, and in the following moment it was gone. It ran away so fast that he had to think whether anything like that had ever happened before. Confused, he strained his eyes to try and see better. The raindrops were becoming heavier, he used the back of his hand to wipe them from his eyes and then ran in the direction the dog had disappeared. The neighbour's size eleven boots splashed in the mud, he ran and ran. Short of breath, his gaze wandered from tree to tree, but with all the rain he could barely see a thing. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his left knee – it reappeared occasionally ever since he had fallen more than half a year ago, climbing into the attic to see whether he had rat infestation after his old rucksack had been nibbled. He stopped, breathing heavily. Again he wiped the rain

from his eyes. Then he noticed it. His canine companion was standing by the wire fence that ran around the park, separating the municipal swimming pool from the grassy area in front of the old mansion. He tried to breathe normally, calm his heartbeat. At the fence, the dog was eagerly sniffing something on the ground. Then it lifted its head and began barking loudly. The rain in his face prevented him from seeing exactly where the dog was sticking its snout, he took a step closer, wiped his eyes again. The downpour was suddenly so heavy that all he saw was a curtain of water veiling his view. Then everything turned red. He opened his mouth to scream but what came out of his throat was a hollow squawk of horror. She lay there on the ground, totally naked, her legs spread wide, her face disfigured, staring at him. It seemed as if he was once again standing before his mother's splayed genitalia.

*

It was early. Far too early and all too wet. The driver parked the official Skoda Octavia RS on the drive right in front of the lowered barrier and switched off the engine. Sitting on the back seat were the on-call state prosecutor Mio Aurelli and the ten-year younger investigating judge Matjaž Sinčič, also known as Kiddo. Aurelli had heard talk at the courthouse bar about his success with the ladies and he had one of those faces that appeared boyish, almost childlike at times, despite his middle age, hence the name. Kiddo was typing god-knows-what into his smartphone and his black hair glistened with brilliantine. Rain trickled down the window, muffled thunder could be heard from somewhere afar. Aurelli smoothed his short hair with the palm of his right hand, then leaned forward slightly and looked towards the sky through the windscreen. The treetops blended into the blackness that seemed to be descending lower by the minute. He could faintly see the yellow police cordon tied around some trees, representing a no-go ring for anyone passing by, one he would have to step into in a few moments' time. He pulled the hood of his dark blue anorak over his head and clapped his hands together. Kiddo winced, then put away his phone in the inside pocket of his jacket and produced a notepad and pen from it. He turned towards the prosecutor, raising quizzical eyebrows.

Shall we go?

Aurelli took a deep breath and felt the air enter his lungs, still smoked up from the previous night. He opened the door. Wearing waterproof work shoes, he thrust his feet outside. He instantly felt the wetness from the rain on his thighs and had to make a conscious effort to persuade his mind about the body's false capacity.

Despite daybreak, it was still dark. The thick treetops barely allowed the grey, wet rays of light to reach the forensic investigators who were just putting up a white tent to protect the evidence from the rain. A thick curtain of low visibility masked their field of vision, making it impossible for them to do their usual work. The forensics always reminded Aurelli of archaeologists, using tiny brushes to tirelessly clean away the soil, with great discipline waiting to discover a microscopically tiny piece of a once much larger puzzle. In their white robes they appeared as astronauts in spacesuits. Kneeling on the soaked soil, they were collecting any remnants that will form the mosaic in the story that would later seal yet another fate in a series of deviations of the worst kind. He walked down the asphalted path and turned right towards the police camp made up of the head of the criminal investigation team, two lower-ranked crime investigators and three policemen. He pulled the shield of his hood further over his brow and, stepping into the mud, made his way towards the white tent. A blue van marked POLICE with capital letters had just driven past the swimming pool in Kodeljevo and parked at the lowered

barrier. The sliding door opened, and out stepped two police officers with a trained police tracking dog. He heard barking and the impatience of the animal that had been taken out of its cage half an hour ago and could not wait to follow the scent. Kiddo followed them, muttering something to himself under his beard. Aurelli knew that this was his way of raising his self-confidence, for a policemen had less than an hour ago described to both of them in detail the brutal extent of the state the body of the murdered girl had been found in.

The clicking of the camera cut into the silence. Over and over again. All that could be heard was the wild screeching of the magpies that had inundated the town in recent years. Everyone worked without unnecessary questions, without the sarcastic and cynical remarks that they usually insensitively dropped at each other, trying in this way to rise above the reality that always had to be mercilessly mulled over an endless number of times and finally also digested. Aurelli stood over the girl, staring at the forensic investigator who was trying to place a paper bag over her hand in order to preserve any evidence behind her nails. She was so young that her childish skin was snow white, her breasts merely a hint, two tiny hills that would have grown into breasts with time. Her thin neck held her face in a grimace of deathly horror, her light blue eyes staring at each one of them, as if to say – you came too late. Aurelli felt a sharp pain in the stomach and he had to turn away to count to five in his mind. All the alcohol of the previous night stirred within him, threatening his brain with fainting, not something he was accustomed to. Slowly he looked up and then dropped his eyes towards the body of the child, lying there, set out in a sexual and grotesque position before the feet of adult men. The whiteness of her skin contrasted against the bright red colour of her cotton cape with a hood pulled over her head. He stared at Kiddo who was meticulously jotting down something in his notepad. He waited a few moments for their gazes to meet.

What does it remind you of? he asked the young judge.

Gulping with difficulty, Kiddo glanced at his older colleagues, then said, *Only a beast could do this.*

Aurelli found his cigarettes in the inside pocket of his jacket and lit one. The nicotine stimulus only made his stomach worse but he slowly drew the smoke into his lungs and silently stared at the sky for a few moments. The rain wet his face. He wiped the back of his left hand across his eyes, then looked at Kiddo once again.

What do you see?

A naked young girl dressed only in a red coat. The dark brown eyes of the investigative judge appeared tired. Then his face was suddenly overcome with realisation. *Oh, damn shit... I mean... this coat...*

Aurelli turned slightly, peering at the trees around them. He then once again dropped his gaze upon the murdered girl.

So we have her, Cappuccetta rossa. Or, as you Slovenes might say, Little Red Riding Hood.

Aleš Vidmar, Head of the Homicide and Sexual Offences Section at the Criminal Police Directorate for the last two years, shook his head. Aurelli leaned closer to him, grabbing him by the forearm.

Call the tramp with the dog who found her. Let him explain why any normal person would be out in the park at seven o'clock in the morning on a Saturday, right after a tremendous downpour.

Vidmar produced a packet of chewing gum from his trouser pocket and stuck one into his mouth.

Just look at how he savaged her...

Aurelli noticed that Kiddo had turned his head away, as if only now had it all sunk in. He gently placed his hand on his shoulder.

The young judge winced, then quickly said, *We need to find this man. The psychopath seriously thinks he is some kind of wolf...*

Aurelli raised his head and blew the cigarette smoke into the grey sky. It looked as if the rain was stopping. For a while he stared at the dark clouds, then he turned to the criminal investigators.

Check if anyone is missing a child... And make sure it doesn't get out into the public that she is wearing a red coat.

He pulled his hood from his head. The droplets of rain slipped from the plastic surface and wet his face. Once again he looked at the girl lying on the ground. Then he turned towards the Lunapark Inn on a slight hill above the park, giving anyone sitting on its terrace a good view. He took the packet of cigarettes from his pocket, tore off a piece of cardboard from the top, extinguished his cigarette on it, and put it back into his pocket with the box. He thought that he needed to breathe some fresh air – hanging around all day in places with low ceilings and bad lighting was not doing his health much good. But he did not possess even the tiniest amount of willpower that might help him avoid Miklošič Street and the casino monster that lived there, opening matinee hours also mid-week, precisely for people like him.

excerpt from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh