

**Polona Glavan**  
**NO MATTER HOW**

LIII (pp. 134–139)

And here we are, the twenty-odd of us from 3C, thrown together as if randomly into one pile, one class, but when you look at us it doesn't take a genius to see it can't be that much of a coincidence. A few idiots, a few plonkers who don't know what the fuck they are and a few of us who know a bit more about how things stand. Just enough to be aware of them. Oh yeah, and a few *cefurs*, of course. There's no class without a few *cefurs*. They're a special breed, that lot. Of course, we've been told since we were born how we're all totally the same, us and them, how you can't judge a person by where they come from or what they look like but by what they do. But hell, they can preach that to country folk like Špela who commutes from some hilltop village near Horjul, people like her might actually buy it and forget about it halfway back to their godforsaken hole where they don't have to deal with these things anyway. But someone like me who's been living among them her entire life and I guess always will – well, they can't sell that shit to me. 'Cause the point is that *cefurs*, they *do* shit that provokes you. Just look at Halilović and her daily show, look at the trackies yawning on the benches outside the shop, unable to keep their mouths shut if a broad under a hundred walks past them, *Hey doll, where ya at*; I heard that once and that was it; from then on, I rather take a detour around ten blocks of flats just to avoid them. You could say they spoil my quality of life, hell if they don't. And god forbid you ever say something, no, then you have a whole army of them after you and good luck getting them off your back. That's what happened to Zajc, Brane's mate who lives two buildings down. One time, this guy Cvijanović, an ex-Yugoslav National Army officer who thinks he's still a big shot and no one can touch him, slammed his door into Zajc's car in the car park right before his eyes. He hit it so hard it left a dent. At first he pretended like nothing happened of course, what else can you expect from a guy like him, and when Zajc finally lost it, saying he was going to call the police, the bloke just shrugged and walked away, just like that. Then, after a couple of days when Zajc cooled off and told himself it wasn't worth it, things were only just getting started. One day he was missing a wiper, then his bumper was torn off, then someone stuck a gum to his doorbell in the middle of the night, waking the entire building before he managed to get down and scrape it off. And he kept seeing that bastard around, he seemed to be patrolling every corner on purpose, laughing in his face. He was obviously waiting for Zajc to punch him so he would finally have an excuse to get his *četnik* crew together and beat him to a pulp. Luckily, Zajc was smart enough to let it go but it gave him ten years' worth of grey hair. Yep, *cefurs* are in a class of their own when it comes to provocation. Take this guy Založnik from our class. You wouldn't know it from his name and he was born here and all, and on top of everything he has

blue eyes and blond curly hair like an angel looking down from the façade of some cathedral, anyway, when you see him you say to yourself, now he's an original Slovenian, no doubt about it. Well, I guess the guy had a close encounter in Bosnia where his mum's family lives or fell in love with a Balkan chick or something, I don't know, anyway, after the summer holidays, he walked into school wearing a leather jacket, a chain around his neck and brilliantine on his skull and started telling everybody he was actually a *cefur*. Man, Mina and I fell down laughing when we saw him, we thought it was the best joke ever, but Založnik just looked at us like we were a pile of dog shit in the middle of the pavement and asked us, dead cool, if we had a problem with his identity. *No, man*, said Mina, *just with your look*. *Yeah, sure*, said Založnik looking past us, *that's the only thing stupid bitches like you care about*. Then he turned around, scrunching and clanking away in his jacket and chain, and Mina and I looked at each other with a shrug and said no more about it, even though it was obvious Mina felt a little bad about it. I felt bad too for a little while, but then I said to myself, fuck it, what's the deal with this guy, wanting to be a *cefur* all of a sudden? What the hell does he get from it? It doesn't even make him special or anything because there's already millions like him. There's three of them in our class, Bešić and Muamerović and Dokić, all the same, of course. They bark at you and hassle you and act stupid and shit. And Hadžipašić, well, she's a whole different story. A textbook gold digger. About a year ago, she found herself some Albanian who comes and picks her up in his black Audi, tinted windows and all, like you would expect from an aspiring young mobster, and buys her Manolo Blahniks and Louis Vuittons and bling and all that shit. Hadžipašić doesn't really need to go school, she's already sorted it out so she'll never have to work a day in her life, but Bakljavi obviously sends her here so he can focus on his business in peace in the meantime. And so we get something out of it too. I mean, really, only a year ago, looking at her made me want to puke but now I find it hilarious. Her porn-blond extensions, her orange skin straight from the tanning salon, her tiger-stripe top with a cleavage with maximum push-up effect – that's fucking art to be able to do that exactly by the book. I'd tell her that one day, really I would. But of course, Hadžipašić doesn't speak to anyone, maybe Bakljavi told her not to, I don't know. She looks out the window, tapping her fake nails on the table, drawing circles on the floor with her high heels, waiting for the time to pass. She doesn't give a fuck and, in fact, the teachers don't give a fuck about her either. Then there's Spasojević. She's out of this world. A straight up whore. She gives it up to anyone, it doesn't matter if he's less than five feet tall or if he weighs three hundred pounds or if he's so pimple-faced you can't even tell what his skin colour is. Truth be told, no other bloke would have her. Foksa told me that, one time when she was still going out

with Andraž and they were standing outside during break time holding hands, she walked up to them, planted herself straight in front of them and said, *Hey Andraž, you know, I really feel like having sex.* Just like that, as if she was asking him what time it was. Andraž was smart enough to tell her to fuck off and Foksa almost had a heart attack; she looked like she was about to cry as she was telling me this. She said she wasn't going to come to school anymore, that she couldn't stand looking at that bitch, that she was going to strangle her one day, she didn't give a fuck what happened to her. I felt so bad for her I walked straight up to Spasojević and asked her what business she had going round hitting on other chicks' men. And she just looked at me shrugging her shoulders and said, *I'm sorry, I won't do it anymore,* and went on copying her math homework or whatever she had next. I took a deep breath to let her have it with both barrels, but it suddenly struck me there was nothing I could do about it, it's impossible to have a normal conversation with people like her no matter what the fuck you do. So I just turned around and went to Foksa and told her that, and she kind of got it and cooled off. Because that's just the way it is, some people's brains aren't wired properly and there's no point in wasting your energy on them because, at the end of the day, they're still crazy and you're pissed off and exhausted from the whole thing. And Spasojević's brain isn't wired properly, anyone can see that, she's always all good and eager in class, doing her homework and raising her hand before speaking and all that shit but as soon as the bell rings, she flips out and walks out into the hallway to pester guys. No one in their right mind would say that she's normal. Alright, ok, who is normal and why, that's always the question, I would probably be labelled as crazy by certain criteria but not nearly as many as this cow. Being a Spasojević is a diagnosis, as Mina would say. And I guess the same goes for being a *cefur*. Mars has read a lot about this shit, the whole history of former Yugoslavia and the war and further back, and he says that all Balkan people have this twisted logic in their heads, that they won even if they actually lost and that that's where they get that feeling that they're better than the rest of us and of course all the other shit that comes with it. And obviously, if your parents and their parents and your uncles and aunts and the whole family have been telling you since you were born that you're a hotshot even if you're the biggest loser, you're going to think you can play the boss wherever you go. I mean, what can you say to someone who's lost but claims they've won? You can run them over with a tank and they'll go on saying they're alive and well. And when this has been going on for years and centuries, it's no longer just a matter of what you see and what you hear, it gets in your genes. Mars said that too. And of course he's not making this stuff up, there are tons of books on the subject, they're always discussing it at Orga, almost everybody's read something about it. If something keeps

repeating itself long enough, it becomes genetic. Giraffes grew long necks because other animals would eat all the leaves near the ground. *Cefurs* felt they weren't good enough, so they made up they were. And us, who have always been used to a certain logic and fair-play, we let ourselves fall for it. First for the tale that we would be able to speak Slovenian, which we couldn't do before when we were under Austria, and then the one that we were brothers and that we were stronger together and that we would help each other and everything would be just great. That was kind of the long-term plan but unfortunately, it went so well people bought the whole thing no questions asked. We have it in our genes too, for fuck's sake, fooling ourselves that we're our own people now and that no one can touch us and that they're finally letting us be. Sure, they let us be. They're everywhere, they got into every fucking hole, ramming their music and their language and their customs down our throats and you can't say shit because then you're a racist and a nationalist and practically a bad guy just because you want to live in your own country and speak your mind and because you expect other people to play by the rules that apply here. Like Mars says, they want to fuck us over the nice way. Subtly. Inconspicuously. And the worst part is that people don't want to see what's really going on. That they're too lazy to think and do something about it. That they're too lazy to even listen. That they're, just like us, the people in this class, fucking *in between*. Now that I think about it, it's almost as if we're *nowhere*.

When, after a couple of minutes, I nearly walked into the right building, I was almost disappointed. The harmonious melancholy of early afternoon pulled me into a pleasant spell of reverie, into a state when, after a few long seconds of properly narrowed eyes, practically anything is possible. I stood still before the glass doors, squinting at the tiny cracks in the plaster. Reality presented itself in the form of a long row of buzzers with surnames made out in different handwritings, colours and techniques. With a methodical glance, I ran my eyes over the names. *Muisavljević*. I found it a little above the middle, between *Djurić* and *Hasanović*. I smiled to myself. The clock on my mobile showed two twenty-five. I looked over my shoulder. A woman pushing her bike past me gave me a nod. At the point I had been moments before, I could have lit another cigarette, texted David or simply looked at the clouds. I threw my phone in my rucksack, lifted my hand and pressed the bell.

A few long seconds passed and nothing happened. I leaned against the wall by the doors. Maybe the entry system was broken. Maybe they had the TV on too loud. I always imagined that people who watched the telly during the day had it on too loud. They might have forgotten about me or simply decided to ignore me. In a surge of guilty relief you feel when, for instance, your dentist appointment is cancelled, I pictured myself moseying on home, perhaps even footing it, why not, it seemed like the perfect day for it, and calling the Ogress to tell her with a clear conscience that, unfortunately, there must have been a misunderstanding. It wouldn't be the first time. I slipped my thumbs under the straps of my rucksack, looking stealthily over my shoulder. The speaker screeched.

“Yes?” panted a woman's voice abruptly. “Who is it?” she asked in Bosnian.

I bit back a moment's disappointment that inevitably surged through me, resigning myself to my fate. That was life. I'd known it for years.

“Hello,” I rasped. My voice was hoarse from a few hours' silence. I cleared my throat. “It's Alja. The tutor. From Crossroads.”

“Oh.” There was a long sigh from the speaker. “Yes. Of course. The lesson.” Her voice rose in pitch as she switched into a different language. I asked myself if she ever noticed it. “Come on up, Alja. I mean – come on up, miss. Sorry. Ninth floor.”

Half an instant later she buzzed me in; I pushed the door open with a flat hand, dilating my nostrils as I waited for the lift. Every house had its smell, every apartment, every entrance hall. It couldn't be transferred anywhere else and it couldn't be recreated no matter how similar it might be to others. Here, too, the typical dry sandy foundation was pervaded with an

indeterminate mix of dwellers and visitors, their breaths and odours. The smell of security is when nothing stands out. The lift hiccupped to a halt on the ground floor, and for some reason I was relieved to see there was no mirror inside it. The subdued yellow light disappearing behind the metal walls could have been your regular claustrophobic nightmare and the gloomy hallway that opened up before me behind the door only strengthened that impression. My gaze searched hungrily for the point where the wall and the floor met, the first semblance of a solution that might present itself. The second door on the left was ajar. I headed towards it. It was quiet, as if the whole building was holding its breath, and a beam of watery daylight slanting over the doormat was the only thing available to the senses. Their TV was not on after all, or perhaps they had turned it off for my benefit.

“Hello,” I said, stopping two feet from the door. My voice was stiff and throaty, like every time I thought I had to convince someone my intentions were serious. I stood still on the edge of the doormat, lining up my feet perpendicular to it. “Hi,” I said again.

The door opened so inaudibly I winced and took half a step backwards. Against the white background of the hall, I saw three pairs of eyes gazing at me, all equally dark and round in the half-light. A man to the left, a woman to the right and a boy in the middle were lined up from wall to wall as if waiting for a long-promised reward. Or maybe punishment. From where I was standing I couldn't quite make out their facial expressions, not even if they were the same.

“Muisavljević?” I said. I lowered my voice as if uttering a password I wasn't sure was correct. “Is this the right apartment?”

For an instant or so, they kept staring at me in the same tone as before. Then the woman shifted from one foot to the other and nodded. I took that as a hint to enter.

“I'm Alja,” I said. “I study English and I help those who have problems with it. And you must be Senad.”

I smiled, reaching out my hand. The boy gave me a cold nod, but didn't budge. The man nudged him on the shoulder.

“Senad,” he hissed softly. “Shake her hand,” he said in Bosnian.

The boy lowered his eyes and extended his hand to me. I held it as carefully as some tiny animal for which you cannot be sure how much it can take. I felt an encouraging smile prickling my cheeks. I knew I couldn't hold out much longer.

“Don't worry,” I said. “I won't be tough on you and I won't yell. I promise.”

I laughed. I heard my voice bouncing off from wall to wall. I would never have thought that so much silence could build up in a building with so many people in it. The woman and

the man smiled at the same time. I couldn't tell whether they did it spontaneously or out of politeness.

"Nihad," said the man, holding out his hand. "And this is my wife, Aida."

Now that we were standing face to face, I noticed that none of them was taller than me. I could peer over the father's head without having to lift my chin and I had to bend my shoulder a bit to shake the mother's hand. Senad was up to my nose, at best. I searched my memory. Seventh, eighth grade, maybe? He looked about ten.

"Come in, Alja," said the mother. "Sorry – come in, miss. Ah. Excuse me."

At the end of the sentence, her voice plunged into weary desperation, as if she had failed a test any child could pass through sheer carelessness.

"Call me Alja," I said. "Please."

"Ok. Alright." She nodded eagerly, her dark eyes lighting up in a hollow, grateful grimace. "Let's – let's all be on first-name terms, then."

"I'd love that," I drawled emphatically, stooping down to my shoelaces. For a moment, I expected one of them would hurry to say *please, you don't have to take your shoes off*, but they kept on watching me, silently and now with mild curiosity. It made me think of one of those sects that strictly adhere to their rituals and keep their contact with the outside world to a minimum. But I could see no trace of conditioned behaviour. When I stood up, all three of them turned towards the kitchen. The father took a stiff, uneven step forward. He leaned slightly on the wall with the palm of his hand. *Early retirement due to disability*. Not surprisingly, the Ogress' words shot through my brain, together with the accompanying tone of voice. I gave myself a slight nod.

It was only after we walked through the kitchen door that I finally realised where their silence and uneasiness came from. The space was small and cramped, filled with pieces of furniture, none of which matched. A scratched stove and a faded grey kitchen sink were squeezed into the right corner, three rickety chairs stood around a miniature table and two feet of a double bed peered from behind a slanting wardrobe that intersected about two thirds of the room. Under the peeling window frame stood a battered sofa. Judging from the way Senad sat on it, I assumed it was his bed. The mother pulled out a chair for me while holding the father by the arm so he, too, could sit. My eyes wandered around the room automatically, first quickly, then slowly, until I figured out what was it that seemed to be missing. There was no other door anywhere. That room was all they had. It was about the size of the kitchen in our apartment. The chair creaked as the mother took a seat as well. With my back straightened, I placed my hands on the edge of the table, between the countless scratches and dents on the

meticulously wiped surface. I looked at the poverty, simple and honest poverty. And, through the three pairs of eyes that now glistened with a flat and slightly hollow shine in the full light, the poverty stared right back at me.

The mother was the first to speak.

"Would you like some coffee, Alja?" In that context, her voice could only be forcedly neutral. I shook my head in a surge of learned guilt. It would be inappropriate in such circumstances to take anything that wasn't absolutely and objectively free.

"No, thank you," I said with an equally forced neutrality. "Just a glass of water, please." I nodded to myself. Giving someone the cue for showing their hospitality, allowing them the possibility to have something more than you, at least symbolically speaking, that seemed kind of noble to me. I spread my knees and smiled again, softer this time. The initial shock was over. I turned to Senad. His gaze was a little evasive; one of his eyes was turned to me and the other one to the floor. As though he wasn't sure if he was really allowed to look at me. I wrapped my fingers around the glass that the mother had put before me and nodded a thank you.

"Tell me, Senad," I said. "What's giving you trouble?"

Senad's eyes glanced at his parents, as if asking for permission to speak. Then his gaze wandered somewhere under the table. He gave a barely visible shrug.

"You know, English," he said softly.

"Which part?" At the last moment, I resisted the urge to speak louder. "Tenses? Words? Writing?"

"Everything," said Senad. He lowered his chin and tucked his hands under his thighs. His slightly curly hair gleamed softly over his smooth forehead. There was nothing manly about him yet.

"That's us Bosnians," said the father sitting to my right. He laughed raucously. "You can't teach us a foreign language. We don't even know what ours is supposed to be called now."

"Oh, come now, Mr Muisavljević – I mean, Nihad." I giggled and instantly knew it sounded silly. "You're just like everyone else. We Slovenians aren't much better – if you only knew the things I have to teach the kids. I have to start practically from their ABC's. It's terrible." I shifted in my seat. One of its legs creaked as if in protest at the absurdity of my behaviour.

"Besides," I went on, "I'm here to help. And something can always be done. If we both try hard, we can do it. I'm sure we can."

Senad nodded. This time, he looked at me more closely, with his whole eyes. I noticed a hint of a smile forming around the edges. He was so different from the children I had tutored, arrogant creatures who hid their insecurity behind clipped voices and fed-up eye-rolling that I soon learned to return with an equally all-knowing haughtiness. Creatures I'm sure Senad's class was full of. I didn't want to give it any further thought.

"He's a good boy," said the mother. "Our Senad." When she smiled, the wrinkles above her nose smoothed and the air of youth that fell on her face made her look beautiful in an unapproachable sort of way. "He studies. And he helps out when he can."

I looked at her rough and knotted hands on the table. For a moment, I felt like touching them.

"There aren't many children like that," I said. "Believe me." I nodded for the umpteenth time that day. Perhaps some other time I could deal with the issue of where my need to prove myself when it was least expected of me came from. This time, I pushed it to the back of my mind. "Kids who are used to putting in the effort are the easiest to work with anyway."

I raised the glass to my mouth. It was a bit dry like every time I spoke in a voice that was not entirely my own. I left half a sip. I didn't want them to get up again because of me.

"Well, me and Nihad will get out of your way, then," said the mother. "So you can work in peace."

I opened my mouth automatically one last time, wanting to say that it was ok, that they could stay. But I checked myself at the last moment. This – this – I looked at the room one more time, trying to chase away the word *lair* – this space offered no alternative.

"Come on, old man." The mother got up and offered the father her arm. "Let's go stretch our legs a bit. Doctor's orders."

She giggled. The father grumbled in reply, his face one big smile, as he scrambled to his feet. His expression was one of fundamental, unconditional love that was obvious even to the most inexperienced. It was a little moving in a calming sort of way.

"Be good, Senad," he said, hobbling from the table towards the hallway. "And listen to Alja. See how smart and beautiful she is."

I laughed in his direction. He threw me a wink. His prematurely wrinkled face that, in the half-light, looked like it was carved in high relief revealed gratitude. My eyes followed them out the front door, her, slowly but surely setting the pace, him, limping earnestly by her side.

"Sit here, Senad," I said as the door closed behind them. "And bring me your exercise book, please."

Without saying a word, Senad got up, pulled his schoolbag from behind the sofa and fished out a cheap, bulky, thin-papered exercise book. He sat down next to me, not saying a word. I flicked over the cover, leafed through it and sighed softly. We had our work cut out for us.

**LILI** (pp. 162–177)

”Mars, I love you,” I say.

”Lili, I love you,” says Mars.

It’s fine. Everything’s fine. I open my eyes slightly. A triangle of pale sunlight hangs on the ceiling. I wiggle my toes; they’re warm – another good sign. Mars takes a long drag on his cigarette and stubs it out on the saucer he’s put on his belly. When I put out mine, he sets the saucer down on the table. His shoulder cracks as he reaches over me.

”Lili,” he says. He turns to his side and props up his head. “Lili, I want to tell you something.”

I nod. My lips still want to curl up, though the corners of my mouth hurt from laughing. I let them drop where they will. Mars looks over my shoulder, runs his tongue over his teeth. He breathes in and suddenly he looks like he’s just grown a few inches.

”Lili, I don’t want you to do it,” he says.

The first second, everything is as it was before. It’s a beautiful day, Mars and I are together, everything’s going to be alright. The shock comes the next second; it hits me somewhere in the ankles, in the palms of my hands, on the skin around my bellybutton. As if it wished to steer well clear of my brain. I feel my shoulders stiffening and my neck being pulled up, and I barely manage to lean on my elbows before hitting the edge of the bed with full force.

”Do what?” My voice is pathetic and idiotic, as if to further emphasize the lameness of what I’ve just said.

Mars looks at me, looks up and down, looks at me again.

”Have an abortion,” he says, as if speaking to some retarded kid. “I don’t want you to have an abortion.”

”Mars,” I say robotically. I feel a tightening in my stomach, my lungs and my throat, like I’m being run over by a steamroller. I don’t know where I find the air to breathe the next moment. “Mars, you’re fucking with me.”

”No, Lili.” Mars shakes his head, cool as a cucumber. Of course he was expecting me to say something like that. “I’m not fucking with you. I’m totally serious. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I was so sure about anything.”

I look at him. My eyes, my jaws, my tongue, everything has got a life of its own. I’m shaking my head, just shaking it, with some bizarre force, some crazy speed.

“But yesterday – before – you ...” My voice is coming from weird hollows, from under my ribs, above my tongue. I’m not sure if you could even call it a voice, if it’s not just some stupid, pointless movement of the air.

”Yes, Lili,” nods Mars. He puts his hand on my back; it’s steady as a rock against my vibrating skin. “I did say that. But then I talked to Loko. He just guessed something was going on with me, can you believe it? He came after me when I went to take a piss and said, hey, mate, I can see you have a problem. You can tell me about it or not, but I can see it’s eating you up. And before I knew it, I told him everything that was going on. It came out of me like puke. I guess I really needed that.”

Mars swings his chin from side to side, like he’s not sure himself if something like that is possible. His eyes are round and darker than usual. He rubs his head with his palm.

”You know, Lili, he’s not just anyone, Loko.” Mars’ eyes are fixed on me. I stare back at him; of course I don’t have the strength to turn away. “He’s not like most of us who only care about taking the easiest way through life. He used to be a junkie, you know. And he got clean all by himself. Now he reads a lot, philosophy and shit. And he helps others when they need him. He’s awesome.”

I lift my shoulders a quarter of an inch. Finally I can breathe normally, finally my vocal cords feel like they’re where they need to be.

”No,” I say. “No, Mars, no, no.”

Mars moves. I feel his breath on me. My head flinches away.

”Lili, look at me.” Mars’ voice is calm, fucking, disturbingly calm. “Just look at me. Please. Lili.”

Mars takes my hand, slowly and carefully, as if he’s touching me for the very first time. His skin is warm and familiar, so familiar it makes me shudder. I blink quickly, just so I can catch his eyes, gentle and a little sad. Of course I know I won’t be able to hold his gaze. I close my eyelids, waiting for the rainbow circles to cover my whole field of vision.

“Look at me, Lili,” says Mars.

“I did,” I say.

“Not like that. Lili. You know what I mean.”

“I looked at you the way I wanted to.” I feel the muscles around my eyes contract. Fluorescent dots zoom back and forth like shooting stars. I wish that I could immerse myself in it, that there was nothing else I had to think about. That there was no me, that’s what I wish most of all.

Mars rolls onto his back and bends his legs. The mattress heaves as he props himself up on his elbows.

“Alright, Lili,” he says. “Don’t look at me, then. But you need to hear what I’ve got to say to you. Because it’s about me and about you and pretty much everything we care about.”

I’m silent. I don’t move. I look at the tiny shooting stars and the darkness in between. Somewhere down there is my beating heart. It’s too far away for me to feel it.

“Mate, you don’t know what a problem is,” says Mars to no one in particular. “That’s the first thing Loko said when I told him. Being sick, that’s a problem; being so lost you can’t see a way out, that’s a problem; losing something, that’s a problem. In your case, it’s the opposite. You got something. You created something. A human being, for fuck sake, the ultimate creation. And you call that a problem. Come on, think about it. That’s exactly what he said.”

Mars reaches his hand over me. He’s careful not to touch me. The lighter gives a light clink as he picks it up from the table.

“Come on, Loko, it is a problem, I say to him.” Mars lights a cigarette and takes a long puff. A couple of threads of smoke drift down to me and I dilate my nostrils automatically. “And I don’t have to tell you what it is, right. Lili’s still in school, I work part-time, and me and my mum barely scrape up enough money to eat and pay the bills. You can’t say that’s not a problem, I told him. Loko looked at me for a while, a few seconds, like, then he said, no, mate, it’s not a problem. You think it’s a problem. In fact, they *made you think* it’s a problem. People used to have ten kids and no money, and they survived all the same. Then wars would break out and they would lose five of them and still have another five. Or they would make another five, whatever. Things were once totally fucked up, and yet there were more and more people. And now when everything’s cool and all and no one’s dying of hunger or cold or tuberculosis or some shit, there’s less and less of us. You know why that is, mate? Can you guess why that is?”

Mars taps his cigarette against the saucer. I can’t hear his breathing.

“It’s because now they have more subtle ways of fucking with us. Let’s give people money, they say, let’s get them used to a certain lifestyle so they think that’s the only way to live. Let’s give them fucking cars and TVs so they prefer them over their children. And the machines will outlive them while they die off. And in a hundred years or so, we’ll have a country called Slovenia with a million cars and no Slovenians. Instead there’ll be chinks, muzzies, gypsies and the like, the kind that don’t give a fuck about the latest mobile phone or a holiday home at the seaside. Because they’re trained that way purposely. Do you think your

average chink thinks he's important? He doesn't think that. Even their names are similar to make sure no one stands out too much. There's a billion two hundred of them over there and the only thing that chink needs to care about is getting to one billion three hundred. And if he gets two pounds of rice a day and he needs four, he goes to Europe and America and works there for peanuts so all his bosses are totally happy and he has enough to live on and make a few kids along the way. And there's another couple of million. And in the meantime, our lot worries about not having clothes for five hundred euro or the newest laptop. Yes, let's do that, for fuck's sake. Until there's no one left. Until one day you go to the shop to get some bread and no one gives you a time of day because you don't speak Chinese. Or Arabic. Let's fucking do that, let's worry about that!"

Mars is somewhere else. He simply isn't here. It was someone else who said everything was going to be ok. It was someone else who said I didn't have to worry at all. This thing next to me is a clone. A mutant with a virus in its system, sent by some evil secret service to fuck up my life even more than it already is. I can't look at him. Of course I can't look at him.

Mars stops talking. Nothing in the room moves, not the bed, not the window, not the radiator. Not the air. Least of all the air.

"Lili, I love you," he says then.

It sounds funny in that voice of his. It sounds like an answerphone. It shakes me. Yet a moment ago I thought nothing could get to me anymore.

"The fuck you do." I say it automatically, too. My throat is constricted. I feel like I'm breathing through my skin. Maybe I'm even talking through my skin, it sure sounds like it.

"Lili, I love you more than anything in the world," says Mars. "That's why I'm being so honest with you. Because I have to be completely honest with you now. It's just that kind of a situation. Maybe the most fucked-up situation we'll ever be in. Quite simple. And if I don't tell you everything now, I don't know when I will."

Something in his voice cracks. It drops about half a note and all of a sudden he becomes insecure, so completely human that I suddenly feel everything that I tried to keep out crash right back into me. My head starts to spin, my skin is crawling, my lungs contract and expand abruptly. I jump up like I'm on springs and open my eyes and mouth suddenly. Mars is sitting before me, just looking at me with such concentration and intensity like he's channelling all his energy into it.

"Alright, then," I say after a couple of gasps of air. "Now I'm going to tell you something. Right now. Everything." I feel a rush of blood to my head; my forehead is hot like lava. My hands are all over the place. I'm looking at Mars like he's some poster on the wall.

“I can’t do it. I don’t want to. There. I don’t want to be pregnant. I don’t want to give birth. I don’t want to get up at night and stay at home all the time and have tits full of milk. I want to go to school and party and hang out with my friends. I want my life back. That’s all.”

When I close my mouth, I’m out of breath, as if I’ve just run a marathon. Mars’ lips tremble. My eyelids twitch. Of course.

“That’s how it is,” I say flatly and calmly. “I’m just telling it like it is.”

Mars sighs. I want to punch him so bad I clench my fists and dig them in my ribs.

“It’s not right to think like that, Lili,” he says in this fucking adult voice.

“How is it not right?” I shout it so loud Mars jumps and almost hits his head on the wall. “How the fuck is it not right? It’s what I think, end of story. I didn’t read some deep philosophical shit, I didn’t have a hard life, I can’t go around saying what is and isn’t good for this fucking world. But I do know how I feel. I feel awful, Mars. Totally awful. And all I want is for things to be different. Not having to worry about this shit. That’s all.”

“Yes, Lili, of course I know how you feel.” Mars’ voice is still cool and it doesn’t even seem like an act. It’s like some *Big Brother* shit again. I want out, now, the quicker the better.

“I don’t want a kid,” I say. “I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna.”

A shiver runs through my shoulders. I’m actually cold and this is the first time I notice. I cross my arms over my tits. By reflex, Mars reaches out to hold me. I turn my whole body away.

“It’s your fault,” I yell somewhere between my knees. “This is all your fucking fault.”

“Yes, Lili, it is,” says Mars from far away. “I’ve known that all along. And I’m not going to try to defend myself by saying how we’re both to blame. It’s my fault. I should’ve been more careful, I should’ve known better. Gritted my teeth and put on a condom when it was still time. Mine and mine alone.”

I bit my lip. I suck in the air through my nose.

“So why didn’t you?” I scream in the same volume as before. “Why the fuck didn’t you?”

“Hey, Lili, I’ve asked myself that a million times.” Mars is sitting next to the wall, not moving. It’s clear to me he can’t be ruffled. Realising that, something twitches in my throat and spills inside my stomach in a warm rush. This weird feeling of pride or something, I don’t know. I lift my head half an inch. I want to hear him better.

“It was the first thing that came to my mind when you told me,” Mars goes on. “How could you be such a fucking idiot, man, what the hell were you thinking? That’s what I said to myself. Then I thought about it and thought about it some more, I’m still thinking about it

actually, but there you go, I'm no closer to an answer than I was before. I thought it was safe – well, not really safe but that it couldn't happen to us. That we're too smart and too good for that. Man are we smart. Fuck."

Mars gives a short, quiet laugh. It looks like a studied effect, as if he's trying to demonstrate it to someone who doesn't know how to laugh. If there's anyone in the world who doesn't know how to, it must be me. I can't imagine myself laughing ever again, at least not right now.

"So I decided," says Mars. "I actually decided right then and there, but I really made up my mind after that thing with Loko yesterday. I decided that, if I can't change the past, I might as well take responsibility for the future. If it's my fault, I want to do anything I can to fix it."

I tilt my head to the right so I can see him with one eye. Mars instantly starts staring at me; I can tell he's been waiting for this this whole time.

"I thought about my old man," he goes on once he realises I have no intention of saying anything. "What a bastard he was. He left my mum to take care of me on her own, while he just took off and who gives a shit. He didn't give me a single euro my entire life. He never asked how I was and what I was doing, much less offered my mum any help. Man was I happy when I found out he got squashed by that train. I would have been even happier if he died a slow and painful death from some horrible cancer. But ok, he's gone. That's what counts."

Mars has told me about this before, some two or three times. The first time it made me cry, not so much out of sadness but out of rage at how someone could do a thing like that. Then it got more normal, never completely normal, of course, but, like, a part of Mars, like the scar he had above his elbow from when he crashed his bike. Now I think it's pathetic and unnecessary, like he was trying to tell me you have to move your legs in order to walk or breathe if you want to live.

"My father doesn't give a shit either," I say. "But what does that have to do with me?"

Mars pulls up his shoulders. His chin quivers.

"What do you mean what does that have to do with you? It has everything to do with you. Look, my mum and your mum were in the same boat. They both got screwed over by a guy, neither of them had much money or terribly bright prospects in life. Neither of them had the support of their community, they both sentenced themselves to hard work for a good while, if not for life. And yet they both decided to suck it up and go all the way. And there, that's why you and I are here right now. Are you going to say it would have been better if we

were never born? If my mother and your mother said back then, you know what, we don't feel like it? We would rather have more money and more time than take all of this on? You can't say that, damn it, you can't."

Mars is looking at me, he's looking straight at me without blinking an eye. His whole face is trembling, his mouth, his nose, his ears and the skin on the top of his head, only his eyes are still as ever, like there was a hundred-ton rock somewhere in there, resistant to all the earthquakes on this planet.

"You can't say that, Lili," he repeats slowly.

I nod. I don't want to look at myself, I don't want to feel myself, I have no idea whether I'm shaking, too.

"I can't," I say.

"You mean you can't say that." Mars' voice is steady, part of that rock. "Is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

Mars lowers his shoulders. He exhales loud enough for me to hear him. I think what time it is, whether mum will be home soon. If I've learned anything in the past couple of days is that shit can always get worse. Always.

"Then you understand what I'm trying to say," he says.

I straighten my head like a cobra before striking. My hands burn.

"Damn it, Mars!" I yell. I turn around and lean towards him until I'm two inches away from his face. Mars flinches, but doesn't move. "What do you take me for? Some stupid little doll or something? Of course I know what you're trying to say. Yes, ok, you would do otherwise. Yes, ok, other people did otherwise when they were in my place. But I'm still me. And you obviously don't give a fuck about how I feel and what I want."

I put my hands between my thighs. I rock back and forth. A high-speed lift is racing up and down from my stomach to my nose, up and down, up and down. It's carrying too many feelings, more than I can count.

Mars inches closer to my face. I can feel his breath on me. From this distance, his eyes are round and brown like conkers.

"Look, Lili," he says slowly. "I'll tell you one thing. If you have an abortion, don't count on me. I won't come with you. I don't want to hear it if you have any problems afterwards. In fact, I don't want to see you. Ever."

"Alright," I say equally slowly.

"It'll be over, Lili," says Mars. "I mean it. Over."

He says it like he's giving an answer in an oral exam. Syllable by syllable. *Excellent*, I could say to him. *That's an A. Good job, Mars.*

"Lili, you can't do it," says Mars. "You can't if you're normal."

"What's happening to me right now isn't normal," I say.

"The same thing's happening to me, too," hisses Mars. "But I know what the right thing to do is."

My hand smarts as it strikes Mars' cheek. I have a tingling sensation in my fingers, not so much from the blow as from the energy that was apparently forcing to come out with such might that it's now pouring down my skin and out somewhere into the air, into space. I raise my other hand, I make a fist, punching everything within my reach with both hands.

"Get the fuck out!" My voice is as hissy as Mars'. It has only one dimension, one direction. "Out! Out! Out!!!" My eyes are wide open but I can't see Mars or my hands, I can't hear anything either, the only thing I feel is this unbearable combination of rage and helplessness running through my veins like electricity that just wants out, out, further and further out. When I feel my knuckles sting I start waving my hands, when I can't do that I hit with my arms, my muscles and bones, my veins and tendons, the last cell that has ever grown between my shoulder and my wrist. Then all of a sudden my strength fails completely, I can't feel my arms, my head falls forward, pulling my whole body with it. I find myself in this state of nothingness, I'm surrounded by darkness that doesn't let through sounds or smells or feelings, only the awareness that I'm still alive, nothing else. In a long, long while, I feel Mars' arms squeezing me tightly around my back, and a moment later I smell his skin somewhere above me. Mars is shaking, slowly and continuously, he's vibrating everywhere I touch him, and it's only when he takes a breath and makes some strange, high, sobbing sound that I realise he's crying. I move, jerking my shoulders very slightly, and when he doesn't react I grab him around the waist with my right arm and shake him a little. Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck.*

"Mars? Mars?"

My throat hurts. My voice is rasping like I swallowed a ton of sand. I have no idea how long I've been screaming, how loud.

"Mars. Hey, Mars."

Mars doesn't give the slightest indication that he heard me. He's turned towards me, but his face is buried in the duvet. Short, quick spasms are running up and down his back. I grab his hand, the first body part in my reach, and hold it as tightly as I can. I'm scared now, totally and utterly scared. I'm squeezing Mars' hand, though everything hurts, I'm staring at the hairs under his elbow that have a weird red hue in this light, my back feels cold but I'm afraid to let

go, to take the blanket and cover myself. I daren't say anything either when I move my eyes to Mars' head, to the skin in the back of his neck, it's strangely still, like his eyes earlier, and just like his eyes, its stillness is proof that everything's wrong, totally and utterly wrong. Mars can't cry. Mars mustn't cry. It's a meltdown, there's nothing left to hold onto here, this is the point when the world goes to hell and no one can say if it'll ever come back. I swallow my saliva, then some air and finally tears, I swallow and wait, long moments pass and I just wait, maybe for the ground beneath my feet to split open and show me I'm not making this up. Then I can't take it anymore.

"Mars!" I scream at the top of my voice or what's left of it. "No, Mars, no, Mars, no, no, no." I let go of his hand and throw myself down on him with all my weight, I stick my hands under his neck and further down, and press my mouth and nose against his skin as hard as I can. If something carries me away, I'm not going alone. If anything swallows me, let it swallow me with him.

"Mars, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Mars." Tears are stuck in my oesophagus, I'm crying with my vocal cords instead of my eyes. When I speak, my mouth is touching the skin behind Mars' ear. I want him to feel me and hear me at the same time, I'm convinced that what I'm about to say can't reach him otherwise. "Mars. Stop it. Mars, I'm sorry."

Mars stirs under me. I take a deep breath. I wrap my legs around his waist.

"I won't do anything, Mars." My voice is still rasping, but gradually getting louder. "I won't have an abortion. Everything you said is true, damn it. I have no reason to. I won't, Mars. I won't."

Mars turns his head to the right. He takes a short breath. His eyes are closed, tears smeared around them. When I see a scratch next to his mouth, I grind my teeth in horror. I should fucking throw myself from the window right now. *Bitch. Bitch.*

"Mars, what have I done to you?" The lump in my throat finally bursts, tears start trickling down my nose, falling straight on Mars, there were my hand daren't go. The next moment I'm howling like a siren, I can't stop myself and I don't even want to, it's just something I have to do, something I should have done earlier instead of doing what I did to Mars. *Bitch, bitch, bitch.* I should just tell Mats to hit me back, to spit on me or lock me out, butt naked for all I care, to do anything he wants to me, there's nothing I wouldn't deserve. Seconds pass, I'm howling, Mars is screwing his eyes shut, the sun is falling outside or the clouds are shining, mum will probably be back soon. My life is screwed. Everything I could, I messed up, nothing is up to me anymore. It's essentially finished. I'm finished.

"Mars. I'm sorry. Mars." I whisper it like some desperate little prayer, the kind you say to someone who can't hear you. My eyes are misty but I'm afraid to lift my hand and wipe them. I'm afraid to blink.

"Lili." Mars speaks from somewhere far away. I'm not sure if I heard right. I choke back my tears, I hold my breath, I think even my heart stops beating as I listen for another sound to confirm it.

"Lili. Hey. Calm down." I flinch at hearing Mars' voice, at the realisation that it is him, and oxygen and blood instantly start flowing through my body again as if, by saying that, he decoded it. I lift my hands to my eyes, wiping the tears with the bottom edge of my palm. Mars rolls onto his back and looks at me. His eyes are arched downwards, and when I take a cursory look at him, I see that the scratch next to his mouth is the only one he has. My chin quivers, I can't say anything. I give a brief nod.

"Lili, come here." Mars sits up and reaches his hands towards me. He doesn't seem to be in any kind of pain; either that or he just doesn't want to show it. He doesn't want to say and do what I most deserve. I look away again for a brief second; it's too much for me. Mars puts his arms around me gently and pulls me towards him. I let out a low, howling, totally animal-like sound. Mars holds me a little tighter and it's only then that I really turn to face him, burying my head in his neck and breathing in his warmth. It feels like I'm doing it for the first time in a hundred years. Of course.

"It's alright, Lili. Calm down." Mars is speaking to me in a barely audible murmur somewhere down my shoulder. He has one arm across my back, grabbing me under the knees with the other to pull me even closer to him. It's only when I'm completely glued to him that I put my arms around his back again and squeeze, as hard as I can, until I feel a sharp, white-hot pain.

"What have I done to you, Mars? What did I say to you? What did I do to you?" My tears keep flowing, pouring down his skin. Maybe hitting the same spots where his fell earlier. At the thought of this, my oesophagus gets into another knot. My skin vibrates down to the soles of my feet. Mars clings to me more firmly still.

"You didn't really do anything to me," he says so close to my ear I can feel the air under his mouth move.

"Of course I did. Just look at yourself –"

Mars holds me back before I even try to move away.

“It’s nothing, Lili. It doesn’t hurt at all. Honest.” He brushes a lock of hair from my ear with his finger, letting it fall over my shoulder. “You were in shock. Just a reaction, normal enough. I’ve forgotten about it already.”

“No, you haven’t forgotten. You can’t forget a thing like that.” I take a quick breath of air through my nose and feel that my tears are falling more and more sparsely. Mars buries his fingers in my hair.

“If I haven’t yet, I will,” he says. “It’s over. Done. What happened doesn’t matter anymore.”

I nod. Mars is breathing deeply and slowly; hearing him, my breathing gradually settles down, too. After a million moments there’s finally one when I don’t need to say anything right away. Mars grabs the blanket and pulls it over me. I bend my shoulders to cover as much of my body with it as I can. I have no idea how long I’ve been cold; definitely longer than I can remember.

“Lili, you’re so totally special.” Mars’ voice is a little rasping when he says it but he doesn’t clear his throat. “It’s not just that I don’t know anyone quite like you, I’m also sure there isn’t one person in the whole world that could mean as much to me as you do. If I lost you, I would lose a part of myself, a big and important part of myself. I would never be the same again. I’m one hundred percent positive about that.”

“Same for me, Mars,” I whisper. “I wouldn’t be the same either.”

“We can’t just break up,” says Mars. He swallows. That’s when I realise his voice is like that because of tears, the tears that are still there waiting right under the surface somewhere, ready to come pouring out any moment. And I know they won’t, that I can stop them if I need to. Understanding and certainty and trust, all of it is coming back to me now.

“No, we can’t,” I say.

“It would be totally wrong,” says Mars.

“Yes. Wrong.” My tongue is smooth and dry, as if in proof that I’m telling the truth. I squeeze Mars a bit tighter and Mars squeezes me back. We’re silent; we still know how to be silent. Everything is nice, everything is ok, and in one hour, one day, one year, it’ll be even more ok.

“Lili, you have nothing to fear with me,” I hear Mars say. “Whenever things get hard, whenever you’re not sure about something, I’ll always be there for you. And it doesn’t matter what time it is or where you are. All you have to do is call me and I’ll be right there with you. I swear that on everything I love. On my life.”

I move my head away from him slightly so I can see his face. We're looking into each other's eyes, Mars smiles at me, his eyes still a little crooked, still red around the edges. I put my hands to his cheeks. The warmth is flowing into me, inch by inch, unstopably.

"I'm not afraid," I say. "I can never be afraid when I'm with you."

I'm smiling at him. Mars is smiling at me. We're the same, we're one. Anything can happen to us, anyone can threaten us, nothing can get to us. Him and I. Forever.

Mars reaches his hand behind his back and searches the bed until he finds my shirt. He passes it to me.

"Come," he says. "Let's have that coffee now."

“Someday when I’m president,” said Juju, setting the empty teacup firmly down in the middle of the table, “I’ll ban this fucking December dictatorship of *joy* on my very first day.” She frowned, letting out a deep breath of air through her pursed lips. “I can’t even turn on the radio or click a link without everyone telling me to be joyful about something. Fucking Coca-Cola. Idiotic Telekom. And all those fucking mcdonalds’ and of course spars and other retailers.” She picked up a flyer from the table and held it up before her nose for a second. *LET YOUR DECEMBER BE EVEN MERRIER*, it said across the first page. “Oh, yeah, and H&M, of course, let’s not forget H&M. Fuck off.”

“Hey, leave that!” jumped one of the twins. “There’s a coupon for a ten-percent discount in there!”

“Twenty if you come on the first day in the morning,” added the other, placing her hand protectively on the piece of paper before Juju got another one of her revolutionary ideas.

“I mean, who are they?” Juju rolled her eyes. “Do they know me? Do they ever stop to think there are people out there who don’t feel like being joyful? Who say to themselves, what the hell do I have to be joyful about? January maybe? Darkness and cold? And temperatures below zero after all that senseless spending? Well, you go right ahead and do it. Go on!”

“Creating a collective psychosis paves the way to mass manipulation,” said Margareta in a solemn tone that clearly betrayed she was quoting the object of her desire.

“And who thought of these stomach-turning Santas?” spat Juju. “What kind of a pervert do you have to be to plant a drooling old man on every corner, jiggling his potbelly and shouting ho-ho-ho? Is that some kind of shock therapy for people who are too depressed to go on a spending spree?”

“Their clothes are totally flammable,” remarked Pero. “One tiny accident, say a rocket that hasn’t fully burned out, would do wonders.”

”Stop it!” yelled the twins with a synchronized shudder.

“But seriously, where did they find these old dudes?” exclaimed Juju. “It says in that Middle Eastern anthology that Jesus was born on Christmas. Give or take a few days, it doesn’t matter. A baby by all criteria. Why, then, do we never see him? Yeah, that’s what they should do. They should put baby Jesus pictures and dolls everywhere, all pink and umbilical-like. And maybe add a comet for those who can’t do without something sparkly. Although, no, that’s just another myth like everything else. The essence. The truth. Yeah, that.”

“They could also be hanging from some nice tit,” said Pero longingly. “And it would say: At least at Christmas time, offer your breasts to those in need. Ooooh.”

“The general infantilism of our society is the result of immature libidos,” said Margareta keenly, contemplating the black painted nails on her right hand.

“Yes, and the condition is treated with flashing reindeers and singing Christmas wreaths,” added Juju with zeal in her voice. “And that giant Christmas tree as the ultimate phallic symbol. And your average libido doesn’t stand a chance of growing. Hallelujah!”

“Oh, come on, Julija, it’s nice when the city is shining with lights,” said the first twin encouragingly.

”And there’s music everywhere,” said the other one hopefully.

“I love you too, girls,” said Juju with a spark of irritation in her eyes. “But I’m not going to be happy when someone tells me to. I consider that a violation of my civil liberties. There’s this cluster of cells in my brain that, every time I hear something like that, starts sending me these incessant warning signals that I need to kill everyone around me immediately. And I think it keeps growing. I don’t know how long I can keep it under control.”

“God, you lot are distasteful,” said Besna standing at the stove. She obviously couldn’t hold out behind the closed door of her room any longer. “If you think everything is so awful, rummage through your brains a little and try to think of what the message of all this is.”

“Compulsory socialization?” chirped Juju softly. “For those who refuse to do it otherwise?”

Furious sighed in resignation.

“Peace and love,” she said with her eyes on the ceiling. “It still means something to some people. Though I admit it doesn’t sound very cool.”

“It sounds cool enough to me,” said Juju. “The only thing I object to is the packaging they sell it in. And of course the promotional approach. In short, their marketing aspect, as you would call it.”

”Well what’s wrong with people having a little fun? It’s better than venting their frustrations on others, don’t you think?” Furious stressed that last bit with such a fierce dose of sarcasm I could almost congratulate her.

“I’m happy enough,” cut in Pero. “I sit here, spreading peace and love among my roommates, and it doesn’t frustrate me a bit if they don’t love me back. And when so many women put up with me without objection, I can only be genuinely happy.”

Furious threw him a weary glance, as if to say, stay out of this.

“If you’re talking about me,” said Juju, “I have a lot of ways of shaking off any excessive joy. Don’t you worry.”

”Oh, yeah?” said Furious expectantly. “Are you thinking of setting fire to some cross?”

“Oh, no,” replied Juju cheerfully. “They’re all wet during the winter.” She reached for the pack of tobacco lying before Pero and opened it. “We’re doing some seasonal stuff with the Rog crew,” she went on in a slightly lower tone. “Tomorrow, for example, we’re organizing an event for the Association of the Erased. It’s far more effective than Metal Camp, believe me.”

Furious pressed her lips into a somewhat wry line.

“They still exist?” she said somewhere over our heads. “The Erased? Haven’t they all been entered back in the system?”

“Far from it,” said Juju, raising her chin so high it made the skin on her nape crease. “Some of them did manage to get their status resolved. But a lot of them are still waiting. It shocks me every time when I think how many.”

“So you take care of that for them or what?” said Furious in a strangely neutral voice.

“Not us,” said Juju, spreading the rolling paper out on the table. “We’re not competent for those things. But we do advise them where to turn or what to do. Or just listen to them. I often hear people say to me how grateful they are for just listening to them. Because they simply don’t come across people in their lives who would listen to them without passing judgment or asking weird questions.”

Furious rolled her eyes routinely. “Do they know enough Slovenian for that?”

Juju’s hand reached for the pack of filters and froze.

“Some of them speak three or four languages, if you must know,” she said with a stiffness I recognized as a sign of oncoming anger. “Their life had forced them into moving around a bit. If you can’t prove you exist, it doesn’t take much to get exiled, you know.”

“Well, they should have thought of that when it was time,” shrugged Furious, casting a sideways glance at her. “Instead of playing the poor-me card now.”

Juju’s elbows twitched.

”The poor-me card?” At the end of the sentence, her voice jumped to menacing heights. “Who the hell is playing the poor-me card? These *are* poor people and there’s no fucking doubt about that!”

Furious turned her whole body to face her. The knuckles on her hands gripping the edge of the table turned white.

“They weren’t poor at the time,” she spewed somewhere from the depths of her throat. “They knew what they were doing. They just thought they could do whatever they felt like and no one could touch them. And all they had to do was follow a couple of rules, that’s it.”

Juju lifted herself up high against the backrest of her chair.

”If someone does need to set rules,” she said with emphatic calmness, “they must, at the very least, clearly say what happens if we break them. And no matter what you say, the government didn’t do that at the time. I mean, go on, imagine: *If you fail to sort out your citizenship in time, you will officially stop existing.* You would think we were living on the Dark Side.”

“Ugh, look, Julija,” finally burst out Furious. “We had a neighbour back home, some Serbian, Montenegrin, I don’t know, who paraded down the street at independence, shouting that their tanks would squash us all. And that no one was going to give him the citizenship of a country that didn’t exist. Well, they erased him, of course, and then he starts whining about the injustice of it all. And I guess now he’ll want compensation, too. I don’t think it’s right, I really don’t.” She let out a long, sudden breath, as though she had just recited the hardest part of her exam.

Juju straightened her hands before her stiffly.

“Ok,” she said. ”From a basic ethical point of view, that really isn’t ok. If someone killed my mum, sister or cat, I would want to take them out with a single shot to the head. But you can’t do something like that in a normal society. Because there’s always going to be a bunch of innocent people on the other side who get screwed. And that’s what we at Rog are trying to do. To minimize the chance of that happening.”

“We have plenty of those ourselves,” barked Furious. “Innocent people who got screwed. Who have no job, no apartment and no money left. And who don’t have a house or property somewhere ... *back home.*”

Juju looked at her in disbelief.

“Home *where?* Most of their homes are here, if you must know. They were born here, they never lived anywhere else. And if someone did have a house in Bosnia or Serbia, they couldn’t get to it anyway. *Hello, my name is nobody and I come from nowhere and I’d like to sell this house, you know, just like that.*” Juju blinked and scratched herself behind the ear. “There were cases where it was the other way around, though. People couldn’t get to the apartments they had here. *No ID? Well, I guess there’s nothing here for you, is it?*” Juju looked at the floor. I recognised the reflex she got when she imagined herself in difficult situations. “Yes, that’s what we do. Monthly parties for the victims of those nice ladies down

at the local administrative unit who grabbed a pair of scissors and went swish.” Juju lifted up the rolling paper with the edges of her fingers and ripped it apart. The sound twitched into the silence that gathered at the edge of the table.

“I still don’t believe it,” said Furious after a few long seconds. “That all of them simply didn’t *know* at the time. I don’t believe it.”

Juju shrugged.

“Well, that’s not my problem,” she said. “I spend most of my time thinking about the people who *did* know what they were doing. And mostly what they *want*. And I want them to finally admit they simply wanted to get rid of a few thousand people in a horrible way. That’s why I’m doing all this.”

“Go right ahead,” said Furious, waving her hand. “And good luck.”

She turned on her heels, walked to her room and closed the door behind her.

Juju nodded to herself and leaned back. She picked up the cigarette from the table, sealed it and put it between her lips.

“I’m not thinking of becoming president anyway,” she muttered. “It would be way too small of a challenge for me.”

*excerpts from the novel translated by Špela Bibič*