

Katarina Marinčič

THE WOMAN WITH THE SILVER EYE

“It’s a posh villa with a boxwood perimeter hedge and nothing but farm houses around it. You should pay them a visit since you’ll be going that way, then you can tell me how they’ve got it furnished inside.”

But they’re not even related to us, not really, he would have objected until not long ago. Tonight he just lied without the least twinge of guilt, so naturally that he felt it wasn’t a reasoned response, but came straight from his body, kneaded and toughened by time. “Sure, mom, why not?”

What struck him in this business of the Slapar’s villa was that his mother was viewing him as a potential ally in her elderly nosiness - a clear sign that she now finally saw him as completely grown up. He found this pleasant in some strange way. He couldn’t have explained how it was connected, but he felt the way he did on those rare occasions when for an instant he thought he could become someone else, overcome his crippling self-consciousness and do things toward which he felt a profound aversion: play golf, dance a waltz, clap in time to the Radetzky march, organize his high school reunion.

He caught scent of the boxwood and went back to his childhood, to his essence. This now had nothing to do with his mother. Lying to himself had always been his favorite variety of lying. He had no intention of stopping, but he enjoyed pretending that he wouldn’t make the actual decision until the very last instant.

He sped up just as he got near the hedge. His heart began pounding, but not from exertion, since the road sloped gently downhill. He set out at a sprint, as though monstrous rubber hands were reaching out for him from the hedge, fat fingers with their pudgy, glabrous little pads.

No question, those were the hands from the haunted house in the Tuileries Garden that his mom and dad had taken him to see as a reward for patiently touring Paris with them for two days in a row, when he noted in his Bordeaux-red notepad in an already finely articulated slanting script, *saw the Louver, the Eiffel Tower, the dome of the Invalides, Napoleon’s tomb...* At the time it felt like a slight for them to reward him as though he were still little. (On the other hand not so much that it clouded his pleasure; still, he acted as though he weren’t having fun.) On the verge of his mature years he had to admit that his memories of those sights from his notepad were faded and distant. *Tout change*, in adolescence his handwriting shifted from an introvert’s to that of an extrovert. (Adolescence, introvert, extrovert: what nonsense people think up, how insulting it all is for a child, for a person!) Only his memory of the rubber fingers was still vivid, as though it had just been yesterday.

With the road deserted and no one in sight, he pretended that voices kept surging after him, drawn out wails one moment, raucous staccato shouts the next, cranes one moment, seagulls the next: as though from the villa’s porch someone were alternately urging the rubber monsters not to give up, and then calling out for him to stop and come in for a cup of coffee. Just don’t look back and it will be fine, he reassured himself, they don’t even know he can hear them. All right, it’s all right now, now he was far enough away.

“I rang the bell twice, mom,” he’d say. “Either nobody was home or they were still asleep.”

At ten on a Saturday morning it wouldn’t be unusual if they were still sleeping. He’d ring the doorbell, wait, try to look at himself in the window. He’d admire his torso, his broad shoulders and flat stomach in the bright green T-shirt. He’d at least take off his helmet, since the shoes already made him look a bit like a duck. In the window the circles under his eyes would be visible. When it’s humid, they swell. The second time he’d ring, his palm would sting and

that would tell him this bell was probably the persistent, buzzing type. Among the pleasant emotions the sight of the house would have already evoked, there would now be a good-natured insistence. The thought that he was waking somebody up would suddenly be gratifying. (We don't even know, after all, what really wakes us up. Daylight, noise, a touch - or in all of these cases a fear of intrusion?)

Anja Kogovšek Slapar would shudder in anger that the neighbors were remodeling again. Then she'd remember that now she lived in her country house, no longer her Ljubljana apartment. Oh, the doorbell, she'd sigh as she turned onto her side. There was no way she was going to go answer it. Slapar and her children would sleep on undisturbed.

It would be as though he, Emil, simply didn't exist. The birds would chirp to the delight of the lady of the house, who would observe the band of sunlight on the hardwood floor beside her bed as morning tears crept from her right eye onto the pillow. Perhaps she'd stretch her fingers, perhaps her knuckles tended to swell if she lay in bed for too long. (He couldn't remember her hands. They might look like a pianist's, but then again they might not. Not all pianists have pianist's hands.)

He went up close to the glass to block out reflections so he could see into the entryway. A raincoat, windbreakers, sweaters, a straw hat, umbrellas. House slippers lined up in a row. A metal dish, a purple Whiskas bowl. Dust and cat fur on the inside ledge, with particles afloat because the window frame isn't tight. Or an alternative, poetic explanation: the dust is in motion because this household is full of living beings.

Suddenly he'd realize he'd been prowling around this house for an eternity, with no one inviting him in. He'd dash off the porch and out of the yard, angry at himself, but then less so at himself.

Not even a chance, he gasped. Not even the least chance he'd go barge in on people. He could stay maybe ten minutes. Turn down any offer of coffee and at most have some juice, or better yet just some water.

If she chose not to hide and come open the door, he'd address her formally at first. Hello, ma'am, I don't know if you remember me, but my mother spoke to you after your concert at the summer outdoor theater. *Please, without the ma'am*, she'd interrupt him, smiling - didn't we determine then that we're relatives? Distant, he'd nod. Your great grandfather and my great-great-grandmother Ana Kogovšek, known in her village as the Carver's little Anica, were first cousins. She got married to someone in Austria. Their descendants have a hotel on Lake Wörth.

He'd stop speaking because he'd have noticed that her thoughts had gone somewhere else. He'd understand, he wouldn't mind, genealogy had never particularly appealed to him, either. Put in other terms, he'd be at a loss for words. Her eyes would gleam dimly like stars in late autumn. (At the concert she'd worn a dress with no sleeves. She'd rested the gladiolas she was given at the end against her upper arm with what had looked like a touch of resistance, since the stems were probably cold. It's incredible what white skin some women have on their upper arms, especially along the inner side.)

There are no more hideous flowers on earth than gladiolas, he went charging up a slight hill. As if some Asian martial arts instructor had designed them. (Lots of those people are into drawing and their favorite subjects are swords, flames and dragons.)

He was passed by a green car. Shift into third, sister, you're killing your engine, he said in his thoughts. Without any particular vehemence, since he rarely got angry at present reality, the way he did about memories and speculations.

Soon the road became level again. It was a hot day and there were shimmering spots, false puddles on the asphalt ahead of him. He felt relief when the road reached a wooded area. The cool air caressed his cheeks and his eyes were at last free to open up wide. He pulled off the roadway at the first turn-off for passing, sat down on some logs and had a good look around. The rays of the sun pierced through the crowns of the trees vertically like heavy brass poles. He took some pictures. Cupping the screen of his phone with his hand, he checked to make sure he'd captured the emerald cast of the light. He added a note to one picture, *Called mom yesterday, she's OK. How are the two of you? Hot here. Not sure if I'll have signal up there, don't worry if you don't hear from me. Hugs and kisses.* Then he remembered. *Once more, this time without the photo in case you don't have multimedia.*

"All right," he said and got up.

This was the first thing he'd said out loud since calling his mother and it had sounded to him like a bad recording. He swallowed as if trying to unblock his ears. Suddenly he got dizzy, his field of vision went black and he reached an arm out to grab onto whatever tree trunk was nearest at hand. His vision came back quickly, though everything seemed edged in gold for a while. Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta, a woodpecker or some distant machine rattled away. He could hear the leaden ebb and flow in his veins.

He forced himself to take a drink of water from his canteen. The water got stuck going down, forming a bubble of air somewhere in his chest. He hadn't swallowed that much water or that much air, but the resulting bubble was hard and exerted a pressure that forced him to double over. He decided to ride on, since on the bike he'd have to be hunched over, anyway.

His stomach gurgled and began throbbing more powerfully than his heart, jabbing at his upper abdomen and seizing at the small of his back. Slowly these discomforts passed. Then his thighs and calves began burning and he got the feeling that his muscles and tendons had stopped seizing up. His thighs began rhythmically pumping as the force of gravity pulled them down, while a stronger and stronger force from below, like the cast-iron pedal of an old-fashioned sewing machine, kept pushing them up. It's just in the way, his grandmother used to say, I'd put it in the attic if only the whole thing didn't weigh a ton.

Weigh a ton, weigh a ton, he inhaled and exhaled. Each exhalation had the fuse of a burst of laughter in it. *A ton... A ton...*

As he came out of the forest he was greeted by brownish, desolate slopes. The houses had red house numbers on them, Valley 1, 2, 3 and 4. Valley 2 had no stucco on it and its lowered roller blinds were overgrown with moss. That's a strange combination, he thought. Roller blinds are too modern and vulgar for a house in the country, but here they are, rotting with age. (And it's a desolate gulch, not a valley.)

He rode at a leisurely pace through villages with more appropriate names: Black Village, Black Water, Black's Clearing, Devil's Sawmill. Mud the color of buckwheat groats was drying in the culverts. Tufts of vitrified grass hung out of drain pipes built into the escarpments. There was almost no traffic.

Twice he rode past an old man. It couldn't have been the same old man, but both times were identical. A man standing on the side of the road and staring ahead, as if admiring the view. But there was no view to admire, which made the old man's posture seem strong and defiant, along with his sweater, which years of wear had turned into armor.

In Black Water there was a bar. Its door was closed and it was dark inside. (Maybe it opens later, if it's a bar.)

Then he began the main ascent. The barren slopes opened out and the road began to gleam like the path leading to heaven in a religious painting. He put on his glasses and fastened his gloves. Now, for a while, he'd stop thinking in allegories.

As he pushed uphill, the sweat began pouring down his face and his back and out of his nose. A little boy with prickly hair stuck his tongue out at him from the back window of a passing Škoda Superb. Just as he was about to stick out his tongue back, he realized it was already hanging out of his mouth. The boy, who had since vanished around a corner, was actually imitating him. At a moment of extreme effort, that fact seemed more bitter to him than funny. It also annoyed him when people cast him meaningful glances from cars as they passed. Some woman sitting in the passenger's seat of one car did her best to keep from even glancing across at his thighs. Her fat cheek shook, colorless, and her eyes were outlined in black like Nefertiti's.

At the top - not quite the real top, an intermediate stop, the end of the steepest part of the climb - he got a surprise. Meadows! He liked the word and it fit. The landscape was bowl-shaped, fluffy, gently magnificent. The village here was conveniently laid out, with enough room for the houses, which weren't jumbled up, but stood at a peaceable distance from each other, yet still together.

How little it takes in our country to escape from the city into a rural idyll!

Right after this another bright thought occurred to him: he got the impression that this place was happy because he knew that the people who lived here returned home from some office or factory each day straight through those meadows. In winter it would already be getting dark when they got home from work. Darkness would enfold them like a blanket, separating them from the world all night long so they could sleep in this cradle in the midst of the universe. On a sunny summer weekend like this it would be the other way around, your home here was the universe, with the world so far away you were scarcely aware it existed.

He dismounted, walked his bike and listened. He heard a hand mixer from somewhere, its blades rattling against the sides of a plastic bowl. Somewhere a child was splashing in water, probably in an inflatable pool, his high-pitched whoops soaring as if at the seaside. A Mediterranean melody boomed out of a garage with its door wide open.

He walked to the rhythm of the bass, relaxed but festive. He couldn't make out the lyrics, though he knew them by heart, he knew at which point the song was going to launch into its hymnic surge. At the pause just before the refrain he blinked and felt a pleasant shudder, as though from a towel drying his lightly sunburnt shoulders.

When he was little, nobody worried about sunburn. That balcony niche up there must have been painted precisely back then, and just that one time. His eternally childlike eyes took a delight in its geometric mural. It was a black and white pattern that glimmered. Circles, triangles and trapezoids. The way it glints probably tricks some people into thinking there's a mosaic set in the niche, but that's just paint mixed with mica powder. When he was little, items made out of artificial materials were popular. Women's polyester slips, plastic wicker baskets, drinks of every possible horrific color.

Beneath the balcony a rhododendron extended its branches in domesticated obstinacy. In the window a curtain with a decorated border shielded the living room and orchids stood arrayed on a shelf like dancers in a chorus line with their stems all rising at the same angle. The thought of the relentless order that had to govern that household aroused him in a grim sort of way.

It was quiet in the old part of the village, though the people had to be home. Real country folk don't take seaside vacations or even short weekend trips. The air was filled with a variety of sour smells: manure, compost, silage, last year's apples.

The church was tiny. On a signboard at the gate to the churchyard a sheet with guidelines for visitors had been signed and stamped by the president of the village council. Next to that was an invitation to the chess club's upcoming meeting and an ad for math and physics tutoring. Saint Peter stood holding book and key in a shrine, looking innocent, chipmunk-alert and unmistakably brown-eyed.

The silence was shredded by a hoarse bark. (Dogs have acute hearing and can get upset by the least little thing, all it takes is a dry twig under a cyclist's shoe.) Emil was frightened. It wasn't cowardice he was ashamed of, so much as the relief he felt when he heard a chain rattle. He told himself he could kill the fat woman who shouted fuck that shit and kicked a dishpan at the German shepherd. But that was just childish self-reassurance, yet another reason to be ashamed. In fact, he smiled self-effacingly at the woman and stammered a greeting. She turned her back on him. Her hair was tied up in a bun at the fat nape of her neck. She was still young, at most thirty.

As soon as he'd reached the meadows, he began hoping the village would have an inn. But it turned out not even to have a farm bed and breakfast. Not that he would have gone to one, he would have been much too embarrassed by its artificial hospitality.

He had his snack under an old apple tree. He'd made sandwiches with a special chicken salami, cheese and cucumbers. He'd deliberately packed food that he didn't ordinarily eat at home. Now that it turned out there was no inn, that proved to have been providential: so he could enjoy a change of pace, after all.

He stretched out, let his eyelids droop and drifted off to sleep. He dreamed that dragonflies were darting over him and that bees and wasps were humming nearby. According to the logic of dreams he took these as good signs. He woke up abruptly, to utter silence. It reverberated and then only gradually filled with sounds: cicadas, a large bird strutting and pecking, a brook, a lawn mower. The air was humid and oppressive, but he felt refreshed. He thought there had to be coltsfoot growing alongside the stream. Coltsfoot, cowslips and silt: cool, wet and refreshing words.

There's no forest like a pine forest. No other forest has such dark shadows or such recognizable scents. (It smelled particularly of resin. The air was syrupy and slightly intoxicating.) Pine wood isn't much use and changes its color in unpredictable ways. The timber is one thing, but the trees themselves are another. As trees, pines are highly predictable. Their branches are always the same weight, bowed gracefully down under the same burden. Surely they must break at times. Surely pine needles die and fall off eventually, sending up new needles to replace the old. But all that happens unnoticed, the lifetime events of pines take place in secret.

He thought about how the tips of pine branches had always struck him as artificial, made out of wax. And the moss on their trunks, how else to describe it than by comparing it to something inanimate? Like velvet. There are fewer sounds in a pine forest than in a deciduous one. There aren't any ticks, so that's at least one worry less. (Forest road, read the sign at the last fork, proceed at your own risk.)

He didn't waste any time at the barrack out in the clearing, just gave it a quick glance and moved on. It was the meeting place of some group, with a coat of arms and a pair of chamois antlers hanging over the front door. An outdoor fireplace with a cement chimney, a stack of charcoal, a grill and a stand for a kettle. Benches with plastic upholstery in a pattern normally used for tablecloths. A barrel for rainwater, translucently white with black rings at the levels the water had reached in the past. A smaller barrel for trash, blue and filled with green cans; once it

got emptied, they'd be able to cover it again with the wooden lid that somebody had fashioned a handle for out of boat cordage.

He reached the top early in the afternoon. There would be plenty of time of time to ride back down while it was still light. If, as he reached the hikers' lodge in the pass, it occurred to him that darkness was approaching inexorably, that was more just an observation than a cause for alarm.

Why do we say that darkness falls? Darkness sneaks up from below, waits in ambush and finally tightens the screws from all sides. Its perimeter was already visible as a black line at the edge of his field of vision. In *that* sense darkness was already at hand.

The parking lot was full. Out on the terrace, which was paved with composite flagstones, people out for a weekend drive were seated, their noses buried in tall glasses of whipped cream. The lower half of the building was faced in reflective glass, while the upper part was covered with metal roofing colored and shaped to look like roofing tiles. Rust was oozing down from the screws that held the roofing in place. The curtains in the attic windows had a red and white checker design.

It was like Italy, in the Dolomites: mountainous, yet cosmopolitan. The atmosphere buoyed him up. In this place that he was visiting for the very first time, he was more at home than the furtive souls watching him from the terrace. *Felicità!* Watch me, folks, as I secure my bike! See? A totally non-chalant person arriving at a lodge in a mountain pass does exactly what I'm doing, dressed in exactly the same biking gear. And it may well happen - why not? - that he decides to extend his bike tour and spend the night in this charming lodge.

From the building's entrance he looked first into the room at the left. A small office. Between a table and the window a child's rug depicting a road with intersections lay on the laminate flooring.

The interior of the place was disappointing. Not that the smell of warm plastic put him off - he liked it, the way we like familiar things. (What else was he supposed to expect on the other side of that reflective glass?) It was just that the furnishings were so unexpectedly soulless, especially the table surfaces the color and pattern of quail eggs. Maybe it all makes a warmer impression, he reassured himself, when it turns cold and there aren't all those people outside. He felt even more reassured by the mardi gras garland hanging over the register.

He noticed that aesthetic discernment had clearly gone into the way the bottles of liquor were arranged on their shelf. At the midpoint, at the transition from red labels to green, was a bottle of Cynar. He assumed that the arrangement had not been the work of the lady who was putting dishes away behind the bar. But there was some winning quality even in her gestures. She was taking baskets of steaming porcelain out of the dishwasher, averting her face from the damp billows of heat, bending over and stretching like a bird when it preens.

"Outside, second door on the right," she called out to him.

He greeted her as he approached the cash register. He knew this was stupid, that it must have needlessly, inadvertently sounded like he was scolding her. He could have just shaken his head to signal that he wasn't looking for the restroom, instead of clinging to the lines he'd already made up in his head, "Hello, ma'am."

"Go have a seat outside. The waitress will come take your order," the woman shot back.

He wasn't certain she'd actually taken the reproach personally. Maybe she always made such a racket with the dishware. No, he didn't want to order anything, he'd do that later, he explained amid the din. Coincidentally - or maybe it wasn't a coincidence and the power of well-chosen words was showing itself here - it got quiet just at the moment he went back to his script.

“Actually, ma’am, I wanted to ask about something else. You have rooms available, don’t you?”

Without looking away from the coffeemaker, in fact, looking straight into it and without even turning her head to direct her voice to the back room, the woman called out, “Klavdija!”

Klavdija came out of a doorway with a sign reading “employees only” over it. She wasn’t tall. If he’d wanted to hug her he would have had to bend down. She was dressed in black spandex pants and a light brown, zippered sweater. She wore an apron as a substitute for pockets to have some place to put her waitress’s billfold. He detected the scent of fabric softener and one of those revolting powdered deodorants. He guessed she was about thirty-five years old. She probably hadn’t changed much since she was twenty. And she probably wouldn’t for a long time to come, with a body lithe and firm, as if made for gymnastics.

He examined her with calm curiosity. He saw everything, took in everything. He could read from her face how little had taken place in her life. She’d excelled at school, the best in her class, and she’d been good at athletics, completely bypassing any awkward age. And that’s how things stayed. The straight A’s, the praise and the medals had hardened like rosebuds paralyzed by frost, as every year fewer of her classmates wished they could be like Klavdija. The disappointment that showed on her face hadn’t been acquired with the passage of years. She’d been disappointed for a long time, from the start. When she was younger it had actually given her a certain advantage, a motive to grimace disdainfully whenever anybody predicted how far all that skill and dedication was going to take her. And here she was, still dedicated and skillful and never, ever awkward.

“What is it, Mrs. Jeglič?”

What is it *this time*, she was actually thinking.

“This gentleman is interested in a room,” Mrs. Jeglič shrugged.

It was only now that Klavdija noticed a third person was present

“Oh, hello,” she said. “You wanna to stay overnight?”

The A student was addressing him as if he was a peer. So she had a sense of irony, too.

“If you have a room free. I’m here on my bike, you see.”

Her upper lip twitched. The smile didn’t extend to her rounded cheeks, caressed by the ends of her pageboy haircut.

“Well, I suppose that part’s obvious,” he said, passing a hand over his abdomen.

At least Mrs. Jeglič laughed at this, even if Klavdija didn’t.

“And if everything’s already taken, no problem,” he said.

Klavdija gave him a startled but indifferent look. (And that’s how he immediately noticed and interpreted it - at the instant she first looked at him that way, she had resolved that this was the look that was most appropriate for interacting with him.)

“We have rooms,” she said.

She took a basket full of keys out of a drawer on her side of the bar. The numbers on their fobs had been written by hand.

“Do you want to look at them first?” she asked.

“No need, whatever you have, I’ll be fine!” he exclaimed.

“Single with bath,” she said.

“Don’t we do this at the reception desk?” he asked, getting yet more indifferent surprise in response.

“I thought the reception desk was in the office back there.”

“That office is rented out,” she said. “You can give me your ID right here.”

It frustrated Klavdija that the registration book kept closing on her, and here was something where he could relate to her: a fondness for cooperative notebooks and a hatred of unruly ones.

“I’ll take you there,” she said.

No, no, he’d be fine if she’d just show him which way.

“Over there,” she said as she pointed to the corner, where he could barely make out the gleam of a doorframe.

“Next floor up, room four.”

He took the key and set off. Reason told him it was less dark in that corner than he thought, that his eyes had lost their ability to adjust after being out in the sun all day. Then a dense, fearful feeling overshadowed this rational explanation and swallowed it up: in order for his eyes to adjust to this much darkness, he’d have to keep blinking for as many hours as he’d spent out in the sun in the course of his life.

“Wait!” Klavdija called to him.

He turned around toward the light. His eyes hurt, seizing up in a spasm of gold. What was more unusual was that he felt the same kind of cramp in his lower abdomen. As if he were submitting to something, as if he were losing control.

Klavdija tore a receipt out of a square notepad.

“You have breakfast coming to you,” she said.

On the other side of the doorway it was no longer dark, with half-basement windows admitting a milky light. Suddenly his eyes were the least important of his senses. Now he could see precisely enough: the terazzo flooring, the corkboard siding, the metal stairway railing. He was drenched in cold. But this cold assaulted him differently than if he’d walked into a draft wearing a damp T-shirt. This chill was ancient and took hold of him, weighing his body down like a suit of armor. There was the smell of mold, with a slimy rotten stench penetrating the acrid aroma of penicillin. The memory of going with his grandmother to the pharmacy mixed with a recollection of having to go to the basement to fetch up potatoes. (*Don’t tell me you’re afraid, Milly!*) Good god, he thought to himself horrified, what have I done to myself, what sort of night do I have to endure! His teeth chattered. Midway up the stairs he warmed up slightly, probably from sheer movement.

There was another door at the top with a thick mustard-yellow glass pane in it, reminiscent of an antique German sideboard. He pushed on the door handle. Sometimes the body is smarter than us. Only later did he realize why he was glad when the door at first didn’t give. It was stuck from years of high temperatures, because up in the attic it was hot. He stepped over the threshold and carefully pulled the door shut behind him. He could have sworn that his face had been caught in a fine, warm spider’s web - even though there was nothing left in the hand he used to wipe it off. *Spinne am Morgen bringt Kummer und Sorgen, Spinne am Abend erquickend und labend.* He liked house spiders, so only believed in the second part of the proverb and took special delight on seeing a spider in the late afternoon or evening.

Once he’d heard from some roofer that spiders find their way into houses with the rafters and beams and that whole spider colonies can survive the trek from forest to roof. He didn’t look into whether that was true but took the man at his word out of a feeling that if submitted to a comparable trek on a human scale - felling, timber slide, stripping, planing, hammers, saws, everything the little creatures might have to endure - he, too, would be able to endure it. The resilience and adaptability attested to by the spiders’ miraculous survival impressed him, the way the

good qualities we have that we know people either don't notice or are unable to appreciate impress us.

His room was tiny. The air was stale and smelled of turpentine. He dropped his two handbags and took off his shoes. He pulled the bedspread and blanket off of the bed and stuffed them into the wardrobe where he wouldn't have to see them anymore. He stretched out on the bed and covered himself with the sheet. Under the sheet - as if he were hiding, but then again not, not bashfully - he slowly peeled off his tights, T-shirt and socks. The linen didn't stick to his bare skin, but just touched various parts of his body like a salubrious hand.

He typed a message. *Arrived at the pass, decided to stay overnight and extend bike tour. Good weather forecast. Lodging OK. Miss you both.*

He really did miss them. As he typed, he broke into a smile. However, this wasn't the smile of a happy person, rather of a good person observing happy people from a distance. He, the real, palpable him, was content at that moment, not happy. The room he had occupied like a spider's cocoon induced complex thoughts that he would leave behind, one after the other, aware that he was supplied with all the essentials.

He had one sandwich and half a chocolate bar left. He wouldn't have to go back downstairs. But he probably would, because a beer would really hit the spot.

"If that's not the smell from their frying vat coming through the air vent," he thought regarding the turpentine smell.

When the sky outside his little window turned purple, he knew he was past due to go down. The door to the shower stall was still in his hand. He pushed it back, then waited with it half open for the water to heat up. The floor of the stall gave way as he stepped in. Like the plastic cliff under Wotan in that Russian production of *Die Walküre*.

The bar of soap had melted in the heat - oh no, out of the question that somebody else might already have used it. The towel had been washed pink over the years and undoubtedly dated to the time before the place's most recent remodel. He put on a checkered shirt and a pair of dress shorts and told himself he was at least half back in civilian clothes. The shirt, which he'd bought at a sporting goods store, only gave the impression of a dress shirt. The material was silky, some fabric that dried quickly and didn't get wrinkled. He frowned at the thought of some loner who might buy a shirt like this, or a whole bunch of them, for everyday use, so he could get by without ironing and maintain the illusion that his wardrobe was looked after by a loving hand.

At the top of the icy stairway he heard voices from the tavern below the way we hear them from underwater. He wasn't absolutely convinced they existed, they could have just been sounds in his ears. But the scene revealed when he pushed the door open was one of the most real ones he'd seen in his life.

Men were standing the length of the bar. He counted them quickly: eight. They were each of them so firmly entrenched, that he said to himself: what a marvel. A marvel that a place that just two hours before had seemed empty and desolate could now look like it's always been occupied! Sure, the darkness outside may have turned the window panes into an impenetrable wall, but that change wasn't important. The territory of the men at the bar didn't even reach to the windows, only as far as the light from the bell-shaped metal lamps hanging over the bar reached. And even if those were just sixty-watt bulbs, there was more light here than the locals thought decent for illuminating their homes, and its color was warmer. A community hearth, more enticing than their individual hearths. Embers glowing in a cave, and against the back wall

of the cave the gleam of colored bottles and glasses, a pirate's treasure. No wonder these guys are here every night.

He sat down at a table at the edge of the band of light. His eyes caught on the row of flat rear ends, all of them just a shade too flaccid and low, like the trousers that hung from them. It took him a while to notice that among the men there were also two women. Both were in shadow, each in her own way.

The older of them was quietly sitting on a bar stool, one elbow propping her up at the edge of the bar. She was sipping white wine and only occasionally focused on anything - and even then she didn't really redirect her eyes or move her head, you could just see, even from this far off, that her eyes, which were blue, came to life. She had bleach blond hair, which had been teased and was held in place with hairpins.

The younger one was short, slim and dark-haired. She was flitting around the bar like an imp in the underbrush. She kept trying to talk the men into a game of darts.

"Christ, you're annoying, Andreja," one of them said. "As annoying as a fly buzzing around with those darts."

The imp burst out laughing along with the bears and her forced laughter revealed two fence-like rows of front teeth followed by gaps where there should have been molars. The older woman shrugged, but her shrug apparently set her off balance, because she nodded, quickly recovered her equilibrium and frowned. No one except Emil had noticed, but he didn't count. Of course the regulars had noticed his arrival. As he had approached his table, there had been a five-second silence. Not more than five seconds, because then they did their best to raise a ruckus again. It would have been beneath their dignity to be bothered by an outsider. That was the first reason they let him alone. The other reason was the bidding of their queen, who stood at anchor in the bay of the wooden bar.

Klavdija had frowned for an instant when she first noticed him standing back in the corner doorway. A second after that expression of displeasure, a strict, taut look appeared on her face. Eyebrows raised, teeth clenched, with mute authority she ordered the men to settle down for their guest. He was grateful to her, though he knew she didn't do it for him, but for the reputation of the lodge in the pass - and even that not so much out of a sense of dedication to the establishment as conformist A-student habit. He sat in the refuge of his table as if on some sheltered cliff ledge, as if in a theater box and understood again what Klavdija's position was like. Her after-dark authority was fragile, depending on a balance of attentive listening and staring off into space. She had to give the impression that nothing got past her, especially no jokes. It was all right for her face to dimple, as if on the verge of laughing. But she couldn't laugh outright, because then she'd no longer be conductive and all the tension would stop flowing through her. ("Don't overdo it, Stojc, or Klavdija's gonna throw you out. See, you've already got her mad.")

Before approaching Emil, she rinsed her hands and dried them on a dishrag. She didn't ask him what he wanted, she just planted herself next to his table.

"A large Laško if you have it on tap, otherwise just a bottle," he rattled off. "I imagine the kitchen's closed by now, but maybe there's some small thing to eat?"

"Such as?" she exhaled.

"Whatever you have on hand," he said. "It really doesn't matter what. A sweet roll, for instance."

"A sweet roll?" she asked, surprised.

"The decoration made me think of it," he said, pointing to the garland hanging over the cash register.

Then came a voice from the bar, "He's right, Klavdija, you've still got us celebrating Fat Tuesday!"

"Kavčič cheesecake, savory strudel," Klavdija said in a low voice.

"I'll have the savory strudel," he answered, also quietly, almost conspiratorially.

She wasn't in the mood for conspiracies and replied with a loud, "You want that warmed up?"

"Sure... please," he said, out of a sheer desire for affirmation. (The bell of the microwave would cut into the usual backdrop of noise, at least he'd have that satisfaction.)

Once he got what he'd ordered (the beer was bottled), once he relaxed and began to feel safe, his field of vision opened up. Most of the time his attention was still focused on her, the A-student in her illuminated bay. But gradually the men standing on shore each began acquiring distinctive traits, too.

One of them was exceptionally good-looking: like a youthful noble patriarch from some Oriental painting, like a traveler out of an ad for Camel cigarettes. His sandy hair (light brown with some streaks of gray) cascaded in waves to the nape of his suntanned neck. His eyebrows were dark, his eyelids translucent, his nose prominent with just the right arch, his lips full and furrowed like two slices of blood orange. A man like that smells of tobacco, hay, leather and motor oil.

Emil would have liked it to be him. But Klavdija paid no attention to the good-looking man. She kept topping up somebody else's glass slowly and awkwardly, as if she wanted to show everyone that serving him was not part of her job, but a volunteer, recreational activity. The waitress's idol was still young, fair-skinned with sparse hair already tending toward baldness. His eyelids were hooded and if he'd been a German actor, that and his high cheekbones would have gotten him parts as a Russian, in which he would perennially show off the same grimace, a bloodthirsty smile that excites girls like Klavdija and drives them a bit crazy.

It's painful to look at scenes like that, so best not to think about the relationships behind them.

"It's the energy point," a fat man in rubber shoes stressed. "I couldn't believe it. And now I've gone three weeks without any pain."

"What do you mean, energy point?" a guy wearing glasses said as he casually shook loose of the imp. "Cut it out, Andreja!"

"Andreja's energy point is bothering her," Stojc ventured to joke.

Andreja hissed and threw a punch at the man, but the blow fell as flat as his joke. Stojc gave a forced laugh, but not at Andreja, much as Andreja got angry, but not at Stojc, both of them exhausted from vainly vying for attention.

"I don't know what the trick is," the man in the rubber shoes said, "I just know that it doesn't hurt anymore."

The blonde spoke up, but as if from a distance, "Of course it doesn't hurt anymore, Jože."

Her voice was younger than she was, mellifluous and gentle. "The point eliminates energy blockages, so your body is able to draw on its own self-healing reserves again."

A guy in glasses shook his head at this explanation, then moved on to think about something else, focusing on his hand, its fingers extending one by one. Perhaps he was counting.

"There's energy everywhere, we move through it all the time, unaware," the blonde said. "An energy point facilitates its flow and makes it possible for us to consciously tap into prana direct from the cosmos."

After this she fell quiet so portentously that nobody asked her what prana was. Her blue eyes gleamed as though they were tracking her voice through the universe.

“Look at her, she’s off in nirvana now,” the patriarch said. “Menči’s off on her ocean voyage with Marjan already!”

The woman’s eyes started open and she burst into laughter. “Ha ha ha! With Darjan, you dolt!”

The slightest of chuckles caused the guy wearing glasses to shake.

Klavdija turned the radio on, but not very loud. Music from it barely wafted out as far as the tables. Even so, Emil could sense its magical power. He could see the straight A-student’s eyes mist over. Planting both elbows on the bar, she propped her chin on her fists and let herself drift off into a ballad about an indomitable woman.

He had to go to the restroom. As he was washing his hands he listened to sounds coming from the stall: something plastic like a rattle or something, followed by a sharp, metal zipper. He assumed that Menči must have come in after him.

And he was right. The stool at the far end was empty. Klavdija was talking animatedly non-stop. The redhead was scrolling through the feed on his smartphone, periodically giving her signs he was listening. She had him to herself and now her moment had come. (Who knows if she has a chance to talk to him intimately like this every night? The greater the love, the smaller the crumbs it will make do with.)

When Menči came back, she didn’t go straight to the bar. She picked an aluminum tray up off one of the side tables.

“Does anyone else want to try them?” she called out. “I’m not taking them home if I’m leaving town in the morning.”

Late middle-aged, practically old, but not at all out of place in her blue jeans and high-heels. Her gestures were decisive and confident as she offered her cookies around with just a slight bit of pushiness. Klavdija shook her head and frowned. Andreja helped herself to a snowball. The men took handfuls of the small cookies and started tossing them into their mouths.

Emil noticed that the woman was heading toward him with her tray.

“Good evening,” she said, smiling at him.

Her smile was pink, freshly applied.

“Oh please don’t get up. I just thought I’d bring you some of these. We’re having a little party before I go on a trip tomorrow.”

She explained that her friend (and she gave the word “friend” special emphasis) had gotten a good deal on a cruise package called *From Italy to Florida*.

“What a nice, long voyage that should be!” he said enthusiastically.

“Oh, yes. But have some cookies! I spent all afternoon baking them, I was such a good girl.”

The phrase good girl lingered in her cooing laughter.

“Nice! Londoner Stangerle, London bars,” he said, to show that he had charm, too. (As if to say, you and I are both sophisticated types, aren’t we, ma’am?)

Her response to that was “Help yourself to the apple strudel. It has walnuts, in case you’re partial to them.”

She introduced herself. “I’m Menči.” “Emil, pleased to meet you.” She told him she lived in a house at the first bend in the road leading toward Styria. “If you came from Upper Carniola, you won’t have passed my house.”

He would have rather just sat on the periphery and arranged the people into scenes, but if it had to be, he'd make the most of a conversation. Maybe it was because he'd missed contact with people for the past several days. He confided in Menči that he bicycled for the sheer pleasure of it. He enjoyed taking in the panorama of nature and villages from the seat of his bike.

"My wife Sonja and our little girl Sara have gone to spend the whole summer on the coast, where her parents have a vacation house. I've stayed home to finish writing a book and will get my vacation when I join them in August."

She didn't ask him what the book was about or even how old his daughter was. Still, he didn't feel slighted. Her pastel eyes watched him closely and sympathetically. The pauses in the conversation were meaningful. Pregnant pauses were Menči's specialty. Not just later in memory, but even at the time the conversation seemed to go on longer than it actually did.

"You're a nice guy, Emil," she said amidst one of the smoldering silences.

"You're right, but how do you know that?" he was tempted to reply, if only he'd dared.

He looked down to keep her from reading his thoughts. He wouldn't have wanted to insult her. She was overly sensitive from all the wine and in that state, if a person is gentle by nature, our sense of what's good and fitting becomes more acute.

Since they were still hovering between ideal and reality, he permitted himself an innocent fabrication: "On the way here I stopped by to visit my cousin, the pianist Anja Kogovšek Slapar, maybe you've heard of her? She's not a first cousin, we're more distant relatives. In June she had a concert in the outdoor summer theater in Studenec."

"No, I haven't heard of her," Menči said. "I'm fairly new here myself, moved here four years ago. The people here have been welcoming. — I'm telling him how welcoming you all were when I moved here," she called out to the folks at the bar.

"Of course we were, to a fine gal like you."

She laughed and then instantly grew serious again. (As though she were flipping to side B. Side A upbeat dance tunes, side B piano recital.)

"Mr. Bedjanič probably knows your relative," she said. "He's my neighbor. He moves in artistic circles. He's not here today. He doesn't actually live here."

She asked him if he liked the area. There's actually quite a bit to see and do, even cultural activities, something for every taste. Sure, it's nice, he confirmed, especially the nature around here. There's nothing nicer than escaping from the heat into the cool of a forest.

"Emil, trees are healing," she said.

"Oh, no doubt," he jumped in. "There's a beneficence about them that each person experiences in his own way..."

"No, that's rubbish, 'each in his own way,'" she said. "Trees are *healing*."

She picked up the tray and took it on one final, slightly wobbly but determined pass by the locals, who no longer helped themselves to the cookies on it. He thought he'd probably annoyed her, but he was too tired to get upset. By the time she came back to him, he was almost dozing.

"Come with me, Emil, I want to show you something," she said. "Because you said you like pine trees."

He got up obediently and let himself be led out. It was dark outside, the way it usually is in the Austrian countryside. (It's never that dark in Italy anywhere.) Once out on the veranda he had trouble orienting himself, following his memory, instinct and the faint glow of the composite pavingstones. Then he trusted blindly to his guide, who lit their way with her smartphone, following her scent (glycerine cream) and her muffled calls ("Come on, Emil, this way!"). They

went down a wooden walkway (its planks creaking), then slightly downhill until they reached a kind of balcony where he also grabbed onto a metal railing after hearing Menči's rings scraping against it. He could see nothing other than her profile, which flickered like a disfigured daguerrotype: a copper outline against a background of tin. He wondered how she managed to stand so close to him in the dark without ever touching him. He didn't ascribe a sixth sense to her, although at that moment she almost seemed enchanting.

They remained standing there, drawing shallow breaths. Out in the open, no question, and yet there was no sense of openness or space here, with the sky made of black satin and the air motionless. Still, Menči said with a note of pathos, as though she were practicing a monolog behind a curtain that any second was about to go up in front of a full house, "Look, Emil! Those are Bedjanič's pine trees below us as far as the eye can see."

A gust of wind came through the top of the pass only, while the black hole beneath them made not a sound, but just sent a chill wave rushing up, as though the wind had knocked the lid off a huge bowl of ice.

"Does the temperature always go this far down overnight?" Emil asked.

Menči managed not to hear the question. During the process of denationalization, she explained, Mr. Bedjanič had been awarded this forest as restitution in kind. He rents it out now. This isn't his permanent residence, he just has a weekend house here, a cabin. He's grown very attached to the place. He loves to take hikes and likes to say he knows every tree in his forest.

They went back to the lodge. In the entryway he decided he would head up to bed. "I'll pay in the morning, if the young lady asks about my bill."

Menči agreed it was late and that she needed to head home, too. He wished her good night and a wonderful cruise. As he reached the corner doorway, he turned to look back. He couldn't have said she appeared to be in a hurry. (Where else would she be as at home as in the orange light of the bar, which she moved back into like a determined retiree wading into the pool at a thermal spa, resolutely, but with a bit of concern for her hairdo. She was going to be a wreck when she started that cruise.)

He lay in bed thinking that he wouldn't get to see the company downstairs break up and he was perfectly fine with that. (It would have been awkward if that had left him alone with Klavdija at the end.) He tried to find the thought of Mr. Bedjanič's pines funny, until he realized that the subject was actually quite serious. The phantom trees had something poetic and exalted about them. That's how he would describe them if he were going to try to tell anyone what his evening at the lodge in the pass had been like.

Just before dropping off to sleep, his whole body twitched mightily, exhaustion rocking him like the first jolt of an earthquake.

He was awakened by laughter. He looked at his watch. It was slightly past midnight. Stop that, Dejan, Klavdija whined. Stop it, that tickles, you'll tear them, that tickless... And so on, endlessly, until the words and breathing stopped for a minute or two, a minute or two during which, instead of occasional giggling there came the sound of something like the echo from a gym, of a basketball bouncing or repeated leaps from a gymnast's launch pad. (They don't even have to be in the next room, he judged, the walls here are as thin as cardboard.) Then Klavdija laughed again, as loudly as before, only now she kept punctuating the laughs with an occasional *shh!* (She was drinking, too, the cow.)

"What on earth is funny about that?" Emil found himself getting angry. "What are you laughing at, you pitiful creature? Why are you laughing at the most profound, the most solemn thing in the world?"

He closed his eyes in profound solemnity and saw scarlet, as from time immemorial, forever and ever, always the same, each time anew. Scarlet and then flash, flash, flash! *La grande paix d'en haut vient comme une marée*. And for a few moments the blissful feeling that it would never be necessary again.

It's all right to laugh afterward, if at all. And then not nervously, but from the depths of your being, in big helpings, triumphantly, with just a single and for that very reason purified thought: good for me..., good for me...

When the two of them snuck past his door, he had his hands clasped under his head again. (He was used to plumper pillows than this.) He could almost have sworn they were barefoot. Certainly not out of concern for him, more likely concern for order and cleanliness. He thought he heard a cigarette lighter and several failed attempts at lighting it. And now you're going to burn us all down, he muttered.

It was strange how completely alert he was after a full day spent cycling - although it's true it can be hard to fall back to sleep once we've had just a couple of hours of shut-eye. Something had disturbed him. It wasn't noise, just the opposite, it was something in the silence that the two lovers had left behind them. As though chance had smiled at him, as though he'd been given a sign that it was all right for him to indulge an old dream that he'd had countless times before.

He had never been able to understand people who don't grow attached to their houses. If it had been up to him, he would have retained all of his former domiciles. It hurt him profoundly if he was deprived of the right to visit some place he had lived in before. In daylight he would assuage his bitterness with nostalgia. "Do you see that building, Sara? That's where we lived back when I was the age you are now." But in his dreams he'd be standing outside the same building like the personification of hurt. He would glare at the windows and feel sorry for himself and he'd keep going inside - in his head, always in a dreamlike fog - on the wildest pretexts, ready to ask very specific questions. What's the bathroom like, have you kept the gas water heater? Is the living room overfurnished? (Most people stuff their living rooms full of bulky bookcases, but we always just had narrow bookshelves.) The questions always went unanswered, because he never actually managed to finagle his way into the spaces themselves. The more he wandered around one of these dream apartments, the more rooms it had - one residence always had rooms from some previous residences grafted onto it. In the longest variation of these dreams there were steep, winding staircases. Each step up them was accompanied by suspense. Not by any sense of guilt that he was violating an unfair injunction, just by a sense of his own boldness. The shudder, the cold sweat on his upper lip, the apprehension, the indomitable instinct for fun.

That was precisely the kind of delicious glee that came over him that night when he realized he was in the lodge in the pass all by himself. (Would he have been able to explain the connection? He would - if it were to somebody who already understood.) He got dressed quickly. His footsteps were soft and almost catlike.

Downstairs he sat down on Menči's stool. Enraptured, he looked at what the light of the cooler window revealed to him. Ordinary things prepared for the coming day lay there as if set aside forever, like bewitched objects in an enchanted castle. The garland over the register was slightly, miraculously swaying in the faint breeze produced by the cooler located under the bar. The cooler kept kicking on, its compressor groaning like a living being, but a being that was deep in a century-long sleep and didn't mar the solitude. He could see the tables and chairs in

outline. They were like deer timidly frozen at the edge of a wood. More precisely: like the silhouettes of deer set up at the side of the road to alert drivers to their presence. (When you get close enough, your disappointment that the deer and its young aren't real is tempered by the abrupt realization of your own touching susceptibility to illusions.)

He could have scooped up as many napkins, toothpicks, packets of sugar and artificial sweetener, corrugated cuplets of cream, honey in its flat little containers and decorative swizzle sticks for cocktails and ice cream as he might want. He wouldn't take any beer or Kavčič cheesecake, that would have been theft. But he could have helped himself to as many of the things made available to customers and other outsiders for free, if in minimal quantities. He was on the inside that night and had discretion over the whole inventory.

In fact it's not all that complicated, he said to himself. It's just nice, mysterious and special to be in a deserted establishment late at night. I have a right to be here, even if officially I don't and have done nothing to earn it, least of all due to the fact that I have an eye for a particular kind of beauty. (And indeed, what do any of us do to earn the right to be in the world? Nothing. So, does that make this a particular kind of grace? The answer to that again is: no.)

At nine fifteen he was sitting at his table, just in case breakfast was only served until nine-thirty. No trace remained of yesterday's feeling that he was in the Dolomites. He felt short on sleep and fuzzy-headed but reconciled to the fact. Klavdija's face was colorless and she had red rings around her neck from a synthetic T-shirt she was wearing that irritated her skin. Again she was listening to the radio. (What use were traffic reports to a woman who was going nowhere?) The atmosphere was homelike - domestic, but not homey or cozy. He felt like he was on some high school exchange program, sitting in the family kitchen of his counterpart from the other high school, alone with his counterpart's mother or older sister who hadn't yet fixed herself up for the day.

"Back at work so soon in the morning?" he asked. "I assumed Mrs. Jeglič would handle the breakfast shift."

A puzzled look. Maybe she sensed that in his head he was already calling them all by their names: Klavdija, Mrs. Jeglič, Menči, Andreja, Stojc, sparse-haired Dejan, Jože in the rubber boots. (As though the lot of us had minded the cows together, as they say in these parts.)

She told him that Mrs. Jeglič drove up from the valley. During rush hours the traffic down there was awful. She, Klavdija, lived just around the corner, so it was no problem for her to open in the mornings.

"Ah, around the corner, so not here in the lodge. So there's nobody here in the structure at night?"

She grew visibly peeved, maybe because of the word structure. That's how inspectors talk. A normal person would have said building.

"No, nobody stays here at night. Unless there are guests in the rooms, obviously. We have smoke detectors and the fire station is just a couple of hundred meters away. Everything's according to code."

Clearly she had no idea that he'd heard them the night before, Dejan and her. One less thing to feel embarrassed about.

He was horrified when he noticed that she was fixing him an instant cappuccino. He knew himself well enough to realize that he wouldn't be able to ask for real coffee, instead. He'd just blush when she brought it to him and pretend everything was all right.

She was serving him according to her own taste. She had already fixed herself a similar brew (the foam on which had already subsided) and was sipping it from a ceramic mug, in which she'd left a spoon with a long handle that kept sliding down to collide with her cheek. Emil could have readily explained why he didn't at least ask for a Turkish coffee - his heart wasn't up to it - and anyone would have accepted that. But in fact he was a hostage of hopeless misanthropy. He still had enough pride to refuse to deny the misanthrope in himself. It would have been agonizing for him to do, and *that's* why he didn't complain, not for sentimental reasons.

He resolved to spend the new day differently than he had the evening before. Above all, he was not going to make assumptions about strangers. There were too many things that he presumed to understand and care about, and he was constantly developing affinities to poor wretches that he later tired of. He'd be a better person if he could just refrain from being so good.

He wouldn't leave yet. He'd have a look around the vicinity, take in some of the sights noted on his tourist map, systematically, one after the other - no wandering around - and he'd tend to his duties resolutely.

He immediately resumed making assumptions. There had to be more people living in the vicinity of the lodge than the few regulars who hung out at the bar every evening, he said to himself when he went out onto the view terrace and his lungs drew in the warm, but still fresh air. In the hamlets that clustered just under the pass there had to be men and women who left their homes every day with a clear sense of purpose: dressed up for mass, carrying an empty milk pail, or with their saw into the forest...

Instead of a human presence he sensed an avian one. On top of the signboard with the map that he was planning to use as his guidepost, a buzzard was sitting. It thrust its breast out at him straight on, showing its head only in profile. Respectfully he froze, although he knew he'd already entered its field of vision and it was bound to fly off.

But there came no sudden flapping of wings. It spread them, as though revealing its construction - except that there are no such perfect constructions. Its finely articulated bones moved mechanically like the keys of a typewriter, but it was inconceivable that these keys might bunch up or get stuck. Neither Leonardo da Vinci nor anyone else in the history of engineering had ever come close to the perfection of these wings. In just four flaps it was way up in the sky. He watched its receding dot until the pale blue of the sky swallowed it up.

Then a flock of crows passed overhead. Their joint flight sounded like the breathing of a woman giving birth. No, not like a woman giving birth, like something more measured, almost like some athletic endeavor with a barely perceptible undertone of instinctive need: breathing exercises at a course for expecting parents.

He checked his bicycle lock and felt the tires for air. Then he had his phone in hand to report to Sonja and Sara how the new bike was performing. *Good compromise, the bags are a big upgrade, I don't miss the racing bike that much at all.*

Why should they care about that? He left the terrace like a man with a purpose.

He took pictures of the mural on the facade of the firehouse. That would entertain them. It had been recently painted or perhaps restored, the colors were so vivid. St. Florian smiling confidently, his lips a raspberry red. His muscular calves and thighs glowed ocher and his knees were highlighted in orange outlines. His right hand held a dark brown bucket from which he poured gray water onto a tiny church resembling the cement chapels that are so frequent on the roadsides of Eastern Orthodox countries. The building, which didn't even reach to the patron

saint's waist, was entangled in bright yellow flames, above which a cloud of cauliflower-white smoke hovered. The background of the scene was petrol blue.

The area in front of the firehouse served as a playfield, with one basketball hoop and two soccer goals that were small, rusted and missing their nets. Out in the sun the heat was already oppressive. Today's going to be more humid than yesterday, he thought. He fell into an American mood. Not a sense that he was in America (where he'd never been, in fact), but rather a sense that he was watching an American movie. (The image of heat shimmering over the American countryside goes with a particular kind of music: suspenseful, played on loose strings, as if the sound of a cat howling in the distance were mixed with the unnaturally loud, electronically amplified buzzing of flies. The roads in those movies roll on forever.) The sound of the church bells that started to ring from several directions - none from very nearby - returned him to his native reality.

Menči's house at the first turn in the road was small and covered in rough, white stucco. Its shutters had been stained a shade that designers call Provençal. A wreath of dried wild flowers hung over the front door and a broom made of willow branches was leaning against the doorframe. Menči Pirtovšek, Ltd. was written on the mailbox, counseling in personal growth, energy coaching and crystals. He shrugged and sighed. Wind chimes were jingling. If he were going to be disappointed, it would be with himself.

Mr. Bedjanič had just driven up and was carrying items from his jeep into his cabin. Past Bedjanič's place there was another wooden house, this one more modest, off the side of the road on the downslope. Then came houses of some of the locals that leaned into the hillside, as if their builders trusted there would never be any avalanches in their lifetime, the time of those was already long past. Here and there was some new construction, most of it unfinished, with a layer of bituminous coating on their foundations. In one of the unfinished houses, in an empty room with big windows that still had the anti-shatter tape on them from their delivery, he could see laundry hanging on a collapsible drying rack, little baby overalls.

Just before he got to the top of the pass he thought he could sense what it was going to be like in the next valley over. He had ascended from a land that produced milk and potatoes and was about to descend into a world of hopfields and vineyards. On the hops side the yards would be less consistently raked, the houses more arbitrarily decorated. And the people louder.

He almost immediately realized this last part might not be entirely true. The first village on the way down had a garden inn where he barely got a table and where it was so quiet you could hear the sound of the utensils. Conversation was suspended, however, not because this was a village of furtive snoops, but because everyone's attention was fixed on their Sunday meal. The waitress was tall, clumsy and still very young. Her hair was tied in a pony tail and her eyelashes were so light that they seemed like a puffy fringe surrounding her gray eyes. Her cheeks were flat with no dimples, her nose turned up, dainty and more finely chiseled than the rest of her face. A Flemish Renaissance painting, a Dutch doll, he thought. And that was all. There was no sign she had any particular thoughts about him and he, likewise, made no assumptions about her.

For the first time on this tour he grew sad. He looked dejectedly at the side dish to his roast veal, orange-colored rings and green coral beads dripped with herb butter. The cloying smell of frozen vegetables deepened his sadness. He was used to better things. He needed to go back, he decided, he wasn't going to go any further down this slope without his bicycle.

As soon as he left the inn he forgot about *going back*. Instead, he wanted passionately to go *back up*. As though that were some kind of solution, he tried to persuade himself, but not very convincingly.

Instead of using the road he returned on a path that led through the pastures and orchards. The sod was drenched, the ruts upholstered with mossy grass. You never know, sometimes a good path suddenly just comes to an end. He was counting on this one holding out at least as far as the shrine on the slope overlooking the village.

He acted as he would if he knew that somebody was secretly watching him. He made his way uphill, playing the role of a contented hiker. He wasn't pretending, just making a point of outwardly showing his actual disposition. He kept sheltering his eyes from the sun in order to see, smiled at the cows and one baby goat out grazing along the way, smiled at a hayrack, a power line, the summer, the powerful leporine beat of his heart, the juxtaposition of the adjectives powerful and leporine.

But not at Mary. Mary always looks like she could be an actual woman, especially if the statue isn't a work of art. Laughing at a bad statue of Mary would be a sure sign of bad taste. It didn't even occur to him to take a picture of this one. He wouldn't even have tried to describe it, not to mention that he didn't look at it carefully enough to be able to do so. He gave it a quick glance and then respectfully looked away. (There were cracks in the glazing, on her cheeks reminiscent of capillaries, down her cloak like the fissures on the bottom of a swimming pool.)

The path turned into a forest trail with a waymarker that told him it was a fifteen-minute walk to the pass and exactly as much to a place called Ravbar's Ravine. He decided to follow the markers, but on a whim the ones leading to the ravine.

It opened up at his feet and it also stretched out, because it turned out not just to be deep, but extensive as well. He crouched down amid the previous year's litter. (Nobody picks up in the forest.) Through some gnarled branches that jutted out over the edge of the hollow he could make out the far side of the ravine, leading toward another vast upland. The air was transparent. Amid the green mass he could make out individual crowns, not just distinguishing coniferous from deciduous trees, not just lighter from darker masses of foliage and needles. At moments he imagined he could see the wind on the far side swaying the cones and turning the leaves from their green sides to silver. Of course that was just some atmospherically induced shimmer. The shadows from the clouds that were crossing the sky, each one compact and far apart from the others, slid from the left to the right side of the slope with pronounced languidness, as if they were intentionally dawdling. The shadow of a hang glider slid across it a trace faster.

In the slanting light of the afternoon sun the shadows from the undergrowth around him had risen up, too. A short time before he had already decided to stay over one more night at the lodge in the pass. He no longer cared what kind of impression he might make there. It would be more convenient for him to ride back home in the morning. One day more or less, his work could wait for him.

He had found a comfortable spot. The clouds in the west didn't trouble him. Whatever storm might be brewing was clearly a long way off. As he watched the left side of the horizon begin to shut down, he even recalled with a sense of satisfaction one of his few technical victories: a big gray blanket, stretched taut between battens that he had cut to size, that he would use every autumn, usually sometime in early November, to stop up the opening that led to the attic. It moved him to see something taking place in the sky that he could compare with his improvisation. The wind has died down, he thought, the warmth is accumulating. When he recalled the winter decor in the lodge, it occurred to him how much he liked winter, too. Snow, smog, fur-lined gloves. This thought filled him with the sense that he was wealthy and grand, a property owner with a guaranteed income of time: winter would always return for him. Whenever he thought in the middle of summer how much he liked winter, that meant winters in general, many

future ones. (Waiting for summer was something else entirely. He never told himself in the middle of winter how much he liked summer. The winter would be over soon in any event, he'd tell himself.)

Visibility was still good, especially toward the east, except that the light seemed less natural, more electric. He became aware of the woman a good time before he caught sight of her. At first he thought it might be a hedgehog approaching or perhaps even two, her footsteps were so heavy, so relentlessly did she make her way through the undergrowth. She came to a stop close enough that he could hear her breathing. She was wheezing without the anxiety that heavy breathing causes younger people. She was old and fearless, and catching her breath was part of her routine.

The woman was wearing the kind of transparent plastic sandals that people used to wear to the beach when Emil was a child. He recognized the style of the footwear, even though hers were yellowed and misshapen. He noticed a bunion on each foot, the result of wear and tear on the joint of the big toe bending it permanently over the second. (Mom is thinking about having hers operated on, a friend had recommended a clinic near Klagenfurt.) The distensions were so great they had altered the angle of her lower legs. Her calves were withered, but the skin over her shinbones was taut and covered with a scale-like excrescence. The hem of her house dress, printed in a minute floral pattern in shades of blue, hung inertly as a result of the stillness of the air and the fact that her skinny legs supported a much fuller torso.

He looked up. Above a matronly bosom was a face with a fleshy nose and raw cheeks. Her chin had typically feminine whiskers, long and curved, each one distinct. Her neck looked like it was made out of crape paper. Emil's thoughts leaped across decades and he could almost hear the quiet, tremulous and yet piercing chorus of old women singing in church.

It didn't occur to him that he ought to stand up. His behavior adhered to rules more ancient than good manners and he observed the imposing figure from below.

"What are you doing?" the woman addressed him. "Taking a rest? Have you been out picking blueberries?"

She was holding a basket to her waist. The tiny flowers on her house dress could as easily have been crushed berries. If she got fruit stains on herself while out picking, it would have been unnoticeable.

(The simplicity of an old person's life. His grandfather, once he became a widower, lived with one spoon, one cup, no washing up, just some rag that he hid from his daughters and day nurse.)

She laughed at him because he was staring with such obvious curiosity. He was startled only by her big, golden teeth. He didn't feel embarrassed - that was an emotion the matriarchy didn't acknowledge. He kept staring and trying to make sure.

"You almost can't see it."

And then, holding his breath, "Oh, but you can!"

And then again, "But just barely."

One of the woman's eyes was silver. Her right eye was a normal gray. But the left iris lacked a pupil at the center and the glint from that eye came entirely from its surface, like jewelry with a matte finish.

How noticeable the difference between the eyes was depended on his angle of vision, she couldn't control the light or the shadows. If he had the impression that each time he changed his

mind about her eyes an expression of barely concealed contempt crossed her face, that was because the changes kept startling him. He knew that was a false impression, that there wasn't a malicious bone in the old woman's body.

"I've been out picking blueberries, see?" she said holding the basket out for him. "Try them."

He shook his head. "No, thank you."

"Are you afraid you might get rat fever?" she asked.

"No, that's not why," he said.

"I assumed, because it was just now on the radio. We don't have that around here. I've been picking blueberries for the past sixty years and there's never been any problem. Go ahead, try them. They're so sweet. Take two or three handfuls and you'll have a sweet taste in your mouth for the rest of the day."

"I can't. I just had lunch," he said.

She: "Just for a treat! You'll see, they're not sour at all."

He: "Honestly, ma'am, I'm just so full..."

She: "Then take some for home. There you go!" and she set the basket down by his feet.

He can rinse them beforehand, but best not to bother, since they're not dirty at all. Once you get them wet, they go bad very fast.

"Oh my," he said. "This is awfully kind of you, but I really can't. I'd be eating up your supply."

She: "Give freely and God will repay you twice over. I know where they grow. There are so many this year you can't pick them all. Keep the basket so you can go pick them, too."

He relented and thanked her. She gave a slow and dignified nod, as if to say don't mention it, my pleasure. But also stop making faces, this is how it's supposed to be. And then there was something else in the message, something between solicitousness and guile, like satisfaction over a bargain that brings the seller - and she was the seller - just the right margin of profit. Which is far from suggesting that there was some acquisitive trick behind her gift. Still, goods had changed hands and the woman's face couldn't help but show that nobody got the better of her in a transaction.

"Are you out by yourself? And taking a rest?" she asked him again.

He thanked her for the blueberries very distinctly, trained as he was in childhood to assume all old people are a little deaf. She responded in kind, also speaking slowly and loudly. They probably scared any wildlife away.

"I'm doing some traveling. On my own. With my bicycle. I'll be heading back home to the lodge in the pass."

She, skeptically: "No! You don't sound at all like you're from around here."

He: "I'm just renting a room there, of course. At the inn, the place that has rooms for hikers and such."

Lightning bolts began to appear beneath the gray vault to the west. It was unusually regular, zig-zag lightning like in cartoons.

"I'm from Ljubljana, actually," he said.

"And all by yourself?" she repeated.

"I'm here alone," he replied. "But not in Ljubljana."

"Who do you live with in Ljubljana? Do you still have your mommy and daddy? Are you married? Are you a daddy yourself?" the woman with the silver eye asked him.

"I still have my mother. And I'm a dad."

“Hallelujah!” she exclaimed, casting her arms up, as though she were singing a Black gospel hymn.

“What are you smiling at?” she grew angry. “There’s no greater blessing than to be a daddy and have your health. Aren’t I right?”

“You are,” he said.

She didn’t ask him about his children. She was looking at fatherhood from his point of view, which actually wasn’t his at all, since he’d never viewed Sara before as the fulfillment of his fatherly mission.

“I have a little girl,” he said. “I came to her quite late.”

“That doesn’t make any difference,” the woman said. “The main thing is that you’re a good daddy and that you’re kind to your wife and your mommy, who by the grace of God is still alive and with you.”

“I hope that I am.”

“If you think you may not be nice enough, you can always improve. The worst sin of all is when out of sheer stubbornness a person refuses to improve. Don’t you agree?”

“I do, I do,” he said and changed the subject. “It’s really wonderful around here. I suppose you also pick mushrooms? And spruce tips for syrup?”

“The squirrels break all of the spruce shoots and throw them down on the ground,” she said. “In spring the whole forest floor under the spruces is carpeted with them.”

“Why?” he asked in surprise.

“Why what?”

“Why do the squirrels break the shoots?”

“To get to the previous year’s buds, which are their favorite treat.”

It thundered. At that moment he turned to look for the first time with a trace of concern. He asked the woman if her house was nearby. It might be wise for them to take shelter from the approaching storm while there was still time. He had some twenty minutes’ walk to get to the lodge in the pass.

“My house is almost at the top,” the woman said, waving in an indeterminate direction.

And instead of speaking about the weather she began about herself. “I’m not afraid. As long as he’s with me, nothing bad can happen to me.”

“He” was probably God, Emil thought. Like a not particularly gifted child who’s been assigned to paint his thoughts with water colors, out of the cumulus clouds to the east where the sky was still partly clear he had assembled a picture of an old man with a long beard.

“Daddy,” the woman said. “If daddy was around I was never afraid. God protected him and he protected us. When he was a young man he’d been rescued from an avalanche. They were able to find him because he had a whistle on him, thank the good Lord. He lived to be ninety-seven years old. Fit to the very end, not two days before he died he headed out to the forest. Now he’s in heaven and he looks after me.”

Emil could vividly imagine what daddy must have been like before he went to heaven: how he would head out to the forest, how he would stand at the edge of a ravine, shielding his eyes to see across to the other side, his thin legs in their knickers, woolen knee socks and worn hiking boots planted far apart, his massive torso dressed in a green hunting jacket, holding a berry basket at his waist, perhaps with a hunting horn (no, no, he had a whistle, what use would he have had for a hunting horn?), deep laugh lines around his eyes, a long beard like one of those cumulus clouds, gray at the bottom and progressively whiter toward the top.

As he often did when visiting cemeteries, where he liked to calculate what age the people resting beneath the grave markers had reached, he tried at least to determine when daddy had been young: had it been in the early twentieth century, or back in the nineteenth? The old woman had fallen silent, as if out of consideration for him, as though she could tell from his face that he was trying to solve some mathematical problem.

The horizon had closed on all sides. The smell of steamed herbs wafted out of the forest, followed immediately by the smell of black chocolate and clay. Emil squinted and beneath his eyelids two images flashed: a potter's wheel, wet hands smoothing the clay; and some trifle or other, some strands that particles kept getting caught in, tiny lavender blossoms or fringe (and the still vivid recollection of the old woman's dad, her dad's beard). He got up.

"Where shall we wait out the storm?" he was about to ask the old woman.

Then - like Stendhal's young man at Waterloo - he noticed that dirt, not rain was coming down all around him. He felt his cheeks and found that the skin was smooth and swollen, as if jabbed all over with dull needles. There was sand between his fingers and toes, in his nose, his ears and his mouth. He was struggling to keep his eyes pried open as some kind of muck in his eyelashes kept pasting them shut. Behind him something began squealing threateningly, as though there was some dangerous machine in the forest, a gigantic electric cooker that hadn't been cleaned in ages and refused to go off automatically when its water boiled. Then the squeal lowered, turning into a more solemn sound, as if from an organ, as though the wind were blowing through countless pipes. When the wind grew yet stronger, the whistling and howling in the crowns of the trees, just as the words whistling and howling suggest, began in some horrific way to resemble the voices of living creatures.

Something came crashing onto his back and he could have sworn it had happened deliberately, with malicious intent. He could no longer turn around, so he backed away from the edge of the ravine.

"Ma'am, can I help you? We need to find shelter!" he called out.

Through the slits of his eyelids he could see that the woman had crouched down in a ditch. What surprised him was how swiftly and nimbly she'd done that, like one of those animals that despite layers and layers of protective fat remain agile (hedgehogs, doormice and even wild boars). Then he crouched down, too. He contracted into a ball with his back uppermost and tried to get heavy. Soon he could hear sharp explosions, like shots coming from pistols, as all around branches were breaking. Tree trunks began creaking like ship masts, which was comforting - no, no, he knew that was wrong. He was completely beside himself, paralyzed with fear, yet despite this he felt a degree of certainty. He did what he could, which was to protect his vulnerable core. The blows that came crashing down on him had a hollow sound. *Thump, thump, thump*: a branch, a stone, more likely a pine cone. Cold gusts of air soothed the pain they inflicted.

The trees in the forest fell with the same sort of *thump*, but a thousand times louder, as if the hillsides themselves were hollow, not just his ribcage. From time to time, in the moments before a trunk came crashing down to the ground and caused it to shake (just as his ribs were shaking), he could make out the sound of tree crowns getting entangled with other tree crowns in the course of their fall.

The storm subsided as suddenly as it had begun. Something began scratching, as persistently as mice in an attic. Emil was still crouching in his ditch. I didn't scream, I'm not screaming, he thought. And then, from an inertia that wasn't just physical, he made use of the same simile for a second time now: I've been as quiet as a mouse.

He raised his head, slowly straightened and stood up. His legs were wobbly. There was a cut on his right hand which he licked to deaden the pain. His memory told him which way was Ravbar's Ravine. The basin was covered by a low cloud of unnatural density, like the soap foam in a bathtub. (He had always liked baths. When he was little, his aunt from Germany had brought him bubble baths that smelled like various fruit candies. Wow, Milly, what a great *Schaumbad* you've made for yourself, his grandmother had said. *Schambad* is what he'd heard - and once and for all, with the obstinacy of the righteous, he came to insist on that pronunciation. (Shame on the people who would smile ironically whenever the boy in all innocence said *Schambad*.) Once he'd had Schambad in a frog-shaped dispenser that he held onto for a long time after that as one of his most precious treasures. (Where had it gone, when had he lost it, when had they lost it for him?) If there had really been a bath in the basin, that foam would be long gone, it would have dispersed as the water cooled. Something nearby was dripping as though from a broken pipe.

The sky was gray and the slope opposite was a monotonous pastel green. At last he looked over his shoulder and an abrupt shriek escaped from him. The hill behind him was no longer the same hill as before: its forest was gone. But what shook him more than the destruction was the order. The tree trunks lay like pick-up sticks from a game of Mikado which some frustrated child had decided in a kind of pedantry that sometimes comes over even the most poetic of children to arrange them into a fan. (Shall we play a game, Milly? If you want, I'll teach you the rules, his cousin Bojana, dressed in a crocheted sweater and sweating like a grown-up woman, had suggested. Milly had disdainfully shaken his head.)

"Impossible," he said, shaking his head again. "We don't have meteorological phenomena like that in this country."

For a moment he felt offended by the ugliness and inappropriateness of what was before him, as if at the sight of some tasteless urban design solution. Then he realized that there was no sound of tree crowns or bees or flies or birds or cicadas. He grew saddened. He began feeling sick with a wish for a story with a happy ending. He knew in advance that if his wish wasn't fulfilled, he'd fulfill it himself. ("If everything hadn't been so quiet, I wouldn't even have heard their squeaking," he'd say. "I bent down and shone the light from my phone into the gap underneath a boulder where a mouse was hiding with her young, the entire litter had survived the storm." When he'd tell that part, he'd believe it. Why shouldn't he believe such a likely story?)

He took the phone out of his pocket. There was no signal.

"Ma'am!" he remembered. He began feeling hot out of a sense of shame for forgetting about the poor woman. "Ma'am, are you all right? Where are you?"

She was no longer in the ditch. He looked over the edge of the ravine, where the bushes and undergrowth were still intact. If she had slid down there, they would have intercepted her. He kept calling out to her, lifting up heavy branches and tree limbs, and catching his breath each time he didn't find her. In the course of his search he discovered a purple heap: the basket had been carried away, but the blueberries remained. They'd been too insignificant and wet to be caught by the wind. This is where he'd sat and that's where the lady had stood. She had probably just moved on. She'd seemed more the headstrong type, after all.

A civil defense siren began to wail from the top of the hill. For as long as the forest had covered this slope, that siren probably would have been barely audible down here at the edge of the ravine. But now the sound could travel unobstructed and echoless, as though in some enclosed space. The landscape was enchanted, but in a terrifying way, while the siren sounded ordinary, as it did every Saturday: steady for half a minute as a sign that any danger had passed.

Emil set out for the top of the hill.

excerpt from the novel translated by Michael Biggins