

“August, August is the cruellest month.”

Dunja Anko

Ana Schnabl

TIDE

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The branches of the old pine tree hung across the white balcony fence. They were long and heavy, and the cones were barely holding on. At the first gust of wind, which by evening became a storm, it really did, the branches banged against the metal and the inflorescence fell. Above, it tumbled across the tiles; below, across the paving stones of the path that led to the block of flats. Together with the cones, bunches of vivid green needles also surrendered. The orange balcony tiles were covered with heaps of sickly yellow pollen from the male inflorescence, which had not found the female scales in time, and which, when the wind blew again, albeit more feebly, collected in drifts in which he could certainly recognise animal forms. All around there was a smell of trees and – of what exactly? Of spring soil, worms, of soaked and then dried out grass, car exhaust, seafood risotto? Of course, naturally, exactly of that, but also of his generously applied deodorant, an overwhelming mixture of eucalyptus and grapefruit and juniper.

It was an unpleasant smell, extremely unpleasant; she and her mother and father often got a headache because of the fumes, but he would not be told. Then don't smell it, he kept saying. Then hold your nose, he would snap, giving them a black look.

The loose glass pane of the balcony door, thanks to which, spring after spring, damp crept into the living room, reverberated when he stepped through it, his slippers sliding on the tiles. Behind him, the pollen swirled once more. Rearranged itself once more. He bent his head and examined the creation that had poured across the floor. He didn't like it and so he furiously smeared it with his heel into his own creation; he forced it into symmetry, he wanted symmetry, always, everywhere, even though he knew that it could not exist, that something – life, fate,

nature, but aren't those synonyms – would quickly spoil it. And indeed, the wind was gusting in circles. The picture was suddenly scarily yellow and some pollen returned to its source, back to the tree. To a female flower, if it was lucky.

He waved his slender palm, with soft, spread fingers, in front of his nose, in an exaggerated way, as with a fan, as his idol did, that outrageously infamous singer – an artist, Art-ist, he corrected her – whenever he appeared on the high stage in front of a sea of people. There and then the drama of the gesture was justified, for it was the only one visible, but on the nameless balcony... Well, there was no need to begrudge him dreams and passion.

He also wanted to be dressed like this Art-ist. Only *wanted*, for the result was a cheap, quite eclectic approximation. The narrow, black, presumably leather or silk trousers became his father's too wide, ash-grey jeans, cut off above the ankles, instead of the white collarless shirt, again silk, a t-shirt advertising a local company, tucked deep beneath his belt, a leather jacket with hundreds of platinum studs and chains was replaced by a dark brown corduroy jacket with a gold zip. His socks *were* white, a great success, but unfortunately, so were his plimsolls. Black plimsolls could not be found so far from America, so far from the supply. For his parents to buy him some elegant black shoes, of which there were plenty on the market, he would have to behave more like a grown-up, they said, on the feet of an average teenager they would look more like a joke that had misfired, they teased him. The most stellar thing – again unfortunately – was the long silver-plated chain on which, to make it seem unique – but oh, how wrong he was – he hung a dog tag with the name of a fictitious soldier engraved on it, his blood group and Rh factor, which he bought on a stall at the beach.

He reached for the branch that was forcing its way into the shutter of his room – ever since he came back from school it had been scratching against the wood, scraping out its slow, bothersome rhythm – and pushed it lower, so that, for the thousandth time, it caught beneath the window sill. Sisyphus had to appear happy, cheerful at least: his mother had forbidden him to cut the branch, as it seemed charming, even atmospheric, and she *so enjoyed watching it* from her armchair in the living room and his mother's caprices had to be respected.

Before he leaned his elbows on the fence, he turned round again, suspiciously: the caught branch was swaying slightly, *for fuck's sake, if it comes unstuck again*, yes, her irritated brother had muttered something like that.

Supported by the cold metal, he then lifted his sharply formed shoulder and crossed his right leg over his left. He licked his lips and touched his left trouser pocket, in which he had, in which over the past year he *always had* a flat tin with cigarettes from different places, cadged, stolen or extorted, even one Italian and one French one. He would have a smoke, of course, but he had

to be careful: if his father caught him, then he would give him a conspiratorial smile, as one smoker to another, maybe even praise his son's style, but if his mother caught him, oh no, then it would mean nothing other than a battle. So he rubbed his face and pushed his fingers into his black locks, from which he chose three strands and, impersonating a red hot hair straightener, he used his index and middle fingers to straighten and smooth them. He glanced nervously towards the car park and the driveway leading to it, stretched his neck, angled it, hopped left and right beside the fence, stood on tiptoe and bent his knees to take in the clearing between the trees and rhododendrons, the narrow tunnel without those damn branches, through which he could observe her and mother's arrival, but no bloody, erm, fucking angle was right. At least not for *him*, for his weak eyes, for which for two years already, out of vanity, he had refused to wear the glasses prescribed for him. But from the grass beside the driveway, hidden behind the massive metal container for waste paper, she could see him well. Very well, actually.

She saw how he patted his left pocket, to check whether the tin also contained his lighter, and with what eagerness and transgressive skill, which was far from being vulgar, he then lit the cigarette. He placed it avidly against his lips, shook his head as if it was resonating, and inhaled. He exhaled and brought it to his thigh with his hand, which did not travel through air, but through something denser, something tangible, something that already had a beat, something that already had rhythm. He flicked the ash far from the balcony, but without effect, for each time the wind blew it towards the building and the flakes clung stubbornly to his clothes. Now and then he supported the hand that held the cigarette with his other hand, bending his elbow, straightening like a peacock and tapping his padded heels. She giggled a little, of course, because standing there like a prince he looked laughable, and most of all because she envied him: he could be an exceptional dancer, she felt, no, she was *convinced*, he was brilliant, like Michael. His gift was a rare one, it even trickled into the choreography of smoking, tidying up and walking, even sometimes into the way he cut a pizza. Through the slightly ajar door of their room through which she often watched him, he allowed his gift to grow into an improvised but moving and charming variation of *hip-hop*, *jazz ballet*, *voguing* and *what have you*. His economy and precision of movement, his flexibility and decisiveness, his softness but also rigour, speed and clarity, his presence and magnetism, and her, ha, two stiff legs and arms, which her aunt once decided that she somehow *jerked* and which for dance school, *which was in any case too expensive for you*, her mother should believe her, were simply too heavy. Too pernickety.

His cigarette burned right down to the filter, how French, but at the same time Hollywood and macho, and he extinguished it on a rusty part of the fence, where a mark would not be seen as

it would blend in with the background of decay. When he wanted – unwisely, as if he had learned nothing from the experience with the ash – to throw the stub towards the patch of grass with rubbish bins, precisely towards her, he flinched. Or to be more exact: they *both* flinched. *Hi, Jovanka*, from the narrow path, shielded by cypresses, which connected their car park with that of the neighbouring block, their mother yelled, yes, really *yelled*. *Yes, let's get together tomorrow, sorry to cut us short, I really am, I've got to cook*, she carried on shouting, when Jovanka, no doubt resigned, had already turned her back. *I'll call you and we'll sort something out*, their mother added hoarsely, when she stepped from the path in front of her block of flats and Jovanka had probably disappeared through the door of her block. On the first floor, Dražen blanched, clenched his jaw, pushed the cigarette into his trouser pocket, rolled his eyes, the cotton would smell terrible, he must have realised that, leaned his pelvis against the fence and gripped it with both hands. *Firmly* gripped it and looked up the road that wound towards the school as if a magnificent procession of thousands of white horses was making its way along it – that much she managed to decipher before she jumped parallel with his mother, who was loaded down with two full shopping baskets for at least five and at most seven days.

Thanks for waiting, pussy cat, she gave a gentle smile, *we chatted a bit, she can't get a job, you know, she worked in the shop down in Lucija, next to the canal, you remember, the one that sells socks and tights and so on, but they sacked her two months ago*, she explained, as always without a sense of what a child's ears could take. She suddenly stopped beneath their balcony and with a slightly irritated sigh put the shopping baskets down on the ground. Her daughter, who had overtaken her by a few paces, had already jumped to help her with her *too heavy* hands and when she lifted the load she staggered – ha, like a dancer – almost turning on her own axis. *Maybe it's too heavy for you*, her mother realised with a grimace, wearily shrugged her shoulders and momentarily stared at her pensive son on the balcony above, and yelled, yes, again *yelled*, not angrily, but ironically: *Oh, look at him, acting as if I'm not here! Have you at least swept the balcony, if you're out there? If you haven't, then get on with it. From all that awful pollen, it looks as if fatally ill people have weed on our balcony!*

Brother and sister looked at each other as if under orders, dark eyes at brown, brown eyes at dark. At first in embarrassment, naturally, because their mother had to be so damned loud, and because she could be at the same time both thoughtless and crude, not at all like Jovanka or Mirsad or Olga, but soon Dražen let go of the fence and shyly aimed the first burst of guffaws into the palm of his hand, then after the fourth burst he let it go free, while she squatted, she somehow couldn't stand or withstand, knees too weak or bladder too weak or the fear that they

would see her as ugly, who knows, and during the waves of laughter they tried to summarise, *poll-en, fat-ally ill peo-ple have weed* said Dražen in syllables, *only you could come up with something like that*, she managed to say, *only you*, Dražen chimed in with a thinned voice and crowned her *the queen of metaphors*.

Often crude was certainly true, but even more often witty – yes, mother was complicated, and she was standing in front of the flats grinning, and the wind was tousling her shortish brown curls. Unconvinced, like a conductor who does not actually know the choir’s songs, she waved her arms to halt, how ironic, her children’s strange behaviour, before they were all caught, and in vain she kept saying *oh, Dražen, stop it, you know how loud your deep voice is, and you, my little one* –

– “Dunja?”

That couldn’t be their mother’s voice. Too gentle, too rounded, but it seemed not unfamiliar, far from unfamiliar

“Dunja, is that you?”

And in a moment Dunja opened her eyes and blinked, nervously and roughly, so that the colours and shapes and smells and sounds in her mind slowly and reluctantly, but nevertheless, *arranged themselves*. Into the sharp August afternoon light, which – did anyone ever notice this? – masks blue shades, especially the shades of the sky. Into the odious green block of flats with odious yellow shutters and equally odious concrete balcony fences. Into the long row of cacti, big and small, chubby and spear-like, with flowers and without, displayed on the wall of the smallest balcony on the first floor. *Dražen’s* balcony. Into the four, no – look carefully – the five dream catchers on the crossbar attached to the ceiling of the top balcony, hanging meditatively among the plants. Into the snow white cat, whose fur all three would suffer from – father, mother and Dražen, which had managed to find its way among the domed cacti to gawp at the bewitched visitor. Into the – great! – similar or even same scent of pines and cypresses – everything that comes from the earth ages more slowly – sneakily weighed down by the smoke from joss sticks, smelling, oh dear, of eucalyptus-sandalwood-orientalism-cancer. Into, penultimately, the sawing of cicadas, scattered among the limbs of the evergreens, overcoming the sounds of the traffic, the unusually heavy traffic, at one time it really hadn’t been like that, passing through three new roundabouts adorned with islands of agave and palms. Into, really the last, the furious boyish *fuck you, fuck you*, he would never change and the slap of a football against heads, branches, elbows and against, *no shit, the most expensive football boots, man*, no, they yelled *dude*. And, last but not least, the waving of firm hands – are the

fingers short, are they round? – and into an over made-up face, black eye-liner and mascara already visibly melting in the heat, purplish, lumpy lipstick, and layers of too dark powder also, especially bad on the nose, bleached hair, almost white, in a high pony tail, although this wasn't an ideal term for the limp strands of hair, but the smile, what a smile, a sharp contrast, clear, undisguised and healthy, with sparkling teeth, a smile that she hadn't forgotten, only mislaid, badly placed, a smile that when she was five and six and seven and nine she wanted to extract and keep for herself, oh god, that smile!

“Oh my god, Katarina!”

She wanted to embrace her, of course she did, the coincidence had completely warmed her in a second, but she couldn't get past propriety, which pushed her arms spastically behind her back. For sadly, or because or something, her long, fluttering white dress didn't have any pockets.

But it was actually Katarina who embraced her. Playfully strongly, like the way children embrace dogs, with her nose into her neck so that she could feel its warm, sticky tip, her hands exactly across the small of her back and her breasts exactly beneath hers, so that it took her breath away and her arms behind her back tautened even more. Across Katarina's shoulder, for a moment, she saw her backside, covered in denim, the pockets decorated with silver and pink sequins, and, ha – Katarina was still a lot smaller and narrower, but was now fuller, more flexible and softer than her: that arse and those breasts, which in the embrace slid to both sides of her torso, which must certainly, *absolutely*, reign on Instagram, she thought. *Sunshine80* or *SunnyKeti80* or *KetiInTheSky*, yes, those were the variants of Katarina that used to be.

“Yes, it's me,” she mumbled into Dunja's collar bone, “oh my g-god, I c-can't believe it, you here, in front of our entrance, I was c-convicted that it would n-never happen again, I c-convicted myself that you'd never c-come back to Lucija or the c-coast.” She took hold of Dunja's forearms and was startled at how firm, girlishly firm, they were and how thin, then she considerately pushed her away, no longer like a child with a dog, but more like a dancing partner at the end of a Viennese waltz. “I'm so happy to see you, it's c-crazy, c-crazy.”

Dunja, just like at the end of an amateur waltz, stepped back, took a deep breath and smiled. A wide smile? No, that wouldn't have been quite true. Although her hands were finally dangling in front of her, and even scratching where not long before exotically painted and pornographically manicured nails had been bothering her body, her nervousness had barely taken wing. A logical delay, it struck her, absolutely logical.

And justified. Katarina's grip slid from Dunja's forearms to her hands and entwined her fingers with hers. Warmly, encouragingly. In Katarina's particular way. But a question still followed. The question that the provinces ask the centre, that the past asks the present, which is accusatory

and understanding, concerned and brusque at the same time. “B-but what on earth are you doing here?”

She stared at the ground, scattered with dead rhododendron flowers. At the ground, every summer, even the ones she had omitted, missed, resisted, scattered in the same way. She could *easily* – for with Katarina, *Ketica*, *Ket* it had always been *easy* – have replied that she had returned because she herself was still the same. Broken in the same way. She would reply that she had decided, well, that she *hoped*, that she could deal with her reservations and doubts. That she had asked and wanted, no, *demanded* an explanation, a clarification and a justification, like anyone can demand for their life. That she therefore needed a narrative, comprehensive and clear and convincing. That after twenty years she had decided once and for all to seek peace. To seek at least a promise of it. A pupa of it, ha-ha. She could easily reveal to her, how demented – unbelievably timid and unpredictable, unbelievably different, almost unrecognisable – her mother had become in barely a year and how unbearable it was, that she was suddenly coping with the absence completely, completely alone.

But *easy* is just a word. A rhetorical decoration. She raised her chin and glanced at the chestnut brown eyes, staring at her. “I’m writing a book,” she whispered, cleared her throat and hurried on, “well, I’d *like to* write a book.” For writing, she could have smoothly added, was the closest thing to peace for her. Her little peace.

“You’re going to write a b-book?” Katarina let go of her hands. “About all this? I m-mean about th-this?” Her index finger circled in the air, the gesture taking in the courtyard, the car park and grass, the avenues of trees and paths, the balcony on the first floor and then the balcony on the second and fourth, the fishmonger’s, open only in the mornings, the grocery shop, which in the years of Dunja’s absence, had been demeaned into a bar, the pavement by the road that led to the primary school, the secondary school that lay some kilometres up the slope, the discount shop, ironically inserted into a fashionable block of flats on the hill opposite, the kiosk beside the foetid canal by the main road, the moorings in the marina down below, their ice cream parlour and fish restaurant, the decrepit and constantly vandalised bus stop at the edge of the resort, but most of all, her twirling finger took in what could not even be seen or sensed: the town of Piran, *damned* Piran, *fucking* Piran, *loathsome* and *evil and terrifying* Piran, *unjust* and *cruel*, *how bloody cruel* Piran, the walls of Piran, which had taken from her, taken so much from her, Piran beach, which had deprived her, deprived her of so much, and Piran, which should burn, which should have burned a long time ago. Been reduced to cinders. Evaporated, Vanished.

“Yes,” she collected herself, “I’m trying to write about *that*.” Again, she wished she had pockets. “There are plenty of things I don’t remember all that well, but I’ll be here for a few weeks so that I might be able to knock something together.”

“You’re b-brave,” Katarina shook her head, barely noticeably, melancholically, “well, you always were.”

For a moment she looked down, as if she wished to check and evaluate Dunja’s shoes, as if she still had that strange habit, that baseless, but in spite of that no less shameless snobbery, and continued in a semi-voice: “You’ve done a lot Dunja and you’ve c-come a long way, a really long way. I’ve followed you th-the whole time and everywhere, all your books, all your p-publications, and when you g-got the award the year b-before last, or whenever it was, I was so p-pleased for you. I c-cried when I saw it on t-television, when you lit the b-bonfire and it was windy and you couldn’t m-manage it and you laughed with your m-mouth open. I really liked that novel, you know, it’s g-good, so g-good, you deserved it, you d-deserved everything.”

Her cleavage visibly rose between the polyester straps when she breathed in and fell again, almost collapsed, when she exhaled – theatrically, calculatedly, thinking about the impression that is encouraged by everything non-verbal, yes, that was precisely how Dunja would have evaluated the combination if she didn’t know Katarina.

Didn’t know. *Hadn’t* known? Yes, *that* was the correct tense, she thought. The past perfect was right, she concluded, with a gentle frown.

“Thanks, Katarina.” She ran her fingers through her hair and scratched her temple, except that it was not itchy, apart from with embarrassment. “What if–”

“Hey, I know that my opinion doesn’t c-count for m-much,” she cut in and her chin retreated into her chest and for a moment was almost indiscernible, “I understand that you’re used to p-praise from p-people who know a lot more about everything, but b-basically I want to say that p-people like me who don’t read also read you, that’s all.” She took her limp pony tail in her hand and smoothed it and – identically, the same, similarly as once before – stammered so that almost every noun split wide open. “B-b-but th-that is also s-something, you kn-know!”

“Yes, it means a lot, it’s true,” the centre consoled the provinces, carefully but patronisingly, there was no other way. She straightened up, hard and forcibly, actually she only knew how to do hard and forcibly, stuck out her chest, which defied her by staying sadly blunt and flat, spondyloarthritis had already exemplarily taken its toll, and tried again. “But what about you Katarina? How are you doing down here?”

She repeated the theatre of sighs, that could be completely new, reached into the back pocket of her jeans and a moment later lit a cigarette. “Okay, q-quite okay, if you c-can believe it,” she

offered the cigarette packet to Dunja, who refused, “for a long time it was pretty hard for me, you know. I had three abortions, Dunja, three, then I got pregnant again, and I said n-no, I w-won’t have an abortion, I w-was already t-twenty-four and you can guess who I g-got p-pregnant with, and he left me anyway, b-before Duška was born.” Keti had once hated the smell of tobacco and felt that smoke was killing her, but now her cigarette was glowing like brushwood in a stove and it was evident that straight after the first one she would just light another: quite okay, it struck Dunja bitterly. “But look, at least I f-finished secondary, although I f-finished it at evening c-class,” she threw the cigarette end in the canal, “at least I have that, because my mum, when he threw me out on the street, helped quite a lot with Duška, so that I quickly g-got a job, which I soon lost, then again g-got a n-new one, then lost it again, and I changed six, s-seven jobs, all p-pathetically paid, but Duška was g-growing and I accepted them all, I’d even go and work in a meat factory if I lived in Italy, you know?” She sucked in the first half of her second cigarette and settled her weight on her right hip, like stubborn girls do, little vagabonds, who do not relax their free foot, but rather keep it tensed on its heel, always ready to push off, to run, to flee. “My m-mum and I were on our own for quite some time, th-thirteen years it was, I think.” She placed her left sandal on the ground and Dunja glanced at her pedicured – of course, naturally – but terribly swollen feet with wide, hard ankles, the feet and ankles of a fifty or even sixty-year-old, certainly not someone in their forties. It was unjust, it struck her, that the dictates of experience were so much stronger than those of biology.

“But you p-probably still remember my m-mother,” she turned aside and Dunja nodded before she called into memory a precise image of a good-hearted and shy woman, whose hearing too quickly began to fail her and who, where possible, tried to conceal the situation by turning the radio up loud – *I can’t hear you, Katarina, I can’t hear you, Dunja, it’s the music* – which she turned down precisely when her interlocutor decided to shout. The image of a single mother, who had settled in the local hairdressing salon, where customers swarmed and the profit grew, but then her hips joints had begun to give way and she had begun to relieve the pain, or so Keti had told Dunja, with analgesics of unfavourable colours, blue, pink and yellow, which made her feel constantly nauseous and so she gradually stopped eating proper meals and her fuel became snacks, grissini, bananas, rusks, in the summer apricots and peaches, and unbelievable quantities of probiotic yoghurt, which had at that time pompously erupted into the shops, with the result that in a year or two she lost weight and faded into a sheet of paper, the image of a curly-haired, blond-haired and then probably grey-haired women who have a subtle feeling for jewellery, for *pearls*, as she called them, although they were far from being real pearls, but rather necklaces, bracelets, earrings and rings made of plastic and twine and wire, tastefully,

but nonetheless plastic and twine, the image of a woman who, every time she saw her in the courtyard, waved enthusiastically from her second floor balcony and so-ooo often shouted how happy she was to see her and happy that Katarina had her.

Yes, I remember Cvetana, Cvetka, she should have *said*, how is she holding on, she could have been polite, but Keti's downcast look immediately betrayed everything: her mother had died, probably quite recently, probably completely deaf, probably she had a fall. She would find out everything, but not right now, when workers who had finished the morning shift in the coastal plants and factories had started to appear at the flats, and not there, in the last of the white-hot courtyards of School Street, she decided. She pressed Katarina's hand compassionately and firmly and waited for her clouded eyes to clear. They cleared *quickly and as if accustomed*.

"But hang on, we can't just stand here and fry," Katarina summed up the situation, *obligingly*, "hell, why don't you c-come round and v-visit? Tomorrow, t-towards evening? It's Saturday, everything's easy on a Saturday, isn't it, and if it's not so f-fucking hot, we'll no doubt b-be able to say a b-bit more." She gave a broad grin, the broadest, in complete contrast to her eyes, which had been absent a moment before. "I'm still on the second f-floor, even the n-name on the b-buzzer is the same."

"You know I will, Ket," she swallowed the 'i' and with it her saliva, breathed out squeakily and finally, finally, somehow relaxed. "I'd really, really like to. I'll be at yours at seven."

"Great, great," she exclaimed and hugged her, her magnificent breasts once more beneath hers and this time Dunja returned the affection. She pressed her close her old friend, and smelled – Chanel, Dior, Givenchy? Something expensive, nice, not at all sour or alcoholically fading.

"You know," said Katarina, when she relaxed the embrace, "it's not just m-my name on the b-buzzer anymore." She winked and sent a kiss through the air, which Dunja would have believed if the voice that accompanied it had not barely perceptibly gone lower. "You'll see t-tomorrow, you'll see everything."

She spun round agilely and sashayed towards the flats. Luckily, she still wasn't troubled with any of her mother's problems.

Except men, she corrected herself, except men, Dunja was willing to bet.

He dropped a scoop of chocolate ice cream and then a scoop of hazelnut into the cup, and pushed a little umbrella into the ice cream. *And* a wafer. She was surprised; these days they rarely decorated ice cream with umbrellas or wafers. At some point, probably, when the Slovene market was inundated with home-made ice cream, ice cream with natural ingredients, vegan ice cream, low calorie ice cream, aroma free ice cream, granny's ice cream, start-up ice cream and Italian *gelato*, in other words ice creams predicated on the idea of minimum harm or, perhaps better, minimum evil, the sinful décor lost its civil rights in most ice cream shops. The market even slowly banished cream, that insidious fattening material, and so at first his gesture seemed sweet – an indestructible Albanian aesthetics, perhaps. But when, just before he handed the dish over, he added another wafer and smothered everything with chocolate sauce, which immediately went hard, it seemed to her that he had recognised her. He had remembered her. He remembered her exclusive desires, her sweet-toothed obsessions, her loud childish complaints that there were too few wafers, that they always vanished before the ice cream and her regular, usually solitary teenage visits, when she tried to do without the wafers, well, when she told him and all his brothers – there were seven of them – that she was trying to do without them. She never actually did. On the contrary, when she was overtaken by puberty she became insatiable.

That he had recognised her, she thought, maybe wasn't all that strange. After all, she had a distinctive face, features which ageing had carved even deeper, sharper. Three tiny moles beneath her right eye and on her right cheek, distributed in the shape of a crescent moon, her eyebrows almost growing together, a bulging top lip above an otherwise narrow mouth, and the pinkish eyelids of the always tired, sleep-deprived. *Sturm und Drang* eyelids, as she had been teased by a fellow student at the faculty, who was, she sensed, in love with her.

All this was true, but it certainly wasn't the truth, she had to admit as she rummaged through her purse for coins. He recognised her because she, well, her family, more than twenty years ago, almost thirty! – as if the distance mattered at all – had appeared for some months in the local and national news. On the television and radio news of all kinds of stations. In the libellous or compassionate comments of locals. In houses, in flats at the top of seaside elevations and in flats below them, day bars and night bars, in restaurants, fishmongers and shops. On posters, when they first appealed to people's conscience – *Had anyone seen anything? Does anyone know anything? Any information welcome!* – and announcements that in the end had appealed to greed – *All information will be rewarded!* During the sermon at Sunday mass and in prayers, oh, how unbelievably they helped, and on the internet, as it was then, in chat rooms and on forums, even in schools and kindergartens, fucking everywhere they had been, and what had

once engulfed the place, she, who had once engulfed it, would be remembered by everyone on this damn coast. Bučko, although that wasn't actually his name, but that of his hunch-backed father, was probably susceptible to female beauty, she decided, picking up the dish with a sweaty, trembling hand, but even more susceptible than most – and susceptible is far from being the same as *sensitive* – to tragedy.

From the container on the glass counter above the ice cream containers, she took a spoon, no, in her nervousness two, squeezing out a smile and a *thank you*, and rushed out the door. Remembering her was – of course – *almost* natural, but addressing her would have been cruel. It would have been shameless.

She pushed one spoon into the ice cream and put the other in her pocket. (She had learned that she really needed pockets on this damn coast.) Without looking left or right, she went across the zebra crossing, incredibly slo-ooowly and behind her someone immediately started blowing their horn – what else than an old-style low-slung BMW with, if she was seeing properly in broad daylight, a lighted under chassis. This was an integral part of the seaside folklore: her preoccupied, lazy walk and this hot-blooded horn-blowing, cursing as well, and she quickly switched into it, although certainly reluctantly. Folklore – in her mind she selected and rolled around and twisted the meanings and eventually decided – folklore or *hiding in plain sight*.

She stopped beside the canal of cloudy seawater that served as a mooring for boats, sunken, smashed, merely shabby or homeless, and the wooden walkway above them. Behind, a go-kart track and a fast food outlet – kebabs, hotdogs, rolls, burek – closed, of course – still only open part-time – a small pharmacy and a one-storey health centre, as round as a cake and as colourful as, well, ice cream. In front of the entrance a narrow car park and a prickly, wildly overgrown hedge and stones scattered over the paths that wound forward and back and around. Beneath the arcades of the clumsily placed neon signs of former shops selling nautical goods, which were too big to now rent out or sell. In the distance – although not so far, for Lucija is actually quite short – the sharply drawn masts of yachts being maintained or repaired, and the hazy outlines of their prows. Opposite the marina, tennis courts – for managers, for public servants, for Russians who were not there and would not be – and a collapsing iron fence and right next door the Beach Pizzeria, a playground for drunks and north-easterners on holiday, and here and there heaps of gravel and gigantic rubbish bins. And above all: so few people, at least not with their feet on the ground, sorry, on concrete, all like carpaccio cooling in cars, old, young, foreign, domestic, and even their pets. There wasn't even the whine of scooters, which at one time whined everywhere non-stop, the rulers of the seaside, the rulers of the world.

However, where there were no cars but plenty of rubbish, there gathered large flocks of big, fattened seagulls, which did not give up either in storm or in heat, terrible seagulls which tussled over crumbs and, literally, pecked each other's eyes out. Two, particularly fat and particularly crazy ones came hopping over, if these were hops, quickly appearing at the height of her chin, their beaks almost in the creamy prize. She ran away, into the slight shade of the larches and the birds, luckily too satiated, did not follow her.

She sat astride a bench and turned, with her back to the non-place Lucija, so that she could study the introduction to the non-place Portorož. The mini-golf, where with her family, when they were still a family, she had celebrated all her birthdays, was still the same; she thought that one of the holes, one of the hardest to hit, was still a mistake, a knobbly surface where it should have been smooth. The complex of shops beside it also looked the same, boxy and grey and overgrown with roses, where tourists, no, probably *holidaymakers*, but rarely locals, kept finding something for themselves, flippers, armbands, crisps and condoms. She did not recognise the trio of restaurants on the corner, but she recognised the model: loudly expressed identities, Mexican, Italian, fish, but in reality lacking identity. Across the road rose a plantation of hotels in pastel shades and parking garages built into the hillside, with the luxurious *Grand Casinó* in the foreground. Two of the hotels were certainly new, she decided, while another two only bore new names, for a name is a *brand* and the Slovene seaside is a *brand*, so there were fewer mentions of flowers and trees, and certainly more uses of *prestige* and *villa*. But the lido, ha, lido, raised above the expanses of concrete by the sea, with rotund Czechs, Hungarians and over-cooked British couples, with cracked tiles and chips and milky drinks with fruit and salmonella, the pool chlorinated beyond permitted levels, so that fungal infection and urine did not become an obvious problem – what you don't know about, doesn't itch – with rusty showers and dried-out palm trees, this *lido*, she quickly decided, would be branded only by some madman, certainly not a local. It remained without a name, even though this *lido* expressed a key point in the story of this non-place of a thousand flowers: slow and noisy and cheerfully hopeless decline.

But the ice cream, hooray, did not disappoint her, it was precisely how it had once been, precisely the best, just sweet enough, and just light and fresh enough, but in spite of that it had almost all melted. She threw the softened and soaking cup in an arch towards the litter bin in front of her and got it in. Through the green mesh, she saw how the creamy soup poured over the fermenting banana skin and the bits of plastic packaging on top of plastic packaging on top of paper packaging on top of a scrap of meat.

She had grown up, yes really, she had grown up, it struck her as the liquid dribbled through the holes onto the ground. She had grown up in that *morbid* fashion – if there even is any other way, she wondered, finally putting on her sunglasses, which, too big for her, immediately slipped down the bridge of her nose – where reality constantly takes away enjoyment – the heat, dust and collapsing ice cream – and play – the gentle pushing of the spoon into the creaminess, the smacking of lips and giggling – often goes into exile. She automatically but strictly pushed the sunglasses back towards her forehead, straightened up and – merely confirmed her insights. She was not surprised by this, of course not. *Morbid* comes from the Latin *morbus* and *morbus* communicates illness and illness likes to, prefers to communicate – to bring, to cause – death. The catch was in the language the whole time: she grew up *on death* and developed with it, she decided and closed her eyes. She moved her face out of the sunlight that was finding a way through the evergreen branches – quite a lot of it. She found it hard to take the sun, and so she joked feebly, trying to tame her dizziness, that she would never become bright. At the end of the day, isn't a person defined most of all by what they can most easily bear? What seems the easiest to love?

But as a girl, she did like the sun, she had wanted it, expected it. It suited her on her skin and beneath it, in her ears, her nose, her mouth, on her eyelids. In her stomach, her head, between her ribs, deep in her pelvis. She drew and painted it, sang about and wrote about it; it was in every scene and she tried to make it at home in all her poems. She liked it, yes, really liked it, until suddenly, like a brick through the window, like a treetop through the roof, it was completely revealed to her. Until, then, it showed that it had never meant a thing, nothing at all.

excerpt from the novel translated by Maja Visenjak Limon