Bronja Žakelj

WHITES WASH AT NINETY

pp. 1-14

I

They call you Mita, and I call you Mum. You're so very pretty and you're so very mine.

I know your hair, it's brown, sometimes with flashes of red. That's when it catches the sunlight. I know your skin, the shape of your teeth, and mouth, and the lines on the palms of your hands. I know your scent and how the vein in your neck protrudes when you laugh out loud. And I know your eyes, your many different eyes.

I know the pattern on your handbag, which I sometimes pose with in front of the mirror, and your shoes that I then slip in to. I know your hair rollers, and I know the exact shade of blue of the drier that you sit beneath every Sunday evening, when we all have a bath, one after the other, all of us.

I have a bath first, Rok has to go second, because he's my brother and because he was a baby for a long time and it was impossible to compete with him. For ages I couldn't even play with him. The only thing I could do was put him on the table and play doctors. I'd take his trousers off and prod about at his willy. Sometimes I would call our neighbour Lina, so that she could see the willy too, because her brother, who was also a baby, didn't let her.

You're the third to have a bath, so that you can dry your hair afterwards, and Dad goes fourth. Dad doesn't always have a bath, so sometimes Dada gets her turn earlier.

'There you are Mum, you're profiting again', you say to her.

The word 'profiting' sounds very difficult to me, but I like it and I memorise it. Just like the word 'actually'.

We live on Vojkova, and the sun is always shining on our street. In March, the kitchen smells of the air blustering through it as Dada opens the balcony doors for the first time; in summer there's the smell of the scorched green linen of the roller blind, and in autumn, the damp earth from the gardens below. The sun shines on Vojkova in winter too, when there's snow and frost outside and we place blankets over the bottom of the balcony doors, and we walk to the cellar with a metal bucket to get coal. That's when there's a fire in the kitchen, warm wood, singed milk and sweet doughy buns, and every Friday the smell of Toko wax which drips on the grey lino flooring in the hallway, where Dad prepares our skis for Saturday. If it's icy, he uses the blue wax; for more southerly temperatures, he uses the yellow. But mostly it's the red wax. When the skis are greased-up, he sticks newspaper between them and

secures them together with tape. They never stay upright when we carry them over to the ski slope. If the edges grind together, Dad gets angry.

At half-past seven we watch the daily news. The television goes on at 7.13, so that it's warmed up in time for cartoons at 7.15. We also watch *Cik-Cak.* Every day, all together.

Rok and I have to go to bed after the news. We're only allowed to stay up twice a year: for New Year, and for Youth Day. That's when everyone watches Tito's birthday celebrations, though Dad doesn't always, and he says that it's a load of crap. I like the celebration, because you get to see a lot of Tito, who's really friendly when he receives his baton, and because they all perform in such straight lines. So me and Rok look forward to the 25th May from New Year onwards, and from the 25th May we look forward to New Year.

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Dad doesn't have a lot of hair and often says: *Boy, oh boy!* He apparently has good fashion sense, but I don't see it; I do think he's smaller than you though, even though he says he's not. One time I hear you call him a choleric. I don't know what that is.

Dad is a history and geography teacher, but he doesn't teach anymore, because he works at the Slovin company. He only taught whilst he was still studying.

'They got one of these if they messed around,' he says, pulling my hair or grabbing me somewhere on the back of my neck, where it hurts so much that I always gasp.

'I kept them on a tight leash. Iron discipline. But they still gave me this at the end of the year,' he says, and takes out a wooden cigarette box from the wardrobe, his name engraved on it. Janez Žakelj, it says on the box. A cigarette box doesn't seem much to me, but I can see that it means a lot to Dad.

Dad says a lot of strange things at the news. Sometimes he says:

'Communist wankers! Those reds have ruined everything!'

I don't get it. Which reds? Who is red? There's nobody like that on TV. And what have they ruined? Because it seems good to me. Everything. I'm proud, because we're different to everybody else and because we're the best. We dig up the most coal, we have the best potatoes and the most corn, we have the best skiers, we're the best at basketball, and everyone loves Tito. And I'm proud because we're building new roads, which are long and wide. And so I'm waiting until I'm a bit older, and then I'm going to build them myself, too.

At the youth work actions - where they sing songs and play guitar, raise the flag, and you get

sausage and a bread roll at break time, just like when you give blood, too, which I can't wait for either.

'Christ, you never stop,' Dad says then.

'Come on Janez, don't get so wound-up,' Dada normally tells him, dressed in one of those pink smocks bought from Ona-On. She wears an apron tied over her smock, and she says that one day she's going to buy herself some Borosana work shoes.

'Because they're good for the feet', she says.

I don't like Borosanas because the caretaker wears them, the one we call 'comrade caretaker' at the tower block at the crossroads, next to our block. I tell Dada.

Dada's fingers are yellow from cigarettes — as yellow as the lock of hair that falls across her forehead — because she smokes a lot, because at our house everyone smokes an awful lot. But her hands are warm and most of all very soft. They cut peeled apples into segments, fry potato in browned onions and secretly slip sugar into natural yoghurt when Dad isn't looking. They warm our hands when they get cold and wipe our noses when they run.

You and Dada often argue, because she's your mum. Sometimes it's the bread that she gives to me and Rok, covered in margarine and sprinkled with sugar, that makes you argue; sometimes it's the biscuits slathered with apricot jam.

'Why are you fattening them like pigs', you say.

I go to ski training at Olympia, so I'm not fat, and I do a lot of climbing when we play cops and robbers. I do have a tummy though, and when we have visitors I love to pull my t-shirt over my head and blow it up like a balloon. My belly button sticks out, because it healed that way.

'There's nothing we can do now,' the doctors say to you on a routine examination. 'It goes one of two ways.'

And you really don't like that. But I do, and everyone, even Dad, finds my t-shirt balloon-trick funny. You're the only one who doesn't, so you always shout:

'Bronja, for God's sake, pull your t-shirt down!'

The sugar on bread and the sugar in yoghurt winds Dad up too, but even he sweetens his yoghurt when all of us have gone to bed. That's what Dada says when she sees him one night, and I believe her, even though Dad is furious and says that she's making it up, when she says:

'Well well, Janez – fancied a bit of sweetness last night, did we?'

Everyone laughs, except Dad, so we pipe down.

But normally Dad laughs a lot, and laughs out loud, and most of all when we have people round. That's why Rok and I like it when people come round. It's when Dad says funny things. Something he says a lot is:

'You know the one from *Alan Ford,* when the doctor asks: "Your leg's hurting? Chop his leg off!" Then the patient goes: "But doctor, it's not my leg, it's my stomach that hurts!" And the doctor goes: "Well get rid of his stomach then!"'

Then Dad absolutely loses it. He also loses it when he tells the one about the blind man and his guide dog, who mutters 'stingy bastard!' when someone drops a coin in his hat. Dad does the impression of how the stingy guy turns around when he hears the blind man. He turns around just like the picture in the *Alan Ford* comic.

We get a lot people coming round, and when the kitchen's full, Dada says it's like a session of the resident's association. Our neighbour Bakika, who is very clever and strict, comes over for coffee in the morning. Her husband Dida never comes for coffee though, because he reads really big books that he keeps in the cabinet next to the kitchen. Dida is a professor and is very serious and doesn't talk as much as Bakika. I only hear him shout for one reason. That's when Bakika lets out the white, boiling water, called lye, from the washing machine and into the tub where Dida is having a bath.

Sometimes Vida comes round, and if we're lucky, Marjana, who Dada used to work with, when she still went to work. 'Colleagues, we were,' says Dada. Vida is serious; Marjana is fun. She starts before she's even through the door:

'You'll never believe what happened to me, Mihela! Listen to this!' Dada listens, we all listen, but Rok and I most of all.

Sometimes Rada comes round, too. Every time she leaves, she says:

'No hard feelings then!'

I don't get it: she didn't break anything, she didn't shout, she just sat at our table.

'Did she offend us or something?' I ask Dada.

'I told you last time, it's just something you say,' Dada tells me and shoos me away.

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pp. 98-109

'Mita needs to move into the new flat as soon as possible, while there's still time', Dada says to Dad at the end of August.

She says it while you're not there. Her voice breaks awkwardly. Her voice has been breaking awkwardly a lot recently. It makes me anxious, I don't want to listen to her. She's been doing this a lot recently too: she draws in a deep breath through her lips, holds it briefly and then breathes out. She breathes out through her lips too. It makes a noise and it annoys me. 'That breathing is getting on my nerves,' I say. Then she looks at me so that her eyes and whole face get on my nerves too.

You and Dad move into the new flat when school starts, while Rok and I stay with Dada.

'You'll move as soon as your rooms are ready,' you say, drawing us close to you.

Every evening, Rok says: 'Do you think the room will be ready tomorrow?'

'I don't think so,' I say.

We don't play the angry snake and crazy snail game anymore.

*****

The rooms are ready and by now it's cold outside. You come to over to Vojkova, you smile and say:

'Your rooms are ready! We'll all be together this weekend!' My tummy churns. Because it's over.

On the first evening in the new flat, Bojan's Marina comes round.

'I've come from the beautician's, don't look at me!' she says.

She brings me a red, round mirror. It's beautiful. I place it on the book shelf and then I start to like my room a little bit. Rok gets a green car that you can put pencils and crayons in.

When we go to bed, I call out to Rok. He lies next to me. 'The wall's too thick,' I say.

You leave the two of us together.

*****

When visitors come round, they say:

'It looks like something out of a French magazine, Mita! Look at that light! Is it made of copper?'

Or: 'It's practical having a separate toilet'.

Or: 'Two washbowls always come in handy. If not now, then in a couple years' time.'

You're beaming.

When visitors come round, they also say:

‘That’s a fine bit of decking you’ve got there Janez, not the slightest gap anywhere!’

‘Ha, we dried it out that way, as you have to – we don’t mess around here!’ says Dad.

When visitors come round, they also say:

‘Isn’t it nice that you each have your own room?’

‘We don’t need a room each,’ we say.

When Dada comes, she says:

‘It’s too good to last.’

I can’t stand the sight of her when she says that, but you’re all beaming and bright.

*****

Winter in the new flat is saved by the Olympic Games.

It takes Vojkova off my mind a little. Rok and I draw pictures of Vučko, the mascot, and stick them around the room. ‘Sarajevo 1984’, we write underneath.

As we watch the opening ceremony, I wish I were Sandra Dubravčič. I like her white trainers.

‘I like her white trainers,’ I say.

‘They’re rubbish,’ says Dad. ‘They wouldn’t last two minutes.’

When Križaj goes up to take the athlete’s oath, Dad says:

‘He’ll mess it up’.

He starts off well.

‘He won’t, you’ll see,’ you say.

We’ve got crazed grins on our faces when he does mess it up.

‘What did I tell you, no balls,’ Dad says.

During the Olympics, I fall a little bit in love with Jure Franko, in addition to Clint Eastwood in American Sniper. Not just because he beat Wenzel, who annoys me, in the Giant Slalom, but mostly because he knows how to stand on the tips of his skis, but also a bit because he has a nice hat and because he got a videorecorder from Hitachi for his bronze medal. I know he’s with Andreja Leskovšek, but I don’t know what he sees in her freckles.

We cry when we watch the award ceremony. Beneath the stage they’re shouting: ‘Yu-go-slavia. Yu-go-slavia.’ And: ‘We belong to Tito! Tito belongs to us!’ This annoys Dad, but I like it.

The Olympic Games are the best thing about winter in the new flat, but we watch them alone. If we'd been at Vojkova, we'd have run out of chairs in the kitchen.

*****

When the Olympics are over, it's nearly springtime.
And when it's almost spring, I'm accepted into school in Bežigrad. You're happy.

'Now I don't need to study anymore,' I say.

We argue and I have to clean the bathroom. Twice you tell me the floor isn't clean enough.
The next day you call me over to Dada's. You ring from the phonebox at Ferant.

'Hurry, I've forgot the key, I'll wait for you by the door to the flat, I'm not feeling well, they've removed the cyst from my neck.'

I go slowly, because I'm angry at you. Because of school, because of the bathroom. I'm not in a rush to go anywhere. I get off the number six, down to Nama and then past Maximarket, to see if they're selling ice cream in the tea room yet. There's no ice cream, so I go to Šumi for cream cake. I stop at the Mojca Makuc boutique, I stop anywhere I can, wherever I can think of.
When I get to the flat, you're sitting on the steps and you have a big white gauze on your neck. You're pale and leaning against the walk. It looks as if you're crying, or have been crying not long ago.

'Sorry,' I say. 'Sorry Mum!'

I feel like an awful person and think that Rok is much better. Sometimes I think that Rok is a much better person than me.

*****

Your birthday is on 10th March. Your thirty-seventh. Dad buys you a white blouse with a light blue collar. The two of you go out for dinner. This strikes me as odd, because you never go anywhere and because he never buys you anything, even for your birthday.
Something else is strange that spring – your stomach is growing.

'Mum, are you having a baby?' I say.

You laugh out loud, and the veins in your neck and forehead strain.

'No, darling, you must be joking, I've just put on a bit of weight, you've must've seen me eating anything and everything.'

I haven't seen you just eating anything and – apart from your stomach – you're thin, very. When I see you in the bathroom you look thinner than you were that summer in Punta Corrente.

*****

Marina is also pregnant. For the second time. You and Rok go to see her, while she's studying to be a pulmonary specialist. That seems like a complicated word to me and I don't remember it straight away. When you come back, Rok says:

'Marina's having a hard time being pregnant .'

You find that funny, but I don't think anything of it.

That evening I go to Rok's room and tell him:

'Did you know that we're going to have a baby too? Have you noticed Mum has a tummy bigger than Marina's?'

We chat about whether we'd prefer a brother or a sister. I'd prefer a sister; he'd rather have a brother. Then I say:

'Well, I don't mind, because you're ok, even though you're a brother.'

And he says: 'You're pretty.'

That's the first time he's ever called me pretty.

*****

In the middle of May, you announce that you're going to the Slon Hotel to meet your dad, and say that you and Lojze have something to sort out. I'd like to go with you, I'd like to see him, but I'm scared to ask you.

When you go, you wear your new blouse under a grey coat. It's the first time you've worn it. When you leave, I set off after you, but I only go as far as Šumi, because I don't dare go any further, because there's a big window in the tearoom at the Hotel Slon.

When you get home, you cry.

'He didn't want to talk,' you say.

You're crying, but you look amazingly beautiful to me.

*****

Not long after that, your back seizes up. It's hurting you, most of all between your shoulder blades. You lie down.

'Sciatica', Dad says, giving you ibuprofen.

I like them, because they're big and bright pink.

You let work know that you're not very well and won't be in for a while.

Your stomach is getting bigger, and I'm getting more excited about the baby.

Soon the ibuprofen aren't helping anymore, you're lying down most of the time, and when you lie down, you have a very old face.

*****

'I took Mum to the hospital last night,' says Dad one Sunday, and he's completely white. 'We're going to do the washing and ironing ourselves today.'

The washing dries quickly that Sunday, as there's a breeze and by this time it's already June, so I can do the ironing that same afternoon.

'She ironed a whole load by herself', says Dad when we go to visit you at five.

'You're a good girl, darling,' you say. 'I'll be home soon – and we still have to find an outfit for your leaver's ball. And shoes.'

I don't know why you don't want to admit you're having a baby.

*****

In the end I don't buy my outfit for the leaver's ball with you, but with my school friend Andreja, because when you come home you're still lying down. The dress is light blue, cut to the knee. I'm scared that you won't like it.

When we buy it, we go sit on the benches on Črtomirova, because that's where Andreja's from, only a short way from the place where the swing once fractured the bone above my eye, right in front of you. Sat on the bench, I say:

'What would you do if your mum died?'

I don't know why I say it, because I could have said any number of things, because it's a busy day, a perfect spring day, and my new dress is perfect too, with its silver stitching.

'I couldn't live without my mum,' Andreja says.

‘I couldn’t live without my mum either,’ I say, barely audibly, muscles tensed, and I immediately want to rush back home to you.

‘It’s wonderful, it really is wonderful,’ you exclaim, when I bring the dress up to your bed to show you my beautiful purchase. ‘Try it on!’

I put the dress on. You take a long look at me and start to cry.

‘My girl,’ you say softly, before shouting from the bedroom into the living room: ‘Janez, come look at this!’

‘Boy oh boy,’ says Dad, when he comes in.

*****

You can’t come to find shoes with me either. You ask Marina, because Marina has good taste.

When Marina arrives, her daughter Barbara is with her. Barbara likes to eat ham, and I know this because she’s always saying: ‘‘am! ‘am!’ She doesn’t have red spots anymore, because she’s three years old now.

Marina and I buy white ballet pumps with a small white bow, at the shop next to the photography place.

*****

When it gets to Monday, there’s only three days until the leaver’s ball, and you’re still lying down all the time. I’m worried that you won’t be there, I’m worried that out of all the mums there, my mum will be the only one missing.

‘You are coming on Thursday, aren’t you?’ I say to you.

‘You know I’m coming, my little poppet,’ you say, and you caress my cheek, and then stay stroking my face. I keep still, so you don’t stop, because sometimes you stop and drift off to sleep.

On Thursday, the day of the ball, you still haven’t got up.

‘Mum, it’s at five,’ I say to you, when I come up to see you. ‘Don’t forget!’

‘I’ll be there,’ you whisper into my clean hair. ‘Don’t worry. I’m just getting a bit more rest.’

It’s ten-to-five when the caretaker opens the doors to the hall. He opens them out wide, opens them as if to open a grand exhibition.

Everyone is waiting for their healthy mums, and the healthy mums are arriving from all sides, the dads with them.

‘Is your mum coming?’ everyone asks.

‘Is your mum coming?’ says my teacher, putting her arm around my shoulder. The lump in my throat is enormous.

When it gets to five, you’re not there. I go to the bathroom. I stare at the ceiling for a long time to stop myself from crying. When the lump in my throat feels smaller, I go back out to wait. The seats are filling up, the benches too, but I’m still on the lookout in the entrance, waiting to catch sight of you, waiting to see you in this awful crowd of happy mums.

And then you arrive. You’re wearing your grey coat and new white blouse with the blue collar. That’s the second time you’ve worn it. Your hair is washed and curled, your make-up is done and you’ve powdered your face. You’re glowing. Of all the mums, you are yet again the most beautiful.

‘You’re shaking, poppet,’ you say, when you hold me close.

*****

On Friday we celebrate at Vojkova, and Dada makes hazelnut pancakes especially.

We all sit at our table. Everyone together, just like it used to be. Dada, you, Dad, Rok and me. The table is covered with the special cloth, carnations and ferns are in the crystal vase. We eat pancakes and watch the European championship. Stanči in the brown trousers calls, Uncle Franci calls, Bojan calls. I am happy.

*****

On Saturday you can no longer stand.

‘I can’t stand up anymore, my legs won’t hold me,’ you say.

When Bojan brings Aunt Lenka round, Aunt Lenka takes you by the hand and says:

‘I was the same, Mita, when I got sciatica. I couldn’t stand for a whole month, Bojan will tell you.’

‘Did you have a stomach like this too?’ you say. Aunt Lenka doesn’t say anything.

You close your eyes and once again the lines around your mouth are terrifyingly deep, as are the lines on your forehead. When you feel pain, the deepest lines are between your eyebrows. On Saturday you also sleep through lunch.

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You sleep almost non-stop until Friday, when Rok gets his school certificate. And on Friday too, when Rok breaks up for summer, you don't wake up, so I help him choose the cleanest pair of trousers for his last day.

After Rok has gone and Dad has also left for work, I get back into bed. It's a perfect morning, I feel a sea of sunlight inside me, all of summer is inside me and inside me is an endless calm. At nine the doorbell rings, and Dada is at the door.

'I've come to do some ironing and cooking,' she says.

When we come up to you, you're still sleeping and you're covered by a thin, white sheet.

'I've washed and washed it and it's still like new,' Dada says, stroking your clammy forehead, as recently your skin has become clammy, especially your face. She covers you up to your shoulders and says: 'Damask.' And then again, under her breath: 'Damask.' It sounds far away to me, as far away as you are that moment.

'Come on, let's have something to eat,' she says shortly afterwards.

*****

The eggs are frying, covered with a sheet of newspaper. Dada is staring into space, and then she takes a breath, and then she looks at me with eyes I don't recognise. I know all of her looks, but this one I don't understand. She holds her gaze for a long time and doesn't say anything. She's breathing heavily, in fits and starts, and loudly. It's making me nervous.

The eggs are done and she crumples a dishcloth against her stomach.

'Come,' she says.

I don't go. She comes to me and she draws me towards her, pulls me right up close and so quietly, so slowly, tearfully, speaks into my hair:

'My love, your mum is dying, surely you must see that? She's not having a baby, she has cancer.'

Her whisper disables my entire body. In an instant. Swiftly, permanently.

I shove her away forcefully and shout: ‘You’re lying!’ And I scream: ‘It’s not cancer!’ And I scream: ‘She’s having a baby!’

I scream and I scream and my head spins. I can no longer tell the difference between the floor and the ceiling. My mouth dries up, there’s no air. I slip down on the floor by the fridge door.

‘Please, don’t shout,’ I hear above me. ‘Please, I ask you, just don’t shout, Mum doesn’t know anything, we haven’t told her.’

I sink down into the floor and Dada sinks over me.

The pressure in my head is intense. I see yellow spots before my eyes, and sometimes red ones.

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II.

When you go, everything is different.

The cake in the fridge on the 12th July is no longer one of yours. I buy myself a forest fruits one from Maximarket and in my diary I write: *Today is my fifteenth birthday. I tidied the flat in the morning, I also washed the floor. Everyone came, even those who never came round before. I put on a good spread, they told me. I got so many presents, I’ve never received this many presents. I heard them say that luckily I put on a brave face.*

*****

When you go, everything is different.

I put gel in my hair, and when I get to the hairdresser, I say: ‘I want a lion’s mane!’ Or I say: ‘Chop it off up to my ears, please!’

I’m getting Fs at school, I even get three in one day at one point. I’m studying, but it won’t go in, I can’t remember anything. My essays are the only things that are still read out in class. Everything is turned upside down when you’re not here. Dad doesn’t speak to me anymore, I no longer speak to him. The flat is cold and empty. Rok and I steal sweets, money, gel, a comb, cassettes and everything from one another. He doesn’t come into my room anymore and I don’t go into his.

That summer I meet my first boyfriend on holiday, and we make out. Laurent from Paris, who plays the piano. Aunt Anita says:

'That's a different culture, Janez, I wouldn't allow it, she should find one of our own.'

Dad says:

'Find yourself one of our own, those Frenchmen shut women up in the kitchen and stick black sheets on their heads.'

*****

When, the next year, I bring home one of our own, Dad calls him into the living room and says:

'I'm Janez, who are you?'

'I'm Blaž,' Blaž says.

'What does your father do?' Dad asks.

'He fixes washing machines,' says Blaž.

This pleases Dad, because he's a practical man. They share a brandy.

Dada calls Blaž 'pigeon', because that's what his surname means, while to me she says:

'Bronja, this is serious now, we're going to the clinic.'

We go to the clinic, I get a diaphragm.

'Sex is wonderful, you know, but it's even more special when two people love each other,' says Dada. 'Don't forget that!' I don't forget it.

I'm at Dada's every day, and Dada knows everything, absolutely everything. Only sometimes do I lie to her. On one occasion I tear a page out of the newspaper and say that it was delivered like that. I stick the page in my diary. The article is called 'A Diary is Published' and my grandfather Lojze wrote it. *I'm going to find him one day*, I write under the piece of newspaper. *When I dare.*

I'm at Dada's every day, because everything is easier at Dada's. I also have lunch with her, because the fridge is empty at home, because Dad rarely wants to go to the shop.

'You eat everything too quickly,' he says.

He draws a line on the mayonnaise jar with a black pen so he can see how much has disappeared, because too much of it always disappears. I have to take just a small amount of each slice of strudel, so that the number of slices remain the same, because he's always counting the slices.

In my second year of upper school I start going to the evenings at Klub Palma. I go with Maja mostly. We dance from five until ten, my favourite is *Proud Mary*. We drink Ballantines and coke before we go. When Dad sees this, he draws a black mark on the whiskey bottle too, so I have to top it up with water each time we drink. It all goes wrong when visitors come over, and when I catch sight of the murky coloured water in the crystal glasses which were your wedding present. I run out, because I'm scared. 'What the fuck,' I hear Dad rage.

Dad doesn't let me go to Palma.

'You'll get beaten up,' he says, whilst showing how they once beat him, or maybe you, or him because of you. Because he doesn't let me go to Palma, I lie to him. I say that I'm off out to study, or to hang on the benches. Once he says:

'Tell me where you were, just be honest, I won't get angry.'

'I was at Palma, dancing,' I say. He hits me hard, in the face.

At Christmas I write in my diary:

Today is Christmas Day, the second without you. Rok and I are alone, Dad has gone out with a tidy beard and clean teeth. I'm sitting in front of the fireplace eating chocolate that Father Christmas brought me at Lindtners – our neighbour below. It's a good job we've got such big windows.

At Easter I write in my diary:

Today is Easter Sunday. The second without you. Dad bought a new tablecloth this morning. He decorated eggs, and instead of potica, *he baked strudel. He cooked a ham and bought carnations at the market. It's just the two of us at home; Rok is at Dada's. I'm not hungry, but I eat anyway. Ham, eggs and potatoes. We hardly say a word to one another, but it was still nice. Nice, because I peeled eggs with him on the freshly-laid table, and in the evening I could tell Aunt Helena about how we'd peeled eggs at home too.*

*****

When you go, Anita's Profi goes too.

He gets cancer of the stomach. Just like you. Uncle Vlado operates on him, or Bojan does, or both. The operation is a success, the cancer isn't as aggressive as yours was, but Profi gets pneumonia, and then Profi is no more.

When Profi dies, Anita says:

'Never….! I'll never be with anyone, ever again!'

That seems strange to me, because if Profi was a priest, I'm not sure how she could be with him in the first place, and she was just his housemaid. And then she says:

Isn't that right, Janez – we'll never be with anyone else ever again, now that Mita and Profi are no longer with us?'

She says it a few times, because Dad doesn't say anything.

The fact that they'll never be with anyone again doesn't seem like anything special to me, as they're both over forty anyway.

Despite all that, Anita is soon with Jim and she and Jim get married. Jim is from Australia and is part Chinese, which is why he knows how to cook Chinese food. They meet in Rovinj, over Anita's garden fence.

'I don't know why Anita can have someone who's half Chinese, when I wasn't allowed to be with Laurent from Paris,' I say to Dad.

Dad says: 'Don't be a clever dick.'

*****

When you go, Aco goes too.

The last time I see him in the care home, he says:

'The docs have fucked me over, Janez, I'm never going back,' waving in the direction of his motionless legs.

There's no funeral, because his brother comes and takes him to Montenegro.

'It's weird if there's no funeral, because then there's no ending, and there's no peace without an ending,' I say to Dada.

'Beautifully put, poppet,' says Dada.

*****

When you go, I'm on my own.

Sometimes I miss you so much that it hurts. Others think that I don't, because I'm going out, because I have a boyfriend. I feel guilty about that.

Sometimes I dream that you're waking me up for school.

*****

Sometimes, in town, I think that the bright raincoat in front of me is yours, that it really is yours and that it's you inside it. My heart goes wild. And sometimes, on the escalators in Maximarket, I think that the hair in front of me really is yours. Sometimes, for a split second, I really do think that it's you. 'Maybe I really am that lucky,' I think at times like that.

Sometimes I walk along our streets, from Vojkova up to the corner at Plava laguna. It's then that you're holding my hand again, and you say:

'Hey, we don't throw wrappers on the floor!' Or: 'No, it's not nice to smoke in public.'

It's then that we walk by Gavrilovič, turning right again, past the gooseberries and past Cevec up to Peričeva street; or we go up to Gavrilovič, cross the street and head straight on past the local shop and the nursery. And then, in front of the nursery, you say to me again:

'It's a good job that the two of you never needed to go to nursery – did you know they put the children in cribs?'

And once again I think to myself: I'm lucky that Dada looked after me, that I didn't sleep on straw and that I didn't have to go to that stable in the morning. And again I think to myself that this makes me special. It's then that you're mine again, all mine, and it's then that once again my palm gets lost in yours.

*****

Yet during the night I actually do see you. In the streets I pace behind you, in the streets which are always wet and always grey, because it's always raining. And your hair is wet too, from the sweat and the rain. Greasy and sticky. You're wearing your bright raincoat, worn-out brown shoes and your bucket tote bag. A waxwork face and lifeless arms. My heart goes wild, as I find you again. 'Wait,' I cry out, 'wait for me,' as I run after you. You don't hear me, you just keep going, along the street ahead, and I lose you amidst the other people. I'm running, running so hard, and then my hair is wet too, but you already far, far away, and once again I lose you.

Sometimes, only sometimes, you stop and when you stop, you also turn around. It's then that I don't breathe, frightened that I will do something wrong and you'll go again. So I just wait for you to catch sight of me, to see me again, to say to me:

'Where are you, my little poppet?'

But you don’t say anything at all, because your face is foreign, white and clammy, and your face is distant, as distant as your eyes, which are also white. And never, never ever, do you touch me. If I take hold of your hand and put it against my hair, the arm falls. The hand falls away from my face. If you speak, you say only:

‘Let me be.’ Or you say: ‘Leave me in peace.’

The worst is when you don’t say anything, and the worst is when you don’t say anything in front of the school, where everybody then shouts:

‘You don’t have a mum, you’re lying, you don’t have a mum, you’re lying!’

I wake up from the dream wet with tears and sweat.

The feeling of longing for you frightens me, that longing frightens me so much that it burns.

*****

pp. 145-152

I start going out with Urban when lectures begin, and we go to Planjava mountain on the first sunny Saturday in October.

Already in the trees, just before the path starts to wind upwards, my legs are heavy, as is my head.

‘I need to warm up, let’s go a bit slower,’ I say.

Urban goes slowly, but still I’m left behind. Cold sweat gets in my eyes. I feel embarrassed. .

‘I was still running the Kokra Saddle back in spring,’ I say.

‘Don’t worry, we’ve got all day,’ says Urban and he gives me a hug. It reassures me.

Before we’re out of the forest we make our first stop. I sink down on to a rock, I can’t go on.

‘Maybe I’m hungry,’ I say and I take a salami from my rucksack. We have something to eat and we set off again.

My legs are still heavy as we walk; when I take a step, I’m conscious of how I take a step. I take care to lift my feet properly. So as not to trip on stones and on rocks and on tree roots. I’m short of breath, I can’t fully inhale the air into my lungs.

When we reach the edge of the forest, we make our second stop. The sun is already high, but I feel so cold. The cold is deep inside me, brimming out from my spine and I have pins and needles all over. Urban is wearing short sleeves, he’s all brown with a big smile on his face.

‘Come on babe, it’s not that bad, you’re just a bit unfit, we’ll take breaks together, and we’ll do it,’ he says, breaking me off a piece of chocolate. I eat it, but the chocolate tastes of nothing. I don’t say anything.

Then we’re making stops all the time. When we stop, I sit down and lean on a rock behind me, or on my knees, or on Urban.

When we reach the summit, the sun is already going down. Ten hours of walking behind us.

‘Let’s sit on the grass just a little while longer,’ I say.

As we sit on the grass, the sun is by now glowing orange before it then turns to red.

‘I like it here,’ I say and I lie on my back. Every bit of me is heavy, I have nothing left.

‘Don’t fall asleep!’ says Urban. ‘Let’s go, it’s getting dark.’

When we set off, my legs buckle, I cling on to Urban. It’s not long before the darkness is completely dark.

‘Don’t be scared, I know this route like the back of my hand,’ says Urban. I am scared nevertheless. Not of the dark, but of myself.

It’s already the dead of night in then Kamnik Bistrica valley. I’m done in, I’m trembling all over.

*****

‘It took me ten hours to walk up Planjava,’ I say to Rok, who is still up at home. He makes fun of me.

I’m in bed all day Sunday. When I lie on my back, my chest hurts; if I lie on my side, my chest hurts even more. It hurts the most if I lie on my left side. The pain is sharp and it stings and I’ve never felt anything like it before.

That evening, when Dad is watching television, I approach him in the living room and I say:

‘I’ve got pneumonia, I should go see Marina.’

‘Yeah, give her a call,’ says Dad, changing the channel.

‘And these glands on my neck here are swollen,’ I say, pulling my palm across my neck.

Dad gets up from the sofa and he’s all anxious.

‘Which glands, where, since when, show me!’

I show Dad and he’s instantly white as a sheet.

*****

Marina waits for me in her clinic in Fužine. She gives me a hug and talks and smiles, because Marina always talks and she always smiles.

'So, come on then, show me these glands,' she says. I show her my glands and Marina instantly turns white as a sheet too. 'We need to x-ray your lungs,' she stutters.

My lungs are already behind her back, on the milky-white light box, when I return. Half of my lungs are dark, half of my lungs are white. My heart is ginormous, so it seems to me.

'Have I got pneumonia?' I say.

'It's not pneumonia,' says Marina, and her face is just like when she calls round to visit and says: *Don't look at me, I've just come from the beautician.* Her eyes are red and the end of her nose, and chin, are red.

'Can I get back to uni then?' I say.

'Uni will have to wait for a while now,' says Marina. That seems odd.

*****

The next morning I meet Marina at the hospital, Bojan comes too. I'm in a bad mood, thinking that they're going over the top with checks, and I'd like to go to lectures.

Marina arrives first. She's been crying, I see. When she hugs me, she says: 'Don't worry!'

Then Bojan arrives, and as he walks along the path, he wipes his sleeve across his face. I think they've had an argument. Bojan also hugs me and says: 'Don't worry!'

This also seems odd, because I'm not worried.

There's a big letter 'D' on the building that Bojan then leads me into.

'Oncology is nothing to do with you,' says Bojan, as we go through the glass doors, and then he adds: 'They'll perform a gland puncture. They don't do it anywhere else, which is why we're here.'

As we sit on the plastic chairs outside the treatment room, Bojan won't stop talking.

'There's no need to be scared,' he says.

He says it over and over, sometimes he says it ever so quietly, sometimes he strokes me on the thigh.

When I come back out into the waiting room with a gauze on my neck, his eyes are red again, just where his lower eyelashes are.

'Do you know where Oncology B is?' he says.

At that point my mind starts to murmur ever so slightly, and ever so slightly the polished floor wobbles beneath my feet.

'Yes, I know,' I say through clenched teeth, remembering myself in a green dress with little flowers, a building with a big letter B, that woman behind the wall and you, you firmly squeezing my hand and you say:

'Don't stare, come on, she has cancer!'

For a moment it makes my mouth completely dry.

'Oncology is nothing to do with you,' Bojan says quickly again. 'But you just nip over there, Marina has already arranged everything with the doctors.'

The glistening floor is still wavering beneath me.

*****

The doctor that's waiting for me in the building with the letter B is serious, and imposing. She asks a lot of questions and I talk a lot. She writes everything I say down in a file, I feel the centre of attention and important.

'I know that you and your brother lost your mum,' she says.

My heart beats faster, my cheeks tingle, because finally someone is asking about you, because finally I can tell someone something about you.

When I talk about you, I stay focused on the ceiling and sometimes out of the window; so that no-one sees that I'm crying. I don't want to cry, I never want to cry, because I'm worried that it will make others scared and not want to listen, let alone ask questions, and that they'll go quiet again. And when they go quiet, you'll be far away once again, too far away from my side once more.

That's why I talk and I explain as if it's completely normal that you've gone, like it's as normal as chickenpox or measles.

*****

I arrive at Dada's hungry. Rok is there, and Urban too. They're eating plum dumplings.

'Stop showing off, take that gauze off,' says Rok.

I pull the gauze off from my neck. 'Did you know I had to go to oncology?' I say, when I sit down at the table. 'I still have a load more tests to do, total panic, I'll miss lectures!'

Dada strokes my hair and says: 'You work hard, my little poppet!'

She puts five dumplings with crispy bits, still sizzling, on my plate. I sprinkle them with a couple of spoons of sugar. ‘What do you reckon, what’s going on?’ I say with my mouth full.
Urban flicks through my referral forms and says: ‘I’ll ask my Mum a few questions, she works in microbiology, she must have an idea about these things. It all seems like a load of shit to me.’
He’s serious, in the way that Urban sometimes is.
Rok takes a slice of apple from the compote: ‘But, why were you at oncology? If you ask me, you’ve got cancer, but listen, I’m no doctor!’

‘For Gods’ sake Rok, what the hell are you on about!’ shouts Dada.

*****

The day they take a bone marrow sample, it’s raining. I’m not scared.

‘If it was ok on my neck, it can’t be much worse on my bum,’ I say to Rok as we walk together along Vegova that morning; him to school on the left, while I head onwards to get the bus straight ahead.
Again I go to the building with the letter B. ‘Just nipping in for a puncture,’ I joke with the doorman, as I pass through the heavy doors. He smiles back.

‘On the first floor, then to the right,’ he says. He’s really nice.
I run up the stairs, because I’m fit and well. On the first floor I turn right. I take a seat on the white bench and I wait. I observe the green gowns that skate past me, and the bare heads upon long necks that protrude from them. The eyes on the heads are wide, and they look back at me. I hear groans and spewing and I hear coughing and it compresses me in a steel bind, too tight for me. I’m short of breath, but just a little, and just for a moment. Because I know that this isn’t my world, because the green gowns and pale heads aren’t my world, nor the toxic bottles that ride around with them. My world is outside, out there behind the heavy doors, two flights of stairs and a few steps up to the pavement. My world is on the number eleven bus, the number twenty bus, on Vojkova, in the sun, at uni and on my bike, at the foot of Planjava amongst the warm grass. And I’m only here for a test, for a test that can’t be done anywhere else.

‘It won’t hurt, will it?’ I ask the nurse, as she calls me into a large white room, white and metallic. ‘Is it a thin needle? They’re always thin for punctures, aren’t they?’

‘It won’t take long,’ says the nurse. ‘Don’t worry!’

I scan the shelves for the needle that awaits me, I don't see it. I then go quiet, and get undressed.

In the middle of the room, right in the middle, a table is waiting for me. Upon it there's a fresh white sheet. It strikes me as nice, that it's fresh just for me. I lie on my front and I wait. I'm calm, perfectly calm, with my hands under my chin.

The doctor comes and says: 'I'm going to make a small jab in your pelvis to enable me to extract some bone marrow, but first we'll give you local anaesthetic.'

I'm even calmer, because the pelvic bone isn't thick. I know that.

'Just relax your arms down by your side,' the nurse says, as we wait for the anaesthetic to take hold. 'So I can hold on to you.' I put my arms down by my side, so she can hold on to me.

The doctor says: 'I'm putting the needle in.' And she inserts the needle into my bone. It takes my breath, the room dances before my eyes, dances and dances. And then the nurse says: 'The worst is over, all we do now is take it out.' My breathing is shallow and fast and sometimes I don't breathe at all. I'm waiting for the end, which is due any second now, it has to come any second now, because the worst is over.

But there's no end, it's getting increasingly worse and worse and the pain gets stronger. It's no longer just a sharp sting, it overflows into my body, all over me. The needle thrusts into me, straight in, it thrusts to the left and it thrusts to the right and it circles endlessly and then the needle is pulled out, crudely and with force, a lot of force, with more, more and more. Sweat trickles into my eyes and mouth, I tense up, cramps seize my calves and my thighs and my back and all over. I'm writhing, the nurse holds me down to the table, holds me onto the sheet, holds me down firmly. When I catch her gaze for a split second, she immediately looks away. Panic takes hold of me, an infinite panic.

'I can't get it out!' gasps the doctor shortly after. 'It's got itself stuck'.

'Please, stop, I can't, I can't take any more,' I sob into the damp, white sheet beneath me.

And then the body which is tossing around on the table is no longer mine. I hear the creaking, the gasping and the thrusting from afar. I am lost amongst the grass, amongst the mountains, amongst the rocks, behind the white, the completely white cotton wool clouds.

There is an eternity before the needle eventually comes out.

*****

pp. 203-207

In spring I am overwhelmed by fear. Fear that it will happen to me again. My chest is tight, I seek calm, of which there is none, I seek the ground beneath my feet, which isn't there either. When I sleep, I dream that they perform a bone marrow transplant on me. They put me in in a cell, in a sterile white and green glass cell, no visitors allowed, nobody. There are only shadows that stick fat needles into my arms. And they stick the needles in my chest and in my neck the most. A red liquid flows into me and never stops. I pull the catheter from my arms, from my chest and from my neck, but the shadows always drive the sharp, hollow needles back into me again, they always stick them into me again. I become afraid of the night. I don't want to sleep anymore. Fear envelops me like a wet bathrobe.

'I'm scared it'll happen to me again,' I say.

'What's there to be scared of? You're better now,' others say, and then they always add something else, to distract from what came first. But I'm only interested in what came first and I don't want it to stay silent in the background. Because it is so strong that at the moment it's all that I am. I'm not interested in anything, absolutely nothing else, because inside my chest something very powerful is swelling, and it's becoming so big that it hurts, so very big that I'm scared that all of a sudden my heart won't have enough space to beat. It's then that I wish they'd draw me in close, small and frightened, it's then I wish they'd allow me to descend, without shame, it's then that I wish that it didn't take so much of my own courage to cross the bridge over their own fears.

But descent is not something they allow. They want me to say: 'Everything will be fine, I know!'

They want me to say: 'Don't give cancer a second thought!'

Because that's when they can start smiling again. Then there's no more illness, nor death. Then, to them, I'm healthy and they'll forever be healthy with me. Then I have hair again, that I put up into a high ponytail, then I'm just as they want me to be, the only version of me they can bear.

But it doesn't work like that. Sometimes it really doesn't work.

When I can't take any more, I call the doctor. 'I'm scared,' I gasp into the receiver. 'I'm scared it's going to happen to me again. Sometimes I can't swallow. I haven't slept in so long.'

‘Come in,’ she says. ‘Come in straight away.’

I go in straight away and she says:

‘I know you’re worried; I know you’re scared. Everyone’s always scared it will come back. But you’re doing brilliantly now, believe me, for now we’re doing brilliantly.’

And then she shows me the most recent scans of my lungs and the most recent results, and she shows me statistics and she shows me graphs. And then I believe again that the chemotherapy has done its job, once and for all, and that’s been enough radiation treatment, once and for all. I’m overcome with calm. There, already, in front of her in her clinic I am overcome with an endless sense of peace and calm.

That evening I drink cocoa and I read. For the first time in a long while I can read, and when night comes, for the first time in a long while I can sleep.

*****

On the 26th June, we become independent. There’s a celebration in front of Maximarket. Dad is delirious. He’s had a shower.

‘Shall we go celebrate?’ I say to Urban, when he comes over. We go.

It’s a Wednesday when we leave Yugoslavia. I have a weird feeling, because I don’t want to leave my things behind. And Yugoslavia is my thing. Because you lived in Yugoslavia, because we were all there, Vojkova was there, and our address was Vojkova 11, 61000 Ljubljana, S.R. Slovenia, Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was mine and yours, and I felt proud during break times when I looked at the relief in the school hall. You taught me that; how to love our country, how to draw the burning red torch in the emblem and how I have to draw the lines to get top marks for my star.

And now this country of ours is collapsing, and with it collapses all that is mine, and with it you become a little further away. I can’t bear it, but I don’t dare say this out loud, because it seems like I’m the only one. At least it seems that way on Congress Square. And I don’t dare say that out loud, because I know that they wouldn’t understand that this doesn’t make me any less Slovene. On this of all days they wouldn’t understand.

*****

As Urban and I are standing outside Maximarket, Kučan says: ‘Today, dreams are allowed; tomorrow is a new day.’ I like that; it speaks to me.

Light pours out from the Iskra building, Mežek is singing: *I was born in a land, where songs and May days and apple trees are home…* and I've got tears in my eyes. Luckily they don't overflow. That would be embarrassing.

I'm tired by the time celebrations are over. I'd like to sit down somewhere, but Congress Square is packed. My hands hurt, I slip them into my jeans pockets.

'Are you coming to stay at mine?' I say to Urban. 'Dad will be partying 'til morning, and he'll sleep in tomorrow.' I say this because Urban isn't allowed to stay over at ours.

We go back to mine.

*****

At half seven in the morning, Dad rushes into my room.

'Bronja, we're at war!' he bellows from the door.

Žiži shoots out of his cage, Urban pulls up the covers. When Dad catches sight of Urban, the vein in his neck protrudes. He's red in the face, as he roars:

'What the hell are you doing here? There's a war on, you lousy good-for-nothings, there's a war on and you two don't give a fuck!'

He slams the door before rushing into Rok's room.

'Rok, we're at war! War!' he bellows.

Rok isn't there. He's been climbing in Črni Kal for the past three days.

This is how the war begins under at our house.

*****

On Sunday we're supposed to capitulate, we have until nine in the morning. When, at nine, we don't capitulate and the sirens sound, Dad bellows: 'Air raid!'

I start packing for the air raid shelter. For myself, for Žiži. Dad is going crazy.

'A hair dryer? Hair gel? The guinea pig? What, so he can use all the oxygen? You do know that there's no oxygen in an air raid shelter?' He loses it.

Because Žiži isn't allowed to go with me, Dad goes to the shelter on his own, and I put the television on and wait for the press conference because I like Jelko Kacin.

When the press conference has finished, I call Dada.

'Have you heard that there's a war in Ljubljana?' I say.

'I have - are you coming round for pancakes?' says Dada.

excerpts from the novel translated by Olivia Hellewell