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ALMA

An English abstract

The island

In April there are few boats shuttling from the mainland to the island. She walks through the closed town: a woman with stork legs and wrinkles on the sides of her blue eyes, like those of who grew up in a windy city, wanders alone around uninhabited vacation homes, some facades sporting a Zagreb Dynamo flag hanging from laundry lines, others a wall decorated with bullet holes. Alma looks up at the bell tower and sees a seagull stretching its wings. This morning she phoned the hotel on the island, asked if it was possible to book a room. It is possible, they answered her reluctantly. Times have changed but the island retains its rudeness.

The sky meanwhile has cleared, there is a Baltic sun. It seems to her that she has spent her life under skies like this, chasing after something she could never quite grasp. One winter in her hometown, it must have been the end of February, she was walking in the woods of Baron Revoltella and the trees were jerking from the bora, she was trusting a man's hand that had snuck into the pocket of her coat and she was shivering. Such things happened, she knew people she spent time with, they would scan the sky together, walk together for a little while, then she would leave.

The bells strike the hour, the boat captain has entered the cabin to check that everything is ready. Alma hurries to the gangway, no one checks her ticket: she is the only passenger, and she looks like a foreigner from the north. Wherever

she has lived they have always mistaken her for someone from elsewhere, there is something tentative about her gestures, as if she is always about to leave, or because she gives the impression of waiting a moment too long before answering questions and people think she doesn't understand the language, no language, even though she understands and speaks several.

On the deck she rests her elbows on the rail and leans out to watch the water ripple as soon as the engines begin to roll. Once, in her father's arms, she had dropped her hat in the water. A straw hat with a blue ribbon they had bought in Venice. To console her he had taken her below deck, where many had instantly risen to shake his hand, he then said something to the captain, who had popped out of the locker under the controls a rectangle of blue fabric with a red star sewn on one side and placed it on her head. She had said thank you, and the captain and her father had exchanged a meaningful look.

The hat of the young pioneers of Yugoslavia has not survived childhood and there are no photos of that day: few of us were immortalized on festive occasions, if we weren't lucky enough to enter national parades and end up on the "Vjesnik" or "Novi list." Alma remembers wearing blue pants and a navy shirt. For years she believed that memory was a figment of the imagination, growing up in the desert of familiar memory with the stubbornness of an acacia tree in the Sahara, then she had stopped thinking about it.

At that time her father took her to the island two or three times a year. There was the atmosphere of a film festival and glasses of champagne, the jaunty air of non-aligned countries. Men in suits or white hats strolled along the boulevards or paraded in small convertible cars; herds of fawns grazed the grass of the golf course. Alma would dive from the flat rocks and swim among the fist-sized sea tomatoes and mullets, and breams. She was forbidden to speak to anyone and on the other hand she wondered how she could ever do so, since

they spoke indistinguishable languages different from her own, only every so often she could recognize sounds that resembled those she heard on the buses in her town, or at the beach after the pine forest where the Slovenians from Contovello went down to bathe.

Sometimes there were also other children on the island, the little blue hat with the red star like hers, white shirts and a red handkerchief around their necks. Her father had explained that they were the young pioneers, and she had told him that she wanted to be a pioneer. And why would that be? To have the uniform like theirs! She actually hated the times when there were pioneers on the island. They were a band, a tribe. They spoke an esoteric language, they possessed a code of gestures she ignored, they beat palm to palm, fist to fist, they shouted, they dived from the cliffs on the south coast, the most dangerous, they whistled with two fingers in their mouths. Sometimes they dragged her in their expeditions to the villas and from the holes in the fences they spied the uniformed waiters preparing the fire for the grill while on the large stone tables the vases waited to be filled with flowers and the military guarded the gates. None of the soldiers ever threatened them, nor chased them away when they became annoying, because the Marshal adored the children, he had his photograph taken with them whenever he appeared at public ceremonies, kissed them and accepted their gifts, financed the athletic games he attended with his wife and the officials who over the years survived the purges.

Alma happened to run into her father strolling down the island's avenues in the company of women with pearl necklaces and men who smoked, winking at her to say that this was not the time to remind everyone that he was a father. As she passed by him, she heard him speak different languages each time, the words coming nimbly out of his mouth, overlapping each other so that it became difficult for anyone to attribute an accent to him, to understand where he came

from or, better yet, which side he was on. (Where had he been born? Who were his parents? And what about his name?) Little did they know, those women and the elegant men, that his father was a gypsy with the ability to baste stories that stunned and to sing lullabies that frightened – he would come and go from home without one could ever be sure of his return. He was not to be trusted. He was always fleeing eastward, and she and her mother were left only to wait for him, an eternal wait.

Alma's childhood, which lasted more or less until they moved to the house on the Karst, had been an alternation of waiting and tense days when her mother would come home with aluminum trays filled with roasted ćevapčići and ajvar, kipferl and beets cooked with potatoes, dinner for the return of her father, which they would end up munching by themselves. And if as an adult Alma developed a certain irritation at the sound of women's heels advancing on the parquet floor, it was because in those days of vain hope her mother wore the green satin dress that left her knees and shoulders bare and the heels resounded tormentingly from the kitchen to the living room window, for hours, until they surrendered to the darkness and were thrown into the closet, leaving a trail of trepidation and pain in the air.

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Her mother had been a child overwhelmed by closets organized with military rigor, by the tight cotton linens stowed among lavender bags and Marseille soap flakes, by sofas matching the color of the carpets and walls, stifled by decorative order and good taste, and thus felt a swaggering attraction to any form of instability, pathological restlessness: convinced that she wanted to surf the waves of the ocean, she ended up regretting the shore, barely coping herself on

an ill-equipped raft prone to stormy seas. As a young girl she had studied art history, because they told her she had style in dressing, but within a few exams of graduation she had dropped out of college and married Alma's father, the Slav, facing threats, curses, and infinitely the reserve-filled hostility from her parents. She didn't know how to do anything specific, she didn't cook, she had no idea how to stuff sheets under mattresses, dropped items from her hands and left stains on the hardwood floor that ended up having that sticky texture that tables in taverns have. She had never been on time for an appointment in her life. However, she loved plants and flower gardens and their home was a living nature that fought with laundry to be washed and cups crusted with coffee, the table covered with crumbs. She had gotten a job at the City of Fools because she had shown up to the interview with a jar of roses in her arms, and it had pleased the doctor who wanted to make the revolution, so he hired her to bring some good cheer to those parts.

Some evenings Alma would hear her crying in her room. Let's go find Dad, she would tell her then, but her mother would shake her head, she would not be able to tell where he was, somewhere beyond the border in the east, in some Yugoslavian hotel and maybe in someone's villa. She wiped her eyes with the edge of the sheet streaking it with black lines and told her that they would not go anywhere, they would stay in the city because dad would always come back there. And Alma at seven or ten years old knew that it was the town, not the family, that called her father back. If someone had told her one day that she would step into those same footprints, she would have looked at them in horror.

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The boat crosses the short stretch between the island and the mainland with the inertia of a travelling salesman. The bora wind has risen over the sea. The outline of the hotel takes shape in the distance, surrounded by a greyish vapour: a façade of an Austro-Hungarian sanatorium or a Balbec fallen out of time; who knows if the waitresses still wear the thick flesh-coloured tights, if the elegant barmen like figurines and the portrait of the Marshal above the liquor shelf have survived? How old were you the last time you were here? At that time she only vaguely sensed her father's language and discomfort. At the tip of the pier, a man now looks at the land with his hands in his pockets. She is travelling with a shoulder bag that holds the weight of a laptop, a book, a few sweaters and spare underwear, beauty essentials: she has impulsively decided to leave, avoiding giving way to preparations that might have made her reconsider. When she gets off the boat, the man with his hands in his pockets greets her in German. The hotel is shrouded in an air of desertion. The entrance hall lit by the wall-mounted ceiling lamps of yesteryear, which radiate into the room that yellow light immortalised by certain Kodak films, the carpet is still ochre-coloured, and the amber ashtrays and armchairs where Hollywood actresses used to recline have endured. She checks in speaking in English, the guy at the reception desk is half her age, he carefully reads the passport she handed him and does not suspect that she might speak the same language as him. He hands her the keys without comment. On the second floor, the corridors are those of a Soviet boarding school, the only thing missing is the cleaning lady in the chair in front of the communal bathroom door handing out rationed toilet paper or newspaper sheets. But this was a party hotel and the details are taken care of, there are travel photographs on the walls and parquet in the rooms, now the bathtub drips rusty water and neon flickers on the ceiling. She walks out onto the balcony of the room, the woods in the back are silent and neglected. She

recalled it resembling a vast English garden. Mythologising the past, changing the contours of reality, is an exercise she is trained in: she learnt it when she was a child and her time was contended between her mother, father and maternal grandparents, antagonistic worlds between which it was up to her to pull a thread that would not drive everyone mad. There was life with her mother, where the sink overflowed with dirty dishes, the ashtrays with cigarettes, the couches with guests who came and went filling the house with pizza boxes, bottles of wine, accents from the capital and a boisterous cheerfulness, sometimes even mad people came and bit the feet of Alma's dolls as if they were chewing gum. There she could move around freely: she spent afternoons in the garden or riding her bike on the pavements around the house, if she fell and skinned her knee her mother didn't hear her, because she was sleepless at night and in the afternoon she made up for it by putting wax plugs in her ears, so Alma would cry for a while, then forget about it and pedal away without anyone telling her not to go too far. There was life with her grandparents, which she actually preferred, with the chocolate snacks and polite conversations, the oil paintings on the walls and the cushions with hunting scenes on the sofa, the conviction that she would be the one to inherit silver cutlery and Baccarat glasses, their elegant and worldly way of life, instead of their daughter to whom they recommended hiding the antique coins they gave her for her birthday. At her grandparents', Alma rested, there were always clean pyjamas for her under her pillow and fruit for breakfast, a clear table to do her homework and pencils with a well-sharpened tip. And then there was her father. A blond scarecrow that popped up on the horizon without warning. Tall and straight in the air that was always summery around him: the white shirt scrambled on his back, his trousers balanced on his hips, the astonished, airy smile. Her father who disappeared and reappeared, who used to take her to the island of communists,

dressing her as a little pioneer and teaching her melancholic Balkan songs, letting her taste slivovitz with the tip of her tongue, and who when he finally came home took her to the cinema. Alma shivers with coldness, the wood stretches the half-light up to the rooms, lowering the temperature a few degrees, obstructing the comfort of the April sun; she notices that she is clutching the terrace balustrade tightly, as if afraid of falling down. She looks at the taut skin on her knuckles that look like wax, the raised bones of her fingers; she stopped wearing rings when she realised they wouldn't hold people together.

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Do you want to see the zoo?, her father would ask her as soon as they set foot on the island, even they had already seen it several times. Mountain zebras from Guinea, zebu brought as a gift from the Prime Minister of India, sheep from Somalia with their milk-white bodies and black muzzles, antelopes. Let's go to Sony and Lanka!, he urged her in a good mood, and that momentum was enough to make her body feel like it was shot through with an infinite number of electric sparks. He liked the two elephants that came as gifts from an Indian princess, or he liked the princess story. The visit was always short, someone would usually appear to call him, at some point, and he would slip his jacket over his bony shoulders. And even though he wore elegant trousers and an immaculate shirt, those clothes could not take away the tentative air of someone approaching the banquet just for a toast before fleeing elsewhere, into the dust of the world. He jumped into one of the convertible cars that took him to where the party raged, to the decision rooms. The exotic excitement vanished with him: Sony and Lanka were back to being two pachyderms laid back on the

straw in a shady corner of the corral, somewhere in the park buffaloes could be heard fighting, the rush of zebras in herds making the earth tremble.

The time on the island stretched out and became endless, a whole summer long. The children, forgotten at the edge of the official celebrations, roamed in groups, isolated. We would look for the sea beyond the park, go down among the rocks and stand with our feet soaking in the anemones, creating tiny waves towards the spiny black urchins. Sometimes some small breams would approach and we would reach out our hands to touch them, imagining we were turning them into sharks or water snakes with ten thousand teeth. We mulled over who knows what thoughts, unable to tear ourselves away from the water, until a wave crashed violently against the rocks and drenched our hair. The island is a key, but it doesn't know which drawer to open. Now it is beaten by the bora and lonely, but in the days when she travelled with her father there was a welcoming crowd, chauffeur-driven cars, actresses in high heels, and a big commotion in the back of the hotel. When the women were there, the air became crisp, diplomacy relaxed and the guests became more festive, her father relaxed, they spent more time together, hunting the albino peacock or swimming in the bay of the Roman ruins where the water was warm: he could hold his breath for a long time, he went down to the bottom and searched for the largest stones he could find, bringing to light colonies of algae, snappers flocked in shoals and followed him like a Pied Piper of the deep sea. Children would dive after him and he would make them laugh in all languages.

Alma never knew in advance when she would go to the island. One day her father would appear unannounced at the door of the house on the Karst, where they had ended up when they had severed ties with her maternal grandparents: he was always agitated, happy, between his wrist and elbow a pile of crumpled newspapers, his eyes glittering with the frenzy of one who is glued to the flow

of news. He would announce his departure for the next day, take her mother to dinner at an osmiza in Samatorza or to the fishermen in Duino. He had the ability to make every moment magnificent, which is the prerogative of the fickle and the selfish or of those who are always leaving for something irresistible that others, mostly family members, do not understand. The next morning the two of them left at dawn like fugitives, Alma dragging her pillow behind her.

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On the island, on this April day, the avenues are deserted and desolate. In front of the museum, the Marshal's Cadillac is parked, but no one polishes it anymore; it's a relic under glass, rented out for the weddings of the Yugo-nostalgics. A caption explains that it was a gift from the emigrants in Canada to the man who was more than a head of state, a staunch fighter who knew how to disobey the little Russian father and get away with it. Alma remembers the Marshal. When he came down to the dock, the men put on their jackets. He was sturdy, monolithic, tanned. She remembers him as tall, but maybe he wasn't. He had greenish, energetic, calm eyes (some said they were the color of forget-me-nots, "snake eyes," the Americans wrote in their reports). He smiled with a genuinely seductive sincerity. In her father's stories, on the rock with his feet soaking in the warm bay water, he became a ruler with the aura of a warrior: he possessed thirteen golden swords, about ten golden collars with diamonds, sixteen Yugoslav decorations, and ninety-nine foreign ones. In the world divided by the war of steel, everyone paid homage to him, as is customary for dictators. A few years later, those grand stories took on an ambiguous feeling: at the May Day parade, a group of students had carried a huge mirror on their shoulders and turned it in front of the tribune so the sovereign, or the despot,

could see himself. She didn't understand whether it was a detail to admire or disapprove of.

Once, on the island, the Marshal had spoken to her, looking so closely that she saw yellow specks flicker in his iris, and she had stepped back in fear, hiding among the other children in the choreography, and he had smiled at her.

The last time she saw him was on a day of reckoning under a blinding September sun. Her father had warned her, "Go, don't be seen," and had ordered a drink from the bartender in a white shirt and bow tie. Alma headed toward the Byzantine castrum, on the opposite side of the island, but along the way, the wind in the deserted meadows and the rustling of the woods frightened her: a girl with a red scarf tied around her neck, wandering alone in the shadow of the military base and the Kupelwieser tomb. Disobeying her father, she had returned toward the hotel. The boats docked at the marina were gone, and there was no trace of human activity.

She had climbed the few steps leading to the patio and, from there, approached the tall windows of the dining room. The glass was almost entirely covered by velvet curtains to protect the interior from the glare. The lights were on in the room, and a haze of cigarette smoke lingered. A girl in full light spied on a room in the shadows: she could see the oval table with the amber ashtray on the crocheted doily, the men with their elbows on their knees, the Marshal, whom everyone addressed, seated in a bamboo armchair, his back leaning against the backrest and the cigarette between his fingers. He was looking toward the window, seeming drowsy or lost in reminiscing about someone.

Then her father appeared, the lithe body of a blonde swimmer just out of the pool. Unlike the others, he wasn't wearing a tie, and this detail made him stand out. He dragged a chair to the table, staying in the second row, leaning forward

as if following a chess game. Someone had said something to him, but he didn't move his lips, and the other person gave up.

The sun warmed her back, making her position comfortable. When the Marshal spoke to her father, she understood why everyone around him had turned, parting like a curtain, so that the light from those greenish or yellow eyes could fall on him. He had started to rock in his chair. They looked at each other for a while, God and the creature, then her father had let the chair regain its balance and said a very brief sentence. The men around them crossed their arms. Her father had resumed speaking, this time at length. The Marshal's head was imperceptibly turned toward the windows.

Her father spoke, and the others stood with their arms crossed, one of them had covered his mouth with his hand. Alma understood that if she moved at that moment, they would all see her. The sun continued to shine, oblivious, on her back. The Marshal had said something without taking his eyes off the window, and then her father stood up. She had feared he had ordered him to make his daughter disappear, like the God of the Jews asking for the sacrifice of the innocent, but without the power to stop the hand.

Just a few months earlier, her grandfather had told her that across the border, people were eliminated for no reason — her father's idol sent opponents to an island that was a prison, a camp like the Nazis had, you know, Schatzi? And no one ever heard of them again. She had started to suspect that the island was the same one where she went with her father, but she couldn't ask her grandfather because she had promised never to reveal those trips east, especially to him. A pioneer's word? What does that mean? Never mind. Yes, a pioneer's word.

Her father didn't come to take her to sacrifice her to the tyrannical God; he didn't move from his spot. Standing, he passed a hand across his neck, which floated thinly inside the collar of his shirt. One of the men who wore a plastic

badge on his jacket pocket spoke, and the person sitting next to her father took the notebook he had been holding and let it fall on the table with the gesture of someone brushing a hair off their plate.

The blue notebook now lay between the amber ashtrays on the crocheted doilies — a landmine before which one holds their breath to avoid setting it off. No one touched it. Her father kept massaging his neck, and the Marshal kept staring at the window. A man in a striped tie said something, but he was stopped by her father. Now everyone was silent. Her father gestured to sit down, then changed his mind.

It seemed as if she could touch the silence around him, as if it were a dense, sticky substance. The Marshal stubbed out his cigarette in the amber ashtray. Her father reached for the blue notebook, but the man beside him blocked his arm, and another slid the notebook into a folder. The Marshal smiled toward the windows, waved his hand, and a waiter appeared to fully close the curtains. Alma then ran as far as she could, so her father wouldn't have any doubt that she had seen everything.

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Even today, the sun warms the air; even today, there isn't a soul in the park on the island.

The boy at the reception desk lifts his eyes from his phone when he sees her pass by—a tall blonde woman, as tall as a Swede, wrapped in a turquoise windbreaker too light for the season. They exchange a glance. The boy lowers his gaze back to the screen of his phone.

Alma moves out of his field of vision and enters that of the man who has never left the dock. Now he watches her walk toward the bay, thinking she must be a

foreigner traveling alone, an eccentric soul, a troubled one. The wind shakes her like an apple and tears the thoughts from her body. The deer are no longer in the grove, and the albino peacock doesn't appear—if it even still exists.

That last day on the island, her father had found her when it was already getting dark, and the crickets had long since taken over from the cicadas. He had reached the lighthouse with trembling breath, and for the first time, she realized that she was something precious to him, someone whose absence was not indifferent. He had grabbed her by the arm, pulling her down from the wall roughly—or perhaps out of fear. He had been about to say something but then let it go, and they had started walking toward the boat dock. Now she wonders if she inherited from those days with her father the ability to remain silent next to the people she loves—a habit she had never noticed until someone pointed it out to her.

That day, the boat was waiting for them at the pier, and they boarded without looking back, leaving behind Balbec—or more likely a Castle—without knowing if they would ever return. They reached the bow and leaned against the railing, staring for a while at the foam of the waves as the ship's prow split them into two symmetrical fans. The distant lights of the mainland looked like dots, only slightly larger than the stars, with a light just a bit warmer. And as the boat moved forward smoothly, night fell over the sea.

"There's something you need to learn, Alma. It's very important that you remember it," her father had said suddenly in the midst of the darkness of water and sky. "In life, you can have all the freedoms you want, but if you don't have the freedom to say and write what you think, it means something very bad is coming."

She had understood that he was referring to the blue notebook but not that he was talking about her life.

"Do you know who the man I spoke to today is?"

"The Marshal Tito," she had said proudly.

"Do you know who he is?"

"A dictator!" It had seemed the perfect moment to bring up that piece of knowledge she had learned from her grandfather.

"Who told you that?"

She had felt the muscle in her father's forearm stiffen against hers and knew, even in the darkness, that he was scrutinizing her. So she kept her eyes fixed on the water; she would not betray her grandfather because it was shared knowledge in the family that being a spy was one of the worst disgraces, worthy of those reserved for the utmost contempt. It must be said that in her house, contempt was never in short supply.

"Without Tito, the country wouldn't have defeated the Nazis." Her father's voice had turned to steel. "When the war ended, he was the one who decided which side to take—with the United States or with Russia. Do you know that?"

He had fallen silent, waiting for Alma to say something.

"Which side are we on?" she had asked then.

"You and I are on no one's side," he explained. "Because when people have power, they always end up making deals among themselves, and the only thing you can do is be on no one's side, take no orders, and think for yourself."

"But America and Russia aren't people!"

"It's the same thing," he said. Then he lifted her chin with a gesture full of tenderness, making her turn toward him to ensure that in the darkness, she wouldn't miss his words. "Even if it seems strange to you, sometimes countries work like people. Imagine two people who hate each other—America and Russia—and try in every way to win over a third person because they believe that makes them stronger. America and Russia both tried to win over Marshal

Tito, like the sirens in the story of Ulysses, each offering great gifts and promises. But you should never trust those who need to make you promises, okay?"

Alma nodded.

"No, this is important. Do you really understand?" He was so close that she could feel the warmth of his breath.

"Yes."

"You must always remember this. In life, there will be many people ready to promise you their friendship, their love, their loyalty—things that make no sense to promise because they either exist, or they don't."

"I understand. You're hurting me," she had said. He was gripping her arm without realizing it.

Her father let go and looked away. He went to sit on the painted benches on the deck and waited for her to join him. They remained silent and close. Above them, the Big and Little Dipper shone, along with the constellation of Cygnus, and Mercury low on the horizon.

"Papa, is your country Yugoslavia?" she had asked when the engines began to roll for docking.

He had smiled, then held out his hand to help her down the deck stairs, just as he used to do when she was younger.

"Yugoslavia doesn't exist anymore, *zlato*," he had said in the dark.

It was 1976—or perhaps a day she had only imagined.

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The lighthouse house still exists, and even at the tip of the island, there is no sign of human presence. Only wind, rocks—an atmosphere like snipers on

rooftops. The island is a truce or a bridge; Alma has decided to come here before returning to the city where she was born to deal with her father's inheritance, which arrived unexpectedly when it already seemed too late to settle accounts with family, the past, the dead, and roots—the kind of things buried underground.

Many of her friends, after losing a parent, had felt the urge to return to the places of their childhood, seeking in the familiarity of streets and intersections a glue to piece themselves back together, to remind them of the people they once were. But the city of her childhood is, for her, more a place of dispersion, a kaleidoscope of possible lives—all those she could have lived if she had known how to choose one path over another, if she had known how to stay anchored to something, cultivating relationships with people the way her mother cultivated roses, grafting them into the same pot. Instead, she lacked perseverance. She loved plants on the verge of blooming but then forgot to water them or change their soil, and, no matter how resilient, they died.

"Why don't you ever talk about yourself?" her friends would ask, those she made and lost over time. They meant: why don't you ever talk about your past, about the places you belong to? Because, first of all, she wouldn't even know where to begin.

From her childhood, she remembers the island, those days as a little pioneer, but they are memories she has long deserted, and she isn't sure she ever really lived them. She could have made them up as a surrogate for life with her father. Telling facts as stories is a skill she built a career on, demonstrating a talent she cannot apply to personal matters—least of all the past. Impossible.

Some things I don't want to talk about. But... No.

The Marshal's thirteen golden swords, her father's red passport that granted him freedom to travel anywhere—and she inherited that freedom and used it

to leave, always, without explanation. And now, with Balkan irony, it was her father who forced her to return to the city in the east, on the edge of the nation. He left a note for her, a postscript to recover. Something more than an inheritance, a blackmail to drag her back, just as times are changing.

There's another war at the door—are you planning to run from this one, too?

I don't know anything about it. Leave me alone.

She must stop stalling.

The island is a timeless diorama. It soothes every tension. In the bay, you can hide under the wind-warped maritime pines and let yourself be embalmed by the salt, become one with the Roman ruins. The island's calm for eternity. The military base standing guard. The albino peacocks.

The Marshal found embalming repulsive—he wouldn't end up like the Russian dictators.

She must start from here, rewind the film and watch it from the beginning, like those old black-and-white movies that are now artificially colorized and look so kitsch, so wonderful. The island was a film set for African kings and American stars.

Don't stall!

It's better to go back to the hotel. Tomorrow morning, she will take the boat to the mainland, drive back to the border. She remembers what the border used to be like. Today, nothing—not even the red-and-white barrier, not even a rifle. Or rather, yes, the rifles are still there, but not for those traveling on the main roads. The rifles are for travelers on foot, those who get lost in the forests of wolves and bears, and when the men with rifles meet the men on foot, they snatch from their hands documents written in languages they cannot read.

Her father's passport was worth so much, once. Now, it's worth nothing—what matters more is the freedom to write and to think.

Are you sure, Dad?

Yes, *zlato*.

She had believed him—she always did. It's a habit she has never lost, believing in people and situations, even when it would be wise to be wary.

She rolls up her pants and steps into the waves up to her calves. She shivers.

Yes, tomorrow she will leave—she must reach the city because these are the right days if she wants to find him. The days of Orthodox Easter, with the red-colored eggs and the blessing in the temple of Saint Spyridon.

She takes two steps forward in the water, her feet disappearing into the carpet of algae covering the Roman ruins. A crab swiftly hides among the rocks.

This difficulty in seeing him again.

Seeing who?

A brother, a friend, an antagonist.

Her hesitations, her indecisions, her having avoided the city to come here, to the island—these are just a story hiding another, more difficult one to tell.

Her father left her an unexpected inheritance.

Just when she thought she had accepted the fact that he was simply gone. She had left the funeral behind, with all its whispering—because she, the daughter, hadn't spoken a word. With her profession, of all things, she could have at least read a few thoughts. But in those days, she had no thoughts, only a black hole swallowing every intention or impulse, a violent, shapeless rebellion against the time she had lost, against her father, who had made her believe that people never really leave, against the unapproachable despair of her mother, who cried and cried, attracting every attempt at consolation and making her own lack of tears, her jeans and sneakers, all the more scandalous.

Because Alma had arrived in a hurry. She hadn't thought about a suitcase or a pair of dark glasses. And at the funeral, she had wanted to escape the gazes, just

as she did at ten years old when she missed her father and rode her bike furiously along the road to Vienna, convinced she would reach him, wherever he was.

She had dreamed of him for many nights, leaning against the railing of a boat or sitting on the island's rocks. Just a few months ago, she had finally erased his voice from the answering machine—nothing more than a "How are you, zlato?"—so she wouldn't go mad. And just as she had begun to come to terms with the idea of the irreversible, a message had arrived, informing her of a legacy to collect.

And now, she is forced to return to the city where she was born.

She hasn't traveled east in a long time.

How long?

If someone asked, she would wave a vague hand, as if she didn't remember. But of course, she remembers the year and the day.

When the new war in Europe broke out, some people made connections to what had happened in these parts thirty years earlier. The editor of the newspaper where she works called her, asking her to go.

Go see—it'll be easier for you to understand.

No.

She has no key to her worlds.

You're from there—you understand these things.

From there. A vague concept, as vast as a feeling.

A departure could be arranged in a few days.

Not a chance.

She had seen photos of Donetsk in a newspaper, the credit bearing the name of that brother, or friend, or antagonist. This time, the photos were in color, but the framing—the way it captured the vast background and the distorted

detail, that typical shot of someone getting very close and using wide-angle lenses—was the same she had once held in her hands, thirty years earlier, in an apartment in Belgrade.

Not a chance.

The last thing Alma wants now is to find herself in another war, together.

Then, the belated letter with her father's final wishes arrived by mail.

And suddenly, returning to her city in the east seemed like the lesser evil—an excuse to get out of it.

"At a certain point, it becomes easier to go to war than to return home," the editor had told her, knowing exactly how to handle her—by letting her go.

She wondered if he truly understood how complicated the details were.

Sometimes, on buses in the capital, she would hear the language of the island. She would then study the people, almost always women, trying to sit close to them without saying a word, just to feel that sharp pang of familiarity that rekindled her cherished sense of not belonging—to her life, to her friends, to her lovers, none of whom knew anything about her. Not one of them spoke the languages of her childhood.

She had learned, at dinners on terraces overlooking the Tiber, that people carried a wealth of knowledge different from hers, and that her own was considered eccentric. It didn't create connections; for the most part, it provoked boredom or distrust, sometimes attracting the disturbed. She knew things others ignored, things they found uninteresting.

It had happened, once, that she recounted how, on an autumn day, rushing back from Bucharest to settle accounts, the Marshal had told his aides, "If you knew how I see the future of Yugoslavia, you would be horrified." Or how she had quoted a poem by Trakl that every middle school student in her hometown once had to memorize. Or how, at a dinner where politics was being discussed, she

had remarked that, when vacationing in the Balkans, one had to know where to order a brinjevec and where to ask for a slivovitz instead—without offending anyone—because even alcohol had become an issue of identity in those parts. When she said such things, the people around her would smile and change the subject. They didn't seem interested in that kind of knowledge. And after speaking with such enthusiasm, she would wish she could disappear.

*

She's stalling, but it's hard to stall for long with her feet soaking in the April water.

She steps out, dries her feet on the grass. She walks barefoot like a young girl until she reaches the paved road leading to the villas. Then she puts on her socks and shoes, following the path along the edge of the forest, past the fence with barbed wire marking the military grounds. There's still an armed outpost on the island.

She imagines that in the small hut visible in the distance, a soldier of the heroic Yugoslav People's Army remains, unaware of everything that has happened. A Balkan Hiroo Onoda, speaking Serbo-Croatian or Croatian-Serbian, unable to navigate the new borders of the country.

Meanwhile, the sun has settled on the line of the sea, and the air has turned a sugary shade of orange. The rocks refract foamy droplets, and the waves offshore ripple the blue. The wind blends with her steps, freeing her from her thoughts once again.

She has stopped fearing uninhabited places and the creaking of branches fallen in the last summer storm. What remains is her fear of the albino peacock and the curiosity to peer through windows into the lives of others.

She could stop at the bay, climb down to the rock that was once hers—now almost entirely hidden by the maritime pines that brush the water—and summon the ghosts of an era from there. But this place doesn't belong to her. It's only a fragment of a summer as long as her childhood, or maybe even less. A suspension of life happening elsewhere, a time made unreal by secrecy.

Don't tell anyone about the island, okay, *zlato*?

Yes.

For years, she believed she had imagined everything—the Marshal and the red scarf of the pioneers. And yet, she knew the details.

Those days existed. Geography confirms time.

All stories end on an island, her father used to say. But Alma suspects that, for her, the island is only the beginning.

The city

She had never slept in a hotel in the city. But she had no idea what had become of the house on the plane tree avenue, and if she could choose, that's where she would return—not to the one on the Karst, with its cracked walls and square windows, even though she had spent most of her life there before leaving. The time on the plane tree avenue was easier to remember; back then, the fact that her father would appear and disappear was just an accident in the background, and all she had to do was cross the street to spend the afternoons at the San Marco café, where her grandfather would meet her for a hot chocolate with whipped cream and to read the newspapers.

She would have liked to enter the city from the north, descending via Commerciale, which drops steeply from the hill and suddenly curves open to the sea like a dive from the highest springboard—being able to count on the fatal consolation of water, on a faded blue cotton T-shirt pulled from an old childhood dresser and thrown on before heading to the beach for the first swim, on the cries of the boys practicing their clanfa dives along the waterfront at Barcola. Instead, she had taken the wrong road. She had taken the southern exit, skirting the wreck of the steel mill, a rusted-out body that had long since stopped spewing fire but still retained the charm of a denuclearized Soviet zone. Around it, the buildings of the s'ciavi with their crumbling plaster, balconies with faded geraniums, and antenna wires dangling precariously from their gray facades. Once, from the street, you could hear the pop songs from Radio Capodistria drifting out of the windows in the Servola district, which had the best bakeries in the Empire.

The sea from here had nothing sporty about it, framed as it was by the lemon-yellow mechanical arms of the commercial port and the tracks of the freight trains bound for Vienna and Hamburg. Further ahead, the fascist profile of the Bagno Ausonia was already visible, where her grandmother used to play bridge while she learned to dive into the petroleum-colored water of that urban, melancholic sea.

What a city without a future! She realized she was thinking it with tenderness.

"Your daughter is just like this city," the psychiatrist had once told her mother. They were smoking, seated at the stone table under the wisteria, while the children of the doctors and nurses played cops and robbers in the asylum park. Her mother had stubbed out her cigarette halfway, watching her daughter run by in shorts and a mismatched T-shirt. She had looked at him with suspicion.

"She's proud," he had observed. "She gives the boys a run for their money."

"Her legs are longer; it's normal she's faster."

"She's having fun."

"She always does things her own way."

"Like everyone, no?"

Her mother had let out a nervous laugh, then placed a hand on the psychiatrist's arm.

"I'm going back to the patients."

The psychiatrist liked Alma, especially because she wasn't his daughter, so he could enjoy the freedom she carried with her, the spirits he read in her aquamarine eyes, without having to worry about her. In his house, there were strict schedules, discipline, and little tolerance for libertarian dissent. But outside, he loved chaotic life, conflicts—where he usually came out on top—fast driving. He loved this city, which he had arrived in by trial and error, because nothing really took root here for long, allowing him to conduct his experiments:

the mad had been let out onto the streets, and people hadn't given it much thought. They hadn't locked themselves inside; they had looked at them with sympathy, dressed, after all, just like everyone else.

She passed Viale Romolo Gessi, leaving the Iron Curtain architecture behind, along with the Balkan soul the city reluctantly acknowledged. She took the Rive towards the grand piazza, where the gray gave way to brick red and egg-yolk yellow from the renovations: the city was covered in scaffolding, resembling those old sick bodies onto which sheets, scalpels, and respirators were desperately applied, trying to keep them alive or restore them anew.

She parked in front of the fish market: once, inside that high-windowed hall, tanks pulsed with live octopuses, iron scales, and baskets filled with croakers. It was here, as a child, that she had swallowed a fresh oyster along with its seawater.

She stepped out of the car and started walking, one step after another, in no particular direction.

She knew that as soon as she decided, she would find him. Because once, she had managed to track him down in the chaos of a nation at war, in a city she didn't know. In two days, Orthodox Easter would be celebrated, and she was certain that Vili wouldn't miss the chance to visit San Spiridione—he had always liked shutting himself away in churches under golden domes.

Once, people searched for others in telephone directories left on doormats or in bars under the coin-operated phones. Homonyms and attempts. What name would he use on his doorbell? She had noticed that in the photo credits of war reports in the newspapers, he signed as Vili Knezevic. But Vili was what her father had called him, and they had all followed suit. Officially, he was Guglielmo Knežević, one of the many lesser sons of the city, sheltered by a bilingualism that once seemed normal.

The letter with her father's will, received unexpectedly a few weeks earlier, stated that there was an unresolved inheritance for her, a legacy that Vili was holding onto, waiting for her to come forward—in other words, waiting for her to return to the city. A move of betrayal, since she and Vili had nothing in common except for a fragment of life they had been forced to share.

Was that all? Yes.

"Our societies are built on the transmission of heritage," a friend had lectured her when, the day after receiving the letter, she had mentioned it. Slumped on the couch of a house in the capital, he had reminded her that they were at an age where they dealt more with the dead than the living. "Even if we sleep with whomever we want, without exclusivity," he had said, taking a calculated sip of his gin and tonic, "even if we've freed ourselves from the old bonds of family, death comes along and reminds us that we are someone's children, and that blood is the most important thing. But we don't like to think of ourselves as old, do we?" He had smiled at her.

She had lost all desire to sleep with him.

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning," she had said absentmindedly, without explaining that, where she came from, they didn't care about genealogical transmissions. She had never spoken about Vili to anyone.

Without realizing it, Alma is now walking toward the plane tree-lined avenue where her life existed before Vili—the beautiful house her maternal grandparents had provided out of love for their granddaughter, so she could grow up within freshly whitewashed walls and near the city-center school where the foreign language was German. Her grandparents had guaranteed her good origins, and because of this, she had grown up with a gentle and trusting nature. When she reaches the corner of Via Gatteri, she doesn't recognize it: the once soot-covered building with stone balconies and the austere wrought-iron gate, a guardian of an aristocratic and unchanging past, now gleams in a playful peach color. She steps closer to the intercoms, reading the handwritten names one by one; the double-barreled surnames alternate with those ending in "-ich," all equally belonging to the lineage of the Adria rowing club members—just like her grandparents, after all.

A voice behind her asks for passage—a teenage girl with a gym bag slung over her shoulder enters and holds the iron gate open for her, without doubting her intention to step inside. The elevator arrives, but Alma gestures no—she prefers the stairs. The apartment is on the third floor, on the side where the balconies overlook the plane trees. After moving to the Karst, she ignored the fate of this house; she doesn't know if it was sold or, more likely, if her grandparents left it to her mother as a means of support. She wouldn't be surprised if it's now abandoned.

It's this thought that makes her climb to the third floor and ring the doorbell.

As if expecting her, the door immediately opens, revealing a slender woman in an Oriental-style blouse and coral earrings. She smiles with a warmth Alma wouldn't have expected from those sharp cheekbones and the features of someone from the Sarmatian plain. The woman raises her hand in a gesture

that simultaneously means come in and what are you looking for? Alma steps forward—it's easier to enter than to explain herself. She says her name, but the homeowner's name immediately slips past her ear. She wants to take in the rooms at a glance but only catches glimpses—a brass doorknob, a movie poster, a white or maybe gray sofa, the scent of wild rose in the air freshener. She recognizes nothing. I've come to the wrong house, she thinks. I made a mistake coming here.

"This was my grandparents' house," she says, though the apartment was originally meant for her mother, remaining hers even after the reckless marriage to the s'ciavo for the granddaughter's sake, and later returning to the grandparents when Alma and her parents had hastily moved to the Karst.

"Would you like a coffee?"

She wants to leave, but sitting and waiting is easier. The woman prepares the coffee pot, lights the stove without speaking, and places two cups on the kitchen table. Alma notices that they are from the holly-decorated set her young parents used to drink Pelinkovac after dinner—a distant time she had forgotten: the three of them at the kitchen table, her father whistling Yugorock, her mother turning off the radio, complaining of a headache, retreating to the bedroom while Alma and her father were left to wash the dishes. But this kitchen isn't the one from her childhood—this one is pale wood and pristine steel, clearly little used. It resembles the kind of kitchens she has found herself in on certain nights of her life—apartments in city centers, bought by wealthy people as investments, then used to escape from crying babies who wail all night, from wives who remember the bank account signature or the car needing service, from beds to sleep in because there was nothing else to do. Those apartments, furnished with Ikea furniture and designer objects, kitchens used only to place takeout containers, those homes exuding despair and cruelty—she had

sometimes entered them without even bothering to bring a bottle of wine, come in! come in!, allowing the shutters to be closed in haste, allowing clumsily expert kisses.

"Do you live far away?" the woman asks, interrupting her wandering thoughts.

"Far, yes, I live far away," she surprises herself by answering.

"So do I."

Alma watches as the woman gets up to search for something in a bag hanging from a door handle—the door to what used to be Alma's room, its walls painted sea green, the desk beneath the window where she used to draw autumn leaves. She seems to remember a small white crib and a red-painted wooden rocking horse her grandparents had brought from Salzburg.

The woman returns to the kitchen and sits beside her, showing her phone—a rental listing for the apartment. Alma sees the rooms through the screen—agency photos that have nothing in common with her memories. The walls have been repainted white, the tall bookshelf where her father's magazines and her mother's books—Wright and Laing and Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*—once stood is gone. But the holly-decorated cup set from her grandparents has survived.

"You found it like this?... Online?" Alma asks.

"No, no, the owner gave me the agency's contact. She's an old friend."

Good manners keep Alma from asking personal questions, but her job has taught her that sometimes staying silent is enough to get others to tell you what you want to know.

"She's a friend from my youth. I did theater when I was young. Street theater, mime. I came here to put on a show with the madmen, the actual lunatics, can you imagine? The asylum patients. They called our troupe because, at the time, we were drawn to those things—revolutionary ideas. And here, there was a huge

asylum and a doctor who invited artists. We had so much fun, you know? I still have friends from those years."

There's a gentleness in the woman's voice, and an admirable care in the way she reconstructs for Alma—a stranger—the years of her youth: the friendships, the lunatics, the asylum garden, the roses. With benevolence. Perhaps this is how solid people talk about their past, Alma thinks. But most of all, she realizes that her mother had sent this woman—an old friend—to an agency to rent out the apartment. Her mother, who had always maintained the illusion of being a helpless creature for whom cooking potatoes was an insurmountable task, let alone managing money, was in fact selfish in a childlike way, always securing some advantage for herself and the gratitude of everyone around her. Her mother had never mentioned that the house on the plane tree-lined avenue had remained hers.

Alma stands up, still holding the holly-decorated cup, feeling annoyed by her own thoughts. She feels like a hybrid—somewhere between a guest and the owner of the house.

"I have to go," she says.

"I figured."

"Thanks for the coffee."

"Do you want to see the house?"

She hesitates.

"No, no, I was just curious…"

"Your grandparents must have sold it a long time ago, when my friend bought it."

Alma clenches her teeth.

"I'm staying here for a few more days," the woman adds. "Then you could try asking the agency, see if it's available."

Alma nods, forcing herself not to flee down the stairs but instead waiting for the elevator with a light conversation of farewell. Only when the iron gate clicks shut behind her and the sky reappears above the avenue—intact, unaltered—does she feel her teeth release their grip, her breath return.

The years in the house on the avenue of plane trees are all summers.

Vacation days, when she wakes up early in the morning and goes with her mother to buy krapfen from the Greek baker. They walk down between the Art Nouveau buildings—the little girl with her crane-like legs and her beautiful mother, who looks like a theater actress, her straw hat over her fair locks and her tanned ankles in rope sandals: the professor's disinherited daughter.

They walk in the cool shade of the branches that trap the sunlight, while the street sweepers are still wiping away the night from the sidewalk in front of the Rossetti Theater.

The bakery arrives with the scent of yeast and cinnamon. The Greek has a silver tooth, and when he smiles, it turns into a thief's grin; as proof of his origins, or perhaps just to fuel the false legend, he tells the girl the story of Antigone, leaving her deeply impressed with the burial affair. Behind the counter, large wicker baskets line up, overflowing with kaiser rolls and baguettes, but the display cases are dedicated entirely to jam-filled krapfen dusted with powdered sugar: a constant coming and going of golden trays animates the bakery, arriving fresh from the back room, still warm, fogging up the glass with the grease of the frying.

They buy bags full of them. At home, sitting on the floor or tangled in the unmade sheets of the marital bed, mother and daughter sink their teeth into the krapfen until their stomachs grow tight, until the mother says it's late and sends her off to put on her swimsuit while she gets ready for work—at the moment, she works at the modern art gallery, where she will soon be fired for letting students in without tickets and spending hours smoking with the guard on the rooftop terrace designed by Carlo Scarpa.

Her father's absence in those days is taken for granted.

"What does your dad do for a living?" the teacher asks at school.

“Dad, what’s your job?”

The inventor, the explorer, the magician, the storyteller. He loves misleading her with half-truths.

In the summer, before Vili arrives, she spends most of her time with her maternal grandparents (the existence of the paternal ones is an inappropriate topic, as is any attempt to peek into the family's past). Her mother resisted at first, but when the pile of unpaid bills on the entrance table grew too high to ignore, she gave in, pretending to negotiate.

They spend summer afternoons in the dim light of Café San Marco, where her grandfather has a reserved table. They read *Die Zeit* together—one of the reasons he insisted she study German at the school in the city center—and he quizzes her on the capitals of the world. Sometimes her grandmother joins them, returning from a sailing trip or a bridge game, interrupting them with city gossip and ordering a slice of Sacher cake with whipped cream, just like the girl, or a Martini cocktail after five in the afternoon. She scolds her husband, saying he will turn Alma into an academic. Instead, she teaches her to play briscola and how to cheat at tressette, takes her canoeing in the gulf, and gives her bracelets and necklaces with glass stones. When she is older, she gives her Marina Tsvetaeva’s poems—still unread by anyone in the city. This is the kind of education her grandparents value more than any inheritance.

What had suffocated her mother throughout her youth—the memorized poems, the Christmas tree reaching the ceiling, the table set with gold-rimmed plates—had driven her to escape by marrying her husband, the gypsy without a past. He had been her way out, freeing herself in one stroke from her family, their expectations, and Austro-Hungary.

Her grandparents, on the threshold of their seventies, have never lived in the same house, following a custom widespread in the city that they proudly claim

as a mark of civilized living. They have homes on opposite hills overlooking the old port and the new one; there was probably a time when they shared a bed, but what binds them now are their travels, literature, and a taste for gossip. Her grandmother speaks of Russian writers as if she were in a melodrama, treating Pushkin and Georges d'Anthès like old friends she spends evenings with and loves to talk about behind their backs. And Gogol, Gogol, the greatest of them all. She delights in the details of the clandestine and unhappy loves of that circle of Russians, all of whom died young and unfortunate. She gambles at friends' houses or in casinos across the border, where she will later meet Vili and like him better than her granddaughter.

With her grandparents, Alma speaks in German and the city's dialect: she enters those afternoons as if stepping into an enchanted wardrobe that, once its doors are closed, catapults her into an era light-years away from the unstable disorder of her own home—the buttered pasta shells, the dishes piled up in the sink. A world where people speak softly and even bed sheets are ironed. At school, she describes her grandparents' homes as if they were her own, wishing more than anything to live with them, dreaming of school uniforms and set schedules. Only her father can break through these desires when he bursts in like a storm escaping the tempest, announcing himself at the door with such enthusiasm that everyone must immediately drop what they're doing and rush to him, as he promises stories and news. And his stories are, indeed, the most adventurous—he sings melancholic Balkan songs and whispers Cold War secrets. His daughter hangs on his every word—he has the art of inspiring devotion, like all the fickle and the fugitive.

That magical time, which Alma will always identify as the only period when she knew exactly where she belonged (the house on the avenue of plane trees, with its high ceilings, polished parquet, family furniture, and afternoons at Café San

Marco), ends abruptly after some unknown quarrel—surely a trivial one, she will think for years with resentment—when her parents, always united in their decisions, choose to leave the house her grandparents had so generously provided and move to the Karst, to a little house of their own, with peeling walls, a garden, and a rusted swing, among people speaking another language.

From that moment on, Alma is only allowed to see her grandparents on her birthday.

That's why, now that she has returned, the first place she wants to go is the old Mitteleuropean café. It is still just as she remembered it, frozen outside of time along with the city: marble and wrought-iron tables, globe-shaped lights hanging from the walls. She has only found cafés like this in cities to the east—more in Budapest than Vienna, where a certain Mozartian affectation prevails. In Saint Petersburg, while having tea at Café Singer, she once told a man she loved (because he was Russian and a dissident) about her afternoons at Café San Marco and the Marina Tsvetaeva poems her grandmother had read to her. He, born in Moscow and visibly uncomfortable with these topics, had changed the subject, revealing instead what the political bigwigs whispered about at Café Pushkin. This misunderstanding between them had bored her.

The last time she had been at Café San Marco, her grandfather was breathing with the help of machines that had been brought into the bedroom in their San Vito home from a private clinic—after much negotiation, as he had refused hospitalization. Alma had learned he had only days left through a phone call from her grandmother; her mother hadn't told her, believing that speaking of misfortune would bring it closer and that thinking about tragedies was pointless when nothing could be done about them.

Her parents had always agreed on keeping death away from their daughter, sparing her hospital beds and farewell speeches, hands to shake at funerals, the

embarrassment of other people's tears. Later, she understood it wasn't out of care—her parents simply lacked the words to face personal sorrow. They felt a natural discomfort with emotional intimacy and, in the end, thought that the past—whether in the form of stories or people—should be kept separate from life's progression, preserved only as monuments. They loved cemeteries.

Her grandmother, on the other hand, believed that when misfortunes happen, they must be looked at straight in the eye and up close.

Then Vili arrived and erased Austro-Hungary for good.

He had materialized at the door of the house on the Karst on a September Saturday when people were still swimming in the sea: a very skinny boy, with black eyes and a dark fringe like a little thug. He wore sweatpants and a Red Star Belgrade jersey that looked like he had been sleeping in it for days, a sweatshirt tied around his waist, and a sports bag slung over his shoulder—his only luggage. In his arms, he clutched a toy space rocket.

Alma's father rested a hand on the boy's head and smiled cheerfully, as he always did when he needed his family to rid himself of the anxieties and difficulties that plagued his life across the border.

"Alma, this is Vili. Vili, this is Alma."

They eyed each other with hostility. They were both ten years old, but she was several centimeters taller than him.

Who was that boy? Where had he come from? What language did he speak, since he remained silent in the doorway? These were questions Alma's mother didn't even have time to form on her lips, because her husband kissed her, pushed her down the hallway into the bedroom, and closed the door. He told her everything, in detail. Just as he did at night, when he kept her awake confessing political secrets that should never have left certain hotel rooms—disappearances and vendettas that haunted her dreams for weeks. He had always told her about the ferocity of men and the danger of women. He spoke at length about women, the way people in love do, talking about the object of their affection to anyone, even to the walls.

She had always listened, and her silence soothed him. When words became too many, she would stroke his hair, unbutton his trousers, and they would make love, pressing a hand over each other's mouths so the child wouldn't hear them. Every morning, he would come downstairs in just his underwear and shirt, cooking eggs and speck for breakfast, as cheerful as a schoolboy who had just

learned he had passed without merit. For a few days, he would whistle rock 'n' roll tunes, wander lightly through the house eating raisins and telling stories from Sarajevo. Then he would get bored, or he would miss his life over there, and he would leave again.

"He'll stay with us for a while," he said that September day, pushing the silent boy into the middle of the room. "Alma, talk to him, okay?" He winked at her—their secret trips to the island, the irresistible complicity shared by storytellers and selfish people—before disappearing.

Alma's mother embraced this new cohabitation with enthusiasm: in the first few days, she handled the basic necessities, bought a dictionary to communicate (though Vili didn't seem particularly interested), enrolled him in school thanks to freshly minted documents and lenient times, made pizza and ice cream with meringues. She planted beans in cotton wool cups with the children, but they were too old for such things and quickly lost interest, leaving her to do it alone. Alma took advantage of the attention the intruder was drawing and slipped away to spend her afternoons at the Austrian soldiers' cemetery.

Weeks passed, and Vili remained inscrutable. Alma's mother gave up—her enthusiasm had only lasted for a moment. The ficus in the living room began shedding its leaves, and the house slowly drifted into the disarray of exhausting effort. She stopped cooking and, in the evenings, cried on the couch, cursing the man she had married. The children stayed away, embarrassed.

Soon, help arrived. Friends from the City of the Mad, but also neighbors whose geraniums she had saved from summer caterpillars or to whom she had gifted hydrangea cushions—people who had laughed with her, sharing personal misfortunes. They arrived with bowls of rice salad, frozen shrimp and mayonnaise, ran the vacuum over the floor, and put Patty Pravo's *Pazza idea* on the record player. Laughter filled the rooms again.

Some of the doctors knew how to handle wild children and managed to get Alma and Vili to play a game of bocce in the garden. The doctors laughed, the children half-heartedly tossed the balls toward the jack, but mostly, the rescue mission for the adult in the house made them feel united in their hostility.

In the afternoons, Vili would sneak into Alma's room—it was the only place in the house that seemed to spark his curiosity. He would slip in every time he saw her ride away on her bicycle, her blonde ponytail swinging between her shoulder blades before disappearing into the woods. He opened the desk drawers, flipped through her books, put a tape in the little recorder with the volume turned down low, but it was only fairy tales for children. He slipped under the sheets and lay on the bed staring at the ceiling with its painted clouds. He would steal a pair of socks, a hair tie, or a Lego brick—things he had no real use for.

It became a habit, and like all habits, it made him careless.

One afternoon, Vili entered the room with too much ease, and only when it was too late to pretend he had an excuse did he see Alma. And Alma saw him. She was kneeling on the floor, almost entirely hidden behind the desk, scissors in hand. Before her was a mess of cut-up clothes—skirts with colorful flowers, woolen socks with glitter, t-shirts with rhinestones. Clothes he had never seen her wear, since, like him, she always wore jeans, sweatshirts, and Fruit of the Loom t-shirts.

They stared at each other—Vili in his pajamas in the middle of the room, Alma in the corner like someone hiding in her own home.

Vili realized these were the clothes her mother had bought for her.

Alma realized he was the one making her ribbons, pencils, and socks disappear—the ones she had thought she had lost.

"It's for a school project," she said, gathering the pile of fabric scraps under her knees.

"I was looking for..." he started, but he didn't have the words.

Now they had a shared secret, and neither of them liked it one bit.

