JOSIP NOVAKOVICH

Crimson

The sulfureous red tip of Milan's match tore trails in the wet matchbox and fell into a puddle that filled a large boot imprint. The match tip shushed, and a little frog leaped out, young, brown, and merry. Milan threw away his wet cigarette, spat into the puddle, thumbed his aquiline nose, and pressed his knuckles into the eyes beneath the high-arching brows, but he couldn't get a sensation of alertness.

This tedium was not what he had expected. The war was supposed to be over in two weeks, and the Pannonian Plains of Eastern Croatia would become part of Serbia, but this was the army's fourth month of lingering in the woods and cornfields.

Most nights the Serb soldiers, who had crossed the Danube into Croatian territory and now encircled the town of Vukovar, fired from mortars, tanks, and cannons into the town. They aimed wherever the Croat soldiers could hide, and they also fired randomly at the houses. "Don't pay any attention to what you hit," said the captain. "They are just Croats, *ustasha* children, *ustasha* parents, *ustasha* grandparents. If you don't wipe them out, they'll wipe you out." As he talked, the captain's disheveled silvery hair shook, and beneath thick black eyebrows, his eyes blinked quickly.

Half of the cannons did not work because they were rusty and soldiers often forgot to oil them. When the weapons would not fire, the soldiers played cards and watched American porn movies on VCRS hooked up to tank batteries. And they sang: *Oh my first love, are you a bushy Slav?/ Whoever you rub and mate, don't forget your first hate./Oh my first hate, who should I tolerate?* He wondered why so many songs dealt with first love, lost love—why all this nostalgia? His first love was only a childhood thing; on the other hand, childhood was perhaps the only genuine time of his life, the time to which all other experience was grafted, like red apples on to a blue plum tree, where apples grow stunted.

At the age of fifteen he'd had a crush on a girl, Svyetlana. For a New Year's dance party, he had put his shoes on the stove to warm them and gone to the bathroom to shave, though he had no need of shaving yet. The rubber soles of his shoes melted, but he didn't have another pair, so he went to the dance in them. Waiting to meet Svyetlana atop a stairway, Milan dug the nails of his forefingers into the flesh on the edge of his thumbnails so deep that several drops of blood dripped onto the ochre tiles of the floor.

He had then followed Svyetlana to the gym, where the dance had begun. To avoid stepping on her feet, he stood away from her. Her friends whispered and giggled—probably about his melted soles. Like Svyetlana, they were Croats and the daughters of engineers and doctors; to them he was just a Serb peasant. He slipped out of the room, his cheeks brimming.

Several days later he and Svyetlana talked in front of her house. He walked around her, desiring to touch her and kiss her, though he knew deep down that he could not. His tongue probed several cavities from which the fillings had fallen. He feared that his breath was bad, and he cursed the dentists at the people's clinic.

Thinking back on it now, he felt ashamed again. He drank more *rakia.* At the beginning of the campaign, they had had fine *slivovitz,* gold colored and throat scorching, but now only this rotten, pale *rakia,* made from doubly brewed grapes. There was no coffee. The captain had thrown a sack of it into the river, saying, "No more stinky Muslim customs and Turkish coffee dung here—is that clear?"

"But coffee originally comes from Ethiopia," Milan said as he watched brown fish surface and open their yellow mouths to swallow the black beads, which looked as if they'd spilled from rosaries used to pray for wakefulness.

"That's Muslim," the captain said.

"Didn't use to be, and it's Coptic too—that's very similar to Orthodox."

"That doesn't matter. We don't have any filters, and if you don't filter the coffee, it's Turkish."

"You could filter it through newspapers," Milan said.

"Yeah? You'll get lead poisoning."

"You will anyway," Milan mumbled, thinking of bullets.

"What did you say?"

Milan didn't respond. The captain was edgy, and Milan thought he should be quiet.

To recover from drink, Milan and many other soldiers drank more. The soldiers were festive, although the festivity seemed forced. Milan did not want to be there. But going back to Osijek, his home town in Croatia, would not do. Once, he might have lived there unmolested; now, after being a Serb soldier, he certainly could not. Officially, he was in the Yugoslav—mostly Serbian—reservist army, but the Croats would not make that distinction. To them he would be just a *chetnik,* a Serb loyalist striving to create Greater Serbia by subjugating Croatia and Bosnia—just as to the Serbs all Croat soldiers were *ustashas,* striving to purify Croatia ethnically. He had heard that Croats had burned his home, and now he hated them. He ground his teeth, but carefully, because one of them hurt. He resented the Serbs around him as well.

One night, three Serb cops had come to his home and asked him to join the army. When he hesitated, they threatened him with knives. The Serbs would soon conquer the town, he was sure. Still, he could have stayed back. His brother, older and stronger than Milan, had not joined. Neither had a friend of his, who'd spent his young days in fights. Most of the violent and brave guys had stayed behind, and

nothing had happened to them. Croats respected them for remaining in Croatia and not joining the Serb armies. The strong guys had the courage to say no. Those who had no courage, the yes men, would be the military heroes.

Many soldiers had deserted, and several companies from Serbia had left. Still, with twenty thousand well-armed soldiers surrounding a city with two thousand poorly armed and untrained Croatian soldiers, the Serb army ought to be able to take the city in a day. He did not understand what they were waiting for, launching thousands of bombs every night. What would be the point of taking a devastated city, a mound of shattered bricks? But when the tanks had gone forward, heat-seeking missiles had blown up many of them. The Croats had smuggled in some arms.

By the middle of November, the Serb ring around Vukovar seemed impenetrable: Vukovar hadn't received any supplies from Zagreb, the Croatian capital, in weeks; and the Serb guards would not allow the U.N. ambulances through for fear they concealed weapons. The Croats had run out of food and bombs. The tanks and the infantry made steady progress, taking a suburb of Vukovar. Milan's company moved from house to house, block to block, smoking people out of their cellars with tear gas. No water flowed through the pipes and most of the sewage system was empty, so the people had lived like rats, together with rats, and the rats waited for them to die, so they could eat them.

Serb soldiers killed men, even boys. Milan's captain said, "Just shoot them. If you don't, someone else will, so what's the difference—as long as there are no journalists around, and if you see a journalist alone, shoot him too." In a dark cellar, Milan stumbled as he leaned against a dank, sandy wall and slid forward. The captain shouted from above, "What are you waiting for? Keep going. There's nobody down there." Milan saw a man's silhouette against the light of a window in the cellar. The light fell in shifting streaks, hurting his eyes. The man was quietly crawling out the window. "Stop or I'll shoot," Milan said. The man slid from the window, the sand shushing. Facing a tall, bony stranger, Milan felt neither hatred nor love, but he did not want to shoot him. Could he save the man if he wanted to? He could not escape from the army himself. Still, he said, "Do you have any German marks? Give them all to me and I'll get you out of here."

"I have nothing."

"That's too bad."

"If you know God, don't shoot," the man said in a tremulous voice. "You have kids?"

"You'd better come up with better reasons for me not to pull the trigger."

"I can't harm you, why should you want to harm me?"

"Let's get out of here, with your arms up." They walked up the stairs, into the light. Milan's captain said, "What's taking you so long? Shoot him." Milan raised his rifle unsteadily and stared at the Croat's widow's peak and the deep creases separating his cheeks from his thin mouth.

"You haven't shot anything in your life," said the captain, "have you?"

"A bunch of rabbits and birds, that's all."

"You must start somewhere. What kind of soldier are you if you're squeamish?"

Milan said nothing. You can't be in a war and not kill. Although Milan was scared and embarrassed, he suddenly became curious, not so much about how men died but how they killed, about whether he could kill. Who knows, from a distance some of the bombs he had handed to the cannon man might have killed, probably had. But he had not seen it. Maybe killing an unarmed man was wrong—of course it was wrong, what else could it be—but he thought that to be a soldier he needed to pass the test: to be able to kill.

Milan still could not shoot. He imagined this man's grandchildren, and how much misery his death could mean to the people close to him. If they exchanged places, would anybody miss Milan? Probably not, he thought, and that thought irritated him, and he pitied the man a little less.

"Do you want a cigarette?" Milan asked.

"What, are you doing the last-wish bullshit?" the captain said. "If you don't shoot the bum, I'm going to shoot both of you." He lifted his pistol. "You got to be able to pull the trigger."

Several other soldiers gathered to watch this initiation rite. "Come on, Milan, you can do it!" a voice shouted. "This guy probably killed your grandfather in the world war!"

"He's only about fifty-five," Milan said.

"Then his *ustasha* father did," the voice said.

"My father was a partisan," the tall man responded.

"Yeah, right—now you are all partisans," the captain said.

Milan abhorred this public performance. His hand trembled and he tried to hide it. He used to have stage fright when he addressed audiences; holding a glass of water, his right hand would tremble, simply because once, during his high-school oral exams, it had. He was scared of groups. In that way, he and the man had more in common than he did with the other soldiers: they both were outside the group. The man could do nothing about it; for him, this was fate. Milan, on the other hand, could pull the trigger or not pull. Not pulling would be the right choice, obviously. But in front of the deranged group, it would be the wrong choice. Whatever he did or did not do would work against him. He should not have the illusion that he had a choice. He breathed hard, as though he was about to have an asthma attack.

"I know you're a good man," the man said hopefully, in a shaky voice. "You can't kill the defenseless, right?"

Milan thought that the man saw through him, through his anxiety, through his thin guts, straight to his shit. Milan saw that the man's knees shook; the man spoke out of desperation. The man's green pants sagged. There was a streak of urine on the pants, growing bigger and bigger. When Milan had been in the second grade, the teacher had called him up to the green blackboard to subtract numbers. Out of Milan's fear that he could not do it, crap, solid and dark like cattails, slid down onto the floor and smoked while the class laughed, and for a whole semester, he could not look anybody in the eye.

Milan pulled the trigger, three times, quickly.

The man fell. His hazel eyes stayed open while blood gushed from his neck onto the brick-laid yard, the narrow yard between two three-story buildings—the dank, dusty smell blowing from out of the cellars, as though the Danube water had softened the clay beneath the cracked cellar cement, and the river mud exhaled its old air of rotting caviar yolks. Uneven over the melted soil, the rain-drenched bricks darkened slightly in the new blood.

Milan breathed in the gun smoke and coughed. So that was it. It did not feel like anything as long as you concentrated on the details. He watched the crushed snail houses on the bricks, and red earthworms sliding straight, unable to coil, in the cracks between the bricks.

The captain poked his finger into Milan's buttocks. "Good job. I was worried for you, that you were a sensitive Croat-loving homosexual. You passed the test."

Milan cringed and thought he wouldn't mind shooting the captain.

"See, you passed the test." The captain's laughter smelled of onions and cigars.

Accordion music, a bass, and shrill voices came from around the corner, from a tavern with a burned-out, red-tile roof. Milan waited for a long while, then walked in. Water leaked through the ceiling, and beads of precipitated steam slid down the walls, like sweat on a harvester's back. In their muddy boots, disheveled bearded soldiers danced the *kolo,* the Serb *rondo,* more slowly than the accordion rhythm called for. They yodeled derisively and fired their guns into the ceiling. Mortar was falling off the reeds and thudding onto the wooden floor. They tilted gasoline-colored bottles of *slivovitz* and emptied half-liter bottles of beer into their mouths, pouring some of the liquid down their chins, beards, shirts.

Milan gulped down half a liter of beer and then heard a scream in the pantry. He kicked the door in with his boot and saw the hairy buttocks of a man above the pale flesh of a woman. Milan's lips went dry with a strange excitement: was he appalled, yes he was; was he lustfully curious, yes he was. He grabbed a bottle of pale brandy from the shelf and gulped, tasting nothing, but feeling a burning on his cracked lips. The woman's face was contorted in pain, but even so, he was sure he recognized the stark, pale skin, the black eyebrows under streaks of wet brown hair falling across high cheekbones: Svyetlana. And the man was his odious captain, who turned to look at him and said, "After I'm done, you go ahead too, dip your little dick, and enjoy. *Hahaha.* You'll have a complete education today. You know, Stalin recommended rape as a way of keeping up the aggressive impulses. You'll make a soldier yet."

"Don't worry about my aggressive impulses," Milan said. He lifted the rifle and with its wooden butt struck the captain's head. The captain's head collided with the woman's, driving hers onto the brick floor. Milan kicked his head away from hers, and when his rifle struck the captain's skull again, the bones cracked. The man bled from his mouth onto the woman's belly. She had swooned. Milan dragged him away from her and covered his head with an empty coffee bag. What to do with her? How to protect her from the bar? His heart beat at a frantic pace, and his windpipe wheezed.

This was she, his childhood memory, Milan thought, as though all that singing

about first loves and hates had summoned her. He gazed at her parted scarlet lips, thin vertical lines ruffling the shiny skin. The swollen lips were shapely, twin peaks of a long wave, a wave of blood, whipped by internal winds from the heart and netted in the thin lip-skin, which prevented it from splashing out, onto the shore, onto Milan. Only the thin membrane, the lips, separated his rusty plasma from hers.

He remembered how Svyetlana's lips had looked when he had leaned forward to kiss her. Her lips had parted like now, but when it was clear that he would not lean closer, she chewed her bubble gum loudly and, it seemed, challengingly, disrespectfully—her saliva gluing and ungluing foamily beneath the blue belly of her tongue. Coldly she stared at his lips through her deep brown eyes with their black stripes. And then she vanished without a whisper through a large wooden gate, into a dark garden with vines of ivy and grapes. As he gazed after her, his heart bounced in his chest like a wild dog on a chain. After that, they were strangers to each other, but he continued to yearn for her.

Milan suspected that his longing had been unrequited because of his cowardice. He had not had the courage to declare his love to her. In a dangerous world, wouldn't a woman be attracted to courage? She went to Zagreb, graduated from the school of architecture, married a doctor, and stayed a class above Milan. Perhaps out of despair, he was loud and unruly and flunked out of the engineering school at the University of Belgrade. Once, when it was his last chance to pass an exam in thermodynamics, he'd stayed in the chess-club room because he thought he'd figured out a mate in five. He stayed for the romance of it, for the sake of freedom, saying in his way, *Fuck you!* to school, ambition, and class—instead of going to the exam, which he thought he'd flunk anyhow. After that, he became a subdued engine man, driving cargo trains all over the damned federation: a blue-collar worker, the most despised in the socialist worker's state.

All his failures had to do, Milan was sure, with Svyetlana's aloofness. She could have seen what he was up to and could have helped him approach her. And now he had killed a man, two men, for her, for himself.

He stared with a sorrowful glee at the woman lying at his feet, her skirt and bra ripped open and her supple breasts tilting downward and trembling with her uncertain breath. He felt a thrill and a shudder. Below her blood-smeared ribs, her thighs, ample, curvaceous, defenseless, loosely stretched before him.

Milan carried the woman outside and gave her aspirin and water to drink. She looked at him disdainfully and asked, "You saved me or something?"

"I don't know whether anybody saved anybody, but you could thank me. Maybe I saved you."

"Will everybody be free to rape me now?"

"No, you can go. Nobody will rape you."

"I have a horrible headache." She blinked.

"The captain's head knocked against yours pretty hard. Just a concussion would be my guess."

As he escorted her to a bus crowded with Croat women and children, she stumbled alongside him, but refused his support. He wondered if the rusty bus with bullet holes would make it or if at some drunken sadist's whim a sulfureous bomb would strike the bus on the road and burn up all the passengers, including her, and if—the way things were going—he would be the one throwing the bomb. He felt sorry for the woman and asked, "What's your name?"

"What difference should it make?"

"Come on, aren't you Svyetlana?"

"No. Olga."

"Are you sure?" Milan gripped the woman by the shoulders so he could look into her face and compare it with his memory of Svyetlana's—and so he could lean on her, because he was stunned.

She pushed his arms away. "Sure I'm sure, at least about my name. Probably about nothing else."

"Olga in the Volga. And I'm Mile in the Nile," he muttered drunkenly as she stepped onto the bus. How was the confusion possible, he wondered. But the woman was not lying: her voice was higher and her eyes darker than Svyetlana's.

In a ditch, Milan took the uniform from a dead Croat soldier. He walked into the tavern, where his comrades still danced. In the pantry he dressed his captain in the uniform, and then he carried his body out and dumped it on a horse-drawn carriage, onto a pile of a dozen corpses. Milan shifted uncomfortably because the blood had soaked through his cotton uniform and shirt, gluing the fabric to his skin. A dark-orange horse with strong round buttocks stood, his head bent to the road, which was covered with empty gun shells. His hoof screeched over shards of glass. The shrill sound shook the horse's ears, reddened and pierced by the sun's rays so that a thick vine of veins stood out. A round fly sat on an ear, filling up its green belly on a vein. Milan was jittery, as though he'd had delirium tremens. Who knew what diseases lurked in this city, where cats had been eaten and rats frolicked in the walls; where cat and rat skeletons lay entwined together; where maggots formed shifting gray mounds over loose flesh detached from bones. He did not dare take a deep breath, for fear of inhaling a plague. Piles of bodies lay on almost every street corner, yellow eyes looming out of purple faces. Soldiers—some with their teeth chattering as though they suffered from hypothermia—poured gasoline over the piles and burned them.

After taking Vukovar, Milan's army progressed north to surround Osijek. One night while on guard duty in a far-flung trench beneath oak trees with long branches and water-darkened trunks, Milan sat on a sack of sand. Loud rain was knocking the last brown leaves off the branches. Drops hit the mud, splashing it. The wetness carried the smells of poisonous mushrooms and old leaves, not only the leaves that had just zigzagged to the ground but also the leaves from the last year, and from hundreds of years ago, with mossy, musty whiffs of old lives in the soil, and new lives that slid out of the cloudy water and soiled eggs: snails, frogs, earthworms. When the rain let

up, the leaves sagged and a cold wind swayed them, and water continued sliding down in large drops, which hung glittering in the moonlight before falling onto Milan, into his shirt and down his hairy neck.

The other guard on duty snored. Irritated, Milan stood up and then realized there was nobody else in sight. The series of events in Vukovar had changed him: he no longer feared what would happen if he were caught deserting the Serb army or if he were apprehended by the Croat police. Milan crawled out into a cornfield, threw away his gun, tore off the army insignia, and by dawn walked into a village near Osijek. He went to his brother's place, where his brother let him sleep on the sofa.

When Milan walked in the streets, those who recognized him merely looked at him suspiciously, as they did everybody, more or less. Milan joined the citizens who placed sandbags in front of all the shops and windows, and while doing so he wondered whether he was sandbagging his conscience more than the buildings. One afternoon three months after the fall of Vukovar, Milan had just finished piling sandbags. Dusty and sweaty, he walked past the scaffolded red-brick cathedral, where masons plastered up grenade holes in the bricks. Wet cement kept falling and thudding like hail. Listening to the thudding and to the ringing of a tram, he noticed a graceful and pale woman with black hair and a full figure walking toward the Drava River, frowning, her eyes glassy and luminous. Milan recognized Olga, and at first was surprised that he could have confused her for Svyetlana, then scared that she might jump off the bridge. But she had survived Vukovar, so ending her life now, when it was no longer threatened, would be absurd.

"Hello," he addressed her, "what a fine day, isn't it?" She shrank back as she recognized him. He was thinner than before, and white streaked his oiled brown hair. Still, his face had to be unmistakable: the eyes set deep and wide apart under the brows; large ears that stuck out the same way they did when he was a boy. He thought that he still looked like a boy, had the same expectant, big-eyed look, of desire, hunger, envy, even love, perhaps: he had been dreaming of Olga many nights.

"What are you doing in Osijek, of all places?" she asked.

"I'm looking for a job." He was so nervous he could hardly breathe.

"That's brave of you, after what you've done."

"What have I done?"

"You know best . . ."

"Where do you want me to go? To hell? Where isn't it hell these days?"

"Go to Canada or Britain, and give them a story of how oppressed you are here. They love those stories."

"Why shouldn't I be here? I killed a Serb officer. Anyhow, the Croatian government wants to prove to foreigners that Serbs can live in Croatia, and I'll test them. I can't live in Serbia. In Belgrade, from what I've heard, if you are a Serb from Croatia, the police look for you where you live, in cafés, bars, and even churches, to draft you for the war in Bosnia. And the Belgraders, you think they'd be grateful to someone like me? They'd say, 'What are you doing here? You brought the sanctions and poverty upon us, and now you want to sit on your butt, sipping espresso? Go back to the war, get the hell out of here!'"

"That's not a particularly touching story."

"I know it."

"So now you want to live here as though nothing had happened."

"What else?"

"It might be easy for you."

"I saved you from—"

"I guess. But I'm pregnant—since then."

"I thought I killed him before he could do it."

"Sorry, but I have to rush. It's almost two o'clock—the abortion clinic will close."

"Don't do it."

"Why not? Who'd take care of the baby?"

"I will. I don't mean that we should get married. But then, why shouldn't we?"

"Why would you do that? We don't know each other."

"We do."

They stood in front of a café, and in silence they looked at each other. With blue lines under her eyes, she looked tired, but she was also curious, scrutinizing him.

She motioned toward the café and they walked in. They sat by the window. "I replaced the windows here." Milan proudly knocked on the glass. He didn't like his part-time job fixing windows, but he could bear it full time, he thought, if he lived with Olga. He enjoyed looking at her mouth as she answered his questions about where she worked (taught high-school science), whether she had other kids (didn't), parents (mother died a while back, father was killed in Vukovar), a house (no, but apartment, yes). He had kissed those crimson lips while she was still unconscious in Vukovar. He thought he should tell her about it, but he was certain that if he did she'd leave right away, and he wanted her to stay. Still, he thought that he should tell her, but instead he said, "What kind of music do you like?" and decided to tell her later.

"You want to make small talk? Years ago, that's how people talked—wasn't it nice? I don't like to listen to music anymore, but I play it on the piano, mostly Bach."

He clasped his hands, which seemed to want to touch hers of their own will.

"How many people have you killed?" she asked, staring into his eyes.

"Yes, I've killed. I don't know what counts. Feeding bombs into cannons that I didn't fire myself—how do you count that?"

"There'll be an accounting formula in hell, I'm sure." She grinned at him.

"Come on, that's not funny. You're right: I'll pay for it somehow. I wish I'd run away sooner. But then I wouldn't have met you."

A waiter with a round tray and a black apron came by, and Milan ordered a bottle of red wine. He looked through the crimson wine at his thin fingers. Her glass beads below her long neck glittered through the wine like rubies.

They gulped the wine.

"Don't go to that abortion clinic," said Milan. "I got divorced because my wife and I couldn't have kids—we were married for a year. Since my twenties I've always

wanted to have a baby. Wouldn't you love a little wet infant to crawl between us, and look up at us, with hazy, filmy eyes, to see the world for the first time—a world that would be new, innocent, big, admirable, imitable, and that we would be a part of? Wouldn't you like those astonishing little fingers to grasp your finger, barely closing around it, and to tug at it?"

Olga smiled and did not say anything.

Milan imagined the power of a new life sleeping with his dreams inside her, and the dreams caressing her. He had not dared to think so concretely about a baby. Now he liked imagining a biological happiness with her, more with her than with any other woman, more than with his lost childhood loves or pretty young women.

She pursed her lips. "But the kid's not yours."

"We wouldn't tell him. Or her."

"Mixed marriages aren't exactly in fashion." She stood up as though she'd had enough nonsense.

Leaving behind a crumpled blue bank note on the tablecloth, he followed her into the windy and darkening streets. "Eventually Serbs and Croats marrying each other will be all the rage," Milan said. "You'll see. People will want to prove they're not nationalists."

They walked to the river bank, then looked into each other's eyes, calmly, and listened to the ice in the Drava River cracking. They watched floating ice pieces piling on top of each other, breaking, sinking, rising, colliding, exploding—sharp, white, jagged, glaring in the sun like gigantic glassy swords clashing with slabs of marble. He imagined that the ground they stood on floated north like an iceberg while the river stayed in place.

"You think the ice comes from Austria?" Milan asked.

"And Hungary."

"And it's flowing down to Serbia. See how we are connected."

"Who is? The rivers?"

"Our waters, we."

The wind that blew chilled them, and they walked past an aluminum kiosk with postcards, cigars, and a saleswoman who yawned with her gleaming silver teeth. From behind them, the wind pushed Olga and Milan, and they walked effortlessly, with their chilled ears red and translucent against the sunshine, which shone in thick rays through black branches of leafless acacias. They pulled up their collars, and stepped into the tobacco cloud of a tavern, listened to the Hungarian *chardash,* and drank more red wine. They walked out into the sleety winds, with lips purple from the dried wine, and they huddled against the weather, against each other, making one standing mound, a man and a woman against each other.

Milan now worked full time as a glass cutter. Because of occasional shelling and frequent low MIG jet flights, which penetrated the sound barrier above the town with loud explosions, there was no shortage of broken windows. He and Olga enjoyed each other's company, and he moved in with her. When the baby was born, he held

her hand in the hospital, and cut the cord with a pair of scissors. They got married, and lived happily—almost. Milan had rat and war nightmares and ground his teeth in his sleep, and during the day, if he wasn't playing with Zvone or working, he'd sit in the armchair and brood. He couldn't talk about all that had happened in the war. Not saying wasn't good; saying might be worse. In a way, it was the same kind of bind he was in when he shot the poor man in Vukovar. And, to a large extent, it was the poor man who troubled him, until one evening at home, two years later, when Olga showed Milan her family pictures while their boy slept with a light snore that made them both laugh.

"This is my dad, see," she said, pointing to an old, brown photo. "Here he's teaching me how to walk. Today would be his birthday, is his birthday." Tearfully, she looked at Milan, who winced and bit his lips.

"So still no word on him? Do you think you'll ever know what happened to him?" His voice was barely coming out of his throat.

"He was in Vukovar when you were there—maybe you saw him?" she asked.

"Such a tragedy—it really saddens me to think about the loss you've suffered." He paused. "Is there any brandy?"

"You drink too much."

"Or too little." She ignored his request and showed him more pictures of her father.

"This is awful. I don't know how to say this. But I must—I killed him in Vukovar."

She dropped the family album on the floor.

As soon as he'd spoken, he regretted what he'd done. After all that had happened, why did he feel the need to be honest? Why not keep secrets to himself, live lovingly, and cling to the bit of life that he had left?

"I didn't want to kill anybody, least of all my future father-in-law. I didn't know it was your father, at the time I didn't know you either, but the man I shot looked exactly like the one in that picture."

"Oh, my God."

"The captain had me at gunpoint, and if I hadn't done it, he and the soldiers around us would've killed us both. So it's just a technicality who pulled the trigger. I would've been forced to pull the trigger on my own father."

She moaned.

"I can't say I'm sorry—it wouldn't make sense to be sorry for something I had no control of."

She moaned and lowered her chin to her collarbones.

"That's amazing bad luck. How many people lived in Vukovar? Thirty thousand? Two thousand men in their fifties? And to chance upon your father . . . But not to chance upon anybody would have been even more unlikely."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I only saw a small, hazy picture of him before, and while I could tell there was a similarity, I couldn't be sure—there's often a similarity. I'd even mistaken you for

someone else. I'm no good at recognizing faces. Even if I had been sure before, how could I have simply come out with it: 'Listen, I killed your father.' Why wreck a family—for we have been reasonably happy, haven't we?"

After this, Olga would not allow him to stay in the bed with her and Zvone anymore.

One evening while Milan brooded, Olga said, "All right, we can't live like this—you can join us."

But he continued sitting and sulking.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"There's always something," he said.

She stood above him and said, "Why are you talking in riddles? I know what else there is. That captain of yours who, you said, raped me? Strange that we never talked about it."

"It's not strange. I didn't think women liked to talk about such things. Yes, he was doing it when I bludgeoned him."

Lately she had remarked several times that Zvone looked like Milan: he had the same kind of drop-off between his forehead and the rest of his face, and his broadly separated, large hazel eyes peered hungrily from beneath his brows.

It angered Milan that, no matter how hard he tried, just one hour out of whack made it impossible to live the rest of his life honestly and peacefully.

She paced the room, kicking her way through plastic cars, trucks, and animals donated by UNICEF, Caritas, and German Protestant churches. "Zvone looks like you. How come?"

"Isn't it obvious."

"I can't believe it."

"Listen, throughout the war, I was shoved around. Once I killed your rapist and my rapist, I felt free for the first time ever, and I was in a frenzy, beside myself, and I couldn't control either the drink or the lust. I couldn't handle anything consciously anymore. And I didn't know that I could have children—I was told my sperm count was too low. So later, I didn't think it made any sense to tell you; I thought it was either the captain's seed or, who knows, there could have been people before him. But when I noticed the similarity, I thought that in a way we should be happy: we are the biological parents."

"So you killed the rapist, to rape me, and you never told me!"

"What could I tell you? At that time I was unconscious, drunk, and there you were. I just lay with you. I did not force anything. I did it in some kind of dizzy grace period, when I was free from everything, even from the past and the future—lucky to be alive, and unlucky, doomed."

"But I was unconscious!"

"So?"

"That's rape."

"No, rape is done against a person's will, not without the will."

"That's a sophism. You raped me."

"Come on. If we were both unconscious, how could it be rape?"

"But you weren't."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Anyway, I put you on the bus. If I hadn't, the whole bar would've raped you and they would have shot you after it."

"So you're saying I should thank you?"

He didn't respond, but threw up his arms in despair. What could he do about it—about going off the edge for an hour of his life? Suffer for the rest of eternity? Kill himself?

She was wearing a gold necklace with a cross. She grabbed it, tore it from her neck, and twisted the cross in her fingers. "If it weren't for the child, I'd kill you."

She wept. He came close to her and put his arm on her shoulder. She shuddered and pushed his arm away.

They paced the room. Lightning filled the room with flashes of blue light, and he saw her as if she were in a series of blue snapshots. In silence they stumbled over chairs and walked on toys, crushing them.

Milan thought how strange it was that he should be held responsible for the past, three years ago, when he was conscripted and enslaved—when he wasn't even himself. "We all have multiple personalities," he said. "One of us is the past, and another the future, and there's no present me. We are vacant right now—spaces through which the past and the future disagree." He sounded academic, but he was trying to articulate his alienation—and while alienation and displacement usually troubled him, now he wanted them to help him. Yes, it would be good to be as alienated from Vukovar as possible.

"What nonsense. Don't philosophize. Philosophy is an excuse. You have no excuse," Olga said. There hadn't been a lightning flash in a while, but thunder grumbled and rattled the loose windows. Zvone cried in the bedroom, and Olga went to him. Milan watched from the door. Zvone sucked eagerly, kneading a breast with his little fists, sinking his untrimmed nails into the opulent flesh. Milan could see that she did not mind the scratchy nails, the little loving kitten's claws, nor the raspy tongue. Letting one of his hands roam, Zvone caught the other venous breast and smiled when he got it to squirt.

Milan undressed and went to the sofa. The baby, as though sensing the tension in the room, kept sucking for an hour, and Milan heard Olga say, "It's empty, they are both empty—can't you stop? Do you want some bread?"

"No. Milk, I want my milk," he said.

"Time to go to sleep," she said and turned off the light.

"Light. I want light!"

She switched the light on and read him a book about happy bears and happy eagles eating happy fish.

The lightning storm resumed, and the thunder rumbled the silverware on the table. "Lions are fighting," Zvone said.

Loud raindrops hit the windowpanes. "They are crying too," Olga said. "They are knocking for us to let them in."

After a while Milan's mouth was sticky, tasting of plum brandy and onions. He

didn't want to walk to the bathroom to brush his teeth, in case Olga slept, and he wondered how much she must hate him at that moment. She probably wanted him to die in his sleep. He dozed off, then awakened to a stabbing pain. Olga was lifting a hand that held a large kitchen knife, and before he had time to realize that he was not dreaming, she drove the knife down into his abdomen. She leaned hard on the knife until the stainless steel ground against his rib.

The pain scorched him. He pushed her and then kicked her against the wall. He stood up and staggered, bleeding, then collapsed, but stayed half-conscious in the burning pain. The boy woke up and screamed, "Mama, I'm afraid! Lions are biting! Where's Dada?"

Now she panicked too: the cold blue lightning revealed the spooky aspect of her deed—a man in a black puddle. She called an ambulance and went to the hospital alongside Milan, with Zvone at her breast. She did not know her husband's blood type, so finding out took time. The hospital was out of supplies of his blood group. As she belonged to group O and was thus a universal donor, she gave as much as she could: three pints of blood, enough to keep him alive until new blood came, and enough to exhaust her. Now her blood would stream through him. Zvone wanted to suck, but she was empty.

As Milan came to, Zvone cried, "Milk! I want more milk!" Zvone sucked hard.

Milan's body hurt and his ears buzzed, but he listened in elation to Zvone's voice, which he'd thought he'd never hear again, and the voice cried, "Milk!"

"No, no more milk," Olga said. "Maybe blood, if you like. Keep sucking, it will come. There's some left."