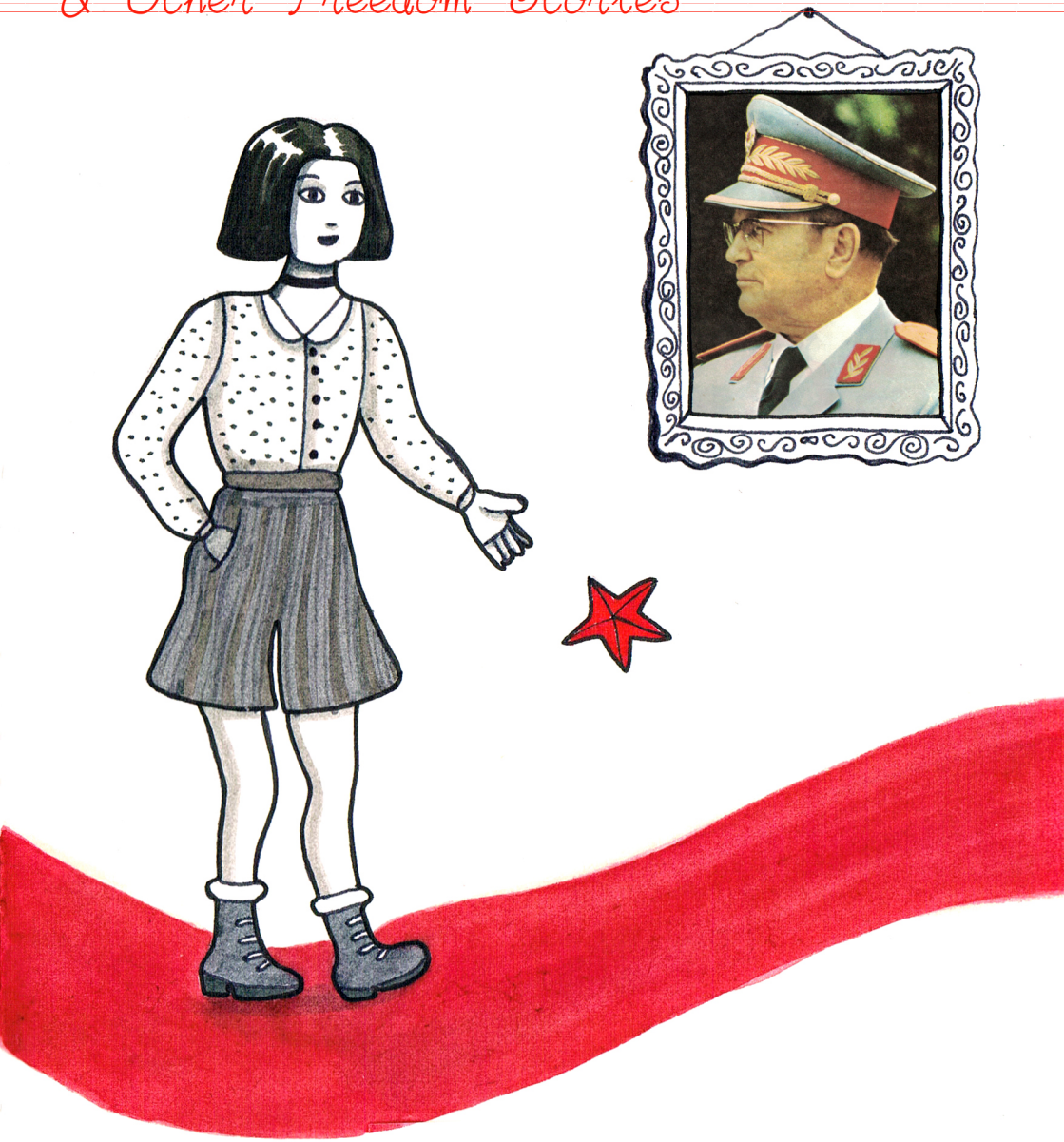
In My Father's Village

& Other Freedom Stories



by Tamara Lazaroff

In My Father's Village & Other Freedom Stories
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For, and because of, my grandfather,
Dedo *'Dedushko' Trajan;*
and to my mother, Mara,
who went before me.

In My Father's Village

& Other Freedom Stories

☆ ☆ ☆

by Tamara Lazaroff

You can say anything you want, yessir, but it's the words that sing, they soar and descend… I bow to them… I love them, I cling to them, I run them down, I bite into them, I melt them down…

– Pablo Neruda

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Preface

I am a daughter of both first-generation migrants and second-wave feminism. Growing up in Sydney in the early '70s, the extended Macedonian family and culture I belonged to was very important to me, and yet, and yet… I also witnessed how it could treat women like my mother who left her unhappy arranged marriage and suffered terrible consequences. Of course, my experience is only one among many, and I don't want to suggest that misogyny is particular to my heritage; sadly, the social system of patriarchy exists almost everywhere, including, though in different forms, in dominant Anglo-Australian culture – a revelation which, frankly, has to have been one of the greatest disappointments of my adolescence.

In my late teens, then, though there were many aspects of what I perceived to be Macedonian-ness that I loved – the tight circle of laughter, the loud talk and tall stories, the lack of pretension, the earthiness and generosity – I chose to find my own way. Still, no matter how far I travelled in body or mind, my Macedonian-ness always seemed to haunt me, like grief.

When I began writing in my twenties, of course I tried to write about this loss, but it was without much pleasure or success. It was only after I began to formally relearn Macedonian, my first childhood language – which included a period of study and travel in the Balkans – that I was able as

an adult to remake, recreate and reimagine my relationship with that aspect of my identity, and finally embrace it on my own terms.

And so the stories that follow began to present themselves.

I call them stories because, although they are all either autobiographical or grounded in some kind of lived experience, I view them as fiction. I can see, in retrospect, that I was not so much attempting to report on a past, fact by fact, but clearing the way for a new and emancipated pathway forward. I was also trying to find a way to honour my roots and to preserve some of the knowledge and knowing of my grandparents, and their generation, which I came to treasure, thankfully, before it was too late. To them, to my grandparents, I am forever grateful and in awe of their courage, resourcefulness and strength in moving to a new country, not always comprehensible or kind, from the old.

Macedonia. In my lifetime alone it has had many of its own crises of identity – and three name changes to boot. After the second world war, it was a state in the former Yugoslavia; and then, in 1991, during the Yugoslav Wars and the process of secession, it became the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; more recently in 2018, amid more turmoil and under some duress, it was officially renamed the Republic of North Macedonia.

In the following pages, however, I will simply and affectionately refer to the country of my ancestors as Macedonia. May it and all of its people enjoy peace, power and

prosperity.

Prison in Macedonia

Marko, Alek and I are sitting together on this warm summer night under a mulberry tree, enjoying some *rakija* – home brew – soda and wine. The Ohrid lakeside breeze is blowing gently over us, and Alek, with wry eyes, is telling me, me and Marko, about prison in Macedonia. From experience. How you have to take your own cup and bowl and spoon.

I'm not sure whether to laugh.

'Seriously?'

'Seriously. Why would I lie? And all they give you to eat in your bowl, if you are lucky enough to have one, is boiled mung beans and beetroot. As if you are an animal on a farm.'

Marko's elastic face is all creases and lines as he chuckles along. From his relaxed, buoyant expression, I'd say he's heard the details of this story before, but he leans in to listen, generously, as if it's for the first time.

Marko and Alek are old friends. I don't know for how long, but I can see they have the easy familiarity of two old comrades, of high school chums. Me? I'm no one special, probably, for them. Just another tourist passing through, a paying guest at Marko's pensione in Ohrid, where the mulberry tree stands.

In my mind, of course, I am someone. I'm more than just a tourist. This country was my almost-homeland. It's the country of my parents and grandparents, my great-grandparents and great-great grandparents before that. And this is my 'return' to gather knowledge, stories, alternate realities, the possibilities of the life I might've lived, breathed, owned, been owned by and had to break free of – as from a prison. Just as anyone attempts to break free from what is expected, conventional, known.

Marko and Alek are good people to talk with, then, about these possible realities. We are *generacija*, of the same generation, all of us in our late thirties now. But we notice that I've got a baby-face, in comparison with them – as if I've had it too easy, as if I've lived my life, in Australia, in a match-box padded with cotton wool. I don't have any lines or scars, no cuts on my cheek or forehead, as Marko does. He catches my eye running over them.

'I know, I know,' he says. 'I look like some kind of criminal, like our Alek here. But, I swear, I got this one' – he touches the freshest scar above his left eyebrow – 'from running into a door.'

He's spent the winter just gone, he says, with too many

things to think of: renovating, trying in a rush to turn the crumbling ground floor of his mother's house in the old part of town into rooms that people will want to pay to sleep in during their holidays.

He laughs. 'This one here is from walking into a pole on the street, when I was trying to decide which plaster to buy. I'm ashamed to say it's true!'

I like Marko's face. I like his scars. I'd like to trace over the sticking-out seams with my fingertips. But I don't. It would seem too intimate, like a romantic gesture, which it isn't. Instead, I praise him with words.

I say, 'You've done a good job.'

With the renovations, I mean. Even though every time I brush past the walls in my room, the plaster crumbles away. Even though the shonkily-hinged door to my bathroom doesn't close properly. Who cares? It's the effort, the trying that counts. And the warm welcoming atmosphere that Marko creates, just by being himself.

Because of this – Marko's warmth – I am always forgetting, crossing the line. Maybe, there is no line. It's confusing sometimes. I don't know whether I am a just temporary tenant or now a friend, because of the generosity he exudes, the genuine connection that seems to exist between us.

Yesterday, he invited me to go for a swim with him in the late afternoon. We did lazy laps together in the lake, and then we lay down, side by side, under the sky and soaked up the sun until we were dry. It was the first time I'd seen

him wearing so little, just a pair of sagging speedos, and so I got to see, to study the rest of his many scars on his chest, his arms, his legs. A lifetime, I thought, of distraction, absentmindedness, dreaming whilst awake. And not the result of crime or violence as it might seem.

I also got to hear what came before.

Up until last spring, Marko lived in South Africa. He lived there for ten years. Macedonian, professionless and cashless as he was, no other country would have him. But he badly wanted to get away. He would've gone anywhere he said, to see what else there was to see of this world. And he saw it – or some of it.

He worked in a semi-legal gambling house in Johannesburg with other people from other countries – Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Kosovo, Bangladesh – whose citizens no one else wanted. He earned good money, too, until one night the Chinese mafia arrived with machine guns. There'd been some kind of unpaid debt. So, Marko, in an attempt to save himself, ran up to the first floor, jumped off a balcony, broke both ankle bones – but didn't feel the pain till afterwards – and fled into the night.

But this isn't what made Marko want to return to Macedonia.

He said he could feel himself changing, becoming the kind of person who likes to live alone, alarm on, like a Western European all locked in on himself. Marko didn't want this to happen, he said. Even though he had his own house, a good car, money, it wasn't enough.

I said I understood as we drove back to the pensione along the pot-holed road in his old, beat-up Yugo. We were silent the rest of the way.

But here, now, there is no silence. There is only Alek, gregarious, who wants to talk and laugh, to steer the conversation back to the topic of prison in Macedonia. For him it's almost one big joke.

'Can you believe it?' he says. 'Every day, boiled beetroot and mung beans. But this is the food I hate most in the whole of the world!'

We all laugh. The terrible, terrible tragedy of it. And I watch the way the two of them do – laugh – free in their bodies. It delights me. I see the two old men they will become, *inshallah*, if they make it that far.

Marko slaps his thigh and makes a sucking in and out sound, like an old-fashioned air pump. And Alek laughs with no sound at all coming out of his wide-open mouth. You can see all the fillings and the gaps where he's already lost teeth. Marko's body vibrates. And then there's one final wheeze.

But I want to know how Alek came to be in prison.

We will get to that.

First, Alek and Marko want to laugh some more, and their laughter is infectious. It's also intelligent, dark, ironic. I can garner only the edges of its meanings as they remember a mutual friend, Lupcho, who went to prison a couple of months ago, not in Macedonia but, in all places, Belgium, for something petty. An unpaid fine.

'Imagine! Lupcho!' Alek says. 'In prison! In Belgium!'

There is more open-mouthed, uncontrollable laughter, the wiping of tears from eyes.

This Lupcho, I gather from the two, is the most law-abiding citizen you could meet. He is honest to a fault. This is what makes the prison sentence so funny for them.

Alek is saying, 'But remember, he wouldn't even cross the road unless a policeman waved a flag and gave him the nod.'

Marko is saying, 'I remember he wouldn't give me the answers to the driving exam, even when I offered him a hundred *dinar* note.'

Alek: 'Better he went to prison in Belgium than here, in Macedonia. He wouldn't survive. But imagine! Cable TV in every cell! Special food to suit every allergy. Free medical care. In prison in Belgium, Lupcho, I hear, is studying to be an astronaut. You can do everything in prison in Belgium. You can fly to the moon!'

Lucky Lupcho. We all agree about that.

But Alek…

Apparently, as Alek tells it, he once lived quite close to luck but not close enough. He used to share a one bedroom flat in Brussels with Lupcho, five other Macedonians and one Serb.

'We were all, you know, trying to enjoy the luxuries the West still does best. Good times on film, good times in style. Label whiskey, sunglasses, sexy music, sexy art.'

Alek was a student then. He was studying to be an

architect. He had dreams. He also had a student visa and a working visa, too, but then they both ran out, they lapsed.

Alek explains now, under the mulberry tree, what I already know.

'We all go to other countries to make money. Everyone does from here. Like Marko. Sometimes we like it better and want to stay. Life is good in Belgium. The stars shine brighter there. I did not want to go home. So, I didn't. I became an illegal immigrant.'

Alek and Marko begin to laugh now, afresh.

'An illegal immigrant,' Marko repeats again and again. In English with his thick Balkan accent, he sounds out all the syllables, emphasising every one. Gives each rendition a new intonation, all of them filled with mock menace and evil.

'Yes,' says Alek, proud. 'This is what I was. But then I got sick of being poor. I got sick of asking my parents, like a baby, for twenty euros here, twenty euros there. I got tired of waiting for the money to arrive. I wanted to be my own man. So, I slipped back across the border into Macedonia. I went to the capital and I got a job in a bar along the banks of the stinking Vardar. This river will stink for me, always. And I waited.'

We wait, too, for the rest of the story, as Alek pauses to fill his shot glass with more home brew. He downs it and goes on.

'Friends, this is how it happened. In the bar, I worked. One week, one month, two months, three. It didn't matter. I knew they would come. You can't overstay your welcome in

the EU without someone taking notice. They'll get you there or they will get you here when you return. Still, I was calm, I was patient. It was the middle of summer. It was Skopje.

'Skopje, you have to know,' he says for my benefit, 'is just one giant *dupka*, a hole that collects the humidity and dust. This heat, it makes us Macedonians more lazy. Everything takes twice as long. So, I had time. I knew that. I also knew there were people ahead of me in the queue. So, I waited my turn.

'And then they came. Right at the end of August. They were just as I expected. Two middle-aged coppers in plain clothes. One with a flabby stomach hanging over his pants from too much pork, and the other one with large sweat patches under his arms and bad breath like sour milk. In no hurry, they sat down at some stools by the bar and asked for two beers, a couple of *Skopsko*s.

'They said, "Don't worry about glasses, young man. Just give us the bottles."

'And then they drank and smoked a bit. They eyed off the waitress's arse. They made some lewd remarks, loud enough for everyone to hear. They tried to bring back their youth.

'After a bit, one of them, the one with the stomach said, "So, you'd be Alek Nikolovski, then?" taking a swig.

'I said, "Yes, that's me."

'The other man with the sweat stains said, "Well, well, here's our man."

'I didn't put up a fight. It was too hot. Forty-four

degrees. If I really wanted, I suppose, I could have run, but where would I have run to? I took off my apron. I went to tell my boss why I wouldn't be able to finish my shift. My boss accepted my reasons. He wished me luck. I was ready, but then the coppers didn't want to rush.

'One of them said, "Get us two more *Skopsko*s for the road, hey pal?"

'The other one added, "Well, you might as well get one for yourself, too."

'So, I did. Then we sat and drank together. We talked about the football, this and that, and then when we finished the fat one pulled out the pair of handcuffs from his pocket. I offered him my wrists.

'As we left, one of the other barmen, a good man, a Muslim, called out, "Hey, Alek. Here. Take these."

'He knew, from experience, I'm guessing, about prison in Macedonia. There are more Muslims and gypsies than anyone else in there. He gave me a bowl, a cup and a spoon. His own, goddamn it. He probably carried the things around with him just in case he ever got into any kind of trouble. I looked at him as if he was mad.

'I said, "What is this?"

'He said, "In case your parents can't come to see you straight away."

'I said, "What?" Because I didn't know. I'd never been to prison in Macedonia before.

'The coppers just gave my friend a wink and waved, pulling me by my collar towards the van. They pushed me in.

They put the siren on, for fun. Then they took me where I had to go. And that was that.'

I have lots more questions. I want to know if Alek made friends in there. What he did, how he spent his days. But Alek, all he wants to do is take off his shirt. He's sweating. He's hot, I suppose.

Then he turns, showing me his back. He wants me to see.

'This is what I did in prison in Macedonia. I got this tattoo,' he says.

It's huge. It would've taken weeks, months to complete. The image of an intricate eagle with outstretched wings, a power symbol, and then over the top in a horseshoe kind of arc the Cyrillic letters: СО ПАТНИК ПАТНИК.

I read the words out loud.

'But you don't know what that means, do you?' Marko asks.

Marko wants to tell me it's a Macedonian idiom, an old saying. He wants to tell me that in Macedonian ПАТНИК (pronounced *patnik*) has a double meaning. The modern – 'journeyer'. And in the old Macedonian – 'suffering', the noun.

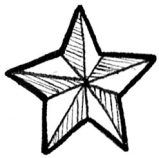
So, the tattoo reads: With the journeyer, suffering.

I say that I understand, that even though I have not been to prison in Macedonia – I probably never will – that this saying makes sense. With almost any journey there is the accompanying suffering and also, you hope, some joy.

For me, for example, coming to Macedonia, being

here, it's hard. I feel so much emotion. It's a tangled knot I have no words for yet. It makes me tired all the time. I sleep and sleep until midday. I go to bed before nine, as if I've been dragging around a heavy weight all of the day. Of course, I know, my suffering is a privileged suffering, different to the suffering of these two good men. But suffering is suffering any which way. It's not always relative.

Never mind. Tonight, under the mulberry tree, I am warm and lighter because of the company of Marko and Alek. I smile at them. I smile at the lake. I smile at the starry sky. I smile at the whiskey on the table. Because if I don't smile, I'll cry.



I Am Natasha – No, Really, I Am

So, it has come to this.

Here, on the ninth floor of this tall, grey block of – how do you say it? – *stanovi*, flats, concrete mouse-holes made in the Communist era, I sit alone by the window on a wooden chair, its paint peeling. It's also from the Communist era, or maybe even before that, from *Tursko*, Ottoman times. A small chair for small people in a small country. Here, I sit.

I look out of the window onto the cold, winter street in the old part of town of Skopje and watch the neighbourhood children, some Albanian and some Orthodox, fight an ancient fight with fists, and then disperse after one of them gets a bloodied nose.

When they have gone, in their place, a plastic bag dances in the wind like a ragged ghost. That is what history is

here, in this part of the world, the Balkans – a hungry spectre roaming the streets, wanting to be fed and made fat again and again. People are willing to kill and die for this ghost – this plastic bag. But I am not. I do not care for politics, even though the news of politics, the politics of news, was my whole life until recently, until my husband Bore died.

I was a journalist. Yes, a political journalist. Who cares now? I wrote for *Borba*, the official newspaper of the League of Communists, which translates into English as something like 'Attack', 'Conflict', 'War'. Yes, I was a rocket-ship ready to explode. In the 70s, I studied in Belgrade along with other students from Non-Aligned countries – Cubans, Indians, Egyptians, Algerians and my husband-to-be, a fellow Slav. You could say I was a child of Tito's Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. Once, I personally handed Tito his birthday baton which contained all of the birthday pledges of the country's youth. He shook my hand. He smiled at me. He looked me straight in the eye. You can imagine what an impact this had on me. I was fourteen years old. It was 1969.

But now all that is gone – that impact, Tito. He lies in a marble mausoleum. Yugoslavia – broken into small pieces. Socialism – dead. My ideals, dead, too. Bore – buried, gone.

I am like an animal now. It's only the whims of my body that I care for. I want a cigarette. I have a cigarette. I light it. I suck in the nicotine. I blow out the smoke. This is good. And I wonder how it is that I have become old.

In the small bathroom, as big as a closet, in this small flat, in this small country where I can hardly breathe, I study

my face closely in the mirror with the light on. I cannot remember when I have done this before, looked so intensely into, at myself.

I see how the skin, especially around my eyes and neck, wrinkles and sags like old leather that has not been oiled for a long time. I notice the dark whiskers that grow above my lips. And the fine lines around my mouth that make another second set of whiskers, as if I had a snout. Yes. I am an animal. A body. A skeleton. Some skin, and hair, and bone.

But inside, somewhere behind this old skin, at the top of my intestines, at the pit of my stomach, to the left of my slippery, red liver, I feel – yes, I feel – something new. It is alive. A surprise. Like a bulb in the winter that will shoot and flower in the snow.

I go to the kitchen now to boil a coffee, Turkish-style, in a small pot, the pot I had before I married Bore. I make it *sredno*, not *gorchilvo* – too bitter – or *slatko* – too sweet – but somewhere in the middle. Alone I drink it in a country where rarely anybody is. There is always something: some *zhurka*, a wedding, a funeral, a party, a fight, a revolution, too many people with too many opinions, someone with a gun, gossip, the latest war.

Also, there are – there were – my husband's lovers. There were my lovers too, younger men. And our competition, intellectual, sexual. Our combat, that noise. Not that we fought like other couples in love fight. It was – how can I say? Right from the moment we met at university in Belgrade in 1972, we were like two men, two comrades, equals

in every way, married to a cause, an ideology trying to outdo each other for a greater good.

I have not had one lover since Bore left, since he died. Because I see, now, that my lovers were not for my own pleasure but so that I could keep up with his. I did not know this until the moment I was alone. I know now, too, the reason why this society keeps us suffocated, pressed together, close. In the quiet of solitude, radical, new thoughts and possibilities arise.

But, now, there is a loud banging. I drink my coffee and smoke. I don't even bother to look up. I know that it is only that somebody upstairs has just taken a shit and flushed their toilet. You know these old apartments, with their old plumbing. Every time someone has a bodily function or turns on a tap, everybody knows about it. When we were children, we used to think there was a man who lived in the drain who had nothing to do but beat the pipes with a stick all day and all night.

Noise.

There is a knock at the door.

I go to answer it. And just as I open up, another door from across the hall opens as well. It is the neighbour, Vanja, in a house dress and *shamija*, a scarf wrapped too tightly around her head as if it hurts, as if it throbs from too much meddling in other people's business. The floor busybody, she always wants to know who comes and goes.

'Oh, it's only you,' she calls out to Mira, my guest.

Mira is a woman my husband used to work with at the television station. A colleague or more? I don't know. I only know that Mira, a widow too, has decided to befriend me. She comes for coffee and to keep me company, sometimes, in the afternoons. But before I can get the two of us safely through the door, Vanja the neighbour tells us excitedly she has something more she wants to tell.

'Hai, Natasha. We live in terrifying times. Did you hear about the killer in Kichevo? He rapes and strangles women in their own homes.'

'Yes,' I say.

How could I not? We have never had a serial killer here before – not one unassociated with an army or war. It is a story that captivates the whole nation. There is a man-hunt going on. And something of a pride and horror, I suspect, that we are catching up to western Europe, that we are enacting purely personal, not only political, brutality.

'Who knows?' I tell Vanja. 'Maybe this incident will get us into the EU.'

But Vanja does not understand my humour. Standing in the hall, she changes her tack of conversation.

She says, 'Oh well, let him come and take me if he wants. It's been so long. Let him have these breasts.' She lifts one sagging breast. 'Let him have this cunt.'

She lifts her dress to show us her oversized underwear and her crotch. She laughs, cackling, playing her bit part as a lonely, old, lewd woman.

We, too, Mira and I, laugh along with Vanja, playing

our bit parts as equally lonely, old women.

'Yes, let him take us,' I say.

Mira politely smiles. 'We are waiting for him,' she says and winks.

That little performance done, we go inside.

Behind the door, as I take Mira's coat, I admire Mira's dress.

'You look lovely in it,' I say.

It is a light green, with a belt at her waist. It shows her softness and roundness. Her curls frame her face. Younger, or even as she is now, she is exactly the kind of woman Bore would have found attractive. I tell her so. And I do not see her flinch. She does not mention him further. Good. She hands me the *lokum*, the rose-flavoured Turkish delight she has brought with her as a gift.

'Sit, Mira,' I say. 'I will make us coffee.'

I disappear for a moment and bring back the tray. We sit on the couch. Steam rises. Neither of us picks up our cups to drink. Together, we look out the window and say nothing. Snow begins to fall, lightly, outside. It is beautiful, I think and think.

But how long has it been that I have been looking at this snow? It is as if I have disappeared into the sensation of lightness and whiteness, the softest chill. I have travelled onto the other side of the window, through the glass, and only when I return to myself, into this skin, do I realise that I am holding Mira's hand, and she is holding mine.

I say to Mira, looking, not at her but straight ahead, 'I didn't think you would come today.'

I try not to say it solemnly, but solemn is how I sound.

In answer, Mira carefully picks up my hand and begins to turn it over and then over again, to one side and then the other, stroking, back and forth, with her fingertips as if she is trying to melt ice. She does this for a very long time.

Then she says, 'But why wouldn't I come?'

I do not say a word. I barely move. I barely breathe. I don't want this moment to end. It is fragile, like a dream. I do nothing until Mira says my name. It is a question.

'Natasha?' she says.

I turn then to look at our two entwined hands and then at her. She turns to look at me, too. The snow continues to fall, lightly. My body leans in. I cannot stop it. It wants to be closer to her, to kiss her. My lips, they seem to grow more flesh, more nerves.

This is the point we got to yesterday, before Mira got up, suddenly, to leave. But today, Mira does not go. My body yearns and Mira yields. Her body grows towards me, too. It is like sunshine. She is lovely and soft.

I tell her, 'Mira, you are so lovely, so soft.'

She is a flowery perfume, musk. She is silky underclothes. And I am shy, I am stupid, I am ugly, I am shame, I am innocence. I am young, I am old. I am Bore, I am me. Bore. More than anyone in this world I want to talk with him, to tell him, my comrade, about this sweetness, but he is not here. I want to say, Bore I understand everything. At

last Bore, I understand. I am peace. I am also full of agonies. I am light and bright as the snow that continues to fall, lightly, gently, outside the window.

And then I want to know, 'Mira, have you done this before?'

It should not be important. But it is. Suddenly, I am angry. I want to know if I have been left out of this great secret all of my life. I want to know whether these are the kinds of pleasures that are going on, commonly, that no one has thought to tell me about.

'No,' Mira says.

But why would she tell me even if she had, in this small country where everyone has a mouth and knows someone else who has a bigger mouth. Where homosexuality is considered a psychiatric illness, a leprosy, a disease.

Only last year, in this ugly, grey block of flats, two young men, a lawyer and a restaurateur were thrown out onto the street after someone told the landlord that they were not just sharing the rent. They were pushed and spat on, publicly, on the gravelly footpath and told, 'We don't want your kind here.'

Vanja told this to me in the hall, outside her door, shaking her head – at the young men, not the landlord.

'*Sramota*. Such shame. But I wonder which one took the role of the bride? Do you think it was the lawyer or the restauranteur? I think it was the restauranteur. He was like a woman, too emotional, crying into the shoulder of the other one as they got into a taxi and sped away.'

'No,' Mira says. 'I have not done this before.'

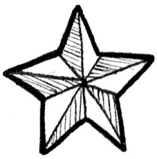
And the snow outside the window is like a silent movie. And I am a criminal. Good.

I begin to unbutton the delicate buttons of Mira's pretty dress. Mira lets me. She shows me how to do it without pulling the threads. What would Vanja say now? That I am the man? I don't care. I lay Mira's head down on a pillow, gently. I roll up her skirt. How is it that we know what to do next?

We begin to move together, as if our bodies have always known. We tremble. And we sigh and sigh. We laugh. It is like the tinkle of bells. I laugh and it is with abandon, in relief to have found this joy in this ex-Communist concrete flat, in this grey mouse hole, in this cold city, in this winter, in these grey years, in my aloneness, in this small, small country full of small people and us, and me, Natasha.

And then I get up. Triumphant. Larger. Look. I am full of bold energy. I hold up this small chair for small people. I do not want to sit in it anymore. I raise it above my head.

I say, 'Mira. Do not be afraid. But, with my bare hands, I am going to break this piece of rotting wood.'



Lezbianka

In the kitchen, in our extended, three generations family house in Sydney, my grandmother, *Baba* Magda, is shouting again. She's talking with her hands over us kids, over our heads.

She's saying to my Auntie Petka, 'Well, well. Leni's back.'

I hadn't even noticed she was gone.

I don't really notice Leni that much.

Leni's just Nikki's older sister, almost a big person. And if I ever go to their place, which is only two doors down, it's to jump on the trampoline with Nikki. Or to run with Nikki's dog. Or to bounce a ball on the brick wall outside and catch it while Nikki counts how many claps I can do in the space between the catch and the throw. It's not to see Leni. Leni doesn't play. She's too busy studying to become a doctor and being a good girl. The kind I'm supposed to be when I grow up

so I can make everybody, my grandmother especially, proud.

But today – it's confusing – the stories have been switched around. Leni is not a good girl. My grandmother says so. She is a *kuchka* – a dog. And a *kurva* – a girl who takes off her clothes with men she doesn't know in alleyways and dark parks. I know these words. And I know what they mean. But I don't know what a *lezbianka* is.

'That good-for-nothing *lezbianka*.' My grandmother says it again.

'What, what?' I say.

My grandmother leans in close and says, 'Leni is the worst of the worst. You know what else? She had a baby in a gutter in Newtown and she sold it for a piece of bread.'

I wonder, 'Who to?'

'To man in a black coat going past in a car. No shame. And now she's come back to her family to hang her head.'

Like a cartoon, a picture pops up in my head. The swap through the car window between Leni and the man in the black coat – a baby for a piece of bread, all floppy and thick and white and soft like the Tip Top toasties we get from the corner shop.

But I don't remember Leni being pregnant. Not like Auntie Petka with her big watermelon belly stretched out to the limit so my little cousin Danny can have not only me, but a little brother or sister to play with. I would've noticed that. But maybe I wasn't looking hard enough. I try to think back to when I do remember Leni for sure, clear.

It was at her big twenty-first birthday party in her

backyard, with a jukebox and everything, not that long ago, in the summertime. We went. And I remember looking at Leni, really looking at her because just then she looked so pretty and happy and free. She was playing ping-pong with a bald man with a tanned head and a beard. He was smiling at her, and she was smiling at him, as if they knew a good secret. But, anyway, that bald man didn't matter so much. It was Leni who shone. She had no shoes on and was wearing big, wide flared jeans. Her long, brown hair was out. It swayed with her pants, left to right, right to left, like a beautiful ballet, as she waited for the little white ball to come her way, right before she hit. And her eyes were bright. In them, they had little cut-out glints.

No. She didn't look like she was having a baby.

Her stomach was flat.

Maybe my grandmother has got it wrong.

Either way, I'm going to find out.

I ask my grandmother, 'Is Leni home right now?'

My grandmother shrugs her shoulders. 'Where else does she have to go?'

I say, 'I'm going over.'

She says, 'Go. See the devil for yourself.'

So, I go.

At our door, as I open it, my little cousin Danny cries because he wants to come, too.

'Just stay,' I say. 'I won't be long.'

But, of course, he starts shrieking at the top of his lungs.

My grandmother says, 'Take him. Please. He only wants you.'

So, I take his hand. I hold it tight. I tell him, 'It's alright, it's alright. Come on.'

And as we go out the door and down to the gate, I'm torn between feeling sorry that I don't always want to be with Danny, like he wants to be with me, and hoping that he's not going to get in the way of my investigations.

Outside on the footpath, Danny and me are still hand in hand. Like we've got superglue sticking us together. Like it's my arm that's his, or his that's mine. Like this, joined, we go past the house that's in-between Leni's and ours. And as we do, a cold shiver goes through me, so it must go through my little cousin, too. That's because he's younger and nearer and closer to remembering how it is to be swimming inside his mum's belly and dependent one hundred percent. Not like me. I'm already wanting to stand alone. I'm separating out.

But that house between Leni and us, it makes me feel things I don't have names for, words. It belongs to an old, old lady who's tiny and shrunken and frail. She looks as if she's made of birds' bones, a sparrow's that anyone could snap. As if at night she has to sleep in a box wrapped in tissue paper with mothballs and dead moths and dust. I don't know, really, if she does. But she's got a big wig of white hair and she lives alone. We hardly ever see her. But Leni's mum and my grandmother sometimes stand out the front, with their hands on their hips, and talk about her business.

They say – but not in English – 'Oh, what shame. What grief. Her kids never come and see her.'

'Oh, but they'll come when she's dead to collect the money. That's the way the Australians are.'

'They don't care about family. One day, the old lady will die and we'll be the ones who smell her rotting away like vinegar cabbage.'

Things like that, they say – as if they, and everything they believe in, will always be invincible like superheroes and never fall down.

Looking at the house, as me and Danny walk past it, I wonder what the old lady is doing inside now. If she is at the window, behind the blind, peering through a crack. Or if she died last night in her sleep and her ghost is already looming above us, over the roof, over the whole neighbourhood, bigger than she was in life. But with fiery eyes and pointed teeth, angry that no one cared.

I don't say anything about it to Danny, but I sniff the air. No trace of vinegar cabbage yet. We walk on, faster.

Up the three brick steps and then we are there, at Leni's door. With my one free hand, I knock. Still attached, Danny looks up at me with big eyes, I know, but I don't look back. I knock again and put my ear to wood.

I can hear loud noises like someone's dropping boxes from a high place. And then stomping. Big booming footsteps. Suddenly, the door opens in front of us. I jump back. It's Leni standing right there. But she's got no horns or

anything. She hasn't grown another eye like an ogre in the middle of her forehead. She looks like her normal self, to me, at first glance.

She says, 'Hello, Tammy,' a little out of breath. 'Nikki's not home.'

I just stand there and stare.

'Nikki's out with Mum and Dad at the shops. She'll be back soon if you want to come back then.'

I don't know what to say next, so I don't say anything. I bore holes with my eyes deep into hers trying to detect the badness my grandmother was so excited about. But I can't see any. It's disappointing.

After a bit, Leni says, 'Well then, do you want to come in?'

I say, 'Yeah.'

Then Leni moves aside, and I pull Danny straight down the hall, the way I would normally go, in the direction of the back door. But Leni stops us half-way.

'Why don't you take a seat? Why don't you sit down here?' she says.

She's pointing at one of the velvet couches in the good lounge room that I've never sat on before. The good lounge next to the good glass coffee table and, next to it, the good telephone made of white-and-grey marble. It has a golden wheel with numbers behind it that you have to put your finger in and turn around, if you want to ring out. And the wheel goes brrr-brrr-brrr when you let it go. I know because we used to have a good phone like that, too. No one was allowed

to use it. I don't think anyone uses it here either. Stiffly, we, me and Danny, sit on the good velvet couch where we have never sat before.

'So, can I get you a drink? Some Coke?'

Leni opens her arms.

I look at Danny, read his eyes, nod my head.

'One for me, and one for him,' I say. 'Separate. Thanks.'

In case she doesn't realise that we are.

So, Leni goes to get the drinks and comes back with them on a silver tray. They're in fancy glass glasses, not plastic, that as kids we might break. Then she starts talking.

She says, 'So, how's school, Tammy?'

'Good.'

'What class are you in now?'

'Fourth.'

I take a big gulp of fizzy drink, but don't take my eyes off her for a second.

'And what about you Danny?' she says. 'You must be going to start school soon?'

I speak for my little cousin. 'Next year.'

I know he doesn't want to speak for himself.

I can feel him wriggle next to me. I squeeze his hand hard, tell him to stay put. I want to keep studying Leni. Because the more I look, the more I do see that there really is something different about her. Her cheeks are thin. It's like you can see the cogs and spokes behind the mechanical clock of her face. She doesn't look like she did at her party. Her hair isn't swinging free. There're no cut-out glints in her eyes.

They're dead and grey. And her mouth. It looks like someone's sewn the sides of it to her ears with invisible string. To keep it from drooping.

'You'll be a big boy then, Danny,' Leni says, still smiling weirdly.

I want to ask Leni about the baby, and the man, and the piece of bread. I'm going to. But then the door bell rings.

From the velvet couch where I still stiffly sit with Danny, I strain to hear the voices at the door. I don't know who they belong to, but I can hear what they are saying and how, the woman and the man.

They're saying, 'I hope we're not intruding.'

'We were just driving by.'

'We thought we'd come and see how you are.'

'You're looking really well.'

'Really, really good, Leni. You're looking really great.'

And Leni's saying, 'Thanks. I'm better now. Come in.'

'No, no. We don't want to disturb you.'

'Please.'

'Well, we won't stay long. Just for a minute.'

Then the voices are coming down the hall.

Three times the boom-boom of footsteps.

And then the voices are here with us, with me and Danny in the good lounge room, with the bodies that belong to them. They are a woman who has a round, kind face and a man wearing a brown jacket with his hands in his pockets. All of them, Leni, the woman, the man, they stand on their legs as

if they are uneasy that they have them. They shift from foot to foot. Then the woman steps forward and gives Leni a giant-sized card in an envelope and some chocolates in a box.

She says, 'These are from everyone at the hospital. The doctors and nurses and your fellow students. We all want you to know that we send our love.'

Leni mouths the words 'thank you', but no sound comes out.

She takes the card and the box of chocolates but doesn't open them, not even the chocolates. I would have. Instead, she holds the things to her chest, hugging them hard, like she wants to crush them, the card, the box, the chocolates inside. To make their runny, gooey caramel insides ooze out of their shells, like blood out of her heart. But that doesn't happen. There's a silence.

Then Leni does a thing that I don't expect. She turns to me and Danny. She introduces us. Like she thinks we are big people.

She says to the kind lady and the man with his hands in his pockets, 'Linda, Brad. This is Tammy and Danny. Tammy, Danny, this is Linda, my supervisor from the hospital where I was doing my medical training. And her husband, Brad.'

'Hi,' I say from my seat. I wave.

Danny says nothing.

Then the kind woman and man turn to look at Leni again.

Leni keeps smiling the same weird smile with the help

of the invisible strings. And I'm wondering if the strings will snap. Eventually, I think they will. Especially if Leni and the woman and the man keep talking like they're talking, saying things that on the surface are calm and flat but underneath go up and down, quickly, like zig-zag mountains. I wish that they would just say it, whatever they really want to say, let it all out like my grandmother would. But they don't. And the invisible strings get tighter and tighter. It makes me nervous, for Leni, like I want to bite my nails right down to their quicks.

And if that's what I feel, then Danny must feel it, too.

His little hand taps me on the shoulder.

'I want to go,' he says.

I whisper, 'Wait.'

'No! I want to go home now.'

His face starts to break. And then he starts to cry. And then he starts to scream like his head is a siren going around and around.

So, we go. We rush to the door.

As we do, Leni calls, 'Come any time,' which is strange, too, because, anyway, we do. She also says, 'Give my very, very best to your grandmother.'

I say, 'I will.'

But I don't. Because I know that Leni's very, very best won't be good enough anymore, now that *Baba* has made up her mind that Leni is bad.

That night in bed, I try hard to stay awake. I'm waiting for my mum to come home from the ham factory where she has to

go to work, and the college where she goes after that to try to make a better life for us. It's hard to stop falling into sleep. And just when I think I can't keep my eyes open any longer, the door to the bedroom that we share with our two single beds and the dressing table between us, opens up. I don't move a muscle. I wait for her to tip-toe in, pull down her sheets and get underneath before I say, 'Mum?'

'Aren't you asleep yet? What is it?' she says, as if she's a piece of paper that's been crumpled up and thrown in the bin, and I'm asking her to flatten out and be new and fresh again. Well, she just can't.

'Mum,' I say. 'I'm sorry. I'll go to sleep soon. But can I just ask you one thing? Mum, what's a *lez-bi-an-ka*?'

I say the word carefully, slow because I've been dragged by my ear out to the laundry and had my mouth washed out with soap for repeating words my grandmother has said before. (And my grandmother has just looked on bewildered, peering from behind the corner, while my teeth have grated the hard cake and my mouth has foamed up with suds. She's shrugged her shoulders, as if to say, 'What? What's the problem?')

My mum's voice is sharp. She asks, 'And who said that?'

'*Baba*,' I say, dobbing her in straight away. 'About Leni. *Baba* said that Leni had a baby and sold it to a man in a car.'

My mother sighs in exasperation in the dark.

'Leni isn't a *lezbianka*. And she didn't have a baby. I don't know why your grandmother says the things she does.'

She sighs again, longer this time. 'Leni got mixed up with the wrong people at the hospital. Someone there gave her drugs. She had to go to a special place so that she could get better again.'

'What do you mean?'

'She couldn't stop taking drugs and she had to get help.'

'Why couldn't she stop taking them?'

'Because that's what happens. You become a slave. You become addicted. Leni was under a lot of pressure. It was her last year.'

'But why did they have drugs at the hospital?' I'm confused. 'I thought you went to jail if you had drugs. Like people on the news.'

My mum says, 'Well, yes. But sometimes drugs can help people. In hospitals.'

'Don't they get addicted, too?'

'Maybe. But at the hospital they keep their drugs in a cabinet, locked up. Only the doctors have a key. The patients just can't go and get them. Okay?' she says in her just-about-running-out-of-patience voice.

'But, Mum, who gave Leni the drugs?'

'I don't know, darling.'

'Was it the bald man she was playing ping-pong with at her party?'

'Who?'

I'll bet it was him. I don't know how, I just know. I can imagine how he would've, dressed in a white coat, led Leni

into a lonely, dark hospital storeroom. He would've turned behind after every step to see if she was still coming. She was. And his eyes would've gleamed at her, twirling, hypnotising. A perfect fit, he must've put the key, that only he keeps, into the lock of the cabinet. And the cabinet doors would've opened up in slow-motion, like in a dream. I can see it so clearly – inside, the rows and rows of triangular-shaped, little glass bottles full of drugs that turn people into slaves. They bubble and smoke and froth. They glow green and dangerous, like kryptonite. And the bald man with the gleaming eyes offered one to Leni. She couldn't resist, though she wanted to. She took a sip, and her eyes rolled backwards. She fell to the ground. Addicted.

That's how it must've happened.

And this is how it must've felt: the same way it feels when my Uncle Dimmie twirls me around and around in the park. When he stops I drop. I'm dizzy, I lose my legs. But, still, all I can do is beg, 'Again, again. One more time.'

I want to ask my mum if I'm right.

But before I can, she yawns loudly and says, 'Enough now. It's time to sleep.'

'Okay, Mum,' I say. 'There's just one more thing. I promise. Then I'll go to sleep. Please. What's a *lezbianka*?'

'We'll talk about it tomorrow.'

'You'll forget.'

Half-asleep my mum starts to speak, to tell me. But with every word her voice fades away. 'It's when…'

'What, Mum?'

'Sometimes two ladies love each other like, like a husband and a wife. And they…'

'What?'

'They just love each other, alright? We'll talk about it again another time. Now, good – '

' – night.'

I hear my mum roll over on her springy mattress. She starts to snore softly, purring like a cat. But I can't sleep. Not now. I lie there on my back thinking about Leni. Leni before and Leni now. And about ladies who love each other. Girls.

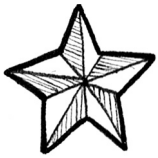
I don't exactly understand. But maybe it's a bit like me and my best friend, Naomi, at school. Sometimes we play mummies-and-daddies and getting-married at lunch-time behind the fig tree in the quadrangle. Sometimes, we lift each other's pretend veils, our cardigans tied around our heads, and kiss each other and say, 'I do, I do'.

I think about my grandmother, *Baba* Magda, too. Why would she say Leni is a *lezbianka* if she isn't?

Maybe she doesn't even know, properly, what a *lezbianka* is. She doesn't know everything. That's why in the morning, first thing, I'm going to tell her when she gives me my egg on toast and shouts at me and calls me a *krasta* – a measles-infected girl – which is bad, it isn't good. There's no in-between. Even though I don't have measles. I never have.

She probably won't even listen. She'll just start making up stories again, while I try to tell her something true. She'll be yelling, telling me to eat faster, faster or I'll be late for school where she wants me to go to learn and be smart. So I

can make her proud.



Blaga Writing Poetry

Now that I'm here in Ohrid, at the 44th International Macedonian Language Summer School Seminar, it seems naive to have imagined that all of the other students would be people like me: an adult child of post-World War II migrants come to reconnect with her roots. A near-middle-aged woman who, as an angry teenager, felt she had to sever all connections with her culture and relations after seeing just what 'family' means when, as a female, you don't do what you are told. A distraught daughter – or even a son – who, after a death of parent (say a mother), didn't know what else to do. Having always found salvation in language, words, I found myself enrolling in an online Macedonian Language Diploma course at Macquarie University in Sydney, then applying for an overseas study scholarship, getting it, going, arriving. And now, seated at a table in the student dining hall of the old, ex-Communist Metropol Hotel, I'm wondering how I thought

this decision would help me deal with all my complicated grief as, hungry, I wait for the sauerkraut and vegetarian pasta starters to arrive. There'll be dietary issues…

People like me – I thought there'd be at least a few of us.

Instead, from what I've been able to make of things so far – from the brief introductions at breakfast this morning and the conversations that followed the official opening ceremony (where a red ribbon was cut, the national anthem was sung and the Minister for Culture and a row of tired-looking academics made long speeches, which an MKD TV crew recorded for the evening news)… Yes, from what I've been able to gather so far, all of the other students are here not because of any personal life problems, fresh or accumulated, but because of their professions or areas of academic study.

There are the Slavicists – linguists from Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Serbia, the Ukraine, Hungary, Belarus, with specialist subjects such as the loss of the infinitive, dialectology and the Balkan sprachbund – so I've been told. There are also a few PhD exchange students from South Korea – apparently, there's been an agreement to foster a closer international relationship. Then, a couple of lexicographers from Russia who are compiling the very first Macedonian-Russian bilingual dictionary. A translator of popular novels to Polish. An older, kindly ethnomusicologist from Belgium whose passion is folk dancing. And from the U.S., an archaeologist who's working on a Greco-Roman dig over in the east and needs a few handy everyday phrases. There's

even an Orthodox priest from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Istanbul, or Constantinople as he still refers to it. And, last of all, a luminous-skinned, young actress from Moscow who needs the accent for her next part on stage.

You could say that they, my fellow students, are the cream of the cream – the fat. As you'd expect, they are very reserved, polite. Formal, even. They know, for example, how to lay napkins on their laps. They know how to dab at the corners of their mouths. They have impeccable table manners. On their seats, they sit modestly, patiently for what feels like aeons to me, and when the sauerkraut and vegetarian pasta starters do finally arrive – the waiter with his trolley is delivering to our table right now – they do not shovel, or wolf, or hoe once the plates are in front of them. Nor do they guzzle or slurp. They merely sip at their drinks. And between mouthfuls, willingly, they lay down their knives and forks. They speak only when spoken to in low, un-inflammatory tones. If they have any wild opinions they keep them to themselves.

Well, everyone, except Blaga, that is.

Opposite me, this Blaga from Bulgaria is banging her fist on the table. Predictably for this part of the world, she is wanting to light a match and throw it into the ever-waiting barrel of petrol. She is saying in a loud voice that the Macedonian language is not really a language at all, but a Bulgarian dialect. And, furthermore, that Macedonians are not really a people, but a Bulgarian ethnic subgroup.

And now I see why a red ribbon had to be cut, why

the national anthem had to be sung, and why the Minister for Culture had to speak on and on, flanked by a row of academics who all looked so haggard and long-jowled and worn-out from not being allowed to take their language for granted for one single second.

Nervously, I look around. But my fellow students only chew and chew and don't stop chewing. Tactfully, they avert their eyes. It seems to me that no one wants to be the first to swallow or have to acknowledge Blaga and her old, boring nationalistic arguments. I suppose, we all know – you'd have to be an idiot not to – where that leads.

But who can believe it? Apparently, someone tells me under the cover of their napkin, Blaga is a highly-regarded Balkans historian at a prominent university in Sofia. A professor, even. Still, you have to ask the question: What the hell is she even doing here at this 44th International Seminar on Macedonian Language, Literature and Culture if she doesn't even believe it exists? For a possible answer, I study Blaga's face, her figure.

Quietly, now, she is stabbing at her sausages and tearing her bread. She's not looking up but down at her plate, so I have time to dissect. And it's not her features that impress upon me. It's… it's that there's something dishevelled, unselfconscious – or unconscious – about her appearance, as if she's just gotten out of bed. Her clothes are crumpled. Her short, black, wiry hair stands up, ungroomed, every which way. And at the back of her head – I see this as she turns it – there is a very large, flat spot of hair, presumably from where

she's slept. Which everyone else can clearly see but of which she must be unaware. For a moment, I feel a strange sympathy stretch out from me to Blaga. But then it's gone.

All of a sudden, I feel so tired, so exhausted that I have to excuse myself from the table. 'Jet lag,' I say and go back to my room. I take the stairs to the third floor. (The elevator's been broken since I arrived.) Then I lie on my back on my bed and hold my head. I've got problems of my own, Blaga, I think. Like how, since stepping off the plane, it's as if I've been asked to carry an invisible, leaden weight through a dry desert heat and told I'm not allowed to put it down. Why did I even tell them I was coming? The telephone in the room keeps ringing and I don't want to answer.

It's my father's relatives. They're leaving message after message with reception saying that they want to drive over from the east to see me. What would I even say? They'll want to know why my father and I don't speak. And I don't feel like telling them. I don't even want to think about it, that ancient story, but I do.

With my eyes closed, I caress, I finesse the finer details. I ride the old pathways, which are not just lines in the sand but dents in concrete. Then I feel angry and helpless all over again and I can't sleep. So, I take a little pill – I don't often, I don't like to – and then I do – sleep – but I don't dream. I disappear. It's like being on a real holiday until the morning, when I wake, dull and foggy-headed. I've forgotten all about Blaga, but not for long.

Outside my bedroom door, she is everywhere, loud,

announcing herself and her opinions, her 'facts'. By mid-morning, she is shouting over our lecturer in the Macedonian linguistic history series saying something to the effect that the Macedonian language's origins only go as far back as the end of World War II – when a band of Communists with a Serbian typewriter cooked it up one sunny afternoon.

Then, the next day, when we are all out on an excursion to see the medieval King Samuil's crumbling ruin of a fort, Blaga, again, clearly disagrees with our organised tour-guide's version of former events. She puts on her owl-shaped sunglasses and lights up a cigarette. Everyone else faces forward but she turns her back and blows smoke ring after smoke ring to communicate her dissent, her complete contempt. She shows, too, to anyone who wants to see it, that infuriating, blind, flat spot of wiry, black hair at the back of her head. It's still there. And I watch, incredulous, as each O forms, floats and disappears.

In the evenings, after dinner, it's the same story. In the main hall, every night at 7 pm, a Macedonian folk dancing specialist comes to instruct us. Tonight he is teaching us all a traditional circle dance called *The Little Bird*. But Blaga does not join our group. Outside the glass doors, she only peers in on us while, with linked hands, arms around shoulders, we hop and bop. We leap and jump, spinning faster as the crazy music speeds up. And as it does – dizzy, sweaty, mid-leap, mid-hop – I catch flashes of Blaga and her long, mournful face on the other side of the glass. I don't know why, but I'm moved, I'm drawn. I leave the circle knowing that the gap

that's left will immediately be filled. And it is. And I go out into the night to meet Blaga, to ask her for a cigarette. She gives one to me, no problem, and then, while we smoke, I ask dumbly if she is married and has kids. I regret it, instantly – the roundabout articulation of my confused attraction. But Blaga doesn't seem to register the question, or my meaning.

She only points with her chin in the direction of the dancers and says, not to me or anyone else in particular, maybe just to herself, 'That's really a Bulgarian dance, you know.'

I sigh and say goodbye and go back, not to dance, but to my room. I climb the stairs. (The lift's still not fixed). I get into my bed and, again, I hold my head. The cigarette hasn't helped the headache that's been threatening all day. But I'm beyond tired. I can't sleep. The thoughts, the memories and the meaning and power I give them, they just won't stop. When I'm alone, they go around and around in my brain. So, I take two pills instead of one this time. And then I do sleep, but I don't dream, and I wake foggier, duller, to a day I believe will be the same as the one before and the one before that.

It is not. Unusually, I have slept through my alarm, the routine baklava breakfast and my early morning grammar tutorial. We were doing definite past tense today, too. And now I'm running late. I throw on some clothes. I don't wash my face. I don't brush my hair either, but I do think as I run down the stairs that as a consequence I, too, like Blaga, probably have a flat spot on the back of my head. From where I have slept, of which I am unaware. I don't care.

Just in time, I make it to the car park where a bus is waiting to take us on an excursion to see a sixteenth-century Orthodox church. That part is not surprising. It's ordinary, predictable. Just like the presiding priest who, when we get there, comes out to greet us. He guides us all around the church grounds, pointing out this and that. But when he stops by two solitary gravestones, that's where things start to get odd, interesting.

Blaga, I notice, does not argue with or contest anything the priest says. She definitely doesn't show him her back or light up a single cigarette to display her dissent or contempt. Neither does she position herself so that she stands alone outside the circle, behind a glass door, on an edge, a periphery or any other kind of borderland. Instead, she sets herself right at the centre of things.

Perplexed, and still a little foggy-headed, I cock my head and watch as a thick wall of students forms around her, the priest and the two graves. She doesn't even seem uncomfortable with it – being an International Macedonian Summer School nucleus. In fact, she smiles and nods and talks calmly, congenially with the black-clad, long-bearded clergyman. And he talks equally calmly and congenially back.

The problem is I can't hear. Soon enough, however, the explanation, the whisper that's going around, reaches my ear. Apparently those graves belong to Blaga's grandfather and great-grandfather who were – are – two very important Macedonian poets. Canon, even. Now, I am sure that Blaga

would have something to say about that, just not here, not with the priest. But me, I'm not interested in any defining or claiming or arguing about what belongs to who and how and why. What I want to know, what I push my way through to the front of the crowd to ask is, 'Hey, Blaga. Do you write, too?' I'm not sure why I want to find some commonality between us, but I desperately do. Blaga crosses her arms over her chest as if, vulnerable, she senses imminent attack.

She answers, 'I write only fact.'

'I know, I know, Blaga,' I say. 'But, I mean, do you also write poetry? Like your grandfathers who came before you? Like them.'

'No,' Blaga comes back, defiant, resolute. 'I write history. I write only truth.'

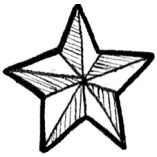
A voice groans in my head. Didn't anyone ever tell her? I mean, how is it that she came to be a professor? Doesn't she know that history, national history, any history, is a fiction? A story, Blaga, that we tell ourselves to suit our purposes. That we change as soon as those purposes change. That's what I feel like saying. But I don't. What good would talk do? I walk away.

And then we're all back on the bus. On the way home, we squeeze in another sixteenth-century Orthodox church before we stop to eat a hotel-staff-packed lunch of cheese and thickly sliced salami (which I pick off) on bread.

And then, just like that, it's night and I'm in bed holding my head. I'm not even considering taking one, two or three pills now. Those won't help. I'm not thinking, either,

about the past – my past – or the problems I believe it has caused me. I'm only talking to Blaga – Blaga, Blaga, Blaga – even though she's not listening. She can't hear.

Blaga, I'm saying, wake up! Why can't you see? It's not that your stories and their details aren't true. So, maybe the Macedonian language project was a political one. So, maybe King Samuil was a Bulgarian golden era king that ruled on current-day Macedonian soil. And *The Little Bird* is a dance that was once yours but now you share it so generously. So what? What are you going to do? What will you do with your stories, Blaga? Do you want to rot with them? Or will you – can you – try to grow something out of them that gives pleasure, is beautiful? Tell me, Blaga, what will you do? What will you say next? What will you give up? What will you give? Come on, Blaga. Try, try your best.



The Sock Seller's Socks, The Plum Picker's Plums

The sock seller is making me laugh as I stroll and he struts through Skopje city park. The sock seller in his crocodile shoes, always a pointed toe's length in front, telling me his wise-fool, guest-worker stories from Germany – about the lies he had to tell to get the jobs.

'I told them: Yes, of course. My family and I are master cow washers from generations. We shampoo and condition cows morning and night. Sheep. Goats. Roosters. Hens. I can shampoo anything you want. Believe me!'

Naturally, when we come to it, we sit ourselves on a bench, by a lake, in the park and lick the ice-creams the sock seller has insisted he buy for me, for him, for us. Then, when the ice-creams are licked, had and done, the sock seller, in a relaxed way, lifts one foot onto one thigh so that his pants pull

up and expose one sock.

It is thin and patched and worn as you would expect. Just as the car fixer's car is always in the garage; and the plumber's tap always has a drip; and the dog catcher's dog is too-often lost; and the back cracker's back always has a crick. And the story collector can never think of what to say next in a conversation. As it is with me now. I just listen, encourage and nod.

In this lull, predictably, the sock seller is faking some kind of yawn. He is stretching his arms up behind his head, then out to the sides, then onto the back of the bench and around my shoulders. Not touching, but almost.

Now, I know what he's doing. But does he know what I'm doing? Even more importantly, do I know? Do I know what I will be expected to do in return? I do. And I won't. But does he know that I won't? I don't think he does. He will go on and on until he is sure. It's like a drug. I just want his stories. I want them now.

'After I was a cow washer, I went to Berlin and became a lamb cutter and a beef shaver at a döner kebab's.'

He tells me what I would like to hear: about the kilos of meat he dropped and had to kick with the point of his crocodile shoe under the stainless steel as he learned his trade, while his boss, who thought he'd employed a professional, was looking the other way.

And then the conversation veers.

The sock seller, leaning in close, would like me to know about the döner kebab shop owner's wife and how she

fell in love with him at first sight. With a wink, he tells me about the passionate affair they had behind the döner kebab shop owner's back. But then the döner kebab shop owner found out and the sock seller had to flee. He went to Münst where he became a master hedge trimmer and bush pruner for lonely, old, rich women and found out all about why they keep their little dogs.

'I can show you. Believe me! If we go to the hotel across the road.'

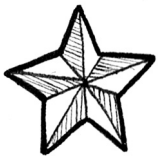
But just then, from behind us, there is a loud rustling and a sudden crack of wood.

The sock seller says, 'Don't worry about that. That's just the plum pickers. Now where were we? Where was I up to?'

But I have to turn to look.

And I see them – the women, ten or more in their apron dresses, their heads wrapped in colourful scarves. They are everywhere, dotted. Together, but working alone. Not even a metre away, there is one such one, a fierce look of determination on her face. Her skirt hitched up, she is scaling a small tree. She is doing it. With one hand she is holding on to one branch, while with the other she is straining, stretching, reaching, sweating to get the thing she wants. She doesn't even appear to notice the sock seller or me.

This is how it is. A plum picker only has eyes for plums.



Walnuts, Almonds, Nuts

We – Zlatko and I – are stepping out of the bar and onto the cobbled street. We leave behind us Gligor, Gligor's sudden temper and the chair he has just thrown against a wall and broken to pieces. All the way back to Zlatko's flat, we walk without talking about this or anything else. We dodge the midsummer late night crowds, Ohrid lakeside tourists and locals alike. We pass by the post office, the old telephone exchange, the new McDonalds, a supermarket and the international bus stand situated across the road from Zlatko's graffitied block. We enter and climb the bare concrete stairs, five floors of them, until we are standing outside Zlatko's wooden door.

Without a key, he opens it. It's not locked – it's never locked – for philosophical reasons, as he's already explained. We take off our shoes before we cross the threshold. We leave them outside, as is his ritual, and then Zlatko hands me a pair

of the thick, woollen, crocheted house socks that he keeps in a stack for visitors on the other side of the frame. We wear the socks so that the almonds and walnuts that he has spread thickly on the floor don't hurt our feet, mine or his. Those nuts can be dangerous, especially the ones that have been husked. I put on my nut-protection socks and walk down the hall into the living room, in the dark. Zlatko doesn't like electricity.

Instead, he lights some candles and begins to boil some water on a portable gas ring – which also gives off a bit of extra light. He's making a pot of *Na Majchina Dushica*, A Mother's Little Soul's Mountain Tea, for me. It's meant to be calming. And I'm trying to relax, but I'm finding it difficult after Gligor's violent outburst.

Still, I sweep aside some of the nuts and sit on the floor next to the fridge which, in the last days, I have come to know is not really a fridge but a cupboard for clothes. It stands across from the TV, which is just a box for wires. The electric kettle – a vase for plastic flowers. In the same way, all of Zlatko's household appliances have been disentangled from their regular meanings and functions. There is only one piece of traditional-seeming furniture. A bookcase which displays books, seminal works such as: the *Bible*, the *Koran*, *American Psycho*, *Tito: Life and Times*, *Capital*, The Brothers Grimm. But the books' insides have been gutted. Perfect rectangles have been cut out of their centres to fit, snugly, Zlatko's cigarette packets.

What else is there to do? I pull down one of the

nutcrackers that hangs on a hook from the ceiling, attached to a piece of long, stretchy cord. And I think back to the time I asked Zlatko what they were about, for – the nuts, the nutcrackers – but he told me that I should make my own mind up, like with art.

Anyway, I haven't yet.

Using the plier-ends, I grasp a tough, old walnut. I squeeze and crack it open, picking bones and flesh apart. I put the meat in my mouth, chew. But it isn't a good one. It's rotten. I swallow, anyway, grimacing as Zlatko arrives in perfect time to wash the bad taste down with the pot of tea he's brought.

He sits beside me, opens a little tin, and with the things inside begins to prepare a joint for himself – his herbal remedy. I sip my tea, hug my knees and rock gently, watching, until the paper's licked, he's lit the match and begun to draw deeply.

Then I say, 'Well, that was weird.'

It's the first time either of us has spoken since we left the bar and Gligor the smasher of chairs.

'What was it all about, do you think?' I ask.

Zlatko concentrates on inhaling and exhaling. Then he says, 'All that was for you. Gligor thought he would be with you tonight.'

'But where would he get that idea? We only met this afternoon.'

Zlatko, with a calm face, free from any sudden furrows, tells me, 'In Macedonia, we didn't have a war when Yugoslavia broke apart, not like Croatia and Serbia and

Bosnia. The young people feel they didn't get a chance to vent their anger, their tensions. But this country was affected as well. The young people have no future. There are no jobs. No security. The young people are suffering mentally. Gligor is suffering mentally. He takes pills.'

I nod taking in this information, Zlatko's argument: that a war would help someone, would help Gligor who takes pills and breaks things when he doesn't get girls, feel better in the short and long term. I consider it. Then I begin to feel panicky.

I say, 'Okay. Well, I'm a bit freaked out, actually. Do you think Gligor will come tonight? He knows I'm here. Do you think he'll come?'

Zlatko says, 'No. He won't come.'

I say, 'Are you sure?'

Zlatko says he is sure.

My eyes dart around.

'Still,' I say, 'would you mind, would it be okay, if we locked the door to your flat? I know it's against your philosophy. But just in case.'

Zlatko says that we could, if it will make me feel safer.

'It would, it would,' I say.

Soon, when he's stubbed out the butt of his joint, Zlatko gets up and unscrews the mouthpiece of a non-functioning telephone and digs out a key – calmly, too calmly, I think. With it he goes down the hall to lock the door. And as I observe him do this, as he slides the inside chain across its slot as a final measure, I begin to wonder if Zlatko really is

the kind, wise, laid-back yet slightly eccentric person I have judged him to be. What if I'm wrong? What if in trying to protect myself from what I imagine lies outside, I have now willingly locked myself in with the real monster?

Maybe the whole scene in the bar was planned, choreographed so that Zlatko could get me here alone: a young female traveller who knows no one. Probably, Gligor is in on it as well. Soon, he will come with his own key, his own way to open the sliding lock – with a push and shove. He'll bring with him three other young, angry men with no futures and no jobs and they'll rape me. They'll laugh as they do it. I torture myself. *You're an idiot. You don't even know this guy properly*. *No one knows you're here*.

I try to get a grip. I tell myself: *Breathe, breathe*. *Look around*. *What's really happening*? *What's reality right now*? I watch Zlatko for clues to this reality, but he's just plodding around in his woollen nut-protection booties – they're green and pink with stripes. He's getting ready for sleep, he's brushing his teeth. He's doing normal things like folding up his dirty clothes and putting them in the vegetable crisper at the bottom of the fridge, picking up my empty tea cup and putting it in the sink. He wants to show me the room where I can comfortably rest. He's offering me his hand.

'It's okay. I can do it,' I say.

I lift myself off the floor with my own hands. I wipe the nut shells and husks from the back of my dress and follow Zlatko down the hallway to see what he wants to show me. A few steps and we're there. Zlatko's standing in front of a door

which I have never been inside of, never really noticed before.

'It's the guest's room,' Zlatko says, pausing, explaining. The room he rents out to tourists in summer so he can pay his heating bill in winter – when he likes electricity. But tonight, tonight, it is free for me. I don't have to pay. Because I am a friend. 'You are a friend now,' he says.

I want to believe him, but I don't.

My eyes are two slits as he opens the door and turns on the light switch. Amazingly, the light works. I peer in, afraid of what I might see.

Yawning, Zlatko only starts introducing me around.

'This is the bed,' he says.

But it's just an ordinary object, a thing to lie in, as beds usually are.

'Here is the window.'

It's hidden, closed behind some curtains, but I could open it if I wanted to.

'You have a blanket.'

It's one of those hairy, red rug-like things they have in cooler mountain climates, nothing more.

'Clean sheets.'

These are made of linen, as anyone might expect, and tucked in extra-tightly around the mattress.

Everything is what it is, what it appears to be.
But Zlatko doesn't mention the floor which is, strangely, completely nut-free. There are no nuts and no nut-crackers hang from hooks from the ceiling.

'Oh. I almost forgot,' Zlatko says, gesturing towards

an ordinary-looking small table sitting by the bed, 'This is the bedside table.'

And then he goes, closing the door behind him.

On the table, I notice there is a book. I pick it up and turn it over. I open it to see that it, too, simply is what it is – not a home for a packet of cigarettes but for words arranged in sentences. I recognise the book's blue, watercoloury cover. It is a memoir by a French woman who recounts, vividly, her memories of the first three weeks of her life. Zlatko read pieces of it to me in the park where I met him a week or so ago.

And I remember watching his face, beautiful under the daytime trees, expressive as he translated from French to Macedonian to English, his lips moving like an underwater acrobat falling without taking a breath, between grammars and syntaxes, genders and cultures to produce a meaning I could understand. I was moved. It's not something I know how to do so well – this almost effortless-seeming linguistic shapeshifting.

Now, in the guest's room, I flick. I stare dumbly at the pages. I can't make sense of it. I close the book, turn off the light. I lie down on the bed, feeling the hairy, red rug-blanket beneath my back. I keep all of my clothes on, removing just the woollen socks. I push them off with one foot, then the other and kick them to the floor. I try to sleep but, instead, I lie with my eyes wide open, feeling the release of tension in my body, my earlier fears diminishing.

I think of the night that is passing and about my life

and how it's come to this.

I think of Zlatko and how he seems to have made his life, in part at least, from the walnuts, almonds, the nuts he has scattered on his floor.

I think about Gligor in the bar, right before he demolished the chair. How his mouth opened and closed like a wooden puppet's, up and down, but I couldn't make out what he was saying because of the blaring Euro-techno.

I think about Macedonia as a whole and the civil war that was averted. The war that Zlatko thinks Gligor needs and wants. I wonder, really, if he does.

I try to remember the first three weeks of my life, but I have to admit I can't.

Outside the closed window, there's a lot of howling and hooting and hollering going on. I listen to the cries and imagine all the mistakes people might be making, the things people might regret in the morning – or not. And I wonder how it is that I got to be so sober, so careful, so afraid. I decide to get up. I pull back the curtains and open the window to let in some air. Then I leave my room and creep down the nutty hall – barefoot, unprotected – to where Zlatko is resting under a sheet, a lump on the floor on some foam.

I stand there and ask in a half-whisper, 'Zlatko, are you awake?'

'No,' he says, joking. 'What is it?'

I say, 'Sleep won't visit me.' The way he might, poetically.

Zlatko lifts his head.

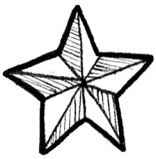
He says, 'Do you want me to come?'

I say, 'Will you come?'

He repeats: 'Do you want me to come?'

'Yes,' I say.

Then we walk back down the nutty hall to the room for guests and lie on the bed on the red-rug blanket, next to each other, on our sides. We look, for what feels like a very long time, soulfully, seriously, into each others' eyes. Then we drift into sleep.



From What I've Just Read, It Sounds Like Every Man In Macedonia Must've Hit On You

Don't get me started about the Macedonian Poetry Festival.

Put it this way. If it's a sex fest that you want, and you look like you might be a woman, then go to the Macedonian Poetry Festival. Put it in your calendars. It's in August every year.

Then again, if it's actually poetry that you want, also go to the Macedonian Poetry Festival, which, as I discovered, and to my surprise, is not just a local affair but an event international in scope and focus. It's been attended by such laureates as Pablo, Ted, Allen, Seamus, W. H., and others from

other places that in the English-speaking world we may not be so familiar with. Like Eugenio Montale, Joseph Brodsky, both Nobel Prize winners. And Leopold Sédar Senghor who, as well as being a poet, was the President of Senegal. Like Václav Havel from the Czech Republic. Poetry and politics, politics and poetry. Remember him?

Would you believe it? Even our own Thomas Shapcott from Ipswich was guest-of-honour in 1989 and upon his head was placed the Golden Wreath.

There have also been, in the entire fifty years of the festival's existence, two women, one white and one black – a Desanka Maksimović of Serbia and a Nancy Morejón of Cuba – who also had golden wreaths placed upon their heads.

Imagine that.

So, now here I am on the first morning of the first day of the Festival's Golden Jubilee. I'm downstairs in the Hotel Drim in one of the official gallery spaces where there is a photographic exhibition, a memorial of sorts to mark the first half-century. I'm doing the rounds, pacing the perimeter, perusing the pictures hanging on the walls in their frames: your Nerudas, your Heaneys, your Lundkvists, your Amichais. All interesting. But it's the image of Ginsberg blown-up in front of me, in dark-room-developed black-and-white, that holds my attention.

No chiselled bust shot or self-conscious solitary study. Instead, in it, Ginsberg is strolling the Struga streets with another man, a poet, a Macedonian poet whose name escapes

me the moment I read it on the paper plaque. But I do take in what he's wearing.

The man is wearing a light-coloured safari suit and a pair of delicate spectacles. There is something fine, too, about his features, his bones, his throat, in comparison to the wiry-bearded, goggle-eyed Ginsberg. They are both smiling – one the smile of someone who has caught, the other the smile of someone who has been captured. They share the same dreamy expression on their faces, the same glazed-eye gazes. And because of this, it seems to me as if they have known between them some kind of intimate pleasure, poetic or unpoetic or both. This pleasure, at that time, in that place, in Macedonia in 1986, when homosexuality had another ten years to be decriminalised, would have been unspeakable.

Of course, I'm only speculating. But if they did share the kinds of pleasures I am imagining, I do not begrudge them. On the contrary.

Something for everyone at the Macedonian Poetry Festival.

No, I do not begrudge them. Just as I do not begrudge the present-day patriarchs, or their pleasures, on the first night of the first day, at the fiftieth Macedonian Poetry Festival's official opening ceremony.

Out they come, one by one.

They teeter, they totter, they dodder assisted by walking frames, sticks and the beautiful, young women who accompany them, arm in arm, in old-fashioned ways onto the main stage. There, into the microphones that patiently await

them, they gasp – or at least they seem to – their poems' and their own last breaths. It does seem that way. As if hunched in their now too loose, crumpled suits they tire too easily. As if their bodies can no longer withstand or contain the force of their words or passions.

So, no. I do not begrudge the patriarchs anything.

They are my dear dears.

And, now, I am here.

In the audience, I mean.

With the thousands and thousands – the thousands! – I sit on the grass. Others sit on chairs, fold-out, cafe, or the odd municipal bench. Some stand. We all flank the banks of the River Drim. We face the stage which is actually, most days, a bridge. And we listen so attentively to the patriarchs and their poems. They transmit and we receive. It's an eerie-feelinged atmosphere.

So quiet you could hear a pin drop – if pins were actually being dropped, which, of course, they aren't. Instead, what you hear in their place, along with the patriarch's seeming last gasps, is the soft beat of the wind; a breeze on the sails of the toy-like ships, boats that bare-chested boys make twist and turn on the water's surface as part of the festival's spectacle, as part of the celebration.

And then when the patriarch's poems are done, when each poem is done, the people, the thousands and thousands of us roar with applause, and cheers, and bravos like I have never seen people roar for poetry before. Like, really, it is satisfying some great human hunger, a deep pit of desire.

And then again the quiet.

And then the roar of applause.

Again, again.

And if that's not enough, then do you know? I don't. The nice middle-aged couple, who have invited me to share their picnic blanket and roasted pumpkin seeds with them, tell me that this night, and the next, and the next, the Poetry Festival is being televised live and uncut on Macedonian National TV. To the whole of the rest of the country. To the thousands and thousands of other people who cannot be here but wish they could. To those who sit, the couple promise, glued in front of their screens. For poetry?

But Ginsberg. Back to that beatnik.

There's a story that comes to mind when I think of Macedonia and poetry and him.

I can't remember if it was an old friend, also a poet, who told it to me when he came back from New York where he'd been – and good for him – chasing his dreams. There, he'd gotten involved in the famous, fledgling-welcoming Nuyorican Poets Cafe and had sort of gotten to know Ginsberg, at least rubbed shoulders with him regularly. Enough to understand that it was a habit, his custom to cruise the Nuyorican venue for fresh, young male meat, as my friend put it, and to go home with a new piece of it every time.

Now, I'm not judging. Again, I'm not begrudging. As long as it's all adult and consensual. I'm just saying. Poetry. Gatherings. Festivals.

But the story I was remembering.

Maybe it was this same friend, the one who went to New York, who told it to me. Or maybe I read it somewhere in a book or magazine. In any case – hearsay, gossip – it's become a part of my own personal Ginsberg lore and legend. An example of his humanity, along with his pleasure-seeking, which is also an example of his humanity, I believe.

The story goes like this.

Ginsberg – he wasn't always in New York, obviously. Sometimes he used to teach – poetry – in Boulder, Colorado at the *Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics* which he co-founded, incidentally. And what a crazy name. I mean – disembodied? Who wants a disembodied poetics? Not me. And I'd guess not him. Well, what do I know? I don't know everything.

Anyway, while Ginsberg was teaching – poetry – he used to get quite involved with his students. He'd socialise with them. He'd have them around to his house for these big, generous, impromptu family-affair type dinners. You know the kind. With a big pot of stew and a ladle laid out on the table, loaves of day-old bakery bread, mismatching crockery, cutlery, glasses and lots of bottles of cheap red wine. Lots of talking and shouting and laughing, too.

One night, sometime between the start and the middle of one of these dinners, there was a knock at the door. Ginsberg – Allen – got up to answer it, thinking it was just another guest who was late. It was. It was a young lone Jehovah's Witness that Allen saw standing on the doorstep.

All crew-cut, clean-shaven and neat-suited, he was carrying a copy of the Bible, the good news.

Well, Ginsberg – Allen – what else could he do? In the fabulous frame of mind and mood he was in, he opened the door wide, wider still. He wrapped a warm, welcoming arm around the shoulders of the Witness and whisked him down the hall, telling him that he must come, come, join them, join us, eat, eat your fill.

And the Jehovah's Witness – what else could he do? Probably a little stunned that he had not been shunned as he usually was, he came, came, joined, ate, communed and broke bread with Ginsberg and the young poets-in-training. He was full. He had become so. He could not eat one morsel more, he said. At which point, Ginsberg – Allen – with perfect timing and in all sincerity, turned to the boy and said, 'Now, what is it that you have come to tell me?'

And the boy's mouth hung open, slack at its hinge.

He was speechless, or he'd forgotten the answer to the question.

He also had a bit of spinach caught between his two perfectly straight, white front teeth.

There, right there, Ginsberg should have been made an honorary Macedonian. Given the Macedonian people's love not just of poetry, but of hospitality, of being hospitable to anyone who should come a-knocking. Be it a neighbour, a relative, a friend, a travelling cabbage-grater salesman – or sales*woman* – children folk song singers on saints' days and other special holidays. Even gypsies. Well, maybe not them.

But definitely the Jehovah's Witnesses. These door-knockers, in Macedonia, are especially well-loved. New in the region, having just expanded their mission, the Witnesses are enjoying a surprisingly friendly market.

This is an actual, true phenomenon.

So, what is it that I have come to tell you? What is it that I have come, to your door, conjuring so much smoke and so many mirrors, to say?

Firstly, it's this.

Maybe no man in Macedonia ever hit on me at all. I may have simply been projecting my own repressed, internalised sleaziness – needs – desires – out onto the screen of the world, onto Ginsberg, onto poets everywhere, onto the anniversary of the fiftieth Macedonian Poetry Festival. It's possible.

Then again, I am an extremely beautiful and charming woman whose mere physical form must, no doubt, excite erotic promise. And I was, I am travelling alone – in a country where women normally don't. Did I mention that?

Secondly – and this is not what I have come to say, but a consequence of what I have said – I want to offer my apologies to the Macedonian Poetry Festival for possibly defaming its name. It was not my intention. But I accept, I concede that I may never, despite the country's love of guests, be welcomed back. Let alone be the third woman to have a Golden Wreath placed on my very embodied head.

Anyway, I've got enough hats at home already.

And there is one last thing.

On the first night of the first day, at the official close of the official opening of the fiftieth Macedonian Poetry Festival, there is a surprise for me, for us. After the patriarch-poets have finished their fine sets, and the bare-chested boys have laid their sails to rest, and the roar of the audience's applause has died down to an almost-silence, there is one final thing I want to show you.

Above us, above the crowd's heads, the thousands and thousands of us heading home or to our hotels or on to the late-night open mic bars, there is a sudden explosion. We don't know of what. For a moment, I think, we all think in collective unison, that it must be a bomb – bombs. Stunted Second World War bombs that have been taken from an ancient military storage facility by an individual, or terrorist group, and set off. But it's not. It's just fireworks. Cheap ones. I don't want to say from where. But they boom and crack so low. They send flaming shrapnel-type objects from sky to earth and threaten to set bushes and ladies' bouffants and small trees alight.

We run. We shield our heads with newspapers, handbags and festival programmes, with bare hands. The thousands and thousands of us, stirred, affected, confused, we run. But from or to what? In this little scene and also in a broader sense – from and to what do we run? Which kind of folly? What kind of danger, desire or threat? Here at the fiftieth Macedonian Poetry Festival, is it really just sex that we all think we want?

Well, I'll speak for myself.

No.

It's union that I aspire to, that I need. Spacious union – with appropriate boundaries, of course – with all things. Embodied. Disembodied. Both. Isn't that what poetry's for? Am I right or am I wrong?

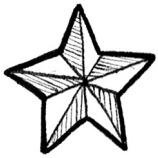
Still, if every man in Macedonia didn't hit on me, I'd probably feel something was amiss. I'd miss the indignation I feel. I'd think: I've lost my mojo.

But in this moment, under the fireworks-pretending-to-be-bombs, amidst the chaos of criss-crossing crowds running away and towards, all that's not so clear.

We run. I run.

But if I stopped and looked up, if we all looked up, we'd see – I want you to see – the night sky. It's full of colour. Red, pink, blue, green. Yellow in bursts and streams, fountains. Comet-type things with tails appear only to disappear. Faulty, imperfect; shrapnel flaming, falling. So much wild colour. And it's way too brief.

Now, are there any more questions? Comments?



The Menkas

Not that long ago, in Macedonia, there was a man. He lived in a small town on a cobbled street in a wooden house. In it, he had a wife and a bear. He also had a job – not in the house, but at the metal smelter in the town's centre. It was this or nothing else. So, it was unfortunate, then, that the products and byproducts from the metal smelter contaminated and poisoned the town's river, air and earth.

But that is a whole other story.

The point is that the man had the wife, and he had the bear. And both of their names were Menka.

The first, his wife, had always been a Menka, ever since the man had known her. She was his valentine-faced childhood sweetheart. They had just been married.

The bear, on the other hand, still a cub, had been nameless, as far as the man knew, when he'd first found it in the forest in the surrounding mountains not long after the

honeymoon. Then, it had seemed abandoned, so he'd picked it up and taken it home and called it Menka, too, because it was a girl. And because, even though he could sometimes be serious, he very much liked a joke. And this was a very good joke, he thought. To have two Menkas – one for a wife, and one for a bear. A great, great joke.

His friends thought so, too. Hilarious! The friends who also worked at the metal smelter. The same ones who every Friday night went over to the man's wooden house to play cards, and bluff and bet, and lose and win, and laugh and shout and swear. This they did each time with high, high spirits. And so, of course, eventually, inevitably, at some point in the evening they'd all get hungry and thirsty. Then the man would call out, 'Oh, Menka! Oh, Menka! Bring us some pretzels and peanuts and beer.'

And Menka would come – one or the other. But which? The man could never be sure. Sometimes it was Menka the wife who'd push through the door wearing a thin, worn smile across her no longer valentine face. At other times it was Menka the bear, still a cub but growing, who'd lumber in on her hind legs carrying the pretzels and the peanuts and the beer on the silver tray that had been a wedding gift.

When that happened the man's friends would laugh and laugh. They'd slap each other on the back, fold in half at their middles, wipe the tears from their eyes and say, 'Oh, brother, what a good joke. A great joke. Really, it's the very, very best.'

Then, eventually, inevitably, when it was late and

the games were over the friends would have to leave. They'd go back home to their wives – if they had one – or to their mothers who still washed their socks and boiled their eggs. But none went home to a bear.

And so, life carried on as it always did in its seemingly small, ordinary way. Weeks, months, years went by and Menka the wife's marriage to the man matured in its way. As could be expected, Menka the bear cub grew, too, as bears will tend to do. The men went to work at the metal smelter. They didn't like it, but what else could they do?

It, the metal smelter and its products and byproducts, unfortunately, continued to poison and pollute the town's river, air and earth. A chemical spill here, a chemical spill there, no one seemed to notice or care. Again, that is a whole other story.

The point is that Friday night card nights, they always rolled around. And each time they did, it could be guaranteed, it could be relied upon one hundred percent, that at some point in the evening the man and his friends would get hungry and thirsty. Then the man – he always did – would call out, 'Oh, Menka! Oh, Menka! Bring us some pretzels and peanuts and beer.'

And Menka would come. But which? Which one? That joke never grew thin.

If it was Menka the bear who came lumbering in, the men, without fail, without fail, would slap each other on their backs. Their sides would split open. Their guts would hang out and stain the seat of their pants. Oh, how they'd laugh and

laugh. But why exactly it was they did laugh not the man nor his friends could've said, if they'd been asked. But nobody did ask. So they didn't have to say.

All the friends had to do, when it was late, once the games were over, was go home to their wives or their mothers, but none to a bear. And the man, all he had to do, was climb the creaky stairs to the bed where Menka the wife lay. Once there, then all he had to do was pull off his pants and shirt down to his boxers and socks and lean over and whisper into his wife's ear, 'Oh, Menka. Oh, Menka. Are you awake?' hoping to get some loving. And sometimes he would and sometimes – increasingly – he wouldn't.

Like this, life went on seemingly ordinarily, until one cold winter's night. It was a Friday. Card night as usual. Everything the same. The bluffs, the bets. The losses, the wins. The laughs, the hunger, the thirst. It was late. It had become so. The games were done. The man's friends had just left. And as usual, the man, a little drunk, but not too much, was beginning his ascent of the creaky stairs to where he supposed Menka the wife – why wouldn't she? she always had – would be lying in their bed.

He climbed and climbed, wobbling as he went. Even so, still he was confident. He took it for granted, the way things would work out. But when he reached the door to the room that they shared, he opened it to find, to his shock, his surprise, that no Menka did lie in the place she should have – though the covers on her side had been pulled down – and the lamp had been left on. It shone, and the window had been

opened wide. Why? He did not know.

'Menka?' the man asked, quietly, almost to himself as he looked towards the window to see that outside it, snow, the first of the season, fell. Light and white it made no sound. Falling. Snow. Outside the open window.

But the man did not bother to close it, that window. The cold, he didn't seem to feel it. Instead, by the light of the lamp, he pulled off his shirt and pants down to his boxers and socks. And then he pulled down the covers and got into his side of the bed, thinking that Menka, his wife, would be along any moment. But she wasn't.

And so, after some time had passed – too much of it as far as he was concerned – the man called out, 'Oh, Menka! Oh, Menka! Where are you? Come keep me warm!'

Then, quickly, he turned off the lamp. He'd never done that before. And he waited. And he wondered – but which one? – which Menka would come? Of the answer he could not be sure.

In anticipation, his heart beat a little faster in his chest. Excitement made his blood pump triple-time through his veins. Giddy with desire, he congratulated himself. Now this, this, having two Menkas, one for a wife and one for a bear, was not just a good, great joke that he could not have explained even if he'd wanted to. It was a thrill, a chance, a risk. Like bluffs and bets, or losses and wins. Like playing cards on Friday nights, but much, much better. In the dark, he waited as, outside the open window, snow, the first of the season, fell.

And soon, soon Menka – but which one? which one? – did come. She was coming. The man could hear her footsteps climbing up the creaky stairs. And then there was the bedroom door clicking open and closed. The man heard that, too. Then there was the weight of her, of Menka – but which one? which one? – on the bed as she sat and then lay down.

The man's heart beat faster still.

What a thrill, what a thrill.

And he reached out to the Menka, to whichever one she was. In the dark, he drew that Menka close. He caressed her skin – or was it fur? But how soft it was. He kissed her lips, her open mouth. But what sharp teeth she had that bit at him. Ouch. And how warm her body that received him. And how low the growl in his ear. And how sharp the nails that clawed down his back. And how strong the thighs that gripped him tight, tighter.

'Oh! Menka! Oh! Menka!' the man cried out.

And then it was all over.

The man lay flat on his back. He gasped for air. He took great gulps of it, saying over and over again the same, 'Oh, Menka. Oh, Menka. That was amazing, that was amazing!'

But Menka – still, which one? – said nothing.

'Menka?' said the man.

What had he done?

'Menka, my wife,' he begged, 'speak to me.'

But Menka would not.

And so, even though he would rather have rolled over and slept and woken to another ordinary day, something in him – curiosity? courage? shame? – made him reach over and turn on the light of the lamp to look the truth square in the face. He was prepared.

But there beside him on the bed, under the cover and on the sheet, was only Menka his wife, his childhood sweetheart with her once again valentine face. Drowsily, she smiled at him. She stretched her arms above her head. She yawned long and loud. Ah! That was the sound she made. But, still, she did not speak.

It didn't matter. The man, overwhelmed with relief, kissed her nose – 'Oh, Menka!' – he kissed her eyes – 'Oh, Menka!' – he kissed her cheeks. He wept and said, 'I'm so happy to see you. You see, I, I, I thought… I, I, I hoped… I, I, I feared…'

Menka the wife, the woman, only put a finger to her husband's lips to shush him, his stuttering, his stammering. And then, and only then, did she do a strange and out-of-the-ordinary thing.

She closed her eyes. She squeezed their lids as if to gather her energy, resolve and will. And then, when she opened them again – wide and bright, they sparked with life – she took one great leap and landed to stand, naked, before her husband, on her feet, on the rug, at the foot of the bed.

There she said, 'Well, tell me, my husband. What was it? What did you think and hope and fear? I wonder. Could it have been this?' she said as she proceeded to unzip the zip of

her skin-suit that began at the top of her head and ended at a place between her legs – to reveal – Menka the bear.

Menka the bear! How could it be? How could it be?

The man's jaw hung slack. His eyes blinked in his head. And the back of his throat went horribly dry. There was no way he could answer the questions that were being posed to him.

'Or was it this? Was it? Tell me, my husband. Is this what you thought or hoped or feared?' said Menka the bear in the voice of Menka the wife – it really was very confusing – as quickly, expertly, as if she'd done it a thousand times before, she proceeded to unzip her fur-suit which began at a place at the top of her bear head and ended at a place between her bear legs – to reveal – another Menka altogether, of sorts.

And then that Menka unzipped and revealed.

And that Menka unzipped and revealed, too.

As did the next, and the next, and the next.

Too many Menkas zipped out of and into every kind of suit or skin or get-up or costume imaginable and unimaginable, both.

These Menkas, they also did something else. It was only logical, even the man thought so himself. With each unzip and each reveal, they got smaller and smaller still – as with Russian *babushka* dolls – until standing before the man on the rug at the foot of the bed was the very last Menka. Tiny, a speck, a wisp.

And she, too, said, in her tiny Menka voice, just as every Menka before her had, 'Well, well, my husband. Tell

me. Tell me, please. Is this what you thought or hoped for or feared?' as she too unzipped – and revealed – nothing.

Nothing.

There was no Menka left. There were no Menkas anymore. Just the pile-up of suits and skins and get-ups and costumes. But they too – bang – woof – poof – went up, spontaneously, dramatically, in a flash and a puff of smoke. And that was that.

And though the man tried to find her that night and on the many that followed, under the rug, in the fridge, out on the cobbled street, running, running, calling her name, he never did. The wife, the bear and every-Menka else were never heard of or seen again.

So, life went on – it had to – it always did. Seasons came and went, years. The man matured in his way. Inevitably, eventually, he wrinkled, he sagged, he moaned, he ached. Even so, he still went to work at the metal smelter, along with the other men, his friends, until one day, unexpectedly, it was boarded up and closed down and marked with signs saying DANGER! TOXIC! STAY OUT!

But, once again, that is a whole other story.

Only Friday night card nights remained. It was just that now the man and his friends had to get their own pretzels and peanuts and beer. But that wasn't that hard. They got used to it. Harder was finding something to laugh about. Instead, they became philosophical.

'Brother,' said the friends to the man. 'Things can only get better. There's talk the Germans will be opening up a new

factory in town soon. Still, even so, no matter what happens, it's not good to be alone. You should find a new wife. You really should.'

But the man only shrugged his shoulders and, poker-faced, looked at the hand he'd been dealt. Without saying a thing, he shrugged his shoulders one more time and laid his hopeful, reckless bet.

In My Father's Village

In my father's village, it's dusty and hot.

'Well, what did you expect? It's summertime,' says the taxi driver, grinning like he can't believe it. Can't believe that my father is paying him, bill after bill, from a wad of American dollars for taking us all the eight hours from Belgrade airport to here, my father's village. This is the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. I'm eleven. My father is thirty-five. It's 1984.

In my father's village, there's only one road in and one road out. Heat haze shimmers at either end as the taxi disappears and my father and I are alone again. Just like we were last night in the Munich transit hotel room where, in the middle of the night, I woke with a sharp cramp. I felt down to the sticky wetness between my legs. Blood, and not for the first time, but still, instinctively, I tried to hide all evidence of my

femaleness from him, every hint. I crept as noiselessly as I could to my bag to get what I needed – a pad – but with all the unzipping and crumpling of plastic, my father woke and wanted to know what I was doing.

'Nothing, nothing,' I called from the other side of the bathroom door, where I had quickly locked myself.

It was only in the morning, while my father showered, that I pulled back my sheets to examine the pool of bright red blood I'd left. It looked as if someone had been stabbed and I thought, with regret, about the maid who would find it later on.

I think about her now – I'm sure she is a she – while an old, sad man and his donkey lug a cart and take an age to pass us by, in my father's village.

Across the road, there are a few more old men outside what looks to be a cafe. On wooden stools around a low table they sit, monumental, stooped, and watch us with our suitcases. I watch them, too. My father doesn't watch anyone. He just stands with one hand on his hip, looks right and left.

When one of the old men calls to ask if we need help or directions, he says, 'What do you think? This is my place. I was born here.'

Down the winding dirt path we go, my father leading the way. We pass houses with storks nesting in chimneys, a small tomato and pepper crop, more donkeys, barns and then we are at a metal gate. Beyond it is a courtyard. Grape vines, fruit trees. My father tells me to wait. I wait. He enters and, a

few moments later, I hear a happy shout, a shriek. My father is striding back now, telling me to come, but behind him there is someone else. An old woman, short and wobbly, running on bowed legs.

With arms outstretched, she is laughing, calling out my name, saying, 'Hey, my little bird. Hey, my baby frog. Do you know who I am? Do you know who I am?'

She kisses my head, pats my hair flat with spit. She grabs at my flesh, squeezes my shoulders, my cheeks, my arms, every part of me as if checking to see that I am real. Just like the others, the rest of the whiskery old women who come and keep coming, all afternoon. And then the old men. Each one of them wants to know the same thing.

'Do you know who I am? Do you know who I am?'

'I am your *Baba* Dora's sister.'

'I am also your *Baba* Dora's sister.'

'Me too.'

'And I am your *Dedo* Tom's eldest brother.'

'I am the youngest!'

'I'm the fifth.'

'Sixth.'

'Number seven here.'

I can definitely see the resemblances.

The old ladies sitting on the sofa in a line look just like my grandmother back in Australia, like they came out of the same mould. But when the clay was still wet, one had her ears pulled, and another had her nose pinched, and the other had a weight put on her head so she wouldn't grow too tall. It's the

same with my grandfather's six brothers. They all wear glasses and have the same square head, but one has gone bald in a horseshoe shape, another combs his hair over one side, and another has a thick white mop that sprouts thickly from the middle of his scalp.

They all talk loudly and happily at once.

And I wonder, sitting on my chair, how and why it is that my father and my grandparents back in their suburban house in Sydney have never told me about these people, these relatives who seem to know exactly who I am and love me so abundantly. Why, when I visit the three of them every second weekend, like the family court ordered, it is as quiet and cold as a tomb in comparison. No one talks. They live in their own private worlds. My grandfather always in his little back room with beer in hand and a transistor radio pressed to his ear, listening to the TAB. My grandmother forever leaning over some sink, the stove, the mower, bending down to pick up someone else's crumbs from the carpet.

And my father, in and out, at the local RSL or lying on the couch watching his football team lose again – come on, come on, go the Rabbitohs – and every now and again telling me in my single seater, during a commercial break, why he won't pay child maintenance: 'Because she'll just go and buy herself new shoes.'

And that is what this holiday is for, he told me between Singapore and Germany – back payment for the last ten years.

Still, the blood of love feels thick in my father's village.

Even my father, who I have never seen cry before, wipes away a tear when he meets the relations he hasn't seen for almost twenty-five years.

More people arrive. I don't know how they all fit into the tiny stone house, but they do. Younger ones – uncles and aunties coming from work, countless cousins from school.

'Do you know who I am?'

It's the same question.

When I just smile and don't answer, the old ones answer for me.

'She understands everything. She just can't give a reply.'

'Oh, but she'll learn, she'll learn. It won't take her long before she's talking back.'

'Do you know who I am? Do you know who I am?'

I don't really. So, they just tell me.

'I am your *Baba* Dora's sister Tsotsa's daughter, Sofija.'

Three kisses: left, right, left cheek.

'Mitko. Uncle.'

Money pressed into my hand.

'I'm *Dedo* Itsko's other son, Uncle Danche.'

Broad shoulders, same square head. Gladiator man.

'And this is my new wife, Christina.'

'Nice to meet you. This is our baby, Itsko. Say hello, Itse.'

Wide staring eyes. Wobbly neck.

'I am Gligor, your cousin.'

Egg-head, cheeky grin.

'Lenche.'

'Keti.'

Soft, milk-white skin.

On and on.

And then: 'I am your Auntie Beti. But you can just call me Beti,' says Beti, shy, even though she is much older than me at twenty. She cries when she takes my hand and holds it, doesn't let go. Her cube-shaped eyes look into mine. Elfin face, dark hair, petite. She has the bones of a bird and the tiny, beating heart of one. I can feel it, her fluttering sensitivity. 'You'll sleep with me in my room, if that's okay. I hope it is. Your father will sleep in my brother, your Uncle Branko's room. You would've met him, too, but he's away on his army year. Oh, time is too short! I promise, I'll take care of you. I'll take you everywhere with me, and I'll go everywhere with you. Like your shadow.'

'Me too! I'm Verka,' Verka, pushing to the front, chips in. Bright, sparky eyes, curly hair. A forward streak. 'We're third cousins. I live right next door. We're going to have so much fun. You better believe it. Together – you, me and Beti.' Her fingers squeeze my cheeks. 'But, Beti, look! Isn't she just too cute?'

In my father's village, sure, it's dusty and hot. At least, it will be soon. One cock crows. Another follows. Sunlight through

the spaces in the slats of the closed shutters. I open one eye and find that I have two looking at me.

It's Verka, sitting on Beti's already-made bed, staring, waiting and then singing, 'Beti! She's up! She's awake!'

Beti comes running. 'Did you sleep okay? Are you hungry? Are you thirsty? What do you want? Tell me, dear heart.'

'Where is everyone?' I yawn. The stone house is quiet.

Beti tenderly explains, 'Well, all the guests went home late last night. *Baba* Slobodanka and *Dedo* Tasho' – her parents – 'have gone to work. And your uncles Mitko and Danche have already come to take your father out.'

'It's just us now,' says Verka, all eager electricity. 'So, are you going to have a shower and get changed? What are you going to wear? Beti, I want to see her clothes from *Amerika*. I've been waiting all morning.'

Beti's lids close over her cube eyes. She takes a deep breath.

I correct, 'But, Verka, I don't live in America. I live in Australia.'

'For us, same thing, baby. Capitalism,' Verka says. 'Come on, Beti, don't tell me you're not curious, too.' Then to me: 'Can we take a look inside your suitcase now?'

Beti is horrified.'Verka! Aren't you embarrassed?'

'It's okay,' I say. 'You can look.' I'm not sure what there could be in there that would be so interesting, but Verka is determined.

She unzips, rummages and mines. 'Hey, Beti, look at

this. Super!' She holds up a Target top like it was an object that fell to earth from the moon. 'And look at this! Ooo. Interesting! Look at the pockets! The quality, Beti! The quality!'

It's a cheap, factory-made dress from Flemington Market.

So that I understand, Beti tells me, 'I'm so sorry. You should know, Yugoslavia doesn't trade with many countries outside of the Eastern Bloc. So for us, the things you bring – it's something new to see.'

'Ha! But what are these?' Verka interrupts.

She holds up the twenty-eight pack of paper underpants that my mother, in all her modernity, has found in some specialty shop in the city and bought me specifically for this trip. She takes out a pair and examines them, stretches the thin elastic side straps and pulls down the paper gusset for Beti to see, for us all to take a solid gawk at.

I try to explain – and it's very hard because I don't have all the words – that you are only supposed to wear them once and then throw them away. That they are disposable. I, too, had never heard of such a thing. They're not common. Actually, they're very uncomfortable.

Verka ignores my embarrassed disclaimers and laughs out loud in delight and disbelief. 'Beti! In *Amerika*' – I don't correct her geography again – 'they wear and then throw their underpants away. Wear and throw, wear and throw!' Laughing, she mime-demonstrates, over her shoulder, the carefree discarding of the frivolous, empty-headed West she

imagines. And then to me again, cackling, 'But don't you worry they'll rip?'

Beti, more level-headed about such things, informs me that, here, when they go on holidays, they just take the same underpants they wear at home. 'We wash them. With soap and water. And then we hang them out to dry.'

Imagine.

But Verka, impatient, doesn't want to hear about things she already knows. 'Have you got disposable paper clothes, too?' She throws up her hands. 'Beti, you can see for yourself. Anything is possible!'

'No,' I say. 'But I have a disposable camera.' I show it to her. And then, while Verka is handling it, I have a question, too. I want to know, 'Who is the man with the blue and red army cap?'

There is a framed picture or a tapestry of him in every room in this little stone house.

Beti, shrugging, says, 'That's Tito.'

'Who's Tito?'

'You don't know?' says Verka, one eyebrow arched.

Is he a relative I haven't yet met?

'He's the Father of the Fatherland, the patriarch of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia.' Verka adds, in a way that makes me think she doesn't quite mean it, 'He's our comrade.'

'Oh,' I say.

Beti steps in to defend my ignorance. 'Well, Verka, what do we know? Maybe they don't tell stories about Yugoslavia on the news in Australia. She's still young. Maybe

she's not interested in politics.'

'Who is?' says Verka, her eyes losing their glimmer for a moment. 'Alright. Doesn't matter. Come on. Shower, eat. Get ready.' She claps her hands. 'And bring your disposable camera. We're going to take you out. We want to show you the village. We want to give you a tour.'

Out on the main street, in my father's village, we make our way on foot towards the centre. Beti on my right, Verka on my left; they are like my personal bodyguards. Maybe I need them. All the way, it seems that skinny, ragged tobacco-grower kids with big eyes stand, smoke and stare as we pass.

People hang out of windows and shout, passing on the message, 'Here comes the *Amerikanka*. Here comes the *Amerikanka*.'

'So, where do you like it better?' Verka asks, all smiles. 'Here or there?'

Beti, fast having become my protector, admonishes, 'How does she know, Verka? She just got here. Dear heart, ignore the rude catcalls. Walk on straight, proud.'

But, actually, I don't dislike it – being the centre of attention, being the village rockstar.

Past two bars, one open, one closed, a minimart and a small commemorative park with a statue of a mythical, domesticated bear and the bronze bust of the bearded shepherd who, a couple of hundred years ago, founded this

place after a plague wiped out most of the original nearby settlement. It all happens too fast. We have travelled through the village's eye and are now heading towards the increasingly dusty and hot edges. On our left, the left of the road, there is a large concrete building, some kind of factory complex with a fleet of revving trucks, buses and other vehicles parked outside.

Beti says we have reached our destination. 'This is where your *Baba* Slobodanka and *Dedo* Tasho work. This is where they are right now. *Baba* at a sewing machine and *Dedo* in the mechanics workshop.'

'Well, it's not only your *Baba* and *Dedo*. Just about everybody in the village works here – except for the tobacco and tomato farmers,' says Verka. 'And pity them.'

Beti works in the office, as a secretary, apparently. And in two years, when Verka finishes high school, she will hopefully find a place, too.

'Most probably with my mother in the cooperative kitchen. Or, if I'm lucky, if Beti's good word counts for anything, with her in the office. Nice and clean,' Verka tells me. 'No sweating. And I can dress up, you see. I won't have to wear a net around my hair.'

We push through the front doors of the building, walk past the unattended, wooden reception and into the back rooms, to the office. We meet with Beti's colleagues.

'Hey, Ruzha. Hey, Milka. Hey, Slavitsa.'

All of them, the office workers, are women and, just like Verka said, made-up, rouged and lipsticked, dressed in

tight tops and short skirts, with dyed red or bleached blonde hair, permed or teased. There is something voluptuous and sensual and seductive about them, too – their figures, the way they hold themselves. Something knowing and wicked that lulls me into a sweet, happy stupor.

'So, is he here?' asks Beti, looking behind her shoulder at a closed door.

She is talking about the Director with a capital D.

'No. He's out.'

'Good.'

Confirmed. We are in a world of women-only.

Beti says, then, that I can ring my mother – if I want. But I have to be quick about it. 'Come on. Don't be shy,' she says.

I must tell the telephonist woman behind the desk the right numbers so that she can put the call through her wiry exchange. It'll be free.

I am amazed. Not that the international call won't cost anything, but that Beti is offering me this at all. Because in my father's world, in my grandparent's house back in Sydney she – my mother – must never be mentioned except in insult, in slur. Until now, there has always been a wall – no windows, no doors – between my parental hemispheres.

'Hurry. Call her,' Beti says again. 'She'll be happy to hear your voice. She must be wondering if you have arrived.'

So, I call.

'Hello, Mum,' I say, ear pressed to the receiver.

All of the tight-topped office women lean in and listen

to me speak in English.

'It's me.'

But my mother's voice on the other end sounds tinny, faraway. She speaks politely as if she has forgotten who I am. She seems nervous, lost for words, confused – as if even she thinks that it's strange that I am calling her from the closed system of my father's village.

When the call is finished, when I have hung up, I feel like crying. But the tight-topped office ladies, Beti's colleagues, are ravenously curious. They also want to know, now that I have had a taste of back home, the answer to Verka's earlier impossible question: 'So, where is it that you like better? Here or there?'

In my short life, in the world as far as I understand and have experienced it so far, there seems to be perpetual conflict, constant polar opposition in every sphere.

Mother, father.

Here, there.

Anyway, the women don't need an answer from me. Amongst themselves, they passionately discuss and debate both sides of the argument. Affirmative and negative.

'We know how to live here,' says one woman, lighting a cigarette, leaning back on her chair.

'Yes. There, people have material possessions, but they work too much. They don't enjoy themselves.'

'Then again, we have so little. We crave. We long. We dream of freedom, of choice.'

'Ah, but too much freedom can be bad.'

'Can it?'

'It can lead you astray. You need to know which way you are facing.'

'I just want the option to dye my hair brown. You think I prefer being a redhead?'

'Be serious!'

'I am being serious!'

'Both ways are good,' says a fence-sitter. 'There are pluses and minuses for both – the colours and the ideologies.'

'Ah, but you can't have it both ways. You must choose. You must choose,' says another, filing her nails into perfect almond shapes.

More cigarettes are lit. More circular, philosophical chit-chat. Someone offers to make little cups of Turkish coffee for anyone who wants one. Someone else offers to read the black dreg fates.

'Ah, but what more is there to learn? It has all been written. There is no escape.'

The women, true to their own word, their own self-definition, don't have too much pressing work to do. They relax and smoke some more. There's no too tight an agenda that warrants any urgent action here. But there's another question – about me.

'So, has she got a boyfriend?' the telephonist asks, holding up her lipstick-marked cup, not in an unfriendly way. 'Have you got a boyfriend, beauty queen?' Then back to Beti, 'Beti, how old is she?'

'Young, young,' Beti says. 'Too young.' She holds my hand.

The telephonist woman sizes me up, looks me up and down. Then she initiates a new discussion about my figure, my features – again, it's not in an uncomplimentary way. With her encouragement, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia village cooperative office ladies notice my femaleness – my widening hips, my growing breasts – applause, bravos – but I don't mind it. I don't mind at all how their eyes and words trace the outlines and contours of my body. In fact, I like it.

'If you want,' says the telephonist, 'I have a son. He's very handsome. I can introduce you sometime. If you like each other, you could get married and stay. If you decide, in the end, you like it here better, that is.'

Beti, still holding my hand, squeezes it now. 'Don't worry, dear heart. She's just talking, just playing.'

The telephonist's lipstick lips suck at the tip of her cigarette and then she lets out the smoke in one luxurious, slow billow that travels towards me.

Verka pipes in. 'Oh, but you know what? I can't believe it took me until now to tell you all. In *Amerika* – I've seen it with my own eyes. In *Amerika*, they wear disposable underwear!'

'Oh, but they have disposable everything over there,' a nicotine-hoarse woman makes comment. 'Disposable marriages. Disposable men!'

'How I wish I could dispose of my husband,' laughs

another. 'I'm stuck for life. But where can I go? How can I leave?'

'Ah, but, if you ask nicely, the guest might take you back with her – you're small enough – in her suitcase.'

'Do you think?'

'They even have disposable cameras!' says Verka. 'Show them.'

I take the little plastic Kodak out of my bag.

'Well, let's take some photos then!' says the telephonist woman with a sly grin – and a plan.

'How would you like to sit in the Director's chair?'

'Okay.'

I let them take me there, to their boss's office with the big leather chair on wheels.

'Sit.'

I sit.

'Spin.'

I spin.

'Lean back. Put your arms behind your head. Act superior. Put your feet – don't take your shoes off – up on the desk.'

Click, click. The office women snap away. They tell me how to pose.

I pose. They laugh hysterically. They shriek and cry. They wipe the tears of transgressive joy from their eyes. Makeup runs down their faces. In their tight tops and tight skirts, their fleshy parts jiggle and jostle for space.

'Chin up. Look like you're about to give a command.'

'Look authoritative. Don't give a damn.'

Later, when the photos are developed, I will see how my female figure is semi-superimposed on the large and looming framed photograph behind me. Of the man in the blue and red military cap – Tito, the patriarch. And I will understand – I do even then, in an inarticulate felt sense – that what the office women are asking me to do is to play out something of their own fantasies, to disrupt their own realities with this pantomime of hope. Possibly, they are giving me instructions, too – for my future – laying out the map, a pathway ahead. Assuming that I, the *Amerikanka*, can walk it. That, or they are just having a bit of late afternoon fun.

Beti and Verka are laughing.

'When you get home, make sure you send us the copies.'

'Don't forget. Don't forget us!'

And then there is the call from the lookout at the door.

'He's coming, he's coming!'

The pork-bellied monolith, the Director, and his shadow move quickly behind the glass of the window. Frantic, all of the women office workers rush back to their places, their stations. Once there, some shuffle papers. Others clack furiously at Cyrillic alphabet typewriters. Maybe the order of the keys they are striking doesn't make sense, doesn't even make real words. Maybe it's just: ЖЖЖ or АБВГ, АБВГ. Someone else is bringing out the Director's cup of Turkish coffee. Another is handing him his newspaper and his

messages. Yet another is taking the jacket off his back, lighting his cigarette. Each one, each office woman performs her own little skit in synchronised collaboration with the others – a secret smile, a secret wink.

Beti, Verka and I carry out ours – our skit.

We stand ordinarily by the telephonist's desk. Beti answers, only when asked, that she has dropped by to show me, the guest from afar, her workplace. To proudly show off the village's centre of successful Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia industry.

The Director nods his head in approval at Beti, then at me. He offers me his meaty hand to shake, as if I really were an important person.

'Ah,' he says. 'So you are the guest from *Amerika* I keep hearing about. So, how do you like our village? How do you like our little cooperative? And where do you think it's better? There or here?'

Then, without waiting for my reply, he just walks on, with his plaster expression and his superior smile, as if he already thinks he knows the correct answer.

☆

In my father's village, the sun is a fiery, red ball as it sets, close to nine o'clock. It is time then – Verka says it's so – to go to one of the three local discotheques and dance, dance, dance like crazy maniacs. My father doesn't think the same. He says

that I am too young and he doesn't want me to learn loose ways, to be spoiled – whatever that means.

Anyway, *Baba* Slobodanka comes to the rescue and says, with gentle deference – I notice how she does it, placatingly, making him think he's the boss – 'Well, nephew, you know best. But, this is not New York. This is not London. This is the village. All the kids go to the discotheque to dance. They drink homemade lemonade. That's all. Plus, she'll be with Beti.'

Beti, on cue, smiles demurely.

'But if you say no, it's no. I understand. I respect your word.'

Stubbornly, my father agrees.

Besides, he's busy getting ready to go out himself. He has to shower and shave. He has to put on his pants with the crease down the front that *Baba* Slobodanka has just ironed – because he doesn't know how. He has to douse himself, too, with his Brut 33 aftershave. In his wake, there's the fug of formaldehyde as he goes down the stone house stairs. At the bottom, Uncle Mitko and Uncle Danche are waiting outside their little car. Their arms are crossed – kings of the world – and they are wearing sly, secret smiles of their own.

'Where are they going?' I ask *Baba*.

It's not to a village discotheque.

'Where then?'

'To a town nearby. To do men's things,' *Baba* says slowly, but doesn't elaborate.

We watch the little car take off down the unsealed road

and as it does I wonder what instructions for life my father will receive from wherever it is he is going, the unnamed place where men do 'men's things'. And whether these instructions will be in conflict with mine, those I have received from the cooperative office ladies. Somehow, I think they will. The little car turns a corner and is out of sight.

Beti, Verka and I turn and go back inside. We get ready, ourselves, for our night ahead. We shower and change, style our hair. Beti puts on a bit of light rose-coloured lipgloss and offers me some. I accept. Verka paints a brighter pink on her fingernails and toenails and then does the same for me. We wait for them to dry. And then, in sandals, we walk – no streetlights, just the moon and stars – to the village discotheque in the safe, sound dark.

When we get there, we dance like crazy maniacs, just like Verka said we would – left, right, left, wiggle down, shimmy, turn, jump, genie hands – on the dusty, checkered dance floor whose squares randomly light up. When we're thirsty, we drink the homemade lemonade. Then we go home.

These are the nights in my father's village from then on.

The days, too, take on a routine of their own.

One cock always crows. Another inevitably follows, echoing his raspy reply. Sunlight beams through the shutters. Stripes of light, shadow, light. But Beti – who has taken the month off work – and I don't rouse. We roll over in our single beds. Verka, too, I suppose, does the same next door in hers. She's

nowhere to be seen at this early hour. And so, my suitcase zipper stays zipped. Because Verka is not here, my disposable underwear and all the other items in my luggage remain secure, unhandled, untampered with.

Finally, at about eleven, our day begins in earnest. With the help of Beti, my father and I have familial obligations we must fulfil. We must accept formal invitations to lunch and we must arrive there, at our relatives' houses, at the latest, by one. Tito, the patriarch, is always invited, too.

On a wall, he hangs in his frame, always looking down at us, in whichever house we are visiting. In his presence, too, we must eat what we are served. Usually, it's thick white bean stew and pork, if the family enjoys relative wealth. Or it's a boiled egg from the pen and a cup of goat's milk, if the household does not – which is to say there are no children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren under the one roof, not a great many hands to work.

Whatever it is that is being served, however, whoever is doing the serving, it's always my father who is offered the first and largest ladleful, the pick of the pork, the thickest hunk of bread, the guaranteed double-yolker in its shell. Then the hierarchy is worked down – the other men, children, boys then girls, then the women. Lastly it's Beti, who is not so much an invited guest as a guide, our escort.

She always says, 'No, no, I've eaten. Thank you.' Even if she hasn't.

Still, we need her because even though this is my father's village, in his absence in the last twenty or so years,

things have changed. New roads have been paved, old ones erased and built over. Beti must lead the way through the back streets, up the hill, off the main road, in and through the windy maze of narrow dirt and cobblestone paths.

For her constant presence, I am grateful. I don't want to be alone with my father again, if I can help it.

But, as it turns out, of course there is one afternoon that Beti cannot accompany us. She is called urgently into work. There is some administrative emergency that only she can solve – and she'd better not refuse if she wants to keep her good, cushy job at the village cooperative office. So, just this once, my father and I must make our way on our own to our relatives' home for lunch.

Under the hot midday village sun we walk, sweaty-browed. Past the fountain where donkeys drink, past the public rose garden in full bloom and up the hill. My father leads the way with the directions he has received.

For some reason, though, he is quiet, quieter than usual. In his ironed pants with their crisp crease down the front and stinking of his Brut 33 aftershave, he smiles to himself. Toothpick twirling at the side of his mouth, he looks cocky, smug, like he's got a secret. I don't want to know what it is, but it seems I don't have a choice.

He begins, 'So' – toothpick still twirling between his teeth – 'do you know that your Uncle Mitko has a mistress?'

Inside, I freeze.

'She's sixteen years old and she lives in a flat below his.

His children, your cousins, carry messages between them. So they can organise the next time they'll meet. His wife, your Auntie Tinka, doesn't mind. See?' He nods and nods, still smiling.

I look at the village ground beneath my feet.

He continues. 'And have you noticed the bruises on your cousin Maria's arms and neck, the way her nose sits crooked on her face? Her boyfriend beats her, but she won't leave him. She loves him.' The smile has spread fully across his face. 'And did you see…?'

I don't want to hear any more of it.

And yes, for the record, I do see. Even in my youth, I understand that my father is trying to teach me, to show me a picture of how it looks when all is well in his world. A world where women accept infidelity, double standards, abuse, and don't leave men when they could and should – like my mother did when she left him.

We walk on in silence.

And then we are at the door of our smiling relatives, our generous hosts – 'So, you found us alright? Welcome! Come in!'

There I will have to eat, chew, swallow and try to digest.

Later that afternoon, I sit in the bedroom that Beti and I share, rubbing at my nails with acetone-soaked cotton balls, trying to remove the pink polish that Verka has applied, layer over layer, every night. I am trying to hide all evidence of my

femaleness, and if not my actual femaleness then my playing at femaleness, my acting out of roles and behaviours that will mark me as such. I rub and rub. I try to erase. But then, in doing so, I discover that I have left a different kind of stain – a bleach mark on the wooden table I've been leaning on. Quickly, guiltily, I try to cover that up, too, with a crocheted doily.

Then I wait for Beti to come home.

When she does, I can't help it, I can't keep it in. 'Beti,' I say, 'I've done something bad. I've done something wrong.'

'What?' Beti says. 'Dear heart' – she sits close, calm – 'tell me. What?'

I lift the doily. I show her the stain on the wood. I tell her about the nail polish, my voice breaking. I cry a little.

'Oh.' She lifts her arms to embrace me. 'Is that all? I thought it was something serious.' And then she starts to cry, too. 'Oh, you are silly to think that I would be upset about such a small thing. I don't care about wood. I care about you! You are important, not a table.'

We are both crying now. She holds me in her arms and I feel safe, secure.

'Beti there's something else…' I venture. I feel that I can trust her. She's passed a test I didn't know I'd set. 'Beti,' I start again.

'What, dear heart? What?' She rocks me back and forth.

'Beti…'

She puts her arm around my shoulder and holds me

close.

I try to find the words, but they are stuck or unformed.

'Try, try, my love.' She nods encouragingly.

'Beti, I – I – I don't feel as close' – I try to gulp as I gurgle snot and tears – 'I don't feel as close to my father as I do to my mother.'

It's only a diluted truth – a massive understatement, in fact. Still, it feels like I have said the worst thing I possibly could.

Beti laughs, wiping away her tears. 'That's all? Is that all? Oh, my love, that's normal.' She tries to make it so. 'You don't have to cry about that. It's the same for me. It's the same for all daughters. It's normal as you grow up to be closer to your mother than your father. I'm closer to your *Baba* Slobodanka than I am to *Dedo* Tasho. I talk to her more than I talk to him. That's just the way it is. Oh, is that all my love?'

I am still crying. I'm really sobbing now because it has taken a great effort to say even that much. It's as if there are stones in my throat. Stones in the place of words that could articulate to Beti what my father said earlier on the way to lunch and how it makes me feel – ugly and alone. Words that could tell the story of everything that came before. How he treated my mother behind closed doors. How, when I sit in the passenger seat of his car for the half-hour ride between my mother's house and my grandparents' every fortnight, I have to listen to him talk about the women he meets at bars, how he despises them. According to him, they wait, all dressed up, for someone to pay for their drinks. But at the end of the

night all they say is, 'Thank you. I had a lovely time.' Imagine, then, how unsafe I feel – I wish I could explain it properly to Beti – when on Saturday nights, he takes me out to his RSL and buys me oysters, lobster and Bacardi and cokes. He introduces me to the waitress and to all his friends as his girlfriend. They're the ones who have to point out, 'No, mate. She's your daughter.'

Stones.

It will be my life's work, though I don't know it yet, to cough them up. To polish and to transform those stones into seeds that will, in time, grow things that are beautiful and useful. I suppose, I should, or will be thankful. But right now, I simply cry. I cry and cry until I fall, from exhaustion, into sleep.

☆

And so, summer in my father's village continues. Life goes on. During the days, my father and I continue to attend our relatives' lunches, but thankfully Beti is always with us from then on. At night, we – Verka, Beti and I – keep on dancing at one or the other of the local discotheque halls.

In the mornings, for breakfast, we eat watermelon and ice-cream – a good combination, we discover. But, one time, I gobble down too much and suffer a terrible belly ache and diarrhoea. The remedy for that, *Baba* Slobodanka insists, is a heated urine-soaked (my own) towel across the stomach. And it works, this village medicine!

Watermelon, plums, strawberries, cherries, figs and tomatoes – all ready, ripe and in abundance. In fact, there are too many of them in my father's village, which has no industrial refrigeration equipment. They are going to rot.

There is a remedy for that, too, *Baba* Slobodanka says.

One weekend, we all gather together to make homemade tomato sauce, bottles and bottles of it, with a communal sauce making machine. One person chops, another peels, the other boils, another stirs the bubbling pot. The resulting stoppered jars will be saved for the coming winter months. Along with the soon-to-be prepared jams, preserves, relishes and pickles.

When my stomach has settled and the lunch invitations have begun to dwindle, *Baba* Slobodanka takes a day off work and, with Verka and Beti, we visit a busy open market in a neighbouring town, so that I can buy souvenirs. I choose a giant metal ladle and a fifty piece Turkish coffee cup and saucer set.

That makes everyone laugh – the idea of an eleven-year-old girl preparing her dowry.

'But that's not it at all,' I explain. 'When people visit me, I want to be generous and hospitable like you!'

Not everything, after all, is bad in my father's village.

Still, it is true. It's getting hotter and hotter every day.

When the thermometer finally hits a dry thirty-six degrees, we decide to go to the nearby lake to swim and cool down.

In the water, Beti, Verka and I splash about. We wade, we lie on our backs and I find out that my father did not meet his own father until he was ten years old. In fact, he didn't know that he had a father at all, separated as my newly-wed grandparents were during and after World War II. Apparently, as Beti tells it, when the boy and man finally met a decade later in Australia, they didn't get along very well – and haven't since. I want to know how Beti knows all this and I don't. Beti shrugs. Women – *Baba* Slobodanka and my grandmother – talk. On the village cooperative free international telephone service.

From this, I begin to understand that there is always more than one side to any story.

In the same sort of way, Verka never truly understands that I live in Australia, not the USA, but I don't mind. I come to accept it. Just like I have to accept that I am down to the last of my twenty-eight pack of disposable underpants. Time has gone too quickly.

It's my last morning here in my father's village. Of course, one cock crows confidently. Another follows, but – last night, someone must have forgotten to shut the pen – all the chickens are loose. They're clucking and clacking, as if jubilantly celebrating their freedom, which I take as a good personal omen.

Beti, superstitious too, asks me to kick the cup of water that she has placed at the threshold on my way out the front door. This, she tells me, is to ensure that I will come

back when I am grown.

Tears, tears, more tears, hugs.

'I will always love you,' says Beti, holding and not letting go.

'Me too,' says Verka, giving my cheek one last affectionate pinch.

All of the relatives, too, the whiskery old women and men, the aunties and uncles and countless cousins, have lined up in a row and are waiting, not to squeeze, but to kiss – left, right, left – my cheeks.

'Goodbye.'

'You'd better write!'

'Come again!'

'Tell your grandparents we are waiting for them to visit next.'

Then an uncle, a village cooperative truck driver, gives us a toot. He is going, anyway, to Serbia to deliver some goods, so he can drop us off en route, back at Belgrade airport where we need to catch our return flight.

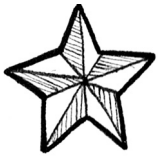
First, however, he says, he will take us to pay our respects at Tito's mausoleum, which is in the capital, too. Because the old patriarch – why doesn't anybody ever tell me anything? – is actually dead. He has been, according the inscription on his tomb, for four years. In my unpatriotic, cold heart, I also see this as a good personal omen. That all dictatorships, all reigns, must come to an end.

And then we are really leaving. My father and I get on the aeroplane. We are seated and told to secure our belts. The captain then, via a microphone, welcomes passengers and tells us what time we will arrive in Colombo on our long zig-zag circuitous flight. There, in Sri Lanka – my father tells me when I ask – we will wait a few more hours for the next plane, but there will be no overnight stopover. Relief.

I feel myself begin to bleed.

I will have to deal with that soon.

And then the wheels roll, they gather momentum. We lift off the ground and I feel the lurch and drop of my stomach, the popping in my ears. In my window seat, I look through the portal out and down at my world below. I see more and more of it as we, in this metal shell defying gravity, rise, rise, rise.



Greasy Words

Now I can forgive the Macedonian dictionary police everything, those post-World War II scrubbers and scourers, those nation-building bleachers, those language-sterilising erasers with all their good intentions. Because right here, at the 44th International Summer Seminar on Macedonian Language, Literature and Culture, I hold in my hands – in my hands – a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy of the fourth volume of the old, rare and precious *Dictionary of Greasy Words*, to translate literally.

And it's full, so full, of the most wonderfully foul, dirty, but good, Macedonian phrases, idioms, proverbs, blessings, curses, stories and jokes.

They were collected, our young, feminist linguistics lecturer Ilina tells us, from the illiterate but verbose tobacco-growing inhabitants of the Bitola-Prilep region in the late 1800s. But can't you just see them?

I can.

The old men, sure, but more definitely those head-scarved, cheesy-smelling old women sitting on wooden stools in village squares, slapping their thighs, a cackle always ready in their throats, each one singing, 'But learned Sir, wait! Don't go. I've got another whole volume inside me alone.'

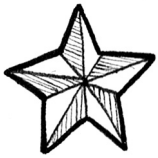
How I thank them, those crones who went before me.

I thank the ethnologist, too, climbing and descending mountains, cracking lenses of spectacles and twisting ankles in order to do this, his important work.

I thank our lecturer Ilina, also, for coming all the way from Skopje at the last minute to replace the distinguished dictionary police descendant who was supposed to teach us this late afternoon. That long-jowled, exhausted anthem-singer, he came down with the flu. For that I thank him, too.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

But, most of all, I want to thank the words. For being. For remaining not only on the page, but always in the body, our bodies, my body. Words: slick and slippery and wet, dripping in fat, leaking with lard and grease, waiting for the slightest chance to shriek with joy and life.



Shoes That Go Krtz-Krtz

In his broken-down gumboots and with his pants rolled up to his knees, my grandfather, *Dedo* Trajan, in our suburban Sydney backyard, is sitting in the chicken coop again.

With my two eyes, I can see him from the kitchen window. With my two hands I'm twirling my two silky ponytails while, behind me, my mum is chopping the celery for the celery soup. She's making it from the Margaret Fulton cookbook. Even though my *Baba* Magda came past before and rolled her eyes and said, 'What? Soup from celery? I've never heard of it before. Is this the kind of food the Australians eat? Are they rabbits? Are we?'

But I don't care. I'm proud of my mum for trying new things, for trying new recipes. And everyone will have to eat it, too – *Dedo*, *Baba*, Uncle Dimmie, his new, fancy wife, Auntie Petka, the baby growing in her belly, and me. But not my dad. Last year, we ran away from him after he went to

work one morning. So, he has to eat his dinner somewhere else.

'But, Mum. Why does *Dedo* sit in the chicken coop with the chickens?'

I really want to know. It's all he ever does since he got us the big, new house so that we could all live together, one family.

'One family!' he said. But now he doesn't want to even come in. At night, my grandmother has to shout at him from the back door and tell him he can't sleep out there.

'Why, Mum? Why does he do it?'

'Well, darling, I don't know,' she says – in English – busy with her measuring cups and spoons. 'But I've got an idea. Why don't you go and ask him yourself? Go on. Go.'

So, I do.

I go out the back door.

I go past the Hills Hoist.

I pass the little sticks-and-old-bedsheet screen that hides the hole that my *Dedo* and my Uncle Dimmie had to dig yesterday afternoon. That's where we have to pull down our pants and go to the toilet and then cover whatever we do with a shovelful of dirt. But only until Monday morning when the man comes to fix the blocked-up pipe.

And then I'm outside the chicken coop.

At the gate, I stand frozen. It feels like a magic line, a force field that I can't cross without my *Dedo* giving permission first.

So, I ask, '*Dedo*, is it okay? Can I come in?'

And *Dedo* nods his head without looking at me. But I can't take my eyes off him as he lets the smoke from his cigarette come out slowly from his lower lip. It's a sheet of mist that moves up over his face like it's an old, craggy mountain in some faraway, mysterious place. In the end, there's one last wisp. I gasp as I watch it disappear and then, like magic, I'm free. I can move again.

I lift the latch.

I go inside and shut the gate behind me.

I make my way to where my grandfather sits, by the fence, on an upside down, empty feta bucket. Conveniently, beside him, there's a second vacant, upside down, empty feta bucket. On it, I take my seat. And then we're both sitting on upside down, empty feta buckets – inside the chicken coop. We don't say anything for a bit.

Meanwhile, the chickens do their thing.

They don't bug us and we don't bug them.

They scratch, they cluck, they peck.

And *Dedo* keeps smoking and nodding his head over and over again, like he's coming to an understanding of a problem that he's been wrestling with for too many years. That, or he's judging, weighing and reckoning the possible reasons I might be visiting. I never have before.

Finally, he speaks.

In a proud voice, he asks, 'So. What is it that you want? What did you come for?' He lifts his chin.

'Nothing,' I gulp, I lie.

I try to shrug my shoulders, casual-like.

But he doesn't believe me. His eyes narrow to slits.

'Ha!' he says. 'Everyone wants something. Tell me. Do you want a cigarette? Is that it?'

And then, before I can answer yes or no, he shakes the soft pack at me so that a few poke out like slim, straight, white fingers.

'But, *Dedo*,' I reason. 'I'm just a kid.'

Well, that just makes him laugh. Ha! Like that.

'I'll tell you something you'd like to know,' he says. 'When I was your age I was already smoking twenty a day.'

'Well, okay. Maybe I'll have one later,' I say to make him happy.

Then I add, hopefully. 'But you can give me your lighter to play with, if you want?'

So, he gives it to me, no question, no argument.

And I take it in my greedy hands.

Usually, in the house, my *Baba* Magda won't let me touch the thing. I can't even look at it without her jumping to her feet and grabbing it away and saying, 'Eh, girl. That's not for you.'

Well, why not?

Now, I've got it.

I make the lighter do its tricks. I turn the lighter upside down so that the lady with the red hair's red dress disappears. I take a good look at her bosoms and bare skin and everything. Then, when I want, when I feel like it, I turn the lighter again, the right way up, and the red-haired lady's dress pours back onto her. Like that, up and down, down and

up, I make her take her clothes off and put them back on, again and again, non-stop. I never get sick of it.

But then my grandfather interrupts.

He clears his throat importantly. He wants to know, 'So, come on. Now, tell me. Did anyone fall down the hole yet?'

He means the hole in the backyard.

And I say, glancing up and down, trying to divide equally my attention between the lady on the lighter and him, 'No. Not that I know of.'

'Oh, but they will, they will,' he predicts, throwing his head back, laughing like a villain from a midday movie, showing his gold tooth. Then, specifically, he's interested to know, 'What about your Auntie Petka?'

'What about her?' I ask.

'Has she been to the hole to lighten her load?'

'Yeah,' I say, off-hand, half-listening. 'This morning at eight o'clock.'

'And how did she like it? How did it go for her?'

He holds his chin, waiting for my answer.

'I don't know. I don't think she did.' I try to give him the information he needs. 'She came back with an upset look on her face and said that we were going backwards to where we came from.'

'Ah-ha. Did she now?' *Dedo* says, knowingly.

And then he starts to laugh again. 'Ha-ha-ha, ho-ho-ho.'

And, if I really think about it, maybe I know why, too.

Sometimes at night, when my Auntie Petka is upstairs with my uncle in bed, my *Dedo* and my *Baba* sit in the kitchen and talk about her. They say that she thinks she's better than us because she's never gotten her hands dirty in the earth. And because she went to college before she came here to Australia for a holiday and met my uncle and made him fall in love with her.

Anyway, *Baba* says that Auntie Petka can think what she likes, but we're all made the same. A hole for a mouth and a hole for what comes out. No one's better than anyone else.

'Yeah,' *Dedo* says as a chicken walks past, stops and drops a blob of sticky white. 'I can tell you a lot more about holes if you want. If you have the time.'

'Sure,' I say, 'I've got time,' still looking at the naked lady lighter.

I've put myself in a kind of trance.

My *Dedo* has to compete for my attention. He does his best.

He says, 'Oh-ho, you won't believe it when I tell you. Something you can't imagine happened to me back in the old country when I was a kid. Even I can't believe it, when I think of it now.'

'Uh-huh,' I say, still distracted.

So, my *Dedo* leans in closer.

'I was about your age.'

'Yeah?'

He leans in even closer.

And then he adds, 'I've never told anyone before.'

And that's when I take my eyes off the red-headed lady. I put her down.

I give my *Dedo* my full concentration now.

'What? What happened?' I beg.

'I'll tell you, but you can't tell anyone else.'

I nod hungrily. 'No, no. I promise. I won't. Ever.'

'Well,' chin high, with full confidence in me, he begins. 'Let me first say, you know we didn't have toilets in the village that flush. Only holes. And not just for the weekend. Not just until Monday morning when the plumber can come, but every day. For always.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'You told me before. What about them?'

'Well, one night…' His eyes look into mine, then widen and flare. They whirl like kaleidoscopes and pull me in and keep me there. 'That night, that night, it was deep and dark. There was no moon, there were no stars shining in the sky – when, all of a sudden, my guts woke me up with a kick.' He stops to let that sink in. 'Diarrhoea,' he explains with a serious, matter-of-fact expression. 'I must've had some bad goat's milk to drink.'

'Yuck,' I say. 'Goat's milk tastes like hooves and hair.'

'Alright. What if it does?' My *Dedo* pulls me back into line, back to point. 'I needed to go, bad. My stomach was a knotted, twisted cramp. So, I got up. I rushed out the door. But that night, like I already told you, it was the deepest, the darkest. It was black. There was no moon, there were no stars to guide my way. I stumbled around out there trying to find our hole. It was where it always was, of course. But I

misjudged. I missed. I slipped and fell in. I fell down into all of my family's shit and piss and who knows what else. Oh, and I fell in deep. It was awful. The smell! I retched in disgust. And then I shat my pants. What did it matter? I called and called, but no one heard me. No one came. I was so alone. I had never felt so alone in all of my life.'

'Really? Never?'

'Well, no,' my *Dedo* says. 'I'm just saying that for effect. To tell you the truth, I've always felt that way. That's how life is. You have to get used to it. You come alone, you leave that way. In the meantime, no one holds your hand. You make your way the best you can. You fall in a hole, you have to get out. Well, believe me, I called and called. Still, nobody came. I was stuck. In that hole. Can you imagine? I tried to climb out of the slippery side, but every time I tried, the earth – mud and more – broke away. I started to cry. And in a quivering voice, I asked for help. "Please, please," I begged. I don't know to what or to who. You know that I don't believe in the church and their priests and what they say. They're all crooks.

'But then, then, out of nowhere, I heard a voice. It was just a whisper at first. I thought it was the wind. But the whisper grew louder. It was a woman. Or an angel. Or both. In the hole with me. She had to be. She was close. Then I felt a touch on my shoulder. Then a hand, two hands that put mine in hers and then around her waist, her hourglass hips. Up and down, up and down, she moved my hands and sang such sweet but nasty things, like I'd never heard, into my ear.

'And that's how time passed until first light. I must've

fallen asleep or passed out because I opened my eyes. And the first thought I had, my only wish and hope was that I would finally get to see the face of the woman who had stirred me so. But to my surprise, in my hands I found that I was not holding a woman but a chicken – caked in brown.'

My grandfather stops and sighs and sighs, wistful, sad.

'To this day, I still don't know what happened down there in the hole. I don't know if it was the work of a witch. Or a desperate dream. Whatever it was, I don't care. It felt real. And it was beautiful. And I got through. I came out alive. That's what matters most.'

And then I say – suddenly remembering why I have come, what I want to know – 'Is that why you stay here? With the chickens? Because you think one of them is going to turn into a beautiful woman and sing sweet but nasty songs in your ear?'

'No,' he says, laughing away my idea. 'I'm too old for all that now. Anyway, your grandmother wouldn't like it. She'd whack the back of my knees with the feather duster and it would sting. No. I'm telling you this story because I want you to know the important things that have happened in my life. So that you don't think that you come from nothing and no one. So that you don't think that you are alone. Even if you are. We all are, like I said. Besides, a story,' he shrugs, 'it's also to pass the time.'

And then he picks up the lady lighter from my lap and flicks it so that a fire flashes onto the tip of a new cigarette. He sucks in and then lets the smoke slide slowly out from his

lower lip. It's like a sheet of mist that moves mysteriously up over the old, craggy mountain that is his face. There's one last wisp. I watch it disappear. And then there's a call from the back door.

It's my *Baba* Magda shouting, 'Come on. Come inside for dinner. We're having grass soup.'

But my *Dedo* shouts back, 'We're busy talking, woman. Can't you see?'

My *Baba* just shakes her finger and then her fist.

'Listen to me. You can't sleep out there,' she shouts, louder than ever, and then she lets the door slam.

Soon enough, it's quiet again, for a bit.

My *Dedo* can finish smoking his cigarette in peace.

And the chickens can keep on pecking and scratching, happily.

The sun, too, can begin to set.

Then it's time – my grandfather says it is – for the birds to go to bed.

'*Mrsh*!' he tells them.

Some of them do go by themselves into their nests. Others he has to shoo. They flap their wings. They think they can fly. They want to.

'Come on. Try, try. Tomorrow's another day,' my grandfather laughs.

And then they're in, all of them. There're a few *bach-bach*s, but quickly the chickens settle into their chicken dreams. And then my *Dedo*, with a sigh, sits back down on his upside down, empty feta bucket next to me.

'Yep,' he says it again. 'Tomorrow is another day. Tomorrow.' He raises one eyebrow at me. And then he looks far into the distance at a point that isn't there, that hasn't arrived yet. 'Tomorrow – I've given that a lot of thought, too,' he tells me and the future, like it has ears to hear him. 'One day, you'll finish school – not like me, only to fourth grade. You'll go to college or university or wherever it is that young people in this country go. Then you'll get a job in an office. Oh-ho, and you'll look good, too. Do you know how?'

'No.'

'Do you want me to tell you?'

'Sure.'

'You'll wear a nice-fitting suit.' A warm, happy smile spreads across his face as he speaks. 'A jacket and a skirt to the knees to show off your figure and your legs. Tight like this at the waist.' He pinches in his own to show me. He sucks together his lips like a fish. 'Like this.'

'Oh,' I say, catching on fast. 'Like the lady on the lighter. Like the lady you met down the hole?'

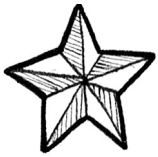
'Well, in a way. Not exactly. But did I say? You should know, you'll be carrying a briefcase with important papers inside it. Don't ask me what they say. You'll be going to an important meeting to say important things. I can't imagine what. It's beyond me, I'm an ignorant man. But, oh, you'll look so fine. You'll wear silk stockings with a black seam down the back. And you'll wear high, high heels – *shtikli* – that have fine, fine points. And when those points strike the ground as you walk down the office building halls, they'll go *krtz-krtz*,

krtz-krtz.'

'*Krtz-krtz*?' I giggle and make a face like the kid that I am.

'Yeah,' my *Dedo* says solemnly, uncrossing and recrossing his legs the other way. His legs in their rolled-up pants, his feet in their broken-down gumboots that would go *sloosh-sloosh* in the mud and the rain, if they went anywhere.

'Of course! What do you think? *Krtz-krtz*. That's the sound your shoes will make. *Krtz-krtz*. So that everyone hears you're coming. *Krtz-krtz*. So everyone knows you've arrived, so everybody knows you're here.'



Theodora in the Vizba

It's not always going to be like this. Soon, I'll have to go back home to my quiet, one-bedroom flat in Australia. And my little cousin, Tanja, will grow up and probably go on coffee and cabbage diets. As for *Baba* Slobodanka, she has a sick, sad leg that cries all the time from the hole that never healed up after her operation in the capital. And they're saying they want to take it off, that leg.

'Well, what can you do? What can you do?' *Baba* says that all the time. 'What will come will come.'

But, for now, for this moment, we don't want to think about that.

And you know what else? I'm glad that I decided to come back here – to my father's village – after all. Even though Beti and Verka are now busy and married and have families and responsibilities of their own. My time is mainly spent with *Baba* and Tanja, Beti's brother's youngest, cheeky

daughter, who I have only recently met but feel I have known forever.

With the three of us together, our three female generations – Tanja at nine, *Baba*, eighty-two, and me, somewhere in the middle – everything is good, everything is right. It has to be. We are inside the *vizba*, *Baba*'s *vizba* – which is the house under the house, the house under every house for miles. Where old people and old things, like tomato sauce making machines and black and white box TVs, and religious figures and Communist stars of times past, have to go to live when the upstairs world thinks it has no use for them. But we, Tanja and me, we know better. We know more.

In this village on the plains of Macedonian east, in this forty-four degree heat, the *vizba* is the coolest place to be. It's also the place where you don't have to worry about going forward, keeping up and moving ahead – like they do upstairs, like they do in any upstairs anywhere. Also, you don't – Tanja doesn't – have to worry about bossy, older sisters who think they know everything and stare at mirrors all day and tell on you for the smallest things, trying to curb your freedom. Downstairs, you can just be yourself.

Plus *Baba* keeps a hidden stash of chocolate.

There's already been a screeching hunt for it. And *Baba*, from her sick bed, has pointed her walking stick like an extension of her arm to all the possible places the block could be, but isn't. It's been found, anyway, by Tanja who, with a tight grin, has held the block like it's a trophy that's hers, and hers only. I've chased her around the table to get my share.

Furniture's been banged; knees have been bruised. And *Baba* has shouted out over our noise, 'Hey, you two cucumbers off the same vine, be careful of my leg,' as she's whacked at our bums and poked at our ribs with her stick.

But now, laughing, catching our breath, it's all come to an easy truce.

Tanja's still in charge, of course.

She is the one who tears open the silver wrapper and divides the lines and squares, metes them out carefully, evenly, exactly so that no one gets any more or less. Then, when that is done, in our various poses of luxuriating – *Baba* stretched out on her bed with one arm behind her head, me with my skirt hitched up under my underpants, and Tanja lying relaxed back on the sofa, her long hair hanging off the sofa ledge – we eat. We smile and chew. We don't shriek or shout. We express our pleasure only with soft grunts and the occasional smacking of lips and long *mmm*s until, out of nowhere, out of our great silence, Tanja finds she has something to say.

Holding a square of chocolate high up in the air between her fingertips, she has one question: 'Oh, why, why did those dummies upstairs' – she's talking about her parents here – 'why did they have to call me Tanja? Tanja's such a boring, common name. Why couldn't they for once have thought with their heads? Why didn't they call me something like… like Theodora? That would have suited me better.'

I take a quick look at her face. I want to laugh, but when I see the serious expression, I hold myself back. I would

never want to crush or discourage anything in her. Usually, upstairs especially, she's so shy.

So, I say, 'You know what? If Theodora's the name you like and prefer, then that's who you can be. That's what we'll call you here in the *vizba*. Right, *Baba*?'

Baba nods her head. 'Whatever you say, whatever you tell me, my two little cucumbers off the same vine.'

At that, Tanja's face lights up with possibility.

Then she says to me, 'Well, what about you? Who do you want to be? What name do you want to have? In the *vizba*.'

I say, 'Actually, I like my name. I'm happy with it. I think it fits.'

'No!' says Tanja. 'No, you have to have another name. A special, secret name only for here, for us.'

'Okay, okay,' I say. I try to think, finger to chin. 'Okay, I've got it. I want my name to be… Luda-mila-lunka-linka.'

Theodora just stares at me, disbelievingly. 'That's not a name.'

I say, 'Well, you told me I can have any name I want. And then when I say it, it's not good enough.'

'Alright, alright.' She grants permission and then she moves on. 'Now, *Baba*, how about you? What name do you want?'

Baba, straight away, without blinking, as if she's known the answer for years and has only been waiting patiently for this moment to arrive, says, 'Pepi.'

But Tanja, who's too smart, has something to say about

that also.

'Ha!' she says. 'You just want that name because that's the name of the lady on that Spanish soap opera you love to watch on TV every afternoon.'

Well, *Baba* isn't hiding anything.

'Yeah,' she says. 'So what?'

To which Tanja has no good answer.

And so, that's that. It's decided, it's done.

We, in order of age but not importance, are Theodora, Luda-mila-lunka-linka and Pepi. Here. In the *vizba*.

Now what? What next?

Oh, we just do what we always do.

Me and Tanja – I mean, me and Theodora – we eat more chocolate, of course. We finish what's left off, including *Baba*'s share, what she couldn't finish herself.

Then, in the stomach, we feel a bit sick.

That doesn't stop us from playing – actually, it helps – an almost violent game of what Tanja calls *Dzhanderi* and I call Snap.

'Snap!'

'Snap!'

'Slap!'

Before we know it then, it's time – *Baba* says it is – for Tanja to turn on the old, black and white box TV and fix the aerial in the right spot, so that *Baba* can watch, without lines or fuzz, her favourite, with-subtitles Spanish soap opera, the one with Pepi in it.

'Pepi!'

To be honest, for us, for me and Tanja, *Baba*'s show is a bit boring. Still, we two cucumbers know we have to, we want to be – *shhh* – extra quiet so that she can watch in peace and forget about her sick, sad, crying leg, at least for a little while. While it's on, I do Tanja's hair.

'Come on, Luda-mila-lunka-linka.'

I am her happy slave. I fix the locks the way she likes: in lots of thin, little plaits. And when they're done, I twist a piece of long wire around each – the wire that we found underneath the stairs, behind the tomato sauce making machine – so that each will stick out any way she wants. Up or down, straight or crooked, even in a zigzag.

The whole process takes a while and when *Baba*'s show is over, after almost an hour, we're still going. We're not even halfway through. But Tanja doesn't get up to turn off the TV, and *Baba* doesn't ask her to either. That's because they've just put on one of those fill-in, five minute folktales that they sometimes do right before the news. And we love them; they mesmerise us, though they don't always make full, logical sense.

This time – twist-and-curl, twist-and-curl, we watch wide-eyed – it's about an old, hunchbacked woman dressed in rags, who pushes herself along with the help of a walking stick. From door to door through the village she goes saying: 'I don't want to know the day, or the time, or the year, but please, from the kindness of your heart, could you give me a crumb? Could you give me a place to rest my weary bones? Just for a moment, and then I'll be on my way.'

The first two houses tell her: 'Beggar woman, be gone. Out of sight!' But when the third door opens up, the young woman inside says: 'Yes, Mother. Come in.' Obeying the request, she doesn't tell the old woman the day or time or year, but she does give her the crumb that she wants and a soft, cushioned seat. Then a baby starts to cry. The woman must tend to it. She goes and the old woman, gathering a newfound strength, finds she can suddenly stand up straight. She throws down her walking stick and stretches out her arms which become wings. She turns into a bird and, straight away, flies up the chimney.

And that's it. The end.

'Ha,' says *Baba*, shaking her head. 'You never know who you're really talking to, do you?'

And I say, 'Yeah,' and poke Tanja – I mean, Theodora – in the back.

But she just says, 'Hmmm?' distractedly, not getting my meaning at all about our new double identities.

She's too busy dreaming as she gets up to turn the TV knob off before the news comes on, which *Baba* doesn't like to watch – none of us do.

'We know the blood is dripping. We know there is suffering everywhere,' *Baba* always says.

'But, Pepi,' Tanja says. 'Pepi, you know what?'

'What? Say it, my little, green gherkin.'

'When I grow up, I'm going to fly on an aeroplane like Luda-mila-lunka-linka here. I'll see everything that's only beautiful and good. And I'll write you long letters about it. I'll

never forget you. And then, when I'm finished, I'm coming straight back here to the *vizba*, to live with you for always.'

'Well,' *Baba* says, honestly. 'I don't think I'll be around then.'

'You will,' says Tanja. She goes straight to *Baba* and holds her face in her two small hands. 'You will be here. And your leg will be all better. You'll have two good legs to walk on. You'll even be able to fly, if you want to!'

'Uh-huh,' say *Baba*.

'Uh-huh.'

'We'll see.'

'Yeah,' says Tanja, confidently. 'We'll see.'

And we will, I think but I don't say. We'll see what will be and what won't, and who will stay and who will have to go. We'll see everything when it's time, and not before. But right now, I still don't want to. I don't want to think about goodbyes. So, I get up from the spot I've been sitting in too long, and I stretch. I yawn – *Ahhh-ooo-whaaa* – inarticulate, monster-like, and raise my arms above my head. At least, I attempt to – but the ceiling in the *vizba* is so low that I can't even straighten my elbows. I can lay my palms flat on the ceiling. I can do my best.

'Yeah. Go on. Try, try,' says *Baba*, who, happy, cheers me on from her bed.

It must look like I think I'm some sort of muscle woman who can lift the whole of the upstairs – the brick, the stone, the cement, the rushing ahead and passing of time, the happiness and the sorrow of life, everything – with my bare

hands.

'Come on,' says Tanja, joining in. 'Push, push.'

And I do with all my might.

'But it's… ugh… no… ugh… use. It won't move.'

Then I fall down in defeat, in a heap, and we all laugh ourselves silly.

And that's when there's the call from outside.

'Ho, Tanja,' says the voice, serious.

We all freeze because we know it belongs to Tanja's older sister, Mirka. We don't usually see much of her. She's too busy doing other things like fighting pimples and helping her mother with the chores and planning to go to college next year to become an engineer of a mechanical kind.

'Tanja, I know you're in there,' Mirka calls again. 'Mama says you have to come up and eat. Now!'

'I'm not hungry,' Tanja tries. 'Tell Mama I'm not coming, okay?'

Then she, all three of us, wait, almost not breathing, for the response that we know will come. And it's coming, it's coming. Boom, it's here.

'Tanja!' shouts Mirka at the top of her lungs. 'I know what you're doing in there. You can't just live on chocolate, you know.'

Tanja smiles and keeps quiet. Yes, she can.

'Tanja! I'm telling you. Open up right now.'

Mirka bangs at the door. She twists and shakes the locked knob. Then, in the *vizba* window, next to *Baba*'s bed, her angry face and squinty eyes appear, adjusting to the dark

and when they do, when they find Tanja…

'Heee!' is the sucking-in sound that the mouth of Mirka makes. 'Heee! What did you do to your hair, you freak?'

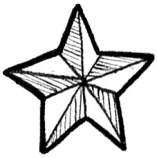
'It looks good,' says Tanja, proud, moving in closer to the window so her sister can take a better look. 'You think you know everything, but you don't. You don't know anything about us. Anyway.' Her hands are on her hips, she's flicking back her wired-up hair, and the hair is doing its best to obey. 'Anyway, my name's not Tanja. It's Theodora.'

Mirka looks on, droll-faced, drop-jawed.

'Tanja, have you lost your mind?'

But Tanja just sighs and rolls her eyes. 'Mirka, how many times do I have to say? My name's Theodora when I'm in the *vizba*. Theodora!' she proclaims. 'Do you want me to write it on a piece of paper? Do you want me to spell it out? Because I can. It's T-H-E-O-D-O-R-A. Okay? T-H-E-O-D-O-R-A. Can you get it through your head? Have you got it? Now, can you understand?'

And then Tanja turns and looks at us, at me and *Baba*, and gives a wide, wild, gleeful grin.



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Notes

‘Blaga Writing Poetry’ appeared in *Gargouille* 10 (2019); ‘The Menkas’ in *Heroines* (The Neo Perennial Press, 2018); ‘Walnuts, Almonds, Nuts’ was highly commended for the Ink Tears Short Story Competition (2018). ‘In My Father’s Village’ appeared in *Gargouille* 7 (2017); ‘Greasy Words’ in *Girls Will Be Girls* Winter Edition (2017); ‘Shoes That Go Krtz-Krtz’ in *Tincture* 17 (2017); ‘Theodora in the Vizba’ in *The Wrong Quarterly* V (2017); ‘The Menkas’ in *Headland* 5, 2016; ‘Lezbianka’ in *Quadrant* 60.1/2 (2016); ‘I Am Natasha’ was performed by Chrissie Page at Quart Shorts Literary Reading Night (2017). ‘The Menkas’ won the Biennial Literary Award (2015); ‘The Sock Seller’s Socks, The Plum Picker’s Plums’ was audio-produced and broadcast by Radiotonic, Radio National (2015); ‘The Sock Seller’s Socks, The Plum Picker’s Plums’ also appeared in *Hecate* 39.1 (2015); ‘From What I’ve Read So Far Of Yours, It Sounds Like Every Man in Macedonia Hit on You’ in *Verity La* (2014); ‘Walnuts, Almonds, Nuts’ in *Meanjin* 73.2 (2014). ‘Lezbianka’ was longlisted for the Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize (2014); ‘Prison in Macedonia’ appeared in *Transnational Literature* 5 (2012); ‘I Am Natasha’ appeared in *Hecate* 37.2 (2012).

About the Author

Tamara Lazaroff is a writer of fiction and narrative nonfiction. Her short stories and personal essays have been published widely in Australian, New Zealand and UK journals and magazines including *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *Feminartsy*, *The Big Issue*, *Headland* and *The Wrong Quarterly*, among many others. She has a particular interest in hidden histories, the migrant experience, queer and feminist themes, oral storytelling traditions, and belonging and social connectedness. Currently, she lives in Brisbane.