SON AND SNOWFLAKE

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Translated from the German by Yana Ellis

(…)

SARAJEVO

In another time

Son and Snowflake

When people asked my father how come he called me, Dijana – his first born – Sine, meaning Son, and whether he would rather have had a son instead of a daughter, he just smiled mysteriously like he knew something about me that everyone else would sooner or later discover. They pried, 'But if you did have a son, what would you call him?'

'Well, donkey, of course, what else?!' Father shot back as if firing a gun. Everyone nodded in understanding, as it suddenly dawned on them that, like most fathers, they, too, called their sons things like dumb head or magarac or some other such animal – majmun, konjina, mulac, tele, bivo, krmak, džukac.

No one batted an eye when he called Dada – my dark-eyed, dark-haired little sister – Pahuljica Snowflake. Whether appropriate or not, it was customary to call one's daughter princess, doll, flower, blossom, butter cup, goldie, raindrop, violet or even snowflake. Only I was called Sine. Mother, on the other hand, always called me Dušica, Little soul. She would say: 'Steady on, Dušica, you need to watch your temper! You came angry into this world, with your middle finger sticking up. Even the doctor in the delivery room said in surprise: "Oh, it's a girl! You'll have to keep her away from guns and find her a calm husband." Dušica, if you carry on like this, you'll end up alone; no one likes angry people. A lone crow cannot survive the winter!'

I lost no sleep over her words. I didn't like weapons anyway, and no one needs a husband, but being alone always scared me.

Around here, if you want to really curse someone, you say: 'God grant that no one knocks on your door ever again.'

But how's that supposed to work, I thought, how, if you please, could I to end up a lone crow in this family of thousands, in this city? That will never happen. I have my sister, my father and my mother, many aunts and uncles, grandparents, friends and neighbours. They can't all vanish overnight, can they? Back then, I thought that to end up alone you'd have to lose an

entire city, your whole family, and all your friends. Now I know that all you need is to lose one person. When that one person is gone, you're alone forever. So I carried on being my father's angry son who found it harder to say yes than to say no, who tended to get upset about not enough sweets and too many injustices, who beat up anyone who called me Son like my father did, as well as anyone who bothered my sister or any of the other princesses, dolls, flowers or butter cups.

This went on until I started school. There I announced to everyone that when I grew up, I would be Gavrilo Princip. From then on, they called me Princip. I didn't care it was a man's name, anything was better than Son. Since we already had a Lenin, a Ghandi, a Conan, and a Presley in the class, as Princip I didn't stand out too much until, at some point, I grew breasts, and the ones who wanted an extra beating called me behind my back: 'Princip has boobies!' I hid them as best as I could, because who needs breasts – but I'll tell you later about Gavrilo Princip's breasts and how I went back to being Son.

To my sister Dada I was Di-jana. She struggled to say my full name, so she divided it into two parts. She was a surprise baby. Mother was on birth control, but Dada arrived anyway and in the dead of a cruel Sarajevo winter at that. Father said she was the snowflake that floats into the room just before the window is slammed shut.

I had come into the world before her, and somehow, she knew that and treasured it. I was always a step ahead of her. But she's been around for as long as I can remember. She floated and fluttered and buzzed around me, jumped and fell on me, rushed up to me, tumbled and whizzed to wherever I was. From the very beginning it felt as if I had never existed before she came along. The first image I remember of myself is with Dada in my arms, her small head leaning on mine, we are in our parent's room, it's cold and dark, only a candle burning on Mother's bedside table because there were so many power cuts back then. I looked, fascinated, at our shadows on the wall. There were two heads and one body, her small body keeping me warm.

It took her a long time to walk or talk. Father believed it was the -17 chill on the day she was born and the harsh weather those following months. 'No one goes walking and then opens their mouth in such freezing cold.' I was the only one who always knew what she was trying to say and where she wanted to go. I spoke for her, and I carried her everywhere. Once, when she was about three years old, she slammed her hand in a drawer, ran over to me and showed me her red, swollen fingers. She screamed in pain, tears pouring down her pale face. I hugged her tightly and tried to comfort her; I blew on and carefully kissed the swollen fingers that looked

like they might pop. Nothing helped, and she screamed and screamed. I desperately called for Mother and helplessly asked Dada what I should do. Suddenly, for a moment, she went silent. She raised her other hand to my face and gently touched my eyes, first one and then the other. I should cry with her, she wanted to tell me. Then she screamed again, shriller and louder. She screamed and I screamed with her. Only when Mother ran into the room in panic, a bundle of firewood for the stove in her arms, did we stop screaming and begin laughing. Mother looked so comical with her huge eyes and face contorted in fear. It looked as if she had forgotten the rest of her face somewhere outside and was made only of eyes. She often looked like this – frightened and worried. Sometimes we would scream just to startle her because we couldn't get enough of laughing at her funny face.

For Dada it went like this: no matter how bad something was, it was enough for me to be with her and cry with her to calm her down. For me it went like this: without hearing her breathing I couldn't fall asleep, without her I was lost, with her close by I never got angry. Dada was terrified of angry people. If she were afraid, she would start laughing uncontrollably until the fear was gone. I yelled at her once because she had lost my favourite ballpoint pen, one of those where you could switch between four colours; she laughed until she threw up.

Dada laughed when frightened, Mother got hiccups. I remember a movie night when we watched 'Dance of the Vampires'. During his mad escape from the vampires Polanski's screams were punctuated by Mother's hiccups and Dada's laugher. Dada always knew where she was and what she wanted, and I went along with it. In those days, we agreed on everything, except two things, which to this day I don't understand, and yet they meant everything to Dada: ballet and cats. How could anyone even remotely like ballet and cats? She would watch the snowflake-like ballerinas on TV and say with a firm voice: 'That's me!' One day she came home with a light grey kitten she had found in a dump in the woods and said cheerfully: 'That's me!'

However, she didn't call the kitten Dada, but Miško, little mouse, because of his mousy-grey coat, but we'll talk about Miško later.

Even before she could speak, she could dance. She imitated the ballerinas from the TV, and her greatest talent was mimicking the tortured facial expression of the dying swan. I always pretended to recognise the hand flapping as the flapping of wings so that I didn't appear ignorant, but in truth, I didn't get any of that drama in tulle at all and found it totally ridiculous. Father took Dada to ballet classes despite Mother's protests that it was too expensive, and it

would damage her bones; his only response was: ‘A Snowflake belongs with other snowflakes, otherwise there won’t be snow.’ Mother muttered to herself: ‘What does he mean by that?’, but she was one of those wives who preferred to save themselves the headache by not bothering much to understand what their husbands were saying.

Unlike me, Dada was friendly, cheerful, and light-hearted. One day, though, when she was around ten, she came back from primary school in tears. Nothing could calm her down, not even me. It wasn’t until much later, after we had gone to bed, that she stopped sobbing, and said defiantly: ‘I’m not a Serb, not a Croat, a Jew, a Roma or a Bosnian. I’m a dainty, graceful, beautiful ballerina!’

This sentence was the first sign of what would be unleashed upon us in time, the first snowflake announcing the storm that would freeze the blood in our veins for years to come.

SARAJEVO
MARCH 1992
'TV-spitter' or 'Losing My Religion'

Dada can no longer watch ballerinas because we're not allowed the turn on the TV, that govno, anymore, that crap. And anyway, there're fewer and fewer ballerinas to be seen there, fewer images of the Adriatic coast, of Yugoslav athletes performing miracles all over the world, fewer images of the Slovenian Alps (where everyone must go at least once in their lives) or partisan films reminding us of the huge sacrifices we make, but where we ultimately always defeat the Chetniks, the Ustaše and the Nazis.

The TV now broadcasts a lot of scantily clad women with big boobs 'singing' turbo-folk songs and lounging around suggestively as if they were having invisible sex with the cameramen (and in fact with all three of them, recording from different angles, at the same time). The lyrics of the 'songs' are exclusively about men who 'only want one thing' and how they won't be getting it under any circumstances. Everything else about these 'singers' says the opposite: come and take me, I want a 'real' man, I escaped from a porno-film, but I too 'only want one thing'.

Ever since Dada asked what the 'one thing' was, Mother has more or less forbidden us from watching TV. At least there's another singer, Lepa Brena, Beautiful Brena, who also jumps around half-naked, but we are allowed to watch and even like her because she pulls us together and sings about how beautiful both we and Yugoslavia are. Besides that, all the channels are either half-naked bawlers or angry men giving angry speeches, interspersed with images from military drills to defend against any enemy out to destroy Yugoslavia. We still believe the enemy will come from outside; we were taught that in school. Tanks and tits merge with screaming men who somehow look like children throwing a tantrum, like badly made-up clowns, still funny but at the same time realistic and unsettling.

On New Year's Eve 1992, we hear more real gunshots than usual, into the early hours. Father says: 'The war has started.' We don't believe him. Since then, he's been sitting nonstop in front of the TV, frantically switching from channel to channel. As soon as a 'singer' comes on, after the tanks and the images of the war in Croatia, he switches to the next speaker on the next channel, before she's even jiggled her tits. Words tumble out, words he's never heard out loud, words no one has dared utter on television before. People who are strangers to us spit out these

words. This one man is new to us, apparently, he's a doctor and a poet. He has greying hair, crazed eyes and roars at his followers with an unhinged voice as if he were driving a flock of deaf sheep up the side of a mountain. He's on every channel and an ever increasingly larger part of our day-to-day lives. Dada shrieks with laughter every time she sees him, not because she's frightened by him, but because his hairdo look just like Miss Golubeva's, her old Russian ballet teacher. His crazed eyes also look like hers when she's angry at someone for getting the 'pigeon wing' wrong again. 'You not pigeon, you bear!' Dada imitates her. 'You not Bosnian, you Serb!' the clown echoes her on screen. Dada's laughter is contagious to us all. The television rattles and threatens to explode from this man's manic roaring. We can't stop laughing, and meanwhile Mother is in the kitchen cooking dinner in a fit of hiccups. The clown's words echo through the apartment and mix with the smell of burnt stuffed peppers.
'Target … volunteers … independence referendum … damn … territory … Muslims … an eye for an eye … vermin … disappear … liberate … fear … dirt … genocide … coercion … we … deportation … humiliation… the others … excrement… protect our children … honour … our wives and daughters … distrust …'

In the beginning, father also laughs at the angry clown, who keeps saying: 'Northern Ireland is a holiday village compared to Bosnia!' But soon the clown's words are followed by the first dead bodies. Father is furious because now the speaker on TV also says *us* and *them*. The poet doctor wants to protect us from *them*. When he says, *we* are under threat, it must be true; surely, he's better informed. After that, our father says there are *their* channels and *our* channels. When he watches *their* channel, we only hear snippets – we need volunteers … referendum … territory … liberate … filth … annihilation … vermin … we must… – interrupted by Father's loud curses – 'You standing shitter[1], you droning moron, you bloodsucker. I wouldn't even give you three chickens to protect! I'm not your *WE*!'
From then on, Mother, Dada and I give up the crap thing voluntarily and Father sits on his own in front of it.
Every so often, he summons me and says in a serious voice: 'My son, remember this, we are not his *we*, we don't agree with what he's saying, in this film *we* are the partisans, and *they* are the Chetniks!'

[1] Marko Vešović was the first to call Radovan Karadžić, the poet doctor who was a president of the Republika Srpska during the Bosnian war, a "standing shitter". The term alludes to the fact that the village, where Karadžić was born and grew up, was under snow for seven months of the year and, since there were no indoor toilets, people had to go outside. Because the snow was too high, they couldn't squat but had to do their business standing up.

I've just turned eighteen and have no idea who I am and why. I don't care about this clown; I don't care what Father's angry about. I have plenty of reasons of my own to be angry. At night I'm usually out going clubbing in the city with Zoka. At breakfast each morning Mother asks if I've found myself a boyfriend. It makes me furious. Why does everyone assume that a girl goes out to find a boy. I go out to find myself; I don't need a man for that.

Then, at the beginning of March, before sunrise, after a long night of dancing and drinking, Zoka and I sit with a few friends in café Sloboda – café Freedom. Including the twin brothers Darko and Marko, who everyone knows as Marx and Engels, and who have been my best friends ever since primary school. We're eating kiflice pastries and drinking Bosanska coffee, when out of nowhere Marx says: 'We're raja – friends, so I'm looking out for you when I give you this warning – the city's surrounded, go home, tell your parents and leave while you can!'

'What're you talking about?' I ask.

'We won't allow you to take our land from us!' he says.

I ask again: 'What are you on about, who's *we*, who's *you*?'

'What you call the sovereign Bosnian State has never existed and it never will!' he says, glaring at me with a red face and angry eyes.

Engels says: 'Guys, he's drunk, he's just talking shit. Darko, you oaf, stop it.'

'No, Engels,' says Zoka, 'let him speak, we're all listening!'

I'm stunned and scoot away from Marx. Sitting close to him suddenly feels like coming across a dead rat on the street and being afraid it could still jump up and infect you with a deadly disease.

'What's wrong, Princip?' Marx hisses at me. 'Do I stink? All of a sudden, we stink to you, huh!' he shouts, his face reddening even more. His eyes look as if any second they'll grow legs of their own, jump out of their sockets and trample over me.

'You don't stink, Marx,' I say quietly, 'but the shit you're saying stinks.'

'I'm just telling it as it is,' he retorts, his voice severe, changed.

'Then put that truth in your arse where it belongs,' I say coldly.

Zoka picks up the tune: 'Exactly, and you can fuck off to wherever it is you say is so much better. Maybe there you'll find someone actually wants you to dump your truth on them. We're staying here, in our non-existent city and non-existent street. We'll see who's doing better then!'

Marx fiddles with his jacket and suddenly has a gun in his hand; he points it at our faces.

Engels puts himself between us: 'Darko, what are you a zombie or what? Come off it!'

‘Fuck off, Marko! I’ll shoot you too, you traitor.’
Marx cocks the gun, it clicks, a shot fires. The front window of Sloboda shatters behind us.
For a moment, silence reigns. Marx, the traitor, takes off, but then turns back again: ‘You’re trapped, you filthy vermin. The city is already surrounded, there’s artillery every thirty-six metres. We’ll shoot each and every one of you, at any time, in any place, day or night. You won’t be able to run, you won’t even have water, you won’t see the sun or the moon, you’ll starve to death, no standing in front of shop windows, we’re going to destroy all of you, and then we’ll see who’s doing better!’
Marx marches off into the hills without Engels, gun in hand and an arse full of truth.
Eventually, Zoka breaks the silence: ‘What was he talking about, this artillery shit?’
Engels clears his throat, ‘Our father told us. He’d already been there and apparently saw everything, said Mother’s already left town.’
We don’t believe him. Starting that morning, though, I pick up Dada from ballet school in the evenings. Since that morning, I no longer trust the dark.

And then, towards the end of March, Father is still sitting in front of the TV late into the night when he sees images of people lying dead on the streets of a small town in northern Bosnia; he watches them, partly naked, alone or in small groups, killed by the guerrillas of that charlatan clown. Father shouts, sobs, asks questions, can’t believe all this evil, and while spitting angrily at the TV he has his first heart attack.
Meanwhile I’m in the BB Club, dancing and singing, ‘Ohhh, life, is bigger, it’s bigger than you, and you are not me. The lengths that I will go to, the distance in your eyes. Oh no, I’ve said too much, I set it up. That’s me in the corner, that’s me in the spotlight, losing my religion. Trying to keep up with you, and I don’t know if I can do it. Oh no, I’ve said too much, I haven’t said enough. I thought that I heard you laughing, I thought that I heard you sing, I think I thought I saw you try…’

SARAJEVO

APRIL 1992

‘April-li-li-li’ or ‘The last passenger flight from Belgrade to Sarajevo is cancelled due to fog’

‘Winter arrived early this year, as early as November; it is cold, damp, and whiny; tears of ice drip almost constantly over the city. But most mysterious is the fog that regularly descends like an impenetrable grey dome. Everyone who doesn’t have to go out is happy. I spend my winter holidays here, in the mountains. My idea of winter magic is the image of the city, often swallowed up by the fog. You only know it’s still there because the minarets, the church spires, and the top of the television tower stick out like watchmen and supervise the city from above.’ Dada writes an essay for her homework on the topic ‘My winter magic.’

At the end of March the news presenter, unusually emotional, opens the 7:30 broadcast bulletin with the words: ‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, hopefully you’ve found your way home in this fog. We don’t have it easy these days, the Sarajevska magla has nothing to do with a normal fog that comes and goes. The Sarajevska magla is grumpy, it has something obstinate, something stubborn about it like everything else in this city. Here, everything that comes from above, whether it’s rain, snow, lightning, fog, or politicians, is vicious, because it feels it’s been offended as if it believes it deserves a better place to descend upon or to rule, such as the Algarve coast for example, with its ocean and cliffs, and not here, on this disgruntled grey city, on these disgruntled insignificant people. Indeed, who among us wouldn’t like to be somewhere else right now?’

Dada would probably prefer to be up in the mountains, for the fog is only beautiful if you’re not stuck inside it. The notorious Sarajevska magla feels like a punishment in and of itself; it’s suffocating, doughy, thick, and sticky; it moves slowly through the valley as if it were a huge, grey, hungry snail that swallows everything in its path and prevails over every emotion. No one knows when it will come, no one knows when it will leave. Trapped in the fog’s watery dome is the stink of smoke from thousands of fires smouldering in the ovens of houses and factories; gulping down this fog is like being on the verge of drowning. You take tiny breaths, shorter, more frequent. You come home wet even though it hasn’t rained. Some cover their noses and mouths with scarves just so they can breathe at all. For days, for weeks, there’s no seeing the sky or the sun. People grow silent, restless, dour, and irritable. Many, like Dada’s mother, are afraid to go out; you can see a metre in front of you at most, it’s impossible to find

your bearings in that void. So, Mother never leaves for work alone, her colleague Maja picks her up most mornings.

Maja's father, a heavy smoker, died of lung cancer years ago, and now she blames every evil in the world, like the fog, on smoking, and often chants reverently: 'This is God's smoke. God is smoking and blowing his smoke on us, we're all going to die of lung cancer, everything bad sticks to this fog, we're smoking with God.'

Mother keeps quiet then, overwhelmed by it all she walks fixedly, clinging to Maja's hand, as if she were walking on the edge of a cliff and as if a tiny lapse of concentration could cost her life and cast her into the abyss. She coughs heavily. All you can hear in this fog is coughing, some hum a melody or carry a portable radio, so you know they're there, or bring along a flashlight, but sound and light only vanish in this muggy porridge. When Mother comes home in the evenings her ribs hurt from coughing so much, she's hoarse, she calls it fog-hoarse. For once, she goes easy on her students. 'Poor birdies, they can no longer hit the notes, it's because of the fog …' Even the real birdies can't hit their notes any longer either, only the crows caw and reign over the Sarajevska magla. And Dijana, who else?

Dijana is at home in the fog. She's a fog child. The day she was born, the fog was so thick that 'even the birds had to fly on foot', her mother always says. Dijana, happy and excited, often urges Dada: 'Come on, let's go watch the fog.'

'What's there to watch? There's nothing there!' Dada says then and Dijana retorts, 'Look closely!' and smiles at her invitingly. 'Dada, the fog is freedom. Don't you understand that?'

Dijana takes Dada to the park, hides with her in the bushes, as if anyone could see them in the fog, and spooks people scurrying by in every way possible. Out of nowhere, she pelts them with small potatoes, eggs, kidney beans, and once even with a dead mouse, one of those Miško regularly brings home 'to pay his rent', as her father puts it. People run away in panic, cursing, and hurling threats. Dijana imitates their shrieks, and the sisters roll over laughing; they amuse themselves like this for days. Dijana often plays 'hide and seek' with Dada in the fog in the grassy park. They run in opposite directions and then try to find each other again. Dada doesn't like looking for her sister in the damp, terrifying nothingness. She usually stands in one place and lets Dijana look for her for some time, because she knows her sister loves the game, and she doesn't want to spoil the fun for her. Dijana always finds her in the end, it's as if she's the only one who can see through the fog.

This winter's end the fog is unusually persistent. Dada has little reason to be happy these days. Her ballet teacher Miss Golubeva, whom she loves more than anything, is nowhere to be found,

no longer turns up to the school, hasn't left word with anyone. Without dancing Dada feels even more blind than in the fog. Her best friend Slavica disappears, too, and Dada calls to her several times at home, but no one answers. People are starting to disappear from Father's work as well, he's shaking his head more each day: 'We all know the fog suits those who need to hide, thieves and clandestine lovers. Those who sneak out of the city ahead of us under its cover are not doing it out of love for us, but because they want to steal something from us.'

Father's evenings in front of the TV become increasingly distraught, agitated, Mother's grumbling grows pricklier each morning when there's ever more spittle to wipe off the TV. They whisper to each other over coffee, always alert to the girls' presence. Once Dada catches Mother looking for the family passports, finding them in a drawer and then stuffing them into a small black bag and putting it by the front door. Her hiccups echo and echo through the quiet apartment.

Then, on the morning of the first of April, Dada walks to school through the fog, through the filthy weeks-old slush, feeling her way along the walls of the buildings. The fog has thinned out a bit, now and then the headlights of cars driving at a snail's pace waltz across her path. People hurry past her, no one looks anyone in the eye – that's the first thing you learn to do in the fog. Nevertheless, Dada sees that many have their children with them along with suitcases, holdalls, sacks. *Where are they planning on going, it's not the school holidays*, she thinks, confused. She hears quick footsteps approaching, someone runs towards her. *That's weird, no one runs like that in the fog*. Her ballet teacher Miss Golubeva abruptly appears in front of her. Her otherwise bushy grey hair, now matted and damp, clings to her head; she looks as if an overly affectionate cow had licked her. Her face pale, her coat buttoned haphazardly, an oversized suitcase in her hand, she halts in surprise before Dada. 'Little one…,' she stutters, her face flushing.

Dada lets out a cry of joy and flings her arms around her enthusiastically: 'You're back! We were worried.'

'I wasn't gone. I'm only going now…'

Her voice is heavy, tearful, she slips out of Dada's embrace, embarrassed. She sounds a bit theatrical, stilted, as if she were playing Anna Karenina in the train station scene.

'You're making an April fool's joke, aren't you?' Dada asks uncertainly.

'The first of April is no longer what it used to be, now that everyone lies every day. I'm sorry, my little one…,' Miss Golubeva says and disappears back into the fog as quickly as she had appeared.

(…)

Nothing special has happened since that Thursday. Dada listens to music at home, visits Father in the hospital, does the shopping for Mother and waits for Sunday and the first ice-cream with her friend Leyla. On Sunday, the fifth of April, around 11 a.m., Dada goes out and meets Leyla at the Baščaršija bazaar in the town centre. Excited and giggling, with ice-cream in hand, they trail behind a group of boys because Leyla likes one of them. His name is Džemo, and he's a DJ. They stroll along Tito Street, closely following the boys, until they reach the Sarajka department store. Around twenty of the boys' friends are waiting there, carrying banners, wearing sunglasses, one of them even has a dog with him. Leyla knows one of the girls in the group, and without giving it too much thought, they join them. Five minutes later they're walking with a motley crowd towards Marijin Dvor district. From windows all over people wave at them enthusiastically, people step out of their houses, people are emerging from side streets and spontaneously join the demonstrators. Dada is nowhere on Leyla's mind for she's walking close to Džemo now, both flirting eagerly. He's taken Leyla's hat and tries to put it on, she's trying to get it away from him. Dada tries to keep up with them, but as small and delicate as she is, she is now frequently overseen and jostled by others, but she keeps going. What would she do at home? Clean the windows with Mama? A hair-raising noise echoes through the streets, Dada has to cover her ears; she notices with annoyance that her fingers are sticky with ice-cream, it's onto her hair now as well, she hates it.

She decides to slip away from the crowd and go wash her hands and have a drink in one of the cafés, she is parched, and anyway everything is starting to look surreal, as if she were in a film, her brain fog is slowly making itself known again. She tries to manoeuvre herself out, but she can't; the crowd clenches her tightly and carries her onwards. Rushing to her head are images of the fearsome Ljuta Cura river from her childhood, and thoughts of Dijana – is she somewhere here as well? How is she supposed to get out of here?

Next thing she knows, she's in the middle of a raging mob on the large plateau; she's alone; she's lost Leyla. Gunshots. Then word gets round that people were shot on the bridge. Part of the crowd is pushing towards the scene. People pour out of the side streets onto the square, they are louder, shriller, their determination now fierce. Abruptly, the crowd parts before Dada to make way for a group of men carrying a woman shot on the bridge. Everyone around Dada stands in solidarity with the injured woman, thousands of throats shout in unison: 'Murderers! Murderers!' The men come directly towards Dada. Dijana's blond hair appears before her eyes, sticky with blood; her curls drift in the air as the men carry her lifeless body through the

frenzied throng. Two men at the front, three at the back, Dijana's head lolls back and forth without support … Now Dada gets a glimpse of her – why is Dijana's face so calm? Dada wants to stop them, to say something, but they've passed her in a flash, the crowd closes in again. Wait, she silently screams, that's my sister! Mute, Dada stands on the giant plateau, she's lost track of time and just watches the world around her become more incomprehensible by the second. Hundreds of thousands of throats thunder: 'Hoćemo mir! We want freedom!' The voices reverberate through the valley and are returned even angrier, even more urgent. Like in a Hollywood action film she again hears shots, the chanting halts, thousands of people drop to the ground as if on command. Huddled together they form a living carpet, its colours are those of the Yugoslav flag – blue, white, red; the flags' red stars dance back and forth on the carpet as though come to life. To protect themselves from the shots, people dive in between the bodies of others and disappear among them as if into a dark lake. Still, the human carpet lies there as if on a platter, as if at a macabre carpet bazaar so its durability could be tested before it's offered for sale. What would such a human carpet be worth? What is the life of these thousands of people here worth? Dada realises with a shock: 'Nothing.' No one knows where the next shots will come from, people shield their heads with their hands, their banners, their Yugoslav flags.

Someone yells: 'Behind the curtain, in the hotel, he's shooting from there.' All heads turn in that direction. Dada is still the only one standing up in the middle of this human carpet, someone grabs her hand and pulls her down. She ends up under a giant portrait of Tito, it covers her like a roof. Under this roof it smells of fear-sweat, tears, tobacco, aftershave, gunpowder and carnations. Someone breaths frantically into Dada's hair, the thin voice of a woman praying to Jesus for help. Then, new shots, now louder, the carpet cannot withstand the pressure of fear, it bursts, and like angry ants trailing confused out of their hill that's been poked with a stick, people scatter in all directions, away from the plateau, away from danger. Dada remains lying down. Where should she go?

Then she hears someone call her name. It's Dijana's voice. She looks around, everything's moving, she can't work out where the voice is coming from. Did she really hear this voice? No. Dijana was carried past her, she saw the trail of blood. Ah, yes, the trail of blood … she looks at the ground, it's still there … Finally, she can think again, the blood belongs to Dijana. She stands up and begins to follow the trail, surely her sister will be at the end of it, alive or dead. She runs, bumps into people, she's pushed, trampled on, insulted; Dada has never seen so many adults out of control – frightened, disoriented, staggering, helpless – a total loss of control. Finally, she is at the edge of the square, the trail of blood suddenly breaks off, she

looks around feverishly, Dijana must be somewhere. Again, she feels herself plunging into a twilight state. The earth opens under her feet, she loses balance, staggers forward, trembling and for a few moments no longer knows who she is, where she is, what she is doing here. She looks behind her to where Dijana's trail of blood ends, as if seeking help, then she sees people trampling over the blood, she screams: 'No, stop stepping on it, that's my sister!'

In that moment, a young man snatches her arm and drags her away. She fights as hard as she can, someone else comes and takes her hand; they pull her behind them into a side street. Out of breath, they stop in front of a small shop, all three leaning against its dirty window. 'Little one, you must go home,' says one of them. 'Give her a moment,' says the other softly. 'She's just lost her sister…' He strokes her hair gently. Only now does Dada see that they are twins and they are armed. They can't be more than twenty. One of them sees Dada's look. 'Don't worry, we won't hurt you … we're defending the city.' Then they hear the saleswoman in the shop behind them screeching at her brother on the phone. He's obviously in Belgrade. 'The war has begun! Yes! What? You're watching it live!? But that's not true, they're lying to you! What's that supposed to mean, "We see beautiful people on the streets chanting Peace, Peace!" You must get us out of here! What…the flight to Sarajevo is cancelled because of the fog? No, we haven't had any fog for days. They're shooting at us, right now. Believe me! It's war here. Why don't you believe me?' One of the boys goes to the door and fires in the air several times, the woman jumps in fear. 'Do you believe me now?' She drops the receiver in panic and runs out of the shop through the back door. 'What did you do that for?' asks the other boy, surprised. 'Her shouting got on my nerves…!' They wink at each other amused and walk into the shop, each takes a chocolate bar and completely forgetting Dada, they walk back towards the plateau. Dada glances around the shop and realises that she's never been so thirsty in her entire life. An absurd, tingling feeling, alone in a room full of sweets, and she can take anything she wants, no one will ever know. What wouldn't Dijana, who would kill for sweets, give for that? She walks past the crammed shelves – happy, satisfied women, children and animals smile at her from every direction, she stops in front of the shelf of chocolates and looks at the packaging of Dijana's favourite. A cow grazes peacefully on a green meadow with the Alps in the background. She chooses the largest bar and tucks it under her arm. She's looking for water really, but for some reason pauses in front of the shelf right next to the sweets. Colourful bottles of alcohol are lined up like school children in the playground waiting to be picked up. On this shelf laughing fruits, black horses and pretty women called 'Sweet Mara', and 'Beautiful Kata' greet her from the labels. One of them shows an old man on a wooden stool, he's giving Dada a friendly wink, she picks up the bottle and goes back to the door. As she opens the cap, a

familiar smell rises. The last day of every holiday in her life smelled of Slivovitz, of the Adriatic Sea, of laughter, of tanned skin, parents beaming particularly happily, the scent of fresh figs and the anticipation of going home. Father always took a bottle of home-brewed Slivovitz with him on holiday and opened it on their last evening for him and his friends from the holiday park to say goodbye.

She carefully takes a sip, the stuff still smells terrible, she feels the heat spreading through her body, after the third sip her thoughts gather into clear images again.

She still hears distant shots and the stamping of thousands of feet on the run. Panicked voices echo through the streets and muffle the blast of falling glass shards from hundreds of broken windows. A MiG fighter jet has just flown low over the city and breached the sound barrier. The pressure shatters the windows and wakes up all the babies in town. Dada feels as if she has been torn from her boringly normal life and thrust into this surreal existence. She is stranded here like a ship without a captain, and the bottle of Slivovitz is the anchor that prevents her from being swept away. She looks to the sky, another plane approaches. Will it shoot this time? But there is no plane, just smoke. Somewhere something is burning. The smoke rises into the sky, much like the fog, and yet unlike anything she has seen before. Black, stinking, threatening, smothering everything like a large thick tarpaulin, the thing hovers over the city, letting nothing in and nothing out.

Her mouth burns, her eyes itch, her breath falters. A man in a light-grey suit with a blue saucepan on his head comes running up the street. The image is so absurd that Dada has to laugh. He stops in front of her and politely smiles back. Then shyly stretches his hand towards the bottle of Slivovitz. Dada hands it to him. He takes a gulp; for a moment he looks like a baby at its mother's breast. 'Aren't you a little young for this bottle?' he asks, then answers himself, 'How does it matter, you're also too young for war.' He hands the bottle back and briefly takes off the saucepan as if to prove to her that he is a normal person underneath it. His thick black hair is interspersed with light grey flakes of ashes; he shows her a large dent in the saucepan. 'That's from a bullet! My wife sent me out yesterday to buy a new saucepan, but then unfortunately I lost myself in the pub all night, and when I came out, they started shooting at us on the square, so I quickly put the saucepan on my head. This pot saved me. Still, it won't do me any good, my wife will kill me when she sees it's damaged.' He smiles again politely. 'Do you need help?' Since Dada's still not responding, he says in a hoarse voice: 'Run home quickly, little one. The slaughter has begun. I hope you live on the right side of the river, because the 'ranking' of blood has begun as well. Soon we'll be sorted out according to who has what blood.' He hurries on, constantly adjusting the saucepan as if he were wearing the

most beautiful hat, which mustn't be allowed to drop and fall apart. The price tag is still attached to the saucepan – 30 000 000 dinars.

Somewhere in the farthest corner of her mind Dada knows that what she saw in the past two hours and what she sees right now is real. Still, she tries to force it back into the fog, keep it safely stowed in her brain until she can somehow make sense of it. Or maybe the images will disappear on their own and she can just go home where everything will be the way it's always been. She feels as if she's standing on the threshold between sleep and wakefulness, in fact maybe she isn't here at all? She'll wake up in her room and see Dijana on her bed devouring a slice of bread with rosehip jam and ask her what she's up to today.

'I'm going for ice cream with Leyla.'

'And you won't help Mother with the holy spring cleaning?'

'Mama says it would do me good after the whole thing with Father…'

'Well, if I had found Father, I wouldn't have to move the furniture around and beat carpets with her now,' Dijana grumbles sullenly, her blond curls flounce impatiently around her face. Dada wonders how a person can be so wide-awake so early in the morning.

'When Father has his second heart attack, it's my turn,' Dijana jokes.

'That's not funny!' Dada says quietly; her father's face distorted in pain still before her eyes. Miško jumps on Dijana's bed and snuggles up to her legs, she grabs him and throws him across the room to Dada. Dada catches the cat and cries out: 'Goodness Dijana, cats might have nine lives but they're not immortal!'

'Oh, again with this I-stink-out-of-the-jaws-like-a-hundred-years-old-dragon-monster already, is it?' Dijana says and walks out.

Forever, says a voice in Dada's head. Your sister is gone forever.

She must go home, she must fetch her mother. She realises it's not that far from here and carries on down the street; her thirst doesn't subside and she keeps on drinking. The Slivovitz finally manages to line up the images in the right order. Yes, that is her house, yes, that is her mother standing at the window, waiting restlessly, above her the black blanket of smoke, above it the blue sky. As soon as Dada arrives, her mother runs barefoot to the landing to meet her. 'Where have you been? Where's your sister?'

Dada slurs: 'They carried her past me, Mama; I couldn't find her afterwards, but her blood…'

'What are you talking about? Are you drunk?'

She snatches the bottle of Slivovitz from Dada's hand and sends it crashing to the ground. She cups Dada's face in her hands, looks at it briefly as if to gauge how drunk she is, and then

speaks as if to a deaf person – slowly and very loudly: ‘Where is Dijana?’

Her voice sounds like the siren of a fire engine.

‘They carried her away … I took chocolate for her …’ Dada pulls the chocolate from under her arm and shows it as proof, but her mother, still barefoot, is already running towards the hospital. Dada staggers behind her, just about manages to catch up, everything around her is wrapped in cotton wool, Mother’s floral dress buzzes in front of her, multicoloured and blurred.

Dada quickens her steps, everything spins, she falls. She sees Mother in her floral dress moving further away and calls: ‘Mama, wait!’ Mother turns round briefly, sees Dada lying on the street, but hurries on regardless and vanishes. Dada gets up, feels her way along the walls of the houses. In an attempt to hold on to her balance she fixes her gaze on the buildings to the left and to the right as if she were on an involuntary city tour. At regular intervals, cars drive past her; the shrill discordant cacophony of their horns clearing the way. They sound as if they’re barking. Their boots are open, human feet and other body parts stick out, Dada doesn’t look too closely. Every attempt to classify these images is punctuated by the thought of the Slivovitz bottle which she suddenly misses greatly. The anchor is gone, Dada, out of control. Then finally, at the end of the street, where all the cars screech to a halt, she sees the main entrance of the hospital. It’s crammed, people in white coats pick up the injured and hurriedly disappear into the milling crowd in the entrance hall.

Dada approaches, cautiously looking for her mother. In front of her is a queue of pale, worried, anxious people. Someone says irritably: ‘You have to queue from the back!’ Dada lines up, it’s probably the only way to get in. Time passes, the queue gets shorter and shorter. Suddenly a woman in a white coat stands in front of her and asks her in a practised voice: ‘What is your blood type?’ Frightened, Dada thinks, *the man with the saucepan on his head was right, the ranking of blood has begun*.

‘How do you mean?’

‘Child, what blood type? You’re queueing here to donate blood, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Dada says out of embarrassment.

‘So?’

‘I’m O-negative.’

The nurse immediately grabs her hand: ‘Heaven sent you!’

She pushes her ahead of her, past the queue. They enter a crowded room full of blood donors, some sitting, some lying down, tubes run from their arms into red pouches. *Everyone’s red fluid looks the same, no matter if Bosniak, Croat, Serb, Roma or Jew*, thinks Dada’s drunken brain.

‘Julija, I have an O-negative here!’ the nurse shouts across the room. All eyes turn to Dada. Julija, a small woman in a doctor’s coat, comes to Dada with fast, firm steps. ‘Are you afraid of blood?’

‘I don’t know—’

She leads her by the hand further into the interior of the emergency room and as if she were talking to a small child, she tells her that there is someone very young on the operating table who urgently needs her blood. They have no time to determine his blood type, she carries on frantically.

‘I…I don’t know, I am scared of blood, please let me go…,’ Dada stammers.

Julija suddenly turns to face her, shakes her vigorously and says: ‘I’m scared too, but I won’t let you go.’ Then a little softer: ‘You have blood that anyone can receive, you are his only chance.’

She drags Dada further into the building, they stop before a bright green door. A stretcher leans against the pale wall opposite; it’s smeared with blood. Julija puts Dada on another stretcher, a nurse comes and inserts a syringe into Dada’s arm, her blood flows through a transparent tube into a bag. Dada protests faintly: ‘But I drank Slivovitz…’

‘I’m sure the boy on the operating table would rather be drunk than dead!’ the nurse snaps. The double doors at the end of the corridor swing open with a bang; frantic demonstrators carry in more injured people, everyone disappears behind the green door from where Dada hears Julija’s firm voice giving instructions like a general on a battlefield. The men come out of the room in a daze, empty hands, empty eyes, empty stretchers that they lean against the wall behind Dada. With her trembling free hand, she covers her eyes, so she doesn’t have to see anything anymore. Her fingers are still sticky with ice-cream, she still hates it.

Dada doesn’t know how long she’s lain there with her eyes shut, but when she gets up again and is allowed to leave, her head is almost clear, as if they pumped out all of the alcohol together with the blood. *Poor boy*, she thinks. Someone hastily presses a piece of chocolate and some juice that stinks of grapes into her hand and takes her back to the reception.

Dada stumbles through the crowded room and finally finds her mother in a corner. Her hair looks like a chicken’s nest, her dirty feet are tucked discretely under the yellow plastic chair she’s sitting on. Empty hands lie folded in prayer on her lap atop the multicoloured flowers of her dress. And no, she doesn’t look like a praying Mother Mary, she looks like a witch who has just escaped the stake. Without realising she’s being watched, she looks up to the sky, an angry curse on her lips. Dada waits until Mother’s gaze wanders back to earth and finally

discovers her. A faint smile encourages her to come closer. ‘She’s alive, they’re operating on her right now …’ Mother says as if to herself. Dada sits down next to her, the plastic chair sways under her, the dizziness briefly rushes back, apparently the Slivovitz simply went into hiding during the transfusion and is now flowing again at full speed towards her brain. In panic she grabs Mother’s hand to avoid being swept away. ‘Still drunk?’ Mother asks absently.

‘I’m sorry, Mama…’

‘Ah, better drunk than dead.’

Grateful, Dada squeezes her hand, Mother squeezes hers back and says seriously: ‘Pity I broke the bottle, I could do with a sip right now – anything is better than this helplessness.’