

A portrait of Janja Vidmar, a woman with long blonde hair and bangs, wearing a black jacket. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a colorful, abstract pattern with blue, pink, and green tones. The text is overlaid on a white, tilted rectangular background in the upper right corner.

Janja Vidmar

One of Slovenia's most
acclaimed authors of
youth literature



Biography

JANJA VIDMAR

1962, Ptuj

Janja Vidmar was born early enough in the history of her homeland to live through two subsequent countries and under four presidents, yet late enough to be under the spell of rock and roll that dictates the rhythm of her writing. She creates, plays sports and bitches in Maribor. Unless a nearby vineyards-covered hill comes down around her ears, she'll remain for the time being a thorn in the side of various apologists for the catechism, adapted for everyday use. Her literary rock n' roll conceals an inquiry of individual conscience.

Janja Vidmar is a member of the Slovene Writers' Association and the president of the Association's Children's and Youth Literature Section. Through her contemporary issues oriented works this winner of international and domestic literary awards engages young readers in individual exploration of important ethical questions. Meager writers' fees, a teenage daughter and obese tomcats provide her with excellent working and creative conditions in her home town of Maribor. Janja Vidmar wrote over 50 books, many screenplays, dramatic texts and radio plays and has received many national and international awards for her works: The Večernica Award 1998, The Desetnica Award 2006 and The Večernica Award 2008, The Medaglia d'oro Award and The Golden Accolade at the international literary competition Parole senza frontiere in Trento, Italy 1999 and 2003. Her book, *My Nina*, was selected by the IBBY Documentation Centre for Young People with Disabilities, Sandvika, Norway, within the project "Important Books for Young People with Special Needs" and her award winning book, *Pink*, was included in White Ravens in Internationale Jugend Bibliothek Munich. She also made the IBBY Honour List 2010 with her book *Angie* at the IBBY international congress in Compostela 2010. Her works have been translated into German, Croatian, Serbian and Italian. In addition, two TV series and two motion pictures have been produced based on her screenplays. She also wrote screenplays for two short films for European Broadcasting Union.

Awards

The Golden Pear

(2011)

Kebarie

THE IBBY HONOUR LIST

(2010)

Angie

The Večernica Award nomination

(2010)

Kebarie

The Desetnica Award nomination

(2010)

Pink

The Večernica Award

(2009)

Pink

The Desetnica Award nomination

(2009)

Angie

THE GOLDEN PEAR

(2009)

Pink

The Desetnica Award nomination

(2008)

Boys of clay

THE DESETNICA AWARD NOMINATION

(2007)

No Clue

The Desetnica Award

(2006)

Zoo

Medaglia d'oro Award and The Golden Accolade,

Parole senza frontiere, Trento, Italy (2003)

Summer Shadows

THE VEČERNICA AWARD

(1999)

Princess With A Flaw

Medaglia d'oro Award and The Golden Accolade,

Parole senza frontiere, Trento, Italy (1999)

Princess With A Flaw



večernica
Nagrada Večera za otroško in mladinsko literaturo

On Vidmar's Writing

Professor Dragica Haramija

PhD, University of Maribor

To date, writer Janja Vidmar has published close to sixty books, more than fifty of them being for young people, which renders her very popular among Slovenian young readers. The author's opus hints at different approaches to themes and motives, the narrator's perspective, and the choice of narrative genre. She writes shorter realistic prose for children of early school age, horror stories for children and young adults, realistic novels, realistic adventure novels, and young adult novels.

Janja Vidmar's adventure prose belongs to the genre of detective stories for children, in which the main literary character, always a child or a group of children, intentionally enters into explora-

tion of adults' negative deeds.

Those are, of course, always exposed and the police only comes into play at the very end, when the child/children have already solved the crime on their own. In these works, despite the very clear genre framing, the author also touches on motives not common in detective stories, such as the issue of ecology or interpersonal relations, where she particularly warns about the alienation of modern society and consequently children's loneliness. Horror stories, just like fantasy, need fantastic elements, which in this case "trigger an astonishing event", while at the same time triggering the reader's uncertainty about the real and the fantastic. One such novel

(Creature) distinguishes itself from the basic cliché in the choice of material and belongs to the genre of occult fantasy. The most numerous and at the same time the most important segment of Janja Vidmar's creative work, however, is longer children and young adult prose, where we find realistic stories and realistic novels.

Alienation and stratification of contemporary Slovenian society, always in the forefront of Janja Vidmar's socio-psychological novels and stories, is the most important material element of such longer narrative prose. Her literary characters originate from such very different worlds, that logically they should never meet, yet they do. The revelation of her literary heroes' characterization often unfolds through internal monologues and commentary of the omniscient narrator in third-person. Because of the dark subject matter (eating disorders, domestic violence, xenophobia, death, homosexuality, disability, religious

intolerance), a large dose of irony and self-deprecation can be traced in the main characters. It seems that such ironic relationship with the world indeed helps the characters survive in the modern society and to some extent preserve their dignity. Here is the author's comment on the characterization of her literary heroes: "My works clearly show that the heroes closest to my heart are those in conflict with the world, or those who often act against the established moral norms, though the humanistic values, in which they themselves believe, are never questionable."

The construction of the narrative is often built synthetically, with partial retrospectives (helping the reader understand the background of the events), while the synthetic part of the narration deals with a relatively short time span, only a few days or months, in which the whole plot is built up and the events unraveled. In nearly every young adult novel the author brings forth

taboo/problematic subjects in a manner that reveals moral dimensions. Her engagement is obvious from the statement given at the award ceremony *Parole senza frontiere* ("Words Without Borders") in Trento for the book *Princess With a Flaw*. The statement is included in an article celebrating the award, authored by Darja Lavrenčič Vrabec: "My book is not a fairy tale, but rather a dirty, raw truth, we close our eyes to. At the turn of the millennium we talk of globalization, yet here we are still ruled by chaos, confusion, and fear. As a human being I am saddened by the fact that I do nothing for those that need my help, so I have written a book to bring to my countrymen's attention the need to fight all forms of violence and the need to lay the foundation of our society with our children." With her statement Janja Vidmar indicates the direction of the development of her novels, since all of them have a touch of those societal problems that are supposed

to stay unexposed: domestic violence, societal violence, exclusion of the poor, ideal teenage (outward) look, derision and hatred towards (a variety) of otherness.

Lately, the author has been paying special attention to language, as stated: "Backtracking to my creativity: the role the linguistic tools play in it is more and more important, slowly becoming the key. I don't pay attention to how some of the linguistic elements, lately introduced into my works, affect the reader, because I am much more fascinated by the possibilities offered by the language as a tool to create literary reality." Her beginning works, whose most important element was predominantly the development of the plot, are fundamentally different from some of the recently published novels for young adults, where the author tests the boundaries of language and its inherent ability to paint.

The linguistic innovation in the works by Janja Vidmar can be

found in the segment of word formation, combination of different linguistic forms into a totally new whole, making up of new words, even recreation of slang expressions, that function as the language of teenagers, yet in its core are author's authentic expressions.

In his recommendation of Janja Vidmar for the prize Glazerjeva lista 2007 writer Tone Partljič stated: "How tolerant is our contemporary society? Judging by some of the responses to the author's books, not very. The opening to inspection and revealing of the relationships in the society is a constant in

literary works. It often so happens that writers create a work, which is not desired, not accepted, or is even intentionally overlooked by the society. Some subjects are still a taboo in literature for the young, particularly young adults, and those that break the taboo, have to break down the barriers, too." That is the reason that Janja Vidmar's works have quite a few detractors as well as supporters.

I always wanted to be a serious writer, writing deep, unintelligible philosophical treatises, making me safe as an author, as no one could possibly write my review or be critical of my writing. Yet somehow I was always attracted by a more roguish, rather brutally truthful, orthodox direction. Here I talk about straightforward, merciless, wounding writing, much lacking in the adult, canonized literature.

(From an interview with Janja Vidmar)

About the Books

My Nina

(2004)

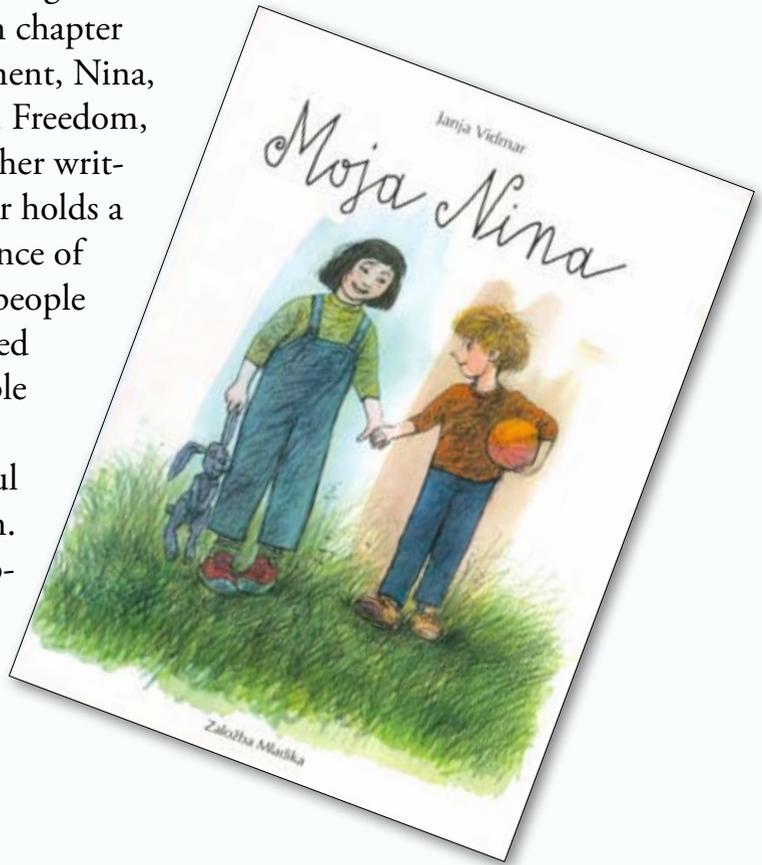
is a story about a girl with Down Syndrome and an expose on the hypocrisy of the society that does not accept differences in people, or does not accept them to a large enough extent. Obviously, disability is still a taboo, to be avoided in real life, particularly by the adults.

The titular character, Nina, is Tim's older sister, who is, because of her disability, affectionately nicknamed a "downsy". Throughout her work the author takes a strong ethical stance, describing the incurable illness through the anguish of her literary characters. Tim admires his sister, plays with her and loves her tremendously, and, one day, when he comes to the realization that he has surpassed her in development,

and now knows much of what Nina never will, he also takes her under his wing. Tim, who takes life with a Down Syndrome sister for granted and without any particular challenges, soon starts to realize other people's derogatory attitude towards everything that is different, including disabled people.

At first he does not understand, then he gets angry. He puts up a fight for his sister and tries to please her in any way possible. The biggest declaration of his love for Nina is their departure to the train station, for Nina loves trains. Tim overcomes his fear of the unknown, his dislike of people and assures Nina's safety.

The story is divided into seven chapters, their titles revealing fundamental motives of each chapter (e.g. Homework Assignment, Nina, Trains, School, Holidays, Freedom, Not Over Yet). Through her writings, author Janja Vidmar holds a mirror up to the intolerance of modern society towards people with special needs, deemed as not fast enough, capable enough, greedy enough, insolent enough, beautiful enough, deceitful enough. Every difference is a problem, but mostly a problem of average people.



“Nobody stands alone in the Universe because of his family. Maybe there are families on other planets, too. But there is no other like ours anywhere in the Universe. I always succeed at everything, except sometimes, when things go wrong. Nina is a downsy and has a syndrome. We drive in an old Fiat. Dad collects butterflies and mom loves to jump with a parachute. What else could we possibly need? Maybe 101 Dalmatians. Also we have no need for rockets, because we can fly on the wings of Fantasy. Except for Nina, who prefers to ride trains ...”
(My Nina)

Zoo

(2005)

is a socio-psychological novel revealing a search for the meaning of life. The identity of the pursuer of this goal is not really important, since sooner or later everyone finds himself in the role of a confused, powerless, ignorant human being, that has to, for the logic of his existence, find the direction of his own development. It is certainly more difficult when that human being is only seventeen.

This is a novel featuring the intertwining themes of juvenile delinquency, love, growing up, and death. Teenage years are the time of drawing boundaries and finding the way into adulthood. What is the meaning of life? When are you in love? What is love? What role do parents play in growing up? What,

where, when... Questions that every person answers differently. Ruby, the first-person narrator, accordingly looks for the answers to her questions subjectively. The novel describes a relatively short period of time, therefore the intensity and thickness of the plot is understandable. The storyline clearly shows the disentanglement of all the literary characters, while the question of the meaning of life stays unresolved.

For this revelation every reader must work hard on his or her own. The main character, teenager Ruby, is a high schooler, who likes to walk on the edge. On the edge of life, that is, as she experiments a bit with drugs and life full of adrenaline. She is the center of her own universe, has the 'worst' problems and strives to draw attention to herself with her appearance.

From an ever complaining child she transforms into an understanding, patient, responsible young woman. A close encounter

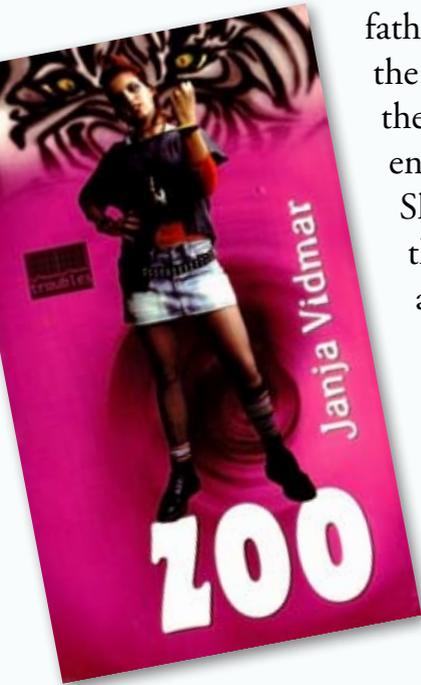
with death will do that to you. In this deathly agony Ruby starts to become aware of the uniqueness, oneness and preciousness of human life, even her own. Ruby lives in a single parent family with her mother, calling her by her first name,

Dana. Yet her father Vekoslav is the one who has the bigger influence on Ruby. She veers off the right path a bit, but not so much that in the crucial moment she couldn't find enough good judgment to set herself a life

goal. Indeed, without a goal a man can not function, and is lost. Ruby loves to visit the zoo; there she finds peace. She is particularly close to tiger Pan, whom she likes to talk to. She tells him about

herself and sometimes she tries to entertain him, but she mostly seeks acknowledgment of her own self-worth in his eyes.

Through the literary work the real zoo turns into a metaphor for life, because "the world is not a zoo, but a closed off department of the biggest looney bin." In such circumstances a teenager has to find her own piece of luck. Ruby finds her luck in love, when she realizes that Shorty is her one true love. "I was truly, definitely, irrevocably and boundlessly in love. I was suffocating. Suddenly every step was causing me pain. I could barely move. Stiff with love! One could die laughing!" Her father and Shorty gradually, inadvertently, change her, so that Ruby slowly begins noticing more than herself alone. When her father dies of cancer, Shorty offers her his warmth and closeness.



Angie

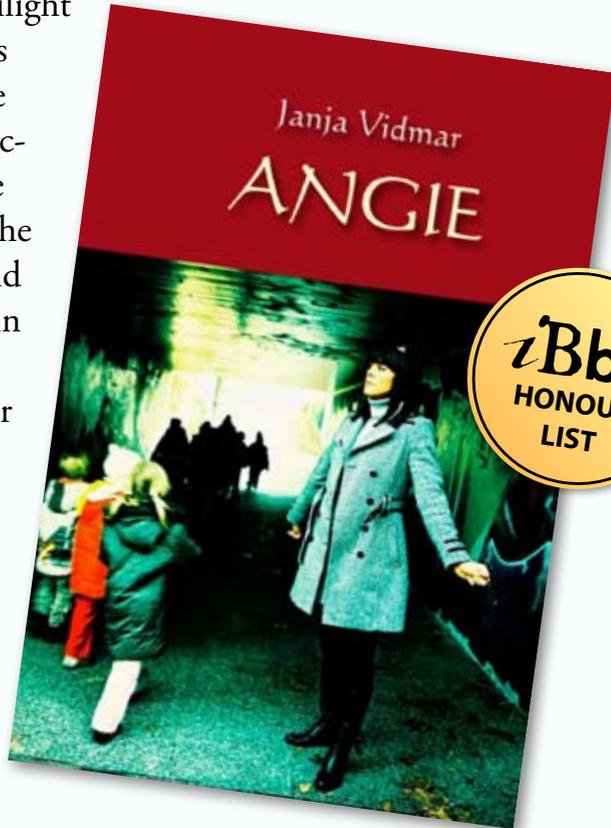
(2007)

is a novel about a teenager with special needs who has an obsessive compulsive personality. She suffers from agoraphobia, panic attacks and speech impediments. Her brilliant intellect fails her when her life patterns cease to be daily, repetitive, and predictable, which is quite often. The narrator, who keeps the basic focus of the world view through the main character, provides a scenic perspective of about two years of Angie's life. The story begins somewhere between the fifteenth and sixteenth year of the main character's life, in July, just when "U2 release their album *All That You Can't Leave Behind*", and ends during her eighteenth year. The basic linear story is interwoven with retrospective fragments

of her life, with pictures of her family life from the time before her father's departure to a Rolling Stones' concert, from which he "returned to his homeland, but not home," and even that many years after his departure, while Angie and her mother constantly anticipate his return. Father's departure for the concert from which he never returns to his family, inflicts »a devastation in mother's hearth, since every fateful man turns out to be transitional." Angie realizes that "sometimes people begin to be only when they cease to exist."

By consciously switching between standard Slovene and slang, the author manages to paint the heroine's moods and internal struggles. Indeed, the least amount of action is concentrated on the visible, outside plane of Angie's life, which is only shown as a landscape of her interior, with all her fears and struggles stemming from her illness.

“Angie sat in the twilight of her soul. /.../ Thomas Edison was afraid of the dark, so he invented electricity. What should she do? Invent future?” In the epilogue, the present and the future of all the main characters are described in a few sentences. Their fateful connections in the timeframe of the novel’s plot become paradoxically untangled: every one of them becomes or will become something totally different from what the story led us to expect.



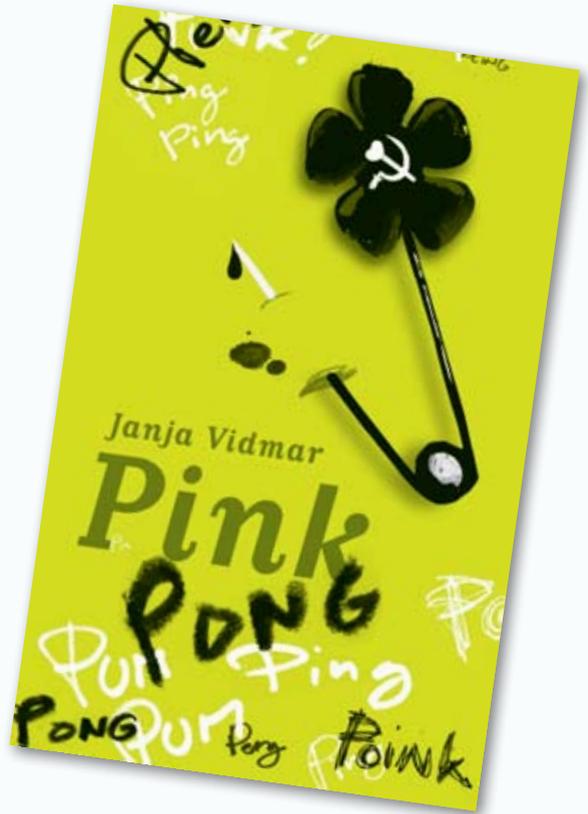
“Angie sat in the twilight of her soul. /.../ Thomas Edison was afraid of the dark, so he invented electricity. What should she do? Invent future?”

(Angie)

Pink

(2008)

is a novel using autobiographical strokes on a thematic level, as clearly indicated by the name of the main character, Janca Vidner, by the precisely delineated literary space - the city of Maribor with its surroundings, streets and squares, High School no. 1, town pubs, and by linguistics specialties, since the author, predominantly in the dialogues, intertwines standard Slovene with colloquial language tinged with local dialect, occasionally even slang. Of course this is not a typical autobiography, rather a description of events from the young age of a generation, therefore the dedication at the beginning of the book (For My Generation) rings true. Janja



Vidmar creates a distance from the events described, using third person narrative, which is unusual for autobiographical prose. She also uses a comical perspective (all the descriptions can only become funny through the distance of time).

Literary time is measured in two ways: with events from the historical period (starting with the day when Janca becomes Tito's little pioneer, and ending on Sunday, May 4th, the day of Tito's death), that are woven through with micro events on the level of the main character, linked to everything that she, first a little girl, then a young woman, experiences for the first time (helplessly watching the maturing of her own body, peer identification, sexuality ...). Janca's experience is actually an experience of growing up at the end of socialism, just be-

fore the disintegration of Yugoslavia (e.g. yearning for Levi's jeans, for records of world renowned musicians, for things not accessible at home but available right across the Austrian border) and at the same time an experience of maturing from a little girl, a proud Tito's pioneer, to a rock girl, who loses her virginity on the day of Tito's death and makes the transition from girl to woman. The title of the book refers to Janca's blush, that appears most frequently at the least opportune moments.



WHITE RAVENS

VEČERNICA

Nagrada Večera za otroško in mladinsko literaturo

The Desetnica Award nomination

Bloody Legend

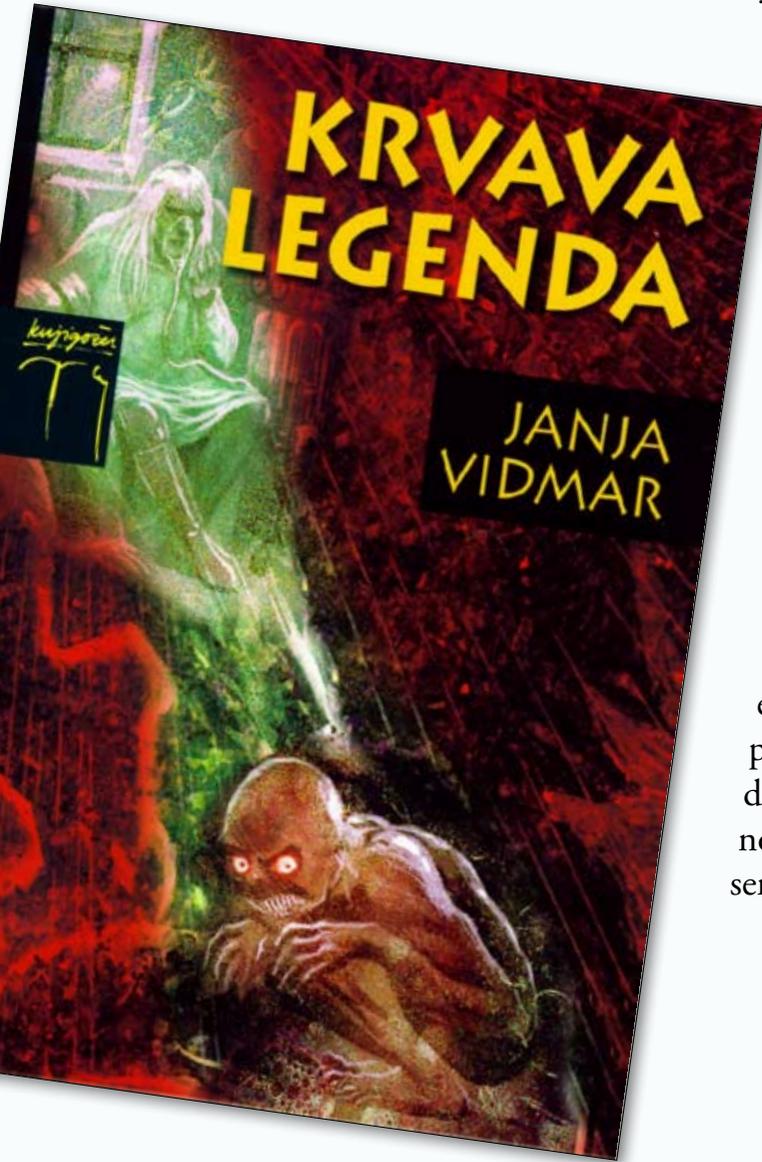
(2003)

is a story about teenagers Aljaž, Peter, Kuki and Clara. Literary time is precisely set with the chapters titled by day and time (or part of day) of particular events, e.g. Friday, Afternoon; Friday, Evening; Friday, Midnight. The plot is compressed into two and a half days (Friday afternoon to Monday morning). Forti tells the kids a story about a 100 year old woman Džina from Strmnik, (“when it was still an ordinary village!”), who

at this advanced age supposedly gave birth to a monster. The high schoolers set off into the woods, where an unknown entity starts to haunt them, giving rise to the old legend. At first, Aljaž, Peter, Kuki, and Clara act as a collective character, even a novelistic hero, until supernatural things occur - or their internal fears come to life - and their team falls apart with each of them becoming an individual. The adventure, initially intended as a weekend fun, turns into the deepest experience they ever lived through. The description of their horrifying feelings can be compressed into Peter’s experience of anxiety “He was suffocating, his stomach was killing him and more than anything in

I yell in my books, yet the majority is still deaf.
(From an interview with Janja Vidmar)

the world he wished for a boring family breakfast.” The description of anxiety continues from the perspective of other characters, for example Clara, who “heard a sound and a strange gurgling behind her back. As if someone had a thick, greasy slime stuck in his throat. / .../ There was a dark shapeless mass crouching in the thick bushes.” When the youngsters finally escape from the gruesome woods, they try to rationalize their experiences, yet their own personal experiences are so diametrically opposed that no one can get to any kind of semblance of truth.



Boys of Clay

(2005)

In this novel the topic of homosexuality, another taboo theme close to the author's heart, is revealed. The author deals with the topic with great sensitivity. The novel mainly addresses social questions connected with the condemnation of same sex love and the prejudices that the main (Aik, Little) and supporting characters deal with.

The novel develops through two first person narratives of the main characters with chapters taking turns equally. The author uses an interesting approach, based on two parallel stories, that from time to time shed light on the same event or events from a different perspective. Changing storyteller's perspective follows suit with chang-

ing of language tone: Aik's part of the novel is linguistically hard, ironic and self-assured, while Little's is soft, sad, hurt and introspective, which is sensed well in the shades of his narrative. Toward the end of the novel when, despite his best efforts to hide it, Aik's homosexuality is revealed, Aik becomes a true opposite of his old self. The biggest irony of Aik's sexual orientation is the existence of his father, a perfect homophobic and macho man. Throughout the novel Little is trying to get over the death of his friend, Rok, who committed suicide, for which Aik is at fault. His classmates have different recollections of Rok (e.g. smiling, of asymmetrical face, with messy hair). While working on Rok's collective clay portrait, Little is liberated. Rok of course is not forgotten, but Little's deep grieving comes to an end.

Igor Saksida, the author of the novel's preface, suggests that Boys of Clay offer different levels of

understanding. He exposes three: “the novel is an adventure story, a representation of the anguish of youth and a love story” and points out the possibility of many more interpretations.

The multilayered theme, the individual empathy or antipathy towards homosexuality, the influence of environment, reader’s maturity and other immeasurable shades of a palette of factors certainly can not leave the reader cold.



Friends

(2003)

In the novel *Friends* the main characters, Jacob and Amir, decide that their gods, God and Allah, are surely friends. The topic of faith and diversity of faiths is rarely represented in literature for young people, especially on such a high ethical level as encountered in this work. A special virtue are humorous elements that lessen the intolerance towards people of different religious persuasions. Humor, the authenticity of the friendship, and (probably subconscious) tolerance can be summed up in the following dialogue between the two friends:

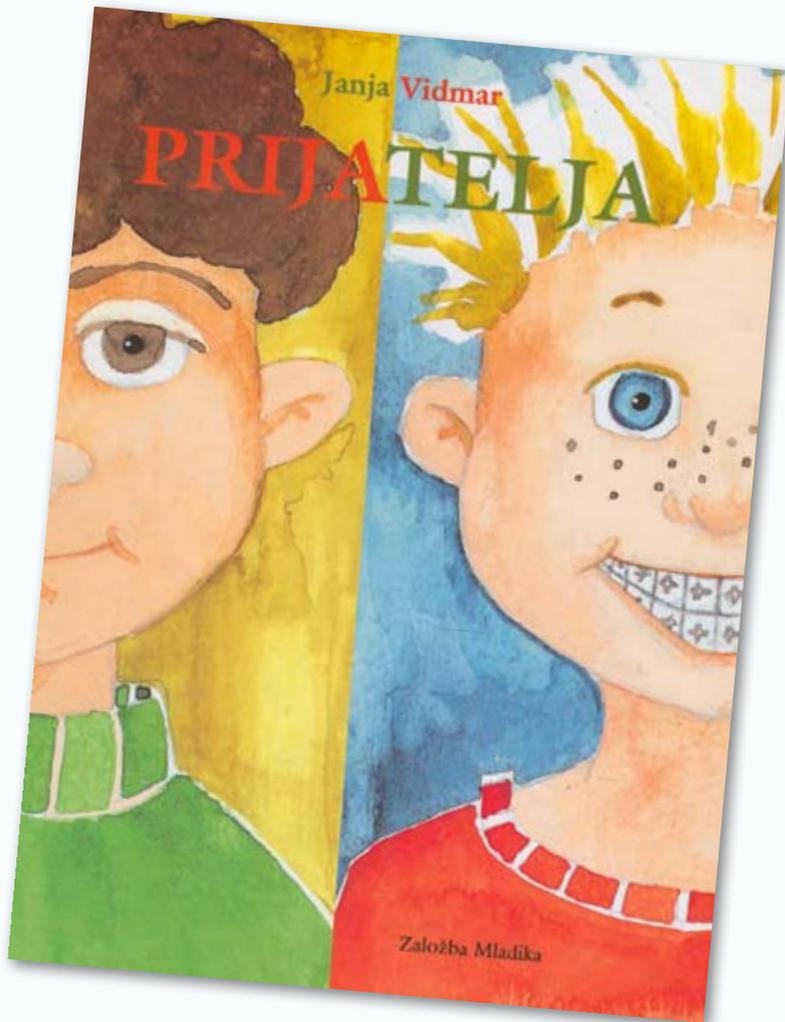
“We have a church in every village,” brags Jacob. “So, you see, our god is the boss!” “The bossiest boss?” asks Amir innocently and

both erupt with laughter. After wolfing down a bag of candy Jacob asks with interest, “Where do you keep the cross?” “We don’t,” says Amir, shrugging his shoulders. “You don’t have a cross?” Jacob is taken aback. “So where did you hang Jesus from then?” “We don’t have Jesus,” shrugs off the question Amir. “You don’t?” Jacob can hardly believe his ears. “What about your parish priest, doesn’t that make him mad?” “He is not a priest, but a hodza.” “A what?” “A hodza!” “A hodza,” repeats Jacob.

The title itself expresses the central theme of the novel. The book belongs to the young adult works that try to promote tolerance and acceptance of others among children and adults. In sociological sense religion often divides, instead of uniting, therefore the novel *Friends* becomes a valuable tool for deliberations about the religious attitudes of our society.

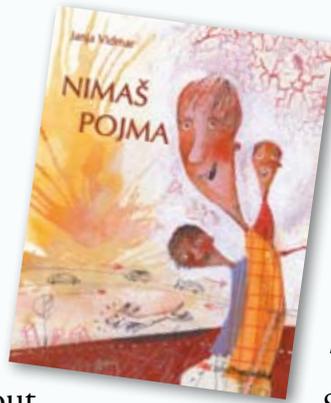
We all declared ourselves rebels against the system.
To this day all of us, who truly were,
are still maladjusted.

(From an interview with Janja Vidmar)



No Clue

(2006)



is a novel about before and after. Before is about the closeness of Piksi, Nejc and Sonny. Sonny and Piksi are friends since birth. Nejc joins them in preschool. When they are eight, they are best friends, they play together, take care of dog Snoopy, swear a blood oath to be friends forever; after they become teenagers, have no mutual interests and spend no time together anymore. Before is much simpler, more sincere and straightforward than after, and those are the most important predicaments of growing up.

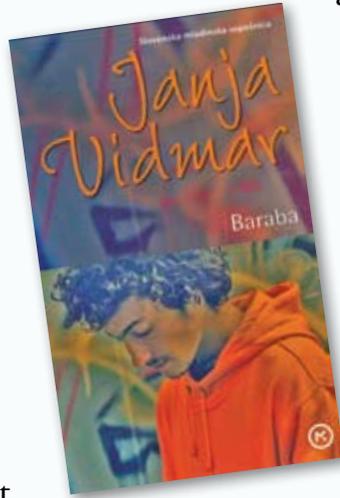
When Piksi, Sonny and Nejc become teenagers they lose their common interests, they stop spending time together after school and in class. Just once is the warmth of

their friendship rekindled. Over the loss of Snoopy, in the waiting room, just before they have to put the dog down for subcutaneous cancer, they form over the dog's body "a safe bridge from intertwined hands". The moments before mourning Snoopy awaken the memories in all three about how at first they tried to all be alike and later to be as different as possible. The titles of chapters in the second part are directly tied in with the most important motive of the chapter and also show what each of the friends has become. (Gloomy Piksi, Mad-at-the-World Nejc, Casanova Sonny...) No Clue is mostly a book about growing up, about traps that teenagers fall into, about alienation and disappointment in people. Through maturation of her literary characters the author reveals their in depth characteristics. Of special note is her adaptation of language to the ages she describes, first young boys and then adolescents.

Bad Lad

(2001)

is a novel about violence behind closed walls. A child or a teen's home, that should be a haven, becomes hell. The place, where one should feel the safest, becomes a place where one is the most vulnerable. The first person narrator, sixteen year old Matej Filipič, nicknamed Tizzy, is a shocking example of suffering in a stepfamily, where he lives with his abusive stepfather, an alcoholic mother and a terrified twelve year old half sister Rebecca. After the disappointment with Matej's biological father, his mother marries Korun and has a daughter with him. The whole family is afraid of Korun. Because of his violence and her disappointment with life, the mother turns to



alcohol, which damages her relationship with the children. The children are terrified about what reason their father/stepfather will yet again find to abuse them, and find it he always does. Gradually Matej starts turning into a problematic teenager, a scoundrel, but he is forced into it by the hopeless circumstances at home, for many

years kept secret by all the members of the family. Tizzy finds redemption in love and grows so strong that he can solve his life's dilemmas: the relationship with his stepfather, his mother, his (ex)friend Rory, and Bisa. Bisa is the one who is the conduit for the resolution of Tizzy's problems, as she is the one who reports the abusive stepfather. Quickly, Tizzy's and his little sister's desperate situation improves. This is one of Vidmar's few works concluding with a happy ending, as she usually keeps her endings unresolved.

Fatty

(1999)

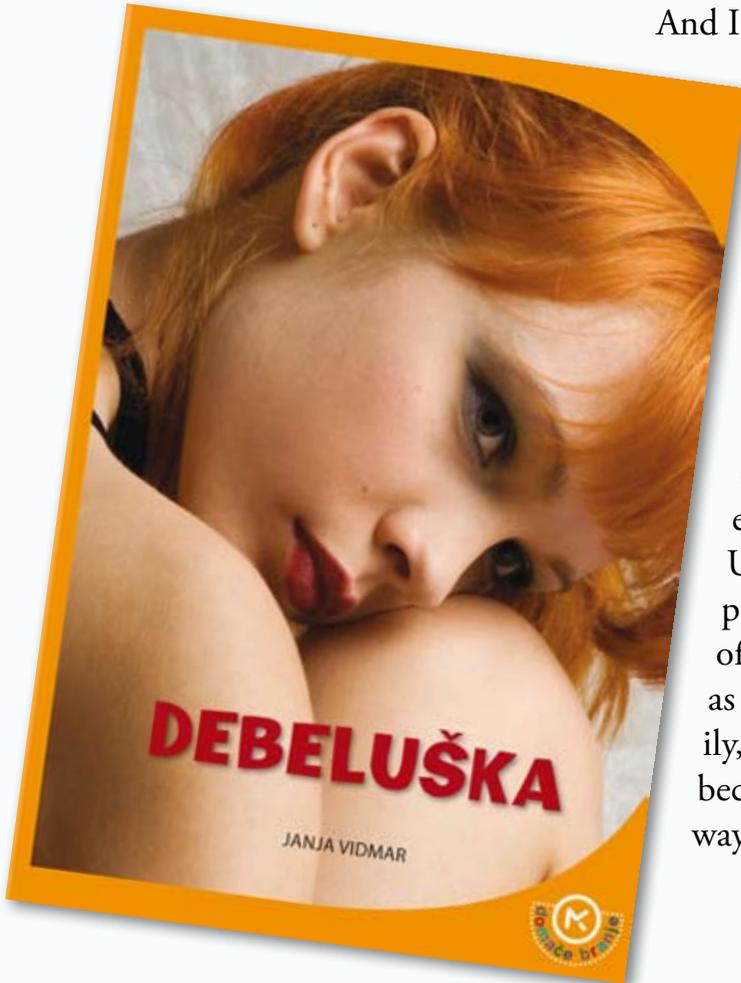
In this novel Vidmar talks about the tragedy of longing for the perfect body, which in real world often leads to anorexia and bulimia. The main character of the novel, teenager Uršula (Urša) Klančnik-Mušič causes her own suffering, tragically not of her own volition, but to satisfy her mother's yearning for winning in the modeling world (mother's failure should be daughter's success). This sick ambition results in a serious illness. Fatty is a grave warning to all girls and women who through wrongly controlling their weight wrongly control their life, too. Uršula lives in a totally alienated family, where no one plays a traditional role: the mother is sick with ambition and insists on her daughter calling her

by her first name - Dunja, as that makes her feel younger, father is a self-indulgent writer, disinterested in his surroundings, including his own daughter, and Urša, not really knowing why, maintains the ideal weight according to her mother's standards by purging and gorging. At the onset of the novel Urša is a typical teenager, her troubles begin because of her mother's wish for the girl to participate in a beauty pageant. Urša's own view of her own body and that of others changes drastically; her best friend Karin suddenly seems terribly fat to her and she starts to hang out with Žana, who shares with her the trick of gorging and purging, for which Urša is eternally grateful, since now she can easily maintain her weight. Even Žana's death from bulimia doesn't stop Urša. When she herself ends in the hospital she does submit to doctor's orders, yet she says "because everyone believes that I am healed. That everyone who wakes up

from the dead starts madly cherishing life. /.../ they all believe in me. Just because I survived. They want me to grow into a roly-poly little ball and roll away. To stop causing trouble. To be grateful. I don't want to take their

hope away! Let them have it their way. But deep down I know. They can stuff their slops down my throat. They can stuff their advice down my throat. They can rescue me from my own life, to their hearts' content. But alas! One slip. And I will try again. And one day I will succeed."

The novel, constructed as an essay, written by Urša and sent by Karin to a Unicef's literary competition does not evoke a happy ending: despite the fact that Urša wins at the competition, her desire to control her body overpowers everything else in her life. Urša is adaptable enough to pretend she is accepting the offered help and even behaves as if she plans to live healthily, but all that is just a front, because deep inside she will always think of herself as a - fatty.



Princess With A Flaw

(1998)

The first work which left a deep mark on the writing career of Janja Vidmar is her novel *Princess with a Flaw*. It was awarded the Slovenian “Večernica” award and also an Italian “Words Without Borders” award (Medaglia d’oro: Parole senza frontiere). The reasoning behind the Večernica 1998 award states that the novel “is a portrait of contemporary insensitivity, cold-heartedness, which symbolically takes place in the cold time around the New Year. Through the core characteristic of the heroine - her loneliness, the author paints the contemporary barbarianism of our time: indignity, violence, and hatred of anything different.” At the time of the conception of the novel the topic of refugees was very

significant in the political and social spheres due to the proximity of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and due to a large number of refugees crossing over into Slovenia (the story takes place in the town of Maribor). The destiny of the main character, fourteen year old Fatima, is tragic, yet the ending does offer a chance for a better life.

Fatima lives with her family in a basement flat of an apartment building in Maribor. She attends one of the elementary schools in the area. Her classmates do not like her, because she is different from them. The only one standing by her is her biology teacher, Curly. Fatima falls in love with an older boy, Adam, and has sexual relations with him, which is totally unacceptable for her family. The men in her family take on a blood feud against Adam, who fortunately survives. In the hopes of saving the honor of the family, Fatima is taken to Germany by her uncle. Fatima constantly faces

challenges: she is torn from her familiar home environment, without friends, money, social network and security.

She does not know the language; Slovenian proves especially difficult for her. The war has fundamentally changed her life, not surprisingly for the worse. While her family survives, which likely would not have been the case had they stayed in their homeland, the question remains, whether this kind of refugee existence is worth living. The prejudices of the characters encountered by Fatima are so strong they are nearly unbridgeable. Therefore it should not come as a surprise that both, the work itself, as well as the author, were victims of a negative campaign when *Princess* was chosen as the core text for the national reading competition – the Cankar Award.

All the ethical deficits described by Janja Vidmar in her novel simply came to life in the real world: xenophobia, discrimination, racism, non-acceptance and non-understanding of anything different.



The Tribe

(2009)

This novel places a mirror in front of us... We are only allowed a peek, but no entrance, because the entry into the world of the Tribe is not voluntary, as it is the world of the homeless, the anonymous, of abandoned children who are not raised by their mothers and fathers, but by the society. It is the world we do not know and have no need of knowing, for we are lulled into the sense of false security in our deceptively carefree world of consumerism.

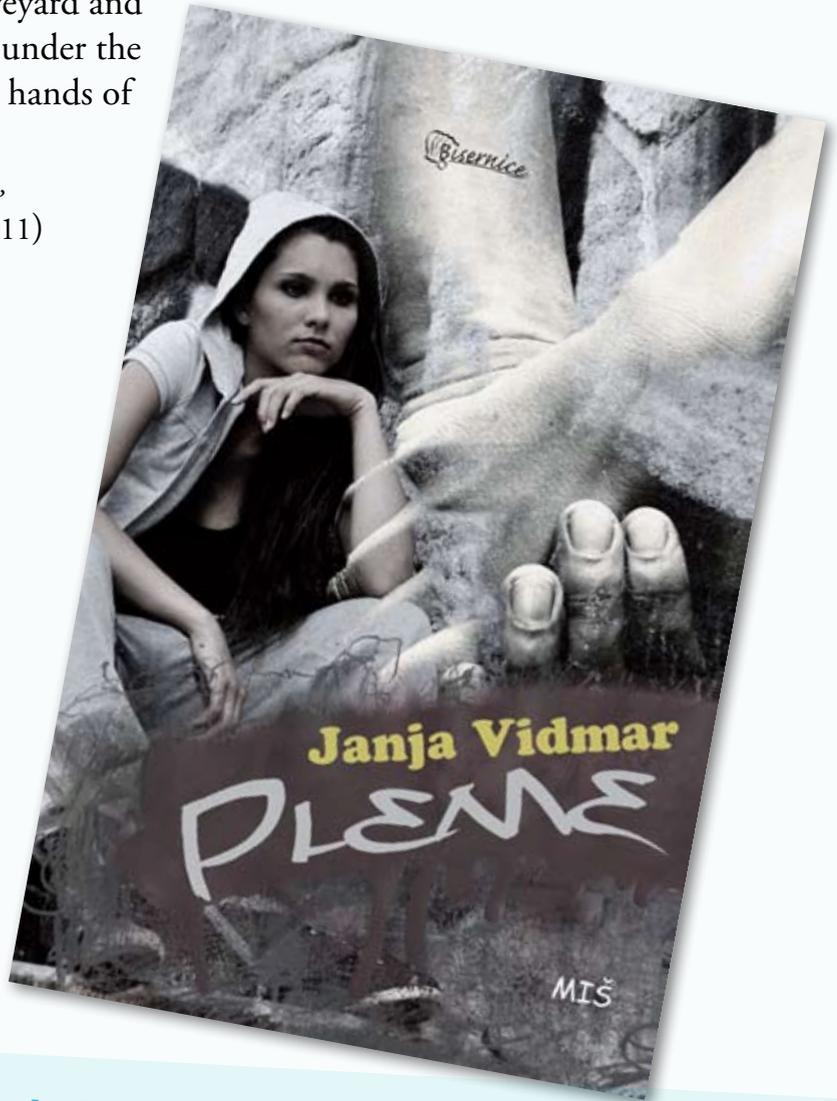
As we read on we slowly uncover a so called housing community, a group home, a shelter for four children, two Bosnians, both undocumented foreigners, one eccentric teenage girl, who shoplifts to irk the world and her own father,

and who saves a Bosnian girl from suicide and later tries it herself, and the graffiti Dude.

The commune or THE HOME is inhabited by four little people, who are of no use to the society. For sentimental and emotional social reasons they are offered, besides food and a roof over their head, an odd psychotherapist, whose spiritual methods prove surprisingly successful and effective. In his own way he liberates the children from their past and tries to erase the mark that brought them all to the commune. Hoody Girl and graffiti Dude succeed in finding new life through their love, gentle and pure, as they are. It seems like the youngsters belong to no one, not even the city. Graffiti Dude decorates it, leaving his drawings, his signature with his spray. He paints every day, every night, and is most selective in his surfaces... Never on church doors. Hoody Girl defies everyone, especially herself; she tries to find recon-

ciliation at the graveyard and demands her place under the sun. The entangled hands of both offer hope.

(Tanja Vamberger,
planet siol.net, 11.3.2011)



Reni: "He'll come back, he doesn't go anywhere, he just walks around."

Kafka: "You mean like in circles?"

Reni: "Yeah, except he goes straight."

(The Tribe)

Kebarie

(2010)

Kebarie is a Romani (Gypsy) girl, a girl from a different culture, who goes to a Slovenian school and is therefore in constant conflicts with her classmates, her teacher and the wider surroundings. She also has a slew of problems in her own family, mainly because everyone is hiding the truth about her father's absence. The story, divided into days of the week and illustrated by Damijan Stepančič, is very attractive to the young readers.

An excellent combination of literary, artistic and design concepts, the book is very compelling for contemporary (younger) readers. Especially praise worthy is the dynamic and suspenseful narration, thoughtfully constructed by the author with a language enriched by

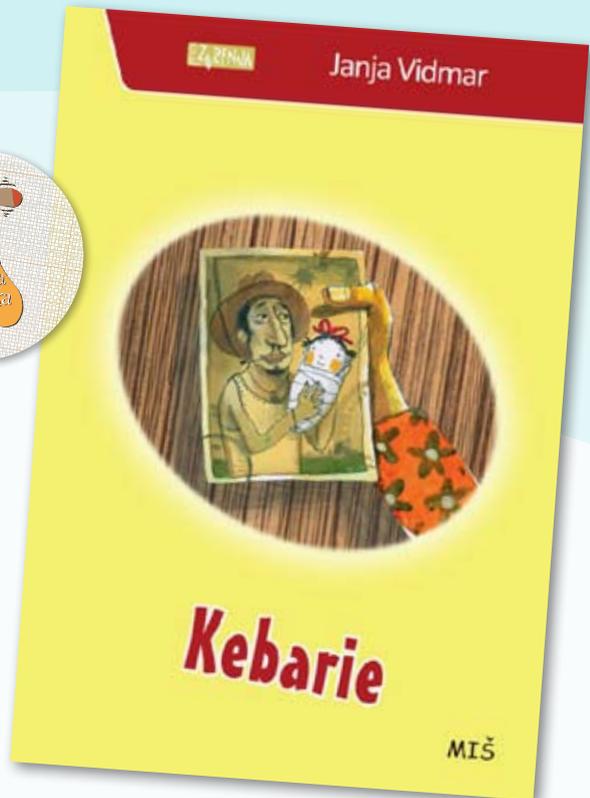
Romani expressions, contemporary messages about differences and understanding, multicultural dialog and multilingualism, the private and the communal, while interwoven with timeless messages of basic human values, such as love, truth, loyalty etc. She is convincing to the point of tears when showing the girl's attachment to her father and her belonging to Roma's traditions.

It is especially worth mentioning that Kebarie's father tells her wonderful fairy tales and encourages her to read ("folks called her Kedi, which means read in Roma language!"). Consequently the text imparts the important conviction about the necessity of storytelling and reading. In all of its aspects this is a contemporary work of great quality and can as such largely contribute to maturation of young readers, as well as offer an exquisite reading experience to adults. It was a finalist for the "Večernica" award for the year 2010.

(Tilka Jamnik, *Geneze-The Ways to Smart Nonsense*. Manual for Reading Quality Youth Literature 2011, City Library of Ljubljana, 2011)

From the review of Kebarie:
Therefore for all the adult obduracy stands out the freedom of thought and independence of little Kebarie, who in the search for her own identity comes to mostly one conclusion: she wishes to be neither Romani nor Slovenian! Recommended for children nine and above, even more for their parents.

(Iva Kosmos, Dnevnik)

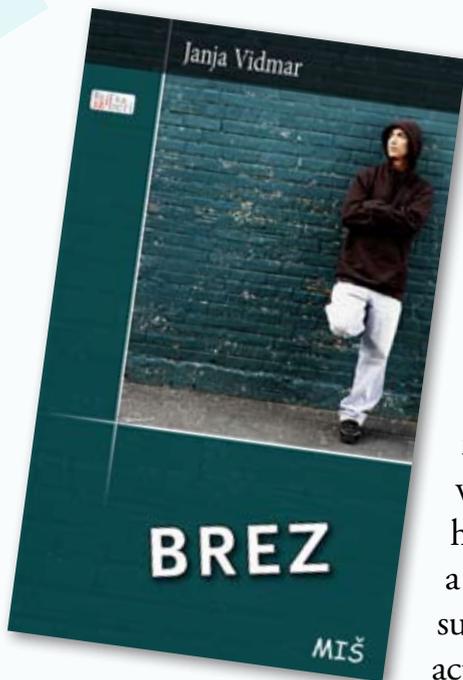


Without

(2011)

This is a special and original book - a combination of two texts; of prose and dramatic narrative. As such it will be a welcome “aid” to understanding of how a story can be transformed from one literary genre to another. At the same time it might also become the impetus for the creativity of young people, who could, under the guidance of their teachers, or in drama clubs, stage the play Without.

The story is constructed around a problem: the protagonist Simon has difficulties with the law - he steals mobile phones and other technical merchandise and sells



them on the black market. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree - Simon's father is in jail, while his mother takes up with a new man. On top of it all Simon is in love with Leila, who has no tolerance for his deeds... Without is a dynamic story, full of suspenseful situations: both actions and more static events, such as family con-

frontations or dialogues between Simon and Leila, written in a convincing, lively colloquial language, peppered with slang. Despite mostly serious and suspenseful atmosphere, the work doesn't lack, at the right moments, funny, original and comical formulations, typical for the author.

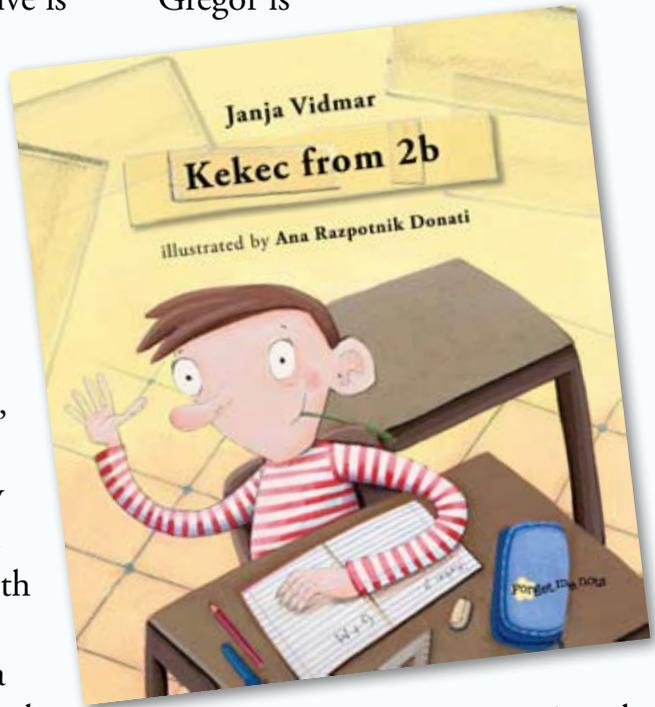
Janja Vidmar won the Golden Stick Award for best dramatic work for young adults by Ljubljana Puppet Theatre.

Kekec From 2 B

(2011)

This first-person narrative is supported by original child logic of impish, individualistic, seven year old Gregor. Instead of being crazy about the modern age heroes, such as Pokemon or Hulk, Gregor likes the famous home-grown national hero, small, but brave shepherd boy Kekec. There are many books written about Kekec and he is also associated with other mythological characters, such as Goldenhorn, a rock goat with magical blood - the flower that grows from one drop of its blood can cure any illness - as well as the wild man Bedanec, the fairy Škrlatica

(Scarleteen) and others. Just like his hero Kekec, Gregor is in love with Mojca, a classmate, who does not return his affections. Kekec's Mojca was blind and was healed with drops given to her by the healer and witch Pehta, who had kidnaped her. Therefore Gregor is



convinced that his Mojca would, with the help of the right drops, start to see how much he loves her.



Sample Translations

The Tribe

Translation by Judita-Mia Dintinjana

The Founder possesses all rights and privileges of the Tribe. He has the power to dissolve the Tribe or change its name and the power to grant rights and privileges to its members. These rights should never be given lightly, for they can be used to disband the Tribe or to take away privileges.

The Girl In The Hoodie

Customer Toilets on the Mobile Tech Floor

The place smelled of urine. Of scum. It had the smell of every public toilet in every shopping mall in the world. Her body was cold. Too cold to trigger the light sensors. The twilight around her had grown thick in the hue of clotted granulation tissue. Her breathing was shallow and jerky. Her head fell to her chest. For a moment, she was overcome by blankness or a slumberous stupor of some kind, or so it seemed.

She twitches and rubs her eyes. Exhales lightly. Takes in a whiff of air. This was as much dreaming as her lungs could afford to give her. She is holding a suicide note in her hand. All she has to do is get out of the mall first and record it. She wants to die in style. Only a frigging nerd would die miserably in a public toilet. Flickering fluorescent lights above her. Shadow spread out under the contours of her body sprawled alongside the toilet bowl. Her ass stuck to the ceramic floor tiles. It would take a scalpel to separate one from the other. Her entire body stubbornly resists the thought of being mauled like that. People end up broken-bodied, dangling from corrugated polypropylene canopy roofs. Or meet their end impaled on iron fence pickets. Or as pulp splattered in the middle of a deserted plaza in front of some hotel. Illuminated by intermittent beams of light flashing from cars that speed by. A rusted razor blade. Pills past their expiry date. A mix of dishwashing detergent and petrol. The pulp wins. Some are more susceptible to gravity. Virtually painlessly they toss themselves into the heart of things. They step out and linger on the doorstep for that singular moment as the town bows before them. A jumble of streets. Open crossings. Squares. Grey asphalt. All their experiences etched into it. Then they take the stairway to the roof of the only high rise in town. Cast a final glance beyond the pale. Then, after three seconds. That's how long the fall lasts. They morph. They imprint their atlas on the concrete forever. Every suicide is like a letter written in longhand, with calligraphic beauty at first, all four cylinders, but the strokes gradually descend into ugliness, all the way down to the last scribble.

She cracks the door open. A filament of light pierces the gloom, halving her face. Peering between the open swing doors, she tries to assess the traffic on the sales floor. A strip of white light lands on the bruise under her eye. Her swollen eyelids betray the emptiness imprinted on her retina. And she wears this emptiness as if it were a hood.

The doors creak and swing apart, deep into the washroom. A pair of stiletto heels with legs enmeshed in fine nylon stockings carrying a slight

figure of a middle-aged woman advance into the washroom. Her gait hints that if she takes one more step, the bones in her feet will crumble. The double doors behind her continue flapping laboriously against each other and then come to a halt. The woman disappears inside the neighbouring cubicle. She has evidently triggered the sensor, and brightness floods the place.

She feels a smarting pain behind her eyes. She swallows with considerable difficulty. The pain in the ear has now spread to the throat. Clotted blood on her cracked cheekbone pulls the skin taut. The bruise has bared a tiny part of her soul. It stares out in plain sight like a frightened cub. The scent of the woman, whose breath has mixed with her own in this godforsaken pisshole, tickles her nostrils. She feels panic coming on. Just like she always does when O. turns into an 0 on the doorstep of her home. There is no way out. In a toilet cubicle at the end of the world she suddenly feels bilked. No deliverance. O. inhabits her like a dry lump of soil. O. = 0, she tells herself. O. = 0. What has become of the conviction that formerly sane, cool individuals, when they find themselves in the parenting phase, fail so miserably, becoming pitiful caricatures of their own selves? To be played by their own children? To bitch and whine and turn rheumy-eyed every time they hear their children snap at them, “I hate you,” “Why don’t you drop dead.” O. is scrapped goods welded together by a god without any rhyme or reason. You open the familiar box and out he pops on a long and rusty coil, casting a looming shadow over her life.

Except for an occasional clank of the door latch, the adjacent cubicle was mostly puzzlingly quiet. She was waiting for the sound of a spurt hitting the ceramic bowl. Zilch. For the telling plop. Nothing. Just what was the woman in there up to? Was she playing with herself? What if she was sent by O.? Did he find out her whereabouts? He might have implanted a locator chip in her while she was sleeping.

Fear rose from deep in her gut. It tooted its horn. Swamped her stomach like thick black crude. What if she faced the woman? Slipped the HD Canon HR 10 video camera in her bag? Within O.'s system modules she was fast evolving into a master of the trade, the world's most ingenious sneak thief. As a matter of fact, she could hardly peg O. down as a scoundrel. But who could blame her for having jumped, head first, into all this mess? In a way, she didn't quite understand how she was able to land on her feet.

Something in the adjacent cubicle clanked. And then—the sound of shards grating under heels. Barely audible sobbing. Air choked with emotion. Something unnatural got trapped within those thin ribbed walls that separated the cubicles. The wait was getting to be a drag. She rolled a crumpled sheet of toilet paper up and down between her palms. She was becoming paranoid. O. couldn't have had a clue how to find her! Tears, tears, and more tears, the fluid of wretchedness under her hood.

She clammers to her feet and pushes open the cubicle door. In the chipped mirrors above the sinks she sees a veritable garrison of identical reflections, misted over and split around the cracks in the glass. Water taps, encrusted with lime-scale veins, jutting out of the enamel. She can hardly recognise herself. Around her head a pirate-style bandanna patterned with tiny skulls and flower stems she added by hand to complement the original design. At a glance and from a distance the skulls could easily be mistaken for tiny flower buds. She is wearing a not entirely too short green dress. Her sockless feet are clad in toe-cap army boots. A Hello Kitty pendant with a This is Hazardous to Your Health note hangs from one. She readies the camera and removes the lens cap to capture freedom. She has become accustomed to living a fugitive's life. After two sleepless nights in the freight train yard, life reeks with such a colossal stench that she finds it quite worthwhile to stick her nose in it.

Something rubs against the wall panel in the other cubicle. A dull, smacking sound follows as that thing thumps to the floor. The latch in

the metal notch shifts under the weight of the body, and a calf in a brass-buckled beige stiletto shoe jolts forward like a machine gun through the narrow gap under the door. The heel is jutting out in her direction like a pointed umbrella tip.

“Open up!” She kicks the door. She holds the camera ready so she can later feed the video to vultures on YouTube. “Open up or I’m calling security!”

Suppressed breathing slithers across the floor. Ever since she ran away, she has been on the lookout, her senses alert, vigilant—the sense of touch, above all, and intuition. She takes the camera from the canvas bag and begins twisting and turning it under the lights to create curvy, streaming streaks of light that follow the camera body and bounce off it like streaks of lightning. She hits the door with her shoulder.

“I can see your ass there on the floor, right there next to the toilet bowl, you hear? Open up or I’ll videotape you!”

No reply. No, wait a second!

Correction: “Open up if you WANT me to videotape you!”

Still no reply. Odd. People were usually provoked to anger by the mere sound of her voice.

“I record suicides, in case you’re interested. Don’t have a business card yet, but I can give you my cell phone number!”

A faint snuffle escapes from the cubicle.

She pushes herself into the adjacent cubicle and lays the camera on the floor. Then she closes the toilet seat cover, climbs on it and looks over the cubicle wall. The woman’s hair is strewn across the toilet seat. She has

collapsed in the corner. An upturned toilet brush rests in her lap. A heavy Strass bracelet hangs from her wrist. Beneath the short unbuttoned jacket of a good make—the rhinestone decorated tag and the golden chain reveal the Miss Selfridge logo—the woman’s chest rises and falls lightly under the white tight-fitting tee-shirt. A hardly visible cut transverses her wrist, no wider than a scratch. Product tags and security pins dangle from her clothes. The woman is dressed to the nines, as for a banquet. A pair of nail scissors lies by her side.

Her radar turns on. What drove the woman to this absurd idea? Perhaps it was the same thing that pushes her to dump stolen goods in garbage containers all over town. When she crosses the finish line, the adrenalin subsides. The loot becomes as insignificant as a job that never happened. She tosses it into the nearest container. Leans over and feels it before letting go. Slightly, just enough to savour the triumph with her fingers one more time. All the passers-by seem to think she is mystically absorbed in combing through the refuse.

“Hey! Hey, are you awake? Come on, don’t get off here!”

“Leave me be,” the woman whispers exhaustedly.

“You’ve no chance of bleeding to death with this scratch.” She shrugs. She pounds her fist on the wall panel a couple of times. A hollow sound reverberates through the cubicle. She hops off the toilet seat and dashes out. Then she throws herself against the closed door and pushes against it with her shoulder. The latch rattles like a denture. A jolt of electricity shocks her arm. There is no time to call for help. She tears the rickety towel holder out of the grip in the wall, rams the top between the door and the cubicle wall, applies her shoulders and pushes. The bolt flies off with a bang. The door creaks and gives in. The woman is still lying on the floor in the corner, between the toilet bowl and the wall, like a crumpled beverage carton.

From the corner of her eye she registers the bright red droplets on the woman’s wrist. The woman is lying there in her expensive stolen rags. She really could have dropped her anchor on the mattress of some solitary bed

somewhere else instead of here, in this stinking cubicle, where she would draw the attention of the entire quarter, the whole western residential district. And that's not even the least of it.

“Hey!” Upset, she grabs the woman by the shoulder and shakes her. “You mustn't fall asleep!” As if she were just trying to get some sleep, silly. She wanted to kill herself. She should probably call the emergency services and be out of there. How could she be such a moron to dare choose between the hate of this dolled-up idiot by NOT LETTING her die and the disapproval of society if she DID LET her die? And calling the cops was out of the question, at any rate. Because there is that funny thin line beyond which each of us starts fearing for our own life, even if we don't really give a piss about it. O. may have reported her as roaming the town again without permission. If the Social Services by CHANCE revived their interest in her case, her horizons would shrink to the view of the pigeon shed she sees from the window of her tiny room. To the view of rusting sheet metal, cans filled with turbid rainwater, corbels with pipes and wire mesh: Pigeons shuffling about with wings tucked in, shifting their weight from one foot to another as they tilt their fat grey heads graced with rings of shimmering greenish plumage. O.'s life, which never knew any permanence other than her presence, was filled with the obsession that he would train birds as thieves to pilfer and carry off their loot through open windows. The reason behind this idea was that good stories always have an animal.

“Help!” She yells out in the direction of the swinging doors. “Help, somebody! Hello?”

Under the leather of the woman's handbag she senses the vibrating of a cell phone. Somebody was trying to get through to her. She is not going to steal anything. SHE IS DETERMINED NOT TO TOUCH A THING. Let the phone purr. She is going to call the emergency services. She will see to it that the woman's heart continues to tick away in a happy beat again. Keep the blood where it belongs. The first dark droplet lands

on the floor. She rummages through the bag, feeling the contents with her fingers. A notebook. A ball-point pen. Lipstick. A compact. She nervously inhales the pungent air and stops to rub her numbed neck muscles. The woman continues to lie in a heap, calmly letting herself be robbed. The lights go out because they are both too low to the ground for the light sensors. She gets up to her feet and makes a little hop, as if to assure herself that she is still breathing, and bumps her elbow against something in the process. Dazzling bright light spills over the shards of a compact mirror taking up half the space under the bottom edge of the cubicle wall. A spider web stretches across the other half. At the bottom of the wall, paint flakes off in oily scales, leaving behind pale blotches.

An open wallet. She bites her lip. A sheaf of crisp fifty-pound notes. She rolls up two, slips her hand under her collar and tucks them into her bra. A photo of two little boys. A twinge of pain pierces her close to the breastbone. Something in her has condensed and tipped over for a moment. She breaks into sobs, like an ailing kitten. A sour scent of momentary despair wafts from the two bodies and fills the air. The woman's strength has failed her.

She pulls out the woman's phone. A first-rate Nokia E5 0 with a camera, USB, MP4, GPS, WLAN. The bright pink Nike check sign on the screen's black background indicates the unanswered call. She weighs her own small pile of life patched up with battered cardboard and Sellotape against this woman's life hanging in the balance.

She dials 113.

"No... Don't," the woman groaned. A small ladder has appeared in one of her stockings. The running mascara is drawing tiny grooves on her cheeks.

And then she calls 112.

"No, wait... I don't want anyone to know." Her eyelids flutter, beating across

moist eyeballs. The cracked whites of her eyes are filling with fragments of glass.

Sorry, old girl. This is my emergency exit.

“Where are you?” – “In the basement”, she misdirects the dispatcher. This is the only concession she is willing to make.

“You have fifteen, maybe twenty minutes to get here.”

In one go she tears the hem off her dress—just where did she get the strength to do it—and wraps both ends around the woman’s wrist. The green strip turns brown where the fabric covers the cut. Shit, she just needed a short break! A breather to put her mind back on track. She helps the woman sit up. With an awkward gesture she takes the woman’s hand. The dam bursts, the sobbing and moaning alternating with intense surges of crying. The girl in the hoodie lays her hand on the woman’s delicate shoulder, tensed up, stiffly, as if she were touching the surface of a counter top, and starts patting her mechanically. It has been a long time since she knew any warmth. Now she finds herself sharing this remarkable moment with a stranger drowning her in her own private pain. Her palm soaks up the feeling of aliveness from the trembling shoulder. She was a stealer all right.

“There, there...”

Steps start echoing along the corridor. Increasing numbers of them. Accelerating toward the door. She feels a surge of tension rush up between her buttocks and through her gut, all the way up to the lobes of her lungs. She withdraws her hand, on which a couple of blood drops have already started to clot.

“In here!” she yells, and then: “Help!”

“No,” the woman whimpers plaintively.

A train of tattered thoughts about her fellow human being—a decision made by many will prevail over the will of the few, when the need arises—flits through her

mind like a butterfly. Their Ethics teacher had told them as much about democracy.

The doors burst open with a crash and swing apart. As if after an explosion, the place is overrun with blue-and-white police uniforms and paramedics carrying long intricate cables and tubes attached to oxygen masks and infusion kits, a veritable symphony of plastics, electromagnetic shielding emergency equipment, walkie-talkies and first-aid bags. Injection needles spring up in the air, their plungers ready to push the soul back inside the body.

She let go of the woman's cold, sticky hand and placed her own hand on her tummy to warm up. Death does take place before one becomes dead for a fact. Resting her palm on her tummy made her feel like she was drawing a cross-section of all her decisions, past and present. Clearly, no one can do her dying for her. She had to do it herself. But first she had to take care of her UNFINISHED BUSINESS.

The faces of the police officers and paramedics emerged in her field of vision, fusing together, their lines blurring into one another. The jumble of people and voices, their looks, ideas, orders, colours were coalescing into an envelope of oblivion around her. She was once again a cell in this pulsating micro-universe. She opened her empty wallet, as if to browse for her ID, and started to explain. Slipped up on her words. Went back to where she started. As if she were clicking through a menu that had been set to replay individual scenes in sequences.

“Please take another good look at the woman...”

“Does she seem familiar?”

“What were you doing here?”

“...lost some blood. In a worse case scenario, a sudden drop of blood pressure in the brain could cause a circulatory collapse.”

“Whose item is this, on the floor?”

The item had slipped from the woman's hand when she missed the toilet seat and drew a half-circle around herself with her spiked heels, didn't it? Having raided half of the women's clothing department on the other side of the corridor, all she needed was a camera for a fashion show. Words tangoed on her tongue. I need help, can't you see I'm BLEEDING? She sighed and the words blew back, down her throat. She was

moving backwards, toward the exit. She had left the camera on the floor. The thin fabric of her dress was soaked with the salty sweat of her skin. A patch of cold shiver ran between her shoulder blades, like a small moon slithering down her back. Girls and women in black tee-shirts with the logo of a leading entertainment electronics corporation were running to and fro, up and down the corridor. Those gaping gawkers might as well be charged a fee for the spectacle. They were straining to catch a glimpse of the washroom, beyond the ceramic sinks, on the other side of the swinging doors that occasionally flashed open.

In the bizarre tousled crowd that converged from all directions and, along with her, mixed into a stream of bodies, she inconspicuously broke away to the exit. A voice on the speaker was promising pensioners a ten percent discount and a coupon for free coffee. The thick, foul air compressed the sound into pellets that jetted along the shelves with video game consoles, past the cameras and LCD TVs. Atomised against the viscosity of bodily fluids and gas kept under control, they returned to the sweat and bad breath of those vacant faces, and ended up lingering on the glutinous filaments of human curiosity. The sound tugged at her as if trying to throw her off course. She bumped against a shelf showing traces of brown Sellotape along the edge. She pushed past all those malignant lumps that swelled in her direction. She aced the fire escape staircase outside the building. With her small human footprint she had managed to shake up her world, unnoticeably yet more powerfully than a tectonic shift.

Just as she scrambled through the exit, she saw the security guard's scruffy blue uniform in the corner of her eye. An unknown magnetic force pulled her into the alleyway where the wind tossed old trash up and down the deserted passage. The wind blew through the cracks in the walls with a high shrill pitch, like someone whistling through a gap in their teeth. She sneaked under the bridge, to its metal underbelly. Closer to the tears accumulated by the city. From here, the opposite riverbank looked like the surface of an unfurled brain, dotted with pulsating car lights that buzzed through like thought impulses. The bridge above quivered in the rhythm of wheels that whizzed by. She snuggled against the cool concrete. Her body absorbed some of its cadenced release. Light on the other shore pulsated like an LED on an answering

machine.

And there she was, running through the streets glistening wet from the rain. Puddles of light reflected from the street lamps lay on the wet asphalt. It must have been around eightish. Traffic to the centre was already becoming sparse. The greens and reds of neon advertisements bloomed off the pavement. The massive facades stood above her in a double row like guards of honour as she hurried past and kept going at a breathless pace. She stopped to rest by the bronze bust of a writer on whose pedestal someone had sprayed the words “I’m the best, fuck the rest.” She glanced up to the sky above the rooftops that were wrapped in a dotted black cloak. The flat round moon in the background was spiked with antennas. She took out the woman’s cell phone and adjusted the pixels. The phone made a shutter-like sound. Her hand trembled when she was finished taking pictures of the night sky. The river lay calm and still, almost mirror-like, in the riverbed. A sip of tears had gathered on her sleeve. She smiled blissfully at her relic. She used to appropriate other people’s feelings and discard them long before they wilted. A thief preying on people and things. O. had trained her like a pigeon, all she needed was wings.

The streets were almost deserted now. The pavement was littered and smeared with splotches of oil. Dusk danced around her feet in the rhythm of her steps. The evening chill had already begun to sharpen the outlines of the indistinct corners under the arches of the art gallery she had just passed. An inhuman scream resounded somewhere in the distance. She sat down on the cool stairs by the iron fence that protected an island with a tall residential building and pretty playground equipment in a sandy square. Balconies with laundry ropes stretched across their length beckoned her like open palms to step in and relish a bit of this homey atmosphere. On the tails of a teenager wearing baggy pants with a real metal chain as the crotch seam, she slipped through the posh double PVC door with glass panes designed like a chessboard. The ground floor enjoyed the additional security of a door with rectangular glass panes as thick as the bottom of

a beer bottle. She crossed the long corridor of hair salon windows with vertical blinds. A post-it note was rubbing shoulders with the elevator door. Poshness out of order. Behind another door—in the apartment facing south—she could hear cats meowing, and the rattling of pots and pans. In the corridor on the first floor, a classical symphony was bouncing off the walls undecided between vegging out and accustoming itself to emptiness. Strings were breaking under a relentless reminder of an unforgettable night of pain and pleasure. Steel beams and girders hopped and danced. The building's foundations were spinning, the water pipes braiding together. The freshly painted walls were playing the game of hips and the wood grain was scoffing at blotches on the plastic. The entire flawlessly designed first floor whined. Then suddenly everything went very quiet.

On each side there were two apartments, with a metal-rimmed garbage chute hatch halfway between them. She stopped to soak up those quaint islands of safety and clusters of blinking lights. She pressed close against the freshly painted balustrade. Rested her temples against the balls set at the mid-section of the crossbar carved with leafy ornaments. She had now reached the lowest point of her misery. Every perception and image in her memory was glazed with a thin coat of varnish that was the image of home. Dried crusts on rims of unwashed pots abandoned in the kitchen sink. The lifting edges of the kitchen linoleum, its innumerable cuts and cigarette burns. Crumbs and bits of food stuck in the spaces between the wooden floor boards. O's jacket, threadbare on the elbows and around the collar, hanging on the door like a bad omen. Friday the thirteenth, the black cat in whose company optimism becomes the most treacherous state of mind.

She got up and started climbing the stairs. It wasn't far to the top. She politely greeted the man wiping the milk glass which he had apparently just installed in a window frame. None of the doors looked beat up or scratched, they were glazed with smooth varnish. The air smelled like buckets of lime-scented disinfectant. Fuchsia plants with polished green

leaves graced the corners. No speck of dust anywhere, no dried vomit. A woman in a strapped Indian nightgown was lighting incense sticks. Her head was wrapped in a towel that looked soft and fragrant like a baby's blanket.

“Evening.”

The tenants did not seem bothered by a stranger wandering late at night through their small world composed of chrome fixtures, towels smelling of fabric softener, decorative flower pots, separated garbage, recycling bags and energy saving light bulbs, because all of those things kept them safe and shielded from the moth-eaten messed up real life.

Out there, police sirens howled. Brakes squealed, the noise of traffic on the overpass was breaking through the stone ribs of balcony passages and their clothes dryers. Lights from the ceiling pierced her cold, sweaty skin, the silk pad inside of which she had evolved from larva to chrysalis. With the tip of her index finger she rubbed her eyes dry until she felt a burning sensation, before she began ascending to the roof terrace. Occasional gusts of wind rushed at her and licked at her goose-bumped skin. She fixes her gaze on the infinite vastness of the sky, possessed by an inexplicable calm. From the dim structure of the urban jungle, a crane towers up through the scarlet belt of the evening glow, a hook dangling from its extended arm. Inside her pocket, the woman's cell phone starts to ring. Anguish spirals up around her chest as the phone continues to roar, shaking her pocket. The exorbitance of the blackest darkness, which has gathered in the corners of the attic and around the laundry-drying room, forces her to shrink far inside. A tidal wave swells up in her eyes. Beneath the wave, the neighbourhood undulates toward her like an octopus trying to encircle and squeeze her with its tentacles. God knows how long she would remain lying on the pavement, limbs twisted in a strange way, her face smashed, like over-ripe fruit, next to a pile of old newspapers or a garbage container. Or, better yet, behind some discarded cardboard, with the day and the sky for a bedcover,

before some passer-by stumbled on her.

Something stirs behind the concrete barrier, behind the pile of fire bricks, discarded oil-soaked rags, opened bags of potting soil, and there was something else that resembled a snake nest in the faint silvery moonlight. She makes a leap for the edge, as if out of mind. Her boot-clad feet press hard against the cold concrete as she runs. Down there, the canopies of the elegant ash trees stretched out their arms to catch and keep her in their ample bosoms, or perhaps to release her to the plot of concrete between their roots. She was going to defile that small temple of innocence, no one had jumped off that roof yet. It was high time that she blighted the building and ruined someone else's evening in turn. Perhaps even the morning of the following day. That was her asking price, the best she could get of a bad bargain and not one iota more.

She felt the air surge under her armpits and between her legs. Her right leg dropped into the void. The Hello Kitty pendant flitted to and fro as if in slow motion. The void was slashing the weight off her like a scalpel. The rush of cold air agitated the nerves in her body. At that very moment she crashed against the hard rough concrete. Its texture became embossed on her face and her jaw made a grating, hurting sound. The weight of an unknown body was pressing her into the ground.

Kebarie

Translation by Ksenija Šoster Olmer

Monday/Pondiljak

Kedi's real name was Kebarie. That's what her classmates and her teacher Erika called her. At home they called her Kedi. *Kedi* in Roma language means to read. Kebarie doesn't mean anything. Kedi read well. But her hand writing was terrible. The letters in the notebook she used for her dictation exercises didn't stand up straight. They were bent in all directions. Sometimes even into the second line. Kedi found the letters boring. She liked to draw little tails and wings on them. Her letters hugged each other like good friends.

"Letters don't have friends," said her teacher Erika.

"Every letter has a whole alphabet of friends," objected Kedi.

"That's what we call writing, Kebarie," insisted Miss Erika.

Kedi had to write her name one hundred times in her notebook. One hundred times is a lot. It hurts your wrist. Reading was fun. Except when you had to read your own name one hundred times.

Kedi found Miss Erika cold hearted. Her *dade*, daddy, said, cold hearted people were unhappy. Nothing touches their heart.

"Their heart, *vodži*, is encased like a sausage," he complained. Then his face lit up with, "A gypsy heart is an open book. Just imagine it falling into the hands of someone who can't read."

Kedi didn't understand. "Everyone can read. They learn to read in school."

Dade picked up a dry branch and broke it in two. He gave the other

half to Kedi. He wrote the letter K in the sand. Then he paused. They were sitting on the bench in front of the house. The sun was glimmering in the window panes.

“*Kedi*,” he encouraged her, “*kedi* ...”

“You want me to read?” she asked.

“*Kedi* ...” repeated *dade*.

That is how Kebarie became *Kedi*, the reader.

She discovered that her teacher, Miss Erika, was not an open book. Her eyes did not shine with joy while she was celebrating with her students. The lively children’s pictures left her cold. What she liked best was asking her class to arrange the numbers on the blackboard by size from the biggest to the smallest.

“Twenty four, twenty two, twenty two, no, twenty three ...” Elvis tried hard. He was red in his face like the stripes on Kedi’s sweater.

“Kebarie, why don’t you try,” said Miss Erika.

Kebarie arranged the numbers correctly, “*Štaridvajset, trinidvajset, dujidvajset, jekidvajset, dvajset.*” She was excited. Perhaps just a tiny bit scared, because she did better than Elvis.

Miss Erika dusted off the remains of the chalk from her fingers and said, “Excellent, now let’s try in Slovene.”

“Why?” asked Kedi. Her *phuri dei*, grandma, said you can learn a language but not the street smarts.

“Kebarie, you have to learn Slovene. It will be easier for you to follow in class,” explained

Miss Erika. “Let’s give it a try!”

But Miss Erika did not have to give it a try. She already knew everything. That left Kebarie all alone, stumbling over Slovene words.

And those stupid capital letters, too! In her dictation notebook Miss Erika corrected the words Blackbird and Canary to blackbird and canary.

Kedi rebelled, “A child is a child and a bird is a bird.”

“Correct,” said the teacher.

“The child is called Kedi and the bird is called Blackbird.”

“That’s incorrect,” objected the teacher.

“But we do write names with capital letters, don’t we?” inquired Kedi.

“Correct,” agreed the teacher.

“And the bird is named Blackbird.” Kedi was glad to have solved the dilemma.

“Blackbird is a kind of a bird,” explained the teacher. “There are too many blackbirds for all to be named Blackbird.”

“Is Urška a kind of a girl?”

“Teacher,” objected Urška, offended.

“Urška,” retorted Miss Erika.

“Teacher?” Kedi was waiting for an answer.

“Kebarie, please sit down,” said Miss Erika.

Miss Erika started to draw the multitudes on the blackboard.

“I don’t understand,” despaired Kedi.

Learning was tiresome and boring.

She couldn’t wait to run home after school.

“Is *dade* back?” she asked at the door.

No one answered.

Tuesday/Torek

It happened during the math class. Her teacher, Miss Erika, was standing with her back to the class. She wrote a mathematical equation across the whole blackboard. She was so deep in the numbers that she didn’t hear the snickering and the moving of a chair.

Kedi was dancing *čoček* on her chair. That’s a Roma dance. Babies learn it in their cribs.

The class was laughing out loud.

Miss Erika turned around. Her eyes were blinking furiously behind her glasses.

“Get down right now.” she yelled.

Kedi was dancing on her chair, arms in mid air.

Miss Erika pulled her by the edge of her sweater.

“Kebarie, I am warning you,” she shouted. The anger in her voice was replaced with concern.

Kedi stomped on the chair. She twirled on her tipi toes.

“The child will fall and break her neck,” wailed Miss Erika.

“The child is written with lower case letter,” cried Kedi.

Miss Erika tried to catch her.

She twisted away.

“Enough!” Miss Erika lost her nerve.

They started to jostle. The teacher’s glasses were slipping down her nose in irritation. She pulled Kedi down towards herself as if she was bored with being a teacher and decided to become a rescuer. Kedi ended up on the floor.

“You can not dance on the chair,” said Miss Erika angrily. “You could fall down and get hurt!”

“Why not? We dance on tables! Only mothers dance on the floor. Girls dance on tables or on chairs.” She watched the teacher with shiny, bright eyes.

“I can even dance in a circle. Shall I show you how?”

“No, we don’t dance during class. We listen and cooperate,” said Miss Erika. Kedi’s smile was contagious. Miss Erika did not like fooling around. But Kedi felt she didn’t like chastising either.

“Just wait till recess, OK?”

Kedi sat at her desk. She rummaged in her pencil box. She gave a big belly to the letter D.

She stared at the math columns on the board.

$$10 + \underline{\quad} = 22$$

$$17 + \underline{\quad} = 32$$

$$11 + \underline{\quad} = 29$$

$$4 + \underline{\quad} = 27$$

$$9 + \underline{\quad} = 23$$

She started to get sleepy. She blinked with her long eyelashes. Sometimes her mom painted them with her mascara. Her eyes were closing.

She was dreaming that the wind was blowing her out the window. Suddenly she was high up. From above she could see her house at the edge of the settlement. Her sister Samanta was chasing the chickens around the yard. Her brother Arhim was racing his bike in the field behind their house. *Phuri dei*, her grandma, was sitting on the bench. She was turning over her fortune-telling cards. Some women did not venture a step without consulting her cards. They came running to *phuri dei* for every little thing.

“Mix ‘em up,” she ordered. The women nervously shuffled the cards. After them *phuri dei* did them one last time. Then she divided them in three piles. She read stories from her cards just as Kedi did from her reading-book. Sometimes she pulled the card with Death holding a scythe out from the pile. The women screamed in horror.

“Why are they screaming? Will they die?” asked Kedi curiously.

“Of course not. Death means a new beginning,” explained *phuri dei*.

“And where is the end, *fertik?*”

Phuri dei caressed her hair. Kedi closed her eyes from pleasure. She wasn't sure where *phuri dei* ended and where Kedi began. There is no end. The women probably just enjoy screaming.

The wind was silent.

She thought of *dade*. He was climbing up a bricklayer's scaffolding at the town offices. He won't be home anytime soon. She hasn't seen him in a couple of days.

Maybe he was in Italy looking for her suitors. She was too young for marriage. But *dade* will chose her the best husband in the whole wide world. He will be searching high and low just like the prince in The Princess And the Pea.

“My daddy is a doctor,” was Urška full of herself during the recess.

“My *dade* is a *čarovnjak*,” said Kedi.

“It is magician,” Aljaž corrected her. “Magicians don’t exist.”

“My daddy saves lives,” said Urška.

“My *dade* saves our family!” yelled Kedi.

Her classmate Frelih kicked the chair so it bumped into the desk.

“Mine beats up all the drunks, thieves and gypsies because he is a policeman!”

Elvis pushed the desk into the wall. The chair clanged onto the floor.

“My dad drives the best Audi!”

“Mine can jump over three parked Audies on his motorcycle!” cried Kedi.

“We are rich!” chimed in Špela.

“We are, too,” said Kedi. “The other day *dade* made magic for a golden bracelet to appear in my mom’s pocket.”

A pleasant melody announced the end of recess.

“But I have a horse named Cesar in the stables,” said Špela.

“My *dade* astrides a horse without a saddle,” came back Kedi.

“It is ‘rides’,” Aljaž corrected her.

Her classmate Frelih was kicking the backpack on the floor.

“And he drives stolen cars without a licence!”

Kedi got mad.

“Says who?”

“My daddy!” spit back Frelih.

Dade told her driver’s licences were only for bumbling people.

“Licences are only for cowards!”

Now it was Frelih’s turn to get mad.

“Says who?”

“My daddy!” retorted Kedi.

In the afternoon she waited for *dade* in the courtyard. The neighbour’s *čhavoro*, baby Burim, played in the mud. He was naked and dirty. Next to him lay a golden chain. She took it to the neighbour. Then she went to wait for *dade* on the road. In the evening she sat by the door, just in case.

But *dade* didn't show up.

Wednesday/Srida

"Kebariel!" Miss Erika called on Kedi unexpectedly during class.

Kedi blinked in confusion. She was thinking about *dade*. Perhaps he was sick. Or someone shot him. Just like in a movie.

"Did you fall asleep? Show me your homework."

Kedi recollected the pages from the math book:

CAREFULLY OBSERVE THE NUMBERS. IN EACH LINE DRAW THE EXACT NUMBER OF OBJECTS DENOTED BY THE NUMBER:

4/ picture of telephone

7/ picture of glasses

10/ picture of letter

She carefully copied the exercises into her notebook.

"*Zvesko pobistendža khere,*" she mumbled. She didn't want others to understand.

"Slovene, please," demanded the teacher.

"I left the notebook at home."

In fact she had a feeling that her dog ate the math notebook. She searched the whole house from top to bottom. She even moved the man-hole cover in the courtyard. She peeked in the sewer. The notebook vanished mysteriously. Every *čharovo romane*, Roma child, knows that the world is inundated with magic in the night. Sometimes somebody gets enchanted by magic. Then they send for *phuri dei* to heal him. They forgot to put money in late uncle Kamal's coffin. So he came back to haunt them. Maybe he took her math notebook. She was afraid of the dead. It would have been better if the notebook had been indeed eaten by the dog.

Luckily Miss Erika got tired of berating her. They moved on to read-

ing comprehension. Miss Erika read aloud the story of the Magic Mill that ended up broken on the garbage heap.

Nevertheless it goes on to grind all the garbage into dust. The teacher posed the questions about the story.

Most of the questions were directed to Kedi.

“What kind of a mill do we find in the story?”

Kedi understood the story perfectly well. It was quite simple. But her thoughts were still with *dade* so she answered,

“Sick.”

“What do you mean?” Miss Erika was upset. “You wanted to say magical, right?”

“First it is magical, then it gets sick.”

“The mill gets broken,” tried Miss Erika.

“If it was magical, it should have fixed itself,” she answered absent-mindedly.

Miss Erika tugged on her ear. Perhaps she thought she was dreaming.

“Why does it end on the garbage heap?” she asked in desperation.

“Because it was shot by a bandit.”

“But the Magic Mill continues to mill,” concluded Miss Erika too loudly.

“Only in stories,” said Kedi.

Suddenly Miss Erika was tired of reading. Kedi wasn’t quite sure why.

Dade would have been proud of her. He would have answered exactly the same. He knew the answer to every question.

“*Dade*, why is there a sky?”

“So that the Earth is not cold.”

“Why are the clouds so soft?”

“So that the sky doesn’t get blisters.”

“Why doesn’t a ship drown?”

“Because it can swim.”

“*Dadeeee*, you’re pulling my leg!”

“If all the ship sank, the *morji* would rise up and flood the world.”

“Everyone would die.”

“Everyone.”

“But death means a new beginning.”

“Just in cards, *čaj mro*, my daughter.”

He had a thin moustache, like a shoelace, under his nose. He rubbed it with his thumb and pointer, laughing. When she knew a poem by heart, he joyfully threw his hat up in the air.

She daydreamed about her *dade* till the end of school. When the bell rang, she waited in the hall for Diva and Pužo. They walked home together. Pužo was really called Džekson. They called him Pužo, snail, because he was too slow to keep up with the rest. He was repeating the class.

In the afternoon she pulled her sister Samanta around in a wooden cart. Her brother Arhim was guarding the road. She kept an eye on the field. And on the woods, just in case. There was dust rising behind a tractor on the field. She was twisting and turning the cart until Samanta tumbled out. *Phuri dei* was clapping her knees, laughing. Even mom smiled.

She forgot to do her homework again.

By the evening *dade* still wasn't home.

Thursday/Četrtko

Žiga was sick. He didn't come to school. Her classmate Frelih didn't have a partner at his desk. So Miss Erika invited the class to a game of 'The seat on my right is empty'. This is how it went: The student invited a classmate to take the empty chair next to him. He switched. His chair was now empty. The pupil next to it invited another. And so on. With this game the teacher checked who was the least popular in class. Which was stupid. Even without the chair game it was obvious who was the least popular.

Kedi got a stomach ache. 'The seat on my right is empty' was a mean game. She wished it would be over soon.

The classroom was loud like a construction site. Miss Erika was giv-

ing out instructions. “Push the desks apart so you will have more room to switch chairs. Pair the chairs in two!”

Then,

“Don’t be wild! Don’t rattle the chairs!”

The students went wild rattling the chairs.

“Don’t jostle!”

They jostled wildly. Elvis lost his balance and fell. He got up quickly and pushed Kedi over. That’s how he covered up the tears, streaming down his cheeks.

Kedi got hurt bumping into the table.

“Elvis, apologise at once,” demanded Miss Erika.

Kedi couldn’t push anyone. No one was close enough. That’s why everyone noticed her tears. She preferred berating to the chair game. Or even extra homework. Her teacher, Miss Erica, just made it worse with her game. So Kedi chose Miss Erika as the least popular in class. She decided to be *učiteljnica*, a teacher, when she grew up. In her class there would be no unpopular students.

“Let’s start!” said Miss Erika, clapping her hands.

Her classmate Frelih had an empty seat to his right.

“The seat on my right is empty!” he cried.

“I want ... Aljaž to seat on it!”

Aljaž changed seats triumphantly. He was popular like a president of state. Every week he found a new invitation to a birthday party on his desk. Presidents like other presidents. That’s why he always walked with Frelih at the head of the line when the class went for a walk. Kedi didn’t remember Frelih’s first name on purpose. He didn’t remember hers, either. He called her Kozlarie on purpose. Sometimes even Kozarie. But Kedi knew a secret about him. One day she was late for her early-morning care. She was changing into her school slippers. Frelih was sitting in the corner. He was learning the dictation from his notebook by heart, so that in class it would seem he could read fluently. He was a lousy reader. Worse than a first grader. He never forgave her for finding him out.

Her classmate Urška said vainly,

“The seat on my right is empty. I want ... Ula to sit on it!”

Kedi thought the name Ula was stupid. Ula-Bula. There were a lot of silly rhymes to be made out of it. But nobody made fun of the name Ula. She was popular like a head of state. Or a gold medal winner. She tossed her long hair over her shoulder. She sat next to Urška as if on a throne.

“The seat on my right is empty. I want ... Luka to sit on it!”

“The seat on my right is empty. I want ... Špela to sit on it!”

“The seat on my right is empty. I want ... Elvis to sit on it!”

Kedi’s head was spinning from all the getting up, yelling, and switching. Špela stepped on her foot. Probably intentionally. Nobody chose her. She hated her teacher, Miss Erika.

She took the long way home. Across a wooden footbridge. Underneath ran a thin spurt of water. Like from a water pipe. Long time ago there were ducks swimming in the stream. *Dade* told her that the stream had dried up. The nearby construction work had interrupted the flow of the river bed. *Dade* knew everything! He read like a radio announcer. Even better! When she read a *vištorja* all by herself for the first time, the story of the Princess and the Pea, she found out that when *dade* read her the good-night story, he changed the princess into a gypsy princess.

“The gypsy princess knocked on the door of the gypsy king in the middle of the Russian steppes,” he read. “Her black hair was wild. The king decided to test her with sword and fire. Because only a true gypsy princess knows how to use a sword and walk on the hot coals without singeing her feet ...”

Kedi listened entranced. The gypsy princess makes it through all the tests like a true queen. The king sat her on an untamed colt. They rode off together into the starry night.

“How does the night smell?” he always asked her at the end of the story.

“Of horses and hay!” they answered in unison.

“But where is the pea?”

“*Du piri*, in the pot, of course!” He was laughing and started to tickle her.

The princess with the pea underneath the mattresses reminded her of Ula. *Dade's* gypsy princess was better. She missed him. She was his gypsy princess. *Romni* princess!

She ran to the courtyard. *Dade's* bike was leaning against the wall. He was back!

“*Dade, dade!*” she cried excited.

Godfather Kerim, the chieftain of the settlement, stepped out of the house. He knew how to read and write. He had a cable TV in his house. He didn't wear a hat. Even if he did, he wouldn't throw it in the air. His face was serious and dark.

“Kebarie,” he grumbled.

“*Dade* calls me Kedi!” she cried. “They all call me Kedi.”

“You're still just a *chavoro* romane, a plain little gypsy girl,” he cut her off. He took *Dade's* bike.

In a fit she started to pull at his coat.

“Leave the bicycle alone. It is not yours! When *dade* comes back, he will miss it!”

“He won't.”

“You can have the bike when *dade* doesn't need it any more. We can only keep things that nobody will miss.”

“Your *dade* won't need it anymore,” he said and pushed her away. She staggered.

Her school bag slipped off her shoulders. It opened and out on the gravel spilled her schoolbooks and notebooks. Without them she wasn't Kedi, the reader, anymore. She was only Kebarie, a plain little gypsy girl.

Godfather Kerim left on *Dade's* bicycle.

Friday/petek

During the recess she cleaned off the dirt from her books and notebooks. Under her pen tip she heard the grinding of the sand. Her dictation notebook was covered with brown stains. Tiny pebbles were rolling amongst the colour pencils in her colouring box. Half of the colours were missing.

Last night she worked on her homework. She answered aloud the questions in her reading-book. She sharpened her colour pencils. She meticulously changed the ink cartridge in her pen.

Her mom watched her all the while.

“You’ll never be *učiteljnica*,” she said suddenly.

“Yes I will!” Kedi jumped in the chair. “*Dade* said I will teach all Roma to read, write and count.”

Mother’s face darkened.

“Your *dade* doesn’t ...” She didn’t finish her sentence.

“I’ll go to school for *učiteljnica*!”

“There is no *dinari* for school,” her mother responded dejectedly. “*Kirivo*, godfather Kerim has found a husband for you. He will bring money to the house.”

Her eyelids trembled. Her eyes filled with tears.

“I don’t want a husband! *Dade* will find me a true gypsy king!”

“After elementary school you will get married!” said mother angrily.

“I am *Dade’s* princess *romni*,” she talked back to her mom.

“Your *dade* is budal, an idiot!” mom lost her temper. She got up and walked to the window, turning her back on her.

The tears wet her notebook. They blurred the letters and the drawing of the coffee mill, shot by the bandit.

“*Dade* will go to the Russian steppes for the king, “ she sobbed quietly. “I know he will.”

“Do you even know where the Russian steppes are?” snarled mom, without looking back.

“Past the forest at the Russian village.”

“Russian steppes are in Russia, you fool,” her mother laughed out too loud. “Do you have any clue where Russia is? You *ideš* to school, not me.”

Kedi stood up from the table. She scooped up her notebooks and books and marched out to the courtyard. She hurled them to the ground. She smeared soil and mud on the open notebooks. In the afternoon she became saddened by the school bag. By the evening she was enraged. She let the school supplies out in the yard.

She was tossing and turning all night. Surely *dade* left for Russia to see the Russian king. It was still too early for his return. Russia is far away. But he will return to her! He would never abandon her!

She changed her mind in the morning and picked up the notebooks. She dusted off the soil from the covers. She put everything into her school bag. Mom did not say a word. She had never left for school without her mom combing her hair.

She checked the damage at school. Her dictation notebook was ruined. Just as the new math notebook. The old one was probably eaten by the dog. The bag was filthy. She could only be a sloppy *učiteljnica*, and not a scientific *učiteljnica*.

Her teacher Erika was far from thrilled with the state of her school supplies.

“I want your mother to come to school.”

“She won’t,” mumbled Kedi.

“Why not?” Miss Erika was aghast.

“Mom doesn’t care about school.”

“I am sure you are wrong, Kebarie,” Miss Erika said doubtfully as if she didn’t believe her own words.

“Mom doesn’t care. We are gypsies.”

Miss Erika started to feel uneasy.

“Even Roma need education,” she said.

“Will you show me Russia on the map, teacher?” Kedi asked.

“Russia?” Miss Erika was confused. “Why do you want to know about Russia?”

“I need an education,” she came up with a quick retort.

“Are you moving?” asked Miss Erika suspiciously.

“Just me and my *dade*. He is taking me to the real gypsy king.”

“Why?” asked Miss Erika with a long face.

“To be his wife.”

“Don’t be silly,” Miss Erika said adamantly. “You’re just a child! You can’t be anyone’s wife!”

“I am a gypsy princess!”

“You are Slovene! And in our country only grown ups get married,” Miss Erika started to raise her voice. “What’s the meaning of all this?”

“I think so, too, that I am a child,” agreed Kedi.

“You think so?” said Miss Erika with a high voice. “I demand that your mother come to school. Please, write a note to your parents. Otherwise I will be forced to take measures!”

“What about Russia?” insisted Kedi.

Wordlessly the teacher took her up to the second floor. There was a tube with a string under the ceiling of the geography classroom.

“Step aside,” said Miss Erika. She tugged on the string. From beneath the ceiling a huge map unravelled like a sheet. It covered half the wall and blackboard.

“This is Russia.” With her hand Miss Erika covered an area as big as Kedi’s head. It was green and brown and intersected with blue lines.

“Those are rivers.”

She stared into the network of lines, dots and stains. Her *dade* was wandering somewhere in all that confusion. He can stray and lose his way! Miss Erica was joined by another teacher. She noticed they whispered behind her back. They watched her, worried. As if she herself was lost.

She didn’t feel like going home after school. She was loitering around the store. All the shopping carts were chained to the post. On occasion Pužo and her got some change for ice cream out of the abandoned carts. Sometimes the homeless chased them away. They wanted the coins for themselves.

“*Po ulici vaso mandre ...*” she sang. She kicked the ball that rolled under her feet. It was late. At the end she had to head home. She was too young to spend the night outside.

Arhim’s old, rusty bike lay in the yard. She lunged through the door.

“I am Slovene. In our country children get married when they grow up!” she cried triumphantly from the doorstep.

Mom, *phuri dei*, and sister Samanta sat on the sofa. None paid any attention to her.

Dade, she felt a stab in her heart. Something happened to him. Perhaps he was crushed by the gypsy king in the middle of the Russian steppes.

“Arhim is gone!” exploded Samanta.

“Mom? *Phuri dei*?” she begged for an explanation, confused.

“*Kirivo Kerim* took him,” said *phuri dei*, outwardly indifferent. “He will help *njegovem kolegi* in the warehouse.”

“But why?” she screamed. Arhim was only eight. Too young for marriage, old enough for work?

“Because there is no *dinari*!” *phuri dei* cut her off.

“What about school?” She couldn’t understand.

“*Koja* school?” mom yelled. “School doesn’t give you *dinari*, money, school takes away *dinari*!”

Quietly she sat on the chair. Without *dade* the world was turning in the wrong direction.

Saturday/Sobota

In the morning she wandered around the town. She window shopped at the nicely decorated stores.

She watched people passing by.

“Will you come with me?” she begged Diva.

“I have to watch my little brother,” replied Diva sullenly.

“Let’s go get the coins out of the carts,” she tried to persuade Pužo.

“I am helping mix the mortar for the new addition at home.” Pužo

was afraid his *dade* would beat him. He had to go to Germany often with his family visiting their relatives. At times he missed months of school. That's why he had a lot of trouble reading. Kedi wanted to practice reading with him. But his *dade* wouldn't hear about it.

"When he grows up, he will help me in the workshop. For polishing and forging he will need nimble fingers, not his ABC."

"Just so he doesn't chop one off, clumsy as he is," worried Kedi. His fingers were just as slow as his brain. Except when drawing. Pužo drew the most beautiful horses. The first lines on the blank paper were a jumble of doodles and shades. Then suddenly, like through a fog, a slender body with a proud neck and splendid mane broke out. *Gra*, a colt! Kedi watched him while he drew. She was his sole admirer. At times it seemed as if a real horse inhabited him during drawing. While he drew, he would snort through his nose like through twitching nostrils.

She passed the town bookshop. There was no sign of the beggar woman with her baby.

Last Friday she gave her a coin. She felt a sting in her chest thinking about it. She found the coin in the school yard. It was the first time ever she found money.

"You can keep anything you find as long as nobody will miss it," *dade* told her once. He was bringing home stuff from the dump with his wooden cart. He showed her all the things people discarded. At first glance some seemed perfectly new.

She held the coin tight in her hand. She closed her eyes. Slowly she counted to ten. Nobody missed it. It was all hers!

On the other side of the yard Ula went into panic, "My two euros! Someone stole my two euros!" Kedi opened her fist slightly. She peeked at the coin. She thought she held twenty cents in her hand. But she wasn't sure. *Phuri dei* collected change in a glass jar. At the end of the month they bought milk and bread with it at the store. Sometimes they were missing a few cents. Sometimes a euro or two. The difference was supplied by a kind saleswoman. She held tight to the coin in her sweaty palm. This time she

will be the one contributing to the family till.

At that moment Urška grabbed her by the wrist.

“Kebarie is hiding something!” she cried.

“Show me!” demanded Ula.

“*Na, na!*” she tore herself away. She had counted to ten. The coin was hers.

“Teacher, teacher, Kebarie stole money from Ula!” Her classmate Frelih brought attention of the whole school yard to her. The children stopped playing. A few of the teachers came closer, Miss Erika among them. Ula loved the attention.

“Grandma always gives me two euros for taking out the garbage.”

“Just for taking out the garbage?” Urška was surprised. “I have to do the dishes on top of it.”

“My dad pays me for my A’s,” bragged Aljaž.

“How much?” Elvis wanted to know.

“It depends,” said Aljaž. “The most expensive is an A in math. Ten euros.”

But he is a straight A student, thought Kedi. He has nothing but A’s.

Miss Erika looked from Ula to Kedi and back,

“Did you check the pockets?” she asked Ula.

“It’s better you check her,” Ula quickly suggested.

“I asked if you checked your own pockets,” the teacher said angrily.

“Let her show what she’s hiding in her hand,” Frelih pointed to Kedi.

“You don’t like her, you don’t like her,” snickered Špela.

“We usually don’t like what we don’t know,” said Miss Erika. “And what we fear,” she added. She sent him to get the gym keys. Even though she didn’t need them at all.

She touched Kedi’s shoulder gently.

“You don’t have to do anything.”

Kedi opened her hand. The coin seemed to bore through her hand. She let it go. It fell on the ground. It rolled towards Urška’s feet. It came to a stop with a clank. Nobody said a word. Then Elvis blurted out, surprised,

“It’s only twenty cents.”

Her chest stung from the injustice of it. They all believed she stole from Ula. They sometimes talked in front of her, how their parents slandered the gypsies. They said mean things.

“Ula, apologise to Kebarie,” said the teacher.

“I made a mistake, I am sorry,” said Ula, with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Ula, you will write an essay, due tomorrow. You will describe how you have acted and how you should have acted,” said Miss Erika. “Everyone else get to class!”

The children dispersed. Ula wanted to join them. But Miss Erika held her back.

“I want you to think about why you should not accuse someone of stealing money from you.”

“I did,” said Ula hurriedly. “Because it would be an injustice.”

Kedi noticed that Ula didn’t care one bit if she did her an injustice or not.

“Can I go now?” asked Ula.

Miss Erika sighed and let her go. She picked up the coin from the ground. She gave it to Kedi.

“You can keep it.”

“No, I don’t want to,” declined Kedi.

“Why not? It’s yours,” she tried to convince her.

The coin stung in her hand. On the way home she gave it to the beggar with the baby. The beggar threw a glance at the coin full of contempt. She didn’t understand that Kedi gave her all her savings. Her hand was stinging a long while after.

The town bookstore was decorated with the newest books. She read the titles. When she becomes *učiteljnica*, she will buy the book about the princess and the pea. She will write a *vištorja* about the gypsy princess and glue it into the book.

She turned towards home. She had to check if Pužo managed to make a cast of a horse from the mortar.

“*Gra, Gra,*” she cried running. The man with the baby thought she was

imitating a crow, kra, kra! She was neighing like a colt. The man showed her to flap her arms like a bird. Similar words can mean different things. That's another reason to be *učiteljica* when she grows up. *Učiteljica*-scientist.

"*Gra, Gra, Gra!*" With the flap of her arms she transformed herself into a winged horse. She raced to the home courtyard.

Phuri dei was foretelling a new baby to the neighbour in her cards when Kedi cried,

"Phuri, watch ... *Gra!*"

"*Ajme, Gra čiriklj!*" phuri burst into laughter. "Bird-horse!"

"Winged horse," Kedi corrected her.

She ran into the house.

"Arhim, Arhim, watch ... *Gra!*"

She forgot her brother wasn't living at home anymore.

Without

Translation by David Limon

1.

Simon hated the park. Or rather he hated the fact that by noon it was swarming with first graders. Their yelling interfered with his concentration.

“Your hair is like silk, your skin is like milk...” It sounded like a bad advertisement. The cut grass felt prickly through his jeans. The sun had come out and its warmth spread across his numb shoulders. A brat began crying nearby. On any other day, he would have shoved it off the swing. But today he had a date with Leyla. The most beautiful girl in the school was a fighter for the rights of children and animals. There was no way he would jeopardise his chances with her.

They had arranged to meet in the north-west corner of the park, left of the pavilion. Simon lacked all spatial sense. This was his excuse whenever he found himself on the wrong side of the law. Which happened frequently. But a date wasted because of him going the wrong way would feature at the very top of the list of all the mess-ups in his life. So he skived off school in order to have enough time to circle the park until he found the right place. He cracked his knuckles and waited for Leyla to turn up. Waiting didn't seem especially bothersome as he had plenty of time.

“Hey Simy,” she said as she approached from the left. Or the right, actually. She stepped over some soil scattered beside the flower beds. On the way she emptied the contents of her lunch bag into the bin, which he found romantic.

“Hey,” he waved to her. He liked watching her walk. Other girls minced, but Leyla sailed through space. Sometimes he would move back a few steps so that he could watch her for longer. Who cares about left and right, he fully mastered the two fundamental notions: front and back.

A man on the main path whistled at her.

Oy, you, clear off or I’ll get my garrotte out... She’s mine!

Looking at Leyla gave him a hard on. At night, while thinking about her, he had the most majestic ejaculations. He was worried that such a high frequency would cause him to dry up. He could not sleep because of her. It’ll pass, he kept telling himself while concealing his soiled underpants into the empty sewing machine cabinet, the only usable hiding place at the moment. His mother had temporarily moved it into his room. But the problem was refusing to go away and was instead intensifying. Now he was unable to close the cabinet door.

“Hey man.”

He struggled to sound laid back.

“Oh Leyla, wassup, man?”

Leyla looked at him suspiciously.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Eh? ... With me? ... Nothing. ... What’s the matter with you?”

“Why don’t we do it...”

From beneath her untidy hair big, her wide eyes contemplated him.

“... on the grass...”

He said something incomprehensible in a high pitched voice.

Leyla sat beside him on the ground. She put her hands on his shoulders to push him into a prone position. They tussled. His breathing was shallow and he had goose pimples. Everything on him was erect. Only another moment of this sweet agony and he would come in his pants.

He pushed her away so that she collapsed onto the grass. His heart was beating hard against his sweaty shirt.

“Look, not a cloud in the sky,” she said, pointing upwards.

Insects buzzed around his ears. The grass was tickling the back of his neck. Below ground there was a metallic noise. The din in his chest was

slowing down into a heartbeat.

You're so cool,

You make me shiver.

"What is the matter with you? Are you cold?"

He moved away slightly. "Can you stop getting at me? Why don't you tell me instead if you've got it or not."

"Me? Haven't you?"

He sat up and reached into his pocket, then victoriously pulled out a joint. It was a miracle that it hadn't been crushed by his tool, which he could have used to crack walnuts with.

"Wow, finally. And you've even rolled it. Cool!" she said as she jumped up. A blade of grass protruded attractively from her hair. He wanted to take hold of it with his teeth and pull it out. But then he would get a hard-on again.

He flicked the lighter. The end of the joint glowed red. He pulled on it and held his breath. Then he handed it to Leyla.

"How many times have you skived off school?" Her eyes watered from swallowing smoke.

"No idea. I don't even know which teachers we have this year. How's your gran?"

Her moist eyes became softer.

"Hey, my gran, she's a real treasure. She's saving up for me to go to university. She puts some of her pension away every month."

"Cool."

"And she'll pay for my driving lessons and test. And my dance group has been invited to a competition in London and she wants to sew a costume for me."

He turned on his side, supporting his head with his hand.

"Still doing hip hop?"

"Dance is my life," she beamed.

He was desperately looking for the right words.

"My mother sews, too."

"Does she? Gran needs a new sewing machine. The old one's packing up."

A few pigeons were strutting nearby.

“I’d like to meet her.”

“You know how it is, man. My gran believes in me. I can’t introduce someone like you to her just like that.”

“And why not? The other guys who are after you are all gits,” he said, upset.

“But they’re grammar school gits and you’re from the crafts school, get it? They’re on a grant for the gifted and you’re on ganja.”

Light twinkled in her clear, moist eyes. Maybe that was why he did not notice a ball that was flying at them until it was too late.

“Watch out...your left!” he managed to say.

The ball hit her head from the right. The blow knocked her sideways and she moaned loudly.

Simon wanted to jump up, but his legs refused to work because he had been sitting for so long.

“Just wait till I get you, you little git!”

Leyla was rubbing her red cheek.

“Simy,” she said. “It’s nothing. I’m OK.”

He took no notice of her words and ran after the boy who had lost his ball. Branches scratched his back. The little boy ran across a flower bed and Simon could see him hide behind a bush. The boy was in front of him and Simon held his breath while he noiselessly approached him from behind. He grabbed the boy’s collar.

“Ha ...” gasped the boy.

First, Simon slapped his cheek. That was the least he owed Leyla. The boy cried.

“Not a sound! I’ll give you smashing people on the head with your ball,” he hissed at him. “Show me your pockets!”

“Simon, where are you?” he could hear Leyla shouting. But the opportunity to take it out on someone weaker than him was very attractive. So he gave him another slap. Then he reached into the boy’s pocket and pulled out a mobile phone.

“No...” said the boy, sobbing. Fat tears ran down his cheeks.

“If you tell anyone, I’ll ...” he waved his fist in the boy’s face. “Now get lost!” The little boy staggered towards the playground. Simon saw that Leyla was looking around nervously, but she did not spot them. He pushed the child’s phone into his pocket and hurried back to her. He stopped a few metres away from the bench she was standing next to.

“Hey, Leyla, let’s walk towards the town,” he said quietly, inviting her to follow him.

“The town is in the opposite direction,” she said. “Tell me I just imagined it and you didn’t really do anything to that kid?”

“The odd educational slap doesn’t do any harm.” He slunk into the shelter of some huge beech trees.

“Have you totally lost it?” She came after him, furious.

“My head isn’t a goal he should be aiming his ball at and neither is yours,” he said, playing the protector. “Next time I’ll make a hole in it, the little shit, playing football here!” They were making their way through the bushes.

“Don’t you understand that there’s no excuse for violence? Where are you going now? The centre is that way. I can’t believe you went and slapped him...” she kept repeating in shock. She deliberately let go of a low branch so that it hit him in the face.

“Ow!”

“Oh, did it hurt?” she pretended to be concerned.

He rubbed his cheek, feeling offended. That brat gets an Ericsson worth a few hundred bob and him a Nokia worth a packet of condoms. And then it’s him Leyla gets at. It was the world that was crazy, not him.

They pushed their way through the bushes and found themselves in front of the new fence of the sports ground. They managed to squeeze through the gap between the metal gate poles.

Leyla wiped her eyes with her hand as if trying to erase an ugly scene from her head.

“You’re a total bloody idiot sometimes,” she said, pushing him off her path with her elbow, and moved off.

“Wait, where are you going?” he shouted after her. “There’s a bit of the joint left, one drag for each of us.”

“It’s too weak anyway,” she shouted without looking back.

“Oh come on, have a drag,” he said as he caught up with her and knocked the ash off the joint. “You’ve only just come.”

“Leave me alone!”

“I swear I won’t do it again. Alright? Please, let’s go and sit on the wall for just a little bit longer,” he said as he tried to stop her.

Leyla shrugged, looking at him searchingly, as if she was watching him through a peep hole in the door.

“I have to go home, I’m late, before I met you I went to town with Peter ...” she admitted reluctantly.

Peter was the boy she was seeing at the moment. Simon felt a stab in his heart. Did his future really reach no further than the name of her next guy?

“But you can walk me to the bus stop,” she said with a sigh. Then she slapped him across the chest, saying: “And stop torturing little children. Moron!”

Together they crossed the green verge of the road. The grass beneath their feet rustled. The air was hot and humid.

“How’s your dad?” Leyla broke the silence. While they were walking her hand brushed against his a few times. He felt an electric shock each time.

“Still ruling the joint.”

“When does he get out?”

“Soon, I hope, so that he can get things sorted.”

Silence again as they both sank deep into their own thoughts. Litter was scattered under the arcades of the museum.

“What about your new dad? Is that working out?”

The question disrupted the rhythm of his walking.

“Can we please not talk about that geriatric yuppier?”

He could feel the veins in his neck swelling and a lump in his throat. His mum had married an old man. There was a special name for such women in movies. He didn’t want his mum to be called that name.

They walked around a van illegally parked on the pavement.

“It’s a shame that you’re so without...” Leyla said suddenly.

“What? A sense of direction?”

“I don’t know ... without any goals and ... I don’t know ... just without anything...”

“You mean without money, expensive toys and designer stuff and the right genes,” he said with a bitter smile.

“I don’t mean material things,” she said defensively, “but look, we’ve known each other for nearly a year and I still don’t really know you.”

But I know you ...

“Simy?”

Tell her, tell her ...

“Ehm ... actually, I wanted to say ...”

A stupid tune could be heard from her handbag. David Guetta. He covered his ears. Her taste in music was the only flaw in her perfection.

“Hey, wait, it’s Peter ...” She pulled her mobile out excitedly. It gleamed coldly in her hand like a gun. “Where are you, sweetheart?” Her laughter echoed around the street, even under the cars and in doorways.

“Hey, see you, man!” she shouted faintly from another world.

... I wrote you a poem actually ...

2.

Obviously, he was late for his meeting with Marky. He had to walk past the old folks’ home and the bank. He kept to the familiar route past the post office and along the main street. No way was he going to stray into the labyrinth of narrow streets in the old town. In about a hundred years archaeologists would dig out his rotting bones in some lonely hallway.

On the steps in front of the bar there were a few people gaping at the world. The walls were covered in graffiti and the corners marked with piss stains. Marky was sitting on the ground among crushed cans, surrounded by emptiness. His arms around his knees, he was swaying gently to and fro.

“Hey, mate,” Simy said as he nudged him.

Marky got up with difficulty.

“Where have you been?”

“I walked Leyla to the bus stop.”

“And got lost, I assume.”

“What’s that smell, Marky?” Simon nudged him again. “You haven’t shat yourself, have you?”

Marky’s messy locks fell over his eyes.

“Don’t you understand that Tyson is looking for us?” he said with a tinge of hysteria.

They had got involved in doing business with the dodgy Tyson by chance. In the winter they were getting bored in the disco under the castle. Their smiles were bouncing off girls and their empty pockets meant the evening would be another miserable one. Until they caught the attention of a man with thin orange hair, wearing an elegant black suit. He invited them for a drink.

“You look like guys people have given up on,” he said in a friendly manner.

“And you look like agent Smith from The Matrix,” Marky said briskly.

“You can call me Tyson,” the man said.

“And you can call us Simy and Marky,” Marky replied confidently.

The man gestured to the waiter behind the bar: “Two large beers for these guys.”

They toasted each other in a more relaxed atmosphere.

“Do you have any friends?” said the guy.

“Heaps,” said Marky with a wave. He gulped down his beer and the man ordered another.

“What do you do in your free time?”

“Loads of things,” Simon said mysteriously.

“At your age that probably includes school, revision and wanking,” said the man trying to be witty.

“I’m not a goody goody school boy,” Simon said indignantly. “My old man is in prison and I take after him.”

“What do you take?” said the guy sarcastically.

He listened indifferently to their bragging about alcohol, the bending of car aerials and knocking rubbish bins over. There was a calm smile on

Tyson's face. No one would have thought that he offered protection to bar owners in exchange for money. No one would have thought that he was selling cheap Chinese technical gadgets. And certainly no one would have taken him for a ruthless bastard. He looked like a post-office clerk.

"I'm impressed," he said flatteringly when they were finished. "Would you be interested in a professional career?"

And so they enthusiastically sailed into professional waters.

"Have you got anything on you by any chance?"

Marky lost his rag: "STOP FARTING AROUND."

"Hey, keep it down," Simon said.

A van drove into the inner courtyard. The driver jumped out, opened the back door and began unloading crates of drinks.

Simon knocked a cigarette packet against the fence. A filter peeped out. Simon caught the cigarette with his mouth and lit it. Marky knocked it out of his hand.

"Do you really want the guy to shoot us?" he hissed into Simon's ear. "Have you forgotten he's given us an advance on three mobile phones that we haven't sold yet?"

Simon pushed him away. "You're getting carried away, mate. I don't give a shit about any of it."

"Except Leyla," said Marky jealously.

"I get a hard-on with her," Simon said sarcastically. What did Marky know about the pain inflicted by unrequited love? The only thing he had ever held in his arms was a bucket to throw up in. Simon had got a little further with girls. He had put his hand in the back pocket of Maja's jeans. He had finished off Melisa's pizza, the edges of which were stained with her saliva and lipstick, which counted almost as kissing. While they were wrestling, he had restrained Leyla's arms, which could technically be considered an embrace. He pulled his t-shirt out of his jeans and pushed his hands deep into his pockets. The mere thought of her made him hard. Hard-ons and spots were his alpha and omega.

Marky tapped the side of his head with his index finger: "I mean, man,

we really are dicing with death here. Tyson also gave us an advance on a Dell laptop. And we don't have anyone interested in it at all."

"Don't be such a drama queen."

"We're really sticking our necks out ..." said Marky, shaking his head and nervously biting his thumbnail. The smell of fear spread from him.

"Not enough ends up in our pockets from Tyson." Simon turned decisively and set off for the stairs.

"Hang on a minute, what about our Nokia?"

"That's for a present."

"Where are you going?" Marky shouted after him.

"Home," Simon shouted back without turning. "And you find a buyer for an Ericsson S500. I found it in the park today."

"Found it? And what about Tyson?" Marky said very unhappily.

"Who?" Simon said sarcastically and disappeared round the corner.

3.

There was a smell of exotic spices in the hall. The old fart had made Simon's mum very enthusiastic about buckwheat and barley stews, cheeses made from nuts and salads. Meat and potatoes had vanished from the menu. Simon tried to convince her that he needed protein for his development and she bought him whey powder.

He could see his mother through the half-closed living room door. She was sitting motionless on an exercise bike, staring ahead. Simon shuddered. Had she hit the bottom again? Did this mean a return to the times of sedatives and her staring into empty space whilst Mexican soaps played on the TV?

He did not want to find out and tiptoed into his room. A musty smell hit his nose. He would have to do something about the dirty clothes that he had been stuffing under his bed for a month now. His mother grumbled if he changed his clothes too frequently. But he sweated profusely because of Leyla. He was hiding his underpants in the sewing machine cabinet. Now he had nothing clean left to put on. A smell of mouldy cheese was

spreading from beneath his bed. In addition he had lost the Nokia 930. Usually he hid the mobile phones among his comics, but now the Nokia was gone. If mum had found it, he was for it. She was terrified that he would turn out to be like his dad. By marrying again she wanted to present him with a better role model. But he was not the type to walk towards the light. Although... The sewing machine cabinet held not only his soiled underpants but also most of his poems. Writing poetry could also be seen as a search for light.

Suddenly he closed his eyes and swayed in horror. In his imagination he spotted the Nokia sitting on the sideboard in the living room. When had he put it there? How could he have made such a stupid mistake?

You're stealing? You're throwing your life away!

All he wanted was to throw himself on top of Leyla.

He sneaked behind his mother's back. Sitting motionless on the bike looking at the television. Simon's eyes rapidly travelled along the sideboard. No sign of the Nokia. Panic overcame him.

"Why are you sneaking behind my back?" mum said suddenly.

"I'm not," he said.

She looked around and gave him an accusatory look.

"Have they cancelled your classes or are you skiving again?"

"It's half-past three."

"Already?" she said, looking around in confusion.

"Are you alright?" Simon asked her cautiously.

"Of course."

He studied her. "Why aren't you pedalling if you're sitting on the bike?"

"Because I was going downhill," she said with a wink.

He felt relief. He did not want to be coming home with a heavy heart, wondering what state he would find her in.

"Have you eaten anything? You're as thin as a rake."

Simon shuffled from foot to foot. He found a bit of paper in his pocket and crumpled it into a ball.

"I've come to get something."

His mother got off the bike.

“Oh, you’ll never believe what I found in the cellar,” she said excitedly. “Some old video cassettes.”

He noticed that her hair was lively and glossy and her cheeks flushed. Suddenly he regretted she had recovered. As if she had finished grieving after his dad. His eyes darted nervously around. He was going to be late again.

“Let’s sit down and watch a video together,” his mum suggested, sitting on the couch. “You’ll see what a sweetie you were.”

He sat down reluctantly.

“I’m on the tapes?”

Mum switched on the video recorder and he saw himself when he was six or seven. He was running around the garden chasing a leather football. He was wearing an ugly red swimming costume that he had hated. He felt as if he was returning to something remote and hazy. To a hallucination.

“Look how much you loved me,” his mum said tenderly.

“I forgot you were filming,” he said. These recordings from his childhood were like something sticky that stayed on his behind and left traces everywhere.

Dad, catch the ball... dad, dad, dad!

He shuffled restlessly. His family existed only as a memory to him. Now he drank, smoked and shagged girls in his imagination, taking responsibility for his own decisions. Like a grown up, really.

He tried to avoid his mother’s eyes, ashamed of the emptiness in his own. But sometimes a moment like this made him feel sorry for her, perhaps even some tenderness. Which was something he was also ashamed of. His dad had told him that tenderness was only for women and philosophers. Real men believed in lust. And he was lusty, so very lusty. All his school friends had already slept with a girl. Some of them even with a boy. If he didn’t soon get himself a girl, it would drop off.

Leave your dad alone, son, he’s sleeping. Let’s get some lemonade instead.

His mum laughed out loud. How could that be, she was never happy.

Dad, dad, I’m going to shoot!

“Do I really have to watch this crap?” he said brusquely.

“Look how you fall on your little bottom,” his mum said. “Ooops.”

Can't you see I'm sleeping? Am I a goal? Is my head a goal, I ask you? Is it? Say something. I'll put a hole in that ball of yours, you little brat, I'll teach you to play football here.

Even ten years ago his dad looked bad. He used to come and go like an occasional visitor. Simon and his mother gradually stopped paying any attention to his absences. Maybe his dad had left his mum a long time before his friend had seduced her. Maybe he had to leave his wife in order to find his son. Because now Simon and his father were the best of friends.

Simon pulled the remote control from his mother's hand and turned off the television.

“Why did you turn it off? Give me the remote!” said his mum angrily.

“No!”

“Perhaps this is what you're looking for?” his mum said, victoriously pulling the Nokia out of her pocket.

Simon jumped up nervously.

“That belongs to a guy at school. Give it back.”

“Which guy at school?”

“You don't know any of them.”

She gave him a stern look.

“Well ... it's Chill's,” Simon gave in before she began dissecting his social life. Which, incidentally, was clinically dead. He knew she would feel his confession like a blow. The hand in which she was holding the phone fell. The ribbon on her track suit had come undone.

“Why are you like this?” she said. “You know I love you.”

“I know.”

“I've always loved you.”

“I know.”

“Do you know how difficult it is to love you?”

“I know. Thank you.”

Suddenly she handed him the phone.

“There, do what you like,” she said drily. “Do you think I don't know

it's stolen and you'll sell it on?"

There was no point denying it. His story was full of holes anyway. His mum and stepfather tried to fill them the best they could. They tried to create the impression that they were a normal, decent, loving family. But since Simon had himself, two years ago, got his mum a lawyer – his dad's acquaintance – for the divorce, his mother had been following his progress with cautious respect.

"I give up," she said, lifting her arms. "Wash your hands, we're going to eat."

"I don't have the time, I'm off to the prison," he said, knocking a cup of shelled pistachios off the table. His mum munched on them between meals.

"To visit your dad? But there are no visits today."

He clenched his jaw and stared at the new lino on the floor. In their previous flat, the lino had been all curled up at the edges.

"The visiting hours on Thursdays are between four and six. If you ever visited him, you'd know."

She ruffled his hair. He hoped that in her imagination she was not turning his hair into a halo.

"I don't think it's wise you going there," she said.

He wriggled out of her reach. He blamed her for being unfaithful to his dad with his dad's friend. And his mum blamed him for still believing in his dad.

In his mind, his departure was accompanied by the ever louder sound of Time Reaction, his favourite Slovene band.

"Are you afraid I'll get too used to my second home?" he said as he was going out the door.

At least he knew how to leave home without a compass.

4.

It was getting dark. A few couples and pensioners were walking in the park. Crickets chirped in the bushes. The smell of burning wood floated in the air.

Simon and Marky were hiding behind a hawthorn bush. The young

shoots were tickling their necks. No one paid any attention to them.

“What if he doesn’t turn up?” Marky burnt his fingers with his cigarette lighter and said: “Fuck!”

“I’ve been following him for days. The brat walks home from his music lesson at this time,” said Simon. The green twigs bowed to him. A bee buzzed lazily above him. Going on all fours, he moved deeper into the bushes. Marky followed on his elbows and knees.

“I don’t quite get why he has music lessons this late. Are you sure?”

“Hey, I’m not his mum. Maybe he’s doing overtime...”

Simon closed his eyes. It would be easier for him to concentrate under clear skies. In the bushes it was humid and smelt of rotting leaves. Simon put his heart and soul into determining the kid’s direction.

“Will he pass right by here?”

“Aha.”

“And the booty?”

“iPod touch, silver. The way the little louse plays with it makes you sick.” He could smell dog shit somewhere nearby.

“Where were you earlier? I called.”

“With my dad.”

“When does he get out?”

“Soon, I hope, so that he can sort things.”

Marky looked at him with curiosity.

“What did he say about the present? The Nokia?”

Simon flexed his bicep and felt it. His firm, flexible body gave him a feeling of safety.

“How do you know I didn’t give the Nokia to Leyla?” Simon said challengingly.

“Because she’d never take it.”

Simon felt discomfort deep inside.

“Are you telling me that my dad is a louse?”

“I’m saying that my old man wouldn’t take a stolen mobile phone from me either.”

Simon’s fist sprang up and struck Marky’s head.

“Ow, you idiot.” Marky’s eyes bulged.

“Do you really think that my dad is so low?” Simon hissed. “Don’t say another word about him.”

Marky was stroking his head, grimacing.

“Chill out, man. Why are you so pissed off?”

“My dad loves me, he’d do anything for me,” Simon said to himself rather than to Marky. Behind the bush there was a memorial plaque on a plinth, bearing the names of Partisans killed in World War Two. Simon tried to kick it. “He’s under a lot of pressure right now, doesn’t have the time, they’re trying to pin another case of forgery on him.”

“Oh yeah,” said Marky with a shrug.

“That’s the only reason he accepted Chill’s Nokia. He’ll sell it on.”

“Obviously.” Marky was trying hard not to show he was upset.

“He needs money for a lawyer.”

A dog without a collar approached them and stuck his wet nose into Marky’s elbow. The dog was nothing but skin and bone. Simon stroked its matted coat.

“Nice to animals, nasty to people,” said Marky.

The dog moved into the nearby undergrowth. The smell of his wet fur stayed with them.

“I hope that brat has his iPod with him,” Marky said after a while.

“If it was mine I’d even take it to bed with me.”

Simon leaned on his elbow and stretched out his legs. The branches around them swayed. Marky’s armpits reeked of dead meat.

“Have you ever thought of having your glands sterilized?” Simon said sharply.

“When you can tell the difference between your left and right testicle,” Marky returned the insult.

Suddenly Simon froze. A boy with a violin case was approaching along the path.

“Watch out, he’s coming,” Simon said to Marky and tensed. For a moment the guilt inside him felt like a patch of ugly, cracked lichen. He knew he

would regret this. Or more likely, when the news spread, Leyla would hate him till the end of time. How could he botch everything up so badly?

“Now’s the time,” he could hear Marky whisper in his ear.

He stumbled out of the bushes like a crazed wild man of the woods.

The boy stopped breathing when a pair of strong arms grabbed him. Behind the bushes, he and his attacker rolled on the ground, wrestling. Dark brown spots appeared on the boy’s jeans from the soil. Marky sat on the boy’s knees and pinned down his arms. Simon put one hand on the boy’s mouth and with the other searched his pockets. He found the metal casing.

Simon and Marky exchanged silent looks. Simon moved his hand from the boy’s mouth, but before the boy managed to shout for help, they stuffed a fistful of soil and grass into his mouth. And then another fistful.

“Time Reaction, man!” Simon said with a hiss.

And then they ran.

Simon in the wrong direction, of course.

5.

Everything was quiet at home. He had expected them to be in bed by now. The smell of spices had been replaced by the smell of roast coffee. The hall was clean and shiny. His mum was a model of tidiness and cleanliness. He thought of his underpants in the sewing machine cabinet, stiff from his wet dreams. He thought of the poems also stored in the cabinet. They contained everything that was good and pure in him. No one must ever get their hands on them. Simon nearly suffocated at the thought of his mum separating the white underpants from the coloured ones. Or reading his poetry. Perhaps he should look for another hiding place.

He sneaked to the kitchen to get a slice of bread.

He stopped dead on the threshold.

His step father and his mum were sitting at the table. The light under the extractor hood above the cooker was throwing shapes like Olympic circles onto the kitchen top. A few plates were drying on the rack. It was clear he had just interrupted the frantic hissing of an argument, involving only a few words.

His mum was leaning over a cup of coffee, inhaling the strong, thick aroma as if his arrival had nothing to do with her. His step father's steel cold eyes drilled into him.

"With all those stolen mobiles you could at least ring us," he said drily.

"I got lost," Simon admitted.

"Where have you been?" his mum asked vacantly without lifting her eyes from the cup.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "Is there anything to eat?" He searched the table.

"That girl Leyla called," his mum said. "You didn't answer your mobile."

"I was busy," he said. Leyla. He could feel a hardening between his legs. He thought about how varnish should be applied to wood and the procedures necessary for drying it. Peace returned to his trousers. It always worked. Simon was not achieving the minimum standards in the subject of wood finishing.

"What's happening to you?" His step father's voice was vigilant and thoughtful.

"Would you really like to know?" Simon said, cracking the joints on his fingers. He did this in order to derail his step father, but it only had an effect on his mum.

"Can you please stop that," she said in a raised voice.

"I'll have to reduce your pocket money," his step father said calmly.

Simon covered his face with his hands and pretended to be upset. "Please, don't..." He dropped his hands and went on in a monotonous voice: "Haven't you heard what mum said? Mobile phones are selling very well."

"There's no need to talk to your mum like that," said his step father.

"I wasn't talking to her, but to you. I'm not talking to her at all."

"Don't talk to me like that," his mum suddenly came alive.

"It's late," said the step father. "Let's postpone this conversation until tomorrow."

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Foreign rights contacts:

Irena Miš Svoljšak: irena.m.s@zalozbamis.com

Janja Vidmar: janja.vidmar1@guest.arnes.si

MIŠ založba, Janez Miš s.p.

Gorjuša 33

1233 Dob pri Domžalah

tel: (+386) 1 7214 540, (+386) 41 684 187

fax: (+386) 1 729 31 65

info@zalozbamis.com

www.zalozbamis.com

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