

Fear by Jozef Karika

COMING BACK

I

The door of my parents' house opened with ease, as if entering the territory that I had wished to flee all my childhood was a piece of cake. The parquet floor in the hall creaked—even now, after all these years, I remembered the sound. It had spoken to me every day until I turned eighteen and went to live in a dormitory. Since then I'd come here only rarely, and only when it was absolutely essential, like for my mum's funeral. And even back then I didn't stay too long. As soon as we came back from the funeral reception, Dad turned on the TV, munched on an onion, and focused all his attention on some quiz show. He held back his tears until late at night, when he was sure I was already asleep. He shut himself in the bathroom. At first he only sniffled, but soon he started to sob quietly. (He tried to make sure I didn't hear anything—that was very important to him.)

I didn't bother taking off my shoes; I put my travel bag down on the floor in the hall, quickly crossed the kitchen and opened a window. An onion smell hovered in the airless flat. I hated it; I feared the walls had soaked up the disgusting smell. Fortunately, it only took a moment for the icy breeze smelling of snow and a nearby forest to defeat the mustiness. When the smell of the darn onion had disappeared, my spirits finally lifted.

I went back to the hall, took off my shoes and threw off my thick jacket. I was shivering with cold. And it wasn't just because of the open kitchen window. Dad had been living in a retirement home for over a year; the radiators had only been set to keep the flat moderately warm. This is what I had asked the neighbour to do when she had called me the previous winter to tell me that Dad had been taken to an old people's home. I never went to visit him. I was way more interested in the newly vacant flat. I didn't know what I would do with it; I didn't think about it very much; I had no time for things like that. I paid the heating and electricity bills regularly as if I already knew how it would all end in Žilina; subconsciously I was preparing for myself a place to escape to.

I felt a lump in my throat when I remembered Lívia, and a heaviness descended on my chest. For a couple of weeks I had known something would happen, that something was not right. On the outside there was no indication something was wrong: we lived together, made love and talked to each other, but on the inside we both lived in a desert.

Her timing was just perfect, I have to admit. Until then she had never been malicious, and perhaps it wasn't her fault at all. She just couldn't stand it any longer; the words just came out, and she got rid of this unbearable heaviness.

A break-up.

"Of course, I understand," I stuttered. Sure, why not break up with me when I've just lost my job? The small advertising agency where I had been writing promotional texts for four years had gone under. I wanted to start job hunting, but the break-up with Lívia had robbed me of all my energy. I also now had nowhere to live. She didn't force me to leave her flat, but I couldn't stand it there an hour longer. I felt terribly cold there, as if the heating system had broken down and the severe January frost had crawled inside. It was as if even the winter was being purposefully and exceptionally cruel at the beginning of 2012, a supposedly

magical year. Several times I had checked to make sure the radiators were working, but I still shivered with cold. When Lívia was in the flat, it was even colder.

I didn't feel like running about ice-cold Žilina looking for a new flat and a new job. I didn't have the energy for that, I needed some time away. I packed my stuff, got on a train (which happened to be an outrageously slow passenger service) and trekked home—to Ružomberok.

No luck here either. I was greeted by an equally cold flat. Moreover, this one had been empty for over a year now (inhabited only by lurking memories); the air was filled with the smell of onions and cigarettes, and the parquet floor creaked in the same way it had so many times before when I had fled in tears before my enraged father.

I spent the first evening sitting by the window, staring at the falling snow. It snowed thickly and ceaselessly, a feathery white layer covered the trees and rooftops of the surrounding houses. The driveway must have already been cut off. In the following days, cars would need snow chains to climb up here.

Looking at Malé Tatry—the suburban neighbourhood where I had grown up—didn't do me any good. Emptiness lurked behind every bush; a cold apathy which I associated with my childhood. Memories of games like tag and hide-and-seek that I had played with my friends flashed through my mind, but they didn't bring up any pleasant nostalgia. Once they emerged, they collapsed into a dark hole, disappearing without a single sound or quiver.

Behind me the parquet floor creaked from time to time, coming alive under the heat that slowly flooded the flat. Inside me nothing came alive. It could be scorching in the room, but I still felt like I was in the middle of the desert at night. The frost that had painted the darkening window frames was sinking its teeth into me. I stared outside. The scene before me was swimming in a thickening twilight. I sat motionless until I realized I had been looking into my own eyes. The reflection of my face in the cold black glass brought me round; I woke up from lethargy and cooked the sausages that I had brought.

II

I slept in the living room. I woke up many times; my neck, bent in an awkward position, was hurting and so were my hips, buried in the saggy sofa. I longed for a proper bed. I frowned at the bedroom door illuminated by the moon's silver gleam, but I didn't dare to open it. Just to the contrary. I flinched a couple of times, glancing at it sleepily to make sure it was closed. I wouldn't open it for anything in the world, not even a thousand comfortable beds. Because my mother was lying behind it. Every time I dropped by for a short visit, she was lying there—behind the closed door—all the time. To cross the doorsill was to enter a black hole.

I fell into a restless sleep, but it didn't last long. Suddenly, I was squinting at the closed door again. The moonlight didn't move much, I must have been asleep only for a while. Memories of my mother were just one of many layers of memory, one of the fresher ones. Underneath lay something much worse—what was now a bedroom had been my room as a child. I knew that if I opened the door just a crack, a flash of the past would pierce through, and I wouldn't be able to stand being at home a minute more.

In the morning I looked more exhausted than the evening before. While brushing my teeth, I looked in the mirror and tried to figure out when I had changed so much. I had always given the impression of being younger, at least people often told me so; no one could tell I was thirty-five. Now I would put my age at about forty. My face was swollen, I had a dry complexion, and the skin around the corners of my mouth was sagging. I guess I must have

sold my soul to the advertising industry—whatever we advertised had to be positive, optimistic and dynamic. I had been putting false emotions into promotional texts. I dug them out of me; it was like working in a uranium mine. The look in the mirror convinced me that even the consequences were similar.

At the end of my morning ablutions I caught myself biting my thumbnail. It was incredible, just a couple of hours in my parents' house and the bad habits from my childhood were already coming back!

When I was a child, I would often bite my fingernails until they bled. The wounds inflamed, then festered, and I would have to wear bandages on my fingertips. The children at school would make fun of me as a result, but that was not the worst of it. The bandages and ointments didn't always work, the inflammation didn't go away, and I would have to see a doctor. He would either cut my finger open and squeeze the pus out or tear my fingernail off. A wave of the pain and fear that I had felt back then echoed in me. I swear I hadn't thought of it for fifteen years! Home sweet home indeed.

I didn't eat much (I still had some sausages and a piece of bread); my stomach was clenched up in knots. I pushed the food around on the plate and listened to the radio. There was more snow coming; in the following days the temperatures would drop rapidly. The broadcaster warned that arctic air would flow over the country, and that we could expect record lows.

I looked out of the window. The spruce fortress was bending under the weight of the snow cover. The silence in the flat was getting on my nerves. I opened a window, but I might as well have left it shut. The darn snow absorbed all sound and it seemed that it was even quieter outside, not even a dog's bark could be heard. I closed the window and tried to calm down.

It's a six-apartment building, you're not alone, I told myself repeatedly.

I closed the blinds; looking at the all-absorbing whiteness didn't do me good.

Sure, it's a six-apartment building, but it's full of pensioners who could no longer hear well nor who would talk too much and stay in their warm living rooms all winter. Besides that, the two upper apartments in this two-floor building could be entered using a separate hall at the back of the building. I was sitting in one of them; I shared no common areas with the other inhabitants. The apartment next door had long been uninhabited; it had been empty since that terrible incident with old Mrs Drečková; only the bereaved family from Bratislava would stay overnight from time to time.

I went back to the living room, wiped clumps of dust off the shelves (I avoided the bedroom door by a wide margin) and let in some fresh air. When I was done with the cleaning, a drop of blood glistened on my bitten thumbnail.

I needed something to make myself busy. I turned on the TV, but the aerial must have been broken or something because I couldn't tune in to any channel; it was just more snow accompanied with noise. I opened a cabinet with videotapes nervously. Dad wouldn't hear a word against them; no one was allowed to touch them.

Shooting and editing was his only hobby. He often told me about his grandfather, who used to play him short films on an old projector. The greatest moment of his coming of age was the day his parents gave him his first 8 mm camera. He could only shoot short and silent movies with it. Nevertheless, it was an exciting thing for him. He would sometimes show me the ancient camera. When he saw that I didn't share his excitement, he got upset and aggressive. I hated cameras, projectors and his bad movies. He didn't have a shred of talent. Not even later when he got himself a video camera did he learn the basics of shooting—each

movie was shaky and chaotic. My father was very insensitive with the lens, he jumped from one shot to another; watching his recordings was a torture.

I glanced at dozens of videotapes stacked in several rows. I hoped I would find a title of a real movie at least on one of them; I would watch anything. But there were only dates scribbled everywhere. The earliest were from the sixties, when my father started to shoot with his 8 mm camera (he had his footage transferred from film reels to videotapes) and the latest were labelled with dates from forty years later when he finally stopped shooting.

Watching his creations wasn't very appealing to me; not even my desperate boredom made me do it. I took my iPhone out of my travel bag and checked the emails. No new messages. I suddenly remembered that there used to be a small bookshelf in the bedroom; perhaps I would find a book I could read. I approached the closed door, hesitated, but then I turned round, walked towards the annoyingly soft sofa and collapsed on it. I slept until noon, and woke up only to my rumbling stomach. I didn't feel like going out into the cold, but there was nothing to eat. I got dressed and went shopping.

III

The Malé Tatry neighbourhood is at the foot of Čebrať—a steep mountain looming over the city. Fourteen apartment buildings and a few terraced family houses are arranged into three rows. Each row is separated by a steep slope and a cracked tarmac road lined with a lime alley. The neighbourhood is hidden by a thick forest that covers all of Čebrať—the most western part of the Chočské vrchy mountains—and extends to the Orava region and the Polish border.

I came out of the building (which stood at the beginning of the third and the highest row of buildings) and stared at the rapidly rising slope, completely covered with spruce and high fir trees. When I was little, the proximity of these mysterious places only a few metres away from our doorstep fascinated me. Today, the forest didn't speak to me and didn't greet me in any special way. It was drowning in the snow quietly and staring dully at me.

I waded through the snow onto the road and started to go down to the Rybárpole neighbourhood spread out below Čebrať. Fifteen minutes later I passed the crumbling complex of the former cotton factory with its long-dead chimney. I trudged over the icy bridge crossing the Váh River and headed towards the nearby Tesco.

The journey back was much more exhausting. I crawled up the hill, slid on the ungritted pavement and panted as if I had just run a marathon. My four plastic bags rustled annoyingly; the icy air stung my nose and throat. It was getting cold quickly; it hadn't been quite so cold when I left the flat. The temperature must have been well below zero; there was zero humidity, so the dry air cut my throat with every breath like a razor.

To get pneumonia right now—nothing would make me happier!

I paused at the middle row of apartment buildings and rested. I knew it was not a sensible idea, I was sweaty, but I had to catch my breath. There was someone coming down the road towards me—an adult man and two children. I had an urge to say hello to them, after all I had not talked to anyone since the previous day. I felt ignored and cut off, and the visit to Tesco had not helped me much. Besides, I thought I could make out something familiar in the movements of the approaching man. The closer he was to me, the clearer I could see it. A man limping gently on his left leg, his two sons making snowballs, and suddenly it dawned on me—Oto Novák! I felt ashamed that I hadn't recognized him straight

away. Although he was muffled up in a thick jacket, his face was covered with a cap, and his scarf reached just slightly underneath his eyes, we had played together all our childhood.

I felt a quiver of anxiety run through me, but I chased it away. I liked Oto. Although I had not thought of him for years, it didn't play a role—childhood friendships remain strong even after years.

He recognized me and stopped. He leaned his head to the side, bent down, scooped up a handful of snow and flung it at me.

"You should snowball this old man real well!" he shouted at the exhilarated boys. They obeyed and I found myself in the firing line.

"That's for not showing up!" laughed Oto. He limped towards me (he'd had something with his left knee since his early childhood) and hugged me. I couldn't feel anything through the thick jacket; the heavy plastic bags prevented me from returning the hug; I felt embarrassed. My friend fortunately stepped aside; over his scarf covered with tiny crystals his eyes looked at me cheerfully.

"Welcome home, you advertising wizard. Now you're all coming back. Finally understand where you feel good, huh?"

"What do you mean 'you all'?"

"Hana also comes here," he winked at me. "I think she visits her mother."

Hana Sliacka—another one from our group, my childhood sweetheart. I felt a lump in my stomach and a new wave of anxiety ran through me.

Green fog, an icy plain and footprints in the snow, lots of footprints, thousands of madly scattered footprints. I chased the memory away, I was shocked that it had come to the surface; I had kept it locked for almost twenty-seven years beyond the borders of my consciousness.

A heavy snowball hit me.

"Ivko!" shouted Oto at his older son. I could tell he was smiling by the wrinkles around his eyes.

"I've only come for a while," I said.

"Yeah, sure, that's exactly what Hana said. You shouldn't have left. I live over there," he said, pointing at the bungalows at the end of the street.

"You never wanted to leave?" I asked with great interest.

He looked at me perplexed, "Leave? And why?"

"You know why," I said, shrugging and clenching my teeth.

Back then it was freezing like this.

He was still staring at me as if he didn't know what I was talking about. Could he have forgotten about all that, could he really...?

I have forgotten too! I told myself. No more remembering!

"I must go," I almost barked out and picked up my bags.

"Sure, we must go too, it's chilly," he clapped me on the shoulder. "Make sure you drop by. I am at home now, there's no work at the moment. I only go out to get the kids from school."

"Ok. I will," I lied.

The joy of the meeting evaporated. We turned round and set off in different directions. For a while I could hear the echo of Oto's little sons' joyous chatter, but the snow and strengthening wind soon absorbed it.

I prolonged the preparation of my late lunch as much as I could. I knew that when I finished and washed up, I would be left alone, face-to-face with the boredom that was killing me. Its sticky fingers would grip me, the flat would be shrouded by a haze, and a crushing emptiness would engulf me. No sound would interrupt the roaring silence rising off the walls. There would be no escape.

I tried to tune in some TV channels again, but without success. I turned on an old radio, but there was only a hiss and I was losing the signal, so all I could hear were fragments of sentences or songs. I checked my iPhone—no missed calls, not even spam in my e-mail account. I had bought some newspapers at Tesco, but this helped only for a while. I had read everything in an hour; the thin pages couldn't hold the thundering silence. It spilled over them and got to me.

I walked towards the window. It was getting dark outside, the thermometer on the window frame covered with frost showed eighteen degrees below zero. I could almost see the whole neighbourhood. The streets were empty; no cars passed by, just one or two pedestrians. Some children pulling a bobsleigh ran across the street. A man on the lower street came out of the apartment building, walked towards the waste containers, emptied his bin and hurried back. I watched the surroundings until it got dark, but I couldn't see a living soul. When I was leaving the window, I looked at the thermometer again. The rime got thicker, the frost had coloured the whole glass. I put my hand on it; I could hardly see the thermometer reading. The mercury had dropped to twenty degrees below zero.

I finally slept well; this time no nightmares woke me up. I jerked myself awake only once; I was shaking with cold that had permeated the walls and windows. I didn't dare enter the bedroom. Instead, I covered myself with just a thin blanket. I then got up and turned the radiator right up. I wanted to check the thermometer, but the window pane was now painted with icy ornaments and flowers. I went back to bed and fell asleep.

BLONDIE

I

I turned on the radio during breakfast.

"Europe is paralysed by record frosts," announced the broadcaster. The rest of the news was drowned in a hiss. All I could make out were some fragments.

"...On the first of February...the temperature dropped to minus thirty-two degrees...in Ukraine forty-three people were found frozen to death..."

February was here. The whole of January got lost in a smear; to me it blurred into one long day. Perhaps a new month will bring me something better, as the beginning of this year had been such shit, I thought.

I walked towards the window; I still couldn't see the thermometer, but I didn't doubt the temperature had dropped to minus thirty. The crackling radio was reminding me of it all the time. From the snippets I understood that record lows had been recorded in the Orava region. A front of Siberian air was heading towards Slovakia. Therefore, we could not expect any improvement. Instead, in the following days it would get even colder and the north wind would become stronger too.

All of a sudden I thought that it wasn't just Oto and the Malé Tatry neighbourhood that had brought up yesterday's memory (thousands of madly scattered footprints). It was the frost. This awful winter—just like then!

The steel aftertaste of the icy air, the dry glistening snow, the atmosphere brought back by the sudden cold. Memories hung in the air. I was inhaling them with every breath, and I couldn't avoid them.

Back then!

The icy plain disappearing in the green fog. The metallic drone reminiscent of hundreds of huge barrels scraping against each other...

I forgot! Forgot! I told myself and licked a drop of blood off my thumb.

The telephone rang.

I flinched, the piercing sound put me off for a while, but I ran for it and answered happily.

It was just someone offering a better calling plan.

II

I spent the day lying in and hanging around the flat. Only preparing lunch amused me for a while. I then spent the afternoon standing by the window as usual. For the whole day the temperature didn't rise above minus ten. From what I heard on the radio, I grasped that meteorologists called this situation an "arctic day". The influx of Siberian air had apparently claimed new victims; people were freezing to death like animals.

Malé Tatry looked particularly deserted. The bare but white crowns of the old lime trees rocked in the wind; when I opened the window just a crack I could hear the freezing spruce and fir trees crackling. Some children ran across the street from time to time. Then two cars with snow chains passed by.

In the evening a sudden burst of nostalgia overcame me. Feeling sentimental, I almost played Dad's recordings. I opened the cabinet with the videotapes, but fortunately I contained myself. Who knows what his creations would do to me? His movies certainly wouldn't cheer me up. Despite the boredom, isolation and the onion smell, I felt better than the day before, better than the previous weeks. Finally, I was able to pull myself together. All I needed was not to think in the wrong direction (Lívia, Žilina) and to try and ignore even the older, long buried and unwanted memories.

That's why I kept avoiding the bedroom. Unpleasant images of my ailing and always discontent mother lurked there. What was much more devastating, however, were the dozens of sleepless nights that I had spent there as a child. I was trembling with fear and tried my best to chase away the green fog and the drone of the metallic barrels that were thundering in my ears. During the day I managed to escape the icy plain, but at night, when I was a prisoner in my room, there was no escape. I covered myself with a blanket because I knew they were not just my memories of what had happened. My thoughts were there drawing this unnameable thing to me, or perhaps it was a being; it could sense them, smell them. It circled around the house, snooped around the gardens and the nearby forest, searching for the tiniest crack to slip through to reach me.

Even now, twenty-six years later, the power of my past imagination and the intensity of my childish fear could still paralyse me completely. Therefore, I avoided the bedroom door stubbornly, and every time I entered the living room my eyes shot towards it unconsciously.

I lay down on the sofa at around nine and fell asleep. Two nights of good sleep were a greater blessing than I had hoped for.

I woke up feeling fresh and restored—no memories, no Livia, nothing disturbing. I walked towards the window and looked out.

There was a police car parked two houses further away. A white jeep with snow chains. I felt a lump in my stomach.

Hopefully, nothing has happened...Hopefully, it hasn't...

Years ago, there were a couple of police cars parked down there, just like now. They looked different then. They were the old Skoda 120Ls, and instead of *Police* written on them there was *VB—Verejná bezpečnosť* (Public Security)—but they still produced equally unpleasant feelings. About ten metres away from the car I saw a bunch of policemen. They walked around, searching the ground and the surroundings, and argued about something.

I got a dry roll. While munching on it, I watched and waited to see what would happen.

Not much did happen. The uniformed men just hung around; another car came and they all crawled around the whole neighbourhood. They walked around the houses, rang the doorbells, and when someone answered the door, they asked questions and showed some papers.

I didn't long for such a dialogue, but curiosity gnawed at me.

What happened? What do they want?

Within quarter of an hour, they rang my doorbell too. I opened the door; a whiff of icy wind blew in from the stairwell. There were two men in uniforms standing at the door, completely numb with cold, but I didn't let them in.

"Good morning, it's the police, we're looking for a child that has gone missing," announced the younger one.

"Good morning," I said and bit my thumbnail.

"Can we see your papers?"

I shrugged, went back to the flat and came back with my identity card. They copied something down. When they were giving it back to me, I took it with my left hand. The thumb on my right hand was bleeding.

We're looking for a child that has gone missing...

"Mr Karsky, do you know Janko Milický?" asked the younger policeman. I was surprised they didn't arrest me right there. They must have noticed how I turned pale when they told me what was going on.

"No, I don't," I said, shaking my head. "I haven't lived in this town for fifteen years; I came back only two days ago."

"Only two days ago?" the older uniformed man asked attentively.

"Yes, this is my parents' apartment. I'm alone here."

"Where do you work?"

"I'm unemployed."

"I see."

I sensed they didn't like me. I rather remained silent so as not to make the situation even worse.

They showed me his photograph, apparently a birthday shot.

"This is him, he's eight."

A little blond boy with a pretty smile and sparkling eyes.

I hadn't seen him, really.

"He got lost yesterday in the evening, when he went out with the rubbish."

“When I see him, I will let you know,” I tried to be helpful.
“Good,” they looked me up and down with their hostile eyes and left.
I closed the door and licked a drop of blood off my thumb.

III

I lasted exactly an hour. The cars had still not left; a flock of onlookers had gathered around them. Many pensioners lived here; they would otherwise have never come out and risked slipping on the ice. The presence of policemen and a sense of foreboding had drawn them out like a magnet. They shuffled out of their warm flats, loitered in the street, and discussed and looked at the uniformed men with a ferocious urgency. They didn't mind either the frost or the cold wind; the excitement of something going on was keeping them warm.

Something was going on.

I got dressed and went out. A chilling wind blew hard against me; I breathed in the ice-cold air. The cloudy sky didn't let in too much light; the surroundings looked rather grey, even the snow looked like ashes.

The Kliš family were standing outside the house—the father, mother and two little girls. They lived in the flat below me with a separate side entrance. I gave them a nod. We only knew each other by sight and had never talked. I crossed a small meadow sloping down between the houses and reached the road. I couldn't see what the policemen were doing due to the bunch of curious spectators. I went closer and pushed myself through to see the scene.

Two metal containers on a snowy road, nothing terrible. But that wasn't everything. There was a black waste bin standing next to one of them. It was covered with frost and a thin layer of snow; it must have stood there for a while.

Suddenly I shivered and my throat tightened.

Little Janko had gone out in the evening to empty the waste bin. It was certainly dark or gloomy. He reached the containers, put the bin on the road and...

Something had happened.

The bin was still full and Janko was gone.

The policemen searched the containers in case he might have fallen in, but they found nothing interesting. Searching the surroundings ended up the same. No footprints led up to the forest. Also, the snow on the mound sloping down on the other side was intact. Only tyre tracks with winter chains were visible on the surface of the frozen road.

The policemen had also brought a search dog with them—a large German shepherd. But it didn't turn out to be of much help; it appeared rather confused, leading them up and down all the time as if Janko had been going round in circles for hours.

An icy plain, thousands of scattered traces, I thought.

I turned round (just no memories, please) and saw Hana Sliacka. She was standing there with a couple of other people, holding her little daughter—who might have been six—by the hand. She was staring at the dog who was running to and fro, but her look was hazy.

I knew what she was thinking about.

Thousands of scattered traces.

I approached her. The girl hid herself behind her mother and frowned at me with hostility. Hana appeared not to notice me; she was still staring at the dog. I could read memories in her green eyes. I hesitated; at first I feared the icy plain had got stuck in her mind too, but finally I felt relieved. Hana wasn't playing hide-and-seek like Oto, who had

persuaded himself that the meadow with the green fog didn't exist, that we had never stood there and that we had never seen what we had seen.

"Hello, Hana," I said and approached her.

"Hi," she said without looking at me. She wasn't surprised at all; she must have noticed me before. Her cheeks were red, and her face was fuller than I had remembered; I spotted a few wrinkles. It surprised me; I usually don't notice things like that, but I had known Hana since we were kids. I had her face imprinted in my memory.

For a while we stood quietly. Only the whispering of the pensioners and the panting of the search dog interrupted the silence.

I didn't know whether she didn't want to talk to me or whether she was just mesmerized by the unusual scene. It wasn't so unusual; in fact, the search for Milan Jurecký over twenty-seven years ago had started in a similar way.

"Mummy, I'm cold," the girl whined.

Hana finally looked at me; her frightened eyes were sending out a plea.

What could I say? How was I supposed to comfort her? I was shivering all over; the waste bin standing on the icy road looked like a transmitter of pure horror.

I shrugged helplessly.

"Mummy, it's cold!"

"Yes, we're going, honey," Hana said and looked at me again. This time I sensed anger in her eyes, as if she were mad that I had not rescued her, torn her away from the gnawing memories, or at least suppressed them. I wanted to, but it was impossible.

The confused police dog raised its head and started barking at the low grey sky.

IV

I tossed and turned on the sofa, trying to escape the half-sleep in which the winter of twenty-seven years ago was lurking. When I was awake my memories were fragmentary; I had only been eight then, after all. When I was in a deep and dreamless sleep, I was safe as well. But when I was neither awake nor asleep, scenes from that awful period would attack me like piranhas. They would bite me, sink their prickly teeth into me and rip out chunks of meat—wanting to gnaw me to the bone.

I have everything inscribed in detail somewhere in the corners of my mind. My deep memory is my greatest enemy. The winter of 1985 was a turning point in my life; I was frozen in it and no spring has ever come. The images, scents, feelings...all of this is in me, has been there for decades; it's a disgusting mental tumour that cannot be cut out.

Stupefied, I turn over and wail. I want to wake up, but the past has already appeared from the stinky swamps; it has dug its rotting claws into me and pulled me under the surface. I'm going through all of it again, as if it were happening right now. It all started on a Tuesday at the end of January...

I'm at home by myself. My parents have gone somewhere; they said they would be back by the evening. It's not that late, but the windows have already turned darker, as if life has died out beyond them. I'm cold. Outside it's getting really chilly; it's never been so cold. I'm afraid to turn up the radiators because Dad could get angry.

I hope my parents will get back soon. The flat is really creepy when it's quiet. I walk to my room, but I don't feel safe there. I'm upset. Something is happening, something is changing, but I can't really tell what. I felt like this when we were passing the roaring turbines of a hydropower station on a school field trip. I remembered what they were because they

really scared me. It wasn't just the roar they were making; the air around them was somewhat different. Our teacher explained that there are fields around these huge turbines. I didn't understand it, but now, standing in my room, I feel as if I were standing in a similar field. I can't hear a turbine or any roaring, just the opposite. It seems everything has been filled with invisible cotton.

My head spins and I feel pressure both in my eyes and ears, the kind of pressure I feel when I'm diving into a pool. The window panes are quivering. I can't see it, but I can hear the glass cracking weakly.

The silence is becoming unbearable.

I walk in the hall; there's a red telephone there. Mum told me that if there was a fire, I should call the firemen. Nothing is on fire, but I still feel I want to call someone. I grab the receiver, and to my surprise I discover my palms are sweaty. I don't understand what's happening with me, it's ringing in my ears, my head is spinning and I can hear my heartbeat.

I can hear sounds coming from behind the entrance door. They are coming from next door. At first, I hear a key rattle in the lock. Then a creak from the pressing of the door handle.

Mrs Drečková, I think to myself.

The old woman lives on her own; her husband had died over a year ago. It had happened in an armchair in the middle of their living room. Apparently, he was watching TV at night and the old lady just found him in the morning—all stiff. I heard my parents talking to each other.

"Just imagine. I come to see whether she needs anything," my mother was telling my father. "She has left her old man in that armchair, his face all blue, eyes wide open."

"Probably a stroke," my father stated.

"She told me to sit down and pointed at an armchair right next to him," Mum's voice quivered noticeably. "She took a seat opposite him and offered me some coffee. Next to a sitting corpse, can you imagine?"

"The old lady has gone crazy because of the shock. It happens," Dad said, trying to comfort her.

I'm holding the red receiver, my hand is shaking, and I'm thinking of his words.

The old lady has gone crazy because of the shock. It happens.

Drečková shuffles in the hall behind our door.

I hope she's not coming into our apartment?! I am scared.

The shuffling steps come closer. No one else lives there. The common stairwell leads only to the two apartments.

I go stiff, I'm afraid to move, lest I make some noise. In the worst case, she will ring the bell, and when I don't open, she will leave.

The steps stop within an inch from our door; I can hear the old woman panting.

Soon she will ring, it will happen any second. I'm clenching my teeth; I mustn't move nor make a sound.

The door handle moves; Drečková tries to open the door.

She's trying to open it! The door to someone else's apartment!

Fortunately, when my parents left, I had latched the door, so now it won't move an inch.

I feel a lump in my stomach, and my heart is pounding like crazy.

The old woman rattles the door handle like mad.

Everything becomes quiet, the handle doesn't move, and the roaring in my ears intensifies.

Has she gone? I ask myself. I can feel a metallic aftertaste in my mouth. I have chewed up the skin on my thumb out of fear; I can feel my sticky blood.

The windows cease to quiver; the heaviness suddenly disappears in the same way as when my father turns off an electromagnet when he is working on his DIY stuff.

I relax.

“Jožko, open the door!” I can hear from behind the door.

My teeth start to chatter. I cover them with my sweaty palm; I breathe in the smell of blood.

“I know you’re there, I can hear you!” she starts rattling the handle again.

I wet myself a bit, a couple of drops trickle down my thigh.

“I have some news I’ve got to tell you. I saw them come out of the forest!”

I have no idea what she’s talking about; I stare pleadingly at the latch and pray for it to resist Drečeková pushing against the door.

“I will introduce you, I will introduce you nicely. They’re already in my apartment, waiting in the living room,” the old woman mumbles to herself and tries to break inside.

I hear footsteps from the ground floor, then voices.

I shrink back at first, but then I recognize my father’s deep laugh.

My parents are back!

When Drečeková hears them, she lets go of the handle and heads back to her flat.

I stand stiff in the hall until my father rings the bell. With great effort I walk to the door, unlatch it and open it.

At first my parents don’t notice anything; they come in and close the door behind them. Mum, Dad and someone else who I can’t see very well.

I grab Mum by the hand and burst out crying.

When I calm down enough to be able to say what happened, Dad goes to check on Drečeková.

“I have to see her and check whether she’s gone totally nuts. She could set the whole house on fire,” he murmurs with a frown.

Mum and the stranger shut themselves in the kitchen; no one takes care of me. I’m scared, really scared, but I sneak after Dad. What if there is really someone waiting for me at Drečeková’s place?

She’s left her door ajar, but Dad knocks nonetheless.

“Mrs Drečeková! Are you all right?” he shouts in the dark apartment.

Nothing, no answer.

“Mrs Drečeková, are you all right?”

When the answer doesn’t come, he enters. I walk behind him, but I make sure I don’t give myself away, because he could get angry.

I enter a dark corridor and a sharp smell hits my nose. I know what it is—it used to smell like this when I was in kindergarten. Someone has pissed themselves. The smell intensifies with every step. It’s getting thicker until finally it seems like a solid matter filling out the whole room.

In the front I hear the parquet floor crack. Dad is trying to tread lightly, but it still gives him away. Fortunately, I’m quite light, so under my feet the floor cracks only slightly.

I approach the living room door, lean forward (my sweaty T-shirt sticks to my back) and look inside.

The room is dark, only a few rays are shining through the drawn drapes. There’s a street lamp standing right in front of the house; it’s been blinking lately, so the living room is lit only by weak flashes.

I can see my father has stiffened; it's like he has grown into the floor, his shoulders are heaving. His wide back is blocking my view. He must have found something terrible since he's lost his tongue. My vision blurs, my eyes fill with tears, the smell is unbearable, it's pouring out of the room.

"Mrs Drečková," Dad says with a rasping voice. This scares me even more; I have never heard him talk like this before. His throat is tight and his voice is filled with fear. I make a decisive move; I'd like to run to Mum, but at the same time I long to see what has scared him so much.

The streetlamp blinks and then goes out. I make out a silhouette sitting in an armchair; shadows of little figures flash on the wall.

I will introduce you; they are waiting in the living room.

The lamp lights up again.

There's Drečková, sitting in the armchair; no one else is here. The old woman is staring through the window towards the forest; her head leaned to the side as if she were listening. She shakes her head a little.

My breath gets stuck in my throat.

She's naked!

Seeing her pale, skinny, wrinkled body makes me want to vomit; my head is spinning.

My eyes slip down between her thighs; with disgust I notice that the whole armchair is wet with piss.

How long had she been sitting here before she came to see me? How many days?

She looks at me (I swear she looked right at me!) and rasps something.

A second or two pass...

The meaning of her words dawns on me, "It was here where they got acquainted with my husband."

She turns her head towards my father, who is still standing there dumbfounded. "They sent me to fetch Jožko, he was supposed to come alone," she announces with irritation. "You've made them angry."

I know people can go crazy, I just hadn't seen it before. The look of this old woman is terrifying. The whole living room is immersing in horror. I look at the coffee table beside the armchair. There's an empty wine bottle, a few medicine bottles, some scattered pills and a manicure set.

"Mrs Drečková..." Dad says with difficulty.

"Look!" screams the old woman and points through the window towards the forest.

I turn instantly. Her madness has bewitched me. The window is dark; there's nothing to be seen behind it.

Her wrinkled face twists in horror; she howls terribly and covers her eyes.

"Mrs Drečková!" Dad shouts; he wants to approach her, but then looks around the room in search of something to cover her.

"No, no, I don't want it!" whines the old woman and wriggles in the armchair. Before we can do anything, she grabs the manicure scissors and stabs both of her eyes.

"Oh my God!" Dad breathes out, throws himself at her and twists her hand. I get a look of two sticky holes oozing with blood, turned directly at me.

"Jožko! They've come to get Jožko!" screams Drečková and starts wailing from the pain. Thick, dark red blood starts trickling down her cheeks.

I want to help Dad, but my fear is stronger. With tears in my eyes I run for Mum. I hear glass shatter behind my back. Later everyone tried to persuade me that it was frost that broke the window, but I didn't believe them.

I flinched; it took me a while to pull myself together.

“I’m lying on the sofa in the living room; nothing can happen to me,” I kept telling myself. The tightness in my chest finally loosened, but I still couldn’t fall asleep. The wall separating me from Drečeková’s empty flat suddenly seemed too thin. Right behind it was the living room where that terrible scene had taken place.

What’s happening there right now? What does it look like? These thoughts flashed through my mind.

A complete horror seized me and a dull sense of panic started to spread from my stomach. The question that had provoked it was slowly coming to the surface, unhurriedly like a drowned body rotting in water.

It took me a while to formulate it.

Who is sitting in that armchair right now?

The night has its own logic. Suddenly I knew there was someone in Drečeková’s flat, and no one could convince me this wasn’t true. Who is sitting there, looking at the same wall from the opposite side?

(...)

The windows in Oto’s bungalow were all lit up. The rectangles of yellow light reflected themselves off the snow crystals. The glass panel of the entrance door had been shattered; the hallway was strewn with its shards. It was how it had gotten in.

I was walking mechanically, showing no interest or fear, as if I was on a school excursion.

There was a loud TV on in the house. There was a general knowledge quiz show on.

“How tall is the Eiffel Tower?” asked the host. The contestant hesitated. In the tense silence I peeked into the kitchen.

There was a pot with cooled water on the cupboard’s worktop, a pack of spaghetti, a block of hard cheese and a grater. When the mayhem had broken out, Julia had been making dinner.

“Is there anybody in here?” I called—nonsensically.

“Three hundred twenty-four meters,” answered the contestant, winning five hundred euros.

There were crushed oranges on the kitchen floor. When the parents and the children had been fleeing, somebody must have knocked over the bowl of fruit on the table. The house had become filled with the intrusive scent of orange juice and rind.

I peeked into the living room.

“Where did the 1992 Summer Olympics take place?” asked the host.

There were two abandoned pieces of drawing paper and color pastels in front of the TV. Stanko and Ivko had been light-heartedly drawing before they received the visit.

I returned to the hallway, and with the tip of my shoe I gave a nudge to the door leading to the garage. It creaked, revealing darkness and a bit of some jagged stairs. It was where the apparition had stood just a while before.

I stepped on the stairs, sinking step by step into the dark hole.

A neon tube was on in the garage. Its quiet buzzing reminded me of the humming of static electricity that I had heard on the phone. There was no sign of anger in it, no enraged hornets.

I could hear a rattle behind my back and a bang on the stairs.

I didn't flinch; I kept staring dully into the dark passageway.

An orange rolled down the stairs, bouncing like a yellow tennis ball. It was stopped only by hitting a gas can.

An orange and gas.

I turned my back to the stairs, not caring if there was someone up there who was going to get me.

Cold neon light illuminated an old Volkswagen parked in the middle of the garage. Peering through the dusk, I could see the outline of an overhead door.

Then it dawned on me that there had been a hunter behind it too. Oto had sensed his presence; he had known he was there. There had been nowhere to run; they had been trapped. One paper kid had driven them into the garage; the other had been lurking outside. This was how they had gotten Bohuš. They had chased him down like a wild animal. As if it wasn't enough, they had been chasing us for the past three decades until we nearly gave up the ghost, acknowledged our defeat and returned to Malé Tatry.

I tilted my head and carefully examined the battered car. The Nováks had taken refuge in it. It had been their last chance (however negligible). I came up to the windshield and looked in. There was something on the backseat—I couldn't make out much in the dark. I recalled the knock on the glass that had been recorded in the phone message.

They had been cowering in the car, mad with fright. Something had knocked on the window.

Then it had opened the door and...

I grasped the handle. There was a loud click.

I needn't have looked; I needn't have been there at all.

I cracked the door open a bit.

An unbearable stench oozed out of the car—feces, entrails, blood... My hand flew in front of my mouth.

I could see two corpses.

Oto and Julia.

Terribly twisted, as if their bodies were boneless, intertwined like a monstrous braided rope. Two bodies twisted together by a titanic force into one inseparable whole. A human Danish braid sprinkled with sharp splinters of fractured bones—a crispy pastry ready to be gulped down. A two-headed snake, two gaping mouths shrieking beyond the threshold of life.

When it becomes more powerful, it will dare to attack adults too.

It had become more powerful through Bohuš's murder; its power grew with each death.

Where are the boys? What's happened to them?

I looked around, but I couldn't see the remains of their bodies. I looked under the Volkswagen. All I could see on the concrete floor was an orange and a gas can at the front wheels. At the wall was the plastic bag I had brought, and next to it a shiny metal buckle.

The children had disappeared.

The silence was cut through by the jangle of a phone.

I jumped back as if I had been stung. I ducked and froze.

The ringing continued.

I found it deafening. It rumbled in my ears and head. The garage wasn't quiet at all. The old neon light was making a loud buzzing noise. When the ringing echoed through the garage again, I put my hands over my ears.

Only then did I notice the display of a cellphone flashing under the backseat of the Volkswagen (at the feet of the human braid).

It was the phone Oto had used to call me shortly before his death.

Its ringing sent shivers down my spine; it made me shudder. I leant a bit more forward, attracted by its bluish glare.

Who's calling Oto? The question whirled through my mind shattered by the shock I would never recover from.

Who's calling?

As if it mattered. As if anything mattered.

I came one step closer, surprising myself, but I could only helplessly look on my own crazy action.

The cellphone kept ringing. It seemed to me that its ringing had merged into one continuous sound.

I could finally make out its lit display.

Who's calling?

The caller's name was flashing on the device. It kept appearing and disappearing as if the phone was throbbing with life.

At first I didn't recognize the name; then I narrowed my eyes to see better. It took a while for the letters to start making sense.

Who's calling?

Jožo Karský, I read on the display. A strange name... It rang a bell with me. Where do I...?

I felt dizzy. The garage darkened, but the neon tube kept humming. Also the cellphone kept ringing relentlessly. Its display kept flashing with the caller's name—my own.

Jožo Karský.

I had left my cellphone in my parents' apartment. It was on the kitchen table being recharged.

Who's calling?

I slowly lifted myself up off my knees, but I couldn't stand up straight. My legs were too shaky. Crawling, I dragged myself to the car, and like a sleepwalker I grasped the ringing device. It nearly slipped out of my hand—it was covered in blood and feces.

I was still only a viewer to myself. I couldn't understand at all what was happening.

Am I calling myself? Am I in the kitchen? Have I split myself in two? Am I not here at all?

Spit was coming down my chin, my eyes were popping out of my head, I couldn't breathe. I answered the phone. My hand was shaking; the flashing display was bouncing in front of my eyes.

Silence. There was no sound coming out of the speaker, I could hear no breathing or humming, only a very deep silence.

Who's calling from my kitchen?

My fingers had gone so numb that I nearly dropped the cellphone. Then something clicked and music surged out of the device—jolly brass music.

Cymbals were banging together; tubas were producing a deep bass rumbling.

I recognized the music with the background noise. It was coming out of the old radio in the kitchen. It had just been switched on, or it had started playing by itself—it didn't matter that it was unplugged.

I understood that it was an invitation—I was supposed to return home. No more running.