



AN  
HOUR  
BEHIND

Dina Hrecak

An Hour Behind  
by  
Dina Hrecak

(preview)

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# Chapter 1

She opened her eyes, as if suddenly awoken from a hundred years of sleep, but instead of a blonde prince with puppy-dog eyes, she was welcomed by an unknown sense of thinness, abruptly made emptiness that reality can acquire after interesting and unreal dreams. Angelica got up involuntarily; her stiff legs wouldn't cooperate, her body seemed foreign and too small, her movements uncoordinated, and she was leaving a horrible mess behind her, from bedroom to the bathroom, from bathroom to the kitchen and everything she touched seemed to her to have been moved by an inch to the left. A tiny matchbox that was her apartment in New Belgrade, stuck between other such matchboxes that comprise the Eighth World Wonder of communistic skyscraper colonies, sadly reminded her of a TV commercial and the only thing that was missing was that artificially subtle female voice: If you cannot get anything done, try our latest mortgage payment plan / anti-dandruff shampoo / weight loss pills / brand new tampons...

And the day could have been any autumn day. Tall, grayish buildings, square pieces of sky in alarmingly similar color and one tortured-looking tree in something that was supposed to be a park, at least according to urban planning, all of it suggested the end of October. Poking around her memory, that served her no better than her body, she tried to discover exact time, first and last name of this nightmarish morning. Like a much needed solution, a TV entered Angelica's line of sight, all dusty and forgotten, and she felt ridiculously satisfied because of this twist in the situation that she spent full five minutes staring at the pretty reporter and her excited story about winter hibernation of bears in local zoo, until the entire charade was ended by a somber middle aged man who announced morning news for Sunday, October 27th.

The date did not catch her attention, though it should have since it was her birthday, because the first news was the change to the daylight savings time and everything else just slipped into background. This one hour, completely insignificant, negligible in comparison to the ocean of hours that fly by unstopably got her undivided attention so thoroughly that the rest of the morning news never even registered in her brain. It announced two things. The first, the worst of the two, was the fact that from this day on the night would fall

at 3 p.m., and that invoked a depressive feeling of waiting for cruel winter winds and rains that will slam into her windows and make her hate the very thought of getting out of bed and doing anything remotely useful. It meant that the year would be slowly dying through hideous fogs of November and freezing temperatures of December.

The second thing required more thinking. The emotions, at first unclear, that Angelica felt upon hearing the news, patiently dissolved into odd words and she tried to catch their meaning in hope of understanding what made her feel so out of place, as a guest in her own body, an intruder in her own house. Beside the facts that the moving of her watch one hour behind was of utmost importance and that that one hour must be somehow connected to this unusual strangeness that had her surrounded since early morning, she understood little else. And without understanding the importance of such insignificant discovery and fully feeling the growing pressure and threat it made, Angelica stood still, in the middle of the room, while TV insensibly whistled the rest of the morning news and after that the rerun of a popular Turkish series.

An hour behind. As if defying the logic of time flow, canceling the common sense and known order of things, those sixty minutes, three thousand six hundred seconds, packed into themselves all human history, every human life that brushed it and every mistake that could have been avoided had it been known what would follow it. And Angelica, mesmerized by history, by its finality, firmly confident in its invariability, observed that one hour as a mockery of the holy principle upon which the human existence was based. Time should not change so irresponsibly, like a temperament of a teenager, a bit this way, a bit that way, and especially not so insidiously, in the middle of the night when people are sleeping and have no idea what they will find in the morning. Her firm belief that there is no going back was shaken by this changing of the hour; she watched into the gaping Pandora's box with its unknown horrors brimming over the edge – it should not happen like this.

She tried to see something positive in the entire situation, to accept this one hour as a gift from gods of inevitably flowing time and to grin in their faces, if for nothing else, than because she could sleep an hour longer, but Angelica was wide awake, with eyes like coffee cup saucers, and unable to satisfy her basic need for optimism. Something unclenched in her this morning, some small bolt, just a tiny

worm, a crumb of doubt enough to eat away, bit by bit, the delicate canvas of reality in which she meticulously built everything that was hers. For time to move back just like that, without consequences, even if it was just one hour, that it's nine again now instead of ten, as logic suggests, it corrupted and confused her thought process, even though she experienced that occurrence, including this morning, for twenty five times.

Upset, deeply submerged into philosophy of one insignificant act, suddenly unsure of everything around herself, Angelica sunk to the floor, cross-legged, and breathed too deep, like she hadn't breathed for days. And then the memories came.

## Chapter 2

Air was unknown. Its unusually clean smell cut the lungs into deep slices that filled with devastating freshness after each breath.

Whether it was dusk or dawn or maybe even the noon of a murky day, Angelica could not tell. A roundish clearing in the woods, sticky with silvery fog, mirrored in her eyes like in a mountain lake, endlessly calm, still to the smallest blade of grass. Silence, cumbersome and greasy, perfectly belonged to this place that, despite inert horror, never raised the tiniest lisp of fear in her, not even when she tried to move, to turn, to see where she was and when her body did not listen but remained still and sluggish – she never felt the need to panic. She listened curiously to the lack of sounds that had to belong to this unusual scene, but everything was unnaturally calm, like an accidental photograph of a persistent tourist.

Carefully, not to upset this primordial peace, a wave of raw, unrestrained strength crashed on Angelica in dead silence, she felt it like a gust of wind, of a mighty hurricane she could not see, and while it passed through the skin, through big, coiled muscles of arms and torso, she realized that the body she was in was not hers. With mild annoyance caused by that, she listened to the raw strength burn in the veins, the way that unknown tensed body relaxed like it was about to sleep, and with each new breath of silvery fog the wave whirled faster and faster through bones, tendons and muscles, forcing it to stretch more, to bury the strong legs into soft, wet ground until they became roots, to encompass the entire small clearing with those arms, to make them like strong plane-tree branches and then finally to reach the skies with its head. The sheer power of that need, unleashed strength and excitement made Angelica drunk, even though everything was unknown and scary, especially the fact that somehow she had become a man.

“Deep breaths, calm down,” this stray thought emerged, mild and serene like a counter-balance to the wild body that became too small, and this thought came in a soft fatherly voice that no one could ever dismiss. “Deep breaths,” the voice repeated and she obeyed dutifully, because there was no other choice. The lungs expanded without her willing them to and cutting freshness burst in, mildly

misting the view in front of those new eyes through which Angelica watched in excitement as if watching the rebirth.

In the rhythm of deep inhaled and exhaled she could not control, the clearing was easily losing its original fairy-tale like illusion as it became more and more just a plain opening in a plain forest submerged in unusual silvery fog. The air was still ripping the lungs, but this body never seemed to be uncomfortable and Angelica followed the rhythmic breathing pattern as if her life depended on this pristine, underestimated routine.

Wild, devastating power, that besieged her new male body like an army, drizzled out through the fingertips with each breath, until it completely disappeared. Purified by the breathing exercise, Angelica asked herself for the first time where she was, even though it was not of great importance, and continued to carefully observe, with her inner eye, this body in which she found herself. Somehow she had become a man. Without a reason, she had a feeling that she once was in this body, that she knew it and a need to move it overpowered everything else.

“It’s time to go on,” the fatherly voice said, mirroring Angelica’s thoughts and the bulky body moved easily and graciously, which produced a strange effect in her consciousness – like an oversized doll moving in perfectly harmonious movements despite its largeness. They stepped underneath huge treetops, she and that male body, on a non-existent path, following the non-existing markings, in a step she could not command. She had no doubt that the body knew where they were going.

“How long have I been away?” she heard the voice again, now most certainly not hers, and a right hand extricated an old-fashioned watch on a chain from the pocket – it showed ten minutes to seven.

At ten minutes to seven, either in the morning or in the evening, she realized that she was not alone in this new body of hers, that its owner was still there and possibly not aware of her presence. His disjointed thoughts made no sense to Angelica and paid no attention to her frightened curiosity.

“I hope they won’t notice how long I’ve been away. Dear God, I do not want to sit with them tonight, and that old hag threatened with a rowanberry brandy. They must be thoroughly drunk by now. Maybe they won’t even notice me.”

As uncomfortable memories of the afternoon events slowly returned, the man's thoughts became more protected and he tried to hide his growing abhorrence the best he could by adopting an obedient type of behavior that, it seemed to Angelica, he had practiced for years. Walking softly through thinning woods, he buried deeply inside himself this rare moment of peace, like a jealously guarded secret, the last stand of freedom for a man who has to earn a living each day by traveling dusty and muddy roads. He can be unbound only in the forest where no one can see him, and only then he can let that supernatural strength wash over him, drug him, fill him and then wring him out like a squeezed lemon, until he becomes just a suppressed echo of his secret desires. Only in deep dark forest he dare expand his wings to their full, mighty length and more, he can rip off the mask from his face and break the shackles binding him to the ground, and there was no one to reproach him for it. He knows where his place is today, unfortunately, he is painfully aware of it, but wait – he mutters – just wait, today will end and tomorrow has to come, and tomorrow is mine.

Resigned to the fact that she could do nothing else but observe the drama of this unknown man like a theatre viewer, Angelica started to doubt that she would ever leave it. Somehow, she fell into his unprotected fantasy while he shed the dregs of disappointment off himself, and now the screws of his façade were getting tighter and invisible walls went up with her still inside and unable to run away.

They got out of the forest in suddenly warm spring dusk, onto an old bumpy road that followed a river, and the man started towards a decrepit house that resembled an inn shyly protruding behind the bend in the middle of nowhere. Its two floors looked like they had been made of mud, last painted god knows when, and were supposed to dominate the scenery once the road was built, but that dream the long passed builder had was left to neglect by the following generations, mostly because there had never been another building beside this unfortunate inn, nor the country side ever developed like the old builder dreamed it would. Like patches in ripped cloth of once white walls, the inn's wooden windows stood askew, sadly closed and dirty, without hope of ever letting in a clean ray of sunshine – even the old hag of an inn keeper, the granddaughter of the failed dreamer and builder, did not dare open them, fearing they would never properly close. To complete this picture, an unmistakable smell of stables and greasy folk cuisine surrounded the sad inn and since Angelica already suspected that she was



in a different time, besides being in a different body, she was spared the unpleasant surprise.

“I hope Zuya fed the horses,” she heard the voice of the unknown man whose head she shared. Hoping to delay the unwanted return for a minute or two, he walked behind the ruined inn and followed the stench towards the stables.

A fifteen year old boy, skinny, filthy and small, with disheveled curly hair, brushed an enormous horse which Angelica, a real city child, had never seen before. Trying to reach the tall horse’s back, the boy stood on a creaky stool and deftly moved it with his bare feet so he would not have to get down all the time.

“Zuya,” the man said loudly. Turning around, the boy’s face was set in the lines of fear, but when he noticed who called him, his lips split into an involuntary smile from one dusty cheek to the other and he jumped, barefoot as he was, from the creaky stool onto the cold soft ground.

“Miodrag, sir,” his head bowed, as if in embarrassment, the boy tried to appear obedient but his gesture wasn’t completely successful, for in the next moment he lifted his curious, admiring eyes.

I wonder why Spasoje employs him, Miodrag thought, while Angelica tried to get used to him having a name and not just being the figment of her overworked imagination, he is so tiny and small. The boy’s skinny body awakened a protective instinct in him – it was obvious that others paid no attention to the puny stable boy. Miodrag asked him mildly, “Have the horses been fed?”

“Yes, boss,” the boy replied readily. “I have only to brush this one and I’m done. He is yours, isn’t he?” Proud to have good news, the boy squared his small shoulders and emanated happiness. Some people really are satisfied with small things, Miodrag thought and nodded.

“Did you eat anything?”

“I did, sir. Missus Kruna brought me some bread and cheese.” Miodrag was not surprised by this – inn keepers all around the country suddenly softened at the sight of this small, neglected boy who had to traverse the roads with a group of disinterested pig merchants.

“Go to bed early tonight. We go to Belgrade first thing in the morning.”

“I will, boss,” the boy said dutifully.

“And I am no one’s boss,” Miodrag murmured while turning around, half hoping that the boy did not hear him.

Yes, he was no one’s boss. Except his two hands and that terrifying sense of power he so cleverly hid from others, Miodrag had nothing – even the enormous horse belonged to his uncle Spasoje, towards whom the man felt a mixture of duty and contempt and whom he wanted to get rid of, even though he knew uncle was his only chance to become independent. He followed him like a faithful dog, always in silence, never daring to criticize uncle’s old ways while they traveled around Serbia like homeless people, selling cattle. The fact that servants called him boss got on Miodrag’s nerves, because the title was not earned no matter how much he craved it, because he also received wages from his uncle like a common laborer, just like all the others who called him boss so as not to offend short-tempered Spasoje. And Spasoje was boss in every sense of the word: he commanded without hesitation, he allowed himself unprovoked outbursts of anger only to demonstrate his right, never allowing anyone to meddle in things he knew best, which was pushing his less than average pigs into the hands of anyone remotely interested.

Torn between two irreconcilable pictures, the laborer that he was and the boss he wanted to become, Miodrag entered the smoke filled inn. Inside everything looked like it belonged in the nineteenth century and the sound of Spasoje’s drunken voice was drowning out every other noise. Because of the tobacco smoke the ends of the room could not be seen and the room itself looked more like a Turkish tavern than the last rest stop for travelers going to Belgrade. Everything in it – from black scrubbed tables, odd chairs, rugged and faded rugs to guns and pots hanging from walls – all of it could have belonged to a museum, had it not been in such poor condition. Angelica barely had time to take it all in and to notice a small group of men gathered around the fireplace in the middle of the room. Miodrag’s sudden uneasiness revealed uncle Spasoje to her, a burly, balding man, reddest of all, who didn’t bother to check the volume of his voice while swearing about government and king, taxes and officials, and at the same time drinking away the first quarter of earnings he was supposed to take home to Belgrade.

Miodrag intended to sneak away to his room and avoid all these people, his half-drunk uncle and uncle’s protégés that were looking at him at this moment almost

like a saint, helping him slur his words by adding fresh glasses of rowanberry brandy, hoping all the while for some pocket change to slip out of Spasoje's hand. He was repulsed by those pathetic sycophants and grovelers whose luck depended on the amount of alcohol in his uncle's blood, but he quickly bit his tongue. What made him different from them? Only the insane desire that made him itch every single day. He did not have the right to think like that. He successfully skipped a couple of pools of light and caught the first stair leading to the upper floor when someone noticed him.

"Mickey, goddamn, where were you?"

He rearranged his face to show that he was tired, but he knew it was in vain at this point. He turned around just enough to notice Spasoje's big head snap and everyone's attention point toward him.

"I went to the stables to check on Zuya," his excuse was already prepared, the one both his uncle and all other men would like – uncle because it meant his nephew watched over his goods and all the others because they would be spared that degrading task.

"So come drink one with us," Spasoje ordered with satisfaction.

"What? Just one?" he said, trying very hard to sound as if he cared about their company.

The conversation continued like it had never been interrupted by Miodrag's arrival. Angelica observed all the participants, those theatrical characters whose lives never reached the pages of history books. The same people as today, she thought, with the same kind of jobs and problems, common people complaining about the government, wife, kids, high prices and health. Or she had completely lost her mind. She chuckled darkly and remembered her grandmother who crunched the last years of her life in a retirement home at Vidikovac. Suddenly, it became desperately important for her to return to her reality, right this instant, without delay. The fear she was supposed to feel half an hour ago wrapped its cold fingers around her neck and Angelica whimpered helplessly and silently inside Miodrag's head, praying to an entire pantheon of gods she could remember or imagine at that moment.

As if he was able to sense her anxiety, Miodrag got up, said something about an early start the next morning, and seeing how no one had any intention of

stopping him, he ran to his room. Panic was gripping Angelica tightly and she wasn't able to notice the tiny room they entered, until Miodrag's piercing eyes looked at her from an ancient cracked mirror.

That look cut every thought. From the murky mirror, embellished with elderly grey spots, eyes the same as Angelica's looked at her, the eyes of a young, twenty-something man whose face could have been the male version of her own. Focused eyes, unusually dark blue, examined each line, every detail and persistently drilled just one thought, chasing away all others as insignificant and unnecessary. Completely naked in front of that unnerving look, Angelica did not catch the thought until Miodrag said it out loud.

"I will be rich. I will be someone and people will know me. When I walk down the street, they will greet me. I will have everything I wish for!"

Even before Angelica could understand what had happened and absorb his fiery words full of such murderous flame, Miodrag grinned at his reflection in the mirror, contagiously happy like a child, powerful and completely wild. She would never ever think about talking like this with herself, let alone make such decisions. Her life was settled, everything in it just where it was meant to be, and not even remotely like his where beasts of poverty and impossible dreams jumped out from every corner. And everything she had seen since the moment she found herself in his head seemed unreal, dirty and breakable, and he so contradictory that a need to run away from him manifested stronger than before.

As soon as Miodrag, exhausted from a long day and heavy decisions, touched the shabby pillow and fell asleep, her wish came true. Angelica sank into black oblivion.

## Chapter 3

The telephone was persistently buzzing for a while, it shuddered and jumped over the wooden surface of a coffee table and through the cramps caused by vibration a subtle jazz melody streamed into the air. Catapulted from her trance by this incessant noise, Angelica's first thought was to throw the damned device out of the window, but she remembered that she left nineteenth or whatever century behind; she uncurled her legs and stretched across the floor to reach the phone. A thousand little pricks rushed down the liberated blood stream of her legs. How long had she been sitting like that? On TV, the Turkish series had long been replaced by an agricultural show or something equally exciting.

"Yes," she barked into the phone once she managed to reach it.

"Angelica Sretenovic, for heaven's sake, where are you? I've been calling forever!"

"Hi, Danilo."

"Don't you 'Hi, Danilo' me! I was just about to call the police to check if you were alive, and all I get is 'Hi, Danilo'"

"I've been in the shower," she lied smoothly.

"Are you aware that you won't get a 'happy birthday' now?"

"Really?" The question was derived more from the fact that she had forgotten it was her birthday and not because Danilo, her best friend, mother, father and shrink would not greet her.

"Yes, really. You pissed me off."

"What is the matter with you? I was in the shower."

He continued to make a drama out of it, but there was already laughter in his voice and that familiar tone, colorful curses and a smile that saturated ether between them brought Angelica back into her body and into well-known everyday life. He did this thing – plowing the person he talked to with clever remarks that needed no response, because there was no room for interjecting, not even for breathing.

"So, are you getting ready for tonight?" he asked excitedly, returning her scattered attention to himself.

“Oh, yes,” she lied again, trying to remember what was supposed to happen this coming night.

“I reserved a table for us in this cool new club, I won’t say anything else – it will be a surprise.” His enthusiasm was catching.

“Okay,” she smiled, “whatever you say.” Yes, the birthday party Danilo threatened her with for a better part of the previous week. Good, she did not lose her mind.

“I’ll pick you up between nine and ten, with Isadora. At nine, now I think of it, I need to check what you’ll be wearing, I know I won’t like it, I just know.”

“Great, Danilo. See you around nine.”

“Bye dear, see you.”

Danilo could return those long dead to the twenty first century with his silly, colorful vocabulary, and even more with his appearance, Angelica thought after they hung up. The pricks and needles in her legs subsided a little and she decided to try walking, carrying her phone in the pocket. As if somehow, after Danilo’s call, everyone got some secret signal that she was free now, her phone endlessly buzzed in that pocket and till early afternoon she wished she could just turn it off.

Getting a full three minutes of quiet for anything she wanted to do that last Sunday afternoon of October turned out to be a very hard task. She was constantly touching her arms, legs and torso, without ever being aware of doing so, she waved her hands and feet trying to assure herself that she was in her body, while the memories from someone else’s life kept on coming, making her unable to relax. Not even the endless streams of questions helped in solving this puzzle, and the afternoon swiftly turned into night and brought her Isadora and Danilo.

Three of them, like a trio of faithful musketeers, each with their own secret story near the heart, found each other in sickly green classrooms and hallways of their primary school. Back then, Danilo hated that everybody called him Ducky, and the more he protested the more the nickname stuck. In one of those first school years his father had left him, ran away with an obscenely younger woman, either a secretary or colleague from work, which made Danilo quite hard and closed, but always with a defiant smile on his face that hid nasty scars and itchy wounds which only Angelica knew how to scratch with a couple of choice words. He used to mock everything – nothing was ever holy to him, nothing really good to be

exempted from his harsh language behind which stood that scared boy from a broken home, persuaded that people came into his life only to leave him. He became like a hedgehog with needles dangerously sticking out, whose soft pink belly nobody but Angelica had a right to see.

Isadora, who seemed disinterested and blasé to an untrained eye, sliding through life like a knife through butter, never affected by things and always very sure of herself, had that amazing luck to wear a memorable face and pleasant manners that left people impressed. During the school years through which they suffered together, there was not a boy who wasn't in love with her, even though she never paid attention to them. Isadora was a master of controlling her emotions, always steady, paced and firmly on the ground that never swayed beneath her long legs, inexplicably beautiful, tall and slim. Her god was reason and she the priestess in that temple, an anchor that never unhooks, not even during the storms or huge waves that sometimes threatened to sink the boat of their friendship.

How the three of them found each other and remained friends, only the Three Fates know. Danilo and Isadora were the only people to whom Angelica could reveal her dreams, who were always there and in their mostly completely opposite attitudes she could find the compass she sorely needed. Danilo's mocking and Isadora's objectivity were just two opposite ends of a same thread that guided Angelica's decisions. Now they were taking her to celebrate the quarter of a century she had managed to spend.

Inside the club, everything pulsed like a multi-headed organism to the rhythm of tireless music. Boys were kissing other boys, girls held hands with other girls, because it was that sort of club, and Danilo, completely in his element, with electric blue cocktail that matched his electric blue pants, buzzed through an enormous space heavily packed with swaying bodies, and accidentally brushed against any boy he liked. Isadora was dancing with little enthusiasm, or at least was trying to dance because the amount of people around them turned her dancing into hopping from one leg to the other, and trying to discover who was straight in this melting pot of faces, with no luck. She never had to chase guys – they came willingly – so she would not be caught dead using Danilo's tactic, which narrowed her maneuvering space and every little while she turned to talk to Angelica, casting disinterested looks around.

The party was great. Hundreds of dancing people touched each other in semi darkness punctuated by the flickering of a thousand stars from mirrored balls and Angelica wished that this was happening any other day so that she could plunge into its rhythm and let go. But everything was upside-down. Swaying mass pushed her left and right, while she sipped her drink absentmindedly, with her thoughts in an unknown forest. She half listened to Isadora and strained to answer or comment on her friend's remarks. Any kind of more meaningful conversation was interrupted by piercing bass lines that made Angelica's innards tremble as if there wasn't enough air. She was supposed to smile and enjoy herself – her friends made an effort.

Danilo ran over to them, all excited, trying to speak above the noise about the cutest guy he just saw and who was not gay, unfortunately for him, and that the guy would soon pass them. Isadora's head jerked curiously, because Danilo's judgment was usually unmistakable, but Angelica remained disinterested in the news. Those relationships forged in clubs might have been appealing had her thoughts been present. However, neither one of them had time to respond to Danilo's story – he suddenly grabbed Angelica's hand and pointed it towards the DJ.

“Listen, listen,” he yelled above the noise.

Music faded into background and the DJ's voice took its place: “We have a birthday girl with us tonight. Angelica, where are you?” Danilo threw her arm high up in the air and the DJ's voice reverberated loudly: “Happy birthday! This is for you.”

A popular song filled the club, a song that Angelica hated which was the only reason Danilo picked it up – he knew all the clubbers and DJs and had no problem asking for such favors. Roaring approval, screaming and shouting with countless hands lifted up into every inch of space not already occupied with tobacco smoke and she smirked at Danilo and punched him in the shoulder. She was not too happy about being the center of attention, but luckily, no one gave her a thought.

“You are absolutely horrible, you know.”

“Happy birthday, little girl!”



In the next moment his eyes widened drunkenly, his face serene and a bit stupid, because he recognized the guy he talked about before the greetings interrupted him, a guy who now stood behind Angelica and touched her shoulder.

“Is it your birthday?” he asked when she turned around.

“Yeah.”

“Happy birthday!” Completely unexpectedly, he bowed down and kissed her, after which she slapped him in the face and jumped back like she had been scalded. “But, your taste in music is tragic,” he added, trying not to sound too serious and soften his harsh words. He held his cheek and stretched his lips into a blissful smile. Angelica shook her head – what was there to say and not start a fight? Guy just grinned victoriously and went to find his friends.

“Will anyone tell me what happened just now?” Isadora and Danilo looked at each other and shrugged.

“Unexpected birthday present, perhaps,” Danilo suggested.

Early Monday morning smelled like low-hanging clouds and strong winds. Angelica rolled out of bed helplessly out of tune, while her head screamed in the rhythm of last night’s party. Her ears buzzed uncomfortably, but she had to get dressed and eat, because the hunger in her stomach roared like the wind outside. Getting ready for work seemed too much.

Work was only the nominal title for what she did. Every day she ran away from her lonely apartment, with a bag full of history books and went to a tailor’s shop run by her aunts, more to bother them while she wrote her master thesis than to actually help. Her aunts, two colorful spinsters who never spent a day apart, were glad to have their niece who became an irreplaceable source of fun, worry and gossip.

While her ancient Yugo moaned and whined through traffic jams, each traffic light was a point closer on the way to an old, decrepit house on Vozdovac, one of those rare villas that gallantly oppose demolition. All the way up and down the Vojvoda Stepa Street and on the intersecting streets that led left and right from it to hidden parks and similar time-worn beauties of villas, new modern buildings emerged in clashing colors and shapes, and this redneck modernism forced Angelica to drive up her favorite street looking only at the edge of pavement. Following the secret map she learned long ago – after church one turn right, then

one left – she reached the well-known antebellum house, hidden in a yard of roses and fruit trees that nobody had looked after for a long time. The façade had been successfully peeling off for years, maybe decades, and some stray onlooker that managed to peek through disheveled roses would have to really strain their imagination to embrace its grandeur. Those people who remembered the house from its early days said that the façade used to be white as snow, fine stucco made her light like a fluffy cloud anchored among those roses. Now the fluffy cloud is grayish and wet from rain, its brick innards shyly show the teeth markings of some god of time and tired from demanding caresses of that lover, the cloud no longer looks like it could lift up the anchor that was thrown in this yard long ago. Grounded forever, it sheds its cloudy skin and becomes just another in the long line of houses that hungry contractors will turn into concrete monsters with PVC eyes.

Those who remember would also add that the yard used to be at least twice as big. While the front yard remained the same, the backyard reached the next street and spanned both adjoining plots. They say that there were many outer buildings, the entire place was abuzz from servants and workers and the estate used to be the biggest in the neighborhood. They would also note with great joy that the person who built the house was a wealthy merchant but that everything was taken from him after World War II, because he was dubbed bourgeois and capitalist.

Angelica never believed those stories that former Belgrade's ladies used to tell, ladies that were a bit decrepit like this house, coming to see her aunts in their tailor's shop. Whenever Angelica came to visit her aunts with her brother, they were there, reading their destinies in coffee grounds, whispering, so that the aunts could not hear them, some fairy tales, myths and legends about the building of their house. Angelica could hear their whispers every time she set foot in the front yard – that remained an inseparable part of her childhood fantasies, all those hours spent there with her brother Alexander when they ran from room to room and up and down the ruined staircase with eyes filled with adventurous stories about the building of this magical castle of theirs, until their parents picked them up to take them home to New Belgrade, in that matchbox that never had fairies and dragons and sudden bizarre deaths of innocent foremen builders.

The better part of downstairs was transformed into a tailor's shop and two sisters, Zvezdana and Svetlana, spent their days there. Since their third sister Suncica,

Angelica's mother, moved with her husband and son abroad, they decided to take care of their niece. To Angelica this faded beauty of a house became a second home and she grew fond of its mismatched furniture and smell of antiquity that filled it, so she decided to exchange, for a short while, her history diploma for a position of a tailor's shop clerk, even though she still was not able to make an even seam.

The shop lived its isolated life, untouched by time that rushed with unbelievable speed all around it, and on this grayish Monday, just like on any other Monday, the irreparable chaos of just made clothes ruled the space cluttered with scattered magazines, scissors, threads and chinks. Angelica was the only one who tried to make some sort of order so that she could have a smidge of free space to study and improve her measly student budget by helping her aunts.

More interesting than the antiquated villa were Angelica's aunts. Older Zvezdana could easily be mistaken for a Latin professor – she was skinny with thin glasses that perched on the end of her nose and unavoidable dark shirts always buttoned up, even when the temperatures outside were sweltering. She hardly spoke, only when she had something really important to say or when Svetlana's incessant chatter drove her mad, which did not happen often. She was strict and implacable and children usually crossed to the other side of the street when they met her, even the local storeowners and neighbors did not like her and dared not speak to her. Everybody respected her, though. That's why Svetlana made up plenty for her sister's quietness with never still tongue and pleasant smile. Plump and good-natured, always full of worry about every little thing that could disturb her daily routine, even if that was a mosquito that would fly in during the hot summer nights – she was a steady motherly figure to everyone, no matter the age. There was not a day when she did not cook or bake in her uniquely savory way and her culinary miracles smelled like obesity and cholesterol, sinfully tasty as they were.

Why the two of them never married, Angelica could not ask. From her mother's tales she knew that there were proposals, and here and there the aunts would tease each other about some long gone sweetheart, but they never felt sorry for missed opportunities. She knew that Svetlana once came very close to the idea of marriage and from that period the crown jewel of evidence of courtship remained for Zvezdana to tease her talkative sister about – four unique chairs that held their regal position in the tailor's shop, handmade by an upholsterer

tragically in love with her who pledged his undying love to Angelica's reserved aunt, even after she said no to him. However, their niece could never picture them anywhere else but in this house and with no one else but each other. No husbands, children or cousins could be set into their lives. Dislocated from time, on a side road that probably never belonged to any path, two of them slid through life unnoticeable, leaving behind thousands of new and repaired skirts, pants, jackets and shirts.

Every morning when Angelica walked into the shop, the ritual was the same. Svetlana would ask if she slept well, if, when and what she ate, she would complain a bit of her niece's tired eyes or skinniness and then she would badger her a little about her master thesis even though she could not always understand the answers, until Zvezdana got tired of this cop-like examination.

"Stop pestering the girl," Zvezdana would say in her flat, disinterested voice and Svetlana would just snort a couple of times and go to her sawing machine or to draw some new piece of clothing, while Angelica, who had no one to spoil her as a child, had immense fun with their well-rehearsed replicas. Zvezdana would sometimes wink at her like a conspirator, when she was in a good mood, just like she too was only twenty-something and in complete accord with how boring such questions must be.

Forenoon went smoothly on. Aunts were sewing a dress with Svetlana's endless whispered chatter and Angelica had submerged her thoughts into her history books, like into a minefield, studying about events of the interwar period in Serbia carefully and with due respect so as not to get accidentally ambushed by a historical fact from hidden corners of enormous books that held the theme of her master thesis. That's why she never noticed when the bell above the door jingled, announcing visitors, nor the cold air that swooshed into the shop, and least of all a man who walked in. Only the sudden stop in the rhythm of Svetlana's chatter made her raise her head and check what her aunts were doing, but the bell jingled again and the scuffle that erupted the next moment completely scattered her concentration.

Zvezdana and Svetlana squealed and cooed in unison, it was hard to tell which one more, excitedly threw everything from their hands and ran, as much as the room allowed, towards the two men who entered the shop. The older one was smiling and welcomed them both in a wide-open embrace. Angelica, deafened by

previous silence, could not distinguish their happy and loud words. At the same time, the younger man stood by watching them curiously and when his left hand reached his cheek, she recognized the guy who had kissed her the previous night. Seconds were rushing like a speeding train into emptiness while three older people talked excitedly, unaware of the silent exchange of emotions that happened two feet away.

Zvezdana was the first to collect herself and, like a chief of protocol, she introduced her niece to their friend from youth, mister Philip Doronjski, who in return introduced his son with kind and chosen words that revealed deep pride in the boy.

“Adrian,” the guy said.

As if they were plugged into a socket, the aunts shone brightly like two prematurely decorated Christmas trees, exchanged with each other a very significant look that Angelica caught and then the visitors were seated into those unique chairs, mess was instantly cleaned up and niece sent into the kitchen for coffee and coconut biscuits.

In the cold kitchen, while shivers of unknown origins ran up and down her spine, Angelica tried to gather her thoughts. Abruptly thrown out of her books just to meet this odd guy, she did not know what to do, worried in that womanly way not to seem too harsh or haughty, not to show unrest that occupied her thoughts and above all not to give her aunts any more ammunition for questions that would inadvertently rain on her after the gentlemen leave. She could not decide whether to be kind or angry, to pretend that nothing had happened and simply forget about last night’s incident or to just pull him aside and nicely ask what that kiss meant. Unthinkingly she touched her lips, while water boiled and cups waited.

His name was unusual and she said it a couple of times, rolling the vowels across her tongue and wondering how he got it. With the coffee-making process nearing the end, Svetlana burst into kitchen.

“Angelica, dear child, what’s taking so long?” She sounded agitated. “Quickly go to the store room and bring granny’s cherry brandy,” she continued without waiting for a response, “I don’t know now where exactly it is, but you will find it.”

“Isn’t it a bit early for brandy?”

“Nonsense,” she waved her hand. “Listen to her, early! Heavens!” She started towards the door, but she changed her mind in mid-step. “And bring those crystal glasses, please.”

“Svetlana, hold on,” she had to ask, the opportunity was ideal – they were alone and out of earshot.

“Yes, honey?”

“Who are these people?”

“Oh, you don’t remember Mr. Doronjski? Off course you don’t, listen to me, you probably saw him last when you were just five or six. He is our old friend, we grew up together. Afterwards he became a diplomat, but you see, he didn’t forget us. And his son is such a lovely young man, so tall and handsome, it’s a pleasure to look at him!”

Christmas tree lights flickered innocently in her eyes, threatening the electric grid, and Angelica momentarily realized what that significant look between her aunts meant, why she had to bring the cherry brandy they drank only on holidays and antebellum crystal glasses that saw daylight even less. Like a careful matchmaker, Svetlana hovered over her love life and now Angelica knew that she wouldn’t have a moment of peace because of this boy with an unusual name, that both her aunts will be pestering her now, which added one more layer to the growing amount of existing worries.

“Okay,” she said shortly and disappeared into the storeroom to avoid further flaring Svetlana’s already vivid imagination and to stop a conversation that was veering off into embarrassment.

In the shop, conversation picked up a pace, like always when old friends met after a long time, one memory tugged another and so on, and the job started that morning was completely forgotten. Even the forever quiet Zvezdana could not stop talking. Angelica and Adrian looked at each other from time to time, both aware of what was hiding beneath those stories and unskilled insinuations that followed some of their looks. She was growing increasingly uncomfortable, he was pretending not to notice and if three older people had guessed the kids’ new friendship was hanging in the balance because of their talk they would have shut up.

Adrian was a bit arrogant, but it looked well on him even with Angelica's disapproval; at twenty eight he was on his way to becoming a known architect with the entire world in the back pocket of his pants, convinced that he had already seen and experienced everything, while this cute girl was just another one of those who spent their lives in one place. When they finally talked, not wanting to listen to their elders' stories they could not participate in, he tried to fascinate her with all the cities and countries he had seen, because there was something about her that he liked. He was trying to hide his belief that Belgrade was just a village in comparison, which was enough to make Angelica lose her temper. They talked, but about all the unimportant things, and by the time their visit ended Angelica was sure she would not like to see him again.

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