

Jedrt Maležič: **Noughts and Crosses**

an excerpt from the novel translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

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SMS. Goblin, my, for now, only sanctuary. *'Have been told. How R U, old girl?'*

Huh, what am I supposed to say? How am I? Well, so *how* am I?

How I almost single-handedly got my ex to move out, or at least sent her away, behaved as if I was simply shifting a pile of hay. How she took the bedroom door off its hinges and lugged it away with the assistance of Universal Bros removals? How she took with her the half empty packets of flour and sugar and the almost empty tube of toothpaste, not to mention the electric toothbrushes that I had ordered from some online Chinese company, black and white, for the two of us? She took both! What she wanted mine for, is beyond me; where the hell will she take my black sonic toothbrush?! Is she going to stick it into her curlyguy's gob? Seriously?!

Of course, I couldn't have cared less about the toothbrushes, the sugar and the flour, but what followed was truly horrible, so horrible I won't ever dare tell anyone.

I was stubbornly barricaded in the bedroom as she packed, and at some point heard her slippers hissing along the parquet floor. And then she opened the door. I thought, well, I don't even know what I thought, probably some age-old reflex awoke in me, assuming that she was about to come and hug me goodbye.

No.

She opened the door in order to lift it off its hinges and carry it away. I swear.

Not that I even wish to recall, neither do I know how to describe, the expression of absolute shock that I felt was constructing itself across my face. Indeed, when things once get this bad, nobody can in any way help the jug be whole again, glue itself together along those golden repair joints typical of Japanese pottery, repairs that add value and are seen as part of the history of a piece. The jug is broken. That's all there is to it.

If you put every single part of the jug, even the tiniest fragment, on the floor in front of you – was this ever even really a jug?

I am in tears by the time I get myself over to Goblin, I have nothing to say, all I do is keep repeating that it is over, it's over, over, she left and it's over, I should have known but I didn't... The same thing over and over again, as if I cannot, do not know how to speak, as if there is nothing to say – yet there is so much.

She immediately gets the picture, Goblin has been through her own share of system failures and is no fool. So in turn, she too either stays silent or keeps repeating

the same, knowing that it won't do much good, every so often awkwardly putting her hand on my shoulder.

'Let's go for a walk up to Rožnik,' she eventually suggests and I shrug my shoulders, for at this moment I don't care where I am anyway. My current state must seem on the outside the same mess it is on the inside, but I haven't got round to taking a proper look. Whatever. So we set off.

Haze before my eyes on the sunny day, we clamber up the slope, I plod along, life doesn't want to end, why, for goodness' sake does it all not just end, and why do I still not give up, why don't I just stop breathing?! How is it possible that a comet has not yet crashed upon me? How is it possible that I don't want to just drop dead on the spot and that this damned burning sun has not fucking blown up yet? How?

We sit down on a bench next to a children's playground at the top of the ridge. People hurrying past with mutts and kids shouting, but inside my head is pure, absolute silence. As if I had forgotten some hearing aid, crosses my mind.

It's odd and I don't know how to explain it to myself, there is nothing to compare it with. I had been with girlfriends who were not right for me, had made crazy mistakes, but it was never this... physical. The gloominess in my eyes dispels briefly when some babe almost trips over me and Goblin, perhaps some girl from university, apparently I am supposed to know her but at that moment I haven't the faintest clue who she is.

This tiny person, whom I do know I know from somewhere, turns to me, 'Oh-my-G, it's you?'

It isn't. I swear it isn't.

She goes on, 'My, I really follow you. You're so brave,' she says. 'When you and your... partner published that article in the newspaper, I cheered along for you!'

I suppose I should smile a little, if nothing else because she is so enthusiastic. I even manage it, I can feel my lips spreading in a peculiar way, they haven't forgotten the mechanism.

'You remember me, don't you? I stayed with you at the seaside... You do know who I am, don't you? From uni?' she asks full of hope.

Goblin in the meantime tries to indicate that this was not a good moment, but Goblin doesn't know her. I apparently do, and at that moment decide I am capable of coming up with a few lame replies, so I pat Goblin reassuringly and turn to the girl. 'Of course I remember you, Barbara! How could I not, we spent time at the seaside together,' I continue grinning.

Barbara, who otherwise seems happy, almost unnoticeably lowers her gaze in disappointment. 'In fact it's Špela, but I thought you would know.'

What a cow I am. A somewhat devastated Špela walks away, and I maintain the fake smile until she disappears further down the path.

With the blurry haze in my head persisting, I slowly turn towards Goblin who hurriedly suggests we might go for a drink. All I say is, 'I feel sick.'

I feel slightly better on the way back down after I throw up behind a bush with the echoes of kids shouting nearby. I finally sit down next to Goblin on a bench by the path. Even though it's sunny, I feel numbed, and just as some elderly urban jogger comes running past, I gob right onto the edge of the path.

Goblin nods and then also spits, a little further to the left.

The guy stops, it seems he's in the mood for rebuke.

'What would your mothers say about you spitting on the ground like this?'

Goblin and I look at each other and for the first time, I swear, for the first time in hours, I feel I am capable of thinking and sense a genuine smile forming on my lips.

We grin like the pair of morons that we are, and shout out at the man in unison, 'Our mothers are dead!'

Without replying, he hits the path and I smugly, in as much as I could be arsed with him, thought how next time he'd better bite his tongue before coming up with such degenerate patronising shit.

Goblin finds her metal cigarette box that Linz and I gave her for her birthday. It has *This too shall disperse with the smoke* engraved on it. I was really not prepared for this scene, this memory of jointly trying to think of something witty to write on the box. But now I manage to look away in order not to once again break down into pathetic tearful pulp. I wait, wait for Goblin to light a pre-rolled joint. She keeps passing it to me for a puff. Just a little more, and it will hit me. And it does. Inside my head my angle shifts from a close-up gawk to a birds-eye view, I am no longer involved in any kind of action, everything around me is becoming virtually indistinct, almost funny. The sun scatters its rays and my senses are numbed.

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Sure, somewhere everything about girls that eventually run away has probably already been written. Alright, perhaps they were superficial, or found something better. It might be that History was on the side of guys going off with other girls. Did they then soon move on to others, did the girls feel used? Perhaps it's easier if you read about how many times any of these girls have had to put up with it and survive. Without doubt.

But what about the woman you love, the woman you have become attached to, that you depend on, are emotionally involved with precisely because she is a

woman and you were together in all of this, shared this ungrateful fate, and then she took the shortcut into the world of the ordinary, much-celebrated heteronormative love impulse? Well, about that, I'm not so sure. Absolutely nothing.

For my part, she could just as easily have disappeared off the face of the planet. Only that she won't. She will stay there all the time, reminding me that I was some kind of *puberty*. An anomaly. My girl, my woman, in love with a guy. Some idiot might say that she finally realized what this *normality* has to offer, that she at last managed to *have a good fuck*, find her way out of this obscure, unsatisfying lesbianism – what can a couple of women do together anyway, apart from paint each other's nails?

Beside the fact that I just could not come to terms with it, that I still could not see her in the role of Mrs Straight, what hurt most was that somewhere in this world some random cis- or straight guy is probably congratulating himself on a status symbol. He convinced her, converted her, of course. What is funniest in all this is that it never even crossed my mind – alright, not even that Linz and I would ever finish – but *not even* that my girl, my *spouse*, had in her body a single bone that would permit such an outcome. Such a tectonic shift destroys civilization.

We did talk about it. About Urban and why Urban. Only once and never again. She didn't want to.

'Honestly, Lina,' I decided to bring up the difficult subject when Zarja finally fell asleep, knowing that the following day they will move somewhere right across town. 'Do you honestly believe that you could ever love a male character?'

'This is not about any character, stop thinking it's all a film shoot. I fell in love, simple as that.' She keeps busy by hanging out some wet clothes, something I always hated doing and she always resented me not *knowing* how to fit it all onto the drying rack.

'You also fell in love with me,' I say. 'Didn't you?'

'I did, very much. I did. But I'm no longer in love. I don't feel what I used to feel,' she tells me.

I find the fact that we are no longer in love quite reasonable and natural – who would expect it anyway, after all these years?! It's normal, all too normal. Perhaps I should have been childishly self-deluded, to have my life depend on a childish *crush*, from the spell to the blindness, like in some fucking kindergarten!

She folds down some underwear on the backrest of the sofa, throwing me a fed-up look. 'Come on, try to understand. It will be easier for you too when we are apart. We were no longer right.'

'Oh, so you're doing me a favour,' I laugh. That's all I need, that I would have to console her and thank her for leaving us out in the cold, betraying us, basically. *The good Samaritan*.

‘With Urban things are different. He is untainted. He’s a little younger than me.’

Suddenly she smiles dumbly, gazes at the floor, generally behaves as if entrusting her best friend in kindergarten or in the first years of primary school with some secret that I am not supposed to betray. How could I, how would I dare ever tell anyone when her confession touches upon my darkest anxiety, awakens homicidal tendencies in me, making me *ashamed* that I had ever fallen for her, ever fallen upon her.

‘Untainted?!’ against my better judgement and self-warning I am incapable of stopping taunting her.

‘Yes,’ she says with an unintentional smile. ‘So kind, patient, idealistic.’

Shite, what have I waded into?! I am witness to her daydreaming, as if I was listening intently but in silence to a school friend, yet in fact I am listening to my *wife*, my spouse of many years, who here, right in front of me, drools over some random straight guy! I want to throw up. I want to tell her that *I couldn’t care less* about what her fucking lover is like, the guy she shattered our relationship for, what this this ‘Urban’ of hers is like?! Hell, I really do not care.

‘The two of us once meant something,’ I tell her from the sofa.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ she nods. ‘I loved you very much.’

‘Well, and now you have turned me into a rare statistical occurrence.’

I somehow manage to keep composed, though I know I will not be able to put up with this kind of conversation for long. I will fall apart and, if I do so, it is better I do it alone in the bedroom with the kid fast asleep than here slobbering over this creature I obviously know nothing about who sees me as her best friend.

‘And, you know what,’ she gives me a harsh look. ‘I know it will in the end seem as if it is all my fault,’ she says, nodding in a matter-of-fact manner, getting on my tits even further. *Yes, it will, but that is because it really IS. This catastrophe is all YOUR fault. You’re the only one to blame.*

‘I know that standing by you will be your backup of warrior sisters who won’t believe what I have inflicted upon their movement...’ she begins.

‘Community,’ I correct her.

‘It doesn’t matter. Forget it. What gets on my nerves is that you even feel the need to pick on that point, so now I don’t even want to tell you anything.’

‘Alright. You’ve got me covered anyway, you’ve said it all.’

I move myself into the room, close the door, then press my runny nose against the pillow for so long that I start doubting whether I ever knew her at all. I don’t fall

asleep, not for a long time, and my eyes are totally dry. Can I cry, please, to wash all this away? Can I?

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It was a matter of time, doomed to failure, which only became clear with hindsight.

We were watching one of those Bidončić matches she so loves and I find so alien... well I was flicking through Instagram, trying to ignore her shouts, 'let's go... hold it... block him' and shit like that with which she masked our emptiness.

Right in the middle of the match I sensed she was giving me some vicious glances. At least it looked as if she was angry, or perhaps she was trying to pick the right moment to start on the dark subject matter. Our boundless darkness. Our gap. Our domestic silence.

'There's someone at work I get on well with lately,' she said. A phase shift. We all instinctively know what that means, always have done, especially if it is uttered on top of a year of getting through indifferently trying to find a time a married couple might go out on a date together, a couple who regularly changed nappies and drove their daughter to kindergarten, cooked lunch, but in this daily routine ended up so far from each other that they no longer recall when they last laughed at the same joke. Well, we all know and should know what it means – *apart from me*.

Clearly she had been laughing elsewhere. I certainly hadn't been laughing with her, in fact I didn't really *laugh* much at all any more.

Looking back at it now, my God, what an idiot, what a scene, what a damn universal joke!

No more than a few seconds pass between her announcement that she gets on well with someone and my trudge through the past few years, yet it is an eternity. I should have seen it coming, but I didn't.

I put down my tablet, look at her, attentively sitting on my legs, as if expecting a blow.

'What do you mean?'

Then her angry gaze, which I took to be just another drama I didn't need and rejected, dispels. Behind it is just a terribly sad wound, swamped in tears, which scares me and cuts right into me.

'That we split up,' Linz says. 'That that is possible.'

I give her a conciliatory smile, though I am chickening out, and I stroke her, 'No we won't, Linz, we will never break up.'

I feel sorry for her, that wounded, Bambi-eyed look immediately wins me over. 'Don't worry, pumpkin.'

I gaze at her gently, thinking about how hard it must be if you start doubting in us who are bound together forever, who have promised each other that we would go through all the safety steps, even therapy if needed, right to the end, as long as we preserve our intimacy, our home, our daughter Zarja who has barely begun to start liking kindergarten and her peers with whom she will soon start school, and who is ours forever, mine, ours. I also panic sometimes, but every time I soon realise how pointless it is to be afraid about something so blessedly bestowed.

'Poor Linz, was that what was worrying you?' I lean my head across towards her, gazing at her reassuringly. 'Come on, give over!'

Creeping into her gaze at that moment is a rebelliousness I had never seen, one I didn't know existed.

'You're not even listening to me,' she says and begins... I don't know, gasping for air in a strange way.

All of this is too fast for me. I continue sitting there like some idiotic heap of jelly, quivering and soft, a pitying look on my face, unable to understand what is going on, when she comes up with the next sentence:

'What I am saying is that I am leaving you!'

Alina bursts into tears and her face is so strangely distorted that I cannot help staring at her features as if I had never seen them before.

The living room, the basketball match, and the world, all the children's toys around us are turning into a chilling backdrop and all that stands at the front of the stage is a total grotesque, alien like something from the horror films I never watch, and worse, like a performance that just doesn't and doesn't end.

In a last attempt at getting a grasp on the situation, I ask, 'But... where will you go?'

Even as I utter the words I realise how very dumb I was, thinking that this world and this kind of intimacy was all there is. Intruding on me now are other worlds, an endless palette of possibilities that are not my own and which I had so far been pushing aside, which I know I don't want, but Alina had been seeking for all the time, trying to dig them up, magnifying glass in hand, so hopelessly unhappy she was with me, because of me.

I can't even shed a tear.

I get up, go to bed, conk out.

When I open my eyelids again, I first comprehend that I was awoken by Zarja crying. I step to her bed, which is in our room and, perhaps after a long time, all I want

to do is cradle her in my arms, telling her everything will be alright because she is here with us, because her mummies love her more than anything in the world and because nothing can go wrong as long as we are all together.

Alina is not in the room. She slept on the sofa and is not moving. I get Zarja up, dressed, ready, and take her to kindergarten. When I return home, Alina is gone.

Like every morning, I set off for the office, for my pathetic administrative job, but at least it seems I know where I am going. I walk around, wander. I am not there either.

Only when it starts hurting like shit, causing me to bend over in the middle of the road, do I know that I won't know how to cry for quite some time.

Lina sends me a message, 'Discuss things tonight.'

Please, no. That's like being a child and your father writing, 'You'll get a beating tonight. Be home.'

I am so mechanical, so numbed, that it is not until the afternoon in the office that I think who this new cunt of hers is with whom she 'gets on well lately'. Perhaps some closet, or lesbopredator, or... could it be, her boss? I saw her once, shaved side cut... I should have known!

I need to get this ridiculous idea out of my head, my Linz, we know each other, we have always known that we would spend all our lives together – what is it with you?!

It will be easier for me if I do something, so I buy a flower. I hate cut flowers. I get a Strelitzia, her favourite, bird of paradise, no less!

After kindergarten I get my Old Man to look after Zarja, without telling him I am on the brink of the abyss when he winks at me and says, 'Have fun.' He must think that we have finally found the time to have a married couple sex date, that we will finally be alone, have a chance to become immersed in each other. It's what I think as well, that's exactly what I think!

The bird of paradise in my hand wilts to a plucked pigeon when I see Alina's face.

What an idiot of cosmic proportions I am.

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Sometimes in the universe strange force fields fall into place, forecasting some kind of storm. Looking back at it, it seems obvious, yet still. Ages ago Cowboy Junkies sang: *You can always see it coming, but you can never stop it.* You can expect a speeding train as much as you want but cannot move a finger to stop it. But the trick is, that if

you are expecting something, you have at least a minimal advantage because you can... I dunno, at least hold your head and protect yourself. I wasn't expecting it.

I felt that we were somewhere close to the collision that could set in motion further disasters, nothing more. I didn't know when it would happen, and it looked like it wouldn't happen today, not yet, at least, because Linz said, 'I so like living with you.'

When I don't suspect anything, like today, I imagine that I am a satisfied and fulfilled lesbian, in my minority world even very much privileged. If I would ever have thought that it all might go rotten and decompose, my next thought would be that I am forever provided with offspring, a wonderful daughter, our descendant, my descendant, who goes to kindergarten and for now hasn't had any serious problems with homophobia. That's a blessing! My life is a fucking piece of cake.

I don't have to creep around lesbian joints to find sex or even love, and it is totally clear to me that even if I was forced to do so, I would no longer manage it. Just as I am too old to wear uncomfortable shoes, I am also too old to be bothered to get to know too stupid, too young, too sex-driven new people. Just as well then, that I have already set up my own life, that I have a roadmap and goals along the way, that I have already parked.

'We've settled down in our nest, haven't we?' I say with a self-satisfied grin. 'When will we go on a date again?' I smirk. 'I haven't *seen* you for a long time, if you know what I mean.'

'Oh... you know I don't feel like it. I've put on weight,' Linz says and I could not have cared less what she looks like on the outside. It's what I have been trying to tell her right from the start, by all means, but she keeps saying she doesn't feel beautiful to herself.

'We see each other every day,' she says. 'Try and enjoy me as I am,' she slaps me on the nose with her accusations for which you can't even say they are actual accusations.

Perhaps I will call Goblin to supply me with something to smoke. I haven't, I haven't in a long time, I've refrained from it ever since Zarika was born. When she was pregnant, Linz was known to complain that she could smell my pot even outside the main entrance to the block of flats. I didn't pay her much attention but later when the procedure for Zarja's adoption was in place it did cross my mind a couple of times that it would not exactly be great if when the psychologist came for a visit some neighbour out in the corridor would hiss that an intoxicating whiff often came from our one-and-a-half-bedroom flat.

'Then I might call Goblin,' I suggest. 'We could meet up at the place next door,' I indicate through the window with my thumb at the local bar.

'Do what you want,' she says, sounding as if she is unloading the blame on me. As if to say, *I don't need anything from you, it's your life, fuck it up yourself.*

'I'm not responsible for you,' she adds just in case I had previously not been entirely sure that she was pumping her guilty conscience onto me, I would now certainly get the point.

'Well, no, it doesn't matter, nothing urgent,' I reply and it really isn't. Though I would be hard pushed to say that I find fulfilment in this constant routine. I am tormented by isolation and worry that I am missing something, something out there, far away – even though there are constantly two of us, often the three of us.

I do miss company, in this ivory cell the three of us are so alone, alone together. Alina pretends that we are normal, a usual neighbourhood family, but I stick out all the time. I stick out like a black sheep, I am not part of their idyllic picture, even less so a face for the cover of some family magazine, however much I try to fit in.

'You go ahead,' she says and looks at the blank screen of her phone. 'Go for it.'

Of course after all that I don't go, I wouldn't dream of going under such circumstances, but she was successful in making me feel like shit for having even thought about life beyond our ivory tower.

'Should we go to bed?' I suggest to break the silence after a meaningful pause.

'You go ahead, I'm going to watch Jersey Shore.'

'Seriously... that's what you watch now? Since when? And *why*, for god's sake?!

'Yes. They too are people. Sometimes you should peek out of your alter shelter enclosure,' she says calmly and I am not sure whether she is taking the piss.

'I mean, who watches this stuff... And what then, when you gawk at those twats in stretch tiger body suits, pumped up and botoxed, what do you think then? That's what I want to know.'

'Fuck off.'

'No, I really am interested. I have never met anyone who watches Jersey Shore. Were you pulling my leg, perhaps?'

'Go to bed.' I sense that she is really upset and it occurs to me that I perhaps really don't know her as well as I thought I did. Does anyone ever truly know anyone?

I stagger into the bedroom where Zarika is sleeping, trying like some stealthy ninja not to make any noise and spoil the peace in the tiny flat. Like always, it's all like always, just that I don't know, nothing is clear. Until now I always somehow knew what was coming. It was predictable, but this time... I cannot pinpoint it, but nothing is the same... Jersey Shore? You don't give a sod about the tiger bodies, how bored must you

be that you prefer to stare at reality shows than take your wife on a date, even if just within your own flat.

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Zarja says R, Zarja is no longer Zalja and I am no longer 'thilty-thlee yeas old'!

When she wishes me happy birthday, she is a little begrudging that it is not her celebration. In fact, I am not really celebrating, at least I had not intended to, but when I returned from my shit-job at an NGO that pays just about enough to survive, I found on the door a collage of one of those paper doll chains we all made at nursery school, and I felt so nice, warm.

I unlocked the door with great joy. They waited for me with party hats, apparently both of them enthusiastic. Well, Linz probably playacted a little in front of the kid. But it doesn't matter. Zarja stood in front of me on the doorstep, put her hands on her hips and shrillingly growled, 'Happy BiRRRRthday!'

'Hey, hey, someone's learnt something today!!!' I cried out and whirled her around in a hug. 'Ringa-ringa roses!' I tickled her and she wriggled and giggled. 'It took a while, but we've won!'

Indeed. 'No more visits to the speech therapist and no more teasing at school. What a relief.' Linz huddles up to us, kisses me on both cheeks and then on my mouth; clearly all is OK again, forever.

Linz baked a cake, the first time in her life. I tease her that it's good that she has started to practise since my old man doesn't bake and baking will come in handy for kids' birthdays where the parents are invited along. Obviously, the parents are the most serious challenge. They are judgemental, always curious about how 'we who are different' bring up our kids, not to mention the fiercest competitiveness in their eyes when checking out the cake at these official meetings.

I bite into a piece of chocolate cake with raspberries. Yummy. 'Well done, Linz, you've surpassed yourself... Not to mention that yours is better even than the one Juš's mum made the other day,' I wink at her and as a joke Linz proudly thumps her chest.

Zarja sooner or later starts pestering us unless it's her own birthday. We are used to that. And after a while she quietly asks, 'And do you have a present for me, Mummy Giga? Did you bring anything for me?'

Of course I have, because I'm weak. But I'll drag it out a little.

'And what did you bring *me* for *my* birthday?'

Puzzled, she looks around until she spots some plasticine on the table. She opens the pot and heart-warmingly places the stuff in her cute childish chubby hand.

Hurriedly she starts moulding it into something folded, silently pressing her lips together, concentrating on her important mission. Lina and I look at each other, amazed. We are like three musketeers, only that one of us has a unique approach and the other two of us follow her faithfully.

‘Here, Mummy Giga!’ Zarika proudly shouts out. She offers me a blue green mix of moulding clay, folded in two large creases, to my eyes looking like a hurriedly kneaded lump, which it basically is. Our daughter might be talented in many ways, but you wouldn’t call her especially meticulous.

I grin and Zarja howls, ‘Can’t you see, I cRRReated a sofa!!!’ This is followed by uproarious laughter from the tree of us, a sign of our brilliance and humour. Then Linz, still laughing, says, ‘All we need to do now is teach her to sip a glass of wine, and we’re done.’

I really love us, the way we are.

Then Zarja turns to me, ‘Now you give me your present.’

‘How do you even know I have a present for you? It is my birthday, after all...’

‘Give it to me.’

‘I won’t!’ I tickle her again but she no longer finds it funny.

‘I said, give it to me!!!’ she raises her voice so Lina and I stop laughing and Lina gives her an instructive look of warning and raises her index finger.

I decide that today is not a day for firm upbringing, so I step across to my backpack where I have a set for making sparkling bracelets.

When I pull it out of the bag I theatrically step to the middle of the kitchen, wanting my offspring’s full attention, reciting a verse from Prešern’s *Baptism on the Savica*:

Less terrible is the night in the earth’s dark fold

Than living days in slavery under a sun of gold!

Zarja grins, happy and contented.

Linz also grins because we both know that we have spoilt our stubborn child. Today is not a day for regrets.

As I finally put Zarika to bed, before I will – yes, she is a good observer – once again roll myself like a pile of seal blubber onto the wonderful sofa in our living room, she, just before sinking into sleep, worriedly asks me with a whisper, ‘Mummy Giga?’

‘Go to sleep, darling,’ I say. ‘Go to sleep, little mouse.’

‘Mummy, they won’t really hide you in the earth’s dark folds in the night, will they?’

I can't hide my smile but it's late, so I just place my hand on her forehead, cover her up right to her chin and reassure her it is only a funny poem.

'Nobody will hide me anywhere, never ever, squirrel. I will always be by your side.'

'Deal,' says Zarika and turns so she is facing the wall. Then she begs me, 'Write on my back, Mummy.'

As I stroke her back for a while with my index and middle fingers, I hear her deep breathing and her ever so slight twitching lets me know that my favourite person in the entire world has already crossed the bridge into the land of dreams.

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It is often Lina who takes her to kindergarten because it's on her way to work. I go and collect her in the afternoon. Once we came home late after a brilliant sunny day when Zarika played with one of her peers on the playground next to the pond. She was dirty from head to toe. Muddy tights, torn dress, a happy kid, full of adventures.

Linz waited for us, beside herself because I hadn't called.

'Oh, that? You could have called me...'