

**30 April 1992, Thursday**

It was the perfect moment—her skin still saturated with the warmth and scent of the bath, her body wrapped in a towel, her bare feet on the carpet letting her feel how soft the world was—and that was why she almost didn't notice it.

On screen a model was bending over a baby with cartoon butterflies flying out of its diaper; in a light that exists only in TV ads and ice cream freezers, the twirling decoration shimmered and swayed above the cot.

A jingle announced the final news bulletin of the day. She grabbed the remote and pressed the red button, smiling at her reflection in the darkening screen. Holding the towel close to her chest, she walked slowly over to the cot she had prepared by her bed, now fading in the late afternoon light. She ran her hand along the wooden edge, folded her fingers over the rail.

Something slightly ticklish rolled down her thigh. She stopped to focus on the sensation. The drop slid past her knee with the next one hurrying behind it. She thought she hadn't dried off properly and unfolded the towel. The trail almost looked like a vein that had pushed its way to the surface of her skin. She shuddered and the vein smeared across her leg. A red stain seeped into the fluffy carpet as the fluid flowed down both legs. She knew she should move but whilst her body was launching itself within, it stayed still externally with only her toes curling inwards as if to hide.

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The taxi driver took one glance and, even before she told him where she was going, drove off. At every set of traffic lights he leaned back and looked toward her legs, assessing the risk to his seat covers. The moss-green Mercedes slid silently through the night; it was ritual that not a single Yugoslav Gastarbeiter dared a visit back home before he had earned enough in Germany to buy one.

The driver kept licking his mustached upper lip and only spoke once:

"A son is it?"

She shook her head and, noticing the disappointment on his face, added:

"I don't know. I didn't want to know."

"Ah, a lottery!" he nodded and flicked at the rabbit paw hanging from the rearview mirror.

"I have a system, I always win," he added as they waited for the green light and he kept pressing on the accelerator to keep the engine running.

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The face of the nurse at Reception loomed like a storm cloud above the surface of her sky blue uniform, the discontent already petrified upon her features.

Spotting the pregnant woman, she stood up and began placing various sheets of papers on the counter as if salvaging them from water and laying them out to dry.

The woman approached the desk. "Good evening, I've come . . ."

"Fill out the forms!"

The nurse furrowed her brow and the visitor stopped.

"ID and health insurance card," said the nurse and took both documents that the visitor was already offering her. She tapped her finger on the counter:

"The forms, please."

The pregnant woman picked up the pen. It felt slightly sticky on her fingers. She wanted to wipe her hand against her coat but felt embarrassed. She closed her eyes for a moment, tried to compose herself, and began forming the tiny letters in the half-light.

ZALA JOVANOVIĆ, she filled out the first line.

The child moved and the fear of fainting swept over her.

She entered her date of birth, 1959, and deducted the year from the current one. There was no need, she knew how old she was, but she could never resist—it came as a reflex. From her school days she could still recall how schoolbooks and encyclopedias would give two dates in brackets under the names of people long dead. Perhaps it was because the dash between the dates looked like a minus sign, but she always calculated the difference.

"I'm bleeding!" she said. The nurse did not look up from the screen. She was knifing away at the keyboard with her extended index finger.

Zala was no longer sure how loudly she was speaking, so she repeated:

"I'm bleeding!"

The finger came to a halt and the head turned. The look displayed the utter boredom of an assembly line worker.

"Do you even have contractions?" she asked.

"No, at least I think I don't."

“You’ll know when you will.”

“But, the blood . . .”

The nurse sighed, her breasts sinking softly. She pushed herself back from the desk, caught with her hand, in a move she was clearly used to, the worn back of the chair covered in brown fabric, and looked over the counter.

“Make sure you don’t make a mess.”

“I used lots of towels, for the taxi . . .” Zala started to explain before she realized that she was being apologetic and recognized in her own voice the echo of a schoolgirl caught without her homework. She remembered the countless excuses she’d given to her father, and her shoulders stiffened.

“I came to give birth! If anything goes wrong it will be your fault!”

For the first time the nurse actually looked at her, moving her gaze from the wet, ponytail-tied hair to the dark eyes besieged by Zala’s prominent cheekbones and tight lips, ready for battle.

“You’ll be fine. Sometimes the mucus plug becomes dislodged, don’t worry,” the nurse said, switching to reassuring mode, and seated herself back at the computer.

Zala didn’t know whether it was her heart or the baby pounding inside her. She felt a pain in her side and wondered: ‘Was that a contraction?’ Her belly tensed, pulling the skin over itself, stretching it, ready to rip it apart if necessary. The sheets of paper on the counter constituted a hurdle she needed to overcome as soon as possible.

Father’s name, the form demanded and, before realizing, she had already drawn the first vertical line, so she crossed it out until she was quite sure nobody could read it.

“Excuse me, I don’t wish to give the father’s name . . .”

“Unknown!” the nurse did not even turn her head.

A wave of pain pushed Zala against the counter. She clutched the edge with the palms of her hands and closed her eyes. Once it was over, she quickly continued her scribbling race through the forms.

When she was done the nurse was still battling with the computer.

“Excuse me, I’d like to get on with giving birth now!” Zala said.

She had deliberately spoken a little louder, her voice echoing through the large space, over the chairs welded onto the floor and next to each other, across to the phone booth, the

coffee and drinks machines, under the mostly extinguished fluorescent lamps. The only other people sitting in the waiting room were an elderly woman and her husband, a large bruise on his forehead, one hand shaking visibly. They kept their eyes to the floor as if embarrassed by Zala's presence. An orderly walking through the hall stopped, giving her an odd look, and continued on his way.

"If contractions are not less than five minutes apart you are in no hurry," the nurse said, not looking up. "I need to enter the data, without it we can't do anything." She frowned at the computer and handed the health card back to Zala with an air of finality. "Look, there is something wrong. You have a problem with the computer. It can't find you! Zala Jovanović, you do not exist."

The nurse was a seer for whom things happened as she foretold. In the depths of her embitterment a satisfaction with her own unhappiness stretched out like a contented cat.

"Are you sure you have spelt it correctly? Have you tried both with a č and a ć?"

"I have. Both. You are not in there."

"Everything was fine at my doctor's. But there they don't yet have computers, they keep their records in files."

"Well, lucky them!" the nurse said and Zala, realizing that she had once more drifted into excuses, felt a new tightening of her belly.

"I know nothing about technology! I'm about to deliver my baby!"

She wanted to seize the edge of the counter but overshot, hitting the surface with her wrist that sounded like a slap.

"This is my job," the nurse said, peering at her with contempt, "making sure everything is in order. Collecting and verifying the information. If things aren't properly sorted out here . . ." she tapped her finger against the counter as if it were a keyboard, ". . . then how can they possibly be sorted out up there?"

She pointed to the ceiling.

"Things need to be in order. We're no longer part of Yugoslavia, this is no longer the Balkans with everyone doing whatever they feel fit. This is now independent Slovenia!"

The pain caused Zala to close her eyes. When she opened them again she had to blink to draw back the tears before she could once more see the nurse's face, now glowing with hatred. She couldn't hear the last sentences and something inside her wanted to grab hold

of the nurse and fight her way past the desk to Delivery before this night was out; the child could well already be suffocating, vomiting blood and dying, and this cow here in front of her was . . .

She felt a forward thrust, the hardness of her belly pushing against the hardness of the wood.

She pulled herself away and staggered toward the seats. For a moment, she thought she would faint. Zala unbuttoned her raincoat and laid it out on the seat. She lifted up her dress and stared over her belly at the towels she had wrapped around herself. Hastily she started to untie them. Her child needed her.

“What are you doing?” the nurse shouted.

Without looking at her she replied:

“Getting ready for delivery. You will have to deal with the flood of blood. What else can I do, when I’m not in that stupid computer of yours?”

The first towel fell to the floor and Zala worried she might also drop her child. She searched for it amidst the rags, untying the towels, her fingers catching in the knots. The first drops of blood fell onto the linoleum floor.

Now the nurse was yelling something into the receiver.

## **2 May 1992, Saturday**

The child was born at six in the morning and it was only a couple of days later that Zala wondered if his arrival had been accompanied by the traditional May Day marching band. On the First of May every year her father had woken her up at half past five, fully dressed in his uniform. He would pick up a checkered blanket from the sofa and wrap it around her when she started shivering from the cold. Zala begged him to let her sleep, but he always refused with a “No, son!”, the greatest possible compliment a Serb father can utter to his only child who is not a son.

Before her sleepy child eyes, the night slowly peeled away, revealing the outlines of apartment buildings, supports holding up balconies, and the occasional cars parked below. Covered in the dawn dampness, anything metal remained faint, as if composed of the mist. The birds were still silent. Father would put his arm across her left shoulder and allow her right side to warm up against him.

First they would sense a kind of tremor that tickled them up through their slippers, then came the sound, the metallic wave arising somewhere at the far end of the row of apartment blocks.

Father's fingers gave her a squeeze and she suddenly lifted her head, by then completely leaning against the source of warmth, to attention.

"They're coming," he would say in Serbian, the language he always used. If anyone teased him about the only language he spoke, in a country of many languages, his reply depended on his mood. "Speak Serbian and the World is your oyster!" he would say. Or, "This is the official language of the Army and I'm a soldier even when I am not in uniform!"

They stood on the balcony, the only people on the entire block to do so, and watched the brass band musicians in their uniforms march along in a swaying rectangle. As they disappeared into the distance Father would say a few sentences, the same ones every year, about the First of May, International Workers' Day, about the workers' struggle and how Marshal Tito was at the forefront of this struggle. After this Zala was allowed to go back to bed. As he covered her with the blanket he would add:

"Son, if you were a boy, I'd wake you up early every day so you'd get used to army life."

This thought always made her feel better when she envied boys who could simply pee wherever they happened to be when they needed to while girls had to hide somewhere or run off home.

It wasn't until she was a teenager that she realized it was his way of comforting her, but by then she was beyond trying to find mitigating circumstances for him.

Now, as she leaned against the window in the maternity ward, observing the flags drooping from the lamp posts after a holiday that had been much wetter and cooler than usual, she was surprised that she could remember the marching musicians as both large and tiny figures, closer and further away, and then realized why: with her father an officer, they were often re-stationed to different apartment blocks and complexes, changing to floors higher up or lower down, the tide of her growing up years.

She straightened her gown, wondering why hospital clothing had to be so baggy and plain. Was it just so that one size really did fit all? Could beauty not fit the masses?

Returning to her bed, Zala stared at her son's tiny head with its pulsating lips and wondered what the difference might be between dreams two days after birth and those inside the womb. He looked as if he was sucking on milk, though without the wiggling, searching, turning away and grunting of when he was awake.

'Two days!' she thought, 'Two days!'

She was amazed at how far away the birth already seemed; she could not get over her awe at this creature, though it felt like he had been with her forever. The woman on her right was already breastfeeding and the two opposite were still asleep. She looked at the one in the corner whose mouth curved downwards even in her sleep. She cried almost continuously and whenever her baby's mouth as much as touched her breast she began shaking her head, saying she had no milk, that she couldn't . . . she would't. At night she complained that she couldn't sleep, that the newborns should be kept in a separate room like in other hospitals, that she needed quiet to rest, that the visitors were too noisy . . . that . . . . Her husband kept bringing her flowers, so many she didn't know where to put them, pushing them away with the back of her hand, saying they were full of germs.

Zala was glad she wasn't like that, that she was stronger than her, but instantly felt guilty for thinking it. She tried to exonerate the woman, what if she had had a difficult childbirth? Zala's delivery was easy, far less painful than she had imagined, though she discovered long ago that pain is not something one can imagine or remember. Still, she did not wish to start a conversation with the weepy woman, as if her misery could be contagious.

She turned back to her own son.

'A name, now I will finally have to decide on a name.'

At six months she had gone to the library and found a baby name book. At seven she went through the telephone directory at the post office. The problem remained: was she looking for a Slovene name or one that could also sound Serbian? Boris, for example, was one that her father would also accept.

(if)

It was all about him; she was trying to please someone to whom she had not spoken in ages. She had given birth to a son, and to her father that was the ultimate thing a woman could do. Had he been there at that moment, she would have slapped him.

Zala Jovanović: her father's Serbian surname and a very Slovene-sounding first name.

Had that been a small victory for her mother—a woman who always supported her husband and stood by his side, even through his greatest follies? Even through the final row, the outcome of which Zala had had few doubts about. It had just taken her a few years to pluck up the courage, a few years for enough anger to build up inside her to make her face the decision.

Ten years later both she and Father were still true to their word: they had never seen or talked to each other since. Zala wondered whether he ever thought about her, whether in his head he continued to argue with her like she did with him. She would see Mother just before All Saints' Day on the First of November, when they would tidy the grave of her parents. This was another one of those Slovene customs that Father didn't want to hear about, though he still accompanied his wife to the cemetery once a year to what is the most colorful spectacle of living in Slovenia: graveyards smothered with a kaleidoscope of candles and bouquets, people standing about at the graves, eyeing each other's clothes, counting the candles and summing up the value of the flowers. Contentedly, they acknowledge the ostentatious wreaths and gossip about those conspicuous by their absence. After the tour they make their way to the parking lot where they spend time ascertaining the success of kith and kin, however distant, as well as friends and acquaintances. They scrutinize their cars, judging how successful their lives must be. Was that Father's moment of shame? An old Zastava 101? When Mother once suggested they borrow a car, Father ranted around the apartment all night. It would not have been much of a transgression; after the First of November each year there was talk of people taking out ruinous bank loans in order to dress and drive expensively. Mother's cousin was a second hand car salesman and used to say how the most expensive models were only sold in the week before All Saints' Day.

Zala always visited the grave a day earlier to help her mother pull up the weeds.

Crouching and plucking away at the plants, staring at the gravel, they had little to say to each other.

"How are you?"

"Fine. You?"

"Fine."

A long silence before Mother, in passing added:



“Father is fine too.”

Instead of a parting handshake they simply showed each other their earth-brown and plant-green stained palms and nodded in greeting as they left.

For Zala, giving her son a name that would not (also) be a Serbian name would mean severing the last contact with her father. She was overcome by fear whenever she had thought about this in previous months. In their final quarrel Father had hit her, and in a double move she'd scratched his cheeks. She had left home shortly after that, swearing he'd only ever be a name to her. Now this person whom she no longer thought about, or wished to think about, had surfaced once more, unnerving her with the memory of shouting and words sharper than knives, though she could not even remember the reason for them.

‘Does he look at all like him?’ she wondered without knowing the answer. The other women in the room and their visitors precisely distributed every organ and feature through the extended family: father's nose, aunt's eyes . . . with the inevitable jokes about the milkman and the postman. She didn't dare stroke his surprisingly thick black hair in case it woke him up, but she again felt relieved that he was not fair. Hiding the identity of the child's father had become second nature to her and she shunned the memory of the flash of sunlight through the still wet disheveled hair, the manly hand holding the towel, the long fingers that . . . No!

She stared at the tiny fingers on the sheet.

‘The little guy has his father's fingers,’ she thought and all of a sudden felt his absence.

‘Another person who knows nothing about you, little guy!’ she thought as she looked at the baby and added:

‘You will have a different childhood than mine, I swear!’

She wasn't sure whether she had perhaps said it aloud and worriedly looked around.

The door flung open and the doctors making their rounds marched in. Without greeting they stopped at the first bed and the Attending Physician gave a feeble nod and whispered so the younger man and woman who came in with him leaned forward, their white gowns forming a pyramid-shaped tent.

Zala sat on her bed. She wondered whether she should lie down but didn't move. The group in white advanced to her bed next, the doctor glanced at her fleetingly and, for a brief moment, held his gaze; the raised brow and satisfied smile letting her know that this

was a compliment, that despite the circumstances in which he came across her, he still considered her someone to be tempted by. He was radiating the self-confidence of a still handsome man close to sixty who had the ability to make up for his waning appearances with an increase in status and wealth. His gray hair fell across his head in long slick waves, erupting right above the ear in wild tufts resembling a shaving brush. His tan stood out from the sallow spring paleness of most of the town's population after a winter of absorbing the mist with which they began their day. Zala expected the glint of a thick gold chain, but she didn't see one; the doctor might have adopted the Latin lover look, but not entirely its tackiness.

He looked at the female intern on his left, his gaze once more lingering briefly, then, without any of the same interest glanced at the young man on the other side before returning his attention to the chart he had unclipped from the bed rail.

"An easy birth, a healthy child, home on Monday providing there are no complications."

He held the notes out like a tray, the two heads approached obediently, then he rehooked the chart and they crossed the room. The scent of his expensive aftershave stayed with Zala, keeping her company.

'A healthy child!'

She remembered the sleepless nights when her belly had begun to grow and there was no longer enough space inside her, so she had to go to the bathroom frequently during the night. Very rarely did she go back to sleep straight away; most often she had gazed at the gaps in the blinds with the steady glow of streetlamps sporadically intensified by the headlights of a belated car. At first she thought ghosts only crawled out of the darkest corners of the room but during the last month she had had the impression they were hiding in her limbs, in the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet as she sprawled across the bed, her large belly greatly limiting any possible sleeping positions. Fragments of news or scenes she had seen throughout the day and which her brain was almost obsessively on the lookout for, a disabled person in a wheelchair, a retarded child, an amputee, all floated before her eyes, turning her heart to ice. Laying her hands on her belly, she tried to feel not only the life inside her but life as a whole. The gynecologist's reassurances remained locked outside the Gates of the Night and only Morning had allowed them to reach her once again.

‘A healthy child!’ she smiled and became aware that the intern had not followed the doctor but was still looking at her.

“Aunt Zala . . .” she whispered as she sneaked a glance at the white-coated pair behind her.

Zala stared at the familiar features whose youthfulness did not fit with the white gown or the hospital.

“It’s me, Tania, your neighbor’s . . .”

“Oh! Tania! I didn’t recognize you! How you have grown!”

Zala was also whispering and tried to get up quickly, then realized her center of gravity had shifted. She swayed and the intern grabbed hold of her arm.

“We haven’t seen each other in ten years!” said Tania.

“You are a doctor!”

“Not yet, only in my fourth year!”

Half way across the aisle, on his way to see the last woman in the room, the Attending Physician scowled at Tania.

“Ten o’clock at the coffee machine!” Tania whispered and ran along.

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Zala laid the baby across her shoulder and walked the corridor in the ritual of trying to get him to burp. The child seemed so light that she dared not take her eyes off her own hands, both to make sure she was actually still holding him and to avoid clutching him too hard. She felt his warmth through his clothes and his tiny fingers curled into tight fists.

Her dressing gown cord had come undone and she felt where the loose robe exposed her skin. She held her son carefully with her left hand as she tried to do it up again.

“You can give the child to me,” said a deep voice behind Zala’s back, and for a moment she thought she was being addressed by a man. The woman stood there without extending her hand, holding her arms almost parallel to her bosom, secured inside a full coverage bra which held everything firmly in place.

“Mrs. Avber, Director of the Maternity Clinic. Glad to meet you,” she added with a nod.

Everything about her radiated control, from her hairstyle that, with the help of various chemical substances, seemed to defy gravity, to her starched collar, white suit, and black shirt, her thin necklace that disappeared into her short cleavage, and her stiletto-heeled

shoes. An excessively thick layer of powder covered her face like snow does a landscape, muffling any expressions despite the fact that the owner probably only wished to paint out her age. Zala felt as if the woman's piercing eyes were probing her, continuously digging up new matters that she wished to hide. They had once lived in an apartment block where the lady living above them had a cat with such eyes. Zala had never dared even to stroke it. She covered the baby with both hands and her gown came entirely undone.

The director's lips puckered slightly as if, were the owner allow them to do so, they wanted to express her disapproval.

Zala sensed that her body was reluctant to let go of the child, but reason intervened. For fourteen years she had worked as a nursery school teacher and met new parents every autumn. After a couple of years she noticed that she always formed her opinion of them, good or bad, in the first moment. In cases of the latter she would try to persuade herself otherwise—if they're so polite, surely they must be good parents, and things like that. With time she realized that her initial impression rarely deceived her and she began looking out for it, trying to extend and preserve it within, if possible right until she got home where she could revive, dismantle, and analyze it in peace. In her sixth year of working she met a mother who struck her as a thief. She remained on the lookout for months whenever the woman brought or collected her child from the nursery before remembering that her face reminded her of a woman who stole from them during Father's stint in Bitola, and stopped believing in her instinct. What if it was merely memories of faces and past experiences? She remained undecided about her abilities to judge from the first moment, but there were times, like now, when the feelings were loud and clear.

But there was nobody else around in the corridor and the woman was waiting, reason won, and Zala carefully placed her son in the waiting arms.

Hurriedly she covered herself up, tied the cord, and reached back for the child.

"Thank you!"

The woman nodded:

"A beautiful boy! Healthy and handsome . . . you are very lucky!"

"I know, thank you."

The woman remained silent, her eyes still probing, and Zala nervously shifted her feet.

A part of her rued her own submissiveness that wouldn't allow her to leave; after all this

woman standing in front of her was the boss. 'Would I have handed the child to a cleaning lady?' she asked herself and remembered how she had needed to make a conscious effort at the nursery school not to be too obliging to the headmistress.

"There is . . ." the woman began and let her sentence extinguish like a match with a long streak of smoke trailing after it.

"What?"

"Are you a foreigner?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought . . . you don't have any visitors . . . and . . ." she gestured toward the child,

"There is also no father . . ."

"My friends have gone on holiday to the coast. They invited me to come along, but I refused, just in case, and it seems I was right," Zala almost stuttered as a voice inside her screamed out: 'Too many words! Too many!' She gulped and added:

"I'm from Ljubljana."

"Oh." It sounded like the falling of the guillotine.

'Is this something she learned or was she born with it?' Zala thought, amazed at the woman's sense of command, 'If it's through training, where can I learn it?'

'But,' a tiny voice added, 'would you then still be you?'

"You are not in the records," the Director of the Clinic said emphatically with a somewhat exaggerated tone of sympathy.

"What do you mean? How can that be?"

"You are not in the computer . . ."

"I don't know . . ." Zala faintly tried to refute the woman before adding more firmly: "It was always fine before."

The Director lifted her open palm, once again right next to her body as if unwilling to give anything away, not even her limbs:

"Do not worry, we will sort it out. You're in good hands."

She folded all but her index finger. She waved it as she turned toward the baby:

"Gu gu."