Mojca Kumerdej: **It Might Be Something About Me**

a short story from the collection *The Anechoic Chamber*

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Was I being too conspicuous? Not careful enough?

 They said it was not to do with me as a person, but it might be something about me – perhaps my grey-blue eyes, prominent nose or my high-pitched, slightly squeaky voice that I try to keep low? Was it my height – wearing high heels I am taller than most women, and indeed men –, or it might have been my short, garnet-red hair that has grown longer since and is now mousy grey-brown?

Whenever my friend suggests I should liven up my image, I shake my head and we change the subject of our conversation. She tells me about what is going on outside, down below my window. In the town where I no longer live but merely keep myself alive. I have been working from home in the flat for the past three months and spend my spare time – and I certainly have plenty of that – watching comedies (which I find incredibly funny), travel documentaries (which don’t arouse in me any desire to travel), and romantic dramas (which bore me), making my solitary existence somewhat bearable. Without surprises, without unpredictability… safe.

 I have arranged for delivery of food and other necessities with a supermarket chain. We follow a strict protocol. Before arriving, the delivery guy gives me a call, then rings the downstairs bell once, then rings it a further two times, the second ring being slightly longer than the other two. I press the button to open the main entrance to the block of flats and wait for him to come up to the fourth floor with the lift. Outside the door to my flat he calls me again and I first check the camera, then the peephole, he shows me his ID and leaves the shopping in front of the door. I then count to twenty, carefully open the door, glance to the left, then to the right, and pick up the delivered items. Always the same procedure. They don’t complicate things. For a slightly increased price, it is all arranged in advance. If they change their delivery man, the supermarket chain forwards me the new person’s photograph beforehand. I would never open the door to someone I didn’t recognise.

 ‘But how long will you still be able to carry on like this? It’s almost a year since…’

 ‘I don’t know,’ I respond to the encouragement from the few people who occasionally visit me.

 Today I have difficulty imagining the ease with which I used to move around the world, establish contacts and mingle with people I didn’t know and had never met before. I recall how blithely I would leave the house, going to different places, shaking hands with people, hugging them, occasionally even discovering the skin, the bodies of others, without ever thinking about any possible traps and dangers. They must have existed, even if they were not as fateful as the one that has changed my entire life.

‘Why me?’ I asked the criminal investigator at the hospital a few days after that weekend in August.

 ‘We are still looking into it, but very possibly it could have been any other girl in your place,’ she replied.

 ‘But it was me next to that white van, parked next to the pavement, responding to a casual enquiry about how to get to the ring road.’

 ‘You responded, just as most people would respond…’

 ‘People who are kind? People who are obliging? Was my kindness the reason for what happened to me? Because I was never really over kind with strangers I was not interested in, formally polite, at the most.’

 She stayed silent. I thought I could recognise embarrassment in her gaze. And also anger.

 ‘Did he know me? Watch me beforehand?’ I ask her. ‘Perhaps somewhere close to that place I stopped at on my way home from work? Because I am convinced that there was nobody else in the place looking like the man who an hour later asked me for directions, not when I arrived, or later.’

 ‘He might have been watching you, perhaps even stealthily following you, but none of the surveillance cameras along the way from your work to that café picked up on him,’ she responds.

 ‘And who was it that reported my disappearance, my partner?’

 ‘Your friend. She thought it was unusual that you didn’t pick up the phone. A day later she rang your doorbell, called your partner, friends and relatives… Nobody had a clue where you might be.’

 ‘My partner didn’t report me missing?’ I asked.

 The investigator shakes her head.

That Friday afternoon in August, metallic black clouds were closing in on the crimson-tinged sky. We’re going to have a storm, it occurs to me as I walk through the outskirts of the industrial estate. I call a taxi. The woman’s voice from the taxi company tells me that the cab would arrive in ten minutes and that I should wait for it outside the only café on this street. I stand on the pavement in front of a narrow overhang, in the concrete yard to the side of which are a few tables and chairs. A young waitress in tight white trousers and a pink T-shirt looks up at the sky, closing the sun shades next to the empty tables, carrying them off into the shop. It’s so muggy my dress sticks to my skin, sweat trickles down my face, the salt stinging my eyes. A sudden strong gust of wind starts swirling dried rubbish. We have not had a single drop of rain in over three weeks. There is a heat haze above the baking asphalt. I stare at the plastic bags being lifted into the air by the wind, carried off high up above the nearby prefab warehouses. With no sight of the taxi twenty minutes later, I call the cab company again and the same woman’s voice tells me that the driver was stuck in traffic and they have already sent out someone else. Considering the chaos on the roads, it will probably arrive in about half an hour’s time, though it could be longer, says the phone operator. Well, forget about it, then, I tell her, just as I was being blinded by the sunlight reflecting sharply from the hot tin roof.

Sitting at the window, I sometimes wonder whether some chain of coincidences had not even previously saved my life. For example, a decision made to go to a specific place later than I had intended to, a detail that drew my attention, made me stop or slow down, a sudden flash thought that I should turn right instead of left, even though I would find it hard or impossible to explain why. A kind of feeling. Or intuition. A set of information that runs faster than any rational explanation. That comes later, or doesn’t come at all.

‘But still – why me specifically?’ I repeated the question to the criminal investigator a few weeks after that weekend.

 ‘He probably picked out something about you,’ she replies, staring out of the window as if searching for the continuation of the answer somewhere outside. I get the feeling that she wants to tell me something but either can’t bring herself to do so or isn’t allowed to. She slowly turns to me and says, ‘You were enormously lucky!’

 ‘Indeed, but ever since, that horror is followed by a new one, one I will have to live with.’

‘Things will get better over time. The main thing is – you’re alive.’

‘But this is not exactly a life, it is more like simply passing time…’

‘Apparently they have found you a therapist. I hope you will get on with each other.’

‘I don’t believe I could ever get on with anyone again.’

I used to pass the time on the underground by carefully observing passengers sitting opposite and trying to figure out which of them might be close to their deaths, either due to an accident or illness. Had anyone who I happened to be watching right now killed a person? In self-defence, or as a soldier, a policeman…? Or even that their victim might not yet have been found, closest relatives still holding out hopes, while the dead person is already decomposing in some ditch or gravel pit? Or whether any of the people close to me right now might soon become a murder victim – I would glance across my fellow passengers and stare at my reflection in the carriage window.

 Some months ago, sitting at the living room window, it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps things are destined, and for the first time in decades, I suddenly recalled the smell of some cellar from my childhood. Is it possible to hallucinate, to smell something that is neither close by, nor in the present, and perhaps comes from the past? That a memory is triggered by the smell of baking in that French novel, only that now there is nothing smelling of vanilla nearby, only a stench wafting in from somewhere that reminds me of coriander, which I can’t stand, just as I can’t stand fennel, making me feel sick, wanting to vomit, apparently similar to the smell emitted by bed bugs?

‘We are checking his contacts, social media, apps he used,’ the criminal investigator tells me during our next meeting.

 ‘But in my case, it was not a digital contact, merely an analogue, everyday, seemingly innocent question out in the street,’ I reply.

 ‘True, but it seems that you and the woman in the next room were not his only victims.’

 ‘What was he like?’ I ask. ‘My height, reddish hair, slightly overweight? He used to enter with a strong torchlight, so I never saw his face…’

 She places a photograph on the table in front of me. ‘He corresponds entirely to your description of the man by the white van. Try and erase him from your memory, you only saw him for a brief moment anyway. Because faces haunt. And you will continue to be haunted by male figures for a long, far too long time…’

 ‘Do you think it was my fault?’

 ‘Your fault?’ she gives me a surprised look.

 ‘…that I made a mistake stopping next to that white van? The white van… even in crime novels, such vans are usually white… We read crime novels and watch TV series with such ease, but they were other people’s stories. Characters. None of us knew anyone to whom anything of the kind had happened. There is a filter between us on our sofas and the events in books and films.’

 She doesn’t say anything, watching me in silence.

I have never been particularly comfortable with silences wedged between questions and answers, so I ask, ‘Do you watch crime series?’

‘Rarely, I deal with all these things on a daily basis. Reports on missing persons, then searches, sometimes taking forever, checking up on their friends and relatives, locations, events… missing people that we find in various, sometimes very bad states… sometimes an inexplicable void, as if they have vanished without trace… in some cases also bodies…’

‘Did I miss something on that empty street, could I have avoided all this?’ I insist.

‘You described the situation as an entirely normal event: he was standing next to the parked vehicle and, when you approached him, he asked you for directions…’

‘Yes, yes, but I could have just pointed with my hand in the direction, I could have ignored him and walked on, I didn’t have to stop…’

‘Many would do the same…’

‘But it happened to *me*…’

‘You are not to blame at all. What does your therapist think about this?’

‘I don’t know what to think about his therapies. He kept asking me how I was dressed on the day. Whether I was wearing trousers or a dress? What is my – to begin with he spoke in the present tense – lifestyle like? Whether I live with anyone or live alone, what my social life is like, whether I use any of those damn dating apps, whether… whether…. whether… over and over again. As if with my lifestyle I had brought what happened to me upon me myself. Self-confident, he suggested; was self-confident, he put down in his notes, and since then uncertainty, fear, panic attacks, a not exactly stable relationship, professionally very successful but totally dysfunctional after the event.’

‘Fortunately nothing actually happened to you…’

‘It’s not true, that nothing actually happened!’ I give her a harsh look. I don’t understand why she is so rigid and awkward, why she utters all this triteness, as if she is talking simply to cover up something essential. It’s just a feeling I have, though it seems we shouldn’t rely on our feelings…

‘Well, you were extremely lucky to have survived…’ she says.

‘That, yes, but I don’t know how I can live from now on. I don’t know how to… I am incapable of living…’

It is mid-August. The city is melting in the heat. On one side, the reddish glow of the sunset, on the other, the sky is closing up with lead-coloured tones. In the summer I sometimes cross the industrial suburb by bike but, with storms forecast towards the evening, I used the underground to go to work that morning. As I left the office soon after five, I decided to walk the first part of the way and get onto the underground train at the far end of the industrial estate. After a hard week, I sometimes need to walk and think. Walking calms my thoughts. Slows me down and I don’t have to think about anything.

 At about half past five in the afternoon, I am walking along the street on the edge of the industrial park, a route much shorter and quieter than the dual carriageway where the air almost doesn’t move in among the heavy traffic. It’s becoming more and more humid. As I walk, my dress clings to my skin. Above the asphalt and the metal surfaces, a heated mass of air winds its way along. The offices and buildings in this remote part of town are for the most part already empty at this time. A strong gust of air brings a few raindrops. I stand under the overhang, call for a taxi, and stare at the sky, darkly closing in on itself in the distance. After twenty minutes, I step from the pavement into the concrete courtyard of the café. They have a few plastic tables and chairs outside. I have never before stopped at this place. There is music coming from inside. The waitress stands leaning against the wall, browsing her phone. I doubt she has noticed me. I sit at the round plastic table. To one side are two boys and a girl with sports bags, each staring at their phone. At the next table along, a pair of muscular young men in tight T-shirts, immersed in conversation with a great deal of gesticulation. A little further along are three men in work suits.

The waitress puts away her phone and when she slowly approaches me, I order a macchiato and some mineral water. Sitting down, I observe the sky, almost not thinking about anything at all. At some point the men in tight T-shirts stand up, pick up their car keys from the table and glance at me briefly as they leave. I find my phone in my handbag and check the display. Twenty-two minutes to seven, five unanswered calls. The darkness on the horizon is devouring the red-orange light above the industrial halls, the wind is causing the electricity wires running across to the neighbouring building to sway. It must be some kind of warehouse. I look around and notice that I am the only one left among the plastic chairs. From inside the café I can hear Springsteen’s *State Trooper*, reminding me of my student years, and *Frankie Teardrop* by the duet Suicide, vibrating, thickly-hissing resonance, cutting into which is the electrified scream of the singer Alan Vega. *State Trooper* is softer but no less dark, it occurs to me during Springsteen's hollow *…don’t stop me … maybe you got a kid … a pretty wife … the only thing that I got’s been bothering me my whole life…*

 Just before the storm I am in the industrial area, stranded among plastic chairs and tables. As if something in this brick-red ambient with dark metallic tones is stopping me on my way home. Back home, where I am heading, there is nothing much waiting for me. The wind is picking up. The leaden darkness cutting into the glowing sky. My phone rings. You’re late, I hear a man’s voice. Just work, I reply. Wires sway and vibrate in the wind, creating a whistling sound underscored by a low drone. The humming of the wires spreading amorphously across the urban landscape is similar to the sound I will listen to a few hours later in a dark cellar. As if I had been ejected from life into a high-voltage, inexplicably stretched out out-of-timeness.

 Sitting at the plastic table, it suddenly occurs to me that I had most likely made a serious mistake in the report I had been preparing for over a week. That I could have checked it and solved the problem before Monday, but it was too late as I had already sent off the report two hours before I left the office. Had I become soft in my weakness and stopped on the pavement a little later? Because it occurs to me in the concrete yard of that café, that it is perhaps not quite true that there is nothing waiting for me back home where I am heading. It could be that I am just not attentive enough and don’t notice many things around me, especially if these have been unresponsive, stale, unexciting, uninteresting for a long time.

Was it this bout of doubting in myself which led me half an hour later, at the fateful moment, to be prepared to assist even a complete stranger? Whenever I would previously see a person in the street with a querying look, I would turn away and continue along my way, thinking to myself, you have a phone, apps get you to where you want to go, don’t involve me in your petty problems, large problems, and life, don't try to involve me in casual chat because I only indulge in that when it is expected, or useful to smooth out undulating silences.

I often wonder whether he was watching me from somewhere as I sat in the yard of the café. I am certain that he was not in the place when I arrived, or indeed later. But at the time I did briefly think – this I remember now – that, as I sat at the table with the bottle of mineral water and the empty coffee cup, the entire world was watching me, and that something would happen that I could not do anything about. Until that late Friday afternoon, I thought I was untouchable. That fears, illnesses, anxieties and dangers were for others, not for me. When I look into the past, I see a woman in her late thirties, strong, invincible, slightly arrogant, who refuses to hear or notice the signs around her saying the world can be a dangerous place, the world is full of cracks, and so far you have been lucky that none have opened up close by.

Or is all that I have been pondering over ever since that day merely my own reworking of memory, and in reality I had no particular premonition that Friday afternoon, that in a few hours’ time my world would collapse. I do have the feeling that something that happened that afternoon, indeed in my life before then, is eluding me and that it is linked to my incomprehensible feeling of guilt.

A little before seven I pay, get up, and leave the café. As I walk towards the underground, I see from afar a man, engrossed in his phone, standing next to a white van. The strong wind carries the smell of cooked vegetables, probably from a long way away, as there are no private homes on the non-residential industrial estate, and no nearby food joints open at this hour. There is nobody else around. As I approach the white van, the man briefly looks up and then looks back at his phone. When I am about three metres away from him, he turns to me, and with a ‘sorry, I don’t seem to be able to make head or tale of this,’ asks me for directions to the ring road.

 Slightly gingery hair, about my height when I’m wearing high heels, which I normally do whenever I am not cycling. I glance at his phone and begin explaining where he has to turn, moving my finger just above the screen, and pointing out where he is right now. At that moment it dawns on me that I have very probably forgotten my own phone on the table at the café. I open my bag, feel inside with my hand, find the notepad, my keys, notice the wallet, the small bright green toiletry bag… and slide into darkness…

 *What is on the other side?*

 *There is no other side, just folded over edges…*

Darkness. When I come to, I am in darkness. I feel dizzy. A headache. I can hear the buzzing of electrical wires and a mechanical noise that sounds as if it might be coming from a boiler room. I can hear strange shuffling in the room. I am sitting against a cold wall. My hands tied on my back, my legs stretched out in front of me, also tied. Another nightmare, I think to myself, one that causes cramps in my body, numbing it so I have difficulties moving it for a few minutes after I wake up. If I manage to move a knee, if I bite myself in the tongue or the inside of my cheek, then I will open my eyes. Eyes that I keep opening and closing. And I blink with my eyelids to try and interrupt the nightmare here and now. The room is cold. The concrete floor in total darkness is cold. Only that noise. A hum. A drone and the high-pitched groan of the wires. A metallic smell, and another scent of something more disintegratingly organic that seems familiar. Sometime later – I don’t know how long, the sense of time disappears in the darkness – something shoots past me, brushing against my leg. Sometime later – how much later? – the heavy door opens and the light of a torch shines straight into my face… Is this the end? The end I had never imagined for myself? One of the ends intended for literary and TV characters, but not people I know. Not me.

 I am running out of air. On the edge. About to vanish. Some heavy steps approach. From the way they sound, I assume they must be rubber boots. The strong light blinds me, so I don’t see anything.

 ‘Why… why me?’ I try to utter.

 The person in the room with me does not answer. From the heavy steps and the way he moves, I know it’s a man. He stands in front of me, the light of his torch shining into my face. He leans over and points it straight into my eyes. I can feel his heavy breathing on my face. I can smell his breath, sweetishly sour, stale and sharp. And I can pick up on something else – the smell of chemicals. With my throat muffled, I am unable to say anything. If only I could finally manage to move, I will wake up. The torch with the heavy steps moves away. He opens the door and leaves it ajar, there is a faint light coming from the corridor beyond it. I can hear the opening of another, similarly heavy, metal door. First silence… a long silence… then a woman’s scream… screaming… very long screaming… Underneath me and around me a warm liquid. I can smell my own urine. I can smell the sharp, acrid scent of my own sweat. I feel nauseous. Make me disappear. Make it all end. I throw up. Did he not tie up my mouth so I would not suffocate in my own vomit? Is the woman in the room next door screaming so long because he is deliberately keeping her conscious? Is the room isolated, does it have sound insulation, so there are no ears to catch the piercing pain? After some time – how much time? – there are no more human voices coming from the other rooms, merely the metallic noise of machines. I am losing consciousness. My own excrement all around me… Memory windows opening up in the darkness: …burbling… squatting on the gravel, I play with the pebbles… Mother is combing my hair, gathers it in a ponytail and fixes it with a plastic butterfly-shaped pin… I am worried, keeping my fingers crossed not to be called up in front of the blackboard and embarrass myself in front of the entire class… on my bicycle the wind is ruffling my hair and for the first time I am overcome with a feeling of immense freedom… I turn around quickly and accidentally hit the handle of the pot on the stove so it falls down and the hot soup scalds my palm… suddenly I wake up crying in bed but the man next to me continues to sleep... I am opening a bottle of wine at home after work… if that happens almost every evening, is it already a habit?... jogging along I realise that I have finally fallen into a routine… it is no longer hard, no longer insurmountably hard… I try on a pink dress… perhaps this time it will… I have had enough of searching… confusion… waiting… I stare at the sun as I stand outside the café with the plastic chairs… the warm light blinds me, filling my eyes with tears… eyes full of tears… tears mixing with vomit… I am suffocating… what if… perhaps… Is this my death?

 I come to when the torchlight is once again shined at my face. He stands in front of me, then the steps leave the room. The door closes. I don’t sleep. I am not awake. Somewhere in between. I am less and less. Seeping from somewhere in my memory is an image of filthy taps and a sink in some cellar… the smell of rotting wood in the shed… in the yard of the block of flats next to the house I lived in as a child… I don’t know how I came to be there… The figure of a man without a face… I no longer remember… in the dark… something brushes against my leg again… them my hand… in the dark… the dark…

I recently received another invitation to an interview with the criminal investigator.

 ‘We have come across another location where he kept items belonging to his victims, and we are trying to identify these,’ the investigator explains.

 As I enter her office, I notice by the way she looks at me that she is surprised. I have changed since our last meeting. With my grey-brown hair and one and a half stones added weight, I look neglected. Over the last eleven months I have had few visits, among them one which was not really a visit but a departure.

 You have to understand, he kept explaining, we can’t go on… it wasn’t working previously… and after all that happened to you, I just can’t be of any help or support.

 It really hadn’t been working even before. But at that moment I wished that he would hug me, squeeze me in a safe embrace. I moved closer to him, he took a step backwards, I extended my arm towards him, almost touched him, but he moved out of the way. I realised how very much he is repulsed by my body that had been drowning in its own excrement for two days and had been destined for a terrible death such as the one that befell the woman in the next room in that cellar… Cellar, it suddenly briefly occurs to me again, the smell of coriander from my childhood brushing momentarily against me, masked by an impenetrable darkness such as the darkness that suffocated me eleven months ago.

Did it hurt? It did.

Does a person get used to solitude? No. You are not alone in such solitude. Every unexpected sound sends a shiver through your body, totally incapacitating me, so I cannot move. Even though the reinforced burglar-proof door is locked, even though I have had a surveillance camera installed above the entrance and the flat is on the fourth floor without a balcony.

The criminal investigator places photographs of objects on the desk in front of me: a fluffy pink keyring, a pastel brick-red lipstick, deodorant, mascara, a green jewellery box, a small hairbrush, an open box of condoms, a photograph of a child, a nail file, two phones, a pill box, a small packet of tampons, a family photograph with a woman, a man, two children and a big brown dog, before me she places snapshots of a silver scarf, a small bright green toiletry bag...

 I point to the photo of the toiletry bag. ‘This is mine. What about my notebook, didn’t you find that, or my handbag, my wallet, my keys?’

 ‘No,’ she shakes her head.

 ‘Did the woman in the room next door look anything like me? Were the other two women whose remains you found like me at all?’ I ask.

 ‘None of you had anything in common, not in looks or lifestyle. Two of them had families, one with two, the other with three children, the youngest woman lived with her parents, you lived alone, or whatever – your ages ranged from twenty-seven to fifty-one. The only thing you had in common was that you were all women,’ she replies.

 ‘The woman next door was going crazy with the pain…’

 The investigator thinks for a while, then says, ‘But initially not from physical pain…’

 ‘I don’t understand…’

 ‘He first pumped her with anaesthetic and began slowly butchering her. She initially wasn’t screaming due to physical pain but with the sight of what he was doing to her as she was tied to that metal table with the mirror fixed above it – cutting… pouring chemicals over her… dismembering… after a while the anaesthetic began to wane...’

 I feel sick. She stands up and brings me some bottled water. ‘There is no point in me explaining the details.’

 ‘But the press didn’t mention any of this…’

 ‘We didn’t inform the public about the details.’

 ‘Who was he?’

 ‘He had no criminal record… lived alone… unnoticed… with a regular job… And, no, he wasn’t ill. He didn’t do all this because of some mental illness.’

 ‘And he is now dead…’

 The investigator nods, then switches off her computer and says, ‘Let’s finish for today. Are you having anyone pick you up?’

 ‘There is no longer anyone to drive me here and pick me up. I very rarely leave the flat. I occasionally ask one of my closest relatives, usually my nephew or brother-in-law to take me on essential, unavoidable business…’

 ‘It’s not good that you stay closed in your flat like that.’

 ‘I can’t bring myself to do anything else…’

 ‘He didn’t succeed in finishing you off, now you are allowing him to rule over you even after his death. You are allowing him a legacy.’

 ‘It’s easy to dish out advice while I am terrified of the world!’ I give her an almost hateful look.

 ‘What happened to you is a rare event. Not all the world is dangerous and hateful…’

 ‘It is for me. It’s enough that it happened once… it means it can happen again… it might be something about me… something I might do…’

 It had gotten dark during our talk. It is raining outside. She suggests she could drive me home. I pick up my phone and let my brother-in-law know that there is no need for him to come and collect me. Speaking on the phone, I notice in the reflection on the glass that she is observing me, lips half open, as if wanting to tell me something when I finish the conversation. But no. She doesn’t say anything. When I finish on the phone, she silently puts on her jacket and we leave the office together.

 Without umbrellas, we run to her car, and I realise how long it has been since I have felt raindrops on my face. Or the rays of the sun that might warm my body.

 She drives calmly. I start wondering, does she live alone? Does she have a family? Is she happy with her life?

 ‘How do you manage to put all this out of your head when you get home?’ I ask her.

 ‘I don’t. Sometimes I don’t sleep long into the night…’

 ‘Do you ever regret doing this job?’

 ‘It’s not easy, but regret?... No, I have no regrets. It’s good that I do what I do.’

 ‘He was shot during the intervention… there… in the next room in that cellar, wasn’t he?’ I say.

 ‘It’s true,’ she replies.

 I observe her, hesitate, then tell her, ‘Before hearing the gunshot from behind the closed door, I could hear shouting, a woman’s voice… your voice… He was not shot by your colleague. It was you?’

 She pushes the windscreen washer leaver a few times, switches on the wipers, and nods.

 ‘Because he attacked you?’

 She stares straight ahead, driving, and when I begin to think that she will not reply, she suddenly looks at me.

‘Yes, because he attacked me… that is what the report says… officially I shot him in self-defence, because he rushed towards me with a scalpel…’

‘Officially?’

‘I have never spoken to anyone about it… Are you really interested in what actually happened?’

I nod.

‘And you will keep it to yourself?’ she looks at me.

‘I will,’ I nod.

‘That stuffy Friday in August a huge storm was raging at around eleven in the evening. It caused havoc across town, tearing down roofs, breaking and uprooting trees, it continued to rain until Sunday morning, storm water flooded many cellars. On Sunday afternoon someone called 911, saying they didn’t want to be a nuisance and didn’t like interfering in other people’s lives, and didn’t care what was kept on this premises, but there is something is seriously not right here. My dog keeps rushing up to a prefab metal building which had a tree fall onto it in the storm. The dog keeps barking, squealing and sniffing a gap in the metallic wall that has water coming out of it and a horrible rotting stench.

Perhaps it was intuition, but certainly that unmistakable feeling that I instantly recognise. After the phone call, I immediately set off for the location and on the way informed my colleague who was a few kilometres away. Four women, including you, had disappeared since early July. And we had no clues whatsoever. The women had left their homes in the morning or during the day, and never came back. Their phones were dead, well, apart from yours, which was found by the waitress in that café and which started ringing endlessly about an hour before she locked up.

The area on the outskirts of town in the middle of an abandoned industrial plant was empty. There was nobody around. Through the gap in the damaged wall with the fallen tree hanging across it, I followed the light and the noise coming from the cellar. The door was ajar, the place was flooded, and there was a terrible stench everywhere. I spotted a metal table and on it a butchered female body with a couple of rats moving nearby. Next to it stood a man in rubber boots, his back turned to me, pumping out the water. He didn’t hear me due to the noise of the pump. I entered the room, shouted at him to slowly raise his hands and turn towards me… No, I didn’t shoot him in self-defence…’

‘You shot him deliberately?’

‘When he heard me, he dropped the hose, picked up a scalpel from the table, turned around and rushed towards me. Then, a few metres in front of my gun, he stopped and stared at me. He looked straight into my eyes and his face spread into a slightly contorted, almost calm smile, which I had seen twice before. The first time as a young assistant of an experienced colleague, and then again. A contemptuous smile, as if to say, no more hiding, just shock, revulsion, and most of all, extraordinary attention. Pictures of me will appear throughout the media. I will speak calmly and slowly. I will not regret a thing. Why should I, anyway, I am different from you. I don’t break up. I don’t doubt. I do, what I have to do, you do what you can do, mostly what others allow you to do, demand of you. I am the freedom you have forsaken. You like victims, it is so easy to identify with victims, but even more than victims, you like executioners, we trigger within you horror, anxiety and fear, and also some, just admit it, secret admiration. The trial will go on for a long time, I am sure there will be some law office wanting the publicity. Because I am freedom. I have nothing to lose.

I shout at him to drop the scalpel, and aim more precisely. He opens his arms, lets go of the scalpel, and smilingly says, ‘You can’t… I am not armed… you aren’t capable of…’

‘Am I not?!’ I shout at him. ‘You think I’m not?!’ I shout again and press the trigger…

She falls silent and the silence in the car thickens. As we continue to drive along she stares motionlessly ahead. I look at her and repeat my question, ‘You shot him deliberately?’

Without turning around, she nods and says calmly, ‘I didn’t want to risk some procedural mistake coming up – I had been witness to this seventeen years ago when I first began to doubt the judicial system. I didn’t want to risk lawyers inventing some alibi for him and he would eventually be acquitted, as I had helplessly observed eight years ago. I wanted to prevent his brutality and life becoming a story, which I have seen a number of times.’

‘But surely you could not have thought about all that at that moment?’ I look at her.

‘…I had thought about all that for almost twelve years. I probably shot him in rage, but at the same time because it seemed right. I don’t believe he deserved a judicial process. These guys, women also, but they are mostly men, do not perceive a trial and sentence as punishment but as a media performance, while their victims, if they happened to survive, and those close to them, live in continuous fear that the perpetrator might escape justice, what will happen if they are released? Thinking about whether he is thinking about them? Even the thought that the perpetrator is thinking about the victim escalates the terror. And then the stain that attaches to the victim, as if to say, you’re lucky to have survived, but whenever they look at you, even more when they touch you, they cannot simply not think about the evil you have been through.

Only when the bullet hit him, did he realise this was the end. The end of his stories even before they had begun. Only at that moment did I sense shock on his face, and then defeat. My colleague appeared on the scene the moment after he fell to the ground. Perhaps not, perhaps he saw how I shot him. But my colleague does not ask questions, and I don’t see a trace of questioning in his glance…’

I stare at her and realised that this was what I had thought she had wanted to tell me over the last few months.

‘Even if he spent the next decades or the rest of his life in jail, this would not outweigh the pain he caused, which he will not in the least regret,’ she continues. ‘You do not have to face him, you do not have to tremble before his frozenly cynical face. It is the end.’

It is the end. As far as he goes, the absolute end. But not for me… not for those close to the murdered women. I think for a while, and ask, ‘You said you haven’t spoken about this with anyone…’

‘I haven’t,’ she shakes her head. ‘It would mean an investigation, probably I would get suspended… I am aware that I am not flawless but I believe that what I do is good…’ she falls silent for a moment and continues, ‘…I have not come across such freaks only professionally…’

‘But before?’ I look at her in shock.

‘…a long time ago…’ she nods. ‘But at the time I was totally numbed and powerless...’

Silence… this is followed by a long silence… It dawns on me that here, in this car, I could utter what I have never said before… because I was incapable of doing so… I could not find the words. ‘I keep thinking,’ I begin hesitantly, ‘that that cellar last year opened up the door to some other cellar… there too there is darkness… very thick darkness… the stench of decaying, rotting wood, and something that reminds me of coriander… apart from the vague outlines I don’t see anything else... apart from the stench, I don’t remember anything…’

‘…leave it, perhaps you’d best leave it…’ she interrupts me. ‘This kind of prodding is risky and painful… your soul and your body have blocked that out… that is why you only get the occasional smell, association, sound or outline, but mostly the barrier is impenetrable.’

I watch the raindrops reflecting the colourful spectrum of the night light. I would like to ask her why she told me all this but I don’t. It seems as if I should say something to her but I don’t have the right words. So I ask, ‘What should I do with those two days in the cellar… how can I, if at all, get them out of my mind?’

‘You are alive, so live,’ she says.

When she parks outside my block of flats, she switches off the engine, looks at me and asks, ‘What do you think? Did I do the right thing?’

She asks the question calmly, there are almost no doubts or cracks in her voice.

Staring at the windscreen with raindrops bouncing heavily off it, I nod categorically. And it occurs to me that I should perhaps feel at least slightly guilty. Not because he is dead but because I feel a strong satisfaction in the fact that she killed him. Because I know that she did it for herself, for me, for the murdered women, for those that she protected from him. It was not lawful. Somehow it was not even civilised. But I don’t feel any guilt over his death. I feel empty, strangely drained. Since that weekend in August, I am no longer many of the things I used to be.

 Before I step out of the car I ask her if she minded waiting there, outside the block of flats, until I appear at my living room window. I take the lift to the fourth floor and, before stepping through the door into my flat, glance around to check that nothing has changed during my absence. Then I lock the burglar-proof door, put down my things, go to the bathroom to wash my hands and face, and approach the living room window, drawing back the curtain. She is standing next to her car holding her open umbrella. When I wave at her, she raises her right hand and waves back. In the diffused light of the street lamp I notice that she smiles at me.

 Standing at the window as she sits in her car and drives off, I wish to myself for the first time in months that the world would also stop being dangerous and toxic for me. And it occurs to me that perhaps there is after all a door through which I could leave the flat and go outside… not just yet… but surely at some point… perhaps… probably already in the near future.