

**AGATA
TOMAŽIČ**
KNIFE
IN THE MOUTH

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KNIFE IN THE MOUTH

short stories

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Author: Agata Tomažič

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About the book

About
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book

Though these stories' lonesome protagonists have probably all but lost hope, they are portrayed in seemingly mundane, yet all the more significant moments, which nonetheless offer an opportunity for change. With just a few masterful strokes – and a lot of humor – the author manages to introduce the characters' backgrounds, once more proving that good literature reveals what we've always known, yet never before realized.

How will the seemingly perfect family deal with the daughter's leftist boyfriend? How will a seemingly cosmopolitan woman react to a Syrian tenant or a chauvinistic farmer? Seen from a distance, even the most tragic circumstances – like being served an egg with no yolk – lose their gravity and become a series of life's bizarre jokes.



About the author

Agata Tomažič is the author of a novel and two books of short stories, and the co-author of the highly original guidebook – shortlisted for the book of the year award – about how to get lost in Istria. Agata Tomžič translates from English and French and has been a respected journalist for daily newspapers and various other cultural magazines. Currently, she's working on a new novel as well as a new guidebook.

About the translator

Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying at UCL in London he taught English in Greece and then completed a Masters at Kent. He now lives in Cyprus and regularly translates contemporary Slovene literature for publishing houses and authors in Slovenia, with translations published in both the UK and US.

Sample Chapter

Flora's father doesn't wear slippers. He finds the notion and even the sound of the word itself off-putting. At home he moves around in special shoes with a thin leather sole and laces. He buys them in London and, though it is not something he trumpets about, this is clear simply by looking at them. In them he purposefully stamps across the wooden floor, occasionally straightening a book on one of the shelves.

There are many books, stacked by collection and size; they keep him pretty busy. If he is not moving books around, he is straightening picture frames. There are many pictures too, covering most of the walls in the living room (apart from above the fireplace), the dining room, the glazed porch, his study, and the corridor that connects all these spaces. There is always at least one that needs straightening and only rarely can he afford a day off.

Right now he also feels there are matters he should be getting on with. Sitting at the table in the dining room, he is staring at the wall covered in wallpaper. Hanging on it is a framed wedding photo of his grandfather and grandmother; a cheerful looking, slightly fat man with a moustache and a young bride with plaits under her headscarf and an expression on her face reflecting a genuine fear of the camera. There is something odd about this yellowing black and white photograph, as if the lavish, richly-carved, gilded frame clashes with the straightforwardness of the couple depicted. It is as if his grandparents in their

plainness, not allowing itself to be crushed by the gilding, are mocking him posthumously. On top of everything the frame is slightly crooked to the left and Flora's father feels he won't be able to take it much longer, he is about to get up from the table, walk across to the wall, and straighten it. In the end he manages to restrain himself, straightens the linen napkin tucked behind the collar of his pale blue shirt and turns his attention to the tenderloin on his plate. The meat is soft and it seems as if it would be enough to merely press the heavy, old-fashioned, silver knife against it to open up the supple, still slightly bloody texture. When he cuts into the steak it oozes blood onto the plate, covering the gilded fancy initial *M* with a pink translucent glaze.

On the far side of the table, Flora is paying considerably less attention to her plate – she uses the cutlery with an innate skill, none at all to the wall, a little to her father and mother, and most to Primož. Primož has wavy black hair, a seven-day beard and a penetrating gaze. The greenness of his eyes complements the olive green of his T-shirt proudly displaying a red hammer and sickle. In the light of the afternoon sun spilling through the gap in the heavy curtains, he looks like a Mitteleuropean version of Che Guevara.

"Truffles," says Primož, "are not something I am familiar with. I mean, I've heard of them, of course, but I have never eaten them. In fact I read about them in some book by Balzac, I think it was from his *Comédie humaine* series. You probably have the entire collection here," he adds, glancing at the bookshelves.

"Well, I have to admit that they taste really great," he mumbles, chewing away indifferently. "Isn't it funny how in our society those who can't afford truffles are those who know them from books, and those ordering them don't even know Balzac?" he asks, laughing provocatively. His whole body shakes in an insolent snigger, the hammer and sickle bouncing along with it and Flora's father quickly diverts his gaze from Primož's T-shirt,

probably deliberately not covered with a napkin, back to his plate. Mr Medved slowly and gracefully lifts a piece of meat towards his mouth, masticating carefully in silence. Never talk with your mouth full.

“Well, but surely *you* must have read Balzac, no?” Primož asks.

Flora suppresses a giggle, stares at her lap and tugs Primož by his T-shirt. Supposedly discreetly but so everyone can see. Primož gives Flora’s father a questioning stare. Piercing him with his gaze, waiting for him to turn his head, he resembles a shark who has smelt blood and is about to attack. But the victim cannot be bothered to respond... Mr Medved, Flora’s father, continues to chew on his meat, enveloped safely in what must be the most majestic demonstration of a mixture of contempt and indifference found anywhere across Central Europe. His gums ruminate, squeezing and releasing, his tongue leisurely drifting round the mouth, tasting the choice food. It does not even cross his mind to respond. When he eventually nods, it is quite unclear whether this sudden move of the head is his way of helping the food move smoothly down his gullet or whether he actually thought it worthwhile to respond to Primož’s question.

“They aren’t truffles but *tartufata*,” says Flora’s mother. “*Tartufata* is a kind of paste made of truffles that is easily mixed into mashed potatoes. You can buy it in a supermarket, it comes in a glass jar. It would be a shame to grate whole truffles onto potatoes.”

Mrs Medved then also swiftly withdraws from the battle field of conversation, but instead of the food, she reaches for her glass. A crystal goblet on a stem in which the level of wine was rapidly diminishing, though, miraculously it never dries up. Like some well-tuned sports team, Mr Medved quickly pours out some more at the slightest premonition of it reaching the bottom. And every time Mrs Medved throws him a grateful glance. After the fourth glass or so, her eyes start to sparkle and the bags under them become less apparent. Mrs Medved smiles.

“Yes, Daddy often picks up these books,” says Flora and grins, moving away from her face a lock of her blonde hair insistently falling forward from behind her shoulders. Even the sequins on her pink T-shirt seem to glitter with a scornful sparkle.

“Really?” says Primož and calmly starts on his meat. It is so tender he uses only his fork. In between he raises his hand as if to say, no, no more wine for me. “You need to stay sober for the revolution,” he adds and stuffs some more mashed potatoes with truffles into his mouth, at the same time forking some shallots cooked in port of which he does not recognise the taste. He holds the fork awkwardly in his hand, the knife resting throughout the meal next to his plate like a crutch abandoned by a cured cripple at Lourdes. Only that he is cured in the spiritual dimension of the word, revolutionaries don’t have time to waste on using knives.

Flora is about to burst into laughter but manages to place her hand over her mouth in time. She then shudders for a while, trying not to chortle, before her entire body shakes with a thrust as she kicks Primož under the table.

In desperation Mr Medved once again tries to find support with Grandpa and Grandma. Both of them stuck in their ostentatious frame simply stare motionlessly out at him in silence. Narrowing his eyes, Mr Medved peers at them as if trying to hypnotise them. As if trying to convince them to finally participate and come to his aid. That they might drop some of their village ways and allow themselves to be covered with the magic dust of worldliness. If only Grandma were to undo those plaits and take off the headscarf... The picture next to them in a smooth silver frame, a refined example of art deco, gives him an even better screen, it shows the daughter of the couple in the opulent frame, Mr Medved’s mother. She is wearing a neckerchief. Her tanned face, dishevelled hair, jaunty smile and the company of three other girls with a similar proletarian provenance leaves little room for doubt – the shot was taken on a youth work brigade

project. The Brčko-Banovići railway, 1946. She was sixteen at the time and it was where she met his father.

“And what did you study?” Flora’s mother asks delicately and immediately takes another sip of her wine. An enraptured smile has hovered over her face for at least the last quarter of an hour, she is at peace with herself and the world. No response coming from the mouth of Flora’s boyfriend can derail her right now.

“Political science,” Primož replies proudly and fixes the mane on his head with a gesture indicating taking off a hat and bowing. “Politics have always interested me and I feel I was born for this. We need change, things can’t go on like this, capitalism has gone down a blind alley...” he desperately tries to convey some of his enthusiasm to the people around the table but this appears to be harder than the marble block on the vault at the municipal graveyard. He is unable to establish eye contact with either Flora’s father or mother; they both stubbornly look away. Only Flora responds when he turns to her, pride lighting up in her eyes as she hastily explains, “Did you know that Primož has founded his own party! They are against personal property, for social justice and for poverty.” Then she pauses, thinking briefly, resembling the woman in GPS that keeps saying ‘Recalculating,’ every so often, before adding, “I mean, not for poverty, against poverty, basically that the poor would no longer be poor and that we would all be equal and all be satisfied!” She is almost out of breath when she finishes. Blushing slightly, she rubs her hand against Primož’s arm, a mischievous smile flashing across her face, and she concludes, “Isn’t that... isn’t that wonderful?”

Mrs Medved puts down her glass next to the plate and wipes the corners of her mouth with her napkin. Staring somewhere into the distance, she sighs dreamily, “Oh, yes, that’s nice. Really very nice. A very noble idea. I like it.” She smiles with content, gazing at everyone around the table. Mr Medved is still sporadically chewing away and staring at the wall.

The third picture is of his parents with himself. He must be about three. He cannot recall the moment the photograph was taken but judging by the expression on the child's face he was not too happy about it; the boy is grimacing and about to burst into tears. Mother, dressed in a light suit, her hair in tight curls against her head, is holding him firmly. Father, his hair drenched in brilliantine – shining like a basket of Easter eggs – combed backwards. 'Photo Studio Repnik, Litija, 1957' it says on the edge of the photograph. Father is a proud man – how could he not be, the year before this he had been given a position as an official at the local spinning mill and after successfully completing one of the internal training courses organised by the Communist Party smoothly climbed into the director's chair. Only reliable members dared take on such functions, the rule of the working class was a serious matter. Private ownership was theft and Mr Medved still remembers the words his father had told him from a very young age. He had listened to him with concentration and without blinking, an expression of enchantment typical of a child taking in a fairy tale. One that even then he knew was too beautiful to be true.

"But would you... would you support our party at elections?" Primož asks, raising his voice, trying also to wake Flora's father from the torpor from which he is staring vaguely in his direction though he cannot be precisely certain what he is looking at. He wants to turn round to check what is so interesting behind his back that has been drawing all of Mr Medved's attention since the start of this lunch. Primož leans sideways, beginning to turn his head, when Mr Medved suddenly thunders.

"What a load of codswallop?!"

It was the first time during this meal that Flora's father had spoken more than two words in sequence and his voice continued to ring loudly. The intonation by the double bass is followed by an echo from the other end of the orchestra – the triangle. In indignation Mr Medved drops his knife and fork onto the plate.

Primož gapes and the charming greenness of his eyes is of little use. The muscles on his legs tighten into a starting position only that the direction of his move is not forward but backwards. He moves slightly back from the table and sinks further into his chair.

Mr Medved now glowers at him like a sumo warrior at the start of a bout. He straightens his napkin and continues with his authoritative silence. Silence is sometimes the strongest weapon – Primož is still tense, trying to turn his neatly curled hair to the left without really knowing precisely why. Because he cannot stand direct eye contact with the man sitting opposite him at the dining table, in years and charisma far ahead of him, or because he wants to clarify what the hell is on the wall behind him that his girlfriend's father has been staring at throughout the meal until a moment ago? Until he began glaring at him with such hostile fervour that Primož almost fears his gaze might turn into one of those laser beams with which characters in science fiction films deal with their enemies. Eventually Primož realised how to avoid defeat: he merely needs to turn his head forward, stare straight ahead, and not look back at all.

Mr Medved's hand shakes slightly as he tries to prick a shallot softened in port with his fork. It is only his self-control and agility with the knife that he has to thank for the onion not to evade the tip of the fork and fly off his plate, crashing onto Primož's nose. In truth he bitterly regrets possessing both of these – if he didn't, the agony would have ended there and then. Instead they still have to partake in the dessert that Mrs Medved had announced a little earlier and gone to get from the kitchen. Right now she is carrying in the cake as a kind of peace offering. There is an elated smile on her face – she alone knows that she also downed a quick shot of whisky in the kitchen.

As she is about to sit down she staggers, tilting the cake dangerously. Mr Medved jumps up to help her – it is clear his reaction time is so quick due to years of training. This time

though he is worked up and almost trips as well. Eventually they all settle down again. The tension in the air settles but is not discharged, spirits are low and everyone looks miserable, like an army after defeat.

“Chocolate cake with strawberries,” says Mrs Medved. She then appears about to hiccough but takes a deep breath at the last moment. Reaching for a large cake knife she dips it into a glass of water and begins slicing.

Flora stares at the floor. She has been for a while. She seems totally detached. Primož tries to stroke her hand but she moves it away instantly.

“Well, who will have the largest piece?” Mrs Medved asks, grinning. She looks like the most cheerful person in the world and is certainly the most relaxed member of the group sitting at the dining table. She is the one least concerned with the situation she has found herself in. Floating above everything she couldn’t care less where she was. Wherever she might be, it all seems the same after a few glasses. Equally pleasant. The number of glasses has increased over the years, but who cares. It is not as if she needs worry about the cost. It is terrible when you can’t afford a bottle of good wine when you want one. Just as it is terrible if a woman cannot afford some help around the house when she needs it. In the Medved family this is at least twice a week and the cleaning lady also comes at weekends if they are at home and if they have guests. Like today, for example. Dirty dishes mount in the kitchen but Mrs Medved is not concerned at all because she knows that Fanny will come and deal with everything. And she is happy. Not just because she does not need to stack the dishwasher and then also put away the clean dishes into various cupboards and drawers but because doing all this gives Fanny great joy every time. Giving her a few banknotes makes her life easier. Mrs Medved believes allowing Fanny to do these chores is a noble act and is even slightly proud of herself. She too is

fighting against poverty, for all people to be provided for and satisfied.

She is even prouder of her husband who has made all this possible. First with hard work, then also with resourcefulness and wise investments. In their late fifties, neither of them need to work anymore. They no longer need to drive to the office though Mr Medved is in fact quite busy with letting flats and collecting the rent. And with the maintenance of their three holiday homes and boat. Not to mention straightening the pictures and books on the shelves in their home. He has a lot of work with all this and hardly a week goes by without them needing to drive somewhere. Mrs Medved joins him sometimes and they even take Fanny along if something needs cleaning. No, their life isn't easy.

"Who will have this one?" Mrs Medved asks, looking round the table for takers with a seductive smile. It is not appropriate for a hostess to sulk even when everyone else is sullen. She holds the plate high, offering it around, eventually stretching to pass it to her husband who pulls it towards him without saying anything. A few moments later everyone has their slice and they silently reach for their dessert spoons. Everyone apart from Primož who somehow managed to hold onto the fork and knife from the main course and is now tackling his slice of the cake with them.

Mr Medved frowns slightly when he notices Primož prod-ding the cake with his fork and using his knife to remove all the strawberries from the chocolate icing. He is now firmly convinced that he will go crazy should he have to look at the boy in front of him for much longer. Once again he fixes his gaze on the photographs on the wall and his lips appear as if moving in an inaudible prayer. He seems to be whispering something but even someone used to lip reading could not make out what he was saying. Mr Medved scowls and straightens up. He fixes his gaze on Primož who is still busy with the strawberries.

“Well... what *are* you doing?!” he growls.

Primož shyly looks up from his plate.

“I’m allergic to strawberries, I cannot eat them, they cause me a rash all over my body,” he almost whispers.

“What?” says Flora, moving slightly away from him with an almost tangible revulsion. She looks at her father across the table. Were Mr Medved not directing his severe gaze at Primož so intensely, he might have noticed that her eyes had acquired a mild glint. Suddenly overcome by pure admiration, mixed with gentleness. No, not suddenly, these feelings were pretty clear before, though they had previously been directed at Primož... She then turns to her boyfriend but any trace of admiration vanishes. She is regarding him with disgust, like some wastrel, a ragged vagabond, whose misfortune is his own fault.

“You never told me you were allergic to strawberries,” says Flora reproachfully. She then coquettishly brings one of the red berries to her mouth, looking at him provocatively, as if to say, copy me if you dare.

“Nooo, never had the chance,” Primož utters. “Strawberries weren’t yet in season when we met...”

Then he uses his fingers to detach a strawberry – manoeuvring his knife and fork was too much trouble – and places it on the side of his plate with the others he had already removed from his slice of cake. They are piling up on the side like discarded bones or shrimp shells.

“What a pity,” says Flora. “I love strawberries. I cannot imagine any proper celebration without them.”

Primož gives her a confused look. Too late, Flora is sitting next to him but at this moment she herself is far away. She is at her graduation party, on the lawn under a white marquee put up for the occasion in the garden of their seaside holiday home. She is dressed in a light white dress and everything is looking great. She has passed her exams, grades aren’t important, said her father,

the main point was that she could enrol on the course she wanted. She is about to have the longest holiday of her life, the plane ticket that her father has bought her is on the table with the rest of the presents. The catering staff are unobtrusively moving among the guests with trays of glasses of champagne and strawberries in crystal bowls. At midnight her father congratulates her and kisses her on the forehead. Everyone claps. At half past twelve precisely he and her mother, who was unfortunately unable to attend the party because of the headache that had set in early on in the afternoon requiring her to lie down in her room, set off for Ljubljana. Let the younger generation celebrate their own way, Mr Medved had said and Flora's school friends clapped enthusiastically. Flora had stood at the gate for a long time, waving them goodbye until the red lights of her father's car disappeared into the night. Then she drops her hand, looks in the direction they left for a while, glances to her left and right, and when she had established that nobody was watching, wiped away the emotional tear rolling down her cheek. All the things Daddy had prepared for her...

Flora gets up suddenly from the table. Primož smiles nervously and very quietly asks her where she is going.

"The bathroom, what did you think?" she throws at him, striding haughtily down the corridor.

Primož glances at the pile of strawberries on his plate, hunches further, and turns all his attention to the chocolate cake that looks more like a pitiful pile of leftovers after all his interventions to remove the strawberries. Lowering his head right to the plate, he holds the knife and fork as someone drowning might cling to a lifebuoy.

Mr Medved puts down his spoon and wipes the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

"Anyone for coffee?" Mrs Medved chirps and without waiting for an answer goes off into the kitchen. Soon they can hear the sound of the coffee machine and water being heated.

Mr Medved folds his napkin without taking his eyes off Primož who seems to be collapsing in on himself like some lump of wax exposed to an open flame. It seriously looks as if by the time Flora returns from the bathroom there will be little but a melted pile left on his chair. Nevertheless, she does come back in time. Just in time for the grand finale.

Flora sits back down next to Primož with an expression of ultimate boredom on her face; a little girl who was given a toy she already knows as a present and only her polite upbringing is preventing her from expressing this loudly, even though she knows she will abandon it as soon as the guests are out of the door. Until then she needs to pretend to be happy with it. With her left hand she moves the lock of blonde hair from her face and with her right brings the last strawberry to her mouth.

Primož is still struggling with the cake. His face sweating, he cuts up the pieces, awkwardly handling the knife and fork. Just a little longer, a little more and the battle will be over. The closer the end and the smaller the piece left on his plate, the weaker he feels. There is only a small piece of chocolate icing left, bravely he puts down the fork on his plate, uses his right hand to hold the knife, scrape the chocolate off the plate, and brings it to his mouth.

All this time Mr Medved has been observing him motionlessly. He stares at him in disbelief over the amount of work this pathetic excuse of a man was having with dessert. As Primož lifts the knife loaded with the chocolate icing to his mouth, Mr Medved flinches. The reflection of the sun briefly caught on the silver blade momentarily blinds him so first he blinks and then has to close his eyes. He seems about to explode. By closing his eyes all the fury amasses inside him, needing to find another path to escape. He must make way for it to leave, to externalise, otherwise he will go crazy. His lips part and...

“Get out!” Flora’s father loses his temper. “Out!” he shouts again. “Get out of our home!”

Primož flinches, his grip weakens and the knife clatters loudly onto the plate.

Mr Medved stands up, pushes the table away so forcefully that even Flora who has not taken her eyes off him all this time becomes worried. She quickly recovers, the corners of her mouth turning upwards into a contemptuous smile though she says nothing and stares straight ahead.

Primož questioningly, almost pleadingly turns towards her. She continues to look stubbornly at her plate. Mr Medved stands there, bolts of lightning shooting from under his ferocious eyebrows. Lowering his head Primož – a caught fish in its last throes, still however able to bite at one's finger – he rebelliously straightens his T-shirt with the hammer and sickle and silently marches out of the dining room. In the corridor he comes across Mrs Medved. When she sees him the porcelain cups she is carrying on a silver tray rattle slightly on their saucers, and she sighs, "Oh, are you just leaving? Won't you have some coffee?"

All that is heard then is the creaking of the door handle. The front door slams and the next moment everyone is laughing. Mr Medved's guffaw resonates through the room. He is soon joined by Flora, less intense, more sonorous, but still loud. By the time Mrs Medved enters, the room is filled with laughter. She looks at her husband and daughter merrily and joins in the laughter. What a happy family she has!



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