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**SEBASTIJAN
PREGELJ**



A CHRONICLE OF FORGETTING

Proposal for a Book in Translation

Original Title (Slovene): **Kronika pozabljanja**

Author: **Sebastijan Pregelj**

Title in Translation: **A Chronicle of Forgetting**

Translator (English): **Gregor Timothy Čeh**

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About the book

An old man in a retirement home gets up early every morning to see the sunrise. Life begins anew, the world comes alive and with it memories. Slightly different each morning. The world in the novel *A chronicle of Forgetting* is ruled by dementia. The sometimes tense, sometimes romantic stories may be real or could just be the result of hallucinations but are always set against a backdrop of silence, of a great secret which awaits beyond death. In his novels, Sebastijan Pregelj (born 1970) has led us into astonishing, fantastic worlds, often moved into the past, in one novel even into space, but the most incredible world is hidden in the folds of the human brain.

Finalist for the 2015 Kresnik Award.

About the author

Sebastijan Pregelj was born in Ljubljana in 1970. He holds a degree in History. He has been publishing stories in literary publications since 1992. His first book, *Burkači, skrunilci in krivoprisežniki* (Jokers, Desecrators and Perjurors), was published in 1996. He has since published a number of collections of short stories and well-received novels. His work has been included in several anthologies, including translations in German, Slovak, Polish and English. Two of his novels and some of his children's stories have also been published in German. He lives and works in Ljubljana and is a member of the Slovene Writers' Association.

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.

Reviews

“An balanced novel about life and passing with a contemporary, socially engaged tone.”

Samo Rugelj, in Slovenia's main book-review journal *Bukla*

“This is not (merely) a novel for the elderly or those worried about getting old; it does not bet on empathy, addressing the reader more comprehensively with – not at all unimportant in literature – a very readable and animated story with poetic, lively and unforced language.”

Tina Kozin, on RTV Slovenia's portal *MMC*

“A remarkable tale of deliberation upon life and searching for purpose, for the happiness which we in the affluent West no longer know how to find and which people from other continents are so desperate to partake in, but most of all it is a novel about coming to terms with human transience.”

Blaž Zabel, in the Slovene magazine for culture and society *Pogledi*

Short Summary

Newcomers in an old people's home are divided into two groups. The first see the home as the last stop. Things go rapidly downhill for them. If, upon arrival they are still strong and mobile, after a few months they are barely able to move. Initially clear thoughts very quickly blur, become complicated and tangled. They soon become helpless, dependent on the staff. Then there are the others, those who experience their arrival as a new beginning. They slowly become involved in life and activities at the home and after a while realize that from some aspects life inside is even better than life outside. All this is of little concern to the novel's protagonist who has recently celebrated his eightieth birthday, and lives in a one-bedroom flat in sheltered accommodation. He likes his peace and quiet and almost does not need anyone else to get by. This, however, changes when the new arrival Constanza moves into the flat next door and his conscience is being troubled by the word of homeless people who have nothing. So maybe the elderly at their last stop do still have a chance to change the world into a better place and because of this live fully once again?

Sample Chapter

Memories are Just a Game, Innocent for the Most Part

It was my eightieth a few days ago.

Eighty years is a long time, almost too long for one person and definitely too long for a lonely person. For the most part I was not alone all those years and I was mostly not lonely as I was surrounded by people I loved. Now as these people are largely gone, having left for where I shall soon go myself, I am mainly surrounded by memories.

My memories are of all kinds. What they have in common is that, over the years, they have begun changing shape and hue, as if they were glass that liquefies every so often, changes shape, and then the molten liquid quickly solidifies again. Sometimes they even leave me altogether for a brief moment, only to return in the next. Transformed but still mine. It is all a game.

Life isn't bad. Quite the opposite, I've never experienced this many comforts and this much splendour. The sheltered, one-bedroom flat is light and spacious, and the lighting is always switched on. I can regulate the intensity, but cannot, for safety reasons, ever switch it off entirely. The tiny refrigerator is filled with snacks suitable for the elderly, I have drinking water running from the tap. The radiators switch themselves on when the temperature inside the flat falls below twenty-one degrees, the air-conditioning comes on when it exceeds twenty-eight. I also have a phone and an emergency call button on it, but I never use the phone. I do use the TV and radio. The flat has a small balcony with enough space for one person, two perhaps with a little bit of a squeeze. I clean my shoes on the balcony.

Lunch is served every day at half past twelve. The menu is

set a week in advance, but I'm never overjoyed about any of the food. Despite the occasional shortages and hunger, I have eaten more than enough of everything in my life. Besides, all the food tastes the same here, as if they use the same herb mix for everything down in the kitchens. This is not to say I'm not grateful. I always eat what they bring me. Perhaps not everything, but I still eat. Lunch is brought to the flat for those of us who so wish, others eat in the dining room. I don't like eating in the common room. I don't like the munching, coughing and clattering of cutlery. I can't stand the smell of food mingling with the smell of disinfected and over-washed clothes, piss and old, spent bodies. All this takes away the little appetite I still have. Breakfast, unless you are bedridden, is served in the dining room. So I have little choice but to eat with everyone else. I don't eat in the evenings and haven't for years. I usually have some tea or some stewed fruit. That's all.

Every day the cleaning lady empties my waste paper bin and wipes anything there is to wipe. Twice a week they come to collect my laundry and bring it back all freshly washed and ironed. Once a week my sheets are changed. Every first Tuesday in the month I also have a visit from the doctor. I usually tell her I'm feeling well and that everything is fine. I only ask for help when I really have problems. That is almost never because, unlike most, I sometimes would just rather put up with it. People here never stop complaining of pain in their backs, intestinal pains, their head shaking, being short of breath, their heart pounding unusually strongly at the slightest exertion, at the same time having nausea and a feeling that they might be fainting. How else are they supposed to feel?! The way they felt when they were twenty, thirty?! Would they like to feel the way they were at forty, fifty? They're just grumpy, spoilt old men.

Despite my persistent assurances that I'm fine, the doctor always takes my blood pressure when she comes. She says it does

not cost anything to do so. Every six months I also have a medical check-up. They take blood and urine samples. The doctors are satisfied with my results. They say things couldn't be better. I don't know whether it is really true, as I feel increasingly worse. But I understand. It's because of my age.

The block of flats in which I live has a lift that is wide enough for two wheelchairs and deep enough for a stretcher on wheels and two assistants. There is a small shop at ground level. There is a fenced park behind the building with benches in it. Half of them are in the sun in the mornings, the other half in the shade and in the afternoon it's the other way round. There are some birdhouses near the benches with sparrows and blue tits hopping about inside and pigeons under them, cooing their content or discontent accordingly.

There is a pond with some goldfish and turtles in the middle of the park, and a pavilion beyond it. Perhaps at one time there would have been a brass band playing in the pavilion, perhaps those who could would dance every Saturday or Sunday morning and the others would watch them. I have never experienced anything like that. And if it had happened in the last few years, I would know, since those who have been here longer than myself would have told me about it. But nobody has mentioned anything of the sort.

Perhaps also because I have not asked. I have not asked because I have not really had a chance to. I don't socialize with people here more than is necessary.

The reason I don't socialize with the people here is mainly because their stories are all similarly dull and because their fear of death is so great it drowns out all other thoughts. They all speak as if they were clones of the same person with a boring past, are incapable of experiencing the present and are afraid of the future because they know there is not much of it left. This fear paralyzes their minds, and in some cases also their bodies.

Conversations seem like a theatrical performance in which the actors are so good that they have forgotten it is all a performance. They think it is all true.

They talk about the dead as if they were still alive, as if they have only left for a while to return at some point. Where could they have gone? On a holiday down on the coast? To the mountains? To relatives who never visited them all these years, only remembering them occasionally with a postcard with merely the word 'greetings' written on it, or a birthday or Christmas card, but at the point when the exhausted old relative stopped coordinating excretion and pain has distorted their brain, then they decided to take them in? I don't think so. But my cohabitants prefer to believe this to admitting that those who left will never return because the dead don't. I also wonder where, were this to happen, they could possibly return to. Their beds are occupied within a week at the most. Their wardrobes emptied, disinfected and soon filled with stuff brought along by the new residents. Occasionally something is left behind. A wall clock, a potted plant which has just started flowering and it would be a shame to throw it out, sometimes a calendar with a few pages left till the end of the year. In general, though, when residents depart, there's nothing left at all. That's how things are here.

Eighty years is a long time, so I can definitely say that life has never been better. I survived the war in which millions died. I survived because I was too young to become a soldier and never sought shelter in houses that were hit by bombs. I survived hunger when not even grass would grow. People first ate the green parts and in the winter dug out the roots. I stayed on the other side of the wired fence, I lived through an epidemic of a laboratory-generated disease. Mostly because I never needed a blood transfusion and was not in the high-risk group of the population. I survived earthquakes and floods. I was elsewhere at the time. I have survived accidents because I never boarded the

plane that crashed, trains that derailed, boats that sank. I survived all sorts of illnesses passed on from animals to people, and deadly bacteria from poisoned vegetables. I was lucky not to have eaten meat from those pigs or cows or ducks or had those courgettes or cucumbers. I survived terrorist attacks. They happened elsewhere. And sometimes it seems like I have survived myself as well.

Should I be grateful for this? Many residents have religious images on their walls and side tables, icons, crucifixes, candles, ticks, house altars, holy books of which some are read from left to right, others from right to left, yet others from top to bottom; they have prayer rugs, ceremonial vessels and incense. A number of times a day they thank whoever they thank for all that they had and all that they have, thank them for their endless love and in the same breath beg for mercy. One who trusts doesn't beg for mercy. One who trusts doesn't ask for themselves but asks for others to also trust. At least that's what I think.

I sometimes think about how this behaviour, day in day out, is not making them any better people, quite the opposite. Evil did not come over the years. They have been carrying it inside them all along and never knew how to shed it. No prayer worked. Perhaps their prayers were not sincere enough. Perhaps they believed that all that was written in the books that they kiss before they are opened applies to others, and they can pick and choose only the lines they like. Perhaps they thought that it is enough to talk about what is right and not actually do it. I don't know. I don't want to judge them. I do know that, over the years, malice started running from their tongue and oozing from under their nails. But I don't bother about them. I leave them alone and hope they will also leave me alone.

There are three prayer rooms in the basement. Various caretakers of souls come in every day. They comfort and encourage, anoint and watch over the departing. I would like to hear what

they ask for in the morning and evening when they are alone and what they will ask for when once they will be in our shoes. Or is their trust really so strong they don't ask now and they won't ask then? Of course I will never find out, but I do wonder, just as I wonder about many other things.

I wonder about the future. I would so like to slightly open the door between now and then, take a peek into the future, just enough to see whether people in the future are happier than we are.

I wonder whether children will experience the smell of cut grass the same way we do, or watch bubbles forming on puddles during summer rainstorms, or whether they feel the rays of the sun on their faces and catch the particular faint smell of burnt skin that they don't even notice at the time but will later remember with ever greater intensity, longing more and more for the time that has past, even though their lives will be quite comfortable. I wonder what they will grow up to be, what they will do, and how they will live. Will their lives be better than ours? Will they know how to share? Will they know how to give? I don't know. But I wish them a better and more beautiful world.

I'm happy without answers. It seems like the world is improving. Perhaps only in my imagination and comparisons. But if anyone asked me whether things were getting better in the world, I'd agree. Because that's what I believe.

My eyes have seen enough horrifying things to go blind. My ears have heard enough terrible things to go deaf. I was spared. Perhaps just so I can be a witness. I don't know if this is so. What I do know is that I've started forgetting.

At first this forgetting scared me. I asked the woman in the shop to order a thick hardcover notebook. When it arrived I began writing my memoirs. When I read the following day what I had written, I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that I was reading the memories of someone else. I wrote them all again. When I read them on the third day, they still seemed no more mine.

When, a few days later, the notebook was already half-full and the box of ink cartridges empty, I took it into the bathroom, placed it in the sink and lit a match. The fire alarm went off before the notebook had a chance to light properly. The duty security officer rushed in, pulled me out of the bathroom into the corridor and sat me on the bench. He grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall and returned to the bathroom to put out the fire. The duty nurse arrived in the meantime. And immediately after her the fire brigade with their large red truck and loud siren drove into the courtyard. Before the men had a chance to switch off the siren and lift their ladder, the duty security guard told them that everything was fine. One of them went to check for himself and then they left.

The duty nurse took me to the medical office and examined me. After her, the doctor also arrived, called back just for me. She told me not to try such things again. It could be dangerous. For me and for the other residents. The duty security guard said we old people were like children, or even worse. And anyway, where did you get the matches?

From then on I understood that memories are just a game, innocent for the most part.

All the Windows in My Life Looked Out to the East

My mornings are early. They say old people don't need as much sleep. I never needed much sleep even when I was younger. Five or six hours were always enough. It's no different now, just my sleep is lighter. And I never wake up really rested. I usually wake up when it's still dark outside, though the room is only in semidarkness with the lights that can never be totally switched off. Your eyes soon get used to it.

When I wake I am instantly alert. I never lie in or try to go

back to sleep. I just get up straight away and go to the bathroom.

In my bathrobe and with socks on my feet, I return to the room and sit by the window. My window faces east. This was the only thing I asked for when I moved in; an east-facing window. All the rest was less important. The staff tried to persuade me that the equipment in all flats is the same so that all the flats are equally as good. I am not interested in equipment, I told them. I am interested in the window. I want to look out towards the east. All the windows in my life looked out to the east.

Most people don't know what the world is like at the moment dawn breaks. Of those who do see it, be it because they are awake then for work, illness, worry or just are, very few are aware of the beauty of those first moments in this countless repetition of creation. Most are just happy that another night is over.

All my life I have been observing birth and arrival through windows facing east. Every morning reminds me that I need to be happy and satisfied with what I have. And I truly have a lot. I was born on the better side of the world, the side where people, by their own conviction, have an easier and better life. It doesn't take much to see what things are like in the worse side of the world. You just need to switch on the TV or radio, look at the front cover of the newspaper. Sometimes I wonder whether people on our half are even aware of this. I fear they're not.

Every so often they do go to some philanthropic event and perhaps even transfer some money into the accounts of this or that charity. They don't care what the charity does with the money. They say this is not something they can influence and that misuse happens everywhere. Some of the aid will eventually get to where it was intended for. And that's better than nothing.

I'm ashamed. Our help comes not from our heart but from our hand, and it is doused in venomous spit. Our help arrives mostly too late and into the wrong hands. And we're satisfied by this. Even more, we expect the people to whom we send

medication that has past its sell-by-date, surplus food in damaged tin cans, discarded clothes and weathered tents we no longer use, to be grateful.

On the better side of the world we have huge ships and airplanes. But we don't build airplanes to bring people to places where life is better. We are also not prepared to share the knowledge which could help build a better world. We want them to stay there, where the shortages are, where nothing grows from the sand, where the water has dried up and it won't rain for the next one or two hundred years, we want them to stay where the soil is toxic, acid rain falls from the sky, and where smog hides the sun every day of the year. We want them to need our help. We build boats and planes so we can take away from them everything we don't need. And there is more and more such stuff. If everything we take away from them would stay here, we would drown in rubbish. You can't wear five pairs of jeans at the same time, or eat ten kilos of pasta a day, or talk into twenty mobile phones at once. If those on the worse side of the world aren't grateful for our help in the right way, we add a few automatic guns, mines, bombs or machetes into the containers and it all starts over again.

The world is beautiful only on the one side. Only from this side are windows that look out to the east better than other windows. On the other side they don't have windows looking out to the east. On the other side they don't have windows at all.

On the worse side of the world they make boats too weak for waves many feet high. They use these boats to try and come across to our side on dark nights. They keep their eyes shut and mouths closed on these boats so the white of their eyes and teeth do not reveal their position. They wait to see what will happen. If their boat is not upturned by a wave, a patrol boat stops them and tows them into port where they are wrapped in blankets and given some food and water. Then they are loaded

onto boats, which are strong enough for waves many feet high, and taken back to their side of the world.

On the worse side of the world people make themselves cloaks out of thick animal hides and set off in summer footwear or barefoot across snow-covered passes. They walk in line and do not scatter even when they are being shot at by border guards. Anyone who manages to get across the ridge, hopes not to be caught by the patrol from the better side of the world. Anyone caught is given a hot meal, loaded into a truck and taken back to the worse side of the world. We care little what is going to happen to them there.

Anyone who does, despite everything, manage to come to the better side of the world and is also later not caught, can start a new life. In their new life they cannot walk along wide streets full of shop windows and posters. Their new life is a life of hiding. They need to hide because they are still being pursued. They are pursued even if no one is sure they are even here. Just in case. Because we like order. In their new life they must not ask for things, but they can pick things out of the rubbish bins. They cannot work, but they can steal. They cannot live in a shelter but they can squat in abandoned buildings or sleep rough on the streets, smelly and dangerous as they are. And nobody – absolutely nobody – is really interested where anyone had come from, what they know and what they want. We are all afraid of them. We all avoid them. We would all rather see that these people should not be here.

Out of caution we buy burglarproof doors, bolts, guns and pistols. All for our own safety. We must be prepared. That is why occasionally some boy who finds a gun in his father's cupboard kills a friend as they play. That is why occasionally some girl who climbs over a fence is ripped apart by guard dogs. These things happen. Bad things happen. But we simply cannot avoid it. Newspapers report on these tragedies on their front pages,

but only for a day or two, then everything settles down and is forgotten. It is of little concern to us.

What we are concerned with is happiness. Our happiness are windows looking out towards the east, even if we don't observe the sunrises. Our happiness is to have.

We have wardrobes full of clothes we will never wear, refrigerators full of food we will never eat but throw untouched into the bin, we have balconies we never sit on, neighbours we never talk to. Our heads are full of plans about what we will do when we will have more time, our drawers full of brochures about places we will never go to, even if at some point we will have more time. We're generally not satisfied and happy, even though there is no real reason for us not to be. We always expect the worst. Fear hides under our beds, squats under our chairs, hangs in our cupboards among our clothes.

We would like to get rid of our fears, but first we want some assurances. We don't believe our own doctor that we are fine and want to hear the opinion of various experts who will, based on a thick folder of results of countless tests, assure us that all is fine and that we needn't worry because our organs at seventy, eighty or even ninety are as healthy as those of a newborn and our bodies as strong as an eighteen-year-old's. We do not trust our own feelings that we are happy. They could well be deceiving, perhaps our mind is misleading us because it doesn't want us to lose hope. We don't believe those close to us either, they might only be feigning concern. If we had the choice, we would prefer to feel the hand of our guardian angel on our shoulder as it whispers into our ear that all will be fine with us. Even if this were to happen, we would begin seeking a second opinion. We would start checking whether our guardian angel really was what it said it was and not the devil in disguise, whether it was telling the truth, and so on and on.

My mornings are early. I sit by the window looking out even

before dawn. I wait for the moment when the first light glows in the east, changing the black and grey into blue.

As I sit by the window and watch creation, the birth and arrival, I forget for a moment that the world has a better and worse side, I forget for a moment that we are split into people here and people there, the shod and the barefoot, the replete and the starving. For a moment I think that things everywhere are as they are here. For a moment I think that we are all looking out of windows at the new day awakening, and at that moment we all sense joy.

The Empty Bench Will Always Remind Me of the Man I Had Nothing to Do With

As I am getting dressed for breakfast I hear footsteps and the squeaky wheels of the trolley. I pause and listen. The footsteps are coming closer and the squeaky wheels ever louder, then the commotion in the corridor suddenly ceases. It happened instantly, as if someone had switched off the sound by remote control or put in earplugs. Time stands still, the hands on all clocks stand still. Sounds and words are suspended mid-air, images frozen; the bird that was flying past the window looks like a photograph that someone has pressed against the glass, as do the branches of the tree that were being blown about by the wind only moments earlier.

Everything around me is caught in a timelessness, but my body is still functioning as if it was not of this world. My eyes still see, my ears still hear even though there is not much to hear. All I can hear is my heart, beating ever louder and faster, as my thoughts slow down and thicken. I can feel a weightlessness, as if I was slowly rising from my body, and slight dizziness, as if I had sat too long on a merry-go-round. I'm becoming dizzy.

Then the door to the next room along opens with a jerk. When it slams shut my door also shakes. With the doors the walls shake, the floor and ceiling shake, the whole world shakes, the world that had been so still until then. The hands on the clock move again, words and sounds resonate once more, the bird in the window flies away and the branches start swaying in the wind again.

My nose catches certain unfamiliar scents, my ears sharpen. Voices can be heard through the wall, I can hear furniture being moved around. Then there is silence and voices again. Suddenly the soles of my feet feel cold, as if I had stepped onto a sheet of ice. The cold, which quickly transforms into a burning pain, spreads up my legs. My skin comes out in goose bumps and becomes sensitive. My heart clenches, my mouth is dry, my eyelids quiver, my head shakes more than it does usually. My back aches and the pain is excruciating. My thoughts, however, suddenly became lucid and rapid. As if, within a few brief moments, I wanted to consider everything in the past and understand everything in the future.

Ever since I have moved in, the flat next door has been occupied by a man called Jon. Jon is a little older than me, thin, tall, bright eyes, a crooked nose and large teeth. Regardless of the time of year, he likes to sit on the bench outside the entrance. As if he is expecting someone. As if he is waiting for someone. I like him because he minds his own business. He greets anyone who goes past. If anyone stops he chats a little. Mostly he listens and says very little himself.

Jon always wears grey trousers with a crease and a white shirt. He always wears a tie. In the summer he drapes a light jacket over his shoulders, in the winter a coat with fur on its collar. Jon wears shoes that are big even for his height. His shoes are always polished as if he was a soldier on guard duty. In his right pocket he keeps a comb he uses every time the wind ruffles his long thin

hair, in his left pocket he has a handkerchief he wipes the sweat off his brow on hot days.

I saw him in the common room a few times, playing chess with Max. Max is a man who says of himself that he should have been national champion, and that he was very close a couple of times, the last time in ninety-one. Thankless second or third, he shakes his bald head. I don't remember him even though I regularly read the sports pages. It could be true but it is also possible that he made the whole thing up. Either way, Max is indisputably the best chess player of us all. If we had a tournament he would certainly win.

The matches between Jon and Max that I have seen were inevitably long, but Max always won in the end. Jon always thanked him for the game, shook his hand, and returned to the bench outside the entrance.

Someone told me that Jon has been sitting on the bench ever since his wife died. They had moved into the newly-built residences together a number of years ago and were among the younger residents at the time. Mostly they looked after themselves. And kept to themselves too. They had come here for the future, for the time they could no longer look after themselves. I don't know whether they didn't have anyone to look after them or just didn't want to impose on anyone and it is now not important anyway. They got a somewhat larger flat in the residences, one with a hallway and kitchen. After his wife's death Jon was moved to a smaller flat. He asked to be moved himself. They say that Jon sits outside the front entrance because he wants to see his wife once more. When she departed he was not with her. He was at the hospital having some checkups. In the end there was nothing wrong with him. But his wife had died in the meantime. She wasn't having any checkups because she appeared to be fine. Now Jon is waiting for another chance, they say. I don't believe this. Jon does not seem to me to be a man who would

wait for his dead wife. I don't believe he would sit outside the apartment block believing he would see her again. Perhaps he just said something like that so they would leave him alone. That seems more likely to me.

I stand in the middle of the room, looking out of the window. Dawn broke ages ago. It is already half past eight. The birds under the window have awoken and there are fewer and fewer voices coming from the flat next door. I fear the worst has happened. But I won't find out until I step out into the corridor, which I don't want to do. Not now. Right now I don't want to find out anything.

I would like to think about Jon a little more, as if nothing has happened. For a few moments I'd like to think that I shall still meet him at breakfast and if we miss each other there, I'll find him on his bench outside the front entrance. I'll walk up to him and speak to him, tell him that something was going on in the corridor in the morning and that I had thought something had happened to him. I'll tell him that I feared the worse, and tell him how relieved I am to see that he's fine. How silly! I'll shake my head and wave my hand dismissively as if nothing had ever happened around here and it had all been a figment of my imagination.

Over the years Jon and I rarely spoke, but we did often sit in silence at the same table and ate our breakfast. We often sat in silence on the same bench in the waiting room until one or the other was called by the nurse. Then we would look at each other and nod. The one who remained waiting outside would wish the one going inside luck. As if we were miners. Old people and miners have one thing in common, we venture underground. For the most part old people stay there whereas most miners come back to the surface a few hours later.

In all these years Jon did tell me a few sentences about himself and I was eventually able to connect them into a whole. He

mentioned that he worked on a ship for almost twenty years. At first he did the heavy work, later progressed and was the ship's cook in the end. But he was far from just a heavy-duty hand and a cook, he was also a boxer. He would fight in ports where they organize matches at night in warehouses and big money was bet on the winner. There are no categories in duels like this. Man on man. Fists, muscles, sweat and blood, he said in a dry voice and added, Boxing is not just a sport. Boxing is an art.

Whenever Jon mentioned boxing his eyes glowed in a special way. The moment he stopped talking about boxing the glow faded. He never said much more about himself and I never asked.

Now I am standing in the middle of the room and don't dare go out into the corridor, as if I believe that I need to stay inside if I want everything to stay as it was when I lay down in bed last night. If I stay in the flat the bad news won't reach me. And if there is no bad news, nothing bad happened. If I do step out, one of the employees or one of the residents is bound to tell me very soon what happened. In this case the news won't be good. I'm afraid I might find out about a death. I'm afraid that Jon has died.

A strange feeling fills my stomach and softens my legs. If I went to breakfast now and took a single bite, I would throw up immediately. True, I could just take some tea, but I know what will happen because it's always the same. Even before I sit down I will sense the cold coming from the bodies of the other residents. Bodies cold with the fear of death. The cold spreads with the rancid smell like elsewhere a glow of warmth and a sweet scent spread from the bodies of saints. People try to drown out their fear with words, so they keep repeating the same ones over and over, louder and louder.

I don't want to go out, but I also don't want to stay inside the flat. I don't want to be alone but also don't want to go out among the scared residents. I want to stay in, I want to go out.

Shit, I clench my fists, take a deep breath and make my mind up. If it happened, it happened, and I can't do anything about it. I step with determination towards the door and just as I am about to grab the handle, someone knocks on the door. I stop, my heart pounds and my thoughts fall silent. I want to throw up. As if I was afraid that I had made some mistake and have just been caught by those who hear thoughts and punish. I should have stayed inside but I wanted to go outside. Now I have it. My tongue stiffens and my lips numb. The next moment the door opens and I see a chubby woman outside who says with relief, Here you are.

I see Melita, the psychologist, almost every day, but we only ever spoke on the day I moved in. I couldn't see you downstairs, the woman shifted her weight, so I came up. Tell me, she tilts her head slightly, are you alright after what has happened?

After what has happened? I slowly repeat after her. I swallow and frown a little, Did anything happen?

Oh, the woman comes closer and holds my hand. You must have heard the commotion. The emergency medics were at your neighbour's early in the morning. They tried to help him. I heard, I nodded, of course I heard, but I don't know what happened. They tried to help him, the woman repeated. He called for help himself. But old age and illness are not much of a combination, she shakes her head. They came quickly, but it was too late. Even if they had come immediately, they could not have helped him, it would only have taken longer. That's what the doctor said, she pressed her lips together and shrugged her shoulders.

Suddenly I feel relieved. My body is becoming lighter again, as if I was weightless. My lungs are filled with a sweetness which could be happiness but isn't. It is just relief, a relief because I know that I can step out into the corridor. What happened had nothing to do with me. It is not my fault. Had I stayed in, it could not be have been avoided. Even if I had stayed inside my

room until the end of the month or the end of the year. It didn't happen because of me, it happened because of Jon, the man who was Max's only serious rival in chess. In the end Max always won, but now that's not important any more. What is important is that it happened because of Jon. His illness was stronger than life. His organs gave up. And it didn't happen because of me.

I can go outside. I can even go out of the building. The empty bench will always remind me of the man I had nothing to do with, but for whose death I, for a brief moment, thought I might be to blame. It will remind me of the cook and the boxer who wore polished shoes in his old age as if he had been a gentleman all his life. Perhaps I will at some later point also sit on that bench myself. If anyone will ask me why I'm sitting outside the front entrance, I will say that I'm waiting for Jon. I will say so, so that they will leave me alone.

Sebastijan Pregelj, (*A Chronicle of Forgetting*, 2014)
translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh



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