

**MARKO
ŠOSIČ**
TITO,
AMOR MIJO

Založba · Publishing House

GOGA

The primary activity of Goga Publishing from Novo mesto, Slovenia, is publishing high-quality books by Slovene authors and promoting them in Slovenia and abroad while also upholding the highest editorial standards.

shing

GOGA

www.goga.si

MARKO SOSIČ



TITO, AMOR MIJO

nonfiction

*keywords: childhood, family, World War II,
Italy, Yugoslavia*

Author: Marko Sosič

Title of original (Slovene): *Tito, amor mijo*

Title in Translation: *Tito, Amor Mijo*

Translator (English): Gregor Timothy Čeh

Foreign Rights: Goga Publishing (rights@goga.si)

Publication date: February 2020 (first edition: 2005)

202 pages, 13 × 20 cm (hardcover)



About the book

Kresnik Award shortlist

Prešern Fund Award shortlist

Shortlisted for the Kresnik Award for best novel, *Tito, My Love* is probably Marko Sosič's best known novel. It depicts a young boy, growing up near Trieste, Italy, having trouble spelling Italian words, because in his everyday life, he speaks and reads almost exclusively in Slovenian. With his uncles and aunts, he watches old films about partisans, the resistance fighters during World War II, and listens to tragic wartime stories, such as the one about his grandmother surviving a shot in the head, albeit with a bullet still in place, or about his aunt going blind after having been beaten up by fascists. But for the boy, this stark legacy is complemented by another reality, a whole new world opening up right before his eyes: the wonders of play in the beautiful nature, forests, rivers and, most importantly, the sea. Giving him courage is the promise that one day, he'll meet the Marshal himself – the mythical hero of his relatives' stories.

About the author

Marko Sosič (1958–2021) is the author of several well-received novels as well as books of short stories, written in a warm, poetic, and compassionate style, fascinated by richness – and limits – of the human spirit. Marko Sosič was one of the most important Slovene writers, living in Italy, a highly original voice and a reminder of the importance of the literary diaspora. Marko Sosič was also the artistic director of a theater in Trieste and had been active as a screenwriter.

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

*Vuei a è Domènia
doman a si mòur,
vuei mi vestìs
di seda e di amòur.*

Today is a Sunday,
tomorrow we're dead,
today with silk and love
I adorn myself instead.

Pier Paolo Pasolini

MAY

I

I throw back the sheet that covers my body, stretch my hand towards the wooden shelf at the top of the bed, and switch on the light. I can't sleep. I am lying on the bed in my room, which is now only mine, thinking about the sea, blue and deep, across the hill. Sister has her own room because she is much younger

and needs to get used to sleeping in the dark, because that's how it should be. Because boys and girls are not allowed to sleep in the same room, says Mother, and also because she wakes up in the night and cries because of the pain in her little stomach, and then she throws up. Like Tata does when he is sad. He laughs so I won't notice on his face the worry about money that he doesn't have. Standing at the door, then, the one leading into the bathroom, he smiles at me, closes the door and throws up into the toilet. I can hear him. Then, at the time it happens, I stay in the middle of the hallway, block my ears with my hands and the music Tata listens to on the radio comes into my head. Opera. I think about it. And it comes, then, as Tata is throwing up. I can hear a female voice and the orchestra, and the words she sings.

Aaaamaaamiii Alfreedooo, mmmmmmmmm...

And then I hear the water as Tata pulls the chain, and the key in the door as he opens it. Then I see him again at the door, dishevelled and pale in the face, smiling at me. And I try to return the smile, to hide from him the worry I have for him in my eyes. I sense that he can see it, then, when, all tousled and pale from vomiting, he looks at me. I sense that he sees my concern, the cracks in the walls of the house, woodworm in the worn beams in the attic, black chips in the saturated marble on the stairs leading into the house, old weathered roof tiles that nobody knows when might start leaking whenever there is a storm.

I look at the light shining on the wooden shelf at the top end of the bed and the white porcelain angel standing in its yellow glow. I shall say a prayer to my holy guardian angel on the shelf, ask it to grant me my wishes and I can then fall asleep and dream. I just need to utter my prayer to it and all will be well; you'll fall asleep and dream, Mother always says. That is what she says to me in the evening when she leans across my bed and kisses me on the cheek. I don't like her kisses but can never find the words to stop her tired face drawing closer as it hovers above me in the evenings.

I look at the angel on the shelf. I see it, how it was once attached to a large box of chocolates that I received as a gift for my First Communion when I was dressed in a blue blazer and shorts, white socks and lacquered shoes that were still brand new at the time because Mother had bought them on credit. This will be your angel, Mother had said then, grabbing it and pulling it off the lid of the box of chocolates. Now it has sticky tape round its neck because it fell from the shelf and its head rolled off under the wardrobe. Mother says I was having a dream and waved my hand about, that I always wave my hands about when I dream. I lie in bed and pray: *Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom His Love commits me here, ever this night, be at my side, I sneeze, to light and guard, my nose drips, to rule and guide, Amen.* I take the handkerchief from my pyjama pocket, wipe my runny nose, and cross myself. *In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.* And I put the handkerchief back in my pocket.

Angel of God, my guardian dear, I wish all the chemists would run out of Vicks because Mother rubs it on my back and chest every evening. She thinks that the Vicks too, not only the pine trees in the forest where she takes me to breathe every morning if it isn't raining, will drive away the shadow from my lungs. I don't want the shadow on my lungs to go anywhere – I hope it stays there until the summer and beyond because this way I will once again see Alina in Laze, close to the river that is whisperingly known as *Nediža*.

Our teacher, the one with a red car and black eyes, says I don't write well in Italian. Make it happen that I get better at it so that at this year's exams when the teacher will dictate us the text I will write all those words with double letters correctly. Make Mrs Slapnik, where Mother sends me for lessons, also teach me how to speak Slovene properly and well. She knows because she and her husband came from Yugoslavia. I'm afraid of her husband whom I haven't yet seen, but Uncle Albert and others have said

he has blood on his hands. Make me understand why his hands are bloody and I will no longer be afraid of him.

I am now one metre and fifty-two centimetres tall and wear shoes size thirty-five, mostly ones my cousin Jurij has grown out of. Make it happen that I grow at least another twenty centimetres so I will be wearing shoes size forty like Tata. Jurij says that when you grow your willy grows too. Mine is now five centimetres long but is always the same. Jurij's however changes and grows and when I sometimes stay over at his house, he tells me stories that both scare me and attract me. Make mine grow too.

My neighbour Angiolina is at least five centimetres taller than I am because she is three years older, like Jurij. Angiolina has only a father. He always has pain in his toes, on the foot where he no longer has any, so he goes to Lido near Venezia every summer because there is lots of hot sand there that helps the toes he doesn't have not hurt as much. Mrs Slapnik says that in Slovene we call Venezia Benetke, but I still say Venezia because I think of that town as a woman I have never seen and to me Venezia sounds more like a mysterious woman's name than Benetke. Angiolina says she will once show me all that she has under her skirt. Make it really happen, because Ms Moore who lives in the old villa covered in ivy, not far from the house where Nona Katarina and Nono Mario live, always says in English, *Oh, what a beautiful girl*. Tata told me what it means, he understands English because he chopped wood for the Americans at the barracks when they were in Trieste. I'm not a girl, because girls don't have a willy, that much I know.

Ivan is my only friend. Make it happen that we will soon be able to once again ride our bikes down to the woods and find the hole that will take us to the centre of the Earth, as we said we would do.

I wish Tata would not need to sell his old Vespa because he does not have the money to pay the debt on the house he built himself from used bricks, beams and roof tiles. Make it happen

that Tata will take me to Venezia with the Vespa. To Venezia on the sea, and also show me the big iron underground wheels that pull the steel ropes that lower the funicular down towards Trieste. I want Tata to be happy. I like it when he smiles, waking up in the morning, his hair all ruffled. When he jumps into the sea from a high rock. When he exercises. I see him in photos when he was still young, exercising with Uncle Albert who was a partisan. Uncle Albert is now married to Aunt Sofia who is the mother of Jurij and my cousin Sonja. My Nona Lucija who is Uncle Albert's mother and blind Josipina also live with them, behind the house, where they used to keep pigs. Make it happen that Tata would always be happy.

I also wish Aunt Sofia would not keep fainting because we never know whether she will wake up again, not even when Uncle Albert slaps her to wake her up because he loves her and doesn't want her to die.

I wish the chickens in the hut behind the house would lay many eggs, so Mother can sell them and get money for them. For the debt at the bank.

Make it happen that I can go on the school trip if I get the grades, so I will see the Republic of Slovenia, which everyone tells me is my homeland. A small homeland in the large homeland, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, across the border, there in Sežana. Make me understand what a homeland is because Uncle Albert says that our homeland is all of Yugoslavia but Mrs Slapnik says our homeland is only Slovenia. Mother says we are Slovenes who live in Italy and that there are very few of us, that we will disappear if there won't be any children, and says we have two presidents, Mr Saragat and Marshal Tito who is not a mister but a comrade.

Make it happen that the war in Vietnam ends because Tata never smiles when he reads the newspaper and says, So many dead again, when will this slaughter end!? Make the people in

Czechoslovakia and Hungary not burn themselves any more. Tata says that people burn because the Russians came to Czechoslovakia and Hungary. With tanks.

Tata says that the Indians in America are right when they are angry about their land being stolen. He says that the Indians in America are like us because our land is also being stolen. Make me understand who is our enemy and who is our friend.

Nona Katarina says that Nono Mario is too obliging towards Ms Moore who lives in the old villa near their house. Nona says that they were given their house, which was originally intended for servants from the villa, by Mr Cosulich who was their first and only master. Nona says that Ms Moore, who is from England, was never their master and that Nono doesn't understand this. Make him understand.

Angel of God, my guardian dear, I beg you that Nona Katarina won't die of the bullet she has in her head. Aunt Sofia and Mother say that the lead bullet flew at Nona's head when the Americans were here and the Partisans had already left. They say that somewhere close to Nona's house, where Mother and Aunt Sofia also lived when they were little, a soldier was cleaning his gun and accidentally fired it. Mother and Aunt Sofia say that the bullet flew straight into the side of Nona's face while she was picking radicchio in the garden. That it made a hole in the skin on her cheek and stopped somewhere above her teeth, right next to an artery. They say that even now nobody can operate on her because the operation could be fatal. *Angel of God, my guardian dear*, make it happen that Nona doesn't die until I grow up and become a surgeon like Christiaan Barnard who lives in Africa and knows how to fix people's hearts if they beat too slowly.

Angel of God, Mother earns money with chicken eggs and as a servant, like Aunt Sofia and like Ivan's mother who works for the Baroness. Mother works for a family that speak our language and who are rich because the mistress runs a shop and the

master travels around the world and knows many people. Mother says that her employers are friends with Marshal Josip Broz Tito who liberated Trieste and our village and that his wife Jovanka is also their friend. Mother says that her employer promised he would, when the opportunity arose, introduce her to Jovanka and Marshal Tito who was the leader of all the partisans, including Uncle Albert. Her employer says that Mother could also sing for him because she has a beautiful voice and Marshal Tito likes listening to beautiful women with beautiful voices. Make it happen so.

Tata says he will buy a TV when he wins the lottery. Mother keeps saying she would rather be a nurse than a servant, or a dancer who would twirl like a feather in the wind, or an actress, like Anna Magnani who we watch in a film on TV at Angiolina's or Uncle Albert's, where she runs after a truck screaming *Francescooo! Francescooo!* and is then killed by the Fascists and falls to the ground. Sometimes Mother dreams and I can hear her talk in her sleep. The following morning she says she dreamed of Queen Elizabeth and how they were drinking tea together. Like always. Make Mother be what she most wants to be, like all those poor people in the film we watch on TV at Uncle Albert's who have their metal huts taken away and the land on which they live, and then happily keep warm under the only ray of sun before flying into the clouds.

I hope your head will stay stuck in place for a while, *Angel of God, my guardian dear*, so you can grant my wishes. Amen. Oh, so I don't forget: Make me understand who the man with the wide brim straw hat is. I have never seen him before. He now stands at the kiosk and if we walk past there with Mother, she always squeezes my hand and pulls me to the opposite side of the road. She never squeezes my hand as hard as whenever we see the man with the big straw hat. Why? Amen.

I switch off my light and in my mind see the sea, over the top of the hill. Blue and deep.

Breathe, breathe! says Mother. She holds my hand, walking swiftly down the pavement by the tram lines and at the edge of the pine forest. Forest on my side, the tram lines on hers. A few more steps and we will turn towards the path that leads through the forest towards the top of Selivec by the Obelisk. Breathe, breathe! she says again and looks at me. I inhale the air through my nostrils. The morning pours across her face and softens her wrinkles, softens the landscape, the slope alongside the tram line, covered with pine trees. You can see the sea if you get to the top. Breathe, breathe! she says again and pulls me along the path into the forest. And it seems to me as if she is addressing the air I'm breathing in, to get it to finally drive away that shadow that descended upon my lungs last year and is still there now. I take a deep breath through my mouth when Mother turns to look at me with her green eyes. I think that in her eyes I see my tree, the one I can climb up and see the Alps and the Dolomites from the top, today, it being spring and the morning being so clear. I breathe deeply and walk by her side, past large tufts of grass that lick my bare knees with their dew. I can feel my hand in hers and in my hand her skin, rough and chapped from scrubbing the stairs, her fingers, bony and bent from washing up, clinging onto mine. I breathe and I can see how mother thinks that with every breath a piece of the shadow from my lungs is torn away, how it creeps up my windpipe, all the way to my throat and how it flies out of my mouth, towards the forest, vanishing when it reaches the trunk of the pine tree. Mother is daydreaming, unaware that I know her dreams, for I can hear her at night when she talks. Breathe, breathe! she says now. And you can go to Laze for the summer if the shadow is still there. The air in Laze is better because of the spruce that grow there! she tells me and lets go of my hand so I can now walk alone in the forest with my hand in

my pocket, my fingers touching the rounded pebble I keep there. And suddenly I am not breathing any more, at least not for a few seconds when Mother can't see my face. I want the shadow to stay right there in my lungs. I want it to cover all of them like the oak that covers the lawn outside our house with its shadow. This is the only way that I will get sent to Laze for the summer where Alina and I will chase fireflies and collect rounded pebbles by the river we quietly call Nediža. Alina never calls it that loudly when we are outside and there are other people in the middle of Laze. Because she is scared, she says. Only her Tata says Nediža. Nediža, he says whispering even when the door onto the road is closed because people could still be eavesdropping and then report them, says her Tata who whisperingly calls it Nediža.

I hope the shadow does not fly away from my lungs because this way Alina will go for walks with me all summer and together we shall discover new meadows and ancient beech trees with holes in them where the wild women live who wake up in winter and leave tracks in the snow that are not like ours but the other way round, back to front. I wish that we could go to the woods together in winter and wait for the wild women to come crawling out of those beech trees, and we could huddle together in fear, hug like last year when I was leaving and I could feel the beating of Alina's heart. Too fast, says her Tata when he places his hand on the vest covering her tiny breasts.

Don't be a such a mope, breathe! says Mother when she comes closer and slaps me gently across my neck because she has noticed my face and how I was holding my breath. Breathe, *Dio Christo*, or you'll die. You're only ten and a couple of months, *Dio mio!* You have yet to grow up, become a big boy and a man, so you can get married and have lots of children. You need to have lots of children because there are so few of us here and there will be fewer and fewer. If there won't be any children, there won't be any of us left! Breathe! says Mother who sometimes tries to

speak in the beautiful way Mrs Slapnik and her husband with the bloody hands speak.

And I breathe, so I might not die now that it is spring and summer is approaching. I walk upwards, along the path towards the pine trees with low branches. I know I need to get there so I can breathe in the scent of the fresh tips that make the shadow from the lungs go away, make it vanish into the forest, as Mother keeps saying, traipsing behind me, like yesterday, like now.

I walk along and stare at the shoes on my feet. And the nibbled pinecones on the ground. I think of Jurij who is my cousin and is three years older than I am. The shoes I am wearing are his. A little worn but still good, says Aunt Sofia whenever she comes to our house and places a large bag on the table. The bag is full of clothes, jumpers, trousers, shirts, and shoes that Jurij has grown out of. This way Mother doesn't have to buy things on credit, says Aunt Sofia. And at least she doesn't have to buy shoes, because the man in the shop first looks at the shoes you're wearing and only then looks you in the eye, so you're instantly embarrassed if you aren't wearing shoes you have bought from his shop. You are also embarrassed because you haven't yet paid off the previous pair and still owe him money and who knows if the man will continue to sell you shoes on credit. Aunt Sofia always says this when she is well and comes round with a bag full of second-hand clothes. Sometimes I don't see her for a long time because she loses the ground from under her feet and becomes unconscious, so we are all worried about whether she will wake up and hope she won't die.

I walk along and stare at Jurij's shoes that are now mine. And I stare at the gnawed pinecones that roll to the side of the path as I walk along it. The squirrels have nibbled them, I know that. Jurij knows all about squirrels because he hunts them. With a catapult. You see a squirrel, he says, find a stone in your pocket, place it in the sling, pull the elastic band, aim and pfff, the stone hits it in

the head and it falls to the ground unless you are a total mope and miss. Come along with me once, he keeps telling me when I sometimes stay over at Aunt Sofia's and we lie in bed together in the dark and he scares me with his stories, which intrigue me. And in the dark I imagine Jurij pulling that *laštik* that Mrs Slapnik in her correct Slovene calls *elastic*.

Don't walk off the path, you could slip into a hole! I hear Mother behind me when I veer into the grass. The ground is full of holes down here! It's the Karst, holes everywhere! There are tunnels, there are caves down there, below the earth. We used to hide in them, during the bombings. We hid down in the tunnels... It's full of holes, trust me! she says. And I see the caves and tunnels below me, now as I am once again walking down the path towards the pine trees where Mother will later smear the resin on the bark and make me lean my face towards it. I can see tunnels below me, huge and deep caverns that open up under my feet. I can see myself, walking along a transparent and thin layer of earth, covered in brown patches of pine needles, with a lot of clear space in between. And through the clear patches I can see deep into the hiding place below me. People standing silently, waiting for the bombing to end. Then I am suddenly among them, invisible. I can hear the aeroplanes above me and the whistling bombs and explosions. Then I see them from above again, by my feet, through the clear area of the transparent earth, as they stand there with their grey faces, staring up at me. Among them is also my Tata who is now at home and sleeping because he was driving the tram last night. I can see that he is pink in the face, and holds an accordion in his hands, playing *Rosamunda*, as he does at home under the oak tree when he's happy. So that the people down there wouldn't be afraid.

*Ta ra rara... And he sings, Roosaamunda...
tu sei la vita per meeee...*

I walk on the transparent surface of the earth towards the thick pine trees with resin seeping from them. It just needs to be smeared on the bark, I need to bring my face close to it and breathe so it will help me, even if this is not what I want, it will help the shadow on my lungs find its way out of my body. And Mother will sit down on a rock and stare across towards the sea and the town beyond the hill, and then she will turn to me to check that I am breathing it in, in order to get well.

And that is what it is also like now. She stands me in front of the tree trunk, smears the resin, and sits on the stone. Breathe, breathe! she says and turns her gaze somewhere beyond the hill. I hug the tree. I can feel the rough bark on my cheek and I smell the smeared resin. For a moment I close my eyes, breathe in, and open them again. I watch her sit there, smiling at me in order to reassure me, but what reassures me more is the wind in her hair, brushed in a hurry, because it is not yet the end of the month and she won't go to the hairdresser if the chickens don't lay enough eggs, and Tata will say, oooh, aren't we looking nice. And in the wind I hear *Rosamunda* as Tata plays the accordion down there in the bunker, and I can hear his voice as he once tells me about Uncle Kristjan, who the Germans dragged through these woods, there towards the farm that we are still not allowed to go to because refugees live there. They dragged him like cattle, says Tata then, and as I lean with my face against the pine tree and smell the resin, I always see him in my mind, Uncle Kristjan, in this terrible story, the end of which Tata has yet to tell me. I breathe. I hear the wind, *Rosamunda* on the accordion and I see Uncle Kristjan. Right here, now, as he is staggers across the scree, crosses fences, trips against molehills, stones and thick tufts of grass. He is being tugged by his shirt by young German soldiers, scared that they might be killed by the Partisans who have surrounded them. They tremble, the Germans, and the Partisans also. Uncle Kristjan can feel the hand of the young officer as it shakes, as he

seizes his sweaty shirt in his fist, dragging him through brambles and bushes. The forest is blooming, says Tata. Dogwood, rock cherries, wild roses. Everything. Uncle Kristjan doesn't know where he is being taken, he doesn't know whether he'll be killed right there in the middle of the field... And as they drag him along, shots can still be heard from the village. He had seen them a little earlier when he was caught, seen them hiding in the belfry and in the young chestnut trees, shooting their last bullets at the road, at the people down there, running and shouting with fear. And then they drag Uncle Kristjan to their bunker. The young officer grabs his gun and points it at him, shaking with fear as he kneels before him. The other soldiers are shouting words he doesn't understand, running away, falling down and throwing their guns across stone walls. The cows in the field not far away are mooing with fear, bumping against each other, trying to find a way to safety but it seems that the cows, with their large soft eyes, have lost their memory. The young officer is still holding the gun in his hand. They are both young. Uncle Kristjan and the German officer. Like the fields and the trees in spring..., says Tata.

What's gotten into your head! says Mother when I don't open my eyes because Uncle Kristjan is still in them. I know that Mother sees my head when thoughts move it in all directions. Breathe, breathe a little more, so we can go home and then to school! she says and I move away from the tree trunk and the resin I am breathing and look at her, her head also swaying, all soft with the morning.

O, Dio mio! What's in that head of yours?! she says, smiles and reaches towards me with her hand.

My own hand once again feels the pebble in my pocket and I think I can hear it, rushing and gurgling, the river we quietly call Nediža.

The wind blows softly from the sea at my face and into my body as I stand in the pine forest in front of Nona's house. It brushes against the pines before me, the boxwood planted around them, the hydrangeas in the flower beds, making their branches that are still without flowers rustle dryly. It rushes past them towards the old villa covered in ivy that now ripples across the walls behind which lives Ms Moore. Old, rich and alone.

I breathe. Nona Katarina with the healed scar on her cheek stands behind me, embracing me across the shoulders, and her hands resting on my chest. I will stay with her over the weekend, as always, because there are also pine trees growing near her house, as well as a lot of other trees that Nono Mario planted when he was young. He also planted the silver spruce, the one growing right next to the old villa built by Mr Cosulich in which Ms Moore now lives. Nono says that Mr Cosulich and his wife built a villa in the Karst in order to escape the heat of town in the summer and breathe in the fresh air on the large terrace, in the cool of the trees, the oleanders and terracotta pots with geraniums that Nono still grows over winter and plants out into the large pots in the spring. Not for the Cosuliches now, but for Ms Moore. They were rich... Nona mutters to herself when I once see her opening a large drawer in the bedroom, picking up a sheet of paper that says that Mr Cosulich and his wife left her and Nono the tiny house with a piece of the garden and the cherry tree for as long as they live. As a sign of gratitude for them being faithful servants all this time. Nona the housemaid at the villa, Nono the gardener.

I can feel her hands on my chest and her large breasts against my shoulders as she stands behind me. You mustn't die! Also because of Nona, you mustn't! says Mother sometimes. And I breathe. Because of Nona.

Nono is in the garage into which he has moved all the furniture. He has stuffed it in among the oleanders that he has not yet moved to the terrace by the villa because the nights are still too cold. That is where we will sleep tonight, in the garage, among the oleanders, because over the next few days Tata will repaint their bedroom, the kitchen and the hallway where, close to the coat stand and the door that leads to the bathroom, hangs a photograph of Aunt Sofia when she was still a girl, at her Confirmation. She is all in white, with a white veil across her face and a bouquet of white roses in her hand. Behind her, his hand on her shoulder, is Mr Cosulich. Her Confirmation Sponsor.

I breathe slowly and evenly.

I spot Ms Moore. She is approaching us along the path covered in tiny pebbles that leads past the silver spruce and the flowerbeds with the hydrangeas, all the way to the tiny forest in the middle of which we are standing with Nona. She is approaching us in a long sparkling dress and seems to be hopping along the gravel, almost zigzagging down the path. I can see her ruffled hair, shining in the sun that has almost set. She is approaching us with a slightly slanted smile, her eyes twinkling. Nona squeezes me harder and for a moment I am no longer breathing. Then I see her face close up as she leans towards me and see the sun in her eyes. *Oh, what a beautiful girl!* she says and strokes my face, straightens up and dances and hops in front of us, as if unable to stop her body in the long dress with sparkling stones catching the last rays of the sun. He's a boy, a boy! says Nona in a strict voice and hugs me tighter. *E' un ragazzino, è maschio!* she adds in Italian. Ms Moore in front of us smiles, *Ma è così bella ... She is so beautiful ...!* she says, still dancing around. Like Nono Mario who sometimes sways home zigzagging and brings Nona chocolates with hazelnuts called *Baci Perugina* because he is drunk. With joy, Tata says. And now, as I watch Ms Moore, I think I can see Angiolina, my neighbour, before me, as she was yesterday when

she went to her First Communion. All in white she twirls in front of me in her yard and her Tata in black shoes that hide his toeless foot is taking photos of her: under the apricot tree behind their house, on the lawn in front of the veranda, on the stairs with vases filled with lilies and other white flowers she was given as a gift. I am standing in my house, looking out of the window in the room that is now my sister's, and I imagine that Angiolina is getting married, like Mother and Tata on the photograph in their bedroom where there is dampness and mould in the corners under the ceiling. And that I am not the one she has married and shown me everything she has under her skirt. I can see her now in front of me, turning towards the camera, lifting her skirt slightly from the ground and doing a twirl. Then I once again see Ms Moore as she dances towards the terrace and I can hear Nono calling from the garage.

And Nona lets go of me. I can see her quickly step towards the voice that called her, all soft and large. She turns by the cherry tree near the small bed where radicchio is grown in the summer and up the steps, disappearing into the house emptied of all but the stove.

I stand alone amid the trees and think how now nobody can see me. The wind once again blows gently from the sea over the hill and carries to me only the voice of Ms Moore who is singing on the terrace of the old villa in her sparking dress.

Que sarà sarà, whatever will be will be...
ta ra ra ri rari che sarà sarà...

I pull back the woollen blanket that covers my body on the mattress in the middle of the garage and I open my eyes. I can see Nona and Nono on the other mattress. They are turned towards the oleanders that are not yet flowering and hang above their heads so all I can see of them are their shoulders covered with a sheet that moves upwards when they breathe in and downwards when they exhale. Then I squint towards the glass door of the garage over which Nona has draped some old sheets so the sun wouldn't wake us up too early in the morning. Despite this, the sun is here, peeping through the gap between the two sheets, straight into my eyes. I can see the outlines of the poplar trees outside in the garden alongside the gravel path. And I imagine those trees are mine, and the flowerbeds with the hydrangeas, the old villa in which Ms Moore lives, tripping over the carpets and doorframes at night as she looks for her room, says Nona, and then Nono says, *Ostia Madonna*, you're imagining things, seeing things that aren't there, and he tells her that she's sick in the head if she thinks that Ms Moore is fond of a glass or two. I squint towards the gap in the sheets over the door through which the light is seeping and imagine being at least a metre seventy tall, walking along the paths among the flowerbeds and the trees with a white straw hat on my head. A surgeon. I imagine Mother and Aunt Sofia are no longer servants, nor Ivan's mother who cleans the carpets and tidies up in the large house by the main road so that the glass in the windows shines even when the sky is full of clouds. And that all three of them have become baronesses, like Ivan's mother's mistress. Images sparkle and I can see them brighter and brighter, like the sun coming through the gap in the sheets over the door, shining on Nona's head and the lead bullet that is in it, and brushing against the leaves of the oleander bushes above her forehead.

I watch Nona's face that turns to me as she sleeps. Large and soft, her eyelids covering her eyes, streaks of grey in her hair. I imagine that the lead bullet, all shiny inside her head, moves at this moment.

And I see Nona in my mind, how she grabs a small knife from the marble slab that covers the table in the kitchen, and picks up the bowl into which she will put the radicchio she will pick in the garden. I can see her now in my mind, at a time I was not yet born, when the Partisans had already left but the Americans were still here. I can see her pick up the bowl and the knife, and walk out of the door with an apron over her skirt, wide as a sail. Her skirt ruffles in the spring breeze, making her look like a queen in an apron, walking down the stone steps. Large and soft. And as she walks down the steps with the bowl and knife in her hand, I see that for a moment she thinks about her brother. She often says, after she has been silent for a long time and stares out of the kitchen window, God knows how Lojzi is doing in Bosnia? I don't even know what Lojzi in Bosnia looks like. Nona says he digs coal in a mine and that he was once trapped underground and almost died. Nona says that they are very similar, her and Lojzi.

I follow her in my mind and notice how she changes all of a sudden, how she suddenly isn't wearing her skirt and apron, no longer has her breasts and thick hair with grey streaks. Suddenly she's different. A helmet with a light on her head. And on her face I notice a moustache, she is wearing trousers and black muddy boots on her heavy feet. Lojzi in the coalmine.

Then I suddenly once again see the eyes that are hers and no longer see the helmet with the lamp on her head or the heavy boots on her feet. I can no longer see Lojzi in Bosnia, her brother, I can see Nona, all soft and white in the morning sun, like now, when I am watching her in the garage, still asleep under the oleanders, and I think about how the bullet will come shooting

at her head; I notice the hand of the soldier, holding the gun, then I see his other hand as it slides with the cloth along the black barrel, I see his face, smiling, and then his other hand that brushes against the trigger and the shot! I can see the lead bullet, shooting through the barrel at top speed towards the light outside. It flies, flies across the village towards Nona's face. Nona doesn't know about it yet then. She doesn't know that it will come straight at her cheek and leave a hole in it that Mother and Aunt Sofia keep filling with kisses. She bends over towards the radicchio she has come to pick, close to the cherry tree in the garden and the oleanders that are about to be covered in red flowers. And it flies, the bullet flies, travelling above the village, the landscape below rushing past it, the lines where Tata drives his tram, the house with the sparkling windows where Ivan and his mother and father live in the cellar at the Baroness, the shop with toys and school notebooks, the shoe shop where mother buys shoes on credit, the shop and the flat above it where Mother is cooking, washing and ironing to keep everything clean. The pub. The flat above it where Aunt Sofia cooks, washes and irons if she is well enough to do so. The shop selling bed linen, the baker, the kiosk and the man with the broad-brimmed straw hat, the health centre where the doctor takes pictures of my lungs and checks the shadow lingering on them. The church, the graveyard, the forest and the blossoming rock cherries. Everything rushes past it at high speed.

Nona, who has now filled the bowl with radicchio is slowly rising up. Her gaze is moving from the bed of radicchio up towards the flowering cherry tree. A little more and she will be standing straight with the bowl full of radicchio in her hand. And the bullet comes flying through the net stretched around the enclosure of the old villa and Nona's house. It flies past the pine forest, the silver spruce and the flowering cherry tree, straight into her cheek. Right now! I can see it as it wedges into

the flesh on her cheek, flushed with the sun and the spring wind. The skin on her cheek splits, the warmth of the lead burns in her mouth, her throat, and disappears and at the time nobody knows yet that it has stopped right next to the artery that leads to her heart. I can see Nona's head as it first jolts backwards as if surprised by the blueness of the sky that day, then downwards towards the bed of radicchio, her knees buckling suddenly so she falls onto her belly. Large and soft, in the radicchio, now splattered with a few droplets of blood. Then I hear Nono's scream from the kitchen, Mother crying and Aunt Sofia shouting, both of them still little girls. I can see their hands, lifting her up from the ground, large and soft, and I can see Nona's face, all bloody, lying in their palms like a large peach. But she is still breathing, Nona, at the time. Yes, she is still alive. Like now, as I see her on the mattress, her eyes closed, down here, in the garage, under the oleanders, and I know that she won't die because I will get rid of that bullet inside her head.

5

Ivan also knows that Nona has a bullet in her head and believes that I will once free her of the fear that she might die from it because, when I grow up, I will become a surgeon. Ivan is my only friend. He secretly tears out pictures from magazines that the Baroness buys and then leaves in the cellar where Ivan lives with his mother and father. Images of operations. He secretly tears them out of the magazines, stuffs them into his pocket and brings them to school. Then, in the break, he passes them on to me and I straighten them under the desk and then put them away in my schoolbag. At home I hide them under the wardrobe where Mother's brush doesn't reach to clean the dust and dirt.

Pssst! says Ivan, checking that nobody in the class is watching. Then I know that he has images of operations of the heart, the liver, the kidneys, the eyes, stuffed in his pocket. All in colour. He tears them out of the magazine *Domenica del Corriere* at home, read by his mother after the Baroness leaves old copies of it for her in the basement.



GOGA

CONTEMPORARY



PRAVE
za otroke
VSAKO
17. dec 17

Co-financing Publications of Slovenian Authors in Foreign Languages

THE SLOVENIAN BOOK AGENCY (JAK)

The Slovenian Book Agency's – a government institution founded in 2009 – primary concern is facilitating proper conditions for the development of the field of books: fostering creativity, providing conditions for increased accessibility of Slovenian books, and increasing the awareness of the importance of books and reading in general. Part of this endeavor are several opportunities, offering funding for foreign publishers, interested in publishing works by Slovene authors.

There are two main calls:

- for translation costs,
- for printing costs.

Publishers may apply for both. At Goga Publishing, we will gladly help you prepare and submit your application.

For more information visit the agency's website:

<http://jakrs.si/eng/>

MARKO SOSIČ

TITO, AMOR MIJO

Edited by
Andrej Hočevar

Translator
Gregor Timothy Čeh

Design and layout
Jurij Kocuvan

Publisher
Goga Publishing, Glavni trg 6, 8000 Novo mesto, Slovenia

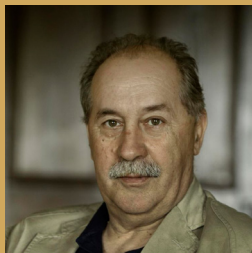
Co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union,
supported by the Slovenian National Book Agency,
and the Centre for Creativity.

For the publisher
Mitja Ličen

rights@goga.si
www.goga.si

Edition
notice





Partners

