

# Svetlana Slapšak

## *Lunar Siblings*

### ABOUT THE BOOK

How to be a pacifist during a time of war? In Belgrade in the 1990s for example? A group of women, relatives and friends, are trying to save whatever can be saved; they hide their men from military conscription, look after refugees, the ill, each other. They also lose friends and their jobs, so the protagonist Milica earns money – anonymously – as a typist for a greatly respected national writer. She finds the work so tiresome that she lets off steam by writing a novel of her own, influenced by the Brontë sisters. Alongside a chronicle of Milica's family and the entertaining ironic excerpts of nationalist prosaic ranting, we thus also get to read a feminist romantic novel.

The novel received the Vital Golden Sunflower Award for the best Serbian literary work in 2016 and was shortlisted for the NIN Award and the Meša Selimović Award.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Svetlana Slapšak** (1948) is an anthropologist and holds a PhD in Classical Studies from the University of Belgrade. She has been promoting freedom of expression and human rights since the 1960s. In 1983, along with her husband, she initiated a petition to abolish the death penalty in Yugoslavia, the first such petition to be published in the Yugoslav media. She was one of the women collectively nominated by the 1000 Peace Women initiative for the Nobel Peace Prize. She has published over 50 books, 400 studies (in linguistics, classical studies, Balkanology, gender studies) and over 1000 essays, along with several translations from ancient and modern Greek, Latin, French and English.

### An excerpt from the novel

*translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh*

### Chapter One

Milica was making the dough for a plum cake. She stood absently by the mixer where the whisk was pounding a large lump of baking margarine, having difficulty blending it into the batter of eggs, sugar and flour. She should have cut it up into smaller knobs but couldn't be bothered, so now the mixer was in overdrive, struggling with the stubborn product from god-knows-which Romanian factory. As a product from our mortal enemy, the popular Zvijezda brand of margarine wrapped in packaging with images of cakes printed all over it, disappeared in the maelstrom of war. Milica, wife and mother, her lashes lowered, her shoulders drooped, her brown curls tied into a loose knot on the top of her head, and a hint of her feminine hips hidden under the oversized T-shirt emblazoned with Pluto the dog, went about her duties with the inconspicuous melancholy of generations troubled by a history of pain and suffering.

When the mixer prevailed, she sighed deeply with relief and awoke from her thoughts on describing the heroine she had been typing up about this very morning, the discursive traces of which were now loitering in her mind. She glanced towards Ella who was meditating on the terrace and gazed across to the neighbouring terraces across the road, the straggly tree in the yard, the rooftops along the banks of the River Sava, the river itself, the concrete blocks beyond it, the glaring blueness of the sky on this September afternoon in Belgrade in 1993.

Ella believes this kind of cake is expensive.

*To make the dough you need three or four eggs (depending on the size of your baking tray) and equal quantities of flour, butter and sugar. Experienced housewives always put a little less sugar and add a pinch of salt, which improves the taste. Start with the butter if you are mixing the ingredients by hand. Butter or line your tray with baking paper and place the dough in it. You can then add pieces or slices of fresh fruit to the cake mix – plums, apricots, sour apples, pears, grapes, blackberries, cherries, strawberries, raspberries, even cubes of diced melon. Bake in the oven at 180°C for around 40 minutes. As soon as you take it out of the oven sprinkle it with vanilla sugar and once it has cooled down slightly give it a dusting of icing sugar. The cake is very filling.*

Ella, Milica's mother, was sitting in the blind spot on the terrace, doing things grandmothers traditionally do – smoking outside the reach of Julka's weak lungs, drinking vile coffees and reading the magazine *Elle* that she, in an era of a rising spirit of consumerism, had begun

buying in 1964. Once her life became so unfortunately intertwined with old age and war, moving house and a partial loss of independence, Ella began reading *Elle* again. Like so many other things, newspapers were hard to come by, so a kind of individual protest can be discerned in Ella's return to the past, as well as a relatively successful self-therapy against senility. In this, the second year of the war, Ella had got as far as Grace Kelly's third pregnancy, when women started wearing trouser suits and men's baseball caps, and shirt dresses were still in fashion.

"Autumnal colours are the prettiest," said Ella even though (or precisely because) she knew that Milica could not hear her. "Good Italian shoes, a neat tweed suit, a cashmere jumper with a soft collar, a beige coat, and you're in the saddle. That was how you dressed when you were still at secondary school. Look at you now, walking around in some kind of tattered poncho or wrapped in a shawl, and those slippers. Listen to me, the worse things are, the more a woman should strive to look good. I was never more elegant than after I divorced your father, even though I was left with virtually nothing. No silk blouse? So what! I created a few plastrons out of old shirts to wear under a suit or a jumper, each one slightly different, all with a little lace, a little embroidery, and a ceramic brooch and immediately my colleagues started asking me how I managed to dress like that on a pay packet like mine and with a child. I even knitted myself some woollen fake fronts so it looked as if I kept changing the jumpers I wore. Later, when I began going to Germany, I saw that clothes catalogues actually list these kinds of plastrons, various models, various colours. There you could even buy improvisation!"

Ella fell silent when Schliemann, the street cat popular in most of the neighbourhood, appeared on the wall below the terrace. She stuck a toothpick into a piece of chicken liver and with a trained gesture threw it onto the wall, right in front of one of the ugliest examples of a cat that Belgrade, known for its ugly felines, has ever seen. In a token of appreciation Schliemann with his white and dirty-grey striped body on long legs, produced a surprisingly clear sound. Whenever he opened his white-lined snout of considerable size, the sound did not come straight away, but with a slight delay, as if it were being produced somewhere deeper – close to the heart perhaps. Schliemann had acquired much of his popularity in communicating with the numerous people who fed him by giving the impression that he was extremely emotional (grateful). It was Goran who had named him, after his talent in excavating rubbish bins and skips. He conducted his systematic rummaging in the early hours of the morning when only Goran would see him. Whenever Goran called him, Schliemann would stick his head out of the rubbish without any of his usual fawning and expressions of

gratitude, more matter-of-fact and in solidarity, as a working man might greet his colleague. The theatrics are for the females, the look on his face said.

From the simple motion of Ella's hand it was possible to discern one of the chief virtues of our protagonist's mother: professionalism. It is easy to succumb to the charms of any old street cat, but its feeding should be a precisely executed process with food prepared and chopped up in advance, toothpicks ready, all on a plate used only for this purpose, at a suitable distance from her coffee cup and souvenir ashtray from Paros. Schliemann would of course jump onto the terrace from the wall but he would never forgo this ritual. Only after it did he skilfully negotiate his way between two flowerpots and begin purring loudly. Ella never got upset when Schliemann's eight kilos of live weight with all its coal dust, neglected scabs, fleas and god-knows-what else jumped into her lap, tore a stocking or soiled her light-coloured skirt. Ella wore beige in winter and white in summer; they were her only colours. In as far as Schliemann's physical contact with Julka, everyone had just given up and hoped for the best: Julka and Schliemann gently loved each other, kissed, washed each other, breathed down each others nostrils, scratched and licked each other's fleas and slept in a gentle embrace. While Dinah (named after Alice's cat), smelling only of her owners' French perfumes, felt a haughty contempt towards Julka, Schliemann correctly estimated that the human offspring was the head of the house. Dinah was the cat Milica had had before she got married and she exchanged bodily passions with Schliemann twice a year. Now that the moment or rather the season wasn't right for that, Dinah merely coldly observed Schliemann from the kitchen window, as he vulgarly rubbed against Ella.

In the silence that lingered after Milica had put the cake into the oven, Ella asked her, "And, how's work going?"

"Badly," Milica responded. "I got the first hundred pages but I only typed up the first two."

The truth was even worse. Even on page one she had got stuck at "*burnt hearths*" and made a tiny question mark next to the words with a sharp red pencil. It looked offensive, almost obscene. She then replaced it with a barely noticeable dot. She typed "*ancient hearths*" into the computer. She would need to ask what it meant and how come a hearth can be burnt when that is the natural state of hearths – being burnt. Milica sighed and took a sip of her cold coffee.

"P'ss" she said quietly.

Dinah understood and a moment later she ended up under Milica's forearm, silky, warm and full of feline understanding.

“Is he really leaving today?” Ella asked.

“Yes. And stop talking loud enough for any nut from the neighbourhood to hear you.”

Ella’s stilettos could be heard from the terrace. Staggeringly high heels were imperative to her concept of a woman’s elegance (“You walk like a squaw in those flat moccasins!”) and she did not forsake them even at home; this summer model with a wooden sole and a metallic enhancement on the heel had a particularly impressive acoustic effect. Schliemann joined Julka.

“Alright, here I am. When is he leaving?”

“I shouldn’t tell you that either... He’s leaving with Vojo and Dušan, driving to Budapest. They’ll be leaving at around one, so they should reach the border at around four or five, and with a little bit of luck they won’t have too much trouble, especially since a colleague will pick them up in Subotica and take them across in his car, to make it look like they were going across the border to buy petrol. If all goes well, Sanja will go to Subotica the day after tomorrow and bring the car back.”

“And then off to Toronto!”

“No, Dušan is going to Montreal.” Ella was not one of those mothers who would sigh and say, “Oh, my dear children!” or anything like that.

“I want you to give me five minutes alone with Goran,” she said.

“Just don’t give him all your money. Leave some for me and Julka.”

Ella contemptuously raised her eyebrows. To a retired analyst of her stature and style, this Balkan muddling of emotions and money was always abhorrent.

“I’m investing in my granddaughter and give those close to her whatever assets are essential and I can afford. By the way, I did think Goran would come up with something more dramatic.”

“It’ll be dramatic enough if the police stop them on their way to the border, if they start paying too much attention to the certificate from the army sector office, if they panic...”

Ella, her heels clacking, withdrew back to the terrace, believing that she needed to let her daughter think about her marriage, about parting with her husband and planning her future as a single mother.

Milica stayed sitting with her coffee, Dinah still on her lap. In her melancholically lowered head, however, there was no trace of the programme Ella had anticipated. When she tried to rid herself of the thoughts of those burnt hearths, she resorted to her old game: when you don’t like something, try to intensively about a complete opposite of what you are trying to forget. In the past this game had got her into a lot of trouble. Imagine what might happen

to someone playing it during a chemistry lesson. But in less risky situations it worked. Milica imagined green grass, fields dotted with the shadows of scattered clouds, sheep, the sky, cornflowers. Gardens that are not gardens, without fences, without yards, paths without people, ponds with fish and ducks, chirping blackbirds and singing nightingales, crunching gravel. An English garden. Why an English garden? Because it is unlike a French, geometric garden. Though there are geometric gardens among English gardens too, especially any herb garden is usually geometric. The Queen of Hearts' garden in *Alice in Wonderland* is geometric. Any garden around a manor or large house or parsonage. Heather growing in Yorkshire, the Brontë sisters. But this was certainly not their garden because the parsonage they lived in, as described in detail by Dara, supporting her description with a number of photographs, was grey and depressing, surrounded by a graveyard that was far too big for Haworth where they lived, a village with little more than a high street. The street lies on a steep hill and it was this hill that was the key reason for the contamination of the local water, running through the graveyard with old flat tombstones and dead people stacked on top of each other. In the first half of the nineteenth century people in Haworth were dying at a rate higher than probably anywhere else in England, until the Public Health Commission identified the cause, prohibited flat shallow graves and introduced upright headstones. Despite this, in the few years that followed, so many people died in Haworth that the new graveyard had to be extended and became enormous. Milica, proud of all the literature she had read on the matter, included all this in her dissertation. Foremost, she looked at the novels of Anne Brontë who was the first to describe a drunken protagonist and a wife who had no choice but to run away from him because she could not divorce him. The result was that the elderly assistant professor, known by the nickname Stub, accused her of 'feminist Marxism' and of failing to mention hermeneutics, immanent poetology and postmodernism. She was given a grade eight and instead of a teaching job at secondary school, had to try and find jobs as a foreign language correspondent. Mostly she translated irrelevant texts. Dara, who spent some time as an au pair in England every year, thus spoke far better English than Milica. She had finished a management course at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts and found a job at the national TV station which she kept until the outbreak of war.

The garden Milica thought about looked a little like the arboretum in Trsteno, or even the one in Volčji Potok near Kamnik. Enemy territories. As soon as Goran leaves, she will pick up *Jane Eyre* and cry until dawn. This is no *Wuthering Heights* by a different sister. Just a positive plan on how to tame a man with all the essential traumas the process involves.

There is of course the madwoman in the attic, who ends up dying in the fire, like... burnt hearths. A study was written about her and she was turned into a feminist academic myth. A novel was also written, explaining her first marriage and madness. Then of course a film was made, showing what was before – a prequel rather than a sequel. Something to do with the Sargasso Sea and Timothy Dalton, if she remembered correctly... I dream on, while other people earn money, make films, write, study, become famous, travel... leave. That's all I need right now, to get into my head that they are working against me, doing it deliberately just to humiliate me, and I'll soon start writing like him...

Milica raised her head. If this is what she was like after a single page of typing, imagine what might happen later? She urgently needs to get in touch with Dara and cancel the entire thing, tell her she's pregnant again, or something... Dinah and Schliemann both stirred at the sound only they heard of a key in the lock at the front door. It was Goran.

\*\*\*

An English garden in all shades of green fuses into one on the black and white screen. Milica opened a new file and began writing, quickly, head to fingers, bypassing the heart. She smiled at the thought of the stereotypical figure of a critic who – when talking about a woman author – would speak of a heart-hand connection and avoid the head... but she just could not stop herself and barely managed to keep under control what was springing forth as an insubordinate, whimsical, entirely independent writing, clearly emerging from suppressed knowledge, an unexpressed satisfaction, the need for escape, the need for play... for love. Something or someone was writing from within, clearly wanting to extend her life, lure her away, take her anywhere that was not here. And Milica obeyed whatever it was and went after it, followed herself, to a Neverland, filled with words and images, everything she instantly recognised. She was prepared to turn inside out like a glove all this that was so familiar, this world of her own beyond the real world; she should not delude herself, what she wanted to explore were the seams, the structure, what was inside, its mechanics, its craft, the writing. She immediately knew that this was a sort of therapy, probably the only therapy to cope with writing that believes the world is at its disposal. So, as dawn was breaking with the distant sounds of the city ridding itself of the grime of night into the sky, words began pouring out of from everything that was Milica.

The inevitability of marriage has been denied by many poets and philosophers, and affirmed by many writers and moralists. A rational woman reading any of these literary forms thus had to find her own way through opposing views and come to her own conclusions. But a woman's thoughts are burdened with the prevalent point of view of society that stipulates marriage as the only possible form of existence. Both the widow Smithson and the never-married Miss Easley thought the same and did not hide their opinion from Echan's indecisive mother: Echan should get married. The possibility of hypocritically hiding her doubts about marriage in front of the two ladies she otherwise held in great esteem was not to her liking, neither was their inadequacy when it came to her too scholarly and too complicated evidence. Mr Thornpen, her dear father, was too scatterbrained and absorbed in his reading to notice the deepening in the rift between theoretical thought and the prevailing social rules in his own house. Emily Charlotte Ann Thornpen, Echan to friends and family, had to make her own decisions and had to make sure not to hurt the feelings of those close to her. The Thornpens were not rich and also not particularly strict parents. A middle solution – leaving home and trying to save up some money as a governess – might be welcome to everyone. Had she not until now been earning money by giving piano and French lessons in Harrowgate to almost every member of the upper class in the area? The widow and the old maid will accept the solution as her looking for a better candidate for a husband, and the mother is well aware that there is nobody appropriate nearby. Father will only care that she should write him long and clever letters... In reality Echan was not thinking about the possibility of marriage or even about any member of the opposite sex that might embody a successful candidate to spend together a lifetime 'until death do us part.' You could not say that there were no potential candidates at all; in all the families where she tutored children there was always – somewhere in the distance or even in the house itself – some elder brother, unmarried relative or family friend. Many visited her; a number of them showed interest or spoke particularly kindly to her. Due to her reading of good literature, however, Echan had very early developed her own conception of love and to her it was key in any scheme to marry. She quickly realized that her understanding had little in common with the understanding of other young women she met. While most of them would stop talking and giggle with embarrassment at the mere mention of love, to Echan this was the most important side of any marriage worth considering. The inevitable result of this was that she had ever fewer opportunities to discuss the matter with young ladies of her age; to be precise, she noticed that they avoided her. Echan believed that what was most important in love was knowledge, from anatomy to philosophy. Texts from antiquity taught her that love was a kind of illness that could only be cured by the proximity



or practice of love itself, so the obvious hypocrisy of the society she lived in was very different from her favourite literary examples. Beside savage rapes and kidnappings, there was also a great deal of intelligent discussion about love in this literature, casual descriptions of the act of love, mourning for a loved one, long-lasting and binding love, the inseparable connection of body and soul in love. Echan, as we can see, was a quick learner, so in conversations with her peers replaced her youthful enthusiasm for understanding love with a distraught expression and kept her keen interest to herself. Young ladies often perform as a group in which the more dominant personalities determine the rules and behaviour, together with the hierarchy within the group, including the exclusion of those who do not fit in with the tastes and – to be clear – the spoiltness of those dominant. Thus Echan was unobtrusively ousted out of her circle of peers and at the same time out of the circle of information about the opposite sex. This was accompanied with covert evil and excluding comments about her, which meant that Echan stayed outside all events that relentlessly led to arranging marriages and changes in the life styles of her peers. Without great effort or hesitation Echan easily came to the resolution that she should leave...

What the hell is wrong with her? *Cut?* No. *Copy, save as:* english garden. Where was all this coming from? She had promised herself *Jane Eyre* and tears, then Jure turned up and really did make her cry. The revenge of the Brontë sisters? Ghosts from her dissertation? She stood up and opened the window. It looked out onto the corner of the house next door and a courtyard with terraces decorated with washing. From the ground floor she could hear her neighbour the gravedigger swearing, music resonated from the building to the side.

Ella appeared at the door.

“Listen, my child, I’ll look after Julka. You go and lie down and I’ll wake you up in about three hours’ time.”

Milica could not recall when Ella last called her “my child.”

“Thank you, my mother,” she replied.

She dragged herself off to bed, a little feverish and with a slight headache. She and Goran used to love going to bed just as everyone else was beginning to wake up. She could feel Dinah nestling at her feet. Images. Goran swimming in green-blue water, though not in the sea but in a large hole in some ice.