

Hatred - Deep

A Novel

By
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(Translated from Macedonian to English and
edited by Risto Stefov)

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THE NOVEL THAT IS READ “IN A SINGLE BREATH”

Dragica Najcheska is a confirmed author in Macedonian literature. She writes for both adults and children. Regarding the collection of the Macedonian story, Dr. Haralampie Polenakovich, early in her youth, one time examined one of her texts, which showed signs of the effort of a focused anthologist. Since then she has published a dozen books in the above-mentioned two spheres of our (Macedonian) literature.

Dragica Najcheska's latest work delves into the socio-psychological side of a problem relating to the personal tragedy of an individual, in this case Maria, a Macedonian woman who is initially happily married to a foreigner then becomes a mother - until she comes to live in Germany under the same roof with her husband's parents. From there everything goes wrong for her. After a short period of living together, the atmosphere becomes very cold (albeit seemingly conflict-free). In fact, that coldness, exhibited by both her husband and mother-in-law, was the real reason for the *les beaux parent* relationship. Living together for a long time without speaking a single word, face to face, to each other drives Maria and her son Carl to flee Germany. Her action seems unjustified to the outside world: it causes severe (unreasonable) injury - marital and ethical problems in their relationship. That is why “justice” is on the side of her husband who initiates divorce measures and deprives the child of his mother who, due to her shaky health and unfavourable social status, ends up in her homeland. Learning of the divorce the young mother becomes mentally broken, where under the circumstances she would be left without her child. This leads her to long-term isolation in a mental hospital where she accidentally finds one of her classmates Elena, who takes the initiative to make frequent contact and provides Maria with moral support. Here Elena discovers the reason for the cold attitude exhibited by the old German couple towards their daughter-in-law which, above all, was due to the death of the mother-in-law's close relative in Maria's country where he served as a German occupying officer. Of course, “pride” contributes no less to this because of the German sense of “purity” of the German race which, so many years after Hitler's Germany collapsed, lived in the older generation who were indoctrinated by neo-fascism and its idea of “superiority”. Therefore - given all this -

Maria has no place in their home and in her husband Hellwig's life. Hellwig, who doesn't share his parents' views but still tacitly surrenders to their wishes, - with a duality in himself - becomes a victim of the family tradition. However, even with Maria's inhumane treatment he is still without a doubt, a human being: neither better nor worse than the majority of the people on this planet. He has his own shortcomings (immaturity for marital relations) and positive qualities (a professional, but also without a completely extinguished conscience towards Maria, and cares for their son whose "half-polluted" blood could never be a reason for alienation - as it was with his parents).

The novel ends with a semi-happy ending, with the most humane and most possible compromise between life and love, dictated by "survival". Thankfully Maria comes out of the hospital healthy, aware of the complexity of the problem, but also convinced of Hellwig's sincerity that she and her husband will take care of their son together and that he will allow her son to spend part of the year with her...

There is another character in the novel, Hellwig's second wife. (She, by the strength of her character, appears stronger than the mother-in-law and father-in-law and is also a willing second mother to little Carl. She is kind to Maria even though she is a stranger to her.)

The novel "Hatred - Deep" that is read "in a single breath" belongs to "Women's literature", not with a black and white schematized solution but with a sense of moderation and a sense of justice.

Prof. Dr. Georgi Stalev

AFFIRMATION OF THE WILL OF A PERSON

Dragica Najcheska's latest work, the novel "Hatred - Deep", builds on her work thus far which is well-known and well-received by our (Macedonian) readers. Her work is an artistic achievement for her which is very much valued by Macedonian literary critics. I want to emphasize that with her work she has always been able to attract attention, especially of the young reader, using in-depth, but also balanced psychological analysis of her characters in order to have a positive impact.

Up to now Dragica Najcheska's literary work has, almost without exception, delved into topics from contemporary life. In her new novel, her characters bring out a positive thread of unstoppable inner heroism. Putting them in a context of conflicting life situations, difficulties, impasses, above all they must resolve their problems within themselves - temptations, firmness and stoicism, virtues... which ultimately help them carry forward their tragedy and misfortune and learn how to live their lives.

Even though the theme of the novel is contemporary, the plot and the main characters are young people with roots extending to Second World War nationalist passions and their tragic consequences. The story is about a mixed marriage involving a Macedonian woman and a German man who, transferred from Macedonia to a distant unknown environment, clash with the war generation and succumb, unable to survive against the deep-rooted prejudices inherited from the war.

In this social-historical setting, the author builds and develops the life destiny of the main character - Maria, who experiences a deep mental breakdown. Not being accepted by the family of her beloved husband Hellwig, she returns to her family in a moment of deep crisis, taking their little child with her. At home, her crisis deepens. Her mental disorder grows and at one point, when the court takes her child away and gives it to the father, it reaches a climax. She is admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Here in the hospital, she struggles for seven years and at the same time exhibits an extraordinary force of the will to live, to overcome... her thoughts keep her trapped behind the hospital bars. Eventually she proves herself as a person

with a healthy psyche. Ultimately she is employed in the hospital as a librarian and a therapist who assists physicians in treating other patients. Maria manages to establish a new balance with her family, as well as with her husband and son Carl.

In building the characters in the novel, in giving them depth and credibility of their psyche, the author manages to carry them very close to us, which is why they are perceived as real, living persons.

The social ambience, which is strikingly present in her novel, doesn't suppress the broad universal human meaning of the topic.

The basic content of her work fits all around in contemporary life. Not only with the problem of mixed marriages, which is more and more present in our time due to international intolerance of various kinds in many countries in the world, but also with the affirmation of the positive energy of the human will, which finds its full confirmation in the author's work. The author with her characteristic natural way, with her lyrical guided action of the plot and its unfolding, manages to keep the reader's attention from beginning to end.

Prof. Dr. Dimitar Boshkov

She walked completely absent-mindedly, preoccupied, along the only straight street in town. It was her first visit. The place was completely unfamiliar to her. She arrived here formally. Not long ago. On a bus. It was approaching noon. The sun was warm. Pleasant sunshine in early spring. Her first impression of the town wasn't so good. Messy, dirty.

At one point she felt more than she saw. Two hands grabbed her by her shoulders, painfully squeezing them. The two hands belonged to a woman. She stuck them between two metal fence bars in the yard of the two-storey building. She looked at the woman's face through the lattice. It was dirty. Unwashed. Her black eyes shone strangely. There was a frantic expression in them. Her black hair wasn't combed. She was dressed in something that looked like a homemade dress and a nightgown. Their eyes met. There was some strange joy in the woman's eyes on the other side of the fence... it was momentary... like a prayer... like a shout.

The woman's crusty mouth, in a cry, uttered the words: "You are my saviour, you, you, only you can save me. Get me out of here! Tell the doctors who I am. That I'm educated... that I'm smart... that I shouldn't be here... that I'm healthy!"

It was a desperate cry. The terrible cry of an innocent convict. A cry for mercy. A merciful cry.

At that moment something touched inside Elena's brain, in her consciousness: She realized she was in front of the psychiatric hospital. She remembered hearing explanations about her and that hospital and the seriously ill that it housed. There were other women in a similar situation there besides the woman who was still holding her by her shoulders.

There was no doubt in Elena's mind: that the woman with her hands clasped on her shoulders was Maria. Her friend from school. From her class.

She heard herself whispering to Maria. Quite mildly. Trying to act cool. Calm.

“I will help you... I will understand...”

Elena gently placed her hands on Maria, who was still firmly holding onto her like a drowning woman.

“Trust me. I will go to the doctors immediately. I will clarify everything.”

“You... Elena, don’t you know me? You know very well who I am ?! They made me this way...” said Maria anxiously in a panicky voice.

“Who made you this way?” Elena asked in a quiet voice trying to speak calmly. Convincingly...

“My husband’s mother and father. My husband. You remember him. I introduced you to him... No, he didn’t do this to me, not him! He was wonderful... He loved me very much... They are to blame! They are the real destroyers! They took my child... They took my child... They took everything from me... And they took my health...”

After her last words, as if regretting what she’d said about her health, Maria quickly added:

“But not now... I’m fine now... With my health... And the doctors said so... But then, why don’t they let me go...”

She quickly leaned towards Elena and quietly whispered:

“I know why. They receive money from there. They pay for me... To be here... Locked up... I’m in a camp... As you can see!... And my family,” Maria went on to say.

“...My mother and sisters... You know I have two sisters... They too betrayed me. Me and my child. My poor Carl! He... do you know where he is? There with them. Alone. Without me. Without his mother...”

From the sound of her voice Maria seemed to be in terrible pain... it was visible on her face. It was twisted.

“My family... They are afraid of taking me home. They think I will be a burden to them... Please, I beg you. Tell them, I will find a job. And I will take my child from those monsters... My little child...”

Maria was crying terribly... Her weak body was shaking. It was unbearable to listen to her cries... Her body began to spasm all over. She let go of Elena’s shoulders...

Two big and strong orderlies quickly came over and dragged Maria inside the building. The orderlies looked angrily at Elena whom they didn’t know. Naturally they blamed Elena for upsetting their patient.

Elena listened to Maria’s scream for a long time. She understood what she was saying when she yelled: “my child, my little one, alone there, with those degenerates...”

Elena stood there as if her feet were buried in the ground. She couldn’t take a single step. And how could she leave her! All that had happened... wouldn’t leave Elena alone. She decided to follow up on Maria. The job for which she had come to the city could wait. She sat down on the wall around the nearby house. She needed time to rest and recover from what had just happened.

* * *

Elena remembered Maria from their second year in high school. She remembered the day their teacher had brought her to class. The teacher said:

“This young lady is lagging behind in her studies due to an illness. Please help her. And spend time with her.”

Elena soon discovered that there was a lot of sadness in Maria. She looked like she was in pain. There were also unusual traces of jaundice in her eyes. Elena understood that Maria had suffered from jaundice for a long time. Her forehead wasn’t very high. She had short, thick black hair. It looked like she’d cut it herself. It stood out like a brush. Standing up. She wore a shabby coat. Old shoes. A deformed old leather jacket that looked like it was well-worn.

For a long time Maria sat alone in the last desk at the back of the class, like she was the latest addition to the class. Almost no one came near her most days. It's true that at that time Maria looked like she was an older sister of one of the classmates. What's more, she sat back there crouched forward in that last desk. As if she wanted to go unnoticed.

Elena was the first to break through to Maria. The others did that later. Elena and Maria didn't become close friends. But they spent time together. By the time she graduated, Maria had already caught up in the school work she'd missed. She had a gift for telling good stories which also helped her. She had the ability to write not too badly. It made sense. She also delved into what she read and came to her own conclusion.

After graduation they stayed apart for a long time. When they met by accident it seemed to Elena that Maria wanted to avoid her. She didn't want to greet her. Not even in the street. Had she done something to make Maria resent her? One time she reached out to her in a brightly lit shoe store. She grabbed her hand and said:

“Hey, how are you? What's the hurry?”

It seemed as if Maria really wanted to avoid her.

She was ashamed of her appearance. From the clothes she was wearing. From her hairstyle. She looked anxious and didn't want to answer.

“What's happening? How are you?” Elena asked again. At the same time, she felt that the questions she was asking were out of place. The answer was in the look on Maria's face. There was no sign of a will to live...

Maria finally replied and said: “Are you still in school?” There was a strange but not hostile look of envy in Maria's eyes. As if Elena possessed a treasure inaccessible to Maria.

Almost with a sense of guilt... Elena said that indeed she was still in school.

* * *

Elena began to walk towards the hospital building. At the gate they refused to let her in. After she had convinced them she was accompanied by an orderly.

She was greeted by a nurse who welcomed her. Elena said:

“I would like to speak with the doctors... And inquire about a sick woman named Maria...” Elena hesitated over Maria’s last name before she said “Petrovska”, wondering if Maria had changed her last name when she got married.

The nurse took her to a door which had a sign that read “doctor on duty.” She knocked.

“Feel free to come in,” she heard a voice say from inside.

She went in. A doctor stood behind the desk. As if expecting her. He was a relatively young man. Dark eyes. Smooth hair. Carefully groomed moustache. He had a slight smile on his face and bright eyes.

“Welcome...” he said.

Elena began to speak excitedly. She said:

“I came to ask about Maria Petrovska. She is a friend. A very close friend.”

“In principle, we don’t provide information. Except to the closest members of her family,” replied the doctor with some hesitation, while shyly looking straight into her light green eyes.

“But Maria and I are very close friends. We sat at the same desk for four years in school. Please... Please...”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and pulled out a green folder from the desk drawer. Apparently with Maria's file. He looked at the name on the folder cover and handed the folder to Elena. He then left the room.

Elena's hands began to shake. She wondered what was written on all those pages of paper? What was written on those lines... what sealed her poor friend's fate?... It seemed like she was invading her privacy... She was afraid to start reading... But when she did she quickly swallowed every word. As if someone was going to take the file away from her. Any moment now. There were also lines underlined. With a red felt tip pen. Most of what was written described the condition Maria was in when she was admitted to the hospital.

Elena recognized Maria's handwriting on several pages. She had written in ink. In sad and beautiful words Maria had described her poor childhood and her experience in school. These pages must have been some kind of diary for her. Also written there was that her father's minimal wage as a railway worker supported the three sisters and their unemployed mother. She wrote about the torn socks given to them by their neighbours, as if out of pity, for which they quarreled and fought. For the blouses and skirts they fought over. And for the small, outdated and worn out things. As well as for their meager meals.

When Elena finished reading she noticed the doctor was back in the room. She didn't notice when he had come back.

I don't understand. What had happened to her before she got sick? Was there an obvious reason..." asked Elena.

"So far we haven't got anything out of her. She gets very upset when we ask about her husband. We even avoid mentioning her child because she panics. I tried to get more information about her situation at home from her two sisters... when they came to visit. But they too don't know much about her life with her husband in Germany. She told them very little. She has said nothing bad, not a single bad word about her husband, not even about his family. When

she came back with her child to Macedonia, her sisters thought she had come to visit...”

...Elena remembered the last time she'd seen Maria. She seemed so helpless. Frightened by the possibility that her marriage might be breaking up. She was afraid her husband was going to take her child... But since then, Elena hadn't spoken to her, even though she had her phone number. They hadn't seen one another again. Maria didn't contact her either. Elena thought Maria had sorted out her relationship with her husband and that was why Maria hadn't contacted her.

“Is there any chance she will recover?... Any chance for improvement?...” asked Elena sounding uncertain.

“As of now it's difficult to say... No one can predict what will happen... We are doing everything we can,” replied the doctor.

The doctor then pointed her towards the door in front of which stood an orderly, who accompanied her to the hospital exit.

* * *

During moments when Maria felt better, without wanting to, her thoughts took her back to the many distant places and past events she had experienced. They lined up before her eyes, sometimes upside down. This happened mostly at night. When the patients were asleep. It happened subconsciously when Maria wanted to remember the days when she met the man she loved, who later became her husband and father of her child.

...She worked all day that day, like she had many days before, at her neighbour Rada's house. They cleaned the house and washed clothes. Late in the afternoon when it was almost dark, after they'd eaten their supper, Rada gave her a nice cream-coloured coat. It seemed to Maria like it was the most beautiful thing she had ever worn. She stood in front of the mirror for a long time looking at herself. Then she took to the streets wanting to go to the town square. She couldn't go back home... As soon as she left her feeling of depression returned. How long was this humiliating feeling going

to last?... she wondered. She couldn't concentrate on school work and she couldn't concentrate on a job...

She nervously stood on the street corner. Completely absent-minded. Maybe that's why she didn't see the young man on a motorcycle, right away, standing right in front of her. As soon as he spoke to her, in a foreign language with only a single Macedonian word, she knew he was a foreigner but understood what he said. He asked her to help him find the new factory in the suburbs. She didn't know about the factory but tried to explain to him where the settlement he was looking for was located. He didn't understand what she said and started to look around. Maybe there was another passerby who could help him. Unfortunately no one passed by. The foreigner asked her to sit on the back seat of his motorcycle and show him the way. At first she was afraid. She wanted to bolt and quickly run away. Then he touched her softly on the shoulder, realizing that he had scared her. He shook her hand intending to move on. He thanked her with his smile and childlike, clear blue eyes.

Maria hesitated. She felt that his smile and childlike clear blue eyes had convinced her to stay. Her fear was gone. She sat on the motorcycle seat behind him. Together they were going to find the factory much faster. It was getting dark. Although she could hardly hear him from the noise of the engine, the foreigner was trying to explain something to her... He told her that the guard at the factory would be able to tell him which hotel room was reserved for him. He would be staying in the city for some time. He was going to install the machines manufactured in the factory where he was going to work. Maria wasn't so sure about trusting him. He could have invented all this. But by some instinct, she felt he was a good man. Finally she thought that whatever happened happened, she would be able to defend herself.

They easily found it. The factory. It was just out of town. They stopped in front of the guard house. A kerosene lamp was shining inside. Similar to those carried by railroad workers at night. An old man covered with an overcoat quickly came out. The foreigner explained to him what he was looking for. The guard went back into the guard house and brought back an envelope. He gave it to the

foreigner. The envelope contained information on his reservation. The foreigner thanked him. The guard frowned at Maria. Who knew what he thought. Then they got on the motorcycle again and went back to the city.

They stopped somewhere in the city centre. Maria helped the foreigner find the hotel mentioned in the letter. She took him to the entrance. Then she shook his hand and got ready to walk away.

“Wait, I haven’t introduced myself,” yelled the foreigner still holding her hand. “My name is Hellwig,” he said.

“Maria,” she replied quietly and quickly withdrew her hand.

He then asked her to come and visit him sometime. Because she now knew where he stayed. If she wanted...

The next day, not too late at night, she walked around near the hotel for a long time. However, she didn’t go inside. Eventually she decided to go home. After taking a few steps away from the hotel someone put their hand on her shoulder. From behind. It was Hellwig. He’d recognized her in the dark.

Since then they had been together almost every day. Their visits seemed to fill Maria’s life. They brought her joy. His presence in her life was a bit like the events in the stories she wrote. Those beautiful stories. He soon became a frequent guest in her house. He never came with empty hands. But not only that, everyone at home loved him. Was he that nice? Maria wasn’t sure but his smile was always present in their home. A clarity since she’d introduced him for the first time. He even learned to speak a few Macedonian words. He was happy to say them.

But the days, like all numbered days, passed quickly. They were counted like a soldier’s days on leave.

Maria’s neighbours didn’t hide their envy and jealousy. All of them. After the foreigner appeared. They couldn’t be indifferent to her when they saw her. She didn’t look like her former self at all. She was fashionably and expensively dressed. And so full of joy. And

she, when she walked with Hellwig, felt like they were somewhere behind a curtain. Behind a half-open door. People were full of envy. Sometimes she heard bad words hurled at her like: “He’ll use her and use her, then he’ll leave her... He pays her, like ‘those kinds of women’...” Maria tried not to pay attention. Even more, the relationship made them walk past them with their noses sticking up in the air.

Maria herself didn’t know how she’d won over Hellwig. She became frightened by the idea that her feelings for him weren’t just feelings for a friend. How could she survive without him? After he left for home? Did he feel anything more than just friendship towards her? Never in her dreams could she have imagined that a man like that could fall for her... That good kind of man. A handsome man. And here, fate brought him to her from somewhere.

And why, as it happens in dreams, do happy days come to an end? The work which he came here to do was coming to an end. Hellwig told her the last machine had been installed. Maria didn’t want to think about it. At night, hidden by darkness, she cried quietly. Could she have known from the beginning what was going to happen between them? Everything happened so spontaneously. And that’s why she didn’t think about how this was going to end. Things and events dictated everything that had happened between them. She was helpless. She indulged in the wonderful feeling... She’d done this to herself. No matter how it ended...

* * *

The days before Hellwig was scheduled to leave were numbered. Maria was surprised, even disappointed, that he didn’t seem to care. She didn’t notice any changes in him. It was as though he didn’t intend to leave. As if they weren’t about to part. She thought... If he does this in every country where he installs machines, that is if there is a woman left behind, then this is something quite ordinary for him...

They were walking along the bank of a river. Late at night. He turned her face towards his with both hands. He looked into her eyes and said:

“Will you come with me?” in a warm and decisive tone of voice.

Maria instantly began to cry. Out of joy. Out of sadness. Out of indecision. Somehow she knew he was going to ask. She loved him... She grabbed him and clung onto him tightly. They stood there in silence for a long time. He didn't ask her again.

She didn't answer him then or the next day. She was tormented by many questions. How exactly had he chosen her? Found her? From all the women in the world who were available to him? Wasn't this a temporary attachment? How would she leave her home? Where would she go with him? Without her own means of subsistence? What if that step wasn't taken? Would their relationship break? Would her love for him end? What next? Did her happiness truly stand here, now, in front of her?! Did all this depend only on her decision?!...

* * *

...On the bus Elena couldn't recover from the shock she'd experienced during her visit with Maria. How was she going to find out what had happened, that was so terrible in her life that had pushed Maria into such a hopeless state? To such a disorder. Going back to her thoughts Elena remembered the moment when she had first met Maria with the foreigner.

...Elena had nearly collided with Maria and a young man, with whom she was holding hands, just as she entered a department store in the city centre. They all stopped. Without hiding her happiness and joy Maria introduced the young man. She said:

“Allow me to introduce to you. This is my fiancé.”

Elena shook his hand. She was surprised and confused and couldn't hide it from Maria.

When he said his name while shaking hands, Elena realized that he was a foreigner. She then, in a mechanical tone of voice, asked:

“He’s not one of us (Macedonian) is he?”

Where had she found him? Elena wondered.

“He’s German,” replied Maria abruptly. “Do you like him?”

Elena kept looking at him and Maria. After seeing her expression, Maria assessed how much Elena liked him. She couldn’t take her eyes off him... Elena hugged Maria congratulating her from the bottom of her heart.

After they separated, Elena couldn’t believe how happy Maria was and the joy this had brought into her life! Deep down in her soul she wished it would last...

* * *

...Was it like this for everyone or just for her? Maria didn’t know. But she believed that small events on fateful days were often decisive during fateful decisions. Just then, in the days when she was thinking what to do - stake everything and go with Hellwig, or... stay here, at home, with her family, without him. Maria remembered meeting Elena, her classmate, who she greatly appreciated. The only one in the class with whom she’d an understanding. That meeting seemed to have helped her make her decision.

When they met at the entrance to the department store, after Elena’s expression, after how she’d looked at her lover, after everything she hadn’t said, Maria realized that Elena saw him as a great choice. Not only for Maria... Where and how she had found him... The whole expression on Elena’s face left a good impression on Maria. Maybe that’s what prompted Maria to act the way she had. Even to say “fiancé”. What Maria really wanted to say to Elena was that this good-looking young man had fallen in love with her, the “ugly duckling”. Surely Elena had difficulty recognizing Maria when she saw her because her appearance had changed so much. Not only because of the beautiful clothing she was wearing and her wonderful hairstyle, but also from the beauty that resulted from all the wonderful things she’d experienced during those months. Almost a

year after Hellwig and her had become close. Others that knew her, when they met her, barely recognized her.

Maria also remembered that after Elena left Hellwig had asked her: “What does that mean - “fiancé”?”

She explained with a laugh. He was overjoyed that she had introduced him to Elena as her fiancé.

On remembering that meeting with Elena, Maria realized that, that day, she’d already made her decision: she was going to go with Hellwig. It was that simple. She wouldn’t ask him to “marry her” beforehand. She would go with him around the world... To have a life together. She trusted him... He had won her over. With all his manners towards her. Towards her sisters. Towards her mother. The hardest thing for her was to leave her family. And without that they would be helpless.

They all cried when Maria told her sisters and mother about her decision. She didn’t know whether they were crying because they would miss her or because they felt pity for themselves. It was uncertain. But day after day she assured them that she would help them. Wherever she went. She wouldn’t forget them. This would be best for everyone. She would send them money. She would certainly find a job wherever she lived with him.

* * *

That day finally came. There was great anxiety at home. Maria was able to hide her restlessness. Before everyone. One time her mother quietly said:

“It would have been good to get married...”

This was the first time that Maria noticed concern in her mother’s eyes.

“That, mother, doesn’t bind us,” she replied.

“No matter what it is, it’s different,” her mother whispered softly. As if being afraid of “learning something not good”. As she used to say.

“Daughter, I wish you well,” she added. “May we always hear good things about you. Don’t worry about us. We will manage somehow. I know you have a good heart. You won’t forget us. You will write to us sometimes. Tell us how you are doing.”

* * *

...Before leaving Maria gave most of the clothes Hellwig had bought for her to her sisters. He’d told her to do that. After they said goodbye they got on the motorcycle and left. Maria remembered having all sorts of mixed feelings as they drove off... She also remembered the words of a wedding song that described the feelings of the uprooted bride... but she wasn’t a bride... According to the song the bride wasn’t allowed to look into her mother’s eyes... not even into her sisters’ eyes...

When they arrived at the train station Hellwig loaded his motorcycle onto a freight car attached to the same high-speed train they left on... The International Express Train. The sleeping car was very comfortable. Only the two of them in the compartment.

Maria looked like Cinderella and Hellwig like the Prince. Was Maria dreaming? Would she wake up from this wonderful dream? All her feelings were merging. Changing from hour to hour. She felt sorry for her mother and sisters. She was afraid of the thought of what would happen next. All the time she felt like she needed to clarify things. To have a common understanding with Hellwig. For example, why weren’t they going to his house first? To introduce her to his family. To see what family he came from. Where, in what house he lived. Why didn’t he mention anything about a wedding?... Everything was done in a hurry. He just told her there was no time because he had to arrive in Sweden by a certain date. That date was fixed and couldn’t be changed. He was doing a similar job there.

He was going there to install machines and put them into operation. At the same time, she was overwhelmed with excitement that she

was going to see the world. Which was opening up before her eyes. When she least expected it. New cities, new people... And, most importantly, Hellwig hadn't left her. He hadn't broken up with her. As some of her evil neighbours, acquaintances and even relatives had hoped. Still, for them, this was certainly not the same as if she were married. Now they would say, "He took her to further use her. To use her to the fullest..." But she left because it was important to her. A new life was beginning for her. With her beloved who was taking her with him.

Along the way they dined in the restaurant car. They also ate the food that they had brought with them. Hellwig, a true German, knew what was needed for the journey. Not a single detail was missed. He was gentle towards her during the entire trip. He was very considerate. He wanted to make her happy. He even taught her a few German words. He felt he was getting closer to her with each new word she learned.

They arrived in the city where they were going to spend several months. They had accommodation in a luxury hotel. Things were very expensive there, especially the hotel and restaurant where they dined. Hellwig took care of all that. Maria wasn't allowed to interfere.

The next day Hellwig went to work, assembling machines. Maria took walking trips around the city so as not to become bored. Soon afterwards Maria enrolled in a German language course. It helped her overcome the language barrier. She continued contact with her family through the letters she sent and received. Her family had no telephone.

* * *

As the days went by one particular question nibbled at Maria like a worm. Had Hellwig told his family about her? He never told her what they wrote to each other in the rare letters they exchanged. Did they know about her and would they greet her if they knew she was living with him? Why was he afraid to write to them about her? Or tell them when he spoke to them on the telephone?

Whenever she tried to talk to him about it Hellwig would interrupt her. He simply didn't want to talk about it. On the other hand Maria had such a nice time with him that she didn't really want to know, especially if it was bad news, she didn't want to deal with it for now... Whatever happened next she would deal with it as it happened...

When he finished assembling the machines Hellwig showed Maria the telegram from the factory that had summoned him to immediately go to another country. Maria realized that, at least for now, they would live their lives as wanderers. In hotels and restaurants. Things that could be very appealing to an adventurer. She began to tire of it. They had no acquaintances, friends, or relatives. They didn't spend time with anyone. However, traveling to another country, to another city, would be a change. It would become more interesting. At least that's what Maria thought.

* * *

Just two days after seeing her friend in such an unfortunate condition in the hospital, Elena went to Maria's house. She rang the doorbell. Her younger sister opened the door. She remembered her name was Nade. She recognized her. She hugged her. They went inside the house. The sister was home alone.

"I saw Maria," said Elena abruptly.

Her sister began to cry.

"I happened to be passing by the hospital. I didn't know she was sick. I was there for a completely different reason. In that city. She is in a very bad condition."

"The last time we visited her she made no contact with us. And the place where she is isn't so close... to go often... It's expensive too. She was in Germany," said Nade and after she paused for a moment she continued, "as well as in other countries. Maria helped us a lot. She also sent us clothes."

Elena felt that Nade didn't want to say much. She acted as if she was afraid of saying too much...

"How are you doing?" asked Nade. It seemed like she wanted to change the conversation... to not talk about Maria. Was she hiding something Elena wondered?

"I heard you became a journalist. That's a nice thing. Interesting," said Nade.

Elena was starting to become impatient. She wanted to talk more about Maria.

"When did Maria come back from Germany?" asked Elena.

"Her child was quite young. He was only several months old..."

"Did her husband come with her?" asked Elena.

"No... He stayed there... in Germany..."

"Are they divorced?" asked Elena.

"Not right away..."

"What exactly happened?... Didn't they get married? They were in love!" Elena was persistent with her questions.

"She didn't say anything to anyone, not even to our mother," said Nade then paused and continued.

"At first we thought that she came to visit. So that we could see my nephew... That's how it looked. She wasn't in a bad mood or anything. That's what we all thought..."

"How long has she been in the hospital?" asked Elena.

"Almost three years," replied Nade in a muffled voice.

"Her husband never came to visit her ?!" asked Elena.

“No, he didn’t come at all. Even when she was healthy...” replied Nade and continued.

“He didn’t write her any letters either... Maybe he felt guilty. When they left together they seemed to be well. She often wrote us. We couldn’t tell from the letters alone if things were going well or badly. We had no idea if something had come up between them and that was a problem. Or if they had quarrels. The only thing is that after they went to live with his family, she rarely wrote. But then she gave birth to the child, so we thought she was busy with him. That’s how it is with a small child,” concluded Nade.

“We need to help Maria,” said Elena. “She hasn’t said anything, even to the doctors... I spoke with her doctor... He said he doesn’t know what made her come back from Germany... With such a small child... If you know something please tell me. I will go and visit her again... I will speak with her... if she wants me to, and if she can...”

Nade was silent for a while. Elena wasn’t sure if she was hiding something or if she didn’t know anything. Elena couldn’t understand the reasons for Nade’s restraint... Maybe she believed it was best that way.

Finally Nade said that Maria had complained to the family about the bad relationship she had with Hellwig’s parents, which influenced Hellwig to change his attitude toward her. Then they got into a fight. That’s all Maria told her family... nothing more.

When she left Nade’s house Elena felt sick. She was angry with Maria’s family... It wasn’t clear to her why they couldn’t find a way to visit her more often. It seemed to her that they were ungrateful... She had helped them both when she was there and after she left. Elena thought that Maria had decided to marry the foreigner, among other things, to help her family. Of course that wasn’t the most important thing. She also loved him. She decided to go into great uncertainty for him. Into a life with great risks... Elena felt sorry for Maria... She had no idea if she would be able to help her...

Elena also found it hard to believe that the doctors had failed to extract information from her for two and a half years. To learn more about Maria's life... there, in Germany...

* * *

Maria lay down with her eyes wide open. She was transferred to a room with three beds. The other two patients in the room weren't in a very bad situation. Doctors and nurses began to visit her more often. From time to time she was sent to other rooms where there were no patients. The staff didn't talk to her about her past. They didn't force her to remember the bad moments in her life. This helped her rest and avoid the usual involuntary nightmares she experienced. She began to remember even the smallest of details. But she couldn't come to terms with everything that had happened. It was tragic for her, for Hellwig, for Carl... her little son. She often questioned if she should even have had a child? Maybe in was too soon? She knew Hellwig wasn't ready to be a father. She felt that it was a bad mistake. It seemed like Hellwig had predicted that this would happen.

...In the days after the second year of living together Hellwig voluntarily proposed to Maria. She hadn't mentioned anything like that to him. She was very happy when he proposed... Unfortunately there was no mention of a wedding. Not even a mention of his or her relatives being involved... But there was something wonderful in the act itself. She took his last name. She also took German citizenship. Hellwig had convinced her. He said it would be easier for them to cross the border together... and stay in hotels... She remembered those moments with pleasant excitement. She sent a telegram to her family to inform them that they were married. She knew her mother and sisters had been waiting a long time for that. She figured her mother would be happy and brag to her relatives and neighbours. Being married was an honourable act.

Life went on as usual... No change. She had everything she needed. An abundance of food. The most expensive dresses. Freedom to go where she wanted. Freedom to go out. If she wanted she could travel to other countries. Alone or with Hellwig. Who could have wished for more?! Until then she was able to see and do many things that

she couldn't have done on her own. Everyone who knew her envied her.

She also sent clothes and money to her family. Hellwig was very good to her even though they didn't have much time for each other. Most of the time he worked late and came home tired but he always found some time for her.

The question that worried Maria the most was "why Hellwig still hadn't taken her to see his family?" She was never mentioned in the letters he received from them. If only he could tell her that his family had said hello back to her. She insisted that Hellwig greet them in every letter he sent. She said the same thing every time he wrote to them. But every time Maria mentioned that it was high time to take her to see his family, to get to know them and they to know her, he said there was no time. Why was he afraid to show her to them? Didn't he consider her to be beautiful enough? Or wasn't she smart enough and he didn't want his family to see her?! Did he write to them and tell them that they were getting married? Even after that no congratulations came from them! And right after that, after those thoughts, a cold shiver would go through Maria's body. Another more difficult question, in Maria's mind, was "did Hellwig have another wife at home, in his family's house, or in their town, or anywhere? Maybe even children?"

It was also strange to her that Hellwig had no desire to go and see her family. Despite how attached he was to them when they were there. Maria also knew that Hellwig wouldn't mind if she went to visit them by herself.

Maria thought she could visit Hellwig's family under different circumstances, perhaps when one of his parents became seriously ill. Or maybe both of them... All this was going through Maria's head. She couldn't gather anything from Hellwig...

...The most difficult problem, which troubled her the most, which tore at her soul, was that he didn't want a child. She repeatedly tried to persuade him to have at least one child. He always gave her the same answer "the conditions are not right. Can't you see how we live...? We are constantly moving." She even tried to persuade him

to change jobs. This was a hard job and he worked very hard. It wasn't good to live in hotels all the time either. Without their own home. But he always reminded her that he had told her in advance what he was doing and how they were going to live. He reminded her that she had no right to ask him to give up this job.

But somewhere inside her, she knew... that wasn't the real reason. She felt as if he didn't belong to her at all. As if there was something "unspoken" about him. Some unknown reason for all that. As if he wanted to be able to leave her. A child would tie him down. Even more. It would bond him to her... All this constantly tormented her. Day and night. In the letters she received from home, from her family, they always asked "if there was anything new?" Where they expecting her to tell them that she was pregnant? "And... if she was, she should go and see a doctor..." wrote her mother.

* * *

She began to worry the day she suspected she was pregnant. She became frightened. She didn't know what to do or where to go. She deliberately postponed going to the gynecologist. If she was really pregnant how could she tell Hellwig? How would he react to the news? What if he didn't want her to have a child? What would happen between them? What would happen to their relationship?

...The gynecologist confirmed her suspicion... She was pregnant. She left the office. She cried while walking down the street. She cried with joy but also from uncertainty... What if Hellwig was determined... not to have children?... What if he left her?... If he broke up with her and dissolved their marriage?

Lunch was approaching. She had no appetite. She hadn't eaten since the morning. Hellwig came home around five o'clock in the afternoon...

They sat opposite one another that afternoon. On the soft armchairs in the hotel apartment and talked. He told her what he'd done at work, the machines he'd assembled and tested. Maria, however, was afraid that Hellwig would tell her that they were leaving and going to another country. The letter from his factory, his notification, was

probably in his pocket she thought... So, Maria decided not to tell him.

Every day was the same and the days passed by quickly. They flew by. The day when the suitcases were being prepared for moving to another country she decided she must not delay any longer. What if he noticed? It would be even worse. He would know that she had hidden her pregnancy from him. They sat down at the table with a glass of juice in front of them. Then, suddenly and unconsciously Maria said:

“Hellwig, I’m pregnant...”

Her voice sounded like that of a guilty person. Immediately after she spoke she cramped up. Out of fear.

She looked at Hellwig. His eyes were wide open. He was motionless. At first he didn’t look at her at all. He looked beside her. He turned pale. Then he went to the bathroom. Surely he needed some time to think about it. Before he said something.

Maria was trembling all over. What would the verdict be?! According to his first reaction she felt there was no hope for anything good. She ran into the bedroom. She didn’t want to face Hellwig. Not now. Not immediately. Better to give him some time to digest the news. To adjust to the new situation.

Hellwig didn’t go to the bedroom that night. For the first time since they had been together. His actions spoke for themselves. Everything he said and did next was predictable.

Hellwig was unable to compose himself for days. He said nothing to her. He didn’t dine with her. He stayed out in the city until late at night. She didn’t know exactly why but the assumption was that his parents needed to be consulted about this issue. At home. This incomprehensible reaction of his brought back the suspicions that he had another family of his own. A wife and children. That alone must be the reason for his unusual behaviour.

When Maria was left alone she felt desperate. What frightened her the most was the thought that Hellwig might ask her to have an abortion. She knew she wouldn't do it. Even at the cost of losing Hellwig.

The uncertainty was horrible. The silence was killing her. There was no one to turn to. But on the issue of keeping the baby she didn't need any advice. It was decided. No one was going to change her mind. Not even Hellwig... She loved her child more than anything in the world.

She couldn't believe how he didn't hide his anger. Not from her. The rage. He didn't even try. He no longer cared for her. Not even for her mental state. He came home. He left home. Silent. Absent minded. Ignoring her. There was a lot of grief in Maria's soul. She felt cold. Lonely and alone in a foreign world. Without anyone of her own.

...It was evening. He was sitting in the living room watching TV. She approached him and said:

“I want to talk to you.”

He didn't look at her.

“I know. You didn't want us to have a child. Not at this point in time. But it happened. What's next?”

She was determined to get an answer.

Again Hellwig didn't look at her. He said nothing. He just shrugged his shoulders slightly. What did that mean?

“If you don't love our child it means you don't love me!” she heard herself say. With pain. With bitterness.

“No... That's not the point...” he replied quietly.

“I'm going home...” she whispered. “It's best for us to separate. Now.”

Maria became frightened by what she had said. What if he accepted her proposition? She would be in a real mess. She had no means of supporting herself. She wasn't employed. There was no one to turn to here. And what would she do at home in Macedonia? Would she have to depend on her mother and sisters?! They couldn't even support themselves.

A moment later she realized that she wasn't being honest with herself either. She knew that the real reason for her fear of being separated wasn't that simple... How could she live without him? When she loved him without limits?... Would she be able to survive?... Without him... with his child. With his child without a father...?

There was no more discussion that night. The silence continued. Would Maria do what she said? Would she leave? Would she go home to Macedonia? Deep down, she felt she didn't have the strength to do it. She wouldn't be able to take that step. Everything seemed hopeless to her. Hopeless. It seemed to her that she was going crazy. She woke up in the middle of the night shaking. Her nightmares wouldn't let her sleep...

She decided not to write to her family and tell them about all this. She didn't want to upset them. Even if they knew about it they couldn't do anything to help her. She was already losing hope. The gap between her and Hellwig was widening. She had little expectation that it would close. She was already feeling like she was sinking into deep despair. Falling into the wide gap.

...Hard times were coming. Tiresome. Unbearable. The most beautiful thing that had happened to her was ruined... Just before she was about to become a mother...

...When she saw him come home with a cake and flowers in his hands and with a smile on his face, she didn't know what to make of it. Her nerves were shattered and she couldn't control herself. She felt horrible until he came over and handed her the bouquet of beautiful white roses. She then began to realize what was happening. It was true that he'd given her flowers. Him! Hellwig! Here in front

of her! She noticed herself holding the flowers in her hand! She noticed the cake sitting on the table and herself in his arms. Maria noticed that she didn't object to him kissing her...

...After that everything changed. She suspected that whatever Hellwig was experiencing he had overcome. He was happy now. He was talking to her... more than ever.

Why didn't the sudden change, without any explanation, restore the peace and happiness? Why didn't it help overcome Maria's fears? From what was going to happen next...?

Months passed. The pregnancy wasn't difficult for her.

On the contrary, it filled her with much joy. Despite everything she went through. At no point did she try to understand what was happening with Hellwig. In fact she was afraid of something he was hiding from her.

* * *

She was six months pregnant when Hellwig said to her:

“Maria, we will soon be going to visit my family. My mother and father. And we will stay there for a while.”

Maria again felt that Hellwig's decision to go home was because of the child. He wanted the child to be born at home and it had something to do with his parents. Maybe he was waiting for their consent? If he was that much attached to them. The very fact that he got married without their presence, Maria assumed, was because they didn't approve of marrying her.

From how he acted though, going home to his parents and staying with them made him unhappy. Before that he used to say he really wanted to go home so that Maria could meet them... but the time was never right. That was earlier, before she got pregnant. Now, it seemed like they had somehow distanced themselves from her. Even though she had been the wife of their son for almost three years. On top of that not a word from them... just silence. Maria wondered

what had made them open the door to their home now. She also didn't like the fact that Hellwig had neither asked her nor consulted with her about this whole thing.

On the other hand, she thought it might better there. For both her and the child. His mother would certainly help her. Maria had no experience with children. And who knows, they might rejoice over the child. Hellwig was an only child. He had no brothers or sisters.

Maria felt it was really unfair of her to speculate on all these things. Especially earlier. To assume that Hellwig was married... that he had children... that his parents were sick... But what was she expected to think when they kept her isolated from them for so long? Had they lived in her country (Macedonia) during these years, Hellwig would have met the youngest child of her relatives. They would have gone everywhere to visit. Hadn't she brought him home soon after they fell in love? But, it seemed, that this wasn't the case with Hellwig and his family.

* * *

They were walking along a riverbank. It wasn't a big river. Beautiful trees were planted next to it. There were many plots of parkland decorated with a variety of flowers. The light from the many lanterns poured down on the fast waters. It looked like snakes flowing down. Oh, how beautiful that night was. It made Maria forget all her worries. All the bad things that had happened to her up to this day. It seemed like she was no longer worried about the uncertainties that lay ahead.

The time for departure to Hellwig's birthplace was approaching. Maria slept less and less each night. She just couldn't sleep. Especially after she began to prepare for a long stay. One morning before leaving for work Maria asked Hellwig:

"Hellwig, do your parents care for me?"

Hellwig didn't immediately reply. He took his time and made some effort to formulate his answer.

“But, they don’t know you...” he said casually.

His answer didn’t encourage Maria. And why shouldn’t they care for her? That depended on how well they got along with their son. Maria and Hellwig had loved each other from the first moment they met. His parents would now have a grandchild. Their first grandchild. Because of that they should be very happy, Maria thought.

Hellwig hugged her tightly. As if wanting to reassure her that all was well.

* * *

Almost two weeks later Elena rang the doorbell on the house where Maria’s mother and sisters lived. She was determined to go inside and talk to them. To all of them.

Maria’s mother answered the door. She didn’t recognize Elena. It was normal. She had only seen her once or twice. That had been a long time ago when Elena was still in high school.

She looked at her with squinting eyes. She had wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. Much more than she should have, based on her age.

“Who might you be, girl?” she asked.

“I’m Maria’s friend, we used to go to school together...” replied Elena.

“Maria isn’t here,” she answered quickly, with a worried look on her face.

“I know that...” replied Elena. “I saw her. I was with her. I didn’t know she was in the hospital. But she seems to be better now. We had a long talk. She wants someone from her family to visit her. One of you.”

“I know, my dear. And we are very sorry that we haven’t gone to see her for a long time. We are poor... we have no money... and it’s far...”

“May I come in?” asked Elena.

“Of course, please do,” said the old lady involuntarily and got out of the way to let Elena in.

Elena sat on the chair by the door. The two sisters were also there.

“What was your name?” asked Elena looking at her middle sister.

“Lile.”

“What do you do Lile, or are you still in school?”

“I work as a typist for a firm,” Lile replied taking her time. “I’m also a secretary and maintain the archives.”

“That’s a fantastic job, it must be interesting,” said Elena with a genuine tone of voice and believing so.

After a short silence, Elena told them why she was there.

“One of these days soon I want to go and visit Maria again,” Elena said addressing Nade, Maria’s youngest sister... “If you want you can come with me and we will visit your sister together. I will buy two tickets for the trip. I will also bring some things for her. It would be nice for you to see her. So she doesn’t think that you have given up on her. That you don’t want her. That you don’t want her to get better. That you don’t want her to come home.”

Elena said all these things on purpose. So that they all heard them. Something like a reprimand. The youngest sister turned and first looked at her mother and then at her older sister, as if she was asking for their approval. She wanted to see their reaction before she spoke.

“My dear girl, how could we not want her and love her,” said Maria’s mother suddenly. “I didn’t find her on the street. She’s my

child too. All the fingers on my hand hurt the same (I love them all equally). Nade will go with you. How could she not go with you? My girls went to see her several times. They will go again. But... there isn't much use... she still is not..."

"Okay then Nade, one of these days I will come and pick you up. I will tell you exactly which day we will go," interrupted Elena.

Nade was overjoyed. It seemed she, the youngest sister, regretted not seeing Maria the most. So it seemed to Elena. She hoped that on the way Nade might tell her something more about Maria.

* * *

One of the things Maria completely avoided thinking about during her stay at the hospital was her experience leading to her and Hellwig's arrival at his parents' home. She kept those memories locked up deep down and avoided accessing them. This is how she defended herself. But at the same time, something, some invisible enemy from within, was forcing Maria to look at them. To think about everything that had happened at that time. Even the smallest details. Maybe she had a need to look back. To make sure that she wasn't to blame for everything that had happened. She needed to get it all out of herself. It weighed too much on her. Suppressed somewhere down there. In the subconscious. Not shared with anyone. Not discovered by anyone.

* * *

... At the thought of meeting his family Maria's heart began to sink as they left for Hellwig's hometown... She would meet them for the first time after all these years.

...A taxi brought them to a tall iron gate. It was painted black. They stopped in front of a two storey building. The blinds on all the windows were closed. Like no one lived there. A dog was heard barking inside. She wanted to leave... run away. She was terrified of what kind of eyes would greet her? What would they say to her? It seemed to her that Hellwig was avoiding her gaze. Was there something he hadn't told her?

Hellwig paid the taxi driver. His hand was trembling. He rang the doorbell. The black gate began to open. Two middle-aged people came out and shook hands with Hellwig one after the other. They were his mother and father. They were blond and skinny. They had a restrained smile on their pale faces.

The moment they turned towards her, it seemed to her like they were wearing masks. She saw two cruel, petrified faces. Unfriendly looks in both pairs of eyes. She shook hands with his mother first. Her hand was cold. She then shook hands with his father. At that very moment, it seemed to Maria as if they had declared war on her. It was like shaking hands with an enemy.

Hellwig seemed completely absent. He was in shock.

His mother was the first to react. She led them down the long half-lit hallway. Then to the guest room.

Maria began her new life with these people. With strangers. Living under the same roof. In their house. Without much promise.

After a few weeks of living with them Maria became aware that he, her husband, her Hellwig, tied to her for all those years of living together, her partner in a lasting relationship, lasting a long time, had only lasted until she became pregnant. It also became clear to her that Hellwig's parents expected Hellwig's connection to her to end. His relationship to a foreigner should just have been for fun. It should have ended one day. They expected their son to come home alone. Without her. It even seemed that they were hoping they would never meet her.

It now it seemed like everyone had been deceived. They felt like she had fooled them all. Like she'd forced herself into their house... With each passing day Maria realized that they didn't want her... They didn't care for her. More than that, they hated her. They couldn't even hold a smile on their faces. The smiles also disappeared...

Everything spoken in the house was painful pedantry. On the second day after their arrival a maid came to clean the house. It quickly became clear to Maria that someone else's hands kept the house clean and tidy. The rooms, upstairs, where she stayed with Hellwig were very clean. Everything was spotless, especially the bathroom. Maria was afraid to step into it, let alone take a bath. It seemed like no living person had ever entered it. Instead of a double bed in their bedroom there were two couches... one for Hellwig and one for Maria. They had prepared it this way even though they knew in advance that Hellwig was coming home with a wife.

After arriving, Maria, Hellwig and his parents had breakfast, lunch and supper together. But that only lasted a few days. The maid set up and cleared the table. Maria wanted to help but was afraid. She was also afraid of leaving a bad impression about how she ate. About the way she ate. About what and how much she ate from the food placed on the table. All this was a burden to her. Dining was a real torture for her.

Maria was very happy when Hellwig told her that starting the next day they would be dining upstairs without his parents. But at the same time she felt offended as if they'd been expelled or something. She was sure this was done because of her but she didn't complain or say anything to Hellwig. She didn't want to create new problems. At the same time it was easier for her this way. She would no longer have to endure the daily ceremony that took place during meals like being there at an exact time, sitting down to eat at an exact time. Everyone sitting in their own place on their designated chair. Waiting for the right time to start eating. Watching the maid wearing a white apron and white cap serving the food. Watching her serve the food in a special order. Maria had a hard time swallowing under these numbing conditions in a cold atmosphere. No one said a kind word or smiled during meal time.

Maria always felt sad when she remembered the noise and chatter she made with her sisters when she ate at home. She felt sad remembering her annoyed mother telling the sisters not to laugh and talk loudly while eating their food.

During every moment spent in the house with these people Maria felt like she was being watched. Every move she made was closely monitored. She constantly felt the gaze of Hellwig's mother. Even when it was done covertly. It was like being watched to make sure nothing was broken. Nothing was damaged in the house. Nothing was changed from the established order of things.

Maria often felt like there was no air to breathe in the rooms. She felt joy just thinking about opening those thick fat drapes. But even the thought of opening them scared her. When Maria took an object in her hand to look at it, and there were dozens of such beautiful objects everywhere in the rooms, Hellwig's mother immediately appeared next to her. No matter where she was in the house. She acted like she was a museum keeper.

Maria felt terrible being treated this way. This was very unusual for her. She felt like she was a prisoner. She often wondered how long she would last in this iron cage. This was probably normal for Hellwig. He was born and raised this way. He couldn't understand why Maria was unhappy. Sometimes Maria wanted to fully open up and explain to him how she truly felt and how much things bothered her but instead she made great efforts to please him and his father and mother. Soon she became aware that she wasn't succeeding at all. On the contrary. She was getting further and further away from them with each passing day.

She rarely saw Hellwig's father. He was too busy doing things outside and only came home for meals and a rest after lunch. But even during those brief encounters, Maria felt the cold looks in his colourless eyes linger over her for a long time. Looks full of indignation and arrogance. And there was something else there... half-hidden. Something that made Maria feel like leaving the house forever. No matter how much she avoided his gaze she was unable to escape it. She couldn't avoid it. She hoped to see something new; something pleasant... some change in him. That she, with all her modesty, even some humility, was able to win him over. But that cold contemptuous business like look in his eyes was only becoming sharper and irreversible with each encounter. She was aware that the cordiality and immediacy with which she won over other people would never work on him. On the contrary. At times his stares

became unbearable. It added to the heavy tension and thick air in the house. She felt like she was drowning. Something that endangered her life.

In the evenings, when she was less and less alone with Hellwig, she refrained more and more from talking to him about her problems. She couldn't open up to him. She didn't dare start that kind of conversation. Mostly because Hellwig himself had become isolated all these months. He no longer looked like or acted like the young man she'd met and fallen in love with. She felt as if he was moving further and further away from her. One evening, while he was looking at a professional magazine, she decided to talk to him. She assumed that he was looking at the magazine while thinking about something completely different.

"Hellwig," she blurted out quietly. Her voice trembling uncontrollably. She sounded like a helpless, unprotected wild animal that sensed great danger...

"Heli, (Hellwig) is something bothering you? Why aren't you telling me? You don't tell me anything anymore..."

Hellwig shook his head nervously... From the expression on his face Maria understood that he wasn't going to talk to her... That there was something to tell but he didn't want to discuss it with her. Or was unable to tell her. One by one, many bad thoughts like that came to her mind. Heavy, mind-numbing thoughts. She was unable to put them aside. They disturbed her very much. Had his mother and father said something to him about her? Against her? Had they tried to convince him to leave her?! She knew they didn't like her! But then she realized these were only assumptions: why was she tormented by her own assumptions? She knew nothing was for certain. What if all this was just the fruit of her own fears?

"Heli," said Maria again not wanting to give up. She wasn't content with him being silent, which indicated to her that there was something and it was bad. "It appears to me... that your parents don't like me..." she blurted out.

Hellwig didn't want to look at her. He felt that his eyes, his looks, would tell her things that he didn't want her to know. That he was hopeless. Or that he had fallen down. What else could he say to her with those eyes? Hellwig hid his answer in the dim light of the night lamp.

She grabbed both his hands with her hands. She was about to start crying when she again blurted, "Hellwig, what's wrong...?"

Was he crying? Maybe he didn't love her anymore. Maybe he would have left her if she wasn't pregnant. Maybe he would have looked at her with different eyes under different circumstances. Now. In his house. With his parents... Unfortunately he didn't have the strength to tell her any of that.

They had been here for several weeks now. In his home... But he never introduced her to any of his relatives. He never introduced her to any of his friends. The freedom they'd had together earlier was gone. All that was nice between Hellwig and her was gone...

A few days later, she tried talking to him again. She said:

"Hellwig, Heli, talk to me... Tell me something... anything... I'm afraid..." begging him.

"Everything will be fine," he said quietly, which to her sounded like the opposite.

The next day, and all the days after that she completely lost all desire to eat. But still she was given food regularly. It seemed to her like someone had made her a charity case. And it wasn't from the heart. It was like forcing generosity to show generosity. And, of course, this was done only because she was pregnant. That perhaps was the only reason why his parents still kept her there... in their home. Maria began to think of leaving their house. There was no reason why her pregnancy would stop her from leaving. She was afraid that if she continued to stay there it would harm her pregnancy, even the child after it was born. They might not love the child like she expected... But then she immediately rejected those thoughts.

Many times she secretly hoped that Hellwig would be asked by his employer to travel to another country for a job. Like he was before. Or even to another city. That would save them from this misery. If they were again alone, the two of them, their love could be rekindled. But did he still love her? Hellwig never introduced her to any of the employees in the factory where he worked, especially those who gave him his assignments and sent him abroad to work. If he had then she could beg them to send him somewhere away from here. Or why didn't Hellwig ask for an assignment abroad? He could suggest that. Then Hellwig would immediately find out how much she couldn't stand his parents. That she couldn't live with them. She didn't even know if Hellwig himself, on his own, had decided to come and live with them here. Or had they asked him? Or had his parents demanded it of him. They must be afraid that if he left with her and went away, she would win him over. And then he would never return home.

One other day, during his afternoon rest, Maria again spoke to Hellwig about this. She said:

“Heli, remember how nice it was for us when we traveled...?”

Hellwig looked at her. The expression on his face told Maria that he understood what she was trying to tell him. The message contained in that sentence of hers. And her sigh that followed... Again no answer. She was becoming more and more desperate and helpless.

* * *

Maria didn't know what was going with Hellwig. What he thought and what he felt deep in his soul. What had changed in him after they arrived in Germany was a secret to her. In fact, it seemed to her that he had started becoming cool with her right after he received the last letter from his parents. This letter was the answer to the letter he'd sent them before he arrived in Germany with Maria. How had his parents responded to his letter? How did they feel about his wife? Were they happy? Disappointed...? He never said a single word to her...

* * *

They must have thought for a long time before responding to that letter. Whatever they wrote to him about her meant that they took the matter seriously. Or perhaps they said nothing. Hellwig knew very well what saying nothing and being silent meant.

Were they surprised? Shocked? Did they believe that their son, their only son, had taken a woman from afar, from a foreign land? They couldn't have expected worse news than that. It must have seemed to them that all their efforts to raise their son as a true heir were in vain. It must have never occurred to them that after traveling all over Europe, right there, in Macedonia he would become attached to a Macedonian girl. Hellwig should have known that his parents would never allow her to enter their house. Even less as a member of their family. Like a daughter-in-law...! But still there must have been more written in that letter. He must have said something more. Had he told them that he'd fallen in love with her? How could he?! No. The fact that he told them he took a woman with him didn't mean anything... Not yet. He was young. It was fun. It would pass. Surely he had had many girls like that before. Even if it was for fun he really shouldn't have dragged her here from "there".

In the letters that followed neither Hellwig nor his parents mentioned the "woman".

Then, suddenly, a few months later another letter arrived which terrified Hellwig's parents. Especially the last sentence which said:

"My Maria greets you." They couldn't believe it. It sounded so disrespectful. From their own son. She would surely get in his way. Who knew what kind of floozy she was. To so easily leave her own home and run off with a strange foreigner... To go around the world with him... Not finding it strange to be their daughter-in-law and wanting to move in with them. Hellwig must be very naïve. It was unbelievable. But what to do now? They had to stop him. They couldn't accept the fact that their daughter-in-law was from "there" (Macedonia) and was going to live in their house. Mix his blood with hers. Give birth to a grandchild. They had to take action and

fast. So they decided to invite him to come home. Alone. That's what they wrote to him in a letter.

Now their son was silent. He refused to answer the questions his parents asked him. His silence terrified them even more. They sensed that he wasn't going to give up on her so easily. It would probably take a long time to convince him. So they decided to express their opinion on the issue, not with direct words out in the open but through more letters.

In one of those letters they wrote: "So, as you know many girls from our city, from close and distant friends, would be happy if you wanted to marry them. Our family is not just an ordinary family. The wealth you have, the life you can offer your wife, isn't small. We're sure that you, our son, will think carefully about what kind of girl you will connect with further in your life.

We are also convinced that you think very little of us."

What they wrote in the letter, however, turned out to be a monologue. He wouldn't answer them. But still they didn't give up. In each subsequent letter that they wrote they reminded him of their extended family, of their roots, of his origin. Hellwig began to answer their letters responding to everything except the items that referred to the girl. About that he said nothing.

Two years had passed since they had begun to correspond. Maybe more than two years. Until that fatal day, until that fatal letter he wrote to them in which he briefly said:

"Maria and I got married last week. Now you have a daughter-in-law. When you meet her you will see what a wonderful person she is. You don't have to care for her and that's that. The choice of a life partner must be made by the person himself. I will come home with her when you tell me you are ready to receive us."

This was the worst news his parents could expect. They heard from their son what they least expected. Which, as long as they lived, they wouldn't be able to get over. For which they would never forgive him. Not even after their death. He had stabbed them with a knife.

An irreversible act. Their own son had stabbed them. Their only son. What had life meant to him for the last twenty-five years? What next? Should they give him up? Forbid him to come home? Who would be left for them? Who else did they have? After all the blows they had received they now had to endure this blow too?

It was terrible for them that they didn't congratulate him. They would have been very happy if things were different. But not this way. And not with this woman.

They would have liked to go back years. When everything was different. When they lived in abundance... Maybe some people thought: look how they got rich, from someone else's misfortune, by destroying other people's lives! But they didn't invent the war... His grandparents strongly believed, as they often explained to Hellwig, that a pure nation must be above all. That this was sacred. Everything would have been fine if the war hadn't ended the way it did... At least if the accidents hadn't happened... Now this, that's all they needed...

Could their son, whom they believed loved them very much, to the point of bloodshed, hurt them? Humiliate them. Trample on their ideals...? You have no idea how much they hoped that he would be just like them... How much effort they had put into him...

* * *

With each letter he received from his parents Hellwig felt like a battle was brewing between him and his parents over Maria. This was why he took the next step and married her, the first chance he got. Not for a moment did he ever consider leaving her, abandoning her or separating from her. Maybe he wasn't sure about how much he loved her. But he couldn't see himself as the man who would betray her. He wouldn't leave her alone in this world, after she'd left her family and home for him. She had much confidence in him and she had left all on her own. She trusted him a lot... All the reasons why his parents didn't care for her wouldn't be crucial enough to force him to abandon her. To stop him from living with her.

He was well aware of their belief that only a German woman would be worthy to join their family, to “mix blood with them”, and that this was something they would take to their graves. But Hellwig didn’t see it this way, as they did. By defying them he felt that he had managed to overcome this “belief” within himself. He understood the kind of shock they would experience when he sent them the letter in which he told them that he was living with a woman from another country... From another nationality... The meaning of their silence in the letters that followed was quite clear to him. All these years they had been trying to imprint on his brain the image that he was a member of the most powerful, most capable nation. But this wasn’t his “belief”. This wasn’t how he felt even though he himself was especially proud of being German.

Hellwig knew that his two uncles and grandfather were heroes from the stories his parents had told him. The stories that “they gave their lives for the homeland” were repeated countless times. From an early age Hellwig was taught to show contempt for all other nations except his own. His mother and father spoke insolently in his presence about other nations. They spoke with a decisive tone of voice. From the expression on their faces, it seemed to Hellwig that there was a sense of superiority there.

Listening to all this every day, hearing the words his parents spoke numbed Hellwig but he never objected. Even when he was older he never stood up to his parents. Why hadn’t he? Was it because he was an only child? Had the fact that he was their only descendant made him compliant, tolerant? As if agreeing to be their victim? To give them hope that he would follow in their footsteps? That he would be, if not the same, similar to them? That he wouldn’t disappoint them...? To what extent was he subconsciously influenced by his parents and how much of it became part of his subconscious, he himself didn’t know.

His meeting with Maria, his closeness to her, to her family, to all the people there, showed him that what he had learned from his parents wasn’t justified. He was grateful, at least, that they hadn’t made him act like them. He didn’t feel that these other people here were any different than him. If he hadn’t been this way would he have been able to attach himself to Maria and her family? Would he have been

able to love her? All this contributed to his decision to take her as his life companion.

More and more he realized that his biggest mistake was coming back to his parents. But how could he not come back? How long was he going to run away? From home? How could he forever be away from his only family? From those who gave him life...? How could he rob them of his happiest moments? When his first child was born? When their first grandchild was born... where but if not in his father's house? In the house where he was born. It seemed that it would be dishonourable to have his first child born in a hotel. That would be humiliating for him. Especially before Maria.

But he didn't expect so much resistance from his parents. He hoped that when they got to know Maria better they would change their minds about her. If not for anything else, for the sake of carrying their grandchild... But none of that happened.

The day his parents told him that they didn't want to sit at the same table with her he realized the hopelessness of the situation. He was afraid to tell Maria the truth. Of course, Maria was immediately aware that they didn't care for her. He then tried to soften the blow by telling her that Germans were somehow different. That relations between parents and children here were much more restrained. That people here weren't as close as those where Maria came from. That might have been the case but Maria didn't believe him. It was clear to her that they didn't want her in their home.

Hellwig knew how desperate she was. But at the same time he was aware that he couldn't handle the entire situation. On the one hand, he wanted to help her. So that she wouldn't suffer so much. He wanted to persuade her to be patient. To hope that his parents would gradually accept her. To hope that everything would change when the child was born. But even he wasn't convinced of that.

He wanted to forget that his own mother, from a distance, suggested that Maria abort the pregnancy "if they wanted". That it was now possible to do it during all months of the pregnancy. Hellwig wasn't only surprised but couldn't believe that his own mother would suggest something like this. He didn't know why he hadn't just

packed up and left with Maria the moment his mother suggested that. Why he hadn't left his father's house forever?

His parents had also mentioned... that there were many families that would like to adopt a child. Because they didn't have children of their own. And that suggestion too was made from a distance. As an opportunity for young couples who didn't want to be tied down with children during the first years of their marriage.

When he heard comments like this, Hellwig became very depressed. He was disappointed. Mostly in his mother. He felt that she cared for Maria less and less. He couldn't believe that both of his parents had rejected Maria to this extent. That they weren't even trying to get to know her. He felt like they treated her like she wasn't human, never mind being equal to them. All this filled Hellwig's soul with misery. He felt that they wouldn't be able to love his child either. Their own grandchild. This scared him a lot. It was inhumane... It wasn't possible. He didn't know which way to turn... Everything was mixed up in his head. He was so glad Maria didn't know all these things! Occurring now. And those that had occurred in the past. Otherwise, he believed, she wouldn't have stayed in this house with these people, even a single day.

Hellwig felt guilty for not openly talking to Maria. He tried to keep her out of his fights with his parents. When he returned from work he often went to the lower floor to see his parents. His mother would greet him with one of his favourite specialties. She was cunning and wanted to please him. To convince him to stay with her longer. And to come more often. Sometimes he was tempted to ask her to make one of his favourite dishes. To take upstairs to Maria. But he never did. He didn't want to see her frown, curse, or make one of those faces. Expressions that were very familiar to him. Expressions that repelled people. Which showed how much she, his own mother, was intolerant of others.

Time passed quickly. The day when Maria was going to give birth was drawing near. How would the experience be? How would the baby be accepted? Loved or not wanted by its grandparents...

It was now too late to go back...

* * *

Maria couldn't imagine that giving birth was going to be something so unhappy. For the others around her. No matter how much she didn't want to feel this way, she herself felt more sad than happy. Hellwig felt very anxious from the moment he brought Maria and the baby home from the hospital, waiting for his parents to come and see their grandson. He had little hope that the arrival of their grandson was going to bring any feeling out of them. For his son or for Maria, being the mother of their heir.

There was no trace of interest from the ground floor for days. A young woman was hired to look after Maria and the child. Hellwig looked confused. He was untidy. Maria wasn't sure if he could adjust to the new situation. He seemed to be afraid of things. Perhaps for his son.

The young lady helping them left their place in the evenings. No one, except Hellwig, came up to Maria's room. At his usual bedtime. He would give her a kiss and go to sleep in the other room.

"This was better," he tried to explain. Both she and the child would be calmer without him there. It seemed to her that this was his escape from the responsibility of looking after the child. Was she expected to take care of the child alone? She didn't say anything to him. She didn't even cry in front of him.

Maria decided that Hellwig should pick the child's name. She figured this might bring the father closer to the son. Or even his parents to their grandson.

For many days the grandparents didn't come up. This was a huge surprise for Maria. She then wondered how she was going to inform her own family about the birth. Hellwig told her that the same day their son was born he had sent them a telegram to let them know of the birth and that the child was a boy. But they heard nothing back. Not even a word. Maria knew they had no money. But she thought that, for such an occasion, they should have borrowed some and sent a reply. Unfortunately she received no telegram from her family and

no congratulations on the birth of her son. She felt she needed to hear from them because of these people downstairs. The grandparents who didn't care. Who showed no interest, not even a sign that a new person, a new family member, had arrived in their house.

At the end of the second week Maria received a letter from her family. But for her it wasn't the same as receiving a telegram. It would have been more pleasant for her if she'd received a telegram. Because of those downstairs. But still she was very happy.

That afternoon she noticed that Hellwig was particularly upset. He was walking from one end of the apartment to the other. He kept putting his hands in and out of his pockets. Maria wanted to ask him why he was so anxious but was interrupted by a sound. Someone knocked at the door. Hellwig jumped immediately and quickly opened it. His mother and father came in. They were carrying flowers and packages in their hands.

It would have been wonderful, even though late, if she hadn't noticed those stiff smiles on their faces. It was as if someone had forcibly stretched their lips and eyes into the shape that a person gets when they smile. Even now, even at this moment, there was nothing sincere and warm in their expression. Maria was lying down. She tried to get up. Hellwig took the presents and flowers from their hands. They shook her hand with their cold hands. They glanced at their grandson from a distance. They then moved away from the crib and sat on the two-seater by the window.

Hellwig put a couple of beer glasses on the table in front of them and filled them with beer. He then opened a box of chocolates. His father shook his hand at him as if to say - no need. Hellwig also took out some salty and sweet cookies.

Hellwig picked up his glass with whiskey and went over to toast. They raised their glasses and sipped some beer. They also took a chocolate. Soon after, they got up, nodded and left. Hellwig escorted them out. He seemed satisfied. How little consideration he needed... How little attention he craved... Poor Hellwig. It became clear to Maria why he had been so happy when he was at her home with her

family, even though they were very poor. How prepared he was to give them everything he had... at any time. To bring them gifts... He knew how much they loved him with all their heart and soul. Not just because he gave them gifts. But because he was a good person.

Maria couldn't fall asleep well into the night. She wondered: had Hellwig forced his parents to make an appearance? Maybe they'd decided on their own. However, their visit didn't bring her any joy. Didn't calm her down. Didn't make her hope for anything good.

She refused to cry out of stubbornness... She didn't cry at all that night. But the next day, when she tried to write a letter to her mother and sisters she had to start all over again. As soon as she wrote the first lines the paper was covered in tears. Then she would tear it up and start all over. She didn't want them to see the tears and know what was happening to her. How bitter were the days she spent in this dark unhappy house. Instead of being the happiest now that she was with her child, husband and in-laws, she was more miserable than ever. She didn't want them to know. Why write to them and tell them she was miserable? Why bother them with her problems? They were far away and there was nothing they could do to help her. After she moved into the house of Hellwig's parents, she couldn't send them much. She helped them less and less. Fortunately, one of her sisters had gotten a job. That somehow helped them survive.

* * *

Maria's mother sensed that Maria wasn't doing well. Maybe it was a mother's instinct. Something was pressing on her soul. In her last letter to Maria she asked: "How are the in-laws? Have they gotten used to you? Have you gotten used to them...?"

Maria had no idea how to respond. How could she explain to her mother something she herself didn't understand? What was their reason for not caring for her? She was no less educated than them. She could get a job and make money. If it was necessary. She had also learned the language quite well. Their language. She was nice to them and treated them with respect. Very politely. Right from the beginning... And right from the beginning they pushed her away. They didn't allow her to get close to them. One couldn't force

themselves on anyone. One couldn't get close to anyone by force... Sometimes she went to talk to Hellwig's mother when she knew she was downstairs alone. To ask her if she needed any help... help with something. Or, to give her a chance to show her some things in the house. To direct her to something... But her mother-in-law made it impossible. Her barriers were clearly put in place from the day Maria entered her world. She even made sure that Maria was banned from her dinner table. She was forced to live separately. On the second floor. Maria had no idea how events were going to turn and how much isolation she would have to endure. How much she would be ignored. And that she would be erased as a family member.

Now, after her child was born, Maria felt that the isolation was even rougher, more drastic. The isolation was also meant for her son. For their grandchild. The son of their son. What could be worse than that? What next? It seemed like there was something more to this. Something even worse... but she couldn't put her finger on it.

After Hellwig came home from work he spent more and more time downstairs. With his mother and father. His time with them became longer and longer. He stayed there until the late hours. Sometimes Maria would hear them raising their voices. They were fighting. Then he would tiptoe upstairs quietly. She tried listening more carefully to find out what the quarrels were about. Were they quarreling about her? About them? About their marriage? When she heard some words spoken against her, it became clear to her that they were already openly pressuring him. Forcing him to leave her. To kick her out. She didn't know if they wanted to kick her out alone. Or with her son.

Listening to their increasingly frequent quarrels, she heard Hellwig's voice less and less. She realized that he was becoming increasingly powerless in the struggle with his parents. He was helpless. More and more Maria realized how stupid it was for them to have come here! To live with these crazy old people. No matter where else they lived it would have been better than here. Anywhere, except here would have been better. Not here in this dark place...

* * *

In the letter Maria received from home, her sister wrote in detail how her mother had made pituli (fried fritters) for their neighbours and relatives to celebrate the birth of her grandson. Everyone sent their congratulations. The arrival of the first child was a great joy for the entire family back home. God, how different it was with them. They also wrote that they were very happy that the child was a boy... If I were at home, Maria thought to herself, they wouldn't leave my child alone. Maria read and translated the entire letter for Hellwig. It seemed like every word she said hit him hard... Every word irritated him.

...How cordial they'd been to him when he first came to their house. They didn't mind that he was a foreigner... a German. Even though, only a few decades ago, the Germans had forcibly occupied their country. A few decades was both a lot and a little time. Some from the older generation who survived the painful years of war were still alive... But in spite of everything her family accepted him. They even loved him. Even though they didn't understand a word he said.

If her father, and especially her grandfather, were alive they might have objected to having him in their house. The moment her grandfather heard someone speak German on the radio he would angrily turn it off. And then he would swear. Who knows what kind of fears the older people had to live through and how much they had suffered. Even her parents had lived through that, even though they were still children. On top of that they lived through the horrors of the bombings. The panic and running to hide in secure places. There was also the imprisonment and torture their loved ones had to endure in the prisons.

One time, after watching a film about the fascist German and Bulgarian occupation, her mother told her a terrible story from her childhood... from the war. She told her what had happened one night... A terrible night...

...Sometime after midnight they were awakened by gunshots. Soon after that a huge fire erupted. The flames rose like a pillar ten metres high. A house on the third street next to theirs was burning. Her mother and father ran to the living room and her mother opened the

curtain slightly and peered, with one eye, outside into the dark. She looked at the burning house and heard shouts coming from that direction. The voices and screams were horrifying. The people were yelling in Macedonian. Harsh words cursing the foreign soldiers. The voices were part of a larger chorus of shooting. Then suddenly a song broke out inside the house, from the flames.

The next day her mother found out that several resistance organizers working against the occupiers were having a meeting in that house. They were surrounded by the occupiers. A woman had betrayed them. She was the mistress of one of those organizers. She wanted to dissuade him from cooperating with the resistance movement. When the soldiers surrounded the house they called on those inside to surrender. But they didn't. So the soldiers then set the house on fire. And to prevent them from coming out alive, the soldiers shot at them as they went for the windows. But even though they were burning in agony, they began to sing songs about freedom. Her mother was told they were burning like torches standing near the windows...

How could one forget this...? The horror and fear it created in those who had witnessed it. In what part of their brain was this horror hidden? How could one survive after seeing such horror and keep on living a normal life...?

Many times Maria thought about the horrific stories her mother had told her about the war. She even learned things about the war in school during history lessons. One time her teacher told the class that: "Even now, many years after the war, traces of the devastation can't easily be buried. Those who lost loved ones, in prisons, in camps, in the mountains, during the fighting, lived unhappy lives. But one of the most inexplicable and wonderful qualities people have is their ability to suppress the arduous, terrible, unbearable and painful. They have the ability to forget even the most difficult part of their lives. And to again be able to plow and sow the fields. The gardens. Rebuild demolished houses. Repair destroyed roads. Open factories. And move forward. Not go back, not even look back. Especially if what was left behind was unfortunate and tragic."

Maria often wondered how could these people, the Germans, who followed the path of fascism, carry something so beastly in themselves. But at the same time, who knew how many, especially young people, were forced into that terrible war. The cost, their lives...

And now she'd come here to live in Germany... She'd followed the man whom she loved. Rarely, only sometimes, did she ever think of the people around her. The people who lived in this city. Due to the complexity of her circumstances, she didn't know anyone. She couldn't talk to anyone because she never left the house. Somewhere, deep inside her, she often wondered if she'd taken a reckless step coming to this strange world. Why had she chosen a man from so far away to spend her life with?

At the same time Maria was well aware that most criminals who had waged war against other nations were long gone. On top of that her history teacher had often told her class that "not all Germans, and other nations, though not a small number, went on to commit crimes based on Nazi ideals." What a wonderful person her teacher was... With all her thoughts and words, she wanted to minimize the evil on earth.

From the first day she met Hellwig, Maria didn't mind speaking German. Even after she'd seen many movies that showed the horrors of the Second World War. Before that, every time she heard that language the hair on the back of her neck stood up. She shivered.

There was something about Hellwig's character and gentleness that won her over. He didn't want to associate himself with the evils inflicted by the Nazis on other nations during the war years. By the way he treated her people, her friends, her relatives, Hellwig contributed to the friendship of people and steered them away from thinking of those shameful times.

After Maria met Hellwig some of her friends asked her why she wanted to be with a German. They often wondered if she was really going to spend her life with him! Even some of her older relatives asked her that. Some of the older adults, who had experienced great tragedies in the war, tried to dissuade her from that relationship. But

there it was, it happened... She had fallen in love with him. One never knew where the path of life would take them.

At the time she made her decision she never thought she would ever return to the question “how had she fallen in love with Hellwig?” That foreigner about whom she knew nothing except what she learned about him with each new encounter. During the months when they were together she didn’t want to think about it. She didn’t want to think about what his family was like, who his parents were? What did they do in life? What his grandparents were like, especially during the war? Which side were they on? During their love affair, even in deciding to go with him, all this meant nothing to her. And as a result she never asked him about his family or his past. She only asked if he had any siblings. Well, after all, she loved him. If she married him, she would only marry him and not his parents. He was well-established and earned a good wage. They wouldn’t have to depend on anyone.

* * *

Elena was again officially sent to the city hospital where Maria was being treated. It made her happy because now she could visit Maria one more time before she visited with her sister Nade as per their arrangement. Elena stopped in front of the hospital entrance wondering if her visit would make things worse. Elena didn’t know what Maria’s current condition was so before visiting her she decided to consult with her doctor to determine if she could.

The guard at the gate paged Maria’s doctor who then personally came out to meet her. He recognized her from before.

“I will bring Maria to my office,” he said to Elena and took her inside with him.

“How is she doing?” asked Elena impatiently.

“Overall her condition is more stable. She is improving. I see her nearly every day... We have long talks... Now I am more optimistic about her recovery than I was when you came here the last time.

Elena couldn't hide her joy. Soon after she and the doctor arrived at his office Maria was escorted inside by a nurse. The moment Elena saw her she felt awkward and uncomfortable but she wasn't going to let those feelings bother her. She immediately told Maria that she had gone to see her relatives a couple of times and that her sister Nade had agreed to come with her. They would be visiting her together sometime later. She also explained to Maria that her current visit was unplanned and part of an official visit to this hospital and that she'd had to come here in a hurry. She had no time to tell her mother and sisters she was coming.

Maria listened to her friend intently. She found it unusual that someone outside of the hospital staff could talk to her about everyday matters. Elena spoke to her like Maria wasn't sick... as if she wasn't in the hospital. Maria felt the need for Elena to continue to talk without interruption... she'd already forgotten how it felt to have an ordinary conversation...

"Thank you for coming... you didn't forget me... I didn't expect you to come back..."

Elena looked at Maria. She had a whole new appearance. She was dressed in clean clothes, washed and her hair was nicely combed. It seemed like her health had greatly improved.

"Why would you think that I wasn't going to come?! It may take me a while but I will also get you home for sure."

Maria smiled with a sad smile.

"How is my family? My mother...?"

"They are okay. They will be very happy when I tell them that we saw each other... and that you feel much better."

"Say hello to them from me."

"Do you need me to bring you anything when I come back with Nade?"

“I don’t know, I can’t think of anything at the moment.”

Elena got up ready to leave. She apologized to Maria for leaving so abruptly but she had to tend to her official work. She hugged her and walked out leaving Maria with the doctor.

“She will come back with your sister soon,” the doctor assured her to facilitate their separation.

* * *

Even though it was very difficult for Maria to face the fateful events that followed, while living in the home of Hellwig’s parents, she deliberately and consciously wanted to dig deeper into them in order to dissect them to the smallest detail.

Faced with the new situation and the growing impatience of his parents, Maria sensed the danger of their negative influence on Hellwig and his relationship with Maria. She realized that the net his parents had cast over him was getting tighter. He stayed with them more and more. And for longer periods of time. It was as if he was merging with them.

Their maid Elsa kept on coming day after day. Feeling completely lonely, Maria began to get close to her. She gave her expensive gifts and talked to her like an equal, not like a maid. That frightened Elsa. She sensed that Maria wanted to get closer to her for some nefarious reason. And that was the truth. Maria was trying to use Elsa to find out things about these people that she didn’t know. People who increasingly rejected her. Life was becoming unbearable for her. She kept feeling that one of these days something terrible would happen to her, to her health. Or that she would have to leave this house... with or without Hellwig. She began to think that, in one of those rare moments when she ran into her mother-in-law, the old woman would inflict some great harm on her. Maria couldn’t get that feeling out of her mind.

The opportunities to talk to the maid were few. Her mother-in-law rarely left Elsa in the house alone with Maria. The old woman seemed to sense Maria’s intention. And even though she trusted her

longtime maid, she didn't trust her completely. One day after Maria heard the front door close and she was sure her mother-in-law had left the house, Maria spoke to Elsa and asked her:

“Elsa, when did you start working for this lady?”

After seeing Elsa's reaction and the expression on her face, Maria realized that she had touched on a sensitive issue.

Elsa kept quiet for a while and then spoke up. She said:

“Before the war my father worked for Hellwig's grandfather. In a factory. For most of her life my mother also worked as a maid in this house. Call it tradition but all my brothers too worked for these people. And now here I am.”

Maria could barely hide her excitement. Elsa knew a lot about this family. Maria's eagerness to understand things was peaking. But, of course, she had to be very careful about what she asked. She was afraid of losing Elsa's trust. Maria said:

“My understanding from what Hellwig has told me, my in-laws were very rich before the war and even during the war.”

The statement Maria made was unimportant but it was something she needed to say to get Elsa talking.

Elsa said:

“Hellwig's grandfather, on his father's side, owned a large factory before the war. During the war his factory began to produce parts for tanks, aircraft and all kinds of weapons. His grandfather became one of the richest people in this town. Before the end of the war part of his factory was destroyed in the bombings. His grandfather was killed. Both his grandfather and his grandfather's younger unmarried brother died in the factory. Hellwig's mother never worked. Now Hellwig's father is co-owner of the same factory where Hellwig works.”

Maria went rigid all over. How could Hellwig have hidden this from her? He'd never told her what his parents did for a living. He'd never told her what his grandparents did. But, at the same time, she had never asked him. Maybe that's why he hadn't taken her home for the longest time. So she wouldn't find out.

Hellwig himself may have run away from home. Because of them. They, his grandparents, were criminals. Murderers. Who knows how many people were killed with the weapons they manufactured in that factory... Maria was feeling terrible, to a point of physical pain squeezing at her chest and brain... She began to question herself as to where she really was? With what kind of people had she become involved? Inhuman.

"It's terrible," Maria whispered. "A great misfortune had fallen upon them."

Unable to understand what was happening to Maria, Elsa moved away from her. She carefully wiped the dust off the furniture. But, as if feeling the need to continue telling her story, she said:

"And the lady's brother died... What did you say your country's name was?"

Maria said, "Macedonia, Macedonia," repeating the name twice. But Elsa didn't seem to understand so Maria said, "Yugoslavia."

"Exactly there..." replied Elsa without naming the country. "In your country. He was a young man but a great officer. I heard my father telling the story... What were they called... they... who fought against our army...?"

"Partisans..." muttered Maria.

"Yes them!" cried Elsa. "They caught him and killed him..."

Maria didn't know how to react in front of Elsa about what she had found out from her. She took a tray and handed it to her to wipe. But after Elsa wiped it she continued talking. She said:

“When Hellwig brought you here my father said that the lady wouldn’t like that at all. The gentleman wouldn’t like it either. They didn’t even want to hear the name of your country. They also hated the people from your country. Everyone in my house was surprised when they found out that Hellwig had married you. And the only reason the lady and gentleman are alive today is because of their medication. The doctor used to come and see them almost every day. They were so overwhelmed they couldn’t leave the house. Before that they hoped Hellwig would leave you... The scariest thing for them was when he told them that he was going to bring you home. One time they thought of writing to tell him not to come with you, to stop him from bringing you here. But they changed their minds...”

At this point Maria realized that the hatred Hellwig’s parents had for her had deep roots. Up to now she had naively thought that all this had to do with her inability to adjust to their lifestyle. Now it became very clear to her that she was their enemy. From an enemy country.

Indeed, the worst belongs to the past, Maria thought. But it seems that many things, especially the most horrible ones, are not forgotten.

Suddenly something inside Maria snapped. Why did they hate her? Now, after so many years, decades after the war?! Why was she an enemy? They were the enemy. They came to her country to kill. Hellwig’s mother’s brother the “great officer” was one of those who led the assassins in Maria’s country. He was one of the most notorious officers, only his appearance was human. Everything else was beastly. He killed little babies like her innocent son Carl, who fell victim to his sadism.

And because of this stupidity she had been suffering for months poisoning her soul. Now Maria wanted to confront them... to speak to both of them. To tell them that she realized what kind of people she had come to live her life with. To throw insulting words at them. She felt the need to take revenge for their humiliating treatment of her. For the rejection from the first moment she crossed their threshold. For the fact that they treated her like someone who was

there temporarily and they were waiting for her to leave at any moment. To leave the house. After having such thoughts Maria began to feel like she was changing, turning into an evil being. This was a new condition which she discovered existed within herself...

All that day Maria found herself struggling with the restlessness inside her which was getting stronger. As if she wasn't the same person. She feared that her feelings for Hellwig might change. She tried directing her thoughts at Hellwig telling herself that he wasn't responsible for all this. He was born fifteen years after the war had ended and he couldn't be blamed for how horribly the older people behaved. At the same time he loved her and she was the mother of his child, which meant that he wasn't obsessed with everything that was in those dark minds. If he was, wouldn't he have revealed himself by now? And now her hidden thought, her most hidden thought which pierced her brain like an electric current, running right through her heart was, "why didn't Hellwig want her to get pregnant for such a long time?" Maybe she didn't think about it... whenever it happened it happened... Maybe it wasn't going to happen at all... But immediately, as you toss the burning object that you hold in your hand so that it won't burn you, she continued to dismiss this heavy thought. She continued to bury it deep down from where it came.

Every day Hellwig came upstairs late in the evenings thinking Maria was asleep. She felt very anxious while waiting for him to climb the stairs from the lower to the upper floor. She knew that his parents were taking him away from her more and more every day. Before her arrival here she couldn't even have imagined that Hellwig would behave so submissively. He seemed so independent of them. Maria increasingly realized that soon she would be left on her own and would have three people who didn't want her. She believed that Hellwig would be able to endure the endless struggle, less and less. And... it wouldn't be long before he lost the desire to fight... Maybe Hellwig belonged there, with them? But if that were true... why fight?

Pretending to be asleep Maria continued to cry in silence. Her only consolation was her little son breathing calmly beside her. But at the same time, he was her biggest concern. She became more and more

aware that she wouldn't last long in this house. But on the other hand, she felt it would be terrible if she left. For her, for her child, for her family and maybe even for Hellwig?

* * *

If she left Hellwig she would have to go back to Macedonia. To her family. With a baby... If she stayed in this country she didn't believe she could survive alone. Especially with a small child. And what would she do here all alone without her family? If she left she would condemn her son Carl to grow up without a father. And what would she do if she went back home? Would she be able to find work? Even more so now... with a foreign citizenship... If she left she would make Hellwig's parents very happy... in whom only the evil kept them alive.

The scariest thing was that she would lose Hellwig. What would happen to him? Would he still want her if she told him she planned to go back to Macedonia? Should she even tell him? She needed to tell him but only if her plan was definite and she had decided to take that step. Or would it be better to leave and make a clean break...? She fell asleep that night contemplating these bitter questions.

* * *

She continued to live an unhappy life. Maria couldn't complain to anyone about Hellwig being neglectful. To her and to their child. Carl was ten months old and Hellwig had yet to take him for a ride in the beautiful stroller he'd bought for him. Almost every day Hellwig brought the most beautiful clothes, toys and baby food for Carl and various ready made meals for her. But nothing could fill the gap that had been created between the two of them.

One evening just after Maria fed Carl and put him to sleep, she heard very loud voices arguing downstairs. She heard Hellwig yelling bitterly. Maria immediately knew that they were arguing about her again. She quietly crept to the end of the hallway to hear better. From what she heard and understood they frequently used the words "she" and "they".

“There can be no greater shame and humiliation in this house,” yelled Hellwig’s father panting with anger. “You knew very well, even before you brought her here, how terrible it would be for your mother and me. Your mother has suffered a lot all these years. You want to remind her of that every day?! I will not allow it any more...”

Hellwig was quiet for a long time. She then heard his strangled voice say:

“Should we throw her out on the street?... Together with the child? That’s my child too... It looks like you’ve forgotten that!”

He added the last words with revolt in his voice but it also sounded like he was ready to cry. As if he realized that everything was hopeless.

“She has her own family... her own country. Let her go back there, to her relatives,” said his father.

Hellwig was silent for a while. Maybe he was thinking about the bad living conditions he had witnessed in her home. Lacking material things. Or maybe he was thinking about how he was going to break the news to his wife and son... about throwing them out of the house.

Suddenly Maria was overwhelmed by a terrible feeling... full of pride and dignity. Even before she was aware of it she was running down the stairs. Towards them. Towards those dishonest people who were arguing about her fate and the fate of her child, as if they were objects that should be thrown out of their house at any cost.

...It was immediately clear to them that she had heard and understood the entire argument they were having. In fact they had purposely spoken loudly and deliberately so that she could hear them. They at least looked surprised and seemed to feel awkward when she ran down the stairs to confront them. She said:

“Thank you Hellwig for trying keep me here but I see that you’re very weak. I didn’t think you were that weak. But you’re powerless

here in this house. You've been your own person everywhere except for here. And you can't escape from them. There is no need to feel guilty... That guilt falls on me for trusting you, a man I met by chance. With whom I went to share my life. To start a family. You should have had the courage from the beginning to tell me about your mother and father having suffered bitter, tragic and painful events associated with my country..."

While speaking to Hellwig Maria looked at his parents and saw two pairs of eyes full of hatred staring back at her. They looked like the eyes of wolves ready to tear her apart. But she expected that and greeted them with defiance. The next moment she met Hellwig's eyes. She gave him the same treatment. The blood in her veins felt like it was frozen cold. It seemed like the entire place was frozen cold. From that moment on even Hellwig looked at her with unfriendly eyes. The rage she felt boiled her blood. She said:

"There is no longer any need to pressure your son to kick me out. You have your son back... he is all yours..."

Maria yelled at them in German and added:

"Don't worry about me and my son. I will no longer stay in your house even if you ask me to. I don't want my son to have an unhappy childhood."

After her defiant outburst Maria turned around and went upstairs. She heard nothing from them, not a word. She slammed the door after she went into her room. She didn't want to hear anything more. For her, those three were already in her bad past.

...Did she have the right to condemn Carl to live without a father? She wanted to believe that they could have arranged their lives better... if they hadn't come to this unfortunate house. She struggled with the idea of talking to Hellwig one more time. She wondered if she should make one more attempt to speak with him.

...She figured there would only be hope for them living together if they both left this dark house. Regardless of where they went. But when she remembered how Hellwig had looked at her, the

expression on his face a little while ago, her heart stopped beating... She immediately felt weak, like someone had cut her legs with a knife. The question that now raged in her mind was, "What will happen next? What needs to happen next?"

Would she ever be able to accept the fact that even Hellwig had given up on her? She felt severe pain pressing on her chest... Worse than that; he was giving up on his own child, his own son...!

She blamed him. Why hadn't Hellwig, when he persuaded her to be with him and spend their lives together, warned her that his parents might not approve? He should have asked and got their permission before he made his decision to ask her to go with him. Most of all, he should have known that he wouldn't have the courage to oppose them. He should have known that, even in his most intimate matters of life their decision would be crucial. But what Maria regretted and cried most of all about was their poor child whom she loved very much...

The idea of her innocent son having to suffer so much, through no fault of his own, filled Maria with hopelessness and bitterness and made her cry a lot...

She was awake all that night. Hellwig didn't go upstairs until the next morning. His avoidance of her in the evening and at night was his greatest betrayal. And so was his terrible, terrible silence. And for him it was a good thing that he hadn't gone upstairs that night... That way he wouldn't be aware of her immense suffering. He didn't want to know about it... He felt that it was too late to do anything. That everything had already been said. Everything was over and done with.

The next day after Hellwig went to work Elsa the maid helped Maria pack her things. She only packed things that were personally hers and the child's. She counted the money she had saved. There wasn't much there. There wasn't much in her bankbook either. There was hardly enough for her and her child to survive several months back home. But she would have to think about that later. After she returned home...

Maria and Hellwig spoke to each other in the afternoon. It was a dry conversation that had to take place. Without looking at him Maria said:

“If you want to, get a couple of plane tickets for me and Carl for tomorrow’s flight.” She gave the appearance that she wasn’t interested in looking at Hellwig or the expression on his face. She then took her passport out of her purse and put it on the table. After that she went into her room to be with her child.

Hellwig later left a note for her on the same table. The note said that her son’s name had to be added to the passport. But in order to do that Carl had to be baptized. That’s all he said, not a word more. Not the slightest attempt to change Maria’s mind or anything. Even though he knew her decision to leave had been impulsive. He also knew it was inevitable. And pressing.

Everything was arranged. The tickets were purchased. She and the child were dressed for travel and ready to go. The next day a taxi arrived and was waiting for them in front of the house. Nobody held them back. Not even Hellwig... Only Elsa wiped her tears with the end of her apron when they left the house.

Hellwig was mute. A deaf mute. Maria wasn’t sure if it was okay for him to get into the taxi. So that he could accompany them to the airport. His presence in the taxi made it even harder for her.

After they arrived at the airport Hellwig handed her an envelope with money. Maria didn’t want to take it so he put it in her travel bag pocket. Then at the last moment before Maria and Carl departed, in a hoarse voice, Hellwig said:

“Contact me. I will come and visit you...”

She knew he was lying. She didn’t answer him. It seemed like Hellwig’s words had never reached her. She felt like someone was squeezing her brain. Everything inside her was dead. She was also afraid of losing her little son... of someone snatching him out of her arms. He looked happy. It was a good thing that he was too young to understand what was happening between his mother and father. He

had no idea that with this, his first trip, his destiny would be drastically changed.

Walking towards the airplane Maria looked back at the airport building hoping to get a glimpse of Hellwig. Look at him from afar... Look into his eyes one more time. What would those eyes say?

After boarding the plane Maria's throat began to tighten. She was becoming more and more aware of the circumstances under which she had left and was returning to Macedonia. She couldn't breathe. Macedonia never seemed more attractive to her than now, but at the same time she was very upset at having to leave alone with her son and without Hellwig... She was happy that she hadn't run into his parents when she left Hellwig's house... She didn't know whether to hate or pity them.

* * *

Hellwig returned home alone by taxi. Without Maria and without her newborn son. He hadn't even gotten to know him.

What had just happened to him? Why did this happen to him every time he came home... to his mother and father...? Why did he behave like a slave? Why did he behave like a trained dog full of blind obedience? Why did he do everything he was told? If they told him to jump into a lake would he have jumped into a lake? He had no idea why he behaved this way. Maybe it was something instinctive, something he'd inherited?

Was this a remnant of some kind of fear? Of his family's dark past from the war years about which he had only heard and read but had never personally experienced? Was this what made him run away from home for years? Was he hoping to become his own independent man? Was he trying to get off the addiction of his father's tutoring? Perhaps he was trying to escape from the clutches of his unscrupulous and cold despotic father whose only obsession was money. The older his father grew the more he cared for money, which to Hellwig was mere nonsense.

And when Hellwig thought that he had the courage to stand up to his heartless father and his “not at all” sentimental mother, he decided to return home, to the home where he’d grown up. On the hearth that attracted him very much and at the same time made him run away from it irrevocably.

Who knew how he thought. Had he married a woman born and raised under completely different conditions, in a society very different from his own, as part of his struggle with himself? With everything that evaded him? With all that was in vain? Now, once again he became convinced of his inability to oppose them. To stop them from pressuring him. He wasn’t the man he thought he was. That other, courageous Hellwig was hidden somewhere deep in his soul.

It was an absurdity to believe that there was any hope that Maria would be able to live here, in the same house with the two of them... left over from a former world. How could he believe that this naïve, decent Maria would be able to draw near them when their own son Hellwig himself couldn’t? He very well knew that for a long time they had made every effort to turn him into their true descendant, a copy of themselves. But even though he resisted, he knew that he couldn’t escape them and his blind obedience to them. He had been programmed at an early age. But wherever and however much he ran away from them, he always returned to them, even more obedient and submissive than before. Unfortunately he became aware of this only a few days after he’d come back home with Maria.

At first he couldn’t find the strength to oppose them. Not with a single word when they isolated Maria from their dinner table. It was a categorical declaration that his marriage to this woman had been rejected and that they wouldn’t stop until he gave up on her. They would resist to the end.

Hellwig, however, wanted to immediately open the issue. Tell them that his marriage was perfect. That he had brought this woman home to start a family and they wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. But he didn’t say any of that. He was well aware that he couldn’t change their hardened minds or reach their insensitive hearts. It

quickly became clear to him that he was a coward. He realized that the other Hellwig, the one inside him, the one he hated, was stronger than him... That's why he was unable to stand up for his wife and fight for her during those long evening arguments and during the final argument when Maria came downstairs and interrupted them. He himself wasn't aware that he'd become part of them. That, that was it... That the other Hellwig inside of him had defeated him...

Hellwig couldn't believe that he hadn't tried harder, that he hadn't said a single word and that he hadn't even made a single gesture to keep them there with him. To convince Maria and her son to stay. Or to go with them. What kind of man was he...? How did he expect Maria to survive alone with the child? He knew how poor her family was and the conditions they lived under. He was only comforted by the idea that... he was going to send them. How was he, himself, going to live? Alone? Roaming around the world...? Away from home...? He didn't want to be away from home. And if he did run away he couldn't run forever...

* * *

The flight attendant on the plane often came over to see how Maria and the child were doing. She noticed despair and hopelessness in the expression of this young woman. Once in a while Maria let out a restrained cry. This worried the flight attendant but she didn't know how to help her. Seeing how Maria was, the flight attendant invented all sorts of things to talk about. About her and about her child. Just enough to engage her in a conversation. At one point it seemed to the flight attendant that the child wasn't safe in his mother's arms. So the flight attendant suggested that she take the child for a while and hold him. Maria went into shock. She didn't want, not even for a moment, to be separated from her little Carl. He was everything to her now. Instinctively, as if a feeling of grief had gripped his mother, the child sat on her lap meekly. Quietly. Keeping quiet without even the slightest sound coming out of his mouth.

...How could Hellwig hide his other personality from Maria for so long? And how could he have loved her if he was already like his parents? How had she not, not even for a moment, discovered in him

the things that would so irreparably ruin their relationship? Even their marriage? Scariest of all - their love...

That fatal night, when she went downstairs to confront them, maybe Hellwig reacted like he did out of a fear of hurting his parents feelings through her words, through her, who had been chosen by him to be a family member... No, no, that couldn't be it? Why continue to deceive herself? Didn't she see a cold glow in his eyes? They spoke so clearly to her that night. She could never forget that... not even for a moment... He had alienated her with that look... and maybe... even if he didn't want to believe it... he had hatred for her in his eyes...

If it was just a quarrel, arguing among themselves about any issue, what could it have been about? But this issue was the most crucial, the most essential issue... Conditions under which to live there together or not... She couldn't reconcile the idea that he, the man she loved, the man who she thought loved her, had rejected her so suddenly, her and their child... The very moment he realized that she had figured out what was happening. When she discovered the real face of his parents... And his.

...God, if she only knew Hellwig would be like his parents. She would have left him on that side of the camp and it would have been the end of their relationship, their love, their life together... Then she wouldn't have gone downstairs to tell them to their faces how she felt! To tell them to their faces what kind of people they truly were. And regarding Hellwig, even though she tried to hide the reality about him, even from herself, she already knew he was like his parents. From the steps he'd taken she knew he was becoming like them more and more. He was there more for them than for her, in the full sense of the word. And it was good that he was. It was good that he openly stood on their side. She now knew the truth and he would no longer be able to deceive her and try to convince her that he was somehow different from them. That somehow it was someone else who did the things he did...

With all these thoughts running through her mind she increasingly became more and more miserable and hopeless. She could no longer hope for anything. There was no one to turn to. She and Carl were

alone... on their own... Maria had to face that fact. Now she needed to think about what to do next. It would be very difficult to hide the truth from her loved ones.

She warmly hugged her son who was now asleep... Bitter tears ran down her cheeks.

* * *

When her two sisters came to meet her and Carl at the airport, she couldn't believe her luck. "Hellwig must have sent them a telegram," she thought. All this time she wondered how she was going to get home alone with a child and suitcases. A small spark of hope appeared in Maria's heart. It seemed like she no longer cared about everything that had happened...

Her sisters cried with joy. She cried too. But she wasn't sure if it was from joy or sorrow. Or because of all the pity for herself and the child. Or for all the horrible things that had happened to her from the moment she'd told Hellwig, her beloved Hellwig, that she was pregnant.

One by one her sisters hugged her and then took Carl in their arms telling her how sweet and small he was... Carl looked at them with fear in his eyes. He then twisted his face and suddenly began to cry loudly. Maria took him back in her arms. She immediately calmed him down.

Both of her sisters tried to talk to her almost simultaneously:

"When the telegram from Hellwig arrived we jumped for joy that we would see you again. Most of all Carl." Then they all got into the taxi that Maria had flagged and headed home.

Maria's biggest fear now was how she would manage to hide the truth from her mother. From her experienced, tormented and penetrating eyes which could see everything.

Little Carl had a surprise for her.

She slowly came over and looked at him. Moments later she took him in her arms and began to kiss him all over. The strange old woman frightened Carl and he began to cry loudly.

“You’re grandma’s boy aren’t you?” she yelled out loud several times...

“He looks like Hellwig,” yelled Lile.

“That’s not true, he looks like Maria,” yelled Nade.

“Look at him, look at his face, at his eyes and you will see how wrong you are,” yelled Lile.

This back and forth between the sisters would have continued if their mother hadn’t cut in and said:

“He looks like both of them. What’s wrong with you... He looks like this, he looks like that. The poor child is so small that no one knows who he looks like. He looks like himself - that’s what the old people used to say...”

After he was fed Carl was put to bed. One after another the sisters dispersed leaving Maria sitting near a window in the house alone with her mother. Her mother stared at her with her strained tired eyes looking for a cheerful expression on her daughter’s face, that would answer her question “what was it that had suddenly brought her to her mother’s hearth? Alone, without her husband, and with her little son?” Her mother looked like a hunter whose full attention, whose full care was to find out what was behind all this. Why was there no decent and cheerful expression on Maria’s face? But Maria didn’t help her. She continued to look calm and composed.

“Tell me,” asked her persistent mother, “how did you like your mother-in-law and father-in-law?” Going straight for her heart.

Maria didn’t immediately answer. She got up and went to the kitchen. She wanted to think of a good answer.

“Should we make a cup of coffee first?” asked Maria. Fortunately Maria had brought a kilo of coffee which she hadn’t unpacked so she went and got it and brought it into the kitchen. She also brought some other things so there would be gifts for everyone.

“People in other countries are not like us,” Maria said to her mother when she returned to the kitchen. “No one is like us. Everyone there lives for themselves.”

“Did you at least dine together?” asked her curious mother.

“No...” replied Maria.

“Why not? Didn’t you live in the same house? Weren’t they his real mother and father? Wasn’t he an only child? That’s a strange thing,” said her mother.

“It’s strange for us but normal for them,” replied Maria.

“Who took care of Carl when you had to go out to buy something?” asked her mother.

“Are you asking if my mother-in-law looked after him? Hellwig’s mother?” replied Maria barely audibly. “We had a maid and I rarely went out. Hellwig provided us with everything we needed.”

Her mother was silent for a long time. Then she said:

“I know... some people here who have been to Germany say there isn’t much closeness between parents and children there... Especially when the children are growing up. There was also a story where a mother and father gave away their newborn son to a home to take care of him. They had plenty of money to pay for his support. And he was their only child... They simply wanted to live without obligations. He grew up in the home. They only went to visit him on weekends, to take him for a walk. That was it...”

“That’s for sure but those are rare cases,” replied Maria and handed her mother a cup of coffee.

At that moment Maria's mind drifted back to the time when Hellwig had resisted and even refused to have a child. As well as how negatively he'd reacted when she told him she was pregnant. Thinking of those painful moments upset her. She knew that if they didn't change the subject she would tell her mother everything. And she didn't want to do that. For both their sakes. Why add more misery to her mother? Didn't she have enough misery in her life...?

"How is Lile doing at her job?" asked Maria.

"She is doing okay, at least she's not complaining. She'll take you there and you'll see for yourself. The company she works for is small but they do well. The employees work longer hours than in other businesses but receive their pay regularly. Thanks to their boss. More or less. Otherwise we wouldn't have anything to eat. Now at least we have food on the table."

"Is it still difficult to find a job?" asked Maria cautiously.

"Of course it's hard?" replied her mother. "Lile had to knock on doors every day. Badijala. They haven't said that they will hire anyone – but he has already been accepted. Or he worked there illegally but now they are advertising the job so that they can correctly put him to work."

Her mother noticed that her explanation made Maria sad.

The other day her neighbours had come over. They were curious, they wanted to see the "foreigner" and Maria. To find out things about her life...

Maria tried to isolate her child as much as possible, especially from infections. But her mother wanted to brag about her grandson and bathed and dressed him in his most beautiful clothes. If her neighbours didn't come over she would take him out to the yard and the gate. Maria was sympathetic with her. After bringing up three girls Carl was the first male in the house... And he was born to a rich family... Maria was happy to see that her little Carl quickly adapted to the new faces and new environment. He was always ready for someone to pick him up. Talk to him. Play with him. Laugh with

him and take him outside. Maria wished she could see the faces of Hellwig's parents watching Carl laughing and enjoying himself. They would probably explode... No... They wouldn't be able to understand what was happening because this was very far from their way of life and their notion of raising children. This was because everything in their hearts and souls had long been dead, destroyed. Blackened. There was no life in them. Thinking about this made Maria happy. She was glad she'd left and was now far away from them.

The only regret she had was that she had left Hellwig... That she had split up with him... And the distance that separated them. That terrible gap between them... It seemed insurmountable... Permanent...

* * *

A few days after her arrival Maria found herself feeling tense, eagerly waiting for the mailman to go by. She kept watching the other houses to see if he'd come by. If he went to any of her neighbours... to find out if he had already passed by. But he had. Did that mean there was no letter for her from Hellwig? With at least a few words written in it?

She couldn't understand why she needed to hear from him...

Maria struggled with many contradictions. It would have been normal for her to talk to Hellwig. But she had decided to leave instead. That was the first step she took... But could she have acted differently? What else needed to happen? For them to take her suitcases out the door? To take her son away? His parents had unfortunately destroyed her both mentally and physically! Because they were able to do that...

Why hadn't Hellwig tried to stop her from leaving? To not let her go? To say at least a few words to get her to stay... There were other possibilities... He could have come to live with her here in Macedonia. With his skills he would surely have been able find a job and apartment easily. He had expertise. Maria realized that she was making fun of herself thinking this way. How romantic it would

have been, she thought, if he had decided to move here, to Macedonia, to settle permanently in this city. To have left his home, the home of his mother, father, grandmother, grandfather... And come and live here with her and her family permanently. With all those thoughts going through her mind, she again asked herself the question: "What could he, her Hellwig, possibly write to her in a letter now?"

But, despite all the odds, Maria still waited for a letter to arrive. With any kind of news. She was stressed out... She felt unbearable tension... Was he upset because Maria had left him and gone to live with her family...? Not to forget that she'd taken her son with her... His son... Maria was aware that she was expecting the impossible...

Still, every day she waited for the mailman to arrive. Her mother pretended not to notice... But doubt began to enter her soul. Things weren't the way her daughter wanted to portray them...

As the days went by it became more and more important for Maria to receive a letter. But no letter arrived. Had Hellwig completely given up on her and Carl? Was he going to leave them completely on their own without any financial support? He was fully capable of at least sending a letter and some money in it without the two monsters that had given birth to him knowing. Would he find the strength to escape their clutches just for a moment? Where was that good man, the old mailman, who was supposed to bring them the letter? For years since she was little, the mailman had brought both good and bad news by ringing the doorbell.

No one and nothing interested Maria more than receiving that letter. It became more and more difficult for her to continue to wear the mask of nonchalance. She found it more and more difficult to show a good mood on her face. To not cry out loud. To not worry about her child. She was tired of lying and, in front of everyone who came to visit, repeating the fabricated stories she told about Hellwig's mother and father. That they were good people like Hellwig. That they barely let her leave with their grandson, from whom they couldn't be separated even for a short time. That they welcomed her with joy when Hellwig first took her home with him. Of how happy they were when Carl was born... But at the same time she longed for

her birthplace, for her mother and sisters, and that's why she was here visiting them.

Every day Maria counted her money to see how much was left. She was worried. Every day it was less and less. What would she do when it was all gone?! Should she secretly, without anyone knowing, start looking for a job? If nothing else, take Carl in his stroller more often to the city. She might even meet some of her old friends. Maybe one of them could tell her where to find a job... The fact that she spoke German might certainly be useful to her.

Twenty days had passed since Maria had accepted the idea that Hellwig wasn't going to help her. He hadn't written even a single letter, never mind send money. But on the twentieth day when she was coming home from a walk with Carl, her sister happily ran out of the house to meet her with an envelope in her hand. Maria couldn't believe it. By the look on her sister's happy face Maria realized another thing. Her family knew she wasn't receiving letters from Hellwig and were afraid things weren't going well between them. They tried to hide their fears so as not to upset her. Maria could hardly refrain from crying. Her hands trembled with excitement as she took the envelope from her sister.

She deliberately didn't open it in front of her sister's curious eyes. After her sister took Carl from her arms, Maria went to her room. What she found inside the envelope wasn't exactly what she expected. There was a short note that read: "Here, I am sending you some money. I hope you and Carl are well." That was it. Not a word more. There was nothing else in the envelope. There was money... which she needed very much but not a letter. Even though she didn't want to admit it, Maria was actually waiting for a letter from him. For news of hope. Hope that she was still and would remain Hellwig's wife and Carl his son. Unfortunately the words in the note promised very little...

She went into the room where her mother and sisters were. They all pretended not to look at her. They waited to see the expression on her face and find out what news the letter had brought her. Maria ignored them and walked towards Carl. She said:

“Your father sent you money,” even though Carl was too young to understand.

Her mother and sisters were certain that Maria’s words to Carl were for them. But the tone of voice with which she spoke wasn’t a happy one. There was something crying deep inside of her. Something that wouldn’t allow her tears to flow.

Her sister Lile, wanting somehow to bring cheer to the atmosphere, took the candy box out of her purse and yelled:

“Come everyone take one, let’s congratulate Maria. She’ll treat us all later after she gets her money from the post office. She’ll have foreign money. It’s worth more.”

They all gathered around the candy box. Nade took two candies. Her mother gave her the look. Wondering if there were enough for everyone...

It became increasingly clear to Maria that Hellwig would never win the relentless battle which he was fighting within himself. Maria was convinced that the money he sent was sent without their consent. He probably didn’t tell his parents. Which meant that there still was something human in him...

Awake late in the night Maria contemplated: Should she answer his note? Tell him that she had received the money? Write him a brief note with a few words like: “We received the money. Thank you. We are okay.” And nothing more. She wanted him to know that she hadn’t left because of the argument she’d had with his parents. She left because of him... She left because of the murderous look he gave her during that argument. That look told her everything. It brought to light his hidden essence. Also, knowing how hurt she was he still stayed with his parents all night and not with her. Obviously he didn’t care how she felt. If nothing else, he should have said something to her, at least one word that would have alleviated what had happened. Or at least try to blame her for her actions that night. If he thought that she was to blame for what she’d done. Why didn’t he even try to let her know what was happening during all those months he was arguing with his parents?

He was responsible for everything that had happened to her. For the verdict that was passed that night. For sealing the fate of their future. For their child. Maria felt she was least guilty in the matter... And what could she now hope for in finding the strength to take the first step... and get back to him?

* * *

Hellwig too wanted to write Maria a letter. But he was afraid it would upset her even more. Who knew how angry she was about all the things that had happened to her. Everything that she had gone through. On the other hand Hellwig was ashamed of what had happened and was convinced that her family had condemned him. They probably didn't want to hear from him. They would have surely torn up any letters he sent them. Only God knew what Maria had told them about him and his parents.

There were many other reasons too that had made him give up on his intention to write or call her. What could he possibly say to her after all the tragic things that had happened... both to her and to him... but mostly to the child? He didn't believe anything could be fixed... Which one of them would change... become different... completely different? How could the two of them get close to each other again...? Continue to live together?!

He knew that the first thing Maria would ask him to do was leave his parents. And not just physically... Especially since deep down he was convinced that he wouldn't be able to do that... He didn't have the courage to disappoint them to such an extent... He was their only hope... He was their purpose for living... even though he didn't completely embrace their ideology... He simply couldn't reject them because they hated everything that wasn't German and everyone who wasn't German. He also knew he couldn't change them.

He was aware that reconciliation between his parents and Maria wasn't possible... For the rest of their lives. He even thought that if they accepted Carl and wanted to raise him as their grandchild Maria would never agree to it. He was also sure that she would never again want to see them. Let alone live in the same house with them.

On the other hand, his mother and father didn't care that their grandson had left them. They didn't want to know if the departure was temporary or permanent. They didn't care if they ever saw him again! As if he wasn't Hellwig's child. They rejoiced at the idea of him disappearing forever. This thought alone gave Hellwig a horrible pain in his chest... It seemed like he was being cut in half. Even if they couldn't accept Maria, even if they hated her, why did they have to forsake his child?!

Tormented by all the thoughts that tore through his mind day and night, Hellwig decided not to write letters.

He also kept asking himself: Did he have the right to be angry at Maria for her outburst in front of his parents that night? And then leave him without consulting with him, without saying a word? He was angry with her for leaving so abruptly... Even though he was well aware that his behaviour, after moving in with his parents, had pushed Maria away. He felt like he had created a growing gap between Maria and his mother and father who feared that Hellwig one day would leave them... But how could he leave them? How could he live alone for the rest of his life? He had no brothers or sisters. Did Maria leave him because he'd spent more and more time on the lower floor with his parents...? And less and less with her... upstairs? Would his parents have ever given in or changed anything to accommodate Maria? He didn't think so... He was also sure that Maria wouldn't change anything to accommodate them either.

All the assumptions he made and conclusions he reached seemed to only entangle him more and more to a point where he couldn't find a way out.

* * *

For almost two months there was no money and no letters... The way she behaved in front of her mother and sisters, Maria was certain they knew something was terribly wrong but they never said a word about it openly in front of her. Maria had been with them for a long time with no explanation and hadn't told them when she was going to leave? Or maybe she was planning to remain there

indefinitely? Also they had no idea what had happened to Maria. There. Beyond the border. At the same time they didn't have the courage to ask her. All the time Maria, however, was expecting them to ask the question. Especially her mother. But she was grateful that they hadn't and at the same time was angry at herself for the false atmosphere she had created. So finally she decided to start the long awaited conversation.

“Hellwig and I, and most of all his parents, had an argument,” blurted Maria one evening as they sat around Carl. “Right from the beginning they couldn't accept the fact that Hellwig had married a woman who wasn't German. Not one of them. They fought over that but Hellwig didn't want to listen to them. He wanted to convince them that there was nothing wrong with what he'd done. But from the first day when we arrived at their home they looked for a way to throw me out.”

“They can go to hell,” cursed her mother. “I knew they were bad people and used to say to myself ‘why the hell do young people need to go there? They lived here well and they are free’...”

“I too was afraid when Hellwig told me that we would live with them for a while. At their house. That's what he decided we should do,” replied Maria.

“Mistakes were made, daughter. And they broke up your marriage. May fire burn those responsible...” said her mother.

“Didn't Hellwig support you? I remember he loved you very much,” said Lile.

“No he didn't. The moment he was close to them he turned into a different person. They had a terrible power over him. They knew it and they used it,” replied Maria.

“Maybe he'll reconsider now that you're not with him,” said her mother trying to comfort her.

Maria didn't say anything. She didn't want to tell her mother that his parents had a very strong influence over him... And now, when he was alone with them, he would be even more helpless.

"Then why didn't you suggest that he come and live here?" asked the youngest sister.

"I don't believe he would have wanted to do that... Especially not now... They won't allow him to leave... Especially after his marriage to me against their will...?" replied Maria.

"How can they not feel sorry for their grandchild, those ingrates?" asked her mother angrily... and took Carl from his aunt.

Everyone's eyes began to water. They couldn't believe what they'd heard from Maria. They loved Hellwig very much.

"I said to myself then," said her mother as if talking to herself, "when Hellwig suggested that you go with him that you shouldn't go with the foreigner. With a man whose family you don't know. But here, somehow, he won all of us over. You were deeply in love. Well, I thought, how could I possibly stand in the way of your happiness? It isn't easy to find a person who loves you and whom you love..."

Maria started to cry. She said:

"It never occurred to me that his mother and father would turn out to be so bad... so evil..."

Maria hesitated to tell them the whole truth. Everything that had happened. But somewhere deep in her subconscious there was the hope, quite small, barely achievable, that if he, her Hellwig, changed something in his struggle... if he defeated the other Hellwig in himself and returned to them, it would be harder to accept him again. That's why she didn't tell them everything. Then she heard her mother bluntly say:

"Come daughters bring something to eat. Let's not scare this poor child with our sour faces. Not everything is a failure. One of these

days his father will show up. You'll see. He will knock on the door. It will be a surprise.

Everyone's face brightened. It made it easier for them to accept the situation. Maria was convinced that her mother, even in the most difficult of situations in life, was a tireless optimist. She very well knew that what her mother had said about Hellwig was just wishful thinking. But at the same time, for the moment, she also wanted to believe her mother's words.

After dinner Maria went into her room to put Carl to bed hoping that fate hadn't condemned her child to live without a father and in poverty. Like she was when she was a child. But after Carl fell asleep and no one was there Maria was overwhelmed with sadness and hopelessness. She began to cry.

In the morning, before leaving her room, Maria's first thought was to look for a job. She mustn't delay it anymore. After breakfast she dressed Carl in nice clothes, put him in his stroller and the two went for a walk. After her return Maria hadn't seen any of her friends or people she knew from before. She deliberately avoided them. Especially those who knew she had married a German. She didn't want them to know about her break up... At least for as long as it could be avoided.

Walking along the river shoreline it seemed to her like a very long time had passed since she had left the city... When she left she had no idea that she would be coming back to such a hopeless situation. With a small child. Without a husband. No job. No money... Her eyes were full of tears when she suddenly saw her friend Elena standing in front of her. They hadn't seen each other since the day Elena had met Hellwig in front of the department store.

Soon after Maria had introduced her to her fiancé, Elena found out that Maria had married the German and they'd left Macedonia to live abroad.

Elena recognized her from afar and saw that she was pushing a stroller. She hurried over to catch up with her. But as Elena came closer she slowed down. She had the impression Maria wanted to

avoid her. What could the reason be for that? But at the same time Elena wasn't sure why she would want to avoid her.

But as it turned out, Elena was wrong in her assumption... Maria hadn't seen her.

"Maria," yelled Elena and ran towards her.

When Maria saw her she tried to smile. Her smile was full of tears... But nothing could be hidden from Elena's eyes. She saw deep sadness in her friend's smile. She also noticed the tears... no matter how much Maria tried to hide them. Even before that, Elena felt there was something not right about Maria. The moment she saw her. The way she stood... Her slow pace... Her messy hair...

"Maria, how are you? God, you have a son too? Look how big he is... He looks like his father... As far as I can tell... from the time we met. You remember? In front of the department store..."

Maria felt strange... How could she not remember...? She remembered alright. It was one of the happiest moments in her life... with Hellwig... She remembered the nice time she had with him... She couldn't feel the ground under her feet. Everyone was nice to her and she liked everyone. She laughed. She was playful... and liked to go everywhere... He brought joy into her life. Happiness... And now...? What could she possibly say to her friend now...? What was there to brag about now...?

This time Maria had to again face Elena's surprised and envious looks just as she had the time they met in front of the department store... But this time Maria had nothing to say to her. She was willing to let Elena think that she'd found her happiness. The greatest joy of her life...

Maria found her way out of the questions:

"How are you, Elena? What's new with you? Are you married? We haven't seen each other for a long time. I don't know much about what has been happening here."

“No I’m not married; I don’t even have a boyfriend.”

Maria was really surprised. She figured Elena would be surrounded by prospective candidates. Both for love and marriage. She was a beautiful woman. And successful in almost everything.

“Did you finish college?” asked Maria.

“Yes, I did,” replied Elena indifferently, as if it was something unimportant. She did this deliberately. She knew how important but unattainable a college education was for Maria. But so what. Everyone lived their life in their own way and so did Maria... She hadn’t done too badly. - Elena thought. She’d found a man she loved. And they had married. She now had a wonderful child... Who could tell what was more important in life...? Were people who had finished college happier?

“Do you work?” asked Maria.

Maria used the same tone of voice as the time when she asked Elena if she was still in school.

“Yes, I work...” replied Elena.

She saw envy in Maria’s eyes.

Shortly afterwards Maria asked:

“Where do you work?”

“In a bank...” replied Elena.

“Yes, I remember now, you studied at the Faculty of Economics. Were you hired right after graduation?” asked Maria.

“No. Half a year later,” replied Elena.

“Maybe you have a relative working there in a managerial position?” asked Maria with interest. She spoke quickly. Nervously. So as not to startle Elena.

“No, I applied for the job,” replied Elena.

Elena had no idea at the time why Maria was inquiring so much about her employment. Perhaps she was curious because she hadn't seen her for a long time.

“How are you?” asked Elena. “You certainly don't work. Hellwig made good money... when he was here. And of course you can't work. You have the little one to look after.”

Elena went to caress Carl but he immediately began to cry.

Maria tried to calm him down. She was embarrassed in front of Elena.

“Will you be staying a while?” asked Elena.

Her question startled Maria. She averted her gaze. Maria turned to look at the river.

“I should have gone back already,” replied Maria quickly. “But my mother and sisters don't want me to go. They got so used to Carl and want us to stay longer.”

“Have you been here a long time?” asked Elena.

“Well, long enough,” replied Maria vaguely. Elena became suspicious that something had happened to Maria which made her unhappy. But should she, even from a distance, be asking her... especially if Maria herself didn't want to tell her?

“When you're free, let's get together. Come and see me,” suggested Elena.

Maria seemed to hesitate.

“Do you have a telephone? Write the number down and I'll call you,” replied Maria

Elena wrote the number down on a piece of paper that she took out of her bag and handed it to Maria.

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything for Carl. We’ll see each other soon,” said Elena and stroked Carl’s hair.

Elena shook hands with Maria and left. She wanted to turn around and look at Maria from the distance but didn’t. She didn’t want to make Maria suspicious that she’d noticed something unusual about her.

Maria wasn’t sure which would be better – speak or not speak to Elena, albeit from a distance, about her situation. Elena seemed to always give good advice. Would they meet again soon? Maybe she could look her up at her home. When she wasn’t with Carl. She had her phone number... Maria didn’t know anyone else that she could rely on to help her.

Maria walked around the city for a long time. All this time Carl slept in his stroller. She needed to collect her thoughts about what to do... what to write to Hellwig. She had to be firm. He owed it to himself as a father to support his son. And her as well. He should have known that already. But did he? She should take his money by force if necessary. Should she take him to court? She would need to take him to an international court. And for that there must be a lot of money involved to be worth it. Even if she wrote him a letter there was no guarantee that he would get it. It could fall into his mother’s hands. She would never give it to him. Maria was convinced of that. She believed less and less that things between her and Hellwig would get better. Maybe she had been wrong to leave. Maybe this was better for Hellwig. Now he didn’t have to worry about her or his son. They were both far away from him and he was close to his mother and father. Maybe this was better for her. Maria didn’t have to know what was happening with him. Whether he stayed at home or had gone somewhere else to work? Whether he was alone or with another woman... No matter how angry Maria was she became passionately angry at the thought that he could fall in love with another woman! Live with another woman! It was unbearable for her. But she couldn’t understand why she was like that. She’d left him. She had left him with the understanding that she would no

longer live with him, with them, so there was no reason for her to be interested in his current life!

It was neither simple nor easy for Maria to erase all the good things that had taken place between them in the past few years. To be forgotten. Even though they were all mixed with bitterness and suffering. If their relationship meant to him now as it meant to him in the beginning when they left Macedonia, he wouldn't have let her leave so easily! Would he? Maybe he thought she was reacting impulsively, a momentary response and she would come back sometime later? But why then didn't he write, not a single word, to ask her what her plans were? Or ask her to come back? Apparently her leaving helped him somehow. If he already wanted to get rid of her...

By not sending any more money Hellwig might have wanted to sever all ties with her. Maria looked at her sleeping son in the stroller and started to cry. Poor Carl, she thought, and immediately wiped her tears. She didn't want anyone to see her cry, especially someone who knew her.

* * *

A few months later when Elena was returning home from work she heard footsteps moving at a fast pace behind her. It sounded like someone was trying to catch up with her. She suddenly turned. It was Maria following her. God, how much her face had changed, she thought to herself. There was an expression of fear in Maria's eyes. She looked hopeless. In despair. What could have happened to her? Maybe something with the child? Or with her husband? Maria stopped walking. Her right eyebrow was fluttering.

Elena had the feeling that Maria was hesitant in telling her exactly what had happened. After looking at the tree line beside which they were standing, Maria said:

"I'm done! It's all over for me," and began to cry. She looked very uncomfortable.

"What is it, Maria, what happened?" asked Elena anxiously.

“Hellwig is going to leave me. He will divorce me...” replied Maria still in tears.

“How come? Why?” asked Elena looking surprised.

“His mother and father persuaded him to leave me,” replied Maria.

“Maybe it’s not definite. Maybe he’ll think about it and then he’ll change his mind and come for you and the child,” said Elena to reassure her.

Maria seemed like she wasn’t listening to what Elena was saying.

“Is your child still with you?” asked Elena.

Her question upset Maria even more. She opened her eyes wide as if she was experiencing deep fear.

“Why are you asking me that?” yelled Maria. “What are you thinking? Maybe you think... Do you want to say that Hellwig can take my child? Take him away from me by force, or through the courts?!”

“No, no, I didn’t mean that,” replied Elena trying to dismiss that thought. “Believe me...”

“That’s not possible! There is no such possibility, right?” Maria cried repeatedly while persistently waiting for Elena to convince her of that. “Tell me, you’re more educated than me so you surely know more than me.”

“Is that possible? Can they really take her son away from her?” wondered Elena. A terrible question she couldn’t put out of her mind. She badly wanted to suppress it. Cold chills ran through her body. She then forced herself to convincingly say:

“Who would deprive a mother of her child?! Especially so young. Have you been in contact with Hellwig since you arrived?”

Maria's face twisted into a painful grimace.

"Very little," she replied, not telling Elena everything.

"Ask him to come here," said Elena. "Maybe he'll think differently when he's here. And he'll be far away from his parents and their influence.

"He won't come here and I can't live there. With them. With his parents. And they can't live with me..." replied Maria.

"Invite him and he'll come, you'll see. He can't do without you. He loved you very much. Even though I only met him once, briefly, I saw how much he was in love with you," said Elena.

Maria let out a sad laugh and thought to herself, "That's right, this is how it was... But now... Things are completely different..."

"I need to find a job, any job," said Maria.

"Doesn't he send you money?" asked Elena.

"No!" replied Maria barely audibly.

"You should sue him. How can he do that to you?" asked Elena and immediately realized she had spoken too quickly.

"It's not that easy," replied Maria.

"I know..." said Elena and asked, "What kind of work are you looking for?"

"Whatever I can get. See if you can find something for me... You understand..." replied Maria.

"Don't lose hope. Things can get better even overnight. You have my telephone number, I'll wait for you to call me. And I will see what I can do about finding you a job..." said Elena.

When they parted Maria didn't feel any calmer or reassured. She wondered how she would cope with all this. After she had just begun to get her life back in order.

Elena couldn't believe what she'd heard from Maria. Even then, when she'd met Hellwig and saw that he was a foreigner she'd thought: "How difficult it was to meet a man, a Macedonian, here in Macedonia, let alone a foreigner?" But then Maria and the German seemed so happy together they didn't leave much room for doubt. Even in any marriage, who could predict everything in advance? How many divorces took place here in Macedonia?

* * *

For the past few months Hellwig wanted to convince himself that Maria was to blame for everything that had happened, even for leaving with his child. At times he was overwhelmed with grief. But his grief didn't overpower him. He was certain he wouldn't be able to go Macedonia and live with her and his child. Never... Not after all that had happened in the last few months. He felt Maria hadn't only rejected his mother and father but also him. Maybe that was the logical thing to do. In a way he had exposed her to all this... He had chosen her as his life companion... He had brought her to live in unbearable conditions... He'd left it up to her to decide on her own what his conflict with his parents was. At the same time he was aware that he was responsible for allowing his parents to treat Maria and her child badly. He was sure it was over for them. There was no going back, no fixing the problem.

The new woman he'd recently brought home he'd known from before. She was a clerk at the bank where he kept his money. The woman was a few years older than him. A simple woman. Practical. He told her about Maria at the first opportunity, during his first conversations with her. Apparently she hadn't been in a relationship with a man for a long time. Even though she understood what had happened with Hellwig's marriage, that they had just broken up, she didn't mind being with him. She also accepted, without much hesitation, his offer to come to his house. And soon afterwards move in with him.

This was the first time that Hellwig had brought a woman upstairs since Maria left. But, even though he didn't introduce her, his mother and father expressed joy over her. So, the decision to leave Maria was finalized. They had truly kicked her out. They were secretly happy. The only thing that made them curious was why the foreigner (Maria) had never contacted Hellwig. Not a single letter. Not a single phone call. They also didn't know if Hellwig had written to her or sent money for the child. And they didn't even care to ask. They wanted to prove to him that they had simply erased her from their thoughts... Well, the child too.

They began to notice that the woman who came to see their son always came through the back entrance and went straight to the upper floor. She avoided going through the ground floor. She also began to stay overnight. The fact that he never introduced her to them since the first time he had brought her to their house was acceptable to them. Even though they didn't know who she was. Or what kind of woman she was. Not even if she was married. The most important thing for them was that their son wasn't alone. And with the strengthening of his new relationship with this woman, the danger of him going back to Maria was less and less.

That's why, when a letter finally arrived from Maria, addressed to Hellwig, they hid it from him. And so, with his new relationship growing, he seemed to have forgotten about his wife and son. But his mother was so curious about what was in the letter that she opened it. It was written in German. Because of that she was able to read it. Maria wrote only a few brief sentences, all addressed to Hellwig. She said that she was unable to get a job and that she and her son had no means of subsistence.

In a furious tone of voice his mother said to herself: "So now the bitch is asking for money. She's not getting any, let her starve to death! She wandered the world looking for a husband! Then she found him there, all alone, and clung to him. To work for her and support her. Then she hurried to have a child. She must have thought that she could tie him down with the child. Let her look after him now... Alone. What did she really want from my son?!"

Then she burned the letter. She didn't tell any of this to her husband. Why would he need to be reminded of her? To become upset. And as for her (Maria) she needed time to think about what she had done. To make it clear to her that there was no place for her here, in this house, in this country.

* * *

It wasn't long before Hellwig briefly told his parents about his new woman. Her name was Marsha and she was going to live with him upstairs in their house. He introduced her to them the same day she moved in with him permanently. He also told them that Marsha knew everything about Maria and the child and that she didn't mind that he wasn't divorced.

And indeed things in life were simple for Marsha. She needed a man. A well-established man who had his own home. Who wanted her to live with him. And that was Hellwig. For her, the things he told her about his ex-wife and son were situations that were already resolved. They were separated. And she had returned to her own country. She had taken the child with her. It was normal for a child to be raised by his mother. And she believed she would never have to see them.

Marsha, confidentially within herself, couldn't understand how Hellwig could agree to allow that foreigner to bring up his son. But then who could fully understand men? The strangest thing about all this, however, was that he had married her. A marriage which had obviously failed...

It was Marsha's idea to move in with Hellwig. She made it a condition for him to let her move in with him and live together, completely separate from his parents. In every way. She was a special type of woman. She wanted a clean situation and a clean account. She very much cared about her own interests. About her comforts. Everything had to be in a certain order.

...Hellwig's parents existed like an indisputable fact. The house was theirs. They allowed Hellwig to live in it. Alone. Now they had to

make an exception for her. His parents existed for as long as they existed and Hellwig was their sole successor. After their death everything would be his. If he went through a divorce with Maria he would take her as his lawful wife and then everything would be hers. But one thing she didn't know was how much Hellwig loved her. He had agreed to live with her... therefore he must love her... Or at least he liked her. And he was close to her. It looked like they'd be able to be together for a long time. Maybe forever. He earned good money. And so did she.

Marsha's relationship with Hellwig's mother and father was somewhat restricted. She visited them only when she was with Hellwig. And only if they were officially invited. She treated them like she was a tenant and they were the landlords. She organized her life around Hellwig in such a way that he had less and less time to spend downstairs. Visiting his parents. Marsha always had things for him to do. She was quickly overpowering him.

At the same time Hellwig's mother and father quickly became disillusioned with their prospective daughter-in-law. Of course, they didn't want her to know about this. Even less, complain about her to their son. It would look as if they disliked every woman Hellwig had chosen to be with. They figured in time things might change for the better. She'd become closer to them. Or at least she would show them some more respect. Have more contact with them. Interact more with them. Or whatever else she wanted to do except for the usual: "Good day. How are you? We are in a hurry, we have a lot of things to do..." And come and visit sometimes without an invitation. Or come and visit alone... Marsha never visited alone. Not only did they visit together, they always stayed for a short time. She was constantly in a hurry. Hellwig's mother couldn't believe how much Marsha was dominating him. She couldn't wait to get him alone and talk to him in private. If she treated Hellwig like that now, what would happen to him later...? she wondered.

* * *

It seemed strange to Hellwig that he'd never received any letters from Maria. He didn't expect that she would give up on him so quickly and so easily. If not for his sake, she should have contacted

him for the sake of their son. He knew nothing of his wellbeing since Maria had left with him. Many times he asked himself, "What could he have possibly changed in everything that had happened to avoid their separation?" He also thought about going to Macedonia to visit them, to see if Maria had found a job and if that was the reason why she hadn't contacted him and asked for money. But he wasn't sure if Maria's family would want to see him. They would probably treat him badly. Even Maria too. If she wanted him to visit her and their son she would have contacted him by now. Also, she had no right to keep him in such uncertainty about Carl. He wasn't just hers. He was tempted to start looking for her.

He also wasn't sure if Maria had written him letters and his mother had hidden them. She would never admit to it... not to him. As for Maria, he had no idea why she was acting this way...

With all his indecision and because of the new situation, after Marsha had moved in with him, Hellwig figured that visiting Maria and his son would be increasingly unachievable. And who knew how many ways Hellwig, at least in his own mind, had tried to blame Maria for everything. In fact, she complicated the situation... If she had only kept quiet, if she hadn't approached things with such sensitivity, especially her reactions to his parents, all this wouldn't have happened. Perhaps as the mother of a newborn child, she should have been prepared to make greater sacrifices...

She didn't have to dig into their past, he thought. Of course this was his fault because he had never told her anything about his parents. He hadn't prepared her. He didn't believe it was that important and that it would cause conflict that couldn't be solved. Otherwise he wouldn't have brought her home. Everything was unfolding so fast that he was lost in his own quagmire. He was unable to escape from it. During times when such thoughts entered his mind, he looked for ways to place blame elsewhere to take the guilt away from himself. And somewhere deep in his subconscious mind a question kept popping up. "If he truly loved her as much as he seemed to love her at first, when he persuaded her to go with him, couldn't he have found a way out?!" But... he consistently ran away from this question...

The fact that Maria had been silent and didn't answer his letters meant that she wasn't suffering... The experience must have been less painful for her. Which meant that she didn't love him anymore. And how could she love him? However... He couldn't believe that her love for him could end so suddenly... That she would be able to completely erase him from her mind. And why not? He hadn't tried to stop her from leaving. With his child. He hadn't asked her to return to him. That too he hadn't tried. Maria hadn't only found out who his parents were, including his grandparents, but she'd penetrated his soul. She had awakened that other Hellwig who wanted to hide from himself. The Hellwig that Maria couldn't possibly love...

In time he tried to comfort himself and heal his wounds... He figured maybe someday he would be able to visit his son. And he would understand... they'd be able to get to know each other. At the same time he figured Maria would never let him. And rightly so. She would try to raise him by herself no matter how difficult...

All these thoughts ran through his mind every time he found himself alone... which were rare moments these days. He needed to go over things, even terrible things, in order to calm his conscience.

* * *

Maria lost all hope that someday Hellwig would come to her. She even gave up on him sending her money. There was no response to the only letter she'd sent him. Maybe she was to blame for all this. For not contacting him all this time. And after not receiving a reply to the one letter she had sent him, Maria felt sorry for writing it. She now needed to be more persistent in her job search. She decided not to contact him again. Not even to ask him for money or for his support... But why shouldn't she? Her son was also his son. And he was obligated to provide a means of subsistence for him. She needed to sue him. Let the court inform him of his responsibilities to his child... But, at the same time, Maria had no idea how much it would cost to initiate a court procedure through the international court... Money she needed but didn't have. She needed to find a job first. Unfortunately the harder she tried, knocking on door after door, the less she believed that she would succeed.

Maria quickly became aware that becoming a German citizen had been a big mistake. Why had she done that? She couldn't have guessed, of course, in the early years with Hellwig, when their life together was really going well, that things would go this way? It was a done deal. She had no reason to return to Macedonia. But the moment prospective employers saw her documents, they immediately rejected her. She wasn't only rejected because she was a foreigner but also because she was a German citizen. She was rejected, mostly by old white-haired officials who thought, "Oh my God, what made her fall for a German? We just barely got rid of them..." And others who thought, "Don't we have enough Macedonians here that she had to go Germany to get married?" Or "He lied to her to win her over, got her pregnant and gave her the boot..." Or "What did she expect from those kinds of people?" Or "Didn't her father and mother tell her that these people wiped out half the world?" Or "Above everything else, why did she need to become a German citizen!" Or "She could go back to Germany and find work there." Or "What was she doing here?" And so she faced insult after insult. She frequently left job interviews in tears. She eventually lost all hope. One time she became so frustrated she shouted back at one employer, a younger employment officer at a shoe factory, and said:

"I didn't come here to ask you to arrange my personal life, but to look for a job. You were put here for that purpose not to provide political or moral lectures to people," and quickly left the office.

Maria began to sell her things to subsist. She sold the jewelry that Hellwig had given her and spent the last bit of money she'd gotten for it. Because she was desperate for money, the pawn shops robbed her blind.

She had no money for months and no letter from Hellwig. Her hopes for employment were dwindling and she had no job. There wasn't enough money from her sister's earnings and her mother's small pension, not even for basic necessities. It wasn't enough to support everyone including Maria and Carl. But no one was complaining. They didn't blame her for their extreme poverty. At the same time Maria was well aware that the rise in poverty was pushing her

anxiety to intolerable levels. Creating conditions for conflict. Maria at times became so desperate she wanted to run away somewhere, but where?

How could she be sure that the letter she wrote to Hellwig had reached his hands? His mother, that witch, must have taken it. The mailman passed by in the morning when Hellwig was at work and she could have easily hidden it from him. Maria couldn't believe that Hellwig wouldn't send her money, at least for his son, if he didn't want anything to do with her. Was he still at home with his family or had he moved to another country? She didn't know. She blamed herself, why hadn't she tried harder to get close to someone there in the city. Now she could have contacted them to find out what was happening with Hellwig. But, on the other hand, it was impossible for her to get close to anyone after they moved in with his parents. Also, she was in the late months of her pregnancy and couldn't exactly go out much. On top of that, his mother and father had placed her in isolation... At times she was angry with herself for frequently coming back to the same theme... constantly thinking of what had happened in the past. When instead she should have been thinking of what was going to happen next...

She had problems sleeping almost every night. One night she overheard a conversation she wasn't supposed to hear between her mother and one of her sisters. They slept in the room next door. She heard her mother whisper:

"I felt my heart drop when she suddenly appeared, all alone, with a child but without Hellwig. The look on her face told me everything. The moment I saw her I knew she was in trouble."

"A foreigner is a foreigner," replied her sister with a sigh. From her voice it sounded like it was Nade.

"If he abandoned her it will be harder for all of us! Is she obliged to look after the child alone?! Even if she can't find a job? He needs to send her money!" said her mother.

"I feel sorry for Carl..." said her sister. "We'll continue to survive somehow. Maybe Maria will find a job..."

Her mother didn't reply and remained quiet...

Maria began to cry. Quietly. She was well aware of their situation. Things were changing rapidly. She had been helping her family as much as she could in the past few years. Even before she was married. She tried not to lose hope even under impossible conditions.

With tears in her eyes the next day she went to a nearby market where children's things were sold and pawned one of Carl's new pair of pants. With the money she got she sent Hellwig a telegram. She didn't want to but felt she needed to. In the telegram she said: "Hellwig, call immediately". She was hoping that the mailman would deliver the telegram to him personally.

...She again waited with painful anticipation and counted the days. She went outside and waited for the mailman every day. She was outside the moment she saw the mailman at the end of the street. After a while the mailman realized how important it must have been to her, for him to bring her the letter she was waiting for. With a guilty expression on his face and with sad eyes, day after day he shook his head telling her there was no mail for her today.

Now Maria thought that Hellwig might not be home. That he must have gone to work somewhere else. To some other country. And that he mustn't have received the telegram. Or the telegram had ended up in his mother's hands. Nothing could pass her by. With that in mind, Maria wanted to excuse Hellwig. She refused to believe that he was at fault in any way...

* * *

From the first day that Marsha moved into Hellwig's house, and decided to live with him, she'd set herself up as his wife. She wasn't at all burdened by the fact that Hellwig wasn't divorced. For her things like divorce were just a formality. She figured that one by one these issues would, in time, be sorted out. Well, even if he had to send money to support his son. It was completely normal. The

important thing was that Maria and Carl remain far away from Hellwig.

From early on she told her future husband that she wanted to have a child. Giving birth for Marsha was an urgent matter. She figured this would be the fastest way to strengthen her relationship with him. And this would be good for Hellwig too. Because it would make it easier for him to get over little Carl not being in his life.

The fact that Marsha wanted to have a child was normal for Hellwig. He easily accepted it. Even more, he wasn't bothered by the formalities surrounding his divorce from Maria. But months after trying, Marsha couldn't get pregnant. He began to notice her growing nervousness. He pretended not to notice it. He didn't even try to talk to her about it. He felt that this kind of conversation would be very unpleasant for Marsha. Hellwig didn't want to talk to his mother about this either. He was afraid that she would gain a decisive advantage against his relationship with Marsha. From early on it became clear to him that his mother and Marsha would never become close. Not even as friends. There was something in them that made them repel each other. Hellwig had no desire to even try to fix that. He knew that nothing would change. Repulsion was in their character. In their drastic egoism. In their painful need for possession. For supremacy.

One day Hellwig decided to talk to her. He said: "Marsha, I know it bothers you that you aren't pregnant, maybe you should go and see a doctor, a specialist."

"I've already done that," replied Marsha irritably. "The doctor thinks it's a psychological problem. First of all because our relationship is mediocre. He advised me to suggest that you get a divorce as soon as possible."

Hellwig was furious at first. What kind of cunning woman was this woman with whom he'd started a new life? What did this minor formality have to do with her getting pregnant? Surely this was pure fabrication! But, even though he was furious, he kept his cool. He said:

“Of course it will be done without anyone’s advice. But I don’t believe it has anything to do with you not getting pregnant. It would be a good idea if you go to see another doctor and get a second opinion. Don’t misunderstand me! Personally I’m not in a hurry... to have a child... It doesn’t have to be immediately... Okay?”

“Of course,” said Marsha who was now getting angry, “you don’t have to have more children at all. You already have a son! It doesn’t matter that he isn’t here!”

Hellwig felt the need to hit her. And that would mean the end of their relationship. So he restrained himself and left the house. He eventually calmed down as he idly walked along the street without a destination in mind. He thought it was normal for Marsha to want to make their relationship legal. It was also normal for her to want to have a child. The complications were on his side. Sometimes he felt that he should do the opposite; not rush the divorce. Not even rush to marry Marsha. Give himself more time to get to know her better.

But, not following his own advice, a few days later Hellwig went to his lawyer and initiated his divorce proceedings. He handed the lawyer some papers and explained to him some things orally. The lawyer was a relatively young man and very open.

“And the child, will you be wanting to take him?” asked the lawyer.

The question confused Hellwig. It also startled him. He was silent for a long time.

“If you want to think about it then take another day or so. Then you can tell me what you want to do. We don’t have to finalize the papers right away. And, as you know, this may take a long time because people from two different countries are involved,” added the lawyer.

It became clear to Hellwig that, under these new circumstances, because of the woman he was already living with, he couldn’t decide on his own to seek the child. He would need her consent. He would also require the consent of his parents if he wanted to continue to live in their house. On the other hand, he didn’t feel right

to legally give up on his own son. The idea of giving up on him seemed to scare him. It would be a terrible betrayal against him. It would also be a betrayal against himself, as his father. The father of such a small boy. While he was still in the lawyer's office Hellwig felt obligated to give the lawyer an answer before he left. Only now, at this very moment, when Hellwig felt unrestricted, was he prepared to give the lawyer an answer. He had to give him his answer immediately. And because he hesitated in front of the lawyer, he was ashamed of it.

“My son is very young and I feel he should be with his mother,” he said. That's all he said. He then paid the lawyer his advance fee and quickly left his office.

On his way home Hellwig thought of the many things that had forced him to make this decision. He tried hard to calm himself... But it wasn't easy. Until that moment, until that decision was made, everything associated with Maria and his child seemed to be temporary. Things that would eventually pass. Including his complications with Marsha. Even her moving in with him. But having to decide to give up his already born and growing son, just because Marsha wanted a baby, seemed to overwhelm him. He had done this to himself and the actions he'd taken towards the divorce...

What if Marsha couldn't have a child? In that new lawful marriage of theirs... His only son would grow up and live far away. He would know that his father had given up on him... He would never forgive him. Or maybe Maria would tell him that he didn't have a father. That his father had died. It would be like he had no son... That kind of thinking was hell for Hellwig. It dug deep down into his conscience.

When Hellwig came home that evening Marsha thought he'd been run over by a car. He looked messy and unhappy. He didn't say anything to her. He quickly washed
put on his pajamas and went to bed.

Marsha thought he'd decided to break up with her. Maybe because she'd asked him to divorce Maria. Wasn't that a normal thing to ask? She shouldn't have even had to remind him of that obligation...

He should have known better. He should have done that when she moved in with him. He shouldn't have gotten upset with her when she linked his divorce to her pregnancy. She wasn't to blame for what the doctor had told her... And to be honest, she wanted to believe in that herself. She wanted to blame the situation which she was brought into and the fact that she was unable to get pregnant for unknown reasons. If only the divorce was resolved! It would also be important for Hellwig to have another child. Exactly because of all the things that had happened in his unhappy marriage and to his child, there, somewhere far away... But that wasn't so important to her. Her desire to have a child was so great that she didn't want to believe that she couldn't have one.

A few days later Hellwig told Marsha that he'd hired a lawyer and had filed for divorce. That made her very happy. But she didn't show it. Also, she didn't ask him if he was seeking custody of his son... Even though she wanted to know everything. Hellwig sensed that she wanted to ask him about the child, but didn't dare, so he decided to tell her himself.

“As for my son, I debated if I should ask for custody or not. However, I decided to leave him with his mother. He is still very young. It would also be terrible for his mother if I took him.”

Marsha pulled him towards her and gave him a hug and kiss. She then said:

“I knew you were a humane person. And that you had a good heart.” And then she whispered “otherwise I couldn't possibly love you...”

She seemed sincere to Hellwig so he gave her a hug too and went to get something to drink.

“Had I decided to ask for custody would you have objected? Would you have looked after him?” asked Hellwig after he drank his third bottle of beer.

Marsha looked confused. The question had come so suddenly. She was unprepared. It was like he'd hit her in the face with a whip. She knew that their future relationship depended on what she said next.

But at the same time, she was aware that if she lied to him now he would immediately know. So she kept quiet for a long time.

When she decided to speak she said: “Now more than ever Hellwig, I would love to have my own child...” not directly answering the question he’d asked her. “I never did think about your son... I really think you did the right thing by not asking for custody, while his mother is still alive... I could never stand for that if I were in her place...”

Hellwig felt it was time to change the subject. He only added that the lawyer told him that the divorce would take a long time. But that didn’t matter to Marsha. The most important thing that mattered to her was that Hellwig had taken the first step. She felt she would be safer if she legitimized her relationship with him. Even more so... if she could have a child with him. But her biggest fear was that she couldn’t have one. She couldn’t seem to escape that fear...

* * *

Maria was very disappointed. Her ties with her husband Hellwig had been severed for so long that she’d forgotten about looking for the mailman at the corner or noticing him entering her yard. Maria was surprised to see that it wasn’t the same mailman who’d brought them their mail for many years. The month was April. It was a warm April day. She was startled when she heard the mailman call her full name, first and last name. Not only was the mailman not the same person but the envelope he handed her, after he asked her to sign for it, was unusual looking. Her heart started to pound, she was trembling. It was clear to her that this wasn’t a letter, nor was it money from Hellwig. She tried to open it but her hands shook uncontrollably. “Divorce papers,” her panicky eyes finally managed to make out from the jumping letters on top of the page. She knew this was the end of her marriage! Her tears flowed on their own. But why was she crying? She’d expected this would happen the moment she left Hellwig and came home with her child. Perhaps even earlier. Immediately after her confrontation. Downstairs with his parents... Even then it was clear that divorce would follow. But it seemed, like any person in a hopeless situation, Maria had hoped for the impossible... For an empty hope... She had definitely lost him...

Maria went into the room where Carl was sleeping. She felt very sorry for him. Had she ever expected she would raise a child without a father? Didn't she want her child to feel that protection, that security, which in crucial moments in life is provided only by a father? Well, it was happening...

She didn't know whether Hellwig was going to go to the divorce trial in person or appoint a representative, a proxy. She looked over the papers again but lacked the courage to read them. Finally she decided to read them to find out the reasons for the divorce. Her throat was dry. She had difficulty breathing. Was Hellwig really leaving her? Leaving her forever? He'd probably found a German woman as soon as he filed for divorce. They would surely get married. Her legs felt weak. She sat down on the stairs. Her house began to spin all around her. Hellwig wasn't only giving up on her, he was giving up on his own son!

The more she read the angrier she became, especially when she read about the reasons for the divorce and the dissolution of their marriage... He wrote: "She left the marriage arbitrarily... She abandoned her marital obligations..." Hellwig, did you really say that?! She thought to herself and rage engulfed her. "You know very well the condition under which you brought me to your parents' house. You knew about the terrible isolation! You knew about the humiliation! Even your newborn son, their grandchild, couldn't soften their hearts or put a smile on their faces. What was I supposed to wait for? What could I hope for?!"

What had he, her Hellwig, the man who loved her, done to improve that situation? Had he taken her under his protection? Had he stood by her side? No!

Now he'd decided to divorce her. Maybe it would be best for both of them... And for their son. When she thought about Carl suddenly her eyes began to fly quickly through the lines: was there anything written there about Carl?! Did he want custody of him...?! She didn't know what was more frightening than that... If he wanted custody it meant that he still cared for him. He still wanted him as his own child. His own son. His own blood.

In any case Maria wasn't prepared to give Carl up at any cost, no matter how much it hurt Hellwig. But then, when she read further down she felt defeated. She was cut down by the notion that Hellwig thought that his son should stay with his mother. That meant he didn't want him! He didn't care for him! He was prepared to give him up! A terrible, terrible contradiction. Pain tore through her entire body. She felt a splitting headache like someone had burned a hole in her head and all her blood was spilling out.

What did all this mean?! It meant that the good-natured Hellwig, the noble one whom she'd met and knew as a decent man... in the life they had together... in the countries where he worked... suddenly found her at fault for their break up! For ending their marriage! For ending their love!

He knew very well why she'd done that... But... what happened was irreversible... Nothing depended on her anymore.

* * *

It had been almost three months since Hellwig first visited his lawyer's office. He told Marsha that a divorce date was set. It was to take place in ten days. Hellwig expected the news would cheer Marsha. But by the expression on her face, she wasn't happy at all... He didn't want to let her know that he'd noticed her but the fact that she was unhappy bothered him... At the same time he didn't want to ask her directly...

At that point Hellwig didn't know about Marsha's latest gynecological examination, which was very discouraging. She wouldn't be able to get pregnant. She was going through a terrible struggle in her mind and soul. Had Hellwig now missed his chance of getting custody of his child...? She often struggled with this thought. Because of this their marriage wouldn't make much sense anymore. Not being able to have children with Marsha, Hellwig would probably leave her and try to get back with her. His first wife. Or, maybe one day he would ask his son to come and live with him. Or, maybe he would ask both her and him. Once again Marsha

began to think of these things the moment he told her about the forthcoming court date for his divorce.

After some silence Marsha said: “Hellwig, if you want custody of your child then ask for it. Don’t put the blame on me or make me the reason for you giving up your son...”

Hellwig looked straight into Marsha’s eyes. The reason for her silence immediately became very clear to him. Deep inside him he became angry and cold. He had just barely gotten over his heart-breaking decision to abandon his son in the divorce and now, suddenly, he was faced with another difficult and painful question: Did he have the right to take away the only and most precious thing from Maria that was left from her love for him? Should he go that far?

Marsha was well-aware that Hellwig was unable to make such a difficult decision on his own, so she tried to help him. She said:

“The child was born in Germany and bears your last name... And... He is a boy... He will continue your lineage...”

He couldn’t believe that Marsha would take such a step. And she spoke so convincingly.

She continued: “You, Hellwig, one time you mentioned to me that his mother was from a very poor family. And that she was unemployed. What kind of life would your son have? Under what living conditions would your child grow? Surely you, yourself, can’t possibly agree to allow him, your son, to grow up in poverty?”

Everything Marsha said was true. She began to undermine his vanity. To invoke his sense of responsibility towards his son. Images of poverty from the house where Maria lived began to flood his memory. Her mother. Her sisters. Suddenly it seemed like he’d begun to condemn himself: how could he allow his own son to share that misery?

“Only if you agree, Marsha... And you won’t change your mind later... because I won’t know what to do with the child...” he replied.

She gave him a hug showing him her readiness to accept the child. To nurture him.

Now Hellwig began to worry about having to tell his mother and father about this. He expected a fierce reaction. But this time he felt more determined and wouldn't let them change his mind.

At the same time, in order to calm his conscience, Hellwig felt that his decision to take custody and support and raise his son might even be a relief to Maria because of the hopeless financial situation in which she had found herself. But that didn't help him much. He still felt like he'd acted like a scoundrel towards her...

The next day, Hellwig went to see his mother and father to discuss the divorce and his son. He went alone. Without Marsha. As expected, the first reaction was fierce. They agreed that it was okay to legally get rid of Maria. And it was about time. But as for asking for custody and getting his son, they felt, he would have Maria around his neck again.

"If you take her son she won't leave you alone. And it will ruin your life with Marsha. We aren't saying that the child isn't yours. But lo and behold, you will have children in your new marriage. Pure Germans..." his mother said.

While saying all that, his mother noticed sharp wrinkles appear on Hellwig's forehead and he bowed his head down. A wicked thought popped into her head: "Ah, she can't give birth... That's why she agreed to take the child." After that his mother realized how much she couldn't stand Marsha. She rejoiced at this realization even though Hellwig, her own son was in question, who would be left without any other children. Her brain then started working quickly: "Let him take Maria's child. She isn't worthy of taking care of their child," she thought. "Let her once again be punished for mixing in their blood." On the other hand, she thought, Marsha might leave Hellwig. Why would she want to take care of someone else's child, to whom she hadn't given birth? That way, Hellwig would get rid of her as well. Maybe that's why he'd come up with the idea of getting

custody of his kid. He must have known that Marsha couldn't get pregnant. It would then be easier to bring him back to his mother.

After some silence, after all these thoughts crossed her mind, his mother said:

“Ultimately he is your son. Do what you think is best.”

As she said that, his father who was silent during the entire conversation, looked at his wife in amazement. He couldn't believe the words she'd said. But he said nothing. Hellwig was surprised too. What were the reasons for that turnaround in his mother? He didn't understand. But he hurried to get out of there while the words she uttered still floated in the air. His mother too was amazed at what she'd said. Even though she'd said it herself.

Hellwig wondered if perhaps, after Carl had left Germany, his mother had any feelings for her grandson? Or was this about something else. Something hidden and insidious...

* * *

It seemed logical and justified to Hellwig to ask for his child back. So he tried to put a case together to include everything that everyone had suggested. Including what he wanted, what Marsha wanted and what his mother suggested. He was still surprised that his father hadn't resisted. The closer he got to the lawyer's office, the more nervous he became. He was worried that the lawyer would tell him that it was too late to grant him such a request.

“Hey, you're here...” said the lawyer as he intercepted Hellwig at the door. He thought Hellwig was there to inquire about the divorce hearing. “There's nothing to worry about. Everything is clear. Your wife left you. She is a citizen of another country. She went back to her country. To her relatives. She left voluntarily. She even took her son with her.”

As he spoke, the lawyer sensed that Hellwig wanted to say something, something more delicate, so he encouraged him to speak.

“Is there something else you need to ask? To clarify something? Please do. That’s why I’m here,” added the lawyer.

“You know,” said Hellwig quietly taking his time, uttering every word with difficulty. “I thought a lot about my son. I came to the realization that his place is here, with me. I wouldn’t want anyone else to bring him up. His homeland is Germany. His name is German. He was born here. He belongs here.”

The lawyer looked at Hellwig, patiently letting him speak. After Hellwig finished the lawyer said:

“Now you’re on the right track. I was surprised when you first came to me and said he should be with his mother and you weren’t decisive. But it’s okay.” The lawyer then asked: “Will there be someone to take care of him while you’re at work?”

“Well, I mean, of course,” replied Hellwig with a tone of uncertainty in his voice. Or so it seemed to the lawyer.

“Do you think there will be difficulties in getting custody of the child?” asked Hellwig.

“We will find out soon enough. We will list the reasons why the child should be with you and not his mother. Tell me what her financial situation is like?”

“Bad, quite bad,” said Hellwig remembering what Maria’s living conditions were like when he first visited her in her mother’s residence.

“Then the problem is solved!” replied the lawyer somewhat loudly.

The lawyer didn’t look more than forty but had gray hair and wore glasses with thick lenses. Satisfied with Hellwig’s answer he rubbed his hands and immediately fed a blank sheet of paper into his typewriter. While Hellwig was still there he wanted to finish the document and add it as a supplement, i.e. as an extension to the divorce claim.

Hellwig became upset to a point where he had difficulty breathing, especially when the lawyer asked him questions about Maria's financial situation and his son's birth and age. But he didn't waver. Something inside him was upsetting him, something that he wasn't aware of... It was smoldering inside him. And here, Marsha was encouraging that feeling to wake him up.

He paid the lawyer, said goodbye and left. Walking down the street, he didn't, at any point, allow himself to think of how Maria would to receive the news. He didn't want those thoughts to overpower and sway him. His thoughts left his mind one by one and followed him, some in front and others behind. They began to poke him in his head and dig into his brain. But all their efforts to change what he did were in vain. More and more he became convinced that Carl would be his only successor.

* * *

Many days had passed since Maria received her divorce papers yet still she couldn't accept the idea that Hellwig was leaving her. That she and Carl would be left all alone. She would be without the man she loved and Carl without his father. She hadn't yet recovered from that terribly painful fact when the same strange mailman, the one she didn't know, once again arrived at her gate one morning, holding another strange looking envelope similar to the first one. Maria was startled when she saw the mailman. She sensed that he was bringing more bad news but she recovered quickly and thought that maybe it was the summons to go to court for her divorce. Why had it come so early?! Well it was what it was. Maria was expecting the summons. Why did it matter when it came...?

The mailman handed her the envelope. Like before, he asked her to sign for it and left. Maria's hands trembled. She was hoping it was a summons... She was expecting a summons. But it could be something else... a rejection perhaps... But Maria never expected that a German court would reject Hellwig's divorce application.

But as soon as she opened the envelope she realized that it was an amendment to the original divorce papers. The first thing she saw on the first line was Carl's name, which gave her a sharp pain in her gut

as if she'd been bitten by the most venomous snake. Her eyes flew down the piece of paper looking for details. Those insidious people... The reason for wanting custody of the child was because he was German, born in Germany, from a German father. "Is it now? Two years later, that it occurred to them that he's German and that he's their grandson?" cried Maria in the yard, unaware that she had. The second reason, which also angered Maria, was that she, his mother, couldn't even provide for herself let alone for the child. That she didn't have the financial means for his normal upbringing and education. By now Maria was furious. Why did they want custody of the child now? What reason had they come up with? Not too long ago they'd rejected him because he wasn't of pure German blood! Because he was of mixed "unclean" blood?!

So, in the end, they decided to send her this terrible document... Terrible for Maria and for the child... It was monstrous. This was definitely planned by the two monsters. And they had convinced him too. Her Hellwig. He was completely caught in their trap.

Maria wandered around the yard. She felt like a trapped beast. Where could she go? From whom could she seek help? Who could help her find a job? She would take any job, the dirtiest job, just to make a living. She would even take a dangerous job, dangerous to her health. Dangerous to her life.

But the harder she tried the more indifferent the faces of company officials and institutions became as she begged them to give her a job. She became so disillusioned that she was prepared to go to the city mayor, get on her knees and beg him to give her a job. She figured she would have a better chance if she went with her child in her arms. She figured he might have children too and be sympathetic. Especially when she told him that her child would be taken away from her because she wasn't employed and because she had no other means to support him. He might feel sorry for her. If not for her, then for the child. He would understand...

She hid the envelope so that no one there could find it, not her mother and not her sisters. She quickly got dressed. Got Carl out of bed, dressed him and left for City Hall. She was determined to get the city mayor to hear her out. She knew there were many people in

the city who were unemployed but she figured her case was special. She was desperate...

* * *

When she entered the reception area of the city mayor's office Maria was greeted by a smiling face belonging to a beautiful young secretary. She was tastefully dressed and had make up on her face. From her smug expression she gave the impression that everything was in order. As if no problems existed at all. But when Maria told her why she was there the secretary became nervous. Obviously, it wasn't uncommon for people with small children to come to this office.

"Please, let me talk to the mayor. It's very important..." whispered Maria.

The secretary looked at her again from head to toe and told her that she needed to make an appointment well in advance. She could make the appointment by telephone.

Maria tried to briefly explain her problem to the woman and lucky for her Carl wasn't fussy at the time, like he knew his mother was trying to say something very important. Both for him and his mother. Maria hoped that the secretary, being young, would understand and allow her to see the mayor. But she quickly noticed that she didn't care. She looked indifferent and even bored. She could hardly wait for Maria to finish talking. But even before Maria was done talking, she interrupted her and said:

"The mayor is going to a meeting now and immediately after that he will be leaving. If you want a job you need to go to the employment office. The mayor doesn't deal with these kinds of issues."

"But I have been there many times... They won't even listen to me..." replied Maria looking like she was about to cry.

"You need to be more persistent. They have to listen to you. It's their job..." said the secretary.

Maria was silent and so was young Carl. At that moment Maria noticed that the secretary was getting even more nervous. She began to nervously move some juice glasses and coffee cups, which she had probably just taken from the mayor's office. Maria realized that, by doing this, the secretary was letting her know that it was time for her to leave.

Maria took Carl in her arms and, without saying goodbye, left.

With great relief the secretary watched them leave the office. She thought to herself, how ridiculous... It's never a good thing to let people see the mayor for every little thing... and without an appointment... We have all kinds of other services people can go to...?"

Maria was now in despair. She was upset at not being able to see the mayor. She should have forced her way into his office. She shouldn't have listened to that apathetic woman. Apparently, nothing Maria said seemed to touch her. Maria walked down the street with her child in her arms without knowing where she was going. She knew that if she went back to the employment office the clumsy clerk would tell her the same thing he always told her... She was tired of being rejected. Each rejection was similar to the previous one. She'd tried many times to explain her problem and her troubles and each time she got the same response:

“Wait your turn! Get in line! Look how many there are before you... And not with one child but with many!”

* * *

Maria didn't know who to go to and with whom to consult. She didn't believe that a German court would see things her way. At the same time she didn't believe that a German court would reach a verdict without her present. They had to invite her. Moreover, she had German citizenship. Hellwig would have to pay for her transportation. They weren't divorced yet... And, as for the fact that she didn't have the means to support Carl, Hellwig would have pay for his support... because he was his father!

Maria wasn't summoned to go to Germany. She was summoned to go to a court in the city where she lived. On the day of her hearing she put on a nice dress, left Carl with her mother and one of her sisters and went to court alone.

The judge asked Maria why she had left her husband and his home. Maria told him that she'd had an argument with his parents and that it was impossible to live with them. They were evil people. Murderers...

When she said that the judge warned her not to use offensive language against anyone.

"This is a court," said the judge, "not the street."

Maria was very nervous and could barely control her emotions.

"But you by yourself, voluntarily, left your husband and his home. You voluntarily left the country in which he lived and worked! You even took his child. Without prior agreement... without his consent..." said the judge.

The judge's comments seemed to make sense. Everything was true but it was all based on what was written in the divorce document. Any judge, even an ordinary person, would have said the same. But how could the judge possibly understand under what circumstances she was brought to her husband's family? How could he possibly understand the humiliation Maria endured under those conditions? The terrible isolation! His parents' manners towards her? Their villainous attitude? How she was hated and unwelcome from the first day that she set foot in their house? And how they openly showed their dislike for her? How could the judge possibly know Maria's side of the story from what he read in the diverse document prepared solely by Hellwig's lawyer without any input from her?

The judge only knew what was in the divorce document. The same document her husband Hellwig, or Heli as she often called him, had prepared in which he accused her of breaking up their marriage,

without mentioning any of the conditions which Maria had endured while living there... in his parents' house. He never mentioned the horrible things that took place which he was supposed to prevent, but didn't. But instead of her blaming him for making her a victim, he blamed her for everything...

It seemed to her like the judge was speaking from the distance... from afar. He was saying her name in a much louder tone... Painfully lining up event after unfortunate event before her eyes... Spilling out the pain that darkened her life in her recent past.

"As for the child..." she heard the judge's voice echo in her ears to which Maria reacted fiercely. She said:

"What about the child? What about Carl?! Those people are crazy. He and his mother and his father are nuts... A while ago they didn't care for me or my child. We weren't of German blood, we weren't from the celebrated ones... from the war... And why now? Why do they care about Carl now? Why do they want custody of my child now...? Why do they think he is German now...? Doesn't my blood flow through his veins anymore...? Macedonian blood...? Where did that go...? Well? They can't just delete me... just because they want to... Am I not their grandchild's mother...?! Wasn't I Hellwig's wife? Didn't he love me? Hadn't he taken me to Germany because he loved me...? Now they want to erase all that. First Carl was nothing to them, now they want him. Why?"

"Dear Maria, I can't go into the details of your intimate life and marriage. I must adhere to the stated facts. It says here that your spouse is seeking a divorce. You have been separated and living apart for more than a year and, as far as I can tell from what you said, you're not satisfied with that marriage and that family. So logically the marriage should be dissolved," replied the judge.

"But Sir, everything that was written in the document was concocted by his parents... And only by them..." said Maria.

"That's not true, the divorce document was signed by him... Your husband..." replied the judge.

“They! They made him do that!” Maria yelled almost in tears.

“Yes, but he isn’t a minor...” replied the judge.

“What’s going to happen now?!” asked Maria.

“Now, you have to tell me if you agree to the divorce as per the divorce document.”

How simple all this seemed... coming out of the judge’s mouth... Maria was trembling... She expected the judge to reason with her in a similar manner about her child...

“I agree with the divorce,” she said barely audibly. It was hard for her to say the words. Words that were tedious, difficult and suffocating.

That’s the answer the judge seemed to be looking for. He even sighed with relief. He proceeded immediately. In the meantime he took out his handkerchief and carefully wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“As for the child,” he continued, “your husband said that you’re not employed. That you’re without any means of financial support... Is that true? And because of that you don’t have the means, at least for now, to support your son?”

Maria jumped out of her chair and cautiously took several steps towards the judge. She then started shouting at him. She said:

“Judge, why are you on their side? On the side of those non-human lunatics! What did they bribe you with?... Maybe with German marks...? They have a lot of German marks... They inherited them from their parents who made good money during the war... making and selling weapons... that killed innocent people... This is what their family did... It’s true that I don’t have money, that I’m not employed but I will find a job... I will earn money... And I will never give my child to them... I will kill every one of them... the entire family first... before I give up my child... He will grow up here, with us... with my people... and not with those freaks... I will

not give him to them for all the gold in the world... I will not give him up!”

“Yes, but until you find a job you will have to put your child in the care and support of his father... The child must not suffer... His father, according to the documents he submitted, earns a good wage...” said the judge with difficulty, barely managing to get the words out, and added: “I didn’t do anything wrong, I’m just applying the law...”

“What law are you applying?!” yelled Maria. “They nearly destroyed me and now they want to take my child from me. That’s all I have... You mustn’t make me give him up... Who are you to say that my child should be taken away from me?! Even for a short time... I don’t believe that you’re that heartless... That would be too cruel on your part... Please don’t help them achieve their goal... They severely abused me... They succeeded in that... Don’t help them destroy my little one, my innocent two-year-old child... Don’t leave him without a mother...”

“I don’t have the authority to make the final decision... the court in Germany does... You are, as stated here, a German citizen...” replied the judge.

“I can’t deny the reckless steps I took in leaving him... But, even in my worst nightmares I couldn’t foresee what was going to happen... And here it has happened...” said Maria and tears welled up in her eyes.

Her face began to twist in pain. The judge understood Maria’s situation and allowed her to express her pain.

The judge slowly, taking steps backwards, left the courtroom. The typist then asked Maria to sign the minutes to verify what was said during the hearing. Maria signed them mechanically and unconsciously. The typist then escorted her out through the front door.

Maria found herself on the street. Out of the court... Alone with her tragedy... With her pain.

She felt stressed out and had a painful headache. It seemed to her that the vehicles on the road were coming towards her. Any time now one of them would run her over. It would be easier for her if it did... But then, what would happen to Carl...? It would make it easier for them to take him... She walked around the streets like she was going through a layer of impenetrable fog... like she was going through an impenetrable forest...

Everyone at home was waiting for her. They all gathered around her like she'd been in some sort of big car accident... From her hunched back and her teary eyes they had a pretty good idea what had happened but no one dared to ask... Maria took Carl from her sister Lile's hands and pressed him hard to her chest. She covered his face with tears.

God, will they take her child too?!

* * *

Days of helplessness followed. Fears from every knock on the door... From the arrival of the new mailman who delivered bad news to her. Maybe she should have threatened the judge with harm if he delivered a verdict to take away her son...

She became so anxious waiting for the verdict that she was unable to look for a job. She was overcome with stress and nervousness... She was constantly arguing with her mother and sisters... She often asked them to leave more food for Carl. So that she could have some available at all times. She acted like someone, invisible, was watching at all times constantly observing the conditions under which her child lived.

She went out less and less. She hardly allowed her sisters to take Carl out of the house. Her mother and sisters figured she was afraid that someone might take him away by force. They reckoned she was afraid that Hellwig might hire someone to kidnap him, which was understandable but highly unlikely.

After a while, Maria began to stay in her room with Carl all day long. She spent many hours closed in and only came out when she needed essentials. Both her mother and sisters tried to talk to her out of it. They scolded and advised her but nothing seemed to work. Because Carl was used to playing in the yard and going out for walks being inside made him nervous and he cried a lot.

Everyone was worried about everything so when the mailman, who everyone knew by now, knocked on their door, fear ran down their spines. They were even afraid of taking any mail, no matter who it was for.

Maria seemed to sense his presence even before he entered the yard. She would frantically run out of the room and snatch the envelope out of the mailman's hand. This time the envelope was for her from the court. She signed the delivery note as usual and rushed back into her room. It seemed like she wanted to return before Carl had a chance to escape. She quickly opened the envelope but couldn't believe her eyes. She didn't want to believe what she saw written... she didn't want to believe the verdict... She didn't want to allow the words to touch her brain, the horrible thing that the letters, the words were telling her... She was surprised that she didn't rip it up... into small pieces... She should have ripped it up... It seemed to her like she was surrounded by beasts from all sides and they were coming for her... and for her child. She pressed Carl against her chest, like a she wolf protecting her offspring from those stronger than her... Carl fell asleep... She felt numbness in her arms like they were paralyzed... She was becoming powerless... Instinctively she put her sleeping child in the crib... Fear began to penetrate her heart and soul. She was being covered... in darkness... In infinite darkness.

Her mother and sisters stood quietly in the hallway and said nothing. They just listened for sounds...

They heard a loud scream... It was a horrible scream... Then silence... The child too was silent...

What was in that damn letter...? Should they knock on her door and ask? Or leave her to calm down a bit?... To get over it...

Nothing was heard for an hour. Then, after almost an hour and a half and still nothing was heard, her mother quietly knocked on her door... Maria didn't answer... She knocked again.

“Maria, why are you doing this nonsense! Please stop torturing yourself and the child too... You know he misses us. Why are you locking him up in there?! You can't continue to go on like this... Come out, lunch is getting cold... It's been sitting on the table for a long time. We're all hungry... We're waiting for you,” said her mother.

As their mother spoke the sisters began to fear that something horrible might have taken place. They couldn't understand why Carl was silent all this time... Maybe he was too tired...” they thought, trying to convince themselves that he was okay.

Nobody ate lunch that day. Not even dinner... Sleeping that night was more like being on duty in a hospital room than sleeping...

Early the next morning, Maria's mother quietly went to Maria's door with her fingers crossed. Her daughter and grandson were still inside the room. Carl wept despairingly... No sound from Maria.

“Maria,” said her mother quietly. “Please daughter... How can you not feel sorry for the child?... Please don't torture him... He hasn't eaten anything... At least give him some water... The poor thing... I'm begging you, come out and hear me out...”

No reply from Maria. Only Carl started crying a little harder.

Her mother continued to whisper at Maria's door trying not to wake the other daughters. But when she turned around they were both standing behind her. They looked worried. They had questions as to what to do?! A moment later it was settled. Their mother started knocking on the door loudly. She realized she could no longer be cautious. That she mustn't wait for Maria to respond. Mostly because of the child... She sensed that it was no longer safe for him there. Maria's sisters took a step towards their mother wondering if she was doing the right thing... Or was she going to make things

worse... But they didn't say anything. Their mother understood and said:

“We can no longer wait...”

And started banging on the door even harder. She also began to shout... Maria still didn't answer... It became very clear to all three that the situation was already critical...

The older sister hurriedly got dressed and left. Her mother didn't ask her where she was going. Not that she would have answered. She didn't say anything either.

All further attempts to get Maria to respond were in vain... Her mother began to cry loudly... It didn't help.

Half an hour later, her sister came back with an ambulance. Now the other sister began to cry. The paramedics had to force the door open. Maria was sitting at the end of the bed, completely out of it... She wasn't aware that the door had been opened forcefully... That the people in white coats took her and put her in the ambulance... That she had left her child behind... That they took her to hospital...

All three were now crying out loud... In their crying spree they realized how loudly and frantically Carl was crying. They stopped crying and started taking care of him, washing him, dressing him, soothing him, helped him recover. They found the paper with the verdict under Maria's pillow on her bed. One of the sisters began to read. It said that the divorce between Hellwig and Maria had been approved and due to Maria's poor financial situation the child, Carl, was assigned to his father... until Maria's financial situation improved...

When she heard that, Maria's mother started cursing... She said:

“They destroyed my girl... damn them! Everyone was aware that what had happened to Maria was terrible. For her. For Carl. For both of them... They knew they couldn't change the situation they were in... So what choice did they have? But to leave...”

* * *

During Elena's visits, Nade, Maria's younger sister, told Elena what had happened to Maria during her divorce. Elena in turn informed Maria's doctor during her frequent visits to the hospital. The information proved important in directing Maria's therapy.

The day Nade and Elena left for the hospital, while traveling on the bus, Nade said:

"What do you think, should I show Maria the photos of Carl and the note Hellwig sent?"

"Maybe it would be better if you ask her doctor first," replied Elena.

Even though they had no prior permission from the doctors Elena and Nade tried to enter through the front gate. The guard stopped them and flatly refused to let them in. They had no written permission.

However, they were lucky... The afternoon shift doctors were coming in and Elena saw Maria's doctor. She asked him to let them in to see her. She explained that she and her sister had come a long way from another city. The doctor stopped, thought for a moment, and said to Nade:

"Okay... You two come inside, in the hallway... I'll tell the orderly to bring her over."

After he said that he asked the guard to open the gate for them.

On the bus on their way to the hospital, Elena had advised Nade that when they came face to face with Maria she shouldn't get emotional or cry. Also, not to say anything that would upset her. They both agreed to encourage Maria to listen to the doctor as much as possible so that she could get out of hospital faster. So that she could recover faster and go home. They agreed that if Maria didn't mention Carl they wouldn't say anything about him.

“I’m pretty sure she will ask about Carl... She will certainly want to know who took him and how he was taken to Germany. I won’t be able to keep that from her. And, as I recall, when you were here last time she told you that she knew where Carl was. You told me the doctor told her that he was with his father,” said Nade.

“Of course you will have to tell her some things but keep your answers short... and be more reassuring,” replied Elena.

They sat in the visitor’s lounge and waited. They looked eager and impatient. The moment Elena saw Maria enter the lounge she noticed how much better she looked, healthwise, than the last time she was there. At that moment she wasn’t sure if she’d done the right thing bringing her sister with her. But after seeing the burst of joy on Maria’s face, Elena realized that bringing Nade meant a lot to her. After all this time, who knew how much Maria missed her family. Especially in recent months, after she had started to feel better.

The sisters embraced each other and held onto one another for a long time. Maria wiped her tears and then they all sat down around the table.

“Many greetings from Mom and Lile,” said Nade. “They are eagerly waiting for you to come home. We are all waiting for you to come home. Mom made a zelnik (a large pie made with green vegetables) for you. The kind you like the most,” said Nade.

Nade then reached into her bag and took the zelnik out. Maria’s eyes began to water again. Her mother always made the most delicious zelniks. Maria suggested that they all have some and eat it together. Elena and Nade thought for a moment but soon realized that Maria wanted them to eat together and they agreed. She wanted to feel at least a little like being home.

While munching on the zelnik, Elena, by looking at the expression on Maria’s face, got the impression that she wanted to ask something. But was afraid to... She wasn’t sure whether to ask or not... Maria then turned to Nade and said:

“Do you have any news about Carl...? You were at home when they came to pick him up, right...? Who took him?”

Both Elena and Nade looked confused even though they were expecting the question. Nade spoke first and said:

“Hellwig came by car to pick him up. There was another German was him. He said he was from the German embassy in Belgrade. He spoke Serbian. He said that he was authorized by the embassy to act on the German court’s verdict... Hellwig was driving the car.”

“Did Carl recognize his father...?” asked Maria.

“I think he didn’t. We were so distraught we didn’t notice... But he didn’t cry... There were a lot of toys in the car... He played with them. Also he was so young he didn’t understand what was happening... He may have recognized his father somehow... He had seen pictures of him...” replied Nade.

“Did they come without first letting you know?!” asked Maria.

“No. A letter from the embassy arrived a few days earlier. It said that on such and such date, at the request of their citizen so and so, identified by first and last name... it was Hellwig’s name... following the decision of the court from Cologne in Germany, an embassy official would come with him to take Carl. With the verdict that we found in your room, Lile went to court to ask if we had to give them the child. They told her that we did... at least temporarily. She also went to child care services, and when she showed them the verdict they shrugged their shoulders,” replied Nade.

“Has Hellwig contacted you since then?”

Elena noticed that Maria was saying his name quite casually, like a man she hardly knew. She spoke of him with indifference.

“The very next day Hellwig sent us a telegram and told us that they had arrived safely at their destination and that Carl was fine,” replied Nade in a quiet tone of voice.

“Years have passed since then... Who knows how much he has changed... Grown up,” said Maria.

Maria’s eyes began to pool with tears.

At that point Nade took an envelope out of her purse. It had three photographs in it. These were photos of Carl taken recently, which Hellwig had sent them. All three were of Carl. When Maria took them her hands began to shake. Maria looked at the pictures with eyes wide open and full of tears and with mixed feelings of joy and sorrow... Then, wetting them with tears, she kissed the child, her child, her little son... She then caressed them... She caressed Carl’s face and whispered gentle words to him...

Elena had feared this moment the most... She wasn’t sure if they had done the right thing giving Maria the pictures before checking with the doctor... But something inside told her that it was good for Maria to see her child. At least photographs of him. To see that he was alive and well and growing... She believed that seeing her son would encourage her to go on. Give her the will to live.

While Maria was looking at the photos Nade and Elena said nothing. They didn’t even move.

When Maria was done she took one of the photos and kept it. She told Nade to take care of the other ones as she handed them to her. After that Nade began to relax.

“Was there anything else with the pictures? A letter or a short note perhaps?” asked Maria.

Nade took the note from her purse and handed it to her. It was written in German.

At first Maria hesitated... Like she was afraid to take it.. Like she was gathering strength. How long had it taken Hellwig to decide to write her this letter... What had made him do this...? Had his mother... his father, or both died...?! No, she didn’t think so... Maybe they had grown a conscience...? she thought. Eventually she extended her hand and took the note. Her eyes quickly flew across

the lines. She couldn't believe it. Hellwig told her that he would pay for her plane ticket and send her money for her to stay in Cologne... When she'd recovered. Surely he must want her to see Carl... The moment she read this she wasn't sure if it was real or not. Maybe she was hallucinating because of her illness.

Nade and Elena kept looking at her face and the expressions she was making while reading the note... They saw a certain brightness on her face... They noticed joy in her eyes. She was free and unrestrained. She felt relief. There were no questions in Maria's eyes. In fact Maria didn't seem to know what to say... What to do... But this wasn't unusual for her. Finally she said:

"It says here that he will pay for my plane ticket and will send me money for my trip and my stay. I should reply to him by letter and let him know when I can go. To see Carl... Maybe he regrets that the child is growing up alone, without a mother..."

"That's wonderful, that's great," both Nade and Elena said at the same time. "Now you need to get well as soon as possible..." said Elena.

"I would do it if it all depended on me..." replied Maria.

"Of course a lot depends on you... But now that you know that you will be able to see Carl you will get well much sooner and you will call us to pick you up," said her sister.

Maria looked at her with eyes full of hope... She then handed her sister the note.

"Keep it, it will be safer with you," Maria said to her sister.

They all hugged before leaving. Maria felt like Elena was her sister too.

Elena noticed that this time, when Maria left, she wasn't accompanied by an orderly. She thought it was a good sign.

Going down the hall Maria had a thought...

Did Hellwig have to send her to the hospital and spend three years there before he could write her a five line note? But, at this moment, she figured the most important thing was that she would be given a chance to see Carl... To hug him... To kiss him... Elena was right. Maria needed to be strong. To fight her illness. Chase the bad thoughts away. Not let them penetrate her mind. Not let them bother her... Maria had known about Carl for several months... that his father had taken him... The doctor had learned this from Elena. But she couldn't do anything. She was locked up in here. Between four walls... Helpless... She couldn't get out of here until the doctor said so.

* * *

Elena called the doctor the same evening she and Nade had visited Maria. She couldn't stand to wait until the next day. She was restless and wanted to find out how Maria was doing... She was worried that the excitement from the visit might have caused her condition to worsen... But the moment Elena heard the doctor's cheerful voice she knew Maria was okay. Elena's restlessness began to evaporate...

"You are a miracle worker," said the doctor. You're in the wrong field... You should be a therapist."

"Oh doctor, you have no idea how relieved I am to hear you say that... I was very worried. Even though her sister and I wanted to avoid talking about the child, Maria started asking questions," replied Elena.

"That's okay. You did well. You did great. That means she's gotten over her fears on her own. She overcame her obstacles on her own... We were waiting for that to happen for a long time. For her to face the truth... Reality... And move on. She showed me the photograph... She was very happy to see that her son was growing up a nice, healthy boy. She also told me about the letter from her ex-husband... She talked about him somewhat calmly. She was glad that he'd invited her to visit her son... The only obstacle for her now, and still the most difficult one, is her in-laws. We hope that she will slowly

get over it too... I expect you and her sister will visit us again soon. Come straight to my office,” said the doctor.

The moment Elena finished talking to the doctor she hung up the phone, quickly got dressed and rushed over to Maria’s mother’s house. She wanted to make everyone happy with the latest news from the doctor.

Maria’s mother opened the door, hugged Elena and said:

“We will never be able to repay you, daughter.”

“The most important thing now... for everyone... is for Maria to come home...” replied Elena.

Maria’s mother then said: “Nade told me all about the visit and the letter... That he wants her to go there... I don’t want to hear anything about him. Even when he came here... to take the child, I didn’t go outside. I didn’t want to look at his face. He ruined my girl... My daughter Lile openly said to him ‘you must have done something terrible to my sister there, to make her feel the need to escape and come back here alone with the child. With no means of support. Then you dragged her through the courts and took her child away. You did everything to make my sister sick... You put her in the hospital!’

After that Lile said to me “After Nade spoke to him, Hellwig didn’t say a single word... He wouldn’t even look at us. He refused to meet our gaze. No matter what we said it had no effect on him... It changed nothing... But at least Nade told him that he was to blame for our sister’s tragedy...”

Elena wanted to tell them the good news from the doctor as soon as possible so she went inside, got them all together and started talking. When she was done they all looked happy.

Maria’s mother spoke first. She anxiously said, “Should she be in a hurry to get out of that stupid hospital? I know it’s not easy being in the hospital. But she could relapse. And if she’s in a hurry to go and see her child she will have to face that devil... That cursed ex-husband of hers... Who abandoned her... Who allowed his parents to

torment her... She left because she feared his parents... both of them... Cursed people. May they catch some disease... that will make them disappear forever... Why does God allow such evil people to trample the world... May the earth swallow them whole... What kind of people are they not to want their own grandchild... to hate their own grandson... and then to turn around and break my daughter's heart by taking him away... May some terrible plague take them away..."

"Enough Mom, stop it!" interrupted Lile. "No matter what we say there is nothing we can do to help her now. And about that... It's up to the doctor when she comes home... That's all we know... The most important thing now is that she's getting better day by day..."

Her mother agreed to stop cursing but did it against her will. She had so much built up in her soul that she couldn't bear it.

Elena promised to come back again. She said she would let them know the moment she found out anything new. She said goodbye and left. All three escorted her to the front gate.

* * *

When he saw that Maria was in better health, the doctor asked her to read an article about the ideology of nationalism and German Nazism. He felt that Maria's hatred for Hellwig's mother and father and their Nazi leanings were the cause of her trauma and wanted to see what she thought.

After reading the article, Maria couldn't believe that, even now, more than four decades later, after Nazi Germany waged the war, there were people who still blindly lived under its shadow. She had no idea how many families were deceived by the Nazi ideology and how many generations that followed were victims of it... She had no idea how many from the old generations had consciously destroyed the true view of the world for the new generations. How many of them had instilled sinister ideas in the new generation about which nations were worthy of living on earth and which should disappear from the earth... I.e. which nations should be destroyed by the supremacists. All others nations, outside of the supremacists,

according to Nazi ideology, were created to be slaves in the service of the supremacists. Created to be abused and humiliated by the supremacists until they all disappeared down to the last one...

Maria had a long conversation with the doctor. He was faced with many, not so easy questions. She looked to him to find answers.

“From what you told me,” said the doctor, “Hellwig was from the third generation living in the same house of his predecessors. And, as you said, his grandfather and even his uncle gave their lives for the Nazi ideal. And of course, his parents, Hellwig’s parents also carried a deep-seated hatred for those sacrifices. They were victims of an unrealized ideal.”

The doctor continued: “Like you said, your husband did make attempts to escape from his upbringing during his earliest childhood... And at one point, when he met you and fell in love with you, he believed he had... But, obviously, he’d lied... Wandering around the world for years he had the opportunity to become his own man. He was optimistic that he could. But at the slightest pressure from his parents he became a broken man.”

Maria was shown and tried to understand that not everything that had happened in her life was hers or Hellwig’s fault. She began to see the differences. This helped to ease the burden in her soul. Not everything that had happened in her life in these past few years was her fault. She was learning that she didn’t need to fix everything. Or change everything. But still... She was unsure if she could see the light... if there would be brightness in her life...

With each new day, the doctor became more and more satisfied with her progress. She started talking and their conversations were no longer monologues... She was no longer silent.

Almost a month had passed since Elena and Nade had visited her when the doctor told her that she should consider going home. He told her that there was no rush. To just to think about it. And then tell the doctor when she was ready to go. It was up to her to decide when to leave.

Maria was put to the final test. She was happy to have been given the opportunity to return to normal life. But at the same time she was also afraid... How would she cope outside the hospital...? How would she live without Carl...? Without Hellwig...? Alone... With her mother... With her sisters... It wouldn't be easy. Would any of them help her financially?... Maybe Hellwig had plans for her... With Carl... But she had little hope, especially in Hellwig helping her...

* * *

During her stay in the hospital Maria, for a long time, assisted in the kitchen and tidied up the dining room... She also spent time in the library reading. She felt wonderful sitting in that big room with shelves and big windows. Here she found many books, including ones she'd read in elementary and high school. She often picked up a book, read it and then put it back in the same place on the shelf.

The doctors felt that Maria's interest in books was helpful and very useful to her. Maybe the books were an escape from real life... But also a break from life's troubles. The doctor always checked to see which book Maria was reading. After that the same book became part of their conversation. Very often, the doctor was surprised by her mature thinking.

* * *

It was getting harder for Maria to stay in the hospital. Her health had visibly improved... She wanted to tell the doctor she wanted to go home.

After a few questions and answers during the usual doctor-patient visit, she said jokingly to the doctor:

“You can go home this weekend if you want to... Call me by phone and let me know how long you will stay... you decide...”

Maria wanted to do that herself. But even though she very much wanted to go home, she was getting somewhat upset. But she

recovered and settled down. She even made a joke at her own expense. She said:

“It feels like this will somehow be a trial leave. As is often done with prisoners.”

When Maria said that she laughed out loud... But she really felt that way. Like a prisoner...

The doctor got the joke and said:

“Well, sometimes that’s how it turns out...”

He also wanted to say that prisoners were there because they were guilty of doing something themselves, unlike people like her who hadn’t done anything...

But he changed his mind and in good time. He figured that that kind of joke would touch her in her most sensitive spot.

“You don’t have to decide right away,” he added quickly.

Maria didn’t reply and remained reserved.

* * *

The same day she’d met with the doctor Maria called Elena on the phone. Her voice was trembling with excitement. Elena became anxious when she first heard her speak. But then she calmed down and rejoiced when she found out that her friend was coming home for the weekend. It wasn’t clear to Elena why just for the weekend. Anyway. She’d be coming home because healthwise she was okay.

“What time should we come to pick you up?” asked Elena anxiously, as if they were about to be disconnected. But when Elena heard Maria’s voice again she calmed down.

“On Friday at four o’clock. That’s what the doctor said,” replied Maria.

Elena sensed that Maria over emphasized the word “doctor” probably because this was being done with his permission.

“I’ll be coming with your sister, for sure. Now I will immediately go to your mother’s house to give them the good news,” said Elena with undisguised joy in her voice.

She felt that Maria wanted to say something more but restrained herself. Then after a short pause she said:

“See you then!”

After that the telephone went silent.

Elena stood there for awhile with the telephone handset in her hand before she hung up. How would Maria’s family react to the news? Elena wondered but didn’t know why she would ask herself such a question...? She reprimanded herself. However...

* * *

Elena usually telephoned them about any old thing but when she visited them, Maria’s relatives always expected new news. They noticed that Elena was happier than usual. Also more impatient than usual. As soon as she stepped out of the hallway, before sitting down, she said:

“I heard from Maria. I have the best news. The doctor is releasing her for the weekend.”

“For the weekend?!” shouted all three of them almost in unison. “Why for the weekend?” asked her mother.

“Probably to see how she feels being outside the hospital. This means that the doctor is prepared to send her home,” replied Elena.

Everyone was delighted. At the same time they were all somewhat confused. Even Elena felt that her mother was worried. At least that’s what she thought.

“Let’s go Mom, this is an occasion that calls for a treat,” said Lile, and without waiting for their mother, got up and made juice for everyone.

“I will try and find a car,” said Elena. “One of my colleagues just bought one, it will give him a chance drive it a little. We are good friends.”

“Can I come too?” asked Lile.

“Of course, what did you think, I was going alone? Just to scare her? To make her think that you don’t want her to come home?” said Elena jokingly. She then got up and got ready to leave. Before leaving she said:

“We should leave around one o’clock. It will take us two hours to get there. It’s not exactly close.”

All three escorted her outside.

* * *

On that Friday Maria stood near the window overlooking the main hospital yard entrance for almost an hour waiting for her ride to arrive. She’d forgotten to tell Elena and her sister which dress to bring her. Anyway. She only had a few dresses... She also wondered which sister would come with Elena this time.

When she saw Elena and Lile getting out of the car she got very excited. She tried hard to control herself. This is what the doctor had advised her, especially during the last few days. Maybe Elena had bought a car, she thought. But then she immediately saw a young man come out of the driver’s side... Who could he be? Elena’s boyfriend? Or Lile’s? She didn’t know because she hadn’t been home for a long time. She knew nothing about their lives. Maria felt uncomfortable. Mostly because of the unknown. But immediately thought how much easier it would be to travel by car than by bus. There was no train on this route.

She ran out and met them in the visitor's lounge. They hugged. Lile handed Maria a small travel bag and said:

"Here are some things for you. I mean, it has everything you need to get dressed."

"Good, you remembered," replied Maria and took the bag. Looking a little confused she went to prepare herself.

Elena and Lile went out into the yard. Sick people were scattered all around. But well enough to be let out to roam freely around the yard. Their presence made the two women uncomfortable. Then one of the orderlies came over and said:

"Maria's doctor wants to see you."

Lile and Elena wanted to go to the doctor's office immediately but couldn't because they were waiting for Maria.

Elena said to the orderly:

"We have to wait for Maria to come out because she won't know where we are."

"Maria already knows that you will be with the doctor," replied the orderly and escorted them to the doctors office.

The doctor was waiting for them, pacing around the office.

"Oh, hello," he said to Elena.

"This is Lile, Maria's other sister," said Elena. "Do you know each other?"

"Hello," said the doctor and shook Lile's hand. There was some hesitation in his voice. As if trying to remember if he'd seen her before.

Lile's face turned red. She thought the doctor was reprimanding her for not coming to see her sister more often. Her family had visited her only a few times. But of course only she knew why.

"Do you have a job?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," replied Lile, "I've had one for a long time."

"Please make sure Maria takes her medication at the exact hours that I give you. Pass this information on to your other sister and your mother. You must make sure she takes it in front of you. Be sure she takes it. Her condition is much better now but we can't say that she is completely cured. Her further treatment will depend on her and you. I will let her go home for the weekend, as we say here. But if she decides to stay longer and you see that she's feeling good, don't insist on bringing her back immediately. She should stabilize even more outside of the hospital. Please call me and let me know how she feels. If there are any changes that concern you, please call me immediately. I will be happy if she doesn't have to come back, we will easily sort out the documents," said the doctor.

After she'd had a bath, carefully combed her hair and put on a beautiful dress, Maria went to the doctor's office. She looked like a completely different person. Everyone complimented her. She herself felt reborn. She had a big smile on her face and immense gratitude in her eyes when she greeted the doctor.

"Have a nice trip home," said the doctor wishing them well. Coming from that caring, resourceful and well-educated man in the white coat, with whom she'd spent many years, Maria knew that him saying "have a nice trip home" wasn't just a common saying.

There was an obstacle waiting for her in the car, which she had to overcome. That obstacle was the stranger driving the car. The young man who'd driven Elena and Lile there. She had never met anyone outside of the hospital since she'd gotten sick.

Maria and her sister sat in the back seat.

“My colleague here just bought this car... Well, he came here to bring us together... And to give us a ride home...” said Elena.

“The car looks new,” said Maria, “and thank you for doing this for us...” she added in a quieter tone of voice.

Everyone was feeling comfortable and talked about various ordinary things. Then Elena and her colleague began to talk shop about things at their work. They left the sisters to talk privately to one another. This was their first meeting out of the hospital in a long time. Lile told Maria about her new job. She said:

“Some people think that typing is boring. But it isn’t exactly like that. It depends on what kind of assignments you work on. For example, I have learned a lot since I started this job. In fact I have learned something new from each assignment I complete. If nothing else, I’ve learned new words and new expressions.”

Maria saw changes in her sister’s facial expressions as she spoke. She looked very happy.

Lile continued: “Now we have a new boss. And not only is he a lawyer, he seems to be well read. To tell you the truth, I enjoy it when he dictates to me, or when I type his material. It’s not the same with the other people’s material. Not always... I want to read more and learn more things. I’m not any stupider than the others, I say to myself. Those who I type for sometimes bring me a book or two to read. When I’m finished reading I give them back to them. I wrap them in paper while I read them so that I won’t soil them. People give them to me in trust.”

Occasionally Elena listened to the conversation between the sisters. At first it seemed strange to her that Lile would only talk about her work. She later realized that she was doing it on purpose to avoid talking about the hospital.

Maria was also happy that no one was asking her about the hospital. Sometime later Maria asked Lile about Nade, who was still in medical school.

“Will there be job opportunities for Nade after she finishes school?” she asked.

At this point Elena interrupted their conversation and said:

“There is always a need for nurses. There aren’t enough of them. None of those who graduated are unemployed. This means Nade will do better than the three of us regarding finding a job...”

“Literature and language have been good for you since high school. Some jobs can still be found,” said Lile but felt as if her comments had just hit a sensitive spot.

Maria smiled sadly.

When they arrived in front of their house they were greeted by Nade and her mother. With much effort they refrained from crying. Elena and the driver were invited to go inside. There were pastries and juice on the table and they quickly made coffee. But, no matter how hard they tried to ease things, still there was some tension in the air. There was too much unnecessary talk and everyone laughed too loudly. They tried to create a cheerful atmosphere... But it wasn’t working.

Soon afterwards Elena and the driver left. They said their goodbyes right after they were thanked for their help. As they were leaving Elena said that the next day she was going on a work assignment.

After they left, Maria started walking around exploring every corner of the house. Eyes filled with tears she looked at everything except her mother and sisters. She didn’t want them to see her crying. But even though they didn’t, they felt her pain. Her immense sorrow... for losing her child... Her sadness after spending so many happy days here with Hellwig. While thinking of this, Maria kept seeing the doctor’s face in front of her. His words rang loud in her mind reminding her that she had to fight her condition, to overcome it, if she didn’t want to go back to the hospital... If she wanted to stay home for a very long time... She tightened her heart... Literally... And pressed on her chest with her hand from above... She then ran to her mother and hugged her tightly.

“Please, give me something to eat,” she said in a low tone of voice.

Moments later everyone felt at ease and gathered around the dinner table. There was a delicious aroma emanating from an earthenware pan in the kitchen, which had just been taken out of the oven. Maria seemed to enjoy the delicious food. Then, out of nowhere, she began to ask her sisters questions about men.

The sisters looked at each other in silence, allowing their mother to butt in and say:

“Not too many at Lile’s work but plenty at Nade’s work, as many as you want.”

Nade looked down and blushed.

“That’s how it should be,” said Lile. “Not like it is at my workplace...”

The weekend was over. The entire next week passed. And the next weekend. Maria was encouraged by her progress but still didn’t go out of the house. Not even when someone came to visit them. The good thing was that she hadn’t retreated to her room. She realized that she wouldn’t be able to overcome her problems if she ran away from them. She faced her fears one by one. She was determined to win. She fought every crisis and every fear and, by some motherly instinct, she was winning. She became aware that every win, every attempt to suppress her fears, brought her a step closer to being able to see her child. So she was determined to grow stronger.

One day Maria agreed to go with Elena to her workplace and call the doctor from there.

“I was pretty sure we wouldn’t be seeing each other soon...” said the doctor jokingly, the moment he heard Maria’s name and cheerful voice on the telephone.

“Can I still stay home?” asked Maria cautiously, afraid of a negative response.

“Of course you can, although it’s difficult for me being without you,” said the doctor jokingly. He then added: “If you don’t come back, and I see you won’t be coming back soon, then I will come and visit you. If you invite me, of course.”

“Would you really come?” asked Maria a bit confused and in disbelief. “Okay you’re invited then,” she replied with a happy sounding tone of voice.

“Then we’re agreed. I will contact you through Elena. By phone. See you at your house...” said the doctor.

“See you too later... I will wait for you!” replied Maria. Elena noticed joy and happiness on Maria’s face.

“He doesn’t want me to go back to the hospital. He said he will come and visit me instead. I just can’t believe that there are such good people out there... In all my misfortunes he has turned out to be my bright spot...” said Maria to Elena.

“All doctors should be like that,” replied Elena while hugging her.

“Yes, but they’re not,” said Maria and stopped talking.

Elena took Maria home... on purpose. So that she wouldn’t be alone and so they could talk some more, just the two of them.

“Regarding the letter from Hellwig, I advise you not to hurry. I realize that you want to fly there... Immediately. But you have to prepare yourself. To be sure that everything will go well when you get there. The meeting won’t be easy for you. With the child... With all of them. There...” said Elena.

“You’re right. I don’t want to delay the trip... But also I’m afraid of going. But sooner or later it has to be done. One day soon I will have to clench my teeth,” said Maria looking sickly.

After Elena saw the expression on Maria’s face she regretted starting the conversation.

“It would be best if you speak with your doctor and get his agreement,” said Elena. “When he comes to visit you.”

“I don’t believe he will let me go... And maybe he’ll be right... I’m not sure how I would handle all that by myself... But if I miss this, I’m even more afraid that Hellwig won’t give me another chance... He’ll say ‘I invited you... and you didn’t come’...” replied Maria.

“No, no, I don’t believe Hellwig will do that to you... if there is at least a bit of humanity in him... Be optimistic... One by one things will slowly fall into place,” said Elena and hugged her. They said goodbye to each other and parted company. Maria walked into her house slowly. She told her mother and sisters about the phone conversation she’d had with the doctor. Everyone was happy. But as soon as Maria told them everything, her mother began to pace around the house.

“How in God’s name are we going to look after that man? How are we going to treat him...?” asked Maria’s mother.

“Don’t worry Mom... He is very modest... You’ll see. After you meet him you’ll think you’ve known him for a long time,” replied Maria.

“Dear mother,” interrupted Lile, “are we so incapable of looking after one guest? So what even if there are more...”

“He didn’t say exactly when he was coming did he?” asked her mother still worried.

“He will contact us through Elena... I think his wife and children live here in the city,” replied Maria.

Evenings were the hardest for Maria. Both at home and in the hospital... Fortunately she had some books left from her high school days so there was something for her to read. On television they often showed war and crime films. But when such a film came on, without her saying anything, her sisters immediately turned off the TV. And they were right to do so. Not just because of her. But because they

were bad for all of them. Only violence and aggression. Everything that was bad about people was shown in those movies.

* * *

The doctor's visit to Maria's house was a real treat for her. And for everyone in the family. Her mother couldn't find the words to express her gratitude for sending her daughter home healthy. The two sisters were so perplexed that they couldn't behave properly. But this was normal for the doctor. He helped them calm down by telling them a joke he'd recently read in a newspaper.

The visit was short. The doctor explained that his wife and child would be waiting for him on the street at an appointed time and he had to be there. As he was leaving, Maria walked him out to his car, which was parked not far from the house. She quickly asked him if she should accept Hellwig's invitation to go to Germany. To meet with her son.

The doctor slowed down and stayed behind a step. He was obviously hesitant to say anything... However, he decided to advise her. He said:

“The moment when you yourself feel that you are strong enough to endure the journey, to meet Hellwig, your son and maybe your father-in-law and mother-in-law, then you can go. But not before that. Don't give in when you question yourself – whether you can or can't! When you decide, call me if you want. We will meet somewhere in the city... We will talk... Believe me, it won't be easy for you... Neither the decision nor the journey.”

“I know,” said Maria. “But at some point I will have to go... At any cost... I have to see Carl... and maybe...”

The doctor realized that what she really wanted to say was “take him with me”, but she didn't dare say it... For a long time the doctor suspected that that's what she wanted to do... but it would be wrong. Unfortunately he didn't tell her that... Was it better for Maria to live with this illusion? To have hope, or not...? The doctor wasn't

sure... However, hope was better than hopelessness... For everyone, even for healthy people...

“Now go home and get some rest. Also, go out with Elena and your sisters more often... We will continue to look for something easier for you to do... It’s my understanding that you’re a wonderful and very meticulous proofreader... you will do well working in a printing house,” said the doctor.

Maria took his hand. She couldn’t believe what the doctor had said. She was so happy she didn’t know what to say. She was very happy to hear him mention employment. The idea was wonderful. And it was true, she was an excellent proofreader.

“I will be indebted to you for life if you help me find work. And indeed I would do the best job possible with pleasure. It would mean a lot to me to have my own income... Not to depend on anyone... Not to be an expense for anyone... Even to my closest ones,” replied Maria.

“Sorry, I need to go, I’m already late. I will contact you through Elena... You can call me too if you want to,” said the doctor as he got into his car and left.

When Maria returned home everyone noticed how happy she was. They guessed it was something the doctor had said. But they didn’t ask. She didn’t say anything either... She was aware that everything that was said could happen but not immediately... And maybe not so soon.

* * *

Maria couldn’t believe she had boarded a plane and was flying to Germany.

...Twenty days ago, without anyone knowing, Maria wrote a letter to Hellwig. She sent it to the same address that was on the envelope which Nade had given her at the hospital with the photographs. She’d memorized the address before she gave the envelope back for

safe keeping. This was the address of the factory where Hellwig worked.

Hellwig answered her. His answer came in a large envelope. It contained return plane tickets, hotel room reservations and a referral where she could pick up her spending money. Maria shook her head in disbelief. And when she saw all these things she almost fainted.

In the letter she wrote to Hellwig she mentioned that she had been released from the hospital a few months ago and that she had completely recovered. She was now ready to see Carl. She wrote the letter to be sure that Hellwig was serious about wanting her to see her child. She was suspicious that Hellwig might have written the previous letter thinking that she would never get out of the hospital. That she might never recover. Or maybe he wanted to check on her condition.

But Maria never expected such a quick response from Hellwig. Suddenly she was faced with many problems which she needed to solve immediately. She vacillated over her promise to the doctor that she would see him and talk to him before she decided to go on the trip. Finally she decided to call him on the telephone. Again from Elena's office... This was the first time Elena had heard that not only had Maria decided to go and see Carl but that she had received the plane tickets. Elena was very worried.

All the time Maria spoke on the phone Elena listened to everything she said without wanting to. According to what she said, Elena tried to understand what the doctor was telling her.

“Yes, I thought about it. Very good. I questioned myself many times. I can't delay. Everything has been arranged... I leave on Sunday... Whatever happens I will endure... Only two days... I know that you believe in me... And that you wish me all the best... I will call you immediately... The same day I return!” said Maria on the telephone.

After Maria hung up it wasn't easy for her to look Elena in the eyes.

“So, you have decided... Well, okay... Maybe it’s best for you and the child. And for Hellwig. If you can avoid going to his house...” suggested Elena.

“That has already been arranged. Hellwig put me up in a hotel. He will surely come there with the child... No, no, I forgot... Both Hellwig and Carl will be coming to meet me at the airport when I arrive... I’m so happy... And not because of Hellwig...” replied Maria.

But no sooner than Maria had said all this she became visibly upset. Elena noticed but didn’t show it. She made no effort to convince her not to go. She figured she would make things worse. Maybe seeing her child would give Maria new strength to fight her condition.

Elena was trying to understand why Hellwig would want Maria to go to Germany now. Something must have changed since he took her child through the courts. But nothing could be found out until Maria came back. Elena asked Maria one more time when she was leaving for the airport.

“My colleague and I will take you to the airport,” said Elena.

“It’s not right asking him to do me a favour again,” replied Maria.

“It’s nothing for him. He can’t wait to drive his car. This will give him a reason to...” said Elena.

“Okay then,” replied Maria.

“Do your mother... and sisters know you’re leaving?” asked Elena.

“I’ll tell them today...” replied Maria.

“Don’t tell them until I get there, if you want. I will pass by this afternoon around five o’clock,” said Elena.

Maria looked into her eyes with gratitude. Everyone was glad to see Elena when she came by. They loved her visits very much. She always brought them news and told them interesting things.

This time, however, they noticed that Elena wasn't in her usual good mood. They became aware after she sat down. Maybe she had some personal problem of her own... They didn't know why she was like that.

“Did Hellwig reply to your letter?” asked Elena looking at Maria.

Initially Maria looked confused. Then she realized that Elena had come up with something.

“Yes he did!” replied Maria. “I was surprised how fast he replied. And that he sent me a plane ticket and some money too.”

Her two sisters and mother were left with their mouths open. They didn't know what to say or do.

“What's all this?” asked her mother surprised, looking at Maria and Elena.

“Maria sent Hellwig a letter in response to his letter. You remember... he sent her a letter a long time ago asking her if she wanted to go and see her child. Well, now he sent a plane ticket and money for the trip,” replied Elena.

“Have you lost your mind? You're going back to him again to that...” said her mother unable to find the bad word she was looking for to describe him.

“She's not going to Hellwig's place. She wouldn't even think of going there. She's going to see Carl in a neutral place... She's his mother. Let her see him,” replied Elena.

Everyone was silent... They said nothing more. This encouraged Maria to speak. She said:

“It's only for two days, I'll survive! I want to see Carl with my own eyes. He looks good in the pictures. I also want to know what Hellwig's plans are for Carl. Maybe he doesn't want him there anymore. Maybe he has a new wife?”

Everyone, even Elena, was surprised by how calmly Maria spoke. How coherent her few sentences were. Her words calmed everyone down somewhat.

“And when will you be traveling, on what date?” asked Lile.

Maria delayed her answer a bit. She knew they would be upset again when they heard that the flight was only two days away.

And so they were. As soon as they heard the date all three were on their feet.

“That soon?! They all shouted. “And what happens if the doctor looks for you during that time? What if he calls and asks to speak to you?” asked her mother.

“I told him already and he agreed to let me go...” replied Maria.

When they heard this they all felt better. It was okay since the doctor had given her his consent. He knew what was best for her. What Maria could and couldn't do.

Immediately after that Elena deliberately started another conversation. In the end she told them that she and her colleague would be taking Maria by car to the airport.

“Can I come too?” asked Nade.

“I'm all for it,” replied Elena.

While flying on the plane Maria thought about all the details she needed to remember, including what her mother had told her: not to let Hellwig lie to her again and not to stay with him. To just say hello and nothing more...

Her mother barely knew anything about the things that had taken place there... And her sisters...? They knew even less. How could they know anything?! But even though these thoughts kept popping up into her head, Maria was able to consciously stop thinking about

her past. She knew she couldn't afford to go back to the events that had sent her to the hospital. It was best to think about Carl, how he was and how much he'd grown... How her meeting would be with him... How one day she'd be able to bring him home... Would he know her when he saw her...? He was very young when they were separated... She felt her heart beating in her chest like a trembling chicken... And any moment now it was going to come out and fly off...

"We are landing..." Maria was startled by a voice.

It was the flight attendant... It sounded like the sound had come from a great distance...

She walked down the stairs descending from the plane, with a mechanical motion... All she had for luggage was a small handbag. It contained some toys and a shirt and pant suit, which his aunts had bought for him, and two large chocolate bars from Elena. She didn't remember how she went through customs and how she got to the exit where people greeted their loved ones coming off the planes.

Hellwig and Carl were standing at the back, behind the waiting crowd.

She greeted Hellwig like a wind up machine without looking at him... Her eyes were on Carl. On her little one... on her five-year-old son... He was hiding behind his father's pants and didn't want to let go of his hand, not even for a moment. He had wrapped his other hand around Hellwig's leg... Carl didn't want to look at her. As if he was facing some great danger.

Maria came closer and held out her hands. A frantic look appeared in his eyes.

"Carl... son!" said Maria in a pleading tone of voice.

The moment she touched him he screamed loudly. People started looking at them.

Maria pulled her hands back.

“Don’t be upset... It’s normal... The child hasn’t seen you for several years... He will be fine,” said Hellwig quickly, wanting to ease the painful situation.

They left and headed for Hellwig’s car.

“Let’s go and sit down somewhere... In a restaurant perhaps where you can freshen up,” suggested Hellwig. Then, as soon as they started walking, he said: “I should tell you that I’m married now and have another son... That’s why I didn’t invite you to my house.”

Maria was surprised at how bitter she felt when Hellwig told her that. Her thoughts, her feelings now existed only for Carl. Everything else was outside of that...

Carl sat in the front seat next to his father and Maria sat in the back seat behind Hellwig. Hellwig continued:

“After your letter arrived Carl and I started to talk more often about you. I told him you would be coming to see him. Even my wife Marsha told him that his mother who gave birth to him would be coming to visit... She told him that she was the mother who took care of him... but there was also another mother, the mother who gave birth to him... She told him you gave birth to him like she gave birth to Philip. Unfortunately he’s still too young and can’t understand all those things so easily... He was used to Marsha being his mother for these few years...”

Hellwig talked as he drove. Maria took out one of the toys from her bag and tried to hand it to Carl. The child didn’t want it and didn’t even turn to look. Maria put it on his lap. Carl didn’t move. The toy elephant sat in his lap. Carl sat there motionless like Maria had placed a bomb in front of him.

“Be patient,” said Hellwig trying to reassure her. Then Maria thought to herself “Carl is probably thinking ‘who is this strange woman? How could he have two mothers at the same time’...”

She blamed Hellwig for all this. Why hadn't he allowed the child to completely forget her? But now it was too late to talk about it... She was gripped by despair... She began to fear that she would lose Carl forever.

She gently stroked his soft hair... Carl started crying. Maria realized that he was very upset by her presence.

They arrived at a restaurant and sat at a table outdoors. Carl sat in the chair next to his father. He wanted to feel safe and assured that this strange woman wasn't going to grab him. Maria pretended not to notice him. But her heart was sinking in despair.

Hellwig looked into Maria's eyes and saw how much she had suffered. He was not indifferent.

"Carl, do you remember me telling you about Mommy...? I told you she would be coming by plane... Just to see you. You won't be going with her now... You will stay here with me and... Marsha and your little brother... Now we are here just to meet her... And this mom loves you too... Look, what a beautiful toy she brought you," said Hellwig.

Maria took out the other toys. And the suit... But Carl kept looking at his father. Like he was preoccupied with a single thought - how to save himself from this strange woman and how to leave and go home soon. He didn't even want to drink his juice. Then he started saying and repeating the words:

"Let's go home... I want to go home..." and cried a little.

"Let's go to the hotel, Maria," suggested Hellwig.

"Yes, let's go," she agreed.

She didn't try to touch Carl again. She didn't want to scare him anymore. It wasn't his fault... Why should he be traumatized...?

...She cried loudly when she was alone... In the hotel room... Then she heard a knock on the door but she wasn't sure if it was real. It

seemed like she'd heard it in a dream... She didn't answer it... It couldn't possibly have been Hellwig... Even if it was him so what...

She felt torment down in her soul. She became aware that she might have lost Carl again... This time for sure... She had no son anymore... Forever... She would have been happy if he'd let her hug him... even once... Let her feel him in her arms... She could live with that... But it seemed that they had taken him from her forever...

Would Hellwig be able to bring Carl here tomorrow...? If he did she would grab him by the arms and hug him... Maybe when he felt the warmth of his mother, Carl wouldn't see her as a stranger. He would realize that she was someone who was closest to him... Then Maria suddenly began to panic: what if he didn't come with Hellwig? Maybe she wouldn't see him again... She had missed her opportunity to get close to him. She hadn't made enough attempts... She started blaming herself.

She woke up the next day in a daze. She didn't know where she was... She didn't know what time it was. She only knew that she had laid down and fell asleep very unhappy... She remembered crying hopelessly... Then the telephone started ringing. Maria was afraid to answer it.

"Hello? Maria...? Hellwig here. I will arrive at the hotel at four o'clock in the afternoon. Don't worry. There is plenty of time; the flight won't leave until two hours later."

"Carl... will Carl come with you?" she asked quickly as if fearing the telephone connection would drop at any moment.

"Of course he'll be come with me. Don't worry everything will be fine..." replied Hellwig.

...What's going to be fine? Maria wondered angrily but soon felt a little calmer. She tried to do what the doctor had told her, to rationalize things to herself... To logically understand things. That's what he had taught her. But the very moment that she thought of Carl, things began to fall apart. Her eyes immediately filled with tears... Something was pressing hard on her brain... Should she ask

Hellwig if she could take Carl with her?! Why should a child with a living mother grow up with a stepmother?! Maybe Hellwig could hardly wait to give him up... Maybe his wife wanted to do the same...? Now that she had her own child. She should try... and see how Hellwig would react...

She went down to the hotel restaurant and tried to eat something. But with every bite she took she had to hold it in her mouth for a long time because she could barely swallow. She only drank milk by force to take her medication. She had promised the doctor that she wouldn't forget, not even for one day. And exactly at the specified time.

She walked mechanically through the streets. By the shops. Like she was visiting this city for the first time. Like the city was completely unknown to her. She had spent a year here yet she didn't remember a single street, not a single building... This city looked like a different city to her... It hated her... Her tears began to flow again. She could freely cry here. No one knew her... And she didn't know anyone. Even if she knew people, would any one passing by care about her tears...? And about her immense pain...?

There was plenty of time until Hellwig was due to arrive at the hotel.

“Couldn't he have taken a day off from work?!” she whispered to herself.

She arrived at the river and sat down near the shore. On the cold stone.

If Carl didn't know her now, what would happen later? She had no idea when she would be able to come back again... Everything would be lost... She would tell Hellwig that, as soon as she got a job, she would come back again for Carl. To take him... It would be really impossible to do it now... And she was aware that, only a few weeks ago, she was in the hospital. She started crying again... If she hadn't come, she wouldn't have known that the child had completely forgotten her. Maybe it would have been easier for her to continue to deceive herself thinking that Carl couldn't wait to see

her. She had little hope that something would change before their next meeting this afternoon... For Carl the other woman had been his mother for three years. Who could take that away from him now? And replace her with another...

It felt like some invisible force was pounding inside her brain... it was blurring her thinking. Maria tried to fight it. To make it stop... She had promised everyone at home... Elena... The doctor... She must not betray them.

She suddenly realized that she was in her hotel room. She didn't know when or how she'd gotten there. By taxi or on foot? She felt very tired... She was sinking... like in some pool of thick and muddy water...

...Someone was holding her by the hand... It was Hellwig. It had been a long time since I dreamt of you. How did you get here? To our place (Macedonia)? I never believed you would ever come here... And Carl?! Where is Carl?!" When she mentioned the child's name she wiped the wet bed with her hand. Water was dripping from her. It was as if she had walked in heavy rain.

Hellwig and Carl were standing beside her. It took her a long time to become aware of that. Hellwig was now holding the child tightly. As if being frightened by some danger posed by Maria. She got up and went into the bathroom. A while later she came out. She had washed her face and combed her hair. She looked calmer but seemed preoccupied with herself.

"How was work?" she asked Hellwig. Like she used to ask him many years ago. Like they had sent him home early that morning.

"It was all right, like always," replied Hellwig looking a bit confused. There was some uneasiness. He felt that something was happening to Maria. Something to do with her nerves. She was somehow different... She then started blaming herself. She shouldn't have rushed with the letter she'd written him... And with her coming here... She feared that her health would worsen while she was still here. Before returning home. And she would no longer be able to travel by plane...

Hellwig began to worry. She hadn't made any attempt to take Carl from his arms. To free him... This new mother left him alone... She didn't want to go near him... She didn't even try to caress him... To take him in her arms... All that worried Hellwig even more. He noticed that Maria was looking at her watch more and more often... As if she was afraid of being late to go to the airport. And the time was approaching... Without being aware that she had slept for a long time.

Noticing her growing nervousness, Hellwig said:

“Let's go... We should leave now.”

Maria immediately took her now almost empty bag and was the first to leave the room. They really didn't know what to talk about on the way.

When they arrived at the airport Hellwig wanted to buy some things at the mini mart. To send to Maria's mother and sisters. When he suggested that Maria shook her hand violently and said:

“Absolutely Not!” with a sharp tone of objection.

“Something for you, perhaps?” he asked cautiously.

“No!” she replied with an even more categorical tone. Hellwig felt anger boiling in him.

This was the second time Carl wiggled himself out of Hellwig's hand and ran off. Maria ran after him. After she caught him Carl was ready to scream. Hellwig ran to him. Carl felt liberated. He was even proud that his father was able to free him so quickly from this strange woman's hands.

There was a public announcement on the speakers calling for all passengers on this flight to go through customs.

Hellwig and Maria shook hands. Carl looked at them curiously. He had already gotten used to the strange woman being around.

At one point Maria pulled Carl away from Hellwig's hand and, before anyone knew it, ran to the customs area exit. There were no more passengers there. They all had gone through customs. It happened so fast that none of the customs officers were even aware of what had happened. They only heard the frantic voice of a man, who obviously didn't have a passport with him and couldn't reach them.

"The child, she grabbed my child...! That woman is sick...! Take the child away from her...!" he yelled.

Even Carl didn't immediately start to scream... He also didn't understand what was happening.

When they saw a woman with a child in her arms running, the customs officers figured she was late and rushing to catch her plane. They opened her passport and there was a picture of the child inside. Since she had no luggage she was allowed to immediately proceed to the exit.

In the meantime, Hellwig ran down to the airport security office to see the chief. Hellwig was furious that he wasn't allowed to go through customs without a passport... Even after he explained his problem to the customs officers. And especially after he told them to immediately stop Maria.

When Maria was sure she could pass the last obstacle, the door through the departure gate, she freely presented her ticket to the clerk. But the clerk didn't seem happy and sternly said:

"The ticket for the child please!"

At this point Maria figured this would be the end of her caper so she pushed the surprised clerk out of the way and ran down towards the plane without letting go of the child. But by now the kidnapping information had already reached the officers, several of them ran down and took Carl from her. They then caught her and took her to the head of security. Hellwig was there all shaken up. He caressed and hugged Carl.

The security chief, to whom Hellwig had already told that Maria was a mental patient, explained to Maria that she couldn't take the child without her ex-husband's consent because the child was in his custody under a court order.

Maria then, in a higher tone of voice, but also with an expression of guilt on her face, tried to convince Hellwig that the child should go with her, since she was no longer in the hospital.

The security chief looked puzzled. If this woman was in such a crisis then she wouldn't be allowed to go on the plane? The chief tried to indirectly understand from Hellwig what was going on.

"The plane is waiting to take off, I won't be able to hold it any longer," said the chief.

Hellwig understood what he meant and said, "If Maria wants to she can stay here a few more days... Let her decide..."

Maria looked helplessly at both Hellwig and Carl, and at the same time asked the chief to send someone to accompany her to the plane.

* * *

As soon as Hellwig got home he left Carl with Marsha and without explaining anything, ran out of the house, got into his car and drove off. Marsha tried to understand what was happening from Carl but only rubbish came out of his mouth, imitating the plane... and nothing more. She started to worry. Had something bad happened to Carl's mother?!

"Marsha... is most to blame for everything that happened," Hellwig whispered to himself and became even angrier. She invented all this... The child needs his real mother. Who knows how many times she had repeated this to him until she made him do this... And look what happened...? How it turned out...

He drove as fast as he could to the post office. He then contacted the airport in Skopje. He explained to the clerk who answered the call

that a woman who was not in a good mental condition was traveling on the plane from Germany to Skopje and would be arriving there in less than an hour. She had been treated at the mental hospital there and her condition had worsened. Her family would surely be at the airport but she would also need an ambulance. He also told the clerk her full name. Fortunately the Skopje airport clerk spoke German well, so they understood each other.

During the entire flight, the flight attendant tried to speak to Maria. At one point Maria asked her to see Carl. In a loud voice she said:

“Give me my child... you took him from me. Where is he? Tell me where he is. He was here a while ago!”

The flight attendant realized that Maria was having a mental breakdown. She feared that the most. She kept looking at her watch. There was another ten minutes of flight. Fortunately then a steward came over. He was a big and tall man. Maria looked confused. She shook her head... As if to say she didn't want him by her side. The flight attendant took advantage of his presence and walked away.

“Maybe you have a sister... or a brother perhaps...” They'll come over to meet you at the airport,” said the steward.

Maria was silent for a long time before she replied. She said: “I have sisters...”

A lot of time passed before Maria said that as if she needed the extra time to figure out what she was going to say... Then she tried to get up... The flight attendant immediately sat next to her. She held her down with both hands... and said:

“You mustn't try to get up now... The plane will be landing soon. It will be dangerous for you if you are standing during landing.”

Maria looked at the flight attendant with a blank look...

Meanwhile, the other flight attendant informed the passengers of the landing and advised them to fasten their seatbelts. When Maria saw the man sitting next to her trying to tie his seatbelt, she became

horrified. She thought they were going to take him to the hospital. And when the flight attendant tried to tie her seatbelt, Maria started to scream and fight back. When the flight attendant tried to explain to her that all the passengers needed to do this she became even more frantic. This meant that she had relapsed and was sick again!

The passengers looked anxiously at this strange woman. Some with pity. Others didn't know what to say or do...

Most didn't know how to respond... When the plane landed, two paramedics quickly boarded the aircraft. They carefully took Maria out.

Elena and her colleague were waiting for Maria at the exit. They became suspicious when they saw the ambulance and the paramedics. Elena didn't want to believe they'd come for Maria or to speculate about who they came for... But, after the last passenger came out and Maria wasn't there, it became clear to them that it might have been Maria... But who to ask what had happened? They went to look for the flight attendants. They told them everything.

What were Elena and her colleague going to tell Maria's mother and her sisters who were anxiously waiting for Maria to come home and bring them news? Mostly about Carl. They didn't know what to tell them...

* * *

“When I saw you come to our house alone, without Maria I felt something cut at my abdomen. It felt like a poisonous snake had bit me. I said to myself, “Maybe he kept her there for several more days... But I was wrong... it wasn't that... It was bad news again... I knew I shouldn't have let her go. She shouldn't have gone there, not even in a dream. Let alone in reality... Here she is again... sick. The doctor was wrong in approving her trip... He must have felt sorry for her... He is a parent too... He has a girl. There's nothing we can say or do now... It's no use. Let us hope and pray...” said Maria's mother to Elena.

“She didn’t ask me or the doctor. She just told us that she decided she wanted to go. We couldn’t stop her... No one could tell her not to go,” replied Elena sounding like she was trying to justify herself.

“I don’t blame you or anyone... It was her fate to leave. I knew that a five-year-old who hadn’t seen you since he was so young – taken away at two years old wouldn’t remember you... But how could I say such a thing to her? Especially before she left? It would have devastated her,” said Maria’s mother.

Elena only stayed a short time and then left with her colleague.

“If you find out anything from the doctor, if he calls you on the phone, please let us know. We shouldn’t all be bothering him,” Lile said to Elena as she was leaving.

“Okay, you don’t have to ask,” replied Elena over Lile’s shoulder while hugging her. “Maria will get well again. She’s a fighter. You’ll see... In good time.” Lile then wiped away her tears... Elena didn’t look at Nade or at their mother.

* * *

Elena spoke regularly with the doctor about Maria’s health. She called him almost every week. He told her that Maria’s crisis was even worse now. It had deepened.

“I don’t know exactly how this happened but I can guess,” said the doctor.

It was almost three months since Maria was re-admitted to the hospital before Elena told the doctor that she was coming to visit Maria on the weekend. He tried to dissuade her... he told her that he didn’t want her to have any contact with Maria. Still Elena insisted she wanted to see her.

This time she went by bus. She didn’t trust the doctor... that he was telling her everything. She wanted to see her with her own eyes... Also, she didn’t want to postpone her visit as the doctor suggested...

After several unsuccessful attempts to talk to Maria, Elena found it so difficult that she didn't want to talk to the doctor.

“All avenues of communicating with Maria are closed. At least for now. We'll see how long that will take. All we can do now is medicate her. I hope that helps,” said the doctor anxiously.

“If she hadn't gone to see her child and Hellwig, this might not have happened, her crisis wouldn't have returned so quickly,” replied Elena.

“Maybe not. But her illness was still there inside her... She couldn't live a normal life with it inside her... She was aware of that and the risks she was taking... She knew exactly how much she was risking... Sometimes we, the doctors, hope that maybe during such moments like meeting a child might help unburden a person... Especially when one sees that their child is alive and well, and that everything is fine... But, unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way for Maria... Who she saw there, with whom she met, what happened...? We don't know... We only know about the events that we learned about at the airport when she came back.

* * *

Maria's condition lasted three and a half years. Almost everyone lost hope... her mother... her sisters... Elena. But not the doctor... He kept trying different medications and other methods of treatment... He refused to give up. He often quarreled with the nurses and orderlies if they didn't give her the best care or if they left her unwashed or her hair uncombed. He also kept strict control over her diet... feeding schedule, what she ate and how much.

She didn't start improving rapidly until the end of the fourth year. This was unexpected for everyone except the doctor. Although he himself at times was unsure whether there was hope for Maria to find her way out of the darkness into which she had sunk.

The doctor decided not to tell Elena when he saw the first signs of improvement... He waited for her to get better. She needed more time... First to make sure that she was really coming out of her

darkness. The last drugs he'd given her, so far, had had a good effect on only two patients... The doctor wanted to make sure that it was the medication that caused the improvements and not just some coincidence.

He carefully looked at the image of his face on the window. There was something in him that was different from all these difficult months and years of hard work and worry. He continued to walk in the yard. Close to the window of his office... Maybe he would be lucky this time, he thought.

A few days later the nurses told him that they had noticed a slightly more sober expression on Maria's face... Even in her eyes. Everyone was happy to hear that. They were glad they'd never "given up on her", as they used to say.

The doctor increased the dose of the drug he was giving her. Within the limit of what was allowed, of course. Day after day the improvements were more and more noticeable. He patiently waited for more improvements. He hadn't yet invited her to his office for a doctor's visit and to talk. He figured it was best if she asked for a visit herself. He thought he was being witty wanting to believe in miracles!

And a miracle started to happen... before their eyes. Maria started to wash, comb her hair, change her clothes and eat by herself.

The doctor feared the worst the moment Maria realized that she was back in the hospital. And for how long she'd been there! But even though some facts were hard to accept, you couldn't change them no matter how much you wanted to. The most important thing was for her to get well. At least to some extent...

Before she started talking, Maria entered a phase that was difficult for everyone around her. She cried... Very often... Quietly. Uncomfortably. At first she cried almost silently. Then she started crying loudly. With an unbearably sad voice. Most patients either didn't notice, or didn't pay attention to her... But the nurses and orderlies tried, at first very carefully, to persuade her to stop crying. But Maria wouldn't. She cried so often that it seemed like she was

crying non-stop... Day and night. Many from the staff began to lose patience and began to argue with her.

After a while Maria's crying started to sound like singing... More like mourning... It seemed like all the sadness that had accumulated in her soul was pouring out... From time to time she mentioned names through the song... Then she began to call out names by themselves, uncontrollably, while tears flowed from her eyes... When that passed it eased everyone's tension... But they feared that she might be retreating into herself... Fortunately that didn't happen.

At first the doctor hesitated to call her for a doctor's visit. He figured it would be best to wait a while... To find the right moment when she really needed a visit.

Days passed... then weeks...

That morning he asked the nurse to bring her over to his office and he became excited... He wondered if he was doing the right thing.

When Maria came into his office he got out of his chair and went to meet her.

"Hello," he said to her. "It's been a long time since we talked last."

"How long?" she asked looking somewhat confused.

"An eternity!" he replied avoiding giving her an exact answer.

"A year... two?" guessed Maria in a persistent tone of voice.

"Let's say, that long..." he replied.

Maria shook her head. She didn't believe him... But didn't know for sure how long...

"Are you okay now?" asked the doctor more as a statement than asking her a question.

She didn't answer but shook her head for a long time.

“Are we still friends?” he asked.

Maria smiled barely noticeably... That was her first smile since returning to the hospital. It was more like an attempt to smile.

“It’s not easy to find a friend and friends shouldn’t give up on each other so easily,” he said to her, grabbed her by the shoulders with both hands, shook her a bit and said:

“Let’s get you better faster. We have a lot of work to do.”

Maria looked at him with a surprised look.

He then said: “We need to tidy up the library. It’s in a real mess... And there are wonderful books there...”

Maria’s facial expression seemed to change. It became milder...

The doctor then said: “I’m not letting you go anywhere until we sort everything out there, as it should be! Look how many books there are... But no one can find anything.”

What the doctor was saying to Maria sounded like an echo from a very distant dream in her consciousness... Like she didn’t know why he was really there... What he really wanted from her... Did she really need to talk to him?

Then, suddenly, she darted out of his office without saying goodbye.

The doctor sounded the alarm and called on the nurses and orderlies to look for her and follow her. He realized that it had been too early for that talk... He still had to wait... He shouldn’t even tell Elena about this. Let her situation improve, there was a time for talking and for visits... From now on we must be much more careful in what we do.

* * *

After Maria was readmitted to the hospital, due to her relapse, visits from her sisters became rare. Even from Elena. Elena periodically called on the telephone to get progress reports on Maria's condition but the doctor rarely told her anything new. The doctor sensed that Elena was getting more and more upset every time she called. That's why the last time she called and was told that there were some visible signs of improvement, she almost dropped the handset. She wanted to know more... she wanted more details.

"Elena, please let's not rush into any kind of prognosis. I think things will get better in time. Believe me, these are just the first steps. And when you see her relatives tell them not to expect much. With her condition things can change from day to day. Today things can go well and tomorrow they can regress. And please, no visits..." said the doctor.

"But I don't have the patience, precisely because a lot of time has passed..." replied Elena.

"I will let you know when you can come and visit. I will call you myself... You and her sisters. I know you trust me... I'm sorry, I have to go now, I have work to do."

Elena hung up the phone... "When would poor Maria's luck improve... at least a little bit?" Elena asked herself and, before her work day ended, began to carefully think about what she'd say to Maria's mother and sisters when she passed by their house.

When she gave them the news they were happy but also upset...

"It's nice that she has improved at least a little... How much longer must she stay there... It would be nicer if she was at home," they said all talking at the same time. Then they began to calculate how long she had been there.

Elena encouraged them to talk. It gave them hope.

Someone rang the doorbell. Lile went and opened the door. A young man came inside with her. Elena didn't know him.

“This is my friend,” said Lile.

He extended his hand to Elena and said in Serbian “I am Chedomir.” Elena also extended her hand and, while curiously looking at him, figured he wasn’t Macedonian...

After some silence Lile said:

“We work together. He is the director’s driver. He only deals with the directors...” Lile tried to say something more about her friend.

“Not only with directors but also with secretaries,” he replied jokingly.

Soon after that Elena said goodbye and left. Lile went out with her.

“I noticed you looked surprised... I guess you were surprised that my friend wasn’t Macedonian. It’s also surprising that I’m dating a foreigner especially after everything that happened to Maria. My mother is unable to reconcile with that. She’s afraid that the same story will be repeated. I will experience Maria’s fate. And because of the things that are happening in Bosnia... And not only in Bosnia... But, like there is some fate. From the first days when he came to work with us, he and I connected. At least so far. I not only connected with him but also with his entire family. I’m very close with them. They really love me. I believe things will go well for me... I’m sure Maria won’t like this... Fear has dominated her conscience...” said Lile.

“You shouldn’t think like that... Don’t burden yourself... It doesn’t matter where he’s from. Being a good person is what’s important. Maria was unlucky with those people. Not all people are alike. It’s wrong to think that way. Just be sure that your Chedomir is a good man. And that you love each other. That’s the most important thing,” replied Elena.

* * *

It took almost three months before the doctor would allow people to visit Maria. This time both Nade and Lile went with Elena. They

agreed not to say anything about Hellwig or Carl. If Maria asked, they were only allowed to say “from time to time Hellwig wondered if she was in better health. And only through letters... In a few words. Written in some twisted Macedonian language. And that they never replied to those letters...”

In the few sentences they exchanged Maria didn't ask a thing about Carl. She seemed to be afraid to mention Hellwig or Carl. Accordingly their visit ended very quickly. For which they had traveled far. But the most important thing was that they'd seen Maria with their own eyes. And that she was able to talk, at least about some things. It looked like she was going to recover completely. They found that their visit was tiring for Maria. Before leaving Maria asked them how their mother was and to say hello to her... Initially Maria seemed not to want to take the things, especially the food, that they'd brought her... But later, just before they left, she changed her mind.

On the bus, while traveling home, none of them seemed to have any desire to talk. Elena, however, tried to encourage them. She said:

“You'll see how much Maria will surprise us the next time we go to visit her. She's very strong...”

* * *

The doctor scheduled visits and had talks with Maria almost every day. During all these times he avoided talking about her trip to Germany. He figured it would take a long time before she was able to talk about that... If ever.

Maria, however, wanted to clarify some things and started thinking about her most recent events... The last ones being before she returned to the hospital. She, however, never mentioned this to the doctor.

...Carl is very young, she thought... I shouldn't have expected him to recognize me... He had been with Hellwig's other wife for three years. Who knows if she or Hellwig ever told him that he had his own mother and that she was alive? Before their child was born.

And how is a small child expected to understand all that...? Now, however, it's different. He'll soon be nine years old. Surely he already knows how to read and write...

This is where her thoughts were focused.

Her sisters were completely surprised when one day Maria asked them to bring letter sized envelopes and paper to write on. They checked with the doctor and he allowed it. They also got her a pen. She took a long time to write the letter. Many days. When she was done the doctor asked her to whom she'd written. She told him she wrote it to her son in Germany and asked the doctor if he could mail it for her.

"Will he understand Macedonian?" asked the doctor.

"I wrote it in German," she replied.

"Is it okay if you tell me what you wrote? Not that I want to poke my nose everywhere, but anyway. Out of curiosity," asked the doctor.

"Well, I generally wrote to him to explain that he should know that he has a mother... That I was seriously ill because I was very sad at not being with him... And that I'm better now... I also asked him if he could, with help from his father, write me a few sentences... I asked him to tell me if he knew he had a mother... Had they told him...? That's all... Is there something bad that I said...? I don't think so, right?" replied Maria.

"No, there was nothing bad," said the doctor. "And I promise you I will personally mail your letter."

Maria looked him in the eyes with gratitude.

"Even if he doesn't answer you now," the doctor assured her, "you will see that when he grows up he will look for you on his own."

There was a sign of hope on Maria's face...

During every subsequent visit she had with him, after the doctor promised that he would personally mail her letter, Maria seemed to want to ask him - had he sent it? But she didn't dare. The doctor felt that this suspicion would continue until Maria received a reply. If she ever did... He himself was impatient. He was sure that it would be better for Maria's health if her son replied to her... At least a few words... Better than that, it would be a greater joy for her if her child answered her. But not her ex husband.

"Twenty days have passed since the letter was sent," Maria said during a meeting with the doctor.

He understood that this was only a statement of fact but that it also carried a question with it. Having no answer the doctor shrugged his shoulders.

In the meantime, while waiting for a reply to her letter, Maria kept asking herself. "Did Carl's father and stepmother give him the letter? Did he forget her? Did they ever mention her in Carl's presence all these years? And if so did he have feelings for her? Would they allow him to reply to her letter? How does he feel about her now, after so many years away from her? And did his grandparents hide her letter from him?"

* * *

What Maria in fact didn't know was the unenviable situation Hellwig's mother and father found themselves in after he married Marsha. Instead of isolating her, like they had Maria, Marsha began to ignore them. She ignored them to such an extent that, in order to avoid unpleasant encounters with her, they were forced to open a separate entrance to the house... Hellwig was completely under her spell, especially after she gave birth to their son. After that his contact with his mother and father became a real rarity. He was so out of it that he couldn't understand why his parents had to build a special entrance. After all he knew that Marsha only pretended to be offended... On top of that Marsha began to work on Hellwig, suggesting to him that his parents couldn't stand him, Hellwig, their own child... as well as his son.

Because of this new situation, where contact was minimized between Hellwig's family and his parents, Maria's letter to Carl didn't get into the old people's hands. And, as was often the case, coincidences in life bring unpredictable results. The mailman gave Carl the letter. Carl ran into him when he was returning home from school. They met at the front gate. When Carl saw his name on the envelope he became curious and opened it. He read it twice...

Carl decided not to go straight home. There was a small park nearby. He went there. He sat on one of the benches... He cried quietly. Once in a while Marsha and his father had mentioned to him that his mother was living in another country.

"I take care of you because your mother is sick..." Marsha often said to him.

But until he saw the letter, what Marsha had told him about that other mother seemed completely untrue. Like it was part of some story... Marsha had also told him that he would be allowed to see and meet his mother who gave birth to him, if they ever came into contact...

Carl couldn't believe it was true. That his real mother, who has been living in another country for a long time, was sick for so many years... He did remember meeting her when he was very young but thought it was a dream. Like he'd invented her. He didn't believe that she was really there and that he didn't know her. And that he ran away from her. It was so traumatic for him that every time he thought about those moments he wanted to forget them. But sometimes he felt sorry for her even though he didn't believe she was real.

Now this letter shook him up... It proved to him that she was real. He looked at the envelope several times and made sure that the letter was from another country. Exactly the one his father and mother mentioned to him when they told him about his other mother.

Carl thought that it would be best if he didn't tell his mother and father about the letter. If she found out about it... his mother Marsha, might love him even less... And his father? He might leave

them and go to that other mother... That thought frightened Carl and made him shiver... Suddenly he felt a hug from someone standing behind him... It was Marsha.

“Hey, what’re you doing here?! Looking like you’ve been kicked out of the house?” asked Marsha.

Carl tried to quickly hide the letter. But nothing escaped Marsha’s eyes and ears.

By the time Carl was sure he’d managed to put the letter in his pants pocket, it was already in Marsha’s hand.

“So, I see you’re already hiding letters from girls!” said Marsha jokingly.

“As if she were any girl,” thought Carl all in a panic...

Marsha quickly glanced over the envelope again and said:

“And I see here that you found a female abroad?!”

Carl began to blush and then turned yellow and couldn’t speak.

At that point Marsha became very serious. Even angry. She said:

“It’s not possible! You corresponding with your mother and hiding it from me and your father! You ungrateful child...! This is how you pay me for looking after you like you were my own son...? Like I gave birth to you...? Like I’m your real mother? I’ve never treated you any different, about anything, than like you were my own child! Your father will be very happy when he finds out about this! And where your letters come from?! Well, everything is possible... But this...? You doing this? This is something I couldn’t have even dreamt!”

Carl frantically stared at Marsha. She was so angry that he didn’t dare tell her how he’d gotten the letter. That it was his first letter from that woman and that the mailman had given it to him. How was he supposed to remember her, as his mother, when he was only

two years old? This is what they'd told him when he was first taken to Germany? Everything that Marsha said to him was cruel. With the letter in her hand she walked in front of him and he ran behind her crying.

Carl sat alone in his room for almost an hour before he heard the front door of the house open... His father had come home from work. He wanted to run to meet him but was so afraid of Marsha that he didn't dare move.

"Where is Carl? Isn't he back from school?" asked his father anxiously.

"He's here. In his room!" she replied.

Carl could sense there was still anger in her voice. It hadn't passed yet. From the half-open door he saw his mother hand over the letter to his father without saying anything. His father was silent for a long time after he finished reading it. Then Marsha, not being as angry as when she'd spoken to Carl, said:

"Carl has been hiding his correspondence with his mother from us!"

"Didn't you notice that from what she said in the letter this was his first letter from her?" said his father to Marsha in a quite rude tone of voice. "You're so angry you missed all that."

When his father went to his room he found Carl shaking.

"Hello, Carl," he said to him like Carl was an adult. Hellwig was holding the letter in his hand.

"How did you get this letter?" he asked.

"When I came home from school I ran into the mailman at the front gate and he gave it to me. I saw my name on the envelope and I opened it," replied Carl.

Carl's voice trembled so much that he could barely say the words.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” said his father and hugged him to calm him down. “Play for a while then come to dinner.”

“I’m not hungry,” replied Carl quickly. For the moment he was afraid of running into Marsha. Sitting in his room he struggled to hear what they were saying.

“You unnecessarily blamed the child. I was certain that the mailman had accidentally given it to him. Carl is too young to hide such a thing from us. He never believed us when we told him things about Maria... that she was his mother who gave birth to him. It will take years for him to understand these things... The most important thing now is that she’s getting better with her health!”

“You seem to have a guilty conscience,” said Marsha. “Didn’t you read what she said? She got sick because she was missing Carl...”

Carl, who was listening to their conversation, didn’t understand what “a guilty conscience” was... But he knew what “she got sick because she was missing Carl” meant. He also recognized the sentence because it was written in the letter.

“If we have to lay blame, then it’s your fault too. You not only agreed to take Carl from her but you were the one who first suggested it... It was your idea...” replied Hellwig.

“You mean to tell me that you took him from her... because of me...?” asked Marsha.

“That’s right! But I also wanted Carl to grow up with us. I wanted to raise him, not Maria... I thought it would be good for us... To have two sons... Unfortunately it turned out to be tragic for Maria... Or... maybe, you were sorry we took him, and after Philip was born you no longer wanted him...” replied Hellwig.

Marsha didn’t answer him... She didn’t even try to lie to him...

Carl was so confused he couldn’t think at all. He wanted to run to his father... To ask him to explain things to him... To make sense for him the things written in the letter and the conversation he’d

overheard between his father and Marsha. Did he really have another mother, in another country...? And, like she wrote in the letter, she loved and missed him? That she wanted to see him and begged him to write her a letter...? And was it true that she wasn't sick anymore... like she was before? Carl was surprised at how much he remembered from what he'd read in the letter.

“Carl, let's go, come and eat!” he heard his mother's voice say.

“Come Carl, come now, I'm hungry, let's eat” he heard his father say.

Carl wanted to show that he was offended by his mother. He kept quiet and refused to leave his room. Soon his father came over to see what was holding him up. He took Carl by the hand and escorted him to the dinner table. Carl felt a tear running down his cheek. Marsha saw it but pretended she didn't. She was really sorry that she'd gotten angry with the child and that she'd been completely tactless.

When dinner was over they both sat down next to Carl and tried to explain things.

“Now that you're older we can tell you things,” said his father and continued.

“Your mother left me because she no longer wanted to live here in Germany. She took you with her. You were very young then. You were less than a year old. She went back to the country where I met her. To Macedonia. She was very poor and didn't have the means to look after you properly. And that's why I took you from her. To live here with us. With me and Marsha. I thought I would keep you here until she had the means to look after you. At the same time you could grow a little older... But unfortunately your birth mother got sick... Then when she thought she was well she came here to see you. But the same day she had to go back. She wasn't as healthy as she thought,” said Hellwig.

After that Marsha spoke quietly choosing every word carefully. She said: “Don't be afraid. You should be happy. All children have one

mother, so does your brother Philip. But you're lucky, you have two mothers... And if you want, you can write her a letter... If you don't want to you don't have to... You've lived with me many years and I looked after you but she's the mother who gave birth to you..."

After the talk Carl ran outside and sat on the stairs at the front entrance of the house. He thought about what his mother and father had told him and tried to make sense of it. He cried inconsolably. Neither Hellwig nor Marsha went out to get him. They left him alone for awhile. To let him get over it on his own.

A few days later Hellwig noticed Carl writing something secretly. He tried to hide it from him but Hellwig immediately noticed... He felt that Carl needed to... At the same time his father felt sorry for him, that Carl had to deal with such a difficult issue at such a young age. He really wanted to know what the child was writing... but didn't openly interfere. He pretended he didn't see anything. It wasn't until the evening when Carl fell asleep that he decided to take the piece of paper out of his backpack and read it. Carl had written a letter to Maria, who he'd just found out about... that she was his second mother. He'd heard about her from Marsha and his father but he was too young to understand. In the letter he said he was very sorry that she had been so sick and that he was glad that she was well now. At the end of the letter he sent his sincere greetings to her and begged her to send him a photo of herself.

Hellwig didn't want to tell Marsha about Carl's letter to Maria... But told her anyway. He categorically said:

"Don't you dare tell him that you know about his letter? Leave the child alone. Let him find his own way. It's worse if we continue to lead him."

"He needs to learn not to hide things from us," replied Marsha disagreeably.

"Let him have his own world. It's not easy for him," said Hellwig.

* * *

When the letter from Germany, addressed to Maria, arrived at the hospital it was immediately given to the doctor. It was better that way; it gave the doctor a chance to prepare Maria for the surprise. Even more so because they didn't know what was written in it.

The next day the doctor called Maria to his office.

“By the way, how old is Carl?” he asked out of the blue.

Maria loudly began to count the years, the months and even the weeks in front of him.

“What number did you come up with?” asked the doctor.

“Nine and a half,” replied Maria.

“Oh, he's a grown boy!” he said.

The doctor paid attention to every word he said. He felt that everything he said would be very important to her.

Maria followed every word the doctor said. It was as if she sensed that he wanted to say something to her. She kept looking at him straight with eyes wide open... After he smiled she realized it wasn't anything bad.

“Maria, Carl is now in third or fourth grade, right? He certainly already knows how to read and write well,” he said.

Maria grabbed him by his arm and excitedly asked:

“Did Carl write me a letter?!”

“I'll tell you if you promise me that no matter what's written in it, you'll remain firm...” said the doctor.

“I promise!” said Maria resolutely as her face lit up.

The doctor knew the letter was from Carl. The address on the envelope looked like it was written by a child. If what was inside was also written by a child, he believed it couldn't be anything bad.

Maria grabbed the envelope from the doctor's hand. She was so excited she almost accidentally tore it. She then ran to the window and opened it with trembling hands. She began to read... Her tears dripped like raindrops... But she kept the letter away from them... She didn't want to wet it. She then pressed it against her chest and whispered:

"I have my child back... I have my son back... My dear son wrote me a letter... And he wants me to send him a photograph of me... He wants to see his mother... My child has that right... So that he will know me... How else would he know what I look like...?"

Maria was silent for a while... She then went towards the doctor and gave him a gentle hug... Like she wanted to show him how grateful she was... But only her heart knew that for sure.

* * *

Maria's health was visibly improving from one day to the next... Everyone was happy. Almost all the staff who knew her history felt very sorry for her. That's why when her health started to improve they wanted to help her as much as possible.

Her visits with her sisters became more frequent. Elena was there every week with them. At their first opportunity her sisters brought Maria one of the most beautiful photos they had of her at home. So that she could send it to Carl along with the letter she'd written to him.

It took a long time for Carl to reply... The doctor had to convince her that she needed to be very patient. Carl was still a little boy. He needed time to get used to the fact that there, somewhere far away, in a distant country, was his other mother of whom he'd only recently become aware...

And, as it turned out, the doctor was right... A letter from the child did arrive... And in it were many photos... From his school... almost all of them were from his school...

Maria wondered why Marsha and Hellwig had allowed Carl to respond to her letters. What was more interesting was why his grandparents had allowed him to correspond with his mother. On top of that why would they give Carl the letters Maria had sent him? Perhaps they were no longer alive...?

* * *

During the following weeks the doctor gradually, almost without her knowing, put Maria to work maintaining the library... Another sick woman also helped... She was a primary school teacher. There really were a lot of books. They were scattered on all sides of the library. Covered in dust. Maria was happy that she was fulfilling the doctor's wish and the place began to look like a real library with each passing day. The shelves were cleaned, the books dusted and arranged alphabetically.

The library was equipped with a small reading room. With several tables and chairs. Maria began to love this job more and more. She started spending most of her days there. The doctor was very pleased. He saw that Maria was doing the work from her heart. She treated the books with special care, even with love.

Maria began to convince the sick, whose health condition allowed it, to become regular readers in her library. And as they did the numbers grew. Maria had read some of the books during her high school years and felt qualified to recommend them to others. Telling them a little of what the books were about. When the doctor found this out he became even more convinced that Maria should be paid for her work and kept there as a permanent hospital library employee.

One morning he decided to speak to her about it. He said "Maria, I want to suggest something to you but please don't rush to answer."

"You have something for me again?" she asked jokingly.

“Yes. I spoke with the hospital director and if you want a paid job as a librarian in our library you can have it. We will work out your salary if you accept it,” replied the doctor.

While he was telling her this the doctor noticed a confused look on Maria’s face. A mixed expression of surprise and joy. At the same time she wasn’t sure if she understood him correctly.

“Did I get this right? You want to hire me here, as a librarian, in a full-time job?!” she asked.

“That’s right. The date today is the twenty-ninth and you can start work in two days! You will start getting paid from the first day next month!” replied the doctor.

Maria hugged the doctor for a long time and cried with joy...

The doctor had to free himself from her grip...

“And here I thought you wouldn’t want to stay... Of course on weekends you’ll be able to go home and visit your family. Later on you can go home on other days too,” added the doctor.

The next day one of the nurses brought Maria work clothes. She couldn’t believe it. Her first full-time job. At the end of the month, like all hospital staff, she would be paid. The fact that she had to remain in the hospital didn’t bother her at all. On the contrary, she was very happy to be able to help the sick. Through books, through conversation... And she was aware that in that way she too would be able to completely recover... The most important thing was that eventually she would solve her financial situation and would have her own money... She didn’t know how much it would be... but it would be money she’d earned on her own... She would be able to save something... One day she would be able to see Carl... No. She wouldn’t go there anymore... To Germany... She’d invite Carl to visit her and meet his closest relatives... Most of all her... his mother, who’d given birth to him...

When her mother and sisters got the latest news, they didn't know whether to be happy or to worry... Maria would be tied to the hospital for a long time... Maybe she'd stay there forever... Would that be good for her?

Elena didn't hesitate to encourage them. It would be good for Maria to be with the doctor for some time. And with the job he offered her, she wouldn't feel sick... The fact that she would be employed and that she'd receive a salary would give her back the meaning of life... She'd be her own person.

When Maria wrote her next letter to Carl she told him that she had a job as a librarian. She told him that it was one of those things she'd always loved most to do. And lucky for her she'd gotten what she wished for.

Soon she'd be able to invite him over to visit her, his grandmother and aunts during the holidays. She believed that his father would allow him to do that, that is, he would let him go to see her. Nothing was said about the stepmother.

The next day Maria went to the library dressed in her work clothes. She couldn't describe how she felt. Soon the doctor and several of the orderlies came over to see her. One by one all the people who had helped her in her most difficult moments during the many years she was there came over to express their joy and congratulate her.

Maria felt like she was dreaming. After a while all those who came over to wish her well eventually left. She was there alone. It felt weird. She couldn't believe that this was happening to her... Would she succeed in her new job? Would her health improve as a result of it? A while later her colleague came over. She was the woman with whom she would be working in the library. Her presence made her feel secure. Maria picked out two books to read herself. Soon the first readers began to arrive. From her experience Maria knew that the most important thing with hospital patients was to first gain their trust. To communicate with them like you were one of them... She succeeded in that fairly quickly. Maria gained more confidence with each new reader visiting the library. She felt more secure.

People employed by the hospital also started returning to the library. They spent time perusing books. It wasn't difficult to find what they were looking for now that the books were arranged properly. They were also captivated by Maria's smile and her considerate attitude towards them.

* * *

In the last letter Carl wrote to Maria he said his father and Marsha had agreed to let him go to Macedonia during the winter holidays. She just needed to tell him when, on what date exactly that she wanted him to come... When Maria read that she cried with joy... She immediately showed her letter to the doctor.

"I told you it was going to happen... All you needed to do was have a lot of patience," said the doctor.

"I did and somehow I managed to survive," whispered Maria excitedly.

"I can imagine how happy his grandmother and aunts will be when they find out about this!" said the doctor.

Maria thought for a moment and said: "I'm at work every day now... What will it be like when Carl comes to visit me?"

Maria tried to figure out what she would do when Carl came. She didn't want him to see her in this environment.

"Please don't worry Maria. As soon as you find out when Carl is coming and how long he is staying you will get days off. There are quite a few months until then so don't worry..." replied the doctor.

The time before Carl's arrival passed quickly... For Maria it was like a dispersing fog. Since then they'd begun to correspond more and more often. All details were discussed. Every corner of Maria's house was cleaned. His grandmother was most worried about whether he would like the dishes she cooked and the zelniks (pies) she baked.

The only question for Maria now was; how would Carl react to her? How would he treat her? Maybe like a foreigner?! She was aware that since he hadn't seen her since he was two years old, she couldn't expect him to feel like she was his mother... But why make such assumptions? Carl's visit and his stay here would reveal what their relationship would be like.

* * *

On the day of Carl's arrival everyone was awake from the early morning hours. Maria had barely slept. Two or three hours at most... She slept through a nightmare... She dreamt she'd fallen asleep and was late arriving at the airport... When she got there all the passengers had gotten off the plane but Carl wasn't there... She couldn't recognize him...

Dressed in her new dress, which she'd bought with her own money, Maria stood in front of the mirror checking out her hair to make sure it wasn't messed up. Both her sisters and her mother were already dressed. Dinner was baking in the oven. Even the potatoes were peeled and ready to be baked. The aroma of freshly baked zelnik spread through the house.

When Maria heard the car horn outside she ran out, got into the car and was driven to the airport. She thought of the many exciting moments, both good and bad, which she had experienced in her life... Being with her son, after so many years, was causing many feelings to arise in her soul. Her heart began to pound. Would Carl allow her to hug him...? Like a mother...?

When they arrived at the airport Elena gave her a light sedative, even though she knew she was taking medication prescribed by her doctor. When the plane landed, Maria felt like she had stopped breathing.

Carl was the fourth passenger to come out. He walked into the lobby where people greeted the passengers. Maria and Elena noticed there was a piece of paper with large letters sewn onto the boy's jacket. "CARL" was written on it... Maria ran but the more she tried to run the slower her steps were... She figured she mustn't rush... she

mustn't do anything that would cause irritation. There was nothing in his hands. His hands were free. All his things were in his backpack.

"Hello Carl," she said, reaching out to him with open arms. Then she remembered and said hello again but this time in German. She then said:

"Welcome."

The boy looked at her with a smile on his face, shook her hand and then greeted her back in German. Maria didn't hug him like she had planned to. After that Elena and her colleague came over. Maria introduced them to Carl and told him they were her friends who'd come with a car to drive them home.

In the car Maria told him that his grandmother and aunts were waiting for him at home.

Before entering the house Carl greeted his aunts by shaking their hands. But his grandmother decided to kiss him, even though she wasn't supposed to. She looked at everyone with a guilty look on her face. Carl didn't object.

They had some difficulty communicating during the first hour. But that quickly passed. He enjoyed all the dishes his grandmother had cooked for him. He tried to learn Macedonian words by repeating them and asking what they meant. They gave him his own room to sleep in.

When Carl went to bed everyone seemed to be relieved. It wasn't easy to communicate when they didn't speak the same language. Maria had the difficult task of translating for everyone. What they asked and what they answered.

When they were alone in the hallway, Maria, almost it tears, said she couldn't believe that Carl had come... That he was there! That he was sleeping in their home...

The next and following days, Carl himself was surprised at how good he felt being in the home of these four women... He felt like he'd always been here. Intimacy and warmth surrounded him on all sides. He also quickly became friends with the children he met in the nearby houses. They kept calling him to come out and play... He even started going to their houses. Not only the children but also their siblings and even their parents treated him like someone they'd known for a long time. They all talked to him with respect. Even though they spoke to him in Macedonian, he began to understand what they were saying. He soon learned the simpler words he needed to communicate with them.

Similarly, he got along just as well with the children of his relatives, his cousins, etc. He accepted their invitations for him to go to visit them. Carl was happy to go visiting. Everything was somehow different here... Different from Cologne. The people here were strange... They actually made time for him. They talked to him. They didn't mind that he was so young. They joked with him... At times it seemed to him that these people were carefree.

Several times after he'd gone to bed and wasn't yet in a deep sleep, Carl noticed his mother come into his room, with eyes full of love, and look at his face... He felt sorry for her... He didn't know how he could refrain from getting up and giving her a big hug. But he didn't want her to know that he knew what she was doing. He wanted to let that be their secret.

Everything there seemed interesting to Carl. How everything was laid out in his mother's house. How they cooked. How his aunts talked to each other. Of all the people there, he found his grandmother to be the most interesting person... He imagined this grandmother here and the one in Germany sitting together side by side and thought it was very funny... How different they were?! Carl was afraid of his grandmother in Cologne, even though he'd grown up in the same house with her. He felt that she didn't love him. Sometimes it even seemed to him that she hated him... That she would do something bad to him. He never told his father about this and how he felt. He didn't want to upset him. After all, she was his mother.

He was never sure if Marsha loved him or not but he knew she cared for him. Sometimes he seemed to be a burden to her and other times she seemed attached to him. His father felt that Marsha loved both of them equally; Carl and his younger brother. Carl was convinced of that.

Carl's fifteen day stay in Macedonia passed quickly. The visit for Maria was too short... Even Carl didn't feel like leaving... So he asked Maria to take him to the post office so that he could talk to his father and Marsha. Maria didn't think that he would ask them to give him permission to stay longer. When she heard him ask that Maria was afraid Hellwig would think that she was behind this. But his father's answer was categorical. He was to return home as planned! Hellwig told him he would be waiting for him at the airport the next day. Carl was disappointed. At that point Maria embraced him and said:

“Don't worry, it will be easier this way. Your father and Marsha will know that we abided by our agreement. Be assured we will see each other again... During the summer holidays perhaps? We'll convince your father to let you stay for a month.

Carl hugged Maria with both arms. This was the first time he'd hugged her since he'd come here. She hugged him back and gave him a kiss.

“I beg you, please don't cry,” he said looking at her.

Maria quickly wiped away her tears.

“I am happy, that's why I'm crying,” she whispered into his ear and hugged him again.

“I really want to come back again. It's different here from Germany... Here... I met many children in a short time. Even older children. I don't have anyone to hang out with in Germany. We don't visit anyone and nobody visits us... You're also very nice to me! And so is Grandma... And my aunts... And even Elena... She loves me too...” said Carl.

“I bet your father is nice to you...?” said Maria looking a bit anxious.

Maria was afraid that Carl would ask her why she had left Hellwig if he was such a good person. She could hardly explain her reasons. Carl was too young to understand. She had a question for him which she was dying to ask:

“Your grandparents in Germany, are they in good health?”

Carl grimaced a bit like he didn’t want to talk about them and said:

“Yes, they’re in good health...”

He then stopped talking. He didn’t want to tell Maria that he wasn’t very close to them... Or to Marsha.

Carl then said: “My grandparents enter the house from another entrance, other than the one we use. They did this so that we don’t run into them.”

From what she heard, Maria understood a lot. She figured they weren’t on good terms with their new daughter-in-law either. That’s why they had to partition the house and enter from a different entrance... Even the German woman wasn’t good enough for them. Good for her. She fixed them nicely... thought Maria in an evil way.

“Do you love your brother? You must be very happy to have a brother!” said Maria.

“Philip? Yes. He is so cute...” replied Carl.

“Who does your father love more? You or Philip?” asked Maria.

“He loves us both...” replied Carl.

“And Marsha?” she asked.

Carl paused for a moment to think about it.

“Both of us,” he said firmly, wishing that she would stop asking questions like that. He then said “I want to buy a gift for Philip... Will you help me find one?”

“Of course... I will buy it for him,” she said.

“No, I want it to be from me,” Carl was adamant.

Then they went shopping together.

Maria couldn't believe that she was able to part with her son at the airport and accept this as being completely normal. He had been here. He would now go and finish his school year. Then he would come back again... In a few months. They would correspond. Every year he would grow older and understand more.

And that's exactly what happened. Maria's life was filled with joy. She was also happy to work in the library, which soon became a real rehabilitation corner for the sick. Maria wasn't just a librarian. She became the doctor's right hand in returning his patients to normal life.

In addition to offering books, conversation about books and various other topics organized in the reading room, the library soon received a gift. A charity donated a television and an assortment of videos.

Everyone was happy. The doctor and Maria were in charge of the programs that were shown to the patients. Strict control had to be exercised.

Maria found a book in the library that showed how to make a variety of household items. She suggested that doctor organize a workshop for those who wanted to work with their hands. She was also involved in organizing cultural and artistic programs in the hospital.

* * *

Carl's next visit lasted longer. Almost the entire summer vacation. It was impossible to say who was happier - Maria or Carl. They even went for a short stay in a beautiful city with a wonderful lake.

Hellwig had given Carl a lot of money. So they could vacation freely without worrying about expenses. Elena joined them. She wanted to be with them as long as possible, to enjoy Maria's happy days.

That's when Elena confided in Maria and told her that she was going to marry her colleague who had driven them around. For some time Maria had suspected that. She liked him a lot. He was modest and of good character. She wished her best friend a successful marriage and much happiness...

Carl came to see his mother more and more often and stayed with her longer. It often seemed to Marsha that one day Maria would keep him permanently. Marsha felt that even Carl himself might not want to return to her... Carl tried very hard not to bother Marsha. He often helped her with chores. He looked after Philip whom he loved very much. In time Marsha herself became aware that she was so attached to Carl that it wouldn't be easy for her if one day he didn't return from those trips visiting his mother.

"It seems to me that you are very happy going to Skopje. You stay there for a very long time. Will you, one day, remain there permanently?" asked Marsha.

Carl looked at her angrily. He was almost twelve years old. Was she telling him what to do?

"Marsha it's really nice there. The people there are cordial and love to be with each other. Mostly the children," replied Carl.

After that there was silence.

"Both my grandmother and aunts are very nice to me. All my relatives there love me very much," added Carl.

He was silent again for a long time.

"Doesn't your mother want you to remain with her permanently?" asked Marsha.

“No, she wants to keep her word... that I will return as agreed. She doesn't want to upset my father,” replied Carl.

“And you, do you want to stay?” she asked.

“I really want to be with that mother but... I'll never leave my father... or my brother,” replied Carl.

This time Carl was silent for the longest time.

“I don't want to leave you either... you looked after me... for many years,” added Carl.

At that moment Marsha started to have regrets... How could she talk like that to the child...? How young he was when Hellwig had brought him here... She gave him a hug. Carl hugged her back.

Carl started to realize that he would never leave his father's house permanently... He also realized that he could never give up on his mother... Maria...