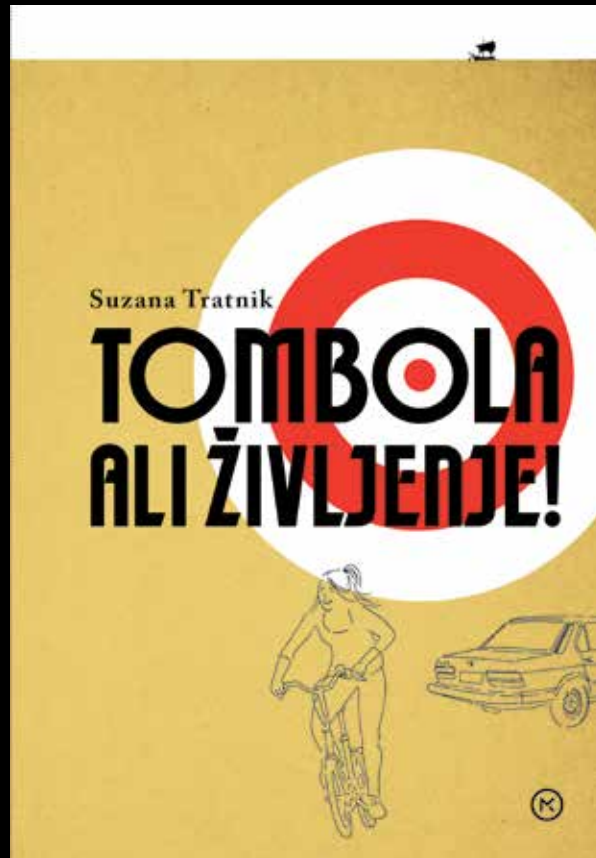


SAMPLE
TRANSLATION



SUZANA TRATNIK

Bingo or life!

PUBLISHED BY: MLADINSKA KNJIGA ZALOŽBA, 2017

TRANSLATED BY: IRENA DUŠA

ORIGINAL TITLE: TOMBOLA ALI ŽIVLJENJE!

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Mia, sixteen, is growing up in a small, dull town, with a mother who would do anything to force her into taking a job. Her father is absent, although he does occasionally appear and fill her head with empty promises and dreams of a better future. Through a period rife with disappointment - over school, choosing an occupation, parents, friend and boyfriends - Mia needs to realize on her own which path to choose for herself and who she can count on in life. Her search for answers, which ultimately leads to surprising discoveries, will also prove a great read for those who left their teenage years behind long ago.

A novel about growing up and searching for one's identity by awarded author Suzana Tratnik received the Blue Bird award in 2016. Blue Bird is awarded by Mladinska knjiga publishing house to yet unpublished Slovenian works of fiction.

2. Chapter: DESIDERIUS ATTILA IN TOWN

Once I did get really lucky! So I know that it's possible and anyone can make it. It was the Austrian lottery. No, you're right, it was German, I got them mixed up. It was my second day of filming, and I said to myself, I'm bored here, it's dull being abroad, if you are all alone. I speak German, but I can't talk with Krauts all the time, what they care about another gastarbeiter. So I went to this modern coffee place, there were loud disco beats playing in there, so you don't have to talk to anyone. A tall chick in thigh high stockings was walking past men, perched at the bar like chicken, offering lottery tickets for the midnight draw. Actually she was more of a fallen woman than a lottery girl, as she tried to make every dude buy a glass of champagne in addition to the lottery ticket. Well, I did, too, I felt somewhat sorry for her, because she was this sorry Bulgarian, just like I was a sorry Yugoslav. Can you imagine, she spent all nights walking up and down the place, offering lottery tickets and champagne and cigarettes and her ass? Life sure doesn't spare anyone - the things I have seen all over Europe, oh, I'd rather not say. I bought a glass of champagne for me and one for that Bulgarian, Hristina was her name, and a ticket, but I told her to hold on to it, maybe she would get lucky and win a coat or a makeup bag. At first she refused to take it, but she gave in eventually and placed the gifted lottery ticket number 5217 in her bra. There were not many other places she could put it, really.

Meanwhile, I sat there, drinking champagne and feeling kind of sad. I was overcome by some sort of nostalgia. A little while later I was singing, too, but more to myself, nobody could hear me over the disco noise anyway, let alone understand what I was singing. I was in the restroom just when the draw came up, I heard something over the speakers, they pronounced the number fünf tausend und zwei ..., though I didn't catch the entire number, I didn't care, really, until they announced the first prize right after, a BMW, the very latest model, straight from the factory, it hadn't been driven yet, not even in Germany. I know I should have hurried back from the toilet and checked the number, to see if it was really »my« ticket, which I generously gave to the fallen woman, the jackass that I am. The problem was I had had so much to drink - I have a very large bladder capacity - it flowed

and it flowed and I couldn't stop peeing, I couldn't put it back in my pants either, not while it was still dripping. When I finally rushed to the stage with the result board, I almost had a heart attack. Number 5217 won the first prize - the latest BMW model, I could buy three cribs in Yugoslavia with it if I wanted to, and if it was mine, of course!

And Hristina? Oh, I never saw her again; she disappeared, taking my jackpot with her. I assume she leaped into that BMW, floored it and sped all the way to Yugoslavia and on to her hometown of Sophia, at least that's where she told me she was from. I did plan to go after her and appealed to her to at least pay me back half of what the car was worth, but I was so busy every year back then, I even went to America, but I never did make it to Bulgaria. Ten years on, it really is too late for an appeal. Let her have it, she must have deserved it. There is nothing worse than selling yourself, that's what I say.

But a man shouldn't share his luck with others just like that. I've been following this principle to this very day.

As Biserka came home from work, she found her daughter sitting in an armchair at the coffee table in the living room, doing a crossword puzzle, not even looking up. She was like that whenever she did something stupid. She could pretend to be so completely engrossed in a book, magazine, music or TV show that she seemed completely deaf for the world around her. Many times she actually was.

Biserka took her shoes off in the hallway and entered the living room which doubled as a bedroom at night, checking her watch in a demonstrative manner. Her daughter no more than murmured hello, eyes still fixed on the magazine.

»Are you home already?« Biserka tried to sound indifferent, naively believing it would make her daughter tell the surely unpleasant truth quicker. Of course, it was a nuisance for the mother to come home from an exhausting day at work just to stumble upon trouble in the living room.

»Did they let you home from the hair salon early or what?«

»Yes,« said Mia, as it was not a lie, whichever way you looked at it.

»What did you do?«

»Nothing much. Sweeping.«

»I see. And what else?«

Biserka went into the kitchen, leaving the door open. »You really didn't do anything else?«

The rattle of plates was heard from the kitchen and Mia's mouth involuntarily started to water. She was hungry, not having eaten the whole day. She spent all of her lunch money on lottery tickets, and she couldn't just come out and say it. She was not a twit, after all. »Mia?«

»What, what do you want?«

»I'm talking to you nicely. Did you learn nothing else in the salon? You were sweeping, that's it?«

»A bit of colouring. I was quite good at it.«

»Will you be learning more on hairdressing in the following days?«

»I don't know. Maybe.« This, too, was only partially a lie.

Biserka brought in sliced bread, salami, cheese and pickles. And some wafers on a smaller plate, saying she wasn't really hungry - hungry enough to eat a horse, as she had a nice lunch at work, but she could do with a bit of a snack. Mia also pretended not to be hungry at all, not that

interested in food, she just eagerly reached for a bite from time to time. She kept staring at the crossword puzzle, occasionally filling in a word.

»Are you going to send this again?«

»What?« asked Mia. She was smart enough to try and avoid the conversation, but her effort was doomed to fail.

»The crossword puzzle, what else! How much does it cost? A stamp like that? And you have to buy the magazine. Well, I guess it's ok, you have to use your brain somehow since you no longer go to school.«

»Oh!« The daughter came alive and shot a provoking look at her mother. »Is this why you sent me to the hair salon? So I can train my brain with a comb in my hand?«

»Stop running your mouth off! You got yourself out of school. You will never come to your senses without me.«

Mia was furious but she wasn't sure if she should stick to her guns or not. Whenever she got upset she could not control herself and quickly spilled her beans. Now she was in danger of blurting out she had caused a scandal in the hair salon. She would exaggerate so much that it would seem she purposely set the countess's hair to orangy red flames, making her bald now. Her mother would find out sooner or later, of course, it was actually strange that she hadn't heard about the incident on her way home from the factory. Therefore it would be better to tell her everything herself and as soon as possible, to secure an advantage of being the first to tell and telling at least the approximation of truth. Looking at it now, it wasn't really her fault. She was only trying to do what her boss told her to. The boss was the one who mixed up the colour in the little bowl. And then she tried to cater to the client's wishes. That was all. If you try to please people twice, you are bound to make a mistake. But who would believe her? She didn't even fully believe herself. So instead of confessing, she went back to the crossword puzzle.

»Well, is Vera going to take you on as her apprentice or not?« her mother kept pushing as she cleared the tables on her way to the kitchen, picking up Mia's socks, arranged the pens and pencils on her desk, swept the dust from the TV set with her palm ... »She's a good woman, you know. She's divorced also; actually she was never really married, so her Klara is a bastard of sorts. Don't forget, this is a nasty word, I didn't come up with it, other people are saying it. Oh - what is this?«

Mia flinched. »What?«

»You were buying lottery tickets again! You abide by absolutely nothing you agree to.«

»I did not!« Mia decisively resisted.

»What is this sticking out of your jacket pocket, then?«

»Oh, I bought those two ages ago. Weeks ago.«

»Did you now?« Biserka kept turning the tickets in her hand. »Why is there today's date printed on them then?«

»Well, how should I know? Why, why?« Mia couldn't think of anything more persuasive. Why did she always have to be interrogated by someone? »Old things sometimes carry today's date, that's just how it is. It's not the first time.«

»Look, look what it says!« Biserka was overcome with laughter, as if she forgot about the date-lie for a moment. »Better luck next time. They should write better luck weeks ago for you,

hahaha. You know, there was once this man, down in my parts, we called him 'My dear'. He wasn't really called that, his name was -«

»Mom, come on, nooooo, I know this story by heart!«

It was no use. Biserka thought this story was always equally funny and educational and she didn't spare anyone, she told it once more right from the beginning. She tried to use it to make Mia come to her senses, to make her stop buying lottery tickets, to stop counting on lottery instead of life. What she really wanted to make her understand with the story was that money should be earned in a different way, through hard work, even if poorly paid, that you shouldn't count on dice and lottery - that was almost as bad as counting on others. It never works out, and in the meantime your life is slipping through your fingers. Finally you end up without your old mended trousers, not only without the lottery ticket. This is why she was curious to know how her daughter did at the salon and what did the other hairdressers say to her - will they let her take her apprenticeship, will she start hairdressing school in the fall?

»Mom ... You know what ... Hey, what is another word for statue? S-C-U-L ... I am missing five letters.«

»Statue, statue, statue, what was it? I've heard of this word starting with S. It's on the tip of my tongue,« Biserka ran with it for a moment. »But did you know how to colour hair? You didn't put in too much developer? Some people are terribly allergic, you know, and if they get their scalp inflamed, they can sue you. Which one did you work on? Some old nag hag?«

»Countess Frida. Retired geography teacher, I was told.«

At that moment the door rang. What if one of those worms from the salon came to tell on her? Mia panicked inexplicably. She tried to comfort herself that surely no-one would come to her house because of one lousy hair job which Vera the mighty boss must have fixed by now, but to no avail. Biserka hurried to see who it was, thinking aloud on her way to the door: »What did you say about the statue? S-C-U-L ... and five more letters?«

She was unlocking the door already. »Scultrice!« she yelled as she laid her eyes on the visitor standing in the hall outside.

»Hm, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine ... The number of letters checks out, but ... I don't know, what is a scultrice anyway?« Mia's voice came from the living room.

Biserka was left speechless, which was a rare occurrence. She returned to the living room perplexed, almost frightened. Meanwhile, the visitor knocked decisively and heavily on the open door and bellowed loudly: »It's a sculpture, my ladies!«

»Yes, that could work ...« Mia looked up and threw the magazine with crossword puzzle to the floor with a broad smile.

»Daddy!« She got up and flung herself into his arms. »When did you come to town?«

»And why didn't you call?« remarked Biserka reproachfully. She was standing in the kitchen door with her hands on her hips - like she was about to serve this guest, although unworthy of it. No longer perplexed, she was sure what she felt for the visitor. But she was distracted by her daughters unwavering love for *such* a father. But *such* a father Mia's Daddy was, a tall man with broad shoulders, muscular, well-built arms, flat stomach, strong neck and unbelievably thick brown hair, always oiled to the point of becoming almost pitch-black, combed back to the nape

à la Elvis Presley. He was wearing his customary working boots from England, they looked like army boots and were something nobody had ever seen around here, Levi's with low set pockets and a checked shirt with sleeves rolled all the way up to his bulging biceps. A mermaid with long hair, draped around her naked breasts and falling mid way down a fin which stood in for legs was tattooed on the inside of his left arm. It was a memory Mia had had since early childhood. On his right forearm was a three-line tattoo marking his time in the army: »YNA Belgrade 9/12 1958 – 4/8 1960« – because he saw our Marshall with his own eyes while serving, he stood just a meter from him as he greeted the soldiers standing in line. As he shook his hand, he realized what a great man he was. He decided that same day to get the tattoo, which he regarded as his personal and national pride.

However, this did not put a stop to tattoo shenanigans, as Biserka was prone to point out whenever she tried to bring Mia and potential by-standing listeners to their senses with a story on Mydear's ditched pants with a lottery ticket in the pocket. No, that was not the last of his stupidities, this man, once her husband, had a giant black rose tattooed on his upper back and part of his right shoulder blade. Because he had seen it in some American movie. They watched it together in an open air cinema when they were in Belgrade in 1962. Biserka was already pregnant while her silly husband contemplated a tattoo of a rose. But everything ended up the way it was meant to end up in this world: next year she had to take on a baby and he got his beautiful black rose.

Daddy's name was Desiderius Attila Vodopivec. The mother insisted that daddy's name was not quite accurate, as he supposedly added the Attila part later or simply made it up – mum never entirely believed daddy's stories, so she herself wasn't to be believed entirely.

After her divorce she started using her maiden name Mrkić again, and she was indeed many times as murky and sullen as a storm cloud. Mia, on the other hand, kept proudly using the surname Vodopivec. Her daddy told her it was a very good surname as it protected you from becoming an alcoholic. Her mother thought this explanation completely far-fetched, as she believed there were hundreds of other bad habits beside alcohol for a person to fall into, and Desiderius Attila proved immune to less than a fifth of those. This man literally lived on foolish habits, risks and dangers.

What else can one expect from a husband and father who makes his living as a stuntman in the movies, always wandering around foreign countries, never holding a steady job, having no insurance and no guarantee of a pension plan? Who will support him in his old age? Certainly not Yugoslavia or Biserka Mrkić! She has enough members of the Vodopivec family on her shoulders – is this what she came to Slovenia for? Surely not, she thought, she had always been naive and honest, not to mention modest, as she grew up in a poor settlement with no road to speak of, no water or electricity, but with a hefty load of faith in fellow humans, socialism and solidarity. She came to the most northern of the republics only to have her husband flee from her and her baby two years later, to Belgium, France, Germany ... wherever. She always figured he might as well wander around his homeland, his own country, staying closer to his family, but no ...

And her poor naive daughter Mia, who was only sixteen and a half, didn't yet understand that this wonderful man neglected her also – which her mom told her in fits of rage, gladly and often. She practically threw it at her. But Mia wouldn't have any of it. When she was a child, she thought

her daddy the handsomest and strongest. She was convinced there isn't a force on earth which could beat and break him! When she was home with him, she was safe. She preferred not to recall how rarely this occurred, and because of her mother she refused to recall correctly. She wanted to have her own past with her daddy. She wanted to have memories of him, of the hero who ate a jar of the hottest chilli peppers to win a bet, without uttering a sound, although he did belch for two days after that. Little Mia found it funny, Biserka considerably less so. He tried to calm her down, telling her he won 500 dinars from the bet with the hot chilli peppers and that the boys down the pub would collect even more next time, when they prepared a bowl of live earthworms on a rainy day for him to bite in half.

No, his wife thought it extremely inappropriate that her husband and the father of her child should refuse a steady job with such vigour, despite him being a trained lathe operator. He preferred to earn his money by entering suspicious, immature bets. He pulled a viper from a rocky hole with his bare hands, on a river beach full of bathers who collected money for »a real hero, not a chicken«, as he used to brag afterwards.

She was always weary of the money her husband unexpectedly earned by doing a breakneck dive head-first from a bridge into a shallow stream, by foolishly jumping over a fence keeping two growling German shepherds, which he needed to respectively calm and pet and then leave the enclosure completely unharmed. By lying in between railroad tracks while a long freight train ran over him, and in addition found a way to drink an entire bottle of wine before the train left ... He didn't fear devilries on a bicycle, motorbike, in a car. He was temporarily employed as a motorbike driver in a German TV series, but he still felt no need to get a permanent job and settle down. He kept coming back and leaving. He worked in movies, TV series, night clubs, he played cards, juggle knives and his life, and not only his at that. What kind of a husband is a man who lives off danger? And worse, what kind of a father?

The best! Desiderius Attila was the daddy who used his few-day-visit home to take Mia to the dentist for an appointment where her entire school class was present. The moment they entered the waiting room, her annoying classmate Martin tripped her for fun, and her daddy grabbed him by the collar, lifted him half a meter up in the air like an irritable dog and hissed into his face: »You better watch it, brat! You don't want to have anything to do with me or my Mia!« Then he put him down like a forgotten cur.

This was her daddy who came to her rescue and protected her from aggressive idiots. But he began coming less often, his visits became less and less frequent, his real life was somewhere else, while the annoying Martins and Martinas in her life multiplied. Biserka, on the contrary, was more and more convinced that the most annoying and worst Martin in her life just happened to be her husband.

»Look through the window! Do you see something red parked down there?« Desiderius Attila was beside himself with enthusiasm, because he got another new old BMW. Mia rushed to the window and Biserka turned away. Reluctantly, she asked him if he would like some coffee, and he nodded eagerly.

»I'm taking you on a trip tomorrow!«

»We don't have time for that, be serious,« grumbled Biserka from the kitchen. »You've only just arrived and you are already planning running around on trips! Some of us have a job to go to.«

»But Mia no longer attends school regularly, does she? I'm taking her to the amusement park, then! We will go to Austria for a cup of tea and a sandwich, to a disco, whatever she wants!«

Biserka rattled the coffee cups. »Mia just started her internship. She is going to be a hairdresser.« She said this in a defiantly proud tone, as if she wanted to brag about her influence trumping his, which was nonexistent. There was still some justice in this world.

»A hairdresser, *my* Mia?« Desiderius Attila sounded so disappointed, as if he wanted to say: *This is why I left her here, so you could make her into nothing more than a hairdresser?*

»Well, she needs to have a profession,« said Biserka with exaggerated calmness so that it was clear to the three of them that something was about to explode – of course it was clear, they used to be a family and this fact was forever imprinted in their memory and bones. »Today was her first day at the hair salon. She coloured some hair and she did well! When do you start tomorrow, Mia? In the morning?«

»I'm not going back there, mom.« Mia miraculously found her courage now her dear daddy was here to protect her.

When he left for Germany years ago she did sense that she was left with no one to protect her and that she would have to rely on herself from then on. She daydreamed about putting kids who shoved her in school hallways in their places, those who called her names and tripped her out of sheer wantonness, and because she was not yet old enough to be groped - bottom line, she had to constantly defend herself either way.

The girls were happy to reject her, chuckle in her face during lessons if she wasn't dressed properly, which she for some weird reason never was, the difference being that now as a teenager she did this on purpose.

In elementary school, she was never invited to afternoon girls' parties with cakes and coke, in the back garden of one or the other nerdy girl she found boring anyway. To resemble grown-up women as closely as possible, these girls liked to dress in grown-up clothes, and most of all they liked to gossip, especially when it came to Mia and Neva. Who knew why the two of them were selected as targets? Because they were quiet, introverted, because they came from weird families?

Mia was most certainly upset to be compared with Neva, which she, too, found somehow dejected and having no taste in clothes. Her long blond hair was forever kept in a bun on the nape of her neck. In addition, she was bad at writing, she struggled with reading and, when asked a question, never found the words to answer. She burst into tears every time she got a bad grade, even though she got them all the time and could get used to it by then, just like Janez got used to sitting in the bench at the back of the classroom. It was rumoured he only cried at the end of each school year, when he found out that he flunked again.

Neva's condition and her foggy image - she dragged herself through hallways and streets like fog - must have had something to do with her home situation, although at that time Mia was not old enough to put the two together. She only heard about Neva's father grabbing her mother by the hair and dragging her around the house and into the street. She wasn't sure of the message people were trying to get across: was there something terribly wrong with the mother, who had to

be dragged over the floor like an old, tattered ragdoll, used for rough play, or was there something wrong with the father who chose to play such a dangerous game with a grown up woman. In any case, it was difficult to live a normal life and study and be popular when your folks used their spare time for hair grabbing, even doing it in front of the house, as if they wanted the whole street, the whole town with every shitty store and bar in it to see and know what was going on.

Neva's hair was always pulled back in a strict bun. Maybe she was afraid people would pull her long locks at school. Her older sister Asja had short hair. Her skirts and dresses were also too short, because she was a tall beanpole. She felt constantly ashamed of her outgrown clothes, until she became the first to be rid of elementary school. When the two sisters left school together and walked home, the nerdy girls followed at a short distance and laughed at them loudly - whatever the reason.

But Mia didn't want to be like Neva, who put up with everything and had »Kick me while I'm down« written all over her forehead. Mia no longer daydreamed and envisioned herself picking the annoying kids up by the collar one by one and throwing them to the ground like worn-out clown dolls, soon she began doing it for real. She kept getting stronger, even she didn't know how and why, she loved to work out, especially in artistic gymnastics. She liked every ball game, excelled in gymnastics and, of course, dreamt of becoming a famous movie stuntwoman, just like her daddy. The only one in Yugoslavia and maybe even Europe and maybe even the whole world. She would travel around Germany and America and have coffee with Don Johnson at the shoot in Los Angeles - just like her exceptional daddy. Even the Marshal would decorate her as a woman with special achievements.

But then Biserka got summoned to school, they said that ever since the divorce her daughter had been exhibiting signs of problem behaviour. Not to judge, many people go through this, nowadays, a divorce is no longer sorrow and shame. You probably just work too much, well, you would have to, labour away, and the girl is probably left to her own devices even more often. Do you ever talk to her, does anyone talk to her? The girl is ten, that's not little. We adults often mis-evaluate kids and falsely believe they are too young to have a discussion. Children understand everything, most of all what we refrain from saying or giving ... They absorb it like mushrooms and carry deep wounds in their hearts and souls as they are growing up ...

The school social worker warned Biserka in this fond way and the ears of the single mother burned with shame and fury. She was already pondering ways to reprimand her impossible daughter, who did shit like this to her, who brought on her the scolding of this spoiled broad in a tweed suit. Wasn't slaving day in and day out for her daughter enough, backstitching on that fucking sewing machine in the factory?! When the social worker added that the two most problematic kids were indeed Mia and Janez, one of the young Romani boys, Biserka couldn't take any more. She got up so fast that the chair fell over with a thud and said she was going straight home to handle this. And that it would never happen again. So they should *not* call her to come here ever again.

The social worker really got her worked up, so when she came home, she got it all out on Mia. To start the conversation, she slapped her across the face, a move well understood even by children aged five or less. She asked if Janez the Romani was her accomplice now, obviously. When Mia said he came from a housing development just outside the town and that was why nobody would

hang out with him, so he sat by himself, Biserka lost it. Was her daughter about to hang out with Gypsies now? Mia shouted back that this was no way to talk about members of this ethnic minority, upon which Biserka got up to her feet, put her hands on her hips and soared above her like a poplar tree: »You little brat, you think you can mouth off about my language like this? I've been schooled enough by that social worker!«

From then on, Mia had to be careful about her reactions to provocations from girls and tripping from boys. But her wild girl reputation was well set by then. She suffered Janez's fate and nobody touched her or talked to her till the last day of elementary school. Occasionally somebody would meekly ask her to help with a dislodged bike chain. This she knew how to do and she was always happy to help bicycles - not people. And this was the only and real reason why her mother was never summoned to school again.

Now sixteen, she once again felt safe by her daddy. She felt relief as she explained how she blew her career as a hairdresser.

»Mia, a hairdresser? It's never going to happen! Bye, bye, baby!« she stressed.

»Say that again? What just came out of your mouth?« Biserka set three cups of black coffee on the table, put her hands on her hips and tried to soar into a poplar. But it no longer worked, although she was quite a tall woman, one meter seventy-two was not at all short, Mia had outgrown her.

When she had worked as a young woman in a bakery in Serbia, she had met Svetozar, an athlete, at a ball in the YNA hall. He said she could play basketball, tall and stocky as she was. Biserka thought it funny as she couldn't see herself shooting hoops. But whenever her life took a wrong turn, she imagined Svetozar would magically appear at the ball and whisk her away to the women's basketball team, to Belgrade and the world.

If she had been an athlete, she wouldn't have gone on that unionist trip to Dalmatia where she met a Slovenian called Desiderius, who was there on a unionist trip of young lathe operators. She fell in love with him like it was the last time in her life. In the fall she boarded a train and slowly arrived to a small town in Slovenia. If she had been a star athlete, she would maybe have lived in Prague, Moscow, Berlin or Paris. Biserka, who missed out on her career in basketball, tried to grow tower over Mia, even though she was 5 centimetres taller than her already.

»I'm not working in the salon any more, mum,« said the daughter completely expressionless, although there was a tangible steel inexorability in her voice. »I made a mess of that colouring job and they don't want me anymore. I don't regret it. It's not for me.«

»Tomorrow -« Biserka lifted her index finger.

»No, mum, I'm not going back tomorrow. I don't want to clean my mess, don't you get it? I *don't want* to go there again.«

»Our kid made it nice and clear to you that she isn't going back! She will not let some salon broads fuck with her,« confirmed her daddy.

Biserka quietly retired to the kitchen, she didn't even touch her coffee. Mia knew that she defeated her in front of Desiderius Attila, flippant and incapable of normal living. She needed his protection, but the thought that Biserka was most hurt by Desiderius's mention of »our kid« never entered her mind. It reminded her of the times when this life belonged to the two of them, the three of them, and now they were all on their own.

The aimless walk Mia and her daddy took to get away from Biserka brought them to a playground. They sat on the roundabout, Mia slowly turning the wheel so they spun like two dreamers on the same bike.

»Do you remember how I used to bring you to this playground when you were little, little Mia?«

She shrugged as if she didn't care, but the truth was she didn't remember that.

»Tell me, do you have a boyfriend?«

Mia kept her gaze on the wheel, she just put a bit more vigour in her spin. Such questions always come from people who don't know you and don't know what to talk to you about.

»Wow!« cried out her daddy. »Careful that my daughter doesn't throw me from my seat.«

He was laughing. She felt he was still waiting for an answer.

»Look over there!« she suddenly said and pointed to the side of the playground. »A bike. An abandoned pony bike. I bet you can't still drive it standing up and jumping over the stairs - by the clinic.«

It was almost too easy. Her daddy never turned down a dare, he never backed from danger. He was up on his feet, made a few steps across the street and picked up the old bicycle. He checked the tires, sat on it and darted towards the platform in front of the local clinic with the swiftness of a schoolboy.

»Come now, kid, come watch me!«

Mia ran after him across the street and sat down on the stairs leading to the platform. She watched him as he got accustomed to the bike, he checked the brakes and the steering, and then suddenly started pedalling really fast in the opposite direction, he raced around the playground and headed back toward the clinic. During the drive he stood up, skilfully put first one and then the other knee on the seat and then stood on it so it looked like he was lying on the bicycle, holding the handlebar with his hands. The bicycle continued to race on with undiminished speed, nearing the staircase as if it went berserk. Mia stood up and instinctively stepped aside while her daddy the superman sailed over the stairs on his flying bike, screaming like a cowboy on his horse: »Yiiiiipiiiiii!«

Mia covered her mouth as the bicycle landed on the platform and her daddy simply jumped with both feet, descended to the floor, mounted the bike astride and stopped.

»Bravo, bravo!« Mia applauded and shouted.

»I will do it again, acrobatic style!« announced her daddy while circling the platform on the pony bike, no hands. He took off his turtleneck and threw it towards Mia, who was happy to pick it up. He propelled himself up the stairs, effortlessly, and pedalled furiously once towards the playground again. He was on his personal trip now, as his bar buddies would say. For an instant she understood what Biserka meant when she clattered on about some people seeing nothing but themselves ...

He was back again. World renowned stuntman in all his glory was also her daddy and she was so proud of him, more than she could ever be of herself. At least as far as physical abilities. Once again he stood steadfast on the bike, though on the pedals this time, and ascended into the air

with the bicycle. He practically flew across the stairs, turned and did a summersault in the air, before landing on the platform! What an acrobatic, hotshot and crazy turn! A moment before the bike hit the ground hard from a greater height than before, her daddy must have realized that the old bike could not withstand such a hard fall, so he jumped off as if it was a trampoline. He must have had tons of experience to make such a quick and accurate choice. The bike thundered apart upon impact, the handlebar coiled as if made of clay, the rear wheel crinkled completely, the chain came off, rattled over the stone ground and broke in several places. But it was fun. Their own stolen fun!

Mia remembered an afternoon a long time ago, when the three of them, Biserka, Desiderius Attila and herself, rambled around the town. She was in elementary then. It had to be on a weekend, because her parents weren't at work, Biserka wasn't sewing and Desiderius wasn't painting the other people's apartments, which was what he was doing at the time, and she wasn't in school. The weather was spring warm, she vividly remembered. They had lunch in an inn, cevapi with loads of onion, ajvar and mustard, though Biserka never cared much for mustard, being a true Serbian she felt cevapi should not be dipped in diarrhoea before one puts them in one's mouth.

After lunch they went to a workshop or someone's apartment, maybe her daddy was looking for a job again, or maybe he was owed wages, who knew, but he got or took a large men's bicycle. Mia remembered his enthusiasm, as he told Biserka: »Look, it's almost like new! I built and welded it from old parts.« And the wife said it was really well put together and the daughter didn't understand the put together part. Desiderius Attila, who had always been very deft and even more vivacious, suggested the three of them should ride the bicycle together, it would be silly to walk on foot next to a bike. He immediately got on it, Mia stepped onto the cargo rack and gripped her daddy by the shoulders, while Biserka stepped on the rack behind her and also held on to his shoulders.

Mia liked it a lot, because it was forbidden to ride like this. In school and elsewhere, children were constantly told there were not many things more mischievous and dangerous than standing on the back of a bicycle, because if you did that, you fell under a car from high up. Let alone two people standing on the cargo rack!

But on that Saturday afternoon, the bike was ridden and steered by the most skilful daddy of them all. He drove fast, faster and faster, causing more and more laughter and screams behind his back. Never again was Biserka as playful in Mia's memory, but at that moment they were both in a forbidden situation, so everything was possible. In that moment, the three of them were really well put together.

Reminiscing on her dearest memory she realized for the first time, that time existed for her parents, too. Not only she was then still a child and now she was not one anymore. Her parents were really young then, and now she felt they were abnormally old. Back then on the bike, she must have been around eight, her mother around thirty and her daddy maybe thirty-five. It was 1970 or 1971. Nothing much was going on in those years, so it was hard to understand why the three of them were so young and so happy.

But then her daddy tried to perform a small jump over a road bump. It was not easy, because it was a macadam road. In the middle of the jump, the front wheel slid sideways and suddenly threw

them all up in the air, as if in slow-motion, as if they were falling into the open sky, and the next moment it hit the hard ground. Mia was convinced they hovered before they fell ... Her daddy managed to hold the bicycle up, even in the air he squeezed it with his knees like a wild, yet thoroughbred horse you shouldn't waste by riding it too hard or too reckless, and finally, mother and daughter tumbled backwards. It was nothing terrible because they had stopped prior to that and the road was empty. Biserka fell on her behind and little Mia landed in her lap. As they were falling, mother tried to catch a hold of daddy's shoulders, but grabbed Mia's blouse instead. She stretched it violently during the fall and the buttons tore off and flew through the air. It was so funny!

Biserka and Mia got up, crying and sobbing with uproarious laughter while they were searching for lost buttons on the ground. Mia remembered having tears in her eyes, and she found that wonderful, because she didn't know you could really cry with laughter before. She had thought the grown-ups were making this up or that »crying with laughter« was something only found in books. Back then, they were all crying with laughter, but they didn't tell anyone about it, because they would be scolded, all three of them – they were still young enough for scolding. What stolen fun!

But not for long, soon a low window opened, with glass painted white, so the passersby were safe from the menacing intimacy of a doctor's office. A strict female voice rolled over the platform and hit the wall of the clinic on the other side.

»What is going on here? What is this hooliganism?«

The platform was surrounded on three sides by low buildings hosting doctors' offices, creating almost an atrium and making sounds echo even louder. Mia was calm. Her daddy could never be a hooligan, it wasn't a word used for grown-ups. They both laughed. Her daddy calmly stepped towards Mia, took his turtleneck from her as if to demonstrate he was a grown man, after all, and not to be scolded no matter what the shenanigans.

»A touch of acrobatics, ma'am,« he said with a slight bow. He was handsome and smiling and Mia had always thought every woman fell for him immediately. »We will pick up after ourselves. We were practicing for a film stunt! I'm her daddy!«

When he said »her daddy«, he knocked on his chest and Mia swelled with pride. A woman of around thirty with a tightly combed ponytail, coiled into a spiral at the neck, was eyeing them suspiciously. It was only then Mia noticed that she was not wearing a white robe and that she ...

»Oh my God, is it really you? Mia, right? I thought you moved to Germany, I haven't seen you for so long! What are you doing?«

»It's ... it's not even our bike,« she stammered confusedly.

»Of course it is, only now it's broken, so it isn't any more, that's what she meant. Hahaha!« Desiderius Attila was quick to correct her.

The woman was not about to be dismissed like that, although she did calm down some.

»You don't do such things in front of the clinic, with ill people coming here, and tiny patients, children. They really don't need to look at this kind of rampage. Health institutions are not suited for performances. – But how are you doing, Mia? Have you decided on what to study yet? You've never come to see me again,« the woman chattered, almost relaxed, then adding in a deeper voice, which once again rolled over the platform: »And you well know that you should.«

Mia was becoming nervous. She was once again caught in a situation where she had to defend herself efficiently and hide things from people. She thought about lighting a cigarette, because daddy let her do that, but she somehow knew this would only make the predicament worse.

»I will go to hairdressing school now. I mean, I tried it, but I'm not sure yet if it's the right thing for me ... It probably isn't.«

»Forgive me – so you are her father? She's told me so much about you. You are an athlete, right?«

A chill went down Mia's spine. This was not a conversation she wanted to have. »Shall we go, daddy? We should go back for lunch.«

The thing with lunch was a lie, but her daddy gladly agreed. Mia took a quick farewell from the woman with the strict voice and tightly coiled hair, and she nodded goodbye to each one of them separately. They hurried away without cleaning the mess they made with the bike.

»Are you hungry?« Desiderius Attila asked her. They were walking in silence back to the town centre for a while now. Mia wanted to forget the meeting with the woman in the window so badly, but she ran out of words to distract her daddy with. She nodded eagerly.

They sat in the restaurant of Paviljon hotel and ordered lunch, which was always the best and the cheapest there. Daddy said there was no way you could get this kind of lunch for this kind of money in Germany. Or in Europe, for that matter. Maybe in Belgrade or Leningrad. Besides they had the best soup with bread dumplings, the best keiserschmarrn, and lettuce and poppy seed cake were always delicious.

»So ...« her daddy cleared his throat with his cheeks full of cake and poppy seed in his teeth. »Who was that lady?«

»Which lady, daddy?« Mia felt her shoulders shrink for a centimetre or two. She hated it terribly when this happened.

»The one which screamed at us for making all the racket with that old banger of a bike ...«

»Oh, of course,« Mia was thinking fast. She sipped some juice and said: »That old banger of a bike. Missis Mara, my dentist!

»Really? Why wasn't she dressed in white?«

»I don't know, maybe she ended her shift already. Or maybe her white robe was being washed.«

»And why does Mara want you to come back?« This was not the daddy she was used to, so persistent, hardly concealing the educational tone in his voice and so ... fatherly, parent-like, it almost made you not want to hang out with him.

»I don't know, tooth decay, probably. I really should go ...«

This was even worse than talking about boys. When she was eight and she fell off the bicycle with her mum, who inadvertently ripped her blouse, it was so funny, crying out loud funny, all three of them stumped their feet with laughter and back then nobody asked anybody if they had a boyfriend ...

Hotel Paviljon was the place daddy slept in for the last five years during his short visits home, although you can't call a five star hotel home, not really, according to Biserka's humble opinion – not that Paviljon was a five star hotel. It had three stars, although some claimed there was a fourth star, but somebody had knocked it off the façade. At first, Mia was sad that her daddy preferred to stay in a hotel instead of with her and her mum, but now she thought it quite excellent, something special, and she liked to brag to her peers about her daddy who worked abroad in the movie

industry, so he could stay at hotels whenever he wanted, just like other movie actors and movie stars and directors. This was nothing unusual for movie people. They were always cared for by others, who served them, cleaned, washed and ironed for them.

»Come,« said her daddy, »let's walk about town a little. I still have time.«

»And what will you do later?«

»I am meeting Stanko in the evening. Do you remember Stanko?«

Mia shook her head no. Often she knew nothing of the people her daddy was friend with. Maybe he forgot she had been too young to remember faces properly. And many times she just wasn't part of his life. At least a far smaller part than he obviously believed ...

»Never mind. Well, I'm meeting him because he's interested in the car I came here with.«

»What do you mean? Is it really new? Isn't it yours? Are you going to sell it?«

»Why wouldn't I help my friend to a new, German car, since I'm already here? I can buy myself another one anytime, used or new, because I don't live in bloody communism.«

Her daddy said this with such disgust, it felt like he couldn't care less that Mia and her mum lived in that very same communism. They simply had no other choice, although Biserka never complained over the political system or the Marshal, she just said that while political systems may have been bad, the people who were quick to sell their asses to them were even worse.

When they finished dessert, her daddy wiped his mouth and shrugged, as if to say he had no power over people not understanding his great fondness for his friends who desired cars made by prestigious companies in the west. Mia didn't know what, of anything, to make of it, but the words tuft-hunter and braggart came to mind. Those were the words her mum used to describe her daddy when she was particularly upset with him – well, maybe not so much with him than with her own life spent on him.

There was a small marketplace behind the hotel and they walked there. Immediately it appeared something was going on, as the place was crowded with people in the early afternoon. Her daddy said it was the fair organized at the beginning of spring. Mia nodded, she knew nothing about such things. She did know however, that any public meeting place, bingo, fair, amusement park, assembly or party there were ample opportunities to chase your luck.

Luck mostly stood for money. Like her daddy's used car, which became a new German vehicle the moment he drove it over the Yugoslavian border, and was converted into money just a short while later.

She and her daddy first tried their luck with throwing hoops around colourful pins in order to win one of the plush animals in different sizes, which were promised as rewards. Neither of them was particularly good at it, but at least they were having fun. Mia picked the nearest pin as her target, but the constant fast movements proved her tactics a failure. Then Desiderius Attila took the hoops into his own hands, determined to »catch something for his kid«, as he gently put it. He bought five large hoops and nodded to the saleswoman tending the stand. She seemed extremely serious and morose, as if she was about to scold all the clients stopping at her station and spending their money on foolish things she incidentally made a living from. Without breaking a smile, the saleswoman turned the lever of the mechanism, which sent pins in circles, at times stopped for a moment, tricking the hoop thrower, and then unexpectedly switched directions. It always seemed so simple, yet unattainable, if the thrower was you.

Her daddy made it, because he was so dexterous, nobody was as daft as him, certainly not anyone from this town. He caught a white pin with one of the hoops and won a white plush rabbit. Not too big, a middle-sized one, just the right size you could fix it on your backpack, or hang it from your belt or even a bunch of keys. They both clapped their hands in joy over the unexpected result.

»Whot lock! This verree nice plyushee!« the saleswoman tried to absorb some niceness, as she stuffed the white loot into an ugly paper bag and handing it over to the lucky winner. Judging from her accent, she was probably Hungarian, maybe it was her poor command of Slovenian language that made her retreat into moodiness, so she could keep communication to a minimum. There was nothing to communicate anyway. You pay, you throw, you lose, and repeat the process several times, until you leave. Unless you were Mia's daddy.

»Would you like to try again?« he asked her playfully.

»I don't know, I'm not too good with the pins ...«

»What are you talking about? When you were little, we used to go to the bowling alley and you loved to throw the ball with both of your hands, sometimes you even hit something.«

»Did I?«

»And when the pins got all tangled up, you ran down the alley to fix them, your pony tail fluttered behind you as you went.«

Mia wrinkled her forehead and furrowed her brows. »But daddy, I didn't wear a pony tail when I was little. Mum wouldn't let me grow my hair long.«

Without saying a word, her daddy took her by the arm and led her to lottery tickets with lower monetary prizes, common at such fairs, so they could be paid out to fast luck hunters and huntresses on the spot.

»But I'm not allowed to ...« Mia was unsure. Even though the fact she wasn't allowed to never really held her back.

»Because you're still a minor. I'll buy the ticket, you just choose one!«

»I am not supposed to, daddy. Mum doesn't like me even near tickets and the lottery ...«

»She doesn't like what? I have trouble hearing.«

He winked at her. Mia smiled with relief at their conspiracy.

By then, he had already paid for the ticket, a yellow one. You could choose among red, green, and yellow. The red tickets had more winners, but the amounts were lower, mostly all you got was another red ticket. The green were more promising, the winnings were large enough to go to Austria and buy a pair of jeans, the ones made from real denim. The yellow prizes were much higher, enough to get a new sport bicycle. The problem was, very few yellow tickets were winners. Mia got a playful nudge in the ribs from her daddy.

»Daddy, you know that woman in the window ...«

»Which window?« He didn't pay much attention to past events, even those that happened earlier in the day, so this might just be a chance to tell him at least something. By Saturday, when they were going to meet again, he would have already processed it and it would be easier to talk over lunch or wherever. She should have told him something about herself, before they got completely lost in the holes of space and time driving them apart, they could gape open any minute. She had to tell someone.

»Today, in front of the clinic. That woman is a psychologist.«

He looked at her as though he understood completely, only it wasn't the right time to talk about this now. This was enough for her. He also looked at her as if he had stopped for a moment and tried to swiftly think of where to go from here – if anywhere. And finally he broke into the broadest possible grin, his cheeks dimpled, another thing they had in common.

»Now spit on your hands for good luck, kid!«

She smiled, let an abundant spit land on her left palm – which was nothing special, all the gamblers there were doing it – loudly rubbed her hands together to smear the spit and let it dry off, went through the yellow tickets and picked one out.

»Did you choose? OK! Let's see!« her daddy said and reached impatiently for the ticket. Then he steadied himself and carefully, almost ritualistically pulled open the yellow piece of paper, which was folded twice to form a square and lightly glued at the edges. When he unfolded it, they both held their breath.

500 DINARS!

It really said that! They screamed, jumped up in the air, high-fived, spread their arms and looked at the sky, as if they were thanking the creation and the universe for this prize, already safely put away among fresh 10 dinar banknotes. Her daddy kissed the envelope he was handing at the back of the stall. Mia kissed it, too. They repeated this a few times on their slow way back to the hotel.

»When are we starting on Saturday?« Mia asked with in a cheery voice. »We don't have to go to the amusement park, it's so boring there, I get fed up with it after half an hour.«

»Probably ... I will come over after lunch.«

They arrived to the hotel entrance and hugged. Her daddy kept holding her upper arms.

»You've grown! Every time I visit, you grow taller! It makes me think if I am getting old at the same pace ... Is my time in Germany passing differently, maybe too swiftly?«

Then he let her go. Half way into his turn to go up the stairs he stopped and turned back, playfully, as if he suddenly found himself on a stage.

»I was just kidding, I wasn't going to leave just like that,« he said. »I didn't forget about your cut. Here you go! May it bring you lots of luck!«

He handed her the ugly paper bag containing the Hungarian plyushee. She took the bag and her hand immediately dropped, as if she couldn't stand this prize next to her body.

Her daddy once again waved merrily and hopped up the stairs. When he reached the landing in front of the door of the hotel, he jumped once more and, while in the air, touched the soles of his shoes together for a moment, just like a clap.

Her buffoonish daddy Desiderius Attila swindled her out of half of her winnings. Slowly she turned to go home, toward her apartment building.

»I will ring the bell and wait for you downstairs on Saturday,« he yelled after her. In the meantime, he surely vanished in the hotel interior and then playfully poked his head once more through the front entrance door to yell what he did, as another prank. She did not turn around to check though, she just lifted her right hand and blindly waved behind her back. They would see each other in two days, anyway. When she crossed the street, just enough tears gathered in her eyes, so they could gush down her cheeks and drip onto the white plyushee she was now holding tight to her chest.