

HIDEAWAYS
by Ivanka Mogilska

translated from the Bulgarian by Svetlana Komogorova – Komata

Cara

I walk around the benches and the tables, looking for abandoned unfinished cigarettes. The waitress from the nearby cafe calls me. She hands me a cup of coffee. Probably she checked it by mistake, or some client ordered it and had to leave right away. The sunshine penetrates my three sweaters. It heats my skin. I feel it creeping in. The waitress is solving a crossword.

A bee falls into the cup. I capture it with the ashtray. I watch it through the fags and the ash. At first she's unaware of her imprisonment. Maybe she takes the fags on the bottom for clouds – it just got dark all of a sudden. She has no reason to worry. Better get a drop of sweet coffee.

In a while, heavy and haughty, she tries to get out. I hear her angry buzzing. She jostles in the ashtray's walls and wanders when, damn it, the sky has grown so hard!

I have to go. I've had my coffee. Eve is waiting for me. I look through the glass - the bee is still trying to break through the sky. I move the ashtray aside. She crawls to the rim of the cup and falls to the bottom. She gives it another try. Fails again. Finally, she manages to get out. She cleans her heavy hind legs carefully, removing whatever she can and starts crawling to the other end of the table. I see that a part of her tiny hind leg is left in the saucer.

She will hardly reach her hive. And even if she manages, most probably she won't be accepted. The worker-bees will chase her away, with ridicule and then they will stand before the queen bee, buzzing over one another:

"We have no memory of the day she disappeared."

"We know only that in the morning, she got detached from us."

"We saw her following a woman wearing a blue jacket along the park lane."

"The two of them were getting further and further in, to the remotest end of the park. We

didn't stop her, because she believed that the woman was a cloud."

"Nothing could stop her! We haven't seen her since. What were we doing that day?!"

"We don't remember! A day like any other."

Guiltily, they buzz for a while and go back to their business.

The bee rests for a while after every movement. Its goal to reach the far end of the table seems impossible to achieve.

* * *

I worked day and night. Not because I had to, but because it gave me pleasure. At the end of the day, I was in a hurry to get home. Not that anything special was waiting for me at home. The very act of getting home was exciting in itself. I had grown addicted to the city minibuses:

I get into the minibus. I glue myself to the window. The driver surely has put some music on. The movie starts...

Those who walk alone, directed by me, will soon, meet the person with whom they will grow old. The bagel seller will get a day off, and the filthy bakery on the corner will be turned into a decent restaurant by tomorrow, and not an expensive one at that. The people in the street seem strangely attractive, hurrying to their big happy secret, separated from it by only a couple of minutes of city transportation. Or in the worst scenario – a small traffic jam.

The sweet guy hailing the minibus wants to get on it not to go home, but because he has seen me even before the corner and has to talk to me. He gets on. Two middle aged ladies stand in his way. We look at each other above their poorly dyed perms and know that when they get off, there will be no more obstacles between us. A fairytale happiness awaits us.

But they don't get off. They talk about their daughters. "Hey, lady, imagine that someone else has put their bags in this stupid manner right in the middle of the minibus, stopping your daughter to get to the prince!"

"Tsk, tsk, just look, they started getting drunk in broad daylight!"

The prince gets off. Before that, we throw farewell glances at each other. This time it didn't work out, but the next time... The next time, there will be no middle-aged ladies and no bags, and nothing will deter us from starting the soap opera. Then I get off as well, and the ladies and the bags continue on their way. The movie has ended. Tomorrow, I can start the demo version again. Perhaps...

The worse part began when I got off the minibus. With no things to do. With no personal minibus movies. Just a small and boring doubt to keep me company. Is that it? Is that why they made us go to school for, and later study in the university? Is this why they brought us up for, and if it is, why did they prepare us so thoroughly, and in so many different fields, for the jog-trot of days lying ahead?

I search for some way out. I take a salsa course. I have a desperate lack of a sense of rhythm. The teacher begs me to stop attending his classes because I distract the whole group with my funny movements. I join some young environmentalists who want to stop the indiscriminate construction. But due to the fact that, on my job, I help designing the buildings against which I protest on the weekends, soon they also make me quit. I go out bowling with coworkers, but I fall asleep from boredom, which brings me more problems and intrigues at my workplace. I take up yoga and meditation techniques, evening classes. I try to postpone the ride home with the minibus in the evening to the maximum. But in vain. The doubt grows with each passing day, and its boredom threatens to penetrate even through the secure walls of the office.

This is why I solve the problem in a different way. I buy a car. Since then, I am passing through the days without any obstacles, and their monotony reminds me of a well-asphalted road.

* * *

I plan every second of the day. No surprises threaten me.

I entrench myself in the office. I don't go out. If I have to go out for an appointment, and can't use the car, I hurry back. I feel that the office, with its gray metal furniture, draws me in. I smoke cigarettes, secretly. Smoking is forbidden at the office. That's why I have to go out every now and then. I don't feel repressed. I'm aware that nothing good awaits me outside. Inside, the rules are simple: either you curry favor with the boss or try to prove yourself to him. The

coworkers are divided into subordinates, important career-wise, and harmless. The dress code has been defined whole ten years ago, when some secretary took the liberty to come to work wearing a red pantyhose and thus she became the reason why one of the most important clients divorced his rich wife and ruined a million dollar deal. Conversation is limited to business, TV shows and unraveling the latest intrigues at the office. The people are calm. They live with the belief they are a part of something great and important. They believe that if they don't create recreation centers with unlimited parking slots and enormous supermarkets with playgrounds where you can leave your child to go on a shopping spree, all happiness in this world will disappear.

After work, I get home and go to bed. Sleeping is my preferred state. I don't have dreams. My sleep is sound. Profound. In the morning, I don't remember anything. I am ready to meet the challenges resulting from the fact that I am a part of a "young and ambitious team" and my job is extremely "dynamic".

I have chosen my clothes for the day the night before. I rarely go out. There are a couple of bars I go to. I do not divert from my route. It is pointless. All the streets are a projection of one single street. The things that happen in those identical streets, are identical. The feeling of adventure is deceptive. Your brain is under the delusion that something worthwhile and interesting is possible to happen. This is why, to excuse ourselves, we call our stupid actions - "adventures".

I have no stories to tell. Unless I'm discussing business. I'm not attracted to gossip. Communication is wearisome. No one listens to the other. Two endless monologues over two cups of coffee or two glasses of alcohol. With the very same success, I can share with my TV. That's exactly what I do. All things considered, when I call some show, they are listening to me with a little more interest than my coworkers.

If I have a really strong desire to have a chat, I log in some chat room. It gives me permission not to reckon with anything. I change my nicknames often. Female. Male. I can be anything. I don't talk to the same person more than two or three times. Thus, there is no danger that they will ask me out. I don't need any details. I don't need any confusion of my schedule and adding someone's whims to my agenda.

I recognize when it is Saturday by the blank pages. Once I had to remember where I was a

week ago, on Wednesday, 4.30 p.m. For once, I did have a business appointment, neither I did something business-wise. It is useless to rack my brains. No memory at all. No notes are of any help. Nothing for my thoughts to cling on. To my relief, I realize that my memory is empty and white... I remember dry facts, but no emotions.

My whole life up to the day fits into several dates - birth, graduation, start of work; and some names.

It could be said that I was never a child.

* * *

It is Friday night. I finish work early. There are only deluded teenagers in the chat. I recognize them at first glance. They start with a direct invitation for a date. Or they ask who your favorite singer is.

I try to log out and close the website. Every time I press CLOSE or EXIT, hundreds of little windows pop-up.

<It's Friday night! Come to party!>

Until recently, only porn sites popped up like that.

<It's Friday night! Come to party!> - is the commercial for "Brilliance", the hottest spot in town right now.

The slogan gets hammered in my head and I promise myself my foot won't step in there, no matter how trendy it is. Finally, I win the fight with the computer, I lock the office and leave. My car is at the service station for repairs. I try to hail a taxi. They all are taken. The Friday evening migration of peoples.

Fuck Friday night. Noisier than all the rest, and more false, full of disorder and people who think they can escape the scheduled pages of their agenda.

<It's Friday night! Come to party!>

I cannot quit the program. On Friday night, we are programmed to relax and no matter

how many times I repeat to myself that this is stupid, I feel I'm missing something if I don't go out. I know what will happen, but... what if this time it doesn't happen exactly the same way?

I go out. I sit in some bar. I am bored for a while. Then I choose someone. We make efforts to have fun. Then, "My place or yours", followed by a bad taste in my mouth, headache, anger, emptiness and desolation, "I could had a good night's sleep instead", "Next Friday I'll just stay at home and have a rest". The same way every New Year I make a promise to myself not to celebrate New Years. I can never keep it – what if this time...

Now, the same thing happens. Irritation diverts me from the usual route. I get lost. I try to find my way. The evening city is an unknown city. Even when it's your city of birth. In the streets, people jostle and shout. The men have hid their ties in their coat pockets. The women have unbuttoned an extra button on their shirts. I hate the Friday night moods. They create complications. They confuse the schedule.

I change my point of view within seconds. My back touches the pavement. A pain pierces my ankle and crawls up my body. I could stay like this, staring at the buildings' roofs until the darkness comes. I feel my ankle swelling. People pass me by. Maybe they think I'm drunk or drugged - it's Friday night. I get up carefully. The heel of my shoe peeks out of a hole among the paving-stones. My ankle has reached elephant proportion. I slip into the nearest bar. Miraculously, there is a free place to sit. A single one.

While I'm waiting for my vodka, someone shoots me in the back. The rattle of a machine gun drowns the music and the chatter. There are no panicked people. No one runs to the exit. They all are talking quietly, while I'm bleeding. I broke my schedule to be shot down.

She passes by me. I can't see her face. She's small. With short hair. She keeps on shooting. Shaking bodies everywhere. People open their arms, exposing their chests to the bullets. I'm still alive.

Another vodka. She keeps on shooting. But always standing with her back to me. I hear the shots and...

... leave the room. I make for the boss's office. A strong kick on the door. I press him to the desk and force him to swallow the phone. While I'm going home, I can still hear his belly

ringing.

Her laughter... No, the vodka makes me dream.

Every morning - three rows of backs before me. I never look back to see how many people are behind me. Out of fear.

One more vodka. Drinking is bad for you, because...

Why?

One more vodka.

I'm watching her. The Friday night fairy who shoots down everyone. On my way home, I leave a bloody trail behind me. It's the only way I'll be able to find the bar again.

Falling asleep, I wonder if anyone has really fallen dead under the machine gun fire of her laughter?

* * *

I had a headache on Saturday. On Sunday, I prepared for Monday. On Monday evening I finished work earlier than usual again. How should I fill in those four or five hours left before I go to bed? Before I figure it out, I'm already sitting in that bar.

I'm drinking and looking around. The thought that maybe I'm waiting for her seems funny to me. It's ridiculous. I don't even know how she looks like. I could recognize her laughter. If she comes at all. A couple is standing right before me, a man and a woman. He's enormous and young. She has put her arm round his waist; she is tall up to his armpit. She is quite elderly. At least, for this bar. All the rest of us still believe that if we work from dawn till dusk, from Monday to Friday, money will give us enough strength to gather up all our meaningful life in Saturday and Sunday. I divert my gaze, not to disturb their conversation. I look around. Maybe she has entered without me noticing.

I hear that machine gun fire again. I turn around. The shooting comes from under the arm of the young man. It takes some time for me to realize that this is actually her. She pats the man on the shoulder. Then she goes to a neighboring table. She chats to some other people. And she is

constantly shooting. Everyone wants to be touched by those bullets. Everyone is trying to touch her, to make her laugh, to order her a drink. It's Monday night. She doesn't stop drinking. Maybe tomorrow is her day off? Or it's her job to entertain the people in the bar? In this case, her laughter is just letting off air for money. People pay for the opportunity to get wrinkles round their mouths, just like hers.

I hate her! Her laughter deforms everyday life. One loses footing, and gets confused. And just for a well performed musical phrase?

This is what her laughter is – commercial stuff!

A chart hit!

Number one in the charts!

I'm armored against such hits! I'll crush her!

Now it is clear to me why I came back here. Only to make sure that she is as fake as everyone else. Everything else would be unnatural. Now I'm at peace. Let her laugh as much as she likes to. She can't affect me. I had simply softened under the influence of Friday. I'm not disappointed. I'm content. I'm calm!

Come on! Go, girl! Laugh in my face! Here! Stand up to me! Just try...

I push the ashtray down. Fads fly around everywhere. The sound of a crash. She turns around.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I'll pay for it. I'll be..."

I want to be...

... a target?

Nonsense!

I get my things and jump out, and I keep repeating myself:

"Any intimacy is obstructive to work. Any digression from work is a risk to your future.

What is more important than your future?"

I will change the bar. I will go to the usual places where there is a TV over the counter showing Eurosport or Fashion TV. There, where you talk to someone just to drag him home and in the morning, ask him politely to put the key into the mailbox on the way out. Everything will be under control.

Any whim is obstructive to your future...

* * *

He is still sleeping. My head hurts and I can't remember how I've spent the evening. I wake that looker up. When I go out of the bathroom, he is gone.

On the pillow, I find a note with a phone number on it, and two blonde hairs. I hate long-haired men.

Work. Coffee. Work. I have to clear off the house from that blond guy's presence. Work. Coffee. Work. Coffee. I hate traces of strangers in my apartment. Work. Work. Work.

* * *

I don't log in the chat. No need of communication at all. A few days ago I had a talk with the boss. I'll get promoted. I'm getting up the hierarchy. I haven't been sleeping well lately. I dream of machine guns.

* * *

I go round the bar by chance. Just to make sure she is not there. But there she is. The third chair at the right counter. She is looking through the window. Watching towards me, but she doesn't see me. For my surprise, I don't feel relieved.

* * *

Back orders. Later orders. Tension flows through the keyhole, flooding the office. I'm absent-minded. Shouts. Seeking responsibility. Everyone is framing one another and no one has the time to finish the job. I get down to it.

I want to observe her constantly. To unravel the small, petty everyday tasks that fill her day. I want to sit at the counter in silence. To be invisible, so I could learn more.

About one a. m. I lock the metal door and let the cold air lead me. It throws me in front of that bar. There are only a few people there. I gather strength and I enter. She is also absent. Maybe at this hour she has already laid her head on the shoulder of some fat, blissfully snoring man, who is pulling at her blanket.

Maybe she lives alone and at this time, she has turned on the radio and the TV, she's talking on the phone while smoking.

Maybe she has three cats to keep her company. She sits in the armchair, drinking vodka... or whiskey... She has turned the vacuum cleaner on, not to hear the neighbors who are fighting or making love.

If I know what she does when she is not here, it will be easier for me to get rid of my dreams. What is her face when she is alone. Is she alone often. How does she look like, when she is walking her Pekingese (though she does not look like a Pekingese type of person), when she gets up in the morning or when she watches TV. I want to know how does she really look like.

* * *

I invent her...

She never goes out. She stays in. To the right of the counter. The small capsuled world she has created for herself takes a revenge for the contentment which its mistress transmits. She does not feel how her peace of mind turns into a small chisel. Enraptured with this motionless, soft, warm material, it carves wrinkles into the cheeks, the forehead. It cannot stop. It will turn her into a spider web, hung between the chair and the counter. And then someone will sweep her off.

* * *

There is no reason for me to think that she will be there again. No reason to confuse my schedule for the day. My agenda is overfilled with tasks. When I divert from them, I become insecure. I start feeling the emptiness conquering me. The moment I stop acting, the moment of

peace, triggers the nightmarish feeling that my agenda is useless and meaningless, that if I don't stick to the schedule, the day will pass by anyway. But what more meaningful could I make out of it?

I get over myself and I turn to the narrow alleys, far from the avenues. I reach the bar. I push the door open. She won't be there, so I will simply leave and rush again...

1, 2, 3, Go!

Hour corridor 10.00 a.m.: an appointment.

Hour corridor 11.00 a.m.: Papers to fill in

Corridor 12.00 p.m.: Study the materials for a new projection

Corridor 1.30 p.m.: Lunch break

2.30 p.m.: Afternoon coffee, and I continue with the research.

She is there. To the right of the counter. The third chair. The bar is almost empty. I don't know where to sit. Should I sit at all? It will be stupid just to go out. She reads a newspaper. I spill coffee in the saucer and stare at her. Her day does not look dependent on any agenda. She does not wear a wrist watch. Nor do I see a watch in the bar. I sit there for half an hour. I have drunk my coffee too fast. A habit from the office. She goes on reading. My cell phone keeps ringing every few minutes.

"Where are you? Where are the projects? Something broke here! When will you drag your ass here, the boss called you three times! The lunch break finished a long time ago! They'll fire you. Don't you know that three more people are waiting to get your job!"

The more they call, the more I flush. I want to leave. She is watching me from behind the newspaper. The waitress hid somewhere. I can't pay and run. The phone rings again. I shut it down and I knock at the bottom of the empty cup with my teaspoon.

Wasn't there supposed to be music playing in this bar?

I hear her turning the newspaper's pages. She is not looking at me, but she is watching

every movement that I make. The phone rings. I close it. It rings again. I close it again. I curse all ring tones - a part of "Rigoletto", a rooster's "Cock-a-doodle-doo", a folk dance. The newspaper is hiding her face. I spill the money out of my pocket. The coins roll and fall under the chair. Everything is scattered around. I bend down to gather them. I leave them carefully on the table and, not turning to her, I fly out with my constantly ringing cell phone. I cook up some story for the boss. At the end of the street, just before I turn, I look back.

Of course, there is no one in front of the bar, but I know that at the other side of the door, she is still staring at the table at which I sat some moments ago. She doesn't laugh. She is smiling.

Two days later, bending over some forms and blanks, it occurs to me that I could have simply turned off the sound.

* * *

I try to picture her in her old.

Her laughter squeaks just like a rusty door. Or it remains untouched? Just the same - dangerous, hurting, mighty. This version is worse.

When she laughs, the people turn to see happiness. Instead they see wrinkles, sagged skin, age spots, trembling hands. To old age, happiness is harder to forgive (or rather impossible), than misery. She will suffocate with the lack of people. Her laughter will ruckle in her throat, eating her away - its might redirected inside.

Time almost always grants us its goodwill too late. When it is totally worthless for us. At its whim, we become neighbors. We already have a real chance to meet each other. I know her schedule for the whole day. But again, I cannot touch her in any way...

Every morning, at 9.30 a.m., the door at the third floor bangs. I measure off half an hour. In this time, she climbs down the stairs. Right on the thirtieth minute, I stick to the peephole. I can see her already, but she has not managed to get down to the first floor landing yet. And she has to go down the stairs to the entrance, too. I never go out to help her.

Only climbing down the stairs takes about forty minutes. An hour and a half more to get to the nearest shop and back, plus forty minutes climbing up to the apartment. It takes a whole

morning to go to the shop. I haven't payed any attention to what she buys. I think she does not take a bag with her. Perhaps she buys a wafer and puts it in her pocket.

Once in two or three days - bread and something wrapped in brown paper. Cheese, probably. And this is it. I suppose that her whole room is full of uneaten wafers.

I believe that she secretly blesses the neighbors' selfishness. The first one to help her will turn into an executioner.

* * *

I eat a diet sandwich with some withered lettuce and I try to imagine her day. Her time. I already know how the bar looks during the day, and it is easy for me to see it. But how does she look? What is her face in an autumn afternoon, about half past three (an afternoon with no rain)? I do not know.

I want her to cry because of me. Precisely by doing this, I would leave a scar of difference on her face. Because she has so many traces of laughter. No matter if she laughed sincerely or not, if she looks at herself in the mirror, she won't be able to tell which wrinkle is from whom. I want her to have a wrinkle with my name on it. I think about the evening.

I see myself entering through the heavy iron door. Everything is just as usual. Only she is not there. I sit, I order and I wait for her. The only free place I have taken is positioned in such a manner that I sit with my back to the door.

She is not coming.

She is not coming.

I can't imagine where she is or with whom. To have a power of attraction for me, her everyday life should be so different than mine that I can't even guess with what is it filled with. That's why I'm just sit.

I'm waiting.

I deliberately do not turn to the door. I have always wanted to have an appointment and feel desperate, because the person I'm waiting for is not coming, to feel like crying and right

when I'm preparing to leave, to sense him behind me. It never happens. I know the direction the expected one will come from. He is so predictable that it never occurs to him to take some other way. Always taking the same route. Always waving his hand from afar. It doesn't matter who the expected one is, he always waves his hand. And I wave, too. And I smile. But I would prefer for him not to wave. To hide behind someone's back. To leave me trembling, almost starting to cry, at least for one more second.

This is why now I sit with my back to the door. I do not turn round, even though I can hear the bang caused by its closure every time.

I order.

I wait.

I order.

When I finally give up, pay the bill; stand from the chair and reach to take my bag, the door opens. She enters. She sees me almost immediately. She tosses her head back. She smiles. I don't know what happens then. Probably we stay together. I order again, and we both sit with our backs to the door. We don't even hear the bang when it is closed. I guess we talk about the most ordinary things. Who did what during the day. Movies. Favorite places. Food. Music. I guess I'm laughing with her, but I'm not quite sure about all this. I'm sure only about the way I wait for her, the way she enters and the way our eyes meet.

I imagine this every day. The only moment when we have a common part of our everyday life, the moment she comes through the door and I'm preparing to leave. The rest is unimaginable.

* * *

She stands at the bar. I pass by chance. Right from the door, I can feel her flinching. The chisel is surprised by her sudden movement and cuts the line askew. A little extra wrinkle appears. She's not aware of it yet. When she finds it, I finally will be able to walk the way from the door to the bar without startling it again.

* * *

A business meeting concerning a project to build a recreation complex. While we shake hands with friendly smiles, the Checkered Tie introduces himself, and the Dotted Tie pays me a compliment.

It occurs to me that when I think of her, I do not hear any name.

We are sitting already. The folders are opened.

"This complex could bring an income of over..."

It also occurs to me that there is just one name which I do not associate with any image.

"Cara, have you prepared the initial financial calculation?"

I hand another folder. Both ties bend over it. Maybe it will be good if I combine those things. Her nameless image and the faceless name...

"Miss Cara, we would like you to offer a version in which more parking lots are provided. My colleague thinks that around a..."

I will call her Eve.

"Cara?!" My boss has bent to me. His eyes stare at the folder with the projects, resting on my knees. The blanks are filled in with her name.

"Excuse me", I say with a smile. „I'm recalculating some things."

The ties smile politely.

The meeting ends with a success.

Eve

I know Cara is approaching...

Unbelievable stories start simply and logically. Unfortunately, you are able to realize this long after they have turned into memories. Then, after overcoming your respect and fear of wonder, maybe you will manage to sort out the missing pieces and get an explanation. You reach the original cause. You wonder at yourself - it is so small, a moment's fear, an impulse to tell someone that you love them, or to stamp them down...

You might have saved yourself so many troubles and sleepless nights and crying, if, at that time, you didn't submit to emotion, to some ridiculous thought. Could have you? And you start chewing over the events from the beginning...

I meet him one evening in the street. He carries some books, a folder (later, I learn that those were some sketches), pencils are sticking out of his coat. There is an enormous blue stain on his upper left pocket. He does not see me. He pushes me and, me being short, my cheek brushes at his pocket.

"I'm sorry", I say and I hold up the books, while he is adjusting the folder under his arm. It is raining, and if those sketches scatter over the ground, our meeting will start badly.

"It's all ri... Oh God! Did I do this? I'm so sorry. Does it hurt? Are you OK? You have such a tender skin... So quickly..."

He is clumsy and I have to hold up the folder, too, while he is fussing about me. I don't understand a thing. Pencils fly over the sidewalk in all directions. It keeps raining. No thought of hiding from the rain crosses our minds. I touch my cheek. Nothing unusual. Only my fingers are blue. Looking at him, I start laughing.

"This is ink. I guess there's a leak in your pocket, from a pen or something."

He instantly loses interest and rushes to gather the scattered pencils. Who will wash his coat, I wonder?

I don't even know his name. I take out a handkerchief; I take him by the sleeve and pull

him to stand up. I start cleaning him. It keeps raining. I know that it won't help, but thus, I can keep him at least a minute longer.

Right before that...

I walk around the city, once again, never noticing the rain. At one spot, I see three black cats reclining on three white automobiles. It is unreal, just like in those novels I've read when I was a child. The bell of the nearest church tolls five times. And then time stops, for no obvious reason. Probably the cats have moved their tails from the right to the left. I don't meet any people at all. If time has stopped for a while and we are preserved in the current moment, why am I moving? I walk the streets again and again. I don't meet anyone. I promise myself that the first person I meet, I will keep with me, so the next time when it occurs to some cat to move her tail from the right to the left, I won't be upset by that.

When finally I meet him, I don't ask myself whether we are a good match or not. It doesn't matter. Sometimes you are just forced to match someone, to lie to yourself, because fear will cheat you, no matter what. It is better to choose your own kind of lie voluntarily. From the moment I pulled him up to clean that stain, to his escape from the little music box we lived in, which he perceived more and more as the only obstacle for his development, neither of us made the confession, or at least not aloud, that the other one is just a life-saving lie. A short rest before you rush in search of another, more convenient one. After his disappearance, I felt happier than on the day I brought him home.

If those three black cats on the three white cars haven't moved their tails from the right to the left, probably those very same thoughts would have been brought to my mind by some other story.

I prefer telling myself that if it wasn't for those cats, maybe nothing would have happened.

It seems to you that any moment you will discover the reason for your fiasco. You observe through a magnifying glass even the flutter of the eyelashes, yours and the other one's. The answer is within one of you. It never occurs to you to seek it between both of you.

I sit in the room. My earring slips over my cheek and comes bumping on the floor. He is startled and distorts the line. We have even stopped the clock, not to disturb him, and now this peal of thunder.

I don't dare to move. Only my head is cocked a little, freed from a part of the weight. He is frozen, his eyes staring at the distorted line of the sketch. I fear to turn. When I see his face hanging over me, I can't recognize him. He is red all over. Probably he will have a stroke and collapse right beside the earring - a blue stone with a flower drawn on it, with a silver lining. "I hope he didn't tread on it", I'm thinking, "those are my favorite". He has never hit me. If he hits me, I'll leave. But he doesn't even touch me, only grows more and more red. His head will explode any moment now. He will splatter me with blood and brains. Why can't he just hit me, so we can get it over it?

"Say something, honey? I'm so sorry. I didn't move at all. I have no idea how it happened. I was simply looking through the window and it fell. Forgive me, my love. Say something, please." - It is better for me to say sorry than to wait for the explosion.

"Why do you wear these stupid trinkets at all?", the volcano erupts, followed by... A gesture by which he commands me to shut up and goes back to his sketch. He did not tread on the earring, but it is left lying on the floor. I can't take it. I can't move at all, because hearing the next noise, even the most negligible one, he will really burst and I will have to clean the whole floor and my clothes too, and, at that, I won't be able to wear that earring anymore, because the police will take it. They always take the weapon of the crime, right?

I keep looking through the window. I do not see anything, I only prey for my other earring not to fall. My whole energy is channeled in holding its clasp closed. He has calmed down and goes on working. If someone lifts the earring from the floor, it could be considered that nothing has happened.

Or...

I'm in the kitchen. Crying. There is no reason. We love each other. He is nice and sweet, has a sense of humor, he is caring, has a good job. He comes and hugs me. He wipes my tears off.

"Don't cry, baby. Don't. Your tears leave marks on the table. You'll ruin the wood."

I am consoled. Or at least I've stopped crying. I dream of killing him. I'm making schemes while he is hugging me. I want it to be painful. But I can't stand blood. I will faint before I manage to finish him, and he'll have the upper hand. And he... He can't stand any sound. Maybe I should simply turn on the vacuum cleaner right next to his ear and dispose of him this way. But it will be hard to take it out unnoticed. I have a specific order to clean only when he is not at home.

A little later, I'm washing some glasses. Dish soap on the sponge. The sponge - in the glass. A twist. Rinse. Then, the next. He stands behind me. He is silent. I clutch the glass. It cracks. I keep squeezing. The glass is falling to pieces in my hands.

"You were going to hit me, right? I know you wanted to hit me with the glass!"

"I wanted to", I say. "I don't understand why this discover of yours makes you so happy."

Then he collects the pieces of the glass, dumps them in the bin and kisses my neck. I...

It is a matter of nerves who will leave first. The one who leaves will take the guilty feeling with them. The other one is the victim. Pure and innocent and abandoned, faithful to the end. They win the sympathies. This is why I clench my teeth, waiting.

I'm doing my evening walk between the big oak dresser and the dressing table, passing the armchairs. (I always brush one end of their red covers.) I reach the window. I look out. Then, back to the dresser. I never look at me in the mirror. I see every step of mine polishing the brown floor more and more. I won't stop until the floor starts looking like a sheet of paper. Then this sheet will tear. I will fall, I will go out, I'll finish with the normal ideas of in and out. Then he will probably search for me. I have the feeling that his desire for success is brought forth by his passion to torment me. He has to work hard to reach the top. When he works, it has to be silent around him. I hate silence!

One day, shortly before the brown floor becomes quite thin, my patience is rewarded. I come home. I lock the door. He is not there. Every creak makes me jump.

I calm down fast. I'm sure he is not there. He has taken out the papers, the pens, his slippers. Delighted, I walk the wooden floor, not taking my shoes off. A symphony of my heels tapping on the parquet floor. My bracelet hits the cupboard, making a scratch. I sleep in my

clothes. In my shoes. Wearing my earrings. I dream of the bed starting creaking at my slightest movements. I buy a radio and a TV. I turn them simultaneously. I sing. I whistle. I talk to the mirror. I am sure that I'm talking even in my sleep. Unfortunately, I sleep alone and there is no one to confirm that. One night I put a Dictaphone on my pillow. In the morning, I listen to the recording. I'm pleased. I talk in my sleep, too.

While we are live together, I think of a game. I walk around the streets and I try to discern the noises. A car, a trolley bus, a motor bus, the opening and the closing of a door - wooden, iron, glass. "Taxi!", the spiteful whisper of saleswomen, fragments of conversations, even taking a drag on a cigarette, the falling of chestnuts and leaves... Then I pick a sound - there is always one which is a bit special, and I start following it. I try to guess who the owner is. How does he or she look like, where do they live. I compare the real image to the imaginary one. I make mistakes less and less frequently.

I invent new sounds. I arrange them in my head. I mix them up. Again. And again. He is turning over in bed all night long, and I invent. He complains of having nightmares. He has my sympathy. Daytime, I hurry to go out, to gather more, so as to be able in the evening to start creating my favorite sound for the night.

He is gone now, but I cannot stop. I go on inventing. My head gets crammed. I arrange them ceaselessly. My brain refuses to stop, inventing more and more. I cannot take a breath without a new sound settling in my head. I try to find one that would master the others and conduct them. The more I seek, the more they pile up, and the one I need is not there... It seems to me I will grow deaf.

At night, the sound terror is the strongest. I remain on autopilot, totally besotted and torpid. Just like when he was still living with me and I felt silence crushing my head. As if he is still sleeping on the left side of the bed.

I decide to eliminate every trace of him. To get rid of the house we lived in. Not simply to sell it, but to obliterate it, so no memory should be left of it, because silence has penetrated the bricks and destroys me, disguised in the clothes of countless sounds.

I draw a loan from the bank. I hire workers and designers. In six months, the bar is ready.

I hire some staff. The first clients enter. More and more people come. The noise is inconceivable. Silence is dead!

I start laughing frequently and the sounds in my head arrange themselves. I neither invent new ones, nor I feel the horrible pressure on my temples.

I inherit a special talent from the now unnecessary game - I can draw out the soul of everyone who enters and turn it into a sound. It is enough for me to start laughing, and all the clients in the bar turn into a tune which sounds in my head. It is fun. I possess the innermost secret of each and every one. This deprives me of the opportunity to get closer to them. I have nothing to discover. We can communicate safely. There is no chance for them to hurt me. They enjoy my attention. They appreciate it. They strive for it, and they stay calm at the same time, because they know that I won't tire them with myself. My story is impossible to tell.

Laughter puts in order that whole chaotic world I carry in my head. I'm happy. This is all I ever wanted - to be surrounded with attention, and, at the same time, protected from being hurt. Only sometimes I reel off the whole story in my mind, from the beginning, and I cannot remember, did I laugh before I knew him?

Cara

I am a background. She fuses me with the other faces. She does not contour me. She doesn't paint me. I want her to paint me. To make me alive. I am too distant. My appearances are too rare. My everyday life has clutched me in its fist, and, no matter how I beg it, it does not want to shake hands with hers. So when I appear, I have to start anew. To attract her attention. To set her hand in motion. To make her feel at least the wish to take the brush.

When I was a child, I closed myself in the bathroom, hiding from my Grandma, and I stared at the floor. It was a marbled floor. There, among the small black and white pieces I saw different shapes. A dog with an opened mouth, a pretentious lady in a ball gown, a tulip. Later they found me, and when I managed to hide again, I needed some time to find my favorites again. I had remembered roughly their places. I knew they were there. There was no way for them to move. I just had to make a little effort.

Eve does not want new shapes on the marble floor. She is content with what she has discovered already. She has no time for more. She has no strength. What if the marble floor gets spoiled by these new shapes? And what if - which is worse - it becomes even more beautiful?

Sometimes I realize that my efforts to rouse her interest are futile and ridiculous. I cannot stop.

Never mind. Nothing can be done. For the patient ones, an opportunity always arrives, or time wears off the desire.

It is raining. Once, we used to jump in the puddles. Now, we jump over them. For the first time, Sunday is not a perfectly arranged waiting for Monday. There's too much time, which threatens to drown me and over which I don't know how to jump. I drag my raincoat on and I go out. I get lost in the streets. Without a car, I do not know which direction to take.

Left - right - left...

I feel a school bag on my back... It used to happen just like that, every time...

A bunch of kids is following me. They shout. They entangle wet leaves in my hair. They take my raincoat off me and start trampling on it in the mud. I have no chance to get out. I cry and I repeat to myself: One day, I will buy a huge car and I will run over you!

Raindrops are rolling down under my blouse. I sober down. The hood has fallen. My hair is wet. My jaw hurts from clenching. I have to hide somewhere. I enter the first bar I bump into.

"Are you OK?"

There she is again! Streets play insidious tricks on me, when I start walking along them. They always throw me out at one particular place. Raindrops are rolling down my nose, falling in my mouth. I clench my jaw tighter and tighter. I look at Eve. I don't want to feel the taste of the autumn, and this is why I cannot open my mouth to answer her. I nod and sit at the bar. At the left side. Before I know, a cup of tea and a glass of cognac appear before me. On the other side, she raises her glass.

Cheers.

Cheers, I nod and water drops cover the counter. Then, she starts reading something. I stare at her. The barmaids are talking. They tease her. They joke with her. Eve throws her laughter at them.

Those who make jokes are beyond me. I envy the ease with which they save themselves and the others from awkward situations; and their negligence to the flowing time. I try to keep my gaze straight in front of me. I have the feeling they are discussing me. The three of them. They laugh. I'm the scapegoat of this Sunday.

I ask for the bill.

"It's all settled", says one of the barmaids. I glance at the third chair at the right counter. It is empty. I have no choice but to put my raincoat on and pray to have the power to swim to Monday's coast of salvation.

Thousands of small inactions occupy my thoughts.

"Are the bank's accounts ready?"

"Did you make that inquiry?"

"How can you ask what the deadline is? It's yesterday, of course!"

"Coffee, anyone?"

"Have you prepared those papers?"

I lock the office's door and light a cigarette. I twist some mistaken papers into a funnel and I shake the ash. I burn the letters through. I watch the paper darkening, going black, turning into a wound. A hole in the part of everyday life gone wrong. I look through it...

I see Eve. She goes out. She is strolling along the streets. She chooses the tiniest and the quietest ones. She is a little insecure. The light is dazzling, and her eyes are used to the dusk in the bar. She walks. She feels the passers-by turning their heads after her. Thinking that no one notices, she touches every zipper and button on her clothes. She smooths her hair. Her hands do not feel anything wrong. She keeps walking. More and more people stare at her, not trying to hide their curiosity. They stop when she passes by. They point at her for their children to see. Panic-stricken, Eve does not notice that she has reached the avenue. Her appearance causes traffic jams. She hails some taxi and cringes in the back seat. She tries to take a breath and tell where she is going. The car sets off. Both sides of the avenue are lined with houses and apartment buildings. She knows that, at every window, someone stands watching her. They call the rest who live at the place. They all pile up at the window. They push each other. They tread on each others' feet. Eve turns her head and she sees that in the opposite house, they have raised one of the curtain's ends and are also watching her. When the taxi stops in front of the bar's back door, it seems that she does not open it but slips through the tiny slit of the mailbox.

Then she gets a newspaper and sits at the right side, the third chair.

Someone is banging on my door. I stub out the cigarette and open the window.

"Just a moment, please!"

I unlock and I let the tasks from the others' notebooks in.

I spill some sugar and I draw shapes on the counter. I do not look to the sides. I hear her aiming her laughter at someone. Not at me. I am an accident. The care she took of me last Sunday was an accident, too. Boredom's whim.

She does not look at me. I leave with the man beside me. He is accidental, too. I haven't seen him before. Here, everyone is a patron. Coming once, everyone stays and desires to be machine-gunned with her laughter. We are the only ones who sneak out unwounded. I see her stunned face in the side mirror of the stranger's car. She is seeking me. She has not noticed in what direction I have disappeared. Probably she would be indignant, if she knew. Or she would congratulate me. Maybe she is just a bored woman with money who wonders where to spend her time.

Her eyes look too young for that version.

I abandon my work. I'm overdue with the deadlines more and more frequently. I want to sit at the counter, the left one, warming myself.

I remember a street, white from the sun. The houses are dancing before my eyes. There is no one there. A yellow horse is crossing the road. It stops and its eyes are goggling against mine. I want to call Mom, but she is far away. They say she is where there are no horses. I cannot imagine such a place yet. I try to escape. It does not take its eyes off me. I stop moving. I feel the sun going under my skin and I become light. The horse comes towards me. I jump on its back and I spur on it. We gallop to that place where there are no horses. Mine will be the first. My mother will see it and she will recognize me. She will get off the car and jump behind me. And we will gallop through the warmth.

Grandma's hard hands wake me up. I am lying in the middle of the street. I ask her where the horse is. She is murmuring under her nose and takes me home. She puts me in bed. The obnoxious smell of pieces of cloth, soaked with vinegar, chases away the yellow horse. I do not see it anywhere, just find out that up to this day, this is the reason that I always feel cold. The disappearance of the yellow horse.

Eve stands beside me, watching me. Watching me questioningly. I blush.

"I didn't hear you, I'm sorry."

"I asked if I may sit, but obviously you're busy, so..."

"No, no... Not at all. I will be very pleased."

She sits next to me and orders a glass of fruit juice. I drink vodka. I start feeling uncomfortable in my chair. I hate her. Why did she come? What could we talk about! I feel nervous. Maybe the reason for that is that I hadn't remembered anything for a long time. If I cannot program the memory to appear at my convenience, it is useless.

Different people enter, they rush to us. They greet her. They hug her. They make her laugh. They model her. They change her every second. She is made of plasticine. If I was skilful in the art of laughter, I could model her too. She sits in silence next to me. I do not dare to breathe. I hate her for the moment she will start talking and she will realize that I am a cloud wishing, but not knowing how, to let her rays through. When I dare to turn at last, the corners of her mouth point downwards; her eyes have lost their shine; she is leaning her head on her hands to hide from the bystanders. I have caught her at a moment of rest, of taking a breath. When she feels I'm watching her, she struts again at once. She smiles at me.

Her eyes half close, ready to hide behind a veil of laughter. I watch them and I don't hear what she says to me. I open my mouth to say...

She has disappeared. A torn packet of sugar lies right beside me. She has drawn with her fingers. Then, she has smeared the little shape.

If there is a word that contains all the other ones, I would repeat it constantly to her. I don't mean that it should contain the greatest, the most enormous, the most meaningful ones. Just the opposite. I keep silent and I write her name on bills, blanks, forms, napkins...

Eve.

Eve

So many people around. Every person - a sound. I arrange them. I talk to them. I listen to the music of what they say. I forget the words.

One sound repeats itself, more and more intrusively. It moves around. It seeks a crack.

A week or two ago I entered the bar and started laughing to arrange the picture. I wouldn't notice her, if it wasn't for that horrible sound of broken glass which pierced me, when she dropped the ashtray. Then I felt her. All the emotions are intertwined inside her in such a way that her core is not a sound but a whole melody. It attracts me. I

have the wish to hum it. Her awkward attempts to draw my attention amuse me. The discomfort and the interest she is watching me with. The fear that she is starting to look ridiculous. I hear all her desires and wavering. Only one small detail is bothering me - I've noticed that when she enters, the harmony breaks down.

I watch her. She visits more and more often. She sits and thinks she keeps an eye on me without me noticing. When I approach, she stiffens. When I move away, she feels relieved and sad - she wants me to come back. Her melody becomes richer and richer.

Probably, somewhere, another one like me exists. If she is that one, I think, I should recognize her.

The bar is half empty. It is afternoon, but the streetlights already peep through the windows. The puddles adorn themselves with the reflections of shining neon signs. The calmness in me flows over the brim, surrounding all the place and every client. The completeness of this moment makes me laugh, not having anything special to arrange.

Suddenly the door opens with a bang and something yellow and wet is standing at the doorstep. I jump off my chair. It's her! Her black hair is hanging in wet locks.

"Are you OK?"

She does not answer. She sneaks alongside me and sits at the opposite side of the bar. She

seems cross with me. As if I've forced her to visit. I try not to pay attention to her. I hear her grief, but I don't understand it. I do not want any anxieties to cross the threshold of this bar. This is why I simply disappear from the room. Maybe she will give up her attempts and leave me alone.

She keeps visiting. I give her a chance to talk to me. I wait for her to start. I cannot imagine how we

could start. With the usual patrons, it is easy. They don't want anything else from me, but to listen to them, so they always start by themselves. She is interested in me. I am amused, because I know that she cannot get anything. I leave the game in her hands. Anyway, she is the one who started visiting, looking for me.

I expect her first word with a gentle thrill. That will define the development of our relationship, and whether we will have one at all. She doesn't make any move, she prefers to leave. I let her go.

Cara

How will she react if I write her a letter? Not an email, not an SMS. A most ordinary, old-fashioned letter. How will she open the envelope? Will she tear it? Will she look for a knife? Will she open it at once, or she will wait? Will she forget this funny whim and will find it after a while in the pocket of some trousers gone out of fashion?

I calm myself down with the thought that I don't know her name, so I cannot send the letter. Left by my hand, it will lose its charm. No one else will be involved into this. The postman won't take a part of my responsibility.

The truth is that I don't know what to write. There is not a single word that I feel the necessity to tell her.

A white sheet of paper, sealed in an envelope and brought by the postman, is too dangerous. She might open it and read something which I do not wish to confess.

I walk around all day long. She meets me in the street. We walk towards each other, as if we have known each other for years. She will stop in front of me at any moment. Then...

She invites me to a cup of coffee. We sit somewhere out of the bar, out of all offices, cars, apartments, our cell phones turned off. Somewhere where there is a river. From time to time, Eve laughs at the jokes I tell her. I tell more and more jokes. One after the other. I make her split her sides with laughter. All the people are turning and looking at us, but this does not bother me. No one could be angry with people who laugh...

I see her coming towards me. I feel like I'm nailed to the ground. I stand and watch her approaching. I manage only to smile at the woman who passes me by, throwing a stunned glance at me, because, of course, this is not Eve. How would her laughter be able to walk along the streets on a workday? I turn my cell phone on. I cook up the next lie for the boss who is shouting something about a last warning, and run to the office.