

One Fly and Two Strokes

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ONE FLY AND TWO STROKES^a

My late mother liked telling stories. Even now, as I am approaching middle age myself, I can remember how every evening, only moments after I had bid her goodnight, she would carefully sit down on the edge of my bed and start to turn the departing day into sentences. She began doing this from the moment my father left us. She was 43 at that time, and I had just turned 13. I was too young to understand the real reasons behind my mother's need to approach the depth of each night with a story.

Now, I see it much more clearly. Late in the evening, each daily occurrence had to be given its because. I didn't enter the county math contest because I would maybe, get into a road accident on the way to the city where the state contest was to be held; true, my final grade of 4^b in Croatian would prevent me from enrolling in the high school I aimed at, but in the other one, I would surely meet the girl who would make me happy. In the beginning, I used to smile at her causal constructs; I would interrupt her and pretend that I was tired and sleepy. But she was persistent. For a year, 2, and 5. Up until I was of age. Her sentences were mild. And she never skipped our ritual. When she had a hard day, she would omit elaborate stories. Instead, she would mention folk wisdom or a saying. She wanted us to discuss it briefly. It was, I guess, her way of preparing me for what is called life. When I asked her about the source of all those bits of wisdom, she had no answer. "Don't know, I remember, hear things, see things," she would murmur. I believed her.

I have a clear memory of one night when she, entering my room, noticed a fly sitting on the curtain. It landed there after circling around my nose for some 15 minutes. My mother stepped close to the window, spread the palm of her right hand, turned it sideways, and touched the fabric. Her palm started gliding toward the fly. It was as sleepy as me. The action was successful. The fly was trapped. Mother opened the door to the balcony, stuck out her arm, and set the captive free. She had freed me from the unpleasant buzzing, at the

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same time getting an incentive for her narration. "two flies at a stroke" was the introduction to the story to conclude that day.

"Two flies at a stroke" was the sentence that first came to my mind when the alarm rang the following morning, and I decided to pretend to have a sore throat. "I'll stay home, watch the Oscars ceremony rerun on TV, and skip the math test." I thought, one stroke, two wins.

Mom and I moved out of our apartment in the city center 2 weeks after my father decided to marry his pregnant mistress, a trainee lawyer at his law firm. It was the end of November. Some 10 years younger than my mother, the long-legged, red-haired lawyer strolled into our apartment, out of which, only 5 hours before, my mother and I had removed our clothes and books. Father had bought us a one-room apartment in Trešnjevka, close to the football ground. I had to use the tram to get to school. I did not want anything to do with my father ever again. I asked my mother to change my family name to her maiden name. I missed my room, my view of the cathedral, and my father's plans for our future. The emptiness was relieved by my mother's stories. They were warm and gentle but still could not strengthen my weakening concentration. Swans^c began to populate my page in the class grade book, where, besides my father's crossed-out name, my new name stood written.

^a In Croatian, "two flies at a stroke" is a folk saying that corresponds to the one in English about killing two birds with one stone.

^b In the Croatian grading system, 5 is the highest and 1 is the lowest (fail) grade.

^c Grade 2, shaped like a swan, is the lowest passing grade.

My teachers were surprised. The young physics teacher showed the most surprise. He could not understand how a boy who had shown great interest in areas, weights, and masses at the beginning of the seventh grade could not being examined in front of the class, calculate the square footage of the apartment drawn on the board. The apartment had three rooms, two balconies, an irregularly-shaped dining room, a bathroom, and several narrow halls, and it was identical to the one out of which I had recently had to move. The teacher could not have known about any of that. I stood before him, sweating, moving my body through the door outlined in chalk, through the passage to my room, opening my window, and listening to the church bells at noon. I was only returned to reality as I was asked to try the calculation of a more modest footage. The teacher outlined a one-room apartment. The same thing happened. Instead of the bells, I heard the fans' cries and the signal to resume the match. "That's a fail; I'm sorry," said the teacher.

I improved my grade just before the end of the school year. It was not the same teacher. The one who had, unknowingly, deepened the wound in my biography by his drawings left our school a month after he had put the failing grade, the number one, which pierced its box both north and south, on my page in the class grade book. I didn't care where he had gone. I just wished he could somehow know that the new teacher had given me a final grade of five. Because the outline of the new apartment he had drawn on the board did not have any details, which reminded me of the one my mother and I had had to leave. The following year I won the school physics contest. By then, I had already decided what I would study at university. Said, done. After graduating from high school, I found myself enrolled in the university, with physics as a major.

I only ever saw my father in the media. He appeared in the company of dodgy characters, always in the first minutes of the daily news. He defended thieves and frauds, criminals and rapists, both the guilty and the innocent. Always successful and with a smile. My mother, after her putting me to sleep came to an end, replaced her storytelling with silence. She only talked if I asked her advice. And I did that often. Because I have to admit, I started to miss her stories. I didn't know at that time that illness had moved into my mother's body and that it was the illness that was stealing her words.

One evening, after I had started the course on teaching methodology in physics, I asked her if I should tell my professor that I was the student whom he failed at the beginning of his teaching career because he was not able to calculate the square footage of neither the large nor the small apartment. "Don't do it as yet; you'll have your chance. Silence means patience and safety," she replied.

I did as she told me. I waited.

In the exam, after he entered a 5 into my grade records, he told me that in his first workplace, at an elementary school—while he was waiting for an assistant position at the university, there was a boy in his class, exceptionally talented in physics, who bore the same name as me and even looked

like me. He also said that he was sorry he didn't know where that boy was now. He remembered he had failed the boy, and he still regretted it. Only after leaving the school, he learned that the boy had been going through a hard period.

He talked and talked. Faster and faster. I stopped listening. Is it the right moment? I kept thinking. I heard my mother say safety lies in silence.

And I did not tell him that the boy was sitting before him. I did as she told me. I waited.

"There is a time for everything," my mother said when I announced that it was me they had chosen to deliver the valedictory speech at graduation. She was lying in her hospital room in the Oncology Department. Her doctor did not mention months anymore. Instead, he talked about days. "I insist, no, I'm ordering it, the Dean said," I explained to my mother.

"And it's him, your first physics teacher," she was quick to see.

I knew that she and I were thinking the same. Her talking me into being patient had proven justified.

"I'll mention the square footage in my speech," I told her.

"I know," she answered.

"Together with the reasons why I wasn't able to do the calculation," I went on.

"I know," she repeated.

"But..." I tried.

"I know," she agreed.

"What do you know?" I asked.

"You want to invite your father," she said.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"For the story to make sense," she replied.

"Is that ok with you?" I pleaded.

"It is." She was not acting.

It was she who broke the uncomfortable silence. "I won't be there anyway," she said calmly. Consoling me. And then, at the same moment, we both said: "two flies at a stroke." And laughed. Mother pointed her fingers at the window. A whole family of flies was sitting in the sun there. "Just don't let them buzz; I'm sleepy."

The following day, on hearing the doctor's voice, the first thing I felt was anger at the flies. If they had buzzed, maybe they would have woken my mother from her sleep.

The valediction was greeted with a big applause. Starting with my personal story, I took up the language of a preacher, not expected of a scientist, and mentioned defiance, perseverance, and obstacles on the way to one's final goal. Just like her, who had taught me to tell stories and to listen, I found causal relationships in everything. At one point, my diploma fell from the Dean's hands. It was easy to calculate the speed of the fall. A second later, a man from the audience started to cry loudly. He did not take notice of all the women who turned their eyes to him in surprise. To them, he looked just like the respected and successful attorney who, only a month before, proved the innocence of one of the newly rich dodgy businessmen.

The camera had caught them smiling triumphantly in front of the entrance to a house whose footage, irrespective of one's grade in physics, would be hard to calculate.

(Children at a Distance, Zagreb, 2021)

THE WRITER'S BRILLIANCE

On the first Monday in June, at about 10 o'clock in the morning, without knocking, Vanja Šurmin entered the Personnel Department of the university she had been employed for the past 19 years, 4 months, and 3 days. In her employment records, pleasant moments tinged with the support of the older professors alternated with long months seasoned with challenges from colleagues of the same generation. A special section was devoted to the benevolent conversations in which she was forced to defend a very personal approach to literary history, considered unusual by the majority. Nevertheless, from the perspective of an ordinary observer of middle-class biographies, the 40-year-old professor of comparative literature, who confessed to the students in her seminars that she had serious difficulties with determining the main character of a novel, had every reason to be satisfied. She was editor of the most important literary theory series in the country, headed juries for renowned literary prizes, and gave guest lectures at European universities. She was well aware that year after year, her coworkers' envy of her blameless career was growing and that they would snigger and scoff at the long line of students, which would, starting at the door of her study every 1st workday of the week, be winding along the dimly lit passage on the ground floor. She addressed her students by their first names, told them about her awkwardness in the company of writers, and selected texts and literary periods which best corresponded to the comprehension of love by the young. In short, she knew how to point to the right title at the exact moment when it was needed to perform its therapeutic function on the targeted patient. She spent hours trying to convince us that no situation in life could be so wretched as to make it impossible for us if we could just turn it into a narrative to emerge as winners. At the student café, she used to have up to 100 coffees in a month, trying to reassure the 20-year-old girls by telling them that after the first unsuccessful romance, there would come another first one and that the following relationships would again be the first ones until the real one happened. And that one would again be the first. She illustrated her thoughts with snippets from her own biography. She was not afraid of disclosures. She would repeatedly stress that honesty was the only true sanctuary for both writer and the passionate reader. She was surprised at critics who were unable to understand this. She studied her ancestors' family tree and searched for the reasons for the name she bore. She talked about everything that was happening to her, about what she feared and what she wished for. We were convinced that Varja had hoped that one day there would be an ornate coach waiting at the university entrance for her, too, and sitting inside would be

the writer whose contemporary stories evoked the prose of the early last century. We wished for the day when she would be presented with a novel whose happy ending would involve a woman just like her. Honestly, we were rooting for her.

Today, looking at Varjas photo, printed on the last but one page of the largest European book fair catalog, it is clear to me that I never have before or after meeting a person who saw interconnections in everything, who remembered dates in a wondrous way, who would unashamedly stop before a city façade imagining the faces of the inhabitants hidden behind the walls. I try to have my coffee the way she usually did. A short one, espresso. Before I bring it to my lips, I gaze into the middle of the cup. I take a sip, check the taste, wait for a few seconds, and then finish the coffee. Looking into Varja's eyes, I can see why she reminded us of a little girl writing a letter to Santa at the end of October, who, suddenly overcome by fear for Santa's health and the health of his reindeers, forgets to mention her wishes. I would like to see her again and visit the hall where the most media-celebrated title of the Frankfurt fair is to be promoted. I fear that after 2 and a half years, she will not recognize me.

On her less good days, which she informed us about in the first sentences of her lectures, she used to say that she felt like an ailing person pouring our energy into her body and rejuvenating her exhausted cells. We felt that someone like her must also be writing something that would not find its place on the pages of scientific journals. Around 6 months before she entered the Personnel Department, and without any prior announcement, she brought the manuscript of her unfinished novel to our tutorial. "You are half my age; I'd like it if you could read this and give me your honest opinion. To see if there's any sense in finishing it," she said timidly.

"The other girls are also half her age," I thought. I was flattered that she had chosen me for the reading. That day, I flew through the city in boots stolen from the story by a beloved children's author.

It was a novel written from a man's perspective. Its subject was a disappointed writer who travels around the world. Staying in the most famous historical places, he seduces waitresses, local nightclub singers, hairdressers' assistants, shop assistants selling sweets, florists who make grave flower arrangements, seamstresses from modest boutiques, and early-morning suburban-line tram drivers. None of the stories, none of the women get closure. As soon as he promises to see them again, he falls for another. Everything that happens to him, he records in his diary. He goes through life as a collector of narrative material. And those he holds in his embrace, listening to their stories, cannot see that above their heads, texts are being created that they will never have the chance to read. His wanderings and thefts from the lives of others only come to an end when he meets a female writer and truly falls in love, not noticing, in his pubescent fascination, that a reversal of roles has occurred. When she suddenly, taking her notes with her, moves to another city and changes her phone number, the writer burns his diary.

Varja's thesis about the need for a story to be earned was clearly recognizable in the manuscript. Her analysis of literary texts was based on it. The imperative "a story has to be earned!" was the most recurring sentence in all her lectures. But Varja was convinced that her theory was not loud enough and that despite her repeating it over and over again, it did not succeed in reaching her colleagues.

I liked the manuscript, which covered 97 pages. However, I was not sure that I had managed, reading it, to free the sentences of the color of Varja's voice. The following Monday, she was not ready to talk about her unfinished novel. "We'll do it next time; thank you for finishing it so fast," she said and showed me a novel that I should read. "The writer is coming to Zagreb after 15 years to promote his new book," she added. "At the Magis bookstore, in the main square, on Friday evening; if you have nothing more interesting planned, I'd be glad to see you there. I'll tell the others, too."

Her following lecture, on Thursday afternoon, was devoted to the subject of "literature, exile, involvement, success." The writer to whose new novel I had been alerted the day before was central to the lecture.

At the beginning of the most recent war, he had left his country, distanced himself from national politics, and presented his well-paid assessments on shared guilt to foreign journalists. "Did he also pack his two state literary prize medals and copies of his five novels published in the most popular literary series to take away in his suitcase? That question will be answered in the future by his biographers," Varja said and started on the female author who had chosen the same path in the early 90s. Parts of his interviews got published in our daily papers. And supplemented by editors' notes. His Musilesque novels were only rarely reviewed. Their final assessments were far more reserved than various analysis which openly insisted on the brilliance of his style and intriguing narrative techniques which defied the conventional manners of developing a story. "His characters dream up the end at the very beginning" was a recurring assessment in the reviews of his prose published by the most esteemed Berlin publisher.

The day of the writer's return to the city in which he had made his first steps and published his first stories was noted only by a local television station, founded with the capital obtained from the sale of a former communist committee headquarters. The audience at the promotion included the author's sister, two former neighbors escorted by their spouses, the leader of the main opposition party, and a few of us students led by Varja. Following the faltering introduction by a critic who was convinced that the audience was not acquainted with the author's writings and that the author had largely forgotten his mother tongue in the 10 or so years of his life "up there," Varja raised her arm and asked to speak. Stressing that she felt she had to add something to the young colleague's interpretation, it took her just a few minutes to single out the recurring themes in the author's narrative opus, describe the latest novel's structure, elucidates its rootedness

in the middle-European tradition, and disclose the writer's poetic parents, while he was looking at her with growing admiration. The writer got up and kissed her hand. He did that even before; by voicing the last vowel of her ending word, she gave the audience a sense that her contribution to the improvement of the presentational atmosphere was about to be concluded. "There is no greater betrayal than the betrayal of literature," was the sentence she uttered as she approached us a few moments later. She was blushing; she seemed to be justifying herself for breaking the prescribed presentational protocol. Or was she reminded of a pupil who wanted to impress her strict teacher with her readiness and prove herself better than the others? Or was she just embarrassed before us for not repeating her invitation for the promised coffee at the nearby café?

We nodded to her in support, wished her a happy holiday, and went out into the main square. Night was falling, and the city was redolent with the scent of Advent. Under the high fir tree decorated with traditional Licitar hearts, something magical happened before our eyes. A copper coach appeared with Varja's name in place of the registration plate. In my hand, I was holding the novel with the author's dedication. In some places, the letters of my name, written in ink, were touching the lower surface of a female proper noun in the dative case, which was followed by an exclamation mark.

After reading the novel, which had two parallel storylines, one following the love stories of a middle-aged man, a respectable dentist, and his wife, and the other portraying a writer whose name would be found in all relevant encyclopedias and his mistress, I wondered which of the two women had deserved to be mentioned in the printed dedication. Numerous sentences reminded me of the thoughts Varja used to convey to us. I still believe that Varja met the author for the first time at that promotion. Anyway, if things were different, Varja would surely have told us.

And when 6 months later, a notice appeared on the door of her study announcing that after June 15th, Varja's exams would be taken over by a professor from another department, we felt her sudden departure to be a kind of betrayal. At the student café, her seminar students would share a farewell coffee with her and then let their favorite professor become a thing of the past. We will confess our anger to each other and show different levels of surprise. In the following 2 months, I will leaf through Varja's lectures every day, preventing myself from letting the fire have them; in the same way, the hero of her novel donated his diary to the flames. I will also feel the wish to burn the copy of her unfinished manuscript, which she had never wanted to talk about. I did not find out if she had finished it.

There was a rumor among the students that she was seriously ill and that she was getting treatment abroad; the department secretary just shook her head at our inquiries, and the head of the department did not show readiness to talk about his younger colleague. I kept vainly hoping that she would contact me; by picture postcard, text message,

or by e-mail. I wished she would choose me again. I felt she had boarded the coach that Advent night, but I feared what had become of the coach around midnight.

It was not before autumn that a yellow-hued weekly brought a picture of the national author celebrated in the German literary market. The image of the smiling man was enriched by the information about his romance with Varja Šurmin, who had abandoned her position at the oldest university for him and devoted herself to the editing of his Berlin novels. Maybe she has become a heroine earned of her story; I said to my colleagues as we had our first coffee at the beginning of the new semester. "She'll turn up as suddenly as she had left," added one of Varja's former student. But before that, I came to her.

Around 2 and a half years after the notice about Varja's departure, I traveled to Frankfurt to visit my sister. I wanted to go through the literature which would help me to produce my graduation paper on "Possibilities for an objective assessment of a literary work." I arrived just at the time of the fair.

About 10 minutes before the book presentation was scheduled to start, I entered the packed hall and sat down in the only free chair, the first one in the fourth row, next to the literary critic whose handsome face I used to see every week next to his column in a high-circulation weekly. Varja passed my seat and approached the presenters' table. Several moments later, the Magis author and his editor came in. I was puzzled by the editor's introductory address and his "short summary of the basic storylines." For a moment, it seemed to me that I couldn't understand the language which I used to speak with my father's mother anymore, that something had happened to me when I saw Varja and that I found myself back in our university's passages at the time when Varja would speak about the earning of stories. I listened to the content of the great novel titled "The Balkan Gate." A writer drifting through capital cities, making love to hairdressers, tram drivers, and cloakroom attendants, stealing from other lives to secure material for his text. The moment he meets a female author of the same persuasion, he becomes the victim. It all leads to the burning of his diary, but the diary continues to live in the female writer's prose. His characters, together with him, the one who established them, have joined the characters of "her" text. When the editor ended his account, I got up. Just to draw Varja's attention to myself. She looked at me and waved her hand. Then she took the critic's role. "The way this woman speaks," I heard a voice behind me. "As if she was speaking about her own life," the young photographer replied and pressed the button of his camera. And Varja, at the Frankfurt Fair, was lecturing her students. The author thanked her, kissed her hand the same way he had done on that evening in Zagreb, and said just one sentence: "I know this is a great novel."

The journalists approached him quickly, cameras clicked, and female admirers brought their books to be signed. On the third page of "The Balkan Gate" stood Varja's name in the dative case.

When I approached and flooded her with the words, "But you know that I have a copy of your manuscript. I can't understand you. Isn't it a betrayal," she was leaning against the wall. She hugged me. "My dear, you all have to forgive me. Do you think it was easy for me to do that? I thought that I, too, was entitled to a place in a fairytale coach; it is a betrayal of myself, I admit it, but you always have to look above; this is not a betrayal of literature, which is much more important to me, you know very well that nobody was listening to me when I was walking along our passage, infallibly knowing which text was drawn from life itself, and which was just a product of untalented, burdensome career ladder climbing," she said in a breath, without pausing.

"Then why didn't you publish the novel yourself rather than letting him have it?" I went on, disappointed, and turned toward the writer, who was still surrounded by critics and readers. "He was undergoing a crisis, and I was aware that my concept about earning would be sure to reach the public under his name rather than mine. If I had come out with this text, it would be considered just a mediocre text by a literary scholar who'd have done better not to publish it. This way, you must understand."

Of course, I understood. I also knew that it was she who had finished the novel. The transfer of characters fitted into her theory about the impossibility of determining the main characters. I told her about how we felt after she left, how we had a farewell coffee and promised to forget.

Acquaintances started to approach her. "She'd rather be with me," I thought and whispered: "Professor, I have to go." She handed me her card, a small piece of cardboard with something written in pencil. Varja's sentence, "I'm coming to Zagreb for Christmas," was uttered with a goodbye kiss in German.

The next day, while browsing through scientific articles on objective literary histories, I suddenly felt doubt. Had I really understood Varja's sentence? What did she say, "I'm coming" or "I'm returning"? I was only sure it would be for Christmas. Glass will be bursting in the piercing cold. The square will again be fragrant with the scent of Advent, and it will be there that the author of the thought that "No situation in life can be so wretched as to make it impossible for us if we can just turn it into a narrative, to emerge as winners" will appear in Cinderella's dress. And the Kaptol bells will be chiming at midnight.

(Book of women, men, cities, and goodbyes, Zagreb, 2009)

YOU ONLY LOVE ONCE

You won't find anything about my neighbor, Mrs C, in encyclopedia entries or history textbooks, not even in memorial volumes on amateur choirs or local folk-dance groups. In this day, her uneventful biography would interest neither psychotherapists nor writers of romances. For Mrs C faced the sad moments in her life with quiet acceptance and did not search for their roots in her childhood or determine traumatic

points caused by some actions of her immediate or long-ago ancestors. Those who used to talk about her while she was among them have already forgotten her. She died 8 years ago, taking with her the title of the oldest citizen of our small flatland town. Toward the end of her life, she was angered by whoever asked her, looking at her face unfurrowed by wrinkles, in which long-ago year she had been born and what the long-ago year of her first marriage had been. She considered the adjective long-ago, as she used to explain to me, simply rude.

"I won't regret leaving this earthly life," she said to me a few months before the news reached me about her death. She lived alone. The only real company she had were her memories. She used to air them before me with a passion that could be envied even by contemporary female writers celebrated beyond the borders of our lovely and small homeland. When the detested socialist brotherhood state was finally entered into the register of deaths, she joyfully said that she could finally die a peaceful death now. She could not forgive Yuga for the misery brought upon both of her husbands by the country's lawlessness: bloody feet earned on the Way of the Cross for the first one and a damp cell of the most severe political prison for the second one. The priest based his funeral address on the concepts of faithfulness and goodness, and the first to throw a lump of clay and red rose petals onto the coffin was my mother, the deceased's most loyal friend. Almost all the citizens wanted to witness Mrs C's departure. She whose beauty and the proud walk was admired by men 4, 5, and 6 decades ago was leaving them, she who elicited the jealousy of women her age for the way her only gray hairs appeared in a single streak, reminding their husbands of the brave Indira Gandhi. She used to cut sewing fabric and knit according to patterns of her own rather than taking them from magazines such as *Wool*, *Practical Woman*, or the German *Burda*. She was a regular theater-goer; she tended flower gardens and baked cakes from recipes of Budapest pastry shops.

She came to the town in the 50s of the last century. She had just turned 30. She used to walk in the park on the arm of her first husband. The tall, slightly stooped, a fair-haired man turned the heads of girls and their mothers. Mrs C was aware of all that and confessed to herself that she rather enjoyed being in the company of a man who attracted the attention of other women. She believed in his loyalty. She told me that in the voice of a lovestruck teenager, repeating the same story year by year. The second husband, whom she married only a few months after the fair-haired one left her for the embrace of his pregnant mistress, was seldom mentioned. When she did talk about him, her words became calmer. She did not accuse the first one. She only dreamed about him. Him and the 5 years they had spent together. She hid her dreams from the second one, with whom she spent 4 decades. And he, drawing lines on hammer paper designing a bridge to link what God had naturally set apart, imagined her elegantly walking along the railing, and stopping halfway to admire the power of the green-blue river flowing through the land of their great-grandfathers. He used to get up at dawn to design while his body still felt rested and

his thoughts were entirely clear. After 2 hours, he would make coffee. He served it in two thin porcelain cups. Both are white but very different. Hers was more rounded and much larger. At the bottom, it was decorated with a flower of forget-me-not and a number guaranteeing the quality of the product. Every Saturday morning, he would polish the copper coffee pot, bought in the Sarajevo Čaršija, and the small silver tray. Mrs C never mentioned her ex in his hearing. Her untold story could be read from the walls of her whitewashed room. To him, it was the clearest in the mornings, flooded by silence. His wife wouldn't utter a single sound. She would merely spill coffee onto her nightdress, add more sugar than usual, break her fingernail, catch on a chair, and upset a vase with flowers. All this would happen when she had dreamed of the first one. The day would be overshadowed by the nightmare. She once confided to me that she used to worry she would hurt the second one, a good and reliable man, by calling him by the first one's name. She was convinced that she was successful in hiding her secret from the designer of the bridges. And that, during their summer vacations in Opatija, he didn't recognize what lay behind her wish to go for a drink in the garden of the hotel Kvarner every single evening and listen to her favorite singer Ivo Robić. The song "You Only Love Once" was a regular part of the night's art program. The Second one was hurt by the verses endorsed by Mrs C as the only truth. He saw it all, but he kept up the hope that time, which eases a woman's wounds, would bring him into her heart.

In short, Mrs C believed in the architect's blindness. Until the winter morning when the morning coffee arrived, served with a special addition, a neat cutout from a newspaper page. Maybe the size of a sixteenth of the page. Before she took the first sip, Mrs C took the cutout, put on her glasses, and went pale. It was the death notice for the fair-haired one. He passed unexpectedly, as stated by the inconsolable lawful wife and only son. The black-and-white photo showed the first one smiling as if he was reassuring someone. The only question was, which of the two of them? "I knew it all from the very beginning. I was naïve to hope," said the second one, passing his loved C a handkerchief. "I couldn't bring down your bridge to him, and I wasn't able to build my bridge to you," he added.

They didn't have their coffee that morning. The next day, the second one did not even make it. Neither did he make coffee the morning after. Nor in the following 10 years. Mrs C stopped having coffee entirely. In our last conversation, she confessed that she had taken it up again only after she laid the builder of bridges to his final rest. And that she wasn't even sure if she could recognize the real taste again or if she was merely sipping the memory of him. And that maybe she was adding sin to the memory.

I listened attentively, staring at the tarnished silver tray. Ever since that day, I haven't stopped asking myself about how much truth there is in the verses of Robić's oldie and whether all my loves after, especially those that started with an invitation for a coffee, have really been just an illusion.

(In the beginning and in the end there was coffee, Zagreb, 2014).