

From Timeline

Jola liked to microwave her soup for too long, and then let it cool to a warm temperature. It had been her mother's way. She stirred rhythmically, submerging the red skin that kept forming. After about a minute she moved on to a caressing motion, slowly folding the thick tomato blend over itself until she thought it was ready for a test. She brought the spoon to her mouth – blew – when someone knocked at the door. It gave her a jump; the spoon shook in her hand. Hours later, when awake in bed and replaying the evening in her mind, she believed that had she not been annoyed by the flecks of tomato soup on her T-shirt, she probably wouldn't have opened the door so late in the evening. She had no way to see who was on the other side, it could have been anyone.

Jola had often wondered how he would have aged, regularly manipulating the young image of him in her mind to match her own changed face. Her daydreams had missed so much. He now wore rimless spectacles, dotted by the night's fine rain, and his face was paler than she remembered. The skin around his eyes, nose, and forehead had been creased by the years that had passed between them in a way that she couldn't have predicted. The new stubble on his face and neck was turning grey and looked coarse; there was a small rash where the stubble met his collar. And after all this time, he had held onto that wonderful, almost black, curly hair, and there was still his flesh-coloured mole just beside his right nostril.

When she had opened the door, her first instinct was to shut it again. She caught him looking at his watch with a tired seriousness that she wished she hadn't seen. But then he looked up at her, and his face broke into a barely contained smile.

His eyes, hardly magnified by his spectacles, glistened in the dim light coming from her house. She realised she was still holding onto the inside door handle. She let it go and brought her hands up to her chest for lack of something better to do with them. Mujo searched her face in his way, his eyes pausing on certain features and then moving on to the next. He was biting the inside of his lip.

Jola, pa, gdje si?

Jola let herself smile; then let it go into laughter. It would have been funny if he had spoken in English, but it had been so long since she had heard her language. He started to laugh too, unveiling a lovely set of new white teeth. The silver veneers had all been replaced.

Pa – ovdje! Gdje si ti?

He climbed the last steps, swapping his briefcase to the other hand. There was hardly enough room for both of them on the top ledge but he stepped up any way. Jola shuffled back until her heels hit the door frame; she kept her hands up to her chest. The blood in her veins seemed to pulse louder, her heart pounded against her wrists, and just as she was to step over the frame and into her house, he lifted his free arm and touched her long black hair. From his hand came a faint smell of leather, the essence of an aftershave, and then finally his natural scent.

He could still barely hold his smile. The new grey stubble gathered in the creases around his mouth and pulled at the same time on his chin, highlighting and shadowing his jaw in such a way that she had never seen before. In that moment, the image of his youthful face finally settled among all her other memories of that time. For too long it had remained suspended; imagining what he might have looked like seemed crude and untrustworthy, but the unchanged image of him as a young man made her feel as though she didn't have a right to think about him at all. Now, her memory could realign, and the peace this gave her, even for just a moment, meant she didn't question why he had knocked on her door.

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Fourteen years ago, when Mujo had called her from London and told her he wasn't going to join her in Sarajevo, Jola remembered wishing she could

spend her days and nights asleep. She never got the chance; her mother had started to believe that she was going to die at any moment, saying she felt pains in her chest just like Jola's father had. Jola had to wrestle the telephone out of her mother's hands, saying again and again that there was nothing wrong with her, and if she called the ambulance every day they would stop coming. In these moments, with her mother's white and petrified eyes, pleading to let her go, then her screams that she had raised a devil, a child that would kill her, there was no chance to think about Mujo.

But when it was silent and her mother was asleep, Jola would often move through the apartment, sometimes folding laundry or dusting the furniture, not silently crying over her mother but crying because of Mujo. She believed she hated him for a few days, but the weeks and months spent in the apartment she had grown up in, with her mother who slept for half of the day and half of the night, meant a pure longing soon overpowered her pride and hatred. Sometimes she fought against it, trying to punch it out of her mind and body with the terrifying weakness she felt during a fight in a dream.

She quickly gave up struggling. She couldn't unstitch Mujo and all that she had felt for him from her mind, so she allowed her feelings of longing to snake around her whenever they came. And though its strength faded over the years, she still felt it. It had happened only moments before he knocked on her door; caressing her soup, feeling the warmth of the bowl in her hand, she had felt an electricity in her fingers as she manoeuvred the spoon through the mixture.

It had just always been so much easier to let it come. She accepted long ago that she would never shake her young desires for him, perhaps because they never had the chance to grow into the desire of her age. She was thirty-five, and during her peaks of longing believed with all the passion of teenage blood that she would have stripped entirely naked the instant she saw him again. Yet she could never try to find him when she ran away from Sarajevo to London, and now she stood at the entrance to her house, clothed, and letting a flinch escape as he touched her hair.

Mujo saw this, and his smile relaxed.

'It's just so long now, beautiful. Before it was boy-short,' he said, lowering his hand.

She pushed down answer after answer. All of them came from different parts of her and all of them could have meant something more than she intended, so she decided it was best to say nothing. He shouldn't have started talking about before. They needed to sit down, have a drink, talk about ordinary things.

'What's wrong?' he said.

'You must be cold, it's been raining.'

He smiled again.

'I know.'

'Would you like to come in? Do you have time?'

'Yes.'

She moved to the side, holding the door open for him.

Mujo had always done what he wanted, and that is why he looked so good doing it. Every movement, how he crossed his legs when he became interested in a conversation, the way he held a glass to a can of beer as he poured, even his walk through a crowded room seemed natural, instinctive, yet purposeful at the same time. But now he seemed awkward. He shuffled in, careful not to brush past her as he walked through the door. It took him a while to take off his coat, which he then bundled into his arms so as to not let any drops of rain fall on her floor. He then remembered his shoes, tucked the coat under one arm and crouched down, untying both with just the one hand. She wanted to tell him to relax, even keep the shoes on, but he seemed so determined. Maybe he had thought of this moment too, replaying it over and over in his mind, slowly changing it with new additions and letting go of the exhausted pieces of the daydream. Maybe she didn't react the way he wanted when he touched her hair. She caught sight of his socks. They were brightly coloured and striped, a style she just knew he would have never bought for himself.

'I think my slippers will be too small for you. Are your feet cold?' said Jola, taking the coat from him.

'They are fine.' He put his hands in his trouser pockets. Now he could barely hold her gaze.

'Mujo. It was fine to touch my hair ... but I haven't seen you in a long time. Ten years maybe?'

His eyes still couldn't settle.

'*Joj*, this place is so different from your mama's house!'

'What did you imagine?'

'I don't know. I didn't expect anything, it's nice.'

She put his coat on the radiator to dry and walked down the hallway to the living area. She didn't hear any footsteps behind her; he was still by the front door, feeling the varnished wood that formed the left side of her hallway, then the tassels on the paper lantern hanging from the arch of her closet door.

'Mujo? What are you drinking?'

He made his way in but didn't reply; gently chiming the copper Indian elephants that hung by the side of her kitchen cabinet, before going on to rub the plastic petals of the fake poppy plant on top of the television. He studied the plates she had hung on the walls, the various posters and porcelain clown masks. He lifted every single photo frame, touched the spines of almost all her books, chuckling occasionally or letting go an *ah-ha*.

She thought her house was perfect until he came. She wanted to follow him, get rid of the half-empty mugs on the shelves or the fallen leaves from her plants before he got a chance to see. There were places that hadn't been dusted and tight corners of the room that the vacuum hadn't reached in a while. And then there was the monstrosity in the right-hand corner of her ceiling. At some point in the life of the house, a hole the size of a tennis ball had been created to make way for various wires. The hole looked as though it had only needed a single blow from a large hammer to be made, and the wires were each of a different thickness and had been painted in magnolia many times. She didn't know where they led, and some of them just cut short, hanging down like vines. Occasionally she would see the corner of the ceiling with fresh eyes, and a few minutes later she would forget again.

Jola wanted to start the evening again, get him to stand outside her door so she could dust everything, tack some kind of colourful cloth over the wires, put on a dress or something. He had known her at her mother's place on Kralja Tvrtka, where the upkeep of the family home had been her mother's life.