

## SENKA MARIĆ

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Summer 2014 was marked by three events.

On the seventeenth of June, just a few days after the afternoon which you spent sitting on your marital bed, in which the two of you had not slept together for more than a year, gazing at the emptiness of the white wall opposite you, in a silence broken only by an occasional weary word, your husband was packing his clothes into two large sports bags. You had yourself brought a third from the lumber room and put into it two single sheets, a pillow, a terry cloth blanket, three small and two large towels. As you were zipping up the bag, you thought of the winter that was to come. You went back to the store where you spent five minutes looking for a large plastic bag into which you stuffed a duvet. The hall was crammed with things. He began several times to say something. But stopped as soon as he saw you standing with your hands on your hips, breathing deeply. He managed to pick up all three bags and the plastic one. Eyes fixed on the floor, he left the flat, hurrying down the steps towards the taxi that was already waiting in the street. Afterwards you spent a long, long time sitting alone in front of that bare wall, gradually realising that he had not left behind him a sense of emptiness, just a sense of defeat.

On the fifteenth of July your left shoulder began to hurt. Mostly at night. You couldn't sleep, so you sat on the bed and cried. It turned out that calcium had built up in the shoulder – a spiky deposit of calcium that damaged the surrounding tissue and caused inflammation. The doctor said that all you could do was take pain killers and wait for it to pass. But you hate waiting. And you hate pills. They are at odds with your need to control everything, with your inability to believe anyone enough to ask for help. You keep reducing the amount of the dose. You take half as many as prescribed. In that hot July, there was nothing in your world apart from pain. It was dust covering over time that refused to pass. You tied a scarf round your neck. You placed your left arm in it. So that it didn't move. To make it hurt less. All you could think of was that you were stronger than the pain. More persistent. *It will pass, and I shall remain.* You think a bit also about how unlucky you are, how for years bad things have piling up, one after another. They just don't stop. *Maybe it's because I believe I can do it, that I'm stronger? If I were to scream: Enough! Would it stop? Would that wheel crushing everything in front of it turn away from the path of your life? It's night. It's hot. The children are asleep. It's the perfect time for crying. You yell: Enough! Enough already!* But deep inside you don't believe it. You know you can take more.

It's the twenty-sixth of August. It hurts a bit less. You even manage to sleep. You have to be very careful in bed. One wrong move is enough to leave you in agony. When you turn from your right to your left side, in order to keep your shoulder still, you take firm hold of your right armpit with your left hand. Part of your hand is then on your right breast. As your body turns to the left, slowly onto your back then towards your left hip, your hand slips back. The fingers pressed into your flesh pass over your right breast. And then you feel it. There, on the side, on the edge of your breast, almost outside it. Like a round stone that had lodged itself in the top of your bathing suit.

You lower your hand. You lie on your back. You look at the ceiling. You can't feel the pain in your shoulder, just your heart in your mouth. You sit up in bed and feel yourself

again. It's still there, it moves slightly under the pressure of your fingers. You take your hand away and lie down on your back again. You can't close your eyes. You don't blink. Your eyes are wide open and they devour the ceiling. The house changes shape and dimensions. It folds up. It pours into your eyes. And with it the town, the surrounding mountains, the river that is trying to flow away from it, the sea, kilometre after kilometre of land, a whole continent folded like the casing of a hot scorched chestnut, until there is nothing but a dead, black sky.

*But I must be wrong!*

You get up again and probe. Your breath fills the room. It bounces off the walls. It makes the summer night day. The round lump moves away from pressure (its touch is forever etched into your fingers' memory). Panic is mud. It pours into your mouth. The night is swallowing you.

You resolve to shatter this image. Like a mirror with a stone thrown into it. After it all that remains is a dull sensation that you are not yet aware of how much has been taken from you.

Your breathing calms. It is slow, inaudible. You say: *You'll go to sleep now. You won't think about anything.* It's easy. Your thoughts are in any case too scattered. You're somewhere above words, above sense and meaning. All you feel clearly is your skin, the border dividing you and the world. You sleep, never more fully, unconsciously, until the next morning, when you will discover that the little lump in your boob has repressed the pain in your shoulder.

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How does the story that is crumbling under your tongue and refusing to take on a firm shape begin to be told?

You knew on that day, sixteen years ago, when your mother's diagnosis was confirmed that you would get cancer?

Or:

Ever since that day, sixteen years ago, when your mother's diagnosis was confirmed, you have been convinced that you'd never get cancer?

Both are equally true. The dots that accumulate side by side to contain that moment, from so many years ago, are two lines forming a perfect oval and dismembering the rectilinear logic of time. Two parallel realities, of which one truly becomes real only at the moment when it reaches its aim. You knew that you would get it and you were convinced that you never would. The present makes the past retrospectively true. You are imprisoned in a reality that does not admit it could ever have been different.

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You were a sad child? That's how it seems now. You didn't lack anything, but you could never free yourself from the feeling that everything was somehow crooked, that there was something dark and heavy lurking behind everything. And yet all that time you thought that you knew you would be happy. Because you were predestined for happiness. In a world in which happiness does not exist.

Is it possible to identify the dot that sliced into the flesh of time like a knife, determining the path that is leading you to this moment?

You're little. You're sitting under the table in Granddad's study. You don't remember whether you're hiding. You don't remember what happened before, or afterwards. You're wearing a red and green checked dress and thick tights. You feel dirty. Bad. Your tights are white. There are treacherous, grey marks on the feet. Your hair is brown. You don't know now whether really is but you think it's greasy, stuck down. This image overlaps with the image of a cat coming out of the darkness of the abandoned cellar. You wouldn't want to touch it. But that little girl under the table (is it really you?) longs for touch. Granddad's study is on the ground floor. The kitchen and living room are on the first floor. Everyone's always upstairs. Why are you alone downstairs? Especially as you're afraid of the Gypsy who'll come and steal you. He looks like Sandokan, but isn't in colour. He's a strange black and white figure who creeps into your house, hides behind the curtain at the bottom of the stairs, and waits for you. From Granddad's study you can leap out straight onto the stairs. The Gypsy-Sandokan can't get you. You rush upstairs. Gran is upstairs, in the kitchen. The pressure-cooker is whistling. Pots are banging. The smell of food is heavy. You don't want to eat soup. You don't want to eat anything. Gran moves unbelievably fast, she juggles with pans and plates. She is spinning around in a blue sleeveless dress. She doesn't see you. But you feel better because she's here.

In your memory, the only part of the whole house that is undamaged is the kitchen. Like a tower on top of an enchanted castle. One whole wall is windows. The light gleams. You never forget the darkness and silence raging down below, beneath it. In the light you're even dirtier.

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You don't open your eyes immediately. You lie. Waiting. Thinking that way everything will disappear. Birds are singing and it occurs to you that you're happy because it's summer and no windowpane separates you from the world. You get out of bed, go to the bathroom and have a lengthy shower. To start with your hand avoids that place. You think that perhaps it isn't there after all, perhaps it's all a mistake. You'll call some friends. You'll go for a coffee. You'll drink wine instead, or whisky, or cherry brandy, whatever. You'll raise a loud toast. You'll laugh at that wandering bullet that whistled through your head, missing you completely.

The lump is still there. Relentlessly present. More malleable than last night. Dancing under your wet skin.

From the wardrobe you take a lilac dress, one of the nicest you have, bare-shoulders, no straps. It falls straight, over your lovely, firm breasts, down to your knees. You put your hair up. You put on make-up. You think you're beautiful. You glance at the sleeping children, drunk with the August heat, calmed by the gentle cool of the early morning and you go to your GP.

When you start talking you realise that you're talking too fast. Or not enough. The day is too dense to be able to take your words in. You lower the top half of your dress. You say nothing while he feels your breasts. He purses his lips, raises his eyebrows. He nods slowly, lowering his eyes. You feel a weight in your stomach. You ought to have been moved on from this starting point. You had counted on this spot as a place from which your life would start pouring into a recognisable current. Into a telephone invitation for a coffee that would not be a coffee. A celebration of a bullet avoided. An instant of crystal awareness of everything that you're doing wrong, and you'd never make the same mistakes again. You would love those worthy of your love. You'd eat healthily. Do yoga. Be aware of the moment.

The doctor wrote out a form and sent you to the hospital.

There were two doctors there. One who wasn't sure what he thought about the multitude of black and white dots making an image of the inside of your breasts through the ultrasound apparatus. And the other, summoned by the first. He put another layer of cold gel on your breasts and circled over them with the ultrasound probe. They agreed that there was nothing. The second one told you to bring your report from your regular check-up of six months earlier, which was perfectly clear, and make an appointment for a mammogram in a year's time.

You go out into the street. Maybe you already know and your hands are shaking. You feel like crying, but you don't want to blot your mascara. You want to go on being beautiful. You tell yourself to be quiet, although there are no words in your mouth. You tell yourself: *Don't look on the black side! Don't look into the dark! Turn your back on the abyss!* You get into the car and drive, although you don't know where you're headed.

Then you see him in the street. The radiologist you have been entrusting your boobs to for years now, determined to anticipate the illness that ravaged your mother's body. You had looked for him in the hospital corridors an hour earlier, but were told that he wasn't there. Now you stopped the car, in the middle of the road, in a crush of speeding cars, and ran after him. You told him that you knew you were crazy, to forgive you, because they had said you were fine. But you already know, you feel that stone under your skin, that sob of your flesh that has had enough of pain that you swallowed silently like a tasteless meal in a strange house. He smiles and tells you not to worry. He'll expect you in his clinic at three that afternoon. You'll go through it all. Everything will quite certainly be all right. You know that he can't know anything of what he's saying. But you feel calm because he won't send you home and tell you to come back in a year's time, not giving you any further thought.

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When you went in, on the fifteenth of September, he said: *Have you really come on your own?* Four days earlier he had done an MRI scan and a biopsy. It would take a couple of weeks to get the results. When he had got to know your lump with ultrasound, that same day that you had chased him down the street, he was convinced that you were fine. That it looked benign. Six months earlier there had been nothing there. *But still, because of the family anamnesis, we'll do an MRI scan and a biopsy. Don't worry. It's looking good!* You would wait for the best moment, the period between the seventh and twelfth day of your menstrual cycle to do everything.

Then, four days earlier, when he did the scan, he didn't say anything. He didn't want to look you in the eye. He muttered that he was busy. That he didn't have time. That he'd let you know as soon as he had the result of the biopsy. You had seen him earlier going into the MRI room and looking at your reading. For a whole five minutes. Later, when he was doing the biopsy and inserting the needle with which he removed little pieces of the lump from your body (oh, what a brutally dull and final sound), you talked about your daughters who were the same age, about yoga and the summer that was coming to an end. About everything else you were silent as you breathed deeply, lying on a narrow bed, covered with a green sheet. For the following four days you didn't think about anything. You weren't in a hurry to be scared.

On Monday morning at ten o'clock the nurse called you and asked you to come to his office at eleven. Minutes are the slowly strained excess of eternity. You dress slowly. You put on your make-up lengthily and carefully. You fix your hair. You put on a ring and earrings. You get into the car and drive to the hospital.

‘Yes, I’ve really come on my own,’ you even smiled.

‘We have bad, but also good news,’ he said, finally looking you in the eye.

‘Let’s start with the bad,’ that’s what you said.

It wasn’t courage.

‘It is carcinoma.’

‘OK,’ you said, ‘OK.’

Something in you wanted to sob, to burst into tears. But all of it together; the room on the ground floor of the city hospital, the big desk behind him with a huge computer monitor showing some twenty images of the inside of your breasts, the big black chair on which he tilted gently to the left, then a bit to the right, you on the low couch opposite holding one hand in the other in your lap, the sharp blue sky that seeped through the cracks in the blinds and the scraping of someone’s soles on the linoleum in the corridor, all that seemed inadequately real, like a mistake in reality that would be put right at any moment. And everything would go back to its right place.

‘But, we’re in time – that’s the good news.’

‘Good,’ you say, ‘good.’

For an instant, the room tightens round your neck. You think you are going to cry. But the very next moment you realise how pointless and unnecessary that gesture would be. Superfluous. You lean forward. You listen carefully to what he’s saying. That you have to arrange for an operation. See a surgeon to discuss whether the whole breast should be removed or only the quadrant where the tumour is. And some lymph glands. The surgeon will decide how many. He doesn’t say what will happen if there’s a tumour in them. He talks about a good prognosis for a carcinoma discovered so early.

‘This is definitely early, definitely in time.’

His words are an anchor that make it possible for reality not to dissolve.

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When you were eleven you moved out of your house into a small apartment. On the fourth floor of a four-storey building. There were no windows in the entrance hall. For a long time, it seems to you for the three whole years you’ve been living here, a fault with the electrical installations means that there is no light in the hallway. It’s always dark. Even during the day. Only at night it’s thicker, heavier. Like tar. Like blood. You stop in front of the building, under your windows, and call. The door of your apartment is opened and you run up as fast as you can. You break the darkness with your body. Towards that opening at the top from which golden light gleams. Your heart thumps in your ears. You’re never quick enough.

Sometimes there’s no one at home. You set off several times but go back. You take a deep breath and run. With one hand you hold onto the handrail, the other flies over the wall. Your hands shake. The handrail shakes. You jerk, you fall, your calves are always bruised. Those stretched rows of concrete steps are the intestines of an enormous animal. Down below gapes the cellar, like Hades. You’ve been swallowed and you’re running upwards, towards its mouth, for it to spit you out, for you to be saved.

It’s five in the afternoon. The sky is grey and it reaches down extinguishing the light. What little light is left reaches the first floor. As long as you can see, you walk slowly and carefully. You tell yourself it’s all fine. There’s no need to be scared. You can make out your hands, the right one on the handrail, the left on the wall. You can’t see your feet. They’ve been swallowed by the darkness. Your little neighbour Saša saw you coming in. He sat down on the ground, in the dark of the second floor. When you reached him he grabbed you by your

right ankle. Your shriek reverberated through the blackness. On every floor four doors opened. They cut through the darkness with crisscrossing shafts of yellow light. Hatidža, the Gypsy from the first floor ran up and brought you a glass of water and sugar. You don't stop screaming. Your hands are trembling. The glass knocks against your teeth. Hatidža strokes your hair. She leans your head on her chest. She smells of the soup that's already bubbling on her cooker. Other voices wind around you. From the darkness you hear Saša's quiet sobbing.

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This is a story about the body. Its struggle to feel whole while reality shatters it into fragments. The gash goes from the right nipple towards your back, after five centimetres it makes a gentle curve to the right and continues to your armpit. It's still fresh and red. *You haven't taken that much away*, you say to the surgeon. He nods proudly. He's done a good job. He stretched the breast from above so that what's missing doesn't show. You both smile in satisfaction.

That's later. While you're lying in the hospital bed, after the operation, your breasts are wrapped in large bandages. Your hand goes to feel, to guess the size of your breast, but you stop. It's early days, you don't want to know yet. And it still seems to you that this isn't really you. That it isn't really your body. That there's no tube coming out of it attached at the other end to a plastic bottle, filled with brown blood. And outside it's September and just two days earlier, when you came to the hospital, it was summer. Now there's rain in your window and wind is wildly dispersing the steam belching out of the hospital laundry on the floor below.

A few days later you're home. In the evening, when everyone's asleep, you take off the bandages and stand in front of the mirror. Your right breast is smaller. Noticeably. Before it was the left one. Hardly visibly. In the centre of the cut is a hole. A piece of rubber peers out of it, extracting the lymph that will gather until the inner flesh heals.

Would this image be easier or harder if it hurt?

Your reflection in the mirror has large, wide-open eyes. They tell you the worst is over. They assure you that this beginning is in fact the end. Because time isn't real. Time is waiting. Waiting for the results that will determine the direction of the future. The lymph glands are dice thrown in a roulette game. They roll in the air. They fly and it's impossible to foresee the moment when they will stop. Nothing is real apart from their flying and the waiting.

Your left breast is still the same. Recognisable. If you turn slightly to the right, your right one also looks unchanged. You don't feel any need to cry. You don't feel anything. You just look. *None of this is important* – you say. *This is still me. I can still be beautiful. I still am beautiful. This cut, this lazy caterpillar, isn't stronger than me.* The body refuses to submit to it. To give in and hide from a stranger's gaze.

*You can't get me!* – you tell it. *I refuse to let you live in my body.* You rise above reality. You spread it out on a large tailor's table. You draw new outlines with chalk. You will cut those little pieces out slowly. You'll sew them together, until you've sewn an image in which you are completely healthy. You've decided.

*Now I'm well, completely well* – you keep repeating insistently. They've taken it away. Taken it out of you. Those disruptive cells that had clustered under your skin. That mistake in the body's system. That fault in your mechanism. *Now I'm well, completely well!*

Your right arm hurts when you move it. You have to do exercises. You stand beside the wall and stretch out your fingers as though you were climbing upwards. Your right hand stops halfway. You shouldn't, but you force it. Although it feels like it's going to break. The pain makes you feel sick. You shut your eyes. You persuade yourself that this arm can do anything, the rules of physics don't apply to it. The tension gives way a bit, but it's still impossible to straighten your arm.

Every few days you go to the hospital. You sit quietly on the hospital bed while the surgeon removes the bandages from your chest. He takes the piece of rubber out of the hole in the cut (you hear the sound inside, that scraping in yourself). He takes a large needle and pushes it into the hole, into the open jaws of the caterpillar. He removes the lymph collected there. You no longer have any lymph glands in your right armpit. That's why it's hard to move your arm. That's why the lymph accumulates without moving, in that place where your downfall began. He cuts off a little piece of a rubber glove and pushes it into the same hole. The sound is almost the same, it's inside you again, but this time you feel clearly that it isn't coming out. It's pressed in and echoes in your chest. Nothing of all of this bothers you. It's all the same to you. In any case you're just waiting. October is passing unwaveringly. Through the window the world is yellowing, misted with raindrops. The hands of that clock inside you that is trying to measure the time knows only how to count the days of your waiting.

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You're thirteen. You're a little girl and you know that you have to behave well. Be careful how you sit. Be careful what you say. Be beautiful. There are games which are no longer appropriate. Places where you don't belong. In the courtyard of your building all the boys are a lot younger than you. Apart from Imad. He's younger too, but only by a year. Two years ago you and he were friends. But you can't be friends any longer because he's a boy and you're a girl. Maybe that's not it. Maybe you don't know how to be a friend to Imad. Imad has sorrowful eyes, dirty jeans, a brother heading for a young offenders' institution, a mother who, somewhere along the way, as she travelled to this district where she was placed in a small apartment on the first floor, lost her proper name so people call her Bosanka, the Bosnian. Only when it's raining does Bosanka not sit on the little wall in front of the building. All the rest of the time she's there. Her legs apart. Under her skirt her white petticoat and fat trembling thighs can be seen. She's leaning with her elbows on her knees. Her huge breasts cover her bent body.

Imad is good. He has hunched-up shoulders, filled with horrors. Shoulders that protect his body. His body that always sways slightly, from right to left, as though wanting to escape from something. He has two younger brothers and a sister. And quick, dark eyes. Eyes with which he wants always to conceal something. Shame of which no one has ever told him that it shouldn't be his. Of his mother. Of that apartment in which there's rarely a hot meal waiting for him. Of everything he doesn't have. Haris, his brother, is different. His body is fast and upright. He refuses to accept the place where he's been put. His anger is a summer fire that devours everything in front of it. It illuminates all the false turns ahead of him, aware of all the choices that will never be offered him.

Haris may have hit your brother. You can't quite remember. Maybe that's how it was. Your five-years-younger brother because of whom you forget that you're a little girl and have to behave properly. You told him, yelling at the top of your voice, with full lungs, to leave your brother alone. You don't quite remember, but you're pretty sure that you swore as well.

Haris gave you a look which said that he was never going to leave anything alone. You threatened him, still more fiercely, more ferociously. Imad started to defend his younger brother. You threatened Imad as well. Drunk with a sense of freedom, flight from the rules, a magical space in which you could be whatever you wanted. Strong and wild. You don't remember whose hand flew first. You know that you lashed out with everything you had, with that strength, which you would later stifle for years in order to be everything that people said you had to be. You don't know how long it lasted. Those flying fists. That body above pain that accepts all the blows and is stronger than them. At a given moment you become aware that it has all stopped. All except you. Your hands are full of Imad's fair hair. His face is covered in blood. From the low wall, Bosanka is watching you with her empty gaze. He lowers his head and goes away. Your parents call your name, appalled, from the fourth floor. They summon you back into the good little girl from whom you had tried to escape.

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It had never happened that you didn't have enough words. There had been laziness, depression, despair, a need to say nothing. But words had always been the thread with which emotion was stitched onto reality. Now they'd gone. The present was prevented from being poured into real experience. By the little lump. By the operation. By the piece of your boob removed from your body. By the sharp scalpel they cut it up with in the pathology lab, placing piece after piece on glass. Whose hand is it that is touching you so shamelessly, so inconsiderately? Perhaps it is precisely at that moment that those pieces of flesh stop being you. They are just an impersonal microscopic sample. It would only be days later, in the diagnosis, like a belated slap for a lapse which you don't recall, that it would be connected with you. The little lump acquires its full name, an identity with which it might even outlive you. Mother told you that later, as long as you are alive (do they really watch over you so carefully?), they keep that dollop of you, that nodule. If there is metastasis, they return it to you. They use it to draw out the necessary conclusions, the direction of the therapy. It's the identity code of your illness.

You can't stop thinking about that piece of flesh that has been stolen from you. That part that lives some distance from you and foretells your destiny. Yesterday morning, when you went for your dressing and the extraction of lymph, you walked through the hospital grounds to the little single-storey building housing the pathology department. You stood in front of it, a step away, in drizzle, without an umbrella, and laughed at the inscription: *No entry*. The most important part of you was already in there. You laughed until you began to cry. You turned away, went home and continued to wait. For four whole weeks. Twenty-eight whole days and nights of empty passing. Of time incapable of filling anything.

You're all just waiting. You. And your mother. And the children. They know. You tell them everything. You want them to be ready, although you assure them every day that you're going to survive. You've told them that death isn't acceptable to you. They believe you.

It's night. You're lying in bed and thinking of Frida Kahlo. You envy her. She didn't need words. She spoke through her body. You imagine sticking an enormous canvas onto the wall, the length of the whole apartment and painting it. You have a paintbrush so large that you have to hold it with both hands. You dip it into a tin of red paint and slowly make thick lines. You dance. The paint runs down your arms. It isn't blood. Blood is deep inside, in your terrified veins. The canvas is covered with an unequal layer of red. You'd like to divide your body in the picture, make its fragmentariness conscious, the pain of what is no longer here. Like Frida. You don't move. You lie on your bed, your arms are relaxed. You feel like crying.



You sob loudly twice, then put your hand over your mouth. So the children don't hear. *So the children don't hear!* Your body is being copied onto the wall. On its chest, on the right side, there's a hole. The scar is a snake. It meanders from your armpit to your nipple. It lifts its head. Snake's eyes smile. You open your own. The ceiling above you opens and lets the sky in. You know that you will survive.

*Translated from the Bosnian by Celia Hawkesworth*