

CALL ME
ESTEBAN

What's a Typewriter to Me?

RAINY MORNING, NOWHERE to go. I sit on the loveseat and leaf through the newspaper. Kiki curls up at my feet, purring. On page 28, the emboldened headline:

LAST TYPEWRITER FACTORY IN THE WORLD CLOSES ITS DOORS
It's Tuesday, April 26, 2011. I read further:

The era of the typewriter, the 20th-century mainstay of office equipment, has come to an end. In Mumbai, India, the last factory to produce typewriters has suspended operations.

My mother was a typist. During a time that they say no longer matters. During a short life that lasted only twenty-two years. She died on a Friday long ago, August 20, 1982. I was two years old.

My life contains no memories of my mother. She's only a story, a sacred one, of origins, of intimate prehistories. My peers fell asleep to fairy tales; I listened to tales about her. Her death was spoken about quietly. The murmur would be turned up only with the occasional anecdote or escapade from her life. Then the lost time inflamed the vocal cords. It rolled between the tongue and palate; it formed words, then sentences, from air. The stories

traced her journey. It didn't matter that sometimes one story negated another, that contradictions arose: one doesn't question the sacred, one can only believe in it.

It was the time of the youth work actions, when everyone would return home with kidney trouble. It was the world where typing competitions were held and awards were given for second place. Second place because some girl cried when my mother was faster and better. As a consolation the jury gave the crying girl the trophy and sent my mother home with a second-place certificate. Aside from that certificate, all that remains from her are her bathrobe, her wedding ring, her Communist Party membership card, and her typewriter.

In my grandparents' apartment the typewriter was a relic. A carefully preserved memory in the bedroom closet. Only my relentless appeals could coax it to the table. Grandma and Grandpa would sit next to me and let me type. Sharp sounds ricocheted off the walls. Ink impressed the shapes of randomly selected letters onto the white paper. And then words, sentences . . . All the way till the end of the line, when the lever sent the cylinder back to the beginning. I'd type like this for an hour or two. When my fingers finally hurt, we'd wrap the typewriter in its plastic bag, in the deep silence of untimely death.

Was it then that I fell in love with writing? I don't know. But I know that I loved to type up the short scenes and episodes from her life. When she broke the window in the living room and made like nothing had happened. Or even better, when she ate the whole ham but regarded the empty plate in my grandmother's hands with great surprise, repeating, "Where did it go?"

I don't know why the news from India bothered me. Nor do I know why I climbed the ladder and retrieved the dusty case from the top of the closet. I can't remember the last time I touched it. Soon it will be thirty years since my mother died.

I contemplate this while inserting an empty sheet of paper and typing:

What's a typewriter to me?

The Four Seasons

THEIR VOICES SPEAK through their eyes. Young and old. Tender, pleasant. I could spread them on my body, like butter on a hot roll. With hot cheeks, I would lick their questions from open palms:

Who are you? Whose are you?

I, the golden one (as I was nicknamed), belonged to summer. In summer I was born. In summer my mother died. In that summer of life and death we were together: Grandma Brana, Grandpa Boro, Nana Safeta, Papa Nedžad, and me. Dad both was and wasn't there. As one family, one house, in two places, in two different parts of town, we ate Nana's pita and Grandma's sarma, and both of my grandfathers drank beer and rakija. Our tenants were God and Tito.

I am of the summer! Summer, that's me.

The voices laughed. Thick fingers pinched my cheeks until they turned red as copper. The tenants would appear here and there. First in Nana and Papa's prayers, and then in Grandma and Grandpa's Partisan songs.

And then the shooting began.

One half of the house—Grandma Brana, Grandpa Boro, and I—went to Grandma's sister's place in Šid. This was my first

betrayal. I went with Grandma and Grandpa, leaving Nana and Papa behind. In this half of the house, which never stood firmly on the ground, we got a new tenant: War. He showed up continually: when we'd be eating, bathing, dealing with diarrhea or constipation. We also had waves. But not sea waves, not the kind that pull fish, shells, barges. These waves lived at the home of one Sreten. He was an older gentleman with a massive ham radio. We would go to his place on Saturdays, in sun, rain, and snow. Sreten would start up the radio, offering us homemade elderflower juice and three stools. We'd sit there and release our voices, rather than our bodies, to the waves. On good days we'd encounter the voices of Nana Safeta and Papa Nedžad; they'd tell us they were still alive and that this shit would blow over soon. I came to hate this half of the house, and our tenant. I imagined pulling his hair, poking him in the eyes, pouring salt in his nostrils. But I didn't dare. He was too big and strong.

And then the shooting briefly stopped.

I left that half, and Grandma Brana and Grandpa Boro in it, and headed back to the other half of the house, where Nana Safeta and Papa Nedžad were. That was my second betrayal. In this half, things were bad. The truce lasted only a short time. Then shooting again. We didn't have windows, only thick nylon sheets, and a stove called a sanduklija that merely farted rather than warming us. I would sit in my tiny room and write letters to Grandma Brana and Grandpa Boro on Red Cross message forms. And here too we had a tenant, and he too was called War. I didn't know him well. I didn't dare touch him. I just hid his socks and pants, and sometimes I would spit in his powdered eggs, in hopes he'd get the message and leave on his own.

And then autumn came.

Grenades falling. Nana Safeta and I sit by the farting stove. I cry. The waves bring a voice that says Grandpa Boro has died.

In his sleep. A tear falling from his eye. Nana Safeta sighs, which unnerves me deeply. Papa Nedžad enters, with a shy smile on his face and a copy of *Oslobođenje* in his hand. He sits beside the two of us and triumphantly turns the newspaper's pages till just before the end. A short obituary, among many, of Grandpa Boro, and a picture of him.

Papa Nedžad says, "Never mind the shooting, I went out last night and got it in the paper, so everyone would know."

Yes, Boro had died, somewhere far from the war—so it was whispered later around our half of the house. Yes, I say, Boro died, with a tear on his cheek, and I'd bet my life that he died thinking I didn't love him anymore, because I'd left. My betrayal deepened.

And then spring came.

In our half of the house it was Nana Safeta, Papa Nedžad, and me. War had moved out, supposedly. A year before. But what a mess he left behind. You've never seen such a pig. We waited for Peace to move into our spare room. He was meant to come, but somehow didn't. And we were counting on that rent. We needed it to live. I'd enrolled in high school. Life costs money. No sign of Peace, and Nana fell ill. The doctors said it was brain cancer, and gave her a month or two, at most. Everything was drifting away from me, as on a vast open sea. Now I hated this half of the house. I slept a lot.

One morning Nana Safeta, too weak to stand, calls out my name and asks me to come help her. I'm not quite awake: I hear her, yet I don't hear her. Somehow I manage to rouse myself and stumble to her bed. She offers me her hand, like the feeble branch of an ancient tree. I tug and tug, but nothing. She's heavy, too heavy. I tug a little more, then stop. I say: "I can't." I go back to bed. I fall asleep instantly. Nana Safeta died the next day. I became an even bigger traitor.

And then winter happened.

Ah, yes. I've almost forgotten to say that Peace had finally moved into our half of the house. That fraud. Totally friendly, full of words and smiles. And never a pfennig of rent. Always tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, just one more day. A real sleazebag. Papa Nedžad communicated with him; I avoided them both. Nedžad wanted us to talk. He even gave me permission to smoke in his presence when we drank coffee, as long as we were together. But I couldn't be bothered. They got on my nerves: him, the house, and Peace. I'd begun studying philosophy at the university; that winter I listened to lectures on German classical idealism. I made fantastic charts summarizing the ideas of each philosopher. When I'd go for coffee with my friends, I'd carefully arrange my charts at the table, so we could trace each phase of being. At that time Grandma Brana moved her half of the house to Bijeljina. I guess some kind of Peace had come to her as well. But he was the same delinquent. She wrote me, called me. I didn't reciprocate. Those fucking phases of being, with no free time. Grandma grew more ill. She was alone. One day the news came that she'd died.

We go to the funeral, Papa Nedžad and I. I'm so pissed off I don't say a word. We walk to the grave. I'm first in line, immediately behind the casket. The procession is slow. I recall Sofka Nikolić, the superstar singer in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Sofka had a daughter, Marica, who contracted tuberculosis at an early age, poor thing. Sofka was never at her side: London, Paris, Vienna. The queen of the bohemian quarter, Skadarlija, garnered fame on all the world's stages. Marica died. At seventeen. The story goes that this killed Sofka. She came here to Bijeljina, to bury Marica, to build her a big crypt. And she bought a house right by the cemetery, to be near her. She lived there for years, until she herself died. Now both of them are in the crypt, one beside the other.

As I walk behind my grandmother's casket, I think about Sofka, and Marica, and everything else irks me, the crying people, and the sky, and the earth. I behave rudely. The cemetery workers lower Grandma Brana into the burial plot. An unpleasant silence. Everyone stares at me. Since I was the only person she had left, I'm supposed to be the first one to toss a clump of earth into her grave. Someone whispers to me that, if I really can't, I can throw a flower instead. The grave is deep, cold, Decembrous. My mother, Brana's daughter, died in summer. A summer long ago, in another city. I peer into the grave that's claiming that half of the house and think about how stupid everyone is. Unforgivably stupid. What does it matter what falls first onto a casket of carved and sanded oak? Now, when it's clear that Brana will not lie in the ground next to her daughter, who, I should add, was named after snow: Snežana.

Between one summer and one fall came Papa Nedžad's turn.

But he was really off his rocker, causing chaos all over the hospital. In the middle of the night he tore out his roommate's catheter, assuring the man that he didn't need it. He was senile; people in the hallway would beg me to take him home. To our half of the house, I mean. At the end the nurses had to strap him to his bed. With virtually no consciousness left, he thanked them profusely, then turned to me: "Bring me some scissors." For two days he continued to breathe, but I knew he wasn't there anymore. This time I witnessed it, which perhaps lessened my betrayal just a bit. I gazed at the tubes stuck in his emaciated body. Like roots that siphoned life irrevocably into the underground waters of death. I sat at his bedside while people passed by the room. At some point a doctor came and took his pulse, checked his tubes and monitor. Then she turned to me: "It won't be much longer, an hour or two."

That evening, on my way home from the hospital, I stopped at a bench in Veliki Park to smoke a cigarette. I wasn't angry. It

had been quite some time since I'd hated the people around me; now I just hated myself. I watched the others while they moved through their lives. They regarded me casually. I heard their voices inside me.

Who are you?

Whose are you?

Betrayal is a dangerous condition. Hard to cure. I know this today, after years of more or less unsuccessful therapy. Today, summer is mine. And autumn is mine. God and Tito are mine. War is mine. And Peace. And winter and spring are mine. Everything is mine. Now that I have nothing left.

Waiting for the Pigeons

DAD LOVED PIGEONS. After Mom's death, the two of us returned to the family house in Vratnik, where we lived with Nana and Papa. And the pigeons. And a few cats that lurked in the garden at night, curled up and treacherously purring beneath the pigeon coop. Papa wasn't too keen on that arrangement: feathers, crumbs, stench everywhere. But life needed to be built anew, cobbled together like that coop of old wire and board.

Papa would work every day in the garage. Sweaty, his plump belly protruding from under his tight T-shirt. He'd spend hours sawing, sanding, hammering. He mounted the coop high on the wall facing the garden. We had tall ladders I was forbidden to climb. "You'll fall and hurt yourself!" Nana would reply at my pleading.

That's why climbing was my secret adventure. I'd sneak up the ladder, stepping carefully so the rungs didn't creak. And the cats? They'd dart around and leap at the wall. Their claws would softly scrape its rough surface. Then they'd tumble down, howling. Only the nimblest prevailed in this nighttime ascent. The odd pigeon suffered: in the morning Dad would find it bloodied, its throat slashed. But Death, that fiend, they concealed from

me like snake feet. They buried the dead pigeons in the garden and covered the freshly dug earth with leaves.

At dawn, Dad fed the pigeons assorted seed. He poured them fresh water, they drank, and then, their beaks still wet, they took flight among the clouds. Everyone headed off at the same time: the pigeons to freedom, and Dad to the post office, where he worked. I was awakened by Nana's voice and the scent of breakfast. Nana eternally on her feet, music gurgling from the ancient radio. Nana would break into song; she said it helped her work. While she stirred the makings of lunch on the stove, scrubbed the sink, or dusted the bedside tables, the songs tumbled forth—thus was Nana able to blend the life of a homemaker and the dreams of a chanteuse.

I eat breakfast in my pajamas. My eyes sting from the crusty sleep. I head back to my room with two slices of buttered toast on a copper plate. I sit on my bed, legs tucked under the quilt, and set the plate in front of me, taking a big bite of toast. I chew slowly and gaze out the window. When I'm finished eating, I dress in front of the mirror. Tucked in its corner is a photo of my father, in a blue work uniform, smiling. He holds a pair of pliers and a spool of wire. Dad sets up telephone lines for the postal service, connects voices. Like the pigeons connecting heaven and earth in their flight. I pull on my socks as I run out of the house. In the garden, the huge stone table is waiting for me. I lie atop it, spreading my wings and scanning the sky for pigeons. The high-flying ones perforate the clouds; the looping, turning ones whirl to unconsciousness. The hours pass. My eyes are tethered to the sky. To that high, high place where, I'm told, live only those who are no more.

Panic descends when a hawk appears. I leap to my feet, wave my arms, shout and hiss, but my voice can't reach those heights. I race to get Nana and Papa. "A hawk is gonna eat the pigeons!" I

cry. Papa hurries from the garage; Nana rushes down the stairs. They smack their hands together. Nana yells "Pis!" at the hawk. When the aerial chase ends, luckily for the pigeons, Papa curses the birds, the plumage, the pigeon poop. Then he asks Nana what time it is. As he makes for the garage, she calls out, "He's on his way now, you'll see."

I go in when the sun streaks westward. The smell of food is dissipating. The radio is silent. The wall clock ticks as shadows slip through the windows. I part the curtains and peek out at the pigeon coop. Only Miki is there. He's a rock pigeon. An excellent flier! When he walks, he waddles a little. Like the way Dad sways when he comes home at night.

"Look at the time, and no sight of him," begins Papa.

"He's coming now."

"You said that three hours ago."

"Maybe he got held up at work."

"He's at the bar, I know it. Every night the same thing."

And the silence has its own voice.

"He better not think he's getting in here tonight."

"Oh, stop it," says Nana.

The shadows lengthen. Like a cat, I creep out of the house with them. The door to the pigeon coop is still open. Step by step, I make my way up the ladder. One rung, two, three . . . It's quiet at the top. And I can see better. I perch there and wait for the pigeons to return.