

LANA BASTAŠIĆ

Daddy Comes Home

Translated from Serbo-Croatian by Ulvija Tanović

SOMETIMES I think about it, but not often. Some doors are better left locked, so that nothing can creep in. But today I was buying lemons. I thought how perfectly they fit in my palm—with their tiny pockmarks. Then my sister-in-law called to tell me how my brother had hit her. I dropped a lemon onto the pavement and it split open. They're not as tough as they seem. And it all came back. The tingling sting spreading across my left cheek like a brittle fan, the mere idea of a hand, a child's palm. My brother's fingers. Moments are fickle as they change into memories.

MY BROTHER HIT ME ONCE. Except he was a child when he hit me, not a grown man. Over the years, the memory of that slap changed. When I thought of it this morning, I couldn't help envisioning myself as I am today, standing before an eight-year-old boy. Whenever I thought of that slap, the girl I remembered would stretch further, swelling and expanding, her ten-year-old limbs growing into their present size. But her brother had remained down there, an eight-year-old propping himself up on tiptoe to reach his giant sister and give her that well-deserved slap, his tiny hand cruelly unequal to the task.

Some pain is good. It is there to remind you that pain exists. I was ten years old and had not yet encountered pain. My brother taught me. That's how it begins: his hand and my cheek and the pain. Dogs chasing me. Toes. My mother's flower-patterned dress always follows, a disfigured dahlia on her chest moving up and down, her eyes are full of water. Or maybe her forehead was sweating? Her whole being in those large, quick hands always looking to catch something suitable.

Then it's not a dress, no—that day she wore a tracksuit—her dirty apron tied tight beneath heavy breasts. Mother shouting, *Don't touch that knife!* Mother shouting, *Dear god, I'll screw it all up.* Mother shouting, *Aren't you happy your daddy's coming?* Mother shaking. The shivering knife in her hand cutting the chicken. You can't screw it up. Who knows when we'll get the chance again. . .

Ranka, the upstairs neighbor, arranged it with Mother. They'd put money away for a while so they could buy a live chicken from Mrs. Popović. The one who lived up the hill. In that house. The pale purple villa with shiny green bars on the balconies, peeking out through the conifers that separated our chickenless neighborhood from the Popović's. And her garden, and the animals, and the endless reserves of Kinder eggs. Even a lemon tree, right behind the large house, though no one had ever actually seen it.

Mother would call Mrs. Popović an *old cunt* who lives in that *insult of a house* bought with *blood money*. Mother would also say that lemon was *no fucking apple*. *What the fuck would we do with lemons? Do we think our men are out there getting killed so that we can squeeze lemons?* The first thought of my dead father. His strong body tangled in long wet leaves of grass; smiling Daddy, kind Daddy, for some reason, smells of lemon. I'd never seen a dead body, or tasted that fruit. Once I'd experienced both, the results were disappointing. The lemon was sour; you needed tea to swallow it. The corpse was just a person not moving.

WHEN IT WAS TIME for Mother and Ranka to go get the chicken, Mrs. Popović suddenly changed. An industrious woman, hard-working. All those pigs and chickens and two cows, they all needed feeding, and not everyone was fit for that work. Ranka was not even half Mother's size, but she did possess a finely tuned Belgrade accent, while Mother exhibited a Bosnian lack of vowels that would be wholly inappropriate for the lilac villa. So it only made sense for our neighbor to go get the chicken.

We had to keep it in our apartment for a whole day because there was no electricity to store it in the freezer once we'd strangled it. Mrs. Popović had offered to strangle the chicken for us, but Mother said she wouldn't give that witch another fucking mark. My brother wanted to give it a name, but I was smarter. "We'll eat it tomorrow. It'll be hard for you if you give it a name." So we called it Roast as a joke and swallowed our tears when Ranka snapped its neck with a single flick of her wrist. Rusty feathers pushed through manicured fingers, the barely visible wedding ring gleamed with sweat.

We knew the sacrifice had to be made, so pride replaced fear before you could say *snap*. Those days, we ate only what didn't need to go in the fridge and could still be found on the half-empty shelves of the chilly supermarket. But there were good days, too, days with spinach

pie and Ranka's judicious knocking on our door when we popped open the oven. Her orange lipstick stained our best glasses. She'd talk on and on about Andrić or Crnjanski, until Mother had no option but to give her an unfairly large piece of spinach pie to atone for never having read those great Serbs.

APART FROM THE SPINACH PIE, the only connection between these sporadic soirees was the stories told about Their Men. These heroes were so far removed from us that only the words *their father*, spoken from time to time to remind Ranka that we were not there by some magic, gave us the right to claim we were actually related to that man.

"You have crooked toes, like your father," Mother would say every Saturday when she cut my nails and put Sinopen on my burning mosquito bites. "These feet are the spitting image of his, look, here is your father's toe," she'd tell me, and I'd go to bed proud, tracing my toes beneath the covers long after my brother had gone to sleep. I'd squeeze my big toe and watch it grow pale until, when I thought it would drop off dead, I'd let go and allow my blood to flow into it again, just like Daddy's.

We got to know our daddy through his absence; we traced his hands from the leather gloves he'd left behind, his teeth from the ragged toothbrush no one dared remove from the glass in the bathroom, his strength from the furniture around us: the table and armchairs he'd put together himself. There was an empty space our mother devotedly worshipped, a place that only Daddy's hands and words could properly fill. Our small feet and silly jokes did not fit into the fine folds and corners of his void.

EVENINGS PASSED in all-consuming darkness; we would look outside the kitchen window trying to make out which house belonged to whom. Muslim. Ours. Muslim. Ours. Even in those times of deep, leveling darkness, we could tell them apart, which gave us a sense of power. It seemed at first as if all the houses were the same, but once your eyes got used to the dark, language would creep beneath the roofs, surnames would fall from our lips, small heaps of letters would slither through the night until we could identify each household.

During those few hours a week when we'd have electricity, the women would jump up, plug cables into every available socket, and run around like headless chickens against the sound of washing machines and vacuum cleaners running wild over next-door wooden floors. We'd

watch television. Our love for that box was only meagerly required—we'd sit mutely watching endless reruns of cartoons about a brother and a sister, hungry and poor, who'd found themselves in a dreamland full of candy, ice cream, and cakes. This one was our favorite simply because the Serbian dubbing made us laugh. The animated mother would cry, she had nothing to give them for lunch, and the two children would open their mouths and squeal, completely off beat, *Mama, mama, we're joking, we're not hungry!* Voices of grown-ups pretending to be children. We loved that.

We were watching that cartoon one afternoon in December when we were told that the war was over. Just like that. We didn't believe it, simply because the evening news was still on TV. Word of Daddy's arrival reached my brother and me in the form of a list of things we were under no circumstances allowed to break. Mother had warned us the minute she walked in and changed the channel from the cartoons to the news. Don't even think about, she told the news anchor, spraining your wrist, losing a tooth, getting a bruise, or messing yourselves up in any way before Daddy comes home. We'll be celebrating New Year's together, she said, and then Christmas. Perhaps she could put in an order for some meat, we'll be breaking bread like a real family. As if, up until that moment, the three of us had not been real people. As if that whole time we'd just been waiting for him, the fourth, the real deal, to show up and breathe life into us.

Our knees better be pristine, she warned, our hair combed, our skin clean and even, like glazing on a cake. She declaimed her list oblivious to our unspoken questions, sliding her crooked finger along every shelf, cupboard, and table to check for dust. She felt all the surfaces, looking for any dents, cracks, or unevenness. Her fingers had finally found their true calling—preparing the apartment for Daddy's arrival. The dusty tip of her raised pointer finger punctuated the air around us. Finally, we couldn't keep it in any more, my brother or me, I don't remember. The question spilled from our mouth: "Daddy's coming home?" Something must have distracted her, Ranka's knocking or the news anchor, because we never heard her reply.

"Daddy's coming," my brother whispered, or was it me, no longer waiting for Mother to confirm what was apparent. We looked at each other and exchanged frightened smiles. Mother had already gone to the kitchen with Ranka to plan the whole thing with the chicken, while my brother and I were left still standing there barefoot, our feet

stuck to the wooden floor, like two exposed plants, scared that even the slightest movement would rip us out of that wonderful realization of what was to come.

I WAS SCARED of falling. I was scared that I would trip over something and twist my ankle, bump my knee, break my arm, before Daddy's return. I was scared of the cars that sped right by me on my way to the store. I was scared that a stray football would break my nose. I was scared of shaky bricks, careless children, poisonous mosquitoes, steep steps, and the mean Doberman pinschers from Mrs. Popović's yard who would catch me and chew off my face. How would Daddy recognize me without my face?

Wherever I went, death lurked behind the corner, counting on my clumsiness. We were supposed to be good, proper, unchanged. We started saying prayers before bed with our eyes closed. If we learnt them off by heart, Daddy would see that, despite all evidence to the contrary, we were actually good kids. Then again, everything around us conspired to scare him off; every little imperfection, something we would have otherwise never noticed, now became enlarged by our fear of disappointing him. Our bunk bed somehow squeaked more than usual, so we took some oil from the kitchen and greased its many joints until the squeaking stopped. We crumpled up a bunch of papers into little balls for our wobbly table until we made one that fit perfectly under its shorter leg and stopped the wobbling. We poured baking soda into our shoes so they wouldn't smell of feet. I gathered all my headless dolls and turned my room upside down to find their discarded limbs and heads. My raggedy princesses were whole again; I was relieved they were just dolls, not real children whose heads couldn't be screwed back on once they were decapitated. My clumsy brother managed to cut his finger, so after I'd given him a good scolding, I had to heal the wound. I found alcohol and Band-Aids and checked on his cut each night until it was reduced to a barely visible pale line. It was decided that he would use his other hand to show Daddy his report card.

We wore our worst clothes that week to keep our best clean and uncrumpled for Daddy's arrival. We practiced chewing with our mouths closed. We were clean and tidy. We flossed our teeth, ate our peas, and said our Hail Marys before bed. Sometimes we'd find new prayers in the daily newspapers. We'd sit on the couch with the *Glas* spread across our laps. I would read the prayer, line by line, and my

brother would repeat every word in a solemn voice. And if we managed to repeat the whole prayer without looking, then I'd read him the bit about the bloodthirsty mujahideen.

BEFORE DADDY RETURNED, Mother saved up ten German marks in the metal box on her nightstand and promised to take us to Dijana, a store downtown whose owner would go to Austria every month and bring back imports, including Kinder eggs, fabric softener, and boxed soap. Two weeks earlier, Mother had ordered a box of Raffaello candies and filter cigarettes. When we came to pick up our order, the Kinder eggs gleamed in a magnificent pyramid arranged on the counter, their foil-covered surfaces perfectly smooth beneath our fingers. But Daddy preferred Raffaello, and besides, most of the eggs were probably cracked and past their expiration date.

On the way home we stopped by the clothing store, but Mother just looked into her wallet and said how the Chinese were incapable of hemming a skirt properly. So on the day of his arrival, she put on her old flower-patterned dress, and from her heavily made-up face rose little clouds of perfumed dust. She smelled of Ranka and though she had a tiny oil stain on her chest, we didn't dare say anything. My brother decided to wear his baseball hoodie, the one that had arrived in the "humanitarian aid" box from the Netherlands. I put on my sailor skirt and starched white blouse with the broad lace collar stretching from one shoulder to the other. I was ready and only slightly nervous, trying to smooth down my hair behind my ears, when he finally knocked on the door.

THE FIRST THING to hit us was the smell of sweat mixed with earth. The stench rushed in ahead of Daddy. It broke and scattered across our scrubbed-clean skin and pressed clothes smelling of Austrian fabric softener. My brother made a face and covered his nose, but I managed to snatch his hand from his face before anyone saw.

Father was thin, skinnier than Mother; when he put down the military bag to hug her, the veins on his arms were purple and swollen, as if his blood wanted to burst through them. His whole figure disappeared into Mother's chubby embrace, as if she was deflating a beach mattress after a long day at the seaside. He had a short beard and eyes like two frightened animals staring out from dark caves. His trousers flapped wildly in the draft caused by his arrival, as if there was nothing in them.

“How you’ve grown,” he said when he saw me. I could see yellowish stains on his crooked teeth.

“My, how you’ve grown,” he repeated to my brother. He must have remembered this was a good thing to say to children. That they’d grown. That they shouldn’t stay the same size forever.

“Give me that, sit, relax,” Mother said in a twittering voice, and she took his bag to the laundry room.

“You have clean clothes on the bed, if you want to take a shower,” she shouted over her shoulder. Our father stood at the entrance for a whole unbearably dragged-out minute, taking in our apartment, its smells, the pictures on the walls, as if he needed time to remember what kind of behavior was appropriate for such places.

“The bathroom is over there,” said my stupid brother, pointing at its white door. Father told him he remembered where the bathroom was and, though he smiled, his lack of experience was evident in the way he talked to us. We wouldn’t have been surprised if at that moment he asked us what our names were.

“How could you say something so stupid?” I asked my brother when we had retreated to our room. “Of course he knows where the bathroom is! This is his apartment!”

“He really stinks,” my brother whispered.

“He was in the war,” I told him. “With the Muslims.”

WHILE FATHER WAS TAKING a shower, we heard Mother run out of the laundry room and slam the door. We hurried out of our room to find her, back stuck to the wall, the stretched dahlia on her chest bobbing up and down, the oil stain bouncing along.

Something was there, behind her, in the shut room, something that had made her run away. Our mother, who was known to say *fuck* and *shit* and *cunt*, and who hadn’t blinked when Ranka killed that chicken. She turned to my brother and whispered, “A huge cockroach, enormous.”

“In the laundry room?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Is it Daddy’s?” my stupid brother asked.

“Of course it’s not *Daddy’s*,” I said, though the cockroach must have crawled out of Father’s army bag when Mother opened it to get the laundry. There were never any insects in our home, because Mother kept it pristine. The last time I’d seen a cockroach was in the hospital when Grandpa died of *sugar*.

“Shhhh! He’ll hear you!” Mother said. “Go in and step on it! Quick!”

We kept standing there, unsure of what to do.

“What if it crawls up my leg?” I asked.

“Not you, stupid. Your brother.”

For some reason, he didn’t find this strange. Him—in his baseball hoodie and Spider-Man slippers, him, who still picked his nose and examined his snot when he thought I wasn’t looking, him, who still could not recite the Hail Mary by heart, the easiest prayer in the book. For him, it was completely normal that she’d picked *him*. A head shorter than me.

The door swallowed him up before I got a chance to protest. We heard a scream and, as I’d expected, he was back out within two seconds.

“What happened?” mother asked.

“It’s huge,” my brother said quietly, showing us an invisible insect in the span between his thumb and pointer finger. “Why doesn’t *he* kill it?” he asked, pointing at the bathroom door.

I started laughing and teasing him. “Did you get scared by a little bug? Is the little bug going to bite off your fingers?” Before I knew what was happening, he had slapped me with all his might, setting my cheek on fire. The impact was so incredible that I first thought it was my mother that had slapped me. My brother’s eyes darted left and right from me to my mother; fear of the cockroach now mixed with the expectation of punishment. And, though it had occurred to me to hit him twice as hard as he’d hit me, I couldn’t. I’d let him down. I’d prepared him, healed his cut, taught him prayers, made him into an exemplary son, and yet I failed to prepare him for what he had found in the laundry room. He possessed this new knowledge, some truth I couldn’t fathom. Evidently our mother did not think the slap worth mentioning. Instead, she crouched down in order to look her son in the eye and said, “Daddy’s been to a terrible place. He’s dead tired. And hungry. And so happy to be back here with us. We won’t let anything ruin that for us now, will we?” My brother looked at me for the last time, frightened or angry, I could no longer tell, and then he crept back into the darkness, away from my useless words and big hands.

HE STAYED IN THERE for a long time. I suppose I felt sorry for him and, at the same time, hoped he would rush out again, small and frightened. Instead, after a painfully long while, an authority walked

out of the laundry room and ordered Mother to get him some paper towels. He was still wearing the Spider-Man slippers on his feet. The cockroach must have gotten stuck to his sole when he stomped on it. Father would never see the bug. He would never find out about how Ranka snapped the poor chicken's neck, or how my brother slapped me and then squashed a large cockroach. He must have spent over an hour in the shower, unaware of all the violence that surrounded his arrival.

HE DIDN'T EAT MUCH of the chicken. We waited for him to refuse seconds so that Mother would allow us to have more. Later there was jam and bread, but he just picked at it, leaving a halo of crumbs around his plate. He seemed starved, staring at the modest spread before him, but he wouldn't give in to his appetite. As if the food had suddenly become a language he could not understand. His old clothes hung from his frame in large, unbecoming folds.

We didn't talk much. Mother kept asking us questions she knew the answers to already. How was school. Who were our friends. Things like that. My brother didn't make faces at the table, he didn't fidget in his chair. He kept his elbows where they should be and gave precise, grown-up answers to the ridiculous questions. He was the one that had gotten rid of the cockroach before father saw it. He had done something good and I had done nothing. I chewed loudly. My collar was crooked. I dropped my fork and, bending down to reach for it under the table, I spotted my brother's small feet floating above the floor in different slippers. I didn't know those slippers.

ONCE SHE'D CLEARED the table embarrassingly quickly, Mother sent us off to bed and commanded, *Daddy will tuck you in*, which all three of us accepted without a word. That quiet man glanced at our room for a disappointingly brief moment and then just stood there, tall and awkward, waiting for us to pull on our pajamas. Though he was now clean, I couldn't stop thinking about bugs crawling out from his oversized sleeves onto my bed, beneath the covers, all the way down to my feet. Luckily, he didn't kiss me goodnight. Instead, he just patted my head and said, "Your daddy's not a bad man." Maybe he'd said "old man" instead of "daddy" or "person" instead of "man," something like that. I don't remember. To me it sounded like he had met my real daddy over there, in the army. As if he wanted me to agree with that self-evident truth; there was no reason for me to doubt it. He is a good

man. He patted my brother in the bunk above and then left the room. There were no bugs to escort him out.

THAT NIGHT I heard strange voices from my parents' room, only superficially similar to theirs. For a moment it seemed as if they'd turned into incomprehensible warbling from the TV set. I could hear them go out and go back in, perhaps both of them, perhaps just him. The sound of water running against the bathtub. The sound of sobbing, or perhaps giggling. And then sleeping, lots of sleeping. A handful of days, inconsequential and long, and then New Year's Eve, which we must have somehow celebrated, they probably gave us presents. And then Christmas and Mother's hands opening the box of Raffaello candy. She distributed the decorations on the bread unfairly, so that Father would get the piece with the coin. How lucky we are, she said, that Daddy got the coin. She had read somewhere that this meant prosperity and luck for all of us. But he just ate his bread and then forgot his German mark on the tablecloth. We were not allowed to take it because it didn't belong to us. Our bread had been empty.

We must have gone back to school and they back to work, and we must have had a lot of homework, and they had a lot to do, and there was more chicken, more chocolate, more spinach pie, more television. Someone must have said those things to us, the things you say to children, How we'd grown, My, how we'd grown. Perhaps he'd even hugged us and heard our properly recited prayers. And I must have come home from school early that day, maybe they'd canceled some classes, or maybe Mother had given me a chore, because I went straight to the laundry room. The air was stuffy and the fridge hummed through our apartment.

His feet were in the air. I thought how lemons must hang like that in Mrs. Popović's garden, quietly, like my father in the laundry room. There was a perfect immobility in that room, with the sound of urine dripping from his big toe into the small, singing puddle on the wooden floor. His big toe was crooked and hairy. A wet, square nail stuck motionless in it.

No, I thought. Our feet were not *so* similar. The same shape, perhaps, the same curve. But not *so much*.

Not the same.

"Daddy Comes Home" courtesy of SalmaiaLit Agency and the author.