

Avgust Demšar ESTONIA

The Vodnjaki Trilogy III



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ESTONIA

The Wells Trilogy III



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The novel begins with a prologue that has not been translated.

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Today

The Arrival

The Volvo couldn't have been more than three years old, but it was already showing signs of wear and tear. The leather on the steering wheel gleamed from frequent handling, the seat edges were cracked and the gearbox had started sticking. "Yeah, that's what happens when you get taken over by the Chinese," remarked Mikael.

His comment alluded to the acquisition of Volvo's car division by the Chinese multinational Geely from the Swedish Volvo Group in 2010, a move met by staunch disapproval by most Swedes. First, the bankruptcy of Saab, and then the arrival of the Chinese-owned Volvo.

They nevertheless opted for the Volvo, despite the Austrian somewhat overzealous car rental representative tempting them with Audis, Mercedes and a brand-new electric Golf. They had always had a Volvo in their household. Besides, they took solace in the fact that the Volvo headquarters still resided in Gothenburg.

They hired a car at Graz airport, marking *for a fortnight or longer* on the rental form. After stowing their luggage in the boot, they settled into the car, with Mikael getting into the driver's seat.

Compared to their hometown of Arlanda, Graz airport appeared ludicrously small. The surrounding area lacked the labyrinthine network of roads, underpasses and overpasses that often befuddled those unfamiliar with them. Here, simplicity reigned, with *Flughafen Graz* nestled amidst fields and adjacent to the motorway. Despite this, Mikael couldn't recall the few roundabouts and stretches of local roads leading to the motorway connection to Slovenia; they travelled this route too infrequently for him to commit it to memory.

He should have followed the signs, but after the flight and with it being in the early hours of the morning, he relied on technology to guide them.

Once they merged onto the motorway after a little over five minutes of winding roads, Iva switched off the navigation. Mikael nodded, and from then on, the route felt familiar.

"Need anything else?" Iva asked, stroking Mikael's hand as he gripped the gear lever.

"No," Mikael replied, his attention focused on the road. They were caught in the morning rush hour, with vehicles rushing in all directions.

"Alright then," said Iva, "I'm going to take a little nap."

She settled in more comfortably. Reclining her seat, she folded her cardigan and placed it against the edge of the car window and rested her head on it. She watched the passing scenery for a few more moments before drifting off to sleep. It was about an hour's drive from there to Vodnjaki.

When thirty-two-year-old Iva Tavčar, nee Sjövall, and her husband Mikael, six years her senior, first visited Vodnjaki four years ago, they experienced a mix of excitement and uncertainty. Yes, "a nostalgic patina" works well in this context. Here is the revised passage with that change:

Their knowledge of the village came solely from Mika's parents' stories, which were somewhat idealised and based on a single visit thirty years ago. In late spring 1993, they had spent four days visiting Iva's parents and encountered a village they remembered as *idyllic, slightly neglected, yet possessing a nostalgic patina, as though frozen in time*. To them, it was *a sleeping beauty awaiting better days*. For Iva, who spent her first three years in Vodnjaki, the village held no personal memories.

Since then, Iva and Mikael had regularly visited Slovenia, and in that time, they had explored much of the village. Gone was the image of *a sleeping beauty*, at least initially.

When they first reached the signpost for *Vodnjaki*, they were greeted by two newly built holiday homes flanking the road on either side. This sight elicited a mix of emotions. While the presence of these buildings indicated that the village was not abandoned, their stark modern design raised doubts about the direction of its development. The two young Swedes, accustomed to architecture harmoniously blending with nature, found themselves unsettled by the discordant sight. However, as they ventured further into the village, their initial reservations softened slightly. Although the houses were neglected, and some even abandoned, they had retained an authentic architectural style.

They parked in front of Iva's inheritance, her parents' house. They were aware of its condition, having been provided with photographs by the lawyer's office. Alongside the photographs, they had also received a cadastral map of the village with annotations indicating the houses' owners. Armed with this plan, they surveyed the area. The house occupied by the Babič family on the right appeared large and sturdy, needing only a new facade and roofing to regain its former glory. Next to it

stood the smaller Levec family house, in a poorer state of repair. The third house down the line was the Furlan family home. It also needed some renovation, but the smoke rising from the chimney lent a comforting sense of homeliness to the place. Between the houses stood a few crumbling outbuildings, little more than walls overrun with weeds and wild climbers. At the far end of the village, nestled against a steep slope, stood a charming little house. It was not visible from the village centre—if one could call an old oak tree and an adjacent abandoned well that. Iva and Mikael had to walk about a hundred metres to even see it. Yet, this house was a true gem, tastefully restored to blend seamlessly with its surroundings. *Rozman* was written next to it on the plan. Overall, the village seemed like a place where, in a few years' time and with a touch of imagination, one could spend part of their annual holiday—a welcome escape from the crowded streets of Stockholm. That was Iva and Mikael's intention, leading them to commit to reclaiming Iva's long-lost inheritance.

That was their first impression of the village. It was a positive impression, prompting them to embark on the restoration of the old house. They had initially anticipated completing the work within a year or two at most. However, various factors, including their residence in Stockholm, limited time, and the sluggish Balkan bureaucracy (which they were not used to), caused delays. Plus, the unforeseen events in Vodnjaki over the next few years only added to their challenges.

There was a period when doubts crept in, leading them to contemplate abandoning the project. This occurred during their second visit, one year later. Bursting with enthusiasm and plans, they returned to Vodnjaki, expecting to encounter the same serene scene as before. However, they were sorely disappointed. But it was not their fault. One would expect such small, remote places to remain unchanged. It was not a sprawling industrial zone on the city's outskirts or a prime location near a motorway that demanded rapid development. A village like Vodnjaki was akin to an ancient tree, rooted in its place for eternity. A year's passing meant little to a centuries-old tree. And the tree that stood at the heart of the village had indeed remained unchanged. It still stood tall, upright and majestic. Yet everything else was different.

"What happened here?" Iva queried. "A hurricane?"

The two modern holiday homes at the village entrance were still there, but everything else appeared ravaged, sullied and muddy. Even the village sign by the road lay twisted, broken, and rusted. Meanwhile, the Levec house had succumbed to fire, seemingly some time ago, with no efforts made yet to clear the debris. No smoke billowed from any chimney, and there no signs of life anywhere. The Babič

and Furlan houses stood empty, their windows and doors boarded up, roofs riddled with holes. The grounds lay derelict and overgrown, fences strewn about. The one restored house at the village's edge remained unchanged, but amidst its ruined surroundings, it too seemed forlorn.

But the natural landscape had changed the most. Instead of the green meadows that used to reach up to the forests and which they had admired so much, the village was now surrounded by a sprawling expanse of yellowish, brown and sometimes black earth. Dirty puddles had accumulated in the hollows, deep ruts from construction machinery had been cut into the ground between them, and pipes, torn construction tarps and all sorts of rubbish lay everywhere.

"It wasn't a hurricane," said Mikael quietly. "It was investors."

It was then that Iva and Mikael began to have second thoughts about the idea of renovating Iva's parents' house in a remote part of Slovenia. That a little wooden house on Sandön or some other island off Stockholm would be a more suitable location for their summer retreat. But in the end, they chose not to change their plans, chiefly because of Iva. There was clearly an invisible bond between her and the village.

"If we leave now, I will lose touch with my parents' homeland forever," she said. "I will never go back, because I will have nowhere to go and no reason to go back. I think I owe it to my mum and dad. And I owe it to my ... well, to our children when we finally have them."

"Right," said Mikael.

Mikael always said *right*, or agreed with his wife, because he loved Iva immensely and would do anything for her. But at the same time, he was also pragmatic. He speculated that once the aggressive and callous development that had ploughed into this idyllic landscape had completed its investment and another of the countless cookie-cutter tourist destinations stood in Vodnjaki, a holiday here, at least as they imagined it, would be unbearable. The very name "Well Water Glamping and Spa Resort Vodnjaki", which he had seen posted on the information board at the construction site, struck him as so unoriginal and stupid that he could not expect anything sensible to come of the venture. Moreover, the computer-generated image of the forthcoming spa resort was also an utter failure from an architectural point of view. Yet, Mikael knew something else: the value of their land, located right in the middle of this looming monstrosity, would skyrocket once this *architectural marvel* was completed. Yes, of course they will sell, but they will sell then. While he didn't

explain this to Iva, of course, he did agree to drop the matter for the time being and return to Stockholm.

And then, the following year, Iva and Mikael visited the village for the third time. Once again, they were completely taken aback by what they saw. They hadn't expected everything to remain the same — they knew the investors were in a rush and that the project might well be finished by now. Their expectations were clear: they anticipated a sprawling, megalomaniacally conceived tourist destination, with nightly rates costing several hundred euros, but so sterile that anyone with a semblance of sensitivity would prefer to spend that money elsewhere rather than stay there. But what awaited them was something entirely different.

This time, the very entrance to the village hinted at a new image. Instead of the battered and muddy sign displaying the village name, a brand new one now gleamed in its place. While traffic signs across Europe are standardised in size, shape, colour and typography, for Iva and Mikael, the Vodnjaki sign on its fluorescent yellow background seemed somehow different, radiating a sense of pride. Perhaps it was because of what stood next to it. About a metre from the road sign with the village name was a homemade wooden pole with a wooden board nailed to it. Both pieces of wood were carefully crafted, preserving their natural tree-like grain, with some bark still clinging to them. The flat parts were perfectly smoothed and the whole was gloss-varnished. On the wooden signpost, in large letters, were the words *WELCOME!* Surrounding the inscription were painted vibrant flowers.

The two holiday homes at the village entrance also had a different look. The one on the left, previously always empty, deserted and dusty, with its shutters closed, now appeared inviting. There was still no one to be seen, but the blinds were up, the windows sparkled, and someone had revived the previously neglected greenery around the house. The grass was well-kept, not freshly mown, but with a homely, lively feel. A few ceramic planters containing lush plants now stood by the front door.

The holiday home on the other side of the road had suffered a different fate. This house was clearly abandoned. One of the large windows on the ground floor had been broken and carelessly covered with some kind of plastic sheeting. In the spot in front of the entrance, where Mikael recalled seeing a large silver SUV parked from time to time, there was now a blue and white sign. It read "DUTB," with "FOR SALE" beneath it, and at the bottom, a stencilled house icon with "REAL ESTATE AGENCY" next to it, followed by a telephone number and a website address.

But the biggest change was in the village itself. It felt as if they had been transported to *Indija koromandija*.

"To where?" Mikael asked.

Iva smiled. "It's a fairy-tale land from Slovenian folk tales."

Between the village and the forest, where a construction site full of rubbish had stood just a year ago, a grove of fruit trees now grew. The still rather fragile trees were carefully supported and protected. Around each one, three wooden stakes, connected to each other and to the trunk by red ties, had been driven into the ground, protecting the fragile life in the centre. Bright green grass sprouted around the trees, with no bare earth in sight. Nature, with man's help, had quickly licked its wounds. The trees were planted in straight rows, evenly spaced, with paths running through the orchard. The grove stretched from the houses on the right up to the edge of the forest, and continued on the other side of the village, on the left, where the slope descended. The black, burnt-out remains of the Levec family house were nowhere to be seen, and it would have been difficult to tell where the house had even stood. The houses of the Babič and Furlan families were still standing, beautifully renovated. The roofing shone a deep red, and the façades were painted in a combination of milky carmine red and purple, with creamy white window and door surrounds. The colours blended beautifully with the greenery of the surrounding countryside.

Both houses had wooden signs hanging above the door, decorated with the same painted flowers as the welcome sign at the entrance to the village. The first sign read "ČUK FARM – BEE LODGE," and the second "ČUK FARM – PEAR LODGE." The only slight deviation from the harmony were the two modern glass sheds with bicycle racks next to both houses.

Now, the only blemish on the landscape of Vodnjaki was Iva's parents' house, standing forlorn and in desperate need of renovation. As Iva and Mikael gazed at the serene beauty before them, they realised that they wouldn't have to sell anything. Here, amidst the tranquillity and charm of the village, they could truly find their happiness.

In Vodnjaki

A year had passed since then. Encouraged by the idyllic transformation of Vodnjaki, Iva and Mikael worked with renewed vigour. Mikael exhausted all his holiday leave and even took some unpaid time off. His father lent a helping hand, and both Iva and Agnes pitched in eagerly. They were fortunate with their choice of contractors and managed to navigate the bureaucracy relatively smoothly. Additionally, the winter had been mild, which expedited their progress. In short, the renovation of Iva and Mikael's house in the village of Vodnjaki, nestled in the Pohorje Mountains, was largely completed by the spring of the current year. While there were still tasks to be tackled, the work was becoming increasingly enjoyable.

The interior needed the final touches to make it homely. They had to decide on wall colours, allocate room purposes, and furnish the house. Handling these logistics, especially from the other side of Europe, presented its challenges. However, sourcing furniture wasn't a major issue. They found a skilled local joiner who gladly renovated the existing pieces in the house, and for the rest, there was always Ikea. The branch in Graz was just over 60 kilometres away, while Ljubljana also had a branch in nearby Maribor. However, other items required more intricate logistics, especially considering Iva's desire to incorporate pieces from her late parents' home.

Iva and Mikael had known each other for most of their lives, and their relationship, despite their relative youth, was strong and harmonious. They shared a sentimentality and nostalgia, particularly Iva. Her nostalgic attachments were deeply intertwined with the loss of her parents at a young age. Only a few mementos survived the storm on the Baltic Sea, making Iva cling to them even tighter now.

Unable to bring everything they desired on the plane, their plan was as follows: Initially, both would fly to Slovenia, rent a car, and after Mikael sorted out a few matters, he would return home a few days later. Iva would drop him off at the airport and then return to Vodnjaki alone in the rented car. Upon reaching home, Mikael would conclude any unfinished business, head to his father's house, borrow his van, load his belongings, and drive down to Slovenia.

Travelling by van would be more of a challenge, but Mikael loves to drive. From Stockholm to the Fountains is just over 2,000 kilometres, or a 24-hour drive. The route he had mapped out would take him first to Malmö and then across the bridge to Copenhagen. From Denmark, he would take the Gedser-Rostock ferry to Germany. It was a two-hour journey, so he couldn't count on sleeping there, and it would be quite early, mid-afternoon. However, he would stop at a friend's house in

Berlin and spend the night there. That was Iva's condition. From Berlin to the Fountains, it would be another 1,000 kilometres, mostly on German motorways. When he entered Austria in Passau, he would call Iva, she would get in the car, and they would meet at the airport in Graz, return the Volvo, and continue their journey to the Fountains together. That was the plan.

They had successfully completed the first part. They flew to Slovenia, rented a car, and within three days, Mikael had made all the necessary arrangements at the administrative unit in Maribor and with the construction company that was doing the final construction work for them. Now, he was on his way back. His flight to Arlanda, with a stopover in Frankfurt, was at 8.30 in the morning. They had anticipated the morning rush hour, but it was not as bad as they had expected, so they arrived at Graz airport quite early and were able to still enjoy a farewell coffee at the airport café.

When they were together, Mikael usually took the wheel, as Iva didn't find driving particularly enjoyable. Although she drove competently, it wasn't her preferred activity. However, she had an excellent memory and a strong sense of direction. After bidding farewell to Mikael, she stepped out onto the terrace and watched his plane taxi down the runway, soar safely into the sky, and vanish into the distant haze of the western horizon. Then, she slipped behind the wheel of the Chinese Volvo and headed back to Vodnjaki. She chose to navigate without the aid of a satnav.

"Fascinating how familiar and manageable this environment feels," she murmured to herself as she approached Šentilj on the motorway, cruising at 120 kilometres per hour. "This is only my fourth visit to this part of Europe, and I haven't spent more than a month in Slovenia, yet it already feels like home."

As she neared her destination, driving the last few kilometres from Bistrica towards Vodnjaki, Iva noticed another change that had escaped her attention before. The road leading to Vodnjaki had been upgraded. The asphalt was smooth and jet black, and the road signs were freshly painted in vibrant white and red hues. Red markings delineated the sections reserved for cyclists, extending a generous metre on each side. The lane for motor vehicles was narrow, with no dividing lines down the middle—a clear indication that car traffic wasn't the primary focus here.

The second observation that caught her eye was the increased number of cyclists. Until that moment, she had rarely encountered cyclists in this area. However, even before ten o'clock in the morning, she counted at least ten of them along the short route from Bistrica to Vodnjaki. A group of four cyclists approached from the opposite direction, prompting her to carefully manoeuvre past two couples and a few individuals making their way uphill towards Vodnjaki.

Upon parking in front of the house, a cycling couple swiftly caught up with her, zipping past before halting at the Bee Lodge holiday suite. They securely parked their bikes in the adjacent glass shed before making their way towards the suite.

"We zijn rijp voor één thee," the man remarked.

"Hut," the woman responded.

Moments later, the sound of a car engine caught Iva's attention. Glancing around, she spotted a taxi pulling up near the closest house—a modern holiday home that now appeared remarkably clean and tidy compared to before. The taxi driver, a stout man with a genial demeanour, swiftly alighted, circled the vehicle and assisted an elderly woman out. She, too, possessed a robust frame, stood short in stature, and wore a black dress adorned with vibrant floral patterns. With the driver's aid, she steadied herself on a crutch before taking a shopping bag and cardboard box from the car's back seat. Together, they made their way towards the house, engaged in lively conversation, as if they were old acquaintances. Intrigued, Iva observed their interaction. As they approached, the woman glanced in Iva's direction and offered a brief nod, to which Iva responded with a friendly hello.

Despite not understanding the Dutch she had overheard earlier, both the woman's gesture and the unfamiliar language somehow contributed to the tranquil ambiance of the Pohorje Mountains morning. Once again, Iva found herself enveloped in a sense of security and warmth. She then went into the house.

The following days were bustling with activity. Surprisingly, her parents' house was in better condition than they had anticipated, requiring only minor renovations such as replacing the roof, addressing rising damp and upgrading the joinery. They decided on some structural changes, notably removing the living room wall and replacing it with a full-length window. Iva was pleased with this decision; it didn't compromise the integrity of the old architecture, and now she had a breathtaking view of the lawn, the gently sloping hillside, and the wooded horizon beyond.

Excited about the upcoming tasks, Iva began her mornings at eight, preparing breakfast and brewing a pot of coffee before diving into her work. She spent her days smoothing walls, mixing paint, and attending to various tasks. Occasionally, she would hop into her car to replenish supplies, driving to Maribor's shopping district on the southern outskirts or venturing into the lively streets of the old town for a coffee break, where she missed the urban pulse. Every other day, she made trips to Bistrica for groceries, often buying more than planned due to hunger pangs. Returning home, she dedicated hours to installing lamps and assembling the central piece of the living room, a towering bookcase. Despite the typical low ceilings of old

houses, this room surprisingly boasted higher-than-expected ceilings, allowing them to design the bookcase to reach an impressive 282 centimeters in height.

At 5 pm, Iva usually wrapped up her work for the day. She'd grab a bite to eat and still have ample time left to enjoy the evening. Every day, she went for a walk. Though Slovenian by birth, Iva was raised in a typical Scandinavian environment, where a strong connection to nature is integral. Up there, it might rain or snow frequently, but Scandinavians don't consider it bad weather.

"There is no such thing as bad weather," they say, "only inappropriate clothing."

Accustomed to being outdoors, Iva was drawn to the nature surrounding her, a stark contrast to the cold north. She felt increasingly grateful that her ancestors — whether her grandparents or earlier — had chosen to build a house in this beautiful location.

Stepping out of the house and into the village, she usually headed first to the old oak tree. The stone well beside it, covered in patina, hinted at its age, but the metal frame and wooden cover were new. Occasionally, she took a selfie by the well and sent it to Mikael. Then she'd follow one of the paths through the grove of trees, climb to the forest's edge, and spend some time gazing back at the village below.

Sometimes, when she closed her eyes and immersed herself in the profound silence — remarkably deep here — she imagined a little girl running and laughing across the road between the houses. The details were vague, but the girl wore a dark red cap with white reindeer and snowflakes, and a matching scarf around her neck. Her laughter echoed through the surrounding hills.

"Maybe," Iva murmured at the imaginary scene, "I used to run around like this once."

It was quite possible; three-year-olds often dash about energetically. But something about the vision didn't fit. The girl's dark red hat with reindeer and matching scarf were items bought for her by her parents during a trip to Estonia — from which they never returned.

Iva continued on her way, walking along the forest edge before taking another path back to the village. This route led her to the edge of a deep hollow at the western end of Vodnjaki. Unlike the gently sloping meadow in front of their house, the hillside here dropped abruptly into a dark, foreboding hollow. There was something unsettling about this hollow, though Iva couldn't pinpoint what it was. Rationally, it was just a steep slope covered in dense vegetation, with a stream flowing at the bottom, judging by the sounds that emanated from it. Perhaps it was the persistent

fog or the cool air that lingered even on hot summer days that gave it a menacing aura. Regardless, Iva had never felt particularly drawn to it, and there was no need to be.

Iva decided to do other thing differently that day. Instead of heading straight back to her own house, she walked a few steps further and turned towards the house of the limping woman in the colourful dress. She hadn't yet made contact with her neighbour, only catching a glimpse of her once when the woman was accompanied by a taxi driver. They had nodded at each other in passing. Occasionally, Iva saw her through the window, awkwardly pottering around the house, trimming a bush while trying to balance or simply standing and staring into the distance. Early in the morning, a taxi would come to the village, always driven by the same rotund man. He would help the woman into the car and return with her about an hour later, carrying a shopping bag and a cardboard box. On the way to the house, the woman always leaned on him, and they would chat casually. Sometimes, the taxi driver would accompany her inside and return within five or ten minutes.

In the evenings, the lights in the house were on until just after ten o'clock. As Iva approached, she glanced at her mobile phone — it was half past eight. Not too late for a short courtesy call.

Later, when detectives asked why she decided to visit her neighbour so suddenly and on that particular evening, Iva wouldn't be able to provide a clear answer. That it might have been prompted by the apparition of the girl in a crimson scarf and reindeer hat running between the houses in Wells wouldn't seem relevant enough to explain.

Iva reached the entrance and pressed the doorbell. Above it was a sign that read:

OLGA TOLSTOJ.

The Estonia Tragedy

Iva's impulse to reach out to her neighbour had proven to be a stroke of brilliance. For quite some time, there had been no movement in the house, but Iva had anticipated this. An elderly person with mobility issues needs time to get up from an armchair, perhaps even to crawl out of bed, put on slippers, find a cane, and slowly hobble to the door. That's why she didn't ring the bell again but waited patiently. And then the door opened.

The woman greeted her warmly. At first, she seemed slightly surprised to see her young neighbour, but it lasted only a moment. She invited Iva inside and made coffee. She declined assistance; Iva had to sit and wait for her to serve. However, the woman wasn't as frail as expected; she moved slowly but was quite agile. She limped much less than when the taxi driver had escorted her home.

The coffee was strong, Turkish style, though not particularly flavourful. It couldn't compare to the Illy espresso that Iva was used to. The biscuits offered with the coffee were cheap and tasteless. Nevertheless, Iva was there for neighbourly visit, not to critique the biscuits.

The conversation started off reserved and formal, despite an immediate mutual fondness between the two women, despite their forty-year age gap. Iva learned that Olga was Russian, spending the autumn of her life here. Like Iva, Olga spoke broken Slovenian. She lived alone in Vodnjaki.

Later, Iva realised she had spent more than an hour with Olga, though it felt like no more than fifteen or twenty minutes. Before falling asleep that evening, the visit continued to occupy her thoughts. There was something about Olga that Iva had never quite felt before. Something... maternal, she thought, though uncertain if that was the most fitting term. Agnes Sjövall, Iva's foster mother, had genuinely loved her and tried to be like her real mother, but there was always a hint of Scandinavian coolness. Olga, on the other hand, was simply warm. That evening, for the first time, Iva also considered herself as having a Slavic soul.

The next day, Iva invited her neighbour over again, and this time the conversation was anything but formal. Olga was seventy-two years old, originally from Tula, a city south of Moscow. She was a widow and, as far as Iva understood, childless. In her later years, she had come to live in Slovenia, where she and her husband had initially planned to buy a dacha—a summer holiday home. However, after her

husband passed away and things at home became rather complicated (she didn't want to discuss the details), she decided to permanently move to Slovenia. Iva refrained from probing further with additional questions. She had sensed Olga's financial struggles during her visit, so she avoided prying. One never knew when a question would touch a nerve.

Olga's house had an impressive design; the architectural project and execution must have been quite costly. Even the building fixtures were of high quality and custom-made. However, this was all a decade ago or more. Clearly, the flow of funds had dried up since then. The facade, parts of the windows, and some corners of the house were in need of renovation. Olga's clothes, the coffee, and everything else she offered told the same story.

As for her health, it was evident that Olga suffered from hip and knee problems, with swollen legs. But when the subject came up, she dismissed these issues with a wave of her hand. Complaining clearly wasn't her style.

"How are your legs?" Iva asked.

"It depends on the weather," Olga replied. "Mornings are much better than evenings."

"That must make shopping quite exhausting for you," Iva remarked, recalling how heavily Olga had leaned on the taxi driver yesterday morning.

Olga smiled. "Ah, Jože. He likes it when someone leans on his arm, so I indulge him a bit."

Iva hoped to reciprocate the welcome she had received by offering Olga similar (Slavic?) hospitality. She decided to prepare a substantial snack, which turned out to be a good choice. She laid out dry salami, sliced prosciutto, cheese, pickles, olives and butter on the counter. In the toaster, she placed slices of wholemeal toast. Olga watched her actions with hungry eyes and immediately joined in, ready to help. She placed a cutting board in front of herself, retrieved a steak knife from its holder, and began slicing the dry salami. She was surprisingly adept.

Thirty minutes later, they were sat in the living room and Olga looked around. Before sitting down and enjoying their snack, Olga took a short stroll around the spacious living area. She occasionally caressed a corner of the refurbished cabinet, glanced at a few photos on the wall, and gazed out of the window.

A hint of fresh paint permeated the house, but it was not unpleasant; instead, it lent an air of freshness and cleanliness. In this room, Iva and Mikael had kept the old furniture, allowing Iva to seat her guest comfortably in an armchair that might once have belonged to her mother or father. She settled into another chair herself.

The conversation that ensued between them took Iva completely by surprise. The seventy-year-old stranger, whom she had met only once before in her life, had Iva opening her heart—a rarity for her. Iva found herself spontaneously discussing the darkest trauma of her life. She began talking about something she hadn't shared with anyone outside Mikael before, not even with all the coaxing in the world.

"My parents died in the Estonia ferry disaster when I was less than three years old," Iva said.

Olga raised her eyebrows and looked at Iva with pain in her eyes. Then she seemed to realise she was staring at her conversation partner, averted her gaze from Iva, fixed it on the wall above Iva's head, and stared into space for a while. Then she shivered as if struck by electricity, lowered her gaze, looked back at Iva, and nodded sympathetically. She didn't utter a word throughout.

Olga's unusual reaction surprised Iva—not negatively, but quite the opposite. There was something about this woman that literally drew Iva to continue her confession. Whenever Iva had mentioned her parents' tragedy to anyone before, which was very rare and always prompted by some external situation, she had typically been disappointed. She invariably received the same: pitying looks, insincere sympathy and a flood of stereotypical words of condolence. Occasionally, someone responded a bit more genuinely, but never had she encountered such a depth of profound empathy, such infinite compassion, as she just perceived in the horrified gaze of her interlocutor. By remaining silent, by saying nothing, by refraining from immediately comforting and pitying her, Olga had conveyed more than a thousand words. Iva was no longer surprised that she was confiding in a stranger. If anyone, she could pour her heart out to her.

"Most of the passengers on the ship perished," Iva said. "Although rescue efforts arrived very quickly. You see, the Baltic Sea is one of the busiest in the world; there are at least two thousand ships sailing on it at any given moment."

Olga reached for her cup and took a sip of tea.

"You don't mind me talking about this?" Iva asked.

Olga smiled. Of course not, her expression conveyed. Iva already knew this; she had asked out of courtesy.

"Did you want to say something earlier?"

Olga shook her head, and Iva continued.

"The first rescue ship arrived at the site when the Estonia sank within twenty-two minutes. Fast, but the rescuers said it still wasn't fast enough. It was too cold. Almost everyone aboard perished, over eight hundred people. They managed to save only about a hundred. Unfortunately, my parents weren't among them."

"But your childhood wasn't unhappy?" Olga asked curiously. In her hands, she held a small photo album that Iva had pulled from under the table and placed in front of Olga during her story. Olga opened it and now examined a picture of a fair-haired Scandinavian couple in their thirties, their similarly fair-haired ten-year-old son, and a small brown-haired girl nestled between them.

"No," Iva said. "After the accident, my grandparents, who lived here in Vodnjaki, fell seriously ill and both died in less than a month. The pain of losing my father, their only child, broke them. I had no other relatives in Slovenia, so I stayed with my parents' friends in Sweden. No, my childhood really wasn't unhappy..."

Iva turned and pointed to the framed photographs hanging on the wall behind her head. She stood up and walked over to them.

"These are my favourite memories from my childhood. In both, you can see that, despite everything, I was a happy child."

Iva reminisced over the photographs, lost in thought. Olga sat and watched her. Then she too stood up, shuffled over to Iva, and gazed at the photographs. Although Iva's memories had just taken her somewhere far away, she was aware of Olga's gesture. And she appreciated it. She knew that her guest had already looked at the photos upon arrival, so her current interest was more or less one of politeness.

Both photographs were quite large, printed on 30 by 40 centimetre paper and framed in dark wood. The first photo depicted Iva's new family gathered around a decorated Christmas tree, with a large window in the background and snow falling outside. Beneath the tree lay a pile of gifts, and a little girl looked eagerly at them. In the second photo, a young Iva sat on the floor in a child's room, about five or six years old. She wore a woollen cap of dark red, adorned with white reindeer and snowflakes. She was engrossed in playing with a teddy bear. In the background, there was a shelf made of natural light wood filled with toys. On the top shelf stood an intricately built Lego house, next to it a rather faded Russian nesting doll, hiding progressively smaller versions inside. Around it was wrapped a red scarf with the same white reindeer as on Iva's hat. On the middle shelf was a plastic model of a TV tower, against which leaned a postcard. Because of its small size, it was not possible

to read exactly what was on it, but it depicted an old city centre. At the edge of the photograph, part of a book shelf could be seen, full of children's books.

"What about your parents? Did they ever...?" Olga asked.

"Yes, they found them both, but I never saw them. They're buried in Stockholm. Sadly, I have no real memory of my birth parents. No inner memories at all. Perhaps that's why I cling so much to external memories, the handful that I have," Iva replied after some thought.

"People say we were among the lucky ones. Most of the deceased in the accident remained trapped on the ferry. The ship dragged them along, and they were never found. They found a total of 94 bodies, most within the first month after the accident, with the last body found a year and a half later. My parents were found after two months, washed ashore a few days apart on the south side of the Finnish island of Utö, about forty kilometres from the accident," Iva explained.

"As you said, you have no real memory of your parents?" asked Olga.

"No. I don't remember what they looked like, or any shared experiences. I was too young. I have a few photographs of them. I found some old albums here, in which I'm just a baby, but they don't evoke any memories."

"So, you don't remember this village, Vodnjaki?" Olga asked.

"No," Iva said. She turned and walked down the hallway to the interior of the house. "I only have this," she said, disappearing behind one of the doors. When she returned, she held a small framed photograph in her hand. Just like the pictures on the wall, it was worn, but the image was clear. She handed it to Olga, who took it, this time looking at it attentively rather than out of politeness. The photograph showed a young couple walking towards the camera. She was looking at the camera, he was looking away. They were in the foreground, with other passengers visible in the background.

"This is the last image of my parents before they died," Iva said. "It was taken by a photographer who captured all the passengers and sold them souvenir pictures. A Polaroid. The photo survived because my mother kept it in a waterproof compartment in her suitcase. This photo, along with several others that were found, was held by accident investigators for a long time to aid in identification. This picture is my favourite memory of my parents."

Olga's empathy for Iva's sorrow was expressed this time in a long gaze she gave the photograph. Her reaction differed from those Iva was used to. With everyone else she had shown this photograph to, she had detected the expected fake sympathy

and lack of real interest in the image. With Olga, it was the opposite. There was no false sympathy in her gaze, only genuine interest in the images of her mother and father.

When Olga finally returned the photograph to Iva, she gently placed it on the bookshelf, walked over to the photographs on the wall, and pointed to a postcard visible in one of them.

"And this," she said. "A few days after the accident, a postcard arrived from them sent in Tallinn."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she had to swallow the lump in her throat.

"You mentioned that investigators found your parents' suitcase?" Olga asked.

"Yes. They collected heaps of luggage washed up on various shores for months. Among them was my parents' suitcase. Alongside the photograph were gifts for me. They had bought me a hat, a scarf and this Russian doll," Iva said, pointing again to the photograph.

With this, no matter how considerate, empathetic and willing her listener was to take on the burden of bitter memories, it was all too much for Iva. She allowed the tears to stream down her hot cheeks. Crying in front of others is never easy, but with Olga, it was possible. And once again, Olga responded in her unique way. She didn't rush to her, didn't try to stifle her crying, didn't force handkerchiefs on her, and didn't immediately start consoling her. She evidently understood that sometimes a person needs to have a good cry. Sometimes they need a shoulder to cry on, and sometimes they need to be alone. Olga stood up and headed home. Although it was late now and her legs were noticeably more painful, causing her to limp visibly, she refused Iva's offer to accompany her.

"I can manage these few metres, my dear girl," she said. Iva stood on the doorstep, watching her swaying walk. It was dark, the light outside Iva's house was dim, and Olga was soon swallowed by the silent Pohorje night. After a while, Iva saw her again as she limped to her house, where the sensor detected her and switched on the light above Olga's front door. Iva went back inside and let herself cry until there were no tears left.

Maserati Quattroporte

The next few days passed in peace and tranquillity. The cycling guests at the Bee and Pear Lodges had probably changed by now, but Iva didn't distinguish them from one another. However, they did catch her attention because they almost never fit the stereotype she imagined. At home in Stockholm, she also used a bicycle for getting around the city, but everyone did that there. She had a comfortable city bike with a large wicker basket on the front handlebars, which she used for errands, trips to the market or social calls. She saw the bicycle as a practical tool for daily chores, not for cultivating a healthy lifestyle. She would never have considered using a bike to climb to some village in the hills.

Iva's stereotypical ideas of what a recreational cyclist should be were reinforced by how the guests at the apartments were equipped. They all wore similar colourful, tight-fitting clothing, all wore cycling helmets, clomped around in specialised cycling shoes, and rode high-tech, visibly expensive mountain bikes. However, they were not all lean, wiry and tanned as she had also imagined. Many of them were elderly (over seventy), heavy (over a hundred kilogrammes) or had hunched, drooping postures that did not suggest intense physical activity. But clearly, she was mistaken. To be fair, they all adhered to some sort of cycling code of conduct; they were all polite, unobtrusive, calm, and quiet. And they all seemed to go to bed early. After eight in the evening, unless they had just returned from a late ride, no one was to be seen anywhere. From around eight in the evening until six in the morning, when dawn began to break in Vodnjaki at this time of year, the village was enveloped in darkness and blissful silence.

Iva and Olga didn't visit each other for the next few days, but whenever they saw each other over the fence, they would wave warmly to each other.

The morning after her confession, Iva woke up feeling rejuvenated, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders, a burden she had carried for so long that she had almost grown accustomed to it. Only when it fell away did she realise how heavy it had been. Later that morning, as she watched Olga's routine arrival, aided by her empathetic and compassionate taxi driver who supported the heavily limping old woman, she couldn't help but smile.

At noon on Wednesday, Mikael called to inform her that he would be delayed by about a week.

"Work?" she asked.

"Yes, but mostly my dad," he replied. "You know how he is, as good as gold, can't say no to anyone..."

"Yes, I know," Iva said. Mikael was right; his father was truly as good as gold.

"So, he's already lent out the van and it won't be available until the end of next week."

"Alright," Iva said.

"Alright? Won't you die of boredom alone in Vodnjaki?"

"Actually, I'm not alone at all. I've met an interesting neighbour."

"As long as it's not a male neighbour."

Iva laughed. If anything, jealousy was not in Mikael's nature. Not even pretend jealousy.

"Is she from that modernist wonder at the beginning of the village?" he asked.

"Yes, once you meet her, even the modernist wonder will seem more acceptable."

"Doubtful," Mikael said cheerfully, "unless she's sexy."

"The house?"

"Yes. Or your new friend."

"I don't think she'd be pleased with your age."

"Why, I'm only thirty-eight. How old is she, anyway?"

"Seventy-two."

After they ended the call, Iva stood by the window for a while, thinking that, surprisingly, she didn't mind spending a few more days alone in Vodnjaki. She didn't attribute this to her acquaintance with Olga; she knew it was mostly due to the peace that was so thick here, you could cut it with a knife. Nevertheless, she missed Mikael more each day, and his absence was the only thing disturbing the perfect tranquillity that was slowly but steadily settling into her.

That same afternoon, she realised that, besides Olga and the cyclists, she had yet another set of neighbours. Although there weren't many opportunities for neighbourly relations in Vodnjaki. The holiday home opposite Olga's home was empty and for sale. The abbreviation *DUTB*, as Iva had checked, stood for some kind of state bank or company that sold seized properties after bankruptcies and similar situations. Considering the inactivity around the house (none), there was no expectation of new residents any time soon. The only other possible place to find life was that small, thoughtfully renovated house at the end of the village. The last time she passed by it was a few days ago when she went for a stroll and returned to the village along the edge of the deep hollow. There was no one there at that time.

It was around four in the afternoon, and Iva was standing in front of her house, examining the fence to see if there were any signs indicating where the water pipe ran underground. The water pressure in their plumbing had been causing problems for a while; there were no leaks detected in the main lines, so the water company had promised to come at the beginning of the following week to check the connection from the junction to the house. This was the last major task remaining in their renovation, and the only one Mikael couldn't handle, leaving it to her. A friendly female voice from the water company on the other end of the phone line confirmed the date and assured her that, barring any major issues, the work would be completed in one, at most two days.

At the very moment Iva discovered an overgrown stone block with a metal plate bearing barely visible letters and numbers — she hoped this marked the path of the water pipe — something rumbled loudly. At first, she thought a military plane was flying low overhead, but the noise wasn't coming from above; it was coming from the road. She lifted her head and caught sight of a low white sports car speeding by. Iva's knowledge of cars started and ended with Volvo, so she wouldn't have known which make and model it was even if it had driven slower and allowed her a closer look. However, she knew it wasn't an ordinary car that most people drove, but one of those sports models known for being expensive and loud, and quite impractical and useless for everyday use. In Stockholm, she was used to the occasional roar of such cars on the streets — it was a big city, after all. But here in Vodnjaki, a place with two residents and four to six cycling tourists, such a sight was, to say the least, unusual.

The white sports car with its deep rumbling sound that sped past Iva was a roughly three-year-old Maserati Quattroporte S Q4. From what Iva could still make out, it was being driven by a younger woman. Considering the configuration of the narrow and winding roads, the constant presence of cyclists, and especially the fact that they were in a settlement, the woman was clearly speeding through the village. Iva was

convinced she had made a mistake and would turn at the end of the asphalt and soon leave the village behind. However, nothing happened; only the sound of the car gradually faded away. Curiosity got the better of Iva after a while. She stepped onto the road and walked towards the end of the village. When she spotted the white sports car parked in front of the idyllic house at the village's end, it didn't particularly please her (nor did it overly bother her). Nobody wants a reckless driver who treats local roads like a racetrack as their neighbour, but city life tends to prepare one for living alongside all sorts of eccentrics. Besides, Iva and Mikael's house was quite distant, not even in sight, and they (still) didn't have children who could be endangered by speeding cars. With that, Iva's interest in the sports car and its owner came to an end. For now.

The Evening Guest

"Sometimes in the evening, a strange guest comes to me. I don't know if he visits other people too. He sits by the bedside and tells old stories."

*Ivan Cankar, Evening Guest. Short story. Collection: Our Word,
Ivan Cankar, Selected Works, VII Ljubljana:
Mladinska knjiga, 1967, p. 167.*

In the evening, Iva thought about Mika. Thirty-eight-year-old Swede Mikael Sjövall was her brother and husband. His parents, Agnes and Per Sjövall, were her parents, as well as her in-laws. However, Agnes and Per were Iva's foster parents, and Mikael was not her biological brother. After the accident involving Iva's parents and the rapid decline in the health of her elderly grandparents, with almost no other close relatives left, Iva faced the prospect of becoming an orphan. Foster care, which awaited Iva in Slovenia, could be quite pleasant, but not if there was a better option available. Due to their strong friendship with her parents and, more importantly, because Agnes and Per had long wished for a daughter like her – alongside their wonderful son, of course – Iva was adopted by them. After the accident, Iva never returned to Slovenia. There was quite a bit of bureaucracy regarding the official adoption status, but in the end, they patched things up with a few Solomon-like solutions and achieved what mattered most: the welfare of the child. Since then, Iva had lived in Stockholm, among people she trusted, feeling safe and loved.

Iva had been in love with Mikael for as long as she could remember. Her early years with the Sjövall family were lost in the fog of early childhood. Iva's earliest memory of that time was a trip to a certain lake. There, she was attacked by a large bird, and Mikael protected her from it. She also had photographs from that time, when she was about five years old.

Mikael's love for Iva developed later. When three-year-old Iva came to live with them, he was nine. He was going to school, had his own friends, interests and his own world. But the new family member didn't bother him. At the same time, he was old enough to understand what had happened to her parents, which awakened chivalry and affection for the poor girl in the boy. Since he could remember, he had been protective and attentive to her. And gradually, he became increasingly happy to have a sister; the arrangement brought multiple benefits. Their parents played an important role here; they didn't burden their son with the care of the girl, and their attention to him didn't diminish because of Iva. Meanwhile, little Iva wasn't demanding, and she didn't detract attention from Mikael's father and mother. As they grew up, the gap in interests due to the age difference gradually narrowed. There were more and more things they could do together.

That there was something more between them, Per and Agnes noticed in the middle of Iva's teenage years. Mikael was already a student and thus an adult, a full-fledged man. The parents didn't bother with potential prejudices; they immediately looked at the matter from a practical point of view. If Iva's parents were still alive, the love between Iva and Mikael would have been very welcome. When Iva was twenty-three years old, she and Mikael got married. Iva's life could hardly have turned out better.

When Iva's parents passed away, she was three years old. She was lively, eagerly exploring the world around her and chattering away incessantly. However, no one in her new family understood the torrent of words pouring out of her. Communication wasn't an issue; such a young child learns quickly, and she absorbed Swedish effortlessly. But as a result, the traces of Slovenian in her babbling became increasingly rare. Yet, wasn't it a loss to ignore the treasure that already lay within the girl? After all, Iva was Slovenian, and to Per and Agnes, what they discussed in their evening conversations seemed owed to her parents.

"Language is the key to the heart of a culture," Agnes said to her husband. "In every language, worlds are contained, no matter how small. And since we all learn major world languages because we need to, knowledge of a lesser-known language is all the more valuable."

Per fully agreed with this sentiment. Together with Agnes, they found a nursery school where there was a group of Slovenian-speaking children and two Slovenian educators. This ensured that Iva's budding mother tongue did not extinguish but rather developed into a slightly less fluent yet better understood Slovenian. Knowing Slovenian came in handy for Iva many years later. When she and Mikael began renovating their house in her parents' homeland, they discovered that Slovenian youth, like everywhere else in the world, were fluent in English but not so much in Slovenian bureaucratic offices in Maribor. Not only were the officials they dealt with bureaucratically rigid, but they also didn't command languages particularly well. However, the true value of Iva's Slovenian language skills came to the fore tonight.

Among the items that had lain in cardboard boxes in the attic of her parents' house for thirty years were also piles of books, which she had now decided to tackle. She took them out of the boxes, carefully wiped off the dust with a damp cloth and then with a soft dry cloth, and arranged them on the bookshelves in the renovated living room. The library wasn't overly extensive, but Iva had never seen so many Slovenian books in one place in her life. She found this absolutely wonderful and looked

forward to sitting down in the evenings and reading through them all. She stood in front of the shelves, admiring the spines of the books. She was particularly drawn to a classically designed collection of red books with black accents and gold trim. The collection contained nearly a hundred books that featured the selected works of the most important Slovenian poets and writers.

Iva randomly picked one of them. She leafed through it and saw that it contained short stories, only a few pages each. Just right for an evening, she thought. She settled into an armchair, chose one of the stories, and began reading. It was harder than she had expected. Many words were unfamiliar, and in some sentences, she got lost and had to read them several times. Nevertheless, she persevered to the end. It was a short story, more a collection of feelings than a description of events, but it left an impression on her. When she put the book down, she felt somewhat melancholic; the reading had immersed her in a mood of introspection. Before going to bed, she looked at the photograph of the author at the beginning of the book. It was taken in 1911; he was dressed in old-fashioned attire, thin, with a majestic moustache, a hat, and large eyes. His name was Ivan Cankar, reputedly one of the most important Slovenian writers. The title of the short story she had just read was "Evening Guest", and it occurred to Iva only later that perhaps the title itself hinted at what would begin happening in a few days.

Work Order

On Saturday and Sunday, Iva spent her time reading. She kept returning to Cankar, sometimes reading from one book, sometimes from another. In the collection, there were at least seven dedicated to him, if not more. She skipped over much, omitted parts, but certain descriptions, sentences, poems and passages completely absorbed her. Due to the language, it was quite strenuous, at times rather dusty and old, yet that melancholic feeling that settled in her during reading constantly compelled her to continue.

That was how it went until Monday morning. Then, a little after eight o'clock, a utility van with a trailer pulled up in front of her house, bearing a miniature orange excavator. Iva had never seen anything like it; it looked like a child's toy. The shovel or whatever was used for digging was tiny and narrow. Because of its orange colour, it seemed even more plastic, like a toy. Several workers spilled out of the van and began gathering around the fence. Iva quickly dressed and went outside. One of the workers, presumably the foreman, approached her. They greeted each other, and he explained they had come to inspect *the local water supply pipe, as arranged with Irena*, handing her a stack of papers.

"Here is the work order," he said. "I'll need a few of your signatures."

"Now?" Iva asked, but the foreman had already turned and walked away to join the others. Iva shrugged, placed the papers on the windowsill, and called after him, "Do you need anything else?"

"No," he replied, clearly eager to get to work. "Just fill up a few buckets of water," he added, "we'll be shutting off the main valve."

Iva nodded and retreated into the house. She decided she would make them coffee later, but for now, she would leave them in peace.

A few minutes later, the sound of the excavator echoed through the village. Since the pipe they were searching for was on the Tavčar's plot, the workers had to remove the fence. Then, across the freshly mown grass that had just begun to properly emerge, they started digging towards the house.

Iva retreated to the other side of the house to escape the noise. She stood by the window, gazing at the dark forest on the other side of the slope, lost in thought. The loud noise of the machinery in this peaceful Pohorje Mountain setting was something entirely new to her. Apart from that sports car three days ago, nothing had ever disturbed the tranquillity here so forcefully. Yet, for Iva, it felt right that

something was happening and that amidst the noise she could hear people's voices. After three days immersed in the literature of Ivan Cankar, she felt a restlessness within herself that she couldn't explain. If she were alone in this moment, surrounded by deafening silence with no one around, she might have even felt scared. Well, more anxious perhaps, because with fear, you know what you are afraid of, or as she had read somewhere, fear has its specific object. Here in Vodnjaki, however, there was absolutely nothing under the sun that a person could fear.

About an hour later, as Iva was arranging books on the shelves, the doorbell interrupted her. She climbed down from the stool and went to the door. It was the foreman. They were obviously on a break; the excavator in the background was silent, and the workers were idly standing around the dug-out pit.

"Um, ma'am, could you come with me for a moment?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," Iva replied with a smile. The man did not smile back.

"Uh, could you come with me?"

Iva nodded, slipped on her clogs and followed him outside. The small excavator was not a toy after all but a very efficient machine. In just under two hours, they had dug a trench about half a metre wide and a little over a metre deep, nearly five metres long. They had almost reached the house from the edge of the road.

"I think we have a problem," the foreman said.

"I don't understand," said Iva. She, like the workers, stood at the edge of the pit and looked down at the heap of earth mixed with stones, bits of rock and torn up turf. She expected to see a completely decayed pipe, water gushing out, a giant puddle or something similarly disastrous that couldn't be fixed quickly, would be very expensive and leave her without water for several days. But it wasn't that. In fact, there was nothing but a neatly dug trench with the occasional glimpse of an intact water pipe amidst the soil.

"And what is wrong?" she asked.

"This," the foreman said, pointing his foot at something in the pit. It was light and elongated.

"What is it?"

"A bone."

"A bone?" Now she saw it too. About half a metre long, thicker at one end, the other end buried in the earth. From what she remembered from school, the thicker part was called the head of the joint. A femur, and it belonged to a mammal.

"An animal?" she asked.

"I'm afraid it's human," the foreman said.

"How can you tell?" Iva asked. The question was rhetorical and sounded rather unconvincing. She already knew that what she was looking at was part of a human skeleton. The discovery didn't scare her, but she sensed it could complicate her peaceful stay in Vodnjaki.

"How do I know?" the foreman said. "Experience... and this." He pointed his foot at something else in the pit. Not far away, a part of a human skull, with bare, gleaming teeth, grinned up from the trench.