

Blaž Kutin: Cenozoic

an excerpt from the novel translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Reality leaves a lot to the imagination.

John Lennon

Chapter 1

The benumbing fatigue that had been weighing him down all day dissipated in the night. His heart was pounding but he felt a sense of calm. The sound of the siren filled him with a sense of power, the empty road giving him an illusion of control. The high beams illuminated enough of the road in front for him to be able to casually speed down the fast lane. It didn't even occur to him that he might get a flat tyre or run over some unsuspecting animal that would leap out in front of his ambulance. His *raison d'être* was clear. They were counting on him and nothing would prevent him from arriving at the scene of the accident as soon as possible.

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Chapter 7

On the ferry she, staring at the waves, mentioned the popular science article she had been reading a few days earlier. They started to chat about whether everything is in fact merely a computer simulation. Luka said that perhaps every one of us lives in a world of our own. What if everything is subjective? What if all he sees and feels, be it the waves below them or the wind in their hair, is different for him than it is for her? Lena said that in this case Luka was also just a figure in her simulation. And the same was true about her, the way he was seeing her. They have nothing to do with each other, they don't even share their reality, not truly, because reality as such does not exist.

Their lively debate, superficially touching upon astrology, reincarnation and quantum physics, continued, accompanied by Dire Straits, all the way to their

destination. Luka had not felt such ease between them for months. Perhaps it really was all only in his simulation and not in hers, but he was optimistic – things, at least as he was experiencing them, were taking a turn for the better.

They parked on the side of the road and descended the narrow path with their luggage. The small stone house with a yard stood a few minutes' drive away from Veli Lošinj. It was high on a slope from where there was an open view towards the sea and the island of Pag. Lena paused to take in the scent of the pine trees, and Luka unlocked the house and brought in the luggage. The interior was a single space with a bed and a kitchen, which was more sensible than having two small rooms. He turned on the radiators and the water heater, then found a bottle of white wine in the suitcase and waved it at Lena who had in the meantime already lain down on the bed, still wearing her shoes. They weren't hungry and they only took a sip of the wine, enough to clink their glasses in a toast.

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After brief and cathartic sex, he lit a cigarette and took a deep draw. Intertwined on the bed, they began passing the cigarette back and forth. They didn't speak, words were superfluous. Finally, he felt confident again.

'I wouldn't say no to someone giving me a foot massage.'

He quickly gave her the cigarette, knelt on the floor and got to work. Smoking, Lena enjoyed watching him.

'How's that?'

'Oh, yes.'

When his fingers started to hurt, he suggested they walk down to the coast and have something to eat. It was just warm enough for them to sit outside in front of the tavern in their sweaters. The scent of the sea mingled with the smell of grilled fish. They ate and were mostly silent. Lena pointed out a fishing boat returning to the harbour. Luka laughed at the tavern dog trying to chase a cat from the terrace. Leaving a large tip, they returned to the house and indulged in some longer, slower sex. There was no TV in the room because despite Majda's nagging, Štefan was strongly opposed to having one, so they simply lay there and fell asleep.

Luka woke up early. He picked up the blanket that had fallen to the floor and gently covered her before quietly getting dressed. The suitcases were still in the middle of the room, the newspapers Lena had bought at the petrol station lay untouched on the kitchen counter. He walked down the path to the pine grove and picked a handful of wild asparagus. When he casually turned towards the sea, he was overcome with an unexpected sense of being at peace with the world. The instinctive contempt he had always felt for the principles by which nature operated all of a sudden melted away and for a moment or two he felt part of something beautiful.

He walked to the shop and chatted to the woman at the counter who jokingly complained about the latest devaluation of the euro. When he walked back up to the house with eggs and fresh bread, Lena was awake. He lit a cigarette outside, waiting for her to come out of the shower and then they had breakfast. Lena announced that scrambled egg with asparagus was her favourite from now on.

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They took a walk by the sea, it was cloudy and windy but that didn't bother them. It was like the first few months of their relationship, only better, because they had been through a hard patch. They had known each other for four years and to Luka it seemed as if he could physically feel their love deepening and becoming stronger.

Lena suggested they went for a coffee to a bar that had deckchairs outside. They settled into one each and covered their feet with the blanket provided. The coffee was weak but the view was especially beautiful. Luka gazed dreamily at the distant sailing boats hurrying along in both directions. There was a flash of lightning in the distance.

'Do you remember,' he said, 'when we were on Mykonos and went every day to look at that beautiful sailing boat, the blue one? And we imagined owning it? Why don't we really buy a boat, even if it is not a sailing boat. Even your folk have that rowing boat.'

'A great idea,' Lena agreed.

'It is, isn't it?'

'Only that we're penniless. We can't even afford a dishwasher, let alone a boat.'

Luka gave her a questioning look. 'What do you mean? That's not true.'

'Take a look. I've emptied all the accounts.'

'You what?'

She smiled at him casually, he stared at her in disbelief.

'Stop kidding me.'

'It all went to good causes. We have so much, others have so little, right? So much happiness, so I thought to myself it should be spread out a bit.'

She sounded completely sincere.

'It was hard to decide who to give to,' she explained. 'There are so many great organisations. In the end I chose a sanctuary for abandoned plants. They salvage flowers, cacti, weeds, and then look after them.'

'You're provoking me, I just don't know why.'

'Why would I be provoking? I thought you'd be happy.'

He found his mobile and frantically logged into his online banking app.

'So we don't have a penny left.'

'Five euros and forty-two cents...' he read out the balance of the account in shock. 'I can't believe it. You gave away all our money?'

'All of it.'

'Without asking me?'

'It was a spontaneous idea.'

He wanted to check her account also, but a message came up that the password was incorrect. He tried again, in case he had mistyped it.

'Have you changed your password?'

'I don't have any left either, believe me.'

'I will change mine as well, if this is what we're doing now,' he responded angrily and immediately proceeded to do so. He put down the phone and gazed at her in desperation.

'I no longer recognise you,' he said quietly.

'Because you're not used to seeing me happy. I really cannot remember ever feeling this good. And it's all thanks to you.'

She turned her gaze back towards the sea while he watched her, waiting for her to announce laughing that he had fallen for her joke. It began to drizzle.

‘I’ve forgotten how beautiful it is here,’ she said entranced. ‘We should come more often.’

‘I want to go home.’

She thought for a moment and then suggested cheerfully, ‘Are you also hungry? Let’s go for lunch to that place that does shrimps in a sauce, remember?’

She asked for the bill and paid with their last cash, then they walked to the restaurant a few minutes away where Luka the year before last had made friends with a black mongrel. The drizzle turned into rain but neither of them paid any attention to that. Lena picked a few sprigs of rosemary and pondered on what she might use it for.

‘And how will we pay?’ he asked when they sat down and she began looking at the menu.

‘Credit card,’ she seemed surprised at the question. The place was small, the owner’s daughter was playing on the floor, it was pouring outside. In his thoughts he made a plan, he would be paid next Tuesday, until then they can last on credit cards. They will manage. Lena glanced around the place curiously.

‘Where’s that dog of yours, remember it?’

When the waiter came to take their order, they found out that the dog had had to be put down last October. They now had another one, but it was out wandering somewhere.

They spent the rest of the day in the house, lying on the bed playing games. Luka was restless, nervous, and every so often kept asking about the money and how she could have given it away without asking him. Lena sank his warships one by one, almost as if she was able to read his mind. He changed his tactics a number of times, but it didn’t help. After a while she said she was bored with Battleship and suggested they played Monopoly instead. Luka was against the idea, said he was hungry, but Lena didn’t feel like going out. After she beat him twice in a row in Monopoly, she switched off the light and fell asleep, and he lay by her side, thinking about himself, the two of them, and her strange behaviour.

In the morning he made coffee and waited for her to wake up. It was still cloudy outside but the rain had stopped. They aired the house and drove off back towards Ljubljana.

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After work he stopped at the police station. He had to wait in line at the reception window for quite some time while a man in front of him argued about his son allegedly being wrongfully detained. After the man finally threatened the police once more with a lawyer and left, Luka pulled out the copy of his report and said he would like to speak to someone who was handling his case. The police officer said that this was not possible at the moment, so he decided to wait.

He glanced with curiosity at a young man in handcuffs – the man who had been in front of him before was his father – and he sat down on the bench next to him. It was hard to relax with him so close, he could sense aggression, but fortunately he was soon taken away. To pass time, he began reading snippets from the history of popular music in his phone. On this day in February 1968, shortly before leaving for India, the Beatles recorded the song Hey Bulldog in ten takes. When a woman was brought in for shooting pigeons with an air rifle from her window, things became noisy. Then all was quiet again and he could get back to reading. In July of that same year, five months before divorcing Cynthia, John Lennon introduced Yoko Ono to his aunt Mimi.

After almost an hour and a half he gave up. He stood up and was making his way to the door when he heard a voice behind him, 'Luka Kastelic?'

Standing next to the reception window was a middle-aged man in a long raincoat and a mole under his left eye.

'I'd like to talk to you,' he said and introduced himself. 'Criminal Inspector Emil Bauer.'

'At last,' Luka cried out, walking towards him eagerly. The Inspector led him into a large room that Luka had not been in before. When they sat at the table, the Inspector opened a notebook.

'A refugee went missing last night,' he said. 'One of the men who attacked you.'

'So you were able to identify them?' Luka asked triumphantly.

'His friends told us what happened.'

'Did they confess?'

'Because you filed a complaint, we were able to show them your photograph. They instantly recognised you.'

'Great! Where are they? Did you arrest them?'

The Inspector leaned back in his chair and slightly changed his expression.

‘Out of curiosity, what were you doing there anyway? Were you provoking them in any way?’

‘I didn’t provoke them at all,’ Luka laughed off the suggestion. ‘Is that what they say? No chance. As I walked past, I recognised them and greeted them.’

‘It says nothing about you knowing them in your report.’

‘Not knowing, knowing. Just knowing by sight.’

‘Where were you headed? The refugee centre is quite out of the way.’

‘Why all the questions?’ Luka wanted to know. ‘Is the case not solved?’

‘The point is that their version is different to yours. They say that you provoked them. As if you wanted them to beat you up.’

‘They would say that, wouldn’t they?’

The Inspector leaned forward meaningfully. ‘Then, in the morning, we found the body.’

At first Luka did not react. He was trying to comprehend what the Inspector was telling him.

‘A body?’ he repeated. ‘Whose body, the guy who has supposedly disappeared?’

‘Someone beat him to death.’

Luka sensed all the weight of the Inspector’s gaze.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘It seems he was on his way back from church.’

‘Church?’

‘Some of them convert to Catholicism, for various reasons. Africans, Afghans, Iranians.’

Luka recalled reading about this recently but had not really understood it then either. Muslims who for practical reasons turn Catholic. It sounded unusually pragmatic.

‘Tell me, where were you last night?’ the Inspector asked.

Luka moved back in shock. ‘Do you think I tried to take revenge for them beating me up? You’re not normal!’

‘I’m only interested in where you were last night.’

'You know I'm an ambulance driver? That I'm someone who saves people, not kills them!'

He wanted to make it quite clear how very offended he was.

The Inspector waited patiently for an answer. There were a number of tables in the relatively busy room, people sitting at almost all of them. Nearby two other criminologists were talking. Hanging on the wall behind the Inspector was a poster advertising a police picnic in Mostec with a prize draw and a concert by the band Modrijani.

'I was at home,' Luka said eventually.

'All the time?'

'My wife will happily confirm it.'

The Inspector looked at his notes. 'Like you, she also works at the hospital?'

'She is a nurse.'

'And was until recently a volunteer at the refugee centre?'

'Yes, she worked there in her free time.'

The Inspector wrote something down and then closed his notebook.

'Right,' he said and smiled. 'See, it didn't hurt.'

He stood up and that was the end of it. He accompanied Luka past the interrogation room where, through the half-open door, he noticed the young man from before. He was no longer wearing handcuffs nor did his face appear as defiant.

Outside, Luka lit a cigarette and hurried across the road to the nearest bar. At the door he took one final puff, angrily flicked the rest of the cigarette away and went inside. He ordered half a pint and drank it down in one. He ordered another one, then he remembered that he had no cash on him. They wouldn't accept credit cards, so he had to leave his ID in order to go to the cashpoint a few streets away. Because the bank charges a commission for every withdrawal, he decided to take out three hundred euros.

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As he was returning down Trubar Street towards the bar to pay for his beer, he happened to glance at a place selling used musical instruments and stopped in front of the shop window, stunned. Staring at him through the dirty glass front, exposed in the middle of the display, was a Martin acoustic guitar, one he could only dream of.

How did it find its way to a small shop in the middle of Ljubljana? He was aware how much these instruments cost: so much that the price was not displayed. The Telecaster he had already bought had not come cheap, even though it was one of Fender's cheaper variations on the theme. He didn't have to think, he stepped inside, hypnotised.

The small space was filled with instruments. Ry Cooder was coming from the loudspeakers. Luka greeted an older guy with thinning long hair who was reading Alan Ford at the counter and shyly pointed towards the window.

'May I?'

The guy eyed him from top to bottom, nodded and switched off the gramophone. Luka carefully reached for the guitar and slowly spun it in his hands. He crouched down and strummed uncertainly. It had a typically deep, sweet tone. He didn't like playing in front of others, he was too painfully aware of how bad he was. Worse players might not have such problems, but Luka wasn't like that. The guy was watching him carefully from behind the counter, so he had to overcome his embarrassment and play something. Trying to look nonchalant, he started with *Sweet Home Alabama* and then moved on to *Wish You Were Here*. He could vividly imagine the guy rolling his eyes at the unoriginality of his picks.

'Martin D-23,' he heard him say. He began to list the names who played this very model. 'Bob Dylan, Jerry Garcia, Eric Clapton, Johnny Cash, Jimmy Page. Neil Young bought the one that belonged to Hank Williams. From '67 on it is supposed to have been Lennon's favourite acoustic guitar, although that isn't quite true, but he did have it with him in India.'

Luka nodded at him absently as he played, fearing that he might make a mistake and miss a string. The Beatles and India, for the second time today. Was this a message? He realised that the jitters were making him play even worse than he would otherwise and the guy listing his guitar heroes wasn't helping. When he really did make a mistake, he was prepared; he made a quick improvisation to make it look as if it had been deliberate, and then stood up.

'How much?' he asked, feeling the sweat on his palm that was firmly holding onto the neck of the guitar.

'2250,' said the guy as if this was quite a normal price, though a new one would certainly cost a great deal more. 'Because it has a scratch on the back.'

Luka turned it around and studied the scratch. It didn't bother him, too bad it wasn't bigger. He thought of Miki. He certainly didn't have a guitar like this.

'Right,' he made up his mind. He took out his credit card and held it against the reader. A few more seconds and it would be his forever. A boat? Nonsense.

After taking its time in processing the payment request, the card reader display came up with 'Rejected.'

He shouldn't have withdrawn the three hundred, he was now going over his daily limit. Feeling uncomfortable, he found another card and tried with that one. The guy waited for a while, then shook his head.

'What if you combine both and take half from each one? Perhaps that will work.'

'What if you find something cheaper?' the guy suggested, stretching across the counter to carefully take the guitar from Luka. He used a cloth to thoroughly wipe the sweat off its neck. Luka stood there looking regretful for a few moments, then left without saying anything.

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Lena was making her way along a crowded street in the centre, her eyes glaring towards Matej who was walking about twenty metres in front of her. He stopped in front of a shop window, then walked on. As she walked past, she quickly checked to see what it was that had attracted his attention: phones. She followed him to the men's section in the department store and watched him from afar as he spent quite a while trying on some leather jackets but in the end didn't buy any. She then followed him to a sex shop, but he came out of there empty-handed as well. He briefly sat down for a coffee and answered some messages or emails. Then he returned to the department store and in the women's lingerie section bought some lacy underwear.

Lena stopped in the middle of the street, watching him as he waited outside the entrance to the cinema. He checked the time and then studied the poster for the new *Mission Impossible*. Lena and Luka had gone to the cinema three times with him and his then girlfriend, and *Mission Impossible* was the first film they saw together. He checked the time again and wrote a message, the last few visitors were entering the

cinema. When he began to start looking up and down the street impatiently, Lena turned away just in case.

Eventually Anna came hurrying along, they kissed, quickly disappeared inside, and Lena lit a cigarette. Slowly she went across the road and bought herself a ticket. She noticed that Luka had just sent her a message.

Hey, where are you? Are you OK, when are you coming?

She switched off the sound and determinedly disappeared into the darkness of the auditorium.

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Although they had tried for quite some time to have a child, they never talked about what kind of parents they would be. It was only now, lying on the bed waiting for her, that Luka really thought about this for the first time. Now that the idea of fatherhood was once again safely removed from reality, he was curious about what kind of father he would be. If he were to be asked, he would say he was a proponent of permissive parenting, but was he really capable of this in practice? Or would he at some point lose his temper and slap the child round the ears, like his parents had done with him? He was aware that he was not immune to repeating patterns.

In the fourth year of secondary school, Teja had one evening announce that she was pregnant. There was no question about not getting an abortion, she had already booked an appointment for the following morning and she didn't even want him to go with her. He had been totally excluded from the matter and they had never talked about it later either, he only asked her the following afternoon whether she was OK. As an event it never had any effect on his life, as if the never-to-be child had left no mark at all. He and Teja continued to go out together, then in August they split up for other, rather mundane reasons. This child, boy or girl, would be twelve years old now. What would Luka's life have been like had it been born? Would he still be driving an ambulance? Would he play the guitar? Would he be with Teja, with Lena, or with someone else?

He was awakened from his thoughts by the sound of the front door. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked towards the living room where the light came on. He checked the time. It was almost two a.m.

Lena came into the room. She was dirty, muddy, wet from head to toe.

‘What’s going on? What happened, are you alright?’

‘Hi.’

He gave her a puzzled look as she took off her clothes and went into the bathroom. Unsure of what to do, he followed her.

‘Did you fall? What happened?’

She stood under the shower with her eyes closed, waiting for the water to wash away all the filth.

‘Lena.’

When she didn’t respond, he picked up her clothes and stuffed them into the washing machine. In the kitchen he ran his hand across the counter that was shining clean. When she hadn’t come home that evening, he had taken the opportunity to wash up and clean everything in peace, including pots they had not used in a while. The only thing that bothered him about the flat was the size of the kitchen. It couldn’t even take a large fridge, let alone have enough space for a dishwasher. He went out onto the balcony and lit a cigarette. A bat flew past, otherwise there was nothing and nobody around at this hour. He felt tired but wide awake.

‘Do we have anything to eat?’ Lena called out from the bathroom.

Extinguishing his cigarette, he returned to the kitchen. Trying to think what he could suggest, he looked into the fridge.

‘There’s some cheese. Do you want me to make you a toasty?’

‘Do we have any ham?’

She came into the kitchen and had a look herself, but nothing seemed to take her fancy.

‘There’s a lasagne in the freezer,’ he suggested. Lena gave him one of her looks and threw her arms around his neck. A moment later her tongue was pushing into his mouth, determined and restless. He sensed something was wrong.

‘Hang on, show me.’

Her front tooth was badly broken. How come he hadn’t noticed this before?

‘What happened?’ he asked worriedly. ‘Tell me. Did you get into a fight?’

‘I slipped.’

She led him to the bathroom, toppled him onto the bed and asked him whether he had bought condoms. She had already told him to do so on their way back from

Lošinj, just in case. He figured it was because she wasn't ready to get pregnant again, but then she didn't show any desire for sex either. Until now. As he was pulling it on, he thought to himself how very good this was. Broken tooth or no broken tooth.

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He stood nervously next to her, helplessly watching her wash up after lunch. Her hair was tied in a ponytail. She had been wearing it like that for the last few days and it suited her.

'They probably blocked your account. I told you we were skint. Anyway, you already have a guitar, why do you need two? But, alright, if you really want it that much, why not borrow the money from Peter?'

Her mention of his brother shocked him.

'Why not?' she asked, glancing at him with an air of satisfaction. 'You know how happy he'll be to finally hear from you after all this time. There, done.'

She put down the sponge without squeezing out the water, the plates and cups still looking dirty, and went into the bedroom. A moment later she stopped and waited for him to obediently step away from the sink.

'Take me to that sanctuary.'

'The shelter for abandoned plants? Why?'

'So I can see where all our cash went.'

She checked the time. 'Alright. But we need to get a move on.'

'Aren't you on sick leave?'

She began getting dressed and so did he. In no time they were at the door and soon driving down Celovška. They made it to the bypass that took them onto the motorway to Vrhnika. They ended up driving slowly down the narrow streets of the old part of town, looking around.

'Where did you find them anyway?'

'Facebook.'

'I still don't get how come you don't know the address.'

'That's why it's called an anonymous donation. I never saw the place.'

'Surely you know who you're donating to. Didn't you need their address?'

'It must be somewhere here. Turn left.'

'You're just guessing. Come on, please find it on the phone.'

Lena pulled out her phone and opened the Facebook page.

‘How can you be so naïve? I bet they conned you. That there is in fact no shelter at all.’

‘Sanctuary,’ she corrected him absently while looking at Anna’s newest post, a playful selfie with Matej.

‘I see the sign, this is it,’ he said and stopped outside an old building with a crumbling façade.

There was no bell but it was unlocked. Through a hallway covered in graffiti, they came into a courtyard covered in weeds. From somewhere above came some Russian, perhaps Ukrainian rap, there was a stench coming from the containers, opposite them in a huge pot was a large palm tree. Lena knocked with determination on the cracked glass door and entered.

The place was filled with plants of all sorts and sizes. Two young women appeared from somewhere, one with blue hair, the other in boots and a yellow dress. They greeted the visitors warmly and introduced themselves as Darma and Marjeta. Luka explained to them that they had recently made a large donation and have come to see the place, but the girls said they knew nothing about this. They kindly showed them around the building, there were two further large spaces at the back. It was damp and cold. Luka insisted on talking about the money: how could they not know anything about it when it was paid into their account? He said he would like to talk to the boss, but Marjeta explained they had no boss because they didn’t believe in bosses.

‘We never received any large donation,’ Darma once again explained.

‘Well, I’m not talking about millions,’ said Luka.

‘Trust me, I would certainly remember it. We welcome every euro.’

He was determined to get to the bottom of things but the girls’ presence and warmth seemed to drive away any stress and ill temper.

‘It’s quite cold here, doesn’t it bother you?’ he asked. He and Lena were wearing jackets, the girls had none.

‘We’re waiting to see if our grant gets approved,’ Marjeta explained.

‘It hasn’t been yet,’ Darma added. ‘And how come you chose us for the donation? People mostly prefer dog shelters.’

‘In general animals are far more popular.’

Luka stroked a rather wilted tree. He no longer wanted to talk about money.

‘How do you know which plants need saving?’ he asked. ‘How do you find them?’

‘People call us or bring them here themselves.’

‘Mostly we get pot plants that shops and florists reject when they start dying off. Or because they have no time for them.’

‘They just discard them?’

He stared at a large tray with a thin layer of soil, tiny green shoots sprouting from it. ‘Weeds,’ Darma explained. ‘We don’t reject anything.’

‘And what do you then do with all this stuff?’

‘Nothing, we look after the plants, we also put them up for adoption.’

‘Do you advertise or what?’

‘And organise an event every so often,’ Marjeta nodded. ‘We invite people to come and have a look. You can also adopt by giving a donation and we continue to look after the plant ourselves.’

Luka stopped at a large old ficus plant.

‘Just look at it,’ Darma smiled. ‘You should’ve seen the state it was in when we received it.’

Gently he touched the dark green leaves, smooth and fleshy.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

The young women were entirely focusing on him, they didn’t even look at Lena again, who found the whole thing quietly amusing. She saw how strongly his emotions were taking over. It seemed like he was not aware of them, otherwise he would at least try to hide them. Everything he was feeling at this moment was clearly apparent.

‘It can be yours, if you wish,’ said Marjeta. ‘You take it with you and that’s it.’

‘Only then you’ll have to look after it,’ Lena said laughingly.

‘Or you can leave it here and it will still be yours,’ Darma explained. ‘Anyone who decides to leave a plant here usually draws it on the adoption contract.’

‘Sorry?’

The women nodded encouragingly. ‘You draw it, so you have a drawing of it at home. It means you’ll always have it with you.’

‘Would you like to draw it?’ Lena asked.

Luka stared absently at the ficus plant, trying to understand what was happening to him. Something hidden deep down inside had unexpectedly emerged. He didn’t know what it was, but it didn’t feel pleasant.

‘We have pencils, colours, felt tips, crayons...’ Darma said.

Marjeta opened the cupboard and grabbed a large fistful of mostly green, brown and yellow coloured pencils of all kinds.

‘Shall we print out a contract?’ Darma asked. ‘Donations are minimal, if you give ten euros that will be great.’

‘Oh, come on, ten euros? With this cost of living?’ said Lena. ‘I’m sure he’ll manage a bit more than that if he really does take it. At least fifty, right?’

She turned to Luka inquisitively, ‘Do you have any cash? I don’t have any money on me.’

All three women turned to him, waiting for a response.

‘You probably don’t take cards?’ Lena asked just in case.

Luka once more gently touched the ficus, then simply turned around and walked out.

‘Where are you going, the cash machine?’ Lena asked after him.

She told the women that they would think about it and quickly took her leave.

When she reached the car, he was already sitting at the wheel, waiting with the engine switched on. She got in and without saying anything he drove back towards the motorway.

It was starting to get dark but despite it being late afternoon there was not that much traffic. An impatient van overtook them on the hard shoulder.

‘Can you drop me off at the dentist’s?’ Lena asked him, browsing on Spotify.

‘Have you finally booked?’ He checked the time. ‘When is it? The last appointment of the day?’ They would have to hurry because the dentist only worked until six.

‘Tell me if you prefer something else,’ she said, choosing Britney Spears.