SMALL TOWN STORIES

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION - ELTA
APRIL 2016

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CREATIVE WRITING COURSE
for ELTA teachers

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Small Town Stories

Creative Writing Course for ELTA Teachers

Published April, 2016

Published on behalf of ELTA Serbia: English Language Teachers' Association

a not-for-profit association

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Nemanjina 28

Belgrade

www.elta.org.rs

ELTA is a non-governmental, non-profit association of teachers of English in Serbia, affiliated to IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) and TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages).

ELTA brings together primary and secondary English teachers, teachers working in higher education, language schools, students of English, all language professionals and professionals-to-be interested in ensuring excellence in English language teaching.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, ELTA would like to thank the American Embassy for recognizing the need to enable teachers to pursue their passion. This project enabled teachers to form a network of teachers who love and promote creative writing and to equip them with writing skills. This project could not be realized without their support.

Dragana Obradovic who guided us through the process of applying for the grant and for giving us moral support.

Nathan William Mayer for being the expert, material developer, facilitator and mentor throughout all stages of the project. We are also thankful to Nathan for his patience and stamina while editing the stories for this publication.

Gordana Klasnja and Olja Milosevic for encouraging teachers to reflect on the course and to design activities that they would use with their students.

Marija Panic for working behind the scenes to bring every stage to completion. We are also thankful to Marija for her endless creativity.

We are thankful to all teachers who took part in the course. Your enthusiasm for writing was contagious.

ELTA Team

Introduction

Teachers all over the world write a lot every single day. They write lesson plans, mark assignments, write comments, give feedback, and write messages to parents. In spite of all this mandatory writing, still there are teachers whose hobby is writing. This publication is devoted to teachers from Serbia who love writing so much that they took part in a Creative Writing Course, worked hard to improve their writing skills, developed creative writing activities for their students, and were brave enough to share their stories with you.

Creative Writing for ELTA Teachers was the professional development course organized by ELTA and supported by the American Embassy. Not many teachers in Serbia have the opportunity to take such a course during their university studies. Designed for those teachers who love to write in their spare time, Creative Writing for ELTA Teachers was an effort to help them pursue their passions. It was designed to strengthen writing skills, ignite imagination, and encourage new pedagogical approaches to language teaching. The course had two components. The Creative Writing component was designed and run by Nathan William Mayer. The ELT component was designed and run by Olja Milosevic and Gordana Klasnja.

This course was the first online course that ELTA offered to its members, and it consisted of three phases: a four-week online phase, face-to-face workshops during a residential weekend that took place in Vrnjacka Banja, and a publication that includes some of the stories developed during the course. A blended learning model allowed for the course to run over a four-week period. This model proved to be not only cost-effective, but also more convenient for teachers. It allowed teachers who are not from Belgrade to engage with the content over a period that would be only possible online. Twenty teachers were selected to take part in the course. Seventeen completed the first phase, and fifteen teachers competed component two. Nine teachers submitted their stories to be included in this publication.

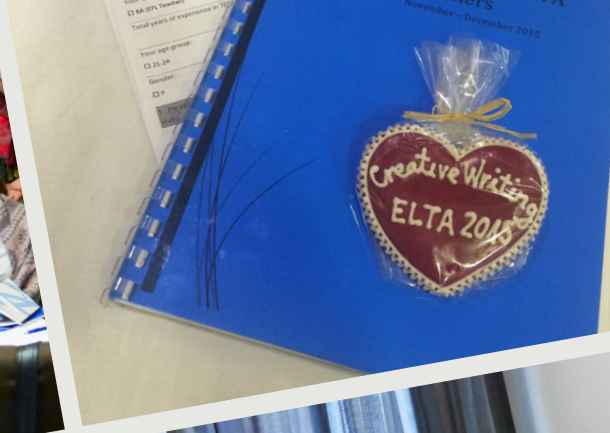
The four-week online component was divided into two areas, a Creative Writing and an ELT Area. Creative writing progressively enhanced teachers' writing with each week of the course having a different creative writing focus. Weekly writing assignments were submitted online, participants commented on them, and the tutor provided his feedback. For the ELT Area, participants had to reflect on creative writing assignments and to design dynamic lesson plans inspired by course activities.

Face-to-face collaborative creative workshops during the Vrnjacka Banja residential weekend consisted of six sessions divided between creative writing and classroom implications. During the creative writing sessions all participants' stories received constructive feedback from tutor and peers. ELT Area sessions were devoted to generating ideas for creative lesson plans. The residential weekend was of immense

value for the teachers, not only for receiving valuable feedback on their stories but also for professional bounding and networking.

This publication is phase three of the course. Working on the publication, it has become clear that teachers in Serbia have a great potential for creative writing. I hope you will agree with me and that you will enjoy reading their stories.

Olja Milosevic
ELTA President


Creative Writing
ELTA 2015

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1.

The End

by Dragana Andrić

“It’s not that I never had the will, you see, it’s that I never seemed to have the time,” he said, sipping another glass of whiskey and considering whether to order the whole bottle. The bartender seemed more attentive to his stories then usual and it was nowhere near closing time.

“Oh, I had my chances, sure did! Not that I was ever a handsome guy, but girls liked me. Not so much while I was at college, I was kind of shy and way too nice, a small town boy in a big city, but later… An honor graduate of the University of Georgia School of Law, a young hotshot lawyer who had the world at his feet… “

“Want me to fill that up?” the bartender asked, his eyes wandering off towards the lady who was just taking a seat opposite the wine shelf in the back bar. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror at the back of the shelf and pulled a strand of blond hair behind her ear.

“Make it a double,” he said, gazing at the reflection behind the wine bottles. Rosie used to wear her hair like that. And to pull it behind her ear whenever she was getting ready to speak in front of the court. She’d stand up, straighten her skirt, adjust her hair and when she lifted her big blue eyes from behind the desk, she’d already have the attention of the whole courtroom.

The bartender poured the whiskey.

As the liquid settled, he saw his own eyes looking sadly at him from its surface. Eyes of a wretched, ruined man.

It wasn’t always like this, he thought.

“I could have got married. I was quite a catch. But they were all after my money. A spacious flat on 14th Street overlooking the Piedmont Park, a black Corvette…” He straightened his back and his tie. “The youngest judge ever appointed to the Atlanta Municipal Court bench - Honorable Gary E. Jackson,” he said, echoes of other people’s voices announcing his name still ringing in his head. His eyes moved over the bottles of liquor as if they were faces of the people in his courtroom, with a stern look, eyes slightly squinted, but stopping at no one in particular.

The bartender snorted and turned his attention to the lady, but Gary was the first to open his mouth.

“Could I buy you a drink?” he said, but she ignored his words and looked straight at the bartender.

“A vodka tonic, please.”

He was never ignored back then. He didn’t even need a pick-up line. At a party, with a glass in his hand, his auburn hair slicked back, his face clean-shaven and smooth, a tailored suit fitting him like a glove, all he had to do was to walk over and introduce himself. He pulled out a thread sticking out of the lining of his jacket. Yes, that suit still fitted him like a glove.

A tall fizzing glass with ice and lime clinked as it touched the shiny surface of the counter. He was never a vodka type of guy. Whiskey, served neat, that was his drink. And his demise. At first, a couple of shots here and there, at a reception, at a party or with a couple of friends. Then, a glass or two to take off the weight of a tedious day. Before he knew it, he would open the liquor cabinet more often than the fridge.

He emptied the glass and called for another drink.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough, Gary? Maybe I should call you a cab?”

A dark shadow of regret and sorrow moved over his face.

“A cab. I should have taken a cab,” he thought. It had been too late, too dark and he had had too much to drink. Someone should have called him a cab. Maybe they even did. He couldn’t remember. It was all too blurry. He couldn’t remember much. Only the eyes. All of a sudden – the eyes. Right in front of his windshield. Wide open. Staring at him first with disbelief, then beseechingly, and then with ultimate horror, and all of that in a split second. Then just a quick thump and it was over. The end. One death, but two lives were over.

And it’s funny how the words he had uttered himself so many times before, never seemed to have such a resonant sound as when they were directed at him, just like a boxer hitting those finial punches before he wins the match. So brisk but it feels like an eternity. Left, right, left, knockdown. First-degree vehicular homicide.

2.

The Chance of a Lifetime

by Dragana Andrić

“You haven’t thought this through,” she says.

“What’s there to think of?”

Angela looks down and starts playing with a delicate gold ring with a tiny diamond on her left ring finger.” How about me?”

“I have been thinking of you, that’s why I’m doing it all!”

“Me? You’re doing this because of me?”

“That’s one of the reasons.”

“Oh, no,” she says, squinting her eyes at him. “That’s the least of the reasons.”

“Yeah, and what’s the greatest one of them, then?”

“You!”

“How’s that?”

“It’s always about you. It always is. You, you, you! You have to be the best, the brightest, second to none.”

“So what if I do?” Ryan raises his chin, but lowers his voice.” It never bothered you before. Why should things be different now?”

“Because this is my life we are talking about.”

“So now it’s about you…”

“It’s about us! Everything will be different from now on…for both of us.” She walks over the dimly lit room, moves the creased bed sheets aside and sits so close to him she can almost hear his heart beating.

He gently moves his fingers over her face and pulls a lock of her black hair behind her ear.

” Listen, we talked about it, and you said you were ok with it. I would have never accepted the offer if you didn’t approve…”

“I said it’s ok but only because I wanted you to be happy…”

“I could never be happy without you.” He pulled his fingers through her hair. “You know that.”

“I do… And I could never be happy without you, love.” Her eyes were fixed on his.

“We’ll make things work; I know we will!”

“But it’s too far, too long…”

“It’s not forever!” He raises his voice, more to encourage himself than to reassure her.

She turns away to hide her eyes and bites her lip. “But three years…” The sentence dies in her throat and his soothing voice takes over. “…will be over in no time and when I come back we’ll make a fresh new start, we’ll leave this godforsaken town and buy a small flat in the city, overlooking the river, we’ll listen to the clinking of the trams and the murmur of the passers-by, we’ll go to the opera and to art galleries and have many new friends sipping coffee crammed in our small living room… And we’ll have one another.”

“And a baby?” Her lips still tremble, but her eyes sparkle with a gleam of hope.

“And triplets, if you want to!”

*****

As soon as the plane landed, the women in tight jeans and T-shirts glittering with Swarovski crystals started veiling themselves and in a matter of minutes there was no way of telling who’s who, just a row of gloomy clones proceeding to the gate. Through the window of the air conditioned taxi, he gazed at the lofty skyscrapers, busy streets and lush lawns with palm trees, but once he stepped out, he was stunned by the suffocating heat and the stench of rubbish haphazardly piled on the sidewalk. From the nearby minaret he heard the wailing voice of a muezzin. Another one joined him shortly, then another and another until the discord was so unbearable he had to dash into the hotel, while simultaneously the notion that signing a three-year contract with Jeddah National Hospital was the biggest mistake of his life slowly crept into his mind.

3.

Short Stories

by Dragana Jovanović-Kuprešanin

I

"I'm not leaving! Damn woman! You really don't understand me, do you?" Sasa was screaming.

"No, I don't understand how stupid you can be. Finally, we found great way to leave this country for good, and you don't want to do that. You don't want to see your family happy? The only thing you're thinking about is your father, a man who..." Jasmina replied.

"A man who gave me life..." Sasa replied.

"Who destroyed your life. You don't remember things he did to you and your mom?"

"Jasmina, do not go in there, I am begging you, please don't..." Sasa screamed

"He beat her..."

"Jasmina..."

"... He tortured her..."

"Don't!"

"He!" Jasmina continued. She fell on the ground. That was the first time in 15. years of relationship and marriage he hit her. She looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"You're coward, you're just like you father," Jasmina said while shaking on the floor.

"Jasmina, I..." Sasa tried to say something, but he couldn't. He thought he was going to faint.

She left the kitchen. He was left there with a thought that he was really a coward. He is going to change that!

II

He was born in 1976 in a small town near the River Danube. First seven years of his life were the best years he has ever had. He was the only child, loved by everyone. His parents adored him. Every time when his grandparents would get the pension, he would get sweets and plastic cars as a reward for just being their grandchild. But one bad decision changed his life. When he was kid, he used to listen to people's story that his father was a gambler. He didn't know what that meant. He realized that word meant something not good. One day his father put his life and future of his family on one card. He lost everything he worked for years.

He still remembers that night. He was in his warm bed, preparing to sleep. He had very important day in the morning. It was his first day of school. Everyone in his family told him that he is going to become a real man after this, and that he was going to have first big crushes in elementary school. He didn't want to listen to them because he already was crazy in love in Sara. He wasn't crazy to leave her for some other girls. No, not a chance. His thoughts were suddenly paused by a noise that was coming out of living room. He could hear his mom and dad talking. But this time they were talking to loud that usual. He realized that something was wrong. Mom was crying, and dad, oh God, he sounded like a wounded animal. He just wanted them to stop. He heard a strong slap. After that everything was quiet again.

When he woke up next morning, he was running to his parents' bedroom as usually he did. This time the doors were locked. He was surprised. Something like that never happened. He tried to open the doors again. But this time he heard noises behind him. When he turned his back, he saw a tall man standing behind him. Eyes of that man were red, and his hair was messy.

"Mom is asleep, be quiet! I'll be taking you to school. Prepare your things, so we don't be late!" his father told him.

Sasa was so afraid. He had never seen his father like that before. He was wondering where his mom was. She would not miss his first day at school. Days were passing, and he didn't know anything about his mom. No one said anything about her. Every time when he asked his father about his mom, he would scream at him, and even punch him. Suddenly he decided not to ask anymore about her. He thought that she had left him. He started to hate her. One day he took all pictures with her, and threw them into the Danube. He didn't want to have any contact with her again. She left him when he needed her. She missed the most important day in his life. He couldn't forgive her for that.

After few months, couple of strong guys came into their home, beat his father, and threw their things into the streets. They threatened that they were going to kill them if they didn't pick their things and go somewhere else. They simply said that they didn't live there anymore. His home, his bed, his things, everything he had couldn't take with him. His father had a sister, who lived in the South of Serbia. She was poor and a prostitute. Since they didn't have money, his father decided to go to Russia with some of his friends in order to earn some money. But he couldn't take a boy with him. So he decided to leave him with his aunt.

"Dad, don't leave me here, please! I'll be working whatever you say, just don't leave me here, please!" Sasa was crying. His father didn't even look at him. He seemed so cold and away.

"Sasa, my son, you're big boy now, you have to take care of yourself. Every penny I earn, I will send to you, don't worry, I won't leave you hungry, do you understand?"

"Oh Dad, it's not about money, I simple want to go with you. Don't leave me here, I don't know anyone…"

"Oh Jesus, Sasa, you're just like your mom. You're always complaining! You are staying here, and that is the end of conversation! Do you understand? Don't make me hit you! You're such a coward, just as your mom!"

The following morning his father went to Russia. He left him. Sasa knew that he couldn't stay with his aunt anymore. He needed to get away from her. She was always drunk, or beaten up by her pimps and clients. He didn't want to live with her. One night he found her in the yard. She was pouring a drink into a glass.

"Do you know where my mom is?" Sasa asked.

"What the fuck!" Violeta screamed. She didn't see him. She got scared.

"I asked you something, answer me."

"I don't know nothing," she spit on the grass. "Do you have some money?" she continued. "I need to buy a new bottle of whiskey, your dad... he drank every fucking drink I had in house...Shit... Aaa, what did you say? Give your aunty money?"

She spread her legs wide, trying to seduce him.

"I don't have money and you know that. Now tell me, where mom is!" Sasa got mad.

"He brought you here," she continued to talk nonsense.

"Woman, listen to me!". Finally, he grabbed her shoulders and started shaking her. Her eyes were wide open. She dropped the glass on the grass.

"What?", she replied.

"Where is my mom? I have a right to know that!" Sasa screamed at her, looking for an answer.

She was looking at him, Sasa believed that she was human for a moment. "I got a letter from her three years ago," she replied.

"Where is that letter?'' Sasa asked nervously. "Give me money and I'll tell you where it is,'' she looked at him with a laugh in her eyes. She didn't mean to tell him where the letter was.

'I've told you, I don't have money,'' he said.

"Then I don't know where it is.'' she said, punched him in the stomach and headed to the house, screaming, "Ahahah, die, you... You should have died... You all should have died...".

Next few days he was looking for that letter. He checked every corner in the house. Eventually he found it between her pictures (that prostitutes had pictures, he was a bit surprised!). He found out everything. Mom's address, her new last name (she remarried the man she adored). She explained in that letter that she was looking everywhere for Sasa. She wanted to know whether Sasa was with her or not. She was giving a fortune to find out that.

"Why didn't you tell my mom where I was? She was giving a fortune to you,'' Sasha insisted to know the truth.

"I had money at that time...and...'' she looked at him with poker face. Suddenly something changed about her, her eyes became so evil. "You want the truth?''

"Yes'', Sasa replied.

“I didn’t care. Screw you! Why would you live in a cozy house, while I give my pussy for a bottle of whiskey? Now you know why. Go if you want, I am not going to stop you. I hate you! I hate your soft mom! She was always talking nice, never cursed, and walked elegantly. She thought she was a lady. Lady my ass. I’m a lady! Do you hear me Sasa!? I’m a lady, I’ m a lady, I’m a lady…” she kept saying, like she was trying to convince herself. Sasa didn’t wait a minute. He packed his things and headed to Belgrade to find his mom.

Only few days after that he was having lunch with his mother and her new husband. When they saw each other they were crying like babies. Her new husband, a creditable doctor, didn’t have children so he decided to adopt him. He was loved again, and he loved again! From his uncle he found out that his mother had been beaten by her father, and that she had been unconscious for days in her bedroom. She almost died in hospital. No one knew anything about Sasa and his father. It had been seven years ever since his father took him away. Sasa continued living with his parents in an apartment in the center, near the place where his father worked (city hospital). So he came very early into a creative contact with the patients there lovingly introduced by his parents (his mother was a doctor too), what became very important for his later life. In 1994 he enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade. In 2000 he was a Doctor of Medicine; in 2002 he got married, with his lovely wife Jasmina. In 2003 they got their first child-a daughter Masa and ten years after, their son Aleksa was born. In 2010. they applied for immigrant visa for Canada. They got it. But, nothing is as it seems.

III

Sasa was standing in the kitchen, and looking through the window. Through the window he used to watch people passing by, but now he was staring and asking himself- was their decision right? Are they really going to leave everything…now, after all…?

‘’Life is too short to worry about!" Especially when you're busy worrying about a million other things at the same time.

-Jasmina came into the room, smiling, she was looking so happy during all these days like never before. She finally made all her dreams come true. Her sister has been living in Canada for more than fifteen years and now she is finally able to join her there with all her family.

“Sasa, I know you don’t want to go now because of your dad, but you have to understand that we need this,’’ she took his hands, and put them into hers.

“Jasmina, you have to understand me, it is not easy for me. He is on his own here, there is no one who could help him. Mom is with dad in South Africa, and I am the only child he has. I can’t leave him, but I also cannot take him with us. He couldn’t endure that.’’ Sasa replied.

“Sasa, but you have to think about your family,’’ Jasmina said.

“Jasmina, he is dying!’’Sasa tried to explain. “He has one more year left to live. I want him to have descent life before he dies. It is true, he made so many mistakes, but then again I can’t go away from him just like that, for God sake, he is my father.’’

“Sasa, he decided to come here and call you after all these years, only because he found out that he had had cancer. I know that he is your father, but you have to think about your family. This happens only once in life. Finally, we got immigrant visa for whole family. If we lose this opportunity, we might never going to get another one.’’ Jasmina replied nervously.

“I know…’’ Sasa tried to say.

“No, you don’t know! You want to destroy everything we were working for very hard. It seems that you just want to walk away from everything we hoped for! Do you really want to work for 600 Euros? Ha, answer me? You can make a fortune in Canada. Here you give your life and soul every day for the greater good of society and don’t get enough salary for monthly bills! Is that what you really want? You want to live in a country where doctors and teachers work for minimal salary while starlets are becoming new role models?! I am not going to let that happen! If you don’t want to go, I’ll…’’ Jasmina yelled when Sasa screamed.

“I’m not leaving! Damn woman! You really don’t understand me, do you?” Salsa was screaming.

“No, I don’t understand how stupid you can be. Finally, we found great way to leave this country for good, and you don’t want to do that. You don’t want to see your family happy? The only thing you’re thinking about is your father, a man who…” Jasmine replied.

“A man who gave me life…” Salsa replied.

“Who destroyed your life? You don’t remember things he did to you and your mom?”

“Jasmina, do not go in there, I am begging you, please don’t.” Sasa screamed

“… He beat her…”

“… Jasmina…””

,… He tortured her…”

“Don’t!”

“He!”, Jasmina continued. She fell on the ground. That was the first time in fifteen years of relationship and marriage he hit her. She looked at him with tears in her eyes.

“You’re coward, You’re just like you father,” Jasmina said that shaking on the floor.

“Jasmina, I…” Sasa tried to say something, but he couldn’t. He thought he was going to faint.

She left the kitchen. He was left there with a thought that he was really a coward. He is going to change that!

IV

Few days after that, he visited his father in hospital. This time his father was the one who needed help. He was ill. He had cancer. His arms were so thin and he had no hair on his head. He seemed so fragile.

“Dad, thanks for this,’’ Sasa said that to his father with tears in his eyes.

“Sasa, my son, listen to your wife. She is right. You should go to Canada, and you know that. I’m dying. Don’t worry about me. I’m happy that I have you next to me now. My heart melted when I saw my grandchildren. I thought that I would never see them. God gave me a chance to see that you have happy and healthy family. And that is all what matters. Remember! Listen to your wife. She is a good woman. Don’t repeat my mistakes! Otherwise you are going to lose them. Don’t let that happen, I am begging you my son! Don’t do that,” said his father while holding a cross in his tiny hand.

Sasa listened to his father. No matter what, he loved him. He made mistakes, but we are all humans. We have to understand if we want to be understood. He got home. Jasmina was sitting at the table, drinking coffee. She still had red marks of his fingers on one of her cheeks. They were looking at each other. Their eyes were showing nothing but love. Jasmina stood up and hugged him. They knew that they can’t live without each other. He loved her big blue intelligent eyes, and she adored the way he was looking at her. They were perfect for each other.

“You really think we should go? I mean Masa is twelve years old, how is she going to fit there? New people, new language, totally new environment?” Sasa seems worried.

“Of course, she will fit there. She is a really smart girl and friendly, she is going to meet many new friends and of course Ivana’s children will be there for her. And you, you are going to be there happy too. You sacrificed yourself working all day long for all of us... Aleksa is just a baby and English is going to be to him like his mother tongue.”

Sasa just stood there, looking through the window again. It was so quiet outside. Aleksa woke up, smiling. Masa took him. Jasmina hug them both. They looked so happy together; the three of them. They were his life, everything that he really had. And this town of course, with its crazy habitants.

Ten days after he was looking through the window again, waving to his friends, relatives. Aleksa and Jasmina were smiling all the way and Masa looked so serious like never before. Fifteen hours and they will be there- a new country, new world, and new life. Everybody told them that Canada is a land of dreams and opportunities. They will see. He asked himself ”will they ever come back”? Answer was so far away, far as Canada by itself.

- Finally, we are taking off! Jasmina was so excited.

Masa was hiding her tears behind her blue hair while Aleksa was playing with his new plastic BMW.

Now everything seems normal, only his mind was thinking about his father that he saw previous day, that lovely town, all those lovely patients –how they are going to be sad when they hear that he has gone with his family far, far, so far away!

4.

Life as It is

by Jelena Spasić

I

"Oh, Mrs. Matthews, good morning! I didn`t expect to see you on a Friday morning. Is everything

all right, how are you this morning?" asked a woman in her thirties, a bit overweight, was both concerned and suspicious at the same time.

"Everything`s fine, thank you, my dear." Mrs. Matthews smiled back and waved her hand. "It`s the age – silly me, I forgot that Mary was coming this Friday and I wanted to make her special cakes. Mary Robbins, Susan`s daughter, do you remember her? She should be around your age?!" Mrs. Matthews didn`t want to pry, but she didn`t want to answer questions about herself either.

"Of course I remember her, we used to go to the same classes." Betsy answered cheerfully. "But she`s a famous reporter now, writing for that fancy London magazine, making her big city dreams come true … And look at me, still working in my father`s store." Betsy sighed wearily.

"Come now, Betsy, we all make choices that we have to live with. Besides, I think you`re quite lucky with what you have here!" Mrs. Matthews knowingly pointed at the family photo behind the cash register. "How are those two rascals of yours?! Still running around frightening poor Mr. Taylor`s hens?!", she winked in a secretive way.

"You know what they say, boys will be boys!" Betsy smiled whole-heartedly and waved her hand. "Here you are, Mrs. Matthews. Give my best to Mary and have a lovely weekend. See you on Monday."

"I will, thank you. Good day to you too."

What a sweet old lady, thought Betsy for herself, as Mrs. Matthews left the shop. Always so kind and friendly, ready to help with a big smile, even though she has little to be thankful for. Or happy … if you ask Betsy! She shrugged her shoulders and a cold shiver ran through her body as she thought about Mrs. Matthew`s life. No, Betsy couldn`t even think about that! She quickly glanced at the small family photo behind the cash register – two blonde boys clinging to their mother`s legs and laughing while their father looked at them half-strictly, half-smilingly. She gently cuddled the photo, realising how truly blissful she was when the next customer walked into the shop and the morning routine of how-are-you-today swiftly continued.

Outside, Mrs. Matthews buttoned up her worn-out but neat cardigan, straightened her matching skirt, improved her small hat and slowly took the usual route to her home. Her eyes wandered between the rows of semi-detached brick

houses, some still with thatched roofs and white wooden windows adorned with flower pots. The paved road turned around the old St Laurence`s church, curved among the charming village houses, past the The Six Bells Pub and ended into the magnificent village Green. Warborough – the perfect English countryside and a perfect place to raise the children. Well, not so perfect, it turned out.

The walk home gave a lot of pleasure to Mrs. Matthews. Over the years she had come to love the soft chirping of reed buntings and the smell of sycamore trees coming from the village Green. As far as the eye could see, an endless stretch of green meadows and open fields rested peacefully reminding Mrs. Matthews that nature had been, and still was, indifferent to human happiness and sorrow. Just as God was.

After twenty minutes or so, the bags turned out to be heavier for Mrs. Matthews than she had imagined them would be. I would have to consider that home delivery, she thought to herself when a friendly barking brought a smile to her face. She opened a small wooden gate and entered a colourful, exuberant garden. A limestone pathway led to a two-storey brick house that had been her home for thirty-four years, a place of great joy and great sorrow. Mrs. Matthews gently cuddled the beagle, her faithful companion for the last ten years, and entered the house.

She went straight into the kitchen and emptied the bags. The kitchen was small and cozy – a wooden table and two chairs, an old cupboard filled with polished cups, mugs and plates, her wedding presents mismatched through the years of usage, crocheted curtains on the windows and an old, framed photo just above the fridge. Mrs. Matthews spread the ingredients on the table – her bonny fingers skillfully mixed the eggs, butter, flour, sugar and just a pinch of cinnamon. Just as the dough was ready to settle for an hour, someone rang the doorbell. It was Mrs. Doherty from the Flower Committee. They had that big annual festival coming in a week, and Mrs. Doherty was nervous and needed reassurance that everything was planned carefully and precisely. Mrs. Matthews poured two cups of tea and readily went through all the details for the flowers exhibition and the charity fund they were raising to help the old Turner`s farm get on its feet after the lightning had burnt down the barn together with all the crops and the machinery. All things checked and double-checked, Mrs. Doherty was satisfied and Mrs. Matthews could return to baking.

II

The afternoon sun was still warm when Mary Robbins parked her red Mini in front of a two-storey brick house. Was it the sudden rush of the old memories or the light spring breeze that made Mary pull closer the cashmere sweater around her slim body? Soft, leather shoes and dark, linen trousers added to her refined city look. She tightened her red hair into the pony tail, grabbed the bags from the back seat and opened the small wooden gate. Mrs. Matthews was already at the door and the two women didn`t try to hide the tears as they silently hugged and went in. The kitchen table was festively set – the embroidered silk tablecloth, porcelain plates and a tea set, silver cutlery, freshly baked cakes and the smell of cinnamon mixed with the smell of recently picked daises. Pure joy could be read from the women`s faces as the forgotten stories were told and re-told alongside this month`s happenings. Time flew by and it was already dark when Mary said it was time for her to leave. Mrs. Matthews couldn`t help but say what was on her mind the whole time.

"Have you been sleeping enough lately, Mary? You look tired. Is everything all right?" Mrs. Matthews was genuinely concerned.

"Everything`s fine. It`s just the work, too many things on my mind, the articles, the interviews...I had a really busy schedule last month and no time to relax."

"And Samuel?! How are things with him? Anything new?" The discontent colored Mrs. Matthews`s gentle voice.

"Don`t bring that up again, please. I thought we had done that talk already!? I`ve told you..."

"I know what you`ve told me, but I`ve told you some things as well – he`s not the right man for you." Mrs. Matthews was determined to go all the way this time. "He doesn`t love you as a man should love a woman. He doesn`t deserve you! He`s not even yours to begin with! He`s got his own ..."

"Don`t go in there again, please!" Mary interrupted her quietly and looked through the window as her eyes filled with tears.

"Why not?!" the old lady didn`t want to stop. "When will you realize that it`s you who are hiding in this relationship, not him?! That you are holding yourself back? Please, Mary, I`ve told you so many times, there`s nothing to be afraid of!" Mrs. Matthews`s voice was a bit quieter. "Or ashamed!"

"No, I won`t let you ruin this lovely afternoon for me! There`ll be plenty of time for that!" Mary sighed deeply as she got up. "See you next month!"

Mary quickly grabbed her leather bag and headed for the door. Mrs. Matthews caught up with her in the doorway and gently hugged her. Words were not needed as the two women perfectly understood each other.

III

As soon as she entered the car, Mary took the cigarettes from the gloves compartment and lit one up. She took a deep breath and leaned back on the seat. Yes, her life was a mess but she couldn`t do anything about it. She was too weak, just as she had been too weak fifteen years ago when she couldn`t have defended herself. Unwanted memories rushed back and Mary closed her eyes.

She was thirteen when her mother told her she would have to go and help the Matthews family with the household. They had a horrible accident and Mrs. Matthews couldn`t look after the house and the garden. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday after school, Mary would go to their lovely house and do what was expected of her to do for a small wage that her mother would receive by the end of the week. They could barely make ends meet so Mary had to work to help her mother. She had been going to the Matthews`s house for two months, but not once had she spoken to Mrs. Matthews. She would take food and tea to her room every time she went, but she would always find her asleep, and often, when she came the next time she would find the food tray as she had left it. But Mary had chores to do, so she didn`t pay attention. She was too young to understand then. She did the dishes, the laundry, cleaned the house, looked after the vegetables in the garden and cooked simple meals that her mother had taught her to cook. She tried to avoid Mr. Matthews because she was afraid of him – he was a strange, big man with red watery eyes and

he was often drunk. So she kept to herself, did her chores and dreamt of earning enough money so that one day she could leave this godforsaken place. Maybe that was why she didn`t notice the hungry looks and the silent footsteps that had followed her for days.

It was Friday just like today, but it was winter and the sun set early allowing the hazy dusk to creep in silently. Mary was changing the sheets in the big bedroom when someone grabbed her from behind, shoved a dirty cloth into her mouth and pulled her onto the big bed. In a flash it was all over – Mr. Matthews was on top of her, squeezing her throat and groaning wildly while his red eyes stared at her violently and his breath reeked on whiskey. Mary was gasping for breath and trying to free herself, but it was no use. When he was finished with her, he stood up, threw a few pounds on the bed, told her not to tell anyone or otherwise … and left.

Mary was a mess – pieces of her clothes were thorn, there was blood, her whole body ached and, as for her mind, the words could barely express it … stunned … embarrassed … hurt … humiliated, and above all … utterly scared. Slowly, she got off the bed, cleaned herself and went home dragging her feeble legs through the winter sleet. For the next few days, she lay in bed with fever, not able to get up, sleep, eat or drink. Her mother went to Matthews`s house instead of her, but when she became worried about Mary`s condition, Mary knew she would have to get up and continue with her sordid life.

At first, Mr. Matthews seemed to be avoiding her as well, so she continued with her chores. But she was cautious this time, weighing her steps and locking the doors behind her, always doing things twice quicker than before. But the devil couldn`t stay away for long – just before Christmas he came after her in the kitchen. This time, she fought him like a wild beast – she kicked him, scratched him across the face, even knocked one of the chairs. But she couldn`t scream. The lump in her throat was there since the last time. He was bigger, stronger and determined to have it his way. And he would have had it if it hadn`t been for Mrs. Matthews.

The cigarette butt scorched her fingers and Mary woke up from her nightmare. Dear Mrs. Matthews – Mary had accused and forgiven her, loved and hated her, depended on her and owed her. That night, a woman-to-be and a woman-that-was, tortured by shame and guilt, reached out towards each other, towards hope and redemption. Little did they know.

IV

As the car slowly drove off, Mrs. Matthews had already cleared the table and washed the dishes. A tray with a few cakes and a bottle of tea rested on the table. Mrs. Matthews turned off the lights in the kitchen, took the tray and carefully went into the hall. The wooden staircase led to the upper floor of the house, but Mrs. Matthews went to the small, barely visible door at the side of the staircase and unlocked it. Once inside the stairs, she turned on the light and carefully went downstairs. There were shelves with numerous pots, pans and jars covered with dust and webs, and on the right there was a solid wooden cellar door with a small window in the middle. She raised the latch and the window opened just enough for her to put her hand inside and pull the rope. A bucket was tied to the rope, so she put the cakes and the bottle inside and pulled the bucket down. She looked up and calmly

looked around the sparsely furnished room – an iron bed, a table and a chair, a bedpan, a light bulb hanging from the ceiling, a few cups and pots, a sewer, a hose. One might even call it a cell for the man inside was truly a prisoner. A prisoner of his own deranged mind, as Mrs. Matthews often thought. He was lying on the bed, all skin and bones, dressed in dirty rags with long tangled hair and beard. At the sound of the window opening, the man opened his eyes and looked at her – his eyes were estranged, his soul long dead and lost.

Mrs. Matthews looked at him with hatred and remorse. No, she didn`t feel sorry for him, she felt sorry for herself. Once, she loved that man! She worshiped him. And he seemed totally devoted to loving her as well. However, after the wedding, things slowly began to change - little things at first, like "you should change your hair, don`t talk to that neighbour, your skirt is too short, why is that man looking at you like that, what`s wrong with this meal, the windows are not clean enough" and on and on went countless, pointless accusations. She was confused but wanted to please him and she changed everything that didn`t suit him. Until one day, she came late from work and the dinner was not waiting for him all neatly set up on the table.

That`s when he hit her for the first time. She couldn`t believe it even though a thin line of blood was dripping from her nose onto the carpet. He was sorry the next day and brought her flowers but things were not the same any more. She was silent and confused and he took advantage of her weakness – the physical and mental abuse continued until one day she though she couldn`t take it anymore. Just then, she found out she was pregnant. And she told him. He was thrilled – he found a perfect house in a perfect little place for his perfect family and they moved to Warborough. Somehow things got better and Mrs. Matthews started to believe that the nightmare was over. She gave birth to her Dave and was the happiest woman on the planet. Watching him grow up, running around in their little garden and picking up spring daises for her were the memories that helped her survive later on.

Her happiness was just a flicker in the darkness – after a couple of months, her husband had to change his job, he became sullen and miserable, took to drinking and all of a sudden, the monster was back. He started slapping her from time to time as if just to remind her who was in charge of everything. The slapping turned into severe beating, but she endured everything because she was afraid for Dave. Her beloved son, the apple of her eye, was growing up in the gloomy shadow of his fierce father and a feeble mother.

He grew up into a skinny little boy, the spitting image of the mother he adored. Once, he tried to protect her from the drunken father thus choosing her side in that nameless struggle that was brought upon them. Alas! His father was relentless. His mother was scared. And Dave was as gentle as the summer dandelion in the wind. Too fragile for the cruelties of this world. One day some fishermen found his little body floating on the river Thames. He was only twelve.

When the police officers came knocking on their door, Mrs. Matthews fainted. No, that couldn`t be true. Not her Dave. Her life. Her heart. Her soul. Her precious little boy who didn`t harm anyone. The days that were to follow, Mrs. Matthews did not remember. The police investigation, the funeral, the sorrowful neighbours. Dave had drowned and she drowned with him. She stayed in his room, half mad with grief,

clutching desperately his clothes. She neither ate nor drank and was ignorant of the passage of time. She waited to die.

Then one day, a sudden noise woke her from her slumber – it was Dave, she thought, clumsy boy, he must have fallen from the kitchen chair. She jumped and ran downstairs to the kitchen to help him. But there was her husband, leaning over someone on the table, strangling him, strangling her Dave. No, she wouldn`t let him hurt her boy this time, she couldn`t... So she picked up the fallen chair from the floor and hit him ... and hit him ... and hit him ... again and again and again ... With every new punch her strength grew and her wounds healed. How long does it take to avenge your youth...? your dreams ... your hopes ... your child? Could these things be measured? Or labeled?

When she woke up from her delusion, she saw a young girl trembling in the corner of the kitchen. She saw her husband covered in blood and above the fridge Dave`s photo with the black ribbon. And it all came back to her – there were times when things could have been different, now it was time to accept. And she wept ... she wept for her little boy, she wept for herself, and she wept for her husband. But she couldn`t forgive – neither him nor herself.

V

She didn`t kill her husband. Instead, she dragged him downstairs and locked him behind the cellar door. It wasn`t too difficult to keep him in there for years. He had never really recovered from that night. And Mary helped. Joint misfortune brought Mrs. Matthews and the little girl together, but it was the sinister secret that created an alliance of mutual understanding, comfort and love between the two. For the villagers, Mr. Matthews had left her and went to live somewhere north whereas she stayed close to the place where her son was buried and took on the role of a village saint, someone that was always there to help.

She didn`t kill her husband but she couldn`t just let him be – she hated him with every cell of her body and she wanted him to feel the suffering and rebuke she felt every single day. So, she deprived him of everything just to show him what life without humanity looked like, what life without love, comfort and joy was. And it brought her a perverted satisfaction but it didn`t bring her any piece of mind. Because death is a relief, and life in which you are painfully aware of the ominous presence of death is a torture. Mrs. Matthews`s life. Life as it is.

5.

Hope

by Katarina Andrić

It`s snowing again. As I`m walking home, my shoes crunch through the snow leaving deep footprints in a sparkly, thick carpet. I look down the street and see rows of bright lights and tall, mighty tress standing proud with sporadic branches poking out of the whiteness not being able to handle the weight of the snow. I look up and wait for the flakes to fall down on my face. I open my mouth and try to catch them with my tongue. One, two, three, there`s another one coming, I can`t catch them all. I smile at the thought that this is a magic kingdom, and I`m its princess whose gifts are these tiny, shiny diamonds. I do this quite often, pretend that I am someone else, someone carefree and blissful.

I enjoy this game for a while, but a tingling sensation slowly turns into pain. The wind is really ruthless tonight. It`s determined to suck even the last drop of warmth from my body. I pull my hat over my ears, my scarf over my mouth and nose and look at my hands. They are unprotected, almost numb. I exhale deeply to warm them up, but the frosty air fights back. Maybe I should hurry home. Just for a moment I dare to think she might be concerned about where I am. I imagine seeing her alarmed face through the window. How foolish of me!

As I`m approaching my house, I feel something inside of me creeping throughout my body, growing bigger with every step. It`s suffocating me, it wants to devour me. I feel it in my throat, in my chest, bones, everywhere. But I keep on walking because my body is yearning for some warmth.

When I arrive at the front door, I press my reddened ear onto it. I listen for any sounds that might be coming from the inside. Something that will show what kind of mood she is in today. I hear some indistinctive laughter. It can`t be her. I`m dreading to go inside. I want to put off that moment, but a warm succulent smell of roast chicken appears from the inside and wraps itself around my frozen body. It is so inviting and my belly is rumbling, reminding me that I haven`t eaten anything at school. I lick my cracked lips and realize that eventually I will have to give in. I open the door cautiously, as if fearing to wake up a ragged beast. I see her slumped on the back of the sofa watching The Bachelor. Good, she won`t notice me. But, the wind is not my friend today, as it pulls the door shut and she turns around. Now, she`ll start to yell. I`m not moving, I`m not even breathing. I`m just waiting for storm to begin. Surprisingly, she just says

"Dinner is ready. Wash your hands and set the table. And pour me a drink! Fill it up!"

On my way to the cupboard I look at the sink. It`s full of dirty, piled dishes, glasses mostly. I count them to see how many she has had already. To know what to expect! I carefully take out the only remaining glass and fill it up! The stench is strong, it invades my nostrils, it makes my stomach sick. I wobble as I bring the glass to her, and with the corner of my eye I notice a sneer on her face. "It took you long enough." She takes a sip, one more, and another one, and another one. I`m still next to her, I don`t know if I should wait for her to finish the drink, or I can leave. She gulps it and hands me the glass. "There, now you can wash them all. And hurry up. I`m hungry. This is finishing soon!"

I do what I`m told and then we all sit at the table. Me, my father, my sister...and her. I try to think of something to say that will cheer her up so I murmur timidly:

"So, today at school I.." but her stentorian voice interrupts me. ``Have I asked you about that? Nobody here wants to listen to that! What? Why are you looking at me like that? Are you about to cry? If I just see one tear on that stupid face of yours, I`ll... You know, you provoke me. Because of you I`m a bad mother. I don`t want to, but you always do or say stupid things! Just like your father!" she screams, grabbing the last piece of meat from the plate. Her face is as red as lava, her eyes are burning like fire, ready to destroy everything in just a couple of seconds.

I cringe and look at my father in desperation. Our gazes lock, but he says nothing. He`s like a solemn figure, sitting there, fiddling with his food, like a child waiting to be scorned. I hate how weak he is. I even think that sometimes I hate him more than her, for not sticking up for me, for him, for ignoring all the hurtful words she has said to me, for not coming into my room after all the beatings to ask how I am or stroke my hair or just sit next to me. Just be there. I hate that I don`t have parents who would care for me. Truly care.

And Hayley! Poor little Hayley! She doesn`t lift her eyes from the plate. I know that her sweet, innocent soul is screaming inside. I will be her protector, her savior. She`s the reason I`m still here. And a reminder that I`m not like our mother.

After dinner, she tells Hayley that she won`t sleep with me tonight. That is my punishment. I go to our room. There is only one blanket on the bed, so I curl myself up in it, trying to soak up as much warmth as I can. And then I let the same questions play with my mind all over again - Am I nothing? Am I that unworthy of a kind word, her love, tenderness, her embrace? And the worst one of all - Am I to blame?

If I`m lucky, I`ll dream. I`ll dream of something nice. Places me and Haley will visit. A cozy house filled with never ending laughter. A garden full of flowers in vivid colors. Two pink bikes outside. A dog. I`ll let Haley pick the name. A doormat with a big Welcome written on it. A home. Something we both long for. Dreaming is my only way to escape, my only joy.

But, tonight sleep won`t come, so I evoke the only fond memory I have of my mother. I must have been seven or eight.

"Do you want to hear a story?" she asked gently.

"Yes", I said as I put my head on her bony knee. It felt uncomfortable, but I didn`t want to move, to ruin the moment. She brushed my tangled hair gently as if she was afraid she was going to hurt me. If only she would feel that way now.

“Once upon a time, there was a young girl.”

“Was she a princess?”

“Wait, don`t be impatient, I`ll tell you everything. She wasn`t a princess, although she was more beautiful than any princess you can imagine. But, she was sad, very sad.”

“Wh—y? Is it because she didn`t have a mummy?

“She had nobody. She would spend her days walking on the beach. One day, while she was walking, she found a shell, without a pearl, unfortunately. She kept it, however, thinking that when she found the pearl, or a better shell, she could throw the old one away.”

“And what happened?”

“She never found neither of those, and to this day forward she still regrets keeping the shell, since for her that shell has never been enough.”

Although I didn`t quite understand the story, it made me tearful. There was something about the way she told it. Her voice was soft and shaky at the same time, her eyes warm. I can`t remember the last time she looked at me like that. Was it regret, pain, sorrow maybe? I didn’t know then. While contemplating the misfortune of the beautiful girl, I fell asleep. Next to her.

And now, many years later, there are a lot of things I still don`t understand, that I never will. Millions of thoughts torturing me, millions of Why. But I hope. That one day I will be away from here, from her... loved... safe... free. One day...

6.

At the Market

By Maja Lazić

People we knew and people we would never meet again shared those weekends with us passionately. Old friends and lovers became reunited in front of my teary and tired eyes. Second hand and new things were sold and resold numerous of times changing their owners way too often. On sunny days I walked dreaming we were going to finally buy one of those fluffy puppies searching for love or a fat lazy cat looking for a cozy blanket she could disappear into. I would listen to people communicating even though they didn't speak the same language. Wanting to add a little bit of meaning to their lives, I especially observed the middle-aged fancy women with fur coats and emerald earrings parading around. Life was so easy for me and I was in a bubble that would soon disappear.

My favorite part of the market was where the old, once very fashionable, ladies sold their ancient jewelry and heavy books about cooking and modern art. Their life was so nice long ago, but now it seemed they were getting rid of it, together with the memories. I would take their rings and bracelets and try them all, imagining being in their shoes and irritating them because I treated those rings without proper respect. My mother never bought me anything and that made them angry even more. But they were not really furious they were just scared, hungry and lost.

On the other side of the market the bicycles were often missing if you didn't secure their safety. That was the place where they sold car spare parts and wires. Metal, cords and taps left sour taste glittering in the winter sun. Music from the old speakers was squeaking and football fans were cheering from the small cafes. The smell of hot coffee brewing and beer pouring in the glass and some barbecue at 7:30AM and sticky fingers giving back your change. It was all in the air! Such a magnificent fairy tale world for me! It was like going to the theater performance with actors spread like bugs all around and me being the part of it, too. Nevertheless, at times it was so uninteresting for me and I begged my mum to return once again to the old lady.

And there she was that weekend as any other one, her forehead wrinkled even more then the last time I saw her, grey hair messy tied in a careless bun. I watched her move slowly and gracefully like a ballet dancer even thought she was just selling parsley and spinach. I didn't like her unattractive clothes, wet apron bought ten years ago and the fact the she didn't wear any make up and her nails very terribly dirty and black. I was wondering how her day looked like and did she know my name. Did she watch TV in the morning and read books before bed? I was just a little girl, wanting to ask her questions but she was busy and time ran fast. Time was money in her world and I was just a curious child.

I remember those Saturdays in December being so hectic and crowded with orders of her cookies, cakes and rolls. My mum would say every time we saw her "I will call

you tomorrow and order the pie and some oat bread, possibly.'' But we never did. We let her down. I know today. We had just bought some tomato juice and a cabbage. We were picky, grading which of her almost the same fresh looking vegetables were better like a beauty contest. My young naive head thought ''how could we promise something we didn't do?'' but just for a second.

My mum and I were her regular customers and maybe she counted on that money. She should have not been working but she did. Not just on Saturdays, everyday. I couldn't understand why she had to work all the time. I caught myself asking her once: "Do you have a family?'', but she didn't hear me. Sometimes she even sold chicken and turkeys and I would make a funny face because of the smell and refuse to say hello. I wonder did that make her sad. But she somehow never showed it.

But we were not her only regular customers. She had those who were buying jam and marmalade. Then, the business people always had a tough decision which cheese to buy. She would give them advice and said: "Taste it and then you'll know". Then the other days she sold chocolate cookies and apple pies. She would let me try them often and I was too greedy and always took the biggest piece. Sometimes I just watched silently holding my mother's hand. People were running around with colorful bags full of vegetables and fruit, waving their almost empty wallets. I was scared of getting lost and gripped her hand tightly.

That last Christmas we gave her a present. It was a simple hand moisturizer. Oh, she was so happy! If only you could have seen her then. She always had such look on her face like a Mona Lisa with empty eyes numb of pain but that time I knew it was different. ''Here, an apple for a little girl!'', and I quietly said "thank you.''

However, she didn't even have a place where to sell all that food so she sometimes shared the table with other people or in many cases held all she could in her hands and said loudly: ''Cakes, cookies.'' People bought them because they tasted nice and they were homemade but mostly because they felt sorry. That last time she gave us her business card. ''Oh, it looks so professional!'' my mum replied and you could only admire her because she was so brave and somehow had more eagerness to strive then some younger people. I put it in my pocket, with a smile. I foolishly thought she only gave it to me and that I was special. Later I saw at least five of her cards lying around decorating the market ground.

Until one day she wasn't there anymore. We searched the whole market three times but she couldn't be found. My heart was broken. I knew she was there teaching me something about life I couldn't learn anywhere else. On some weekends I thought I saw her but quickly I would know this was just somebody else like her but not her. I tried to find another one to replace her, hopelessly. Every granny took her place for a little bit of time, not good enough to keep it. And they all said: ''Oh, you are such a lovely little girl, aren't you?'' And I wouldn't know what to say and only made a pouting mouth and kept silent. I wonder today what I saw in her that reminded me of an old me. Or did I remind her of her so long time ago when she was a five-year old girl.

The market was never the same again. On Saturday mornings I would match up to my mum and shout: "I am not going." It was easier that way then to search for something I would never find again.

7.

A Fit

by Marija Lukač

She seemed to be a good fit for us – fresh out of school, with good grades and with obvious willingness to prove herself. Everybody wants to be on TV, of course, but she had the looks (and the voice, truth be told) for it. What a perfect little jewel! She had already joined some of our teams and started her own call-in program when I realized – she was not good for us at all.

Can one have too much charm? The men were too enamored around her to do any decent work, and just kept putting all her ideas into action. Some of which were marvelous, actually, but even the ones which were ridiculous and half-baked. The women were all smiles at first, but as they were growing more jealous by the day, and the bitterness took over, their creative energy was gone, only giving them more reason to see Anne's little victories as sour grapes.

While I was racking my brains trying to figure out what to do, she was blissfully ignorant. The problem had completely escaped her notice. She strode jauntily into the office every morning, with a cheerful smile, chatted through her make-up, did great in front of the camera, helped the crew when the filming was outdoors, came back hours later, still wearing the same cheerful smile.

Oh, I hate my job at times like this. She reminded me of me, and I couldn't do it. How does one do it? Basically, you admit to yourself that the younger you, although superior in so many ways, cannot fit here in the small local TV station.' You changed. Can't she?' She just could. But at what cost? Now, is it that I really don't have the time ("It would take her too long, believe me, I know. And we don't have the time – we are already falling apart.")? Or is it that I don't have the heart for it? Can you bear seeing her change?

That evening I did what had to be done, went home, and fell asleep holding an old photo album. So many regrets!

A FIT

Anne was lying in the bed. Her gloom was palpable, and I knew she was not to be left alone, not in a place like this, not with her fit of depression. What a fragile little thing! "There, there", I whispered, like it could help.

I felt so guilty, and yet so happy she didn't mind me being here. Her gaze revealed nothing, but she sat there in my embrace, holding my hand as if I was the broken one. She made me whole.

FIT

They say all children do that, and that there's nothing special about this scene. Once, when the girl was really small, she took her Mama's vintage handbag and walked about the room in her shoes, pretending to be her. After all, it was fabulous being her – she was a TV star. The girl loved it that her Mama was such a star. The bag was open, and obviously had to fall when swung and reveal its contents to the girl. The lipstick she recognized, the shape, not the colour, as Mama never wore it. In her wallet, there was this classy business card and a photo of the girl, far younger, frowning at something. Hardly any money. The pills she understood even at that age, because she saw Mama popping them far too often. Nothing caught her attention, and a distinctive hospital odour made her leave the handbag and find entertainment elsewhere. In front of the telly, for sure. Forgetting about Mama's bag but still wearing her stilettos. Too big, of course. But not for long before they fit. If only she outgrew them.

8.

Parting

by Marija Petrović

- Mornin', he said huskily, to which his father just nodded, wiping the cold water off his creased face with an equally creased towel that used to be white. It must have felt rough against his father's five-o'clock shadow but he appeared not to mind. What he did seem to mind was the unbearable cold wrapping around his withered back and chest and thighs. His whole body started to shake as if it was possible to shake off this stone-cold misery.

Vuk leaned against the doorway, whose grey paint had started to peel off years ago, and shielded his eyes with no reason. He had seen his father naked many times and there were no sunbeams rushing through the tiny window opposite him: autumn set in early that year.

- How much do you need? thundered Goran, stepping away from the shiny but cracked sink just to stumble on a beige floor tile that refused to fit into the place people made for it.

- Cursed tile! I never miss it! So, how much?

- 50,000 euros, murmured Vuk, now glancing at his father's reflection in the mirror.

- Jesus, son. Oh, Jesus.

- Yes, Jesus, dad. Jesus! He is to be blamed.

- No, Vuk, nobody is to be blamed. I... I'll see what I can do. Maybe, if... Well, ... err... 5,000 for sure, but 50,000 euros?!

Vuk's almond hair was long and tangled and his clothes were tattered and worn, as if he had been on a long and exhausting journey. He fished for a cigarette end in his breast pocket, the place where he stacked them since he took up his new 'filthy habit', as his father called it. The end dangled in his fingers, unlit. Fixing his gaze on the cursed tile, he said bitterly:

- She doesn't deserve to die.

Goran cupped his son's weary face in his parchment hands that smelled of cheap soap, which brought to memory the long forgotten picture of his once tall father going to work in a mine in a cloud of this smell every morning.

- Nobody deserves to die. Neither did your mum. If you haven't noticed, life ... just isn't fair.

Vuk knew that this gentle cupping was as close to a hug or kiss he or his mother ever got from him although both of them knew he loved them more than anything in the world.

- Dad, I don't want to lose her. I don't want Teo to lose her. He's only three, for God's sake!

As of lately, the boy took to sitting on the narrow garden's bench and gazing into the empty sky whenever he would visit his grandpa. Hic chubby face was filthy but perfectly smooth and his deep-blue eyes were shining bright even though his face was in the shadow of the brim of his favourite Sponge Bob Squarepants cap.

- Mornin', little man. Slept well? asked Vuk, lighting his cigarette end, and sat on the bench next to him.

- Mornin', daddy. The boy's eyes glittered as he looked at his father. Then they both looked down at a sparrow that hopped close to their feet, trying to get at the smallest pebbles in the garden mistaking them for crumbs. Whenever it picked one and realized it wasn't what it was looking for, it moved on to another one and yet another one.

- Daddy, where's mommy? Why hasn't she come with us? It's fun when she's around. And she promised to make me a new slingshot. The last one snaped.

- Snapped.

-All rightey, snapped.

- She will be away for a while. She got sick... Very sick... And she has to spend some time in hospital. I promise we will go and visit her. And now, let's make that slingshot together before grandpa calls for breakfast. Will you show me how?

One long sunny August afternoon while they were watching TV and Teo was playing with his newly made slingshot on the carpet, Vuk noticed that his wife was shrinking. Simply and unstoppably shrinking. The moment she caught him sizing her up her warm green eyes gave him a naughty look. His mouth didn't even make a proper grin when she, heading out from the cozy yellow kitchen to Teo after fetching him his favourite chocolate pudding, suddenly fell and her beautiful face blended with the carpet next to his small feet. Everything happened fast after that: check-ups, second opinion, handful of drugs, first chemo, second chemo... Ever since her youth she was humming all day long the first melody she heard in the morning after she woke up but not anymore. 'I'm afraid transplantation is the only solution. There's a waiting list...' the doctor Mićović's words were still swiveling around his head – sometimes barely audible, sometimes loud, but there all the time, day and night, making a circle after circle.

- Here you are. Hope it works.

- Let's try it out together, daddy.

- OK. Nooo, don't shoot at the sparrow. He's God's creature too.

It's her sentence. Vuk couldn't help feeling the utter hypocrisy behind it now. Where's that God now? To help his creatures? To help, not to orphan and widow? 'Vuk, don't.

Don't', she said. 'It's God's will. You cannot do anything about it. Just... let it go. I don't want anyone to know and I really mean it. I'm ...ashamed. Promise me that you wouldn't tell anyone. Not until I'm ... gone. Promise.' And he did. What else could he do? He loves her so much that he would never think of saying, let alone doing anything that would harm her or disappoint her in any way. It was back then in hospital, but now, here... No, too many of them in this wretched world. Not his Teo. He wouldn't be one of them. And what's all that about shame? Nobody in the town mustn't know until it's over. But if no one knows, no one can help!!! Oh, he will tell them all, he will go from door to door and ask for money, when something big and grave as this happens people always unite and try to help. Besides, he will sell everything and pawn everything and...

His hand jerked at the loud ring of the phone and he missed the target – the only and empty flowerpot in the garden. He skipped the three stairs leading to the front door and picked it up in no time.

- Hello?

- Hello, Vuk. Dr Mićović is on the phone. You should come as soon as possible...

Not waiting for the doctor to finish the sentence, he grabbed his raincoat and skipped the stairs again.

Five days later Vuk had hardly noticed when he came back to the house where he was born and went past his boy who was in the garden playing with his slingshot as usual. He dragged across the stairs and into the house. Then he put down the paper bag with his wife's meticulously sorted stuff: an apricot flavor lip balm, a pack of wet tissues, a violet hair pin, 'Autobiografija' by Branislav Nušić and a photo of the three of them making faces with sugar candies in their mouth taken on the last year's local fair, and crouched at the table.

-It's over, dad. She's ... gone.

- Oh, Vuk... Don't you worry a thing. You're young, you'll get married again. And Teo... Well, he is too small, he won't even remember...

Jumping off the chair, Vuk growled making for the garden:

- You don't understand! I want him to remember! There's so much to remember... And there could've been so much more had I ...

Teo was still ecstatic about his new slingshot and trying to shoot at the only flowerpot in the garden. He shot. He missed. He shot. He missed. But he had firmly decided not to give up.

- Hey, little man, come over here.

Vuk sat Teo in his lap and wrapped his hands around him.

- Daddy, you're hurting me.

Vuk cleared his throat.

- Sorry, little man. Look, this is the last time I called you 'little man'. From now on you are my big man. Is that OK with you?

Exhilarated, the boy laughed loudly, and tried to kiss his father but the brim of the cap was in the way. Teo quickly moved it sideways, hugged his father and kissed him so hard that Vuk could still feel the kiss scorching him on the cheek long after.

9.

Long Night's Journey into Day

by Milana Cvetić

She woke up that morning shaking. She wasn't cold despite being undressed. The apartment was hot and stuffy, it smelled stale and it was so messy she could barely find her way to the bathroom. There were clothes covering the floor, empty bottles, pizza boxes and who knows what else. She hardly bothered to clean any of it up lately. Some oppressive darkness engulfed her for the windows were draped with heavy curtains. She had been such a night owl lately that she could barely stand the light. Somehow she reached the bathroom sink. The water was cold and it felt good on her face, though her hands were slightly trembling. The bathroom mirror was a bit dirty but that couldn't cloud her awful appearance. Her hair was a mess, her eyes bloodshot and her cheeks puffy. She couldn't remember how she got home last night. Nor anything else about it, for that matter. But she had become accustomed to that recently.

She walked back to the room tripping over last night's pumps and cursing. She picked up her creased bathrobe and put it on tying it around her waist with a strap. She approached the window and spread the curtains. The light hurt her eyes and squinting she could barely discern the tall glass buildings of that foreign city outside. The sun was at its peak and it reflected off of the smooth surfaces making the city shine like a diamond. But all that glitters is not gold, she found that out the hard way. What was it that she was actually doing here? There were no tall glass buildings where she came from. Just a couple of ten-story ones with malfunctioning elevators. Why had she chosen to leave her cozy town? She had no friends here. She had no friends anywhere anymore.

She was a small town girl once, who had real friends, who had actual fun. But that wasn't enough for her. She wanted more. She wanted fame and glory and all the whole nine yards that go with it. She wanted to be in the limelight, to absorb every single drop of attention directed toward her. You should definitely be careful what you wish for.

Turning away from the window, the movement from the bed diverted her attention toward it. Blinded by the daylight she could still realize that it wasn't empty. But who the hell was that!? She pulled the blanket off of him and blurted out the words without looking at his face.

"Go away! Get lost!"

The guy was naked and somewhat puzzled and drowsy. He sat up and looked at her in distress failing to realize what was going on.

“What the hell, Babe!?” He was squinting too and half covering his eyes with his right forearm. “I thought we had a connection here…”

“Get out, for God sake!” she pointed toward the door angrily. “The sight of you makes me wanna puke!” She was still refusing to have a good look at him.

“Christ, what has gotten into you…?”

“Get out, get out, get out!” she was persistent.

“Ok, I’m leaving. Call me a cab while I get dressed, would you?” He picked up his briefs and reached for his feet.

“Find your stupid cab on the street and get dressed in the hallway, I want you out of my sight!”

“OK! I’m leaving, bitch!” He put the briefs on, quickly gathered the rest of his things, and left without putting the rest of them on.

Another one? Really, Hope? Having fun, aren’t we? But she was definitely not having fun. At least not the kind worth remembering.

Alone again, she realized she needed a drink. Just a sip to relax and calm the constant trembling. She had been drinking somewhat lately. But it gave her strength and she needed the stamina. And besides, she was in showbiz, partying was her day job. Or her night job, to be more specific. And everybody drank. She was definitely not the worst. And she could stop anytime she chose, she knew it. Just not today. Tomorrow perhaps… It’s not as if she was drinking that much…

The kitchen she only used to occasionally make coffee and heat stale pizzas was so crammed with empty bottles of whiskeys, vodkas and tequilas she hardly found one half full bottle of Bacardi. She took a sip directly from the bottle and instantly felt better. She took the bottle to the living room and landed on a pile of clothes on the sofa. She couldn’t care less. She thought about what she had to do today. She had a gig tonight, but she was so exhausted and didn’t feel like leaving the apartment at all. She hated people lately. They were all so dumb and dull and everybody either wanted her autograph or to fuck her. It was starting to piss her off. There was no one she could trust. Not anymore. Greg was gonna flip when she called him. But who gave a shit about Greg!? Or is the gig tomorrow? Maybe it was yesterday? Who cares… She took another sip from the bottle and closed her eyes.

The sound of the phone ringing startled her. Who the hell could it be? If it’s Greg, I’m just gonna not pick up. She couldn’t deal with him right now. She got up from the sofa instantly feeling dizzy and followed the sound to a spot on the television table where the phone rested under a pair of panties.

Dad was the caller’s ID.

Oh my God, why is he calling again, I spoke to him last week? Or was it last month?

The phone kept ringing. She muted it. But she couldn’t turn away nor divert her eyes from the familiar smiling picture of the person who loved her the most. So she sent it to voicemail.

She went back to the sofa staggering a bit but before she could even think of sitting down the phone started ringing again. She froze on the spot and contemplated for a second.

She had distanced herself from him in the past year. She had distanced herself from everybody lately, from everyone she used to love, from everyone who loved her. She hardly ever called anyone from her old life anymore, him included. He was the one still calling regularly, but she could barely stand the sound of his voice. It just hurt too much. She spoke to him differently and she kind of knew he could tell. He knew her too well. She would always cut the phone calls short, saying she was in a hurry. Or she would send it to voicemail hardly ever checking it afterward.

She turned around looking at the phone from a distance. She felt that he wouldn't stop calling so she plucked up the courage, emptied the bottle, tossed it on the floor and walked toward the phone and picked it up.

"Hello," she spoke.

"Hi, Sweetie, how are you, haven't heard from you in a while?" The familiar voice rang in her ears.

"Great, Dad, as usual... Having the time of my life, yeahy..." Her voice might have sounded ironic, but it was the truth, right?

"Sure, Honey? You sound..."

"It's great, really. It's what I came here for..." she would always tell him the same worn out lines.

"Have you listened to the voicemail from yester..."

"Hey, Dad, I'm kind of busy right now, can I call you back?" She knew she wouldn't.

"But, Honey, I'm..."

"Sorry, Dad, gotta go, really..."

"Sweetheart..."

She hung up the phone feeling guilty. But she didn't lie. It was what she had come here for. It was the price she had to pay...

Feeling even dizzier, she turned the TV on and walked out the balcony to light a cigarette. MTV was on as always and right now they were playing Christina Aguliera's "Hurt." It was a great song; it was one of those songs she always wanted to be hers. The lyrics were so touching... Was she going to let herself be the girl from the song? For all she knew, her father could be dying right now, she never asked for his health. She didn't even let him say what he called to say. He was over forty when he had her. He might be seriously ill... What had happened to them? They used to be so close. She only ever had him growing up. And afterward, he made it all come true for her, she wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for him... What had happened to her? Was coming here a mistake?

A sound of the front door opening snapped her out of her thoughts. She couldn't remember whether she had locked them. She put out the cigarette in a small ashtray

she always kept on the top of the balcony railings and darted toward the door fearlessly her vision a bit blurry.

“Didn’t I tell you to go away?” She uttered tottering through the hall doorway.

“It’s me Sweetheart,” the familiar voice rang in her ears again. And right there, standing in the apartment doorway, there he was, looking right at her astonished face.

“D– Dad? What the h– How’d you get…” her tongue failed her.

“Honey…” Victor looked at her as if for the first time. It had been a long time, though. They hardly ever saw each other since she had moved to the dark side of the globe.

“Honey…” his voice was shaking.

“Dad…” she was still stunned. “What the hell are you doing here? When did you come?” She had thought he was thousands of miles away.

“I told you last week that I was coming, Honey, to the Fair on Martha’s…” he began calmly.

“No, you didn’t!” She suddenly turned defensive for no apparent reason. She was at the bar last week when he called.

“I did, Honey. I repeated it in the voicemail…”

“I didn’t get it!” She probably did.

“It doesn’t matter, Sweetheart,” he changed the subject. “It’s been a long time, I wanted to see you, you sound so odd on the phone…” he closed his eyes and shook his head in disbelief.

“Yeah, Dad, ‘cos I’m always busy, an’ all…” she cut him off smugly.

“…But I never thought I would find you like this,” he finished the sentence and looked right into her eyes.

“Like what!?” She paused looking puzzled. Like what, really!? She was a bit of a mess but she had just woken up… “What do you mean, I’m fine, everything’s great…” She had told him she was great countless times.

“No, it’s not, Honey, you…” he tried to reason with her.

“I’m living, Dad, I’m a big girl, this is my life now, I don’t need…”

“But you do, have you seen yourself recently?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, this morning…” Why was she trying to justify herself?

“And you think you look… fine? Great!?” She could hear his voice becoming agitated.

“Well, I need some make-up, a hairstylist…” God, what I really need right now is a drink.

“You need to stop drinking, Hope!” he finally uttered.

She froze her mouth half open.

“I– I don’t drink!” He was starting to get to her. “I mean, a little… Occasionally, maybe…” She wasn’t drinking too much, was she? “But it makes me feel better…”

“You don’t need a drink to feel better!”

“Yeah, I know…” But she did. Why did she need a drink to feel better? “But everybody drinks some; it’s not that big of a deal…”

“Yes it is, for you it is, just look at you…” he pointed at her with both of his hands.

“I– I– I look… fine,” she lied again. But alcohol had nothing to do with her appearance, did it? “It’s just the way it is; it’s just the way things are. I’m a star, I have a certain reputation, expectations to keep up with…”

“Expectations…” He was finally losing his temper. “Is this what you want, Hope?” He wasn’t yelling but she wished he had been. “All I ever wanted in my life was the best for you. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy! I gave you everything and this is how you use it! Have you forgotten what you said to me that night? Have you forgotten about everything I have told you about my father and what it did to my mother? And me? Do you even care anymore?’ He paused for a second sighing. “Is this what you want? To be like him? ‘Cos, way to go! You’re his spitting image!”

She had forgotten. But it was coming back to her now. It was one of the worst nights of her life. Finding out that her grandfather was an aggressive alcoholic that beat her grandmother and her father, that insulted them and cheated and lied and yelled, that gambled almost all of their money and property, that died of liver failure at the age of forty-two was one of the most striking moments of her life. She swore she would never do that to her family. She even took her grandma’s maiden name instead of his. Has she become like him? How did she come to this point?

“Tell me this is what you want,” he continued as her eyes started to water. “Tell me you want to live in this reeking pigsty, looking like that, God you can’t even stand straight!” His eyes were also welling up with tears. “Tell me this is what you want and I will leave through this door and never come back! Tell me you are happy, right here and right now and I will never call you again!”

No one broke the silence that followed for a few seconds. They just both stood there, glaring at each other their eyeballs wet waiting for the other to respond.

And finally, she burst into tears.

She flung herself into his arms and started sobbing like an infant. She just couldn’t lie to him again. She had been lying to herself for far too long. She wasn’t happy; she had no friends, no actual fun, no one who loved her. She only had some fans, strangers in the night that flattered her to get what they wanted, hypocritical agents and publishers and those empty bottles of liquor. She couldn’t do it anymore, she wanted out.

She could feel his tears wetting her neck. She could feel the love she thought she had lost.

“Take me home, Daddy… Take me home…”

10.

Craving in the North

by Svetlana Gavrilović

The-end-of-the-world Hammerfest has been my home for the last two years. As a routine, I leave Ellen's café at around midnight and head for Kvalsund Bridge, my nostrils and clothes filled with the sweet smell of crispy krumkake and my tongue pleasantly burning with a few Akvavits, slightly peppery in my mouth. The wordless Sami chanting follows me around at seven below zero on a polar night as I walk past the harbour and its fishing boats gently swaying on the invisible waves of darkness. Feeling as lonely and lost as ever, I reach the bridge when, all of a sudden, the bright dancing lights of the Aurora, the unpredictable lady, start swirling across the sky, in rippling curtains and shooting rays, leaving me breathless. And yet, despite this magnificent tuneless music of colours and the awe it inspires, the only thing I can think of is 'Will I ever be able to see my family again?'.

Ellen's café - a popular café in Hammerfest, Norway

krumkake - a Norwegian waffle cookie

Akvavit (Akevitt in Norwegian) - a Scandinavian alcoholic drink with caraway seeds

Sami - Lapps, indigenous people of Norway, Finland and Russia

11.

Remorse

by Svetlana Gavrilović

'We should've been there. I should've been there', she says, picking at her food absent-mindedly. Through a mouthful of roast lamb, he murmurs:

'That wouldn't have made any difference.'

'I know, but still … Nobody should be alone when …'

'He wouldn't have known even if you had been there. He hadn't known you for years before.'

'Are you sure? Can anybody be sure about that?'

'You know very well what he was like. You can't blame yourself for anything. We did all we could.'

She gets up and moves to the window, all blurred with thick rain drops hitting against it, hitting against her heart.

'Will he ever forgive me?'

'What is there to forgive?'

'Not being there.'

'Stop torturing yourself like that. You couldn't have done anything.'

Silence falls, leaden as the skies, interrupted occasionally with the crunching sounds coming from behind her.

'Your business partners were satisfied?'

'More than you can imagine. They couldn't stop praising the house, the dinner, the hostess – you should really be proud of yourself.'

'Should I?'

'Well, of course. The party was such a success.'

'Yes, it was important … for your company.' Her bitterness is dimmed by the clanging of cutlery.

'So … we were laughing and drinking wine while…'

'While what?'

'While he was there surrounded by nothing and no one.'

‘I wish you would stop doing that. It’s over. He’s gone. We’re here. Life goes on.’ His voice sounds impatient, almost angry.

‘It does, doesn’t it? Even for bad people?’ she says, disappearing into the kitchen.

12.

A Jinx

by Svetlana Gavrilović

A crash in the desert but he's still alive, a couple of crawling metres away from his rescue. A rattlesnake is quicker.

Contributors

Dragana Andrić teaches English in a state primary school ‘Heroj Radmila Šišković’ in Smederevska Palanka, a small town in central Serbia. She enjoys reading, travelling, meeting new people, sharing her passion for teaching at ELT conferences and, sometimes, when all the impressions and experiences become overwhelming, she takes to writing poems and short fiction. She’s on the board of the school magazine ‘Glas mladih’, leads English Drama Club, organises poetry and creative writing competitions for her students.

Dragana Jovanović Kuprešanin, Recruitment Specialist, English Professor and Instructor for several Canadian companies and also a director and founder of 'SVEA' Private Language School and Agency. "What I love about writing is that every society on the face of the planet tells stories in one form or another, which leads me to believe that writing makes us more connected to our deepest humanity."

Jelena Spasić is a devoted mother of two boys, an enthusiastic English language teacher, a proud co-owner of “Oxford School” Leskovac, a bookworm and an all-know-how wonder woman. Apart from teaching and having fun with all-levels-4-to-16-year-olds, she likes to explore and contemplate upon diverse human nature through writing.

Katarina Andrić works as an ELT teacher at Lingva Language Centre in Valjevo. She is one of ELTA coordinators for Kolubara District. As a teacher she believes in reinforcing not only students’ independence and creativity, but also our own. And for her, writing is a way to achieve that because it creates doorways to other worlds in which she can release all her thoughts and feelings.

Maja Lazić works in ‘Uroš Predić’ High school in Pančevo. She always has a pen and a notebook with her because she can find inspiration in everything. Writing is for her a transformative process, a tool to stay mindful and grounded, a life style.

Marija Lukač is an English Language Teacher at High School in Kovin who has just started another path in her career, as a Program Leader for Teaching Academy. She dreams big and wants to help teachers become leaders through personal and professional development, which she herself values greatly. She believes in reflection, and innovation. Writing is a result of both these beliefs.

Marija Petrović, once a student and now a teacher at the well-known Gymnasium Pirot, graduated at the Faculty of Philosophy, the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Niš in 2007 and completing her master’s degree at the Faculty of Philology, University of Novi Sad. Literary world, embracing her as a reader and of lately as a writer, is a perfect escape from an imperfect reality.

Milana Cvetić graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Novi Sad acquiring the academic title of Master in English Philology in 2013. She has always liked making up stories and felt very passionate about it. Currently she is employed as an English teacher in the Agricultural and Food-Processing Secondary School in Sombor.

Svetlana Gavrilović has been teaching English for more than 26 years, and is currently working in Grammar School, Užice. She thinks writing is a journey, painstaking and invigorating at the same time: it takes time and commitment to get where you want but when you get there it is worth every effort.

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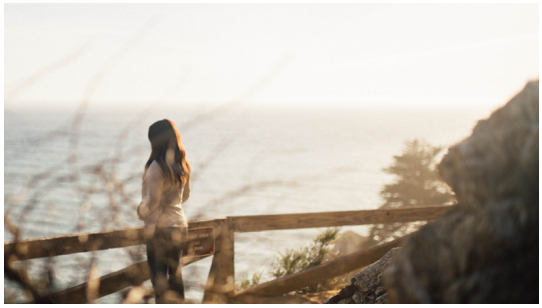

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