



Sorrow

I

"She is dying!"

Our mother whispered too loudly. Her eyes narrowed, her face became wider; she looked all red and round. And my sister lay on the bed with her back turned to us. Mother and I were alone. My sister seemed somehow narrow too. Her hair was thin and looked as if she had a lot of dandruff. My mother was crying. Tears poured incessantly and ever more densely from her eyes; she bit her lips and didn't look me in the eyes.

I am twelve, a sixth-grader. My sister's dying depresses me, but I cannot cry. Perhaps because it all came at a bad time, when the sun is still very high and all the rooms are full of light and the merry voices of the women going home from work.

How different it had been four years ago, when I had seen a dead person for the first time in my life! In the early evening, my teeth chattering, soaked from the rain, I stood with other children in front of a two-story house and watched with admiration a gentleman who had pushed his way through the crowd followed by the whisper:

- He's the first-born of the deceased...

Then the women brought the children of the deceased from the house: a boy and a girl. I immediately felt envious of the skinny and ugly boy who was now the subject of conversation and interest, whom everyone was watching. I envied him terribly, and the thought that he was much uglier than I consoled me only slightly. But I pitied the girl.

They had looked about in wonder and they hadn't cried. The impression they left upon me was similar to the exam at school when my colleague had to recite a poem by Šenoa while I only had to answer questions about math and catechism. He declaimed from a chair next to the teacher's desk, while I answered from the next-to-last row. Hence I too started thinking about declamation: 'That boy is stuttering, looking down, he looks as if he hasn't learned the lesson.. Whereas I would hold my head up high like the teacher when he reads, I would speak loudly and clearly like the principal and wave my hands just like a teacher declaiming This boy is giving a poor performance! True, he's standing on a chair so he looks taller even than the principal, and everyone is looking at him, but still, his performance is poor... Wait, it's too early...next year, if they let me declaim during the exam!... Will I live to see the day when I can show them all what I know, what I am capable of...? This one does not deserve to declaim. He is not worthy of the importance and respect granted him..'

Now I wanted something like that. They were looking at this one too, and I envied him for it: he too was giving a poor performance: he hadn't shed a single tear. 'I would act quite differently' - I thought - 'if my father was to die. I'd weep and pull my hair. And if they tried to carry me out, I'd kick them, bite them and yell like our neighbor Kata did when her husband died. If my father would die! Or my brother! Or even my sister!... It would be quite different, my lad, you who are looking at us mutely as if it was our father who had died... and yet you flatter yourself, you think you are important...No, you did not deserve your father's death!'

And when I saw the funeral and, walking behind the coffin, the same gentleman in black hiding his eyes with a handkerchief, and two others squeezing his hands to comfort him, while women were keening in the house - I perceived it all with the same awe I felt towards the priests burying Jesus Christ on Good Friday.

How different it had all been four years ago!

And now I cannot even weep! And my sister dead! It is a beautiful, sunny day. I can hear the murmur of people talking, of the women giggling. Only my mother is biting her lips and the tears keep falling from her cheeks onto her breasts. There, in the corner of the big room, I can still see my poor sister's back, her wet undershirt and her left ear, white as a waxen angel's... Yes, the candle is burning. But the priest still isn't here. The maid ran to fetch him an hour ago. Is this death? Is this how we die?

My mother is looking at me. If she could see me now! But maybe she has already noticed that I'm not weeping... What will she think of me? I am ashamed, I am a cad, a sinner, God will punish me... I am not sorry for my sister, I'm not even weeping, let alone banging my head against a stone or pulling my hair.

My mother sat up. It seemed that my sister had moved. I could not see anything. Mother was kissing her... Mother was embracing her. Mother was weeping. Mother was laughing. Mother was crazy.

I don't know. I should do likewise, throw myself to the ground, embrace her, weep, carry on... Do I envy my mother or my sister? Mother loved my sister more than I did; mother loved my sister more than me.

Oh, God! Oh, God!

Mother lifts me up. Her gaze is hazy and wet. As if she were saying: You are a cad - or an idiot; either you won't weep or you can't.

Oh, God! Oh, God!

I can't! I am a cad. I don't know how! I am an idiot. I am as confused as my colleague the reciter. I am as childish as my neighbor's little boy. I am worthless, I am unworthy, and above all I am stupid.

I cry out with anger.

2

The maid returned and shrieked when she saw my sister. She is ugly. The priest is on his way, she says, but he still is not here. The same with my brothers. The window and the door are closed. None of the neighbors to be seen. My sister lies dead, the three of us around her. My mother is sitting and weeping. The maid sprayed my sister with holy water. Then she tried to push a cross into her hands. But her hands are

week and the cross is heavy. The maid is angry, I don't know whether with the cross or with my sister... I'm convinced that she is silently swearing. She has always been like that - angry and impatient. When mother wasn't around, she would swear at us. She has been with us a long time. When I was younger, she often hit me on the forehead with her fist. Her hair is red. We call her Red Pepper. And when I cried, she would close my mouth with her hand. She is skinny. When she used to carry me, I would get tired more quickly than if I had walked on my own. She is all bones, like a man. She insults us whenever she gets angry. She has a rough voice and I have seen her drink brandy many times. She often smells of petroleum, and my elder brother Milan told me several years ago that she also drinks vinegar and that is the reason she is so skinny. No, none of us ever loved her, nor she us. We generally considered her a spy and since I started going to high-school I've despised her even more because in my school we believe that spying is "absolutely the worst". I am the youngest; she doesn't even dare hit me anymore. So she tells my father lies about me smoking his cigarettes. I only picked up a butt once to see what it was like to smoke. Because of her, my father slapped me although I am now a high-school student.

So I am glad my sister will not hold the cross the way Red Pepper wants her to. I feel like laughing out loud and I am sure my dear sister would not have minded that. No, she simply will not hold the cross the way Red Pepper wants her to. How grateful I am for that! How I love my sister and hate Red Pepper!

She still won't leave her be. My sister is lying on her back. I can see her face so well. Her lips are tight. She is dead! She died without confessing. Oh, God! Oh, God!

Is she in heaven now? Is she in deadly sin? No, she is free of sin. True, she was recently rude to father, but that was because she was ill. That is no sin. And she ate meat on Friday, because the ill are allowed to do that. And she hadn't been to church for half a year because the ill needn't go. Red Pepper is still near her. The cross is standing. My sister has given in. Red Pepper is now weeping, too, although I know she does not feel like weeping. She is angry because she didn't see my sister die and because she did not have the chance to close the eyes of the deceased! She too thinks she is "something"!

I went to the bed. I could not stand Red Pepper being there. She wants everything her way. She wants to be right about everything. Now she even wants to kiss my sister. But I am already there, kissing my sister's eyes, her lips, her hair. I am kissing her although I have a bad taste in my mouth. I am weeping even though I do not feel like weeping. Red Pepper began kissing her too, only so she could push me away. She is weeping although she would much rather curse. She pushed me away pretending to comfort me. She pinched my arm furiously. But I am holding my own. I am yelling. I am stomping my feet. I am screaming. She pinched me, I scratched her. Even now she reeks of petroleum and brandy, although she is trying to pass it off as the smell of the candle. She must be drunk. And that she would kiss my sister in that condition! I'll tell mother...

The candle turned over and burned her arm. I calmed down. My mother is kissing my forehead now, caressing my hair, and I am weeping at her breast; I know mother is pleased with me now. I am not a cad, I am not stupid. I behaved so well! I am my mother's pride and joy and she is pleased with me.

We hold our embrace. We understand each other. Mother kissed my sister as if she were kissing me; I kissed my sister as if I were kissing my mother.

Red Pepper is trying to cool her elbow. The burn must be pretty bad.

How pleasant it is at my mother's breast. I am pleased with myself, with my mother, with Red Pepper, and with my dead sister...

I am so happy!

3

I waited for my father with great curiosity. Would he cry? Father is quite old, gray-haired and solemn. He never makes jokes. When we play, he asks: "Why aren't you studying?" He has told us so many times that we were no longer children and that we should really be more serious. "When I was your age" he said to me "I already worked in the office, and you complain if I so much as give you a short letter to copy." Our father is generally strict and decent, he punishes with his look and his silence.

But mother said to him several times: "You don't love them (meaning us), and they don't love you."

How will he act now?

He enters with the priest. He is sullen and gloomy, his eyebrows bristling, his chin trembling, his lips pursed, his mouth wide. I always feared him and now I fear him even more. He loved my deceased sister best, because she was the most solemn and the quietest. Now he is not looking at anybody, he only gave me a short, intense look, as if I were to blame. He is awesome. His step is firm and the rooms tremble under it. He has not taken off his hat. I am afraid of him.

If I were to weep now, would he scold me? He told me so many times that I was stubborn and spoiled, that mother spoiled me, that I cry about trifles like a child, that I am not a man. That is why I do not love him. I fear him and respect him.

He stops by the bed. I can see his back. He is hunched forward. He has thrown his hat on the arm-chair. The priest is whispering something and making signs with his hands. Father does not move. How long will he stand like that? Who is he?

Look at him! He has turned around, red in the face, he is pulling his hair. He is suffocated with coughing. His face is wet, from perspiration I think. He has collapsed on the chair and squashed his hat. A new hat. He is moaning.

So that's who he is! So then! He too is weeping. He, who scolded me... He who ridiculed me. There he is, pulling his hair, hitting his head with his fists. So! So!

The priest tries to comfort him. Father is not awesome. I do not fear him. He is suffocated with coughing and tears. So! So!

Is he acting that way because he is in pain or because that's what he is supposed to do? To show off? Hasn't he always been solemn just because he was expected to be? Just for show.

4

They made me leave the room where my sister is lying. Now they are washing and changing her. They will lay her out downstairs. My

brothers have arrived and all of us men are in this room. Father is smoking. Milan is a senior in high-school and he writes poetry. Josip is nine years older than I and he works in father's office. I did not see them arrive, so I don't know how they acted, and I wish I did. Our eldest brother is in Zagreb; we wired him to come. We are expecting his arrival with great curiosity. How will he act? Watching my brothers carefully now, I doubt that they wept. Milan has strange ideas: he says he is an atheist, he makes fun of the holy mass and of priests, even those who are not catechists! Josip already has a sweetheart and picks the most beautiful flowers from our garden. I don't mind - I respect him for it. And I wish with all my heart that he would point me out to her and say: "You see, that one there is my youngest brother..."

I am impressed with Milan also, he even dares argue with father and nevertheless father loves him and respects him more than me. Milan is at the top of his class, while I got Fs in three subjects that first spring and now I have As in three subjects. Father said I would become a simple worker while Milan would be a doctor. Sure. They are grown men. Thus Milan can smoke whole new cigarettes in front of my father, while I was slapped because of a butt. That's why I would like to know whether they wept...

I don't think they did. They are silent, they smoke and look at the floor. Milan is supposed to have loved our sister dearly. This is how they show their sorrow, as men as true brothers. Father wept like a child and a true father.

This is what I don't understand. Why did father cry? Now I respect him less and am less impressed with him. I think I love him more.

(They) Mother came in. I think she is displeased with my brothers. I guess she hadn't cried. Will they say to me tomorrow, the day after, in a week: "You cried like a baby"? Will I be able to cry again? To whom should I listen? Am I really just a child, spoiled by women, my mother calling me her "pet"?

I dislike both my brothers and wish they weren't here. They are so solemn, silent and simple. So is my father. And they all smoke - maybe that's why?

I get slapped for a butt. On Good Friday I had to go to church with mother while Milan and Joso stayed home and drank on the sly. Because

I am a child. And Milan is allowed to be an atheist, to smoke, he doesn't even have to weep...

I understand it all now. During meals Josip drinks even more than father, while I am allowed only a thimbleful of wine only on Sundays. Just one single time I wanted some more, without anyone noticing, and mother beat me in front of our guests. Because I am a child. And Joso even brags about his binges! When my brothers talk about 'certain things', they close the door in my face. But I know what they are talking about, I know that Joso doesn't only kiss his girl-friend on the lips but that he feels her up... In short, I know more than I let on and more than they think.

When father sends Milan to buy cigarettes, Milan sends me to do it. They can beat me and order me around, they can tell me when to cry and not to smoke... Because I am a child.

5

I am left alone in the room. It is getting dark. Red Pepper brings in the lamp. My brothers and my parents are in the drawing-room because some ladies and gentlemen came to call. They left me upstairs because that's only for adults... But I have decided to get back at them, to show them all that I am already a young man... Namely, I have decided not to cry... Red Pepper says that I am not even to go to the funeral. We'll see. I hate them all now because they despise me. Red Pepper sits down across the table and looks at me with sympathy - in other words, she knows how to pretend when she wants to.

- Are you afraid?

Until now I was not afraid of anything; I never even thought of fear. She reminded me. How malicious! She says "thou" to me although mother has warned her several times not to do it. She said that she does it because she is used to it and because she loves me! Now she is unusually gentle with me.

- Come downstairs with me, baby... - She comes close and strokes my hair.

- Let go. I am not a baby and I am not afraid.

Actually, I was now afraid to be alone. My voice trembled. I'm afraid I'll begin to cry any minute now. Her tenderness has either touched

me or made me angry. I don't know which. I know it irritated me.

Downstairs with her... What would I do there? Why is she stroking my hair now? Everyone is downstairs, they left me all alone. They are talking about all kinds of things, about my sister, about illness, about death, about love... I know that my sister "had somebody" whom she called "silly", who looked at her from the road down there when she was at the window, and from the church door when she was by the main altar... Even Milan's friends flirted with her, although she laughed in their faces... And professor Jarić, who has never been in our house and who doesn't talk to my family asked me a month ago: "And how is your esteemed sister?" See? I could talk about all kinds of things too. But they leave me alone, they despise and humiliate me, they think I am nothing!... I have no one but this ugly, skinny, angry and malicious woman, the only one who now treats me nicely, warmly and gently.

Why isn't she more beautiful?

Downstairs with her?... The other day a friend of Milan's was here. When Red Pepper walked by, he asked Milan: "Did you do her?" And Milan smiled but he didn't say anything. He just nodded towards me and his friend looked at me with pity and ridicule. Like, that's not for me, I don't understand... But I know he didn't mean kissing, because they could talk about that in front of me. Why does she never stroke Milan's hair, for instance? Why is she not more beautiful and why am I not older?... I would show them all. I am so unhappy.

A lady enters; it's my god-mother. The room is filled with her perfume. For some time she has been using a different perfume, stronger and more pleasant than my mother's... My god-mother's dress rustles when she moves. My mother's does too, when she goes calling. But this rustle is totally different now. I am blushing, I am embarrassed. Red Pepper says: "They left him all alone, poor thing." I don't hear anything else. The room is spinning around me, I am spinning around the furniture, the furniture is spinning around us. I feel somebody's hand on my shoulder, somebody's glove in my hair, somebody's rustle in my ear, somebody's perfume in my nose.

My eyes are burning.

My god-mother is pulling me close, her black, wide, flimsy sleeve around my neck. She is comforting me and I am still crying. And my

cheeks are burning... I cannot see her, but I know very well what she is like. She has a full figure, like my mother, but her eyes are darker, her hair black. Her face is somewhat paler, her step both light and firm. She has a crooked smile. And only one of her eyes smiles. She holds her head bent to one side. She is very much like my mother and everybody says they are like sisters, but now I feel she is something completely different. I cry, but not with anger. She mentions my sister and says to me: "Poor darling!" I moan even more. And she holds me closer, comforts me more silently, strokes me more gently, kisses me more warmly. My face is red from crying, from shame and happiness. And the more I cry, the more I am ashamed. And the more I am ashamed, the happier I am. And I can only kiss her hand - white and soft and cold - with my red and warm lips.

She is leaving. Her thighs rise alternately. She has pulled up her skirts. Her black stockings and her white neck both shine under the lamp. Only her scent is left behind... Why can't I sleep now? Why are they making me eat supper? How foreign and unbearable are now my brothers, my father, even my mother!... And how happy I'd be if my god-mother were my mother...

6

No one is crying today. My brothers did not cry at all. They say very little. Milan hasn't eaten all day. Joso - very little. I dared not eat either, even though I was terribly hungry.

My mother tried to make me eat, but I just waved her off haughtily and gloomily, like Milan did. Now Milan is my ideal because everyone agrees (Red Pepper and the milk maid too) that he loved my sister dearly and that he is a very handsome and serious young man. Mother and father eat a little. It's all right for them to eat (that's how I figure it) because they cried. I cried most of all, but nevertheless I dared not eat until father became angry.

I am rather uncomfortable. I don't know what my parents, my brother and neighbors think of me now. Have I shown that I loved my sister immeasurably and that I am terribly sad because of her death? I believe I have. My god-mother must have told them. But at the same time, I believe I have not shown them at all that I am no longer a child. If I could smoke

silently like Milan or look down on my plate and drink like Joso... They seem to care little about the sorrow of others and are not interested to see how their sister is mourned... Maybe Milan will write a poem, like he did four years ago when our uncle died, and that poem still hangs framed in the drawing-room and all visitors read it silently and exclaim: "How beautiful!" Joso will take flowers every Saturday to our sister's grave, like he does for our brothers who died before I was born. And I? How will I show my love and my sorrow? I cry like a baby... Ugh! I despise myself... I too shall write a poem. I'll go to my sister's grave instead of to school...

No, indeed I am not as childish and weepy as my family believe. I don't cry just out of fear, sorrow or anger. That first spring when I got my first F, I came home in tears and father did not say one harsh word. Otherwise he might have beaten me. At school also, when I don't know my lessons, I cry and the teacher only says "Sit down" and doesn't write anything into his book. He thinks that I am crying out of fear and that I don't know the answer out of fear. I cry like that when the catechist is about to box my ears. Others laugh, so he slaps them, but he leaves me alone, he doesn't touch me. The same when a teacher wants to write a comment on me into the class-book. I laugh too, but only silently. I am smarter than all of you! So there, if you really want to know what kind of child I am!... Oh, God! Oh, God! So I am not sorry for my sister - I am a great sinner... Oh, God! Oh, God! What am I to do?

Red Pepper says I am not to walk behind the casket. This is already the third day that I haven't been to school, and I won't have to go tomorrow either, maybe even the day after tomorrow... And when I do go, I will not be examined for another week, the teachers won't do it, out of consideration. Especially Jarić. That's what it was like for Jerko, when his father died that first spring, when they were still living in town... In the meantime, I don't even pretend to study, and now that cannot and must not irritate my father. I won't have to study for a few more days. My sister died, so who would think of school now?

And after all, what is one F, even ten Fs, compared to a single death?

7

They laid my sister out downstairs. Today after dinner I saw her. A wide white veil over her face, probably because of the flies. Neighbors -

women mostly - keep coming, sprinkling holy water on her, whispering. Praying and talking. I cannot discern about what. The room smells, reeks actually, of wax. My sister's face is squeezed tight, her lips are very thin and pale, barely visible. A frown on her face. She is not smiling, and that is good, because Red Pepper says: "When the dead smile, they are inviting someone to follow them." All that leaves no impression on me. The sun is as strong as yesterday, the same murmur on the street, everything is exactly the same, only the scent is different. My stomach hurts. Mother sent us, forced us really, to kiss our sister. That has to be the most terrible moment of my life. To kiss that face with no blood, no flesh, no warmth in it! Who is that?... I am now terrifyingly cold. I barely touch her with my lips, having first touched her with my nose. And my mother, who has made us do this, now looks terrible, merciless and abhorrent, like she is not our mother at all. And our sister isn't our sister. I could look at her like this (if they made me) for all eternity without shedding a single tear. She is so cold that I too feel cold. Moreover, I sincerely doubt that that thing over there had ever been my sister, that I ever had a sister; I doubt that the thing had ever been alive... Maybe I would look at "the thing there" with curiosity if it hadn't been my sister...that is, if I weren't afraid that the others would see it was curiosity and curiosity alone...

I am sullen.

How warmly, how sensually, how brotherly I mourned for my sister yesterday, when my clean, sweet-smelling, beautiful god-mother was here, and not these dirty, crooked, yellow old crones smelling like sweaty socks. They spoiled everything for me, even my crying; I don't feel like doing anything, even mourning...

Mother also is ugly, skinny and wrinkled today, all blue in the face. Just like those old crones. How different that kiss yesterday had been. I can still see my god-mother - like last night... I love her and only her. No one else.

Because I no longer have a sister.

I sneaked into the drawing-room. Dark, humid, silent. Something moved on the couch. Joso! He quickly pushed his handkerchief into his pocket and left.

Ah!

He cried when no one could see him! Him too! So he won't be able to make fun of me; I am not a child. So Joso too loved my sister more than I did. He forced himself not to cry in front of the others, so they would not see him. And I forced myself to cry so they could see me.

Oh, God! Oh, God!

Am I really the only sinner? Not one tear was really for my sister. Everyone loved her and still loves her more than I did. Because alone like this, where no one can see me, I cannot cry. I cannot!

Oh, God! Oh, God!

I call her face to mind, but in vain! Stupid me! They were not wrong when they said that I had no memory. I push my face into my hands, into the arm-chair, into the couch, I close my eyes with my hands, with my elbows - to no avail... Nothing. I have forgotten my sister's face... And she used to carry me around, comb my hair, change my clothes. When I was ill, she would read to me... When I was little, she preached to me. She was pretty and pink. Her eyes never smiled, she rarely smiled. When I went downtown with her, men turned to look at her. Everyone liked her and I was proud of her. Everyone said she was very pretty and I loved her...

In vain! I cannot imagine what she was like. That thing out there on the pier, that changed everything. Those old crones, they spoiled it all. That kiss, it destroyed everything. There are photos on the wall over here. She is there too. This is the latest, but it didn't turn out well (my brother took it) and she doesn't look like herself. On this one she looks the way I had not known her, but she is so much like the one I knew; here she is in short skirts, a little girl. Here she is exactly like the one I loved and the one who loved me. That's her. Her I love even now, and I cry for her - from my heart, like a true brother - and no one can see me and no one will ever know...

My little, my good, my beautiful sister. I love your hair, your large eyes, your serious face... And your bare little legs, your short skirts. And your small hands and tiny dimples... My little, my good, my beautiful sister.

Look, look! We are alone and yet I am crying as heartbrokenly as I did yesterday, when my god-mother wrapped the black, wide, light arm of her dress around my neck... (she loved you so much)... and no one

will know about it, and no one must know. God can see and you can hear, for you are up there with our good Lord, my good little sister...

Everything. Everything. Your knee, your fingers, your little shoes... Everything. Everything. Your locket lying on your holy and warm breast. I never loved anyone as much and no one ever loved you as much!

I am crying. I will bathe you in my tears, I will drown you in them. My sorrow is great and my love even greater...

God can see and you know - no one else. No one.

8

Our eldest brother Matija arrived tonight. We rarely see him. He is a wine wholesaler in Zagreb, he knows all the influential people, sometimes he sends us five crowns apiece, for Christmas, New Year and our birthdays. We all respect him. To tell the truth, this Matija is my ideal, because - how shall I put it - Milan is just a student like me. And Joso, even though he works for a living, does not do so far away from us, but through our father. After all, I've called both Milan and Joso "asses" and lots of other things many times. And when Joso chases me I stick my tongue out at him from the top of a tree, and when he pretends to want to climb the tree (which I know he can't do because he is fat and clumsy) I spit on his head and when I succeed, he waves his fist at me and I feel just as if he had given me a ripe fig (I am particular to figs). I am not afraid of him, and even mother laughs with me then, even Red Pepper is on my side in such occasions. She hates Joso now that he has a girl-friend.

Thus I really respect only Matija. So his behavior is the most important to me. Here he comes. We all run out to meet him, all except Milan and my father. But he only shakes our hands and says nothing. Joso turns away, mother embraces him and I take his hand. I think he is going to cry too. It is getting dark again. The sky is clear. All our neighbors are at their windows. I can see each one. What's more, my friend Ferko is pointing at something with his finger. He is still a child. His mother slaps his face. She is right: he doesn't know how to behave. It is not nice to point with your finger! His sisters, one more beautiful than the other, are at the other windows. And that's just for today. What will happen tomorrow? All houses will be filled with light. And I am not to go? We'll see.

How long it is taking! It seems to me that we have been walking for a full hour, and the road is right next to our door. I know Joso can spit at the road from our windows - a few years ago we respected him for it. But not today. We are no longer children.

Matija will probably cry. Will he? The same old crones are at the door. Matija is looking down, his hand on his chin. He will surely cry.

He is inside. He is moaning. He can no longer contain himself. He is sobbing. The crones are whispering: "That's the eldest. He loved her most." He is a wonderful man. Milan steps aside. I look at him, but he dares not look at me. Joso also looks away. They are afraid to look at him, to look at Matija. And with my eyes I try to tell them: he too is crying, and he is not a child. He is a man, bigger and older than us... He smokes the finest cigars... he drinks, good Lord, what none of us has ever seen... He already had a fiancée and he broke off with her... He is already capable of being a husband and a father, he is more capable than Joso and more learned than Milan. And he does not hide his tears!! He acts wonderful, we can all sense that and everyone will talk about it. We cry with him. I am proud of my brother Matija, we can all be proud of him. What a man! What a brother! He knows how to behave! It is indeed wonderful "behavior".

Milan and Joso saw it all - and vanished. They left in order to avoid my eyes. For if I cry, it doesn't mean that I am a child; and if they don't cry, it doesn't mean they are something special. It is natural that I should be more impressed with Matija who, among other things, writes articles for newspapers and who is personally acquainted with many writers, than with Milan who published a single poem - titled Brother - three years ago.

After all, Matija lives in Zagreb, he has been to Vienna, Budapest and God knows where else, while Milan has only seen the places I too have seen. No more and no less. So Matija knows better how a grown man is to act in such moments. Provided such a man actually loved his sister, of course.

9

I dislike Milan now. His behavior - not wanting to cry when we all cried - offends and depresses me. He is younger than Matija, a student

like me, and still - Matija is much closer to me now. His crying, I think, is the only, or at least the main reason. Milan is becoming a stranger to us, and thus incomprehensible: he doesn't act like we do on an occasion that should mean to him as much as it means to us. He is different, or at least wants to be, he is an atheist too, and he doesn't believe for the same reason that he won't cry. He just thinks he is something special and wants to show off.

I don't say anything to him; it seems everyone resents his behavior, but no one says anything. But if Matija hadn't come, I don't know whether I would have felt that way about Milan. So I worry that maybe my brother will not want to go to the funeral or wear black. I worry because I do love him and I would be terribly sorry if others believed what can be seen on him and heard from him was really true.

I already hold God and tears within me, so how can he be ashamed of that... Maybe the same way I am ashamed of my tears and kisses in the humid and dark drawing-room, next to my little sister, when I think of my god-mother...

That time I mourned my sister for her sake, other times for the sake of others...other times I wanted to show it, that time - to hide it...

Why am I ashamed of my true sorrow? And why am I proud of my forced tears?

I don't understand anybody and it is all unclear to me and Milan spoiled it all. He made me angry and contemplative. His 'something-special' behavior and 'something-special' opinion unsettle me and arouse my curiosity. He has changed; his face is pale, he is standing aside as if he felt foreign and lonely among us, and I feel sorry for him. I would like to say something comforting to him. He unsettles me, makes me think and arouses my curiosity.

He really is something special!

Because of him - it is strange - I could begin to doubt my sorrow and my love. But one thing I know: I could not cry or kiss my sister now. Everything seems tight, disgusting and unbearable. A forced kiss on the icy face of a corpse - that's what we all are and that's what she is. That is our sorrow and that is our love!

Milan does not cry and does not believe. Milan is something special.

But now I cannot cry and I cannot hold still.

Milan has really spoiled it all.

There he is in the hall. He is alone. Why did I feel the need to comfort him, to soothe him, to talk to him, to be friendly?

I asked him for a cigarette. He gave me one without hesitation. The smoke bit my eyes, I cough, cry, suffocate...all make-believe, to cheer him up. But he doesn't laugh and doesn't make fun of me.

He abruptly turns and leaves.

10

I thought it was a 'big deal' to walk behind the casket, and going to the funeral - even though I had my brand new black suit - seemed harder than going to school unprepared when I expect to be examined. But, oh! It was so easy, and - why hide it - no fun at all. My shoes were too small, I could only think about going back by coach and I looked forward to that.

I didn't cry until we got to the cemetery. Then I sobbed because Matija was sobbing and because my god-mother came to comfort me... Strange. I felt her scent before I could see her black and flimsy dress. Anyway, I think it is not usual to cry at funerals, that's why women and children don't walk behind the casket. The fact that they let me come only means that they think I am no longer what I used to be. And I do feel somehow older, stronger, more experienced. I've had an unusual experience, something I will be able to tell about.

I no longer have a sister, so -

These words sound terrible now, maybe because I am alone and everything around me is silent. The past two nights I slept in the same room with my father and mother. We were all together these past two or three days, day and night, and the house was full of guests, neighbors and relatives... But tomorrow! The day after tomorrow, when Matija leaves, when we are left alone, when Joso goes to his fiancée, Milan to his friends, father to the library, mother visiting, and I remain alone in the big and dark house, where my once healthy and solemn sister used to play the piano, she who feared no one, who could walk at midnight all alone in the garden and the woods, who made fun of Red Pepper when

she started talking about ghosts... How will I prove what I will tell the others - namely, that my sister with whom I talked, walked, sang, ate, red - is now dead... Dead! Everyone already knows, even the papers wrote about it and they will all ask me about it... - but what shall I say, what shall I write for myself, how do I convince myself?

It's terrible. I can easily talk about her, but it is hard to think of her. In a word, I am afraid. When I'm alone like this, all kinds of thoughts come to mind. When you dream that a dead person is laughing and beckoning you as if they were alive, that means, according to Red Pepper, that you will soon follow them... Will there not be many nights when I will want to fall asleep in order to escape such thoughts and fear sleep because I might dream such dreams. Terrible. My sister is dead. I dare not think about what had been. Her dying, the death, the lier, the last kiss, the flowers; how quickly she was loosing weight, how her hair fell out, how she looked at the pieces she spat out. When I am alone, I cannot think at all of the sister whom I knew, whom I saw live and die.

When I am alone, I can only think of my sister in short skirts, the one I had never seen, alive or dead, whom I kissed and mourned in the little drawing-room; it is about her that I can think now that I'm alone; yes, I could and would like to dream about her. It's just that...I couldn't talk about her.

Everything. Everything else is terrible and although the sun is very high, I am afraid to be alone... And when I'm not afraid, I am ashamed.

11

At dinner mother asked several times: "How did it go? Who came to the funeral?" But Matija said: "I don't know, who would think of such things at a time like this?" I saw perfectly well who was there, but I gave her the same answer as Matija. So did Joso and Milan. Now I have doubts about my brothers... 'Are they answering like Matija or like me?'

Did they see or didn't they?

Joso didn't cry at the funeral. He only cried twice (silently, not sobbing).

That time when Matija sobbed (and he ran to the drawing-room). And the time when he was alone in the same drawing-room (and ran

out). Joso is twenty-three. I am suspicious of him now; a strange thought is plaguing me... Would I cry as heartbrokenly if my brother died and if I didn't have a god-mother? And how would it be if my father died, and would it be the same if my mother died?

I must not think. Every thought unsettles and upsets me. I have no will.

Tomorrow I'm going to school. That is a black thought. And Matija is leaving. That too is a black thought. We will go on as before. Father will be irritated if I don't study. (We are, after all, not in mourning anymore!) My god-mother won't stroke my hair (there is nothing to comfort me about!) and our neighbors will not point me out. (Now I am the same as Ferko and everybody else!).

Ugh!

And Milan won't give me cigarettes! (Now everything is the same as before, when I didn't smoke!)

Ugh! If I heard right, we won't be allowed to sing for some time (nor laugh, joke or fight, I suppose), like yesterday when a corpse was in the house - only now there is none...

Ugh!

12

After so many days I went to school today. My friends asked me several questions which confused me less than I am now confused with my answers.

One of them asked: "Did your sister have a fiancee?"

Another asked: "What did she die of?"

I talked and talked and couldn't bring myself to say: "Of consumption."

And this I don't understand. It seems to me that my friends would respect my sister less and I would have to be ashamed of her if they found out that she had had no fiancee. For a girl who doesn't have a fiancee is either ugly or stupid... And consumption is a shameful disease, just like the very word consumption is an insult. That's what we call a teacher who is ugly, always angry, always giving Fs. My sister once said she would rather kiss his dog - a bulldog - than its master.

Everything confuses me really and I don't understand anything. I thought I would be very flattered when my schoolmates tell me: "Oh, how you cried" (Ferko was at the funeral, as were many others) and "How you (her brothers) loved her!" But I am much more flattered when they tell me that many Milan's friends fancied her, and that professor Jarić was absolutely crazy about her.

Yes, I am more flattered now when I am told my sister was beautiful than if I were told that she was - good.

No. I don't understand. Today I walked home with Ferko and he told me how it was when his father died. He felt important and looked at me with a kind of contempt, as if to say I was less experienced and more childish than he is.

I wanted to tell him but didn't that he who still points things out with his finger did not deserve that his father should die no more than he deserved good grades. Usually his mother goes to beg the teachers on his account and that saves him. Because his mother is very pretty. Ferko also said: "Boy, you sure did cry!" - and I am now ashamed because of that. He is making fun of me and humiliating me. He means: "What is a sister compared to a father!"

Anyway, you can't see any sorrow in him now, and it has only been half a year. Will it still show on me? Does it still show on me?

Today the teachers did not examine me out of consideration. Nor will they tomorrow. But in a few days... I must make up for it now, study all the time... I have three Fs to correct. The spring is almost over... What if I have to go to summer school?

Why wouldn't my mother go to talk to the teachers? Or my god-mother? She is prettier. My mother isn't pretty at all.

Last night I dreamt of my god-mother and my sister. My god-mother was the same as she is now, but my sister was the way she was a long time ago, before I knew her.

At dinner mother said she had dreamt of our sister. Joso did too. I didn't say anything. Mother asked me and Milan: "Didn't you two dream about her at all?"

Milan shrugged. Why did that question confuse and embarrass me and why did I lie looking at my plate and saying just: "No!"

It seems that I love my mother much less than I used to, and she looks upon me the way she looked at my brothers when they couldn't or wouldn't cry. I am no longer her pet. I feel much closer to Milan now...

Today mother asked me and Milan again: "And you really didn't dream about her at all?"

Actually, I had seen my late sister two more times in my dreams and she always looked like on those photos in the drawing-room which I kissed and over which I cried.

Why can't I talk about that?

Why don't I feel the need to at least tell my mother a lie and thus comfort her?

I could not cry at her breast anymore.

I am sullen.

Tomorrow I am to be examined in three subjects, and I haven't been studying at all. That is, I study, but I don't understand what I read. And I can no longer ask my mother to go and beg for me.

The teachers told me I would get an F. I am sad. My mother noticed it today and said: "What's the matter? You have changed so much since your sister died..." And she kissed my hair.

How does she interpret it? Will she defend me in front of father if I fail in school?

I think she will... She loved me and my sister so much.

And so did I...

Punat, April 1909

(Punat is a town on the island Krk, near Rijeka)

Translated by Ljiljana Šćuric