

# LOVE NOVEL

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*Translated from Croatian by Mima Simić*

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# 1

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS, he screamed at the top of his lungs; the first thing that came to his mind when he finally managed to cut through her breathless sentences – he didn't even try to understand what she was actually saying; her hot breath against his ear had woken him up with the irritating persistence of an alarm clock, and he wanted to crush it with his fist, so he roared words, words, words, like a man who couldn't bear the ringing any more, like a man who, to tell the truth, could no longer bear her nearness either, her mouth, the hot steam it oozed; he roared with the force of a scorched man, as if she'd burned him, and for a moment she thought the roar would bring the walls down, so she cowered, covered her head with her hands, dug her fingers in her hair and squeezed her eyes shut 'til it hurt, reacting like a typical female, typical by his standards, meaning excessive, hysterical and self-destructive, since she deliberately pulled her hair out, deliberately curled up in the pose of a crushed alarm clock and forced tears to her eyes as if to take revenge on him with this classic scene of domestic violence. She staged it in a second, lifting her weeping face towards him, towards the ceiling, towards the sky, and protecting herself with her fists full of tufts of pulled-out hair.

It didn't impress him.

It didn't suit her either.

She's capable of coming up with something far more disgusting.

Just opening her mouth would do it. But he won't let her.

He stirs like a volcano, lava boiling in his cheeks; he raises his hand in a frenzy, he raises his hand, he raises his hand and... he stops himself, because the blow would hurt her more if it were shaped into a word, a thunderous and meaningless word that thrashes in all directions and won't be drowned out, and so again he hollers words, words, words, and indeed words are now thundering around the room, throughout the whole flat, or to be more precise, the cramped two-room apartment they're renting at too high a price, so that most of their eruptions could be explained away by the fact they're once again late with the rent. Demoralising, but true.

She'd imagined them in more relaxed circumstances, and with much more floor space.

He admitted that she'd drawn the shittiest straw.

But better not to revisit that topic.

Not now. Because the words are in the room.

Words comparable to quicksand. Crumbling between their teeth, getting crushed into slimy sand, slipping from their lips like muddy bubbles with no meaningful content. Dripping down their chins. They should both look in the mirror and commit the image to memory. To make them sick of it. But they won't. They'd rather keep the mud gurgling until they run out of oxygen, until their last bubbles dribble down to the floorboards and they finally mop them up; they can't live in a pigsty, after all. Only then will they glance at themselves in the mirror, wipe the secretions off their chins and the smudged mascara from their eyes, comb their hair, fix their clothes, inhale, exhale, and expire. You might indeed say: they'll expire in yet another death,

a tragic case of drowning in the bullshit they regularly step in, like true and passionate suicides. But she won't be the one to reach for the mop first, no she won't; she'll let the mud form a crust on the floor for him to see what his words, words, words really look like, up close.

But surely he must be aware of how stupid it is to be repeating words, words, words, without actually saying anything; and just demonstrating that every word is meaningless, and too loud, besides? Isn't he, in fact, trying to convey that they no longer have anything to say to each other and that there was no justifiable reason to wake him from a dream, a well-deserved dream, mind you, with which he'd been trying to cure his unyielding exhaustion, his cursed frantic life with its impending rents that make him age ten years in a month; and just look at him; he's already a hundred, two hundred, three hundred, it's been too much for way too long now, and if she really wants to know, he too had imagined more relaxed circumstances, quiet afternoons of digesting his dinner on the couch, dozing off with his feet resting on the coffee table and waking up during the evening news; he'd imagined things would take care of themselves, or at least that he wouldn't feel guilty if they didn't, and he really didn't expect random acquaintances to be asking concerned questions about his health because he seems so exhausted, withered and fucked up, because he looks like he has a tumour and not just a woman, this woman who always fights back twice as hard, as if to say: man, you sure drew a shitty straw, too. The shittiest. And then she adds that no one would ever love him as much as she loves him. He'd better remember that.

Nobody.

Ever.

As much as me.

He can't stand it any more. He can't handle such a high concentration of contradictory sentences, without going crazy or

getting plastered. He needs to get some sleep. He needs to crawl into the fold of the couch, urgently; disconnect, reset himself, and forget she's nearly killed him with her love again. Indeed, he does this regularly; he falls asleep like a sick man, he curls up around an imaginary tumour and blankets himself with a grimace of ill humour. And she sees the silent pain pacing across his face, she saw it moments ago and felt sorry for him, he looked like he needed an ambulance so she decided to walk over to him, stroke his hair and whisper to him that, just below their window, a pair of sparrows were building a nest; she wanted to share this beautiful image of love, birds' devotedness, nature's balance, or something like that, and tell him it's a sure sign that spring is coming and the heating bill might be lower from next month. She wanted to tell him one thing, but he heard something different, and he raised his hand and roared words, words, words, and she lifted her face to the sky with the same expression he'd had until a moment ago; she thought of the sparrows, frightened, flying out of a treetop, and then she stood up, shook the tufts of hair from her hands, ran to the other room and slammed the door as hard as she could.

She didn't mean to do this, but now it's too late. The child is already standing up in the cot, afraid. The baby thought it was all a dream, of an earthquake or a volcanic eruption, but then the room shook for real. The child looked at her as if seeing her for the first time, and she pulled the tiny body into her arms, whispering it was safe, that Mummy had come, Mummy's here, and yet this still didn't sound like particularly good news. But the child has no choice and huddles close to her, or rather, she huddles up to the child, rocking them both and repeating that everything is all right, it's just a draught shaking the furniture and slamming the doors. Look out the window and you'll see the wind bending the branches.

All this will pass, she tells the child.

Someday we'll laugh at all this.

We'll only remember the little things; the view from the window, the spring snow and other small wonders. The way an empty nest swayed in the bent cypress tree on the other side of the windowpane, and how the sparrows fluttered across the car park. They'll remember the white image of that car park, and the slope with frosted fruit trees, and the kindergarten run by the nuns from the nearby convent. The nuns would come out, wrapped in scarves and long coats, with shovels to clear the snow from the garden paths, and then, like a funeral procession, one behind the other, they'd walk back towards the chapel.

Listen to them sing.

She explains to the child that the nuns also have a child, called Jesus. Every day they pray for his health, they decorate him with dog daisies, they wipe the dust off his pedestal, and coat him with marble polish, because Baby Jesus cares for those who serve him; he protects the poor, the sick and the down-trodden, and he teaches them to endure hardships with a smile and to keep believing that someday their troubles will disappear. Someday the kingdom will be ours.

Maybe when you're grown up?

The child listens patiently as she talks about Jesus in the same way she talks about gravity, electricity, and dolphins. And it doesn't matter that she knows nothing about either physics or electrics, that she's never seen a dolphin, or that she doesn't believe in Jesus – what matters is that it sounds like a fairy tale.

And then the bells ring out.

It's time for Mass.

At the third stroke, he opens the door quietly. He doesn't come in. He's afraid he'll step into some shit on the floor again. He watches them from behind and imagines walking over to them, stroking the child's hair, putting a conciliatory hand on her shoulder, and she'll tilt her head and run her cheek across

his arm, like cats do, or women who don't hold grudges; and then they'll all stand together in front of the frosty window, thinking peaceful thoughts of snow and milk. At some point she'll turn to him and tell him the little sparrows have returned to the nest after all. He'll nod appreciatively, even though he has no idea what she's talking about, but it doesn't matter – what matters is that it will sound like a fairy tale.