

VLASTA GOLUB, THE RHYTHM OF DEPARTURES

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She was always interested in how other people live. Even as a child, she walked every day down the longest street in the city, and she imagined that behind the curtains that swayed in the windows of the houses, carried by the breeze, lived some people whose lives were much more carefree and much happier than the one she knew. In her mind, these people were more successful in everything. For a long time, she considered her family circumstances a predisposition to failure. Even as a child, she vaguely sensed that it was not good to cause pity because when people feel sorry for you, they rank you among the weak, and thus among failures. That's why for years she was careful not to arouse pity in others, but she also let them be the ones who are successful and important. She believed in people for a long time. In how fundamentally good they are. And when a colleague from work spoke of her as a weak person who had a nerve disease in her genes and that she would end up the same as her mother, Dunja was horrified by that possibility. She looked for symptoms that would indicate the truth of that statement, she thought that her behavior had surely led to such a conclusion, and because of this weakness she felt shame and guilt. She frantically tried to prove the opposite. She resolutely denied any resemblance to her mother, even the smallest. Sometimes, one would see her mother's features in hers. That would make her angry every time.

Beneath the anger there was another feeling. It was vague, but it lasted much longer than anger and became more and more intense. In fact, that feeling never left her. It was guilt.

Dunja often felt guilty towards her mother. Many times she accused her unfairly because of her illness, many times she could not understand her. She resented her for not being like other mothers, like other women, who took care of their appearance, who took care of themselves and were full of life. She was often ashamed of her own mother.

But mother tried. She tried many times, much more often and much harder than Dunja could have imagined at the time. She also tried hard when she arrived in Zagreb by train and dragged a bag full of food into Dunja's student-

room because Dunja was sick and she had not been home for months. She arrived then with a smile on her face, nicely cut hair and styled hairstyle. She pulled Dunja out of bed, fed her homemade chicken and fresh salad from the garden she grew herself. And then they walked around the streets of Zagreb, looked at the shop windows and went for a coffee in a well-known cafe on the main city square. Mom looked beautiful. She had a new coat. Dunja noticed that men were looking at her and she was happy about that. At last mom looked the way Dunja imagined she should look. And then, sitting at the table in the cafe, mother took off her coat. Underneath it appeared a vest in a bright yellow color, which she wore over a transparent black shirt and which did not fit at all with what she was wearing, and in every way it contrasted with the ambiance in which neat and tastefully dressed people were sitting. The yellow waistcoat was knitted by mother herself that winter, with a stitch that was lumpy and uneven and gave the impression that it had been made by someone with no skill at knitting. But at that moment, Dunja was not happy that her mother finally had the will to knit and that she made a vest that would protect her from the cold. Dunja was ashamed of her mother in front of unknown people, gentlemen in fancy suits with hats, and ladies in tasteful dresses decorated with decent brooches or strings of white pearls around their necks. They ordered coffee, and Dunja observed the people at the tables. She was trying to find at least one other person in the room who was wearing the same kind of plain clothes, knitted pullover or plaid shirt, something like that, but no one except her mother was wearing anything like that. Everyone was extremely tastefully dressed. And although it seemed that no one was looking in the direction of their table and that her mother's yellow vest did not catch anyone's eyes, Dunja tried to drink the coffee as quickly as possible, so she peeked a little nervously into her mother's cup. Mother noticed Dunja's discomfort.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, why?"

"You suddenly fell silent."

"It's nothing. I'm thinking that we could have coffee somewhere else."

"Why? It's very comfortable here."

"And expensive."

"I will pay."

"It doesn't matter who will pay. I'm just saying it's expensive."

They drank the coffee quickly. When she was paying the waiter, mother pulled out a crumpled banknote from the worn brown wallet from which Dunja's photo was sticking out. Leaving the cafe, she said:

"If I had known we were going out for coffee, I wouldn't have worn this vest."

Dunja was silent. She turned her head away from her mother because she wanted to hide the tears that started to gather in her eyes.