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THE PALISANDER GUITAR

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SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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Petra

It was almost the end of the first trimester, and I still felt nothing. Neither nausea nor vomiting, as if this little seed in my belly refused to get in touch. It was just my sense of smell that had sharpened, I was like a beast sniffing for traces: the scent of strawberries in a passer-by's plastic bag, freshly cleaned stairway, laundry on balconies, coffee, spring, garlic on a tram, the smell of the doctor's office, all these smells haunted me down and followed me everywhere I went.

I took a lap around my tower block, just to clear my mind, it felt good, it was warm and sunny. I sat down on a bench and watched the people in a coffee shop, having coffees and smoking, explaining things importantly to one another. Perhaps I ought to talk to a friend, but honestly, I did not know whom to call. They say that childhood friendships forged in sandpits are the strongest, but while other children played in parks, I spent every afternoon in music lessons. I was never one of the neighbourhood bunch, one of those kids that meet in the park outside the tower block, and then throw firecrackers in the hallway and press all the buttons on the intercom. Then they all run away together and laugh, scream; there is nothing as bonding as shared mischief. In high-school, I missed a lot of classes because of trips, whenever I returned I had a feeling that cliques and clans had realigned and I didn't belong to any. That is why I built my friendships among musicians who, like me, lived with their instruments. We wrote each other long letters with napkins and sheet music, and later emails with links to newly-discovered musicians.

My best friend Sara, a violinist I had met back in high-school, was living in Amsterdam, I could've video-called her on WhatsApp, but I felt that if I started talking emotions would get over me and in the end we'd both feel silly; she because she wouldn't be able to hug me, and I for crying at a phone in my hand.

- D' you mind? - asked the neighbour, Mrs Novak, although she had already put down her plastic bags with groceries at the edge of the bench.

I shoved to the side and showed her to take a seat.

- My legs are failing me. Good thing we have the lifts, right?

Mrs Novak was nearly ninety years old and she had difficulties moving around. She used to come over for coffee sometimes while mum was still alive or mum would send her some biscuits or a piece of cake in a plastic container, then she would return it with vanilla crescents or send us homemade cherry liqueur. Bottles, baking sheets, containers and bags travelled up and down the staircase. I was in charge of the exchange, I'd go up to the twenty-first floor in my slippers and ring her door-bell. I liked Mrs Novak because she never called me "honey, sugar, little girl, sweetie" like all other neighbours, but she asked me the right, serious questions.

- Bach or Barrios? Where are the eyes of the guitar? Should you be playing if you feel anger inside?

When mum died, she didn't come to the funeral, dad resented her for it, they had been friends after all, but Mrs Novak never cared about social conventions.

She wore extravagant clothes, stacked her wrists with jangling bracelets, and never left her flat without red rouge on her lips. Although there were lines on her face, her hair was raven black, with just an occasional grey strand. Other women in the neighbourhood gathered at the local hairdresser's and whispered that the old lady Novak must be dying her hair in some salon downtown, so that nobody in the tower block would know she was as white as a mouse. That long black hair that she wore loose down her shoulders made those women angry, because they went to their hairdressers at the first sight of hair loss, and asked for short haircuts and perms. "She should act her age" they'd say, but Mrs Novak did not comply, wherever she went you could hear the chiming clacking of her bracelets. She had no children to visit her, she never married and no one knew where she had come from. Over the years her gait has slowed down, her back stooped, but she still sported sun hats in summer, and a bright red coat in winter, to brave the chill away.

She sat down on the bench beside me, laid her purse onto her lap and took out a small red lipstick and a small pocket mirror. She applied make up on her lips, slightly pointlessly, she was already in front of the gate and on her way home anyway.

- Is it ok? I can't see anything in this mirror - she smiled at me.

I gently wiped a naughty line over her top lip.

- That's what women are for, to mirror one another and fix lipstick - she laughed.

She noticed that I was silent, I was trying to come up with a topic before the questions came in. I muttered something about the spring and allergies, but she interrupted me straight away.

- Talking about if the weather is warm or cold is a great waste of time. The climate keeps changing constantly, anyway. How's dad?

- I don't know. Fine, I guess - I said honestly.

- Probably sitting in front of the TV, watching the weather forecast - she said ironically.

She looked at me from the corner of her eye.

- And you? How are doing, Petra?

- I don't know.

She nodded and put her hand down on mine.

- How about some apple strudel at my place?

...

The flat smelled of cinnamon, which made me feel as if I was in the Earth's womb, safe and protected. Thick curtains enclosed the windows, no one would have known we were high above the city. Mrs Novak put a plate of strudel in front of me and kept nudging me to eat.

- I can't have more than three pieces anyway. Unfortunately or fortunately, you can't make a strudel for one, you make a full tray. There, as if I knew you'd come - she said, and I didn't know if she had really planned it all along.

She waited for my palate to satisfy the sugar craving and for me to come to her with my troubles.

- I'm pregnant.

I blurted it out in one breath, spilling this secret out in the open, airing it out, for consideration and sharing.

- That's nice - she said.

- Yes, it is actually - as if it suddenly became clear that I hadn't been letting joy implant in me.

I was gorging on another piece of strudel, powdered sugar sticking to my chin, giving me a moustache. Mrs Novak didn't ask about the details, about all those things I tortured myself with. She kept joking with me, telling me that when I was a kid I used to wake her up from afternoon naps, the walls are so thin that she had a free concert every day.

- Go on, tell me, how much do the Japanese and the Americans pay to come and hear you? And here's me, sitting in my living room, listening all I want.

Her laughter was contagious. I had a feeling that through her my mum sent me a bit of laughter and positive energy just when I needed it. At the end, she took a plastic container and stuffed it with the remaining pieces of strudel.

- Tell your dad, he'll be happy.