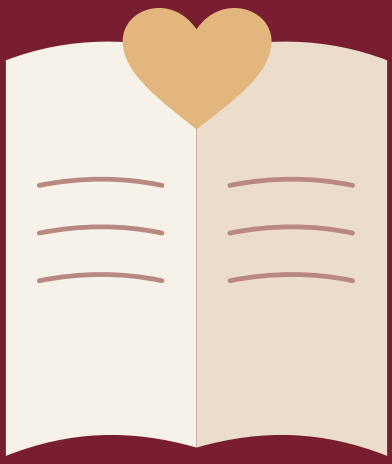


FREE PDF COLLECTION

Deception

249 short stories

Ljubavni romani

ljubavniromani.com

About this collection

This free collection brings together all 249 stories in the Deception category of Ljubavni romani, newest first. Every story is literary fiction: the characters, conversations and events are invented, even when they resemble real life.

Each story starts on a new page, and the foot of every page gives the address where you can read it online, in English or Bosnian. The collection is for personal reading: keep it on your phone, read it offline or print it.

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DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

Anger with a New Address

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/anger-with-a-new-address/

Dušica was crying quietly, in the bathroom next to the kitchen, with the tap running, and Jelica might not have heard it at all if she had not stayed home that Saturday with a migraine. The Topalović house in Starčevica was quiet anyway. Professor Budimir Topalović liked quiet, the way he liked starched shirts and lunch at two, and for twenty-five years all of it had been provided for him. Jelica was fifty-two, with a doctorate in chemistry that hung framed in the pantry and a son in Vienna who called on Sundays. Budimir was spending those ten days in Novi Sad, at a conference on ethics in public office, where he was giving the keynote. Jelica knocked on the bathroom door. The water stopped running, and the crying did not.

The girl was sitting on the floor, leaning against the bathtub, white in the face. She was twenty, had come a year earlier from a village near Kneževo, and cooked, washed, ironed the professor's shirts, and at night, with Jelica's old textbooks, studied for the pharmacy entrance exam. Jelica had given birth to one child, and it did not take her long to understand. She sat down on the edge of the tub. "What month?" she asked. Dušica closed her eyes. She said she would be gone by Monday, that she would go back home, and that she begged only one thing of her: not to ask anything.

Jelica did not ask. She made mint tea, settled the girl into the bed in the small room behind the kitchen, and drew the curtains for her. When she went back into the kitchen to turn off the stove, Dušica's phone had been left on the table. The screen lit up. The message was from a contact the girl had saved under the name Professor. "Don't say anything to Jelica. I'll sort everything out when I get back, I'll find you a job in Belgrade. Delete this." Jelica read the message twice. The second time slowly, the way you read a prescription with something wrong in it. Then she turned

off the stove.

The first thing she felt was anger at the girl, so pure she could almost touch it. She went up to the study, sat down at Budimir's desk, and began typing on the laptop. Pay her a month in advance. Buy her a bus ticket to Kneževo. Write a reference, a short one, without any words that could be misunderstood. She thought of the girl's hands on her pots, of her laughter at dinner when the professor told stories about his students, of her own pillow, which the girl shook out of the window every morning. In my house, she thought. Under my roof. The list was done in ten minutes.

That night she did not sleep. She lay under the lamp and, as she once had in the laboratory, added and subtracted. Dušica: twenty years old, her first job, her first time in the city, a mother who sells milk in the village. Budimir: fifty-seven, a professor whose name appears in the papers, who had asked the girl how her studying was going and once brought her a chemistry book with an inscription. Jelica remembered herself at twenty-four, a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Technology, and the young lecturer Topalović, who listened to her as if every word she said mattered. She remembered how that listening had ended, and what she had given up after it. The anger did not grow any smaller. It only changed its address.

In the morning she found Dušica packing her bag, the same one she had arrived with. Jelica sat down on her bed. "You are not going to Kneževo," she said. The girl burst into tears again and said she had not wanted it, that the lady had to believe she had not wanted it. "I know who wanted it," said Jelica. She asked what he had promised her. A job in Belgrade, said Dušica, far away, and that no one would ever have to know. And money. "He won't find you anything," said Jelica. "I will." She took the bag from the girl's hands and set it down on the floor.

A friend from university, Stanojka, had for ten years been the principal of a high school in Bijeljina, and every September she called Jelica to come and teach chemistry, because there were no chemists to be had and Jelica

still remembered formulas better than anyone. Jelica called her at eight in the morning. "Do you still need a chemist?" Stanojka was silent for three seconds and then said that the apartment above her sister's had just come free. Jelica withdrew the money from her own account, where for twenty years she had kept her inheritance from her mother and never touched it. She did not touch the joint account. By noon two suitcases, a box of textbooks, and Dušica's bag were in her old Fiat.

Before she left, she cleaned the house better than ever, because that was how she had been raised. She emptied the fridge. She went through the rooms one more time. From the bedroom wall she took down only one photograph, the one in which she was twenty-four and wearing a lab coat, and put it in her bag. On the kitchen table, exactly where Budimir read the paper every morning, she left her house keys, Dušica's little apron folded in four, the printed message from the girl's phone, and a sheet of paper that said: "Budimir, Dušica is with me. Do not look for her through me, or for me through her. Lunch is not made. R." She went out and pulled the door shut behind her.

Budimir came back on Friday evening, with a box of chocolates for Jelica and a silk scarf in his coat pocket that he had not yet decided whom to give to. The house was dark. There was no smell of lunch. He called Jelica, then Dušica, and heard his voice come back to him off the empty walls. On the kitchen table he found the keys, the apron, and his own words, printed on Jelica's printer, which now looked as if someone else had written them. Jelica's phone was switched off. Dušica's number no longer existed. In the fridge there was mustard and a bottle of mineral water. He sat down at the table in his coat. It was the kind of quiet he had always demanded.

In the weeks that followed he did what men do when nothing has ever happened to them. He called his son in Vienna, and his son said only, "Dad, leave me out of this," and hung up. He called Jelica's sister, who told him that Jelica was alive and well and that this was all he needed to know. He told his colleagues that his wife was visiting their son. He

boiled eggs and ate them out of the pot. He took his shirts to a dry cleaner's on Gospodska Street, where they recognized him from television and asked after his wife's health. On Tuesday he was a guest on a program about morality in public life and spoke well, as always.

In Bijeljina, in a third-floor apartment near the city park, Jelica walked back into chemistry as into an old house where the furniture had never been moved. In the mornings she taught the juniors, and in the afternoons, at the kitchen table, Dušica. She taped the periodic table to the fridge. The girl studied stubbornly, with a hand on her growing belly, and once told her that no one had ever studied with her before, not at school and not at home. Stanojka brought pastries and never asked anything. In February Dušica for the first time correctly solved an organic chemistry problem that Jelica used to give her university students, and Jelica went into the bathroom so the girl would not see her cry. The neighbor from their floor called them mother and daughter. Neither of them corrected her.

He found them in March, through the list of new teachers on the school's website. It was raining, Semberija lay flat and gray, and as he climbed the stairs he heard two women's voices through the door. "Sodium," Jelica was saying. "Eleven," Dušica answered. "Magnesium." "Twelve." He rang the bell. Jelica opened the door and did not move from the threshold. Behind her, at the kitchen table, sat Dušica, heavy, with a textbook in front of her, and she did not get up.

"I have come to take you home," said Budimir. "Both of you." He paused. "I mean, so we can talk." Jelica looked at him like a man who had wandered onto the wrong floor. "Dušica has her entrance exam in June," she said. "We are studying." Dušica raised her eyes from the book. "Good afternoon, Professor," she said, the way one says it to a stranger in a university hallway. Jelica closed the door. Budimir stood on the landing, a wet umbrella in his hand, and through the door he heard Jelica say "Aluminum," and Dušica, without a pause: "Thirteen."

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

Nine Years and Five Months

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/nine-years-and-five-months/

In July I started seeing a man in a black suit. That week Sarajevo was burning, the asphalt went soft under your shoes, and he wore a black suit buttoned up to the throat, a straw hat, and a plastic bag in his hand. The first time I saw him was on Ferhadija, in front of a jeweler's. The second time at the tram stop by Skenderija. The third time at Markale, between the tomato stalls, and that time he looked me straight in the eye and immediately turned his head away, as if someone had caught him at something. On the fourth night he was standing under my window on Vratnik. I knew that face from somewhere, like a word that sits on the tip of your tongue and will not come any further.

I had not slept well since I turned forty, and those nights I did not sleep at all. I lay there, listening to the cats calling to each other across Vratnik, and remembered things I had not remembered in years. Travnik most of all. Ten years earlier I had spent a year there as the supervising architect on the restoration of an old house in the old town, which the municipality was turning into a museum. I lived in a room above a bakery, ate ćevapi at Plava Voda, and on weekends hiked up Vlašić. I was thirty-eight and convinced I was a good man, because no one had told me otherwise.

Selvija taught music at the elementary school and came to the site to ask whether there would be a piano in the museum. There was no piano. There were nine months in which I wrote her letters, though we lived ten minutes apart, because she said that words vanish on the phone and stay on paper. One July morning she came to my room above the bakery and said it was over, that I should go back to Sarajevo, and not write and not call. For a week I was hurt, and for a year I was relieved. I never asked why. What I could not remember was her husband's face.

He rang at three in the morning. I opened the door in my pajamas and knew before he spoke. "Zehrudin," he said, and took off his hat. "From

Travnik. You don't remember me, architect?" I remembered. The clerk from the municipal tax office who brought receipts to the site sorted by date, who twice invited me to lunch and said "my Selvija" in every sentence. He stood on the doorstep sweating, with the plastic bag in his hand, smelling of rakija. "Selvija died in March," he said. "I thought you ought to know." I let him in, because I did not know what else to do.

He sat in my kitchen until nearly dawn. He drank my rakija, cried, laughed, apologized for the hour, then apologized for apologizing. He drank half a bottle and looked no drunker than when he had come in. He talked about her illness, about the hospital in Nova Bila, about how at the end she asked only for cold water and the radio. Then, as if in passing, he said that while sorting her things he had found a box of letters. "You write beautifully, architect. I never knew how to write like that." He laughed, and I could not tell whether it was humility or a threat. "I have been following you for nine days," he said. "I wanted to see how you live. You live well. Alone."

At the door, his hat already on his head, he said he was in Sarajevo with his daughter, at a hotel near the train station, and that she had never seen Sarajevo. He asked whether they might stop by the next day, so she could see what an architect's apartment looks like. I said they could before I had time to think. "Her name is Rijana," he said from the doorway. "She is nine years and five months old." When he said the months, he looked me in the eye, and I understood that he had counted them many times before I did. I spent the rest of the night on the balcony, watching the sky lighten over Trebević, and tried not to count.

They came at noon. Rijana was thin and serious, in a party dress meant for some other occasion, with a backpack bearing a faded cartoon rabbit. She sat on the edge of the sofa and looked at the drawings on my table. Whenever she was thinking about something, she rubbed her left eyebrow with her thumb. I do that. My mother did that. On my sketchpad she wrote her name, with her left hand, and drew a house next to it. Zehrudin watched me watching her. "Left-handed," he said. "No one in

my family was ever left-handed. Nor in Selvija's. Interesting, isn't it?" In my head I was counting the months. He saw that I was counting.

For the next few days he played with me like a cat with a mouse. He left the child alone in the hotel room with the television while he drank at the hotel bar or sat in my office and said nothing. When he did bring her, he would say in front of her, "Mama had a lot of friends, didn't she, Rijana?" and she would look at the floor. Once, while he was in the restroom, she whispered to me that Daddy cried at night in the bathroom and then in the morning made her pancakes as if nothing had happened. I asked him to let her stay a few days with my sister in Butmir, where there was a garden and children. He agreed at once, too quickly, as if he had been waiting for it.

My sister Azijada asked nothing. She looked at the child, then at me, and set another plate. Within two days Rijana was climbing the old walnut tree behind the house with my sister's sons and drawing houses for me, and every one of them had one window too many. On the third evening, as we sat on the steps, she asked me whether I had ever been to Travnik. I said I had, long ago. She said that on their fridge there was a drawing of a house, with a signature in the corner, and that Mama used to say it had been drawn by someone who did not know what a house is. The signature was mine. I did not tell her.

The night before they were due to go back to Travnik, Zehrudin came to my place around midnight, drunk. I had been lying in bed since evening with a high fever, one of those summer infections that make you shiver under two blankets. As soon as he saw me, he sobered up. He made tea, soaked towels in cold water, changed them on my forehead all night long, and hummed something I did not know. Once, half asleep, I heard him say, not to me but to someone in the room, "You see, Selvija, I'm doing this too." At dawn I opened my eyes. He was standing beside the bed, holding a bundle of my letters to Selvija tied with a hair ribbon, and reading one under his breath, in my words but in his own voice.

When he saw I was awake, he folded the page. "I came to give her to you," he said calmly. "I decided on the bus, near Kaonik. I thought: let her go to the one she belongs to, I am tired." He set the letters down on the nightstand. "And then I saw you counting the months. Like change at a shop counter. For nine years I have braided her hair, architect. I have been there for every vaccination and every school show, and I know which song she sang in first grade. You counted." He picked up his hat. "The letters are yours. She is mine." I tried to get up and could not.

I went to the bus station the next afternoon, still weak, with a drawing in my hand, because Rijana had left one of hers at my place. Zehrudin was standing by the platform in his black suit, with her backpack over his shoulder, almost cheerful. He was still carrying the plastic bag, and now I saw what was in it: Rijana's slippers and a box of cookies. He told me he was getting married in the autumn. A widow from Vitez, a quiet woman, with a house and a garden. "And she has a family friend who drops by often," he added. "A nice man. An engineer." He said it without irony, or with an irony so deep that I could not reach it. Rijana stood between us, holding his hand.

I gave her the drawing. She shook her head and pushed it back into my hands. "It's yours," she said. "So you have one real house." Then they got on the bus. As it pulled out, Rijana waved to me through the window, with her left hand, and right after that, already thinking about something else, rubbed her eyebrow with her thumb. Zehrudin did not look at me. He was straightening her collar. I stood on the platform until the driver of the next bus honked at me to get out of the way.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

Infidelity Out of Spite

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/infidelity-out-of-spite/

Down the switchbacks from Banj brdo it was Marina who drove, because she was the only one of the four who had drunk nothing that evening. The colonel's SUV slid on every curve, and she gave it gas instead of braking and laughed whenever Savka shrieked from the back seat. Colonel Vladimir Stanivuk slept beside Savka with his cap over his eyes, like a man who had survived worse drivers in his life. In the passenger seat, his elbow on the window, sat Dr. Vladimir Grahovac, saying that if she kept this up he would see all four of them at his clinic, only from the other side of the bed.

In Banja Luka people called them Big Vlado and Little Vlado. The big one was fifty-four, with a gray mustache and the rank of colonel, and he had been a friend of Marina's late father. The little one was thirty-three, with a specialization in internal medicine and a smile that, as Savka, the colonel's cousin, claimed, had cured more nurses than patients. Marina had been married to Big Vlado for exactly one month. She had grown up with Little Vlado in the same building on Gospodska Street, but that was not talked about now.

When she was nineteen and he came back from his specialist training in Belgrade, she fell in love with him the way people fall in love with someone they have known all their lives: all at once and with no way back. She wrote him messages she never sent, and one that she did. He answered with a smiley face and invited her for coffee, to which he brought an anesthesiologist. Four years later, when the colonel asked her at a family slava whether she would marry an old soldier, Marina said she would. She said it loudly enough for Little Vlado, who was sitting two seats away, to hear.

At the last curve, where the city opened out below them with the river like a black ribbon, Marina pulled onto the shoulder and stopped. She said

she had to rest her eyes. Savka lit a cigarette and got out. The colonel was snoring. "Shall I tell you why I got married?" Marina asked quietly, without looking at the doctor. "Out of spite. To spite you." Little Vlado laughed, that laugh of his that always came before thought. "You don't get married out of spite, Marina," he said. "Out of spite you buy an expensive handbag, and the next day you take it back to the store."

The house in Starčevica was big, warm, and full of the colonel's things: fishing trophies from the Vrbas, framed diplomas, and photographs from barracks all over Bosnia. The colonel was as careful with Marina as with an expensive watch. In the mornings he brought her coffee in bed, in the evenings he fell asleep in front of the news on television, and in between he was at headquarters. He never asked her anything. In one month Marina had moved every chair and every vase in the house, just to see if anyone would notice. Only Savka noticed.

The next day she went with Savka to a convent in the hills above the Vrbas, where her friend from high school, Darinka, had been living for two years, now with another name and a black habit. Darinka met them in the courtyard, as calm as water in a barrel. She offered them thyme tea and asked nothing. During the evening service Marina stood by the wall, watched the candle flames, and cried, without knowing why. When they were leaving, Darinka only straightened her scarf. Marina envied her that peace so much that she was ashamed.

Little Vlado began coming to Starčevica more often. The colonel was fond of him, played chess with him, and called him son-in-law, though he was nothing of the kind. At the end of January the colonel went to Sarajevo for a week, to a conference at headquarters. On the second evening Little Vlado came with a bottle of wine and a story about a patient who insisted he was healthy because his grandmother had told him so. Marina was not listening. She stood in front of him in the middle of the living room and said that for four years she had waited for him to look at her as a woman and not as the neighbor girl from the fifth floor. He stopped talking. He kissed her, at first as if he were joking, and then not. The living room

door closed behind them.

That week Marina was happy in a way that seemed suspicious even to her. She bought new curtains. She sang while she cooked. She made plans, the way people make them who have never planned anything: a divorce, a small apartment in Borik, the seaside in June. Little Vlado came every evening after his shift, tired and witty, and to all her plans he said "we'll see," in the tone in which he told patients they would get better. She took it as a yes. Savka, who lived in the little house at the far end of the yard, would light a cigarette on her doorstep every time his car turned into the street.

The colonel came back on Sunday, with a box of pastries from Sarajevo and a story about generals who could not park. Little Vlado came to lunch, ate two plates of sarma, and praised the colonel for his chess and Marina for her sarma, in the same voice. The following week he did not get in touch for three days. When she sent him a message, he replied that he had a lot of work and added a smiley face. On the fourth day, through the window of a café on Gospodska, Marina saw him laughing with a young doctor in a green coat, with that same laugh that came before thought.

In the evening she asked him to come over, because the colonel was at a celebration at the officers' club. He came. He was kind, tender, and distracted, like a doctor visiting a patient he cannot help and cannot stop visiting either. When she asked him what they were to each other now, he shrugged. "Marina, you're a married woman, and I am who I am," he said. "What did you think? That we'd run off to Vienna and open a practice? It was lovely. Don't spoil it now." He kissed her on the forehead, the way you kiss a child before bed, and left before the colonel came home.

In the morning Savka came in without knocking, sat on the edge of the bed, and lit a cigarette, even though nobody in that house smoked. She said Little Vlado had a heart like a waiting room: everyone goes in,

nobody stays. She said it had been the same with the sister of one of his colleagues, and with a violin teacher, and with the wife of a lawyer, who to this day believes she was the only one. "None of this is your fault," she said, and flicked her ash into Marina's coffee cup. "You were just the next one."

That day Marina went to the convent alone. Wet snow was falling and the road along the Vrbas was empty. Darinka was clearing snow from the path in front of the church and did not stop when she saw her. Marina wanted to tell her everything. She sat down on a bench, watched Darinka's hands in their wool gloves, and said nothing. Darinka said the evening service was at five. Marina stayed until five, stood by the same wall, and this time she did not cry. When she came out, she was colder than she had ever been.

Little Vlado kept coming. The colonel would not let him go without a game of chess, nor Savka without a round of rummy. They sat in the living room, under the chandelier Marina had chosen in the first week of her marriage, and laughed, and Marina brought coffee and pastries and sat down by the window. When he arrived, Little Vlado would kiss her hand, the same as Savka's, and ask how she was, in the tone in which you ask a patient in the next bed. The colonel would laugh loudly and say it was nice to have both Vladimirs in the house, the big one and the little one, so that his young wife would not get bored.

That evening Little Vlado won game after game and, as always, said it was luck. The colonel demanded a rematch. Savka smoked in the doorway to the terrace. Marina sat by the window watching the snow fall into the yard, on the colonel's SUV and on the doctor's car parked behind it, and silently counted how many evenings were left until spring. She had not got halfway when the colonel shouted for her to bring his glasses, because the little one had come up with something again. She got up and brought them.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

A Sonata on the Night Train

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-sonata-on-the-night-train/

The train for Ploče left Sarajevo twenty minutes late, at half past nine in the evening, and there were five of us in the compartment. An older woman with a bag of mandarins, on her way to her daughter in Ploče. A young couple from Konjic, she a lawyer, he something at a bank, engaged since spring. A gray-haired man in a dark coat, neatly shaven, who had been looking at his reflection in the glass since the station. And me, with a laptop I never opened. Near Hadžići the woman with the mandarins started talking about how people used to know better: you marry, you put up with it, and in the end you come to love each other. The lawyer said that a marriage without love was a lie and that divorce was at least honest.

That was when the man by the window turned around for the first time. "And how long does that love last, miss?" he asked calmly. "A year? A week? Until the first electric bill?" The lawyer said love lasts as long as people take care of it. He laughed, without malice, as if he had heard a good joke in the wrong place. "People do not take care of love," he said. "People take care of the fear that someone will take it from them. I tended that fear for twenty years, like a garden." Nobody said another word until Konjic. The young couple got off there, she without saying goodbye, and the woman with the mandarins fell asleep near Jablanica, the bag on her lap.

Only the two of us were left awake. The train was descending through the canyon, the Neretva below was black and here and there white with moonlight, and he poured me coffee from his thermos into its cap, as if we knew each other. "I am sorry about that," he said. "It is not her fault she is young. I am Miodrag. If you like, I will tell you why I do this. Every year, on the same night in October, I get on this train, ride to Ploče, and come back on the first morning train. That night I cannot be in the

apartment." I said I would like to hear it. I think he would have told me even if I had not.

"I got married at twenty-nine," he began. "Her name is Iris. She taught piano at the music school, and when I first heard her play, at some recital I had gone to because of a cousin, I thought: I want that. Not her, that. I wanted it to be mine. That is how I married, as if I were buying something. The first year we quarreled about everything, about salt, about her mother, about who had turned off the light last, then we made up, then started all over again. Two children were born. I worked as an engineer on construction sites, earned good money, and was jealous. Of the piano tuner. Of the fathers of her students. Of the neighbor who once helped her carry in the shopping bags."

"When the children grew up, she went back to the piano. Seriously, not just with students. Then Krešimir came back from Vienna, a violinist, her classmate from the academy, and suggested they form a duo. Rehearsals were on Wednesdays, at our place, because the piano was at our place. They were preparing Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata for a concert in November. Do you know it?" I did not. He took out his phone and, quietly, so as not to wake the woman with the mandarins, played the first bars, and in the dark compartment the violin sounded like someone looking for something they had lost. Then he stopped the recording. "Enough," he said. "The rest is too fast."

"On Wednesdays I sat in the armchair and watched. That is the worst thing a husband can do. I watched how they looked at each other before every entrance, how she nodded, how he breathed together with her, and I could not stand that there was something between them that I did not understand. That music makes you feel something you did not choose yourself. That is what I thought back then: that the two of them were feeling something together that I had not allowed. Musicians have to look at each other, she told me once, or they drift apart. To me it sounded like a confession. I welcomed Krešimir with a smile, offered him rakija, asked him about Vienna, and at night I lay awake counting how many times she

had nodded to him, as if I were keeping minutes."

"Once I told her I did not like the way he looked at her. She closed the lid of the piano and said: fine, I will stop, I will tell him tomorrow. That is where I made my biggest mistake. I would not let her stop. I said I was not some primitive, that I did not want to be the husband whose wife gives up playing because of him, and the next Wednesday I invited them both to dinner myself. I wanted them both to see how generous I was. But really I wanted to watch them up close, at the same table, and wait for them to slip. The children felt it. On Wednesdays our son went over to a friend's, and our daughter shut the door of her room and played her own music loud, so she would not hear ours."

"In October I had to go to Banja Luka for three days. I came back after two, at night, without calling. I told myself I wanted to surprise her. I knew I was lying. From the street I saw the light on in the kitchen. There was no music, and it was that silence that finished me. I went in and found them at the kitchen table, after rehearsal, with a plate of cheese, a bottle of wine, and sheet music on the chairs. They were laughing at something. Iris had her hair down. To this day I do not know why that, of all things, was the worst."

"I do not remember everything I said. I remember that I shouted, and that I threw Krešimir's violin case out onto the stairwell, and that it echoed down every floor. I remember that my daughter came out of her room in her pajamas, fourteen years old, and heard words a father should not say even in his sleep. Krešimir said nothing. He picked up his case and left. Iris stood by the sink and looked at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. All she said was that now, she supposed, I was satisfied. That same night she took the children to her sister's in Grbavica. Within a year we were divorced."

"Was there something between them?" I asked, because it seemed to me that he was waiting for the question. He looked out the window for a long time, past which the lights of Mostar were sliding by. "She swore there

was not. She swore on the children. Krešimir sent me a letter, a real letter, on paper, and wrote the same thing. They canceled the November concert. She does not play with anyone anymore, only with her students. The piano stayed with me, she never came to take it. I cannot play. Every Saturday I dust it." He said it like a man who was used to not being believed, or who no longer believed himself. I could not tell which of the two it was.

After Čapljina we did not talk anymore. At the border they checked our passports, the woman with the mandarins woke up, asked where we were, and fell asleep again. Miodrag closed his thermos, wiped the cap with a tissue, and put it back in his bag. Through the window we could already see the Neretva delta, flat and gray, with canals reflecting the pylons of the power lines. We reached Ploče at ten past two.

He got off first. On the platform he did not turn around, only turned up the collar of his coat and set off toward the port, where cranes stood under floodlights. He walked slowly and hummed something, off-key, and only when he disappeared behind the first warehouse did I realize what it was: the opening of that sonata, those few bars he had played for me in the canyon, before it got too fast.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

A Marriage Betrayal in Fifty Slides

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-marriage-betrayal-in-fifty-slides/

Fifty slides, one for every year: that was how I pictured it in March, and that was how I made it. Veselin was turning fifty on the twelfth of October, a Saturday, and for that Saturday I booked the hall at a restaurant on Freedom Square, for eighty people, with prosciutto, cheese cured in a skin sack, and lamb baked under the sač. I put the slideshow together at night, at the kitchen table, on the old laptop Milijana left behind when she went off to study in Belgrade. The first forty-four slides were what everyone expects at a party like that. A baby in a cradle on Ljubomir. A first bicycle on Trg slobode, under the plane trees. The army. Our wedding. Milijana's christening. The opening of the Gluhović Driving School, with a ribbon I bought and I cut, because that morning he had quarreled with the contractor. The last six slides were just for him.

I found out by accident, the way, I suppose, people always find out. Last winter Veselin's phone screen cracked, and he opened his Viber on Milijana's tablet to send the insurance company pictures of a scratched car. Afterward he forgot to log out. The tablet sat on the shelf next to the recipe books, and one evening in March, while I was looking for a recipe for uštipci, it lit up. "Did you tell her the seminar is in Banja Luka? Bring that blue shirt, you look good in it." The message was from Aleksandra, an instructor at his school, a woman of thirty-four who taught student drivers parallel parking on the street by the Arslanagić Bridge. I read the whole conversation. It had been going on for ten months. The seminar in Banja Luka was in Herceg Novi, and in the photo from the promenade Veselin was wearing the blue shirt I had ironed for him.

I said nothing. I have been a bookkeeper for twenty-two years, and I know an account is not closed until all the paperwork is in. I took forty-one screenshots, emailed them to myself, and deleted the trail. I kept ironing his shirts, the blue one too. On Saturdays I went to the

market under the plane trees, bought figs and honey from the same woman from Popovo Polje, and asked her about her grandchildren. When Veselin left for a seminar in Doboj in May, I wished him a safe trip. When he went to a trade fair in Novi Sad in July, I packed him sandwiches. I had never sat behind the wheel, not once in twenty-five years of marriage: the wife of a driving school owner, he used to say, does not need to drive, she gets driven. He told his brother on the phone that I was somehow calmer this year and that it must be my age.

The plan was simple. After the slide with the school opening came number forty-five: "March. Seminar in Banja Luka." Under the title, the photo from the promenade in Herceg Novi, on a bench under a palm tree. Then the blue shirt, then the message where he calls me "her," then the hotel bill, then their joint plan for Novi Sad. On the fiftieth slide, over the cake I had ordered from the pastry shop in the Old Town, it would say: "Happy birthday, Vesko. Aleksandra has a present for you. I have packed you a suitcase." I invited Aleksandra myself. I wrote her name in my own hand on the place card for table seven, with the other instructors. That night, for the first time since March, I slept until morning.

I had to get the childhood photos from my mother-in-law. Cvijeta lives alone on Ljubomir, in a house with a stone wall around the yard. She is seventy-eight and has eyes that see more than a person would like. She brought out a shoebox full of pictures, made coffee, and sat down next to me. She had a story for each one: here Vesko is three and scared of a goat, here he fell out of a cherry tree and did not cry so his father would not see. Then she pulled one out and laid it face down on the table. "Don't put this one in." I turned it over. It was her late husband Vidoje, young, at some village dance, and beside him a woman in a light-colored dress who was not Cvijeta.

"Everybody knew," she said, and sipped her coffee. "I found out last, and I knew longest. At a wedding near Bileća, in front of half the village, I poured red wine all over that dress of hers. I thought he would be ashamed. Vidoje died twenty years ago, and nobody remembers her

anymore. But to this day, when I walk into the shop, somebody points: there goes that Cvijeta who poured the wine." She looked at me for a long time over her cup. She did not mention Aleksandra. She only said: "Vesko is his father's son, Radmila. You do as you like. Just make sure you don't end up named after his sin." When I left, she put a jar of ajvar in my bag, and the picture of Vesko scared of the goat.

The night before the party I sat in the kitchen until three. I did not delete the first slideshow. I copied it onto a small USB stick, wrapped it in gold paper, and tied it with a red ribbon, like a present. Then I made a second one. The first forty-four slides stayed the same. I put the last six together slowly, the way you put together a year-end account, and at the end I played the whole thing from the beginning, without sound, to see how it looked. Veselin was asleep in the room across the hall, snoring as always, peacefully, like a man nobody had ever taken the steering wheel from.

Saturday was warm, the way it can be in Trebinje in October, when the plane trees are already dropping leaves all over the square and people still sit outside in shirtsleeves. Everyone came: Veselin's brother from Herceg Novi, the godparents, the neighbors, people from the municipality, the instructors at table seven, and Aleksandra in a green dress, laughing a little louder than she should have. A neighbor from Ljubomir drove Cvijeta in, and she sat in the corner with her bag on her lap. Milijana arrived by bus from Belgrade and hugged her father for a long time, like a little girl. Veselin gave a speech. He thanked the godparents, his brother, his instructors, "who are like family to me," and finally "my Rada, who puts up with everything." Everyone laughed. Milovan the waiter lowered the screen and handed me the remote.

I stood up, took the microphone, and said: "Fifty years, fifty pictures." The lights dimmed. The first pictures went the way I knew they would. The goat drew laughter, the army photo applause, the wedding sighs from the tables where the women sat. I did not watch the screen. I watched table seven. Aleksandra was drinking wine and typing something under the tablecloth, and every time, the phone buzzed in

Veselin's pocket. At the slide with the school opening someone shouted "Long live the boss!" and the instructors slapped their palms on the table. Then came number forty-five.

On a white background, in black letters, it said: "March. Veselin at a seminar in Banja Luka." Below was a photo of me in the office of a driving school in Bileća, holding my enrollment slip. The hall went quiet, then laughed. Next: "May. Veselin at a seminar in Doboj." Me at the wheel of a red car with a school sign on the roof, and beside me my instructor from Bileća, a gentleman of sixty, with his hand on the hand brake. Next: "July. Veselin at a trade fair in Novi Sad." Me with my driver's license held up to my chin, like a medal. The women applauded. Someone called out: "Look at her, sneaking off to the competition!" The instructors laughed loudest. All but one.

Number forty-eight: "August. Veselin on a business trip." Milijana and me in Herceg Novi, on the promenade, on a bench under a palm tree, with two ice creams. The guests saw the sea and a mother with her daughter. Veselin saw the bench. Number forty-nine: "September. Veselin at a seminar." A small gray used car, registered in my name. The fiftieth slide was the cake from the pastry shop in the Old Town, and over it a single sentence: "Happy birthday, Vesko. From Monday on, I drive alone." The hall applauded. They thought I meant the license. His brother whistled through his fingers. At table seven Aleksandra got up and went toward the restrooms, and Veselin sat with a glass in his hand and looked at me the way he had not looked at me in twenty-five years, like someone he had yet to meet.

When the lights came up, Cvijeta was the first to clap, from her corner, slowly, with her bag on her lap. She said nothing, only nodded toward me, the way people on Ljubomir greet each other over a fence. Milijana hugged me and whispered, "Mom, you're crazy," and laughed until she cried. She did not know anything yet. I told her that same night, in the car.

After midnight, when the guests had gone and Milovan was collecting the glasses, I gave Veselin the little gold package with the red ribbon. "This is the other one," I said. "Also fifty slides. Watch it alone, at home. I don't sleep there anymore." He turned the package over in his hands and asked how long I had known. I said: since the uštipci. He did not understand, and I did not explain. He asked who else knew. "Nobody, for now," I said. "You choose who you show it to." I had been carrying the key to the studio apartment by the Trebišnjica in my jacket pocket since August.

My gray car was waiting in the lot behind the restaurant. Milijana sat down beside me, buckled her seat belt, and looked at me as if she were seeing her mother behind the wheel for the first time, which was the truth. I drove slowly along the river, under the plane trees, to a building with balconies facing the water. In front of the entrance there was one single free space, between a van and a dumpster. Parallel parking had never been my thing. Milijana counted the attempts out loud. I made it on the third, and nobody honked at us.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

The First Sunday of the Month

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-first-sunday-of-the-month/

I answered the ad for the pay and for the mountain. It said: tutor of German and English wanted for an eleven-year-old girl, housing provided, a house above Travnik. I was twenty-seven, with a degree in German from Sarajevo, two years of substitute teaching in schools around the Lašva valley, and a room at my mother's in Vitez where you could not even start crying without being heard. The house stood on a bend of the road up to Vlašić, built of stone, three stories high, with a view of the fortress. In November the housekeeper Bahra welcomed me there with a pie and a question about whether I could drive in snow.

The girl's name was Nika, and she spoke German like a native, because she spent every summer with her grandmother in Graz. She was clever, thin, and so polite that I found it suspicious. In the first week she told me her mom was in Graz, the way children say someone is at work, and changed the subject. In the kitchen Bahra told me not to ask about it. I concluded what any woman from Vitez would have concluded: a divorce, an ugly one, and a wife who had gone back to her own people. It never occurred to me to ask what kind of leaving it was.

I met her father only in the third week, on the road, in the dark. I was walking back from town when a black SUV skidded on an icy bend and slid with its rear wheels into the ditch. The driver got out swearing, limping on one leg, and told me to keep going. I did not keep going. I held the flashlight for him while he pushed branches under the wheel, and I pushed when he told me to push. Only at the gate did he realize who I was. "You are that teacher," he said. "I thought you would be older." "And I thought you would be kinder," I said.

Zvonimir was forty-five, with a furniture factory in Turbe and a habit of saying nothing at dinner. After dinner, though, he began calling me into his study. He asked me what I was reading, what I thought of his

daughter, why I was not married, and he listened to my answers as if he were checking them. He laughed when I snapped back at him. He said everyone in Travnik listened to him, and I was the only one who contradicted him free of charge. On the first Sunday of every month he left before dawn and came back late, without a word, and on those evenings he called no one in.

On the third floor there was one room that Bahra never opened, even when she dusted the whole house. Once, looking for Nika's dictionary, I found the door unlocked. Inside there was a wardrobe of women's coats, a table with a few books in German, and a white sweater folded on the pillow, as if someone might come for it at any moment. Nika stood behind me and said, quite calmly, that it was her mom's room and that her dad did not like anyone being in it. I closed the door. That evening Zvonimir did not call me into his study, and I thought it was because of me.

In the spring, the daughter of a Sarajevo investor started coming on Saturdays, a tall woman in a white coat who called Nika little one and me miss. In Travnik people said it was a settled matter. I sat with Nika over irregular verbs and taught myself that it was none of my business. It did not work. One Saturday, for the first time since I had arrived, I went to my room early and locked the door, even though no one tried to come in.

In June, one evening after a storm, he found me in the garden under the old walnut tree. He said the investor's daughter would not be coming anymore, and that it was the easiest thing he had ever told anyone. Then he said he wanted me. Not for Nika, but for himself. I asked him about his marriage, because I had to ask. He looked at the walnut tree while he answered. "My marriage ended nine years ago, one night on the highway near Zenica," he said. "I have been alone since then." I thought he was talking about a quarrel and a divorce. I said yes. That night, in a second storm, lightning struck the walnut tree and split it in two. In the morning Bahra stood under it for a long time and said nothing.

We set the wedding for September, at the municipal office, with no music and two witnesses. In August a car with Austrian plates stopped outside the gate. A tall, fair-haired man got out and talked with Zvonimir in German for twenty minutes over the fence, quietly and angrily. I stood at the window and made out only one word: Schwester, sister. Afterward Zvonimir told me it was a business partner from Graz whose delivery was late. I believed him, because I wanted to.

In the hall of the municipal office the registrar read out our names, and just as she asked Zvonimir whether he consented, the door opened. The fair-haired man came in, and with him a lawyer from Zenica with a folder under his arm. The lawyer apologized to the registrar very politely and said the groom was already married. He had married Brigita Haas in Graz sixteen years ago, that marriage had never been registered in Bosnia, and that was why the papers here said he was single. Brigita was living in a care home in Graz. The fair-haired man said something in German, looking at me, not at him. I understood him. "My sister is alive."

Zvonimir denied nothing. He sat down on the witnesses' chair, took out his phone and showed me a photograph: a woman in a white sweater, in an armchair by a window, looking somewhere past the camera. That night near Zenica she had been driving. Since then she recognized no one, neither him nor Nika. On the first Sunday of every month he drove six hours to Graz, sat beside her for two hours and drove six hours back. He had not asked for a divorce because he could not sign a paper saying he was leaving a woman who did not even know her own name. He had not told me, he explained, because he wanted at least one life that was not a care home corridor.

That night he begged me to stay. Without papers, without the municipal office, however I wanted it. No one in Travnik had to know, he said, and if they had to, let them know. We stood in the kitchen, Bahra had gone home, Nika was asleep. I told him I loved him, and that this was exactly why I could not be the second wife of a man who drove six hours to the first one every month. He said that was cruel. I said I knew. He did not

try to stop me. Later, that was the hardest thing to forgive him.

At five in the morning I walked down to the bus station with the same suitcase I had come with. I left the ring on the kitchen table, under Bahra's cup, because she was always the first to arrive. The first bus to Sarajevo left at ten past six. As it was leaving town I turned around and saw that in the house up on the bend the only light on was in the study.

Now I teach German at a high school in Sarajevo. Nika writes to me, in German, because she says she makes fewer mistakes that way. Last winter she sent me a photograph from Graz: she and her father sitting on either side of a woman in a white sweater, who is looking somewhere past the camera. On the back it said only Mama, Papa und ich. I keep it in a drawer, face down, and I take it out on the first Sunday of every month, around noon, when I know he is just driving past Maribor.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

The Note Under the Wiper

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-note-under-the-wiper/

The note was written in large block capitals, as if a child had written it, or someone afraid their handwriting would be recognized. Ramo found it on Saturday morning under the wiper of his old Golf, in front of the weekend house above Šabići, along with pine needles and dew. "I have loved you for a long time," it said. "You do not know it, and it is better that way. I watch you every Saturday while you chop wood. Tonight at ten, come to the old gazebo by the fountain. If you do not come, I will know I was foolish, and I will never trouble you again."

Ramo was fifty-four, with a bald head he smeared with sunscreen in summer and a belly his wife Bisera called government-issue. He worked at the tax administration in Sarajevo, and no one had ever written him anything but a reminder notice. He read the note three times, folded it in four and put it in his wallet, behind his ID card. That morning he chopped wood without a shirt, even though at seven o'clock on Bjelašnica it was as cold as October.

All day he guessed who it might be. Jasminka, the neighbor from the next weekend house, a widow who washed her car every morning and waved to him when he passed? The waitress at the restaurant in Babin Do, who last Saturday had brought him two sugar cubes with his coffee instead of one? Or the young woman who sold cheese at the turnoff for Lukomir and always called him "sir" in a tone she did not use with others? In each of them he found something that, if you thought about it properly, could mean love.

By noon he had shaved. He took out of the wardrobe the sweater Bisera had bought him for their thirtieth anniversary, which he had never worn because it was for special occasions. He asked her whether it suited him. Since morning Bisera had been carrying buckets, rags and a bottle of linseed oil around the house, and she told him it suited him and to get out

of the doorway. For the third Saturday in a row she was trying to oil the old oak floor Ramo's father had laid. Every time, someone walked across it in shoes, Ramo or his brother, and she had to start all over again.

The brother's name was Reuf. In winter he worked as a ski instructor in Babin Do, in summer he did nothing at all and behaved as if the house were his. He was forty-one, with one divorce and a head of hair he was prouder of than anything. That afternoon Reuf was acting strange too. He brushed his teeth twice, asked Bisera for the hair dryer, and asked Ramo, quite casually, whether he still had that cologne the kids had brought him from Vienna. Ramo said it had been used up long ago, and went to shave once more.

At dinner both of them kept quiet and watched the clock above the stove. Bisera brought out a potato pie and said that after dinner she did not want to see anyone in the house for at least two hours, because she was oiling the floor. Ramo said he was going out for a little walk anyway, for his digestion. Reuf said he would go out too, to look at the stars, because up here you could see them best. "You have never looked at a star in your life," said Ramo. "And you have never taken a walk for your digestion," said Reuf. Bisera said it was all the same to her, as long as they went.

The gazebo by the fountain was old and wooden, with a bench into which the children from the surrounding weekend houses had carved their initials for years. Ramo arrived ten minutes before ten, out of breath from the climb, in his special-occasion sweater and a cloud of that same cologne. Someone was already sitting on the bench in the dark. Ramo stopped, straightened his sweater and cleared his throat the way a man does when he does not want to frighten anyone. The person on the bench switched on a phone flashlight, and Ramo saw his brother's hair.

"What are you doing here?" Ramo asked. "Looking at the stars." "Through the roof?" Reuf said he had been here first and it would only be fair for Ramo to leave. Ramo said he was older and married, and that as such the gazebo belonged to him by the nature of things. "Exactly because

you are married," said Reuf, "you should be at home." "At home the floor is being oiled." They sat down at opposite ends of the bench and waited for the other to leave. Nobody left.

Half an hour went by. The cold came down from the mountain, and the mosquitoes, which should not have existed at that altitude, did not know it. Reuf said Ramo was sitting there purely out of spite. Ramo said he was waiting for someone important. "So am I," said Reuf. "Someone who has loved me for a long time." Ramo froze. Slowly he took out his wallet, pulled the folded paper from behind his ID card and handed it to his brother. Reuf took his own out of his jacket pocket.

By the light of the phone they compared them. The same letters, the same words, the same gazebo, the same hour. Only one line was different: Ramo's said she watched him chop wood, and Reuf's that she watched him drink coffee on the terrace and comb his hair. For a long time they said nothing. Then Reuf said it had to be Jasminka, because she was a widow and had time. Ramo said Jasminka only ever wrote Viber messages, and those without a single comma. They argued a little longer about which of the two of them she had noticed first, and then a fine mountain rain began, and each of them set off home along his own side of the road.

The house was warm and smelled of oil. The floor shone as it had not since their father laid it. Bisera was sitting on the stairs to the attic, in her socks, with a cup of tea, and she did not let them past the doormat. "Don't step on it," she said. "It is drying until midnight." Ramo stood in the doorway in his wet sweater. Reuf stood behind him. Bisera looked at the two of them, then at the sweater, then at Reuf's hair, and started laughing so hard she had to set her cup down on the step.

"I wrote them," she said when she caught her breath. "Three Saturdays in a row I have told you to get out of the house, and ten minutes later you are back, walking across the floor like it is a market square. I needed something that would keep you outside for two hours. Now I know what

it is." Ramo said it had been ugly of her. Bisera said what was ugly was watching him shave for the second time. Reuf asked why she had written to him that he combed his hair. "Because you comb your hair," she said.

That night the brothers slept on the terrace, in sleeping bags, because nobody was allowed to step on the floor until morning. Ramo could not fall asleep for a long time. At around one in the morning he took out his wallet, pulled the note from behind his ID card, and read it once more by the light of his phone. Then he put it back in the same place. In the morning a new piece of paper was waiting for him under the wiper of the Golf, in the same large letters: NEXT SATURDAY, WINDOWS. COME AT TEN.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Spare Key from Grbavica

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-spare-key-from-grbavica/

There are requests you should not hear out to the end. I heard Nevzad's out, one March evening in the Two Lions café on the Obala, while the Miljacka carried dirty snow down from Trebević. We had known each other since second grade in Hrasno. We failed our first driving test together, we got our first jobs together, he as a structural engineer in a design office, I as a translator at an agency in Marijin Dvor. At his wedding to Ilvana, two years earlier, I had been his best man. Ilvana worked at a pharmacy in Grbavica, laughed quietly, and read books with a pencil in her hand. Nevzad used to say she was the only woman who had never asked him how much he earned.

That evening he turned his glass around and said he was happy, and that this was exactly the problem. "I load bridges until I see where they give way," he said. "Only then do I know they are sound. Ilvana is faithful because nobody has ever seriously tried to win her. That is not faithfulness, that is a lack of opportunity." He wanted me to be that opportunity. Three months, he said, a real courtship, messages, flowers, everything. If she resisted, he would sleep peacefully for the rest of his life. If she did not, better to know now than in twenty years. I laughed, thinking he was joking. He was not joking.

"A woman is not a bridge, Nevzad," I said. "A bridge does not hold it against you that you loaded it." I talked for a long time and, as it seemed to me then, cleverly: that you do not test what you have by breaking it, that I would lose both her and him, and he would lose both of us. He listened patiently, the way he listens to investors who do not understand the calculations. Then he said that if I would not do it, he would ask Izudin from the office, who the whole firm knew never let a single waitress go by. That was when I agreed. I told myself I was agreeing only to protect her, and that I would fake all of it.

For the first weeks I was an honest liar. Nevzad invented reasons to leave: a meeting in Doboj, an inspection on a bridge over the Bosna. Before the first time, he gave me the spare key to the apartment, on a key ring with a little plastic City Hall, "in case Ilvana needs anything." I would come over, Ilvana would make coffee, and we talked about her customers who wanted antibiotics for every sneeze and about my translations of dishwasher manuals. Afterward I reported to Nevzad that I had told her she was beautiful, that I had sent her a poem, that she had frowned and changed the subject. He was proud of her and, it seems to me, a little disappointed.

One Sunday he invited me to lunch and, while Ilvana was in the kitchen, showed me her phone. He knew her passcode. There was not a single poem in our messages. There were three recipes for apple pie and one picture of a cat on the neighbors' balcony. "You lied to me," he said, and he was not angry but hurt, which was worse. "I thought you were my friend." That evening I promised him I would do it properly. The next Monday he left for three weeks in Doboj, on a real inspection, and I stayed in Sarajevo with the key in my pocket.

I do not know exactly when I stopped pretending. Maybe the day we walked down the Velika aleja to Vrelo Bosne because Ilvana wanted to see the swans, and came back by tram, soaked, laughing at something I could not repeat today. Maybe the night I wrote to her about the way she held a coffee cup with two fingers, as if it were heavy for her. She answered only the next day, with one word: "Don't." I kept writing to her. I wrote because I did not know what else to do with everything I had learned about her.

Later I found out that she had called Nevzad that week. She told him his best man was sending her messages he should not be sending and asked him to come home. Nevzad answered that she was exaggerating, that Vlatko was like a brother, that she should stay calm and he would be back in two weeks. I do not know what she felt when she ended the call. I only know that two days later, on the balcony above the stadium in Grbavica,

she kissed me first, and that the stadium below us was empty and wet with rain. After that we closed the doors behind us, and I stopped counting the lies.

When Nevzad came back, I told him Ilvana was made of stone. That she had refused the flowers, deleted the messages and threatened to tell him everything. He hugged me in the parking lot outside the office and said he would never forget what I had done for him. For the rest of the spring the three of us lived in that contentment. He was happy because he had a faithful wife, and the two of us because he believed it. Ilvana's younger sister Senida, a pharmacy student, was already living with them by then, in the small room next to the bathroom, and on Fridays she went to their parents in Zenica.

One morning in June, around six, I was walking past their building and saw a young man come out of the entrance and pull up his hood. I did not know him. Something turned over in me, stupid and fast: if she could cheat on Nevzad with me, why not on me with someone else. Still angry, I called Nevzad and told him Ilvana had given in. "On Friday, tell her you are going to Doboj," I said. "Stay in Senida's room and listen for yourself." I ended the call, and within five minutes I knew I had done the worst thing of my life.

I went to Ilvana at the pharmacy and told her everything. She looked at me like a man she was seeing for the first time. The young man in the hood was Senida's boyfriend from Kakanj, she said, and he came over when everyone was asleep, because Nevzad would have thrown them both out of the apartment. Then she fell silent, lined up the boxes of medicine on the shelf, and told me what we would do on Friday. She spoke calmly, as if she were reading out dosage instructions. That was when I understood that I had fallen in love with a woman whom even I did not know.

On Friday evening I rang the bell, even though I had the key. Ilvana opened the door and did not let me past the hallway. She said, loudly

enough to be heard through the closed door of the small room, that I had been sending her messages for two months, that it was shameful for a best man to do this to the man who had given him the key to his home, and that she had kept quiet only because she did not want to break a friendship that meant more to Nevzad than anything. Then she took the key out of my hand, stepped out onto the landing and dropped it down the stairwell, between the railings. I heard it clatter three floors below. She slammed the door behind me. Nevzad, she told me later, came out of the room in tears and knelt in front of her in the hallway.

That night he sent me a message: "Thank you, brother. Now I know." For the next few months he was the best husband in Grbavica. He took Ilvana to Jahorina, invited me for ćevapi on Sundays, and raised his glass to the best man who had freed him from doubt. We did not stop. We stopped only in October, when at half past five in the morning Nevzad found the young man from Kakanj in the hallway and threw him out barefoot into the street. Senida, in tears and furious, told her brother-in-law he had better ask his own wife where she spent her Tuesdays. That same night Ilvana packed a bag and came to me in Ciglane.

Nevzad came the next day. He did not shout. He just stood in the doorway in his work jacket with the office logo. He took out of his pocket the key with the plastic City Hall, a little bent. "I found it that night under the stairs," he said. "I wanted to give it back to you for your birthday. As a present." He set it down on the doormat and left. Ilvana stayed with me for eleven days. On the twelfth morning there was a note on the table saying she was going to her mother in Zenica and that I should not look for her. I did not look for her. Neither she nor Nevzad ever contacted me again.

Now I live in Ljubljana and translate manuals for machines that know on their own when to stop. The apartment in Grbavica was sold three years ago, Senida wrote me that in the only holiday card I ever received from anyone in that family. The key is still in the drawer of my desk, under my passport. It opens a door behind which live people I have never seen, and

sometimes, when I cannot sleep, I wonder whether they have changed the lock.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

The Dance in the New Barn

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dance-in-the-new-barn/

The bus from Zagreb reached Bihać at noon, and Sinan took a taxi on to Ripač and got out by the bridge, not by the house. Ilijaz's café stood in the same place, above the Una, with the same plastic chairs and the same accordion hanging above the bar. Ilijaz recognized him only when he spoke. "Twelve years," he said, "and not even a postcard." He made him coffee and sat down across from him. He talked about everything, about the river that carried more plastic every year, about the tourists with their kayaks, about Sinan's sister, who was getting married on Saturday, and about the wedding that would be held in Ćerim's new barn. About Džejla he said nothing. Sinan did not ask either. He knew, of course. His mother had told him in a single sentence, eleven years ago, in the same message in which she told him the cow had calved.

His mother met him at the gate, dry and upright, her hands in her apron. She kissed him once, on the forehead, as she had when he went off to school, and immediately said he had lost weight and that nobody fed him in that Canada of his. Ćerim came out of the barn wiping his hands. He was heavier than Sinan remembered, slower and more serious, and within the first ten minutes he had told him how much the steel for the roof had cost, how much he had received in subsidies and why in the autumn he would get onto the municipal council. Their youngest brother Jasin, who had been eight when Sinan left, was now taller than both of them. He stood to one side and looked at Sinan's shoes, his watch and his jacket as if he were looking at a map of the world.

Džejla came toward evening with a baking pan of pita for the wedding. She had the same hair, black and unruly, and the same laugh, only a little shorter. She set the pan on the table and looked him straight in the eye. "You came to your sister's wedding," she said. "You didn't come to mine." Ćerim laughed, thinking it was a joke, and said Džejla had always had a

sharp tongue, and that Sinan had done well not to come, because it had been snowing then and the road was blocked. Džejla said Ćerim remembered the weather for every day of the last twenty years. "He gets it from the council," she said. "Everything gets written down there." Ćerim nodded, pleased.

The next day Sinan found her on the bank below her father's café, where as a girl she used to throw bread to the trout. She was throwing it now too. She did not turn around when he sat down beside her. "I waited for you for two years," she said. "You wrote to me three times. About the snow, about your pay, and about how polite Canadians are. Not once did you write come." Sinan said that for the first two years in Hamilton he had slept in one room with five bricklayers and had been ashamed to invite her into that. "You should have asked me what I am ashamed of," she said. She had married Ćerim because he asked and because his mother wanted it. They had no children. Ćerim said they would come when the barn was finished, then when the road was finished, then when he got onto the council. "Your mother kept me in the family," she said, "like a field."

The wedding began on Saturday at five. The barn smelled of new concrete and roast lamb, strings of lights hung from the beams, and the tables were lined up where the cows would stand in the autumn. Ilijaz played the accordion with two young men from Cazin, the groom's relatives danced the kolo, and between two courses Ćerim gave a speech about the asphalt road to the school and how much of the credit was his personally. Jasin sat beside Sinan all evening and asked him how much an hour on a roof paid and whether it was true that the snow there came up to the windows. Their mother sat at the head of the table and watched everything. She also watched Džejla, who carried plates, laughed with the guests and did not once look toward Sinan.

Just before midnight Ilijaz began a slow song, and Sinan asked her to dance, in front of everyone, because he could not do it any other way. She danced stiffly, as if with a stranger. "Come with me," he said quietly.

"Tonight. We'll spend two days in Zagreb, and on Monday I have a flight. I'll buy you a ticket too." Džejla laughed, the way a person laughs when something hurts. "You're crazy." "At three o'clock, by the bridge. I'll wait until four." "And if I don't come?" "Then at least I'll know I asked." The song ended. Džejla stepped back, fixed her hair and went to fetch another pan of pita. Their mother watched them from the head of the table.

Sinan left the wedding at two, and nobody stopped him. It was cold on the bridge, mist was rising from the Una and swallowing the lights of the village. He stood leaning on the railing and listened to the accordion drifting from the barn, quieter and quieter. He thought of Hamilton, of the roofs he had walked on for twelve winters, of the lake that froze along the shore in winter, and of how every year he had told himself he would write to her once he had something to offer. At three there was no one. At three twenty he began to think that this was fair, that a twelve-year debt is not repaid in a single evening. Then headlights appeared through the mist. Ilijaz's old Golf stopped in the middle of the bridge. Ilijaz sat at the wheel, and beside him sat Džejla, in a jacket over her party dress, with a single bag on her lap.

"If it were anybody else, I wouldn't drive him," Ilijaz said through the window. "But I waited for her mother on this very bridge, and she came." Sinan opened the back door. Just then Jasin came running out of the mist along the road, without a jacket, out of breath. He had seen Sinan leave the barn and had gone after him, but had lost him in the mist. He asked nothing. He said only: "Take me too." Sinan held him by the shoulders for a long time. "Not now," he said. "Somebody has to stay with Mother. When I get settled, I'll send you a ticket." He took off his own jacket and put it around his brother's shoulders. Jasin stood on the bridge until the Golf's lights disappeared toward the border.

He walked home along the river, in his brother's jacket, which smelled of airports and a foreign city. The lights were still on in the barn. Lamb bones, empty juice bottles and crumpled napkins were left on the tables, and Ćerim was asleep at the head of the table, his head on his arms and

the speech for the next council session in his pocket. He knew nothing. Jasin did not wake him.

Their mother was already in the kitchen, as she was every morning at five, making coffee in the big džezva. On the table stood three cups, hers, Jasin's, and the old one with the faded flower that Sinan had drunk from as a boy. She looked at Jasin, then at the jacket he was wearing, then at the road behind him. She asked nothing. She poured coffee into two of the cups. The third she wiped with the corner of her apron and put back in the cupboard, on the top shelf, behind the jars of fruit preserves.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

Infidelity on the Banks of the Una

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/infidelity-on-the-banks-of-the-una/

"I don't know if you remember me. I still remember the linden in front of the high school and your red jacket, the one you wore even when it was warm." The message arrived on Sunday evening, while Sanida was in the bathroom taking off her makeup after a colleague's wedding. She read it twice, sitting on the edge of the tub with a cotton pad in her hand. The profile picture was old and blurry, taken with her father's camera: a young man of twenty standing knee-deep in the Una and waving to someone out of the frame. Sanida knew who that someone had been. Under the picture it said Almedin Midžić, St. Louis, Missouri. She did not reply. She switched off her phone, lay down beside Mersad, who was already asleep facing the wall, and until three in the morning listened to the trucks rolling toward the border.

She was forty-two and had been married for twenty years. She worked at the pharmacy near the Fethija mosque, where the older women from Ozimice called her doctor, though she had explained to them countless times that she was not one. Mersad was a lineman for the power company. He climbed poles in snow and rain, came home with scratches on his hands that she never knew the cause of, and ate in silence in front of the news. He was a good man. Everyone told her so, her mother, the neighbor women, and she told herself, the way people say of a winter that it could have been worse. In twenty years he had never written her a single letter. When she gave birth to their son, he sent a three-word text to the maternity ward: "Is it okay?" He was asking about the baby.

She replied on Wednesday, from the pharmacy, between two customers. She wrote only: "I remember." The answer came within a minute, as if someone had been waiting with the phone in hand, although in St. Louis it was six in the morning. He wrote at length and beautifully, at greater length than Almedin had ever spoken. He remembered how they had

jumped from the rock into the cold water at the Kostela falls, how she had once patched his jacket with thread of the wrong color, how the rain in Bihać always fell slanting, off Plješevica mountain. He asked whether she still drank her coffee without sugar. He asked whether she was happy. To that she did not reply.

From then on they wrote to each other every evening. Sanida learned to delete the conversation before bed and to leave her phone face down on the table. When Mersad asked from the living room who she was writing to, she said it was Hedija from the pharmacy, who was getting divorced and needed support. Mersad would nod and go back to the game. Never in her life had she lied so easily, and that frightened her more than the messages themselves. Her daughter, who was finishing high school that year, noticed that her mother was wearing earrings to work again and humming while she ironed. "What's with you?" she asked. "Spring," said Sanida, though it was already June.

In the messages she said things she had never told anyone. That in her house people talked only about bills and repairs. That Mersad could fix every outlet on the street but had never asked her what she dreamed about. That sometimes, when he fell asleep, she went out onto the balcony and watched the lights from the bridge break up in the Una, and that it seemed to her then as if someone else had decided her whole life for her. Almedin answered carefully. Once he wrote: "Maybe he doesn't know how to ask. Some people only know how to fix things." Another time: "I can see you standing on that balcony, waiting for the rain to stop." Sanida looked at that sentence for a long time. She did not know where he had gotten the rain.

At the end of July he wrote that he was coming. He had bought a plane ticket, he wrote, for the very days of the regatta, like in the old days, when they had watched from the bridge as the boats came into town. He suggested they meet on Saturday at five, in the garden of the Mlinica café, on the bank below the Captain's Tower. "Sit at the table by the water," he wrote. "I will find you. I always found you." Sanida did not sleep for two

nights. On the third night she wrote "I'll come," was immediately ashamed and deleted it, then wrote it again and sent it. She told Mersad that on Saturday she was covering for a colleague at the night pharmacy until ten. Mersad said that in that case he would cook beans.

On Saturday Bihać was full of people. The regatta boats were coming down the Una, trout was grilling on the bank, music blared from the speakers by the bridge, and children stood waist-deep in the water shouting at the rowers. Sanida put on a blue dress she had bought in Zagreb and never worn, because Mersad had said it was beautiful, which with him meant too expensive. Over the dress she wore her white pharmacy coat, so that in the street she would look as if she were hurrying to work, and she took it off only in the café garden. At the Mlinica she sat at the table by the water, ordered a coffee without sugar and set her phone in front of her. Her hands were cold, although the heat was making the asphalt stick to the soles of her shoes.

At ten past five someone pulled out the chair across from her. It was not Almedin. It was Mersad, in the white shirt she had bought him for their anniversary and that he had worn only once, at their son's high school graduation. Sanida felt the blood drain from her face. She began to talk fast, about her colleague, about the night shift, about how she had only stopped for a coffee. Mersad let her finish. Then he took out his own phone, typed something with his thick, cracked finger, and her phone vibrated on the table. The screen said Almedin Midžić: "I'm here."

For a long time she could not speak. She looked now at the screen, now at his hands. Mersad spoke quietly, as if he were explaining a fault in the wiring. In March, when the wind lifted the roof tiles, he had climbed into the attic and found a shoebox with her name on it behind the chimney. Inside were the diary she had kept until her wedding, two postcards from America and the photograph of the young man in the Una. He had read it all in one night, in the attic, by flashlight. "You didn't write a single page about me," he said. "Not even when we met. About him you wrote a hundred." "I was twenty." "I know. That's why I wanted to find out

whether you would leave when he got in touch."

"And him?" she asked. "Where is he?" Mersad shrugged. The real Almedin Midžić, he said, drove a truck around Missouri, had three children and a wife from Sanski Most, and had no profile on any network. He had found him through his sister, in a photo from someone's birthday: balding, smiling, holding a plate of cake. He had photographed the picture in the Una from her album with his phone. Everything else had been in the diary: the linden, the red jacket, Kostela, the thread of the wrong color. Sanida felt shame, then anger, then shame again. "You read my diary and wrote to me as another man," she said. "And you lied and came," he said. Neither of them went on.

The boats passed below the tower, and people on the bridge applauded the last rowers. Sanida thought about the messages. About the linden and Kostela, which he had copied out. But also about the other things. "And the balcony?" she asked. "The rain? That isn't in the diary." For the first time Mersad looked away. "I saw that," he said. "I don't sleep when you go out. I lie there and wait for you to come back." "And the part about some people only knowing how to fix things?" "That was me too." The waiter brought him a coffee. Mersad dropped two sugar cubes into it, as always, and did not drink it.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" she asked. "Under your own name." He turned the cup on its saucer for a long time. "It was easier to be him," he said at last. "He is twenty and hasn't broken anything. I am forty-six and I keep quiet." He said he would understand if she wanted him to leave. He had already packed a bag and left it at his brother's in Žegar. The beans were on the stove, just in case.

Sanida took his phone. She opened the profile with the young man in the Una and deleted it, slowly, confirming every step, while he watched her. Then she gave the phone back to him. "Write me something," she said. "Now. Under your own name." Mersad typed for a long time, deleting and typing again, carefully, as if he were splicing live wires. Her phone

vibrated. She read the message and did not tell him what it said. She said only that it was shorter than Almedin's. "I'm a shorter man," he said.

He paid for both coffees. They walked home through the crowds around the regatta, each on their own side of the street, like two people who had just met and did not yet know whether they were allowed to approach each other. On the bridge Sanida stopped. Mersad stopped too, on the other side, and waited. She crossed over, between two families with children and a balloon seller, and took his arm. That night they ate the beans cold, after midnight, on the balcony.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

The Guy on the Lock Screen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-guy-on-the-lock-screen/

In Mostar, in July, at two in the afternoon, nobody with any sense walks down Onešćukova Street. Klaudija is twenty-six, works at a travel agency and knows by heart how many stone steps lead up to the Old Bridge, but today she is counting nothing. She walks, because she has just read a message from Leon in Munich: "I can't come this summer, don't be mad." At a hundred degrees and with that sentence in her head, in front of Smajo's copper souvenir shop by the Crooked Bridge, the world spins around her and she falls straight into Smajo's arms. Smajo, sixty-two, with a mustache and two spinal operations, has not caught anything since eighty-seven. This time he catches.

He carries her into the shade of the shop, sits her on a little stool and fans her with a big copper plate engraved with the Old Bridge, the one that costs a hundred and twenty marks. He tells her to sit as long as she needs, and it is the first sentence he has ever spoken in the shop that was not about a price. In two minutes Klaudija comes to, apologizes, says she lives nearby and leaves, without noticing that her phone has slipped out into a basket of embroidered purses. Upstairs, at the window of the apartment above the shop, Hidajeta sees only this: her husband, a young woman, his arms, and a plate swinging back and forth. Hidajeta has seen enough.

She comes down slowly, to gather evidence, but finds only a phone in the basket. The screen lights up. On it is a young man, tanned, with an oar over his shoulder and the kind of smile you see in ice cream ads. Hidajeta has had a hard day and looks at him longer than she should. "Oh, my boy," she sighs, "if only I were twenty-five." At that moment Smajo comes in with a new bottle of water and sees his wife, phone in hand, sighing over the picture of an unknown young man.

"Who is this?" asks Smajo. "And who was she?" asks Hidajeta. "Who?" "The one you were holding in your arms and fanning with a plate!" "The woman fainted!" "I would faint every day if I knew you would fan me." Smajo snatches the phone from her. "And this one? What is he doing in your hand?" "I found him in the basket!" "In the basket! Thirty-five years of marriage, and a lover in the purse basket!" Hidajeta picks up her bag and says she is going to her sister's in Bijeli Brijeg and does not know when she will be back.

Smajo is left alone with the phone and with his honor. Honor demands that he find this young man and tell him everything to his face. Smajo looks at the picture once more: the young man is broad in the shoulders, and his arms, from rowing, are as thick as Smajo's legs. Smajo looks at his own arms. He concludes that honor can also be defended with words, and from a decent distance, preferably across the river. He sits down on the doorstep and starts working out a speech. The first sentence goes: "Sir, you are a scoundrel." The second: "Sir, you are a shameless scoundrel." The third is so sharp that he says it out loud, to hear how it sounds.

Just then Leon walks across the Crooked Bridge. The message about the summer was a lie: he came on the night bus from Munich to surprise Klaudija, and now he is heading toward her building with a backpack and flowers from a gas station. In front of a shop he sees a man with a mustache waving a phone in a case with a sticker of the Old Bridge and a ladybug. Leon bought that case. And on the screen, when the phone lights up, he sees his own face. "Excuse me," says Leon, "where did you get that phone?"

Smajo lifts his head and sees the young man from the picture, alive and taller than he had thought. "From my wife!" he shouts. "From what wife?" "From my wife, and you're on her screen! Have you no shame!" Leon goes pale. Klaudija's phone, from somebody's wife. Klaudija's messages had been getting shorter and shorter these last months. "Your wife," Leon says quietly, "does she have shoulder-length hair? Blond?"

Smajo, who does not even know what size shoes Hidajeta wears, but does know that she gets her hair dyed at a hairdresser's on Musala every other Saturday, says, "She does! Blond! So what?" Leon sits down at the other end of the doorstep. Eight months in Munich, and Klaudija has married a man who sells plates.

At that moment Klaudija comes back, because at home she realized she did not have her phone. She sees Leon on the doorstep and stops. "You're in Munich!" Leon stands up, as cold as the Neretva in May. "And you're married. Congratulations." Klaudija does not understand a word, but she understands one thing: he said he was not coming, and he came, and he did not let her know. "Who did you come with?" she asks. "Who is she? Is that why you lied?" Leon says she is changing the subject. Klaudija says he is the one changing it. Smajo stands between them with the phone and does not know whom to reproach first.

And then Hidajeta comes back from Bijeli Brijeg, with her sister, because her sister said such things are not to be left for tomorrow. She sees the same young woman in front of the shop and Smajo beside her. "There she is again!" she shouts. Within five minutes four people are shouting by the Crooked Bridge, tourists are filming on their phones, and the waiter from the café terrace across the way brings out chairs for those who arrived late. A tourist from Japan asks him whether this is a show and how much a ticket costs. The waiter says that for now it is free. Smajo has been betrayed by his wife and by the young man in the picture. Hidajeta has been betrayed by her husband and by the girl with the plate. Leon has been betrayed by Klaudija and by the man with the mustache. Klaudija has been betrayed by Leon and by a woman nobody has seen.

Then the phone in Smajo's hand rings. The screen says: "Aunt Marica." Smajo answers and, in his fury, presses the speaker button. "Who is it now?" A woman's voice comes out of the phone, cheerful: "Klaudija, sweetheart, has Leon arrived? He said he wanted to surprise you, and I didn't tell you a thing, did I?" By the Crooked Bridge a silence falls such as nobody there can remember. "That's his mom," says Klaudija. Leon

points at Smajo. "Then who is this?" "The man who fanned me with a plate when I fell." "Fell?" asks Hidajeta. "From the heat," says Klaudija. "And from his message."

Leon first hugs Klaudija, then apologizes to Smajo, then hugs Klaudija again. Smajo hands him back the phone with dignity, as if he were returning a sword, and when he hears that the young man rows for a club in Jablanica, he concludes it is just as well that the speech went unspoken. Then he turns to Hidajeta. "And the picture? Why were you sighing over it?" Hidajeta looks at him as if he had asked what time it was. "I was sighing over you, you fool. Over the one from eighty-seven, who caught me when I slipped at the dance in the community center." Smajo opens his mouth, then shuts it. Her sister says she knew it all along.

By evening the video from the Crooked Bridge had forty thousand views. The next day tourists from three countries stood in front of Smajo's shop asking for the plate from the video. By Saturday Smajo had sold twenty-seven of them, at a hundred and twenty marks apiece, and showed every customer how to fan a woman who has fainted. Hidajeta sat on the little stool and counted the money, and whenever a tourist asked who that woman was, Smajo would say, "The first one I ever caught."

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Inscription on the Inside

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-inscription-on-the-inside/

I drove for Berin Mušanović for eleven years, and in that time I learned two things: to keep quiet in the car and not to ask anything. That is why, on the evening in Vienna when it all began, I sat at the next table with a glass of mineral water and heard everything, and said nothing. Today I think that was my mistake, the first and the smallest.

We were at the Zlatni Klas restaurant in Favoriten, where our builders celebrate when they win a job and when they lose one. That summer everybody was hoping for the same contract: an extension to a hospital for the firm Leitner Bau. At Berin's table sat men from three firms, and next to him Velimir Kesić from Banja Luka, who had a company in Vienna, two cars and an opinion about everything. Around midnight the talk turned to wives who sit at home while their husbands work in Austria for six months at a stretch. Velimir said there was no woman who would wait that long. Everyone laughed except Berin. "Mine waits," he said.

"They all wait," said Velimir, "until somebody comes along who has the time." Berin put down his glass. Velimir proposed a bet: twenty thousand euros of his against five thousand of Berin's that within two months he would bring him proof that Zinka was not what Berin thought she was. Berin held out his hand across the table, and the men from the other two firms were witnesses. I looked into my mineral water. I knew Zinka. She was a licensed pharmacist at a pharmacy on Ferhadija, she spoke softly, and whenever Berin sent me to pick her up, she always brought me a coffee out to the car, because she knew I did not like going in.

Velimir went to Sarajevo the first week. Three times he walked into her pharmacy, bought vitamins and talked about Vienna. Zinka handed him his change and said "goodbye" before he could finish his sentence. When he understood he would get no further across the counter, he looked for another way. The apartment in Vratnik was cleaned on Thursdays by

Fehima, a woman from an agency, while Zinka was at work. Velimir gave her five hundred marks and said he wanted to buy an apartment in the same building, so he would just like to see the layout of the rooms. Fehima decided to believe him. She let him in and went out onto the balcony.

In twenty minutes Velimir photographed the bedroom: the watercolor of the Štrbački buk waterfall above the bed, painted by Zinka's father, the pillow with embroidered initials, the note tucked into the frame of the mirror. To pass the time, Fehima told him how the lady slept with the radio on, always tuned to the same station, because silence weighed on her ever since her husband had gone to Austria. And from a box on the dresser Velimir took an old silver bracelet, which Zinka had inherited from her grandmother, with an inscription on the inside.

Five days before the deadline they sat down again at the Zlatni Klas. Velimir put his phone on the table and slowly swiped through the pictures, as if he were showing a house for sale. Berin recognized the watercolor and went pale. Velimir told him about the radio, about the station, about how she could not fall asleep in silence. Then he took the bracelet out of his pocket and laid it next to Berin's glass. Berin asked nothing. The next day he transferred five thousand euros, and he ordered me to go to Sarajevo, pack Zinka's things, drive her to her mother's in Bihać and call a locksmith. "I will not hear her voice," he said. "Not even on the phone."

Zinka opened the door to me with flour on her hands, because she was rolling out dough for a pita. I told her everything, just as I had heard it. She did not cry. She asked only what exactly Velimir had shown Berin. I listed it: the picture, the radio, the bracelet. She went to the dresser, opened the box and stared for a long time at the empty hollow in the velvet. Then she sat down on the bed and said one word: "Thursday." It took me half the drive to Bihać to understand what she meant.

Near Bosanska Krupa she asked me to stop. "Don't take me to my mother's," she said. "She will cry, and I have no time for crying." She asked whether I had anyone in Vienna. I gave her the address of my sister in Simmering, who at the time cleaned offices, Leitner Bau among them. I told Berin that Zinka was at her mother's and did not want to talk. It was the first time in eleven years that I had lied to him, and it did not sting.

What follows I know from my sister and from Zinka, later. Austria did not recognize her diploma overnight, so through my sister she got a job in the office of Leitner Bau, under her maiden name, which nobody at the firm connected with Berin. Mrs. Gertrud Leitner, a woman of sixty who had inherited the company from her father and trusted no one, gave her the key to the archive within two months. Zinka was precise, was never late and never asked anything she did not need to. Velimir's file was in the archive too.

In November she took the bus to Sarajevo for two days. She found Fehima in Hrasno, in an apartment on the eighth floor. Fehima cried, made coffee and cried again, and then on a sheet torn from a notebook she wrote down what had happened that Thursday and signed it with her full name. From a drawer she took an envelope with five hundred marks, untouched, and pushed it across the table. Zinka took it, even though she did not need the money. She said it was evidence, not money.

She saw the bracelet in December, at a reception Leitner Bau gave for its subcontractors. Velimir's girlfriend was wearing it, a young woman in a green dress, on her left wrist. Velimir did not recognize Zinka: he looked only at people he needed something from. Zinka went up to the girlfriend and told her she had a lovely bracelet. "Velimir brought it for me from Sarajevo," the young woman said, pleased. "He says he won it on a bet." Zinka smiled and went to Mrs. Leitner's office. She talked for half an hour. Mrs. Leitner listened to her without a word and then said, "We sign the hospital contracts in January. Invite them both to dinner."

I drove Berin to that dinner. He had lost weight, he wore the same suit as in June, and he did not say a word in the car. They sat in a restaurant in Vienna's first district, Mrs. Leitner at the head of the table, Velimir with his girlfriend and the bracelet, Berin across from them. Over dessert Mrs. Leitner said she had heard about a famous bet and asked Velimir to tell it. Velimir told it well, with jokes and without names, and looked at Berin. Berin looked at the tablecloth.

That was when Zinka came in from the next room, a folder under her arm. Berin stood up so suddenly that he knocked over his chair. Zinka did not look at him. She asked the young woman to read what was written on the inside of the bracelet. The young woman took it off, turned it toward the light and read aloud: "For Zinka, so she keeps it safe. Nana, 1999." Velimir laughed and said she had given it to him herself. Then Zinka laid Fehima's statement and the envelope in front of Mrs. Leitner. "This is the five hundred marks you gave the cleaning woman to let you into my apartment while I was at work," she said. "She gave it back. And she wrote down why."

Mrs. Leitner read the statement, closed the folder and told Velimir, in German, calmly, that his firm would not be working on the hospital, not now and not later. Velimir walked out without his coat. The young woman set the bracelet down next to Zinka's plate and went after him, though not very fast. Berin tried to say something. Zinka put the bracelet on her wrist and only then looked at him. "Velimir owes you twenty thousand," she said. "You will pay it to me. That is the price of five months in which you never asked me anything."

She did not go back to Vratnik that winter. With that money she paid to have her diploma recognized, and in March she started work at a pharmacy in Favoriten. Every Saturday Berin had me drive him to that pharmacy, and he bought things he did not need: hand cream, bandages, vitamins. In April she came out and sat down beside him on the bench in front of the pharmacy. In May she got into the car. I kept quiet, as I had learned to, and drove slowly.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

The Mistress and the Poppy Seed Rolls

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-mistress-and-the-poppy-seed-rolls/

The little bakery below Gradina opens at five thirty, half an hour before Antea finishes her night shift in radiology at Gradina. The first time she stops by it is by chance, in February, because it is cold, because the bus is late and because from the bakery, on the street that runs down from the hospital toward town, steam pours out onto the sidewalk as if from a bathhouse. Behind the counter stands a woman of about fifty, with glasses on a chain and flour up to her elbows, and sevdah plays quietly on the radio. "What will the doctor have?" the woman asks, as if she has known her for years.

"I'm not a doctor," says Antea. "I only take the scans." Still, the woman hands her a burek, hot, from the first batch, and won't let her pay more than half. "Anyone who looks inside people is a doctor," she says. Her name is Suada. She runs the bakery on her own, with one helper, and gets up at four, every day except Sunday, for twenty years now. On the wall behind her hang the first banknote she ever earned, in a frame, and a calendar from a flour company in Gradačac.

By March it has become a habit. Antea comes in at six, Suada makes her coffee in a džezva behind the counter, and for ten minutes, until the first rush arrives, they talk. About people who buy bread as if they were punishing it. About Suada's knees. About Antea's mother in Brčko, who asks every Sunday when she is going to get married. One morning, tired after a hard night, Antea says what she has told no one. That she has a man. That he is married. That he is fifty-two, that he has beautiful hands and bad jokes and laughs like a boy when something works out for him, that he sells medical equipment to hospitals and says his marriage is over in everything except on paper, because his wife lives only for her business, gets up before dawn and never asks him anything.

Suada does not interrupt her. She washes the džezva for a long time, as if it were the most important job in the world. "And does he come?" she asks at last. He does, says Antea, on Thursdays, after his rounds, and he always brings poppy seed rolls, warm, which he buys somewhere along the way. Suada laughs. "Mine travels too," she says. "He also sells something to hospitals, I never remember what. On Thursdays he's late. He says he was in Doboj." Then she adds, wiping her hands on her apron: "He loves my poppy seed rolls more than he loves me. Every Thursday he takes six and says he's taking them to his colleagues." Antea asks her whether it isn't hard. "It's hard when you wonder," says Suada. "I stopped wondering."

At the time Antea makes no connection. In Tuzla there are many men who sell something to hospitals, and every bakery makes poppy seed rolls. She thinks only that Suada is a good woman and that her husband is a lucky man, whatever he is like. In April she tells her that she is going to ask her man to choose. Suada nods. "If he loves you, he will choose," she says. "And if he doesn't choose, he has chosen."

On the Saturday before Bajram, Suada's helper falls ill, and the line outside the bakery stretches to the corner. Antea, free that weekend, pulls an apron over her head and steps behind the counter, though she does not know the difference between somun and pogača. Suada shows her how to pick up a roll so it doesn't get squashed and how to twist a bag shut in two turns, and praises her in front of the customers like a daughter. They laugh all morning. At nine the back door opens and a man comes in with a folder of invoices under his arm. "Suada, has that flour from Gradačac arrived?" Antea recognizes him by his voice before she raises her head. Sabahudin. Saba, as she calls him when they are alone. "Saba, meet my doctor," says Suada, without stopping cutting the pita. "Antea, this is my husband."

Sabahudin stands in the doorway and does not move. Antea is holding a pair of tongs with a roll in them, and the only thing she can think is that she must not drop the roll. "Nice to meet you," he says, and the hand he

holds out across the counter is cold. "The pleasure is all mine," says Antea. Suada puts six poppy seed rolls into a bag. "For the colleagues," she says, and hands the bag to Antea, because she is closer. Antea passes the bag across the counter to the man with whom, last Thursday, she lay on the couch watching a film. Sabahudin takes the bag and goes out the back door without asking anything about the flour.

Antea stays until noon. She sells bread, takes money, gives change and smiles at people whose faces she does not see. On her break she goes into the little kitchen behind the bakery, rests her forehead against the cold tiles and counts to a hundred, the way she does when she waits for the machine to finish a scan. Suada talks about Bajram, about the baklava that has to be baked for tomorrow, about a daughter-in-law who is never on time. If she has noticed anything, she does not say. At the end she kisses Antea on the cheek and says she saved her day.

The next Thursday Sabahudin rings the intercom at seven. Antea does not let him in. "Take the rolls back to your wife," she tells him through the speaker. "She bakes them at four in the morning." He calls her twice more that evening and once the next day. Then he stops calling, as if that too were something he had long known how to do. That night Antea sleeps badly, and in the morning she feels lighter than she expected.

Antea changes her way to the bus. She takes the upper street, around the park, ten minutes longer. She buys bread at the supermarket, wrapped in plastic, and eats it without appetite. The hardest thing is not Sabahudin. The hardest thing is six in the morning, the džezva behind the counter and the ten minutes in which someone asks her how the night went and waits for the answer.

In May, after one long night, her feet carry her down the old street on their own. The bakery is lit, and steam pours out onto the sidewalk. Suada sees her through the window, taps on the glass and waves her in. Antea goes in. Suada is thinner than in April, and on her left hand there is no wedding ring anymore, only a pale mark on the skin. Without a word

she makes her coffee. They ask each other about their health, about the knees, about the mother in Brčko. Then Suada, wiping her hands on her apron, says: "You know what's funny? For twenty years I've been baking him poppy seed rolls, and he never liked poppy seeds. They always get stuck in his teeth."

Antea looks at her. Suada does not look away. She takes six rolls from the display case, still warm, puts them in a paper bag and pushes it across the counter. "These are not for him," she says. "You like them." Antea takes the bag. Neither of them says anything more. The radio behind the counter plays something old, the first customers come in from the street, and Suada goes to meet them, as she does every morning.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

Tulips Under the Zenica Smog

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/tulips-under-the-zenica-smog/

In Zenica they call me a wizard, but I am only a gardener. For fifty years I have had a nursery in Nemila, by the Bosna, and I sell pepper, tomato and cabbage seedlings to people who still believe something can be grown under the chimneys of the steelworks. I am seventy-one, with bad knees and good hands. My late wife used to say that I talked to plants more than to her, and she was right. For the fact that they named me a wizard, an engineer is to blame, and a woman, and most of all one January.

The engineer's name was Tomislav. He had come back from Stuttgart to work on the heating at the steelworks, and the first time he came to me was in November, after dark, when I was already closing. He did not ask about prices. He asked whether I could, in the middle of January, in Zenica, make a garden that looked like May. I told him I could not, because nobody could. Then he told me why he was asking.

For two years he had been courting Emira, a librarian at the city library, the wife of the physics teacher Musa. He left flowers for her on the counter, waited at the bus stop, wrote her letters that she returned unopened. Emira was a woman who did not laugh without a reason and who put books back on the shelf exactly the way they had stood. She was known for her garden in Mokušnice, for the roses that in summer hung over the fence halfway across the street. One evening, when she had had enough, she told him in front of the library, so that the doorman heard too: "When my garden blooms in January as it does in May, I will be yours. Until then, leave me alone." She thought she had shut the door on him. Tomislav took it as a contract.

"I am not asking her to love me," he told me. "I am only asking her to see that it can be done." He had bought the empty lot across the street from her house, with a collapsed shed and two wild plum trees, and he offered me money for which I would normally work three seasons. I told him he

was mad. He said he knew, and that he would pay half in advance.

We worked from December. We put up a greenhouse as long as a city bus, with double glass, and Tomislav himself installed a pellet boiler in the shed and pipes under the soil, the way a floor is heated in a house. I had kept tulip and hyacinth bulbs in cold storage since October, so they would think winter was over. I cut lilac branches in Nemila and kept them in warm water, as my father had taught me. I brought roses in pots, strawberries, violets, and one old cherry tree in a tub, which I kept under lamps for two weeks and coaxed like a child. On the outside we covered the greenhouse with boards, so no one could see what was growing. One night, just before New Year, the power went out in half of Zenica. Tomislav woke me at two in the morning. Until dawn we fed the boiler with wood from the collapsed shed and covered the beds with blankets from my van, and he, I swear, was whispering something to the cherry tree in German.

The neighborhood talked. Some said Tomislav was building a café, others that he was building a gym. Once Emira stopped by the fence, with a bag from the bakery, and asked me what we were building. I told her I was building a business for my old age. She looked at the boards, then at me, and walked away. I never saw Musa once. People said he was a man who read a lot and went out little.

We took the boards down on the fifteenth of January, at six in the morning. Outside there was the kind of frost that bursts pipes, the smog lay over the town so thick that the steelworks chimneys could not be seen, and the snow on the lot was gray. But inside the greenhouse, under the lamps, it was May. Red and yellow tulips, hyacinths whose scent reached the street, lilac, roses, strawberries with their first white blossoms, and the cherry tree, all in bloom, as if it had not heard what was outside. Tomislav stood in the greenhouse doorway holding his phone. He sent her a single line: "Look out the window." Behind us, in the street, a taxi driver stopped and got out of his car without turning off the engine.

I saw the light come on upstairs. I saw her pull back the curtain. She stood there for a long time. Then she came out, in her bathrobe and slippers, crossed the street over the snow and walked into the greenhouse. She said nothing. She walked between the beds, touched a tulip, as if checking that it was not plastic, and looked at the cherry tree. Tomislav said only: "I have done my part." She nodded, turned and left, leaving slipper prints in the snow.

For the rest of the day she did not appear. Tomislav spent the night in the greenhouse, on a camp bed by the boiler, so the pellets would not run out and the cherry tree would not freeze. I came the next day at seven to top up the pellets. Emira came in a few minutes after me, dressed, in a coat, with a small bag in her hand. She was pale and calm.

"I have come," she told Tomislav. "I said January. It is January." Tomislav got up from the camp bed. For a moment I saw on his face the thing he had built all this for. Then it was gone, and for a long time he only looked at her. He asked whether Musa knew. "He knows," she said. "I told him everything last night. He listened to the end and said that my word is his word too. That he cannot live with a woman who does not keep her promise, and I could not live with having deceived you. He said: go, and I will wait for you. Whatever happens, I will wait." Her voice did not tremble once. Mine did, and I had not even said anything.

Tomislav was silent for a long time. He looked at the cherry tree, then at her, then at the cherry tree again. Then he took the greenhouse key off its nail and put it in her hand. "Go home, Emira," he said. "You came, and your word is kept. A man who lets you go because of a word is better than I am, who asked for you because of a word. The garden is yours. Let Musa water it." Emira closed her hand around the key, wanted to say something, and did not. She went out, and this time the prints she left in the snow were from shoes.

Then Tomislav turned to me. He took out an envelope with the second half of the money and asked whether it was the right amount. I took from

my pocket the invoice I had written him in November, in my crooked handwriting, and tore it into four pieces. Tomislav protested and said that business was business. "Business is business," I said, "and this was not business. If he could let his wife go, and you could let her go, then I can let the money go. I am seventy-one. This was the most beautiful garden I have ever made, and nobody owes me anything for having seen that it can be done."

Tomislav went back to Stuttgart in February. The greenhouse stayed with Emira and Musa, and to this day, every December, I come to Mokušnice and light the boiler. Musa holds the ladder for me and says nothing, like a man who reads a lot. On the fifteenth of January we take down the boards, and half the neighborhood comes in their slippers to look at tulips under the smog. And about ten days later a postcard arrives from Germany, addressed to me, at the nursery in Nemila, always with a single word: "Bloomed?" I answer him by text, also with a single word. So far it has always been the same one.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

A Clerk's Cherries

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-clerks-cherries/

On Fridays at half past two Miroslav was the first to leave his office in Marijin Dvor, before his boss and before anyone could catch him to ask about some statement. He worked as a tax adviser at a firm that taught people how to pay less, while he himself always paid everything, and on time. At the Markale market he bought a full bag of early cherries, at the toy shop by the Cathedral two wooden boats for Zoja and Ema, and on Baščaršija a box of rose rahatlokum, from the same shop where he used to buy it for Nevena when they were students. At four he was sitting on the train to Konjic with the bags on his knees, like a boy going home for the holidays.

They had bought the house above the Neretva three years ago, on credit, for the girls. An old stone house with a wooden porch, plum trees in the yard and a view of the river, which in summer was as green as bottle glass. Nevena spent the summers there with the children, and he came on weekends. In the first years she waited for him at the station in Konjic, in a summer dress, with Zoja and Ema running along the platform and shouting his name as if he were coming back from another continent. This year, since she had met the people from the art colony in June, something else was waiting for him at the station.

This time it was an old white van full of people. At the wheel sat Ševal, who was shooting a documentary about something he had never managed to explain in one sentence. Next to him was Sena, a poet with her hair cropped to the skin, who had published a collection of poems without a single capital letter. In the back seat was Kiki, a painter whose real name nobody knew, with his feet up on the window. Nevena got out last. She was tanned, barefoot and smiling, and she kissed him on the cheek quickly, the way you kiss a cousin at the airport. "Miro! What bags have you brought? Look, everyone, Miro has brought bags." Laughter

came from the van, and Miroslav laughed with them, because he did not know what else to do.

The girls were not in the van. They were at the neighbor's, Aunt Šuhreta's, Nevena explained on the way, because grown-ups sometimes had to work in peace. In the yard Miroslav could not find the plastic pool he had spent an hour and a half blowing up by mouth last summer. He found it behind the woodshed, deflated and wrapped in a tarp. "It was ruining the composition," said Kiki, who had set up an easel on the terrace. "That blue. It was killing the whole valley." The guest room was now Kiki's studio, Sena slept in the room next to it, and Nevena made up the couch in the hallway for Miroslav, because, as she said, he was used to sleeping anywhere anyway.

The cherries disappeared before dinner, but nobody ate them. Kiki tipped them into a clay bowl, put Miroslav's tie from the bench next to them and began to paint. "Still life with a clerk's cherries," he said, and everyone laughed. Ševal filmed it. Sena opened the box of lokum, took one cube, sniffed it and put it back. "Who still eats rahatlokum?" she said. "It's like eating a postcard." Nevena laughed loudest. Miroslav waited for her to look at him, to tell him with her eyes that she knew where that box came from. She did not look at him.

On Saturday at noon they all set off for the river. Miroslav had already changed for swimming when Nevena, with a towel around her neck, stopped in the doorway. "Miro, you stay with the girls, okay? You're better with them than I am anyway. And the water is freezing, you wouldn't like it." They went down across the meadow, the four of them, Kiki with a bottle of wine, Sena with a book, Ševal with his camera, she in the middle. Miroslav sat on the steps with Zoja and Ema and floated the wooden boats in a bucket of water, because the girls were not allowed down to the river without an adult. Laughter came up from the river. Ema asked why Mom laughed differently now. Miroslav told her it was because of the water, because people laugh differently in cold water.

For dinner they grilled trout on the porch that Ševal had bought from some fisherman by the bridge. They talked about an exhibition in Belgrade, about a director who had betrayed art because he had made a commercial for a bank, about how marriage, as Sena put it, was only a contract for being bored together. Kiki asked Miroslav what exactly he did. When Miroslav began to explain, Ševal pointed the camera at him, and Kiki pretended to yawn, until Miroslav fell silent in the middle of a sentence. "Don't be angry, Miro," said Nevena, and put her hand on his shoulder, but she was looking at Sena. "They're like that with everyone." Miroslav knew that was not true. They were like that only with him.

On Sunday afternoon Ševal drove him to the station in the van. Nevena did not come. She stood on the terrace with Kiki's brush in her hand, because he had promised to teach her to paint water, and she waved the brush at him, the way you wave at someone leaving after a short, pleasant visit. The girls cried. Zoja pushed one of the wooden boats into his pocket, so that he would have it in Sarajevo.

On the train, past Bradina, where the track goes into the tunnels and the phone loses its signal, Miroslav took out the planner in which he usually wrote down deadlines for tax returns and began to write. He had not written a letter by hand since his student days. He wrote all the way to Sarajevo, tore out the pages, folded them, and in the morning, before work, handed the letter in at the Main Post Office, registered, as if he were sending a contract.

The letter said that he had seen how happy she was with those people and that he did not hold it against her. That maybe it was his fault, because he had become a man who wears a tie and buys cherries on Fridays, while she had always been someone who paints, and he had known it when he met her in the reading room at the Faculty of Philosophy, when she spilled coffee on his notes and instead of apologizing drew a fish on the stain. It said that he would not deny her freedom if she needed it. That the house was hers, that the girls could stay with her until September, and that he would not come next Friday unless she asked him to. "I love

you the way I did that day with the coffee," it said at the end. "I don't know how to say it more beautifully. You always knew how to say things more beautifully."

The letter arrived on Wednesday, with the mailman who drove up to the house only twice a week. Nevena opened it on the terrace, at breakfast, and Sena snatched it out of her hand before she had read the first line. "A letter! A real letter, handwritten, registered! Everyone, this is a museum piece." She gave it back to Nevena. "Read it aloud. We all have to hear this." And Nevena read. She read in a funny, deep voice, as if she were reading a notice about a lost dog, and the three of them were rolling with laughter. At the sentence about the tie and the cherries Kiki slapped his knee. At the coffee and the fish Ševal ran off for his camera. "This should be framed," said Kiki. "This is better than anything Sena has written this year."

At the sentence about the girls and September Nevena's voice broke. She read "unless you ask me to," and then once more, quietly, in her own voice, and folded the letter. The others kept laughing, thinking that this too was part of the performance. Sena wanted her to read the ending. Nevena said the ending was boring, got up and went into the house.

Upstairs, in the bedroom, she sat on the bed and read the letter alone, from the beginning. This time it was not funny. She saw Miroslav on the train, with the planner on his knees, writing in the tunnel past Bradina about the fish she had drawn fifteen years ago and which he, obviously, remembered better than she did. She saw the bags, the cherries in the clay bowl, the tie beside them and her own face as she laughed. She was ashamed in a way she had not been ashamed since she was a child. I have to answer him right away, she thought. Today, before something else happens. She took a sheet from Zoja's sketchbook and wrote two words: "Dear Miro".

Under the window the van doors slammed. "Nevena!" Sena was shouting. "Ševal has found a spot by the bridge where the water is almost warm!

Let's go now, while the sun is out!" Kiki honked the horn. Nevena looked at the sheet, then at the window, then at the sheet again. She would write to him tonight, calmly, when everyone was asleep and she could find the right words. "Wait for me!" she shouted, heard them laughing down below, and laughed herself, with that new laugh, before she had time to decide whether to. She grabbed her towel and ran down the stairs.

On the windowsill, held down by a pebble from the Neretva, lay the sheet from a child's sketchbook with two words on it and a cherry stain in the corner. Down below, across the meadow, four voices were moving away toward the water, and in the bucket by the steps the other wooden boat was floating.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

A Six-Year Business Trip

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-six-year-business-trip/

I rented him the room in January, without a contract, because he paid six months in advance and because he said he was writing a book. On Bistrik rooms are let to students and tourists, and a man of fifty with a single suitcase struck me as odd, but the money was real, and I am a widow with a pension of four hundred marks. The room is in the attic of my house, with a sloping ceiling and a window that looks down the hill, over the roofs, two streets down to a yellow building with balconies full of geraniums.

The first thing he did was move the armchair. He turned it away from the television and toward the window. The second was to switch off the light. When I went out into the yard in the evening to hang the washing, I would see him up there in the dark, sitting and looking down, and every half hour the glow of a cigarette would light up and then go out. I did not ask. I am from a generation that does not pry into lodgers' business, especially lodgers who pay in advance.

What I did not ask, I found out at the bakery. The women were talking about Nedžla from the yellow building, the third floor. At the beginning of January her husband had gone to Banja Luka for an audit, for three days, with one bag. A week later he sent a message from an unknown number: I am fine, do not look for me, I need time. Nedžla went to the police, and the police told her that a grown man who reports that he is fine is not missing. The women at the bakery knew the rest better than the police. There is, they said, someone over there, a younger one. There is always a younger one. I came home with two loaves of bread and looked at the yellow building, at the third floor, at the kitchen window with the yellow curtain. Then I looked up at my attic, where a cigarette was burning in the dark.

Even then I did not ask him. I asked only in March, when he came down to pay, and I had made coffee for two, so he could not refuse. "Hariz," I said, because I knew the name from the bakery, and he had never told it to me. He did not even flinch. He drank his coffee down to the grounds and told me everything, calmly, as if he were talking about someone else.

He had planned nothing. He went to the bus station, bought a ticket, sat down in the waiting room and suddenly wanted to see what his home looked like without him in it. Just a day or two. To see whether she would notice. He walked back across town, climbed up to Bistrik and rang at the first gate with a sign saying a room was for rent. That was me. "I meant to stay until Friday," he said. "On Friday it was hard to explain three days. Now it is hard to explain three months." I asked him whether he had someone in Banja Luka. He laughed, for the first time since he had been with me. "I have nobody anywhere," he said. "Only her and this window." He had money from some savings his wife did not know about, and at night he did translations on his laptop for some foreign agency. I asked when he would go back. "Tomorrow," he said.

That tomorrow lasted six years. I watched him watching. He knew when she left for work, at seven twenty, and when she came back, and from the way she walked uphill he knew what kind of day she had had. The first winter Nedžla sat up late in the kitchen almost every evening, and her sister came over on Sundays. The second year she took down the yellow curtain and put up a white one, painted the kitchen, and gave his bicycle, which had stood on the balcony for years, to some boy from the street. The third year she got a cat. That same year a man began to come by, on Wednesdays, with a bag of tools. Hariz did not sleep for two nights. It turned out he was a plumber replacing the pipes in her bathroom, that he was married with three children, and Hariz reported this to me with such relief that I felt ashamed on his behalf. Hariz reported all of it to me when he came down to pay, like the news: she painted, she got a cat, her sister got divorced, she bought a new stove. Once I told him that he knew more about her now than when he lived with her. He said that was true, and

that it was the worst part.

In the fourth year they met. Hariz rarely went out, and only late, to the corner shop, wearing a cap and the beard he had grown that first winter. That morning he had run out of bread and went to the bakery when everyone else did. Nedžla was standing ahead of him in line. When she turned with her bag, she stepped on his foot, said excuse me and went out. He came back white as a wall and did not turn on the light all day. In the evening he told me she had not recognized him. I thought about how many years that woman had looked at him across the same table, and whether a man can change that much from a beard and a cap. I did not tell him that.

In the fifth year the snow piled up to the gutters, so I called him to help me clear the roof, and that was when I first saw how much he had aged. He was thin and gray, his hands shaking in the cold. I told him he could not go on like this. "I know," he said. "Tomorrow."

In the sixth year, in November, it rained for three days. That evening Hariz came down to me soaked to the skin, because he had gone to the shop without an umbrella, and put the key on the kitchen table. "I am going home, Mukadesa," he said. I asked why tonight of all nights. He shrugged. He said he was wet and cold, and that down there a light was on in the kitchen, and that was all. For six years he had been telling himself tomorrow, and tonight, in the rain, he understood that nobody was going to say that tomorrow for him. I told him to wait until morning, to change his clothes, not to go like that. "If I wait until morning," he said, "it will be tomorrow again." He left the suitcase and the laptop. He said he would send someone for them.

I climbed up to the attic, for the first time since he had moved in, and sat in his armchair. I saw him going down the steps between the houses, stooped, and then the street swallowed him. The door of the yellow building cannot be seen from my window. Only the kitchen window on the third floor, with the white curtain. I watched for half an hour. In the

kitchen one shadow moved, then two. Then the light went out, and I did not know what that meant.

Three weeks later Nedžla rang at my door. It was the first time I had seen her up close: small, gray at the temples, in a good coat. She said she had come for her husband's things. She took the suitcase and the laptop, asked how much he still owed, though he owed nothing, and left fifty marks on the chest of drawers for, as she put it, the coffees I had made him. I could not hold back. I asked her what he had told her, where he had been.

"He said he was in Banja Luka," she said. "That a job dragged on." "And you believed him?" She looked at me the way you look at a child who asks why the sky is blue. "I told him I had waited for him," she said. "So we are even."

She took the suitcase and started down the steps, and at the gate she turned and looked up, toward my attic, toward the window without a curtain. "From my balcony you can see your roof, ma'am," she said. "And the glow of one cigarette, every evening. For six years I thought he would get tired of it before I did." Then she closed the gate behind her, slowly, so it would not bang, and went two streets down, home.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

Twenty-Three Envelopes

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/twenty-three-envelopes/

The box was a shoebox, size forty-three, and it stood behind rolls of old sketches, where Ranko keeps the things he does not throw away and does not look at either. Iskra was looking for New Year ornaments. Nađa was shouting from downstairs that a tree without ornaments looked as if it had been stolen from the forest, and Ranko had promised that this time the stand would stay upright. Iskra lifted the lid because she thought the box held the string lights. Inside were envelopes, held together with a canning jar rubber band, with a German address written in blue ink. The handwriting was hers.

She sat down on the floor among the boxes and counted them. Twenty-three. On each one a stamp from Banja Luka, a post office mark, a date. Not one had been opened. Some were stiff from damp, and on one the ink had run so that Munich looked like a stain. She remembered every one. She had written them at the kitchen table in a rented room in Starčevica, on Sunday evenings, with the window facing a chestnut tree, and taken them to the post office on Monday mornings before class.

She had been twenty-four then and studying German. In the afternoons she looked after six-year-old Nađa, the daughter of the architect Ranko Vidović, whose wife had been ill for two years and rarely left her room upstairs. Ranko came home late, sat with Iskra in the kitchen and told her about the buildings he would never build. He laughed beautifully and listened even more beautifully. One evening in February, in the hallway, while she was putting on her coat, he kissed her. A week later he took his wife and Nađa to Munich for treatment, and at the door he told her to write to him. "Letters, not messages," he said. "Letters can be kept."

She wrote to him every Sunday. About the Vrbas, which overflowed its banks that spring. About Nađa's drawings she had forgotten to take down from the fridge. About herself, more than she had ever told anyone. No

answer came. In the fourth month she wrote that she would not write anymore, and then she wrote three more letters. In June she heard from a neighbor that Ranko's wife had died in Munich. She wrote him a condolence letter, short and careful, and that was the last. Afterward she spent two years at a call center, speaking German with people from Graz who complained about their internet, and she stopped turning around for every gray coat on Gospodska Street.

Then her aunt Danka died in Vienna, after forty years of cleaning other people's apartments in Ottakring, and left Iskra her own, a small one on the fourth floor with no elevator. Iskra sold it. In Banja Luka such things are known before you know them yourself. Three months later Ranko rang her doorbell, thinner, holding Nađa by the hand. He said he had not been able to write, that grief had shut him up completely, but that he had thought of her every day. They married that autumn. Her aunt's money paid off the debt on Ranko's firm and covered a new roof for the house on the bank of the Vrbas. Only once, on their first anniversary, in a restaurant above the Vrbas, did she ask him, half joking, what he had thought while reading her letters. Ranko put down his fork, looked at her the way only he could, and said he knew some of them by heart. Then he changed the subject, and she was grateful to him, because she thought it still hurt him.

Nine years had passed since then. Nađa is seventeen, she calls her Iskra, not mom, but when things are hard she comes to her, not to her father. When Nađa got pneumonia in eighth grade, Iskra slept for three nights on a chair at the hospital in Paprikovac, while Ranko brought flowers and jokes, and everyone on the ward said what a wonderful father he was. Everyone loves Ranko. Waiters bring him coffee before he orders it, neighbors invite him over for rakija, clients forgive him his deadlines. Iskra pays the bills. Envelopes from the bank, from the tax office and from the doctor lie for a week on the chest of drawers in the hall until she opens them. For years she laughed about it. She told her friends she was married to a man who was afraid of paper.

Now, sitting on the attic floor, she understood that he had not been afraid only of paper. He had not lost the letters. He did not know them by heart. He had kept them for more than ten years, behind the sketches, in a shoebox, and had never opened a single one. She tried to imagine why. Maybe he had never loved her. Maybe he had loved her and was afraid of what he would read in them. Maybe he had come to her door when he heard about her aunt's apartment. Maybe all three at once. She knew she would never find out, because if she asked him, he would give her a beautiful answer, and she would believe half of it.

She opened the first envelope. The paper smelled of a cellar. The girl who had filled it wrote fast, with a lot of commas, about the chestnut tree outside the window and how Nađa had learned to whistle. At the bottom was a sentence Iskra had forgotten she had ever written: that he did not have to answer her, that she loved him and that this was hers, not his, and that no one could take it from her, not even he. Iskra looked at that sentence for a long time. She did not remember ever being so wise. She had only been stubborn, she thought.

She thought about leaving. She had her own salary at the school, she could rent an apartment in Borik, Nađa was almost grown. She imagined telling him, in the kitchen, with the box on the table. She could see his face: he would go pale, his eyes would fill, he would say something well put together, about grief and shame, and he would lay his hand on hers. She knew exactly how long it would take before she laughed along with him. She also knew that after that she would never again open a single envelope in that house, not from the bank, not from the doctor, and that everything would be left lying on the chest of drawers.

"Iskra!" Ranko was standing at the foot of the ladder. "Are you still alive up there? Nađa says it's the stand's fault, and I say it's the tree's." His voice was light, as always. Iskra put the letter back in its envelope and the envelope in the pocket of her sweater. She bound the others with the rubber band, the way they had been, put the lid back on and pushed the box behind the sketches, in the same place, so that there was no mark in

the dust. Then she picked up the box of ornaments and went down.

In the living room the tree was leaning toward the window like a drunken guest. Ranko was lying under it tightening the screws on the stand, and Nađa was holding the top and telling him he did not know what he was doing. They both looked at Iskra as if she were the referee. She set the ornaments down on the couch, knelt beside Ranko, took the wrench from his hand and told Nađa to let go of the top. The tree straightened. Ranko said that was exactly what he had been trying to do all along, and he kissed her hand, as if she had helped him win. Nađa laughed. Iskra got up and began taking the glass balls out of their paper, one by one, and hanging them where it showed least that the branches were thin.

That night, when everyone was asleep, she sat in the kitchen and read that sentence once more. Then she folded the letter in two and put it in her own drawer, under her passport, where Ranko never looks. She did not touch the box in the attic again. In the morning an envelope from the electric company lay on the chest of drawers in the hall, with Ranko's name on it, unopened. Iskra opened it, as always, and paid the bill before breakfast.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

A Diary from Banja Vrućica

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-diary-from-banja-vrucica/

July 6. I arrived at Banja Vrućica at noon, with a referral from a cardiologist in Banja Luka who claims my heart skips beats. I think my heart works perfectly, it just has nothing to do. At the mineral water spring old men in tracksuits fill plastic cups and talk about blood pressure the way other people talk about politics. On a bench by the fountain sat Veljko, twenty-four years old, with a brace on his knee and a crutch he carries like a flag. He tore his ligaments in a motorcycle race, but he talks as if he had come back from the front.

He is in love, of course. He pointed out a girl who was drinking water at the spring with her mother: Anja Đukić, twenty-two, a pharmacy student from Doboj, the daughter of a woman who owns five bakeries and keeps a cardiologist on speed dial. Veljko dropped his cup and Anja picked it up for him with the kind of smile people give to patients. I was looking at her, and as she turned away she looked at me, briefly and with a certain anger, because I had not picked anything up for her. That evening I wrote down that this girl would love me. Not because I like her. Because Veljko will be watching, and there is nothing else to do here.

July 8. Doctor Pantelić is the only intelligent man at the spa, so we are friends. He takes my blood pressure and plays chess better than I do. Today he told me that the Đukić women had been asking about me, the mother about my firm and the daughter about my past. Then, as if in passing, he added that Obren Lalić, a builder from Derventa, had arrived after a bypass and taken the apartment above the Đukićs in the villa over the park, with his wife. The wife is young, blond, with a mole under her left eye. I put down my chess piece. I knew who she was before he said her name: Ivana.

We met at the spring early the next morning. Ten years had passed since she walked out of my apartment in Banja Luka and said she was waiting

for someone who would promise her something at least once. She married a man of sixty-five who promised her everything. She said that Obren was good, that he fell asleep at nine after his pills, and that she wanted nothing from me except that we see each other now and then. "Get to know the Đukićs, Andrija," she said. "If you visit them, no one will ask what you are doing at the villa." Then she left before I could answer, just as she had ten years ago.

July 12. For a week I did not go near Anja. Instead, every evening on the hotel terrace I told stories, and the young men who had been standing around her drifted over to my table one by one. She watched it angrily, and I let her be angry. On Saturday there was a dance in the hotel hall. A drunk guest from Teslić grabbed her by the hand and would not let go. I walked over, took his arm like an old friend's, led him to the bar and ordered him a coffee. Then I asked Anja to dance. She said nothing, but she danced with me until the end.

After that it was easy, and easy is always boring. We walked the path through the woods above the spa, and I told her about myself, half truth and half what she wanted to hear. Veljko limped twenty steps behind us and pretended to be watching birds. On a small wooden footbridge over a stream she felt dizzy, or decided to, and leaned against me. I kissed her on the cheek. "Do you love me?" she asked. I did not answer. She walked ahead of me all the way to the villa, wiping her face with her sleeve, and I was thinking about Ivana's window.

I saw Ivana at night. Obren fell asleep at nine, the Đukićs turned off their light at ten, and the outside stairs of the villa led past Anja's window to Ivana's balcony on the second floor. We sat on the balcony, she in Obren's sweater, and talked until one, quietly, about how everything would have been if I had been someone else. On the fifteenth of July, as I was coming down, two shadows stood under the linden tree. One was leaning on a crutch. Someone shouted, asking who was there, and I jumped the fence and walked off through the park, unhurried.

July 16. In the morning I was sitting in the café next to the hotel when Veljko and his friend Momir from Prnjavor sat down at the table under the open window. The plan was simple: at noon, at the spring, in front of everyone, Veljko would say he had seen me leaving Anja Đukić's place at night. "He won't dare say where he really was," Momir said. "When he keeps quiet, everyone will believe you, and the girl will be ashamed of him for the rest of her life." Veljko asked whether that was fair to Anja. Momir said it was fair to Veljko, and that was enough.

At noon there were more people at the spring than usual, because Momir had made the rounds of half the spa that morning. Mrs. Đukić stood with Anja under a sunshade, Doctor Pantelić beside them, and a little further off, in a white hat, Obren Lalić. Veljko said his piece, loudly and badly, like a poem learned by heart. I asked him whether he had seen me come out of Anja's door. He said he had seen me on the stairs. I said that the stairs led to three apartments and into the park, and that I would leave the spa today if he now said, in front of her mother, that he had seen the door. Then I added that Momir was right: I would not say where I had been. But I would not let Veljko say what he had not seen either.

Veljko was silent for a long time. It was the only moment in which I respected him, and the only one in which I felt sorry for him. Then he said, looking into his cup, "I didn't see the door." Mrs. Đukić turned her back on him. The people with their cups moved away from him as if he were contagious. At five Veljko left on the bus for Banja Luka, with his crutch across his lap. Obren Lalić said nothing. He only looked for a long time at the outside stairs, then at his balcony, then at me.

In the evening an envelope was waiting for me at the reception desk. Ivana had written a few lines: Obren knew, they were leaving at six, I should not look for them. She also wrote that she had loved me even when I had not asked for it, and that this had been her mistake, not mine. It was ten past seven. I got in the car and drove toward Doboj, until on a climb the engine overheated and died. I sat down on the guardrail by the road and cried, for the first time I can remember. When I got back it was

past midnight, and the whole thing already seemed ridiculous to me.

July 18. Mrs. Đukić invited me to the villa for coffee. She thanked me for defending her daughter's honor and said, in a roundabout way, that there was room in Doboj for one more firm. I asked her to leave me alone with Anja. Anja came in pale, her hands clasped in front of her, and sat down only when I stood up.

I told her the truth, because it was the shortest. That I had been laughing at her. That I had been playing all July, because of Veljko and out of boredom, and that I did not love her. That at the spring I had not defended her for her sake. She listened without taking her eyes off me, and only once did her chin tremble. She asked why I was telling her this. I said it would be worse if I did not. "I hate you," she said quietly. I said that was fair, bowed, and went out, and I met no one on the stairs.

July 19. I paid my bill at seven in the morning. Doctor Pantelić did not offer me his hand, he only said that my blood pressure was, unfortunately, excellent. The receptionist asked whether I would be coming back next year. I said maybe, and for some reason she wrote it down.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Mistress with the Same Pajamas

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-mistress-with-the-same-pajamas/

I bought the pajamas at a quarter past seven, by the Rondo, in a small shop that was only just raising its shutter. Blue, with thin white stripes, cotton, size XL, thirty-nine marks. The saleswoman asked if they were a gift, and I said they were for the hospital, and without a word she put them in a plain bag. At home Mario had three pairs of pajamas, all washed out. I did not want the people on the trauma ward to see him in something that made him look like a man nobody cared for. Twenty-three years of marriage teach you small things like that.

The phone rang at ten past two in the morning. A police officer, very polite, said that my husband had gone off the road near Buna, that he was alive, that he was conscious and that they had taken him up to Bijeli Brijeg. A broken shin, two ribs, a cut above the eyebrow. The Škoda had ended up in the fence of a pomegranate orchard, and the orchard, the officer added, had come off worse than the car. On Wednesday Mario had told me he was driving wine to a hotel in Neum and would sleep there, because he did not like driving at night in the rain. After that I lay awake until morning, tracing in my head the road home from Neum, which really does go through Buna. I traced it again and again, as if someone were going to grade my homework.

Visiting hours on the trauma ward are from three to four. I arrived twenty minutes early, because I had asked a colleague at the pharmacy to cover for me, and I sat down on a plastic chair in the third floor corridor, next to a machine that gives you something like coffee for one mark. Outside it was raining that November Mostar rain that does not fall so much as hang in the air. Apart from me, only one other woman was sitting in the corridor, younger, maybe thirty-five, in a beige coat, with wet strands of hair stuck to her neck. She held a bag on her knees. Out of the bag peeked the sleeve of blue pajamas with thin white stripes.

At first I thought it was a coincidence, because Mostar does not have many shops and they all sell the same things. Then I remembered how every winter, when I bought him checked or plain pajamas, Mario would shake his head. "Only stripes, like my father," he used to say. "Everything else is for pensioners." He said it in front of my mother, in front of our daughter Petra and, as I now understood, in front of this woman. I looked at her bag, then at mine. She looked at mine. We even had the same receipt, folded in half and tucked between the buttons.

A nurse with a folder came out of the room at the end of the corridor and asked who was there for Krešić. I stood up. So did she, then she sat down, then stood up again, as if her legs did not know what they were allowed to do. The nurse looked at the two of us and at what we were holding. She said the patient could have one visitor, fifteen minutes, but he had just fallen asleep after his medication, so we should wait half an hour. Then she went back into the room faster than she had come out.

The woman's name was Monika. She told me that first, before I had asked anything, as if she were introducing herself at a counter. She also said she lived in Blagaj, above the spring, and that Mario had left her place at half past midnight because he supposedly had a meeting in Čitluk in the morning. When he did not text to say he had arrived, she called him ten times, and at two in the morning she called the hospital. She said all of this quietly, and at the end she added that she knew this was not easy for me. I answered that she did not know, but that it was all right, because I had not known anything either until three minutes ago.

Half an hour is a long time on a plastic chair. I bought us two coffees from the machine, because it seemed silly to buy one only for myself. Monika talked, and I listened the way I listen to people at the pharmacy counter who list the medicines they take, checking what goes with what. Mario had told her that we had slept in separate rooms for a long time. He had told her that I knew about her and had agreed to keep quiet until Petra finished her degree in Zagreb. He had also told her that Petra's apartment in Zagreb had eaten up his savings, which was why the two of them could

not yet rent a place together in town. Petra lives in a student dorm and works in a bakery on Saturdays.

Then I told her my side, because that seemed fair. That we slept in the same bed, the window on my side, the radio on his. That in September he had told me the firm had cut their pay, so we had canceled our summer vacation in Gradac. That every other Thursday, while he was out on the road in Neum, I went alone to his mother's in Rodoč to wash her windows. Monika listened, holding a coffee she did not drink. When I mentioned the Thursdays, she set the cup down on the floor. She said that on Thursdays he had dinner at her place and always brought wine from the cellar in Čitluk, the kind he said was not for sale.

The nurse came back and said the patient was awake and one person could go in. Monika said I should be the one to go in, because I was the wife, and that she would leave the pajamas with the nurse and go. I told her to give me the bag. She looked at me for a few seconds, as if weighing everything a woman could do with thirty-nine marks' worth of pajamas, and then she handed it to me. I took both bags and went in.

Mario was lying by the window, with his leg in a cast and a bandage above his eyebrow. When he saw me, he smiled the smile he kept for customs officers and traffic police. He started right away: the hotel in Neum, the rain, he could not sleep so he set off early, he did not want to wake me. He spoke smoothly, as if he had been rehearsing the lines all morning. I did not interrupt him. I took out both pairs of pajamas, spread them side by side over the blanket and over the cast, and straightened their sleeves. They were identical down to the last button.

Mario fell silent in the middle of a sentence. He looked at the pajamas, then at the door, then at the pajamas again. Then he asked quietly, "Which ones are yours?" That stayed with me more than anything else. He did not ask how I knew, he did not ask where she was, he did not say he was sorry. He asked which ones were mine, as if the answer would tell him what to do next. I told him there was no difference. I folded one pair

in four and put it back in the bag with the receipt, and I left the other on the blanket. I told him those were from Monika and that his things would be waiting for him at his mother's in Rodoč, in wine boxes, when they let him go home.

In the corridor Monika was still standing by the machine, with her hands in her pockets. She asked what he had said. I told her he had asked which ones were mine. She looked at me for a long time, and then she laughed, short and ugly, the way someone laughs at a funeral and is frightened by their own voice. She asked whether I needed a ride into town. I said I did. She drove a small red car that smelled of Mario's cologne, so without a word between us we both rolled down our windows even though it was raining.

She dropped me off at the Rondo, in front of that same shop. The saleswoman recognized me and asked whether the size had been wrong. I said the size had been fine. She gave me back my thirty-nine marks. I crossed the street, sat down in a café by the window and ordered a real coffee, the first that day that had not come from a machine, and I drank it slowly, until the rain over Hum began to lift.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

For Special Merit

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/for-special-merit/

Some people want money, some want love, and some want only that someone, once, call their name from a stage. Hilmija Telalović, a senior clerk at the city water company, belonged to the third kind, and had since the fourth grade, when he won a commendation for the neatest notebook and the teacher forgot to read out his name at the school assembly. He had been waiting ever since.

He was a member of six associations, from the Friends of the Vijećnica to the Sevdah Lovers' Club, where he did not sing. For twenty years he had measured the temperature of the water at Sarajevo's public fountains, on the first of every month, and written it down in a notebook that had grown to three hundred twelve pages. Every year, when the newspapers published the winners of the Ministry of Culture Charter for Contributions to Heritage, he read the list aloud at breakfast, slowly, like an indictment. "That fellow with the photographs again," he would say. "And I have measured the Sebilj a hundred and eighty times."

His wife Elzana was eleven years younger and ran the Tulip flower shop on the street behind the government building, where the ministries ordered wreaths, bouquets and flowers for ceremonies. She knew the names of all the secretaries and the birthdays of half the assistant ministers. One of them, Ćemal Kulašin, ordered from her more often than the rest, always white tulips and always without a card. "Your turn will come, Hilmija," she would say, straightening his tie. "You just must not chase it."

One Tuesday in March a heating pipe burst at the water company and everyone was sent home at ten. On the way Hilmija bought a pound of baklava to surprise his wife and walked up to their apartment in Džidžikovac. The key went into the lock, but the door caught on the chain. He rang. For a long time nothing happened, and then Elzana

opened the door, in her bathrobe, her hair wet, her face flushed. She said she had just come back from the wholesale market and had been in the shower.

In the hallway, on the coat rack, hung a coat. Navy blue, of heavy English wool, much longer than any Hilmija had ever worn. He might even have walked past it if there had not been a small gold badge pinned to the lapel: an open book with a quill across its pages. He knew it the way other people know their mother's face. That badge was worn only by winners of the Charter.

"Elzana, whose coat is this?" he asked quietly. Elzana did not pause for a second. "Yours," she said. "You have ruined my surprise." She took the baklava out of his hands, as if the baklava were to blame for everything, and lowered her voice. The decision, she explained, had already been made, but it could not be announced before the sixth of April. A man from the ministry, who bought flowers from her, had brought her the badge early, so that Hilmija would have it on his coat for the photograph, and she had bought the coat herself, because he could not go in front of the cameras in his old one. "Me?" said Hilmija. "For what?" "For special merit," said Elzana. Hilmija sat down on the shoe cabinet.

He put it on at once. The sleeves came down to his knuckles, and the hem to the middle of his calves. "Italian cut," said Elzana, looking somewhere behind him, toward the bedroom door. "They wear them longer now." Hilmija turned in front of the mirror, left and then right, and then he said he had to go straight down to Đulaga, the barber on the ground floor, because Đulaga found out everything first, and it would not be fair for him to find out this last.

At Đulaga's he sat for half an hour in the coat, even though the shop was hot. Đulaga congratulated him twice, once as a neighbor and once as a citizen. Somewhere between the two congratulations both of them saw through the shop window a tall man in a suit come out of their entrance, without a coat, hands in his pockets, and walk off quickly toward Koševo.

"Look at that one," said Đulaga. "March, and him without a coat." Hilmija buttoned his own up to the throat. "People no longer know what is proper," he said.

For the following weeks Hilmija did not take the coat off. He wore it to the water company, to the Markale market, to the meetings of all six associations, and in every conversation he turned his left lapel, as if by chance, toward whoever he was talking to. He told his colleagues in confidence, each one separately. At the meeting of the Sevdah Lovers' Club he stood up to make a toast, although no one was making toasts, and said only: "I will say nothing. You will see on the sixth." The only place he did not call was the ministry, although he picked up the phone three times. Elzana explained to him that nominees who called and gave thanks ahead of time were struck from the list, without explanation. "Those are the rules," she said. "I do their wreaths. I know."

That same week Elzana called Kulašin from the flower shop. He answered in a hoarse voice and sneezed into the phone. "I have had a cold since Tuesday," he said. "I know," said Elzana. "You have until the sixth of April to give my husband the Charter. Otherwise I will send your wife a coat, in cellophane, with a bow." Kulašin was silent for a long time. "What for?" "For special merit," said Elzana. "You know his merits better than anyone."

Kulašin chaired the committee, and the committee, as always, had more candidates than ideas. At the meeting he took out Hilmija's notebook of three hundred twelve pages, which Elzana had brought in a bag from the flower shop, and said it was work of a kind rarely seen: twenty years of quiet, selfless care for this city's water. None of the committee members read past the first page. One professor asked why water of all things, and Kulašin answered that without water there was no culture either, which sounded serious enough that no one asked again. They voted unanimously, because Kulašin was smiling the way assistant ministers do not smile without a reason.

The ceremony was held on the sixth of April in the ministry hall, with a sound system that squealed and with wreaths from the Tulip flower shop. Hilmija would not leave his coat at the cloakroom. Elzana sat in the second row, in a new dress, and did not once look toward the stage. Hilmija sat in the front row, in the coat, and when his name was called, he walked past the whole row like a man who had waited forty-seven years, because he had waited exactly that long. Kulašin pinned the new badge on his lapel, right beside the old one, and his hand trembled a little as he did it. "A fine coat," he said. "Italian cut," said Hilmija loudly, so the whole hall could hear. "My wife chose it." "Your wife has taste," said Kulašin, and shook his hand for a long time.

That evening, at the kitchen table, Hilmija took off both badges and laid them side by side. They were exactly the same. He looked at them for a long time. Then he pushed one toward Elzana. "This one should go back to that man from the ministry," he said. "It must be his. What kind of man, Elzana, gives his own badge to someone else and asks nothing in return?" Elzana was wiping the table and did not look up. "A modest one," she said.

"He must be a very modest man," said Hilmija, thoughtfully stroking his sleeve, which still came down to his fingers. "Very," said Elzana. The next day she took the badge to the ministry in a little box, with a bouquet of white tulips, and the coat to a tailor on Ferhadija, to have the sleeves shortened.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

A Bag on the Landing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-bag-on-the-landing/

In Lisičići news always arrives before the bus. When Enes got off at the crossroads above the lake, in a red Norwegian jacket with strips that glow in the dark and a watch like nobody in the village owned, the whole village already knew he was back, and he still did not know what everyone else knew. His mother held him for a long time, and then, without letting go, she told him in his ear what he had already read on the neighbors' faces: Džana had gotten married in May, to Zahir, the one who drove a truck for the quarry.

Zahir was fifteen years older than her, a quiet, broad-backed man who drove stone in a truck and trailer to the port of Ploče and back, and once a month farther, to Germany, for a week at a time. He had built a two-story house across from Bećir's trout farm and brought Džana into it, with a ring that, people said, had cost him half a truck. The next day Enes bought a used Golf and parked it under her balcony, windows open and music turned all the way up. On the third evening she came out onto the balcony. "I waited for you for a year, Enes," she said. "And you sent me pictures of salmon." "I sent you messages every night," he said. "Every other night," she said. "Then every seventh."

Out of spite he took a job with Bećir, at the trout farm. He had known trout since he was small, so Bećir, who believed only in work, gave him the keys to the storehouse in the very first week. Bećir's daughter Almasa kept the books and sold fish to the weekenders. She was loud, laughed out loud and never wore heels. Enes brought her Norwegian chocolate and stood with her beside the pools, always turned so that he could be seen from Džana's balcony. Almasa noticed it the first day and pretended she had not, because she liked him more than she dared admit.

Džana watched. She watched while she hung the laundry, while she watered the geraniums, while Zahir slept after a run. When Zahir left for

Germany for ten days at the end of July, she sent Enes a message of three words: "Come tonight, orchard way." Enes looked at the screen for a long time. Then he went, and the kitchen door closed behind him quietly, as if someone had been oiling it for days.

In the nights that followed the Golf slept behind the orchard, where it could not be seen from the road but could be seen from the trout farm. In the mornings Enes came to work sleepless and silent and no longer stood beside the pools turned toward the balcony. Almasa noticed that before anything else. On the third night she could not sleep, went down to the pools to check the pump, and saw the headlights of the Golf go dark behind Zahir's plum trees.

In the morning she was waiting for him in the storehouse. "I know where you sleep," she said. Enes lied, then lied once more, then got angry, because it is easier to get angry than to lie a third time. "Stay out of it, Almasa. You are a good girl. Girls like that stay out of things." "Am I good to you only while she is watching?" she asked. He did not answer. He picked up the bucket of feed and went to the pools, and she stayed among the sacks, and that was when she decided something that would later weigh on her more than anything.

Zahir came back on Friday toward evening. As always, he left the truck at the wide spot by the bend and set off home on foot with a bag over his shoulder. Almasa was waiting for him at the bend. She told him everything, briefly, looking at the asphalt: while he hauled stone, his wife received guests, and the guest slept behind the plum trees. Zahir was silent for a long time. "If you lied," he said at last, "neither your father nor the village will forgive you." "I did not lie," she said. "That is why no one will forgive me."

On Saturday there was a village fair on the meadow by the lake, with roast lamb, an accordion and a tent where beer was poured. Enes was in high spirits and loud, and he was paying for the whole table with Norwegian money changed into marks. When Zahir came into the tent,

Enes held out a glass to him. Zahir looked at it and put it back on the table. "I do not drink with you," he said, quietly enough that only half the tent heard him. The accordion stopped. "Tomorrow at six. At the old landing." Enes stood up. He could have lied, and everyone knew it. "I will come," he said, and in Lisičići that sounded like a confession.

That night he did not sleep. Before dawn he went into his mother's room, where she was awake anyway, and sat on the edge of the bed like a boy. "Forgive me, Mother," he said. "Forgive you for what?" "Everything. And if I am not back by noon, go to Bećir's and look after Almasa. She has no one but me." Hava looked at him the way she had looked at him when he was seven and lied that he had not been at the lake. "Almasa has a father and a trout farm, son," she said. "You are the one who has no one."

Mist lay over the lake, and there was no one on the landing but Zahir. He had nothing in his hands. Enes stopped two steps from him and let his arms drop. "Hit me," he said. "I will not defend myself." "I would not hit you if you paid me," said Zahir. "Then you would be the one the truck driver beat up, and the women would pity you for twenty years. Last night I asked her. She said she loves you. She said it to my face, in my own kitchen."

He turned toward the end of the landing. Out of the mist came Džana, in a coat, with a travel bag in her hand. She did not look at either of them. "I told her to wait for you here at six," said Zahir. "If you want her, take her. Today. To Norway, to Konjic, wherever you like. I will sign whatever needs signing. But you take her for the rest of your life, not until I come back from a run."

Enes looked at the bag. For a year he had thought Džana was all he wanted, and now, when she stood ten feet away from him with a bag in her hand, he could not take a single step. He was silent too long. Džana saw it before either of the men did. She set the bag down on the wet boards. Zahir picked it up, slung it over his shoulder and set off up the path toward the village without looking back. Džana stood a little longer,

and then she followed him, one step behind, her head bowed.

On the road above the landing stood Almasa, out of breath, in the rubber boots from the trout farm. She had been running since half past five, because she was afraid of what she might find. Enes walked past her and stopped only once. "You told him," he said. He was not asking. "I did," she said. He nodded, as if someone had confirmed a bus timetable for him, and went home for his bag.

The noon bus to Sarajevo stopped at the crossroads. Hava put pita and two boiled eggs in a bag for him, the same as last year, and did not cry until the bus pulled away. Through the window Enes saw the trout farm and Almasa, who was throwing feed into a pool and did not raise her head. As soon as the trout farm disappeared behind the bend, his phone buzzed. A message from Džana: "Let me know when you land." He held it in his hand all the way to Konjic, neither answering nor deleting it.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

An Inheritance for the Younger Brother

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-inheritance-for-the-younger-brother/

On the ship where I work, the infirmary is four decks below the main deck, without windows, and you cannot hear the sea in it. I treat seasickness, sunburn and passengers who have eaten more at the buffet than their hearts can handle. The pay is good, the cabin is small, and the contract runs nine months. My coworkers are Filipinos and one Croat from Rijeka, who calls me Doctor Bosnia. When I signed the contract, the most important clause for me was that here no one knows my parents' names.

It all began with a phone call from Vienna, in April. A lawyer called to say that Sejfudin Kadić had died, the man we called Uncle Sejfo. He was an engineer from Sarajevo who after the war spent three years rebuilding bridges on the Una and lived with us, in the room above the garage. He fished for grayling with my father, he carried me on his shoulders up to the Captain's Tower, and then he went to Vienna, never married, and came for a week every summer. He always slept in the same room above the garage, he always brought my mother the same perfume from the Vienna airport, and he always left on Sunday before dawn, so he would not have to say goodbye. He brought me medical books and my brother Adil a soccer ball. The lawyer said Uncle Sejfo had left everything to Adil: an apartment in Vienna and savings of almost three hundred thousand euros. To me he left nothing. Not a single sentence.

My father was happy. "Sejfo was always an honest man," he said, and went off to the river with two rods, as if nothing had happened, because to him nothing had. My mother spent a long time washing dishes that were already clean. Adil kept blushing. "We'll split it," he told me that evening. I said there was no need and laughed, and that laugh followed me for days. I was thirty-three, with a specialization in internal medicine, a doctor's salary and a room in my parents' house, where I had slept since

I was born. Adil was twenty-eight, with a law degree he had barely finished, a girlfriend who adored him and, all of a sudden, an apartment in Vienna.

The first sentence came from the old pharmacist on Bosanska Street, where I had worked summers as a student. He congratulated me on my brother's inheritance and adjusted his glasses. "That was kind of him," he said. "Only, you know how it is in Bihać. When a man leaves everything to one child and nothing to the other, people do not read it as a gift." I walked out of the pharmacy, and that sentence followed me all the way to the river.

The second came from the waitress at the café on the Una, who had known us since grade school. She brought me coffee and smiled. "I hear Adil has come into money. Well, he deserves it, he's just like that engineer of yours, so calm." She meant it as a compliment. I paid and left the coffee untouched.

That night I opened the old album from the cabinet in the living room. Photographs from ninety-seven: Uncle Sejfo on the bridge with my father and their fishing rods, my mother young, laughing, in a yellow dress I do not remember. Uncle Sejfo had fair hair, a gap between his front teeth, and he held his head slightly tilted, as if he were listening to something others could not hear. Adil has fair hair. Adil has a gap between his teeth. Adil tilts his head when he listens. My father is dark, short and has been bald since forty, and I am his copy. I also remembered that a framed photograph of Uncle Sejfo used to stand on the television. When I was ten, my mother put it away because, as she said, it was fading in the sun.

The doctor in me could not stop counting. Uncle Sejfo left for Vienna in the summer of ninety-eight. Adil was born in January of that year. My father had spent all of ninety-seven working on a construction site in Slovenia and came home for Bajram and for New Year's. None of that proved anything. I would have told any patient that it proved nothing. I did not know how to tell myself.

In May I went to Vienna with Adil, because he does not speak German and I had learned it for an exam I never used. Uncle Sejfo's apartment was on the fourth floor of a quiet street behind the Naschmarkt, as tidy as a hospital room. The lawyer gave us the keys and left us alone. On the shelf in the living room stood photographs in identical silver frames: Adil on his first day of school, Adil at his high school graduation, Adil with his first fish, Adil in a gown at his law school commencement. Only one person could have sent those photographs. Twice I ran my eyes along the shelf. There was not a single one of me. Adil said Uncle Sejfo had been sentimental and opened the window.

I began saying things at the table. I asked my mother whether she remembered when Uncle Sejfo left, and whether he had cried when Adil was born. While my father was talking about the huchen season that starts in October, I said it was nice when a man thinks of his children even after his death. My mother put down her fork and left the kitchen. My father noticed nothing. I hated myself as I said it and could not stop, the way you keep pressing a bruise to see whether it still hurts.

One evening in June Adil called me out to the yard, above the river. He showed me a ring he had bought for his girlfriend and the plan for the office he would open on Bosanska Street. For the third time he offered me half. I told him I did not need his father's money. He looked at me for a long time, his head tilted. "What father?" "He left you everything because you are his," I said. Below us the Una flowed as it always had, green and cold, and on the other bank someone was lighting a grill. Adil said nothing. He got up and went into the house.

My room is next to the kitchen, and the wall is thin. It was half past one in the morning. I heard my mother crying, quietly, the way women cry who have practiced it for a long time. I heard sentences I will not repeat. One I do remember. "That year nobody asked me how I was. Only him." Then Adil said something I did not expect, not from him or from anyone: "You are my mother. Dad is my dad. Let the rest stay in Vienna." I heard the chair creak, heard him put his arms around her, and heard her stop

crying.

In the days that followed my mother spoke to me as if I were a guest. She asked whether I wanted more coffee and whether I had slept well. Adil was the same as before, except that he no longer looked at me with his head tilted. I understood that in that house the stranger was not him. At the end of June I found a printed ad on my desk: a cruise company was looking for a ship's doctor, a nine-month contract, boarding in Split. The phone number was circled. Adil had ugly handwriting and circled things like a child.

We went to Split together, through Lika. Adil drove, my mother was silent and looked out the window, and my father talked about fish the whole way. "Too bad," he said near Knin, "the huchen season starts in October, and you won't be here." In the harbor stood the Lorena, white as a hotel on the water. My mother hugged me briefly, as if she were afraid it would last too long. "Keep in touch," she said. Adil held out his hand, and then he hugged me after all, awkwardly, the way brothers hug who have never done it before.

From the deck I watched them as the ship pulled away. My father had already turned toward the fishermen on the breakwater. Adil had his hand on our mother's shoulder. My mother was waving a white scarf, and she waved the longest, until nothing was left of her but a white dot, and then not even that.

Every Sunday she sends me a message: how is the sea, am I eating, am I cold in the infirmary. I answer on Mondays. Sometimes she sends a photo too. Last Sunday she sent one of my father and Adil on the Una, with a huchen as long as an arm. My father is holding the fish, Adil is laughing, his head slightly tilted. I looked at that photo for a long time, down here, where you cannot hear the sea. Then I wrote: nice fish.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Envelope He Never Opened

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-envelope-he-never-opened/

The restaurant on the hill above Slana Banja is called the Old Saltworks, and Sadik Mujagić has had dinner there every Friday for twenty years. Always at the same table in the corner, always the same thing: soup, ten ćevapi, mineral water. The waiters changed, the menu got an English translation, televisions appeared on the walls, and he stayed, like a piece of furniture no one moves. That Friday in November, as the waiter was bringing his soup, someone at the table by the window laughed, loudly, throwing his head back. Sadik put down his spoon. He knew that laugh before he saw the face. It was Faik's laugh.

Three people sat at the table by the window. A gray-haired, heavyset man in an expensive sweater. A woman in a green coat, her hair dyed the color it had once been on its own. And a young man of twenty-five, tall, who was laughing at something on his phone. The woman's name was Melita, and for twelve years she had been Sadik's wife. The man was Faik Hrnjić, Sadik's best friend from high school. The young man was Semir, whom Sadik had walked to kindergarten every morning until he was five.

Twenty years ago everyone said Sadik was a good man, and no one meant it as a compliment. He worked as an accountant at the salt factory, returned borrowed things before they were due, and remembered other people's children's birthdays. Melita was better-looking than he was, and she knew it. He adored Semir. They built towers of blocks all over the living room, on summer Sundays they went to the Pannonian Lakes, and he carried him on his shoulders across Freedom Square, though the boy had long since learned to walk. Faik, a dentist with an office near Kapija, came to lunch every Sunday, brought Semir chocolate, and called him champ. At the table he always sat in the same place, across from Melita, and he was always the first to praise the pie. When Semir fell off his bike on Ilinčica, Faik was the first to pick him up, because Sadik ran more

slowly. Sadik loved all three of them and had no reason to doubt anyone.

Hasnija, the housekeeper, a widow from Simin Han, came three times a week to clean and look after Semir. She had a sharp tongue and did everything properly. One Tuesday in March Sadik came home from work early with a fever and found her in the hallway, already in her coat, her bag on her shoulder. She told him she could no longer work for them. Puzzled, he asked whether he had been paying her too little. "It's not about money, Mr. Sadik," she said. "I can't stand watching them make a fool of you anymore."

Then she told him, standing up, as if afraid she would lose her nerve if she sat down. Faik came on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while Sadik was at work, and they sent her to the park with the child. It had been like that since she started working for them, and she had worked there for six years, since before Semir was born. "And the child," she said, and here her voice trembled for the first time. "Look at his ears. Look at how he laughs. I kept quiet because I love that child. But I can't anymore." She left her key on the shoe cabinet and went.

Sadik sat in the hallway for an hour with her key in his hand. When Melita brought Semir home from kindergarten, he looked at his son's ears for the first time. They were small and set close to his head, like Faik's. From that moment on he could not stop seeing them. That night he took a few hairs from the boy's brush and put them in an envelope. In the morning Melita made him coffee and asked how his fever was. He looked at her and saw nothing. Maybe Hasnija is jealous, he thought, maybe she is mad, maybe they had not paid her enough. At noon he called Faik and said he had a toothache and would stop by on Thursday. "Thursday's impossible," said Faik. "Patients all day. Come on Friday."

On Thursday he left work at eleven instead of four. Faik's car was parked in front of the building. He unlocked the apartment with his own key. They were in the living room. Faik's jacket hung over the armchair, Melita's hair was down, and there was nothing a court would accept as

evidence, and everything a husband needs. Faik stood up. "Sadik, this is not what you think." Sadik did not even look at him. "Is Semir mine?" he asked Melita. She looked at Faik. Faik looked at the floor. "I don't know," said Melita. That "I don't know" was worse than any yes.

Then Sadik, a gentle man, shouted for the first time in his life. He shouted until the neighbor upstairs banged on the radiator. He told them to leave, both of them, and not to come back while he was alive. That afternoon Melita picked Semir up from kindergarten and went to Faik's, and three months later they moved to Sarajevo. The divorce took half a year. Sadik did not fight for custody, because every time he saw the boy in the courthouse corridor he saw Faik's ears, and then hated himself for seeing them. The last time, Semir waved to him from that corridor, his hand in his mother's.

A week after they had gone, he sent the hairs, together with his own sample, to a laboratory in Sarajevo, and no one knew about it. The answer came two weeks later. Sadik put the envelope in the drawer of his desk, under the warranty for the washing machine, and did not open it. He told himself he would open it when he was strong enough. For the first three years he sent Semir birthday cards at the address in Sarajevo. None came back, and none got an answer. Twenty years went by. He stayed in the same apartment, at the same job, on Fridays he had dinner at the Old Saltworks, and in summer he went alone to the Pannonian Lakes and watched fathers teaching their children to swim. He opened the drawer only when he was looking for the warranty, and he replaced the washing machine twice. Once his colleagues in accounting introduced him to a widow from Lukavac. They had coffee on a terrace on the Korzo, and for an hour he told her about a little boy who could count to a hundred. They never had a second coffee.

Now he got up from his soup and went over to their table. Faik was gray and heavier, with glasses he had not needed when he was young. Melita went pale and put down her fork. The young man looked up from his phone, politely, the way one looks at a waiter. "Can I help you?" Sadik

was looking at Faik. "You raised him well," he said. "He laughs like you." Faik stood up. "Sadik, please. Not here."

"Not here?" Sadik did not shout. He spoke quietly, in the voice in which for twenty years he had read balance sheets. "For twenty years I've had nowhere. You took my wife, and that I might have forgiven you. You took my Sundays. You took the child I carried on my shoulders across Freedom Square." The young man put his phone down. "Mom, who is this?" "Sadik, he doesn't know," said Melita, so quietly that he barely heard her. Sadik turned to the young man. "I am the man who taught you to count to a hundred. Ask your mother whose son you are. Maybe she can tell you. She couldn't tell me." Semir looked at his mother, and Faik sat down heavily, as if his legs had given way. Then Sadik left money on his own table, for the soup he had not eaten and the ćevapi he had not even waited for, and walked out.

Outside there was fog, the Tuzla kind, thick and salty, through which the city lights look as if seen through milk. Sadik walked down the hill on foot, past the closed lakes, past Kapija, where Faik's old dental office was now a phone shop, and past the building where they had once lived, where on the third floor a kitchen light was burning for some other family. His hands were not shaking. He was surprised by that. For twenty years he had imagined this meeting, and in every version his hands had shaken.

At home he opened the drawer. The envelope had yellowed, and the laboratory's stamp had faded, but the name and the date could still be read: April 2004. He held it for a long time. Then he went to the kitchen, took the bread knife, and opened it the way he opened all his bills, neatly, along the long side. Inside was a single sheet of paper, with a table he did not understand and one sentence beneath it, which he understood at once.

Probability of paternity: ninety-nine point nine eight percent.

He read the sentence again, and again, as if it were a balance sheet with an error hidden somewhere. There was no error. He got up, went to the bathroom, turned on the light, and looked at himself in the mirror, for the first time the way Hasnija had looked at the boy. His ears were small and set close to his head. He had never looked at them. A man does not look at his own ears.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

In Pencil on the Wall

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/in-pencil-on-the-wall/

The flat on the third floor of the house above the sea had one flaw, which Mrs. Stanka mentioned only once they had carried in their suitcases: someone already lived in it. From October to June it was home to the poet Slaven Kordić, who every summer moved in with his sister in Hutovo, because in winter Stanka charged him half the rent on condition that he cleared out the flat for tourists in summer. His books stayed on the shelves, his clothes in a locked wardrobe. "He won't bother you," Stanka said. "It's as if he weren't there." Ismar laughed and said nobody bothered him as long as the air conditioning worked.

Amira and Ismar had been married for twelve years. He had a small firm in Tuzla that made aluminum windows and doors; he was a good, punctual man who made his living measuring openings and believed that everything could be measured. She worked in the library of a high school and wrote poems at night at the kitchen table, once the children were asleep. She published them rarely, in a literary magazine in Tuzla, signed only with her initials. In the same magazine Kordić's poems appeared on the first pages, with a photograph that was always too small to show his face. For two years Amira had envied him without knowing what he looked like.

On the first evening, while Ismar was watching a match on the balcony and the children were asleep, she discovered the wall. Behind the curtain, beside the bed, on the white paint, someone had written in pencil in small, slanted letters: half a line, a single word, then half a line again, as if he had written in the dark without turning on the light, so the thought would not get away. "At night the sea has no color, only a voice." "Someone in the next room is turning a page, and it is the rain." Amira stood with her hand on the curtain until Ismar shouted from the balcony that they had scored. She lay down and looked at the wall for a long time,

though nothing could be seen in the dark.

On the fourth day Ismar got word that the biggest order of the year had come in, a school in Živinice, and that he had to come and take measurements. He said he would be back in ten days, kissed the children and left with a colleague who picked him up on the coastal highway. Amira stayed with her daughter, her son and the poet's things. In the mornings they went to the beach, after lunch the children slept, and she read his books, his notes in the margins, his underlined sentences. She dusted his desk as if it were her job. Behind the glass of a framed old postcard of Neum, on the wall by the door, she found two photographs of him, tucked one behind the other. A thin face, dark eyes a little too big for that face, the head tilted like that of a man listening to something far away.

Mrs. Stanka liked to talk, and Amira asked. Kordić was from Mostar, quiet, paid on time, and worked as a proofreader for a newspaper over the internet. His heart had been weak since childhood, and he climbed the stairs slowly, stopping on every landing. Every morning he went down to the bakery for the paper and a burek, and he always bought two rolls, though he lived alone. He had never married. "He says he never found a woman who would want to listen to what he hears," Stanka said, and shrugged, as if it were an illness like any other. Then she remembered: on Thursday at five he would come by for a dictionary he had forgotten.

On Thursday Amira sent the children off for ice cream with Stanka's granddaughter. She washed her hair, put on her blue linen dress, set two cups on the table, then put one back in the cupboard because it seemed ridiculous, then took it out again. At half past four Stanka came up, out of breath, with her phone in her hand. He had called. His sister's car had broken down in Hutovo, he could not come, he would send someone for the dictionary. Amira said it did not matter and laughed. Then she went into the bathroom, turned on the tap and cried so that no one would hear, the way women cry when they do not know why they are crying.

That night she wrote a letter to the magazine, asking them to forward it to the author. She wrote about one of his poems, about the rain that turns pages, and signed with her initials. The answer came the next day, two lines: he thanked the unknown colleague, whose poems he had noticed in the same magazine, and thought she had a good ear for silence. She read it thirty times. Stanka had left her the key to the wardrobe so she could take out blankets, and Amira took a blanket, but also his old linen jacket, and sat in it on the balcony until two, looking at the lights on Pelješac and the bridge, which in the dark showed only by its lamps.

On Saturday evening she walked along the waterfront with the children. The children were eating ice cream, and from a bench Stanka waved. "There he is, he just went by, the one in the white shirt!" Amira turned around. A hundred men in white shirts were walking along the waterfront toward the hotels, all with their backs to her. She ran a few steps, pulling her son by the hand, then stopped, because she did not know which back was his. Her son dropped his ice cream and began to cry, and she knelt to comfort him, and as she knelt on the warm stone, she knew she had just lost a man she had never had.

Ismar came back pleased, tanned from the building site, with a contract in his bag. He noticed that she was sunburned and absent, and put it down to the sea. On the last night she did not sleep. By the light of her phone she read the wall, line by line, while he breathed beside her, calmly, like a man who had measured everything. She added nothing. In the morning, while Ismar was loading the suitcases into the car, Stanka promised to tell the poet that the lady from Tuzla had liked his poems very much.

In November, in the library, between two classes, she read the news on a website. Slaven Kordić had died in the hospital in Mostar, at the age of thirty-nine. His heart had given out in his sleep. A month later a friend published his last poems in the magazine, with a short note from the poet's notebook: all his life he had written for a woman he had invented, he had left the door unlocked for her, and she had not come. Amira

locked herself in the archive and sat among the old school reading books until the bell rang for the long break.

She wrote to Stanka. Just before New Year an envelope arrived: the two photographs from behind the glass of the postcard and a note written in large letters. "I told him about you in September. He asked what you looked like. I said you were blond and quiet and read standing up. He said you should come next summer and have coffee on the balcony. There." Amira put the photographs in the folder with her poems, at the bottom of the wardrobe, under the winter sweaters. That same week she learned she was pregnant.

The boy was born at the end of April. He was calm, rarely cried, and would look at the window for a long time, as if listening to something far away. He had dark eyes, a little too big for his face. Amira saw it on the very first night in the maternity ward and told no one, not even herself.

Four years later Ismar was looking for the papers for the house, because the firm needed a loan, and at the bottom of the wardrobe, under the sweaters, he found the folder. Inside were her poems, signed with initials he recognized from a magazine he had never read, a clipping from the magazine with a poet's last poems, and two photographs. He looked at the face in the photograph, and then at the boy, who was building a tower on the carpet out of aluminum profile samples. The same eyes. The same head, tilted toward the window. He sat down on the bed and began to count. August. Ten days in Tuzla. The poet in Hutovo, fifteen minutes from the sea.

When Amira came home from work, the folder lay open on the table. Ismar asked quietly, the way he had always asked everything. She told him the truth, the only one she had. She had never seen him. Not once. For three weeks she had lived among his things, read his wall, worn his jacket on the balcony, and written him one letter, to which she got two lines. That was all. Ismar looked at her for a long time. "Nobody keeps pictures of a man they have never seen," he said. "I do," she said, and

only then did she understand that for something that never happened there is no proof at all.

He did not shout. He closed the folder and put it on top of the wardrobe, where she could not reach it without a chair. The boy came running with his tower in his hands and wanted to be picked up. Ismar picked him up, as always, and held him for a long time, looking out the window over his shoulder. From that day on he carried him on his shoulders to the market and bought him ice cream, just as before, but when the boy told him something, Ismar looked at his hands, at his shoes, at the tower of profiles, anywhere but into his eyes.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Room in Velešići

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-room-in-velesici/

I had not seen Mithat in eleven years, since I moved to Ljubljana, and when I ran into him on the Obala embankment in November, I recognized him first by his walk. At the First Gymnasium he had been the most honest of us, the one who answers a question at once and does not understand why the others beat around the bush. Now he had gray at his temples, a good coat and the look of a man who has lost something in his pocket and cannot stop searching for it. We sat down in a café across from the Miljacka. We each drank a coffee and talked about people we both barely remembered, and then Mithat took out his wallet and from it a photograph, a real one, printed, the kind nobody carries anymore.

The photograph showed a woman in a light-colored coat on the Latin Bridge, half turned away from the lens, as if someone were calling her from the other side of the river. She was beautiful the way women are who have known it for a long time and no longer care. But it was not her eyes that stopped me, it was her mouth. It was pressed together slightly, as if she were holding something she must not let fall. "What do you think of her?" Mithat asked. I said she looked to me like a woman with a secret. Mithat looked at the photograph for a long time, then called the waiter and ordered two more coffees, which with us had always meant the story would be a long one.

Her name was Elena Filipović. He had met her three years earlier, at a reception during the film festival, where he was because his firm was restoring an old cinema, and she was because she was invited everywhere. She was the widow of a diplomat, lived alone in a large apartment behind the Cathedral, and spoke softly, as if in the next room there were someone who must not hear. Mithat brought her a glass of water and asked her something about the film. She answered him with a question. When they parted she did not give him her phone number, but

told him to leave her a note with the flower seller on Ferhadija. When he brought the flower seller an envelope the next day, she took it without a word, as if she did this every week.

They saw each other all autumn and winter, but always the way she arranged it. She never invited him to her place. She never let him call her. She wrote to him from a number that changed every few months and told him where she would be waiting. In the waiting room of the railway station. In a cabin of the cable car to Trebević, up and down twice in a row. In the old Jewish cemetery, at ten in the morning, in the fog. She always arrived on time and always left first, and always, before she turned the corner, she looked back once, not toward him but over her shoulder, as if checking whether anyone was behind her. Mithat thought it was style. Then he thought it was fear. In the end he decided he did not care and that he would ask her to marry him.

It was in March, in the rain. Mithat was in Velešići because of a house that had to be reinforced before they added a floor, and he was standing under the eaves of someone else's yard, waiting for the rain to ease a little. Then Elena came down the street. She wore a scarf over her hair and dark glasses on a cloudy day, she walked fast, looking down at the cobblestones, and she did not see him. She stopped in front of an old house with a green gate, took a key out of her bag, glanced over her shoulder in that way of hers and went in. Mithat stayed under the eaves until the rain stopped, and then for another half hour. She did not come out.

That evening they had dinner in a small restaurant below Vratnik, which she had chosen. She was especially beautiful and especially calm, and the whole time Mithat kept his hand on the pocket where he carried the ring. He asked her what she had done that day. She said she had been at home, that she had had a headache and had not gone out. "I saw you in Velešići," he said. "You were going into a house with a green gate. You had a key." Elena put down her fork. She did not turn pale and she did not laugh. "I wasn't in Velešići," she said. "And don't ask me about things

that are none of your business."

Mithat said that everything was his business if he was going to marry her. He said he could not spend his life with someone who had a key to a house he was not allowed to enter. Elena listened, and then said only that it was late and that she would like to go home. He drove her to the Cathedral and she got out without saying goodbye. A week later Mithat left for Doha, for a project he had been weighing for months, and he got in touch with her only once, with a message to a number that had already been disconnected. The ring stayed in the pocket of the coat he did not take, because in Doha it was over a hundred degrees.

He came back in December. The first thing he saw, when he went down to the old town to buy tobacco for his father, was a death notice on the wall by the Cathedral, among the other death notices. Elena Filipović, passed away suddenly. In the photograph she was looking straight into the lens, which she had never done. From a friend of hers, who barely recognized him, he learned that in November she had walked out of a premiere at the National Theater into the sleet without a coat, because, as she said, she had left it at someone's place, and that the pneumonia had been stronger than she was. Whose place she had left the coat at, the friend did not know.

The next day Mithat went to Velešići. The green gate was opened by an older woman in a wool vest, Mrs. Sejfija, and when she heard the name, she stepped aside to let him in. The upstairs room, she said, had been rented to Mrs. Elena since the autumn before. She came twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays in the afternoon, always alone. Mrs. Sejfija made her tea. Elena sat by the window, read or looked down toward the station and the trains that rarely passed, and around six she would leave. "And did anyone come?" Mithat asked. "Who would come?" said Mrs. Sejfija. "She came here so nobody would find her. That is what she said when she took the room. She paid until the end of the year."

They went upstairs. The room was small and clean, with two armchairs, a table and a single window. On the table stood a cup, turned upside down on its saucer, and a book with a pencil in place of a bookmark. On the hook behind the door hung the light-colored coat from the photograph. "She left it the last time," said Mrs. Sejfija. "It was warm when she came, and when she left it started to snow. I told her to put it on. She said she had to stop somewhere and would pick it up on Tuesday." Mithat stood in front of the coat and did not touch it. He asked if he could sit down. He sat in the armchair by the window until it grew dark and saw nothing but the station, the rooftops and one train for Konjic that was running late.

Mithat fell silent and laid the photograph on the table, face toward me. His coffee had gone cold. "What do you think?" he asked. I told him what I thought. That there had been no one. That Elena had not needed a lover but a door nobody knew about, and that the door was dearer to her than any man who might walk through it. That the secret was all she had, and that was exactly why she could not give it even to him. Mithat nodded, as if he had already heard this from someone. "That's what I think too," he said. "Almost always."

He paid the waiter and, as we stepped out onto the Obala, he told me, without looking at me, that he had taken that room from Mrs. Sejfija himself. He pays in advance, as she did, always to the end of the year. He goes there on Tuesdays and Fridays after work, drinks tea, reads, watches the trains. The coat still hangs on the hook behind the door. Nobody knows where he is, he said, not his mother, not the people at the firm, not the woman he sometimes sees, who has already asked him twice where he disappears to. I asked him what he tells her. "Nothing," said Mithat. "I tell her not to ask me about things that are none of her business."

We parted at the Latin Bridge. I watched him walk away along the Obala, his hands in the pockets of his good coat. Before he turned the corner, he looked back once, not toward me but over his shoulder, as if checking whether anyone was behind him.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

Entrance A, Fourth Floor

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/entrance-a-fourth-floor/

If you had passed through Borik that January evening, between the bakery that stays open until midnight and the parking lot by the sports hall, you might have seen a man in a fur coat and a fur hat walking up and down in front of a twelve-story building and looking at the windows as if he were counting them. It was Vukašin Jovanović, tax inspector, fifty-four years old and twenty-two years married. The snow was falling in big wet flakes, the kind that falls in Banja Luka when winter cannot make up its mind.

It had all started with a message. Zorica's phone had been left on the table at lunch, the screen lit up, and Vukašin, not of his own free will but out of the habit of a man who has spent his life reading other people's papers, read: Tomorrow at eight, at my place, entrance B, fourth floor. Bring that cream, I'll take care of the rest. The message was from someone called B. The next day Zorica said her sister had asked her over to Lauš. Vukašin said that was nice and to give her sister his regards, and an hour later he was sitting in his car around the corner, headlights off, watching his wife walk into a building in Borik instead of onto the bus for Lauš.

The trouble was that the building had two entrances, A and B, side by side, with the same glass doors and the same broken intercom, and while Vukašin was locking his car he had missed which one she went into. While he was thinking it over, a young man in a red scarf came out of the dark and stood beside him under the same awning. He was looking at the same windows. "Excuse me," said Vukašin, in the voice he used on inspections to ask for fiscal receipts, "you didn't happen to see a lady in a fox-colored coat?" The young man looked him over. "I've seen five of them. It's winter in Borik." "This one had red boots." "I don't look at other men's wives' boots," said the young man, and Vukašin concluded at

once that he was lying.

They talked like that for ten minutes or so, each convinced the other knew more. Vukašin explained that he was not looking for his own wife but for the wife of a friend, who was ill and could not come himself. The young man, who introduced himself as Nemanja, said he was waiting for his sister, who was late because, well, that was how she was. Vukašin asked him what floor his sister lived on. Nemanja asked him what the friend's name was. They both said the fourth, and they both frowned at that. Then on the fourth floor, above entrance A, someone switched on a light and switched it off again at once, and when Vukašin turned to point it out, the young man in the red scarf was gone.

Vukašin decided it was a sign. He went in through entrance A, because the glass door was propped open with a brick, climbed the stairs to the fourth floor so the elevator would not give him away, and found the door of the apartment on the left ajar. Later, when he talked about it, and he talked about it only once, he said that at that moment he was not thinking. He pushed the door. The hallway smelled of sarma and lavender. From the living room came the voice of a television announcer and an older man's voice arguing with him. From the kitchen came a woman's laughter. Vukašin concluded that he had arrived just in time. Then he heard footsteps coming toward the hallway, and the only door beside him was the bedroom door.

The bed was wide, old and high, with a lace cover that reached the floor. Vukašin crawled under it in his fur coat and hat, head toward the wall, and bumped his shoulder against something soft that said, "Ow." "Who's that?" Vukašin whispered. "Who's that?" whispered the voice. In the dark he felt a scarf. It was wool and, he was sure of it, red. "You," said Vukašin. "You," said Nemanja. "What are you doing here?" "What are you doing here? This isn't your bed." "It isn't yours either," said Nemanja, and Vukašin heard more confidence in that than he liked.

Before they could clear anything up, a couple came into the room. From under the lace Vukašin saw two pairs of slippers: one a man's, plaid, with white ankles sticking out of them, and one a woman's, with little feathers. They were not Zorica's. Zorica did not wear feathers on anything. Behind the slippers a small dog ran into the room, white as a ball of wool, and stopped in the middle of the rug. "Smiljana, is the apartment locked?" asked the old voice. "It is, Momčilo," said the woman's voice, a little too quickly. The bed creaked under two people and sank down onto the back of Vukašin's neck.

Under the bed began the quietest quarrel in the history of Borik. Vukašin whispered that he was here because of a woman. Nemanja whispered that he was here because of a woman too. Vukašin whispered that his wife was an honest woman and that all of this was a misunderstanding. Nemanja whispered that his was honest too, she just happened to be married to a man of seventy-seven who was supposed to be at the Banja Slatina spa until Sunday. Only then did Vukašin understand who Smiljana was, and why the door had been left ajar, and for whom. "Move your knee," whispered Nemanja. "That isn't my knee, it's my hat." "Take off your hat." "I won't. It's cold under the bed." Above them retired judge Momčilo Stojanović was reading aloud from the newspaper about electricity prices.

All this time the dog had stood on the rug, looking under the lace. Her name was Mici, as both of them learned when Smiljana said, "Mici, go to your place." Mici did not go to her place. She came closer, pushed her nose under the cover, found Vukašin's nose and barked, in a thin voice that rang like a bicycle bell. "What is she barking at?" asked the judge. "A mouse, I'm sure," said Smiljana. "There haven't been mice in this building since the nineties," said the judge, and, groaning, he began to get up. "I'm going for the broom." "Momčilo, leave it." "I'm going for the broom and the flashlight."

When the plaid slippers went out into the hallway and the kitchen door opened, Nemanja wriggled out from under the bed first, on one side, and

Vukašin, his fur coat caught on the lace, on the other. Smiljana was sitting on the bed in a nightgown buttoned to the chin, watching them without a sound. First Nemanja, then Vukašin, then Vukašin again, as if she were trying to place him from some service counter. She pointed them to the door. Mici, however, thought a game had begun. She ran after Vukašin barking, and he, not knowing what else to do, bent down, picked her up and tucked her under his coat. Mici went quiet at once, licked his chin and burrowed into his armpit as if she had always lived there. On the stairs Nemanja said neither thank you nor goodbye. He raced down the steps, three at a time, and the red scarf stayed behind him on the railing of the third floor.

Vukašin got home by taxi at half past nine. Zorica was at home. She was sitting in the kitchen in her bathrobe, drinking mint tea and watching a quiz show. Her eyebrows were new, thin and dark, and the skin around them still red. "Biba is a real artist," she said without turning around. "Entrance B, fourth floor. I told you my sister had asked me over, but she sent me to Biba, because I couldn't go to your brother's slava looking the way I did. And where have you been?" Vukašin stood in the kitchen doorway in his wet fur coat. He did not know what to say. Something moved under the coat.

Zorica turned around just as Mici poked her head out between two buttons. "Vukašin," she said. "What is that?" Vukašin looked at the dog. The dog looked at him. In twenty-two years of marriage he had never brought her anything except the car keys and the electricity bill. "That," he said, "is for you." Zorica put down her cup. She came over, took Mici out from under the coat, held her up to her face like a baby and burst into tears the way she had not cried even at their wedding. That night Mici slept between them, on Vukašin's pillow. Vukašin did not sleep at all. He lay there listening to the dog snore and wondering how you return someone else's dog to a building you can never go back to.

In the morning, over breakfast, Zorica showed him her phone. In the Borik residents' group, which she had joined because of the bakery, a post

had appeared from judge Momčilo Stojanović: Missing, white Pomeranian Mici, entrance A, fourth floor, last night around nine, reward for the finder. Below the post, twenty minutes later, from another profile, there was only one comment: Whoever took her, please keep her. It was signed Smiljana Stojanović, with a heart. "You see how good people are," said Zorica, and gave Mici a piece of a crescent roll. Vukašin looked at the comment for a long time. Then, while Zorica poured the coffee, he added a heart of his own under it from her phone.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

The Woman in the Brick-Red Jacket

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-woman-in-the-brick-red-jacket/

The woman was waiting for her at the bottom of the steps, where the narrow street from Kovači runs down toward Baščaršija, and she stepped into her path as if they knew each other. She was heavyset, in a brick-red jacket, her hair dyed black, with a cheap perfume that arrived before she did. "So you're the one," she said, loudly enough that a man stacking copper coffee pots in front of his shop turned around. "You're the reason Tin doesn't call me anymore." Lidija tried to get past. The woman moved with her, a step to the left, a step to the right, saying that her name was Gorana, that she had been with Tin for three years, and that a lawyer's wife had no business being in his apartment at four in the afternoon.

Lidija did not remember what she answered. She remembered only that she opened her bag, found two fifty-mark notes in her wallet, and that the woman took them like change, unhurried, looking her in the eye. "That's for today," said Gorana. "We'll be seeing each other." Lidija went down to Baščaršija almost at a run, got into the first taxi by the Sebilj fountain, and only at Marijin Dvor did she realize that she was going home to Mustafa, who thought she was at the hairdresser, without a new haircut.

She had married Mustafa Muratović fourteen years ago, when he was already a lawyer they invited onto television and she was a bank clerk who thought she would always work. She stopped working when Daris was born. Mustafa was good, patient and punctual, and after all those years a little like the furniture in their apartment on Koševsko Brdo: reliable, expensive and invisible. She had met Tin in April, at a concert at the Academy of Music, where he was the accompanist for a violinist. He was ten years younger and looked at her as if she were something still waiting to be discovered. That was all. She did not love him. She loved the way to his apartment, the steps, the key he had given her, and the fact that nobody knew.

For the first few days she did not go out. She told Mustafa she had a headache, and he brought her tea and laid his hand on her forehead like a doctor. Every time the intercom buzzed, Lidija felt her stomach go cold. Every time an unknown number appeared on her phone, she let it ring out. Over dinner Mustafa talked about a case at the Municipal Court, and at one point he raised his eyes to her. "You haven't been yourself these days," he said. "Everything is fine," she said. "Good," he said, and went on eating, and that very good kept her awake.

Gorana got in touch on the sixth day, by text message. She did not explain how she had found the number. She wrote only the amount, five hundred marks, and the place, a bench in the park behind the National Museum, at noon. Lidija withdrew the money from the cash machine by the post office and made sure the card was her own, not the joint one. On the bench Gorana counted the notes slowly, like a woman selling at the market, and said Tin had always had a weakness for women with something to lose. "I have nothing," she said. "That's why I don't have to be nice." After that came a thousand marks, then another thousand, then a message at eleven at night, while Mustafa sat in the same room reading a case file: Friday, noon, same bench.

That week Daris broke the side mirror on a neighbor's car in front of the building with his ball and said it had not been him. Mustafa did not shout. He sat down beside his son on the couch and told him he had until bedtime, that he did not have to say anything if he did not want to, but that he knew what it was like when a person carried something inside. Daris held out until ten. Then he came into the living room in his pajamas and told everything, crying, and afterward he fell asleep in two minutes, arms spread wide. "You see," Mustafa said quietly, switching off the light in the children's room, "the punishment is not the worst part. The worst part is waiting for it. Once you confess, it gets easier right away." Lidija stood behind him in the hallway and could not swallow.

On Friday at noon Gorana did not ask for money. She sat on the same bench and looked at Lidija's hand. "The ring," she said. "The one with the

emerald. I'm tired of paper." Lidija said it was the ring her husband had given her when he proposed, and that he would notice by evening. "Then tell him you lost it," said Gorana. "Or tell him the truth. It's all the same to me. You have until Monday."

Lidija went straight to Kovači. Tin opened the door in a T-shirt, sheet music spread across the floor, and he was not glad to see her. While she told him, he looked at her as if she were retelling a movie. He said he did not know any Gorana. His exes, he said, were two students and a cellist who now lived in Graz, and none of them wore a brick-red jacket. Then, instead of putting his arms around her, he went to the window and looked down into the street. "Maybe it's better if you don't come for a while," he said. "For your sake, you understand. Because of your husband." Lidija understood. She went down the same steps, and this time nobody was waiting for her, and that was worse than if someone had been.

That evening Mustafa came home early. He made coffee, which he had not done in years, and sat down across from her at the kitchen table. He talked about his father, who had kept a goldsmith's shop in Tešanj and used to say that you recognize real gold because you are not ashamed to show it. Then he fell silent and looked at her for a long time. "Lidija," he said, "is there something you want to tell me?" Her mouth had already opened. She saw Daris in his pajamas standing in the living room doorway. She saw herself saying Tin's name in this kitchen, under the clock they had received as a wedding present. "No," she said. "I'm tired, that's all." Mustafa nodded and washed his cup.

She did not sleep. At four in the morning, while Mustafa breathed evenly beside her, she understood that she could not hold out until Monday. She could not hand over the ring, she could not not hand it over, she could not listen to the intercom anymore. She dressed in the dark, took the phone with Gorana's messages and went out. She had decided to go to the police and report the blackmail, and let whatever came out afterward come out. She walked through the empty city, past shuttered shop

windows and the Eternal Flame, because she thought she would change her mind if she got into a taxi. A light was burning in front of the police station. When she put her hand on the door handle, a car stopped behind her. It was Mustafa's car.

He did not get out. He rolled down the window and told her to get in, that she did not have to go in there, and he said it so calmly that she knew at once. She sat down beside him. Only then did her hands begin to shake. Gorana, Mustafa said, was really named Zrinka and acted in the puppet theater at Skenderija, mostly wolves and witches. He had paid her. In May he had seen Lidija coming out of the building in Kovači, and for a week he had thought about what to do. He did not want a scandal. He did not want a divorce. He had wanted, he said, for her to come to him herself and tell him, like Daris, because he thought it would be easier for her then.

Lidija was silent for a long time. "A month," she said at last. "For a month I haven't slept." "I know," he said. "Neither have I." He took an envelope out of the box between the seats. In it was all the money she had paid, note by note, and a slip of paper on which Zrinka had written down the dates in neat letters. The ring had not been his idea, he said, but Zrinka's, to speed things up, and he had agreed. Lidija looked at the envelope on her knees. She wanted to say that what he had done was worse than anything she had done, and she did not know whether that was true. "And if I had gone in?" she asked. "Then I would have gone in after you," said Mustafa, "and told the officer on duty that my wife had reported an actress."

They got home at five, before Daris woke up. Mustafa fell asleep at once, fully dressed, like a man who had closed a long case. Lidija did not. In the morning she wrote to Tin that she would not be coming anymore and deleted his number, and that was the easiest thing of all and meant nothing to her. A week later she bought a ticket for a children's show at Skenderija and sat in the back row among the grandmothers and nannies. Zrinka played the wolf. She had the same black hair, but without

the perfume and without the brick-red jacket she looked smaller and younger. When she came out at the end to take her bow, her eyes found Lidija across the hall in the back row and stopped. Lidija stood up and clapped, for a long time, until the children around her began to turn and look.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

A Secret Affair at Second Fifty-One

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-secret-affair-at-second-fifty-one/

The video runs two minutes and fourteen seconds. Arnela, our youngest dancer, posted it on the ensemble's page at twelve minutes past one in the morning, somewhere between Ptuj and the Croatian border, with the caption: Heading home, thank you, Slovenia! I opened it at seven, over my first coffee, because since I stopped dancing I am the one who reads the comments and answers the relatives in Germany when they ask about the next performance. In the video the whole bus is singing Moj dilbere. Someone is beating the rhythm on the back of a seat. Bahrija, our choreographer, conducts from the front row with a bottle of water, as if she were holding a baton.

I danced in that ensemble for sixteen years. I met Asmir at a rehearsal, in the hall of the Cultural Center where the heating works only when someone from the District comes by. We danced together at weddings, at festivals in Tuzla and Bijeljina, once even in Vienna, in front of our own people, who cried from the first song to the last. Then three years ago my knee gave out, on the steps outside the market, with two bags in my hands. After the operation the doctor said I could walk, but that I was finished with the kolo. Asmir wanted to quit along with me. I told him not to be ridiculous, that one of us had to stay. Bahrija gave him a new partner, Slavica Tomić, the wife of Dražen Tomić, who runs a tire shop near the bridge over the Sava. At the spring festival in Tuzla they were named the best pair. I framed that certificate and hung it in the hallway.

I watched the video once for the song, and a second time for Asmir, because the first time I had not found him. The camera moves from Bahrija toward the back of the bus, past the children from the junior group asleep on each other's shoulders, past the accordion player who plays and yawns at the same time. At fifty-one seconds it passes the second to last row. Asmir and Slavica are sitting there. They are not

singing. Asmir is peeling a mandarin the way he always peels it, in one piece, so the peel stays whole like a spiral, and without looking he holds a segment out to the side. Slavica takes it without looking. The camera moves on. The whole thing lasts maybe two seconds.

For twenty-two years he has handed me mandarins like that. On the couch while we watch the news, in the car on the way to Tuzla, in the hospital after the operation, when he would not let me sit up. I never look at his hand and he never looks at mine. I thought it was ours, the way a word is ours or an old nickname. I took the video back to fifty-one seconds. Then again. I watched those two seconds eleven times, until my coffee went cold and I began to hear, in the sound of the accordion, when the accordion player took a breath.

By eight o'clock there were a hundred and some comments under the video. Well done, the pride of Brčko, God bless you all. Some aunt in Sweden wrote that she had cried. Dražen Tomić left a heart. I looked at his name under the heart and understood that he had seen nothing, and that nobody had seen anything, because nobody but me knows how Asmir peels mandarins. There was nothing in the video you could show a court, or the relatives, or Bahrija. There was only one hand that knew where the other hand was.

The bus was due around two. Before that I went to the market and bought two pounds of mandarins from the Neretva, from the same man I buy from every autumn. He asked whether our people were back from Slovenia. I said they were, almost. Then, for the first time since I stopped dancing, I went to meet the bus in front of the Cultural Center. I stood among the mothers of the children from the junior group, in the wind that came off the Sava. Asmir was among the first to get off, with the big bag that held the costumes, and he was glad when he saw me. That was honest, I have to give him that.

Slavica got off after him and went straight to Dražen's car. They did not look at each other. Not once. I danced in a pair for sixteen years, and I

know that partners look at each other at least once after a tour, if only to say it went well. They parted like two people who had never met, and that was exactly how I knew they had met very well.

At home he talked about Ptuj. About the stage below the castle, about the hosts who treated them to sausages and white wine that Bahrija would not let anyone touch before the performance, about a Slovenian man who came up after the kolo to ask where he could buy opanci. He told it well, as always. I put a mandarin on the table between us. He picked it up without breaking off his story, peeled it in one piece, left the peel like a spiral beside the plate, and held a segment out to me, looking out the window. I did not take it. The segment stayed in the air. Several seconds passed before he turned his head.

"How long?" I asked. "How long what?" I showed him the phone, the fifty-first second, and played it twice, so there would be no confusion. He looked at the screen, then at the segment still in his hand. "Sanela, it's a mandarin," he said. "People eat on the bus." "People eat on the bus," I said. "But you gave her a segment and you did not look. You don't do that with people. You do that with me."

He was silent for a long time. Then he set the segment down on the peel and said it had started last winter, during rehearsals for Tuzla, when they stayed after everyone else to practice that turn in the second part. He said he had not planned it. He said it was not what I thought, and when I asked him what I thought, he could not say. He also said he would quit, the ensemble and everything, if that was what I wanted. I asked whether Dražen knew. He said nobody knew. I asked whether Arnela knew, since she had filmed it. He said Arnela films the song, not the people.

When he went to take a shower, the way you go when you do not know what else to do, I picked up my phone and opened Arnela's video. Below a hundred and fifty comments I wrote my own, publicly, under my own name: You sang beautifully. Asmir, I bought mandarins. For Brčko it was the most ordinary comment from a woman waiting for her husband to

come home from a trip. A neighbor liked it within four minutes. Within seven minutes the video had disappeared from the page. Later Arnela sent me a message saying someone had asked her to take it down, supposedly because you could see the children sleeping with their mouths open, and she asked whether anyone had saved it, because it was her favorite video from the tour.

I had saved it. I did not send it to anyone. I sat at the table while the water ran in the bathroom and peeled a mandarin myself, for the first time in many years, and it did not go well. The peel tore into small pieces, my fingers smelled bitter, and I ate the segments one by one and looked at each before I put it in my mouth. In the ensemble's group chat, meanwhile, Bahrija had asked who was coming to rehearsal on Monday. Asmir answered first, as always. Under his reply I wrote that I was coming too. Not to dance. Just to watch.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

A Full Bowl for Karaman

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-full-bowl-for-karaman/

It was I who brought Karaman to Strahinja, as a puppy, from a village near Nevesinje, and that is why I think I have the right to tell this to the end. He was a Šarplaninac, gray and shaggy, and by his second year he had grown so big that the children in Gacko called him the calf. Strahinja Banović, my best man and my neighbor, drove a truck for a company from Bileća: three weeks on the road in Germany, one week at home. When he came back, Karaman would meet him at the gate and lie down across his feet, and Jagoda would call from the kitchen that at least someone in this house was happy.

Jagoda was from Bileća, the only sister of the five Jugović brothers and the daughter of old Bogdan, who owned a gas station there, two bars and an opinion about everything. She married Strahinja at twenty-two and for ten years she waited for the truck. They had no children. Winters on the Gacko plain are long, the fog can lie on the fields for weeks, and of all the voices in the house the one heard most often was Karaman's. I saw it, as everyone did. Nobody said anything, because you do not talk about another man's house until it burns down.

That autumn Mihajlo came to Bileća. People remembered him as a skinny boy who had left at eighteen without saying goodbye. He came back twenty years later, with shoulder-length hair, in a white shirt, with a restaurant in Istanbul and a story for every table. He came for his mother's seventieth birthday and stayed a month. He sat in Bogdan's bar and talked about the Bosphorus at dusk, about the ferries and the gulls, about fish you eat with your fingers. Jagoda started dropping in on her father every day. People said later that they had heard her laughing, loudly, for the first time in many years.

At the end of October, while Strahinja was somewhere near Cologne, Jagoda left. On the kitchen table she left a note and placed her wedding

ring on top of it. She filled Karaman's bowl to the brim with kibble, enough for three days. When Strahinja arrived, I met him at the gate, because someone had to. He heard me out, sat down on the step and kept his hand on the dog's head for a long time. Then he got up, washed his face and drove to Bileća.

Bogdan received him in his bar, at the corner table, with his five sons around him. "I no longer have a daughter," the old man said. "If you find her, do not bring her to my door. We will find you a better one." Strahinja asked whether any of the brothers would go with him. The brothers looked at the table. The eldest, Damjan, said he had work to do. The others did not even say that.

He went alone, in his old car, with Karaman on the back seat, all of which the dog took up. He drove for two days, across Serbia and Bulgaria. He found the restaurant from the photographs Mihajlo kept posting: in Kumkapı, in a little street full of tables, musicians and cats. He parked the car across the street and for an hour he only watched through the glass. Jagoda was carrying plates between the tables, quickly, tiredly, with her hair tied back the way she had never tied it at home. In passing, Mihajlo patted her on the back, the way a boss pats a waitress who works hard. Then Strahinja left the window open a crack, for the dog, and sat down at a table outside. Jagoda came out with a tray and stopped. The glasses rattled. Mihajlo came after her with his arms spread wide. "My countryman! Sit down, everything is on me."

"I came to talk to Jagoda," said Strahinja. "She is a free woman," said Mihajlo. "Let her speak for herself." Jagoda put down the tray and said, loudly, so the other tables could hear: "What do you want? For ten years I talked to your dog more than to you. You sent me money and pictures of the highway. He showed me the sea." Strahinja listened to it calmly, the way you listen to a weather forecast for a road you have to take anyway. "I did not come to take you," he said. "I came to tell you that the car leaves tomorrow at six, from in front of the hotel by the station, and that the seat next to me is empty. If you do not come, I will go alone and I will not

bother you again."

Mihajlo walked him out to the street, with his hand on his shoulder, laughing for the benefit of the guests. At the edge of the sidewalk he stopped and said, quietly but loud enough for Jagoda behind them to hear: "If you want her back, pay me for the ticket and the dresses. She did not come cheap." Strahinja looked at him for a long time and said nothing. In the car across the street Karaman threw himself at the glass and barked, with all his teeth, the way he barks at wolves near the sheepfold. Mihajlo took his hand off Strahinja's shoulder and stepped back two paces. They say the guests at the tables laughed. Jagoda did not laugh.

What happened in Kumkapı that night, I do not know. Strahinja never told me, and I never asked. I only know that at six in the morning she was standing by the car, with the same small bag she had left with, without makeup. Karaman whined and licked her hands. She did not sit in the front, next to Strahinja, but in the back, beside the dog. They drove for two days, and she spoke only once, at the Bulgarian border. "Why did you come?" Strahinja was looking at the line of trucks in front of him. "You left him a full bowl," he said. "Whoever leaves a full bowl means to come back." Somewhere in Serbia, at a gas station, Jagoda got out and brought him a coffee without asking, with two sugar cubes, the way he had taken it for ten years. Neither of them said a word then either.

By evening all of Bileća knew. In two days it would be Mitrovdan, Saint Demetrius Day, Bogdan's slava, when half the town gathers in his yard. On Saturday morning the five Jugović brothers came to Gacko, to Strahinja's yard, and I went outside, because I knew why they had come. Damjan spoke for all of them. Strahinja should bring Jagoda to the slava, in front of the whole family and the neighbors. He should stand her before her father, give her back the ring in front of everyone and say why. "So it is known," said Damjan, "that the Jugovićs do not defend women like that." Jagoda listened to all of it from the kitchen door, a dish towel in her hand, and did not look at her brothers once.

Strahinja took the ring out of his jacket pocket. "I have it," he said. "I carried it to Istanbul and back." Then he said, without raising his voice, that for ten years he had left his wife alone for three weeks at a time, on a plain where in winter the fog does not lift from the fields. That they were her brothers, and not one of them had got into the car with him. "So who left whom?" he asked. "We will come to the slava if her father invites us. Together. And whoever wants to say something to her can say it to me." Damjan opened his mouth, then closed it.

Strahinja went into the house. Through the kitchen window I saw him set the ring down on the table, in front of Jagoda, and not on her finger. She looked at it for a long time, like something she had forgotten she owned. Then she put it on herself. Karaman lay down on the threshold, across the whole doorway, and one by one the Jugović brothers went back to their cars.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Unfinished Tapestry

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-unfinished-tapestry/

Since lunch Aunt Rejhana had dusted the piano three times, the piano nobody in the house in Vratnik ever played, and Hatidža knew it was not because of the dust. "He will come tonight at eight," her aunt said at last, without turning around. "Just to say hello. Sixteen years have gone by, my dear." Hatidža put down her tapestry, the sky above Vrelo Bosne that she had been working on since spring, and said she knew how many years had gone by. She had counted them better than her aunt.

In the autumn of two thousand seven she was twenty-six years old and the only child of Professor Hazim Muftić, a heart surgeon whose name opened every door in Sarajevo. Her mother had died when she was two. Her father loved her the way one loves a neatly performed operation: with satisfaction, but without surprise. He used to say she was as good as bread, and he did not mean it as a compliment. Hatidža was quiet and broad-faced, worked in the administration of a private clinic, stitched tapestries, and at weddings did not know what to do with her hands.

At a cousin's wedding, in a hotel in Ilidža, Tahir Dautbegović asked her to dance three times and talked with her until the music stopped. He was thirty-one and as handsome as the actors in the series her aunt watched. He had come back from Vienna, where, as he said, he had studied and worked. He talked about museums and about the Danube, and he listened better than he talked. The next day he came to Vratnik with flowers. It was Aunt Rejhana who opened the door to him.

Rejhana was her father's sister, a widow, and she believed in love the way she believed in Turkish television series: in installments. She left the two of them alone in the parlor, brought coffee and Turkish delight, and whispered to Hatidža that a man like that comes once in a lifetime. Hatidža believed her, because it was the first time anyone had told her such a thing.

That winter Tahir took her walking on Wilson's Promenade and bought her popcorn as if she were a little girl. He asked about her tapestries, and, blushing, she showed him the Old Bridge she had stitched over two winters. He looked at it for a long time, traced the stitches with his finger and said it showed the kind of patience nobody had anymore. Nobody before him had looked at her tapestries for longer than a second. When he kissed her for the first time, under the chestnut trees by the National Museum, Hatidža thought that her father, for the first time in his life, had been wrong about her.

The professor watched Tahir over two dinners, and then he made inquiries about him the way one makes a diagnosis. He went to Hrasnica, to Tahir's sister Azemina, a widow with three children, in whose apartment Tahir was living. Azemina turned her coffee cup around for a long time, and then she admitted it. In Vienna Tahir had spent everything their parents had left them, his share and hers. Now he lived with her and borrowed from the neighbors. She asked the professor not to tell her brother who he had heard it from.

The professor received Tahir the next day in his study and did not offer him a seat. Tahir sat down anyway. He said he loved Hatidža, that money had never mattered to him and that he would prove it. "Prove it by leaving," said the professor. Tahir smiled, stood up and said that he did not give up on people as easily as some fathers did. The professor saw him to the door, and then stood at the window for a long time, watching that handsome, straight back move away down Vratnik.

That evening her father called Hatidža into his study. "He does not love you," he said calmly. "He loves this house, the apartments in Ilidža and my savings." If she married him, he would leave everything to a foundation for heart surgery, and all she would have left was her mother's small apartment in Marijin Dvor. Hatidža was silent for a long time. "Then we will live in Marijin Dvor," she said. Her father looked at her as if he were seeing for the first time that she had a spine, and it did not please him.

He took her to Toronto, to his brother's, for a year, until she got over it. Hatidža went because she was obedient, but she did not get over it. She wrote to Tahir through her aunt, every week, long and clumsy letters. In the meantime Tahir came to Vratnik to visit Rejhana, sat in the professor's armchair, drank his coffee, read his newspapers and smoked on his balcony. Rejhana considered this proof of devotion. One evening in February her father took Hatidža out to the shore of Lake Ontario, which was frozen all the way to the horizon. They stood in the wind for a long time without speaking. "Have you given up?" he asked. "No." "I have spent my whole life looking at hearts from the inside," he said. "Yours is good. His is empty." Hatidža said she was cold and would like to go back.

When they came back, neither father nor daughter had changed their minds. Hatidža told Tahir she was ready and that they did not need her father's money. Tahir was silent for a long time. Then he said there was no need to rush, that a daughter must not lose her father because of him, that the professor might soften with time. He spoke beautifully, as always, but while he spoke he looked out of the window, toward the garden and the house, and not at her. A week later he said he had been offered a job in Munich, temporarily. He promised he would come so they could say goodbye. He did not come. Hatidža waited at the window until two, watching a street where nothing moved. He left by bus from the main station. The next day a message came: "I do not want to be the reason you lose your father. Forgive me." Hatidža read it once, deleted it and went back to her tapestry.

"I told you so," her father said at dinner. "You did," she said. She never forgave him for being right, just as she never forgave Tahir for not being what he had said he was.

Others came afterward: a widower, a dentist from Grbavica, then a professor from the Law School, polite and dull. Hatidža turned them down kindly, each one over coffee. Her father fell ill with his heart, which he himself considered a bad joke. Before he died, six years ago, he asked her to promise that she would never marry Tahir Dautbegović. "I have no

intention of marrying him," she said. "But I will not promise either." He changed his will. The largest part went to the foundation. Hatidža was left the house in Vratnik and her mother's apartment. It was enough for her.

At eight the doorbell rang. Tahir was forty-seven, with a thicker neck, thinner hair and an expensive coat that remembered better seasons. His voice was the same. While he talked, his eyes went twice to the piano and to the paintings on the wall, as if he were counting them. Her aunt, as in the old days, left them alone in the parlor. He said he had divorced in Munich, that he had come back to Sarajevo and that not a day had passed without him thinking of her. He had been young and foolish, he said, and her father a strict man, God rest his soul. "Can we at least be friends?" he asked. "And in time, who knows."

"No, Tahir," said Hatidža. She said it quietly, without anger, the way you say what time it is. He smiled his old smile. "Rejhana told me you were alone." "My aunt watches television series," she said. "I have changed, Hatidža." "I know. So have I." She stood up and opened the parlor door for him. On the threshold he paused, as if waiting for her to change her mind, the way she had once waited. She did not change her mind. "Good night," she said, and closed the door.

Her aunt was crying in the kitchen. "My dear, he came back for you!" Hatidža did not answer. She went back to the parlor, sat down by the lamp and picked up her tapestry. She threaded the needle with blue thread and went on with the sky above Vrelo Bosne, stitch by stitch, slowly, as if she had her whole life for it.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

Infidelity in the Midnight League

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/infidelity-in-the-midnight-league/

Bakers do not cheat on their wives, my mother-in-law used to say, because they do not have the time. Željko has been a baker for twenty-two years. He goes to bed at nine, gets up at three, and at four he lights the oven in the small bakery in Mejdan that he inherited from his father. I am a pharmacist, and when I am not on the night shift, I cannot fall asleep before two. We spent eighteen years of marriage like two clocks that agree only at noon. While our son was at home, nobody noticed. When he left last autumn to study in Novi Sad, our house in Paprikovac became as quiet at night as a pharmacy after closing time.

It was Nataša, a colleague from my shift, who brought me into the Midnight League. The league was run by a retired geography teacher named Milutin, every Wednesday at midnight, over a video call: twenty questions and twelve teams from all over the Krajina region. Nataša's team, which was called Gornji Šeher, was short a fourth member, because one of the girls had had a baby. "We need someone who knows the Latin names and does not sleep," said Nataša. "You meet both conditions." On the first night I sat at the kitchen table with headphones on, so I would not wake Željko, and I knew two answers: the Latin name for chamomile and the name of the river that flows into the Vrbas in Banja Luka. Nataša screamed quietly, the way people scream at midnight.

Besides Nataša and a student from Laktaši, the team included Siniša. His camera was always off, the screen showed only the word Kastel and a black square, but his voice was deep and slow, the voice of a man who works nights. He knew everything about old films, about the songs our parents listened to and about the bridges on the Vrbas. That first night, at half past one, while I was washing my cup, a message came: "Chamomile. I thought nobody knew that by heart anymore." I answered that it was my job. He asked what a pharmacy looks like at three in the morning.

Nobody had ever asked me that.

Within a month we were writing to each other every night. I learned that he worked as a sound technician at a local radio station, that he was divorced and that he lived alone, in an apartment with a view of the Kastel fortress. He wrote long messages, without a single mistake, with a period at the end of every sentence, and he always knew where I had left off the night before. He learned more. He asked what I had wanted to be when I was a girl in Kotor Varoš, and I wrote him what I had never told Željko: that I had wanted to study music and that my father talked me out of it with one sentence over lunch, and I obeyed. I wrote to him that sometimes, on the night shift, I stand behind the counter and imagine getting on a night bus to the sea and not calling anyone. He answered: "You talk like someone nobody listens to until the end." I read that sentence ten times.

I had rules, and I repeated them to myself the way I repeat a dosage to patients. I had never seen him. I had never sent him a single photograph. I had never told him my address. Infidelity, I thought, was something you do with your hands. What I did not repeat was that I took my phone into the bathroom, that I had changed my passcode, that I deleted the messages before going to sleep and that I laughed quietly, into a towel, so I would not wake my husband. One night Željko got up at ten to three and found me in the kitchen laughing at the screen. "Who are you laughing with at this hour?" "With Nataša. The quiz." He nodded, put on his jacket and left. He did not ask again. That, I admit, offended me a little. In the morning I found two warm kifle wrapped in paper on the table, as I had every morning for eighteen years, and I ate them without thinking about them.

Siniša never asked to meet. I thought it was consideration. Later I realized it was skill. In May, Milutin the teacher announced that the season final would be played live, at the Lampa café on Gospodska Street, for the eight best teams. Gornji Šeher was in third place. I told Željko I would be with Nataša, and it was the truth, just not all of it. I bought a

new green blouse and hid the receipt in the drawer with Željko's warranties, where he would never look for it. "Bring me whatever you win," he said, and went to bed at nine.

The Lampa was packed. The teacher had a microphone and a bow tie, and on the bar stood a tin trophy and two bottles of wine. Siniša arrived last. He was taller than I had imagined, gray at the temples, in a dark shirt, and he smiled at me as if he had known me for years. He touched my elbow and said: "At last." Then he went over to the table of the team called Mostovi, touched the elbow of a blonde woman in red and said something to her. I did not hear what. I only saw her blush. Under the table Nataša squeezed my hand and whispered that I was as red as a traffic light. I told myself it was a café, that people were friendly and that I had no right to anything.

During the break before the last round I found the blonde woman in front of the mirror in the restroom. Her name was Slađana and she was a teacher from Prijedor. She watched me in the mirror while I washed my hands, and then she said, as if apologizing: "Don't take this the wrong way. Did he say at last to you too?" We stood there for a while in silence. Then she took out her phone, and I took out mine. The same sentence, word for word: You talk like someone nobody listens to until the end. Hers had arrived at one forty, mine at one forty-two, on the same night in March. Slađana said there was another one on the team from Gradiška, who had stayed home tonight with a fever. We both laughed, the kind of laugh that makes your ribs ache, and Slađana's mascara ran.

The last question decided between Gornji Šeher and Mostovi. The teacher read it out slowly, enjoying himself: from the bark of which tree was a substance extracted in the nineteenth century that later gave rise to aspirin? Siniša picked up the pencil at once. "Cinchona," he whispered. "I am sure, I read about it." Nataša nodded, because she always nodded when he was sure. I took the pencil out of his hand, crossed out cinchona and wrote willow. "Danica," he said, saying my name out loud for the first time, "don't be stubborn." "Cinchona is for quinine," I said. "That is why I

am writing willow."

We won by one point. The teacher handed Nataša the tin trophy, and I took my jacket and left while they were still taking pictures. I walked along the Vrbas, past the Kastel fortress, where students with a guitar were sitting on the walls. At one forty a message came: "Where did you disappear to? You were brilliant tonight." I pictured Slađana in a car on the way to Prijedor, reading something very similar, and the woman in Gradiška reading it with a fever. I blocked him and stood on the bridge until my hands stopped shaking.

I got home at half past two. At ten to three Željko came into the kitchen, dressed, and put the džezva on the stove. "Did you win?" "We did." "I knew it." He poured two coffees, even though I never drink coffee at that hour. I sat down across from him, in the green blouse, and told him everything in five sentences, because I had been putting them together the whole way home. That for half a year I had been writing to a man, every night. That I had not seen him until tonight. That I had never sent him a photograph. That I had told that man things I had never told my husband. That tonight I was not the only one he had been writing the same sentences to.

Željko was silent for a long time, looking into his cup. Bakers have big hands, and his looked on the table as if they did not know what to do with themselves. "I knew there was someone," he said at last. "You were laughing in the bathroom. The same way you laughed twenty years ago, when I was the one writing to you." I did not understand. He got up, went into the bedroom and came back with a shoebox I had not opened since we moved. Inside were his letters from Innsbruck, where he had worked for two years in a bakery before our wedding. "You read them in the bathroom so your mother would not see," he said, "and you laughed into a towel." He set the box on the table, put on his jacket and looked at the clock. "The oven has to be burning by four."

I read until morning. He wrote in big, clumsy letters, with mistakes, about flour, about the snow on the Alps, about a boss who shouted in German, and in every letter he asked twice whether I was sleeping well. At the bottom of the box was my photograph from the graduation dance, folded in half, which he had carried in his wallet for two years. Not one sentence was beautiful. Not one could he have sent to anyone else.

At half past five I wrote him a message, the first in many months that was not about bills: "I am not sleeping well. Can I come?" He answered within a minute, from the bakery, surely with a floury finger: "The oven is warm."

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

A Summer on the Great Avenue

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-summer-on-the-great-avenue/

My father's funeral was last November, at Bare cemetery. I stood among the men, hands folded the proper way, and I should have been thinking of him. I was thinking of one summer in Ilidža, of the hedge between two gardens, and of a woman in a dark green headscarf who stood by the cemetery fence, far from everyone, and left before the imam had finished. My mother saw her. I recognized her by the way she held her head, a little tilted, as if listening to someone telling her something funny.

That summer, in two thousand seven, I was nineteen and had just passed every exam of my first year of architecture. Our apartment in Grbavica was being renovated, so my father rented a house in Ilidža, two hundred yards from the Great Avenue, with a garden where old pear trees grew. My father was a civil engineer, a tall, calm man who spoke to my mother politely, as if to a client. My mother, Zejna, spent the whole summer baking cakes nobody had asked for. I read, rode my bicycle to Vrelo Bosne and back, and waited for something to happen to me.

It happened in July, when the villa next door, an old Austrian house with a yellow facade and a wooden veranda, was rented by a woman from Mostar and her daughter. The woman was divorced and in debt, that was known within two days, because at the gate she begged the mailman not to bring her the letters from the bank. The daughter's name was Ilijana. She was twenty-three, with short black hair and a voice that carried over the hedge even when she whispered. The first time I saw her, she was on the veranda tossing crumbs to the pigeons, and the pigeons, like all of us later, did not know what to do with so much attention.

In the evenings a crowd gathered on her veranda. Samed, a dentistry student, who brought watermelons. Rijad, who wrote poems for a website and read them aloud, though no one had asked him to. Stjepan, a married lawyer from Sarajevo, who came by car and said every time that he was

only stopping by. And Muhidin, the son of a carriage driver from the Avenue, who drove her to Vrelo for free whenever she liked. Ilijana called them all by their surnames and humiliated all of them a little, and they came back every evening, at eight sharp, as if to work. One day she called me over the hedge. "You are Muamer," she said. "I heard your mother calling you to lunch. From today you are my aide-de-camp."

Being her aide-de-camp meant carrying her umbrella, buying her ice cream on the Avenue and standing behind her chair while they played a game she had invented herself. Each of them would write one wish on a slip of paper, she would mix the slips in a straw hat and draw one. That was how Samed won the right to take her up Igman. Rijad won the right to have her listen to a poem all the way to the end. I was not allowed to write. "Aides do not wish," she said. "Aides serve." Everyone laughed, and I laughed with them, and at night I could not sleep for happiness that she had noticed me at all.

One afternoon, at Vrelo, she sat on a rock above the water and said men only talked. She asked me whether I would wade across, for her sake, a channel where the water was so cold it made your teeth ache. I went in with my clothes on, up to the waist. When I came out, my teeth were chattering and I could not say a single word. Ilijana laughed, and then she stopped, came over, wiped my face with her scarf and kissed me on the forehead. "You are crazy," she said. "Never love anyone like this." At the time I did not understand that the warning was not meant for me.

At the end of July she changed. She stopped playing the game with the slips of paper, so her admirers sat alone on the veranda and looked at one another. By day she slept, and in the evenings she walked alone down the Avenue and came back when the carriages were already empty. Once I found her crying in the garden, among the pear trees, and when I asked her what was wrong, she said a wasp had stung her. I knew she was in love, because I was too, and I began trying to find out who he was. I suspected Stjepan, because of the car. I suspected Muhidin, because of the horse.

A week later I could not fall asleep and went down into the garden. I sat under a pear tree and looked toward the villa. Around midnight our back door creaked. Someone passed ten feet from me without noticing me and slipped through the gap in the hedge that I myself had made on the very first day, so I could bring her ice cream faster. There was moonlight. I knew the white shirt, I knew the way he threw back his shoulders when he walked, I knew the smell of the cologne my mother bought him every year for his birthday. On the veranda of the villa a light came on and went out.

Two days later my father said he had to go into Sarajevo, to a building site. I rode my bicycle to Vrelo and saw his car in the parking lot by the entrance. I found them on the little wooden bridge over the stream. Ilijana was speaking quickly and quietly and holding him by the sleeve. My father slowly shook his head, the way he did on a site when he told a worker that a wall had to be torn down and built again, and he removed her hand from his sleeve. She took that hand of his and pressed it to her face. She stood like that, eyes closed, until he looked away. I went home and did not leave my room until evening.

My mother found out the way everything in Ilidža gets found out: from the woman at the bakery, whose sister cleaned at the villa. She did not shout. She closed the bedroom door and spoke quietly, and my father said nothing, and that silence was worse than any quarrel I had ever heard. In the morning she said the apartment in Grbavica was finished, though it was not, and that we were going back. My father spent the whole day carrying boxes to the car and did not look at me. There was no one on the veranda of the villa, neither the admirers nor Ilijana, only the straw hat full of slips of paper, forgotten on the table.

Before we left I went to the hedge. Ilijana came out as if she had been waiting for me. She did not justify herself and explained nothing. She said only: "You were the best of them all, my aide." Then she kissed me, not on the forehead this time, briefly and seriously, as if she were signing something, and went into the house. I stood there with my arms full of

my mother's jars of fruit preserves. Later I heard she had married in Split, then divorced, then gone back to live in Mostar. I never looked for her.

After that summer my father lived with my mother for another sixteen years, courteously, as if with a client, and never once mentioned Ilidža. Nor did I to him. At the funeral, when people had dispersed, my mother came up to me at the cemetery exit and took my arm. She was looking toward the fence, where there was no one anymore. "Who was that?" she asked. I could have said I did not know. I said: "Someone from Ilidža." My mother nodded and squeezed my arm. "I know," she said. "For sixteen years I imagined her. I thought she would be prettier."

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

The Camera He Did Not Buy

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-camera-he-did-not-buy/

Sakib Delić stood before a glass display case in the Kapetan shop on King Tvrtko Boulevard, choosing the camera with which he would destroy two lives. Less than an hour earlier, when a fault in a transformer had sent the whole shift home from the steelworks, he had unlocked his apartment on the sixth floor and found in the living room his wife Mubina and Mehmed, the neighbor from the fifth floor. The curtains were drawn. Mehmed was wearing his slippers. Mubina was the first to jump off the couch, Mehmed the second, and the slippers stayed on the rug as evidence. Sakib said nothing. He turned around, closed the door and walked down all six floors, because he could not wait for the elevator.

Kapetan was half a fishing shop and half something else. On the left side were rods, lures, rubber waders up to the waist and boxes of hooks sorted by size. On the right side, behind glass, was what Sakib had come in for: tiny cameras shaped like chargers, alarm clocks and key rings, devices for tracking cars, and voice recorders as thin as a stick of chewing gum. Above the case it said Security. Behind the case stood a salesman of about sixty, with a mustache and glasses pushed up onto his forehead, smiling like a man who had spent the whole morning waiting for him in particular.

"I need a camera," said Sakib. "A small one. So it can't be seen." "For a business or for a home?" "For a home." The salesman nodded like a doctor whose patient has just shown him where it hurts. He introduced himself as Rifet and took out of the case something that looked like an ordinary phone charger. "This is the best we have. A picture as sharp as at the movies, it records in the dark too, it switches on by itself as soon as anything moves. You plug it into the socket and forget about it. It doesn't forget."

Sakib took the charger in his hand and at once saw everything. The camera in the socket behind the television, pointed at the couch. Tomorrow he goes to work as if nothing had happened. The day after, he has the footage. And then his mother-in-law celebrates her sixtieth birthday at the restaurant by Kamberovića Polje, all the relatives from Kakanj and Vareš at a long table, and he stands up with his glass, connects his phone to the big screen and says: this is my present. He saw Mubina's face. He saw Mehmed's wife Hasna knock over a glass of juice. He saw his mother-in-law sit down, for the first time in her life without a word. It was so beautiful that he closed his eyes.

"There's an app too," Rifet went on. "You watch live, from work, from a café, from Germany if you like. The recordings go onto the internet, so even if someone finds the charger, the footage stays. One of my customers watched his house from a fishing trip on the Drina. He caught two grayling and one burglar on the same day." He laughed at his own story, briefly, as if he had told it a hundred times already.

Sakib opened his eyes. Someone at that dinner, he thought, would still ask where the footage came from. And that someone would surely be his brother-in-law Nail, who worked for a lawyer in Sarajevo and always asked exactly the wrong question. In front of everyone Nail would say that people must not be filmed without their consent, that there was a penalty for it, and that the one sitting in court would not be Mehmed but him. Mehmed would be the neighbor who had dropped by for coffee. He would be the man who had hidden a camera in a charger. He put the charger down on the glass, carefully, as if it were hot.

Rifet did not notice, or pretended not to. He took out a gadget the size of a matchbox. "Or this. A tracker. You stick it under the car, the magnet holds even on cobblestones. On your phone you see where the car has been, how long it stood there and at what address. Women buy these most, you know. Husbands buy cameras, wives buy these. A man wants to see, and a woman wants to know where." Sakib imagined Mubina's car with that little box under the bumper and an app telling him the same

address every day, their own, because Mehmed lived one floor down. Day after day the device would assure him that his wife was at home. That made him feel worse than the camera had.

Then he could do it differently, he went on thinking. Without any gadget at all. Write everything in the group Zenica Without Filters, which had forty thousand members and where someone argued about parking every day. First name, last name, floor. Let the whole city know who wore other men's slippers. In his head he was already writing the first sentence and deleting it, then writing a second. And then he saw the comments. He saw women who had never met him writing under his post: and where was he, he must work night shifts, that kind always does, no wonder. He saw hundreds of laughing faces. He saw that in the locker room at the steelworks he would be the one with the slippers until he retired.

Meanwhile Rifet was talking about batteries that last seven days. The simplest thing, Sakib thought, would be to go down one floor and ring Hasna's bell. No footage, no group, nothing at all, just say: your husband is sitting in my slippers. He imagined Hasna opening the door in her apron, a wooden spoon in her hand, listening, her face tightening. And then he imagined the next twenty years. The elevator in which the four of them would ride together, staring at the numbers above the door. The meetings of the building council. The shared storage room in the basement. Hasna would forgive Mehmed, because she forgave him everything, from loans to the betting shop, and Sakib would forever remain the man who had rung the bell.

"Let me tell you something," said Rifet, and lowered his voice, though there was no one else in the shop. "I bought all of this for myself first. Eight years ago. I thought my wife had someone. I put up three cameras, two in the apartment, one in the car. And I was right." Sakib looked at him properly for the first time. "And what did you do?" "Nothing. I watched. For a year I watched, every evening, like a TV series. Then she went off to Slovenia with him, and I was left with the cameras. My brother-in-law gave me this job so I would have somewhere to go in the

mornings." He pointed his glasses toward the case. "They say I'm the best salesman in Zenica. I know what a man needs before he knows it himself."

Sakib stood there looking at the charger on the glass. He saw himself sitting every evening on the couch at his mother's in Kakanj, because the apartment was Mubina's, from her father, and watching his former living room on his phone: Mubina wiping the table, Mehmed coming over with burek, the television on, and he watching, like a series, for a year, while his mother told him from the kitchen that she had said so back at the wedding. He saw the court too, and the lawyers, and Nail shaking his head. Every plan he had made between the sixth floor and the Boulevard was turning out, one after another, to be a door that led into an even smaller room.

"So, are you a fisherman?" Rifet asked suddenly. "You have the hands for a rod. You can tell by a man." Sakib said he was not. As a boy he had gone with his father to the Bosna below Raspotočje, but that was long ago and his father had always held the rod. "Ah, you never forget that," said Rifet, and he was already coming out from behind the case to the left side of the shop, among the rods. "The Bosna is cleaner now than it has been in thirty years. Chub, barbel, there's even trout up toward Vranduk. And for a man with a problem at home, the best thing is to sit by the water. Water doesn't ask questions."

He took down from the wall a net on a long aluminum handle, folding, green, with a rubber mesh. "A landing net. The handle extends to six and a half feet, and the mesh is rubber, it doesn't hurt the fish and the hook doesn't get tangled. This is the first thing a fisherman needs, before the rod, before anything. Without a landing net you can catch a fish, but you can't get it out of the water." Sakib looked at the net and did not know what to say. He was ashamed to walk out of the shop empty-handed after everything this man had told him, as if he too were one of those who only watched.

"How much?" he asked. "Forty-five marks. Forty for you." He paid by card. Rifet tried to wrap the net in newspaper, though it would not be wrapped, so the handle stuck out at both ends, and he gave him a free calendar with the fish of Bosnia and Herzegovina to go with it. At the door he held out his hand. "And for the camera, when you make up your mind, you know where I am. Most of them come back." Sakib said he would come back, and he heard how much it sounded like a promise.

Outside it was a sunny October day. Above the steelworks the smoke shone white as if it were a holiday, and on the Boulevard high school kids were eating pizza out of boxes and laughing at something on a phone. Sakib stopped in front of Kapetan's window and in the glass saw a man in a work jacket, with a fishing net over his shoulder and a calendar under his arm, standing in the middle of Zenica with no idea where to go. He recognized him only when the man straightened his collar.

He did not go home. He set off toward Kamberovića Polje, where there is always someone with a rod on the bank of the Bosna, so that he could at least see how it was done.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

The Man Who Comes Every Night

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-who-comes-every-night/

My husband Elvedin has been driving a taxi around Tuzla for twenty-two years, and in all that time he has not learned one thing: a phone you leave on the charger in the kitchen lights up even when you are not there. That is why I knew about his jealousy long before he worked out how to hide it. He asked his passengers about me. He asked the neighbor on the third floor what time I went out to the market. Once he tried to work out how many miles I had ridden on my bicycle, and my bicycle has no odometer.

In October a page called Honestly, Emela, advice for women who have no one to tell, began appearing on my Instagram. The profile picture showed a gray-haired lady in glasses, the kind each of us imagines as the aunt who knows everything. The page had eleven followers, one of them Elvedin's cousin Zuhdija from Lukavac, and its ad kept popping up between pie recipes and videos from the Pannonian Lakes as if someone were looking for me personally. Someone was. For a whole week before that, Elvedin had been watching videos on YouTube with the sound off and putting his phone away whenever I walked in.

I wrote to Emela that same evening, out of curiosity, something harmless about my mother-in-law. The answer came in two minutes, and at the same moment I heard the fan running in the bathroom. Emela called me "my dear," which Elvedin calls everyone, from me to the air conditioner repairman, she wrote "sta" without the little hook over the s, and spelled "naravno," which means of course, with two r's, the way Elvedin has spelled it since grade school. Below it said: Greetings from the heart. The same words had been on every birthday card I ever got from him. I turned off my phone and laughed into my pillow until he came out of the bathroom, as serious as if he had been at a meeting.

That was when I decided to give him what he was looking for. The next evening, while he was sitting in the bathroom, I wrote to Emela that I had

a problem I could not tell anyone about. That a man came to me every night. That he had his own key. That he arrived around half past nine, took off his shoes in the hallway, ate out of the pot whatever I had left for the next day, lay down beside me and snored until morning like a truck climbing toward Ilinčica. That his feet were always cold and he put them on mine. That I did not know how to get rid of him, or whether I even wanted to.

The fan in the bathroom ran for a long time that evening. The answer came twenty minutes later and was full of questions. What did this man look like? How long had he been coming? Did my husband know about him? I answered that my husband knew nothing, because my husband never noticed anything, and that the man had been coming for years, that he was of medium height and hid a bald spot on the crown of his head under a cap. When Elvedin came out, he had a cap on his head, as he always did when he was cold, and it never occurred to him to look in the mirror. The next day he told me the company had given him night shifts, the whole week, from nine to six.

That night the taxi stood in front of our building in Slatina, between the dumpsters and the transformer station, with its headlights off. I saw it from the balcony while I was taking in the laundry. Elvedin sat behind the wheel and watched the entrance as if he were watching a match. Around midnight he ate a burek out of a bag, around two he fell asleep, at four he jerked awake and stared at the entrance again. I slept the way I had not slept in years, in the middle of the bed, with both pillows. Nobody put cold feet on mine.

At seven in the morning Emela asked whether he had come. "He didn't," I wrote. "For the first time in I don't know how long. Strange, and I had left him sarma." Elvedin came home at eight, gray in the face, and said it had been a quiet night, no passengers. He ate the sarma. The second night he sat in front of the building again, and the third. Every morning I wrote to Emela that the man had not come, that my bed was too big, and that maybe he had grown tired of me and found someone younger who did

not hold his snoring against him.

On the fourth morning Emela asked the question I had been waiting for. Was it possible that this man got in some other way? Through the basement, say, or through the garage? I wrote that it was possible, because he was very resourceful and had keys to everything. That night the taxi moved behind the building, to the basement ramp, and after midnight Elvedin walked around the building twice on foot, with the light on his phone, and frightened Sadudin, a retiree who was out walking his dog. In the morning Sadudin told everyone in the elevator that a man in a cap was walking around Slatina at night checking the doors.

On the fifth day the rain started, that October rain in Tuzla that does not fall so much as hang in the air. I think by then Elvedin could barely see from exhaustion. In the evening I packed him a thermos of tea and two sandwiches, kissed him at the door and wished him a quiet shift. He said that if things were quiet, he might stop by around midnight. I said he did not have to, that he must not leave his work, that I had gotten used to being alone. The look on his face at that moment was worth all five nights.

At ten I turned off the light in the bedroom and stayed in the kitchen, in the dark, with my phone. Through the window I saw a screen light up in the taxi by the ramp. I wrote Emela one last message. "My dear Emela, I don't need advice anymore. I have figured out why the man doesn't come. For five nights he has been sitting in a taxi behind the building, eating burek out of a bag and walking around the basement with a light, because he is afraid his wife has someone else. If you see him, tell him the door is unlocked, the sarma has been warmed up, and he is the only one with a key. Greetings from the heart."

The screen in the taxi stayed lit for a long time. Then it went dark, the car door opened, and Elvedin, without an umbrella, a cap on his head, ran across the parking lot. I heard him in the elevator, then outside the door, then the key in the lock. He stopped in the hallway and did not dare turn

on the light. "Adisa," he said into the dark. "I didn't even know I snored." I turned on the light over the stove. He was soaked to the skin, a thermos in his hand, and he looked like a man who had spent five nights guarding his house against himself. "Take your shoes off in the hallway," I said. "The sarma is on the stove."

The page Honestly, Emela disappeared from Instagram the next morning. Around noon Zuhdija from Lukavac called and asked Elvedin what had happened to that lady, because he had really wanted to ask her something about his wife.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Sister from Bihać

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-sister-from-bihac/

The parcel came back on a Tuesday. Over my address, over the German letters I had carefully copied for seven years, a yellow sticker had been pasted: Empfänger unbekannt. Recipient unknown. That much German I knew. Inside, everything was as I had packed it: dried meat wrapped in newspaper, a jar of ajvar, two pairs of wool socks, and a chocolate bar for the boys in the container, so they would not envy Smail. I put the parcel on the kitchen table and looked at it for a long time, as if it would tell me itself where it had been.

For seven years Smail had gone to Germany for the season. From March to December, on construction sites around Munich, as he said, and he slept in a container with three young men from Kalesija. Every evening at nine he called on video. The light was always bad, a gray wall behind him, and he was always tired. He said it was cold in the container, that the boss was stingy, that they had cut the hourly rate again. In December he would come home, thinner, with presents from Lidl, and sleep until noon for three weeks, and by the middle of January he would already be looking at the calendar the way you look at a clock. He sent six hundred euros a month. With that I paid the electricity, Adis's books in Sarajevo, and whatever my salary as a cook at a kindergarten did not cover. It never occurred to me to ask why after seven years everything was always the same.

That evening I told him about the parcel. He was not even surprised. He said the containers had been moved to another site and that from now on I should send things to a post office box, and he dictated the number. Quickly, as if he knew it by heart. When we had finished, I went into the bedroom and took out of the wardrobe the box from the perfume he had sent me for our twentieth wedding anniversary. I keep all the boxes, Adis laughs at me for it. On the back, under the postmark, was the sender's

address: Pasing, a street with a long name, house number fourteen. No container has a house number.

At work I took four days off and said I was going to my sister's in Sanski Most. I bought a ticket for the night bus at an agency by the old bus station, paid for it out of the money for the winter preserves, and told no one anything. In my bag I put what had come back, the dried meat and the ajvar, and the blue sweater I had spent all winter knitting for him, because he had lost the old one, also blue, on some construction site three years before. The bus was full of women my age going to their children and grandchildren. One of them carried a tray of baklava on her knees from Bihać to Salzburg and did not put it down even when she fell asleep.

Munich met me gray and clean, with trams that wait for no one. Twice I got on the wrong train, and twice a kind man put me back on the platform, pointing his finger at my phone. In Pasing I found the street at nine in the morning. House number fourteen was yellow, two stories high, with a garden where pear trees grew and two garden chairs stood. A white van was parked in front of the garage. On the van's door, in big blue letters, it said Mešić Bau GmbH, and under that a Munich phone number. I stood on the sidewalk for a long time reading my own surname on someone else's vehicle.

I rang the bell. A woman of about fifty opened the door, her hair dyed blond, in an apron, and said something in German. Then she took a better look at me, looked at my bag, and her face spread into a smile. "Why, you're Nevresa!" she said in our language, with a Prijedor accent. "The sister! You look just like your picture!" She told me at once which one: Smail had shown her a photo from Adis's graduation night, in which I stand between the two of them in a green dress. I said nothing. She was already hugging me and pulling me inside, saying that her name was Duška and that Smail always said his sister was afraid of traveling and would never come.

She made coffee, the way I make it too, and put in the sugar before she asked me. The living room was bright, with a big window facing the pear trees. By the window stood an armchair, and on the back of the armchair hung a blue sweater. My sweater. The first one, the one he had lost on the construction site. I recognized it by the sleeve, which I had gotten slightly wrong back then, so it was shorter than the other. Duška noticed me looking. "That's his armchair," she said. "He sits there in the evenings and watches the news from Bosnia. And he won't let that sweater be washed. He says his late mother knitted it for him." Smail's mother, may she rest in peace, never in her life picked up a knitting needle. I tried to teach her, and she gave up at the first stitch.

She talked for a long time and gladly, the way you talk to someone your dear one has been describing to you for years. They had been together six years. They had started the firm four years ago, and now they had eight workers and more work than they could handle. Smail was a good man, she said, he just worked too much and worried too much. Every month he sent six hundred euros to his sister in Bihać, his widowed sister, so her son could go to university. "I tell him, send more, we have it," she said. "And he says there's no need, that his sister is modest." Then she lowered her voice. "How did your husband die? Smail doesn't like to talk about it." "Suddenly," I said. She showed me pictures on her phone. Lake Garda. A Christmas market. Smail in a white shirt, with my watch on his wrist, the one I bought him for our twentieth anniversary.

Smail was at a construction site in Augsburg and was not due back until evening. Duška was already reaching for her phone to call him. I took her by the hand. "Don't," I said. "I want to surprise him. I have to go back tonight, on the bus, but I'll come again, for New Year's. Don't tell him I was here. Let it be a surprise." Duška laughed, delighted, like a little girl who has been trusted with a secret, and swore she would not breathe a word. I left her the dried meat and the ajvar. I said they were for her. I did not mind. To this day I do not know why I did not tell her the truth. Maybe because she, too, put in the sugar before she asked.

On the bus back I did not sleep. The blue sweater, the new one, lay in my lap from Munich to the border. At Izačić the customs officer asked if I had anything to declare, and I laughed, for the first time since Tuesday, so that the woman with the baklava, who was coming back empty-handed, looked at me with concern. I got home at noon. I bathed, made coffee, put in the sugar, and sat down at the kitchen table, in the same place where the parcel had stood.

At nine the video call rang. The light was bad, a gray wall behind him, and he was tired. He said it was cold in the container, that the boss had been stingy again, and that he was afraid they would cut the hourly rate. He asked if I had sent the parcel to the new number. I looked at that gray wall and only then saw what I had not seen for seven years: the corner of a tool shelf and the edge of a white van. A garage. Seven years of a garage.

"You're cold?" I asked. "Freezing," he said. "Then put on that blue sweater," I said. "You left it on the back of the armchair, by the window that looks out on the pear trees." Nothing moved on the screen. Not him, not the wall, not the edge of the van. Only his lips parted slightly, like a man searching for a word in a language he thought he knew. I hung up before he found it.

DECEPTION · 7 MIN READ

The Mistress Not Named on the Death Notice

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-mistress-not-named-on-the-death-notice/

The death notice pasted on a post in front of the Šarena Mosque said that Zarfa Kurspahić had passed into the next world on Sunday evening, in her eightieth year, and that the funeral prayer would be held today, Monday, at two in the afternoon. Below that were the names of the bereaved: son Vahid, daughter-in-law Sabira, granddaughter Ilhana, sisters Hata and Šuhra, brother Šaćir, other relatives, neighbors and friends. Naida read them twice, the way she used to read the list of admitted students at school. Then she stood on the sidewalk with her car keys in her hand and thought that if she was here at all, she was in that last line, between the neighbors and the friends, where anyone fits who is no one.

For six years Vahid had come on Mondays. He worked in Sarajevo as a site supervision engineer, went back to Travnik on Fridays, to his wife and daughter, and on Monday at seven in the evening he rang her doorbell in Grbavica. Always with the same canvas bag: inside it a pie from his mother, a piece of Vlašić cheese, sometimes a jar of plum jam. "Mom sent it for the colleague," he used to say in the first months, laughing, because once at home he had said there was a colleague at the office who lived alone and ate from the bakery. From then on Zarfa baked one extra tray every Sunday. In time Naida learned to guess from the pie what was going on in Travnik: potato pie in January, spinach pie as soon as the first spinach reached the market, cheese pie when Zarfa's knee hurt and she did not feel like stretching the dough for long.

Naida heard her only once. It was the second winter. Vahid was in the shower when his phone rang, the screen said Mom, and it rang a third time, so Naida answered, thinking something had happened. "Are you

that colleague, dear?" asked a voice that sounded as if it were stirring something on the stove at the same time. "Was the pie salty? Vahid always says it's just right, and he would say it's just right if it had as much salt as the sea." Naida said it had been just right. It had been too salty, it was always too salty, but Naida said it the way she would go on saying, for years, that empty weekends did not bother her.

At six this morning a message had come: "My mom died." Nothing after that. Until eleven she sat in the office staring at the screen, and then she took the day off and set out for Travnik, through Kiseljak and Busovača, behind a truck loaded with firewood. In Vitez she stopped at a florist and bought white roses. Only when she parked below the Old Fortress and saw people walking silently toward the mosque, empty-handed, did she remember that nobody brings flowers to a Muslim funeral. She left the roses on the back seat, under her jacket, as if she were hiding them from someone.

The women stood along the wall of the mosque courtyard, apart from the rows of men, in dark coats, with headscarves tied under their chins. Naida took her own silk scarf out of her bag, too bright a blue for this day, and tied it the way they did. The coffin was covered with a green cloth. Vahid stood in the first row, and she recognized his neck, but not his shirt. Someone had ironed it for him in Travnik. Among the women, two steps away from her, stood Sabira, upright, with her hand on the shoulder of a girl of seventeen who had Vahid's eyebrows. "Whose are you, dear?" the older woman next to Naida asked quietly. "I'm from work. Vahid's work." "That's kind of you. Zarfa fed half of Travnik." "I know," said Naida, and regretted it at once, because the woman looked at her more carefully.

After the prayer the men lifted the coffin onto their shoulders and carried it toward the cemetery, quickly, taking turns as they walked. The women stayed behind. As he passed along the wall, Vahid saw her. On his face she saw something she had not seen once in six years. It was not grief. It was fear. He looked away and shifted his shoulder under the coffin, and

Naida understood that he was afraid of her, here, on the day he was burying his mother.

She should not have gone to the house. But the women slowly set off down the street toward the Lašva, toward the Kurspahić house, and she went with them, the way a crowd carries you. In front of the door the shoes stood in rows, flat, black, worn. She took off her heeled boots and put them at the end of the row, where they stood like a guest who had come to the wrong address. Inside, the women sat on the built-in bench along the wall and on chairs brought over from the neighbors. On the wall above the bench hung a photograph from someone's wedding, in which Vahid, younger and thinner, stood between his mother and Sabira. An older woman was quietly reciting prayers, and the others were silent and looked at their hands.

Sabira went around the room with a tray of small coffee cups. When she reached Naida, she stopped. "And you are?" "Naida. I work with Vahid." Sabira looked at her for a long time, calmly, the way you look at a bill you already know is wrong. "Ah," she said. "You're that colleague from Sarajevo." She put the tray down on the table, went into the kitchen, and came back with a plastic container wrapped in a dish towel. "Mom baked yesterday, before she was taken ill. She said this one was for you, so you wouldn't be alone on Monday." She handed her the container. Then she added, more quietly, without changing her expression: "Take it. I don't bake for Sarajevo."

Naida took the container and said "May God have mercy on her soul," as the others were saying, and the words sounded borrowed in her mouth. The girl with Vahid's eyebrows watched her from the window. Naida got up, found her boots at the end of the row, and went out without anyone stopping her. Nobody had to.

At Plava Voda she sat in the car and set the container on her knees. The water rushed under the bridge, tourists were eating ćevapi at the tables, someone was laughing. She unwrapped the towel. Inside was zeljanica,

spinach pie, cut into even pieces, and on the lid was a slip of paper on which, in large, crooked letters, was written: For the colleague. Her phone buzzed. "Thank you for coming. You shouldn't have." She read it twice and could not tell whether it meant thanks for the kindness or that there had been no need for her there. She did not answer. At a gas station in Kiseljak she gave the white roses to the girl at the register, who held them for a long time and did not know where to put them.

That evening at seven, when he had always rung on Mondays, nobody rang. Naida sat at the table by the window and ate the last piece of Zarfa's zeljanica, slowly, to the end. When she had swallowed, she said out loud, in the empty kitchen, what she had not told anyone for six years: that it was too salty.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

Infidelity Drawn on the Map

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/infidelity-drawn-on-the-map/

For twenty years Omar had been reading lines that other people do not see. At the land registry office of the Novo Sarajevo municipality he drew property boundaries, compared old Austrian plans with new surveys, and argued with people who were certain their neighbor's garage stuck into their garden. He knew that a line on paper never lies on its own. The people who draw it lie, and even they usually give themselves away at the corners.

Larisa had started running two years earlier, the autumn her mother died. First a loop around Koševo Stadium, then the whole length of Wilson's Promenade, then on Sundays Vrelo Bosne, the entire avenue and back. She joined a running club that met near Skenderija and got a coach, Dženis Hamzić, a former track athlete of thirty-four, who sent her training plans in the app along with comments full of exclamation marks. She lost weight, quit smoking, and started sleeping. Omar was happy for her the way he was happy about a good weather forecast: contentedly, from a distance.

For her birthday he installed the same app and followed her, so he could send her applause. Larisa laughed. "You and running," she said, but she followed him back so as not to hurt his feelings. Omar liked looking at her lines. They were orange, tidy, always the same length for the same day of the week. Tuesdays and Thursdays training with the club, Saturdays easy, Sundays long. He knew her pace better than any coach, because he knew what it meant when a line thickened on an uphill and stretched out on a downhill.

They had been married seventeen years. Their daughter was studying in Graz and called on Sundays, always at the same time, like a bus. Omar was not a jealous man. He did not read other people's messages and did not ask where anyone had been, because he believed that the truth, like a

boundary line, shows itself in time. In their early years Larisa used to tease him about it. She said he would accept even being cheated on only if it was properly drawn up and stamped by the municipality.

He noticed it one Tuesday in March, entirely by chance, while he was waiting in the kitchen for the rice to cook. Under the map it said: moving time forty-eight minutes, elapsed time one hour and forty-one. For fifty-three minutes Larisa had not been running. He looked at the Thursday before: fifty-one. The Tuesday before that: fifty-five. Sundays were clean, Saturdays too. Only the club days had that hole in the middle, like a bill on which someone had neatly entered everything except one item.

The hole had a place, too. When he zoomed in on the map, he saw that the orange line ran from Hrasno down Wilson's Promenade to Skenderija, where the club met, then came back to Grbavica and, on a street behind the stadium, made a small tangle. Omar saw tangles like that every day at work. When a device stands still on a tripod, the satellite signal does not: the points scatter on their own and gather into a little knot, as if the instrument were thinking. Larisa's knot was not on the sidewalk, not in the park, not by the fountain. It was on a building. On the third entrance of a six-story apartment building.

Omar told himself everything a man is obliged to tell himself. That they stretched at the home of someone from the club. That one of the runners had a birthday. That the app got confused when it was cold. Then he opened Dženis's profile, which was public, because Dženis made his living from his running. That Tuesday Dženis had run with the club until six fifty-two, and his line ended at the same spot. His next activity, an easy twenty-minute run, began at seven forty-five, from the same entrance. The two lines touched at a single point, like two pencils laid down on the same desk.

At the registry he could have checked in two minutes whose apartment was at that entrance. He did not do it. Some things a man must not find

out with an official password. Besides, there was no need: in Dženis's profile picture, behind his smiling face, you could see a balcony with a green awning and part of a stadium floodlight.

That week, for the first time in twenty years, he made a mistake at work. On a plan in Hrasno brdo he joined the wrong two points and, on paper, cut half a plum orchard away from some pensioner. A colleague from the next office brought him coffee and asked if he was ill. He said he was not. He said he was not sleeping well, which was true, and that it was because of spring, which was not.

On Thursday Larisa came home at ten past eight, her hair wet. "How was it?" he asked. "Hard," she said, and kissed him on the forehead. "Dženis made us run all the way up to Vraca." Under the table, on his phone, Omar looked at her Thursday. There had been no climb up to Vraca. There had been Wilson's Promenade, straight as a ruler, and the tangle in Grbavica, fifty-two minutes. Her hair smelled of a shampoo they did not buy. Over dinner she talked about the half marathon in September and how Dženis said she could finish in under two hours, if she did not give up halfway. He asked if she wanted tea. She said she did.

On Saturday he went to the shopping mall at Marijin Dvor and bought running shoes. The salesman asked what kind of surface they were for, and Omar said asphalt and standing. The salesman laughed, thinking it was a joke. On Sunday, while Larisa was out on her long run to Vrelo Bosne, Omar went over her Tuesday in the app twice more. He memorized the streets she took, the corner where she turned, and the number of the entrance. He did not have to. He already knew them by heart.

On Wednesday after work Larisa went to her sister's in Ilidža, as she did every Wednesday. At six Omar put on his new shoes and set off, not after her, but after her line from the previous Tuesday. He did not know how to run. He ran to the first bench, then walked, then ran again, down Wilson's Promenade to Skenderija and back, past kids on rollerblades

and pensioners with dogs, until his lungs began to burn as if he were breathing sand. In Grbavica he turned onto the street behind the stadium, went up to the third entrance, and read the name Hamzić on the intercom. Then he went back across the street and stood under a linden tree. He left the phone running in his pocket. He did not look at the windows. He looked at his watch.

He stood there for fifty-three minutes. A woman went by with bags from the bakery, then a boy with a ball, then the same woman without the bags. He remembered that they had gone out for the first time right along here, eighteen years ago, down Wilson's Promenade to the Vrbanja bridge and back, so slowly that an old woman pushing a stroller overtook them. Larisa had said then that she liked how he was never in a hurry. The streetlights came on. When the fifty-three minutes were up, Omar ran back the same way, more slowly than on the way there, and at home he saved the activity. He gave it a name: Tuesday, Grbavica. On the map was Larisa's line, the same down to the last corner, and at the third entrance a small, dense tangle of fifty-three minutes, like a fingerprint. He pressed the button to post it.

He sat down in the kitchen, still in his running shoes, his legs trembling. Within three minutes his phone buzzed with a notification: Dženis Hamzić gave you applause. Omar stared at the screen until the applause disappeared. It lasted forty seconds, as long as it takes a man to look at a map all the way to the end.

Larisa came home at ten past eight. She did not take off her shoes. She stood in the hallway with her phone in her hand, and the screen lit up her chin. "You never told me you run," she said. "I didn't really run," said Omar. "Mostly I stood." Larisa sat down on the shoe cabinet, jacket still on, and for a long time she said nothing. Omar got up and put the water on for tea. Out of habit he took two cups from the cupboard. Then he put one back.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

The Light in Mak's Room

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-light-in-maks-room/

The train from Mostar was forty minutes late, and Anisa Ramić did not mind. She had spent three days at her brother's house in Bijeli Brijeg, where her sister-in-law Ajša was stuffing Rusmir's shirts into garbage bags, while Rusmir, caught exchanging messages with a colleague from the bank, sat on the stairs as if he were the one who had been betrayed. Anisa talked her sister-in-law into staying at least until the end of the school year. She was good at repairing other people's marriages. She had never had to repair her own. Across from her on the train sat an older lady from Trebinje who talked from Jablanica to Konjic about her son, a captain, who called her every day, did not drink, and was not yet married, which was her only worry in the world.

At the Sarajevo station the captain was waiting for his mother with a bouquet of yellow roses. He was tall, with close-cropped hair, and as he kissed his mother on the cheek, he looked at Anisa over her shoulder one second longer than he should have. He carried her bag to the taxi, though no one had asked him to. "Thank you, Captain," she said. "Ognjen," he said. "I am only a captain at work." In the taxi Anisa laughed at herself, the way a woman laughs when someone notices her who should not, and by the time she reached Marijin Dvor she had forgotten about it.

Zijad Ramić was waiting for her at the door of their house on Koševsko Brdo, his glasses pushed up on his forehead. He was the director of the Office for the Oversight of State Funds, a man ministers called before they signed anything. That evening, for the first time, his ears bothered her, sticking out from under his short hair like the two handles on a pot. "Has your brother come to his senses?" he asked, and without waiting for an answer he went back to his laptop. Mak was already asleep, a plastic locomotive under his pillow. Anisa tucked him in, turned off his light, and stood for a long time in the dark of the child's room.

Sarajevo is a small city for people who go to the same receptions. That winter Captain Vranješ appeared everywhere she did: at an exhibition opening at Collegium Artisticum and at a reception in an embassy in Bistrik. He never approached her first. He stood by the window with a glass of juice and waited. Vildana Kapić, who always knew who had arrived with whom and left with whom, said to her at the coat check: "That captain of yours is either in love or ill." "He is not mine," said Anisa. "Then he is ill," said Vildana.

Zijad noticed only when others had noticed. One night he sat down at the kitchen table, took off his watch, and laid it beside him, as if he were opening a session. "I am not asking you what you feel," he said. "That is a matter for your conscience. I am asking you what other people see. My wife cannot stand in a corner with an officer for forty minutes while half the city watches." Anisa laughed, and that offended him more than anything. He stood up, because his meeting was at eight. It was exactly eleven.

In February she went for the first time to Ognjen's apartment in Ciglane, and she was back home before Mak got out of school. She did not have to lie, because no one asked her anything. After that she went every Wednesday. Ognjen made bad coffee and told her about exercises at Manjača. She told him about Mak. They did not mention Zijad, as if he were the weather forecast: something that exists and that you keep an eye on, but that nobody talks about.

In March a winter competition for military teams was held on Igman, and Zijad was among the guests of honor on the stand near Malo Polje. Anisa sat beside him. Ognjen's team led until the last descent. On an icy curve below the ski jumps Ognjen lost his balance, hit the fence, and lay still in the snow. Anisa stood up before she realized she was standing and said his name, not Captain, but Ognjen, loud enough that two rows in front of her turned around. Zijad took her by the elbow. "Sit down," he said quietly. Ognjen got up, waved the medics away, and reached the finish last, limping.

In the car, on the curves down toward Hrasnica, Zijad said nothing until the first traffic light. "You behaved improperly," he said then. "People saw." Anisa looked at the wet roofs of Butmir. "You are not mistaken," she said. "I have been with him since February. Do what you like." Zijad did not take his eyes off the road. Near Stup he said calmly, as if reading out the conclusions of a session: "Nothing will change. You will live in your house, you will go with me wherever necessary, and you will not bring him anywhere near Mak. I am not changing my life because of some captain." At home he made tea, as he did every evening.

She held out until May. One morning, after Mak had left for school, she packed a suitcase and waited for Zijad in the hallway. He said she could go wherever she liked, but the child would stay in his own home. "If you want to go to court, go. You will see whom the judges know." She thought it was anger and that within a month, through lawyers, everything would be settled the way it is between normal people. Zijad was not angry. Zijad simply opened a new file.

They spent the summer in a rented house in Herceg Novi, and those were the two happiest months of her life, if you did not count the evenings. By day they swam and ate fish below the fortress. In the evenings Anisa opened her email. The lawyer wrote that the divorce was in process, that the father was asking for the child to be placed with him, and that the social services center was proposing visits "under supervision, once the expert team judges the child to be ready." Mak could be ready tomorrow or never. That was decided by a psychologist whom Zijad, as it turned out, knew from university.

In October she wanted to go to a premiere at the National Theater. Ognjen said it was not a good idea, and she replied that she had not committed a crime. She sat alone in a box on the first floor, in the dark blue dress from Zijad's jubilee. Mrs. Bećirbegović, the wife of a judge, stopped at the entrance to the box, looked Anisa up and down, and said to her husband, loud enough for half the orchestra seats to hear: "I will not sit here." They moved two rows back. Anisa stayed until the end of

the first act, looking at a stage on which she saw nothing. At the intermission she went out onto the Obala and called Ognjen. "I told you so," he said, in the same voice Zijad had used to say it for years.

Mak turned nine in December. At seven in the morning Anisa stood in front of the house with a box under her arm, and Aunt Mevla, the Ramić family cook, opened the door for her and wiped her hands on her apron. "Ten minutes, ma'am. He gets up at half past seven." Mak was sleeping on his stomach, as always. When she touched him, he opened his eyes and was not surprised. "Dad says you are on a long trip." "I was," she said. She gave him the box: a model of the old Ćiro, the narrow-gauge locomotive that used to run from Sarajevo to the sea. Mak set it at once on the tracks he had laid across the floor. "Will you come for the cake?" he asked. There were footsteps on the stairs.

Zijad stopped in the doorway of the child's room, in his bathrobe. He did not shout. He looked at her, then at the locomotive, then at his son, and Anisa saw that his lower lip was trembling, which had not happened to him even at his mother's funeral. She kissed Mak's hair, which smelled of sleep, and walked out past Zijad without touching him. In the kitchen Aunt Mevla was crying into her apron. At the gate Anisa turned and saw the curtain in Mak's window move and fall back into place.

In January Ognjen was given two years with a military mission in Brussels, and he begged her to come with him. She knew that leaving the country two months before the hearing would look in the file as if she had given up her son herself, and she stayed. That winter she began reading his messages and asking who that colleague from the ministry was. One evening, with his suitcase by the door, Ognjen said: "I cannot be everything you have lost. Nobody can." She did not see him off at the airport. The first week he called every evening. By March, every other.

In March the court ruled that Mak would stay with his father and that visits with his mother would be arranged "when the child is ready." The psychologist wrote that the boy did not want to talk about his mother.

Anisa read it three times and did not cry, because it seemed to her that crying belonged to someone who was still waiting for something. That evening she went up to Koševsko Brdo and stood across the street from the house, under a linden tree that had not yet come into leaf. At nine o'clock the light in Mak's room went out, exactly when she used to turn it off herself, after the third story. She stood there a long time, as if someone might turn it on again. Then she walked down the steep street, carefully, because of the ice, and at a bakery near Markale she bought half a loaf of bread for one person.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Nightingale of Onešćukova Street

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-nightingale-of-onescukova-street/

Onešćukova Street is so narrow that when it rains, the water from the eaves on either side meets above the cobblestones. Nadira knows this because for nine years she has watched it from the window of the front room, on the second floor of the stone house Mensur inherited from his father. Across the street, at the same height, seven feet of air away, is the window of Sejad the coppersmith. Below the windows is the street, and below the street, out of sight, the Neretva roars, and at night its sound is the only sound in the neighborhood.

Mensur is a good man, Nadira tells herself. He runs an auto parts store in Bijeli Brijeg, he does not drink, he does not shout, and every evening, before bed, he takes her phone and reads all her messages, slowly, from top to bottom, as if he were going over bills. He knows the code to her phone, she does not know the code to his. When she objected once, he said she had nothing to hide, so he did not see why she was objecting. After that she did not object again. She had nothing to hide. That winter she did not yet.

The first time they spoke was in March. Nadira could not sleep, so she got up and opened the front room window to let in some air, and across the street, in the dark, Sejad was sitting at his window with a glass of tea, looking at the sky above Hum. "You too?" he asked. She nodded. Neither of them said what that "you too" meant, and both of them knew. Sejad had a shop in Kujundžiluk, where he hammered out coffee cups, coffee pots and plates with the Old Bridge on them for tourists, and he lived with his mother, who had been bedridden for two years. Until then they had greeted each other the way neighbors do: good morning, how is your mother, rain again.

From then on, every night. Once Mensur falls asleep, and he sleeps heavily, on his back, his hands folded over his stomach, Nadira gets up,

leaves the bedroom at the back of the house and stands by the open window of the front room. Sejad is already there. They talk in whispers, and the Neretva below covers everything they say. About his mother, who calls him by his father's name at night. About her father, who wanted her to go to university, and she got married instead. About how copper is hammered: slowly, with a thousand small blows, because a single hard one makes it crack. Sometimes they say nothing at all. Once Sejad held a broom handle out across the street, she took hold of it, and they stood like that for a few minutes, each on their own side, holding the same stick. They never even tried anything more than that.

By day they keep to a rule they have never spoken aloud. When Nadira walks through Kujundžiluk to the market, Sejad does not raise his head from the anvil, and she does not slow down in front of his shop window. They have never exchanged phone numbers, because Nadira knows Mensur would find every number, every message and every deletion. Nobody reads a window. Once, in April, Mensur bought a coffee pot from Sejad for his sister's birthday, and Sejad gave him a lower price, as a neighbor. Afterward Nadira looked at that coffee pot on her sister-in-law's shelf and thought of the hands that had hammered it.

In May, in the fig tree that grows out of Sejad's courtyard wall and spreads its branches over the street, below both windows, a nightingale began to sing. It sang from midnight until dawn, louder than Nadira had thought so small a bird could. She never saw it, she only heard it, and one night Sejad told her it was their watchman: as long as it sang, nobody on the street could hear anything else.

One night, when she comes back to bed, Mensur is awake. He is propped on his elbow, watching her. "Where were you?" "At the window." "You get up every night. Did you think I didn't know?" Nadira sits down on the edge of the bed. "Because of the nightingale," she says. "I can't sleep when it sings, and when I listen to it, I can't stop. As if it were the only beautiful thing on the whole street." Mensur is silent. "A nightingale," he repeats. "On Onešćukova Street." "In the fig tree," she says. "Listen to it."

Just then the nightingale starts to sing, and Mensur listens to it, and something in his face closes, like a shutter.

In the days that follow, Mensur is the same as always. Every evening he reads her messages, asks what she cooked, watches the news. On Thursday he comes home with something in a black plastic bag and takes it straight into the front room. Nadira hears him open the window. She does not ask. That night she does not get up, because Mensur is not asleep. He lies beside her, still, his eyes open, and listens to the nightingale with her. In the dark Nadira counts his breaths and, for the first time since she has been hearing it, wishes the bird would fall silent and fly somewhere farther off, across the Neretva. Just before dawn the nightingale goes silent in the middle of its song, and she hears Mensur get up.

In the morning, on the kitchen table, next to her coffee cup, lies the nightingale. Smaller than she had imagined it, brown, plainer than a sparrow. It does not move. Beside it lies a rolled-up fine net, the kind sold by people who catch birds, though they are not supposed to. Mensur drinks his coffee and watches her. "Here's your nightingale," he says. "Now you can sleep." Nadira does not ask how it died. Mensur does not explain. He finishes his coffee, picks up his keys and leaves for the store, and only at the door, without turning around, does he say that the net cost him twenty marks.

When the door closes, Nadira sits for a long time. Then she takes from the wardrobe her mother's white silk handkerchief with embroidery along the edge, which she has never used, along with a needle and blue thread. The handkerchief smells of lavender and of the wardrobe in her mother's house in Stolac. The embroidering takes half an hour, and her fingers tremble only on the first letter. In the corner of the handkerchief, in tiny blue letters, she stitches four words: I can't get up anymore. Then she wraps the nightingale in the handkerchief, carefully, as if it were still warm, and ties the ends in a knot.

She opens the front room window in the daytime, for the first time ever in order to say something. Sejad's window is open, as it always is when he is at the shop, so that the house can air out for his mother's sake. Nadira hangs the bundle on the end of her broom handle, leans out over the sill and, across seven feet of air, slowly, as if carrying a full glass, sets it down on his windowsill, between a pot of basil and the frame. Below, a group of tourists passes down the street behind a guide, and nobody looks up.

Sejad comes home at seven. Nadira watches him from behind the curtain. She sees him pick up the bundle, untie the knot, read the corner of the handkerchief and stand for a long time with the bird in his palm, without raising his eyes to her window. Then he closes his own.

For the next three days a knocking comes from Kujundžiluk, from his shop, different from the usual, fine and dense, without stopping, from morning until dark. The neighbor women say Sejad is working on some big order for someone in Sarajevo. On the second day Mensur meets him in the street on his way home from the store, and they greet each other as always. "I hear you've got a big order," says Mensur. "I do," says Sejad. "A small thing, but a lot of work." On the fourth evening, on his windowsill, where the basil used to be, stands a copper box the size of a palm, with a lid on which he has hammered a fig leaf, and on the leaf a small bird. The box is closed. Nadira knows what is inside.

Mensur sees the box the very first evening. He stands at the window for a long time, looking at it, and says nothing. The next day he calls a carpenter, and by Saturday new wooden shutters have been put on the front room window, and the bed has been moved into the room facing the courtyard. But the box stays on Sejad's sill, across the street, on someone else's window, where Mensur can do nothing about it. Every morning, when Nadira opens the shutters to air the room, the first thing she sees is the copper catching the sun.

In June nightingales sing all over the neighborhood, in the gardens toward the Neretva, in the courtyards behind the mosque. Nadira hears

them through the bedroom wall, from far away. She lies still beside her husband, her eyes open, and listens, and does not get up.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Stranger in Seat 14B

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-stranger-in-seat-14b/

The arrivals board showed that the flight from Istanbul was five minutes late, and Ismet took it as a personal insult. He had come to the airport in Butmir two hours early, in the navy blazer he had worn at his daughter's wedding, with a bouquet of white freesias wrapped in cellophane. He had ordered the freesias at a flower shop near Pofalići back on Tuesday, because Senija loves freesias, and in January they are hard to find. He had parked the car he washed that morning, although a fine rain had been falling from Igman all day, and now he stood in front of the glass doors, on the left side, where you could see best.

For four months Senija had been in St. Louis, with their daughter Melika, who had given birth to twins in September and who, as Senija said on the phone, was as lost without her as a child at a fair. Ismet stayed alone in the apartment in Velešići. He learned to turn on the dishwasher, he learned that you hold the phone upright for a video call, and he learned that in an empty apartment you eat lunch with the television on. He crossed off the days in red pencil on the calendar from the pharmacy. He told his sister not to come today. The first evening was theirs.

All her life Senija had been afraid of flying. The first time they flew, twelve years ago, to Melika's graduation, she held his hand from runway to runway, and he pretended he was not afraid. From then on it was his job: at takeoff and landing her hand was in his, and he felt her nails dig into his palm when the plane dropped through a cloud. This time she had flown alone, for the first time, both there and back. On the phone she told him she had not been afraid. He did not believe her.

The plane landed at six twelve. The board said Landed, and Ismet straightened the cellophane on the freesias. The first to come out were businessmen with small suitcases, then a diaspora family with carts full of bags, then students. People around him hugged, cried, took pictures.

Twenty minutes passed, then forty. The baggage belt stopped. Senija did not come out.

At the information desk the clerk told him there had been a medical emergency on the flight and that all passengers would come out once the procedure was over. Ismet asked what kind of emergency. She said she was not allowed to say. He asked if it was a woman of sixty, in a beige coat. Next to him a man was saying into his phone that there was an ambulance on the runway. Ismet called Senija's number three times. The phone was switched off. The clerk looked at him the way you look at a man you are not allowed to tell anything, and Ismet sat down on a plastic chair with the freesias in his lap and for the first time in his life thought that he might be left alone.

She came out after an hour and a half, with a suitcase dragging on one wheel. She was pale and calm, with a scarf he did not know, blue, American. Behind her came two police officers and a woman in an airline uniform, who squeezed her shoulder and went back inside. When he hugged her, she hugged him too, firmly but briefly, and he felt that she held her hands as if they were cold. "What happened?" he asked. "I thought it was you." "Nothing happened to me," she said. "A passenger was taken ill. I will tell you at home." She took the freesias, smelled them and said they were lovely. She said it the way you thank a neighbor.

In the car he did the talking. He talked about the rain, about the new traffic light in Stup, about how he had taught himself to bake bread in the machine and how his first loaf came out like a brick. He asked about the twins, about Melika, about their son-in-law, and she answered accurately and briefly, as if at an exam, and watched through the window the trams that went down Zmaja od Bosne lit up and empty. Once she touched his knee, when he stopped at a red light, and he was so happy about it that he forgot to go when it turned green.

In the apartment everything was as she had left it, only cleaner. Her shopping list from September was still on the fridge; he had not let

anyone take it down. Ismet had cooked Bosnian pot stew, because she always cooked it when he came back from a job in the field, and he had set the table with the white tablecloth that only comes out for Bajram. Senija sat down, looked at the tablecloth and said he should not have. She ate half a plate. Then she put down her spoon and said she had to tell him now, because she would not be able to sleep until she did.

The man's name was Ibrahim. He was seventy-nine and had spent thirty of those years in Chicago, where he worked in a bakery until his legs gave out. He was going home for the first time, to Sanski Most, to see his brother's grave and the house where he was born. In Istanbul he sat down beside her, in seat 14B, and told her right away that he was afraid of flying and did not know how to fasten his seat belt. For thirty years he had put off this flight, every year for a different reason. She fastened it for him. They talked about the Sana, about the karamanka pear tree that grew behind his house, and about how bread in America cannot be eaten the second day. He showed her a picture of his wife, who had died six years ago. Senija showed him the twins.

Over Croatia he was taken ill. He said something was squeezing him, as if someone had set a stone on his chest. The flight attendants brought oxygen, the captain asked whether there was a doctor among the passengers, but there was no doctor, only a nurse from Zenica, who knelt in the aisle and counted. Ibrahim reached for Senija's hand. She held his hand for twenty minutes, while they descended, while the plane banked over Igman and while he stopped breathing. When the wheels touched the runway, he was no longer breathing. She did not let go of him until the paramedics came. Then she gave a statement to the airport police and called his niece in Sanski Most, whose number was written on a slip of paper in his passport.

Ismet listened and felt something growing in him that he was ashamed of. He felt sorry for the man, of course. But he was also thinking that at six twelve, while he was straightening the cellophane on the freesias, his wife had been holding another man's hand, at landing, when that hand

had always been his. That the last thing that man saw in this world was her face. That he had waited four months for that moment, the first look through the glass doors, and she had given it to someone she had known for two hours. "You did not have to stay," he said. "I did," said Senija. "Nobody else knew his name."

Ismet took a freesia out of the vase and broke its stem between his fingers. "Did he say anything to you?" he asked. "At the end." Senija nodded. "What?" She looked at him for a long time across the white tablecloth, and in that look he saw something he had not seen in thirty-eight years: a place he could not enter. "That was his," she said. "I cannot give it to you."

That night she fell asleep at once, turned toward the wall, with her hand under the pillow. Ismet lay awake and looked at that hand. It was the same hand he had held at their wedding, in the maternity ward, at his mother's funeral. Once he reached out and touched her wrist, lightly, so as not to wake her, as if checking whether it was warm. He knew it was foolish. He knew he would be ashamed if anyone knew what he was thinking. He got up, went to the kitchen and sat by the freesias until morning, listening to the first tram pass down below on the main road.

The funeral was the next day, in Sanski Most. Ibrahim's niece Zilha called at eight and said she would be glad if Senija came, because she had been with her uncle when none of them could be. Ismet drove for three hours, through Ključ, through a fog that would not lift. Senija was silent and kept her hands in her lap. Past Ključ they stopped at a gas station and he bought her coffee in a paper cup. She drank it all and said thank you. When they reached Ibrahim's house, where people were gathering, he parked by the fence and said he would wait in the car, because of the heater. Through the windshield he watched his wife walk up to people she had never seen and an older woman in black take her by both hands and not let go. The engine was running. The freesias had stayed at home, on the table, in water that no one had changed.

DECEPTION · 7 MIN READ

A Red Coat on Installments

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-red-coat-on-installments/

Nothing happens in Maglaj without my hearing of it first, because every illness, every love and every debt finds its way into the pharmacy sooner or later. Mine is across from Dr. Nazif's clinic, on the main street, and for thirty years I have watched through its window who comes to see the doctor and who comes to see the doctor's wife. Dr. Nazif is a good man. I say that without malice. He drives out to the villages along the Bosna even in the snow, knows the blood pressure of every grandmother from Maglaj to Žepče, and has never in his life read anything but medical journals and soccer scores.

He brought Irma from Doboj seven years ago. She was twenty-six, with a literature degree and three suitcases, two of them full of books and home decorating magazines. The apartment above the clinic looked out on the Kuršumlija mosque and the river, and from the first day it was too small for Irma. She read about Tuscany, watched videos of apartments in Milan, rearranged the flowers in the vase three times over and waited for something to happen. Little Zejneba was born. Nothing else happened. The doctor praised the soup, talked about his patients and fell asleep as soon as he sat down in front of the television.

What happened was called Zahid. He had a furniture and home goods showroom in Doboj, and on Thursdays he made the rounds of the markets with his catalogs. He was always clean-shaven, always smiling, and never asked about money. He told Irma what men like him tell women like her: you can pay when you are able. First came the velvet curtains, then a lamp from Milan, then a walnut table, then a red coat that turned every head in the old bazaar. I wrote down every van from Doboj in my prescription notebook. Not out of curiosity. Out of habit.

Ferhat had raspberry fields above the town and a sawmill by the Bosna, forty-five years of age, a divorce behind him and a black SUV in front of

the café. He brought a worker who had cut his hand on a saw to the doctor, and there, on the stairs, he saw Irma for the first time. At the agricultural fair in September, while the mayor spoke from the stage about raspberry exports to Germany, Ferhat sat beside her in the back row and talked to her about the sea, about freedom, and about how a life must not be wasted on waiting. That day I was on the stage handing out the prize for the best plum jam, and I saw everything. The prize was my idea.

After that came the drives in the SUV to his cabin on Mount Ozren. The doctor thought Irma was going to yoga in Doboj. Irma thought she would go to Italy with Ferhat, and she bought two suitcases on Zahid's installment plan. The day before they were to leave, Ferhat sent her a message saying they should be reasonable, because he had a sawmill and she had a child. He left alone, for the season in Austria. Irma lay in bed with a fever for six weeks, and every day the doctor bought vitamins from me and asked whether I, as a man of science, knew what was wrong with her. I told him it was the climate.

In the spring he took her to the theater in Doboj, to cheer her up. There she met Sanjin, who had once been an intern at our municipal office and who, while he was an intern, had liked her enough to carry her books from the library. Now he worked at a bank in Doboj and wore expensive glasses. On the way out of the theater he told her she had not changed at all, and that was the one lie Irma recognized at once and forgave at once. The next day Irma told the doctor she would like to study English with a teacher in Doboj, on Thursdays. The doctor said it was an excellent idea. He paid for the course and the bus as well.

The English was studied in an apartment above a bakery near the bus station, and Irma paid for it. She also paid for the lunches, and the gifts, and the watch Sanjin had wanted, all of it on installments, with Zahid and with a quick loan agency whose poster hung at the station. When the payments started falling behind, she brought the doctor some papers to sign, for the bank, she said, about the apartment. The doctor never read

what Irma gave him. He signed at the table, with a spoon in his other hand.

In November the bailiff pasted a court order on the clinic door. The list was long and precise: velvet curtains, lamp from Milan, walnut table, two suitcases, man's watch. By noon all of Maglaj had walked past that door, some of them twice, and the women stopped at the word velvet. I read the list aloud to customers who had not brought their glasses. People need the truth, not gossip. That is exactly what I told them.

That day Irma went to Doboj, to Sanjin. She told me about it later, herself, because she no longer had anyone else to tell. Sanjin had gotten engaged to the bank director's daughter, and he asked her not to come to his counter. Ferhat, who was back from Austria, offered her coffee on the terrace of his house, beside a new SUV, and said that he had no cash at the moment. She walked home along the Bosna in the dark. Just before closing time she came into the pharmacy and asked me to lend her money, any amount. I have a family and a reputation. I turned her down politely, the way one does.

The doctor learned the truth from the bailiff, and the rest from Irma's drawer, where he found Ferhat's messages, printed out, and Sanjin's letters, because Sanjin liked to write by hand. He read them in the kitchen all night. He did not shout. In the morning he took Zejneba to his mother in Doboj, sold the clinic to a doctor from Tuzla and with that money paid off the debts, down to the last mark. He filed for divorce in December. He never said an unkind word to Irma. I think that was the hardest part for her.

Irma lost the apartment, the clinic she had never loved, the child she now sees on Sundays, and the town that had always been too small for her anyway. She rented a room from a widow near the station. In the end it was Zahid who gave her a job. She works at his showroom in Doboj, selling curtains, lamps and tables to women from the towns around and telling them they can pay when they are able. When she meets me at the

station, she greets me first. They say she sells well. She knows what those women want to buy.

That winter I received a municipal plaque for my contribution to public health. It hangs in the pharmacy, above the register, and customers notice it before they notice me. Every morning at six forty I see Irma through the window, getting on the bus to Doboj. She wears the red coat. It is the only thing the bailiff did not list, because that morning she had it on.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

A Love Triangle Missing One Side

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-love-triangle-missing-one-side/

In Mostar every third man is called Toni, Matea used to say, so they were not very surprised when, in the same spring, each of them started seeing one. Alisa's Toni drove a tour bus on the Dubrovnik route and climbed Mount Velež on weekends. Matea's Antonio, as she stubbornly called him by his full name, was a guide on those same buses, listened to jazz and said he could not stand mountains. Both men worked shifts, which was why the four of them never managed to go out together, and the friends were left with evenings for just the two of them. They laughed about it over coffee. When the two of them meet, Alisa used to say, they can start an association.

They had been friends since the first day of high school, in that yellow gymnasium building on Spanish Square, where they shared a desk for four years, minus one and a half. In their junior year they did not speak for a year and a half because of Dario from the basketball team, who in the end went out with neither of them. They never talked about it. But every time a man appeared, both remembered those eighteen months, and each was a little more careful than she needed to be. Now they were thirty-two, Alisa worked as an architect at a firm near the Rondo, Matea taught piano at the music school, and they lived two streets from each other.

Alisa met Toni in March, at a café by the Crooked Bridge, when he spilled coffee on her sleeve and paid for a new one. In April he took her up Velež at five in the morning to watch the sun rise over Mostar. He had brand new hiking boots and blisters on both heels, but Alisa thought he had bought them just for her, and she was pleased. He had no Facebook, did not like having his picture taken, and never had time for her friends. He said he was shy. Alisa liked that, because her ex had been anything but shy.

Matea met Antonio in Blagaj, by the Buna, when he caught the keys that had fallen from the restaurant terrace at her feet. He told her about Chet Baker, lent her CDs in cases that still had the price stickers on them, and once, in the car, played her a whole album from beginning to end without saying a word. He did not like pictures either. Matea once took one of him anyway, secretly, by the Buna, as he laughed with a coffee in his hand, and she kept that photo as if she had stolen something valuable. She talked to Alisa about him for hours, and Alisa listened and thought that the two of them, for once, had been lucky at the same time.

At the end of July, after four months, they decided it was enough. They booked dinner for four, Saturday at eight, at the Two Mills restaurant, on the terrace above the Neretva. Each told her man. Alisa's Toni said he couldn't wait to meet the famous Matea. Matea's Antonio said he couldn't wait to meet the famous Alisa. They reserved a table by the railing, with a view of the Old Bridge, and Matea spent two days choosing a dress. Alisa made a list of topics not to be discussed at a first dinner together: politics, exes and Dario.

On Saturday both arrived early, as always, because neither wanted the other to wait. They ordered mineral water and watched the divers on the bridge. One of them stood on the parapet collecting money from tourists, and every five minutes Matea glanced at the door. The waiter brought four menus and left two empty chairs. At five past eight both phones buzzed at the same moment, briefly, like a single phone.

Matea read her message aloud, laughing, because she thought Antonio was running late and apologizing. "Babe, a shift to Dubrovnik came up, sorry, I'll make it up to you, I promis." Alisa was looking at her own phone and not laughing. Then she read hers. It was the same. The same word at the start, the same shift, the same winking smiley and the same mistake in the last word, a letter missing at the end. They laid the phones side by side on the white tablecloth, and for a long time neither said anything.

"Show me the picture," said Alisa. Matea opened the photo from the Buna. Alisa looked only once. She recognized the scar in the left eyebrow, which, he had told her, he got on Velež as a boy, and the blue jacket he wore even when it was not cold. "That's my Toni," she said. Matea stared at the screen as if the picture would change if she looked at it long enough. "That's my Antonio."

For a while they looked at each other across the table. Alisa felt the old feeling from junior year, like the smell of a classroom. "Did you know?" she asked, and regretted it at once. "How would I know?" said Matea, in a shaking voice. "You saw him on Velež. I only saw him by the Buna. I'm not that girl from junior year anymore. Neither are you." The waiter came over and asked whether they were still waiting for the gentlemen. "The gentleman," said Alisa. "Just one." The waiter apologized and left, without understanding why neither of them was laughing.

Matea was the first to laugh. "He doesn't even like jazz," she said. "His CDs were all new, with the price on." "Or Velež," said Alisa. "His boots were new. He had blisters as if his feet belonged to someone else." Then, on a napkin, they put together his week. Monday, Wednesday and Friday, Alisa. Tuesday and Thursday, Matea. Weekends, Dubrovnik. They sat over that napkin until they were worn out from laughing and from anger, and it became clear that he had invented two men, one for each of them, and that neither of them was him. "Junior year," Alisa said quietly. "I know," said Matea. "I'm not doing a year and a half again." "Neither am I."

They wrote the answer together, bent over Matea's phone, and then Alisa copied it onto hers, letter by letter. "No problem, babe. I'm out with my best friend tonight anyway." They counted aloud, three, two, one, and sent it in the same second, the way he had sent his. Then they blocked him, each watching the other's screen, to be sure.

They told the waiter to bring all four dinners. He brought two trout, japrak, stuffed peppers and, at the end, four tufahije, and watched two

women in their best dresses eat for four and offer each other bites from their forks. Matea said it was the best dinner a man had ever canceled on her. They split the bill in half, as they always had since high school, when they used to split one burek between the two of them. They left a big tip, because, as Matea said, he had seen what happened too and had said nothing.

They walked home across the Old Bridge after midnight, when the divers had gone and the stone was still warm from the day. On Kujundžiluk the waiters were stacking chairs. Matea took off her sandals and carried them in her hand. Alisa hummed something that might have been jazz, if either of them had known how jazz goes. In the middle of the bridge Matea took Alisa by the arm, as in junior year, before Dario, and that is how they crossed to the other side.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

The House in Another Woman's Window

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-house-in-another-womans-window/

The registered letter from the bank arrived on a Thursday, in a smog so thick that from Radakovo you could see neither the steelworks nor the Bosna River. The mailman gave it to Meliha, as he did with everything addressed to Ekrem. She signed without looking, the way she had signed for twenty-six years, and opened it at the kitchen table, because Ekrem was at a trade fair in Vienna and because in that house they had both opened the mail for a long time.

It said that three installments were overdue. A loan of seventy thousand marks, taken out in March, secured by a mortgage on the family house in Radakovo, entered in the land register in the name of Ekrem Avdić. Meliha read it twice, then a third time, slowly, the way she read test results to patients who had not brought their glasses. On paper the house was Ekrem's. His father had left him the ground floor. The upper floor they had built together, in 2009, from her nurse's salary and from the money her father got for his land in Janjići. Their children had grown up on that floor. On that floor she now sat with the letter in her hand.

She called him. Ekrem laughed into the phone, and behind him she could hear music and a woman's voice. He said it was the bank's mistake, that there were ten Ekrem Avdićs in Zenica, that he would sort it all out on Monday when he got back, and that she should not get her blood pressure up. For twenty-six years Meliha had measured other people's blood pressure on the internal medicine ward. She knew how a man sounds when he says everything is fine. She thanked him, wished him a good fair, and hung up.

Ekrem kept the key to the drawer in his office in the garage in the coffee tin, behind the džezva, ever since the children were small and the papers

for the trucks were kept out there. The folder was at the bottom. The loan agreement, with his signature. Quotes for walnut shelves, for lighting, for six window mannequins and for a cash register. A lease for a shop on Tito Street, tenant Arijana Mujić, guarantor Ekrem Avdić. And one printed page with a sketch of a sign: ARI, boutique, opening on Saturday.

She remembered March. Ekrem had been tender then as never before: on his own he had bought a new washing machine, and twice he had taken her to dinner in Vranduk. In March he had also taken away her sehara, her mother's walnut dowry chest with brass nails, saying he knew a carpenter in Kakanj who would restore it for next to nothing. After March the trade fairs began, in Vienna, in Sarajevo, in Istanbul. So did the new shirts, which she had not bought.

On Friday evening she walked into town. The shop window on Tito Street was papered over, and the paper said the opening was on Saturday at six. Between two sheets there was a gap as wide as a finger. Through it Meliha saw a young woman, about thirty, arranging silk scarves on a walnut chest with brass nails. Two letters were carved into the front of the chest, her mother's initials. She stood in front of that window until her toes went numb in her boots, then went home and did not sleep.

On Saturday she worked the morning shift, came home, bathed and put on the coat she saved for weddings. By six the boutique was already full. There were balloons, juice in champagne glasses, and women from town whom Meliha knew from the ward. Ekrem stood behind the register, in a new shirt, like a man at home in his own house. When he saw her in the doorway, he went as white as a clinic wall. He did not move.

Meliha walked past him as if he were a clothes rack. She went up to the chest, lifted one scarf from it, a blue silk one, and carried it to the register. Arijana smiled, because she did not know her, and said it was the most beautiful piece in the boutique. "I'd like an invoice in my name, please," said Meliha. "Meliha Avdić." The register could not do that, so Arijana wrote it out by hand on a pad. Meliha paid eighty-nine marks,

folded the invoice and put it in her wallet. Then she took the letter from the bank out of her handbag and laid it on the counter. "You've done it up nicely," she said. "Shelves, lights, mannequins. All of it paid for with my house. Three installments are overdue. Ekrem forgot that the mail in Radakovo comes to me."

Arijana looked at the letter, then at Ekrem. Someone in the boutique turned the music down. "You said it was your savings from Germany," she said quietly. "You said you two split up two years ago." Ekrem said this was all a misunderstanding and that Meliha should go home, and they would talk there. "You don't have a home," said Meliha. "You have a mortgage." She pointed at the chest. "And this was never at a carpenter's in Kakanj." She took the scarf and walked out, and no one said a word after her.

On Monday she sat in the office of the lawyer Indira Šehić, whose IV she had changed on the ward three years earlier. Indira read all the papers and said that the ground floor was Ekrem's inheritance, but the upper floor, built during the marriage, was joint property, and a mortgage on the whole house without Meliha's consent could be challenged. She would file a lawsuit and ask for a notice of dispute in the land register. Besides that, if Meliha wanted, a divorce. Meliha asked how long it would take. "A long time," said Indira. "But from today on, nobody can do anything with that house without you knowing about it."

Ekrem went to his brother's in Kakanj. The first week he called every day, then every other day, and then he started sending messages that began with "Mela" and ended with "you know you're the only one for me." Meliha did not delete them. She printed them and put them in the same folder, because the lawyer had told her not to throw anything away.

In January the boutique closed. There was paper on the window again, this time with a sign saying the space was for rent. One afternoon a van stopped in front of the house in Radakovo. Arijana got out with a workman, and together they carried the chest into the hallway. "I didn't

know whose it was," said Arijana. "Now you do," said Meliha. Arijana stood in the doorway and did not leave. She said she had returned the stock to the suppliers and had told Ekrem not to call her anymore. She also said that on their first evening he had told her that only with her did he know what he wanted from life. "He told me that in ninety-eight," said Meliha, "in Vranduk. The dinner was better."

When the van had gone, Meliha knelt beside the chest and opened it. At the bottom lay price tags, little white stickers that had come off the scarves. She peeled them off one by one. Then she laid the blue silk scarf on her mother's embroidered towels and closed the lid. That evening she put the folder for the lawyer in order once more: loan agreement, mortgage, lease, shelves, mannequins, register. Her name was not on a single one of those papers. It appeared on only one, written by hand: blue silk scarf, eighty-nine marks, paid in cash.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Same Message for Four Women

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-same-message-for-four-women/

The number three tram runs from Ilidža to Baščaršija and back, through the whole city, in a little over an hour. Anyone who drives it in winter knows where ice gathers on the rails, at which traffic light at Marijin Dvor the passengers start pushing, and which stop in Alipašino Polje has a shelter that shelters you from nothing. The women who worked the three line, drivers and ticket inspectors, knew all of it by heart. They also knew Riad Pobrić, the dispatcher in the glass booth at the depot, whose voice they heard over the radio every day, from the first morning shift to the last tram.

Riad was thirty-eight, had never married, and had a voice that made passengers ask who that was when they heard it from the driver's cab. "Three seven, you're two minutes late, but you're forgiven," he would say, and the driver of three seven would smile all day. On night shifts he brought burek from the bakery near Stup, remembered birthdays, and knew whose husband worked in Germany and whose child was sick. He had an old red Golf and a habit of taking someone to Vrelo Bosne on Sundays. Nobody at the depot could say exactly whom, because it kept changing.

Anesa Mujanović had been working as a ticket inspector for three years and for a long time would not give in to him. She was twenty-seven, with short hair and a voice she used in a packed tram to say "tickets, please" in a way that made even the loudest young men reach for their wallets. She laughed in Riad's face. But he was patient. In October he waited for her outside the depot after her shift with two coffees, in November they went to Vrelo Bosne for the first time, and while they watched the swans from the little bridge, he told her she was the only one who understood him. That was when she kissed him, on the little bridge, and all winter after that she believed it had been her decision.

In January something changed. Riad still greeted her when she passed his booth, but he gave her night shifts, stopped answering after eight, and one Sunday he did not show up, because, as he wrote, his mother was ill. That same Sunday Ankica, a driver with fifteen years on the job, saw the red Golf in the parking lot at Vrelo Bosne, and in it Riad and little Belkisa, who had only come to the depot in December.

Anesa asked him only once. She waited until he was alone in the booth, knocked on the glass, and asked him what had happened. Riad took off his headset, smiled at her the way he smiled at passengers, and said he was tired, that he had a lot of work, and that she should not make scenes at the workplace, because she was smarter than that. Then he pressed the button on the radio and said: "Three two, go ahead, you've got green." Anesa stood in front of the glass until it became clear to her that the conversation was over.

In the break room, over tea, Ankica told them what she had seen at Vrelo Bosne, without looking at Anesa. Then Jadranka Pejić, the oldest driver on the shift, laughed in a way nobody liked. She took out her phone, scrolled back two years through her messages, and read aloud: "You're the only one who understands me." Ankica turned red and took out her own phone. The same sentence, from last spring, with the same flower at the end. Anesa did not need to take out hers. She knew it was the same. Belkisa, whom they called in the next day, cried for ten minutes and then showed them her message too, exactly seven days old.

"He's not going to pick our shifts for us," said Jadranka. "We'll pick his." Ankica was afraid for her job, because she had a loan and two kids in school, but Jadranka told her nobody got fired over a conversation in the break room. She also told them something she had never talked about: that Riad had written to her the winter she got divorced, when she had no one to say a word to, and that for two years she had been ashamed of believing him. The plan was simple and had nothing in it that could be reported to management. On Friday Belkisa would ask him to stay in the break room after the last tram, because she had something to tell him.

The others would already be there. Jadranka said nobody would so much as touch him. "He'll just choose," she said. "One of us. In front of everyone. Let him see what it's like when a person has to make up his mind."

On Friday it snowed. The last number three came into the depot a little before midnight, and the yellow trams stood in rows with their lights off, like a herd asleep. The break room was on the second floor, above the workshop: an old radiator, a coffee machine that worked when it felt like it, a table covered with oilcloth, and a faded poster of Vučko, the Olympic wolf. When Riad came in, smiling, with a box of burek and snow on his shoulders, Belkisa was standing by the window. Ankica, Jadranka and Anesa were sitting at the table. Jadranka stood up, locked the door, and put the key in her jacket pocket.

"What's this," Riad laughed, "a union meeting?" Nobody laughed. Jadranka pointed him to the chair at the head of the table, and he sat down, because he was a man who always sat down when a woman pointed him to a chair. Then Ankica read her message. Then Jadranka hers. Then Belkisa, in a voice that trembled. The same words, the same flower, the same promised weekend in Mostar, which none of them had ever seen. Anesa read nothing. She looked at him across the table, and for the first time that evening he looked away.

He tried the way he had always tried. He told Ankica she had been special to him, Jadranka that she had been like an older sister to him, Belkisa that she was still young and did not understand what she had read. Jadranka cut him off. "Riad," she said, "you didn't call us to a meeting. We called you. And you're not leaving here until you choose. One of us. Out loud." He stood up and started for the door, then remembered the key and stopped. He said he would call the security guard. He reached for his phone on the table, but Ankica was faster and dropped it into the tin tea caddy.

"You don't need the guard," said Jadranka. "We have a Viber group. The depot, all shifts, three hundred people. I'm the administrator." She held up her phone. "Four messages, the same sentence, the same flower. Either you choose, or I hit send, and from Monday on every driver in the city who hears you on the radio will know who the only one who understands you is." Riad looked at Jadranka, then at Ankica, then at Belkisa by the window, and his face changed. It was no longer charming. It was tired and mean, and suddenly older.

"Fine," he said. "You want me to choose? I'm choosing." He leaned across the table and pointed at Anesa, the way you point at a tram that is running late. "Her. Anesa. Are you happy now?" He said it without looking at her, in the voice of someone buying a ticket, and the room became so quiet that they could hear the radiator.

They all turned toward Anesa. By the window Belkisa held her breath. Anesa slowly stood up. She looked at Riad, at his hands on the oilcloth, at the snow melting on his collar, and something in her face closed, like the doors of a tram as it pulls away. "I don't want you," she said. She said it calmly, in the voice she used to say "tickets, please." "Jadranka, give him the key."

Jadranka gave him the key. Ankica took the phone out of the tea caddy and set it on the table. Riad picked up his phone and his jacket and left without a word, leaving the door open. They heard him going down the metal stairs, his footsteps crunching on the snow between the trams, and the red Golf in the parking lot starting only on the third try. Nobody rejoiced. Ankica laughed, too loudly, then fell silent. Belkisa cried. Jadranka put water on for tea and stood with her back to them for a long time, although the water had long since boiled.

Anesa sat at the table, in front of the box of burek he had brought, which was growing cold, unopened. She did not cry. On Monday she worked the first morning shift on the three line, from Ilidža toward the city. At Marijin Dvor a young man in a leather jacket got on without a ticket and

gave her the kind of smile that makes everything easier. Anesa wrote out the fine without raising her eyes, tore off the slip, and handed it to him, and only when the young man got off two stops later did she notice that her hand was shaking.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

The Suitcase That Came Back to Mejtaš

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-suitcase-that-came-back-to-mejtas/

Erol Halilović loved the moment when his car, in second gear, made it up the last steep stretch of Mejtaš and his house appeared around the bend. It was an old house with white walls and a new roof, with a view over the whole valley, bought six years ago and restored exactly the way he had imagined it. That Thursday in October a fine rain was falling, the lights of the city were coming on below him one by one, and Erol, switching off the engine, felt what he felt every evening: that everything was in its place. He was forty-two, the regional director of an insurance company with offices from Bihać to Trebinje, the chairman of the board of a tennis club, and a man of whom no one could say he had ever raised his voice.

His marriage was as well ordered as his house. Ines was ten years younger, translated from German, dressed well, and at receptions knew whom to talk to and for how long. They never quarreled. Erol considered this proof that they had chosen well, and when his friends told him about their marital troubles, he listened with the pity of a man who has put his affairs in order in good time. On Thursdays Hašima, the woman who looked after the house, did not come, so he was not surprised that the ground floor was dark.

The letter was on the dressing table in the bedroom, propped against a bottle of perfume, with his name written in Ines's upright hand. He read it standing, in his coat. Ines wrote that she was leaving tonight, with Mirnes Beširević, and that she would not be coming back. She wrote that she did not hate him and held nothing against him, except one thing she could not explain, which was that in this house everything had always been correct and nothing had been alive. At the end she wrote that a lawyer would be in touch about the papers and that she had left him the keys to her car in the drawer in the hallway.

He read the letter once more, more slowly, the way he read contracts with an unclear clause. The first thing he felt was not pain but shame, so strong that he turned toward the window as if someone were watching him. Mirnes Beširević. A columnist for a weekly that stayed in print only because Erol's company paid for two pages of ads in it every month. A man who wore a scarf even in May and talked about poetry at receptions. Erol saw how it would look: the board meeting on Monday, the glances across the table, his mother asking what he had missed, the people at the tennis club who would fall silent when he walked in. He saw himself in the mirror of the dressing table, in a good coat, graying at the temples, and that man suddenly seemed ridiculous to him.

He went down to the living room without turning on the light and sat in an armchair. He began working out what he would say. That Ines had gone to her sister in Vienna, say, for a few weeks. That they had agreed to separate, calmly, like adults. Every version sounded better than the truth, and every one had the same flaw, because in each of them he remained, alone, in the house on Mejtaš, while someone in town told how it had really been. He crumpled the letter in his fist, and then, without knowing why, smoothed it out on his knee and put it in the inside pocket of his coat.

That was when he heard the key in the lock. The door opened, someone set something heavy down in the hallway, and the light came on. Ines stood in the doorway of the living room, her hair wet, and behind her, by the front door, stood a small suitcase. She had not expected him to be there, in the dark, in his coat. They looked at each other for a long time. "I couldn't," she said at last. Mirnes had been waiting for her in his car by the Eternal Flame, she told him, and when they started down Titova Street, at the traffic light by Marijin Dvor she had gotten out of the car and taken a taxi back. She explained nothing to him. Nor to herself.

Erol stood up. What he felt at that moment was so close to relief that he himself called it that. But beneath the relief, like water under ice, something else rose, small and hard, and he gave himself over to it

because it was more familiar to him than anything else: the feeling of being in the right. "Sit down," he said, in the voice he used at meetings to open the difficult items on the agenda. Ines did not sit down.

He talked for a long time, calmly and in good order. He said he understood her better than she thought. That people were weak and that even the best of them sometimes made mistakes. That the only thing that mattered was that she had come back, because it meant that in the end she had understood what duty was and what was owed to the house, to the name, to him. He said that no one ever needed to know about this. That he would be generous, because he could afford to be. He spoke of Mirnes as an error in the accounts, to be corrected and forgotten, and of himself as a man who had been wronged and who, in spite of that, was ready to forgive. The longer he talked, the more he liked the way it sounded.

Ines listened to him standing, without taking off her wet jacket. When he paused for breath, she said: "I didn't come back out of duty, Erol. I came back because I'm a coward." He waved his hand as if shooing away a fly. He said that this did not matter now and that what mattered was what she would do from tomorrow on. She asked him whether anything at all had hurt him while he read the letter, other than what people would say. Erol opened his mouth and realized he had no answer he could speak without lying. So he said the question was unfair, considering who was asking it and after what.

"You're right," said Ines. She said it without irony, and that was worse than irony. She took off her jacket, hung it on the coat rack in the hallway, as she did every evening, and went into the kitchen. Erol heard her open the refrigerator, take out the dish of sarma Hašima had left on Wednesday, and turn on the burner. He heard the clink of two plates. Ten minutes later she called him to dinner, in the same voice she had used to call him for six years.

They ate at the kitchen table, under a lamp he had picked out in Graz. Ines asked how work had been. Erol answered. She nodded in the right places. She said that on Saturday she would of course come with him to the reception at the chairman's house and would wear the green dress, because that was the dress he liked. She said she would never mention Mirnes again. "I'll be everything you want," she said, stacking the plates in the sink. "Everything I was before. Just don't ask me for more than that."

Erol sat at the table and watched her back. Only then did he understand what she was offering him. She was offering him exactly what he had been demanding a little while ago: a house where everything was in its place, a wife who knew whom to talk to and for how long, a marriage without quarrels. She was offering it to him completely and honestly, and he knew it would last for years, that every evening she would set out two plates and smile at receptions, and that he would never again know what she was thinking as she looked out the window toward the city. He tried to remember a single evening before this one when he had known what she was thinking. He could not remember one.

"This isn't fair," he said. His voice was quieter than he had meant it to be. "I did nothing wrong. I was here. I did everything the way it should be done." "I know," said Ines. "You always did everything the way it should be done." She turned toward him, a dish towel in her hand, and in her eyes there was neither defiance nor remorse, only tiredness. Erol waited for her to say something more, anything, to accuse him or to plead with him, because then he could be in the right one more time. She only hung the towel on the oven handle.

He got up and went into the hallway. He still had his coat on. He touched his pocket and felt the paper. Ines came to the kitchen doorway and asked him where he was going. He said he did not know. "I came back," she said quietly, as if reminding him of something he had forgotten. "You did," said Erol. "You did." He opened the door and went out into the rain. He left the car in the yard. He walked down the steep streets of Mejtaš,

toward the lights of the city, with the stride of a man who is late for a meeting.

He never went back to the house on Mejtaš. That night he slept in a hotel near Skenderija, and a week later he sent a driver from the company for his suits and books. Hašima packed everything into three boxes and in the last one, on top, she put the tennis trophy, because the lady had told her he loved it. Erol later rented an apartment in Grbavica, with a view of the same city, only from the other side. He kept the letter. It lay in the drawer of his nightstand, folded in four, and sometimes he took it out, not to read it, because he knew it by heart, but to check whether that sentence about a house where everything was correct and nothing was alive was still there.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

You Asked for It, Jozo

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/you-asked-for-it-jozo/

In Brčko they said Jozo Grgić had more trucks than teeth, which was only half true, because he still had all his teeth. He had started with a single dump truck and gravel from the Sava, while the young men his age were leaving for Germany. In twenty years he had turned that dump truck into a concrete plant on the road out toward Bijeljina, three gas stations, and a company that employed seventy people. On the company building and on every truck it said GRGIĆ BETON, in big blue letters.

The only thing he lacked was something that cannot be poured into a mold. The Šimundić family lived in a house in the center of town, with a plaque on the facade saying that Brčko's first notary had lived there, back under Austria. The facade was peeling, the roof leaked, and Mr. Vinko Šimundić, a retired judge, still wore a bow tie to Sunday Mass. When Jozo proposed to his daughter Antonela, Mr. Vinko asked for a week to think it over. During that week Jozo's workers, quite by chance, replaced his roof. At the wedding, in a hotel by the Sava, Mrs. Ljerka Šimundić introduced her son-in-law to the guests as "our Jozo," in the tone people use for a plumber who does good work.

Antonela was beautiful and tall, she spoke three languages better than Jozo spoke one, and from the first day of the marriage she did not hide that marrying him had been a family decision, not hers. She lunched with her friends in Tuzla and laughed into the phone in a voice she never used to laugh for him. Jozo was building a villa on the hill above town, with a pool and a terrace facing the Sava, and he believed that once the villa was finished, everything would sort itself out. The design was being done by a young architect named Dominik, whom Antonela had recommended personally.

The first time, he learned the truth at the gate of his own building site. It was January, late afternoon, and Jozo was standing in knee-high rubber

boots, spattered with cement, when a flower delivery scooter pulled up at the gate. A young man of about twenty took off his helmet, looked him over from head to boots, and decided he was facing the watchman. "This is for the lady," he said, and handed him a bouquet of white roses. "From the architect. Just make sure the husband doesn't see you, they say he's some hick with a concrete business, jealous as a dog." Jozo took the roses and asked the young man his name. Mateo, the young man said, and added, lowering his voice as if between friends, that this was the third time he had brought roses, that there was a card in the bouquet, and on the card it said Thursday, tennis club, seven o'clock.

When the scooter had gone, Jozo looked at the card for a long time. Then he said out loud, although nobody but the cement mixer heard him: "You asked for it, Jozo." And he went straight to his mother-in-law and father-in-law.

Mrs. Ljerka received him in the parlor, beneath the portrait of the notary. Before he could sit down, she explained to him, as she did every time, that in this house one did not say "mother-in-law" but "Mrs. Šimundić," and that muddy boots were not to be brought onto the Persian rug. Jozo took off his boots and stayed in his socks. He showed them the card. Mr. Vinko read it through his glasses, twice, and said that this was a serious accusation, and that in the Šimundić family serious accusations were not made behind people's backs. He phoned Antonela and the architect. They arrived half an hour later, each in their own car.

Dominik was calm, in a sand-colored coat, and spoke in the voice architects use to explain why everything will cost twice as much. He said the card was not his, that plenty of people in Brčko played tennis on Thursdays, and that he was deeply hurt to have his name mixed up in matters like this. He swore on the honor of his family. Antonela said nothing and looked at Jozo's socks. Mr. Vinko stood up. "Jozo," he said, "a man of honor has suspected, and a man of honor also apologizes. Stand up and tell Mr. Dominik that you are sorry." Jozo stood up in his socks and said it. Mrs. Ljerka made him say it again, because the first

time, as she put it, he had apologized as if he were selling gravel.

The second time he prepared better. The following Thursday he got into a truck belonging to one of his drivers, parked it across from the tennis club, and waited. At ten past seven Antonela and Dominik came out of the club and sat down in a café on the riverbank, at a table in the corner. Jozo filmed them on his phone, then called his father-in-law and told him only to come right away and bring the lady. The Šimundićs arrived twenty minutes later. But through the glass Antonela had seen the truck with GRGIĆ BETON written on it, which in Brčko cannot be hidden even behind a block of apartment buildings.

When her parents walked in, they found their daughter standing by the table and, loudly enough for the whole café to hear, handing some envelope back to the architect. "I have told you once already, sir," she was saying in a trembling voice. "I am a married woman. My husband may be a simple man, but he is honest, and I do not wish to read your messages. I came here only to tell you so in front of witnesses." Mrs. Ljerka embraced her daughter and said she had raised a saint. Mr. Vinko turned to Jozo, who was standing in the doorway with his phone in his hand, and asked him whether he was not ashamed to be spying on his own wife while she defended his honor. Jozo apologized to Antonela, in front of the waiter and half the café.

That night, on the way home, he said to the steering wheel: "You asked for it, Jozo." The steering wheel did not object.

The third time he decided he would call no one until he was sure. On Saturday Antonela said she had been invited to a friend's birthday party in Tuzla and would sleep at her place. At one in the morning, from a window of the villa, Jozo saw her car climbing the hill, and behind it a silver car he knew well, because the architect had bought it with the advance Jozo had paid him. The silver car turned around at the bottom of the street and switched off its lights. Jozo locked the door from the inside, left the key in the lock, and called his father-in-law. "Come and

see where your daughter sleeps when she sleeps in Tuzla," he said, and hung up before Mrs. Ljerka could correct him.

Antonela knocked, then rang, then called to him through the door for a long time, sweetly at first, then angrily. Jozo sat in the hallway on a pack of tiles that had not been laid yet and did not answer. Outside there was frost and the stone steps were iced over. Then from the other side of the door he heard a short cry, a thud, and silence. "Jozo," Antonela moaned, "my leg. I think I broke it." Jozo jumped up, turned the key, and ran out in his pajamas and slippers. Antonela was lying on the steps. When he bent over her, she slipped out from under his arm more easily than a cat, ran into the house, and locked the door. The key was still in the lock, only now on the other side.

The taxi with the Šimundićs arrived a few minutes later. Its headlights lit up their son-in-law in striped pajamas, wearing one slipper, pounding on the door of his own house. A light came on in a second-floor window and Antonela appeared, in a bathrobe, her hair down. "Mom," she said in a tired voice, "it's good you came. I've been home since ten. He came back a little while ago, I don't know where from, and look, he's shouting in the street. The third time this month. I don't know what to do anymore." Mrs. Ljerka brought her nose close to her son-in-law's face and smelled rakija, the one small glass he had drunk with his workers at the opening of the new gas station. That was enough for her.

Antonela would not open the door until her husband apologized. Mr. Vinko dictated the apology to him, sentence by sentence, like a verdict. In his pajamas, in a frost that burned his ears, Jozo repeated that he had been wrong, that his wife was a decent woman from a decent house, and that he would never again doubt her. Mrs. Ljerka demanded that he say it more nicely. He said it more nicely. Only then did the door open. Mr. Vinko went in first, then Mrs. Ljerka, who noticed in the hallway right away that the tiles had not been laid yet.

Jozo was the last to enter his own house. On the threshold he turned and looked down the hill. At the bottom of the street the silver car switched on its lights, slowly turned around, and disappeared toward town. "You asked for it, Jozo," he said quietly, and locked the door, this time from the right side.

DECEPTION · 10 MIN READ

The White Pear Tree of Bistrik

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-white-pear-tree-of-bistrik/

Belma is thirty-two, and sometimes, as today, climbing to the fourth floor of an old building in Bistrik, she has to stop on the stairs, because something inside her is so full that she cannot go on. It is not tiredness. It is not happiness either, or it is, but too big for that word. She feels like a glass someone keeps pouring into and pouring into, and she must not move her hand or it will spill. She cannot find her key for laughing. The woman on the third floor is watching her through the peephole, Belma knows it, and that seems to her both funny and touching.

The flat smells of the lamb Haris put in the oven on low this morning before he left for the office. Belma takes fruit from the Markale market out of a bag: mandarins, green apples, grapes as dark as plums. She arranges it on a blue ceramic plate, then takes it all off and arranges it again, until the mandarins lie beside the grapes exactly as they should, as if the blue plate and the new dark purple carpet in the living room had to say something to each other. She looks at her work and laughs out loud. Let it be, she thinks. Let it be funny, too.

The nanny, Behija, is feeding little Asja in the bathroom, because that is what she is used to, and when Belma comes in, she looks at her the way you look at a guest who has turned up unannounced. Belma takes the spoon and feeds her daughter herself. Asja laughs at her and grabs her hair. Belma would like to stay there all evening, on the cold tiles, with that small warm thing in her lap, but the phone rings. Haris says he is running ten minutes late and asks whether everything is all right. Everything is fine, she says, and she would like to tell him something more, but she does not know what, and he has already hung up.

From the bedroom you can see the courtyard, and in the courtyard a pear tree that, they say, was planted by some Austrian clerk long ago. This year it bloomed all at once, in two days, and now it stands white to the last

branch, still, against the green wall of the house next door. Belma looks at it and thinks that this is her life, that pear tree: full, in blossom, without a single bare branch. She has Haris, she has Asja, she has a flat with a new carpet and friends who talk about films, she has just enough money not to have to think about money. And she has Biserka, her new friend, who is coming to dinner for the first time tonight.

For dinner she puts on a white dress, green shoes, and a necklace of green stone her mother brought her from Istanbul. Only when she stands in front of the big mirror by the front door does she notice that she is dressed like the pear tree, and she laughs again, alone, in the hallway. From the bathroom Behija asks what is funny. Nothing, says Belma. Nothing is funny. Everything is just too lovely.

She met Biserka in March, at the opening of an exhibition on Ferhadija. They were both standing in front of the same painting, for too long, and Biserka said the painting was sad and Belma said it was cheerful, and that was enough. Biserka is blond, quiet, a little absent, as if she were always listening to music from another room. Belma knows almost nothing about her: that she lives alone somewhere in Ciglane, that she translates from French, and that she drinks no coffee after five. She likes not knowing more. Belma attaches herself to new friends that way, at once and completely, and Haris laughs at her for it. He says Biserka is boring, that she only smiles and keeps quiet and surely has nothing to say. Belma does not believe him. She knows he always talks that way about people he does not know yet.

Tijana and Dino arrive first, she an interior designer, he a director at a small theater, both in clothes that you can tell at once are expensive and were meant to look cheap. Dino talks about a play nobody comes to see, Tijana about a client who wants a kitchen the color of salt cod. Then Vedad arrives, a young film critic, pale, and straight from the door he talks about the taxi driver who drove him from Skenderija as if he were running from the police. "I thought it was the end," he says. "The whole way I held on to the handle above the door." Haris arrives out of breath,

his scarf over his shoulder, kisses Belma on the hair, and goes straight to the kitchen to check the lamb.

Biserka arrives last, in a silver dress, her hair pinned up, and when Belma takes her coat, she feels that her hands are cold. At the table Biserka says little. She smiles, listens, eats slowly. Only when Tijana says that the fruit on the blue plate looks like something out of a Dutch painting does Biserka look at Belma and nod, as if she knew who had arranged it and how many times. Haris sits across from her and behaves, Belma thinks, almost rudely: he does not look at her, does not speak to her, asks Vedad about films and Dino about the stage. Belma would be angry with him, but she cannot be, because she is too proud of everything: of the lamb, of the fruit, of the people at her table, of the way the candles are reflected in the window. Every few minutes she looks at Biserka and waits for a sign. She does not know what kind.

After coffee, while Dino and Tijana are arguing about some review, Biserka leans toward Belma and quietly asks her whether the flat looks out on the courtyard. And that is the sign. Belma gets up without a word, leads her down the hallway to the bedroom, does not turn on the light, and draws back the curtains. Below, in the moonlight, stands the pear tree. It is so white it seems to shine by itself. The two women stand side by side and say nothing. It seems to Belma that something binds them, that they are both inside that white tree, that they understand each other without a single word, and that this moment, when everything else has passed, will keep coming back to them both.

They return to the table, and no one has noticed anything. Vedad reads a line of poetry from his phone, and Tijana teases him. Haris pours the wine, and Belma watches him pour. She watches his hands, the back of his neck, the way he laughs at Dino's joke, and for the first time in many years she feels that she can hardly wait for the guests to leave. For the two of them to be alone, she and he, in the flat with the candles burning down. The feeling is so new that she is embarrassed and blushes, and Tijana asks her whether she is too warm. Belma says she is. She thinks:

all of this is because of Biserka. She gave me this, there by the window. She will tell him, she thinks, tonight, when they turn off the lights. She does not know what yet, but she will tell him.

Shortly before midnight Tijana and Dino get up, because early in the morning they are driving to Mostar. Vedad calls a taxi and is frightened at once. Biserka says she will go with him, that it is on her way, and that she will hold his hand if the driver is crazy. Vedad asks them to wait while Belma finds him the book she promised him, an old poetry collection signed by the author. Belma goes into the living room, to the shelf. The book is on the second row, where it has always been. She turns with it toward the door.

From the living room you can see part of the hallway and the big mirror by the front door. In the mirror is Haris. He is holding Biserka's coat, but he is not handing it to her. Biserka steps up to him, puts her hands on his shoulders, and he draws her close and kisses her, unhurried, like a man who is not doing it for the first time. Then he whispers something to her. Belma cannot hear, but she sees his lips in the mirror and knows what he said: tomorrow. Biserka touches his cheek with her fingers, briefly, the way you touch something that is yours, and takes her coat.

When Biserka comes into the living room to say goodbye, her face is as calm as it has been all evening. She takes Belma's hands in hers. Her hands are still cold. "Thank you for everything," she says. "And for the pear tree. How lovely your pear tree is." Vedad is already at the door, his cap in his hands, calling that the taxi is waiting and the meter is running. Haris sees them out to the stairs. Belma hears the elevator going down, the building door closing below, and Haris coming back, whistling.

Belma walks to the bedroom window. The curtains are still drawn back, the way she left them. Below, the pear tree stands in the moonlight, white to the last branch, perfectly still, and nothing about it has changed. From the kitchen comes the sound of Haris stacking glasses in the sink and asking her whether he should put out the candles. Belma does not

answer. In her hand she is still holding the book Vedad asked for. No one took it.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

Three Women in the Bread Van

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/three-women-in-the-bread-van/

I loaded the van that Friday, so I can say I was there first, and what happened afterward all three of them told me, each in her own way: one at the post office counter, one at the hair salon, and one across the counter at the bakery. I have worked at the Kruna bakery in Sanski Most for twenty-two years, and I know every driver who has ever passed through our yard. Elvir was the only one to whom women brought coffee at the loading ramp without being asked. He was twenty-seven, with hair he combed in the rearview mirror and a fiancée, Mirsada, who worked at the post office and whom he was to marry in September.

The van was white and old, with the bakery's name on its sides and a handbrake that for eight months had held only when it felt like it. Everyone at the bakery knew it, and every month the boss promised he would have it fixed. That Friday I stacked empty crates in the van for Elvir, along with the flour sacks we send back to the mill, and told him to leave it in gear on a slope. He winked at me. "Hajrija," he said, "I'm like that handbrake. I hold when it counts." He set off for Ključ singing along with the radio, and I just waved him away.

In Ključ, at the market, he ran into Una, a hairdresser from the salon by the bus station, who needed to get to her sister's in Sanski Most. Una was one of those girls who laugh before they hear the joke. She sat up front, took off her sunglasses, and told him the whole market had told her he was getting married. Elvir said nobody asked the market anything. By Vrhpolje he had already told her she had the most beautiful hands in the Krajina and that, if she wanted, he would marry her tomorrow, just so she would do his hair every morning.

At the bus stop by the bridge in Vrhpolje stood Mirsada, with a bag full of cakes from her aunt. Elvir, as Una told me later, went as pale as if he had seen a traffic patrol. He pulled over before the stop, around the bend, and

told Una that it was Mirsada, that she was jealous of everything that breathed, and that there would be a big scene if she saw Una in the van. He asked her to hide in the back for five minutes, under the sacks. Una laughed, but she went, because, as she said, she liked the game even more than the ride.

Mirsada sat up front and started on the wedding right away. The restaurant on the Sana was booked, but the band was not, and neither was the number of guests on his side, because he kept forgetting someone. Elvir said yes to everything, his eyes on the road. Mirsada told me later that something rustled in the back and she thought it was mice, so she did not turn around, because she was more afraid of mice than of a mother-in-law. She asked him whether something was bothering him. He said the handbrake was bothering him.

And then, in front of a house in Hrustovo, they saw Anela taking laundry off the line. Anela was the girl Elvir had been sighing over since high school, and she had never looked at him twice. Now she looked at him and waved. Elvir stopped. He told Mirsada that Anela's mother was the biggest gossip in Hrustovo, and that if she saw the two of them alone in the van before the wedding, she would talk about it until Bajram, so he asked her, for the sake of both families' good name, to tuck herself into the back for five minutes. Mirsada grumbled, but she went.

It was dark in the back and smelled of flour. Mirsada lay down under the sacks beside the crates, and in the dark her foot struck somebody else's foot. Somebody whispered to her: "Quiet." Mirsada, as she told me, wanted to scream, but she was too curious. Una, as she told me, could barely keep from bursting out laughing. And so two women lay side by side under the flour sacks, neither quite sure who the other one was, and both perfectly sure what they were about to hear.

Anela sat up front. Elvir, they say, spoke without joking for the first time in his life. He told her he had waited ten years for her to look at him, that Mirsada was a good woman but he would not be a good husband to her if

he was thinking of someone else, and that if Anela agreed, he would marry her before September. "You're engaged," said Anela. "That can be fixed," said Elvir. In the back, two flour sacks stopped breathing. Anela said she would think about it, and that was the worst possible word, because it sounded like a yes.

On the bend above the meadow they saw Elvir's father waving from his tractor. A wheel of his hay trailer had gotten stuck in the mud, and the old man was trying to pull it out by himself. Elvir stopped the van on the downhill slope, forgot everything I had told him about leaving it in gear, and ran toward his father. Anela got out to watch. The handbrake held exactly as long as it felt like, which was about half a minute.

The van started rolling backward, slowly, almost with dignity, went over the edge of the road, and settled into the ditch beside the meadow. The back doors, which had never closed properly, swung open on their own. Out of the van tumbled two empty crates, five flour sacks, and two young women, white from head to toe, one in a summer dress, the other in her blue post office suit. They sat on the dry grass facing each other and looked at each other. Anela screamed. Elvir's father switched off the tractor.

Una laughed first. Mirsada did not. She stood up, shook the flour off her skirt, and said she had heard everything. Una said she had heard everything too, and a bit more before that, from Ključ to Vrhpolje, if Mirsada was interested. Anela stood on the road with her arms crossed, looking at Elvir as if she were seeing him for the first time. Old Alić climbed down from the tractor, looked at the van in the ditch, then at the three young women, then at his son. "Son," he said, "what is this?" "This, Dad," said Elvir, "is one long ride."

What he did next, the whole of Sanski Most admits, took courage. He turned to Anela and proposed again, in front of everyone. Anela said she would not be the third woman in a bread van, and that now he could do the thinking by himself, because she had already done hers. Just then her

father arrived on his bicycle, having seen from far off that something was going on, and took her home without asking a thing. Elvir then turned to Una. Laughing, Una told him she had a boyfriend in Linz and a client coming in for highlights at five, and she got into a neighbor's Golf that happened to be passing.

That left Mirsada. She was standing by the ditch shaking the flour out of her hair, and Elvir walked up to her like a man going to collect his punishment. He said nothing. She looked at him for a long time, and then she said that a woman does not get proposed to with flour in her hair, shook the last of it out, and told him that now he should ask properly. Elvir knelt in the grass, muddy as he was, and asked properly. Mirsada said yes, but on two conditions. The first was that the wedding stayed in September. The second was that from that day on, she would carry the keys to the van.

In October Mirsada quit the post office, and the boss hired her on the spot, because she had held a driver's license longer than Elvir and had never paid a fine. The handbrake was fixed the first week after the wedding, and Mirsada paid for it, out of the wedding envelopes. Today she drives, and Elvir sits beside her and carries the crates. Una still colors my hair when I come to Ključ, and she always asks about them. I tell her they are fine. And that whenever Elvir waves at someone by the roadside, Mirsada pulls the handbrake without a word.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

Swifts Over the Old Bridge

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/swifts-over-the-old-bridge/

The carousel in the amusement park beside the Mostar fairgrounds turned until midnight, and the music from its loudspeakers could be heard across half the town. Edita Pehar went to fetch Anđela at half past eleven, because the doors of the Kameni Han hotel were locked at midnight and Ante did not give the staff a second key. She found her on a plastic horse, her hair loose, laughing every time she swung past a tall young man in a dark jacket. The young man stood by the railing and looked at nothing else.

Edita stood behind him and waited for the carousel to stop. In the crowd someone pushed her against him, and he caught her hand so she would not fall and held it a moment longer than he needed to. He apologized and laughed in such a way that she could not be angry either. His name was Eldin Zubović, he was a lawyer from Sarajevo, and he had a trial at the Cantonal Court in Mostar. He was staying at their hotel, in room seven. All the way back Edita could feel his fingers on her wrist, like the mark left by a watch she had taken off.

She was forty-one and eighteen years into her marriage to Ante, who was twenty years older than she was and owned, besides the hotel, a wine shop near the Old Bridge. Ante talked about the prices of Žilavka and Blatina the way other people talk about the weather, and that was almost all he talked about. They had no children. Anđela had worked for them as a chambermaid since the spring. She was twenty and had come from a village near Stolac, with eight years of school, one suitcase and handwriting she was ashamed of: she wrote slowly, letter by letter, without the accent marks and with mistakes that had made her stand in front of the blackboard at school.

Eldin stayed three days. Anđela brought his breakfast to room seven and came back red in the face. On the third evening they walked to the Old

Bridge, and she came back late, with the key Edita had left for her under the flowerpot and a business card in her pocket. On the back it said: Write to me. Anđela showed the card to Edita as if it were a document she could not read. Then she asked her: "You write so nicely, ma'am. I'll write nonsense, with mistakes, and he'll laugh at me."

They wrote the first message together, at the reception desk, after midnight, on Anđela's phone. Anđela said what she wanted to say, and Edita arranged it into sentences. It was short and polite. Eldin replied that same night, at length, about Sarajevo in the rain and about the cases he lost because his clients were right and the law was not. The next evening Anđela fell asleep on the sofa in the lobby while Edita was still searching for a word. Edita finished the message by herself. She wrote that the swifts had come back and were circling the bridge so fast that it seemed they were the ones holding it up in the air.

From then on she wrote every night. Sometimes Anđela dictated, but more often she only asked what he had written. Edita retold it to her, and then she began to retell less. She read Eldin's messages twice, at the reception desk and then in bed, while Ante watched the news beside her with the sound turned low. She wrote him things she had never told Ante: that at twenty-three she had wanted to study literature in Sarajevo, that she loved the rain on the stone roofs of Kujundžiluk, and that she was afraid of the silence in big houses. Eldin wrote that he had never met a woman who saw things this way. Edita knew he was writing it to Anđela and knew he was writing it to her, and she did not know which was worse.

In June Eldin came for a weekend. Anđela was happy and awkward, telling him about her village, her brothers and her boss, who was strict but kind. Eldin listened to her with a smile and now and then looked at her as if he were searching her for the woman in the messages. "In person you talk less than you write," he said. Anđela said she was shy. Edita spent the whole weekend in the office, behind a closed door, and for the first time she wished he would leave.

In July Anđela's father let her know that he had found her a job for the season at a hotel in Austria and that the bus left on the fifteenth. Anđela cried in the laundry room, among the clean sheets. That night Edita wrote only that to Eldin, without any ornament: that she was going and did not know whether she would come back. The answer arrived ten minutes later. "Don't go. Marry me." Edita looked at those words for a long time. Then she went to the laundry room, woke Anđela and showed her the screen. Anđela shrieked and hugged her. In the end it was Edita who typed the answer, "Yes," because Anđela's hands were shaking.

They were married in August, at the registry office in Mostar. Eldin's mother was ill and could not come from Sarajevo, and Anđela chose Edita as her witness. Edita, in a blue dress, stood beside the bride and signed the register right after her. Anđela signed slowly, the tip of her tongue between her teeth, as she had at school. Eldin's witness, a colleague from his office, took photos on his phone the whole time. Lunch was on the terrace of a restaurant above the Neretva, and Ante argued with the waiter about whether the Žilavka was cold enough.

After lunch Eldin took out of his pocket a greeting card his mother had given him, and a pen. "Write Mom a few words," he said to Anđela. "I read her your messages while she was lying in bed. She thinks I married a poet." Anđela took the pen and wrote for a long time. When she had finished, Eldin read: dear mom many regards from yor daugter in law see you insarajevo. No accent marks, no commas, letters of different sizes. He looked at Anđela, who was smiling proudly, then at Edita, across the table. Edita did not look away.

He found her later at the end of the terrace, by the stone railing where you could see the bridge. He did not ask her anything. He said only: "The swifts." Edita said that she had written all of it, from the first message to that one word, Yes. She said she had not wanted to, and then she had wanted to, and that she was not asking him to forgive her. Eldin said he had married one woman and fallen in love with another, and that he did not know how to spell that. He kissed her once, briefly, as if he were

signing something that could no longer be withdrawn. Edita was the first to step back. "She loves you without a single word," she said. "I never knew how to do that."

In the evening the newlyweds left by train for Sarajevo. Before Jablanica Anđela fell asleep on his shoulder, the bouquet in her lap. Eldin opened his phone and read the messages from the first one on, while outside in the dark the Neretva flowed past. They were as beautiful as before. He read the one about the swifts three times. A later message had said that swifts never land and that they sleep on the wing. He had looked it up back then, and it was true. Anđela stirred in her sleep and murmured his name. Eldin locked the screen and stayed like that, his hand on her hair, all the way to Sarajevo.

Edita walked home, across the bridge. Ante was already asleep, and on the table he had left the restaurant bill, with the price of the wine underlined. She sat down in the kitchen and opened the messages on her own phone, empty, because she had never written to Eldin from it. She typed: The swifts flew low tonight. She looked at the sentence for a long time. Then she deleted it, letter by letter, slowly, the way Anđela writes, until the screen was empty.

DECEPTION · 7 MIN READ

A Secret Affair on the Company Calendar

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-secret-affair-on-the-company-calendar/

The invitation arrived on Wednesday at ten fourteen, in the same second, for all sixty-two employees of Kvadrat Soft, and I heard it before I saw it. On the ninth floor of a building in Marijin Dvor sixty phones buzzed, on desks, in pockets and in one paper bag of burek. My office is a former storeroom next to the kitchen, and through the open door I watched people look down all at once, then look up and stare at one another over their monitors.

The invitation said: Jahorina, room 214, Hotel Bijela Staza, from Friday at five until Sunday at noon. Organizer Jelena Marić. Attendee Dževad Mašić. In the notes: "Bring a charger. Your slippers are at my place. And this time no phone under the pillow." Below it all, in the recipients field, was what we always saw under the notices about pay and holidays: All Employees.

Jelena ran projects and was the most organized person in the company. Her calendar was colored in five colors, and she had never been late for a meeting. Dževad was the sales director, forty-six years old, with a photo on his desk of his wife Senada and two boys on a sled on Bjelašnica. Since the summer he had been telling everyone that he and Senada were heading for divorce and that he was sleeping at his mother's in Dobrinja. He said it quietly, over coffee, like a man going through a hard time, and people patted him on the shoulder. I had suspected something, because both of them left at half past two on Fridays and both came back on Mondays with the same Jahorina tan, but it was none of my business.

Jelena was in my storeroom before I had time to close the invitation. "Recall it," she said. "Goran, please, recall it." I explained to her, faster than I had ever explained anything to anyone, that recall works only for

messages nobody has opened, and the system was already showing that forty-seven people had opened it. She asked how this had even happened. I showed her: instead of her personal calendar she had chosen the shared one, the one with the holidays and paydays, and that one automatically invites everybody. The difference was one click in a drop-down menu.

Dževad came two minutes after her, his face calm, and shut the door behind him. He did not even look at Jelena. He said that I, as the administrator, knew how to delete a message from every mailbox on the server, and that he knew I knew it. "We'll say it was your security drill," he said. "A fake invitation, to see who would click. Everyone will believe it, Goran. People always believe you." Jelena looked at him then, for the first time, as if she were seeing him from some distance away.

Before I could answer anything, the desk phone rang. The director, Mubera Hasić, said only: "Goran, nothing gets deleted in this company without my signature," and hung up. Then the replies started coming in. The first to click was Kemo from support: "Accepted: Jahorina, room 214." After him eleven more people, then a "Maybe" from the accountant, then an acceptance from Mubera's assistant, who swore afterward that it had been an accident. Laughter came from the open-plan office, the ugly kind, the way people laugh when they are glad they are not in someone else's place.

At ten thirty-one a reply to all arrived, from Senada Mašić's private address. It said: "I accept. The kids are asking whether to bring the sleds. Senada." The laughter stopped as if someone had pulled a plug.

That account was mine to shut down. When Senada left the company two years earlier, after her second son, she had asked me to forward the mail from her work address to her private one for a month, until she had informed her clients. The month had lasted two years. In all that time Senada had received everything the rest of us received: pay notices, invitations to cake for other people's birthdays, requests to empty the fridge on Fridays. And the invitation to room 214.

Jelena read the reply standing behind me. Through the glass wall I could see Dževad in his office, a phone at his ear, calling someone who would not pick up. Jelena did not cry. She asked me, quietly, how long Senada had been getting our mail. I told her. "So there is no mother in Dobrinja," she said. "There is," I said, because I did not know what else to say. "The mother exists," she said. "He just doesn't sleep at her place." She went to the kitchen, made coffee, went back to her desk, and did not get up until five.

In the afternoon Dževad sent everyone a short email: "Colleagues, please respect people's privacy. This is a misunderstanding." Within a minute Kemo from support clicked "Accepted," and this time it was certainly no accident. At the same moment Jelena got a message on her phone and showed it to me over the partition, without a word. Dževad had written to her: "It's not what it looks like. I'll explain everything on Friday." She stared at the screen for a long time, as if she were reading the fine print of a contract. "On Friday," she said. "He still thinks we're going."

On Thursday Dževad did not come in. Senada came, at nine, and left at reception the keys to the company car, his access card and the bag with his laptop. Then she knocked on my storeroom door. She was shorter than in the photo and calmer than I had feared. "You're the one who set up my forwarding," she said. I apologized. "Don't," she said. "For two years I knew from your emails that the company holds no Saturday meetings in Tuzla. I knew he was lying. I just didn't know with whom." She asked me to switch off the forwarding while she watched. I switched it off. She said thank you and headed for the elevator. On the way she passed Jelena's desk. Jelena stood up. Neither of them said anything. Senada gave her a short nod, the way you nod to a neighbor you share an elevator with, and left.

On Friday at four forty-five sixty phones buzzed again. A reminder: "Jahorina, room 214, in fifteen minutes." Nobody had deleted the event, not me, not Jelena, not the director, and now it was reminding all of us. Somebody laughed, then went quiet. Mubera came out of her office, said,

"It's the weekend, people," and turned off the light in the meeting room, though there was nobody in it. Jelena put on her jacket, picked up her bag and left first, without looking at anyone.

On Monday I found her at the coffee machine. I asked her, because nobody else dared, how the weekend had been. "I went," she said. "The room was paid for and could not be canceled. I slept for twelve hours, and I left my phone at the front desk." She picked up her cup and started toward her desk. "And the slippers?" I asked, and was sorry at once. She stopped. "I left them in the wardrobe in room 214," she said. "Let somebody accept them."

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

Midnight at Porporela

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/midnight-at-porporela/

From the terrace of a small hotel at Ploče you could see the whole old harbor, the city walls and, a little farther off, the dark patch of Lokrum. It was late afternoon, at the end of July, and the tourists were already coming down off the walls like water down a staircase. At a table by the railing sat two women of fifty-eight, both in linen dresses, both widows, both from Sarajevo. At noon their daughters had taken a boat to Lokrum with two young men from a sailboat out of Split and said they would be back before dark. Ljiljana was doing the crossword from Oslobođenje. Nermina was looking at the sea.

They had known each other since the first year of high school. Nermina had always been the one people looked at, Ljiljana the one who stood beside her and held her bag. Nermina married Zlatko Mutevelić, the architect half of Sarajevo had dreamed about, and Ljiljana, in a hurry, that same autumn, married Predrag, a quiet engineer nobody remembered. Predrag had died five years earlier, Zlatko three. At both funerals the two women stood side by side, as always.

Nermina looked at Lokrum and thought about their daughters. Her Lamija was clever, good, and sensible, the kind people call when a form needs filling out. Ljiljana's Katarina sang in Vienna, laughed out loud, and walked into a room as if the room had been waiting for her. When the girls were small, Nermina had enrolled Lamija in piano lessons, and Katarina, on a visit, sat down at the same piano and played by ear what Lamija had been practicing for a month. Nermina had been measuring this for years and had never understood it. How had quiet Ljiljana and Predrag, whom nobody remembered, ended up with a child like that?

"Do you remember the first time we were here?" she said. Ljiljana looked up from her crossword. It had been the summer of ninety-seven, the first summer after the war. They had come by bus with a group of students

and slept in a room with four other girls above a tavern on Prijeko. Zlatko had arrived a week later, as Nermina's fiancé, with a ring in his shirt pocket. "I remember," said Ljiljana. "You fell ill back then," said Nermina. "That night when it rained. You were in bed for a week with a high fever."

That summer Dubrovnik still smelled of fresh plaster. The roofs in the Old Town were covered with new tiles, bright orange among the old ones, and on the Stradun you could see patches in the stone. Zlatko took them to Lokrum, paid for their ice cream, carried their towels. In the evenings the three of them walked the city walls until the guard chased them off. Nermina talked, Zlatko laughed, and Ljiljana was silent. Only later did Nermina notice that Zlatko fell silent whenever Ljiljana did, as if the two of them were listening to something she could not hear.

Ljiljana put down her pencil. The sun had dropped behind Mount Srđ, and the terrace turned blue. The waiter brought two glasses of white wine, although nobody had ordered them, because that was what they did every evening. Nermina took a sip and decided that thirty years was enough. "Do you know who wrote you that note?" she asked. "What note?" "The one at the front desk. I will wait for you at midnight on Porporela. Z."

Ljiljana was silent for a long time. "Zlatko," she said at last. "No," said Nermina. "I did." She explained it calmly, as if she were talking about a recipe. She had Zlatko's letters, she knew how he wrote his capital Z and how his hand drifted to the right at the end of a line. She had seen the way he looked at Ljiljana on the Stradun, that first day, while Ljiljana, as always, was carrying her bag. All she had wanted was for Ljiljana to wait one night alone on the stone pier, in the wind, and come back in the morning looking ridiculous. She had not known it would rain.

Ljiljana opened her wallet and took a folded piece of paper out from behind her identity card, yellow along the creases. She unfolded it on the table, between the two glasses. Nermina recognized her own

handwriting, which for thirty years had been Zlatko's. "I kept it," said Ljiljana. "I thought it was the only thing he ever wrote me." Nermina felt something like shame and pushed it down at once. "I'm sorry," she said. "It was a stupid joke. You waited all night alone in the rain, and he was asleep at his hotel."

"I didn't wait alone," said Ljiljana. Nermina laughed. "I answered him," Ljiljana went on. "That afternoon I left a note at the front desk of his hotel. I wrote: I'll come. He came." Nermina stopped laughing. She remembered the morning after that night, Zlatko at breakfast, his hair wet and strangely quiet, saying he had gone for a walk because he could not sleep. She had thought it was nerves before the wedding. She remembered, too, that the next day she had carried tea up to Ljiljana in the room above the tavern and been unusually tender with her, because underneath it all she had felt a little sorry.

For a long time she stared at the paper on the table. Then she drew herself up, the way she had drawn herself up all her life whenever someone in the room mattered more than she did. "So what," she said. "He came out of politeness, because he thought you were calling him. I had him for thirty years. The house in Koševo, two people at the table every morning, a funeral where everyone knew whose wife I was. You had one night on Porporela and a note that I wrote for you." She stood up and threw her cardigan over her shoulders, as if the conversation were over.

Ljiljana did not stand. Slowly she folded the paper along its old creases. "Katarina was born in April, Nermina," she said. Nermina stopped with her hand on the back of her chair. She did not understand at once, and then, as with everything in her life, she counted. July. April. The hurried wedding in September, which all of Sarajevo said had happened because Ljiljana had realized late that the years were passing her by. Katarina's laugh. Katarina's eyebrow, which went up when she did not believe someone. Katarina's hand, which drifted to the right when she signed a greeting card. "Predrag knew?" asked Nermina, and her voice sounded like someone else's. "Predrag knew from the first day," said Ljiljana. "And

he loved her more than any of us did."

Just then the boat from Lokrum came into the old harbor. Two young women stood at the bow, waving toward the terrace. One waved modestly, from the wrist. The other waved with her whole arm, above her head, the way Zlatko used to wave from the platform whenever he left on a trip. Ljiljana stood up, put the note in the pocket of her dress, and went down the steps toward the harbor, unhurried, like a woman who had known for thirty years where she was going.

Nermina was left alone on the terrace, with two glasses of wine and her hand on the back of an empty chair. Below her, on the stone pier of Porporela, the first lamp came on. She watched Katarina jump from the boat onto the quay and hug Ljiljana, and then Lamija too, and for a long time she still saw that waving before her eyes, although the boat had long since been tied up.

DECEPTION · 8 MIN READ

Betrayal in the Family Album

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/betrayal-in-the-family-album/

The tablet hung on the kitchen wall above the fridge, where a calendar with pictures of Visoko had once been. Sabiha and Nedim had bought it for his mother for Bajram, so she would not have to wait for Sunday whenever she wanted to see her grandchildren. Ena, their daughter, had created a shared album and named it the Hodžić Family. Everything went into it: Ena's photos from her university in Sarajevo, Amar's from his football matches, tomatoes from Grandpa's garden, Aunt Šemsa's grandchildren in Stuttgart. Hajra watched the album the way people once watched a soap opera, with commentary and without a break. In the first months she called Sabiha every time she thought she had deleted something, until she understood that nothing in that album deleted itself.

That Sunday the table in the house in Moštre held sogan dolma, spinach pie, and a fresh cabbage salad, and through the open window you could see the Bosna, muddy from the rain that had fallen all Thursday. Nedim was half an hour late and sat down last, and he left his new phone in his jacket on the coat rack in the hallway. Ena had set it up for him on Saturday, because he had asked for everything to be the way it was on the old one. She had sat in her room with his phone the whole afternoon, and when she gave it back, she was unusually quiet. Sabiha thought she was tired. While Hajra ladled the soup, the tablet changed photos every eight seconds, and she announced them like a television presenter. "This is Amar at the match in Kakanj. This is Šemsa's little one. This is Halid with his tomatoes."

Then a hotel balcony appeared on the tablet, with the sea behind it. "This is one of Šemsa's people at the seaside," said Hajra. Sabiha noticed that Nedim's fork had stopped halfway. The next photo had been taken in a restaurant: Nedim at a table with a dark-haired woman who had rested her head on his shoulder. Behind them you could see the Old Bridge. In

the corner was a date, the nineteenth of March. On that day, as far as Sabiha knew, Nedim had been in Banja Luka at a furniture fair.

"Why, that's Nedim," said Hajra, pleased that she had recognized him. Nobody answered. Halid set his spoon down in his bowl. Amar stopped chewing. Nedim said it was a colleague, Medina from the Tuzla branch, that they had been at a team-building retreat and that everybody there took pictures with everybody. As he was saying it, the tablet changed the photo. The same woman and him in a car, her kissing his cheek. Then her by the Neretva, wearing his watch. Then the two of them in front of a hotel in Mostar, her hand in the pocket of his jacket. Amar looked at his father, then at his mother, then at his father again, and Sabiha saw that her sixteen-year-old son was adding up, in that moment, what she had been adding up for months: the long meetings, the fairs, the phone that always lay face down on the table.

Nedim stood up so suddenly that he knocked over a glass of juice, and he ran out into the hallway for his phone. Through the door they heard him trying to unlock it. The phone was new, and Nedim did not know the code. "Ena, what's the code?" he shouted. Ena did not lift her eyes from her plate. "Mom's birthday," she said. They heard him typing. Once. Twice. "It says to try again in one minute," he said, in a voice Sabiha had never heard from him.

Halid got up and yanked the charger out of the socket, but the tablet was fully charged and kept running on its battery. In that minute it showed seven more photos. In the last one there was a cake, chocolate, with words piped in whipped cream: For my N. Sabiha recognized the tablecloth, checkered, red and white, from the café by the old tannery where Nedim liked to drink his coffee whenever he was in Visoko. She recognized the date too. It was her birthday. That evening she had sat with the children until eleven, with her own cake, because Nedim had called and said a truck had overturned near Jajce and the road was closed.

Hajra stood up. Of everything the tablet could do, she had learned only one thing: how to stop a photo when she liked it. She pressed the button. The cake stayed on the screen, with its words in whipped cream, above the fridge and above the whole family. "Sit down," Hajra said toward the hallway, calmly, the way she had when Nedim was ten years old. Nedim came in with the phone in his hand and did not sit down.

Sabiha wiped her mouth with a napkin and turned to her daughter. "How do you remove someone from the album?" she asked. Her hands were steady, and that surprised her more than anything. Ena got up, took the tablet off the wall, and set it down in front of her mother. She showed her the settings, then the members, fourteen names, from Šemsa to Amar. Next to each one was a small picture. Next to Nedim's was a photo from their wedding, which Ena had chosen herself, because she thought it was lovely.

The screen said: Remove member Nedim Hodžić from the Hodžić Family album? His photos will be removed. Sabiha pressed Yes. The cake disappeared. The hotel, the Neretva, the car, and the watch disappeared. For a moment the tablet went black, and then it started cycling through photos again as if nothing had happened: Amar with the ball, Šemsa's little one, Halid with his tomatoes.

Nedim finally unlocked the phone and stared at the tablet as if seeing it for the first time. "What did you do?" he asked. Nobody answered him. Halid picked up his spoon. "The soup will get cold," he said. Then, without raising his eyes, he added: "And you will wash the dishes today." Hajra put the tablet back on the wall. Nedim stood a little longer with the phone in his hand, and then he went over to the sink and turned on the water, although nobody had finished eating yet.

Sabiha left with the children before coffee. Hajra walked them to the gate and pushed a container of dolma, wrapped in a kitchen towel, into her hands. She said nothing. She only held her by the elbow for a long time, as if afraid she might fall. Nedim did not come out of the kitchen.

Through the window they could hear the water running. Amar sat in front. Ena sat behind her mother and all the way to the highway looked out the window at the Bosna.

At the toll gate Sabiha looked at her in the rearview mirror. "Did you know?" she asked. "Since Saturday," said Ena. "On the old phone those photos were in a hidden folder. On the new one they aren't. As soon as the phone connected to Grandpa's internet, they started going into the album. Dad said he wanted everything the way it was on the old one." She paused. "I didn't want it to be the way it was on the old one." Sabiha said nothing. She paid the toll, took the receipt, and when the barrier rose, she switched on her turn signal and passed the truck that was crawling ahead of them toward Sarajevo.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

My Lovely Memorial Service

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/my-lovely-memorial-service/

My memorial service, they say, was one of the nicer ones that fall. It was held in the hall of the faculty where I used to teach lab sessions, and Ermin Šarac, my best friend, spoke for twenty minutes without notes. Edna stood in the front row, in the black coat we had bought together in Vienna. People cried. I read all about it on my phone seven days later, in a hostel in Ljubljana, and I admit I cried a little myself, not for my own sake, but because of Ermin's speech, which was far better than I would have expected from a man who had owed me five hundred marks for three years.

I fell on Treskavica in October, in fog, above the lakes. The rescuers searched for nine days and found only my backpack at the edge of a scree slope, and below that slope there is nothing but rock and wind, so they concluded what any reasonable person would. I, however, had slid down the other side, sprained my ankle and limped for two days to a shepherds' hut, where an old woman gave me thyme tea and asked me nothing. I had time to think. The night before the trip, on the family tablet, I had read the messages between Edna and Ermin. The last one said: "When he gets back from the mountain, we'll tell him." Lying on the old woman's hay, I decided to spare them that conversation.

I rode down to Foča in a dairy truck, went on from there by bus through Montenegro, and a month later I was working night shifts at a factory in Augsburg, maintaining machines that make parts for other machines. In Germany I was alive, with my own passport and my own name, and in Bosnia I was dead. Between the two there was only a border, and nobody had any reason to compare the paperwork.

Three years later, during a break, my coworker Mevludin from Tuzla handed me his phone. "Look at this guy from back home," he said. The picture showed Ermin Šarac in Brussels receiving a European innovation

award, a glass plaque in his hands, and beside him stood Edna, now his wife. The caption said that the Sarajevo inventor had developed a ceramic filter that cut the smoke from coal stoves by two thirds, and that this winter the canton would install ten thousand of them. The filter had my ribbed honeycomb, my casing and my mistake in the layout of the holes, which I had corrected only in the week before the mountain. Mevludin said our people were clever. I said they were and took some days off.

I reached Sarajevo in November, when the city can only be seen from the inside. The smog lay over the valley like a lid, and in Breka it smelled of coal and roasted chestnuts. The house was the same, only the gate was new, and the mailbox said Šarac. I rang the bell. Edna opened the door with a bag of mandarins in her hand, and the bag fell. The mandarins rolled down the steps, and we both watched them, because that was easier than looking at each other. "You're dead," she said. "Not exactly," I said.

We stood like that for a long time. Then Edna sat down on a step, among the mandarins, and asked where I had been. I said: on the mountain, then in Germany. She asked why I had not gotten in touch. I said that the night before the trip I had read the messages on the tablet. She nodded, slowly, as if it were a relief, and said she had sold the tablet long ago. Then she took out her phone and called Ermin. "Come home," she told him. "We have a problem." For three years I had been a dead man, and now I was a problem again.

Ermin arrived ten minutes later, white as a wall, and the first thing he did was call a lawyer. The lawyer brought my father-in-law Muris, because my father-in-law was sitting in his car, and my father-in-law called Mr. Tufo from the Cantonal Fund for Clean Air, because this, as he put it, was a matter of public interest. By eight in the evening, in the living room next to the new kitchen with its gray tiles, five men and one woman sat discussing me like a fault in the wiring.

The lawyer, Kreso Bilić, spoke first. Legally, he explained, I had died. The court had declared me dead, the registry office had entered it, the insurance company had paid out. To come back to life I would need a procedure that took a year or two, and during that time Mrs. Edna would be married to two men, which was a criminal offense, while Mr. Šarac would be, and there he paused, because he could not find the word. "The second," I suggested. The lawyer thanked me.

Mr. Tufo spoke about the air. The fund, he said, had received European money in Mr. Šarac's name, and European money does not like surprises. If it came out that the inventor was not the inventor, the money would go back to Brussels, the filters would stay in a warehouse in Rajlovac, and Sarajevo would stay in the smoke. "You, Mr. Bašić, would have the lungs of the whole city on your conscience," he said. My father-in-law Muris spoke about the kitchen. The insurance had paid a hundred and twenty thousand marks, and that money had gone into the kitchen, the car and an apartment in Stup, and if I really wanted to come back to life, I could also pay it back.

Edna said I had always been impractical. Ermin said that he had in fact saved my invention, which would have sat gathering dust in my garage for another ten years, and that I ought to be grateful to him. Then they offered me twenty thousand marks, a ticket to Augsburg and a paper stating that I had no rights of any kind to the filter. I said I would think it over until morning. At the door I added one more thing, just as an engineer: that in a real Sarajevo winter the core of that filter cracks, because the holes are laid out wrong, and that only I knew the correction. Ermin laughed. "The dead man wants to sneak in through the back door," he said. Mr. Tufo said the filter had been tested in Brussels. In Brussels, I knew, it had been tested in a laboratory, at room temperature.

That night I walked around the city. At the faculty, in the hallway on the second floor, hung my photograph in a hiking hat, and under it the year of my birth, the year of my death and a line of verse about summits. Students walked past it eating burek out of paper. In a ćevapi shop on

Ćumurija a waiter looked at me for a long time and then said I looked like that late engineer on the plaque, and that if I wanted, the portion was on the house, for his soul. I ate it. In Sarajevo, I realized, the dead man was more respected than I had ever been alive.

In the morning I went to the municipal registry office anyway and told the clerk that I wished to report that I was alive. She looked at the computer, then at me, then at the computer again. She said there was a form for death but none for this, and that I would need a court ruling and two witnesses to confirm that I was me. I called Edna and Ermin. Both of them said they were not allowed to see me, because that, as the lawyer had explained to them, would mean acknowledging a fact. In the afternoon I signed their paper at the lawyer's office. I left the envelope with the money on his desk, unopened. The paper spoke about the filter as it was. About the filter as it ought to be, it said nothing.

In January a winter came such as Sarajevo had not had in ten years. In a single night eight thousand ceramic cores cracked, the stoves went back to their old smoke, and on television Ermin Šarac, in a suit, explained that it was sabotage. The reporters asked what kind. He did not know. I watched it in Augsburg, during a break, on Mevludin's phone. The canton suspended the installation. Mr. Tufo stated that the fund had never really believed in ceramics. Edna sent me one message, the first in three years: "You knew." I replied that I had told them at the door, but that nobody listens to the dead.

Ermin called me at three in the morning, at the number I had left with the lawyer just in case. "Edo, brother, please," he said. "Tell me where the holes go." I told him I was sorry, but I could not. "I'm a dead man, Ermin. You have it on paper, with a stamp." I hung up and went back to sleep. In the morning I took the train to Munich, and at the patent office I filed the corrected honeycomb under my own name, which in Germany was still very much alive.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Garnet from Mostar

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-garnet-from-mostar/

In the drawer with my tax papers, under an old passport, I found Grandma's garnet last week. That was what Elma called it: a small red stone on a thin chain, which her grandmother had worn until she died, and which she pressed into my palm at the bus station in Mostar, in August of two thousand three. "So you'll have something heavy in your pocket while you're in Neum," she said. I was twenty-nine, with an apartment in Grbavica, a fiancée in Mostar and three days to turn all of it into one life. Today I am fifty-two, with a room in Ottakring and the garnet. The rest I sold, myself most cheaply of all.

Elma's father, Ragib Bajrić, ran a pastry shop on the corner by Kujundžiluk. Tufahijas were made on Saturdays, rose pastries every day, and baklava only when Ragib was in a good mood. I had come to Mostar for my company, for ten days, to set up a network at a bank, and on the third day, in the pastry shop, I caught Elma's brother when he collapsed from the heat behind the display case. Elma brought me a tufahija for it and would not let me pay. The next day I came back to pay for it. I came on the tenth day too, and the eleventh, when the company was already asking me to come back. The Old Bridge was still being rebuilt then, so in the evenings, once Elma had closed the till, we stood by the scaffolding and watched the stones the masons were marking with numbers, one by one.

She was half engaged to an insurance agent who talked about interest rates the way other men talk about soccer. She broke it off with him on Thursday, told me on Friday, and on Saturday, while she was making tufahijas with her niece, she agreed to marry me. Ragib was silent for two days, and then he told me that a son-in-law who lives in Sarajevo is not a son-in-law but a guest. I promised to move. I would sell the apartment in Grbavica, I said, and invest in a second shop, by Musala. That was the

first time Ragib nodded.

I found a buyer faster than I had hoped, and that should have been a warning. Davor Polić, whom I had gone to high school with, had married rich. His wife Marijana had a real estate agency, two hotels on paper and a summer house in Neum, and she bought apartments in Sarajevo the way other people buy shoes. Davor told me over the phone to come to Neum, that Marijana would look at the papers, and that he personally did not even know how many apartments they had, because it tired him. Elma saw me off at the bus and gave me the garnet.

Davor met me on the terrace above the sea, in a bathrobe, with a plate of prosciutto on his knees. He was fat, kind and showed interest in nothing except lunch. He talked about high school as if it were the only job he had ever done. Marijana appeared only toward evening. She was two years older than me and no more beautiful than Elma, but she looked at people as if she knew their price and was ready to pay more. She leafed through the papers in five minutes and said she would take the apartment, but that she did not discuss price when she was tired. "Stay until the day after tomorrow," she said. "Davor has no one to be quiet with anyway."

I stayed. On the first day I told her about Elma, about the tufahijas and about Ragib, who had been silent for two days, and she listened carefully, her elbows on the table, and asked the kind of questions an agent asks when she appraises an apartment: how many square feet, how much damp, what kind of view. On the second day she took me in a speedboat to a cove where there was no one. She swam far out and came back only when I had begun to worry. Afterward, on the warm rocks, she told me that I was made for a bigger city than Mostar and a bigger life than a pastry shop. I told her she was wrong. She said that perhaps she was wrong, but that I did not look like a man who was sure of it. On the way back she let me drive the speedboat.

That night Elma sent me a message: "How's the sale going?" I answered: "Slowly. Tomorrow." It was the first lie, and it was small, and it was easy.

On the terrace Davor, sprawled in an armchair with his hands on his stomach, said to Marijana, loudly enough for me to hear: "This one's in love. This one will hold out." Marijana laughed. Only much later did I understand that they had made a bet. The stake was a weekend in Vienna, and Davor lost it on Thursday evening, when Marijana closed the door of her room and I stayed on the inside.

That night the garnet was in the pocket of my jacket, on the hook in the hallway, and in the morning it was still there, heavy, the way Elma had wanted. I did not take it out. On Friday Marijana signed the contract and paid more for the apartment than I had asked, and then she told me she was going to Vienna for a week and that she was taking me with her, because she needed someone who knew computers and knew how to keep quiet. Davor paid for Vienna. From the gas station on the way out of Neum I sent Elma a message of three sentences. She called twice while we were waiting at the border, and I let it ring. I do not remember exactly what the message said, and that may be the only mercy I have allowed myself.

The week in Vienna lasted two years. I carried Marijana's bags, fixed her laptop, went with her to real estate fairs in Munich and Milan and kept quiet, which was what I was best paid for. In that time I learned enough German to understand when people were talking about me. Then one morning, at breakfast in a hotel, she told me she did not need me anymore, the way you tell a waiter your plate is empty. She gave me three months' pay in advance. She was always correct about money. I stayed in Vienna, because I had nothing to go back with, and no one to go back to.

For twenty years I worked night shifts at the front desk of a hotel near the Westbahnhof. I married once, briefly, a woman who said, rightly, that I lived with her like a lodger. Every year in August I promised myself I would go to Mostar, sit down in the pastry shop and order a tufahija, and every year I found a shift I could not swap. Once, at the Brunnenmarkt, I saw tufahijas in the window of a Bosnian bakery and did not buy any. All that time the garnet lay in the drawer with the tax papers, under a

passport that had long since expired.

When I found it last week, I sat down at the computer and searched for the Bajrić pastry shop. It exists. It even has a website, with photos of the display case and one picture I sat in front of for a long time: Elma behind the counter, gray at the temples, laughing at someone out of the frame. Next to her stands a girl of about twenty, with her eyes and in a white apron. Under the picture it said that the shop is run by Elma and her daughter and that tufahijas are made on Saturdays, as in Ragib's day.

I wrote an email. I wrote it all night, between guests asking for their keys, and deleted it four times. What I finally sent was shorter than the message I had sent her from the gas station in Neum. I wrote that I was sorry, that I had the garnet and could return it if she wanted it.

She answered two days later. She wrote calmly, as if writing about the weather: that she had married two years later, an engineer from Konjic, that she had a daughter and a son, that her daughter made tufahijas better than she did, that her father had died six years ago and had said to the end that the guest from Sarajevo had at least paid for that first tufahija. She wrote that the garnet need not be returned, because she had given it, and what is given is no longer hers. At the end she added one sentence, without any explanation: "Tufahijas are on Saturdays."

I bought a bus ticket for Friday evening. It arrives in Mostar on Saturday morning, at ten past seven, when the shutters of the pastry shops are just going up. I do not know whether I will go in. The garnet is in my jacket pocket, and it is heavy, exactly the way Elma wanted.

DECEPTION · 9 MIN READ

The Mistress Who Won

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-mistress-who-won/

A mistress has rules, and for four years I knew them by heart. You do not call after eight in the evening. You do not call on weekends. You do not post pictures together, and it is best not to have any. You celebrate your birthday a day late, in Laktaši or at some restaurant on the road to Jajce, where nobody knows you. When one of his colleagues runs into you on Gospodska Street, you are the dental technician from the clinic he sells equipment to, which, after all, was true. That was how we met: Nikola Vuković delivered a new ceramics furnace to our clinic and stayed for coffee longer than a furnace requires.

The promises changed, but they always came down to the same thing. When the boy finishes elementary school. When Biljana gets over her mother's death. After New Year's, after the summer, after the season. My sister Dragana, married to a man who had never had to hide anyone, used to say that men like that do not leave, they only run late. I used to tell her she knew nothing. I was thirty-four, with an apartment in Borik on a mortgage and one man twice a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays, when he told them at home that he was out in the field.

On my thirty-fifth birthday, a day late as always, at a fish restaurant on the Vrbas below Karanovac, I told him it was enough. I did not shout. The trout was good, and it would have been a shame to spoil it. I said only: by New Year's or never. Nikola put down his fork, went pale, then red, like a man who has just been told the total at the checkout. "All right," he said. I did not believe him. That night I texted Dragana, "I told him," and she answered with one heart and three question marks.

Six weeks later, on a rainy November night, someone rang the bell at eleven. Nikola stood at the door with two suitcases and a cardboard box of vinyl records, soaked to the knees. "I told her everything," he said. "It's over. If you'll have me." I cried in the hallway as if someone had died, not

as if I had gotten what I had waited four years for. I made him mint tea, and while he slept on my side of the bed, I sat in the kitchen and looked at the suitcases. In the morning I sent Dragana just two words: "He left."

In the first weeks everything was new to me, even the things that got on my nerves. He made his coffee far too sweet. He left his socks by the couch as if he would come back for them. He put his records on the shelf where my books had been, and I moved the books into the wardrobe and did not complain. I bought a label for the mailbox, "Kos and Vuković," and stuck it on one Saturday, and on Sunday he peeled it off. He said his lawyer advised that his new address should not be visible until the divorce was final, because Biljana could use it. I understood. I was an expert at understanding.

He still left his phone face down on the table. When I joked about it, he said it was a four-year habit, and we both laughed, I a little longer. He still went out in the field to Prijedor on Tuesdays and Fridays, only now he came back to me. I wanted us to go up to the Kastel on Saturdays, to walk down Gospodska like people with nothing to hide. He said not yet, because of the children and because of the lawyer, that Biljana was sensitive and should not be provoked. One Friday, at nine in the evening, I called him in Prijedor. He answered in a whisper and said he could not talk now, he was at dinner with a client.

At the beginning of December it turned cold, and Nikola's winter coat had stayed at Biljana's, in the apartment in Starčevica, along with his car registration papers. He said he could not go for it. Biljana would not open the door to him, there would be a scene in front of the children, and he did not want that for them or for himself. "You go," he said. "She doesn't know you. Say you're from the company." I looked at him and waited for him to laugh. He did not laugh. The worst of it was that I agreed, and not because of the coat. I wanted to see the woman I had beaten.

Biljana opened the door in a gray sweater, with reading glasses pushed up into her hair. She was in her forties and had the face of someone who

had not slept through the night in a long time. The apartment smelled of sarma. I said I was from the company and had come for Nikola's coat. She looked me over from head to toe, slowly, as if reading a bill. "From the company," she repeated. "Come in. The coffee's made." In the kitchen a child's soccer cleats were drying on the radiator. The coat was already packed in a big bag by the door, with a folder of papers on top of it, as if someone had been waiting a long time for them to be collected.

She poured coffee into two cups and sat down across from me. "You're not from the company," she said. "You're Maja." I did not know what to say, so I said the only thing I knew: "Who is Maja?" Biljana took her glasses out of her hair and set them on the table. She looked at me for a long time. Then she told me, calmly, as if telling someone else's story. On the second of November she had found messages on his phone from Maja, a pharmacist in Prijedor. For a year, on Tuesdays and Fridays. That same evening she threw him out of the apartment. For two weeks he slept at his cousin's in Lazarevo, and then he told the children he had found an apartment.

"You didn't throw him out because of me?" I asked, and only when I heard my own voice did I realize how stupid the question was. "I don't know anything about you," said Biljana. "Who are you?" I told her: Borik, the clinic, four years, Mondays and Wednesdays. Biljana laughed briefly, almost as if she were coughing. "On Mondays and Wednesdays he was out in the field," she said. "For four years I washed his shirts for the field." Then we were both silent and drank our coffee, in the kitchen where he had eaten breakfast for sixteen years.

At the door she handed me the bag with the coat. "Check the inside pocket," she said. "I couldn't." On the bus to Borik I sat in the back seat and opened the bag. In the inside pocket was a small box of blue velvet. Inside it was a thin gold ring, and on the inner side, when I turned it toward the light, a single letter was engraved: M. Under the box was a folded receipt from a jeweler in Prijedor, dated the third of October. That was the day I had told him, at the fish restaurant below Karanovac, that it

was enough.

I got home at eight. Nikola was lying on the couch, one of his records was playing on the turntable, and his phone lay on his stomach, face down. He got up as soon as I came in. "Was there trouble?" I said there was not. "What did she say?" "She said you left her for me." Nikola breathed out, smiled and said: "Well, I did." Then he took the bag, pulled out the coat and, before he had even shaken it out, pushed his hand into the inside pocket.

The box was with me, in my hand. He looked at it for only a second. "Who is it for?" I asked. "For you," he said without a pause. "For New Year's. I wanted it to be a surprise." I opened the box and turned the ring toward the lamp, so he could see the letter. Nikola glanced at it briefly, like a man checking his change. "M," he said. "As in mine." I have to admit it was good. In four years I had heard a great many sentences from him, but this was the fastest.

I closed the box, put it back in the coat pocket and draped the coat over his arm. "It's an hour's drive to Prijedor," I said. "If you leave now, you'll be there before midnight." He packed the suitcases himself, while I stood in the bedroom doorway and looked at the clock. I carried his records out to the stairwell in the same cardboard box they had come in. At the door he tried to say something more, warm and convincing, as always, but I closed it before he got to his second word. It was nine in the evening. I called my sister and talked loudly, from the hallway, so the whole building could hear me.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Reconciliation Without My Consent

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/reconciliation-without-my-consent/

I believed people most regretted conversations they had never had. I repeated that sentence to Marko whenever he mentioned the father he had not spoken to for nine years. Marko said he had talked enough; nobody had listened. I did not ask what that meant. I carried my own picture of a family embracing in the end, and kept trying to force his family into it.

I obtained his father's number from a cousin and called without Marko's knowledge. The man sounded older than I expected and said he missed his son. I did not examine his version of the past. Pity was enough to make me feel useful. I arranged lunch at a restaurant, telling Marko we would celebrate his new job. I even bought a cake, convinced that sweetness would help the words I had planned to say.

When Marko saw his father at the table, he stopped. He did not run towards him, cry or do anything from my imagined scene. He asked whether I had arranged it. I said I only wanted them to try. His father stood and began saying there was no need for old grievances. Marko turned and left. I followed, angry that he had not stayed long enough to show gratitude for my intentions.

Outside he told me I had invited him under a false pretext and brought him before a man from whom he had spent years trying to distance himself. I began explaining that his father would not live forever. Marko replied that he did not have an infinite number of lives to spend on the same injuries either. He owed me no details for his refusal to be clear enough. For the first time I heard that as a fact rather than an obstacle to remove gently.

I cancelled lunch. I did not promise his father that I would try again. I apologised to Marko without saying I had meant well, because he had

heard that too often already. For several days he did not want to see me. I did not ask the cousin to intervene. It was difficult to sit with my mistake without taking another action that would make me the central person in somebody else's relationship again. The cake remained unopened in the fridge.

When we finally talked, Marko did not promise a quick return of trust. He said he wanted a partner who asked him, not someone who arranged him according to her picture of a happy ending. We stayed together, more carefully than before. I did not discuss his father unless he began. That month love did not appear as a grand restaurant reunion, but as the ability not to open a door he had clearly told me he wanted closed.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Name Above the Doorbell

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-name-above-the-doorbell/

The names above the doorbell were printed in faded blue letters: Dario and Mirna. When Hana moved in, Dario explained that his former partner had left and he had never found time to change the plate. Hana offered to order a new one. He said he would deal with it because the entry panel had unusual dimensions. Four months later she was still telling delivery drivers to ignore the second name.

Mirna arrived on Saturday morning carrying a travel bag and two pastries. She unlocked the door with her own key, saw Hana in a dressing gown, and stopped before the bag touched the floor. She did not shout. She asked where Dario was. Hana pointed toward the bathroom, then remembered that he was at work. He had been changing his schedule constantly lately, and she had answered out of habit.

At the kitchen table, between two cups neither had asked for, they compared what they knew. Mirna worked seasonally in another town. She had been with Dario for six years. Hana believed they had separated before she moved in. His messages contained the same photographs of dinner, but different explanations of whose place was empty across the table from him.

Mirna opened the hallway cupboard. Behind the winter coats stood her box of books. Until then, Hana had thought it belonged to his sister. She pulled out a book and recognized a recipe Dario had presented as a family tradition. That small detail hurt her more than the photographs. Even their ordinary evenings carried someone else's signature, while she had been thanking him.

When they called him together, he first asked how they had met. Then he claimed he had been waiting for the right moment. Mirna said she would collect her belongings on Sunday, with a friend. Hana arranged a room at

a colleague's home. They did not promise each other friendship or explain how the other should grieve. They only agreed who would take which shelf, so that nobody's belongings ended up in the wrong box.

Hana was the last to leave. At the entrance she removed the paper bearing both names and dropped it into the mailbox. For a moment she considered adding a message. Instead, she called her colleague and asked whether there was a spare hanger for her dressing gown. Only when she heard an ordinary, slightly sleepy "there is" did she begin to cry. Mirna had already gone. There was nobody there for whom she had to appear strong.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Different Address for the Bills

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-different-address-for-the-bills/

The storage bill arrived at their home because the old mailbox had been removed during renovations to an office building. Selma recognized the name of their former business. Two years earlier they had closed the shop, sold the remaining stock, and shared the loss. She was still repaying a loan from her sister because of it. The bill said that the storage unit had been rented continuously for thirty months.

Amir said it was a mistake. He had kept a few empty shelves that nobody wanted. Selma offered to help take them to the scrapyard at the weekend. He immediately began listing commitments: the car inspection, a colleague's birthday, repairs to the water heater. As he spoke, he collected crumbs from the table into a perfectly straight line. He used to do that when lying to suppliers.

She did not go to the storage unit alone. The next day she asked for their old business records and placed the bill in front of him. "Show me what we're paying for." Amir first talked about her lack of trust, then about how badly the shop's failure had affected him. Finally, he took a key from his glasses case. Selma put on her coat. He fetched his, and they went together.

Inside stood boxes of goods she remembered as having been sold. Beside the wall was a table with packages ready for shipping. Amir had continued selling through online listings. He told customers he was the sole owner. He kept the proceeds in a separate account, convinced that one day he would restart the business and surprise her. He could not explain why that plan required her to remain in debt to her sister.

Selma photographed the stock and called the accountant they had previously used. She arranged a review of the records with both of them present. Amir asked whether she was leaving him. She told him that she

was counting boxes at the moment and would not let him use that question to escape the conversation. They remained in the unit until evening, working together on the same real problem for the first time in a long while.

Selling the remaining goods took seven weeks. Some of the money went back to her sister; the rest was allocated after their obligations had been checked. Amir proposed starting another business together. Selma declined. They still lived together, but for the first time she had an account that only she could access. When confirmation arrived that the storage rental had ended, she put it on the refrigerator. She did not take it down when visitors came.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Message He Did Not Write

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-message-he-did-not-write/

She read the message on the bus, returning from the award ceremony he had missed. Marko wrote that he had been wrong, that her work deserved the same attention as his, and that he would stop putting other people's small requests ahead of their agreements. Tamara cried with relief. For three years she had tried to explain exactly that, without any success lasting longer than a weekend.

That evening she told him how much the passage about no longer wanting to be the person who always understood meant to her. Marko paused. He asked which passage she meant. Tamara showed him the screen. He began speaking generally about love, time, and obligations. He did not sound like the man who had written such precise sentences only a few hours earlier. She simply asked whether he had composed the message himself.

He had asked a friend to help. The friend wrote speeches for other people and knew how to strike the right tone. Marko had sent a short explanation of their argument and received a finished text. There had been no first version written in Marko's own words. He had simply copied the reply and added her name at the beginning. He thought what mattered was that the apology should be well written.

Tamara was not angry that he had sought help with words. Sometimes she struggled to find them herself. But she asked what he intended to do differently the following Friday, when she had a public presentation of her project. He said he would try to come. Everything had returned to the same promise the message was supposed to replace with a concrete action. Tamara put her telephone facedown on the table.

They did not separate immediately. She asked him not to send any further apologies for a few days. On Friday she arrived at the

presentation alone. Marko appeared before it began, with his telephone silenced. He stayed until the end and helped stack chairs, without announcing that he had done something remarkable. She thanked him as she thanked the other people who had helped.

Afterward they walked to the bus stop. He said he had been ashamed of not having an excuse that sounded good, so he had looked for a beautiful way to hide it. Tamara said that ugly answer meant more to her than the earlier message. She did not know whether it would be enough for them to stay together. When the bus arrived, she let the first one go. The conversation they were finally having did not fit into a prepared text.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Weekend That Lasted a Year

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-weekend-that-lasted-a-year/

On Saturdays Dunja ate lunch alone. Her husband Filip went to a hotel to work an extra shift at reception. He said he was saving to replace their windows, so she stopped complaining about empty weekends. Sometimes she left him cake in a box. He would return late and compliment her without mentioning that he had never opened it.

She met the hotel manager outside a shop while they were both trying to fit their shopping into an overfilled trunk. Dunja joked that the manager owed her at least one free Saturday with her husband. The woman did not understand. Filip had not worked there since the previous spring. The job had lasted two weekends, covering someone else's absence. Dunja helped close the trunk, said goodbye, and left her own shopping bag on the asphalt.

That evening she did not greet him by asking where he had been. She told him what she had learned. Filip sat down without removing his jacket. He had been losing money on betting. It had started with small wagers, then attempts to recover his losses, until every weekend became a continuation of the previous one. There was no money for the windows. Some of their shared savings had disappeared as well.

Dunja let him speak but stopped the sentence in which he promised to recover everything with one good move. She did not want another plan built from the same hope that had brought them to that table. She asked to see their accounts and for time to decide what she could bear. For the first time, Filip said he did not know whether he could stop alone. He said it almost inaudibly, looking at the unopened cake box.

The following week he sought professional support and stopped having access to the money Dunja kept for household expenses. She temporarily moved in with a friend. She was not leaving to force him to change, but so

she could sleep without listening for his telephone. They met on Wednesdays for a short walk. Sometimes they discussed nothing except who would water the plants.

One Saturday Filip sent her a photograph of the kitchen table. There were two cups and an empty space for a box. He did not write that everything had changed. He asked whether she would like to come for coffee, for an hour. Dunja looked at the message for a long time. She agreed, but stated when she would leave. At the shop she bought a small cake, enough for two, and for the first time she carried no promise about the following weekend.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Diploma Nobody Had Seen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-diploma-nobody-had-seen/

For her mother's sixtieth birthday, Ivona decided to make a small exhibition of photographs. Among the seaside pictures and family lunches, she wanted an image from her mother's university graduation. Her mother often talked about studying literature, her professors, and the days when she could read all night. Ivona had chosen the same course herself, partly hoping to continue the story that sounded most beautiful in their home.

There was no photograph. Her mother said it had disappeared during a move. The diploma was supposedly in a box that was difficult to reach because old furniture had been stacked over it. Ivona suspected nothing; she simply offered to come with her husband and move the wardrobe. At the other end of the telephone, she heard her mother set down a cup. Then she said there was no need for any exhibition.

They argued about the birthday, but neither mentioned the real reason. Ivona accused her mother of rejecting every attempt at affection. Her mother said Ivona turned everything into a project. That evening Ivona found an old family picture of her mother standing outside the university in an ordinary jacket. She sent it with a message saying that this photograph was perfectly sufficient too.

The reply arrived as a voice message. Her mother had never graduated. A few examinations remained, then she had started working, married, and never returned. She had first lied during a conversation with her future mother-in-law, who used education as a measure of someone's worth. Afterward, the lie became shorter than the explanation. When Ivona began saying she wanted to be like her, she became most ashamed of admitting the truth.

Ivona listened to the message three times. The unfinished degree did not hurt her. What hurt was that her mother had spent years sternly criticizing every postponed examination while hiding her own unfinished work behind a perfect image. The next day she said so without softening it. Her mother did not offer a difficult youth in reply. For the first time, she said she had been unfair to her daughter.

They held the celebration anyway. The photograph outside the university hung on the wall with the simple caption "Student days." When an aunt began talking about the family's grand tradition of graduation, her mother stopped her and explained what she had completed and what she had not. Ivona did not rush to make it easier for her. Later they washed plates together. Her mother asked to borrow a book from Ivona's table. Ivona said she could, but this time she must actually return it.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Sundays at the Imaginary Aunt's

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/sundays-at-the-imaginary-aunts/

Every other Sunday I said I was visiting Aunt Mira. Aunt Mira existed, but she lived in another country and was healthy enough to look more rested in photographs than I did. I told my family she had returned temporarily and needed company. In reality I went to a small park across town, read a book and ate a sandwich without anyone interrupting to ask me to find, send or explain something.

The lie began as an excuse for one Sunday. My husband had invited relatives to lunch without discussing it with me, and I lacked the strength for either lunch or an argument. My aunt was distant enough that nobody checked the details, and the duty was noble enough for everyone to respect. Soon they began praising my thoughtfulness. Every compliment made returning to the truth more uncomfortable. I did not want to admit that I had obtained peace only by disguising it as care for somebody else.

Then my grown daughter decided to make soup for my aunt. My husband offered to drive me because it was raining. I stood in the hallway with an empty bag and excuses that suddenly needed an address. I could have said my aunt had left. Instead I admitted she had never arrived. My daughter held the saucepan, my husband the keys, and I the book I had planned to read. The objects looked like badly chosen props.

My husband asked whether there was someone else. I said no, apart from myself, whom I rarely met without obligations. It sounded more elegant than the situation deserved, so I stopped explaining through clever remarks. I apologised for the lie. Then I said every previous attempt to rest had ended with a question about why I could not help at that particular time. My daughter admitted she had never considered our messages that way. My husband did not immediately accept that part of the conversation.

The following Sunday I stayed home and we invited nobody. The quiet was uncomfortable. I did not want my new freedom to seem a reward for deception, but neither did I want punishment to mean returning to the same schedule. We agreed who would handle household tasks and which invitations we would not accept without discussion. Trust did not return through one good plan. My husband asked where I was going several more times, and I answered without taking offence.

I called Aunt Mira and admitted the role I had given her. She laughed, then said I should actually invite her next time because she sometimes wanted company without duties too. I returned to the park a month later. On the table I left a note saying I was going to read and would be back in two hours. It was shorter than all my previous explanations and, for the first time, required no imaginary address.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Test I Failed

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-test-i-failed/

I had no proof Petra was cheating on me. I had a few changed plans, a phone placed face down on the table and my own ability to turn ordinary things into an entire investigation. When I asked whether there was someone else, she said there was not. That answer should have begun a conversation. I turned it into a reason to demand better proof. Today I know how unfair it is to ask someone to prove the absence of a story I have already written.

I told a friend who knew a persistent suitor that I wanted to see how Petra would react. I presented it as a joke among people with nothing to hide. My friend hesitated but agreed to pass on the message. I did not consider how many people I was introducing into a relationship where I complained about a lack of trust. I was busy imagining the moment when I would finally discover the truth, preferably one that justified everything I already felt.

Petra declined the dinner invitation. The man reported this through my friend, adding that she seemed entirely uninterested. My relief lasted a few hours. Then I began wondering whether she had recognised a trap. I had received the proof I wanted, but it lacked the power I had assigned to it. The next day I watched her phone again, as though the problem remained locked inside the device rather than sitting beside her.

My friend told her what had happened. She could not keep talking to Petra as though she knew nothing. When Petra confronted me, I began explaining how insecure I had felt. She let me finish. Then she said she was sorry about my insecurity, but it gave me no right to turn her into the subject of other people's arrangement. She asked whether I had considered how she would feel knowing acquaintances had been discussing her response.

I had not. I had considered only how I would feel when I received the result. I admitted that too late for it to sound noble. Petra packed a few things and went to her sister's. She said she needed space, without naming a return date. I blamed my friend for telling her until I heard my own sentence aloud. Again I was looking for fault among people who refused to preserve my version of events.

Petra returned for the rest of her belongings two weeks later. I did not ask whether she had someone else. I asked whether I could help with the boxes. She said I could. I carried them to the car and for the first time did only what she had agreed to, without a concealed question or a test. It did not restore our relationship. Some lessons bring no reward to the person who finally learns them, only the possibility of not doing the same to someone else.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Reader Who Knew the Ending

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-reader-who-knew-the-ending/

I gave Tea the manuscript in April. She said she would read it slowly because she wanted to enjoy it, and I accepted that sentence as proof of love. It was my first longer story. I expected neither a publisher nor prizes. I merely wanted someone close to read what I had worked on during evenings she often spent travelling. Occasionally I asked how far she had got. Her answers were always precise enough to prevent further questions.

In June she praised the relationship between the two brothers. In July she said the ending left a powerful impression. By then I had told her almost the entire plot, worried that my work was becoming a burden. At a mutual friend's birthday someone asked what I was writing. Tea took over the explanation, proudly and convincingly. She described a character removed from the final version before I had sent her the document.

At home I asked whether she might have opened the wrong file. I offered an explanation that could save us both. She said she did not remember every detail. Then I asked about the final scene, the one I had never described to anyone. She did not know it happened in a cemetery. She claimed to remember a station. I stared at the books on the shelf for a long time, searching for a less pathetic response than that of a wounded amateur writer.

Finally she admitted she had read the first ten pages. Continuing had felt difficult, but she had not wanted to disappoint me. Later she had assembled comments from our conversations. Every compliment created another obligation to remember the previous lie. She asked whether I would truly have found it easier if she had said she disliked the story. I replied that we would never know, because she had allowed neither of us that possibility.

I did not break up with her that night. It would have been too simple to turn the manuscript into a measure of all our years together. But I stopped offering it as a bridge across every silence. A few days later Tea said she would read it now. I asked her not to do so out of guilt. I needed time to trust her attention again, and she needed to stop believing love meant always saying what the other person wanted to hear.

I sent the story to a group of readers I did not know. One said the middle was slow. Another did not believe the ending. Their criticisms hurt, but I could use them. Tea asked how it had gone and listened to the answer without offering praise. For the first time in a long while, we talked about writing without either of us pretending to be a reader who was not there.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The View That Did Not Belong to the Flat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-view-that-did-not-belong-to-the-flat/

Maja worked in another city and was looking for a flat through a friend. Nermin sent photographs of a bright room, a small balcony and a row of trees below the window. He said the owner was in a hurry and she should decide before the weekend. Maja asked whether he had personally inspected the flat. He replied that he knew the building like the back of his hand. It was not an answer, but in her rush she heard what she needed: someone reliable had already checked everything.

She paid a deposit after a video call in which Nermin showed her the room and kitchen. The connection dropped before they reached the balcony. When she arrived with two suitcases, the view ended at the neighbouring building's wall. There was no balcony. The room had the same table and curtains as the photographs, but far less light. Nermin stood at the door explaining that the pictures might have been taken from another angle.

The landlady said she had never sent photographs of the trees for this flat. She had given them to Nermin for another flat in the building, one already rented. Maja asked why she had seen sunlight on the floor during the video call. Nermin admitted he had made the call from that other flat because this one was occupied. He considered the difference small. The balcony had been Maja's reason for accepting a higher rent, and he knew it.

Only afterwards did she learn he had received a fee for finding a tenant. He had not mentioned it because he wanted the help to seem friendly. The landlady claimed she did not know what he had promised. Maja could no longer decide how much to trust either of them. She photographed the actual conditions, saved their messages and found

temporary accommodation. Her first night in the new city was spent unpacking only her pyjamas, exhausted by decisions she should have made earlier.

Nermin wrote that she was behaving as though they were strangers. He said he had wasted time trying to help. Maja asked whether he would recommend the same room to his sister at the same price. He did not answer. Instead he sent more listings, as though the problem were a lack of options. She did not open them. A friendship cannot become reliable simply because someone quickly finds the next offer.

Part of her deposit was returned after lengthy correspondence. She accepted the remainder as a loss that staying in the wrong flat would not reduce. She inspected her next room herself, in the morning and early evening. It had no balcony, but she knew that before deciding. Through the open window she saw an ordinary car park and a crooked tree. The view was not particularly beautiful. It was exactly the one she had chosen.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Room Everyone Paid For

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-room-everyone-paid-for/

Dario said he needed just one more month. His job would start soon, the landlady would not wait, and he was embarrassed to ask for help again. Mirza paid his rent and asked him not to tell anyone. He did not want his friend to become the subject of their dinners. They had known each other since university, long before any of them had enough money to help someone or keep something quiet.

At the grocery shop Mirza met Vedrana carrying two heavy bags. One was for Dario. She said she could at least bring him groceries since she was already paying for his room that month. At first Mirza thought she meant the previous month. They compared dates without taking out their phones, precisely enough to understand the problem. Then Vedrana mentioned that Luka was also worried about the same rent.

They did not immediately create a group conversation. Mirza called Dario and asked how much he actually owed. Dario named the same amount Mirza had already transferred. When Mirza mentioned Vedrana, he began explaining bills, dental repairs and money he had lent someone else. Every sentence introduced another emergency. He never said that he had told each of them they were the only person who could save him from the same deadline.

They met in the café where they had once celebrated passing exams. Luka arrived angry, Vedrana exhausted, and Mirza hoping there was an explanation they had not yet heard. Dario first talked about pride. Then he said people found it easier to give money when they knew what it was for, so he had offered everyone the same reason. He did not consider it deception because he really needed the money. The table became very quiet.

Vedrana said she might have helped with other needs too, but could no longer know. Luka demanded immediate repayment, although everyone could see he would not get it. Mirza asked whether the job Dario had mentioned existed. Dario admitted he had submitted an application, without an interview or a promise. His new life consisted of future events presented to his friends as facts already arranged.

They agreed on the amounts he owed each of them separately, without organising a collective punishment. Mirza left his latest help as a gift and said there would be no next time. It was not easy to say. Dario looked offended, which hurt more than anger would have. A few weeks later he invited Mirza for coffee without mentioning money. Mirza agreed, but for the first time arrived without feeling he had to bring an answer. Their friendship remained at the table, smaller and less certain than before.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Gift That Had to Be Returned

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-gift-that-had-to-be-returned/

She received the bracelet for her fortieth birthday, in front of twelve friends and a cake already losing its shape. Adnan opened the box slowly, enjoying the attention. Emina rarely wore jewellery, but the bracelet was simple and beautiful. Everyone said how well he knew her. Later, alone together, he asked whether she had noticed Jasmina's envy. Emina laughed because she did not know what else to say.

The relationship ended in January, more quietly than she had expected. They divided their books and arranged to return the keys. Adnan did not mention the bracelet. Emina put it in a drawer beside the tickets from the concert where they had first kissed. She did not want to throw things away while still angry, or turn every memory into evidence against the man with whom she had spent four years. She thought they deserved at least that kind of parting.

In March Adnan's sister called. She asked when she could collect their mother's bracelet. Emina said she did not understand. His sister explained that Adnan had borrowed it for a photo shoot, supposedly as a prop for a business associate to wear. Their mother now needed the jewellery for a family celebration. The silence at the other end matched the silence in Emina's kitchen. Both women realised they were discussing different versions of the same box.

Adnan was angry that his sister had called without him. He told Emina he had intended to buy a similar bracelet and replace it before anyone noticed. Money had been inconvenient at the time, and afterwards he had forgotten. She asked why he had not simply bought her a book. He said she did not understand the pressure of milestone birthdays. The sentence contained nothing about her taste, only his fear of looking less successful in front of their friends.

She took the bracelet to his mother herself. The woman opened the door looking prepared for an unpleasant conversation, but Emina had not come for a verdict. She explained how she had received the jewellery and handed over the box. His mother said she was sorry. Emina believed that short sentence more than all of Adnan's explanations. They drank coffee, talked about the weather and allowed the visit to end without joining forces to mock the man they both knew.

That evening Emina removed the concert tickets from the drawer. She did not throw them away. The kiss had happened even if the birthday gift had been false. She sent Adnan only confirmation that the bracelet had been returned. His message saying she had overreacted went unanswered. When friends later asked about the jewellery, she told the truth without softening it. She no longer wanted to carry the weight of his generosity, even as a story that made everyone more comfortable.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Album Without a Bride and Groom

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-album-without-a-bride-and-groom/

When Damir asked for a few photographs for a presentation, Lejla agreed because he had once lent her a lens when she needed it. She wrote clearly that her name had to appear beside the images. He replied with a thumbs-up. Lejla did not ask for a contract. They knew each other through work, had coffee after shoots and referred clients to one another when busy. She considered such favours part of friendship, not a risk.

Two months later a woman she did not know called. She wanted extra photographs from her sister's wedding album. Damir had given her Lejla's number, saying that she kept the archive. Lejla immediately recognised a wedding she had photographed alone. The woman believed Damir had been the main photographer and Lejla his assistant. That was what a recent post said. She sent it during their conversation.

On his page, her pictures appeared among offers for the following season. Her name was absent. Damir claimed an associate had accidentally left it out and offered dinner as an apology. Lejla asked him to remove the images and correct the description before the same audience. He said a public admission could destroy him. Then he mentioned the lens he had lent her, as though that had purchased the rights to everything she would ever photograph with it.

She did not answer him until the next morning. Instead she reviewed their messages and found three enquiries she had passed on. One of those brides had already paid a deposit, expecting the style shown on his profile. Lejla called Damir and said she would no longer accept work through him. She neither offered to take over the weddings nor contacted all his clients. She wanted to stop participating in the lie without turning other people's disappointment into a new market.

He published a correction in small print beneath an old photograph. Lejla then posted the original series on her own page, with the shoot date and a brief explanation of authorship. Mutual acquaintances told her she could have been kinder. Nobody asked why Damir could not have been more honest. She lost several referrals and a regular coffee companion. In the following weeks her phone rang less, which hurt more than she wanted to admit.

The woman who had first called came to collect the extra prints. She brought a message from her sister, who remembered Lejla kneeling in the rain to capture their exit. She did not remember Damir because he had never been there. Lejla wrapped the prints in plain paper. She now sent clear conditions whenever she lent out photographs. She had returned his lens long ago, and had just refused to pay the final invisible instalment of that debt.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Allergy on Four Legs

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-allergy-on-four-legs/

Petra took Leon to a boarding kennel whenever Miro stayed at her place for the weekend. The dog knew its yard and staff, but each trip required time, money, and his offended stare through the car window. Miro had said he was very allergic to dogs. Petra asked no further questions. She washed the furniture covers, opened the windows, and only then prepared dinner for two.

At lunch with his parents, a small shaggy dog jumped onto his lap. Miro scratched behind its ears and continued talking about work. Petra put down her fork. She asked how he could tolerate a dog so close. His mother answered before he did: "It always sits on him like that." The rest of lunch passed with many questions about traffic. Petra did not want to argue in front of people she had only just met.

In the car he first tried explaining that his allergy only occurred around certain dogs. Petra said he should not, then, have presented it as a rule applying to every dog and every visit. He was silent, then admitted there was no allergy. He was frightened of large dogs. Leon seemed enormous to him, although he mostly slept with a paw over his muzzle. A dog had knocked him over as a boy, and he had avoided close encounters ever since.

Petra did not say that her dog was good and therefore there was nothing to fear. She said he could have talked about his fear. Miro frowned. "You would have laughed at a grown man being scared of your pet." That angered her more than the clumsy lie. He had judged her in advance, then handed her all the work of protecting his pride. She showed him how much she had spent on boarding that month.

He offered to pay, then said he would try getting used to Leon. She did not accept that second suggestion as the only possible next step. She did

not want her apartment turned into a testing ground for courage. They could spend the next weekends at his place, where they had not gone because he thought it insufficiently tidy. "So my problem was easier than your vacuum cleaner too," she said, more tired than witty.

Their first meeting at Miro's was brief. Petra left Leon at home only as long as he usually stayed alone. Miro prepared dinner and repaid her for two unnecessary weekends of boarding. They made no sweeping agreement about the future. When her reminder for the dog's walk sounded, she stood up. This time she did not say she was sorry to leave. He did not suggest that she stay a little longer.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Who Wrote About Lela

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/who-wrote-about-lela/

The message reached Jasmin while he was peeling potatoes in Lela's apartment. An unknown profile claimed to be warning him out of female solidarity. Apparently Lela changed men as soon as they ran out of money and adored expensive gifts. Jasmin looked at the woman who had just mended a kitchen towel because she liked its stripe. That did not prove anyone's character, but the message sounded strangely disconnected from her.

He showed her the screen. Lela first thought of a former colleague with whom she had parted badly. She read everything twice, becoming less angry and more ashamed. "Now I have to defend my entire life against someone who doesn't even have a surname," she said. Jasmin replied that he believed her. Nevertheless, he asked whether there was anything he should know, then saw how that question was also part of the work the unknown person had just imposed on her.

A second message arrived the next day. It said that a man must beware a woman who would 'make someone else's loaf out of two grains.' Jasmin paused. His mother used that strange phrase about people she disliked. It was not a known proverb, but something she had been remembering incorrectly for years. He called and asked whether she had created the profile. The silence lasted longer than he could bear.

She admitted it only when he visited. His favorite pie waited on the table. She said Lela was too independent, that she would take him far away, and that she had only wanted to see how serious he was. "You wrote that she takes money from men," he said. His mother waved a hand, as though the actual words were insignificant beside her enormous fear. He did not even uncover the pie.

Lela did not want an apologetic call from his mother that same evening. Jasmin had to accept that identifying the message's source did not erase his first uncomfortable question in her kitchen. He named exactly what he had asked and why he was sorry. He did not promise that his mother would become a different person. They agreed that he would visit his mother alone for the time being and would not ask Lela to perform relief at the family table.

A week later his mother sent him a photograph of lunch and asked whether they were both coming. He answered that he was coming alone, as he had already said. Lela went on an outing with her sister that day. When they met that evening, she told him about a flat tire and a man who had lent them a pump. He did not interrupt to prove that he had taken her side. He let her finish the story.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Guest Who Was Not Visiting for a Weekend

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-guest-who-was-not-visiting-for-a-weekend/

I prepared clean towels and moved the drying rack out of the small room. Marko's friend Nenad was coming for the weekend. That was what I had been told. I knew him slightly, enough to make coffee and ask about work, too little to understand why he arrived with four boxes, a monitor, and a large plant. Marko immediately took the heaviest box, hurriedly, as though carrying speed could explain the quantity.

Over dinner Nenad mentioned starting work near our building on Monday. I said that was convenient and asked where he would live. He looked at Marko. Marko looked at his plate. That brief geometry contained enough information for me to stop eating. Nenad thought he was staying with us until he found a flat, probably two or three months. Marko had told him we both agreed.

I did not argue with our guest. I asked Marko into the kitchen. He claimed he had intended to tell me but was waiting for the right moment. Nenad was struggling; he did not want him to feel unwelcome. I asked how he thought I would feel in a home where somebody else had already given my consent. He said withdrawing the promise now would be awkward. I realised he had relied on precisely that awkwardness from the beginning.

We returned to the table. Marko had to say he had not asked me. Nenad blushed and began gathering his things before anyone mentioned leaving. I stopped him and said he could stay the agreed weekend. A longer stay had not been agreed. I disliked becoming the person stating a boundary before a man who had already moved his life. I disliked abandoning the boundary for that reason even more.

On Sunday Nenad found a room with a colleague. Marko helped move his boxes. On returning he said I had been cold. I did not ask whether it would count as warmth if I moved a friend into his workplace. Such comparisons already sounded like additional work. I simply said his friendship with Nenad did not entitle him to promise my days in advance.

The small room again became a place for laundry and my occasional reading. Nenad messaged to thank me for two nights and apologise for the misunderstanding. I replied that he had not created it. Marko was in the kitchen when the message arrived. He did not ask what it said. For the first time he had to bear a conversation concerning him taking place without his prearranged version.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Cake for His Anniversary

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-cake-for-his-anniversary/

The order showed two names and the number twenty. Selma recognised his name before reading the telephone number. The cake was for the wedding anniversary of the man she had been seeing for nine months. His wife requested simple decoration, a little less sugar, and a dedication to their shared years. Selma stood in the workshop holding ground walnuts while her apprentice waited to hear which tin to prepare.

She knew he was married. She could not offer herself that easier story. He said there had long been no closeness in the marriage, and she had stopped asking questions once the answers became uncomfortable. Now the woman with whom he supposedly shared only an address was choosing lettering for their anniversary. Selma did not know whether that meant a happy marriage. She knew only that accepting the job meant her hands would decorate the lie in which she already participated.

She called him during her break. He said he had not known where his wife ordered the cake and that work should not be mixed with private life. The sentence was so tidy that Selma felt sick. He had already mixed everything; now he had assigned her the duty of appearing professional. She asked him to tell his wife himself by evening. He replied that the moment was wrong. Selma realised the right moment probably did not exist in his schedule.

The next morning she called the customer. First she said she could not make the cake, then explained why. She did not discuss falling in love or how hard this was. The woman remained silent for a long time. Then she asked whether Selma knew he was married. Selma said yes. The conversation ended with a demand to return the payment that day. Selma refunded it and recommended another workshop only when the woman requested one.

He arrived angry, convinced the confession was an attempt to force him to choose Selma. She remained behind the worktable. She said he was not choosing between two cakes and she no longer wanted a place in that schedule. She did not look strong. Her hands shook while she put away the walnuts. The apprentice was in another room and did not have to become an audience to their ending.

Several days later Selma washed the tin she had never used. She received neither forgiveness nor news of what had happened to their marriage. She received silence that this time she did not try to fill with his messages. The next order required only someone's name. She wrote it slowly, careful that no letter extended over the edge.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Genius from the Next Episode

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-genius-from-the-next-episode/

In episode six Boris said the journalist was lying. In seven he guessed where the sister had disappeared. In eight he immediately knew who would not survive dinner. I looked across the popcorn bowl and asked when he had become so perceptive. He shrugged, pleased with himself, and said you only needed to follow details. Apparently I followed the wrong ones. We had started watching together after the children moved out, a small ritual requiring neither ironing nor family lunch arrangements.

Before episode nine I went to open a window. From the sitting room I heard him say the power would now fail in the heroine's house. It happened before I returned to the sofa. The accuracy was so absurd that I switched off the television and asked whether he had already watched it. He said he had accidentally seen a preview. Then that a colleague had revealed part. Only after the third question did he admit finishing the entire season while I slept.

I could understand his not wanting to wait. I could even understand his embarrassment at admitting he had not lasted three evenings. I could not understand ten days of lessons in paying closer attention. His little genius performance made me feel continually slower beside him than I was. Boris said it was only television. I replied that the television was the only thing not pretending at that moment, since it was switched off.

I watched the next episode alone. It was not as sweet as expected. Without him I had nobody to tell that the characters were opening suspicious doors entirely unnecessarily. Still, I did not call him merely to fill the empty place. When he came in, he asked whether he could sit. I said yes if he knew nothing I had yet to discover. He sat and, for the first time, remained silent without looking as though he possessed important information.

He apologised for the part about details. That meant more than promising never to watch ahead, since I had not requested such a promise. We agreed he could watch whatever he wanted alone, while for our evenings we would choose something neither had seen. Finding a new title took half an hour, and admitting it was terrible took another half-hour.

During the first episode Boris said he thought the gardener was guilty. I looked at him. He raised both hands and said this time he really was guessing. In the end the culprit was the aunt. I made him a little paper trophy for coming second in his own sitting room. He keeps it beside the remote, where he can see it whenever he wants to be cleverer than he is.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Woman Who Knew About the Blue Cup

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-woman-who-knew-about-the-blue-cup/

The visitor said her name was Selina and she had known Milena's husband. A month after the funeral, that was not unusual. People still arrived with stories, returned books, and more food than the fridge needed. Milena invited her into the kitchen and asked whether she wanted coffee. Selina looked at the shelf above the sink. 'You still keep his blue cup,' she said, then closed her mouth as though the sentence could be taken back.

The cup was nothing special. He had bought it at a petrol station and refused to discard it despite its cracked handle. Milena asked how Selina knew about it. The woman lowered her gaze to the table. They had been seeing each other for four years. Sometimes he came to her flat before work and talked about mornings at home, coffee cooling while he searched for glasses. Milena sat before the water boiled.

She did not request details about places or dates. She asked whether Selina had known he was married. She had. That brief, unadorned answer allowed Milena to remain at the table. She did not have to hear that the marriage had long been empty, because it had not. They had good days, ordinary arguments, an arranged trip that would never happen. And alongside everything there had been another woman. She did not know where to put a fact that cancelled no memory yet passed through every one.

Selina said she had come asking for nothing. Then she asked whether she might have one of his books. Milena looked towards the sitting room. All the books remained as he had left them. She said no. Not now. Selina nodded, stood, and pushed her chair under the table herself. Milena did not offer the coffee she had never finished making. She accompanied her

to the door without asking whether she would call again.

That night her greatest anger was having nobody to ask the second question. The first was why. She could not even formulate the second. In the morning she called her sister and told her everything before grief occupied her whole language again. Her sister did not tell her to remember only the good. She came, washed several plates, and stayed until lunch.

Milena moved the blue cup to another shelf. She neither broke it nor gave it away. Sometimes she forgot it for days; sometimes she saw it immediately on entering the kitchen. When she first took a short trip alone, she brought a new little cup with a lid. At the hotel she drank coffee beside the window without needing to decide that morning what her entire marriage had been.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Trip Cancelled Only for Me

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-trip-cancelled-only-for-me/

Jelena asked me to water her plants while she was at the seaside. She sent a short message, the sort you send someone you rely on. I read it during lunch, between two mouthfuls. Two weeks earlier she had said we would not take our shared trip this year. Too expensive, dates incompatible, everyone had something. Now she was going to the same little apartment the four of us had visited for years.

I called and asked whether she was going with her husband. The pause lasted long enough that I no longer needed an answer. The three of them were going. Jelena tried explaining that it had been arranged at the last moment, but I knew what her haste looked like. Even for a weekend she bought sun cream seven days ahead. I asked when the trip had actually been cancelled, and she said my name as a plea not to continue.

We met outside her building. She said that on the last holiday I had constantly made schedules, commented on costs, and grown angry whenever anyone was late. I could not deny everything. I could indeed turn going to the beach into an expedition's departure. But none had told me it bothered them so much. Inventing an expensive apartment had been easier than enduring a conversation in which I might be hurt.

Now I was hurt without the conversation. Jelena said I was not excluded forever, as though the group had an admissions deadline. I refused to water the plants. It had nothing to do with the plants. I did not want to spend the next ten days entering her flat and performing a small proof that nothing between us had broken. I wished her a good holiday, which was not entirely true then, but I had no better closing sentence.

They went. I requested no photographs and did not ask mutual acquaintances how they were. Saturdays were hardest, when I would normally send travel suggestions. Instead I booked a day trip with

strangers and deliberately left the schedule to the guide. Not everything was pleasant. Somebody was late, lunch cost too much, and I nevertheless enjoyed several moments without repairing the plan.

On her return Jelena brought a fridge magnet. I let her in but did not immediately stick it up. We talked for a long time without promises about next summer. When she asked whether I had changed on my outing, I said that was not the only question that needed asking. The magnet remained on the table between us, a little house without a single door that opened.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

An Apology Sent Without Me

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-apology-sent-without-me/

The message arrived while Nataša waited at the post office. Her mother-in-law wrote that she was glad Nataša had thought carefully and admitted her mistake. She added a heart and an invitation to Sunday lunch. Nataša read everything twice. She had written nothing after their last argument. She had simply said she would not attend lunches where her parents regularly became a joke. She still intended to discuss that with her husband.

Marko immediately admitted sending a message from her phone. She had left it on the table while showering, and he knew the code. He had written a short apology and deleted the sent message to avoid upsetting her. He thought his mother's warm reply would prove the argument unnecessary. Nataša stood in the kitchen doorway listening to his explanation of peace achieved by removing one person from the conversation.

She asked exactly what he had written. He said she apologised for overreacting and knew nobody had meant any harm. Those were precisely the sentences she refused to say. Her mother-in-law had called her father a ridiculous peasant before guests and expected Nataša to laugh too. Marko said that was how his mother spoke. Nataša replied that it was not how she wrote, although he had decided otherwise.

She demanded that he tell his mother the truth. He tried suggesting a gentler version: that they had composed the message together and he had perhaps misunderstood her tone. Nataša refused shared authorship of a lie. She sat beside him while he called but supplied no words. When his mother said his wife was obviously forcing him to withdraw the apology, Marko had to repeat that she had never sent it at all.

On Sunday he went to his mother's alone. Nataša spent the day with her parents without recounting every detail to turn them into a jury. That evening she changed her phone code. Marko asked whether she no longer trusted him. She said that was precisely the question he could not answer on her behalf. They neither embraced nor agreed on a fresh start that day.

Several weeks later her mother-in-law sent a message without a heart. She asked whether they could discuss what she had said. Nataša let the message sit until evening, then answered that they could. Marko sat in the same room watching television. He did not ask to see the reply. For the first time since the argument, his silence served a useful purpose.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Match Behind Her Voice

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-match-behind-her-voice/

The earbud was in his right ear, concealed by his collar and the hand supporting his head. Across the table, Mirela described a conversation with the owner of the shop where she worked. She had to decide whether to accept a new shift or find another job. Ado looked directly at her and occasionally nodded. On the phone beneath the table, the match entered its final minutes, and the commentator sounded as though his rent depended on the result.

Mirela said she was frightened. Ado replied, 'There's still time.' The sentence might have passed if he had not simultaneously slapped the table and laughed. A goal. He only saw her face after pulling out the earbud. First he said he had merely checked the score. Then that he had listened for only a few minutes. Mirela asked which part of her account he had started at. He could name none.

She rose and took her plate into the kitchen. Ado followed, explaining how important the match was. She said she knew. He had shown her the date the previous week. He could have said he wanted to watch and talk afterwards. Instead he offered the face of someone listening while something else ran behind it all along. Now she lacked the energy to tell the same story again, to him or anyone.

He tried repeating fragments he had caught. Shop, shifts, owner. They sounded like words from somebody else's quiz. Mirela asked him to stop proving minimal presence. She left him in the kitchen and went for a walk. The match finished while he sat at the table. He checked the result later, without the pleasure he had anticipated all afternoon.

The following day he admitted he had not feared her forbidding him. She had never forbidden matches. He had felt awkward saying he wanted something in the middle of her bad day, so he chose a deception that then

seemed smaller than openly refusing. Mirela did not immediately accept the apology. She had already considered the job decision with her sister. She did not want to manufacture another opportunity simply to make him feel useful.

He watched the next important match with friends. Mirela went to the cinema. When they met at home afterwards, he asked about the film and left his phone on a shelf. She did not tell him everything. She began with a scene that had made her laugh. This time he waited until she finished before saying anything about a goal.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Wedding Beneath a Roof That Did Not Leak

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-wedding-beneath-a-roof-that-did-not-leak/

According to Adnan, the roof leaked directly above the dance floor. The venue had therefore cancelled their wedding. Lejla listened with her phone in her hand, already prepared to call other places. They had two months left and sixty guests. Adnan said perhaps they should accept the sign and postpone everything until spring. Lejla did not believe in signs caused by poor building maintenance. She believed in other venues.

Over the next three days she found four. Adnan found fault with each. One was distant, another too formal, the third small. The fourth had their exact date available and plenty of room. Then he said the whole organisation made him feel sick. Lejla left him to rest and called the first venue to ask whether she could at least collect the seating plan he had previously made with the manager.

The manager knew nothing about them. She checked the date, surnames, and guest numbers. That weekend they had another celebration, booked long before Lejla and Adnan became engaged. The roof did not leak. Lejla thanked her in an excessively polite voice, the kind used to finish a conversation before falling apart in front of a stranger. The seating plan in Adnan's handwriting was still on their fridge.

She waited at the kitchen table. She requested no confirmations or explanations from the manager. She simply asked how long he had been postponing the conversation they now had to have. He admitted never visiting the venue. Whenever he imagined the wedding, he felt he was agreeing to a life he was unsure he wanted. Drawing tables had been easier than interrupting her excitement. He had invented the roof when the invitation deadline approached.

Lejla studied his drawing for a long time. On it her father sat far from the loudspeakers because he found noise difficult. Even in the false plan, Adnan remembered such details. That made everything more painful, not prettier. She said she could accept someone being uncertain whether to marry her. She did not know whether she could accept his letting her live for months inside an answer that was supposedly already settled.

The invitations were never sent. Adnan spent several days at his brother's, and Lejla booked no new venue. When they talked again, for the first time they were not choosing a date. They discussed whether they wanted to continue together at all. She removed the seating plan from the fridge before he arrived. In its place remained an ordinary white surface neither hurried to fill.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Orders I Never Refused

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-orders-i-never-refused/

In recent weeks the sewing machine had been covered more often than switched on. Ines assumed her customers were economising. She had a small dressmaking shop on the ground floor of the house, with a telephone in their shared hallway. When she went out for fabric, her partner Zdravko answered calls. He told her they were mostly wrong numbers. In the evenings he consoled her that perhaps it was good she could finally rest and devote herself to their home.

An old customer stopped her outside the bakery. She asked when Ines would work again, since she was sorry everything was booked until winter. Ines said she could bring her skirt tomorrow. The woman looked confused. Two weeks earlier a man's voice had told her the dressmaker was no longer taking orders. It had not sounded like a wrong number. He knew her name and said Ines intended to slow down.

Zdravko did not deny it for long. He admitted refusing several jobs because he saw she was overdoing things. Then a few more, because she seemed calmer without deadlines. Ines stood in the hallway with a bag of pastries slowly growing greasy at the bottom. She had been quieter because she was calculating how long she could pay for materials and contributions without new orders. He had declared her silence to be contentment.

She told him he could have washed dishes, taken over shopping, or asked whether she needed help. Instead he had decided which part of her life should shrink. Zdravko defended himself by saying money was no problem because he earned enough. Ines put the bag on the floor. She had opened the shop before their relationship. It contained skill, acquaintances, and satisfaction that could not fit inside his salary.

She called the customers she could remember. She did not recount the private argument to everyone. She said incorrect information had been given and she was working normally. Some had already found another dressmaker. One ordered curtains; another returned only after several months. She obtained a separate business phone. She did not give Zdravko the role of helping repair what he had damaged, however often he offered.

They stayed together, for now. That was a phrase Ines had not previously used when speaking of her home. One evening she was finishing a hem while Zdravko washed dishes in the kitchen. He did not come to the doorway to show what he was doing. She heard water, then silence, and continued sewing. She did not yet know whether it meant change. She knew the skirt would be ready in the morning.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Call Was for His Former Mother-in-Law

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-call-was-for-his-former-mother-in-law/

On Saturdays Almir left with a large sports bag. Belma handed him a water bottle and stayed to finish the housework. He said he went for coffee with the group after exercising, so he often returned near lunchtime. One morning he left the bag open. Inside were mandarins, detergent, and soft slippers. Belma thought her husband had discovered a very unusual form of exercise.

She did not follow him. When he returned, she asked whom he had bought the slippers for. Almir looked towards the door as though the answer might remain in the hallway. They were for his former mother-in-law, Zlata. After divorcing her daughter, he had continued speaking to her occasionally. In recent months shopping had become more difficult for her, so he helped. Belma said she did not understand why that required inventing an exercise group.

He claimed he had not wanted her to feel threatened. He spoke slowly, in the tone used to soothe someone's assumed jealousy in advance. Belma asked when she had forbidden him from talking to people in his life. He could give no example. Then he admitted telling Zlata that Belma disliked their meetings. That was why the older woman never called their home. That was why his former wife had treated Belma coldly during their last chance encounter.

Belma did not want a visit at which she would demonstrate her generosity. Nor did she ask Almir to stop helping. She wanted him to tell everyone to whom he had invented her prohibition what he had actually done. He said that would be humiliating. She looked at him, waiting for him to hear his own sentence. He stood by the sink for a long time before taking his phone.

Zlata called Belma several days later. The conversation was awkward, full of apologies from the wrong person. Belma said she did not have to apologise for needing groceries. They talked a little longer about the mandarins that had turned out sour. They did not suddenly become friends. At the end Zlata asked whether she could call the home phone in future if Almir did not answer his own. Belma said she could.

The Saturday shopping continued. Almir left with canvas bags and finished the housework on his return. Belma no longer saw him off with a water bottle. It was not a punishment she had planned. She simply needed time to feel pleased again when the man returned from a visit about which he was now telling the truth.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Plant He Was Not Expecting

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-plant-he-was-not-expecting/

Vesna entered carrying a pot of basil and a bag that could not be mistaken for a toiletries case. Alen stood in the kitchen of the new flat, looking first at the bag, then the plant. When he said they would finally have their own space, she had imagined shelves, two toothbrushes, and mornings when nobody dressed in a hurry. He had bought two glasses and one towel. The towel hung from the oven handle.

She told him she had spoken to her husband. Not about another weekend, but about leaving. Alen pulled out a chair and sat before she did. He asked why she had not waited until they agreed. Vesna put the basil on the windowsill. During eleven months together they had spoken about the future often enough for her to stop asking when the future began. Now she listened as he pushed each conversation back into an indefinite time.

His wife knew nothing. He did not intend to leave, at least not now. He had rented the flat so they could stop looking for available rooms and watching the clock. He considered it a major step for them. Vesna looked at one lonely glass on the table while the other remained in its cardboard box. She asked where, within that major step, she was supposed to keep her winter coat. He did not answer. There was no wardrobe.

She was angry with him until she said he had destroyed her marriage. She heard the sentence and stopped. Alen had lied about the size of their future, but she had lied to her husband daily without his assistance. She disliked the fact that both things could be true at once. She sat on the other chair, the wobbly one, and for the first time did not try to imagine a lovelier version of the room.

She went to her sister's. She took the basil because she had bought it herself and because leaving it to decorate the next secret afternoon was

unbearable. Alen called, saying she was panicking and asking for time. Her husband sent one message, a practical question about belongings she needed to collect. His restraint hurt more than her lover's fear, but she did not ask him to make it easier for her.

A month later she found a small studio. There was enough light at the window for the basil. Some evenings she wanted to call one of them simply to avoid eating alone. Instead she washed her plate, opened the window, and stayed in a room that this time she did not have to describe as anything larger than it was.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Landlady at Our Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-landlady-at-our-table/

According to Vera, the landlady was a difficult woman. She refused to replace the cooker, disliked late payments, and raised the rent every other year. Ruža listened to these complaints and reliably paid her share. After her divorce she had moved in with her old friend, grateful not to search for a flat alone. They had separate rooms, shared Saturday breakfasts, and an agreement to split all costs equally. She had never seen the landlady. Vera said that was for the best.

When the latest increase became too much, Ruža cancelled a trip to her daughter. Vera consoled her, saying they would somehow manage. That month Vera's son came for lunch with his girlfriend. They looked around the kitchen, discussed a new cooker, and talked about how they might arrange the flat when they eventually took it over. Ruža asked from whom. The young man pointed to his mother, not understanding the question.

Lunch ended quickly. At first Vera said ownership was none of Ruža's business since she had a roof over her head at a reasonable price. Ruža agreed that an owner could charge rent. But she had not agreed to rent openly set by an owner. She had agreed to share a cost with a friend who sat opposite her every month pretending to endure the same worry.

Vera had been sending the money from the latest increase to her son. She was helping him pay for a car. 'You would understand if you were in my position,' she said. Ruža raised her voice for the first time. She too had a child, one she had not visited because of that increase. She did not want to hear again that one woman's maternal love was taken for granted while another's could wait for a cheaper month.

She did not leave that night. She spent three weeks looking for another room, and meanwhile talked to Vera about water, keys, and who had

finished the coffee. The absence of arguments did not mean reconciliation. It was strange living with a person to whom you suddenly had nothing to tell. Vera offered a lower price, then a free month. Ruža realised that staying would require a friend, whereas only a landlady was addressing her now.

Before leaving she washed her shelf in the fridge. Vera stood by the door holding their two Saturday mugs. She asked whether Ruža would ever come for breakfast. Ruža took her mug from Vera's hand. She said she had a bus to catch, which was true, but not a complete answer. This time she did not owe a fuller one.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Watch That Stopped Lunch

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-watch-that-stopped-lunch/

Nedžib said he had not touched his grandfather's watch. His mother believed him, but his father shrugged in a way that left the door open to suspicion. Their son sometimes borrowed things without asking. He was twenty-six and had an old habit of defending himself too loudly. At Sunday lunch his denials grew louder while Kenan repeated that there was no sense creating tension over a watch. His wife Amina stopped eating.

The watch had belonged to her father. It was not expensive, nor did it always keep accurate time. She wore it when she needed the feeling that someone calm was accompanying her. She had last seen it on the chest of drawers. After lunch Nedžib left without his usual coffee. Amina wanted to follow him, but Kenan told her to let him cool down. It sounded reasonable. With him, that was usually the problem.

On Wednesday Kenan asked Amina to collect his watch from the repair shop on her way home, forgetting how many things he had given the same man to examine. The repairer produced two bags. One held Kenan's wristwatch. The other held her father's, dismantled, with cracked glass. He said he was still looking for a part for that one, but could promise nothing after such a fall. Amina took both bags home.

Kenan had dropped the watch while moving the chest of drawers. Then he had taken it for repair, convinced he could put it back before anyone noticed. When the search began, shrugging had been easier than admitting it. Amina listened to the end. She did not ask about the price of the part. She asked why he had watched his own child defending himself against something he had not done.

He called their son in front of her, but she refused to be a witness who could later confirm that he had apologised. She went into another room.

The conversation was brief. Nedžib did not come the following Sunday. Kenan made his favourite lunch and grew angry as the food cooled. Amina did not help him turn their son's absence into another fault.

The watch stayed in its bag for months. Another repairer eventually got it running, but Nedžib first came back before that, one Tuesday, just for coffee with his mother. Kenan returned from work while they sat together. He paused at the door and asked whether he could sit. His son moved the empty cup towards him. This time his father did not try to decide what the gesture meant.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Man from My Old Notebooks

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-from-my-old-notebooks/

Adnan loved precisely the song none of Lana's friends knew. He too had once wanted a flat overlooking a railway station. He even claimed the best cherries came in crumpled paper, eaten before reaching home. Lana recounted these coincidences to a friend with the embarrassment of a grown woman afraid of sounding like a little girl. After a long, weary divorce, meeting someone she did not have to translate herself for felt good.

One evening they stood outside a closed cinema. Adnan told her that a missed performance was merely an exit disguised as a wall. Lana did not laugh. She had written that sentence seven years earlier, after the conversation in which she first seriously considered divorce. It had never been published. She had not said it to him. It was in a black notebook packed away at her sister's while she changed flats.

Her sister had been Adnan's flatmate before introducing them. When Lana asked where the boxes had stood, her sister said they had been in the sitting room for a while. She sensed something unpleasant in the question and offered to come over. Lana declined. That evening she wanted to hear only the man who already knew too many of her answers.

He admitted opening one notebook. Then two more. At first out of curiosity, later because he liked the woman who had written them. When they met, he wanted her to feel the same. He insisted he had not lied about how much he liked her. Lana asked where the story about his cherries had come from. He lowered his eyes. She did not even have to ask about the railway station.

What hurt most was that she could no longer recall a conversation without searching for a stolen piece. Perhaps she would have loved him without his knowing the song. Perhaps explaining why a station meant

arrivals to her, rather than noise, would have been interesting. He had taken away their chance to get to know each other, then called that shortcut closeness. She asked him not to come again. Whether he considered that excessive no longer mattered.

She brought the notebooks home in two canvas bags. For a long time she did not open them. One rainy afternoon she finally found the sentence and crossed it out with a single line. Underneath she wrote what had actually happened outside the closed cinema. Adnan's name fitted into the first line. The rest of the page belonged to her.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

What Jasmina Never Said

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/what-jasmina-never-said/

From what Dino had heard, Jasmina had nothing good to say about him. She thought he talked too fast, that his family visited too often, and that sharing a flat with him was a bad idea. His girlfriend Ivona reported all of this, usually when the conversation turned to moving in. Dino tried to be polite to Jasmina, but every meeting made him feel like a candidate the panel had already rejected.

At a birthday lunch they sat beside each other. Ivona went to fetch more plates. Dino looked at Jasmina and asked exactly what he needed to change for her to trust him. She thought he meant the incorrect cake order. When he mentioned the flat, she put down her fork. She had not even known they were looking for a flat together. Ivona had told her that living separately suited them perfectly.

They did not continue in front of everyone. After lunch they went onto the steps and compared just a few statements. There were enough. Jasmina had never asked Ivona to end the relationship or commented on Dino's family. Quite the opposite, she had asked why Ivona's friends no longer came to dinner. Ivona told them Dino wanted peace after work. Dino thought they did not want to sit at his table.

When they approached her, Ivona immediately began crying. She said she had only been buying time. She was afraid of living together, but found it easier to repeat someone else's supposed opinion than express her own. The unannounced visits from his family bothered her too. Sometimes she wanted an evening without his stories. Jasmina listened until she heard: 'You know I could always tell you anything.' Then she stood. 'You could. That's why I didn't deserve this.'

Dino and Ivona did not separate immediately. Their first conversation without the invented Jasmina lasted twenty minutes and was much more

uncomfortable than any before it. They cancelled the flat viewing. Dino did not know whether he believed her when she said she wanted to stay together. Ivona realised how convenient it had been to have a friend who delivered the ugliest part of every argument for her.

Weeks later she wrote Jasmina a long message, then shortened it to an apology and an invitation. The answer came the next day. Her friend still did not want coffee. Ivona was sitting with her phone when Dino asked what had happened. 'I hurt her,' she said. For the first time she did not put anyone between the subject and the verb.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Two Kettles on the Same Staircase

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-kettles-on-the-same-staircase/

I brought empty boxes, packing tape, and an electric kettle. Denis said his landlord had suddenly thrown him out, and I had a spare kettle and too little suspicion. We had been seeing each other for four months. I did not know his flat because he claimed to share it with an unbearable cousin. When your love for someone is new enough, unbearable seems a perfectly reasonable description of a person you have never met.

On the fourth floor, a woman met me with another kettle. Her hair was wet and a white mark from the wall stained her sleeve. She asked whether I was there to transport things. I said I was the girlfriend. For several moments she looked at my boxes, as though the answer might be printed on their sides. Then she said, 'Apparently I'm the landlord.'

Denis appeared carrying a lamp. I saw the precise moment when he realised he did not have enough free hands for this situation. The woman's name was Melisa. They had lived together for six years, and last night she had told him to leave after he admitted there was someone else. He had not told her the truth about how long we had been together. For her it was two confused weeks. For me he had been single since last winter.

I put the kettle on a step. Denis began saying their relationship had not been real for a long time, that he had not known how to finish it, that things were different with me. Melisa sat on my largest box. The cardboard creaked beneath her. Entirely inappropriately, the sound almost made me laugh. I asked whether she wanted a chair. She said she wanted us to stop carrying his belongings.

So we did. He put the lamp down himself. There was no shared embrace or friendship formed against him. Melisa was hurt by my presence too, although I had not known. I felt like a guest whose host had neglected to

mention the house was burning. We exchanged numbers only so we could check any further stories. Denis complained that we were turning him into an enemy. Neither of us answered.

I took my kettle and two boxes home. I left the others in the hallway, empty. A few days later Melisa messaged that he had taken everything. I wrote that I was glad she no longer had to wait. Then I deleted an unfinished sentence about us. There was no us. There were two women who had stopped helping the same man settle comfortably into his life that morning.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Cake That Fed an Entire Floor

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-cake-that-fed-an-entire-floor/

Nedžada baked orange cake on Fridays because early in their marriage Samir said he had never tasted anything like it. She remembered the sentence as praise. Twenty two years later she knew the recipe without weighing and bought orange peel even when she would rather end the week in bed with a book. Samir ate a thin slice, neatly wrapped the rest, and took it to work. He said it particularly suited morning coffee there, when nobody interrupted him.

One Friday he forgot the box. Nedžada had a free morning and brought it to his office. His colleagues welcomed her like a long awaited cook. One woman said Samir had saved their floor from bad biscuits for years, although he personally could not stand orange in desserts. The sentence was spoken so cheerfully that Nedžada needed several seconds to decide what expression belonged on her face. Then she put down the box and asked them nevertheless to save one piece for her husband, purely out of professional respect.

That evening Samir returned with an empty box and a smile he could not sustain. He admitted never liking the cake but loving how happy making it seemed to make her. Nedžada replied that for the past ten years she had mostly enjoyed the moment she removed it from the oven and washed the bowl. Both fell silent, then began calculating how many oranges had passed through the kitchen because of a sentence that had never been precise enough. Samir miscalculated, and she corrected him from habit.

It was not merely a funny story. Nedžada felt hurt that her time had been spent for years proving affection in a form it did not need. Samir said the truth had grown harder every year. She asked whether there was anything else he gave colleagues to avoid hurting her. He mentioned a scarf that scratched, then immediately regretted opening that subject too.

Nedžada told him to find something he genuinely liked for dinner while she read at least fifty pages without getting up.

The following Friday she baked nothing. Three worried messages arrived from the office floor, along with an offer to pool money for oranges. Nedžada sent the recipe. Samir bought ice cream in two flavors and checked which she truly wanted. Afterward they ate from separate bowls, laughing at a colleague who asked whether the oven should be heated before or after mixing. Nedžada did not answer immediately. The cake had finally gone where it was sincerely wanted, together with the work required to make it.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Refund for Someone Else's Account

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-refund-for-someone-elses-account/

They canceled the trip because of Milan's new work schedule. Milena was unhappy but accepted that the agency would refund most of the payment and they could travel later. For six weeks she asked for news. Milan said administration moved slowly. Meanwhile she postponed dental work she intended to fund with her share and repeatedly calculated how long she should wait before calling the agency again and appearing impatient.

She called on a Friday. The employee said the refund had been issued a month earlier to the account used for payment. Milan's account. Milena had previously transferred her contribution to him. When he came home she asked where the money was. He did not deny receiving it. He said he had paid for professional training because registration was closing and his new qualification would benefit them both. He intended to replace her share before it became a problem.

Milena studied his bag, from which a folder bearing the course logo protruded. She had supported him for months as he discussed changing jobs. She had not known support included his right to decide when her plans could wait. She said his desire to learn did not bother her. What bothered her was that every Monday he watched her postpone her own need, then convincingly claimed over dinner that the agency had not sent the money.

Milan offered to withdraw from training and seek reimbursement. Milena said she did not want to make that decision for him. She wanted her money by an agreed date and an end to the story in which her consent was unnecessary because his intentions were good enough. He made a real repayment plan from his earnings. He continued reduced training and postponed other expenses. She took no pleasure in his sacrifices. It mattered that they were finally his, rather than hers secretly assigned.

They did not immediately plan another journey. Milena first attended her scheduled dental appointment, while Milan prepared dinner that day without presenting it as redemption. Later they opened a new wish list and each wrote actual costs beside their wishes. When he suggested an excursion, Milena asked how much he could contribute now, without promised future wages. He gave a definite amount. They chose somewhere closer and bought separate tickets, then placed them together on the refrigerator. This time both knew what each ticket really cost.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Steering Wheel I Could Not Mention

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-steering-wheel-i-could-not-mention/

Mirjana told her husband she spent Saturdays at work organizing the old archives. In fact she was learning to drive. She was forty eight and had enough savings of her own for lessons, but lacked courage for another conversation in which Vjeko explained she was too absentminded for a steering wheel. For years he had driven everywhere and reminded her how much time it took. Whenever she suggested a change, he turned her idea into a joke before friends.

During the first lesson she could barely coordinate hands and feet. The instructor did not pretend everything went brilliantly, but turned no mistake into a character trait. Mirjana began progressing. At home she talked about old filing binders and felt uneasy about the lie. She did not think secrecy improved a marriage. For the first time she simply had somewhere an attempt did not require her husband's prior approval or assessment of how much patience it would cost him.

Vjeko discovered the truth when he saw her leaving a driving school car. He claimed he was angry not about her learning but about being lied to. Mirjana admitted the lie without claiming it therefore made her good. Then she asked what would have happened had she told him before her first lesson. He began explaining how dangerous roads were and how she panicked over simple things. She waited until he finished, then said she had just heard the answer to her question.

She did not offer to quit to prove honesty. She told him when her next lessons were and said she would no longer invent extra work assignments. Vjeko was cold for several days. Mirjana continued attending, spoke with a friend, and considered other decisions she had left to him to avoid ridicule. She took the test alone and failed the first

time. She returned home disappointed but did not hide the result. She did not want her independence to depend on pretending never to make mistakes.

The second time she passed. Vjeko congratulated her, then began preparing a speech about proper driving. Mirjana asked him to save it until she requested advice. That afternoon she drove to her aunt's with a cake on the back seat. She parked far from the entrance because it was easier there. When her aunt asked why she was glowing, she replied that she had come alone. She still did not know what her marriage would look like afterward, but for the first time she could go somewhere to think without asking for a ride.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Silence Someone Was Paying For

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-silence-someone-was-paying-for/

Nina told her former partner she wanted no more discussions about reconciliation. Several days later he messaged about a fear she had mentioned only to her friend Merima. He could not have guessed the same words. He also wrote that he knew she sometimes wanted to call after midnight, a sentence spoken through tears rather than an invitation to him. Nina stared at the screen until her tea became completely cold.

She called Merima and asked whether she had passed anything along. Her friend first said she had only wanted to calm things down. He was suffering, she added, and needed to understand Nina was not indifferent. Nina replied that sadness did not cancel her decision. Merima remained silent for a long time, then admitted he had paid some bills while she sought work. In return he requested occasional updates on Nina. Occasionally had become after almost every meeting.

"I didn't send him messages from your phone," Merima said. Nina replied that this was not the boundary they had agreed on. She had hidden nothing from her friend because she believed she could think aloud there, even when thoughts contradicted each other. Now every uncertain sentence traveled to the man she was trying to leave and returned as evidence that she did not know what she wanted. Money made it worse, but the betrayal had not begun only with the first payment.

Nina wrote to her ex asking him to stop seeking information through other people and saying her decision remained unchanged. She told Merima she wanted no contact for a while. She did not try persuading all their mutual friends to choose sides. She explained what happened to two people close to her and asked them not to repeat private conversations. In the following weeks she often paused midway through stories, suddenly unsure whether she had said too much. She regretted that one

person now made her doubt the space others sincerely offered.

Later Merima sent an apology without mentioning her debts. Nina read it but did not answer immediately. She returned to social life gradually, sometimes discussing important things, sometimes only lunch. One evening she wanted to call her ex and told a new friend. The woman asked whether she wanted to talk until the desire passed. Nina said yes. Her phone remained on the table, silent all evening, and nobody outside that room needed to know how much it meant.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

My Name for Someone Else's Night

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/my-name-for-someone-elses-night/

When Amela's husband brought flowers to thank me for taking her in after a difficult week, I first thought he had confused the date. Amela had not stayed with me since the previous winter. I told him I had not seen her on Friday. He stood in the doorway with a bouquet he no longer had anyone to give. He asked nothing else. He said goodbye politely, so politely that I felt his confusion all day like something left in the hallway.

Amela called half an hour later. She asked why I had not said I had forgotten. That was when I learned my name had served for three months as somewhere she could be while she was with another man. I did not know him. I had not even known her marriage was as bad as she now claimed. I knew I had just received a role in someone else's life without a single opportunity to accept or refuse it.

"You should have called me first," she said. I replied that I had not known there was an arrangement to check. Her voice contained more anger at my truth than regret about her lie. Twenty years of friendship suddenly became an argument that I owed her help, as though every shared illness, move, and birthday existed in an account book from which she could now collect silence.

I did not call her husband to tell him everything I had just heard. Nor did I promise to confirm untruths in future. I told Amela not to use me as an explanation and that, if anyone asked where she had been, I could say only what I knew. She cried. I stayed on the phone until she calmed down but withdrew no words. It was the most uncomfortable thing I had done for a friend, although I had not done what she requested.

We did not meet for months. I heard she had divorced but gathered no details through mutual acquaintances. One November day she messaged that she wanted coffee and did not expect everything to be as before. She

came alone, without an elaborate account of how everyone had misunderstood her. She said she regretted turning my name into shelter for something she herself had not wanted to step away from.

We sat for a long time. I promised neither the same trust nor withdrew her right to remain dear to me. When leaving she asked whether she could call again. I said yes. That evening I did not feel I had saved the friendship. I felt we had finally both come to the conversation under our own names.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Message Waiting for the Wrong Person

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-message-waiting-for-the-wrong-person/

The message arrived while Mladen queued in a shop: "I can still feel how you looked at me this morning." He had not received such a sentence from Mira for years. First he smiled, thinking she was trying to revive something both had neglected. Then he realized they had not seen each other that morning. She left before he woke. A second message came immediately: wrong conversation, a joke between colleagues. The cashier had to ask twice whether he wanted a receipt.

At home he prepared no trap. He put the groceries on the table and asked whom the message was intended for. Mira first spoke about overinterpretation, then about a close friendship. The man was a colleague she had messaged at night for months. She claimed nothing physical had happened. Mladen did not know whether that was true, but did not want to reduce the conversation to one boundary whose remaining uncrossed was supposed to erase everything else.

"You told me you were too tired to talk," he said. "I didn't know you had whole evenings somewhere else." Mira sat down, for once without a phone in her hand. With the colleague she shared fears, plans, and anger at the marriage, leaving Mladen only information about shopping and responsibilities. Their relationship had indeed become impoverished. But she had secretly taken that absence to another man, allowing him to grow close while her husband did not even know something was being built.

Mladen stayed with a friend for several days. He did not request every message to spend hours comparing each word with what she had told him. He requested time and a clear answer about whether Mira wanted to remain married at all. She stopped private messaging with the colleague and proposed conversations with professional help. Mladen did not

promise that would be enough. He agreed to the first meeting, then they decided about each subsequent one, sometimes tired before it even began.

Months later they sat on the balcony after a particularly difficult evening. Mira said she missed ease. Mladen replied that he missed it too but did not want to buy it through silence. They did not embrace like people in a film. They cleared away the glasses together and went to bed. The next day she messaged asking whether he could come home earlier because she wanted to talk. He read it twice before answering. He knew whom it was intended for. They had not yet resolved the rest.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Buyer Behind a Familiar Smile

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-buyer-behind-a-familiar-smile/

After selling her first large painting, Sanela walked around the apartment in her shoes all morning because she could not settle enough to remove them. The buyer was supposedly a collector who liked young artists, although at forty three she did not describe herself that way. Her husband Armin brought cake and said he had always known someone would recognize her. For the first time Sanela seriously considered reducing her office hours to paint more.

A month later they visited Armin's colleague in his new apartment. Her painting stood in the hallway, still wrapped against the wall. The colleague said he would bring it to their place as soon as he found a suitable vehicle. Sanela looked at her husband. He tried explaining that arrangements had been confused, but the colleague had already fallen silent in a way that left little room. Armin had bought it. His friend had merely appeared as an interested stranger and offered a price the two had chosen beforehand.

On the way back Sanela said she wanted to know where the money came from. It was his personal savings, which removed one concern but not the main one. Armin did not understand why the gift hurt. He wanted to raise her confidence. She explained that she had already negotiated fewer working hours, believing a real buyer existed beyond their circle. Support pretending to be a market had given her incorrect information about a costly decision rather than courage.

Armin offered to hide the painting and forget it. Sanela did not want that. She brought it home, leaned it in her work corner, and for several days could not look at colors she had loved. She paused discussions of reduced hours until she made a more realistic plan. She continued attending her workshop, angry and embarrassed that she had wanted success so badly. The instructor said one false sale did not make the painting false too, so

Sanela stayed an extra hour after class to complete a new drawing.

They attended the next exhibition together. Armin neither bought nor arranged anything. When nobody asked about prices on the first evening, he stood beside her and tolerated disappointment without secretly trying to repair it. Sanela later took the painting home and kept working. For her birthday he gave her quality brushes, precisely the ones she requested. He did not claim to know what her career would become. He said he wanted to see what she made, and this time his words required no unknown buyer to be enough.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Gift That Returned Every Sunday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-gift-that-returned-every-sunday/

Dino brought Tarik the same sour cherry juice every Sunday, as though closeness could be confirmed through loyalty to a label. They had been together a year. Tarik knew his schedule, favorite breakfast, and how he fell asleep before films ended. He knew almost nobody in Dino's life. Dino said he was private and his friends mostly lived far away. Tarik did not want to demand public posts as proof of love, so he accepted the explanation.

At a concert he happened to meet Dino's friend Sanja. When he gave his name, she recognized him as the man Dino helped with a business plan on Sundays. She asked whether his company was finally doing better. Tarik had no company. He worked as a translator at an agency and had never asked Dino for business help. In the noise before the concert, he simply said there had been a misunderstanding and went to buy water he did not want.

The next day Dino brought juice. Tarik did not open it. He asked why every Sunday had received an invented purpose. Dino admitted most friends did not know they were together. Some knew he loved men, others did not, and he feared losing the tidy image of his life. Tarik did not demand that he explain his identity to everyone before he was ready. He asked Dino not to lie to him about his place in it, or turn him into a project used to excuse lateness.

They talked for a long time. Dino said he would immediately message everyone, desperate to prevent a breakup. Tarik refused such a performance. He did not want to become the reason for an announcement Dino might later experience as coercion. They needed to consider separately what they could truly offer. Dino left, and the bottle remained unopened. Tarik spent the afternoon with his sister, speaking less than usual, grateful that there he needed to explain neither his name

nor his right to be sad.

A month later Dino invited him for coffee with Sanja and clearly told her who Tarik was. That did not resolve everything, and Tarik did not promise the relationship would continue. Nevertheless, he came. They discussed the concert, work, and a film neither had managed to finish. When leaving, Dino did not call him a colleague. Tarik felt both warmth and caution. He still did not know whether he would stay, but for the first time he could decide about a relationship that did not change its name before him whenever someone else entered the room.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Café That Was No Coincidence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-cafe-that-was-no-coincidence/

The first time Filip appeared outside her office, Lana thought him romantic. The second time he brought coffee to the very park where she sat reading. The third time he entered a café she had never mentioned, smiling like a man constantly favored by coincidence. They had been together eight months. Lana told friends he was attentive while beginning to feel a strange unease whenever she sat anywhere alone.

During an outing they had enabled location sharing to find each other more easily when the group took different paths. Lana forgot it remained active. Filip did not. When she asked how he knew about the café, he said he had been passing. The street was not on his route, so she asked again. Then he admitted sometimes checking her whereabouts to surprise her. He expected a smile for his effort. She closed her book and remained silent.

The problem was not merely that he had come that day. It was that he lied about the meetings being accidental and turned information intended for one outing into a view of her daily life. Filip replied that she had nothing to hide if everything was fine. Lana said the right to an afternoon without an audience did not depend on having a secret. It was not a sentence she had previously needed to say to a man with whom she planned vacations and kept toothbrushes in the same bathroom.

She switched off sharing and said she wanted several days without meeting. Filip sent messages about only wanting to be close. He did not mention his lie. Lana spoke with a friend and arranged to exchange belongings in a public place. She did not want to wait for her unease to become a larger event before she was allowed to take it seriously. Filip was offended at the meeting, especially when she refused his offer to drive her home. She returned his key and left by tram herself.

Several weeks later she sat in the same café again. When the door opened she instinctively raised her head, then continued reading. She did not immediately feel completely calm. Still, she stayed until finishing the chapter, ordered another coffee, and explained to nobody why she had changed her afternoon plan. That evening she told a friend by message that her day had been good. She shared as much as she wanted with someone she trusted and discovered how much she had missed that simple possibility of choice.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Sea That Went into Someone Else's Account

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-sea-that-went-into-someone-elses-account/

Daria and Milen had not been to the sea for six years. They set money aside from small refunds and work done after their regular shifts. In February Milen bought secondhand flippers and kept them behind the wardrobe as proof that this time it would really happen. In April Daria lent her brother almost the entire amount. He said he needed it briefly, just until payment came for a large job. She did not tell her husband because she believed it would be returned before they booked.

In June Milen asked them to choose accommodation. Daria rejected every suggestion for a different reason: the high price, a distant beach, stairs. He thought she no longer wanted to travel with him. That evening he admitted his fear while washing dishes. Daria stood beside the window and realized her secret was already making him misinterpret their marriage while she allowed him to look for the problem in himself.

She told him where the money was. Milen turned off the tap but did not answer immediately. Then he asked how often she had rejected his proposal to help his mother with new windows because they needed to save. Daria could not remember the exact number. That was worse than remembering. Her brother's urgent question had received an immediate answer, while their shared wishes had spent months proving they deserved expenditure and extra work.

Her brother could not repay them. The job remained unpaid, and he had spent part of the loan on other things. In front of Milen, Daria spoke to him, clearly said she had lent shared money without agreement, and requested a realistic repayment plan. She did not shift responsibility to her brother. Milen refused to keep living according to her assumption that he could always somehow wait. They agreed not to give larger

amounts without discussing them, even to their closest relatives.

They did not go to the sea that summer. They spent several days at a nearby lake, angry that it was not the trip they had planned but still able to enjoy the water. Daria did not call the modest vacation proof that they needed nothing more. Milen brought his flippers and actually used them once. When her brother began repaying the money, they put it in the same place, this time both knowing about every payment. The next seaside trip did not become a promise that everything was forgiven. It became a plan nobody could secretly move into someone else's life again.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Winnings That Did Not Cover the Truth

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-winnings-that-did-not-cover-the-truth/

Luka came home with flowers and money for a new refrigerator. He said he had won on sports betting, almost casually, as though finding a banknote in the street. His wife Jelena felt happy before thinking. For months the old refrigerator had hummed loudly enough to be heard from the bedroom at night. Luka opened a drink they saved for guests and began describing models he had already examined, each with more room than they actually needed.

Then his friend called to congratulate him and ask whether he had finally recovered at least part of what he had lost. The phone was on speaker. Luka muted it, but Jelena had already put down her glass. She asked how much part meant. He said the friend exaggerated. She repeated the question, this time without trying to preserve the good mood. Slowly he admitted betting for months and that the winnings covered less than half what he had spent from money reserved for other obligations.

Jelena thought of all the small expenses they had argued over. He calculated what she spent on haircuts while calling his own stakes little things he would recover when the right moment came. "I brought you money, not debt," he said. She replied that he had brought only the end of a story, expecting it to keep her from asking about the beginning. The new refrigerator suddenly looked like an object meant to close the door on questions that spoiled his celebration.

They bought nothing that evening. They reviewed their joint finances and agreed to protect money for essentials. Luka also had to admit borrowing from his friend, small in his words but large enough to change the next two months. Jelena did not take on the role of someone inspecting his phone daily. She said he needed to seek professional support for the

behavior he had hidden and take concrete steps toward rebuilding trust, while she would decide whether she could remain in that process.

They replaced the refrigerator much later with a modest model paid for from genuinely available money. By then Luka had spent several months speaking with a counselor and regularly showing his obligations without waiting to be asked. Jelena did not call every orderly month a victory. She wanted an ordinary life that did not depend on unexpected winnings. When they switched on the new appliance, the kitchen became quieter. They sat without a celebratory drink, and Luka asked how much to reserve for the next bill. This time he waited for the answer before promising anything.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Chorus He Knew by Heart

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-chorus-he-knew-by-heart/

For twenty years Faris said he could not dance. At weddings he held Azra's bag, brought water, and waited for the music to stop. Eventually she stopped suggesting lessons. At their cousin's wedding, however, a guest offered him her hand and he rose before she finished her first word. He turned her smoothly without looking at his feet. Azra remained seated with the bag she was holding herself this time.

It did not hurt that he danced. What hurt was the ease, the way the woman knew where he would step and adjusted his collar afterward. Faris returned to their table sweating and said the music had carried him away. Azra asked how he knew the guest. He replied that she was a friend of the organizer. He did not say her name, although she had just called him a nickname he never used around their friends.

At home Azra asked when he had learned to dance. He said he had taken a few classes for exercise. Then, after a long conversation, he admitted an affair that had begun there. There was no need to inspect his phone. He described enough for her to understand how long Thursdays had carried two meanings. For her they were his billiards evenings; for him, evenings when he was not the man presented as someone who disliked music.

He tried saying the other woman made him feel younger. Azra replied that she too had aged during the same years, only without a secret schedule. She requested neither the course's name nor photographs. She asked him to leave the bedroom and give her peace until morning. The next day they agreed on a temporary separation. They did not offer the family a wedding story to repeat. Azra told one friend enough not to face everything alone, and told the others only that they were currently living apart.

Two months later she enrolled in beginner dance lessons. Her first partner was a nervous man who stepped on her shoe three times and sincerely apologized each time. She saw neither a new romance nor Faris's replacement in him. She simply wanted to learn a step she had postponed. When the music began again, she raised her head. She did not know the chorus by heart, but it did not matter. She no longer waited for someone else's wishes to approve movement belonging to her body and her evening.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Year That Never Arrived

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-year-that-never-arrived/

Mirna held her sister's new coffee machine while Boris explained to his brother in law that he had never wanted children. He said it casually, like an established fact. Mirna nearly dropped the lid. For five years she had heard that they needed a little more stability: first his permanent job, then a larger apartment, then the final car payment. She had not believed a child was promised. She believed they were having an honest conversation about a possibility they both still wanted.

She did not speak immediately in the car. Boris repeated that he had expressed himself badly. She asked what the precise version would sound like. They drove several streets in silence, then he parked. He said he did not want to be a father and had known that for a long time. He feared she would leave if she heard a final answer. So he had participated in conversations about names, calculations of apartment space, and the word later, which she understood as time and he as an escape.

Mirna wanted to shout that he had stolen years, but did not say a sentence she would struggle to explain precisely afterward. She knew nobody could promise the future or guarantee parenthood. He could, however, tell the truth about his own wishes. She said his answer was not wrong. What was wrong was allowing her to make decisions using information he knew was false. Boris cried with both hands on the steering wheel of the parked car.

Over the following weeks they tried to talk without persuasion. Mirna did not want a child with someone who would agree only to keep her, and Boris did not want to promise a change he did not feel. They loved the same films, cooked together, and still laughed at the same foolish things. That made separation slower, not less necessary. Friends offered easy conclusions about who would change their mind. Both stopped arguing with people who turned someone else's life into a bet.

When Mirna moved, she left the shelf they had assembled together because her new room had no space. Boris helped carry the last box and did not ask her to stay another year. She did not know whether she would ever become a mother and did not try to replace that uncertainty with a hurried new relationship. Above her desk she hung a calendar. For the first time in a long while, she did not mark someone else's promise for next summer. She entered her own vacation and called her sister to arrange where they would travel together.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Evening I Called a Seminar

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-evening-i-called-a-seminar/

When I said the seminar had run late, my husband asked whether I had eaten. I now remember that question more clearly than the entire evening with another man. I said yes, although I was hungry. Emir left a portion of soup in the refrigerator because he knew me better than I wanted then. I was forty, had a job that exhausted me, and habitually used those two facts to explain every decision I made.

I had been seeing Nenad for two months. We met at a real seminar, and then I began using the word seminar for everything I did not want to name. He said I was different with him. I failed to notice how easy difference was without laundry, bills, or deciding who would take my mother to an appointment. Emir and I were distant, but I had never clearly told him how unhappy I was.

I did not confess because of sudden enlightenment. Emir asked why my colleague said the program ended at four. I could have continued lying. Instead I sat on a hallway step and told him what I had done. He remained standing with a bag of groceries. I remember parsley protruding from it, entirely green and inappropriately ordinary.

At first I spoke too much. I explained loneliness, exhaustion, our silence. Emir interrupted by asking whether I had told him any of that before telling Nenad. The answer was no. That did not mean our marriage had been good. It meant I had replaced his opportunity to participate in a decision with my own secret, and now expected him to understand the whole background before feeling hurt.

I ended things with Nenad without asking him to comfort me. I moved out temporarily. Emir declined a joint conversation with a counselor, and I accepted that refusal was not a punishment I should overcome through persistence. We arranged only matters concerning the apartment and

responsibilities. Sometimes a message would be kind, and I immediately turned it into hope. I was learning to let kindness remain only that.

After several months he invited me to talk. He said he wanted a divorce. I did not list everything I had changed in the meantime as a price he was required to recognize. We signed what was needed and separated our books. The soup pot remained with him because he had bought it with his first wages. I took two bowls.

Recently I made soup in my small apartment. The phone rang, and a friend asked whether I could come for dinner. I said I was tired and wanted to remain alone that evening. An ordinary truth, without a better excuse. It did not restore my marriage or make me a brave person. It simply left another human being the opportunity to know where I was and believe me.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Place I Stopped Running

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-place-i-stopped-running/

Maja did not finish the race. She sat on a bench after the first third of the course, removed her number, and bought a banana in a nearby shop. Later she went to the finish to meet a friend, and a volunteer mistakenly handed her a medal. She accepted it before thinking of an explanation. A photograph with the finish arch behind her looked like success. At home her partner Almir hugged her so proudly that she could not say what she had taken a deep breath to explain before entering.

For weeks people mentioned her persistence. Her father showed visitors the photograph, colleagues asked about training, and Almir bought her a new running shirt. Maja answered briefly, each time promising herself she would correct the story when they were alone. But they were always tired or hungry, and she increasingly resembled someone praised only because she did not speak enough. She kept the medal in a drawer beneath electricity bills.

For their anniversary, Almir suggested traveling to another race. He wanted to run a shorter distance and meet her at the finish. Maja said she could not because her knee hurt. He offered to go just as spectators. Then she began crying, angry at her inability to find another polite escape. She confessed everything, including the banana, the bench, and the medal she had not earned. She expected him to laugh. He did not. He asked why she had been unable to tell him she had stopped.

The answer was not simple. For months she had worked overtime and cared for her mother, while the race had become the only thing supposedly done for herself. She did not want that too to become evidence of failure. Almir said the lie hurt him, but he also regretted celebrating endurance so much that he had not asked how she felt. They did not turn the conversation into shared blame. She had to correct her words, and he had to learn to ask different questions.

Maja told family and friends she had not finished the race. Some wondered why she had lied at all; her father simply removed the photograph from the refrigerator and asked whether she wanted tea. She returned the medal to the organizers with a brief explanation. For their anniversary they visited another city without entering any competition. They walked a long way, then sat on a bench because Maja wanted to sit. Almir bought her a banana. This time she laughed before eating, without needing to show anyone a finish line afterward.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Birthday She Celebrated Twice

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-birthday-she-celebrated-twice/

Jasmin reserved a small restaurant for Selma's birthday, a place she herself had mentioned several times. When they entered, the waiter welcomed her back and asked whether her friends had got home after Saturday's party. Selma answered too quickly that they had. Jasmin looked at her smile, suddenly holding on only one side of her face. On Saturday she had said she was taking inventory at work and returned shortly after midnight.

She sat opposite him and opened the menu like a screen. She said her colleagues had spontaneously arranged an outing. The waiter brought water and mentioned how well they had hidden the cake she ordered a week earlier. Selma asked him for a few minutes. Jasmin did not raise his voice. He asked why she had needed to lie if she wanted a celebration without him. Four years of marriage already included enough separate evenings for that not to be a problem.

She studied her glass for a long time. She had met the new friends at a language course. They were successful, traveled, and discussed expensive neighborhoods. Selma had told them she was single and came from an entirely different family. Jasmin, a delivery driver she loved when nobody was watching, did not fit that story. There was no other man. There was another life in which nobody associated her with an apartment above a tire shop or parents who saved every mark.

Jasmin requested the bill for their drinks. Selma said there was no need for a dramatic exit. He replied that he was trying to leave without a performance, since apparently they had been playing one for months. They did not celebrate at home. The cake he had bought remained in the refrigerator until the next day, when he took it to colleagues. He did not explain why. He did not want to trade her humiliation for relief from his own, even among people who would immediately support him.

Selma told her friends she was married and admitted the other untruths. Some withdrew; one asked why she thought she had to invent her parents for them to study a language together. Jasmin did not attend the next gathering merely to validate her correction. He needed time that public introductions could not shorten. A month later, while they cleaned the balcony together, Selma asked whether he wanted dinner at that restaurant. He said today he wanted a sandwich at home. She sat beside him on the floor, without trying to make the scene prettier than it was.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Bet on the First Invitation

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-bet-on-the-first-invitation/

Maja met Aleksandar as a gallery was closing. He asked for her number while she waited for her coat, awkwardly and sincerely enough for her to like him. Seven months later they sat with his friends in a restaurant when one toasted the best bet Aleksandar had ever won. Maja raised her glass, not yet understanding that she was the noun everyone else was trying to avoid. The laughter stopped before she asked anything.

Outside, Aleksandar explained that his friends had teased him that he would never gather the courage to approach the woman in the red coat. They had wagered dinner. Maja said the initial encouragement was not itself what hurt. She asked how he had reported back afterward and how often their meeting had been retold as a successfully completed challenge. Aleksandar answered too quickly that she should not give weight to male foolishness, as though the label could diminish what had just happened in front of her.

The next day he brought flowers and said he had truly fallen in love. Maja believed he had fallen in love. She did not know whether he understood that this erased none of the pleasure with which he had initially presented her attention as a trophy. She said she needed time. He asked whether she would discard seven months over one dinner. She replied that she did not want him using seven months to pressure her into immediately becoming someone whom nothing bothered.

Aleksandar spoke with his friends without her. He did not ask everyone to send matching apologies. He said the story would no longer be repeated, then admitted how much he himself had enjoyed their approval. Later he told Maja only his own responsibility, without offering other people's messages as proof. They met in a park. For the first time he did not try ending the discussion with a statement about how much he loved her. He listened to what that restaurant table had changed in her

memory of their beginning.

They did not immediately resume the relationship. For several weeks Maja went out alone, restoring the red coat's ordinary meaning as clothing that kept her warm. When she called again, they arranged one coffee without promises. Aleksandar arrived early and waited with no gift. He asked whether he could sit opposite her, and she said yes. At the evening's end each paid separately. Nobody owed anyone a victory, which finally allowed the conversation to begin again.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Guests Who Knew Our Schedule

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-guests-who-knew-our-schedule/

The outing was canceled because the bus broke down, so Iris returned home three hours after leaving. Unfamiliar people sat in her living room drinking tea from cups she had received for an anniversary. The woman stood; the man opened a booking confirmation on his phone. Both thought Iris was the cleaner. On the screen she recognized her sofa, the plant beside the window, and a photograph of the shelf from which her family pictures had been removed.

She called her partner, Alen. He said he was coming and asked her not to frighten the guests. Iris remained in the hallway because she did not know where she could sit in her own apartment. She explained to the guests that there was a misunderstanding and offered water. They were not responsible for having received a key. The woman quietly asked whether they would have to find another place halfway through the evening. Iris said Alen would resolve that as soon as he arrived.

Alen booked them a hotel and refunded their payment. Only after they left did he admit renting the apartment for four months, mostly on weekends when she traveled with her hiking group. He supposedly stayed with a friend to work on a project. He would return the photographs to the shelf before she came home. He spent the money on card debt Iris knew nothing about. He said their shared budget had not suffered and he always left the apartment clean.

Iris looked at her bedroom. The cleanliness of the sheets did not concern her as much as the fact that every departure had already become his opportunity. She asked how many people had access, where the spare keys were, and whether a copy of her identity document had been used. Alen answered while looking at the floor. Together they closed the listing, canceled the remaining bookings through the platform, and informed the landlord, because neither of them owned the apartment.

The landlord required a new lock and a clear agreement about continuing the tenancy. Iris decided to move. A friend offered a room while she found somewhere else, and Alen promised to restore everything to how it had been. She could not explain that the past now looked different: his carefully washed cups, sudden money for dinner, strange questions about when she would return. All were small things she had once called concern, now carrying another meaning.

On her first evening in the new apartment, she did not unpack every box. She took out only two cups and the family photographs. She arranged them awkwardly on the shelf, without considering how they would look in anyone's advertisement. When she went hiking the following weekend, she locked the door and put her keys in an inside pocket. She returned tired, in muddy shoes. The same silence she had left greeted her, for once reliable enough for her to sleep peacefully inside it.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Ring in the Button Box

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-ring-in-the-button-box/

Lana was looking for a black button for the jacket she wanted to wear to a job interview. In Denis's sewing box, beneath a spool of white thread, lay a ring. She was not surprised that he had one: they had discussed sharing an apartment for six months. What surprised her was the card bearing another woman's name and the previous Saturday's date. That evening Denis had supposedly driven his mother to relatives and sent Lana a photograph of rain through the car window.

She returned the box to the table and went to the interview. She discussed experience, deadlines, and how she resolved misunderstandings within a team. Only on the bus afterward did she begin shaking. She called Denis and asked him to meet at her place. He brought a spare button from a shop because he had seen her morning message. That small sign of consideration made the question harder but did not remove it. Lana placed the card between their cups.

He said he was keeping the ring for a friend. She asked why the receipt showed his address and why the card bore his recognizable handwriting. Then he admitted proposing the previous Saturday to Mirna, a woman he had dated before meeting Lana. Their relationship had never entirely ended. Both families expected a wedding, he said, as though their expectations had formed his hand and placed the ring on another woman's finger.

Lana did not try to prove he loved her more. She asked him to collect the belongings he kept at her place. When he said he had nowhere to go now, she reminded him of the apartment he had described as his. That apartment was not entirely his either: he shared it with Mirna. He began crying. Lana offered a tissue and maintained her request, surprised that compassion could exist in the same room as a clear decision.

She contacted Mirna once, briefly, giving her own name and offering to explain what she had learned if Mirna wanted. The reply came the next day. They sat in a café and compared dates, without comparing gifts or intimate details. Mirna removed the ring and put it in her bag. Lana did not ask what she would do. When they left, each paid for her own coffee. Both had enough other people's bills behind them for that small independence to matter.

She got the job a week later. On her first day she wore the jacket with a button she had found herself among old coats. It differed slightly from the others, visible only on close inspection. In the elevator she straightened her sleeve and thought how long she had waited for Denis to open the next part of her life. The doors opened on the right floor. She stepped out before they began closing again.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Wedding Dress with Someone Else's Hem

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-wedding-dress-with-someone-elses-hem/

Naida knew every seam of her mother's wedding dress because, as a girl, she used to take it from the wardrobe when she was alone. That was why she immediately noticed the different hem at the final fitting. The dressmaker said it had arrived that way, with a new lining and a zipper inconsistent with the fabric's age. Naida's sister, Belma, looked out the window. She insisted memory was unreliable and clothes often behaved differently after dry cleaning.

Naida asked the dressmaker to leave them for a few minutes. She raised the hem and pointed to where their mother had once embroidered a tiny letter by hand. The letter was missing. Belma began crying before Naida spoke again. She had sold the original to a vintage clothing dealer to settle unpaid rent. She bought a similar dress and paid for alterations. She thought nobody would notice the difference after so many years in a dark wardrobe.

Naida called her fiancé, Kenan, asking him to collect her. He told her not to be too harsh with Belma. The sentence came too quickly. He had known for two weeks and even contributed to the alterations, convinced he was preserving peace before the wedding. Naida sat on a backless chair. Suddenly the problem was not just a missing dress, but the two people closest to her jointly deciding how much truth she could bear and what she should feel.

Belma supplied the dealer's address. The dress had not yet been sold, but Naida did not retrieve it that day. She asked her sister to discuss its return herself and tell her the actual cost. She spent the evening with Kenan at the kitchen table. He asked whether she wanted to cancel the wedding. She replied that first she wanted to know whether she would be

an equal participant in her own life or someone later shown neatly repaired consequences.

They postponed the wedding for two months, making uncomfortable calls and losing the flower deposit. Belma recovered the dress and repaid the debt for its return without Naida's money. Kenan stopped explaining his good intentions and began answering specific questions. When they finally arranged another fitting, Naida decided to wear a simple new suit. She carefully stored her mother's dress with the letter visible at its hem. She did not need to fit inside it to preserve the memory, or suppress her hurt to preserve the possibility of marriage.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Return Ticket for One

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-return-ticket-for-one/

Dario bought two tickets for the night train because Sanja said she loved mornings in cities she had never visited. Two days before departure she said she had to help her former husband with their sick dog. Dario knew the dog and did not object. He suggested postponing their departure. Sanja replied that he should go anyway; he needed the rest more than she did, and wasting both tickets would be a shame.

That evening her former husband called. He wanted to check whether Sanja was with Dario, because she had not answered him all day. The dog was healthy and currently asleep on his feet. The conversation briefly stopped. Both men understood there was a space between what they had been told, but neither wanted to guess where Sanja was. Dario asked him simply to tell her to call when she could.

Sanja returned around ten with a shopping bag and a story about a long line. Dario placed the two tickets on the table. He did not mention the call until she repeated that she had to visit the dog tomorrow. Then he explained the conversation. She sat down, leaving frozen peas on the edge of the sink. She admitted that she occasionally traveled with her former husband and tried to rebuild their relationship, but this time she had not told him the whole truth either.

She had been alone in a hotel room, trying to decide. Dario believed she had been alone that evening. He could no longer believe that their two years of living together had meant the same agreement to both of them. Sanja said she had never promised to stop feeling anything for her ex. Dario replied that he had not demanded control of her feelings. He wanted to know he was living inside someone's unfinished decision before handing over his time.

The next day he exchanged the tickets for a later date and separate journeys, as far as the conditions allowed. They agreed to live apart temporarily. Sanja took some belongings and asked whether he would wait. He said neither forever nor never. He said he would not organize his life around her return. The sentence felt unfamiliar in his mouth, but bearable. They threw away the peas because they had remained warm all night.

A month later, Dario boarded the train after all. In the next seat was a woman who immediately opened a book, which meant he did not have to tell his story. In the morning he stepped into an unfamiliar city and spent a long time choosing where to have breakfast. Nobody was waiting for him. For the first time, that fact did not sound like punishment. He sat beside a window and ordered a dish Sanja disliked, carefully pronouncing its awkward foreign name.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Voice That Opened the Door

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-voice-that-opened-the-door/

The technician asked Jasna to press the button on the new intercom. A woman's voice came from the speaker: "Leave the package with the neighbor, we're coming down." Jasna looked up. The voice was not hers, and she shared the apartment only with her husband. The technician explained that the device stored the latest automatic message someone had recorded through the app. Then he fell silent, suddenly absorbed in a small screw that refused to fit its socket.

Jasna paid the bill and waited for him to leave. She entered the bedroom, opened the wardrobe, and withdrew her hand from a hanger. She did not want to search for someone else's hair among her dresses. She called Faruk and played him the recording. He said it was probably left over from when tenants had lived there. The intercom had been installed the previous week. She delivered that sentence calmly, almost as if correcting a date on a form.

He came home before his shift ended. He brought flowers from a gas station, still wrapped in paper showing the price. Jasna left them on the hallway bench. Faruk admitted an affair with a colleague who visited while Jasna stayed with her mother. He explained that their marriage had not been working for a long time. Jasna did not dispute their distance. She asked why he had promised a shared vacation every Sunday if he had already made an entirely different decision.

He had no answer that did not sound like wanting to keep both possibilities. He tried discussing his colleague, her loneliness and difficult divorce. Jasna stopped him. She did not want another person's biography as justification for her own humiliation. She asked him to move temporarily to his brother's while they arranged the next steps. When he asked whether he could keep a key because of the mail, she said she would forward it properly to his new address.

In the following days, acquaintances offered advice she had not requested. Some said everyone made mistakes; others insisted she immediately throw away all his belongings. Jasna invited a friend to cook lunch together. They rearranged just one shelf and spent the remaining time talking about work. That ordinary afternoon restored more strength than everyone else's grand conclusions. Faruk's boxes remained stacked beside the door until the agreed collection.

The technician returned to check the sound. He showed her how to erase the old message and change access to the app. Jasna recorded her own name without explaining to whom the apartment no longer belonged. When her friend rang later, she answered immediately. For a long time she had thought a home was preserved by keeping enough things unspoken inside it. Now she opened a window, placed two bowls on the table, and let a familiar voice come in.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Two Addresses for the Same Lunch

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-addresses-for-the-same-lunch/

Lejla was drawing up the delivery schedule when she spotted her husband's number among the customers. Two lunches, three times a week, to an address she did not know. His company supposedly had a canteen. First she thought of another woman, then grew angry with herself for already imagining her tablecloth. She did not send a driver to investigate. She called Adnan and asked whether she could deliver his order herself, since she was passing nearby.

He told her to cancel it; the meeting had been moved. Lejla parked outside the building but remained in the car. She sent a message saying she was waiting outside the entrance for a conversation. Ten minutes later he appeared in the shirt she had ironed that morning. He carried a plastic container with half of yesterday's lunch. He sat beside her and admitted he saved the second meal for the following day, because an order for two disguised the address better.

He had lost his job five months earlier. He rented a room in a shared office, left punctually every morning, and sent applications. At first he thought he would secure another contract before she noticed. Then he began spending the savings intended to replace the delivery vehicle. He said the company was late paying wages. Because of that, Lejla took extra shifts while he described invented meetings every evening.

The office contained an unwatered plant, an old laptop, and a suit on a hanger. Lejla felt pity, then feared it would swallow her anger. She asked how much money remained. Adnan showed her the account balance, for once without rounding it off. She did not ask why he had failed to be brave. She said she had a right to know what life she woke into each morning and why her own plans were moving farther away.

He ended the rental and messaged his sister to say he needed help finding work. Lejla declined his suggestion that he immediately join her business. She did not want to become both his wife and the supervisor of his return to other people. They agreed to review their shared expenses and speak with a counselor. For several evenings they ate separately, not because they lacked food, but because they needed more space than the table provided.

When he found temporary work in a warehouse, Adnan brought home a real contract with lower pay than before. Lejla read it and asked when he started. The next day, she entered a single lunch in the delivery schedule, at the new address. She did not draw a heart on the lid as she once had. She wrote his name. For now, she wanted everything she sent to reach the man who really was where he said he would be.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Signature Beneath the Blue Tiles

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-signature-beneath-the-blue-tiles/

Emina photographed the new kitchen to show her sister the blue tiles. Reflected in the window was an open folder on the table. She enlarged the picture to inspect a mark on the glass and recognized her name beneath an amount they had never agreed on. The kitchen was supposed to cost what they had saved by selling their old car. The document claimed she had agreed to repay almost as much again over the next two years.

She waited for Damir without switching on the light above the counter that he had shown her so proudly. His first question was whether something had burned out. When he saw the contract, he sat on the still wrapped bar stool. He said he had wanted everything finished before she returned from her seminar. The contractor needed an immediate decision, and the more expensive tiles were the last ones available in that color.

Emina ran her finger over the signature. Her surname contained a loop she never made. Damir had practiced it on a shopping receipt; she found it beneath the contract. That small scrap hurt her more than the price. There had not been a single hasty decision but time spent sitting at their table, trying to look enough like her. She asked how many attempts he had thrown away.

He replied that she was behaving as though a stranger had stolen something from her. Emina stood and opened the window because she could not catch her breath. Precisely because he was not a stranger, she had never locked away her documents. The next day she took the agreement to the contractor and clearly disputed the signature. Damir arrived later, his ears red. In front of the contractor, he admitted what he had done and asked for the obligation to be settled with him alone.

The contractor stopped the final order and referred the payment question to his office. Emina offered no answer and made no promise to contribute. She stayed with her sister for several days. Damir sent messages about the kitchen, then stopped when he understood she was not waiting for furniture updates. He sent a photograph of the agreed cancellation of the disputed contract and wrote that he understood why she still did not want to talk.

She returned for clothes one Sunday. His actual repayment plan lay on the table, without her name. They sat in the unfinished kitchen and talked for the first time about his fear of not earning enough. Emina listened, but she did not stay overnight. She still liked the blue tiles. It mattered to discover that she could love the color and refuse a price someone else had decided for her.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Language I Kept Secret

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-language-i-kept-secret/

I began learning Swedish because of his mother. Throughout our conversations she would patiently wait for Daniel to translate, then laugh several moments too late. I wanted to tell her something funny myself one day. I did not mention the lessons to Daniel. I looked forward to the imagined moment when, between two ordinary sentences, I would speak and watch both of them lose their words.

After eight months I still could not tell a good joke, but I understood far more than they knew. In their kitchen I heard that the soup was too salty, the neighbor's dog had escaped again, and Daniel feared the dentist more than he admitted. I felt comfortable among these small family secrets. I began postponing the surprise. The ignorance they attributed to me gave me a place where I did not have to answer or take sides.

Over New Year's lunch his mother asked whether we would arrive in June or July. Daniel replied that it depended on my notice period at work. I put down my fork. They discussed the flat we would rent near her, the job his cousin was already finding for me, and our move, which Daniel described as a settled decision. The last thing he had told me was that he was considering a two-week summer visit if we could coordinate our holidays.

I asked his mother for water in her language. She looked surprised, and Daniel froze with his hand above the bowl. Then, slowly and with incorrect endings, I said I was not moving in July. His mother immediately switched to English and asked whether we had argued. I did not want to make her our judge. I said only that some things had not yet been said where they ought to have been agreed.

In the guest room Daniel first talked about my secret lessons. He asked how long I had been listening in. I could not hide behind my original

good reason; I explained why I had later stayed silent too. Then I asked who had decided I would leave my job. He said he had wanted to give his mother something to look forward to. He had turned her waiting into my promise, counting on me to accept it later so nobody would be hurt.

We went home together without a new moving date. We talked for a long time, then barely spoke for several days. I attended my next lesson at the usual time. Meanwhile his mother sent me a message, in very simple words, about the escaped dog. I answered her myself. I still did not know whether I would stay with her son. For the first time I knew our conversation did not have to wait for that decision.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Sin I Invented

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-sin-i-invented/

I said there was another man because I thought that sentence would end the negotiations. Four times before, I had tried to leave. Each time Haris produced a plan: less work, more outings, a new flat. He sincerely carried out those plans. We would return from an outing, unpack our bag, and resume living in a silence that no change of address could remove. The fifth time I chose a lie.

I gave him no name. I said the name was unimportant, which sounded exactly like something a woman protecting someone would say. For the first time he offered no plan. He sat on the edge of the armchair while I packed my clothes to the sound of his breathing. I felt relief. That is the hardest part of this story to tell. Admitting the spoken lie is easier than admitting how peacefully I closed the door that evening.

Three days later he called a colleague who sometimes drove me home. Then he called the man who had bought my old bicycle. My colleague contacted me only after speaking to his wife. There was no curiosity in his voice; he was furious. My nonexistent lover had begun entering real homes. I realized I had left Haris a puzzle he would have to try to solve while I was already sleeping at my sister's.

We arranged to meet in the empty flat. I told him there had been nobody. He asked me not to comfort him. I repeated the truth and explained why I had invented an affair. For a long time he looked at my belongings stacked by the door. Then he fetched two glasses of water with the same movements that once began discussions about repairing our marriage. "Then we can try again," he said.

Now I had to say what I had escaped by inventing a much uglier story. I did not want to try. I was not waiting for a better offer or proof that he was a bad man. I wanted our marriage to end, and I was ashamed that my

reason would never be enough for him. He pushed his glass away. "You could at least have left me my own story about it," he said. I had no answer that could repair that sentence.

In front of him I called my colleague and the man with the bicycle to tell them what I had done. Haris took no part in those conversations. When I lifted the last box, he did not ask where I was going. A week later he sent a message with a date for collecting my books. I replied only that I would come. I was still certain I had needed to leave. For the first time I was not trying to appear innocent because of it.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Seam I Had Not Sewn

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-seam-i-had-not-sewn/

The quilt arrived three days before their anniversary. Ljubica opened the parcel, touched its small pieces of fabric, and thought she had chosen the perfect gift. She had sent the maker the colors of their first kitchen, a piece of an old curtain, and a drawing of the arrangement she liked. When Miran asked whether she had made it herself, she said yes. His smile was so proud that she added nothing to return the story to its actual size.

Miran showed the quilt to every visitor. He spoke of her patience and the evenings she had supposedly spent at the sewing machine while he worked. Ljubica confirmed little details and avoided larger questions. She borrowed a box of thread from her sister and left it on the shelf, giving their house traces of work that had never happened there. The box looked more ridiculous each morning, but she did not remove it.

Then a seam opened at one corner. Miran brought her the quilt and asked her to repair it before the gap widened. He was neither demanding nor suspicious. He assumed a skill she had claimed. Ljubica said she would do it on Saturday. On Friday she called the maker, who offered to repair it in a few minutes. While arranging the secret visit, she looked at the thread box and first felt how exhausting the whole thing had become.

Miran listened without interrupting when she confessed. She asked whether he would forgive her, and he said he was still trying to understand what the lie had been for. She explained that he had built her a shelf with his own hands for their previous anniversary, and she had wanted to give something equal. Miran looked at the quilt. He knew the kitchen colors and recognized the old curtain. He did not know about months of discussions with the maker, because Ljubica had hidden all her real effort beneath an invented skill.

They went for the repair together. The maker greeted them with magnifying glasses on her head and showed where the seam had loosened. Miran thanked her and repeated her name, carefully remembering it. Ljubica asked to watch her close the opening. She did not promise to learn to sew entire quilts. She wanted to understand those few stitches without immediately turning them into a grand talent in somebody else's eyes.

At home they returned the quilt to the bed. Miran continued to love it but no longer told visitors the same story. Hearing the correction was difficult for Ljubica the first time. By the third time it was easier than nodding at praise belonging to another person. She returned the thread box to her sister. She kept only the needle the maker had given her and a little piece of fabric where her seam remained very crooked.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Dog from a Borrowed Life

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dog-from-a-borrowed-life/

Rina loved the way Omar spoke to the dog. He neither fussed over it nor pulled it along; he stopped and said they had time. They met in the park after a literary evening both had attended without speaking. The dog approached her bench. Omar said it did not usually approach strangers. Rina liked the notion that, beyond any reasonable explanation, the animal seemed to have chosen her in particular.

Three months later they still talked about that encounter. Rina retold it to friends with a small, happy disbelief. Omar added a detail about the rain or the wet lead. His flat had no dog bowl, but the dog supposedly often stayed with his sister. The arrangement seemed ordinary. She shared responsibility for her mother's cat with her brother and knew an animal's life need not fit inside a single household.

Then a woman arrived in the park whom the dog recognized well before Omar did. It pulled its lead and whined with delight. The woman lifted its front paws, greeting her little old man. She was Omar's sister. She thanked her brother for looking after it while she traveled and told Rina it was lovely finally to meet the reason Omar had suddenly started borrowing her dog. Only then did she notice his expression.

Rina asked no questions in front of her. She waited until they were alone and then requested the story of their first meeting again. Omar admitted noticing her at the literary evening and later seeing her in the park. He wanted to approach her but found it easier with a dog. He had only intended to start a conversation. Everything afterward, he insisted, had been real. Rina asked why he had never allowed her to laugh at that awkward preparation.

She did not mind that he did not own the dog. She minded that every affectionate return to the beginning of their relationship had received

another confirmation of a story he knew was false. He had turned coincidence into a little piece of evidence that something was destined for them. For the first time Omar had no detail left to improve his explanation. He suggested beginning again without the dog or excuses. She said they already had a beginning, together with everything he had added to it.

They did not meet for several days. He sent a brief apology without a story about his shyness. Rina read it twice and replied that she needed time. Later she met his sister in the park. The dog approached her as happily as before. She stroked it and laughed when it immediately ran toward another bench. Strangely, that little disappointment was easier to bear when nobody invented a special meaning for it.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Necklace I Had Not Lost

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-necklace-i-had-not-lost/

I sold the necklace in February. I had worn it twice, both times because Denis asked why I never wore his loveliest gift. It was heavy and cold, intended for a woman who arrived at dinner without clay beneath her nails. I used the money to buy a small secondhand pottery kiln. I told Denis the workshop owner had lent it to me. That first lie sounded like a temporary arrangement while I worked out how to explain that I had turned his gift into something of my own.

In April his sister invited us over. Denis said I should wear the blue dress, the one that looked particularly good with the necklace. I opened the empty box in front of him and performed surprise. I had not decided beforehand to do that. The words saying it was missing simply came out, and then a few more gestures made me a woman searching drawers for an object whose last location I knew perfectly well.

Denis hugged me. He said things got lost and he did not want it to ruin our evening. Then he found the shop where he had bought it on his phone. He intended to order another, identical one, even if he had to spend months paying for it. I stared at the screen, realizing that my escape from an unwanted gift would become a debt we would both carry far beyond that celebration.

I told him to close the page. The necklace had not disappeared; I had sold it. He did not shout. He asked about the kiln, and I confirmed the other lie too. Then he asked why I had not simply said I did not want the necklace. Saying I had not wanted to spoil his pleasure sounded feeble while the price of its replacement remained on the screen. I had tried to redirect his care through an invented misfortune rather than an ordinary conversation about what I wanted.

We attended the celebration together, without the necklace. Denis was quiet, and I heard every ordinary kindness from him as something I had not yet earned. At home he said he would gladly have helped buy the kiln. I did not know whether that was true; until then we had discussed pottery as a hobby that had to fit into free evenings. We could have argued about that. Instead of an argument, I had secretly made the decision and left him with an inaccurate picture of our agreement.

I continued using the kiln. It could not restore the necklace, and leaving it unused could not repair the conversation I had avoided. I gave Denis the sale receipt and left him time to decide what he wanted to say. For days he did not ask what I was making. When he finally approached the shelf, I showed him a bowl with a cracked rim. I did not call the mistake small. I simply turned it so we could both see it clearly.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Inscription the Author Never Wrote

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-inscription-the-author-never-wrote/

I had stood in the signing queue for almost an hour. The author had to leave, and ten people still waited ahead of me. The organizer apologized. I bought the book and went home angry about the wasted afternoon. It was my husband's birthday the next day. For months he had talked about wanting to meet that writer. The previous week I had told him I had a special present, in a voice already promising more than an ordinary book.

I did not plan to forge the signature until I opened the first page. I found a photograph of an inscription and tried copying just the name, out of curiosity, I told myself. I added a few warm words addressed to Emir. When the ink dried, I spread wrapping paper across the table. I was not skilled at copying handwriting. I counted on his love for the present leaving little room for close inspection.

Emir showed everyone the book. He particularly liked the sentence about people who find time to read. I had written it thinking of him reading on the bus, his bag wedged between his legs. I was glad it touched him, then hurt that his gratitude belonged to a stranger. I had no right to feel wounded. Nevertheless, I did, and that feeling made me avoid every further conversation about the gift.

In spring the author returned to our town. Emir decided to take the book and thank him. I suggested buying the new novel instead, without bothering him over old matters. He could not understand why gratitude would bother anyone. Watching him dust the cover, I realized I was about to let him embarrass himself so that I could preserve my little role as a thoughtful wife. That was when I told him who had written the inscription.

He placed the book on the table. First he asked whether the writer had really visited the previous autumn. That was the only truth I could easily

confirm. Then he read the sentence about time for reading. He said it would have meant something if I had signed my own name. I did not explain that I had wanted to make him happy. He looked like somebody who had been lent another person's happiness, only to have it collected.

He went to the new event alone. He bought a book without an inscription because he did not feel like queuing. He kept mine, though for a while he did not read it. Later he asked me to add the date and my own name below the false signature. I did not mistake that for forgiveness closing the matter. I wrote them neatly. For the first time the present contained something I did not need another story to defend.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Half a Small Prize

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/half-a-small-prize/

We bought the prize ticket while waiting for a bus. Maja said we might win enough for the dinner we had postponed for months. She took out her wallet, but I had already handed the seller some change. I said we would split any winnings. She replied that we would certainly split the disappointment too. I folded the ticket into my coat pocket. It was one of those small agreements people never write down because they think they know each other.

The prize was not large. Enough for several dinners or a bill hanging on my refrigerator. Checking the numbers, my first thought was to call Maja. My second was that I had paid for the ticket after all. The third already resembled an explanation: her promise had not even been serious; we were only amusing ourselves. I did not call. I collected the money and placed it in a drawer, waiting for my own version of events to become natural.

A few days later Maja asked whether we were rich. I said no. That was technically true and therefore useful. She laughed, then suggested an inexpensive dinner at her place. I brought juice. Chopping onions, she explained that her hours at work had been reduced. I had not known. Now I could offer some money as help and perhaps appear generous, but that would be another theft, this time of credit for giving what already belonged to her.

I lasted until she put two plates on the table. I said the ticket had won and named the amount. Maja lowered the forks. She asked why I had not told her. I replied that I kept telling myself I had bought it. She did not argue about the change. She repeated my bus stop sentence almost exactly. I heard how simple it was before I began adding conditions that existed only when they benefited me.

I returned home for her half. Maja did not want a later transfer because she wanted no further promise. When I brought the envelope, dinner had cooled. I asked whether I could stay. She said yes, but I should expect no pleasant evening merely because I had done what I should have done immediately. We ate quietly, occasionally discussing ordinary things that now required greater effort.

The friendship continued, more slowly than before. I spent my winnings on the bill and never asked what she did with hers. Months later we waited for the same bus again. The seller offered another ticket. Maja declined. I did not press her into a shared joke that no longer sounded the same to both of us. Instead I asked whether she would have dinner with me. I clearly said that this time it was my treat.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Date He Moved Back

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-date-he-moved-back/

We agreed to separate on the last Friday in April. I remember because the next day I helped a friend move and brought my own empty travel bag. Before that Friday we had no perfect marriage, but we had a marriage. We discussed summer, argued about dishes, and bought curtains neither particularly liked. When we began seeing each other again four months later, I thought we at least knew where we were trying to start.

We sat in a small restaurant discussing what had changed. Tarik said he had briefly been with another woman during our separation. Hearing it was unpleasant, but we had explicitly given each other that freedom. I asked how long it lasted. He mentioned the weekend before my birthday. My birthday was in early April. Initially I thought he had mistaken the month, so I helped with a question that did not receive the expected answer.

He said we were already practically separated then. His voice contained no confession, only mild impatience that I distinguished things he had long since combined. I asked when he had told me our agreement began. He replied that some things were understood without words. Those same days he had asked where we would holiday and said he loved me before leaving for work. I was not listing evidence of a happy marriage. I was listing what I had lived by.

Tarik insisted our feelings had already ended. I said perhaps his had, but he had not informed me of their ending. He could have left earlier. He could have requested a different agreement. Instead he now wanted me to rearrange April so his actions could receive a more comfortable name. The waiter asked whether we wanted dessert. Tarik declined for both of us. I ordered tea, unwilling to let him decide this conversation's ending in advance as well.

For the first time he used the word cheating. He spoke quietly, then said he had not wanted to destroy our chance of reconciliation. I replied that he had already changed that possibility by trying to make me question our shared agreement. We did not argue loudly enough for other tables to remember. We each paid our share and left. At the crossing he reached toward me from old habit. I did not take his hand.

We no longer meet to reconcile. Sometimes we must discuss remaining shared belongings and stay courteous then. I gave the curtains to the friend I had helped move. She likes them. I kept nothing to prove a date, because I need no such collection. It is enough that I no longer accept his retrospective version of my life as more important than the life I actually lived then.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Second Envelope from My Aunt

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-second-envelope-from-my-aunt/

My aunt gave me the first envelope three days before the wedding while we stood by the lift. She was hurrying across town and said she did not want to carry money to the celebration. I put it in my bag, hugged her, and thanked her. I could never later remember the second envelope as a misunderstanding. When she handed it over at a family lunch the following week, I immediately knew what had happened.

She said she had recently muddled the wedding, my brother's birthday, and a present for a friend. "I haven't given you anything, have I?" she asked, still holding the envelope. Instead of answering, I smiled and took it. Lunch continued. My husband had not witnessed the first gift, so he thanked my aunt more warmly than I did. His gratitude gave my silence a respectable appearance.

At home I counted the money. We could pay for some things that had remained more expensive than planned after the wedding. I told myself my aunt would notice if she needed it. That sentence allowed me to treat her possible oversight as permission. I told my husband I was tired and went to bed early. I did not sleep, but neither did I get up to fix matters. For several days I chose discomfort because it required no repayment.

My aunt called Thursday. She asked whether I happened to remember her giving me something by the lift. I did not explicitly say no. I said all sorts of things got confused in that rush. I heard her tell herself she probably meant my brother's birthday. Only then did my behavior become clear: I was not merely keeping somebody's surplus, but helping someone who loved me trust her own memory less.

I visited her that evening. I returned the second envelope and said I had known immediately. My aunt did not want to count it. She asked why I had let her become confused. I tried mentioning expenses, then stopped.

Expenses explained why I welcomed the money, but not why I had blamed the rush. We sat a while without coffee, although she usually put it on immediately. I did not ask her to keep the conversation between us.

I told my husband when I returned. He was angry that I had left his gratitude attached to my deception. My aunt still calls on Sundays, but several times she has checked whether she has already told me something. I do not hurry her then or laugh at her caution. We spent the gift I was entitled to keep. The one I returned remains between us, without an envelope or a date when it will entirely disappear.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The First Marriage I Erased

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-first-marriage-i-erased/

My first marriage lasted eight months. It ended long ago, without children or belongings keeping us connected. For years I mentioned it only when necessary, then stopped assessing necessity and behaved as though it never happened. When Faris asked early in our relationship whether I had ever married, I said no. He did not pressure me. I simply selected a story requiring no explanation of my earlier mistake.

I did not think the relationship would grow serious. That was the first of many sentences later used to justify delay. Then it became serious, so I told myself this was no time for something unimportant. A friend who knew once asked why I hid it. I said I had a right to privacy. I did, but I had not told Faris I preferred not discussing it. I gave an explicitly false answer and let him build his understanding of my past upon it.

When he began mentioning marriage, I felt happy and simultaneously burdened by every first time he described. He said we were both learning how to plan a wedding. I knew details I could not explain without inventing other people's experiences. One evening he showed me a simple ring he liked. Before even putting it on, I understood I could not accept a new beginning by erasing the old one again.

I told him everything relevant to the marriage and my lie, without making my former husband a bad man to ease matters for myself. Faris stayed silent a long time. What hurt most was not that I had married but how often I repeated afterward that I had not. He asked why I had decided he would reject me for it. I had to admit putting my shame into his mouth before he said anything.

We postponed wedding plans. He did not demand meeting my ex or investigating every detail. He needed time to trust an ordinary answer again. I struggled not to hurry him by claiming the marriage meant

nothing. It mattered because I lived in it, made mistakes, and learned something. Its brevity gave no permission to pretend my later lie had no duration either.

We are still together. We bought no ring then, and I wear none now as proof everything is repaired. Recently I told Faris a funny incident from that old apartment. For the first time I changed neither people nor place to fit a more acceptable version of myself. He listened and laughed. The past had not become beautiful, but finally stopped demanding another lie whenever something from it wanted to enter a conversation.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Experience I Did Not Have

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-experience-i-did-not-have/

In my résumé I wrote that I had looked after two children for three years. I did not give their names, so initially the lie seemed less serious. In reality I occasionally watched my nephew while my sister went shopping. I needed work, and the advertisement required experience I lacked. I stared at the empty section as if it were a locked door and wrote myself a key. When an interview invitation arrived, I wore the shirt I saved for better occasions.

Jasna welcomed me into the kitchen. A mug with dried cocoa marks stood on the table, and a washing machine could be heard through the wall. Nothing resembled the tidy world of the advertisement I had tried to fit. The child was with the other parent. Jasna wanted to discuss schedules, expectations, and how we would get acquainted privately first. I had brought my own pen, unnecessarily solemn, as though neat notes could give me what I had invented.

She asked what had been hardest about my previous family. I had prepared an answer about accommodating different habits, but no particular day. I began describing a little girl who refused her shoes. It was my sister's story, borrowed almost word for word. Jasna smiled, then asked to telephone a parent. I said they had moved away. Even as I spoke, I was considering whom I could ask to confirm the invented job.

Then I stopped. Not because Jasna seemed suspicious, but because she turned her calendar toward me and began offering a stranger part of her real life. I said the previous family did not exist. I laid the pen between us and explained what I had done and what I had added. Jasna closed the calendar. She did not shout, which was harder than shouting. She asked whether I had intended telling her before the first day. I could not convincingly say yes.

The conversation ended without an offer. She said my limited experience was not the problem, but having to separate it from invention now. I thanked her for her time, although I wanted to escape without that ordinary courtesy. Outside, I messaged my sister that I had not got the job. Then I deleted the addition that they expected too much. I called and explained what I had done before she requested my familiar list of unreasonable employers.

The next day I revised my résumé. It remained short and unimpressive. I applied for work I could describe without borrowing other people's days, and sought a chance to learn childcare alongside someone experienced first. Jasna never contacted me again. Sometimes I still remember the proposed schedule in her calendar. I do not imagine getting the job after all. I imagine how many other sentences would have been needed to keep that first one in place.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Eyes That Had Seen Nothing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/eyes-that-had-seen-nothing/

When I told Alma I had seen her partner with another woman, she set down her cup so carefully that I wished for the first time I could take back the sentence. She asked where. I named the café my colleague had mentioned. She asked when. I said Friday, because I knew he had been in town then. Her next questions required more and more answers from me. By the time we finished our coffee, the man I had never seen was holding somebody else's hand in my story.

My colleague had actually only heard that Nedim was meeting somebody. She had not claimed to know what kind of relationship it was. I felt embarrassed appearing before Alma as another person passing on rumors. I wanted to be the friend brave enough to tell the truth. So I invented the authority I did not possess. Afterwards I kept telling myself I would at least make her pay attention. I refused to admit how much I enjoyed suddenly becoming necessary.

Alma called two days later. Nedim insisted the story was untrue. She said she believed me and asked me to visit while he was home too. I suggested they should both calm down first. She replied that she was calm; she simply wanted me to look at him and repeat what I had seen. I could not have asked for better protection for my friend than the same simple thing that now threatened me.

I arrived with a bag of fruit, as though making an ordinary visit. Alma did not take it. Nedim stood beside the window. Before anyone asked a question, I said I had not been in that café. My voice sounded small in their living room. Alma asked who had been there, then. I had to answer that I did not know that either. Nedim began to speak, but she stopped him with her hand. She wanted to hear me out first.

I could not confirm that he was faithful. I could confirm nothing about his Friday. All I could do was withdraw my false testimony and admit that I had turned her life into a space for my own importance. Alma did not shout. She said my certainty had already made her start doubting her own memories of their relationship. She asked me to leave and tell my colleague what I had done, without attributing the invented details to her.

I do not know how the two of them finished that conversation. I do not even know whether they stayed together. Alma did not answer me for months. In the meantime, I admitted everything to my colleague and refused to describe Alma's reaction to another friend. This was not some new wisdom for which I deserved praise. I had simply, for the first time, left an empty space where I had no right to add a story.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Ring from a Workshop That Never Existed

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-ring-from-a-workshop-that-never-existed/

At her cousin's birthday, Ivana noticed a ring with the same narrow groove as her own. Delighted, she asked whether it had come from the old craftsman her husband had told her about. Her cousin knew no craftsman. They had ordered their rings from a website selling ready-made designs. She immediately opened a photograph and showed Ivana the available sizes, widths, and colors.

Ivana thought someone had copied their design. Eight years earlier, her husband Saša had described a small workshop, a man without a computer, and three meetings to decide how the edge would rest against her fingers. He said he had taken her photograph so the craftsman could see her hands. She had later retold the story to friends. She never knew the man's name because Saša claimed he had stopped working shortly after their order.

At home she showed him the website photograph. Saša said all rings looked somewhat alike. When she suggested finding the craftsman and asking him, he sat down. The workshop had never existed. He had bought ready-made rings in a shop a few days before the wedding. There had been no time for the custom work he had previously promised, so he compensated for the actual failure with details that cost him nothing.

He said the rings had not been cheap. Ivana stopped him. Price had never been part of the story she loved. She had loved imagining him sitting with someone and thinking for a long time about her hands. As she explained, she felt foolish about an image that had meant so much to her. For the first time Saša heard everything a few invented sentences had earned him: admiration, gratitude, and eight years of credit for attention he had never given.

He offered to commission special rings now. She did not want them. She did not want an object made under the pressure of an exposed lie. She wanted him to stop minimizing what he had done by repeatedly mentioning the value of the gold. Saša also admitted that he could have told the truth later but liked how people looked at him when she told the story. That admission was uglier, but at least it contained no decorated workshop in the background.

Ivana did not remove the ring. It bore real scratches from moving home, repairing a shelf, and eight years of life that consisted of more than that lie. She messaged her cousin to say she had been mistaken about the design's origins. Saša asked whether she needed to explain it to anyone else. She said she would decide that herself. The next time he brought her flowers, he simply said where he had bought them. He added no story.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Money for the Woman Who Never Came

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/money-for-the-woman-who-never-came/

For four months Denis left money each Friday in the blue dish for the woman who cleaned their apartment. He had never met her because she came while they were both working. Tamara said her name was Senada and she preferred cash. The apartment was tidy, the sheets changed, the bathroom clean. Denis thought they had finally resolved an argument that returned every other Sunday.

One Friday he came home early for a forgotten folder. Tamara knelt beside the shower with gloves reaching to her elbows. She said Senada had been unable to come. He offered to take her the money later because she was ill, then asked where she lived. Tamara rinsed the sponge for a long time before turning off the water. Then she admitted that Senada did not exist. She took an afternoon off, cleaned the apartment, and kept the agreed amount.

Denis immediately said she had stolen from him. Tamara removed her gloves and listed everything she had done that day. The work was real, as was the time she had spent on it. Why was it acceptable to pay an unknown woman, but insulting for her to receive that money? The question was not unfair, but it did not erase the lie. She had invented a worker, her schedule, and three different reasons why they could not meet her.

They sat at the still-wet kitchen table. Tamara admitted that inventing Senada had felt easier than asking once again to divide the chores. Denis admitted he had instantly agreed to paid help while always considering her requests that he clean exaggerated. Nevertheless, he wanted to know who entered their apartment and how their shared money was spent. He did not want either of them justifying invention whenever they believed they had a good reason.

They did not immediately agree about the money. Tamara had already spent some of it repairing her bicycle and would not call it theft, but she accepted that she would stop misrepresenting their agreements. The following week they jointly interviewed an actual woman offering help. She asked exactly what they expected. Denis realized for the first time how many tasks fitted inside his brief phrase 'just a little tidying.'

They agreed on two visits a month and wrote down who would do which jobs in between. Tamara did not suddenly stop being angry, and Denis did not forget four months of an imaginary person. One Friday he opened the blue dish and found gloves. It was his turn to clean the bathroom. He did not ask where the cleaner was kept. He found it in the cupboard, where it had been all along.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The People Who Came to Help

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-people-who-came-to-help/

Nataša reached the summit first and sat on a rock to tighten her shoelaces. Her friend Sonja arrived out of breath, looked at her with obvious relief, and said it was wonderful to see her so strong. Nataša laughed. She had been walking all summer. Sonja added that she had not wanted to pry after everything Nataša had been through. Nataša raised her head. Apart from a broken refrigerator, nothing that summer had required any particular recovery.

At first Sonja fell silent. Then she mentioned the money her husband had given Nataša's husband, Bruno. She did not expect them to return it. All that mattered was that they had helped with the treatment. Nataša said there had been no treatment. They sat on the rock while other walkers passed. Sonja searched in vain for a less ugly possibility, an illness her friend still did not want to acknowledge. Nataša had to repeat twice that she was healthy.

At home, Bruno's first question was how much Sonja knew. The question remained between them while he removed his shoes. He owed people money because of a failed business venture he had been trying to hide from her too. He could not ask for another loan in his own name. He had told several friends they needed help paying for her treatment and asked them not to disturb her with questions. Her supposed need for peace protected his story perfectly from scrutiny.

"I didn't say you were dying," he said, as though that was where he had drawn a decent line. Nataša sat down because, for the first time after the whole climb, her legs felt unsteady. She remembered the fruit people brought, the unusually gentle conversations, and the friend who refused payment for repairing her bicycle. She had thanked people, thinking they loved her. They did love her, she realized; Bruno had simply attached an invented price to that love.

She insisted that he call everyone in front of her. She did not want a gathering where she would calm people while he expressed remorse. Bruno made the calls at the kitchen table. One friend shouted, another hung up, and a third demanded a deadline for getting his money back. When Bruno started explaining how upset she was, Nataša stopped him. Her present pain must not become the next reason for people to let him off either.

She stayed at Sonja's. In the morning she found two cups of coffee and a plate of plain toast on the table. Sonja asked whether she wanted to talk or go walking again. Nataša chose walking, a short route with no climb. Before leaving, she called the friend who had repaired her bicycle and said she owed him thanks she was only now beginning to understand. She did not promise to repay Bruno's debts herself. She took her jacket and left her phone on the charger.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Wife Nobody Knew

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wife-nobody-knew/

Jasna knew how a woman waiting for somebody else's husband behaved. She did not call him in the evening, leave earrings at his apartment, or ever ask whether they could go away together over the holidays. During their first month, Alen had told her that his marriage had long existed only on paper, but his wife struggled with change. Jasna had expanded that cautious description into an entire life for the unknown woman, her sensitivity, loneliness, and tendency to cause scenes.

At a mutual acquaintance's birthday party, Alen introduced her to a childhood friend. While he went to find a bottle opener, the friend laughed and asked whether she had finally persuaded the eternal bachelor to buy curtains. Jasna thought the man knew nothing about the secret collapse of the marriage. She asked when Alen had married. The friend raised his eyebrows. "He hasn't. Even his mother has stopped mentioning weddings."

She waited for Alen to return, then said they needed to go outside. At the entrance he first tried claiming that his friend knew nothing about his private life. When Jasna headed back to fetch him, Alen caught her sleeve and released it before she said anything. He admitted it. He wanted a relationship in which nobody expected a shared apartment, introductions to parents, or an entire Saturday together. A married man, he said, at least came with restrictions that were understood in advance.

"You could have told me you didn't want those things," she replied. "Then you would have thought you could change me." Jasna looked up at the window of the apartment where she had so often pulled on her boots quietly. There was no wife who might arrive. There was no reason to whisper either. For months she had participated in a humiliation he invented for his own convenience, and she accepted because its forbidden nature lent significance to his brief visits.

Later she told a friend only that Alen had lied. Her friend said it was good that at least nobody else had been hurt. Jasna wanted to keep that simple version. Nevertheless, she admitted she had believed all along that another woman existed. She spoke more slowly than usual. She did not ask her friend to excuse her by invoking an unhappy marriage that had never existed. For the first time she tried imagining the unknown wife without qualities that would make her own choice easier.

A few days later, Alen wrote that they were now free to be a normal couple. The message angered her more than his initial admission. His imaginary wife had been dismissed as soon as she stopped serving a purpose. Jasna did not reply. On Saturday she went to collect the earrings she had, after all, once forgotten. She rang the bell loudly and stayed in the hallway until he brought them out.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Gifts after Forgiveness

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/gifts-after-forgiveness/

The first gift after his affair was a coat. I had not requested it, but I knew why he brought it. Petar stood at the door with a bag and the expression of someone hoping an object could say what he kept getting wrong. I said the coat changed nothing. Nevertheless, I wore it the next day. It was warm, beautiful, and expensive enough to give me a moment's satisfaction unrelated to love.

Over the following weeks we talked extensively. He ended the other relationship and asked whether I wanted to try continuing our marriage. I said yes, although I was already looking at apartments I could rent alone. I did not yet know when I would leave. I knew I imagined no shared future. I concealed that difference because, for the first time, his guilt gave me power I did not want to relinquish immediately.

I began mentioning things I had previously postponed. A new computer, a trip with a friend, the armchair I had admired for ages. Petar agreed to almost everything. I never called a gift the price of forgiveness, but let him believe I drew closer whenever I thanked him. My hurt was real. What I did with it was something else, although I tried not to make the distinction.

An offer to buy a smaller apartment where we could start again stopped me. Petar had already set money aside and wanted us to choose a neighborhood together. Sitting opposite him, I realized acceptance would require a much larger lie than smiling over a coat. I wondered how far I intended to let someone build something in which I had already decided not to live.

I said I did not want to stay. At first Petar thought the old pain had flared again. Then I admitted knowing it while accepting his attempts to keep me. He was furious. I did not let that erase his affair, but neither did I use

his affair to erase my decision to entice him with false reconciliation. Two ugly truths remained at the same table.

We divided our shared belongings more slowly than I had imagined. We even argued over the coat, not because of its price but because of everything we had both assigned to it. In the end I left it behind. One cold morning I emerged from my new apartment in an old jacket and, for the first time, felt no need to turn my dissatisfaction into something somebody else would have to purchase. The pain remained, but at least it had its proper name again.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Smaller Share of a Shared Bill

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-smaller-share-of-a-shared-bill/

Mirna sent her share of the rent as soon as she received her salary. She earned more than Adnan, so they had agreed she would contribute more. She did not consider it a favor requiring acknowledgment. They lived together, and she wanted both to have money for personal needs. Adnan said they would recalculate the arrangement as soon as his situation improved at work.

It improved in March. He received a new contract and a more responsible position, but told Mirna only that his schedule had changed. Initially he intended to wait for one salary payment to be certain. Then he bought the camera he had long wanted. Next he repaid an old debt. By autumn he had become accustomed to the money left over, as though he had created it entirely separately from everything they shared.

Meanwhile Mirna postponed a course she had planned. Everyday expenses had risen, and she did not want to touch her small savings. Adnan listened while she calculated whether she could enroll in spring. He said caution was wise. Later that sentence would shame him most, because it was not an omission. He actively supported her sacrifice to avoid his own.

The truth emerged over dinner with his old friend. Relaxed after a good day, Adnan began describing how much the new contract had changed his life. He mentioned that he now almost matched Mirna's salary. Mirna put her glass on the table. His friend immediately understood that the conversation was not supposed to go this way. He asked whether they needed more bread, although the basket was not empty.

At home Adnan tried explaining that he had planned to tell her. Mirna did not ask when. She asked why, while watching her abandon the course, he considered her larger share of expenses still consistent with

their agreement. He said the money had never belonged to anyone else; he had earned it. She answered that she wanted neither his money nor anything unearned, only truthful figures on which to base decisions about her own.

They changed the distribution of expenses, and Adnan reimbursed the difference for the previous months. That was simpler than the rest. Mirna enrolled in the course, but stopped casually sharing every small wish with him. Adnan noticed the silence only when he saw a new book or learned about an outing she had already arranged. He had returned the money to the proper account. He still did not know how to restore the ease with which she once told him what she wanted from the following spring.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Morning I Claimed Not to Remember

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-morning-i-claimed-not-to-remember/

I remembered every word. That needs to be said first, because later I claimed I had been tired, distracted, or insufficiently attentive. When Nejra suggested abandoning the purchase of a large apartment, I said I understood. When she asked whether we could move somewhere smaller the following month, I agreed. The next day I said we had merely considered possibilities. That way I kept everything open long enough for her to abandon the question.

Initially I considered it a way to avoid arguments. I disliked her proposals but did not want to appear stubborn. I let her go to sleep peacefully. In the morning I would express surprise at her certainty that we had agreed. I said she was putting words into my mouth. Very soon she began repeating sentences several times, watching me confirm that I had heard.

That irritated me. I claimed she spoke to me like a child. I did not admit creating a situation in which an ordinary answer no longer meant anything. Once, after a conversation, she left keys to another apartment on the table. She said she had found somewhere she could afford alone. I nodded, certain that this decision would also dissolve if I did not treat it seriously enough.

On Saturday her sister arrived with a car. Nejra began carrying boxes out. I asked what she was doing and why she had not told me she was really leaving. She looked at me across a chair back. She no longer tried repeating the entire conversation from the previous evening. She said I knew. For the first time that brief sentence contained no plea for me to confirm her memory.

I could have admitted it then. Instead I told her sister that we had obviously misunderstood each other. Her sister refused the role of judge.

She simply took a box Nejra had packed and carried it downstairs. I was left without an audience to turn my confusion into evidence. Nejra checked the bathroom drawer and placed her key on an empty part of the table.

After she left I wanted to write that I was ready to talk. I read the sentence several times. We had talked for months. There had been no shortage of words, only of my willingness to retain my answer the following morning. I deleted the message. Later I sent one admitting what I had done, without claiming I now understood everything deeply enough to deserve another chance. She did not reply. This time I remember that clearly too.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Price I Was Not Supposed to Learn

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-price-i-was-not-supposed-to-learn/

Selma trusted me because I knew several antique dealers. She owned a large porcelain vase passed down through her family, but her small apartment had no space for objects that had to be carefully walked around. She did not know its value or claim she was selling treasure. She asked me to contact someone who might buy it. I said I would gladly help.

The dealer to whom I sent a photograph immediately requested to see the vase. After examining it, he offered far more than I expected. The amount was large enough to cover my credit-card debt. I passed a lower offer to Selma. I justified the difference through supposed brokerage, transport, and cleaning costs, although nobody had requested such charges.

She accepted without bargaining. She hugged me and brought cakes to thank me for my effort. My husband Adis looked at the money on the table and asked why she was giving me so much for a favor. I said it was an agreed commission. I had not only lied to my friend. I also wanted the man living with me to believe I had earned that sum honestly.

A month later Selma entered the shop to buy a small present for her aunt. The vase stood in the window. She was not surprised that it was being resold, but by the dealer's passing remark about the amount he had paid. She called me from outside the shop. I could hear traffic and something in her silence that frightened me more than shouting. She asked only whether I had conveyed the whole offer.

First I said it was not that simple. Then I heard my own voice, the same voice I normally used to criticize people who took what belonged to others and gave it a respectable name. I admitted it. Selma did not ask for the vase back. She requested the difference and told me not to arrive with cakes or a long explanation. I wrote down the sum I had known by heart since first concealing it.

I repaid the money from my own savings. Adis learned everything and did not offer to soften the debt through our shared account. Selma confirmed the final payment in one short message. Afterwards she stopped responding to ordinary things I sent as though friendship might begin working again before noticing the damage. Later I saw the vase in the window once more. I no longer wondered what it was worth. I wondered how cheaply I had valued something that had never been for sale.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Coffee with His First Wife

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/coffee-with-his-first-wife/

Ivana found the number in an old message she had never deleted. Six years earlier Dunja had written that she knew about Ivana's affair with her husband. Ivana did not reply then. She believed Adnan when he said his marriage had long been over and Dunja would understand once she stopped being angry. Now she sat in the kitchen of the apartment they had bought together, trying to compose a message to that same woman.

In recent months Adnan carried his phone even when taking out the rubbish. One night she heard him in the hallway using the tender voice she had considered theirs. She did not need to see a message. When she asked him, he said she was too insecure and was suffocating him. He had once used those same words to describe Dunja. Ivana recognized them six years late.

Dunja agreed to coffee, but chose somewhere far from both work and home. She arrived carrying a bag of groceries and left it on an empty chair. Ivana began with an apology she had prepared for too long. Dunja listened, then asked why she was contacting her now. The question was not hostile. It was precise, which made things even harder for Ivana.

She described the phone, the voice, and Adnan's answers. She asked how Dunja had first realized. Dunja looked toward her bag, from which a leek protruded. She said she remembered, but did not want to relive every step so Ivana could determine whether the same pattern applied. Her former marriage was not an instruction manual for the current one.

Ivana felt an urge to defend herself. She wanted to explain that she had been deceived too, that she had not known how much Dunja suffered. Then she realized the woman opposite had not summoned her for judgment. She herself had come requesting something, perhaps forgiveness that would make her own position easier. She lowered her

hands into her lap and said only that she was sorry for not answering that message.

Dunja nodded. She did not embrace her or say they were now the same. She finished her coffee and left to collect her child from school. Ivana remained a few more minutes, looking at the empty space where the bag had stood. She had received neither evidence nor a verdict. At home she told Adnan she wanted to discuss their marriage, without invoking Dunja and without accepting an insult as an answer. This time there was no other woman behind whom she could hide her own decision.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Man Who Could Not Sew a Button

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-who-could-not-sew-a-button/

I sewed my husband's buttons on for fourteen years. He could not thread a needle, or so he claimed. He would try, sigh, tie a knot in the wrong place, and leave the shirt on a chair. I would finish it while we watched television. It was quicker than listening to him grumble, which gradually became the explanation for many chores in our home.

One Thursday I came home early because a meeting had been canceled. Damir sat at the kitchen table sewing a torn pocket on his fishing bag. His movements were small and assured. Beside him lay scissors, two needles, and neatly cut pieces of fabric. He did not hear me until I put down my keys. Then his hand remained raised, thread hanging between his fingers.

First he said this was different. Then he said a friend had shown him last weekend. I looked at the stitching, then at the photograph of his mother on the shelf. She had been a seamstress. I remembered her mentioning once that both sons helped her while they were at school. Damir had changed the subject. I forgot that small detail, along with many other things that did not seem worth an argument.

I did not shout. I sat and asked what else he only failed to know while I was present. Offended, he said I was exaggerating over a button. For him the problem was one small round thing. For me, all the evenings spent finishing tasks he theatrically abandoned suddenly came alive. I did not know how often he had really been clumsy and how often merely patient enough to wait for me to take over.

That evening I left his clean shirt on the same chair, without a button. He asked whether we now needed to keep records of every little thing. I said no records were necessary. He needed to consider his trousers, shirts, and sports bags his own belongings even when they required repairs. He disliked that I mentioned the fishing bag last.

Over the following days he often performed tasks more loudly than before, ensuring I noticed. I deliberately did not praise a washed plate. He had never called me from another room to congratulate me on locating the laundry detergent either. We were unpleasant to each other for almost a whole week. Nevertheless, he gradually stopped asking where objects he had seen for years were kept.

A month later a strap broke on my canvas bag. Damir picked up a needle, then paused and asked whether I wanted him to mend it. I handed him the bag. His stitching was better than mine. That angered me a little more, then made me laugh sincerely. While he sewed, I finished the episode of a series I had previously always only listened to.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Chair for a Neutral Man

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-chair-for-a-neutral-man/

Petar said they kept getting stuck in the same place because nobody listened calmly enough. He suggested talking with a man who helped people resolve disagreements. He did not call him a therapist, only a neutral mediator found through an acquaintance. Maja agreed. For months they had been trying to decide whether to move into his parents' house or continue paying for their own apartment.

The man was called Goran and arrived carrying a small notebook. They met in a quiet part of a café. First he asked each of them what they wanted, then carefully summarized their answers. Maja felt relieved to hear her fear of living under constant observation expressed without mockery. She thought perhaps they could finally talk without making her the woman who hated somebody else's parents.

Then the questions became oddly directed. Goran asked whether gratitude could sometimes take the form of a concession. He praised Petar for thinking about family property and asked Maja to reconsider her need for complete independence. He did not ask what conditions the parents were imposing. When she mentioned that they already wanted her to report her arrival time every day, he said older people often expressed concern awkwardly.

Maja went to the bathroom. On her return, she heard Goran tell Petar, "Your mother always did that when we were at university, too." Petar looked up and saw her. The notebook remained open on the table, holding the fears she had honestly voiced. She sat and asked how long they had known each other. Goran closed the notebook before replying.

They had been friends for almost twenty years. Petar had asked him to help because Maja no longer believed anything Petar said. Goran claimed friendship did not prevent him from being fair. Maja asked why, then,

they had needed to hide it. Both fell silent. Little remained of the neutral man when he had to answer a question he had not prepared.

Maja took her coat and paid for her drink. Petar followed, explaining that he only wanted them to stay together. She said a shared life could not be decided by a vote of two against one. The following week she renewed the apartment lease in her name alone, while Petar returned to his parents. Goran helped move his belongings. Maja watched from the doorway as they carried the table and, for the first time, felt no need to convince anyone where it should stand.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Perfect Match for Two Strangers

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-perfect-match-for-two-strangers/

Zora paid a matchmaking agency after deciding she no longer had patience for messages from unfamiliar men. The woman conducting her interview neatly recorded the answers: she liked cats, did not ski, did not want to relocate, and visited her sister on Saturdays. Zora was fifty-six and expected no miracle. She expected someone to listen carefully before suggesting a partner.

Three weeks later, a recommendation arrived. Emil supposedly shared her love of animals, desire for a quiet life, and interest in old films. The matchmaker emphasized how rarely such compatibility could be found. Zora bought a new blouse, then left it on the bed and wore the one in which she felt like herself.

At the restaurant, Emil looked equally nervous. For the first ten minutes they discussed the weather. Then he offered to show her skiing photographs and asked how long she had been an instructor. Zora laughed, thinking he was joking. He took out the matchmaker's message. In it, Zora was an athletic woman considering life abroad who adored dogs.

They looked at the two recommendations, then at each other. Emil was preparing to move near his daughter and actually wanted a woman comfortable spending part of the year abroad. He disliked old films because they reminded him of days spent ill. Zora told him she was afraid of dogs. The waiter arrived to take their order just as both began laughing loudly at their own perfect compatibility.

The next day, the matchmaker blamed an unfortunate technical error. Zora asked why exactly the answers that would have immediately separated them had been changed. The woman said people thought too much about differences and sometimes needed a little help. Zora

requested a refund. She did not intend to finance someone's notion that her clearly expressed wishes were merely an obstacle to bypass.

Nevertheless, Emil called again. He wanted to know whether she liked fried dough or the agency had invented that too. She did. They went for lunch and talked about her sister, his daughter, and the city neither could leave as simply as they had suggested at their first meeting. They did not begin a relationship. They became friends who occasionally checked in, without a paid guarantee and without a perfect reason to be fond of each other.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Twenty Minutes Early

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/twenty-minutes-early/

Nina was often late without a good excuse. At the last moment she always found a message to answer or a plant to water. Saša waited outside cinemas, in the car, and at family lunches. She was not pleased about it, but apologizing had become as firm a habit as being late. When she finally began arriving early, she felt proud.

The change began one Tuesday. The wall clock said it was time to leave, but at the station she discovered she still had twenty minutes. She thought she had overestimated the walk. The same thing happened the next day. Saša praised her new punctuality, and she joked that perhaps she had grown up. He laughed, knowing that the previous weekend he had moved every clock in their apartment forward.

He could not change her phone, so he began giving her earlier times as well. Dinner at eight became dinner at half past seven. He explained what he was doing to friends in advance. Most found it amusing. Nina avoided looking at her phone while getting ready, specifically to prevent losing time on messages, so his little performance lasted almost a month.

She discovered it at a friend's birthday, when their hostess was still in the shower as they arrived. From the bathroom, the friend called that Saša had overdone Nina's special schedule this time. Nina stood in the hall with a cake in her hands. Saša quietly told her not to spoil the evening. Suddenly she realized other people knew something about her daily life that she herself did not know.

At home she took down the wall clock and moved its hands to the correct time. Saša listed all the occasions when she had left him waiting. He was right about every one of them. That did not help her forget how, for weeks, people had patted her on the back for a success they had staged themselves. She asked what he would change next without her knowledge

if he decided it would help her.

For the first time, Saša had no witty answer. Nina said that in future he could leave without her if she was not ready at the agreed time. She was not asking him to keep saving her a place forever. The following Friday he went out alone, angry that she was still drying her hair. She arrived later and sat at the other end of the table, where a place remained available.

They looked at each other several times during the evening. Neither knew whether they had solved a small problem or opened a much larger one. As they left for home, Nina asked him to wait while she fetched her coat. Saša looked at his watch, then at her. He stayed by the door, this time because he had chosen to.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Car without a Past

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-car-without-a-past/

Amra washed the car before the buyer arrived, cleaned crumbs from beneath the seats, and found an earring she had been searching for since the previous summer. They were selling it to afford a longer trip after their wedding. Nermin's company car was enough for everyday needs. While adjusting the seatbacks, she imagined the sea and their first week without either having to rise for work.

The buyer arrived with his sister. He was younger than she expected, a quiet man who examined every detail carefully. He said this was his first car bought with his own money. Nermin showed the interior, described regular maintenance, and explained their decision to sell. When the young man asked whether the vehicle had ever been hit, Nermin answered no without hesitation.

Amra remained beside the open trunk. Two years earlier she herself had stood in the rain beside that car after Nermin drove into a fence. Nobody was injured, but the front had been repaired and repainted. She did not know what that meant for its current value. She only knew the question had not been ambiguous, nor had the answer she heard.

Nermin looked at her across the roof. His look contained no plea, only the expectation that she understood their shared interest. The buyer's sister was already taking deposit money from her bag. Amra lowered the trunk lid and said the car had been in an accident. Nermin immediately added that it had been insignificant. Amra did not debate the extent of the damage. She described what she had witnessed and left the buyers to decide.

They departed without an agreement. Nermin reproached her for failing to wait until they could discuss it privately. Amra said that in private the buyer they owed an answer would no longer be present. He insisted

everyone embellished advertisements and that she had cost them their trip. She kept seeing the young man carefully pressing the window button, as though examining a large part of his future.

They later sold the car to someone else, openly discussing the repair and receiving less money than planned. They did not take the trip. The wedding took place, less joyfully than Amra had imagined before that afternoon. She did not consider one ugly action the entire truth about Nermin. Nevertheless, when they began planning a shared business the following spring, she asked first to discuss what each understood by the word ours.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

An Agreement Made Too Late

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-agreement-made-too-late/

Lejla began the conversation on Sunday, after they washed the balcony and moved the wet chairs aside. She asked Vedran whether two people had to be everything to each other. Still holding a cloth, he said she certainly did not have to be his plumber. She laughed too loudly. She had rehearsed the question for weeks, hoping it would sound less serious if spoken between ordinary chores.

They had been together eleven years. They did not want children, their work went well, and intimacy had become a quiet language of habits. Lejla did not want to lose that life. At the same time, she had been seeing Nermin, an acquaintance from a photography course, for three months. She did not say that. Instead, she suggested considering a marriage in which they could have other relationships, with a clear agreement and honesty.

Vedran did not answer immediately. A week later he asked what such an agreement would mean if someone fell in love. Lejla said she could not know in advance. He asked whether she already had somebody in mind. That gave her a chance to tell the truth. Instead, she assured him they were only discussing possibilities. Eventually he agreed to consider it, provided neither started anything until both were certain.

The following Friday, Nermin called while they prepared dinner together. Lejla turned on the speaker because her hands were wet, expecting a conversation about an exhibition. Nermin asked whether their apartment would be available again at the same time as last month. There was no second sentence to be misunderstood. Vedran set down the knife and stared for a long time at the finely chopped pepper in front of him.

Lejla tried explaining that this was exactly why she had started the conversation. She heard her words becoming worse as she spoke them.

Vedran said their future agreement could not travel backward. The affair was not the only thing that hurt him. For weeks she had led him to consider something his own decision when she had already shaped it without him. He went to sleep in the living room, and the pepper remained on the board until morning.

Over the following months, they tried several conversations with a counselor's help. Lejla ended things with Nermin. Vedran nevertheless did not want to continue the marriage. When he came for his belongings the last time, they carried the chairs onto the balcony together. One caught in the doorframe, and they both remembered at once how to turn it. Lejla held on to that brief, useless harmony. Nothing they had learned about each other was enough to persuade him to stay.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Friday Off That Never Existed

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-friday-off-that-never-existed/

Emina could not stand Fridays at the home of Denis's friend Vanja. Dinner regularly started late, the men retold the same student adventures, and she ended up in the kitchen with people whose surnames she did not know. The first two times she said she was tired. The third time Denis sighed so deeply that, instead of a fourth refusal, she invented an extra shift at her cousin's flower shop.

The shop closed early on Fridays. Emina knew because she occasionally helped during holidays. Denis did not know the schedule. He said that was a shame, kissed her, and left. She ordered pasta, put on a loose shirt, and spent a wonderfully peaceful evening watching a series nobody interrupted. The following week, the shift happened again. By the end of the month it had become a permanent part of their week.

Vanja's girlfriend caused the problem. She suggested that they visit Emina one evening, bring dinner, and help her close the shop. Denis mentioned this while they washed dishes. Emina let go of a plate so abruptly that it struck the edge of the sink. She said visits were forbidden. "At a flower shop?" he asked. She immediately added a story about a strict owner, although he also knew her cousin.

On Friday she actually took the shop key. She told her cousin she would rearrange the window display. For hours she moved vases, waiting for the time when the group might arrive to pass. When the door finally opened, Denis was alone. He carried the pasta she had ordered. He said the restaurant had mistakenly sent the previous notification to his phone, where their shared account was still signed in.

Knowing the truth, he had still let her invent an owner, a schedule, and a ban on visitors. Emina understood this while unwrapping the utensils. She was angry with him for the trap, with herself for the cheap

performance, and with Vanja, who was probably still talking about his university trip. Denis admitted that he rarely wanted to go either, but did not know how to refuse a friend who called every absence a betrayal.

They ate among the vases while the lights buzzed overhead. They did not suddenly become good at saying no. Denis first composed an excessively long message; Emina suggested a lie about a headache, and both burst out laughing. Finally he wrote that they were spending the evening together. Vanja sent three question marks. Emina turned the phone facedown. She did leave the window display rearranged. Her cousin did not like the new arrangement at all.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Beginner with Four Aces

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-beginner-with-four-aces/

When Dario explained the difference between trumps and an ordinary suit, I nodded as though I had just discovered electricity. The man had warm hands, a lovely voice, and patience I had not expected from someone repeating the same rules every evening. I found the class after seeing him at a friend's birthday party. Competitive cards had been my favorite sport ten years earlier.

I stopped playing after my divorce. My former husband had been my partner at the table and in the arguments following every wrong decision. With Dario, I wanted a different beginning. I did not want to be the Mira who remembered scores from the previous century and could not tolerate a bad deal. So I let him arrange my cards and praise my progress. Every compliment felt pleasant, although it belonged to an invented woman.

In the fourth week, we arranged a small gathering with another club. I came wearing a green blouse Dario had never seen. Opposite me sat Safet, a former opponent with whom I once played a final until midnight. He looked at me, opened his mouth, and stopped when I kicked him under the table. He was older, but certainly no slower. "How lovely to meet this beginner," he said.

I could have confessed then. Instead, I played so badly that the woman beside me, an actual beginner, started nervously adjusting her glasses. She was losing because of my performance. When I reached for the wrong card again in the final hand, she caught my wrist. "Stop pretending to be stupid for him," she whispered. She knew nothing about my past. What she could see was enough.

I laid down the right card. Then another. Safet leaned back and began laughing, while Dario stopped handing out drinks. Afterwards I told him everything in the corridor, beside boxes of board games. I asked whether

he would still go out with me. He said he did not know which version of Mira would arrive for that date. I had no answer that would not sound like another rehearsed sentence.

The following Thursday I was no longer in the beginners' class. I sat at an available table, without a partner. The woman with the glasses approached carrying two coffees and asked whether I wanted to practice. Passing us, Dario offered a brief, friendly greeting. I did not try to read anything between his words. My partner dealt the cards. I had four aces, and she insisted that I had rigged something again. This time we both laughed.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Gift with a Delayed Question

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-gift-with-a-delayed-question/

His mother thanked Faruk for the soft blanket as soon as he entered. She said he had chosen exactly her favorite color. He looked at the package on the armchair and assumed his sister sent it. But the card bore his name in Merima's handwriting. He and Merima had separated five months earlier. Their breakup had been quiet, exhausted by long conversations, without one major event easily explained to relatives.

Faruk had not yet told his mother everything. He knew she loved Merima and would try mediating. He merely said they were busy and would not visit together for a while. Now he found that postponement folded into a blanket with a message speaking for him. His mother added that the earlier teas were good too. Those teas were another thing he knew nothing about.

After the visit he called Merima. She admitted sending gifts since the breakup. His mother had been close to her, and she did not want to lose that relationship too. Why his name, then? Because she feared a direct gift would look like an attempt to return. Faruk asked how putting his name on a card preserved anyone's honesty. She did not answer immediately.

Merima had neither taken his money nor requested repayment. That made the conversation harder: he could not demonstrate the problem through an amount. She spent her own money on something kind but used it to prolong a performance in which he remained her partner. His mother began planning a shared holiday lunch, convinced work was their only difficulty.

Faruk finally told his mother the relationship had ended. He acknowledged his own fault in avoiding the conversation. He explained the gifts without calling Merima a bad person. His mother said she would

keep the blanket because it was warm but wanted to know who sent things in future. Later she called Merima herself. Their relationship could remain if it stopped hiding behind another signature.

Faruk and Merima met to return their last belongings. There was no renewed reconciliation attempt. She said losing his family had been harder than she admitted. He listened without offering his return as medicine. Several weeks later his mother showed him a postcard signed by Merima. He felt slightly uncomfortable but not betrayed. Everyone could finally choose their own relationship without a hidden intermediary keeping the former one alive for them.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Song He Dedicated to Everyone

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-song-he-dedicated-to-everyone/

When Damir first sang the song to her, Nadja cried. It was not especially complicated, a few chords and a line about a woman leaving a window open even in winter. Nadja did exactly that. He said he wrote it after their first night talking until morning in her kitchen. She kept the song as something that did not need sharing with every audience.

A year later they performed together in a small club. With his agreement Nadja sang it and mentioned it was written for her. Afterward a woman named Iva approached, looking cautious rather than mocking. She said she had received the same song five years earlier with the same story about an open window.

At first Nadja thought Iva wanted to spoil the evening. Damir had described a jealous former partner before. But Iva did not ask to speak to him or promise more secrets. She sent an old performance recording published publicly years before Nadja met him. In it Damir used Iva's nickname and dedicated the song to her. Later another woman contacted Nadja without demanding anyone take her side.

Damir said artists constantly reworked their material. Nadja knew that was true. She was not accusing him of using the same chords. She asked why he gave each window another name and claimed the song had never existed before. He replied that at each moment he felt what he sang. That did not explain why he needed to invent its creation date to make the feeling sound more special.

There was no simultaneous affair she could prove, nor did she need a new investigation. What she knew had already altered their intimacy. In later conversations she noticed how often he used the same lovely sentences to bypass uncomfortable questions. When she requested a break, he half-jokingly sang the chorus. That was when she decided to end the

relationship.

They continued separately as performers. Nadja removed the song from her repertoire, not because it lacked value but because she could not sing without hearing somebody else's story beneath hers. She began writing lyrics, badly at first, with too many words and too little breath. At one performance she forgot a line and simply told the audience. They laughed and waited. For the first time an imperfect moment sounded more honest than a perfect dedication.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Years She Erased

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-years-she-erased/

Alma entered forty-two instead of forty-nine in her profile. She told herself it was only a way around other people's filters and she would tell the truth before anything became serious. Then she met Pavle, forty-six, who laughed at the same wrong moments in films. At the first coffee it was too early. At the third it was too lovely. Later every suitable moment had a reason to pass.

She did not lie about her daughter, work, or divorce. That was precisely her comfort. Seven years seemed small beside everything else she had told him. Yet whenever she mentioned a school friend or an old trip, she had to recalculate dates. The love meant to make life easier acquired invisible arithmetic.

For her birthday Pavle ordered a cake bearing forty-three. Alma saw it when the courier delivered the box while he showered. For a moment she considered removing the number and claiming it had broken. Then she sat on a kitchen chair. Her daughter and several friends were due in two hours. She could no longer leave the truth to them as an awkward surprise.

She told him as soon as he emerged. Today she was fifty. Pavle looked at the cake, then at her. Initially he thought she was joking. Once he understood, he asked why she had not trusted him to decide whether he wanted to be with her. Alma began explaining how people viewed women her age. He stopped her: he believed that hurt, but he was not every man who had ever rejected her.

They told guests the celebration would happen another day. Alma told her daughter without asking her to defend her. Pavle went home and contacted her only several days later. Fifty did not trouble him. What troubled him was that in every conversation she had known something

important about a lie he could not even recognize.

They continued seeing each other more cautiously. Alma deleted the old profile without presenting that as sufficient repair. She had to endure questions and his uncertainty without saying he exaggerated over one number. Meanwhile she had a small celebration with friends. There was no number on the cake, which was no new secret. Her daughter had simply bought flower-shaped candles.

Several months later Pavle invited her to a concert by a band she had loved as a student. She asked how he knew them. He said he listened when she spoke, now without changing dates. Alma took the ticket and felt relief for the first time about all the years she no longer had to carry separately from herself.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Morning After the Holiday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-morning-after-the-holiday/

In the hotel lift they agreed nothing would change. Hana would return to her husband, Viktor to his partner, and what happened during the professional seminar would remain one isolated mistake. They had known each other twenty years. That helped them present the intimacy as a continuation of friendship until they had to part outside rooms where they had no longer slept alone.

At home Hana found a repaired kitchen cupboard and a husband who had bought pears because she mentioned them before leaving. These small things did not prove a perfect marriage. They were simply their life, which she now viewed through something she had not told him. That evening Viktor sent a joke from the hotel. She did not reply but read it three times.

The agreement to change nothing lasted four days. Viktor suggested lunch, then another. He said their affair helped them be better at home because they were less unhappy. Hana listened and recognized the appeal of that explanation. It required nobody to lose anything immediately. It merely required two other people to lack part of the truth about their own lives.

At the second lunch she said she would not continue. Viktor felt hurt and asked whether it had meant nothing to her. Hana replied that it mattered, which was why she could not call something they deliberately repeated a mistake. He said this would destroy their friendship too. For the first time that possibility seemed a consequence to accept rather than a threat requiring her to stay.

She told her husband several days later, once she could speak without blaming their distance. He requested time and asked uncomfortable questions. Hana did not expect confession to clean everything away. She

slept in the study, went to work, and tried enduring ordinary evenings without using Viktor's messages as shelter.

Viktor chose not to tell his partner. He messaged Hana that he hoped she would not drag him into her decision. She replied she would not speak on his behalf but would not confirm lies if asked directly. Then she ended contact. Their longstanding friendship did not survive what they had done with it.

Months later Hana and her husband were still trying to understand whether they wanted to remain together. One morning he asked her to buy pears. She did not make that a sign of forgiveness. She simply selected them carefully and brought them home, ready for their future to be built from real answers even if some eventually meant leaving.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Reservation for One

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-reservation-for-one/

Dina had planned the Lisbon trip for a year. It was not luxurious: a small apartment, hand luggage, and breakfast from a shop. Her partner Filip promised to switch off his work phone for at least a few hours daily. For the previous two years client calls had interrupted every holiday, and Dina increasingly traveled like someone keeping a spare place for him at the table.

Two days before departure she could not find her booking. Filip said the system was probably delayed. His ticket was fine. She tried again in the morning, then called support using the contact in the confirmation she had saved herself. She learned her booking had been canceled five days earlier at the purchaser's request. The money had already returned to Filip's card.

When she asked, he admitted there was a business gathering in the same city to which he had unexpectedly been invited. The organizers' hotel booking could accommodate only him. He thought Dina would understand if he explained later, once everything was arranged. So he canceled her ticket before telling her. The apartment was canceled too. Their holiday disappeared while she was still choosing books for the flight.

Filip offered a trip somewhere in spring. Dina said she first wanted her share refunded. It was not about the sum but his treating her time as spare material for his own opportunity. He replied that he worked for their future too. She asked where that future contained room for a decision of her own.

He traveled to the gathering. Dina did not buy an expensive replacement ticket to prove her independence. She used the planned leave to visit a friend in another city, where they walked, cooked, and watched films.

There was no romantic revenge or new man. She simply spent a holiday for the first time without waiting for somebody's meeting to end.

On his return Filip brought a gift and plenty of business news. Dina listened, then said she was considering living separately. He looked surprised because he believed the problem had been the trip, now over. She explained the problem precisely had not passed: he still thought he had been entitled to decide for her and merely should have announced it sooner.

They separated several months later. Dina went to Lisbon alone the following autumn. In a small restaurant the waiter asked whether she was waiting for someone. She looked at the empty chair and said no. She ordered dinner while still hungry, without sending a message to check when somebody else would arrive.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Lessons He Concealed

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-lessons-he-concealed/

Jelena went to the sports center to return a scarf her friend had forgotten. Through the small studio's glass she saw her husband dancing. Emir held a woman by the hand, turned her to the music, and laughed in a way he rarely did at home. Jelena recognized the woman from an old photograph. Her name was Dunja, and she had once won amateur dance prizes with him while they were a couple.

Emir said he helped a colleague at a repair shop on Saturdays. Jelena did not wait for the song to end. She entered, placed the scarf on a bench, and asked whether the shop had changed businesses. Emir dropped Dunja's hand. Their instructor stopped the music and tactfully went for water. Dunja immediately said she had not known Jelena was unaware of the lessons.

They were preparing a performance by former dance-club members. There was no renewed romance, something Jelena could later accept. What she could not immediately accept was six weeks of invented working Saturdays. During that time she had decorated the apartment alone and canceled an outing because she thought they needed extra income. Emir had obtained the freedom to dance through her trust, not an agreement.

At home he explained that a call from Dunja had upset her several years earlier. Jelena remembered it: Dunja called at midnight, and she had an early shift. She admitted reacting harshly but had not forbidden an entire part of his life. He admitted it was easier to use an old argument than open a new question. He also enjoyed having something of his own without explanation.

"You can have something of your own," Jelena said. "But Saturdays didn't become longer because you told me you were working." Their

arrangement about responsibilities had to be real. She did not ask him to abandon the performance. She asked him to stop treating her agreement as something to bypass because he expected an uncomfortable conversation.

The following week Emir cleaned and painted the room he had promised to finish. It was not payment for guilt, simply overdue work. Jelena took a day trip with a friend. She later attended the dance performance, sat in the last row, and watched without pretending enthusiasm. He was good. That pleased and hurt her at once.

Afterward he offered his hand for an ordinary dance. She said she did not want to that evening. Emir accepted the answer. A month later she suggested going out for music herself. She danced awkwardly and became annoyed when he tried teaching her mid-song. They laughed, and he stopped counting steps. It was not a return to the past but an attempt to let something of his exist without being hidden from her.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Man Who Did Not Like Meat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-who-did-not-like-meat/

On their first date Mirza said he did not eat meat either. Lejla had not asked whether he shared her reasons or set a condition for dating. She was merely choosing food. He wanted an easy beginning, so he ordered the same and omitted that he had eaten grilled meat that afternoon. A small adjustment, he thought, something to explain once they knew each other better.

A year later they still did not know each other in that ordinary detail. At Lejla's he ate her cooking; with colleagues he ate everything else. He had no health problem or reason to hide a meal, only an increasingly long series of conversations confirming her assumption. When she offered a new recipe, he praised it as a life-changing discovery. Sometimes he genuinely liked it. Sometimes he bought dinner afterward on his way home.

At a friend's barbecue the host placed his favorite meat on his plate without asking. Lejla stood beside him. Mirza could have told the truth but first claimed his friend had confused him with somebody else. The friend laughed and recalled their lunch the previous day. Silence at the table became much larger than one plate.

Lejla did not criticize his food. She asked him to walk. She asked what he thought would happen if he said he ate differently. Mirza admitted fearing he would interest her less. She said it now felt as though she had spent a year speaking to a man who answered what he thought she wanted. Suddenly she questioned films, plans, and his promise that he wanted country life one day.

That last point was not accidental. Mirza did not actually want to leave the city. He said so too, for the first time without softening the sentence. Lejla sat on a low fence and said she needed time. They returned to the

guests without pretending cheerfulness. The host discreetly removed the plate. Nobody needed a joke to fill their discomfort.

Over the following weeks they discussed differences Mirza previously skipped. Some were easy, others important. Lejla neither abandoned her choices nor asked him to copy them. But she would not continue until he spoke as someone allowed his own answer. They stayed together more slowly and cautiously. At their first subsequent lunch they ordered different dishes. Mirza ate without hiding, and Lejla asked for the first time whether he liked it, waiting for an answer he did not already know.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Dog at the Green Door

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dog-at-the-green-door/

Bojan took over the morning walks while his wife Milena prepared for her final licensing examination. Their dog Roko was ten and had habits firm enough to make every outing last almost the same time. On the third morning, however, he pulled toward a street Bojan never used. He stopped at a green door and sat wagging his tail as though outside his own home.

A man behind the door called the dog by name. When he opened it, he looked surprised to see Bojan. He said he knew Roko from the park. The dog was already trying to push his head between the man's knees. Bojan pulled him back, thanked the man politely, and continued walking. He did not know what to conclude from a dog knowing somebody better than he did.

At home he mentioned the street. Milena said she had never been there. Then she added that a friend sometimes walked Roko. Bojan knew the friend had been living in another city for months. He did not say so immediately. He watched Milena move books around the table and felt another conversation suddenly exist between them, the one she was trying to postpone.

That evening he asked directly who lived behind the green door. Milena first asked to talk after her examination. He said he could wait for a longer conversation but not another untrue sentence. She admitted a man lived there whom she had been seeing during Bojan's business trips. The affair, she said, had ended a month earlier. The dog was the only one who had not received a new explanation of the schedule.

Bojan went to stay with a friend and left Roko in the familiar apartment. He missed the dog so much he became angry with himself: his marriage was collapsing, and he thought about paws in the hallway. His friend said

loss did not have to follow an order of importance. The next day he arranged a time with Milena to collect Roko without incidental arguments at the door.

Later they talked many times. Milena passed her examination, but Bojan could not join the celebration. That hurt her, while for him it was the first time he did not soften his own pain to preserve her mood. They decided to live apart until they could see whether any wish to continue existed beyond fear of change.

One morning Roko pulled toward the green door again. Bojan paused, then calmly changed direction. The dog briefly resisted before following the smell of fresh bread from a bakery. Bojan bought him a plain roll and sat on a bench. He did not know where his marriage was heading. That morning it was enough that the walk no longer had to follow somebody else's secret.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Sunday at an Aunt's House

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/sunday-at-an-aunts-house/

Every other Sunday Ismet visited his aunt. He took groceries, returned with an empty bag, and said her television kept losing channels. His wife Vera once offered to come, but he said his aunt disliked visitors. She accepted the explanation because sometimes she did not want to see anyone herself. They had been married eleven years, and she thought she knew at least the outlines of his life before her.

She met the truth in a bookshop. A young man around twenty approached Ismet while they chose a gift and said, "Dad, I didn't know you were here." Ismet froze. Vera looked at the young man's eyes, equally dark and a little close together, and understood before anyone explained. He introduced himself as Danis and immediately saw that she was hearing his name for the first time.

The aunt did exist, but she was not the reason for the Sunday visits. Danis lived with his mother in a neighboring district. Ismet had fathered him before the marriage and initially concealed the child because he feared Vera would leave. Later he told himself the truth would now hurt more than silence. He told Danis that Vera knew but found meetings uncomfortable.

Vera left the bookshop without the gift. She was not jealous of the son. She was horrified by the cold woman her husband had written her into someone else's life as. Danis caught up and awkwardly said he had not meant to cause trouble. Vera replied that neither his arrival nor his existence was the problem. She thanked him for introducing himself because it was the day's only honest introduction.

At home Ismet tried listing everything he had properly done for his son: money, appointments, birthdays. Vera let him finish, then asked who would explain to Danis that he had not been unwanted in their house for

years. She could not conduct that conversation for him. She asked him to correct the lie directly without making her an interpreter or witness to her own goodness.

Ismet did so. The marriage did not immediately collapse, but it did not resume its old rhythm either. Vera spent several weeks living separately and refused to let relatives call Danis a secret, as though he were something that needed hiding. Later she invited him for coffee, with his agreement and no promise of an overnight new family. They discussed university and books. His father was not present.

At the end Danis asked whether he could sometimes contact her for a reading recommendation. Vera said he could. Much remained unresolved with Ismet. Still, she did not want his longstanding lie to keep deciding which people in her life were allowed to sit at the same table.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Money for Blue Tiles

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-money-for-blue-tiles/

Merima kept a blue tile sample on the windowsill for months. In the morning it looked gray, by afternoon almost turquoise. She and Sanjin had saved for two years to replace their old bathroom, giving up trips and major purchases. When the contractor finally had an opening, Merima brought the sample to the table and said they needed to pay for materials.

Sanjin admitted the money was gone. First he said he had made a bad investment in a colleague's small business. Merima requested an explanation, not because she understood investments but because they had never discussed the risk. Sanjin invented deadlines and repayment promises. As he spoke, he looked at the tile as though its reflection might save him from questions.

Three days later his brother Faris came to thank them. He brought a bag of fruit and said he did not know how he would have managed without their help. Merima stood in the doorway long enough for Faris to realize he was addressing the wrong person. The money had paid debts accumulated during several months of betting. Sanjin told him they had jointly decided to help, provided he sought support and stopped borrowing.

Faris sat in the hallway and admitted everything he knew. Merima did not humiliate him over his problem but clearly said she had not agreed to give away her savings. His shame could not explain Sanjin's decision to exclude her. When her husband arrived, for the first time the brothers could no longer shelter one another behind good intentions.

Sanjin said he could not watch his brother fall apart. Merima replied that she would not have turned away either, but help had to begin with the truth about whose money was being given and what it could solve. The second lie, the invented colleague, hurt most; it protected not Faris but

Sanjin's image of himself. That evening she returned the tile sample to the windowsill without throwing it or making a speech.

They postponed the bathroom. They separated personal savings from their joint account and agreed no major decision could be made in silence. Faris began repaying what he could and sought help for his betting. Merima did not follow his every step; she refused to become the keeper of a debt she had not chosen. Her relationship with Sanjin remained tense long after the first repayments.

When they finally bought tiles a year later, they no longer chose blue. Merima had grown tired of looking at them. Sanjin suggested white, she suggested green, and they went home without buying anything so they could think further. For the first time she did not mind a decision taking time. At least both were in the room where it was being made.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Guests Who Did Not Fit the List

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-guests-who-did-not-fit-the-list/

Miran called his uncle and apologized for not inviting him to the wedding. The room was small, he said, and he and Ines wanted a modest celebration. His uncle said he understood and offered to bring village cheese anyway. Afterward Miran stared at the phone. His uncle had raised him after his father's death, and now he was leaving him out over twelve fewer places on a list.

Ines insisted there was no alternative. Her agency job required a few professional invitations, but she promised to limit her family too. Miran trusted her because he had left most arrangements to her. He worked double shifts at the repair shop so they could pay without borrowing. It never occurred to him that his absence from planning might become an opportunity for a different order of importance.

At the restaurant, while delivering the deposit, he met Ines's colleague. She was delighted to bring her new partner, although the couple had never met him. Miran asked how many people the room held. The manager showed him a layout for eighty with twenty free places. Miran requested no changes. He took a copy home and waited for Ines.

At first she talked about guests' comfort. Then she admitted fearing how his family would look in front of her professional acquaintances. His uncle sometimes drank, his aunt spoke loudly, and his cousins wore clothes insufficiently formal for her taste. Miran listened and understood that a small room was merely a more polite name for her shame.

He did not claim his relatives were perfect. His uncle could indeed be difficult. But Ines had not discussed behavior they wanted to avoid; she had removed people beforehand. He asked whether she would one day hide him when he became unsuitable. She cried and said he twisted everything. Miran canceled his extra weekend shift and went to explain

the truth to his uncle in person.

They postponed the wedding. They lost part of the deposit and received part as a voucher for a later celebration. For the first time Ines had to tell colleagues the date was changing without inventing family illness. For months they discussed what they were actually trying to build together. Not every conversation ended in reconciliation.

Eventually they married before a small group both had chosen. His uncle brought cheese, his aunt spoke loudly, and Ines no longer apologized for them. She invited her business acquaintances to an ordinary dinner another time. That day Miran noticed her setting out an extra plate for his uncle herself. It did not erase what had happened. It was an action he could respect, unlike the first guest list.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Postcards Without a Journey

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/postcards-without-a-journey/

The first postcard showed a sea Lada had last seen five years earlier. She bought it in a secondhand shop with three others and asked a friend on the coast to mail them. She told her partner Emir she needed a week alone. He helped pack her bag and wished her a good rest. She packed pajamas, a book, and spare socks, everything she actually needed at her former husband's apartment.

Vlado was recovering from surgery. He had no close family in town, and they had remained on civil terms. Lada wanted to help but feared Emir's jealousy. She did not even ask how he would feel. She remembered one awkward remark he had made the previous year and turned it into permission to hide the entire week in advance.

Vlado knew nothing of the lie. He thought Emir was coming on Friday with a shower stand he had offered to lend months earlier, when surgery was still only planned. So he called to ask whether the afternoon suited him. Emir thought it was a wrong number, then recognized the name. Lada was washing cups in the kitchen when Vlado said her partner sounded confused.

Emir came without the stand. He looked at her bag beside the sofa and the postcard she had not yet sent her friend. He did not shout at Vlado, who was trying to stand without assistance. He asked Lada to come outside. There he first asked why she could not say she was helping. She answered that she had not wanted an argument. "So you decided what I'd say, then punished me for that answer," he said.

Lada began explaining there had been nothing romantic. Emir said what hurt him more at present was that every phone call from the beach had been an invented performance. He showed her the message describing a sunset while she was actually waiting for soup water to boil. Nobody's

illness required that. She had added it herself to make the lie convincing.

She stayed until her agreed help for Vlado ended but immediately corrected the story with him too. Emir sent the stand through a friend. He neither demanded she abandon a sick man nor returned to their routine as though nothing had happened. Over the following months they discussed jealousy, assumptions, and boundaries, often uncomfortably. Lada understood that a good reason for an action was not automatically a good reason for secrecy.

Her first real holiday was alone in the mountains, with Emir's knowledge. She sent one photograph without trying to prove every hour. He replied that it was raining at home. It was an ordinary exchange, more modest than her postcards and much harder to earn.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Handwriting from Someone Else's Notebook

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/handwriting-from-someone-elses-notebook/

Helena kept the letters in a biscuit tin. They were not extravagant, merely carefully written: about a tram smelling of wet wool, an old man always feeding pigeons with the same hand, and the way her eyebrows drew together when she read. Adnan, whom she had dated for five months, spoke little in person. The letters seemed the place where his shyness disappeared.

At a writing workshop she met Mara, a woman who wrote wedding speeches and occasional pieces. During an exercise Mara used a sentence about wet wool. Helena laughed and said she had recently received the same image in a letter. Mara paused, asked who wrote to her, and immediately looked as though she would rather change the assignment.

She did not try to lie. Adnan paid her to help compose the letters. He brought notes about Helena, small things he noticed, and Mara turned them into graceful paragraphs. She thought Helena knew. Helena had not known. She returned home feeling someone was moving furniture in a room she had considered her own.

Adnan came that evening. He admitted the arrangement and showed his notes, written briefly, almost roughly. "Likes bread crust. Doesn't like me saying don't worry. Laughs when angry, but I shouldn't laugh then." Helena read them, confused because they were both more intimate and much less beautiful than the letters. She asked why he had not given her those. He said he thought someone like her expected better words.

She expected his. She asked him to leave and did not answer for several days. The letters had not become false in every detail, but the signature had. What hurt most was that he had let her praise his language, accepting admiration for courage he had rented. Mara offered to talk.

Helena thanked her and declined; a third person skilled at sentences could not solve their problem.

After a week Adnan left a short note with the porter without asking her to read it immediately. It said he was sorry, would not use shame as an excuse, and would like to walk if she ever wanted to. He had crossed out the last word and written it again. Helena studied that awkward correction for a long time before calling him.

They continued seeing each other more slowly. She kept the letters but no longer stored the tin beside her bed. One day Adnan told her in person about waiting for a bus and seeing a dog refuse to cross a puddle. The story had no beautiful ending. Helena asked what happened next. He shrugged: the bus came. She laughed, this time knowing whose voice she heard.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Message for the Substitute Mother

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-message-for-the-substitute-mother/

For three weeks Ela helped Andrej prepare his daughter's graduation celebration. Lena was nineteen and lived with her mother in another city. Andrej said she needed time to accept his new relationship. So Ela agreed to be introduced as a friend for now. Two years into their relationship that word already felt too small, but she did not want to force an adult child into feelings she did not have.

She ordered the cake, found chairs, and helped arrange the garden. Andrej thanked her at night when they were alone. Before others he merely said Ela knew where things were. On the day Lena approached with an envelope and said her father had forgotten the agreed weekend supplement. Ela looked without understanding. Lena thought she had been coming for years as household help.

There was no ambiguity. Andrej told his daughter Ela cleaned, cooked, and helped because work kept him too busy. He had not simply postponed an introduction. He assigned her an occupation and working hours to explain her shoes in the hallway. Ela returned the envelope and said she did not work for Lena's father. Then she asked him to speak with them before guests arrived.

Lena became angry first. She was not against their relationship; she objected to her father claiming for two years that he still mourned his marriage while sharing daily life with somebody else. Andrej tried saying he had protected both. Ela asked from which truth exactly: having a partner, her being a real person, or his daughter having her own reaction without his script.

The celebration continued because Lena did not want her father taking that day too. Ela stayed only as long as she wished, sat as a guest, and declined to take over the kitchen when glasses ran short. Andrej carried

trays. It was not public punishment but the host's work he had until then invisibly left to her.

Afterward Ela went home and requested time without daily calls. Andrej had to explain his decisions to his daughter without Ela mediating. Several weeks later Lena sent a graduation photograph and thanked her for avoiding a scene before guests. Ela wished her a good summer. She did not continue with Andrej. She did not want a third year trying to occupy a place he already knew how to make for her only when nobody else watched.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Same Joke on Two Balconies

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-same-joke-on-two-balconies/

Masa rented two apartments because she believed friendship needed both shared dinners and separate bathrooms. Her recently divorced best friend Sonja traveled with her and her husband Aleks. On the first day they bought too many tomatoes, lost the way to the beach, and laughed at everything that would not have earned even a smile at home.

On the third evening Sonja spilled wine on the balcony. Aleks immediately said, "The red cloud again." They both burst out laughing. Masa asked what it meant. Sonja explained they had once heard it in a film. Aleks said an advertisement. A small pause followed, short enough for everyone to ignore, long enough for Masa to stop hearing the sea.

She did not question them at the table. The next day she went for bread early and returned without it because the bakery was closed. In the hallway she heard Sonja say, "I can't do another three days." Aleks replied that now was not the time. Masa remained outside the door holding her empty cloth bag. She did not need the whole sentence to understand they meant her.

She entered and asked how long. Aleks looked down. Sonja said it had happened during winter when Masa was away for work. That word, happened, made everything almost accidental. Masa asked them to use verbs with people actually doing things. Then they admitted meetings, messages, evenings in her kitchen when she believed they were helping Sonja through her divorce.

Aleks suggested finishing the trip peacefully and talking at home. Masa looked at the tomatoes in the bowl and felt a strange anger at their perfect red color. She did not want to perform for another three days. She called the apartment owner, explained the change of plans, and arranged separate bills. Sonja left on the first bus. Aleks packed their things, but

Masa told him to leave hers.

She stayed two more nights alone. She cried in the mornings, swam in the afternoons, and once ate only ice cream for dinner because she could not bear a restaurant for three. The owner asked no questions. She brought clean bedding and showed her where to leave the key. That practical kindness was the only kind she could accept then.

At home came difficult conversations and a separation. She did not resume her friendship with Sonja. A year later she returned to the same place with her sister. On the balcony her sister spilled juice and began apologizing. Masa rose to fetch a cloth without the sudden collapse she had expected. She could hear the sea clearly. They wiped the table, brought another glass, and continued a conversation belonging only to them.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Weekend in a Borrowed House

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-weekend-in-a-borrowed-house/

Damir knew where the glasses were kept, which key opened the shed, and how to switch on the heating. That knowledge let him present his aunt's house as his own. He told his fiancee Azra he had bought it cheaply a few years earlier from a friend moving abroad. In reality he checked on his aunt's property at weekends while she worked overseas.

The lie began at dinner with Azra's parents. Her father kept talking about apartments and investments. Damir, who worked in a bookshop, felt small and uttered a sentence he later had to feed with details. Azra had not asked for a house. But when he first brought her there, she loved the garden, planned to plant herbs, and left an old jacket in the wardrobe.

They invited their parents to lunch to celebrate the engagement. Damir prepared the barbecue and asked his aunt not to send any repairmen that weekend without explaining why. He did not expect her to return early from Vienna herself. She appeared with a suitcase while Azra was showing her mother the room they supposedly intended to turn into a study.

"What are you turning into what?" his aunt asked. Nobody laughed quickly enough to make the sentence a joke.

Damir tried to lead her into the kitchen, but Azra remained at the door. She asked who owned the house. His aunt answered simply, without anger because she did not yet understand the whole story. Damir confessed in front of everyone. Azra's father immediately began saying he had always suspected. Azra asked him to stop. She did not need Damir's lie turned into her father's proof about the worth of people earning less.

Lunch ended before dessert. Azra collected her jacket and left in her own car. Damir stayed to clean the grill, talk to his aunt, and admit for the first time how ashamed he had felt of his own life. She told him a bookshop

was nothing to be ashamed of, but someone else's house was no cure for shame. She did not forbid him to visit. She forbade him to speak on her behalf again.

Azra postponed the wedding. After several weeks she agreed to talk in his real apartment, small and full of books. She asked them to review everything he had said about money, work, and plans. Damir answered without embellishment, including things that did not make him interesting. They set no new date immediately. She left late, forgetting a scarf on a chair. She had not deliberately left it, but Damir did not turn it into a sign of certain return. The next day he simply told her where it was.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Three Identical Bouquets

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/three-identical-bouquets/

The customer requested three identical bouquets, without roses. He said roses looked like an apology. Filip arranged white lilies, greenery, and tiny purple flowers. The man inspected all three, paid cash, and asked for cards he would write himself. Filip was thinking about weekend supplies, not why someone needed three identical tokens of affection.

The customer left one card on the counter. It read, "For our Thursday, N." Beneath it was Filip's home address.

At first he thought he had misread the number. His wife Irena worked from home on Thursdays. The man returned before Filip could decide anything and collected the card, thanking him for his care. Filip let him leave. He did not know whether a question asked in the shop would produce truth or merely a performance he would have to watch in front of his assistant.

That afternoon he closed on time and went home. His bouquet stood on the kitchen table. Irena said a colleague had sent it to celebrate a completed project. Filip pulled the receipt from his pocket and placed it beside the vase. "I made it," he said. Irena looked at the number of bouquets on the receipt, then at him. Her first reaction was to ask who the other two were for.

The moment almost made him laugh. They stood in their own apartment, and she had just discovered she might not be the only woman receiving flowers from her lover. Filip did not answer because he did not know. He sat at the table and asked how long their affair had lasted. Irena said five months and that she had not planned to leave. It did not sound comforting to him.

Over the following days they discussed the apartment, work, and the people who needed to know they had separated. Irena tried explaining

that the affair had become a habit she did not know how to escape. Filip understood habits could be powerful. He did not understand why he had to live inside a version of her day that did not exist. He temporarily stayed with a friend, retaining his rights to their apartment and time to decide.

Two weeks later the customer returned for flowers. Filip served him properly and coldly. He did not mention Irena or charge extra. Afterward he asked his assistant to take over for ten minutes. He sat in a nearby park and let his hands grow still. He did not have to turn his business into a place of revenge for his hurt to be real.

Eventually he decided to divorce. At the shop he continued making bouquets, including white lilies. One morning he bought himself a small potted plant, something he did not have to cut for it to look beautiful. He placed it in his new apartment's window and forgot to remove the price tag. When he noticed it, he left it another day. He was in no hurry to make everything neat at once.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Name She Invented

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-name-she-invented/

Tamara said a colleague had sent flowers because Ivan had failed to notice her new dress. The sentence came more easily than she expected. She had bought the flowers herself, discounted just before the shop closed. Ivan looked at the bouquet and asked the colleague's name. Tamara said the first name that came to mind: Marko, a designer she had worked with two years earlier.

She expected jealousy, perhaps an apology for his distraction. Ivan simply said it was a nice gesture and returned to messages about his ill father. Tamara took his calmness as further proof she did not matter. The next day she told a friend that Marko was inviting her to dinner. The friend knew his wife, something Tamara did not consider at the time.

At the weekend Marko sent a short message asking whether she could explain the flowers. Her face instantly grew hot. His wife had heard the story and believed he was again hiding something about which Tamara knew nothing. She tried replying that there had been a misunderstanding. Marko called and said the misunderstanding had her name and a very specific account of a supposed dinner.

Tamara wanted to ask Ivan to help find a way out, then realized that would be another means of shifting responsibility onto someone else. She called her friend and said she had invented everything. Then she wrote the same to Marko and his wife without claiming it was a joke. She offered to repeat the correction to anyone who had heard the story.

Ivan learned from her that evening. He sat in his jacket, having just returned from the hospital. He asked why she had not said she needed attention. Tamara answered that she feared sounding selfish while his father was ill. "And this sounded better?" he asked. There was no good answer. She admitted wanting to provoke a response instead of facing the

possibility of an honest refusal.

During the following weeks Ivan visited less often. He did not inspect her phone or demand evidence, but he no longer believed every casual story. Tamara did not demand her old trust back because she had confessed. She began speaking more simply: I miss you, I am angry, I cannot be alone tonight. Sometimes he could come. Sometimes he had to stay with his father.

Marko's wife later thanked her for the clear correction but offered no friendship. Tamara accepted that too. In spring she bought flowers again. When Ivan arrived, she immediately said she had chosen them herself. He put water in a vase, then noticed she was wearing an old dress he liked. This time she did not have to invent another man to tell him how much that meant.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Concert for One Empty Seat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-concert-for-one-empty-seat/

The tickets sat beneath a refrigerator magnet for a month. Jasmin had bought seats near the aisle because he knew Dzenana disliked stepping over other people's knees. It was a concert by the band they listened to when they first met. Every morning, as she reached for milk, she looked at the date and calculated how much time remained for her to stop lying.

Three months earlier she had met Igor again, a university friend. First they drank coffee after work. Then she began silencing phone notifications and telling Jasmin she was staying at the office. Igor promised no future together. That very impermanence had seemed like freedom until she understood that she paid for her freedom with somebody else's ignorance.

At a rehearsal for a school concert organized by their adult daughter, a music teacher, she watched Jasmin patiently hold a stand for a pupil. He had not become a better man that afternoon. He was the same man she had spent recent months turning into a tedious obstacle in her mind. Dzenana stepped into the corridor and told Igor she would not come to their planned dinner. Then she switched off her phone so she would not wait for his reply instead of talking at home.

Jasmin was folding laundry when she told him. She offered no lengthy account of the distance between them. She said what she had done, how long it had lasted, and that she had decided to end it. Jasmin put down the shirt he had just folded. He asked whether anyone else knew. Then he asked her to stay with her sister that night. He did not raise his voice, which made none of her sentences easier.

The next day she messaged to ask whether he needed anything from the shop. He said no. Only then did she understand how much faster her need to repair something was than his right to be hurt. She stopped

offering small favors in place of an answer. She ended contact with Igor and, when Jasmin asked, showed him the message without demanding that it make him trust her.

There was no anniversary dinner together. Jasmin took a friend who knew every song to the concert. At her sister's, Dzenana washed her hair for the first time without checking her phone between movements. Later they began conversations with professional support. Some evenings ended early because Jasmin could not listen any longer. She learned to remain present without asking for his pain to have a deadline.

A year later they still lived separately but saw each other on Saturdays. On one walk Jasmin mentioned another concert. Dzenana did not ask whether that was an invitation. They continued to the bakery, where he bought two pastries and handed her one. It was a small shared moment, real enough that she did not have to turn it into a promise of complete forgiveness.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Bad Review for a Good Cake

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-bad-review-for-a-good-cake/

The first bad review arrived after a lemon cake. It said delivery had been two hours late and the filling had spilled across a car seat. Aida checked the messages: the customer had collected the cake personally, smiling, ten minutes early. Her fiance Nermin said the internet attracted spiteful people. He suggested closing the page until she found a safer job.

Aida worked from a rented kitchen, following all its rules, and was saving for her own premises. Nermin considered it an expensive hobby. Still, he brought flour and drove her to the market, so she interpreted his objections as fear of debt. When a second review arrived for an order she had never received, she began recording profile names and dates.

The third concerned a birthday cake for a woman named Nadja. Aida knew only one Nadja, a librarian who had thanked her a week earlier with a photograph of an empty plate. She sent her a screenshot and asked whether she had misunderstood something. Nadja was angry that somebody was using her name, but even angrier that they described a private event they had not attended.

The review said her granddaughter cut the cake with a green knife. Aida had told only Nermin that detail, laughing about the child's persistence. She did not immediately draw a conclusion. She showed him the messages over dinner and asked him to help report the fake profile. Nermin said she should not create drama. Then the review disappeared before the report was submitted.

The next day she asked him directly. At first he denied it, then admitted wanting to show her how difficult business could be. He claimed he was trying to protect their future. Aida placed her hands on the table to stop them trembling. "My future can't depend on whether you stop sabotaging it," she said. She did not remove her engagement ring theatrically. She set

it aside while washing dishes and never put it back.

Nermin removed the remaining false posts and confirmed in writing what he had done. Aida did not publish his name. She kept the confirmation and requested a review of the disputed ratings. She asked customers to describe their honest experiences if they wished, without telling them what to say. Nadja wrote that the cake arrived on time and the child ate two slices. She also mentioned the green knife.

Within three months Aida saved enough for a small counter in a shared shop. At the opening her friend brought flowers and her mother an oversalted pie. The first customer ordered a lemon cake. Aida wrote down the date and requested a deposit, as she did from everyone. Success was still uncertain, but failure finally had nobody secretly helping it along.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

An Hour Apart

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-hour-apart/

Nina turned off the television to hear her husband better. Davor was supposedly calling from a hotel in Lisbon, where he was leading a business workshop. He said dinner with clients began in an hour. In the background she heard something resembling a tram announcement. Nina asked whether it was raining. He said it was sunny, although darkness already filled the window behind her.

What confused her was not the weather but his saying it was equally late where he was. Davor often got time zones wrong. She messaged him that Lisbon was an hour behind. He answered with an emoji and changed the subject. Nina put dinner in the refrigerator and resumed studying Italian, a course she had started after their children left for university.

The next day their professional association posted an invitation to a public lecture at the local Konac center. Davor's coat appeared in a photograph of the stage preparations. Nina recognized the patch she had sewn on its sleeve. It could have been an old photograph. She called the organizer, whom she knew from earlier projects, and asked when the lecture began. He said Davor was checking the projector at that very moment.

She went after work. She did not enter the hall. She waited by the cloakroom, where he stood beside a woman adjusting his collar. When he saw Nina, he stopped in the middle of a sentence. The woman stepped back but did not seem surprised by her name. She knew about the marriage. That shortened a conversation Nina might otherwise have tried to make polite.

At home Davor admitted he had not traveled for three months. He had been staying in another apartment, telling both women he intended to make a decision soon. Nina asked which decision he could make on her

behalf. He had no answer. Then he said he had wanted to wait until her course ended, as though an Italian verb test were a smaller obligation than the collapse of a marriage.

The following week Nina slept at her sister's, not because she had surrendered the apartment but because she needed a night without explanations. Later they agreed on temporary living arrangements and separate expenses. They told their children together, leaving out details that would turn them into witnesses. Davor tried several times to speak about loneliness. Nina accepted that he had been lonely but refused to let that become her fault.

At the course's closing dinner, the teacher asked where they wanted to travel first. Nina said she wanted to go to a city whose name she had not yet chosen. Everyone laughed, assuming she was joking. Afterward she bought a travel notebook and wrote the date on the first page. Beneath it she left an empty space for the destination, ready this time to choose both the place and the time of departure herself.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Wardrobe in the Rented Apartment

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wardrobe-in-the-rented-apartment/

Daria knew every pattern on the bedding in their rental apartment. She sewed pillowcases, welcomed guests, and noted which locks stuck in damp weather. Her husband called the business their extra income. His part was communicating with guests. Hers began when the last guest left a wet towel over the back of a wooden chair.

In November she noticed the apartment had stood empty for three consecutive weekends. Emir said he was changing platforms and waiting for new photographs. Daria went to check the radiators. Inside the wardrobe she found neatly folded women's shirts, a book with underlined passages, and a box of tea Emir disliked. It did not resemble a forgotten travel bag. It looked like somebody's shelf.

While she stood before the wardrobe, a key turned in the lock. A woman her age entered carrying a bag of mandarins. Each first assumed the other had come to clean. The woman's name was Sanja. She said Emir worked late and had let her bring her things early. They were supposed to live together from January. Daria sat on the edge of the bed she had planned to change that morning.

Sanja did not know the marriage was still ongoing. Emir had shown her a photograph of Daria with a colleague, presenting it as proof they had both moved on to other people. Daria knew the picture: it was taken at a colleague's retirement party. She did not defend herself. She opened the shared booking calendar and showed Sanja that a Danish couple had supposedly stayed that weekend.

They called him together from Daria's phone. He tried explaining that things developed at different speeds. Sanja interrupted and asked when he had intended to stop taking her share of the rent. Daria had not expected that information. Emir was charging the woman he had

promised a home while telling his wife business was slow. They ended the call without arranging for him to come.

Daria waited while Sanja removed her clothes. They did not embrace. She helped find a bag big enough for the tea and mandarins, which was more useful at that moment. Afterward she photographed the apartment's condition and retrieved all the financial statements. Only once she had orderly documentation did she speak to Emir about ending their joint business and their marriage.

Several months later they sold the apartment by agreement. With her share Daria bought a small sewing shop with one window facing the street. Her first order was curtains for a young couple. They asked whether she could choose the color for them. Daria brought samples, sat opposite, and waited for them to agree. This time her work began only when other people said what they actually wanted.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Bill for Two Breakfasts

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bill-for-two-breakfasts/

On Sundays Mirna checked the inn's receipts while her husband Alen went to collect fresh cheese. She was used to coffee stains and incorrect sums. What struck her as odd was the handwriting on a bill for two breakfasts in a room that had served as a storeroom the previous week. She recognized Alen's seven, crossed twice, just as on his shopping notes.

She asked who had slept among the boxes of napkins. He said he had put up a supplier whose car had broken down. Mirna might have believed him if she had not found the same receipt a few days later, bearing a different date. She called their accountant about the records without mentioning her marriage. All their suppliers, she learned, sent invoices electronically. Alen had entered these papers as cash expenses.

She did not open his phone. She took out statements for the business account they both had access to and compared them with bookings. For three months he had been paying for an apartment across town. When she placed the papers before him, he first claimed it was business space. Then he sat down and admitted that he met a woman there with whom he had resumed an old relationship.

Mirna poured a glass of water but did not drink it. She asked whether the woman knew about the inn. She did, he said, but believed they had separated long ago. That sentence hurt more than the apartment's address. For months Mirna had served guests as half of a contented couple while elsewhere she had already been declared his former wife.

Alen offered to end everything and repay the money immediately. "We'll settle the money before we discuss us," she said. She arranged a meeting with the accountant and asked for the personal expenses to be separated out. She wanted neither to close the inn nor to keep performing for guests. Alen temporarily handled supplies outside working hours and

moved in with his brother, agreeing to give every employee the same brief explanation.

The woman from the apartment appeared one Wednesday. Her name was Lejla, and she carried an envelope containing a key. Mirna offered her a chair in the empty dining room. They did not compare promises or try to establish which had been more deceived. Lejla said she had ended the relationship. Mirna replied that she was still thinking about her marriage. Both had the right to finish the conversation without a shared plan.

A month later Alen repaid the last of the money. Mirna signed a receipt and left another document in her folder, a proposal to separate their business interests. She did not hand it to him in anger. She had spent weeks calculating what she could manage alone. The following morning she served breakfast to two cyclists, recorded the exact number of eggs, and for the first time in a long while did not listen for a car outside.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Discount I Never Received

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-discount-i-never-received/

Dunja worked at a small bookshop and could buy books for herself and gifts with a staff discount. It was modest but mattered to her. Her husband occasionally collected orders while she was at home. He said he was buying for birthdays, colleagues, and nieces and nephews. Dunja believed he had finally adopted her habit of giving books. She was pleased that he remembered titles she mentioned in passing, even when he did not intend to read them himself.

One morning the owner asked Dunja to review several receipts. She did not accuse her in front of colleagues. She simply showed how many copies of the same title had been purchased under her name. Dunja began explaining their large family, then stopped. Nobody in that family needed seven identical handbooks. The owner said a personal discount could not cover purchases for resale. Dunja heard that word for the first time and felt her face grow hot.

At home her husband admitted it almost immediately. Friends wanted cheaper books, and he kept part of the difference for his time. He did not consider himself a trader. He said he was only helping people and the bookshop still made sales. Dunja asked why he had never told her. He replied that she would have made a problem out of something small. That sentence contained more confession than his entire explanation about his time and other people's benefit.

She asked him to visit the owner with her and explain what he had done. He said there was no need; she worked there and would find the conversation easier. That hurt most. His little profit had already been spent, while her name remained on receipts and in the looks of people with whom she spent her days. He tried giving her money to cover the difference. She took it but said money could not speak the truth on his behalf.

He went. The conversation was short and unpleasant. The owner requested repayment of the difference and ended the practice of other people collecting staff purchases. Dunja received neither praise for honesty nor an immediate restoration of trust. For several weeks she double-checked every personal receipt, although nobody ordered her to. At home her husband stopped saying he had meant no harm. That did not restore her ease, but at least left room for her to describe what she had lost.

For the next family birthday he bought a book at full price. He brought the receipt home, perhaps expecting a smile. Dunja looked at it and returned the paper. She said she did not want to supervise every purchase. She wanted him to stop treating her trust as something on which savings could be made. They gave the book together. He wrote the inscription under his own name, and she signed only after reading the whole sentence.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Prediction from Our Kitchen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-prediction-from-our-kitchen/

Lana did not believe everything the cards told her, but she enjoyed evenings when the future could be laid out across a table. Her friend knew this. She invited an acquaintance who was supposedly especially good at interpreting major life changes. Lana arrived with a cake, intending to enjoy herself. She did not mention the cottage inherited from her grandmother. She was already tired of conversations in which her husband presented selling it as the only reasonable step.

The woman turned over several cards and said she saw a house holding Lana in place. Lana felt uneasy but kept listening. The woman added that a memory was not an obligation and she did not owe the dead the upkeep of a roof. Her husband repeated almost that exact sentence. It could have been an ordinary saying. Then the woman mentioned a red chair beside a window, the only object she should preserve when freeing herself from the rest.

The chair appeared in none of the photographs Lana shared. It stood in a small attic room. The previous week her husband had suggested bringing it to their apartment as a substitute for the house. Lana looked at her friend, who began cutting the cake too quickly. Little further interpretation was needed. Lana asked who had described her house to the woman. She was told some things were simply sensed. Her friend then put down the knife and admitted speaking to Lana's husband.

There had been no elaborate paid scheme. There were several messages, a conviction that they were helping, and an agreement to present the sale as something Lana already deeply desired. It hurt precisely because everybody spoke so gently. Nobody believed they were doing anything cruel. Her friend explained that they only wanted her to stop suffering over an empty house. Lana said she would like a chance to explain what troubled her before they printed the answer in her future.

At home her husband first asked how it had gone. She said the red chair had been very fortunate in the cards. He understood immediately. He tried discussing expenses, but she stopped him. Those expenses had existed before that evening. Now something else existed too: people she loved were willing to impersonate a mysterious authority rather than accept that she had not yet agreed with them.

Later she decided to rent out the cottage for a fixed period. She did not do it to prove her husband wrong. She had found an option their arguments repeatedly skipped. A long time passed before her friend came for coffee again. The cards stayed in the drawer, not because Lana had renounced them, but because she wanted nobody's predictions that evening. She wanted to hear an apology in the ordinary present tense.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Hour I Spent in the Cafe

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-hour-i-spent-in-the-cafe/

I booked the first appointment myself. After months of turning every disagreement into days of silence, I wanted to speak to someone outside our apartment. Emil had neither sent me nor made it a condition. He said he was glad I was trying to do something for myself. That sentence pleased me so much that I carried it all the way to the counseling office door. Then I walked past and sat in the cafe across the street.

I canceled too late, with a short message about work. At home I said the conversation had been difficult. Emil did not ask for details. He made tea and left me in peace. I could have admitted then that I had never entered. Instead I said I had another appointment the following week. I had not booked one. I entered the same time in the calendar, creating an obligation that existed only between me, him, and the waiter who remembered my order.

I invented no professional advice. I invented my own courage. I said I had managed to express something difficult, that I needed time, that change was not immediately visible. All those sentences were plausible enough to escape questioning. Sometimes in the cafe I genuinely wrote down things I wanted to discuss. But no notebook could answer when I started explaining why I was always the one who had to give in first.

One Wednesday Emil finished work early and sat at my table. He had not followed me. He saw me through the window on his way to a shop. I said the appointment had been canceled. He asked whether I wanted company. The waiter brought my usual coffee and asked whether I would stay until six again. Emil did not understand immediately. I understood that continuing would turn him into a man to whom yet another coincidence had to be explained with lies.

I said I had never attended. He sat still, which was harder for me than anger. He asked why I had let him believe we were waiting together for some progress. I had no good answer. I feared speaking to a stranger and simultaneously enjoyed his newfound patience. He was not angry because I had failed to seek help. He was angry because I used nonexistent effort to postpone every question about behavior that hurt him.

I did not put the next appointment in our shared calendar. I booked it and went, without promising that it would repair our relationship. Afterward I told him only that I had attended. He did not make tea as a reward. He asked whether we should have dinner, and at the table told me something I usually refused to hear. I did not manage a graceful answer. I managed to stay and say I needed ten minutes, rather than three days of punishing him with silence.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Dream I Kept Revising

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dream-i-kept-revising/

Over breakfast I said I had dreamed about cheating on him. Marko laughed and asked whether the man in the dream at least had a better car. I accepted the joke with relief. Then I added that the dream had felt unusually real. I described a hotel corridor, a yellow carpet, and the jacket I had left on a chair. I omitted the date. Everything else had happened on Friday, three days before that breakfast, while Marko believed I was at work.

I thought his response would tell me whether I could confess. If he became angry at a dream, I would stay silent. If he said people could not control themselves while sleeping, perhaps I could find a way to bring the conversation closer to the waking world. I did not admit this so clearly to myself. I said I was preparing him for a difficult conversation. In reality I wanted an ending where I received forgiveness before saying what I had done.

The next day I said I had dreamed the same thing again. This time, I added, I immediately regretted it in the dream and returned home. Marko put down his cup. He asked why I was telling him. I said the guilt troubled me. He replied that he could not sit in judgment on my dreams. I wanted to ask what he would do if it had really happened, but I could already hear how that question would sound. Instead I offered more coffee.

On the third evening he interrupted as soon as I mentioned the corridor. He said the carpet never changed, the jacket never changed, only I became a better person at the end each time. He had no proof. He had me, too attentive to every detail that could not help my case. I began crying before confessing and saw him prepare to comfort me. Then I said it had not been a dream. His face stopped halfway through a movement.

He did not ask about the car. He asked whether I had ever intended to return immediately, as I had described. I said no. I stayed until evening and afterward ate dinner with him as though nothing had happened. That part was difficult to say because it left the least room for accident. Marko asked me to stop discussing how bad I had felt. He wanted to know what I had done, without subsequent improvements to my character.

For several weeks we slept separately. I did not know whether the marriage would survive. When we finally talked without interruptions, I did not begin with the dream, loneliness, or how the other man had looked at me. I began with Friday. Marko listened and sometimes asked questions I did not want to answer. I no longer offered another ending. For the first time he had the whole story, and the decision that followed would not belong only to me.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Bags That Did Not Exist

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bags-that-did-not-exist/

I said I was taking two large bags for my sister and would therefore travel in her car. Darko accepted the explanation without many questions. He intended to leave later, and we were supposed to arrive together at the family celebration. I planned to wait for him in the yard, kiss him, and erase the journey from our conversation. I had no two bags. I had one small one and enough fear to turn it into an entire trunkful.

Darko drove too fast for me. Saying I was frightened was never enough. He replied that he knew the road, that the car handled well, and that I was distracting him. Sometimes he slowed down for a few minutes, like a favor that must not be requested again. After our last journey my hands hurt from gripping the edge of the seat. At home I told him I had felt sick. He accepted that excuse more easily than my actual words.

In the morning he came outside early to help with the luggage. My sister opened the trunk. Inside were two jackets and my little bag. I looked at her, but she did not understand what help I wanted. Darko asked where the rest was. I said the plan had changed. He offered to take me after all. My sister was already holding her car door, and for the first time I clearly saw how many more lies avoiding one uncomfortable truth would require.

I said I did not want to travel with him because his driving frightened me. He laughed toward my sister, expecting her to join him. She did not. He said we had arrived alive for twenty years. I replied that I did not want another twenty years of arriving with aching hands. Saying it in front of her felt unpleasant. Hearing it felt unpleasant for him. But I had already tried privately, always ending up explaining why my fear was not an insult to his skill.

At the celebration he spent a long time talking to people at another table. When we were finally alone, he said I had humiliated him. I admitted lying and said I should not have turned my sister into cover. I did not withdraw my reason. He asked what I expected now. I said I would return with her. It was not a plan to teach him a lesson. It was an answer to a specific question about my journey home.

A week later he suggested that I drive us to lunch. I did not turn it into proof that everything had changed. I took the keys. At one junction he began explaining how I could go faster. I looked at him when we stopped at the light. He closed his mouth and moved his hand away from the seat. For the rest of the trip we discussed what food to order. I never once had to invent a reason to breathe.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Suitcase Waiting for an Argument

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-suitcase-waiting-for-an-argument/

I kept the suitcase on top of the wardrobe, behind empty boxes. Davor believed it held winter clothes. I never told him it contained three changes of clothing, a toothbrush, a little cash, and a list of places where I could spend the night. I was not afraid he would hit me or prevent me from leaving. I feared becoming, in every serious argument, the woman who stayed because she did not even know where her bag was.

I had been that woman in my previous marriage. Davor knew the marriage had been unhappy, but I gave him the tidy version in which I simply left one day. I skipped the months of turning back from the hallway. With him I wanted to seem decisive. After we argued, I would later climb onto a chair and check the suitcase. That small task calmed me more than the conversation I refused to continue.

Then the zipper on his travel bag broke. He was spending two nights at his brother's place. I said my suitcase was too small, although he had seen it a hundred times. He offered to take the winter clothes out. I said I had no key. After the third lie in a single minute, he looked at me so carefully that I could not continue. I brought the chair, lowered the suitcase, and unlocked it in front of him.

He did not ask whether there was another man. He asked when I had planned to leave. I said I had not chosen a day. He took out a folded shirt and recognized the one he had looked for two years earlier, wanting to pack it for me on a trip. He realized how long the bag had been waiting. I was surprised that the duration hurt him more than the contents. To him, our arguments ended. After each one, I quietly prepared a possible exit.

I did not promise to stay forever. He did not ask me to throw away the suitcase. He said he did not want to live with someone who let him believe they had resolved something while actually counting clean shirts.

That night we discussed our last argument, the one I had declared unimportant as soon as he raised his voice. For the first time I told him what had hurt in his sentence, instead of ending the conversation and counting my belongings.

He traveled with a bag borrowed from his brother. My suitcase stayed downstairs for several days. Eventually I unpacked the clothes, but put the cash in my own drawer. Davor saw and said nothing. I did not offer him the empty suitcase as proof of love. When I returned it to the wardrobe, I left the key in its lock. Our next argument was no easier, but this time it did not end with my false agreement.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Decision He Made with My Body

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-decision-he-made-with-my-body/

When I told him I was pregnant, Damir smiled before looking at my face. That smile confused me more than the news. We had clearly discussed that I did not want children. He said he agreed and later claimed he had undergone a vasectomy. Now he said life was obviously surprising us. I sat holding the result, trying to understand how he already saw happiness where I had not even managed to name my fear.

I asked about the procedure he described. I did not assume pregnancy alone proved a lie. I wanted to know what happened and what needed checking. Damir avoided answering, redirecting toward the future, a room we could rearrange, and his mother offering help. I repeated the question. Only then did he admit never having the procedure. He said he thought I would change my mind once a child ceased to be merely an abstract possibility.

The room became quiet. I neither shouted nor stood immediately. I looked at a man who considered my clear decision a temporary obstacle, unimportant enough to bypass with an untruth. He began saying he loved me and would accept responsibility. I asked how he imagined taking over what was already happening inside my body. He had no answer, only more promises about the good father he could be.

I went to my sister's. I told her everything without softening it by saying Damir wanted a family after all. She did not ask me to decide that evening. She brought water, offered a room, and accompanied me to speak to a doctor the next day. There I could ask about myself and my options without his plans turning every sentence into a predetermined answer. I did not owe him attendance merely because he wished to participate.

Damir sent messages, initially tender, then angry about being excluded. He said relationship decisions were made together. I replied that he had removed the possibility of a shared decision by lying about something I relied upon. I did not negotiate returning to the apartment. I collected belongings with my sister's help and limited conversations to what genuinely needed settling.

I made the pregnancy decision with information and support I chose myself. I do not want to turn it here into an explanation justifying my departure. I left because someone I trusted tried determining my future through deception, then requested gratitude for a possible outcome. Afterward I spent a long time learning to state my wishes without expecting someone to explain that they knew them better than I did. My sister listened. She did not finish my sentences.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Messages I Answered First

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-messages-i-answered-first/

When Marko saw my ex's name on the screen, I immediately rolled my eyes. I said he would not leave me alone. It was not the whole answer, but it made me appear decisive and innocent. My ex neither threatened me nor arrived uninvited. He wrote occasionally, and I continued conversations more often than I wanted to admit. I showed Marko the latest message, never the one with which I had reopened the door the day before.

I said I was trying to be polite. In reality I liked feeling someone from the past still wanted to hear from me. Things were good with Marko, but I sought reassurance in old messages for the part of me unreconciled with the breakup. I did not want the former relationship restored. I wanted its attention while having Marko comfort me about attention presented as a burden.

One evening he offered to speak to my ex and ask him to stop. I objected immediately, too sharply. I said I wanted no drama. Marko asked why, then, I brought every call into our evening. My prepared account failed. If they actually spoke, he would hear another story, perhaps my recent question about whether he ever missed me. That sentence did not fit the role I assigned myself.

I admitted initiating conversations too. Marko did not demand my entire phone. He said he did not want to supervise someone he should trust. I asked whether he could understand how hard ending my previous relationship had been. He replied that he could, but understanding did not mean playing protector against a situation I maintained myself. For the first time I saw how little room I left for his feelings.

I wrote to my ex that I would stop sending ambiguous messages and had been dishonest toward my new partner. I did not blame his persistence. I

gave Marko time without daily reports of good behavior. We met less frequently for several weeks. I missed him, and then most wanted to seek familiar attention elsewhere. Instead I stayed with the discomfort I had previously distributed between two men.

We continued our relationship more cautiously. I no longer comment on every old contact as proof of being desired or expect Marko repeatedly to confirm he deserves me. Sometimes I remember my ex and regret how things ended. That need not become a message. I can have unresolved feelings without making them a task for the man beside me asking how my day went.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Gift Made with My Savings

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-gift-made-with-my-savings/

For my birthday he brought me a camera. I had wanted it for ages but postponed buying until I saved enough. Holding the box, I was touched he remembered the exact model. Armin watched my reaction with visible satisfaction. He said I deserved something lovely instead of constant waiting. I hugged him, photographed the cake, and told friends all evening how thoughtful he was. I did not know his thoughtfulness was sitting in my nearly empty envelope.

The envelope held my own savings, separate from shared expenses. Armin knew its location because I once showed him how much more I needed. Days after my birthday I opened it to add money and found only a little remaining. First I feared a counting mistake. Then I remembered the camera's price. The gift became a heavy object on the table before I even touched it.

Armin did not deny it long. He said he merely accelerated what I planned anyway and added a smaller amount of his money. He thought I would be happy. I asked why he had not said so when presenting it. He replied that it would spoil the surprise. In that sentence I heard everything he considered important: his generous moment, my delight, the story I would tell others. My right to choose when to buy had no place in the box.

He offered to return the money when possible. I did not immediately ask to return the camera, although I avoided using it for days. I still wanted it, which complicated the conversation. Armin tried using that desire as proof he acted well. I said a useful result did not change how he obtained it. I could love the camera and be angry about publicly thanking him for money he took from me.

He returned what he took in several installments. When friends mentioned the gift, I explained its actual purchase. Armin thought I was

punishing him by talking publicly. I did not share every detail of our argument; I merely refused to maintain the image on which his decision depended. We rebuilt trust more slowly than savings. Sometimes I checked the envelope without reason, angry that this too had become part of my day.

Later I photographed a local craft exhibition and received a small photography commission. I put away the earnings myself. Armin asked what I would do with them. I said I did not yet know. This time he proposed no helpful surprise to decide for me. He sat beside me while I reviewed pictures, without trying to turn my progress into evidence that his original idea had been good after all.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Debt Nobody Forgave Me

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-debt-nobody-forgave-me/

When Emir said we did not need to repay the money immediately, I felt relief. A friend had lent him money for car repairs when our expenses piled up. For months I set aside part of my salary and declined small purchases to clear the debt. Then one afternoon Emir said his friend considered the matter settled. I asked whether he was sure. He replied that they had known each other long enough and life was not all accounting.

We bought a new washing machine. The old one leaked and we genuinely needed it, which made accepting his story easier. I suggested taking his friend something in thanks. Emir resisted a visit. He claimed it would only make an awkward conversation more awkward. I did not understand why generosity required so much avoidance, but let it go, happy not to collect water with towels.

I met the friend's wife at the shop. She mentioned postponing their own purchase while awaiting several loan repayments. I did not immediately think of ours. I said how grateful we were to have been relieved of it. She looked puzzled. Nobody had forgiven the debt. Her husband had merely told Emir it was not urgent that week and they should agree on timing. As she held her basket, I mentally recounted every month of saving.

At home Emir claimed his friend had misunderstood him. I asked exactly who had said what. After several rounds he admitted knowing he still owed the money. He was tired of postponing things and wanted us finally to buy something for ourselves. He could not explain why he had not told me and his friend that wish instead of converting patience into a gift nobody offered.

We called them together. Emir spoke; I did not repair his sentences. We agreed on a repayment plan we could actually fulfill. We could not simply

turn the new machine back into spent money. It stayed in the bathroom, a useful object beside which I felt uncomfortable for a while. Separately I discussed future decisions with Emir, because shared money did not mean I was permitted only his pleasant version of events.

When we repaid the last amount, his friend thanked us in a brief message. There was no celebration or restoration of the old ease. Trust between them remained more cautious. Emir stopped saying life was not all accounting. Sometimes an exact amount acknowledged that another person existed even when you trusted them enough to wait. I kept using the machine but no longer let needing it change the name of somebody else's money.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Ingredient I Did Not Like

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-ingredient-i-did-not-like/

I first said I could not eat onions when Faruk's mother offered me pie. I wanted to decline without explaining that I disliked the flavor. New to the family, nervous, and convinced an ordinary dislike would sound ungrateful, I used those words. She immediately removed the plate and offered something else. Her concern contained so much warmth that admitting my wrong choice of words became harder at once.

Afterward she cooked separately for me. At family lunches she checked ingredients, asked what others had brought, and reserved a separate spoon. I did not stop her. Faruk passed my supposed requirement to friends, restaurants, and his sister. I behaved as though it all came from a fact I had not chosen. Whenever someone made extra effort, I thanked them too warmly, trying to pay with gratitude for the truth I owed.

The problem became obvious before his sister's birthday. She planned a large dish she could not adapt and offered to order food separately for me. I heard her changing the whole preparation schedule because of it. I said she need not, but she replied that she would not risk my health. I could not say everything would be fine without reopening the story I had maintained for years. For the first time I clearly heard the weight others gave words spoken to avoid small discomfort.

I confessed to Faruk that evening. He was angry more about everyone I had made worry than about the onion itself. He said I could simply dislike something. I replied that I feared rejection. He did not accept fear as the conversation's ending. He asked why I continued once everyone knew me well. I had no answer except that receiving care had become easier than being honest.

I called his mother and sister. I explained that I had no such health restriction but had concealed an ordinary food preference. I did not laugh

to make it sound harmless. His mother said she would happily have prepared something else and was sorry I had turned it into a reason for fear. His sister was briefer. She asked me to bring my own food to the birthday if I did not want the planned meal.

I brought salad and helped wash dishes. Nobody forced me to eat onions as punishment. Most uncomfortable was everyone behaving more reasonably than I had assumed for years. Faruk later asked whether I liked the tea he always bought. I admitted it was too strong. He shrugged and moved the box to another shelf. The conversation lasted seconds. Sometimes that is enough for truth to fit at the table.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Flower with a New Label

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-flower-with-a-new-label/

When Davor went away for a longer work assignment, he left me a plant his grandmother had given him. Unsure how to care for it, I asked him to write instructions. He put them on a note taped to the pot. During the first week I moved it into a room I rarely entered. Then I forgot it and overcompensated with attention. Before his return it no longer looked like something explainable by one bad week.

I bought a similar plant and put it in the same pot. I thought I would tell him later, after his travel exhaustion passed. But Davor noticed immediately. He said the leaves looked different. I replied that it had grown and he had not seen it for a long time. When he mentioned a small branch his grandmother tied with string, I said he must mean another plant. By then I knew I was not merely hiding a mistake but rewriting his memory.

For several days he circled the pot, saying something puzzled him. I laughed, called him too attached to details, and pointed out how beautiful the new plant was. I even asked the shop to explain differences, hoping to find a more convincing reason. The assistant asked why I did not simply tell him what happened. I said it was not that simple, although it was becoming complicated mostly through sentences I kept adding.

I confessed over dinner without an occasion I could blame. Davor was initially silent. He said he would have been sad about the plant, perhaps angry at my carelessness, but worse was my persuading him he did not remember his own grandmother. I began saying I feared his reaction. He asked when he had given me reason to replace truth with that conversation. I had no honest answer that excluded my fear of appearing unreliable.

He did not discard the new plant. He left it at the window but removed and kept the old note. I bought no ten new pots and did not ask him to appreciate my effort. For several evenings we discussed other small things I embellished after mistakes. It was uncomfortable discovering how many excuses depended on another person doubting themselves before doubting me.

The plant grows well now, mostly because Davor cares for it. Sometimes he asks me to water it. If I have not, I say so. It sounds too small for a story about trust, but not to me. Once he showed me a new leaf and said his grandmother would have liked it. I did not hurry to agree as though I knew. I asked why, and he told me something about her I had never heard.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

I Had Already Agreed in His Story

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/i-had-already-agreed-in-his-story/

The car was blue, with too much room for people who mostly traveled alone. Sead circled it enthusiastically while Ivona mentally repeated the amount they would have to set aside monthly. They had discussed buying but made no decision. They had agreed only to look. The seller approached with a key and said he was pleased they had both chosen the same model. Ivona looked at Sead, already smiling as though the deal were done.

She said they were still thinking. Sead rested a hand on her shoulder and repeated something about her natural caution. He gave the seller a friendly wink, forming a small alliance in which she became the person who always delayed enjoyment. Ivona recognized it. That was how they had decided on an expensive holiday and agreed to a family lunch she could not prepare. Before others Sead spoke in the plural, making her later no seem like spoiling an existing agreement.

The seller began explaining next steps. Ivona interrupted and said she had not agreed to the purchase. Her voice sounded harder than intended because she had to get through two other sentences to be heard. Sead flushed. He said they could discuss it later. She replied that later came after the paperwork about which he was behaving as though everything were settled. The seller withdrew to give them space.

In the car they had arrived in, Sead accused Ivona of humiliating him. She asked whether he had left any way to tell the truth without correcting him. He claimed he knew she would eventually agree. That was the problem: her opinion had become a temporary obstacle before the answer he already considered final. She did not ask them to abandon every larger plan. She wanted plans to be shared before gaining an audience.

They went home without the new car. For several days they barely discussed money. Then they sat at the table and examined what they could actually afford. Ivona did not immediately soften her position to reward his participation. They chose to keep their existing car longer. Sead called the seller himself and explained that no decision had been made, without mentioning a wife changing her mind.

A month later friends invited them on a trip. Sead began saying they would come, then paused and looked at Ivona. It was not a look asking her to keep the peace. He asked whether she wanted to go at all. She said yes, but they should check dates first. The answer was not especially exciting. That was precisely why she found it easier to believe the plural genuinely included her this time.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

An Apology with an Expiry Date

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-apology-with-an-expiry-date/

Vlado chose Friday because we would have the whole weekend to talk. He said that before telling me why. We sat in the kitchen, lunch ready, his phone switched off. He was unusually calm. Later I understood the conversation had already lasted weeks for him, inside his head, with prepared sentences. For me it began only when he said he had had a relationship with another woman several years earlier.

He spoke precisely: when it began, how long it lasted, that it was over. He cited no receipt I could check because I needed no evidence then. I recognized the month I thought work was troubling him and the weekend when I packed his bag for a supposed trip. I asked several questions, then stopped. Vlado said I could ask anything. I did not yet know what anything meant in a life that had just shifted.

On Saturday he made breakfast and suggested a walk. He said he did not want us trapped indoors with the problem. I did not want to put on a coat. I sat in a room looking through the window. By evening he was impatient. He reminded me he had confessed voluntarily, could have stayed silent, and had behaved differently for years. Every sentence placed his relief on one side and my newly begun pain on the other, an obstacle spoiling progress.

On Sunday he asked whether we could try normality from Monday. That was when I first shouted. What angered me most was not normality but the calendar behind it. He had chosen when to stop hiding and now wanted to choose when I stopped feeling. I said confession was no contract agreeing to his schedule. If honesty mattered only while quickly bringing forgiveness, we were still mostly talking about him.

He went to sleep in another room. The next day I went to work, did what I could, and returned without a decision about our marriage. For weeks I

asked questions at awkward times. Sometimes he answered; sometimes he tried to hurry the discussion. I refused to believe I needed a final outcome to be entitled to time. We arranged conversations with help from someone who would not turn us into competitors for the better version of the past.

I still cannot say how it ends. That irritates some people more than the affair itself. They want to know whether I am staying or leaving, as though indecision were an additional fault. For now I know Friday is not his designated confession day, nor Monday my deadline for a new beginning. When he suggested a walk last week, I accepted. We walked a long time, and for the first time he did not ask whether it meant we were all right.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Birthday He Canceled Himself

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-birthday-he-canceled-himself/

Jelena wanted a simple dinner at home for Saša's birthday. He said he would invite his friends and she hers. A week before the celebration he told her his could not attend. First one, then another, then almost everyone. Saša shrugged and said age showed who was truly close. Jelena hugged him, angry with people who, she believed, had abandoned him without explanation.

The dinner happened anyway, small and pleasant. Saša seemed content but occasionally mentioned those absent. Jelena began responding coldly to his oldest friend. When that friend met them in town and asked why they no longer invited him, she said he apparently considered invitations unimportant. His bewilderment was so immediate that she stopped before continuing the accusation. He knew nothing about the birthday.

Saša first claimed the message might have remained unsent. Jelena asked about the others. There were no other messages. He had invited nobody. He admitted fearing friends would come only from obligation, the evening would be exhausting, and everyone would notice how insecure he had felt lately. He did not want to say the celebration did not suit him. Turning others into people who did not value him was easier.

Jelena could understand fear but would not accept the account as harmless. Because of him she had hurt a man who had refused nothing. Saša said he had not expected her to interfere. She replied that she had listened to her partner describe friends letting him down. She could not simultaneously support him and doubt every sentence in advance. She asked him to tell the truth to those whose names he had used.

The conversations were difficult. One friend grew angry; another said he too sometimes avoided celebrations. Nobody promised Saša never to decline an invitation in future. He had to learn that one no was not a

verdict on an entire friendship. Jelena personally apologized to the man she had treated coldly. She did not relay Saša's fear as an excuse he was supposed to protect for him.

The following year Saša organized no birthday celebration. He said he wanted a peaceful day and suggested separate coffees with several friends during the week. Jelena bought a small cake and did not urge him toward more. One friend could not make coffee, so they arranged another time. Saša told her without bitterness. It was enough that a plan had failed that day, without anyone needing to become a bad person because of it.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Key His Mother Still Had

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-key-his-mother-still-had/

The rice jar changed shelves first. Then the bathroom towels appeared folded in a way Tena never used. Her partner Boris said she had probably moved things and forgotten. Tena was not immediately suspicious. They had recently arranged the apartment and were still deciding where things belonged. Yet when a bowl she had not bought appeared on the table, she could no longer accept that the home was simply adjusting itself to them.

Boris's mother previously had a key, but they agreed to retrieve it once moving was complete. Tena did not want daily visits while they worked. Boris said it was settled. Now she asked whether the key really was with him. He showed her one from a drawer and laughed at her suspicion. He did not mention leaving his mother another copy, convinced a few small visits would not bother Tena if she never learned of them.

Tena found his mother in the apartment when she returned for a forgotten wallet. The woman was washing a window and looked equally surprised. She said Boris had told her Tena appreciated help but did not know how to ask directly. She showed her bag of cleaning products and immediately explained that she did not want to intrude. Tena sat down. For the first time she saw no opponent, but another person Boris had given a convenient, inaccurate role.

When he arrived, both were waiting. He tried embracing his mother, then Tena, as though physical closeness could distribute blame. His mother asked why he said the help had been requested. Tena asked why he claimed to hold the only spare key. He said he wanted them to get along. Neither responded to that intention. They wanted answers about his actual actions, without discussing which woman was more demanding.

His mother left the key on the table and took her cleaning products. She did not invite Tena for coffee to turn their new alliance instantly into

intimacy. She simply said she would ask her directly about visits in future. Boris was dejected for several days and expected comfort. Tena let him be dejected. She was not responsible for repairing the consequences of a story that presented her boundary as an inability to request help.

Later they washed the windows together, awkwardly, leaving streaks his mother would notice. Tena did not demand perfection. She wanted decisions about their home not to originate in conversations where she was absent. Next time Boris invited his mother to lunch only after agreeing it with her. His mother arrived without a bag and sat at the table. The rice stayed on the wrong shelf another month because nobody urgently needed to correct it anymore.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Polite Man Behind Another Name

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-polite-man-behind-another-name/

My partner Zoran never raised his voice at a waiter. He held doors, offered seats, and listened to people others interrupted. So when my friend sent me a series of insulting messages, I first thought of helping her report them, not searching them for someone I knew. She had posted a modest advertisement for sewing lessons. An unknown account mocked her mistakes, age, and attempt to earn extra money.

One message contained a sentence I had heard from Zoran a hundred times: an especially unusual expression for someone putting on airs. It was not proof, but it stopped me. I asked whether he recognized the account. He studied the screen too long, then said everyone wrote nonsense online. I refused that answer. I asked whether he had written it. He admitted it only after I repeated the question without anger that would let him redirect the discussion toward my tone.

He said they were jokes, nobody knew his identity, and he had not intended to hurt my friend. I asked whom he intended to entertain. He showed me other posts where strangers supported his remarks. He was proud of their quick wit. I sat beside a man who days earlier had told me my friend needed more confidence while personally working to destroy it.

I did not ask whether our relationship was the only place he behaved decently. That would offer another grand question he could answer beautifully. I asked him to tell my friend the truth. He refused, claiming it would cause more harm. Then I understood that in his calculation harm primarily concerned him. I told my friend what I had learned, after asking whether she wanted to know who was behind the account.

She blocked him and stopped visiting us. Zoran deleted the account, then grew angry that the atmosphere did not immediately improve. I missed the simple image of the good man I lived with but could not restore it by

closing a screen. I left for a few days, then longer. He said I was leaving him over the internet. I lacked the energy to keep repeating that my friend had cried in a real room, with a real voice.

Later he told me he had apologized to her. I neither checked nor made it a reason to return. At her next class I helped arrange chairs. She did not ask to discuss Zoran. She placed fabric in my hands and asked me to hold it straight. It felt good doing something whose effect I could see immediately, without guessing what kind of person hid behind a courteous sentence.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Joy I Performed for Them

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-joy-i-performed-for-them/

I was the first to say we should go. Mladen received an offer in another city and hesitated over accepting it. I said I needed a change, would find another job, and our current apartment was too small anyway. I was not lying then. I pictured broad streets, a new kitchen, and who I might become away from tiring habits. The trouble began when he believed in that picture more seriously than I could.

As we packed, I grew afraid. My job might not have been interesting, but I knew people. My mother lived nearby, my friend had a key, and the shop saved the bread I liked. I did not tell Mladen I was reconsidering. Instead, at our farewell dinner, I said I had not had much choice. His career required sacrifice, and somebody had to make it. Friends looked at me with an understanding I enjoyed.

Mladen heard only later from a man who kindly advised him to make my adjustment easier. He asked why they thought he was forcing me. I replied that they had not understood it that way, although that was precisely what I wanted. Being a selfless woman felt easier than being someone who had strongly requested something and panicked upon receiving it. I protected my image by slowly turning him into a selfish man.

The argument erupted beside a box of books. Mladen said he could accept my change of mind, but not a life in which his reputation paid whenever I failed to say what I wanted. I started crying, expecting comfort. This time he remained seated. He waited for an answer to a simple question: did I actually want to go? I said I did not know. For the first time I told the truth without choosing a role that made me look better.

He went first. I kept the apartment several more months and paid the expenses my hesitation created myself. I told friends he had not forced me. Some tried explaining that I had merely felt pressured, but I would not let them retell my story in a more comfortable form. Mladen and I talked often, sometimes warmly, sometimes with exhaustion that did not disappear merely because we remembered loving each other.

I moved in spring. I did not bring everything at once or expect my arrival to close the previous months. On the first morning I went out alone for bread and bought the wrong kind. Mladen offered to come with me next time. I said I wanted to learn myself. It was no great declaration of freedom. I was simply trying to take responsibility for the daily part of a decision for which I no longer needed somebody else to blame.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Word Rest on Someone Else's Calendar

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-word-rest-on-someone-elses-calendar/

Debora wrote rest on the calendar in large letters. She had worked several consecutive weekends and wanted one Saturday without arrangements. Her partner Ivan said he understood and promised not to plan anything. On Friday evening she bought pastries for a late breakfast and left her phone charging outside the bedroom. The doorbell woke her much earlier than she would have risen herself, with the feeling she already owed somebody something.

Ivan's friend stood outside with two large plant pots. He thanked her for keeping and watering them while he traveled. Debora thought he had the wrong apartment. Then he showed a message in which Ivan wrote that she was free and happy to help. Half an hour later another message arrived from a friend expecting Debora to accept a package and stay home until the delivery came.

Ivan insisted they were not big jobs. The pots merely stood there, the package simply needed receiving, and she had not planned to go out anyway. Debora asked how he knew what she might want during the day. She did not intend to spend Saturday proving rest was substantial enough to deserve protection. Worse, he had told people she already agreed. His generosity carried her name and used her free time.

She called the friend and said she could not take the plants. He was confused but apologized and returned for them. She sent a similar message about the package. Ivan grew angry because now he looked unreliable. Debora replied that precisely what he had tried to conceal had happened: he had promised something he did not control. She added no softening sentence. She left him to explain how the arrangements had originated.

The rest of Saturday did not become perfect. She was too angry to read peacefully, the pastries dried out, and several times she reached for her phone to check whether anyone was offended. Still, she went alone for a walk without a destination. She bought a newspaper she did not intend to finish and sat on a bench. On her return Ivan asked what she had done. She said nothing special and refused to sound as though she were justifying herself.

The next week he received another request for a favor. In front of Debora he told the friend he had to ask her. She looked up. He corrected himself: he could ask but could not count on receiving the answer that suited him. She did not immediately trust that he understood. On her next free Saturday she wrote rest again. This time she left every other space blank, including the one she once reserved for an explanation.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Dues for a Club That Does Not Exist

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/dues-for-a-club-that-does-not-exist/

Edin said his group paid annual dues to organize outings. It did not sound unusual. I barely knew them, and he had gone to the river with those people since before we met. When we began going together, I offered to buy food and fuel because he already paid into their shared fund. He thanked me like a man offered a reasonable division. He could have ended the lie then. Instead he let it become our custom.

For three summers I packed sandwiches, bought drinks, and filled the tank. Edin carried chairs and chose music, which seemed his share of the effort. I did not want to count every little thing in a relationship. Sometimes money was tight, so I postponed an outing or purchase for myself. He would say we could stay home next time. He never offered to pay for what I believed he had already contributed toward another way.

I learned the truth when a new woman in the group asked whom to give her money to. I repeated Edin's account, and the people around the grill exchanged puzzled looks. There were no dues, no fund, and nobody keeping accounts. Everyone brought whatever they wished. Edin tried saying I had misunderstood. Then I stated the exact amount he mentioned every year. He stopped looking for a joke to rescue us. His friend moved away, giving us privacy I no longer wanted.

On the drive home he admitted spending the money on his equipment and outings without me. He said he would have paid if I had asked. I replied that I made decisions based on what he told me, not on a secret requirement to ask the right questions. It was not only about sandwiches. While I avoided being petty, he carefully used every gap where I would not check. He asked me to calculate a sum he could repay, as though a final bill would close the conversation.

I accepted partial repayment but did not continue the relationship. The group invited me on their next outing. For a long time I thought I could not go without embarrassment, yet I brought one bowl of salad and a chair. Nobody expected me to feed everyone. I sat beside the water, listening to conversation that did not revolve around my breakup. On the way home I bought myself a small ice cream. It was ordinary, but I paid without calculating what it required me to postpone.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Wrong Reason for the Canceled Course

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wrong-reason-for-the-canceled-course/

Dženita enrolled in an evening course because she wanted to change jobs. She was thirty eight and, for the first time since school, bought a notebook for herself. Her husband Mirza told friends he was proud. He even drove her to the first class and waved through the car window. They agreed that on Tuesdays and Thursdays he would make dinner and visit her mother, who lived in the next building and enjoyed a little company.

After several weeks her mother began saying Mirza was exhausted. Dženita asked from what, and she replied that everything at home fell to him while her daughter pursued new ideas. She heard the same tone from her brother. Nobody openly asked her to quit. They merely kept asking whether it had to be now, whether it was worth it, whether she realized how much her husband helped. She came home feeling guilty before opening a book.

Mirza insisted they were only concerned. He said he was not complaining and she should not take every sentence personally. Dženita believed him until class finished early one Thursday. At her mother's she found him eating dinner her mother had prepared. He was saying Dženita was hardly ever home, everything was becoming harder for him, and things would go badly unless she soon realized what mattered more.

She stood in the doorway with her folder under her arm. Her mother rose to fetch another plate, but Dženita asked her to sit. She asked Mirza when he had told her the arrangement was not working. He had no answer. He began saying he had not wanted to hold her back. She looked at her mother and, for the first time, explained the exact schedule: two evenings a week, a few meals, a half hour visit, nothing resembling the abandoned life she had heard described.

At home Mirza admitted he disliked the new responsibilities and hoped her family would influence her. Remaining a generous, supportive husband felt easier than directly saying the change bothered him. Dženita did not leave the course. She also stopped correcting dinners he prepared differently from her. His responsibilities were not supposed to be a temporary performance until everything returned to her shoulders.

The following Tuesday her mother called before class to wish her luck. Mirza later brought a plate of pasta without explaining how much trouble it had caused him. Dženita ate while reviewing her notes. They were not yet all right, but at least the chorus speaking in his place had disappeared. When she received her first good result, she showed him only after holding it in her own hands long enough for herself.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Gift That Had to Be Repaid

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-gift-that-had-to-be-repaid/

Sabina brought me a coffee machine when I moved in. She said it was her old one, though the box looked new, and that she would be glad to see me use it. Later she found a handyman, lent me curtains, and brought lunch several times. I was alone after a long relationship ended, and her attention meant more than all the objects. I did not count the gifts because I believed she was not counting either.

The first request came as a small favor. She needed an order spreadsheet organized for her shop, and I worked with numbers. I finished it that evening. Then customers needed answers, accounts needed preparing, and I needed to stay available over the weekend. When I said I had my own job, Sabina mentioned the coffee machine or curtains still hanging in my window. She said it jokingly, so I laughed too while opening my computer.

One Sunday she called during lunch with my new partner. It was not urgent, but she wanted the work done immediately. I said I could only manage Tuesday. Her silence lasted long enough for the familiar guilt to arrive. Then she said she had thought she could count on me for what she herself had given. I looked at the man opposite me and realized I was again explaining why I must leave my own afternoon.

On Tuesday I returned her curtains and coffee machine. She was surprised, then offended, insisting gifts should never be returned. I said I was not returning friendship but objects that had become a bill without an amount. Sabina accused my partner of changing me. Imagining his influence was easier than hearing my decision. I showed her a proposal for the work she wanted, with a price and clearly specified hours.

She did not accept. We did not speak for several weeks. The apartment felt strange without curtains, and coffee made in a small pot needed more

attention. I missed Sabina, especially on evenings when I remembered how often she sat with me during difficult times. I did not rewrite those moments as lies just because she behaved badly later. Still, I no longer wanted gratitude to become a job with unlimited hours.

We next met in a queue at the market. We asked how each other was, awkwardly, like distant acquaintances. Sabina said she had hired someone to handle orders. I replied that I was glad. She did not offer coffee, nor did I. We exchanged a smile that promised no return to the past. I bought curtains with money earned from my own work and spent almost an entire afternoon choosing them.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Handyman Who Was Always to Blame

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-handyman-who-was-always-to-blame/

The kitchen cupboard handle fell off while Sanela was taking out tea. Armin immediately said the handyman had done another careless job. It was his third such remark in a month. First a shelf, then the storage room door, now the handle. Sanela had known Nikola for years and wondered why he was suddenly making so many mistakes. Still, she believed the man she lived with and stopped recommending Nikola when friends wanted small repairs done.

Nikola came to inspect the cupboard and immediately noticed different screws. He said he had not installed them. Armin was at work, so Sanela called to check. He answered too quickly, claiming the handyman was now inventing excuses. Nikola did not argue with the telephone. He showed Sanela two old holes and explained that the handle had been moved. Then she remembered the pencil mark she had seen on Armin's hand the previous weekend.

That evening she asked whether he had tried changing anything. He admitted only the handle, then, after several questions, the shelf and door too. He had watched repair videos and wanted to show they could save money. When something went wrong, he put the tools away and left the absent man with the blame. Sanela could not believe how a small wish to appear capable had expanded into a story of somebody else's incompetence, which she had begun spreading herself.

Armin said he had not expected her to take him seriously. Sanela reminded him he had spoken seriously and repeatedly. She did not mind that he could not install a shelf. She minded that he considered it acceptable for Nikola to lose work because of his pride. She asked him to call and explain himself, without her translating his good intentions. She

would have to answer for her own recommendations and silence.

She called the friends she had told she no longer trusted Nikola's work. She did not describe her partner's embarrassment in detail to make her confession easier. She simply said she had passed on inaccurate information and still trusted him. Armin's conversation with Nikola was brief. The handyman did not want a lengthy apology. He only asked Armin not to use his name when he made mistakes. Armin found that simple request harder than the argument he had expected.

He repaired the cupboard under Nikola's supervision and properly paid for the time. Afterward he did not circle the kitchen seeking praise. One day Sanela found tools on the table and asked what he was doing. He said he was trying to assemble a stand and did not yet know whether he could. She offered tea. She did not help with the instructions until he asked, and when he made a mistake, this time there was no absent culprit in the house.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Sunday Lunch I Claimed to Forget

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-sunday-lunch-i-claimed-to-forget/

I had not forgotten lunch at her sister's. I remembered it in the shop while choosing a roll to eat in the car. I remembered when my phone rang too. I let it ring, looked toward the river, and told myself I was entitled to one peaceful afternoon. When I eventually called Aida, I used the familiar sentence: "It completely slipped my mind."

There was no customary sigh at the other end. She asked where I was. I said I had stopped to finish something. She said her sister had just sent a photograph of the table, to her rather than me, and the empty chair looked like a message. I offered to bring cakes another day. Aida replied that she was not talking about cakes. She sounded calm, which was when I finally sensed something was different.

At home she met me with a calendar in which nothing was circled. I expected a list of missed events, but there was none. She described inventing excuses throughout lunch, listening to her sister's hurt feelings, and defending a man who would not answer her calls. I did not like her sister; she knew that. I also disliked being rude, so for years I had packaged my rudeness for Aida to unwrap in front of other people.

When she asked whether I had really forgotten, I tried to turn the conversation into an argument about how often we visited her family. She refused the diversion. She waited for an answer. I said I had not. Nothing dramatic happened in the room: no glass fell, no door slammed. She simply stopped explaining things. She said next time I should decline the invitation myself, in advance, to the person who had issued it.

A week later her brother in law invited us on an outing. I did not want to go. I held the phone for a long time, inventing a broken car, exhaustion, and unexpected work. Then I wrote that I would skip it and wished them a pleasant day. His reply was brief and unenthusiastic. I had to endure

someone disliking my decision. Aida went alone and came back happy, with no obligation to soothe me because she had enjoyed herself.

For the next lunch I called her sister and accepted. I did not expect praise for appearing. I brought a salad and ate at the table for the first time without secretly calculating what they owed me for coming. Aida laughed several times at something I had not heard. She did not pull me into every conversation. I was sitting there by my own choice, a little uncomfortable, but finally present.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Desirable Quality in Someone Else's Application

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-desirable-quality-in-someone-elses-application/

Iva did not ask me to lie. She needed a reference for a store manager position, and I had worked with her long enough to know how well she remembered orders and calmed unhappy customers. I volunteered before she finished her sentence. On our break we ate rolls on stockroom boxes and laughed while picturing her in an office with a door that closed. I told her she would certainly get a call.

When the other store's owner called me, the conversation began exactly that way. I praised Iva's organization and experience. Then I added that she struggled under pressure and that, as her friend, I hoped the job would not be too demanding. I said it in a caring voice. I did not mention that Iva was currently resolving a complaint our own boss had refused to handle. Or that I dreaded a morning when someone else would sit on her box.

The interview invitation never arrived. Iva checked her phone for several days, then said they probably had not even considered her application. I offered her half my roll. I could say I felt ashamed then, but the truth is that first I felt relief. Our little world stayed the same. In it I was needed, funny, and familiar. I did not have to seek friendship beyond working hours or admit how little of it I had.

She learned the truth by chance from a former colleague who had started at that store. The owner had mentioned the concerned reference. Iva waited after our shift without making accusations I could call exaggerated. She asked what I had said about pressure. I began explaining that I had meant no harm. She interrupted: "I didn't ask what you meant." I had to repeat the exact words and hear how carefully I had chosen them.

She refused my offer to call immediately and fix everything. She did not want a new opportunity to depend on another conversation of mine. She applied elsewhere and named our boss as her reference, though they often argued, because at least he knew what they were arguing about. I nevertheless admitted to the owner that my assessment had been inaccurate. That neither restored the time nor entitled me to expect forgiveness.

Iva got another job. On her last day she brought cakes for everyone, including me. She thanked me when I handed her jacket over, as politely as she thanked the others. Now I spend my breaks in a small park. Sometimes I write a message asking how she is and delete it before sending. I am still learning the difference between missing someone and believing that, because I miss her, she must stay where I can find her.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Box Marked Winter

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-box-marked-winter/

The box said winter in my handwriting, although I kept summer things inside: tickets, a cloth bag from my first festival, and the red scarf I had worn singing with friends beside the river. The wrong label was an old joke nobody understood anymore. When Rifat suggested clearing the storage room, I carried the box onto the balcony and said I would sort it after work. That evening it was gone.

He insisted I had emptied it the previous month. He sounded so certain that I began questioning my memory. I had been working a lot lately and forgetting ordinary things. Yet I clearly remembered the tape catching my sleeve as I lifted the lid. I asked him again. He said surely we had agreed there was no point keeping every foolish thing from before our marriage.

The next day a neighbor called. She had found my old bag in the communal storage area and wanted to check whether she could use it for shopping. I went downstairs so quickly I left lunch on the table. Beside the bag were my tickets in a sack someone had prepared for removal. The scarf was missing. With hands trembling from anger, I separated the papers and found a photograph in which I looked carefree, almost indecently young.

Faced with the sack in our hallway, Rifat changed his story. He said he had not wanted me to change my mind again. We needed space, and I grew attached to useless objects. I asked about his three boxes of cables no appliance used anymore. He said that was different. I did not make him explain the difference I was seeing clearly for the first time: he made the assessments, and I was supposed to adjust.

I sorted the keepsakes over the weekend. I threw away many things myself. That angered him more than keeping everything would have, because he believed it proved he had been right. I explained that the

decision had not belonged to him. Harder to bear than the missing scarf was his calm insistence that something I remembered had never happened. That was why I slept at a friend's for several nights, not because of a cardboard box.

When I returned, the storage room was half empty. Rifat had removed his cables. I did not praise him like a child who had tidied his room. We sat down to discuss what could not be replaced by clearing a shelf. Later I did give the bag to my neighbor. I only asked her to return a small badge attached to its strap. It now sits beside my keys, under no obligation to justify to anyone why it stayed.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Six More People at Our Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/six-more-people-at-our-table/

When Haris's friend said at the barbecue that the blue sofa had won after all, Lejla assumed her husband had mentioned their purchase. Then another added that he had voted for gray because she would change her mind sooner or later. They laughed like people continuing a familiar discussion. Lejla laid her fork on her plate. She had not chosen a sofa with them, yet apparently they all knew how long the selection had taken.

Haris said he occasionally told his friends little things about their marriage. She asked which little things. One guest, still convinced it was harmless, took out his phone and showed her a group named after their address. At the top was a poll on whether Lejla would abandon a weekend with her parents. Below were her messages, copied without the introduction explaining that her mother was struggling with the anniversary of her sister's death.

Lejla did not ask for the phone to read the rest. She called a taxi and left before the meat Haris was taking off the grill. At home she sat on the blue sofa, trying to recall how many arguments had ended with his strangely prepared answers. He often told her she was overreacting, always using the same words. Now she pictured six men approving those words between a match photograph and arrangements for a beer.

He returned angry that she had left. He said everyone discussed relationships with friends. Lejla agreed that they did. She pointed out the difference: seeking support when confused was not the same as shortening someone's sentence until it became funny. Haris offered to delete the group. She replied that erasing his screen would not erase all the people who had read her grief as a question to vote on.

The following morning a friend called with a new joke. This time Haris heard what he had previously expected to entertain him. He interrupted,

but did not run to Lejla to claim credit. He wrote to the group that he had sent them selected parts of conversations, often deliberately unfair. He went alone to speak to a counselor, for the first time without an audience that would decide beforehand he was the reasonable one.

Lejla did not immediately decide whether to stay. She canceled their joint appearance at the next barbecue and visited her parents alone. When she returned, Haris asked how it had gone. She looked at his phone on the table. He turned it facedown, then realized that the gesture proved nothing either. He left it where it was and waited. For now, Lejla only told him her mother had made soup.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Married Until the Holiday Ended

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/married-until-the-holiday-ended/

Dragan carried the wrong suitcase to the wrong room. His daughter, Una, followed along the hallway, asking why he left her mother's belongings with her and his own in the small room at the other end. He said her mother snored. Una looked at his expression and didn't laugh. The family rented a holiday house together for the first time in years. Both adult children paid their share, expecting ordinary days with their parents, not a performance with undisclosed roles.

Mira and Dragan had separated four months earlier. No single major event caused it. They were exhausted by a life where every conversation listed obligations and grievances. They hadn't told the children because Una was finishing an important project and their son, Vedad, was moving. Then came the holiday booked in winter, and they decided to wait until returning. Every postponement had a caring-sounding reason until someone asked whom it actually relieved.

At lunch, Una directly asked whether they were still together. Mira looked at Dragan, then said no. Vedad lowered his glass so carefully that it still echoed. He didn't demand reconciliation. He asked why they let him plan their anniversary and reserve dinner for two. Mira said she hadn't wanted to hurt him. Vedad replied that he now had to reconsider every supposedly ordinary conversation they knew rested on a false picture.

They spent the remaining day separately. Dragan wanted to leave immediately, but Una asked him not to turn departure into another avoidance. That evening, they sat on the terrace. Their parents explained the shared-living arrangements without confiding intimate grievances to their children. They admitted postponing partly through personal discomfort. Una and Vedad said they could accept separation but didn't want future truth withheld until it stopped disturbing plans.

The holiday didn't become cheerful immediately. Still, the next morning, they openly rearranged rooms. They canceled the anniversary dinner and all had lunch together without a toast to a long marriage. Mira then walked alone; Dragan stayed reading. Their children no longer needed to interpret every separate movement as approaching disaster.

On departure, everyone carried their own suitcase. Una kissed her mother and arranged to visit her new apartment the following week. Vedad planned a shelf repair with his father. There was no perfect family picture to end the holiday. There were real arrangements no longer dependent on everyone's believing in the same finished marriage. In the car, Mira first felt sadness without the extra effort of concealing it from people she loved.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Smell Left in the Coat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-smell-left-in-the-coat/

The smell of smoke remained on Bojan's coat, familiar and stubborn. Dunja noticed it while seeking her scarf, then found an open cigarette packet in an inside pocket. She didn't wait with the packet displayed like courtroom evidence. When he arrived, she said she knew he was smoking again. Bojan immediately claimed it belonged to a colleague. Dunja lowered her scarf and asked him not to begin this conversation with someone else's name.

Quitting had been his decision after a long discussion about costs and habits he wanted to change. Dunja supported him but never requested a promise that it would be easy. Recently, he often went downstairs for things they didn't need: another loaf, batteries, water while a full bottle stood in the refrigerator. Returning, he said he had met someone and stayed talking. Now those small stories formed a schedule he knew and she didn't.

He admitted smoking since summer. He was ashamed to admit failing, especially after she praised him before friends. Dunja said she could apologize for public praise that created pressure. She couldn't accept responsibility for every subsequent lie. What hurt most was his once blaming a neighbor for smoke entering their window, leading Dunja to confront a woman who had done nothing.

Bojan apologized to the neighbor himself. He didn't bring Dunja to translate his discomfort. Then they discussed what she actually wanted: a smoke-free home and honest answers about shared money. She didn't want to count cigarettes, search pockets, or interpret every outing. Bojan sought support for quitting but didn't announce the new attempt as a gift to her. It was his responsibility, with room to admit difficulty before concealing it.

The following week, he said he had smoked after a bad day. Dunja felt disappointed but gave no speech. She asked whether he wanted discussion or simply wanted her to know. He said, for now, he wanted her to know. It wasn't romantic and didn't immediately restore trust. Still, the conversation ended somewhere real, without an invented colleague forgetting packets or an innocent window supposedly admitting every problem.

In spring, he cleaned the coat again. Dunja hung it beside hers without checking pockets. They still disagreed about money and habits, but he stopped going downstairs for unnecessary water bottles. One evening, he went walking and said staying home felt difficult. Dunja wished him a pleasant walk. Returning, he asked whether there was tea. For the first time, she didn't need to search that ordinary sentence for a missing part.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Promise That Couldn't Begin with a Lie

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-promise-that-couldnt-begin-with-a-lie/

Small white invitation envelopes lay on the table. Maja turned one between her fingers, listening to her fiancé, Nenad, explain over the phone why the wedding would happen earlier. Their families already knew about the pregnancy. They knew because she said she was pregnant, not because it was true. She told the lie during an argument when Nenad again requested time to consider marriage. Now every arrangement bore the face of someone who believed her.

She hadn't planned the story in advance. She repeated that to herself for days, as though an unplanned lie shrank if named often enough. Nenad became more attentive, brought food, and asked how she felt. Maja received exactly the security she craved, but every tender act grew harder to bear. When his mother proposed a small family celebration, she realized she couldn't keep waiting for a painless moment.

She asked Nenad to sit and told the truth without inventing another event to cover the first. She wasn't pregnant. She never had been. Nenad stared at the envelope she still held. He asked whether she had truly wanted him to agree to marriage because of it. Maja said yes, although she wanted to believe she merely accelerated feelings he already had. She couldn't neatly separate his fear, obligation, and love to retain only the part she wanted.

Nenad stayed with a friend and requested time without calls. Maja agreed, then personally told her parents and his mother that the news was false. She didn't ask them to persuade him. Some comforted her too quickly; others condemned her so broadly that they no longer addressed the specific act. She tried staying with what she actually needed to do: correct the information, cancel arrangements, and stop asking Nenad to

release her from guilt.

When they met two weeks later, he said he didn't want to continue. He still loved her in a way that hadn't vanished overnight, but couldn't accept a future begun through such pressure. Maja proposed no new deadline or grand promise to become another person. She sought professional support to understand why she turned fear of being left into a right to control someone else's choice.

She kept the invitations until cancellations were settled, then discarded them. She didn't preserve one as a souvenir of love she nearly obtained. Months later, when an acquaintance asked about the wedding, she said it was canceled and her serious lie caused the separation. She disclosed no intimate details, but didn't portray herself as abandoned without reason either. It was a brief, uncomfortable answer no longer requiring someone else to live inside it.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Commission for Marital Advice

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-commission-for-marital-advice/

Tanja visited the premises three times before signing the lease. They weren't perfect, but her husband, Boran, insisted the location was excellent for her adult-training studio. He said he knew the owner as an honest man and she wouldn't soon find a better offer. Tanja trusted her own judgment, but his insistence helped her overlook damp beside a window and higher monthly costs.

After opening, the owner visited with flowers and casually asked whether Boran was satisfied with his part of the arrangement. Tanja asked what he meant. Confused, the man explained he paid Boran a commission for referring a tenant. He didn't know Tanja and Boran shared finances or that she hadn't heard of the payment. He thought they operated as a business team. Tanja left the flowers in the sink because she couldn't seek a vase while the conversation spun through her head.

At home, Boran admitted the payment but claimed it changed nothing. He would recommend the space without money. Tanja asked why he hadn't disclosed a benefit from her decision. She wasn't demanding her husband never earn through contacts. She wanted to know when his advice wasn't separate from his interests. Boran replied that she would have refused merely because he benefited. He missed how that admitted deliberately controlling information.

Tanja stayed because moving again would cost too much, but required the owner to repair agreed defects. She didn't blame him for a lie he didn't know about. With Boran, she discussed the concealed money and earlier recommendations. She found no similar payments, but didn't try checking every conversation either. She said marriage couldn't become a permanent business investigation.

He returned the commission after speaking with the owner, without asking Tanja to forget everything immediately. Still, for months he resented her seeking advice elsewhere. Each time, she explained that restoring trust didn't mean relying exclusively on him again. The business grew more slowly than expected, giving them many chances to discuss matters without quick claims that he knew best.

When choosing new equipment, Boran recommended a friend's company. His first sentence clearly disclosed that he would receive a fee for a sale. Tanja thanked him, compared offers, and chose elsewhere. There was no argument over dinner. Boran asked whether the equipment arrived on time. Tanja said yes and described how students used it, discussing her work for the first time in months without a hidden price behind his interest.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Bought Card for an Invented Success

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-bought-card-for-an-invented-success/

The card said persistence paid off. Vanja left it beside a small cake, proud that Nermin finally found work. For months, she supported his applications, paid most of their rent, and said she didn't mind it taking time. Still, they had recently agreed on a deadline after which expenses needed changing. Nermin announced the job offer that very evening, as though choosing the loveliest moment to release them both from worry.

Three weeks later, Vanja met an acquaintance working at the supposed new company. She mentioned Nermin, expecting ordinary talk about colleagues. The woman didn't recognize the name. She said nobody had joined their small team since spring. Vanja requested no employee records or internal information. She simply thanked her and left with an uncomfortable feeling that the card on the refrigerator was beginning to say something else.

At home, Nermin claimed to work through an external contractor. When asked why he previously described an office and a colleague sharing his desk, he changed his story. The job supposedly collapsed after an initial agreement. Vanja asked him to stop offering versions and say what happened. He hadn't even reached the final interview. He invented the offer, fearing she would stop covering expenses and reconsider the relationship.

Vanja sat on the floor beside the refrigerator, too tired to remain standing. The hardest part wasn't the absent salary. It was his turning her support into something maintained through false good news. She said she could discuss a failed interview. She couldn't plan life with someone inventing an entire workplace whenever an uncomfortable decision approached.

They separated expenses and agreed Nermin would temporarily stay with family. Vanja didn't take over his job search, although her habit of helping pulled her toward listings almost daily. He began doing temporary work and sent updates, hoping to return quickly. She thanked him for the information but clearly said income wasn't the only missing thing. She needed time to decide whether she believed his ordinary sentences.

Eventually, they didn't continue the relationship. Vanja removed the card only while cleaning the refrigerator before friends visited. She neither ceremonially burned it nor preserved it as a warning. She discarded it with other paper. She made friends the same cake because she wouldn't let the recipe belong to his lie too. That evening, they discussed small, real successes, none large enough for a slogan, but each true enough for her to laugh freely.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Week Without a Dress Rehearsal

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-week-without-a-dress-rehearsal/

Admir found the costume on a chair while airing the apartment. His wife, Melisa, had gone to a dress rehearsal, and he knew how much she worried about having everything ready. He took the dress to the theater, believing he was helping. The caretaker opened and said nobody was there that evening. The play Admir mentioned had ended months earlier. A new group rehearsed only on Mondays.

The hallway smelled of dust and old wood. Admir held the dress on its hanger, too festive for the empty building. He called Melisa. She said she couldn't talk because they were about to go onstage. He didn't immediately reveal where he stood. He asked her to come home and added that he knew there was no rehearsal. A chair moved on the other end, followed by a quiet, "I'm coming."

She admitted an affair with a former partner from university. They met during the hours when she once genuinely rehearsed. She had accidentally left the costume on the chair after organizing the wardrobe, but the lie it revealed wasn't accidental. Admir asked how often he collected her outside the theater while she approached from another direction. Melisa lowered her eyes. He couldn't bear having to count the moments when he participated in an unknown play himself.

Melisa said her former partner made her feel like the person she had been before all the obligations. Admir replied that he had changed too, but hadn't known their shared time had become a costume she secretly removed. He didn't claim their marriage was perfect. He wanted discussion of its actual problems without making the affair an inevitable result of fatigue. They slept in separate rooms that evening.

Separating took longer than expected. Melisa ended the affair, but Admir didn't accept that as an automatic return to the past. Both sought help for

conversations they couldn't manage alone. After several months, they realized they wanted to end the marriage with dignity, without a shared story declaring anyone entirely innocent. Admir kept his bicycle in the hallway; Melisa took her books and costumes.

A year later, he saw a poster for her new play. He didn't buy a ticket or inwardly tear it down. He passed it and continued toward a friend waiting for dinner. Melisa later messaged that the play had gone well. He answered briefly and sincerely, without asking where she went afterwards. He was no longer responsible for checking her schedule, and that freedom finally began resembling a life rather than merely a loss.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

One Sunday Too Many

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/one-sunday-too-many/

Jasmin set out an extra plate because Merima said her friend would come after training. It was a small sign that perhaps they were returning to shared Sundays. In recent months, Merima always had something outside the house: training, coffee, a brief visit to an aunt. Jasmin didn't want to count her outings. Still, he began counting lunches eaten alone while the second portion dried in the oven.

The friend called to ask when she should arrive. In passing, she said she hadn't seen Merima since spring and was glad to hear from her again. Jasmin lowered the ladle. That same friend supposedly trained with her regularly in recent weeks. He didn't question her further. He said lunch was postponed over a private matter and apologized for telling her so late.

Merima arrived smiling, with wet hair and a bag of oranges. Seeing two empty places, she asked where the guest was. Jasmin told her what he heard. He didn't raise his voice, but wouldn't accept a story about misunderstood schedules. He asked where she had been that morning. Merima sat and admitted seeing a man she met at work. She no longer knew how to end her relationship with Jasmin and had postponed the decision for months.

"You made the decision every Sunday," he said. "You simply didn't tell me."

Merima cried. She said she hadn't wanted to hurt him and had felt lonely in their marriage for a long time. Jasmin could discuss their distance, but not as an explanation erasing her choices. He said he had been lonely too and hadn't known how to turn it into justification for another home. He didn't demand she immediately love him again. He demanded she stop making him the only person unaware of the life they were living.

They separated, with difficult arrangements over the apartment and shared belongings. Merima moved to her new partner, but received no confirmation from Jasmin that everything had ended well for everyone. He didn't spread their intimate conversations through the family. He stated what happened and retained the right to anger without a performance. For a while, he cooked only soup on Sundays because the smell of a large lunch brought back the same waiting.

In spring, he invited friends for a meal he wanted to make himself. Nobody was late without a message. One chair remained empty because a guest was ill, but it wasn't an empty place imposed through concealment. Afterwards, he packed leftovers and gave them to guests. He left no portion in the oven for someone who might arrive. For the first time in months, he closed the kitchen once the work was truly finished.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Tenant in Their Future Room

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-tenant-in-their-future-room/

When Klara unlocked the apartment, a stranger emerged from the future study holding a toothbrush. Both stopped. She carried a measuring tape and curtain samples; he had a towel over his shoulder. He introduced himself as the new tenant and asked whether the owner had announced her visit. Klara said the owner was her partner and they planned a shared worktable in that room. The man looked at his open suitcases and sat on the bed.

Luka had claimed the apartment wasn't ready. For months, Klara contributed renovation money, chose colors, and waited for the bathroom to be finished. They lived apart because he said he wanted everything settled before sharing a home. The apartment now had a completed bathroom, a guest bed, and a kitchen full of food that wasn't theirs. Only the truth was missing: the space was already earning income.

The tenant had also been misled about the arrangement, although he paid rent properly. Klara said he needn't pack because of her. She went into the hallway and called Luka. He admitted renting the room for several months because he needed money. He didn't say how long he intended to keep accepting her contributions while claiming the tradespeople weren't appearing. His first answer to that question was that she was being dramatic.

They met at the apartment while the tenant worked. Klara requested a clear account of her contributions and completed work, with an arrangement to return her share. Luka offered to cancel the rental and move her in immediately. He didn't understand why that no longer sounded desirable. Klara explained that she didn't want a room gained by someone else suddenly losing a home, nor to begin living together after months as his silent investor.

With independent professional advice, they arranged repayment. They ended the relationship while questions remained over jointly purchased items. Klara didn't take curtains because none had been sewn. She carried only the measuring tape and sample box, feeling how even small objects could become heavy when carrying a plan that never happened. She told the tenant to contact her only if he needed clarification about what she personally witnessed.

Later, she rented a smaller apartment alone. A worktable fitted by the window, but not the large bookcase she imagined. She bought two smaller ones. On the first evening, she didn't celebrate independence; she unpacked tiredly and ordered food. Still, before bed she measured the window without needing to ask anyone when the room would finally be ready. It was an ordinary task that finally led toward a real place.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Weekend That Wasn't Alone

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-weekend-that-wasnt-alone/

Nedžla protected Emin's solitude as an important family agreement. Once a month, he went to the cottage, with no calls unless urgent. He said he needed quiet after working with people. She understood because she ran a noisy salon herself. During those weekends, she covered his obligations, from shopping to visiting his father, believing she supported the way the man she loved stayed well.

At the market, she met the owner of the neighboring cottage. The woman cheerfully said she was glad Emin came with Jasna again because the two always made a good barbecue. Nedžla asked whether she meant his former partner. The woman realized her mistake mid-answer and tried saying she might not have seen properly. Nedžla thanked her and left, without asking a stranger to resolve what had just opened.

Emin returned on Sunday with a story about a novel he read. Nedžla asked him to stop before giving its title. She said she knew he hadn't been alone and asked whether he was involved with Jasna. He didn't answer immediately. Then he admitted meeting for several months. He said they merely talked easily because of their shared past. Nedžla asked why that conversation required a lie about silence.

Only then did he admit the rest of the relationship. She could no longer listen to "merely," which he placed before everything he wanted to diminish. She said she didn't object to a person sometimes wanting solitude. She objected to his turning her support into a schedule for another relationship. The cottage wasn't a problem solved by selling it. The problem was that she had sincerely protected the space in which he deceived her.

Nedžla took several days for herself but clearly said where she would be and when they could talk. She didn't want to repeat his behavior under

another name. Emin stayed home, handled shopping, and visited his father, realizing for the first time how much work supported his supposed solitude. When they sat together, he didn't offer never to travel again. He admitted choosing a comfortable double life and not knowing whether he wanted their marriage enough to rebuild it.

That honesty came late but helped Nedžla decide to separate. Several months later, she took a short holiday alone. On the first morning, she didn't know what someone needed by nobody did. She made coffee, opened a book, and read the same page three times. There was no miraculous peace. Still, the time belonged to her, without a hidden schedule or any need to earn it through someone else's absence.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Photograph They Staged

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-photograph-they-staged/

In the photograph, Mina stood very close to a man outside a hotel. His arm encircled her waist, her head turned toward him. A mutual friend, Tarik, sent Boris the picture with no explanation beyond: "I thought you should know." Boris felt his stomach tighten. Mina was attending a work seminar at that hotel. She had told him she would stay for coffee with participants afterwards.

He called her but didn't begin with an accusation. He explained what he had received and said he wanted to understand the scene. Mina was silent for several seconds, then sighed angrily. The man was a colleague who steadied her when her heel caught between paving stones. Three other people stood beside them. She didn't demand belief without discussion. She said she would come home and explain everything, but wouldn't prove fidelity by abandoning every colleague.

Boris asked Tarik where the rest of the group had been. Tarik replied that he didn't know because Boris's former partner, Ena, had sent the photograph. He had omitted that earlier. Ena also attended the seminar, although she claimed to have passed by accidentally. When Boris called, she said she merely wanted to protect him. He requested the full picture. She admitted cropping out the others because they would distract attention.

At home, Mina was more hurt by Tarik's role than Boris's question. He frequently sat at their table, yet had forwarded an accusation without checking or naming the person who prepared it. Boris met him. Tarik admitted Ena had requested help because she hoped Boris would return. She said he only needed to show what could be seen. Only now did he understand how much had deliberately been left unseen.

They put distance into the friendship. Boris clearly told Ena he wanted no further contact. Mina didn't request access to his phone, nor did he ask her to stop attending seminars. They discussed how quickly one picture could have made them opponents. It was uncomfortable to admit that trust didn't remove the first stab of doubt, but could change what a person did afterwards.

A few weeks later, they went walking with friends. Mina caught a root, and Boris steadied her elbow. Someone raised a phone for a group photograph. Mina asked them to wait until everyone was ready. They came out awkwardly, with someone's eyes closed and an arm entering from the edge. They posted the entire picture because that day the rest of the scene was precisely their favorite part.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Rehearsed Script for Sunday Lunch

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-rehearsed-script-for-sunday-lunch/

Filip's mother asked Lana which hospital she worked at. Lana assumed she had confused professions and explained that she ran a massage studio, with the training required for that work. The woman paused with a bowl of potatoes in her hands. "I thought you were a doctor," she said. Filip immediately began discussing traffic, too loudly and unrelated to the question. Lana looked at him across the table. He didn't meet her eyes.

They had been engaged for three months. She was meeting his parents only now because they lived far away and earlier visits kept being postponed. Filip had said they were straightforward people and she needn't worry about what to say. Now she understood that a script already existed; she simply hadn't received it. His father mentioned her specialization, and his younger brother asked whether she could examine a test result. Lana calmly said she wasn't a doctor and he needed an appropriate professional.

The silence at the table became heavier than conversation. Filip said he had probably described her work awkwardly. Lana asked how a studio became a medical specialization. His mother lowered the bowl and said he had personally described university, hospital shifts, and training abroad. She didn't look disappointed in Lana. She looked ashamed of her son and the questions she had asked based on his invention.

After lunch, Filip claimed he had merely wanted them to accept her immediately. His parents valued titles, he said, and he didn't want them belittling her. Lana replied that the belittlement began much earlier, when he decided her actual work wasn't good enough to introduce. She had built her studio over years, repaying a loan and working weekends. She didn't need someone else's degree to give that effort value.

She returned the engagement ring until she decided whether to continue the relationship. Filip offered to explain everything to his parents, but Lana said he needed to do so without a promise of forgiveness in exchange. A few days later, his mother called to apologize for the discomfort and say she didn't need a doctor in the family. Lana thanked her but wouldn't let the mother repair her son's story for him.

They ended the relationship before planning the wedding. Lana returned to work and ordered a new studio sign because the old one had detached from the wall. It carried her name and an accurate description of her work. When the installer asked whether she wanted another title added, she said no. Then she prepared the room for her first client, knowing she felt more tired than liberated, but at least wouldn't introduce herself as somebody else.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Cat That Hadn't Gone Missing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-cat-that-hadnt-gone-missing/

For three evenings, Sanja called for her cat outside the building, holding an open tin she could no longer bear looking at. Boro walked beside her, shining his phone beneath cars. He said the cat had escaped while he took out the rubbish. Sanja didn't blame him for the open door. She blamed herself for not noticing how unsettled the animal had become since Boro moved in with large boxes and new habits.

On the fourth day, his cousin called to ask what food the cat could eat. Sanja held the phone to her ear for a long time before managing to ask where she was. The cat was safely in his apartment, brought with a story that Sanja temporarily couldn't care for her. The cousin didn't know she was reported missing. He offered to let her collect the cat immediately, confused about hearing tears instead of an answer about food.

Boro admitted being bothered by hair on his suits and scratching at the door at night. He thought she would find it easier to accept a loss than agree to rehome the cat. Sanja looked at him, for the first time without wanting to translate his words into something less ugly. For three evenings, he had pretended to search for an animal whose address he knew. It wasn't a difference in cleanliness standards. He had made her fear part of his plan.

She collected the cat alone. The animal initially remained beneath the sofa, then emerged at the familiar rattle of a bowl. Sanja thanked the cousin for caring for her and said receiving a false story wasn't his fault. She brought home the carrier and food he had bought. Boro tried helping open the door. She asked him to step aside and return to his previous apartment while she decided whether to continue the relationship.

Friends were divided. Some said she was too harsh over a cat. Sanja stopped explaining once she realized they kept discussing the wrong

issue. She wrote to Boro that the question was whether he would solve the next problem by making her live in an invented reality too. He replied that he had only wanted peace at home. That answer helped her end the relationship.

After he left, the apartment didn't immediately become pleasant. She missed his laughter and ordinary conversations, which didn't mean she was wrong. The cat still scratched at the door at night. Sanja sought practical advice and changed the bedtime play routine. Not every problem vanished, but none required searching in the dark for something deliberately removed from her life anymore.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Medal in Someone Else's Window

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-medal-in-someone-elses-window/

The medal hung between an old watch and a tie clip. Adisa recognized the small scratch across its rim, made when she dropped it at a stadium as a young athlete. The secondhand shop stood far from her usual route. She had come to the street for repaired boots. Now she stood before her fastest day, marked with a small price on a white label.

Her husband, Nenad, had said he put the medal box in the basement while they painted the apartment. Adisa hadn't checked. Sport was no longer her work, but she didn't want that to make her memories unimportant. She entered and asked the shopkeeper to hold the medal until tomorrow. She showed him a photograph of herself wearing it, without accusing a man who couldn't have known what he bought. He agreed to keep it behind the counter.

Nenad first said he sold only things they hadn't used for years. Then he admitted needing money for debt from equipment purchased for a small engraving business. Adisa had thought he rented the equipment and the investment was modest. He hadn't told her how much he borrowed. He sold the medals because he assumed she wouldn't look for them soon. That assumption hurt almost more than the sale.

"Not wearing them around my neck doesn't make them yours," she said.

They went to the shop together, where Nenad bought back the remaining objects with his own money. Two smaller medals had already sold. The shopkeeper agreed to pass along a request if the buyer returned, without revealing his information. Adisa didn't make a scene. At home, she asked Nenad to show his entire debt and stop claiming everything was under control. The review lasted late. She heard several amounts spoken aloud for the first time.

They agreed to sell his equipment and manage part of their money separately, with professional help over the debts. Adisa didn't become the guardian of every purchase he made. She clearly stated what she would no longer share responsibility for. The two medals didn't return. Nenad tried buying replacements online, and she stopped him. She didn't want a shiny object resembling the old one. She wanted him to understand why the original belonged to her.

In spring, she attended a local athletics meet. She brought no medals. Nenad sat beside her and, for the first time, asked how she had felt before the final she previously mentioned only briefly. Adisa described the start, a poorly tied lace, and her surprise at the finish. He listened without offering compensation. When she finished, she said trust hadn't yet returned. This time, he didn't ask how long that would take.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Reply She Never Wrote

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-reply-she-never-wrote/

Vedrana spotted Ognjen in the ticket queue and nearly turned away. They hadn't seen each other for three years, since he stopped replying after an argument. His brief message accepting her decision hadn't made sense then. She assumed it was merely a cold way to leave. Now he approached politely and cautiously, asking whether he could stand beside her while they waited because pretending not to know her felt awkward.

They discussed work, moving, and the play both wanted to see. Then Ognjen said he regretted how they ended but had respected her request never to call again. Vedrana felt cold beneath her coat. She had never written that. Their argument concerned his postponement of a shared holiday, not a wish for him to vanish. She asked him to repeat the exact words he remembered.

She recognized a phrase her sister, Selina, often used: "Don't spend my peace." During those days, she stayed with her sister, leaving her phone unlocked while showering. She didn't immediately accuse Selina. She told Ognjen she needed to check something and wasn't asking him to change his present life. He was in a new relationship. Vedrana also had a partner and was happy with him. The truth didn't need to promise reunion to matter.

Selina admitted it as soon as she asked. She had seen the messages, decided Ognjen was merely prolonging her pain, and replied for her. Afterwards, she deleted the conversation. "I couldn't watch you cry over him," she said. Vedrana replied that she had cried for months afterwards, with the added belief that she wasn't worth an explanation. Her sister wanted to discuss good intentions. Vedrana wanted her to hear that she had taken over a decision that wasn't hers.

She stopped sharing passwords and asked her sister not to visit unannounced for a while. Their family said they were too close to become distant over an old message. Vedrana explained that their closeness was exactly what enabled the deception. She sent Ognjen brief confirmation that she hadn't written the message. He thanked her. They didn't arrange coffee that might give an old injury a false romantic opportunity.

A month later, Selina visited by arrangement. She brought cake but didn't use it instead of an apology. She said she had tried to manage her sister's life and that it hadn't been protection. Vedrana let her inside. They talked briefly, more cautiously than before. When the phone rang while Vedrana was in the kitchen, Selina left it on the table and waited for her sister to return.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Nine Floors Without an Answer

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/nine-floors-without-an-answer/

The elevator stopped between the seventh and eighth floors without a jolt, almost politely. Azra pressed the call button and was told a technician would arrive soon. Her husband, Dejan, stood holding a cake for his mother's birthday. The box said to keep it cold. The elevator was stuffy, and for two days they had discussed nothing beyond purchases or arrangements about time.

Azra sat on the floor. Dejan remained standing until his arms began trembling, then put the cake between them. "I need to tell you something," he said. She thought he had lost his job or lent money to his brother again. He said he had been seeing a colleague for four months. He gave a name Azra had heard before, always in harmless office stories about a broken coffee machine and changing shifts.

She didn't ask why now. She knew an enclosed space could seem like an opportunity for a conversation the other person couldn't leave. She said she wanted no details until they were outside. Dejan continued anyway, claiming he had ended the affair and chosen today to confess. Azra raised her hand. "I heard you. Now stop." He obeyed, but his silence asked for comfort she couldn't give.

When the elevator moved, her relief had nothing to do with their marriage. At his mother's door, she handed Dejan the cake and said she wouldn't enter. Her mother-in-law opened before she could leave and asked whether they were all right. Azra said they weren't, but wouldn't discuss it before guests that evening. Dejan remained holding the box, unable to call her absence a simple headache.

She stayed with a friend. The next day, they talked in a park where she could stand whenever necessary. Dejan admitted planning a confession for months and repeatedly choosing moments that would make it easier

for him. Azra asked what he had ended, the relationship or merely the meetings. He couldn't answer immediately. They agreed to live apart until each decided whether they could and wanted to continue, without calls from relatives urging quick forgiveness.

Three months later, Azra attended her mother-in-law's lunch alone. Dejan wasn't invited at the same time. It wasn't reconciliation, but a relationship she wanted to preserve separately. The elevator worked. Nevertheless, she took the stairs slowly, pausing on the landings. She wasn't proving herself stronger than fear. That day, she simply wanted to choose when the doors opened and where she stepped out.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Mother's Call During the Wrong Dinner

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-mothers-call-during-the-wrong-dinner/

Edina answered her partner's mother's call. Arman's phone had switched off during their conversation, so his mother had called Edina's number from old contacts. She asked whether Edina knew where Arman had left a spare key. Edina said it was probably in their kitchen. Silence followed. His mother repeated, "Yours?" She sounded confused rather than accusing, which was precisely why Edina couldn't pretend she hadn't heard.

Arman had told his family they separated six months earlier. He told Edina his parents were angry at their decision not to marry yet, so they should reduce visits for a while. She respected that, although she missed his mother, with whom she had cooked on Sundays. Arman was supposedly visiting a cousin that evening. His mother said he had just left for dinner with his new girlfriend.

Edina didn't ask anyone to trap him. She said they still lived together and she would speak to him herself. His mother apologized, although she hadn't known about the deception. Edina stopped her, thanked her for telling the truth, and ended the call. Lunch she intended to take to work tomorrow cooled on the stove. She divided it between two containers, then emptied one back into the pot, angry at her own automatic care.

When Arman arrived, she met him at the table without raising her voice. At first, he claimed his mother was confused. Edina asked him not to involve her in another lie about a woman who had merely wanted a key. He admitted the other relationship. He said he hadn't known how to end theirs because being with Edina felt safe. She felt that word, once beautiful, become a description of a waiting room she had furnished for him.

They agreed that he would stay with his brother while they resolved the rental arrangement. Edina didn't take responsibility for explaining the whole story to the other woman for him, but sent her the brief fact that they had lived as a couple until that evening. The woman replied that Arman had claimed they were merely roommates. They didn't continue exchanging details. Each had enough information to decide her own next steps.

Arman's mother invited Edina for coffee a few weeks later. Edina agreed provided they didn't discuss his reconciliation with anyone. They sat in a small café, talking about work and a new plant his mother couldn't keep healthy. At the end, they embraced without promising their acquaintance would remain unchanged. Edina went home alone and bought dinner for one, this time before a second portion entered her plans at all.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Proposal Prepared for an Audience

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-proposal-prepared-for-an-audience/

When the waiter set down the plate with a ring, Una first thought he had the wrong table. Then Dario stood, and the music grew quieter. Their friends took out their phones almost together. Una looked at her closest friend, who nodded encouragingly. Two months earlier, she had told Dario she wasn't ready for marriage and never wanted a public proposal. It had been a calm, clear conversation, without a hidden challenge to surprise her.

Dario knelt. He spoke about four happy years and the home they would make. Una heard someone whisper, "Say yes." Panic tightened her throat, but she didn't want to use one word to purchase a few minutes of peace. She said she wanted to speak privately. Dario kept holding the box open, as though her sentence weren't final yet. Only when she stood did he lower his hand.

In the restaurant corridor, he asked why she was humiliating him. Una replied that he had known what she wanted and brought an audience anyway. He admitted hoping the atmosphere would help change her mind. He attributed her reluctance to her parents' divorce, convinced that he understood her reason better than she did. Una said it wasn't only fear. She didn't yet want a promise that would alter their lives, and now she wasn't certain about the agreement they already had.

She returned for her bag. She asked her friends to delete the recordings and post nothing. Most immediately complied. One said it was a shame because the beginning had been beautiful. Her friend took his phone and waited while he deleted the recording in front of her, with his consent. Later, she admitted to Una that Dario had said they had already agreed to marry and that only the form was a surprise.

Una slept at her sister's. Dario sent messages, first angry and then pleading. The next day, she replied that they could talk when he stopped asking her to comfort him about the consequences of his own decision. At their meeting, he admitted concealing her refusal from their friends. There was no other plan behind the plan, only his certainty that a sufficiently beautiful scene would outweigh what she had said.

They separated several weeks later. Una missed the man with whom she had shared four years, so leaving didn't feel triumphant. Still, she never wished to return to the moment before the plate and say a false yes. At the next dinner with friends, the waiter asked whether he could remove the empty chair. Una said he could. Conversation continued without slowed music or raised phones, and she ordered what she actually wanted to eat.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Tent That Was Always Occupied

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-tent-that-was-always-occupied/

Jelena went to fetch the lamp from the shared tent, but her husband, Luka, said Marina had it. He didn't ask or check. He simply knew. Ten minutes earlier, Marina had handed Luka his spare shirt without looking, pulling it from the bottom of a bag. Both behaved as though that closeness were ordinary, while it was becoming visible to Jelena only now, beside the lake they had visited with friends.

The camping trip lasted three days. Jelena had worked weekends in recent months, so Luka attended earlier outings with the group without her. She didn't believe sharing a life required sharing every step. Now she was unsettled by feeling like a guest in familiar company, someone nobody wanted to explain an old joke to. When Marina mentioned the food Luka liked in the morning, he looked at her quickly enough for Jelena to stop stirring her tea.

She asked him to walk to an empty stretch of shore. She stated what she had noticed and asked whether there was a relationship she didn't know about. Luka first claimed she was jealous without reason. Jelena sat on a fallen tree and said she wouldn't continue if his only answer was an assessment of her character. Water struck the stones while she waited. Finally, he admitted that he and Marina had begun seeing each other at the start of summer.

She didn't shout across the campsite. She said she wanted to leave and called a friend who had a car. Luka asked them to stay until morning so they wouldn't spoil everyone's trip. Jelena asked why he had become concerned about that only now. As she packed, Marina came to help. Jelena said she wanted neither help nor an explanation that evening. Marina withdrew, and the others left enough space for her to close her bag without an audience.

At home, she didn't try to restore the marriage by competing with camping trips. Luka temporarily moved in with his brother, and they discussed whether to continue together. He quickly requested a plan for forgiveness, as though diligence would be enough. Jelena didn't know the answer. After two months, she decided to end the relationship. She told friends only what she wanted them to know, without any obligation to prove every detail.

The next summer, she went to the lake with her sisters. She didn't choose somewhere else to preserve a memory she no longer wanted. She put up the tent herself, mistakenly facing its entrance into the wind, and moved it while laughing. That evening, the lamp disappeared beneath a blanket. Nobody knew where it was. They searched together and eventually ate by phone light, without feeling that somebody's ignorance concealed something.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Suit for a Job That Had Ended

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-suit-for-a-job-that-had-ended/

Danijela came to the cinema for a meeting with the manager, who needed curtains repaired. Through the open auditorium door, she saw her husband, Marko, in the third row, his coat neatly folded over the adjoining seat. The film began at ten in the morning. An hour earlier, Marko had left home in a suit, saying he had a meeting with a new client. When he turned toward the door, both stopped waving before the greeting had truly begun.

He followed her into the corridor. He said the meeting had been canceled. Danijela asked why he hadn't called home, knowing she was free that day. Marko looked at the poster behind her and finally said he no longer had a job. He had been dismissed eleven weeks earlier. Every morning, he put on the same suit, went to a park, library, or cheap morning screening, then returned with a story about traffic.

Danijela didn't ask how he could have lost his job. She asked what they were living on. He had been spending their savings, transferring the same amount as his former salary so she wouldn't notice. He said he would replace everything once he found something new. Meanwhile, she had declined a large sewing job because he told her they didn't need extra money and it would be nice to rest together on weekends.

At home, they reviewed their account balance. Enough remained for a few months with careful planning, but less than Danijela had believed. Marko cried, ashamed not only of losing his job but of every story he had added afterwards. Danijela said she was sorry he had faced it alone, but he had excluded her himself. She didn't promise that trust would return with his first paycheck.

They agreed on separate amounts for personal expenses and a weekly review of shared obligations. Marko sought support for prolonged low

spirits and began applying for jobs unlike his former title. Danijela accepted a new curtain order with a realistic deadline and price. When he offered to help, she gave him fabric to mark. She didn't employ him to conceal the problem, but because the work actually needed two people that afternoon.

His first new offer paid less. He came home in an ordinary jacket and showed her the contract before signing. Danijela read the hours and salary, then asked how he felt. He said he was relieved and afraid. This time, both answers were true. On Saturday, they went to the cinema together for an evening screening, and he kept his coat in his lap because the adjoining seat was occupied.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Friend Who Always Knew

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-friend-who-always-knew/

When Sonja asked her husband whether he wanted mushrooms, her friend Kaja answered for him: "Not at night. They upset his stomach." Everyone at the table continued talking. Sonja remained with her spoon in the air. In recent months, Armin had eaten away from home almost every evening, supposedly after training. He had never told her mushrooms upset him. She looked at Kaja and saw that she had lowered her glass before taking a sip.

It was Sonja's forty-first birthday. Kaja had brought the cake and arrived early to help, as she did every year. She knew where the candles were, which music Sonja liked, and how much Armin's distance had hurt her. She had listened to Sonja's doubts and said marriages went through dry periods. Sonja now recognized how easily somebody else's secret could hide inside advice that sounded reasonable.

She didn't interrupt dinner. After the last guest left, she asked Kaja to stay. Armin began collecting plates, but Sonja told him to sit. She asked how long it had been going on. She didn't present her suspicions one by one. Kaja began crying. Armin said it wasn't what it looked like, then fell silent when Kaja said, "Since February." It was enough for the date to stand between them like a fourth person.

Sonja first asked Kaja to leave. Her friend wanted to explain how lonely she had felt, but Sonja couldn't be both the injured woman and her comfort that night. She told Armin to sleep at his brother's. She remained with a cake from which exactly half had been cut. She removed the candles, put it in the refrigerator, and called her sister. She couldn't tell the whole story before crying.

In the following days, people proposed a meeting of everyone involved, as though this were a misunderstanding about an appointment. Sonja

refused. She spoke with Armin about separation, finances, and their adult son, who shouldn't become a mediator. She sent Kaja a single message: she wanted no contact until she requested it herself. She didn't need to decide whether she would ever forgive her to know what she needed that morning.

She celebrated her next birthday in a small restaurant with her sister and three friends. Armin sent a polite greeting; Kaja sent nothing, respecting her last request. The waiter asked whether she wanted mushrooms with her main course. Sonja requested an extra portion. Conversation continued at the table while she chose dessert. Nobody answered for her, and only then did she notice how much she enjoyed that ordinary freedom.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Reservation for an Anniversary That Didn't Exist

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-reservation-for-an-anniversary-that-didnt-exist/

The receptionist spoke pleasantly: "Mr. Andrej previously requested the same room for his anniversary. Would you like flowers again?" Maja held the phone between her shoulder and ear while searching her calendar. She had been with Andrej for seven months. They had no anniversary and had never stayed at that hotel together. She said she would call later and remained staring at Saturday's empty square.

They had met in a photography class. Andrej said he was divorced and visited his adult son on weekends. Maja respected his wish to introduce family slowly. They mostly met at her home because he supposedly shared an apartment with his brother during renovations. Each explanation made sense separately. Together, they now resembled a corridor with every door locked from the other side.

When she asked about the anniversary, he laughed and said the hotel remembered his former marriage. Maja asked him to state clearly when he had divorced. He gave one year, then another. She didn't need to search his phone to recognize the changing answer. She said she wouldn't book the holiday until she heard the truth. Andrej became angry that she didn't trust him. That anger could no longer substitute for an answer.

He admitted still living with his wife, Vedrana, but claimed they were separated in every way except formally. Maja asked whether Vedrana knew about her. She didn't. Maja took time to decide what she wanted to do, then sent Vedrana a brief private message giving her name and stating that she was seeing Andrej. She sent no intimate photographs, insults, or comparisons. She offered a conversation if Vedrana wanted one.

They met at a café outside their neighborhoods. Vedrana brought confirmation of their recent shared booking for the same anniversary. Divorce proceedings hadn't even begun. Maja showed dates of meetings, then put her phone away. Neither decided for the other. Vedrana said she would speak to her husband herself and seek advice about next steps. Maja admitted ending her relationship already but still feeling foolish about every dinner she had prepared.

"The dinners weren't foolish," Vedrana replied. "He lied." That simple sentence stayed with Maja longer than the entire conversation. She canceled their joint holiday and took a short trip with a friend, without needing to make a triumphant post about it. At the hotel, she received a room without flowers. She opened the window, unpacked her camera, and for the first time that month went out to photograph something that didn't need to serve as evidence.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Letter Nobody Sent

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-letter-nobody-sent/

Filip answered the call while cleaning the coffee machine's filter. The woman on the line asked when he would send his confirmation for the professional course. He said he hadn't been accepted. She checked his name and repeated that his place was still waiting. Water ran over the sink while he tried to find the rejection his wife, Tena, had shown him on their shared laptop.

The course lasted eight weeks in another city. After a long period of unemployment, Filip had finally found something to anticipate. Tena said she supported him, but ended every discussion with concerns about the house, their elderly cat, or her own insomnia. When the rejection arrived, she embraced him and suggested spending the travel money on repainting. He felt disappointed, but also relieved that he no longer had to leave her worried.

The message wasn't in the inbox. It was a saved image bearing the organizer's logo and his name. Filip sat at the kitchen table and waited for Tena. He didn't set a trap. He said they had called and asked who had written the rejection. Tena began crying before answering. She had made it herself by copying earlier messages. She had deleted the original invitation, thinking the organizer wouldn't contact him again.

"I was afraid you'd discover a better life there," she said. Filip remained silent for a long time. Her fear wasn't laughable to him, but her decision to narrow his life was real. He said he would accept the course if the place remained available. Tena asked whether that meant the end of their marriage. He replied that he didn't know and couldn't comfort her before understanding what had happened.

The place was available. He changed his account password, arranged for a neighbor to care for the cat, and booked a counselor. Tena separately

sought help for insomnia and fear of separation. She didn't message every hour with proof that she was changing. They arranged two calls a week and the right to say when a conversation became too difficult, without disconnecting in the middle of a sentence.

Filip returned with a course certificate and a job offer. Tena met him in the apartment, whose walls remained unpainted. A real letter lay on the table, unopened and addressed to him. She didn't hand it over as evidence of redemption. She merely said it had arrived that morning. Filip opened it, read it, and sat opposite her. The conversation about their marriage began only after he put the paper in his own bag.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Bakery Closed Early

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bakery-closed-early/

"You're at your mother's on Thursdays anyway," the assistant said when Nadina proposed a new shift roster. The sentence wasn't strange by itself. What was strange was that Nadina had been going on Wednesdays, rather than Thursdays, for three months. She had mentioned the earlier schedule only to her husband, Mirza, while trying to fit her mother's appointments around work. The assistant immediately glanced toward the back room, where he was cutting paper for pastries.

Nadina and Mirza had opened the bakery twelve years earlier. She handled the money and morning shift; he managed production and evening closing. People called them a hardworking couple, which sometimes sounded like another term for people who no longer had time to talk. Their assistant, Sara, arrived the previous autumn. Nadina had trained her on the register and bought her more comfortable shoes from their shared budget.

When they were alone, she asked Mirza why Sara knew her old schedule. He said she probably remembered conversations in the shop.

"Then I'll ask her," Nadina replied.

He admitted the affair before she reached the door. It had lasted four months. Nadina sat on a flour sack because there was no other chair. She didn't ask where or how often. She asked whether he had spent bakery money on their meetings. Mirza said no, then corrected himself: twice he had taken cash from the till and replaced it later. She didn't know why that small correction, in particular, made her nauseous.

The next day, she met Sara with the bookkeeper present, separately from discussions about her marriage. She said she wouldn't reveal private details to customers or withhold earned wages. Sara decided to leave after an agreed notice period. Mirza wanted the bakery to continue as if

nothing had changed. Nadina refused. With professional help, they valued his share; he accepted payment in installments and left their joint business.

For the first few weeks, Nadina closed early. The door displayed new opening hours without an explanation passersby could repeat. Customers complained; one even said a good marriage could be seen in a full display case. Nadina wrapped her bread and returned the exact change. At home, she cried over an electricity bill, exhausted by the fact that betrayal didn't postpone ordinary responsibilities.

In spring, she hired an experienced baker, a married man who immediately requested a clear schedule. Nadina drew it up with him and hung it on the wall. On Thursdays, she finally went for a walk instead of visiting her mother. The bakery stayed open. When someone asked where the owner was, the answer was simple: it was her day off.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

An Apartment Reserved for One

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-apartment-reserved-for-one/

Bojan thought the landlady was sending an offer for their move together. The message had reached the family email address because his wife, Jasna, had used it on the form. Attached was a payment confirmation for a studio apartment, one occupant, with a move-in date two weeks away. The previous evening, they had discussed whether to leave their city at all. Jasna had told him he still had time to think.

A small publishing company was offering her a job in another city. She had wanted such an opportunity for years, while Bojan ran a bicycle repair shop that couldn't move overnight. Both feared one of them would have to give something up. Still, he believed they were talking while a decision remained possible. Now he was looking at proof that his opinion had already become a polite formality.

Jasna didn't deny the payment. She said she had needed to secure the apartment before it disappeared from the listings. When he asked about the job, she admitted signing the contract already. "Every time I mention leaving, you list reasons for staying," she said. Bojan replied that reasons weren't prohibitions. Then he stopped. He remembered how often he had ended a conversation by saying the idea would pass. He didn't like what he recalled.

With a counselor, both had to speak without interruption. Jasna admitted that she hadn't dared say clearly that she was leaving, so she had pretended they were considering it together. Bojan admitted treating her wish as a temporary nuisance. Neither admission canceled the other. They agreed to live separately for three months and discover whether they wanted a relationship that didn't depend on one of them always yielding.

On moving day, Bojan helped pack books but didn't drive the van. Jasna arranged transport and expenses herself, including the costs she had concealed. A ceramic bird they bought on their first trip remained on an empty shelf. She asked who it belonged to. Bojan said he couldn't decide that today. They left it where it was, without turning an object into a verdict.

Three months later, they met halfway, in a town where neither had obligations. They didn't reconcile the moment they embraced. Jasna described the job she loved and lonely evenings; Bojan discussed the employee he had finally hired. They decided to try separate addresses for another season. When she reserved a room for their next meeting, she first sent him the date. She waited for his reply before paying, not because she needed permission, but because this time she was truly inviting him.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Envelope Beneath the Wedding Box

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-envelope-beneath-the-wedding-box/

A month after the wedding, Hana finally opened the box of unnecessary crystal glasses. She intended to exchange them for ordinary plates. Beneath the decorative paper, she found an envelope containing a hotel receipt in her husband Emir's name. The date was two days before their wedding. That evening, he had arrived late for a family dinner because he was supposedly driving a friend whose car had broken down outside town.

The receipt could have several explanations, so she didn't photograph it for the family group. She placed it before Emir when he came home. He immediately said he had paid for a friend's room. Hana asked the name. He gave one, then admitted it hadn't been a friend when she reached for her phone. He had met his former partner, Lana. He needed, he said, to close an old chapter before their new life.

"Why did closing it take until morning?" she asked. Emir stared at the glasses beside the sink. He admitted that they had continued their relationship for several weeks, until the wedding. Hana remembered Lana standing near the exit at the reception, introduced as an acquaintance from university. Imagining the hotel room wasn't the hardest part. It was hearing her husband try to reduce a decision to an insignificant mistake while she had been choosing his surname that same week.

She contacted Lana with a brief message saying that she knew about the hotel and wanted no intimate details. Lana confirmed the meetings and said she had believed the wedding was postponed. She sent only the message in which Emir claimed that. Hana asked for no further proof. The same lie had two different audiences. She thanked her for answering and ended the conversation before it became a comparison of the two women.

The next day, she postponed their joint mortgage appointment. She told Emir she wouldn't decide about their marriage in front of a bank employee. She temporarily moved into her sister's small apartment, sleeping on the couch and hating the morning tram noise. Relatives said she should consider the money spent on the wedding. Hana listened, then replied that the restaurant had no vote in her life.

After several conversations with professional support, she decided to seek a divorce. Emir finally stopped talking about a single hotel and acknowledged the entire sequence of lies. That helped her leave without doubting her own memory. She exchanged the crystal glasses for six blue plates. During the first dinner in her new apartment, one serving of pasta cooled while she called her sister. It wasn't ceremonial, but nobody was arriving late from an invented place.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

There Was No Meeting on Tuesdays

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/there-was-no-meeting-on-tuesdays/

Amra spotted vanilla on a store receipt, followed by the name of a cooking studio. Her husband, Tarik, supposedly attended a transport association meeting on Tuesdays. At home, he never cooked except when he overheated soup. Waiting for him to leave the bathroom, she checked the date. It was the Tuesday when she had driven their dog to the vet alone because he said his meeting couldn't be postponed.

"I'm learning to make cakes," he admitted, almost offended at having to say it. Amra initially laughed with relief. Then she asked why he had lied. Tarik replied that she would think he was wasting time and money. She couldn't recall a conversation in which she had actually said that. She did remember several evenings when she had declined a friend's invitation because someone needed to stay home while he attended to important work.

He agreed to take her to the course's final evening. The instructor greeted them by saying, "You finally let him join us." Amra felt her smile stiffen. Tarik tried changing the subject, but another student added that he was glad his wife no longer objected. Delicately decorated cakes stood on the table. His new freedom bore her invented, stern face.

Amra didn't make a scene. She asked the instructor for a glass of water, then told Tarik to explain what he had actually been saying. Before the three people present, he admitted that she hadn't forbidden the course. It had been easier to play a man fighting for himself than to admit his embarrassment at a beginner's clumsiness. When the instructor apologized to Amra, he added that she wasn't responsible for his story.

They took home a pear cake, which tilted on the back seat. Amra said that she didn't want to be either his permission or his prohibition. She needed to know where he was and whether he would be available to help, just as

he knew her plans. Tarik wrote the next course schedule on the refrigerator and asked which Tuesday he should exchange. For the first time, they discussed an arrangement without an imaginary opponent between them.

A week later, Amra went to the cinema with her friend, while Tarik stayed with the dog, who couldn't bear thunder. When she returned, she found a burned baking tray and a wide-open window. He didn't try to hide his failure. He said he had thought he could watch a film on his phone while baking. Amra opened a box of store-bought biscuits. They ate them over the sink, without praise for effort that nobody had demanded in advance this time.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Someone Else's Name Beneath the Drawing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/someone-elses-name-beneath-the-drawing/

The photograph on the invitation was small, but Dunja immediately recognized the angled balcony. She had drawn it one Sunday while her husband, Faruk, made lunch. The house project for a young couple had supposedly failed the first round. Now it appeared on the poster for his company's exhibition, under someone else's name. Dunja enlarged the picture on her phone until the lettering blurred. The signature was his.

She worked independently, mostly on small renovations. Faruk had offered to show the large design to his colleagues, then brought back only a verbal response that it didn't fit their plans. Dunja believed him. She paid for her software and spent the next two months drawing other people's bathrooms. She didn't mind taking smaller jobs. What troubled her now was that she couldn't find a single point when her husband had told her the whole truth.

She attended the opening without warning. Faruk saw her beside the model and stopped with a glass in his hand. His manager approached, delighted to meet the woman who, according to him, provided "support at home." Dunja explained that she had created the original design and offered dated files. She didn't raise her voice. The manager took them both into an empty office, where a fan made an indecently cheerful sound.

Faruk admitted submitting the drawing under his name, believing he would include Dunja later. Colleagues developed the structural work, the client signed, and he received a promotion. "I didn't want it to look like a favor to my wife," he said. Dunja asked who exactly would have been receiving the favor. For the first time that evening, he had no prepared sentence. His manager suspended publication until authorship could be

established.

The correction included Dunja's name and a fee, with the rest of the team's work clearly credited. Faruk lost his promotion. At home, he said that she could have called him first. Dunja replied that he had had three months to make the first call himself. She went to a friend's home with her laptop and several dresses, without dramatically emptying the wardrobe. She postponed discussions about their future until the business arrangements were complete.

At the repeated presentation, she stood beside the colleague who had solved the balcony's structural problems. They discussed what each had changed without competing. Faruk sat in the audience, without a speech and without the right to surprise her with reconciliation. Afterwards, he handed her a folder containing every earlier version. Dunja took it and said thank you. It acknowledged receipt, nothing more, but for the first time he didn't have to guess what her words meant.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Recipe on the Last Page

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-recipe-on-the-last-page/

On the last page of the cookbook she intended to sell, Sanela found an amount written in blue pencil. Beneath it were the words: "Return by spring, brother knows." She recognized her husband's handwriting, although he had tried to turn the number into a sourdough recipe. Three bags of flour had never cost as much as the two of them had once saved to repair the roof.

Four years earlier, Haris had told her that a broken car and a debt to his workshop supplier had swallowed almost all their savings. She had believed him. She took extra shifts at the care home and postponed a pottery course. They patched the roof with plastic sheeting, and her brother helped for free. She was selling the cookbook now because they finally intended to reduce the number of things in the house.

Haris stared at the open page. "I wanted to tell you when it came back," he said. He had lent the money to his brother for a shop that failed. There had been no breakdown and no supplier debt. Sanela asked why, each winter, he had joined her in cursing the car they couldn't afford to replace. "I didn't know how to stop," he said. That sentence angered her more than the amount.

They called his brother, despite Haris protesting that it would cause a family argument. His brother knew nothing about the lie. He believed that both of them had given him the money and showed a message in which Haris said there was no hurry to repay it. The screen even displayed a little heart. Sanela felt a strange envy of that ease, of the generosity her husband could afford only while she worked Sundays.

She didn't demand that his brother repay money he didn't have. She asked Haris to say what he had done in front of him, without a story about her supposed strictness. Afterwards, they sat at the kitchen table.

She moved her wages into her own account and booked a couples counselor. Haris offered to sell the workshop. "I don't need another grand gesture you decided on alone," she said. "I need you to stop deciding for me."

She kept the cookbook but put the note in a folder with the bills. Reconciliation didn't arrive over one dinner. For months, Haris practiced naming uncomfortable sums before spending them. In spring, Sanela enrolled in pottery. She brought her first bowl home crooked on one side. When Haris praised it, she told him to notice the uneven edge. This time, he looked more carefully and admitted that he could see it.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Message Forwarded to the Wrong Bride

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-message-forwarded-to-the-wrong-bride/

Sanja had three conversations open on her phone and spoke as a different version of herself in each. She wrote to Marko that only with him could she forget her difficult divorce. To his wife, she sent holiday recommendations with warm messages about the importance of family. To her niece Nika, she explained that their business partner Robert deserved a chance because love often developed only after a sensible decision.

Nika was twenty-eight and worked at Sanja's agency. Her aunt had helped when she lost her job, so every conversation about Robert was decorated with a reminder of that help. He was polite, but they had nothing to talk about. Sanja insisted Nika was simply not open enough. She omitted that his joining the family would probably bring the investment she needed.

On Friday, she sent the schedule for their shared dinner. She intended to forward Nika's confirmation to Robert. Instead, she sent Nika an entire private conversation with a friend. In it, she described Robert as "safe, boring, and financially perfect," said Nika would give in once she understood how dependent she was on the agency, and noted that Marko still believed he was the only man Sanja seriously trusted.

Nika did not reply immediately. She saved the messages concerning her and called Robert. She said she did not want a romantic relationship and had never promised otherwise. He was silent, then admitted Sanja had presented her shyness as hidden enthusiasm. They agreed each would cancel the dinner in their own name.

Sanja first claimed the messages had been taken out of a joking context. Then she said she had always meant the best. Nika asked for whom. She

did not threaten to publish the conversation or demand that the whole family take sides. She requested proper payment for her work and took a job at another agency. Robert withdrew his investment offer, not because Nika did not want him, but because he no longer trusted the person offering him a partnership.

Marko soon learned that Sanja tailored her promises to him too. Their relationship ended in a conversation he could not package as a story of tragic love. Sanja was left with a smaller agency, several bills, and a free evening. She wrote Nika a long message full of explanations, then deleted it. In the end, she sent only confirmation of payment and an apology for the pressure. Nika thanked her for the payment. She said nothing about the apology. For the first time, Sanja left a conversation open without trying to write the other person's answer herself.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Explanation That Came After the Engagement

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-explanation-that-came-after-the-engagement/

Vesna stopped rehearsing as soon as she saw the photograph. The pianist with whom she had spent the summer stood beside another woman beneath an announcement of their engagement. Two days earlier, he had written that he was away because of business complications. Now she learned from the newspaper that the complication was named Lana and that her family financed the concert venue he wanted to run.

Her older sister, Adela, came to collect her. She did not say she had warned her. At home, she made soup, opened a window, and let Vesna tell the whole story twice. Vesna felt everything aloud. Adela was accustomed to feeling quietly, which made it seem as though nothing could seriously hurt her.

Seven days later, the pianist appeared outside Adela's apartment. His name was Igor, and now he pronounced it like a plea to be remembered in a better version. He wanted to explain. Adela allowed him ten minutes in the courtyard, since Vesna had already said she did not want to see him.

Igor admitted he had fallen in love. He claimed that debts, missed opportunities, and fear of failure had taken their toll. He had not wanted to hurt Vesna; he simply could not refuse security. He spoke of his future wife as though she were a business contract that had somehow signed itself. Adela interrupted. If Lana knew the truth, he owed her respect; if she did not, he owed her the truth. In neither case should Vesna become a refuge from his choice.

After he left, Adela relayed the conversation to her sister without softening it. Vesna was silent for a long time. Then she said it helped to know that not everything had been invented, but that did not mean any of

it had been enough. For the first time, she did not ask whether he would return.

That night, Adela admitted to her own recent breakup, which she had concealed to avoid burdening anyone. Vesna stared in astonishment. She had thought her sister never lost her head or her sleep. She sat beside her and asked her to tell everything from the beginning. The soup cooled on the stove, unnoticed.

In autumn, Vesna gave a small concert with a new ensemble. Adela sat in the front row, with an empty seat beside her because she had not invited the man she had only just started dating. She was not ready for introductions. After the performance, the sisters went out to eat alone. They talked about music, work, and how much easier things were now that neither had to pretend she always recognized love in time.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Crystal Bowl for Other People's Excuses

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-crystal-bowl-for-other-peoples-excuses/

The crystal bowl stood on top of the display cabinet, heavy, impractical, and always dusty. Dunja's former boyfriend had given it to her as a wedding gift, remarking that some things looked beautiful until you tried to hold them. Her husband, Mladen, found the gift amusing. Dunja never used it, but never put it away either.

When a pipe burst, the bowl was in the room the water missed. When Mladen lost his job, she noticed a small scratch on its rim that same day. Over time, they began saying the gift brought bad luck. It was a convenient joke: misfortune acquired a shape they could point to, reducing the need to discuss what people actually did.

After twelve years of marriage, a loan reminder arrived for a debt Dunja knew nothing about. Mladen had invested in an apartment with a colleague. He claimed the business opportunity had failed and he had been ashamed to tell her. In the envelope of documents, Dunja also found an agreement for shared use of the apartment, with dates matching their supposed business trips. The colleague believed Mladen was already divorced.

He stood beside the cabinet when Dunja confronted him. Looking at the bowl, he muttered that the same bad luck had followed them from the start. For the first time, Dunja heard how absurd the excuse was. The crystal had not taken out a loan. It had not booked a weekend. It had not sat across from her every Sunday saying how glad it was that they had a peaceful life.

She took the bowl from the shelf. Mladen stepped back, expecting her to throw it. Instead, she carried it to the sink and washed it carefully. Under the water, she saw that the supposed scratch was a hardened drop of wax.

The object she had considered damaged for years was entirely intact. The marriage, however, required a more serious examination than household superstition.

Dunja separated their finances and sought legal advice. Mladen moved out temporarily. She answered his colleague's questions about dates without insults or a contest over who had been deceived more. Later, at a flea market, she found a woman who collected old crystal. The woman examined the bowl in daylight and offered a fair price. Dunja accepted. She returned home with two ordinary cups and enough money for a new lock. A pale circle remained on the empty shelf. She did not cover it with an ornament. She needed time to get used to a space where nothing had to be blamed in place of people anymore.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Pirate Her Family Paid For

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-pirate-her-family-paid-for/

Tara brought headphones and a book she had no intention of opening onto the boat. Her aunt had organized the trip for her thirty-second birthday, but along with the cake came a photographer's son. Tara had never met him. She knew only that her aunt and his mother had spent months wondering when their children would finally stop being so choosy.

The son did not appear. Instead, a replacement skipper boarded, a tanned man with a torn bag who called himself Leon. He claimed to work on the coast in summer and disappear somewhere warmer in winter. Tara liked that he did not ask about her job, apartment, or plans. When he suggested a short stop at an abandoned harbor, she was the first to agree.

There they found a locked cinema, a table beside the water, and a man who had brought a guitar for them. Leon knew a great deal about old films, just like her. He even knew the song Tara had listened to after her divorce. She convinced herself that coincidences could sometimes be generous. That evening, they talked on the bow while her aunt snored excessively loudly in the cabin.

The next morning, an invoice arrived on Tara's phone for a private screening, music, and costume rental. The event organizer had confused the client's address with the birthday guest's. At the top of the document was Leon's real surname. He was the photographer's son. The torn bag was a prop, and her aunt had supplied the details about her divorce and music.

Caught out, Leon tried a joke. He knew she would never have accepted an ordinary family introduction. He wanted a chance without prejudice. Tara asked what, then, from the previous day had belonged to her: the

surprise, the conversation, or the feeling that someone had understood her by chance. He said he truly liked her. She believed him, but that did not repair the way he had chosen to approach her.

At the harbor, she took a taxi. She sent her aunt half the actual boat cost and a message saying she would choose her own company from now on. Leon later wrote an apology without the words "romantic" or "only." She did not answer immediately. A few weeks later, they met in a cinema line. He was buying one ticket. Tara bought hers for a different film. They greeted each other and went to their separate theaters. As the lights dimmed, she thought it had been their first meeting in which no one knew how the evening would end.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Connection That Would Fix His Career

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-connection-that-would-fix-his-career/

The invitation arrived at her work address. Mira was to speak about a project restoring an old cinema, and among the guests was her former partner, now director of a large foundation. Viktor noticed his attendance before she did. "You two were very close, weren't you?" he said, turning the invitation between his fingers. At work, he was waiting for a promotion for which, he claimed, he lacked the right contacts.

Mira had been with Denis eighteen years earlier. They broke up because everything in his life took precedence over plans he made with her. She did not consider that memory a connection worth renewing. Viktor persisted. Dinner cost nothing, he said, and Denis would surely like to help her. He spoke as though offering her an interesting opportunity, although he had already prepared his own résumé.

In the restaurant, Denis stood, kissed her cheek, and complimented her appearance. He did not ask about the cinema. Viktor soon mentioned his company's reorganization. While the men talked, Mira watched the waiter collect crumbs from the white tablecloth. She recognized an old feeling: she was present, yet served only as the reason for a more important conversation to occur.

Denis promised a recommendation. Then, as though in passing, he asked Mira to state in her application to the foundation that his organization had supported the cinema's restoration from the beginning. It had not. They had refused funding once and failed to answer two invitations. Under the table, Viktor touched her knee. It was the familiar signal not to complicate something that could be settled with a polite smile.

Mira said she would not change the report. Denis raised his eyebrows and began talking about flexibility, and she reminded him of the date of the

rejection letter. Dinner ended early. In the car, Viktor complained that she had ruined everything over one sentence. She asked how many sentences about her life he would rewrite for a better job. She did not let him answer that he had not meant it that way.

Over the next few days, they talked about money, envy, and his fear of falling behind. Mira would not be an intermediary between his ambitions and her past. He came to the restored cinema's opening on his own, without a résumé or requests. The project had received smaller support from another donor. After her speech, he asked her to show him the projection booth. For the first time that year, he was interested in how something she had spent so much time on actually worked.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Performance for One Guest

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-performance-for-one-guest/

Adnan arrived at the small film festival with a backpack and a short documentary about abandoned cinemas. At the evening reception, he met Lara, an actress who lowered her voice whenever an older man in a white jacket approached. She introduced him as a producer. Later, on the steps, she said he was also her fiancé, although she no longer wanted the relationship.

Adnan listened until midnight. She spoke about a contract that prevented her from leaving the film, fees she would have to repay, and an apartment owned by the producer. She did not ask for help. That was precisely what convinced him he should help. The next morning, he was invited to a meeting in a suite, where two men opened a folder containing a supposed debt. Lara sat by the window, looking as though she wanted to disappear.

They demanded payment before the festival office closed. Adnan had money from selling his car, intended for a new camera. He said he wanted to speak to a lawyer first. The man in the white jacket smiled and explained that any delay would destroy Lara's career. Then she repeated a sentence from the previous night about filming on an island. Only this time, she named a different island.

The small detail stopped him. He looked at the contract heading and noticed a production company absent from the festival program. He asked them all to go to the organizers together. One man said there was no time. Adnan stood up. The door was not locked, and Lara suddenly followed him. In the hallway, she quietly told him not to pay anyone anything.

In the festival office, she explained that they had hired her to play a desperate fiancée. She had thought, she said, that they would take only a small fee for supposedly canceling a meeting. When she saw Adnan's

savings on his phone screen, she understood the scale of the fraud. She handed over messages and details of the other participants. The organizers called the police and gave her somewhere to wait, without promising that a confession erased what she had done.

Adnan watched the final screening alone. Lara later sent an apology, and he wished her future jobs in which the audience knew they were watching a performance. They did not begin a romance. On the way home, he stopped at an equipment store and bought the camera he had planned. Its first shot showed the festival hall in morning light, without guests, music, or anyone telling him which role he should play.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Woman He Kept for Conversation

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-woman-he-kept-for-conversation/

When Ena entered the studio, two cups stood on the table, while a third had been washed and turned upside down. Dunja explained that Filip usually dropped by on Thursdays. Ena had come on Wednesday. They were due to marry in six weeks, and she wanted to meet the woman whose opinion her fiancé quoted whenever they chose a film or a holiday destination.

Dunja was a restorer. She was forty, had careful hands, and a habit of hearing an entire question before answering. She said she and Filip had never been a couple. They had never even kissed. Ena felt relief, followed by an unease she could not name. On a shelf, she recognized a book Filip had recently recommended. On the first page was a dedication to Dunja, written nine years earlier.

Their routines emerged through conversation. Filip called late when he could not sleep, brought his worries, and left them on her table. When Dunja needed someone to accompany her to a family celebration, he was busy. When she mentioned another man, he withdrew for several weeks, then returned with flowers and an explanation that he missed their special closeness.

"Did he ask you to wait?" Ena asked. Dunja shook her head. He had never said it. He always left enough warmth for her to invent a reason to wait. As she spoke, she heard for the first time how that arrangement sounded to someone who had not lived it for years. She set down her cup and began removing Filip's manuscripts from her worktable.

That evening, Ena told him about the conversation. He considered the absence of an affair a complete defense. He even expected her to thank him for his honesty. She asked whether he knew what Dunja wanted from life. He replied that she liked art and peace. He knew nothing of the job

offer in another city, the one she had declined after he told her he did not know how he could get through a difficult period without her.

They postponed the wedding. Ena did not need to prove infidelity to acknowledge her own doubts. Dunja packed the manuscripts and sent them by courier, then accepted a short engagement at a restoration workshop on the coast. On Thursday, Filip found the studio locked. On his phone were two messages with clear answers, without hints or spaces between the lines. He read them for a long time, searching for the familiar place where someone else would explain what he should feel.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Right to Leave and the Bill That Remains

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-right-to-leave-and-the-bill-that-remains/

On their show, they were known as the couple who hid nothing. Lana edited the conversations, and Boris answered listeners' questions. Most often, he repeated that people were allowed to leave when they no longer loved someone. She would nod and add that staying out of fear made no one faithful. They recorded at the kitchen table beside a bowl of lemons nobody ate.

On the tenth anniversary of their life together, Boris said he had met someone. It was not passing infatuation, he explained, but a change that deserved respect. Lana heard her own sentences returned in another person's mouth. She asked how long he had known. Four months. During that time, they had bought furniture for the apartment, which she had agreed to finance from her savings.

"You have the right to leave," she said, "but for four months I was making decisions based on information you had already changed." Boris suggested recording a special episode about it. He thought their breakup could help other people. She switched off the microphone. For the first time, she felt her own life had become content about which she had no right to remain silent.

That evening, she called Armin, a former partner. She had left him years earlier, convinced a reasonable explanation would cancel his pain. Now she apologized for how she had left, without trying to reopen their story. Armin was silent briefly, then said what he had needed most was for her to stop insisting it was good for both of them. They ended the conversation with an ordinary question about work.

Lana and Boris met with a list of shared expenses. They agreed on repayment of part of the money and a deadline for moving out. She

refused to make his new partner responsible for decisions he had made. She also refused to say she wished him happiness while she still could not say his name without a lump in her throat. For the first time, Boris listened to her entire sentence without seeking a neat conclusion for an audience.

They wrote their final announcement to listeners together. It was brief and contained no details of the breakup. After he left, Lana moved the table toward the window and began editing other people's shows. A few months later, she recorded a conversation with a musician about a failed concert. They offered no advice. They laughed about the moment when, despite all the preparations, the power failed. At the end, Lana switched off the recorder and kept talking as the streetlights came on outside.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Bell from the Locked Room

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bell-from-the-locked-room/

In the villa converted into a small guesthouse, the room at the end of the hall was never rented. Alma received the keys to every other door and a thin folder of rules. The owner said family belongings were stored behind the locked door. He mentioned his former wife only when explaining why something was missing from the house. Supposedly, she had left with someone else's money and someone else's husband.

On the first night, an old wall bell rang. The number of the locked room lit up on the panel behind reception. Alma knocked. Nothing. The following evening, it happened again, exactly when she moved the umbrella stand to mop the floor. The owner laughed and said old houses demanded attention. She found it strange that he still refused to call an electrician.

The next morning, while replacing a faded picture frame behind the stand, she found a recess containing a small recorder and a wire from the old call system. The batteries had long since weakened, but the device still worked when plugged into its charger. She did not play it immediately. On the back was the name of the woman people in the house spoke about in whispers. Alma found her number on an old contract in the folder and asked whether she wanted to collect the device.

A neatly dressed woman in a gray scarf arrived, visibly tired of explaining who she was. Her name was Vera. She had been recording a furniture inventory when her husband came home with a proposal to transfer his debt into her name. Their conversation could be heard in the background. She had refused, and after the divorce he began telling guests and acquaintances about her supposed affair. She had hidden the device while packing, expecting to return soon.

Alma offered to send her a copy. Vera wanted the original and a bill for a night's stay. She would remain until she collected her books, she said. When the owner arrived, they met him in the lobby with an inventory and his earlier message saying the room was empty. There was no dramatic exposure before the guests. Vera had already arranged an appointment with a lawyer, and Alma refused to repeat a story she could not verify.

A few weeks later, the owner corrected his claims to the people he had told, accompanied by a written apology. Vera collected her books and the round table where she had once translated novels. Alma stayed to run the guesthouse, now with a clear contract. The electrician discovered that the stand was pressing against an exposed contact in the old bell system. When he finished, the hallway fell quiet. The locked room received a new key, and all that remained inside was the smell of fresh paint.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Compatibility Test with Broken Questions

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-compatibility-test-with-broken-questions/

The first question read: "If your partner buys pears and you like apples, which of you is hiding your emotions?" Tarik wrote it while waiting for the refrigerator to defrost. He was a programmer with a free Saturday, irritated by online tests that declared a relationship doomed after four answers. He devised twelve equally absurd questions. The result was always: "Talk to each other."

His wife, Mina, laughed so hard she spilled her coffee. The next day, she sent the questionnaire to her colleagues, but replaced the final instruction with a lengthy explanation of emotional profiles. She worked in marketing. She knew how an empty page acquired authority as soon as a blue logo and a promise of understanding appeared at the top.

Within a week, the first requests for paid consultations arrived. Mina opened a small website and introduced Tarik as the method's creator. She translated his objections into an expert's modesty. With the money from the first talk, she paid for their broken water heater, and he stopped mentioning the invented questions. In the evenings, he simply checked the number of registrations. It grew faster than his discomfort.

Then a message arrived from a woman who had canceled her anniversary celebration because her husband chose the wrong answer to the pear question. Tarik read it three times. During their next livestream, he sat beside Mina, listening to her talk about trust. Behind the camera stood a mug declaring them the perfect team. He had bought that mug one winter, when they had already stopped eating breakfast together.

"I'm not qualified to tell you whom to love," he said in the middle of her presentation. He explained how the test began, without jokes or blaming the audience. Mina ended the stream. They did not speak for forty

minutes. Then she said he had listened for months to her wanting something of her own and had never asked what. He admitted he had been happy to put his name on her work while it brought in money.

They refunded the payments and published a correction. Some people were angry; others insisted the test still worked, which embarrassed Tarik even more. Mina kept the website, now for her actual marketing services. At breakfast a few days later, she put a bowl of pears in front of him. "This is all we have left," she said. Tarik took one and asked about her plans for the day. He stayed at the table to hear the answer.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Travel at His Expense

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/travel-at-his-expense/

On the ferry, Ivan held three bags while Lara checked whether the photographs were bright enough. They had just finished a trip that looked like a spontaneous holiday on her profile. In reality, he had chosen every lunch according to whether he could pay for it before his next freelance payment. Lara called it an investment in their life together.

When they met, she sold handmade bags and said she wanted to see the world. Ivan liked her energy. He worked from home, earned good money, and was tired of his own orderly boredom. He happily paid for their first trip. On the second, he was already working nights while she slept in a hotel bed beyond his usual budget.

Over time, the photographs became more important than the trips themselves. Lara grew annoyed if he looked tired in them. Ivan stopped asking whom she was messaging because the answer always involved a potential collaboration. He did not know whether she was cheating. He knew he spent more and more of their private evenings waiting for the public part of her day to end.

At their last dinner, the owner of a travel agency approached and talked to Lara for a long time. The next day, she said he had invited her on a trip with a group of creators. Ivan felt relief so strong it embarrassed him. He caught himself thinking that if she fell in love with that man, he could finally leave without an explanation.

While packing, he found a receipt in his pocket from a restaurant he had never wanted to visit. Lara had ordered an extra dish because it looked good on the table, then barely touched it. Before, he would have hidden the receipt to spare himself another calculation. Now he smoothed it out and placed it with the others. It was not evidence against her. It was evidence of how long he had been signing up for something he did not

agree with.

Now, on deck, Lara asked him to photograph her beside the railing. Ivan put down the bags and said they needed to talk first. He did not accuse her over messages he had not seen or intentions he could not know. He said he no longer wanted to finance a life in which he felt like staff.

Lara replied that she had never forced him. There was an uncomfortable truth in that. He bought tickets instead of stating a boundary, then resented her for not guessing it. He acknowledged his part. Still, he did not withdraw his decision to end the relationship.

At home, they divided their belongings and canceled future reservations. He lost some money; she repaid some. Lara went on the agency trip, and Ivan did not check the photographs to find out with whom.

On his first free weekend, he drove to a small lake near the city. He brought one bag and a sandwich. When the sun fell behind the trees, he reached for his phone, then left it on the bench. No one was waiting for proof that he was enjoying himself.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Jewelry He Never Bought Her

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-jewelry-he-never-bought-her/

The woman at the door did not raise her voice. That frightened Nika more than shouting would have. She carried a folder and asked whether Miloš was inside. Nika said he was not. After the afternoon rehearsal, he had stayed only ten minutes, drunk coffee, and left for an alleged meeting with a producer. Only then did the singer notice the visitor's wedding ring.

Her name was Sonja. Miloš was her husband. Money had been disappearing from their joint account for months, and he had finally admitted buying expensive gifts for a woman he was seeing. Sonja placed a printed photograph of Nika performing on the table. She had circled a necklace and two bracelets.

Nika felt sick. Miloš had told her he was divorced and merely finishing the paperwork for the apartment. He had never bought her anything more expensive than flowers. The necklace in the photograph was borrowed from a stylist, one bracelet was her mother's, and the other came from a market. When she said so, Sonja's face hardened.

"That's what I would say too," she replied.

A few years earlier, Nika would have taken out her own jewelry and handed it over just to end the unpleasant scene. This time, she brought her phone. She called the stylist in front of Sonja, showed the messages about the loan and the receipt for the costume. She was not proving she was a perfect person. She was proving one thing she could verify.

Sonja sat down. From her folder, she took a list of payments. It contained company names neither recognized. Nika recognized one email address: Miloš had used it to offer to finance her album. It turned out he had made the same promise to several performers, using money he moved between accounts.

They did not try to untangle the entire case themselves. They kept the documents and sought professional help. When Miloš called Nika, his first question was why she had humiliated his wife. Nika interrupted and told him Sonja had just heard that sentence on speakerphone. Silence followed at the other end.

They did not become friends. There was too much hurt for a cinematic embrace. Still, Sonja apologized for coming to claim someone else's belongings, and Nika apologized for accepting the divorce story without checking. They parted with the same number of possessions they had when they met.

At her next performance, Nika wore only her mother's bracelet. When she introduced the first song, her voice trembled but did not stop. Sonja was not in the audience. She did not need to be.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Winnings That Took Their Evening

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-winnings-that-took-their-evening/

Amela was washing cups when Tarik called from the living room for her to bring the ticket. A row of numbers resembling theirs had appeared on the screen. They bought the same selection every month, a small shared habit from the days when they had more enthusiasm for big plans than money.

The first four numbers matched. Glare obscured the fifth. Tarik muted the television, as though noise might change the result. Amela sat beside him with wet hands. They did not check the rest immediately. They allowed themselves a few minutes in which anything was possible.

Tarik mentioned a house on the coast first. Amela said she would finish the education she had interrupted for work. He laughed and asked why, with that much money, she would return to a classroom. She replied that she did not want to spend the rest of her life choosing tiles for his house.

The conversation shifted quickly. Tarik spoke of traveling without a plan, Amela of an account of her own. The words of her own hung between them. He asked whom she intended to give money to. She asked when every wish of hers had become something that had to be useful to him. They mentioned relatives they should help, then those they absolutely would not. Each found someone from their own family in the second group.

Amela admitted she had been looking at a small apartment near work for months. She had not intended to buy it, only looked at photographs and imagined the quiet. Tarik said he had considered a long trip alone. Both spoke as though the possible winnings had finally freed them from the obligation to be kind.

When he checked the numbers, the final two did not match. They had won nothing. Tarik tried to joke that at least they had enjoyed

themselves. Amela did not answer. She turned off the television and asked what they should do with everything they had just learned.

Over the following weeks, they talked more seriously than they had in years. They tried counseling and wrote down their wishes separately for the first time. They found no shared plan both could honestly accept. They separated more calmly than anyone would have expected after that evening.

Amela enrolled in evening classes, and Tarik took a short trip he could afford. The old ticket stayed in a drawer while they divided their belongings. Neither took it. Carrying out the last bag of paper, Amela placed it on top. It was completely worthless, yet it had finally brought something to an end.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

An Excuse Called Coincidence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-excuse-called-coincidence/

On the third day of the seminar, Ivona changed her breakfast time. She told herself she wanted to avoid the crowd, although the hotel was almost empty at seven thirty. She knew when Luka would arrive, the visiting lecturer who had made her laugh the previous evening with a remark about their endless working groups.

She had been married for eleven years. Her marriage was not unhappy in a way that could be easily explained. Boris was kind, often distracted, and inclined to end a conversation before it became uncomfortable. Lately, Ivona had been saying she was tired. She did not add what she was tired of, because that would require her to look more closely herself.

Luka listened. He remembered the title of a book she had mentioned and asked what she thought of a lecture, even when she disagreed. On a walk by the lake, he said he liked her. Ivona replied that she was married. He nodded and let the conversation stop. He did not press her. That left her without a convenient enemy against whom she could defend her innocence.

That evening, she called Boris and suggested he join her for the weekend. He could not. He had an earlier commitment. Ivona became angrier than the situation warranted. She wanted him to come and decide for her by being there, but had not told him why it mattered.

She met Luka in the hallway. He suggested a glass of wine on the terrace, without pressure in his voice. She said she would get her jacket. In her room, she opened the wardrobe and chose the one that made her shoulders look better. Then her own expression in the mirror embarrassed her. None of this was simply happening to her. She was rising earlier, choosing her seat at the table, extending their walks.

She returned to the terrace and said she would not stay. Luka accepted her answer. There was no great scene, only two untouched glasses. Back in her room, Ivona called Boris again. This time, she did not ask him to come. She said she was attracted to another man and frightened by how long the two of them had been postponing a real conversation.

When she returned home, there was no quick forgiveness for something that had not even become a physical affair. Boris was hurt, and she could not wear leaving the terrace like a medal. They began talking with a counselor's help. On the first evening after a session, they sat in the car outside their building. Ivona did not say she was tired. She told him what had made her tired.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Applause for the Man She Never Noticed

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/applause-for-the-man-she-never-noticed/

At exhibition openings, Jelena introduced her husband with a laugh. "He's our man from the real world." Amir was an engineer at an organization that adapted assistive equipment for people with disabilities. He did not know how to talk about his work in a way that silenced a table. He spoke about joints, materials, and people whose names no one at the gallery knew.

Jelena ran a small gallery and lived on encounters that promised the next major event. Viktor, a painter, could describe blue as a personal tragedy. At first, she found this amusing, then seductive. She began staying at his studio after closing and messaging Amir to say she was negotiating with buyers.

Viktor loved an audience. When she told him she was risking her marriage for him, he would take a cigarette and explain that art could not tolerate ownership. Jelena accepted the statement as profound, although it increasingly meant that he wanted no responsibility. At home, Amir washed cups left from the previous evening and tried to show her a photograph of a new prototype.

Once, she told him she was not in the mood to discuss work. A few minutes later, she spent an hour listening to Viktor's voice message about an exhibition. Amir heard enough to stop asking about the photograph.

When he told her he knew about the affair, there was none of the scene she expected. He spoke wearily and precisely. He said he did not want to live as a supporting character in her search for interesting people. They separated. Jelena believed that, after a little time, they would return to their familiar routine.

Six months later, the gallery received an invitation to an award ceremony for contributions to society. Jelena attended because of a potential

sponsor. Amir's photograph appeared on the screen. His team had created an assistive device that users could adapt more easily to their needs. A woman came onto the stage and explained what his work had made possible in her ordinary working day.

She showed a short video from her workshop. There was no grand revelation, only a few movements she had previously found difficult. Amir stood to one side, holding a door open for a cart of materials. Jelena recognized his old jacket. So often, she had greeted him in it by asking whether he really had to appear like that in front of her guests.

Jelena listened and recognized the photograph he had tried to show her. Amir accepted the award, thanked his colleagues, and left the stage without a grand speech. The audience applauded. She clapped longer than necessary, as though her hands could make up for being late.

Afterward, she approached him and said she was proud. Amir thanked her as politely as everyone else. He was not cruel. He had simply stopped waiting for her recognition. When he left for dinner with his team, Jelena remained beside the empty stage and, for the first time, read the entire program.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Reservation Under Another Name

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-reservation-under-another-name/

The booking confirmation arrived at their shared email address because the app had remembered an old account. Boris opened it while looking for the internet bill. Two nights, a room for two, his wife's name and the surname of a man he knew from business dinners. In the calendar, that weekend was marked as Anita's seminar.

He did not search her phone. He saved the confirmation and waited for her to come home. For years, he had worked nights in a laboratory while Anita ran an events agency. He was accustomed to schedules that rarely touched. That explanation now resembled furniture that had suddenly become too large for the room.

Anita did not deny it for long. She said she had fallen in love, was confused, and did not want to hurt anyone. Boris asked what she intended to do. She replied that she needed time, but saw no reason for sudden decisions. The apartment was theirs, their expenses were shared, and separating would only complicate everyone's life.

What hurt most was the way she spoke, as though they were negotiating a lease renewal. When he said he would not agree to live in that uncertainty, she accused him of being cold. When she cried, he wanted to take back everything he had said. He knew how to comfort her. He no longer knew whether he had the right to remain hurt himself first.

The next morning, she called asking him to pay her annual business-club membership. She had forgotten their conversation about the end of their marriage, or expected practical matters to continue unchanged. Boris said they would sit down to agree on shared obligations, but each would take responsibility for new personal expenses.

They did not separate in a single conversation. They listed the bills, arranged a valuation of their belongings, and settled the separation with

professional help. Some days, he missed her so much that he almost called just to hear her voice. Instead, he contacted the friend with whom he had regularly played chess before his marriage.

When Anita took away the last boxes, she left a flowering plant on the kitchen table. Boris did not throw it out. He repotted it because the pot was too small. He looked for no symbolism in the task. Soil spilled, he had to vacuum, and he needed to buy another saucer.

That evening, he opened their shared calendar and removed the old reminders. The new entry was simple: Saturday, chess at Jasmin's. For the first time in many months, he did not have to check who had told him the truth about that date.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Woman with the Red Leash

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-woman-with-the-red-leash/

The dog stole Davor's paper bag of pastries, and its owner apologized as though she had planned the theft herself. A red leash was wrapped around her wrist, and there was a trace of salt on her sleeve. Davor told her the dog had good taste. She laughed, bought him a new bag, and sat beside him on the bench.

Her name was Nela. Both were vacationing alone, with explanations that sounded rehearsed. Her husband could not leave work. His wife did not like the sea out of season. Neither had removed their wedding ring. At first, that seemed like proof they were hiding nothing important.

Their walks grew longer. They talked about books, sleeplessness, and the habit of saying everything was fine at home before anyone asked. One evening, they kissed beside a closed kiosk. Afterward, they were silent for a long time. Nela said things like this did not happen to her. Davor replied that he was not that kind of man either, although he had just become one.

They continued writing after returning home. Photographs of the dog gave way to messages they deleted before bed. Davor began traveling to invented business meetings. Nela told a friend she was attending a seminar, then spent the afternoon with him in a town between their homes.

In that town, they always chose the same hotel because no one at reception asked questions. Once, the power failed, and they sat beside a hallway window. Nela said she did not want their entire relationship to consist of emergency exits. Davor tried to promise a future, but she asked for a date. For the first time, he fell silent before saying something else beautiful.

Exposure did not bring the turning point. An ordinary shopping trip did. In a store, Davor noticed the tea his wife drank when her stomach hurt and automatically put it in his basket. He realized there was a real person at home, with habits he knew and information he was deliberately withholding. That evening, he told Nela he no longer wanted secret meetings.

At first, she thought he was leaving her. Then he admitted he did not know whether the two of them would survive once they stopped being an escape. Nela cried, but agreed. They both needed to have conversations at home without the promise of a reward waiting on the other side.

The months that followed were difficult and messy. Davor's marriage ended in an agreed separation, with hurt he did not try to minimize. Nela decided to live alone until she understood what she wanted. They did not send each other reports of every conversation.

They met again in autumn, in a public park, without claims of business trips. The dog immediately pushed its nose into Davor's bag. This time, there were no pastries inside. Nela laughed, and Davor offered his hand. They walked slowly, now without other people's lives hidden between them.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Dinner That Was Not Waiting

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dinner-that-was-not-waiting/

There was no pot on the stove, and Sanja's sweater was not hanging over the chair. Vedran came home at nine, certain he would hear the usual complaint about being late. Instead, he was greeted by the hum of the refrigerator. He called her. Her phone was unavailable.

At first, he was angry. He disliked unclear plans, although he rarely announced his own arrival. Then he noticed that her weekend bag was missing too. An empty envelope lay on the kitchen table. The night before, Sanja had said she no longer wanted to talk to a man who only called to explain why he would not be coming home again.

He sat down without taking off his coat. He remembered how they used to dance in that kitchen while pasta boiled. In recent months, he had come home full from business dinners and asked what there was to eat. Sanja left a plate in the refrigerator. He had taken that as proof that, despite her words, things were mostly fine.

He opened a notebook and began writing. He promised to finish early on Fridays, to stop arranging weekends without her, and to stop using work as the answer to every question. He wrote quickly, almost angrily. Only after filling a page did he notice how many specific things he knew, after months of claiming he did not understand what she wanted.

The door opened before midnight. Sanja came in with wet hair and her bag. Her sister had fallen ill, so she had gone to stay with her until her brother-in-law returned. She had left a message, but on the other side of the envelope. Her phone battery had died. Vedran felt such relief that he immediately began saying he had worried for nothing.

When a friend called about a Saturday outing, he almost automatically said he would come. Meanwhile, Sanja had read the open notebook. She did not shout. She simply turned the page toward him while he was still

holding the phone.

Vedran stopped. He told his friend he would call the next day. Sanja sat opposite him and asked whether he truly wanted any of what he had written or simply wanted never to feel frightened again.

He could not think of an answer that would sound good. He said he did not know how to change all at once. They agreed on one Friday and one conversation without phones, and then they would see. The following Friday, he came home on time. Dinner was not waiting for him. Sanja was ready, shoes on and keys in hand. She had reserved a table for two.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Skill He Could Not Reveal

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-skill-he-could-not-reveal/

At the wedding rehearsal dinner, Ivan was the first to notice the wrong spacing between two letters in the contract. Sara's father had brought the document recording the sale of his share in the family workshop. It was meant to be a reason for another toast. The buyer sat at the end of the table, smiling, his phone face down beside his plate.

Ivan looked at the document only once. The signature was good. The stamp was almost perfect. But the contract number and the bank's name looked as though they came from two different worlds. He knew that feeling. Years earlier, he had made his living altering other people's references and certificates, until one job ended with a criminal complaint and a suspended sentence.

Sara knew he had been through a difficult period. She did not know what he had done. He had told her about bad business partnerships and said he was no longer interested in quick money. These days, he designed menus, packaging, and advertisements. His office had two healthy ficus plants and no locked cabinets.

When the buyer asked Sara's father to sign an addendum immediately, Ivan put down his fork. He said no money should be sent until the document had been confirmed directly with its issuer. The buyer asked what gave him the right to interrupt a family dinner. Ivan looked at Sara before answering.

"Because I used to make things that looked like this."

The silence lasted. Sara took the document, not his hand. She asked her father to call a contact he already knew instead of the number printed on the paper. They did not finish checking that night. By morning, they had learned that the proof of funds had never been issued. The buyer stopped answering, and the family kept the correspondence and reported the

attempted fraud.

Ivan had expected gratitude to make the conversation with Sara easier. It did not. She said she was glad he had spoken up, but that did not make the previous two years honest. They postponed the wedding. Her mother asked why she would punish the man who had protected them. Sara replied that she was punishing no one, only making a decision with all the information.

Over the following months, Ivan showed her the judgment, explained whom he had already apologized to, and told her what remained unresolved. He did not ask for a new date. One morning, Sara came to his office with two pastries and a catalog of wedding invitations. She sat opposite him. "This time," she said, "tell the whole story at the beginning."

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Message a Jealous Friend Rewrote

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-message-a-jealous-friend-rewrote/

Filip knew all Bojan's passwords from their university days, but he did not need one this time. Bojan handed him the phone himself. In the draft were six awkward sentences for Lana, the woman he had gone cycling with on weekends for the last two months. He wanted to invite her to dinner without helmets or sportswear.

"You're good with words," he said.

Filip truly was. He worked as an editor and could improve any sentence. He was also in love with Lana. He had never told her, instead expecting her to recognize one day how carefully he listened. Bojan's openness struck him as crude and unfairly effective.

He deleted the simple invitation. In its place, he wrote a long message about fear of commitment, needing space and how it would be best to remain friends. He showed Bojan only the beginning, which he had left unchanged. "I've sent you a polished version," he said, returning the phone after the message had already gone.

He expected Lana to be offended and Bojan to withdraw. Instead, she called him that evening. She asked why Bojan's message used the same expressions Filip used in every discussion. Then she said she had already spoken to Bojan. Confused by her reply, he had immediately called and read her his original draft from a notebook.

Filip tried calling it a misunderstanding. Lana let him speak until the explanation wore itself out completely. Then she asked only, "Did you change his meaning because you like me?"

His admission was quieter than he had imagined. It brought no relief. Lana said she did not want to see him until she could trust an ordinary sentence he spoke. The next day, Bojan came for the books he had lent

him. They did not argue. That hurt Filip more than the shouting he had expected.

A month later, he sent them separate apologies, without explaining how lonely he had been and without asking for replies. Bojan wrote that it would take time. Lana did not answer.

When they met at a city cycling event in spring, Bojan and Lana arrived together. Filip greeted them and stayed with another group. Before setting off, he adjusted his own helmet. For the first time, he was not trying to edit someone else's conversation.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Luxury Car at the Wrong Address

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-luxury-car-at-the-wrong-address/

On the hotel terrace, Tarik set down the keys to an expensive car with the emblem clearly visible. The car belonged to a guest he had just driven from the airport. Tarik was a driver, but the woman at the next table could not know that. She had a French book and the air of someone whose coffee nobody was allowed to hurry.

"Are you waiting for someone?" she asked after hearing him sigh for the third time over his dark phone.

He said he was resting between meetings. She introduced herself as Mila and explained that she had come to sell a family apartment. She was tired of property, travel and people asking about her money. Tarik nodded with the understanding of a man who had spent the morning calculating whether he could afford the registration on his old car.

They talked for almost an hour. Mila claimed to value simplicity above all. Tarik therefore kept quiet about liking her watch and talked about hiking, which he had not done for three years. She spoke of France without once opening the book. Both were funnier when they forgot what they were pretending to be. That happened while they argued about putting sugar in coffee.

They parted without surnames. Mila said she might stay a few more days. Tarik promised to show her the city if his schedule opened up. As soon as she turned the corner, he called the dispatcher and apologized for being late.

The next morning, he arrived to collect another guest. At reception, he found Mila in uniform, wearing a badge that read Milena. She looked up at the sound of his voice. They stared across the counter long enough for a colleague to ask whether there was a problem with the reservation.

"With the service description," she said.

Tarik began explaining the keys, then abandoned the attempt and told the truth. Milena admitted borrowing the book from the hotel lounge. The apartment she was selling belonged to her aunt; her role was answering interested buyers. After a difficult shift yesterday, she had wanted an hour as someone nobody judged by a uniform.

He invited her for coffee. She declined that day because she was working late, but gave him her number. On Saturday, they sat in a bakery opposite the bus station. Tarik placed his own car keys on the table, their plastic casing cracked. Milena opened a book in Bosnian. They both took sugar.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Kiss That Could Not Be Explained

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-kiss-that-could-not-be-explained/

In a furniture showroom, Lana and Boris were choosing a table for their future apartment. He discussed the number of guests; she discussed the color of the wood. Boris had a successful company, a gentle voice and a habit of leaving her the final say. They planned to become engaged as soon as the apartment purchase was complete.

Davor, a photographer and her occasional lover, came through a side entrance. He knew nothing about Boris. Seeing her beside a fabric sample, he approached with a smile and kissed her like a man entitled to familiar tenderness. Lana kissed him back before her eyes reached Boris.

Boris put down the catalog. She quickly explained that Davor greeted friends that way. It sounded bad as soon as she said it. Davor stepped back, realizing he had been transformed into a man with unusual customs. He said he would leave them and went out before managing to ask anything else.

That evening, Lana offered Boris a tidier version. Davor was an old friend, confused, perhaps still in love with her. She did not want to hurt him. Boris listened and asked just one question: did this friend know that she and Boris were together? She said he did. It was a new lie, spoken to protect the previous one.

Two days later, the men met at an exhibition opening. Boris approached Davor without a threat. They spoke briefly, long enough to discover that neither was in the relationship that had been described to him. When Lana arrived, they were standing by a window with expressions that left no room for another improvisation.

She expected an argument. Instead, Boris returned her key and said he was stopping the purchase. Davor asked whether she would finally speak for herself without explaining his intentions for him. She admitted

feeling secure with one man and excited with the other. She had never asked whether they accepted that arrangement.

She stayed with neither. Months later, when a friend tried turning the incident into a story about two jealous men, Lana stopped her. They had not competed. They had withdrawn. That fact hurt because it did not allow her to consider herself a prize over which other people had lost their minds.

She bought a small table for her own apartment, secondhand and scratched. One morning, she sat at it and wrote two apologies without requesting a reply. Then she made coffee and sat by the window. For the first time, she was not waiting for a message confirming she was desirable enough to be forgiven for everything she had not said.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

An Alibi in the Waiting Room

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-alibi-in-the-waiting-room/

When Aleksa grew dizzy and collapsed beside the table, Tamara immediately called for help. She left the apartment door open and waited beside him, holding her phone. Only when the crew arrived did she remember that her husband was due back from a trip. On the table were two glasses and a dinner she never made for herself.

Aleksa had come as a colleague, supposedly to discuss a project. Their affair had lasted four months. Each time, Tamara said she first had to resolve her marriage, then found another week she needed to wait. That evening, she had planned to discuss ending things, or so she repeated to herself while lighting the candles.

In the ambulance, Aleksa regained consciousness. A medical worker asked him questions and made notes. Tamara felt such powerful relief that she began to cry. Then, almost in the same breath, she asked whether the record could say he had become ill in the street. The worker paused with her pen.

"I can write down what happened," she replied calmly. She gave no speech about adultery. She asked whether Tamara would accompany them to the hospital. Tamara nodded, looking at her shoes. Aleksa turned away from her. Even then, she felt angry that he had not helped her invent an answer.

In the waiting room, her husband sent a photograph of his suitcase: he had arrived early. Her finger had already begun typing a story about an unexpected meeting. She deleted it. She called him, said where she was and who she was with, and told him she needed to explain their relationship. At the other end, she heard only the zipper on his bag being lowered.

He did not come to cause a scene. He said he would spend the night at his brother's. After examination, Aleksa was discharged with the doctor's instructions. Tamara did not take him back to the apartment. She called a taxi and waited until he got in. They parted without a cinematic line. Both were tired and pale, and for the first time they had nowhere to hide behind the same story.

The conversations with her husband lasted weeks and ended in separation. Tamara did not offer the emergency as a reason for forgiveness. She signed an agreement about the apartment, found temporary accommodation and told their mutual friends only what they had both agreed to share. The hardest part was stopping herself from managing everyone else's impression of her.

Later, she met the medical worker in the street. She thanked her for helping Aleksa. She wanted to add something about the question in the ambulance, but the worker simply nodded and continued toward her shift. Tamara stood on the pavement for a few moments, freed from the need to have a stranger confirm that she was good again.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Table for Secret Lovers

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-table-for-secret-lovers/

"Book under another name," Ines suggested. She did not have a secret lover. She had a husband with whom her longest conversation in recent months had concerned a broken washing machine. She wanted a dinner where they would not behave like two people accidentally assigned to the same apartment.

Mladen chose a small restaurant in the next town. They arrived separately. She wore a jacket she had never worn to work, and he stood to greet her as though seeing her for the first time. The waiter led them to a table behind tall plants with a professional indifference that made them both laugh.

At first, the game was easy. They invented names and occupations. Ines said she translated letters for people unable to admit what they wanted. Mladen claimed to sell watches that ran slow only when their owners were happy. They had not enjoyed themselves like that in a long time. Then she asked how many women he had taken to similar dinners before her.

He gave a larger number than the truth. Even he did not know why. Perhaps he wanted to seem more interesting as the man he was now pretending to be. Ines grew quiet. She asked whether all those women had known he considered them episodes. Mladen protested that she was questioning him like a wife, although tonight they were supposedly something else.

"What's the point of a game if you use it to boast about things that would otherwise hurt me?" She took the ring she had hidden in her bag before arriving and put it back on her finger. She was not threatening to leave. She simply wanted to stop listening to a performance in which other people's lives served as proof of his worth.

He admitted exaggerating. In reality, he had had several relationships, one ended badly by message, and enough shame that he rarely spoke of it. Ines told him how she had once stayed with people because she felt embarrassed disappointing them. The dinner lost its theatrical sparkle but became more interesting.

When the waiter asked about dessert, Mladen looked at Ines instead of ordering her usual cake. She chose something different. Afterward, they walked through the empty square and agreed not to use jealousy as a way to wake up each other's attention. They did not need to invent competition to admit that something was missing.

On the way home, they reached their cars and paused, awkward as though after a first date. Ines invited him back to her place for coffee. Mladen said he would like that but had an early start at work. They both laughed. He followed her to the apartment they shared, this time feeling that he had truly been invited.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Reunion in Carriage Six

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-reunion-in-carriage-six/

Vedran entered the compartment and found his wife taking off her gloves. Their divorce was scheduled for the following month. They had lived apart for three years, speaking only about their shared house and bills. "What a coincidence," Dunja said, moving her bag from the seat opposite.

They were traveling toward the coast. Vedran was visiting his sister, while Dunja said she had a business conference. Once, her carefully arranged traveling clothes would have seemed cold to him. Now he noticed the tiredness around her eyes and began wondering whether they had both agreed too quickly to the distance that had felt like a relief at the time.

They talked for almost two hours. Dunja asked about his mother and remembered the anniversary of his father's birth. He thought perhaps they could finally speak without their old contest over who had given more. When the attendant brought coffee, he paid for both cups. She gave that familiar, brief smile.

As they approached the station, she took out a small mirror and adjusted her hair. Her phone lit up with a message: "The photographer is on the platform. Stay together." Vedran did not ask to see the screen. He simply read what lay on the table between them and felt the conversation he had just valued changing behind his back.

Dunja ran a relationship counseling practice. Since a public argument with her business partner, rumors had circulated about her marriage. She said she needed one calm photograph of them together, nothing more. She knew which train he was taking because he had told his sister his arrival time. She had bought a seat in the same compartment.

"I didn't lie about anything we discussed," she said. Vedran looked at the two empty cups. He believed at least part of their conversation had been

sincere. That was precisely why it hurt. He explained that he would not provide a picture of a reconciliation that had not happened, nor deny her the right to preserve her dignity.

They stepped onto the platform separately. Dunja told the photographer the shoot was canceled. The next day, she sent her colleagues a brief notice that her private divorce proceedings were ongoing and that she would not use her marriage as proof of professional expertise. She lost several clients but stopped answering every rumor with another performance.

Later, she sent Vedran a message without a travel plan or photograph. She apologized for the way she had put him in that situation. When they met at the notary's office, they discussed selling the house and a tree she wanted to transplant. He helped her carry out the sapling. They did not reconcile. At last, they could do something kind without proving anything to anyone.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Honeymoon at the Last Stop

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/honeymoon-at-the-last-stop/

When the bus reached its last stop, Nina was still keeping the seat beside her free. Her husband Marko had stepped off earlier to buy water, saying he would board through the other door. They were on their honeymoon, planning to look along the way at premises for the little bakery they had discussed since they met.

The driver patiently searched the bus with her. Neither Marko nor the bag of documents was there. His phone was switched off. Nina tried to find a reasonable explanation: perhaps he had misunderstood the stop, perhaps he had become ill, perhaps he had gone for a taxi. Each new perhaps lasted less time than the one before.

The previous week, she had transferred most of her savings to him for the business. Marko said the lease had to be paid immediately and that he would show her the documents when they arrived. She was a pastry chef; he said he understood contracts. At the wedding, her aunt praised him because someone was finally willing to support Nina's talent.

She sat on a plastic bench holding the bouquet she had not wanted to leave at the hotel. She called her cousin Azra and said she had lost her husband. Azra asked whether she was sure he wanted to be found. The question hurt, but it stopped Nina circling through excuses. Azra came to get her before dark.

The next day, they contacted the bank, reported what had happened and saved the correspondence. Nina received no promise that the money would quickly be returned. She received a case number and a list of facts to supply. When she finally lay down in Azra's guest room, she cried more for the imagined bakery than for the man she had barely known.

She sent her family one message. She explained what had happened and asked them not to tell her which signs she should have noticed. Her aunt

nevertheless began with "I always..." and then stopped. The following day, she brought a professional mixer that had sat unopened in her basement for years.

Nina rented several time slots in a shared kitchen. She began with small orders, without a shop window or grand opening. Azra helped her prepare a price list. When Marko sent a message months later about a supposed misunderstanding, Nina passed it to the person handling her case and did not enter another private negotiation.

Her first large order was a cake for someone else's wedding. She stared at the empty box for a long time before accepting the work. On the lid, she placed a label bearing her business's name. It was not the bakery Marko had described to her. It was smaller and grew more slowly, and every one of its keys was in Nina's pocket.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

A Piece of a Star from the Gift Shop

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-piece-of-a-star-from-the-gift-shop/

For her birthday, Denis brought a small box lined with dark fabric. Inside lay a black stone with a metallic sheen. He said it was a piece of meteorite, found during a nighttime journey through the desert, and that he had kept it until he met someone worth giving it to. Ena held the stone in her palm as though it were fragile.

She had loved astronomy since university but had never traveled to a desert. Denis spoke of cold sand and a silence unknown in the city. She was glad he was sharing a memory he considered important. He mistook her attention for admiration of his exploit and added several more details.

In reality, he had bought the stone in an airport gift shop. The box described it as decorative volcanic rock. He had intended a harmless joke, or so he told himself, but the moment for joking passed as soon as Ena embraced him. Later came their engagement, their plans and a photograph of the stone on her desk.

At a lecture, she asked a geologist to look at the gift. She did not want a valuation. She wanted to know how to care for it. The geologist explained what could be established through a simple examination and what would require analysis. Then she found the gift-shop label stuck to the bottom of the box.

Ena showed Denis the box in private. She asked only where he had bought the stone. First, he said gifts should not be investigated like receipts. Then he tried explaining that he had embellished the story for her sake. She stood up from the table. "I trusted you for our sake. That's not the same thing."

She returned her engagement ring and took a few days to herself. Denis considered buying a real meteorite. He was already looking at offers

when he realized he was again seeking an object to have a conversation in his place. He closed the website and wrote her a brief admission, without a sentence about how much he had wanted to make her happy.

When they met again, he told her about the real journey: a delayed flight, a bad sandwich and a shop assistant offering a discount on a second box. Ena laughed despite her anger. It did not mean the engagement was restored. They agreed to move more slowly for a while and stop using grand plans as evidence of trust.

She kept the black stone with a new label: "Airport, actual origin." A year later, they went stargazing together above a small mountain village. Denis could not recognize the constellations. He asked Ena to show him the first one, and she raised her hand toward the north.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Envelope on the Wedding Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-envelope-on-the-wedding-table/

The band had just begun the first-dance song when a waiter placed an envelope beside Haris's plate. Inside was a short message from his former partner, Ivona. Their shared studio, closed a year earlier, had received its final clearance notice that day. Her paintings were still locked inside.

Haris had the key. He also had a promise, repeated for months, that he would settle the rent and bring her things. Instead, he had gone quiet as soon as he began a new relationship. He had assured his bride Lana that everything from the past was properly finished. When she asked what had happened, he said only that he had to make an urgent call.

He disappeared for forty minutes. Lana stood beside the cake while guests offered jokes and guesses. Someone said men became frightened of marriage. Someone else began mentioning Ivona. Lana asked the band to take a break and went to the hotel lobby.

She found Haris there with the keys in his hand. He intended to go to the studio but did not know how to explain his absence. He showed her the message. Lana first asked whether Ivona needed help protecting her work. Then she asked to see the other correspondence, as far as it concerned the unfulfilled obligation and their shared debt.

There was no secretly renewed romance. It was something less cinematic and far more uncomfortable: Haris had avoided responsibility because it spoiled his picture of a fresh start. He had missed payments, concealed warnings and hoped Ivona would find a solution herself. Lana looked at the keys for a long time.

"We'll go and finish what you promised," she said. "We'll talk about us afterward." They asked their wedding witnesses to keep the celebration going without inventing a story. At the studio, Ivona waited with a rented

van. Lana introduced herself, then helped wrap two large paintings. Ivona neither asked for her understanding nor offered unnecessary comfort.

They returned to the hotel before midnight. There was no first dance that evening. Lana told the guests they had needed to settle a family obligation, without turning someone else's troubles into a wedding spectacle. Haris paid his share of the debt the following week. They postponed their trip and had several difficult conversations with professional help.

Months later, they danced in the kitchen to a crackling radio. Lana did not claim to have forgotten everything. Haris no longer said the past did not matter. When the telephone rang, he looked at the screen, said who was calling and answered. She went on stirring dinner, for the first time without needing to listen through a closed door.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Box Beneath the Winter Coats

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-box-beneath-the-winter-coats/

Armin found the box beneath the winter coats six months after his wife Sara died. It held earrings she had called her little bits of glass, several rings and a necklace she wore only to the theater. He wanted to give everything to her sister, but first he needed to repair a broken clasp.

The jeweler put on his glasses and examined the necklace beneath a lamp. He did not ask where it had been bought. He asked whether Armin had a receipt or proof of inheritance. When he gave an approximate value, Armin thought he had mixed up the boxes. Sara had worked in a library. He repaired elevators. They could never have afforded jewelry like that.

He returned home with the clasp still broken and a neat business card. He remembered every evening she had gone out, every play he had not felt like seeing. His memories suddenly fell into an uncomfortable new arrangement. His joke about showering her with diamonds one day now sounded like something she had heard with a private understanding.

In the drawer of bills, he found three short letters. They were signed by a man they both knew from an amateur choir. He wrote about a journey they had never taken and an evening he could not forget. It was not enough to reconstruct the whole story, but it was enough that Armin could no longer claim nothing had happened.

He called him. The man confirmed that he and Sara had seen each other for one winter, long before her illness. The jewelry had been his gift. Armin asked why it had ended. "She ended it," he replied. He did not ask for forgiveness on her behalf. Armin ended the conversation when he sensed that further questions would serve only to hurt him again.

For several days, he carried the box around the apartment like something that belonged nowhere. He considered selling it all, then throwing it

away, then returning it. Sara's sister came with food and found him sitting on the floor beside the wardrobe. She listened without trying to turn Sara into either a saint or deception in human form.

"I don't know what she kept from you," she said. "I know what I saw between you." Armin admitted that he did not want to erase twenty good years, but he still could not say her name without anger. Her sister stayed until he had eaten his soup. She did not tell him when he should forgive.

Eventually, he sold the necklace and set the money aside until he could make a calmer decision. He left one glass ring, genuinely worthless, on the shelf. He had bought it for her on a day trip when it began to rain. That memory answered none of his other questions. Still, for the first time, he allowed it to remain true alongside them.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Borrowed Sparkle

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/borrowed-sparkle/

Milica adjusted the necklace three times in front of the mirror. She had borrowed it from a friend for a charity dinner to which her husband Emir had finally received an invitation. They were not poor, but for years they had postponed their own wishes to save for an apartment. That evening, Milica wanted to look as though she was postponing nothing.

At the reception, people photographed her beside the flowers, asked where she had bought her dress and remembered her name. Emir watched from the doorway, proud and slightly puzzled. On the way home, she talked faster than usual. Only in the bathroom, when she lifted her hair, did she see her bare neck.

They returned to the restaurant, called the taxi and searched every fold of her coat. The necklace was gone. Her friend Tea was away. Milica messaged to ask whether she could keep the jewelry a few more days. Emir suggested telling her what had happened. Milica asked him to let them try to find an identical necklace first.

A jeweler showed them one that cost almost their entire savings. Without speaking, Emir calculated how many months they would need to save again. Milica said she could not bear Tea thinking her unreliable. That night, they lay facing away from each other, counting the things they would have to sell.

In the morning, Emir brought the savings withdrawal form. As Milica read his name, she noticed the hand holding the paper was trembling. His willingness to help suddenly frightened her more than her friend's disappointment. She picked up the phone and called Tea. She said everything before she could invent another excuse.

Tea was silent for a few moments. Then she explained that the necklace was not made of diamonds. She had bought it for a performance and

wore it because she liked it. Milica sat on the floor. Relief was not all she felt. She realized she had been ready to sacrifice their shared plan to preserve an image that perhaps nobody else had even asked for.

Only then did Emir become angry. He said it hurt that she had not trusted him when he suggested telling the truth. They did not resolve it with one embrace. They talked over several evenings about money and how tired they had become of doing without. They left most of their savings untouched and set aside a small part for things other than an apartment.

A month later, Tea came to dinner. Milica gave her a new, simple necklace and told her the whole story, including her own shame. Tea put it on immediately. As Emir brought the plates, Milica wished, for the first time that winter, that someone would photograph them right there at their old kitchen table.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

Rules for the Eighth Floor

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/rules-for-the-eighth-floor/

Adna knew the meeting would be uncomfortable as soon as she saw the rule book on the desk, open at a page nobody had read before. Mirela, the editor in chief, offered her water. Then she mentioned the producer Damir and their dinner at the hotel near the station.

They were both single, but they had kept their relationship from the newsroom. Damir was choosing the team for a new documentary, and Adna had applied for the lead reporting role. She could explain why they had not disclosed it. She could not explain why everyone else should trust that the selection would be fair.

"I'm taking you off the project," Mirela said. "And I'll request a disciplinary warning." Adna accepted that she should withdraw from consideration until another panel reviewed the selection. The warning felt like a punishment already written before the conversation began. She asked to see how similar cases had been handled.

Mirela smiled. "We haven't had any." At that moment, she opened her bag and a hotel key card fell out. On its own, it meant nothing. But beside it was a dinner receipt charged to the company of their new major advertiser, a man Mirela had spent weeks describing solely as a business partner.

Adna did not photograph the receipt. She picked it up and handed it back. The editor blushed before anyone asked a question. "We've been together a long time," she said quietly. The advertising contract had been signed the previous month. Since then, two critical reports about his business had been postponed without a clear explanation.

Adna could easily have proposed mutual silence. Judging by the way Mirela closed the rule book, that was exactly what she expected. Instead, Adna opened a blank notebook. "If I disclose our relationship, you

disclose yours. Let the same people review both cases." She did not ask to be put back on the team.

The conversation lasted until dark. Afterward, they went together to the director. Adna remained outside the selection process for that documentary, while Mirela withdrew from decisions involving the advertiser's company. Another editor took over the delayed reports. The newsroom did not become free of gossip, but at last everyone knew who was deciding what.

Damir waited outside the building with two coffees. He said he was sorry about the project. Adna took the warmer cup and admitted she was angry with both him and herself. Then they went to dinner at the restaurant across the road. This time, they chose neither a table behind a partition nor a bill made out to the company.

DECEPTION · 3 MIN READ

The Man They Called Faithful

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-they-called-faithful/

While adjusting his microphone, Viktor asked to be filmed from the left. His right eye still reddened when he spoke about the divorce, he said. Ema, an editor at the small television station, wrote his request beside the camera number. The studio smelled of burnt coffee.

The program was called Second Chance. Viktor described spending years protecting his marriage, forgiving absences and buying flowers for a wife who had fallen in love with someone else. The presenter listened with her hands folded. Viewers especially loved the story of the red umbrella under which he had waited for his wife outside the hospital.

Ema paused the recording. That umbrella was hers. Viktor had taken it when he left their apartment seven years earlier, and she had been the one waiting outside the hospital while his father underwent surgery. During the interview, he had never mentioned his first marriage. His more recent former wife, supposedly his only one, had just as much reason to be surprised.

By the following morning, Viktor had been invited to open a festival celebrating family life. The editor showed Ema the viewing figures and asked her to prepare a longer version. She did not want to turn the editing room into her own courtroom. But she could not cut his lie into something even more convincing.

She called the producer. She showed her a photograph from the hospital parking lot and old messages, but asked that they speak to everyone involved first. The second wife, Alma, agreed to bring her own records. They sat opposite each other, wary as women who had spent years being portrayed as rivals.

Alma recognized the candlelit dinner mentioned on the program. She had prepared it after Viktor admitted having another relationship. She did

not want viewers to learn names or intimate details. She simply wanted her absence from his story to stop being sold as proof of his goodness.

When the producer invited him to clarify his account, Viktor offered to return his fee. "People have already heard an uplifting message," he said. For once without editing controls in front of her, Ema replied that an uplifting message could withstand accurate facts. The program published a correction, accompanied by his written acknowledgment that he had combined events and omitted his own actions.

The festival canceled his appearance. There was no applause, no final victory. After filming, Ema and Alma had coffee, talked about work and discovered that they both hated carnations. It was raining when they left. Ema opened an ordinary blue umbrella and offered Alma half of the dry space.