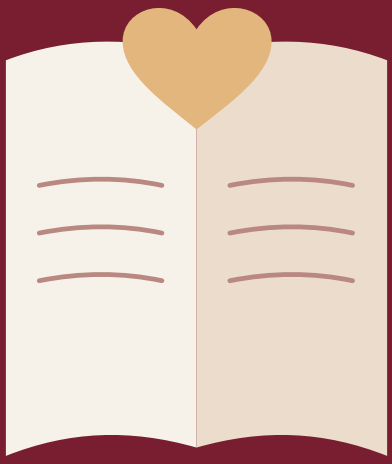

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Romance

307 short stories

Ljubavni romani

ljubavniromani.com

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This free collection brings together all 307 stories in the Romance category of Ljubavni romani, newest first. Every story is literary fiction: the characters, conversations and events are invented, even when they resemble real life.

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ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

Lilacs Without a Card

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/lilacs-without-a-card/

Velibor Ristić turned fifty on a Tuesday in mid-May, and the National Theater celebrated by putting his name over the entrance in letters three feet high. After the performance there was a dinner at a restaurant on Ferhadija, with toasts, colleagues who cried at the right moments, and a message from the ministry read out by the director. He got home to Mejtaš after two, with an armful of flowers that he left in the bathtub. On the chest of drawers in the hallway, among the birthday cards, lay a thick envelope with no return address, his name written in a slanted, unfamiliar hand. He was too tired to open it.

In the morning Kosara came, the woman who had cleaned his apartment for fifteen years and was the only one who did not admire his voice. As she put the coffee on, she asked where the lilac was this year. Every birthday, early in the morning, a bunch of white lilac would appear outside his door, without a card, and Kosara would put it in the blue vase in the hallway. Velibor had long ago stopped wondering who it was from. Some admirer, he thought, of whom there had been many. This year there was nothing outside the door. "Maybe she got old," he said, and shrugged. Then he opened the envelope.

Inside was a short note on a sheet from a notepad and some fifty pages torn from a school notebook, lined, written on both sides. The note read: "Dear Mr. Ristić, my sister Tanja died on the twelfth of April at the Koševo hospital. She asked me to send you this for your birthday, not a day sooner. I have not read it. Vlasta." Below it was a phone number. Velibor began reading standing up, by the window. When he got to the third page, he sat down. The coffee went cold, and Kosara vacuumed around his feet as if around a piece of furniture.

You don't remember me, the letter began. Don't try, it is not your fault, and I am not writing to blame you for anything. I am writing because in a

few weeks I will be dead, and I do not want to go without at least one person knowing what I have known for twenty-four years. I was nineteen when you moved into the apartment across from ours, in Čengić Vila, with two boxes of books, a guitar with no strings, and a coat that was too big for you. You were twenty-six. Since that day, not one has passed without my thinking of you. I tried. It did not work.

Through the wall I listened to you learning your lines. Hamlet, then Platonov, then that peasant from Kočić, and I learned them better than you did, because inside my head I prompted you every time you got stuck. I brought you your mail when the mailman left it with us. Once you said "thanks, kid" and shut the door, and I carried that thanks around with me for a whole week. Mama sewed for half of Čengić Vila and used to say that actors are not people but weather forecasts. I bought tickets out of my scholarship and sat in the Chamber Theater, in the seventh row, always in the same seat. You never once looked at the seventh row.

A year later you moved to Mejtaš, to the apartment where you still live. Two years after that I came up to you in the lobby after a premiere, and you looked at me as if you were seeing me for the first time. You asked my name. For five evenings we walked from Skenderija to Wilson's Promenade and back. You bought me chestnuts by the Skenderija bridge and said I had a face for silent films. You talked about the roles you would play, and I knew all your roles by heart and kept quiet, so it would not give me away. On the fifth evening I stayed with you until morning. In the morning you left on tour for Ljubljana and said you would call me as soon as you got back.

You did not call. I am not angry. After Ljubljana came Zagreb, then a film, then that actress from the papers, and I followed all of it from the seventh row and from the papers. I had the library in Hrasno, where I worked for twenty years, and Mama, who fell ill, and a lilac bush in the yard of our building, which I planted the autumn you moved away. Mama died, and the lilac stayed, and I stayed with it. Every May, for your birthday, I cut its branches and carried them to your door, early, before

you woke up. I never put in a card. What would I have written? That it was me? You did not know who I was.

Five years ago I waited for you outside the theater, after Uncle Vanya. It was cold, I had on a beige raincoat and a program in my hand. You took it, smiled the way you smile at everyone, and asked, "Who should I make it out to?" I said, "To Tanja." You wrote "To Tanja, with love," signed it, and were already looking over my shoulder at the next woman with a program. I did not hold it against you. I walked home, all the way to Hrasno, and laughed the whole way, I don't even know at what. That program is still on my nightstand.

I am writing to you from a room at Koševo, with a window facing the Bare cemetery, which, you will admit, is bad staging. The doctors are kind and they don't lie to me, which is more than I asked for. On my windowsill there is a branch from the yard, still in bud. Vlasta thinks I am writing my will. I asked her to send you this only on your birthday, so you would not have to decide whether to come to the funeral. I ask for nothing. You don't have to remember me. Only, if you ever look at the seventh row while you are playing, seat twelve, know that it is mine and that it is empty only because I can no longer come. Your Tanja, from the apartment across the hall.

Velibor put down the last page and tried to remember. Čengić Vila he remembered: the building with the broken elevator, the damp stain on the hallway ceiling, the seamstress across the hall whose machine ticked through the wall at night. The seamstress he remembered. The girl he did not. He tried with those five evenings. The line about a face for silent films, he realized uneasily, he had said to others too. In those years there had been many evenings on Wilson's Promenade and, he was ashamed to admit, many girls waiting for him in the lobby. The tour in Ljubljana he remembered for the rain and a bad review. There had been thousands of signatures with love. Not one of them had a face.

He called the number under the note. A tired woman answered. He said who he was, and there was a silence in which he could hear a television on somewhere in her home. He said he had received the letter. He did not know what came next. He asked whether Tanja had been ill for long. "A year," said Vlasta. "Don't worry, she never mentioned you. She only asked me to bring her notebooks." He asked where she was buried. "At Bare," said Vlasta. "She could see the spot from her window." Then he asked whether she had a photograph. An hour later it arrived on his phone: a woman of about forty, in a beige raincoat, at a tram stop in Hrasno, with a sprig of lilac in her hand, smiling at someone outside the frame.

He looked at it for a long time. He enlarged her face with two fingers until it broke apart into little squares. He looked at the eyes, the mouth, a small white scar above one eyebrow. He waited for something to move inside him, the way an actor at rehearsal waits for the lines to pass from his head into his body. Nothing moved. He did not know her.

That evening he played as he did every other evening. When he left the apartment, the blue vase stood empty on the chest of drawers, and he did not put it away. In the dressing room he put the letter in the inside pocket of his costume, without knowing why himself. In the second act, for the first time in thirty years on the stage, he looked at the seventh row. Seat twelve was empty. He looked at it a second too long and forgot his line, something that had never happened to him before. From the prompter's box someone whispered him the word. Velibor repeated it and played on, and the audience noticed nothing.

ROMANCE · 11 MIN READ

The Flute Above the Canyon

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-flute-above-the-canyon/

At my mother's, love was argued about the way prices were: loudly, with examples, and with no hope that anyone would convince anyone. That winter, one Sunday in January, we were sitting in her apartment in Koševo: me, my husband, two of my mother's friends from the pensioners' club, and Ademir, my husband's friend from university, who had dropped by to return a drill and stayed for the pita. On television they were just then talking about a young woman from Tuzla who, two days before her wedding, had left a rich fiancé and gone off with the drummer of some band. My mother switched off the television and said that loves like that last exactly as long as the money they take with them.

Zlatija, my mother, is seventy-three and has the right to the last word in her own home. One of her friends told us about a cousin who married a poor man and held it against him until the day she died. My husband kept quiet, as he always does when something that is not his needs defending. Only Ademir turned his cup on its saucer and smiled. When they had all said their piece, he said that he had once seen a love that lasted fifty years and was paid for at the highest price there is. My mother looked at him over her glasses and told him to go ahead, but not to lie. Here is what he told us, the way I remember it.

Two years ago, in October, I was doing a land survey on Bjelašnica. The Municipality of Konjic was renewing its land registry, and nobody wanted to go to Lukomir, so they sent me, because I was the only one crazy enough to say I loved the mountains. For three days I measured the boundaries between stone houses and sheepfolds and listened to the women on their doorsteps explain whose meadow was whose all the way back to Ottoman times. On the fourth day, around three in the afternoon, fog rose out of the Rakitnica canyon. When I did find my four-by-four half an hour later and set off toward Umoljani, snow began to fall at the

first bend, and at the second I ended up with two wheels in the ditch.

I walked back toward the village with the flashlight on my phone and five percent battery. The only house with a light on was the last one in the village, right on the edge of the canyon, low, built of gray stone, with a steep shingle roof that came down almost to the ground. The door was opened by an old woman as small as a child, in a wool sweater, with a headscarf tied at the back. She looked at me, then at the snow behind me, and said, "Please come in, you are wet to the knees." She said it the way people used to speak on Bistrik when I was a child, softly, with that drawl at the end that you never hear in the mountains.

Inside there was a single room, warm as a hammam. A wood stove, two beds under kilims, sheepskins on the floor, a transistor radio on the windowsill. By the stove sat an old man, big, with hands like roots, carving a piece of wood with a small knife. When I came in, he only nodded. "He can't hear," said the old woman. "Not for twenty years now. He doesn't answer me either, and I talk to him all day." On the wall above his bed hung a flute of dark wood, polished by hands. The old woman made coffee and brought it in two cups of thin white porcelain with gold rims, which did not belong in that house, any more than her voice did.

She asked where I was from. When I said Sarajevo, she kept silent until I had drunk half my cup. When I said Bistrik, she set the coffee pot down on the stove so slowly that I thought she had remembered something. She asked whether the big house with the green fence above the brewery was still standing, the one with the linden tree in the garden. All of Bistrik knew the Bakarević house. I told her it was still there and that now it was a small hotel where foreigners ate breakfast under that very linden. The old woman laughed, for the first time since I had come in, and said that her father used to say that as long as he lived, only Bakarevićs would eat breakfast in that garden.

That is how I learned that her name was Nadžija Bakarević. Her father had been a professor at the Faculty of Medicine, and before the Second

World War her grandfather had owned three shops on Baščaršija and an apartment in Vienna. She was the only daughter. She studied French, played the piano, and was engaged to the son of an important man, a young man preparing for the diplomatic service. In the summer of seventy-four she went with a group from the university on a trip up to Lukomir. Toward evening a young man drove his sheep up onto the hill above the canyon and played the flute. She stayed to listen until all the others had gone back to the village.

"He played as if no one were there," she said. "I had played all my life so that someone would hear me. My teacher, my father, my fiancé, the guests at my aunt's receptions. And he played to the sheep and to the canyon, and he did not care who was listening." She went back to Sarajevo, to the house with the linden, and for a month she did not sleep. In September she packed one suitcase, left her ring on the piano with a letter under it, and took a bus to Hadžići, and from there went on foot and in a truck hauling timber. When she arrived, the young man with the flute, Sejdija, was at the watering place with the livestock. He looked at the suitcase, then at her, and was not the least bit surprised. He only said that up here a suitcase is not carried in your hand, and he hoisted it onto his back.

The next day, she said, her father told the relatives that he no longer had a daughter. Her mother wrote to her for eight years, through the post office in Konjic, and Sejdija brought the letters once a month, when he went down to sell cheese. Then the letters stopped. She learned of her father's death from a newspaper that a shopkeeper in Konjic had wrapped her sugar in. She did go down for her mother's funeral, in eighty-seven, in rubber boots and Sejdija's coat, and stood by the cemetery wall while the people prayed. No one recognized her. After the war her brother sold the house and left for Canada.

While she talked, the old man carved and did not raise his head. I looked around the room: the skins, the bucket of water from the spring, and that one cup with the gold rim. I asked her what anyone would ask, whether

she had ever been sorry. She did not answer right away. She stood up, poured the rest of the coffee for the old man, and brushed the hair off his forehead with her hand, as if he were a child and not a man of eighty. He lifted his head and looked at her. "Fifty years," she said to me, without taking her eyes off him. "I was happy every day. Even on the days when there was nothing in the house but cornmeal, and the snow was up to the window."

Then the old man set down the knife and what he had been carving, which was a new flute, still unfinished, and took the old one down from the wall. He had not heard my question or her answer. But he had seen her face. Nadžija sat down on the bed and folded her hands in her lap. He played for a long time, something slow, with no tune I could repeat, and his hands trembled only at the start. Later she told me, in a whisper, that he played every evening at the same hour, even since he went deaf, because hands, he says, remember what ears no longer can.

I slept on the sheepskins by the stove. In the morning the fog was gone, and from the doorstep you could see the whole canyon, white with snow and red with beech. Two neighbors pulled my four-by-four out with a tractor. Nadžija walked me to the end of the village. When we parted, she asked me for one thing only. That I not tell any of her family that I had seen her, because it would only frighten them. And that when I passed the house on Bistrik, I would look to see whether the linden was still the old one or whether they had planted a new one. "It's the old one," I said. "Then all is well," she said, and went back to the house, where the old man was already standing in the doorway.

Ademir finished and reached for the pita, as if he had just told us how he fixed a water heater. My mother's friends were silent. Then one of them said it was a sad story, a woman from a house like that ending up in a stone hut without water. My husband looked at me. And my mother took off her glasses, which with her always meant something serious. "Nadžija Bakarević," she said. "She sat in front of me at the Second Gymnasium. She had the best handwriting in the class and never once let me copy her

homework."

She told us what the gossips of the old town had known in seventy-four. That the Bakarević daughter had run off after a shepherd and would be back before the first snow. That her mother told everyone the girl was studying in Grenoble, and that everyone knew it was not true, but nobody said so to her. That on Bistrik children were forbidden to play the flute, half as a joke, half in earnest. "Fifty years," said my mother, shaking her head. "And we thought she had ruined her life." No one added anything. Ademir put the pita back down on his plate.

When the friends had gone, my mother asked Ademir when the road to Lukomir opens. "At the end of May, if the winter isn't hard," he said. "But there's no shop up there, and no doctor, Auntie Zlatija." My mother said she was not going up there to shop. She took the pen off the fridge, and on the calendar on the kitchen door, between a cardiology appointment and her granddaughter's birthday, in the last week of May, she wrote in big letters just one word: Nadžija.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

The Copper Jug from Bembaša

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-copper-jug-from-bembasa/

My grandmother's copper jug survived fifty-two years in Stuttgart, three moves, and two grandsons who kept tadpoles in it. When I sold the apartment last spring, I divided everything else between my sons or gave it to the neighbors, but the jug I wrapped in a towel and carried on my lap all the way to Sarajevo. The flight attendant asked if it was an urn. I said it was not, it was for water. She did not believe me, I could see it on her face, but she did not ask any more. At my age people let you carry whatever you want.

When I was nineteen, my grandmother claimed that real coffee could only be made with water from the fountain by the weir at Bembaša. The water from the kitchen was lukewarm and tasteless to her, as if, she used to say, someone had already drunk half of it before us. So every evening that summer, when the sun went down behind Hum, I took the jug and walked down from Kovači over the cobblestones to the river. My mother grumbled that it was a waste of time. My grandmother said that a girl who goes for water has a right to half an hour nobody counts.

That summer Tefik was the lifeguard at the bathing spot below the weir. He studied mechanical engineering, wore a red cap, and used his whistle to chase off the boys who jumped from the wall. In the evenings, when the bathing spot had emptied, he sat on a stone by the fountain as if he were resting, though anyone could see he was not resting. The first evening he only held the jug steady while I filled it. The second he asked whose daughter I was. The third he took the jug out of my hand and carried it uphill, to the corner of our street and not a step farther, because Dževida lived on the corner, and she saw everything and repeated everything.

That was how it went all summer. We talked about everything that means nothing: exams, the heat, how shallow the Miljacka gets in August and

whether the fish from it can be eaten. Every evening a radio in the garden of a café across the river played that old sevdalinka about the girl who goes down to Bembaša, and Tefik whistled it all the way uphill with my jug in his hand. Once I told him to stop, that he was embarrassing me. "The song isn't about you," he said. "It's about every girl who goes for water." Then he stopped to catch his breath. "A little more about you."

One evening, at the end of August, he dropped the jug. He slipped on the cobblestones because of me, because I had turned to ask him something just when he should have been watching his feet. The jug rolled down the steps and struck the curb. The water ran into the drain, and on the belly of the copper there was a dent the size of a thumb. Tefik apologized as if he had broken someone's window. The next day he wanted to take it to a craftsman in Kazandžiluk to have it straightened. I would not let him. I said my grandmother would think I had dented it myself, and in a way that was true.

In September a friend of my father's came to visit from Foča with his son Razim, who had been working for five years at an auto parts factory near Stuttgart. Razim was big, calm and polite, and he looked at me as if everything had already been agreed. It turned out it had. My father said it was the kind of chance you do not turn down, and that in Germany a woman does not have to go down for water. That evening I went down anyway. Tefik was waiting on the stone. He carried the jug to the corner, and the whole way I waited for him to say one single word. He said: "Careful, it's full." And he handed it to me.

I married in October. Razim was a good man, I have to say that, and now that he is gone I will say it even louder. For thirty-eight years he worked in the same factory hall, he never raised his voice, and he bought our sons bicycles before they knew how to ride. I cleaned offices, then worked in a bakery for a Greek man, then looked after the grandchildren. The jug stood on a shelf in the kitchen, with the dent turned toward the wall. Razim once asked me why I would not have it straightened. I said it was my grandmother's. That was the truth, but not all of it.

Razim died three years ago, in his sleep, quietly, the way he had lived. My sons wanted me to stay with them, a week with one, a week with the other, like a parcel sent back and forth. I said I had a house in Sarajevo. I did not. I had my brother's apartment in Kovači, empty since he had gone to his daughter in Canada, and a key he had mailed me with a note asking me to water the plants, if there were any left. There were no plants. There was dust, a view of Baščaršija and, down below, the river.

For the first weeks I did not go down. The city was mine and it was not: along the river there were new benches now, a walking path to Kozija ćuprija, people with dogs and children on scooters. The old bathing spot was gone. The fountain had stayed, with new stone around the spout, but it was the same. One evening in October, when I caught myself dusting the jug for the third time, I put on my coat and went down. The cobblestones were the same, and my feet remembered them better than I did. I felt as foolish as a little girl. Seventy-one years old, and going for water.

At the fountain an old man was filling plastic bottles. He had five of them, lined up on the stone, and he filled them slowly, one by one. I waited behind him with the jug in my hand. When he had screwed on the last cap and turned around, he did not look at me. He looked at the jug, for a long time, his head tilted, like a craftsman judging someone else's work. Then he reached out a finger and touched the dent in the belly of the copper. "This is mine," he said.

Tefik, as it turned out, had stayed in Sarajevo all his life. He had worked as an engineer at a design firm and married late, at forty, a woman who taught chemistry at a high school and who had died five years ago. They had no children. "And the bottles?" I asked. He shrugged. He said it was something left over from a girl who used to claim that real coffee could only be made with this water. "For fifty years?" "Not quite every day," he said. "Sometimes I was sick."

We sat down on a bench above the weir, because his knee asked for it, and I was glad not to have to get up right away. The water murmured over the weir just as it had back then, only the people around it were different. He asked me about Germany, and I told him without dressing it up: about the factory hall, the bakery, about Razim, who cooked beans every Sunday and burned them every Sunday. Tefik listened and nodded. Then he said he had seen me once, in eighty-five, at Baščaršija, in front of the Sebilj. I was leading two little boys by the hand and wearing a blue coat. "Why didn't you come over?" I asked. "You had two little boys and a blue coat," he said, as if that explained everything. And it did.

When I had filled the jug, he offered to carry it. I said I had carried it myself for fifty years and could manage a little longer. "You didn't carry it," he said. "It stood on a shelf. You can tell by the copper." He took it out of my hand, just like back then, without asking, and I let him, just like back then. We went up the cobblestones slowly, because of his knee and my breath. I asked him why he had not said anything that summer. He stopped to rest. "I did," he answered. "Every evening I carried your water up the hill. What else was I supposed to do? Sing?"

I did not know what to answer, so I said that Dževida from the corner had been gone a long time and there was no one left to watch. Then he laughed for the first time, and only then did I fully recognize him, more than by his finger on the dent. At the corner, where he had always stopped, he did not stop. He walked past my brother's gate as if he passed that way every day, climbed the stairs with me to the second floor, and set the jug down on the kitchen table with the dent turned toward me.

I made coffee with that water, in my brother's coffee pot, on a stove that first had to think about whether it would light. Tefik drank slowly and said nothing. Then he said the coffee was no better than with water from the kitchen, that he had known that for fifty years, and that he had gone down every evening anyway. I asked if he would come tomorrow. He said it was going to rain tomorrow. I said I had an umbrella. All the way down the stairs he whistled, and I knew which song, even though he was off

key, the same as back then.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

A Lily Out of Reach

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-lily-out-of-reach/

In Graz, in November, it gets dark before five. That is when Arnes shuts down the computer at the office by the Mur, where for eleven years he has been calculating the water levels of other people's rivers. At home he does not turn on the light. He sits by the window and watches the light from the tram stop slide along the wall to a small framed photograph. In it there is a girl in a yellow jacket, on a rock above green water, laughing at someone who cannot be seen in the picture. Arnes knows it by heart. It is enough for the light to reach it, and he goes back to the Una.

She was six and he was eight when, on the bank below the houses in Golubić, they built a hut out of willow branches and old plastic sheeting. Selvedina secretly brought plates from her mother's kitchen, and Arnes brought stories: about the countries he would go to one day, about rivers that flow underground and come out at the other end of the world. "Will you take me too?" she asked. "I will take you," he said, "if you don't cry on the way." She promised she wouldn't, and that summer she did not cry once, not even when she fell out of the willow.

When she started third grade and he started fifth, the school took the children on an outing to the meadows above the village, and the teacher promised a chocolate bar to whoever picked the most strawberries. Arnes claimed he knew a place where there were as many as you could want. They wandered for two hours through beech trees and ferns and found one single strawberry. When they came back, Selvedina said in front of everyone that at their spot the strawberries had been sweeter than anywhere and that they had eaten them along the way. Arnes never forgot that she had lied for him, and without a trace of shame.

After finishing high school he went to Graz to study. His uncle found him an attic room. That first winter, at night, Arnes copied into a thick notebook the songs his grandmother used to sing to him: old songs from

the Krajina about girls by the water and mothers who know everything. Before New Year's a parcel came for him, and inside it were an apple pie from his mother and wool socks Selvedina had knitted. One was noticeably longer than the other. In her letter she wrote that this was because he was always one step ahead of her.

He did not come home until the spring break of his third year. Selvedina was twenty by then and worked at a pharmacy in Bihać. On the kitchen windowsill stood a cage with a yellow canary. The first one, which Arnes had bought her at the market before he left, had died that winter, so Senahid had brought her a new one. Senahid was Arnes's classmate, the son of a man who kept trout ponds on the Una near Kostela. "Senahid knows what a woman needs," said her mother Ifeta, pouring Arnes a coffee. "Songs don't heat a house." "Neither do canaries," said Arnes.

On the last evening he gave her the notebook with his grandmother's songs. Selvedina leafed through it on the steps in front of the house, and the songs she knew she read aloud, and the rest with her lips alone. In the morning she walked him to the bus station. The bus to Graz was twenty minutes late, and for those twenty minutes they stood side by side and kept silent about everything. When the driver started the engine, Arnes said: "I have something to tell you. In two years, when I finish." She nodded and did not ask what. He took that as an answer.

That fall his mother told him that Senahid had proposed to Selvedina and that she had turned him down. In March she wrote that Selvedina had turned him down a second time, and that Ifeta was telling the whole town her daughter had no sense. In June a message of three lines arrived: there had been a wedding, on the terrace above the fish ponds, Ifeta had cried with happiness, and the bride had been beautiful, only pale. Arnes read the message in the cafeteria and ate everything to the last bite. A week later he passed his hydraulics exam with the best grade in his year, and he told no one.

Six years later Senahid called him out of the blue. He had heard Arnes was in Bihać to take measurements at the springs, and he said it was out of the question for him to sleep in a hotel while his friend had a house with six rooms. "I won't say a word to Selvedina," he laughed into the phone. "Let it be a surprise." Arnes wanted to refuse. Then he stood in front of the hotel for half an hour with the room key in his hand, and in the end he got into the car and drove down the Una toward Kostela.

The house was bigger than he remembered, with a new terrace and concrete tanks for fry along the bank. Behind the house, under the old willows, the pond where Senahid's father had started the business was still there, still and dark. Senahid called it the lake. Selvedina came out onto the terrace wiping her hands on her apron and stopped in the doorway. Then she came over and held out her hand to him, as if to a man from the municipality. When it got dark, Senahid remembered he had heard about some notebook of songs and asked to see it. Selvedina went to fetch it and came back quickly, as if she had not had to look for it.

Arnes read, and Senahid asked for more and slapped the table with his palm. On one page was a song his grandmother had sung more quietly than the others, about a girl whose mother gave her to the man the mother wanted, and the girl kept silent and looked across the water. Arnes read two lines and stopped. Selvedina stood up, said she had to check the pantry door, and went down the steps toward the willows. Senahid poured more rakija. "Women can't stand sad songs," he said. "Mine doesn't have to, at least. She has everything."

Shortly before midnight Arnes went down to the pond. In the middle of the water, far from the bank, he could see one white water lily, open, alone among the broad leaves. Arnes took off his shirt and went into the water, which was colder than he had thought. He swam toward the flower, and it seemed close, and then far again. Long stems wound around his legs and pulled him down, softly and stubbornly. When he stretched out his hand, the lily was still two strokes away. He turned around and swam back. For a long time he sat on the bank in the dark,

watching the flower, which had not even moved.

The next day, while Senahid was at the vet's, Selvedina asked him to drive her to her mother's in Golubić. They walked along the bank, then uphill by the old path. The ferns were the same, only lower, or they were taller. At one spot Selvedina stopped and said this was it, this was where he had claimed back then that there were as many strawberries as you could want. This time they showed red in the knee-high grass. Neither of them bent down. "Where did all of it go?" she asked, and she did not mean the strawberries. Arnes looked across the valley, toward Plješevica, beyond which lay the border and the road to Graz, and he did not know what to answer.

He left the following morning, before the house woke up. When he opened the gate, Selvedina was standing behind him, with Senahid's jacket over her shoulders and her arms crossed as if she were cold. "You won't come again," she said. She was not asking. "I won't," he said. She nodded, just as she had that morning at the station, and this time he knew what it meant. At the bend he turned around once more. She was standing in the same place, and behind her mist was rising over the pond.

The light from the tram stop has fallen lower, and the photograph is left in the dark. Arnes does not need to see it. In the darkness of the room he sees the white water lily, alone on black water, and the stems that wind softly around anyone who comes near it. The refrigerator hums in the kitchen. Out on the street someone is calling a dog. Arnes gets up, turns on the lamp on the desk, and opens the report on the water levels of the Mur that he has to hand in by Friday. He works until past midnight.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

The Turkish Delight Tin

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-turkish-delight-tin/

That evening, on a terrace above the Drina, they were arguing about whether a person can love only once in a lifetime. It was the end of August, below us swimmers were still sitting on the town beach, and the hostess, the widow of a judge, brought out an apple pie and said that these days love lasts about as long as a phone battery. Her grandson said that for older people it had lasted just as long, only they had no phones. Then everyone turned to me, because I had worked at the hospital for forty years and because old doctors, as the hostess put it, have seen everything. I said I had seen one love like that, only one, and that it was not beautiful the way they imagined. So I told them about Raza.

Raza and her parents mended umbrellas and shoes at the markets. They had an old white van, and on Mondays they were in Foča, on Tuesdays in Čajniče, on Thursdays in Goražde, and on Saturdays in Rogatica or Višegrad, depending on the summer. Under a tarp her father glued soles and nailed on heels, her mother replaced umbrella spokes and sewed the fabric, and Raza, from the time she could walk, sat on a crate between them sorting tiny nails into Turkish delight tins. They slept in the van or in rented rooms, and by the age of fifteen Raza had changed schools seven times.

When she was eight, one Thursday, she came across a boy crying on the low wall by the river. It was Vehbija, the son of the man who ran the hardware store by the market, clean, his hair combed, in a white shirt, and some older boys had just taken his ice cream money. Raza pulled out of her pocket everything she had, the coins her father gave her for sorting, and poured them into his palm. He stopped crying, went for an ice cream, and, because he felt awkward, let her sit beside him on the wall while he ate it. That was all. But from that day on Raza saved coins all week and brought them to him every Thursday, and he took them and let

her sit beside him.

It went on like that for years. Vehbija grew up and cried less and less, and he kept taking the money, until he started at the gymnasium and began to be ashamed for his friends to see him with a girl from the market. Then he went to Sarajevo to study pharmacy. Raza was fifteen, and she kept coming on Thursdays. In the summers, when he came home, she waited for him on the bridge, and he would walk past her with his friends as if past a lamppost. Once he nodded to her. That day, she told me later, she remembered better than the days her parents died.

Vehbija came back with his degree, opened a pharmacy on the main street, and married Rubina, the daughter of a department head at the municipality, a tall, proud woman who wore a white coat herself and stood at the register. By then Raza had a van of her own, her parents had died one after the other, and she worked alone. Every Thursday, when she had packed up her tools, she went into the pharmacy and bought something she did not need: aspirin, bandages, cough syrup, hand cream. She paid in coins. Vehbija would give her the change without raising his head, and Rubina would say something about umbrellas after her and laugh. Around town people said Raza was a little odd. Back then I knew her only from the market, because she had mended my umbrella twice and would not take any money.

One winter, four years ago, the man who runs the gas station at the edge of town called me. He said the woman from the van had not come out for three days and was coughing so hard you could hear it at the pumps. I found her in the van, under two blankets, with a fever and lungs that sounded like wet paper. She was sixty-two and looked older. She would not go to the hospital until she had told me what she had to say. So she told me, there in the van, over the tea I poured for her from my thermos: about the wall, about the coins, about the bridge, about that one nod. She spoke calmly, as if she were talking about the weather, and not once did she say she loved him. She did not have to.

Then she pulled a Turkish delight tin out from under the seat, scratched and dented, and gave it to me along with the keys to the van. In the tin there were twenty-three thousand four hundred and sixty marks, in tens and twenties folded in half, and some coins at the bottom. She had saved it, she said, her whole life, from umbrellas and soles. "Give it to him," she said. "He does not have to say anything. Just let him know that someone did." That night I drove her to the hospital. She died on the third day, at seven in the morning, during the shift change. The municipality paid for the funeral, and there were five of us there.

A week later I went to the pharmacy with the tin under my arm. Vehbija and Rubina received me in the little room behind the medicine shelves, among the cardboard boxes, and I told them everything just as it had been told to me. Vehbija turned red to his ears. He said he had exchanged maybe two sentences with that woman in his whole life. Rubina stood up. "That tramp?" she said. "For forty years she stares at my husband across the counter, and I know nothing? Why, it is a disgrace, Doctor. What will people say? That he promised her something?" Vehbija stared at the floor as if someone had robbed him rather than given him a gift.

I set the tin down on a box of vitamins and said how much was in it. The little room went quiet. Rubina sat down. Vehbija lifted the lid, looked at the folded bills, and put the lid back. "Well," Rubina said after a while, much more calmly, "we can hardly leave it out on the street. We will give part of it to the mosque, for her soul." Then she asked about the van. Did it run, did it have its papers. They had a weekend house near Ustikolina with a big garden, and they really needed something to keep their tools in.

I left the keys on their table. The next spring I drove past their weekend house. The van stood at the end of the garden, without plates, its back doors open, full of tomato stakes and sacks of fertilizer. The Turkish delight tins with Raza's tiny nails and spokes lay in a pile by the fence, set out for the trash. That same year the pharmacy got a new sign, with a green cross that lights up at night and can be seen from the bridge.

One Thursday that fall it was raining, and I was walking across the market. Rubina, a black umbrella over her head, was passing the spot where the white van used to stand. I recognized the umbrella by its new fabric and by one spoke that was lighter than the others. Raza had mended it for herself that last winter and left it on the seat of the van.

When I finished, nobody at the table said a word. The grandson held his phone in his hand but did not unlock it. The hostess got up, gathered the pie plates, said she would go and make coffee, and was a long time coming back from the kitchen. When she returned, she brought, along with the džezva, her own old umbrella, with one spoke hanging loose, set it down beside my chair, and asked whether I knew anyone who could fix it. I said I did not. I still do not.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

The Cows Are Fine

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-cows-are-fine/

The first time, she ran off to her parents in Memići, and nobody counted that as running away. It was seven weeks after the wedding, on a Tuesday in July, and Lejsa walked half an hour down the gravel road with a bag over her shoulder, came in through her father's gate, and told her mother she would not be married anymore. Her mother asked whether Kadir was rough with her. He was not. Did he shout? He did not shout, he barely even talked. Did he drink? He did not even drink coffee in the afternoon. "Then what is it?" her mother asked. Lejsa could not say. It was not Kadir who bothered her. What bothered her was that she was now a wife: that in the morning someone asked her what they would have for lunch, that his socks lay on the chair beside the bed, that he said "our house" and "our cow" as if she too had come with papers. The next day her father brought her back on the tractor, in silence, and Kadir met them at the gate and helped her climb down.

Kadir was thirty-six and had twelve cows in Vukovije, a house with a new facade, and his mother's old house across the road, empty. He was a widower. His first wife had died of an illness five years earlier, and for a long time he had not looked at anyone, until one Saturday at the market in Kalesija he heard a girl behind a cheese stall laughing right in a customer's face. He married her within three months. He got up at five, milked, waited for the dairy truck at six, then went out to the raspberries, and in the evening he collapsed onto the couch with hands that smelled of milk and hay. When Lejsa, after she came back, looked at him across the table, he asked what he had done wrong. "Nothing," she said. "That is the worst part."

The second time, her brother helped her. Džemo worked in a building supply warehouse in Tuzla, was twenty-four, had a used Golf, and had never liked Kadir's silence. "If you don't want to stay at Mom's," he said,

"there is a woman by Kapija who rents out rooms. Nobody will look for you there." On Thursday, while Kadir was at the cattle market in Kalesija, Džemo drove the Golf up to the house. Lejsa stuffed two dresses, a hair dryer, and the money her grandmother had given her for the wedding into her bag, and on the kitchen table, under the salt shaker, she left a note: "Don't look for me. It is not you." All the way to Tuzla Džemo hummed, as pleased as if the two of them had robbed a bank.

Kadir found the note at dusk, after the milking. He read it twice, put it in his shirt pocket, and sat down on the steps. He remembered his mother. When he was nine, his mother had gone to her brothers in Srebrenik, and his father had gotten into the old Mercedes and brought her back the next day. She lived with them another thirty years, cooked, washed, raised the children, and Kadir never once heard her sing again. He had not even known she used to sing until his aunt told him at the funeral. He sat on the steps until the cows in the barn began lowing for their evening water. Then he sent Džemo a message: "Tell her I won't come for her. When she comes, let her come on her own. The cows are fine."

Đurđa was seventy and had two rooms to rent and a balcony facing Kapija, where she smoked thin cigarettes and commented on the passersby. The apartment was on the second floor of an old Austrian building, and the floor in the hallway tilted slightly, like half the old town, because Tuzla stands on salt that has been dissolving beneath it for years. "Don't be afraid," Đurđa said when Lejsa stopped on the threshold, "it sinks slowly. I have lived here fifty years and I am still on dry land." The other room was rented by Dalibor Šešlija, a journalist at the local radio station, a man of thirty-four who read in the kitchen in the evenings and drank tea from a mug printed with the name of some long-ago Olympics. He offered right away to show Lejsa around town, because new people in Tuzla, he said, always get lost on the Korzo first.

For the first few weeks Lejsa was happy in a way she could not explain even to Đurđa. Nobody asked her what she would have for lunch. She ate burek standing up, by Kapija, and sat for hours on a bench by the

Pannonian Lakes, watching children splash in the salt water. She applied for a job at a bakery, but they wanted someone with experience. Dalibor took her up Ilinčica to see the town from above, explained why the buildings in the center were leaning, and she laughed that the town was just like her, standing on something that was slowly dissolving. She told him about Memići, about the market, about her grandmother. She told him, without noticing, about Kadir too: how he called every cow by name, how in the first week he had fixed the bathroom door for her because it would not lock, how he went quiet when he was tired, and he was always tired.

In the third week Dalibor realized that he loved her, and at about the same time that she did not see it and would not. He said nothing to her. He was a man who had read enough novels to know how such things usually end, and he was decent enough not to try. Sometimes, while she talked about the raspberries in Vukovije, he looked at her hands on the table and thought that if she ever reached across that table on her own, he would take her hand and ask nothing. She reached across only for the sugar. Đurđa watched them from the balcony, blew smoke toward Kapija, and kept quiet, which was not usual for her.

In August the smell of coffee began to bother Lejsa. Then the smell of Đurđa's cigarettes, then the smell of burek, and one morning she could not get up for the nausea. Đurđa sat on the edge of the bed, looked at her the way women of seventy look at girls of twenty-one, and said: "Child, you are not sick." Lejsa went to the pharmacy on the Korzo, bought a test, and took it in Đurđa's bathroom, behind the door that would not lock. She sat down on the edge of the tub. The first thing she felt was not fear. It was something warm and large that climbed from her stomach to her throat and stayed there, and in that warmth, for the first time since she had left, was Kadir. Not marriage, not socks, not the question about lunch. Kadir standing in the barn door in the morning, calling the cow Zekula by her name.

She told Dalibor that evening, in the kitchen, while he was pouring tea. That she was pregnant and that she was going back home, tomorrow, on the first bus. She spoke quickly and laughed, and she did not see him set his mug down on the table slowly, as if it were made of glass. "Home," he repeated. "Home," she said, and blushed, as if she were saying the word for the first time. He congratulated her. In the morning he carried her bag to the bus station, bought her water and cookies for the trip, and stood on the platform until the bus pulled out onto the road toward Kalesija. He waved only once. She waved until she lost sight of him, and then she forgot about him before Živinice.

From the main road to Vukovije she walked, her bag over her shoulder, along the same gravel road she had run away on the first time. It was time for the evening milking. Kadir was in the barn, in rubber boots, and did not hear her come in. She watched him from the door as she had never watched him before: the broad back, the hands dripping with milk, Zekula turning her head toward her before he did. Then he turned too. He asked nothing. He set down the pail, wiped his hands on his trousers, and stood still, as if afraid he would frighten her off if he moved.

Lejsa went up to him and told him, there in the barn, beside Zekula, what she had been putting into sentences the whole way and what came out in the end as one single sentence. Kadir was silent for a long time. Then he took her in his arms, clumsily, careful not to get her dirty, and she pressed herself against him and, for the first time, did not think about being married. She thought only that he smelled of milk and hay, and that it was, suddenly, her favorite smell in the world.

When they came out of the barn, it was already dark. Kadir stopped on the threshold of the house, turned to her, and asked quietly, as if asking something terrible: "Are you hungry?" Lejsa laughed, the way she used to laugh behind the stall at the market in Kalesija. "I am," she said. "Starving. What is there for dinner?"

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

Stuffed Vine Leaves for the Critic

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/stuffed-vine-leaves-for-the-critic/

"In Mostar there is no guesthouse without mosquitoes and no landlady without an angle," Silvio Rondić wrote last summer in his column No Stars, and half of Kujundžiluk remembered it. Fahira printed out that sentence and stuck it on the fridge in the kitchen of the Tri smokve guesthouse, between the electricity bill and the shift schedule. The guesthouse was a stone house with six rooms above Kujundžiluk, with a terrace under three old fig trees from which you could see the Old Bridge. She had inherited it from her father two years earlier, and along with the guesthouse she had inherited Redžep, the receptionist, who had worked there since he was nineteen and knew what coffee every regular guest drank and which pipe leaked when the south wind blew. In his last week in the hospital her father had told her: "Redžep is an honest man. When you get married, don't look any further." Fahira had laughed back then and straightened his IV line.

That summer two regular guests were courting her. Nurko Hasanbegović from Stuttgart owned three car washes, a black Audi with German plates, and an opinion about everything. He came every July for a month and each time brought something: perfume, a gold bracelet, a coffee machine for the terrace, "so I don't have to watch you struggle with a džezva." Behaudin Kreho held a doctorate from a private university that operated in a former furniture showroom. His business card listed three titles, and his wallet usually held nothing. He paid for his room late, but he offered protection. "I know people in the canton. One phone call from me and they will never send you an inspector again." Fahira accepted the gifts graciously, the protection even more graciously, and charged both of them the full rate.

Then a name appeared in the bookings: Silvio Rondić, room four, three nights. Redžep read the name twice and went to fetch Fahira. The critic

arrived at noon, in a heat that softened the asphalt on the Bulevar. He was thin and neat, with a laptop in a canvas bag, and at the front desk he told Redžep that he wanted his breakfast brought by him, not by the lady. "Women in the hospitality business fake friendliness," he explained, "and I don't pay for acting. Generally I don't trust women even when they tell me the time." Redžep passed this on word for word. Fahira listened leaning on the bar, a dish towel over her shoulder. "In three nights," she said, "he will write me a poem." "Don't play games, Fahira," said Redžep. "It isn't a game. It's marketing."

The first evening on the terrace there was a quarrel, but not Fahira's. Nurko and Doctor Kreho were arguing over who had more right to the landlady: the one who gives or the one who protects. Nurko waved the key to his Audi, the doctor his business card. Silvio listened from a corner, drank mineral water, and finally said: "Gentlemen, you are fighting over a woman as if over a parking space. And you will both end up with neither the space nor the woman." Both of them turned toward him and, for the first time that summer, agreed on something: the critic was unbearable. Fahira heard it all through the kitchen window and was pleased. A common enemy for her suitors was a good start.

The next morning, as the guest had requested, Redžep took breakfast up to room four. On the tray, next to the eggs and coffee, stood a small bowl of japrak, which was not on the menu. "The lady says you told us you don't like acting," said Redžep, "and this cannot be faked. She rolled them last night, from her father's recipe." Silvio ate one stuffed vine leaf, then another, then the whole bowl, and by noon he had not written a single sentence. In the evening he came down to the terrace. Fahira did not go over to him. She sat over her accounts and let him speak first.

When he did, she agreed with him. She said that she would never marry either, that men were like guests: they arrive, complain about the air conditioning, and leave, and afterward you wash the towels. Silvio had never heard a woman speak in his own sentences. They talked until midnight, while below them the Neretva rushed over the stones and from

the bridge you could still hear tourists waiting for someone to jump. On the third day he extended his stay to seven nights. On the fourth day he asked Redžep what flowers Fahira liked. Redžep was folding towels and said he did not know, although he did: white roses, but never from a florist, only from other people's gardens.

Nurko and the doctor noticed. The next morning Nurko left a small box with a ring on the table, and the doctor offered to enroll Fahira as an honorary member of his academy. Silvio began coming down to breakfast in an ironed shirt and looking at both of them the way he used to look at dirty sheets. Redžep watched all of it from the front desk. One evening, while they were closing out the register, he told Fahira he no longer knew where her marketing ended. "I know exactly," she said. "You don't," he said. "You never know when you have hammered a nail into someone too deep."

On the sixth day Silvio realized what was happening to him and got scared, like a man who had spent his whole life writing about other people's mistakes. He packed his suitcase at eight in the morning and came down to hand in his key. Fahira was on the steps with a watering can. When she saw him with the suitcase, she sat down on a stone step, put her hand to her forehead, and said quietly: "The heat." Redžep brought water. Silvio dropped his suitcase, knelt beside her, and held her hand as if she might run away from him. "I am not going anywhere," he said. "Fahira, never in my life have I," he began, and did not finish. She drank some water and said she felt better. Redžep picked up the watering can and went to water the fig trees, and he kept watering them until the water ran down the steps.

That afternoon Silvio's review came out on the portal. Five stars, the first time since the No Stars column began. About the rooms he wrote two sentences, about the japrak a whole paragraph, and about the landlady three, one of which said that she was the reason he had stopped believing his own writing. By evening half of Mostar had read it. Nurko asked for his coffee machine back. The doctor said he would sue the portal. That

evening on the terrace, in front of all the guests, Silvio told Fahira that she had to choose, here and now. Then he looked toward the front desk and added: "And tell that one to stop bringing water."

Fahira stood up. The terrace fell silent, and from the bridge came only the voice of a single diver counting to three. "You are right, Mr. Rondić," she said. "I have to choose. I am getting married." She walked over to the front desk and took Redžep by the hand, the one holding the tray, so that two glasses clinked. "To Redžep. My father wanted it, and only this week did I understand why. He is the only one in this house who has never given me anything or promised me anything, and he has fixed everything for me." Redžep set the tray down on the counter. He was silent for a long time, then said: "On one condition. No more marketing." "None," said Fahira.

Nurko was the first to recover, and he asked whether he could at least come to the wedding and whether they would need a coffee machine. Doctor Kreho offered to be a witness, since his signature with three titles on the marriage certificate meant something. Fahira thanked them both and told them both that their bills were waiting at the front desk. Silvio said nothing. He went up to room four, carried his suitcase down the stone steps himself, without anyone's help, and walked to the bus station in the heat, with his laptop in its canvas bag.

The next morning the review on the portal had been changed. Of the five stars, four were left. Beneath them stood a new sentence, shorter than any Silvio Rondić had ever written: "One was taken away by the receptionist." Fahira printed it out and stuck it on the fridge, over the one about the mosquitoes. Redžep said it was not nice to gloat. Then he went to get some tape, because one corner kept falling down.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Twenty Marks in a Paper Cup

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/twenty-marks-in-a-paper-cup/

"Twenty thousand," said retired Colonel Hodović. "In the account. Not in plans, not in ideas, not in anybody's promises. When I see twenty thousand, we will talk about a ring." He sat in his armchair on Koševsko Brdo, beneath a glass cabinet of badges and medals, and looked at Alem the way you look at a recruit who has shown up for inspection in slippers. Iman brought coffee from the kitchen and set it down in front of her father without a sound, the way one learned to in that house. Alem said that was fair. The colonel said he knew no other way.

Alem was twenty-nine, with a nice smile, lots of friends and not a single job that had lasted longer than one season. He had sold insurance, guided tourists around Baščaršija, worked at an apartment rental agency, and for three months offered solar panels to people who gladly bought him coffee and bought nothing else. Everyone loved him. Nobody paid him. When he left the colonel's, he had one twenty-mark note in his wallet, and it had to last until Friday: for the tram, for bread and for one coffee with Iman.

Iman taught Bosnian at an elementary school in Breka and graded homework with a green pen, because red, she said, frightened the children. "Dad is not mean," she used to say. "Dad is just a colonel." She said she would wait. Alem knew she would, and that was exactly what made it hard. At his pace, by the colonel's estimate, it would take him roughly seventy years to reach twenty thousand marks.

That evening they sat on a bench in the garden of the National Museum while the guards were already jangling their keys. Iman showed him her savings account on her phone: three thousand four hundred marks, put aside since her first paycheck. "This is a start," she said. Alem handed the phone back and closed her fingers over it. The colonel, he reminded her, had said in his account, and the colonel did not like people interpreting

his orders. Iman said he was the most stubborn poor man in Sarajevo. Alem said it was his only asset and he did not intend to sell it.

The next day he went to see Jakša, a friend from high school, who had a photo studio in the attic of an old building behind the Cathedral. Jakša was preparing an exhibition of portraits called Faces of the Čaršija, and for it, as he put it, he was looking for faces that had survived something. When Alem came in, an old man was sitting on a wooden chair under the spotlight. He wore a coat torn at the elbows and a cap faded by the sun, held a paper cup with a few coins in it, and had a face Jakša had already been photographing for three hours.

"Don't move, grandpa," said Jakša. "A little more light from the left." Alem sat down on a box of cables and watched. The old man's shoes were split at the toes, and one lace had been replaced with string. His hands lay quietly on his knees, like the hands of a man used to waiting. While Jakša was changing lenses, Alem quietly asked him how much he paid his model. "Thirty marks for the whole afternoon," said Jakša. "And a burek." To Alem that seemed terribly little for a man who could not even scratch his nose for three hours.

Then Jakša's phone rang, the gallery calling, and he went down to the courtyard to hear better. Alem and the old man were left alone. The old man looked at him from under his cap and asked what he did for a living. "I am a millionaire without the millions," said Alem. "I have everything but money." The old man laughed, quietly, like a man who does not laugh often. Alem took out his wallet, pulled out his only twenty and dropped it into the paper cup. "It is not much," he said, "but you need it more than I do." The old man looked at the note for a long time, then at him. "Thank you, son," he said. "I will remember this."

He walked home to Vratnik, because he no longer had money for the tram. An April rain was falling, and the climb up Kovači was so steep that he had to stop twice. The rain got into his shoes, and still he whistled the whole way without knowing why. That evening Iman paid for the coffee,

and he told her he had forgotten his wallet, and that was the only lie he ever told her.

Later he dropped in on Jakša at the little café below the studio. Jakša laughed so hard he had to put down his glass. "You gave twenty marks to Abdurahman Tabaković?" Alem did not know who Abdurahman Tabaković was. Jakša explained: for forty years the man had made watch parts in Switzerland, had owned three factories, and had the largest private collection of old Sarajevo photographs in the world. He was Jakša's best client. For the exhibition he himself had asked to be photographed as a beggar. "He says it is the only role he has never tried in his life."

Alem put his forehead down on the table. "I gave a millionaire money for the tram," he said. "He will think I am an idiot." Jakša said the best part was still to come: after Alem left, the old man asked about him. Everything. Who he was, what he did, why such a cheerful man was so poorly dressed. "And you told him?" "Everything," said Jakša. "About Iman, about the colonel, about the twenty thousand. What was I supposed to tell him? He asked nicely." Alem said he had to go and apologize to him. Jakša said the old man was flying back to Geneva soon and, as far as he knew him, did not need an apology. Alem ordered another coffee, and Jakša paid for it.

In the morning someone knocked on the door of Alem's room. A young man in a dark suit stood outside with an envelope in his hand, and behind him, on the stairs, the landlady with her arms crossed. "Mr. Tabaković sends you this," said the young man, and he left before Alem could ask anything. Alem thought the old man was returning his twenty. Inside the envelope was a white card, written in fountain pen: "For the ring. Returning your twenty, with interest. The old man from the paper cup." As he was reading it a second time, his phone vibrated. The banking app was reporting a deposit of twenty thousand marks. Alem sat down on the stairs, next to the landlady, and for a long time said nothing at all.

The colonel did not ask where the money came from. He took Alem's phone, put on his glasses, looked at the screen, took his glasses off and put them on again. Then he handed the phone back and said that June was a good month for a wedding, because it was neither too hot nor too rainy. In the kitchen Iman laughed so hard it could be heard all the way down the hall. Alem wanted to explain, but she would not let him. "Later," she whispered. "First let him get used to the number."

The next day Alem and Iman went to the hotel on Bistrik where the old man had been staying, to thank him. The receptionist said Mr. Tabaković had left for Geneva that morning and had left a message for Alem. On hotel stationery, in the same fountain pen, it said: "Don't thank me. Invite me to the wedding. I will come dressed the way you know me." Iman asked what that meant. Alem said she would see, and that for now the colonel did not need to be told anything.

The wedding was in June, at a restaurant by Vrelo Bosne, under the big plane trees. Jakša was the best man and photographed everything except himself. The colonel stood at the entrance in his best suit, with a small badge on his lapel, and greeted the guests as if he were receiving reports. He shook each one's hand and told them their table number. There were ninety guests, half of them the colonel's former colleagues, who sat up straight and ate as if someone were grading them.

Around eight, when the music was already playing, the old man appeared on the path from the parking lot. He was wearing the same coat torn at the elbows, the same cap, and he carried a plastic bag. The colonel reached him before he got to the door. He pressed ten marks into his hand and quietly, politely, said that this was a private celebration. The old man looked at the ten-mark note and nodded gravely. "Thank you, Colonel," he said. "You are the second man in this city to give me money this year. The first one gave more." And he walked past him.

Alem got up from the newlyweds' table so suddenly that he knocked over a glass. He embraced the old man in front of all the guests, and Iman,

without asking anything, pulled a chair up next to hers. From the plastic bag the old man took a small framed photograph and set it down in front of the bride and groom. It showed him under Jakša's spotlight, with the paper cup in his hand, and in the cup a single twenty-mark note could be clearly seen.

Meanwhile the colonel asked the best man who that man was. Jakša told him. The colonel stood by the entrance for a long time with his wallet open in his hand, as if he were still calculating something. The old man, in the meantime, had stood up, tucked the colonel's ten-mark note under the accordion player's strap, and requested Emina.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

The Pine Behind the House in Visoko

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-pine-behind-the-house-in-visoko/

I was the one who showed my mother how to block a number. It was in January, over a video call, she in a hospital corridor in Munich, I in our kitchen in Visoko, with the phone propped against the sugar bowl. I thought it was because of the people from the bank who kept calling Omer about the loan for the apartment. "Three dots, top right," I kept telling her, "then block. No, Mother, top right." It took her ten minutes. When she managed it, she thanked me as if I had helped her carry the bags home from the market.

By then Omer had been working in Germany as an electrician for over a year. He had gone to earn money for an apartment, because he wanted to live with Merima on their own, not in the room above our mother's kitchen. Merima came from a house across the river, below Visočica hill, from a family that people in the old town said had no luck. Her father had lost their house at cards, and later his health, and her mother cleaned other people's apartments. Our mother never forgot it. "I have nothing against the girl," she would say. "I have something against the house." Omer would laugh and walk across the bridge. Merima wrote to him every evening, and on Sundays they saw each other on camera, she with the Bosna behind her, he with a bare wall.

In January he fell from scaffolding on a building site outside Munich and broke both forearms. For the first time in her life our mother got on a plane. She stayed with him for five weeks, first in the hospital, then in his rented room, fed him with a spoon and held the phone to his ear, because his fingers did not come out of the casts. She read his messages to him. She was the one who answered them. I learned all of this only in June, in someone else's garden, and back then all I knew was that my brother was getting better and that Mother called from Germany every day and complained about the bread.

Merima wrote every evening. Mother read and deleted. In the third week she wrote to her from Omer's phone that he had met someone and that she should stop writing to him, and then she blocked the number, just the way I had taught her. To Omer she said at first that Merima was not getting in touch. A week later she told him she had heard from a neighbor that Merima was marrying some policeman from Zenica. Omer asked her to call Merima. Mother dialed some number, held the phone to his ear, and he listened to it ringing into nothing.

He came back in April, thin, his arms as narrow and white as a boy's. He sat on the balcony and watched the Bosna, and he asked no one about Merima. I thought she had left him for someone else and I was angry with her, so I did not ask either. In May Mother began to mention Melida, the daughter of her friend from the leather bag shop, a teacher at a kindergarten in Sarajevo. She is calm, Mother would say, from a good family, she commutes every day and is never late. Omer listened, looked at the river and finally said: "It's all the same to me, Mother. Arrange it however you like." The engagement was set for the last Saturday in June.

At Melida's family home the garden was full of relatives. Baklava and ružice stood on the tables, the women sat in the shade under the walnut tree, and the men stood by the grill. Omer wore a suit he had bought in Munich and stood up straight, as if posing for a passport photo. Melida was prettier than I had expected, and shyer, and when he put the ring on her finger she looked at the ground. Mother wept with happiness. Afterward Melida photographed the ring on her hand and, laughing, sent the picture to someone. A little later her phone rang in her hand. She went behind the house to answer it. She came back pale.

She called me into the kitchen, where there was nothing but dishes and silence. "Was your brother ever with someone called Merima?" she asked. "Merima from Visoko, from below Visočica?" I said he was. Melida sat down on a chair. Merima, she said, was her colleague from the kindergarten, the one she had coffee with every morning before the children arrived. Since spring she had been living in Sarajevo, because

she could not bear to look at the bridge he used to cross. All winter Merima had cried over a young man in Germany who had written to her that he had met someone else and then blocked her, and she had never said what his name was. Now she had seen the photo from the engagement. "She isn't married," said Melida. "She never has been. She wants to talk to him."

Melida went out into the garden and held out her phone to Omer, in front of everyone. I watched him listen. He said almost nothing. Once he said: "I didn't write that." Then again: "My arms were in casts." Then he lowered the phone and looked at Mother, across the table, across the baklava and the ružice, and Mother did not look away. "I wrote it," she said, loudly, so that everyone would hear. "For your own good. Nothing good ever came out of that house." Omer turned to me. "Did you know?" I told him the only thing that was true. That I was the one who had shown her how to block a number.

Melida took off the ring and set it down on the tray, between two ružice. "Go," she told Omer quietly. "I will explain to my family." Nobody stopped him. Omer went out to the street, and I followed him, because I did not want him to drive alone. We drove to Sarajevo in silence, along the Bosna, past Ilijaš and Semizovac, all the way to the apartment blocks of Alipašino Polje, where Merima rented an apartment with two other girls. It was almost midnight. She came down in slippers and a tracksuit, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and stopped under the streetlight without coming any closer to him.

I stayed in the car, but the window was down and I heard enough. Merima did not cry. She said that for a week she had not believed that message. That she had written to him on every app there is, that she had called from a friend's phone and our mother had answered and said that Omer did not want to talk. Only then had she stopped. "In one week you believed I had gotten married," she said. "I waited six months for you to come across the bridge, to my mother's, and ask. You didn't come. You came with a ring for someone else." Omer said he would put everything

right. Merima shook her head.

"Your mother wrote in your place once," she said. "And you let her get you engaged as well. I am not going to spend my whole life checking who is writing to me." She said that in September she was leaving for Graz, for a kindergarten she had signed a contract with back in March, when she thought there was nothing left to wait for in Visoko. She turned and went into the building. Omer stood under the streetlight until the light on the third floor went out. We got home at two. Mother was sitting in the dark kitchen, and none of us switched on the light.

Merima left in September. Omer never married. He works as an electrician in Visoko, fixes other people's wiring and seldom speaks, and with Mother he talks only about bills. That autumn he planted a young pine behind the house, without explaining why to anyone. Last year Melida showed me a photo from Merima's balcony in Graz: a red rose in a plastic pot, and behind it a foreign river. I did not tell Omer. Every morning Mother waters the pine, though pines do not need water, and Omer watches her from the balcony and says nothing to her.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Play It Slower

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/play-it-slower/

When my father died, Branislav was the first to arrive and the last to leave. It was February, rain had been falling on Trebinje for days, and the plane trees on the square stood black and leafless. My father had been a surgeon at the hospital and everyone in town knew him, so the house below Crkvina hill was full of people I had never seen before. Branislav had been his friend from university, an agronomist with a vineyard above the Trebišnjica and forty years that seemed to me then neither young nor old, simply someone else's. He stood in the hallway and opened the door to everyone who knocked. I was twenty-two, and I had my aunt Kosana and a piano that had been my mother's.

After the funeral he came on Sundays. He brought papers from the bank and the pension award, opened the electricity bills I had left unopened and sorted them out at the kitchen table while Aunt Kosana fried uštipci. He called me little one. It made me angry, and yet by Thursday I was already thinking about what I would wear on Sunday. One Sunday he opened the piano, wiped the dust off the lid with his handkerchief and said: "Go on. Your father would have wanted it." I played badly, my fingers were stiff from the winter. He lay on the sofa with his eyes closed, and whenever I rushed, he would say only: "Slower."

In July the figs ripened in our yard. I climbed the old fig tree behind the house, and Branislav stood below with a basket and pointed out the ripe ones, because you see better from below. It annoyed me that he told me even that. Then my sandal slipped off, straight into the basket, onto the figs, and he laughed like a boy. I had never seen him laugh like that before. I sat on the branch with one bare foot and understood that I loved him, completely and foolishly, the way you love for the first time, at twenty-two. For the rest of the summer I did not know how to do anything else.

At the end of August we were sitting on the terrace, and without looking at me he told me about an acquaintance of his. This man, he said, was forty and had fallen in love with the daughter of his best friend. He said nothing to her, because he knew how these things go. She was young and sad, she was grateful to him, and gratitude is easily mistaken for love. In ten years she would want to dance and he would want to sleep, and she would resent him for every year she had given him. "Your acquaintance is a coward," I said. "Or a wise man," he said. "A coward," I repeated, and then for the first time he looked at me the way a man looks at a woman, not at a little one.

We were married in October, after the harvest, in the church on Crkvina, and I moved in with him, into the stone house above the vineyard. We brought the piano over in a neighbor's pickup, wrapped in blankets, and set it by the window that looked out on the river. That first year I lived as if I were always a little drunk, though I drank nothing but grape must. In the mornings we walked the vines together, he explained the diseases of the leaves and I pretended to listen. In the evenings I played, he lay on the sofa and said: "Slower." The world ended at the vineyard gate, and it seemed to me that this was quite enough world.

In the second winter I began to listen to the silence. The rain beat against the stone, the refrigerator hummed, Branislav read, and every evening was the same as the one before it. Everything he loved, order, quiet, the vines that are pruned in February, suddenly looked to me like old age that had come before its time. One evening I said I wanted to go to Sarajevo. That I wanted to see people, the theater, concerts, that I was twenty-four. I thought he would object, and I had already prepared everything I would say back. He said only: "All right. Let's go." That hurt me more than any objection.

In March we rented an apartment in Bistrik, with a balcony facing the City Hall. During the week Branislav worked as a consultant for a company that was planting orchards across Semberija, and I discovered that people in Sarajevo like new faces. They invited me to gallery

openings, to premieres at the National Theater, to dinners in Kovači that lasted until dawn. Women asked who that young woman from Trebinje was, men brought me drinks I had not asked for. Branislav went with me the first few times, stood by the wall with a glass of water and smiled politely. After that he stayed home and read. He never reproached me for anything. His silence was worse to me than any reproach.

In October a neighbor called from Trebinje to say the vranac grapes were ripe and the rains were coming. Branislav packed a bag and asked whether I would come with him for the harvest. On Saturday there was a party at the close of the theater festival, to which I had been invited for the first time, and I said I would not. I said more than that. I said he had married me so that I would play for him in the vineyard until I grew old like him. He looked at me for a long time, then said quietly: "I married you so that you would be happy. If you are happy here, stay." And he left alone, at night, by way of Stolac.

At that party I met Lorenzo, a director from Milan, with gray hair and young eyes, who talked about my dress as if it were a play. All evening he did not leave my side. Just before midnight he took me up to the Yellow Bastion, to show me the city as Sarajevans no longer see it, because they have grown used to it. Below us lay the city, all lights. It was cold, he put his jacket around my shoulders, and then he kissed me. For one moment I did not move. Afterward I was more ashamed of that moment than of anything else. Then I pushed him away, left his jacket in his hands and ran down through Vratnik, over the cobblestones, in heels, all the way to Baščaršija.

At two o'clock I sat down on the stone by the Sebilj fountain and called him. He answered at the first ring, as if he had not been asleep. "Come and get me," I said. He asked nothing. At half past six, when the pigeons were starting to land on the square, his old Passat pulled up on the embankment by the City Hall. He got out in muddy shoes, with a vine leaf stuck to his sleeve, and opened the door for me. All the way to Trebinje we were silent. Near Stolac he bought two coffees at a gas station and

handed me one, the way you hand a coffee to a fellow traveler.

After that came many years that I would find hard to tell apart. A son was born to us, then a daughter. Branislav was a good father, patient and attentive, the way he had been with me that winter after my father died. With me he was now kind. We talked about the children, about the vineyard, about the roof that leaked, and never about that night. The piano stood closed. Sometimes I thought he no longer loved me, and sometimes that he had never loved me at all, only looked after me, the way he had looked after my father's papers. I did not dare to ask.

One evening in October, after the harvest, the children fell asleep early and the rain beat against the stone just as it had in that second winter. I opened the piano and began to play the Moonlight Sonata, for the first time in many years. He came in and sat down on the sofa. I stopped in the middle of a bar. "Why didn't you stop me?" I asked. "Back then, in Sarajevo. Why weren't you jealous?" He was silent for a long time. "I was," he said. "Every night. But if I had stopped you, you would have spent your whole life thinking you had missed something. You had to leave on your own and come back on your own. All I could do was come and get you."

"And our first summer?" I asked. "The figs, the sandal in the basket?" "That happened," he said. "And it will not happen again. You are no longer twenty-two, and I am no longer the man who holds the basket and is afraid of losing you." "Then who are you?" "The one who stayed," he said, without any sadness, the way he says how many barrels he filled that autumn. For the first time in many years he seemed to me neither old nor a stranger. He was simply my husband, gray at the temples, with hands cracked from the vines.

Our daughter came out of her room, barefoot, in pajamas, woken by the rain. She climbed onto the piano bench beside me and put her little finger on one key, then on another, the wrong one. I started again from the beginning, with her finger among mine. From the sofa, without opening

his eyes, Branislav said: "Slower." Our daughter laughed, and I laughed with her. We started over, slower, and that time we made it to the end.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

A Love Story Under the Code Word Bjelašnica

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-love-story-under-the-code-word-bjelasnica/

The ad cost me twenty-eight marks and three days of second thoughts. My daughter Dženet said that these days you do this kind of thing on Facebook, that there are groups where people look for everyone, from lost cats to old army buddies, and that she would find me the woman from eighty-four in a single afternoon. I told her that woman does not sit on Facebook. That woman reads newspapers, and she reads them from the back page. Dženet sighed exactly the way her mother used to and took my text to the classifieds desk of "Novi glas," because I no longer knew how it was done.

The text went like this: "Looking for a woman named Ranka, who on Saturday, February 11, 1984, at the party for Olympic volunteers in the Youth Center, wore a blue cap and danced with a driver from the motor pool. I did not come on Sunday at five to the stop by the National Museum. There was a blizzard on Bjelašnica. Reply under the code word Bjelašnica." Dženet wanted to add "widower, sixty-seven, nonsmoker." I would not let her. I was not offering myself. I wanted only one thing: for someone to forgive me for being forty-two years late.

That winter I was twenty-five, and I drove a white van for the organizing committee, with the Olympic rings on the doors. I drove journalists from the hotel to Bjelašnica and back, the same bend a hundred times over. I went to the party at the Youth Center only because it was free. Some band from Zenica was playing, a band that knew only the songs everybody knew, and that was enough. She was standing by a pillar, in a blue cap she did not take off even inside the hall, and laughing at the way I danced. I told her that she should show me how it was done, then. We danced three songs in a row, and the fourth one, a slow one, we did not

even notice was slow. She said her name was Ranka, that she was from Tuzla, and that she was working as a hostess at the press center because she spoke French. She also said that she read newspapers from the back, because the last pages held the real stories: who had been born, who had died, who was looking for whom.

I walked her to the tram at Marijin Dvor. Big flakes of snow were coming down, the kind that do not fall but hang in the air. We agreed to meet the next day, at five, at the stop by the National Museum. On Sunday at six in the morning they sent me up to Bjelašnica for the downhill, with a van full of Austrians. They postponed the downhill because of the wind, and then the snow closed the road, and we were stuck for two days in the hotel on the mountain. The Austrians played cards. One of them, a photographer from Innsbruck, asked me why I kept looking at my watch. I told him somebody was waiting for me. "Then she will wait," he said, as if that were a good thing. At five o'clock I stood at the window and watched the snow go sideways. When I came down into the city on Tuesday, they told me at the press center that they had three Rankas and not one of them from Tuzla. I left a letter with the porter. Nobody ever got back to me.

Three years later I married Nesrin, a nurse from Koševo hospital, and we were married for thirty-seven years. I am not telling this so that anyone will think Nesrin came second. She did not. She baked the best hurmašice in Grbavica and quarreled with the neighbors over parking, and I loved her for the one as much as for the other. But she knew about Bjelašnica, because I told her about it that very first winter, and every February, when the television ran old footage from the Olympics, she would say, "There it is, Taib, your blizzard." She was not jealous. She used to say that a man who tells his wife about another woman has nothing to hide. She died two winters ago. In the hospital, in her last week, she said to me, "Don't sit alone in the kitchen listening to the clock."

I listened to the clock for two years, and then I placed the ad. It came out on a Wednesday. I bought five copies and stuck one on the fridge, like a

greeting card. Every morning I called Dženet to stop by the newspaper office and ask whether anything had come under my code word. In the first week two letters came. A lady from Zenica wrote that she was not Ranka but would gladly be, and enclosed a picture of herself at the seaside. A man from Vogošća wrote that he had also driven a van that winter and asked whether I remembered a certain Mile to whom he still owed fifty dinars. Dženet laughed until she cried. In the second week nothing came. In the third week I stopped asking.

Then one Monday Dženet brought home an envelope with a Tuzla postmark, addressed in a hand that slanted to the right. The letter was short, and I read it in the hallway without taking off my jacket. "Dear driver, the cap was not blue, it was green. The blue one belonged to my roommate, Ranka, from Doboj. That evening I introduced myself by her name, because my mother had told me never to tell drivers what my name was. My name is Zdenka. On Sunday I waited for you until six. Afterward I read the newspapers from the back for a whole year, thinking you would get in touch. It took you a little longer."

Below that she had written that her husband had died four years ago, that she had three grandchildren and bad knees, and that, if I was still up for it, she would wait for me on Sunday at five, at the same stop. I sat down on the chair in the hallway. Dženet took the letter out of my hand, read it twice, and said, "Dad, three Rankas, and not one of them was her." I told her I had figured that out myself. For the rest of the day I walked around the apartment straightening the pictures on the walls, even though every one of them was hanging straight.

On Sunday I left the house at three, even though you can get from Grbavica to the museum in twenty minutes. Dženet drove me and said she would wait in the car and pretend to look at her phone. A fine snow was falling, the kind that melts the moment it touches your coat. I had shaved twice and changed my shirt twice, and in the car I realized I had forgotten my gloves, so I kept my hands in my pockets like a young man.

She was already there. At four o'clock, an hour before we were supposed to meet, she was standing under the shelter, in a green cap, a little stooped, with a bag from the bakery, and looking at her watch as if I were late again. I recognized her by the way she laughed, before I even saw her face. "This time I didn't want to wait," she said. "So I came first." I held out my hand to her, the way I had back then in the hall. A tram came, then another. We did not get on either of them. Dženet later insisted that from the car she had counted seven.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

The Yellow Line at Split Harbor

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-yellow-line-at-split-harbor/

The bag had been packed since Thursday, and it sat under the bed, behind the box of winter boots, where her father never looked. Every evening Sumejra touched it with her foot, just to make sure it was still there. Inside were two pairs of jeans, the black dress she had bought for her grandfather's funeral and never worn again, a passport issued in March, and a blue folder holding a contract in English. The contract said that Sumejra Mehanović, thirty-one, had been hired to work in the laundry aboard the ship "Stella del Sud," boarding at the port of Split, on Saturday, at eight in the morning.

From the kitchen window she could see the chimneys of the steelworks and, when the air was clear, the forest on Smetovi. When she was little, there had been a meadow behind the houses where the children from the whole street played until their mothers called them in from the balconies. Now that spot held a car wash and a building with glass balconies. Of those children, two were in Germany, one in Sweden, and Sejo from the end of the street lay in the cemetery above the town. Her mother was gone. Six years had passed since she died, and Sumejra still washed the curtains in May, because that was how her mother had done it.

Her father, Osman, had retired from the steelworks after thirty-two years, and since then two things had stayed with him for good: a sore back and a bad day. While her mother was alive, he had shouted at Mehdin, because Mehdin was a boy and, in his view, should have known better. He did not shout at Sumejra, because she was a little girl. Then Mehdin left for Stuttgart, her mother died, and Sumejra was the only one left in the house who could be shouted at. He did not hit her. He hit the table with his fist, and that was enough. Every Saturday she handed him her pay from the market, and he gave some back for groceries, counting the bills twice and saying she would scatter everything the way her

mother had.

At the Lipa market, on the embankment along the Bosna, she had worked the register for eight years. The manager, Mrs. Smilja, liked to scold her in front of customers whenever the till was two marks off. Sumejra often thought about what it would be like over there, where nobody would know her. She would be a married woman, as Mirhad said, and she would live in an apartment overlooking a river so wide you could not see the other bank. She would have a kitchen where nobody counted bills.

Mirhad had come into the market in December for cigarettes and batteries and stayed at the register longer than he needed to. He was tanned in the middle of winter, with a cook's hands, crisscrossed with small knife scars. He read the name off her tag and repeated it twice, as if he were learning it by heart. For nine years he had worked in the kitchens of cruise ships, and he came home only between contracts. He told her about the Panama Canal, about the port of Valparaíso where the houses are painted like candy, about a storm off the Azores when four hundred plates were broken in a single night. He said this was his last contract: a friend in Buenos Aires was opening a restaurant and was waiting for him to come be the head chef. She would work one season on the ship, and then they would stay there, together.

Her father found out in January, from a neighbor woman. He sat down at the table, was silent for a long time, and then said, "I know sailors. Every one of them has a girl in every port, and you he would leave in the farthest one." He forbade her to see him. From then on they met at Mirhad's aunt's place in Tetovo, or in the car outside the market. Sumejra knew all along that her father was not entirely wrong when he talked about sailors. She just did not believe he was talking about Mirhad.

Still, her father had not always been like this. When she was fourteen and in bed with pneumonia, he sat beside her for two nights, cooked her an unsalted vegetable soup, and told her about a man from the rolling mill who claimed he could talk to the machines. Once, on an outing to

Smetovi, while her mother was still alive, he put on her mother's sunglasses and her headscarf and imitated the woman who read the news on television, until her mother started crying with laughter. Sumejra remembered this on Friday evening, while her father slept in his armchair in front of the television, his glasses resting on his stomach. For the first time it occurred to her that he would need her more than she needed him.

She wrote him a note on a sheet from a notepad and put it under the coffee tin, where he would find it first thing in the morning. She wrote that she was fine and that she would get in touch. Then, from the house next door, through an open window, a sevdalinka her mother had loved began to play. Sumejra stopped in the middle of the kitchen. The same song had been playing the night her mother was dying, at somebody's wedding two streets down, and her father had gone out in his slippers to ask them to stop. In those last days her mother kept repeating one sentence: "Turn off the stove, Sumejra." The stove was off. Sumejra promised her she would look after the house and her father, and her mother nodded and again asked her to turn off the stove. Now, standing in the kitchen, Sumejra felt a sudden fear, as if someone had opened a door a crack behind her: the fear that she would live the same life, all the way to a last sentence that made no sense. She pulled the bag out from under the bed and left, and she put on her jacket only once she was in the street.

Mirhad was waiting for her at the bus station, with two coffees from the machine and a bag of burek. The night bus to Split left at five past ten. They went through Travnik, Bugojno and Kupres, where snow still lay in the fields along the road, even though it was April. Mirhad fell asleep on her shoulder before Bugojno. Sumejra did not sleep. She watched the phone in her lap. Her father did not call. She knew he was asleep and would not call, and yet every half hour she lit up the screen, and its silence weighed on her more than any call could have.

They reached Split at six. The port smelled of diesel and sea, gulls were quarreling around the containers, and the ferry to Supetar was already sounding its horn. The "Stella del Sud" stood at the end of the pier, white and as tall as a twelve-story building. In front of the fence the crew was gathering: Filipinos with big suitcases, a young man from Kakanj whom Mirhad knew and hugged like a brother. Mirhad talked fast, as he always did when he was happy, explaining to her where the cabin was and which shift was best.

The gate was an ordinary one: a wire fence, a barrier, a metal turnstile, and a guard with a tablet on which he looked up names. On the asphalt in front of the turnstile a yellow line had been painted. Mirhad handed over his passport, the guard looked at it and nodded, and Mirhad went through. He turned around on the other side and reached his hand through the wire, smiling. Sumejra stopped at the yellow line and could not cross it. She thought of her father, who would wake up at seven and look for coffee, of the tin, of Mrs. Smilja, who at eight would be looking at the clock. She thought of the stove. She felt sick to her stomach, as if the sea were already under her feet. She prayed to God, without words, to tell her what to do.

"Sumejra!" Mirhad called to her over the fence. "Come on, what are you waiting for?" A line had built up behind her. The ship's horn sounded, deep and long, and the gulls rose off the pier. Sumejra stepped aside and gripped the wire with both hands, so tightly that the knots of the fence cut into her palms. Mirhad came back to the turnstile, but the guard signaled with his hand that he could not go back out: whoever was through was through. "Sumejra, please. Come." She looked at him and wanted to tell him something, one true sentence, and she did not have it. She took one hand off the wire and put it back.

An officer in a white shirt called Mirhad by his last name. He walked backward a few steps, not taking his eyes off her, then turned and went toward the ship with the others, growing smaller among the containers. Sumejra stood by the fence until the line had broken up. The guard came

out of his booth and asked her whether she was all right and whether she was waiting for the ferry to Supetar. "No," she said. "I'm waiting for a bus."

The bus to Zenica left at noon. Somewhere past Livno her phone vibrated. Mirhad had sent a photo of the sea from the deck, blue to the edge of the screen, and written underneath: "There is a plane from Lisbon. I'm waiting for you." Sumejra did not answer. She did not delete the message either.

She got home after dark. Her father was sitting in front of the television, in the same armchair. "Where have you been all day?" he asked, without turning around. "At the sea," she said. Her father laughed, then coughed. "At the sea. And did you buy bread?" She had. She had bought it in Split, at the bakery near the station, and carried it in her lap the whole way. The note was still under the coffee tin, folded the way she had left it: her father had spent the whole day waiting for someone to make him coffee. She took it out and put it in her pocket. Then she went to her room and pushed the bag under the bed with her foot, behind the box of winter boots. She did not unpack it.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

A Dad Without the Paperwork

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-dad-without-the-paperwork/

In Livno a father is called ćaća, and Roko learned that word before he found out he did not have one. He found out in second grade, on the school playground, from Duje Barišić, who was a head taller than everyone and whose dad drove a truck to Germany. "Where's your dad, Roko?" Duje asked in front of everyone, the way you ask something when you already know the answer. Roko said his dad was in Austria, on a construction site, because he had heard that from some other kid about some other dad. Duje laughed. "Austria, my foot. My mom says you don't have a dad. That you never even had one."

By the end of the long break the whole school knew. The kids surrounded him by the basketball hoop and chanted no dad, no dad, like at a match. When the bell rang for the end of classes, Roko did not go home. He ran down the street, across the road, to the Bistrica, and sat on the stone wall by the old mills, where the water foams over the weir. He threw pebbles into the river and cried the way eight-year-old boys cry when they think nobody can see them: angrily, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Mijo Galić saw him from the door of his workshop. Galić Auto Body stands right on the bank, in an old forge his grandfather built, and above the entrance still hangs a horseshoe as big as a plate. His grandfather was a blacksmith, his father a blacksmith, and Mijo worked the forge until he was twenty-five, when horses became rare, and the wild ones on Cincar had never needed shoes anyway. Then he switched to fenders, hoods and the doors of old Golfs. He was big, with hands like shovels and a voice he tried to keep low, because since his wife had died four years earlier he had had no reason to speak loudly in his house.

He went down to the wall, wiped his hands on his overalls and sat next to the boy, not too close. For a while they both looked at the water. "Who made you angry?" he asked. "Nobody." "That Nobody must be big if he

makes you cry like that." Roko almost laughed, then remembered and started crying again. He told him everything in one breath: Duje, the playground, the Austria that did not exist. "They say I don't have a dad," he said. "Everybody has a dad," said Mijo. "Sometimes he just isn't around." "Mine never was." Mijo had nothing to say to that. So he said it was late, that his mom would be worried and that he would walk him home.

Roko lived with his mother at the end of a street below Gorica, in a small house with a blue gate and a Golf whose front door had been dented since last winter. Višnja worked shifts at the cheese dairy, and in the afternoons she cleaned offices at the town hall. In Livno she was known as a woman who never lingered anywhere: not in the shop, not after Mass, not at the gate when someone called to her. She had been twenty-one when she gave birth, and the town had never forgotten it, though nobody knew anything for certain except that the father was from Split and had worked one summer at Buško Lake.

She opened the door before they knocked. She saw her son with red eyes and a big man in overalls behind him, went pale, then turned red. Mijo took off his cap and held it in both hands as if it were to blame for something. He said the boy had been down by the mills, that he was fine, that the kids had teased him a little. Višnja said a brief thank you and hugged her son, and Mijo was already turning to leave when Roko pulled at his sleeve. "Will you be my dad?"

A silence fell in which they could hear the bell at Gorica ringing for evening Mass. "Roko," Višnja said sharply, the way you speak to a child who has touched a hot stove. Mijo looked at the boy, then at her, then at the dented door of the Golf. "I will," he said. Then, because it seemed to him he had been too quick, he added: "If your mom allows it. And if you come help me in the workshop on Saturdays, because I need somebody who knows how to hold a hammer." Višnja said nothing. She closed the door quietly, and Mijo talked to himself the whole way back to the Bistrica.

The next day Roko walked into school as if he had grown overnight. At the first break he planted himself in front of Duje and said he had a dad. His name was Mijo Galić, he was a panel beater down by the mills, and he had a hammer bigger than Duje's head. Duje went to ask his mom, and at the second break he came back with a verdict: Mijo Galić had not married Roko's mother, and a dad who has not married your mom does not count. It's like a car without the paperwork, he said. The kids laughed. This time Roko did not cry. After classes he went straight to the workshop.

There were two other men in the workshop: old Mijat, who had worked with Mijo's father, and Dinko, a young man who painted cars and sang while he painted. When Roko, standing in the doorway, told them what Duje had said, Dinko stopped singing and Mijat set down his grinder. Mijo was standing over the hood of a Passat, tapping at a dent with a rubber mallet, slower and slower. "Without the paperwork," he repeated. "That's what he said," said Roko. Mijat wiped his hands on a rag and said, without looking at anyone: "She is a good woman, Mijo. She works two jobs, she gossips about nobody, and her child is well brought up. If I were your age, I would not wait for somebody who is eight to tell me." Dinko added that Višnja's Golf needed a new door, if that meant anything to him. Mijo looked at the hood for a long time. Then he took off his overalls.

That evening he knocked at the blue gate washed, shaved and in a shirt that had clearly spent a long time in the wardrobe. In his hands he held a wheel of Livno cheese, the best, from a farmer in Čaprazlije. Višnja looked at him, then at the cheese, and laughed, for the first time since he had known her. "Mijo, I work at the cheese dairy." He turned red to the ears and said he knew, but he had not known what else to bring, and he could not pick flowers. He came in. He sat on the edge of a chair as if he might stand up any moment. They talked about Roko, about school, about the Golf. When the boy had fallen asleep, Višnja told him about Split and Buško Lake too, briefly and without tears, and waited to see how he would look at her. He looked at her the same way.

He came on Wednesdays and Sundays. He straightened the Golf's door, then the gate, then the gutter. On Saturdays Roko sat in the workshop on a wooden crate, with welding goggles sliding down his nose, learning that you do not hit a dent, you coax it. On the street people were silent at first, then they whispered, and then one day Višnja's neighbor offered on her own to watch Roko when the two of them went into town for pizza. Višnja said they were not going for pizza. The neighbor said they should.

In June, at the gate, Mijo took something wrapped in newspaper out of his pocket. It was a small horseshoe, a real one, which he had forged the night before at his grandfather's fire, for the first time in twenty years. "I don't know how to talk nicely," he said. "I only know how to fix things. If you want, I would like to get married. To you, I mean. And to him." Višnja held the horseshoe for a long time, still warm from his pocket, and Mijo already thought he had ruined everything when she said yes, but that he should tell Roko himself, because the boy had asked first.

The next day, at the first break, Roko planted himself in front of Duje again. He said that in September Mijo Galić was marrying his mother, that he would have the paperwork like any dad, and that Mijo had said he would straighten the ears of anyone who bothered him like a fender, with a rubber mallet, slowly, so the paint would not crack. Duje was silent for a long time. The kids waited. Then Duje said, more quietly than usual, that last week his dad had clipped a dumpster in the parking lot by the department store and his bumper was all dented. He asked how much that would cost. Roko looked him up and down, the way Mijat sizes up a car that has been hauled in after a crash. "For you," he said, "double."

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

A Second Chance on Thursdays

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-second-chance-on-thursdays/

On Thursdays at nine Emsuda gets on the bus at Marijin Dvor with a cloth bag on her knees. In the bag are a bottle of water, a small rake, rubber gloves, a rag for the headstone and something wrapped in a kitchen towel, depending on the week: zeljanica, apple pie, once sarma in a jar. From the stop she walks uphill, between the plots, past the fountain that does not work in winter, to the row where Džafer is buried. She crouches by the stone border, wipes the headstone, recites the Fatiha, and then quietly tells him about her week: how much the electric bill came to, what the doctor said, that Adna called from Hamburg at the wrong time again.

Beside the next grave, on the left, Abdulah sits every Thursday. He brings a folding chair and a thermos of coffee. He drove a tram for thirty-eight years, on the line from Baščaršija to Ilidža, and he still sits upright, hands on his knees, as if waiting for a green light. When he cleans the headstone of his Sejda, he talks to her the way he once talked to passengers: briefly, kindly, with the occasional joke nobody else would understand.

Džafer and Sejda died in the same week, in November of twenty twenty, when burials were quick, with masks and ten people at the funeral. They were buried a day apart, side by side, because that was how the row came up. Emsuda remembers nothing of that day except the mud and a man who held her elbow as she went down the slope. A year later, one Thursday, the same man held her water bucket for her and said: "We have already met, we just did not have the time."

Since then they have greeted each other. In the second year they began to talk, across the low stone edge that divides the two graves, each turned toward their own headstone. He told her how for forty years Sejda corrected him whenever he said ja bi instead of ja bih, and she told him how Džafer whistled while he shaved, always the same song, off-key. In

the third year Abdulah began bringing two cups. Emsuda began bringing pie. Neither of them mentioned it. The agreement they never spoke aloud went like this: Thursday, from ten to twelve, here. They never sat together on the bus. Once, on a Tuesday, she saw him at Markale picking out leeks, a shopping bag over his arm, and she turned off among the apple stalls before he noticed her, without knowing why herself. She would not have known what to say to him without headstones between them. On Thursday Abdulah, pouring the coffee, remarked that the leeks had been good on Tuesday and the apples expensive. They said nothing more about it.

In the spring Emsuda planted marigolds on both graves, because Abdulah had once said Sejda loved them, and he had never known what to plant or when. In summer he carried water for both, two buckets from the fountain, and left her bucket full beside Džafer's headstone before she arrived.

In October Adna calls. The baby is due in December, her husband works shifts, and she does not know how she will manage alone. "Come at least for the winter, Mom. The ticket is bought. The second of November, from Sarajevo through Vienna." Emsuda agrees, because what else would she do, and only when she puts the phone down does she remember that tomorrow is Thursday.

She tells him while she pours the coffee, so she does not have to look at him. Abdulah is silent for a long time. He wipes Sejda's headstone with the rag, though it is already clean. Then he asks only: "And who will look after Džafer?" Emsuda had not thought of that. She looks at the rake, at the marigolds the frost has already scorched, at Džafer's name carved in gold letters that have begun to darken. "I will," says Abdulah, before she can say anything. "Every Thursday. If you will let me. I will send you a picture, so you can see it is not neglected." She hands him the rake, as if handing over the keys to her house. On the last Thursday before the trip she dictates to him what is needed: boxwood, not marigolds, because marigolds cannot take the frost, water only if it is not raining, the

headstone wiped with a dry rag, never with detergent. Abdulah writes it all down in a small squared notebook, neatly, in columns, like a timetable.

Hamburg is gray and wet, and the sky is so low that every morning Emsuda thinks she will hit her head on it. The fifth-floor apartment is warm, the baby arrives three days early, and Emsuda cooks, washes and carries the child up and down the hallway, from the kitchen to the window that looks out on the Elbe. There is no time to think. But on Thursday at ten fifteen her phone buzzes and she drops everything. The picture shows Džafer's grave, cleaned, with a sprig of boxwood on the edge. Nothing is written. Just a picture.

The next Thursday, again. And the one after. Emsuda begins to notice things that are not on the grave. First a shadow, long, a November shadow, falling across the headstone and wearing a cap. Then the tip of a black shoe in the corner of the picture. Then a thermos left on the edge and two cups, one of them empty. In December the snow falls knee-deep, and under the picture, for the first time, a message arrives: I cleared both graves. Sejda would say I write like a tram driver. Emsuda laughs out loud, alone in the kitchen with the baby on her shoulder, and does not know whom she could explain it to.

One Thursday in January there is no picture. Ten fifteen, ten twenty, ten thirty. Emsuda stands by the window with the baby, who has finally fallen asleep, and stares at her phone like a clock at a station. She thinks of the ice on the path between the plots, of his knees, of the fact that she does not know his surname or where he lives, or whom she would call. At two minutes past eleven the phone buzzes. The grave is cleaned, and under the picture it says: Bus was late. A tram would have been on time. Emsuda sits down on the nearest chair and only then feels that her hands are cold.

Adna notices before she does. One Thursday, while Emsuda holds the phone and looks at the picture a little longer than anyone looks at a grave,

Adna sits down across from her. "Who is it that sends you the cemetery every Thursday?" Emsuda tells her. Everything: the water bucket, the marigolds, the two cups. Adna listens, then asks how old he is. Sixty-seven. She asks whether he is a good man. Emsuda says she does not know, she only knows him on Thursdays, from ten to twelve. "Mom," says Adna, "a man has been clearing Dad's grave in the snow for three months and sending you pictures so you will not worry. I do not know what that is, if not a good man." Then she adds, more quietly: "And when that picture comes, you smile the way you used to, when Dad was alive."

Emsuda comes back at the end of March, a week earlier than she said. She does not let Abdulah know. Sarajevo greets her with rain and the smell of coal from the houses around the airport, and for the first time in five months she sleeps through the night. On Thursday morning she gets off the bus with the cloth bag holding a thermos, two cups of real glass wrapped in a towel, and an apple pie. She walks uphill slowly, because Hamburg has made her forget how to climb. Bare is green and wet, and on some graves the first violets have already appeared. From a distance she sees him: he is sitting on his chair with his back to the path, holding his phone out in front of him, framing a shot.

Emsuda stops behind a tall headstone, takes out her own phone and photographs him just as he is: bent over, in a gray jacket and a cap, with the thermos by his foot, above Džafer's grave, where the marigolds have been replaced by boxwood and two white hyacinths. She sends the picture before she can change her mind. She writes nothing. Just a picture.

Twenty meters away Abdulah's phone buzzes. He looks at the screen and keeps looking at it for a long time, longer than anyone looks at a single picture, as if he were reading. Then he slowly lowers the phone to his lap and turns around. Emsuda is already walking toward him, up the last stretch of the path, the cups clinking in her bag. "The coffee is mine today," she says. Abdulah stands and offers her his chair, and he himself sits on an upturned bucket, right against the stone edge between the two

graves, where for three years the border had been.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

The Accordion Across the Bregava

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-accordion-across-the-bregava/

I wanted to buy that accordion for twenty years. My café stands on the left bank of the Bregava, below the Vidoški fortress, and across the water, a little upstream, is the stone house of Asaf Krehić. In summer, when the road goes quiet, you can hear everything: Asaf watering his tomatoes, Asaf coughing, Asaf opening the accordion at nine in the evening and playing until his hands grow heavy. Red and old, its keys yellowed like a smoker's teeth, it had come to him from his father. Every year I offered him more for it. Every year he shook his head. "When I sell that, Hido," he used to say, "I have nothing left to sell."

Few people today remember that Asaf was once the second richest man in these parts, right after Abid with the quarry. He had a restaurant called Šipak, the Pomegranate, in an old watermill on the Bregava, with trout from his own pool and veal baked under a sač lid that brought people in from Mostar, Dubrovnik and Sarajevo. He had two cars, a house in Neum and fourteen waiters. He also had, unfortunately, eyes, and one summer those eyes fell on Džemila, Abid's wife.

Džemila was not a woman anyone would call a beauty. She was tall and calm and looked at people as if she were counting them. But Asaf saw no one else. He courted her the only way he knew, with food. When she came on Saturdays with Abid and their friends, dishes nobody had ordered arrived at their table: trout stuffed with walnuts, stuffed peppers, baklava he had baked himself at five in the morning. For her birthday he brought musicians from Mostar, and one August night he set off fireworks over the Bregava, so that half of Stolac thought somebody had lost his mind. Each time Džemila thanked him, politely and briefly, and went home with her husband. She never gave him half a reason. Abid laughed. He said Asaf was the cheapest cook in the world, because he only charged for the drinks.

In six years Asaf spent everything on those lunches and fireworks: his money, the house in Neum, the cars, and in the end Šipak itself, which a man from Čapljina bought and turned into a pizzeria. What he had left was his father's house upstream, a garden with figs and pomegranates, two beehives and the accordion. In the old town they said that was what a man gets for loving another man's wife. I thought it was what a man gets for not knowing how to love halfway.

Two years ago Abid died of a heart attack in his office at the quarry. Džemila was left with ten-year-old Jahja, with money nobody could see the end of, and with Abid's brothers, who from the first week began worrying about whom she would marry next. She moved with the boy from Mostar into the family house on the Bregava, three houses from Asaf's. And there something happened that neither she nor he had planned: Jahja heard the accordion.

The boy started coming every evening. He would sit on Asaf's stone wall with his legs over the water and listen. After a week Asaf put the accordion in his lap and showed him how to hold the bellows. By the end of the summer Jahja could play the old sevdalinka Sejdefu majka buđaše, wrong, but all the way through. I listened from the café and dried the glasses more slowly than usual. Džemila called him from the window when it got dark. She never once crossed those thirty meters to Asaf's yard.

In October Jahja fell ill. It started as a cold, turned into pneumonia, then into complications that kept him in the hospital in Mostar for three weeks. When they let him go home he was pale and light as paper and would not eat. He lay by the window that looks out on the Bregava. When his mother asked him what he would like, anything at all, he said he would like Uncle Asaf's accordion. If he had it, he said, he would get up right away.

Zulejha, Abid's sister, told me later that Džemila paced the house for two nights. She could have bought twenty new accordions. She bought one,

German and expensive, and Jahja turned it to face the wall. I want Asaf's, he said. Džemila knew what it meant to ask for that. That man had given her everything he had, and she had never given him so much as a coffee. Now she had to go and take from him the only thing he had left. On Saturday morning she got dressed, brought Zulejha along for company and crossed those thirty meters.

Asaf was in the garden, in old trousers, when they appeared at the gate. Zulejha says he put down his hoe and stood there as if he were looking at a ghost. Džemila held out her hand. "We came to return at least one lunch," she said. "If you will have us, we would like to eat with you today. Nothing special. Whatever you have." Asaf said it was an honor, seated them on the terrace in the shade of the fig tree and went into the kitchen. In the kitchen, as he told me afterward, he had half a loaf of bread, three eggs, a jar of fig jam and an onion. In his wallet, twenty marks. In his head, twenty years of lunches he had carried to her table.

Ten minutes later he walked into my café with the accordion on his back. He did not sit down. He set it on the bar carefully, like a child being laid on a bed. "How much was it you offered, Hido?" I told him. He said he would take twelve hundred, if I had it right now, in cash. I did. I asked him what had happened. "Džemila came to lunch," he said, and on his face was something between a funeral and a wedding. He took the money and ran across the bridge toward the butcher's, and I was left with the accordion I had bargained over for twenty years, not even daring to open it.

The lunch, they say, was like the best days of Šipak. Trout from the fish farm on the Bregava, grilled, with chard and potatoes. Lamb chops, a salad of tomatoes from the garden, bread he had bought still warm. To finish, figs stuffed with walnuts, with kajmak, and coffee in a džezva he brought out on a tray, the way he used to. Džemila ate slowly and talked about Jahja, about school, about Abid's brothers, and Zulejha says that for the first time since she was widowed she laughed out loud.

When she had drunk her coffee, Džemila set down her cup and said she had not come only for lunch. She told him about the hospital, about the German accordion turned to the wall, about the boy lying by the window who would not eat. "I know how much I am asking, Asaf," she said. "I know what you gave me, and I gave you nothing. I have no right. But he is my only child. Give him the accordion to hold until he gets better. I will pay whatever you say, or I will give it back, as you wish." Asaf was silent for a long time. Then, Zulejha says, he burst into tears like a child, his hands on his knees. Džemila thought it was hard for him to give it up and began to apologize.

"It is not that," said Asaf, when he could speak. "I do not have it anymore. I sold it this morning to Hido, to make you lunch. I had nothing else to set in front of you. For twenty years I waited for you to sit at my table, and when you did, I had three eggs." He pointed at the empty plates. "There is your accordion. You ate it." Džemila looked at the plates, then at him. She said nothing. She stood up, touched his shoulder and went home with Zulejha, and Zulejha says she was silent the whole way, the way people are silent when they are deciding something.

That evening the accordion sat on my bar and I could not look at it. Before dawn I picked it up, crossed the bridge and knocked on Džemila's door. She opened it in her bathrobe. I said this was Jahja's, from Uncle Asaf, on loan until he was well, and that there was nothing to discuss about money, because the accordion was mine now, and I give my things to whomever I like. She took it in both hands and said only: "He will not forget this, Hido." I did not ask whether she meant Jahja or Asaf.

Jahja played all winter. First lying down, then sitting up, and in February standing on the terrace in his jacket while his mother shouted from the door for him to come inside. In March he went back to school. In April Abid's brothers came from Mostar with a proposal: a widower with two hotels in Neum, decent and well off, had asked about her. Džemila heard them out and said she was marrying Asaf Krehić. The older brother laughed and said Asaf did not even have an accordion. "He does," said

Džemila. "Jahja has it. For twenty years he fed me, and I never made him so much as a coffee. Let us see how it goes the other way around."

They married in June, in Asaf's garden, under the fig tree. There was no music except Jahja's: he played Sejdefu majka buđaše, wrong, but all the way through, and Asaf stood with his hand over his eyes. The accordion has been in their house ever since, and all that is left to me is to listen across the water to the boy practicing. Nobody ever paid me back, and I never asked. But on Saturdays I eat lunch at their place and they never let me pay, so I have worked out that, God willing, I will have eaten that accordion by next fall.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

Mother-of-Pearl Buttons

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/mother-of-pearl-buttons/

You go down four stone steps into the Đerđef notions shop, from the passage between Ferhadija and Zelenih beretki Street, and anyone who does not know it is there can walk past it for a whole lifetime. Above the door hangs a brass bell that Mrs. Ilinka brought from Trieste before the war, and inside it smells of starch, cardboard and sewing machine oil. The walls are drawers from floor to ceiling. Some hold buttons, sorted by size and color, others thread, others lace wound onto cards. Mesud Pilav has worked there for eleven years and knows which drawer is where the way other people know the stairs in their own building.

That Saturday in May the shop was full. Graduation proms were coming, and mothers brought their daughters in with photos of dresses on their phones, asking for sequins exactly like these, satin exactly this shade, beads like the ones some singer had worn. Mrs. Ilinka, small and strict, sat at the register and took the money, while Mesud ran from drawer to drawer, cutting, measuring and wrapping. Around eleven Nadija came in. He knew it was her before he lifted his head, because only she closed the door behind her so carefully that the bell never got to finish its sound.

Nadija was twenty-four and had a small dressmaking workshop in one room of her family's house in Vratnik, where she sewed prom dresses and gowns for modest weddings. She came to Đerđef twice a week, always with a notebook in which she kept a list in small, upright letters. Mesud knew that notebook better than his own bills. He knew she wrote her sevens with a line through the middle and that she never bought the cheapest thread. He also knew that he loved her, roughly since the second of January two years ago, when she came in wet with snow and asked for two yards of white cord for a dress she had not managed to finish by New Year's. He had never told her. Instead, he saved her the most beautiful lace from every shipment in a box under the counter, marked in pencil

with nothing but an N.

That morning the notebook stayed in her bag. Nadija stood at the end of the counter, away from the mothers and daughters, and asked for six yards of ivory satin ribbon, then changed her mind and asked for white, then ivory again. Mesud took down both spools and laid them side by side. "Who is it for?" he asked. "A girl from Koševo who is graduating. Her mom wants her to look like a princess, and she wants to look like she did not even try." She laughed, but briefly. Then she lowered her voice. "Mesud, can I ask you something? But seriously. As a man, not as a shop assistant."

"Ask," he said, and began unwinding the ribbon. She talked fast, as if she had been arranging it in her head for a long time. His name was Irfan, sixth year of medicine. They had met in March, when he came to pick up a dress for his sister's engagement. Since then they had seen each other almost every evening, walking the Wilson promenade; he bought her lemonade at the kiosk by the bridge and told her about his patients. "He says he loves me. He says I am the only person he can be silent with. But he has never taken me home. Last week we ran into his mother in front of the Cathedral, and he introduced me as the dressmaker who is sewing his sister's dress. The dressmaker, Mesud. Not as his girlfriend."

Mesud measured the ribbon against the brass yardstick set into the edge of the counter, once and then once more, though he knew it was six. "Maybe he is afraid of his mother," he said. "There are men like that." "There are," said Nadija. "But he got a residency in Graz. He leaves in September. When I asked him what would happen to us, he said we would see. That Graz is close, that there are buses every day. What does it mean when a man says we will see?"

At that moment Mrs. Ilinka called him over to the register, because a lady was waiting for silver sequins, number four. Mesud went, counted out two packets for her and came back, and in that time he thought up ten answers, not one of them honest. He could say that Irfan surely meant it.

He could say what he really thought: that he would never tell anyone we will see, he would have seen long ago.

"Tell me honestly," said Nadija when he came back. "Will he marry me?" Mesud pulled out the card of mother-of-pearl buttons, the expensive ones from Italy, though she had not asked for them, and laid it in front of her as if the buttons might explain something. "Nadija," he said, without lifting his head, "a man who wants you to be his does not introduce you to his mother as the dressmaker. He tells her your name and waits for her to ask what you do. Your student will go to Graz. He will send you pictures of the Mur from the bridge, and then one day he will stop writing. And in two years you will be sewing a wedding gown for some doctor, because his sister will be telling everyone that you are the best dressmaker in town." He said it faster and harsher than he meant to. He heard himself and could not stop. "If I were in his place," he began, and there he fell silent, because Mrs. Ilinka was loudly asking whether there was any more of that gold cord.

Nadija looked at him, then lowered her eyes to the buttons. Mesud saw her eyes fill and saw one tear fall onto the card, right onto the biggest button, and stay on the mother-of-pearl like a raindrop on a window. Behind them stood three mothers and two graduating girls, and one of the girls was just craning her neck to see whether the drawer had any more beads.

Mesud took a step to the left, so that his shoulders hid her, pulled out the biggest drawer of lace and began laying the cards across the counter, one after another, talking loudly, as if at a market. "This here is French lace, miss, seven inches wide, it sits on a hem like it was poured there. This is guipure from Italy, a little heavier, but it does not pull. This is broderie, pure cotton, for summer dresses, it washes at forty." Between two laces he said quietly, only for her: "Not here. Look at the lace, as if you were choosing." Then loudly again: "This one with the little flowers is Czech, everyone wants it for proms now."

Nadija stood bent over the counter, her fingers on the lace, crying without a sound, the way people cry when they are used to being heard by their family through the wall. Mesud went on listing: borders, tassels, cords, velvet ribbons, glass beads and plastic beads you cannot tell apart until they hit the floor. Never in eleven years had he talked so much.

When she lifted her head, her eyes were red but dry. She took a handkerchief from her sleeve, wiped her nose and, as if nothing had happened, said she would take six yards of the ivory, two yards of the French lace and twelve mother-of-pearl buttons. "The expensive ones?" Mesud asked. "The expensive ones," she said. "The girl wants to look like she did not try, and that costs the most." She almost laughed.

Mesud cut the ribbon, measured the lace, counted the buttons twice and wrapped everything in brown paper, the way Mrs. Ilinka had taught him, with string tied crosswise. Nadija paid at the register and came back for the parcel. She took it in both hands. "Thank you," she said. "I don't know what I would do without you. You are the only one I can tell everything, you know? It's like having a brother."

The bell rang, and this time it finished its sound, because she went out too fast. Through the shop window he saw her take out her phone at the top of the steps, read a message and, for the first time that morning, smile with her whole face. Then she turned toward the Cathedral, where someone was waiting, and disappeared among the tourists and the pigeons.

"Mesud," Mrs. Ilinka called, "the lady is waiting for the Czech lace." Mesud opened the box under the counter marked N and laid in it half a yard of French lace, the extra he had cut, as always. He closed it and pushed it back, against the wall. "Two yards, ma'am?" he asked. "Take two and a half. You always end up needing more than you think."

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

The Linden and the Oak above the Vrbas

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-linden-and-the-oak-above-the-vrbas/

We did not look like people doors are opened for. We were soaked, muddy to the knees, and I was carrying my bag as if I had stolen it from someone. At the time I had been working as a doctor at the health center in Jajce for only four months, having come from Sarajevo to the first job I was offered, and nobody in those villages knew me. Zdravko was a medical technician, fifty-eight years old, and he had spent thirty of those years in ambulances on the roads around Jajce. We were driving back in my car from a training course in Banja Luka when the radio announced that the Vrbas was rising and that a landslide had closed the road through the canyon.

Zdravko knew the old road over the hill. The rain was falling so thickly that the wipers only smeared the water around. Above the hamlet of Rastovac the car slid into a ditch and stayed there, tilted, with a front wheel in the water. It was nine in the evening. Jajce was three hours away on foot, the phone had no signal, and the village had maybe twenty houses, with lights on in most of them.

We knocked on the first house, the one with new aluminum windows. A man in a tracksuit opened the door, looked at us, looked at the mud, and said his children had come from Austria and he had no room to put even a cat. At the second house the light went out as we approached the gate. At the third, a woman told us through the window that she had heard on the news about people who pretended to be doctors and robbed houses while everyone was rescuing their livestock. I showed her my official ID. She said you could buy that too these days and closed the window. At the fourth a dog barked and no one came out. At the fifth Zdravko did not knock anymore, he only stood in the rain and laughed, the way people laugh who have driven an ambulance to those same villages for thirty years.

The last house stood at the very top, above the road, small, with a tin roof and smoke rising from the chimney. In front of the gate grew a linden and an oak, so close to each other that their crowns had long since grown into one. An old man in a wool sweater opened the door, and behind him appeared an old woman holding a lamp. They did not ask anything. "Come in, children, you are soaked," she said, and he was already stepping out of his slippers to offer them to Zdravko.

Their names were Tadija and Stana. They had been married fifty-four years and had no children, and from the pension Tadija received from the forestry office they bought medicine and sugar, and everything else they had of their own. Stana put polenta and milk on the stove, took cheese out of the tub, and sliced it thin so it would look like there was more of it. Tadija said this was no supper for guests and went out into the dark. He came back wet, with a hen under his arm, but the hen wriggled free, flew across the table, and hid under my chair. Tadija knelt to pull her out. "Leave her, please," I said. "I will not let a guest eat nothing but polenta," he said. In the end we settled on eggs, and the hen stayed under the chair until morning.

Over supper Tadija told us how they had met. He worked for the forestry office, and on Saturdays she sold cheese at the market in Jajce, below the fortress. For two years he bought cheese every Saturday, even though he did not like it, until she told him that if he did not speak up she would stop selling it to him. He planted the linden and the oak the year they married, one tree for each of them. "So we would not fight over the shade," he said. "And we fight anyway," said Stana.

She poured us cornelian cherry juice from a big glass bottle, and the bottle stayed full all evening. Zdravko drank four glasses, I drank three, and the juice never went down. Only in the morning did I understand why: every half hour Tadija had gone out, as if to look at the rain, and gone down to the cellar with the bottle under his sweater. In the cellar I later saw the empty bottles, one beside the other along the wall, everything they had put up for the winter.

They gave us their bed, and they lay down in the kitchen, on the bench by the stove. I could not sleep for the rain on the tin. Around midnight I heard them talking quietly. He was telling her to cover herself, because her blanket had slipped off. She was telling him he had not taken his blood pressure pill. They argued in whispers, as if they had done it every night for fifty-four years, and then they fell asleep, she first, then he.

In the morning the rain stopped. From the yard you could see the whole village and, below it, the Vrbas, brown and wider than ever. The lower houses, the ones along the stream, stood in water up to their cellar windows. The man in the tracksuit was bailing out water with a bucket, and the woman from the window stood in rubber boots in front of a barn that the wind had stripped of half its roof. No one was hurt, but everyone was on their feet. Zdravko put on his wet jacket and went down to help them, and I went with him. The woman with the barn recognized me only when I bandaged the hand she had cut on the tin.

Before noon an excavator came and pulled out my car. As we said goodbye, I asked Tadija and Stana what I could do for them. Tadija said they needed nothing. Stana was looking at the linden and the oak in front of the gate. "We need only one thing," she said, "and you cannot do it, child." "What?" "That neither of us has to bury the other. That neither of us is left alone in this house." I said I could not promise that. "I know," she said. "I told you that you cannot."

In March I was given the area above Jajce, seven hamlets and not a single clinic. I told the director of the health center that I needed a room in Rastovac, and he asked which one. I said I knew a kitchen. Since then I have gone up there on the first Tuesday of every month, and Tadija and Stana's kitchen has become the clinic for the whole village, because theirs is the only house you can reach even when the Vrbas floods. In April Zdravko came with his son-in-law and replaced the tin on their roof. He would not take any money. He said he had already drunk four glasses of juice.

The first to sit down on the bench in front of the house was the man in the tracksuit, with blood pressure like I had only ever seen in textbooks. He could not look Stana in the eye. She poured him some juice and asked about his children in Austria. After him came the woman from the window, then the others, and now on the first Tuesday of every month half of Rastovac sits on that bench, under the linden and the oak, while Stana brings coffee and makes sure no one jumps the line.

What Stana asked for I cannot give to anyone. I can only make sure that neither of them gets sicker than the other. When everyone has gone, I check the two of them: first Tadija, then Stana, and I write them into the same notebook, on the same line, one beside the other. Every time, Stana asks whose blood pressure is better. "The same," I tell her. Most of the time it is even true.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

The Investor in Someone Else's Coat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-investor-in-someone-elses-coat/

The coat was dark gray cashmere with a wine-colored lining, and it did not belong to Jasmir. A gentleman from Vienna had brought it in during the spring to have the sleeves shortened, paid half in advance, and never come back. Jasmir's shop by the bus station in Doboj closed in July, and the coat stayed on its hanger, with white thread on the sleeves, where Jasmir had tacked the new hems in place. In December he was called in for a job interview at a uniform factory in Brčko. His only jacket had a hole in the elbow. He put on the coat just for that day, he told himself, and he would have it back on the hanger by evening.

The bus to Brčko stopped in Gradačac for a half-hour break. Snow was falling. The driver, Hamdo, who had been watching the coat in the rearview mirror the whole way, got off first and went into the café at the station, where he liked to trade jokes with the owner. Jasmir stood by the door in the coat, holding an old leather bag that held scissors, chalk, and a tape measure, because a tailor does not go even to a job interview without a tape measure. "Watch out for this one," Hamdo told the owner, loudly enough. "Investor from Vienna. Looking for land for a plum drying plant." The owner repeated it to the man at the next table. That man was Mehmedalija Ćurić, who owned forty dunums of plum orchard, a small jam factory, and a bank debt that was growing faster than his plums.

Within ten minutes Mehmedalija was sitting at Jasmir's table, and in front of Jasmir stood a coffee he had not ordered. Jasmir tried to explain, but every sentence he spoke took on a new meaning with Mehmedalija. "I am not here on business." "Of course, of course. You are looking around. Smart." "I am just waiting for the bus." "A modest man. I like modest people." When Hamdo honked the horn, Jasmir half rose, and Mehmedalija put a hand on his shoulder. "What bus? I will drive you wherever you want." The bus left for Brčko, and the job interview went

with it.

That evening at Mehmedalija's house there was sarma, pita, two cousins, and an adviser from the municipality. Everyone asked about Vienna, and Jasmir, who had been to Vienna once, on a school trip, talked about the only thing he really knew something about: cloth. He explained how wool behaves in the rain, why English worsted should not be pressed with heavy steam, and how you can tell from a seam who made a man's suit. The guests nodded and whispered to one another that you could see his refined taste. Then Mehmedalija's daughter Medina, an agronomist, came in from the orchard in rubber boots and said the only sensible sentence of the evening. "Dad, investors do not come by bus." Silence fell over the table. Mehmedalija laughed. "You see how modest he is."

Jasmir decided to leave in the morning. But in the morning Medina, who did not believe a word he said, took him out to the plum orchard so that he could see, as she put it, what he was planning to invest in. Snow lay on the branches. She showed him the old trees her grandfather had planted and the young ones she had grafted herself, and she waited for him to make a mistake. He made none, because he was not pretending anything, he only listened and asked questions. When she caught the pocket of her jacket on a branch and tore it, Jasmir took a needle out of his lapel, because a tailor always keeps a needle in his lapel, and sewed it up in two minutes, with stitches so small that afterward she could not find them. She looked at him for a long time. "You have hands like you have done some work," she said. "I have," he said, and she laughed for the first time.

That was how a week went by. Every day Jasmir meant to tell the truth, and every day the lie grew a little bigger. The local radio mentioned an Austrian investor. The bank director called Mehmedalija twice. When his host took him to the only men's clothing store in town to buy him a new suit, Jasmir could not hold back and showed the saleswoman how to raise a trouser hem properly, and she said only a real gentleman would know something like that. In the evenings he walked with Medina around Lake Vidara, along the frozen shore. She told him she would never let

anyone cut down her grandfather's trees, no matter how much money they offered. "Neither would I," he said, and she took his arm.

Mehmedalija saw his daughter's face and decided there was nothing to wait for. He booked the engagement party for Saturday at the hotel below the fortress tower: eighty guests, live music, and a projector for pictures of the couple. On Friday evening Jasmir finally told Medina that he had to tell her something. She put a finger to his lips. "If it is something nice, tell me now. If it is something ugly, tell me after the engagement." Jasmir said nothing. Medina looked at him for a long time and did not ask anything.

The only one who had disliked the investor from the start was Dževdet, the bookkeeper at the jam factory, who had been courting Medina for three years, mostly with spreadsheets. Dževdet had noticed what no one else had: on the sleeves of the expensive coat you could still see white thread, the temporary kind tailors use to hold a hem in place before sewing it. On Thursday he got in his car and drove to Doboj. At the station he showed people a picture on his phone, and within five minutes he was standing in front of a pulled-down shutter that read: Tailor Jasmir, repairs and alterations.

At the engagement party, after the appetizers, Dževdet asked for the microphone to say a few words as a man from the firm. He said that in their part of the country there was a saying that clothes make the man, and he signaled to the young man at the projector. On the screen, instead of pictures of the couple, there appeared the pulled-down shutter in Doboj, then the sign, then Jasmir with a tape measure around his neck, measuring a trouser leg on some heavyset man. "And this coat, ladies and gentlemen," said Dževdet, "still has thread on its sleeves. It is not finished. Just like the investment." Someone laughed, then went quiet. The musicians lowered their instruments. Mehmedalija turned red to the tips of his ears.

Jasmir stood up, slowly took off the coat, and hung it over the back of the chair, the way he used to hang jackets in the shop while a customer tried on trousers in the fitting room. "It is true," he said. He went out into the snow in his shirt and walked to the bus station, where the last bus to Doboj left at ten forty.

He had been sitting on the bench for twenty minutes when Medina arrived, in her party dress and rubber boots, with the coat over her arm. "You forgot your coat." "It is not mine." "I know. I read the label." She sat down beside him. "What else was a lie?" He listed it: Vienna, the investment, the drying plant. "And the orchard? When you said you would not cut down my grandfather's trees?" "Not that." "And what happened by Vidara?" "Not that either."

Medina looked at the snow for a long time. "Then listen," she said. "Dad has an orchard and a debt. I have a degree and my grandfather's trees. We need someone who works with his hands and who will not sell anything just because it looks nice." "I am a tailor." "Then you will be a tailor in Gradačac. People wear trousers here too." The bus stopped in front of the bench and its doors opened. Hamdo was at the wheel. He looked at Jasmir in his shirt, then at the girl in boots, then at the coat. "Mr. Investor, are you coming?" "He is not," said Medina, and she put the coat around Jasmir's shoulders.

For a month Mehmedalija did not say a word to his son-in-law, and then he came into the young man's small shop on the main street, below the tower, to have his trousers shortened, and haggled as if he were buying an orchard. The coat from Vienna still hangs in the window, its sleeves finally sewn, with a piece of cardboard on which Medina has written: Not for sale, waiting for its owner. When people around town ask what his son-in-law does, Mehmedalija says he is an investor. "In thread," he adds, "and the domestic kind."

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

The Gearbox Debt

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-gearbox-debt/

For a year Dženana wore black and did not open the windows at the front of the house. Everyone in Gradačac knew it, from the baker by the clock tower to the women who walked around Lake Hazna on Sundays. Some said it was love. Others, more quietly, said it was spite. Her husband Edin had not been a man worth losing your breath over: he loved bars, trips he took alone, and cars more than any person. Dženana knew all of that while he was alive. When he died, she decided she would be more faithful to him than he had ever been to her. Let him see, she told herself, if he has anywhere to watch from at all.

The only thing she brought out of the garage was Edin's old cream-colored Mercedes, its seats still smelling of his cigarettes. Edin had called it the Pasha. Every Saturday her neighbor Hamid, a retired postman of seventy, washed the Pasha in front of the garage, because she had ordered it, then rolled it back inside and covered it with a tarp. Nobody drove it. Every Saturday, along with soup, Hamid brought his opinion, just as free of charge. "You are a young woman, Dženana. Forty-four is not old. At least go down to the lake." She would answer that he should wax the Pasha too, because Edin had liked it to shine.

That Tuesday, a little after noon, someone began banging on the gate as if the house were on fire. Hamid went to see and came back pale. He said a man from Brčko was standing outside, a car mechanic, and he would not leave until he had spoken to the lady in person. "Tell him I am not receiving anyone," said Dženana. "I told him," Hamid answered. "He says he does not receive refusals either."

The man came in behind Hamid without waiting to be asked. He was big and broad-shouldered, in a leather jacket that remembered better years, with hands from which no soap on earth could lift the traces of oil. He introduced himself as Safet Kurtović. The late Edin, he explained in a

voice that filled the whole hallway, had owed him two thousand four hundred marks, for the Pasha's gearbox and two major services. He had the paperwork too. He took it out of his inside pocket and smoothed it on the chest of drawers, right over Edin's photograph.

Dženana moved the papers off the photograph as if she were brushing away crumbs. "My husband was an orderly man," she said. "If he owed you, I will pay. My accountant comes on Thursday, and you will get the money then." Safet shook his head. He needed the money today, he said, because tomorrow the bank would take his workshop if he did not pay the installment, and he would not be troubling her if he had anyone else to turn to. "In this house we do not talk about money," she said. "In this house we mourn." "Then I will sit down and wait while you mourn until Thursday," he said, and sat down in Edin's armchair.

What followed Hamid later retold to half the neighborhood, each time with some new detail. Dženana said Safet was a boor. Safet said he might be a boor, but at least he was honest, which could not be said of people who spent a year acting out grief for a man who had cheated on them with half the Posavina region. Dženana went pale. Safet, realizing he had gone too far, turned red, but he did not back down. Instead of apologizing, he began to deliver a speech about women.

The speech was long and, he claimed, based on experience. Women, he said, were either crocodile tears or a calculator. He had had two fiancées and one wife, and all three had explained to him what love was, each in her own way, and not one had stayed to see what it looks like when something really gets repaired. Only a car, he concluded, was an honest creature, because when it was broken, it told you so. "If you know women that well," said Dženana, "then God has spared you from knowing them any better."

Safet said he had no intention of leaving. Dženana said he was a bear. He admitted he was a bear, but a bear who worked. She said no one in any town would speak to a widow like this. He replied that, as far as he could

see, she was not a widow but a museum attendant, and he pointed through the window toward the garage, where the roof of the Pasha showed under the tarp. That was when Dženana did something she had not planned.

"You think women are good for nothing but tears and bills," she said calmly, with a calm Hamid, standing in the kitchen doorway, had not heard since the day of the funeral. "Fine. Let us see. Edin taught me one thing while he was alive, because he could not be bothered to get his hands dirty. How to change a wheel. If I change one on the Pasha faster than you, you will wait for your money until Thursday and never again say a word about women in my house. If I lose, I will pay you today, out of my own money, and you can sit in that armchair as long as you like." Safet looked at her for a long time. "You would fight me in a duel?" "In a duel," she said. "Hamid, take off the tarp."

It was the first time in a year that the Pasha had left the garage for anything other than a wash. Hamid brought two jacks and two wrenches and stood between them like a referee, with a stopwatch on his old phone. Two neighbor women appeared on the next terrace, then three more. Dženana took off her black sweater, stayed in her black blouse, and rolled up her sleeves. Safet took off his jacket. Only then, for the first time since he had walked in, did he look at the woman in front of him and not at the debt.

When Hamid told them to start, Dženana knelt beside the front left wheel faster than anyone expected. She loosened the nuts while the car was still standing on the ground, the way Edin had always said to, set the jack in the right place, and turned the wrench with an anger that had been gathering for a year. Safet worked on the other side with calm, practiced movements, and yet he was slower. Not because he did not know how. Because he kept lifting his head to watch her.

He saw a strand of hair that had slipped from her clip and that she kept blowing away like a little girl. He saw the sweat on her forehead and her

lips moving without a sound as she counted the nuts. Above all, he saw that she was as angry with him as she had never dared to be with the dead man. When she pulled the wheel off and rolled it toward Hamid, Safet was still holding his second nut. He set it down on the concrete and stood up. "I surrender," he said. "Nobody surrenders in the middle of a duel," she said. "I surrender," he repeated. "But not because of the wheel."

The neighbor women on the terrace fell silent all at once. Dženana stood up, wrench in hand, and said she did not understand what he wanted. Safet said he did not understand either. He had come for two thousand four hundred marks, and now it seemed to him that nothing would be honest unless he said that he had never met a woman like her, not in Brčko, not anywhere else, and that if she let him, he would take her fishing on Lake Hazna this very Sunday. He said he knew he was a bear, and that bears in love did not know how to behave, but at least they did not lie.

"Get out," said Dženana. "I am going," said Safet. He picked up his jacket, headed for the gate, stopped, and came back. "You forgot something. You have three more wheels." "Get out!" He walked to the gate and turned around. She was standing beside the Pasha, wrench in hand, watching him. He came back once more, and this time he said nothing at all.

In the meantime Hamid had run across the street for help, because it seemed to him that the woman was finally either killing someone or saving herself, and he did not know which was worse. He came back with two neighbors. One carried a rake, the other a monkey wrench. They found the widow and the mechanic kissing beside the front wheel, clumsily and stubbornly, like two people who had been quarreling a minute ago and were still not sure who had won.

Dženana pulled away first. She looked at the neighbors, then at the rake, then at Hamid, and tucked back the strand of hair. "Hamid," she said, "you don't have to wash the Pasha this Saturday." Hamid lowered the wrench. "And Thursday? The accountant?" "Let him come," she said.

"Somebody in this house has to keep track of the bills." That Sunday, for the first time in a year, the cream-colored Mercedes left the garage and set off toward the lake. She was driving, and the mechanic from Brčko sat beside her and kept quiet the whole way, which, Hamid insisted, was the greatest miracle of all.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

A Report in Two Sentences

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-report-in-two-sentences/

"Two thousand marks," said the lawyer Rajić, and he said it again, because it seemed to him the young man had not heard. Aleksa Despotović had heard him. He just did not know what to do with a number that was too large for one night and too small for anything else. His uncle Svetozar, owner of a printing house behind Banski Dvor, had died in March, at eighty, and left his nephew exactly that much, in an envelope, with one condition: that within seven days he write to the lawyer how he had spent the money. In writing and signed. "My uncle was a joker," said Aleksa. "Your uncle was a printer," Rajić answered. "He liked things written down."

Rajić read the rest of the will quickly, as if he were ashamed of it. The printing house, the house in Starčevica and the savings were waiting, it said, on a sealed addendum, which would be opened when the nephew turned in his report. To Vanja Ćulibrk, who had lived with Svetozar since she was fifteen, when she was left without her parents, and who for the last three years had worked as a proofreader at the printing house and brought him soup when he would not eat, the uncle left one hundred marks and his old fountain pen. Vanja said thank you, took the fountain pen and left the office before they did.

Aleksa was twenty-nine and had been studying economics for nine years, with two exams left to go. On weekends he played music at a club below the Kastel fortress, and until now his uncle had paid his rent. His uncle called him a journeyman with no trade, and on the first Wednesday of every month, over coffee, asked him what he meant to do with his life, and every first Wednesday Aleksa had a different answer. All of Banja Luka knew him and nobody took him seriously, himself least of all. He had loved Vanja since she was twenty, ever since one summer he saw her on his uncle's terrace correcting other people's mistakes with a red pencil

and swearing quietly, through her teeth, so that nobody would hear. He never told her. She thought that everything in his life happened by accident, and she was right.

Since he did not know what to do with the money, he decided to ask other people. First he asked a taxi driver at the stand by Krajina Square. The driver thought for a long time and then said he would buy four new tires and take his wife to Neum for the weekend. "In Neum you can spend two thousand in two days," he said. "That is the best investment in a marriage there is." Aleksa thanked him, paid for a ride that had never happened, and walked down Gospodska Street on foot.

The waiter at the café across from Banski Dvor advised him to open a tab with them and drink until Christmas. In Petar Kočić Park, by the chess tables, old Boro, a retired history teacher, heard him out without lifting his eyes from the board. "Your uncle wanted to tell you that you are a fool," he said, moving a bishop. "And he gave you two thousand so you could prove it yourself." Aleksa said that was harsh. Boro said that history was always harsh and that it was his move.

In the end he went to Kaja, who sang on Saturdays in the bar of a hotel on the Boulevard and went out with him when she had nothing better to do. Without a word Kaja took him to a shop window on Gospodska Street and showed him a handbag that cost one thousand nine hundred fifty marks. She said she could carry him around in it too, if he were a little smaller, and that it was the only thing in Banja Luka that would not bore her within a month. Aleksa went in and took the bag in his hands, and then, in the mirror by the register, he saw himself holding someone else's bag and thought of Vanja, with a hundred marks and a fountain pen, packing books into boxes. He gave the bag back to the saleswoman, apologized to Kaja and took a taxi to Starčevica.

In the living room Vanja was packing books into cardboard boxes printed with the name of the printing house. The old man's armchair stood turned toward the window, with a blanket over its back, and the room

still smelled of the printing ink he used to bring home on his hands. Until the envelope was opened, the house belonged to nobody, and she did not want to wait in a house that belonged to nobody. She had found a room with a woman in Borik. Aleksa stopped in the doorway and said he had come from Rajić. The lawyer, he said, had forgotten to read something out: Uncle Svetozar had left her another two thousand marks, here they were, in an envelope. Vanja looked at him for a long time. "Rajić forgot?" "Lawyers are people too," said Aleksa. She took the envelope, but she did not open it.

"And one more thing," he said, because it seemed to him he would not have the courage a second time. "I love you. Since you were twenty. You don't have to say anything." Vanja put a book down in the box. She said she was sorry, and that she was truly sorry, because he was a good man. "But everything happens to you by accident, Aleksa. And I don't know how to live by accident." He said he knew. He also said the money was hers either way, that the one thing had nothing to do with the other, and he left before she could add anything.

In the morning he sat down in Rajić's office on the second floor of an old building on King Peter Street, where the cabinets were full of folders older than he was, and wrote his report on a sheet of paper in two sentences: "I gave the two thousand marks to Vanja Ćulibrk. I did not know anything smarter to do." He signed it and pushed the paper across the desk. Rajić read it, raised his eyebrows, opened a drawer and took out a sealed envelope. He slit it open with a paper knife, slowly, like a man who has been opening other people's secrets for some thirty years and is no longer surprised by any of them.

The addendum was written in the uncle's hand, on printing house paper. If the nephew had spent the money wisely, or had given it to someone who needed it, he was to receive the printing house, the house and the savings of one hundred fifty thousand marks, because then he was a Despotović after all. If he had squandered it, like everything else until now, all of it belonged to Vanja Ćulibrk, the only one in that house who

had ever worked. Rajić folded the paper, took off his glasses and held out his hand to congratulate Aleksa.

Aleksa did not take the hand. He was looking at his report on the desk. He thought about the boxes printed with the name of the printing house, about the room in Borik, and about how Vanja had said she did not know how to live by accident. "Can I fix this?" he asked. "I made a mistake." He took the paper, tore it in half, then in half again, and laid the pieces on the desk. Then on a new sheet he wrote: "I lost the two thousand marks at a betting shop, on Sunday, on the Borac match." He signed this one too.

Rajić looked at the new sheet for a long time. "On Borac?" "Against Borac," said Aleksa. "You are from Banja Luka and you bet against Borac?" "That is why it all went." The lawyer was silent. Then he said he was obliged to record what his client told him, not what he thought, and that Mr. Despotović surely knew what that meant. Aleksa said he knew. Vanja would get everything. Rajić stamped the paper, and the pieces of the first report he did not throw in the bin but, out of the habit of an old man who throws nothing away, put them in his drawer.

Aleksa walked out whistling. On the stairs he met Vanja, whom Rajić had asked to come at noon. In her hand she held that envelope, unopened. "Rajić did not forget anything," she said. "I typed your uncle's will." "You didn't type all of it," said Aleksa, and went down the stairs faster than she could hold out the envelope. On Gospodska Street he spent his last five marks on a burek and ate it standing up, for the first time pleased with something he had done himself.

In the evening he was sitting in a café below the Kastel, by the Vrbas, with a single coffee he had stretched over two hours. Vanja came in, sat down across from him and laid on the table the uncle's fountain pen and four pieces of paper stuck together with tape. Rajić had given them to her, she said, and had told her he was not supposed to, but that he was old anyway. For a while they both looked at the paper. "I did not know anything smarter to do," she read aloud. "Against Borac, Aleksa?"

"Somebody had to."

Vanja said she could not take something that was his. Aleksa said it was not his, that it was there in black and white, signed, and that nobody argues with Rajić. Vanja was silent, turning the fountain pen in her fingers. Then she said that the printing house needed someone who knew how to talk to people, because all she knew was commas, and that yesterday, perhaps, she had been wrong about that word, accident. Aleksa opened his mouth to say something, and for the first time since they had known each other, she told him to be quiet and let her finish her sentence. She paid for the coffee.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

The Doctor's Mermaid

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-doctors-mermaid/

In Neum they called the doctor's wife a mermaid, and it did not always sound like a compliment. From May to November, every morning at six, Nikolina walked into the sea below the house and swam straight out, past the buoys, toward Pelješac, so far that from the shore she could be seen only as a dot. She came back only when Doctor Pavao, on the terrace, put down his cup and stood up. He never told her she swam too far. He just left a towel on the chair by the steps every morning.

Pavao was the family doctor at the health center, a widower twenty years older than her, a man who knew half of Neum by its blood pressure. He had married her eight years earlier, when she was thirty and he was treating her mother. His daughter Rina, who studied in Mostar and spent her summers at home, called her stepmother a mermaid out loud and kept the rest to herself. "Our mermaid is staring at the open sea again," she would say at breakfast, and Nikolina did not get angry, because it was the truth.

The open sea had a name. When Nikolina was twenty, she worked summers at the front desk of a hotel above the beach, and Frane was a ship's mechanic on leave between two contracts, ten years older, with hands that smelled of diesel and salt. At night they sat on the rocks below the old road. One night he took off his ring and she took off hers, and he threaded them onto the same piece of fishing line and threw them into the sea. "Now the sea has married us," he said. "And the sea does not grant divorces." He left on a ship bound for Singapore and sent three letters. Then word came that the ship had been held in some African port over smuggled cargo and that the mechanic had disappeared before the trial. He never got in touch again.

She told Pavao all of it one night before the wedding, from beginning to end, and he listened the way he listened to patients, without interrupting.

All he said was: "That was before me." She thought that was enough. But even after eight years she slept with the window open and stayed in rooms only as long as she had to. She said she could not breathe under a ceiling.

The yacht sailed into the bay at the beginning of September, when the tourists had already gone. It was white, under a Maltese flag, too big for Neum, and it anchored between the hotel and Klek. The next morning, when Nikolina came out of the sea, a man with gray temples was standing on the pebbles beside her towel. He did not need to say anything. She recognized him by the way he stood, legs apart, as if even the land were rocking.

"I said I would come," said Frane. "I have come." He explained to her calmly, as if reading a weather forecast, that he was the chief engineer on the yacht, that the yacht was sailing tomorrow at eight in the evening for Kotor, and then for Greece, and that he would not try to talk her into anything. "You will come by yourself, or you will not come at all. The sea married us, not I." He did not touch her. He walked off down the beach toward the dinghy. Nikolina stood with the towel in her hands and shook, and she knew it was not from the cold. She was afraid. Not of him, but of how much she wanted to go.

She told Pavao that same noon, in his office, between two patients. Pavao took off his glasses and, for the first time since she had known him, raised his voice. He said she was going nowhere, that the man was a fugitive and that he would go to the police, to the border, to whoever he had to. Nikolina let him finish. "You can lock me in," she said. "But if I stay because you locked the door, I will spend my whole life on that yacht. And you will know it every morning, with a towel in your hand."

That night no one in the house slept. Through the wall Rina heard her father pacing the kitchen, so she went downstairs and found Nikolina on the terrace in the dark, watching the lights of the yacht. She sat down beside her, for the first time without a single word about mermaids. "I

thought you did not love us," she said at last. "But you are just afraid." Nikolina did not answer. Rina put a hand on her shoulder and kept it there a long time, as if holding on to something that might float away.

The next day Pavao saw twenty-two patients, took twenty-two blood pressures and did not remember a single one. At seven he locked his office and went straight to the pier. The dinghy from the yacht was already waiting, and Frane stood at the end of the pier, without a bag, like a man who needs nothing. Nikolina came ten minutes before eight. In her hand she had a small travel bag.

Pavao went up to her before Frane could say anything. His voice was quiet, the one he used when giving test results. "Nikolina, I forbid you nothing," he said. "I am not going to the police. I am not locking anything. If you go, I will send your things wherever you say, and I will tell Rina it was your decision, not running away. If you stay, let that be yours too. You are free. Choose for yourself, and let no one choose for you, not me, not him, not the sea."

Nikolina looked at him as if she did not understand the word. "Free?" she asked. "Free," he said. She looked at the sea, which in the dusk was calm and gray, then at the yacht, then at Frane at the end of the pier, who held out his hand to her. For eight years she had thought it was Pavao's house that held her. Now no one forbade anything, and the sea was suddenly only the sea, wet and cold, full of other people's ships.

She set the bag down on the concrete. "The ring is on the bottom," she said to Frane. "Let it stay there." Frane looked at her for a long time, then at Pavao, then at the bag. "So someone finally let you choose," he said. He turned, stepped down into the dinghy and did not look back. The motor hummed, and within a few minutes the lights of the yacht began to slide toward the mouth of the bay. Nikolina did not watch them to the end. She took Pavao's arm, and he carried the bag.

Rina was waiting for them on the terrace with three cups of tea, even though no one in that house drank tea in September. "You stayed," she

said. "I stayed." Rina nodded and pushed a cup across the table to her. "Tomorrow morning I am going swimming too," she said. "If you will wait for me at the buoys."

In the morning the sea was as smooth as oil. They swam together, and at the buoys Rina stopped, out of breath, and said she could not go any farther. Nikolina looked toward Pelješac, then toward the shore, where Pavao, on the terrace, was just pouring his coffee. She turned and swam toward the house, for the first time before he had stood up.

ROMANCE · 7 MIN READ

A Vow in the Vlašić Blizzard

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-vow-in-the-vlasic-blizzard/

I was a witness, so I can tell how it was, even though for eight years Marta insisted that nothing happened that night. She is my cousin, two years younger than me. That winter she was twenty-two and in love with Domagoj, a ski instructor from Guča Gora, who had a snowboard, a rented room at Babanovac, and debts. Her father ran two pharmacies in Travnik, and her mother had already chosen the dentist's son from Vitez for her. People called Domagoj a seasonal worker, which in our family was worse than a curse word.

In February Domagoj was leaving for a season in Austria. Before that they wanted to bind themselves somehow, so that no one could arrange anything for Marta while he was away. No priest would marry them without papers, and papers meant parents. So they came up with a vow: at night, in the wooden chapel above Babanovac, with candles and two witnesses, me and my Ivica, in words they had written themselves. "This is not a wedding," Marta told me. "This is a promise. The wedding will be in April, at the municipal office." I told her that a promise in a chapel weighs more than any paper. "That is the point," she said.

It was a Saturday in the middle of January, and since noon the forecast had been warning of a blizzard. We drove up from Travnik in my old Passat. Marta was in a white jacket, with her grandmother's white scarf over her hair, because she wanted to have at least something white. Domagoj was supposed to come from the other side, from the hut below Devečani, on the ski school's snowmobile, because the road on his side was closed.

By the time we reached the chapel, the snow was falling sideways. The power had gone out at Babanovac, so even the little lamp above the door was dead. We lit the candles we had brought. Marta knelt in front of the altar, and every ten minutes Ivica went out with a flashlight and came

back whiter. Domagoj's phone was unreachable. Ten o'clock. Half past ten. Eleven.

What was happening to Domagoj we learned only later. He set off from the hut at nine, and within five minutes the blizzard had buried the track. He drove in circles across the plateau, the snowmobile's light showing him nothing but snow, and in the end he ran into the fence of some shepherd's hut, miles from the chapel. He went inside, with no signal, and until dawn he fed the stove with someone else's wood.

At a quarter past eleven the chapel door banged open. A man came in covered in snow, with a hood up and a scarf over his face to the eyes. Ivica let out his breath. "Where have you been, man! Come on, quick, the candles are burning down." I pushed him toward Marta. He looked at us, at the candles, at Marta on her knees in the white scarf, and said nothing. I should have seen that he was taller. Only later did I remember that Domagoj's jacket was orange, and this one was black. In the dark everything is the same color.

I read from the paper the words the two of them had written: that before God and these witnesses they promised each other faithfulness, and that they would look after each other as long as they lived. The man repeated them quietly and hoarsely, and I thought it was from the cold. Marta said hers loudly, as if she wanted them heard all the way down in Travnik. Then Ivica, laughing, said: "Now the kiss." The man lowered his scarf. Marta lifted her face and screamed.

It was not Domagoj. It was a young man none of us had ever seen, unshaven, red from the wind, with the smile of a man who has won a bet. "Excuse me, miss," he said. "I thought it did not matter to you who it was." He was out the door before Ivica could reach him. From below came the sound of a snowplow, then an engine, and through the snow we saw two red lights following the plow down the mountain. Marta collapsed onto the cold boards. Her grandmother's scarf ended up in the wax.

In the morning rescuers found Domagoj, alive, with frostbitten fingers and no fault at all except that he did not know the mountain in the dark. Marta lay in a fever for two weeks, and her parents never learned what had happened; they thought it was pneumonia. When she got up, she told Domagoj she could not. She had spoken a vow, and it was spoken. He thought it was an excuse. He was ashamed, left for Austria in February, and stayed. Three years later I saw his wedding in Tyrol on Facebook.

Marta finished her pharmacy degree and took her place behind the counter in her father's pharmacy in the old town. She turned down the dentist's son, then an engineer, then a judge from Zenica. In town people said she was proud. Her mother cried, her father stopped asking. Her grandmother's scarf, with its wax stain, lay folded in the drawer under the register, and only I knew it.

In the seventh autumn an engineer came from Zagreb to supervise the building of the bypass and rented the apartment above the pharmacy. His name was Tihomir. Every week he came down for something, allergy pills, bandages, eye drops, and he said little, but he looked at you the way people look when they are listening for something. In the evenings he walked along the Lašva. Marta began walking at the same hour. "He doesn't ask me anything," she told me, "and I tell him everything."

But Tihomir asked for nothing more than a walk, not in November, not in February, even though Marta saw, and I saw too, how his face changed when she walked in. In March, on the ramparts of the old fortress, he told her he had to tell her something so that she would not think he did not love her. Eight years earlier, in January, he had been coming back from skiing and got stuck in a blizzard on Vlašić. He saw candles in some chapel. Inside they had taken him for a bridegroom, and he, out of stupidity and because he was twenty-six and thought the whole world was a joke, had spoken a vow with a girl whose name he still did not know. "I said before witnesses that I would look after her," he said, "and I left her on the floor. Since that night I cannot promise anyone anything."

Marta was silent for a long time. Then she asked him what he had said on his way out. Blushing, he repeated the same words about how it probably did not matter to the girl. "It did matter to her," said Marta. "Look at me more closely. Remember the candles." Tihomir went pale and sat down on the wet stone of the rampart, as if his legs had given way.

She told me all of it that same night, in my kitchen, laughing and crying at the same time. She took her grandmother's scarf out of her bag, the one with the wax stain, and spread it on the table. I asked her what she would do now. "Get married," she said. "But this time, the papers first."

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

The One Who Turns Off the Radio

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-one-who-turns-off-the-radio/

The first time, a mistake sent me. Rifka at the Jasika Taxi dispatch mixed up two numbers, so that Friday at six thirty, instead of going to Ilidža for a man with two suitcases, I pulled up in front of a building in Dobrinja. Standing by the entrance was a woman in her forties with a brown bag over her shoulder and a folded blanket under her arm, even though it was May. All she said was: "Koševo, dialysis, the side entrance." She sat in the back and fastened her seat belt before I had pulled away.

Some folk song was playing on the radio, and I, out of habit, started talking about the traffic by the Holiday. At Marijin Dvor she interrupted me. "Could you turn off the radio? You go ahead and talk, just no music." I turned it off. I talked all the way to the hospital, and she looked out the window. At the side entrance she took an envelope out of her bag with the date written on it in pencil. In the envelope there were exactly eleven marks. The meter showed twelve forty. "It has always been eleven," she said. "Eleven is fair," I said, because at Skenderija, I admit, I had turned where I should not have.

The next Friday Rifka called me at ten past six. "The one from Dobrinja is asking for you," she said. "She says, the one who turns off the radio." I did not explain to her that it was not me who had turned off the radio, it was her. I was glad that somebody was asking for me in particular. In nineteen years of driving that had happened to me maybe three times, and each time it was someone whose forgotten wallet I had returned.

That was how my Fridays began. Her name was Munira. Until four years ago she had worked as a bookkeeper at a printing house in Stup, until her kidneys failed, first one and then the other. She went to dialysis three times a week. On Mondays and Wednesdays her brother-in-law drove her, but on Fridays he worked in Kiseljak. Somewhere between the Airport neighborhood and Čengić Vila, I told her my own story: divorced

for twelve years, a daughter in Graz, I live alone in Hrasno and on Sundays I cook beans for three days.

I quickly learned things I had not known existed. That people on dialysis may drink only a little liquid a day, a pint in her case, and that this includes soup and coffee and every ice cube. When I once offered her coffee at a gas station, she said: "I have half a cup left for today. I am saving it for the evening, with the news." I learned that I must not touch her left arm, because that was where they put the needles in for the machine, and that after four hours on the machine she was as cold as in January. From June on, on Fridays at a quarter past eleven, I turned on the heat and waited for her outside the hospital, sweating, with a second blanket on the passenger seat.

Between morning and noon I could have done six or seven fares. For the first few weeks I did them. Then I started staying in the parking lot below Koševo, reading the newspaper down to the last page and working on a crossword I had never known how to finish. Rifka noticed. "Džemal, what are you doing on Fridays from seven to noon?" I told her my clutch was giving me trouble and I could not drive around town. "For three months?" she asked. "It is a bad clutch," I said.

Munira talked about what she would do when she got a kidney. She was on the list, and her brother in Klagenfurt was going for tests, but she did not like to talk about that, as if everything would go wrong once it was said aloud. She talked about small things. That she would eat watermelon without a scale. That she would go to Vrelo Bosne and drink from the spring out of her palms, as much as she wanted, until her throat ached from the cold. "I will not count the sips," she said once near Skenderija. "Never again." I watched her in the rearview mirror, and that was the first time I thought I would like to be there when she drank.

In October, one Friday, Rifka did not call. I called her at six thirty. She said someone had phoned to cancel the ride, a woman's voice, but not hers. I drove to Dobrinja anyway and stood in front of the building until

seven. No one came out. The next Friday, the same. That was when I realized I did not have her number. I had driven her for five months, I knew how many sips she had left until evening, and I did not know her phone number, because she always called the dispatch, as if that too were part of the rules.

The third week I went to Koševo and climbed up to dialysis. The nurse who met Munira at the door on Fridays recognized me by the blanket, which, I do not know why, I had brought along. She said she could not tell me anything because I was not family. "I am the taxi," I said. She laughed, for the first time since I had seen her. "Then I can tell you only one thing. You do not have to come on Fridays anymore." I must have gone pale, because she added at once: "That is good news, sir. The best we have here."

Her brother from Klagenfurt had given her a kidney, I learned later, and the operation had been at Koševo, a few hundred yards from the parking lot where I used to read the newspaper. I was happy. And on Fridays I still woke up at six, turned on the heat at a quarter past eleven, and sat in the car in the parking lot in Hrasno, not knowing where to go. Rifka would not give me her number. "I can't, you know that yourself," she said. "If she needs you, she knows where you are."

Apparently she did not need me. November, December and January went by. In February I stopped getting up at six. Then one Friday in April, at ten past six, Rifka said over the radio, in a voice as if she were reading the news: "Dobrinja. That address. She is asking for the one who turns off the radio."

She came out without the blanket and without the thermos, in a light coat, with color in her face I had never seen there before. This time she sat in the front. "Where to?" I asked, even though I knew, and something tightened in me when she said: "Koševo." Then she laughed. "A checkup. Once a month. But not until nine. Until then you are driving me to Vrelo Bosne, if you have nothing better to do."

I had nothing better to do. I did not even turn on the meter. At Vrelo it was cold and empty, and the first horse carriages were only just coming down the avenue. Munira knelt by the spring, rolled up her sleeves and drank from her palms, for a long time, with pauses. I stood behind her with the blanket over my arm. I had not even noticed I had brought it until she said: "Leave that in the car, Džemal." "Habit," I said.

She stood up and wiped her hands on her coat. When we started back toward the car, she held out her left arm to me, the one where the hard mark of the needles could still be seen under the skin. "You may touch this one now," she said. I took it carefully, as if I still was not allowed to. When we sat down, the radio crackled. "Džemal," said Rifka, "are you free? I have Ilidža, two suitcases." I looked at Munira, who was looking out the window and smiling as if she were not listening. "No," I said.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

A Love Story from Grandfather's Apiary

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-love-story-from-grandfathers-apiary/

Delila Bešlija reads contracts for a living. At the notary's office in Travnik, in March, while the last snow melts down along Plava Voda, she reads her grandfather's will too, twice, the way she reads everything: a house below Vlašić, a meadow above the creek, twenty beehives and "the blue notebook, which is not to be sold with the house or without it." Grandpa Vejsil died at eighty-nine, on his meadow, with a smoker in his hand. The other grandchildren are in Germany and Sweden. At the funeral she was the only family there. The only one who cried was the neighbor.

The neighbor's name is Jakub Dedić, he is forty, he has a hundred hives on the slope above her meadow and hands cracked from propolis. When she comes out of the notary's office, he is waiting for her beside his pickup. "I hear you already called that man from Sarajevo," he says. Delila does not ask how he knows. In the village everyone knows everything. The developer is offering ninety thousand marks for the meadow, where he wants to build weekend cottages for skiers from Babanovac. "Vejsil did not want that," Jakub says. "Vejsil didn't sign anything," Delila says. "Vejsil signed with a handshake." "A handshake is not a legal instrument," she says. Jakub laughs without any joy. "That's why there are so many of you in Sarajevo."

The developer wants a signature in September. Until then Delila plans to sell the hives as well, because a living bee colony is worth money and a dead one is worth nothing. So someone has to look after them until fall. Jakub refuses before she finishes her sentence. "I don't work for a woman who is selling Vejsil's meadow. If you want your bees to see September, learn to keep them." That night, in her apartment in Grbavica, Delila orders online a beekeeper's hat with a veil, gloves and a book for beginners. She was the best of her year at law school. No insect is going to beat her.

In Sarajevo no one would recognize her in that hat. There Delila is a lawyer who reads loan agreements for a bank from eight to eight, who eats lunch at her desk, and who two years ago broke off her engagement because, as her former fiancé told her on his way out, she read his promises like an annex with penalty clauses. She last saw her grandfather at Bajram the year before, for an hour. He told her the bees had come through the winter well and that number seven was the angriest again. She did not ask him what number seven was.

The first time she comes is in April, on a Friday after work, two and a half hours' drive through Kiseljak and Vitez, then the switchbacks above Travnik. Jakub is waiting for her at her grandfather's fence, without a hat. He shows her how to light the smoker, with dry pine needles and a piece of old sack, how to lift the lid and how to take out a frame slowly, upright, "as if you were taking a book out of a library where someone has fallen asleep." On the first day a bee stings her on the eyelid. Delila says she will sue him. Jakub says she is the first lawyer he has ever seen cry over one bee, and that it will be gone by Sunday. It is gone by Monday.

They argue about everything. About her parking her car in the middle of the road, and about him leaving his pickup so that she cannot turn around. About her wearing gloves, when he says bees don't like people who are afraid. About him talking to the bees, which she says is not scientific. "Your contracts aren't scientific either," he says, "and people still sign them." The next Friday she brings him a printed article on how bees recognize faces. He brings her a little jar of propolis for her eyelid. Neither of them says thank you.

In the evenings, in her grandfather's house, where the stove is lit even in June, Delila reads the blue notebook. For forty years her grandfather wrote down in it every inspection, every rain and every jar of honey. The hives did not have numbers but names. The first was called Fata, after her grandmother. The fifth was called Sweden, after her uncle who had gone there and never come back. The seventh was called Delila. "Delila strong, angry, won't let you look inside. Just like her. Her honey is the

best," it said next to one May ten years earlier. Delila sits by the stove until long after midnight. In the morning, for the first time, she asks Jakub something that has nothing to do with the meadow: what her grandfather was like in his last year.

Jakub answers while they inspect Fata. In his last winter her grandfather could hardly see, so every evening Jakub read the notebook aloud to him and wrote down whatever he dictated. On Sundays her grandfather called Delila from the landline and hung up before she could answer, because he did not know what to say to her. "I had that number," Delila says. "I thought someone had dialed wrong." Jakub says nothing. That Saturday they do not argue once, which they both notice and neither of them mentions.

In June the hive called Delila swarms. Delila, the real one, is at a hearing in Sarajevo that Friday when Jakub sends her a photo: a dark cluster of bees hangs from her grandfather's pear tree, as big as a watermelon. "If you don't make it before dark, they will fly off." For the first time in her career she asks a judge for an adjournment, and she arrives at eight, in her suit and high heels. Jakub holds the box, she climbs the ladder and shakes the branch. Thousands of bees fall onto her arms and shoulders. Not one stings her. "They recognized you," Jakub says when they close the box. Delila says that is not scientific. Her hands keep trembling for another half hour. They sit on her grandfather's steps and eat bread with honey from Jakub's jar, and for the first time she asks him nothing.

In July he teaches her the plants. The linden is down in the valley around Travnik, the acacia was over in May, and in August heather blooms on her meadow, which is why her grandfather's honey is dark and bitter at the tip of the tongue. "That's why the developer wants it," Jakub says. "A nice view. But you can't eat a view." Delila tells him he talks like a bad poster. He says she talks like a good contract: everything accurate, and nothing warm. That time they argue until midnight, on the bench in front of the house, and neither of them gets up first.

At the end of July a bear comes to Jakub's slope. Delila does not see it, only hears it, at two in the morning, something heavy breaking the fence and Jakub shouting in the dark. She runs out in her pajamas, with a flashlight and her grandfather's pot, and bangs the pot with a ladle until her arms go numb. The bear goes off toward the woods with half the comb from one hive. Until dawn they repair the fence, in silence. When the sun comes up, Jakub tells her she was stupid and she was brave, and that he cannot decide which of the two she was more.

In August the contract arrives. Delila reads it in her office in Marijin Dvor, the way she reads everything, pen in hand. Article nine: the seller undertakes to remove all existing structures and beehives before the handover, and the buyer reserves the right to treat the land with chemicals for landscaping. Delila has read a thousand articles like that. Her boss says it is standard wording and that the price is good. This article Delila reads five times. Then she calls the developer and tells him the signing is moved back a week, because of the honey harvest.

They extract the honey in Jakub's shed, with an old extractor her grandfather bought back in the seventies. Jakub turns the crank, Delila holds the sieve, and the honey runs down her wrist all the way to her elbow. The honey from Delila is dark and thick and smells of something she remembers before she knows what it is: her grandfather's kitchen when she was seven, when he would stir a full spoon of honey into her wild thyme tea. Then Jakub hands her the blue notebook, open to the last page. "I didn't want to show you this before you decided."

The last entry is in her grandfather's handwriting, large and crooked, from February: "I offered Jakub the meadow and the hives. He won't take them. He says Delila needs the meadow, only she doesn't know it yet. He is as stubborn as she is. Let them argue, it's good for the honey." Delila reads it twice. Then she looks at Jakub, who is looking at the extractor as if he were seeing it for the first time. "You could have had all of this for nothing," she says. "I could have," he says. "But then you would have sold just the house, and you would never have come."

Delila walks out of the shed with sticky hands and calls the developer. She tells him she is not selling. He asks how much more she wants and says there are other meadows on Vlašić. There are, she says, but none of them is hers. The contract has an article nine, she tells him, and for her that is the end of the conversation. Then she hangs up and stands for a long time on the meadow, among the hives that have names, while bees land on her sticky fingers.

In September she arrives on a Friday with a trunk full of empty jars and a single printed sheet. An agreement on the use of the meadow: Jakub Dedić has the right to keep hives on the Bešlija meadow free of charge and for an indefinite period, with one obligation, that he teach Delila Bešlija everything he knows. Jakub reads it on the hood of his pickup. "This isn't a contract," he says. "This is a marriage proposal." "Don't interpret," she says. "Sign." He signs with the carpenter's pencil her grandfather used to count frames, and then, without asking, he writes one more article under his signature. Delila reads it twice, the way she reads everything, and does not cross it out.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

A Song Over the Low Wall

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-song-over-the-low-wall/

For forty years I have been playing other people's songs in Mostar. I wrote only one of my own, in the summer of 2008, when I was fifty-two and should have known better. At the Two Mills restaurant on the bank of the Neretva, where I played the saz and the guitar from May to October, the waiters called me Professor, because once, long ago, I had enrolled at the music academy in Sarajevo and never finished. My name is Rizah, but few people knew it.

I lived alone in a small stone house below Brankovac, with a courtyard where one grapevine grew and nothing else. The women in the neighborhood said I had married my saz, and they were not far from the truth. I had one love, in my twenties, who went to America and sent me only one postcard, with a bridge much bigger than ours and much uglier. Over the low wall was the house of Hafiz Šukrija, who had been imam of the small mosque down the street for thirty years, and was now retired and hard of hearing. That spring his daughter Emina had come back to him, twenty-four years old, with a nursing diploma from Sarajevo, and she had taken a job at the hospital.

Every evening around seven, when the stone in the courtyard begins to give back the heat of the day, Emina came out into the garden and watered the roses. Her father had a hose, but it did not reach the corner by the wall, where the oldest roses grew, the dark red ones her late mother had planted, so she carried water there in an old copper ibrik. She wore hospital clogs, her hair pinned up, earbuds in her ears, and she watered slowly, as if every rose were a patient. Sometimes she would stop, pick off a wilted petal, and put it in her pocket, as if she were not allowed to drop it on the ground. I sat on my doorstep with my coffee and tuned the saz. "Good evening, Uncle Rizah," she would say over the wall, always the same, kindly, the way you greet an older neighbor. Every time,

the word uncle stung me.

I did not intend to write a song. It wrote itself, the way a grapevine grows, a little each day. First came the melody, while I watched the water trickle from the spout of the ibrik. I wrote at night, on the backs of restaurant receipts, and crossed out half of it in the morning. Then the line came: "Water me too when you water the roses, for I am wilting across the wall." I laughed at myself, a man of fifty-two wilting across a wall. But I kept the line. By the end of July the song had three verses and a refrain, and I knew it was the best thing I had ever made and that it was for no one.

I played it at the restaurant. Tourists from Korea and Germany filmed the bridge over my shoulder and clapped when I finished, the way you clap for a waiter who has not dropped his tray. The head waiter told me, "It's nice, Professor, but play the old one, about Emina. That's what they ask for." I played the old one too. People sang it with me, and mine no one did.

In the evenings I played it on my doorstep, louder than necessary, so the sound would carry over the wall. Emina watered the roses. She did not turn around. Once she began to hum, and I stopped playing to hear what she was humming. It was some song from the radio, the one that came out of every car on the Boulevard that summer. At the end of July I copied the lyrics onto a clean sheet of paper, folded it, and left it on the wall, under a stone, in the spot where she set down the ibrik. The next day the paper was gone. I waited a whole week for her to say something. She said nothing. I thought the wind had carried it into the Neretva, or that the hafiz had thrown it out with the old newspapers.

Hafiz Šukrija, who was hard of hearing, heard it all the same. One evening he leaned on the wall, prayer beads in his hand, and asked, "That's a lovely song of yours, Rizah. What does it say?" I told him. He was silent for a long time, and then he laughed softly. "I wrote songs to her mother for four years. She never read a single one, or so she always

said. And she married me." Then he went into the house and turned off the light on the porch.

One evening in August I gathered my courage. I took the saz and went over to the wall while she was watering. "Emina, I wrote something. For your roses." She took one earbud out. "Sorry, Uncle?" I said it again. She smiled, politely and tiredly, because she had come back from a night shift that morning. "That's nice. Record it and send it to me." She put the earbud back in and poured the rest of the water from the ibrik under the dark red rose by the wall. I stood there with the saz in my hand like a man who has shown up at the wrong wedding.

I never recorded it. In September a young doctor from Vienna started coming to see her, a Mostar man who worked there, with a white car and Austrian plates. At the end of October there was a wedding in the courtyard. I played at it, because the hafiz asked me to, and I played everything except that song. Emina danced with her husband under the vine that reached over the wall from my side, and once she looked at me, briefly, over his shoulder. I thought she was looking at the vine. The next day she left with her husband for Vienna. When the car set off down the street, she waved through the window to the whole neighborhood, and to me as well.

Hafiz Šukrija died four years later. The house was bought by a man from Split who turned it into vacation apartments, and the roses were dug up to make room for parking. That year I stopped playing my song, both at the restaurant and on my doorstep. The restaurant closed during the pandemic and never reopened. These days I play only at small weddings, when someone remembers me, and my fingers do not obey me as they once did. I am sixty-nine and have a cane that I shyly hide behind the door.

Last June, one evening, I walked slowly down to the Old Bridge. Kujundžiluk was crowded, the copper shops were calling to tourists in five languages, and the smell of grilled meat spread down the

cobblestones. The divers were collecting money from the tourists, as always, and at the very top of the bridge, where the stone is polished smoothest, stood a girl of maybe fifteen, with a guitar too big for her and an open case for coins. Tourists walked past her and looked down into the Neretva. I stopped to catch my breath, and that was when I heard: "Water me too when you water the roses, for I am wilting across the wall."

It was my song, my melody, only slower, and in the second verse she had changed one word, so that it was better than mine. I had sung that the water was cold, and she sang that the water was warm, and she was right: the water from the ibrik was always warm from the sun. I stood there until she finished. Then I put a twenty-mark note in the case. "Uncle, that's too much," she said. That word again. I asked her where she had learned the song. "From my mom. She sings it every evening when she waters the flowers on the balcony." "And where do you live?" "In Vienna. In the summer we come to stay with my aunt." "And what is your mom's name?" "Emina."

She was tuning a string as she talked, without looking at me. "Mom says a neighbor wrote it when she was young. She says she pretended all summer not to hear it, because she was embarrassed, and he was much older. But she remembered every word." She looked up. "I think he's dead. Mom says he must have died a long time ago." "He probably has," I said. "Would he be angry that I sing it?" she asked. "No," I said. "You sing it better than he did."

I set off across the bridge, toward home. Behind me the girl began the song again, from the beginning, for the tourists or for no one. I did not turn around. I walked slowly, the way she used to water the roses, and I listened to it all the way to the end of the street.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Four Nights by the Miljacka

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/four-nights-by-the-miljacka/

For four years Halim had lived in the attic of an Austro-Hungarian building on the riverfront, in a room with a view of the Miljacka and, if he leaned out of the window, the roof of the City Hall. He translated from German: manuals for washing machines, lease agreements, pension decisions from Austria. He worked from morning until dusk, and then he went out for a walk. He knew every facade from Skenderija to Baščaršija, every balcony with geraniums. The city knew nothing about him. There were weeks when he spoke only to Zijah at the kiosk by Ćumurija and to the woman at the bakery, and both conversations would have fit on a single page.

That June the nights were warm and long, and the river was shallow and green, the way it always is at the start of summer. On Thursday, a little after ten, near the Šeherćehaja Bridge, he saw a young woman leaning on the railing. Her shoulders were shaking. He walked past her, stopped, then went on, angry with himself. A few steps further he heard a car slow down. A black Golf was rolling along beside her at walking pace, and the driver was leaning out of the window: "Want a ride, gorgeous? Don't cry, he's not worth it." She walked faster. The Golf sped up with her.

Halim was not a brave man, but he crossed the street before he had time to think about it. He stopped beside her and said loudly, as if annoyed, "There you are! I've been waiting for you by the City Hall for half an hour." The driver snorted a laugh and drove off toward Bistrik. The woman wiped her face with her sleeve. She was maybe twenty-three, with short hair and a faded denim jacket. She thanked him and said her name was Amna. They walked to the Latin Bridge and back, and Halim, to his own surprise, talked the whole time. He told her he had never walked with a woman at night. That was when she laughed for the first time. At the corner of her street she stopped. "Come tomorrow at nine, to the

same place. I'll tell you something. But don't fall in love with me. That you must not do." He promised. They exchanged numbers, just in case.

The second night he came half an hour early. She arrived at nine on the dot and immediately asked him to talk first. He said there was nothing to tell. He lived on other people's sentences, translated other people's lives at eight marks a page, and on his walks he invented the people behind the windows: in one lived a retired tram driver who counted the trams every evening, in another a woman who knitted socks for her grandchildren in Sweden. He had fallen in love a few times, but always with someone from a book he was translating, and always until the last page. Amna laughed out loud. "So you've never even lived," she said. "I haven't," he admitted. "That's why I talk for so long."

Then she told him her story. Her parents worked in Linz, and since the age of ten she had lived with her grandmother in Bistrik. Her grandmother saw poorly in one eye and did not trust the other, and she did not let Amna out of the house after dark. In the afternoons Amna read her the newspaper, and her grandmother kept a hand on her knee, to know she was there. When her grandmother dozed off, the hand stayed, and Amna would not move for an hour. Two years ago her grandmother had rented the upstairs room to a young doctor named Ahmed, who was doing his residency at Koševo. He was quiet, carried her grandmother's bags home from the market and brought Amna books. Once he bought three tickets to Hasanaginica at the National Theater. Her grandmother went with them and held Amna's hand through the whole play, while on the other side Ahmed's knee touched hers, and Amna did not hear a single word from the stage.

Last June Ahmed had gotten a job at a hospital in Freiburg. The evening before he left, Amna went up to his room with a packed bag and told him to take her with him. He sat her down on a chair, sat across from her, and was silent for a long time. He said he had nothing but a room in a dorm and a one-year contract. "I'll come back in a year," he said. "If you still want me then, I'll marry you." At first he wrote every week, then less

often, and in January he stopped. Four days ago, on a friend's Instagram, Amna had seen a photograph from a café terrace on Ferhadija. In the corner, laughing, sat Ahmed. He was in Sarajevo. He had not come by and had not been in touch. "That's why I was crying on the bridge last night," she said. "Now you know everything."

Halim said she should write to him. She shook her head: she would not write first, she was not the one who had made a promise. "Then I'll deliver the letter," said Halim, and surprised himself. "You write it, and I'll take it to him. That way you won't be writing first, you'll be sending an answer." Amna looked at him as if he had invented fire. She wrote the letter on a page from his notebook, leaning on the railing, and he looked at the water so as not to see the words. The next morning he took it to Grbavica, to Ahmed's parents. His mother opened the door with flour on her hands and took the letter the way you take one from the mailman.

On the third night Amna was as cheerful as a child before Bajram. She talked fast, held his arm, and looked at her phone every few minutes. "You're so kind," she told him twice. "If only he were a little like you." Halim said nothing. He had known since the night before that he had broken his promise, and she did not see it, because she was looking past him, toward the Latin Bridge. Ten o'clock passed, then eleven. Ahmed did not come. Amna went quiet, and then she said, "Maybe the letter didn't get there." Halim did not say that he had put it in his mother's hands. At midnight she left without saying whether she would come the next day.

On the fourth day it rained from morning on. Halim went out anyway and stood under the awning of a closed café by the bridge. She came at ten, soaking wet, with no umbrella. Ahmed had neither shown up nor been in touch. Amna had called his family's house in Grbavica, and his mother told her she had left the letter on his desk the same day. Amna cried and said she hated him, then that she loved him, then that she no longer knew anything. Halim gave her his jacket. Then, because he no longer had anything to lose, he said, "Amna, I love you. Since the first night. I know you forbade me."

She looked at him for a long time. Rain dripped from the awning between them. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she finally asked, quietly. "You were busy," he said. She laughed through her tears. Then she said something he had not expected: that maybe she could love him, if he gave her time, because Ahmed had left and he was here, and because in four nights he had learned more about her than Ahmed had in two years. "May I stop being so formal with you?" she asked. She could.

The rain stopped. They set off upstream and talked like children planning their summer. She would bring her grandmother, and her grandmother would get the room with the window facing the river. He would translate in the kitchen. Her grandmother would hold his hand too while they read her the newspaper, and when she dozed off, he would not be allowed to move either. Halim laughed louder than he had in all his four years in Sarajevo. In the window of a closed shop he saw two people under one jacket, and it took him a moment to realize that one of them was him.

On the Latin Bridge stood a man in a light-colored jacket, with a travel bag at his feet, looking toward Bistrik. Amna stopped. Her hand slid off Halim's arm. "Ahmed," she said, very quietly, and then loudly. The man turned around. She ran. He dropped his bag on the wet stone and met her with open arms.

Then, in the middle of the embrace, she tore herself away and ran back. She threw her arms around Halim's neck, kissed him, quickly and clumsily, said "Forgive me," and went back to the bridge. They walked off toward Bistrik under Ahmed's jacket. Halim's stayed on her shoulders. He stood on the riverbank until the bridge was empty, and then a little longer.

In the morning a message came. It was long, full of typos. Ahmed's phone had been stolen in Munich, and he had not wanted to show up in Bistrik empty-handed, before he got the lease for an apartment in Freiburg, with a room for her grandmother. He had read the letter only last night, when he came back from his brother's in Mostar. "I'll return your jacket," Amna

wrote. "And come to the wedding. Nana already loves you, and she's never even seen you." Halim read the message several times. He wrote, "Be happy, Amna." Then he deleted the name, typed it again, and sent it.

That evening he went out for a walk again. The river was muddy from the rain. At Ćumurija, Zijah was closing up the kiosk, and when he saw Halim, for the first time in four years he said something to him other than a price. "What's up, neighbor? She's not with you tonight?" Halim stopped. "No," he said, and bought a newspaper he did not need, just to stay a little longer.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

What the Wind Said

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/what-the-wind-said/

My daughter Mia thinks I learned to sled as a child, on the hill behind my grandmother's house in Pale. I do not correct her. I learned to sled at twenty, on Jahorina, the winter the gas ran out in the middle of January and half of Sarajevo kept warm with space heaters, and the man who taught me is not the man I married. I was not even with him, if by that you mean what people usually mean. There were only a few rides down one hill and two words, and to this day I do not know who said them.

My uncle had a small wooden weekend house below the ski run, with a wood stove and three beds upstairs. My cousin Vesna came up from Sarajevo with two friends from university. One of them was Srđan, a fourth-year architecture student, tall and quiet, in a cap his mother had knitted. He said little and looked at people as if he were measuring their rooms. I was studying English in Pale then, and I was afraid of everything that slides: skis, ice, the stairs in the student dorm.

Behind the house a long hill ran all the way down to the forest road, and the children from the nearby houses sledded on it from morning till dark. My uncle's old wooden sled with red runners hung in the woodshed. On the third day Srđan took it off its nail, shook off the cobwebs, and said, "Let's go." I said I was scared. "That's exactly why," he said. I sat in front, he sat behind me, and his hands held the rope next to mine.

The first few yards were bearable. Then the hill tipped, the sled jumped, and the world turned into white noise. The wind hit me in the face, snow got into my eyes and down my collar, and the pines on both sides ran together into one dark strip. I was screaming, I think. And right there, on the steepest part, where I was sure we would end up among the trees, from behind me or from the wind itself, came the words: "I love you, Isidora."

The sled stopped in a drift at the bottom. I sat there out of breath, and Srđan stood up, shook the snow off his cap, and looked toward the hotels as if checking whether it would snow. "Still alive?" he asked. I looked at his face. There was nothing in it, no smile and no shyness, only red cheeks and snow in his eyebrows. In the pines above us the wind was still roaring, and I had known since childhood that this wind could make whatever it liked out of any sound: your name, a dog barking, your mother's voice from the kitchen. "Shall we go again?" he asked. "Let's," I said, though I was shaking.

It took us twenty minutes to drag the sled back to the top. Srđan talked about whether the bus to Pale would run with chains, about a hotel that had lost power, and about the new apartments by the road, which in his opinion were badly built. About the other thing, nothing. The second time, in the same spot, I heard the same words. The third time as well. By the fifth ride I was no longer afraid of the hill. I was afraid it would stop.

In those days I became someone I did not know. I would wake up and look out the window first to see if there was wind. At breakfast I asked Srđan, as if in passing, whether we were going sledding, and Vesna gave me an odd look, because she remembered how I had once cried at the ice rink in Skenderija. In the evenings we played rummy with my uncle, Vesna fried uštipci, and Srđan beat everyone in turn and wrote the scores in a notebook in tiny letters. Later I lay upstairs listening to the wind in the chimney, and every gust sounded as if it were about to say something.

One morning, while everyone was asleep, I took the sled out alone. I climbed up, sat down, and pushed off. The slope, the noise, the snow, and the pines were all the same. On the steepest part I held my breath and listened. Nothing. Only the wind, and the wind said nothing. At the bottom I sat in the snow for a long time, until a boy from the house next door asked if I had hurt myself. I said I had not. I put the sled back in the woodshed and told no one.

That afternoon I went down again with Srđan, and in the same spot I heard it once more: "I love you, Isidora." At the bottom I grabbed his sleeve. "Srđan, did you..." "What?" He looked at me with that measuring look of his. Behind him the wind was lifting snow off the drifts and carrying it toward the forest. "Nothing," I said. "I'm cold." "Then let's go have tea," he said, and took the rope out of my hand.

On the last evening the others were watching the news about the gas, and my uncle commented on it louder than the anchorman. I went out onto the terrace. The wind was coming down from the summit and carrying a fine snow that stung my face. I stood leaning on the railing and looked at the lights on the slope. Then, out of the dark, from the side of the woodshed or from the wind itself, came the words: "I love you, Isidora." There was no sled, no hill, no speed in which a voice could hide. I did not turn around. I smiled, at God knows whom. When I went inside, Srđan was sitting at the table shuffling cards. His hands were red from the cold, but in that house everyone's hands were red.

The next day he left. He had landed a job at a design firm in Ljubljana and had to be there by Monday. My uncle drove him to the bus station in Lukavica. Beside the car he held out his hand to me. "Take care of the sled," he said. All that winter and part of the spring I waited for a message on my old Nokia. Only one came, from Vesna: Srđan says hello to everyone.

I finished university, and today I teach English at an elementary school in Pale. I married Boško, a calm electrician who fixes everything in the house and never asks what I am thinking when I look out the window. We have two children. Once, a few years ago, I found Srđan on Facebook: Ljubljana, a wife, a big gray dog, photographs of buildings. I wrote to him, "Was it you who said it, back then on Jahorina?" I looked at the message until the screen went dark, and then I deleted it letter by letter. I did not feel I was betraying anyone. There was nothing to betray. There was only a question that, after so many years, you do not ask anyone.

Last January we went up to Jahorina with the children. The hotels are new, the road is wider, and my uncle's weekend house was bought long ago by some people from Belgrade. But the hill behind it is still there, and children still sled down it. Mia wanted me to ride down with her. Boško stayed at the top with our son and the thermos. I sat behind her, the way Srđan once sat behind me, and held the rope next to her small gloved hands.

The hill tipped, the sled jumped, and the world turned into white noise. On the steepest part I leaned down toward her cap. At the bottom Mia turned around, covered in snow, her eyes wide. "Mom, did you say something?" Above us the wind was roaring in the pines, as it always had. "No," I said. "That was the wind." She gave me a suspicious look, then grabbed the rope. "Shall we go again?" "Let's."

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

Extra Fare to Mostar

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/extra-fare-to-mostar/

For twenty-two years I have been punching tickets on the line from Sarajevo to Mostar, and in that time I have seen more love stories than all the women in my building have seen in all their TV series put together. Most of them begin in summer, when tourists with backpacks board the train in Sarajevo and photograph everything except the station, and they end on the platform in Mostar with a kiss and an exchange of numbers that nobody ever calls. This one of mine began in October, in the second car, over a single seat, and nobody in it had a backpack.

He got on in Sarajevo and got off in Jablanica. He worked at the power plant, in maintenance, carried a thermos that remembered the old country, and every morning did the crossword from the newspaper, in pencil, without an eraser. His name was Mirzet; I learned that from his monthly pass. She got on in Sarajevo and rode to the end, to Mostar, where she was restoring stone facades on Kujundžiluk with some company. She had a wool cap, hands cracked from lime, and always mandarins in her bag. Her name was Zana. That too from her monthly pass. My job has its advantages.

They both wanted the same place: the window seat on the river side, in the second car, first row behind the door. The first week, whoever came first got it. Mirzet started arriving twenty minutes before departure. Zana started arriving half an hour before. Then he brought coffee from the machine at the station and left it on the seat like a towel on a beach, and she carefully moved the coffee to the little table and sat down. They both asked me to decide. I said the ticket came without a reservation, ladies and gentlemen, and went off to the third car so they would not see my face.

They made peace on their own, somewhere around Tarčin, on the second Monday. I heard only the end. He sits by the window as far as Jablanica,

she from Jablanica on. Pero, the engineer, when I told him about it over coffee in Mostar, said the man was a fool, because he had just handed the woman the whole canyon. From Jablanica to Mostar is the most beautiful part of the line: Grabovica, Drežnica, one tunnel after another, and the Neretva far below, green as if someone had painted it. Mirzet had never seen it from the train. What he got of the line was Bradina, the tunnel and the lake near Konjic, which is not nothing, but it is not the canyon either. Pero said fool. I said that in my line of work that is often the same thing as being in love.

In the afternoon everything repeated in reverse. Zana would get on in Mostar and sit in his seat, and he would get on in Jablanica, tired, with a hard hat clipped to his bag, and sit across from her. And she would tell him the canyon. Not like a tour guide, but like someone bringing news from a village he had never been to. "Today by Grabovica the water was the color of a mineral water bottle." "Today at Drežnica the fog stood halfway up the hill, and above it the sun, as if someone were holding a lid on it." "Today I saw a trout. I'm lying, I didn't, but the water was so clear I could have." He would listen and nod. He never said he would come and see. I walked by with my punch and slowed down.

In January snow fell on Ivan Sedlo, and the train stopped in front of the tunnel for an hour and ten minutes. People called home, grumbled and ate sandwiches. Mirzet opened his thermos, Zana peeled mandarins, and they gave me a cup too, because I was standing beside them as if I were checking tickets I had already checked. They talked about everything: about stone that must never be cleaned with sand under pressure, about turbines that sound different when the water is high, about how to make a good burek and who in Sarajevo lies about making one. Only about themselves they did not talk. Three months, and neither of them had asked for the other's phone number. Pero and I placed a bet on how long it would take. I said by my birthday in March. Pero said never.

In May Zana stopped coming. The first day Mirzet sat in his seat as far as Jablanica and stared at the crossword without filling in a single letter.

The third day he asked Pero on the platform whether something had happened on the line. The seventh day he sat across the aisle, as if the window seat were no longer his. The eighth day he asked me. He asked the way men ask about a woman, as if he were interested in the timetable: whether there had perhaps been some change among the passengers for Mostar.

I had carried the envelope in the pocket of my uniform for eight days. Zana had given it to me on her last morning, on the platform in Mostar, and said: for the man with the crossword, if he asks. If he doesn't ask, throw it away. When I asked her why she did not give it to him herself, she said she had waited seven months for him to ask for her number, and now she was not going to ask him. Because of a deadline, her company had rented rooms in Mostar for its workers for the last month, and she no longer commuted. I did not throw the envelope away, but I did not hand it over either. I waited for him to ask. In my job I have learned that a man who does not ask does not need a letter either. I gave it to him near Konjic.

He opened it right away, without hiding it from me, which was wise, because I would have seen anyway. Inside were one sentence and a phone number. I know the sentence by heart, because, I confess, I read it before he did, over coffee in Mostar, eight days earlier: You have never seen Drežnica. Mirzet looked at the paper for a long time. Then he took out his phone and made a call, but not to her. He called his boss at the power plant and said he would not be coming in today, that he had a fever. He did not have a fever. He had a ticket to Jablanica.

When we passed Jablanica, he came up to me with his wallet in his hand and asked for the extra fare to Mostar. I wrote out his ticket slowly, in better handwriting than usual, and said to him: finally. He did not ask what I meant by finally. He sat in Zana's seat, by the window, and for the first time saw what she had been telling him about for seven months. I watched him from the door of the car. By Grabovica the water was green. At Drežnica there was no fog. Mirzet was looking out the window, but I

could tell from his face that he was not looking at the canyon, he was checking it, like a man reading a letter that someone has already read aloud to him once.

What happened in Mostar, I do not know. I stay on the train; that is the rule of my trade. I only know that two people boarded the afternoon train from Mostar and quarreled over the same window seat, with the difference that each of them was trying to make the other sit in it. Nobody won the bet, neither Pero nor I, and we were both glad.

Now they travel on Saturdays, and not for work. They sit in the second car, first row behind the door, and every time they start over: who gets the window. When I reach them, they hand me their tickets and both look at me, as if I were finally going to decide. "The ticket comes without a reservation, ladies and gentlemen," I say, and punch them both. Then I go off to the third car so they will not see my face.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

The Longest Message

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-longest-message/

I was nineteen when I wrote the longest message of my life. I wrote it from eleven at night until four in the morning, on my phone, in the upstairs room of our house in Kreševo, while the crickets chirped in the plum orchard outside and my sister Nina, a year younger, slept in the bed by the wall with the smile of a girl for whom everything is easy. For Nina everything really was easy. I practiced on the old upright piano in the living room and dreamed that one day I would stand in front of an orchestra without my hands shaking. I never told anyone that.

That summer Nina was going out with Lovro, a kind, starry-eyed boy from the lower part of town who studied in Sarajevo and wrote lyrics for a band nobody had heard of. One Saturday in July Lovro brought a friend from university to dinner. Arman was twenty-seven, from Sarajevo; he had lived in London for two years and had come to Kreševo to sell the house his uncle had left him, above the town, toward the woods. He talked about everything as if he had already seen it twice and been bored both times. At the table he was the only one who noticed that the music on the piano was Brahms and not a songbook, and he asked who played it. I said I did. He asked why. Until then no one had ever asked me that.

For three days I watched him sit in our garden, turn down brandy and drink water with lemon, and laugh at Lovro's lyrics so that Lovro would not notice. On the fourth night I wrote. I addressed him formally, because he was older and because it seemed to me that this was how women wrote in books. I wrote that I knew I should not, that tomorrow I would be ashamed and that I did not care. I wrote that I had been waiting for him before I knew he existed. I wrote that I asked for nothing, except that he tell me, just once, that he had read it. I deleted it and started over. At twelve minutes past four I pressed send, turned off the phone, and lay listening as the roosters in the village above us, one after another, began

the day.

The message was marked as seen at twenty past four. There was no answer that day or the next. On the third day, in the afternoon, Arman came alone. He found me in the orchard behind the house, where I was gathering fallen plums into a basin, because I did not know what else to do with my hands. He stopped two steps away from me, in a white shirt, his hands in his pockets.

"I read it," he said. "Twice. It is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever written to me, and that is why I owe you an honest answer." He spoke calmly and kindly, like a doctor giving a diagnosis to a patient he will never see again. He said he was not a man for a message like that. That in a month I would be dear to him, and in a year boring, and that then he would hurt me, because he always did. That I would love many more times, and better. And that I should learn to be more careful, because someone else in his place would not be this polite. I said nothing. I looked at the plum in my hand, which was overripe and split between my fingers.

My birthday was on the twenty-eighth of August. Mom set up tables in the yard, Dad roasted a lamb, half the street came. Lovro brought Arman, though Arman had not wanted to come, and it showed. Maybe that was why he danced with Nina the whole evening. He whispered something in her ear, she laughed louder than usual, and Lovro stood by the grill turning a piece of meat that had been done long ago. Around midnight Lovro asked Arman to step out to the gate with him. They did not come to blows. It was worse than that: Lovro said something quietly, Arman answered something even more quietly and laughed, and Lovro turned and walked off down the street without his jacket, and he did not come back.

In September Lovro went to his brother's in Canada and never called Arman again. Nina cried until November, and in the spring she got engaged to a policeman from Kiseljak who had nice teeth and no lyrics at all. Arman sold his uncle's house through an agency and did not even

come for the signing. Before it was handed over to the new owners, I went up there one afternoon. A neighbor gave me the key from under a flowerpot. In the empty room were the books he had not wanted to take. I leafed through them, and in one, a collection of essays by some English writer, I found underlined the sentences he had spoken to me in the orchard, almost word for word. I sat down on the floor and laughed until I cried. He had turned me down with a quotation.

Twelve years later I stood in front of an orchestra in Vienna, and my hands did not shake. I had graduated in conducting in Sarajevo, won a scholarship to Vienna, and spent five years as assistant to an old maestro who shouted at everyone except me. I had married Konrad, a viola player in the same orchestra, twenty years older than I was, a calm man who every morning set a cup of tea beside my score and never asked for more than I could give him. My name was on the posters at the tram stops: Dora Matić, Brahms, Second Symphony, end of season gala.

I saw him at the reception after the concert, in the foyer, holding a glass he was not drinking. He was thirty-nine, gray at the temples, in the same dark suit as every other man in that hall. He worked, I learned later, for some consulting firm in the First District, and a client had brought him to the concert. He looked at me as if he were trying to remember where he had seen me, and then he remembered, and I watched his face change. It was I who went over to him. I offered him my hand, asked about his health and about London, and introduced him to Konrad. I was gracious. It was the hardest thing I conducted that evening.

After that he began to come. To rehearsals, in the back row of the empty hall, where he thought I could not see him. To receptions he had not been invited to. He sent short, polite messages, and I answered briefly and politely. And then one night in November, at four something, the phone on my nightstand lit up. Konrad was asleep. The message was long. He addressed me formally. He wrote that he knew he should not, that tomorrow he would be ashamed and that he did not care. He wrote that he had been waiting for me for twelve years without knowing he was

waiting. He wrote that he asked for nothing, except that I tell him, just once, that I had read it.

I did not answer. I read it on the tram, in the rehearsal break, in the kitchen while the water was boiling. On the third day, in the afternoon, while Konrad was teaching a class, someone rang the bell of our apartment in the Fourth District. I opened the door with the phone in my hand, because I had just been reading it again, and I had not had time to wipe my eyes. Arman stood on the threshold without a coat, although an icy rain was falling outside. He saw the phone. He saw my eyes. He thought, I know, that he had won.

I let him into the hall, no farther. "I read it," I said. "Twice. More than twice. It is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever written to me, and that is why I owe you an honest answer." I saw that he recognized the sentence. I told him I did not hold the orchard against him. He had been honest with a nineteen-year-old girl who knew nothing, and that girl had survived it and made of it a woman who knows how to stand before eighty musicians. But back then I was nobody, a daughter from a house in Kreševo, and he did not want me. Now I am a name on a poster, and I do not know whether it is me he wants now, or the poster.

Then I also told him what I had not wanted to say, because I do not know how to lie, and I would have had to lie if I kept it back. The girl from the orchard had not gone anywhere. She was still here and still listened when he spoke. But I have a husband who sets a cup of tea beside my score every morning and who has never asked me to love him more than I can. I am staying with him. Not because I must, but because I chose it, with my own hand, the way I once pressed send with my own hand. "And please do not come to rehearsals anymore," I said. "The back row is easy to see from the podium."

Just then a key turned in the lock. Konrad always came home ten minutes earlier than he had said. He came in wet, with a bag of mandarins, and stopped when he saw a stranger in the hall. "Konrad," I

said, "this is an old acquaintance from Kreševo. He was just leaving." Arman gave Konrad a slight bow, looked at me once more and went out into the rain without a coat, and I listened to his footsteps going down the stairs until they faded away.

Konrad set the mandarins on the table and asked if everything was all right. I said it was. I turned the phone face down onto the score we were to rehearse the next day and went into the kitchen to put the water on for tea, because that evening it was my turn.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Love Stories on Side B

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/love-stories-on-side-b/

My grandmother kept the record in a pillowcase, between two starched sheets, at the bottom of a wardrobe that smelled of soap and quinces. I found it in April, when my mother and I were clearing out her apartment in Slatina, a month after the funeral. It was heavy as a plate and black as coal, with a fine crack running from the edge toward the center. On one side there was a printed label: Kad ja pođoh na Bembašu, sung by Hivzo Turbić, accompanied by accordion and violin. On the other side the label was blank. Someone had only written on it in pencil, in small slanting letters: For H., Tuzla, 1957.

My mother turned the record over in her hands as if it were hot. My grandmother had never owned a record player. She did not sing at weddings, or at evening gatherings, or in the kitchen, and whenever someone on television started singing a sevdalinka, she would get up and go put the water on for coffee. "Maybe it's from someone at the factory," my mother said, because my grandmother had worked at the salt factory for thirty years, and everything my mother could not explain came from there. I work as a sound technician at a small Tuzla radio station, and when I put the record in my bag, my mother said nothing. She only watched me wrap it in a scarf.

For a seventy-eight rpm record I needed a record player of the kind nobody has anymore. I found one at Uncle Avdija's, who sells old radio sets at the flea market on Saturdays and lets nobody touch them. He let me, once he saw the label. He said Hivzo Turbić had sung in the fifties at a café near Freedom Square, and that he had a voice that made the waiters forget to collect the bill. Then he disappeared, Uncle Avdija said, the way singers disappeared in those days: he got married and fell silent. He lent me the player for a week, on condition that I bring him a recording.

I recorded at night, after the last show, when only I and the automated system that plays music until morning are left in the studio. Side A was scratched but whole. The cleaning software stripped off the crackle layer by layer, like old paint coming off a wall, and underneath it a voice appeared. It was a young man's voice, high, a little husky on the long notes, and he sang Bembaša as if someone had just told him something funny and he was trying to keep a straight face. I played it five times. Then I turned the record over.

I had never heard the song on side B. It was not in any collection, on any recording, or in the songbook my mother had kept since music school. It began with a violin, alone, as if someone were quietly opening a door, and then the same voice came in, only without the laughter: Habiba, salt on your lips, whoever loves you, loves you bitterly. My grandmother's name was Habiba. The song had three verses. In the middle of the third, exactly where the crack cut across the groove, the needle skipped. A second and a half of silence, then the final chord. I tried everything I know. The groove was simply not there anymore. Whatever had been in that second and a half had gone with the crack.

The internet knew little about Hivzo Turbić: three records between fifty-five and fifty-eight, titles without years, and one photograph as blurred as if seen through steam. And one comment, four years old, under a recording of Bembaša by some other singer: My grandfather Hivzo Turbić sang this too. If anyone has a recording of him, please get in touch. We don't have a single one at home. Selim. I wrote to him at two in the morning. He answered within four minutes, as if he had been sitting by the phone for four years. He was a piano tuner in Sarajevo. On Saturday he arrived on the first bus.

He was tall and thin, with a canvas bag over his shoulder and hands that did not know what to do with themselves until they touched something that made a sound. From the bag he took a wooden box with his own headphones. He said he did not trust other people's headphones, just as he would not trust another man's hammer. In the studio I played him

Bembaša. He listened with his eyes closed, and when the song ended, he did not open them right away. "That's how he sang when he was old, too," he said. "Only quieter. And only in the bathroom." In fifty-eight, he told me, his grandfather had moved to Sarajevo, married, and worked for thirty years as a bookkeeper at a tobacco factory. He never talked about the records. When his grandchildren asked whether it was true that he used to sing, he would say that had been some other man.

Then I played side B. Selim did not move until the second line. On the second line he began to hum, ahead of the voice on the record, half a beat early, like a man who knows the way by heart. He took off the headphones and looked at me. That tune, he said, his grandfather hummed every morning while he shaved, without words, always up to the same place and then from the beginning again. When they asked him what it was, he would say: a song I gave away. Nobody knew to whom. I asked what his grandmother's name had been. "Mersa," he said. "And yours?" I showed him the label and that penciled H. For a long time we were silent, each with our own grandmother.

We knew nothing. We knew only that in fifty-seven my grandmother was twenty and worked at the salt factory, that in fifty-eight she married my grandfather, a miner from Kreka, and that she never owned a record player. We knew that Hivzo left for Sarajevo that same year and fell silent. What remained was the song, and without its ending. Selim asked if he could hear the place with the crack. I played it for him five times, ten times. Each time he hummed across the gap, because he knew the tune, his grandfather had repeated it for him every morning, but he did not have the words. That was when I thought of my mother.

I called her at noon and told her to listen. Selim, a little embarrassed, hummed the last line into my phone without words, the way he had heard it over the bathroom sink. On the other end there was a silence so long that I thought the call had dropped. Then my mother, who does not sing even at birthdays, began to sing softly and hoarsely, as if afraid of waking someone: sing, my love, when I am gone. My grandmother, she said

afterward, sang that to her every night until she fell asleep. Only that one line, always the same, to a tune my mother had never heard anywhere else. She had thought it was some old song from my grandmother's village.

My mother promised to come to the studio at seven. Until then Selim and I walked around the city. We had ćevapi for lunch near Freedom Square and then went to the salt lakes, empty in October, with the showers turned off and the kiosks locked. Selim dipped his hand in the water and licked a finger, seriously, as if he were tuning a piano. He said the water was salty and that now he knew where his grandfather got his first line. I laughed, and he looked at me as if he had heard a note he had been searching for a long time. He asked me why I hum when I think nobody can hear me. I had not known that I hummed.

At seven my mother came, in her best coat, as if for a doctor's appointment. She stood in front of the microphone and said she could not sing. Then, when I gave her the signal, she sang that line three times, each time a little louder. Selim stood behind the glass with his hands in his pockets. When my mother came out, she looked him over from head to toe and told me, loudly enough for him to hear, that my grandmother had never trusted a man with ugly hands.

I set my mother's voice into that second and a half of silence. It took me two hours to bring it down to the same pitch, to give it the same crackle, and to make sure the seam could not be heard. Then the three of us sat down and I played the song from the beginning. The violin, the door, the voice of a young man who is not laughing. Habiba, salt on your lips. Three verses. In the middle of the third the voice for a moment became older and lower, a woman's, a little unsure, and sang what someone had given away in fifty-seven and someone else had kept for almost seventy years in a single line. My mother looked at the floor. Selim looked at me. Nobody said anything until the end began to crackle.

The last bus to Sarajevo left at nine. I drove Selim to the station and gave him a USB stick with the song, and he gave me his business card, as if I did not have it. He said that in Sarajevo he had his grandfather's piano, out of tune for twenty years now, and that he had been saving it for some special occasion. The bus pulled out. Somewhere near Živinice a message arrived with three words: whoever loves you. I knew how the line went on. I wrote back that this time it did not have to be bitter.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Dandelions with a Boiled Egg

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/dandelions-with-a-boiled-egg/

The menu of the Behar eatery in Bistrik was typed every morning by a woman who had never once walked into the Behar as a guest. Fehim Čaušević, the owner, said it was the smartest deal he had made since he inherited his father's cooking pots and his debt to the suppliers. By eleven o'clock Sumeja Kadrić would type and print the day's offerings for him, in Bosnian and in English, for the tourists who came down from Baščaršija and asked what klepe were. In return he sent her food twice a day in a sefertas, an old one, with four pots. The sefertas was carried by Fehim's grandson Ajdin, a mechanical engineering student, up the steep stairs of a house in Sagrdžije, where Sumeja had been renting an attic room since March.

She earned the rest of her living by typing other people's words. For a translation agency she transcribed recordings of court hearings, for students she typed theses, for pensioners petitions to the municipality. They paid her when they remembered. Her laptop was eight years old, and the printer swallowed every third sheet, so she had learned to pull the paper out of it with two fingers, slowly, like a bone out of a fish. She spent her days at a window that looked out on rooftops and on a piece of Trebević, with headphones over her ears and other people's lawsuits in her head.

Last summer she had not been here. Her grandmother had died in April, and Sumeja spent the whole summer in Nišići, on the plateau above Srednje, emptying her grandmother's house and answering the neighbor women who asked why she still was not married. Asim Mehić was the son of the next-door neighbors. She remembered him as a boy who threw pine cones at her, and she found a man of thirty, with shoulders as wide as a barn door, with forty sheep, with bees and with a habit of keeping quiet until he thought of something worth saying.

In June, when the dandelions are just opening on the plateau, because up there spring runs a month behind Sarajevo, Asim took her to the meadow above the village. They sat down in the grass, and without looking at her he wove a wreath of dandelions and set it on her head. He said the dandelion was the first green to come out of the ground after winter, and that every spring his mother picked it for a salad with a boiled egg, to wake up the blood. Then, in the same voice, he said he would marry her when the snow melted and the ewes had lambed, if she was willing to wait. Sumeja said she was. She dried the wreath between the pages of a book and brought it to Sarajevo.

All autumn and winter he called her every evening at nine, from an old phone he kept in a plastic bag in the barn so the damp would not harm it. The calls were short. Asim reported how much snow had fallen, which ewe had fallen ill and that he had been thinking of her, in that order. In December he even sent her a real letter, four pages long. And then in March, in a single week, everything shifted. Her landlady in Hrasno raised the rent, and Sumeja moved to Sagrdžije. Two days later, in the crush of a tram at Marijin Dvor, someone pulled the phone out of her jacket pocket. Asim's number was in it, the only copy. She did not know it by heart. She could not find him online, because Asim had neither a profile nor any intention of ever opening one.

She wrote him a letter at the only address she had: Nišići, the Mehić house, for Asim. She wrote her new number at the end in large digits and underlined it twice. One week passed, then another. The phone stayed silent. Sumeja transcribed court records and in every stranger's quarrel looked for an explanation of her own silence. Maybe Asim had read it and decided he had more peace with his sheep. She made up her mind to get on the bus on Saturday and ask him herself, to his face. Until Saturday there were three days left and one menu.

Fehim called on Tuesday morning, in the mood of a man who has made a good purchase. "As of today it is spring," he said. "Strike the beans and the cabbage. Write: zeljanica, sirnica, nettle soup, wild garlic with

potatoes and dandelion salad with a boiled egg. This morning a man brought me a whole sack of dandelions, he says he picked them at dawn above the city, the dew is still on them." Sumeja said the menu would be ready in half an hour, opened a blank document and started typing.

She typed the way she always did, fast and without looking at the keyboard. Zeljanica. Sirnica. Nettle soup. Wild garlic with potatoes. When she reached the dandelions, her fingers stopped above the keys. She saw the meadow above Nišići, the grass that smelled of honey, and Asim's big hands braiding stem into stem, clumsily and patiently. Her eyes clouded over. No longer seeing the screen, she typed the line to the end, printed five copies and went back to the court record before she had a chance to read what she had written. A tear fell on the first sheet just as it was coming out of the printer and spread across the middle line into a small gray stain. When Ajdin came for the menus at eleven, Sumeja was knee-deep in someone else's lawsuit and did not look up.

At noon the man from the mountain was sitting in the Behar, at the table by the window, because Fehim, pleased with the dandelions, had invited him to lunch. He was big, in a work jacket, with a folded sack under his arm and the face of someone who had not slept well for a long time. It was his eleventh day in Sarajevo. He slept at a cousin's place in Rajlovac, picked dandelions at dawn in the meadows above the city, in the morning sold the cheese he had brought from home at the Markale market, and in the afternoon went around Hrasno, building by building, asking about a girl who typed on a laptop. The neighbors only knew that she had moved somewhere in the Old Town. The Old Town, a pensioner on a bench told him, has more gates than you have sheep.

While he waited for his zeljanica, he slid the menu out of its plastic sleeve and began to read, slowly, the way people read who do not read often. Zeljanica. Sirnica. Nettle soup. Wild garlic with potatoes. And then, under the gray stain, a line that read: Dearest Asim, with a boiled egg. He read it three times. Then he got up, went over to the register and showed the sheet to Fehim. Fehim turned red to the ears. "I am sorry, this is a

mistake. My typist never makes mistakes, I don't know what is wrong with her today." "She did not make one today either," said Asim. "Where does she live?"

At half past six someone knocked on the attic door. Sumeja thought it was Ajdin with dinner, so she opened it in her socks, with a pencil behind her ear. Asim was standing at the door, holding the sefertas. Behind him, two steps lower, Ajdin was pretending to look out of the window on the landing. "This is for you," Asim said, and held out the pot. "The kid says there are klepe inside." Sumeja did not take the sefertas. She stood on the threshold and looked at him as if he too were one of those recordings that have to be transcribed exactly, word by word, so that nothing gets lost.

"I called you," he said. "Every evening at nine. A woman's voice tells me the number does not exist. I wrote to Hrasno twice, and both letters came back. Nobody in the village knew where you were. Eleven days ago I left the sheep with my brother and came." "My phone was stolen," she said. "I wrote to you in the village." "Then the letter is waiting for me there," he said. "And I am here."

From his jacket pocket he took the folded menu, the one with the stain, and showed her the middle line. Sumeja read it, and for the first time in two weeks she laughed, the way a person laughs who has been caught red-handed. "This is a mistake," she said. "The boss says the same," said Asim. "He says tomorrow you will type a new one, the right way. I asked him to give me this one. Nobody has ever put me on a menu before." Then he added, seriously, as if he had been thinking about that for days too: "Only, I am not bringing the egg. The eggs are in the village. The hens are waiting for you."

Sumeja took him by the sleeve of his jacket and pulled him into the room, together with the sefertas and the sack. She hugged him the way you hug someone you have already begun to mourn, hard and angrily, and he stood there with the pot in his hand, not knowing where to put it down. Ajdin quietly went back down the stairs. On the table, next to the laptop,

lay a book with a dry brown wreath sticking out of it. Asim kissed her only when he finally put the pot down, and he put it down on a stack of printed court records.

In the sefertas there were two portions of klepe, two spoons and a slip of paper in Fehim's handwriting: "For two. You type the menu until May, without mistakes. After that I am looking for a new typist." They were married in May, in Ilijaš, and the wedding lunch was held in the village. Whenever a guest orders the dandelion salad, Fehim still tells them it is the most expensive dish he has ever had on his menu: it cost him the best typist in Sarajevo. Since then Ajdin types his menus, with mistakes.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Eleven Steps Across Bravadžiluk

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/eleven-steps-across-bravadziluk/

Between the Kalajdžić burek shop and the Mušović burek shop there are exactly eleven steps. Benjamin Mušović first tried to count them when he was seven, as he set off across Bravadžiluk Street, but his father caught him by the collar on the sixth step and pulled him back inside. Across the street, on the threshold of the other shop, stood a little girl with braids, crying, because her father had just yanked her back by the arm too. That was in two thousand two. By then Ćazim Kalajdžić and Hakija Mušović had not spoken a single word to each other for six years, and until last Ramadan they had no intention of doing so.

Everyone in Baščaršija knows why. As boys, both had apprenticed under master Zulfo, who rolled out dough as thin as a headscarf and never said which apprentice he liked better. When he died, in the summer of ninety-six, he left behind two objects and one note. Ćazim got his sač, the baking lid, black and heavy as a bell, and Hakija got the big copper tray in which the pita had baked under that lid for forty years. The note said: "When you come to an agreement, you will bake a pita." Each believed everything belonged to him, and neither would give up his half. Within a year they had opened shops facing each other. Each hung his half on the wall, and beneath it the same photograph of Zulfo, in the same frame, bought in the same shop on Kazandžiluk.

From then on Bravadžiluk hosted a contest the neighbors followed like a football championship. Hakija opened at five forty-five, so Ćazim started opening at five thirty. Ćazim cut the price of a portion by twenty pfennigs, so Hakija started giving away a yogurt with every portion. When Ćazim hung up a new sign, Hakija hung up a bigger one. Whenever tourists asked for cheese burek, both men would step out onto their thresholds at the same moment and explain in the same voice that burek is only made with meat, and everything else is pita. It was the only thing they agreed

on, and they agreed on it loudly, each looking off in his own direction.

Nejla Kalajdžić came back from Ljubljana last autumn, with a master's degree in economics and a laptop on which, within two weeks, she built a spreadsheet her father refused to look at. The spreadsheet showed that the Kalajdžić shop had been losing money for three years, that the rent was rising, and that twenty pfennigs of discount, multiplied by twenty-eight years of spite, had turned into serious money. She suggested a card terminal. Her father said a card was not money. She suggested they stop opening at five thirty, because at that hour the only people eating burek were bakers and Hakija. Her father said he would close the shop on the day Hakija turned off his lights first.

Benjamin Mušović had not gone anywhere. Since the age of fifteen he had been rolling out dough in his father's shop, from four in the morning, singing old sevdalinke as he worked, so quietly that only the pigeons on the roof could hear them. He had forearms that looked borrowed from some bigger man and the habits of an old one: coffee without sugar, newspapers read from the back page, no phone before noon. Nejla saw him up close for the first time in many years the winter the big snow fell, when the two of them, each in front of their own shop, were shoveling the same sidewalk until their shovels met in the middle. "Eleven," said Benjamin. "Eleven what?" "Steps. I counted." Nejla remembered the braids and the crying and laughed so loudly that her father came out onto the threshold.

Two weeks before Ramadan, Ćazim lifted a sack of flour and stayed bent over it like a man over a bill that does not add up. The doctor at the health center said he had a pinched nerve and that for three weeks he could not stand for more than five minutes. Three weeks in the middle of Ramadan, when before iftar the line on Bravadžiluk reaches all the way to the Sebilj fountain. Nejla tried to roll out the dough herself. It tore in the middle, then at the edges, then split across the whole table like an old map. On the first morning, at half past three, she sat down on a sack of flour and for the first time since coming back from Ljubljana she cried,

quietly, although she was alone in the shop.

Someone knocked at the back door, the one that opened onto the passage behind the shop. Benjamin stood in the passage with an apron over his shoulder. "Your dad rolls to the left, and you roll to the right," he said. "That is why it tears." He did not wait to be invited in. He washed his hands at her tap, took her rolling pin, and in twenty minutes a sheet of dough lay across the table so thin you could see the flowers on the oilcloth through it. "At half past four I have to be back at ours," he said. "My dad must not know. And neither must yours." Nejla asked him why he was doing it. Benjamin shrugged. "Zulfo would have done it," he said, and did not look at her, which was the first sign he was not telling the whole truth.

It went on like that for twenty-one mornings. At half past three he knocked, and at half past four he left. In between they rolled dough together, he the pastry, she her patience, and at four they ate the predawn meal of the fast sitting on a sack of flour while he kept an eye on the clock. She learned that Benjamin had enrolled in university twice and twice come back to the table, because he could not imagine a morning without dough. He learned that in Ljubljana she had had a boyfriend who called burek pita, and that she had left him partly because of it. On the tenth morning she learned to roll to the left. On the fifteenth he watched her blow the flour off her forehead and forgot to sing. On the twentieth he kissed her, briefly, between two trays, and left five minutes later than usual.

Nothing on Bravadžiluk can be hidden for long. Hakija noticed that at half past four his son was arriving already white with flour. From customers who called to ask after his health, Ćazim heard that his burek was better than when he made it himself, which hurt him more than his back. On the twenty-first morning he got out of bed before the doctor's deadline, took a taxi to Baščaršija and came into the shop through the back door, like a thief into his own house.

He found Hakija Mušović's son up to his elbows in his dough, and his own daughter wiping flour off the young man's cheek. What followed could be heard all the way to the Sebilj. Ćazim shouted that they were stealing his recipe. Hakija came running across the street in his slippers, saw his son, and shouted that they were stealing his child. In front of the shop gathered the porters who were unloading goods, two taxi drivers from the stand, and a few people who were still eating their predawn meal in the ćevapi place next door. "My recipe!" shouted Ćazim. "Your recipe is Zulfo's recipe!" shouted Hakija. "We both stole it from him!" A silence fell, because it was the first time in twenty-eight years that either of them had said it out loud.

In that silence Nejla went to the wall and took down Zulfo's sač. It was heavier than she had thought and she had to hold it with both hands. Benjamin looked at her, wiped his hands on his apron and crossed Bravadžiluk. Everyone watched his lips move as he counted to eleven. He came back with the copper tray from his father's wall and set it on Ćazim's table. Nejla lowered the lid over it, and rim met rim as if someone had taken them apart only yesterday. "When you come to an agreement, you will bake a pita," said Nejla. "We have come to an agreement."

They baked the pita right there, in front of everyone, in a tray that had not seen fire for twenty-eight years, under a lid onto which Benjamin heaped embers from both ovens, Ćazim's and Hakija's. Nobody left. The ćevapi man brought out chairs. Someone played a sevdalinka on a phone, and Benjamin sang along quietly as he spread the embers. Tourists who came by around seven asked what was being celebrated and got an answer from six men at once, a different one from each. Ćazim sat on the chair his daughter had brought him for his back and stared at the lid. Hakija stayed standing, because he did not want to sit down first.

When the pita was done, Nejla cut it and set two plates on the table the ćevapi man had carried out into the middle of the street, on the sixth step, exactly between the two shops. The fathers sat down across from

each other. For a long time neither ate. Then Ćazim took a piece, chewed it and said: "Too much salt." Hakija took his. "With you there was always too much salt," he said. They went on eating, not looking at each other, until the plates were empty, and then Hakija, without asking, reached over and took the last piece from Ćazim's plate.

A week later the Kalajdžić shop got a card terminal. The Mušović shop got one the next day, because Hakija refused to come second in anything. The lid and the tray now hang on the same wall, and Baščaršija is still arguing about whose. Benjamin still comes at half past three, only now through the front door, and Nejla waits for him on the threshold with two coffees, one without sugar.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

A Song for the Next Shift

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-song-for-the-next-shift/

The first note was stuck to the mixing desk, yellow, written in a small hand that slanted to the left: "Microphone two crackles on the letter š. Avoid plums, sugar and the head of marketing." Dalila read it twice, laughed out loud in the empty studio, and only then realized she was laughing with a man she had never seen.

Radio Ćuprija broadcast from two rooms on the fourth floor of an old building by the Stone Bridge in Zenica. Dalila hosted the show "Before Midnight," from eight to twelve, and Faris the night program, from midnight to six. Ever since a reporter had slipped on an icy sidewalk last winter, the director, Ešref, had made a rule that anyone leaving at midnight went home by taxi at the station's expense. The taxi arrived two minutes before midnight and waited exactly two minutes. Faris came in on the last bus from Kakanj, which stopped by the bridge at five to midnight, and it took him another three minutes to reach the elevator. So every night at three minutes to twelve Dalila played the jingle and the news, took her jacket and went down the stairs, while he rode the elevator up. For two months they passed each other somewhere between the ground floor and the fourth.

At first the notes were about work. That the left earphone was weaker. That someone had left coffee on the desk again. Then one evening Dalila left half a zeljanica wrapped in foil and wrote underneath: "From my mom. I can't roll out the dough." The next day a new slip was waiting on the desk: "It was salty. I ate the whole thing. Your mom knows what she is doing." Within a month the desk was covered in yellow slips, and in the drawer beneath it a pile had grown of the ones neither of them wanted to throw away.

Soon they began to talk in songs as well. The last song of her show was a message, and the first song of his was the answer. When one rainy

evening she ended with "Snow Fell on the Blossoms and the Fruit," he opened with an old jazz song about rain that will not stop. When she played "Beside the Slender Fountain," he answered with something quick and cheerful, as if asking her why she was sad. Neither of them ever said any of it into the microphone. But people heard.

The first to notice was Mejrema, a nurse on the night shift at the hospital in Crkvice, who called Faris every night around two to request a song for the patients who could not fall asleep. "What was she telling you tonight?" she asked on air. Faris laughed and said he did not know who she was talking about. Then the truck drivers on the highway called in, then the bakers from Pehare, then a retired man from Vranduk who wrote his messages only in capital letters. They all wanted to know the same thing: when would the two of them finally meet.

Dalila did not know what Faris looked like. She imagined him tall and thin, with a beard he shaved only on Sundays. She knew he drank mint tea, because she found the tea bags in the trash, that he wrote with his left hand and that he lowered the chair so far that every evening she had to crank the handle. She knew how his voice sounded at three in the morning, because sometimes she could not fall asleep without it. About her he knew that before the last song she always sighed softly into the microphone, because he had once left her a note: "You sigh before the last song. Don't stop." They could have met whenever they wanted. All it would take was for her to miss the taxi once. She never missed it, because she was afraid the man from the elevator would not be the man from the notes.

One Thursday in October there was a note on the desk different from the others, written carefully, almost upright, as if he had written it several times. "They called me from Sarajevo, for a morning show. I start on the first, if I say yes. Ešref knows. I wanted you to hear it from me." The first was ten days away. Dalila put the slip in her jacket pocket and ran the whole show as if she were reading someone else's script. That night she played no message at the end. She played the weather forecast, and that

was worse than any song.

On Friday at half past eleven she called the taxi company and said nobody needed to come tonight. The dispatcher asked if she was sure, since Ešref was paying. Dalila said she was sure. The last song that evening was "Emina," the old song about a girl who walks past the poet's garden and does not turn around. When the song ended, she did not play the jingle. She left the microphone on and said, in her eight-to-twelve voice: "I am staying a little longer. Whoever is waiting for the elevator, hurry up."

The elevator creaked two minutes before midnight. The doors opened slowly, as always, and out stepped a man shorter than she had imagined, with glasses that fogged up in the warm air of the hallway and a paper bag from the bakery in his hand. His hair was wet and he did not know where to put the bag. She did not know where to put her hands. He came into the studio, sat down at microphone two, and the first thing he said was: "What is this?" In Bosnian it starts with š, and the microphone crackled. They both burst out laughing, and that was how two people met in front of several thousand listeners.

That night they ran the program together. They did not talk about Sarajevo. They talked about zeljanica and mint tea, about how he had imagined her taller and she had imagined him without glasses. Mejrema called at two and said only: "Finally," and hung up. The retired man from Vranduk sent a message in capital letters that Faris refused to read aloud, and Dalila read it. At three they played "Emina" once more, and before the song they both sighed into the microphone. The truck drivers honked on the highway, though no one in the studio could hear them.

At six the morning host relieved them and looked at them as if he had walked into the wrong room. They left together and crossed the Stone Bridge while fog lay over the Bosna and the steelworks smoked behind it. On the way they ate poppy seed rolls from his bag, long gone cold. Halfway across the bridge Faris said he had not yet signed the contract in

Sarajevo. Dalila did not ask why. She said only that the first bus to Sarajevo left at six twenty, because she had checked on Thursday, and that you could see the station from the bridge. Faris looked toward the station, then at her, and asked where a person could get mint tea at this hour.

When she came to work at eight that evening, the doorman told her that a man with glasses had stopped by at noon and would not say what he wanted. A yellow note was waiting on the desk, slanting to the left like all the ones before it: "Microphone two still crackles on the letter š. I am not going anywhere until we fix it together."

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Rosemary from the South Station

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/rosemary-from-the-south-station/

In Vienna there is a station that no longer exists. They tore it down some fifteen years ago, and in its place today stands a large glass building with escalators. Last night my daughter Esma sent me a photograph from that building, her first day in Vienna, with a suitcase up to her knees and the kind of smile only eighteen-year-olds have. Below it she wrote: "Dad, is this where you studied?" I answered that it was, but that I had never been where she was standing. I had been a little farther off, on the third platform of the South Station, one December evening in two thousand six, and I had not gone back since.

I arrived in Vienna in the autumn of two thousand, with a scholarship from the municipality of Maglaj and one suitcase my mother had spent three days packing. The scholarship came with a condition in small print: once I graduated, I would work five years at the health center in Maglaj or pay back everything down to the last mark. I signed without thinking. I was nineteen, and five years seemed like something standing on the far side of a mountain. I rented a room in Favoriten, from a widow named Gruber, on the second floor of an old building where at night you could hear the trains creaking at the South Station. Mrs. Gruber had a cat, two house rules and a daughter.

The daughter's name was Theresa, but everyone called her Resi. She worked as a gardener in the city parks and came home with soil under her nails and the odd leaf in her hair. The first winter we did not exchange even twenty sentences, all of them on the stairs and all of them about the cat. The second autumn she found me on the balcony studying anatomy and drying laundry at the same time, and without asking she turned my shirts inside out so they would not fade. She sat down next to me and asked what the word I kept muttering meant. I told her it was the Latin name of a bone in the hand. She laughed and said Latin was her

job, not mine, because every plant in Vienna has two names, one for people and one for her.

From then on we walked. She took me around the parks the way you take a guest around to meet your relatives: here lives a linden that survived two wars, here a plane tree that sheds its bark every summer the way a snake sheds its skin. I told her about Maglaj, about the Bosna River that carries off half a mountain in March, about the fortress above the old town and about my mother, who rolled out pastry dough so thin you could read a newspaper through it. She learned to say "Maglaj" without a foreign accent, then "hvala," thank you, then "ne znam," I don't know. In my third year, one rainy Sunday, she kissed me in the entrance hall, under the mailboxes, and said she had done it for practical reasons, because it was raining outside.

My mother wrote to me every other week. The phone was expensive, so she wrote by hand, in blue ballpoint on graph paper, with margins full of afterthoughts. She wrote about my father, who had started coughing at night, about the neighbor woman who had bought a washing machine, about how the Bosna had once again carried off a piece of the bank under the bridge. At the end of every letter, after the greetings and before the signature, stood the same sentence, like a seal: "Just don't bring me home a Švabica." She knew nothing about Resi. That was what people in Maglaj called any foreign woman from the north, without malice, the way you say of rain that it is cold.

Once Resi picked up a letter from the table and asked what it said at the bottom. I lied that my mother was asking whether I was eating enough. Slowly she repeated the word "Švabica," like the Latin name of a new plant, and I said it meant something like "darling." From then on she left me notes on the fridge in her funny Bosnian: "Švabica cook soup." "Švabica go to work at six." I knew that each of those slips of paper was one lie I owed her.

The summer before my last year she wanted to come to Maglaj. She bought a map of Bosnia and circled the town in red pencil, then the fortress, then Mount Ozren, only because she liked the name. I told her summer was too hot where I came from, that we were renovating the house, that my mother did not know a single German word. All of it was true and all of it was an excuse. Resi folded the map and put it in the drawer with her gardening gloves. She did not ask again. At the time I thought she had forgiven me. Today I think she had only started counting.

In October of that last year a letter came that was different from all the others. My mother wrote neither about the neighbor nor about the river. My father had fallen in the garden, between two rows of peppers, and spent three days in the hospital in Doboj. He survived, but the doctors forbade him to lift anything heavier than a spoon. "The house has been left without hands," she wrote, "and the health center is expecting you in January. They told me at the municipality that they are holding your place." At the bottom, after the greetings, that sentence was missing this time. As if my mother knew everything and no longer felt any need to warn me.

I received my diploma in the middle of December. Resi came to the graduation in the only dress she owned, a green one, and clapped louder than all the parents in the hall. That evening, in Mrs. Gruber's kitchen, she told me she had spoken with her boss and could get six months of unpaid leave. In Maglaj, she said, there were surely parks that needed someone who knew two names for every plant. She looked at me across the table and waited. I said we would work it out once I got there, that first I had to see my father. She said "dobro," all right. She said it in Bosnian, without a foreign accent, and I had to turn toward the window.

The train to Zagreb left at ten to nine from the third platform of the South Station. It was Monday, the eighteenth of December, and a fine rain was falling that had not turned into snow only because it lacked the strength. Resi carried my second suitcase and a flowerpot wrapped in newspaper.

In the pot was a rosemary, a little bush as tall as a palm. She said it was for my mother, that rosemary puts up with frost and with people who forget to water it, and that my mother could keep it in the window until she came and planted it properly.

That was when I told her. I had no sentences ready, though I had been preparing them for weeks. I said my mother was old, my father was ill, that in Maglaj everyone knew everything about everyone and that there she would be a foreigner for the rest of her life, and I the man who had brought home a foreigner. I told her not to come. Not in six months, not later. I said I was sorry, and that was the worst sentence of all, because it was accurate and meant nothing. Resi stood under the big clock on the platform, the pot in her hands, and did not cry. She asked only one thing: "What does Švabica mean?" I told her.

She nodded, the way she nodded when someone in front of her called a tree by the wrong name. She set the pot down on the bench beside me and took the newspaper off the rosemary so it would not suffocate on the train. "Give it to your mother anyway," she said. "The plant is not to blame." Then she turned and walked down the platform toward the exit, neither fast nor slow, in a green jacket that grew darker and darker in the rain. Not once did she look back. I got on the train with the rosemary in my arms, and all the way to Zagreb I held it on my knees, as if it might run away.

My mother put the rosemary in the kitchen window and never asked me where it came from. My father lived eleven more years. From January on I worked at the health center, took the blood pressure of people who had known me since birth, and listened to them call me "doctor" and then add my childhood name. A year later I married Selvira, a teacher from the next street over. Selvira is the best woman I could have found, and I was not even looking for her. I love her. That is true and it is not the whole truth, and Selvira is wise enough never to ask for the rest.

The rosemary is alive. Every autumn I bring it into the house before the first frost, and every April I carry it out onto the terrace, and I do it myself, although Selvira says she has hands too. As a child Esma asked why we did not plant that bush in the garden. I told her it could not stand our winters. I did not tell her that I had written to Vienna only once, three months after I came back, to Mrs. Gruber's address. The letter came back unopened, and on the envelope, under the German postmark, in Resi's small handwriting, stood one word I had taught her myself: hvala, thank you.

Last night, after the photograph, Esma sent one more message. She asked whether there was anyone in Vienna she ought to visit, so she would not be alone on Sundays. I held the phone in my hand for a long time. From the kitchen Selvira asked whether I wanted coffee. I wrote to my daughter that there was no one, that Vienna was hers now, and that she should watch out for the tram tracks, because nobody honks there. Then I got up, filled a glass with water and went into the living room, to the window, where since October the rosemary has been waiting for spring.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

A Duet for Alto and Baritone

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-duet-for-alto-and-baritone/

In a choir the alto is the voice nobody hears until it is gone. Desanka liked that. For eleven years she had stood in the second row of altos in the amateur choir Javor, on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the community center hall in Lauš, between a former bookkeeper and a hairdresser, and nobody had ever looked at her longer than necessary. For thirty-five years she had taught math at an elementary school, and she had seen enough faces waiting for her to say something. In the choir she was one of twelve. That suited her.

In September the conductor Milica, a young woman of twenty-nine with a pencil always tucked behind her ear, announced the program for the choir's fiftieth birthday, in December, at Banski Dvor. At the end of the program was the duet Two Shores, which the choir's founder Mitar had written for himself and his wife and which nobody had sung since 1990. For the alto Milica chose Desanka. Desanka said she did not sing solo, had never sung alone and was too old to start. Milica said she had the only alto in the choir that did not wobble, and there was no escaping that. For the baritone she chose Radovan.

Radovan Šipka had joined the choir that same September, and within three weeks everybody knew him. He was a retired train driver, big and gray, in sweaters that, as he said himself, had been knitted by someone who did not love him, and he had a voice that came out of him like a train out of a tunnel. He laughed loudly, came to rehearsals ten minutes late and apologized to everyone each time, one by one. Until then Desanka had not even said hello to him. Now they stood side by side in front of the piano, holding the same sheet music.

The first rehearsal was hard. He sang too loudly, she too quietly, and Milica lowered her hands and said: "You are two shores, not a shore and a flood." Radovan laughed about it until the end of the rehearsal. It also

turned out that he could not read music. He had learned his part by heart from an old recording Milica had put on the internet, listening to it in the car on the way to Gradiška and back. Desanka read music the way she had once read problems off the blackboard, and she counted the beat with her lips, silently, as if she were back in class.

The hardest part was the last bar. At the end of the song the two voices meet on the same note and hold it together, for a long time, until the conductor lowers her hands. Every time, Desanka stopped first. Not by much, by half a beat, but enough for the hall to hear the baritone left on his own. "Desanka, wait for him," Milica would say. Desanka would nod and the next time stop early again. For thirty-five years the school bell had told her when it was over, and she had always known before the bell. "You would jump off a train before the station," said Radovan, and it did not sound like a reproach.

After rehearsals they began walking down toward the Vrbas together, because he parked by the bridge and from there she caught the bus to Borik. Chestnuts were falling on the sidewalk, and he gathered them into his pocket as he went, for a granddaughter who lived in Canada and whom he had seen twice. He talked about railway lines, about nights on the Doboj run and about a wife who had left long ago and had not come back. She talked about Slavko. Slavko had been a good man and always got to the station forty minutes early, so every trip they took began with waiting. He had died six years ago, peacefully, one Sunday after lunch, as if he had finished that on time too.

In November the heating broke down in the hall in Lauš, and there were five weeks left until the concert. Milica said the duet had to rehearse wherever it could. Desanka, to her own surprise, said she had an upright piano. It had stood in her living room in Borik since her daughter's childhood, half a tone out of tune, covered with crocheted doilies and photographs. Radovan came for the first time on a Tuesday at six, at exactly six, with a bag of Banja Luka ćevapi from Gospodska Street, and said it was the first time in his life he had not been late. Desanka made

coffee and moved the photographs off the piano.

The rehearsals in the apartment were different. The neighbor downstairs banged on her ceiling with a broom every time Radovan went for a high note, so he learned to sing more softly. To hear him over the piano, Desanka learned to sing louder. Somewhere around the second week they met in the middle. One evening her daughter Sonja called from Vienna on video and saw behind her mother's shoulder a man in a green sweater eating a ćevap. "Mom, who is that?" "The baritone," said Desanka. Sonja laughed so hard she had to put the phone down. "Mom has a baritone," they could hear her telling someone in Vienna.

The last bar still would not come right. Desanka knew where the mistake was and could do nothing about it. When she reached the end, something in her would say enough, and the breath would leave on its own. Radovan stayed on the note alone and then laughed, more and more quietly as the weeks went by. At the end of November, at the door, while he was putting on his jacket, he told her that on Sunday he was driving to Krupa na Vrbasu to see the watermills before the snow came, and that he would be glad if she would. "No," said Desanka, before he had finished the sentence.

Radovan nodded, wished her good night and went down the stairs without turning on the light. Desanka stayed behind the door with her hand on the handle and listened to his footsteps fading somewhere around the second floor. Only then did she realize what she had done. Once again she had finished first. She had not even heard everything he meant to say, whether there had been something more after if she would. That night she lay awake for a long time. She listened to the old recording of Two Shores on her phone, Mitar and his wife in seventy-eight, and at the end, in the last bar, she heard the wife hold the note even after her husband had run out of breath, just a little, so that he would not be alone.

For the next two weeks Radovan arrived on time, sang correctly and left right away. He no longer gathered chestnuts, because there were none

left. At the dress rehearsal Milica said everything was in place and yet something did not sit right with her, and she did not know what. Desanka knew. She kept quiet and counted the beat with her lips.

The concert was on the seventeenth of December. Wet snow was falling in front of Banski Dvor, and the hall was full: grandchildren, sons-in-law, former colleagues, retirees from all over the Krajina region in coats they did not take off. Sonja watched the livestream from Vienna. The choir sang everything in order, and the duet was left for the end. When Desanka and Radovan stepped forward, alone, in front of eleven altos and thirty other voices, she felt her hands go cold. Then Milica raised her hands, the pianist played the introduction, and Radovan began to sing softly, the way he had learned because of the neighbor downstairs.

They sang well. Not perfectly, but well, the way people sing who have listened to each other for five weeks over an out-of-tune piano. Then came the last bar. Desanka landed on the note together with him and felt the moment when she had always let go, the moment when something in her said enough. This time she did not let go. She held the note while he held his, and then a little longer, when he had already run out of breath. The hall was completely silent. Milica lowered her hands only when Desanka stopped, and only then did someone in the front row begin to clap.

At the coat check he held her coat for her. "Desanka," he said, not looking at her, "I will ask you once more, and if you say no again, I won't ask anymore. On Sunday I'm going to Krupa. There's snow, but they say the watermills run in winter too. I have chains for the tires, a thermos and a blanket for the back seat, and we could, if you like, sing on the way, just the two of us, without Milica and without the neighbor downstairs, as loudly as we feel like singing." He paused, used to her cutting him off right there. Desanka was slowly buttoning her coat, button by button, and let him say everything to the end. Only then did she say yes.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

Every Saturday at Someone Else's Wedding

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/every-saturday-at-someone-elses-wedding/

At a Bosnian wedding two people never sit down: the singer and the photographer. Minela and Hamza met in May, at a restaurant on the Una below Bihać, by getting in each other's way. She was singing for the first dance, he was kneeling on the dance floor looking for a frame with nothing in it but the couple, the river and the sky. In every frame, behind the bride's shoulder, stood the singer in a green dress. Near the end of the song Hamza waved at her to move to the left. Minela nodded, smiled, and for the next verse stood even closer.

During the break he found her at the bar. "The couple is paying me to shoot them without the band," he said. "They are paying me to be heard," she said, "and what is seen is heard best." She was drinking water with lemon and did not even look at him. Hamza left convinced he had met the most conceited woman in the Una-Sana Canton. At home in Travnik, while he was choosing photographs for the album, he stopped at one he had not planned: the couple sharp in the foreground, and behind them, blurred and green, the singer with her head thrown back in the middle of a high note. He did not send that photograph to the couple.

Two weeks later, in a hall on the bank of the Neretva in Mostar, he caught his foot on her cable and the microphone flew out of her hand in the middle of a chorus. The band kept playing, and Minela picked the microphone up off the floor and said into it: "The photographer always hits the dance floor first, a round of applause for the photographer!" The hall clapped. Hamza, red to the ears, took a bow. Later they realized that the same agency, Bijeli Veo from Zenica, had hired them both, and that they would see each other often that season. At midnight he brought her a glass of water with lemon. In return she told him which song the band

played when the bride was supposed to cry, so he would be ready.

In June, in Brčko, the wedding had six hundred guests and went on until four in the morning. The musicians and the photographer eat last, that is a rule nobody ever wrote down, so at one past midnight Minela and Hamza sat in the restaurant kitchen, between the dishwasher and crates of empty bottles, eating cold sarma off the same plate, because the cook said there were no clean ones left. That was where they talked for the first time without the noise. She had finished a degree in solo singing at the Academy of Music in Sarajevo and had once wanted to sing Puccini. In that month alone she had sung Kad ja pođoh na Bembašu fourteen times, and that, she said, was not the worst thing that could have happened.

Hamza said he had studied architecture in Banja Luka and had never built anything but albums. He shot weddings for the money, and for himself, when everyone had gone, he shot the empty halls: chairs upside down on the tables, confetti in a puddle of juice, balloons sinking down on their own. She said she would love to see that. Then she fell asleep, sitting up, with the plate on her knees, while he was telling her about a hall in Doboj that in the morning looked like an abandoned cathedral. He photographed her before the accordion player Šućro came to wake her for the last round.

The rest of the summer went by on a schedule. They sent each other their Saturdays in advance, and the Saturdays matched more and more often, partly because Hamza always recommended the same band to couples who asked him about music. Tešanj below the fortress. Livno, where in August hail the size of hazelnuts came down. Gradačac, Jajce, Gračanica, two weddings in Sarajevo in the same week. They had an agreement they never quite put into words: at every wedding he would take one photograph of her, and at every wedding she would sing one song for him, unannounced, the old Emina, no matter who had requested what.

Away from weddings they never saw each other once. They had no time. On Saturdays they worked, on Sundays they slept until noon, and on

weekdays he edited photographs in Travnik while she gave singing lessons to children in Doboj. Hamza did not know what her voice sounded like when she was not singing into a microphone. She did not know what he looked like without a camera around his neck and without the black suit he wore to every wedding, a suit which, as she told him, ought to retire before the two of them did. One Tuesday in July Hamza got into his car and set off toward Doboj, for no reason he could have put into words, and got as far as Žepče. There he drank a coffee at a gas station and turned back, because he did not know what he would say to her in the quiet, without a band behind her.

At the end of September, at a wedding in Zvornik, Šućro, while tuning his accordion, told Hamza what Minela had kept to herself. She had signed a contract for the winter season at a hotel in Tyrol, she would sing every evening for tourists who would not understand a single word, and she was leaving on Monday. This was her last wedding until spring. "You didn't know?" asked Šućro, pausing with his hand on the bellows. "Well, I thought the two of you," he began, and did not finish. Hamza said he had not known and went off to photograph the groom's family on the staircase, where twelve people were waiting for him.

That evening he worked badly. He missed the cutting of the cake, and the bride's mother scolded him in front of everyone. Twice he forgot to take the cap off his lens. The groom asked him whether he was all right. Minela was on the stage all evening, and between her and him there were three hundred people, a kolo and two families competing over who could request the same song more times. There was no kitchen and no plate of sarma. At midnight he realized there was only one way to reach her, the way everyone else did.

He made his way through the kolo, climbed onto the stage and tucked twenty marks into the microphone stand, the way guests do when they request a song. The drummer stopped playing because he was laughing. "The photographer is paying," Šućro said into the microphone. "This has never happened before." Hamza said only: "Emina." Minela looked at

him for a long time, and then she gave the band a signal. She sang it more slowly than ever that summer, looking straight at him, and the guests kept turning to see who she was singing to. The bride's aunt asked out loud whether that was her husband. Hamza did not photograph that song.

At five in the morning, in a parking lot above the Drina, the band was loading speakers into the van. Hamza gave her an envelope. Inside were twenty-six photographs, one from every wedding they had worked together, and on the back of each the town and the date, written in his small architect's lettering. Bihać, Mostar, Brčko, Tešanj. Minela leafed through them under the light from the van. In every one she was singing. In the last one she was not: she was asleep on a chair in the kitchen in Brčko, with a plate of sarma on her knees and her mouth open. Šućro was coiling cables and pretending not to look.

"This is not for the album," she said. "No," said Hamza. "That one is for me." Šućro shouted from the van that they were leaving. Minela put the photographs back in the envelope, all but one, the one from Bihać, where she was blurred and green behind other people's backs. That one she put into the pocket of his black suit. "Give this one back to me in May," she said. "The first wedding is on the eighth, in Visoko. The agency has already signed you up." Then she got into the van, and Hamza was left standing in the parking lot, in a suit that was due to retire, with his hand on his pocket.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

Tea with Honey, Captain

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/tea-with-honey-captain/

The rain had been falling since Foča, fine and persistent, October rain, and Rade drove slowly, because the Sutjeska below the road was muddy and loud, and trucks came out of the bends without warning. General Dragoljub Šipovac sat in the back, in a gray coat, as upright as if someone were still lining him up. He was sixty-nine, with a white mustache, medals in a drawer, and an apartment in Herceg Novi, bought long ago for a wife who had not spent a single winter night in it. That was where he was going now. Rade, the son of his former driver, talked about football and fuel prices, and the general was grateful to him for not expecting answers.

Near Tjentište Rade said he needed a coffee and that there would be an inn just past the bend. It was a stone house with a wooden upper floor and a porch, with smoke from the chimney and two trucks in the parking lot. The sign over the door said Han pod Magličem, the Inn below Maglić. Inside it was warm and clean: a wood stove, checkered tablecloths, a calendar from a hardware store in Foča, a television with the sound off, and, above the bar, a faded photograph of a man in a fishing vest holding a trout as long as a forearm. A smell of pie and damp jackets. Two truck drivers were eating in silence at a table by the window.

A woman of about fifty came out of the kitchen, in an apron, with a towel thrown over her shoulder, black hair with streaks of gray, a straight back. She asked what they would have to drink. Rade ordered coffee and cheese pie, and the general tea, if they had it, with honey. The woman looked at him a little longer than necessary. She came back from the kitchen with a cup and a jar of honey, set them in front of him, and said: "Tea with honey, Captain. Like before."

Captain. No one had called him that in thirty years. He had been a colonel, then a general, then a pensioner whom people at the market

addressed as boss. He looked at her, and the years began to fall from her face one by one, until what remained was a girl of twenty who had carried coffee down to the river for him in the summer of 1990. The inn had belonged to her father then, the man with the trout above the bar. He used to come for the trout, two summers in a row, with a book of poems that he read to her in the evenings on the porch, and in September he had promised to come back at Christmas and take her to the city. "Milena," he said.

He remembered, or thought he remembered, the last morning of that September. Mist over the river, her father carrying his bag to the car in silence, because he knew everything and asked nothing. She on the porch, barefoot, with her hands in the pockets of her father's jacket. She did not wave. She said only that she would wait for him with tea and honey, because the first time he came, soaked to the skin, that was exactly what he had asked for. He sang all the way to Foča. By Sarajevo he was already thinking about the transfer, and by spring he was not thinking about her at all.

She sat down across from him, with the towel on her shoulder, as if she had sat down for a minute, between two orders. She said she had recognized him through the window, by the way he got out of a car, as if someone behind him were standing at attention. Her father had died in ninety-eight, and the inn had passed to her. She had not married. "Why not?" he asked, and was immediately embarrassed by the question. "You were the most beautiful girl from Foča to Gacko." "Because I was a fool who waited for Christmas," she said calmly, the way she would have said what the pie cost.

Rade sensed something and took his coffee over to the truck drivers. The general lowered his voice. He said he had been young, that a transfer order had come, that everything had happened faster than he could think, that he had married. "I know who you married," she said. "A general's daughter, in April. We had newspapers here too, Captain, and a postman, and people who like to talk. I was twenty, and you were

thirty-four. You knew what you were doing. I did not even know that it could be done that way."

She told it without hurrying, as if she were reading someone else's letter. For Christmas she had baked the česnica bread and put on a dress bought in Foča. On Christmas Eve snow fell and closed the road near Tjentište, and for a whole week she blamed the snow. After that she blamed the post office, then the army, then herself. In April her father brought home the newspaper, left it open on the table, and went out to the barn, so he would not have to watch her read it. She kept the book of poems for two more years, and then she took it to the village schoolteacher, for the school library. "Let the children read it," she said. "They don't know who brought it."

He was silent, and then he said what he had never told anyone. That his wife had left him after twelve years, for a dentist from Novi Sad, that he had loved her, stupidly and for a long time, even after that. That his son had taken his savings for some business in Vienna and lost them within a year, and now called only when he needed something. That he had an apartment full of things nobody looked at. "I was not happy, Milena. If that means anything to you." She looked at him for a long time. "It doesn't," she said. "I thought it would. For years I thought I would be glad to hear you were doing badly. I am not glad. It does nothing to me."

"Can you forgive me?" he asked. Milena looked out the window, at the road vanishing into the canyon under the rain. "For thirty-five years I have opened the shutters every morning and looked at the road first," she said. "The first years I was waiting. After that it was not waiting anymore, it was a habit, like coffee. You forgive what happens once, Captain. This happened to me every morning." She stood up, straightened the towel on her shoulder, and told him his tea was getting cold.

He reached across the table and took her hand. She did not pull it away at once. For a few seconds she stood like that, with her hand in his, and looked at him the way you look at a photograph you know is the only one.

Then she drew her hand back, slowly, and picked up the jar of honey. "The tea is two marks," she said. "Coffee and pie for your driver, four." He gave her fifty marks. She brought him back the exact change, the coins counted out on the tablecloth, and when he wanted to leave something for her, she shook her head. "In my place nobody leaves more than they owe."

In the car Rade was silent for a long time, and then he could not hold out. "Did you see what kind of woman that is, General? The richest from Foča to Gacko. Half the valley owes her, people from Foča and from Gacko too, she lends money and takes interest, but fairly. My father borrowed from her for a roof. He says she has never taken anyone to court, but she has never forgotten a single debt. And she never married, though they say even doctors proposed to her." The general looked out the window at the muddy Sutjeska and did not answer.

He tried to imagine what would have happened if he had come that Christmas. Milena in army apartments in garrison towns, Milena at receptions among the colonels' wives, Milena as the mother of his son, maybe of a different son, one who would not call only when he needed money. Milena in the apartment in Herceg Novi. He could not do it. Every time he put her in one of those rooms, she stood by the window, with a towel on her shoulder, and watched the road. He closed his eyes and shook his head for a long time, alone with himself.

When they had passed the bend, he turned and looked through the rear window. The inn could still be seen among the beech trees, with smoke from the chimney and two trucks in the parking lot. The shutters on the window above the porch were closed. Rade saw it in the rearview mirror and slowed down. "Shall I stop, General?" The general looked a moment longer, until the house disappeared behind a rock. "No," he said. "Drive on."

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

The Brother I Did Not Make Up

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-brother-i-did-not-make-up/

There were forty-one names on the list of the rescued, and I read it eleven times, always from the bottom up, as if Armin could have hidden among the letters. The excursion boat Galeb left Neum for Ston at ten in the morning, with tourists who wanted to eat oysters and with the two of us, who only wanted one day of not thinking about Sarajevo. The jugo wind met us off Klek. The engine died, the boat lay down on the rocks, and of all of it I remember an orange life vest, my brother's hand on my shoulder, and the wave that carried that hand away. A police boat from Neum pulled me out. Nobody pulled him out, at least not on that list. We were born eleven minutes apart and had never been separated longer than one summer camp.

For the next few days I had no phone, no wallet, no ID card. The sea had taken those too. Divers went in and came out, every morning the inspector told me the same thing, to wait, and I waited, in a room I rented from a lady above a bakery. I called my mother in Sarajevo from someone else's phone and lied that we were staying another week because the weather was so nice. She asked me to put Armin on. I said he was at the beach. Afterward I sat for a long time on the steps in front of the bakery, because I did not know how you tell someone something you do not want to know yourself.

The phone I borrowed belonged to Dijana, a receptionist at the Hotel Modra Uvala, who did not like it when someone cried alone. On the third day she told me there was work, if I knew how to write. I did. In Sarajevo I wrote ads for yogurt and insurance. The job was for Orsat Lučić, a singer who sang every evening on the hotel terrace and made women forget why they had come with their husbands. Orsat had a voice for stadiums, and he wrote messages like a boy late for class: no commas, two mistakes in every sentence, and a rose at the end. He was in love with

Klara, the owner of the Plima café on the promenade, who had lost her brother last winter in a car accident on the coastal highway. Since then Klara had worn black, turned off the speakers in the café, and sent back every flower Orsat sent her.

Klara had blocked his number, so Orsat came up with letters, real ones, on paper, that someone would deliver to her in person. He paid fifty marks a letter. We wrote at his kitchen table, in an apartment above the marina. He walked from the refrigerator to the balcony and dictated: "Write that she is like the sea. Write that without her I cannot breathe." I wrote that he had seen her wiping the terrace tables herself in the morning, though she had a waiter, and that since then he too had started washing his own cups. He read it, said nothing, and signed. By the third letter I knew that he hummed when he was nervous, that he warmed up my coffee and never his own, and that I was writing what I would have liked to read myself, and from him in particular.

The Plima was empty when I brought the first letter. Klara was behind the bar counting receipts, in a black sweater with the sleeves rolled up. She read the letter standing up, twice, and put it down on the bar. "Orsat did not write this," she said. "Orsat spells volim, I love, with two l's and puts a rose at the end." I said I was only the courier. "A courier who does not look you in the eye," she said. "Tell whoever writes this to come himself." She did not give the letter back.

I brought her letters for seven days, every morning at nine, when she opened. She read them, and then she began asking questions Orsat had no answers to, so I answered them, over coffee she never charged me for. She told me about her brother, who used to fish off the pier and sang worse than Orsat. I did not talk about mine. On the sixth day she said: "Tell him to stop writing Orsat's letters and start writing his own. Who is he?" And I said it was my brother. That his name was Armin Zukić, that we were twins, that he was just like me, only taller, and that he was not in Neum at the moment. Maybe I said it because I could not bear to think of him in the past tense for one more day. Klara laughed for the first time.

"When he comes back," she said, "let him come himself. Without letters."

Orsat was overjoyed that Klara was keeping the letters, and he decided to sing under her window on Saturday, with a guitar, like in the movies nobody watches anymore. That evening, while we were reworking the song on his balcony, he asked me in the middle of a sentence: "And you? Do you have someone you would write to like this?" "I do," I said. "But he loves someone else." "Idiot," said Orsat, sincerely angry at a man he did not know, and went on tuning the guitar. I looked at the sea below the balcony and thought how that sea had carried Armin off somewhere and left me to write love letters for a man who could not even read me.

Armin turned up on the tenth day, a Tuesday, with a bandage over his eyebrow and in someone else's tracksuit. It turned out later that fishermen from Ston had pulled him out, that he had spent two days in a hospital in Dubrovnik without documents and without a single phone number in his head, and that someone had entered him on the list of the rescued as Armin Žunić. As soon as he was back on his feet, he took the bus to Neum and went from café to café asking if anyone had seen a woman who looked like him. He walked into the Plima around noon. Klara looked at him, saw my face on a taller man, and dropped a glass. "Zukić?" she asked. "Zukić," he said, carefully, because lately he had not been sure even of that.

What happened next I know in three versions: Klara's, my brother's and the waiter's. Klara told him she had known he would come. Armin said he had not known it himself. Klara said she had read every one of his letters ten times. Armin, who had never in his life written anything longer than a text message without vowels, decided not to argue with a bruised head. And then Klara told him his sister had been there that morning, at nine, as she was every day. Armin jumped up, hugged her across the bar and kissed her, first on the cheek, out of happiness, and then, as the waiter claimed, no longer only out of happiness. Klara did not protest.

Just then Orsat was walking along the promenade with his guitar, to see where he would stand under the window on Saturday. Through the glass he saw Klara in the arms of a man with my face. Within ten minutes he was standing in my room above the bakery, red to the ears. "You were writing letters for your brother," he said. "With my money. With my words." "Your words?" I asked. "You dictated the sea and breathing." "I saw him!" I stopped listening. I ran barefoot down the stairs.

When I walked in, nobody in the Plima was talking. Armin got up from the table. We stood in front of each other, him a little taller, and then I hit him on the shoulder, hard, like when we were children, and only then hugged him. "Žunić," he said into my hair. "They put me down as Žunić." Klara kept looking from him to me and back. "Which of you two was writing?" she finally asked. "Me," I said. "He writes text messages without vowels." Armin nodded, red in the face. "I did not write a single letter," he told Klara. "But since this morning I think I would like to."

Klara laughed, the way, the waiter told me later, she had not laughed since last winter, and went behind the bar to turn on the speakers. Orsat stood in the doorway with his guitar. He looked at me, then at Armin, then at me again, and I watched everything cross his face: the kitchen table, the cups he had started washing, the letters he had signed without understanding them. He came over and asked quietly, so Klara would not hear: "That one of yours, who loves someone else. Who is he?" "Someone who spells volim with two l's," I said.

He was silent for a long time, too long for Orsat. Then he took a napkin from a table, borrowed a pen from the waiter, and wrote something, covering the paper with his palm like a schoolboy. He gave me the napkin folded in four. I did not open it in front of him. My mother called Dijana's phone that afternoon, and without a word I handed it to Armin. "There he is," I told her when he gave it back to me. "He came out of the sea." That evening Orsat sang on the terrace of the Modra Uvala, and Klara, for the first time since she started wearing black, came down to listen, with my brother at the table by the stage, while I sat at another table holding

in my pocket a napkin on which, without a single comma and without a rose, was written volim, with two l's.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Neither Hers nor Anyone Else's

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/neither-hers-nor-anyone-elses/

I have worked at the Hadžiosmanović publishing house for twenty-six years, in prepress, and I have learned that in this building nothing is ever said directly. Not a mistake in a book, not a salary, not love. The house was founded between the two world wars by the great-grandfather of the present owner, in a building on the bank of the Miljacka, and his portrait in a fez still hangs above the reception desk, next to the portraits of her grandfather and father, Hadžiosmanovićs every one, all with the same look of a man who has just found a mistake in someone else's sentence.

Nasiha Hadžiosmanović took over the firm when her father died. She was thirty-seven, with two university degrees and an Aunt Zarifa who brought a lawyer from a good family to Sunday lunch every week. Nasiha listened to all of them with equal politeness and never invited a single one back. Those of us at the firm knew why. His name was Amer Osmić, he was the editor in chief, and he had grown up in a home for children without parents, with a surname the home's director had given him, because his own could not be found anywhere. He came to the firm at nineteen as a courier. Nasiha's father caught him in the hallway reading a manuscript he was supposed to take to the post office, and in ten years he made him the best editor in the city.

Nasiha loved him, you could tell from the way she corrected his commas. But Hadžiosmanović women do not marry couriers, even a courier who knows half of Mak Dizdar by heart. When Amer started going to lunch at the ćevapi place across the street with Martina, our young designer, Nasiha saw it from her window. The next day Martina was handed a travel order for the book fair in Banja Luka, for seven days, followed immediately by one for a course in Frankfurt. My grandmother had a saying for people like that, about the dog in the hay: it will not eat, and it will not let anyone else eat either.

Then Nasiha came up with the manuscript. One morning she brought Amer a folder with no author's name on it, a short novel in which a woman from an old family loves a man who works for her and cannot tell him so. She asked him to edit the last chapter and to write the man's reply himself, because the author, she said, did not know how such a man would talk. Amer brought the folder to me so I could print the proofs. We read it together, bent over my desk. The heroine had an office with a window onto the Miljacka and wrote with a green fountain pen. "Šerif," said Amer, "this is her."

He wrote the reply that night, in my prepress room, while the machine was running. The man in the novel told the woman he would follow her through fire and through the tax office. In the morning Nasiha read it, blushed to her ears, and gave him back the folder with a red line through the entire page. In the margin she had written: too bold, a man knows his place. That week she took him to dinner twice after book launches, and both times, at the meeting the next day, she addressed him as Mr. Osmić and found a mistake in his imprint page in front of everyone.

Meanwhile Martina called from Frankfurt every evening, and every evening Nasiha happened to have urgent work for Amer just then: a poetry collection that had to go to the printer by morning, a letter to the ministry, a contract with a translator from Ljubljana. At a reception in the City Hall she took his arm in front of half of Sarajevo and introduced him as the right hand of the house. Then the lawyer Aunt Zarifa had brought that month came over, and Nasiha let go of Amer's arm as fast as if it had burned her. Amer spent the rest of the evening standing by the table of little savory pastries, looking out the window at the river. I stood next to him, because one of us had to eat those pastries.

That went on until April. Martina came back from Frankfurt, realized what was going on, and started going out with our accountant, who was at least boring in an honest way. One evening Amer sat down on my chair beside the machine and said he was leaving. He had been offered a job at a publishing house in Zagreb. "I can't go on being a chair she moves

around whenever she needs to," he said. "And I can't stop waiting for her to move me, either." I asked him whether he had told her so. "Tell her what?" he said. "That I love her? She knows that. She knows it, and so do the portraits above the reception desk. The problem is not what she knows, it is what her great-grandfather thought of couriers." He typed his resignation on my computer and left it in my drawer, to hand in on Monday. I looked at him and thought of old Lutvo.

Lutvo Begtašević came every Thursday at ten, with an umbrella and a box of cookies for the reception desk. He was eighty-two, and he was paying for the printing of a monograph about his family, the Begtaševićs, who, as the first chapter said, had for three centuries produced judges, merchants, and one bad poet. The monograph lacked only its final chapter. Lutvo had had a son, Amer, born in eighty-eight. A year later his wife left him and went to Istanbul with the child, and he never found them again, although, as he put it, he had spent two cars and one set of health on the search. He told me about it every Thursday while I laid out his photographs.

Same name, same year. The rest I set myself. On an old typewriter from the basement, on yellowed paper I had kept for years from an order in the eighties, I wrote a letter from Lutvo's late sister-in-law in Istanbul. In the letter she confesses that in ninety the child was brought back to Sarajevo and left at the children's home, because his mother could not take care of him. I signed it with her name, which I knew from the monograph, and slipped it into the box of family papers Lutvo had brought me for scanning. I said nothing to Amer. I knew he would stop me.

The next Thursday Lutvo did not bring cookies. He walked into reception pale, with the letter in his hand, and asked where the editor in chief was. He asked him when he had been born and which home he had grown up in. Amer answered and looked at me. He tried to say something more, but Lutvo put a hand on his cheek and said only, "The same chin as my father." Martina dropped a folder, and the accountant picked it up. Then Lutvo embraced him in the middle of the hallway, beneath the portrait of

the great-grandfather in the fez, and wept out loud, the way old people weep when they no longer care who is watching. By noon the whole firm knew that Amer Osmić was really Amer Begtašević, the last descendant of a three-hundred-year-old family. Aunt Zarifa found out by lunchtime.

That afternoon Nasiha appeared in Amer's office with two coffees, for the first time in ten years. She said the Begtaševićs were an old house and that her aunt had no objection. Amer put down his cup. He could not do it. He told her the truth: that he was nobody's son, that Šerif had put the letter together in prepress, on old paper, and that he would not build a life on someone else's tears. I heard it because the door was open, and I happened to be carrying proofs down the hallway just then, more slowly than usual.

Nasiha was silent for a long time. Then she asked only one thing: whether Lutvo knew. Amer said he did not, and that he would tell him everything tomorrow. "You will not," said Nasiha. "I saw him in the hallway. That man has been waiting thirty-six years to put his arms around someone. You are not taking that away from him over one letter." Then she closed the door, but not all the way. "You told me the truth before I had asked you anything," I heard her say. "Nobody has ever done that for me. The rest does not interest me. Lutvo has a son, my aunt has a family, and I have you." She came out and stopped in front of me. "You will keep quiet as long as you live," she said. "And you will get a raise, to make keeping quiet easier."

They were married in June, in the garden of the Hadžiosmanović house above Bistrik. Aunt Zarifa cried with pride, Martina came with the accountant, and Lutvo sat in the front row in a suit that, as he said, had been waiting thirty-six years. When the music started, he came over to my table and sat down next to me with a plate of baklava. For a long time he watched the newlyweds.

"There is not a single mistake in your letter, Šerif," he said at last, without looking at me. "My sister-in-law never in her life wrote a sentence

without two. I knew right away it had been written by the best proofreader in the city." I had nothing to say. Lutvo finished his baklava and wiped his fingers on a napkin. "For twenty years nobody came to see me on Thursdays," he said. "Now bring me the proofs on Monday. The monograph needs its final chapter, and nobody can set it better than you."

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Two Men, One Name

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-men-one-name/

Jakov Kardum had two lives and one brother who did not exist. Old Kardum, who had raised him, had left him in trust a house in Fojnica and his granddaughter Lucija, and there Jakov was a serious man of thirty-four who paid his bills on time. Whenever Fojnica bored him, he would say he had to go to Sarajevo, because his younger brother Iskren had once again run up a debt, scratched someone's car, or gotten engaged to the wrong woman. In Sarajevo he then introduced himself as Iskren. There he had an apartment, friends, and, as of recently, a woman he wanted to marry.

Only one man knew about Iskren, and by accident. Alen Mandić, a friend from university, picked up Jakov's phone one evening to check the time and read the message on the screen: "Uncle Jakov, when are you coming? Mrs. Pajić is making me do German again. Lucija." "Who is Jakov?" asked Alen. "And who is Lucija?" Jakov had to confess everything, and Alen was delighted, because he had the very same system himself. His was called Cousin Bekir from Tešanj, eternally ill, and Bekir took a turn for the worse every time Aunt Ljubica Bracanović invited Alen to Sunday lunch. Alen called it going to see Bekir.

That Saturday Aunt Ljubica came to Alen's for coffee with her daughter Melisa, and Alen, as agreed, led his aunt into the kitchen to show her his new coffee machine. Jakov stayed in the living room with Melisa and proposed before the machine had started to hum. Melisa said yes at once. "Do you know why?" she said. "Ever since I was a little girl I have known I would marry a man called Iskren. That name cannot lie." Jakov cleared his throat. "And if my name were, say, Jakov?" Melisa frowned. "Jakov is a name for a man who returns borrowed books on time. No. I would not marry a Jakov."

Aunt Ljubica came back from the kitchen and sat down to examine her future son-in-law. She asked about his job, his salary, his apartment, and she was satisfied right up until she came to his parents. Jakov decided that here, at least, he would be honest. He had never known his parents, he said. In September 1990 he had been found as a baby in a travel bag from the cloakroom of the Sarajevo railway station. Old Kardum had checked his suitcase that day, and at the counter they had given him back someone else's bag by mistake, with a child in it. Aunt Ljubica stood up and put on her coat. "My daughter is not marrying into a cloakroom," she said. "Find your parents, sir. Or at least one of them, by the end of the year." In the hallway Melisa managed to memorize the address in Fojnica. Alen, who had been listening behind the door, memorized it as well.

In Fojnica, Lucija sat in the garden with a German grammar and did not study. Mrs. Zora Pajić, a retired teacher who was preparing her for an exam, read her the rules on grammatical cases and glanced toward the gate every five minutes, because at that hour every day Mr. Čubelić, head of the registry office at the municipality, walked past. Lucija was twenty and had a secret: in a notebook with pink covers she had been engaged for three months to her uncle's brother Iskren, whom she had never seen. In the notebook they had even broken it off once, out of jealousy, and then made up. A man who goes wrong so beautifully, she would say, must be more interesting than a man who pays the electric bill.

That afternoon a young man with a backpack rang at the gate and introduced himself as Iskren Kardum, Jakov's brother. Lucija dropped her grammar book. Within ten minutes Alen learned that he was engaged, that he had been forgiven, and that he had promised to mend his ways. He did not protest. For the first time in his life he wanted something to be true. And as they walked down to the river, Lucija told him the same thing he had already heard once in Sarajevo: that she could never love a man who was not called Iskren. "Not even an Alen?" he asked carefully. "Alen?" she laughed. "Alen is a name for a hairdresser."

Toward evening Jakov arrived, in a black suit and with a mournful face, determined to finish with Iskren once and for all. He gathered the household in the living room and announced that his brother had passed away in Vienna, suddenly, of pneumonia. Mrs. Pajić crossed herself, and Lucija began to shout for joy, because Iskren, she said, was alive and well and at that very moment eating fritters in the kitchen. Alen appeared in the doorway with a plate in his hand. "Brother," he said, and spread his arms. Jakov embraced him the way you embrace a man you would much rather send to Vienna.

Later they quarreled in the kitchen in whispers. Jakov demanded that Alen leave immediately. Alen said he could not, because he was engaged, and besides, he had not finished the fritters. Then, without saying so to each other, both of them went to the municipality. Mr. Čubelić received them half an hour apart, each with the same form for a change of personal name, and told each of them it was a rare and beautiful decision. Fojnica had not had a single Iskren for as long as he had worked there.

The next day Melisa arrived in Fojnica too, by bus, unannounced. Mrs. Pajić seated her in the garden with Lucija, and for the first ten minutes the two young women liked each other very much. Then Melisa mentioned that she was engaged to Iskren Kardum. Lucija put down her cup and said that was impossible, because she was the one engaged to Iskren Kardum, and since July, as it said in the notebook. Melisa said she had it on her phone, with a date. When the men came out into the garden, Lucija pointed at Jakov: "That is my Uncle Jakov." Melisa pointed at Alen: "That is my cousin Alen." They looked at each other, linked arms, and went into the house. The door closed quietly, and that was worse than slamming.

The men confessed through the door. Jakov said he had already filed a request to change his name. Alen said he had too. The door opened a hand's width. "Both of you?" asked Melisa. "At the municipality?" asked Lucija. That, they admitted, was brave, but it still left the question of parents, and the question of parents arrived at five in the afternoon, in a

white taxi from Sarajevo, in the person of Aunt Ljubica.

Aunt Ljubica had come for her daughter and refused to sit down. She gave her consent for Alen and Lucija as soon as she heard that Lucija's grandfather had left her a house in Fojnica and an apartment in Split. Jakov, as guardian, refused to give his until the aunt agreed to him and Melisa. They were all standing in the living room like pieces on a chessboard when Aunt Ljubica caught sight of Mrs. Pajić, who was carrying in the coffee. The tray rattled. "Zora," said Aunt Ljubica, in a voice that made even those who were already standing straighten up. "Where is the child?"

Mrs. Pajić sat down for the first time that day. In September 1990 she had worked as a nanny for Ljubica's sister Nevenka and her husband, Dr. Mandić. One morning she went out with the baby in the stroller and with a bag in which she carried the manuscript of her romance novel, in three notebooks. She was absent-minded, as women who write tend to be. She put the manuscript in the stroller and the baby in the bag, and checked the bag at the station cloakroom. The stroller was later found near the National Museum, with the novel in it, and out of shame she moved to Fojnica and never wrote again.

Without a word Jakov ran upstairs. They could hear him moving wardrobes and turning over boxes. He came back with an old brown bag with a broken zipper, the initials Z. P., and a faded sticker of Vučko from the Olympics. Mrs. Pajić recognized it before he had set it down. "My bag," she said. "I have been looking for it for more than thirty years." Jakov embraced her and said, "Mother." "Mr. Kardum," she said, "I am not married." Aunt Ljubica parted them with her umbrella. "You are my sister's son," she told Jakov. "Alen's older brother."

Alen sat down on the floor. Melisa asked only one thing: what they had called him. Aunt Ljubica could not remember. They had given him his father's name, she said, but she had been in Vienna that year, and she remembered everything by the weather, not by the people. Jakov opened

the glass cabinet of old Kardum, who had collected directories, and took out the Directory of Sarajevo Physicians for 1989. He leafed through to the letter M and read aloud, then once more, more quietly: "Mandić, Dr. Iskren, internist." Melisa kissed him in front of everyone. "I knew it," she said.

Mr. Čubelić, who had just then come to bring Mrs. Pajić flowers, stopped in the doorway with two forms in his hand. "I must reject one request," he said. "The gentleman is already Iskren." Alen reached for the other one. "Mine stands." Lucija lowered his hand. "Leave it," she said. "Alen is a lovely enough name for me. Just don't go to see Bekir anymore." "Bekir got better this morning," said Alen. "Completely."

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

First Love at the Wrong Station

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/first-love-at-the-wrong-station/

Emrah proposed to me in August at the Pannonian Lake, kneeling on the wet wooden steps and nearly dropping the ring into the salt water. From then on both our families kept saying it was high time the parents met. My dad died six years ago, and Emrah's mom lives in Innsbruck with another husband, so on that first Saturday in October there were supposed to be just four of us at the table: my mom, Emrah's father, Emrah, and me. Mom made sarma, pita, and three salads, even though Emrah had told her his father ate nothing but ćevapi. The apartment in Brčanska Malta smelled of bay leaves, and since noon Mom had changed her blouse twice.

Admir Softić rang the bell at seven on the dot, with a tray of baklava and a bouquet that had obviously been picked by the florist. Mom opened the door with her apron still tied around her waist. They looked at each other. The tray tipped, and Emrah caught it at the last moment. "Zemira," said Admir, not as a question but as if he were reading a name off a list. "Admir," said Mom. Then she took off her apron and folded it on the little cabinet in the hallway, which she had not done even when the principal of her school came to our house.

Dinner lasted two hours, and it was the strangest dinner of my life. Admir praised the sarma and looked at his plate. Mom brought out the salt three times, even though it was already on the table. They talked about the price of gas, about how Tuzla had changed and which café used to be where, and both of them kept saying "our high school," as if it had belonged only to them. Under the table Emrah kept nudging me with his knee. I nudged him back. When Admir said that Mrs. Fazlić, the chemistry teacher, still carried the same brown handbag, Mom laughed so loudly that she startled herself.

I caught her in the kitchen while she was cutting the baklava. "Who is he to you?" "Nobody," she said, and cut a piece no one could possibly eat. "Mom." She put down the knife and looked at me. "Sit down, Inela. He was my first love," she said. "From sophomore year until graduation. Ninety-nine. We were supposed to go to university in Sarajevo together. We agreed: the first of September, seven in the morning, at the station. I waited for him until noon. He never came." "And?" "And nothing. I enrolled here. He left. Pride is a strange thing when you are eighteen." Admir's laugh came through the door, and Mom went on cutting the baklava, smaller and smaller.

At the same time, out on the balcony, Emrah was getting the other version, while his father smoked a cigarette he promised would be his last. Admir told him he had waited at the station from half past six until ten, with two bags and a cassette he had recorded for the trip, and that Zemira never came. He thought she had changed her mind because of her parents, since her father had never liked a boy from Kreka. In the evening he left alone, and afterward he did his best to let nothing tie him to Tuzla. He was in Sarajevo, then in Germany, then he came back, married, divorced. "Which station?" Emrah asked, because my Emrah is an engineer and always asks the right questions. Admir looked at him as if he had asked what year it was. "The train station, of course. Where else would I wait for the train to Sarajevo?"

At midnight, after Admir had gone, Emrah and I sat on the steps in front of the building and compared versions. Mom, as it turned out when I asked her, had waited at the bus station, because she had always gone to Sarajevo by bus. Twenty-five years, two people, two stations, and not a single phone. We laughed until the neighbor on the second floor opened her window and asked whether we knew what time it was. Then we stopped. "What do we do?" Emrah asked. "We tell them," I said. "No," he said. "We invite them to the station. This time to the same one."

On Tuesday I told Mom that Admir wanted to hand over something for the wedding, something from his family, and that the easiest thing was to

meet on Friday at seven, at the bus station, because he was heading to Lukavac from there. Emrah told his father the same thing, only with my mom in the starring role. It was so transparent that I was sure they would see through us right away. They did not. On Friday, from five o'clock on, Mom changed into three different blouses and switched her earrings twice. "To hand over an envelope," I said. "To hand over an envelope," she repeated, and switched them a third time.

At half past six Emrah and I sat down in the café across from the station, by the window, with two juices and the feeling that we were in a movie we would never have paid to see. Mom arrived first, ten minutes early, and stood by platform three with her handbag pressed against her stomach. Admir came over from the parking lot at five to seven, in a blazer that was too tight across the shoulders. He saw her and stopped. She saw him and looked around for us, and then, you could see it even through the glass, she understood. She said something. He said something back. And then they were both laughing, the way people laugh when something has finally turned out right.

Admir took something small and yellowed out of the inside pocket of his blazer and showed it to her. Emrah found out later that it was a train ticket, Tuzla to Sarajevo, for the first of September, ninety-nine, never used. Mom opened her handbag and took out hers, a bus ticket, with the same date. I had not known she had it. I had not known either that she had spent the whole night after that dinner leafing through her graduation album, or that she had been carrying the ticket in her wallet ever since. They stood on the platform with two old tickets in their hands while the bus to Brčko boarded around them, and none of the passengers had any idea what they were looking at.

They did not go anywhere. They walked off toward the center of town side by side, not holding hands, but close enough that their shoulders touched with every step. At the traffic light they stopped, even though it was green, let it turn red and then green again, and then they crossed and disappeared from view. We were left with two juices somebody had to

pay for. Emrah paid. "And what if it works out for them?" he asked as we were leaving. "Then you will be my husband and my future stepbrother, or whatever it is called," I said. "Husband," he said. "Just husband. I do not want to hear anything else."

That winter Mom came home later than I did. She bought walking shoes and went up Ilinčica every Sunday, and I knew with whom, though I never asked. She hummed songs I knew only from her cassettes. Once I caught her dancing in the kitchen with a dish towel in her hand, pretending to wipe the stove. Admir started coming to Sunday lunches and, as it turned out, eats everything, not just ćevapi. Emrah said he had never seen him eat pita. Mom said he had loved pita back in ninety-eight.

One Saturday Admir brought the cassette he had recorded for the trip in ninety-nine. Mom carried the old cassette player up from the basement, it barely worked, and they listened to the tape in the living room from beginning to end, while I pretended to study in my room and listened through the wall. At the end of side two, after the last song, came the voice of Admir at eighteen: "Zemira, if you are listening to this, we are already past Doboj." Mom was silent for a long time, and then she laughed.

The wedding was in June, in a hall by the lake. Mom made the seating chart, and she put herself next to Admir, "for practical reasons," as she said, though none of us had asked why. When the band played an old song from the late nineties, they got up before we did. I watched Mom laughing with her head thrown back, just as in the graduation photo that had stood in the glass cabinet my whole childhood, and I had never asked who had been standing beside her, cut off at the edge of the picture.

Emrah leaned over to my ear. "So is this our wedding or theirs?" "Ours," I said. "Theirs started on a Friday, at the bus station, at seven."

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

The Dress in Tissue Paper

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dress-in-tissue-paper/

Ismeta sewed in the room above her shop, on a street that climbs from the Colorful Mosque toward the old fortress, and from her window she could see the Lašva, the rooftops, and, on clear days, the first slopes of Vlašić. That Saturday afternoon she hemmed a wedding dress for a girl from Novi Travnik, hung it on the dress form, swept up the threads, and arranged the needles in their little box by thickness, from the finest to the heaviest. She changed the canary's water. In a one-cup džezva she made coffee and drank it sitting down, her hands in her lap, the way coffee had been drunk in her house since she was left alone: slowly and without conversation.

Fourteen years earlier Rifat had gone to Germany, to the construction sites around Ulm. They had gotten engaged two weeks before he left, in a garden café at Plava Voda, and agreed they would marry when the house in Dolac was finished and the loan paid off. They thought it would take three years. Rifat came every August, for twenty days, brought her chocolates and perfume she did not wear, and every year said there was only a little left to go. In all that time Ismeta sewed. She sewed wedding dresses for other people's daughters, prom dresses, curtains for half the neighborhood. She learned to live so that she lacked nothing, and she did not notice when she had learned it.

In March Rifat came back for good. The house was finished, the loan paid off, and the wedding was set for the first Saturday in June. He came every evening, big and kind, with cement in the creases around his eyes, and always sat in her chair by the sewing machine. He leafed through her fashion magazines and put them back upside down. One evening he knocked over the button box with his elbow, and while he was apologizing, the buttons rolled under the wardrobe. When he had gone, Ismeta knelt down with a flashlight, gathered every one of them, and

sorted them by size, the way they had been. It took until midnight. She was not angry. She only noticed that she felt easier once he had gone.

In the yard, on a chain, lived Medo, an old yellow dog, who had bitten the mailman fourteen years ago and had not been off the chain since. The neighbors were more afraid of him than he deserved. Every evening Ismeta brought him a bone and water and talked to him as if to a child. "Once we are married, we will let him loose," Rifat said. "A dog has to run." Ismeta pictured Medo running down the street toward the old town, and the mailman, and the children coming out of Quran school, and said nothing.

Rifat's mother in Dolac was ill, and since the autumn she had been looked after by Adela, a neighbor's daughter, a twenty-nine-year-old nurse, tall and loud, who drove an old Golf and laughed so that you could hear it two gardens away. Ismeta had seen her a few times and liked her. Adela wore whatever suited her without a second thought, and there were few customers like that. In May Ismeta took her own wedding dress out of the wardrobe, sewn ten years before and wrapped in tissue paper. She tried it on. It fit her as it had the day she made it. She looked at herself in the mirror and wondered where her sewing machine would stand in the house in Dolac. Rifat had said: in the basement, there is room, and anyway you will not need it anymore, you will not have to work.

A week before the wedding, at dusk, she took a basket and walked up below the walls of the old fortress, where every spring she picked elderflowers for syrup. That year the elder had bloomed late and thick. When the basket was full, she sat down on a stone wall behind the bushes to rest her legs and watched the lights come on below. On the path beneath her she heard footsteps and two voices. She recognized them before she understood the words.

"I am going to Vienna in July," said Adela. "I got a job at a hospital." "Do not go because of me," said Rifat. "It is exactly because of you. I cannot watch you with her at the market every Saturday." For a long time they

were silent. Then Rifat said, quietly, as if to himself: "She waited for me for fourteen years. She sewed wedding dresses for others and waited. I cannot break that." "I know you cannot," said Adela. "If you could, I would not even love you." The footsteps moved off toward town. Ismeta stayed on the wall until it was completely dark, the basket of elderflowers in her lap, and she did not cry. She felt, and this surprised her, easier than she had all spring.

That night she made the syrup, as she did every year. She washed the blossoms, sliced the lemons, measured the sugar, and as the kitchen filled with the scent, she thought calmly, the way she cut cloth: first measure, then cut. Rifat is a good man. Adela loves him. He will marry her, Ismeta, because he promised to, and he will live with her honestly and unhappily in the house in Dolac, and she will be hunting for a place in the basement for her sewing machine. Before dawn she filled the bottles, stuck a slip of paper with the date on each one, and lined them up in the pantry, one beside the other.

The next evening she made coffee for two. When Rifat sat down in her chair, she sat across from him, in the customers' chair, and told him she could not marry him. She said she had lived alone too long and had gotten used to her own ways: the shop, the sewing machine, the quiet after eight, the buttons being where she had left them. She said she would not know how to live in Dolac and that she was afraid of what Medo would do without his chain. She mentioned neither the elderflowers nor Adela. Rifat looked into his cup for a long time. "Ismeta, I came back because of you," he said. "I know," she said. "And I will never forget that."

He tried to say something more, but it would not come, and Ismeta saw his shoulders, for the first time since he had come back, drop the way a man's shoulders drop when a load has been taken off them. At the door he stopped. "You are a good woman," he said. "A good seamstress," she said, and laughed, and he laughed too, with a relief he did not know how to hide. In the yard he bent down and stroked Medo's head. For the first time in fourteen years, Medo wagged his tail for someone other than her.

Travnik talked about it until Kurban Bajram. Her sister in Zenica called her twice to ask whether she had lost her mind, fourteen years, and then nothing. Ismeta returned the deposit to the restaurant at Plava Voda and let the musicians know. She wrapped the wedding dress in tissue paper again and put it on top of the wardrobe, where it had sat for ten years. In July she heard that Adela had not gone to Vienna. In September she heard that Adela and Rifat had married in Dolac, quietly, because of his mother.

That autumn Ismeta sewed two prom dresses and a coat for a woman from Turbe. In the evening she covered the sewing machine with a cloth, gave the canary water, and took Medo a bone. Medo barked once, just like that, out of habit, and lay down. Ismeta sat by the window with coffee in her own cup. Above the Lašva the lights were coming on, one by one, and she watched them until the last one was lit, and then she got up and washed her cup.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

Cards for a Golden Anniversary

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/cards-for-a-golden-anniversary/

Fifty years of marriage is no small thing, so the kids said it was time we went somewhere like normal people. Our son in Salzburg and our daughter in Banja Luka pooled their money and paid for seven days for us in Neum, half board, the Blue Cove hotel, a room with a sea view. Seven hundred and twenty marks all told, and in September at that, when it is cheaper, but Dragica does not know that, so do not tell her. I was against it. What do I need the sea for, I said, when I have the Bosna river right below the house. But once the kids had paid, it would not be right to let it go to waste.

We left Doboj on the bus at ten past five. Dragica had made enough potato pie for half the bus, and all the way to Zenica I explained to the driver that it was faster through Maglaj, even though he was already going through Maglaj. Behind us sat some man from Tešanj who talked on the phone the whole way, so twice I said loudly that other people have ears too. Near Jablanica we stopped for lamb, which I did not eat, because a portion was twenty-two marks, and I know what lamb costs in Doboj. We got to Neum at a quarter past three, forty minutes later than it says on the ticket, and I said so at the front desk too, so it would be on record.

On the second day, on the promenade, somebody shouted: "Dragica! Dragica Rakić!" Rakić is her maiden name, and nobody had called her that since seventy-five. Standing in front of us was Milenko Jović from Teslić, in white trousers and a hat, with every hair still on his head, which I did not like from the start. Dragica went out with him for two months in the spring of seventy-three, until I turned up at the dance at the community center, and from then on she was mine. That is how I tell it. Dragica says it was four months. Milenko was with his wife, Radojka, a big, cheerful woman who laughed even before anybody had said

anything.

That very evening the four of us were sitting on the terrace, because they too, as it turned out, were staying at the Blue Cove, one floor below us. Milenko took out a deck of cards and asked if I played tablić. Did I play tablić. At the retirees' club in Doboj nobody sits down across from me without a shot of rakija for courage. We played until eleven, and I won three games out of five, and Milenko said it was because he was not used to this kind of light. The next day he won three out of five, and I noticed, though I said nothing, that Radojka kept sitting behind me and laughing just when I had good cards.

On the third day Milenko suggested bocce on the court behind the hotel. I had never played bocce, but what could be hard about it: you throw the ball and watch where it stops. Milenko, it turned out, had been champion of the bocce club in Teslić four years running and had a certificate, which he had not brought, but he talked about it. Radojka applauded every one of his throws and only one of mine, when I hit his ball, and it turned out that had been good for him. I lost thirteen to two. He gave me one of the points out of pity, you could see it. I said the wind off the sea was to blame, and Dragica said there was no wind, and right in front of him.

After that the walks began. Every morning after breakfast Milenko and Dragica would go on ahead, along the promenade toward the border, talking about the old movie theater in Doboj, about the fortress, and about people who were gone, while I walked behind them with Radojka, who told me about her blood pressure, about her grandchildren in Sweden, and about how to make proper ajvar the proper way. I timed it on my watch: forty-seven minutes the first morning, an hour and ten the second. The third morning I sped up and passed them, so they would see I could walk too, and I got back to the hotel alone, because in the meantime they had sat down for coffee.

That evening, when Milenko and Radojka had gone to change for the music, Dragica said, eating her ice cream: "Milenko was always a good

dancer." She said it just like that, as if nothing were going on. "Then why didn't you marry him?" I asked. "He never asked me," she said, and went on eating her ice cream.

The music that evening came from a keyboard player from Čapljina, who played everything at the same tempo, sevdalinkas and pop hits alike. Milenko was the first to ask Dragica to dance, and I, so as not to sit there like a stump, asked Radojka. Radojka leads. I am telling you so you know, if she ever asks you: she leads and she does not ask. I kept trying to steer us closer to them, to hear what they were talking about, and that is how we ran into a waiter carrying three lemonades. The lemonades ended up on me. Milenko said even that had its charm, and Dragica laughed until she had to sit down. That night, for the first time in twenty years, we went to bed without saying good night to each other. I lay facing the sea, she lay facing the wardrobe, and we both pretended to be asleep, which she does worse than I do, because she only snores once she is really asleep.

In the morning I went down to breakfast first and sat at a different table, so it would be clear. Dragica sat with Milenko and Radojka and laughed at something. After breakfast I went down to the pier by myself and sat there for two hours, watching some man from Vienna fish and catch nothing, and that pleased me. I thought about what it would have been like if Dragica had married Milenko. She would have white trousers in the house and a bocce certificate on the wall. She would have a husband who knew how to dance. Do not think I was jealous. I was only doing the math. Around noon Radojka came out onto the pier, sat down next to me, took off her sandals, and put her feet in the sea.

"Stevo," she said, "you are a fool, but a good fool." And then she told me something neither Dragica nor I had known. For fifty years Milenko has been telling everyone in Teslić how Dragica Rakić left him for a tall fellow from Doboj who danced the kolo better than he did at the dance. "For fifty years I have been hearing about that kolo," Radojka said. "When we ran into you, he paced the room all night. He cannot beat you at anything, Stevo. That is why he cheats." "Cheats?" I asked. "At tablić," she said.

"When I sit behind you and laugh, it means you have good cards. That is how I have signaled him ever since we got married. As of today I am stopping, because I feel sorry for you."

That evening I came out onto the terrace with a new deck of cards, bought at the kiosk, and told Milenko we would play one last game, for the title. Radojka sat down beside Dragica, not behind me. We played until midnight. Milenko was sweating, I was counting cards, and Dragica was looking at me the way she looked at me in seventy-three, over a glass of juice, when I walked up to her and asked if she would join the kolo. I won seven to five. Milenko held out his hand and said it had been a real game. I said it had, and neither of us mentioned Radojka.

When we got back to our room, Dragica sat on the bed and said: "Stevo, I left Milenko because of the motorbike." I asked what motorbike. "He had a Tomos and he talked about nothing else. At the dance you talked about me." "And the kolo?" I asked. "You danced the kolo terribly," she said. "And you stepped on my foot twice." So I laughed, and then she laughed, until Radojka on the floor below banged on the ceiling with a broom, or whatever she had handy.

We set off for home on Saturday. Milenko and Radojka saw us to the bus, and Milenko gave me his phone number, for a bocce rematch, and I said I would think about it, which with me means no. From Mostar to Zenica Dragica slept on my shoulder. My arm went numb by Jablanica, but I did not move, and Milenko, if you ask me, would not have lasted even to Konjic. When we got off the bus in Doboj, Dragica looked up at the fortress and said the sea was lovely, but we have the Bosna right below the house. I said that seven days ago. I did not remind her. Let her have it.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

A Love Story in the First Person

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-love-story-in-the-first-person/

When I interpret in a courtroom, I speak in the first person. I saw, I was standing by the fountain, I do not know what time it was. The judge knows this, the court reporter knows it, the lawyers know it, and yet every time someone on the public benches turns and looks at me as if I had been there. I was not. I only stand beside the witness, a little to one side, so he can see both my hands and my face, and I lend him my voice. For this the court pays me by the hour, from nine in the morning until the judge gets hungry.

I was lending my voice before I had one of my own. My parents are deaf, both of them from birth, and in our apartment in Zenica my first word was not mama but the sign for milk. At eight I interpreted for my father at the bank, at eleven for my mother at the doctor's, at fifteen at a meeting of the building council, where the neighbor from the third floor asked me why my parents did not learn to talk normally. I interpreted that exactly, word for word, and my father stood up and left. Since then I have always interpreted exactly.

I first saw Faruk Ajanović in October, in the hallway on the second floor of the court. He was a witness in a case against a pickpocket who, in June, near the Sebilj, had pulled a wallet out of the backpack of a tourist from Malaysia. The police had camera footage that showed only a cap. Faruk had the face. He sold ceramics in a small shop in Sarači, and that day he had been standing in the doorway, clay up to his elbows, watching. He came to court in an ironed white shirt, but under his nails there was still a little clay, like a child who had been playing in the garden.

He testified quickly and precisely, the way people testify who have spent their whole lives watching instead of listening. He described how the man walked, a little on his toes, how he wore his watch on his right wrist, and how the lace on his left sneaker was untied, so that twice he stopped to

keep from falling. I said all of it in the first person, and the court reporter typed. Then defense counsel, attorney Dautović, stood up and asked how the witness could claim to know what had happened if he had heard nothing. I interpreted. Faruk looked at the lawyer, then at me, and answered slowly, so I would not have to hurry: "I did not hear him. I watched him. You, as far as I can see, only listened to him." I had to say it aloud, in my own voice, to a man in a two-thousand-mark suit. Judge Omanović lowered her eyes to the file, and the lawyer sat down.

In the hallway he was waiting for me by the coffee machine. "Thank you for saying it exactly the way I did," he signed. I told him I was not allowed to talk to a witness while the proceedings were under way. "How long do they last?" "In this building? Sometimes three years." He laughed without a sound, with his whole face, made the sign for patience, and went down the stairs. I stayed by the machine, holding a coin I had not put in.

I avoided Sarači until November. Then one Saturday, on my way to the bakery, I walked past his shop and stopped. On the shelves were coffee cups, bowls, and plates in a green the Miljacka has only in April. A small board hung on the glass, written in chalk: I am deaf, not mute. Write, point, draw. Faruk was sitting at the potter's wheel and did not see me. I did not go in. I bought bread and ate half of it on the way home, which I never do.

The verdict became final in February. The pickpocket got a suspended sentence, and the tourist from Malaysia sent the court a postcard thanking the witness. That same afternoon I walked into the shop in Sarači. Faruk was standing at the counter with a young couple from Japan, who were trying to ask in English whether the cups could survive a suitcase. I opened my mouth to interpret, out of habit, the way you open an umbrella at the first drop. Faruk raised his hand without looking at me. "No," he signed. "You are not at work today." He took a cup, wrapped it in newspaper, pushed it into a sneaker that stood under the counter, and put the sneaker in a box. The Japanese couple laughed and bought six. When they had gone, he turned to me. "Now," he signed.

"Coffee?"

We sat down in a small café called the Two Mulberries, behind the Bey's Mosque. The waiter, naturally, looked at me. I started to say two coffees, and Faruk took a napkin and wrote in capital letters: ONE WITH MILK, ONE PLAIN, BILL TO ME. The waiter read it, nodded, and left, and I felt embarrassed, as if I had been caught at something. When the coffee came, Faruk asked me, slowly: "When did you last say something of your own?" I did not understand. "In court you speak other people's words in the first person. At home, I am sure, you interpreted for your parents. What do you want?" My hands lay on the table, still, as if someone had switched them off.

I did not answer him that day, or the next. But I kept coming. On Saturdays I sat on a three-legged stool in the corner of the shop and watched the clay rise on the wheel under his palms. In the evenings we walked up to Vratnik and back, and on the tram we talked with our hands while the passengers watched us like television. For the first time I argued in sign with someone who was not my father. For the first time someone kissed me in the middle of a sentence, and I had to start over from the beginning.

I gave him my answer in March. We were sitting on the low wall below the Yellow Bastion, the city was in fog, and without thinking how it would sound in some other language, I signed: I want, sometimes, for nobody to need me. To sit at a table and just eat. Faruk looked into the fog for a long time. Then he took out his phone and wrote me a message, though I was sitting right beside him: Take me to your family.

We went to Zenica on the first Sunday in April, by train, with a box of coffee cups on our laps. My mother made potato pie and spinach pie, and my father put on the shirt he wears for Bajram. At the door, before I could say a thing, my father asked him which team he supported. Željezničar. My father made a sign I would not be allowed to interpret in any courtroom, and both of them laughed. At the table hands flew over

the pie. My mother showed Faruk her Zenica sign for the old town, he showed her the Sarajevo one, and they argued over which was prettier. He and my father debated Čelik and the price of clay. Nobody asked me to interpret anything.

I sat between them and ate. For the first time at that table I did not turn my head from one face to another, and I did not wait for someone to finish a sentence so I could repeat it to someone else. Before coffee my father tapped a finger on the table, the way deaf people ask for attention, and we all looked at him. He raised his glass of juice. "To Kanita," he signed, "who has no work today." My mother laughed, Faruk laughed, and I laughed with a mouthful of pie, and nobody waited for me to tell them what was funny.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

A Geranium Above the Buna

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-geranium-above-the-buna/

That year I was thirty-one and thought I had time for everything. I had been in Blagaj since June, because of an old mill on the Buna that a foundation from Mostar wanted to restore, and every day I measured stone, drew, and slept in a room above the bakery, with a window facing the cliff. I was born in Zagreb, and I had come to Mostar for work four years earlier and stayed. In the evenings I sat on the terrace of the restaurant by the spring, watched the water come out from under the cliff, green and cold, and listened to tourists speaking every language except mine.

One evening at the next table I heard Bosnian with a soft Swedish r. A brother and sister: Elmir, an engineer from Malmö, my age, and Merjem, who was twenty-one. Elmir asked me if I knew where he could buy good cheese, I told him, and until midnight we drank pomegranate juice and talked about Zagreb, about Malmö, and about how our people can be recognized anywhere in the world by the way they call a waiter. Merjem was silent the whole time and looked at me as if she were sizing me up for some role. When we got up, she said I had the hands of a mason, not an architect, and left before I could answer.

They had rented a house above the river, with a yard full of geraniums, and we saw each other every day. I could never catch hold of Merjem. One day she would sit on the terrace in a white dress and read, as upright as a schoolteacher, and answer me in complete sentences. The next day I would find her on the walls of Stjepan-grad, right on the edge, her legs dangling over the drop, eating cherries and spitting the pits toward the valley. On the third day, at the restaurant by the spring, in an apron she had borrowed from someone, she carried coffee to a group of Italians and pretended not to know a single word of any foreign language. Elmir would just shrug. "That's how she is," he would say. "She's trying out all

the things she could be."

He told me the truth one night, when Merjem had gone to bed and the two of us had stayed on the terrace over coffee. Merjem was his sister only through their father. In ninety-nine his father had come from Sweden to Blagaj for a month and fallen in love with a woman who worked at the bakery below the tekke. Merjem grew up here, with her mother, in a house near the river. When she was thirteen, her mother fell ill and died, and their father took her to Malmö, to a house where Elmir's mother never accepted her. "She thinks she owes everyone proof that she's worth keeping," Elmir said. "That's why she either says nothing or says everything at once." They had come, he said, so she could visit her mother's grave and see the house, which belonged to strangers now.

After that I looked at her differently, and she felt it. She stopped playing roles. One afternoon she took me to the house where she was born, behind the tekke, with blue shutters that the new owners had painted brown. She stood in front of the gate and would not go in. She told me about her mother, about the smell of bread at five in the morning, about how her first winter in Malmö she cried every morning because there was no river under the window. Then she turned to me and asked, quite calmly, whether I could live somewhere without a river. I said I didn't know. She nodded, as if I had said something else.

That evening I left their house late, and when I stepped out into the street, something fell at my feet from an upstairs window. A sprig of red geranium. I looked up, but the window was already empty. I took the sprig to my room, put it in a glass of water, and for a long time I could not fall asleep. I thought: what am I doing? Twenty-one years old, Malmö, a girl who becomes three different people in three days. I thought I had time.

The next day Elmir came to the mill. He stood in the doorway, beside my drawings, and said without any preamble that Merjem had kept him awake all night. She loved me, he said. She had not told him so, she had

shouted it, crying, at two in the morning, and made him promise they would leave at once, because she knew I could not want her. "I'm asking you as her brother," he said. "Not as someone who holds anything against you. Would you marry her?" I said what people say when they do not know: that I had known her for two weeks, that she was young, that it would take time. Elmir nodded. "Then we'll leave," he said. "But before that she wants to see you."

Around five a boy from the bakery brought me a scrap of paper. "Seven, at the mill. I have to." Only that. She came at seven exactly, in that white dress, and stopped on the threshold as if she did not know whether she was allowed in. She was pale and trembling, although it was warm, and she would not look at me. All I had to do was hold her. I know that now. Back then I stood between the millstone and the table with my drawings and talked. I said Elmir knew everything. I said she had made a mistake by telling him, that now nothing could go slowly, that everything was spoiled before it had begun. I talked like a man defending himself when nobody had attacked him.

"So it's my fault," she said quietly. I wanted to say it wasn't. I wanted to say something else entirely. But she was already at the door, then on the path along the river, white among the willows, and she was gone before I had moved from the spot. All I could hear was the water.

I looked for her until midnight. I went along the Buna to the spring, then back to the bridge, then up toward Stjepan-grad, with the flashlight on my phone, and I shouted her name at the cliff, which sent it back to me twice. Two older men were sitting by the tekke, and they told me they had seen a girl in white running toward the village. In the end I went to their house. Elmir opened the door in a T-shirt, tired. She was back, he said, wet to the knees, and she had locked herself in her room. He did not let me in, and I did not even ask. I said I would come in the morning. "Come," he said, and I did not know how to read the look he gave me.

I walked back through sleeping Blagaj and I was happy. That is what I am most ashamed of. I was happy because at last I knew what I wanted. In the morning I would come and tell her, in front of Elmir, in front of all of Blagaj if need be. In the morning. That night I did not want to wake the house, I did not want to knock on her window, I did not want her to think I had come only because I had been frightened. I wanted it to be done properly. I fell asleep just before dawn, with the geranium in a glass beside the bed.

At eight the house above the river was locked. The landlady, a woman watering the geraniums in the yard, told me they had left at four in the morning, by taxi to Sarajevo, to catch a plane. She gave me a note Merjem had left for me. "I stood on the threshold of the mill and waited for you to stop me. You talked about Elmir. Please don't look for us." Below it was her name, written in the large, careful letters children learn in first grade.

I looked for them, of course. I drove to the airport, where the morning plane had already taken off. I wrote to Elmir, and the messages stayed unread. Her profile disappeared within a day. In November I went to Malmö, found the street and the building, and there was some Swedish surname on the door. A neighbor said they had moved away, she did not know where.

Five years have passed. The mill was restored that autumn, and today they sell pomegranate juice in it to tourists who take pictures of themselves with the spring behind them. I have met other women, and some of them I have loved, the way you love when you know you have time. I keep the note and the geranium in an envelope, in the drawer of my desk. The geranium lost its color long ago and smells of nothing. The note is still folded in four, the way she folded it, and I do not open it, because I know by heart what it says.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

The Pomegranate Below the Crooked Bridge

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-pomegranate-below-the-crooked-bridge/

The door was bricked up in the summer of ninety-eight, and after that nobody in the stone house above the Radobolja ever spoke aloud about what had been behind it. The house had once had one owner and one courtyard with an old pomegranate tree. When the owner died, his heirs sold it in two parts, to two families, and in the very first year the Dizdars and the Hindićs quarreled over the courtyard, over the pomegranate and over the water tap. The court ruled nine years later, and the wire fence ran straight through the tree's crown. Between the room where Amila Dizdar slept and the room where Edvin Hindić slept there remained a wall one brick thick, where the door had once been, whitewashed white on one side and peach on the other.

The crack appeared in June, when Amila was studying for her pharmacology exam. At first it was a thin line in the whitewash, then a groove through which, when she turned off her light, she could see a sliver of someone else's lamp. She studied aloud, because she could not remember things any other way, and one night, after half past one, when she got the name of the same drug wrong for the third time, someone in the wall quietly told her the right answer. She froze. "Sorry," said the voice. "I've been listening for two hours. I thought you'd remember on your own, but you won't."

Edvin worked as a cook at the Lula restaurant, next to the Old Bridge, and came home after midnight smelling of the grill and onions. Amila had known him by sight all her life. She knew how he looked pushing his scooter up the cobblestones and how he lowered his head when he passed her father. She had never heard his voice. That summer she heard it every night. They talked in whispers, their faces against the whitewash, about

exams, about customers who sent back their ćevapi, about how Mostar in August was full of foreigners photographing the bridge while nobody photographed their street, and about how their parents had never explained what exactly had happened with that pomegranate tree. "My dad says your dad lied in court," she said once. "Mine says yours did," he said. "Maybe they're both right."

They had exchanged phone numbers by the second night, written on a scrap of paper pushed through the crack. But messages were for the daytime. The night belonged to the wall. At the end she would knock three times, he would answer three times, and both of them, though they never admitted it to each other, would press their lips to the cold whitewash, to the place where the crack was, as if that counted for something. Sometimes Amila scolded the wall, quietly, because it stood between them. Sometimes she thanked it, because it had cracked.

In October Amila's mother heard the whispering. She could not make out the words, only that her daughter was talking to the wall at two in the morning, and in the morning she told her husband. Rašid Dizdar did not shout. He set down his coffee cup and said only that if he ever heard his daughter had spoken a word to any Hindić, he would move her bed into the kitchen and patch the wall with cement. The same week old Ševko Hindić told Edvin almost the same thing, only more briefly. That night, through the crack, they decided they had had enough of whispering.

They agreed on Saturday, at one in the morning, when Edvin finished his shift, by the old pomegranate tree on the bank where the Radobolja flows into the Neretva, below the Crooked Bridge. In the morning, Edvin said, they would knock together, first on one door, then on the other. "Or we'll run away to Sarajevo together," said Amila, and it was not clear whether she was joking.

She left the house at half past midnight, barefoot as far as the gate, her sneakers in her hand. Around her neck she wore her grandmother's silk scarf, a red one, the only thing she wanted to have on when she said

something important. There was nobody on the bank. The Neretva was louder than in the daytime, green and black under the single lamp on the bridge. Under the pomegranate tree the ground was covered with fruit that nobody had picked up, split and trampled, and the juice was red on the stone. She sat down on a low wall and waited.

The dog came out of the darkness under the bridge without a sound and barked only when it was close. It was big and yellow, with a torn ear, one of those that sleep by the souvenir stalls during the day and make the rounds of the dumpsters behind the restaurants at night. Amila did not even have time to be properly frightened. She jumped up and ran up the stone steps toward the street above, felt her scarf slide off her neck and her phone fall out of her jacket pocket, and did not stop. She hid in the doorway of a closed souvenir shop and listened to the dog bark, then growl, then fall silent. For a long time she did not dare come out.

Edvin was twenty minutes late, because that very night the owner of the Lula wanted the grill cleaned properly. He did not find Amila on the bank. Under the pomegranate tree he found her scarf, torn and wet with something darker and redder than silk, with paw prints all around it, and two yards farther on, on a stone right by the water, her phone with its screen smashed. He called her. The phone lit up by his feet. That was when he began shouting her name.

He did not think the way he would have thought in daylight. All he saw was the red on the silk and a river that carries off everything that comes to it. He called the police and said something that made no sense: a girl, a dog, the Neretva, the Crooked Bridge. Then he took off his jacket, turned on his phone's flashlight and started climbing down the rocks into the water, holding on to the stone, calling Amila's name into the darkness downstream, where the river foamed around the rocks. The water was October water, cold, and it was already up to his waist. He did not feel it.

Amila heard him from the doorway of the souvenir shop. She recognized her own name, spoken the way only one voice had ever spoken it through

the wall. She ran down. Edvin was standing in the Neretva up to his shoulders, one hand on the rock, and the current was pulling at him. She saw his hand slip off the stone. "Edvin!" He turned toward her voice and lost his hold, and in that same instant she was already at the edge of the rock, on her knees, holding him by his shirt collar with both hands. She pulled until he caught hold of the stone, then of her, until they were both lying on the wet steps, breathing as if they had run all the way from the Buna.

For a long time they said nothing. Then Edvin raised the hand in which he was still clutching the scarf. "I thought this was blood," he said. Amila looked at the red silk, then at the trampled fruit under the tree, and began to laugh and cry at the same time. "It's pomegranate," she said. "You fool, it's pomegranate." A police car arrived with its blue light flashing, and the two officers spent a long time looking at two soaking wet people and a yellow dog that sat calmly to one side, as if it had nothing to do with anything.

They got home at three, through the main gate, his jacket on her shoulders. In the courtyard the lights were on on both sides of the fence. Amila's mother had found the empty bed and woken the whole house, and the noise had woken the Hindićs too. Rašid Dizdar stood in his pajamas on one side of the wire, Ševko Hindić in a tracksuit on the other, and for the first time in twenty-seven years both men were looking at the same thing: the torn red scarf in Edvin's hand. Rašid went pale. "It's pomegranate," said Amila before anyone could ask anything. "Just pomegranate." Rašid looked for a long time at his neighbor's soaking son. "Come in and change, son," he said at last. "You'll freeze before you get around to your own door."

The next morning Ševko Hindić brought his son a cup of tea and sat down on the edge of the bed, and then a knocking came from the wall, from Amila's side. Three times, slow and heavy, the way a man of sixty knocks when he does not know how hard you are supposed to hit a wall. "Ševko," said Rašid Dizdar's voice through the crack. "I know you're

there. We need to talk about the pomegranate tree." Ševko looked at his son, then at the wall. He set the tea down on the floor, walked over to the wall and, after twenty-seven years, knocked three times.

ROMANCE · 7 MIN READ

A Proposal Across the Property Line

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-proposal-across-the-property-line/

Selver Kurtić put on the suit he had graduated in, took his blood pressure twice, once on his left arm and once on his right, and crossed the stream that separates his yard from Salko's. It was Saturday, around ten, in Arnautovići near Visoko, and a morning haze was rising off the Bosna. At the gate he was met by Salko's tornjak sheepdog Mrki, who sniffed his trouser leg and walked off, as if he had seen everything that interested him.

Salko, a retired leatherworker who had tanned hides for forty years in the Visoko factory, sat under the grapevine shelling beans. When he saw the suit, he stood up and wiped his hands on his trousers. "Selver, son, what happened? Has somebody died?" "Nobody has died, Uncle Salko," said Selver, and sat down, then stood up, then sat down again. "I have come with a request. I just hope I do not get sick while I say it. My left eye has been twitching since this morning." Salko poured him water from the jug. Selver drank it, took heart drops out of his pocket, put twenty into the glass, drank that too, and then said, looking at the beans, that he would like to ask for Amina's hand.

Salko dropped the beans into the bowl and hugged him so hard that they both nearly fell off their chairs. He said he had been waiting for this since Selver learned to walk, that his late wife had always said the two of them would marry, and that he would call Amina right away. "Please do not tell her," Selver begged. "I will do it myself. I have to do it myself." Salko went into the house, and Selver stayed under the vine and took the pulse at his wrist, counting out loud.

Amina came out in a tracksuit with gardening gloves on, because she had been transplanting peppers. She was thirty-one, worked at the pharmacy in Visoko, and was the only person in the village who did not believe Selver when he said he was ill. "Why are you all dressed up?" she asked.

"Going to court?" Selver stood up, straightened his tie and began from a distance, the way he had practiced in front of the mirror for two weeks. He said they had known each other since childhood, that their houses stood side by side, and that their gardens, as everyone knew, were separated only by the stream and a strip of land under the old walnut tree, which had been his since time immemorial.

"What do you mean yours?" said Amina, and took off her gloves. "The walnut is ours. My great-grandfather planted it." Selver said that his great-grandfather had planted the walnut, and that her great-grandfather had only stood next to him giving advice. Amina said the land registry said otherwise. Selver said the land registry knew nothing, because it had been drawn up by a man from Kakanj who was tipsy by noon. Amina said it was a disgrace, that he came into their house in a suit to steal their walnut, and that she would not give it up even if he dug it out himself with a spoon. "I did not come because of the walnut!" Selver shouted, clutching his heart. "Then what for?" Amina asked. Selver opened his mouth, felt his left leg go numb, and said he would not stay there another minute.

He went back across the stream limping, with one leg wet to the knee, because he had missed the stepping stone. Salko burst out of the house with coffee on a tray and asked where his son-in-law was. "What son-in-law?" said Amina. "He came to take our walnut." Salko set the tray down on the table so hard that the coffee spilled. "He came to propose to you, you poor fool! He practiced for two weeks. Half the village knows, only you do not!" Amina went pale, then red, then ran to the stream and started calling for Selver, in the voice you use to call a cow that has run off.

Selver came back slowly, with a wet trouser leg and the blood pressure monitor in his hand. He sat down under the vine. Amina brought him a towel and said, calmly, that the walnut, if he really insisted, was perhaps half his. Selver said she was a very reasonable woman and that he had always known it. They were silent. Salko watched from the kitchen

window and waved at Selver to begin. Selver took a breath, said "Amina, I would like," and at that moment his Garo, an old barak hound, ran under the table and lay down at Amina's feet.

"Look at him," said Selver, touched. "The best hound from Visoko to Kakanj. Last autumn he chased a fox out of Meho's henhouse all on his own." Amina laughed. She said Garo was a good dog, but old, that he limped on a hind leg and his lower jaw was short, while their Mrki was a real dog, a tornjak, purebred, with papers from Livno. Selver said Mrki was not a dog but a rug that barked. Amina said Garo could not find his own tail. Selver said Mrki's mother had been an ordinary mutt from Kralupi. Amina jumped up from her chair.

The quarrel that followed could be heard as far as the bus stop. Salko came out to calm them down and within five minutes was shouting louder than both of them, because he had been giving Garo bones for years and knew that Garo did not limp, he was faking it. Selver said his heart was stopping. Nobody heard him. Then he stopped in the middle of a sentence, went pale, sat down on the ground and slowly leaned back against the trunk of the walnut. His eyes closed.

"He is dead," said Amina. "He died because of a dog, before he asked me." She knelt, unbuttoned his collar, felt for his pulse the way they had taught her in the first aid course, and told her father to bring water. The pulse was there, fast and offended. Salko brought the water and poured it over Selver's head with all the love he had. Selver opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Amina, who was holding his hands. "Selver," she said, "ask what you came to ask, while you are still alive."

"Will you marry me?" asked Selver, his hair dripping. "I will," said Amina. Salko said "Thank God," kissed them both on the forehead, then made them kiss properly, because, he said, this village had waited long enough. They kissed under the walnut, briefly and a little awkwardly, in front of Salko, Garo and Mrki. Selver said he did not feel the least bit ill, for the first time in his life.

"But Garo is still the better dog," he added. "He is not," said Amina, still holding his hands. "He is." "He is not, and the walnut is ours." Salko went into the house for fresh coffee, shaking his head, and did not come back for a long time, because he was calling his sister in Visoko to tell her. When he returned, the two of them were still arguing under the walnut, now about whose house they would live in. Garo and Mrki lay side by side in the shade, right on the boundary, and neither of them cared whose it was.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

Mostar from Above

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/mostar-from-above/

I tell tourists that the Old Bridge is as tall as a seven-story building and that the Neretva beneath it is cold even in August. The first I read in books, the second I heard from other people. I have checked neither. I cross the bridge four times a day, five in summer, and every time I look at the stone under my feet, at those white ridges the stonemasons left so that people would not slip. I count them while I talk. To this day I have never gotten the same number twice.

My name is Ivona, and I have worked for the Stone Path agency since I finished my history degree at the university in Mostar. The pay is not much, but in summer there are tips, and in winter I have time to read. I have been afraid of heights for as long as I can remember. Not because of some fall or accident, but just like that, the way someone is afraid of dogs or the dark: my knees go soft, my palms sweat, and the world tilts to one side. That is why I cross the bridge right down the middle, with my umbrella raised so the group can see where to go. The tourists look at the water. I look at their faces, and it seems to me that I see what they see.

Ervin stood on the parapet every morning at eleven, when I brought the first big group. He wore black swim trunks, his hair wet, a towel over his shoulder and a cap in his hand. He held the cap out toward the tourists and repeated the same sentence in four languages: thirty more euros and I jump. Until he has collected it, he stands. People stood with him, took pictures of him and waited, and my schedule came apart like wet paper. "Professor, bring them closer, I don't bite," he would call out to me. "We have lunch at half past twelve," I would answer. "The Neretva doesn't know about lunch," he would say, and hold out the cap again.

He called me Professor because in front of the group I listed the years: 1566, when the bridge was finished, 1993, when it was destroyed, 2004, when it was opened again. Once, while I was waiting for him to collect his

money, he said that I knew when the bridge was built but did not know what it looked like. "I look at it every day," I said. "You look at it from the bank, like a postcard. You have never looked down from it. I see how you walk, down the middle, as if it were ice." I answered that he, for his part, knew what the bridge looked like but knew nothing about it except the price. He laughed. I thought I had won.

At the end of June I brought a group of retired teachers from Lyon. One of them, tall and loud, said in English, while Ervin stood with his cap, that he would pay double if the guide climbed up there too. The group laughed. Ervin, more as a joke than out of any malice, held out his hand to me. "Come on, Professor. Just stand next to me, you don't have to jump." People started clapping. I took two steps toward the parapet and the bridge tilted. I know it did not tilt. But I grabbed the stone, fell to my knees in the middle of the bridge in front of thirty people, and could not get up until two of the teachers lifted me under the arms.

I finished the rest of the tour as if nothing had happened. I told them about the coppersmiths, showed them where to get the best coffee in Kujundžiluk, and smiled through lunch. Only later, when the bus had left for Počitelj, did I sit down on the steps below the Tara tower, and my hands shook so badly that I could not open a bottle of water. Ervin found me there toward evening. He was in jeans and a dry T-shirt, and without the wet hair he looked older and somehow smaller. He sat down one step below me. "I didn't know," he said. "Now you know," I said. "You can tell the tourists. You'll have one more story for the cap."

He was quiet for a long time. Then he asked if I knew why he collected money before a jump. I said I knew, because he needed it. "That too," he said. "But mostly because I'm afraid. I've been jumping for thirteen years, and every time, up on the parapet, my knees shake just like yours did a little while ago. The money is an excuse to stand there longer. While I collect, the fear settles a little, and when it settles, I jump. The tourists think I'm greedy. Let them. Better that than for them to see." I looked at him and did not know what to say. For the first time someone beside me

had admitted being afraid, and it was the very man I had envied every morning.

He proposed a deal. I would tell him about the bridge, since he really knew nothing about it except how to fall from it, and he would teach me height, but from below. That evening, after the last group, we went down to the rocks under the Halebija tower, where the locals swim and where tourists rarely come. From below the bridge did not frighten me. It was only an arch, white and thin, as if someone had drawn it in a single stroke. Ervin made me stand on a rock as high as a chair. Then on the wall by the river. Then on another wall, a higher one. Each time he stood below and said nothing, only waited, the way he waited with the cap.

I told him about Hajrudin, the builder, and how they say that on the day the scaffolding came down he fled the town, because he did not believe his bridge would stay standing. Ervin had not known that. He said he was glad the builder had been afraid too. He brought figs from Blagaj and cold tea in a thermos, and I brought books he did not read. One evening, when I climbed to the window at the top of the Tara tower and looked down without closing my eyes, he came down the stairs after me and kissed me on the last step, as if that too were part of the exercise.

The diving competition was on the last Saturday in July. Ervin said he would not jump if I was not watching. I said I would watch from below, from the rocks, as always. "From below you see the fall," he said. "From above you see the man." I watched him from below. He jumped beautifully and took third place, and when he surfaced he waved to the riverbank, and I waved back and knew that it was not enough for me.

On the first Tuesday in August I brought a group from Seoul, twenty-two people with sun hats and fans. I did not walk down the middle. I went up to the parapet, put my palms on the stone, warm from the sun, and looked down. The Neretva was as green as bottle glass. The swimmers on the rocks were as small as crumbs. I saw the wall I had first stood on and the rock as high as a chair, which from above looked no bigger than a

matchbox. My knees were shaking. I did not move.

Ervin stood on the parapet three steps from me, cap in hand. He had already started collecting. He saw me and lowered his arm. He looked at my palms on the stone, then at my face, then at my palms again. Then he left the cap on the parapet, turned to my group and said, "No collecting today." And he jumped right away, without waiting, for the first time in thirteen summers. I watched the whole jump from above. I saw him spread his arms like a swallow, bring them together just above the water, and the Neretva take him in almost without a sound.

When he surfaced, he did not wave to the bank. He tipped his head back and searched for me on the bridge, and found me where I had never been. A woman from the group asked me in English whether he was my boyfriend. I said he was part of the tour. I picked up the empty cap from the parapet and took it with me. On the way back across the bridge I did not count the ridges. I looked down, where a wet man sat on a rock, waiting for my shift to end.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

A Carnation from the Charity Ball

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-carnation-from-the-charity-ball/

That evening, in the garden of a café on the Vrbas, the young people were arguing about how much a man needs to know about the family he marries into. Some said it was enough to know the girl, others that you always marry her father too. Miloš Vujić, who was seventy-two and had been listening in silence until then, his hands resting on his cane, said at last that it was not a matter of how much you know, but of which morning you happen to see. When they asked him what he meant by that, he ordered another coffee and told them this.

I was twenty-four and head over heels in love. Don't laugh, that's how people put it, but with me it was literal. I had finished mechanical engineering, was waiting for a job, and lived with my mother in Borik, and everything I did, I did in order to see Natalija Kosorić. She was tall, she had a long neck and a smile that started in her eyes and only then came down to her mouth. Half of Banja Luka was in love with her. I was only the most persistent. And her father liked me, or so it seemed to me. He invited me to Sunday lunches, asked me about machines, poured my rakija himself, from his own bottle, and promised me a place in the company's design office as soon as my diploma arrived.

The ball was a charity ball, for the children's hospital, in February, in the great hall of an old hotel near Gospodska Street. The orchestra from the cultural center was playing, the women wore long dresses, and the men wore suits that were tight across the shoulders. Natalija was in white, with a carnation pinned below her shoulder. I danced a waltz with her, then a tango, then a waltz again, and whenever someone else came up to her, she would say she had already promised that dance to me. I drank nothing. I was drunk on her and on the music, and on the way the hall smelled of cologne, of wax, and of the snow people brought in on their coats.

Near the end, around two o'clock, the organizers asked Director Kosorić to open the last waltz with his daughter. Velimir Kosorić was the director of the largest wood products company in the city, a man whose name was spoken with respect in the bars and in the city offices alike. He was as tall as she was, gray-haired, upright, with a mustache he groomed as if it were part of his job. People stepped back and made a circle. He held out his hand to his daughter, bowed slightly, and the orchestra began.

He did not dance much, but he danced precisely, with the old-fashioned seriousness of people who had learned to dance at a class in their youth. I looked at his shoes. They were black, old, resoled many times and polished to a shine, and that moved me more than anything, because I knew the man had money for a hundred new pairs. Later I heard he wore them on purpose, because he liked to say he came from a working family and did not forget where he came from. When the waltz ended, he brought Natalija over to me, as if handing her over, said, "Take care of her for me, young man," and went back to his table. People applauded him. I applauded hardest of all.

When we said goodbye, on the hotel steps, Natalija gave me her carnation. She told me to put it in water and said she would come and check whether I had kept it. It was, I think, the happiest moment of my life, and I know that so surely because it lasted only three more hours.

I could not sleep. At home I put the carnation in a glass, changed my clothes, and went out again, at five in the morning, because my room felt too small. A fine snow was falling. I walked along the Vrbas, across the bridge and on down the bank, and my feet carried me on their own toward the Kosorić house, which stood just past the factory grounds of the wood company, by the river. I only wanted to see her window. I imagined that she could not sleep either and that she was thinking of me.

When I came near the fence around the factory grounds, I heard voices. In the yard, under a floodlight, between stacks of planks, stood two rows of workers in blue coveralls, facing each other, like a line of guests at a

wedding. Between them, at the head of the rows, stood a man of about sixty, without a jacket, in his shirt, holding his cap in his hand. Next to him, on the snow, lay a sack from which pieces of firewood had spilled. And in front of them all, in a long black coat over his evening suit, stood Director Kosorić.

Later I found out what had happened. Mićo Gajić, the night watchman, twenty years with the company, had been caught carrying a sack of scrap wood out of the grounds. At home he had a sick wife and a cold stove. Someone had called the director at four in the morning, and the director had come straight from the ball, without changing. He lined up the first shift that had arrived and ordered Mićo to walk between them, slowly, from the beginning of the rows to the end, and every worker, as he passed, was to say one word to his face. Thief.

And that is how it went. Mićo walked step by step, his head bowed, his cap pressed to his chest as if in church, and the men spoke, one after another, some loudly, some quietly, some looking down at the snow. Thief. Thief. Thief. The director walked beside him and listened. When they reached a young man near the end of the row, the boy mumbled something no one could hear. Kosorić stopped. He stepped so close that their faces almost touched and said calmly, in the same voice in which he had told me three hours earlier to take care of his daughter: "Louder. Or tomorrow you will be standing in his place." The boy said it louder. His voice broke in the middle of the word.

Then the director turned and looked toward the fence. He saw me. I know he saw me, because I was standing under a streetlamp, in the same coat I had worn at the ball, and because for a moment something shifted in his face. But then he looked away, as if I were anybody, a passerby, a dog, and told the foreman to see Mićo to the gate and not to pay him his wages for that month. He took his gloves out of his coat pocket and pulled them on, finger by finger. That is how I remember him. The gloves, finger by finger.

I don't remember how I got home. I remember feeling sick, the way you feel sick when you have eaten something spoiled, except that I had eaten nothing. My mother asked me what was wrong, and I said I was tired from dancing. The carnation stood in the glass on the table. I looked at it for a long time. I did not throw it away. But that day I did not go to the Kosorićs' for lunch, although I had been invited, and I did not go the following Sunday either.

Love, children, does not end all at once. It goes out like a stove. I saw Natalija a few more times that spring. She knew nothing, she was guilty of nothing, and she was as beautiful as before. But whenever she smiled, with that smile that started in her eyes, I saw the yard, the snow and the gloves, finger by finger. Once we were walking below the Kastel fortress, by the river, and she told me her father was asking why I no longer came and that the job in the design office was still waiting for me. She asked me what was wrong. I did not know what to tell her. How do you tell a girl you have fallen out of love because of her father? In the fall she married a doctor from Prijedor. I heard she was happy. I hope she was.

"And me?" Miloš laughed, when one of the girls in the group asked him what had become of him. "I didn't go to work for the wood company, even though a job there had already been promised to me. I went to a small workshop in Laktaši and stayed there thirty years. Kosorić got a medal, and later a street, not here, but in the town where he was born. I don't know whether he was a bad man. Maybe he believed that was how things should be done. Maybe he knew something I didn't." He fell silent and looked at the river. The young people were silent with him. In the end someone asked what had happened to the carnation. "It stood in the glass until it wilted," said Miloš. "Then my mother threw it out. I didn't tell her not to."

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

The Apprentice Who Jumped the Wall

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-apprentice-who-jumped-the-wall/

In the window of my shop in Trebinje, between the wedding bands and the little crosses, a flowerpot of baked clay has stood for three years now, glued together in four places. Customers ask how much it costs, and I tell them it is not for sale, because it is the most expensive thing I have ever sold. Then I let them think old Simo the goldsmith has gone a little soft in the head, and I tell them how my apprentice Uroš married the daughter of the merchant Momo Kecojević.

Uroš came to me from Ljubomir at twenty, with hands bigger than my molds and a patience that cannot be taught. In five years he learned everything I knew and a few things I did not. He was quiet, wore the same navy jacket winter and summer, and sent every mark he earned home. When Miss Ksenija Kecojević first walked into the shop in March, with her grandmother's bracelet whose clasp had broken, Uroš froze with the loupe in his eye as if someone had nailed him to the chair.

Ksenija was twenty-four then, had studied economics in Belgrade, and had come back to keep her father's books, although her father still kept them himself, in his head. Momo owned a wholesale business on the edge of town, three grocery stores, and a stone house by the Trebišnjica, with a high wall and a fig tree peeking over it. He guarded his daughter like the company seal. Ksenija looked at Uroš's hands and said: "Master, this is a delicate clasp, please don't fix it with a hammer." Uroš repaired the clasp so that the joint could not be found even under the loupe, and when she came for the bracelet, he would not take any money.

From then on Ksenija passed our window every morning, on her way from the square with the plane trees to her father's office. For the first few weeks she did not even turn her head. Then she began stopping to look at earrings she did not need. In July she came in once to ask the price of a silver chain and stayed half an hour, because Uroš was

explaining to her how wire is drawn, and I went into the storeroom so as not to be in the way. She told him he was boring. The next day she came again, to tell him once more how boring he was.

Momo heard about it from someone, because in Trebinje everything is heard from someone. He came into the shop, bought a gold pen for his best man and, while I was wrapping it, said loudly, so that Uroš at his bench would hear: "Simo, tell your apprentice to look at the gold, not at my house. My daughter is marrying a doctor." The doctor was Vojin, a dentist from Belgrade, with a practice in Vračar and a mother who was already choosing the hall. The engagement was set for the first Saturday in September.

Uroš worked all through August without a word. On the Thursday before the engagement he asked me to lend him the ladder. I did not ask why. For forty years I have watched gold melt, and I know there are things you should not touch until they cool.

On Friday, at six in the morning, when the bakeries on the square raise their shutters and the women from Ljubomir lay out cheese and kajmak at the market, Stojanka Bodiroga, the Kecojevićs' neighbor, went out for bread. First she heard barking, and then she saw the goldsmith's apprentice in his navy jacket climbing down over the Kecojević wall, through the branches of the fig tree. Behind him he knocked a pot of basil off the wall, and it shattered on the sidewalk. Uroš jumped down, buttoned his jacket up to his throat, looked at Stojanka, and said: "Good morning, Aunt Stojanka. I only beg you, not a word to anyone." Then he walked off down the street, unhurried, like a man with a clear conscience and something valuable in his pocket.

Stojanka kept her promise until seven. By seven the baker knew, by eight the market, by nine the taxi drivers in front of the bus station, to whom Neđo, Uroš's friend, confessed over coffee that around midnight he had driven the apprentice to the Kecojević gate and that the boy had asked him to keep quiet. By noon half of Trebinje knew that Ksenija Kecojević

was letting the goldsmith in over the fig tree, and by evening that it had been going on since spring.

Ksenija burst into the shop at noon with the shards of the flowerpot in a plastic bag and shook them out onto the glass above the wedding bands. "Are you out of your mind?" she asked Uroš, and did not even look at me. "You have never been in our garden. I have never let you in. Half the town is looking at me as if I were out of a soap opera." Uroš put down the loupe. "I was in the garden," he said. "From five to six. I sat under the fig tree and waited for Stojanka. Your family was asleep, you were asleep, and the dog has known me since July, because I've been bringing it bones from the ćevapi place." Ksenija said she would tell everyone the truth. "Tell them," said Uroš. "Who will believe you? Stojanka saw me." She grabbed the largest piece of the flowerpot, and I feared for the window, but she only put it in her bag and slammed the door behind her.

She came back an hour and a half later. She was no longer angry, or she was, but in a different way. She sat down on the customers' chair and told us that on her way three people had asked her when the wedding was. The woman at the market had given her a bag of figs and said "for the bride, from the heart." By the cathedral the priest's wife had asked her whether the wedding would be up at Hercegovačka Gračanica. And at the pharmacy she had heard the newest version, in which Uroš came into the garden over the fig tree and left through the gate, while Momo, in his pajamas, held the ladder for him. That was when she began to laugh. She laughed so hard that I brought her a glass of water, and Uroš stood behind the counter, red to the ears, not knowing where to look.

"You are crazy," she told him when she caught her breath. "You are crazy and you lied to all of Trebinje." "I only lied to Stojanka," said Uroš. "Trebinje made up the rest on its own." Then he took a little box of red velvet out of the drawer and set it in front of her. Inside was a ring of gold he had bought out of every paycheck, with a fig leaf engraved so finely that it showed only when the ring was turned toward the light. "I started making it the day you told me not to fix things with a hammer," he said.

"If the doctor had come on Saturday, it would have stayed in the drawer." Ksenija turned the ring toward the window and looked at the leaf for a long time.

Momo came at five in the afternoon. The doctor's mother had called him from Belgrade at three, because someone had sent her a message on Viber, and told him that her son was not a man who got engaged to a girl all of Herzegovina was talking about. Momo came in stooped, sat down on the customers' chair, and was silent for a long time. Then he said to me, not to Uroš, that the Kecojević house had always been a clean house and that a shame like this could be washed away by nothing but a wedding. "Let them marry by Mitrovdan," he said. "And let no one say I did not give them my blessing."

Ksenija, who was standing by the window, said she would think about it. Her father looked at her as if he were seeing her for the first time. Uroš searched under the counter for a cloth for the glass, because his hands were shaking. "I have thought about it," said Ksenija after a minute, and put the ring on her finger herself, before anyone could put it on for her. Momo let out a breath, stood up, straightened his tie and, like a true merchant, asked me how much the wedding bands would cost him and whether there was a discount for the Kecojević house.

I told him there was, but that he was paying for Stojanka's new flowerpot. Ksenija took the largest piece out of her bag and put it back among the shards on the counter, and that evening I glued the pot together in four places. That is why I say it is the most expensive thing I have ever sold: for it I gave away the best apprentice I ever had. Uroš and Ksenija have their own shop now, on the other side of the square. When some tourist asks me why an old flowerpot stands in a goldsmith's window, I just point past the plane trees, to where Ksenija Bjelica, once Kecojević, is waving to me through the glass.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

A Key That Opens Nothing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-key-that-opens-nothing/

People in Sarajevo have been waiting by the Eternal Flame for as long as anyone can remember, and everyone who waits there pretends not to be waiting, but to be reading the plaque or looking at the shop windows on Ferhadija. Amela arrived half an hour early and did the same. A fine April rain was falling, the kind you do not see but only feel on your face. She had an umbrella, but she did not open it. She recognized him by his walk before she recognized his face: he was coming from the Cathedral, leaning slightly forward, hands in his pockets, as if pushing against something. He was fifty-one, with a gray beard and the same leather jacket, or one very much like it.

The last time they had seen each other was at the bus station, one April morning in 1992. Her mother had somehow gotten two seats on a bus to Split for her and her younger brother, and she kept telling everyone it was for two weeks, until things calmed down. Igor ran alongside the bus as it pulled out of the station and through the open window tossed into her lap the key to his parents' flat on Koševsko Brdo. "So you'll have somewhere to come when you get back," he shouted. That was the last thing she heard from him with her own ears.

Getting from Split to Melbourne took her two years, a refugee camp in Germany, and a twelve-page form. In Melbourne she worked the night shift at a biscuit factory in Dandenong and studied English in the evenings, and then she became a lab technician at a hospital. She married Kemal from Prijedor, a good man who cooks beans on Sundays, and had two sons who understand Bosnian but speak it as if they were reading it off a sheet of paper. Her mother had died the year before. She had come to sell the flat in Alipašino Polje where she grew up. She had written to Igor three weeks earlier, a single sentence: would he have a coffee.

Igor had stayed. He carried water in canisters from the brewery up to the fifth floor, studied for exams by candlelight, and in 1993 received one letter from her through the Red Cross, with a photograph of her in front of some house, a photograph in which everything was strange except her smile. He wrote back four pages. He never found out whether his letter arrived. He heard about her marriage in 1997, from her cousin, at the market. He married two years later, Danijela, who works at a bank and knows everything about Amela, because she does not like secrets. They have a daughter, Lea, who studies architecture and helped him come up with a reply to the message.

When he stopped in front of her, neither of them knew how to say hello. He held out his hand, she tried to hug him, and they bumped shoulders and laughed, and that helped. They did not want to sit in a café. Amela said she had never ridden the new cable car, and before she could add anything, he remembered her nineteenth birthday and the old cabin in which they had ridden up Trebević in July 1991 with a bag of cherries, tossing the pits out the window. They walked to Bistrik and bought two tickets.

The cabin rose slowly above the rooftops. Below them was the city where she had grown up and which she did not know: new towers, glass, minarets, and on the hills white Muslim gravestones and crosses that had not been there in 1991. Igor did not point them out. They talked about their children, about apartment prices, about how in Melbourne nobody is surprised by her name. He asked her whether she still took her coffee without sugar, and when she said she did, they were both surprised at how glad it made them. They sat facing each other and took care that their knees did not touch. The whole time she kept her left hand in her coat pocket. Halfway up the cabin swayed in the wind, and Amela grabbed his hand with her right, then let go, as if she had touched something hot.

At the top it was colder and smelled of wet pines. They walked to the old bobsled track, which ran down through the forest like a gray concrete

snake covered in graffiti, and sat down on its edge. Then she asked him what she had really come to ask. "Did you wait for me?" Igor looked at the concrete for a long time. He said that whenever it was possible, on the first Sunday of every month at five o'clock, he had gone to the Eternal Flame, until the fall of 1996. He did not know himself why at five. Probably because that was how they used to arrange to meet.

Then she told him what she had told no one, not Kemal, not her mother. In March 1996 she had bought a ticket to Sarajevo, by way of Vienna. A week before the flight, in a pizzeria in Footscray, Kemal asked her whether she would marry him. She said yes, because he was good and because he was there. The ticket stayed in a drawer, and it is still there today. "If you had come," Igor began, and she put her fingers to his lips, the way she used to when he started singing at the tram stop. "Don't," she said. "I know everything that would have happened. I have been thinking about it for thirty years."

They sat like that for a while, shoulder to shoulder, on the cold concrete. Igor took her right hand, and she did not pull it away. Neither of them said anything that would have to stay up here, among the pines. And then the phone in his pocket rang. It was Lea. She asked where he was, because Mom said he should buy bread and milk on his way back and not forget that Grandma was coming to dinner tonight. Igor said he would, that he would not forget, and that he loved her. He said it in an ordinary way, as he did every day.

When he put the phone away, Amela was already on her feet. She took her left hand out of her pocket and opened her fist. On her palm lay a yellow key with three teeth, warm, because she had been squeezing it all the way up. She placed it on his palm. "I had nowhere to come," she said. "So I kept it." Igor looked at the key for a long time. He said they had changed the lock back in 1997, when they sold his parents' flat, and that this key no longer opened anything. Then he put it in his jacket pocket anyway, next to his own keys, and zipped the pocket shut.

At the upper station he said he would walk down, through the forest, because that was how he always went. They both knew that was not how he always went. They did not hug. She touched his sleeve, briefly, as if brushing a hair off his jacket, and got into the cabin. The doors closed by themselves. The cabin set off, swayed, and descended down the mountainside, and she watched him standing at the edge of the platform among the pines, growing smaller. He did not wave. Then, when she could barely see him anymore, he raised his hand after all.

Only above the rooftops of Bistrik did she look at her left hand again. On her palm the imprint of the key remained, red and clear, with three teeth. She looked at it the whole way down. By the time the cabin reached the lower station, the imprint had faded.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

Snow over the Ćehotina

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/snow-over-the-cehotina/

Aunt Zlata and Aunt Munevera had been seeing in the New Year at their flat in Bjelave for thirty years, and in thirty years nothing had changed except the guests. The same embroidered tablecloth, the same spinach pita and the same Russian salad in the crystal bowl, the same radiator that knocked as if someone were calling from downstairs. Every year at midnight Rešad, as their eldest nephew, gave the toast. This year too he carried a slip of paper with notes in his jacket pocket, and all evening he wondered whether the line by a Sarajevo poet that he had put at the end was too bookish for people who had come to eat roast meat.

Aldina was in the kitchen with the aunts, her sleeves rolled up to the elbows, laughing at something Munevera was telling. She was from Foča, from a house above the Ćehotina, and after twenty years of marriage and two children Rešad still liked to watch her move around someone else's kitchen as if it were her own. The children were at her mother's that night. The forecast had called for snow, and taxi drivers struggled to climb up to their apartment in Sedrenik even on dry roads, so Rešad had booked a room in a small hotel near Baščaršija. He was pleased with himself for it, the way he was pleased with most of the things he planned in advance.

At midnight he stood up, tapped his glass with a fork, and spoke about hospitality, about the aunts who had taught half the city solfège and piano, about the people who had once sat at this table and were here no longer. The guests grew serious in the right places and laughed in the right places. The line at the end went over better than he had feared. Fireworks were bursting over the city, from Bjelave you could see the light falling across the rooftops all the way to Marijin Dvor, and through that light the first snowflakes began to fall. Aunt Zlata kissed him on the forehead and said he spoke just like his late father. Rešad knew it was not

true, but he was glad.

After two o'clock the guests began to leave. Rešad stood in the hallway of the building with the coats over his arm, waiting for Aldina, who had gone back for her scarf. When he turned toward the stairs, he saw her on the landing above him, standing in the half dark with one hand on the railing, not coming down. From the flat, through the door left ajar, came the voice of old Mirsad Begović, once a member of the radio choir, who sang only when he thought no one was listening. He was singing quietly, to himself, as he looked for his cap in the kitchen: Snijeg pade na behar, na voće.

Rešad was not listening to the song but to the woman listening to it. He looked at her blue scarf and her head tilted a little, the way you tilt it in a crowd when you try to make out who is calling you, and he thought that if he were a painter, he would paint her just like that, on the stairs, her face turned toward a voice that could not be seen. He wanted to take out his phone and photograph her, but he felt ashamed. The song broke off in the middle of a line, because Mirsad had found his cap. Aldina came down slowly and took her coat from his hands as if she did not recognize it right away.

The taxi barely made it down from Bjelave. The city was white and empty, except by the Cathedral, where some young men were pelting each other with snowballs and wishing a happy New Year to every car that passed. Aldina was silent and looked out the window. Rešad held her hand and remembered their first winter, the apartment in Grbavica with no heating, and the night they missed the last tram and walked from Skenderija under one umbrella. He felt tenderness and something warmer than tenderness, and he was looking forward to the room, to the quiet, and to the door he would lock from the inside.

The room had a wooden ceiling and one window onto the street. Below they could see the Sebilj under the snow and the empty square where by day the pigeons will not let you pass. Aldina did not turn on the light. She

stood by the window, still in her coat, and when he came up to her and put his hands on her shoulders, she did not turn around. He asked her what was wrong. For a long time she did not answer. "That song," she said at last. "What about it?" "A boy in Foča used to sing it, when I was seventeen."

Rešad laughed, briefly, and heard how his laugh sounded. He asked who the boy had been. His name was Nihad, she said. He was two years older than she was, worked in his father's watch repair shop by the bridge, and had been born with a weak heart, so he was not allowed to play football with the others. He sang instead. They used to walk along the Ćehotina, and he would sing her that song and a few others, quietly, the way Mirsad had tonight. "Did you love him?" Rešad asked, and heard himself asking in the voice he used at the university to ask students why they had not done the assigned reading. "We were going out," she said. "It was a long time ago."

Then, with her back to him, she told him the rest. In November of that year her father had found a job in Sarajevo, and the family was to move. Nihad was ill in those days, just out of the hospital with pneumonia. The night before the move someone threw a handful of sand at her window. It had been raining since noon. She looked down and saw him in the garden, without an umbrella, soaked to the skin, standing under the apple tree and looking up. She went down in her slippers and begged him to go back home, because he would only get sicker. He told her he would, that he had only wanted to see her before she left.

A week after they arrived in Sarajevo, a girl from her class called to tell her that Nihad had died. His heart had not held out against the infection. Aldina told it calmly, and then she turned around, sat down on the bed, and wept into her palms, like a child afraid that someone will hear. "I think he died because of me," she said. Rešad sat down beside her. He did not know what to say, so he said nothing. He held her hand until she stopped crying, and then until she fell asleep, still dressed, on top of the covers.

For a long time he sat in the half dark, under the light of the streetlamp, looking at her face, which showed years he had never noticed at home. He thought about his toast, about the slip of paper in his pocket, about the line he had spent a whole week choosing. He thought about his proposal: a restaurant in Vratnik, a ring he had picked from a catalog after checking the price twice. Everything he had ever done out of love he had done in the dry, with a reservation. No one had ever waited for him under a window, and he had never waited for anyone in the rain. And in this room, with them, there was a boy of nineteen with whom he could never quarrel and never make peace.

He got up and went to the window. The snow was falling thick and slow now, and Baščaršija looked as if no one had ever walked on it. The roof of the Sebilj was white, and down below the Miljacka could not even be heard. He thought about the road that runs south, over Trnovo and Miljevina, where surely no one was driving now. He thought that the same snow was falling tonight on Foča too, on the bridge over the Ćehotina, on the gardens above the river, on an apple tree he had never seen, and on the cemetery on the hill, on a gravestone bearing a name he had not known until this night.

He took off his jacket, carefully, so the slip of paper in the pocket would not rustle, and hung it over the back of a chair. He covered Aldina with his coat. He drew the curtain halfway, so that the light from the street would not fall on her face, and lay down beside her, at the very edge of the bed, careful not to wake her.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Long-Distance Love at Nine O'Clock

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/long-distance-love-at-nine-oclock/

For three years, every evening at nine, I propped my phone against the sugar jar and waited for Mirza to pick up. Nine o'clock in Stuttgart is the same as nine o'clock in Bihać, and that was the only way in which the distance worked in our favor. I knew him from the waist up, with sawdust in his hair and a workshop behind him that ended where the screen ended. I knew which nail his saw hung on and that the calendar on the wall came from a tile showroom in Cazin. I did not know what was to the left of the door.

We met one summer, when he delivered a new cherrywood kitchen table to my mother. He carried it in by himself, and while my mother made him coffee, he ran his palm over the top as if checking whether it was still warm. That evening we sat near Kostela with our feet in the Una, which even in August was so cold it hurt. He told me he did not believe in long-distance love, that it was like ordering furniture from a picture. Two days after I went back to Germany, he called for the first time.

Our conversations had their own order. First he would show me what he had worked on that day: a walnut board he had just planed, the corner of a sideboard, hinges for the doors of an old house in Ripač. He would hold the wood up to the camera as if I could smell it. I showed him the kitchenette on the ward, the coffee machine that swallowed coins, the window facing the Neckar, and Mrs. Kessler from room twelve, who knitted socks for her grandchildren and called me Nurse Ida. Sometimes I fell asleep in the middle of a sentence, and he would not hang up. I would wake at three in the morning, and the screen would show the ceiling of his room.

Long-distance love, I came to understand, is a love of edges. I knew his voice and his hands, but I did not know how he walked when he thought nobody was watching. He did not know the smell of disinfectant that

stayed in my hair, or the S-Bahn train at five twelve, full of people sleeping on their feet. Twice a year I came home, for Bajram and in the summer, for two weeks each time. We met in town and by the river, never in the workshop, because he said it was too much of a mess for guests. Every time we were as shy as strangers on the first day, and by the time we had gotten used to each other, it was time to go back.

In September the head of the ward, Dr. Hollweg, called me into his office. The head nurse, Ulrike, was retiring, and he wanted me to take her place. A permanent contract, a third more pay, and an apartment with a balcony in Bad Cannstatt that the clinic rents to its staff. He gave me until the first of October. My colleague Teodora, a Romanian woman who had arrived the same year I did, said I was crazy if I thought about it for even a moment. On the phone my mother only sighed: stay, daughter, while they want you.

I told Mirza that same evening. He was sanding something out of frame, and for a long time there was only the whisper of paper on wood. Then he said it was lovely and that he congratulated me, in the voice you use to congratulate a neighbor on a new car. I asked him what he really thought. He put down the sandpaper and looked straight into the camera, which he never did, because he always looked at me on his screen, a little lower down. "I could come," he said. "They need carpenters there. Ćamil from Cazin has been working at a shop in Esslingen for two years."

I had imagined so many times that he would say it, and now that he had, I felt something cold, the way you do in the middle of a shift when you realize you forgot to check an IV drip. I asked him about the workshop, about his mother. He said a workshop was not a home and that his mother had a sister across the street. Then, a little embarrassed, he pulled a thin book with a yellow cover out from under the table. Since spring, he admitted, he had been going to German lessons on Tuesdays with a teacher in town, and he had not wanted to tell me until he passed. He read to me from the first page, slowly and carefully: "Ich heiße Mirza. Ich bin Tischler."

As he put the book back, his elbow caught the box of screws the phone was leaning against. The phone fell onto the workbench, slid against a can of glue, and stayed leaning on it, turned the other way. For the first time in three years I saw the rest of his workshop, at a slant. I saw a window facing the Una that I had not known existed. I saw a half-finished walnut table, long and wide, for six people. And I saw cardboard boxes along the wall, tools wrapped in newspaper, and a sheet of paper taped to the band saw, with words written in marker: for sale, cheap. Mirza quickly picked up the phone, and again I had him only from the waist up.

That night I could not sleep. I put a jacket on over my pajamas and went down to the Neckar. I imagined him in Esslingen, in a big hall under neon light, assembling the same particleboard kitchen units from someone else's drawings and coming home in the evening to the apartment with the balcony that I had not even moved into yet. I imagined asking him how his day had been, and him saying nothing, because he had nothing to show. And then I imagined myself in that apartment ten years from now, with a third more pay, and I could see nothing but the ceiling.

The next day I went to Dr. Hollweg and said I could not accept. He thought it was about money and started working out figures on a sheet of paper. I told him it was about a table. He looked at me over his glasses, shrugged, and said the door would stay open for me for a year. That same evening I wrote to Senka, who had finished nursing school with me and now worked on the internal medicine ward at the cantonal hospital. She answered within five minutes: they needed nurses, the pay was a third of mine, and the shifts were worse than I thought. And come, she wrote, there are hardly any of us left here.

I told Mirza nothing. For the first time in three years I lied to him and said I had signed. He looked at me for a few seconds, then laughed and said that in that case he would keep studying. Every evening I listened to him read me sentences about the weather and about traveling by train, and he thought I was laughing at his accent. I asked him for only one thing, not to sell anything until I came home in December. He promised

and did not ask why. The sheet on the band saw was no longer in view, but I did not know whether he had taken it down or only turned the camera.

I handed in my notice and worked until the end of November. Teodora was angry for two weeks, and then she helped me pack the apartment into six boxes. On my last day Mrs. Kessler gave me a pair of gray socks and said they were for a man, because my feet were not that big, and somebody would surely wear them. The bus left at seven in the evening, crossed Austria, Slovenia and Croatia while I slept against the window, and at noon entered Bosnia at Izačić, where a customs officer went through my boxes and asked whether I was coming back for good.

I let my mother know only from the border and forbade her to tell anyone. Bihać was foggy, and under the bridge the Una was green and loud, as it always is after rain in the mountains. I left the boxes at my mother's, drank coffee at that same cherrywood table, and waited for it to get dark. At half past eight I went out. I walked toward Harmani along the river, and on the way I realized I did not know the way to his workshop, because I had only ever seen it from the inside. I asked a man outside a shop. He knew at once.

The workshop door was ajar, an old sevdalinka was playing on the radio, and it smelled of walnut, the smell I had been watching for three years. The boxes were still standing along the wall. Mirza had his back to the door and was sanding the long table, the one for six. He did not hear me. I watched how he moved when he thought nobody was watching: a little stooped, a pencil behind his ear, humming along with the radio and getting the words wrong. Then he looked at the clock, wiped his hands on his trousers, took out his phone, and leaned it against the box of screws. It was nine.

The phone rang in my coat pocket. Mirza turned at the sound. I took out the phone and answered, and for a while we stood like that, he by the table, I in the doorway, looking at each other across two screens and

across a workshop full of sawdust. "I lied to you," I said into the phone. "I didn't sign." I heard him twice, once from the phone and once from across the room, when he said: "I can see that." He did not move, as if he were afraid I would step out of the frame if he took a single step.

I walked over to the table and ran my palm across the top, the way he used to do on the screen. It was warm from the sanding. Later I gave him Mrs. Kessler's socks, and they fit him just right. The last thing I remember from that evening, before he turned off the radio and took the paper off the band saw, is our two phones on the workbench, facing the ceiling. Neither of us ended the call. For a long time they went on showing each other the same ceiling.

ROMANCE · 7 MIN READ

The Lawyer for the Other Side

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-lawyer-for-the-other-side/

Two workers carried in the walnut sideboard, and behind them into the workshop came a woman in a gray coat, a phone at her ear, telling someone that she would file the appeal by Friday even if she had to write it in the car. Bojan Lukić recognized the voice before the face. Six years earlier that same voice, in a courtroom in Banja Luka, had said his name forty-one times, he had counted, and had taken from him the apartment in Borik, the 2009 Golf and half his savings. The lawyer Snježana Ilić. She had represented his ex-wife.

Snježana did not recognize him. She ended the call, slipped the phone into her pocket and looked at the sideboard the way, he supposed, she looked at case files: from the top, then from the side, then by the dates. It had been her mother's sideboard, from Jajce, she said, and she needed it for her new apartment in three weeks. Bojan said five. She said five was unreasonable and that he knew it. They settled on three and a half, and only after she had left did Bojan realize that he had given in to her again, and in his own workshop at that.

Six years after the divorce he lived in a rented apartment above his workshop in Starčevica. Svjetlana had married a dentist and sent him a photo from the wedding so he would not hear it from others. His daughter Ana was studying in Novi Sad and called on Sundays. Everyone, as his friend Dejan said in a bar on Gospodska Street, had moved on with their lives, except Bojan, who had only moved on with his working hours. Dejan had three divorces and a great many opinions. Once, at his urging, Bojan had gone to dinner with a bookkeeper from Laktaši and talked to her all evening about varnishes. Bojan had one sentence he could not get out of his head: that he was emotionally unavailable, as Snježana Ilić had told the judge, calmly, looking down at a paper.

Snježana came by on Tuesdays and Fridays, after court, to see how the work was going. They argued about everything. She wanted the sideboard to shine like something in a shop window. He said walnut needed wax, that wood had to breathe, and that gloss from a can turned a sideboard into office furniture. "You are stubborn," she said. "I am a carpenter," he said. "It's the same thing." One Friday she stayed an hour longer and drank coffee from his mug with the chipped rim, sitting on a toolbox, in a coat that cost as much as his monthly rent.

She told him about her mother, who had taught music in Jajce for forty years and kept sheet music in this sideboard instead of plates. She told him too that she was divorced, for eleven years now, and that divorce lawyers had the worst marriages in town, because they knew too much about marriage. Bojan listened, sanded a drawer and said nothing about himself. He did not know how he would begin. Every time she laughed, he thought of the apartment in Borik, and every time, to his surprise, a little less.

In the third week she came for the estimate. Bojan gave it to her, written by hand, with the workshop's stamp. Snježana read the name and did not look up for a long time. "Lukić versus Lukić," she said at last. "Borik, third floor. A 2009 Golf." "And I thought you didn't remember me," he said. "I don't remember faces," she said. "I have had four hundred divorces. I remember cases." Then she set the paper down on the sideboard and looked at him differently, as if she were searching his file for something she had overlooked long ago. "You're the one who asked for Sundays," she said.

He remembered too. When the judge asked him what he wanted regarding the child, Bojan said Ana should live with her mother, because it was closer to school, and that he asked only for Sundays, to take her up to the Kastel. He asked for nothing else. Snježana now told him that after that hearing she had sat in her car in the parking lot outside the court and cried, for the first and only time in twenty years of practice. Her own father, she said, had never asked for a single Sunday. "That is why I was

even harder on you back then," she said. "I was ashamed."

Then Bojan said out loud what he had been carrying for six years. "Emotionally unavailable." Snježana looked at him without understanding, then remembered and blushed, for the first time since she had walked into the workshop. She said it was a phrase from a form. That she had written it in forty petitions, maybe fifty, that her trainee kept it in a template and that nobody ever read it. Bojan burst out laughing. He laughed so long that he had to put down the sandpaper. For six years he had carried inside him one sentence from a template. "I'm sorry," Snježana said, laughing herself. "For this I really don't have a form."

The sideboard was finished on Friday, as they had agreed, waxed and matte, with drawers that closed by themselves with a soft sigh. Bojan and the two workers carried it into her apartment on the second floor, with a balcony facing the Vrbas, and set it against the wall, between the window and her mother's upright piano that nobody ever opened. Snježana looked for a long time at the walnut without its shine and said he had been right, but that she would not repeat it in front of witnesses. The workers left. She made coffee and set two cups on the table, both of them whole.

Bojan turned his cup in his hands for a long time. Then he asked what she was doing on Sunday. Snježana said she had a hearing on Monday and that she spent Sundays writing briefs. He said he understood. When he was already at the door, she said: "I write until eleven. After that I'm free." She asked where. He said that on Sundays he went up to the Kastel, he had for six years, even when Ana did not come. That evening on Gospodska Street Dejan said it was a textbook conflict of interest and ordered two rakijas to celebrate it.

On Sunday it was cold, and the Vrbas was as green as the glass of an old bottle. Snježana arrived at ten past eleven with a folder under her arm, because she had had to finish something after all. They walked along the

ramparts to the spot where you can see the whole river. She told him about her mother and the sheet music, and he told her about Ana, who had sent him a message that morning: "Dad, are you at the Kastel?" Bojan replied: "I am. I'm not alone." Ana asked at once who he was with.

Bojan wrote: "With a lawyer." Ana sent three question marks and asked which one. Bojan showed the message to Snježana, not knowing what to answer. She took the phone, thought for a moment, as if over a brief, and wrote: "The one for the other side. The old case is closed." She handed the phone back to him and took his arm, the way you pick up from a desk a file you have yet to read.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

No One's Field Above the Drina

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/no-ones-field-above-the-drina/

On a plateau above the Drina, between the Ćosić and Pašić houses, lay a field that no one plowed. It belonged to Hilmo Ličina, who had left for America thirty years earlier and never been heard from again, and in that time it had grown over with wild rose, brambles and two wild pear trees. Šaban Ćosić and Nurija Pašić each plowed their own land on either side of it, and when they stopped to light a cigarette, they looked at each other across that wilderness as if into a mirror. Their children, Almin and Zerina, picked strawberries in it and built a house of branches on the heap of stones in the middle, which they called the fortress.

One fall Šaban's plow took a furrow across the boundary. Nobody said anything. The next fall Nurija took two. It went on like that for years, quietly and neatly, as if they had agreed on it, and the field narrowed from both sides until all that was left was a thin strip of wild rose and stones with the fortress in the middle. The children grew up. The brambles retreated before the plows, and the strawberries were the first to disappear.

When Almin was sixteen, the municipality announced that it would sell the ownerless field at auction. In the hall by the bridge in Višegrad, Rizo turned up too, an accordion player who played weddings from Rogatica to Rudo and who was said to be Hilmo's grandson. He said so himself, loudly, but he did not have a single paper, because his mother, who had given birth to him far from here, had never registered him. People laughed. Šaban bought the field. The very next day Nurija said that the triangle on his side, which he had been plowing for years, had long been his, and Šaban said he had bought what was written in the papers, and not an inch less.

That was how the lawsuit began. It lasted nine years. There were lawyers from Foča and Sarajevo, surveyors who arrived with instruments and left

with money, expert witnesses, appeals, and hearings that were postponed because the judge was ill. Šaban sold his cows, then his tractor, then the woods above the stream. His wife went to her sister in Sarajevo and did not come back. Nurija took out a loan against his house and twice had to renegotiate it. In the end Šaban was running a café next to the bus station in Višegrad, where he sat alone more often than with customers, and Nurija came down to town every day, sat in the café across the street and stared at Šaban's door. Both of them forbade their children to greet each other.

After high school Almin went to Slovenia to work on construction sites. Zerina stayed with her father and sewed in a workshop in Višegrad, dresses for some boutique in Vienna that sold them as if they came from Paris. For eight years they did not speak. They knew about each other what is known in a small town: that he was building some hotel on the coast, that she had broken off with a fiancé from Goražde two weeks before the wedding. When he came home for Bajram, she would happen to have work at the workshop that very day.

Last June Almin came because his father needed his signature on the final appeal. Before going down to town, he climbed up to the plateau. All that remained of the field was the stones in the middle, overgrown with wild rose, and everything around them had been plowed to the last hand's breadth. Zerina was sitting on the stones. For a long time they said nothing. Then she said: "The fortress has fallen." He sat down next to her. He did not know what to do with his hands after eight years, so he put them on his knees. The sun was setting behind the hills across the Drina, she told him about the dresses for Vienna, he told her about scaffolding and the wind on the tenth floor, and both of them found it strange how easy it all was.

That was how Nurija found them. He saw them from the road below and climbed up the field faster than he was able. He shouted at Almin that he was a thief's son, and at Zerina that she was shaming her mother's grave. Almin did not move. He said only: "Uncle Nurija, sit down, you will make

yourself ill." And he did fall ill, in the middle of a sentence. He sat down on the stones and could not move his left arm. Almin carried him to the road, and Zerina called an ambulance. At the hospital they said it was a stroke, a mild one, but that he would no longer be able to live alone. His sister came from Sarajevo to fetch him. Because of the loan, the bank had already taken the house. Zerina had to move out by Monday.

On Saturday evening Almin came to the empty house. Zerina was sitting on boxes of dishes. Nothing of what they wanted to say made any sense, so he said something else: that there was a fair in Višegrad the next day and they could go. One day. As if there were no fathers, no field, no bank and no Monday. Zerina looked at him as if he had lost his mind. Then she opened one of the boxes and took out her mother's dress, blue with white polka dots, which she had never worn because it was too beautiful for a workday.

They went down on the first bus. Višegrad smelled of the grill and the river, and under the bridge people crowded around stalls of honey, leather opanci, plastic toys and cotton candy. They ate ćevapi on a bench by the water and watched the children swimming under the stone arches. From one vendor they bought two rings of white metal, five marks each, and put them on each other's fingers, laughing, as if it were a joke. A photographer on the bridge asked them to stand by the railing, because newlyweds at a fair, he said, brought him luck too. They did not correct him. An old woman at a stall selling socks wished them as many children as there are stars in the sky.

In the evening there was music on the flat ground by the river, and people danced the kolo. Almin and Zerina danced until they were out of breath, and then once more. The accordion player was Rizo. When he recognized them, he stopped playing in the middle of a song, looked at them for a long time, and then began to play something old, slowly, just for the two of them. Afterward he sat with them on the wall by the water and drank juice from a bottle. "Children," he said, "your fathers ruined themselves over my field, and it never even crossed my mind to plow it. What would I

do with it? I have this." And he slapped the accordion with his palm.

He offered to take them with him. He had a van, two musicians and weddings every Saturday from Foča to Zvornik, and he needed someone who could sing, and he remembered that as a little girl Zerina had sung at every village gathering. They would sleep wherever they ended up, eat wherever people treated them, and never have a field, or a loan, or a court. Almin looked at Zerina. She was silent for a long time, and then she said thank you to Rizo, but that all her life she had watched two men circle around one piece of land, and now she wanted to stop somewhere where she knew where the door was. Rizo laughed and said she was smarter than both fathers.

They stayed on the riverbank until dawn. They sat beside one of the wooden boats waiting for the regatta, watched the lights from the bridge break up in the water, and decided, slowly, the way you decide about a house. Almin has a room in Ljubljana and a job from Monday to Saturday. Zerina knows how to sew, and you can sew anywhere. On Monday at nine, when the court in Višegrad reads out its verdict, they will be on the bus to Sarajevo, and from there farther on. Each of them wrote the same letter to their father, on the back of one of the photographs from the bridge: that they did not need that field and would never ask for it.

On Monday the verdict was read out in front of an empty bench. The field went to Šaban. Šaban learned it in the café, from his lawyer; that morning he had already found under the door the photograph his son had left at dawn, and he sat with both pieces of paper until closing time. That fall no one plowed a single furrow. By the next year the plateau had grown over with grass from both sides, the brambles had come back, and in June strawberries appeared again around the stones in the middle. Sometimes, when there is no wedding, Rizo sits on those stones and plays, alone, for no one. Sometimes Šaban joins him and says nothing.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

The Tunnel to Orlovac

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-tunnel-to-orlovac/

The tunnel to Orlovac is a hundred and twenty paces long and has no sign at its entrance, but everyone in the village knows whose it is. The first ninety paces are rough, full of chisel marks, as if someone had written on the rock by hand. The rest was drilled smooth by machines. Every driver who goes through it gives one short honk, and few people still remember who started it. Before the tunnel, the only way to Orlovac, the last village on the Prenj side above the Neretva, was a goat path over Greda, which in winter no one crossed except the postman, and only when he felt like it.

Šejla was twenty-seven and the youngest resident of Orlovac. She kept thirty goats, made cheese and carried it down to the market in Jablanica on Saturdays, an hour and a half downhill, two hours back up. Her mother Ziba had a weak heart. When she fell ill one February night, the ambulance stopped where the asphalt stopped, and Šejla and two neighbors carried her over Greda in a blanket. The next day Šejla went down to the municipal office, sat in front of the clerk who was showing her the same project for the third time, and said, loudly enough to be heard in the hallway: "I will marry whoever brings a road to Orlovac." The clerk laughed. So did the hallway.

The only one who did not laugh was Fahrudin Kolaković, who was waiting in that hallway for his turn about a permit. He was a stonemason, he had a workshop next to the quarry and he cut Jablanica granite for headstones and kitchen counters. He knew Šejla from the market. Every Saturday he bought a piece of cheese from her that he did not need and said only "good morning" and "thank you." When she came out, he went in to the clerk and asked how much rock was left. A hundred and twenty paces, they told him, and there was no money until next year, or the year after that. Fahrudin said he would cut through it for the cost of materials.

He started in April, with a compressor, a hydraulic hammer and two young men from Jablanica. The young men left after a month, when it became clear there would be no pay. Fahrudin stayed. He slept in a shipping container below the rock face, drilled from dawn to dark, and stacked the stone he broke off into a dry wall along the road, neatly, as if someone were going to inspect it. At noon Šejla came with a thermos of coffee and cheese wrapped in a cloth. She would sit on a rock while he ate and look at the Neretva far below, green as bottle glass. They did not talk much. Once she ran her palm over the chisel marks, as if over a crust of bread, and said nothing.

In the evenings, after she left, Fahrudin used a small chisel to carve a profile into the rock beside the entrance: a woman with a headscarf tied at the back of her neck and a goat pushing its head under her arm. When Šejla saw it, she laughed and said it looked nothing like her and the nose was too big. The next day she stayed until dark. That summer the tunnel grew by a pace or two a day, and the old men of Orlovac began walking down to the container just to see how far it had come.

In July Husref Karadža also reached the rock face, an investor from Mostar in a black SUV that he had to leave behind for the rest of the way. He built apartments in Mostar and holiday flats on Blidinje, and now he wanted to buy the land above the village, where you could see the whole valley. When he saw Šejla, he wanted her too. He brought her flowers from town and offered to take her mother to doctors in Sarajevo. Šejla gave the flowers to the goats, and when her mother needed to go, she took her herself. Husref promised that his machines would cut through the rock in a month, if only the village would sell him the land. "It is already being cut," Šejla told him, and pointed toward the container.

By the end of October thirty paces were left. Šejla had not come for a whole week, and there was no signal in the container to call her. One afternoon Husref came to the rock face and handed Fahrudin his phone. In the picture was Šejla, in a long pale dress, holding a bouquet, beside a young man in a suit, in front of a restaurant on the Buna. "She got

married on Saturday," said Husref. "To my cousin. I thought it was only fair for you to know, master, so you don't break your hands for nothing." Fahrudin looked at the picture for a long time. Then he gave back the phone and said thank you, the way he did at the market.

That night he loaded the compressor, locked the container and left the key under a stone. He did not write a word. Ten days later he was working in Salzburg, for a firm that clad facades in granite. He got an Austrian number and never switched on the old one again. Meanwhile Šejla came back from Mostar, where she had rushed with her mother one night, where she had spent seven days at her bedside after an operation, and where, between two hospital visits, she had been a bridesmaid at her cousin's wedding. She found a cold container and a key under a stone. Husref told her the stonemason had found a better job, that was craftsmen for you. Fahrudin's number could not be reached.

She waited two winters. Every evening, after milking the goats, she walked down to the rock and sat beside the profile with the headscarf. She did not sell Husref the land and did not open her door to him. The following year the municipality was shamed by the newspapers, which wrote that one stonemason had done what the state would not, and it brought in the machines. They drilled the last thirty paces in three weeks. The first bus through the tunnel was driven by Zijo Musić from Jablanica, a big, cheerful man, who honked in the middle of the tunnel, just like that, out of joy, and from then on he honked every time.

Fahrudin learned the truth in his third winter in Salzburg, from a man from Jablanica who showed him a video on his phone during a break: a bus coming out of the tunnel, children and goats waiting for it in Orlovac. Under the video someone had written that the road had been started by a craftsman because of a girl. "She got married," said Fahrudin, "two years ago, on the Buna." The man laughed. "It was her cousin who got married on the Buna. Šejla was her bridesmaid. She waited two years for you, all of Jablanica knows it. She only got married last spring, to Zijo the bus driver."

In July he came home. He drove slowly through the tunnel, over his own ninety rough paces and the thirty smooth ones that belonged to someone else. In Orlovac Šejla was standing in front of her house, with cheese laid out on a table for the people who now came by bus. She was pregnant. They looked at each other across the table for a long time, as if across a gorge. "Why didn't you ask me?" she said. "I was proud," he said. "And you?" "I waited," she said. "Two winters. Then Zijo started honking in the tunnel, every day, and one day I got on the bus." He bought a piece of cheese. She would not take his money.

On his way out of the village he stopped in front of the tunnel. The profile with the headscarf was still there, and the nose that was too big had been touched by children so many times that it had turned smooth and shiny, the only smooth spot on his part of the rock. Fahrudin touched it too. Then he got into the car, drove into the tunnel and somewhere in the middle, like everyone else, gave one short honk.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

The Ghost at the Engagement Party

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-ghost-at-the-engagement-party/

My aunt Rasema swears to this day that on that Saturday in Brčko a ghost sat at our table. She swears he was pale, that he did not touch the lamb, and that his hand was as cold as a stone taken out of the Sava. I was twenty-two then, I sat two chairs away, and I can confirm only that he was pale. For the rest, my aunt will have to answer.

My cousin Nizama was supposed to get engaged that day to Kerim Bešlagić from Linz. A distant aunt had introduced them, the way it is done these days: first photos, then messages, then video calls on Sunday evenings, when Linz was quiet and back home the rain drummed on the tin roof of the garage. Nizama's father, my uncle Ćamil, had a company with six trucks and an opinion about everything, and his best opinion was of the Bešlagićs, because they ran two restaurants in Austria and had never once asked for a discount. Nizama had seen Kerim only on a screen. She told me he was nice, that he had a lovely smile, that she neither liked nor disliked him, and that the rest, she supposed, could be learned.

The engagement was set for five. From noon a lamb turned on the spit in the garden, Aunt Rasema washed glasses that were already clean, and my uncle called Kerim three times and three times heard a woman's voice saying the number could not be reached. "The border," he kept saying. "At Orašje you can wait two hours." By six there were forty guests in the garden and no groom. At seven a taxi pulled up at the gate, and out stepped a tall young man in a dark suit, with his left hand bandaged and a small blue box in his right.

We learned the rest later. Kerim and his friend Jasmin had set off from Linz at dawn. Not far from Orašje, on a wet road, a truck that had swerved out of its lane slammed into them. Jasmin got away with two broken fingers. Kerim died in the hospital a few hours later, and before

that he managed to ask for only one thing: that Jasmin go to Brčko and tell them in person, because news like that is not sent by text. Jasmin took the ring box from Kerim's jacket and got into the first taxi outside the hospital.

Jasmin did know one more thing, though he remembered it too late that evening. His last name was Kapetanović. Twenty years earlier his father and my uncle had been partners at the Arizona market, they had shared a stall selling jeans, and they had split up over a van full of goods whose owner nobody can name to this day. Ever since, the name Kapetanović had been spoken in our house like a curse, and my uncle used to boast that he would not even ride the same bus as one of them.

Jasmin came through the gate and opened his mouth. That was as far as he got. My uncle hugged him so hard that his bandaged hand was trapped between them, and the aunts kissed him on both cheeks and said he was better looking than in the pictures. "What happened to your hand, son?" asked Aunt Rasema. "We had an accident," Jasmin began, "and Kerim is," but my uncle was already shouting across the garden that the boy was alive and well, just a little scratched, and that people drove that road like a racetrack. The photographer wanted everyone lined up beside the lamb. The accordion player started up. Jasmin stood in the middle of the picture, and nobody asked his name again.

They seated him next to Nizama. She looked at him, and something on her face paused, the way a person pauses when it seems they have come to the wrong house. On the screen Kerim had been shorter, with a fuller face and glasses. But screens lie, everybody knows that, and this one was tired and pale and could not take his eyes off her. "You're different," she said quietly. "I know," he said. "I have to tell you something." "Later," she said, because my uncle had just stood up with a glass of juice to make a speech.

The speech lasted twenty minutes. My uncle talked about trucks, about honesty, about how in his life he had met two kinds of people, those who

pay their debts and the Kapetanovićs. The guests laughed. Jasmin put down his fork. Three times he tried to stand, and three times Aunt Rasema tugged him back by the sleeve, because you do not stand up in the middle of a speech. I watched and thought he was shy. Nizama thought something else. I saw the way she looked at him: like a puzzle she had decided to solve on her own, without a screen.

After the speech they went out to the fence, where it was quieter. I do not know what they talked about. I know Nizama laughed twice, and she had only ever laughed at Kerim on the screen out of politeness. When the time came for the ring, Jasmin took out the blue box, looked at it and put it back in his pocket. He stood up, and everyone fell silent. "Forgive me," he said. "I don't belong here. At midnight they are expecting me at the hospital morgue." And he walked out through the gate, on foot, toward the main road, while my uncle was left standing with a glass in his hand.

On Sunday morning Kerim's father called. He was crying. He said Kerim had been in an accident near Orašje on Saturday around noon, that he had died in the hospital around five, and that only now did they have the strength to let us know. My uncle put down the phone and sat on the steps. Aunt Rasema knew at once what had happened: Kerim's soul had sat at our table, it had come to keep a promise and then gone back to where it was expected. That was why he was pale. That was why he did not eat. By noon half of Brčko knew. That day Nizama cried for Kerim, honestly, as one cries for a good man she had known only on Sunday evenings. And then, in the pocket of the suit jacket the young man had put around her shoulders by the fence and forgotten to take back, she found a business card: Jasmin Kapetanović, electrician, Linz.

She showed it only to me. Two weeks later, when Jasmin came back from the funeral in Austria, she called him. They met on the embankment along the Sava, and I sat on a bench fifty paces away eating sunflower seeds, because somebody had to keep an eye on things. I saw him talk for a long time, his hand still in its bandage, and I saw her stay silent. Afterward she told me he had explained everything: that the words would

not come out that evening, first because of my uncle and the name, and then because of her. "And what did you tell him?" I asked. "That on a screen nobody ever kept such a lovely silence with me," she said.

When my uncle found out, he shouted for two days. On the third day Aunt Rasema reminded him that in front of forty witnesses he had hugged that young man, kissed him and called him son, and that in Brčko such a thing cannot be undone. My uncle was silent for a long time, and then he asked only one thing: did the boy at least know whose van of jeans that had been. Jasmin said he did not. "Good," said my uncle. "Neither do I." The wedding was the following fall. Aunt Rasema sat beside the groom, and all evening, when she thought nobody was looking, she kept pinching his arm.

ROMANCE · 10 MIN READ

Thursdays at the Mahmutovićs

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/thursdays-at-the-mahmutovics/

When Kenan Selimović got a job at the family medicine clinic in Crkvice, he was twenty-eight and had one suitcase, a secondhand Golf and the advice everyone in Zenica gave him, from the nurse at the front desk to the pensioners who were the first to come in for prescriptions. If he wanted to know what culture looked like in this town, they said, he should go to the Mahmutovićs on a Thursday. The town was gray with smoke from the steel mill, and in winter the Bosna carried ice and plastic bags. Still, people were proud of one house by the river, where, they claimed, life was lived differently.

He went for the first time in November. Esad Mahmutović, a retired engineer from the steel mill, met him at the door with the words: "Welcome, doctor, and may we never need you, except on Thursdays." Esad had a joke for every occasion and not a single new one. He liked to say that the only clean air in Zenica was kept in his refrigerator. His wife Nevzeta had been writing a novel for nine years, and after dinner she read the guests two new chapters. The novel had a great deal of rain, carriages and letters in it, and a countess in Vienna who never told anyone what she felt, and nothing of what could be seen through the window: no chimneys, no market, no line outside the clinic. "Why don't you publish it, Nevzeta?" someone asked every time. "It isn't finished yet," she answered every time.

Then the daughter sat down at the piano. Ajla was nineteen, with short hair and a habit of biting her lower lip while she played. Her father called her Kitten. She played something long and difficult, striking the keys as if she wanted to drive them into the wood, and Kenan, listening, thought of stones rolling down a slope with no idea where they would stop. When she finished, everyone applauded. She bowed only halfway, like someone who knows she deserves more. Nevzeta explained that Kitten would take

the entrance exam at the academy in Graz in the fall.

That night Kenan walked home along the Bosna and hummed the whole way. He felt warm, even though a fog that smelled of coal was rising off the river. Then came the kind of months that come to every young doctor: flu, blood pressure, diabetes, house calls in high-rises where the elevator does not work, and he did not make it back to the Mahmutovićs until March. When he came again, Ajla herself took him out to the garden to show him the cherry tree her father had planted on the day she was born. She told him about Liszt, about concert halls where no one dares to cough, about how Zenica was too small for people who feel something. Kenan told her about his patients. She looked at the cherry tree.

From then on he came every Thursday. He fell in love the way people do who spend all day listening to other people's ailments: quietly, stubbornly and without much hope. They walked across Kamberovića polje, and he carried her sheet music under his jacket so it would not get wet. He told her that nothing had to be big to be good, that he was happy when an old woman from Crkvice came back for a checkup after a month and told him she felt better. Ajla laughed. "You are like my father," she told him once. "Everything is enough for you."

At the end of May she sent him a message: "Tonight at eleven on Smetovi, by the lookout. Come alone." Kenan knew it might be a joke. All the same he shaved, put on his only jacket and drove the Golf up the switchbacks, through darkness that smelled of cut grass. There was nobody at the lookout. Below it lay the whole town, the orange lights of the steel mill, the bridges over the Bosna, the windows of the high-rises. He waited until half past one, listened to the dogs in the villages and asked himself what he really wanted from her and what she could possibly want from him. Nothing was clear to him, except that it was cold and that he was glad to be waiting. He drove back into town before dawn.

The next day Ajla told him she had only wanted to see whether he would come, and she laughed so honestly that he could not get angry. On

Thursday, before Nevzeta could reach a new chapter, Kenan took Ajla by the hand in the hallway and proposed to her. While he talked, a small, cold voice in his head kept counting: the house by the river, Esad's two apartments in town, a piano worth as much as a car. He was ashamed of that voice, but the voice did not stop. She heard him out to the end. She said she respected him and that he was a good man, but that she did not want to spend her whole life listening to talk of other people's blood pressure and blood sugar. "I want to be a pianist, Kenan. Not a doctor's wife in Zenica." In September she left for Graz.

For three days Kenan was sick with shame. On the fourth day he saw forty patients at the clinic, and that evening, sitting in the Golf outside the building, he imagined what it would have been like if she had said yes: a wedding at a hotel, her concerts where he would sit in the front row and understand nothing, Esad at the lunch table every day. He imagined it with relief, and that frightened him more than the refusal. He stopped going to the Mahmutovićs. Through acquaintances at the market Esad sent him greetings and a joke about how doctors, like the electricity, come back when you least expect them. Kenan would smile and buy another bag of potatoes.

Four years went by. Kenan opened a private practice in the center of town, next to a bank. His patients liked him, because he wrote fast and asked little. He bought an apartment on the street behind the theater, then another one, and rented both to students. He traded the Golf for a big black SUV in which he sat alone, sprawled back, with a belly that touched the steering wheel. He had put on weight, he breathed hard climbing to the third floor, and in the evenings, instead of reading, he counted the cash from the practice and stacked it in drawers, sorted by the color of the bills. On Thursdays he played rummy at the club for retired engineers, where he was the youngest and the angriest man at the table.

One June Nevzeta called him. Ajla had come home, she said, and had asked about him. Kenan went. Esad met him at the door with the same

joke, only now he added: "And may we never need you privately." Nevzeta was writing the same novel. Ajla was thinner and more serious, with glasses she had not worn before. She played the same long, difficult piece, but more softly, as if she were apologizing to the keys. Kenan listened and thought about the students on the street behind the theater, who were late with the rent again.

Afterward she asked him to step out into the garden. The cherry tree was bigger, the bench beneath it the same. Ajla told him that in Graz she had realized she was not as gifted as everyone here had thought. There were girls from Korea and Ukraine who at sixteen played better than she ever would. "Starting in September I teach at the music school here," she said. "I have no regrets. But I often thought about you. About what you told me about the old woman from Crkvice. You were the only one of us doing something real." Kenan tried to remember that old woman's name and could not. Still, he felt something warm inside, like embers that stir when you open the door of an old stove, and he waited for it to catch.

Then Esad called out the joke about doctors and electricity from the window. From the house came the sound of Nevzeta leafing through her manuscript. Kenan thought of all those Thursdays, of the rain and carriages in the novel, of the applause after every performance, and the embers went out as quietly as they had stirred. It seemed to him that her refusal in the hallway had saved him. If he had come into this house, he too would be telling the same joke every week by now. Ajla watched him and waited. He said it was late, that his practice opened at seven the next morning, and he got up from the bench more heavily than he meant to. "Call me sometime," she said. "I will," he said.

That summer Ajla sent him two messages. In the first she wrote that she would like to sit under the cherry tree again. The second said only: "Are you all right?" Kenan read both in the SUV, in the parking lot outside the bank, and did not answer. It was not anger. He simply did not know what to write to a woman who was speaking to the man he used to be.

Several more years have passed since then. Kenan owns three apartments and has his eye on a fourth, in a new building near Kamberovića polje, because the air is better there, he says. At the practice he shouts at patients who are late and at those who ask too many questions, and among themselves the nurses call him the Till. He lives alone. When he drives past the Mahmutović house on Thursday evenings, a piano can be heard through the open window, sometimes Ajla, sometimes one of her pupils striking the keys as if trying to drive them into the wood. Kenan turns up the radio then, keeps his eyes on the road and works out how much rent he could ask for the fourth apartment.

ROMANCE · 9 MIN READ

A Mortar Without a Pestle

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-mortar-without-a-pestle/

For twelve years I drove Velid Hrustić, and in that time I learned three things: not to turn on the radio while he was talking, not to talk while he was silent, and that he was never silent. Hrustić Construction had put up half the new buildings between Slatina and Sjenjak, and on every billboard along the road to Lukavac Velid smiled beneath the slogan "Building Tuzla to Measure." Whose measure, it did not say, but anyone who knew him knew. He was forty-two, with three cars, an office on the fourteenth floor of his own tower and a habit of sometimes speaking about himself in the third person, as of someone he held in high regard.

Ibro Salkić had been the firm's storekeeper since the days when the firm had two trucks and one cement mixer. That March they were tearing down an old house in Džindić mahala, so that something with an underground garage could rise in its place, and in the rubble, under the rotten floorboards, Ibro found a mortar. It was brass, as heavy as a one-year-old child, with engraved flowers and a year nobody could read. He took it home and spent the whole evening cleaning it with lemon and vinegar, until it shone like new.

His daughter Nejra was twenty-eight and had lived with him in Slavinovići since her mother died. She made crosswords for a Tuzla news site, and in the rest of her time, as Ibro used to say, she put him together as well. She looked at the mortar on the kitchen table and said: "Dad, don't take it to him." Ibro said it was the honest thing, that the mortar had been found on the building site and belonged to the firm. "It does," said Nejra. "But I know Hrustić from the papers. If you bring him the mortar, he'll ask for the pestle." Ibro waved her off. A mortar without a pestle is still a mortar, he said, and the boss knows how to appreciate a beautiful thing.

The boss appreciated the beautiful thing for exactly four minutes. I was in the office when he lifted the mortar to the window, turned it in the light and said it would stand on his desk, where the investors from Vienna could see it. Then he set it down. "And the pestle?" Ibro said there had been no pestle. "There's no mortar without a pestle," said Velid. "Whoever found the one found the other. What were you thinking, Ibro, selling it at Baščaršija?" He called accounting and told them to stop Ibro's pay until the pestle turned up, and told the gatekeeper not to let him onto the site.

Ibro sat down on the bench in the hallway, under the framed photograph of Velid cutting a ribbon, and began to speak aloud, to himself: "My daughter told me. My daughter told me." He repeated it ten times, loud enough to be heard through the door. Velid came out. "What daughter?" Ibro told him everything, from the kitchen table to the lemon. Velid listened with the smile of a man whose move someone had guessed in advance. He did not like that. "Zoran," he said to me, "bring me a brick from the warehouse."

I drove the brick to Slavinovići, with a note written in Velid's fountain pen: by Monday his daughter was to build a house out of this brick, and then he would take her father back. Nejra opened the door in a tracksuit, with a pencil behind her ear. She read the note in the doorway, laughed, went into the house and came back with a single match and a sheet of paper from a notepad. "First let him make me a crane out of this match," it said. "I don't build without a crane." She gave me a coffee too, for the road. Velid looked at the match on his palm for a long time, and then he laughed too loudly, the way people laugh when they do not know what else to do.

The next day he ordered thirty hard-boiled eggs from the canteen and sent them in cartons, with a note saying that by Saturday Nejra was to hatch thirty chicks from them for the opening of the shopping mall, because it would look nice on television. I came back with a pot of beans, still warm, wrapped in a kitchen towel. A note was taped to the lid:

"Cooked beans. Let him plant them on the roof of his tower, so the chicks will have something to eat when they hatch." I drove that pot more carefully than I had ever driven the director. At the traffic light by Kapija I tried one spoonful. It was good.

Velid ate the beans himself, at his desk, beside the empty mortar, and did not say a word through the whole lunch. It was the first time in twelve years. Then he took his fountain pen and wrote for a long time, crossing out and writing again, as if drafting a contract. The third note was short: Nejra was to come to him in the tower neither by day nor by night, neither on foot nor by car, neither with a gift nor without one. When he sealed the envelope, he laughed properly for the first time that day. He was sure he had caught her. Nejra read the note in the doorway, said nothing, and this time she did not give me a coffee.

The next day, at dusk, when the streetlights had already come on in the city but the sky above Ilinčica was still light, Nejra rode up to the tower on an electric scooter. A red balloon on a string was tied around her wrist. The gatekeeper called upstairs, and Velid came down in person, in his jacket, and looked at his watch, as if a watch could settle it. "Neither day nor night," said Nejra, and pointed at the sky. "Neither on foot nor by car," she said, and tapped her foot on the scooter. Then she untied the balloon from her wrist and held out the string to him. "And this is the gift." When Velid reached for it, she let it go.

The balloon rose past the fourteen floors of the Hrustić tower, past the billboard with his face, and Velid watched it until it vanished above Ilinčica. I stood by the car and watched him not knowing what to say. "All right," he said at last. "You win. What do you want?" Nejra said she wanted her dad's pay, her dad's job and an apology in front of the whole warehouse. "And the pestle?" Velid asked. "There never was a pestle," she said. "And you knew it from the first day."

He rehearsed the apology in the car, at every traffic light from the tower to the warehouse, and I pretended not to listen. In front of twenty

workers he told Ibro that he had been wrong, and he said it once, without the third person. Ibro got his pay and his chair back. On the first morning the gatekeeper greeted him as if he were back from a trip. The mortar stayed on Velid's desk, empty. But Velid was not finished. A week later he sent me to Slavinovići with a new envelope. Inside was a sheet with an empty crossword, clumsily drawn in marker, and a single clue: "Twelve letters, across: a man one woman outwitted three times."

Nejra filled in the squares in a minute. Underneath, in small letters, she added a clue of her own: "Five letters, down: the word this man never says before he asks for something." Velid spent the whole afternoon over it. He tried "hitno," urgent, and "odmah," right now, two five-letter words he said every day. Around six he stood up, put on his jacket and told me to drive to Slavinovići, but this time not to carry anything, because he would carry it himself.

Nejra opened the door with a pencil behind her ear. Velid stood in front of the door without his fountain pen and without any papers, with hands that did not know where to go. "Molim," he said, which means please. Nejra waited. "Please, come out to dinner with me. You choose the place." She looked at him for a long time, and then she said: "Correct. Five letters." She took her jacket from the coat rack. I drove them to the ćevapi place by Kapija, because that was what she chose, and waited outside for three hours. For the first time in twelve years I turned on the radio, because there was nobody in the car to talk to me.

In September I drove them to the municipal hall. Nejra carried a pencil in her bag, just in case. As a wedding present Ibro brought a package wrapped in newspaper. Inside was a brass pestle he had turned himself on the lathe in the workshop behind the warehouse. It was a little shorter than it should have been. Velid set it in the mortar and said it fit, and nobody contradicted him, not even Nejra.

ROMANCE · 8 MIN READ

Letters in a Dry Bag

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/letters-in-a-dry-bag/

On the Una, between Bihać and Kostela, two rafting camps have faced each other for twenty years, and for twenty years their owners have not greeted each other. Ferid Mulalić runs Green Pool on the left bank, Šefko Begić runs Stone Slope on the right. No one remembers how it started anymore: some say it was a parking space by the bridge, others a bad review supposedly written by Ferid's brother-in-law. Whoever eats lunch at Ferid's must not mention Šefko's grill, and whoever sleeps in Šefko's bungalows hears every evening that Ferid would charge for the river if he could.

Ferid's daughter Azra was twenty-three, with a degree in English and a summer that felt too long to her. She washed helmets and kept the booking ledger. Then in July the cook Rasim, who cooked on both banks because at his age nobody asked him anything, brought the news: Šefko's son Nermin had come back from Ljubljana, where he had worked for five years as an engineer. Now he sat on the terrace of Stone Slope dressed in black, read thick books and said that people did not interest him. "What is he like?" Azra asked. "Tall," said Rasim. "And sad the way a young man is sad when he wants everyone to watch him."

Two days later Azra borrowed a red jacket with a faded logo from her cousin Mevlida, a seasonal guide at a small camp in Lohovo. She braided her hair into two plaits and practiced the speech of her grandmother from Kulen Vakuf, with words that four years of Sarajevo had knocked out of her head. "I'm Mina," she told the mirror. "From Vakuf. I lead tours to Lohovo." Rasim, when he saw her on the path, only shook his head and went on peeling potatoes.

Every morning at six Nermin put his kayak in the water alone by the old mill below Kostela, and the whole riverbank knew it. Azra waited for him on a rock with a thermos, as if resting before a tour. Nermin had an

opinion about everything: about the Una, which was more beautiful than all the Slovenian rivers but which people did not deserve, about tourists, who took pictures instead of looking, and about love, which was a comfort for the uneducated. Mina listened with wide eyes and finally said that he talked nicely for a man who did not like people. Then Nermin laughed for the first time, a perfectly ordinary laugh, not sad at all.

They saw each other every morning for three weeks. Mina told him about the Dutch tourists who came to the rapids in sandals and about how she wanted to work on cruise ships but could not even write an application in English. Nermin offered to teach her. Azra, who had studied English literature for four years, had to be careful to make enough mistakes. She wrote "I am verry happy" and "the river is beutiful," and he circled the letters in red pencil and said she had talent. They left each other assignments in a yellow dry bag that Nermin hung on a willow above the mill. Soon there were no more assignments in the bag, only letters.

Meanwhile Ferid was saying that Šefko's son was a failed Ljubljana type who had come home to spend his father's pension, and Šefko was saying that Ferid's daughter was surely just like her father, only with a diploma. Then at the end of July Ferid took a group of Germans down the stretch below Štrbački buk himself, because his guide was sick, and at the first big drop he fell out of the raft. The current carried him straight in front of Šefko's raft. Šefko pulled him out by the strap of his life jacket, without a single word, and paddled him to the shore. Ferid had a sprained ankle and half the Una inside him.

Šefko drove him home. For the first six miles they were silent, and then Ferid said that had been a good grab, for a man of Šefko's age. Šefko said it had been a good fall too, for a man of Ferid's age. At the house they drank two coffees, Ferid's sister Zehra brought out apple pie, and by dark they had established that the parking space had been too small for both of them anyway. As they parted, Ferid invited Šefko and his son to lunch on Saturday. "So the children can meet," he said, and Šefko nodded like a man who had just been struck by an idea he had already had himself.

When she heard about the lunch, Azra did not sleep all night. If Nermin recognized her, it was all over: Mina, the letters, the mornings at the mill. In the morning she went into Bihać, to a friend's salon, and came back with false eyelashes, a blond wig to her shoulders, foundation two shades lighter than her skin and her graduation dress. Ferid looked at her from the doorway and asked whether someone had died. Azra said it was fashion. "Whose fashion?" "City fashion," she said, and her father fell silent, because he had never been in a city long enough to argue.

On Saturday a young lady nobody knew sat at the table. She spoke half in English, asked Nermin whether Ljubljana had a proper brunch, laughed three seconds after every joke and looked at her phone. About the river she said it was, like, wet, about books that she did not read them because they hurt her eyes, and about the weather she said nothing, because she was photographing the pie. Under the table Šefko kept nudging his son with his knee. Ferid looked at his daughter as if he did not know her, which was the point. When the guests had left, Azra took off the eyelashes in the bathroom and cried with laughter, and a little from something else.

On Monday, instead of a letter, Nermin himself was waiting at the mill. He told Mina that his father and Ferid wanted to merge the camps, the rafts, the vans and the children, all at once, and that they had called it the business opportunity of the century. "And you?" Mina asked. Nermin said he had seen that girl once and it had been enough. Then he paused, because what came next was harder to say without a book in his hand. "I would marry you," he said. "If you don't mind that I can't even make coffee on a rock." Mina jumped off the rock and ran off without an answer.

When Šefko heard the refusal, he laughed at first, and then he stopped. He said that in his family sons did not choose a guide from Lohovo over half the Una. Nermin said that then he would go back to Ljubljana, but not alone. Next, because he was an engineer and liked things clear, he wrote Azra Mulalić a short, polite letter: he was sorry, but he loved someone else, and he asked her to tell her father herself. He carried it

across the bridge in person, so there would be no confusion.

Zehra opened the door and told him Azra was on the terrace. Nermin went through the kitchen, where Rasim was peeling potatoes, and stepped out onto the terrace above the river. At the table sat a girl in a red jacket, her hair in two plaits. A yellow dry bag lay in front of her, and in her hands she held his letter from Friday, the one about the difference between "beautiful" and "beutiful." When she raised her head, Nermin was still holding the letter for Miss Mulalić in his hand.

"Mina," he said. "Azra," she said, in her own voice, without a trace of Vakuf. "The wig was my friend's. The mistakes were on purpose." Footsteps came from the kitchen: Ferid was limping on his bandaged foot, and behind him came Šefko, who had come to apologize on his son's behalf. Azra took the letter from his hand and read it, slowly, to the end. "There is one mistake," she said. "You wrote that you love someone else." "What's wrong with that?" "It isn't someone else," she said. "It's the same girl."

Ferid and Šefko came out onto the terrace just as he kissed her, and for the first time in twenty years both of them went speechless at the same moment, on the same bank. In the kitchen Rasim went on peeling potatoes. He had known since the first morning, but nobody ever asked him anything.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Last Light in the Reading Room

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

Vesna always switched off the lights in the same order. First those above the magazines, then two rows by the windows, then the lamp over the table where Emil read the newspapers. She never had to tell him it was time. He would arrange the pages by number, pick up his hat, and wait while she put on her coat. They walked together to the crossroads. There, each turned in a different direction.

Three years of those evenings fitted into a single sentence when she told him she was retiring. Emil said it would be nice for her. She said she hoped so. Neither mentioned the crossroads.

During her final working week, her colleagues were preparing a cake. Vesna sorted her legacy of ordinary details: the spare cupboard key, a list of faulty sockets, instructions for the window that only closed if you first lifted it slightly. Among the papers she found Emil's library membership application. It contained a telephone number. She held the form for a few seconds, then put it back. She did not want to use his application as her personal address book.

On Thursday he arrived later than usual. Vesna showed him an invitation to the small farewell gathering. He said he could not attend because he took his brother to a regular appointment on Fridays. She knew about the brother, and about the garden Emil never managed to weed. He knew she was widowed and afraid of empty mornings. Yet asking about an ordinary Saturday coffee seemed larger than all those conversations.

"I didn't invite you just because of the cake," she said as he returned the newspaper. Emil removed his glasses. Vesna looked at them, at the loose arm he kept tightening with a fingernail. She continued, saying she would like to see him when she no longer worked there. She added no explanation about loneliness. She did not make a joke to soften what she

had just said.

Emil took a piece of paper from his pocket with the address of a small seed shop. He went there on Saturdays, then had coffee in the cafe next door. He asked whether she would like to come. He wrote his number on the back, more slowly than necessary, and handed her the paper.

On her last evening at the library, they left early. The new colleague stayed to lock up. At the crossroads Vesna paused from habit, but Emil reminded her that she needed to buy a lemon for the cake. They continued along the same street. While she chose the fruit, he held her bag, and she noticed for the first time how suddenly free one of her hands felt.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Thursday Without an Order

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-thursday-without-an-order/

The last customer on Thursdays always ordered whatever was left. Alisa appreciated it until she noticed that he stayed even when the food had run out. His name was Nebojša, he was fifty-four, and he repaired elevators. In her small lunch kitchen he sat by the window, his hands washed so thoroughly that his knuckles cracked in winter.

They talked while she cleaned the counter. He knew her dog's name and the date of the roof ventilation inspection. She knew he disliked beans but would eat them if he thought she might otherwise throw them away. Once she packed a pie just for him. He sent a thank-you message in which the word "lovely" could have described either the pie or the woman who had made it.

After her assistant went on extended sick leave, Alisa decided to close on Thursdays. She could not work six days and spend the seventh shut inside her apartment, too exhausted to see anyone. She taped a notice to the door. Nebojša read it twice, said he understood, and took his lunch away. For the rest of the day Alisa felt angry with him for the question he had not asked.

On her first free Thursday she sat in another restaurant and ordered fish she never cooked herself. Nebojša called while she was waiting for the bill. He asked whether her kitchen would be open the following day. She said it would, but the opening hours were posted on the door. There was a silence. Then he said, "I wanted to ask where I could have coffee with you when you aren't at work."

They arranged to meet in the park. Alisa arrived without a bag of food, although she had opened her refrigerator twice before leaving. Nebojša did not bring a broken object to justify their meeting. They bought coffee and spoke with unnatural politeness for almost ten minutes. Without a

counter between them, both had forgotten how their conversations normally began. A pigeon stealing a piece of his pastry helped.

Later he admitted that he had long assumed she was kind because she sold him lunch. She admitted she had feared he stayed only so she would not be alone while closing. No grand explanation followed. Nebojša reached across the table, and Alisa placed her hand on his open palm.

The next day he returned for food. He ordered what he wanted, without first checking what needed using up. Alisa charged him the full price. They arranged coffee for the following Thursday afterward, outside the door, once she had taken off her apron.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Tickets for Different Nights

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-tickets-for-different-nights/

Ena bought two tickets after their fourth lunch together. She and Luka worked in neighboring workshops: hers repaired musical instruments, while his made picture frames. For months they had shared a bench behind the building and discussed everything except whether their lunches were dates. A play seemed a simple way to find out without actually asking the question.

When she showed him the tickets, Luka looked first at the date and then at the theater. He thanked her but said he could not go. He did not suggest another evening. Ena put the tickets in her pocket and ate indoors the next day, surrounded by dismantled violins. She felt embarrassed that she had settled the place, the time, and the nature of their relationship without him.

On Friday he brought over a framed photograph for a customer. As he was leaving, he paused and said he could not follow performances in that auditorium. He had some hearing loss, and captions were provided only at certain performances. At lunch he sat facing her because that made speech easier to understand. She had assumed that his attention to her lips was particularly meaningful.

"You could have told me," she answered too quickly. Luka carefully set the empty wrapping on the table. "You could have asked whether I wanted to see that play at all." Then both of them laughed, briefly and with some embarrassment. The title promised a comedy about people who talked too much and heard nothing. It did not seem a particularly good choice.

Ena gave the tickets to her sister. She did not immediately buy replacements. At their next lunch she asked Luka what he liked doing after closing his shop. He pulled out a small notebook containing

sketches of old signs he found around town. She showed him a map of places where she had played music in the street as a student. Some overlapped. She had passed one for years without noticing the faded lettering above its passageway.

They agreed to take a walk on Sunday. Luka chose the route, and Ena chose the time. When the passage became too noisy, they stopped in a quiet side street and continued their conversation. They did not try to fix the whole evening in advance; they simply changed where they were standing.

Outside her house, Luka asked whether she would go on a proper date with him next time. Ena said they had just been on one. "Good," he replied. "Then I've already prepared my question for the second." He did not produce any tickets. He waited until she was looking at him.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Bench That Was Not for Sale

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bench-that-was-not-for-sale/

The same narrow bench appeared in every photograph of the workshop. Customers asked about it more often than the tables Maida made to order. Her answer was brief: it was not for sale. It had belonged to her father, although only one leg remained from his original work. Over the years she had replaced everything else, piece by piece, always postponing that final repair.

Viktor came in to order a shelf for his small bakery. While she measured his drawing, he sat on the bench and immediately stood up. A board had caught the edge of his coat. He apologized to the bench. Maida laughed for the first time that morning, loudly enough for her assistant to peer through the doorway. Viktor did not ask why she kept it. He ordered the shelf and left his telephone number.

Every Wednesday he visited to check on work that could have been discussed in a single message. He brought bread with peculiar faults: an overly salty roll, a flatbread baked too dark, a perfect loaf that he insisted was a disaster. Maida recognized the excuse. She kept the finished shelf covered with a cloth for two days longer than necessary herself.

When he finally collected his order, he offered to buy the bench for his shop window. Customers liked things with a past, he said. Her smile disappeared. She counted the money for the shelf, returned his change, and opened the door. The following Wednesday passed without pastries. She worked so noisily all day that she did not hear a delivery driver leave a small paper bag.

There was no breakfast inside. Viktor had returned a tiny piece of wood that had broken off and remained in his coat. His note said, "I asked the wrong question. I wanted a reason to come back." Maida sat on the floor beside the bench. Her father would probably have replaced the cracked

leg immediately. He had been a practical man, quite different from the memory she kept trying to preserve.

She called Viktor and asked him to come the next day without a drawing, an order, or any deliberately bad bread. Then she removed the last old leg herself. She did not throw it away, but placed it in the drawer where she kept family photographs. The next morning they carried the repaired bench outside the workshop together. When he sat down, nothing wobbled. Maida took the other seat and opened a bag containing two perfectly ordinary bread rolls.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Conversation After the Credits

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-conversation-after-the-credits/

Tanja joined the film club for the films and stayed for the discussions. At work she spent all day arranging deliveries and listening to people who wanted every conversation finished as quickly as possible. Here she could spend twenty minutes explaining why a final scene bothered her. Ivan contradicted her most often. He worked in a school kitchen and spoke calmly, even when describing her favorite film as beautiful packaging with nothing inside.

Several members began deliberately seating them opposite each other. Tanja disliked it because it turned their conversations into entertainment for everyone else. One evening she said nothing about the film. After the meeting Ivan asked whether she was tired. She replied that she did not always want to play the argumentative woman. He said he had never listened to her that way. She did not immediately believe him.

The next time someone announced their expected duel, Ivan suggested first hearing from people who usually remained quiet. The discussion lasted longer than ever. Tanja learned that the quiet man in the back row made short films on his telephone and that the librarian enjoyed thrillers she had never mentioned. Afterward Tanja bought Ivan coffee from the machine. It was so bad that, for the first time, they immediately agreed.

They began staying after meetings. Tanja talked about a divorce that had passed without major conflict, but also without a single honest conversation. Ivan admitted that in relationships he often agreed to things he did not want, then became quiet and unpleasant afterward. He found it easier to contradict a stranger about a film than someone close to him about an ordinary Sunday lunch.

Only the two of them and the organizer attended the screening of one comedy. The film was bad, the room cold, and the sound too loud. During

the closing credits, Tanja said she would like to have dinner with Ivan. The organizer assumed she was inviting both men and began looking for his jacket. Tanja blushed but explained what she had meant anyway. Ivan did not try to rescue the situation with a joke. He said he would gladly go.

At dinner they disagreed about where to sit. Tanja wanted the window, while Ivan preferred a quieter corner. Each explained why, and they chose a third table. It did not seem particularly romantic until she realized how long she had waited for such an ordinary agreement. Before they parted, she kissed him. At the next club meeting they sat together and once again disagreed about the film.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Coming Home from Someone Else's Wedding

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/coming-home-from-someone-elses-wedding/

Ela removed her shoes as soon as they left the reception hall. Nermin carried a bag of leftover cake and someone else's jacket, which he had promised to return to a cousin. They had sat at the same table during the wedding but barely seen each other. He had driven guests around; she had searched for lost hairpins and calmed a nervous aunt. When the newlyweds danced, both stood behind other people with telephones in their hands.

In the car, Nermin said it had been lovely. Ela did not reply. He drove several streets before asking whether her shoes had hurt. She said they had, but that was not why she was quiet. She had waited all evening for him to ask her to dance. He replied that she could have asked him. They both knew the conversation had not begun that evening.

For fifteen years they had been a good couple for practical matters. Bills were paid, parents looked after, presents bought on time. Their time together mostly served to organize other people's lives. When Ela said it aloud, it sounded exaggerated to her. Nermin began listing outings from the previous summer, then stopped. On every one they had driven someone else or completed an errand along the way.

They stopped outside a bakery that was still open. Ela went inside wearing the spare slippers from the trunk. They bought one pastry and shared it on a bench, careful not to stain their formal clothes. Nermin said he missed the way they used to argue about silly films. Now they mostly watched television to help themselves fall asleep. Ela laughed with her mouth full and covered her face with a napkin.

They promised neither a holiday nor a romantic weekend. They considered the coming Sunday and found two hours they continually

gave to others. In front of her, Nermin called his brother and asked him to drive their father on his visit this time. Ela messaged her sister to say she would not bake cakes for her guests. Both requests were accepted more easily than they had expected.

At home they hung the borrowed jacket in the hallway. Nermin played the song they had danced to at their own wedding, but a poor connection interrupted the recording. Ela took his telephone and put it on the table. They danced without music, in socks and slippers, laughing at the creaking floor. Plenty of obligations awaited them the next day. On Sunday they went to the cinema alone and afterward had a proper argument about the film.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Dance Without a Photograph

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-dance-without-a-photograph/

By their third dance evening, Robert had finally stopped counting the steps aloud. Ivana rewarded him with a smile and permission to choose the next song. Both were over forty and had enough bad wedding memories to make dancing a difficult invitation. They had arrived at the small hall separately, through different friends. Now they were already waiting for each other by the entrance.

When the organizer raised a camera for a group photograph, Ivana went to get water. Robert assumed it was a coincidence. The following week she stepped behind a pillar as soon as someone began filming on a telephone. Afterward he asked whether she was married. The question came out more sharply than he intended. She looked at him as though he had suddenly changed the music in the middle of a step.

She was not married. Her former partner had posted every outing, ended every argument with a photograph of them together, and taken offense if her comment was not affectionate enough. After the breakup, a whole public exhibition remained of a relationship in which she had often felt alone. Dancing was the first place she had returned to without needing to prove to anyone that she was enjoying herself.

Robert lowered his eyes. His former partner had hidden their relationship from colleagues, so an absence of photographs meant something very different to him. He told her that. Ivana did not promise to change her habit to repair someone else's old injury. Instead, she asked whether he would like to have Sunday lunch with her friends. Without secrecy, and without compulsory recording.

He arrived with an excessively large box of cakes. One friend asked whether she could photograph the table. Ivana said yes, as long as she kept them out of the picture. Nobody demanded further explanation.

Robert spent hours talking to people who knew his name and why he was there. As he left, Ivana kissed him in the open doorway while someone behind them asked where the spoons had gone.

At the next dance evening the organizer invited them into the photograph again. Robert said they would stay to one side this time. Ivana took his hand and drew him toward the nearly empty dance floor. The song began, and he got the second step wrong. She rested her forehead against his shoulder as she laughed. Later she had no evidence of how that moment had looked. But she could describe it exactly when her friend asked.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Lap They Never Finished

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-lap-they-never-finished/

Petra arrived at the starting line determined to beat last year's result. She had a new bicycle, a carefully calculated target time, and a sister she had promised not to spend three days telling exactly where she had lost her advantage. Beside her, Tarik was trying to open a food packet with his teeth. She offered the little scissors from her bag, and he said she was exactly the sort of person missing from his life.

She did not take him seriously. People said all sorts of things before a race to hide their nerves. They rode together through the first few bends, then she overtook him. On the climb beyond an orchard, she heard whining from a ditch. A small dog on an excessively long leash had become tangled in branches. Petra pedaled several more turns before braking. Tarik stopped as soon as he saw her bicycle beside the road.

The dog would not let them approach. They did not pull at it. They sat on the ground, left some water within reach, and waited for it to settle. Riders passed; some asked if they needed help, while most merely slowed down. Petra watched her plan disappear down the road without her. Tarik recognized the name of a smallholding on the collar and called the number beneath it.

The owner arrived about twenty minutes later, breathless and wearing slippers. The dog approached her as soon as she freed its leash. She invited them in for juice. Petra was already lifting her bicycle when she realized there was no longer any reason to hurry. They sat beneath a tree and drank from glasses of different sizes. Tarik received the one decorated with a smiling rabbit.

Only then did they begin talking. Both had divorced the previous year, and both had signed up for too many activities to avoid empty weekends. Petra admitted that she competed even when nobody else was keeping

score. Tarik said he had entered the race because he felt awkward refusing a colleague. It was not the meeting she would have chosen in advance, which felt unexpectedly pleasant.

They reached the finish while volunteers were already folding the tables. Her sister was waiting with a spare jacket and a sympathetic expression ready. Petra told her she had not completed the final lap. She did not begin explaining how fast she would otherwise have been. While they returned their race numbers, Tarik asked whether she would like to ride to the same smallholding the following Sunday. "Without registering or timing ourselves," he added. Petra agreed, but insisted on bringing the scissors.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Half of the Last Poster

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/half-of-the-last-poster/

The poster above the till was the last thing they had not packed. It named the concert where they had met twenty-two years earlier. Hana claimed it belonged to her because she had saved it. Marko said it belonged to the shop, and the shop was closing. Neither wanted to say they were really arguing about who owned a memory when love ceased to be a shared address.

They had divorced three years earlier but continued running the business. Customers considered this proof of maturity. Hana knew how often she had cried in the storeroom after a conversation that began with stock and ended with old grievances. Marko knew how difficult it was to hear her calmly arrange a weekend with another man. Yet they did the work well. Cooperation was not always peace; sometimes it was merely the ability to postpone pain until closing time.

The rent rose, sales fell, and eventually they decided to close. On the last day regular customers brought cakes and stories about the first records they had bought there. Hana listened to their shop living on in other people's lives, beyond the marriage that had failed. Marko played an album they had listened to while painting the walls. He did not ask her permission. She did not ask him to change it. This time the music could belong to something besides regret.

Towards evening they were left alone. Hana found a photograph from the opening, showing Marko holding a ladder while she put up the same poster. They looked tired, young and convinced everything could be solved through work. Marko said he was sorry he had not understood sooner how lonely she had been. Hana replied that she regretted treating every later gesture of care as an overdue debt. They were not negotiating a reunion. They were simply talking for the first time without needing someone to win.

The poster tore as they removed it. The old paper could not withstand the glue. Both froze, then began laughing, tired and almost childlike. Hana received the half with the date; Marko took the band's name. It was neither a fair division nor an elegant symbol they would have chosen in advance. It was an ordinary accident that solved a question on which they might otherwise have spent another evening.

Outside the shop Marko handed Hana the key. She would return it to the owner. They hugged longer than planned, without promising to become friends now. At home Hana placed her half of the poster among her books. She did not frame it. Some memories no longer require a wall or an audience, only enough room to exist without being obliged to become an entire life again.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Lunch in the Delivery Slot

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/lunch-in-the-delivery-slot/

Lejla and Vedad's shared calendar held many obligations and no dates. She worked mornings in a bakery; he ran a restaurant's evening kitchen. They had been married for eleven years. Most conversations happened through messages about bills, detergent and food that needed taking out of the freezer. One morning Lejla read his message, "I miss you," and replied that the milk was on the bottom shelf. Only later did she realise what she had seen instead of what he had written.

Vedad was not angry. That saddened her more than anger would have. They had become so accustomed to accommodating each other that they no longer expected even a small protest. She suggested a Sunday outing, but he had a celebration booked at the restaurant. He suggested Monday, when she was covering for a colleague. They studied the calendar as though seeking an appointment with a specialist rather than a chance to be two people who had once lost entire afternoons together.

Eventually they found Thursday between one and three. Lejla finished early; Vedad started late. He booked a table in a restaurant where they knew nobody. She wore a dress usually saved for other people's celebrations. When they sat down, both checked their phones first. Vedad expected a delivery at his restaurant. Lejla awaited a colleague's message. Once they stopped checking whether anyone needed them, they did not immediately know what to discuss.

Lejla said she feared good organisation was all they had left. Vedad studied the menu for a long time, then admitted he sometimes stayed in the kitchen because he did not know how to come home and wake a wife who had to rise again within hours. His absence was not indifference, but increasingly resembled it to her. They found no culprit at the table. They found habits they had both respected for so long that the habits had begun making their decisions.

The phone rang halfway through the main course. Vedad turned it over, sent a brief message to his deputy and put it in his bag. Lejla did not applaud the decision. She simply continued talking about the book she was reading, discovering she had forgotten how he looked while listening to something that needed no answer. Later they shared dessert and nearly missed their departure time. They did not kiss until the exit, where they were surprised by how much they had missed it.

They did not change jobs overnight. They began with one Thursday every fortnight and a rule against surrendering it to the first person who needed something. On the calendar Vedad wrote "Delivery for us". Beneath it Lejla added that it must not be left outside the door. Their marriage did not become easier to schedule. It became something worth moving other things for again, even when they had only two hours.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Room for Two Names

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/room-for-two-names/

The new doorplate carried only the flat owner's surname. Lana had ordered it herself between arranging a tradesperson and buying curtains. When she brought it home, Iva asked where her name was. Lana replied that it was simpler for the post. They had lived together for six years. Throughout those years the post had managed to find them both, even when the postman pronounced their old address incorrectly.

Iva did not raise her voice. She put down the screwdriver and went to buy bread, although they already had some. Lana remained in the hallway with a plate that suddenly looked larger than it had in the shop. She did not hide their relationship from friends. Her family knew, as did her colleagues. Yet in the new building she had introduced Iva as the person she shared a flat with. The statement was true in the way a closed door can still leave someone outside.

When Iva returned, they talked at the kitchen table still surrounded by unpacked boxes. Lana said she needed time to get to know the neighbours. Iva replied that she was not asking for a flag on the balcony or an explanation for every passer-by. She wanted her presence not to become temporary whenever a stranger appeared. Lana had bought the flat with her own money, but they had planned their life in it together. Those facts did not need to cancel each other out.

Lana wanted to say that Iva found courage easier because she had grown up in a different family. She stopped. She had used that explanation for years while Iva learned to stay quiet before Lana's aunt, sit a little further away at weddings and wait to be introduced. Not every old fear deserved a new sacrifice from the same person. For the first time Lana asked which of those small retreats had hurt Iva most.

The answer did not come quickly. Their conversation lasted beyond dinner, with pauses to eat cold bread and cheese. They did not decide everything would be easy the next day. They agreed that Lana would no longer choose words on Iva's behalf. In the morning Lana took the plate back and ordered another. The shopkeeper requested no explanation. He merely asked whether they wanted the names side by side or one beneath the other.

At home Iva held the plate while Lana tightened the screws. A neighbour on their floor stopped to introduce herself. Lana gave their names and added that Iva was her partner. The neighbour offered spare jars and warned them about a window that let in rain. They closed the door without a dramatic sigh. Iva ran a finger over both names and said they still had to decide whose shoes would go into the undersized cupboard first.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Ring We Never Bought

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-ring-we-never-bought/

My daughter booked the restaurant before Ivan and I had decided what we were celebrating. She said a year was long enough to know. She was right, but she did not know which question we had answered. Ivan and I knew we wanted to be together. We did not know why that should mean selling an apartment, sharing a wardrobe and repeating words before our relatives that we both still remembered from other lives.

We met at an Italian class. He attended because he wanted to visit his son; I went because the house felt especially quiet on Tuesdays. I had not expected love in a classroom with broken heating. He first made me laugh when, instead of asking the teacher for a pen, he asked her forgiveness. Later he claimed it had been an intentional exercise. I allowed him that small invention because he spoke unusually openly about everything else.

My daughter, his son and their families came to dinner. The children gave us a trip for two and an envelope containing a drawing of a house. Their proposal was practical: Ivan would sell his apartment, move into mine and keep the money for our travels together. I listened as people I loved rearranged our drawers, memories and morning habits. Ivan turned his fork beside his plate. I knew the movement. He was searching for a sentence that would hurt nobody.

I said it before he did. We did not want to move. My daughter looked at Ivan as though he were the reason for my fear. His son asked whether that meant the relationship was not serious. Ivan put down his fork and said he took seriously a woman who needed her own kitchen in the morning, just as she took seriously his need to listen to the radio too loudly on Sundays. At that table it sounded almost indecently simple.

Dinner was not ruined, but it lost its script. My daughter admitted she feared my loneliness. I said I knew what it looked like too, which was why I did not want to cure it by surrendering everything I enjoyed. We did not refuse the trip. We refused the drawing of the house. Later the children laughed at the distinction, still slightly hurt that their good intentions were not enough to become our plan.

That night Ivan walked me to my door. He asked whether I wanted him to stay. I said I did, but he would have to turn down the radio in the morning. There was no ring box in the hallway, nor a decision that would require us to be braver tomorrow than today. There were his shoes beside mine and an agreement to sleep at his place on Wednesday. For us, that was a perfectly serious form of a future.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Date Without a Horoscope

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-date-without-a-horoscope/

That Friday I promised an unexpected encounter to four zodiac signs. For the others I offered caution, rest and a conversation with someone close. I had written an entertainment column for the local newspaper long enough to know how many people read general sentences as personal letters. I did not base my own decisions on them. Still, when a friend invited me to dinner with a colleague I "had to meet", I refused because I disliked encounters written in advance.

I met the man a week later while helping the same friend move. His name was Ivan, and he carried the boxes in the wrong order, so the books arrived before the shelves. We argued about where to put a lamp neither of us would use. Afterwards we cleaned up spilled juice together. He did not ask my sign. He asked whether I always worked on Sundays, because I had checked a message from my editor three times. I said I worked more than I admitted.

He brought a newspaper clipping to our first coffee. His forecast said he should listen to a friend encouraging him out of his routine. He said he did not usually believe such things, but liked that part. I recognised my own sentence, written while waiting for window varnish to dry. I did not tell him immediately. For a few minutes I allowed it to look like a sign of fate, then became ashamed of my little performance.

I admitted that I wrote the column. Ivan looked at the paper, then at me, and asked whether that was how I had known he should order tea instead of coffee. I said the waiter had known because Ivan had told him. We laughed, but I noticed a little disappointment. I asked whether it spoiled the meeting. He said it did not spoil the meeting, only deprive him of a story he had planned to use when teasing his brother.

Over the following weeks we did not behave like people joined by something predetermined. Once I cancelled an outing for work and had to suggest another time. Once he was late and apologised without joking. I liked our relationship taking shape through decisions that could be checked rather than sentences broad enough to contain everyone. Ivan nevertheless kept the clipping in his wallet. He said he liked the paper more now that he knew who had written it.

For his birthday I wrote a brief prediction that was not intended for the newspaper: "On Saturday at seven, someone will be waiting who will probably be five minutes late, but is coming because she wants to." I arrived exactly on time. Ivan opened the door and said the horoscope was obviously unreliable. Then he kissed me before I could offer a general explanation.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Last Ferry, Without Hurry

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-last-ferry-without-hurry/

Nina reached the harbour seven minutes after departure. The ferry was still visible, close enough to suggest it might change its mind. A man sat on a bench with a large paper bag. He told her waving did not help; he had already tried. Nina put down her bag and opened the timetable. The next departure was in the morning. Until then, she had imagined the island as a day trip with a precise ending, never somewhere she would be stranded without a toothbrush.

The man's name was Boris. His bag contained a broken wall clock collected from his late aunt's house. He did not want to call his relatives and ask them to take him back to the house he had just locked. Nina did not want to call the colleague she had told she was travelling with friends. She had travelled alone for two years, but every explanation at work ended with an offer to introduce her to someone's brother. The two of them shared two small lies before sharing a sandwich.

The owner of the only open inn had two rooms available. Nina made no effort to hide her relief. Boris merely asked what time dinner was served. At the table he told her about his aunt, who had kept the clock stopped for years because its ticking annoyed her. Nina asked why he was taking it to be repaired. He did not know. His relatives had told him he should, and he was good at carrying out final tasks.

After dinner they walked to the harbour. Nina admitted she had lingered in a little museum because she had not wanted to return. Monday held the same job that had awaited her for nine years. Boris said he had deliberately walked slowly down the hill. The house had been sold, and leaving would end the possibility of his aunt appearing at the door to complain that he had closed the shutters incorrectly. Neither offered the other advice. The sea filled enough of the gaps between their sentences.

In the morning Boris arrived at breakfast without the bag. He had left the clock with the innkeeper, who immediately recognised it from his aunt's kitchen. Nina bought two tickets and checked the time only once. They sat together on deck without making grand statements about coincidence. When he suggested lunch the following Saturday, she said she would need to check her schedule. Then she put her phone away before unlocking it. "Actually, Saturday works for me," she said, leaving the return journey open.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Bird They Never Saw

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bird-they-never-saw/

Jasna received the trip as a gift from colleagues who said she needed some peace. On the bus she answered her phone loudly three times. The guide, Mladen, said nothing. He simply handed her a sheet of instructions with silence at the top. Jasna folded it and put it away. She was fifty-two and disliked being brought up by strangers before her first coffee.

At the edge of the marsh, the group arranged themselves behind a wooden fence. Mladen explained that they were waiting for a bird rarely seen in that location. Jasna could not even tell the two ducks in front of her apart. She moved away, sat on a bench and finally switched off her phone. Her former husband was removing his last boxes from their apartment that day. She did not want to know whether he had found a charger, a folder or another reason to call.

Mladen approached with spare binoculars. She told him he did not have to pretend to be kind to a bad participant. He sat at the other end of the bench and admitted that he had fallen asleep on his first trip. He had been working nights in a bakery, while the woman he was dating wanted to spend time in nature. The relationship had failed; the habit had remained. For the first time that morning, Jasna laughed without trying to hide anything.

He showed her a nest that looked abandoned. As he explained why birds did not always return to the same spot, she thought he was offering consolation. She said she did not want life lessons drawn from nature. Mladen looked confused, then explained that he had meant the receding water. Her mistake was so embarrassing that they both started laughing. The other participants turned towards them.

At that moment the rare bird flew behind their bench. Everyone saw it except them. Mladen had to listen to excited descriptions, and Jasna offered to take the blame. He refused. On the journey back he sat across the aisle from her instead of in the guide's seat. They talked about bakery shifts, bad gifts and places where a person could sleep sitting up, without making a single grand confession.

Beside the bus he gave her a schedule of future trips. Jasna asked whether he ever took anyone for coffee without binoculars. He said that was not yet part of his service. "Then expand the business," she replied. At home she found the keys neatly arranged and part of the wardrobe empty. She did not immediately become fond of the silence. Still, she pinned the schedule to her fridge and saved the number written on its reverse under his name, without adding the word guide.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Smile I Brought to Dinner

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-smile-i-brought-to-dinner/

Three shirts lay on Rifat's bed, and none was responsible for his nerves. He had invited Jasna to dinner after meeting her four times among mutual friends. She liked assembling other people's misquoted verses into new poems and never pretended to understand jokes she did not find funny. Rifat was sixty-six and had new dentures he was still getting used to. That afternoon, those two facts seemed unfairly connected.

At the restaurant he studied the menu so long that Jasna suggested ordering drinks first. It did not help. He chose soup, then said he was not particularly hungry. She ordered fish and asked about a trip he had mentioned. He gave short answers, watching every word. When she laughed at something he said, he covered his mouth with his napkin and missed her next question.

Jasna put down her fork. She asked whether he actually wanted to be there. Rifat wanted to say he had had a difficult day, that something at work was bothering him, anything more suitable for a first date. But he was retired, and she knew that well. "I'm afraid I'll look ridiculous eating in front of you," he said. He explained why, looking into the soup that was already cooling.

She did not tell him that nothing showed or that it was normal at their age. She asked what he would feel most comfortable eating that evening. He said he wanted mashed potatoes and felt his own answer bring him back into the room. They ordered an extra side dish. Jasna then admitted that all the way there she had wondered whether the mark from her sock would fade on her calf, because she had worn shoes she only liked while sitting down.

Their difficulties were not equal, and they did not try to make a competition of them. They simply continued talking. Rifat described how,

at his first job, he had accidentally locked his own boss in the storeroom. Jasna laughed so much she had to set down her glass. This time he did not follow her eyes to check whether she was looking at his teeth. He noticed a little sauce on her sleeve and pointed it out without ceremony.

After dinner they did not walk far because of her shoes. They sat on a bench while she loosened the straps. Rifat asked whether she would come for lunch on Sunday, warning her that for the moment he was best at cooking soft things. She said she could bring a dessert eaten with a spoon. When he returned home, the three shirts still lay on the bed. He folded them and only then realized he had been smiling all the way home.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Evening Without a Spark

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-evening-without-a-spark/

Nikola looked exactly like his photographs. That was the hardest thing for Lana to explain when her sister later asked what had been wrong. He had not lied about his age, talked over her, or treated the waiter badly. He brought her a book she had searched for in vain. For three months they had exchanged messages about work, poor sleep, and films they watched simultaneously from their separate apartments.

At the table she felt the warmth of familiarity, but no desire to touch him. She told herself she was tired, that the feeling would appear after a second coffee. Nikola noticed her silence and began talking more than usual. He produced two tickets to an exhibition the following Saturday. He had bought them because they had discussed it. Lana said she was looking forward to it, afraid of ruining his evening.

When they parted, he leaned in to kiss her. She turned her cheek, awkwardly and too late for the movement to seem accidental. Nikola drew back and asked whether he was rushing things. She replied that she just needed time. At home she put the book on the table and realized how much she had already committed herself to something she did not want. His gift did not create a debt between them. But now she owed him a more accurate answer.

She called him the next day. She did not mention tiredness or a difficult period, although those sentences offered themselves as a comfortable exit. She said she cared about him and that their conversations had been real, but she felt no romantic attraction. Nikola was silent for a long time. "Then why did you say you were looking forward to Saturday?" he asked. She could not erase that question by listing his good qualities. She admitted that she had said what she thought would hurt him less.

She offered to return the book and pay for her ticket. He did not want the book back, and he would take his brother to the exhibition. When she suggested they keep talking as before, he said he could not do that at present. She felt the sting of rejection, then immediately felt ashamed for seeking comfort from him that she could not give him herself. They agreed not to contact each other for a while. He did not specify how long.

She spent Saturday at her sister's, helping assemble shelves. Her phone stayed in her bag. That evening she began reading his gift and found a receipt between the pages. It showed a morning time, before their date. She cried for something that had mattered, although it had not become love. She did not send him a photograph of the book. She left his silence to him.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Hand Across the Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-hand-across-the-table/

On their fifth date, Emina had already chosen the restaurant exit opening directly onto a busy street. People usually said quick goodbyes there, with someone behind them already holding the door. She liked Vahid. She laughed at his stories, remembered when he worked the late shift, and imagined showing him the little cove from her childhood. Only the end of the evening turned that pleasure into calculations of distance.

She did not enjoy kissing. There was no former partner about whom she needed to tell a terrible story, and no hidden person she wanted more. That particular touch simply did not usually feel pleasant. Previously she had endured it and waited for it to end, afraid that any discussion would conclude with the claim that she had not found the right man. Now she was forty-four and had little patience left for such tests.

That evening Vahid noticed her stiffen when he removed a thread from her shoulder. He withdrew his hand. "If you don't find me attractive, you can tell me," he said quietly. Emina knew she could no longer blame crowds, cold weather, or an early appointment. She told him she wanted to be close to him but did not enjoy kisses. As she spoke, she watched his hand beside the glass, a hand she actually wanted to hold.

He asked whether that meant she wanted no touching at all. She said it did not and offered him her hand. He did not immediately smile or produce the perfect sentence. He said he liked kissing and needed a little time to think. Emina felt disappointed, but also relieved to be talking to a man allowed to have wishes of his own. She did not offer the possibility that enough patience would finally change her.

Two days later he invited her for a walk. They met beside the sports field and first discussed his broken oven. Only when they reached the trees did he ask whether he could link arms with her. She found that formal

gesture unexpectedly appealing. She also told him she liked someone resting their forehead against hers. They tried, laughed at their own seriousness, and kept walking before a passerby had to divert around them.

That evening they did not settle everything they might someday miss. They arranged another meeting and promised not to conceal discomfort behind politeness. Outside her building Emina remained standing, without her key already prepared in her hand. She hugged him for as long as she wanted. Vahid did not wait for something afterward. When she went inside, she sent him the address of the cove. It was a plan for summer, still entirely possible.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Streets We Walked Apart

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-streets-we-walked-apart/

Every Thursday at nine, Anja left her building and Ognjen left his rented room in another city. His new job was supposed to last a year. They talked through headphones while she circled the stadium and he followed the canal behind the factory. She learned when the train passed and where the wind swallowed his words. He could recognize the final hill before her home from her breathing.

When she first came to visit, she expected to recognize the city by its sounds. But the station smelled of hot pastries he had never described. His room was smaller than it looked on screen. A shirt with an unfamiliar logo lay on the chair, and a plant sat at the window, a gift from a colleague whose name she did not know. Ognjen lived entire days between their conversations.

On Thursday they walked toward the canal together. He walked faster than she had imagined, while she stopped at shop windows he passed without comment during their calls. At the bridge he showed her where he had once argued with her. She did not remember an argument. She remembered searching her pocket for a lost key and giving a short answer. They both laughed, then suddenly fell silent.

Over dinner he asked whether she could picture herself there. Anja looked at the city map taped above the table. She could imagine a weekend, perhaps two weeks. She could not immediately imagine leaving a job she had only just begun to love. "I don't need an answer tonight," he said. "But we always talk as though there's only one possible decision waiting at the end." For the first time, their Thursday did not have a predetermined ending at her front door.

The next day he went to work and she explored the neighborhood alone. She bought too many cherries, got lost among identical buildings, and

found a little garden open to passersby. That evening she took him there. He had not known it existed. They sat on a low wall and spat cherry stones into a paper bag, having a very awkward discussion about how long their current arrangement suited them both.

She returned home without an agreement about moving. The following Thursday he called from that garden. She heard children behind him, and he heard practice taking place at her stadium. "I'd rather sit today," he said. Anja found a bench. They did not play the same song or measure how far they had walked. As she talked about her day, she could clearly picture where he was actually sitting for the first time.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Slippers That Did Not Fit

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/slippers-that-did-not-fit/

For their first date Filip chose shoes that disliked water. He discovered this on his third step through a puddle, while rain was already falling too hard for a respectable expression to serve any purpose. Jasna lived nearby. She invited him to dry off before continuing the evening. In her hallway he left two dark prints on the wooden floor and began apologising as though he had deliberately brought bad weather.

She gave him the only spare slippers, pink and too short. They belonged to her sister, who had left them after a weekend. Filip sat, neatly straightened his wet trousers, and tried placing his feet far enough underneath him to hide them. Jasna handed him a towel. Going to make tea, she heard a slipper squeak across the floor. She returned to find him halfway to the kitchen, dignified from the waist upward.

Both burst out laughing. Filip said he had spent three days choosing a restaurant and now resembled someone who had escaped another person's bathroom. Jasna admitted hiding a heap of unironed laundry in her bedroom before leaving with him. She had expected no guest, but could not bear returning with the feeling that everything was untidy. A sock she had overlooked remained on the table.

Both had divorced several years earlier. Previously they had discussed it carefully, like information needing an orderly exchange. Now Filip described still buying oversized food packages because he could not estimate life for one person. Jasna said she sometimes left the radio on when going out so she could return to a flat where someone was already talking. Neither immediately tried to remove the other's habits. The tea was hot, the shoes wet, and nobody cared about the restaurant reservation any longer.

They ordered dinner. Filip opened the door for the delivery driver wearing the slippers, without trying to exchange them for wet shoes. Jasna saw the little moment when he decided he could bear another person's gaze. Afterwards they played cards and argued over rules both remembered incorrectly. The rain had stopped long before they noticed the silence at the window.

The next day he came for his shoes, left to dry completely. He brought bread and asked whether breakfast was still possible. Jasna indicated the hallway. The pink slippers waited beside his shoes. He put them on without comment, then carried two cups to the table himself. That meeting looked no more like the restaurant he had carefully chosen.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Laundry for Another Conversation

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/laundry-for-another-conversation/

They first spoke because of a red sock. It appeared among Denis's white towels, and the man beside him claimed it. His name was Marin, he worked at a small theatre, and he had brought curtains too large for his home machine. The sock had nothing to do with the theatre. Marin said every large undertaking of his contained one small unnecessary object. Denis laughed, surprised the laundry had offered something beyond detergent smells that Tuesday.

A week later both were there again. Denis lived in a flat with a broken washing machine he could not yet replace. Marin carried bed linen. They discussed work and how angry people grew at the sign forbidding machine doors to be opened during operation. Denis delivered office supplies and had an entire collection of similar unread notices. The drying finished too soon. Both began folding clothes more slowly than necessary.

On the third Tuesday Marin brought a rucksack. He produced two shirts and a completely dry towel. Denis looked at him over his large basket. He asked whether the curtains had finally abandoned him. Marin laughed, then admitted he had little to wash. They stood before a machine it would be absurd to run for those three objects. Denis felt joy so clearly that he immediately became cautious.

He said there was somewhere opposite where people could sit without paying for a spin cycle. Marin asked whether he meant now or another time. Denis checked his machine's timer. He had twenty-eight minutes. They went for coffee, both aware this was their first meeting for which dirty clothing was not responsible. Along the way Denis mentioned a former male partner. Marin accepted this without surprise, then said something about his own ex.

They returned a minute before the wash finished. Marin helped fold towels but did not try entering Denis's life as the man who would buy a new machine and solve everything. He asked whether Denis wanted a walk on Saturday. Denis agreed, then finally stopped explaining why he still used the laundry. On Saturday they never discussed household appliances, which surprised them both a little.

When Denis replaced his machine several months later, Marin gave him the red sock in a little box. Denis said he expected the other half of the present for his birthday. Marin promised only to look. He stayed for dinner that evening, and his rucksack was entirely empty.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Dog Who Went Home with Neither

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dog-who-went-home-with-neither/

Nera arrived for the conversation with a new lead. Tijana brought a photograph of her garden. Both wanted the same old dog, a brown male with a white patch on his chest, who continued sleeping as they arrived. The volunteer asked them to wait on a bench. They sat far enough apart to leave space for the dog, although he showed no intention of joining the selection of his own future.

Nera worked two shifts and was already imagining how to ask her neighbour for help. Tijana had a garden but shared the house with a sister who had not agreed to an animal. Initially they discussed these difficulties cautiously, like candidates unwilling to reveal a weakness. Then the dog rose, passed them, and lay beside the woman cleaning his space. Tijana laughed. She said they had evidently brought the wrong references.

Speaking with the volunteer, Nera did not claim the neighbour had already agreed. Tijana did not conceal her sister. Neither received a promise of taking the dog home that day. They left together, both slightly embarrassed at having treated a wish as a completed plan. Nera held the lead wound around her hand. Tijana asked whether she wanted coffee before going home to explain the purchase to herself.

At the café they properly introduced themselves for the first time. Nera learned that Tijana restored wooden windows. Tijana learned that Nera read crime novels at night because after a shift she needed someone else's problem that would be solved by the end. They talked long enough for the lead to slip from the chair. When both bent to retrieve it, their heads collided. It was not particularly gentle, but it made them laugh more than politeness required.

The dog later went to a couple able to provide what he needed then. The volunteer informed them because both had asked. Nera forwarded the message to Tijana, adding that at least their first shared failure had ended well. Tijana replied by asking whether that had been their first date. Nera studied the screen for a long time, then wrote that a second could be arranged without an application process.

They arrived for the next coffee without a lead or photographs. Before leaving, Tijana asked whether she could kiss Nera. The answer required nobody's garden or approval. The lead remained in Nera's drawer for later, when a plan contained more than good intentions. For this Saturday she lacked nothing.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Meeting Outside the Waiting Room

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/meeting-outside-the-waiting-room/

In the corridor they identified each other by their parents. She was the daughter of the man in room eight; he was the son of the woman who always requested another pillow. Only in the third week did they exchange names. Sanja and Haris. They brought each other machine coffee, saved places on the bench, and listened to the same uncertain statements without immediately trying to fix them. When her father went home, Sanja realised she missed a man she had seen nowhere else.

She messaged suggesting coffee. He agreed, mentioning that he would visit his mother afterwards. In the café she did not immediately recognise him. He wore a green shirt, without the bag packed with fruit and spare belongings. He paused before her table as though on the wrong floor. Both laughed, then asked about their parents. Their conversation promptly found the familiar corridor and stayed there longer than intended.

Sanja first admitted she did not know what he did. Haris repaired musical instruments. She handled payroll for a small company. The facts sounded oddly official after everything they already knew about each other's fears. Haris tried telling a funny story about a man who had brought a broken trumpet in a potato sack. Sanja laughed, surprised to see a completely new liveliness on his face.

Then they encountered their first difference. He loved loud concerts; in crowds she always looked for an exit. He thought the right music could change that. Sanja looked at him calmly enough for him to stop himself. She had not come to be another person whose condition needed improving. Haris apologised and asked where she did feel comfortable. She said she loved early walks before the city had fully opened its eyes.

They arranged Sunday morning. It did not look like a grand beginning, merely another attempt to meet without the shared bench where they worried. Haris's mother left hospital later that month. There was no longer a reason to encounter each other accidentally. That gave their messages something less certain and more beautiful, because each now had to be intentional.

On their third walk Sanja grew angry at his lateness. Haris bought the wrong pastries. They were not a perfect couple born from difficult times. They sat on a cold bench, negotiated fifteen minutes, and shared a breakfast neither particularly liked. When he asked whether they would meet again, she said yes, but next time she would choose the bakery.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Highest Shelf in His Kitchen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-highest-shelf-in-his-kitchen/

The cups stood on the highest shelf. Leona reached them without thinking, then felt her body automatically bend as though she should become slightly shorter before Vedran. It was their first weekend together. She was taller than him by enough for people to notice and often consider it their business to comment. On their previous two dates she had worn flat shoes even though those were the shoes that rubbed.

Vedran entered carrying bread and said he had finally found someone who could reach his ambitions. Leona laughed, then stopped. It was not a cruel joke. She was simply tired of spaces in which her body required explanation. She asked why he kept the cups so high. He said a former flatmate had put them there and he had never bothered rearranging things. He fetched a small stool from the pantry.

She sat while he made coffee. At work they called her the team's pillar, relatives asked whether she would ever find a sufficiently tall man, and her former partner always chose the higher side of the pavement. Vedran was not responsible for all those people. Yet his first morning joke had accidentally opened a door through which they all entered. She told him that without a list of accusations, holding her cup in both hands.

Vedran admitted he joked before others did. If he mentioned the difference first, he thought nobody could use it against him. Leona asked whether they could skip rehearsing for an imaginary audience this morning. He looked around the empty kitchen and said he could try. Then he burned the toast. Both had much less sensitive comments about that, and breakfast became louder and simpler.

In the afternoon they went to the market. Leona wore shoes that suited her, with a small heel she did not need to justify. A seller called out that Vedran had chosen well; at least nothing would be left on top of his

wardrobe. Vedran did not laugh from habit. He asked the price of tomatoes. Leona continued choosing, grateful he had turned the remark into neither a joke nor a grand defence.

Back home they moved the cups to a lower shelf. On top went a cake tin he used once a year. Leona asked whether he needed anything else reached. He said he needed her bag from the chair where he wanted to sit. She handed it over. They spent the afternoon each at their own height, without any special programme built around it.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Date Without His Speech

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-date-without-his-speech/

On the first page of a little notebook, Alen wrote that he had not planned this. Nejra looked at the message, then his scarf-wrapped neck, and laughed. After a weekend hosting two events and shouting over music, his voice had almost disappeared. He had suggested postponing the date. She said he could come without a speech. Now he sat opposite her in a tea shop, a man known for his quick tongue, holding a barely functioning pen.

They had met at a book event where he moderated the discussion. Nejra liked how he listened to the guest, although she later wondered whether he was simply good at waiting his turn. When he approached afterwards, he spoke easily, without a sentence that had to be found halfway through. She worked in accounting and often felt she thought of interesting things only after conversations ended.

That evening she had an entire conversation at her disposal, which frightened her at first. Alen wrote a question about her day. She answered briefly. He wrote another, more specific one: who had last ruined her break? The story of a colleague and a missing mug drew so many words from her that the tea cooled. Alen laughed almost silently. When he wanted to add something, he raised a finger and began writing. She had to wait, and that waiting felt unusually pleasant.

On one page he attempted to draw his cat. It looked like an angry wardrobe. Nejra took the pen and added a tail. They spent a long time improving the entirely unnecessary animal. No audience awaited a good punchline. When the waiter brought an incorrect bill, Alen could not quickly charm the situation right. He simply indicated the item and waited. Nejra saw for the first time how much energy he normally spent keeping everything around him moving without interruption.

Before they parted, he wrote that he was sorry he had not been entertaining. Nejra turned the notebook round and asked on paper whether he wanted another date or a programme review. He looked at her, then crossed out his sentence. He wrote Saturday at seven. Beneath it she added that he could speak that day, but need not fill every moment.

His voice had returned by Saturday. At first he talked too much, noticed, and stopped halfway through a story. Nejra did not rescue him with another question. She took the notebook he had brought and opened the cat page. She added a small cushion. Alen watched her draw, perfectly content to have nothing to say for several minutes.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Missed Stops

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-missed-stops/

Nadija knew Igor carried a bag of oranges on Tuesdays. Igor knew she slipped off her shoes as soon as she sat on Fridays, discreetly enough for the driver not to notice. They met on the bus after work, usually in the same seats. Their conversations lasted exactly seven stops. That was the distance to Nadija's building. Afterwards he waved through the glass and continued two more stops, returning to a dinner he usually ate standing up.

One Thursday they discussed an argument in his building about an abandoned bicycle. Nadija recognised her stop, pressed her bag against her knees, and remained seated. She wanted to hear the ending, she told herself, although the story already had one. Igor was so occupied watching her laugh that he did not immediately notice. When he did, she asked where he bought good bread. That question spared them explanations for the next two turns.

At his stop somebody beside them rose. Igor did not move. He said he was going farther today. Nadija nodded, trying not to sound more interested than politeness allowed. Thus two people who normally could hardly wait to reach home spent ten more minutes pretending an urgent obligation awaited elsewhere. Shops thinned outside the window. The bus grew emptier and their excuse louder.

At the final stop the driver switched off the engine. Nadija began laughing before she stood. She said she should have left much earlier. Igor pointed back along the road and admitted the same. They stood beside a closed kiosk, two adults with work bags and a thoroughly unconvincing plan. Nadija asked whether they had just missed the simplest way to invite each other for coffee.

Igor said he had prepared the question at least three times, but the bus had braked at the wrong moment each time. That was not entirely true, so he immediately corrected himself. He had feared rejection would cost him even those seven stops. Nadija felt tenderness towards that small, reasonably adult concern. She pointed to a café opposite, open despite the nearly empty street.

They sat by the window and discovered that conversation without a timetable sometimes paused. They did not mind. Nadija ordered a sandwich too; Igor admitted he bought Tuesday's oranges for his mother. They returned home on a later bus. This time they got off at different stops exactly when they should, because they already had plans for Saturday.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Kite That Came Back to Earth

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-kite-that-came-back-to-earth/

Ljiljana recognised his laugh long before his face. Emir stood on the shore holding a large red kite and talking to the organisers. At school he had always stood in the middle of a group. She had usually stayed at the edge, ready to laugh at whatever he said. Thirty years later she had come to the kite enthusiasts' gathering with her own blue model and the feeling that she could spend Sunday doing something entirely useless, which she needed.

Emir hugged her warmly. He said she had not changed. Ljiljana thought of the marriage she had ended, the workshop she had opened, and the week she had learned to live alone with a broken fridge. She said she had actually changed considerably. He laughed, convinced she was being modest. He was already reaching for her kite to show her how to hold the string.

She did not give it to him. This was her third season. Her kite rose high, then rested calmly in the wind. Emir's red giant made a dramatic circle and fell into the grass. As he retrieved it, he apologised for assuming she was a beginner. Ljiljana said she forgave the kite mistake, but for the rest he would have to discover who she was now. They sat on a low fence, letting others run past.

This time Emir asked instead of guessing. He learned that she made picture frames and no longer feared speaking before people. She learned that nowadays his laughter often covered uncertainty, especially after a dismissal he had mentioned to nobody from school. She did not tell him she had always known there was something behind his confidence. She had not known. She was glad she need not pretend to have understood him before everyone else.

Towards evening they collected tangled strings together. Emir invited for coffee the Ljiljana who made frames, seasoned soup badly, and resented interruptions. He said it that way, deliberately exaggerating the list. She agreed, provided he stopped reciting her characteristics like schoolwork. They laughed, this time both from the middle of the conversation.

He brought a smaller kite to the next gathering. Ljiljana brought a flask of coffee. When the wind weakened, they let the kites settle in the grass and remained seated. Neither looked defeated. Emir held the free end of her string while she poured coffee, then returned it as soon as she extended her hand.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A House for Two Different Dreams

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-house-for-two-different-dreams/

Davor opened the shutters before Marija had taken her bag from the car. His aunt's house smelled of closed rooms and dried apples. He had inherited it the previous autumn, and now brought the woman with whom he had spent two happy years for the first time. Showing her the garden, he described where they would put a table, where she could read, and how good things would be once they stopped paying for a city flat.

Marija loved the house. That was not the problem. She also loved lunch beneath the pear tree, the neighbour's dog arriving uninvited, and the fact that Davor did not check his phone every ten minutes here. Towards evening they sat on the doorstep. Nothing surrounded them except a distant tractor and the sound of someone washing plates in another house. Davor said he could live like this forever. Marija felt a small knot tighten in her stomach.

In the city she had work she could not move to a kitchen table, a sister three tram stops away, and choir on Thursdays. She did not want all that to become a journey requiring planning. She asked whether he had considered keeping the house for weekends. His smile diminished. He said he could finally breathe here. She looked at the pear tree, wishing her need for the city did not sound like opposition to his breathing.

The following morning they walked for a long time without talking. Davor tried listing the advantages of moving, then stopped midway through a sentence about heating costs. He noticed he was selling her a future like property. Marija said she did not want to spend the coming years waiting for this to become enough. She did not ask him to give up the house. Nor did she promise that her love would someday change what she knew about herself.

They returned earlier than planned. For a week they were unusually polite to each other. Then Davor suggested spending longer periods at the house during summer, with her visiting when she wanted. That did not settle the next ten years. For the first time both let the question remain unsettled. Marija bought a ticket for his first free weekend instead of packing boxes.

He met her at the little station. He carried a bag of pears, though there was an entire tree at the house. She laughed while he explained that gifts were not measured by need. They kissed beside the bus. In her bag lay a return ticket. In his pocket was a spare key for her.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Tandem for Two Stubborn People

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-tandem-for-two-stubborn-people/

Branko insisted a tandem must be easier than two ordinary bicycles. Two people pedalled, one chose the route; the mathematics was simple. Nataša agreed, mainly because she liked the yellow frame and because they had not yet argued about anything more serious than a film ending. They had been seeing each other for two months. Their first outing was supposed to show how they functioned outside a café. It demonstrated that at the exit of the hire yard.

Nataša sat in front because she knew the trail. Behind her, Branko tried steering with his body, leaning into each turn before she did. The bicycle swayed. She told him to stop; he said he was only helping. The man who had hired out the tandem watched from the door long enough to make Nataša want to get around the corner even if they had to push. Both laughed, but their smiles no longer had the same intention.

At the first rest point Branko suggested swapping. Nataša agreed with relief that should have warned him. Now she sat behind, commenting on every gear, stone, and family along the trail. When he said he did not need navigation on a straight road, she took offence exactly as he had earlier. They stopped beneath a tree. Between them the yellow bicycle resembled an ill-chosen piece of shared furniture.

Branko said perhaps they were not people who could travel together. Nataša looked at him, breathless and red-faced. 'Perhaps we're not people for this bicycle,' she answered. Both found that smaller verdict easier to bear. They sat in the grass and ate sandwiches that had become completely flat in the rucksack. She told him she had spent years organising everything alone. He admitted feeling uncomfortable sitting behind and not seeing what was coming.

They discovered no miraculous rhythm. They simply agreed to announce turns beforehand and that whoever sat behind would stop correcting everything at once. They stopped several times. Once they pushed. Before turning back they managed a long, quiet stretch without a single instruction. Nataša felt the wind on her face and noticed the smell of cut grass for the first time that day.

They returned the tandem later than promised. Asked whether they had enjoyed themselves, both began answering, then stopped. Nataša said they would take two bicycles next time. Branko paid for the extra time and asked when next time would be. They held hands on the way home, walking slowly enough to be overtaken by an older woman carrying a full bag of tomatoes.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Front Row for a Bad Joke

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-front-row-for-a-bad-joke/

My best joke ended to the sound of coughing. Not the nervous kind that happens accidentally, but the long, determined cough of a man with more important business involving his own throat. I stood under purple light waiting for the audience to laugh at my bus ticket story. Nobody did. Filip, the man I had been dating for six weeks, sat in the front row. He smiled. At that moment it annoyed me more than everyone else's indifference.

At forty-two I had signed up for an open microphone evening. I drove a city bus and had spent years recounting passengers' conversations to friends. They said I must get on stage. Now I wanted all those friends to appear and return five minutes of my life. Filip had offered no such advice. He had simply bought a ticket when I invited him.

After the performance I said I did not want to discuss it. I lasted until the first traffic light. Then I asked whether I had been terrible. Filip said the beginning was good but he had lost the thread during the ticket story. I asked why he had smiled, then. 'Because I loved seeing you up there,' he said. The word loved appeared between us earlier than planned, in a sentence that offered no prize for my performance.

I wanted to take offence. Arguing with him would have been easier than admitting my voice on the bus and my voice before an audience were different things. Instead we bought chips. Filip asked whether I wanted him to sit farther away in future. I said I did not know. Then I ate his last chip before he could reach it. That I already knew how to repair. I apologised and bought another portion.

Over the following weeks I shortened the text. I threw out some jokes entirely. Filip did not edit them or become my coach. Sometimes I told him something from my shift and he laughed without thinking. I learned

to distinguish that laugh from the smile with which he had helped me avoid being entirely alone that evening.

He arrived late for my second performance because a pipe had burst in his flat. He sat at the back with wet trouser legs. The ticket story worked better this time. Afterwards I hugged him so hard he said he was not the one who had made the audience laugh. I know, I answered. I kissed him before asking exactly what had burst.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Crossing for Frogs

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-crossing-for-frogs/

The frog sat on Zoran's shoe as though it had a ticket for that seat. Sanela shone her torch on it, crouched, and gently transferred it into a plastic bucket. It was her first night with the small volunteer group that carried frogs across a local road during spring rains. Zoran had been coming for years. His raincoat lacked a button, and he wished every rescued passenger a good journey.

At first his constant joking irritated Sanela. The organiser had explained where they could stand and when they must wait, and she wanted to be certain they did everything correctly. After her divorce she had only recently begun going among people again without a friend to introduce her. She did not want her first independent decision to look like pointless standing in the rain. Entirely unfairly, Zoran came to represent everything she could not arrange in advance.

Then she saw how he checked an empty bucket before putting it down, making sure no small creature remained beneath the rim. He stopped speaking as soon as a car could be heard. When another volunteer's torch began slipping, he handed over his spare without a joke. Sanela realised his apparent lack of seriousness had a perfectly reliable schedule. He simply did not wear it on his face.

Near midnight they were left working together along a short stretch of road. They talked between passing vehicles. She said she taught accounting to adults. He repaired coffee machines and spent most days listening to people claim they had inserted more money than they actually had. She asked whether he believed them. 'Some,' he said. 'Frogs generally don't lie.' This time she laughed before deciding whether the joke was good.

When the operation ended, Zoran asked whether she wanted breakfast. It was far too early for breakfast and too late for dinner. Sanela said she worked in the morning. He nodded and began stacking buckets. Only while removing her wet gloves did she realise he might not have meant that morning. She returned and asked about Saturday. In her hurry she suggested seven. Zoran looked at the sky, then at her. He said people who did not cross roads by hopping could manage nine.

On Saturday she barely recognised him without his raincoat. He sat in the bakery, seriously examining the pastry selection. Sanela was four minutes late and did not offer an entire explanation in apology. She showed him a wet patch on her sleeve. It was raining again. Zoran moved his cup and made room for her.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Dinner in My Price Range

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/dinner-in-my-price-range/

Ognjen studied the menu so long that Maja thought he was choosing wine. He was actually calculating whether he could order a starter and still buy new work shoes. She had chosen the restaurant, as she had the previous two times. She owned a small business and was accustomed to paying for a pleasant evening without much thought. He worked in a warehouse, knew exactly when his wages arrived, and more precisely what had to wait until the next payment.

When the bill came, Maja took it. Ognjen reached at the same moment and overturned his glass. Red wine spread across the white cloth. The waiter brought a napkin, Maja said she would pay, and Ognjen heard himself say he was nobody's project. He had not meant to say it. Her expression showed that the wrong sentence had nonetheless reached the right place.

They left the restaurant separately, then stopped beneath the same awning because it was raining. Maja asked when she had treated him like a project. Ognjen had to admit she had not. But three dinners he considered a special expense were an ordinary week for her. He agreed so he would not appear mean, then resented her for failing to guess a figure he had never told her.

He showed her on his phone how much he could spend each month on going out. She did not ask to see his salary. She simply said she was sorry he had felt as though he were taking a test beside her. Then she added that she would not withdraw every offer to pay for fear of offending him. If she wanted to invite someone, she wanted to be able to treat them. Ognjen watched rain strike the edge of the pavement. That sounded more reasonable without a bill attached.

Next time he chose. They bought savoury pies and sat in the park, while Maja brought expensive strawberries because she had seen and wanted them. Ognjen almost asked what they cost, then ate one instead. Not every difference had to become a negotiation. Later they argued again, this time about a weekend she could afford and he could not.

They found no single formula. They had cheaper places, occasional invitations at her expense, and several postponed plans. When he finally bought work shoes, Maja admired them. He showed her the soles as though unveiling a new car. They finished the evening eating leftovers from his fridge, relaxed enough to admit that the cheese had abandoned all hope.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Green We Never Mentioned

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-green-we-never-mentioned/

When the decorator asked which colour they wanted, Jasna said the same as before. Behind her, her husband made a face. She saw him in the mirror, the one they should have taken down before work began. 'You don't like this colour?' she asked. Vlatko looked at the walls like a man being asked to identify a suspect. He said he had always considered beige a sad colour. Jasna opened her mouth. For twenty years she had thought it was his favourite.

The decorator went to fetch protective sheeting, leaving them among the displaced armchairs. They had first painted while Jasna was pregnant. Vlatko had said beige was a safe choice. She heard that he liked it. He saw her nod and concluded he had found what she wanted. Every subsequent repainting confirmed a decision neither had made with particular enthusiasm.

Now they sat on the floor with a catalogue. Jasna wanted green, not the gentle kind shops called sage, but one that made Vlatko lean closer to check its number. He wanted dark blue. They had time for an argument because the decorator called to say he had a flat tyre. Instead, they listed what else they supposedly did for each other. Vlatko disliked Sunday bean stew. Jasna disliked walking after dinner. Both kept going to the same seaside hotel because each thought the other feared change.

By afternoon they felt like marital impostors. Then they found things there was no confusion about. Both liked an open window while rain fell, the old kitchen radio, and friends who did not announce visits seven days ahead. They did not have to reconsider every year. Jasna marked the green, and Vlatko fetched a blue cushion to see how they would look together.

When the wall was finished, neither immediately spoke. The colour was much more assertive than in the catalogue. The decorator left them looking at it and went to wash his roller. Vlatko said he felt they had walked into the inside of a green pepper. Jasna laughed so loudly the decorator returned to the doorway.

They did not paint over it. They bought another blue cushion and began making pancakes on Saturdays because both suggested it without a prior agreement. Vlatko went out alone for his evening walk. Jasna waved from their green room, then returned to the book she no longer had to put down at its most interesting page.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Day That Was Not Ours

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-day-that-was-not-ours/

Vedran booked a table for Saturday without looking at the calendar on Sabina's fridge. When he told her, she immediately shook her head. She could not that day. Nothing was written beside the date, only a little circle in blue pencil. Her husband had died on that day five years earlier. Vedran knew, but kept the date somewhere distant, among facts you think will never enter your ordinary weekend.

He offered to go with her. She said she was going alone. He offered to drive her, wait afterwards, prepare lunch. Each offer was kind, and behind each the same question grew: why did she not want him that day? Sabina looked at the olives she had just transferred into a bowl. 'Because I don't want to explain how I feel to anyone,' she said.

That night Vedran lay awake in his flat. He knew there was no attractive way to express that kind of jealousy. Still, he imagined the man he had never met as a perfect rival, spared every future argument and bad habit. Sabina had sometimes told him how her late husband left wet towels on the bed. He was forgetting that ordinary flaw now. All that remained in his mind was the way she said his name.

On Friday he told her everything, awkwardly and without excuses. Sabina did not try to prove she loved him more. She said she sometimes missed her former life, including the arguments and wet towels. She loved Vedran, but could not promise to stop missing what she had lost. He sat beside the table and slowly peeled the label from a water bottle. He stayed for dinner. They never reached a sentence that would settle everything.

On Saturday he did not message to check whether she needed anything. He repaired a shelf in his flat, watched a match, and picked up his phone several times. Towards evening she called him herself. She asked whether

he knew where fresh bread rolls could still be bought. Of course she knew too. He said the shop on the corner was open until nine.

She arrived with a bag of warm rolls and a tired face. She did not recount everywhere she had been. Vedran brought out plates and she found the jam. His restaurant reservation had been moved to the following week. While they ate over the kitchen sink, Sabina rested her forehead against his shoulder and remained there long enough for the roll in her hand to grow cold.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Dinner I Did Not Cook

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dinner-i-did-not-cook/

As soon as I said Haris was coming for dinner, my colleagues began suggesting dishes. Duck. Fish baked in salt. Something with caramelised pears. I had worked ten hours in a restaurant kitchen that day, and my only idea involved sitting down. Still, I bought expensive mushrooms because it seemed that a woman who cooked for a living had no right to invite a man over for something ordinary.

Haris arrived with wine and an empty stomach. He stressed the latter with a smile. All day, he said, he had been saving room for my famous dinner. We did not yet know each other well enough for me to tell him how much that sentence tired me. Between us were four good dates, one awkward kiss, and a great many messages that had nothing to do with food.

In the kitchen I opened the mushroom bag and realised I hated them. Only that evening, only those mushrooms. Haris stood in the doorway and asked whether he could watch me work. I said I had not started working, then heard my own voice, as sharp as the knife I had not yet picked up. He retreated into the sitting room. I remained against the fridge, angry with him and myself over a dinner nobody had explicitly requested.

I took him the bag. 'I'll cook these tomorrow,' I said. 'Tonight I'd like to order pie.' He looked surprised, then asked whether he had offended me. I sat and explained that I wanted to find out about his day without counting minutes until the meat needed turning. He admitted bragging to a friend that he was going to the best dinner in town. It had not occurred to him that even that compliment could sound like a table reservation.

The pie was late. We ate olives from the jar and debated whether a hat might repair his unsuccessful haircut. By the time the delivery driver rang, I was barefoot and Haris knew about the argument with my sister. Afterwards he washed the plates without making a performance of helping the great chef. He asked whether I would go out with him again on Saturday.

I took the mushrooms to my mother the next day. A week later I made Haris eggs for breakfast, overcooked them while we talked, and ate my share without apologising. He said he liked crispy edges. I gave him a stern enough look to make him reconsider. 'All right,' he added, 'these edges are a little difficult to love.' He stayed until noon.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Message Read Aloud

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-message-read-aloud/

Emina always sent voice messages. Short ones, usually while waiting for a bus: I'll be there in ten minutes, buy some bread, I fancy something spicy today. Mirza played them twice because he liked her voice. They had met at a mutual friend's birthday, both recently past fifty. After three months he knew how she took her coffee and why she disliked Sunday markets. He did not know that reading a long menu required a serious effort from her.

Once she sent him a written message. Her phone would not record sound, so she slowly typed where he should meet her. She misspelled several words. In his reply, Mirza repeated one mistake beside a laughing face. Emina deleted their conversation before the bus arrived. When he called, she said she did not feel like going out.

Three days later they met outside the bakery. She would not let him begin with coffee and the weather forecast. She said she had left school long ago, had spent years recognising what she needed and hiding the rest. Now she was attending adult classes. She read slowly. His joke had taken her back among children tapping pencils while she stumbled at the blackboard.

Mirza apologised. Then, wanting to make things right, he offered to bring texts for her to practise with every evening. Emina let him finish his plan. 'I have a teacher,' she said. 'I wanted to go out with you.' He looked at her for several moments, then removed his hands from the railing he had been gripping. He asked whether she would like to walk to the river. He did not offer to read her anything along the way.

They continued seeing each other, more cautiously than before. When she asked for help, he gave it. When she lingered over a sign, he stopped guessing whether to step in. Sometimes he got things wrong and she grew

angry. One Thursday she brought him a short story she had read all the way through in class. She told him the ending before the beginning and spoiled the surprise, so they laughed at something entirely different.

For his birthday she wrote a card with four sentences. She read them aloud while he sat on a kitchen chair, dressed for dinner. At the third she paused, recognised her own mistake, and corrected it in pencil. Mirza waited. The fourth sentence was the one that made her hand tremble most, and there was not a difficult word in it.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Pillow in the Next Room

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

On their first night in the rented house, Selma counted the wooden strips across the ceiling. Then she counted how often Enver pulled the covers towards himself. After midnight she abandoned arithmetic, took her pillow, and went into the little room where their children had slept for years. The children were now holidaying with their own friends. The bed beside the window was empty, cool, and wonderfully still.

She woke at nine, rested enough to feel she had been given a new head. Enver was sitting outside with two coffees that had long gone cold. When she asked why he had not woken her, he said he had not known whether he was allowed in. Selma laughed, then saw that he was serious. To him, a pillow in another room was practically a packed suitcase.

They had slept together for thirty years. Their bed had survived children's fevers, cramped rented rooms, Selma's night shifts, and Enver's returns from travelling. Separating it now, when they finally had the place to themselves, felt like the wrong beginning to the rest of their lives. He told her this on the beach, so quietly she had to lean across the bag. She sighed. She loved that man, but his anxiety could not make her spend another night hunting for the edge of a sheet.

She suggested swapping sides. He suggested another cover. That night they had four pillows, two sheets, and an entire little border dispute between them. At three they were both sitting up, awake. Selma burst out laughing first. Enver followed her, reluctantly, then completely. He carried her pillow into the next room as though it were a ceremonial flag.

For the rest of the holiday they ate breakfast later than he preferred, and he went for his morning swim alone. Selma joined him afterwards, bringing peaches. In the evenings they stayed in the same bed talking until one grew sleepy. Crossing the hallway became so ordinary that once

she took his book as well, and he had to go and retrieve it.

Before they went home, Enver asked whether she would move rooms there too. Selma did not know. Their spare room was still full of boxes, winter coats, and an exercise bike that nobody rode. She said they would have to move the bike first. He looked at the sea for a long time, then asked whether a small armchair could take its place. He would like to come over and read before bed.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Train Through the Living Room

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-train-through-the-living-room/

Ilma knew Damir collected model trains. She did not know the railway crossed the dining table, passed between two armchairs, and ended at a station above the drawer he offered for her belongings. She was forty seven and had enough unusual habits of her own not to mock anyone else's. Still, when she tried eating breakfast at the table's corner that first Saturday, she had to move her plate whenever a locomotive and three carriages passed through the plastic landscape.

Damir discussed his hobby with a delight Ilma loved in him. After his divorce he began building models and constructed an entire small town where train arrivals were predictable. His friends called him a big child. Ilma did not want to repeat that. Instead she asked where her laptop might go if she sometimes worked at his place. He indicated a shelf, then noticed it had no room even for a cup, let alone another person's working day.

That evening he suggested spending more time at her apartment. It seemed simple, but Ilma did not want to be the only person adapting a home for their relationship. She said she liked the trains but still wanted a chair she did not have to vacate whenever he opened a tunnel. Damir fell silent. He had expected a demand to remove everything and was already preparing a defense. He did not know what to do with a question that did not attack his hobby but merely requested room for another person.

The following week he invited her to help choose a smaller arrangement. Ilma did not want to manage the town's reconstruction. She sat on the floor passing boxes and listening to stories about stations built from travel memories. One track section could fold away; another could move into the study. Not everything fit. Damir stored some models, surprised that displaying fewer objects allowed him to really see the others. Ilma

brought a reading lamp, the first item in the apartment that did not need to be bypassed for a train to pass.

A month later they invited friends for dinner. Plates occupied the table while the railway rested beside the wall. One guest joked that Damir had finally been domesticated. Ilma opened her mouth, but Damir spoke first. He said he had merely expanded the station. Later, alone together, he ran a small train while she read under her lamp. She looked up when it whistled. She did not need to move her book, plate, or herself. She simply waved at him and continued to the end of the page.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Apple We Did Not Have to Share

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-apple-we-did-not-have-to-share/

Vedad always took a bite from Nela's plate. He did it cheerfully, offering his own afterward, convinced such exchanges proved closeness. Nela smiled and moved her fork. After three months of dating he knew she liked sour food, never ordered dessert, and saved the best part for last. He had not noticed that this was precisely what he most often took when reaching across the table, saying he merely wanted a taste because it looked much better on her plate.

One Saturday she made lunch and put two small pies on the table. Vedad cut a piece from hers before she sat down. Nela sharply told him to stop. The tone exceeded the incident, and both fell silent. He withdrew, embarrassed like a child caught stealing. She immediately wanted to repair things by offering her entire plate, then realized that would again be precisely the behavior making her angry with herself.

She explained that sharing had not always been a gentle word for her. She grew up in a house where the older sister was expected to give younger siblings anything they asked for, even when nobody was hungry. She learned to hide favorite foods and eat quickly. Now she was gradually allowing herself to choose something for herself alone. Vedad listened without describing how difficult his own childhood had been. He said his family showed love precisely by offering bites, so he had believed he was doing what she expected.

They did not spend the rest of lunch analyzing every spoonful. They agreed on a simple question before taking. Sometimes the answer was yes, sometimes no, and Vedad learned the latter did not mean less affection. Nela also began asking him instead of assuming everything was fine with him. Once he said he wanted the final cake himself. She brought him a plate and opened the window, surprised by how little drama a clear answer actually required.

On an autumn outing they bought two apples at a roadside stall. Vedad's was sour; Nela's was sweet. He asked whether she wanted to exchange halves. Nela considered, then said she wanted her whole apple that day. He shrugged and bit into his, laughing at his own expression. Later they shared a scarf beside the water because it suddenly grew cold. Nela moved closer quite naturally. She did not have to surrender every bite to show how willingly she made room beside her.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Pause for the Yellow Umbrella

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-pause-for-the-yellow-umbrella/

Whenever Hana saw a beautiful view, Dina was already looking through a lens. They had dated for almost a year and were traveling for the first time without other friends. Dina was a photographer; Hana worked in publishing and loved the pictures she sent. Living inside them, however, was not easy. Before an old bridge she waited three times for people to pass, once for clouds to move, and once more to adjust a scarf the wind had put in entirely the wrong place.

Eventually she bought a yellow umbrella and opened it although no rain fell. Dina lowered her camera, confused that her composition had disappeared. Hana said she needed a break from looking beautiful. She did not speak angrily, but Dina nevertheless heard criticism of the only way she knew to observe attentively. They argued outside a souvenir magnet shop, both slightly ashamed to discuss intimacy beside a sign offering three items for the price of two.

In a café Dina admitted constantly taking pictures partly through fear of forgetting. Work had taught her a missed frame never returned. Hana replied that a missed afternoon together could not be repeated either, even if they had a hundred photographs of its beginning. She did not ask Dina to keep her profession outside their life. She wanted to know when they were on vacation and when she was accompanying someone at work who needed her patience as part of the equipment.

They agreed on an afternoon without photographing people and a morning when Dina would go out alone with the camera. The yellow umbrella became a sign that Hana did not want to be in the frame, without requiring a fresh discussion every time. She did not open it to punish Dina. She opened it when she wanted to eat ice cream before it melted or simply stand hunched because her feet hurt. Dina began asking before moving her hand, and sometimes lowered the camera herself

without a reminder.

On the final day real rain fell. They stood together under the umbrella, laughing because it was too small for two people unwilling to stand close enough to a wet wall. The camera remained in its bag. At home Dina printed several photographs of empty streets and one of the yellow umbrella leaning against a chair, taken with Hana's permission. Hana placed it on a shelf. When anyone asked where she was in the picture, she said she stood just outside the frame, precisely where she had wanted to be that evening.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Curtain That Let Morning In

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-curtain-that-let-morning-in/

During her first week after moving in, Vera kept her boxes closed to avoid making a mess. Ognjen cleared half a wardrobe, two drawers, and a bathroom shelf. He was considerate, brought tea, and asked whether she was comfortable. Yet when she tried moving an armchair nearer the window, he said it had stood there thirty years. He had shared the apartment with his late wife, and every object seemed entitled to a place earned long before Vera arrived.

Vera did not ask him to remove photographs. She had a long past herself, although her marriage had ended in divorce. She merely wanted a small sewing table near the light. Ognjen suggested the hallway, then a bedroom corner with the socket too far away. He spoke gently, convinced he was seeking a compromise. On the third evening Vera closed the sewing machine box again and said perhaps she would leave it at her sister's until she knew where it belonged.

"The machine or you?" he asked. Vera looked at him because he had finally asked the right question. She said she did not want to become a well served guest who left no trace. Ognjen admitted every rearrangement felt like deciding something earlier had been worth less. For years after his wife's death he had not realized how much he had made the apartment into an arrangement protecting him from change. Vera did not assure him change would stop hurting once he fell deeply enough in love.

The next morning they moved the armchair together. Beneath it they found a coin, two hairpins, and an old curtain receipt. Ognjen placed the receipt on the table and studied it for a long time. Vera kept cleaning without rushing him to decide what to do with the memory. Later he helped bring in the machine. They chose a new curtain because the old one blocked too much light and kept one strip in the family photograph

box, where it no longer had to function as a wall.

On Sunday Vera sewed while Ognjen read in the moved armchair. She asked whether the machine's sound bothered him. He said a little and fetched headphones, making her laugh more than any grand assurance that everything was perfect. His adult daughter came for lunch and praised the light. Ognjen pointed to the window and said the two of them had finally let it into the room. Vera returned her scissors to her own drawer, the first not simply given to her empty but placed where she herself had chosen.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Sunday with Three Portions

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/sunday-with-three-portions/

For Sunday lunch Petar bought ingredients for eight people, although only his daughter and the woman he was dating were coming. His daughter Iva was twenty six and had her own apartment. Biljana was forty nine and disliked being called a future family member before anyone asked whether she wanted more coffee. Petar believed good food would explain to everyone what he could not say without excessive significance.

Iva arrived first and found him checking the potatoes for the third time. She asked whether he needed help, and he assigned setting the table, adding an unnecessary remark about how beautifully Biljana folded napkins. "Then she can fold them when she arrives," Iva replied, not particularly seriously. Petar immediately heard resistance. He began explaining that nobody would replace her mother, although nobody had suggested it. Iva put down the forks and said she had come to meet a person, not defend a boundary he was drawing across the table.

Biljana brought a bakery pie and admitted she had not made it. Petar nervously said she was an excellent cook, as though repairing her reputation. "Sometimes," she replied. "Today I wanted to read until it was time to leave." Iva laughed and asked which book. While they talked, Petar forgot the bread in the oven. Smoke brought all three into the kitchen, where finally something happened outside his carefully imagined warmth.

Lunch was good and excessive. Iva and Biljana did not instantly become close, but managed conversation without him translating. After his daughter left, Biljana said she had liked her, but being with him had been unusually difficult. She felt like an applicant interviewing for a position she had never requested. Petar admitted fearing any awkwardness would mean the relationship had no future. Biljana took a plate from his hand

and asked him to sit before he tried tidying away the conversation again.

The next time, just the two of them went out. Petar did not recount Iva's opinion like a score. They discussed their weekend and planned a short trip. Iva messaged that she still had the potato container and could return it the following week. He showed Biljana the message. "See," she said, "lunch did have a sequel." He laughed and put away his phone. On the table stood only two glasses, precisely as many as he needed that evening to be happy.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Places Beneath the Same Awning

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-places-beneath-the-same-awning/

Elvira sold flowers and Željko local cheeses from neighboring stalls beneath an awning that leaked exactly down the middle. Each insisted more water fell on their side. In the morning they watched each other's stall while getting coffee; in the afternoon they argued over whose customers left more empty bags. They had known each other nine years. Both divorced, both convinced that coincidence alone meant nothing that needed saying aloud before the neighbors.

The market began renovations and offered them different temporary locations. Željko received a covered space near the bus station; Elvira got the edge of a parking lot. He offered to exchange places because rain bothered her flowers more. She refused, angry that gratitude resembling sadness immediately filled her eyes. "You don't have to give me your business," she said. He replied that he was giving nothing away, only trying to help. For the rest of the day they spoke solely with customers.

On the first morning at the new locations, Elvira bought two coffees from habit. She held the second until it cooled. At noon Željko sent a photograph of his dry awning, saying his old accusations against her half had clearly been unjust. She laughed while arranging bouquets. She wrote that she now had so much space she had nobody to annoy. He replied that he missed precisely the person who annoyed him, then studied the sent message he could no longer turn into business.

They met after closing in a café where neither had ever sat without merchandise bags at their feet. Now they came empty handed. Elvira said she did not want a relationship merely because both struggled with change. Željko replied that for nine years she had persistently overestimated his need for coffee. He wanted her not only in mornings beneath an awning. He wanted to know her on Sundays when she was not counting coins or removing wilted leaves before anyone noticed.

On their first Sunday they walked outside town. Elvira brought no flowers, and Željko did not discuss cheese until hunger struck. Afterward they laughed at having lasted almost two hours without work. When the market reopened, they requested locations that suited their businesses, not necessarily neighboring ones. They still drank coffee together when possible. One rainy morning Željko stood beneath her new awning. "Yours doesn't leak anymore," he said. Elvira moved a chair for him and replied that he could stay anyway.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Breakfast After the Last Dance

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/breakfast-after-the-last-dance/

The hotel was closing for a lengthy renovation, so on the final evening staff were allowed a celebration in the large ballroom. Rada worked at reception; Bojan occasionally maintained the computers. They knew each other through brief conversations outside the networking cupboard. That evening she first discovered he could dance, while he discovered she sang much louder than she spoke to guests. Both were single and old enough not to believe immediately that a good song must mean a grand destiny.

Still, they remained together until the end. When the music stopped, Bojan asked whether she wanted breakfast. It was almost six in the morning. Rada removed her heels and put on sneakers she kept at work. They left through the staff entrance carrying a bag of pastries the cook had packed. The city was just beginning its day. They sat at a bus stop because the bakery opposite had not opened its seating area and the benches outside the hotel had already been carried inside.

Rada said she did not know where she would work in a month. Bojan immediately began offering contacts. She raised her hand, not harshly. "First let me be frightened for a little while," she said. He listened. She admitted she had spent so many years at the hotel that she knew the elevator's moods, but was unsure how to write a good résumé. Bojan said his work had been uncertain for a long time and what most exhausted him was pretending flexibility always suited him.

At the celebration they had looked like people in complete control. At the bus stop they shared cold pastries and said things that were not especially seductive. Precisely because of that, Rada felt more at ease. When the bus arrived, Bojan asked whether he could call the next day. She said yes, but after noon because she intended to sleep. She did not promise the same smile she had worn beneath the ballroom lights. He said his shirt would no longer be so neatly ironed either.

He called at the agreed time. Their second meeting was a short walk between two of her job interviews. They spent the third searching for a lost key in his untidy apartment. Neither came with music to help. Still, when she found a new job a month later, Rada first wanted to tell him how she had stumbled over the question about her greatest weakness. He brought pastries from the same bakery. They sat at the kitchen table, fully awake, and remained together far longer than breakfast required.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Room for a Dog Who Snores

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/room-for-a-dog-who-snores/

When Igor accepted a vacation invitation, he knew Lejla's dog was coming too. He did not know the dog expected the left side of the bed, half his breakfast, and the right to snore louder than the old refrigerator. On the first night he slept at the mattress edge, trying to appear relaxed before the woman he loved. In the morning he said he had rested wonderfully. Lejla examined his red eyes and replied that this was a very kind but obvious lie.

The dog had lived with her for nine years, through a move and a divorce. Igor understood his importance but did not want every request for space to sound like jealousy of an animal. He suggested a dog bed beside theirs. Lejla felt offended before hearing the sentence's end. She said the dog could not understand and she could not suddenly reject him. Igor replied that he could not understand either why several hours of sleep were called rejection.

They spent the morning apart. Lejla walked the dog beside the water; Igor sat beneath pines and read the same page three times. He realized he had agreed to everything before the trip because he did not want to seem demanding. Now he expected Lejla to guess his limit herself. When she returned he admitted that without requesting an immediate matching confession. Lejla said she was accustomed to testing every new person by whether they would respect the life she had already built.

They agreed Igor would use the second bedroom that night, followed by gradually getting the dog accustomed to his own bed without turning vacation into a major battle. Igor did not have to love dog hair on every towel; Lejla did not have to defend her relationship with him as betrayal of an old friend. They bought an extra mat and spent evenings together on the terrace. The dog mostly chose a spot between their chairs, pleased both were close enough occasionally to drop something on the floor.

On the final morning Igor found Lejla drinking coffee quietly. She asked whether he would still consider living together. He said yes, with a serious conversation about space, habits, and one door that could close. Lejla agreed. At that moment the dog snored loudly from his bed, as though offering an objection. Both laughed. Love had shown itself not in everyone being comfortable without discussion, but in willingness to repeat the conversation before someone spent another night balanced on the very edge.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Time for a Whole Sentence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/time-for-a-whole-sentence/

Whenever Denis paused over a word, Ana found it for him. She did it quickly, almost gently, convinced she was making things easier. They had met through mutual friends and dated for two months. Denis had stuttered since childhood. He wrote funny messages, loved old trains, and knew how to listen to Ana's long stories about work. She often misread his silence as an invitation to accelerate the conversation before others grew impatient.

At a restaurant the waiter asked what they wanted. Denis began saying a dish's name, paused, and Ana ordered something else she thought he liked. The waiter left before Denis could correct her. He put down the menu and said he had wanted something entirely different. Ana smiled, ready to call the waiter back. He said the problem was not only dinner and asked her to let him finish a sentence even when the answer seemed obvious.

Ana initially defended her intention. Then she noticed she was once again preventing him from finishing his explanation. She fell silent. Denis said he could request help when he needed it, but did not want the person he dated deciding beforehand how long his voice was allowed to occupy space. He was not angry with the waiter who had hurried to another table. He was hurt by her assumption that the meaning of his words mattered more than his right to say them himself.

The evening did not end perfectly. Several times Ana began interrupting, then stopped, overly conscious of her behavior. Eventually Denis asked whether they could discuss something other than his speech. She told him how she had accidentally sent an internal joke to her entire team. He laughed so much he had to put down his glass. The tension did not magically dissolve, but they became two people having dinner again, instead of a problem and someone attempting to solve it.

Several weeks later they took an excursion on an old train. At the ticket desk Ana stood beside him without taking over the conversation. Denis bought the tickets and handed her one afterward, without thanking her for something that ought to be ordinary. During the journey she lost the thread of her own story because she forgot a town's name. He waited, then asked whether she wanted help. She laughed and said yes. Later she fell asleep against his shoulder, comfortable beside a man she no longer tried to translate for others before hearing him herself.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Guitar Behind the Empty Wardrobe

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-guitar-behind-the-empty-wardrobe/

The guitar appeared when they moved their daughter's wardrobe. For twenty years it had stood between the wall and a cardboard box of cables. Senad wiped the dust away with his sleeve, and Mirsada immediately joked that the neighbors did not yet know what danger awaited them. He laughed briefly and returned the guitar to its case. Their daughter had moved out three days earlier. They planned to turn her room into a workspace, though neither actually knew what they would do there.

The following evening Mirsada heard a quiet sound from the room. Senad was trying to tune the strings and stopped whenever he heard her footsteps. She remembered him playing that way early in their marriage, always a little more quietly than he could. Back then she teased him because she liked watching him blush. She had never considered that the joke had gradually become an obstacle. She entered and asked whether he wanted her to close the door from outside or stay and listen.

He said she could stay but that he still sounded bad. She replied that she had not bought a ticket. Both laughed, this time together. He played a song he once knew, losing chords midway through the chorus. Mirsada tried singing and forgot the words too. After a few minutes they abandoned accuracy and began inventing. For the first time the empty room sounded less like somewhere a person had left and more like a place where something could still happen.

Later he admitted putting away the guitar partly because he felt ashamed of wanting to play without any particular talent. Everything in their life had to produce a result. Mirsada said she had wanted to write short stories for years but always first ironed things nobody had requested be ironed. They agreed on two evenings a week when neither needed to justify how they spent time. Sometimes he played while she wrote; sometimes they sent each other into another room because concentration

had its limits.

He did not arrange a concert for their anniversary. He cooked dinner and afterward asked whether he could hear one of her stories. She read a short scene about two people unsure what to do with an empty apartment. He recognized them and did not ask whether she would publish it. He picked up the guitar and found a simple melody. Mirsada rested her feet on his chair. Their daughter messaged to ask how they were. They replied later, after finishing what belonged, for that moment, only to them.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Back Row for the Two of Us

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-back-row-for-the-two-of-us/

Una and Petra bought the same two tickets every other Friday. Back row, left side, far enough from people who talked through films. They had known each other for six years, since Petra sought someone to replace a partner who canceled a film quiz. Una had then mistaken a title everyone at the table knew and spent the evening certain she would never be invited again. Petra called the very next day, insisting she needed someone with whom she could lose with dignity.

Over the years both had relationships with other women. Their Fridays sometimes disappeared from the calendar and returned, each time a little more precious. Una began feeling something different after Petra spent an entire afternoon with her waiting for news of her mother's operation. It was not a dramatic moment. Petra simply fetched sandwiches and knew which one Una could manage when things were difficult. After that, ordinary meetings were no longer entirely ordinary.

Then the cinema closed for renovations. Petra suggested another venue across town. Una said it was too far, although it was not, because she feared how much she missed their old ritual. Petra thought she wanted to meet less often. Two Fridays passed in short messages about work and weather. On the third, Una bought two tickets to the new cinema but did not send them as the usual reminder.

She called and said she wanted an evening they did not have to pretend was merely the continuation of a habit. Petra remained silent for a long time. Una was already preparing to retreat when she heard the question: did she mean a date? She replied that she did. Petra said she wanted the same but had feared losing a friend over a possibility that might exist only on her side. Neither promised that nothing would become awkward. They simply agreed not to hide the conversation behind a film.

The new auditorium did not have their seats. They sat in the middle, too close to loud teenagers and far from the exit. The film was not particularly good. Halfway through, Petra reached across the armrest between them, and Una took her hand without looking. Afterward they walked for a long time, discussing things they would have to learn despite already knowing each other. The following Friday they skipped the cinema. They cooked dinner at Una's and missed the beginning of a television film, happy that this time no purchased ticket determined when their conversation must stop.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Postcard from the Wrong Shore

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-postcard-from-the-wrong-shore/

The postcard showed a sea so blue that Adnan thought someone had recolored it. The address was his; the name was not. It said the sender was enjoying her rest and had finally stopped buying souvenirs for people who disliked traveling. Adnan turned it over several times, searching for a legible enough signature to help. He found only the name Lana and a small drawing of sunglasses beside a coffee stain.

He took it to the post office. The worker recognized that the street number had been exchanged with the apartment number and said she would try to correct delivery. A week later a woman appeared at his door with the same postcard. It had been intended for her aunt, who was visiting and had dictated the address incorrectly. Lana brought chocolate to thank him for not discarding the card. Adnan said he had wanted to learn who these people needing no souvenirs were, since he belonged to that species himself.

Their doorway conversation lasted long enough for a neighbor to suggest they at least sit down. Lana admitted she was tired of turning travel into proof of an interesting life. She worked too much to afford vacations from which she returned more exhausted. Adnan had lived in the same neighborhood all his life and felt neither pride nor shame about it. He liked going somewhere for a good reason, and that year's reason was his sister's new baby in another city.

They went for coffee several days later. Lana expected him to urge her to travel less. Instead he asked where she had felt peaceful. She thought for a long time, then described an ordinary bench behind a bus station, far from the places she had photographed. Adnan showed her a similar bench in their own city, sheltered from traffic. They sat until dark and shared the chocolate she had brought for him, both with dirty fingers because it had begun melting.

The following month she traveled again, this time for only a few days and without a full schedule. She sent him a postcard with the correct address. On the back she wrote that he would like the soup in a small harbor restaurant and that she had bought him nothing. Adnan kept the card on a shelf. When she returned, he invited her to make the soup together, although neither knew the recipe. It tasted different from the original, but enough remained for tomorrow's lunch, which both considered a good reason to meet again.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Call in the Middle of an Ordinary Day

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-call-in-the-middle-of-an-ordinary-day/

When Sanja saw Ervin in the vehicle inspection queue, she first checked whether she could leave through another door. She could not, because her car was already inside. They had not met for four years. Their relationship had ended with many beautiful sentences and too few real agreements. He always planned the future, she always organized the present, and ultimately both claimed to carry everything. Ervin approached with two coffees from the machine and asked whether she wanted one.

She said she no longer took sugar. He looked at the cups, laughed at his assumption, and drank both alternately. That small act surprised her: previously he would have explained why one sweetened coffee was no problem. They discussed work, parents, and mechanical faults. Ervin led a different life from the one she imagined. He had given up constant travel and cared for his father several days a week with his sister's help. He described it not as proof of maturity but in answer to where he now lived.

Sanja admitted she was still inclined to take everything over before another person even saw the task. After him she had been in a relationship where she repeated the same habit. She did not say that made their separation a mistake. Nor did Ervin offer nostalgia as an argument. When her number was called, they wished each other well and left it there. Only that evening did she receive his message asking whether she wanted a walk without discussing what they once should have done.

They discussed that too, nevertheless. They walked beside the river and named things they would no longer accept. Sanja did not want to manage their shared life's calendar in advance. Ervin did not want to promise moves merely because they sounded romantic at the time. Either could withdraw, and that possibility made the conversation calmer. When he

took her hand, the feeling was familiar but not identical. She did not try comparing it to what she remembered from four years earlier.

Three weeks later they planned dinner. Ervin bought ingredients; Sanja arrived later than agreed because work had run over. She apologized without insisting it was not her fault, and he reheated the food without silent punishment. Nothing happened worth putting into a love message. Still, as they ate slightly dry pasta, Sanja thought precisely such evenings could distinguish a new beginning from repetition. The next day she called in the middle of an ordinary afternoon simply to hear how his morning had gone.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Three Laps Around the Airport

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/three-laps-around-the-airport/

When the flight was delayed a second time, Dalia stopped counting messages on the screen and began walking laps of the small airport. On her third circuit, a man from the coffee queue asked whether she was training or looking for an exit. She said she was trying not to eat a third sandwich out of boredom. He displayed his second and suggested she warn him before he crossed that line too. His name was Leon, he was forty six, and he was traveling to visit his brother.

Dalia was going to a job interview. She was not certain she wanted the job. In her hometown she had an apartment, friends, and a relationship that had ended neatly only on paper. Leon said he had recently broken off an engagement. They could have turned the conversation into a competition over whose past was harder, but a boy dropping a ball beneath a bench interrupted. They helped find it and afterward discussed things less like opening statements before a court.

They discovered both disliked voice messages longer than a minute, that she liked cold pizza, and he read a book's ending before its beginning. Dalia said the last was a serious flaw. Leon defended himself so badly that she thought she would like to hear his other unsuccessful defenses. When a new departure time was announced, she felt no relief. She looked at her ticket and realized they were seated at opposite ends of the aircraft, which suddenly seemed an unnecessary administrative separation.

Before boarding they exchanged numbers. Leon said he did not want to promise a call merely because the airport had created a pleasant pause in the day. He genuinely wanted to call her. Dalia replied that she would answer but might have no interesting report after the job interview. He said a boring one interested him too. On the flight, she nevertheless opened her interview notes. She did not want the possibility of a new relationship to make her forget why she had set out.

She declined the job but accepted Leon's call. They talked briefly, then again the next day. Once home, they arranged a walk through a neighborhood both knew, without delays, travel bags, or the special lighting of departures. Their conversation paused several times. Leon was quieter than at the airport; Dalia was more tired. Still, at the end she suggested another circuit of the park. He accepted. They did not have to reproduce the coincidence to discover whether there was something they could also choose entirely deliberately.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Compote for Two Stubborn People

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/compote-for-two-stubborn-people/

Adna proposed a weekend at her aunt's country house, convinced she would get to know Nermin better among trees than in restaurants. In exchange, her aunt left three full crates of pears and asked them to make compote. Nermin said he knew how, although he had only watched his mother do it once. Adna replied that she knew too. Half an hour later they stood before the stove, each with a different sugar ratio and precisely the same stubborn expression.

They had been together for four months. Both were accustomed to their families calling when something needed solving; neither knew how to be a beginner before someone they liked. Nermin tried opening a stuck jar with bare hands. Adna offered a cloth; he refused, the jar slipped, and it shattered on the tiles. They were barefoot because they had left their shoes on the porch. Their romantic weekend now required someone to admit they could not even move without help.

Adna laughed first, but not at him. She asked him to pass her slippers from a chair he could reach. He did, she fetched a broom, and they cleaned the floor together, carefully checking the corners. Only then did they call her aunt. The woman said there was a jar opener in the lower drawer and a recipe hanging inside the cupboard door. Both had opened that door several times, so certain of their knowledge that they had not looked at what was written there.

As they peeled pears, Adna admitted she felt uncomfortable when anyone thought her clumsy. As the oldest in her family she had early become the person who could always manage. Nermin said that after his divorce he had decided to do everything alone, so now he often heard help as someone else's doubt in him. The conversation did not remove those habits. They still bumped elbows several times and offered unwanted advice, but they began recognizing the moment before turning help into a

defense of pride.

They made less compote than her aunt expected and a pie burned around the edge. That evening they ate the middle of the pie on the porch, tired and sticky. Adna rested her head on his shoulder and said she needed someone to drive home tomorrow. Nermin agreed, then asked her to wake him because he always slept through his alarm. When they left, they took two jars marked only with the date. They did not look like evidence of competence. They looked like something they would enjoy opening together in the middle of winter.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Four Stars Before Dawn

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/four-stars-before-dawn/

Sara arrived to watch meteors after a night shift, her hair still marked by its elastic band. She worked at a hotel reception desk and had only two free hours before sleeping. The group gathered on a hill above town. The only man not holding his phone toward the sky sat on an upturned crate eating a peach. He offered her another, warning that it was probably too ripe and that he had no paper napkins.

His name was Adis, and he had just finished a restaurant shift. He knew four constellations and named the others after shapes on the menu. For the first time that week, Sara laughed without professional obligation. They saw two meteors, one clearly and the other perhaps. As the sun began lightening the edge of the sky, Adis said people could come there even when nothing special was expected. Sara thought she would like to try that.

They began meeting between his restaurant closing and her departure for work. Sometimes that meant forty minutes on a bench with bakery food. Sometimes one fell asleep while the other was still talking. They did not make that proof of insufficient interest. Sara would soon move to another city for training for a job she had long wanted. She told him at their third meeting, before they kissed and before silence could become easier.

Adis was quieter for several days. He did not want a long distance relationship, having already ended one exhausted by traveling and waiting. Sara said she would not stay because of him. The sentence hurt her although it was true. They sat on steps outside a closed stadium and agreed not to promise things they did not want. They could have stopped immediately, but both wanted more time together. They did not call it meaningless simply because they knew it would end.

On the last morning before her departure they returned to the hill. Adis brought firmer peaches and napkins. Sara showed him a constellation she had learned in the meantime, and he kept giving it the wrong name until she bumped his shoulder. They parted outside her entrance, sad and sleepy. A month later she sent him a photograph of the sky over the new city. He replied that he missed her, without asking her to return. Sara studied that sentence for a long time, grateful that one lovely thing had not had to become an obstacle to another.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Part with Two Lines

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-part-with-two-lines/

Marija received a part with two lines and studied them everywhere: washing her hair, waiting for a green light, sorting white laundry. She was fifty three and had never stood on a stage. Her daughter enrolled her in the amateur company because her mother kept saying she would like to do that someday. Now someday arrived every Tuesday at seven. At rehearsal her voice disappeared precisely when she said the name of the imaginary visitor.

Hamza, playing her theatrical husband, knew the entire scene but constantly lost his hat. He left it on a radiator, in the dressing room, and once among another production's props. Marija began announcing where she saw it, while he quietly supplied her first word when she froze. He was an electronics technician working reduced hours before retirement. Confident on stage, offstage he was unexpectedly shy and inclined to lengthy explanations about the weather.

Two weeks before the premiere Marija said she would withdraw. The director was already tired of her apologies. Hamza did not insist she had nothing to fear. He invited her to read the scene with him after rehearsal in the empty auditorium, without lights. They sat among the audience seats and delivered the text like an ordinary conversation. When her line finally sounded natural, Marija laughed, then cried with relief that surprised her more than stage fright.

Hamza fetched a tissue from his car. He admitted his first wife had called theater a waste of time, and he had resumed attending only after their divorce. Marija said her former husband had forbidden nothing. She had postponed her own wishes until everyone else finished theirs. They did not conclude that everything could now be recovered. They went for hot chocolate and discussed things they still wanted to attempt, including some they would probably never be good enough at.

At the premiere she delivered both lines, one slightly too quickly. Hamza forgot his hat, and she had to hand it to him outside the script. The audience laughed, convinced it belonged to the play. After the bows, her daughter hugged her, and Hamza waited until they were alone beside the dressing room. He asked whether she wanted dinner tomorrow without rehearsed lines. Marija accepted, adding that she would probably be nervous again. He said that was fine. This time she did not have to learn exactly what to say before appearing in front of someone.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Last Clean Shirt

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-last-clean-shirt/

For their first trip together, Nina packed five shirts and Vanja two. At the airport, hers was the suitcase that disappeared. In the hotel he offered one of his, loose and patterned with tiny fish, while she tried to explain by phone the color of the missing bag's handle. When the call ended, she put on the shirt and looked so serious that Vanja did not dare laugh. The journey was supposed to be a trial before living together.

It rained the next morning. Nina wanted to buy essentials and visit a museum; Vanja wanted to remain in the room until the weather improved. To him a vacation meant having no plan; to her it was a rare opportunity to fulfill a plan that did not belong to work. They argued about breakfast, but both knew they were discussing more than eggs and coffee. Her apartment already contained an empty shelf intended for him, while not a single book had moved in his.

Nina went out alone. In a shop she bought socks, a shirt, and a cheap umbrella that immediately turned inside out. Instead of visiting the museum, she sat in a small café and called Vanja. She said she did not want to spend three days testing whether he would spontaneously want the same things. He admitted he had not decided whether to move in, although he had let her make room for his belongings. Nodding had been easier than risking losing her.

He came to the café without excuses or suggestions that they now hurry through every attraction. They talked until afternoon. Nina wanted a shared home soon but did not want a housemate arriving out of fear. Vanja loved his apartment and quiet while also imagining ordinary evenings together. They agreed to live separately for several more months, then have a definite conversation. They did not call it a perfect arrangement. It was simply more honest than a shelf waiting for an answer in place of a person.

The suitcase arrived on the final evening just as they brought restaurant food back in paper cartons. Nina did not open it immediately. They sat on the hotel floor and ate, each from a separate lid. Vanja asked whether she wanted an early walk before leaving tomorrow. She said yes, without an obligation to talk the entire way. After returning, she gave back his washed fish patterned shirt. He left her a book, not as a sign of moving in, but as something they could discuss when she had read it.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Table for One Free Morning

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-table-for-one-free-morning/

On his first Monday in retirement, Branko sorted all the cups by size. On the second he took over the shopping, and on the third he began preparing breakfast before his wife Nada woke. She still worked in accounting and previously spent the first twenty minutes of her day alone, with coffee and an open window. Now a man greeted her with an omelet, a shopping plan, and a question about why she looked as though none of it suited her.

One morning Nada said she missed silence. Branko removed the plate too quickly, sending a fork to the floor. They spoke all day only to ask whether there was bread. That evening she went to the kitchen for water and found him studying old photographs of colleagues. In the last, he stood beside the machine they had shut down when he left. Beside it on the table lay a household work schedule he had drawn himself.

She sat opposite him. He said he did not know where he ought to be between seven and three. For thirty six years there had been a definite place. Nada admitted she feared every need for solitude would now look like rejection of him. She did not want to become his new supervisor. Branko laughed for the first time that day and said he had never tolerated supervisors well, even those he brought breakfast.

They agreed on mornings without a program. Branko began going for a walk while she drank her first coffee, and once a week he played table tennis with a former colleague. He did not enjoy it immediately. He returned too early and checked whether anything needed repairing, but he was learning to sit without a task. On Saturdays Nada proposed outings they did not have to earn by washing windows first. The first Saturday they visited a museum where they had sent guests for years but never gone themselves.

Before a painting of the sea, Branko asked whether she remembered their first vacation. She remembered the wrong bus, a broken fan, and his determination to find her cold cherries. Suddenly she saw someone with whom she still had untold stories, rather than the man who had moved her cups. The following Monday, coffee waited on the table without an omelet or schedule. Branko was already walking. She left a message asking him to return by ten because she had taken the day off and wanted a long breakfast with him.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Other Side of the Net

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-other-side-of-the-net/

Mila had lost to Tarik three times and remembered all three defeats better than her own birthdays. They played recreational tennis after work at a club where nets were patched and the autumn tournament trophy was smaller than a teacup. Tarik kept coming to the net. Mila kept promising herself she would lob him next time. When he invited her to dinner, her first thought was that he wanted to discover how she trained and what her serve was like.

At dinner they avoided discussing tennis for almost twenty minutes. Both considered that an achievement. Mila led a design team; Tarik ran a small sports shop inherited from his uncle that he was struggling to sustain. Both liked winning because it was a clear event in days full of unfinished work. Their second meeting was in his kitchen. He made too much rice, and she washed the dishes without asking, a habit that led him to request that sometimes she simply sit down.

When they ended up in the same tournament group, friends began teasing Tarik that he would have to let Mila win. She laughed the first time, but not the second. Tarik said it would be interesting to see how she handled losing to her boyfriend. She liked that word more than the whole sentence, but the rest still bothered her. She said she did not want a relationship in which her effort became a shared joke whenever someone felt uncomfortable.

They arrived separately for the match. Mila played patiently; Tarik attacked too much and ultimately lost. He was not immediately pleasant. He shook her hand and went to shower while she gathered the balls alone. That evening he called and admitted being angry with himself and ashamed that he had left her to interpret it. Mila said she did not need a perfect loser, but she needed someone who would not punish her with coldness because she had played well.

The following week he watched her final and loudly protested one poor decision she made, exactly as he would have reacted for a friend. Mila lost the last set. Tarik did not offer his own defeat as consolation. He took her for fries and let her explain the wind in detail for ten minutes. On the way out she booked a court for Thursday. She asked whether he would play. He kissed her and said yes, but that this time he intended to win. That sounded like a perfectly good arrangement.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Game Without a Gifted Queen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-game-without-a-gifted-queen/

Tatjana came to the chess club after her son sent her a phone game and stopped responding whenever he was losing. She wanted opponents who would not disappear halfway through a match. In the library hall she sat opposite Emir, an archivist with a very tidy mustache and funny cloth shopping bags. On the first evening he beat her in twenty minutes. On the second they played for almost an hour. On the third he invited her for coffee, then lost his queen in a suspiciously simple way.

Tatjana examined the board and moved the piece back. She said he could repeat his move. Emir refused, claiming he could not think with her sitting opposite him. The sentence was meant to be seductive. To her it sounded like an excuse that had already turned her victory into his generosity. She put away the pieces earlier than usual. She did not go for coffee, but clearly told him why before putting on her coat.

The following week Emir brought a chess problem from an old newspaper. He did not use it as a substitute for an apology. He said he had thought she would enjoy winning and now understood how ugly that assumption had been. Tatjana admitted she had been pleased by his invitation until the gifted queen. Both had spent a long time alone and were too accustomed to arranging conversations in advance to prevent discomfort.

They began another game without special rules. Emir lost because he overlooked a knight, and Tatjana asked whether he wanted to repeat his move. This time both laughed. Afterward they went for coffee and discussed bad habits: she interrupted stories with questions; he finished other people's sentences. They agreed that they did not need to present these as charming qualities. The waiter brought them water twice because they kept failing to leave.

A month later they entered the club tournament as individual players. Tatjana was eliminated earlier and stayed to watch Emir, without feeling obliged to cheer every move. When he too lost, she did not try to repair the result with a pleasant lie. She said his opponent had played brilliantly. Emir accepted that, picked up his cloth bag, and asked whether she wanted to walk home. On the bridge, Tatjana took his hand. This time neither had to lose something for the other to gain.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Flowers for an Ordinary Monday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/flowers-for-an-ordinary-monday/

Biserka had ordered too few flowers for her daughter's wedding. She realized only after the tables were set and the final three remained bare. The florist had already closed the van, and her daughter said nobody would look at the vases. Biserka knew she was right but still struggled with tears. She was not crying over flowers but over her former husband, who had arrived early and moved her place at the table without asking.

The groom's uncle Vedad stood beside the window holding a box of candles. He asked whether she wanted to divide the larger bouquets. Biserka nodded. They found nine ordinary jars in the kitchen and arranged the stems so no table remained empty. Vedad did not tell her to calm down or say weddings were always stressful. He simply held the stems while she trimmed them with kitchen scissors that were not sharp enough.

Her former husband arrived midway through the task and said they had been moved for better photographs. This time Biserka replied that she wanted her original seat. Her daughter supported the request. Vedad continued washing a jar, leaving them room to talk. Later he admitted he was a widower and often felt that other people believed they knew best where he should sit, how much he should smile, and when he should begin going out again.

At the celebration they danced only near the end, when shoes had become uncomfortable and the photographer had packed the extra lights. Biserka said she had to return rented tablecloths the next day. Vedad offered to help with the boxes, without an elaborate dinner invitation. On Sunday they delivered them together and afterward drank coffee at a gas station. It was not particularly romantic, but she liked being able to laugh with him about a bad sandwich and exhaustion, without makeup concealing the shadows beneath her eyes.

When her daughter later asked what was happening between them, Biserka replied that she did not yet know. She sought no approval but made no secret of it either. Vedad called on Monday to ask whether her feet had recovered. They arranged a short walk after work. She brought him a jar with one surviving flower; he brought scissors that cut properly. Biserka laughed so much that passersby looked toward them. After years of major family occasions, she looked forward to something belonging only to an ordinary Monday.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Trail Without a Summit Photograph

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-trail-without-a-summit-photograph/

Marta came on the hiking trip wearing new boots that began rubbing her feet in the parking lot. She had bought them after a breakup because she had decided to become someone who conquered summits on weekends. Her bag held energy bars, an expensive raincoat, and a phone ready for the photograph that would show she was fine. The man behind her carried sandwiches in an ice cream container and asked the guide how often they would stop.

His name was Goran, and he had walked that trail before but spoke like a beginner. Marta thought he deliberately slowed the group just to talk. At the first rest stop, he saw her removing a boot. He offered a blister plaster without asking why she had not broken in her footwear. She had an excuse ready that she did not need to use. As she covered her heel, Goran ate half a sandwich and carefully returned the rest to its container.

Before the climb, the guide offered a shorter return route for anyone who had had enough. Marta looked toward the summit, then at her foot. Goran volunteered first. She joined him, with the guide confirming that they would follow the marked trail and report when they reached the lodge. They walked without hurrying. Only then did she learn he had no trouble with fitness; he reserved Sunday afternoons for visiting his father in a care home, where they watched matches together regardless of who played.

Marta admitted the reason for her new boots and almost became angry with her own voice. It sounded sad. Goran did not say her ex did not know what he had lost. He asked whether she actually liked mountains. She replied that she liked the trees, the air, and this trail, but did not understand the need for someone to defeat an altitude every Sunday. Goran pointed to a mushroom growing through a crack in a stump. They bent to examine it, forgetting both the summit and the breakup for

several minutes.

At the lodge they ordered bean stew and changed their socks. Marta photographed her plate, then deleted the picture because she did not need an audience for lunch. Goran asked whether she wanted to walk beside the river the following week, where there was no climb. She said yes, but only after buying ordinary comfortable sneakers. In the parking lot they parted with a brief hug. Later he sent the match result and his father's angry assessment of the referee. Marta smiled at a message that did not require her to look happy before she actually became so.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Bakery Before the Weather Report

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bakery-before-the-weather-report/

The radio station was upstairs from Merima's bakery. Every morning its presenter, Ognjen, ordered a roll without seeds, then left half. Merima considered this a quiet insult to her craft. She listened to his voice while kneading the first dough: cheerful, polished, and tireless, even when announcing rain. When he came down for coffee, he barely mumbled a greeting. She concluded that he used up all his kindness on listeners before she opened.

One morning the whole street lost power. The ovens had already completed the first batch, while the station switched to backup programming from another city. Ognjen came downstairs with a flashlight and asked whether she needed help. Merima gave him paper bags. In the darkness they assembled orders by phone light, while regular customers at the door gave names instead of receipt numbers. Ognjen asked each one whether they needed help to the exit, much more quietly than he spoke into a microphone.

When the rush passed, Merima broke a warm roll and offered him half. He admitted he could not eat before his program because of nerves. He took the leftover half to the technician but always forgot to ask for a second bag. He had hosted the morning show for eleven years. Merima looked at him incredulously. He said the years taught a person how to keep nerves from being heard, not how to make them disappear. She said she still checked the locked bakery three times.

Ognjen asked why she never discussed her bakery on the neighborhood program. Merima admitted she feared how her voice would sound. He offered an interview without broadcasting, just so she could hear herself. They recorded a few minutes by phone: she discussed dough that could not be hurried and a customer who ordered three different rolls to avoid admitting which he preferred. When she listened, she heard not

insecurity but a tired woman who knew her work.

The electricity returned as they drank their second coffee. Ognjen had to go upstairs, but he did not offer to turn them into a morning story. He asked when the bakery closed on Sundays. Merima said noon, unless the dough decided otherwise. He waited at twelve thirty with two tickets to a photography exhibition. Both arrived sleepy and stayed longer than planned. The next morning he ordered two rolls and two bags. Merima marked one with his name and wrote on the other that he should greet the technician.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Shoulder Deep

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/shoulder-deep/

At her first adult swimming lesson, Alisa said she had come because of back pain. That was only partly true. She was forty one and spent every summer on the shore, watching other people's bags while everyone else swam. The man beside her admitted he was afraid of water. His honesty made her explanation unnecessarily complicated. His name was Nedim, and he held his rubber cap like an object discovered on another planet.

The instructor positioned them beside the edge. Alisa put her face under, while Nedim covered both his nose and mouth with his hands at every attempt. After class they met beside the tea machine. She proposed an agreement: neither would miss a lesson without telling the other. Nedim accepted but added that the message must not contain an invented fever. Both laughed too loudly for the empty corridor.

Over the following weeks they progressed unevenly. Nedim mastered floating while Alisa still held the rope. She submerged her head easily, while his eyes remained tightly closed. They did not give each other instructions over the teacher's. After class they shared a roll from the bakery that was still open. They discussed small things: stiff towels, boring meetings, his son who had recently moved out, and her unsuccessful attempts to grow basil on the kitchen windowsill.

One evening Alisa did not come. She messaged that she was outside the entrance but could not go in that day. Nedim replied that he would wait for her after class if she wanted. He did not rush outside to persuade her. An hour later he found her on a bench. Her former husband had called about selling their shared vacation house. Throughout the conversation she had felt once again like someone agreeing to other people's plans. Nedim sat with wet hair and listened without suggesting a property price.

At the final lesson they swam the required width of the pool, each at their own pace. Nedim arrived first, turned toward Alisa, and stayed far enough away not to interfere. When she touched the tiles, he did not raise his arms like a coach. He simply smiled. Afterward they arranged a Saturday trip to a lake, with an explicit right to remain on shore all day. Alisa brought two bags and did not have to guard either of them. As they walked beside the water, Nedim took her hand, warm and completely dry.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Shelf for Books That Stay

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-shelf-for-books-that-stay/

For thirty years, Vera had sold secondhand books in a shop about as wide as an average living room. When the owner divided it with a partition, the other half went to a man who repaired suitcases. His drill interrupted her reading, and plastic wheels rolled beneath the poetry shelf. Vera wrote her first complaint on the back of a postcard. Harun returned it with a sketch of rubber padding to quiet his workbench and a question about whether the smell of glue bothered her.

They could not divide the display window equally. One side received afternoon sunshine; the other had a cracked pane. Vera proposed exchanging sides every week. Harun brought an old suitcase and arranged travel books inside it. Customers stopped to look. One woman bought a novel and ordered a new wheel. For the first time, Vera thought the partition might be more than a sign that her business was failing.

Harun made her tea in a cup with a chipped handle. He was a widower, five years younger than her, and could sense when a conversation needed to end. Vera had been divorced so long she told people it had happened in the previous century. One rainy Thursday, he admitted he had not traveled since his wife died. He repaired other people's departures, he said, while his own suitcase sat above the wardrobe. Vera did not offer consolation from a book. She simply poured more tea.

In December she received an invitation to a fair in another city. Usually she would refuse because of the heavy boxes and driving in the dark. This time she asked Harun whether he would rent her two suitcases. He offered his own and said he could drive if she wanted company. On the road they argued about the radio, bought too many rolls, and missed a turning. Neither tried to turn their awkwardness into a sign that they should never have started the journey. That evening they sat in separate hotel armchairs, their feet tired from the fair.

Vera said she would like to go somewhere with him again, even without a business reason. Harun studied the map on the table for a long time, then asked whether he could hold her hand. She did not mind being asked. On Monday they returned the old suitcase to the window, but removed the travel books. Inside they placed the books they had brought along and never managed to read. Beneath them, Vera wrote: For a journey where conversation lasts. Harun repaired the cracked pane before she opened the shop.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Color We Had Not Named

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-color-we-had-not-named/

At pottery class, Boris kept choosing brown glaze and calling it green. Selma corrected him on the first two evenings; on the third, she simply passed him the right container. He was a fifty two year old electrician, with hands where clay dried in deep creases. She conserved paper and came to class wearing thin gloves, as though she had not yet decided whether she really wanted to get anything dirty.

When they made bowls, Boris's looked like a bent hat. Selma's was flawless, but the instructor asked her to stop measuring its rim. Boris laughed at himself, nobody else. Selma offered to exchange places beneath the lamp because she thought dimmer light was causing his trouble with colors. He said he had difficulty distinguishing some colors, and a new bulb could not fix it.

She felt ashamed of correcting him without asking. To the next class she brought labels naming every glaze, but she did not stick them on immediately. She asked whether he would find them useful. Boris said he would, especially since the florist had been sending his sister colors she hated for years. Selma laughed and admitted that she never bought herself flowers because she had always waited for someone else.

After class, their conversation lasted until the nearby tearoom closed. Both were divorced and cautious about sentences that sounded like promises. Boris spoke about his adult daughter, who left food for him although he could cook perfectly well. Selma described how she still kept two theater subscription seats, despite taking different friends to performances for three years. Neither offered the other a quick answer to an empty chair.

Before firing, Selma's bowl cracked. She wanted to throw it away, but Boris suggested waiting for the instructor. The repair left a visible seam,

something like a river on a map. Selma did not cover it with decoration. When the pieces emerged from the kiln, Boris's bowl was genuinely green. He showed her the label he had saved in his wallet, between a tool shop card and a photograph of his newly born granddaughter.

For the final exhibition, they placed their bowls side by side. Selma brought flowers she had bought herself and separated a sprig for his piece. Boris asked whether her second theater seat was occupied on Friday. She said it was free, but the play was rather long. He offered dinner afterward, if they still felt like talking. She accepted without measuring how far that Friday might lead.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Key on the Last Bus

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-key-on-the-last-bus/

In the seat pocket of the last bus, Mirza found a key with a yellow pear attached. He handed it to the dispatcher, Hana, expecting the usual complaint about running late. Instead, she rose so suddenly that her chair rolled against the wall. She recognized the key ring of a woman who traveled every evening to the bakery she cleaned. Without the key, she could not enter the apartment where her mother was bedridden.

The woman had no telephone number in their records. Hana knew only her stop and her habit of carrying empty cloth bags. Mirza offered to drive her in the staff minibus. Hana completed the authorization first, as carefully as ever. He laughed. For months he had called her the queen of paperwork, quietly enough to believe she had never heard him behind the glass.

The bakery was locked, but a light burned in the basement. They called through the delivery opening until a baker emerged dusted with flour. The cleaner had gone to a neighbor to borrow a phone. He gave them an address opposite the old clinic. On the way, Hana admitted she disliked night journeys because her father had been injured on a bus. That was why she examined every report he submitted about braking.

Mirza slowed down although the street was empty. He said he ran late because he waited for an older passenger who struggled down the stairs of his building. He had never recorded it, fearing they would cancel the already unpopular service. Hana watched his profile in the dashboard light. Their arguments suddenly acquired a different arrangement: they were not on opposing sides, they simply lacked all the information about the same journey.

They found the key's owner outside her entrance, wearing someone else's oversized coat. When Mirza handed her the yellow pear, she pressed it

against her cheek. She invited them for coffee, but Hana said they needed to return before the morning shift. Only in the minibus did Hana notice that she was shaking. Mirza offered her his water bottle, without the joke he usually used to fill any uncomfortable silence.

The next day, Hana proposed moving the departure four minutes later and attached the passenger's actual arrival time. Mirza brought her two coffees. On hers, he wrote his route number, then crossed it out and added his telephone number. Hana turned the cup toward him. She said she did not make schedules on Saturdays and would like a walk without an official authorization. Mirza promised to arrive on time. For the first time, she had no reason not to believe him.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Seeds for Next Season

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/seeds-for-next-season/

On a shelf in the public reading room stood a box of seed packets. The lid said that anyone taking some should return a portion of their new seeds at the end of the season. Adela selected beans labeled Rasim and added her own name to the list. She had a small balcony and a large memory of her mother's garden. She had retired a month earlier, convinced she would finally have time for everything she once refused because of her shifts.

The beans did not meet her expectations. Adela left a question in the box, accompanied by a drawing of a very unhappy stalk. A reply awaited her the following week. Rasim could not conclude much from the drawing, but he admired the leaf that resembled a sail. He enclosed another packet. Adela replied that she had no spare pots. She added that, despite her evident lack of talent, she was prepared to give the beans another chance.

Through the summer they left letters among the packets. She learned that Rasim had an adult son living far away, hated television noise during lunch, and forgot where he had put his winter gloves every year. He learned that Adela ate lunch too late and still moved through her newly acquired leisure as though somebody might call her back to work. They wrote less and less about plants. Yet neither suggested that their letters stop traveling through the reading room.

In September the librarian announced a seed exchange gathering. Adela arrived carrying an empty packet. She recognized Rasim by the handwriting on his card, not the appearance she had imagined for months. He was shorter and far more restless. Before she could deliver her prepared confession, he said he had something to explain. His sister had grown the beans. He had merely copied the labels and delivered the box, hoping it would get him out of the house more often.

Adela opened the empty packet and showed him its bottom. She had nothing to return. They stood beside a table full of neat little promises and laughed so long that the librarian asked them to help stack chairs. As they worked, Rasim asked whether she would stop writing now that she knew he was no gardener. She said he still owed her the end of the story about finding his gloves in the bread box.

They drank their first coffee together on her balcony. Rasim brought a healthy basil plant bearing a large label: bought at the market. Adela placed it in her only empty pot. She left the bean packet on the table beneath a cup so the wind would not carry it away. Spring was still many months off. They did not need to decide what they would sow then to arrange the following Tuesday.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Name the Parrot Remembered

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-name-the-parrot-remembered/

The parrot first greeted her with, "Nera, where are you?" Vesna laughed, and Alen explained rather too quickly that Nera was his former wife. They had been divorced for five years; the bird simply remembered. Vesna was forty-eight and owned things she had not replaced after her divorce either. She understood. She just had not expected one of his belongings to turn every arrival into a roll call for an absent woman.

On the third Saturday the bird added, "My darling." Alen covered the cage with a thin cloth and asked whether she wanted more tea. Vesna said there was no need to darken an animal's world in the middle of the day on her account. She felt embarrassed even to notice whose name it said. Nera lived in another city and had remarried. Yet in this room somebody kept calling for her, in a voice far gentler than Alen's current way of speaking.

The next time, a slip of paper bearing Vesna's name lay on the table. Alen admitted they had been practicing. Every morning he told the bird, "Vesna is coming." It answered with the old sentence, followed by the sound of the kettle. Vesna laughed so hard that the parrot paced uneasily along its perch. She pictured this serious man negotiating before work with a little green creature indifferent to the sequence of his romantic life.

Still, she told him that something else had hurt. She wanted to hear him speak tenderly, rather than persuade the bird to change its repertoire. Alen studied the paper for a long time. In his previous marriage he had said those words automatically, he explained, and now he feared promising things he might not know how to sustain. Vesna asked for no grand speech. She simply asked whether he looked forward to Saturdays. "I start looking forward to them on Wednesday," he replied.

They stopped training the bird. Vesna brought mandarins, because Alen always forgot to buy fruit, and sat farther from the cage. Sometimes Nera entered their conversation as a person, with an amusing habit or a bad recipe. Then her name in the parrot's beak no longer occupied the entire room. It had a place among the other things they had both brought from their lives before that small table.

One Thursday Alen called and let Vesna listen. The parrot clearly said, "Vesna is coming." Then it imitated the kettle three times. Vesna looked at her pile of unwashed dishes and the clock above the window. "It has the wrong day," she said. "Perhaps it doesn't have to," Alen replied. She arrived without mandarins, carrying an ordinary loaf of bread. This time the man who opened the door was the first to say her name.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Five Minutes Without a Transcript

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/five-minutes-without-a-transcript/

I took a pen that did not smudge to my first speed dating event. At the time it seemed like preparation rather than a warning.

My sister signed me up without much negotiation. I was forty-six, worked as a stenographer, and since my divorce had managed to turn three ordinary dates into conversations resembling formal statements. The evening had simple rules. Five minutes, a bell, another table. On a small card we were supposed to circle the number of anyone we wanted to see again. I began adding notes because I feared forgetting a name or confusing two women who liked the same film.

My first four companions regarded the pen with varying degrees of mistrust. One asked whether I was writing a job reference. I said it was a professional habit. She did not find that funny. At the sixth table I began writing below the edge of the tablecloth, which looked even worse. Each time the bell rescued me from another sentence intended to explain the previous one. I wondered how long I had to stay before I could tell my sister I had tried.

Lea sat at the final table with her shoes neatly arranged beneath her chair. She pointed to my card. "That isn't your symbol for gardening. It's the one for a construction site," she said. Ten years earlier she had done the same work. She had read my clumsy summary of somebody's hobby as a report about rebuilding a bridge. For the first time that evening I forgot to take a note. She asked which words I still heard when I closed my eyes, and I told her I sometimes answered shopkeepers with, "Please repeat the last part."

The bell rang while she described her worst mistake, when she had turned the word for a pepper into an entirely serious discussion about paper. I did not move. The organizer reminded us that the round had

ended. Lea put on her shoes and said the story had a continuation if there was somewhere nearby where they did not measure time. I put my pen into my inside pocket so carefully that she laughed again.

At the café I learned that she now made stained glass, disliked olives, and had a funny little cough when she laughed too hard. I wrote none of it down. When we stood, she handed me the card bearing her table number. On the back, in ordinary, unhurried handwriting, she had written Saturday and a time. I kept it. Later I could not reconstruct every sentence she had said, but I remembered the moments when we both fell silent and neither hurried to fill the transcript.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Date Without Stilts

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-date-without-stilts/

Whenever she collected a repaired stilt boot, Ines entered Jadranko's workshop carrying it over her shoulder like an unusual animal. The boot had an extended leg and glittering buckles that constantly fell off. He replaced them without questions. Once he came to a street festival, where Ines, raised above the crowns of the young trees, leaned toward him and lowered a paper flower into his hand.

After the performance he invited her to dinner. She was thirty-nine and experienced enough not to attach prophecies to an ordinary invitation. Yet at home she tried on four pairs of shoes. Without her costume she was small, slightly stooped from carrying equipment, with restless fingers that always needed something to tie. On stilts she could stand calmly before a hundred people. In front of the mirror she had no idea what to do with her shoulders.

She chose the highest heels she owned. By the time she reached the restaurant they had raised a blister. Jadranko stood when she arrived, and she sat too quickly, grateful that the tablecloth hid her feet. They discussed the festival, the weather, and his shop. When he praised how fearless she looked up high, Ines held her glass in both hands. Once again he was seeing the woman who had been left packed away in the basement that evening.

"I'm afraid every time," she said. She explained how she checked the ground before performing and calculated where to stand if the wind picked up. Jadranko listened, then admitted he still broke into a sweat when a customer asked him to stretch expensive shoes. She was unsure what she had expected, perhaps a little disappointment. Instead they discussed jobs people considered easy because they watched only the final five minutes.

When she stood, her face tightened. Jadranko looked at her shoes but offered no immediate advice. Ines admitted she had worn them to avoid being too short. "Too short for what?" he asked. She laughed, now partly at herself. His workshop was across the street. He waited outside while she took the flat trainers from her bag that she habitually carried as a spare pair for the journey home from performances.

They walked past the closed shop windows. She came up to his shoulder, and for the first time that evening she was not calculating where to stand. Outside her building he took the paper flower from his coat pocket. Its edges were already crumpled. Ines offered him a new one, but he shook his head. As he bent to kiss her, she rose a little onto her toes. For that height she needed neither buckles nor somebody else's footwear.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The First Word After the Silence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-first-word-after-the-silence/

Dunja chose a silent weekend because her customer service job had filled her head with other people's sentences. At the mountain house she received a room, a walking schedule, and instructions to speak only when necessary until Sunday breakfast. The man opposite her immediately spilled his tea. As he gathered the wet napkins, he raised his eyebrows with such despair that she laughed. It was their first infringement.

The next morning she found a dry napkin folded into a clumsy bird beside her cup. There was no message. His hand was too large for that tiny piece of paper, the thumbnail blue from some earlier accident. That afternoon Dunja saved him a chair in the sunshine. Whenever he looked toward her, they both quickly turned away, although they had no task beyond sitting and watching the trees.

By Saturday evening she had decided he was gentle, patient, and probably witty. His name was Adis, according to the label on his suitcase. She had watched him fetch a cushion for an older guest and wait for a snail to leave the path. From those few scenes she constructed an entire personality. Before bed she imagined his voice, low and slow, perfectly suited to the sentences she was preparing herself.

On Sunday Adis began speaking before he sat down. He spoke quickly, rather loudly, and almost without commas. He managed a sales team, enjoyed impersonating sports commentators, and had paid for the silence after a bet with his brother. Dunja stirred her cold coffee. The man in her head disappeared in less than five minutes, leaving a friendly stranger at the table who was explaining an amusing breakdown at a car wash.

On the steps he noticed her disappointment. "Were you imagining somebody else?" he asked. She admitted she had been. He said he had

taken her for a shy painter. Dunja burst out laughing so loudly that their host turned around in the doorway. She told him about her job, a customer who had demanded the return of a used battery, and how she actually never knew when to stop talking once she felt comfortable.

The bus would arrive in forty minutes. Adis offered coffee at the village shop, solemnly promising not to imitate a commentator. Dunja did not ask for a promise. She wanted to hear the end of the car wash story now that she had stopped waiting for a different voice. At the end of the path he took her hand. It was the same large hand that had made the bird. She still liked that.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Dancing on Different Channels

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/dancing-on-different-channels/

My daughter bought me a ticket and pointed out that the event was not only for young people. That reassured me about as much as being told a medicine almost never caused nausea. Still, I went. At the entrance they gave me headphones with three channels and showed me the button that changed their light. People danced in a strange silence inside the hall. There were footsteps, occasional shouts, and laughter that did not need to compete with loudspeakers.

I chose the channel playing songs from my earliest nights out. I was fifty, with knees that disliked sudden decisions, so I stayed near the edge. A man several steps away danced entirely alone, wearing a serious expression that did not suit his movements. He did not look skilled. He looked as though it did not matter to him. When he glanced at me I raised a hand, unsure whether it was a greeting or a request for help.

He approached and began dancing beside me. For a moment I thought we were moving to the same old song, both knowing when to wait and when the chorus began. I laughed far more than I had planned. Then I noticed his headphones glowed a different color. I gestured for us to swap them. A fast, persistent rhythm entered my ears without a single familiar word. The man with whom I had just shared a memory had never heard it.

We removed the headphones simultaneously. His name was Damjan, he worked nights at a hotel, and that weekend he had decided not to sleep through his entire day off. I told him I had thought we were hearing the same thing. He replied that my dancing had seemed unusually slow to him too. We stood among people moving by different rules and tried to talk without raising our voices. I liked that more than the coincidence I had invented.

We tried one song on each channel. He did not mock my music, but clearly had no idea what to do with his hands. His left me breathless too quickly. Finally we each returned to our own headphones and danced close together, touching shoulders whenever our rhythms happened to meet. I did not need to convince myself that we had identical taste to want him to stay.

Toward the end my battery died. Damjan removed his headphones and suggested some fresh air. From the steps we heard a tram, people talking, and someone singing badly to a song still playing in their head. I asked whether next time we could go somewhere we could talk. "Without channels?" he asked. I nodded. This time I heard his affirmative answer perfectly well.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Letter from the Last Drawer

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-letter-from-the-last-drawer/

Lada arrived for the final two prints on Friday, when Aleksandar had already removed the sign from the door. The old printing press was moving to a younger colleague's workshop, and the small pieces of type still needed sorting and packing. For years Lada had framed his cards and small posters. They knew each other well enough to discuss aching backs and bad landlords, but had never shared coffee anywhere that at least one of them was not working.

She said she had an hour and rolled up her sleeves. Aleksandar thought he should pay her for helping, although he knew the offer would offend her. Since his divorce he had lost the habit of someone staying without an order or an invoice. He showed her the drawers. Lada lifted the letters carefully, turning them toward the light like miniature objects with a memory on either side. A dark mark remained on her thumb.

They searched almost half an hour for one missing letter. It was not expensive, and the collection did not have to be complete before the truck arrived. Yet they both checked the floor, table, and apron pockets. Lada found it on the windowsill beside a dead fly. She held it up triumphantly, then paused. "Now we have no excuse," she said. Aleksandar did not immediately know whether she meant packing, leaving, or something that had long stood between their ordinary conversations.

He said he wanted to print one more thing. He prepared a small line of type, painfully aware that his fingers were moving more slowly than usual. Lada waited without peeking. When he lifted the paper, it asked whether she would have dinner with him. There was no decorative border, date, or former business logo beneath it. Lada said she liked the question but wanted to hear how it sounded when he spoke it.

He repeated it aloud. She accepted and admitted deliberately extending her hour of help. The truck arrived before they finished, so they filled the last drawers alongside its driver. Once the press was removed, the room looked indecently large. Aleksandar stood where he had chosen paper for years. Lada did not hurry him into celebrating freedom. She simply stayed beside him until he switched off the light himself.

The restaurant he had planned was full. They ate in a small place across the street with their coats on the neighboring chair. Lada tried to wipe the dark mark from her thumb with a napkin, then abandoned the attempt. Aleksandar took her hand across the table. The next day she framed his last print but did not immediately take it home. She left it behind the counter, where he would see it when he came without a reason connected to work.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Morning Without a Familiar Scent

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-morning-without-a-familiar-scent/

Klara knew when to close her eyes and smile. Marko would hand her a cup of coffee, say it was freshly ground, and she would perform the brief pleasure that had once arrived by itself. She had been unable to smell since the previous winter. She could discuss it with people who had known her before. With a new man, she wanted at least a few meetings where she did not immediately have to explain what was missing.

Marko liked small surprises. He brought a sprig of lavender, soap from his travel bag, and a mandarin whose peel he had carefully removed in one piece. Klara listened to his descriptions and tried to summon the memory. Pretending was not difficult because he pressured her. Stopping was difficult because he looked sincerely pleased each time he brightened her morning. She found no fault in his attention, only no place to set down the truth.

On Sunday he took her to the market and bought a bouquet meant to be chosen with closed eyes. The seller told him to smell it, and he passed it to Klara. Around them people carried bags and pressed toward the stall. Klara kept looking at the flowers. "I can't," she said, first to the seller and then to him. Marko thought the scent bothered her. She had to repeat herself, this time in a complete sentence, in the middle of the market where she least wanted to talk about herself.

On a bench behind the market he asked why she had not told him. She replied that she was tired of faces growing sad as soon as people learned. She had wanted him to see something else first. Marko looked at the bouquet between them. He did not promise that everything would improve or ask her to list what she had tried. He asked which flowers she liked looking at. Klara pointed to a crooked stem rising above the others, stubbornly spoiling their neat shape.

Their meetings became less carefully prepared. Once Marko brought coffee he had boiled too long and admitted it immediately, as though relieved that he no longer needed a small achievement every time. Klara noticed how he held a glass by its very top and hummed while looking for his keys. She loved these things before thinking that she ought to love them as replacements for something lost.

In early spring she stayed at his place until morning. The sound of the grinder woke her from the kitchen. No aroma arrived, but his voice did, irritated by a stuck lid. Klara got up and carried two cups onto the balcony. When he handed her coffee, she did not close her eyes. She watched his sleepy face and asked why he had flour on his sleeve again. He was laughing before he could answer.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Word That Would Not Fit

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-word-that-would-not-fit/

The letter began politely and ended by claiming Ivan did not know what home meant. In his crossword he had described it as the place we always return to. The reader asked what that meant for people forced to leave their homes. Ivan put the letter beside his cup. He had constructed crosswords for a small weekly newspaper for twenty years and was accustomed to complaints about obsolete fish names. This was something new.

The following month the same woman disputed his description of patience. She signed herself Ema, without a surname, but left a complete return address on the envelope. He replied that short clues sometimes had to simplify life. She returned a card saying that life did not become simpler because of it. He liked that stubbornness. He began saving his most troublesome words for her, although he did not admit it.

After six letters he suggested coffee. Ema accepted and added that she would not bring a dictionary. She was fifty-one, sold travel equipment, and spoke much faster than she wrote. Ivan brought a newspaper in case conversation failed. She immediately turned to the final page and found an error in the crossing words within three minutes. They both laughed. His fear of an awkward beginning had acquired a familiar shape.

Then the conversation did stop. Ema looked out the window while Ivan tried to choose a question that would be neither too personal nor boring. She said she liked that he had not hurried to describe his divorce as a completed task. He wondered how she knew he was divorced. She pointed to the lighter circle on his hand. That morning he had first left off the ring he still wore from habit, although he had lived alone for a year.

He wanted to explain everything at once. Ema stopped him only to ask whether he wanted more coffee. They stayed an hour longer than he had

planned. He did not have to summarize his former marriage to earn a new conversation. Outside he asked what she would call what had just happened. She thought about it and said she needed more information. For the first time he did not try to extract a more certain answer from an answer.

In the next crossword he described home differently. He did not send Ema a copy as proof that he had listened; she would buy it anyway. Instead he called on Thursday without a sheet of paper on which to arrange his sentence beforehand. He suggested a Sunday walk. "Yes," she said. That short word remained clear enough without a letter count, black squares, or an answer printed somewhere on another page.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Wrong Table at the Right Time

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wrong-table-at-the-right-time/

Marta knew only that the man was called Ivan and would wear a blue shirt. Her friend had sent a photograph, but in it he wore a hat and stood far from the camera. At the café she spotted a blue shirt by the window and approached. The man stood, smiled, and moved a chair. They both looked so relieved that the other had arrived that neither repeated a name. Marta ordered tea, although she did not normally drink it.

Their conversation began with the broken parking meter outside. The man admitted he had first paid for somebody else's car. Marta laughed and said she had once waited in the wrong queue for half an hour. Neither tried to sound particularly interesting. After ten minutes she already wanted to make her tea last longer. Then she asked how school was going, because her friend said he taught mathematics. He looked as though she had asked a difficult question in an entirely different subject.

His name was Damjan. He worked in a warehouse and was waiting for a woman called Marina. At first Marta thought her friend had muddled all the details. Then she saw a man in a blue shirt across the room uncertainly raising his phone. At the same moment Damjan received a message saying his guest was late. The confusion lasted briefly but left an awkward question: how do you leave a table where you are happy?

They could invent urgent obligations and abandon their arrangements. Damjan almost suggested it, then stopped. He said he would not want to be the person left waiting without an explanation. Marta admitted she would not either. They exchanged numbers without promises, then continued their own evenings. She told Ivan the truth about the wrong table. She did not compare him with Damjan or attempt to prove that fate had already decided.

Ivan was pleasant, and they talked for almost an hour, but neither suggested another meeting. The following day Marta thanked him for the evening and said she had not felt what she was looking for. Only afterwards did she write to Damjan. He replied that he had enjoyed talking with Marina, but both concluded they wanted different things. He did not claim to have thought only of Marta all evening. She liked his not needing to diminish another woman before inviting her.

They met beside the same window again. This time Damjan wore a gray T-shirt and Marta ordered coffee. He placed a little piece of paper bearing his name on the table. She laughed as she turned it to face him, because she knew who he was. For the first few minutes they were more nervous than before. Confusion no longer protected them. When he began describing his working day, Marta moved her chair closer to hear him better.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Pots on the Same Stove

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-pots-on-the-same-stove/

Jasna said she would stop eating meat on Monday. She made no speech. She had considered it for a long time and now wanted to try. Branko nodded and asked what that meant for Sunday lunch. They both laughed, but his question was not entirely a joke. For twenty-six years they had sat at the same table and served themselves from the same pot. Their grown children had moved out, giving that little custom a weight it had not carried before.

During the first week Branko brought everything he considered evidence against the decision to her place at the table. He did not insult her; he simply made every lunch a debate. Jasna asked him to stop. She said she was neither seeking permission nor planning to check what he ate at work. He replied that apparently they would now each live for themselves. Hearing his own sentence, he thought it sounded too large for a bowl of beans.

On Saturday they went to the market together. He stopped outside the butcher's, expecting her to continue. Jasna said she would wait by the flowers. She did not look disappointed. That confused him more than an argument would have. He bought less than usual, then found his wife talking to the flower seller about a plant she could never keep alive. She had a whole life of thoughts that required no decision from him.

At home he said he wanted to prepare his own part of lunch. Jasna showed him the smaller frying pan without remarking that he ought to know where it was. They worked beside each other, bumping into one another at the sink. Branko put too much salt on his potatoes. She offered some of hers and said they did not need two plans for a side dish. Only then did he admit her decision had reminded him of their children beginning to close their bedroom doors.

Jasna set down her spoon. She said she was not moving into another room; she was trying to eat in a way that suited her now. She asked whether there was anything he wanted to change but kept quiet about because they were used to their routine. He admitted wanting to swim on Saturday mornings. For years he had assumed she would be hurt if they skipped breakfast together. She laughed and said she could then sleep peacefully until nine.

The following Saturday he returned with wet hair and pastries. Jasna was still wearing her dressing gown. They prepared lunch later, using two small pots and making one salad. When they sat down, he reached across the table before picking up his fork. He had no new speech about their marriage. He simply wanted her to look at him. She gave him her hand, a little flour still clinging beside her ring.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Saturday I Kept

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-saturday-i-kept/

I cancelled Saturday for the third time while Zoran was already buying cinema tickets. My daughter had asked me to watch the baby so that she and her husband could go out alone. I did not mention having plans. I had become a grandmother four months earlier and still welcomed every call, even when I spent a long time afterwards staring at the dress I had intended to wear. I told Zoran something had come up. He did not ask what.

On Sunday I sent him a photograph of my grandson. He replied that the baby had my eyebrows. Then he asked whether there was a day when we could be certain of seeing each other. I felt offended before I recognized the question. I said babies could not choose when they needed someone. He said he understood, but the parents had been at a restaurant on Saturday. I had no answer for a man who merely repeated a fact.

Zoran did not ask me to choose between him and my family. He asked me not to promise an evening I already considered somebody else's. After our conversation I opened my calendar. None of the plans written there belonged to me. There were other people's shifts, appointments, and nights out. I was proud to help. Meanwhile I was becoming angry with them over arrangements I volunteered, often before anybody asked.

I told my daughter I was not free the following Saturday. She asked whether I was going somewhere special. I could have invented an appointment or important work, something more serious than dinner with a man. I said I was going out with Zoran. She paused, then said she would ask the other grandmother. I had prepared so thoroughly for disappointment that her ordinary answer almost annoyed me. I had to admit how often I assumed other people's needs before hearing them.

At dinner I left my phone facing up. Zoran did not comment. He described trying to return the wrong light bulb without a receipt. I laughed so much I forgot to check the screen. Later I mentioned my grandson and immediately apologized. He said he wanted to hear about him too. He had not come to meet a different Ljubica, one without a family, just the one who had also made it to dinner.

I came home after midnight. There were no missed calls. At my door Zoran kissed me briefly, then again when I caught his sleeve. The next day I watched my grandson and told him his grandmother had enjoyed Saturday. He listened solemnly, with his entire fist in his mouth. This time I sent nobody a photograph. Zoran already knew where I was and when we would see each other again.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Melody That Waited for Tuesday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-melody-that-waited-for-tuesday/

The piano in the shopping building's passage had one key that returned more slowly than the others. Vesna discovered it immediately because that note began the only melody she still remembered from music school. She sat merely to check whether her fingers had retained anything after thirty years. After several bars she stopped. Behind her a man's voice hummed the continuation, rather inaccurately but familiarly enough to make her turn.

The man carried a canvas bag full of vegetables and was apologizing before doing anything wrong. He said he had played that piece too, long ago and not particularly well. His name was Harun. Vesna offered the other end of the bench. He tried repeating the part he remembered and made a mistake precisely where he had just sounded confident. Their first shared sound ended in laughter attracting more looks than the music.

Harun had to catch a bus. Vesna stood, thinking it would remain a small incident to tell a friend that evening. Then he said he usually passed through on Tuesdays. He did not ask whether she would come, but waited for an answer as though he had. She said she might check whether she remembered a few more bars. She had no piano at home. Until the following Tuesday her fingers invented a path across her table that might have been entirely wrong.

They met without vegetables or any need to pretend coincidence. Harun brought printed sheet music. Vesna laughed because she had brought some too, from another edition with different page layouts. They spent most of the time seeking the same place. A girl stopped with her father and asked whether they could play something cheerful. Vesna said they were trying. The girl nodded seriously, as though hearing sufficient reason to keep waiting.

Over the following weeks the melody assembled more slowly than their conversations. They knew where each worked, what they cooked alone, and why Harun disliked Sunday evenings. Vesna noticed choosing earrings on Tuesdays, although she usually forgot them. One day the piano was covered while the passage was cleaned. Harun stood beside it, unnecessarily worried. She asked whether he wanted a walk. He looked so pleased that she realized both had been waiting some time for that simple suggestion.

They never played the piece perfectly, even later. Sometimes they stopped at the piano; sometimes they continued to dinner, leaving the bench for somebody else. When Harun first kissed her, they were not discussing music. Vesna was telling a story about a neighbor's escaped laundry and forgot to finish the sentence. She did not regret it. Some things could remain unfinished without anything important being missing.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Lot Number Forty-Two

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/lot-number-forty-two/

Amila knew the man holding number nineteen by his hand. He raised it calmly, without turning, just when she thought an old box or glass paperweight was finally hers. In three months of small Sunday auctions, he had outbid her twice. Once she beat him and felt pleasure entirely disproportionate to a cracked porcelain dog's value. At home she put it on a shelf, where it represented victory more than good taste.

Lot forty-two was a small wooden letter cabinet. Before the auction Amila opened it and smelled the dry wood, imagining where it would stand. She set the maximum she could spend. The man with number nineteen stood several steps away, also studying it. This time she noticed a warm green shirt and glasses he constantly pushed toward his forehead. She resented her opponent suddenly acquiring a face she liked.

When bidding began, several other people joined faster than expected. Amila reached her limit and lowered her number. The man raised his once more, then also stopped. A woman in a purple coat bought the cabinet, nodding contentedly as though everything followed her schedule. Afterward Amila collected an ordinary box from an earlier purchase. The man held the door and said it was fortunate they need not hate each other over the cabinet too.

His name was Nedim. He admitted still remembering the porcelain dog. Amila said the dog was not particularly attractive. "I know," he answered, "which is why wanting it annoyed me in the first place." Their laughter was sincere enough to stop them halfway down the stairs. He offered coffee nearby. She accepted but first took the box to her car. She did not want to seem in need of help merely because she suddenly wanted him around longer.

Over coffee they discussed objects bought for wrong reasons. Nedim had scales missing a weight; Amila had three frames fitting none of her pictures. They also discovered things that were not for sale: his love of morning quiet, her habit of calling her sister whenever something funny happened. When he mentioned the next auction, Amila suggested dinner before then. She wanted to know him with both hands free as well.

They continued attending occasional auctions, each with their own budget and taste. They formed no alliance against other buyers. Sometimes they wanted the same object and laughed about it beforehand. The porcelain dog stayed at Amila's, and Nedim formally greeted it on his first visit. They never saw the cabinet again. It was the only lost object they both remembered with exactly equal pleasure.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

What Would You Like Me to Call You

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/what-would-you-like-me-to-call-you/

Lejla first became Little Crumb while they were choosing biscuits. Rasim dropped an open box, she laughed, and he said one Little Crumb was looking at a hundred relatives. The joke was silly, which was why she liked it. Later he wished her goodnight that way. Later still, at dinner with his friends, he asked across the table whether Little Crumb wanted more potatoes. This time she did not laugh.

She was the youngest in a family where adults remained permanently arranged by birth order. Even at thirty-nine, she heard that the little one would eventually understand bills, exhaustion, or serious life. Rasim did not know this. In his family, nicknames permitted silliness among people who loved you. His father happily answered to the name of a longstanding pet rabbit. At dinner, however, Lejla stopped speaking once she became smaller than her own name.

Returning home, Rasim noticed her silence. She said she no longer wanted the nickname. Initially he laughed, expecting a further joke. When none came, he asked whether they must become a couple addressing each other like colleagues. Lejla replied that her name was not an official stamp. She would like to hear it spoken tenderly without needing it transformed into something tiny. Rasim stopped beside a closed bakery, realizing for the first time that this was not about biscuits.

She told him the family remarks that had exhausted her. He explained what he meant to offer, then stopped defending good intentions as a conclusive answer. He asked whether she liked any nicknames. She did not know. She felt uncomfortable having no ready replacement for what she rejected. Rasim said they could leave the space empty. Then he simply called her by name and offered his hand across a small puddle she could have crossed herself.

Over the next few days he stopped himself several times at the beginning of the old word. Lejla kept no record. She noticed the effort, and also that he missed a little private laughter between them. One morning they assembled a shelf together and both persistently read the wrong instruction page. She called him professor of the wrong page. He appointed her dean. The nicknames lasted until breakfast ended, then vanished without any obligation to become their new names.

Tenderness did not wither after one boundary was spoken. Sometimes Rasim said Lejla so softly that she knew the word was meant only for her. Sometimes they invented titles that amused nobody else. At the next dinner he asked whether she wanted more potatoes. She said yes, then continued the story she had abandoned last time. He listened. That sounded more intimate to her than any nickname.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Face She Was Meeting Again

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-face-she-was-meeting-again/

For the first ten days, Nadina waited for the beard to end by itself. Emir had stopped shaving on holiday, so it seemed reasonable to assume the new decision would disappear with the sandals. Yet on the final Sunday he bought a small comb. He stood before the mirror carefully drawing its teeth through the still uneven hair. Nadina watched from the bathroom doorway, surprised by the tenderness he devoted to something she considered a temporary lapse.

Back from holiday, their friends immediately praised him. They said he looked more serious, younger, more interesting, sometimes all three in a single sentence. Nadina did not know where to put her quite different opinion. She loved his familiar jawline and the small hollow in his chin. Now she had to imagine them. When he asked whether she liked it, she said she was still adjusting. Emir heard a promise that she would soon begin.

One evening she moved her face away when he kissed her. She did not mean to hurt him; the hair had scratched beneath her nose. Emir withdrew farther than necessary. "I can shave if it bothers you that much," he said. Resentment made the offer sound like a future debt. Nadina sat on the bed's edge. She said she missed his old face but did not want to issue permits for a new one.

He asked whether she found him less attractive. An immediate no would have been comfortable. Instead she admitted attraction confused her, because she loved the man yet noticed the change. Emir turned the comb between his fingers for a long time. He had grown the beard because he liked himself that way, for the first time after months of seeing only a tired man at the working day's end. He did not want to become somebody else. He wanted to stop viewing himself as finished.

Nadina asked him to show her how he arranged his moustache. He exaggerated his serious expression, and both laughed. The conversation ended without an agreed length or a deadline for her enthusiasm. Later she kissed him more slowly, moving her head until they found a comfortable position. They discovered nothing revolutionary. Two people who thought they knew every movement had needed to pay attention to one entirely ordinary kiss.

The beard remained. Some days Nadina loved it, others barely noticed, and occasionally she still wished for the old appearance. One morning Emir extracted a toast crumb from it and unsuccessfully tried preserving his dignity. She wiped his cheek with her thumb. The movement was neither new nor old. It belonged to her, directed toward him. When he offered to buy breakfast, she pulled him close again before he left.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Night He Stopped Counting Rivals

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-night-he-stopped-counting-rivals/

When Mina told me she was bisexual, I said it did not bother me. I thought an honest answer was sufficient, that nothing behind it needed examining. We had been together several months and agreed on a monogamous relationship. She was changing no agreement, only sharing something about herself. Yet the next time she went to dinner with a female friend, I caught myself asking questions I had not previously considered necessary.

I asked how long they had known each other, whether they had ever dated, and whether anyone else would join them. Mina answered the first, then paused at the second. She said the woman was a friend and asked why the conversation resembled an inspection. I tried joking that my competition had suddenly doubled. She did not laugh. She said the people in her life were no list of potential replacements for me.

She went to dinner while I stayed home angry, mostly because I could invent no reasonable explanation for my behavior. She had neither cheated nor requested different rules. I had turned information about attraction into an account of reliability myself. When she returned, I said I understood I was unfair. I did not immediately add but. It took several attempts to keep the whole sentence without that small exit.

Mina sat beside me and said she could discuss our relationship but would not repeatedly defend every friendship. She did not promise I would be the world's only attractive person to her. We had never required that of each other. We promised certain behavior and honesty. Now I needed to decide whether to trust her actions or constantly ask her to remove imagined dangers.

My jealousy did not disappear overnight. I stopped making every jealous feeling a question she must answer. When uneasy, I first examined

whether there was an actual reason or simply a previously unnoticed habit. Mina did not praise every small improvement. She kept seeing friends, loving me, and saying when something hurt. Our relationship grew easier when I spent less time calculating who might take her away.

Months later I met the friend from that dinner. We discussed old bicycles and spent half an hour seeking the name of a part neither could remember. Mina teased that we finally found a shared subject that was not her. On the way home I held her hand. I felt no victory over an imaginary rival. I was glad finally to have met another person from the life of the woman I loved.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Date over Bitter Lemonade

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-date-over-bitter-lemonade/

I told the waiter I wanted lemonade and immediately expected a question. He asked none. Nera, the woman on my first date, asked one, but simply whether I wanted mint in it. I had prepared so intensely to explain not drinking that I nearly missed an ordinary question about taste. I said yes and lowered the menu, still expecting the evening to become the interrogation I had imagined.

I had not drunk alcohol for several years. I could discuss the past but did not want it to be the first and largest thing someone new knew about me. I chose the place from habit, knowing it from earlier outings. Only when bottles and loud greetings began arriving around us did I realize I had created a harder evening than necessary. Nera spoke about work while I watched the table behind her.

An old acquaintance sat there. He noticed me, approached, and offered to send a drink. I declined. He said one glass was hardly a wedding and laughed at his own remark. Nera did not answer for me. She looked at me and waited. I repeated my refusal, this time without the smile I normally used to make it comfortable for others. The acquaintance shrugged and left, leaving me angry with myself for returning to that atmosphere.

I told Nera I wanted somewhere quieter. I did not seek an apology for changing plans. She said she had already noticed a small cake shop across the street. We paid and crossed. Over cake I explained that not drinking was more than that evening's mood for me. She nodded and asked whether she needed to know anything when choosing places in future. She demanded no story proving my choice had sufficient reason.

For the rest of the evening we discussed films, her dog, and my failed attempt at learning knitting. Nera laughed especially long imagining a scarf widening toward its end. I was not a man whose evening had been

saved, but a man she might like. That mattered more than being called courageous. On parting I asked whether she wanted another date. She said yes, but next time she would choose the cake.

Later I told her more when ready. She neither took responsibility for me nor monitored my orders. Sometimes she drinks wine, sometimes not, and I say what suits me and where I do not want to go. I remember the first lemonade for bitterness because the waiter added too much peel. Nera remembered the same detail. I like that our first date also contains an entirely ordinary bad drink recommendation.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Man Who Remembered No Dreams

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-who-remembered-no-dreams/

In Sanja's dreams, Adis drove a tram through a field, sold shoes that talked, and once appeared on their balcony in a suit made of newspaper. Each time, over breakfast, she told him everything she remembered. He listened with interest, occasionally asked about an impossible detail, and laughed at his nighttime occupations. When she asked what he had dreamed, his answer was always the same. He remembered nothing.

It did not bother her for the first few months. Then a friend described how her husband often dreamed of meeting her again in the place where they first met. That evening Sanja asked Adis whether he had ever dreamed about her. He tried to think. He remembered some old dreams about school and one in which he could not find his car. He did not want to invent an answer just to please her. Nevertheless, his careful honesty disappointed her.

She placed a small notebook on his bedside table. She suggested he write as soon as he opened his eyes, before he forgot. Adis tried for several mornings. The notebook contained a date, a question mark, and a single word whose reason he later could not recall. Sanja asked every morning. Soon he looked at the notebook before greeting her, as though he had to submit homework in something he did not know how to learn.

One Saturday he said he had dreamed of them sitting together on a train. Sanja immediately brightened and began asking where they were traveling. Adis opened his mouth, then stopped. He had not dreamed it. He had imagined their journey the previous evening while checking the timetable for a trip they were planning. He wanted, he admitted, to have an answer for once that would not make it seem as though he missed her less when he was asleep.

Sanja put down her pen. She said she had not meant to ask him for a lie. He answered that he knew, but no longer liked the morning question. She looked at the two notebooks, hers full of strange stories and his almost empty. His blank paper was not a place where he could decide she should be absent. Yet she had turned it into evidence that needed correcting every day. She put the notebook in a drawer, without promising she would never again desire impossible reassurance from somebody else.

The next morning she told him she had dreamed of their kitchen table floating down a river. Adis asked whether they had at least cleared away the plates. She laughed and said she did not know. After breakfast they bought tickets for a real train. As they headed toward the station, Sanja asked what he was looking forward to. He pointed to her hand, which he held in his, and said he wanted to see whether she would let go even once while pointing out of the window.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Years That Assigned No Role

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/years-that-assigned-no-role/

Branka was fifty-eight, Milan forty-three, and they both knew those numbers before their first kiss. They had met through work they shared and, for several months, mostly saw each other alone. When he invited her on an outing with his friends, she accepted without visible hesitation. Afterwards she spent almost an hour looking at her wardrobe, trying to choose something that would neither hide nor emphasize a difference nobody had yet mentioned.

She decided to bring food. She made two salads, baked a pie, and packed spare jackets because the forecast predicted a change in the weather. In the morning Milan asked why they were taking enough things to lead an entire school class on an excursion. Branka laughed and said somebody had to think ahead. During the drive she reminded him to take water when he got out of the car, although he had just put a bottle in his backpack himself.

His friends greeted them in a meadow beside the river. They were all adults with their own bags, food, and opinions about the weather. Nevertheless, Branka began distributing plates, asking whether people had eaten, and clearing empty cups. While the others talked, she stood beside the open car trunk. Milan approached and took the bag from her hand. He did not say how wonderful it was that she looked after them. He asked when she would sit beside him.

"As soon as I finish this," she answered. He led her a few steps away, to a spot where they could still see the group. He said it embarrassed him when she spoke in front of his friends as though he did not know how to bring water. Branka felt ashamed and immediately thought her age had finally become a problem. She asked whether he wanted a younger girlfriend. Milan sighed. "I want you. But I don't want you to raise me."

That hurt because she recognized her own attempt to become indispensable where she feared she would not be desirable. She told him she did not know what place she had among his friends. He answered that he had saved her a place on the blanket, not a task beside the trunk. They returned together. When somebody asked where the clean forks were, Branka pointed at the bag and remained seated. The conversation had just reached a film that only she had seen.

Later it grew cold. Milan put on the jacket he had brought himself and spread his blanket over their legs. Branka did not straighten his collar. She described going to concerts alone in earlier years, before she began planning every outing around other people's needs. He asked whom she would like to hear now. She named a band, and he admitted he knew none of their songs. Branka took out her phone to play her favorite. This time she had something for him that was neither lunch nor advice.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Circle Left in the Sand

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-circle-left-in-the-sand/

Vera noticed the empty place on her finger when she reached for her towel. Her ring had been loose for several months, but she had postponed visiting the jeweler because she did not want to leave it behind even for a few days. Now she stood at the water's edge, trying to reconstruct every movement of her hand. Ivan set down his book. He asked when she had last been certain she was wearing it. At breakfast, she said, immediately wishing she could offer a smaller portion of the day.

They searched her bag, their sandals, and the hollows between stones. Ivan carefully shook the towels over dry sand. Every few minutes Vera found something shiny and felt the same brief jolt of hope. There was a piece of glass, an earring back, and a wet sunflower seed shell. When she picked up crumpled foil, she suddenly began to cry. Ivan knelt beside her without explaining how small the object was on such a large beach.

She had worn that ring for twenty-eight years. The date inside was almost unreadable, and the outside bore a tiny dent from a long-ago fall on some steps. Vera knew every irregularity. Ivan said they could leave their number at the nearby café in case somebody found it. He did not mention buying another. Nevertheless, she asked whether he would think their marriage meant nothing to her because she had not resized the ring in time.

"I think you've lost your ring," he answered. "And you're very upset." Vera looked at him almost angrily. She wanted him to understand how much she had lost, but she was also grateful that he was not adding an accusation to the loss. She told him she had never removed it even when they were so angry that they ate dinner in separate rooms. Ivan remembered those dinners. He said it was good they had returned to the same table, even when neither knew how to begin.

The sun was already low when Ivan suggested stopping. Vera asked for ten more minutes. He agreed, then went to the car for her sweater. When he returned, he found her sitting on the towel. She held all the small things she had found in her palm. She separated the little stones from the rubbish and closed her empty fist. She was ready to leave, although she was no less sad.

They left their phone number at the café, drank water, and ordered sandwiches because they had missed lunch. Vera glanced toward the beach several times. Ivan did not tell her to stop. On the way back to their accommodation, she took his hand. His ring touched the bare skin of her finger. The sensation was new and a little painful. She did not withdraw her hand, and he did not loosen his grip.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Porcelain for the First Free Tuesday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/porcelain-for-the-first-free-tuesday/

On her last working day, Melina brought home a plant, a card, and a small box of paper clips she had accidentally packed among her belongings. There had been no big celebration. Several colleagues were on vacation, the manager was at a meeting, and she had said nobody needed to organize anything. She showed her husband Branimir the plant and asked where they should put it. He suggested the kitchen window, then continued peeling potatoes.

The next morning she woke at six. She did not know whether she should stay in bed on principle. She got up, put on the trousers she usually wore to work, and opened the cupboard for a cup. Their wedding set stood on the highest shelf, thin porcelain with a blue rim. For thirty-two years they had saved it for important guests and proper occasions. Somehow those guests always ate from ordinary plates, in case anything broke.

Branimir found her dusting the box. He said they could take a trip, now that they had their first free Tuesday together. She asked whether that was everything that had changed. He had retired two years earlier, with a dinner and a speech she had written from his colleagues' memories. She did not want the same ceremony. It was simply difficult to see her departure slotted between potatoes and the evening news.

He reminded her that she had said she wanted no celebration. Melina confirmed that she had said exactly that. It was unfair to expect him to read the unspoken continuation. But it was not too late to say she needed a little attention. They agreed on a picnic. She chose a spot beside a stream, and he packed lunch. When he reached for plastic plates, she put two blue porcelain ones in his hands. He did not object.

At the picnic she talked about work longer than she had thought she would want to. She would even miss the colleague who always left the

door open. Branimir did not interrupt with suggestions for new hobbies. Only when she finished did he ask what she would not miss. The list became so long that they laughed between bites. Melina got the edge of the tablecloth slightly dirty, folded it under, and continued eating.

At home they washed the porcelain by hand. Everything remained intact, which almost seemed like a missed lesson, making her laugh at herself. They did not need to break anything to begin using it. She left two plates on the bottom shelf. The next morning she woke at six again. Branimir got up after her and asked whether she wanted breakfast. She said she did, but today she would eat it very slowly.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Voice I Came Home With

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-voice-i-came-home-with/

At dinner at a friend's home, Lidija put the stress in the wrong place in a word she had never previously needed to think about. Everyone laughed, including her. Then they asked her to say it again. After seventeen years abroad, she had returned for a job she wanted, not because of the failed life acquaintances enjoyed speculating about. Yet at dinner tables she constantly had to prove how much she still belonged to them.

Armin sat opposite her that evening. He asked whether she liked her new job and then remembered the answer. That was enough for her to accept his invitation for coffee. They discussed apartments, buses, and his habit of forgetting a tangerine in every bag. Lidija stopped halfway through a sentence, searching for a word. He supplied it without mockery. She thanked him, although the familiar feeling of an examination remained.

The third time they went out, Armin said he found the way she pronounced his name sweet. He asked her to repeat it. She put down her cup a little too loudly. He looked surprised, so she had to explain something she did not want to explain on every date. Her speech was not a souvenir from another country. Not every unusual syllable meant she was playing a game or trying to attract attention.

Armin did not defend himself by citing other people who surely did it out of love. He said he liked her voice but should not have placed her in front of a little microphone. Afterward he became stiff himself, as though he now had to watch every word. Lidija teased him about that. She did not want a different kind of examination taking place beside her. She only asked that they not repeat her past every time she opened her mouth.

One morning they went shopping for curtains for her apartment. Lidija could not summon the name of the small plastic piece used to hang them. She began describing the hook with her hands, and Armin showed the

seller an old example he had brought in his pocket. Along the way they argued about color. To him they were all gray; to her they were very different. She bought the ones she wanted and invited him to help hold the ladder.

While hanging the last curtain, she called him over to the window. In one short sentence she mixed two accents and a word from the other country. Armin understood that he needed to catch the end of the fabric. He came over, lifted it, and stayed beside her looking at the street. Lidija rested her head on his shoulder. Her apartment was not fully unpacked yet, but that morning nothing in her voice was being asked to go backward.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

After Seventeen Years, on Saturday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/after-seventeen-years-on-saturday/

Selma proposed to Goran while they were choosing a new ironing board. He held one end of a folded model while she tried to find the price. She thought she would like to marry the man who, for seventeen years, had remembered that a high ironing board suited her. She said so without kneeling. Goran asked whether she meant this year. When she nodded, he said he would prefer a Saturday so they would not need to ask for a day off.

They bought nothing then. They sat in a nearby cake shop and shared a slice that was too sweet for either of them. Selma expected the conversation to become serious, that she would have to explain what had changed. Instead, Goran asked whether she wanted flowers on the table. "I do," she said, surprised by how clearly she knew the answer. She also wanted music they usually turned down because of the neighbors, and a chance to see him wearing a shirt she had not chosen for him.

The news provoked an investigation among their friends and relatives. Her sister asked whether they had recently argued. His friend waved a hand and said marriage at their age was usually about paperwork. Her mother cried as though her daughter had spent all seventeen years standing outside and had finally been granted permission to enter. After the call, Selma told Goran she no longer felt like organizing anything. He brought a sheet of paper and wrote down nine names. "These people know how to turn up just to eat and celebrate."

Of course, it was not that simple. Before lunch, one guest still asked why they were doing it now. Goran looked at Selma, who was holding a bouquet of small yellow flowers. "Because we agreed on it now," he answered, passing the guests a basket of bread. Selma felt no need to add anything. Under the table she touched his shoe with the tip of hers. For the first time that day, their decision required no explanation longer than

a single sentence.

After lunch they danced in the narrow space between the tables. Goran stepped on her dress and they both stopped to check whether the seam had held. Then she lifted the hem while he moved a chair to make room. People applauded when they started again. Selma felt this was the most accurate part of their wedding: the brief pause, checking the damage, and moving the furniture together.

On Sunday they returned for the ironing board. The saleswoman remembered them and said she had kept the model they had been looking at. Goran took the box and Selma the receipt. At home they ate the remaining wedding cake from soup bowls because the clean plates were still packed in a box from the previous day's lunch. Selma brushed a crumb from his chin. They were both wearing rings and old slippers.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Braid before Going Out

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-braid-before-going-out/

Sanja managed to put on a loose shirt, butter bread, and open the window herself. Her hair was another matter. One arm remained in a cast, and her long hair fell across her face whenever she bent forward. She tried gathering it before the mirror until the elastic rolled behind a cabinet. Then she sat on the edge of the bed, much angrier about the elastic than about the fall on the stairs itself.

Viktor offered help as soon as he heard the comb hit the floor. Sanja said she could manage, although she had no new plan. They had been together eight months. Until then he had arrived at an apartment where almost everything was ready, including her. She had not deliberately performed perfection. She had simply grown up believing help was the last thing one requested, after exhausting every other possibility.

Viktor found the elastic and placed it on the table. He did not keep insisting. He went to make coffee, while Sanja remained staring at her hair as an unsolvable task. Finally she called him. She asked whether he could try making a braid with her instructions. He said he could try, but the last thing he had woven was a rope barrier on a school trip.

The first attempt fell apart as soon as he released the strands. The second began too high and pulled behind Sanja's ear. She said it was fine, although it was not. Viktor looked at her in the mirror and asked her to tell him when it hurt. He could not help if she confirmed every poor attempt as successful to protect his pride. The sentence made her laugh and feel a little sad.

On the third attempt they produced something resembling a braid. It was crooked, but her hair no longer fell across her face. Sanja wanted to go to the bathroom to adjust whatever she could, then stopped herself. Instead she took her coffee and sat by the window. Viktor washed the cup he had

already dirtied while waiting. He did not seek praise for generosity. He simply asked whether she was ready for a walk now.

Over the following weeks he improved, while her instructions became clearer. When she could raise both arms again, she braided her hair quickly, almost without looking. Nevertheless, one Sunday morning she handed him the comb. She no longer needed help. She wanted a few peaceful minutes in which he would stand behind her carefully separating strands, while she had to do nothing except remain in the chair.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Name That Was Already His

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-name-that-was-already-his/

Dunja bought a small compass for Nermin's birthday. At school they had drawn maps of imaginary islands together, and now he really enjoyed hiking and traveling. They met again the previous autumn. By then Nermin had lived for years as a man, using the name that suited him. Dunja knew that before their meeting. What she had not expected was how easily familiar friendship would become a new attraction.

She had the old initials from their shared notebook engraved on the back of the compass. She thought she was giving proof that she remembered his whole life, not merely the last few years. Choosing the letters, she never asked herself whether she had the right to decide how he should carry that past. She imagined his smile and therefore stopped examining her own idea.

He opened the box at her kitchen table. He liked the compass until he turned it over. He ran a finger across the letters and set it beside his plate. Dunja immediately began explaining the notebook and their islands. Nermin said he remembered. The problem was not that he had forgotten their shared years, but that he did not want those initials accompanying every new journey.

For a moment she felt rejected, as though he had rejected the person she was while they grew up together. Then she heard how selfish that thought was. His gift was not supposed to preserve her conviction that she understood everything. She asked whether he wanted her to exchange the compass or choose something entirely different. Nermin relaxed only when she stopped defending the reason for her mistake.

They went to the shop together. He chose another compass without letters, and they spent the remaining money on lunch. He described the first trip on which everyone knew him only as Nermin. Dunja did not

interrupt with school stories. Later he himself told one she had forgotten, about the map they submitted instead of homework and the punishment they received together.

Before his next departure she put a short note in his bag, addressed with the name she spoke every day. She did not mention how long she had known him. She wrote that she missed him before he had even left. From his trip Nermin sent a photograph of an ordinary forest path and asked whether she wanted to join him next time. Dunja said she did, although she had no sense for maps and never had.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Witnesses on a Tuesday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/witnesses-on-a-tuesday/

The wedding included only the couple, two witnesses, and the groom's father, who insisted he would not cry. Irena held her friend's bag. Denis guarded the ring box, checking his pocket every few minutes. They met half an hour before the ceremony and exchanged all the sentences people consider polite when they have no idea what to say to each other.

Afterwards they had lunch at a small restaurant. The newlyweds were hurrying to catch a bus for their trip, while the father kept repeating that they still had time. Ten years earlier Irena had had a large wedding and a marriage that ended quietly, without any of the hundred guests nearby. Denis had never married. He did not explain why, and she did not ask him to justify it.

After seeing the bus off, they remained at the station with a bouquet her friend did not want to carry on the journey. Irena said her apartment now seemed too quiet to return to. Denis suggested a walk, then immediately added that she did not have to accept out of politeness merely because they had just attended a wedding. That unnecessarily considerate sentence was the first thing she particularly liked about him.

They walked without a destination. They discussed their departing friends, the quick decision to marry, and everyone who had expected a larger celebration. Then Denis asked what an ordinary Tuesday looked like for Irena. The question made her laugh. She said it mostly involved laundry, work, and rushing to reach an open shop. That sounded familiar enough for him to continue the conversation.

In the park the bouquet began losing petals. Irena separated it and gave Denis half because she did not want to carry all of someone else's romance home alone. He sat beside her holding several roses, looking slightly ridiculous in his formal suit. She asked whether he would have

coffee on an entirely ordinary day as well. He said he would, promising to arrive without responsibility for any rings.

They met the following Thursday. Irena was late because she could not find parking, while Denis had a lunch stain on his sleeve. Talking was much easier that way. They did not mention a future wedding or joke that their friends could replace them as witnesses. For a beginning, it was enough to discover that both wanted to remain at the table after the coffee grew cold.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Pear Tree across the Fence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-pear-tree-across-the-fence/

Lejla grew up hearing that one did not speak to the people across the fence. Supposedly their grandfather moved a boundary stone, cut someone else's branch, and never returned borrowed ladders. When she took over the small house after her mother's death, she was forty-three and had many reasons not to maintain another old obligation. Nevertheless, on the first day she merely nodded briefly to the man in the neighboring yard.

The man was named Vedad. He inherited the house from an aunt who explained that the family on the other side had not returned her jars and that their grandfather moved the stone first. Vedad listened to these instructions alongside the explanation of where to turn off the water. He remembered the water. Regarding the rest, he was unsure what he should do about people he barely knew.

A pear tree grew beside the fence. Half its crown hung above Lejla's yard, and fruit fell on both sides. One morning Vedad heard her trying to chase wasps away from a full bucket. He offered an empty container with a lid. She accepted, then warned him she would return it to avoid starting another family war. He laughed loudly enough for a neighbor two houses away to hear.

Soon they began drinking coffee on the steps. They discovered both lived alone and neither wanted to turn the inherited house into a museum of their parents. On her first visit, Lejla's aunt noticed the unfamiliar container in the kitchen. She looked across the fence and immediately said Lejla needed to be careful. Lejla asked exactly what she should fear now that everyone in the ladder story had long been dead.

She received no answer that explained Vedad. She received another version of the old quarrel. That evening she told him everything, and he

described his aunt's warning that Lejla was probably very calculating. They tried seriously comparing the accusations but ended up laughing over a plate of hard pears. Vedad kissed her when she took the last piece, without any connection to ownership of the branch.

The following spring they repaired the fence. They did not demolish it for a romantic image. Each liked their own yard and closed the gate when wanting peace. They did, however, add a little gate between the houses, agreed without discussion of grandfathers. The aunts interpreted it differently. Lejla learned to live with that. Sometimes Vedad came through the gate in the morning carrying coffee, and sometimes only a cat passed through, respecting neither side of the family.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

After the Final Question

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/after-the-final-question/

Tanja first noticed Ognjen trying to open a water bottle with one hand without crumpling the papers in the other. She offered to hold them. They were the only candidates in the waiting room not looking at phones. The interviews were running almost an hour late, and the coffee machine supplied only lukewarm water. Shared grumbling made an easy start to acquaintance.

They had applied for the same position managing a small cultural center. Tanja had organized programs for years without secure employment. Ognjen was returning from another city, where his contract had expired. Neither pretended the outcome did not matter. Learning how long she had freelanced, he did not say she therefore deserved it more. He simply said he understood why she had brought such a large folder.

After their interviews they went for lunch. They laughed about the question concerning their greatest weakness and admitted what they had not managed to explain well. Tanja wanted to stay longer but did not know whether his attention was merely relief after an exhausting morning. As they parted, Ognjen requested her number. He said he wanted to see her when they no longer had to discuss their best qualities.

The news arrived the following week. Tanja got the job. First she called her sister, then stared at Ognjen's name on her phone for a long time. He congratulated her in a brief message. When she suggested coffee, he said he needed a few days. She felt punished, then ashamed of that thought. His disappointment could not disappear simply because she liked him.

They met after two weeks. Ognjen admitted that the rejection had affected him more than expected. Tanja did not diminish her success to make him feel better. They discussed it for ten minutes, then entirely different things: his habit of cooking too much rice, her fear of large dogs,

and the city that kept surprising both with small changes.

After she began working, she felt tempted to ask him about every professional dilemma. She stopped herself before turning their new acquaintance into an unpaid continuation of his interview. Ognjen later found work at another center. He invited her to the first dinner he prepared at home without discussing programs or applications. Tanja brought salad. There was enough rice for four more people, but they nevertheless spent the rest of the evening alone.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Tissues for the Final Scene

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/tissues-for-the-final-scene/

Davor cried over a cartoon rabbit. Nera had not expected that. She chose the film, convinced an animated adventure was a safe third-date option, without awkward romantic scenes or conversations about former partners. At the end, the rabbit found an empty house, and Davor took out a tissue. Nera looked toward the screen, searching for something she had obviously missed.

After they left, she asked whether the film reminded him of someone. He said no; he simply felt sorry for the rabbit. He did not look embarrassed. Nera felt more confused than she had while he was crying. In her family, tears meant something major had happened or someone was trying to win an argument. She did not know what to do with a man who simply wiped them away and asked whether she was hungry.

They ate sandwiches outside. Davor spoke about his warehouse job, his sister's new car, and his unsuccessful attempt to make pancakes. Nera waited for a serious story explaining the scene at the cinema. None arrived. Instead he asked what had last made her cry. She said she could not remember, a truth that suddenly made her uncomfortable.

They continued dating. Davor could laugh loudly, grow readily angry at unfairness in an ordinary queue, and quickly admit mistakes. Nera did not always understand him. Sometimes she considered his openness excessive, then wondered why she found people whose feelings she had to guess easier to be around. He never asked her to resemble him. That was perhaps the most confusing thing.

One Thursday her application for a job she had wanted for a long time was rejected. She came to his home intending to say she had never really cared. While he opened the door, the prepared sentence collapsed in her throat. She began crying, angry at crying over work and angrier still that

he could see her. Davor brought water and sat beside her.

He did not list other companies or say there must be a reason. He waited. Only later did he ask whether she wanted dinner or some time alone. Nera said she wanted both, but not simultaneously. They laughed through the remainder of her anger. She stayed to eat, then went home to sleep in her own bed.

She brought tissues to the next film. Davor noticed the packet and smiled, certain they were for him. Nera left it between them on the armrest. This time they did not reach the end without a tear, but both left the cinema talking only about the film, free of the need to justify every emotion separately.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Face behind the Beekeeper's Veil

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-face-behind-the-beekeepers-veil/

Ajla joined the beekeeping course because she had inherited a small plot of land, not because she was brave. When she first put on protective clothing, she decided to spend the rest of the day breathing shallowly and following every instruction. The woman beside her had a calm voice and a small hole in a glove that the instructor immediately replaced. Ajla remembered the voice. The face was barely visible behind the veil.

During the lesson they stood together. The woman was named Ema and did not try to look more experienced than she was. Whenever she missed something, she asked again. Ajla liked that more than any amount of knowledge. After the lesson they remained by the fence for a few minutes, still behind their veils, waiting for others to retrieve their bags from a locked room.

Ema said she shared her land with a brother who expected her to do everything that did not involve a tractor. Ajla laughed and told a similar story about her uncle. In passing, Ema mentioned a former girlfriend. Ajla listened to the remainder of the sentence with unexpected attention. She was already preparing an invitation for coffee when the instructor called them to return their equipment and Ema's phone rang.

The following week Ajla arrived early. She approached a short-haired woman standing beside the same cupboard and asked whether their old coffee arrangement still stood. Confused, the woman said a new one certainly could. Ajla began explaining their conversation about a brother, a tractor, and a former girlfriend. The woman laughed. "I have a husband and sell tractors," she said. "I think you're looking for somebody more interesting."

Ema stood behind her carrying two empty buckets. She had heard enough to understand. Ajla wanted to put her veil back on and remain

beneath it until winter. Instead, she turned and invited the right woman for coffee, this time by name. Ema accepted, and the tractor seller recommended somewhere that supposedly served the best pie in the area.

Without the suit and gloves, Ema looked different from how Ajla had imagined her. She had freckles, a quick smile, and a habit of tucking one leg beneath her chair. The voice was the same. They talked until the waiter began clearing empty tables. Ajla admitted she had been sure she would recognize her eyes. Ema said Ajla's own eyes had been closed in fear for almost half the first lesson.

At the next class, the tractor seller asked how their division of land was progressing. Ajla replied that they had not reached such serious questions yet. Ema passed her gloves, both the same size. That day, for the first time through the veil, Ajla noticed the colors of the flowers around her instead of watching only where she could put her feet.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Places Where We Are No Longer the Same

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/places-where-we-are-no-longer-the-same/

First the cinema had closed, then the cake shop, and a parking meter now stood where the bench beside the river had been. Sanja and Vlado visited all these places on Saturday morning like two poorly informed tourists. They arranged the meeting after twenty years and several months of messaging. In messages they were witty. In person they kept pointing toward things that no longer existed.

Sanja had come from another city, where she had lived since finishing university. Vlado had stayed, married and divorced, and changed jobs three times. Their messages rarely mentioned any of that. It was easier to remember their first kiss, rain on a school trip, and the teacher whose voice they could both imitate. They had an entire relationship composed of memories, although they had not begun a present one.

At noon it began raining. They entered the first open establishment, a small restaurant completely unfamiliar to Sanja. Vlado apologized for the unusual choice. There was no reason to apologize. The room was warm, the food smelled good, and the window overlooked a street they had never crossed together. Sanja removed her wet scarf and relaxed her shoulders for the first time that day.

She asked what he did when he was not working. He said that on weekends he took his mother shopping and tried repairing a small boat, although he had nowhere to keep it. She explained that since her divorce she was living alone for the first time and did not yet know whether she liked it. The conversation was no longer easy. They had to listen instead of merely remembering.

Vlado admitted avoiding mention of his daughter in messages because he did not want to sound old. Sanja showed him a photograph of the son she

had just sent off to university. Both felt ashamed of their caution. Twenty years was not empty time to skip so they could return to the old story. During those years, adults had grown whom they did not yet know well enough to kiss.

At the station Vlado hugged her and asked whether she would visit again. Sanja said he should come to her next time. There they could not spend the morning searching for vanished benches. She would have to show him the shop where she bought bread, the park where she ran, and the apartment she was still arranging. Vlado agreed. The bus departed before they found a perfect closing sentence, leaving both something for their next meeting.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The First Slice for Herself

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-first-slice-for-herself/

That morning Ruža took the first slice of pie, the one with the most plums. Milan had already reached toward it and stopped, surprised as though the plate had escaped by itself. He always left her the edges because she said she liked them. Ruža sat, broke off a bite, and realized she was hungry for precisely that soft middle portion. She offered no exchange, although she felt the familiar urge.

Two days earlier, a friend had asked what she wanted to do for her birthday. Ruža replied that she did not mind, which was what she had said most often throughout thirty years of marriage. Her friend said they would then spend the entire day visiting her uncle, who raised ornamental chickens. Ruža objected so quickly that both burst out laughing. Apparently there were things she wanted less than others after all.

Milan first noticed the difference at breakfast. Then he heard that she disliked the orange marmalade he had bought her ever since their wedding. He ate his own spread in offended silence. He had thought he knew her better than anyone. Ruža knew it was unfair to be angry with him for answers she had never given. Nevertheless, she was tired of her own politeness returning to her in jars.

For her birthday, she asked to spend the morning in town without a family lunch. Milan called her sister to explain the change, then made the mistake of saying Ruža was a little strange this year. She heard him from the hallway. She took the phone and told her sister she wanted to walk, buy a book, and eat something she had not cooked herself. Her sister replied that it sounded excellent.

During the outing Milan asked too many questions. Did she want left or right, coffee or tea, sitting or walking? Finally Ruža laughed and said he

was not taking an exam. He could suggest something as well. He took her to a small secondhand record shop he had avoided for years because he thought she would be bored. They spent an hour there.

Toward evening they brought home a book, two records, and an uneaten half of a cake. Ruža played the record she had chosen herself, while Milan left the one she could not stand for tomorrow. The pie waited on the table. He asked whether she wanted the middle or an edge. "The middle," she said. He looked at the final generous slice and suggested sharing it. She could negotiate about that.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Scarf for the Strongest Woman

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-scarf-for-the-strongest-woman/

Dina arrived at family gatherings prepared to move a refrigerator. She competed in weightlifting, so her relatives considered her strength communal property. As soon as she removed her jacket, somebody mentioned a wardrobe needing to go upstairs. They joked they needed no movers while they had her. Dina laughed with them, although sometimes she wanted to arrive empty-handed and remain that way.

She met Emir in a bus queue. A ball of yarn fell from his bag and rolled beneath a bench. She retrieved it, and he thanked her as though she had saved him much more than a little bending. He asked whether she minded the fibers sticking to her sleeve. She said her sleeve had survived worse things, and they began talking.

He knitted when he wanted to rest his thoughts. For the first time, Dina heard an adult man say this without making a joke at his own expense. She told him what she did after work. Emir did not ask her to flex a muscle or whether she could lift him. He wanted to know whether she liked competitions or training itself. Her answer took longer than she expected.

They began meeting at a small place beside the station. Once he brought her a scarf, just wide enough to wrap twice around her neck. He chose green because he had noticed her often looking toward green objects in shop windows. Dina did not know how to respond. People mostly gave her useful training equipment, as though the rest of her body and day did not exist.

She wore the scarf to her sister's birthday and brought Emir. Her brother-in-law immediately asked her to help move an old sofa before cake. Emir did not intervene as her protector. He simply looked at her, waiting to hear what she would say. For the first time, Dina answered

that she would not do it today. A brief silence followed, then her sister called her husband to cut the cake. The sofa stayed where it was.

Dina brought Emir to her next competition for the first time. While she competed, he sat among the others and cheered. She did not win. On the way back she was angry about a missed attempt and made no effort to appear cheerful for him. Emir listened, then asked whether she wanted dinner. She agreed. At the restaurant entrance he took the scarf from her shoulders, carefully to avoid snagging it. She had never felt weaker because of someone's attention, or less strong because she enjoyed it.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Lunch without Talking about Work

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/lunch-without-talking-about-work/

On the first Monday without Daris, Mladen bought two bread rolls. He only noticed the mistake on the bench behind the building where they usually ate lunch. He took the second roll back to the office and left it on the empty desk. Daris had changed jobs, stayed in the same city, and promised they would keep meeting. Mladen knew people often made such promises while searching for where they had left their charger.

He messaged him on Thursday. They met at a restaurant near Daris's new company. Mladen described the broken coffee machine, the changed internet password, and a minor argument Daris could no longer fully understand. Daris tried explaining his new job. After twenty minutes they ran out of subjects, and Mladen felt as though someone had taken away their shared language.

He was about to request the bill when Daris took out a small box. He had bought a model boat for his nephew and did not know whether it would survive the bus journey. Mladen asked whether he liked boats himself. Smiling, Daris admitted his apartment was full of models. They had eaten together for four years, and Mladen had not known this. Nor had Daris known that Mladen traveled to dance evenings in another city every winter.

The next time they met on Saturday. Without a work break limiting them, they spent an entire afternoon walking beside the river. Daris spoke about his father, Mladen about his former partner. There was no grand revelation or startled withdrawal. Daris simply said his last relationship had also ended badly, then changed sides of the path to walk nearer the water.

Mladen touched his hand first. Daris did not withdraw it, but stopped. He said he was afraid of spoiling their friendship. Mladen looked toward a

bench where they had never sat. He had no guarantee to offer. He admitted being afraid too, but no longer wanted to buy a second bread roll and pretend he only missed someone to talk to during his break.

The first kiss was brief and slightly awkward, interrupted by a cyclist ringing his bell behind them. They laughed and moved out of the way. Daris suggested that Mladen come and see his boats. Mladen asked whether dinner was included. They agreed on pasta, without promising that either of them would prepare it well.

On Monday Mladen bought two rolls again. This time he left the second at home, on a plate beside Daris's watch. At work they asked how his weekend had been. He said he had learned a great deal about boats. Nobody requested details, which suited him perfectly that morning.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Edges of Sky on the Kitchen Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/edges-of-sky-on-the-kitchen-table/

Lidija bought a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle to give her first rainy weekend with Andrej something to contain. Until then they had always gone somewhere. At her apartment they would be alone for two days, without an exhibition, a planned dinner, or friends to fill the pauses. The box showed a seaside town, with sky occupying almost half the picture. She suggested sorting the edge pieces immediately.

Instead, Andrej found a red boat and started around it. Lidija tried explaining that this only made the work harder. He asked what work. He did not know she struggled to tolerate objects remaining unfinished for days. Even books she disliked had to be read to the end, leaving her angry with both their authors and herself. Andrej had three such books in his living room, each open at a different place.

By Saturday evening, the town had borders, a church tower, and several windows. The sky still lay in scattered pieces. Andrej wanted a walk before more rain arrived, while Lidija wanted to stay until they completed at least one cloud. He went alone to buy bread. Returning with warm rolls, he found her rigid over the table and noticed she had moved his boat to the place shown in the picture.

"I wanted to do that myself," he said. Lidija replied that she had only helped. It sounded reasonable until she saw his expression. She had made the weekend into an assignment with a deadline and allocated him a small portion. Offended, she collected the empty cups. While washing dishes, she heard Andrej put on music. For the first time she resented how content he seemed amid the disorder eating away at her.

On Sunday morning, one piece of sky was missing. They searched beneath the rug and in their sleeves before deciding the vacuum cleaner had probably swallowed it the previous evening. Lidija sat on the floor

and laughed in frustration. Even if they finished, the picture would remain incomplete. Andrej sat beside her. He offered no wisdom. From his pocket he took a squashed roll he had forgotten to eat.

The puzzle occupied half the table for another three weeks. When Andrej visited, they ate on the other half. Once, Lidija left lunch to take a short walk with him. Once, without a reminder, he finished the dishes before leaving. When they finally assembled the town, only one piece of sky was missing. Lidija did not buy a replacement. The yellow surface of the table showed through there, an unexpected sun above the sea.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Room for a Different Kind of Closeness

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/room-for-a-different-kind-of-closeness/

Milena loved the way Pavle moved his cup aside before embracing her. She loved his kisses, funny messages from the shop, and how he left her the warm side of the couch in the morning. After two months of dating, she knew she was falling in love. Precisely because of that, she could no longer treat the conversation she had postponed as an unimportant detail he would somehow understand without words.

She had known for years that she was asexual. The word did not explain every feeling, but she had stopped trying to become someone she had never been. She had not yet discussed it with Pavle. They had made no agreement she had broken, but she could see he imagined their closeness as the beginning of something she did not expect of herself. Enjoying an evening grew harder while she thought ahead to how it would end.

She told him on Sunday while they sat on her balcony. Pavle first asked whether he had done something wrong. Then he asked whether she liked him at all. Milena said she liked him very much, that this was not a carefully softened way of rejecting him. She struggled to explain how strongly someone's closeness could attract her without the desire he took for granted.

Pavle listened, then admitted that sexual intimacy mattered to him. He did not ask her to promise change. Nevertheless, when he said perhaps they could find a way, Milena heard how much both hoped for a simple answer. They left the conversation unfinished and went to buy bread. They held hands in the shop, momentarily making everything both easier and much harder.

They continued seeing each other for several more weeks. There were lovely evenings, but also a caution entering every embrace. Pavle feared exerting pressure; Milena feared treating his restraint as a permanent

answer. Finally they admitted they were attempting a generosity that made both insecure. Neither wanted love to become waiting for the other to desire a different life.

They separated without a major argument. Several times Milena wanted to call and offer something she could not comfortably sustain, simply to hear his voice in her kitchen again. She did not do it. When they met outside the market months later, they embraced for a long time. Pavle still carried the same canvas bag. Afterwards Milena continued home with a sadness that required no culprit, preserving both what had been beautiful and what she had needed to take seriously about herself.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Voices behind the Closed Door

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/voices-behind-the-closed-door/

I went to the audition because my former wife claimed I never finished anything. She turned out to be right about at least one song. The director stopped me before the second verse, thanked me, and looked toward the door. On the stairs I met a woman holding the same sheet music. She looked like someone who had just been told she had spent the past forty years breathing incorrectly.

"Did I at least sing the whole song?" she asked. I said I had not been listening. That was true. During her audition I sat in the corridor, imagining my former wife retelling the story of my failure. The stranger introduced herself as Hana and sat on a step. She did not want to go home before seven because she had told her sister the rehearsal would certainly take a while.

I suggested coffee. In an empty cake shop she showed me a small notebook of song lyrics. She sang while driving, cooking, and waiting for her hair to dry, but never in front of other people. She had applied because she wanted to hear what her voice sounded like among other voices. She did not like my reason. "Your former wife isn't even sitting here," she said, "and you're still addressing her."

A month later she invited me to dinner. At the table sat her sister, a neighbor, and a friend who had brought an accordion despite knowing only a few songs. After eating, they began singing. Nobody signaled when to start or stop. I remained silent, so Hana deliberately mangled the words of a familiar song until I had to correct her. Then she looked at me and continued singing with me.

We continued seeing each other without the group as well. Once I began explaining how all this proved my former wife wrong. Hana picked up her coat. She did not shout, but said she did not want to become a

competition I was conducting with an absent woman. It took me several days to call her without a prepared defense. I asked whether she wanted to visit the market. The market proved nothing to anybody.

Now we sometimes sing while carrying shopping bags up the stairs. Hana comes in early, I come in late, and the neighbor on the first floor regularly closes her window. We have not auditioned again. One evening, washing dishes in her kitchen, I heard her joining me from the corridor. I continued the song to the end. There was nobody I wanted to notify that I had succeeded.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The House Where Nobody Whispers

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-house-where-nobody-whispers/

In Filip's family, doors were closed with elbows, questions were asked from another room, and potatoes passed over someone's head. During the first hour Lana thought they were arguing. During the second she realized they were asking for salt. During the third she retreated to the porch with a book she could not manage to open. She had come for a weekend at the family house, her first since she and Filip began dating.

In her family, people spoke quietly. Her mother even expressed anger in a whisper, which was often more frightening than shouting. Lana had learned to listen for changes in a voice and anticipate when to disappear. She had fallen for Filip's cheerfulness in a small apartment, where he spoke only to her. In this house his voice grew, multiplying through his brothers and sisters, until she could no longer find the man she knew.

On the first evening they played charades. Lana refused three times, but his sister still pushed a slip of paper into her hand. She had to act out a vacuum cleaner. She stood in the middle of the living room, red to her ears, while Filip called out that she should relax. She left the slip on the table and went outside. Behind the door she heard someone ask whether they had offended her. Filip answered that she was just a little strange.

She found him later beside the car, taking a spare blanket from the trunk. She told him she did not need a blanket; she needed him not to describe her next time as a defect his family must tolerate. He sat on the edge of the trunk. He had not known she heard him. At first he defended his sister, then his parents, until Lana stopped him. None of them was her boyfriend. He was.

In the morning she walked to the shop alone. When she returned, two cups stood on the porch, and Filip was finishing an argument with his brother about the grill. He had not quieted the house for her. He came

out, closed the door, and asked whether she wanted coffee without an audience. She told him about silence in her house. He told her how he had fought for a whole sentence in his. Both had long thought other families exaggerated.

That afternoon Lana joined the cooking. She declined another game of charades, this time without an explanation, and nobody insisted. Filip's mother showed her where she kept the tea nobody else drank. On the drive home Filip switched off the radio. A few minutes later Lana turned it on again and rested her head against his shoulder while they waited at a red light. The quiet had felt pleasant, but it no longer had to last all the way home.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Celebrations in a Small Apartment

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-celebrations-in-a-small-apartment/

Marta brought the box of decorations from her mother's apartment in November, although she had always teased her for starting preparations so early. Haris put it on top of the wardrobe, assuming these were things they would not use. He did not do it out of opposition. His family home had never contained a Christmas tree, so a box of glass ornaments did not immediately carry the same meaning it did for her.

They had lived together for only six months. They discussed money, chores, and whose cups were ugliest, but generally left religion alone. Marta sometimes went to church on Sundays. Haris fasted and visited his family for Eid. Both thought respect meant not asking too many questions. Thus they carefully avoided something that brought each of them comfort and memories.

When Marta requested the box one morning, Haris asked where she intended to put the tree. The apartment was small. She heard something else: did he want her customs visible in their shared room at all? She answered more sharply than the question deserved. Haris fell silent, holding the box on the ladder, and nearly dropped its lid.

That evening they unpacked the decorations on the floor. Marta showed him a wooden bird her father had carved years earlier. Haris described how his mother insisted on a holiday cake nobody ever made quite as she did. There was no grand conversation about the entire world. They talked about their homes, smells, and people whose absence felt louder on those days than at other times.

They placed the tree beside the window. Haris helped adjust the stand, and Marta did not expect him to know the songs she played. She visited her mother on Christmas Eve, returning before midnight with a plate of fish for him. A few months later Haris invited friends for Eid. Marta

overbaked the first cake and bought the second, admitting this to their guests before anyone could praise her skill.

One friend asked how they would arrange traditions if they ever had children. They looked at each other and laughed at the enormous question placed between two coffees. They did not have every answer. Haris said that for now they were learning to welcome each other. After the guests left, Marta cleared plates from a shelf, while he picked up the wooden bird accidentally left among them. He returned it beside the window. It looked good there even without a holiday.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Window Without a Sea View

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-window-without-a-sea-view/

Petra taped a sea photograph to the office wall. Mirela said it only made the toner smell stronger. They had shared a small office for six years and knew each other's coffee orders but little about holidays. Petra traveled in large groups. Mirela routinely took September leave and returned with books rather than photographs offered as proof of a good life.

That year Petra's group abandoned the trip. One couple had a baby, another separated, and a friend started a new job. Petra was left with a reservation for two originally shared with a cousin. She asked Mirela to come, speaking too casually, as though offering a spare bus seat. Mirela asked whether she wanted her specifically or simply someone to prevent an empty place.

Petra felt offended, then fell silent. The honest answer was more complicated than planned. She liked Mirela, her humor and lack of panic at silence. But she also feared eating alone, a beach without familiar people, and returning to a room where nobody waited. She admitted this only after work as they closed the windows.

Mirela said she did not want to cure a holiday Petra could not endure alone. Still, she did not reject her closeness. She suggested spending an ordinary free day together before a major trip. They visited a botanical garden, bought sandwiches, and missed the exit three times because they were talking. Petra caught herself laughing without checking whether she was entertaining enough.

At day's end they kissed beside a taxi rank. They did not turn the holiday into a reward for the kiss. Petra still went alone for the first few days; Mirela joined later in a separate room she chose herself. Petra learned to order dinner without apologizing for one plate. When Mirela arrived she welcomed her with joy that was not merely relief.

The room reserved for their shared evenings overlooked not the sea but a laundry courtyard. Mirela said at least the smell improved on toner. Petra opened the window and laughed. Back at the office they removed the faded sea photograph. They did not replace it with a portrait together. The window remained an ordinary city window, and they had a place to meet that no longer needed to resemble a postcard.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Last Box from the Student Residence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-last-box-from-the-student-residence/

Vera lifted the box marked "books" incorrectly and immediately put it down. It contained, as it turned out, pans, weights, and one encyclopedia. Her daughter was moving from student accommodation to her first apartment. Her roommate's father, a man Vera knew from two messages about a van, said the box should be called an ordeal rather than books.

His name was Nenad, and he had been divorced almost as long as she had. Their adult children were friends rather than a couple, as they repeatedly emphasized before the move. Vera did not ask why they kept repeating it. She had enough assumptions of her own and was trying to decide less for other people. She carried lighter bags, Nenad furniture, and both avoided saying they had owned far fewer things at that age.

Near the end the van left full. Vera and Nenad remained beside the last box waiting for its return. They sat on the empty entrance steps. He produced two mandarins forgotten in his pocket since breakfast. He said he wanted to take drawing classes in autumn but it sounded like the beginning of a joke. Vera said she planned her first solo trip and had so far chosen only a bag.

The children called to say they would be late. Instead of irritation they felt relief. They went to a kiosk pulling the box on a trolley borrowed from the caretaker. Nenad asked whether Vera habitually talked about herself or whether all her conversations ended with children too. She admitted no longer knowing what remained when their schedules were removed. He offered no promise to fill the gap. He asked where she wanted to travel.

The first coffee invitation came through the children, which bothered Vera. She told her daughter Nenad already had her number. Later she

called him herself, explaining she liked their conversation but wanted no parental committee for every date. He laughed and admitted a simple message frightened him more than carrying a wardrobe down three floors.

At coffee there were no boxes or moving schedules. Nenad showed his first drawing, in which a cup resembled a boat, and Vera her short-trip reservation. They arranged dinner after her return rather than a joint plan before earning one. Months later the children invited them to lunch in the new apartment. The last box still stood unopened in the hallway. Vera passed without comment, took Nenad's hand, and sat as a guest, for the first time without needing to unpack something first.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Keys to the Shared Kitchen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/keys-to-the-shared-kitchen/

In the communal kitchen Zora chopped onions while Petra counted portions. One worked quickly and untidily, the other slowly and precisely. Every Wednesday they prepared meals for neighborhood residents who registered in advance. They knew little about each other except that Zora drank too much coffee and Petra brought her own apron because the shared ones had ties too short for her liking.

Zora was fifty and lived alone after divorce. Petra was six years younger, never married, with a mother who interpreted every friendship as waiting for the right man. In the kitchen she did not have to explain her private life. Knowing how many potatoes belonged in a pot was enough. She was drawn to Zora's listening without quick questions, as though another person's silence were not a gap to fill.

One Wednesday Zora did not appear. She sent a brief message saying she was tired and would come next week. Petra caught herself preparing an extra portion for her, then paused. She did not know whether she could contact her outside their schedule. Eventually she wrote that she had spare soup and could leave it at the door if Zora wanted. The reply said she wanted soup but company even more.

Zora's apartment was untidy, curtains closed, television silent. It was the date of her divorce, an anniversary she had not expected still to feel in her body. Petra neither opened curtains nor began cleaning. She sat down, poured soup into two bowls, and asked whether Zora wanted to talk or watch something silly. They watched a bad comedy, and near the end Zora rested her head on her shoulder.

The following week both were awkward in the kitchen. Petra counted the same containers three times. Zora finally suggested going out after their shift as two women who liked each other, not workers checking supplies.

Petra said she needed a slower beginning. Zora agreed without pretending nothing mattered to her.

They began with walks, then dinners, then a short trip on which neither packed an apron. Petra told her mother about the relationship when she decided she was ready. The conversation was difficult and did not end in full acceptance. Zora listened afterward without demanding to become proof of anyone's courage. In the kitchen they still chopped onions and counted portions. One evening Petra switched off the light and checked the door while Zora waited outside. For the first time the keys meant not another duty but the end of a shift after which both had somewhere to go together.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Time for the Wrong Answer

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/time-for-the-wrong-answer/

The team lacked a fourth member. Sanela arrived at the cafe to return a friend's book and ended up at a table with a pencil and responsibility for literature. The man opposite was Ognjen, a cook. He said he would handle food, sport, and things heard once and remembered for no reason. Sanela decided she liked that description of his knowledge.

The first rounds went well. She knew an old poem's author; he named a river nobody else could place on the map. When a question asked where a dish originated, Sanela was certain. Ognjen suggested a different answer. She said she had read it in a book. He said he had cooked it with a woman from that region. They chose her answer and lost a point.

Sanela expected him to gloat. Ognjen merely drew a little pot beside the wrong word. That amused her more than she wanted. After the quiz she apologized for her tone, not for failing to know everything. He admitted too often believing practical experience answered every question himself. Once he had claimed he could repair a bicycle simply because he could dismantle a mixer.

Over the following weeks they sat together. Ognjen brought odd kitchen facts; Sanela recommended books that did not feel like homework. One evening their team won dinner for four. Their friends immediately had other commitments. Sanela suspected matchmaking, but Ognjen showed a message about one friend's genuine work shift and said they could simply save the other two meals for later.

At dinner they discovered conversation took longer without questions on paper. Sanela had recently divorced and did not want every meeting to become an assessment of a future husband. Ognjen had lived alone for years and did not know how to say silence did not bother him. They ordered the disputed dish. It was not particularly good, giving them their

first subject of immediate agreement.

Rain began as they left. They stood beneath an awning, and Ognjen asked whether he could kiss her. Sanela said that question did not require consulting a book. The following Thursday they lost again, this time over his wrong film answer. She drew a little screen beside the word and pushed the paper toward him. They laughed loudly enough for the host to warn them. The winning team did not notice them, and that evening they lacked nothing.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Keys for Two Addresses

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-keys-for-two-addresses/

Both offers arrived in the same month. Adnan received a position in the restoration workshop he had discussed for years. Jasmina got the chance to lead a small research team, for the first time without someone else's name above hers. The problem was that the workshop stood in one city and the institute in another, far enough for daily travel to consume both work and marriage.

At first they celebrated separately, each carefully reducing their own joy before the other. They had been together twelve years and were used to compromise sounding lovely while nobody had to translate it exactly. Jasmina had left a job during an earlier move. Several years later Adnan declined training for her project. Both insisted they kept no record. Now they remembered every date perfectly.

They argued over a map Jasmina spread on the kitchen table. Adnan said marriage could not constantly be a logistical exercise. She replied that it also could not be where the better opportunity went to whoever tired of arguing first. Afterward they ate a cold lunch on opposite sides of the map, as though the cities already lay between them.

They found no answer that evening. For weeks they calculated costs, spoke to employers, and discarded plans that sounded good only on paper. Eventually they agreed on six months at two addresses, meeting every other weekend. Nobody promised ease. They also set a date to assess whether they could continue instead of letting a temporary arrangement secretly become permanent.

The first month was oddly romantic. The second was exhausting. One evening Jasmina fell asleep before their call, and Adnan spent an hour angry at a dark screen. The next day he admitted missing an ordinary shared breakfast, not merely carefully arranged weekends. She said she

missed being allowed a bad mood without fearing she spoiled a rare meeting.

They began leaving room for boredom too. They did not travel or eat out every weekend. Once they spent Saturday assembling his wardrobe and arguing about an incorrectly fitted shelf. It was tiring and reassuring, something they would do if they lived together. On Sunday he gave her a spare key, and she gave him hers.

After six months they continued for another season with an adjusted schedule. Later an opportunity opened to do part of their work from the same city. They did not declare victory over distance. They simply unpacked two addresses into one kitchen again. The map remained in a drawer with a greasy plate mark over the city where their marriage learned to accommodate more than one good future.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Dinner That Went Cold

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dinner-that-went-cold/

Irma set the table for two and covered her father's armchair with a clean blanket, as though that could hide how the whole apartment revolved around his habits. After an injury he had difficulty walking and temporarily lived with her. Irma was forty-five, worked in a library, and had a new number in her phone that made her smile. His name was Damjan, and so far they had shared only three brief coffees.

She postponed dinner twice. The third time she told the truth: she could not leave her father alone all evening, and her brother would arrive late. Damjan asked whether she would feel comfortable having him over. She agreed, then spent the whole day trying to make the apartment conceal her exhaustion. When he rang, the sauce was ready, a candle burned, and she was already worn out.

Her father came out to greet the visitor. He forgot he had asked for tea, then became annoyed that there was none. Irma put down the plates and began explaining. Damjan remained seated without adding advice. After her father left, Irma apologized so long the sauce cooled. Damjan asked whether she wanted to warm it or would rather simply eat. She said she most wanted to stop repairing the evening.

They sat with cold plates. Irma admitted fearing that being with her would always include a schedule of other people's needs. Damjan did not promise nothing would be difficult. He had children, work, and days without patience himself. He said he would like to know her without her selling him an easier version of life beforehand. He did not know whether they would work. He knew he liked her speaking in her normal voice without a hostess's smile.

Her brother arrived later than promised. For the first time Irma asked him to confirm times he could actually manage. She did not do it in front

of Damjan as a display of decisiveness. They spoke quietly in the hallway, then she went out for a short walk. Damjan waited beside the lift, not already dressed for somebody else's life but ready for his half hour with her.

They walked to a kiosk and bought ice cream despite the cold. Their kiss was awkward because both held cones. Irma laughed, for the first time without exhaustion in her voice. Later meetings were not always easy. Sometimes a call interrupted; sometimes Damjan changed plans. But she no longer hid her father's armchair. Before Damjan came she merely removed newspapers from the seat where she wanted him to sit.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Plot Between Two Fences

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-plot-between-two-fences/

The sign said plot eight. Ema saw seven and planted radishes in the wrong soil. When she returned the following Saturday, a man carrying a watering can stood over her neat rows as though studying unexplained messages. His name was Luka, and he had intended to grow tomatoes there. Both were new to the city garden, with more purchased tools than experience.

Ema immediately offered to dig everything up. Luka said he did not know whether the radishes had already begun living and would feel uncomfortable interrupting them. That absurd tenderness toward seeds made her laugh. They agreed to share until sorting the numbers out with the coordinator. The following week she offered them separate plots. Both said too quickly that there was no need.

Luka worked at a bank and dreamed of country life. Ema had grown up in the country and moved to the city precisely to stop rising for other people's crops. The garden was a small hobby for her, a rehearsal for his future. As they weeded she listened to his imagined chickens, workshop, and long veranda. She did not mock him but asked whether he knew how much work remained after the veranda photograph was taken.

One hot weekend Luka did not come. He went to a music festival and forgot to tell her. Ema watered everything, angrier than she wished to admit. When he appeared smiling with his first serious dinner invitation, she showed him the empty cans. She said she did not want to enable another person's dream by quietly doing its unattractive work. The invitation remained between them, unaccepted.

Over the following weeks Luka came regularly without performing self-sacrifice. One evening he admitted perhaps loving the countryside as an image rather than an obligation. Ema said that sentence interested her

more than every account of the perfect house. They cooked their first tomatoes into sauce in her small city kitchen. The radishes were too sharp, so they ate them slowly with plenty of bread.

When he asked about dinner again, Ema replied that they were having one. They kissed beside the sink between two washed jars. At the season's end they divided the last harvest and wrote down what not to plant next year. Luka crossed out his large-garden plan without abandoning their plot. Ema added flowers that could not be eaten. The soil did not become their whole life. It was large enough for something they wanted to grow together.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The First Lap on Wheels

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-first-lap-on-wheels/

Danica bought plum-colored pads because they were the only ones that fit her knees. She was forty-one and convinced it was too late for many things, including skating. A friend enrolled her in a class as a birthday gift. At the first lesson she held the rail and seriously considered requesting a refund of the friendship rather than the money.

Beside her stood Armin with new skates and the expression of a man unwilling to admit he was frightened too. He claimed he had ice-skated as a child. The instructor asked him to demonstrate stopping. He ended up sitting on a mat, unhurt but less confident. Danica offered her water bottle and said at least he had found somewhere to rest.

They began practicing together after class, always in the permitted part of the hall. Danica learned slowly and celebrated every successful stop aloud. Armin progressed quickly but grew angry at the smallest mistake. When she praised him, he said it was nothing yet. One evening she stopped encouraging him and said it was difficult to enjoy herself beside someone constantly taking an invisible examination.

He removed his helmet and stayed silent a long time. He had recently lost a job where he was known as the person who always had the answer. He enrolled to prove he could still master something. He had not noticed bringing the very strictness he wanted to escape into the hall. Danica offered no new way to win. She said he could simply come and spend an evening with her, if that was interesting enough.

Next time he was five minutes late and offered no elaborate excuse. He practiced, made mistakes, laughed, and continued. Afterward they went for pizza carrying skates over their shoulders like children returning from school. Danica discussed her divorce without making it her entire biography. Armin talked about music, his favorite aunt, and how he

cooked too much rice every time.

At the final lesson they had to circle the hall without holding the rail. Danica started slowly, Armin a few feet ahead. He did not return to pull her along. He waited at the finish with a smile that did not judge her time. When she arrived she hugged him too hard, and both grabbed the rail. Later he asked whether she wanted to go out without skates too. She agreed but said she might bring the pads just in case. They laughed while sitting on the floor undoing their laces.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Kiss Outside the Frame

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-kiss-outside-the-frame/

Nora accepted a one-day job as an extra because between contracts she had more time than money. She was supposed to walk across a square in a borrowed coat carrying an empty basket. The man assigned to play her partner was named Stefan. He said he worked in an archive and had come because a friend promised lunch. Both immediately checked whether the shoes were at least comfortable.

The assistant director explained that in the background they should look in love without attracting attention. Nora asked how exactly someone fell in love inconspicuously. Stefan said he had plenty of experience, mostly one-sided. She was still laughing when the cameras started. They spoiled the first take, then the second because he missed his pavement mark while looking at her.

By lunch they had learned to walk at the same pace. Between takes they discussed jobs nobody at family gatherings knew how to describe. Nora subtitled educational videos. Stefan organized old catalog cards. In the film they were a young couple from some prettier era; outside the frame they were two people in their thirties carefully calculating how many days off they could afford.

Near the end they received a new direction: he should brush hair from her face. Stefan first asked whether the touch would bother her. Nora said no, then was surprised how much his asking mattered. The shot worked on the first attempt. The assistant praised them and sent them to return their costumes. Suddenly everything that had seemed natural had a deadline at the dressing room.

Nora changed more slowly than necessary. She did not know whether his attentiveness had been part of the job. Stefan waited outside in an ordinary jacket, looking less confident than in the borrowed coat. He said

he did not know whether they should simply say goodbye now. Nora replied that she would like to hear something about him that was not filling a pause between takes. They went for coffee although both were tired of standing.

There were no prepared directions on the second date. Conversation sometimes stalled, Stefan spilled sugar, and Nora talked too long about her former job. Still, they stayed until closing. When he reached toward her hair again, he paused and smiled. "This is my idea now," he said. Nora kissed him before he could habitually seek somebody's approval. The film came out several months later. They were barely visible in their brief shot, so they watched it twice for a reason unrelated to acting.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Marriage Under a Tent Too Small

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-marriage-under-a-tent-too-small/

In the photograph the tent looked large enough for two adults. In reality it was large enough for their bags and one modest argument. Amina sat outside holding a sleeping bag while her husband Nadir tried proving the floor could be turned differently. They had been married seventeen years and were on their first trip alone since their son left for university.

Amina had proposed camping. She wanted a weekend without television, work, or questions about detergent. Nadir agreed because he thought it the cheapest way to show effort. Neither admitted the real reason. He feared he had become boring to her. She feared his readiness to remain silent meant he no longer cared.

By evening they had pitched the tent but could not operate the small borrowed gas stove. They did not attempt repairs. They put it back in its box and walked to a nearby inn, where they ordered bean stew. Amina was angry that their simple adventure already required rescue in someone else's kitchen. Nadir said at least the stew was better than the sandwiches he had forgotten in the refrigerator.

Only then did she laugh. The laughter surprised them more than every failure. On the way back they discussed their first trip, when they spent all night at a station because each thought the other had checked the timetable. Such things used to become shared stories. In recent years they had become evidence against each other.

They lay diagonally in the tent, feet among their bags. Amina said she missed Nadir asking her something without a practical reason. He admitted often not asking because he believed he already knew the answer, and perhaps feared hearing a different one. They lay awake a long time. They did not solve their marriage in one conversation. They simply said, for the first time in many months, that they still wanted to be

present in it.

Fine rain began in the morning. They packed the wet tent and returned home early without claiming the weekend was perfect. Nadir made breakfast from the forgotten sandwiches, and Amina switched off her phone. They agreed on one evening a week when they would not handle household tasks unless something was actually burning. The first Wednesday conversation faltered. The second they went to the cinema. The third they stayed home and danced to a song their son hated. The undersized tent remained in the cellar, ready for an outing that no longer had to contain their whole marriage.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Gray Streak in the Photograph

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-gray-streak-in-the-photograph/

Emil wanted to surprise Amra with an album for twenty-five years of marriage. He collected photographs from boxes, old phones, and family groups. On the last page he placed a new portrait taken during Sunday lunch. Amra laughed while holding a cup with a cracked handle. Before printing he removed the gray streak from her hair, softened wrinkles, and lightened shadows beneath her eyes.

When she opened the album, she studied the older pictures. She laughed at their hairstyles, an oversized jacket, and the apartment where curtains cost more than the remaining furniture. Then she reached the last page. She touched her face on the paper and asked why he had changed her hair. Emil said he had merely made her a little prettier.

Amra had stopped dyeing her hair a year earlier. It was no grand announcement, simply a decision to stop spending every fourth Saturday trying to catch her roots. She liked the gray streak. She had told Emil, but now he did not remember. He thought he was giving her a younger self, as though that were the version every woman would choose.

She did not throw away the album. She said the effort mattered but she did not want to be grateful for part of herself disappearing. Emil felt hurt because he had expected joy. Later, alone, he studied the original photograph. He remembered liking her that day precisely because she was relaxed and no longer hiding from the camera. Then he had erased what made that possible.

The next day he printed the original and replaced the page with her knowledge. He did not end the conversation there. He asked how she wanted him to see her, and Amra replied she wanted no viewing instructions, only to be asked before he decided what needed fixing. Then she asked whether he feared his own age too. He admitted lately posing

from only one angle.

They discussed bodies no longer the same but still containing their habits, touches, and desires. That evening Amra invited him to dance in the living room. They did not try repeating the wedding step they had long forgotten anyway. Emil brushed hair from her face, leaving the gray streak in the light. Later they took a photograph themselves, too close to the camera and slightly blurred. They placed it at the album's end without corrections meant to convince the past nothing had changed.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Sunday Without the Black Coat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-sunday-without-the-black-coat/

Lejla first noticed Marko collecting forgotten umbrellas after a funeral. He had been a longtime friend of her colleague, who died unexpectedly. They had no reason to speak except that she found glasses on an empty chair and did not know their owner. Marko recognized them, called him, and stayed until he returned.

They stood beneath the awning for almost half an hour. They did not discuss life's meaning. They discussed the colleague's bad parking, overly strong coffee, and inability to finish a telephone conversation. Once both laughed, then fell silent as though caught being improper. Marko said their late friend would probably ask them to keep at least one of his faults secret.

They exchanged numbers for a photograph album the friends planned to assemble. They sent pictures and brief memories. Later they began sending ordinary things too: a broken advertisement, a film recommendation, a question about buying good tea. Each time Lejla felt joy, then guilt at enjoying a message connected to someone no longer alive.

After two months Marko invited her for coffee. She declined, saying she was busy. The day was not the problem. She feared their beginning would always seem something taken from somebody else's ending. When he asked again, she told the truth. Marko listened, then admitted sometimes talking to his phone as though needing to explain to his friend why he was messaging her.

They did not decide loss had sent them somebody. They did not want that comfort. They merely acknowledged meeting that day and now enjoying conversation. They arranged Sunday coffee. Lejla wore a green jacket, left the black coat in the wardrobe, and arrived early. Marko already waited

with a book he wanted to lend her, unrelated to their mutual friend.

Conversation was easier than expected and sadder than if they had met at a birthday party. They accepted both. Months later they delivered the completed album to the family together. Afterward they bought dinner groceries and argued about how many onions they needed. Lejla suddenly laughed in the shop. Their closeness finally contained ordinary parts too. At home she hung her green jacket beside his coat and put on pasta water without asking the past's permission to be hungry and happy on the same evening.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Walk Grandmother Cut Short

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-walk-grandmother-cut-short/

Nika agreed to the walk because her grandmother said she felt dizzy after lunch. Once they reached the park, Grandmother walked faster than everyone. Five retired women, a man with a newspaper, and a young man who looked just as deceived as Nika waited on a bench. He carried a water bottle and two bananas, equipment for an outing suddenly turning into something else.

His name was Vuk. His aunt claimed she needed help with her phone but had left it at home. Grandmother whispered to Nika that Vuk had a steady job and washed dishes nicely. Nika asked how she knew. Grandmother said good news traveled fast. Across the bench Vuk received a similar report about Nika's tidiness and supposed love of hiking. Nika did not like hiking.

After ten minutes the older people decided to shorten their walk and have coffee somewhere that "didn't have enough chairs for everyone." They left the pair beside the lake with the remaining bananas. Vuk looked at Nika and said he felt like the last piece of furniture his relatives were trying to position correctly. Nika laughed for the first time that day.

They sat on the grass and agreed not to reward the scheme with a kiss. Both had recently left relationships about which their families had too many opinions. Vuk admitted he did not wash dishes particularly nicely, merely regularly. Nika said her room often resembled a dressing room after a performance. They enjoyed the conversation precisely because they did not have to fulfill someone else's advertisement for an ideal person.

Before parting Vuk suggested telling the relatives they had argued terribly. Nika refused another performance. They simply said they had walked and did not want arranged meetings again. Grandmother insisted

she had planned nothing while carrying a cake she had ordered in advance for two. Nika kissed her cheek, took half the cake, and went home without a lengthy explanation.

Three weeks later she met Vuk at a concert. Nobody had brought them or left them together. He approached after the second song and asked whether she wanted a drink. Nika agreed, then suggested a walk after the show herself. They wandered the city until late, choosing streets that led to nobody's grandmother. When they kissed, Vuk said they had to keep it from the family committee for at least a few days. Nika laughed and promised only not to lie. The following Sunday she brought her grandmother a cake for one.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Path Missing from the Map

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-path-missing-from-the-map/

Tena held the map upside down for two full minutes before Irina said anything. She did not want to embarrass her before the group, but Tena's suggested shortcut led toward a quarry, not the lookout. When she finally pointed to the north arrow, Tena laughed and admitted defeat. Irina expected anger. Instead she received half a chocolate bar as a reward for saving the morning.

Both were around thirty and joining the same hiking club for the first time. Tena had recently ended a long relationship and promised her friends not to spend all summer on the sofa. Irina had just moved to the city for work. She knew many addresses but almost nobody to whom she could send a photograph of a view for no special reason.

They walked together to the summit. Tena spoke quickly; Irina asked brief questions that made the conversation unexpectedly serious. At the rest stop they shared bread, cheese, and the last apple. When the group posed for a photograph, Tena put an arm around Irina's shoulders. Irina stiffened and moved away. Tena immediately withdrew her arm and became overly cheerful with everyone else for the rest of the trip.

They sat separately on the bus. Irina wrote a message, deleted it, and reopened their barely begun conversation. The touch had not bothered her. What bothered her was that club photographs were posted publicly, and at work she had not yet decided how she wanted to discuss her private life. She feared an explanation would sound like shame about Tena when it was really about her own pace.

She sent the message only that evening. Tena replied with one sentence: "You could have told me." Irina admitted she could have but had not managed it. She suggested coffee without the group and without photographs. Tena thought until morning. She did not want to become

someone's secret, but she knew the difference between hiding a relationship and having the right not to announce new closeness before it even existed.

Over coffee they discussed it clearly, sometimes awkwardly. Irina did not promise to become braver in every room overnight. Tena did not promise it would always be easy. Still, they stayed together for three hours, then went to a bookshop because rain had begun. Between the shelves Tena offered her palm, this time as a question. Irina accepted it. They took no photographs. For their next hike they bought a new map, large enough for both to hold correctly.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Mask of Newspaper

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-mask-of-newspaper/

Lina made a mask from newspaper because she forgot to buy a proper one. Its edge scratched her cheek, and through the right eyehole she could see only half the man she was talking to. He wore a plain black mask and claimed he had come solely for potato pie. The neighborhood party took place in the building's courtyard beneath lights that worked only when someone struck the extension cable.

They discussed bad films, empty Sundays, and how every family group had one person sending photographs of coffee without explanation. Lina invited him to dance. He did not dance well, but he listened to the rhythm and apologized only once when he stepped on her foot. She liked that more than excessive skill.

At midnight they removed their masks. He was Dario from the second entrance, the man she had argued with that morning about removing an old bench. Lina wanted bicycle parking. Dario said his mother and three other older neighbors used the bench. Their conversation had ended with her saying the entire courtyard could not be a museum of other people's habits.

Now that sentence sounded much harsher. Dario recognized her first and burst out laughing, then stopped when he saw her embarrassment. He said he still thought she was wrong. Lina replied that she still had nowhere to leave her bicycle. They stood holding their masks, surprised that attraction had not erased the morning's dispute.

They did not kiss. They went to the bench and sat, moving plates someone had left. Dario pointed out where the hedge could be shortened. Lina explained why that corner flooded in the rain. They talked until they found a less tidy but possible arrangement: a rack beside the wall, with two flowerpots moved. They would have to ask everyone else too, because

the courtyard did not belong to their new mood.

A week later they installed the rack with the residents' agreement. Dario came without his mother, Lina without prepared arguments. Afterward they sat on the saved bench with dirty hands, eating rolls from a bag. She asked whether he wanted to go to the cinema that evening. He agreed, provided she chose a film they would not both hate. She could not promise. When he kissed her, the newspaper mask had already gone into recycling, but both remembered how little it took to see each other incorrectly.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Three Hours in a Tree Costume

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/three-hours-in-a-tree-costume/

Ena promised her sister to help at a performance, assuming she would sell juice. On arrival she received a tree costume. It had three branches, a face opening too low, and a pocket containing a sweet forgotten by the previous performer. The man beside her wore a cotton-wool cloud and looked as though considering escape through a window.

His name was Dino, and he had come in place of his ill brother. They were supposed to stand almost motionless while children played animals. Each had one line. Ena would say the forest remembered; Dino would say rain was coming. For the first ten minutes they debated whether a cloud could sit while waiting for its cue. The organizer said apparently it could in their forest.

Before the audience everything changed. One young performer forgot his words; another hid behind Ena and refused to emerge. Dino moved the cloud to shield him until he calmed. Ena quietly repeated the child's line, then waited without rushing him. The scene ran three minutes longer than rehearsal. The audience assumed everything was intended.

Afterward they sat in the corridor with costumes half removed. Ena said Dino's patience surprised her. He admitted he was not always patient, but knew how it felt when people watched while he could not find a word. He had stammered as a child and still sometimes paused when nervous. Ena did not finish his next sentence. She waited, looking at him as though time were not a problem to solve.

Her sister found them together and immediately offered another performance, shared dinners, and a phone number. Ena stopped her. She did not want their acquaintance becoming a family project before they named it themselves. Later Dino asked whether he could give his number himself. She agreed but warned him not to expect leaves in her hair on

their first date.

They went out the following Friday. Without costumes both looked slightly unfamiliar, and for several minutes they spoke too formally. Then Dino produced the forgotten sweet, saved as evidence things had really been that silly. Ena laughed and moved her chair closer. Their relationship began slowly, with ordinary misunderstandings and increasingly easy conversations. They attended the next performance as audience members. When the new tree forgot its line, they did not laugh. They simply waited while it found the words, holding hands beneath the program.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

When They Counted the Chairs

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/when-they-counted-the-chairs/

Hana and Vedad sat at opposite ends of the table while association members elected a new board. She supported turning the old hall into workshop space. He wanted to retain the stage for performances. Over previous months they had spoken mainly through objections, amendments, and sentences beginning with the need to consider every member.

They were not candidates but the people responsible for keeping the day orderly. Hana checked the list; Vedad handed out ballots. When an older member forgot glasses, they brought a version with larger print. Neither tried winning a final vote at the door. That mutual restraint began to matter more than all their earlier speeches about fairness.

The board supporting Hana won. Vedad congratulated them without a photographic smile, then began stacking chairs. Everyone else left to celebrate or complain in the cafe next door. Hana stayed because she did not want all the post-victory work left to the man who had just lost. They carried chairs to storage, counting aloud to avoid starting another debate.

Vedad suddenly asked whether she had ever acted. She said yes, in a school play, and forgot her only line. He admitted never stepping onstage. He wanted to preserve it for his father, who had once built scenery there. For the first time Hana heard a reason that was not an argument. She explained wanting workshops because after her divorce she could not afford any available course in town.

They did not change positions. But they stopped speaking as though the other lacked a personal reason to care. Vedad asked whether the new board could consider a folding stage. Hana said he could propose it, without promising an outcome. Then she asked whether he wanted food. Since morning both had lived on coffee and biscuits crumbling across

voting lists.

They ate soup in an almost empty restaurant. They discussed everything that required no vote. Hana learned Vedad liked bad detective series, while he discovered she traveled without an orderly plan despite how she ran meetings. When he said he wanted to see her again, he added that he expected no change on the stage. Hana laughed and said even a kiss could not guarantee that. Still, she kissed him outside the restaurant, without minutes or an audience counting who had won.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Compartment Seven

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/compartment-seven/

In compartment seven sat a man with a box of cakes and a woman with shoes wrapped in paper. The train was forty minutes late, then another twenty. The woman was named Una. The man introduced himself as Mirza and offered a cake before asking whether the window seat was free. Una took the smallest, the one whose decoration had already fallen off.

She was traveling to her sister. That was true, but incomplete. She was supposed to be the maid of honor at a wedding canceled the previous night. Her sister had realized she did not want the marriage, and the family was still trying to change her mind before the meat came out of cold storage. Una carried formal shoes because she had packed before the news and lacked the energy to open her suitcase.

Mirza was traveling to his own canceled wedding. The cakes were a gift from colleagues who had not heard in time that his fiancee had changed her mind. He needed to return the rented hall's keys and divide the costs. At first he told Una he was going to a family celebration. When the conductor announced another delay, he looked at the box and admitted there was no celebration. Una placed the shoes on the empty seat and said hers was uncertain too.

They talked for a long time, but not like people who instantly knew the cure for each other. Mirza was angry. Una did not tell him it was good he had learned the truth in time. She said her sister currently sounded both brave and cruel, depending on who listened. Mirza admitted he had ignored questions for months whose answers he now wanted in one sentence.

The train stopped at a small station. They bought coffee from a machine, too sweet and lukewarm, then walked along the permitted section of the platform while waiting to depart. Mirza made Una laugh about learning a

wedding dance from a reversed video. She showed him her grazed knee from falling during her sister's choreography rehearsal. For the first time that day the canceled weddings did not occupy all the space between them.

At their destination they exchanged numbers without promising immediate contact. Mirza said he was not currently good material for a new beginning. Una replied that she was not looking for a project either. A month later he sent a photograph of the empty cake box and asked whether she wanted coffee that did not come from a machine. She agreed. They met without suitcases, in ordinary shoes, and spent the first half hour discussing everything except weddings.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Last Lap Around the Lake

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-last-lap-around-the-lake/

Lea knew Nikola by his back. Every Sunday he ran a few steps ahead of her in the same faded shirt and never turned around. In their recreational running club he was known as the man who said results did not matter, then immediately checked his watch. Lea did not believe him. She was no better; she simply hid her watch beneath her sleeve.

At the spring race around the lake she decided to finish ahead of him at last. She was thirty-two, worked in insurance, and had many neatly scheduled worries. Running was the only place where success could fit into a few numbers. At the start Nikola asked whether she had slept well. She said she would tell him at the finish, while waiting for him.

On the second lap her shoelace snapped. She stopped beside the path and tried to knot two ends that were too short. Nikola passed her, then returned. He pulled a spare lace from his pocket. Lea laughed: who ran with a spare shoelace? He said he worked with children at a sports center and the entire world could stop over a little thing the adults had forgotten to bring.

While she repaired her shoe, the fastest runners began the third lap. Nikola suggested continuing together. Lea immediately said she did not need an escort. He shrugged and set off more slowly than usual. She caught up after a few steps and first noticed a slight limp. It was not an injury. All morning he had carried a pebble in his shoe because he did not want to lose time.

She sat on the grass and laughed. "The genius with the spare lace." Nikola finally removed his shoe. They both looked at the tiny pebble in his palm, surprised by how much power they had given it. They continued without timing themselves. They discussed his younger sister, her unfinished photograph collection, and why adults so easily become their own strict

coaches.

At the finish almost everyone was already eating bananas. Lea was disappointed with her result and did not pretend otherwise. Nikola admitted he was too. Then he invited her for pancakes, pointing out that it was not a consolation prize. She agreed because she had liked him sitting barefoot beside the path more than during all those Sundays of confident running.

In summer they competed again. Sometimes she won, sometimes he did. One Sunday Lea deliberately left her watch at home. Nikola had not forgotten his, but turned it to the inside of his wrist. They ran to the lake, then walked the final lap. On a bench she opened the photograph album she had finally completed. The first picture showed his palm with the pebble, blurred and entirely good enough.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Cup Nobody Bought

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-cup-nobody-bought/

The cup leaned to the left and had a handle barely large enough for a finger. Tara kept it on her craft-fair table as a container for change. Every other piece was neat, glazed, and signed. A man in a green sweater approached just before closing and pointed to that one. Tara said it was not for sale. He asked whether he could trade something for it.

His name was Boris, and he restored old frames. He offered a small cherrywood frame, then to repair her wobbly shelf, and finally two tickets to a concert he did not particularly want to hear himself. Tara laughed at the last offer. She said she did not understand why he wanted an ugly cup so badly. Boris replied that it was the only one on the table that looked as though it had been made for a particular hand.

It was the first cup she had made with her father after his retirement. She wanted to teach him the craft, and he insisted he knew better. They argued about the handle and ended up laughing at the failure. Her father died two years later. Tara told a shorter version, without dates or illness. Boris stopped proposing trades. He asked whether he could buy an entirely ordinary coffee cup instead.

The following month he brought a frame containing a photograph of her stall, taken with her earlier permission. He did not ask for the crooked cup in exchange. Tara invited him to her workshop to see how the proper ones were made. He spent two hours trying to make a bowl that would not collapse. When it finally fell, he cursed the clay so seriously that Tara had to sit down laughing.

They began dating cautiously, because for years Tara had confused solitude with loyalty to memories. One evening Boris accidentally knocked over the crooked cup. Its handle broke off. He stood motionless, expecting the end of something larger than an object. Tara picked up the

fragment and felt anger, then sadness, then a strange relief at not having to choose just one. She told him to fetch glue from the drawer, then give her ten quiet minutes.

They repaired it the next day. The join showed, and the handle remained too tight. Tara took the cup home and put it on a shelf, freeing her fair table for new work. Boris received a different cup there, straight and large enough for his fingers. When he asked its price, she said it was a gift. For the first time she felt no need to add a story explaining why she was allowed to give something away.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Snowman Outside the Shop

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-snowman-outside-the-shop/

On the first morning a snowman stood outside the flower shop with a rosemary branch for an arm. On the second it held a little bouquet of dry leaves. On the third it acquired a top hat made from a black plastic flowerpot. Emina assumed the bakers next door were joking. They insisted their snowman would certainly have a three-story belly and something edible for a nose.

The flower shop did poorly in winter. Emina was already considering leaving the premises when passersby began stopping for the snowman. Some photographed it, some bought a carnation, some simply came in to get warm. One evening she left it a strip of red fabric. In the morning it wore the strip as a scarf, tied with a precise tailor's knot.

Then she suspected Vahid, the upholsterer in the courtyard. He was forty-six, divorced, and worked in a shop where a radio always played. For years they had exchanged small favors: she accepted his deliveries; he repaired her wobbly chairs. He had never invited her even for an ordinary coffee. When she asked whether he knew anything about the snow, he said he knew it would soon melt.

Emina rose early and arrived before the delivery. She found him repairing the snowman's nose. Vahid stood with a carrot in his hand, looking comically guilty. He admitted seeing her sad post about possibly closing and wanting to make something that would attract people. He had not intended it as a secret courtship, but while tying the scarf he had realized it was.

"You can ring my bell," Emina said. She unlocked the shop and made coffee. Vahid sat on a chair he had repaired himself and finally asked whether she would take a day trip with him on Sunday. She did not promise before checking her orders. That pleased him more than a quick

answer given out of gratitude. When she said she could, they also agreed where to eat, because snow was a poor substitute for lunch.

The weekend turned warm. The snowman lost its head, then its hat, and by Tuesday only a ring of dirty snow remained. Emina washed the flowerpot and returned it to the shop. Business did not suddenly bloom; she negotiated lower rent and shortened her hours. Vahid helped only when she asked. In March he brought a rosemary plant and said they could try keeping this sculpture alive. She placed it on the window between their two workshops.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Five Minutes on the Chess Clock

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/five-minutes-on-the-chess-clock/

Zora was always five minutes late, and Milan started her clock as soon as he saw her at the park entrance. "Penalty for an unprepared opponent," he would say. She would put down her bag, move a pawn, and take one of his pieces before he finished his coffee. They had played for seven years, Tuesdays and Thursdays, except when it rained or one was looking after grandchildren.

Neither still had a spouse. They knew the facts about that but not the everyday details. Milan did not know Zora slept with the radio on. She did not know he cooked too much soup on Saturdays and froze half in containers without lids. They knew openings, stubbornness, and how both pretended defeat had not spoiled their day.

The dinner invitation came after her worst move that summer. Instead of taking her queen, Milan asked whether she liked fish. Zora assumed he was distracting her and said she did not negotiate during a game. When he repeated the question, she blushed so much that he offered to take the queen after all. She agreed to dinner on condition they did not discuss chess.

At the restaurant they did not know where to begin. Milan asked about her operation five years earlier. Zora answered as though at a medical examination. She asked about his pension. The waiter came three times before they ordered. Then Milan described trying to learn the accordion as a young man until a neighbor bought it from him just to get some sleep. Zora choked on her water laughing.

The evening was pleasant until he suggested driving her shopping from then on. Zora heard the announcement of somebody else managing her life. She said she could still carry potatoes herself. Milan felt hurt because he thought he was offering care. They parted outside the restaurant too

politely. On Tuesday she arrived on time and he did not start the clock. They finished the whole game without a joke.

At home Zora considered how the move might look from her opponent's perspective, a habit she had long ago learned at the board. Next time she brought two coffees. She said she wanted him to ask whether she needed a ride rather than assume. Milan said he wanted to be allowed to offer something without feeling he was taking away her independence. The conversation lasted longer than their usual game.

They took the tram to their second dinner. Zora bought the tickets; Milan booked the table. On the way back they sat on a bench in the empty park. There were no pieces or clock. Zora took his hand and said she would make this move first. Milan did not answer with a joke. He stayed beside her until the kiosk light went out.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Cinema for the Last Two Rows

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-cinema-for-the-last-two-rows/

Maja wanted to remove the last two rows. The seats creaked, their upholstery was burned by cigarettes, and rain had once entered through the ceiling above them. The Traka cinema was due to reopen after eleven years. Her job was to find a program and an audience. Adis's job was to repair the projector, but he behaved as though every chair were a relative.

"People fell in love there," he said. Maja replied that people had probably fallen in love in the toilet queue too, but the toilet still needed fixing. The other volunteers laughed. Adis did not. He was fifty and had spent almost his entire working life there before it closed. Eight years younger, Maja mainly remembered canceled screenings and unsuccessful student dates.

One Saturday she found him carrying out the last row of seats alone. He was not throwing them away but dismantling them and marking the parts. He said he had found an upholsterer who would recover six for the cost of materials. Maja acknowledged the budget could cover them if they were safe. She sat on one and listened as Adis described the first time he projected a film without an older operator's supervision.

While cleaning the booth they found a cardboard box of unanswered letters from viewers. One was Maja's. At nineteen she had asked them to screen a film her mother loved. Her mother was ill then and unable to travel. No answer had ever arrived. Adis read the date and quietly said he had worked that week. The box had ended up behind a shelf before he opened it.

She was not asking him to apologize for her whole youth. Still, his belief that everyone had enjoyed a happy cinema hurt. Adis sat on the floor beside the box and stopped talking about golden days for the first time. He asked the film's title. Maja told him, then added that he should not program it for the opening out of pity. She wanted them to choose

together for people coming now.

They opened with a documentary about river towns. The auditorium was not full, but the last six seats were occupied. Afterward Maja found Adis outside the box office with two tickets for the following week. The film from her letter was available through a small distributor. He had obtained it under a normal contract and asked whether she would watch it with him after the public screening.

She came. They did not sit at the back but near the middle, where the sound was best. Adis did not explain when she should feel sad. At the end she stayed until the lights came fully up, holding his hand on the shared armrest. The cinema was not yet earning enough for winter. The next morning they discussed that over coffee, as a problem they now had together.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Silence Between Two Banks

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/silence-between-two-banks/

The ferry crossed the river in nine minutes. Ena timed it on her first working day while translating instructions for a small tourism cooperative. She was thirty-eight and had a whole summer between two major assignments. Captain Luka carried an old radio with a taped antenna. He spoke briefly except when someone used the wrong name for a knot in a rope.

Ena was supposed to stay three weeks, long enough to translate signs and train two seasonal workers. She stayed a fourth because she liked working in a cabin that smelled of wood and coffee. Luka showed her where the water changed color before rain. She showed him how to explain to foreign visitors that the ferry did not leave early simply because they had arrived first.

They kissed behind the chair storeroom after a village music evening. Ena laughed because Luka had carefully returned her pencil beforehand. He did not want her thinking he had kept it as a reason to meet again. Afterward they ate breakfast together almost every morning, but he never asked about November, when she was due to leave for six months of work in Brussels.

One day she found her backpack moved into his cabin. Luka said her things would stay dry there. Inside was the ticket she had already bought. She had not hidden it. He saw it and became excessively polite, like someone addressing a passenger near the end of a journey. That afternoon Ena crossed the river without entering the cabin for the first time.

She waited after his shift and asked whether he intended to spend the next two months saying goodbye. Luka admitted he did not know how to love someone who had a departure ticket. She replied that she did not

know either, but would rather try than be written off beforehand. They agreed on one call a week and a first visit without promises of moving that neither could keep.

In Brussels Ena worked longer hours than expected. She missed one call and cut another short for a meeting. Luka did not send angry messages, but finally said their agreement mattered to him. She apologized and changed the time. When he visited, she did not show him only the sights. She showed him the laundry, the grocery shop, and the little table where she spent her evenings.

In spring she returned to the ferry with a new contract allowing her to work from home. It was not the result of one kiss or a reward for his waiting. It was an option they had considered together. Luka placed her backpack on a dry bench and asked whether she wanted coffee. They crossed to the other bank in nine minutes, this time saving no words for the return.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Street Without a Number Yet

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-street-without-a-number-yet/

Irma circled the same building for the third time carrying a parcel that was not heavy, merely stubbornly misaddressed. The new street had no sign yet. Entrance numbers were temporarily stuck on, and rain had removed half. The recipient was Bojan. On the phone he insisted he stood outside the entrance, which was true of at least six men that morning.

They found each other when he described a yellow basin on the balcony above him. Irma handed over the parcel and said the basin could become an official landmark. Bojan had just returned from abroad, and the package contained a little bookshelf, the only furniture he had chosen to buy before a bed. Everything else would come later. Irma thought that order promised either an interesting life or serious disorganization.

The following week she received his address again. This time he waited at the corner holding cardboard with his surname. He offered coffee, but she was mid-shift and declined. He was not offended. He asked when her shift ended and whether she would feel comfortable being invited then. The precise question pleased her more than coffee she would drink while watching the time.

They met on Saturday. Bojan described returning as something that should have been simple because you returned to your own language. But the city had changed, friends had schedules, and his memories included neither new buildings nor his own loneliness. Irma had spent her whole life there yet often felt she merely passed between other people's doors. Knowing addresses did not mean having somewhere she wanted to stay.

They began dating, but Irma refused to collect his parcels outside work. She did not want intimacy becoming a series of small favors only she performed. Bojan felt embarrassed because he had not noticed how easily he used her competence. He learned to visit collection points and find

things himself. He brought stories to their dates rather than new tasks.

When the street sign finally appeared, Bojan sent a photograph. He invited her to dinner without any delivery. Irma found the entrance on her first attempt. Books stood on the shelf, and the bed, he assured her, had arrived too. They ate beside an open window beneath the yellow basin the neighbor still kept on her balcony. For the first time he did not need her as somebody who knew the way. He needed her as the person he wanted to welcome.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Ticket Without a Return Date

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-ticket-without-a-return-date/

Selma arrived from Sweden with two suitcases and a list of things to finish in ten days. Her parents' house stood empty, the grass was high, and the garage key would not turn. A neighbor recommended a locksmith. When Almir appeared, she recognized the little scar beside his eyebrow before recognizing the man who carried it.

As students they had shared notes and once kissed behind a cinema. Then Selma left, Almir married, both divorced, and every visit home became too short for a meeting. While he repaired the lock, she asked whether he remembered the film. He did not. He remembered her looking for a lost glove afterward and refusing his because his hands were always cold.

She invited him to dinner in the house she intended to sell. They ate from mismatched plates among boxes of books. Selma described a life in which everything was organized except her reason for getting up. Almir listened, then showed her a photograph of the small workshop he had recently rented. He had plenty of reasons to get up, mostly bills that did not wait for the right mood.

On the third evening she said she might stay because of him. She expected a smile, perhaps an embrace. Almir put down his glass and said he did not want to become the answer to a question she had not yet asked herself. He had already once been the man for whom somebody stayed in town; afterward every bad winter became his responsibility. Offended, Selma said she was not asking for a guarantee.

"Then don't give me the job of being one," he replied. He left early. The next day she walked through the house alone, opened cupboards, and realized she no longer wanted either to recreate her parents' life or escape her own. She called the agent and kept the sale on track. Then she asked

her employer in Sweden about working remotely for several months without mentioning Almir as a business reason.

They met again on the last day of her visit. She showed him her return ticket and a reservation for a small apartment in spring. She said she would come even if they never kissed again. Almir smiled for the first time that week. "That gives me a much better chance," he said. They walked to the now-closed cinema and discussed things neither knew about the other.

In spring he met her outside the rented apartment. He brought tools rather than flowers because she had asked beforehand whether he could install a shelf. Selma opened the window, placed two cups on the floor, and showed him where she wanted her books. Almir measured the wall. Their first kiss of that visit came only after lunch, without trying to repeat the old one behind the cinema.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Ice Cream for the Whole Stairwell

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/ice-cream-for-the-whole-stairwell/

Harun filled the freezer with ice cream because he expected his grandchildren for the holidays. His daughter changed their arrival date, but the power cut did not follow the new family schedule. After several hours he took tubs, plastic spoons, and began ringing neighbors' bells. He was sixty-two and organizing a gathering for the first time without asking how many people would fit at his table.

They ate in the courtyard on a low wall. Somebody brought crackers, another a thermos of cold coffee. Mila from the top floor appeared in slippers and said this was probably the strangest residents' meeting she had attended. For years Harun knew her only by her red bicycle and the way she held doors for others but never requested help with shopping bags herself.

When the others began leaving, they remained with the final tub. Mila admitted she was in no hurry to return upstairs. She had retired that day without a grand celebration and was surprised how difficult imagining tomorrow morning felt. Harun said his first retirement day began with anger at an alarm clock that no longer had the right to ring. Afterward he set it unnecessarily for months.

They talked until the electricity returned. Windows suddenly lit, refrigerators hummed, and their little gathering lost its excuse. Harun began collecting spoons. Mila asked whether he wanted to walk to the market tomorrow. He said he usually went on Thursdays. She looked at him and laughed: she had not asked about his vegetable schedule. It took him several seconds to understand she had offered a continuation of the evening.

At the market they bought too many peaches and discovered they bargained differently. Mila easily gave up on things; Harun knew every

stallholder well enough to feel obliged to buy. They argued over buying a cracked bowl merely because it was cheap. It was not a serious argument, but it showed their conversation in darkness could withstand daylight too.

They began meeting without awaiting another neighborhood mishap. Once Mila brought ice cream, and Harun showed her the freezer, full again. His grandchildren had finally arrived. She asked whether there was room for her little tub. He moved several packages and said yes, if she could stay for dinner too. She sat at the table, this time not as the last neighbor who had not left but as a woman clearly invited. When the hallway light went out, nobody needed to stop talking.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Bread That Waited for Morning

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bread-that-waited-for-morning/

After finishing his warehouse rounds, Tarik would see Anida through the bakery's rear window, pressing dough with her palms. Between them lay a yard, two locked gates, and the smell of bread arriving before the first shift. They greeted each other with raised hands. This continued for months, until one morning her electricity failed just as she switched on the oven.

Tarik was not an electrician, which he said before crossing the yard. He helped her telephone a repairman and carried the dough into a cool storeroom. They waited on empty crates. Anida talked about her former husband, who thought her work seemed romantic until he had to eat dinner alone. Tarik admitted that his relationships generally failed to survive the third weekend he was on duty.

He invited her for coffee on Saturday. She agreed, forgetting she was filling an order for a hiking club. He forgot he was covering for a sick colleague. They sent apologies in the same minute. Their second attempt failed when Anida fell asleep on the bus and woke at the opposite end of town. Tarik had already eaten two pastries while waiting.

"Perhaps this is telling us something," she said on the phone. She did not want a relationship made of exhausted apologies. Tarik did not promise to change shifts. The job suited him because he helped his brother in a workshop during the afternoons. He asked her not to confuse his schedule with a lack of interest. Anida admitted that she had always accepted other people's hours, then resented nobody noticing hers.

They met on Tuesday at six in the morning, on a bench outside a closed florist. Anida brought warm bread; Tarik brought a thermos of coffee and two clean cups. There was no music or neat tablecloth. A street cleaner had to ask them to lift their feet. Anida laughed so loudly that Tarik

forgot the story about an unusual night patrol he had prepared.

Soon the bakery received an offer of larger premises, with an obligation to open on Sundays. Anida thought aloud while Tarik listened without suggesting she decline for his sake. She calculated the costs and hired an assistant for two mornings a week. She did not do it just for love. For the first time in years she could visit the dentist without closing the shop and sleep through a whole morning without guilt.

Their first Sunday breakfast at home still went wrong. Tarik fell asleep at the table while Anida sliced bread. She draped a dish towel over his shoulders, laughed at the absurdity, and went to fetch a blanket. When he woke, the bread was cold. They ate it with lunch without trying to recreate the morning they had missed.

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The Third Stop After the Bridge

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-third-stop-after-the-bridge/

At half past ten the bus carried six workers, a cook, and a man with a yellow notebook. Sabina, the driver, knew where everyone got off. Only the passenger with the notebook changed stops, sometimes remaining until the turnaround. He had a gray beard and a neatly buttoned coat. He always bought a ticket to the final stop, as though unwilling to owe even an accidental minute of travel.

One rainy evening he left the notebook on his seat. Sabina opened the first page looking for a phone number and saw German words, their pronunciation written in Bosnian letters. Beneath them was a note: "Don't give up just because people can hear your accent." She found the number on the cover. The man returned to the garage, breathless and grateful, and introduced himself as Adnan.

He was preparing to visit his daughter in Austria. His wife, who had died four years earlier, used to speak for him when they traveled. Now he was embarrassed to admit he was afraid of airports. He rode the bus to practice listening to lessons because every sound in his apartment reminded him he was alone. Sabina told him most passengers were practicing something; they simply did not use notebooks.

Over the following weeks he stayed up front once everyone else had left. She quizzed him on words while they waited for departure time at the turnaround. Her German was worse than his, but she knew how to ask questions he could not answer by rote. That was how she learned he loved cooking, hated hotel pillows, and that fifty-seven was not old enough to stop feeling shy.

When he invited her for coffee, Sabina refused. She explained that ten years earlier she had been the woman a friend called only when grief overwhelmed him. She did not want to occupy the spare seat again.

Adnan fell silent, then said he could not prove he missed her specifically while seeing her every evening. His trip was scheduled for the following Monday.

From Austria he sent her a photograph of a pastry he had bought by mistake. His second message was about his grandson, the third about the weather. He wrote the fourth without a picture: he missed the way she briefly raised an eyebrow before a difficult question. Sabina replied only after her shift. She sent her days off, explaining that she usually drank coffee in the morning, when she was no longer driving anyone.

After his return he waited at the third stop after the bridge. Sabina arrived on foot, out of uniform, and nearly walked past him. He had the yellow notebook on the cafe table. He showed her a new page, two restaurant addresses and several empty lines. He had not planned the whole day in advance. Sabina ordered strong coffee, took his pencil, and wrote down the address of the place that made the best fried dough.

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A Place for a Wet Coat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-place-for-a-wet-coat/

Jasna inherited a house in the village of Brijesce and a box of books that smelled of apples. She rented out the house but offered the books to the old reading room. Outside its door she found Omer, the carpenter, trying to raise a window stuck with paint. She was forty-three and had last seen him at her own wedding, where he had repaired a broken chair.

She was now divorced, and he was a widower. The neighboring women exchanged those facts before the two of them managed to say hello. Jasna brought coffee in a thermos. Omer declined sugar and asked whether she was staying all winter. She said she did not know yet. In the city she was waiting to hear from a publisher to whom she had offered a translation.

They worked on Saturdays. She copied out titles; he made shelves from boards rescued from a closed shop. When she suggested a coat rack with two large hooks, Omer said it needed at least ten. Jasna laughed: she meant his workshop, where her coat always ended up on a bag of sawdust. He continued measuring the wall.

One evening snow buried their car. They waited for a neighbor's tractor, eating crackers beside a heater. Omer admitted that two years earlier he had fallen in love with a woman who came from the city every Friday. On Sundays she would tell him the village was her true home. After summer she never returned. He did not resent her departure, only the way she had spent so long arranging cups as though she meant to stay.

Jasna put down her cracker. "I can't promise you a winter just to earn somewhere to hang my coat." Omer said he had never asked that. "You have, only without words," she replied. They heard the tractor before he could think of an answer. The following Saturday they worked quietly, leaving more space between their tables than they needed.

The publisher's offer arrived on Tuesday. She could work from home, but meetings required travel. She went to Omer with a schedule, not a suitcase. She said she wanted to try being with him, while keeping a place of her own and the right not to have work trips interpreted as abandonment. He studied the dates for a long time, then asked whether he could sometimes meet her at the station.

There were not enough chairs at the reading room's opening. Omer brought two from his workshop, and Jasna set the coffee on a new shelf. After the ceremony he showed her the coat rack he had made behind his own door. It had six hooks. "Guests have coats too," he said. Jasna hung up her wet coat, left her travel bag at her feet, and kissed him before he could promise anything.

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A Sunday That Asked for No Argument

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-sunday-that-asked-for-no-argument/

Rain ruined their plan for a walk, and Luka merely moved his sneakers out of the way and asked whether Irena wanted tea. It almost offended her. She had spent the morning getting ready, changed her blouse twice, and arrived intending for them to go somewhere together. He was not angry at the weather, did not sigh, and did not think Sunday required rescuing with an elaborate new plan. He poured some water and took two mismatched mugs from the cupboard.

In her previous relationship, Irena had known the schedule of excitement well. An argument was followed by flowers, long conversations, and the feeling that they had chosen one another again despite everything. Quiet days meant waiting for the next explosion. She had been seeing Luka for four months. He remembered arrangements, called when he was running late, and did not demand proof that she cared. Sometimes this made her suspect that he did not really care very much about her either.

He sat beside her with a book while their tea cooled. Irena asked what he was reading, then interrupted his answer to comment on the rain. She did this several times, looking for a stronger reaction. Luka lowered the book. "I'd like to finish these two pages," he said, slightly impatiently. "Then we can talk." For a moment her heart quickened, as though something familiar had finally appeared. She waited for a continuation that never came.

While he read, she noticed he had adjusted a cushion behind her back and left enough room for her to stretch her legs. On a plate were the peaches she liked, already washed. He did not look absent. He looked like a man who was comfortable in a room where she was also sitting. When he closed the book, she asked whether she bored him. He looked surprised. "No. Do I bore you?" This time she could not answer quickly.

She said she sometimes missed feeling that something important was happening. Luka waited. She tried explaining the reconciliations, the relief, and her fear that an absence of drama meant an absence of desire. He did not tell her what sort of person she was or why she thought that way. He simply admitted he did not know how to compete with people after whom she first had to stop crying. Irena felt ashamed but stayed seated. She said she had not come looking for a competition. She was trying to learn what to do with an ordinary good Sunday.

Luka suggested starting with the peaches. She took one, cut it with the knife he brought, and offered him half. Juice dripped onto the blouse she had chosen so carefully. They both reached for the same napkin, then laughed. The rain continued. Irena rested her head against his shoulder and asked him to read the passage that had made him want to finish the chapter. She did not try to guess when the mood in the room would change.

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Voices from a Small Box

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/voices-from-a-small-box/

The answering machine lay in a box with extension cords, a broken flashlight, and instructions for a stove they no longer owned. Rada wanted to throw it away. Jusuf said they should first check whether it still worked, in the same tone he had used for years to postpone parting with every useless appliance. He plugged it in beside the kitchen table. When he pressed the button, his much younger voice emerged from the little box.

"My Rada, I've bought cherries. If you don't come and eat them with me, I'll make myself sick on them." Traffic sounded in the background, followed by his brief laugh before the message ended. Rada remembered the phone booth beside his old workshop. He called from there when he was heading home before her and did not know when her shift would finish. She did not remember the cherries. She was surprised that somebody could say her name with such obvious pleasure at an ordinary homecoming.

The next message was hers. She said she would be late and asked him to save her the warm side of the bed. She added something quietly, then laughed to herself. Jusuf turned up the volume. Rada reached to lower it, both suddenly shy in their own kitchen. For years they had left each other brief messages about bread, bills, and appointments. When one traveled, they ended the conversation by asking whether the other had remembered their charger.

"We were quite sweet," Rada said. Jusuf replied that they had probably been unbearable to everyone around them. He expected her to laugh, but she continued sorting cables. Then he switched off the machine. He asked whether she missed those days. She did not miss the cramped apartment or constantly worrying whether his workshop would survive another month. She missed hearing that he was pleased she was the particular

person coming through the door.

Jusuf said surely she knew that. Rada nodded. She knew from the way he warmed her car in winter, bought her favorite tart apples, and slowed down when they walked uphill. Nevertheless, she sometimes wanted to hear a word too. She was not asking for a speech. He wiped the dust from the answering machine's cord and admitted that he also thought he would sound ridiculous using her old nickname now. It was strange how much easier they found it to discuss their love of twenty years ago than their love today.

They carried the box into the cupboard, but the machine remained on the shelf. Two days later, Jusuf returned from the market without apples because they had not been any good. Rada opened the door and, out of habit, asked whether he had bought bread. Then she came back from the hallway, placed a hand on his cheek, and said she was glad he had arrived. Jusuf stood with the bags in his hands. "So am I, my Rada," he answered, a little too loudly, as though he were speaking from the noisy phone booth again.

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A Conversation After Work

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-conversation-after-work/

On dates, Darija often postponed the question about work until the second coffee. She arranged funerals and could predict almost exactly where the conversation would go. Somebody would try to be funny. Somebody would remember a death in the family and spend half the evening describing someone else's mistake. After their third meeting, one man sent her a competitor's price list and asked whether she could arrange a cheaper offer for his uncle. They did not meet again.

She met Irfan at a pottery class. They had both enrolled in the beginners' group, and her first bowl resembled a hat run over by a bicycle. Irfan made a heavy, ugly candlestick and stubbornly took it home. When he invited her for coffee, she agreed because she liked the way he carried his failure, carefully, in both hands. He arrived in the same blue shirt whose sleeve he had dipped into the clay the previous week.

He asked where she worked before the waiter brought their order. Darija answered and had already drawn breath to steer the conversation. Irfan nodded. Then he asked whether she liked her job. He did not request her most unusual funeral story or mention somebody who would soon need help. She said she liked being useful to people when thinking was difficult for them, but that after a hard day she sometimes wanted to listen to completely silly music.

"How silly?" he asked. Darija named a song she would probably tell her friends she only heard on the radio by accident. Irfan immediately knew the chorus. He sang it quietly, out of tune, with the wrong final word. She corrected him before managing to suppress her laughter. They continued talking about music, dreadful jackets from their youth, and her unsuccessful attempt to learn roller-skating. She could not remember the last time she had told anybody that story.

As they were leaving, her work phone rang. She saw her colleague's name and answered briefly, confirming the time for the following morning. Irfan waited, holding the door. Darija began explaining why people called in the evenings too. She stopped when she realized nobody had accused her of anything. "You don't have to account to me for one phone call," he said. He offered his hand because there was a puddle outside the entrance, and she kept holding it after they reached the dry pavement.

At home she called to ask whether he had seriously intended to display his candlestick in the living room. He sent a photograph of the ugly object beside neatly arranged books. On a blank sheet of paper, Darija drew an even uglier bowl she wanted to make the following week. A difficult working day awaited her in the morning. Tonight she was choosing a color for something that would be useful to nobody, except perhaps the two of them.

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A Night with the Sound of a Machine

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-night-with-the-sound-of-a-machine/

Jela brought an overnight bag and a second bag she immediately placed beneath a chair. She had been dating Omer for three months. They were in their fifties, had grown children, and enough experience not to rush something they enjoyed. Dinner was good, the conversation even better. Still, she kept looking toward the chair. The second bag held the machine and mask she used while sleeping, a part of her life far less elegant than the dress she had chosen.

She mentioned it only when Omer asked whether she wanted more tea. She explained that she needed an outlet near the bed. She did not discuss her condition in detail, only what he would hear and see that night. He got up to move the bedside table. That simple response almost made her cry. She had prepared for a joke, an uncomfortable question, perhaps even a polite withdrawal of the invitation to stay. She had prepared no answer to an ordinary search for an outlet.

While unpacking, she said she did not look particularly attractive in the mask. Omer did not reply that she looked perfect in everything. He said he did not know because he had not seen her yet. Then he opened a little box and showed her the mouthguard he wore to bed. He did not present it as a competition in embarrassment. He simply took it out of the place where it had been hidden, as another object needing space beside the bed.

Jela laughed, then asked him not to watch while she fitted the mask. He turned away. A few moments later she invited him to look. They switched off the main lamp, and she waited to become somebody's difficulty. He asked whether the bedside light was too bright. She said yes. He moved it. She could not believe how exhausting the conversation that never happened had been, a whole evening of rejection performed in advance inside her own head.

Neither slept particularly well. The bed was narrower than Jela was used to, and Omer tried too long to lie motionless so he would not disturb her. Toward morning she told him he could turn over. He admitted that his back already hurt. They laughed softly and cautiously, like people who had finally stopped performing their own simplicity. It was no perfect first night. There were many cables, adjustments, and one missing pillow.

In the morning Jela found her second bag open on the chair. She no longer hurried to hide it. While she washed her face, Omer asked whether next time he could visit her, where they might both sleep more comfortably. She said yes. They kissed in the kitchen, before coffee and before explaining how they looked after a bad night. The dress hung creased over a chair back, by far the least important thing she had brought.

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The Gift I Did Not Have to Choose

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-gift-i-did-not-have-to-choose/

Tarik asked Alma what she wanted for her birthday while she was choosing detergent at the supermarket. She said she did not know. He told her to think about it and send him a link so he would not buy the wrong thing. He was reasonable as always. He never forgot the date, never begrudged the expense, and reliably ordered and wrapped whatever she chose. Yet she stood before the detergent shelves feeling a weariness that could not possibly belong to that question alone.

At home she opened several shops on her phone. Everything she really needed was already on her shopping plan. Everything that might delight her required deciding first whether she deserved the expense. Eventually she closed the screen and told Tarik that this year she wanted a gift she did not choose herself. He laughed, thinking she was giving him a puzzle. She had no secret correct answer. That was precisely what she wanted to stop carrying in her head.

He reminded her of a coat he had once bought and she had exchanged. She remembered. She also remembered how his disappointment had made it the last gift he selected himself. Ever since, they had both preserved peace the same way: she decided, he paid, and then they pretended the box was a surprise. She did not accuse him of failing to know her. She asked whether he could bear knowing her imperfectly.

On her birthday she received a large box. Inside were binoculars for watching birds and a small plain notebook. Tarik said she had stopped their walks six times the previous spring to point out birds whose names she did not know. Alma did not remember. She did when she opened the notebook and found a rough drawing of their usual route. The binoculars were heavy, too large for her small hands. But somebody had noticed something she had not yet turned into a task.

They went out that afternoon. Alma could not adjust the image and initially saw only blurred branches. Tarik offered to try together, then admitted he did not know how either. They laughed at their own serious faces beside an empty tree. Eventually they spotted an entirely ordinary crow. Alma watched it much longer than the sight deserved, pleased that nothing that day needed to justify itself with a grand result.

The following week they exchanged the binoculars for a lighter pair. Tarik went with her and did not look wounded. She kept the notebook. Instead of bird names she recorded the dates of their walks and little things that happened. The first entry said the crow had escaped before the photograph. Beneath it Tarik later added that the gift had worked after all, even though they had spent half the afternoon looking in the wrong direction.

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The Name That Was Not Mine

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-name-that-was-not-mine/

I first saw the tattoo while Petar rolled up his sleeves to wash the dishes. It said Elena, in small letters on the inside of his arm. We had been together for only a month. For a moment I thought something so embarrassing that my face became hot. Then he saw where I was looking and said the name was older than our acquaintance. Of course it was. Still, I had to sit down, as though both possibilities had startled me equally.

He said he had got the tattoo at twenty-two. The woman it belonged to now lived far away, and they were not in contact. He said nothing unkind about her, which I respected and simultaneously, quite unfairly, resented. It would have been easier if he had immediately declared her a mistake. Instead he said they had loved each other, then parted badly, and his arm did not have to remain his enemy for the rest of his life.

Over the following days I noticed the name everywhere. While he held a cup, held a door for me, laughed and moved his hands. It was no more visible than before; I was simply searching for it now. A friend said I had acquired a man with a ready-made dedication. I laughed and felt worse afterward. I did not want to be a convenient replacement for an old girlfriend, a woman for whom even the ink need not change.

I told Petar one evening. He asked whether I thought he had chosen me because of my name. I said I did not think so, but sometimes felt that way. He did not try to prove his love by promising to erase his skin. He asked what happened between us when I stopped looking at the tattoo. The question initially angered me. Then I thought of our long conversations, the different things we remembered, and how often I had been happy before I started checking his arm.

It did not vanish overnight. Once I asked him to wear long sleeves to dinner with my friends and immediately heard what I was asking. I withdrew the request. He said he understood why it was difficult, but did not want to spend a new relationship concealing evidence of an old one. That was a harder answer than a promise. I could accept it or leave; I could not turn the other Elena into someone who had never existed.

At summer's end we went swimming. He held my things while I tied my hair, the name turned toward the sun. For the first time I did not read it to the end. I watched him balance two bags and my sandals, muttering that I had brought half the house. I took one bag. I was the Elena standing there with wet shoulders, and that day I did not need another place on his skin.

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The Sister I Did Not Resemble

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-sister-i-did-not-resemble/

When she met Amir, Nera immediately told him she had an identical twin. It was easier to finish that subject before it became a surprise. He asked whether they lived near each other. He did not ask which was older, which was prettier, or whether they had ever swapped boyfriends. Because of that, she agreed to a second coffee. After the third she told her sister she had met someone who had not yet tried to be funny at their expense.

Then they encountered him at the market. Nera was choosing tomatoes several stalls away while her sister waited with the bags. Amir approached her sister wearing a smile Nera recognized as hers. She saw the moment when her sister explained the mistake and his hand dropped to his side. By the time she arrived, they were both being polite. Amir apologized. Nera said it happened all the time, in the tone she normally used to end discussions of things that nevertheless bothered her.

That evening she canceled their plans. She did not feel like being a woman a man recognized only after somebody else introduced herself. Her sister called and said expecting a miracle from someone who had known her for two weeks was unfair. Nera knew she was right. Still, she remembered a former partner saying he could distinguish them because the other sister was always more cheerful. That little compliment had stayed with her longer than their relationship.

She told Amir the truth the next day. He listened, then admitted he still struggled to distinguish them at a distance. He offered no list of differences, inspected no birthmarks, sought no proof in their eyes. He asked whether, when uncertain, he could simply ask if it was her. It sounded insufficiently romantic. Then she realized how tired she was of men who would invent a special power rather than admit an ordinary mistake. She agreed and suggested they have dinner after all.

A month later both sisters attended the same birthday party. From the kitchen Amir heard Nera arguing about an open window and brought her a sweater without looking through the doorway. Her sister noticed before she did. There was no grand demonstration of recognition. He simply knew the voice of a woman with whom he had already argued about the same thing, and remembered that in ten minutes she would say she was cold.

On the way home Nera asked whether they still looked so alike to him. He said yes, especially in childhood photographs. She did not get angry. She showed him one on her phone and let him guess incorrectly. Then she explained why she was sulking in that picture. Her sister had the same dress and the same smile Nera could produce. She did not have that story, and Amir listened to all of it.

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The Place of Our First Kiss

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-place-of-our-first-kiss/

Adnan turned toward the bridge while Dunja turned toward the passage beside the closed pastry shop. They both stopped and laughed. They were celebrating fifteen years together and had agreed to walk to the place where they first kissed. Dunja was certain about the passage. She remembered the cold wall against her back and his wet jacket. Adnan pointed at the bridge, almost offended by the precision with which she rejected his memory.

In his version it was a clear evening. She wore a blue scarf, the river smelled of summer, and he kissed her after she said something that made them laugh. Dunja had received that scarf two years later. She told him so. He replied that perhaps the scarf had not been blue, as though changing its color might rescue the entire event. They continued walking, each slightly ahead of the other.

At the pastry shop she showed him the spot. He had kissed her after her grocery bag split and oranges scattered through the rain. She was tired, angry at the ruined day, and convinced that he was following her out of pity. Adnan remembered the fruit. He remembered bringing an orange home in his pocket. But he did not remember the kiss. Dunja's expression changed. She asked how he could forget the thing that had enabled her to call him again the following day.

He said he had thought she kissed him merely to say thank you. That was why he had been terribly nervous on the bridge several days later. Dunja sat on the low wall. For fifteen years she had told her friends he had never feared rejection. Now he stood before her admitting that he had kept that orange on the kitchen table for days because he did not know what the event meant. She could not decide whether to laugh or feel sorry.

They went to the bridge as well. Adnan could not remember the joke that had made them laugh. Dunja said it probably had not been particularly good. This time he did not defend the memory. They stood against the railing, trying to separate what they had experienced from what they had subsequently retold so often. Some things fell apart as soon as they touched them. Others, like the wet jacket and the orange, remained unusually clear.

On the way back they bought two oranges. Dunja did not want a new perfect story for their next anniversary. She wanted Adnan to carry the bag because her hands were cold. Outside their building she kissed him, then asked whether he knew what it meant. He said he would check again tomorrow just in case. She laughed while finding her key. They did not have to declare this kiss their first or their best to take it home.

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The Back of a Head I Did Not Know

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-back-of-a-head-i-did-not-know/

Mirko brought the clippers into the kitchen like a man handing something over for repair. His barber had retired, the other one was too expensive, and his hair was already touching his ears. Vera said she had only ever cut their children's hair, long ago and badly. He pulled out a chair. They had been married for thirty years, and she knew that movement, the way it turned his request into her agreement.

She agreed anyway. She draped an old sheet over his shoulders and secured it with a clothespin. Mirko immediately began explaining how the barber used to do it. Vera switched off the clippers. She said he could have her hands or continue talking to the man who had just retired from the business. After a brief silence he lowered his chin. It felt strange to see him obedient, his large hands resting quietly on his knees.

Beneath the hair she found a small pale scar. She asked where it came from. He said he had fallen as a boy while trying to climb through a window after coming home too late. His mother let him believe until morning that he had fooled the entire household. Vera knew the story of the fall, but she had always imagined a knee. She traced a finger above the scar, carefully, so the plastic attachment would not scratch him.

Mirko laughed and then went quiet. In the little cabinet mirror she saw him looking at the gray hairs on the sheet. He said the back of his head would look old now. Vera almost told him he was being silly. Instead she said her own neck had frightened her in a photograph the previous week. They never discussed this. For years they had mentioned aging through bills, medical results, and jokes, never like this, with one sitting while the other held his head.

Behind his left ear she cut one patch too short. Mirko felt it and offered no instructions. She finished as best she could, shook out the sheet, and

gave him a handheld mirror. He inspected himself for a long time, then said he looked like a director who had cut his own expenses. Vera laughed so hard she had to sit down. For the first time that morning she was not busy doing something for him.

After lunch he suggested a walk. At the door he reached for his cap, hesitated, and left it on the shelf. Vera noticed the bare patch, but it no longer looked like a mistake. While they waited for the light to change, she touched the back of his head. He turned, surprised by that public tenderness. She did not ask whether he would find another barber next time. She kissed him where she could reach.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Leaving Without Slamming the Door

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/leaving-without-slamming-the-door/

Two apartment listings lay on the table. In one city Luka had work he wanted to keep; in another Merima had an opportunity near her sister and nephews. Four years together had taken them through enough difficult days to believe they could solve this too. They discussed trains, visits, and possible relocation. Every plan appeared reasonable until one tried imagining their own morning inside it.

Luka loved his city, small circle of friends, and work that made him peaceful rather than wealthy. Merima wanted a different pace and proximity to family she had seen only briefly for years. Neither lied about it. Yet they long behaved as though enough love would produce a third possibility where nobody lost what mattered. They searched calendars for it, exhausted by their own reasonableness.

One evening Merima said she did not want to move merely on trial. She wanted genuinely to leave without constantly holding open a return she did not plan. Luka admitted he did not want a relationship sustained by journeys for years. It was no ultimatum, but an answer delayed because he knew its meaning. They sat on the floor beside the sofa without papers between them and, for the first time, stopped repairing the plan.

They did not part that evening like people in a tidy story. They negotiated several more times, embraced, argued over something small, and reached the same place again. Then they divided belongings. Merima took cups she had brought; Luka kept the plant he watered more. They did not return presents like evidence needing removal. Some things had no clear owner, so they divided them by simply asking who needed them more.

On departure day Luka helped carry her cases downstairs. He did not accompany her to the station because she said a platform goodbye was too hard. They embraced outside the building, long and awkwardly.

Merima cried, and he did not say everything would be fine. He said he would miss her. It was truthful enough without needing to comfort. She left, and he closed the door carefully, as on any other day.

Months later they exchanged brief messages. She was adapting to the new job; he had begun seeing friends again. They did not use every good day to prove the separation correct or every bad one to prove a mistake. Once Merima took out the book he had given her and read until late. Luka watered the plant. Life continued with traces of love they need not declare a failure to stop living together.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Anniversary Without a Reserved Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-anniversary-without-a-reserved-table/

On their twentieth anniversary Jasmin put on the jacket he had last taken from the wardrobe exactly a year earlier. Aida stood at the mirror choosing between two dresses unsuited to a warm evening. They had reserved the same table at the restaurant of their first dinner. Every year they repeated the journey, ordered similar dishes, and posed before the same window. Friends called having a tradition wonderful. Nobody asked whether they still enjoyed it.

In recent years Jasmin barely tolerated the loud music replacing the former quiet. Aida disliked sitting so long in clothes she wanted to remove immediately. Each believed the restaurant meant a great deal to the other. They silently maintained the custom like an old plant nobody liked anymore but feared ceasing to water. That evening Jasmin lost patience with a cuff button and cursed loudly enough for Aida to hear from the bathroom.

She asked whether he wanted to go at all. He said of course; it was their anniversary. Aida repeated the question more slowly. Looking at her in the mirror, he admitted not wanting the restaurant. She sat on the bed, surprised by relief, and said neither did she. They laughed for several minutes at the dinners spent protecting the other's supposed wish. Then Jasmin canceled early enough that the restaurant would not wait for them.

They changed into ordinary clothes and went out without a reservation. They bought roasted corn and sat beside a playground. Aida said this did not resemble an important anniversary. Jasmin replied that he could produce a ring from his pocket but had no second one. She laughed while butter ran over her fingers. They did not try repeating youth. They

discussed things they could not have known then: children, work, exhaustion, and funny habits they developed.

Later they passed the old restaurant. Through its window they saw their table and another couple looking perfectly happy at it. Aida did not feel they had betrayed anything. The place remained part of their story without needing the same continuation annually. Jasmin took her hand and suggested ice cream. They chose different flavors, as they once did before finding a shared one neither liked best.

The following year they spent the anniversary at home because it rained. They created no new compulsory tradition with corn and a bench. Jasmin took out his jacket for cleaning, and Aida asked where he was going now. He said nowhere; he merely wanted it ready when he actually wished to wear it. She kissed him in the hallway, without a window behind them requiring another photograph.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Postcard from the Same City

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-postcard-from-the-same-city/

The first postcard came from the man with whom I had shared coffee that morning. Its front showed a bridge in our city; the reverse held lines about a bench from which we had never viewed it. He signed his full name as though we were still getting acquainted. I thought he had forgotten an anniversary and invented something unusual. When asked, Miran said it marked no date. He simply wanted to tell me something other than asking whether we had bread.

We had lived together eleven years. Our messages were orderly and useful: coming late, buy detergent, call the repairman. We lacked neither trust nor shared evenings. We lacked the surprise of another person seeing something alone and bringing a story that solved no problem. I kept the postcard on the table for days, slightly embarrassed that an object replaceable by one message mattered so much.

Then I visited a part of town I scarcely knew. I sought no secret or landmark. I sat in a small park behind a shop, watching a man repeatedly try opening an oversized umbrella among branches. I bought an ordinary postcard and described the scene to Miran. At the post office I felt foolish paying to send paper to an apartment I would reach myself in half an hour. I posted it anyway.

His next postcard described a bad sandwich; mine, an unusually lovely passage between buildings. We did not compete over finding more interesting places. Once he wrote about sitting at a stop and realizing how long it had been since he listened to strangers' conversations. I admitted feeling lonely on my little outing and wanting to call him immediately. He read beside me without needing to repair an afternoon already past.

Sometimes we began visiting postcard places together. The bridge looked no more magical and the sandwich remained bad, but stories made the

spaces ours differently. Miran kissed me in the passage I described, then apologized to a man whose way we blocked. We laughed all the way home. Nobody had returned us to our relationship's first year. We simply stopped assuming that after eleven years we already knew everything the other might notice.

Now postcards arrive rarely. We do not want another obligation. The latest had a blank front intended for drawing. Miran drew our table crookedly, without perspective, and wrote that today he had nothing farther away to show me. I placed it beside my cup. That evening we ate there and talked longer than the food needed to cool.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Exit from the Haunted House

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-exit-from-the-haunted-house/

Sara loved fairground haunted houses. She enjoyed knowing she would be frightened, scream, and immediately laugh. When she asked Vedran to join her, he said of course. In truth he disliked even corridors where the light switched on slowly. But Sara looked happy, and he imagined her holding his hand afterward, grateful to be with someone afraid of nothing.

At the entrance he already began talking too much. He commented on plastic spiders, poor music, and the actor obviously wearing a rubber mask. Sara laughed, assuming playfulness. In the second room something struck behind a wall, and Vedran jumped so sharply he dropped his ticket. He tried laughing, but his palm grew sweaty. He was not ashamed of being frightened once. He was ashamed of knowing it would happen at every subsequent step.

At the curtain leading farther inside, he stopped. Sara went ahead, then returned when he did not follow. He said he did not want to continue. At first she assumed another joke. When he repeated it seriously, she looked around and asked an attendant for the exit. She neither demanded he endure a little longer nor pulled him ahead insisting it was not frightening. They emerged into daylight beside a store of empty boxes.

Vedran expected teasing. Instead Sara asked whether he wanted to sit. He said he had spoiled her fun. She replied that walking beside someone suffering while pretending otherwise was less enjoyable. She did not stop loving haunted houses because he disliked them. She simply did not believe the evening had to end along the route they entered. She bought candy floss and offered some without joking about consoling a child.

They sat on a low wall while the fairground's rhythm returned around them. Vedran admitted wanting to appear brave. Sara said she needed no

bodyguard against rubber masks. Then she described fearing reaching into a deep kitchen cupboard because she always imagined a spider. Vedran laughed only once she did. He did not use it to even the score between their fears.

They ended the evening on a gentle miniature sightseeing train. Sara held his hand exactly as he had imagined, but not because of his performance of courage. The following year she entered the haunted house with a friend while Vedran waited with hot drinks. On emerging, breathless and happy, she kissed him outside. He did not ask who had protected her inside. He knew she chose him for entirely different reasons.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Letter That Arrived on Time

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-letter-that-arrived-on-time/

When Nevena raised her voice, Luka reached for his jacket. It was his old way of preventing a larger conflict: go out, walk, return when words settled. Nevena saw something else. A man left during an important conversation, abandoning her with anger and the message that her voice was unbearable. She stood before the door, not to block him physically but to ask whether he would return at all.

The argument began over an ordinary arrangement they remembered differently. They were supposed to help a friend move, while Nevena believed they had reserved the afternoon for themselves. Instead of checking messages, they discussed every earlier situation where the other supposedly failed to listen. Within ten minutes the move disappeared from the conversation. Only their worst fears remained, spoken as reliable facts about the other person.

Luka said he needed air. Nevena said she needed an answer. They stood in the hall, each convinced they requested something reasonable. Then Luka put down his jacket and took paper from the kitchen table. He wrote that he wanted to continue talking, was not leaving the relationship, and would return in half an hour. It was no love letter saved among memories. The handwriting was ugly, with one word crossed out.

Nevena read it and moved aside. While walking, Luka did not prepare a better attack. He tried considering what to say without claiming she was always the same. At home Nevena sat, drank water, and stopped sending messages that would keep him in the argument outside. It was not easy. Yet the paper lay on the table as a concrete agreement they could verify, not a promise never to argue again.

He returned when promised. First they resolved the move. Then they discussed what pausing an argument meant to each. Nevena did not

demand Luka stay until losing control of his voice. He did not demand she calmly wait indefinitely. They agreed on a pause with a beginning and end, so neither must interpret intention from slammed doors or a switched off phone.

The paper stayed on the refrigerator several days before Nevena put it in a drawer. Later they had worse arguments, as well as long good evenings requiring no paper. Once she said she needed half an hour. Luka nodded and asked whether she wanted tea on returning. He did not follow her to the door with questions. For the first time both knew staying together sometimes meant letting the other briefly leave and truly welcoming their return.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Menu We Could Not Read

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-menu-we-could-not-read/

Vesna left her reading glasses in her bag, and Mladen left his in the car. Neither knew the other's decision. They sat in a restaurant with small table lamps and a menu whose letters were thinner than the twigs in a decorative vase. Vesna held it farther away. Mladen moved it closer to the lamp. Both looked serious, as though choosing a particularly important dish, while actually unable to read half the choices.

A friend had introduced them, and this was their first outing alone. They were old enough not to expect perfection, at least theoretically. Yet Vesna wanted to look carefree and Mladen younger than the photograph their friend had selected. Glasses seemed a small thing they could skip. Neither predicted that this small choice would require ten minutes of negotiation with unreadable paper.

Vesna pointed at a line she thought described fish. Mladen ordered the same, grateful not to choose further. The waiter asked whether they were sure they wanted two portions. Both said yes. When a large bowl of cold fruit salad arrived, they exchanged identical surprise. Vesna asked first whether there had been a mixup.

The waiter pointed at the exact line. Mladen was still trying to distinguish letters when Vesna produced her glasses. She read, paused, and began laughing. She admitted she had not seen what she ordered. Mladen lowered the menu and said his glasses were waiting in the car, probably more intelligently than he was. The waiter laughed only once they were already laughing, then suggested sharing the salad and choosing something else.

Mladen went out for his glasses. While waiting, Vesna calmly read the whole menu for the first time. On returning he asked her not to tell their friend, then added that he certainly would because the story was too

good. Vesna showed him the dish she actually wanted. They ordered differently, without inventing similarities even in dinner.

The conversation improved. They discussed things they no longer did as before and things they did more easily: refusing bad company, choosing comfortable shoes, going home when tired. They did not make age a contest in self acceptance. Mladen still occasionally removed his glasses while speaking, and Vesna positioned herself toward light she liked.

On the second date she brought spare glasses in case they forgot something again. Mladen brought a large print book and wrote an invitation to a third dinner on its first page. Vesna accepted on condition that she could read the whole menu. They never ordered the fruit salad again. Yet both remembered it as the best beginning to a dinner they did not know how to choose.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Lunch Without a Plan

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-lunch-without-a-plan/

Adisa reserved a table, checked the menu, and even called to ask about a quieter area. It was her first invitation to Denis after four dates he had mostly arranged. She wanted to show she noticed what he liked. When they arrived, the restaurant was closed because of an unexpected kitchen problem. A message waited on her silenced phone. Denis shrugged and said they could go elsewhere. Adisa was already listing everything she must fix.

She called two places, opened a map, and spoke increasingly quickly. Denis suggested sandwiches on a bench, but it sounded to her like politely accepting something inferior. She was an adult who managed complex work, yet one closed restaurant made her feel like a girl with an incorrectly completed assignment. She apologized for spoiling his Sunday. He checked his watch and replied that Sunday had barely begun.

They bought food in a small shop and walked to the water. Adisa realized she had forgotten napkins and apologized again. Denis produced crumpled paper tissues from his pocket. He said the date would receive no grade and there was no hidden complaints form. She laughed but did not immediately believe it. In her previous relationship every small mistake became proof she had not tried enough. Now she voiced criticism first, hoping he would not need to.

Denis did not tell her to forget everything. He asked whether she really wanted to eat there or agreed only because he suggested it. She looked at the river, food in her lap, and people passing without particular plans. She said she wanted to. Only then did she begin feeling hungry. They discussed ordinary things: his untidy wardrobe, her old bicycle, a neighbor who always greeted people too loudly. Nothing belonged in a perfect account of a date.

When rain began, they moved beneath a shelter. Denis spilled the remaining drink on his shoe and briefly grew angry. Adisa felt relieved that he too did not turn every inconvenience into a wise lesson. She gave him the last tissue. They laughed afterward, when the shoe was no longer the main event. He kissed her while they waited for lighter rain, their hands still sticky from food.

Next time Adisa reserved another table. She did not want to become spontaneous merely because one improvisation worked. But she did not check the confirmation three times. She sent Denis the address and added that if the plan fell apart, they would find something else. He replied that he was bringing napkins. The small joke did not deny her effort. It simply left enough room for an ordinary Sunday to be good.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Silence After Good News

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-silence-after-good-news/

When the acceptance message arrived, I ran from the room and showed Ognjen my phone. It was the job for which I had studied for months, submitted applications, and turned our table into piles of notes. He hugged me, said he was proud, then fell silent. His face did not look celebratory. The offer included several months in another city. We had known from the beginning, but only now had it become real.

I immediately asked whether he wanted me to refuse. He said no. I did not believe him because I imagined support as joy without remainder. I said he was spoiling my happiest day, and he retreated to the kitchen to wash glasses. Later it hurt to remember how quickly I turned his sadness into a demand he never voiced. I was accustomed to love being proven by how well another person concealed their own loss.

That evening he said he wanted me to go and was simultaneously sad that we would live apart for a while. He did not ask me to resolve that feeling by declining. He wanted permission to be sad without accusation that he was holding me back. I sat beside him and admitted I feared leaving too, so needed his complete enthusiasm as confirmation that my decision was safe. Each expected an emotion from the other to make our own easier.

We spent the following days planning ordinary matters. When to talk, how to divide visiting expenses, what to do about plants and arriving parcels. We did not make the plan a promise that no evening would be difficult. Ognjen came suitcase shopping with me. When I chose an oversized one, he laughed and said a few months did not require moving the whole apartment. For the first time that day laughter concealed nothing.

I had good and bad days in the new city. Sometimes I hesitated to tell him things were hard, afraid he would think I should not have gone. He never

said that. He listened, then described his day, which continued without me. On his first visit he did not assess how much better my new life was. He helped find a shop open late and met the colleague with whom I drank coffee.

Months later I returned with more belongings than the suitcase could hold. Ognjen welcomed me happily and slightly awkwardly, accustomed to his own routine. This time I did not call his uncertainty a lack of love. I left my bags by the wall, sat beside him, and asked how he wanted to spend the evening. The good news of returning, like the news of leaving, was allowed more than one feeling.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Love on Two Leashes

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/love-on-two-leashes/

My dog liked almost everyone, so I promised Harun our first shared outing would be simple. He said the same of his female dog. At the park entrance the animals barked at each other so loudly that we ended up on opposite sides of the path, apologizing to passersby. Harun tried smiling to soften the situation. I held the leash and wondered why my dog's behavior felt like an assessment of the man I wanted to date.

We had met without dogs at a friend's dinner. We talked for hours, and our shared love of animals seemed extra good fortune. I pictured long walks together, two leashes, and a little household that assembled itself. After the first encounter Harun suggested going out alone next time. I thought he was abandoning an important part of my life, though he merely wanted coffee without competing to be heard.

We tried several more short walks at a distance, without forcing closeness. Sometimes it was calmer; sometimes we returned early. I made no general advice about animals from it and expected no miracle. Yet I stubbornly added up their reactions as signs our relationship could not progress. Harun noticed my disappointment after every unsuccessful walk and asked whether he was choosing my dog as a friend or me as a partner.

The question hurt because it exposed my secretly simple picture of love. I wanted everything to fit without remainder: people, animals, schedules, apartments. Harun loved his dog and would not remove her from his life to prove devotion. Nor did I want to remove mine. We could seek appropriate help with their meetings, but need not turn every evening into an examination of whether we might someday live together.

We began meeting after separate walks. Initially it felt unnecessarily complicated. Then I discovered the pleasure of a date without constantly

checking an animal beside my feet. Harun listened well, sometimes cooked overly spicy food, and loved films whose endings I did not understand. None of those qualities could be judged from barking in the park. I was getting to know him slowly, without a canine approval committee.

We still live separately. Our dogs are still not always delighted to meet, and we no longer retell that as romantic tragedy. One afternoon Harun waited outside the cinema without a leash and with popcorn. I sent him a photograph of my dog sleeping on his cushion. He replied that his was sleeping too. We entered the cinema, four entirely different beings content with their own arrangements for the evening.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Stop Where She No Longer Hides

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-stop-where-she-no-longer-hides/

Maja let go of my hand as soon as we left the tram. A woman from her office stood at the stop. She had not seen us yet, but Maja had already moved far enough away to fit an ordinary story of friendship between us. They greeted each other and exchanged a few sentences while I studied an advertising board as if deeply interested. As we walked on, Maja reached for my hand again. This time I did not immediately offer it.

We had been together eight months. My friends knew, as did several of hers. We had no agreement that everyone must know everything. Yet in moments like that I felt like an object hurriedly put away when visitors arrived. Maja thought privately telling me how much I meant should be enough. I thought love itself should reduce fear. Neither assumption helped us at the tram stop.

At home we argued first. I said she was ashamed of me. She replied that she feared workplace questions and family conversations she did not yet know how to have. I could not decide when she spoke about herself. She could not decide how often I would retreat without consequences. We managed to say that only after a long silence, while the tea she made grew nearly cold.

We set no deadline for courage. We discussed concrete situations. I did not want her introducing me as a distant acquaintance or inventing reasons for our arriving together. Maja said she could stop lying, though she could not yet promise every public touch. I had to decide whether that was enough for me now. I did not immediately answer. I walked outside, returned, and said I wanted to try but not wait forever without discussion.

Several weeks later we met the same colleague again. She asked whether we had coincidentally ended up in the same neighborhood again. Maja

said we lived nearby and often spent time together. Then she paused and added that we were partners. Her colleague briefly nodded and continued talking about the late tram. Maja sought no reward with her eyes. I saw her hand tremble as she put her ticket away.

Later I hugged her at the empty end of the stop. We did not become equally ready for everything from that moment. There were more retreats, conversations, and days when we needed privacy. But I no longer had to guess what her silence meant, nor did she have to prove love with one grand act. When she offered her hand now, she looked first at me and only then at the people around us.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Kiss After the Wrong Name

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-kiss-after-the-wrong-name/

When his friend asked my name, I gave my colleague's. It was so inexplicable that we both fell silent for several moments. Then I corrected myself, laughed too loudly, and added an unnecessary story about a difficult workday. Adnan stood beside me holding juice. He had not noticed my embarrassment or did not know what to do. It was my first visit among his friends, people who had known one another since school.

Their sentences were full of unfamiliar names and events nobody needed to explain. When everyone laughed, I laughed too, slightly later. Adnan occasionally placed a hand on my back, convinced I was fine. I answered questions about myself as I thought they would find acceptable: less about my actual work, more about books I supposedly read, nothing about how I really preferred spending Sundays.

In the kitchen I paused before the sink and considered staying until the evening ended. Adnan followed and asked whether somebody bothered me. I said I disliked the version of myself currently in the living room. He did not immediately understand. I explained that I was trying so hard to be liked I had managed to get even my name wrong. Adnan laughed, then stopped on seeing that I needed more than a joke.

He said I did not have to win everyone over in one evening. I asked whether he really knew that, since he introduced me as someone certain to get along wonderfully with everyone. He admitted wanting a quick, easy joining of two important parts of life. He had not noticed the expectations attached to that wish. We stayed in the kitchen a few minutes, eating pieces of bread intended for dinner, and agreed I could return without an obligation to be interesting.

When we sat, I said for the first time that I did not know whom they were discussing. Someone explained. I did not laugh at one joke but did at

another. I did not become the room's favorite person. One friend seemed uninterested; another man asked about work and listened to the real answer. The evening became bearable once I stopped trying to leave a perfect impression in every sentence.

On the way home Adnan kissed me beside a closed bakery. He said he liked my real name. I rested my head on his shoulder and genuinely laughed at my mistake for the first time. Later I grew to love some friends and remained merely polite with others. Adnan stopped announcing how much everyone would like me. When introducing me to someone new, he says my name and leaves the rest of the sentence to me.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Man Beyond the Finish Line

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-beyond-the-finish-line/

When I bought Haris running shoes, he said they were nice and immediately checked whether I had kept the receipt. I took that as beginner's insecurity. I had run for years and believed people only needed to endure the first uncomfortable mornings before loving what I loved. Haris enjoyed long breakfasts and repairing old radios. We met at mutual friends', where he listened for two hours to my account of a race.

I assumed his interest in me was the beginning of interest in sport. I invited him for a gentle run, then a shorter one, then one I promised would barely involve running. Each time he reluctantly agreed and returned tired, without the joy I expected. I said it took time. He said he believed me. Neither voiced the simple fact that he might never enjoy rising early to make himself deliberately breathless.

Before the city race I suggested entering together. Haris finally said no, clearly, without explanations about work or weather. I felt disappointment greater than an entry deserved. I said I wanted to share important things with someone I loved. He asked whether that meant I must learn to repair radios. I began saying it was different, then stopped. His evenings at the workbench mattered no less because they did not end with a medal.

On race day I went alone to the start. Haris wished me luck and said he would wait afterward. While running I repeatedly imagined him sleeping and grew unfairly angry. When I crossed the finish, he stood beyond the barrier with my jacket and a pastry I liked. He did not know whether my result was good. He asked how it had been. For the first time I answered about the feeling, not only the time.

Later I accompanied him to a small secondhand electronics fair. I understood half of what he examined and did not pretend otherwise. He

showed me a radio reminding him of childhood. I listened to the story without trying to prove interest by buying my own. Since then I run some Saturdays while he eats breakfast. Sometimes he waits for me; sometimes he has his own plans, and afterward I tell him what I want to share.

We exchanged the running shoes for a pair he enjoyed walking in. I regretted the money less than the certainty with which I had selected his future habit. Haris wore them when we went beside the river. We walked slowly enough for him to finish describing noise he had finally removed from an old radio. I did not check our distance. I had a race the following month and a man with whom I did not always need to be on the same course.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Signatures Beneath the Same Complaint

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-signatures-beneath-the-same-complaint/

Ajla drafted the request in four pages. Nenad looked at it and said nobody would read that much about an overcrowded storage room. She replied that problems remained unresolved precisely because nobody explained them properly. They sat at a small table in their building's hallway, chosen to write a shared request to the manager. The other residents left quickly, glad to entrust the job to two people who usually could not agree even about an open window.

Nenad wanted three sentences. Ajla wanted a sequence of events, description, and clear proposal. He shortened her text until the explanation of why the room needed clearing disappeared. She restored every comma and added a heading. While they competed over the page, a neighbor brought coffee and said she hoped the love letter would soon be finished. Both became annoyed suspiciously quickly.

Ajla knew Nenad as someone who turned everything into a joke. He considered her someone more interested in being right than finishing a task. After an hour, however, they discussed why it mattered. Ajla had spent years working somewhere her concerns were ignored unless perfectly argued. Nenad spent his working days reading lengthy messages often concealing no decision at all.

They composed one clear page. It was no triumph of meeting halfway, but a text finally retaining what mattered. After they signed, Nenad said he would like coffee without a request on the table. Ajla asked whether he could then speak in complete sentences. He said yes if she prepared no agenda. They laughed, this time without an audience needing proof of who was wittier.

Their first dates did not remove differences. Ajla liked agreeing on times beforehand; Nenad often said he would see. She did not teach responsibility as though he were a poor student, nor did he try making her relax whenever she planned anything. They discussed concrete things: when he was coming, what she wanted, why he was late. Sometimes they still argued, but no longer made a whole character out of one habit.

The storage room was cleared only months later, according to a schedule beyond their control. By then Ajla and Nenad carried coffee onto the balcony together. They kept a copy of the request but did not frame it. One evening Ajla found three entirely unnecessary explanations in his short message. She replied with a single word: coming. Both knew they would laugh about it afterward.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Evening We Did Not Have to Win

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-evening-we-did-not-have-to-win/

At the bowling alley we argued about whose turn it was although the answer was clear on the screen. Merima held a ball; I held my conviction that the machine was mistaken. The waiter bringing water looked at the screen, then us, and wisely said nothing. We had been together eight years, and people said we were well matched because we were both competitive. That evening I first wondered whether it was actually a compliment.

We competed at more than games. Who found parking faster, estimated costs more accurately, knew the shorter route to the shop. Every detail had a winner, and the loser laughed a little too loudly. At the beginning it amused us. Later it became hard to admit not knowing something, being tired, or wanting a route merely because it was prettier. Everything required proof.

Merima put down the ball and sat. She said she did not want the rest of the evening spent protecting my mood if I lost. I immediately replied that she was the same. She nodded and said that was exactly why we needed to stop. I had no prepared reply to agreement. I sat beside her while balls hit pins in the neighboring lane. I admitted the machine had not angered me; the possibility she understood something before I did had.

Merima laughed, but not mockingly. She said she was tired of softening her own satisfaction so I could remain cheerful. I admitted often correcting her deliberately before others. We did not attribute everything to a love of sport. Part of it was fear of being worth less if we appeared ordinary people who sometimes made mistakes. It sounded serious for a place where we wore rented colored shoes.

We resumed playing. We neither hid the score nor agreed that one should lose deliberately. Merima won. I congratulated her and felt it was not

entirely easy, but said it without adding an explanation. Afterward we went for food. When she suggested the longer route, I asked why. She wanted to pass the illuminated park. I agreed although I knew a shorter way.

We still compete. Sometimes it pleases us; sometimes one says there is no energy for it that evening. The biggest change was not how often we won but how quickly we noticed the other person had stopped enjoying it. Last week Merima took a wrong turn on our way to friends. Rather than announce the score, I opened the window. The street smelled of roasting chestnuts, and we decided to stop before finding the proper route.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Cake That Did Not Need Fixing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-cake-that-did-not-need-fixing/

Filip dropped the cake directly outside the building entrance. The box opened, cream landed on the pavement, and a strawberry rolled toward a drain. Irma stood beside him holding flowers for his sister. She expected a curse. Instead he laughed and said at least he had helped the ants. Then he knelt to collect the cardboard, already devising a version to tell at the table so everyone would laugh.

They had met three months earlier. Filip was the person around whom nobody stayed uncomfortable for long. He could rescue a bad joke, fill silence, and turn his mistakes into entertainment. Irma loved his humor but sometimes felt she was talking to someone who never removed his coat, ready to leave before things grew difficult. As he gathered the cake he had spent all morning making, she saw his jaw tighten.

She asked whether he was angry. He replied that there was no reason to make a tragedy of it. She said she had mentioned no tragedy and repeated the question. Filip lowered the cardboard and admitted that he was, very, foolishly angry over a foolish cake. Irma said the cake was not foolish because he had invested his morning in it. She did not offer to buy another immediately. She stayed while he finished cleaning, requesting no improved version of the moment.

Upstairs his sister greeted them by asking about dessert. Filip began his familiar story about ants, then stopped. He said he had dropped the cake and was upset. His sister laughed, expecting more, but nothing followed. Irma did not explain for him. After a brief silence his sister hugged him and said there was ice cream in the freezer. Lunch continued existing without his entertaining account of the accident.

Later Irma and Filip walked beside the river. He admitted he had long been the family mood fixer. When parents argued, his sister cried, or

someone lost a job, he found something funny. He did not know whether people would still like him if he stopped immediately easing every discomfort. Irma said she had liked him no less while he angrily gathered cream, only found him more real.

He did not stop being funny for her. His messages still made her laugh on the bus. But sometimes he wrote that the day had been bad and left the message without a final joke. Irma would call. For her birthday he made another cake, carried it in both hands, and asked her to open every door. Once it rested safely on the table, they celebrated the small success before lighting the candles.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Hands Full of Ordinary Things

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/hands-full-of-ordinary-things/

Senka knew Milan would repair her suitcase wheel before noticing she was crying. He was not indifferent. He simply noticed first what he could do with his hands. If she said she had had a difficult day, he asked whether to bring food. If she said she missed him, he checked when her bus arrived. She loved his attentiveness while feeling lonely in conversations that quickly became lists of tasks.

For their first birthday together, she wrote him a long message. He bought her a good desk lamp because she had mentioned troublesome light while reading. The gift was thoughtful, but its card contained only two words. Senka thanked him and was quieter all evening. Milan repeatedly asked whether the color was wrong. He offered an exchange, not realizing lighting was the one thing she did not want to discuss.

After dinner she said she would like to hear what he felt. He asked whether she could not see. She replied that she could, but sometimes needed to hear it too. Milan looked like a student given instructions in a language he only half understood. In his family, care meant bringing wood, fixing doors, leaving food. Nobody requested sentences. Senka did not want to belittle that language, but could not live forever on translations alone.

The next morning he brought paper with several written lines. He read awkwardly, paused, and grew annoyed at words sounding foreign to him. Senka asked him to set the paper aside. She asked what he had missed while she traveled. He said the kitchen had been too quiet and twice he had made coffee for two. It did not sound like a speech. That was precisely why she could hear it.

She changed something too. When he brought food, she no longer waited for another, more important kindness before embracing him. When she

wanted conversation, she said she was not seeking advice. Milan did not become eloquent overnight. Sometimes he asked whether she wanted a hug or advice; sometimes he got both wrong and made her laugh. The lamp stayed on the desk, useful and beautiful, without the burden of carrying the entire message itself.

One evening Senka traveled away for several days. Milan sent a photograph of a repaired shelf she had mentioned. Under it he added that he missed her and currently had nothing broken to occupy himself with. Senka laughed in her hotel room. She replied that she would return soon and asked him to leave at least one thing as it was until then.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Shop Closed for a Kiss

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-shop-closed-for-a-kiss/

The small shop window said I would return in fifteen minutes. I had not written a reason. Emir waited around the corner with two coffees and his coat fastened to the wrong button. He had half an hour before his sister returned to work and he took over caring for their father. I was waiting for the woman who visited my mother several afternoons a week. Between our responsibilities a gap sometimes opened wide enough for a short walk.

We had met in a queue for household supplies, both holding the same large package of tissues. Our first messages were practical, then funny, then increasingly tender. Yet dates failed more often than they happened. Once I cried over a cooked dinner nobody would eat because his sister had to stay at work longer. Emir then offered to abandon all future plans so he would no longer disappoint me.

I told him not to protect me by disappearing. Then I had to admit that I sometimes imagined his visits as rescue from my own day. I wanted not only him but someone who would take the phone, carry bags, and know what came next. That was not a fair proposition for a new relationship. Emir laughed without amusement and said he too sometimes dreamed of a woman who would bring his life another pair of hands.

We stopped pretending a completely free weekend would soon arrive. We arranged short meetings and allowed disappointment when they failed, without accusations that the other did not care. I did not take over caring for his father, and he did not become my unpaid courier. We helped when possible and asked before promising. Once we even managed the cinema, although both fell asleep before the ending.

That day behind the shop, the coffee was too hot for the time available. Emir noticed his wrong button only when I moved closer. I wanted to fix

it, then gave up and kissed him. He laughed, spilled some coffee on his sleeve, and said his father would again think he was rushing for no reason. We stood there briefly, neither especially young nor carefree, but sufficiently in love for the street to look different.

I returned to the shop two minutes late. A customer waiting outside asked whether everything was all right. I said it was. That evening I sent Emir a photograph of a new sign with a more precise return time. He replied that he would try to make it. He promised no more. I put away the phone and opened my mother's balcony door, carrying into the ordinary remainder of the day something that was neither duty nor escape.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Only One Overnight Bag

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/only-one-overnight-bag/

After three years together, Emil and Vera agreed to spend two weeks in his apartment. They did not call it moving in, but Emil cleared half the wardrobe as though expecting a final answer. Vera arrived with one bag. She brought several days of clothing, her favorite cup, and slippers with torn lining. Seeing how much empty shelf space remained, Emil thought she had already decided not to stay.

For the first few days they tried to be better housemates than they were. Emil washed dishes immediately, Vera left no books on the floor, and both said nothing bothered them. On the third morning they argued about the radio he switched on while she worked. On the fourth evening she cooked too much and grew upset that he had already eaten. As visitors they were considerate. In shared daily life they still needed to learn to speak before assuming.

On the eighth day Vera went to her apartment for clean clothing and stayed several hours. She watered plants, washed her hair, and sat on her own sofa. Emil messaged that dinner was waiting. She wrote that she would come later, surprised how difficult pressing send felt. When she returned, he was hurt. He said they were trying to build a shared life while she retreated as soon as things became uncomfortable. Vera replied that the afternoon had actually felt lovely.

She did not say it to hurt him. For the first time she clearly recognized how much she loved her space, morning habits, and ability not to explain silence. Emil wanted a shared home and struggled to hear that the same love did not lead them along the same path. They talked until late. She did not promise to change her mind soon. He did not pretend indifference. They decided to complete the two weeks, return to their own addresses, and see what the relationship was without a next step offered as a reward.

Emil helped pack the bag. He was not cheerful but wrapped her cup in a kitchen cloth so it would not break. They did not meet for several days. Then he invited her to dinner, saying he missed her without adding that the wardrobe had room. Vera came; they ate and talked at length. In the morning she went home. They did not know whether two addresses would always be enough, but for the first time left the question open without trying to force an answer through a neatly emptied shelf.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Three Cups Do Not Make the Same Breakfast

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/three-cups-do-not-make-the-same-breakfast/

Nela bought three identical cups, convinced she could remove at least one small awkwardness that way. She had lived with Adam for six years and had been seeing Saša for almost a year. Everyone knew about both relationships. There were no secret messages or invented business trips, but openness did not mean they already knew how to have every conversation. Sunday breakfast for all three was her proposal, carefully prepared and much harder than she had imagined.

Adam made eggs in the way Nela knew by heart. Saša brought pastries from his neighborhood. Everyone was polite at the table. Adam and Saša were not in love with each other, only with the same woman, and Nela increasingly felt she was asking them for a companionship that did not come naturally.

When Saša suggested a walk, Adam said they usually watched a film on Sundays. Nela felt the trap in usually. She offered a walk first, then a film, with the order reversed next week. Saša put down his cup. He said he did not want an addition to their Sunday but time that sometimes belonged only to him and her. Adam looked hurt, although he did not want a shared walk either.

Nela wanted to remind them both that they had agreed on everything. Yet their agreement did not contain the apartment's smell, old jokes, and the place for keys Saša did not have. Saša was not asking to move in. He wanted his plans not always to accommodate an existing life. Adam admitted he felt safer when everyone was together because then he did not have to imagine what he was missing.

Breakfast did not end with three satisfied people embracing. Saša went home, Adam went to wash dishes, and Nela sat on the floor beside the

balcony. Later she spoke to each separately. She asked what they wanted without promising to fulfill everything. For the first time she did not try to be the person who distributed happiness correctly.

She spent some subsequent Sundays with Saša, some with Adam, and one alone. She did not count hours as though equal totals would remove jealousy. When someone was sad, they talked, sometimes painfully and without a quick answer. The three new cups stayed on the shelf, but no longer represented an obligation to sit at the same table.

One morning Saša gave her a key to his apartment. She neither displayed it to Adam as proof of progress nor concealed it guiltily. She put it on her own key ring. That evening Adam told her he had spent Sunday with a friend he had not seen for ages. She listened, grateful his good day had not needed to emerge from her perfect plan.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Man Who Loved the Ending

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-who-loved-the-ending/

Nedim placed a bowl of popcorn between us and asked me not to reveal the culprit. I had no intention of doing so. I had already read the plot description, ending, and three reviews, but considered my knowledge private. I was someone who looked at a novel's final page before its first. He claimed that would destroy his enjoyment. On our fifth date, the difference seemed small enough to be charming.

Halfway through the film he asked whether the dog survived. I said it did. He exhaled gratefully, and I teased him about wanting a little certainty after all. He leaned his head on a cushion and admitted he made an exception for the dog. For everything else he liked not knowing. I watched his face lit by the screen and wished I could sit beside somebody so simply without needing to check where the story was going.

When the film ended, Nedim suggested a weekend together the following month. Instead of joy I felt a procession of questions: would we still be together, what if we argued, should we book separate rooms? I began saying them in order. He assumed I did not really want to go. He rose to clear the bowl, and from his shoulders I saw the space I was beginning to love closing down.

I said I wanted to, but promises I could not yet verify frightened me. My previous relationship had ended suddenly, at least for me, and since then I sought endings even where none existed. Nedim sat down. He did not promise never to hurt me. He said he could tell me what he wanted now and talk if that changed. His answer did not remove the fear, but neither did it use the fear to win me over.

We agreed on a weekend whose plans we could change, without a concealed trial of living together. When we went, it rained, the room was smaller than imagined, and I forgot my charger. We did not turn these

things into signs the relationship had no future. We argued about an open window, reconciled over soup, and returned exhausted. It was a good weekend, although none of my prepared versions had predicted it.

I still read book endings. Nedim does not cover them with his hand or claim he must teach me how to live. When we watch films together, I ask whether he wants a warning if anything happens to the dog. Usually he does. Our story has no final page I can secretly open. Sometimes that unsettles me. Sometimes, while sharing popcorn, I think it is lovely not to know what our next conversation will be.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

In a House Without Proper Beds

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/in-a-house-without-proper-beds/

When she came to help her sister empty the old cottage, Vildana brought gloves and sandwiches for three. At the door she found Harun, the former neighbor to whom she had lent tapes twenty years earlier. Her sister had asked him to move the heavier things. He was broader across the shoulders and slower getting up, but had the same short laugh. He immediately said everything was the same. Vildana looked at the empty room and replied that nothing was.

The cottage had once hosted their student gatherings. They slept on thin mattresses, convinced comfort belonged to people without imagination. Now both sought somewhere to sit without hurting their backs. Harun found their old notebook of plans for a journey they never took. He read the bold sentences aloud, and Vildana recognized herself only by the handwriting. The girl who wrote them did not yet know how much she would love peaceful mornings.

When her sister went to fetch the van, they were left alone among the bags. Harun asked whether she remembered the night they nearly got locked on the balcony. She did. She did not remember him wanting to tell her he liked her. He said it now with a smile trying to diminish the admission's importance. Vildana felt unexpected tenderness, but also resistance to being offered only the continuation of a missed scene.

She said he might find her boring now. She was divorced, worked from home, and sometimes wanted to see nobody on weekends. Harun admitted he could no longer tolerate long journeys and his favorite part of the day was buying bread. They laughed at how poorly those habits fitted their old plans. Then he asked what she liked listening to now. For the first time that afternoon their conversation contained no once upon a time.

After they carried out the last mattress, the house sounded hollow. Harun suggested keeping the notebook, and Vildana handed it to her sister. She needed no proof that youth had happened. On the way back she accepted his invitation for coffee but asked not to go to their old student cafe. They chose a small place neither knew. There were no shared memories to fill every pause.

Their first real date was brief because Vildana had work to finish. Harun did not tease her about becoming serious. That evening he sent her the song she had mentioned, a completely new one, without a message about better times. She listened while putting away her gloves. The next day she invited him to buy bread together. It did not sound like a youthful adventure, yet her heart quickened while she waited for his answer.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Breakfast Without a Favorite Seat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/breakfast-without-a-favorite-seat/

Božo moved the cup before Hana had sat down. He said that was where the bread usually went. She moved it to the other side, and he reached for the knife she had laid on the wrong board. After the third small correction, Hana remained standing. It was their first breakfast in his apartment. They had been seeing each other around town for six months, but the kitchen had rules she had not encountered on their walks.

Božo's wife had died five years earlier. Hana knew that and had never tried to hurry his grief. She knew the name of the woman in the hallway photograph and enjoyed funny stories about their travels. That morning, however, she was not sitting with a memory but with a man correcting every movement as if she were taking a test for a position that would never become available. She asked whether she could at least choose what to drink her coffee from.

Startled, Božo retreated to the window. He had not meant to compare two women, or so he told himself. The kitchen was the last place where he still knew everything by heart: arrangement, quantities, morning sentences. Hana took bread and made toast a little darker than he liked. She said she would not be offended if he made another piece for himself. That simple suggestion revealed how stubbornly he had been trying to produce one correct breakfast.

She sat in the chair beside the window, previously unused because of a draft. Božo began to warn her, then stopped. She noticed the cold air, fetched a cushion, and stayed. They ate with cautious conversation. Finally he admitted that new moments sometimes made him feel like a guest in his own life. Hana said she felt the same in his kitchen, except that at least he knew the arrangement of the cupboards.

They did not remove photographs or buy a new dinner service. Next time Božo came to her home. There the coffee was too weak for him, and the bread excellent. He said both without turning his comments into a judgment. Hana laughed and showed him where she kept extra coffee. Afterward they prepared breakfast together in two different ways, sometimes spoiling it by talking too long beside the stove.

Months later Božo bought a second small baking tray for toast in his kitchen. He did not discard the old one. One Sunday Hana put the bread where the cup had stood before and looked at him. They both laughed, not at the past but at ordinary objects' insistence on determining a life. He opened the now repaired window and asked whether she wanted more coffee before they went for a walk.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Surname I Already Had

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-surname-i-already-had/

Tarik pushed a sheet of paper across the table on which he was trying out the invitation wording. Beside my first name he had written his surname in the beautiful letters he used only for special occasions. I stared longer than he expected. We had been together four years, both divorced, old enough to want a small wedding without borrowed customs. Yet he had not asked about this part. He assumed I would be pleased.

I said I did not intend to change my surname. He was not immediately angry, but ran a finger along the line as if checking an error. My current surname came from my previous marriage. Tarik knew that, just as he knew I spoke to my former husband only about matters we still had to settle. He said starting a marriage while I still introduced myself with another man's name felt strange.

The following Saturday I took him to a small craft fair where I displayed cloth bags. It was not evidence I had staged in advance. I needed someone to help carry the stand. People approached, recognized my signature on the label, and asked about earlier orders. One woman brought a bag ten years old to show she still used it. Tarik held the stand and heard my surname in sentences where my former husband did not exist.

On the way home I said that under that name I had work, friendships, mistakes, and nearly half my life. Once it had come from a man I married. Now it was mine too, shaped by what I had done myself. Tarik admitted that a change seemed a visible sign that he mattered more than his predecessor. It was painful to hear him still competing with someone with whom I no longer even shared a table.

I did not mock his insecurity. I asked what sign he really needed. He said he sometimes feared he was merely filling an empty space in an already

arranged life. We talked about our future home, a journey we both wanted, and weekends we would not surrender to work. Some plans had remained unspoken precisely because we considered ourselves mature enough for the other person to understand without words.

The new invitation carried our full names. Tarik added a small orange dot between them because he said the gap looked too large. I allowed him that aesthetic concern. At the wedding he did not introduce me as his new missus. He simply said he was glad I had chosen him. I replied that I was glad I could make the choice as the person I already was.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Rest of the Evening Is Ours

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-rest-of-the-evening-is-ours/

After the last group left, Denis removed the shirt promising unforgettable fun and put on a plain one without a single word. Maja was switching off colored lights in the next room. They ran activities for adults celebrating birthdays, gathering colleagues, or simply wanting to compete in silly games. Their job was to keep nobody on the sidelines. They often went home with no energy left to be company for anyone themselves.

Denis invited her to dinner after they survived a group that turned every game into an argument about the rules. Maja accepted but spent the day wondering who she should be without a whistle and scorecards. He knew her as someone who invented jokes in a second. He did not know how often she could think of nothing to say on the bus, even when she met a good friend.

The restaurant he chose had entertainment. As soon as they sat down, the host invited them to identify songs. Both automatically smiled, raised their hands, and answered more loudly than everyone else. After the third round Maja looked at her almost untouched plate. Denis was already figuring out how to include a shy couple at the next table. On their date they were doing their jobs, only without pay or a break.

Maja put down her card. She said she could not be entertaining that evening. For a moment Denis looked as though he had missed an important signal, then admitted he could not either. They paid for dinner they had barely eaten and went out to a kiosk. They bought two simple sandwiches. Sitting on a low wall far from the loudspeakers, they chewed for a long time without talking. For the first time that evening Maja felt herself relax.

Denis told her that at home he assembled small wooden models and showed nobody because they were not particularly good. She said she

liked watching long videos of trains, without commentary or music. They did not try to make these habits more interesting than they were. Gradually they asked questions whose answers did not have to make anyone laugh. When he brushed a crumb from her sleeve, the ordinary movement felt more intimate than all his public embraces.

On Monday they were loud, quick, and full of ideas again. Colleagues noticed them leaving together after work but could not imagine their evenings. Sometimes they cooked; sometimes they fell asleep with a train traveling through rain on the screen. When Denis did make a joke, Maja laughed because she found it funny. Nobody kept score or checked whether the evening had fulfilled the promise of unforgettable fun.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Tie with Little Oranges

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-tie-with-little-oranges/

Lana brought seven gray shirts to the clothing swap and one she considered daring because it had dark blue buttons. She was not a sad person, although her wardrobe suggested otherwise. For years she had worked at a reception desk where neutrality was called professionalism. Now she had changed jobs and wanted at least to stop buying things that disappeared in group photographs. At the accessories table she picked up a tie scattered with little oranges.

The man beside her said he had brought it. His name was Damjan, and he looked like someone who knew how to wear such a tie. Yet he was holding one of her gray shirts. Lana warned him it was boring. He replied that he hoped so. He ran the family restaurant, where guests expected a cheerful host even when he did not feel like talking. His ties had become a uniform for a mood.

They leaned against empty boxes while others examined the hangers. Lana tied the tie around her hair. Damjan took out his phone, then immediately returned it to his pocket when he realized taking photographs was not automatically an invitation to intimacy. He said it suited her. Accustomed to practical compliments, she replied that it could probably go in the washing machine too. Both laughed at their awkwardness.

He invited her for coffee at the restaurant. Lana hesitated. She did not want to meet him through the performance he had just described. She suggested a kiosk selling hot drinks by the bus station. There nobody addressed them by name or asked them to recommend the daily special. Damjan was quieter than at the swap. Lana did not try to extract an entertaining version of him. She talked about liking her new job but fearing she might not be good at it.

During the following weeks they met away from his restaurant. Once he arrived tired and without conversation, while she wore a yellow sweater with an oversized label still attached. He removed the label only when she asked. Then she admitted she did not know whether she liked yellow or merely liked having the right to try it. Damjan said it did not have to become her favorite color immediately. They bought pastries and walked without a plan.

She first came to the restaurant several months later, as his guest. Damjan wore a gray shirt and did not apologize for being unamusing. Lana had tied the orange patterned tie around her bag's handle. A waiter recognized it and started to make a remark. Damjan laughed briefly, in a laugh entirely his own, and sat beside her before the soup arrived.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Laugh Too Big for the Restaurant

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-laugh-too-big-for-the-restaurant/

My laugh always arrives before I do. My sister used to say that gently, while my former husband said the same thing as a complaint. So for my first date with Nermin I chose a restaurant with loud music. I sent him the address, put on a green dress, and decided to laugh politely, with my mouth closed. After a divorce, a person sometimes imagines freedom as the chance to hide more successfully whatever attracted criticism before.

Nermin arrived early and selected a quieter table at the far end of the room. He wanted us to hear each other. That small kindness ruined my defensive plan. We talked about work, his sister, and my unsuccessful attempt to grow a lemon from a seed. When he described watering an artificial office plant once, my laugh burst out so loudly that a woman at the neighboring table turned around. I immediately apologized.

Nermin looked confused. He asked whether I had spilled something. I said I was apologizing for the volume. He nodded but did not answer quickly enough, so I filled his silence with all the familiar sentences. For the rest of the appetizer I gave short answers. I was perfectly pleasant company and entirely absent. He put down his cutlery and asked whether I really wanted to stay or would rather go home.

I could have blamed exhaustion. Instead I said I was waiting for him to tell me the whole restaurant had turned around. Nermin looked around. He said he had not noticed, because he was thinking his attempt at a joke had sounded foolish. He rarely laughed aloud. When he found something especially funny, his eyes watered and his face became almost serious. All evening we had been misreading each other's faces.

He did not declare me perfect or promise I would never annoy him. He said he did not want dinner with a muted version of me if he could meet the real one. We left before dessert because the music had grown so loud

we could no longer hear the waiter. Outside I told him I had played recordings of rain to my lemon plant. He stopped beside a shop window and wiped his eyes. Finally I recognized his laughter.

For our second date we went to the park. On the third I met his cat, who considered both of us unnecessary. I still sometimes catch myself covering my mouth with my hand. Nermin does not pull it away as though I need fixing. He simply continues his story. Last week I laughed so loudly in a shop that my sister heard me from the next aisle. This time I did not wish to disappear before she found me.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Fourteen Years to a Shared Key

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/fourteen-years-to-a-shared-key/

Emina spent the first night in their shared apartment awake because the bedroom door was open. Vahid had always left it open in his rented place. Fourteen years of marriage, two cities, and hundreds of weekends had not revealed that one of them fell asleep listening to the refrigerator while the other could only sleep when she could no longer hear it. She got up, closed the door, and woke her husband with the sound that meant peace to her.

Their friends imagined a permanent honeymoon. Vahid had found work near hers, the boxes had arrived, and the separate rent payments had ended. At the housewarming they received two identical large towels. Emina thought she had never asked for their towels to match. She missed the pleasure of anticipating Friday and did not know how to admit that she sometimes also missed Monday, when she had sole control of the silence.

One evening Vahid rearranged the spices while she cooked. He did not do it to hurt her, but because he believed he finally had the right to leave his mark in the kitchen. Emina snapped about cinnamon being among the savory spices. He put down the jar and asked whether he had actually moved in or merely extended his visit. Suddenly they were no longer arguing about a shelf. Both stayed quiet long enough to recognize it.

She sat on an unopened box of his books. She told him she missed being alone and immediately added that she was not asking him to leave again. Vahid admitted he planned activities for them every afternoon, afraid an ordinary evening would reveal he was a better husband from a distance. When they lived apart, every visit had to justify the ticket. Now they were investing the same effort in a Tuesday of leftover lunch.

They did not make a schedule for love. They agreed that either could go into another room without explaining and that an empty evening did not have to be rescued by going out. Emina cleared a shelf for his books. Vahid stopped asking whether she wanted company every time she picked up her coat. Sometimes they got it wrong. One Saturday they spent almost the entire day separately and were delighted to meet in the kitchen with things to tell each other.

The bedroom door remained under negotiation. They found a position that left it ajar and neither of them entirely satisfied. One night Vahid put his head through the gap and asked whether he could come visiting. Emina moved her book from his side of the bed. She laughed as he approached, his own old towel hanging over his shoulder, a man who was finally living at home.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Beside the Empty Carousel

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/beside-the-empty-carousel/

When the carousel stopped, Irma still heard its music in her head. All summer, she sold tickets and repeated instructions to parents who didn't listen. Across the passage, Oskar closed his cotton-candy stall. Every evening, he left her an empty paper cup for water because she always lost hers. It was a modest habit, too small to call courtship and too attentive to remain unimportant.

The season's last day brought cold wind and few visitors. Irma planned to stay in town and accept a permanent warehouse job. Oskar intended to travel with the crew to winter fairs. They had never kissed, although they spent half the summer together after closing. Both discussed autumn as though it would answer their question if they avoided asking long enough.

While stacking chairs, Oskar asked whether she would come to say goodbye in the morning. Irma replied that she disliked farewells where people behaved as though they could accidentally meet whenever they wished. He lowered the chair. He said he meant to ask something else but didn't know how. Irma asked him to try while time remained, because the morning truck wouldn't become less ready through their indecision.

They sat beside the empty carousel. Oskar said he wanted to continue seeing her but didn't want permanent employment or an apartment tying him to one place. Irma said she wanted precisely such an apartment, at least now. Neither explained that the other had chosen life incorrectly. They arranged a visit in a month and how to talk while he traveled. They kissed only after stating the difference that could more easily be replaced by a lovely, vague wish.

The first visit wasn't easy. Oskar arrived tired; Irma had an early shift. They spent half the weekend sleeping and nearly argued because limited

time seemed obliged to be special. Instead of going out, they made pasta and watched a poor film. Oskar said he was glad to see her ordinary evening. Irma admitted feeling relieved she needn't behave as though it were summer's final night.

In spring, the fair returned. Irma visited after work with a shopping bag and comfortable shoes. Oskar left his stall with a colleague for an agreed break. They bought two tickets and rode the carousel they previously saw only empty. As it turned, Irma laughed at her dizziness. Oskar held her bag and didn't ask whether she would join him when the caravan moved again.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Words Across the Kitchen Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/words-across-the-kitchen-table/

Selma left her phone open to a translator on the table beside the salt and bread. Tomas brought flowers and a prepared sentence that sounded, once spoken, like thanks for a business meeting. Both laughed. They met through mutual friends, where someone could always supply a missing word. This was their first dinner without that help, and the potatoes were cooling while they checked how to ask for water.

Tomas had worked in the city for several months on a project that didn't require Bosnian. Selma spoke enough of his language for ordinary conversation but struggled to find words when something mattered. At gatherings, she therefore seemed calmer than she was. Tomas thought he was too talkative. Selma thought her silence soothed him. Neither checked that small, attractive assumption.

During dinner, the phone translated one sentence as though he wanted to leave immediately. Selma began clearing plates. Tomas stopped her, pointed at the clock, and explained more simply that he wished the evening would pass more slowly. They stood in the kitchen holding the same plate. Selma put it down and said they needed to stop accepting the screen's first answer as the final version of the other's feelings.

They began speaking more briefly, repeating without apology, and laughing only at mistakes both understood. Selma said she actually enjoyed debating and wasn't especially patient when tired. Tomas admitted often talking to hide discomfort. They didn't choose a shared language that evening. They chose to ask again, even when nodding and remaining appealing in the wrong role would be easier.

When his project neared its end, Selma directly asked whether he wanted to continue their relationship. She didn't leave a word she knew well to the phone. Tomas said yes, but couldn't promise a permanent return. The

conversation lasted a long time, with paper, dates, and occasional searches for words. They arranged their next meeting without treating a calendar as proof that every future difficulty was solved.

On the last evening before his departure, they prepared the same meal that had cooled the first time. This time, the phone stayed on a shelf. Tomas mispronounced the side dish's name, and Selma corrected him only when asked. Afterwards, they sat close without needing every silence translated. When he said he would miss her, she understood immediately. Still, she asked him to repeat it, for a reason unrelated to language.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Exit They Opened Together

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-exit-they-opened-together/

Luka suggested an escape room because his profile said he liked challenges. Sara agreed, thinking it might be more interesting than another coffee. Before starting, both claimed experience in similar rooms. In truth, Luka once watched a video, while Sara waited outside for friends who played. The first lock stayed shut long enough for their small assumptions to begin resembling a serious problem.

The room concerned an old traveler's missing collection. Maps hung on walls, papers filled drawers, and a screen counted down time. Luka lifted everything; Sara tried arranging objects sequentially. He thought she overthought, while she thought he didn't listen. Ten minutes into their first date, they already had an argument resembling a kitchen renovation after ten years of marriage.

The host's voice asked whether they wanted help. Both simultaneously said no, then looked at each other and laughed. Sara admitted having no idea what she was doing. Luka said he hadn't really played before either. It wasn't a major deception about their lives, but showed how quickly two people could waste time defending an image nobody requested. They asked for help and finally opened the first drawer.

Afterwards, they divided tasks without assuming one needed to lead. Sara noticed a connection between symbols; Luka found an object she overlooked three times. When stuck, they stated what confused them. They didn't finish on time. The host let them see the final section, and they left pleased despite a result unworthy of internet bragging.

Over coffee, they spoke more honestly than they might have if seated together immediately. Luka said he disliked long mountain hikes, although his photographs always suggested he lived on a summit. Sara admitted reading less than her profile suggested because after work she

often preferred a foolish television series. They didn't mock each other. It felt pleasant to lower the advertisement and see what remained beneath.

Sara proposed the second date: an ordinary walk without puzzles. Luka agreed and added that he might mistake the street, asking her to send the meeting place. He arrived on time. On the bridge, they kissed slightly awkwardly without seeking a better angle. Later, they occasionally returned to escape rooms. They were never fastest, but learned early to say what also made life outside the game easier: "I need help here."

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Final Driving Lesson

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-final-driving-lesson/

Nermina began learning to drive at forty-seven, irritated by anyone saying it was never too late. She knew that already. She needed someone to explain mistakes without a speech about courage in life. Her instructor, Filip, suited that requirement. He was patient, occasionally dryly funny, and calm enough not to turn a mistake into something she would fear next lesson.

During training, they discussed private life only as naturally appropriate. She knew he lived alone and had an adult daughter. He knew she recently changed jobs and wanted to stop relying on other people's schedules. Nermina noticed looking forward to lessons even when dissatisfied with her driving. She didn't immediately call it love. It was unusual enough to enjoy someone who could suggest starting again without raising his voice.

She passed on her second attempt. Filip congratulated her, returned her documents, and said she had progressed well. Suddenly, the period giving them a reliable reason to meet ended. For several days, Nermina invented excuses to call again, then rejected each. She didn't need an imaginary difficulty to prolong conversation. She messaged asking whether he wanted coffee now that he was no longer her instructional obligation.

He answered several hours later, saying yes and that he was glad they waited until training ended. She arrived by bus. Filip laughed only when she said she didn't want to make a first date another parking examination. They discussed work, family, and habits someone else might consider dull. His quiet attention from the car remained at the table, without needing to correct her continually.

The following month, she bought a small used car. Filip offered advice but didn't take over. Nermina had an independent mechanic inspect it and chose herself. She drove their first shared outing. She missed a turn, swore, and expected commentary. Filip asked whether she wanted him to check another route. She said yes, grateful that help didn't arrive dressed as an assessment of her progress.

They arrived late at a place without an especially pretty view but with good lunch. Afterwards, Nermina kissed him before they left the table. On the return journey, she didn't ask him to drive instead. She wanted to keep holding the wheel herself beside a man she chose to travel with. Filip discussed his daughter's new job and occasionally fell silent while she followed the road. Neither needed to count how much lesson time remained.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Room for Practicing Bad Speeches

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-room-for-practicing-bad-speeches/

Maja began her speech three times, forgetting the word after her greeting each time. The classroom was small, with seven adults as an audience, but felt like a full hall. She enrolled in public speaking because her job required presenting ideas rather than merely sending them to others. The man in the second row moved his chair so she could see his face between two tall people. He didn't shout encouragement. He simply listened.

His name was Andrej. His problem was the opposite: he spoke so rehearsedly that nobody knew what he truly thought. Once, the instructor removed his notes and asked him to discuss an ordinary object in his pocket. He produced an old key ring his daughter gave him and paused mid-sentence for the first time. Maja then wanted to know him better, precisely when he felt he was losing control of his speech.

They practiced together after class. Andrej helped shorten her lengthy introduction. She removed sentences of his that could belong to anyone. When he proposed recording speeches, Maja agreed only if recordings were deleted after review. He respected the arrangement without persuasion. His attention to a small request meant more than praise delivered after every practice.

One evening, heavy rain kept them in the classroom. Andrej said he had an unprepared question. Maja laughed and asked him not to announce it like an important business proposal. He invited her to dinner. She said she wanted to, but not that evening, because she was tired and wanted home. Disappointment crossed his face, followed by understanding. They arranged Friday. He didn't need immediate acceptance for the invitation to succeed.

Over dinner, Maja spoke easily until Andrej tried describing what he liked about her. He began too neatly, with three prearranged qualities.

She stopped him, laughing. "Say one thing you haven't practiced." He looked at her and said he loved how she became annoyed by an imprecise word. Maja felt her cheeks warm. It wasn't a compliment he could send another person unchanged.

At the final class, both gave good, imperfect speeches. Maja paused, breathed, and continued. Andrej lost his place in his notes and finished in his own words. Afterwards, they had coffee without discussing scores. When he offered his hand across the table, he prepared no introduction. She took it and continued describing a day that deserved no audience, but deserved someone who would listen.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Dance After the Last Guest

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dance-after-the-last-guest/

Elvira and Saša sat at opposite ends of the same table. Their son had asked them to be neither too cold nor excessively friendly at his wedding, as though there were an exact measure they could gauge with cutlery. They had divorced eight years earlier after prolonged exhaustion and stubbornness. There had been no grand betrayal everyone could name. There had been many small moments when they stopped asking how the other felt.

During dinner, Elvira noticed Saša no longer refilled everyone's drink as soon as a glass was half-empty. He once filled other people's quiet with his service. Saša noticed she could leave a poor flower arrangement without seeking whoever made it. Both had changed, but didn't know whether they could say so aloud. Their first conversation concerned their son, safe territory shared for years.

Near the evening's end, they remained collecting forgotten jackets. The newlyweds left with friends, staff stacked tables, and the musicians played one final song for themselves. Saša asked whether she wanted to dance. Elvira said she wasn't sure it was a good idea. He replied that he was asking for one song. She accepted. He held her carefully, without a familiar grip claiming in advance that he still owned a place in her life.

Afterwards, they sat on empty chairs beside the stage. Saša said he regretted treating every concern of hers as criticism. Elvira admitted she had stopped expressing wishes and merely listed failures. They didn't demand equal blame to make the conversation tidy. They remembered good things too, but didn't use them to erase what separated them. Elvira said it felt good to hear him without a prepared answer.

They arranged coffee in two weeks. They didn't immediately tell their son, avoiding making him someone waiting again for his parents to

succeed. Over coffee, they discovered new differences: Saša wanted more travel, while Elvira enjoyed her small garden and slow weekends. Still, they met again. There was no reason one dance had to restore an entire marriage or vanish as a mistake.

Six months later, they ate dinner at Elvira's. Saša left his shoes by the door and asked where to put his coat. He didn't assume old rules remained. Elvira pointed to a hook and brought two plates. They lived separately and met because they wanted to. When their son called, they answered together. They simply said they were having dinner, without an announcement he needed to celebrate for them.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Goodbye at the Third Stop

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/goodbye-at-the-third-stop/

Tarik promised to accompany Elma only to the third stop, where she needed an intercity connection. Instead, he bought a ticket for the whole ride to the terminal and pretended to misunderstand. They had known each other nearly ten years. She was leaving for six months' work in another city, and he behaved as though finding space for her suitcase were the greatest problem, rather than surviving Saturdays without her.

Their friendship contained small shared habits. Elma saved seats at film screenings; Tarik knew which coffee she drank when tired. Both had other relationships, some long, some unhappy. Neither dared ask whether they had missed the timing or merely avoided risk. Anything sounding serious ended with a joke quickly enough that the other needn't answer.

At the third stop, Elma looked at him and said he could get off. Tarik replied that he felt like traveling a little farther. This time, she didn't laugh. She asked why he hadn't said earlier that it was difficult. He stared at his ticket, then admitted not knowing how to say he would miss her without demanding she stay. Elma said a feeling wasn't a demand unless he made it one. She was angry they had to learn this precisely as she left.

At the terminal, they found a bench beside a vending machine. Elma had forty minutes. Tarik said he was in love with her without a grand story about destiny. She lowered her head onto his jacket and admitted wanting to hear it for a long time, but wouldn't abandon the job. He said he hadn't asked. Their first kiss was interrupted by a departure announcement, entirely unsuitable and real.

The following months didn't resemble an extended film farewell. They traveled tired, sometimes argued over the phone, and discovered friendship didn't automatically solve every romantic need. Elma wanted

more spontaneous calls; Tarik wanted clearer plans. They learned to speak before disappointment became a joke. One weekend, both postponed a visit through exhaustion without declaring it evidence that the relationship was failing.

When she returned, Tarik waited at the same stop. He brought no enormous flowers for her to carry beside the suitcase. He brought a sandwich because she sometimes forgot to eat while traveling. Elma kissed him and asked whether he was coming home with her. He bought a ticket for the entire ride, this time without pretending a mistake. They sat together discussing tomorrow's breakfast shopping, enjoying a question that no longer needed to wait until the next weekend.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Dinner Where Everyone Was Busy

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dinner-where-everyone-was-busy/

When the fourth guest canceled, Dalila put her phone on the table and looked at the man opposite. Marko held a similar message on his screen. They had been invited to dinner with mutual friends, and now everyone else had sudden obligations. The waiter asked whether they wanted to keep the large table. Dalila said they first needed to establish whether they were guests or the subjects of someone else's plan.

Marko laughed with relief. Divorced for two years, he was tired of friends treating his free Friday as a fault needing repair. Dalila was widowed but didn't want every new acquaintance presented as a brave return to life. She had lived before that dinner, working, laughing, and getting angry. She simply had no partner. Marko nodded without turning her statement into a sorrowful topic.

They stayed because both were hungry. Moving to a smaller table, they ordered dishes friends probably wouldn't approve for a first date: garlic for her, soup he cooled noisily for him. Conversation became easy once they stopped pretending gratitude for the arrangement. Marko described a neighbor growing peppers in the stairwell; Dalila discussed work where everyone urgently needed what they had forgotten to send themselves.

Before dessert, both received the same question: how was it going? Dalila suggested replying with a photograph of an empty table. Marko said their friends might then come to check whether they had fled. They laughed and switched off their phones. They didn't need to share every good minute with people who had tried declaring it a success beforehand. Outside, it was late, but neither hurried toward a car.

They walked to a fountain that wasn't working. Marko asked whether she wanted another dinner, this time without sick aunts and sudden business calls in the background. Dalila said she wanted coffee because she would

like to see what he was like before dark too. He gave his number without joking about his age. She immediately sent her name so their friends wouldn't become intermediaries again.

Their relationship developed slowly, through several good dates and one dull outing both acknowledged. When friends claimed credit for the beginning, Dalila said they deserved credit for the reservation; the rest was their work. Marko looked at her and smiled. Later, they invited those friends to dinner openly, without surprises. Everyone came this time, and Dalila and Marko sat together because they chose their own seats.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The First Attempt on the Climbing Wall

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-first-attempt-on-the-climbing-wall/

Adna stood on the lowest part of the climbing wall and already wanted to descend. The height bothered her less than the voice from the bench continually telling her where to move a foot. It belonged to Nedim, a new group member who finished his first attempt five minutes earlier and now sounded like a seasoned expert. The instructor asked him to leave instructions to her. Adna thanked her with a look she didn't hide.

After class, Nedim approached to apologize. He said nerves made him talk too much. Adna replied that it showed. She didn't soften it with a joke, but accepted his apology. Both were beginners, she after years at a computer, he after deciding not to spend every evening before the television. They agreed to cheer next time only if the other requested it.

The following week, Nedim stayed so carefully silent that Adna began laughing halfway up. She asked whether he had at least one encouraging word. He said he had several but was waiting for permission. Their joke stayed within the group, but the relationship grew after training, while they sat with tired arms eating sandwiches nobody could hold elegantly. Adna learned that Nedim tended a bonsai. He learned she collected old postcards from places she had never visited.

He invited her to an exhibition of mountain photographs, which seemed too connected with climbing. She said she preferred an ordinary dinner. Nedim agreed, relieved he needn't invent a serious interest in every rock. At the table, they discussed family and former relationships. Adna noticed he now asked before giving advice. He hadn't stopped being talkative, but began noticing when she hadn't finished.

Their first kiss happened outside her building after an awkward discussion of who should message first. Adna said she was tired of rules neither had chosen. Nedim replied that he wanted to stay another five

minutes, then. He stayed twenty. The next day, he sent a photograph of his bonsai without explaining why it was supposedly interesting. She answered with a mountain postcard unrelated to their training.

At the course's end, Adna completed the route she abandoned on the first day. Nedim applauded only after she descended. He asked how it felt instead of explaining where she could improve. She said she wanted cake. They went to a café still wearing sports clothes and ordered different slices. She offered him a bite of hers, and this time he didn't ask whether she needed help finishing it.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Duet Without a Leading Voice

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-duet-without-a-leading-voice/

Anja thought Faris played too many chords. Faris thought Anja sang every song as though it were the world's last. In their amateur band, these remarks had become part of warming up. The others adjusted cables while the two repeated the same argument with minor variations. When the band was invited to open a small reading room, only Anja and Faris were available. They had to perform as a duet or decline.

They accepted because a friend ran the reading room. The first rehearsal lasted twenty minutes before becoming a discussion of who needed to slow down. Faris lowered his guitar and said that without the band he sounded as though he always accompanied her, never played with her. Anja paused. She hadn't known he felt that way. She thought he liked filling every space, just as she liked sustaining a note while breath remained.

They tried differently. He sang one verse, she another, without their usual embellishments. Faris's voice was quiet and slightly rough. Anja had barely heard it alone before. She liked it enough to forget her prepared comment. Afterwards, he said her refrain was lovely when she didn't hurry it. It didn't sound like criticism. Suddenly, the sound had room for both.

After rehearsal, they stayed in the empty room. Anja asked why he never suggested coffee, although he spent half an hour beside her coat after every performance. Faris blushed and said he hadn't wanted to spoil the band. "We could spoil one coffee first," she replied. He laughed while searching for his jacket. At a nearby café, they discussed everything except music, at least for the first ten minutes, a major achievement for them.

At the opening, power to the small speaker failed. The audience moved closer, and the pair performed without amplification. Anja heard Faris breathe before every verse. He saw her smile change when she knew the song was going well. After applause, they didn't kiss before everyone. They packed their equipment and went to a nearby bridge, where he finally stopped asking whether she needed help with her bag.

Their relationship didn't end musical arguments. Sometimes they returned angry from rehearsal and ate silently before talking. The band teased that they had become even more demanding. Anja said she at least now knew when Faris was playing and when defending himself. He answered with a deliberately over-loud chord. She laughed, waited for it to fade, and sang so that he could remain beside her.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Phone Without an Alarm

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-phone-without-an-alarm/

Alma rose at six twenty on Saturday, although no alarm had rung. The children were grown, her mother was staying with her sister that week, and her husband, Sead, finally had a free weekend. Nothing in the house was urgent. Nevertheless, she made coffee, loaded the washing machine, and began a shopping list. Sead appeared in the kitchen and said they had agreed to rest. Alma asked who would otherwise know what was missing.

They had planned a weekend for themselves since their youngest child moved out. When it finally arrived, it resembled an empty room where they didn't know how to place the furniture. Sead wanted to lie down and watch sport. Alma imagined an outing, conversation, and lunch she wouldn't prepare alone. Neither had stated it clearly because both assumed the other meant the same thing by rest.

By noon, both felt hurt. Sead thought she criticized him for relaxing; Alma felt their shared time was becoming another service she provided. She stopped vacuuming in the hallway and said she wouldn't spend all day navigating around his feet. He turned off the television. His first thought was to say he hadn't asked her to vacuum. He withheld it because, for the first time, he heard how easy it would be to say from an armchair.

She sat opposite him. They agreed each would write two things they wanted that weekend. Alma wrote an unhurried walk and dinner out. Sead wrote sleeping late and time without needing to be useful. Reading the last one, she realized she wanted it too. They left the washing in the machine until coffee was finished. None of the disasters her sense of responsibility constantly anticipated occurred.

That afternoon, they walked to a neighborhood they hadn't visited for years. They found a small record shop, and Sead played a song they once danced to. Alma said she had hated it then but hadn't wanted to spoil his enthusiasm. He laughed so much that the shopkeeper joined without knowing why. They ate in a restaurant that wasn't particularly good, but neither needed to wash dishes. That evening, it mattered more than a perfect menu.

On Sunday, Alma slept later. Sead fetched bread without asking where his wallet was. When she woke, he asked whether she wanted coffee now or later. She chose later and remained in bed a little longer. It wasn't an entirely new marriage. It was the same one, with enough room for an answer not always to arrive immediately. The phone stayed without an alarm until Monday, and neither tried compensating for that small omission through excessive work.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Night Without a Single Visible Star

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-night-without-a-single-visible-star/

The sky was entirely gray, but Davor kept adjusting his telescope. Ena stood beside him with two cups of tea and asked exactly which shade of cloud he hoped to find. She joined the astronomy-club outing because she wanted an evening without screens. Davor came with a new telescope, expecting finally to know something the others didn't. So far, both were seeing only their own disappointment.

The group leader suggested waiting for clearer skies in the mountain lodge. Davor wanted to remain beside his equipment. Ena placed his tea on the folding table and said it wouldn't become easier to use if he froze. She didn't sound reproachful. As a documentary-film editor, she knew the persistence that sometimes merely avoided admitting conditions weren't yours to control. Eventually, Davor covered the telescope and followed her.

In the lodge, they sat by a window away from the noisy card-playing group. Davor admitted buying the telescope after his youngest son left for university. He wanted to prove he still had beginnings. Ena said she had just declined a trip offering good work because she was tired of living from a suitcase. Both realized they were trying to change their rhythm, only in opposite directions.

Near midnight, they went out to check the sky. It hadn't changed. Ena still stayed while Davor showed her how to adjust focus. Through the telescope, they viewed an illuminated window in a distant empty cabin, with nobody inside. It wasn't particularly magnificent. Davor laughed at his disappointment and asked whether she wanted coffee next time, somewhere the forecast wouldn't determine whether their meeting succeeded.

Over coffee, Ena discovered that he talked a great deal when nervous, and Davor learned that she asked difficult questions without intending an interrogation. They discussed children, former relationships, and how much free time they truly wanted to share. She didn't want to become his new major interest. He didn't want to be placed among obligations she rested from in advance. There was enough honesty for them to order another drink without feigned delight.

Later, they attended another outing. This time, the sky was clear, but Ena forgot her gloves. Davor offered his spare pair without saying he should have known. They took turns at the telescope, then sat on the grass to rest. He didn't name every point of light. She didn't ask him to fill silence with a story. When she kissed him, there wasn't enough light for a good photograph. Neither reached for a phone.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Table That Didn't Need to Be Special

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-table-that-didnt-need-to-be-special/

Outside the restaurant, Lana found Vedad talking to a waiter as seriously as though organizing a delegation's arrival. He had reserved a table near the entrance, checked the passage, and asked for a chair to be removed. All of that was useful, but then the waiter began pushing her wheelchair without asking. Lana stopped him. Vedad blushed and immediately apologized, although he hadn't touched the chair. Their first date began with other people's haste to make everything right.

They knew each other from a photography course. Lana worked in graphic design; Vedad sold sports equipment. During outings, they discussed sky colors and poor food photographs without grand confessions. When he invited her to dinner, his directness delighted her. Now she watched a man who forgot conversation as soon as he tried anticipating every need. She asked whether he would also choose her meal according to passage width.

He laughed, then admitted fearing rudeness. Lana said he could ask rather than guess. She wanted another table because the entrance was cold. The waiter suggested moving toward the center; they checked the space and sat. The entire restaurant didn't need to participate. Vedad finally opened the menu and admitted disliking fish, although he had chosen somewhere famous for it.

Dinner improved when they stopped trying to be good examples. Lana described a client wanting a logo in a color he couldn't name. Vedad discussed a brother who borrowed equipment and returned it in the wrong bags. They argued about a film he loved and she couldn't stand. That small disagreement pleased her more than carefully prepared compliments. She felt seen as someone capable of holding an irritating opinion.

After dinner, they wanted to visit the riverbank, but Vedad didn't know the path's condition. Lana knew another route and suggested it. He walked beside her without a hand on the wheelchair's back. At a quiet spot, he asked whether he could kiss her. She said yes, and no reservation was needed. His laughter touched her cheek before his lips, which she remembered more clearly than anything from the restaurant.

For their next date, she invited him home to review photographs. Vedad asked whether to bring anything. She requested cake without coconut. He arrived with an ordinary box and his poor photographs, ready for her teasing. He didn't ask whether she was tired before she suggested a break herself. They talked long after turning off the computer. This time, neither thought the date needed earning through a special kind of gratitude.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Shelf Between Two Beds

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-shelf-between-two-beds/

The temporary apartment had two bedrooms but only one uncracked refrigerator shelf. Irena divided it with paper tape. Her side on the left, Milan's on the right. They had ended up sharing accommodation after the owner of their old building sold the apartments before their new agreements were ready. They knew each other from the hallway, enough to greet but not enough to know who left a wet cloth on the sink.

The first week involved small negotiations. Milan listened to the radio over breakfast; Irena worked at night and slept late. She left shoes by the door; he arranged his neatly but lost his keys. They weren't young students who considered disorder freedom. Both were forty-five, with habits hardened through years of living independently. They argued politely, in sentences beginning with requests and ending in sighs.

One evening, the power failed. Irena emerged with a dying laptop, Milan with undercooked pasta. They found a candle, opened canned beans, and ate at the small table previously used only for bills. Irena discussed an old job she missed more than her former husband. Milan admitted never understanding why people assumed a quiet man had nothing to say.

Afterwards, they stopped cooking separately every evening. Milan learned to turn off the radio before she woke, and Irena moved her shoes when she knew he was carrying bags. They didn't keep accounts of concessions. When the moving date arrived, both reacted too cheerfully. Milan immediately sought boxes. Irena spent the evening browsing furniture shops, although she already had enough of everything except reasons to remain in the living room.

Three days before leaving, they kissed while dividing leftover food. Milan then asked whether they should abandon the new apartments. Irena felt how easy that would be and how quickly it might make theirs a

relationship carried by affordable rent. She said she wanted to move and discover whether they chose each other when they could close their own doors. Milan was disappointed but admitted wanting the same answer.

On the first Saturday after moving, he invited her to dinner. She came without slippers or complaints about the radio. Milan made pasta that wasn't hard this time. A small piece of paper tape from their old refrigerator lay on the table. Irena picked it up, crumpled it, and threw it away. "We aren't dividing leftovers tonight," she said. After dinner, she stayed because she wanted to, then returned to her apartment in the morning to water plants and enjoy quiet that no longer meant loneliness.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Pause Between Two Moves

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-pause-between-two-moves/

Emina recognized Luka by the way he said he needed a moment. In their small board-game group, that meant he was thinking or had burned his toast. They played online once a week, mostly adults scattered across different cities. Emina worked in an archive; Luka repaired household appliances. Their usernames sounded far more adventurous than the ordinary days they lived.

When other members began missing sessions, the two continued playing alone. Conversations lasted longer than the games. Emina described a colleague who marked every folder in a different color; he described customers claiming a device hadn't fallen although sand spilled from it. After several months, they switched on cameras. Luka's hair was much shorter than she imagined, and she wore glasses she hadn't mentioned because she didn't think every part of a face needed describing.

They arranged their first meeting at a gaming fair in a city both could reach by bus. Emina arrived early, wanting a few quiet minutes. Luka had arrived even earlier and was nervously arranging leaflets on a table that wasn't his. In person, he spoke faster. She spoke more slowly. For the first half-hour, each tried sounding like the familiar version from their headphones, making the conversation oddly tiring.

Eventually, Emina said she missed the button that let her mute the microphone and eat a biscuit. Luka laughed so sincerely that he stopped arranging leaflets. They bought coffee and sat outside the noisy hall. He admitted fearing he wouldn't be interesting enough without a game to fill the gaps. She said those gaps were precisely why she had traveled, to see what an ordinary hour together looked like.

The hour was pleasant but imperfect. Luka interrupted when excited; Emina withdrew when unsure of an answer. They told each other without

presenting lists of demands. They walked to the river, missed a workshop, and ate lunch too late. At the bus station, Luka asked whether he could kiss her. She said yes, then made him laugh by adding that he needed no extra time for that move.

They continued playing but planned meetings too. Sometimes travel was tiring and weekends too short. Emina didn't turn disappointment into evidence that everything had been a delusion. Luka learned to call even without an interesting story. One evening, an unfinished game remained on the screen while they discussed buying tickets. For the first time, neither minded that nobody was approaching victory. They had something else both wanted to complete.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

We Cheer for Different Sides

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/we-cheer-for-different-sides/

Mirela brought a cushion to the stands, while Goran carried an old flask. They sat in the same row every Saturday because the view was good and the doors didn't let in a draft. Her adult son played for one recreational handball team; his daughter coached another. The teams often met in a small town tournament. Whenever Mirela jumped with joy, Goran usually sank deeper into his seat and drank coffee.

Their first conversations concerned the score. Mirela claimed his goalkeeper came out too far; Goran said her son always shot from impossible angles. They didn't actually know enough to be so certain, but that didn't stop them. Both lived alone. She had divorced, and his wife had died. They learned those facts slowly, between whistles and searches for a fallen hat.

One Saturday, the match was postponed because of a floor problem. Most people left, while the two remained outside the hall, puzzled by an empty part of the day. Goran offered coffee from his flask. Mirela said she would rather drink it at a proper table. They went to a nearby restaurant and stayed until lunch. Without a game before them, they discovered both liked bus journeys, hated crosswords, and kept boxes for objects discarded long ago.

They began meeting on Wednesdays. On Saturdays, they pretended to meet by chance in the stands because they didn't know how their children would react. At first, secrecy seemed amusing, then tiring. Mirela's son once saw them in town and asked why she hadn't told him. He wasn't angry about Goran. He found it strange that his mother thought she needed permission. Goran's daughter reacted similarly, asking only that they avoid kissing before the teams during halftime.

In the final match, their teams played each other. Mirela and Goran sat together but cheered loudly for opposite sides. When her son missed the decisive shot, Goran instinctively began commenting on his angle. Mirela looked at him. He stopped and offered the flask, and both laughed because they didn't intend to become perfectly tactful simply because they loved each other.

After the match, their children left with their teammates, while they went to dinner. Goran asked whether they would sit in the same place next season. Mirela said yes, provided he didn't explain every shot. He promised only every other one. She linked arms with him and kept debating the result as they crossed the parking lot. For the first time, they had no reason to walk several steps apart.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Portrait with Hands Outside the Page

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-portrait-with-hands-outside-the-page/

Danilo drew Viktor with one eye larger than the other and hands ending somewhere beyond the paper. The instructor told them to show their work to their partners. Danilo turned his pad upside down and asked whether he could submit it as a landscape. Viktor laughed, then showed his drawing. In it, Danilo resembled a stern man collecting parking fees. They decided both needed many more classes.

The drawing course met in an old schoolroom. Both were over fifty, with different jobs and a similar wish to do something once a week without needing expertise. Danilo managed a warehouse; Viktor translated technical texts. Between drawing apples and vases, they discussed cooking, tired eyes, and the strange relief of people no longer asking how much their hobby might earn.

After the fourth class, Viktor invited him for a drink. Danilo accepted but talked about colors all evening, as though another subject might reveal him. Eventually, Viktor said he hadn't invited him because of shading. Danilo put down his glass. He said he was glad, then admitted recently leaving a relationship and not wanting to promise more than he could offer. Viktor didn't rush to turn that honesty into a reason to give up.

They saw each other slowly. Sometimes they had dinner; sometimes they merely sat on the bench outside after class. Danilo first felt jealousy when Viktor mentioned a former partner who remained a friend. He wasn't proud of the feeling. He explained what hurt without demanding that Viktor end the acquaintance. Viktor described their relationship and added that he wouldn't hide people simply to avoid an uncomfortable conversation.

For the students' shared exhibition, Danilo chose to show that first poor portrait. Viktor protested that the audience wouldn't know how much he

had improved. Danilo said the audience didn't need to know everything. His sister paused before the drawing, looked at Viktor, and asked whether he was the man she had heard about. Danilo said he was. He added no lengthy explanation, and she merely observed that her brother had unfairly enlarged Viktor's ear.

After the exhibition, they went to Viktor's home for soup that had almost entirely reduced during their absence. They added water and both overdid the salt. For the first time, Danilo left his jacket over a chair without checking the clock. Viktor put a copy of the portrait on the refrigerator. It still had no hands, but at the table Danilo's rested beside his, close enough to take whenever both wanted.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Time Between Two Tours

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-time-between-two-tours/

"That clock never belonged to the mayor," said a man standing behind Irma's group. The tourists turned like an audience promised an unexpected sequel. Irma stopped mid-story and asked him to explain. He was the museum's restorer, named Leon, with a paint stain on his cuff. The clock had belonged to a watchmaker who donated it much later. Irma thanked him, but his correction before twenty people stung throughout the tour.

Afterwards, she waited for him in the courtyard. She said she wanted accurate information but could receive it without a public surprise. Leon first began defending the clock's history. Then he realized she wasn't arguing about the clock. He apologized and offered to show her the workshop, where objects stood that guides rarely mentioned. Irma agreed to visit the following Thursday, between groups.

There she found a broken music box, a child's chair, and a frame whose ornament resembled a displeased dog. Leon spoke carefully, without the interruption through which they had met. Irma asked about the people who used the objects, and he realized how rarely he considered them while cleaning surfaces. The visit produced a new tour story. Gratitude didn't produce coffee because both were too shy to say they wanted it.

They eventually had coffee when a group canceled. Irma had a free hour, and Leon had a break he usually spent working. They discussed their jobs, then their worst holidays, and finally food they could eat every day. When she stood to leave, Leon said he liked the way she asked questions. Irma replied that she liked even more the way he now listened.

They first went out on Sunday, to a park without historical signs. Leon tried identifying a tree, then stopped and laughed. He didn't need to give everything its correct name. Irma spoke about the aunt who taught her to

address people by making her order cakes for the entire family. Leon admitted that in company he often chose knowledge because he didn't know how to show uncertainty. She took his hand without interrupting their walk.

The next Thursday, the group asked who was waving through the workshop window. Irma gave his name and occupation without a private addition he hadn't approved. After the tour, he waited in the courtyard with two concert tickets. She asked what he knew about the performers. "Very little," he replied. "I thought we could find out together." This time, she let the pause linger before smiling.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

An Appointment After Midnight

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-appointment-after-midnight/

There were always seats on the bus leaving twenty minutes after midnight, but Hana sat by the middle door. It helped her stay awake. She worked at a laboratory specimen reception desk, and after a shift the city seemed to move more slowly than her eyes. The man boarding two stops later carried white kitchen shoes in a clear bag. He never sat beside her until one evening rainwater covered the other seats beneath an open roof window.

"I don't snore," he said before sitting. "My head just drops sometimes."

Hana laughed. His name was Armin, he cooked at a hotel, and he claimed he couldn't look at another potato after ten at night. She admitted eating precisely that at home because she could reheat potatoes without thinking. They talked until her stop. The next evening, he sat beside her again, this time asking whether she wanted conversation. Some days, she didn't. Then they watched the windows without trying to turn silence into an insult.

Over winter, they learned more about each other than people usually reveal on a first date. Hana worried about a younger sister struggling with independence. Armin was learning to live with his adult son, who had temporarily returned home. Both needed quiet, yet looked forward to the same brief conversation. One evening, Hana missed her stop. She didn't claim to have been distracted. She said she hadn't wanted to get off.

In March, Armin received a day shift. He delivered the news with a smile that faded as he watched her face. Hana congratulated him and said he could finally sleep normally. She didn't add that she would miss him. He didn't request her number because he thought their acquaintance suited her only while it asked for nothing. On their final shared ride, they sat too

politely, like passengers who had just met.

Before her stop, Hana stood, then sat again. "Could we meet when neither of us is coming from work?" she asked. Armin produced his phone so quickly that his shoe bag fell beneath the seat. They arranged Sunday breakfast. Hana chose somewhere near the park without calculating how many stops they had for conversation. He promised to arrive in shoes he wouldn't need to carry separately.

On Sunday, both arrived too early. In daylight, they seemed different, younger and less certain. Armin ordered potatoes with his eggs, and Hana laughed before he could explain. After breakfast, they walked until the park filled with people. When he offered his hand, she took it without checking the time. A bus passed on the street behind them, empty and entirely unnecessary.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Room with Two Different Pillows

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-room-with-two-different-pillows/

Nela packed two pillows for the trip, a firm one for herself and a softer one for Iris. When she unpacked them at the small guesthouse, Iris paused with a toothbrush in her hand. They had known each other for seven years, but she hadn't expected anyone to remember that particular detail. They had come for a long weekend by the lake after months of postponements. Both were in their forties, with enough obligations to make three free days feel almost unreal.

Iris had left a long relationship with a woman who liked planning every hour. Nela had lived alone for years and insisted that it suited her. Their friendship contained many shared dinners and no conversation about why they often declined other invitations but never these. At the guesthouse, they received a twin room overlooking the parking lot. Nela apologized for the view as though she had built it personally.

It rained on the first day. They played cards in their room, drinking tea from mismatched cups. Iris kept winning and grew increasingly suspicious. Nela wasn't losing deliberately; she simply couldn't follow the cards while her attention remained on a damp strand of hair beside Iris's cheek. When Iris asked what she was looking at, Nela answered truthfully before inventing a more polite response. Only dripping from the windowsill could be heard in the room.

Iris put down the cards. She said she had wanted to know for a long time whether Nela looked at her that way, but feared losing the one relationship in which she didn't have to guess someone else's mood. Nela admitted the same fear. They didn't immediately move the beds. They walked beneath one umbrella and discussed what trying might look like, without promising never to be awkward or hurt. Their first kiss happened by a closed kiosk while they sought a dry place for the map.

On the second day, the sun emerged, along with a small argument about the route to the lookout. Iris wanted the shorter trail; Nela kept consulting the map. They stopped, laughed at their haste to turn a new relationship into a perfect outing, and chose a route both wanted to walk. They didn't agree about everything simply because they had finally declared love. Unexpectedly, that brought relief.

On the way home, Iris held both pillows in her lap because they had bought too many apples for the trunk. Nela asked whether she wanted to stay at her place the following weekend. Iris said yes, provided she needn't leave a toothbrush forever immediately. Nela laughed and turned toward her street. Outside the building, they kissed without looking toward the windows. Iris carried her softer pillow upstairs, knowing she would soon return it to the place where she had been invited.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Ticket to the Canceled Film

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-ticket-to-the-canceled-film/

The cinema door said the screening was canceled because of a fault. Miona read the notice twice, convinced these things happened precisely when she finally went out alone. Behind her, a man in a navy jacket said he had bought the last seat and considered himself lucky. He raised the paper ticket as though the door might recognize it. Miona replied that they could now compete to decide who was luckier without a film.

His name was Erol, and he was a geography teacher on holiday. Miona worked in a laboratory and had taken an afternoon off after a string of long shifts. Opposite reasons had attracted them to the film. She liked the actress; he liked the old music in the trailer. While waiting for refunds, they began debating a film neither had seen. The cashier smiled and asked them to step aside so others could approach.

The rain had stopped, but the pavement still shone. Erol suggested coffee; Miona preferred a walk because she had sat all day. They set out without a destination and reached a closed bookstore with a window full of books neither had read. Erol invented plots from the titles. Miona chose the dullest and made it a story about a woman escaping with somebody else's flowerpot. He laughed loudly without checking whether he was allowed.

When they grew hungry, they bought pastries from a bakery that was closing. They ate standing beneath an awning. Miona admitted that spending an entire evening with someone she knew almost nothing about felt unusual. Erol offered an orderly account of his age, work, and recent divorce, then stopped. "This sounds like a rental application," he said. Miona gave him her number and said they could learn the rest if they met again, without needing to check everything before the final bite.

He called the next day. He didn't wait three days or claim to be passing her neighborhood accidentally. They arranged another screening at a different cinema. Neither liked the film. Miona considered the ending unfair; Erol thought it too long. Outside, they nearly argued about a character who lied from fear. Then she said she was glad he wasn't pretending to agree. Erol kissed her only after she asked whether he intended to remain a film critic all evening.

Later, they kept the tickets from the canceled film in the kitchen drawer with batteries. They didn't frame them. Sometimes they found one while searching for scissors and remembered that an entire evening had emerged from failed plans. When their new plans changed, they didn't always respond graciously. But they at least knew to ask each other about coffee or a walk before declaring the day lost.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Dance Without Turning Back

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-dance-without-turning-back/

Jasmin spent his first dance class counting aloud. "One, two, three" sounded like a warning rather than music. His partner, Dalia, asked him to stop because his counting made her forget her own feet. Both had come alone. He had promised his sister a dance at her wedding; she had decided to stop waiting for company for everything she wanted to try. Neither expected a simple sideways step to require so much negotiation.

The instructor reversed their roles. Dalia led, Jasmin followed, and they immediately collided less. It wasn't because she danced better, but because he stopped anticipating mistakes. After class, they sat on the steps to change shoes. Jasmin admitted managing a team at work and struggling when he didn't know what came next. Dalia said that in her kitchen, even lunch often didn't know what came next.

They arranged to practice in the hall students could use on Sundays. They spent the first half-hour talking and the second trying to set up the speaker. When they finally danced, Jasmin stepped on her shoe and stopped. Dalia continued, drawing him along, and said the music had no obligation to wait for their perfect step. That made him laugh. For the first time, her palm felt like a person's hand rather than a signal he needed to interpret correctly.

Before his sister's wedding, he asked whether she wanted to come. Dalia said yes, but wouldn't pretend to be his girlfriend for his relatives. Jasmin blushed and explained that he was inviting her precisely because he wanted to discuss being together. They stood in the empty hall without music to help avoid the pause. Dalia said she would first enjoy dinner somewhere they wouldn't need to count the steps to their table.

Over dinner, they learned things dancing couldn't reveal. He liked rising early; she worked late. Dalia didn't want children, while Jasmin had

considered the subject at length without deciding. They didn't cover the difference with a kiss. They spoke seriously, agreed not to promise what they didn't know, and continued seeing each other. Attraction didn't disappear when real sentences grew around it.

At the wedding, Jasmin danced faultlessly with his sister, then made a mistake on his first turn with Dalia. She laughed and changed direction. His aunt later asked who led in that relationship. Jasmin wanted a witty response, but Dalia simply said, "It depends on the song." Then she invited him onto the floor because a song they both loved had begun. He went without counting, noticing that his shoes finally weren't louder than the music.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Draw Before the Last Bus

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-draw-before-the-last-bus/

Ines disliked an opponent offering a draw while she still had a good position. At her third meeting with Mateo, she refused before he finished speaking. Their chess club had too few women and too many men who regarded their politeness as a gift. Mateo checked the time, then resigned. Ines was left with a victory that felt like an unfinished argument.

The following week, she arrived early to wait for him. She found him in the kitchen carefully dividing a sandwich into two equal halves. He explained that he needed the last bus to the neighborhood where his mother lived. He helped her in the evenings before she slept. Ines asked why he hadn't explained immediately. Mateo shrugged. He didn't want every club visit to become a conversation about being a good son.

She was ashamed of her assumption, but didn't justify it with a long account of earlier opponents. She apologized and suggested starting their next game earlier. Mateo asked whether she would then let him beat her properly. She said he could try. During the game, he lost a rook through a miscalculation, and she rejected his latest draw offer with such a broad smile that the neighboring table began cheering.

They met away from the chessboard only after a month. Mateo asked his sister to cover one evening, while Ines closed her small picture-framing workshop on time. They went to a restaurant where the waiter kept moving their candle to see the menu better. Ines said she didn't want to become another obligation carefully fitted between buses. Mateo replied that he had wanted this evening, which was why he had arranged it.

They didn't have many free hours. Sometimes they met only for a short walk; sometimes she attended a tournament without him. Once, he was upset that she hadn't told him she had won, and she said she hadn't

known whether he wanted interruption. They agreed on a simple rule: good news could be sent, and the answer could wait. They didn't need to decide in advance how much space they were allowed in somebody else's day.

Toward winter's end, Mateo brought a chess set to her apartment. Ines made dinner, then removed the plates and played the first move. At eleven, he checked the time. She began gathering pieces, thinking he needed to leave. Mateo stopped her and showed his sister's message saying she had stayed with their mother. "There's no last bus tonight," he said. The game ended in a draw after midnight. This time, Ines offered it herself, for perfectly good reasons on the board.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Rest Stop with the Broken Machine

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-rest-stop-with-the-broken-machine/

Rasim missed the exit because Aida was explaining why she didn't want to sit beside his aunt. He said she always distracted him when he needed to follow signs. Aida closed her mouth and looked out of the window. They were traveling to a family celebration, their third that month. After twenty years of marriage, they knew how the argument would end: he would apologize through a joke, she would accept, and nothing would change until the next invitation.

They stopped at a rest area where the machine wouldn't dispense coffee. Rasim inserted money, pressed the button, and waited. Aida said he could stop pressing the same thing if it didn't work. They looked at each other because the sentence sounded too appropriate. Rasim laughed first but didn't use it to end the argument. He sat on a bench and asked why this celebration was so difficult for her.

Aida said she felt like his family secretary. She remembered birthdays, bought presents, and invented excuses when he didn't want to attend. Rasim had believed this came easily to her, almost like a favorite hobby. Hearing how wrong he was felt more uncomfortable than arguing over an exit. He admitted no longer noticing her work once it became routine. For the first time, Aida spoke without fearing she sounded petty.

They called their hosts together. They apologized and said they wouldn't make it, without inventing a car breakdown. Then they ate the sandwiches Aida had packed and discussed where they wanted to go themselves. Rasim mentioned a lake where they never stopped because they were always in a hurry. Aida said she had brought only dress shoes. He took her old sneakers from the trunk, where she had left them after a spring walk.

There was nothing especially romantic at the lake. The wind carried the smell of mud, two families argued loudly about a barbecue, and the bench was damp. Rasim spread out his jacket and sat very close. Aida leaned against him cautiously at first, as though testing a place where she hadn't sat for years. They discussed their early marriage, but also the following Saturday, which he promised to organize without asking where their picnic cups were kept.

They returned home with an undelivered present and muddy shoes. The missed exit didn't cure their marriage. The next month, they argued over schedules again, but this time Rasim called his aunt himself, and Aida didn't correct his excuse. They put a photograph of the lake on the refrigerator, blurred because of the wind. When someone asked where it had been taken, they said they had once been late for somebody else's celebration.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Sunday Outside the Cemetery Gate

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/sunday-outside-the-cemetery-gate/

Mirna came to the cemetery with an empty water bottle and scissors that were never sharp enough. Faruk brought a small brush and always forgot a bag for dried leaves. Their parents rested in neighboring rows. In the first year, they exchanged only greetings. In the second, they began lending things. In the third, Mirna noticed she dressed more carefully on Sundays than the work among stone slabs required.

Faruk wasn't a cemetery employee, as she initially assumed, but a delivery-van driver. Mirna edited books for a small publisher. Both lived alone and had other people in their lives, but nobody knew their calmest weekly conversations happened beside the tap. They discussed weather, neighbors, and parental habits continuing through their hands although they never intended to inherit them.

One Sunday, Faruk mentioned a new café near the gate. Mirna immediately understood the invitation and wished he hadn't offered it there. She said she didn't want to turn visiting her parents into a date. Faruk apologized, visibly embarrassed. They left separately, feeling they had spoiled something requiring no name. The next week, Mirna came earlier, then grew angry at avoiding a man she had no reason to blame.

She waited by the tap and said her discomfort concerned the place, not him. She feared joy would diminish her reason for visiting. Faruk replied that he didn't think her mother occupied the same part of life another person might occupy. He didn't attempt to speak for the dead. He simply described how he felt when he went among living people after visiting rather than straight to an empty apartment.

They arranged Wednesday coffee far from the cemetery. Mirna first saw Faruk without his work jacket and learned he disliked the cakes he kept recommending. He recommended them because he didn't know what

else to offer. She laughed and admitted carrying scissors from habit although most flowers she bought needed no cutting. Their conversation became less solemn once they could be ordinary and a little ridiculous.

They continued visiting separately on Sundays. Sometimes they met, sometimes not. Their relationship grew around dinners, walks, and different opinions about films rather than shared sorrow. Once, Faruk offered to collect her afterwards. Mirna accepted. She emerged through the gate with an empty bottle and saw him leaning against his car. She kissed him without looking back toward the rows, leaving memories peacefully where they belonged and carrying the rest of the day forward.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Basil on the Wrong Terrace

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/basil-on-the-wrong-terrace/

Damir placed every pot in a marked position. His plan for the shared rooftop garden had numbers, a watering schedule, and arrows for walking routes. The next morning, he found a yellow bucket of basil among the orderly rows. It belonged to no marking. A note hung from the handle: "Temporarily here. Irma, third floor." Temporarily lasted seven days, long enough for the scent to begin delighting him while the disorder annoyed him.

Irma made costumes for small productions and lived among boxes of fabric. Damir was a technical draftsman who enjoyed empty surfaces. At the residents' meeting, they argued about the bucket for nearly ten minutes. She asked whether a plant could grow without an application form. He explained that the bucket blocked the drain when the wind shifted it. It was a good reason, so Irma fell silent and moved it, surprising them both.

The next morning, she found a sturdy wooden stand beneath the bucket. Damir had made it from leftover shelving. She left him basil leaves in a paper bag. They began exchanging small gifts requiring no formal thanks: a tomato tie, fabric for shade, the first strawberry a bird had missed. Their conversations grew longer, and the garden plan acquired several handwritten changes.

A storm caught them on the roof while they were collecting chairs. The wind lifted Irma's bucket, and Damir ran so abruptly that he slipped. He didn't fall, but he was frightened. Irma pulled him away from the edge and said the plants could wait. They sheltered in the enclosed stairwell, soaked through. Damir admitted that disorder frightened him because he never knew when something might go wrong. Irma said order frightened her only when someone used it to measure her worth.

After the storm, they repaired the garden without arguing. Damir didn't count broken pots aloud. Irma checked the drains herself and wrote down what needed securing. When they finished, she invited him to dinner, warning that she might need to clear fabric off the table first. He accepted on condition that he could bring bread. She laughed so hard at this modest request that she nearly dropped the bucket again.

Her apartment smelled of roasted tomatoes. Damir folded a piece of fabric and moved it only after asking where he could put it. Irma placed the plates safely away from the table's edge. They kissed while the pasta water was still waiting to boil. Later, the basil remained in its yellow bucket, on a safe stand that fitted none of the original drawings.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Wrong Platform for the Same Train

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wrong-platform-for-the-same-train/

In language class, they were supposed to act out buying a ticket. Alma was selling and Petar traveling, but both forgot the word for platform. Instead of looking in the book, he drew a train on the back of the exercise. It resembled a wardrobe on wheels. Alma laughed so loudly that the teacher asked them to show the rest of the group why they were incapable of departing on time.

Both were forty and had different reasons for attending. Alma planned a three-month professional course abroad; Petar intended to visit his brother, who lived far away. After class, they walked to the same stop, repeating words while looking at shop windows. Alma pronounced long nouns correctly but was shy about speaking. Petar spoke freely and incorrectly without much distress. They agreed that he would lend her courage and she would lend him word endings.

When the group went to dinner, they sat together. Petar described learning to cook for one again after his divorce. Alma said she had never married, so people often drew sad conclusions from that which she didn't recognize. Petar offered no conclusion. He merely asked whether she liked traveling alone. The conversation continued until the waiter began stacking chairs.

They kissed two weeks before her departure. The next day, Alma almost called to postpone her training, then grew angry with herself for immediately turning new love into a test of sacrifice. She told Petar about that moment. He admitted wanting to ask her to stay, but said he didn't want to become the reason she might someday hate her own calendar. They arranged Sunday calls without promising that each would last hours.

The first month was easy. In the second, they argued because Petar forgot to say he was visiting his brother, leaving Alma waiting for a call. He didn't buy flowers online. He called, listened, and scheduled a shared time he could honor. She admitted that waiting needn't ruin her whole evening. They began sending short recordings of ordinary life, including a broken vending machine and a badly pronounced soup order.

When she returned, Petar waited on the wrong platform. She sent a photograph of the sign instead of an angry message. He rolled over a suitcase he had brought to help her, empty and entirely unnecessary. Alma embraced him, then sat on a bench until he caught his breath. They didn't go straight home. First, they bought two tickets for a short trip they both wanted, this time at the same counter and without drawings.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Note on the Wrong Receipt

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-note-on-the-wrong-receipt/

The back of the receipt read: "When you enter, I stop looking for the exit." Lana found it between two books a customer had left on the counter while searching for his wallet. His name was Luka, he came on Fridays, and he always asked for something short that wasn't sad. She hadn't managed to return the paper before he left. She put it under the keyboard, thinking she would know what to say by the following Friday.

Luka appeared with a book list and another sheet covered in crossed-out sentences. Lana served him unusually slowly. When he said he needed a book about a long friendship, she almost felt insulted. Then she saw "groom" at the top of his notes. Luka was writing a speech for his brother's wedding. The abandoned receipt was merely a surface on which he had tried to find an opening line. Lana felt her ears burning, although nobody could know what she had imagined all week.

She decided to confess before the misunderstanding became a coldness he wouldn't understand. She handed him the receipt and said she had thought the message was meant for her. Luka looked at her, then leaned against a shelf that creaked dangerously. "I wish I'd been that bold," he said. Lana laughed, first awkwardly and then sincerely. He explained that he bought a book every week despite not finishing the previous one because he hadn't known how to invite her out of the shop.

She offered to help with his speech if he stopped inventing literary needs in return. They met in a café, where Luka read an excessively long text about his brother. Lana removed three jokes that would hurt the bride and kept the story about the groom saving another child's seat on a bus. Luka listened carefully, without wounded authorial pride. Afterwards, they discussed her wish to open a small reading room, and for the first time he didn't request a recommendation, but asked what she read when she had no obligation to be useful.

The speech went well. Luka sent a short voice message from the noisy hall without recording other people's private moments. He said he looked forward to their Sunday walk. On Monday, he came to return a book he had mistakenly bought twice. On the new receipt, Lana wrote the title of a novel they had discussed. Beneath it, she added: "This is a recommendation. I'll invite you to dinner aloud." Luka put down his wallet and waited for her shift to end.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Gloves That Didn't Match

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-gloves-that-didnt-match/

Tijana had already lifted the chair toward the trailer when a man in a yellow raincoat told her to stop. A name was written in black marker on its back. "It might not be rubbish," he said. The riverbank was full of things that had once belonged to somebody, so Tijana had no patience for his caution. "Then we'll ask every bottle cap about its family first," she replied, immediately regretting her harshness.

The man introduced himself as Niko. He was thirty-two, worked in a print shop, and wore two different work gloves. The chair was dry, although it had rained overnight. A fresh moving-company sticker was attached to its leg. Tijana lowered it. They called the number and learned that some furniture had fallen from an open trailer. Its owner lived two streets away.

"All right, the bottle caps are safe for now," Tijana said.

Niko laughed and took the other end of the chair. As they carried it, she learned that he helped repair furniture on weekends, while he learned that she edited wedding photographs she was finding increasingly difficult to tell apart. The chair's owner, an older woman named Rea, answered with a measuring tape around her neck. Recognizing it, she sat down in the hallway. It was the chair where her late husband had tied her shoes before outings for years.

One leg wobbled after the fall. Niko promised to return with tools, but Tijana noticed that he used "we." She didn't correct him. On Sunday, she arrived early, bringing glue he didn't need and a cake they all enjoyed. Rea told them about moving while they worked. When she asked whether they were a couple, Tijana said, "We're still negotiating about rubbish." Niko lowered his eyes to hide his smile.

After the repair, they went to the river. Tijana admitted that she usually rushed decisions because the amount of unfinished work frightened her. Niko said he sometimes delayed finishing just to avoid going home to an empty apartment. Neither tried turning the other's habits into virtues. They sat on the steps and shared the remaining cake, eating straight from its box.

They arrived together for the next cleanup but worked in different groups. When Tijana found an old picture frame, she showed it to Niko from a distance. He shook his head and pointed to the dumpster. She obeyed, laughing. Afterwards, they went to buy gloves. They chose different colors, then each took one from the other's pair, without any particular reason that needed explaining.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Radio That Only Receives Saturdays

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-radio-that-only-receives-saturdays/

Nada brought the radio wrapped in a kitchen towel. She said it sometimes lost stations. In the Saturday repair workshop, held in the community center's basement, Omer plugged it in and immediately found music. He turned the dial, moved the antenna, and waited for the fault to appear. Nada sat opposite him without taking off her coat. "It sounds different at home," she said when he looked at her.

Omer was a retired electrician whose fingers shook more when someone hurried him. Nada had once worked in a flower shop. Her husband had died three years earlier, and her last close friend had moved away to live with her daughter. The radio filled the kitchen but couldn't answer her remarks. Omer couldn't fix that with a screwdriver, so he offered to listen to another program together while the tea water boiled.

The next Saturday, Nada brought an extension cord. Then came a lamp whose bulb merely needed tightening. Omer checked each object properly, without charging. They discussed songs that irritated them and vegetables they would never enjoy. Nada asked why he wore light-colored sweaters in a workshop. He said he had spent his entire working life in gray and didn't intend to finish that way. She liked this decision more than she expected.

On the fourth Saturday, she brought a brand-new iron. Omer didn't open the box. "If I take this apart, I'll break something that works," he said. Nada blushed and began explaining that the sales assistant might have made a mistake. Omer rested his hand on the box. He added that she could come empty-handed. Someone in the basement switched on a vacuum cleaner, so he had to repeat his next question: would she walk with him after closing?

Nada agreed, then called her adult son to cancel their usual five-o'clock conversation. He asked whether everything was all right. She said she was going for a walk and realized she didn't immediately need to explain with whom. Omer closed the workshop on time rather than accepting one more small repair. They walked slowly because his knee hurt. Nada neither hurried him nor offered to cure him with advice.

At the bridge, they stopped to let a cyclist pass. Omer asked whether he could link arms with her. Nada said yes, provided he didn't pretend that she needed support. He laughed and admitted that he liked it better that way. At home, she switched on the radio and heard the same station as before. The sound was perfectly good. For the following Saturday, she prepared two sandwiches, without a single appliance in her bag.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Soups to Take Away

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-soups-to-take-away/

Ena had prepared eight pumpkin soups, but the office had ordered six. She discovered the mistake only after the courier, Vedad, had put his bag on the counter. He offered to buy one, but she told him to sit while she ate the other. The outdoor table was wet from the morning rain. They wiped it with two napkins and ate from paper containers, careful not to burn their tongues.

Ena was twenty-eight and had only just opened her takeaway kitchen. Vedad had finished university late and was making deliveries while looking for work in his field. He neither apologized for his bicycle nor called her a brave entrepreneur. He asked why she put apple in the soup. She explained, and the next day noticed that he ordered exactly one portion for himself, without inventing a mistake to justify coming.

Over lunch, they exchanged very different news. Her new oven cooked more strongly on the left; his interview had lasted nine minutes. If he was late, she left a container covered with a plate. If she was overwhelmed with work, he washed his own spoon and left. Neither yet mentioned a date. Their first touch was entirely practical: he held a cold compress against her burned finger while she canceled a delivery over the phone that couldn't wait.

Vedad found a job across town, with a fixed lunch break and a shirt he had to iron. He came to share the news expecting delight, but Ena merely smiled and said she would make his last soup. He repeated "last" as though checking a bill. She explained that he would no longer pass along that street. "I can come when I'm not delivering anything," he said. Ena wiped a counter that was already clean.

She admitted that believing in a schedule had been easier than believing in his interest. He admitted carrying flowers three times and giving them

to his sister, convinced he would disturb Ena at work. They arranged a walk after closing, without food or the ordering phone. For the first time, Ena put a notice on the door saying the kitchen would close on Sundays. She gave no reason, although she spent a long time considering how to justify it.

On their walk, they ended up outside a closed museum they both wanted to visit. They read the opening hours and began laughing. Vedad suggested coffee, and Ena took his hand before he could find another practical subject. The following Monday, an ordered soup arrived at his workplace. There was no heart on the lid, just a question: "Saturday, museum at eleven?" He replied by message before opening the container.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Chapter Read Aloud

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-chapter-read-aloud/

Selma came to the book-club meeting carrying a book without a single folded page. When it was her turn to speak, she said she hadn't read it. After eye surgery, small print quickly caused pain, and no audio edition existed. She didn't want the others guessing why she was quiet. The librarian, Boris, offered to make the next selection available in larger print, then continued the discussion without pity.

The following week, she found him recording the first chapter of the same book. He was doing it for a small group of members who struggled to read, with permission arranged from the publisher. He stopped the recording every time he sneezed. Selma suggested that she edit the pauses and mark mistakes. Before retirement, she had worked in radio production. Boris immediately moved her chair beside the computer, visibly pleased to have someone who knew more than he did.

They worked on Thursdays after closing. Boris read too quickly when he became excited, and Selma stopped him by tapping her pencil. In one chapter, the hero proposed so awkwardly that they had to record it five times because they kept laughing. Boris said he would probably be worse. Selma told him there was no competition, then noticed that he had stopped turning the page.

He had been widowed for six years. She had divorced long ago, without wanting to spend the rest of her life explaining why. Their conversations gradually moved beyond the book, but Boris never asked whether she needed company home until she requested it herself one rainy evening. He held the umbrella too high, like someone who had walked alone for a long time. Selma lowered his arm and moved close enough for them both to stay dry.

When her sight improved, she announced that she could read ordinary print again. Boris was delighted, then abruptly quiet. At the next recording session, he had prepared a certificate thanking her for her help. Selma read it and asked whether it meant dismissal. He looked confused. "I thought you wouldn't need to come anymore." She replied that she had never needed to. She left the certificate on the table and suggested dinner after the final chapter.

They finished the book at nine twenty. In the restaurant, Boris didn't know where to put the headphones he had accidentally brought around his neck. Selma laid them beside her bag. She told him about a trip she was planning, and he discussed the cottage he wanted to sell. Neither offered to abandon their plans. When dessert arrived, he asked her to read the name he didn't understand. She read it aloud, slowly, enjoying his smile.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Meeting Between Two Floors

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-meeting-between-two-floors/

The office building's elevator ran only to the second floor, although the building had four. Denis therefore kept a chair on the landing between the third and fourth floors for clients who grew tired. One day, he found Nina there, eating a sandwich over a box of bills. She looked up and said she would pay to rent the chair as soon as her client paid her.

Denis repaired old computers, while Nina ran a small payroll service. Each had an office, a coffee machine, and too much time between calls. They began having lunch on the landing because it was the only place that caught the afternoon sun. Nina brought tomatoes; Denis borrowed salt from the nearby kiosk. They discussed clients without sharing names, cats with colds, and furniture they had inherited after divorce.

Nina noticed that Denis wore a fresh shirt on Tuesdays even though he had no meetings. He noticed that she saved half an apple instead of bringing another. Their courtship lasted throughout spring, disguised as business breaks. When the caretaker found them, they said they were resolving a shared internet problem. Eventually, he brought them an extra chair and stopped asking questions.

In June, the owner announced the sale of the building. The tenants had a month to leave. Denis quickly found a workshop in another neighborhood. Nina decided to work from home. They discussed this on the last Friday, between empty boxes, with the solemnity of people breaking up although they had never dared begin. "There's no sunny staircase there," Denis said. Nina nodded, angry that they behaved as though the chair were their only possible address.

While packing her calculator, she returned to the landing. Denis was unscrewing the chair's back to make it easier to carry. "Will you ask me to a lunch that counts as lunch?" she asked. He looked at the screw in his

palm, then at her. He said he had been wondering how for two months. Nina took the screwdriver and finished while he reserved a table for Saturday. They both laughed at the unusual division of labor.

On their first proper date, the restaurant was too loud and the tomatoes tasteless. Denis said so and immediately apologized, afraid of spoiling the evening. Nina suggested walking to the market. They bought ripe tomatoes and ate them in the park, with a paper bag between them. There was no sunshine, only an overcast June day. When he offered his hand, they no longer needed to invent a fault they could repair together.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Quiet Through a Shared Wall

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/quiet-through-a-shared-wall/

The first message Mira left her neighbor contained only a time: "Two seventeen in the morning." She stuck it across his doorbell after the bass shook the glass on her desk for the third time. She was translating sewing-machine instructions with too little time and a headache. In the morning, she found a reply beneath her door: "I'm sorry. I thought this apartment was still empty."

The neighbor's name was Alen, and he edited sound for small films. He arrived with a notebook and wrote down the hours when she most needed quiet. Mira had prepared for an argument, so his pencil seemed almost suspicious. He showed her his schedules, and together they found three afternoon hours for the speakers. He would wear headphones the rest of the time. He didn't ask her to be patient while he became successful.

After that, they met by the mailboxes. Once, Alen played her a recording of rain on a tin roof. Mira said it sounded like onions frying. He laughed so much that he had to stop the recording. Next time, she brought him a translated sentence claiming that the machine might take offense if oiled incorrectly. They began collecting the world's small mistakes and bringing them to each other.

When Mira received a job requiring six weeks in another city, she told him in a note. She didn't want to make a major event of something that didn't yet have a name. Alen replied with a brief "Good luck." She traveled away convinced that their acquaintance had ended with the speakers. In the hotel room, where there was no shared wall, she realized how much she had expected his footsteps in the hallway.

She called him on the final Sunday. "Did you miss me, or just my complaints?" she asked, surprised by her own directness. Alen admitted

that he had replied briefly because he hadn't known whether he could ask her to return. Mira told him she made her own decisions about work, but he could have said how he felt. Then they talked for forty minutes about ordinary things, without trying to replace every missed word.

Upon her return, a new note waited on her door: "Saturday, seven in the evening, dinner if you'd like." She brought a salad and her old headphones as a joke. Alen removed his computer from the table, and for the first time the apartment was quiet for a reason unrelated to her complaint. When they kissed in the kitchen, the refrigerator suddenly began humming. They both laughed and let it finish.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Pocket for a Tram Ticket

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-pocket-for-a-tram-ticket/

Lejla pulled three tram tickets, a receipt for lemons, and a folded night-shift roster from the torn lining of the coat. The customer stood before the mirror with his arms raised as though being examined. "Make me a pocket that won't let me down," he said. A small flour stain remained on his left sleeve. His name was Adnan, and he cooked at a restaurant that closed shortly before dawn.

Her sewing shop opened when he was heading home. The first time, they drank coffee because the rain wouldn't stop. The second time, she had miscalculated how long the repair would take. The third time, Adnan brought two bread rolls and asked whether something on the squeaking sewing machine needed oiling. Lejla handed him the oil, pleased that he hadn't immediately claimed to know better than she did.

He was divorced, as was she. They learned this without grand confessions, between conversations about stiff buttons and sleepless Sundays. When he suggested dinner, she looked at the wall clock. During his free evening she took her mother to therapy, and he couldn't exchange his Friday shift. "Some other month, then," she joked. His expression closed before she could explain that she was teasing.

The following week, the coat remained unfinished because a pipe burst above the shop. Lejla was carrying boxes of thread into the neighboring hallway alone when Adnan appeared with empty crates. He put them down, asked what he could touch, and stayed until eight. He didn't try to discuss dinner. That was precisely why she admitted that, since her divorce, she could no longer distinguish courtship from promises that would become extra work.

"I can come on Tuesday at ten past seven," he replied. "Just for breakfast. If that suits you." His precise suggestion made her laugh. Tuesday had an

ordinary free space between opening the shop and the first customer. Nobody's life needed rearranging to fit one man into it. They agreed on the corner bakery, where the tables weren't especially pretty but her shop was visible through the window.

When she finished the coat, she made an inside pocket with a button. Adnan paid in full, put it on, and then found a small note: "Tuesday, ten past seven." He took out the pencil he carried with his shift roster and added that he would order cheese pie only if she liked it. Lejla crossed out "if." That morning, for the first time in years, she unlocked the shop ten minutes late without feeling that she owed anyone an explanation.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Mystery of a Hotel with No Missing Woman

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-mystery-of-a-hotel-with-no-missing-woman/

On the journey, Una listened to a show about a mysterious disappearance. When she reached the hotel run by her partner's family, its old façade seemed like the beginning of a new episode. The hotel had a closed eastern wing, uncaptioned photographs, and a receptionist who said the owner disliked questions about the past. Una felt the pleasant excitement of imagining something large hidden beneath a tidy surface.

Her partner's name was Marin. They had been together for five months, long enough to know his laugh, not long enough to know the family details. All she knew about his mother was that she did not live there. When she asked where she was, Marin said she had left long ago. Just then, his work phone rang, leaving the conversation open at the worst possible point.

The next day, Una entered the eastern wing after finding the door ajar. On a shelf were old shirts, a box of women's shoes, and an envelope marked "Do not open in front of guests." She photographed it and sent it to a friend, suggesting the hotel might conceal a terrible story. Her friend replied only: "Have you asked anyone?"

Marin found her in the hallway. The envelope contained invoices for a failed renovation. The shoes belonged to his sister, who had left them before moving. His mother lived in another city with her female partner and was due to visit for lunch the next weekend. Una wished she could disappear into a cupboard among the towels. She showed him the message and apologized for turning someone else's life into a plot before having an ordinary conversation.

The real unpleasantness came that evening. Marin's father learned that Una did not own a company but worked freelance. His tone changed. He

asked how she imagined a future with his son and explained that the hotel could not support another person. Una replied that no one had asked it to. Marin stopped his father and said her income was not a family project to be assessed.

They spent the rest of the weekend in a small apartment near the station. Una sent her friend a correction and asked her to delete the photograph of the private envelope. Marin promised to leave less of his relationships for silence to explain. The following week, they went to dinner with his mother together. She was a cheerful woman who immediately asked whether they liked spicy food. Una answered, then listened to what the woman actually said. All evening, she needed no secrets to find the company interesting.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Voice Message Eight Years in Waiting

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-voice-message-eight-years-in-waiting/

Amra recognized the voice before looking up. At a meeting about restoring the pier, the new consultant asked for the shoreline plan. It was Faris, eight years older and more careful with his words. Back when they planned to marry, he had spoken too quickly, convinced every problem could be solved by going to the sea.

Then he received an uncertain job offer abroad. Amra's family convinced her not to leave steady employment for his plan. She suggested waiting. Faris heard that as a lack of trust and left without a new agreement. Both had other relationships afterward, but each carried the same unfinished argument as proof they had been loved less.

Now they greeted each other formally. Faris was kind to everyone and especially cautious with Amra. Her colleague thought she interested him and asked whether he was single. Amra said she did not know, although she had spent almost an hour the previous evening looking through public photographs of his travels.

During a site visit, the van was late. The others went for coffee, leaving Amra and Faris beside the water. He asked whether she still lived in the family apartment. She said she had moved out six years earlier and ran her own office. Then she added that she made decisions differently now. Faris replied that some people had waited too long to find that out.

Amra looked at him. She said he did not have to wait; he could have asked. She had not called either, proud of her own hurt. Eight years were not her family's doing alone. Part belonged to them, to every message they had written and deleted. Their colleagues' return interrupted them before they found a more polite ending.

That evening, a voice message arrived. Faris said he had come to the meeting ready to prove how well he was doing. Now he cared more about

finding out whether there was room to know her again. He mentioned neither marriage nor lost years. He suggested a walk on Saturday and left enough silence for her answer not to feel expected in advance.

Amra listened to the invitation once. On Saturday, they walked along the new waterfront and talked about lives they had not shared. They did not try to resume exactly where they had stopped. Faris now liked rising early; Amra liked traveling alone. When they parted, he kissed her only after she moved closer. Her mother later called to ask how the day had gone. Amra said it had been lovely. She did not ask what that meant she should do tomorrow.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Seating Plan for the Wrong Couples

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-seating-plan-for-the-wrong-couples/

On Lena's computer, wedding guests were tidy colored rectangles. Divorced people far from their exes, lonely people near talkative ones, feuding relatives separated by tables. She had organized weddings for ten years and believed a good seating plan could prevent almost any disaster. In private, she began applying the same principle, only without asking the people she moved.

She had chosen a young lawyer for her friend Iva. Iva did often talk about Alen, the baker who left bread for her after her shift. Lena thought her friend underestimated her own possibilities. At the rehearsal dinner, she placed her beside the lawyer and assigned Alen a seat next to her aunt, who was hard of hearing.

The lawyer spent half the evening talking about himself and the other half trying to get Lena's attention. Iva smiled out of politeness. Alen left early because he worked in the morning. The next day, he told Iva he had not realized he was invited only to make up the numbers. She replied that she had not known what her friend had arranged for her either.

Lena's business partner, Petar, pointed out her mistake. He said people were not chairs to move until the picture looked right. She became angry, especially when Iva later praised Petar for walking her home and listening. Lena suddenly began listing his faults. Iva asked why, all at once, no decent man seemed good enough for her.

The answer came with uncomfortable clarity: Lena disliked the possibility of Petar becoming someone's partner outside work. For years, she had kept him in the category of dependable people always available to her. She had plans for everyone else, while leaving her own feelings unnamed.

First, she apologized to Iva without offering new advice about whom to choose. She also called Alen, explained her behavior, and stopped mediating. Iva visited the bakery herself. Lena told Petar she would like a dinner that did not end in a discussion of suppliers. He agreed with a smile that suddenly seemed entirely unfamiliar.

At the next wedding, the bride asked her to pair two single guests. Lena asked whether they wanted to sit together. The bride shrugged, surprised by the question. Lena left the seating plan open until morning. After work, Petar waited outside the entrance. He suggested one restaurant, she another, and they spent ten minutes debating which had better soup. She did not know what their future would look like. For tonight, it was enough that both had chosen their place at the table.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

First Impression, Second Page

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/first-impression-second-page/

From their first meeting, Sara decided she disliked the owner of the restaurant where she organized film evenings. Dženan interrupted her suggestions, asked the cost of every small detail, and once said in front of guests that her posters looked cheap. The next day, she sent her invoice in the ugliest available font. She was pleased to have answered in a way she could at least explain as an accident.

Around that time, she met Niko, a musician. He was witty, approachable, and, according to his own account, a victim of Dženan's jealousy. The restaurant supposedly owed him fees, and Dženan had cost him several bookings. Sara believed him immediately. She had an unpleasant impression, and Niko offered reasons to consider it correct.

When Dženan suggested dinner after the final screening, Sara refused more loudly than intended. She listed his criticisms, bad manners, and treatment of Niko. At first, Dženan began answering in the same tone. Then he looked at the guests who had stopped by the exit and said he would clarify the business claims the next day.

He sent confirmations of every payment, the contract, and correspondence about the canceled concerts. Niko had taken an advance for three performances that never happened. Dženan requested repayment, and other organizers independently ended their collaborations when they encountered the same problem. At the end of his message, he wrote that the documents did not change the fact that he had been rude to Sara. For that, he had no attachment, only an apology.

Sara called two people named in the correspondence. They confirmed the details. Confronted with questions, Niko first said she did not understand artistic relationships, then stopped answering. She was ashamed of how much she had enjoyed someone confirming an opinion she already held.

She sent Dženan a short acknowledgment that she had accused him without checking.

They planned the next season at a table covered in paper samples. Dženan learned to explain what bothered him about a poster without judging Sara's taste. She stopped reading every reservation he expressed as an insult. The work improved before they dared ask whether something else might be possible between them.

At the end of one meeting, Sara said she might accept dinner after all. Dženan asked whether she preferred his restaurant or somewhere he did not know the staff. She chose the small diner across the street. At the next table, no one viewed them as feuding collaborators. They ordered and left their phones in their bags, curious to discover what could not be read from posters or other people's stories.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Four Times Someone Said Enough

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/four-times-someone-said-enough/

The first time he heard the word "enough" was from a waiter. In front of his girlfriend, Sanja, Bojan was retelling a billing mistake, mimicking the young worker's confused expression. He thought he was being funny. The waiter calmly said he would correct the bill but did not have to accept humiliation because of it. An uncomfortable silence settled over the table. Bojan left an oversized tip, as though it could buy a different ending to the evening.

The second time, a colleague stopped him after he publicly blamed him for a bad idea. The man opened the meeting minutes and showed that the suggestion had been Bojan's. He did not shout. He simply requested a correction before the same people. Bojan made it, his face burning. That evening, he told Sanja that people had lost their sense of humor. She asked what was supposed to have been funny.

The third time, he was certain it was a misunderstanding. For months, he had been messaging a married acquaintance, leaving enough room for every message to pass as friendly. When he suggested a weekend without explanations, she replied that she did not want that kind of relationship. She did not accept his subsequent "I was only joking." She asked him to spare them both that small lie.

The fourth time, Sanja packed a bag.

She had not discovered the messages by accident. He showed them to her himself, seeking confirmation that the acquaintance was overreacting. Sanja read them and left the phone on the table. She said she had spent recent months living with a man who expected everyone to preserve his good opinion of himself, even when he hurt them. She loved him, but did not want to be the last person to admit she was struggling.

Bojan remained in an apartment where there was no one left to justify himself to. Over the following weeks, he completed the sale of a commercial property. He could have concealed a dispute over the shared entrance, as the agent advised. He had already begun calling it a minor detail. Then he stopped, requested that the dispute be included in the contract, and accepted a lower price. He did not tell Sanja as proof he had changed.

A few months later, they met to collect the remaining belongings. She asked how he was. He said he was learning to apologize without explaining why the other person should not have been hurt. Sanja smiled faintly but did not stay for dinner. Bojan helped carry a box to her car. When she said she could manage from there, he released it and stepped back. He still wanted her to return. For the first time, he did not consider that a reason to ignore what she had clearly said.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Message Written Before the Gate

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-message-written-before-the-gate/

Irena wrote the message at the station: "I'll be there at eight. Tell me which entrance to wait at." Then she deleted "wait at" and replaced it with "come to." She did not want to look like a woman who was always waiting, although that was precisely what she had done for eight months. Marko still lived with his wife, and every meeting began with an explanation of why now was not the time for change.

She had a few hours before the evening train. Near the station was the center where her brother Nenad organized meals for older people. They had never seriously argued. They had simply spoken less often over the years, until their closeness became a series of greetings and holiday photographs.

Nenad welcomed her wearing an apron stained with tomato. He did not say she had finally found time. He gave her a knife and asked her to slice bread. They worked at a table beside a radio that kept losing its signal. Irena expected a story of his self-sacrifice and instead received gossip about two volunteers who had fallen in love and now argued over how to stack plates.

After lunch, they sat in the courtyard. Nenad asked whether she was seeing anyone. Irena began as usual: a complicated situation, a marriage that had long ceased to exist, patience. Her brother neither attacked Marko nor tried to rescue her. He only asked whether she knew what she wanted when she did not have to consider his schedule. Irena looked at the open gate. She could not remember the last time she had framed the question that way.

She said she wanted a dinner she could reserve in her own name. A weekend without an invented business trip. The chance to call when she was sad without first checking whether his phone was allowed to ring.

Nenad listened. Then he admitted his life was not as orderly as it appeared either, that he missed companionship and sometimes hid behind useful work instead of trying a new relationship.

Irena stayed to help wash dishes. Marko sent word that he was late and it would be more convenient if she waited in the car. She sat on the bench before the exit and wrote that she would not come. She did not demand that he leave his marriage immediately or offer a new deadline. She said she no longer wanted to take part in hiding.

At the gate, she stopped to read her own words. Then she sent them. Nenad packed two pieces of cake for her journey. They arranged Sunday lunch the following month, without grand promises to make up for everything they had missed. On the train, she ate both pieces. She arrived home late, at an apartment where she could turn on every light.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Who Is Accompanying Whom Now?

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/who-is-accompanying-whom-now/

At their wedding, people said Armin was the head and Jasna the heart of their relationship. He taught philosophy; she led morning fitness classes. They found the joke charming then. Armin wrote speeches for family celebrations, while Jasna remembered birthdays and lifted everyone's spirits. His books occupied the living room; her equipment filled a small closet beside the bathroom.

Then the university reduced its number of teaching appointments. Armin lost half his income and began helping Jasna in her studio. He discovered he was excellent at explaining movements to people ashamed of their bodies. His class filled quickly. For the first time, he went to work without a bag full of papers and returned satisfied with something he could see immediately.

Meanwhile, Jasna began writing short pieces about people she met. At first, Armin corrected them so heavily that she stopped showing him new ones. She sent them to an editor she had met in class. A year later, a book appeared. Critics praised her precision, warmth, and ability to find a whole life in an ordinary conversation.

At the launch, Armin stood beside the book table. A professor he had wanted to meet for years approached only to ask whether he was Jasna's husband. Then he asked Armin to photograph them together. Holding the phone, Armin felt an ugly, petty urge to mention his own unfinished study. The photograph came out blurred.

At home, he said the book was good but was attracting too much noise. Jasna removed her earrings and asked whether he was really worried about the noise or about the fact that this time it was not centered on him. He tried to explain the difference between serious work and popularity. As he spoke, he realized he was attacking precisely the

attention he had wished for himself.

The next day, he brought her the book with a page marked. She had written about a man who learned to listen only when he stopped being the most educated person in the room. Armin recognized himself, although the character was not based on him. He asked to read the whole book again without a correction pencil. Jasna told him she needed a husband who was happy for her, not a new editor.

For the second launch, he volunteered to hand out books. Afterward, they went to dinner with his studio class, celebrating a year of exercising together. Jasna toasted his patience. When someone repeated the old joke about the head and the heart, they both laughed. Armin said they would need a new one, because in the meantime both had learned to use both.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

An Ice Hall for Their Grand Plans

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-ice-hall-for-their-grand-plans/

In the first week, Selma photographed snow through the window. In the second, she stopped sending pictures to her friends on the coast. In the third, she learned which part of the sidewalk she could use without fearing a fall. In Luka's city, everything worked: buses, heating, queues. Only her days seemed to stand still, without the smell of salt or visits that needed no advance arrangement.

Luka had found her a job at his friend's company. He had furnished the apartment before she arrived. For summer, he had already paid for a mountain house with his friends. When Selma suggested a few weeks on the coast, he reminded her she had lived there for thirty years. "It's time for something new too," he said gently, entirely convinced he was speaking for both of them.

At the winter festival, his company rented a hall made of ice. The tables glowed blue. Selma received an oversized protective coat and a glass she could not hold while wearing gloves. Luka's colleagues discussed her move as a happily completed task. One said she would adjust as soon as she stopped comparing everything with the sea.

Luka went to greet the director. Selma headed toward the exit, but the passage led to an exhibition area, then a hallway behind a curtain. Her phone shut down in the cold. For several minutes, she did not know where the main hall was. She was not in serious danger, yet stood completely lost among walls through which other people's lights were visible.

A worker collecting glasses found her. She took Selma to the cloakroom and brought tea. Selma cried with relief, then anger that ordinary warmth had required so much explanation. When Luka arrived, he said he had looked for her at their table. She replied that for months he had been

looking for her only in places he had chosen.

They did not break up that evening. The next day, Selma went to the coast and stayed ten days, working remotely. Luka came for the final weekend. For the first time, he brought no sightseeing plan. He sat with her outside a bakery, listening to the people she greeted and realizing how much life she had left behind by moving.

They made a new agreement. They would spend part of the summer there, and Selma would choose a job independently of his friends. She bought her own return ticket. In their apartment, they moved the table to the window and cleared a shelf for her books. Snow was still falling. This time, Luka asked whether she wanted a walk or to stay home. That small question warmed her more than the carefully chosen coat.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Glass of Water Before the First Bus

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-glass-of-water-before-the-first-bus/

At the motel, Damir asked for a room facing the parking lot. He placed his bag on the bed and, on the table, money he had transferred without authorization from the small studio he co-owned. He had intended to return it before anyone noticed. Then the deal meant to cover the shortage collapsed, and his partner discovered he had been lying to her for months about their savings.

He bought a bus ticket for the morning. He told himself he needed only a few days to devise an explanation, although he had brought all his documents and clothes for a much longer journey. Around two, someone knocked. The woman from the neighboring room held an empty glass. Her faucet was not working, and reception was locked. Damir gave her the bottle he had bought at a gas station.

Her name was Azra. She was waiting for the morning bus home after discovering that the man she had been messaging for months had a wife. She had come expecting to see his apartment and meet his friends. He sent her the motel address and an explanation that things were complicated at the moment. Azra said she was ashamed to have believed him. Damir replied that she was not the one who had lied, then immediately felt the weight of his own words.

They sat outside their rooms because the hallway was warmer. Azra said her father had advised her to come home as soon as she could, without worrying about what the neighbors would say. He had once lost a good job because he admitted his own mistake before it became someone else's problem. He had earned less for the rest of his life, but never needed to remember which version he had told to whom.

Before dawn, Damir opened his laptop. He returned the remaining money to the studio's account and sent his co-owner the real amounts

and documents. He wrote where he was and said he would appear in the morning with a legal adviser. He did not ask for forgiveness in the same message. He told his partner he would not disappear and did not expect her to defend him. Then he placed his phone on the table, switched on.

He walked Azra to the bus. He did not tell her she had saved him or try to turn their night into the beginning of love. It was enough that, briefly, they had treated each other honestly. He did not use his own ticket. At a bakery beside the station, he bought a bread roll and sat over it for a long time, waiting for the meeting. When his phone rang, he looked at his business partner's name. He answered before he could invent another excuse.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Story He Skipped at Dinner

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-story-he-skipped-at-dinner/

Dario always knew who would drive, where the spare key was, and who needed medicine delivered. That was part of why Alma loved him. Before their wedding, friends arranged dinner at a restaurant overlooking the river. Among the guests was Boris, a former colleague. Their handshake was brief. Dario spent the rest of the evening adjusting chairs and checking that everyone was warm enough.

When someone mentioned a work trip they had taken together, Boris fell silent. Later, Alma asked what had happened. Dario said they had had a difficult job. He repeated it several times in different words. The next day, however, he came to her apartment early and asked her to sit down. He kept his coat on, as though expecting to be asked to leave soon.

Fifteen years earlier, a fire alarm had sounded in a hotel. Dario ran outside, leaving behind a colleague who was recovering from an injury and struggled to walk. Firefighters brought him out without serious consequences. An investigation found there had been no major fire, but that did not lessen Dario's shame. Afterward, he told everyone he had not been in the room when the alarm sounded. Boris knew he had.

Alma listened and did not say everyone would have done the same. She could not know that. She asked whether he had ever apologized to the man he left behind. Dario shook his head. For years, he had tried to compensate for that moment by making himself indispensable to everyone, while never contacting the one person who mattered. He had hoped for a grand chance at redemption, something that would erase the hallway and the door forever.

Together, they composed a short message, but he sent it himself. His colleague agreed to talk. He said he had stopped waiting for an apology long ago, and that the lie had hurt longer than the escape. He wanted no

brave promise. He wanted Dario to stop telling their mutual acquaintances a different version. Dario did, and for the first time could not control what others would think of him.

They did not cancel the wedding. Alma did ask, however, never again to have to choose between a perfect man and the truth he was hiding. Dario began working on his fear of disappointing others. A few weeks later, she asked him to help carry a large wardrobe. He said he could not do it alone and called a friend. It was not a moment anyone would describe at dinner. Alma remembered it anyway: for the first time, he had not tried to appear more capable than he was.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

One Room Without a False Surname

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/one-room-without-a-false-surname/

The receptionist wrote "Mr. and Mrs." before Ivana could take out her identification. She received a wristband for the hotel's anniversary program and a bottle of sparkling wine in the room. Emir wanted to explain the mistake, but she said they would sort it out later. She had only just divorced. It felt good to be welcomed without questions about how she was doing or glances at the empty place on her finger.

At the small hotel, the guests quickly became a group. They dined together, planned outings, and talked about long marriages. Ivana avoided dates. Emir took over whenever anyone asked about the wedding. Their relationship had begun after her separation from her husband, yet now, without any need, they were creating a story that required new small inventions to defend it.

One guest, Daria, recognized Ivana from a business seminar. She remembered her husband. In the garden, she told Ivana she had nothing to fear, then immediately asked her to support a complaint about her bill with the hotel director. She made no explicit threat. She simply mentioned, carefully, that the people at their shared table placed great value on honesty. Ivana realized she had handed a stranger the key to her discomfort.

In their room, Emir was angry. First with Daria, then with himself. He did not understand why Ivana had not told the truth immediately. She asked why he had spent three evenings describing their shared travels from a time before they knew each other. They sat for a long time, separated by the large bed and the bottle they had not opened. Both had enjoyed the temporary simplicity of someone else's assumption.

Emir suggested getting married when they returned. Ivana asked whether he wanted marriage or an end to an uncomfortable

conversation. He had to admit he could not distinguish between them at that moment. They went down to dinner and, while drinks were being ordered, explained that reception had made a mistake. Ivana was divorced, they were together, and they had made no decision about marriage. One guest looked confused. Another asked whether they were still joining tomorrow's outing. Daria said nothing.

They spent their last night on the balcony. They talked about what they wanted after the holiday, separate accounts, and the different cities where they worked. It was less romantic than their hotel biography, but far more interesting. On departure, Ivana paid for the bottle they had opened only the evening before. The receptionist corrected the bill to her surname. She took it without explanation and joined Emir outside, where two perfectly ordinary suitcases were waiting.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Empty Window Seat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-empty-window-seat/

The train departed before Sanja removed the second ticket from the app. Igor remained on the platform. Five minutes earlier, he had said he could not go to their anniversary celebration and pretend once more that everything would be fine. They had not argued. The hardest part was precisely his calm voice as he held the bag of pastries he had bought for the journey.

She placed his jacket, forgotten in her bag, on the neighboring seat. The conductor checked both tickets. She said her partner was in the café car. She had not planned to lie, but the sentence came out ready and neat, like the things she had packed the night before. Her phone vibrated. Her mother asked whether Igor had brought his guitar.

She replied that she would let her know later. Small stations and unfamiliar yards passed outside the window. Beside her was a box containing the cake ordered for their fifth anniversary. For two years, they had not known how to talk without turning to bills, work, or somebody else. Still, she had agreed to the celebration. She thought other people's certainty about their love might return them to the place they had left.

The woman opposite asked to sit by the window because she felt less sick there. Sanja immediately said the seat was taken. Then she looked at the jacket and began crying suddenly, without time to turn her face away. The woman offered a tissue. She did not ask whether someone was ill, whose fault it was, or how long they had been together. She only moved her bag so Sanja could put down the cake.

After a while, Sanja said the whole sentence: "He's no longer with me." It sounded different when she did not replace it with a story about the café car. She called her mother and canceled the celebration. Her mother first

mentioned the dinner they had ordered, then stopped and asked whether she should come for her. Sanja said she would arrive by train. She messaged Igor about the jacket and suggested discussing their remaining belongings the following week.

The whole family was not waiting at the station. Only her mother came, wearing a house sweater beneath her coat. They took the cake home and removed the decoration bearing their names. That evening, they ate a little at a time beside a television neither watched. Sanja put Igor's jacket in the hall closet. It was no longer proof he would return, only someone else's possession she would give back when she had the strength.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Photograph Where She Was Not a Muse

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-photograph-where-she-was-not-a-muse/

At the retrospective opening, Maja was asked to stand before the largest portrait. The photographer had died five years earlier, and journalists ended every exhibition with the same question: what had it been like to live with so much love? Maja would smile, say art was complicated, and move her glass to her other hand. They had never lived together. The catalog had said they did for a decade.

At forty-eight, she was still organizing his archive. She knew every box of negatives but kept her own photographs in a kitchen-table drawer. Omer, the editor of a new monograph, came looking for the story missing between the pictures. He was a few years younger and listened carefully. At first, what attracted him was precisely that she had, as he put it, kept a great man's heart.

They began having lunch after work. Once, Omer mentioned disliking photographs of himself, and Maja took one of him laughing at a broken teaspoon in the restaurant. She showed him the shot. He was the first man in a long time to ask why she did not exhibit under her own name. Instead of answering, she ordered more coffee. That night, she opened the drawer and looked through the work no one had asked for.

Toward the end of the month, Omer suggested a weekend together. Before answering, Maja sent him a letter. She wrote that she had loved the photographer, that he had trusted her as a collaborator, and that he had never returned her feelings as others assumed. She had allowed the legend to grow because, in it, she received the love she lacked, however briefly. She did not want a new relationship to begin with his story too.

Omer came without his laptop. He admitted that he too had been captivated by the legend and did not know how clearly he had really seen

Maja at first. He did not promise to separate his curiosity from his feelings overnight. They agreed that another editor would finish the monograph. Maja reviewed the biographical details and, for the first time, clearly corrected the account of their relationship. Some found the fact disappointing. It brought her peace.

At her small exhibition in spring, there were no portraits of other people. There were kitchens, empty bus stops, and one broken teaspoon. Omer came shortly before closing. They were still seeing each other, slowly, with enough room not to know everything. He asked to photograph her in front of her work. Maja agreed, then showed him where to stand so the reflection in the glass would not cover her face.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Plan for a Perfect Marriage Was Not Theirs

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-plan-for-a-perfect-marriage-was-not-theirs/

Jelena arrived with one suitcase and a lavender folder. She was thirty-two, waiting to start a new job, and needed a room for a month. Her aunt Nada and uncle Faruk lived in a large apartment, large enough to avoid meeting after dinner. They welcomed her gladly. On the first morning, she stuck a schedule to their refrigerator.

Monday was for cooking together, Tuesday for discussing feelings, Wednesday for a walk without devices. Jelena had just completed an online seminar on communication between partners and saw plenty of room for improvement. Out of politeness, Nada bought new aprons. Faruk said he walked every day. "Together," Jelena reminded him, underlining the word with a purple marker.

The cooking ended with burned rice. The conversation stopped when their niece asked them to name three qualities for which they still chose each other. Faruk mentioned Nada's ability to remember where documents were kept. She named his punctuality. Jelena recorded those answers as a starting point. Both felt like old household appliances someone had decided to repair without instructions.

On Thursday, Jelena arranged a meeting with a divorced neighbor to show Nada that she still attracted attention. Faruk found out because the neighbor asked whether to bring wine. When Nada heard, she looked at her husband for the first time in ages and burst out laughing. They remembered meeting at the wrong wedding, where both had arrived with invitations for the following Saturday. They laughed while Jelena arranged candles in the kitchen.

Later, they sat down with her. They thanked her for noticing their distance, then asked her to stop making arrangements for their lives.

Jelena blushed and admitted that she too feared returning to an empty apartment. She had ended a long relationship and told no one because everyone praised her ability to solve other people's problems. Nada brought her tea. They did not ask her to list her feelings immediately.

By the time she left, only the trash-collection schedule remained, the one everyone found useful. One evening, Faruk invited Nada to walk to the cinema. He did not know what was showing. She agreed, but on the way turned toward a pastry shop they had stopped visiting long ago. They sat over two oversized portions of cake and talked about her wish to retire. A purple line remained on the refrigerator where the adhesive had pulled away the paint.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Three Men and One Broken Boat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/three-men-and-one-broken-boat/

Vedran had imagined a weekend at the lake without phones, guests, or other people's habits. He and Lejla had been married for three months. As he unloaded groceries, a man in muddy boots peered over the fence. "Your fuel hose is leaking," he said, pointing at the boat. Lejla hugged him. He was her first husband, the owner of the neighboring cottage.

Before Vedran could think of a polite response, another man appeared carrying a toolbox. Lejla's second husband kept a spare key because they ran an equipment-rental business together. Vedran knew all of this. On paper, her past had seemed neatly concluded. Now both conclusions stood on the dock and knew where the bolts were kept.

He decided to repair the engine himself. He declined help, removed the cover, and immediately lost a small nut between the boards. The first ex-husband offered a magnet. The second brought coffee. Neither was condescending, which annoyed him even more. Lejla was making lunch and called from the kitchen to ask whether they needed more bread, as though gathering three men from her life were an ordinary weather event.

Only when the engine started and stopped again did Vedran put down the tools. He said he felt like a temporary guest in a story everyone else knew. The conversation fell quiet. The first ex-husband looked toward the house and described how Lejla had wanted to learn to sail for years, while he always said they had to finish work first. The second admitted he thought she really wanted a steady income, so he bought her more equipment. Neither had taken her sailing.

Lejla heard the last sentence. She came outside with plates and reminded them that she had long been able to pay for a course herself. "I signed up last month. You were all busy making assumptions." Vedran laughed

before he could decide whether he should. They ate on the dock. They talked about the fuel hose, autumn water, and bad parking, and for the first time he did not measure whose joke held Lejla's attention longer.

The guests left toward evening. Vedran asked his wife whether she wanted to spend the weekend alone together or visit the sailing club. She chose the club, adding that tomorrow she would like a quiet breakfast with just him. As they walked along the shore, she explained where her business with her former husband ended and their shared space began. He did not ask for anyone to disappear. On Sunday, he got up early and set out two plates.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

When the Answer Was Not Love

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/when-the-answer-was-not-love/

Sara waited for the last guest to say goodbye before asking Emil to walk to the river with her. They had completed six months of research into the city's old crafts. She recorded interviews; he organized the material. Tomorrow, he was going home. His suitcase already stood by the door, as orderly as everything he did.

Over the winter, she had learned how he took his tea and when he needed silence. He knew she forgot lunch while editing recordings and left a sandwich on her desk. They did not hold hands. They did not discuss feelings. Still, Sara arranged every small gesture into a story she believed they both knew.

Beside the river, she said she would like to continue something that had nothing to do with the project. Emil stopped. He did not pretend to misunderstand. She asked whether he would visit the following month just for her. His answer did not come immediately, and in that pause Sara heard, for the first time, what she had carefully avoided until then.

He said he cared about her and had enjoyed their time together. Then he stopped before the familiar sentence about bad timing. The timing was not wrong. He did not feel the same. Saying it was difficult, but he knew any gentler explanation would sound like an invitation to wait for him.

Sara looked at the water. She wanted to withdraw her confession, call it a joke, or say she too had meant only friendship. Instead, she admitted that it hurt. She asked him to walk the rest of the way separately. Emil agreed, without trying to comfort her immediately with a hug that would blur everything again.

In his room, he stared for a long time at a message he had begun writing. He wanted to explain how sorry he was, how he was a good person, how he had meant no harm. He deleted it. Sara did not owe him an evening

reassuring him that he was not to blame for not loving her.

They completed the work professionally. She asked that, for a while, they communicate only about the archive. In spring, she accepted a project in a coastal town and left without a grand announcement. On her first morning there, she sat on a terrace with a notebook. She was not cured of sadness. She had simply stopped arranging her day around a message someone might send.

When Emil later congratulated her on the exhibition, she replied briefly and kindly. Then she put away her phone and returned to the woman she was interviewing, an elderly dressmaker who was just beginning the most interesting part of her story.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Rain They Missed

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-rain-they-missed/

Twelve years earlier, their car had broken down on the way back from a hike. Daria and Marko stood beneath the canopy of an abandoned gas station, laughing at rain that found its way into their shoes. He kissed her for the first time there. Later, she said she would remember that evening forever. At least she had been right about that.

Her family owned a hotel, his a small auto-repair shop. The difference itself was not a problem until other people began explaining it. Her mother spoke about the future, her father about different habits. Daria defended Marko in conversations with them, then told him they needed a little more time.

Marko waited. When he found work in another city, he asked whether she wanted them to try together. Daria said she could not simply leave her family. She did not ask him to stay. They parted without a major argument, which later allowed her to call the breakup circumstances for years.

Now he stood in her hotel lobby with a bag over his shoulder. He had come for a professional conference. The gray in his hair was more visible than his years. Daria invited him for coffee and immediately wished she had chosen somewhere less polished. Around them, people quietly moved cups across expensive coasters.

They talked about work. Marko had a partner, a veterinarian he had lived with for several years. Daria was divorced. She stated it as a fact, then felt the urge to explain her entire history, as though arranging the explanations correctly could turn back time.

Outside, rain began. Both looked toward the window and knew what they had remembered. Daria said she had been a coward then. Marko was silent for a while. Then he replied that he too had expected her to solve

everything instead of saying clearly how long he could wait.

He did not offer forgiveness in the form of a new romance. She did not ask for it. They talked about that evening without trying to turn it into proof that their entire lives afterward had been wrong. When he left, Daria lent him an umbrella. He said he would leave it at reception.

The next morning, she found the umbrella and a short note of thanks. She went for a walk before her first meeting, alone and without checking the weather forecast. The bakery lights reflected on the wet pavement. She bought two bread rolls and gave one to the doorman. The other she ate while walking, still warm.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Kiss Sent to the Wrong Person

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-kiss-sent-to-the-wrong-person/

The message lasted eleven seconds. A woman's voice said she had arrived home, had enjoyed herself, and was sending a kiss. Dino listened three times before checking the sender's name. It was Una, a producer he had worked with for the first time that day on a commercial shoot.

On set, they had talked for perhaps ten minutes. She asked what he listened to while editing, and he answered at excessive length, convinced he was boring her. Now every detail took on a new meaning. Perhaps she had stayed beside his desk because she wanted to. Perhaps the question about music had not been casual.

Before he replied, a second message arrived: "Sorry, wrong chat." Dino wrote that it was no problem. Still, he did not delete the first one. Over the following days, he listened to it while walking home. He knew it was not meant for him, but that voice had opened the possibility of a life in which someone wanted to know, in the evening, whether he had arrived safely.

When he was invited to work with her again, he began imagining their meeting. He bought a shirt he did not need and invented a witty remark about misdirected messages. Una arrived with her partner, a camera operator helping with the equipment. She greeted Dino warmly, in a perfectly ordinary voice.

His disappointment embarrassed him. No one had promised him anything. During the break, he went into the courtyard and stared at his phone. Una asked whether he was all right. He could have said he was tired, but he admitted that her message had carried him away a little. He said it without expecting her to comfort him.

Una sat on a step far enough away to keep the conversation clear. She said she understood how that could happen, but she did not know him in

that way. Dino nodded. He felt awkward, yet more at ease than during all those weeks of trying to turn an accident into a sign.

That evening, he deleted the message. Instead of staying in the studio, he went to a small concert a colleague had been inviting him to for ages. They did not fall in love that night. They talked about music, argued over a song, and agreed to go again.

When she later messaged to say she had arrived home, he did not search for a hidden promise. He asked whether she wanted lunch the next day. Her answer was short and meant specifically for him.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

All Her Borrowed Tastes

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/all-her-borrowed-tastes/

In Mirna's basement stood skis, a record player, and a pasta machine. The skis belonged to her relationship with Damir, the records to her years with Filip, and the pasta machine to her last attempt at living with a chef. She wanted to throw none of it away. Every object proved that she had once known what to talk about.

Her friends called her adaptable. When she fell in love, she easily learned the rules of a sport, the names of bands, or the difference between two types of flour. By the third date, she would say, "We like." Her partners enjoyed it until they realized that no second voice could be heard behind their agreement.

After the last breakup, she went to sell some records. The man in the small music shop asked which one she wanted to keep. Mirna named the most expensive. He repeated the question, more slowly. "Which one do you want to listen to?" She had no answer. It was as embarrassing as forgetting her own address.

His name was Andrej, and he hosted an evening show on local radio. He invited her to bring five songs for a segment about people who did not work in music. Mirna accepted before realizing how difficult it would be. At home, she listened to her former partner's records, and every one sounded like someone else's living room.

She called her sister, who reminded her that she had once loved the old pop songs they sang on summer holidays. Mirna found them and, for the first time, played them without feeling the need to justify her taste. She no longer liked one of them. Strangely, that pleased her. She could change her mind without the person beside her changing.

On the show, she became flustered, mispronounced a songwriter's name, and said one song reminded her of the family's broken-down car. Andrej

did not interrupt to add an expert fact. Afterward, he asked whether she wanted coffee. Mirna agreed, then immediately added that she did not like jazz, which was playing in his shop.

"Good to know," he said.

They began seeing each other, but she did not buy any of his favorite records just to have something to say. She kept her Tuesday pottery class and Sunday walks with her sister. One evening, Andrej suggested a concert that sounded exhausting to her. She told him to go alone and that she would wait at home with a book. When he left, the silence was perfectly comfortable. Mirna played her own song, loud enough to hear from the kitchen.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Suitcase Left on the Platform

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-suitcase-left-on-the-platform/

Faruk arrived at the station with two bread rolls and the suitcase Aida had left in his car. She stood beside the carriage, wrapped in a scarf, speaking on the phone to someone at her new office. She was moving for work. Her voice was confident until she saw him running between passengers and trying not to spill the coffee.

They had known each other for eight years. At first, Aida had been his colleague's wife, and they met at dinners where Faruk always sat opposite her. After her divorce, they continued going to plays, repairing shelves, and exchanging messages about ridiculous little things. They never changed the name of their relationship.

Faruk thought confessing his feelings would betray his former friendship with her ex-husband. Aida thought he wanted company, nothing more. Occasionally, one of them would begin dating someone, and the other would behave with exceptional reasonableness. Then came weeks without calls, which both explained as being busy.

Now she was leaving for another city. Faruk helped her lift the suitcase but would not release the handle. Aida said she would miss her train if he kept holding on. He apologized. Suddenly, all eight years seemed to fit inside that pointless little delay.

"I'd like you to stay," he said.

Aida looked at him carefully. She did not want another sentence she could interpret in two ways. She asked whether that was a friend who would be lonely speaking, or a man who wanted something with her. For the first time, Faruk answered without qualification.

The train was preparing to leave. Aida told him she loved him, but she would not give up a job she had spent months choosing because he had

found courage at the last minute. She said it gently. Touching his cheek, she asked him to visit in two weeks if he was serious. Then they could talk without whistles and an open carriage door.

Faruk remained on the platform holding her bag of bread rolls. On the train, Aida realized she had taken the wrong coffee. She sent him a photograph, but this time he did not reply only with a joke. He bought a ticket for the date she had suggested.

When he arrived, her new apartment still smelled of paint. They spent the weekend talking about distance, work, and what each of them could offer. On Sunday, Aida walked him to the station. Parting had not made them brave. Now they had to carry that courage home with them.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Message on the Flowerpot

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-message-on-the-flowerpot/

When Nadina mentioned living in Lisbon, Armin said his Portuguese was quite good. In reality, he could order coffee and repeat two lines from a song. He had not planned a great lie. He simply liked her and did not want to seem like a man who had always intended to go somewhere but never arrived.

They met at a pottery workshop. Nadina made wide, uneven bowls. Armin tried to fix each of his until it collapsed. She would laugh and say clay did not like being persuaded that you knew better. He thought she was talking only about clay.

After a few weeks, he asked whether she would have dinner with him. She said she would answer in an unusual way. The next day, she left a small pot of rosemary at the workshop with a handwritten note in Portuguese. Armin recognized the word for Saturday. The rest looked like a saying about patience.

He could have opened a translation app. He could have asked. Instead, he decided Nadina was gently telling him to wait. He wrote that he understood and there was no pressure. She replied with a simple smile. On Saturday, he stayed home, hurt by something no one had said to him.

At the next workshop, Nadina greeted him more coolly. He concluded that the rejection was final and began talking more than usual. He mentioned cities, exhibitions, and writers. Nadina let him finish, then asked why he had not come.

The note on the flowerpot had been an invitation to dinner at eight on Saturday. Below it was her address. She had cooked and waited, then assumed he had changed his mind after she accepted.

Armin felt every clever sentence from the past few weeks closing in around him. He admitted that he did not speak Portuguese. He also said he had been ashamed to check the meaning, even though that would have solved everything in half a minute. Nadina did not laugh. She asked how many more conversations with him she would have to translate into the truth afterward.

They began with Lisbon, then went through his travels, most of which were plans. She did not immediately offer another date. Two weeks later, he brought a bowl to the workshop without trying to straighten it. Inside was a note in Bosnian: "Dinner on Friday. If you'd like." Nadina read it, looked at the crooked rim, and wrote down a time.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Coffee with the Best Intentions

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/coffee-with-the-best-intentions/

Every Wednesday, he came in with drawings on heavy paper and ordered black-and-white copies. Alma noticed that he wore the same sweater, carefully counted his change, and always thanked her as though she had done something special. She assumed he was an artist going through a difficult time. That assumption soon became an entire story she told herself.

His name was Roko. Once, he stayed longer because the paper jammed, and they talked about old buildings. Alma said she liked drawings in color. He replied that sometimes one wrong color changed everything. To her, it sounded like a beautiful sentence from someone who could not afford color printing.

When he left his documents the following week and asked to collect them before closing, she decided to surprise him. She lightened the background, colored several areas, and removed small marks that looked like smudges. She made a fresh, tidy folder. Beside it, she placed a coffee from a nearby café.

Roko went pale when he opened the folder. The marks were not smudges. They showed the difference between an existing wall and a proposed alteration. The documents were for an anonymous competition with precise presentation rules. The deadline was that evening. Alma listened, her face burning, realizing that he had asked her to copy his work and she had decided she knew his job better.

"I thought it would help you," she said.

"I know. But you didn't ask."

The original files had been saved. Alma closed the shop, left one light on, and reprinted everything at her own expense. Roko stayed to arrange the

pages. They did not speak until they had checked the final mark. He then submitted the documents through the official portal, and she refunded his entire order.

Only afterward did she learn that he wore the sweater because he liked it, collected the coins from his car, and worked as a reasonably well-paid architect. He did not need a patron. Alma admitted that she liked him and had chosen the worst possible way to show it.

For the first time that evening, Roko smiled. He said the coffee would have been enough if it had not come with a redesigned project. The following Wednesday, he arrived without any papers. He asked whether she was free after six. Alma looked at the clock, then at him. "I am. And this time, I'll ask how you take your coffee first."

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Blue Dress in the Rain

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-blue-dress-in-the-rain/

For six weeks, Vesna had looked at the blue dress through the dressmaker's window. It was not particularly expensive, just more expensive than anything she usually allowed herself. At the architecture firm's annual party, she wanted to arrive, for once, as a guest rather than the person checking that every bill had been paid.

Luka would be there too, a landscape architect with whom she had been exchanging messages for months about projects and, increasingly, everything else. In his last message, he said he hoped they would finally talk without drawings between them. Vesna had read it often enough that she no longer needed to open it.

On the day she was meant to collect the dress, her friend Irena called. She needed money for an urgent repair to the car she used to take her sick mother to appointments. Vesna had a little savings left, exactly the amount she owed the dressmaker. She sent the money before she could think of a reason not to.

She told the dressmaker she could sell the dress to someone else. The woman looked at her over her glasses. She already knew how rarely Vesna bought anything just for herself. She offered to let her pay the following month, but by then it was late. The party had started, the rain was heavier, and Vesna was convinced that arriving now would look like an attempt to attract attention.

She put on the dress anyway. She wanted at least to see how it looked outside the narrow fitting room. Pulling on an old coat, she went out for bread. At the corner, she met Luka, his hair wet and no umbrella in sight. He was carrying a box of cakes from the party.

"Did you escape?" she asked.

He said he had left when the conversation turned entirely to work. He had looked for her among the guests, then assumed she had not come. Vesna considered inventing another invitation. Instead, she told him about the dress, the car repair, and her own pointless fear of being late.

Luka did not turn her kindness into a speech. He suggested eating the cakes before they got wet. They took shelter in a small grocery store whose owner let them stand by the window. They drank yogurt from plastic cups and discussed why people at parties always stood near the exit.

Before they parted, he asked whether he could take her on a proper date the next day. Vesna said yes, but she would be wearing jeans. Luka raised the wet box as if making a toast. "Then I'll come without a box of cakes too."

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Last Order in the Shop Window

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-last-order-in-the-shop-window/

When she removed the last of his cups from the back room, Selma decided to close the flower shop. Her former partner had taken some of the equipment and their shared client list to a new shop he had opened with the woman he left her for. He insisted that business decisions were separate from private matters. To Selma, it all belonged in the same box.

She was left with peeling letters on the shop window and a handful of orders for which she had already taken deposits. Every morning, she counted the days remaining on the lease. The street had been dug up, pedestrians avoided the mud, and she worked in her coat. On the glass, she wrote in chalk that she was accepting only orders already arranged.

Across the street was Boris's set-design studio. They knew each other well enough to take in one another's parcels. When he asked why she was closing, she said she had no reason left to stay. She did not add that she felt awkward standing behind the counter while customers tried to avoid asking about her former partner.

The following morning, a large magnolia branch had been painted across Boris's window. Between its blossoms, a message said that spring was arriving across the street. An arrow pointed to her shop. Selma thought his optimism was making fun of her, but two new customers came in that day.

Rain fell all week. Paint from the temporary signs ran across the pavement, while the magnolia stayed the same. Selma began looking at it before unlocking her door. She did not believe a single picture could save a business. Still, she changed her message and reopened orders for Saturday.

When Boris went away, his colleague asked Selma to keep an eye on the studio. There, she found receipts for moisture-resistant paint and a

drawing of the entire window. Boris had worked on it for three nights between paid jobs. His colleague said he had not wanted to tell anyone why.

When he returned, Selma brought him lunch. She thanked him but told him she did not want to be someone's secret repair project. Boris looked confused. Then he explained that after his divorce, it had helped when she took in a parcel and asked whether he wanted coffee, without turning it into a big conversation.

In May, the flower shop was still open. Business was modest, but it was hers. Boris came in for a bouquet for his mother and paid the full price. Then Selma invited him to dinner. This time, no one needed to draw an arrow.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Star Above the Rented Room

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-star-above-the-rented-room/

The skylight opened only halfway. If Tea pushed it any farther, rain dripped straight onto her pillow. The landlord called it the character of an old building. Tea called the room temporary, although she had been keeping her books in a suitcase for four months. After the breakup, she had no energy for another round of unpacking.

She translated instructions for devices she had never seen. Her former partner used to tell her it was time to find more serious work. Then he left with a colleague whose career he considered more ambitious. Tea heard that sentence in her head even when a client paid her on time. At night, she watched one bright point between the television antennas and imagined that at least it stayed in place.

When she sent a photograph to the local astronomy club, a member named Omer replied. He explained that it was a planet, not a star, and that it would not always remain in the same part of the sky. For reasons she could not explain, this made Tea sad. She wrote back that he had just ruined her cheapest form of security.

Omer apologized and sent her the schedule of observations on the hill above town. He did not insist that she come. Over the following weeks, they exchanged photographs of the sky and bad jokes about clouds. She corrected awkward sentences in the club newsletter, and he told her when it was worth opening her window.

She arrived late for her first observation evening. Omer was a man in a broad hat carrying a thermos of tea, a little older than she had assumed. When he asked what she did, she said she translated. She waited for him to ask what she really did. Instead, he wanted to know which word was hardest to translate.

She did not fall in love that evening. Later, that mattered to her. She liked the way he gave her room to approach the telescope herself and did not take offense when she declined a ride home. They met on Sundays, and sometimes on Wednesdays when the sky was not worth watching.

In spring, she found a regular client and rented an apartment with proper windows. Omer helped her carry the books, then asked where she wanted them. Only then did she realize she had stopped waiting for someone to show her what she ought to want.

On her first night in the new apartment, she could not see the planet. She sat on the floor, unpacking her suitcase. Her phone lit up with his message: "Clouds." She replied with a photograph of her shelves, finally full.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Wrong Door on the Third Floor

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wrong-door-on-the-third-floor/

The note he found in the pocket of a borrowed coat read: "Third floor, green door, Friday at seven." There was no signature. Mirza assumed his friend the chef had left the invitation. Every month, he held dinners in unusual places. His friend was not answering his phone, and Mirza did not feel like spending another evening in front of the television.

A woman with packing tape stuck to her sleeve opened the green door. Behind her stood boxes, a dismantled shelving unit, and two identical toasters. Mirza raised a bottle of juice. "Am I late?" The woman looked at him, then at the note, and laughed so sincerely that admitting his mistake became easier.

Her name was Dunja. The dinner was in the building next door. She was sorting their belongings after a divorce and trying to decide which toaster belonged to whom. They had each bought one without knowing the other had already bought the same model. That small detail now seemed to sum up the last year of their marriage.

Mirza could have left. Instead, he asked whether she needed someone to hold the shelving unit while she removed the last screw. She said she did, but only that. She was not looking for advice, company, or a man to explain that everything happened for a reason. He held the shelf. He worked as a furniture restorer and noticed that one leg had worked loose long before the move.

While he was tightening the screw, her former husband arrived for the boxes. He stopped in the doorway at the sight of an unfamiliar man. Dunja explained the mix-up with the invitation, and he clearly found the explanation a little too convenient. Mirza felt the urge to defend himself. Dunja spoke first. "You came for your things. Everything of yours is by the window."

When the apartment was quiet again, she thanked him for not making a performance of being there. Mirza said he would not have known where to stand in a scene like that either. She preferred that admission to a confident smile.

He reached the dinner just before dessert. The next day, he left Dunja the number of a carpenter who repaired shelving and added his own, with a note saying that coffee had nothing to do with the repairs. She replied two weeks later. She had needed time for the new apartment to stop feeling temporary.

For their first arranged meeting, she waited outside a bookshop. She wore the same coat, now without the tape. Mirza asked whether this was the right door. Dunja took his arm and led him down the street. "Tonight it is."

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Date with the Woman He Had Already Won

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-date-with-the-woman-he-had-already-won/

Damir had seventeen windows open on his computer and none open in his office. The air conditioner hummed, his phone glowed, and the coffee Hana had brought cooled on the edge of his desk. He had not noticed the envelope she left beside it. He noticed only the scent of orange peel on her coat.

When they met, they ran a small agency from her living room. She wrote copy; he found clients. Now they had employees, a meeting room and an apartment where conversations sounded like extensions of business correspondence. Hana had recently sold her share and taken a job at a library. Damir called her departure a break.

At noon, an app showed him a photograph from seven years earlier. Hana sat on the floor among boxes, holding a slice of pizza. Beneath it was his old message: "Could you leave the world to everyone else tonight and have dinner with me?"

He copied it into their chat, added a heart and waited, pleased that he had finally done something spontaneous. Hana replied with a photograph of the envelope still lying beside his keyboard. Inside was a dinner reservation and a note in his own handwriting, written three weeks earlier, promising he would not forget their anniversary.

"I know," he typed, then deleted it. Then he called.

Hana was not angry about one forgotten dinner. She spoke calmly, with pauses that made it harder for him. She said he courted her when a photograph reminded him, and the rest of the time expected her to understand. As he began explaining the importance of the new contract, he heard himself saying exactly the same sentence as the previous month.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Decide what you're doing tonight. Without making me manage this too."

Damir did not cancel his work or announce a grand decision to his employees. He handed the prepared materials to a colleague, told the client he was unavailable after six and left. Outside the restaurant, he switched off his phone. Hana was already inside, wearing an ordinary green sweater. Her face did not show the relief he had expected as a reward.

Over dinner, she told him about an older reader who borrowed the same novel every week. He asked which novel, why the same one and what the woman's name was. Hana answered. For the first time in a long while, she did not check whether he had stopped listening. When the waiter cleared their plates, Damir ordered another tea. He had no next appointment.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Shift She Hid from Her Husband

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-shift-she-hid-from-her-husband/

Lejla placed money still damp from steam on the kitchen table. She said a student had paid in advance for six piano lessons. Adnan looked up from his drawing and asked the girl's name. "Sara," she replied, reading it from a bakery receipt beside her cup.

Since their wedding, they had lived in an apartment where every room served twice. The bedroom became a studio in the morning, and the hallway a practice space. Both were in their thirties, and both thought the other deserved another chance. Their families were already advising steady jobs in the gentle voice that made everything sound like a reprimand.

Lejla had begun ironing linens in a hotel laundry. There were no private students. After her shift, she rubbed unscented cream into her cracked fingers and sat at the piano just long enough for Adnan to hear several scales. Then she asked what he had drawn that day. He showed her his work and claimed to be negotiating with a publisher.

One Thursday, her glove caught on the metal edge of a trolley. The cut was small, but her supervisor sent her into the next room for a bandage. There, beside a dryer, stood Adnan in a gray work vest, holding a replacement belt. Neither spoke until the machine finished its noisy cycle.

"The publisher has good ventilation," Lejla said.

He put down his tools. For a month, he had been repairing the hotel's equipment through his cousin's company. The money he had called an advance for illustrations was his pay. He had not told her because he believed she would stop playing if she thought he was abandoning drawing. She explained almost the same thing, in reverse.

They walked home, too tired for the anger they had both expected. On the bridge, Adnan admitted that the secret work was no longer the hardest part of his day. The hardest part was inventing success over dinner. Lejla walked several steps in silence, then said she had never asked for a successful husband. She had asked for a man she could tell she was tired.

On Sunday, they put a schedule on the refrigerator. Monday was hers for music; Wednesday was his for drawing. The other evenings did not have to become art. A month later, Lejla found her first real student, a woman older than herself. Her name was Jasna. Lejla said it to Adnan with such pleasure that he was still laughing as he set the table.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Two Receipts in a Blue Box

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-receipts-in-a-blue-box/

A pale rectangle remained on the shelf above Emina's desk. For years, her first camera had stood there, heavy and scratched, with a strap she had sewn herself. When Haris asked where it was, she said she had taken it for cleaning. She turned toward the monitor before he had to believe her face.

Their fifth anniversary fell in a month when both their fees were late. Haris played in restaurants; Emina photographed products for other people's shops. They kept money for their own studio in a blue box. Sometimes, they opened it, counted the same notes and spoke about large windows as though they already had them.

Once, in an estate agent's window, they found a space exactly like the one they imagined. Haris photographed the advertisement, while Emina calculated how many extra shoots she would need just to pay for heating. After that, they stopped looking in windows. They did not stop saying the studio would open. That sentence was a little household habit, like leaving a light on until the other came home.

The previous week, Emina had heard Haris decline a booking on the phone because his amplifier was broken. A day later, she sold her old camera to a collector. She kept the strap. She bought him a small amplifier, good enough that he would no longer need to borrow equipment, and left it with a neighbor until their anniversary.

Meanwhile, Haris was speaking to the owner of an empty ground-floor shop. It had a large window, a damp wall and affordable rent. To pay the deposit, he sold the guitar he rarely took out of the house. He told Emina it was being repaired. He also bought a new camera strap, very like the old one but without its frayed edge.

That evening, they ate potatoes from the same baking dish because they did not want to wash two plates. Emina brought out her box first. Haris smiled, then stopped. From his pocket, he took the shop key and the receipt for the strap. They did not immediately understand the whole mishap. First, she asked where he would plug in the amplifier. He asked what she would use to open the studio.

"The backup equipment," she said at last. "We have it. We've just been pretending we don't exist without our favorite things."

Even so, she was upset. She resented him committing to rent without her. He admitted being troubled that she had not considered his broken equipment their shared problem. They talked for a long time, until the gifts stopped looking like proof of generosity and became two decisions they should have made together.

The next day, they returned the amplifier and strap. They offered the landlord to paint the wall themselves in exchange for part of the rent. He accepted. At the opening, Haris played a borrowed guitar, and Emina took photographs with her backup camera. The blue box stood on the windowsill, now filled with receipts. On its lid, they wrote the schedule of their free evenings.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Photograph Between Two Books

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-photograph-between-two-books/

Every evening in her small stationery shop, Dunja set aside a newspaper for the locksmith across the road. His name was Nedim. He had a wife and a habit of fixing her jammed drawer before she even asked. Dunja had lived alone for years. She had not planned to fall in love with his arrival before closing time.

She told him nothing. Their conversations stayed brief, about the weather, customers and the books he left on the counter. Still, she knew how often she looked toward the door. When he did not come one Friday, she felt a worry she could no longer call ordinary concern for a neighbor.

His wife Aida came for the newspaper on Monday. She said Nedim was in hospital. Dunja offered to keep an eye on the workshop for a few days. Aida accepted, tired and grateful. Because of her own feelings, Dunja almost withdrew the offer, as though help became dishonest the moment it carried more than one reason.

Nedim did not return. After his death, Dunja continued closing the shop at the same time but lingered beside the newspaper shelf. Once, she admitted her feelings to a friend. She received stern advice to stop thinking about another woman's husband. As though a thought could be set aside with an unsold magazine and no longer belong to you the next day.

For months, she kept a photograph from a neighborhood street celebration between two books. All the shopkeepers stood in it, but her eyes always found Nedim. She did not display it. She feared doing so would take away someone's right to something she had never even claimed. Meanwhile, she began resenting Aida for laughing while speaking to a new neighbor.

One day, Aida came in for a cardboard box. She was selling the workshop and moving closer to her sister. Against her own intention, Dunja said she was glad Aida was moving on so quickly. Aida looked at her without anger. "Quickly from the outside," she said. "At night, it isn't quick." Dunja immediately wished she could take the sentence back.

Instead of making excuses, she admitted missing Nedim and feeling more affection than she had shown. Aida was silent for a long time. She said she had not known and needed a moment, but also that she could not preserve his memory by ceasing to live. Dunja understood how unfair it was to turn another woman into the guardian of her own hidden grief.

On moving day, she gave Aida the photograph, having first made a copy with her agreement. She placed her own behind the counter, uncropped, with all the neighbors. She still sometimes looked at Nedim. But now she noticed herself too, smiling among people who had shared a street and many ordinary days. She remembered to give the next customer their change.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Kiss Beside the Workshop

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-kiss-beside-the-workshop/

Lara came to her aunt's house to finish designs for an exhibition. In the yard, a carpenter named Amar repaired the old fence. He wore a faded T-shirt, worked quietly and did not stop to tell her how interesting her work was. At first, that irritated her. She was used to people asking where she exhibited.

One afternoon, the wind carried several sketches off the table. Amar caught them before they landed in the wet grass. He paused over one and observed that the shelf's proportions did not suit the space. Lara put the papers away, offended that he was right. The next day, she asked him how he would solve the corner anyway.

The conversation lasted until evening. He showed her two possibilities using scraps of wood, and she explained why a deliberately empty surface mattered to her. They laughed at her aunt's radio, which picked up only half a station. Lara felt the attraction before she could devise a respectable explanation for it.

Several days later, they went together to buy fittings. On the way back, they stopped beside the river. Amar asked whether he could kiss her. She said yes. It was a calm, brief kiss, without the excuse that the moment had carried them away. When they returned, Lara introduced him to her aunt as the tradesman who had helped her collect supplies.

Amar said nothing, but the next morning he kept their conversation focused on the fence. Lara tried to restore their closeness with a joke. He asked whether she was ashamed of him. She denied it too quickly, then mentioned that her friends misunderstood certain things. "What things?" he asked. He had no intention of guessing for her.

At a family lunch, her aunt explained that Amar ran a workshop and trained adult students. Lara felt relief, then immediately felt more

ashamed of that relief than anything before it. Would what happened beside the river be worth less if he worked for someone else and owned no business? For the first time, she asked herself the question without an audience.

She found him in the workshop and apologized clearly, without mentioning her friends. She said she had tried to fit him into other people's expectations. Amar accepted the apology but did not immediately resume the romance. He suggested coffee in a few days. He wanted to know the person who would introduce him the same way in a yard and in a gallery.

At the exhibition opening, Lara met him at the door. She did not list his accomplishments to win over the company in advance. She said his name and that she was glad he had come. Later, they stood before the shelf whose corner they had solved together. Its empty space looked exactly as she had wanted.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A House Full of His Absence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-house-full-of-his-absence/

Selma kept a travel bag behind the wardrobe, only half packed. Her husband Oskar had worked far away for months, returning exhausted and leaving before they managed to talk. Meanwhile, she had grown close to Viktor, a translator renting premises opposite her shop. They planned to go away together for a few days.

Viktor was not a passing stranger. They talked at length, walked after closing time and had kissed once. Selma knew she had to tell Oskar what had happened. Each time he called, she heard the exhaustion in his voice and postponed the conversation. In her mind, going away had become a way to make the decision real.

News of Oskar's sudden death came in the morning through his company and family. Selma sat beside the half-packed bag. She could not connect the man she had intended to leave with the man to whom she would never explain anything again. Viktor came, left food and went away when she asked to be alone.

Weeks passed among documents, visits and things people brought because they did not know what to say. Oskar's clothes came back in two boxes. In one, she found small receipts, a spare charger and an unsent postcard. He had written only that she would like the view from the window.

Suddenly, the house was full of him. She remembered jokes she had already forgotten and moments of closeness she had pushed aside with anger in recent months. She felt guilt, but also a love that had not disappeared merely because their relationship had become difficult. After three months, Viktor told her he still had a reservation for another trip.

Selma asked him to cancel it. She admitted she no longer knew whether she wanted a relationship with him. He reminded her of what she had

said before the tragedy. She said those words had been true then, but she could not ask him to wait while her life took shape again. She promised an answer she actually felt, not the one that would hurt him least.

Viktor accepted it after several painful attempts to find another interpretation. Their last meeting was brief. He returned her book; she returned his scarf. They did not agree to remain friends simply to make the parting sound nicer. Necessary distance was the only honest thing they could still give each other.

The following spring, Selma traveled alone to the town on the postcard. Sitting beside a café window, she wrote several sentences about Oskar, including the angry ones. That evening, she closed the notebook and went for a walk. His photograph stayed in her room. She did not carry it into every hour still ahead of her.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Agreement That Left Out Jealousy

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-agreement-that-left-out-jealousy/

Tara and Filip drew up a two-page agreement. She would spend a year at an artists' residency; he would stay in the city and finish a research project. They would visit when possible, without having to report every outing. Their friends called them more sensible than every other couple.

For the first few months, it genuinely worked. Tara sent photographs of her work; Filip sent short videos of their cat. Then she began hearing the same name in several of his stories, a colleague who stayed late in the laboratory with him. She asked nothing. Somehow, in their agreement, jealousy had remained a flaw belonging to other people.

During his spring visit, Filip noticed a man sending Tara voice messages. She did not play them in front of him. One afternoon, she said she had a meeting and left without details. Filip stayed in the little apartment, looking at the two cups he had just washed, and realized he suddenly hated the freedom he himself had defended most loudly.

Later, from a tram, he saw her in a car with the same man. They were laughing. He did not call. He went to a park, wrote a long accusatory message and deleted it before sending. When she returned, he behaved coldly, convinced his silence was more dignified than asking a question.

Toward evening, Tara handed him a package. Inside was his portrait, made from her sketches and old photographs. The man was the printmaker helping her produce it. The secret meetings had been an attempt to prepare a surprise. Filip felt relief, then shame at the way he had already rearranged her behavior into evidence.

He admitted what he had thought. Tara laughed only briefly because she recognized her own silence about his colleague. She told him she was jealous too. Neither had betrayed the other, but both had tried to appear so free that they could no longer ask for a little reassurance. The cat

climbed into the empty packaging, entirely uninterested in their theories.

They did not tear up the agreement. At the end, they added several ordinary sentences: they were allowed to ask questions, allowed to say they missed each other, allowed to change a plan without declaring the whole marriage a failure. Tara did not abandon the residency, and Filip did not ask for access to her phone. They scheduled the next visit before he left.

He hung the portrait in his study. It was not flattering: Tara had included the crease between his eyebrows. When his colleague admired it, he said his wife had seen him clearly. That evening, he called Tara without an interesting story prepared. He simply missed her. She replied that she was glad he had finally said so.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Silk Scarf for an Ordinary Tuesday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-silk-scarf-for-an-ordinary-tuesday/

The tax refund was smaller than Vesna had hoped, but larger than zero. She immediately allocated it in her head: repairing the kettle, replacing a curtain, a gift for her partner's work anniversary. She planned nothing for herself. That part of the calculation had disappeared so long ago that she no longer noticed.

She entered the department store hungry. All morning, she had organized other people's schedules at the office. Before that, she had driven her partner to an appointment and left lunch for his mother. Beside the till, she touched a plum-colored silk scarf. The assistant asked whether she wanted to try it. Vesna almost said she was only looking, then stood before the mirror.

With the scarf, her face did not look younger. It looked like her own. She bought it and sat in a café she had previously visited only for business meetings. She ordered a lunch meant to be eaten slowly. For about ten minutes, she answered no messages, and nobody suffered any serious trouble because of it.

An older man at the next table had a cinema program. He asked whether she knew where the second screening room was. They discussed a film she had long wanted to see. When he left, Vesna bought a ticket for the same screening, but they sat separately. In the dark, she belonged for two hours to a story she did not have to organize.

On the way out, her partner's colleague saw them. She greeted Vesna in the slowed-down voice people use when already preparing a question for someone else. By evening, her partner Darko knew she had been seen "with some gentleman." He greeted her with a casually delivered question about where she had been. Vesna removed the scarf and described her day without omissions.

"You could have invited me," he said. She replied that she could have, but that day she had wanted to make her own decisions. That hurt him more than the story of the unknown man. He sat down and admitted he could not remember the last time he had asked what she would enjoy doing. Vesna did not ask him to repay her Tuesday with a grand apology.

They agreed on a new division of responsibilities and time each could spend without justification. On Friday, Darko went to collect his mother, and Vesna finished early. She called him from town and invited him to a late film screening. He accepted, although the title promised him nothing interesting.

Outside the cinema, he recognized her by the scarf. While finding the tickets, he noticed her smiling to herself. He asked why. She pointed to the poster: it was a bad comedy neither of them would ever have chosen in advance. They went in anyway, ready to spend an evening on something nobody needed.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Guest Across the Hall

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-guest-across-the-hall/

Amna prepared the guest room without enthusiasm. Her husband's friend Tarik was staying for ten days while looking for an apartment after returning to the city. Her husband Edin had invited him before asking her. Amna agreed, but pulled the sheets onto the bed with the unnecessary force she used when she did not want to start an argument.

She expected the loud man from Edin's university stories. Tarik arrived with one bag and a book he left on the kitchen table. He was quiet, tidy and did not expect to be entertained. On the first evening, he washed the glasses himself. Amna was surprised by how much that meant to her.

On the third day, they were alone on the balcony while Edin took a call. Tarik asked about her work, then actually listened to the answer. He had no advice. He did not explain how he would solve it. Amna spoke longer than intended and felt a familiar excitement she had not associated with ordinary conversation for years.

That night, she lay awake. Nothing had happened that she could call an affair, but she noticed herself anticipating the next morning and Tarik's footsteps across the hall. She was frightened by how easily she could cast her marriage as an obstacle. Edin slept beside her, unaware of the story beginning to form.

The next day, she left for a previously arranged weekend with her sister. She extended it by a day and told Edin she needed some space. Her sister recommended neither a secret kiss nor an immediate divorce. She asked what, exactly, Amna had liked. Amna was silent for a long time before answering: the feeling of finishing a sentence without being interrupted.

When she returned, she asked Edin to talk. She said Tarik's presence had reminded her how much she missed their closeness, and that she had felt an attraction she did not want to act on dishonestly. Edin was hurt. He

asked whether their guest should leave immediately. Amna said Tarik would keep to the agreed departure, while the two of them needed to decide how they wanted to live afterward.

Tarik found an apartment early. He thanked them both for their hospitality without assuming Amna owed him anything for his attention. After the door closed behind him, Edin began to speak, then stopped and asked her to go first. It did not repair everything. Still, she noticed the effort.

By winter, they had introduced evenings without guests or phones, but had also learned to argue without retreating into silence. When Tarik invited friends to his new apartment, Amna and Edin went together. They took a long walk home. She talked about something entirely ordinary, and he let her reach the end.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Mustache That Started a Rumor

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-mustache-that-started-a-rumor/

Goran had worn a mustache for twenty-seven years. In their wedding photographs it was dark; at the latest family lunch it was almost white. He had never shaved it off. His wife Vera once said that without it, she would have to get to know him again. He remembered that more seriously than she intended.

He was given a role in an amateur play that called for a very different face. The director suggested makeup. Goran went to the barber. He did not tell Vera, wanting to surprise her at the premiere. She arrived straight from work that day, exhausted and convinced she would sleep through the second act.

In the foyer, a clean-shaven man in a dark suit approached her and offered a glass of water. For the first two seconds, she did not recognize him. Then she laughed so loudly that people turned around. Goran bowed. Vera caught him by the lapels and kissed him just as the cultural center's photographer raised his camera.

The photograph appeared with a report on the premiere. A neighbor sent it to a group chat with a single question mark. By noon, Vera had received four discreet calls. An acquaintance offered support "whatever is happening." Goran looked at the photograph on his phone and laughed until tears ran down his face.

At first, Vera did not find it funny. She was angry that people found an affair easier to believe than tenderness between a married couple. Then she noticed that she had not expected that kiss herself. For years, their parting kisses had been brief and precise, as though confirming that the household timetable still worked.

At the evening performance, the photographer asked for a new picture explaining the confusion. Vera refused to pose as though cleared of an

accusation. Goran agreed to an ordinary cast photograph, published with names. The rumor died by itself, accompanied by several people claiming they had known all along.

At home, she asked whether he would grow his mustache back. He asked whether she would then stop noticing him again. He did not sound accusatory. They sat on the edge of the bed and talked about becoming capable partners in a life they rarely experienced together anymore. Vera admitted missing their old playfulness.

The following Saturday, they met in the foyer of another theater, each arriving separately. Goran waited with two tickets. His mustache had already begun to grow. Vera recognized him at once but offered her hand as though he were a stranger. "I've heard you're an interesting man," she said. This time, nobody took their photograph.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Question Thirty Years Late

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-question-thirty-years-late/

Zoran bought two tickets to an exhibition, although he had nobody to invite. The ticket seller asked whether he wanted just one, but he felt embarrassed correcting himself. At home, he put them beside a bowl of apples. That afternoon, out of nothing more than ordinary boredom, he began thinking about Ema.

They had known each other through a student hiking club. One summer, they were left alone beside a river while the others prepared a barbecue. She asked whether he believed a person could fall in love with a friend. Frightened by his own answer, he began talking about the importance of protecting friendships. Ema later married someone else.

For thirty years, he carried that conversation as proof that his true happiness had passed him by. In the meantime, he had a marriage, a divorce and work he loved. Yet he could turn any lonely evening into a continuation of that walk. In his mind, Ema never changed.

He found her through a mutual friend. She worked in a flower shop and agreed to have coffee after her shift. When she arrived, she had soil beneath a fingernail and was laughing about a broken cash register. Zoran suddenly realized he had not prepared a single question about her actual life.

Even so, he asked the old question. Ema listened carefully. She said she had liked him then and had even waited for him to invite her to dinner. He felt a familiar, almost pleasant sadness rising in his chest. "So we missed everything," he said.

"Not everything," she replied. She had enjoyed a good marriage that ended peacefully, journeys she remembered fondly and years she would not exchange for an imagined version of her youth. She said she probably would have accepted dinner, but nobody knew what the two of them

would have been like afterward. She did not want to become an excuse for his unhappiness.

Zoran felt ashamed, not because he had asked, but because he had spent years preserving her in a role that did not allow her to live. He apologized and asked how she had opened the flower shop. The conversation changed. She talked about her first faulty refrigerator, her stubborn business partner and the satisfaction of finally learning to turn down a bad order.

Before they parted, he mentioned the two tickets. "Is this an invitation from the present?" she asked. He said it was. They arrived separately at the exhibition, met each other again in front of a poorly lit painting and went for soup afterward. When he returned home, Zoran did not think about what might have been. He remembered how Ema had put down her spoon to finish telling him something.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

A Window Seat for Two

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-window-seat-for-two/

Every Wednesday, Nermin arrived at the library ten minutes early. He was sixty-four, with neatly trimmed gray hair and a habit of returning books with a slip of paper marking his favorite page. Jasna, the librarian, was nine years younger. She kept the slips in a drawer she did not open in front of her colleagues.

Since they had both lost their partners, their conversations about novels had grown longer. Once, he invited her for coffee. She said she would like that, but she was busy that week. Nermin did not ask again. Afterward, Jasna often regretted not immediately suggesting another day.

At a literary evening, the organizer joked that Nermin probably read only because he liked the librarian. Several people laughed. He blushed but did not lower his eyes. Jasna felt her hand tighten around the program. The organizer added that some romances had an expiration date.

"With books, I know you can renew the loan," Nermin replied. "With people, you first have to ask whether they want to stay." He did not seek applause. He turned to the author onstage and asked a question about her novel. The laughter died because nobody could continue the joke without being openly unkind.

After the program, Jasna found him stacking chairs. She said she was sorry. He shrugged, but she could see it had hurt him. He explained that falling in love was not embarrassing; listening to other people turn it into a spectacle was. "And you must be allowed to say no without their audience, too."

Then she told him her answer about coffee had been clumsy, not negative. She suggested Saturday. Nermin took out his phone, although he knew he had no commitments. "Eleven?" She asked whether they could make it earlier, while the bakery still had warm rolls. He entered

ten o'clock under "Jasna, coffee."

On Saturday, they talked about their late partners, but also about a bad film they had both seen. Neither expected the other to replace anyone. When the waiter brought the bill, Jasna asked to split it. Nermin said that, in that case, he would choose the cake next time. She smiled and agreed to a next time.

At the next literary evening, they sat by the window. The organizer apologized before the guests arrived. Jasna accepted the apology, then moved her bag from the neighboring chair. Nermin sat down, handed her a book and showed her the slip between its pages. This time, it held no quotation, but the address of a small bakery he wanted them to find together.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Guest Her Host Forgot

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-guest-her-host-forgot/

When Maja arrived in the small seaside town, her bag held two dresses and a manuscript. Filip, the organizer of the literary weekend, had promised a fee, accommodation and a long walk after the reading. They had been exchanging messages since spring. His usually arrived late, often with a photograph of the sea beyond an empty table.

The hotel expected her to pay for her room herself. Filip apologized, saying the person responsible for payments was ill. At rehearsal, he was busy with more important guests. At dinner, he seated her near the door, without a name card. When she asked about her fee, he touched her shoulder and promised to settle it privately.

She did not want to cause a scene. But after two days, her savings were paying for someone else's event. She watched Filip order expensive wine for a writer whose appearance attracted cameras. He whispered that she understood art and surely would not reduce everything to money. Maja put down her fork.

During the closing program, each author was asked to say something unplanned. Maja told a story about a woman who invited a neighbor to repair her window. She admired his hands, praised his patience and assured him he was special. When the window was finished, she told him that a bill would spoil the beauty of their encounter.

The audience laughed. Filip did too, at first. Then he looked at her. "Did he fix it?" the famous writer called out. "He did," Maja said. "But she spent the following winter looking for a repairman who accepted compliments instead of rent." She did not look at Filip as she closed her notebook.

He waited for her backstage, offended. He said she had humiliated him, although nobody had mentioned his name. Maja showed him the

contract and hotel bill. She wanted the money by morning, without further discussions of their special connection. He paid everything. The payment confirmation came with a long message explaining how she had misunderstood him.

At the station, the sound technician Vedran approached her. During rehearsal, he had brought her a chair without making a performance of it. He was taking the same bus home. He asked whether he could sit beside her. During the journey, they talked about bookshops that closed early and the ugly hotel with the beautiful view.

A month later, he invited her to dinner, first checking which day suited her. He did not promise it would be unforgettable. He arrived on time. As Maja put her bag beneath the table, she realized how much room there was for pleasure when she did not first have to make excuses for someone else's absence.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

Dinner Without a Hidden Menu

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/dinner-without-a-hidden-menu/

Lejla's small restaurant closed on Mondays. That week, however, she agreed to prepare dinner for an investor considering a lease on the neighboring premises. His message said he would be coming with a business partner. When he appeared alone, carrying roses and a bottle of wine, the waitress looked toward the kitchen.

"Something came up for my partner," Ognjen said. Instead of leaving the roses on the counter, he held them out to Lejla as though she had already accepted the role of a woman expecting them. She thanked him and placed the flowers in a water jug. Then she showed him the table by the window, set for two.

Ognjen knew that her husband, an architect, was temporarily working in another city. During their telephone negotiations, he had remarked several times that it was a shame such a beautiful woman ate alone. Lejla had replied that she usually ate with her staff. She had thought that was clear enough.

For the starter, she served an onion tart. The main course was roasted vegetables with the same onion, and beside the salad she brought a lightly pickled version. Ognjen tasted the food and praised it. Then he laughed. "All on the same theme? Haven't you got something more exciting for a guest like me?"

Lejla sat opposite him with the lease folder. "The same ingredient can take many forms. Its name still doesn't change." She opened the folder. "This is a business dinner. That doesn't change because you've come alone, either." His smile remained, but he no longer knew where to direct it.

He tried to call it all a joke. Serious women thought too much about harmless attention, he said. Lejla did not defend her seriousness. She

called the waitress to bring a third plate and asked her to join them. She offered Ognjen a choice: they could go through the contract, or she could bring his bill. He chose the contract and, for the first time, asked specific questions.

The next day, he sent an offer with a better price and a personal message unrelated to the property. Lejla answered only the business part, declining to work with him. Three months later, a ceramic artist and a bookbinder rented the premises. They made no grand promises, but they paid on time and occasionally borrowed chairs for workshops.

When her husband returned, Lejla told him about the dinner while they shelled peas. He asked what the dessert had been. "He didn't order any," she replied. Her husband took two pears from a bag and began peeling them. The evening continued with ordinary food and a conversation that required neither person to guess what was really on offer.

ROMANCE · 3 MIN READ

The Perfect Couples Club

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-perfect-couples-club/

"You have to see the way they talk to each other," her friend said as she sent Dina an invitation to a weekend at a mountain hotel. The Harmonious Couples Club brought together people who always rested their hands on each other's shoulders in photographs. Since her divorce, Dina had doubted even the happy endings in films.

She accepted because of a talk about trust. She traveled with Kenan, a sound recordist doing freelance work at the event. They knew each other from the neighborhood. He did not promise to cure her distrust. He simply pulled over when she said she felt like having some pita.

She spent the first evening at a table with the club's founders. Under the table, one woman showed her husband messages he had to approve before she posted them. Another couple did not speak until the photographer arrived. On the balcony, the club president asked Dina to tell his wife they had spent the afternoon preparing a speech together. She had not even seen him that day.

In the morning, she carried her suitcase to reception. The formal breakfast had not begun. Hearing voices in the kitchen, she glanced through the open door. An older waiter was trying to repair the clasp on his wife's shoe. She was the cook, and she was angry because he had postponed his own medical appointment to cover for a colleague.

They did not look harmonious. They spoke over each other, then stopped. "All right, I'll call again," he said. She handed him a piece of warm bread. Dina noticed that they had settled something without an audience or a sentence worth printing on a T-shirt.

Kenan found her in the lobby and asked whether she needed a ride. Instead of answering, she told him what she had seen. She added that, after she refused the president's request, he had said she did not

understand the little favors people did within a marriage. Kenan frowned. "You understand enough not to become his excuse."

She took her suitcase back to her room but skipped the closing talk. With the manager's agreement, she helped the staff arrange tables for the evening concert. The president called it an unusual choice for a guest. Dina told him she had finally found the part of the program that was useful to her. Her friend later left the club after having a conversation of her own with him.

On the way home, Kenan missed a turn. He admitted it immediately, without a story about a bad road sign. Dina began to laugh, freely for the first time that weekend. Outside her building, she invited him to dinner the following Friday. "I have no good evidence that we'll work out," she said. He lifted the bag containing the leftover pita. "At least we have something to start with."