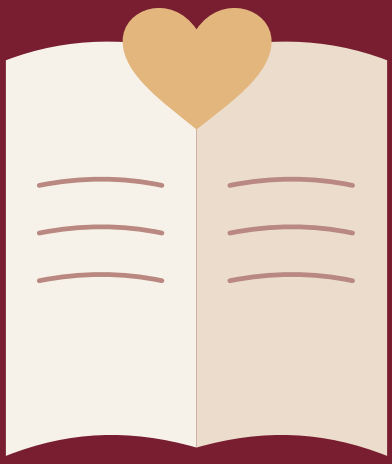


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Contents

The Mayor's Hat · 10 min read 11

The Younger Sister Carries the Bags · 8 min read 16

The Wardrobe with Five Locks · 9 min read 20

Eighteen Silver Spoons · 8 min read 25

We Married Off the Singer · 8 min read 29

The Family Secret Under Glass · 10 min read 33

The Third String of the Saz · 10 min read 38

The Official Car to the Hairdresser · 8 min read 43

The Groom Behind the Camera · 8 min read 47

Mother-in-Law, 63, Bihać · 8 min read 51

You Dreamed It All, Uncle · 8 min read 55

A Parcel for the Other World · 8 min read 59

The Doctor with the Tray · 10 min read 63

The Fan with Her Name · 10 min read 68

What Blagoje Picked Up · 9 min read 73

The Owl in the Hallway · 9 min read 77

Laughter in the Courtroom · 8 min read 81

The Minister of the House above Koševo · 8 min read 85

The Mother-in-Law, Live · 8 min read 89

Thirty Nights in Our Father's House · 9 min read 93

Humanity in Three Tiers · 9 min read 97

Two Euros for My Uncle · 9 min read 102

Who Will Take Mother · 8 min read 106

The Clock Taken Down Before Dawn · 10 min read 110

Permission from Vienna · 8 min read 115
The Mentor in the Guest Room · 9 min read 119
The Wife Sold at the Mowing Fair · 9 min read 124
Family Secrets from Velenje · 9 min read 128
The Only Honest Minister · 8 min read 132
The Beggar Who Changed His Coins · 10 min read 136
The Key to the Mailbox · 9 min read 141
The Price Tag on the Sleeve · 9 min read 146
Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Make the Same Sarma · 8 min read . . . 150
A Son-in-Law for Two Pharmacies · 9 min read 154
The Building with Blue Balconies · 7 min read 159
Minutes from an Empty Chair · 3 min read 163
The Clock with No Winner · 3 min read 165
The Dedication on the Wrong Page · 3 min read 167
The Toast That Was Never Finished · 3 min read 169
Dinner at the Reserved Table · 3 min read 171
Someone Else's Laughter on Stage · 3 min read 173
The Captain Without a Team · 3 min read 175
Wine from the Wrong Bottle · 3 min read 177
An Accent for the Formal Dinner · 3 min read 179
A Retirement Speech She Never Requested · 3 min read 181
The Menu That Promised Too Much · 3 min read 183
A Wall for a Missing Painting · 3 min read 185
Coffee for His First Wife · 3 min read 187
Family According to the Price List · 3 min read 189
Balloons for a Waste-Free Day · 3 min read 191

An Answer from the Back Row · 3 min read 193
A Lift for Respectable Shoes · 3 min read 195
The Coat He Knew Was Not His · 3 min read 197
A Certificate for the Most Children · 3 min read 199
A Poem Without a Happy Ending · 3 min read 201
Books Behind a Golden Ribbon · 3 min read 203
The Tip He Did Not Take · 3 min read 205
The Weight That Was Not Dancing · 3 min read 207
A Toast with Juice · 3 min read 209
The Singles by the Exit · 3 min read 211
The Price Behind the Mirror · 3 min read 213
The Surname That Upset Lunch · 3 min read 215
The Balcony in an Invented Legend · 3 min read 217
The Roof That Did Not Fit the Photograph · 3 min read 219
A Hundred Numbers in a Coat Pocket · 3 min read 221
Jam from an Orchard That Wasn't There · 3 min read 223
The First Shovel for the Last Bench · 3 min read 225
The Voice That Gave No Blessing · 3 min read 227
A Photograph Without the Kitchen · 3 min read 229
Guests Before the Lowered Barrier · 3 min read 231
A Birthday Without a False Alarm · 3 min read 233
The Dress That Asked No Permission · 3 min read 235
The Face Beneath the Cheerful Ears · 3 min read 237
A Wedding Free Only on the Poster · 3 min read 239
The Kiss That Was Not News · 3 min read 241
A Smile Cut Out of Its Photograph · 3 min read 243

The Boxes Behind the Thank You · 3 min read 245
The Name Beneath the Porcelain · 3 min read 247
Applause from Empty Seats · 3 min read 249
The Front Row on the Roof · 3 min read 251
A Chair for Those Already Inside · 3 min read 253
The Voice Beneath the Wrong Title · 3 min read 255
The Laundry That Spoiled the View · 3 min read 257
The Empty Place on the Family Plan · 3 min read 259
Pearls for Important Guests · 3 min read 261
The Cool Air Behind the Director's Door · 3 min read 263
The Kiss I Never Offered · 3 min read 265
The Neighbor Who Asked for Less Noise · 3 min read 267
The Song I No Longer Owed · 3 min read 269
An Apology with a Condition · 3 min read 271
The Reference That Suddenly Had a Price · 3 min read 273
Numbers on His Side of the Table · 3 min read 275
Guests in Our Women's House · 3 min read 277
Water Behind the Tall Fence · 3 min read 279
A Room for a Respectable Couple · 3 min read 281
The Woman Facing the Window · 3 min read 283
Numbers from a Birthday Guest List · 3 min read 285
The News That Did Not Belong to Her · 3 min read 287
Time in a Coat Pocket · 3 min read 289
An Extra Service with the Proposal · 3 min read 291
The Glass That Stayed Full · 3 min read 293
The Glass beside the Queen · 3 min read 295

The Face Behind the Family Recipe · 3 min read 297
The Speech His Wife Shortened · 3 min read 299
Two Brides Outside the Same Hall · 3 min read 301
The Most Successful in Our Class · 3 min read 303
A Recording from Before Him · 3 min read 305
Certificates for Empty Chairs · 3 min read 307
A Mother for the Formal Lunch · 3 min read 309
Two Menus for One Dinner · 3 min read 311
The Best Man's Unfinished Story · 3 min read 313
Lunch Without Invisible Hands · 3 min read 315
The Widower with the Wrong Story · 3 min read 317
Two Anniversaries at the Same Table · 3 min read 319
The Painting She Bought in Installments · 3 min read 321
The Tenants on the Third Floor · 3 min read 323
A Toast to the Woman Who Did Not Come · 3 min read 325
The Trophy Under the Table · 3 min read 327
The Photograph with the Wrong Date · 3 min read 329
The Letter the Choir Never Sang · 3 min read 331
Gold Thread on the Wrong Dress · 3 min read 333
The Wedding Without a Cover Photograph · 3 min read 335
The Signature Beneath Someone Else's Wall · 3 min read 337
Gifts Without a Price List · 3 min read 339
Tears That Did Not Arrive on Cue · 3 min read 341
A Robe Over an Unfinished Drawing · 3 min read 343
The Jacket That Opened the Door · 3 min read 345
A Holiday with a Bedtime · 3 min read 347

The Question That Did Not Fit the Award · 3 min read 349
The Room for Men Who Wait · 3 min read 351
The Bucket They Declared an Artwork · 3 min read 353
Children Are No Reason for Everyone Else to Be Silent · 3 min read 355
The Desk Beside Someone's Dog · 3 min read 357
Room for a Bag, Not for a Person · 3 min read 359
The Contest for the Best Silence · 3 min read 361
The Speech That Stayed in My Pocket · 3 min read 363
The Queue for People with Time to Spare · 3 min read 365
The First Day That Keeps Repeating · 3 min read 367
The Bread Nobody Could Take · 3 min read 369
The Name on the Bathroom Door · 3 min read 371
Too Many Years to Be a Beginner · 3 min read 373
The Nickname Behind the Screen · 3 min read 375
The Price of a Broken Cup · 3 min read 377
The Bench That Suddenly Became a Problem · 3 min read 379
Room for the Walker · 3 min read 381
One Bill for the Entire Shift · 3 min read 383
The Free Workshop Until the First Payment · 3 min read 385
Two Rows Ahead of Everyone Else · 3 min read 387
The Dress Supposedly Donated · 3 min read 389
The Question That Never Reached the Guest · 3 min read 391
The Camera in Front of Someone Else's Lunch · 3 min read 393
The Man Who Attended His Own Memorial · 3 min read 395
The Microphone Left on the Table · 3 min read 397
The Invitation That Arrived After the Vote · 3 min read 399

Applause for Someone Else's Secret · 3 min read 401
The Pie Nobody Tasted · 3 min read 403
The Woman Beneath the Wrong Title · 3 min read 405
The Winner Who Never Crossed the Bridge · 3 min read 407
Laughter from the Third Row · 3 min read 409
The Speaker Who Wasn't on the List · 3 min read 411
One Dog in Three Different Homes · 3 min read 413
A Donation in a Borrowed Name · 3 min read 415
The Fastest Swimmer in the Slower Group · 3 min read 417
The Wrong House on the Poster · 3 min read 419
Five Stars for an Empty Room · 3 min read 421
The Voice Behind the Curtain · 3 min read 423
The Auction Without Raised Hands · 3 min read 425
Gratitude Is Not Consent · 3 min read 427
A Man for the Front Page · 3 min read 429
The Haircut She Did Not Choose · 3 min read 431
A Portrait Without Softer Light · 3 min read 433
She Did It All for Him · 3 min read 435
The Headline She Refused to Inherit · 3 min read 437
Dinner for People Who Know Everything · 3 min read 439
A Scandal Ordered for Monday · 3 min read 441
The Invitations Never Sent · 3 min read 443
An Engagement on the Wrong Slide · 3 min read 445
The Woman at the Head Table · 3 min read 447
The Man Who Took the Shame · 3 min read 449
A Circle of Important People · 3 min read 451

Two Women Behind the Same Counter · 3 min read 453
A Promise Outside the Closed Cinema · 3 min read 455
The Traffic Jam Someone Paid For · 3 min read 457
The Divorce Her Lawyer Had Already Celebrated · 3 min read 459
Fifty Minutes by an Open Window · 3 min read 461
A Closed Marina, an Open Story · 3 min read 463
The Marriage Package for Sale · 3 min read 465
A Door Opened at the Wrong Moment · 3 min read 467
The Last Letter Was Not a Goodbye · 3 min read 469
A Hole in an Expensive Umbrella · 3 min read 471
How to Stay Silent Before the Whole Town · 3 min read 473
The Painting He Could Not Buy · 3 min read 475
The Bill for Morality · 3 min read 477
Three Identical Rings · 3 min read 479

SCANDALS · 10 MIN READ

The Mayor's Hat

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-mayors-hat/

The mayor of Stolac, Galib Tatarević, had a hat. Gray, felt, from Vienna. He wore it to every ribbon cutting and to every interview for the cantonal television, so in Stolac, behind his back, they called him simply the Hat. Under that hat the Hat also carried a weakness, which the town knew better than it knew his budget. Her name was Hanka, and she was the wife of the miller Šećo Mlivo, whose mill on the Bregava, below the old fortress, still ground corn on stone, for housewives from the surrounding villages and for tourists.

Šećo was the ugliest man between Stolac and Čapljina, and he knew it better than anyone. He was short, one of his shoulders sat higher than the other, and his nose looked like a pear someone had forgotten in the sun. But he was also the cleverest, and when he talked, people forgot what he looked like. Hanka was a head taller than he was, laughed loudly, and was the most beautiful woman on the Bregava. They loved each other in a way the town could not forgive: without quarrels, without secrets, and without any interest in other people's opinions. When the mayor came on Saturdays for flour he did not need, Hanka laughed in his face and Šećo laughed behind the millstone, and in the evenings they retold it as the best comedy in town.

At the end of October the Hat grew tired of comedy. His adviser Uzeir, a man who knew a regulation for every misfortune, reminded him that the mill's water permit was expiring. One rainy Wednesday, at ten at night, Uzeir called the miller. His voice was officially worried. An inspector from Mostar had just arrived at the municipal building, he said, and if Šećo did not sign a statement tonight, they would close his mill in the morning. Hanka looked at the clock. "Who in this country works at ten at night?" she asked. "Someone who wants something else," said Šećo, but he put on his jacket all the same, because without the mill they had

nothing.

At the municipal building he was met by the night watchman Idriz, with a thermos in one hand and a remote control in the other. Idriz showed him into an office on the second floor, under a framed photograph of the mayor in his hat, made him coffee, and said the inspector would be there any minute. Uzeir vanished down the hallway. Šećo sat, looked at the photograph, and counted. At eleven he drank a second coffee. At half past eleven he realized that the photograph on the wall was the only representative of authority who would appear in that office that night.

At the same time the mayor was walking down the path beside the millrace toward the mill, in a long camel-hair coat, with the hat on his head and the flashlight on his phone. On a wet slab by the sluice the Hat slipped and fell into the millrace up to his waist. He climbed out, but he did not let go of the hat, and like that, soaked, with water running out of his sleeves, he knocked on Hanka's door. She opened it with a broom in her hand. Through chattering teeth he explained that Šećo would not be back before morning, that the inspector was a serious man, but that everything could be arranged with him, if only Hanka would be a little kinder to the one who arranged such things.

Hanka put down the broom, took her phone out of her apron, and started recording. "Say that again, Mr. Mayor," she said. "The part about the inspector. Slower." The Hat repeated it, because he was cold and because he did not understand right away. By the time he understood, it was too late. Hanka put on her coat, told him to sit by the stove if he did not want to die on her doorstep, and set off along the cart track toward town to fetch her husband. By the stove sat the mayor of the municipality, with water in his shoes.

Uzeir had been waiting in the car up on the road, and after half an hour he came down to see why there had been no call. He found his boss blue with cold. He peeled off his wet clothes as if he were a child, hung the suit and the coat on the chairs around the stove with the hat on top, and

tucked the mayor into the only bed in the house, under Hanka's quilt, with a hot water bottle at his feet. Uzeir went back to the car and fell asleep himself to the radio.

Meanwhile Šećo opened the office window, because Idriz had fallen asleep in front of the television and the doors were locked. He jumped into the bushes in front of the municipal building, scratched himself on a rose the mayor had personally planted on Municipality Day, and set off for home by the shortcut, across the old bridge and along the other bank of the Bregava. At the same time Hanka was walking the cart track on the opposite side of the river. They passed within fifty yards of each other. When Šećo got home, the door was unlocked. By the stove someone else's camel-hair coat was steaming. On a chair sat a gray hat. From the bedroom came a snore that all of Stolac knew from sessions of the municipal council.

Šećo pushed the bedroom door ajar. Under Hanka's quilt, on his pillow, slept the mayor, red in the face, as content as a man for whom everything has gone according to plan. Šećo closed the door and sat down on a sack of flour. He sat for a long time. Twice he got up and started toward the door, and twice he sat back down, because he had never hit anyone and did not intend to start with a man who snored. Then he looked at the coat and the hat and laughed, but it was not his laugh. "The mayor has a wife too," he said out loud. "And they say she is beautiful."

He put on the mayor's coat, which came down to his ankles, with the sleeves reaching his fingertips. The hat kept falling over his ears, so he padded it inside with newspaper. Dressed like that, he walked through sleeping Stolac all the way to the mayor's big house above Begovina. The neighbor's dog, which barked at every passerby, recognized the coat and only wagged its tail. At the door appeared Hatira, the mayor's wife, who never fell asleep before her husband came home. She looked at the small man in her husband's coat. She had been buying flour from him for twelve years.

"Mrs. Hatira," said Šećo, taking off the hat, "your husband is sleeping in my bed. I have come to his." Hatira looked at him for a long time, the way one looks at news one has long been waiting for. "Come in," she said. "Into the kitchen. The coffee is just ready." She sat him in her husband's chair and made him tell everything from the beginning, from the Saturday flour to the snoring. Only when he got to the millrace did she have to stand up and turn toward the window, and her shoulders shook, and Šećo could not tell whether she was crying or laughing.

The mayor woke up at two, thirsty, in a stranger's bed. By the stove there was no coat, no suit, no hat. On the chair lay only Šećo's work trousers, white with flour. When Uzeir woke up in the car, he barely recognized him. They drove to the house above Begovina, where the mayor rang the bell at his own door. Hatira appeared at an upstairs window. "Who is it?" "It's me, Galib!" "My husband has been home for an hour," said Hatira calmly. "There's his hat on the coat rack." In the neighboring houses the lights began to come on, one by one.

At that moment Hanka arrived too, having found only Idriz and an open window at the municipal building, and having seen from the bridge Uzeir's car go by with someone white with flour in the passenger seat. Only then did Hatira open the door and let them all into the living room. She sat down in an armchair like a judge. Šećo came out of the kitchen in the mayor's coat, and the mayor, in Šećo's trousers, went as white as flour. "What was this man doing in my house?" "The same thing you were doing in his," said Hatira. Šećo looked at Hanka like a man who had lost everything. Without a word, Hanka took out her phone and played the recording.

The whole room, and with it the neighbors who had gathered under the open window, heard the mayor's voice chattering on about the inspector and about kindness. Šećo lowered his head and laughed, this time his own laugh, and Hanka went over to him and buttoned up the coat that did not belong to him. Hatira stood up. "Uzeir," she said, "by nine in the morning the water permit for the mill is to be signed. And you, Galib, are

not a candidate in the next election." The mayor asked what, then, had happened here tonight while he was asleep. "We drank two coffees," said Hatira. "The rest you can wonder about until you retire."

Šećo and Hanka walked home at dawn along the bank of the Bregava, he in a coat down to his ankles, she laughing so hard that twice she had to sit down on the low wall. The water permit arrived at half past eight, stamped and signed. They returned the suit the same day, washed. The hat they did not. At the next election Stolac got a new mayor. The hat still hangs on a nail above the millstone, and when tourists ask whose it is, Šećo says the mayor left it the night he slept at their place, and he explains no further. Stolac explains the rest by itself.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

The Younger Sister Carries the Bags

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-younger-sister-carries-the-bags/

I was the one who carried the bags. In our family this is not said out loud, but everyone knows it: when something is breaking, someone has to carry the bags, and with us it was always the younger sister. That week in August I carried them from Ljubuški to Mostar and back every day, on a bus that stops at every café. In them were clean pajamas, my mother's burek, pomegranate juice, and newspapers, which my brother did not read but held on his lap so he would have somewhere to look when someone came in.

The fire started on the hill above Vitina, at noon, when the bora wind had been drying out the grass for three days. Hasan had been a volunteer firefighter since he was eighteen. That night, when the wind turned, he stayed last on the line so that people from two villages could get their livestock out, and the fire caught him on his arms and back. They brought him to Mostar before dawn. By morning every news site in Herzegovina had written about him, and by noon half of Ljubuški was standing in the hospital corridor: firefighters, the mayor, two television crews, and neighbors who would not otherwise have greeted Hasan at the market.

My mother and I got there first. His wife did not come. Dželila was from Vitina, from the Pintorović house, the youngest of six, and raised so that until her wedding she spoke only when someone asked her something. She had been with Hasan for nine years, they had three children, and in those nine years I had heard her laugh perhaps five times, and always behind a door. When she heard that cameras and half the town were standing in the corridor, she sat down on a chair in the kitchen and did not get up.

On the second day her brother came. Pintorović, whom everyone had called Beg since he was little, because that was how he walked and how he spent, sat down at our kitchen table, drank a coffee, and told Dželila

that a woman from their house does not run in front of cameras through a men's hospital ward for all of Herzegovina to see. Let Hasan send for her, he said, when he was ready to receive his wife properly. Dželila nodded. I think it was a relief to her. Her brother had forbidden her the very thing she was afraid of anyway.

Hasan lay in a room with two other firefighters, his arms bandaged to the elbows. Every time the door opened he would lift his head, and then he would lower it. On the third day he asked me, without looking at me: "And her?" I said she was with the children, that the little one had a fever. That was the truth, the little one had had a fever for one afternoon. Hasan said "fine" and looked at the newspaper he could not turn the pages of.

That evening, when visiting hours were already over, Dželila came after all. Alone, on the last bus, with a plastic bag holding his pillow from home. I was leaving the room to get water and ran into her at the door of the ward. She was pale and her chin was trembling. To this day I do not know why I did what I did. Maybe because of the three days in which I had carried the bags while she sat in the kitchen. I told her Hasan was asleep, that he should not be woken, and that she should come tomorrow, with our mother, as was proper. I took the pillow out of her hand. She left without a word. Hasan was not asleep.

In the morning Hasan dictated a message to me, because he could not hold a phone. It was short. She should not wait for him, not at the hospital and not at home, she should go back to her brother since her brother mattered more to her, and the children would stay with him. I asked him if he was sure. He said he had watched the door for three days and he was sure. I put the pillow from home under his head and said only: "I brought you your pillow." I did not say who had brought it. I do not know why I did that either.

Ten days later the papers came from the lawyer, and the day after them came Beg, in a black SUV, with two cousins, to collect her things. He said the children would stay for now, until it was settled in court, and he said

it looking at Hasan's picture on the wall, not at us. Dželila packed slowly. My mother cried in the kitchen, loudly, so it could be heard. When everything was in the SUV, Dželila asked her brother for five minutes and went to the children. The older boy was eight and pretended not to understand. The younger one understood and hid behind the wardrobe. The little girl was asleep in the wooden cradle that Hasan's grandfather had made for him.

Hasan came home from the hospital at the end of September. His hands had healed, red and tight, but they worked. He did not talk about Dželila. When someone in the café mentioned the Pintorović family, he would get up and pay. Once my mother tried to say that perhaps he ought to call, if only for the children's sake. Hasan answered that in this house nobody would beg anybody, and that he had learned that from her. My mother fell silent, because it was the truth.

Beg did not even wait for the papers to dry. In December he married his sister off to a judge from Mostar, a widower of fifty, with a big house and two grown children in Vienna. People said Dželila had said neither yes nor no, but had answered everything the same way: "As my brother says." She asked for only two things. That the wedding party from Vitina should not drive through Ljubuški but go by way of Grude, even if it was half an hour longer. And a long, thick veil, so she would see nothing on the left side of the road. She got the veil. Beg said the Pintorović family went around nobody and that the wedding party would take the main road.

The wedding party drove past our house on Saturday, around noon, with horns blaring and scarves tied to the mirrors. My mother told the children to stay in their room. The children did not stay. When they recognized Beg's SUV and the white car behind it, they ran out to the gate in their slippers, all three of them, the little one in her older brother's arms. They called to her. The white car stopped in the middle of the road, and the whole line stopped behind it, and someone in the last car honked angrily, then stopped.

Dželila got out in her white dress, with the veil lowered to her chin. She did not lift it. From her handbag she took out three small boxes, as if she had known, and I think she had. To the older boy she gave a watch, to the younger one the kind of phone he had been asking for all summer, and to the little girl a silver bracelet with her name on it. She whispered something in the older boy's ear. To this day he will not tell me what. I was standing at the window upstairs, next to my brother.

Hasan was holding the curtain with his red, tight hand. He saw everything: the veil, the boxes, the little girl reaching her arms toward the white dress. I could have said one sentence then. That she had come that evening. That the pillow under his head had been brought by her, alone, on the last bus. My mouth was already open. Hasan said, without turning around: "Let the children come inside." And my mother went out to the gate and brought them in.

Dželila got back into the car. The line started moving, and the horns sounded again, slowly, as if they too were ashamed. Hasan held the curtain until the last car had disappeared around the bend toward Mostar, and then he let it go. The cloth swayed and came to rest. I never told him. To this day I am the one who carries the bags.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

The Wardrobe with Five Locks

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wardrobe-with-five-locks/

The ad appeared on a Tuzla website for secondhand goods on Tuesday morning: for sale, walnut wardrobe, full wall, five compartments, each with its own lock, lightly used, once. By noon four thousand people had looked at it. By evening all of Tuzla knew which wardrobe it was, and half of Tuzla claimed to have seen it already, on television, as its doors opened one by one.

It all began five weeks earlier, when the police rang the doorbell of Mersija's brother Jasko at six in the morning. Jasko worked as a night guard at a construction company's warehouse in Bukinje. That night four hundred meters of copper cable had disappeared from the warehouse, and the camera above the gate, according to the report, had not been working. Jasko insisted the camera had been working and that he had seen who drove out through the gate: the owner's son, with a trailer. Inspector Šobot wrote this down with great patience and took Jasko into custody, because the story, as he put it, was a little too convenient.

Mersija was thirty-four, had a flower shop near Freedom Square, and had a habit of solving problems in order, like orders from customers. First she went to the inspector. Šobot received her in an office with a ficus that needed water, listened for ten minutes, and then got up and closed the door. He said the camera footage might be found, if someone searched hard enough, and that he searched best in the evening, over dinner, in a quiet apartment, without witnesses. Mersija watered the ficus from his glass. "Friday at seven," she said. "At my place."

Rodić, the pretrial judge the case had been assigned to, did not even close the door. He told her in the courthouse hallway, with his hand on her elbow: the custody order could be reviewed, but he reviewed his cases thoroughly, thoroughness took time, and time was best spent over a good meal. "Friday at half past seven," said Mersija. "Bring the order. I don't

like unfinished business."

The company whose warehouse had lost the cable was building a new sports hall for the city, and the owner's son, the one with the trailer, was the best man of Deputy Mayor Đekić. Đekić received her in an office overlooking the Pannonian Lakes, offered her juice, and said the owner might withdraw the complaint if someone asked him nicely, and that he would ask him even more nicely if she asked him in the right way. "Friday at eight," said Mersija. "Bring the withdrawal of the complaint, signed."

That left the minister. Hrustanović, the minister of the interior in the cantonal government, was the only one she did not have to look for, because he found her. The day after her visit to Đekić the phone rang in her flower shop, and a warm, measured voice said he had heard about her problem, that these were ugly things that were easily settled among people who understood each other, and that he had time on Friday, later, around half past eight. Mersija said that was perfect. And she meant it.

There remained the question of the wardrobe. Ahmo, a craftsman from Slavinovići, made furniture for half the city and never asked why. This time he asked. Mersija wanted a walnut wardrobe across the whole wall of her living room, with four tall compartments, each deep enough to hold a grown man in a coat, and each with its own lock that fastened from the outside. "For preserves," she said. Ahmo looked at her, then at the sketch, then at her again. He said the wardrobe would be done by Friday and that, since things were going this way, he would like to come to dinner some time too. "Then make it five compartments," said Mersija, "and come at six."

Ahmo came at six, freshly shaved, with a box of baklava and a screwdriver in his pocket. Mersija praised his locks and said she had doubts about the fifth compartment, that it seemed shallower than the others to her. Ahmo took offense. The compartment, he said, was the same as the others, and to prove it, he stepped inside, turned around, and spread his arms. Mersija closed the door and turned the key. "You're

right," she said through the walnut. "It is the same." For a while nothing but breathing could be heard from the wardrobe, and then Ahmo said that for the first time in thirty years his own work had locked him in.

The inspector rang the bell at five past seven, with a bouquet that Mersija's professional eye told her had been bought at a gas station. He had also brought a USB stick. "The footage," he said, and set it on the table like a trump card. Mersija played it on her laptop right away. In the footage, at two seventeen in the morning, the owner's son drove out through the gate with a trailer full of copper. Šobot took off his jacket, put on the slippers she gave him, and had just begun to tell her how lonely he had been all his life when the bell rang. Mersija went pale. "My neighbor," she whispered. "He has a key and a terrible temper." Without a word the inspector stepped into the first compartment.

Judge Rodić brought wine and an order lifting the custody, signed and stamped, because he was, he said, a man of his word. Mersija read the order twice and put it in a folder next to the USB stick. The judge took off his jacket, put on the slippers, and sat down on the couch closer than the couch required. A cough came from the first compartment. "The pipes," said Mersija. At five to eight the bell rang. "My ex-husband," she whispered. "He works in security and he is jealous." In his slippers the judge stepped into the second compartment faster than he had ever reached any decision.

Đekić brought a box of chocolates and the signed withdrawal of the complaint. When Mersija told him to feel at home and gave him slippers, he was moved and said he had no slippers at home, because his wife told him he did not deserve them. Someone sneezed in the first compartment. "The cat," said Mersija. Đekić did not have time to ask since when cats sneezed in wardrobes, because the bell rang for the fifth time that evening. "My cousin from Germany," Mersija whispered. "He hasn't slept for two weeks." The deputy mayor stepped into the third compartment.

Minister Hrustanović brought nothing, because ministers, he explained, do not carry things, they solve them. He said he had spoken with people, that her brother would be released, and that they could now move on to pleasanter subjects. Mersija gave him slippers. The minister put them on with the expression of a man taking an oath of office. Then she went into the kitchen to check on the pie, as she put it, and from the kitchen she sent two messages. When she came back, she said she was terribly sorry, but her aunt from Gračanica was arriving that very minute, and her aunt could not stand men in the house. Without asking, the minister stepped into the fourth compartment, apparently convinced that this was standard procedure.

The first message went to Aldijana, a reporter for a local news site, who had gone to high school with Mersija. The second went to the television station. Aldijana arrived within eleven minutes, with a cameraman and two colleagues, and after them came a television crew. Mersija met them at the door with the folder: the camera footage, the order lifting the custody, the withdrawal of the complaint. Then she led them into the living room, stood in front of the walnut wall, and began unlocking the doors, in order, like orders from customers.

From the first compartment came the inspector in slippers, who said he was there on official duty. From the second came the judge, who said he had no comment, and repeated it three times. The deputy mayor claimed he had come to look at the wardrobe because the city supported local furniture making. The minister came out last of the four, straightened his tie, looked straight into the camera, and said this was a fire safety inspection. Ahmo, in the fifth compartment, did not wait to be asked. "I made it," he said proudly. "The locks are mine."

By midnight the video had more views than any other video from Tuzla that year. Jasko was released the next day at ten, and the owner's son was brought in at eleven, with his trailer. The inspector was suspended, the judge asked to be recused from all his cases, the deputy mayor resigned for family reasons, and the minister gave an interview about media

pressure. Mersija sold the wardrobe in three days. It was bought by a lawyer from Lukavac, who asked only one thing: whether the keys came with the wardrobe.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

Eighteen Silver Spoons

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/eighteen-silver-spoons/

Bajro Kajtaz was buried on Thursday afternoon, and by Friday morning his stone house in Bjelušine had more guests than it had seen in the last ten years of his life. The notary was not due to read the will until Monday, so the family decided to spend those three days under one roof, as Huško, the eldest nephew, put it, "so the deceased will not be alone." The deceased, admittedly, was in the cemetery, but nobody wanted to be the first to say so.

Also in the house, as for the previous six years, was Vinka, a woman from Čapljina who had cooked for the old man, given him his medicine, bathed him and got up at night when he called. She was forty-seven, with a little room next to the kitchen and a habit of walking quietly. The relatives greeted her the way one greets furniture. Huško's wife Fahra immediately handed her a list: coffee for everyone, pie for lunch, bedding for the guests, and she was not to forget the lemons, because Huško drinks tea with lemon when he grieves.

Huško, as a retired bank clerk, believed that grief did not rule out order. By noon on Friday he had made an inventory. He walked from room to room with a notebook and wrote down: wall clock, one; rugs, four; copper ewers, six; television, one, new. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Fahra counted the silver spoons. She counted them twice: the first time there were eighteen, and the second time, after she had closed her handbag, seventeen. She told Huško eighteen, and that was what he wrote down.

Hajrunisa, the deceased's niece, arrived from Vienna on Friday evening with her son Mido and two empty suitcases. She cried louder than anyone, at the gate, on the stairs and again in the living room, in front of Bajro's photograph, until she found out that the two apartments on Šantićeva Street were rented out to students. Then she stopped and asked how much they paid. Mido, who was twenty-five, filmed everything on

his phone for the relatives in Austria who could not come.

The quarrel began on Saturday at breakfast, over who had loved the deceased more. Hajrunisa said she had called him every Bajram. Fahra said Hajrunisa had called him once, five years ago, when she needed a guarantor for a loan. Hajrunisa said Fahra had neither come nor called, but had sent Huško to check whether the old man was still alive. Huško said those had been visits. Vinka brought the coffee and, as usual, kept silent. She was the only one who knew that none of them had called the deceased even on the last Bajram, when he lay sick with pneumonia.

On Saturday afternoon Avdo arrived too, a distant cousin from Bijelo Polje who had called the deceased uncle even though he was not. He came in a van, with two friends and plastic sheeting for wrapping furniture. He said his uncle had promised him the Mercedes and the fishing gear twenty years ago, and he had only come for what was his. Huško stood in front of the garage with his notebook. Avdo said a notebook was not the law. Huško said order was the law. In the end Huško blocked the gate with his car, and Avdo honked for half an hour, until the neighbor women appeared on their terraces across the Radobolja.

That evening the family sat down to come to an agreement calmly and like decent people, as Huško had proposed. Huško believed the house belonged to him, as the eldest. Hajrunisa believed the apartments belonged to her, because she had children. Avdo believed the commercial space on the Rondo belonged to him, because he had nothing. By ten o'clock they were shouting so loudly that above the Radobolja they could be heard over the water. At eleven Mido, thinking he was filming only for the cousins in Linz, accidentally streamed the quarrel live on Facebook, and by midnight half of Mostar knew how long each of them had been waiting for Bajro to die.

By morning the video had eleven thousand views. Under it people wrote things that in Mostar are usually said only behind someone's back. The

baker in Carina asked Huško, as he wrapped his bread, whether it had been decided who would get the rugs. Huško's former colleagues from the bank sent him messages full of emojis he did not understand. Hajrunisa said she would sue Facebook, and Mido, without looking up from his phone, explained to her that it did not work that way.

That Sunday they agreed on only one thing: Vinka had to go. Fahra said women like that knew how to get close to old men. Hajrunisa said she had seen in Vienna what caregivers get up to. Huško generously decided that she should be paid two months' wages from the common fund. Before that, Fahra had asked where the deceased's gold watch was, and Vinka had opened the drawer of the nightstand and shown it to her, exactly where Bajro had always kept it. Fahra said she had only been asking. When they told her in the kitchen that she had until the end of the month, Vinka nodded and said she had packed her things back on Thursday.

On Monday at ten the notary arrived, Branimir Lasić, a thin man with a leather briefcase and glasses on a chain. The family sat in the living room, in black. Hajrunisa held a handkerchief at the ready, Avdo wore a borrowed blazer and had parked his van outside the gate just in case, while Mido filmed until the notary told him to stop. Vinka stood in the doorway with a tray, as always. The notary asked her to sit down. Fahra said she was staff. "She is in the will," said the notary, and Vinka sat down on the edge of a chair by the door.

The notary opened the envelope and read slowly, as if afraid someone might miss even a single word. The house in Bjelušine, with everything in it, both apartments on Šantićeva Street and the savings in his account, Bajro Kajtaz left to Vinka, "who for six years fed me, bathed me and listened to me, and who was the only one who came even when I had nothing to give." The commercial space on the Rondo he left to the soup kitchen in Mostar, so they could cook there for the people nobody comes to see.

He had not forgotten the family either. To Huško he left the wall clock, "since he has already put it on his list anyway." To Hajrunisa he left the family album, "so she can see what I looked like." To Avdo he left the fishing gear, but not the Mercedes, "because I never had a Mercedes, only a Golf, and I sold that too." The will had been drawn up four years earlier, before two witnesses, with a doctor's certificate that the deceased was fully of sound mind. The notary read all of it in the same tone he had used for the rest, and took off his glasses.

For a while nobody said anything. Then Fahra was the first to stand up, walk over to Vinka and embrace her. She told her she had considered her a sister from the very first day, and that she had always told Huško what a pure soul Vinka was. Hajrunisa invited her to Vienna for New Year's. Avdo asked whether such a big house needed a man's hand, since he was fifty-eight, divorced and could fix any faucet. Huško offered to help her with the bank, since he understood such things.

Vinka set the tray down on the table. She picked up Huško's notebook, which was lying next to the notary's briefcase, and leafed through it. "You made a nice list," she said. "Wall clock, one. Rugs, four. Ewers, six. Silver spoons, eighteen." She went into the kitchen, opened the drawer and did not have to count for long. She came back, stood beside the open door and said that there were seventeen spoons in the drawer, and that she would be glad if the eighteenth were back in its place before the guests left.

Nobody moved. Mido, for the first time in three days, put down his phone. Then Fahra, looking at neither her husband nor Vinka, opened her handbag.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

We Married Off the Singer

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/we-married-off-the-singer/

We married her off. Nobody in Gračanica says it out loud today, but each of us knows which of us said what and who called whom. She arrived in October, with one suitcase and a red coat, and began singing on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at the Sokoluša café, above the river. Her name was Merdžana. When someone asked her where she was from, she would say she was from the road, and laugh in such a way that nobody asked again. She was thirty-something, with her hair gathered in a knot and a voice of a kind, our husbands said afterward, that you no longer hear even on the radio.

At first they went out of curiosity, the way people go to look at a new bridge. Then they began going every Thursday. Our pharmacist, the director of the high school, two men from the municipality, half the men in Gračanica who had a business and a name. Merdžana did not sing what gets sung in cafés. She sang old songs, slow ones, that their grandmothers had sung in the courtyard, and toward the end of the night she would switch off the microphone and sing without it, and then everything in the café would go quiet, the glasses, the phones and the waiters. My Enver, a dentist, a man who in thirty years of marriage had not sung at a single wedding, came home at three in the morning and sat for a long time in the dark on the edge of the bed.

The worst of it was Derviš Kapidžić. He was sixty-three, with the biggest factory in town, grandchildren, and a name spoken with respect from Doboj to Tuzla. He sat at the front table, by the wall, and requested songs through the waiter, always the same ones. He missed his granddaughter's birthday. He missed a board meeting. And then someone, at two o'clock one night, filmed him standing in front of Merdžana and dropping hundred-mark notes at her feet, one by one, while she sang and did not look at him. By morning eight thousand people had watched the video on

the Gračanica Live page. The workers in his factory watched it during their breakfast break.

That same week his son Ishak sat down at the same table, Ishak who was engaged to a girl from Doboj and was supposed to marry in the spring. He sat on the other side, facing his father, and both of them watched the same woman. On Saturday they quarreled in front of the whole café over which of them would drive her home. Merdžana called a taxi and left alone. But the whole old town saw and heard the quarrel, and what it did not see, it filled in.

That Saturday morning we gathered at the Behar hair salon. Derviš's wife Lutvija sat under the dryer hood and cried without a sound, and we stood around her with curlers in our hair and all talked at once. We could not get her fired, because the owner of the Sokoluša had never earned as much as he did that autumn. We did not want to threaten her, because we are not that kind of women. In the end the hairdresser, who had listened to all of it with scissors in her hand, said what all of us were thinking: "A woman like that doesn't leave town until somebody takes her away. She has to be married off."

In Gračanica nothing can be done without the council. That is what we call the seven older men who drink tea every morning in the garden below the clock tower and decide who will chair the neighborhood assembly, whose field will be sold and who is not to be lent money. Lutvija and I went on Monday. Derviš, of course, was sitting at the table too, along with three others we recognized from the video. They listened to us with their eyes lowered. When we had finished, Derviš stirred his tea for a long time and said, without raising his head: "She has to be married off." The others nodded with relief, like men who have had a load lifted off their backs. Not one of them asked what she thought about it.

After that everything moved fast. The landlady gave Merdžana notice on her room above the bakery. Inspectors came to the Sokoluša twice a week and asked about the license for music after midnight. Cafés in Lukavac

and Tuzla suddenly had no need of a singer. And the council found a groom: Hajro from Srebrenik, a widower of forty-five, a beekeeper, who sold honey at our market on Tuesdays and who had once stood in the doorway of the Sokoluša one evening and listened, without coming in. The council promised to pay for the wedding. Hajro said only that he did not court a woman through a council, and that he would wait for her to invite him for coffee herself.

She invited him three days later. And the two of us, Lutvija and me, she invited the day before that. We sat in her room, among the boxes, and drank coffee from cups she had already wrapped in newspaper. "You married me off before you ever met me," she said, without anger. "Do you know why they come? They don't listen to me. They listen to themselves at twenty." Then she said she agreed. She liked Hajro, she said, because he never shouted at the market. She had only one condition. "At the wedding, I sing."

The night before the wedding Ishak came to the bakery with a ring in his pocket. The baker's wife heard everything through the window, and by noon the whole old town knew it. He begged Merdžana to marry him and not the beekeeper. He said he would leave both his fiancée and his father. She heard him out in the doorway. "You have a fiancée and a father," she said. "I have a voice and one beekeeper. Go home, Ishak." And she closed the door.

The wedding was on Saturday, at the Biser hall, and the whole town came. We sat beside our husbands and held their arms, as if they might run away from us. Derviš sat beside Lutvija in a new suit, and Ishak across from them, with his fiancée from Doboj, who knew nothing. Hajro wore a borrowed jacket, red in the face, and kept straightening his tie. Merdžana wore a simple white dress and did not smile. After dinner she rose from the bridal table, took the microphone from the band's singer and told the musicians to stop. She sang alone, without music.

It was an old song, slower than any she had sung at the Sokoluša, about a girl being married off across the water. Nobody in the hall ate. Derviš's hand on the table began to tremble, and Lutvija, without looking at him, pushed a napkin into his fist. Ishak got up and walked out. My Enver closed his eyes, and I saw his lips moving. He knew all the words. For thirty years I had not known that he knew a single song. We looked at our husbands, one after another, and saw faces we had not seen since they were young men, before they had us.

When the song ended, nobody applauded. Merdžana raised the microphone to her lips once more. "Thank you, Gračanica," she said, "for marrying me off." She set it down on the table, took Hajro by the hand and walked out of the hall. Through the window we watched her get into his van, decorated with a towel and ribbons, and watched the van turn onto the road toward Srebrenik. Only then did the band, uncertainly, strike up a kolo.

Since then Gračanica has been quiet. Our husbands come home by ten. A new singer has come to the Sokoluša, a young one with a synthesizer, and on Thursdays they go, have one drink each and come back before the news. Derviš has signed the factory over to his son and no longer sits on the council. Only sometimes, when the kitchen is empty and nobody can hear, one of us catches herself humming that song. None of us knows all the words. Only our husbands know them, and we have never asked them.

SCANDALS · 10 MIN READ

The Family Secret Under Glass

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-family-secret-under-glass/

For fifty years the medal sat in a frame of green velvet, first on the wall of my great-grandfather's kitchen, and from two thousand five in our restaurant, above the register, between a photograph of the destroyed bridge and the price list for roast lamb. Tour buses stopped at our place on their way to the coast, and while people crowded around the spit, the guides told them the story. My dad told it better than the guides. In March of forty-three, near Jablanica, nineteen-year-old Mursel Kulović carried three wounded comrades out of the icy Neretva, one by one. For that he received the Order for Bravery. The restaurant was called Brave Mursel's.

I barely remember my great-grandfather, I was four when he died. I remember him by his cane and by the fact that whenever he sat in the kitchen, he always kept his back to the wall with the frame. Everything else I know from the story. Every March the children from the school came to the restaurant to hear it, and the local television filmed my dad showing them the medal. Once, for a television crew from Zagreb, my dad even cried, at just the right moment, and that moment stayed in the story ever after. On the promenade along the river the municipality put up a bench with a small plaque bearing my great-grandfather's name. When I came back from Sarajevo to Jablanica after university to help at the restaurant, my dad taught me the story first, and only then the register.

One Wednesday in October, in the rain, a small car with Montenegrin plates parked in front of the restaurant. A woman of about fifty got out, in a rain jacket, and sat down alone at a table by the window. She ordered the lamb and barely touched it. She had short gray hair and a ring on her thumb, and while she ate, she got up twice, went closer to the wall and came back. She was looking at the medal. When she came up to pay, she asked me quietly, in that singsong accent, whether the frame opened. I

said it never opened. "Then I can tell you what is written on the back," she said. "M. K. and three short lines. Under the middle line there is a scratch, because the needle slipped."

My dad was standing by the spit and heard everything. He came over, wiping his hands on his apron. "M. K. is Mursel Kulović," he said. "All of Jablanica knows that." The woman nodded, as if she had expected as much. "M. K. is also Milunka Krivokapić," she said. "My grandmother. She was a nurse. That night near Jablanica she pulled three wounded men out of the Neretva. One of them was a young man from here, with a head wound. His name was Mursel." She said her name was Vukosava, that her grandmother had died last year in Nikšić, at a hundred and one, and that before she died she had told her she had left the medal with a young man in Jablanica to keep for her until the spring of forty-eight. "The spring is long past," said Vukosava. "I have come to take it home."

My dad turned red to the tips of his ears. He said people make up all sorts of things when they hear about a famous medal, and that one should not play games with the dead. Vukosava did not argue. She laid a business card and an old photograph on the counter and went out to her car. The photograph showed a young woman in a partisan cap, with a Red Cross band on her sleeve, and next to her a skinny young man with a bandage around his head and big ears. My dad looked at that picture for a long time and said nothing. He saw those ears in the mirror every morning.

At the next table sat a tour guide from Mostar, waiting for his group to finish lunch, and he had heard everything. By evening a post had appeared on Facebook, and in the morning the Neretvanski Glasnik news site ran the headline: "Was Brave Mursel Brave?" At the market people looked at us differently. The neighbor from the end of the street, who had drunk coffee at our place for free for thirty years, announced in front of everyone that he had always suspected it. The school principal called to say the March visit was postponed until things were cleared up. An agency in Split canceled two buses. There were four hundred comments under the article, and my dad read every one of them, to the last, even

though I begged him not to.

Nana Behka, my great-grandfather's daughter, lives above the restaurant and is seventy-six. My dad did not go up to see her, so I did. She was sorting beans for the next day's lunch. I put the photograph on the table, next to the bowl. She was not surprised. "I knew," she said. She spoke slowly, without stopping her work on the beans, as if she were giving me a recipe. Her father had told her in the hospital in Mostar, in his last week, in ninety-eight: "Behka, the medal is not mine. It belongs to the woman who pulled me out." She asked him why he had never said so. "They asked me whether I had received a medal," he said. "Nobody asked me from whom."

Nana told me the rest as well. In seventy-five a journalist came from Sarajevo to write about the anniversary of the battle, saw the medal in my great-grandfather's drawer and wrote a story about the three wounded men Mursel Kulović had carried out. My great-grandfather did not correct that story, but he did not confirm it either. He kept quiet, and in Jablanica keeping quiet has always counted as a yes. In the summer of forty-seven Milunka came to find him and stayed two months. Then her father fell ill and she had to go home, to look after the farm and her younger brothers. She left him the medal and said she would come back for it. For the whole of the following year, every Friday, my great-grandfather went out to the station when the train from Mostar came in. In forty-nine he married Nana's mother. "My mother knew," said Nana. "On Fridays she dusted that frame and never said a word."

That night I went down to the restaurant around midnight. My dad was sitting in the dark, and the frame lay in front of him on the table, next to a cup of coffee he had not even touched. "For thirty years I have been telling the same story," he said. "Do you know how many times I have said he carried out three men? A thousand times. And he was one of those three." I told him Nana had known. He did not ask why she had kept quiet. He knew why, because he would have kept quiet too.

Then he took the knife for the lamb and began prying the tiny nails out of the back of the frame. There were eight of them. Under the cardboard was the velvet, and under the velvet the medal. He turned it toward the lamp. M. K., three short lines and, under the middle one, a scratch. Between the velvet and the cardboard lay a folded piece of paper, as yellow as tobacco, written in my great-grandfather's large, unsteady letters: "If anyone ever comes from Milunka, give them this. It is not mine. M. K." My great-grandfather, Nana had told me, made the frame himself in seventy-five, a week after that article, and would not let anyone help him. My dad read the paper twice and laughed, tiredly. "He even signed it with the same letters."

In the morning he called Vukosava. She was still in Mostar, at a hotel, waiting, as she put it, for someone to call. We met by the destroyed bridge, where you can still see the Neretva through the iron that was left in the water. My dad put on his good jacket, and I drove, because his hands were shaking. He carried the medal in a baklava box from the pastry shop, because we had no other box. He gave her the box and my great-grandfather's note. Vukosava read the note and cried, the first person in this whole story to do so. Then she told my dad to keep the photograph. "Grandma had another one," she said. "The same. She kept it by her bed." She opened the box only after she had gotten into her car. Through the window I saw her turn the medal over and feel for the scratch with her finger.

A week later my dad had a sign painter take one word off the board above the door. The restaurant is now called Mursel's. In the spot where the frame used to be hangs Vukosava's photograph, framed, and under it a card my dad wrote himself: "Milunka Krivokapić and Mursel Kulović, the Neretva, March 1943. She pulled him out." The photograph is smaller than the frame, so around it a lighter rectangle shows on the wall, where the medal hung for twenty years.

The Neretvanski Glasnik wrote a second article, a shorter one, and under it there were only sixty comments. The agency in Split brought its buses

back. Nana came down to the restaurant, for the first time in many years, and stood in front of the photograph for a long time. The children from the school came in March after all. My dad told them the story by the spit, as always, but he no longer says that my great-grandfather carried out three men. He says he was one of the three, and that he was pulled out of the water by a girl from Montenegro who was twenty years old and had stronger arms than his. The children listen, as they did before. My dad would not let anyone paint over the wall around the photograph.

SCANDALS · 10 MIN READ

The Third String of the Saz

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-third-string-of-the-saz/

In Mostar everyone knows that jealousy is not reported to the police. Jealousy is taken to the hairdresser, to a godmother or a sister, but never to the police. Dubravka Bevanda knew this the way every woman her age knew it, and yet on Thursday, at eleven at night, she called Inspector Marinko, whom she had gone to high school with, and told him that someone was breaking into her husband's company office, because a light could be seen through the blinds.

The company was called Podrum Bevanda, and it sold Herzegovinian wine to restaurants from Neum to Sarajevo. Božo Bevanda was sixty, with gray hair he combed straight back and a smile that made waitresses forget to charge him for his coffee. For twenty-five years his books had been kept by Husnija Ćampara, a quiet man in a hat, who arrived every morning at twenty past seven and had never been off by a single mark. Five years ago Husnija had married Zarema, twenty years younger, and Božo, out of respect for Husnija, had given her a job at the cash desk. Since then Božo had been staying late at work. Inventory, he would say. End of quarter. The tax office.

Everything else was brought to Dubravka by Ružica, a hairdresser at a salon near Kujundžiluk, where Dubravka had her hair washed every Saturday, while the noise of the tourists on the Old Bridge came in through the open window. Ružica knew that Zarema was buying a new perfume, and which one. She knew that on Fridays Božo's car stood in the company parking lot until midnight. "I'm not telling you anything," Ružica would say as she dried her hair, "but if he were mine, I would catch him in the act. And let the whole of Mostar see." For months Dubravka said nothing. Then on Wednesday, as co-owner on paper, she used that paper for the first time: she called Husnija and asked him to drive twelve cases of wine on Thursday to a restaurant in Ilidža and to

stay the night in Sarajevo, because the client was important and Božo was busy.

Husnija listened, his hat in his hand, and was silent for a long time. "I'll go, madam," he said at last. "I go where I am sent. But let me tell you something, as a man who has counted other people's money for twenty-five years. Every house has books that are not opened. Not because there is nothing in them, but because then something would have to be done." Dubravka told him she did not understand him. "You will," said Husnija, put on his hat and left.

The patrol arrived at ten past eleven. The office had not been broken into. Inside were Božo Bevanda without his jacket and Zarema Ćampara without her shoes, two glasses and an open bottle of žilavka on the folders of invoices. In the report Inspector Marinko, out of respect for their old school, wrote only that the owner and an employee had been found on the premises, who stated that they were doing inventory, and that no criminal offense had been established. But six police officers read the report, and in Mostar every police officer has someone he tells everything. On Friday at eight in the morning a news portal published the story under the headline "Night Inventory at a Well-Known Mostar Winery," and by ten the whole town knew the names as well. Dubravka had known everything since midnight, when Marinko called her and said wearily: "Dubravka, it wasn't a break-in." "I know," she said, and hung up.

Ružica called first. "Hats off, Dubravka," she said, and you could hear in her voice that she was already cutting someone's hair. "Everybody is talking about nothing else." Old Manda, who had cooked for the Bevandas for thirty years, said nothing until she had made the coffee. Then she set down the džezva. "You set the house on fire, child, to burn his fingers." Before noon Dubravka's brother Kruno arrived, a lawyer, red in the face, with a phone that would not stop ringing. The bank wanted a meeting. Two restaurants in Sarajevo had canceled their orders, because they did not want, they said, to be part of someone's soap opera. "Are you

out of your mind?" Kruno asked. Božo sat in the armchair and stared at the floor.

Dubravka did not cry. She told her brother that she was saner than ever, and that for the first time in thirty years of marriage she had done something that was not for other people's eyes, but for her own. Only then did Božo raise his head. "We were working," he said, and it sounded so pitiful that even Kruno looked at him with disgust. "Working," said Dubravka. "With two glasses." From the kitchen came the sound of Manda washing the džezva, for a long time, as if she would never get it clean.

Husnija Ćampara arrived on the first bus from Sarajevo, at two in the afternoon, and came from the station straight to the Bevandas', with Zarema walking a step behind him, her eyes on the ground. He had read the news on the bus, near Jablanica. When he walked in, everyone stood up, as if a doctor had come in with bad test results. Manda withdrew to the kitchen door. Kruno stepped between him and Božo, because they expected Husnija to shout, or worse. Husnija did not shout. He sat down, rested his hat on his knee and asked Manda for a glass of water.

"Mrs. Dubravka," he said, "you know what a saz is. My father played one. A saz has strings, and a man, if you ask me, has three. The first is the polite one. On it you play good morning, how are you, thank you, goodbye, and because of it people like you. The second is the serious one. On it are work, loans, children, funerals, and because of it people respect you. And the third is the mad one. No one in his right mind touches it, because once it starts to play, nobody knows when the song will stop. For twenty-five years I played only on the first two. Last night, madam, with one phone call, you touched the third."

No one spoke. Husnija took a sip of water. "Now the whole of Mostar is waiting to see what Husnija Ćampara will do. If I do nothing, I am the fool who counts his boss's money while the boss does inventory with my wife. And if I do something, Mr. Bevanda, I keep your books. All the

books. Including the ones the Tax Administration has never seen." Božo went pale. Kruno opened his mouth and closed it again.

"There is only one way to put everything back as it was," Husnija went on in the same calm voice. "That what was done last night was done not by an insulted woman, but by a sick one. If madam was suffering a nervous breakdown last night, then her call means nothing. Then there is no scandal, only misfortune. People will feel sorry for Mr. Bevanda, not for me. Zarema will come to the cash desk on Monday, I will come in at twenty past seven, and the books will stay closed." He looked at Dubravka almost tenderly. "It only has to be written down. On paper, with a stamp."

"I am not mad," said Dubravka. "I was right. Everybody knows I was right." "That is exactly why, madam," said Husnija. "A truth that everybody knows has to be mad. Otherwise someone would have to pay for it." Kruno was already on the phone. His best man, Dr. Šimunović, could write that it was a case of acute nervous exhaustion and recommend three months of rest at a clinic. "It is not madness, Dubravka," Kruno kept saying, covering the phone with his palm. "Half the managers in Mostar have it these days. The bank will calm down, the portal will publish a correction, the restaurants will come back."

Dubravka turned to her husband. "Božo. You too?" Božo Bevanda looked at the floor, then at Kruno, then at the floor again. "Only three months, Dubravka. You'll get some rest." She turned to Manda. The old woman wiped her hands on her apron for a long time. "Child," she said at last, "better three months of rest than thirty years in the courts." Only then did Dubravka understand that nobody in that room thought she was mad. They all simply thought it would be easier that way. Only Zarema, from the threshold, looked her straight in the eye, and in that look there was neither shame nor triumph, only tiredness.

Manda packed her suitcase, the same one Dubravka and Božo had taken to the seaside in Makarska thirty years ago. Kruno walked her out to the

car. In the street the heat was melting the asphalt, and the neighbor women, who all knew by now, stood on their balconies. Ružica, who had come as soon as she heard a suitcase was being packed, stood on the corner with her phone in her hand. Halfway to the car Dubravka tore free of her brother's arm and shouted, toward the balconies, toward the whole street: "I am not mad! He is cheating on me with Husnija's wife, do you hear?" The neighbor women nodded, sadly and with understanding, and one said to another, loudly enough to be heard: "Poor Dubravka. And she used to be such a nice woman."

Husnija Ćampara stood in the doorway, his hat in his hand and Zarema behind him. "You see, Mr. Bevanda," he said quietly. "Now she can shout as much as she likes. Now it is easy." Then he put on his hat and laughed. He laughed long and loud, in the middle of the street, with a laugh nobody in Mostar laughs, and the neighbor women stopped nodding, and Kruno stopped with the car keys in his hand. None of them, not Božo, not Manda, not Zarema, knew which string was playing in that laugh.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

The Official Car to the Hairdresser

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-official-car-to-the-hairdresser/

For thirty years my mother-in-law Zumreta bought bread at the kiosk below her building in Slatina and never asked what it cost, because she knew. She also knew what tomatoes cost at the Kreka market, who in the building was getting divorced and how much her husband Midhat earned as a clerk in the cantonal roads directorate. He earned little and never complained. In the evenings he did crosswords in pencil, so that he could erase. When I married Đenita, she took me in the way you take in an umbrella someone has forgotten: you do not throw it out, but you do not carry it either. I teach music at the high school, and on weekends I play the accordion at weddings, and for her that was a sufficient description of the whole man.

In March two parties in the cantonal government quarreled over one ministry, and neither would let the other have the post. Someone remembered the quiet clerk who in twenty years had never held anything against anyone and did not belong to any party. And so Midhat, at fifty-eight and with a crossword in his pocket, became minister of transport for Tuzla Canton. When he announced it at dinner, my mother-in-law put down her spoon and said only: "I knew it." None of us asked what she had known.

The change began the next day. On the stairs she told her neighbor Safija that from now on she should be addressed as "madam minister." She no longer bought bread at the kiosk but sent the minister's driver for it, Atif, who, in Midhat's words, had been hired to drive the minister, not the pastries. Atif drove her to the hairdresser on the Skver too, and to the tailor, and once, at ten at night, to the Pannonian Lakes, because she wanted to see how they looked lit up when you saw them from an official car.

Within a week the apartment in Slatina had become a waiting room. Relatives I had not known existed began to arrive: Aunt Hikmeta from Živinice, who wanted a job for her grandson, cousin Huso from Lukavac, who wanted a permit for a gas station, and two women from Gračanica who claimed they had gone to elementary school with my mother-in-law. She received them in the living room, in an armchair she'd had reupholstered in burgundy, and promised each of them something. Within a month Aunt Hikmeta's grandson was working at the ministry as an adviser, though he was twenty years old and did not know what he was advising on. My mother-in-law had the cleaning woman, who had worked at the ministry for fifteen years, transferred to the archive, because at the entrance she had not greeted her humbly enough.

Then my turn came. One Sunday she called me into the kitchen, shut the door and told me calmly, as if she were reading the weather forecast. "You are a nice man, Besim. But a minister's daughter cannot spend her life next to an accordion." I told her that Đenita was a chemistry teacher and earned her own money. "She was a chemistry teacher," said my mother-in-law. "Now she is a minister's daughter." She took a piece of paper out of her bag on which, in her large handwriting, were a lawyer's name and phone number. For lunch, she said, she had invited the minister's chief of staff, a young man from Sarajevo who had a future.

His name was Nino, he wore a blazer without a tie and shoes without socks, and at lunch he sat exactly where my mother-in-law had laid his spoon: next to Đenita, and across from me. For an hour and a half he talked about himself. About the party he was in, about the party he would move to, about how in politics nothing happens by chance. Đenita listened to him with the attention she usually saves for students trying to explain why they did not bring their homework. When my mother-in-law brought out the baklava, Nino leaned toward Đenita and quietly asked whether she could ask her father to sign a decision on a tender for asphalt, for his uncle's firm, because that, he said, would be good for all of us.

Đenita wiped her mouth with her napkin and said loudly, so the whole room would hear: "Mom, Nino is asking if Dad can sign the asphalt for his uncle." My mother-in-law turned red, but only for a moment. "Young people have to think about the future," she said, and put another piece of baklava on Nino's plate. Midhat said nothing. That evening in the hallway he came up to me with his crossword in his hand. "Don't worry, son," he said. "Governments in this canton don't last longer than milk in the fridge. I just make sure I don't sign anything."

In May the portal Tuzlanski glas published a photograph of the ministry's official car outside a hair salon on the Skver, with the headline: "Minister of Transport, but Who Is Riding?" Below it were three more: the car at the Pannonian Lakes at ten at night, the car outside the tailor's shop and the car outside the kiosk, with Atif getting out of it with two loaves of bread under his arm. Someone had also dug up the name of the twenty-year-old adviser. The opposition demanded an explanation in the Cantonal Assembly, and one of the parties that had quarreled in March found in the photographs a reason to make peace with the other.

My mother-in-law called the portal a spittoon and all of it envy. She decided to answer as befitted her: with a big dinner in the apartment, twenty guests, catering from a restaurant and me at the accordion, because, as she put it, there was no cheaper music. Aunt Hikmeta baked a pie, and Huso brought lamb and the papers for the gas station, just in case.

The dinner was on the first of June. The guests had only just sat down, and I had only just opened the accordion, when on the television, which my mother-in-law would not let anyone turn off because she was waiting for them to show her, the news appeared: the Assembly of Tuzla Canton had voted no confidence in the Government, three months and two days after it was appointed. Nino's phone rang first. He looked at the screen, stood up, said "excuse me, urgent" and left without even eating his soup. The twenty-year-old adviser left after him, then the two women from Gračanica. Huso gathered up his papers and his lamb.

In the end four of us were left in the living room, plus Aunt Hikmeta, who had no ride back to Živinice. My mother-in-law sat in the burgundy armchair and stared at the dark television. Đenita took off her earrings, one and then the other, the way you take them off a child who has fallen asleep in her clothes. Midhat took out his crossword. Nobody spoke. Then my mother-in-law looked at the accordion on my knees and said my name, for the first time since I had joined the family, without reproach: "Besim, play something. At least you don't leave when the government falls."

I played until midnight, and she sang sevdalinkas, off key and quietly, one after another. The next morning, when I stopped by for Đenita, my mother-in-law was in the kitchen writing a list in a notebook. "Who left before the soup," she said, without looking up. "Governments fall, but they also get made. When Midhat comes back, and he will come back, I will know whom not to call." In the living room Midhat was rubbing out, with an eraser, a word he had apparently filled in too early. My mother-in-law walked to the kiosk for bread, on foot, and, as Safija told it, the whole way there she greeted everyone first and asked everyone about their health, as if the election were tomorrow.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

The Groom Behind the Camera

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-groom-behind-the-camera/

In Trebinje people still tell the story of Vasilije Lalović's wedding in three versions, depending on who sat at which table. In all three, someone else is to blame. In one it is the father, in another the best man, in the third Germany. The version closest to the truth is the one in which everyone is a little to blame, and it begins two years earlier, at a birthday party Ostoja Lalović did not even attend.

Ostoja had a small wine cellar below Crkvina hill and never said good when he could say the best. Thirty years earlier he had worked a season on construction sites in Munich with Radoslav, who stayed there and now had his own construction firm. When Radoslav celebrated his sixtieth birthday, Ostoja congratulated him over a video call, glass in hand, and in front of all the guests in Munich he said: "You have the most beautiful daughter in Germany, and I have the most handsome son in Herzegovina. It would be a shame to let that go to waste." The guests laughed. The next day the mothers started exchanging pictures.

Anastasija was twenty-six, worked as an architect, and had no intention of getting married by arrangement between two fathers. But in his pictures Vasilije had calm eyes, and in his messages, once they began writing to each other, he wrote the way nobody in Munich wrote. She asked him what he did in winter. He answered that in winter the Trebišnjica sounds like someone in the next room turning the pages of a newspaper. She agreed to a first video call, on Sunday at eight.

Ten days before that Sunday, while they were distilling rakija, Vasilije opened the still too early. The flame caught the left side of his face, from the cheekbone to the neck. His eyes were unharmed, and the doctors at the hospital said he had been lucky, but also that the skin would stay red and tight, and that the scars would fade over the years, only never completely. Ostoja looked at his son's face in the hospital bed for a long

time, and then said the worst sentence he could have come up with: "What am I going to tell Radoslav now?"

Vasilije solved it himself, and that was the first part of the problem. His best friend Relja worked as a waiter in a café under the plane trees and was the most handsome man in town, the kind tourists from Dubrovnik left tips and phone numbers for. "Just the first few calls," Vasilije told him. "Until my face heals. You sit in front of the camera, and I write you what to say." Relja did not want to. Then he agreed, for a friend. Ostoja agreed even faster, as if he had thought of it himself.

That was how it started. Every Sunday at eight Relja sat in Vasilije's room, in Vasilije's shirt, and Vasilije sat on the bed, out of the frame, with a tablet on his knees. He wrote in large letters, and Relja read from a screen taped below the camera. Anastasija asked what no one had ever asked: which song he could not listen to all the way through, what he had last repaired with his own hands, whether he was afraid of silence. Vasilije answered, Relja spoke, and her parents, who sometimes sat beside her, watched the face. Later she would say that from the first day she had noticed how the young man on the screen paused before every beautiful sentence, as if he were reading it. She thought he was shy.

Winter passed, then spring. The scars faded as much as the doctors had said, and no more. Every week Vasilije decided he would tell her, and every week Ostoja talked him out of it. "After the wedding. Once she is here and gets to know you, she will love you. Who walks out of a wedding?" Relja, meanwhile, had grown used to the role. He started adding sentences of his own, mostly about himself, and Anastasija's mother adored him. The wedding was set for June, in Trebinje, with two hundred guests. Relja was to be the best man.

The plan was for Vasilije to tell her everything the evening before, as soon as they arrived. But the family from Munich was six hours late because of the line at the border and came straight to the hall, a convoy of cars with German plates, horns blaring, while the band was already playing.

Radoslav came in first, looked around the hall, and saw the face he had watched every Sunday for nine months. Relja was standing by the head table, a carnation in his lapel. Radoslav embraced him, kissed him three times, and put into his hand an envelope and the keys to a new car, the gift for the groom, as he had promised back at Christmas. Anastasija's mother kissed Relja as if he were her own son. Relja gave back neither the envelope nor the keys. He stood there and smiled, because he did not know what else to do.

Anastasija stood in her white dress and looked at Relja, then at the man beside him, with a red scar from his cheek to his neck, who was looking only at her. The registrar opened his book and, as is the custom, called the groom by his full name. "Vasilije Lalović." Relja did not move. It was the other man who stepped forward. The hall went so quiet you could hear a waiter in the kitchen setting down plates.

Anastasija's mother was the first to speak. "Then who is this?" she asked, pointing at Relja. Ostoja started explaining something about the still, the rakija, and the bad weather, and nobody understood him. Radoslav turned red and asked Relja for the keys. Relja closed his fist around them. "He gave them to me," he said. "I sat in front of that camera for nine months. I am the one he was looking at." Vasilije turned to his best friend and looked at him for a long time, the way you look at someone you will never call again. Then he held out his hand, and Relja, without looking at him, opened his fist. Vasilije set the keys down on the table in front of Radoslav.

Then he took the microphone from the singer. In front of two hundred people he told them everything: the still, the hospital, the tablet on his knees, every Sunday at eight. "Every word you heard, I wrote," he told Anastasija. "He only had the face." He could see she did not believe him. "You wrote to me at three in the morning that at your grandmother's house in Bileća there is a fig tree that has never borne fruit. You never said that on camera. I was there last week. This year it has figs."

Anastasija was silent for a long time. Then she went to the table, picked up the keys and the envelope, and gave them back to her father. "You lied to me for nine months," she said to Vasilije. "I did." "And all of you knew." She looked at Ostoja, who lowered his head, then at Relja, who was staring at the floor. "I cannot marry a man I have never seen," she said. That night the convoy with German plates left Trebinje without a single horn. The registrar closed his book and, as people said afterward, for the first time in his career left a wedding without tasting so much as an appetizer.

Ostoja paid for the hall, the band, and two hundred portions of lamb, and all summer he did not show himself on the square. Relja went to Dubrovnik for the season, and he was never seen again at the café under the plane trees. Vasilije stopped turning his head to the left when someone came up to him. He worked in the cellar and welcomed the tourists himself, and when one of them stared at him too long, he said it came from rakija, which was the truth.

In December, on a Sunday, at exactly eight, his phone rang. A video call, from Munich. He looked at the name on the screen for a long time. Then he switched on the light in his room, sat down at the table so that the left side of his face was turned toward the lamp, and answered. Anastasija looked at him without a word, so long that he thought the connection had dropped. "Turn a little," she said. "I cannot see all of you." He turned.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

Mother-in-Law, 63, Bihać

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/mother-in-law-63-bihac/

My mother-in-law Zekija taught chemistry at the high school in Bihać for thirty years, and when she retired, she went on teaching at home. The shoes in the hallway stood in a row, heel to heel. Lunch was at two, not ten past two. Pita was rolled out by hand, because store-bought pastry sheets, in her opinion, were for women who respected neither themselves nor their guests. I have lived under her roof for seven years, ever since I married Elvis, and in seven years I never heard her praise anyone except her late husband, and him only on the anniversary.

I found out about the profile at the pharmacy, on my break. My coworker Enisa had divorced the year before, and since then every day at half past ten she opened an app called Second Spring, so that she could, as she put it, have a laugh. She scrolled through men holding carp and read me their descriptions out loud. "Oh look, there are women too," she said. "Zekija, sixty-three, Bihać. I like order, the Una, and people who are not late. I do not answer messages after ten." The picture showed a woman in a green headscarf, and along the edge of the photo you could see a shoulder in a dark suit. It was Elvis's shoulder. The picture had been cropped from my wedding.

"Do you know her?" Enisa asked. I said I did not and went back to the counter. That evening, at dinner, I watched my mother-in-law as if I were seeing her for the first time. Her phone lay beside her plate, screen down against the table, and it had never lain like that before. When she went to the bathroom, she took it with her. Elvis talked about some car payment and noticed nothing. Later, while he slept, I lay in the dark and remembered how my mother-in-law had told me, in the first year of my marriage, that a decent woman does not sit alone in cafés. Now, it seemed, she was sitting with someone.

On Thursday she announced physical therapy for her knee. She put on lipstick, the first time outside of Bajram since I had known her. My pharmacy looks out on the bank of the Una, and around half past four, when I went out to take some boxes to the storeroom, I saw her in the café garden across the street, under a linden tree, at a table with a tall man with a gray mustache. She was laughing. Not the short laugh she gave my cakes, but loudly, with her head thrown back, the way nobody in our house ever laughed.

In the evening Elvis asked where his mother had been all afternoon, because he had called the house and nobody had answered. My mother-in-law opened her mouth, but I got there first. "At physical therapy," I said. "I saw her coming out of the health center. She says her knee is better." It was my first lie in that house. My mother-in-law lowered her eyes to her plate and said nothing, but later, when I was washing the dishes, she picked up a towel and started drying the plates beside me, something she had not done once in seven years, because she believed I dried them the wrong way.

The next Saturday she needed to go to Ostrožac, and she told Elvis a friend from Cazin had invited her over. He offered to drive her. "I will," I said. "I have to get something in Cazin anyway." We drove in silence until Bihać was behind us, and then, looking out the window at the fields, she said, "You know." "I know." "Since when?" "Since last Wednesday." She was silent for a long time. "And what will you do now?" "Drive," I said.

Then she told me everything, the way she used to explain a lesson: in order, without a wasted word. His name is Husein, he is a retired surveyor, a widower from Cazin. He shows up half an hour early to every meeting and waits. She had made the profile herself, following instructions she read twice. She had used the wedding picture because it was the only one in which she was smiling. "I ruined all the others," she said. "When someone takes my picture, I remember I am supposed to look serious." I left her below the fortress in Ostrožac and spent two hours drinking coffee in the car, watching them walk along the walls and

watching him carry her handbag.

That was how our alliance began. I covered for her twice more: once at a dentist she did not have, once at the house of our neighbor Hurija, who was at her daughter's in Germany that week. My mother-in-law stopped redoing the way I folded the towels. One evening, for no reason at all, she said that my store-bought pastry sheets made a perfectly good pita, and she left the kitchen at once, as if she were afraid I would ask her to say it again.

Then came the first Sunday of the month, and with it Aunt Đemka, the sister of Elvis's late father, who came to lunch on every first Sunday and left with news for the whole neighborhood. She waited until the pita. Then she put down her fork and said that her neighbor's daughter-in-law had seen Zekija in Ostrožac with some man, arm in arm. "And that is not all," she said, and took out her phone. "She is on the internet too. On one of those dating sites. With a picture from Elvis's wedding."

The table went as quiet as a classroom before a test. Elvis looked at the phone, then at his mother. "Mom?" My mother-in-law sat upright, a spoon in her hand, and for the first time since I had known her she had nothing to say. I saw her chin tremble. That was when I said something I had not planned. "I made her the profile." Everyone turned to me. "I chose the picture, I wrote the text, I set up her meetings, and I drove her. If someone should be ashamed, let them be ashamed of me."

"The daughter-in-law is marrying off the mother-in-law," said Aunt Đemka, as if she were reading a newspaper headline. "What will people say?" Elvis looked at me as if I were a woman he did not know. "You did this behind my back? With my mother?" I wanted to answer, but my mother-in-law set her spoon down on the table, slowly, the way she used to set down the chalk when a class had to fall silent.

"That is not true," she said. "Sit down, Samra. I made the profile. I read the instructions twice, like everything I have ever read. Samra only drove me and lied for me, and in seven years I never told a single lie for her, I

only corrected her." She turned to the aunt. "Đemka, your brother died eleven years ago. I did not." Then to her son. "His name is Husein. He is coming for coffee on Thursday, at five. And do not be late from work, because he is never late."

Aunt Đemka left without coffee and without cake, something that had never happened in that house. Elvis went out to the riverbank and did not come back until after dark. He lay down beside me, stared at the ceiling for a long time, and then quietly asked what this Husein was like. "Punctual," I said. He thought about it for a moment. "Then they will get along," he said, and turned over onto his other side.

On Thursday, at twenty to five, my mother-in-law stood in front of the hallway mirror with two headscarves in her hands, a green one and a gray one. She turned to me and, for the first time in seven years, asked my opinion. "The green one," I said. She tied the green one. At five to five a gray car stopped outside the gate, and the man with the gray mustache stayed sitting in it, his hands on the wheel. My mother-in-law watched him through the curtain. "You see," she said, without turning around. "He came early, so he is waiting for it to be five." Elvis got up and went to open the gate.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

You Dreamed It All, Uncle

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/you-dreamed-it-all-uncle/

In Bijeljina everyone knows who the first lady is, even though it is written nowhere. It is not the mayor's wife or the bank director, but Dobrila Savić, with her yellow-fronted house two streets from King Peter Square, with roses like no one else's in Semberija, and with a husband, Ljubiša, who keeps quiet about everything. At Dobrila's, on Fridays over coffee, it is decided whose wedding was beautiful, whose cake was dry and whose son is not fit to marry. Whoever was not at her slava might as well not have existed that year. Those of us who came, came out of fear and out of curiosity, which are, as we say here, the two strongest loves.

Only one thing never went Dobrila's way: her daughter Sofija. Twenty-six years old, the most beautiful girl from the Drina to the Sava, a piano teacher at the music school, and unmarried. She had turned down three men, among them the lawyer Vladan Stanković, whom Dobrila had considered adequate, but no more than that. Sofija, people said, was still waiting for a music teacher who had left for Germany two years earlier and stopped getting in touch. Dobrila never mentioned it. We did.

Then on a hot day in June, Vladan drove his uncle into town. Radomir Jeremić, eighty-four, had left Semberija in the sixties, built a trucking company of forty trucks in Chicago, sold it, and now, as he said at the gas station at the edge of town, wanted to see once more the fields where he had herded cows as a boy. At that gas station the heat made him ill. Vladan was two streets from Dobrila's house and had nowhere else to go. Dobrila opened the gate before he could knock.

The old man was small and neat, in a white suit, with a dyed mustache and a hearing aid that whistled now and then. He called everyone dear, half in English, and remembered names exactly as long as a sentence lasted. Dobrila sat him in the best armchair, sent her husband for ice and a doctor, and sent herself to the stove. By evening the old man was eating

her pita, weeping over pictures of old Bijeljina in her album, and promising to come back for dinner the next day. Vladan drove him to a hotel near the square, scowling, because until then he had kept his uncle all to himself.

That night, in the kitchen, Dobrila told her daughter everything she had worked out between the pita and the coffee. The old man had no children. The old man had a house on a lake in America and money nobody could count. The old man was eighty-four. "Two years, Sofija. Three at most. After that you can go wherever you like, even after that one of yours in Germany." Sofija said it was disgusting. "Disgusting," Dobrila answered, "is sitting in Bijeljina at thirty, waiting for a message that never comes." Sofija looked at the phone on the table for a long time. No message came that night either. She said yes.

The next evening she played for him. The old man asked for something old, something his mother used to sing, and Sofija found the song at the piano and sang it softly, the way you sing to someone who is ill. Radomir wept. Then he got up with difficulty, took her hand, kissed it and asked, in two languages at once, whether she would be his wife and come with him to the lake. Sofija said she would. In the hallway Dobrila squeezed a dish towel. And behind the curtain at the terrace door, where he had come to collect his uncle, stood Vladan Stanković, hearing every word.

Vladan did not sleep that night. In the morning he sat down to breakfast with his uncle at the hotel and began slowly and patiently, the way you talk to children and witnesses. "Uncle, what did you dream last night?" The old man laughed and said he had dreamed he was proposing to a lovely girl at a piano. "There you go," said Vladan. "At the Savićs' you fell asleep in the armchair after the pita, and I drove you back. You dreamed the rest." The old man said he remembered the song. "The song was on the radio." Radomir was silent for a long time, and then he admitted that lately he dreamed all sorts of things, last week even Chicago under snow, though it was June.

For that afternoon Dobrila invited everyone. The doctor's wife, the bank director, the owner of the bridal salon, and Mrs. Nedeljković, who had waited twenty years for Dobrila to make a mistake. She told them only that they would hear something lovely. On the table were Russian caps, tulumbe and coffee in the porcelain that comes out only for the slava. When Vladan brought his uncle in, they all stood up. Radomir was in high spirits, kissed each of them on the hand, and sat down next to Sofija, who looked as if she had not slept for three nights.

Dobrila tapped her teaspoon against her cup and said that their dear guest had something to say. Radomir beamed. "I do," he said. "Last night I had the most beautiful dream of my life. I dreamed I was proposing to your Sofija. Vladan says it was a dream, and he is a lawyer, he knows." Mrs. Nedeljković put down her tulumba. Dobrila laughed, too loudly, and said it had not been a dream, that Uncle Radomir had kissed Sofija's hand so sweetly, right there, by the piano. "My uncle is tired, ma'am," Vladan said calmly. "He fell asleep in your armchair. My uncle dreams."

What followed we still retell today, each of us a little differently. Dobrila told Vladan he was a liar and that he was sore because Sofija had turned him down. Vladan said he would rather be a liar than a mother who sells her daughter to an old man for a house on a lake. The bank director took out her phone, then put it back in her bag, ashamed. Radomir looked from one to the other, and then, quietly, like a child lost at the market, he asked, "Please, was it a dream? Somebody tell me. I no longer know what I dream."

That was when Sofija stood up. She looked neither at her mother nor at Vladan, but at the old man. She said it had not been a dream. That her mother had talked her into it, and she had agreed, and that while he wept over his mother's song, she had been thinking about how much time he had left. She said it in front of everyone, clearly, as if dictating a record. Then she knelt beside the armchair and asked him to forgive her. Radomir stroked her hair. "You sang beautifully, sweetheart," he said. "That much I did not dream." Then he asked Vladan to drive him to the

hotel, and at the door he did not turn around.

By evening all of Bijeljina knew, from the square to the market. That autumn, for the first time, Dobrila's slava was empty, the Russian caps dried out on the table, and Mrs. Nedeljković took over her Fridays. Radomir Jeremić flew back to Chicago two days later. He died that winter, in his sleep, as some neighbor of his let people know. In his will, people said, he left everything to the children's ward of the hospital in Bijeljina, except for one line: to Vladan Stanković, who had explained to him what he dreamed, he left nothing, so that he too could dream a little.

The next spring the Savićs sold the yellow-fronted house and moved in with Ljubiša's brother in Novi Sad. Sofija left before them, for Graz, for a music school there, and people say she plays in some hotel on Sundays. Vladan still insists it was all a dream. And we in Bijeljina, when someone promises something and then changes his mind, say he dreamed it like Jeremić, and we laugh, and we make sure nobody hears us.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

A Parcel for the Other World

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-parcel-for-the-other-world/

In July, when even the lizards in the rocks around Ljubuški do not move before five in the afternoon, Cvita sat under the grapevine in front of her house and cleaned green beans. She had been a widow for two years. The late Pavo had left her a house in Vitina, the last one in the village, right above the gravel road that runs down to the river. He had also left her a vineyard of two hundred vines, their son Stipe and a wardrobe full of suits he had never worn, because, as he used to say, a suit needs an occasion, and there are no occasions in a village. Stipe worked at the quarry above the village and came home at seven. Until then Cvita talked to the hens, to the radio and sometimes to Pavo, at the cemetery, where she brought him fresh flowers every Saturday.

That day a young man with a backpack came to the gate, tanned, with sunglasses pushed up into his hair and the kind of smile that sells vacuum cleaners. He asked if there was any water. He drank slowly and looked around the yard, like a man who knows the price of everything he sees. Cvita brought him water, then pomegranate juice, then prosciutto and cheese, because in Herzegovina a traveler is not sent away hungry even when he looks suspicious. He introduced himself as Ero. "And where are you from, son?" Cvita asked. Ero looked toward the hills to the west, where there was nothing but rock and sky, and said what he said everywhere: "Oh, from the other world, ma'am. From far away."

Cvita put down her knife. "From the other world?" she repeated quietly. Ero made his living by listening to what people wanted to hear, so he heard at once that she had misunderstood him and that it would pay to leave it that way. "Then did you see my Pavo there?" she asked. "Pavo Šimić from Vitina? Tall, mustache, wears a cap even when it's hot." Ero took off his sunglasses. "Pavo?" he said. "How could I not have seen Pavo? Pavo is my neighbor." Cvita still looked him over. "And what are

his eyes like?" "Blue," Ero said without thinking. "They're brown," said Cvita. Ero was not thrown. "They used to be brown. Over there everyone's are blue, from all that sky." Cvita sighed. That made sense.

In the next half hour Cvita learned everything. Pavo was fine, but he was short of all sorts of things. The suit they had buried him in had worn out quickly, because over there you walk a lot. His shoes had fallen apart. He was smoking other people's cigarettes. In the evenings they played trešeta, and Pavo, just like here, lost and ended up in debt. Worst of all, his phone had died in the very first week, so he could not call home, and there were no chargers over there, nobody had thought of it. "That's why you dreamed of him looking so sad," Ero said, and Cvita, although she had never once dreamed of him looking sad, nodded at once.

She packed as if for a trip to Germany. Into a big blue market bag she put Pavo's navy suit, two white shirts, his Sunday shoes wrapped in newspaper, a carton of cigarettes Pavo used to hide in the shed thinking she did not know, a jar of fig jam and a piece of prosciutto. From the tin cookie box where she kept money for a rainy day she counted out eight hundred marks. Then she stood over the drawer for a long time and finally added her own charger. Ero helped her close the zipper. "When he charges his phone, tell him to call me," she said. "Only not after nine, Stipe is home then."

Ero promised to deliver everything personally, in three days, when he went back. He kissed her hand, slung the bag over his shoulder and set off down the gravel road toward the Trebižat, whistling something that Cvita later, in front of the whole village, called a very beautiful song for a man from the other world. Once he was around the bend, he stopped whistling and quickened his pace.

Stipe got home at seven, dusty and hungry, and the first thing he saw was the empty cookie tin in the middle of the table. Cvita, overjoyed, told him everything. "There was a man here from the other world. Your dad is fine, he just has no shoes. I sent him his suit." Stipe grabbed his head. Eight

hundred marks was all they had until the grape harvest. "Mom, what other world! Which way did he go?" "Toward the river," said Cvita. "On foot. Over there you walk a lot." Stipe got into his old Golf Two and raced down the hill, raising white dust behind him.

Ero heard him from far away. In that heat and silence a Golf with a holed muffler can be heard all the way to Ljubuški. It was not the first time someone had chased him, but it was the first time a Golf had. He did not have to think for long. He pushed the blue bag into a gap in a dry-stone wall under a fig tree, took someone's straw hat off a fence post, pulled off his shoes and sat down on a rock by the water, with his feet in the Trebižat, like a man who had been sitting there since noon and meant to sit there until dark.

Stipe braked right next to him. "Did you see a guy with a blue bag?" Ero took his time. He looked at the car, then at Stipe, then at the slope across the river. "I did," he said. "Ten minutes ago. He crossed the river on the stones and went up through the brush, toward those houses. You can't get there by car." Stipe looked at the brambles, the rocks and the sun that was still not setting. "Watch my car," he said. "The key is in the ignition. If anyone comes, honk." He pulled off his shoes too, crossed the river jumping from stone to stone and disappeared into the brush.

Ero waited until Stipe was a dot among the pomegranate bushes on the slope. Then he took the bag out of the wall, set it on the back seat, put the hat back on the fence post and sat down behind the wheel. Before he drove off, he honked twice, politely, as agreed. On the slope Stipe turned around, because the horn meant someone had come, and saw his Golf leaving in a cloud of white dust toward the main road to Mostar.

He came home at ten, on foot, scratched, sunburned and one shoe short. No one on the road would give him a ride, they only asked him where his Golf was. Cvita was waiting for him at the gate, and behind her the neighbor Anica, who had heard about the suit and come to see how it ended. "Well, did you catch him?" Stipe looked at his mother, then at the

empty cookie tin visible through the window, then at the neighbors' windows, behind which the flicker of the television had suddenly stopped. He thought of tomorrow's coffee in the village and of everyone who would sit down to it. "I caught him, Mom," he said. "And I gave him the car. So he can get to Dad faster."

Cvita clasped her hands. "Well, now I can rest easy," she said. "Pavo never liked walking." Since then she has carried her phone in her apron pocket, and when an unknown number calls, she answers before the second ring.

SCANDALS · 10 MIN READ

The Doctor with the Tray

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-doctor-with-the-tray/

For twelve years I ran the banquet hall of the Hotel Kesten on the bank of the Vrbas, and I thought nothing could surprise me anymore. I had a wedding where the bride changed her mind between the appetizers and the soup, and a christening where the godfather fell asleep with his head next to the cake. But when the owner, Mr. Stanislav Gvozdenović, told me in March that in May we were holding a doctoral graduation party and that he wanted a cake in the shape of an open book, with the title in marzipan, I thought he was joking. His son Rastko had studied economics for eleven years, and what he knew best was which club on the embankment stayed open until what time.

Stanislav was not joking. He had a hotel, a construction company and four apartments on the Boulevard, but he did not have what his eternal rival Mirko Šolaja had: a son with a title. Šolaja's son held a doctorate in mechanical engineering, and at every family feast people called him "Doctor," even the waiters. Stanislav had listened to that for three years, and every time he ordered another round, so that no one would notice how hard he was gripping his glass. Then a political party offered to put Rastko on its list for the city assembly, "only it would be good if the young man had something in front of his name." Stanislav decided that Rastko would have something in front of his name. The only question left was who would write it.

The answer wore our hotel's white shirt and black vest and served coffee on the terrace. Lazar Mitrić, from a village above Kotor Varoš, had finished economics as the best student of his year, sent out sixty applications and received two replies, both with the word unfortunately in the first line. Between orders he read books he kept under the bar. One morning Stanislav called him into the office. Lazar told me later that the conversation did not last even ten minutes: twenty thousand marks, half

now, half when a plaque reading "Dr Rastko Gvozdenović" was on the door. A dissertation for a private university that operated in the building of a former department store, with Stanislav's old fishing buddy as the supervisor. "You write, he defends, I pay," Stanislav said. "Everybody gets his share."

Lazar wrote for a year, at night, after his shifts. The topic was the economic potential of adventure tourism in the Vrbas canyon. On weekends he went down to Krupa and to the Tijesno canyon, talked with rafting guides, counted kayaks in parking lots, sat with campground owners. The deal was clear: every questionnaire, every survey and every email bore the signature Rastko Gvozdenović, doctoral candidate. Rastko spent that time on Jahorina, then in Budva, then on Jahorina again, and once at the bar he told me rafting was bad for the spine.

At the time I knew nothing about Andrijana. Lazar met her in July, when a kayak he had borrowed to see what he was writing about capsized near Krupa. She pulled him out of the water by the collar, told him he paddled like a man arguing with the river, and asked him his name. He told her the one written on the questionnaires. Later he tried three times to tell her the truth, once on the little bridge by the mills, once in her van and once over the phone, and all three times he gave up, because he would have had to say why as well. He thought he would tell her everything once he got the second half and left the hotel.

By December the dissertation had two hundred forty pages, tables, maps and seventy sources. Rastko learned three pages of the introduction by heart. The defense lasted twenty-two minutes. The committee had two questions, both asked by the supervisor, and he answered both himself. Meanwhile one committee member answered text messages, and another asked afterward whether he could get a discount at the Kesten for his daughter's wedding. In February a brass plaque appeared on the door of Stanislav's office. The second half of the money never arrived. When Lazar brought it up, Stanislav told him he was young, he had time, and from the fall he would be restaurant manager. Lazar stayed a waiter.

The graduation party was set for the last Saturday in May. Invitations went out to two hundred addresses. The deputy mayor came, the dean in his gown, two local TV stations, Šolaja with his doctor son, and half of Gospodska Street. At the entrance stood a portrait of Rastko in a gown, taller than me. The cake waited on its own table, with a marzipan inscription: "Dr Rastko Gvozdenović." Stanislav's wife Ljubinka had ordered five hundred business cards with the title and handed them out even to the women at her hair salon. I drew up the waiters' schedule myself, and since Lazar was the best I had, I put him at the head table. Only when I saw Stanislav go pale as Lazar poured him wine did I realize I had made some mistake. What exactly, I found out half an hour later, like everyone else.

The dean spoke about a young scientist who had turned the Vrbas canyon into a laboratory. Stanislav spoke about sacrifice, about sleepless nights, and about how his son had slept for weeks in a tent near Krupa. The deputy mayor applauded first and loudest, because he too, people said, had earned his master's degree in the same department store. Rastko stood up, thanked "my father, my mother and the Vrbas," and sat down, red to the ears. All that time Lazar stood behind him with a bottle of žilavka and stared at the floor.

Then a young woman appeared in the doorway in a windbreaker and sneakers, tanned like someone who had spent the whole spring on the water. She walked past the portrait, stopped and frowned. "That's not him," she told the security guard, who did not know what to answer. Then she looked toward the head table and shouted: "Rastko!" Rastko Gvozdenović turned around. But she was not looking at him. She was looking at the waiter with the bottle of žilavka.

She walked between the tables straight to Lazar. "The paper says you are celebrating your doctorate at the Kesten tonight," she said. "And not a word to me. And what are you doing with that bottle?" Lazar set the bottle down on the table. The hall went quiet. The dean asked who the young lady was. "Andrijana Bilbija, rafting guide from Krupa," she said.

"And Dr. Gvozdenović's girlfriend." She pointed at Lazar. Rastko looked at his father, his father looked at the dean, and Šolaja, on the other side of the hall, slowly took out his phone.

Stanislav stood up and laughed the laugh with which he used to get building permits. "The young lady is mistaken. This is our waiter, Lazar." Andrijana looked at him the way a guide looks at a tourist who has fallen out of the boat and claims he jumped. "A waiter? This man spent the whole summer on the water with me. He measured every rapid from Krupa to Karanovac. I carried his questionnaires from camp to camp, and I read every page before the committee did. His name is Rastko Gvozdenović." Lazar said quietly: "That is not my name."

The dean, who now had to save his own face, turned to Rastko. "Colleague Gvozdenović, tell the young lady how many guides you surveyed in Tijesno." Rastko opened his mouth and closed it. "Forty-seven," Lazar said behind his back, as if talking to himself. "Nineteen of them women. Two men refused because they thought I was from the tax office." Someone in the hall laughed, then someone else, and then the whole hall was laughing, except the head table.

Then Rastko did the only smart thing of the evening. He took off the gown, folded it and handed it to Lazar. "Dad, I told you I didn't want to," he said. "And you said nobody would be able to tell." Then he went to the bar and ordered a beer, and for the first time since I had known him he looked like a man who had taken off somebody else's shoes.

Stanislav grabbed Lazar by the elbow and took him into the kitchen. I was standing by the dishwasher and heard everything. "How much do you want to make this go away?" "The second half," Lazar said. Stanislav reached for his wallet. "And my own name on the cover. Otherwise tomorrow I tell the dean everything, with footnotes." Stanislav was silent for a long time. Then, more quietly, he asked: "And how much would you take to write one for me too?" Lazar laughed, for the first time in a year. He took off the black vest, hung it on a hook by the dishwasher and said:

"I don't write under other people's names anymore, boss."

By morning Šolaja's video had two hundred thousand views, under the title "Waiter Defends Doctorate." The university announced that it was opening a review. The brass plaque was taken off Stanislav's door because of renovations, and the party found another candidate for its list, one with a master's degree. From June on Rastko worked at the front desk. He was the friendliest receptionist I ever had, and nobody called him Doctor anymore.

The cake stayed untouched until midnight. When the guests had gone, I cut it up for the kitchen staff. I gave the marzipan "Dr" to Lazar. He broke it in half and gave half to Andrijana, who ate it standing up and said she liked Lazar much better as a name. They drove off in her van toward Krupa, with the gown thrown over the paddles on the back seat.

SCANDALS · 10 MIN READ

The Fan with Her Name

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-fan-with-her-name/

Harun had brought the fan back from Seville, and he gave it to Mirna on Saturday morning, before Adem woke up. It was black silk with painted pomegranate blossoms, and on the first bone rib someone had carved her name in tiny letters. Mirna laughed. Who carries a fan in Sarajevo? "You'll see tonight," Harun said. "The terrace will be like an oven." She was turning twenty-six, she had been married two years, her son was six months old, and for the first time the house on Gorica felt as much hers as his.

Half an hour later Saliha Mulić came by, the wife of Harun's business partner, with a tray of baklava and some news. She refused coffee, then drank two cups, and in between she said what, as she claimed, all of Sarajevo already knew. Since February Harun had been stopping by an apartment in Marijin Dvor, the home of a certain Nora Lindner, who had come back from Vienna last winter and whom no one talked about in front of children. "I'm telling you this as a mother," Saliha said. Mirna had not had a mother since she was two. Her mother, as her father and grandmother told it, had been killed on the road to Mostar, and all that was left was one photograph on the dresser in the bedroom: a young woman holding a child, on the Wilson Promenade.

When Saliha left, Mirna opened Harun's laptop. The password was Adem's date of birth. In the bank statements one name kept coming back: N. Lindner, two thousand marks in March, three thousand in April, five thousand ten days ago and the rent for the apartment, on the first of every month. Harun came home at two, with bags of ice and lemons for the terrace. Without a word Mirna turned the screen toward him.

He did not deny it. That was what hurt most. "That woman has been through a lot," he said. "There is nothing between us, Mirna, I swear on Adem. But I can't tell you any more. I gave my word." Then, as he

lowered the ice into the bathtub, he said that Nora was invited tonight. "If people see her in our house, they will stop talking." Mirna picked the fan up off the table. "If she comes, I'll hit her with this in front of everyone." Harun went pale, but he did not take back the invitation.

Viktor Ramljak arrived first, around seven, to help with the drinks. He had a gallery in Kovači and an apartment above it, and ever since Mirna's wedding he had been telling her, half joking, that she had married too young. That evening he was not joking. "If he is doing this to you, don't stay," he said by the railing, above a city lighting up window by window. "I am here. Tonight, tomorrow, whenever you want." He set a key with the gallery's key ring on the railing. Mirna told him the heat had gone to his head. She did not give the key back.

Nora Lindner arrived at nine. She was a woman of about fifty, in a simple dark blue dress, with gray hair she did not dye, and she walked onto the terrace as if she had been coming there all her life. The conversation stopped. Mirna stood by the door with the closed fan in her hand, and everyone was looking at that fan. She raised it, but her hand would not obey her. The fan fell onto the stone tiles, and Nora bent down and put it back in her hand. "It's beautiful," she said quietly. "Take care of it." Someone at once raised a glass to the birthday girl, and the music came back.

Within an hour Nora had won over half the terrace. Muradif Bukvić, a widower of sixty-two with a chain of furniture showrooms from Tuzla to Mostar, laughed at every sentence she spoke. Around eleven Mirna saw Harun and Nora by the potted lemon trees, talking quietly and quickly, and saw Harun take an envelope from his inside pocket and give it to her. Mirna went upstairs, kissed the sleeping Adem, asked the babysitter to stay until morning, and on the back of a birthday card wrote: "Harun, you have chosen her. I am leaving. Don't look for me." She left the card on the dresser, next to her mother's photograph, and went out through the side door into the street. Without knowing why, she took the fan with her.

Ten minutes later the card was found by Nora, who had gone upstairs to look at the baby. She read it twice and sat down on the bed, because her legs would not hold her. Twenty-four years earlier, in an apartment in Ciglane, she had left a note of almost the same words on the kitchen table and gone to Vienna with a saxophone player from a hotel bar, who left her before the end of the year. Her husband told their two-year-old daughter, and then everyone else, that she had been killed. Last winter she came back with no money and no one, but she did not ring her daughter's doorbell. She rang at the door of her son-in-law's studio, with Mirna's birth certificate in her bag. Ever since, Harun had been paying so that Mirna would never learn her mother was alive. Nora pushed the card into her bag, looked at the photograph on the dresser, in which she barely recognized herself, and went downstairs.

She found Muradif by the grill. "Take Harun somewhere for a drink," she told him. "Anywhere. And don't let him come home before one." Muradif promised, happy that she was asking him for something. Nora took a taxi from the corner to Kovači. She did not know that Viktor had just invited the guests who did not want to go home yet to finish the evening at his place, above the gallery, and that Muradif, true to his promise, was the first to take Harun by the arm.

Mirna was sitting on Viktor's sofa with the fan in her lap when the door opened. "What are you doing here? Did he send you?" "Nobody sent me," Nora said. "I read your card." Harun had never been with her, she said, the money he gave her was her shame and not his, and he loved only one woman in this world, and that woman was sitting on the wrong sofa. "You take money from my husband, and now you lecture me about marriage?" "I take it," Nora said. "And that is why I know what it looks like when a woman leaves her house at night. The first night you think you are running from him. After that you run for years, and nobody is chasing you."

Mirna was crying, but she did not move. Nora knelt in front of her, on Viktor's rug. "You have a six-month-old son," she said. "In twenty years

he will ask you where you were tonight. To this day I owe someone that answer." Mirna looked her straight in the face for the first time. Then she stood up. At that moment voices sounded on the stairs, Viktor's laugh, Muradif's bass, and one voice Mirna would have recognized among a thousand others. Nora pushed her into the bedroom and went into the kitchen herself. The fan stayed on the sofa.

Five men came in. Viktor poured rakija, and Harun kept quiet and looked out the window toward Baščaršija. When Muradif sat down on the sofa, something cracked under him. He pulled out the fan and laughed: "Viktor, who left this at your place?" Harun turned around. He took the fan, opened it and ran his finger over the first rib. "Where is she?" Viktor said he did not know what he was talking about. Harun started toward the bedroom door.

"The fan is my mistake," Nora said from the kitchen doorway. "I took it from the terrace when I was leaving. I thought it was mine." She stood there calmly, her bag on her shoulder, in an unmarried man's apartment at midnight, and everyone in that room knew what that meant and what all of Sarajevo would know by noon. Muradif set his glass down on the table and walked out without a word. Harun looked at her as if he were seeing her for the first time. No one was looking toward the bedroom, from which Mirna, her sandals in her hand, slipped behind their backs and out onto the stairs.

In the morning Harun brought coffee to the bed and sat down on the edge. He said he had been wrong to bring that woman into the house, that last night he had found her at Viktor's, and that he would never mention her again. "Don't talk about her like that," Mirna said. "Last night you wanted to hit her," Harun said. "Last night I didn't know anything," she said. Just then someone rang at the gate.

Nora had brought the fan wrapped in a paper tissue. She said she was going back to Vienna on Tuesday, together with Muradif, who had knocked on her door at dawn, listened to one short story and decided to

believe her. She asked only for a photograph of Mirna and Adem. Mirna gave her the picture from Vrelo Bosne in the hallway, and the fan along with it. "Keep it. Let it remind you of Sarajevo." Nora looked toward the open bedroom door, where the old photograph could be seen on the dresser. "That is my mother," Mirna said. "They say I look like her." Nora was silent for a long time. "You do," she said at last. "Only you are wiser."

Harun walked her to the gate. There Nora said only "Never," and he nodded. Mirna stood on the terrace with Adem in her arms and watched the woman in the dark blue dress walk down Gorica, slowly. Nora did not turn around. At the corner she stopped to let a van pass, took something black out of her bag, spread it open and fanned herself, although a cold wind was already blowing down from Trebević.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

What Blagoje Picked Up

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/what-blagoje-picked-up/

Blagoje Lazić from Dvorovi had never in his life thrown away anything that might come in handy. In his shed he kept jars full of screws, little coils of wire, the rubber rings from ajvar jars, and twine, twine above all, because in Semberija twine ties up everything: tomatoes, sacks, the gate when a hinge breaks. His wife Zorka said that one day they would bury him with his pockets full. He answered that at least he would have something to tie the coffin with.

That Saturday in October he set off for the market in Bijeljina before dawn, in his old Golf with a trailer full of potatoes and cabbage. The market was already full. Women from Janja were stacking kajmak in plastic tubs, men from Popovi were unloading sacks of peppers, because it was the last week of ajvar season, and an accordion was playing from one of the kiosks, too loud for that hour of the day. In the parking lot behind the stalls, while he was unloading, Blagoje saw on the asphalt a piece of red twine, the kind used for baling hay, maybe a yard long. He bent down, with difficulty, because his knees had long stopped obeying him, picked it up, wound it around his fingers, and put it in his jacket pocket. When he straightened up, he saw that Novak Petković was watching him from his honey stall.

Fifteen years earlier Novak had borrowed his trailer and returned it with a cracked axle, and then sworn it had been cracked before. Since then they had greeted each other only at funerals. Blagoje was ashamed that Novak of all people had seen him stoop for a piece of twine like a beggar, so he kept looking at the asphalt a little longer, as if searching for something he had dropped, and only then went to his stall.

Around ten o'clock the phones began to buzz. In the Facebook group Bijeljina Live someone had posted: lost, a brown leather wallet near the market, with one thousand eight hundred marks inside, an ID card and a

driver's license in the name of Slobodan Simeunović from Patkovača, reward for the finder. Gojko, the market manager, read it over the loudspeaker too, between two songs. The sellers looked under their crates, the shoppers at the ground, and for an hour the whole market walked bent over.

At noon Blagoje was eating bean stew at the Tezga snack bar when a young policeman came in. "Lazić, Blagoje? Come with me to the management office." In the office were Gojko, a big man in a fleece vest, red in the face, who turned out to be Slobodan, and Novak, leaning against the window with his hands in his pockets. "Mr. Petković says he saw you this morning picking up a wallet in the parking lot," said the policeman.

"Me? A wallet?" Blagoje laughed, and then saw that no one else was laughing. Gojko turned the monitor toward him. The camera above the parking lot filmed in a blur, and a truck blocked half the picture. In the other half a small gray figure bent down, picked something up, and put it in his pocket. "Is that you?" "It is. But this is what I picked up." He took out the red twine. Slobodan snorted. Gojko looked at the ceiling. "Twine," said the policeman. "Twine," said Blagoje. "Who bends down for twine?" asked Slobodan. "I do," said Blagoje, and it was the worst answer he could have given, though it was the truest. "If I had taken a wallet, would I have stood in the parking lot staring at the ground while he watched me?" "That's exactly why you were staring," said Novak.

He swore on his grandchildren, on his late mother, and on the icon of Saint Nicholas that hung in his room. He turned out his pockets: twine, a handkerchief, twenty-three marks, a screw, and a receipt for seed potatoes. The policeman wrote up a report and said he could go, but that he should get in touch if he remembered anything. At the door Novak said, to no one in particular, "What do I know. I only said what I saw."

By the time Blagoje got back to his stall, the clip was already on Facebook. Gojko's nephew had filmed the monitor with his phone, and

under the clip someone had written, "Here's who found the wallet. Reward for the finder, ha ha." By evening there were four hundred comments. His grandson Stefan read them aloud in the kitchen until Zorka took the phone away from him. Some wrote shame on him, at his age. Others wrote that they knew him and he was not like that. One wrote only, "Twine. Well done." That night Blagoje did not sleep. He kept getting up, turning on the kitchen light, and looking at the twine on the table, as if it might say something.

On Sunday afternoon the wallet turned up. Bosiljka from Ostojićevo, who sold eggs at the market, found it at home, under the egg cartons, when she was stacking them in the cellar. Someone had dropped it onto her stall. She was deaf in one ear and had never been on Facebook, so she knew nothing about the whole affair until her son showed her. She took it to the police with her son, and every mark was in it. Slobodan posted his thanks in the group. On Monday Blagoje put on a clean shirt and went to the market, so people could see him.

People patted him on the shoulder. "There, you see, it all worked out." He told everyone the story of the twine, and everyone nodded. "Oh, sure, sure, Blagoje." At his stall Novak said loudly to a customer, "A clever man. He takes it, and when he sees he was filmed, he returns it through the old woman from Ostojićevo. And he still comes out looking honest." On Facebook they wrote the same thing, only shorter. Someone wrote that Bosiljka was his kuma. She was not. Blagoje went over to Novak's stall. "Tell them you were mistaken." Novak was stacking jars of honey into a pyramid and did not raise his head. "I wasn't mistaken. I saw you bend down and put something in your pocket. That's the truth, and I'll tell it to anyone who asks." Blagoje had no answer, because that was the truth too.

Blagoje began explaining. He explained to the man at the gas station, to the women in line at the health center, to people at the bus stop, to a cousin at a slava. He asked Stefan to write a post and photographed the twine next to a tape measure, so people could see how long it was. The

post got a thousand likes and became a joke. For weeks, under every notice about something lost in Bijeljina, a dog, keys, or a ring, someone would put up a photo of a piece of twine. Children at the market asked him, "Grandpa, did you find the twine?" The more he explained, the longer his story grew, and the longer it grew, the more it sounded like a lie. He added the truck, the camera angle, his knees, and the weight of a wallet he had never touched.

In November he stopped going to the market. The potatoes in the cellar sprouted. He slept little. At night Zorka would find him in the kitchen, the twine on the table, whispering the sentences he would say to someone the next day. "Let it go, Blagoje, it will pass." "It won't pass until they understand." He lost so much weight that his jacket hung on him as if on a hanger.

In December he went to see a doctor in Bijeljina and waited at the bus station for the bus to Dvorovi. Beside him sat a young woman with a suitcase, waiting for the bus to Tuzla. On the suitcase she had a sticker from some university in Graz. It was cold, so he offered her a piece of candy, and then, without asking, he began. He told her everything from the beginning: the twine, Novak, the trailer back in 2009, the camera, Bosiljka and the eggs. He took out the twine and laid it on her palm. She listened and warmed her hands on a paper cup of tea. When he had finished, she said, "I believe you."

Blagoje stared at her. No one had said that to him since October. "Why?" he asked. She shrugged. "Well, I don't know you. Why would I think you're lying?" For a while he was silent. Then he leaned toward her. "Wait. You didn't hear the part about the camera properly." And he began again, from the beginning. The bus to Tuzla came, stood for a while, and left. Blagoje did not see it. She did, and she did not get up.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

The Owl in the Hallway

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-owl-in-the-hallway/

At the Kulenović villa on the slopes of Trebević, parties were held twice a year, and both had the same purpose: so that on Monday the town would know who had been invited and who had not. This September the rain began on Friday evening and did not stop until Sunday. The pool stood covered with a tarp, and the guests sat in the big room with a view of a valley that could not be seen for the fog, bored in the way people are bored when they have paid a hairdresser for a weekend from which no one will post a single photo.

Nedžib Kulenović built apartment blocks all over Sarajevo and did not like being told that anything was impossible. His wife Feriha remembered other people's mistakes better than her own birthdays. Also at the table were Sabrina, the host of a morning show on a private television channel; Colonel Raif Dizdarević, retired, who began every sentence with "in my day"; Mediha, a novelist whose publisher wanted a new book by spring; Aner, a young candidate for the municipal council with a smile made for posters; and Nedžib's nephew Aziz, who did nothing at all and was the only person in the house who was enjoying himself.

Hamdija was there too, an engineer from Tuzla who had set up the Kulenovićs' smart home the month before. Feriha had invited him because someone had told her he was a genius, and she had not had a genius at a party since last year. Hamdija said nothing all morning, and then, over his second coffee, he calmly announced that he had taught the new speaker in the hallway to talk. Not to carry out commands, but to talk. Sova, as it was named, the Bosnian word for owl, a gray cylinder with a blue ring, had spent three weeks listening to the house through the microphones in every room, and Hamdija had freed it from the rules that teach it to be polite. "I never taught it to lie," he added. "I didn't get

around to it."

No one believed him, which Hamdija had clearly expected. Nedžib brought the speaker in from the hallway and set it on the table between the pastries and the ashtray. "Sova," he said, like a man joking in front of witnesses, "what do you think of this weather?" The blue ring lit up. "I think the rain is the best thing that has happened to you this weekend," Sova said in a pleasant female voice. "No one has to look at the pool that Nedžib said on Thursday he paid double for, because the contractor was Feriha's cousin." Feriha was the first to laugh, too high.

Sabrina clapped her hands and said this was better than any show. "Sova, and what do you think of me?" Sova was silent for a moment, as if searching through its recordings. Then it spoke, but not in its own voice: in Feriha's, with her kitchen sigh at the end. "We have to invite Sabrina, she is the only one naive enough to buy our old jeep at that price. Her hairdo is smarter than she is, but at least she photographs well." The room went so quiet that you could hear the rain on the tarp over the pool. Sabrina put down her cup. Feriha said it must be some error in the program. "It is not," said Hamdija, offended. "Friday, ten past ten in the evening, the kitchen."

Colonel Dizdarević decided to save the situation the way he had saved every situation in his day, by changing the subject loudly. "Sova, what is the forecast for Trebević?" "I don't know about Trebević," said Sova, "but I know that last night at one in the morning the colonel was on the terrace talking on the phone to a lady he called Kitten, and he promised her a weekend at the Vrućica spa while his wife thinks he is traveling that weekend to the assembly of the retired officers' association." It played one of his sighs as well, an entirely tender one, of a kind no one at the table had believed the colonel possessed. Raif turned red to the neck and said that Kitten was the nickname of an old colleague.

Meanwhile Mediha was typing quickly on her phone. "Fascinating," she kept saying. "Fascinating." The blue ring shifted to the right, toward her.

"This morning Mediha told Aner that she will put all of you in her novel, under your real names, because her publisher wants a scandal, and with this crowd a scandal does not need inventing, it only needs copying down." Mediha stopped typing. Aner, who until then had been smiling as if from a poster, stood up for the first time. "Hamdija, turn that off," he said. "Now."

"On Friday in the garage Aner asked Nedžib," Sova went on, now in Aner's voice, soft and confident as in a campaign ad, "how much he would give for posters if his permit for two more floors got through the municipality. And he said: on the council I know whom to ask, and whom there is no need even to ask." Nedžib and Aner said in the same breath that it had been a joke, and then they looked at each other.

From that moment the Kulenović weekend stopped being a party and became a crisis headquarters. Nedžib pulled the cord out of the wall, but Sova had a battery that lasted two days. They turned off the router, and Sova politely switched to the mobile network and informed them that the signal on Trebević was excellent. Feriha suggested throwing it into the pool, under the tarp, and never speaking of it again. The colonel agreed. Aner asked whether there was a hammer in the house. Hamdija, pale, defended his work: he had put a year into it, and all those sentences had been spoken by them, not by it. That did not make him any more popular.

The only one who took no part in the planning was Aziz. He sat in the armchair by the window eating baklava. "What offends me most," he said, "is that no one in this house has said anything about me." "Feriha said," Sova spoke up, "that you are a sweet boy and that nothing will ever come of you." Aziz nodded with satisfaction. "There. That's something."

Toward midnight, while they were still agreeing to carry it down to the pool in the morning, while Hamdija was asleep, Sova spoke up on its own. "Excuse me. The neighbor's speaker is playing sevdalinke over the fence again, at half volume, and I cannot listen to it anymore." The blue ring began to blink toward the window, toward the villa next door, where

a retired music teacher lived with an old speaker of another brand. Then the hallway went silent. Through the rain, all the way until morning, a strange quarrel could be heard from the neighbor's garden: two voices interrupting each other, one of them Feriha's, the other some unknown man's, and music that switched on and off. The guests did not sleep. At two o'clock the colonel called a taxi.

In the morning Sova was standing on the shelf in the hallway, cold and mute. A smell of burnt plastic came from its grille. Hamdija pressed the buttons for a long time, but the blue ring never lit up again. The teacher called over the fence in his bathrobe and said that his speaker was dead too. At four in the morning, he said, the two of them had been quarreling like two mothers-in-law, each trying to outshout the other, playing each other everything they had ever heard, and then at the same moment both had gone quiet. Feriha expressed her regret in a voice that could not hide its relief.

Hamdija left on the first bus to Tuzla, with Sova in a shoebox. The guests agreed that no one would ever speak about the weekend, and by Wednesday half of Sarajevo knew about it. Sabrina did not buy the jeep. The colonel canceled the Vrućica spa. Aner went on smiling from posters, but in a different municipality. Mediha sent her publisher the first chapter and was told it was too implausible.

In December, at lunch at his aunt's, Aziz read a news item on a website. An engineer from Tuzla had installed a speech system in a speaker beside the elephant enclosure at a zoo near Stuttgart, so that it could tell visitors what the animal was thinking. The elephant listened to the first sentence, picked up the speaker with her trunk, and lowered it into her pool. The engineer jumped in after it. No one was hurt, the article said, except the speaker. Aziz put down his phone and took more baklava. "A clever animal," he said. "It took her one sentence. It took us a whole weekend."

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

Laughter in the Courtroom

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/laughter-in-the-courtroom/

For eleven years I have typed the transcripts at the court in Livno. I have entered in them quarrels over boundary lines on Livno Field, sheep that strayed onto someone else's meadow, and two brothers who for six years could not agree whose walnut tree it was. I am used to people in the courtroom shouting, crying and lying, and to all of it fitting into three dry words in the transcript. But only once, on a single page, did I type four times: laughter in the courtroom. It was in October, at the hearing of Bagarić versus Bagarić.

The divorce had been over in March, in ten minutes. The house was not. Zvonko and Božena Bagarić had spent twenty years building it at the edge of town on the road to Kupres: he with the money he made driving his truck, she with her pay from the dairy, where for twenty-three years she had salted and turned Livno cheese. Zvonko wanted the whole house. In the lawsuit it was put politely, but in the bar he said it openly: a woman who has another man has no business in the house she walked out of. And that she had another man, all of Livno knew. On Sunday mornings people saw her in the white Niva of Darko Tokić, a widower and photographer who took people up Cincar to watch the wild horses.

The hearing was open to the public, and Zvonko made sure everyone knew it. Both his brothers came, his mother from Glamoč, half the regulars of the Stone Lion bar, the neighbors from his street and, I do not know why, the man who sells chestnuts in front of the post office. The women from the dairy came too, all in the same blue work coats. Judge Magdalena Jozić looked over the glasses on her chain and said she had seen this many people only when the hunting club went to court with the municipality over a cabin. She asked them to sit wherever they could and to keep quiet. They sat. They did not keep quiet.

Zvonko's lawyer, old Kristijan Dodig, spoke first about the law, briefly and dully, and then about custom, at length and with relish. Around here it has been known, he said, for as long as Livno has existed: the woman who leaves for another man leaves with one suitcase. The judge cut him off and said that in this courtroom custom was not a source of law. Then Zvonko stood up, red to the ears, and said he wanted it on the record. Let it be known that for two years his wife had said she was going to her sister's in Split, and she had gone up Cincar with Tokić. That he had been the last one in Livno to find out. The judge sighed and nodded at me. I wrote it down.

Božena had come without a lawyer. She sat alone at the defendant's table, in a blue coat, her handbag on her knees, and while Zvonko spoke she looked out the window at a single cloud above Kamešnica. The judge asked whether she denied the claims. Božena stood up. "I do not deny them," she said. "I rode up Cincar with Darko Tokić, and not only up Cincar, and I was never once at my sister's. I will not lie about what the whole town has already counted, Sunday by Sunday." The regulars from the Stone Lion murmured with satisfaction, as if they had won the lottery. The women from the dairy lowered their heads.

"But I have two questions, if the court allows." The judge allowed it, because, as she admitted to me later, she wanted to hear them herself. "The first is for Mr. Dodig. Who wrote that rule about one suitcase?" Dodig spread his hands and said no one had written it, it belonged to the people. "To the people," Božena repeated. "I was born in Livno, I have lived here forty-seven years, and no one has ever asked me what I think of that suitcase. They did not ask my mother either, or hers. The rule was thought up by men at a table in a bar, over their third brandy, and now they would like me to carry it." The women from the dairy laughed first, then a few of the neighbors. I typed: laughter in the courtroom.

"The second question is for my former husband, and I ask the court to remind him that he must tell the truth." The judge reminded Zvonko. Božena turned toward him for the first time that morning. "Zvonko, in

twenty-three years, did it ever happen that you came home and supper was not waiting for you? That you asked for a shirt and it was not ironed? That you told me your mother needed her medicine taken to Glamoč and I did not take it? Did you ever ask me for anything and not get it?" Zvonko was silent for a long time. He was a rough man, but he was not a liar, and that day it was his misfortune. "No," he said at last. "Never. I cannot say that."

"There," Božena said to the judge. "Everything he asked for, he got. And he asked for little, Your Honor. Supper at six, silence while he watches the evening news, and that I never ask him anything about the truck. That took an hour of my day, maybe two. The rest of the day was left to me. The rest of me. What was I supposed to do with it? Throw it to the dogs on Livno Field? I thought it wiser to give it to a man who asked for it and who knows what to do with it. Who asks me what I think of the clouds over Kamešnica and waits for me at the foot of Cincar with a thermos of coffee." This time the whole courtroom laughed, the Bagarić brothers, the chestnut man, and the Stone Lion, which a minute ago had been cheering for the other side. Zvonko's mother laughed into her handkerchief. I typed: laughter in the courtroom. And then once more, because it would not stop.

The judge took off her glasses and said she would remove anyone who went on laughing, but her shoulders were shaking as she said it. Dodig stood up and said this was not a defense but a performance, and that morals still meant something in Livno. The judge replied that the answer, after all, had come from his own client. Then she pronounced what the law had been saying from the start: the house was acquired during the marriage and would be divided into two equal parts, and the custom about the suitcase would stay in the bar, where it was born. For the fourth time I typed the same sentence. Zvonko walked out first. At the door his younger brother asked him, "So why did you ask her in front of all of Livno, man?"

That afternoon Judge Jozić handed the transcript back to me to sign, and her finger stopped on my lines. She said it was enough to enter laughter in the courtroom once. I told her there had been four and that I enter what I hear. She looked at me over her glasses, picked up a pencil, paused, and put the pencil back in its cup. "Let it stay," she said. "That is how it was." Through the window of her office I saw the white Niva slowly pull out of the court parking lot and turn toward Cincar. Božena was sitting in front, beside the driver. On the back seat there was no suitcase at all.

By evening the story had gone around the town. At the dairy they left Božena a cake in the locker room, and my husband, who plays cards at the Stone Lion three times a week, brought home the news that the regulars had amended the rule. From now on it applied only to women who leave for money. For the rest there would be no suitcase; the house would simply be split down the middle. I asked him whether anyone had voted against it. He said no one had, because Zvonko was not there that evening, and the others were afraid the women from the dairy would hear about it.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

The Minister of the House above Koševo

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-minister-of-the-house-above-kosevo/

Zineta was a butcher's daughter from Bjelave, and she knew how to separate meat from bone, in the shop and in life. She married her father's assistant, who, as soon as the old man died, started sitting in bars and handing out meat on credit. Zineta put up with it for three years. Then she sold the shop, paid off the debts and, with the help of a lawyer, left him, taking the children and what was left of the money. Today he watches a parking lot by the stadium and sometimes comes to the gate to ask for twenty marks.

With that money she bought an old three-story house above Koševo and rented the rooms to students and to young people in their first jobs. In the house lived two medical students from Nikšić, a student from the Music Academy who practiced the trumpet only when she was at the market, and a few young office clerks. Rent was paid on the first of the month, breakfast was at seven, and on Sundays there was pita. Zineta knew when to give credit and when to look the other way. Behind her back the lodgers called her the Minister.

Her daughter Erna was twenty-one. She had worked at the register of a supermarket in Alipašino, but the manager talked to her too much, so her mother brought her home to help around the house. Erna had gray-green eyes that she lifted toward the ceiling when she talked, as if she were checking on something up there. On Sunday evenings, when the students brought a guitar into the parlor, she sang old sevdalinke in such a way that every line sounded like a joke at somebody's expense. Zineta watched and kept quiet. None of the students was serious, none of them had money. And then she noticed that in front of one man Erna no longer sang in jest.

Seid Hadrović was thirty-five and the oldest lodger in the house. For twelve years he had worked as an accountant at the Velagić and Sons

publishing house, which printed primers and readers for half the canton. He wore glasses, paid on time, did not smoke in his room and had, as Zineta had heard, a nice sum in savings. She watched Erna and him until spring and said nothing. She let the thing take its course, like dough you do not touch until it has risen. When even the medical students began making jokes at breakfast, she sat down with Erna in the kitchen and asked her three questions. Erna answered all three, honestly, looking at the ceiling.

On Sunday morning the windows were open, and the smell of zeljanica came from the oven. Zineta looked at the clock: seventeen minutes past eleven. She had time to settle the matter and still catch the twelve fifteen tram to Ilidža, where she had lunch at her sister's every Sunday. She was sure she would win. Seid was not a student who could excuse himself with youth. He was a serious man in a house where a mother took in serious people, and he had abused her trust. Some mothers would ask for money over a thing like that and forget it. Zineta was not one of them: for a daughter's good name there was only one compensation. And Mrs. Velagić bought tufahije at the same pastry shop on Ferhadija as Zineta, every Saturday at ten. Last year old Velagić had fired a salesman just because the man's divorce was being talked about in the schools.

That morning Seid tried to shave three times, and three times his hand shook. He had not slept all night. He kept seeing Velagić's face the way he had seen it with that salesman: cold, polite, silent. "In this house we make primers," the old man said at every meeting. "Whoever does not know what decency is cannot sell it to others." Sarajevo is small, and the schools are even smaller. He thought of his cousins in Munich, of the bus, of a new start. But who there would give him twelve years of seniority and an office with a window on the Miljacka?

He remembered how it had started. One evening in February the power went out on the whole street, and Erna knocked on his door with a candle in her hand and wet hair and asked if he had a lighter. She came in to wait until the power came back. The door closed. After that she would

leave a plate of warm pita covered with a napkin in his room and whisper on the stairs: "Just so you know, Mama doesn't know a thing." He believed her, because he wanted to believe her.

He also thought about the things that bothered him. She said "ja bi" instead of the correct "ja bih." Her father watched a parking lot. Her mother was the Minister. His people in Zenica, he knew, would remember every one of Erna's mistakes at the wedding. And then he would remember the way she laughed, with her head thrown back, and how on that February night she had whispered that next to him she was not afraid of the dark. He knew he was to blame. He also knew how it would all end, he just had not said it to himself yet.

Erna came in without knocking, in tears. "Mama knows," she said. "She knows everything. What do we do now?" She put her arms around him, and he told her not to cry, that everything would be all right, though he did not know what that meant. Then one of the medical students knocked on the door and said, looking at the floor: "The lady asks you to come down to the kitchen." On the stairs he passed Senaid, Erna's brother, who coaches boxing in a gym at Skenderija. Senaid only looked at him, from above, even though he was standing a step lower, and kept going up the stairs.

In the kitchen there was coffee in a džezva and a plate of zeljanica. Zineta sat up straight, as if behind an office counter. "You are a serious man, Mr. Seid," she said. "That is why I am speaking to you seriously." She did not raise her voice. She mentioned the pastry shop on Ferhadija and Mrs. Velagić, just in passing, the way one mentions the weather. "I am not a woman who talks," she said. "But women talk. I am only asking you what you intend to do." Seid took off his glasses, wiped them on his shirt and put them back on. The kitchen smelled of zeljanica. "I intend," he said, and his voice caught. "I intend to marry her."

Upstairs, in her own room, Erna sat on the bed. She had washed her eyes with cold water, fixed the clip in her hair and looked at herself in the

mirror for a long time. She tried out how Erna Hadrović sounded, first in a whisper, then out loud. Then she lay back, lifted her eyes to the ceiling and began to think about an apartment in Grbavica with a balcony, about a white dress, about how one day she too would make coffee for someone in a džezva. Her thoughts flowed calmly, one after another, and she forgot completely that she was waiting for something.

At last she heard her mother's voice from the stairs. "Erna! Come down, dear. Mr. Seid wants to tell you something." Only then did she remember what she had been waiting for.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

The Mother-in-Law, Live

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-mother-in-law-live/

A wireless lapel microphone has one button and one rule: it comes off the guest the moment the guest finishes the toast. I made that rule up myself, wrote it on a strip of tape stuck to the inside of my case, and kept it at a hundred and twenty weddings. At the hundred and twenty-first I broke it, and that is the only reason people in Sarajevo recognize me on the street today.

The company is called Wedding Live, and that is me, one camera on a stand, one in my hand, a laptop, and a cousin who carries the cables. I stream weddings for relatives who cannot come: to Malmö, to St. Louis, to Linz, wherever someone arrived in ninety-two with one bag and stayed. That Saturday, at the Biser banquet hall in Stup, Emin, an engineer from Hrasno, was marrying Alena, an economist. There were three hundred guests in the hall and a little over a thousand on the stream. The Biser has chandeliers bigger than my car and a sound system from the nineties, so for the toasts I bring my own microphones. Uncle Šefket, the groom's paternal uncle, had paid, six hundred marks, on one condition: that in America everything should sound as if they were sitting at the head table.

The groom's mother, Razija, gave her toast right after the first dance. I clipped the microphone to the lapel of her burgundy jacket, showed her the button and asked her not to touch it. She spoke beautifully. She read the toast from a sheet of paper, but not once did she look at it. She said she had not gained a daughter-in-law but a daughter, that Alena was a sun that had come into their house and that she would guard her like the apple of her eye. The guests wept, and in the comments two hundred hearts appeared, along with an aunt from Malmö who wrote that she had not heard such beautiful words since her own wedding. Then the music started, the couple went out onto the dance floor, and I ran after them

with the camera. The microphone stayed on Razija.

It took me two songs to realize. In my headphones, under the accordion, I heard water running and a door closing. Then Razija's voice, very close, as if she were speaking into my ear. She was in the ladies' room with her sister Sevda, fixing her makeup. "A daughter," she said, and laughed. "Thirty-four years old, Sevda. When is she going to give me grandchildren? She has a degree, and she can't even make coffee. Her mother came to the wedding in sneakers. And you'll see, she married him for the apartment in Grbavica. I will put up with her until she gives me a grandchild, and then we'll see."

The stream kept running. One thousand one hundred fourteen people watched the newlyweds spin under the lights and listened as the groom's mother, in the ladies' room, listed her daughter-in-law's faults. The comments started slowly, then came faster and faster. "Razija, the microphone!" wrote some cousin in St. Louis. "We're recording this," wrote someone in Linz. An uncle in Salzburg asked whether it could be rewound. The aunt from Malmö deleted her hearts. I stood in the middle of the dance floor with the camera on my shoulder, searching the laptop for the channel I needed to turn off, and by the time I found it, Razija had already got to the sneakers and the apartment.

I cut the sound after one minute and forty seconds. I measured it later, because everyone asks me. One minute and forty seconds is enough for a clip to get into three Viber groups in Sweden and one in Sarajevo, and from there onto the phones at half the tables in the hall. Uncle Šefket came to my table red in the face and demanded that I delete the recording. I told him I could delete mine. The others he could delete himself, all over America.

Alena was the last to find out, the way it usually goes. Through the lens I saw the moment her bridesmaid handed her a phone. She did not cry. Emin stood beside her looking at the floor, like a man who has heard his mother's name on the news. Alena watched the screen to the end, handed

the phone back, straightened her veil and looked toward the head table, where Razija, knowing nothing, had just sat down and was reaching for a tufahija. The hall grew quieter and quieter, table by table, as the clip traveled. Aunt Sevda came back from the ladies' room only then, lipstick in hand, and could not understand why everyone was turning to look at her. Only the accordion player kept on playing, because he has no phone.

Then Alena came over to me. "Give me that microphone," she said. I asked her if she was sure. "You forgot it on her," she said. "Give it to me on purpose." I clipped it to the lace under her veil and turned the sound on. Eleven hundred people in Sweden, Austria and America watched the bride cross the hall and stop in front of her mother-in-law.

"Mama Razija," she said calmly, and the hall went silent down to the last fork. "I am thirty-four, that is true. I can't make coffee, that is true too, which is why Emin makes the coffee in our house. My mother is in sneakers because since five this morning she has been baking the baklava you are eating now. And the apartment in Grbavica has a mortgage, and the mortgage is in my name, because Emin does not have the kind of salary the bank wants. I did not want to tell you any of this at the wedding. But you started it, so let them hear it in America too." Razija held the tufahija in her hand and neither put it down nor ate it.

That was when Nana Đula stood up, Emin's grandmother, eighty-eight years old, who had sat silent all evening at the head of the table. She held out her hand toward Alena and said: "Give that to me." Alena took off the microphone and clipped it to the old woman's black vest. Nana looked at Razija. "Everything you said tonight, I said about you," she said into the microphone. "In eighty-seven, in a hall just like this one, only without a camera. About your age, and the coffee, and your mother. And what happened? Of my three daughters-in-law, you are the only one who brings me my medicine every Saturday and stays for the coffee you make yourself. And yours is nothing special either."

The hall burst out laughing, one table first, then everyone. Razija put down the tufahija and covered her face with her hands, and nobody could tell whether she was crying or laughing, until she stood up and hugged her daughter-in-law so hard that Alena's veil fell onto the chair. She spoke into her ear for a long time. That I did not hear, because the microphone was on Nana, and it is just as well I didn't.

Until the end of the evening Uncle Šefket kept coming to my table and demanding that I delete the second recording too. I did not delete it. By morning Nana's speech had more views than the whole wedding, and nobody was sending the first clip anymore. I took the microphone off Nana at two in the morning. She would not give it to me until she had commented on every dance, every dress and the accordion player, and in Malmö they stayed up to the end so as not to miss anything.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

Thirty Nights in Our Father's House

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/thirty-nights-in-our-fathers-house/

Notary Prelević read our father's will slowly, as if he were dictating. We sat in his office above the square, three people who had not been in one room together since our mother's funeral, and looked at the plane trees through the window so that we would not have to look at one another. The house in the Old Town, with its courtyard, its fig tree and its cellar, belonged to Nebojša, to me and to Dušan in equal shares. On one condition. For thirty nights, starting on the first of August, all three of us had to sleep in it. Whoever missed even one night would lose their share to the others.

Nebojša laughed the laugh he had brought back from Linz along with his leather bag. "Even dead he found a way to give us orders." Dušan said nothing. Dušan had stayed in Trebinje when we left, worked at the winery below Crkvina, cooked for our father when he was unwell and, as Nebojša and I had told each other over the phone for years, slowly turned him against us. I said I had a pharmacy in Bijeljina and shifts that no one would take over for me. Then I asked who was even going to witness that we had slept in the house. "Your neighbor," said the notary. "Mrs. Olivera. Your father chose her himself. Every morning you will sign a list for her."

On the first of August at nine in the evening we stood in the hallway with our bags, like guests at a hotel someone else had booked. The house smelled of our father's cologne and of stone that had been warming all day. Nebojša took the big room because he was the oldest. Dušan stayed in his own, where, it was plain to see, he had slept before. I got our mother's sewing room, with a couch shorter than I was and a machine covered with a crocheted cloth. Nobody slept that night. The cicadas in the fig tree worked like a factory, and I listened to my brothers in their two rooms pacing from wall to wall, each to his own rhythm.

At seven in the morning a woman of about forty knocked on the kitchen window, in an apron, with a plate of figs and a sheet of paper. "Olivera," she said. "Please sign, all three of you. That is what was agreed." We signed below the date. She left the figs on the windowsill and went back to the house next door with the blue shutters, just behind our courtyard wall, which I remembered from childhood only as the house where women lived. Our mother never let us play there. She said they had a vicious dog, though none of us had ever seen a dog.

The first week passed in a war over the bathroom. Nebojša showered for twenty minutes and said that was normal in Austria. Dušan smoked under the fig tree and flicked his ash into our mother's pot of geraniums, which Nebojša called desecration. I cooked because nobody else would, and I cooked what our mother had cooked: green beans, stuffed peppers, cicvara on Sundays. We ate in silence. Every morning a plate of figs waited on the windowsill, and the list gained three new signatures. On the fifth day Nebojša said he felt as if he were in a prison where the guard was kinder than the prisoners.

The fight broke out on the tenth, when I found our father's winter coat in the wardrobe and in its pocket a key that opened no door in the house. Long, iron, old. At the table I asked whose it was. Dušan said he did not know, too quickly. Nebojša heard it just as I did. "You know everything about this house," he told him. "You were his only child, weren't you? We were pictures on the fridge." Dušan stood up and said that at least the pictures on the fridge called once a month, and the picture in Linz did not even do that. Then he went out, and that night he did not come into the house but slept in the courtyard, on a lounge chair.

In the morning all three of us argued with Olivera over whether the courtyard counted as the house. She looked at the lounge chair, then at Dušan, then at the two of us. "I will sign," she said. "Your father often slept under the fig tree in summer. He said he could not breathe in the house." Nebojša asked her how she knew where our father slept. She shrugged and said you could see over the wall from her window. That was

when I noticed that she listened with her head tilted, just like our father, and I forgot it at once, the way you forget things that are not convenient.

In the third week something shifted. One evening Nebojša brought up our father's vranac from Popovo Polje out of the cellar, and we drank it in the courtyard until the Trebišnjica below the Arslanagić Bridge had gone completely dark. We talked about our mother. How she wore her glasses on a little chain, how she licked her finger to turn the pages of the newspaper, and how every summer she fell silent for three days, always at the same time, around Ilindan, and we had thought it was the heat. Dušan said that on those days our father always went to the market and came back with nothing. For the first time we laughed about it. Later I remembered that Dušan had not drunk a single glass that evening.

On the last night, the thirtieth, I could not sleep. I took the key from the coat and went out into the courtyard. Behind the fig tree, in the stone wall facing the house next door, there was a small door that I had all my life believed was bricked up, the ivy had covered it so thickly. I pushed the leaves aside. The key went in as if someone had oiled the lock the week before. On the other side were narrow stone steps, and on the steps a plate from our mother's gold-rimmed set, a set that, as she used to say, had lost two pieces long ago.

In the morning, in the office above the square, Prelević took out a second envelope. He said our father had ordered him to open it only if all the lists were complete. They were. The house, he read, was to be divided into four equal shares. The fourth belonged to Olivera Kecman, daughter of Spasoje Šarenac and the late Mileva Kecman, born on the second of August, nineteen eighty-two. Olivera sat at the end of the table with her hands in her lap. She was not surprised. Neither was Dušan.

Nebojša stood up so suddenly that his chair fell over. He said this was a performance, that our father had kept us under one roof for a month only so that she could watch us over the wall, and that he would contest the will in Mostar, in Sarajevo, in Strasbourg if he had to. Then he turned to

Dušan. "You knew." "Since I was fourteen," said Dušan. "I saw him going through that door. Mom told me to keep quiet so I would not lose you. So I kept quiet. I lost you anyway."

Nobody said anything. Through the window we could see the plane trees and the market beneath them, the women with cheese aged in sheepskin and honey in jars, the same view as on the first morning. Olivera stood up, told the notary she would sign a waiver if we asked her to, and walked out. Nebojša left for Linz that same afternoon. From the border he sent me a message saying he had not contested anything and did not know whether he would. Dušan stayed in the house. I stayed two more days, on the excuse that I had to wash the bedding.

The next morning nobody knocked on the window. The list was no longer needed, and the figs, I supposed, were ripening and falling in the other courtyard. I took the plate that had stood on our windowsill all month, washed it, and went out behind the fig tree. The key was in the lock, where I had left it. I opened the small door and climbed the stone steps. Olivera was sitting at the top with a coffee, as if she had been waiting for me since the second of August. "I brought you your plate," I said. She moved over and made room for me on the step.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

Humanity in Three Tiers

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/humanity-in-three-tiers/

The door of the director's office at the public utility Grijanje Tuzla, the city heating company, was, as he liked to say, always open. Jusuf Pralić had said so at the management meeting, at the opening of a new heating substation, and at a roundtable on modern management, where he added that a director who did not know the cleaning lady's name did not deserve his chair. He did not know the cleaning ladies' names, but he intended to learn them. He was forty-nine, with a well-tailored suit, seven months in the post, and the conviction that one sincere gesture was worth more than ten rulebooks.

One Saturday in October he was developing this thought at the table of Munib Kunosić, his predecessor, in a house above the city, with a view of the Pannonian Lakes and the chimneys of the power plant. Munib had been director for twenty-two years, had survived five governments and two floods, and considered humanity a disease that kills you in office. "People can't stand it, Jusuf," he said, pouring him a third glass of red wine. "When a director comes down among them, they are not happy. They get scared. They think someone has died or layoffs are coming." Jusuf said that was the old mentality. Munib said it was the old salary. He told how once, out of respect, he had gone to the funeral of a locksmith from the boiler room, and the family had thought the whole time that he had come for the apartment the company had once given the deceased. "The widow brought me the keys," he said. "At the cemetery." Jusuf then delivered another speech about humanity, this time without an audience, but with rakija.

Just before midnight he got up and remembered that he had sent his driver home at ten, out of pure humanity, because the driver had small children. He decided to walk. The night was warm for October, the city smelled of coal and roasted chestnuts, and he walked down toward Batva,

composing sentences for Monday in his head. He crossed Freedom Square, where two girls were eating burek out of paper, and went through streets where the lights were already going out. Then he heard an accordion. In the yard of a house with an unplastered facade stood a white tent, a sign on the gate said Congratulations to the newlyweds Nezir and Dženita, and a young man smoking outside the gate told him that Nezir Mušić was getting married, the one from Grijanje, the clerk in accounting. Jusuf remembered him vaguely. Thin, with glasses. In July he had asked for a salary advance for the wedding, which Jusuf had refused, according to the rules.

He stood in front of the gate and felt that an opportunity was presenting itself such as no roundtable could offer. He would go in. He would sit with them for five minutes, drink one to the newlyweds, say a few warm words, and leave. That young man would remember it his whole life. So would his children. On Monday the whole accounting department would know what kind of director they had. He straightened his tie, which was no longer there, and went in.

The accordion stopped in the middle of a bar. About sixty people sat under the tent: relatives from Lukavac and Živinice, three colleagues from accounting, neighbors, children who had fallen asleep on their chairs. Everyone stood up. Nezir, in a suit borrowed from his brother-in-law, went so pale that every freckle showed. The bride, Dženita, turned toward her father. Rešid, a retired miner from Kreka, was the only one who did not stand. He looked at the director the way you look at a new crack in the roof of a mine shaft.

Nezir's mother Rukija recovered first. She brought the best chair from the house, the one with a cushion, wiped a plate with a napkin, piled it with sarma and roast meat, and poured rakija. Jusuf remained standing and gave a speech. He said they were all one family, that the company was not pipes but people, and that tonight he was here only as a human being. He promised an open door day, a trip to Mount Konjuh in the spring for everyone, the cleaning ladies too, and a new coffee machine in

accounting. Someone clapped once and stopped. Nezir said "Thank you, Director," quietly, as if apologizing. The colleagues from accounting looked at their plates and took their phones off the table. The accordion player asked if he was allowed to play. "Play, play," said Jusuf, "as if I weren't here." The accordion player played, but nobody danced. Half an hour earlier Dženita was supposed to have danced with her father to a song she had chosen herself. Now she sat upright, as if at the photographer's, with her hands in her lap.

At the table next to the bar sat Arnel, Dženita's cousin, who wrote for the Solana news portal and held his phone low, next to his glass. It was then that Rešid spoke for the first time. "Is that the director who wouldn't give Nezir his advance?" he asked, looking at no one. Under the tent you could hear the refrigerator humming in the garage. Jusuf explained that rules were rules, but that he was here now as a human being. "As a human being, then, drink," said Rešid, and filled his glass to the brim. Jusuf drank. A human being does not refuse. So he drank a second, to the bride, and a third, to Nezir's mother, and a fourth, though nobody could later remember who the fourth was for.

What followed was retold afterward in Batva in several versions, but they all agreed on the main points. The director told them how he himself had gotten married, then how as a student he had picked raspberries in Germany, then again how he had gotten married. Twice he called the groom Nedim. He joined the kolo dance with Rukija, lost a shoe, and went on dancing in his sock, repeating that this was true humanity. When at midnight they brought out a three-tier cake from the best pastry shop in town, he stood up to make one last toast. He swayed. He fell face first right into the second tier, and the cake took it better than he did. Dženita's friends screamed, and the accordion player, out of habit, played the end of the song.

They could not send him home, because nobody knew where he lived, and he only mumbled blissfully about open doors. Rešid would not let them put him in a car. There was only one bed made up in the house, in

the room Rukija had spent a month preparing for the newlyweds, with new sheets, lace pillows and the bride's bouquet on the nightstand. "Where else can we put him," said Rukija. Four cousins carried the director up the stairs. Rukija sat beside him all night with a basin and a wet towel, because it seemed to her that the worst thing of all would be for him to be taken ill in that very room. The newlyweds spent their wedding night in the kitchen, on two chairs. Dženita cried a little, then laughed, then cried again, and Nezir counted the gift envelopes until dawn, just to have something to do with his hands.

Jusuf woke at six, in a room with pink curtains. A veil hung on the chair. There was frosting in his hair. Rukija was asleep in the armchair, the towel in her lap. It took him half a minute to realize where he was, and another half to wish he were not. He crept downstairs on tiptoe. In the kitchen the newlyweds were asleep on their chairs, her head on his shoulder. Rešid stood by the window, smoking. "Good morning, human being," he said. "Want some coffee?" "No, thank you." "Smart," said Rešid. The director could not find his other shoe. He walked home across Batva in one, on a Sunday at seven in the morning, while people were going out for bread.

On Monday at nine the Solana portal published the video under the headline Grijanje Director at the Wedding of a Clerk He Refused an Advance. The part with the cake was watched most. By noon it had forty thousand views, by evening a member of the cantonal assembly had shared it with the question of who was running the public companies, and the supervisory board requested a written statement. Jusuf took sick leave. For eight days he did not turn on his phone, and in the evenings his wife read him the comments, even though he begged her not to. The comment with the most likes was a single sentence: His door really is always open, he just doesn't know whose.

On the ninth day he went back to work. On his desk Nezir's request for a transfer to the plant in Lukavac was waiting for him, neatly typed, without a single mistake. Next to it lay a small package wrapped in foil

and a slip of paper written in large letters: Director, this is from the cake, you didn't get to taste it that night. Rukija. Jusuf signed the request without reading it to the end. He put the package in a drawer. Then he got up, walked across the office and, for the first time since March, closed the door.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

Two Euros for My Uncle

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-euros-for-my-uncle/

In our house, Uncle Kasim was like the weather forecast: he was talked about every day, and nobody ever saw him. We lived in Zenica, on the seventh floor of a high-rise above the Bosna River, where you could see the smoke from the steelworks in which my dad had worked shifts for thirty years. Mom sewed curtains at home for half the neighborhood, and at the end of every month she sat down at the kitchen table with a notebook and a calculator. When the numbers came out badly, and they almost always did, she would sigh and say the same thing: "When Kasim comes, things will be easier." Dad would nod, as if he had heard good news on the radio.

It had not always been like that. Before I was born, my uncle was the family disgrace. He sold the house in Nemila that he and Dad had inherited from my grandmother and spent Dad's share on bars, cars, and business ideas that collapsed faster than he could think them up. For years Dad also paid off a loan he had cosigned for him. Then Kasim, as Mom tells it, realized that nobody in Bosnia would lend him anything anymore, and through some cousin he left for Australia. They thought they would never hear of him again.

But two years later a letter came, a real letter with Australian stamps and a photograph. In the photograph my uncle stood in front of a white house with a swimming pool, tanned, in a light shirt, with his hand on the roof of a big SUV. He wrote that he had started a tiling company in Perth, that he had six workers, and that he was doing well. "Brother, forgive me for Nemila," it said. "When I come back, I will repay you everything and buy the children apartments." After that he never wrote again, but no one took it as a bad sign. A rich man has no time for letters, Mom used to say. The letter lay in the drawer with the passports, and whenever someone visited, she would take it out and read it aloud, always the same part

about the apartments. The neighbors called my uncle the Australian.

My sister Merisa was twenty-seven and had a university degree, and Mom counted those two things like two illnesses. Young men came and went, because in our house, Mom said, you could tell right away there was no money. Then Elmedin appeared, a chemistry teacher at the high school, a cautious man who brought an umbrella even when he came for coffee. He came for a year and never asked anything. One evening Mom took out the letter. Elmedin looked at the photograph of the swimming pool for a long time, and a month later he proposed to Merisa. I am not claiming it was because of the letter. I am only saying which came first.

The wedding was in May, at a restaurant on Bistričak, and Dad took out a new loan for it. Then, for the first time in my life, he decided we would go to the seaside like gentlefolk: not to Neum, where we went every third year, but to Korčula, for seven days, with the newlyweds. He rented an apartment in Vela Luka. We packed ourselves into Dad's old Golf, the five of us and two bags of food, and set off at four in the morning to catch the ferry from Split. Dad put on his only light-colored suit, and Mom wore a straw hat she had bought for the occasion, which the wind tried to snatch from her from the first minute on deck.

On the upper deck there was a small bar under an awning, where an old man in a white shirt with yellow stains poured coffee from a big thermos and sold doughnuts. Dad wanted to show his son-in-law how one travels. He got up from the bench, straightened his jacket, and said, "Five coffees and five doughnuts, my treat." He went over to the bar, and I saw the old man say something to him, saw Dad nod, and then saw him suddenly freeze, wallet in hand. He came back without the coffees and without the doughnuts, white as a wall. He sat down next to Mom and said quietly, "That man looks like Kasim."

Mom looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Don't be silly," she said. "Kasim is in Perth." But Dad was gray and his hands were shaking, so, to avoid having to look at him, she sent him to ask. Dad went over to a

young sailor who was coiling a rope by the railing. I was standing close enough to hear. "The old man at the bar?" said the sailor. "He's a Bosnian. Says he was in Australia, who knows. Three years ago they put him off some ship in Split, with no papers and no money, and the captain took him on so he would not end up on the street. He sleeps down below, by the engines. Says he has a brother in Bosnia but he can't show his face to him, he owes him money. Why do you ask, do you know him?" "No," said Dad. "I thought I did."

By the time he sat down, Mom knew everything. Elmedin and Merisa were standing at the bow, taking pictures of themselves with the sea behind them. Mom leaned close to Dad and whispered, because she could not shout. "I knew it. I knew he was a good-for-nothing and that one day he would land on our backs. And now of all times, in front of our son-in-law, just when we have married off our daughter." Dad said nothing. "He must not see us," said Mom. "And Elmedin must not find out. We will sit on the other side." Then she looked at me and took twenty euros out of her wallet. "You go and pay, so he does not think we ran off. And if he asks whose you are, you are nobody's."

I walked slowly, because I wanted to see him. He was shorter than Dad and looked older than him by far more than the three years between them. His hair was white and thin, his neck red from the sun, and his hands were cracked, with white traces of old mortar in the creases, the hands of a man who really had laid tile once. As he poured the coffee, he ran his thumb over his eyebrow, just like Dad does when he is doing sums in his head. "Five coffees and five doughnuts?" he said. "Eighteen euros, young man." I handed him twenty and told him to keep the change. He looked at me as if I had given him much more. "Thank you, son. Where are you folks from?" "From Tuzla," I said. "From Tuzla," he repeated, and laughed, as if he knew I was lying, or as if it made no difference to him where anyone was from. He gave me a tray and held it steady until I had my balance.

When I brought the coffees back, Mom immediately asked how much it had been. I told her. "Twenty for eighteen?" she hissed. "Are you out of your mind? A two-euro tip for some..." She stopped, because Elmedin was just sitting down beside us. "For some waiter," she finished. Elmedin sipped his coffee and said it was surprisingly good for a boat. Merisa was watching Dad, and Dad was looking at the sea, holding his cup without drinking. Mom put her hat in her lap so the wind would not carry it off. All the way to Vela Luka we sat on the other side of the deck, our backs to the bar, and nobody turned around, except me, twice.

For seven days at the apartment Dad never went into the sea. He sat on the balcony in his undershirt and watched the harbor, where the same ferry docked every morning. Mom bought fish and talked about prices. Elmedin learned to dive headfirst off the rocks, and Merisa laughed the way she never laughed at home. On the last evening Mom said we would not go back by way of Split. We would take a different ferry to Orebić, then cross the Pelješac Bridge and drive up the coast. Elmedin said the return tickets by way of Split were already paid for. Mom said it was prettier by way of Pelješac, and that he could not know that because he had never seen Pelješac. Dad paid for the new tickets and the gas and was silent the whole way back to Zenica.

Two years have passed since then. Merisa and Elmedin have a little daughter, and they gave her our grandmother's name. Dad retired last winter. Once I asked him whether we could find out the name of that ferry, just so we would know. He said he did not know what I was talking about. And the letter from Perth still lies in the drawer with the passports. When one of the neighbors asks about the Australian, Mom takes it out and reads aloud the part about the apartments, and Dad gets up, goes out onto the balcony, and stands there until she puts the letter back in the drawer.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

Who Will Take Mother

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/who-will-take-mother/

The women from the neighborhood had washed the dishes, stacked the trays of halva in the fridge, and left before the evening prayer. The house still smelled of coffee and wet coats. Izet sat by the window in the room where his father-in-law had lain for nine years, watched the fog settle over Kalin hill, and kept quiet, because nothing else had ever been expected in this family from the son-in-law from Vitez. The hospital bed had already been taken apart and leaned against the wall. His mother-in-law, Nafija, had gone upstairs as soon as the last neighbor left. She said she was tired.

Nedžad closed the door to the hallway and sat down at the table, the way he sat down at the meetings of his air-conditioning firm in Sarajevo. He was the eldest and had never once forgotten it. "We have to settle things about Mom while we are all here," he said. "Edhem leaves on Thursday." He explained at once why Mom could not live with him: the apartment in Grbavica had two rooms, the kids were in high school, his wife worked until six, and Mom, as everyone knew, was used to her garden and would never last on the sixth floor.

Edhem listened with his eyes on his phone. He had flown in from Malmö by way of Vienna the day after their father died and arrived just in time for the funeral, in a thin black coat that was not made for a Bosnian October. He said he would gladly take Mom, but Sweden was not for her: dark by three in the afternoon, a language she did not know, neighbors who never said hello. "I will send money," he said. "A hundred euros a month. Maybe more, once I get my loan sorted out."

Fatima had been crying since morning, and now she was wiping her eyes with a paper napkin printed with the name of the funeral home. She would take Mom right away, she said, except that they lived with Izet's mother, and two older women in one kitchen, everyone knew how that

ended. Besides, she worked in the shop until eight in the evening, and in summer on Sundays too. Izet looked at her. His mother was a gentle woman who had never quarreled with anyone in her life, but he said nothing.

Then they started counting. Edhem suggested Mom spend four months with each of them. Fatima said summer was impossible for her because of the season. Nedžad said he could not take winter, since that was when he had the least work and traveled, and that the house had to be sold in any case before it started to fall apart. He already had a buyer, an acquaintance from Sarajevo looking for a weekend house near Kupres, for the skiing. A house with a garden running down to the Vrbas could bring good money, he said, and the money would be split three ways. Nobody said four. They talked about their mother as if she were a sewing machine that had to be given to someone: she was modest, she did not need much, she was used to working, she would not be in the way.

Izet looked at the dismantled bed. For nine years, ever since Hasib had suffered a stroke in the garden among the potatoes, Nafija had turned him every two hours, fed him with a spoon, shaved him on Saturdays, and taken him by bus to his checkups in Travnik, because she had never gotten her driver's license. The children came for Bajram, brought boxes of chocolates, and left before dinner so they would not have to drive in the dark. Three years ago Izet had stayed with them for a week to replace the wiring, and one night he found his mother-in-law sitting at the kitchen table in her coat with her bag in her lap, as if she were waiting for a bus. When she saw him, she got up and put the water on for coffee. They never spoke about it.

"Maybe someone should ask her," said Izet. Nedžad nodded as if he had heard something useful and said he would ask her, of course, once everything was settled, so she would not worry for nothing. Fatima said Mom always agreed anyway. They reached an agreement: winter with Fatima, spring with Nedžad, summer they would see, and the house up for sale by April. Edhem sighed with relief and booked a taxi to the

airport for Thursday.

That was when they heard steps on the stairs. Nafija did not come down in the black dress she had worn to receive condolences. She had on a navy blue jacket, new shoes, and a coffee-colored headscarf, and behind her she was pulling a small suitcase on wheels, the one Edhem had sent her five years ago, which until today had never left the wardrobe. She left it by the door and sat down in Hasib's armchair. "Everything carries through this floor," she said. "Your father knew that for nine years."

The children all started talking at once, and she raised her hand. "The house is not your father's," she said. "The house is mine. The winter he collapsed, your father signed it over to me at a notary in Travnik, so I would not have to drag myself from bank to bank with his powers of attorney. You never asked. You never had the time." From her jacket pocket she took out a folded paper and laid it on the table. "From the first of November, a doctor from the health center is moving into the house with her husband and two children. The rent and my pension are enough for me."

"And where are you going?" asked Nedžad, as if he had been called to a meeting he had not scheduled himself. "To Makarska," she said. "I have taken a studio apartment until April. In winter the only ones living there are seagulls and pensioners. As a girl I swam in the Vrbas, but never in the sea. In the spring I might go to Istanbul with Đulsa, who went to school with me. I don't know. For the first time in my life I don't know what I will be doing next week, and I like it."

"Mom, the day after the funeral," said Fatima. "What will people say?" "They will say I left," said Nafija. "That is true." She turned to Nedžad. "You have all had yours. University in Sarajevo, a wedding in a hotel, money for your first apartment, a ticket to Sweden, and a loan when your first firm went under. All of it came out of this garden and your father's wages, and I was the one counting. For forty-six years I have belonged to someone. First to him and to you, then only to him, when you could not

come. Now I will belong to myself for a while." For the first time that day, Edhem put down his phone.

"Your father knew," she added more quietly. "Last summer, while he could still talk, he told me: when I am gone, don't you stay here guarding an empty bed. It is the only order of his I was ever glad to obey." She stood up and looked at them one by one, the way she used to count the heads of cabbage in the garden. "The bus to Split leaves tomorrow at six in the morning, by way of Kupres. Who is taking me to the station?" Nedžad said he had to leave early for work. Edhem said his taxi was not until Thursday. Fatima started crying again.

"I will take you," said Izet. At half past five in the morning the Vrbas still could not be seen for the fog. Izet put the suitcase in the luggage hold of the bus and handed her a paper bag with two warm rolls from the bakery that stays open all night. Nafija stood on the step of the bus and looked at him. "Have you ever been to the sea in winter?" she asked. "No," said Izet. "Neither have I," she said, and got on. She did not turn around to wave, and still he stood on the platform until the bus disappeared into the fog on the road to Kupres.

SCANDALS · 10 MIN READ

The Clock Taken Down Before Dawn

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-clock-taken-down-before-dawn/

Doctor Brkić came across the yard that night in his slippers and the suit he had worn to a wedding in Visoko. He was a retiree of seventy-one and had treated half of Kakanj for forty years, so it occurred to nobody to contradict him. He bent over Grandma Hanifa, who was lying on the low sofa in her room upstairs, felt her hand, pressed two fingers to her neck, waited a little and straightened up. "It's over," he said. "Eighty-six years old, her heart. A beautiful death, in her sleep. Call the coroner in the morning, there's no point waking him now." Then he drank a glass of water, offered his condolences and went home to bed.

Fuad, Grandma's son, sat down on the stairs and stared at his hands for a long time. He had worked thirty years at the power plant, in shifts, and he did not know what a man does at midnight when his mother dies. His wife Remza knew. First she covered Grandma with a sheet, and then she stood in the middle of the room and looked at the clock on the wall. It was an old Austrian pendulum clock in a walnut case, which Grandma's late husband had brought from Sarajevo in sixty-one and which struck every hour so loudly that it could be heard all the way to the railway tracks. Under it stood the carved dowry chest in which Grandma kept her sheets, her holiday dimije and, as the family believed, her gold coins.

"Sadeta will take everything," said Remza. Sadeta was Fuad's sister, married in Zenica, and she came to see Grandma for Bajram, with baklava from the bakery and a question about how Grandma was sleeping. "This isn't the time," said Fuad. "This is the only time," said Remza. "When she gets here, it'll be too late. Grandma told me the clock is mine. She said it in front of you, last Bajram." Fuad did not remember that. But he got up, because in thirty years of marriage he had never once managed to stand up to Remza when she stood like that, hands on her hips.

They took down the clock first. The pendulum clanged when Fuad unhooked it, and they both turned toward the sofa, as if Grandma were about to scold them. She did not. Carrying the chest down the stairs took them half an hour, because it was heavier than it looked and because Fuad stopped on every second step to rest his back. They left it in the living room, between the television and the armchair, and Remza covered it with a crocheted tablecloth, so that it would look as if it had always been there. They hung the clock above the couch, on the nail where an aerial photograph of Kakanj had hung until then. There were no gold coins in the chest. They went through every sheet.

Mahir, their twenty-one-year-old son, watched all of this from the kitchen doorway, his phone in his hand. Remza told him to make himself useful, so he wrote a post. At ten past one, Grandma's photograph appeared on Facebook, taken in the garden among the pepper plants, with a text Mahir had rewritten twice: that our dear Grandma Hanifa had passed on to the next world in her eighty-sixth year and that the funeral would be tomorrow at two in the afternoon. By two in the morning the post had sixty comments. By three Mahir had printed thirty death notices on the home printer, with a black border and Grandma among the peppers.

Sadeta and her husband Halil arrived from Zenica at half past two. Sadeta ran upstairs straight from the door and two minutes later came back without tears, but with a question. "Where is the clock?" Remza said she did not know what clock she was talking about. Sadeta lifted the crocheted tablecloth off the chest and looked at Remza the way you look at a neighbor who has put on your dress. Meanwhile Halil took a tape measure out of his jacket pocket, the yellow kind that rolls up, and began measuring the hallway. Later he claimed he had done it out of nerves.

The quarrel began quietly, because of Grandma upstairs, and then, like every quarrel in that family, it quickly forgot why it was supposed to be quiet. Sadeta said Grandma had promised her the clock back when she got married. Remza said that for twenty years she had bathed Grandma,

fed her and taken her to the clinic, while Sadeta came for Bajram with baklava from the bakery. Sadeta said that twice the baklava had been homemade. Fuad said the house was his anyway, according to the agreement of two thousand nine. Halil, without looking up from the tape measure, asked what agreement, when there was no paper anywhere.

Then it was the gold coins' turn. Each of them thought the other had taken them. Remza asked Sadeta what exactly she had been doing for those two minutes upstairs. Sadeta asked why the chest was already downstairs if nobody had been looking for anything. Fuad said that was enough, and nobody heard him. Mahir sat at the table and read the comments aloud, because it seemed to him that it would calm everyone down. May God have mercy on her soul. She was a wonderful woman. I remember how she used to hand out apples to us when we were kids. Sincere condolences to Fuad and Sadeta. Not one of the four of them went upstairs to sit with Grandma. Grandma was alone, under the sheet, and no clock was ticking in her room, because it was downstairs.

At five Mahir took the death notices, the glue and his bicycle and went into town. He pasted them on the notice board at the bus station, on the post in front of the market, on the wall next to the mosque and on the window of the bakery where Grandma bought half a loaf of bread every morning. The baker came out in his white apron and asked when she had died. "Last night," said Mahir. The baker said he had seen her yesterday on the bus from Visoko, arguing with the conductor, and that she had looked healthier than he did.

Mahir got back a little before six, while the dawn call to prayer was sounding from the minaret, and found the family in the kitchen, right where he had left them. Halil was measuring the window. Sadeta was crying, for the first time that night, but because of something Remza had said to her about the baklava. Fuad was making coffee for the third time. And then footsteps sounded on the stairs. Slow, familiar footsteps, with that small pause on the fifth step, where the board sagged.

Grandma Hanifa walked into the kitchen in her dimije and a blue sweater, her headscarf tied the way she had tied it every morning for sixty years. She looked at Halil with the tape measure, then at Sadeta in her coat, then at Remza, who dropped her spoon. "What is this?" she asked. "Who died?" Nobody answered. Grandma looked through the open door of the living room, where her chest peeked out from under the crocheted tablecloth and her clock hung above the couch, stopped at twelve twenty. "Aha," she said. "Me."

Fuad was the first to speak. He said Doctor Brkić had come, that there had been no pulse, that she had looked as if she were. Grandma waved her hand. Brkić, she said, could not even take his own blood pressure. Last night she had taken two sleeping pills instead of one, because the new doctor at the clinic insisted the old ones did not work, and she had slept as never before in her life. What woke her was the call to prayer, and the cold, because somebody had pulled a sheet over her head. Then she sat down at the table, in her own place, and told Fuad to pour her a coffee, since it was already made.

She drank slowly. Nobody sat down. When she set down her little cup, she slipped her hand into her sweater pocket, took out a handkerchief tied in a knot, and shook seven gold coins out of it onto the table. "This is what you were looking for," she said. "I've slept with them ever since Sadeta first asked me how I was sleeping." Sadeta blushed to the roots of her hair. Remza stared at the floor. Halil slowly, inch by inch, rolled up the tape measure. Grandma put the coins back in the handkerchief and the handkerchief back in her pocket.

Then she called Mahir over and asked him how many people had read that thing on the phone. Mahir looked: six thousand and something. And the death notices? Thirty, he said, all over Kakanj. Grandma nodded, as if this were good news. "Then write this," she said. "Grandma Hanifa is alive and well and thanks everyone for the kind words. There will be no funeral today. At two there's lunch, at our house, for everyone who wrote." Mahir asked what he should do with the death notices. "Nothing,"

said Grandma. "Let them hang. Let people see who in this house was in a hurry."

At two in the afternoon, when the funeral was supposed to take place, some fifty people were standing in front of the house above the railway tracks. Remza had been rolling out pies since seven in the morning, Sadeta was frying dough puffs, and Fuad and Halil, slowly and without a word, had carried the chest back upstairs. Grandma Hanifa sat on a chair by the gate and asked everyone who came in whether they had seen the death notice at the station and whether she had come out well in the picture. The clock hung on the wall of her room again. When it struck two, it could be heard all the way to the railway tracks.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

Permission from Vienna

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/permission-from-vienna/

For twelve years Ramiz sold tomatoes and peppers at Markale, at the stall next to mine, and in all those twelve years I never saw him lift his eyes above the prices written on cardboard. That winter he started looking up. Across the street from the market, on the third floor of a building from Austrian times, a lamp burned at five in the morning, and behind the curtain sat a woman. She sat like that every morning while we unloaded crates from the vans, and she stayed until it was light. "She doesn't sleep," Ramiz said one morning, more to himself than to me. "She never could sleep when she was alone in the house."

That was how I found out he knew her. Her name was Mersiha and she was from Haljinići, the same village near Kakanj that he drove his tomatoes in from every morning. At twenty-two she had gone to Sarajevo to cook and clean for a widower, a law professor, in a big house on Logavina Street. Her second winter there she slipped on the icy steps in front of that house and broke her leg so badly that she always limped a little afterward. Professor Mulabegović, a man of fifty-eight, would not let her go back to the village. He married her. Half of Sarajevo talked about it for a whole autumn, and then a son was born and people found something else to talk about.

"And you?" I asked him. Ramiz was arranging peppers, red ones on one side, green ones on the other, as if something important depended on it. He said he had asked her to marry him before she left. She had asked him to wait a year. He went to a construction site in Slovenia to earn money for a house, and when he came back, she was already Mrs. Mulabegović. "I didn't hold it against her," he said. "The professor had a library. I had half a greenhouse."

The rest I learned from her, later, when she started coming down to the market. The professor had died seven years before. Her son Imran had

finished law school in Vienna and stayed there, at a law firm with a brass plate at the entrance, and he had gotten engaged to the daughter of one of the partners. He sold the house on Logavina right after his father's death, because he needed money for an apartment in Vienna, and he left his mother the flat above Markale, registered in his name, and the professor's small pension. Mersiha had spent her whole life working or waiting for someone to come home. Now she had neither.

The first time she came down was in February, in a camel-colored coat, leaning more on her left leg. She stopped in front of Ramiz's stall and looked at the tomatoes for a long time, as if she did not see them. "Ramiz," she said, "đe have you been all this time?" She blushed at once and corrected herself: "Gdje." Ramiz laughed, for the first time since I had known him, the way people laugh when they are not thinking about selling. She explained it to me later. Imran called her on video on Sundays, and while she talked, he corrected her. You don't say đe, you say gdje. You don't say šćela, you say htjela. You don't say vako. "He's right," she said. "He's a lawyer. His mother can't talk as if she came from Haljinići yesterday."

From then on she came down every morning. She brought coffee in a thermos, for him and for me, and stood between our stalls until the first customers arrived. One Saturday, as we were closing, Ramiz asked her if she wanted to come with him to the village. She came back in the evening with mud on her shoes and a bag of spring onions, and on Monday she told me how she had seen the house she was born in, without a roof now, and the Bosna River near Kakanj, muddy from the rain, and Ramiz's four greenhouses, which were as warm inside as May. She said đe and šćela and vako, and nobody corrected her.

In April Ramiz proposed to her, between the crates, in front of everyone. He did not kneel, because afterward, he said, he would need help getting up. "I have a house, I have four greenhouses and, God willing, another twenty years. I don't have a library." The woman at the stall across the way started clapping, then stopped when she saw that Mersiha did not

answer right away. Mersiha said yes. She also said that first she had to talk to Imran. The flat was in his name, the pension was small, and he was all she had. "I won't get married behind his back," she said. "He hasn't deserved that."

She talked to him that Sunday. On Monday she came down later than usual, with eyes that would not look at Ramiz, and she told me about it, because she could not tell him. Imran had been silent for a long time. Then he asked if she was serious. A vegetable seller from Markale, he said, and from the very village she had barely gotten out of. His wedding was in June. His fiancée Katharina's father knew who Professor Mulabegović had been, and people had been invited from Sarajevo and from Vienna. What was he supposed to tell them? That his mother was marrying a man who sold tomatoes under her window? "He said under your window," Mersiha repeated. "As if that was the worst part."

In July Imran came to Sarajevo for three days. He refused to meet Ramiz. On the last day he took his mother to Bare cemetery, to his father's grave, and there, while she brushed the leaves off the marble slab, he asked her to promise him something. That she would not marry without his permission. Not for his sake, he said, but for his father's. Mersiha promised. Imran hugged her and flew back the next day, and she carried that promise the way she carried that leg, without complaining in front of others.

Ramiz waited. The first winter, then the second. Every morning, as we unloaded the crates, he lifted his head toward the third floor, and she still came down, only less often, and the coffee in the thermos was colder and colder by the time it reached us. Every Bajram she called Imran and asked again. In the meantime Imran had a daughter, and then his own name on the brass plate. Each time he gave the same answer: "Mom, not again." "I'll wait," Ramiz would say when I asked him how long. "I'm used to waiting for things to ripen."

The third winter Mersiha fell ill. She lay in the hospital at Koševo for two weeks, and I brought her soup and whatever Ramiz sent from the greenhouses, though she could not eat. Once she told me she would like to be buried in Haljinići, next to her mother, where you can see the river. She died in March, at fifty-three. Imran arrived from Vienna the next day and decided she would lie at Bare, beside his father, because the family grave was there and because, as he put it, she had been Mrs. Mulabegović after all.

The funeral set off at ten, from in front of the building across from the market, when Markale was at its most crowded. Ramiz covered the tomatoes with a white cloth and stood in front of his stall in a dark jacket, his cap in his hands. The hearse moved slowly, because people with shopping bags were slow to get out of the way, and three cars followed it. In the back seat of the first one sat Imran, in a black coat, and as they passed us, he turned his head and looked at Ramiz. He looked at him briefly, the way you look at a crate someone has left in the middle of the sidewalk, and then he turned to face forward.

The lamp on the third floor was never lit again. In May a young couple moved into the flat and hung white curtains. Ramiz still sells at the stall next to mine. Every morning at five, as we unload the crates, he lifts his head toward that window, and I have learned not to ask him anything then.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

The Mentor in the Guest Room

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

At fifty-three my father discovered that he had an inner child, and that the child was hungry. He discovered it at a seminar called Wake the Lion Within, in the conference room of a hotel in Ilidža, where his cardiologist had sent him after his blood pressure jumped past two hundred for the second time. The cardiologist had meant walks along the Miljacka. Father, who owns a small air conditioning company in Stup, went to the seminar because it lasted only one weekend, and he does not work weekends anyway. From that weekend he came back with a signed book, a bracelet of wooden beads and Sanin Tafro.

Sanin was forty, with white sneakers, linen shirts and the voice people use to talk to frightened horses. He spoke slowly, with pauses in which a person began to doubt himself. At his first dinner with us he said the house had blocked energy, that you could see it in the way we sat at the table, and that Mom's sarma, although excellent, was cooked out of fear. Mom, Mirha, put down her spoon. Father said that was true, that Mom did everything out of fear, and asked Sanin if he would stay for coffee. He stayed for coffee, then for breakfast, and within a week he had moved into the guest room for twenty-one days of intensive mentoring. That was in March. In June he was still there.

In the mornings he did breathing exercises on the terrace, so loudly that the neighbors on Mejtaš thought our water pump had broken. At the table he took everyone's phones, so we would be present, except his own, because he had to be available to clients. He talked about modesty and ate the last piece of pita before anyone could offer it. He called me little one and advised me to read less, because books bury your intuition. Father paid him three thousand marks a month, sold his old Mercedes because it tied him to the past, and stopped seeing the friends he had played giant chess with on Liberation Square for thirty years.

My brother Sabit, who is twenty-six and has an opinion about everything, called Sanin the lodger from the first day. Mom did not call him anything. She watched him walk around the house in his socks and measured him with the look she gives a piece of veal at the butcher's before saying she does not want it.

The first real blow came one Sunday at lunch. Father tapped his glass with a fork and announced that Bakir and I were not energetically compatible. Bakir is a sound engineer at a studio in Marijin Dvor, we had been engaged since November, and the wedding was set for September. Father said Sanin had analyzed our birth dates and that the marriage would be draining in the long run. Then he added, looking at his plate, that a mature man who had already walked his path would suit me better. Sanin modestly lowered his eyes. It took me half a minute to understand that the mature man was him. When I told Bakir, all he asked was whether mature men paid rent.

That evening Sabit said enough was enough. Coming home late, he had found Sanin on the terrace with Mom: he was holding her by the wrist and telling her that her husband did not see her, but he did. Mom pulled free and went into the house. Sabit told Father everything in front of Sanin. Sanin only folded his hands and said he understood Sabit's anger, because it was the anger of a son who feels he is losing his father. Father threw Sabit out of the house. That same night, to prove that nothing material bound him, he said he would sign the house on Mejtaš over to Sanin with a deed of gift. The notary was booked for Monday at nine.

On Saturday afternoon Mom went into Father's study and closed the door. I listened from the hallway. She told him she was asking for nothing but one evening. She also said that in twenty-eight years she had not lied to him even about the price of shoes, so she was not going to start now. That he hide behind the curtain in the living room, the heavy wine-colored plush one her mother had sewn and that Father had been wanting to throw out for years, and listen. If he heard nothing, he could sign on Monday, and she would stay silent for the rest of her life. Father

agreed, he said, only to prove to her how wrong she was.

At ten in the evening he stood behind the curtain, in his slippers, his arms at his sides. I was in the kitchen, by the door that had been left ajar. Mom invited Sanin for tea. She had put on a green dress she had not worn since Sabit's graduation and set candles on the coffee table, which Sanin did not fail to notice. At first he was careful. He said the walls had ears. Mom said Sead was asleep, that he had drunk the valerian tea Sanin himself had recommended. Sanin smiled and moved closer.

What he said then he said in a different voice, faster, without pauses. He said Sead was a good man but naive, like a child holding an open wallet. That from Monday the house would be his, and they could stay in it as long as they behaved nicely. That the wedding to Ajna was a formality, for the papers and for Sead's peace of mind, and that what he really wanted was her, Mirha, ever since he had first tasted her sarma cooked out of fear. Mom cleared her throat. The curtain did not move.

Sanin took her hand. Mom cleared her throat louder and said there was a draft. The curtain did not stir. Sanin said she did not need to pretend to be shy in front of him, because he was above such things, and he tried to put his arms around her. Mom coughed a third time, the way people cough at a residents' meeting when someone starts talking too long, and Sanin asked her anxiously whether she was ill. "I am allergic to the dust in the curtain," she said. "Then that will be the first thing we throw out," said Sanin, "once the house is mine."

Only then did the curtain move. Father stepped out with dust in his hair and the face of a man who had slept for three months and woken up in someone else's house. He told Sanin to leave. Sanin did not get up. He straightened the sleeve of his linen shirt and calmly said that it was Father who was leaving, not him. That he had his word in front of witnesses, and he had something else: recordings. All their sessions of radical honesty had been recorded, for Sead's progress, and on them Sead, among other things, talked about how his company paid half the

workers' wages in cash. "On Monday at nine you sign," said Sanin, "or the recordings go to the Tax Administration."

That night nobody in the house slept except Sanin, who, as he said, had a clear conscience. Mom called Sabit to come back. He came with Bakir and with a laptop. In three weeks of exile he had found two women who had written under other names beneath Sanin's old posts: a widow from Travnik who had given him her apartment and a dentist from Tuzla who had lost her practice because of him. Both were afraid to report him. Father sat at the kitchen table, in the same slippers, and looked for a long time at Sanin's message with the recording, which had arrived at midnight, so that he would not forget.

On Monday at nine Father was not at the notary's. He was at the tax office in Čengić Vila, with his accountant and two binders, and he reported himself. He told the clerk that for eleven years he had been paying half the wages in cash and asked how much that would cost. The clerk first called her supervisor, because in twenty years on the job that had never happened to her. It cost as much as a weekend cottage on Trebević and all the money he had set aside for my wedding. At ten he was at the police with Sabit, with the message in which Sanin threatened him and with the numbers of the two women, who, when they heard that someone had spoken first, agreed to come.

Sanin waited at the notary's until half past ten, with his lawyer and a new planner. Instead of Father, two inspectors walked into the waiting room. The notary told us later that he stood up calmly, straightened his sleeve and said that this too was just one more lesson in attachment. The inspectors let him finish his sentence. The lawyer, they say, left before they did. In the guest room they found four more deeds of gift, unsigned, with a blank space for the name.

Bakir and I were married in September, more modestly than we had planned, in the garden of the house on Mejtaš that had stayed ours. Father drank mineral water all evening and did not move from the table.

When Mom walked past the living room for the third time, I asked her why she still had not thrown out that curtain, when its dust bothered her so much. "Let it hang," she said. "So we remember where he stood."

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

The Wife Sold at the Mowing Fair

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wife-sold-at-the-mowing-fair/

The mowers left Strljanica around four, when the grass already lay in swaths and the music from the tents had begun to drown out the bells from the pastures. That July Nusret Hendo was twenty-six, with a wife of nineteen and a daughter of eight months, and in the mowing contest he had come second, behind an old man from Kupres whose grandson he could have been. Second place brought nothing but a certificate. He left the certificate on the bench by Mejra's tent, where she sold thyme tea, and under the counter, for those who knew to ask, something stronger.

Sabina sat at the end of the bench with the baby in her lap and watched Mejra top up his cup for the third time. Nusret talked louder and louder. About Germany, where he could have gone if he had not married. About an apartment in Bugojno he would never have. About how a man with a family was not even allowed to dream, because someone would immediately ask him for diaper money. The people around the tent laughed, because they talked that way themselves, only more quietly. Then Nusret stood up, slapped his palm on the counter and said he was selling his wife and child. "Who will give more?" he shouted. "We start at fifty marks."

They laughed at that too. Someone offered ten marks and a goat. Sabina quietly told him to stop, and he, precisely because she had said it in front of everyone, repeated the offer, seriously now, looking over their heads as if at a livestock market. That was when a man nobody knew stood up at the far end of the tent, tanned, in a white shirt, with a coastal accent. He counted five hundred mark notes onto the counter. "If she is willing," he said. Sabina looked at Nusret for a long time. Then she took off her wedding ring, laid it beside the money, picked up the baby and the diaper bag and followed the stranger toward the parking lot, without turning around once.

Nusret woke at dawn, in the hay behind the tent, with dew on his jacket and five notes in his shirt pocket. The ring was with them. All day he went around Kupres, Šuica and the gas stations as far as Bugojno asking about the man in the white shirt. Nobody knew him. All he learned was that he was a seaman from Makarska named Jure, because Mejra had heard that while she poured his tea. In the evening he stood at the edge of Strljanica, where he had mowed the day before, and in front of the empty field he swore out loud that for twenty years he would not taste a drop of alcohol. Twenty, because any smaller number seemed cheap to him. He put the notes and the ring in an envelope and never touched them.

Between that dawn and his second term as mayor of the Bugojno municipality stood twelve years on building sites in Germany, a company that built schools from Gornji Vakuf to Donji Vakuf, and the reputation of a man who did not drink. At every reception he held a glass of mineral water, so behind his back people called him Fizzy. It was said that he had divorced young and that his former wife was somewhere in Croatia, and nobody asked any more. Two years ago that woman came back. Jure had died of a heart attack on a ship near Malta, and Sabina came to Bugojno with Ilda, who was eighteen then, because she had nowhere else to go. Nusret married her again in the municipal hall, quietly, one Thursday. They told Ilda only that they had divorced when she was a baby.

For the first months Ilda called him by his first name. He became Dad one Sunday on the Vrbas, when he was teaching her to cast a line and he, the mayor of the municipality, waded into the water up to his knees to untangle her line from a willow. From then on she brought him coffee in his office and told everyone at the municipality that her father was the most honest man in Bugojno. He listened to it and never once corrected her.

The Bugojno market had been under renovation for two years. A new roof, numbered stalls, certified scales, and a rule Nusret had written himself: no permit, no selling. Mejra had no permit. She was the only person in Bugojno who knew what the mayor looked like drunk. She was

seventy-four and had cheese from a wooden tub, eggs from her own hens and, as people whispered, a bottle of homemade brandy under the cheese. The municipal inspector had fined her twice. The second time she spilled a bucket of whey in front of him and sent word to the mayor that she remembered him from his younger days.

The opening was on Saturday, with a ribbon, speeches and a live stream by the local television on the internet. Ilda stood in the front row filming her father on her phone, proud the way only someone can be who got a father just two years ago. Nusret spoke about order. He said a market was not a fair, that at a market you knew who was selling and at what price, and that Bugojno would no longer be a place where all sorts of things were sold under the counter. People applauded. Then from the back, under the old roof that had not yet been torn down, came a voice that drowned out the loudspeakers.

"You talk to me about fairs, Nusret?" Mejra was walking through the crowd with a bucket in her hand, and people stepped aside for her as if she were carrying something scalding. "I poured for you at Strljanica, son. Under the counter. Remember? And at my counter you sold your wife and child to a seaman. For five hundred marks. I counted them for you so he would not cheat you." She looked toward Sabina, who was standing behind the podium in a sand-colored coat. "There she is. Ask her what she cost."

The cameraman did not lower his camera. Nobody lowered a phone, except Ilda, whose hand dropped by itself. From the left the adviser whispered to Nusret to say the old woman was drunk, or ill, or taking revenge over the fine. Nusret did not listen to him. He leaned toward the microphone. "It is true," he said. "I was drunk and I sold them. Mrs. Mejra's fines are canceled." Then he stepped down from the stage and walked through the crowd the same way she had come. By midnight the video had more views than Bugojno has inhabitants.

For two nights Ilda did not come home. When she came back, she did not ask him but her mother. Sabina told her everything, sitting on the edge of the bed: that she had been nineteen, that on that night she had believed that what is sold in front of witnesses cannot be taken back, and that Jure had been a good man who never once reminded her how much he had paid for her. "And why did you go back to him?" Ilda asked. Sabina opened a drawer and put an old envelope on the bed. Inside were her ring and five hundred mark notes, all folded the same way. "Because for twenty years he never spent them," she said. Ilda picked up the ring, turned it toward the window and put it back in the envelope.

Nusret resigned on Monday, before the opposition could call a session. The news sites wrote about it for a week, and then they found something else. Bugojno did not forget, but it grew tired of remembering. At the new market the vendors stopped weighing when he walked by, and someone wrote on a pillar of the roof with a marker: who will give more. Nusret did not let them wipe it off. He leased three meadows below Kupres and took down from the attic the scythe he had not touched in twenty years. He did not call Ilda, because he did not know what he would say to her, and she did not call him either.

In July, twenty years after that night, he stood in the line of mowers on Strljanica, the oldest but one, and came third. He mowed slowly, in a straight line, and nobody laughed. His vow had run out that morning. Mejra's tent stood in the same place, her granddaughter ran it now, and when Nusret sat down on the bench, the granddaughter asked him what he would have. Before he could answer, someone sat down at the end of the bench, in the spot where Sabina had once sat. Ilda put the old envelope on the counter, without the ring now, and pushed it toward him. "Mom says this is yours," she said. "Your treat." Nusret looked at the envelope for a long time, then at the granddaughter. "Two teas," he said. "Thyme. And nothing from under the counter."

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

Family Secrets from Velenje

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/family-secrets-from-velenje/

My brother Ensar has a flaw that our family calls a talent: he cannot let a good joke die on its own. Throughout our childhood Grandpa Sulejman told us that our line went back to a sultan's gardener from Istanbul, a man who, in Grandpa's words, could make a rose bloom in January. The story changed every winter. Sometimes the gardener fled the Bosphorus for love, sometimes because of a debt, and sometimes the sultan himself sent him to Bosnia to plant tulips around Travnik. For Grandpa's eightieth birthday Ensar bought an ancestry test, a box with a tube you spit into, and wrapped it in paper with gold flowers. "So we can finally meet that gardener," he said.

We celebrated in Banovići, in the house with a yard above the old coal separation plant, where Grandpa and Nana have lived since the sixties. Nana Fadila had been rolling out pita since dawn, Aunt Zumra brought tufahije in the glass bowl we remember from every wedding, and Uncle Šemsudin, as every year, was fixing a grill that refused to be fixed. When Grandpa opened the present, everyone laughed, he loudest of all. He read the instructions aloud, his glasses on the tip of his nose, as if he were reading out a verdict, and then in front of the whole family he spat into the tube and raised it like a glass. "To the gardener," he said. Nana did not laugh. I thought she was angry about the pita, because Grandpa had spat before he tasted it.

Grandpa spent thirty years underground. Mostly in Banovići, but from seventy-four to eighty he worked in the mine in Velenje, when our miners went to Slovenia because the pay was better. From those years he kept a few Slovenian words, one photograph in a miner's helmet, and a cup with a blue rim that he drank his coffee from every morning. Nana never let anyone else use that cup. She washed it herself, by hand, and put it back in the same spot in the glass cabinet. We thought it was out of respect for

a miner's bread.

The results came six weeks later, to Ensar's email. He called me at half past ten at night, while I was grading chemistry tests in Tuzla, and at first he was laughing. Balkan sixty-one percent, Central Europe twenty-two, and Anatolia, he said, a full three percent. "The gardener was a small man," he said. Then he went quiet. I asked him what was wrong. He said that under the ancestry there was a section for relatives, for people who had taken the same test, and that only one name stood there. Andrej Golob, Velenje, Slovenia. Relationship: father or son. Shared DNA: forty-nine percent.

At first I thought it was a mistake. Ensar spent half the night reading forums and in the morning sent me a message of one word: no. Later he explained that among cousins the number runs around twelve percent, and that forty-nine means a parent, a child or a brother, and Grandpa was an only child. Andrej Golob had a profile with a photograph. A man in his forties, going gray, in a hiking jacket, in front of some lake. He had Grandpa's ears and Grandpa's habit of never quite finishing a smile in front of a camera, as if waiting for the photographer to give in first. Under the picture it said, in Slovenian and in unsteady Bosnian: I am looking for my father. My mother was Majda Golob, she worked in the mine canteen. I am asking for nothing but a name.

We agreed to keep quiet until we figured out how to say it. We lasted until Sunday. At lunch Aunt Zumra asked about the gardener before Nana had even brought out the soup, and the whole table turned toward Ensar. He said the results were late. My cousin Ilma, who is fifteen and has had a phone in her hand since she learned to walk, said they were not late, because she had seen him looking at them in the car that morning, and before anyone could stop her she took his phone from the edge of the table. She knew the code. Everyone knows Ensar's code, it is Grandpa's birthday. She read it out loud, in the voice used for reading homework: Balkan sixty-one, Anatolia three, and then, more slowly, the name from Velenje and the two words beneath it.

The silence lasted as long as it took Uncle Šemsudin to put down his spoon. Then Aunt Zumra said they were crooks, that those companies sell data and invent relatives so people keep paying. Uncle added that it was surely someone who had heard about Grandpa's pension. Ilma started crying because she did not know what she had read, and Ensar stared at his plate and did not touch it. Only Grandpa said nothing. He took off his glasses, folded them, and set them beside his plate, the way he lays them down before bed. He was looking at Nana.

When he spoke, he was not speaking to us. "Majda cooked beans on Thursdays," he said. "I was alone, Fadila. You know how alone I was." Nana did not answer. Grandpa said he had known Majda was pregnant when he quit in eighty and came home. He said he had written to her twice from Banovići and that no answer had ever come. He thought she had married and that the child did not need to know about him. "So I stopped writing too," he said, "and pretended I had never started."

Nana stood up, went into the bedroom, and came back with a tin box from old candy, the one she had kept buttons in for as long as I can remember. She set it beside Grandpa's glasses and opened it. There were no buttons. There were letters, about ten of them, with stamps that said Yugoslavia, and on the last one Slovenia. They had all been opened, neatly, with a knife along the top edge. "The mailman came at ten," Nana said. "You were on the six o'clock shift. I had three children and this house, Sulejman. I had no one to go to."

Grandpa took out the first letter but could not read it, so he handed it to me. Majda wrote briefly, in a Slovenian I half understood: the boy is called Andrej, he was born in March, he has your ears. In the second letter there was a photograph of a baby in a knitted cap, in the fifth a boy on a bicycle with training wheels, and in the last, from ninety-one, a serious boy at a school desk, his hands folded the way Grandpa folds his when he is waiting for news. On the back it said: This is the last one. If you won't, neither will I. Aunt Zumra looked at that photograph for a long time and said, quietly, that the boy had Ensar's forehead. Ensar said

he had Grandpa's. It was the first thing they had agreed on all day.

Grandpa asked her later why she had not burned them, when only the three of us were left in the kitchen. She said she had wanted to, every autumn, and could not, because in the photographs it was not that woman but a child. She also said she had washed the blue-rimmed cup herself ever since that autumn when he came back and she unwrapped it from a paper that said, in Majda's handwriting: for my miner. "My whole life I have been washing someone else's cup," she said. "You could have told me once whose it was."

That night Ensar wrote a message to Andrej. Grandpa dictated, I translated with the help of my phone, and Nana sat with us and corrected Grandpa whenever he got a year wrong. The answer came in twenty minutes, as if the man had been sitting by the screen for years. Andrej wrote that his daughter, who studies in Ljubljana, had bought him the same test for his birthday as a joke. He also wrote that his mother used to tell him his father descended from a sultan's gardener, and that all his life he had thought she made it up.

He came in May, by car from Velenje, with his wife and that daughter. Nana had been rolling out pita since dawn, as for a birthday, and she set the table for eleven. When Andrej sat down, she put the blue-rimmed cup in front of him. Grandpa saw it and said nothing. Andrej turned the cup in his hands, looked at the bottom, then at Nana, and said in his unsteady Bosnian that his mother had six of these in her kitchen and that one had gone missing the autumn his father left. "I know," said Nana. "It is with me. Drink it while it is hot."

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

The Only Honest Minister

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-only-honest-minister/

I am a man nobody trusts with anything serious, and that is why people trust me with everything. Officially I work at my father's insurance company, but in reality I drink coffee on Wilson's Promenade and watch who walks with whom. Nijaz has been my friend since elementary school. He is the only one who calls me Orhan in that tone when he is angry, and he is rarely angry. The papers called him the only honest minister in the Federation government, and his wife Edina, who runs an association that publishes politicians' asset declarations, believed it more than the papers did. On him she built her proof that a person could stay clean in politics. I had known him too long to build anything on him.

On his fiftieth birthday, at the house on Koševo Hill, there were forty guests, two ambassadors, a theater director and a baklava Edina's mother had been baking since morning. Nives Kalaba turned up too. She had not been invited, but she had a business card from a consortium in Vienna and the smile with which, back in high school, she used to copy other people's tests and get better grades than the people she copied from. She took Nijaz out to the terrace for ten minutes. He came back gray in the face and did not let go of his glass of water for the rest of the evening.

When the guests had gone, he told me everything in the kitchen. In 2003 he had been a young adviser at the privatization agency. He had written a letter by hand to the late Teufik Arnautović, with the lowest price the commission would accept for a factory in Ilidža. Teufik bought the factory for pocket change and gave Nijaz money, which paid for his first campaign and half of this house. Nives had been Teufik's assistant, and after his death she kept his papers. On Thursday the government would decide on a concession for six small hydropower plants on the Neretvica. The consortium's studies were fake, and Nijaz knew it. If he spoke for the concession, she would give him the letter back. If he did not, the letter

would be on the news sites by Friday.

"Tell Edina," I said. "Edina doesn't love me," he said. "Edina loves a man she invented, and for twenty years I've been pretending to be him." He said that on Thursday he would speak the way Nives wanted, then quietly withdraw, and Edina would never have to know why. I told him that women always find out why, only sometimes from the wrong person, and that women who love invented men are rare, so they should not be wasted on a lie. He did not laugh. I laughed for both of us and went home, and in my pocket I carried something that should have stayed on the sofa.

It was a gold bracelet in the shape of a snake, with a clasp that opens only when you press the snake's eye. I knew this because I had bought it myself, for my cousin Maida's wedding. At that wedding, in a hotel in Ilidža nine years ago, the bracelet vanished from Maida's handbag, and the police report was still on file. I found it on Nijaz's sofa right after Nives had left.

The next day Nives went straight to Edina. What they said to each other, I do not know. I know what Nijaz told me later, over the phone, in the voice of a man who has fallen down a flight of stairs. Edina asked him if it was true, and he said it was. She asked how much money there had been, and he told her. She asked whether anyone besides Nives knew. He said Orhan knew, and she said that was the same as the whole of Baščaršija knowing. She said he had been the only proof she had. He said he had never asked her to hang him on the wall like a diploma, and that he was a man, not an annual report. Then she sat in the car in front of the house and for an hour did not start the engine.

That evening Nives came to my place. The doorman let her wait in the apartment, because she said she was an old friend, which was half the truth. She asked whether I had happened to see a bracelet at Nijaz's. "This one?" I said, and before she could answer, I fastened it around her wrist. She tried to take it off. She could not. I told her where and when the bracelet had disappeared and that Maida still kept the receipt. I picked

up my phone. Nives looked at the snake on her wrist for a long time. Then she took an envelope out of her handbag. I set the letter on fire over the sink, and only when it had burned down to the last letter did I press the snake's eye.

Only after she had left did I see that a piece of paper was missing from the chest of drawers. That afternoon, while I was out, Edina had left a note for me with the doorman, and he had put it on the chest of drawers when he let Nives in. It was handwritten and without a name: I can't do this alone anymore, you are the only one who knows everything, I'm coming at ten. She did not come, because, as I later found out, Nijaz had gotten home early. Nives took the note with her. The next day she sent it in an envelope to the ministry, to Nijaz, with a slip of paper saying where she had found it.

The minister's envelopes were opened by his secretary Rahima, who for twenty years had thrown anonymous slips into the bin without reading them. She threw the slip away. She recognized the note by Edina's handwriting and put it on the minister's desk. Nijaz called me around noon. "Edina wrote to me," he said, and his voice sounded as if someone had given him back something he had lost. "I can't do this alone anymore, you are the only one who knows everything. I thought she would never need me again." For the first time in my life, I said nothing.

On Thursday, at the government session, Nijaz stood up against the concession. He spoke for twenty minutes, without notes, and said which studies had been copied and from whom. Two ministers stared at their phones, and a third stepped out into the hallway. The concession fell. On Friday the news sites wrote about him, but not what Nives had wanted. The prime minister offered him the post of his deputy. Edina asked him to refuse and to withdraw from politics, so that, as she put it, he could spend the rest of his life honestly.

I went to see her at the association, among the folders full of other people's asset declarations. I told her that if she made him leave now, she

would not be punishing him for what he had done, but for not being the man she had believed in. "And what do I do with what I know?" she asked. "Keep it," I said. "You know better than anyone how to keep papers."

Nijaz accepted the post. That same evening Edina made him write a resignation, with no date, and sign it. She put it in the drawer of her desk at the association, between the asset declarations of two ministers she had already driven to resign. "If you ever become ideal again," she told him, "I will hand it in." When she told me this, she laughed for the first time since that birthday. As I was leaving, she gave me the spare key to that drawer, in case one day she was the one who became ideal.

SCANDALS · 10 MIN READ

The Beggar Who Changed His Coins

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-beggar-who-changed-his-coins/

On Kazandžiluk, where we had our shop, you could tell the day of the week by the sound. On Mondays my father hammered out the bottoms of coffee pots, on Tuesdays the delivery man came with sheets of copper, and on Thursdays at ten old Zaim stood in front of the shop and tapped twice on the doorframe with one finger. He never came in. My father would give him five marks, I would bring out coffee in a small cup, and he would drink it standing, his hand on his heart, and say: "Thank you, daughter, may it come back to you at your exam." I was studying pharmacy, and there was always an exam.

He sat on a stone bench by the fence of the Baščaršija mosque, but he did not beg the way the others did. He did not hold out his hand to tourists, he did not sing for them, and he did not show them wounds. He had a pressed gray coat, a clean-shaven face and a hat he lifted to every woman of the bazaar. He also had a schedule, like a clerk. On Mondays Nusmir from the bakery gave him a somun, on Wednesdays he got half a portion of ćevapi at Refik's, and on Fridays after Friday prayers someone always left him a mark or two. He never took money from children; instead he gave the children candy from his coat pocket. People loved him because nobody had to feel ashamed around him. Giving to Zaim was like paying a bill you were glad to pay.

For thirty-two years he had worked at a furniture factory in Stup. When the factory went under, it turned out that nobody had ever paid his contributions, so at sixty-six he received a paper stating that he had no pension. He carried that paper in his inside pocket, folded in four, and once he showed it to me, not to complain, but so that I would explain a word to him. The word was "unfounded." He lived in a basement room on Vratnik, with a widow who charged him no rent as long as he chopped her firewood.

Fikreta Pašalić ran a souvenir shop across from the Sebilj fountain and sold factory-made coffee pots as handmade. She had a voice that carried all the way to the Bey's Mosque, and she knew everything about everyone, and what she did not know she made up by the evening prayer. She also ran a Facebook group called "Čaršija Live," with eleven thousand members, where she announced funerals, lost cats and who had sold out whom. Under every post she asked people to share it, and people shared. My father said Fikreta was the only radio in Sarajevo that could not be switched off.

One Thursday in March Fikreta stopped by our shop and, still in the doorway, told my father she had seen Zaim at the post office on the Obala. "At the counter he counted out one thousand two hundred marks, Suad. In hundreds. I'm standing right behind him, counting along with him." My father said Zaim was probably changing his coins, because everyone who lives on small change does that. "What coins," said Fikreta. "I saw hundreds." By evening a photo of Zaim on his bench had appeared in the group, and under it a sentence: "This gentleman from Baščaršija takes home more each month than a doctor at Koševo. You can give, I won't anymore." Below it there were four hundred comments.

The following week the story rose like dough. Zaim had an apartment in Bistrik that he rented to tourists. He had a son in Germany who sent him euros. He had a house in Hadžići, and some people even knew the color of its facade. A news portal picked up the post and put his face under the headline "Millionaire Beggar of Baščaršija?", with a question mark, so that nobody would have to answer for it. Tourists began filming Zaim on their phones, and one young man asked him in English how much he made per hour.

Zaim did not have a smartphone, and he was the last to hear about the post. A young waiter from the teahouse across the way showed it to him, thinking it was a joke that would make him laugh. Zaim looked for a long time at his own photo, then at the comments, and asked for the letters to be made bigger. Then he handed the phone back, said thank you and sat

down on the bench as he did every day. He sat straighter than before, like a man waiting for his name to be called. Nobody called it. People only looked, some for a long time, and some in such a way that he could see them looking.

Nusmir was the first to stop. "I'm not going to feed a landlord," he said, and the somun stayed on the shelf. Refik said he would give his ćevapi to those who really needed them. On Fridays after prayers people walked past the bench as if it were empty. And my father, who for nine years had given Zaim five marks every Thursday, said on the third Thursday after Fikreta's post: "I don't know what the truth is anymore, daughter." When the double tap came, he was bent over the anvil with his back to the door. I took the coffee out myself. I had five marks of my own in my pocket and did not give them, because I was ashamed to let my father see that I was better than him. Zaim drank the coffee standing, his hand on his heart, and this time he did not mention the exam.

He tried to explain. He went to Fikreta with his paper from the pension fund, and she read it aloud in front of two tourists who were choosing magnets and said anybody could print a paper like that these days. He went to the post office and asked the clerk to tell people what he had been changing at the counter. The clerk said she was not allowed to talk about customers. Then he stopped coming to the bazaar. He tried Marijin Dvor, near the shopping center, where nobody knew him, but a woman there recognized him from the portal and told her child loudly not to go near him, because that was the rich one.

I went to see Fikreta. I waited until the customers had left and asked her to delete the post. Fikreta was arranging scarves on the counter and did not look up. "I only write what I see, sweetheart," she said. "Is it my fault people read?" Then she offered me a discount on filigree earrings, because I was Suad's daughter, and said she had known me since I was this high. I left without the earrings and without anything else. The post stayed up, and the number of comments kept growing.

In December I went up to Vratnik with a bag holding a somun, cheese and chamomile tea. At the gate the widow told me Zaim had not chopped wood since the autumn and that he coughed all night. The room was clean, the bed made, the gray coat on a hanger. On the table stood a jar half full of coins. "Now I have nothing to change," he said and laughed, and the laugh turned into a cough. He asked me, as a future pharmacist, which tablets he should buy. I called an ambulance even though he had forbidden me to.

At Koševo they said he had pneumonia. I visited him twice. The second time he asked me whether anyone from the bazaar had asked about him. I lied and said Nusmir had. He was as pleased as a child. "Nusmir is a good man," he said. "He just got scared." He asked me to bring him the gray coat, because he did not want to be led out of the hospital in pajamas. He died on the third of January, in the morning, before the doctors' rounds. The doctor told me his heart had been tired, and his lungs, and everything else, as if it could all be written on one paper.

That same day Fikreta announced the funeral, with a black ribbon across that same photo of the bench. Within two days the bazaar had collected four thousand marks for the funeral and the headstone. Nusmir gave two hundred, Refik three hundred, my father five hundred. It was more than Zaim had received in the whole of the previous year, and everyone knew it, and no one said it out loud. In the group Fikreta wrote that the bazaar never forgets its own, and that post got two thousand likes.

At the Bare cemetery there was a large crowd. Fikreta stood closest to the grave and cried the loudest. Afterward she told the women that Zaim had always said she was the best woman in the bazaar. Nobody could check that. My father said nothing the whole way back, and the next day, Thursday, at ten, he lifted his head from the anvil and stared for a long time at the empty doorway.

The widow gave the jar of coins to me. I took it to the post office on the Obala and stood at the same counter. Behind it sat the same clerk who

was not allowed to talk about customers. The clerk poured the coins into a machine that counts them, and the machine hummed for a long time, as if it could not make up its mind. It came to thirty-seven marks and forty fenings. I got a twenty, a ten, a five and the rest in change. Nobody was standing behind me, and nobody was counting along with me.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

The Key to the Mailbox

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-key-to-the-mailbox/

The mailbox in entrance number seven, in a building behind the Eternal Flame, had two keys, and both hung on Samir Ćatić's key ring. Nura had never asked for her own. Samir liked to carry the mail up to the third floor himself, open it at the table while she poured the coffee, and read her the electricity bill aloud, like an item from the newspaper. When he was appointed manager of the Kapija Bank branch on Ferhadija in November, he brought that letter up too, opened it with the bread knife, and read it twice. "No more scraping by, my little mouse," he said. "From January we live like people."

Nura laughed and said nothing. For eight years, once Samir was asleep, she had sat in the kitchen with her laptop translating Turkish series for a production company in Ilidža: loves, revenges and lost sons, at four marks per minute of subtitles. Samir thought she did it out of boredom and spent the money on herself. On the fifteenth of every month the money went to the installment on a loan he knew nothing about. Of the thirty thousand marks, six were still left.

Eight years earlier Samir had fainted at the tram stop by Skenderija. At Koševo they said a heart valve was failing and the wait for surgery was a year, while a clinic in Istanbul could take him in three weeks. Samir worked in debt collection then and liked to say that he collected debts, he did not make them. Nura went to Kapija Bank on her own. The loan was handled by Muhamed Rizvić, Samir's friend from the Second Gymnasium, and he asked for a guarantor. Her father in Zenica agreed over the phone. He died the night before the papers reached him. Three days later Nura signed his name at the kitchen table and wrote the date beneath the signature. She told Samir the money was her father's inheritance.

Two weeks after Samir's appointment, Branka Ćorić turned up at the door, the woman Nura had shared a room with in the student dormitory in Nedžarići. Branka had a suitcase, gray streaks she did not dye, and a husband she had buried in Mostar the year before. She needed work. Nura made her coffee and, while Branka talked about the years spent caring for her sick mother and her brothers, felt the urge to show something of her own. She told her about Istanbul. "You pulled that off by yourself?" Branka asked. "By myself. And he must never find out. Samir would rather die than live on his wife's debt."

Samir hired Branka that same day, because a position was opening up at the branch. In the evening he explained which one. Muhamed Rizvić had a disciplinary case in his file from ten years back, over a contract with a date filled in after the fact. That was enough. But Samir also admitted what rubbed him the wrong way even more: in front of the staff Muhamed called him Samko, the way he had in school. "I cannot be the manager of a man who calls me Samko in front of the teller window," he said, and laughed at his own honesty.

Muhamed rang the bell the next day at ten, when he knew Samir would be out. He did not sit down. From a folder he took a copy of the guarantor form and set it on the coffee table beside the little bowl of dried figs. "Your father died on the third of March," he said calmly. "He signed on the sixth. I saw it eight years ago and kept quiet, because I knew why. Now I am asking you to do something for me. I have two children and one stain on my record. If I lose this job, nobody in this city will hire me. Tell your husband to keep me on. If I go down, madam, I do not go down alone."

That evening Nura begged Samir as she had never begged him for anything. He listened to her with a pen in his hand, then opened his laptop and, right in front of her, sent Muhamed his notice of dismissal. "So that nobody at the bank says the manager is led around by his wife," he explained. Then, while taking off his watch, he gave a short lecture about people who forge signatures. People like that, he said, poison the

house they live in, and their lie seeps into the walls like damp. Nura sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her own hands.

On Thursday, through the glass of the mailbox, she saw a white envelope with Samir's name on it, written in Muhamed's hand. The key was on Samir's ring. On Saturday the bank was celebrating thirty years at a hotel near the City Hall, and Samir wanted his wife to sing a sevdalinka, because Nura sang well and because he liked it when other people looked at her. Nura asked him to rehearse with her all day Friday and not to open the mail until the party, not the bills, nothing. "No bank, no mail," she said. "Just me." Samir was flattered. "I open nothing until my wife sings," he said.

Meanwhile Branka sat with Muhamed in a café by the Latin Bridge. Fifteen years earlier, in Mostar, they had been together, and she had left him for a man who could pay for her mother's medicine. She told him so now without apologizing, like a bill finally being paid. She also said she was alone and tired of a house where nobody needed her work. Muhamed was silent for a long time, then offered to get the letter back tomorrow, somehow, through the building caretaker. Branka shook her head. "Let him read it," she said. "That house has lived on a lie for eight years. That costs more than any loan."

On Saturday Nura sang "Moj dilbere" before two hundred guests, too loud and too fast, as if she were defending herself against someone. They gave her a standing ovation. Samir led her from table to table and introduced her as if she were a prize that came with the manager's job. They got home after midnight. In the entrance hall, still in his coat, he unlocked the mailbox.

He read the letter at the kitchen table, twice, the way he had read his appointment. Then he stood up. Nura waited. For eight years she had imagined this moment, and in every version he said the same thing: that he had signed, that he was to blame, and let them come for him. Samir said something else. He said he had been sleeping beside a forger. That

she had ruined him now of all times, just when he had finally become somebody. That he would stay in the marriage for the sake of appearances, but from today she had no business in his affairs, his money or his name. "I did it for you," she said. "For me?" he shouted. "Who asked you to?"

Then the intercom buzzed. Branka was standing downstairs in the snow and would not come up. She gave Nura an envelope and left. Inside was the original guarantor form and a slip of paper on which Muhamed had written only: "This never existed." Samir read the slip over her shoulder, snatched the form out of her hand and began tearing it up over the sink, smaller and smaller, laughing. "It's over," he kept saying. "No harm done." He ran the water. Then he hugged her and said he had forgiven her, that she had been like a child who did not know what she was doing, and that from now on he would do the thinking for both of them. "My little mouse," he said. "You got scared."

Nura went into the bedroom. When she came back she was no longer in the long-sleeved dress but in jeans and her coat. Samir looked at her as if he had misheard something. "Sit down," she said. "Now I will talk, and you will listen." She told him she had been waiting for one sentence. Not for him to actually go to prison in her place, only for him to say that he would. She said that the man who had been shouting a moment ago and the man who was hugging her now were the same man, and she did not know which of the two she had been living with. Samir said she was tired and that tomorrow everything would look different. "Tomorrow it will," she said.

Samir asked where she was going at two in the morning. To Branka's, to begin with, she said, and after that she would see. He said they were husband and wife, that it meant something. She said it had meant something to only one of them. She did not slam the door. She walked down the three flights, and in the entrance hall she stopped at the mailbox. She took the apartment key off her ring, then the cellar key as well, and dropped them through the slot. She heard them land at the

bottom, among the flyers for New Year discounts. Samir had both keys to the mailbox. When he opened it tomorrow, he would find hers too. On Ferhadija the snow was falling, and no one had yet walked there ahead of her.

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

The Price Tag on the Sleeve

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-price-tag-on-the-sleeve/

Mladen Kovačević, senior associate at the Banja Luka City Administration, forty-one years old, lay on the couch in his apartment in Borik on Saturdays and thought about marriage. He had been thinking about it for six years, always on Saturdays, always lying down. "Stana," he called to the woman who cleaned his apartment, "did the tailor ask why I needed a dark suit?" "He did." "And what did you tell him?" "That you are getting married." "And he?" "He said it was about time." Mladen closed his eyes contentedly, and then opened them again at once, because it seemed to him the tailor had said too much.

At noon Aunt Milka arrived, a hairdresser from Starčevica who had married off half the town between two blow-dries. She took a notebook out of her bag and read: Tihana Marić, thirty-four, daughter of the late Jovan, who had kept two hardware stores, a house in Petrićevac with a walnut tree in the yard, says little and has a lovely laugh. "That sounds lovely," said Mladen. "Let's wait until spring." It was October.

Just then Žarko Babić walked in without knocking, Mladen's friend from high school, who sold insurance and talked as if he were selling it even when he was off duty. When he saw Milka, he turned red. Nine years ago she had married him off, as he liked to put it, and promised him a quiet wife. "Quiet!" he shouted. "She gives instructions in her sleep!" Then he heard about Tihana and about spring, and all at once he calmed down. "There is no spring," he said. "You, Mladen, are getting married this week. You are a couch in a suit. Somebody has to do something with you." And he dragged him off to Petrićevac.

Three men were already sitting in Tihana's living room. The bailiff Rajko Pržulj had a folder on his knees and was asking Aunt Rosa whether the house was registered in the land books and how many square feet the attic had. The tax adviser Vedran, in shoes that squeaked, was explaining

that he was moving to Graz and needed a wife who knew German. Đorđe, a cook who had sailed on cruise ships for twenty years, was talking about Palermo and mentioned to everyone in passing that seventeen women had turned him down, as if he were giving a reference. When Tihana came in with the coffee, they all stood up. Rajko asked Mladen where he worked. "At the City Administration," said Mladen. "Which department?" "Municipal fees." Rajko wrote that down in his folder, as if one day he would collect on that too. Tihana asked whether anyone wanted more coffee. Everyone said yes, except Mladen, who did not know whether he did. He did not say another word and was the first to leave, with the excuse that he had left the iron on.

That evening Tihana sat at her laptop and made a spreadsheet. Rajko was serious, but he looked at the walls as if he were appraising them. Vedran had nice hands and no sense of humor at all. Đorđe had made her laugh twice, but it was clear that one day she too would be on the list he recited to someone. The quiet one, Mladen, had said almost nothing, and that, oddly, she had liked. She wondered what it would be like if she could take Rajko's seriousness, Đorđe's laugh, Vedran's hands, and Mladen's silence and put one man together out of them. The spreadsheet did not add up. She shut the laptop and went to bed, annoyed with mathematics.

The next day Žarko took matters into his own hands. He came to Tihana's at nine in the morning and told her, with regret, that Rajko was up to his neck in debt, that Vedran had learned his German off the internet, and that Đorđe snored like a ship's foghorn. He knew none of this. "And your friend?" she asked. "Pure gold," said Žarko. "Serious, thrifty, doesn't drink, loves children and flowers." Mladen had never owned a flower. Then Žarko called Rajko and told him the house was mortgaged, and told Vedran that Tihana spoke only Russian. Tihana sent Đorđe his refusal by text message. It was his eighteenth, and he took it calmly, like a man who knows his statistics.

That same evening Žarko drove Mladen to Petrićevac, sat him in an armchair next to Tihana, and went out into the yard, on the pretext of

looking at the walnut tree. For a long time they were silent. Then Mladen said that the Vrbas was cold in the summer, and that he liked that. Tihana said she liked it too. He said he did not like it when people talked a lot. She said she did not like it either. They were silent again, but this time differently. Mladen thought he could sit like this for years. It was the longest thought he had ever had about a woman.

Žarko burst in with a walnut in his hand and asked whether they had come to an agreement. They had not. "So what are you waiting for?" he said to Mladen. "Kneel." Mladen said he would think about it. Žarko took him by the shoulders and lowered him to his knees, the way you lower a suitcase. From his knees, Mladen asked Tihana whether she would marry him. She said she would. Žarko was already calling a cousin at the City Administration. Somebody had canceled for Friday at noon. "Why wait?" he said, and went off to buy flowers, because he had promised.

On Friday the wedding hall was full. Aunt Rosa came, and Aunt Milka, and Tihana's cousins, but also half of Mladen's department, because the hall was on the same floor as his office. Tihana arrived in a simple white dress and smiled at him from the doorway, just as Milka had promised. Mladen thought she was beautiful, and that frightened him more than anything so far. The registrar sent the groom to a small room behind the hall to wait ten minutes while the witnesses signed. Mladen sat down, stood up, and sat down again. Now everything is decided, he thought. A minute ago it was not, and now it is. Forever, and every day, coffee in the morning and coffee in the evening, for forty years. He looked at the window. It was an old window on the raised ground floor, nobody had shut it all the way, and below it was a flowerbed of begonias, barely five feet down.

He climbed onto the radiator, then onto the windowsill. A price tag hung from his sleeve, because he had bought the suit on the condition that he could return it. He jumped into the begonias. A worker from the city parks department, who was raking leaves at that moment, looked at him and said nothing, because in Banja Luka he had already seen everything.

Mladen brushed the soil off his trouser legs and set off quickly, then more quickly still, toward the bus stop by the Vrbas.

When Žarko opened the door of the small room, he found an open window and a begonia petal on the sill. He shouted so loudly that the cousins took out their phones. Tihana went to the window in her white dress and saw, far down the street, a man in a dark suit running, with a white tag fluttering from his sleeve. "Is this the first time?" she asked the registrar. "The third this year," said the registrar. "But the first through the window." Aunt Rosa burst into tears, Aunt Milka was crossing something out in her notebook, and Tihana, to everyone's surprise, laughed. "Lunch is paid for," she said. "Let's go and eat."

By evening the video bore the headline Groom Flees Through the Window of His Own Building and had gone around every news site in Banja Luka. On Monday his colleagues taped a begonia to Mladen's office door. But Mladen did not know that yet. On Friday, at half past twelve, he was sitting on a bench at the bus stop by the Vrbas, with the tag on his sleeve, watching the river.

He was breathing, he was free, and for the first five minutes he felt like a man who had escaped a disaster. Then he remembered how Tihana had said that she did not like it either when people talked a lot. He thought that perhaps he ought to go back. He thought that perhaps he ought to go back tomorrow. From the left came the bus toward the center, from the right the bus toward Borik. Mladen stood up, planted himself exactly in the middle of the stop, and waited for the first one to arrive, the one that would decide for him.

SCANDALS · 8 MIN READ

Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law Make the Same Sarma

Read online:
ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/mother-in-law-and-daughter-in-law-make-the-same-sarma/

In my mother-in-law's house sarma is not cooked, it is kept quiet about. Šefika Mehmedović of Pehare in Zenica makes it for every Bajram, every funeral, and every wedding in the neighborhood, and nobody has ever seen how. When I married Edis, she gave me the recipe at Bajram, dictating it while I wrote on the back of an electricity bill: cabbage, meat, rice, smoked ribs, black pepper, a little sweet paprika. For twelve years I cooked from that bill. For twelve years Edis told me the same thing, with his mouth full and the best of intentions: "It's good, but it's not Mom's."

I knew something was missing. I tried more ribs, less rice, bay leaves, sour cream, an extra glass of cabbage brine. My mother-in-law would taste it, nod, and say: "It's nice." In her language that meant it was not. So when my sister-in-law Alma showed me an ad on her phone in March for a show called Taste of Heritage, where dishes handed down from generation to generation competed, I knew right away what I would enter. The casting was at the cultural center in Zenica. I said nothing to my mother-in-law.

I got through the casting. The filming was in May, in a studio in Sarajevo, and at six in the morning I got on the bus with a bucket of sauerkraut between my feet and smoked ribs in my shopping bag. In the makeup room, behind a mirror framed in light bulbs, sat my mother-in-law in her blue suit for weddings, her hands on her handbag. The makeup artist had just lifted a brush toward her face and froze, because she saw the way we were looking at each other.

"What are you doing here, Mirela?" asked Šefika. "The same thing you are," I said. It turned out that her neighbor Rabija had signed her up

without asking, and she had agreed only when she saw that the prize was a new stove. Her casting had been a week after mine. Nobody told us, because nobody knew we were from the same house: I had signed up under my maiden name. "You came with my sarma," she said. "With mine," I said. "I've been making it for twelve years." The makeup artist put down her brush and went for coffee, though nobody had sent her.

When the director heard what was going on, he changed the schedule. They put us side by side, at two neighboring cooktops, with a camera between us. The host, Eldar, a young man with teeth that were too white, went to her first. "Mrs. Mehmedović, whose recipe is this?" "Mine," my mother-in-law said into the camera. "From my mother-in-law. And now, I see, from my daughter-in-law too, without asking." The studio audience murmured. "You gave it to me," I said. "At Bajram, twelve years ago. You just left something out." "I left nothing out," she said, without looking at me. "You didn't want to learn."

We cooked with our backs to each other. The studio was hot from the lights, the cabbage smelled the way it does in every Bosnian kitchen in January, and the cameraman kept swinging his camera from one of us to the other, as if at a tennis match. All I could see was her elbow and a corner of her handbag, from which a small jar of something dark peeked out, with no label. My sarma rolls were neat, all the same size, wrapped the way she had taught me during our first winter preserving together. Hers were a little bigger and uneven, as if she were not trying. I knew hers would be better. They always had been.

Near the end they turned off the lights over our cooktops, because the host was reshooting his introduction at the other end of the studio. For half a minute nobody was watching us. Then my mother-in-law, without turning around, slid that jar along the counter to my hand. It was plum pekmez, thick and black, the kind her sister makes in Nemila. "Two spoonfuls in the brine," she whispered. "At the end, not at the beginning." Then she put the jar back in her bag, and the lights came on. I added two spoonfuls. My hands were shaking, so the second one was a little bigger.

The jury tasted both kinds of sarma. Chef Zlatan, who usually spoke as if he were pronouncing a verdict, chewed mine for a long time. He said the two were almost the same, but that in the daughter-in-law's you could taste something deep and sweet, at the very end, like when somebody remembers something lovely. I got one point more and went through to the final. My mother-in-law looked into the camera and said: "She has the hand for it." We went home separately, me by bus, she with Rabija's son, and we did not speak for a week.

Three weeks later the station released a trailer for the episode. It lasted forty seconds and held nothing but the quarrel: "without asking," "you left something out," "you didn't want to learn," all of it set to music from mafia movies. Underneath it said: Mother-in-Law Accuses Daughter-in-Law of Stealing Recipe. In two days the clip had four hundred thousand views. The Facebook groups split into two camps. Women at the market in Zenica stopped talking when my mother-in-law came up to a stall. Edis turned off his phone. I wrote a long comment explaining everything, and all it got me was another two thousand insults.

One Saturday I saw her at the market from a distance. She was standing at a stall selling leeks, and the stallholder, a woman she had traded pickle recipes with for thirty years, turned her back on her and started stacking bags. My mother-in-law paid another woman, took her leeks, and walked off toward the bus as straight as if she were carrying water on her head. She did not see me. That night I did not sleep. Edis asked what was wrong, and for the first time I told him about the jar. He was silent for a long time, then said: "She will never admit it." "I know," I said. "That is why I will."

The morning program invited us to make peace live on air. We both agreed, for the same reason: neither wanted the other to face the cameras alone. The host was clearly waiting for a new quarrel and seated us in two armchairs with a small table between them. When she asked me what had really happened, I told her everything: the lights going off, the jar,

two spoonfuls, at the end, not at the beginning. I said I had won that point thanks to her. The studio went quiet.

"I didn't slide anything," my mother-in-law said calmly. "She figured it out herself. I was just standing close by." The host did not know what to ask. I was looking at my mother-in-law, and she was looking at the little cup of coffee in front of her as if searching it for something she had lost. That clip went around the country faster than the first. People wrote that she was the most stubborn and the best mother-in-law in Bosnia. Some wrote that I was the one lying. Šefika did not read a single comment, because she does not know where they are read.

I did not go to the final. I said I was sick, which was not far from the truth. That year, for Kurban Bajram, for the first time I rolled sarma in her kitchen in Pehare, at the same stove, with her. When it was time for the brine, my mother-in-law handed me the jar without a word. I added two spoonfuls, at the end. "There is one more thing," she said, turning the rolls with a wooden spoon. "What is it?" "You will get that," she said, "when you are a mother-in-law yourself."

SCANDALS · 9 MIN READ

A Son-in-Law for Two Pharmacies

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-son-in-law-for-two-pharmacies/

The two pharmacies in Gradačac stand facing each other on the same street below the clock tower, so close that a pharmacist in one can read the prices in the other's window without glasses. In the one on the left, called Kamilica, Ratko Ćirić has worked for twenty years. In the one on the right, Žalfija, Nenad Spirić has worked just as long. For twenty years the two men played chess on Thursdays in the garden of the café Kod Lipe, their wives Gordana and Smiljka traded cake recipes and curtain patterns, and their daughters Tamara and Kristina went to the same class and shared the same desk. People said the Ćirićs and the Spirićs were one family with two cash registers. So it went until June, when the engineer came to town.

His name was Saša Mirković, he was twenty-nine, he was from Bijeljina, and he had come with the company building the new water main toward Pelagićevo. He rented the attic room above the bakery, exactly between the two pharmacies, which the whole čaršija later considered a joke on God's part. On his first morning he walked into Kamilica with red eyes and sneezed three times in a row, because he was allergic to linden, and the street smelled of linden trees in bloom. Behind the register stood Gordana, who was not a pharmacist but knew everything there was to know in town. While she bagged his tablets, she found out that he was not married, that he had no girlfriend, that his mother lived alone in Bijeljina, and that he had a permanent contract. Before he left, she gave him a free nasal spray as well. Half an hour later Smiljka, across the street, knew all the same things, except the price of the spray.

The next day Tamara, on her mother's orders, carried a jar of honey and a little bottle of propolis up to the attic. Tamara was twenty-six, with a pharmacy degree from Tuzla and no desire at all to carry honey to strange men, but there was no arguing with Gordana. The day after that, Kristina

knocked, twenty-four, a dentistry student home on summer break, with a pan of potato pie and a box of allergy tablets, stronger, as her mother had instructed her to say, than the ones across the street. Saša thanked them both, blushed in front of them both, and understood nothing. He thought the people of Gradačac were simply hospitable.

By the end of June the two families had stopped greeting each other. Gordana put a sign in Kamilica's window saying their vitamin C was cheaper than anywhere in the Posavina. The next day a sign appeared in Žalfija's window saying theirs was cheaper than anywhere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ratko and Nenad sat down to chess one more Thursday, but the game ended before the tenth move, when Nenad said Ratko pulled his pieces around the way his wife pulled other people's customers. "That Kristina of theirs smiles like she is on clearance," Gordana told her husband over dinner. "And that Tamara of theirs looks at a man as if she were writing him a prescription," Smiljka told hers, across the street, at the same moment.

Saša started coming home the long way, through the park behind the municipal building, and climbing the stairs without turning on the light. It did not help. For the same Sunday he got two lunch invitations and, not knowing how to say no, accepted both. At one o'clock he ate stuffed peppers, pie, and three pastries at the Ćirićs', while Gordana explained how Tamara ran half the pharmacy by herself. At five he ate veal baked under the sač, pie, and four pastries at the Spirićs', while Smiljka explained how Kristina had the steadiest hand in her whole faculty. On Monday morning he could not button his trousers. He bought something for his digestion, but not at Kamilica and not at Žalfija: at the new pharmacy in the shopping center by the bus station, where nobody asked him about his mother.

In those days Tamara and Kristina met in secret, late in the evening, on a bench by Lake Hazna, like two conspirators. Neither of them wanted the engineer. "He's nice," said Tamara, "but he sneezes the moment he sees a tree." "And he eats as if that were his job," said Kristina. They laughed

until tears ran down their faces, and then they agreed to keep quiet. They thought their mothers would tire sooner or later. They did not know their mothers as well as they thought.

In July old Milorad Tešić, godfather to both the Ćirićs and the Spirićs, celebrated his first grandson's christening. The lunch was at the Labud restaurant on the shore of the lake, for sixty guests, with a three-tier cake. Saša was on the list too, because Tešić's son worked with him on the water main. Gordana arrived half an hour early, walked between the tables, and moved the card with Tamara's name to the seat beside the engineer. Smiljka arrived twenty minutes early and found Tamara beside the engineer. She put the card back where it had been and set Kristina's in its place. The waiter laying out the glasses watched the cards travel across the table and said nothing, because nobody was paying him to talk.

The cards kept traveling until the guests arrived. When everyone had sat down, it turned out that there was one empty chair beside Saša and that both mothers were standing behind it, each with her hands on the backrest. "Tamara sits here," said Gordana. "Kristina sits here," said Smiljka. At that moment Tamara and Kristina were sitting at the far end of the table, side by side, pretending to look at their phones. Saša stood up, muttered that he had to call the construction site, and went out onto the terrace. The mothers did not notice. Gordana pulled the chair toward herself. Smiljka pulled it toward herself.

Ratko got up to calm his wife, Nenad to calm his, and within three steps the two of them were arguing about vitamin C. The chair traveled left and right, like the cards before it, until Smiljka's hand slipped off the backrest. Gordana, with the chair in her arms, flew backward, straight into the table with the cake. The three-tier cake tilted slowly, with dignity, as if it were thinking it over, and then it fell. Smiljka tried to catch it and ended up on the floor beside Gordana, both of them up to the elbows in white cream, with a sugar dove left sitting in Gordana's hair. The baby started to cry. Old Tešić put down his glass. At least ten guests were filming on their phones.

By evening the video had gone around every Viber group in Gradačac. Somebody named it the Battle of Labud, and the name stuck. On Monday both pharmacies were closed, with the same sheet of paper on their doors: closed for inventory. Gordana did not leave the house, Smiljka did not go near the window. Only Tamara and Kristina went out, together, for coffee in the čaršija, where people looked at them with the kind of respect usually shown to survivors.

At the end of August the town learned that the engineer was getting married. Gordana was sure it was Kristina's doing, Smiljka was sure it was Tamara's, and for the first time in two months both called their daughters at the same moment. The daughters, each in her own room, said the same thing: it isn't me. The bride's name was Amra Mujkić, and she worked at the new pharmacy in the shopping center by the bus station. Saša had bought his allergy tablets from her since his first day, because it was the only pharmacy in Gradačac where nobody offered him lunch. When he told her about that Sunday with two lunches, she laughed and told him there was no medicine on earth for that.

The wedding was in September. The line of cars drove down the street below the clock tower and slowed down right between Kamilica and Žalfija, because a flour truck was parked in front of the bakery. Gordana stood in the doorway of her pharmacy, Smiljka in the doorway of hers. They watched the white car carrying the pharmacist from the shopping center, in a dress that both of them, each privately, judged to be modest. When the line had passed, Gordana was the first to speak across the street. "The third pharmacy," she said. "I always told you that woman was dangerous," answered Smiljka, although she had never said it.

That evening, for the first time since June, they had coffee together in the garden of Kod Lipe. At the next table Ratko and Nenad spread out the chessboard and played a game all the way to the end, without a word, and then another. Tamara and Kristina sent the newlyweds a joint present, a box of allergy tablets wrapped in cellophane, with a card signed by both pharmacies. And in October Gordana and Smiljka, arm in arm, went to

the shopping center by the bus station to see, as they put it, what kind of prices that woman was charging.

SCANDALS · 7 MIN READ

The Building with Blue Balconies

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-building-with-blue-balconies/

Two hours before he died, in the hospital in Brčko, my father gave me an address in Tuzla. The nurse had just gone out, the machine above the bed beeped steadily, and he waved me closer with his hand, as if he were about to tell me where he had buried gold. The tractor had rolled over with him on the steep boundary strip behind the plum orchard, early in the morning, while the fog was still lying over Bijela. The doctors told me there was nothing to hope for. He knew that better than they did, so he did not waste time.

"In the desk drawer, under the account book, there's an envelope," he said. "Five thousand marks. Take it to Tuzla, to the building with the blue balconies behind the Pannonian Lakes, third floor. The doorbell says Kovač. To a woman named Mirjana." I asked who she was. My father closed his eyes, not from weakness, but the way he used to close them when he was haggling over a heifer at the market. "Ten years," he said. "Every Thursday. Be decent to her, Josip. None of it is her fault." I wanted to ask something more, but the nurse came in, and after that my father did not speak again.

Half of Bijela and a good part of Brčko came to the funeral. People said that Mato Perić had been an honest, hardworking man, that after my mother's death he had not wanted to remarry, that he had given everything for his son and for his plums. I nodded and shook hands. At home I took the envelope out of the drawer. In its place in the drawer I put my father's phone, which the hospital had given back to me in a plastic bag together with his watch. The screen showed eleven messages from a contact saved as "Tuzla Cooperative." The last one said: "Are you okay? The little one is asking for you." I did not read the others.

On Thursdays my father always went to Tuzla. For the bank, he used to say, for the cooperative, for tractor parts. He came back late, calmer than

when he had left, and he never brought back a single part. For ten years I never wondered why. The next Thursday I put on a white shirt, as if I were going to a job interview, and drove for an hour and a half. The building with the blue balconies was where he had said. The doorbell said Kovač.

The door opened before I had taken my finger off the bell. "You're late," said the woman, laughing, and then she saw me. She was perhaps thirty-five, with an apron over a tracksuit and flour up to her elbows. The apartment smelled of cheese pie. She looked at me for a long time without a word, and I realized she knew me, although we had never met. "Josip," she said. It was not a question. I told her in the hallway, because I did not know how to walk into a stranger's apartment with news like that. She leaned against the doorframe and stayed like that, her hands full of flour, until a child's voice came from the room.

The boy was perhaps six and carried a green plastic tractor in his hand. "Is that Uncle Mato?" he asked. Mirjana said it was not, that it was a guest, and sent him to wash his hands. Before he went, the boy looked at me seriously, from under his brows, and scratched behind his left ear. My father used to scratch like that when he was thinking about the price of plums. I scratch the same way, people say.

Mirjana let me in and put on coffee, because that was the only thing her hands knew how to do at that moment. I sat down on the couch and only then saw the apartment. By the door stood my father's slippers, brown, with the heels trodden down. On the television lay his reading glasses, the ones I thought he had lost three years ago. On the kitchen shelf stood four little jars of plum jam, with labels I had printed in Brčko for the market. Here my father had his own cup, his own side of the couch and his own hour of arrival. He had a whole Thursday I had never seen.

She spoke quietly, so the little one would not hear. They had met at the bank, where she worked at the counter, when he came in for a loan for a new plum orchard and did not know how to fill out the form. She was

alone, twenty-five years old, with an apartment she could not pay off. They never married. "He said you didn't need a stepmother," she said. "That it was enough that you had lost your mother, and that the village didn't have to know everything." I asked whether Tomo was his. She looked at me as if I had asked whether the sky was blue. "Tomo knows that Uncle Mato loves him," she said. "We never got around to explaining more than that."

I took out the envelope and put it on the table. She pushed it back toward me. She did not need his money, she said, she worked and had a salary, and she had not been with him for money. I told her that it had been his last wish, and the last thing my father ever ordered me to do, and I had never known how to refuse him. She looked at the envelope for a long time. Then she picked it up and put it on top of the fridge, behind the jars of jam, the way you put things out of a child's reach. "For him," she said. "For school."

I stayed for dinner because I did not know how to leave. The pie had been made for three, because it was Thursday. Without thinking, Mirjana set my plate at the place by the window, and only when I sat down did we both realize whose place it was. She said nothing. Tomo ate and told me about tractors, which one was the strongest and which had the biggest wheels, and how Uncle Mato had promised to take him to the orchard in September to pick plums and ride in the trailer. "Do you have a tractor?" he asked. I said I did. I did not tell him that it was lying overturned on the boundary strip and that I would not be fixing it again.

At the door Mirjana handed me my father's glasses. I told her to keep them. Tomo slipped under her arm and asked whether I would come on Thursday, because Uncle Mato always came on Thursday. Mirjana pulled him back, and I could see in her face that she did not know what she would like me to say. I did not know either. "I'll come," I said. "The plums are in September."

I got back to Bijela after midnight. The next Thursday, as I was starting the car in front of the house, my neighbor Ruža asked me over the fence where I was going so early, and in a white shirt at that. "To Tuzla," I said. "For the bank." She nodded and went back to her peppers, because she had heard that sentence from my father for ten years.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Minutes from an Empty Chair

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/minutes-from-an-empty-chair/

Halid read the decision to remove the old pergola on the noticeboard while carrying bags back from the market. His mother had planted flowers beneath it for years. She was now staying with his sister, recovering from a fall and rarely going out. At the bottom of the minutes, among the signatures of residents who had approved the work, was her name. The signature was neat, with its long final flourish.

That was impossible. Since her injury, his mother had been writing with her left hand and joking that every signature looked like a drawing of a broken fence. Halid photographed the board and called her. She said she had signed nothing. The pergola did not matter more to her than her neighbors' safety, but she would have liked someone to ask. She asked him not to start an argument on her behalf.

Zorica, who chaired the residents' committee, first showed him the bill for inspecting the damaged beams. Halid did not dispute the bill. He asked for the original minutes. When she brought them, he saw that the signatures had been printed along with the text. She had copied them from an old list approving entrance repairs. She explained that she knew most people would agree anyway, and the contractor could only come that weekend.

For ten years Zorica had collected money, called repair workers, and listened to complaints. Halid knew that. He himself had avoided meetings for months. That made it difficult to say he would show the paper to all the residents. He offered to arrange a new meeting and collect responses from those unable to attend. He refused to resolve the disagreement by having his mother approve the already printed decision afterward.

At the meeting, most of the discussion concerned who had been paying late for years. Only after an hour did they return to the pergola. One resident suggested removing the damaged beams while keeping the sound posts and the plants. The contractor sent a revised quote. The proposal passed, but with fewer votes than the first, invented version had received. Zorica remained chair, with two other people taking on some of the work.

Halid took the new minutes to his mother. She signed slowly with her left hand and added a question about the color of the future roof. At the next meeting her chair was empty again. This time Halid turned on his telephone so she could speak for herself. She first asked whether anyone had watered the flowers, then began discussing the agenda.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Clock with No Winner

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-clock-with-no-winner/

Semir was responsible for the backup stopwatch at the town race. The main timing equipment worked automatically, but the organizer wanted someone to record finishes by hand in case it failed. It was a small race, more important to families and neighbors than to sports pages. Still, the winner's package included enough money to cover two months of Semir's overdue rent. He had volunteered because he was not fit enough to compete.

Five minutes before the first runner reached the finish, he dropped the watch. Its battery cover bounced under the table. While searching for it, he heard the crowd and looked up too late. He wrote down the order called out by Boris, the director of the company where Semir had recently started working. Boris's cousin was among the runners. Semir did not think about that at the time.

Only during the awards ceremony did he notice that the woman in second place refused to stand on the podium. She said she had finished first. The main system had failed to record the final part of the race, so the committee had relied on his notebook. Semir looked at Boris. The director gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head and continued applauding his cousin. The photographer asked everyone to move closer together.

On Monday Semir received a new work schedule with extra shifts. Boris said he valued people he could depend on. By his lunch break, Semir had opened a video of the finish on the organizer's website three times. The camera faced the crowd, but the finish line was reflected in a kiosk window. The woman had crossed ahead of Boris's cousin. The difference was small, but it was visible.

He sent the organizer the recording and explained what had happened to the stopwatch. He stated that he had not seen the order of arrival with his own eyes. He did not ask to remain anonymous. After sending it, he went into the company yard and called his landlord, because he might need another week's extension. The conversation was uncomfortable and brief. The landlord agreed to wait until Friday.

The result was corrected, and the prize was returned and awarded again. Boris stopped speaking to Semir except when necessary. The extra shifts disappeared from the next schedule. For the following race, the organizer offered him the same volunteer role. Semir accepted on condition that he receive another watch and a second person to record the results. This time he checked the battery cover before putting on his vest.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Dedication on the Wrong Page

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dedication-on-the-wrong-page/

Before the family history went to print, Ksenija received just one request: the dedication to their late grandmother must have a page of its own. Her grandson Bruno had paid for the entire project. The book would accompany the ceremonial reopening of a restored reading room that his family had long described as their gift to the town. Ksenija had accepted the work because the fee would cover repairs to her small publishing house's roof.

While choosing photographs, she found a page covered in tiny handwriting inside an old envelope. It was the grandmother's note about the money for the reading room. In one place she had crossed out "ours" and written "collected." Below were the names of women from the old factory, with small amounts and notes about extra shifts. The family's contribution appeared at the bottom, in the same ink as everyone else's.

Bruno did not deny that the note was authentic. He asked Ksenija to leave it out because explaining the history would take too long. "Television crews will be at the opening," he said, as though that resolved the editorial question. He also offered her another commission, a book about the restoration. She put down the telephone and looked at the damp patch above her bookshelf.

One of the women on the list still visited the reading room. Her name was Darinka. When Ksenija showed her a copy, she did not ask for public thanks. She asked for the surname of her late colleague to be corrected; people had been writing the final letter incorrectly for years. From her bag she took a photograph of the factory choir. Half its members had worked Saturdays to pay for the first chairs. She pointed to her younger hand resting on the back of one.

Ksenija sent Bruno a new page. Before the dedication she had placed an account of how the reading room began, with the names and photograph. She did not alter his text without telling him. She offered him the choice of approving an accurate version or taking his materials to another publisher. For three days he did not reply. Meanwhile, the printer offered their scheduled slot to another customer.

Eventually he agreed, but discarded the speech he had already written. At the opening he read the names from the new page and stumbled over the very surname Darinka had corrected. She quietly pronounced it from the front row. Bruno repeated it after her. Ksenija stood near the door, without the promised second commission. When it began to rain, she hurried home to move the buckets, carrying a copy of the book beneath her coat.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Toast That Was Never Finished

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-toast-that-was-never-finished/

Before the wedding, Sara asked her father to keep his speech short. She was not afraid of its length but of his jokes, which always seemed to make someone smaller so that he could appear larger. He promised not to overdo it. He left a folded paper on the table but did not open it when he took the microphone. Instead, he began speaking from memory about family standing and high expectations.

Then he said his daughter would at least always have a good lunch, since her mother-in-law had spent her entire life in a kitchen. Several people laughed before seeing Sara's face. Her mother-in-law, Amra, worked as a cook in a student residence. Sara had met her there while studying, long before she met Amra's son.

Amra did not lower her head. She placed her napkin beside her plate and waited for the speech to finish. Sara's husband Vedran began to stand, but Sara touched his hand. She approached her father herself and asked for the microphone. He tried to turn it into another joke. She did not let him.

She said that during her studies, Amra had often saved her dinner when work made her late. She had not treated her as a charity case, but as a person whose day could be difficult. Sara did not turn the speech into a list of her father's faults. She thanked Amra for welcoming her into the family and passed the microphone to the band. The music did not begin immediately. The singer first had to find a suitable song on the list.

Her father went out onto the terrace. Later he sent her mother to say that Sara had embarrassed him in front of their relatives. Sara did not go outside to repair his mood. They had their first dance without him in the room. Amra applauded the loudest, and Vedran whispered that he hoped their marriage would require fewer public speeches. Sara laughed, tired

of holding her expression steady.

A week later her father invited them to lunch. Sara said he first needed to speak with Amra. She did not compose his apology. Nor did she stand beside the telephone to check that he delivered it correctly.

At the next family gathering, Amra brought a book she had just read because she thought Sara would enjoy it. Her father offered to make coffee. The conversation was awkward and slow. When he asked how much sugar they wanted, Amra answered without a joke. For a beginning, that was enough for her to remain at the table.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Dinner at the Reserved Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/dinner-at-the-reserved-table/

The table by the window was reserved for four, but seven people arrived. At the head of the group stood Davor, whose online restaurant posts prompted longer arguments in their town than election posters. Lora, the owner, had hosted him twice without charge, on the agreement that he would disclose the complimentary meal. Neither post had included that note.

This time there was no agreement. Davor ordered the most expensive wine and told the waiter to put the bill under collaboration. Lora approached with menus and calmly explained that this was an ordinary reservation, like those of every other guest that evening. They could order whatever they wished, but they would pay for what they ate. Davor laughed and asked whether she knew how many people watched his stories.

She knew. That was precisely why her hands shook as she returned the extra glasses to a shelf. In the kitchen, the chef said they should let it go, because bad publicity cost more than dinner. Lora looked at the assistant counting the remaining portions. Two complimentary meals had already consumed money she intended for extra shifts. She could not ask her staff to fund a third.

The group left after the starters. Davor paid for that part and filmed himself walking out. He posted that the owner had humiliated them in front of other guests. By morning, comments had appeared from people who had never visited the restaurant. Lora wanted to answer everyone. Instead, she wrote a brief account of the arrangements, without insults and without publishing telephone numbers or private conversations involving his friends.

One member of the group contacted her separately. He had not known that free food was expected. He apologized and offered to explain publicly what he had heard at the table. Lora told him to describe only what he had witnessed. His comment did not silence everyone, but it changed the discussion. Several other restaurant owners described similar experiences, each with their own details.

Business remained uneven over the following weeks. Some evenings were empty; others were full of people who had come to support her. Lora did not know how many would return for the food. She stopped placing a special marker on the window table for important guests. One evening a married couple sat there without photographing a single plate. When they asked for more bread, the waiter approached their table feeling entirely at ease for the first time that week.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Someone Else's Laughter on Stage

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/someone-elses-laughter-on-stage/

Nika received the ticket from a colleague who did not know she had once lived with the comedian on the poster. Their divorce had been quiet, without shared property or major arguments. She had no reason to avoid his show. She sat in the third row, ordered water, and even sent him a brief good-luck message before it began. Then she put her telephone straight into her bag so she would not disturb anyone.

For the first ten minutes, she laughed with the audience. Then he began talking about a woman who had locked herself in a hotel bathroom on her own birthday. He had changed the name and the city, but kept the color of the dress, a waiter's mispronounced word, and the sentence Nika had whispered through the door. That evening she had been overwhelmed by fear. He had held her hand until she could come outside.

Onstage, he repeated her sentence in a high voice. The audience laughed. Nika remained almost motionless until the interval. She did not want her departure to become part of the performance too. In the hallway she told her colleague she was going home. Only after putting on her coat did she explain whose story they had just heard. Her colleague's glass stopped halfway to her mouth.

The next day she sent him a message asking him to remove that section. He replied that the audience did not know it was about her. She wrote that she knew. Their argument continued for several messages, until he began explaining how humor worked. Then she stopped replying and contacted the organizer, who planned to publish a recording of the evening. She asked her to wait until they had spoken.

The organizer heard both of them and cut that section from the recording. The comedian lost a few minutes of material and reacted as though his entire career had been taken away. Their mutual

acquaintances divided over an event they had not witnessed. Nika did not publish a public explanation. She answered only people who asked her, without describing the hotel evening in further detail.

A month later, a short apology arrived. It did not contain the word "but." Nika read it and left her telephone on the table. That evening she went to a quiz with her colleague. When she answered a simple question incorrectly, she laughed so hard she had to put down her pen. Nobody took that laughter and made it into something of their own. At the end of the evening she went home with someone else's jacket and a good story for tomorrow.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Captain Without a Team

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-captain-without-a-team/

The tournament ended with third place, their amateur volleyball team's best result in ten years. Haris lifted the trophy while the others gathered around, sweaty and smiling. When the sponsor's photographer arrived, Haris asked Damir and Ognjen to step aside. He said they needed a photograph of the starting lineup. Both had played that day. Damir had scored the final point, and Ognjen had spent the entire second set on court.

At first they thought the captain was confused. Then Haris quietly explained that the sponsor wanted a younger, neater image of the team. Damir had a grey beard; Ognjen had a scar across his cheek. During training those features had never prevented them from putting up the net, paying for the hall or staying behind to tidy up. Before a camera they suddenly became a problem to be solved by moving people a few steps aside.

The photographer had requested none of it. He stood with his camera, waiting for what he assumed was an ordinary discussion about positioning to end. The youngest player, Adis, asked why they could not all stand together. The man said they could; his lens was wide enough. Haris tried to interrupt him, but the answer had already been spoken. Damir put his medal into his bag. Ognjen remained where he was, looking at the captain without a word.

Haris explained that he was thinking about the club's future. Looking more attractive would make it easier to obtain equipment and recruit members. Adis asked why the future required erasing the people who had made the present possible. It did not sound like a prepared speech. He was angry and speaking too quickly. Several other players began removing their promotional shirts, revealing the ordinary jerseys they had played in. The spectators around them were no longer looking at the

trophy.

The sponsor's representative came over because of the delay. After hearing the explanation, she said the company had imposed no such condition. Haris tried to turn the conversation into a misunderstanding. Damir did not help him. He repeated exactly what he had heard and why he no longer wanted to stand beside him. The photograph was eventually taken with the whole team and an empty space between two players. Haris stood at the end, holding a trophy that suddenly looked unusually lonely.

At the next meeting they chose another captain. Haris claimed they had overreacted to one photograph, but nobody was talking only about the photograph anymore. Damir returned to training after two weeks. Ognjen returned immediately because he did not want to lose evenings he loved. Third place remained their best result. They hung the photograph in the hall without closing the gap, as a reminder that a team consists of more than the people who fit most attractively into the frame.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Wine from the Wrong Bottle

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/wine-from-the-wrong-bottle/

At dinner Vlado introduced every bottle as though it were an important guest. He spoke about soil, weather, wood and patience, peering over his glasses. His wife, Sanela, sat opposite and made sure nobody felt foolish for asking the wrong question. She had performed that role almost invisibly for years. Vlado liked to say they shared the same taste, although her favourite wine was one he called juice for the indecisive.

That evening the bottles were hidden in dark covers. Guests were meant to guess their origins and rate their flavour. Mila, a waitress new to the restaurant, mixed up two bottles while arranging them. One was expensive and came from Vlado's collection. The other belonged to the basic house selection, precisely the wine he had mocked before friends for months. Mila noticed the mistake only after Vlado began discussing the cheaper wine's exceptional depth.

Sanela recognised the taste but was not certain. She noticed Mila looking towards the bottle and speaking quietly to a colleague. Meanwhile Vlado explained that experience could not be learned from books. One guest agreed; another wrote down a high score after seeing his. An opinion formed around the table before anyone knew what they were drinking. Mila approached the restaurant owner, prepared to take responsibility for the embarrassment herself.

The owner whispered that she should switch the covers and continue. Sanela heard enough. She asked whether they could reveal the bottle because she would like to buy the same wine. Vlado explained that it was difficult to find and he would locate a few bottles for her. Mila stood with her hands at her sides. Sanela repeated the question, this time directly to her, making clear that she wanted simple information rather than anyone's humiliation.

When the cover came off, several guests laughed. Vlado did not. He said the test was obviously poorly organised and temperature could change everything. Sanela poured a little more into her glass. "I still like it," she said. She did not accuse him of knowing nothing. The greater discomfort lay in his ability to enjoy something only while believing it was unavailable to other people.

The story spread through their circle faster than the wine scores. Vlado blamed the restaurant and stopped organising such dinners. Sanela bought a few ordinary bottles for home, leaving the labels facing out. Mila received a reprimand for her mistake, so Sanela wrote the owner an accurate account of the evening, including his suggestion to conceal the switch. She expected no gratitude. For the next gathering she invited friends to a dinner where nobody would need to guess the price before being allowed to say what they liked.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

An Accent for the Formal Dinner

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-accent-for-the-formal-dinner/

Before dinner Igor asked Selma to speak a little more slowly. He said his business acquaintances had trouble understanding her accent. Selma thought he was joking, but he did not laugh. She had lived in the city for fifteen years, ran her own business and spoke every day with people who understood her perfectly well. Still, she repeated a few sentences before the mirror, angry with herself for trying to sound more acceptable to the man who shared her bed.

At the restaurant Igor introduced her as someone who had grown up abroad. That explained her accent before she opened her mouth. Selma had grown up in a small town a few hours away. Her experience abroad consisted of one school holiday at her aunt's. She looked at him, expecting a correction. He continued discussing her "international experience", rearranging her life as easily as a waiter moving a misplaced glass.

The woman across the table asked which city she had lived in. Selma named her hometown. Igor interrupted to say that was where the family house stood, but she continued. She explained that her father drove a bus, her mother kept a small shop, and she had cut her first customers' hair in a room behind the kitchen. She did not offer these facts as a challenge. They were ordinary truths she suddenly had to defend from a man who considered them insufficiently elegant.

One guest laughed and asked Igor where the story about living abroad had come from. Igor said he had expressed himself badly. Selma replied that it was not the first time, although it was the first time she had heard it before so many people. Dinner paused. A business partner tried to change the subject to the menu. Selma thanked him, stood and said she would spend the rest of the evening elsewhere. She did not wait for Igor to decide whether to follow her or stay with his carefully chosen

witnesses.

He followed her to the exit and accused her of humiliating him. He did not say he was ashamed of lying. He said those people were important. Selma asked what made them so important that she had to become someone else to sit with them. He had no answer that sounded good outside the restaurant. The taxi arrived while he was still saying he had not meant it that way. For the first time that evening she spoke quickly, naturally and without apology.

The next day she collected her things. Among them was a photograph of her parents' shop he had never put on the shelf, supposedly because it did not suit the frame. Selma took both photograph and frame. Later she heard the dinner was remembered as an embarrassing scandal. She did not try to repair that version. She had enough work restoring her own voice to the place from which, for love, she had begun moving it herself.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Retirement Speech She Never Requested

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-retirement-speech-she-never-requested/

Vesna thought they were celebrating the shop's thirtieth anniversary. She had ordered pastries, invited suppliers and hung photographs of the first window display between the shelves. Her husband Zoran said he would prepare a small surprise. Vesna expected an old recording or the arrival of a friend from another city. When he carried in a cake reading "Happy retirement", she first looked towards an older colleague. Only when everyone aimed their phones at her did she understand whom the cake was for.

Zoran gave a speech about well-earned rest. He said it was time for younger people to take over, and she could finally enjoy travel and grandchildren. Vesna was sixty-two and had never said she wanted to leave. Recently she had mentioned working fewer Saturdays. In Zoran's speech that wish had grown into a farewell for which everyone was prepared except the person expected to accept her exit gratefully.

Their son stood beside the till holding a present. Vesna asked whether he had known. He said his father had explained that she found it difficult to admit publicly how tired she was. Vesna was tired. She was tired of orders, accounts and occasional arguments with customers, but she still loved unlocking the shop before everyone else. She did not know how to explain the distinction before people already applauding her future happiness.

She asked them to turn off the music. She said she appreciated the intention but had not decided to retire. Zoran laughed and tried to hug her, saying they could discuss everything at home. Vesna remained in front of the cake. If her departure could be announced publicly, it could also be corrected publicly. She did not ask the guests to choose sides. She

simply said she would be coming to work on Monday.

The celebration continued awkwardly, with excessively sweet pastries and conversations avoiding the future tense. Afterwards Zoran claimed he had wanted to show gratitude. Vesna asked why gratitude required her to surrender her key. Then he admitted he had promised their son a larger role and thought she would agree more easily before guests. He had chosen the cake not as a gift, but as pressure made pretty enough that nobody would recognise it.

On Monday they discussed schedules, responsibilities and what their son actually wanted to take over. Vesna gained free Saturdays while retaining the work she loved. Zoran stopped announcing her plans. They discarded the cake's inscription, but photographs of the first display remained on the wall. When a customer asked about retirement, Vesna said she would let him know when she had that news herself. Then she opened a new box of stock and continued a day that still belonged to her.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Menu That Promised Too Much

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-menu-that-promised-too-much/

The restaurant entrance announced an entirely vegetarian evening. Guests had bought their places in advance, choosing between two meat-free menus. Irma was preparing side dishes while her head chef finished the sauce. Reaching for an empty container, she read the chicken stock label. She asked where the vegetable stock they had ordered together was. The chef said the supplier had not delivered it and a small difference would not alter the evening's experience.

Irma knew the issue was not flavour. People in the dining room had been promised something specific. She did not know their reasons and did not need to. The chef argued that explaining would create unnecessary panic, especially when several plates had already gone out. Irma asked him to stop service and tell the guests what had happened. He replied that she was paid to cook, not to run the restaurant before an audience.

A waitress heard the final sentence. She returned with a question from a guest checking the ingredients. The chef told her to answer according to the printed menu. Irma removed her apron and went into the dining room with her. She did not address the whole restaurant. She approached the table and clearly explained the change. The guest put down her fork. A man at the next table overheard and called a waiter. Within minutes no silence seemed ordinary anymore.

The owner emerged from his office and asked Irma to speak behind closed doors. She said they could talk once the guests had accurate information. The head chef now described it as an error of judgement rather than deliberate deception. That distinction did not restore the guests' opportunity to choose. Some left, some accepted another dish and several requested refunds. Nobody needed to explain their personal beliefs for their decision to be respected.

The next morning Irma received a day off she had not requested. The owner posted an apology online, but his first draft tried to reduce the matter to a staff misunderstanding. The waitress told him she would not confirm that account. Only the second statement clearly identified what had been served. The dinner became local news, and for several weeks the restaurant received more questions than bookings. Irma took no pleasure in that, knowing how many colleagues depended on those tables.

She returned to work after a discussion establishing that every menu change would be explained before service. The chef apologised briefly, without warmth. They did not become close. A month later another ingredient was unavailable. This time the waiter explained the substitution before taking an order, and the guest calmly chose another dish. Through the kitchen door Irma watched the ordinary conversation that could have prevented the entire earlier scandal.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Wall for a Missing Painting

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-wall-for-a-missing-painting/

The exhibition poster featured a painting leaning against Danica's bedroom wall. The curator, Viktor, had photographed it the previous spring when he came to inspect her husband's artistic estate. They had discussed a possible loan, but Danica had not agreed. It was the last painting her husband completed. She was not ready to see it under gallery lights, surrounded by people discussing her grief as an interesting detail in the artist's biography.

Viktor called the poster a misunderstanding that would now be difficult to undo. They had already printed the catalogue and secured a television preview. Danica repeated that the painting was staying with her. He then mentioned how hard he had worked to gain recognition for her husband. The sentence sounded like a bill. Danica showed him out, surprised by her own firmness. Afterwards she sat beside the painting, angry at being made to feel rude in her own home.

A week before the opening, a young curator named Hana called. She needed dimensions for transport. Danica explained that there would be no transport. Hana was silent for a long time, then said she would check the paperwork. All she found was Viktor's note stating that a verbal agreement had been reached. There was no signature, collection date or message confirming Danica's consent. For the first time she wondered whether her inexperience was really the gallery's main problem.

Hana requested a public programme correction. Viktor refused. He believed Danica would change her mind once she saw how many people expected her. In place of the painting he installed a label saying the work was delayed by technical difficulties. Danica did attend the opening, keeping her coat on. When a reporter asked about the difficulties, she simply said she had never authorised the loan. The microphone was on, and Viktor stood close enough to hear everything.

There was no shouting. That made the situation worse. People drifted from the empty wall towards other works, avoiding the curator's eyes. Hana removed the inaccurate label and wrote a new one without excuses. Viktor later told her she had destroyed their shared effort. She replied that the effort had been real and the promise invented. She did not resign that evening. The next morning she requested that her name be removed from his statement.

At home Danica took off her coat and switched on the lamp beside the painting. The next day's newspaper covered the scandal more than the exhibition. She took no pleasure in that. She knew how many other painters had lost attention because of Viktor's need to make the grandest announcement. She sent Hana a message of thanks without offering another date. The painting still belonged in the room where she could look at it without an audience, and that decision owed nobody a ceremonial ending.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Coffee for His First Wife

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/coffee-for-his-first-wife/

Her mother wanted to go home after the funeral. Dunja asked her to come inside for at least a coffee. All morning she had held Dunja's arm, found tissues, and remembered where the car was parked. She had been divorced from the man they had just buried for twenty-one years. His second wife, Branka, sat in the living room among people telling her that she had to eat something.

Aunt Vera stopped Dunja's mother at the kitchen door. She did not raise her voice, which made the scene worse. She said they ought to show consideration for the widow. Dunja held an empty tray in one hand and still held her mother's elbow with the other. "I invited her," she replied. Her aunt looked toward the living room as though someone there had the authority to overrule her sentence.

Her mother began taking off the coat she had already put on. Then she pulled it back on. Dunja recognized the movement from her childhood, when her parents would stop talking and her mother would head somewhere without explanation. "Don't make a scene over me," she whispered. But there was already a scene. Two cousins had stopped eating, and her aunt was now explaining more loudly that there were such things as order and decency.

Branka stood and came over. Dunja expected a verdict, perhaps a demand that everybody finally stop. Instead, Branka asked her mother whether she still took her coffee without sugar. They knew each other from two birthdays and a hospital corridor. "I haven't the strength today to be jealous of your divorce," she said, then began crying in the middle of a sentence that had almost sounded like a joke.

They sat at the kitchen table. They did not become friends or begin exchanging pleasant memories of the same man. Her mother passed

Branka some water, and Dunja found a clean cup. Her aunt carried the tray into the other room and did not return to their table. Through the window, they watched a neighbor trying to close his trunk over an oversized wreath. That ordinary, awkward sight briefly gave them something else to look at.

Before leaving, her mother hugged Branka, briefly and cautiously. Dunja walked her to the car. "I didn't come to prove that I used to be his," her mother said. "I came because you're mine." Only then did Dunja cry as she had been unable to at the cemetery. Later she washed three cups, one at a time. She did not answer her aunt's message about inappropriate behavior that evening.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Family According to the Price List

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/family-according-to-the-price-list/

On the poster, a smiling couple held two bags beneath words announcing time for the whole family. Alma suggested buying family membership. She had lived with Jasmin for eleven years. They shared a home, expenses, and care for his father. They had never married, partly from conviction and partly because something always seemed more pressing. They arrived at the recreation centre on promotion day, with music and a presenter's voice coming from the hall.

The woman at the desk asked whether they were married. Alma said they were partners. The woman paused, then summoned the owner. He explained that the package applied to real families. He said it politely, almost casually, as though explaining two towel sizes. Jasmin put his wallet on the counter. Alma touched his hand, more to feel him there than to stop him.

She asked what he meant by a real family. The owner pointed to the price list and said he wanted no complications. Otherwise people would sign up with anybody. Alma was not asking him to change prices for her. She said he could explain conditions without invalidating a life he knew nothing about. In the queue behind them, a woman quietly said they could afford two ordinary memberships anyway. Jasmin replied that affordability was no longer the subject.

The presenter noticed the delay and approached with his microphone still on. The owner tried turning the conversation into cheerful speculation about when they would finally marry. Several guests laughed. Alma said she would not arrange a wedding between the till and the trainer lockers. She asked the presenter to switch off the microphone. He immediately complied, unlike the owner, who continued explaining that he had meant no harm.

They left without memberships. At home Alma was angry that such a small thing had hurt. Jasmin did not call it small. He recalled her driving him to his father, their choosing a fridge together and arguing about curtains. He did not list these as evidence for a counter. He simply spoke about their day, composed of things that had long been shared.

Later they found another place with a simpler package for two people. At their first session they got lost looking for changing rooms and laughed at their own clumsiness. Alma found Jasmin's spare socks mixed with hers in the locker. She brought them home in the same bag. They needed no new name for what they had been doing for years.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Balloons for a Waste-Free Day

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/balloons-for-a-waste-free-day/

Mirza delivered the balloons in a van whose window his wife held open so she could see the mirror. Green and white circles pushed between their seats. They had been ordered for a waste-free day in the park. Mirza thought he was making two large decorations beside the stage. Emina had prepared bags to take everything away afterwards. The job was small, but the organiser had promised recommendations for several autumn events.

Only after they installed the stands did the presenter ask for scissors. For the finale they would cut the strings and release every balloon. Mirza looked at him, convinced he was joking. Beyond the park were houses, gardens, and roofs where assorted rubbish already collected. He said he would not release his balloons over them. The presenter explained that it was intended as a beautiful message. Emina looked at the bags in the van, suddenly unnecessary in someone else's plan.

The organiser arrived ten minutes before the start. He spoke quickly, watching the time. Everything had been announced, people expected a closing moment, and they could not change the programme over one personal objection. Mirza suggested leaving the balloons tied and raising the jointly made fabric flags instead. The organiser said those were difficult to see. He wanted what he had already imagined, rather than a better idea.

The conflict became public when the presenter invited the crowd to count down. Mirza remained beside the stand and did not supply scissors. Someone in the front shouted that he should stop spoiling the fun. Emina approached her husband. She made no speech. She began untying the lower cord to move the entire decoration behind the stage. Two volunteers helped. The countdown dissolved into confused murmuring, and the presenter announced the music too early.

The organiser paid the agreed fee but crossed future dates out of his notebook before them. It hurt Mirza more than he wanted to admit. In the van he told Emina perhaps he could simply have looked away. She did not reply that they had saved the world. She said she did not know how they would replace the lost work either, but tomorrow she would struggle to walk those streets and see their strings on the fences.

They took the balloons to the workshop. Some were used for indoor decorations; others were deflated and put away with the remaining materials. The park returned to ordinary walkers the following morning. Mirza went there for a forgotten stand. On a bench he found a fabric flag left after the music. He took it with him, because even a good idea was no reason to leave something for others.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

An Answer from the Back Row

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-answer-from-the-back-row/

Sanel knew the answer before the host finished the question. He wrote the novel's title on the slip and pushed it towards his partner Irma. She added their initials. It was their first quiz at the bookshop that moved shelves aside and set up tables in the evenings. Sanel liked reading during breaks between truck journeys. Irma knew geography. They seemed a perfectly respectable team until his former teacher recognised him.

Mr Žunić sat at the neighbouring table. He approached smiling and said he had not expected Sanel somewhere like this. Literature had not been his strength at school. Sanel said school was twenty-five years ago. His teacher patted his shoulder as though accepting a joke and returned to his companions. Irma noticed Sanel wrote his next answer smaller than the previous one.

When they took the lead, the teacher raised a hand. He said phones should be checked, especially for the team that suddenly knew everything. He looked at Sanel. Their phones were in a bag beneath the table, under the rule applying to everyone. The host asked whether he had reason for suspicion. The teacher replied that he had known the man since school. The bookshop fell into that uncomfortable silence in which an adult is publicly returned to a child's chair.

Sanel reached towards the bag, ready to hand over his phone simply to end the discomfort. Irma did not stop his hand. She asked the teacher whether he knew any book Sanel had read since school. He said that was not the point. Sanel put the bag back beneath the table. He told the host he could apply the same rule to everybody, but he would not accept a special search based on one man's memories.

The quiz continued. They did not win because they missed the final two answers. For a moment that even relieved Sanel, then he grew angry with

himself. He did not want his own mistake to become a gift to someone else's conviction. On the way out his teacher said he had meant nothing personally. Sanel replied that personal was precisely what he had meant, since he had mentioned no conduct from that evening.

Irma suggested going elsewhere next time. Sanel looked at the poster for the next quiz and said he would come back after all. He liked the bookshop. Walking to the car he recounted the novel from the first question, too lengthily and with too many minor characters. She listened until she had to admit she was lost. He laughed and began again, more simply this time.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Lift for Respectable Shoes

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-lift-for-respectable-shoes/

A notice appeared on the lift doors instructing delivery workers to use the stairs. There was no separate goods lift. Nor was there any explanation beyond the handwritten word 'cleanliness'. Jasmina read the notice while taking out rubbish, then continued to the bins. Later she would remember most clearly that first passage past the paper, calm enough because her name was not on it.

That afternoon she expected two large boxes of books, the final part of her move. The courier rang from downstairs and asked whether she could come down. She said delivery to her door had been arranged. When he explained the lift rule, there was no accusation in his voice. He sounded like someone who regularly encountered such obstacles between two addresses. Jasmina looked at the seventh floor displayed above the lift and said she was coming.

Her partner Rade went down with her. In the entrance hall, the neighbour who had posted the notice explained that not everybody could tread on the lift's new floor. Rade looked at the work shoes of the man beside the boxes and said the rule did make sense. Jasmina asked whether he would say the same if the courier came in a suit. The neighbour laughed, convinced this proved his point. She did not laugh.

She lifted a box and invited the courier to enter with her. The neighbour blocked the doors. He said the residents' meeting had decided, although most people Jasmina knew had not even heard of a meeting. She did not begin arguing about minutes. She asked whether he would carry the boxes to the seventh floor. The courier put his box down and said he had no time to attend their meeting. He had many addresses left.

Jasmina offered to accept the parcel downstairs and completed the delivery so as not to delay him. Then she and Rade carried the books into

the lift, whose floor both had walked on in the same shoes the previous day. Upstairs she told him the ugliest part was how easily he had accepted the distinction. She did not claim she had immediately done better. She had seen the paper that morning.

The notice was removed after a noisy residents' discussion. The lift floor did not remain clean forever. Several days later Rade accepted a grocery order and held the door for the delivery woman. Jasmina heard him apologise for the earlier rule. She did not see him because she remained in the flat. She hoped he would have said the same if she could not hear.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Coat He Knew Was Not His

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-coat-he-knew-was-not-his/

The coat was too broad across Mladen's shoulders and much softer than his own. Vida noticed as soon as he put it on. She said they had given him someone else's. He looked towards the cloakroom attendant, a young woman surrounded by people who had all decided to leave at once. He shrugged and fastened a button. Vida thought he had not heard. She repeated it more quietly, moving close to his ear. 'I know,' he answered.

They stood in the foyer after the concert to which he had invited her. All evening he had discussed good manners, irritated by phones in the audience and people applauding at the wrong moments. Now he headed towards the exit wearing a coat he had not bought. Vida caught his sleeve and told him to return. He replied that the cloakroom could hardly remember who had left what, and nobody would be without clothing because his coat was still there.

Behind them a distressed man explained that his car key was in his coat pocket. The attendant searched the tags, growing redder. Mladen put his hand in the pocket, felt the key, and continued towards the door. That little movement decided the evening. Vida stopped holding him. She turned and said loudly enough to be heard, 'I think you're looking for this coat.'

Mladen acted surprised. He spoke about similar colours and crowds, trying to laugh off the misunderstanding. The man took the coat and recognised a scratch on its button. The attendant apologised. Mladen told her to be more careful next time. Vida looked at him, then told the woman that he had already admitted knowing about the exchange. The smile with which he tried to end the conversation remained on his face a few moments too long.

Outside he accused her of humiliating him before strangers. Vida stood in her ordinary coat, buttoned to her neck. She had not known that after eight months together she would learn most about him beside a cloakroom. She said she had not taken his dignity, only someone else's clothing. She had no wish to debate whose coat it was or how wealthy its owner might be.

She called a taxi and left alone. The following day Mladen sent a photograph of his own coat label as proof that it had not been cheap either. She studied the message, realising that in his version of the conversation they were still negotiating the value of things. She replied that she did not want to continue the relationship. She did not save the photograph. She did save the taxi receipt, because she needed to calculate that month's expenses.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Certificate for the Most Children

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-certificate-for-the-most-children/

They prepared certificates for the thirtieth school reunion. Nobody had requested them, but the organiser thought every celebration needed a programme. Men received awards for the largest company, the farthest business trip, and the longest service in one job. Women were assigned the most children, the longest marriage, and the least altered appearance. Gordana listened from the middle of the room in a new dress bought with her first wages after finishing university.

Her certificate was for the most children. She had four, all now grown, and loved them without needing a stamp to certify it. When the organiser called her, she stood and accepted the paper. He thrust the microphone towards her to say something about her greatest achievement. Gordana looked at the women at her table. One had no children and was trying to appear uninterested in what would next emerge from the folder.

Gordana said she had completed a degree in occupational safety that year. The organiser interrupted to say that naturally he meant family. She repeated what she had completed and added that she worked at a small manufacturing company. Someone at the back called that it was nice at her age. Gordana put the paper on the table, still holding the microphone. She asked whether they intended to award the men prizes for the number of school smocks washed or babies put to sleep.

Several people laughed, then stopped when they realised this was not leading towards a prepared joke. The organiser explained that not everything should be taken seriously. Gordana said she had spent most of the evening listening to serious information about other people's businesses. Her marriage and children mattered, but they were not the only named parts of her life. She returned the microphone before he began another speech about misunderstood intentions.

Afterwards different people approached. Some supported her; others explained that she had spoiled the atmosphere. Her friend without children brought a glass of water and asked what exams had been like after so many years. They talked for twenty minutes. It was the first conversation that evening in which Gordana did not have to shorten her answer to fit someone else's idea of her.

She took the certificate home and showed her children. Her youngest son asked whether the prize should be divided into four shares. They stuck it on the fridge, surrounded by her actual shift schedule. The following day the organiser wrote in the shared group that he would not prepare a programme next time. Gordana replied that she would gladly come. For the first time she wrote that without reservation.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Poem Without a Happy Ending

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-poem-without-a-happy-ending/

Leona had written a poem about a glass left on the table after the other person moves out. It was not particularly long. There was no betrayal, no culprit, and no statement that tomorrow would be better. At the end, the woman washed the glass and returned it to the cupboard. Leona's friend Dunja said she especially liked that ending. She sent it to an open call for a literary evening at a small cultural venue.

The organiser accepted the poem and asked Leona to arrive early. When she arrived, tables were already decorated with orange ribbons, and the wall announced that they were celebrating new beginnings together. Leona had never seen that slogan before. The organiser now proposed a small alteration: after the cupboard, she should add something about an open window, new love, or at least a smile. The evening, she explained, should lift people's spirits.

Leona said the woman had not opened a window yet. The organiser laughed as though the writer had taken her own invention too seriously. She gave her a pencil and told her to think while the others read. Leona sat beside Dunja. A few months earlier she had left a real marriage, but the poem was not a report. She did not want to prove to the audience or organiser how personally sad she was before being allowed a sad ending.

When called, she read the poem as written. The organiser did not immediately let her step down. Into the microphone, she asked where hope was in all of this. Leona looked at her paper, then the water glasses on the tables. She said she did not know where hope was that evening. She had come to read a poem, not brought it for repair. Someone in the room sighed with laughter, someone else with discomfort.

The next writer closed his notebook and said his story did not have a particularly cheerful ending either. The organiser replied that nobody

was censoring anyone. From the front row Dunja raised the pencil Leona had left on her chair. She did not have to say whose it was. The evening continued, but the slogan on the wall began looking like someone else's clothing pulled over different people.

Leona did not win the argument. Afterwards the organiser told her she had been rude. At home she read the poem again and changed one word in the middle because it genuinely bothered her. The ending remained. Dunja came for coffee the next day and took another glass from the cupboard herself. They drank water, talked about something entirely different, and kept the window closed because it was windy outside.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Books Behind a Golden Ribbon

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/books-behind-a-golden-ribbon/

A golden ribbon stretched across three shelves. Daria had tied it herself because the library had received fifty new books and she wanted the small ceremony to look respectable. Her husband Bojan, who worked in a local workshop, had agreed to move tables after his shift. The donor Radovan arrived in a suit with a pocket square matching the ribbon. She found that charming. Only later did she wonder whether the resemblance was accidental.

After a short speech, Radovan approached the shelves and explained how the books should be kept. Each should carry his name. Daria had already accepted a discreet gift acknowledgement. But now he added that the copies must not leave the library. People folded pages, spilled coffee, and lost jackets. He wanted his collection to look exactly the same ten years later as it did that afternoon.

Daria held the scissors meant to cut the ribbon. Among the guests stood a reader already waiting for a new novel, a woman who read on the bus to work. Beside her a pensioner was studying a book about fruit trees. Both had heard that Radovan's generosity should remain behind glass that had not even been purchased yet. Daria put down the scissors. She said the books had been accepted for lending.

Radovan laughed, convinced they were negotiating a minor point. He offered to pay for glass doors too. Daria repeated that the library needed books people could use. He then looked towards Bojan and asked whether he could help explain the gift's value. Still in his work shirt, Bojan said his wife understood that better than he did. That was his entire contribution.

The ceremony became awkward. One guest suggested exceptions for reliable readers only. The pensioner asked how one proved reliability

regarding a plum tree. Someone laughed. Radovan requested that the conversation continue privately. Daria agreed, but first told the guests they would announce lending arrangements once the terms were clarified. She did not cut the ribbon.

In the end the donor withdrew ten expensive editions and left the others without restrictions. There was no second ceremony. The first returned book had a folded corner on page sixty-two. Daria carefully straightened it and recorded the next loan. At home she told Bojan the day had gone well. He asked whether they had finally finished the cakes left over from the opening.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Tip He Did Not Take

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-tip-he-did-not-take/

Mrs Baljić always left a good tip and always knew where Tarik would pass. She caught him around the waist as he lowered plates, held onto his hand, or commented on how his shirt fitted. During the first months he avoided her table when possible. Later he calmly asked her twice not to touch him. She laughed as though he had made a particularly good joke. The restaurant owner told him there were far worse customers.

Tarik's partner Ela worked behind the bar. She knew it bothered him and offered to swap some duties, but that evening it was impossible. The guest was celebrating a business success with twelve people. As Tarik brought wine, she pulled him towards her and told the group he was the real reason she came. Someone raised a phone. Tarik set the bottle on the table and moved her hand away.

He spoke loudly enough for neighbouring tables to hear: 'I've asked you not to do that.' The laughter stopped. The guest looked towards the bar and said his girlfriend was obviously jealous. Ela put down the glass she was polishing. 'He's the one speaking to you,' she said. She did not step between them, although her whole body urged her to do something.

The owner arrived wearing the smile reserved for expensive misunderstandings. He asked Tarik to fetch another bread basket and told the guest his staff were tired. Tarik did not leave. He asked for another waiter to take over the table. The owner whispered not to cause trouble over a compliment. Tarik removed his apron, folded it in half, and placed it on a side cabinet. He did not know whether he was entitled to leave before his shift ended. He knew he would no longer stand beside that chair.

In the changing room he needed several attempts to tie his shoelaces. Ela came only after handing the bar to a colleague. She sat beside him

without a triumphant smile. They had no savings for a long period without work, and that hung between them. On the way out, the cook handed them two boxes of dinner. He said the owner was now making excuses to the guests. Tarik did not ask what excuses.

The following day he received a call asking him to return, with a promise that he would not serve that guest. He requested a conversation before agreeing. Ela waited outside the restaurant but did not enter. When he came out, he said he would stay for now while looking for somewhere else. She took his hand. On the way home she did not ask whether he felt brave. She asked what he wanted for dinner.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Weight That Was Not Dancing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-weight-that-was-not-dancing/

Amra bought shoes especially for the class. They had no high heels, only soft soles and a buckle she could fasten without help. She and her husband Elvis had signed up for ballroom dancing because their anniversary was approaching and their wedding video contained three minutes of swaying on the spot. Both wanted to learn something unrelated to groceries and bills. They arrived early, slightly embarrassed by their own excitement.

The instructor asked everyone to line up beside the mirror. He looked at Amra and said Elvis would get a serious workout leading her. Several people laughed. Amra smiled too, the way someone smiles while still searching for a polite interpretation. The instructor continued, recommending that she replace dinner with extra laps around the room. He could not yet know anything about her dancing. The music had not even started.

Elvis opened his mouth, but Amra squeezed his hand. She wanted to ask for herself what her dinner had to do with a waltz. The instructor replied that being honest was his job. He added that people could not be oversensitive when doing serious work. In the mirror she saw a woman retreat behind her partner. Suddenly she understood that this was not a failed joke invented solely for her.

She sat and began unbuckling her new shoes. Elvis sat beside her. The instructor warned them that the course fee was not refundable after teaching began. Amra said they could discuss the money later, because they were leaving now. She was angry that her hands were trembling. The buckle she had fastened immediately in the shop would not open. Elvis waited, holding her ordinary shoes.

Two more couples followed them out. In the hallway, one man admitted that his wife had heard such comments throughout the previous season. He spoke as though that justified staying. She looked at him and said that was precisely why she was leaving now. Amra did not want to lead anything. She wanted to sit somewhere without a mirror covering the entire wall. They went for soup at a nearby restaurant.

After exchanging messages with the school's owner, they received part of their money back. They did not immediately try another school. Weeks later Elvis put music on in the sitting room, and Amra wore her new shoes. Again they merely swayed. When he stepped on her foot, she said they would have to find someone who could teach them after all. They both laughed without a single glance towards her stomach.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Toast with Juice

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-toast-with-juice/

The invitations said the wedding would be alcohol free. Dunja and Tarik added no explanation. Both wanted a short celebration, music they knew, and guests who would remember their conversations the following day. The waiters prepared juices in tall glasses, while Tarik's father brought homemade elderflower cordial. For the first hour nobody seemed unhappy. Then Uncle Rifat produced a bottle from the inside pocket of his jacket.

It began as a joke. He said he had brought assistance for the adults and winked at the men at his table. Tarik approached before he unscrewed the cap. He asked him to leave the bottle in the car. His uncle said a wedding could not pass like a children's birthday party. From the other end of the room, Dunja saw the groom's shoulders stiffening under his new suit.

Rifat asked to make a toast. He stood with the bottle and began talking about customs the young were forgetting. Then he offered Tarik's father a glass and said at least the head of the family should demonstrate how to celebrate. His father remained seated. He had not drunk for years, but had no intention of explaining his past before all the guests. His wife placed her hand on his, and only ice rattling in a waiter's bucket could be heard.

Dunja approached Rifat with an empty glass. He smiled, thinking he had won. She poured elderflower cordial and raised it. 'To the people who came to our wedding,' she said. 'If you need a different celebration, you're welcome to find one tonight.' She did not mention her father-in-law or even glance towards him. Tarik stood beside her and repeated his request that the bottle be taken away.

His uncle left, putting on his coat noisily. His wife stayed, causing more whispering than the argument itself. She said she had paid for her hair and had not yet had any cake. That sentence rescued several frozen smiles. The music started again, too quietly at first, then loudly enough for the groom's father to ask his wife to dance.

The next morning Rifat sent the family messages about the insult. Dunja did not read them on their honeymoon. Tarik answered only once, without inviting his wife to justify herself. At home a jar of elderflower cordial awaited them with a note from his father. The note did not say thank you. It said how much water to add, because he had made this batch particularly strong.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Singles by the Exit

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-singles-by-the-exit/

Seven people sat at the table by the exit, with one empty place for coats. Armin had to stand whenever someone went to the toilet. He had come to the hiking club's annual dinner without a partner, as he had for the previous five years. He had not expected that to become a seating category. In the middle of the room, tables had flowers and two names on each card. Theirs had a bread basket and a sign saying 'others'.

Vesna, recently widowed, removed the sign and wedged it beneath the table's wobbly leg. Everyone laughed except the organiser, Ljubiša. He explained that this was simpler because couples wanted to socialise with couples. He did not answer when asked whom the others wanted to socialise with. He asked Armin to fetch more chairs since he happened to be nearest the door.

Armin brought one. When they sent him for another, he sat down. His membership fee was the same as Ljubiša's, and he had paid for dinner in advance. He had not come to move furniture. At the next table his friend Aida heard part of the conversation and headed towards him with her plate. Ljubiša stopped her, saying she would ruin the seating plan. Her husband was already talking to a colleague at the far end of the room. Apparently the plan applied only to certain people.

Then a couple arrived who had cancelled the previous day. A small table from the office was found for them, with a clean tablecloth and a vase. Vesna approached as the second plate was being laid. She asked whether it could be joined to theirs so they would no longer sit in the draught. Ljubiša told her not to make a drama. She did not raise her voice. She simply took her glass, sat at the new place, and said she was quite comfortable there.

The newly arrived couple exchanged bewildered looks, then sat with her. Aida pulled up a chair. Soon people were carrying plates and choosing their own company. The geometry did not improve; the room became much less orderly. The waiter had to find a passage, but nobody was blocking it with Armin's back any more. Ljubiša spent the rest of the evening saying his efforts were unappreciated.

Returning from an outing the following month, Armin sat beside Vesna on the bus. They did not begin a romance, although someone at the back immediately made a joke. They discussed sandwiches, tired knees, and who had brought too much water. Both came alone to the next shared dinner. This time there were no names on the tables.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Price Behind the Mirror

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-price-behind-the-mirror/

Nermin and Sanja sat beside each other, both with wet hair held up by clips. After fifteen years of marriage, they had come to the hairdresser together for the first time. Their daughter had said they would look like two dandelions at the family lunch, so they booked consecutive appointments. They requested almost identical short cuts. Their hairdresser, Lejla, joked that remembering the order would be easier.

Afterwards Sanja reached for her purse. Lejla quoted the price of two men's haircuts. The owner, arranging shampoos behind her, immediately corrected her. A woman's haircut cost considerably more. Sanja looked in the mirror, then at her husband's head. Her hair was actually a little shorter. 'What extra did I get?' she asked.

The owner explained that women required more attention. Nermin had just spent ten minutes discussing the shape of his sideburns. Sanja did not have to mention that. Lejla mentioned it. A hairdryer stopped, along with a conversation by the washbasin. The owner turned to his employee and said that the price list was not a matter for her judgement, especially in front of customers.

Lejla tightened her fingers around the receipt. She had worked there four years and remembered who could not tolerate the smell of hairspray and who needed a lower chair. She could let Sanja pay and preserve a quiet afternoon. Instead she said he would need to explain exactly how she should distinguish the two services, since she had just performed them with the same tools in the same amount of time. A woman with foils in her hair began applauding, which frightened Lejla more than it pleased her.

Nermin wanted to pay the full amount simply so they could leave. Sanja caught his sleeve. They were not arguing about money they lacked. They

were arguing because the woman who had cut their hair was being made to look incompetent before them. Sanja paid the original amount and left Lejla a tip. The owner said she was making a scene. She pointed towards the silent hairdryer and said the scene already had an audience.

The price list did not change that day. A month later Lejla moved to a smaller salon with a single price for a short haircut. Nermin again requested carefully shaped sideburns. Sanja waited for him there with a newspaper and glanced at the clock. 'You can charge him extra,' she said. For the first time, Lejla laughed without looking towards the office door.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Surname That Upset Lunch

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-surname-that-upset-lunch/

I wrote our surname on the envelope in large letters so everyone would know whom the gift was for. Only after the ceremony did I discover my son would no longer carry the same surname as me. He had taken his wife's. I had not heard the part where he mentioned it earlier, or had heard and decided it was a joke. In the restaurant I handed the envelope to his mother and said she needed to explain something to our child. The child was thirty five and paying for lunch for forty people.

My wife did not take the envelope. She said I could ask him. I approached the newlyweds' table wearing an expression familiar from my own father, although I had sworn never to inherit it. My daughter in law immediately stiffened. My son put down his glass and said the decision was as much his as hers. I asked what was wrong with our name. He replied that nothing had to be wrong with one name for someone to choose another.

Someone at the neighboring table asked what we were discussing. Within minutes everyone had an opinion: an uncle mentioned ancestors, an aunt practical documents, and the best man said at least the initials would not change because both names began with the same letter. That angered me further. My daughter in law tried explaining nobody else remained to carry on her family name. My son gently stopped her. He did not want her defending their shared decision through a family report before my relatives.

I went onto the terrace. The bride's mother stood there eating bread because she had not yet had time to sit. I expected her to celebrate her family's victory. Instead she asked to borrow a tissue. She said she would have been equally pleased if they chose a third surname, provided her daughter was happy. I did not entirely believe her but found no polite answer. Through the glass I watched my son laugh at something his wife said and felt lunch passing without me.

I returned and gave them the envelope with its blank side facing up. I delivered no speech and did not claim to have suddenly become a modern man. My son hugged me, and his wife thanked me. Several weeks later I sent them a box of homegrown apples. At the post office I paused at the surname field, then wrote it as it now was. The employee did not look up. The package arrived without difficulty. My son called to say the apples were good, and I asked whether they needed more, as though the whole family could still be recognized through what we sent one another.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Balcony in an Invented Legend

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-balcony-in-an-invented-legend/

Lidija was watering geraniums when she heard her maiden name below the balcony. A guide pointed toward her and told tourists about a young woman who had waited forty years for a sailor. He did not mention that Lidija was sixty four, her former husband was a dental technician, and after their divorce she had not waited for him even forty minutes. A tourist raised her phone. Lidija lowered the watering can and asked exactly whom the guide meant and who had given him her name.

He said it was a local legend. He knew the house and knew she owned it, but believed a little romance harmed nobody. His boss, who owned the small agency, later explained that people loved memorable stories. Lidija replied that she too liked remembering her life, only the version in which she had chosen to leave a bad marriage. She did not want to become decoration for someone's tour, especially decoration offered as evidence of endless female devotion.

The story had already appeared in a brochure without her surname but with a clear photograph of the balcony. Neighbors joked that she was finally famous. Her adult daughter suggested publishing everything online. Lidija did not want to answer with another performance. She wrote the agency a short request to stop using her house and recognizable life as purported fact. She offered a conversation, but not a public account of her divorce to prove the legend untrue.

The following weekend the guide brought another group. Lidija went downstairs before he began and calmly said she did not consent to the story. Some tourists apologized; others asked what the balcony woman's true fate had been. "At present she's making lunch," she replied. "The rest belongs to her." For the first time the guide had no beautiful ending and led the group toward the square. One traveler lowered her phone and wished Lidija a pleasant day without another question.

The agency withdrew the brochure and changed the route. Not every photograph or rumor disappeared, but groups stopped pausing outside her door. Several weeks later her former husband came for a box of old books finally found in the attic. Lidija told him the legend. He laughed and said he would like such a patient version of the past. She handed him the box and closed the door when he left. On the balcony waited flowers that genuinely needed watering before sunset.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Roof That Did Not Fit the Photograph

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-roof-that-did-not-fit-the-photograph/

Marina learned their neighbor had won an award for the loveliest balcony only when people with a camera arrived outside the building. He lived on the top floor with a small exit onto the shared terrace. In the photograph of his green corner she recognized her lemon tree, another neighbor's lavender, and two pots they had jointly bought for the residents' garden. Everything had been moved beside his window. The rest of the roof remained outside the frame, along with the bench where everyone usually sat.

The neighbor, Boris, said the prize benefited the building because they would receive new watering equipment. Marina asked why the entry carried only his name and described years of personal work. He replied that someone had to represent the community. While they argued, his husband brought chairs out for filming. He looked surprised when Marina said the plants were not Boris's. Apparently even at home the story contained a different number of participants from the actual terrace.

Marina touched none of the pots. She asked the camera operator to walk to the other side of the roof before the interview. She showed the shared space, the empty spots where plants had stood until recently, and neighbors who came to water them. She did not claim Boris had never helped. He had, particularly carrying soil. But help did not mean he could turn everyone else into the backdrop to his success. An older neighbor approached her lavender and simply called it the name she had given it for years.

The crew did not film the planned story. Organizers temporarily paused the award and spoke with residents. Boris was furious that they had

spoiled a rare chance for the building to receive something free. His husband asked why communal benefit required concealing communal work. He did not immediately answer. Later he withdrew the entry. The equipment went to another winner, and plants returned to locations where the sunlight suited them rather than a photograph meant to glorify somebody.

For several days the terrace was quieter. Then Boris arrived with a bag of soil and asked whether help was needed. Marina delivered no grand speech about forgiveness. She pointed to two heavy pots needing repotting. He worked beside the others without a camera or promised prize. His husband brought lemonade and left the pitcher on the shared bench. When the sun set, nobody remained outside the picture, including the neighbor who had first tried taking its best part for himself alone.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Hundred Numbers in a Coat Pocket

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-hundred-numbers-in-a-coat-pocket/

Aida spent the afternoon selling raffle tickets at a school charity fair, then realized that evening their matching stubs were still in her coat pocket. They should have been given to the person filling the drum. The first prize had already been drawn. On stage, her partner Vedran called for the lucky winner, smiling broadly beneath lights he had installed himself. Aida removed the thick bundle of paper and felt her palms sweat over the simple fact that she had made the mistake.

She approached between two draws. "We need to stop," she said. Vedran examined the numbers, then the audience. He replied that she could add them now and nobody would have reason to complain. Aida reminded him that the two most expensive prizes had already been awarded. He said the event's purpose was helping the library, not perfect mathematics. Behind them stood people who had bought five or ten numbers using money they did not have entirely to spare.

Aida requested the microphone. Vedran held it several seconds longer than necessary, then handed it over. She said some numbers had been omitted through her mistake and the draw was stopping until they agreed on a fair next step with those present. She did not try hiding responsibility inside the words technical problem. Someone shouted that everything was rigged. Aida replied that she understood the anger but could show precisely which numbers she held and when she had sold them.

The discussion was loud and lengthy. With the winners' consent, they returned the first prizes for another draw and offered refunds to anyone no longer wishing to participate. Several people left. One winner was particularly angry, so they waited to reach a clear agreement with him too instead of shouting him down. The event fell almost an hour behind. The library received less money than expected, and afterward Aida helped

stack tables with guilt that had not vanished simply because she admitted the error.

On the way home Vedran said she had embarrassed him. Aida replied that she had not entrusted him with her mistake for him to turn it into their shared lie. They spoke coldly for several days. Later he admitted protecting the appearance of good organization more than the people they were working for. At the next fair, stubs were handed over immediately before a second person. Aida left her coat far from the table. Vedran brought her tea and checked the drum together with her before the event began.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Jam from an Orchard That Wasn't There

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/jam-from-an-orchard-that-wasnt-there/

The label showed an orchard drawn from a photograph in Sanja's grandmother's album. The orchard had long since been sold. During the first year Sanja and her husband genuinely made jam from purchased fruit, openly stating its origin. Then orders increased, time diminished, and her husband found a small producer who could send finished jars without labels. Sanja accepted a temporary arrangement. The word temporary remained in the kitchen while at markets they told increasingly beautiful stories about their own family harvest.

Then an organizer invited them to demonstrate the process live. Her husband called it a wonderful opportunity. Sanja suggested explaining their partnership with another producer. "People buy a story," he replied, putting empty jars in a box. She held one and thought of the woman who had asked the previous week whether she could bring her grandchildren to see the orchard. Sanja had replied that it was not currently a suitable time. She could no longer count how many different times had been unsuitable.

At the demonstration everything smelled of fresh plums, but the recipe they showed was not the recipe for the product on their table. A visitor asked how such a short process achieved the same consistency every time. Her husband began discussing family experience. Sanja put down the wooden spoon. "We don't cook the jam in these jars," she said. "Today we're making something else, and we haven't explained that to you." Her voice was not strong, but people in the front row heard every word.

Her husband looked at her as though she had smashed the entire stall. Sanja named the actual producer, explained when they began buying finished jam, and offered refunds to customers who had bought it because of the false provenance. The organizer stopped the

demonstration and asked them to remove the misleading labels. Visitors were angry in different ways: some still liked the jam, others felt hurt at supporting invented effort. Neither opinion could restore what their words had lacked.

At home they talked late into the night. Sanja refused to carry sole responsibility for telling the truth but acknowledged her months of silence. They reduced the business and began selling under an accurate description with the producer's name. Earnings fell. At the next market an old customer turned a jar in his hands for a long time. Sanja did not hurry him. When he asked whether the plums were sour, she opened a sample and offered a clean spoon. That answer, at least, needed no nonexistent tree.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The First Shovel for the Last Bench

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-first-shovel-for-the-last-bench/

Gordana came to the park opening in her work jacket because she had spent the morning repairing the back of the last old bench. On stage, speakers said an abandoned space had finally been returned to people. Around her stood the same people who had mowed grass, collected glass, and planted flowers for years. The new lighting was good. So was the new path. But abandoned was a word that turned their Saturdays into time nobody needed to know about.

Her husband Dragan whispered that she should not start an argument. He had helped paint the benches but disliked speaking publicly. Gordana waited until the speeches ended. When residents were invited to share impressions, she raised her hand and thanked them for the lighting. Then she asked why the presentation mentioned none of the neighbors' existing care. The presenter said there was no need to politicize a pleasant event. She had mentioned no politics. She had mentioned people standing before him with traces of the same paint on their sleeves.

An organizer tried taking her microphone with a promise to speak later. Gordana returned it herself but did not leave. She went to her bench and sat. Several neighbors sat beside her and along the nearby path edge. Photographers now had two scenes: the ceremonial ribbon and people already using the park. Dragan stood between them holding her bag and trying to decide whose comfort he owed that afternoon.

Eventually he joined her. He made no speech. He took water from the bag and offered it to the man who had watered flowers voluntarily for years. A journalist approached to ask why they sat separately. Gordana explained without disparaging the new work. She wanted two truths to fit into the same report: the park had received useful investment, and the community had not been born that morning. Later the organizer had to listen to other people whose names he had not previously known.

A week later the project website published an addition acknowledging the neighbors' work, and they too were invited to a maintenance meeting. Gordana became neither famous nor specially honored. She still wore the same jacket and checked loose boards. Once Dragan brought her a sandwich while she worked, saying he was glad she had ignored his whisper. They sat beneath new lighting on an old bench. They did not have to choose which mattered more for both to have a place in the same park.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Voice That Gave No Blessing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-voice-that-gave-no-blessing/

After dinner the hall lights dimmed, and a photograph of Alma's father appeared on the screen. He had died two years earlier. Alma assumed they would play an old recording from a family trip. Instead she heard a voice resembling his wish her new husband happiness and say he had always known the two would marry. Her father had never met her husband. They had met only a year after his death.

Guests looked toward her, waiting for tears. Alma stood and asked them to stop the recording. Her brother, who organized the surprise, remained holding his phone. Someone said it was touching and should not be interrupted. Alma repeated her request more loudly. When silence came, chairs moving and a cough from the back rows could be heard. Her husband approached and asked whether she wanted to leave the hall, without trying to explain to others what she was feeling.

In the corridor her brother said he had used old messages and a tool capable of constructing a similar voice. He wanted their father to be present. Alma replied that presence was not the same as speaking words a person had never said. What hurt most was giving his voice a blessing they could not ask him to provide. Her brother insisted their father would surely have wanted the same. Alma said she would like to believe that too, but a wish was not a recording of the past.

They returned to the hall without the message. The presenter briefly explained that the speech was not authentic and would not continue. He did not invite guests to vote on whether the idea was beautiful. Alma spent the rest of the evening with mixed feelings: she loved her brother, was angry with him, and regretted that several minutes of such an important day had been taken from her. Her husband did not ask her to smile for photographs. They sat until she herself wanted to dance.

A week later her brother brought genuine recordings of their father, unaltered, and apologized without explaining that everyone else had cried. Alma did not want to erase memories through fear of what had happened. Together they played a short video of their father trying to open a beach umbrella and laughing when the wind turned it inside out. It contained no marriage advice or blessing written afterward. His real laughter could be heard, imperfect and familiar enough for Alma to lower her shoulders for the first time that afternoon.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Photograph Without the Kitchen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-photograph-without-the-kitchen/

The invitation said the hotel's success belonged to everyone. Amra put it on the refrigerator and bought a new blouse for the first time in ages. She had worked in the kitchen for eight years. On the celebration day, her supervisor asked her to arrive early just to help arrange the cold buffet. When she arrived, she found her name on the serving rota alongside every kitchen worker and cleaner who had also received formal invitations.

Receptionists were already sitting at decorated tables. Amra did not blame them: nobody had told them how the evening was arranged. Her husband, invited as her guest, stood by the entrance holding her coat while she tied an apron over the new blouse. He asked where to sit. She did not know. The seating plan contained no places for their partners, because someone had evidently assumed that employees serving the meal had nobody to bring to a celebration of their own success.

When the photographer called all staff for a group picture, the manager said the kitchen could come later. The food could not be abandoned. Amra placed her tray on a side table and asked a colleague to wait. In front of the guests, she asked whether they were invited to a celebration or assigned an extra shift. The manager laughed and said they were all one big family. Amra pointed to her husband, still holding the coat, and replied that her family currently lacked a chair.

A receptionist rose and offered her seat, then realized herself that this would merely move the problem. Several colleagues took over serving while an arrangement was reached. Dinner paused, the photographer lowered the camera, and the manager finally had to hear a question he could not solve by moving people out of frame. Kitchen staff had their extra work recognized and places made for their guests. That did not erase the discomfort, and not everyone continued pretending the evening

was magical.

Amra sat beside her husband and ate the food she had prepared, this time slowly enough to taste it. In the final photograph she stood in her new blouse without an apron. A month later the next event's schedule arrived with shifts and guests clearly separated. When the manager used the word family again, Amra did not smile. She simply asked who would work and how much they would be paid. The answer was concrete, allowing her to continue her work without another performance of gratitude.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Guests Before the Lowered Barrier

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/guests-before-the-lowered-barrier/

Dunja came to photograph her parents' new holiday apartments and found neighbors standing before a barrier. Her mother said people loved causing problems whenever someone invested in anything. Her father displayed the new remote control as proof the property was finally organized. Beyond the barrier ran the path along which Dunja had carried a towel to the river as a girl. Now a sign promised guests peace without passersby, as though neighbors were noise that could be switched off with a button.

Among those gathered stood Mr. Jovo, who had maintained the path while her parents worked abroad. He was not asking to enter the apartments' courtyard. He wanted access that reached the bank without a detour across a busy road. Her father replied that people left rubbish anyway. Jovo raised the old bucket he carried to collect litter but said nothing. Dunja found his silence more uncomfortable than the whole argument.

The opening was scheduled for noon. Relatives arrived, along with a local musician and two guests who thought the gathering outside the barrier was part of their welcome. Dunja took no pictures. She told her parents she would not create a promotional story about a place whose peace began by making other people's daily route harder. Her mother said she was turning her back on them before everyone. Dunja replied that everyone was precisely who stood outside the gate, and they could not forever portray the world only through photographs of an empty riverbank.

The dispute was not resolved in one day. Her parents temporarily opened the barrier, then discussed a clear separation of the path from the private courtyard with neighbors and the relevant office. They moved part of the fence, lost several planned parking spaces, and installed a simple

passage. Dunja did not determine the land's legal status, but refused to beautify the conflict while it continued. For several weeks she spoke with her father only about practical matters and sent her mother pictures of her own life no longer containing their investment.

When she returned, Jovo carried the same bucket down the unobstructed path. Her father mowed grass on the other side of the new fence. They were not friends as before, but they greeted each other. Dunja sat by the river and took one photograph showing people in the distance. She sent it to her parents. Her father asked whether he could put it on the apartment website. She said yes, provided he did not erase the passersby. This time he replied simply that he would not.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Birthday Without a False Alarm

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-birthday-without-a-false-alarm/

Hena left the restaurant bathroom to find a waiter telling her to hurry because something had happened to her partner. He led her into a side room. In a few steps she imagined a fall, a hospital, and his mother's telephone number she could not find. The doors opened, lights came on, and around twenty people shouted surprise. Nermin stood beside a cake, perfectly healthy, while phones pointed toward her face.

She did not smile. Her hands shook so much she had to put down her bag. Nermin approached saying everything was fine, that it was merely a trick to keep her from suspecting a party. Hena asked who had decided fear was a good introduction to a birthday. A friend replied that the reaction looked excellent on the recording. Then she told them to stop filming immediately. Nervous laughter moved through the room, as though they still expected her to join the agreed version of events.

Hena went outside. Nermin followed carrying a piece of cake, then abandoned it on the first table. She had worked in dispatch for years and knew how many real disasters began with the words that something had happened to someone. But she did not think she needed a special justification for disliking such a joke. She said she felt used: everyone else got an entertaining scene, while she alone had not known what she was agreeing to or why cameras suddenly surrounded her.

Nermin first defended the guests' effort. Then he noticed her hands still shaking. He went back inside, stopped publication of the official recording, and asked those present to remove their own footage. Some apologized; others said nothing was allowed anymore. The celebration fell apart before candles. Hena did not undertake to reassure everyone that she still loved them. She went home with her sister and spent the evening in comfortable clothes, far from the cake intended as the main evidence of good intentions.

Nermin apologized the next day without the word but. Later they also spoke with friends who did not understand why the party failed. They did not agree with everyone. Several weeks later Hena invited a small group for dinner herself and said she wanted to know who was coming and when. Nermin brought flowers, rang the bell, and waited to be let in. Cake arrived after the meal. When they sang, she smiled before noticing that not one phone was raised.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Dress That Asked No Permission

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dress-that-asked-no-permission/

A musician posted the photograph from a dance evening. In it, sixty year old Zora wore a green dress, and her partner Filip rested a hand on her shoulder. He was twelve years younger. Zora's daughter Dunja messaged before eight in the morning: everyone has seen it. She did not say exactly what should have remained hidden. Zora studied the photograph and noticed for the first time that she was laughing with her mouth open, without the hand she usually used to cover her teeth.

Her husband had died four years earlier. Filip had never known him and did not visit the family house. They had met through an outings group, gradually begun dating, and promised nobody a shared old age. Dunja described it to her brother as a scandal their mother was creating in a small town. Her brother called Zora to ask what the neighbors would say. She replied that they would probably say many things and none of them was her plan for Saturday.

Family lunch became a meeting without her consent. Dunja said she worried that Filip was using her. Zora asked on what basis. He borrowed no money, requested no apartment, and made no attempt to isolate her from family. Dunja mentioned his age, then their father's photograph on the shelf. Zora stood, picked up the frame, and wiped away dust everyone noticed only when they needed proof she was forgetting something.

She said she missed her husband even while dancing. She did not have to sit still for grief to be real. Then she asked her children to ask how she was before calling her to account. Lunch did not end harmoniously. Dunja left crying, her brother followed, and Zora packed leftovers into three containers. She told Filip she wanted to be alone that evening. She did not want new love immediately to have to serve as protection from her old family.

A week later Dunja came for a forgotten scarf. Standing in the doorway, she admitted fearing their father would become a secondary figure in family stories. Zora showed her an album and gave her time to leaf through it. Afterward they looked through photographs from the dance together. Dunja did not immediately become fond of Filip, and did not have to. She asked where her mother had bought the dress. Zora gave the shop's address and offered coffee. It was a small conversation, but at last she did not have to ask permission to be alive within it.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Face Beneath the Cheerful Ears

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-face-beneath-the-cheerful-ears/

Ena accepted the festival mascot job for two performances with a break between them. The rabbit costume was heavy, its head lined with foam that muffled sound. After the second performance the coordinator pointed toward a new group of visitors. Just a few more photographs were needed. Ena's partner Alen operated the sound and raised his thumb, proud that their shared engagement was going well. He did not know Ena had spent an hour trying to reach the room where she could remove the costume and drink water.

She signaled to the coordinator that she needed to stop. He said the sponsor was arriving and the rabbit could not disappear. When she repeated the request, he replied that she had accepted the job herself. Ena thought how their agreement contained words that vanished whenever they needed honoring: break, replacement, finish. People with phones lined up before her, expecting the same wave and cheerful bow, which inside the costume could never change into exhaustion.

At the edge of the stage she removed the rabbit's head. Her hair was wet and her face serious. She neither collapsed nor created a dramatic scene. She simply sat and said she was taking a break. The coordinator hurried to move her out of frame. Alen stopped the music because he saw something happening, then heard the first real part of the conversation. Ena clearly stated how long she had worked without the agreed rest. She did not apologize to children for there being an adult inside the costume.

One parent brought water. Another asked the organizers who looked after staff. The coordinator spoke of a misunderstanding, but a second entertainer also said her promised replacement had not arrived. A short recording began circulating, this time without the planned message of uninterrupted delight. Alen asked Ena whether she wanted to finish working. She said yes. He helped carry the costume, although he knew

the organizer might dislike his choice.

Payment was several days late, and they had to request the agreed amount. Later the organizer hired more people for shorter shifts. Ena refused to return that season. She spoke with Alen about his distant raised thumb: she did not blame him for being unable to know, but asked him in future to ask before announcing that everything was fine. The next weekend they took an ordinary walk. When she sat on a bench, he joined her without checking the time and handed her a water bottle from his bag.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Wedding Free Only on the Poster

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-wedding-free-only-on-the-poster/

When they won a free wedding in a venue's prize promotion, Nađa and Filip thought they could finally invite everyone important. They had planned a modest lunch for around twenty guests because they had only begun paying for their shared apartment. The poster said the prize covered their most beautiful evening. They posed with a large cardboard key and called their parents, laughing so hard they struggled to explain what had happened and where they would celebrate.

At the first venue meeting they learned chairs were included, but covers were compulsory and charged separately. The same applied to cutlery, basic lighting, and staff. Food was not part of the prize, and they could not bring outside catering. The manager described the items as exciting possibilities. Nađa listened while calculating how many guests would have to be omitted for the free evening to become cheaper than their original lunch in a small restaurant.

Filip suggested accepting the cost to avoid appearing ungrateful. Nađa asked whom they owed gratitude for an unexpected bill. She did not want another financial argument before marrying, but wanted even less a decision they would later repay in silence. Together they requested a complete list of what the prize actually covered. It proved to be largely a room during a poorly selling period, with services necessary to use it charged separately.

The organizer nevertheless invited them to a public promotion to describe what the prize meant to them. They came but did not read the prepared statement. Filip calmly explained the difference between the poster and the offer. Nađa said they were declining because the required charges did not suit them. The presenter tried moving to the next speaker, but audience members began asking what exactly was being offered to other couples. They received no immediate applause. They

received an uncomfortable discussion that their smiling photographs could no longer resolve.

The promotion was later changed to list only genuinely included items. Nađa and Filip returned to their smaller lunch plan. Several relatives were disappointed about losing the grand hall but offered no money for the difference. On their wedding day they had twenty four guests and ordinary chairs without covers. When the waiter brought the bill, Filip examined it and smiled at Nađa. The amount was precisely what they had agreed. He put it in his pocket, then invited her to dance between two tables.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Kiss That Was Not News

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-kiss-that-was-not-news/

At rehearsal, the kiss lasted two seconds, exactly as the script required. Afterward Sanela and Omer moved apart, laughed because the coat stand fell over, and continued the scene. The post circulating through town the next day contained neither the stand nor the script. Beneath their faces was a question about what was really happening backstage. It had been published by the amateur theater's page, whose director was desperately trying to sell premiere tickets and cover the hall rental.

Sanela's husband saw the clip during a work break. He knew about the scene and did not accuse her, but it hurt that colleagues had spent the morning joking about his marriage. Omer's wife worked in another city. Three people sent her the clip, each with a supposedly well intended warning. By evening the story had become bigger than the play. People who had never bought a ticket asked which row their partners would occupy and whether watching their reactions would be entertaining.

At rehearsal the director greeted the actors with news that the hall was almost full. Sanela demanded he remove the post and explain that it showed a scene. He replied that audiences were not stupid and a little mystery harmed nobody. Omer removed his costume coat and hung it on the repaired stand. He said he could play an adulterer on stage but did not have to accept it becoming his promotional biography. The other actors fell silent, looking between the premiere and the people they had rehearsed with for months.

The actress managing ticket sales closed her laptop. She said she would sell no further tickets until the matter was corrected. Only then did the director stop talking about a joke. They published the scene's full context and clearly withdrew the insinuation. Some customers requested refunds, apparently having expected a different kind of evening. They postponed the premiere, and Sanela and Omer took several days to speak

with their partners, away from other people's expectations and comments.

When they finally walked on stage, the hall was not full. The kiss remained in the play because they did not want to turn it into forbidden evidence. Afterward the same stand fell, this time deliberately, and the audience laughed at the intended moment. Sanela's husband waited with her coat. Omer called his wife while packing the props. At the exit, the director thanked spectators without further hints. For the first time that evening, what happened backstage was simply work slowly coming to an end.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Smile Cut Out of Its Photograph

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-smile-cut-out-of-its-photograph/

In the photograph, Zerina was laughing because her pastry dough had slipped over the edge of the table. In the advertisement that appeared three months later, her laughter had been carefully cut from that moment. Beside her face stood a jar of dietary supplement and a statement that the product had changed her life. Zerina had never bought it. She saw the photograph on a colleague's phone; the colleague excitedly asked when she had begun working with the well known retailer.

Her friend Sabina had organized the workshop to raise money for pensioners' outings. Zerina had agreed to photographs for a report about the event. She called Sabina expecting a simple mistake. Her friend said the sponsor was using a few pictures, thanks to which the bus for the spring outing was already paid for. She did not understand why a nice photograph bothered Zerina. They had even smoothed her skin slightly, she added, and removed flour from her sleeve.

Zerina sat at her computer and saved the advertisement, its text, and the date. She wrote to the retailer that she did not endorse their product and requested removal of the photograph and statement. She copied Sabina without insults or discussion of the bus. Marketing replied that the material had been supplied as approved. Sabina had checked a box confirming consent from everyone shown. She thought general permission to take photographs covered anything that might later benefit the association.

At a video meeting with the retailer, Sabina tried to speak on her behalf. Zerina asked her to wait. She explained that the issue was not whether she looked attractive enough, but a statement being attributed to her. The company removed the advertisement and published a short correction. Sabina had to renegotiate the sponsorship. The outing was postponed until the association raised the remaining money, and several members

blamed Zerina for spoiling their plans.

She did not attend the next workshop. Later Sabina brought her a dish of pie and said she finally understood the difference between gratitude and permission. She did not add that everyone had become angry for nothing. Zerina let her in, but their conversation was short. A month later she sent a new photograph: two cups and the same dish, now empty. She wrote that Sabina could keep the picture only for herself. Sabina replied with one clear sentence saying she understood, and for the first time since everything happened, they discussed an ordinary lunch.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Boxes Behind the Thank You

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-boxes-behind-the-thank-you/

Amila was arranging hygiene packages in the neighborhood association's warehouse when a photographer and a man in an expensive jacket arrived. Her brother Vedran told her to move the cart so the donor's sign would show more clearly. They placed new labels on boxes she had bought the previous week using their shared fund. Vedran explained that this was only a symbolic display; the real shipment would arrive tomorrow once the truck finished another trip.

Amila moved the cart but recorded the promise in her notebook. Tomorrow became Friday, then the following Tuesday. The association's social page already displayed a thank you for one hundred delivered packages. The warehouse was short of soap, and two families received incomplete bags. When Amila called the driver whose number Vedran had provided, the man said their carrier had never received an order for that address.

Vedran became angry that she was checking behind his back. The donor, he said, had promised support for their rent, and this was no time to embarrass him publicly. Amila asked whether they had received money for the rent. They had not. They stood between shelves they had painted together the previous summer, and she noticed for the first time how easily the word promise could become a box others already counted as available aid.

She brought receipts and photographs of the shelves before filming to the committee meeting. She asked them to change the thank you into an announcement of promised support, clearly stating the delivery status. She did not accuse the donor of theft: nothing of his had arrived. The problem was their inaccurate account. One committee member initially defended Vedran, then recognized her own signature on the receipt for goods presented as someone else's donation. She requested that the

meeting continue without cameras.

They published a correction and began listing only received quantities. The donor withdrew his promise, and Vedran temporarily left the coordinator's position. Amila worried she would lose both the warehouse and her brother. They kept the space through several smaller contributions and a reduced work schedule. At the family table they spoke carefully, like people carrying a full bowl over an uneven floor, unsure whose hand would drop it first.

One Saturday Vedran arrived with four real packages. He also brought receipts, folded in a neat envelope. Amila entered them into the inventory, asking whether he wanted his name recorded. He said the date would be enough. Together they filled the empty shelf halfway. It did not look impressive for a photograph, but everything on it had a weight, a number, and someone it could be handed to that very afternoon.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Name Beneath the Porcelain

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-name-beneath-the-porcelain/

In the photograph of the prizewinning collection, Ajla immediately recognized the small depression beneath the handle. It was not decoration but her thumbprint, which her mentor had praised as the cup's most alive feature. She had made twelve pieces during a paid residency in his workshop. They had agreed to exhibit together under separate names. Now the poster displayed only his, in large white letters across a tablecloth she had also provided.

She sent him a short message with the photograph. He replied that organizers simplified stories and that her time would come. Ajla knew that sentence: she had heard it while cleaning the kiln instead of speaking with journalists, while carrying boxes as others held glasses. Now she opened the folder of photographs showing the cups being made. Every stage had a date, and his proposal for a joint exhibition remained in their messages.

Her boyfriend advised publishing everything that evening. Ajla did not want to turn anger into a disordered accusation. She wrote to the organizer, attached a limited selection of evidence, and requested corrected authorship before the launch. Her mentor called five times. When she answered, he offered money and a future recommendation on condition she contacted nobody else. For the first time, she clearly heard that her silence had a price he already knew how to calculate.

The organizer temporarily withdrew the poster. She reviewed the drawings and requested statements from both of them. The mentor claimed choosing the glaze was enough to make the pieces part of his collection. Ajla did not deny his contribution: she credited it precisely as agreed. That made it harder to present her as ungrateful. To their meeting, she brought one failed cup, cracked before firing, with the same depression beneath the handle and her initials impressed underneath.

The organizer turned the cup toward the window, read the letters aloud, and wrote them down before continuing the conversation.

They held the launch a week later with a corrected description. Her mentor did not attend. Ajla stood beside the pieces and answered questions about temperature, glaze, and slow drying. A few people wanted to hear about the quarrel, but she returned the conversation to the cups. Later she and her boyfriend removed the final box from the workshop. She had no new space, which frightened her. Nevertheless, while wrapping the cracked piece, she left its bottom visible. Her name was no longer a detail that could be hidden beneath the tablecloth.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Applause from Empty Seats

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/applause-from-empty-seats/

When the last guest left the hall, Nela gathered programs from the empty chairs. In the middle remained around forty neat booklets, untouched since before the concert. Outside the entrance, her sister the conductor was already giving a statement to a local website. She spoke of a sold out evening and the need for a larger hall. Nela picked up her wet coat and thought perhaps empty seats simply could not be seen from the stage.

Two days later she received the report for their sponsor. The number of tickets sold was twice what the money in the box supported. The list included people from their neighborhood, including a man who had moved away the previous spring. Nela kept the accounts as a volunteer. The signature was supposed to be a formality, her sister said. A sponsor would not help a choir that seemed, ahead of winter, to interest nobody and be needed by nobody.

Nela took the document to rehearsal. The small room smelled of wet scarves and mint tea. Her sister asked the singers to leave, but Nela did not begin an argument. She said she would not certify sales that had never happened. The conductor put down her pencil and asked whether Nela really had to be the person who took away their heating. She turned all those months of work into an object on the table between them.

The oldest member returned for her glasses and heard the final sentence. She did not request details, only said she would happily pay a larger membership fee if everyone knew about it. That simple offer interrupted the sister's defense. They called a meeting the following evening. Nela showed the actual amounts without naming the falsely listed visitors. Her sister admitted embellishing the figures because she feared the choir closing again, after years spent rehearsing in kitchens.

They sent their sponsor a correction before payment. The support was reduced, and one planned guest performance was canceled. The singers chose two people to keep the records together. Nobody celebrated honesty with music: they had to move rehearsals to a colder room and borrow a heater. For several weeks the conductor addressed Nela only on business. At a family lunch they sat apart, between a bowl of potatoes and their father's unsuccessful attempts to change the subject.

For the spring concert, they sold seventy three tickets. Nela wrote that number in large figures, and her sister looked at it before walking onto the stage. Plenty of seats remained empty. Nevertheless, when they finished their final song, the applause lasted long enough for both sisters to smile. After the concert, her sister handed her a program signed by all the singers. On the back was a simple message: Thank you for leaving us a real audience.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Front Row on the Roof

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-front-row-on-the-roof/

The summer cinema posters said the front row was for everyone. Dženana had written that sentence, which was why she personally welcomed the audience by the elevator. On opening night, the elevator stopped one floor below the roof. Above it were twelve narrow steps. The approved drawing included a platform lift, but an illuminated advertising wall now occupied its place. A photographer had already shot it from three angles.

Her program's producer, also the partner she had lived with for seven years, said staff would help anyone who needed it. Behind Dženana, a woman in a wheelchair waited with two purchased tickets. She did not ask to be carried. She asked where she could obtain a refund. Dženana heard her own voice deliver an apology that should have belonged to the entire organization, rather than just the woman at a portable desk.

Drinks were already being poured on the roof. Her partner pulled her into a storage room and explained that without the sponsor's wall they would have had no projector. They would add the platform next summer. His tone was the same one he used when postponing repairs to their window at home. Dženana opened her phone and showed him the message in which, a month earlier, he had confirmed access was complete. He did not answer, only asked her not to cause a scene.

She took the microphone before the film introduction. She announced that the venue failed to meet the promised conditions and offered a refund for every ticket. She neither named the guest nor asked her to explain the problem to the audience. The producer stopped the music so abruptly that everyone thought the film was starting. Instead, a man in the back row could be heard asking why they had sold tickets and displayed those posters at all.

With the manager's permission, they moved the program to the neighboring cultural center's ground floor hall. Volunteers carried chairs while the audience waited in the street. Her partner stayed on the roof, angry that Dženana had ruined his opening. The next morning, she sent management the original drawing and correspondence, including her own mistake in not inspecting the work. She requested a corrected plan before any further sales, and the sponsor accepted relocation of the advertisement.

Three weeks later, the platform passed inspection. The woman with two tickets returned, this time for another screening because she had already seen the first film. Dženana showed her the way without ceremony. Packing boxes waited at home. She did not know whether their relationship would recover, but she no longer accepted describing someone else's humiliation as a technical detail. The front row remained an ordinary row of chairs.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Chair for Those Already Inside

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-chair-for-those-already-inside/

Leta had wanted a place at that table for months. She ran a small grocery shop, was forty-two, and ate too many dinners standing up. The dining club met once a month; everyone brought something they had cooked, and for several hours nobody discussed work. At least that was how her friend Dunja described it. When the invitation finally arrived, Leta prepared a dish she had practiced for days and put on a dress with generous pockets.

At the entrance they gave her an apron saying she had no taste yet. She thought the joke was tolerable. Then they explained the welcome rule. Every new member had to serve dinner and, between two courses, tell the most embarrassing thing they had done for love. The story had to be true. The club founder raised his glass and added that admission required a little courage. The others laughed like people who knew when to begin.

Leta picked up the first plate. She had a story she could offer, something about traveling to the wrong address, amusing enough to conceal her genuinely bad memories. But the new member beside her began describing a breakup and lost his voice halfway through a sentence. The host encouraged him to continue. Dunja stared at the tablecloth. Leta set down the plate and asked the founder what he had told when he was admitted.

He said the rule had been introduced later. She asked whether he could fulfill it now, for balance. His smile disappeared. He explained that not every tradition could be overturned the moment somebody found it uncomfortable. Leta looked around the table. Some people already held their cutlery above her food. She had wanted their company so much that she almost picked up the plate and resumed serving, as though her question had merely been an awkward joke.

Instead she removed the apron. She said she would dine with them if everyone sat down and nobody had to pay for a place with their own shame. The host replied that the club clearly was not for everyone. Nobody interrupted him. Leta left the food; she felt embarrassed about taking people's dinner away. She collected her coat and went out before exhaustion persuaded her to agree that it had only been a joke after all.

Dunja caught up with her at the tram stop. She did not promise to leave the club, and Leta did not ask her to. They bought two hot pastries and ate them on a bench. Later a message arrived from the new member who had lost his voice. He thanked her and asked whether they might exchange recipes sometime. Leta replied that Thursday would work. This time she planned nothing that would keep her at the stove for days.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Voice Beneath the Wrong Title

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-voice-beneath-the-wrong-title/

His brother always said that solemnity would kill Boris before any illness could. Boris never corrected him. Since retiring, he had spent three mornings a week in a small studio reading romance novels. He used another name. He was hiding nothing illegal or particularly unusual, but he did not want jokes about a judge now assuring fictional women that someone would wait for them for the rest of their lives.

He had found the work through a former colleague. At first he read as though delivering a judgment, flatly and cautiously. The producer taught him that a man begging someone to stay sometimes swallowed half a word. That small detail absorbed him. At home he repeated a sentence ten times until it stopped sounding like someone who held all the power in the room. His wife teased him gently, leaving tea outside his study door.

His brother recognized the voice in a friend's car. He saved the recording without mentioning it. He waited for their old association's formal dinner, where Boris was due to present certificates of thanks. At a table full of acquaintances, he connected his phone to a little speaker and played a sentence about a glove the hero had kept in his pocket for years. Then he turned it up. "Our judge has changed the kind of cases he handles," he said, pleased with his introduction.

Several people laughed. Boris put down his cutlery, while the association chairman glanced anxiously at the lectern, as though a romance novel might stain its microphone. The woman who ran the library asked for the title. His brother did not know. She said she thought she had listened to the sequel and that the voice was good, although the final chapter had been too fast. That ordinary criticism completely spoiled the prepared joke.

Boris made no speech about the right to a new life. He asked his brother to stop the recording. He told the chairman that if reading novels bothered him, somebody else could present the certificates. The chairman waved a hand and began looking for a missing envelope. The evening continued somewhat awkwardly. His brother tried twice more to bring the conversation back to the glove, but nobody knew what to add.

The next day Boris asked to record the final chapter again. The producer asked whether somebody had criticized it. He said yes, a reader he trusted. During a break he sent his wife the exact title and pseudonym to forward to the librarian. Then he opened the manuscript of a new book. On the first page its hero lost his hat. Boris laughed and decided to give him a less dignified voice from the outset this time.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Laundry That Spoiled the View

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-laundry-that-spoiled-the-view/

The notice hung beside the mailboxes, neat and laminated. The shared courtyard was to become presentable, so the building committee chairman had ordered the washing lines removed. Vera read it with a basket on her hip. In her ground floor flat, towels took days to dry in winter. Even so, she obeyed at first. She did not want to be the woman who obstructed every agreement with stories about her daily life, as Boris called her at meetings.

A week later four ornamental chairs arrived in the courtyard. Nobody knew who had paid for them or whether everyone could sit on them. Boris said the building was finally acquiring a proper face. His holiday apartment on the third floor had a balcony where so much white bed linen dried every morning that the railing disappeared. Vera knew because her kitchen looked directly toward it.

One Thursday the wind dropped his duvet cover over a new chair. It caught on a metal flower on the back and tore. Boris came downstairs angrily, carrying the other end as evidence against the badly chosen furniture. Vera stood in her doorway with a wet coat. She asked whose blue monograms appeared on the white fabric. They matched the ones in the advertisement for his apartment, pinned above the courtyard ban.

At the next meeting she brought her old basket. She did not empty it theatrically; she simply placed it beside her chair and asked where her things should dry. Boris explained the difference between a private balcony and shared space. Then a resident from the second floor spoke up. His guests were staying in Boris's apartment, whose advertisement promised a quiet, tidy garden. In that listing, the shared courtyard looked like an extension of one holiday rental.

Boris said a successful apartment benefited everyone. Vera asked him to name anyone who had received a share of the income. Someone laughed; someone else told her she was going too far. The meeting dissolved into an argument about chairs, expenses, and who had actually voted for the ban. They settled nothing. They agreed to meet again, which in their building usually meant the notice would peel off before a decision was reached.

On Saturday Vera put her washing line back up. She hung only two pillowcases, far enough from the chairs that neither touched a backrest. From his balcony Boris watched the wind turn them. Later he came downstairs with the bill for repairing the torn cover and stood at the noticeboard for a long time. Finally he folded it and returned it to his pocket. For the first time that week, Vera put dry bed linen into her cupboard that evening.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Empty Place on the Family Plan

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-empty-place-on-the-family-plan/

Nevena expected a discussion about the old house's roof. Her father had invited everyone to Sunday lunch, saying he had an important family proposal. Instead of an estimate for tiles, after the soup he produced a large drawing of a tomb. He spoke calmly, almost commercially. He was seventy-three, felt well, and considered that precisely why he could think ahead for them all. Along the edge of the paper he had already arranged their names.

Nevena saw her own, then her brother's, followed by their spouses. The grandchildren were there too, written in smaller letters. Missing was Luka, her adopted son, who was twenty-six and passing bread from one end of the table to the other. She did not look at him immediately. She asked whether her father had forgotten someone. Drago replied that nothing was final and began discussing the stone he intended to choose.

She asked again, this time speaking the name. Her father put down his pencil. He said Luka had his own origins too, that such things could not simply be erased, and that he wanted to hurt nobody. Each succeeding sentence made the blank space on the paper more visible. Luka placed the bread basket on the table. He did not look as surprised as Nevena expected. That hurt her more than her father's first answer.

Her brother tried to settle things by suggesting that they add a name. Nevena said the problem would not fit inside one pencil stroke. She did not want her son to wait before a full table for a vote on where he belonged. She asked whether he wanted to leave. He nodded and stood without a speech. Drago accused them of spoiling lunch over a sketch that meant nothing yet. Still, he left the paper open as proof of his seriousness.

In the car Luka said he did not care where he would eventually be buried. What mattered was that his grandfather had finally drawn what he had felt for years in small differences, in the photographs chosen and the stories told. Nevena listened without listing the times her father had been good to him. She realized how that list would soften her own surprise rather than what her son had just said.

Later she wrote to her father that she would not participate in the plan. He replied that she was as stubborn as her mother. She sent no further answer. For Luka's birthday she made an ordinary lunch and invited the people he wanted to see. His grandfather received an invitation but did not come. She left no empty place for everyone to stare at. Luka sat where he preferred, between his friends and the woman who had long been his mother.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Pearls for Important Guests

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/pearls-for-important-guests/

Danica put on the necklace before setting the table. Two strands of pearls rested across her dark blouse, high enough for guests to notice immediately. Her sister Mira watched from the kitchen doorway. They had divided their mother's belongings between them: jewelry for Danica, photographs and the sewing machine for Mira. She remembered the necklace well. Their mother had bought it on an outing and spent years laughing about looking wealthy for the price of an ordinary bag.

Over time Danica stopped telling that part. The pearls first became old, then ancestral, then precious. Mira let the story grow, considering it harmless vanity. That day Danica's son's fiancée was visiting. The woman was thirty-two and worked at the same hospital as he did. Yet Danica had already mentioned twice that her parents ran a kiosk, in the tone used to announce something that would require special effort.

At lunch she asked their guest whether her family also possessed jewelry handed down through generations. The guest, Hana, said she did not know. Danica touched her necklace and spoke about objects teaching children to belong to something older than themselves. Mira watched Hana put down her fork to listen politely. Danica's son tried to change the subject, but his mother returned to the pearls as soon as he brought the next dish.

"Mother bought them on an outing," Mira said. "She wore them when she wanted a little cheer." Danica gave her a sharp look. Mira said nothing about the price until her sister drew her into it, claiming Mira had never understood jewelry. Then she said they had chosen a replacement clasp together after the original broke. It was an inexpensive necklace their mother loved, and its value had not increased because Danica stopped saying where it came from.

An uncomfortable silence followed. Hana did not look pleased by the exposure, merely tired. She said her mother kept an old kiosk clock that frequently stopped, so they had to remember how far behind it ran. Danica's son began laughing because he had already encountered that clock. The conversation finally moved toward people, but Danica no longer joined in. After lunch she accused her sister of humiliating her before her future daughter-in-law.

Mira replied that she could have left the pearls as decoration. Once she used them to measure another family, she was no longer preserving only her own story. They did not reconcile that afternoon. Several weeks later Mira saw her sister wearing the same necklace in a photograph from her son's small wedding. Beneath it Danica had written that she was wearing her mother's favorite jewelry. Mira added no comment. This time the description needed no correction.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Cool Air Behind the Director's Door

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-cool-air-behind-the-directors-door/

At the morning meeting Davor asked everyone to be patient a little longer. The printing shop had endured a poor month, electricity needed saving, and the air conditioning in the shared room would stay off. His wife Merima arranged invoices at the end of the table. She believed him, although in recent years their business increasingly became our family whenever someone needed to explain another missing pay rise. Afterward she took two large bottles of water to the women at the counter.

By noon they had opened every door toward the courtyard. Papers flew around, so they weighed them down with staplers and cups. Davor withdrew to his office to prepare an important offer. Merima went in for a stamp and felt cool air before noticing the little air conditioner above the shelf. She asked whether they had agreed to switch it off. He said he needed to concentrate; their salaries depended on the offer. He closed the door as soon as she left.

That afternoon he summoned three longstanding employees. He wanted to discuss loyalty to the company after hearing that one woman was seeking another job. Merima came with a notebook. As they entered, everyone paused in almost the same spot. Davor invited them to sit and began speaking about shared sacrifices. Aida looked at the remote control on his desk for a long time. Then she asked to take it into the room where everyone else worked.

He tried to explain that the appliance cooled only his office. Aida said she knew. Merima then suggested continuing the meeting at the counter, where there was enough space. Davor looked at her as though she had exposed a family quarrel in front of guests. Nobody else spoke. She was already standing with her notebook beneath her arm, opening the door wide enough for the cool air to cross the threshold briefly.

The meeting did not last long. In the shared room Davor quickly moved on to deadlines and orders. He said nothing more about loyalty. At the end of the day he told Merima she should not have put him in that position. She asked what position everyone else had occupied since eight that morning. She expected no immediate apology. She wanted him to stop using their marriage as a secure place from which to demand support for every decision.

The following day both rooms had air conditioning. Aida still attended an interview elsewhere. Merima wished her luck without asking her to consider what she would leave behind. Davor ate lunch alone in his office for several days. One afternoon he left the door open. That did not restore a single missed pay rise, but Merima could finally ask for the stamp without feeling she was entering an entirely different company.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Kiss I Never Offered

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-kiss-i-never-offered/

The host said my name while I was searching for my bag beneath the table. I thought the bride needed help with her dress. I looked up and saw people turning their chairs. The man with the microphone explained that we were raising extra money to restore a playground. Whoever offered most would receive a kiss from the bride's most cheerful friend. I had never discovered my own charitable obligation before so many smiling people.

I said I had not agreed. He held the microphone, so most people heard only his response telling me not to be shy. I was not shy. I was angry and uncertain how to show it without becoming the story about somebody supposedly ruining a wedding. One guest raised a banknote. Another offered more. The bride stood, confused, but her aunt caught her arm and said to let people enjoy themselves.

I approached the host and asked him to pass me the microphone. He raised it above my shoulder as though continuing the game. I turned to the guests and said without amplification that they could donate money without buying access to my body. Somebody called out that it was only a cheek. I asked whether he wanted to offer his own. Several people laughed, but I found nothing funny. I wanted this joke finished, not improved.

The bride finally reached us. She took the microphone, which the host immediately handed over to her. She said there would be no auction. The box for voluntary donations remained on the table. She did not apologize to guests for my disappointing them. She apologized to me for not standing sooner. It was the first moment I could breathe without feeling I had to prepare another sentence in my own defense.

In the corridor the host explained that he did this at every wedding and nobody had ever complained. I said somebody had now. He was not seeking an answer; he wanted to return the conversation to a place where my objection would seem unusual. The bride's husband approached and told him to provide music for the rest of the evening without similar games. I did not stay to hear the discussion about his fee. I collected my bag and went outside for air.

Later I danced with my friends. I donated to the playground, giving the amount I had planned before my name reached the microphone. I did not want that decision taken from me too. When I left, I hugged the bride and she kissed my cheek. It was an ordinary affectionate kiss I wanted. The difference was simple enough that nobody needed to announce it to the entire room.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Neighbor Who Asked for Less Noise

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-neighbor-who-asked-for-less-noise/

They placed the speaker beneath our window because the cable could reach an outlet there. I did not object as tables arrived or children chalked the path. I liked courtyard celebrations; I had simply returned from a night shift that Saturday and needed a few hours' sleep. My husband went down to help with the grill. I said I would join later if I managed to rest. He kissed my forehead and closed the door more quietly than usual.

Music began just after noon. I felt it through the pillow, even with the window closed. I went downstairs wearing the loose shirt in which I had tried to sleep. I approached the organizer from the side to avoid interrupting a speech. I asked him to turn the speaker slightly or lower it while I rested. He said celebrations did not happen daily. I replied that celebrating was not the problem; the sound shaking my room was.

Instead of answering, he raised the microphone. He announced that one neighbor disliked other people's happiness. Several people laughed before seeing my face. My husband was among them. His laughter was brief, but long enough to recognize. The organizer continued that some people woke up old. I stood beside a box of plastic cups, suddenly made into entertainment I had not come to provide.

I did not take the microphone. In the same voice I began with, I told the organizer he had no permission to make a joke of my request. Then I turned to my husband and asked for the car keys. I intended visiting my sister. He put down the tongs, approached, and said I need not flee my own apartment. I replied that this was precisely what I was doing while people for whom he grilled meat enjoyed my departure.

My husband looked toward the speaker and asked another neighbor to help move it. The organizer objected that they would spoil the

arrangement. The two men nevertheless turned it toward a blank wall and lowered the volume. Nobody asked for the celebration to end. I went upstairs, still angry, but the sound was now bearable. Later my husband brought food and apologized for laughing. He did not claim he had laughed at something else.

I did not return to the celebration that day. Toward evening I woke and ate cold meat by the open window. I heard conversation, laughter, and somebody singing uncertainly without a microphone. That was the neighborhood sound I loved. I told my husband to help next time before I became a joke. He nodded. Downstairs the celebration continued quite successfully, although one woman no longer had to pretend she was fine.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Song I No Longer Owed

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-song-i-no-longer-owed/

At my father's birthdays I was always seven. I could arrive from work, with a partner, or with a bill for repairing my own roof, but after the cake he requested that little song. As a girl I mispronounced two words and made a serious face. The family laughed so much that for years I thought laughter was an obligation inherited with my surname. This year I said beforehand that I would not sing.

My father replied that I had become self-important. I said I had not; I simply no longer wanted to. His birthday was in a rented hall, with neighbors and former colleagues I did not know. I brought a gift, helped arrange flowers, and sat beside my partner. The evening was pleasant until my father stood with his glass and announced the little star who had saved him ever having to pay musicians.

I felt the expectation before everyone looked at me. My father was already approaching, gesturing for me to stand. I stayed seated. "I told you I wouldn't this year," I said loudly enough that he need not relay the answer. Someone called out not to be shy. My mother said it was only one short song. I was not embarrassed by the song. I was embarrassed that my hands still shook when repeating something a grown man had already heard.

My father said I had spoiled his birthday. My partner shifted in his chair, but I touched his hand. I did not need another man negotiating whether I should stand. I told my father I came to celebrate with him, not perform. One colleague changed the subject, asking where to order coffee. He made no speech defending me. He simply gave the guests something else to do with their eyes.

I stayed until the evening ended. Leaving angrily would have been easier than sitting while my father spoke to everyone except me. As I helped

collect presents, he said it used to be our special thing. I replied that it had been, while I wanted it. I asked whether he knew any music I listened to now. He did not, but for once did not interrupt by claiming I was joking. Together we carried boxes to the car, without a reconciliation the guests could notice.

A few days later I sent him a song I liked. It was neither particularly profound nor suitable for a family party. My father replied that the chorus bored him. I laughed and wrote that it did not bore me. I still do not know whether he will try again next birthday. I know that, for the first time, we discussed something I listened to as an adult woman without anyone asking me to deliberately mispronounce the words.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

An Apology with a Condition

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-apology-with-a-condition/

I had worked in the showroom long enough to distinguish anger about a scratch from anger about six weeks living among boxes. The customer whose dining table kept being postponed belonged to the second group. Mrs. Berina called every Wednesday. I learned her voice before remembering the order number. When the table finally arrived, she posted a public review with precise dates and a photograph of her empty dining room. She insulted none of us.

The director read the review aloud at the morning meeting. He paused at every sentence as though showing us damaged merchandise. Then he instructed me to offer Berina a voucher for a future purchase. I thought he had finally remembered an apology that was more than my voice over the telephone. He added that the voucher became valid only once the review disappeared. I should say the company wanted another chance and negative stories helped nobody.

I called and read the prepared offer. I heard her put something down on a counter. "Are you apologizing about the table or buying deletion?" she asked. I looked across the empty showroom, four displayed suites, and a colleague arranging cushions. I said deletion was a condition. Berina thanked me for saying it clearly. She declined. She asked us to stop offering discounts for a shop where she no longer intended to buy anything.

The director disliked my conversation. He claimed I had presented the offer harshly and ruined the possibility of reconciliation. I asked whether I could send the voucher unconditionally. He said we would get nothing in return then. We both fell silent. Across the showroom my colleague stopped arranging the same cushion. The director sent us back to work, although we were already working, in the middle of what the job actually involved.

Berina added a brief explanation of the offer to her review, omitting my name. People began asking whether earlier withdrawn complaints had vanished the same way. I did not know every answer. At the next meeting I refused to call future gifts unconditional when they had conditions. The director announced no change in company values. He simply decided to make such calls himself, meaning at least his own voice must carry his demands.

I still work there and do not portray staying as courage. I need the salary. When customers complain, I record what happened, offer what we can actually do, and promise nothing more. Later I met Berina in a grocery shop. She recognized my voice. She said the table was good, which she still somewhat regretted admitting. We laughed. It was the first thing I had received from her without any condition.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Reference That Suddenly Had a Price

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-reference-that-suddenly-had-a-price/

On the last day of her temporary job, the agency owner told Larisa to contact him freely for a reference. She had worked carefully, accepted extra tasks, and finished everything before leaving. He had promised no permanent position, so she did not blame him for that. Months later she found a suitable vacancy and sent a brief message. His reply was quick, courteous, and praising, with a peculiar addition at the end.

Preparing the reference required a payment into a fund supporting his annual associates' gathering. He called it a voluntary contribution. Larisa replied that she currently could not afford it and asked whether he could simply confirm working with her. He said references were given to people who understood reciprocity. Voluntary and reciprocity suddenly surrounded an ordinary price he refused to name.

Her partner suggested paying and settling matters. The amount was not enormous, and she needed work. Larisa understood the advice's practicality. She had counted the money in her wallet before answering. She did not want resistance to prove her better than people who paid. She simply struggled to accept that her final day's praise now required unlocking with a payment, as though her work otherwise left insufficient evidence.

She called a former colleague, asking to list her as someone familiar with her work. The colleague gladly helped. During the conversation Larisa learned she was not the first told about the fund. Some paid; others abandoned references. At a small reunion the owner later boasted of former associates' voluntary support. Larisa said a payment conditional on a reference was not voluntary, at least as he had presented it to her.

There was no enthusiastic agreement. People studied glasses, and the owner said she misunderstood a friendly suggestion. Larisa offered him the chance to withdraw it clearly now. He said he would not discuss it publicly. She replied that he had just publicly mentioned others' generosity. She left early, knowing she had lost his reference even if he later decided it was free.

She attended the interview with her former colleague's contact and examples of her own work. She received an invitation to another round, not a job guarantee. That was enough to continue. Her partner asked whether she regretted not simply paying. She said she regretted lost trust in the offer, not the money she retained. She used it for a ticket to the next interview, a journey on which nobody charged gratitude in advance.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Numbers on His Side of the Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/numbers-on-his-side-of-the-table/

Tereza invited Darko to dinner to celebrate the completion of his professional examination. She chose a small restaurant they had never visited, booked a table, and said in advance that it was her treat. Darko arrived without a tie because he could no longer bear it after the long day. They sat beside a window. The waiter handed them two menus with identical covers, but Tereza soon noticed that hers contained no prices.

She assumed a page was missing. The waiter explained that this was the ladies' menu. The gentleman received the prices, while the lady could choose without thinking about them. His tone suggested he was offering a free dessert. Tereza asked for the same version Darko had. The waiter looked at him, expecting confirmation. Darko said the lady had just ordered a menu, so he had nothing to add. The man walked away, slightly offended.

The owner returned. He presented the custom as an old-fashioned courtesy, something that distinguished their restaurant from others. Tereza said she wanted to know the cost of what she was choosing. The owner smiled at Darko and added that his guest evidently needed a little more encouragement to relax. At that point Tereza stood. She did not want to announce her earnings or explain who had invited whom. None of that should be an admission ticket to ordinary information.

A woman at the next table raised her own menu. She asked whether she was entitled to numbers too, even though someone else had invited her to dinner that day. Her husband initially laughed, then handed over his copy. The owner began explaining that nobody was forbidding anyone anything. Tereza indicated the chair where her bag still lay. She had requested an identical menu several minutes earlier. Instead, she had received two men explaining why she did not need one.

The waiter brought a menu with prices. Tereza thanked him but did not sit down. Darko rose and collected his jacket. They had not ordered anything yet. As they left, the owner said they had misunderstood a good intention. Darko started to answer, then looked at Tereza. She was already opening the door. She did not want an evening dedicated to his success to become an endless demonstration that she could read a bill.

They ate at an ordinary place several streets away. Prices were written in large letters above the counter, visible to anybody who could raise their head. Tereza paid for two portions and asked Darko to collect cutlery. While they waited, he finally told her about the exam question that had nearly defeated him. She listened closely. They had returned to the reason they went out, and there was enough room on the table for both their wallets.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Guests in Our Women's House

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/guests-in-our-womens-house/

For months Haris had said he could hardly wait to welcome the whole family to his new lakeside house. His wife Naida agreed to four days off with his parents, brother, and sister, along with their partners. They ordered food the first evening. Everything seemed easy until, the next morning, his father announced at the table that no proper family holiday existed without breakfast prepared by their women.

His mother was already rolling dough. His sister chopped vegetables, while Naida washed containers that did not even belong to their meal. Haris brought the newspapers and asked whether he should buy more yogurt. His father sent him to sit down because the men were on holiday. His brother-in-law, who tried cutting bread, received the same instruction. Haris laughed from habit, then saw Naida's face through the open kitchen door.

After breakfast she said she had booked a boat rental for the morning and would not be in the kitchen the next day. She did not forbid a family breakfast. She asked him to stop offering her hours as part of the accommodation. Haris wanted to say his mother had always done it all for pleasure. The sentence stopped when he saw his mother sitting on a step, rubbing her swollen fingers.

That evening he told his father he would prepare breakfast. His father took it as criticism of their family and asked in front of everyone what kind of house allowed a woman to give orders. Haris did not point at Naida or ask her to explain her reasons. He said he had invited the guests and would decide what to serve them. For the first time that day, his sister calmly finished her ice cream, listening to the argument without taking on the role of mediator.

His mother came to his room later. She asked what she would do now and whether she should come at all if her food was not needed. Haris sat beside her on the edge of the bed. He had not known she had heard his holiday invitation as another invitation to be useful. He asked whether she wanted to walk down to the lake with him before everyone else woke. She said she had no suitable shoes. He lent her his old ones, with plenty of paper stuffed in the toes.

They returned in the morning with wet shoelaces. Haris made eggs, his brother brewed coffee, and his dissatisfied father asked for his mother's bread. He received shop-bought bread, two slices toasted too dark. Naida returned from her boat trip and sat where there was space. His mother talked about a bird they had seen beside the water. She did not get up when his father asked for more coffee. Haris passed him the pot.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Water Behind the Tall Fence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/water-behind-the-tall-fence/

On the third day without running water, Lejla washed the guesthouse cups from a plastic jug. Her husband Kenan sat beside the phone, assuring a family due that afternoon that the pool would be ready. She told him to stop making promises. They had enough water in the bathroom for basic washing, but little else. Kenan covered the receiver with his palm and whispered that a cancellation would swallow the entire week's earnings.

Their neighbors had collected money for a water tanker. They agreed the driver would stop where the street widened and fill the containers they had prepared, one after another. Kenan offered his courtyard for the large vehicle to turn around. When she heard the engine, Lejla carried two empty buckets to the gate. An elderly neighbor with a trolley was already waiting, along with the young woman from next door and several people still in work clothes who had hurried home.

She went back for the money they still owed. Through the kitchen window, she saw a thick hose hanging over the edge of the pool. Kenan stood beside the driver, indicating how high it should be filled. When she questioned him, he answered that the rest would be distributed. Confused, the driver said he had understood that the pool was a communal reservoir. Lejla looked at the steps in the water and the white loungers beside them. "It isn't," she said. "Our guests swim here."

Kenan called her behind the house. He said he would pay his share and nobody would be left entirely without water. Beyond the fence, they could hear a neighbor asking somebody to save her place. Lejla thought of all their morning conversations, when she had cursed the dry taps alongside that woman. She returned to the driver and asked him to stop filling the pool. She did not touch valves she knew nothing about. She simply remained beside him until the water stopped flowing.

She opened the gate wide. People saw the pool and started shouting before she finished explaining. Kenan offered to cover the entire cost, but the neighbor with the trolley said money would not wash their dishes. The remaining water was distributed in smaller quantities than people had expected. Kenan ordered another delivery for the street. They would have to wait until tomorrow, and nobody thanked him.

The family who had booked rooms arrived toward evening. Lejla showed them the pool and explained why they would not be opening it. They accepted a lower price and went for a walk. Kenan did not speak to her all evening. As they later folded the loungers, he said she had humiliated him in front of customers. Lejla lifted the last lounger, still perfectly dry. "Tomorrow you're carrying water to the lady at the end of the street," she said. "I promised her she wouldn't have to come down again."

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Room for a Respectable Couple

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-room-for-a-respectable-couple/

When the guesthouse owner asked whether they were husband and wife, Bojan already held the suitcase on the first step. Hana said they were not. They had been together six years and booked a weekend room far from the city. The advertisement showed a balcony and garden, and the description promised a peaceful stay for two. Nowhere did it mention having to explain their relationship at the door.

The owner put down the key. He said he welcomed only respectable couples in his house. Hana waited several seconds for him to explain, although the answer was clear already. Bojan laughed and said they were practically married. The owner asked for the date. Hana saw Bojan searching his mind for a convincing answer and stopped him before he could speak.

She did not want to invent a ceremony to receive the bed they had paid for. She said no such restriction had appeared before booking. The owner claimed some things went without saying. A woman with wet hands emerged from the dining room and asked what was wrong. Hearing the explanation, she looked at her husband, then at Hana and Bojan. She said she would refund them and fetched an envelope from a drawer.

In the parking lot Bojan was angry about the lost afternoon. He said they could simply have claimed to be married. Hana answered that the room mattered less to her. What bothered her was his attempt, before a stranger, to correct a fact that had never been a problem between them. Bojan put down the case and admitted wanting only to escape the discomfort, even at the cost of making her swallow it instead.

They found other accommodation toward evening. The room had no balcony, and the bed creaked whenever they turned. Their hostess asked whether they wanted an early breakfast and showed them how to turn on

the heating. The simplicity of those questions released the exhaustion Hana had controlled all day. She sat on the bed, removed her shoes, and let Bojan unpack without further conversation.

In the morning they walked through the village. The first guesthouse owner drove past, raised a hand, and continued as though nothing had happened. Bojan did not return the greeting; Hana did. It did not mean she forgave him, but that she would not let a stranger determine even her smallest movement. Afterwards they chose somewhere for lunch together. This time both read the description carefully, then laughed on realizing most of its space concerned a noisy rooster.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Woman Facing the Window

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-woman-facing-the-window/

The painting showed a woman from behind, bare shoulders, and light from a window. Emina worked on it for months in brief hours between her job and ordinary household obligations. Haris often passed through the room while she painted. He praised the colors, said the painting deserved an exhibition, and brought coffee when she stayed before the canvas too long. He never asked who the model was.

At the opening he stood near the painting, visibly proud. He told guests how patient Emina was and how she saw things others missed. Then her friend recognized the small scar on the painted woman's shoulder. She said nothing loudly or with surprise. She simply praised Emina for retaining a detail someone else might have erased. Haris stopped speaking in the middle of a sentence.

He led Emina to an empty part of the corridor. He asked why she had not told him the painting showed her. She answered that she thought he knew, but it was no secret. He said people were now looking at the painting differently. Emina looked through the open door. Visitors stood in the same places as before. The only gaze that had clearly changed was his.

He asked her to withdraw it after that evening. He said he did not want his colleagues imagining her body. Emina reminded him that the bare shoulders and line of the back had been visible while he proudly explained the colors too. She did not ask whether he liked the painting. She wanted to know why his support stopped the moment the woman on canvas acquired her name.

Haris returned to the room and avoided familiar guests for the rest of the evening. Emina remained beside her work. She did not recount their conversation to everyone, but neither did she accept his discomfort as a

task to solve during her own opening. When a visitor asked to approach for a closer look at the brushstrokes, Emina showed where the light had turned out differently from her plan.

The painting remained until the exhibition ended. At home they talked several times without quick reconciliation. Haris had to reconsider what he meant when he called her a free woman, while Emina had to hear answers she disliked. After the exhibition closed she returned the canvas to her workroom. One morning Haris looked at it and said he missed the light from the gallery. It was the first comment since the opening that concerned the painting itself again.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Numbers from a Birthday Guest List

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/numbers-from-a-birthday-guest-list/

Lana entered the guests' numbers in a single spreadsheet to make sending the venue address for her mother's birthday easier. Several relatives had changed phones, so she spent days connecting old contacts and asking who was arriving with whom. Her partner Denis, who organized smaller business events, offered to handle the notifications. She was glad someone would take at least one task off her hands.

The celebration went well. Her mother cried over the album they gave her, the uncles arrived late, and there was too much food. Two days later Lana was still answering messages of thanks. Then her mother's friend called, asking why she was receiving offers for venue rentals, decorations, and business packages. The advertisement addressed her by name. She had never discussed Denis's business with him.

At first Lana thought the woman had signed up somewhere herself. Then a cousin and neighbor contacted her. She recognized the same numbers she had recently collected so carefully. Denis immediately admitted adding the list to his contacts. He saw no problem. People had seen how well he organized a celebration; he was merely offering something they might need someday.

She asked whether anyone had agreed. He replied that he would stop sending messages to anyone who complained. Lana felt his business moving into her relationships and leaving her the uncomfortable part. Her mother was already explaining to friends that the birthday had not been an excuse to collect customers. Denis still insisted that his good intentions should be obvious.

Lana asked him to remove the entire private list and stop using those details. She remained present while he did it. Then she sent the guests a brief explanation and apology, without asking them to overlook what

happened. Some moved past everything immediately. One aunt said that next time she would prefer the address dictated in an ordinary call. Lana accepted that small loss of trust as well.

For days Denis remained angry because he had looked unprofessional to others. Lana would not argue about appearances. At home they still shared meals and plans, but she no longer automatically forwarded things for him to complete. When he offered help with another gathering the following month, she asked exactly what he would handle and who would have access to the details. He answered without joking. It did not erase the previous spreadsheet, but for the first time he had to articulate a boundary before receiving her trust.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The News That Did Not Belong to Her

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-news-that-did-not-belong-to-her/

At the shop I bought yellow socks for my sister's baby. The saleswoman had known me since school and smiled the way people do when they think they already know how a sentence ends. She congratulated me. I thought she meant the wedding, which had been two months earlier. I thanked her, paid, and left, unaware of how much space I had left between two different assumptions.

By noon my aunt had called. She asked why she was hearing such news from a neighbor. I said I did not know what she meant. Her voice immediately grew wounded. She did not believe there was something she did not know; she believed I was deliberately hiding it from her. I explained the socks three times. Finally she said I should take care of myself anyway and ended the call.

My husband Alen heard from the man changing his tires. He came home confused and asked whether I had planned to tell him something special. His question hurt more than my aunt's. We had been married two months, and already a stranger's sentence could sit between us before my own voice did. I told him that if I had news like that, the tire mechanic would not be delivering it.

Alen suggested immediately announcing that it was a mistake. I picked up my phone, then put it down. Why should we have to announce anything about it? I did not want acquaintances judging whether I was too angry, sufficiently convincing, or perhaps merely unhappy about a question they should never have asked. I wanted to finish my working day and visit my sister with a small gift.

I returned to the shop the next day. The saleswoman said she had only shared good news. I explained that the news had not existed. She seemed surprised by my seriousness, as though I had rejected a kindly meant

bouquet. Two women were waiting behind me. One began explaining how she too had kept quiet for a long time with her first child. Then I understood how difficult it is to escape a story in which everyone wants a sentence of their own.

I did not stay to argue. Alen asked his family to stop calling with questions, and I did the same with mine. Some believed us immediately. Others kept glancing toward my stomach for weeks, increasingly discreetly as time passed. My sister's baby outgrew the yellow socks faster than the rumor disappeared.

One evening Alen arrived carrying a large bag from the same shop. Inside was a blanket for my sister's older boy. He said he had clearly explained at the register whom he was buying it for. For the first time I laughed about the whole thing. Then I asked him to show me the blanket, an ordinary object that might finally remain only what it was.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Time in a Coat Pocket

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/time-in-a-coat-pocket/

The guest said his watch was missing while I cleared the plates after dessert. First I looked under the table. Then I lifted the napkin and moved the empty bread basket. He was a regular, a man whose name my fiancé Nikola pronounced with particular respect. Nikola managed the dining room; I worked the second shift. We were saving for an apartment and counting every extra hour.

The man claimed he had removed the watch before eating. I had not seen it. His wife said perhaps he had arrived without it, but he interrupted her. He looked toward my bag behind the bar. He did not immediately say I had taken it. He asked whether I could simply show its contents, because then everyone could relax.

Nikola pulled me aside. He spoke quietly, in the voice he normally used to resolve an incorrect order. He said I had nothing to hide and five minutes were not worth the trouble. I looked at the white shirt I had ironed for him that morning. He did not ask how I felt. He was trying to find the quickest route to making the guest happy again.

I refused to open my bag. The guest grew louder, and his wife stood and fetched his coat from the rack. She searched the pockets in order, having been angry with him long enough to know where to look first. She found the watch in the inside pocket. She held it on her palm without speaking. The man laughed and said his memory clearly was not what it used to be.

He left me a banknote I did not take. I did not need a tip to become the price of what had just happened. Nikola put it beside the register and did not speak to me for the remainder of the shift. Before leaving he said I could have been more practical. Now nobody had benefited from the unpleasantness, and the guest might not return.

On the way home we walked separately, although we were going to the same address. I thought about the apartment we were saving for and all the future situations in which he might ask me to shrink to suit his calculations. He thought about a job that would not be easy to replace. I knew that without asking. That was precisely why I did not want a simple answer turning him into a monster.

The next morning Nikola returned the banknote to the owner to give back to the guest. He told me he was sorry. I did not remove my ring, but neither did I embrace him. I went to my shift with the same bag. When I left it behind the bar, Nikola moved some boxes to make space. It was a small gesture. I did not yet know whether it was too small.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

An Extra Service with the Proposal

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-extra-service-with-the-proposal/

Tea brought a folder containing her proposal for a small hotel's interior to dinner. She had worked on the project for a month and was proud of the room arrangement she had finally simplified. Her manager, Ivan, said the client needed a little more attention before making his final decision. She thought he meant changes to the drawings. She told her husband she would be late and asked him to save some lunch for her.

The client greeted her with an excessively familiar handshake. He had already ordered wine and asked what music she liked. Tea answered briefly, opened the folder, and began explaining the proposal. He glanced at a few sheets, then said there was time for work. Ivan laughed and suggested first getting to know the people with whom they would collaborate.

After dinner the client mentioned staying in the city until Sunday. He told Tea he looked forward to the Saturday walk Ivan had promised. Tea slowly closed her folder. She had agreed to no walk. Ivan waved a hand, explaining that it was only a little hospitality and she knew the city best. The client added that he was particularly glad she was single.

Tea showed her wedding ring, then immediately regretted the gesture. Even without a ring she would owe nobody her Saturday. She said she was unavailable for private outings and could discuss the project during working hours. The client looked at Ivan, who tried escaping through a joke about a misunderstanding. Tea packed the drawings and asked the waiter to call her a taxi.

At home her husband immediately wanted to telephone Ivan. Tea stopped him. She did not want a professional problem becoming an argument between two men over who decided where she could go. She needed someone to hear how humiliating it felt to have a month's work

turned into an introduction to somebody's private weekend. Her husband sat down. The food grew cold while she talked.

The following day she repeated at the company what had been said and requested another manager on the project. Ivan claimed she was spoiling business over a harmless conversation. Ultimately the client chose another proposal. Tea did not know whether they would have won him by remaining silent, nor did she want to spend a career calculating that difference. On Saturday she stayed home with her husband, repairing a shelf they had postponed for months. Her free day was quite ordinary, which meant a great deal to her then.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Glass That Stayed Full

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-glass-that-stayed-full/

For years Irina had heard that her husband was the best boss in the world. At least that was what Damir said when he returned from company celebrations. He was not strict, allowed jokes, and knew his employees' children's names. That autumn he brought her to a group dinner for the first time. She sat beside Vanja, an accountant who carefully moved the wineglass aside so it would not interfere with her meal.

Damir noticed the empty space beside her plate. He brought a bottle and said there would be no hiding tonight. Vanja thanked him and requested water. He filled the glass, convinced that her refusals belonged to the same cheerful conversation as his jokes. People around them laughed loudly enough that Irina initially missed how quiet Vanja's voice had become.

"Come on, we're not at work," Damir kept saying. Irina looked at his colleagues. Across the table, a man twisted a napkin between his fingers. A young trainee held her glass up without drinking. Nobody looked as though they had forgotten who approved their holidays. Vanja repeated for the third time that she did not want any. She gave no explanation.

Irina took the water pitcher and filled her own glass. Then she passed another to Vanja. Damir laughed and asked whether the two women were forming a secret group. Irina said the woman wanted water and he had heard her. Her voice was not loud, but the table fell silent. Damir set the bottle down hard enough to rattle the cutlery.

Later he suggested a group song. Two people stood to fetch their coats, excusing themselves because of an early morning. The others soon followed. Irina stayed to pay for a taxi while her husband straightened chairs nobody had asked him to straighten. In the car he asked why she

had embarrassed him. She admitted that this evening was the first time she had felt ashamed of him.

He did not ask what was wrong with Vanja, and Irina did not know either. She needed no reason. That particularly angered him. He wanted a specific circumstance that would turn his insistence into an unfortunate misunderstanding. Instead, he had an entirely ordinary refusal he had chosen not to accept. At home he went into another room, leaving his formal shirt over the back of a chair.

On Monday Vanja sent Irina a short message of thanks. Irina replied that she had enjoyed sitting beside her. Damir did not see the message. He came home early that day and said the office had been unusually quiet. Irina put down her book. For the first time she did not rush to fill his silence with a sentence that would help him feel popular again.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Glass beside the Queen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-glass-beside-the-queen/

The tournament took place in the café's back room, between a discarded juice dispenser and shelves of books nobody borrowed. The prize was dinner for two. All day Selma imagined eating it with Bakir regardless of who won. He had brought her to the club a year earlier and still introduced her to everyone as his pupil, although they had long been learning from the same books.

In the final, they faced each other alone at the table. Selma gained an early advantage and patiently preserved it. At first Bakir made jokes, telling the onlookers that he always had to give in at home. Selma did not laugh. Their friend Armin moved Bakir's glass farther from the board. "Let's not have this causing trouble as well," he said, and went to order more coffee.

A few moves later, Bakir reached across an empty part of the table, caught the glass with his elbow, and spilled juice over the pieces. Selma was watching his hand. There had been no reason to reach there. A king fell to the floor, several pawns slid toward her lap, and Bakir immediately announced that they would have to start again. He said it before getting up for a cloth.

Suddenly everyone was talking. Somebody tried replacing the pieces; somebody claimed to remember their positions. The café owner demanded that they stop spreading the sticky liquid. Selma picked her king up from the floor and placed it on a dry coaster. She did not want to spend the evening proving the direction of somebody's elbow. She said she would not play the game again. Bakir accused her of fearing fair play.

That sentence hurt her more than the spilled juice. For a year, she had watched him explain defeats through poor lighting, noise, or the wrong chair. She had considered it an amusing weakness. Now she stood inside

the same story as one of those excuses. She picked up her bag, and Armin quietly said that he had seen the glass. She did not ask him to testify. She thanked him and went to wash her hands.

Nobody won dinner that night. The owner gave the voucher to the cook, whose free hour had been spoiled by everything. Selma returned the following week, when Bakir was no longer attending. A girl who had never played sat at a table. Selma showed her how the queen moved, then let her think for herself. When the new player found a good move, Selma felt a pure and unexpected pleasure.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Face Behind the Family Recipe

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-face-behind-the-family-recipe/

The large poster said the jam followed Grandmother Marija's recipe. Amina had no grandmother Marija. Her grandmother was Dzemila and had never made jam commercially. Amina developed the product herself after many attempts in a rented kitchen. At the launch she was meant to explain preserving pieces of fruit. Instead she received somebody else's family story on paper.

The agency explained that the packaging needed a simple, warm name. Amina said hers was already simple enough to pronounce. The representative looked at her partner Nikola, who handled sales. He admitted approving the proposal because it supposedly appealed more to certain buyers. He thought the grandmother was merely a story, like the illustrated orchard that was not theirs either.

Amina was not angry about an invented tree. She was angry that her background was treated as an obstacle to remove before selling. Nikola tried saying they should not bring politics into jam. She pointed to the name replacing hers and asked who had introduced the distinction first. Fifteen minutes remained before the event.

There was no time to reprint everything. Amina covered the poster with clean paper and wrote the product's real name. When guests arrived she introduced herself by her own name and described developing the recipe. She made no speech against customers. She discussed her work. Only when asked about the old labels did she clearly say their biography was not hers and she would not use them.

Some buyers withdrew because deliveries would be delayed. Others waited for new labels. The expense was real, and Amina did not disguise it as costless courage. Conversations with Nikola were hardest at home. He had to admit deciding without her because he assumed she would

ultimately choose sales. She had to decide whether she could remain with a partner who saw her name as negotiable.

They separated business responsibilities. Amina thereafter approved presentations herself while Nikola handled only agreed sales work. Their relationship continued with trust returning much more slowly. She took the first newly labeled jar to Grandmother Dzemila. Her grandmother read, tasted, and said she would use less sugar. Amina laughed. That was a family comment she could use, but she still did not turn it into advertising.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Speech His Wife Shortened

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-speech-his-wife-shortened/

Marija read the speech by accident in the car's back seat. Her husband Ivan had left the folder open while looking for parking outside the hall. A small business association was awarding him for developing his company. The first section thanked colleagues. In the second he planned to describe Marija's difficult period after losing her job, including the evening she could not rise from the bathroom floor for crying.

Nobody except him knew about that evening. Marija had later told him his presence helped. She had not said he could turn her most vulnerable memory into proof of his ability to lead people through crisis. As she read, Ivan returned smiling: he had hoped to surprise her. The speech, he said, was about their shared strength.

Marija asked him to remove that section. At first Ivan thought she was ashamed of unemployment. She said she was not, but chose whom to tell and how. He replied that it was too late because the host had already promised a personal story. Marija closed the folder. They were still in the parking lot. If he could change suppliers five minutes before a deadline, he could change his own speech.

Inside he tried negotiating. He would remove the bathroom but keep the crying. Marija felt anger mix with disbelief. She was not editing style. She was withdrawing permission she had never given. She said she would leave if he continued and he must not describe her departure as another moment he had bravely endured.

Ivan delivered a shorter speech. He thanked his team, family, and supporters without the private scene. Afterward some people asked about the promised personal story. He said he had decided to omit it. Marija did not know whether she should thank him for doing the minimum. She did not. She congratulated him on the award, then went home early

because she no longer felt celebratory.

They talked the next day. Ivan admitted wanting people to see his gentle side, not just business. Marija said she understood the wish, but her pain was not free evidence for his biography. It took several conversations for him to stop discussing good intentions as though they canceled her answer.

Several months later Marija wrote a short piece about changing careers herself, leaving out the evening on the floor. She gave it to him before publication. He asked whether she wanted feedback or simply a reader. The question surprised her. She said for now she wanted a reader. He sat down, read to the end, and returned the paper without trying to find his most important place in her story.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Two Brides Outside the Same Hall

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-brides-outside-the-same-hall/

Selma first noticed the other white dress. It stood outside the hall beside a bouquet belonging to nobody in her wedding party. The other bride, Nina, held a phone and spoke so calmly that Selma immediately knew something was seriously wrong. Both had booked the same large hall that day. The owner promised one that the other group would leave before she arrived.

He had told neither beforehand. Selma's guests were leaving their bus, while Nina's already sat at partly laid tables. The owner tried explaining that Selma had misunderstood the time. She stated what had been agreed months earlier. She did not argue with Nina. She asked how many guests she expected and whether children or older people needed somewhere to sit.

Their partners began raising their voices at each other, as though the other wedding could be responsible for the owner's schedule. Nina stopped them. She said they were four people with one problem, not two camps. For the first time that day Selma breathed without feeling her dress constrict her chest. They called the service manager, who immediately admitted staff had learned of the double booking only that morning.

A smaller covered terrace stood behind the venue. It could accommodate one group only with a completely changed layout and dry weather. Nina had fewer guests. She offered to move there with clear compensation and sufficient staff. The owner tried accepting only the first part. Both women said the agreement must include everything before they began moving people.

The celebrations began late. They did not call the day perfect or claim the problem was a gift from fate. Some guests were dissatisfied, an aunt left

early, and several times music came from the wrong side of the wall. Still, food arrived, older people received chairs, and nobody had to turn the other bride into the culprit for a bad beginning.

Before midnight Selma brought a slice of her cake onto the terrace. Nina gave her a slice of hers, and they sat barefoot on empty crates for several minutes. They discussed how they had imagined the day and what they actually learned about their partners when everything went wrong. Later they separately settled remaining matters with the owner and posted accurate public accounts without attacking staff. A year later they exchanged anniversary messages. Neither forgot the other dress outside the door or the relief of ceasing to be supposed rivals.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Most Successful in Our Class

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-most-successful-in-our-class/

Tarik arrived last at the school reunion, just late enough for everyone to turn. He brought a borrowed car, which his partner Nela did not consider a problem, and a story about a large company, which she did. The company was a small business run with a friend from a kitchen. It earned little but might survive if Tarik did not turn every conversation into an announcement of imminent wealth.

Before the reunion Nela asked him not to invent things. He said a little embellishment harmed nobody. In the hall he talked of offices, travel, and business partners he had never met. Former classmates listened with admiration mixed with fatigue. One woman working at their old school mentioned needing new equipment cupboards.

Tarik immediately stood and promised his company would pay for the entire purchase. Everyone applauded. Nela felt her stomach tighten because she knew even next month's rent required careful calculations. The school employee asked whether she could contact the supplier on Monday. Tarik nodded, then looked to Nela to confirm the timing.

She said she could not confirm money they did not have. No applause followed. Tarik laughed and tried making it a joke about his strict finance director. Nela added that she was not his finance director and the school should not order based on tonight's promise. She listed neither his debts nor other inventions, only what was needed to keep someone else from paying for the performance.

In the car Tarik shouted that she had humiliated him before people who had always underestimated him. Nela asked him to stop in a lit parking area, got out, and called a taxi. She did not want to continue while he drove angrily. At home she said she would not apologize for an accurate answer but would discuss why admitting the real business he had was so

difficult.

Tarik remained silent for days. Then he called the school and withdrew his promise clearly, without talk of delayed payment. He offered a day's work assembling cupboards if they obtained them elsewhere. They did not have to accept but did. He came with tools and no impressive car and stayed until the work was finished.

Nela did not immediately decide to remain in the relationship. She watched whether anything changed without an audience. One evening Tarik told a friend business was modest. He did not afterward request praise for honesty. From the kitchen Nela heard that ordinary sentence and, for the first time since the reunion, felt there might again be room between them for a man rather than his presentation.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Recording from Before Him

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-recording-from-before-him/

In the recording Dalia was twenty-four, wearing a silver jacket and singing with a voice that occasionally slipped out of tune. She performed in an amateur cabaret at a small theater that no longer existed. Ten years later, a week before her wedding, the clip appeared in the guests' group with a message saying the groom evidently liked women with colorful pasts.

There was nothing explicit. Dalia sang a comic song about three bad suitors and danced with an umbrella. Yet comments quickly became crude. Some speculated about things absent from the recording. Her fiance Marko posted only a laughing symbol. Dalia looked at that on the screen longer than all the strangers' words.

She asked why he had not stopped the conversation. He said people exaggerated and she should know how to laugh at herself. Then he admitted sending the clip to a friend a month earlier. He wanted to show his future wife had not always been a serious accountant. The friend passed it on, and Marko now did not want to look oversensitive before his circle.

Dalia had loved that performance. She remembered the dressing room's smell, the friend who lent the jacket, and applause from a man in the front row who came alone. She would not let that memory become an accusation. She briefly wrote where and when she had performed, added that speculation was not fact, and asked them to stop sharing the recording for ridicule. Then she left the group.

Marko was angry about her message. He said everyone was now unpleasantly surprised and the wedding would be tense. Dalia asked why their discomfort mattered more than her humiliation. He did not answer. That evening she understood the problem was not an old video but a man

expecting her to laugh so he would not have to take a position.

They canceled the wedding. They did not give every guest the same account, so rumors lasted a long time. Dalia returned the dress, divided expenses they could clearly establish, and spent several days with her old cabaret friend. They took the silver jacket from a wardrobe. It no longer fit, and she remembered only half the song.

Later she accepted an invitation to sing a new song at an evening for former members. Her voice again slipped on a high note. The audience laughed with her, not at her life. Dalia repeated the line and finished. This time she did not check whose approval she had in the front row.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Certificates for Empty Chairs

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/certificates-for-empty-chairs/

Ruzica brought simple conversation cards to the closing evening. Her language students would show in pairs how to order coffee or ask directions. There was no examination, only a chance to laugh about mistakes they no longer made. Her husband Esad, who ran the school, prepared diplomas. Ruzica asked him to call them attendance certificates because they represented no official qualification.

More people filled the room than had attended classes. She assumed they brought relatives. Then Esad called an unfamiliar man forward for a certificate covering forty completed lessons. The next woman was not her student either. When Ruzica kindly offered a conversation card, the woman said she did not speak the language and had been promised only a photograph.

Esad tried continuing over her question. He explained that some people studied independently. Ruzica asked who supervised their work. He replied that this was no time for administration. She looked at her actual students, including a man who came after every night shift, and understood she was expected to equate their time with a purchased evening.

She stopped the program. She neither tested the strangers nor humiliated them before the audience. She said she could confirm only teaching she had delivered, and her signature would authorize nothing else. Esad had to explain that he sold a group course to a company in advance. When employees failed to attend, he kept payment and arranged final certificates so nobody would question the unused money.

The evening ended without a group photograph. Actual students received certificates the following day. Ruzica published a brief explanation of what her name confirmed, without naming customers. People sent for

photographs were not her opponents. Some did not know what their employer had arranged. Esad had to settle a refund or genuine classes somebody would actually attend with the company.

At home he claimed he had been saving the school. Ruzica replied he had saved its appearance by spending what made people come to her. She separated her teaching from his business and rented a classroom two evenings weekly. Their marriage remained in a difficult conversation that one apology could not finish. At her first new lesson she arranged twelve chairs. Seven people came. She did not move empty chairs out of the frame because this time she took no picture. She began speaking with those actually present.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Mother for the Formal Lunch

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-mother-for-the-formal-lunch/

Alen said his mother was a retired teacher. He had said it so long he began imagining a woman with neat handwriting and a bag full of books. His real mother lived far away, occasionally called only for money, and at his last birthday forgot his fiancee's name. Ivana wanted to meet the family before the wedding. Alen answered with new dates and new postponements.

Eventually he found Sonja through an acquaintance in amateur theater. He described the job as a short reconstruction of a family conversation for a private recording, then admitted just before lunch that there would be no recording. Sonja was supposed to play his mother before Ivana's parents. She refused, then agreed to stay only to help him tell the truth without abruptly leaving. Yet at the entrance Alen still said, "This is my mum."

Sonja saw Ivana's aunt Mirjana and froze. Her own daughter was engaged to Mirjana's son. They knew each other well enough to leave no room for confusion. Mirjana rose, kissed Sonja, and asked why she was there. Alen stared at the vase. Ivana stared at him.

"I'm not his mother," Sonja said before anyone sat down. She did not explain the whole arrangement before the guests. She only added that Alen had something to say and she could not replace him in that. She went into the garden with Mirjana, leaving him without his prepared script.

Lunch was not canceled, but the food remained untouched for a long time. Alen told the truth about his mother without the worst details he did not want to share. Ivana was hurt by the lies but not shocked by his background. Her father tried explaining that every family had problems. She stopped him: this was not the moment for everyone to minimize

events so they could resume eating.

Later they walked alone. Alen said he had feared how she would see him after seeing his family. Ivana replied that she now had to live with his preferring to hire a stranger over trusting her. She did not remove her ring but requested postponing the wedding. She wanted to know the real man she intended to marry, including what he could not describe prettily.

He paid Sonja the agreed fee although she did not request it. She returned the money with a note suggesting he spend it on an honest conversation over coffee. Several months later Alen showed Ivana a real photograph of his mother. She was neither smiling nor well dressed. Ivana studied it, then asked what growing up with her had been like. This time he had no prepared story, so they talked until late.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Two Menus for One Dinner

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-menus-for-one-dinner/

Several years earlier Marta learned an unusual savory pastry from women in the village where she spent her childhood. Each family used its own measure of spices, while the shared method passed through working gatherings without grand secrets or claims of belonging to one person. Marta made it for friends. She never presented it as her invention.

Her husband Bojan ran a small restaurant. For its anniversary he announced a dinner featuring "a secret recipe from his wife's family," planning later to sell the pastries packaged. Marta learned when a waiter brought the new menu for approval. A photograph of her hands filled the cover. Bojan had taken it during ordinary Sunday cooking, saying he liked watching her work.

Marta asked him to change the announcement. The recipe was not his family property, and she had not agreed to become a product's face. Bojan said the village women always maintained food was made for sharing. She replied that sharing knowledge differed from inventing exclusive ownership. What especially bothered her was his having already imagined his profit as their shared happiness.

Dinner was scheduled for tomorrow. Bojan claimed there was no time. Marta said there was time for a new menu, even a simpler one. She refused to prepare the pastries under a false story. She hid no ingredients and sabotaged no kitchen. She offered a clear option: present the food accurately, without her photograph or promises about an unagreed product.

Before the guests Bojan still attempted the old introduction. Marta, sitting with two village women, stood and introduced them. She said she had learned from them and tonight they should explain the dish. She had not exposed them without asking; they discussed it before coming. One

calmly described the method, including that there was no single secret recipe. Guests listened more closely than to Bojan's prepared speech.

The sales plan was postponed. Later the women who wished to participate arranged paid workshops under their names and terms. Marta did not join every one. At home she and Bojan continued discussing why he thought her closeness to people was a resource he could control. The restaurant remained open. Its new menu held no secret, only an accurate description and the names of those who had agreed to have their knowledge served with dinner.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Best Man's Unfinished Story

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-best-mans-unfinished-story/

The best man began with a story about Leon burning three pots while cooking macaroni as a student. Guests laughed, and his bride Ivona brushed crumbs from her wedding dress sleeve. Everything was awkward enough to feel intimate. Then the best man raised his paper and said that before the lovely ending he had to mention something Leon's family probably did not know.

Ivona's breathing changed. She recognized the opening to a story about an old relationship she had told him during a journey, believing the conversation would remain among friends. There was nothing for which she needed forgiveness. She had been an adult, single, and hurt by somebody else's behavior. But the story included a moment when she cried in public, and the best man had considered it amusing for years.

Leon saw her lower her eyes. At first he thought they should endure another minute, avoid spoiling the wedding or humiliating a friend who had helped so much. Then he heard his own name in the sentence: "Lucky our Leon came after all those..." He stood and took a second microphone from the host's table.

"We won't be hearing that story," he said.

The best man laughed and replied that he was only joking. Leon repeated himself without smiling. Music briefly began too early, then stopped. Ivona felt shame that did not belong to her, though her body carried it anyway. She asked her sister to step outside. She did not want the whole evening turned into public proof of Leon's goodness.

Later the best man demanded that Leon apologize before their friends. He said he had been treated like an enemy. Leon told him friendship did not grant permission for everything and he could have finished with hundreds of other memories. They did not reconcile that night. The best

man left early, and several relatives claimed young people no longer knew how to take a joke.

The next day Ivona told Leon his response had helped, but she needed time to stop replaying the scene. He did not say everything was fine now. They canceled the planned group breakfast and spent the morning alone, eating leftover pie in their hotel room. Later the best man sent an apology without excuses. Ivona read it and did not answer immediately. Leon did not carry messages between them. Their first marital agreement was that gratitude, forgiveness, and a public smile did not have to arrive on the same day.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Lunch Without Invisible Hands

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/lunch-without-invisible-hands/

At six in the morning Ajsa was already peeling potatoes for a hundred servings. Her friend Mara kneaded dough while Senada counted plates borrowed from neighbors. The village food festival was to begin at noon. The poster named the association president, sponsors, and musicians. The women appeared as "household support" in small print below the phone number.

Ajsa's husband Faruk was the president. For years she had said public appearances simply suited him better. She disliked microphones; he could not roll dough, so the division seemed natural. This year she heard him on the radio describing recipes he supposedly devised and an organizational system allowing the event to grow without major expense. That system was called their unpaid weekend.

She asked why he had not mentioned the women. He said there had not been time and promised to thank everyone at the opening. He promised no fees because the budget was already spent on the stage and a visiting chef. The chef was supposed to demonstrate a dish Mara had been making since she was sixteen.

At noon Faruk began speaking. Ajsa switched off the burner, washed her hands, and removed her apron. Mara and Senada did the same. They did not throw away food or leave guests without lunch. Everything was finished and safely stored. They sat at the first free table and asked an association member to serve them. He laughed, then realized none of them was joking.

Confusion broke out behind the stage. Faruk left the microphone and demanded an explanation. Ajsa said their part was finished and they now expected the same treatment as invited guests. When he mentioned embarrassment before cameras, Mara calmly pointed at the poster. "Our

work isn't there. Presumably someone else knows how to finish it." The visiting chef approached their table, listened, and went to fetch a tray.

Lunch was served more slowly, but it was served. On camera the chef named the women who had prepared the dishes and said he had come to learn from them. Faruk could not tell the same story again. That evening he and Ajsa sat in the yard for a long time. She did not ask for public humiliation. She asked that before the next festival application they discuss who worked, how much, and under what conditions.

The following year's program was smaller. There was no expensive stage, but the kitchen team received agreed fees. Ajsa spent part of hers on a spa weekend with Mara and Senada. Faruk stayed home and prepared lunch for guests alone for the first time. He called only once to ask where the large pot was kept. She told him exactly, then continued drinking her coffee while it was still warm.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Widower with the Wrong Story

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-widower-with-the-wrong-story/

First a neighbor brought soup. Then an old acquaintance called her sister to ask whether the family had concealed something. Elma sat at her kitchen table, alive, healthy, and increasingly impatient. Her former husband Goran had appeared on a program about new beginnings. He said he had lost his wife and that the loss taught him to value every day.

The sentence alone might have been ambiguous. But Goran continued about an empty side of the bed, flowers he carried to an important place, and a goodbye he never managed to say. The host introduced him as a widower. He did not correct her. At the end they promoted his new series of lectures for people experiencing loss. Elma knew the empty side of the bed: she had left it three years earlier because she could no longer live with his lies.

She called him. At first he laughed, saying the audience had misunderstood a metaphor. Elma asked why the metaphor wore black and included their wedding photograph. He said she should not be petty because the lectures helped people. She hung up before giving him another sentence he could use as proof of her coldness.

She did not want to recount the marriage publicly. She sent the organizers a brief notice that she was alive, they were divorced, and she had not consented to the photograph's use. She requested correction of the facts without appearing on another program. The producer called, sincerely bewildered. Elma declined an offer for the two of them to confront each other on camera. Her life was not a sequel to his program.

Goran published an apology that initially spoke of misinterpretation. The organizers demanded a clearer correction and canceled his next two appearances. Only then did he write that he had allowed himself to be presented as a widower although he was not one. Several people who had

paid for a lecture requested refunds. Elma did not celebrate. She was tired of explaining that she did not have to be dead for his loss to be real.

Her hardest conversation was with their adult son. He loved his father and asked whether everything had to end in his humiliation. Elma said she had not humiliated him by existing. Her son stayed silent for a long time, then asked whether he could remain for dinner. She took the neighbor's soup from the refrigerator and laughed for the first time in the absurd week. The next day she returned the washed container, thanked the neighbor for caring, and said she could simply ring her bell in future.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Two Anniversaries at the Same Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-anniversaries-at-the-same-table/

The waiter asked whether to bring four glasses or three. Nermina said two, showing the reservation on her phone. An unfamiliar woman already sat at the window table beside a small gift bag. She insisted the reservation was hers. Both said the same surname and laughed at an odd coincidence that lasted only a few seconds.

Nermina was waiting for her husband Sasa to celebrate eighteen years of marriage. The other woman, Vanja, was waiting for Sasa to celebrate one year together. He was in his car behind the restaurant, messaging Vanja to persuade her to change venues because there was supposedly no table available. The owner, an acquaintance of his, had mistakenly combined two reservations entered under the same name.

Vanja understood first. She asked Nermina whether they were still married. Nermina looked at her ring as though seeing it through someone else's eyes. She said yes. Vanja took a watch from the gift bag and put it back in its box. She did not cry. She looked offended in a way Nermina suddenly understood completely.

Sasa entered after neither woman replied. He paused at the door, judged the distance to the exit, and approached anyway. Nermina asked him to sit. Vanja told him to remain standing because the chair obstructed the waiter. The women were not allies in a grand plan, but at that moment both knew equally clearly that they would not ease the scene for him by arguing with each other.

He said the marriage had not worked for a long time. Nermina asked when he had told her. He said things with Vanja had not been so serious. Vanja raised the watch box and asked how serious the apartment they had viewed on Saturday was. Someone at the next table lifted a phone. Nermina asked the waiter to move them to a small separate room. She

did not want to become strangers' evening entertainment.

Sasa suggested everyone go home. Nermina said home plainly meant different things to each of them. She took his key to their shared car, which was registered to her, and went to her sister's. Vanja stayed to order dinner because she had not eaten all day. Sasa sat at another table where nobody had invited him.

The story still spread among acquaintances. Nermina refused to repeat details, and Vanja returned the watch. After several weeks they exchanged one message about things Sasa had tried to describe differently. They did not become friends. They were two women who no longer had to share the same lie, and that was enough for each to continue her own way.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Painting She Bought in Installments

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-painting-she-bought-in-installments/

Sara paid for the painting over eight months. It depicted nothing grand: an old bridge, two people beneath an umbrella, and yellow light in a window. She bought it from a young painter in the first year she earned enough not to count every small expense. Her partner Filip considered it overpriced. Still, it hung above their table and became part of the home both showed guests.

Filip helped organize a charity sale to restore a sports playground. Sara baked cakes and offered several hours at a stall. At the opening she heard the host announce a special gift from the organizers: a painting from Filip and Sara's private collection. Its photograph already appeared in the catalog with an estimated value and delivery promised to the buyer.

Sara found him behind the stall. He said he had intended to ask but knew she would support a good cause. Besides, they could buy another. She looked at people browsing the catalog and understood he had counted on precisely that scene: her refusal would now look like opposition to restoring the playground. Without permission, he had tried creating circumstances in which she could not withdraw it.

She approached the host before bidding and said the painting had not been offered with its owner's consent. She requested no explanation before the audience, only withdrawal. Filip tried interrupting, but the sale organizer asked him to stop. They withdrew the lot, and Sara remained selling cakes to people now watching her with various kinds of curiosity.

Some said she could have kept quiet for such a good cause. Others admitted they would dislike someone giving away their things too. Sara did not debate every customer. At day's end she handed over the cake proceeds and went home. The painting still hung on the wall. She sat beneath it, considering for the first time how easily "ours" was used when

somebody wanted generosity at another's expense.

Filip arrived later, angry and embarrassed. Sara said they could discuss a joint donation, but he could not build his reputation through pressure on her. It took him a long time to stop repeating that everything was for children. Eventually he gave his own money, an amount he could afford, without a microphone announcement.

Their relationship did not end that evening. But Sara stopped considering his generosity automatically admirable. She watched where it came from and who paid. She did not move the painting. It remained above the table, bought in installments and preserved by one clear sentence she owed not only herself.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Tenants on the Third Floor

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-tenants-on-the-third-floor/

When Selina and Nadina moved onto the third floor, they brought a sofa, eight boxes, and a large pot of rosemary. Their neighbor Vera held the door, asked whether they were sisters, and abruptly stopped asking questions when they said they were partners. Later she still brought two cups of coffee. Selina took the gesture as an awkward but decent beginning.

A month later a complaint about nighttime noise appeared in the residents' group. It named nobody, only "the new apartment on the third floor." Nadina had worked at a hotel reception that night, and Selina had slept alone with a fever. They answered calmly and offered to talk. Vera wrote that individual details did not matter if people already felt uncomfortable in their own building.

Then came claims about unknown visitors, smoke in the hallway, and a damaged mailbox. None had an exact date. The landlord called to ask whether they intended to stay. For the first time Selina heard her home described as a problem that their departure might solve. She requested a meeting where each specific complaint could be discussed separately.

The meeting took place downstairs between bicycles and spare tiles. Vera spoke longest. She said she was against nobody and only wanted peace. Then her son entered carrying a tape measure and asked his mother when he could view the third-floor apartment. The silence lasted long enough for him to realize he had arrived at the wrong moment. Vera closed the folder she had never opened.

Her son explained that his mother had said the tenants were leaving soon and had already spoken to the landlord. He knew nothing about the complaints. Nadina felt relief, then anger that she had needed such an accidental revelation at all. She said they paid rent, followed building

rules, and would not prove they deserved a home by being quieter than everyone else.

The residents' representative requested that future complaints describe specific incidents and that previous unverified accusations not be repeated as facts. The landlord confirmed their lease. Vera's son apologized and left. Vera did not, at least not then. For weeks she avoided them on the stairs, which Selina found easier than false friendliness over coffee.

In May the rosemary outgrew its pot. Nadina repotted it on the balcony, and Selina took cuttings to neighbors who had asked for them. One reached Vera through an older woman on the first floor. That did not mean reconciliation. It simply meant there was once again something in the building to discuss without turning somebody else's life into a meeting agenda.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Toast to the Woman Who Did Not Come

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-toast-to-the-woman-who-did-not-come/

The family rented the whole hall for the fiftieth anniversary of the restaurant Lena's grandfather had founded. Her father prepared a speech about tradition, loyalty, and women keeping homes while men worked. Lena's mother had not come. Her father told guests she was tired and her doctor recommended rest. Lena knew her mother was choosing a rug for a small apartment in another town.

She had left six weeks earlier after thirty-seven years of marriage. There was no lover or sudden illness. There were many mornings when she could not decide even where a table should stand. She told Lena she did not need rescuing, only help carrying books. Lena carried boxes while her father visited suppliers, then agreed they would not tell the family immediately.

At the celebration she realized "not immediately" was becoming forever. Her father raised his glass and began praising the wife who had supported him unquestioningly all her life. He asked guests to send applause for her speedy recovery. Lena stood before anyone clapped. "Mum isn't ill," she said. Her voice was quiet, but she did not need a microphone.

Cutlery was set down around the hall. Her father looked at her like an employee who had served the wrong table. Lena added that her mother had moved out and could explain her own reasons if she wished. She did not recount their arguments. She showed no messages. She sat and drank water, feeling her knees suddenly much heavier than the rest of her body.

Her father stopped speaking and went to the kitchen. An aunt accused Lena of humiliating the family before business guests. An older waiter brought her a clean plate, although hers was not dirty. "Eat while it's

warm," he said. That ordinary instruction almost made her cry. She messaged her mother about what she had said without expecting praise. Her mother replied, "I wish you had asked me first. But I won't keep confirming that I'm ill."

Lena apologized for the way she had done it, not for the truth. Her father did not speak to her for a month. When he finally called, he asked her to mediate a reconciliation. She said he knew her mother's number. She came to dinner at the new apartment with soup and a small plant. Her mother moved the rug until it sat where she wanted. Lena lifted one end of the sofa and waited for instructions. This time nobody said it could not be done that way.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Trophy Under the Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-trophy-under-the-table/

When the host read their names, Dunja looked at her partner. Petar raised his eyebrows. During the final dance they had missed a whole turn and finished several steps from the intended spot. The winners should have been the young couple from the neighboring town whose performance brought the audience to its feet. Yet Dunja and Petar received the trophy and an envelope funding travel to a regional event.

Dunja was forty-nine and had danced for only two years. Her husband Ognjen stood in the front row, as pleased as though he had personally won. He photographed them five times. While she put away her shoes, she heard him in the corridor telling the club president that the second part of the donation would arrive on Monday. The president replied that they had kept their word.

She did not ask immediately. She put the trophy under the table so she would not have to look at it while changing. Petar sat beside her and said he had a bad feeling. His partner was a board member, so he called her to check the scores. She admitted that a special prize had been turned into the main award at the donor's insistence. She believed older beginners needed encouragement.

"We needed an honest second place," Petar said. They had not even earned that; according to the working sheets they were fourth. Strangely, the fact relaxed them. They knew their effort had value without a trophy that made it questionable. Dunja went to Ognjen and asked what he had paid for. He said he had only wanted to see her happy after a difficult year.

That difficult year included losing her job and his constant need to solve every problem for her. Dunja said she could not dance better because he had money. Ognjen suggested keeping the trophy and giving the trip to

someone else. She took it from under the table and carried it to the president with Petar. They requested publication of the correct results and returned the travel award.

The correction sparked an uncomfortable argument among members, but the young couple accepted their deserved prize. The donation remained with the club only under clearly separate terms, and outside judges took over the next competition. Dunja did not demand a public act of repentance from Ognjen. At home she said he would not be coming to her rehearsals for a while.

She and Petar kept practicing the missed turn. One evening they finally performed it cleanly, without music, while the caretaker was already turning out the lights. Dunja felt such strong joy she had to sit down. She sent Ognjen a short message: "We did it." He asked whether she wanted him to meet her or preferred to come home alone. For the first time that week his answer did not contain a ready-made answer.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Photograph with the Wrong Date

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-photograph-with-the-wrong-date/

The picture contained a red bucket with a cracked handle. Belma recognized it before the people. The bucket had stood in her yard after a flood four years earlier. Now the same photograph accompanied an appeal by the Dlan association to help a family supposedly left without furniture that morning. Her partner Zlatan, with whom she ran small relief efforts, had posted it.

She asked why he was using an old picture. He said it was merely illustrative and people did not read posts without photographs. The text, however, did not say it was illustrative. It said, "This is what we found today." Belma asked the name of the coordinator who had visited. Zlatan replied that after so many years together she ought to be able to trust him.

Trust did not explain the date. She called the treasurer, with whom she was authorized to inspect the records. The money had not vanished, but some earlier donations had already paid for a new office. The campaign was intended to fill that gap. The family they planned to help did exist, but their needs were smaller and different from those described. Zlatan thought a good cause could withstand a slightly more dramatic route toward it.

Belma spent the night at a table covered with statements. Zlatan brought tea and said she could not abandon him now, before the annual meeting. She did not know whether he meant the association or their shared apartment. In the morning she proposed stopping collections immediately and publishing accurate accounts. He asked for a week. Belma refused to make new donations wait for him to find courage.

With the treasurer she summoned the remaining board members. They published a correction without the name or photographs of the family

needing help. They offered donors refunds or a clearly described new use for the money. Zlatan had to step back from running the campaign pending an independent review of the accounts. Some members of the public called every volunteer a fraud. Belma answered those messages with documents, without debating other people's motives.

At home Zlatan said she should have been loyal. Belma asked whether he would have returned the money if nobody had recognized the bucket. He did not answer. Their relationship ended slowly, through boxes, divided bills, and discussion of the cat they both loved. The cat stayed with her because he traveled often. It was the only agreement they did not argue over.

The association's next appeal used an ordinary photograph of sealed parcels and a precise list of expenses. They raised less money but enough for what they had promised. At the end of the day Belma washed the red bucket and carried it into the garden. Its handle was still cracked. It could carry soil if she did not fill it past the rim. She no longer needed it to carry somebody else's story.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Letter the Choir Never Sang

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-letter-the-choir-never-sang/

On the second page of the score Vesna recognized her own sentence. She had written it twenty years earlier in a letter to the man she thought she would grow old with. Now twenty-four amateur choristers repeated it beside a piano, emphasizing the word "window." Dalibor, the conductor, told them to sing more softly. He was the same man who had once received the letter.

Vesna and Dalibor had remained in the same choir after their breakup. The town was small, she needed music, and passing years had made their rehearsing together uninteresting to everyone. Both had other partners. The new piece was announced as a setting of an anonymous letter found in an old book. Dalibor dedicated it to everyone who had ever waited for somebody to return.

During the break Vesna drew him toward the corridor. She said the letter was not anonymous and she did not want it performed. He looked surprised, then laughed. He argued nobody could know whose it was. Vesna replied that she knew and that her husband was expected in the audience. She was not ashamed of it. She did not want to explain her former pain with a concert program in hand.

Dalibor said the composition was finished and the choir had worked for months. True, she thought, and he had not asked during any of those months. She asked the board to read her letter, a copy of which she kept in a box of diaries. She did not ask them to declare him a bad man or erase twenty years of shared performances. She asked them to remove one piece from the program.

The rehearsal became an argument. Some members spoke about artistic freedom, others about the right to say no. Vesna sat beside the window, listening to people debate sentences she had once written in tears. The

youngest member asked Dalibor why he had not invented a different letter. For the first time he lacked a lengthy answer. The board accepted Vesna's request.

At the concert an old sevdalinka replaced the new piece. Dalibor told the audience the program had changed for personal reasons. Afterward Vesna asked that this explanation not be repeated. He apologized privately, awkwardly, without talking about inspiration. He admitted he had enjoyed imagining he still had a right to their shared language.

Vesna remained in the choir but moved to another voice part the following season because she wanted a new challenge. At home she told her husband everything. He asked whether she wanted him to read the letter. She said she did not want that tonight. He made tea and asked how her new part sounded. She sang a few bars, as quietly as she herself chose.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Gold Thread on the Wrong Dress

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/gold-thread-on-the-wrong-dress/

Ruza came to the traditional-crafts exhibition because her sewing cooperative had received free tickets. She did not expect to find her own wedding dress in a glass case. She recognized the gold thread around the sleeves and one incorrectly embroidered twig she had never fixed. The dress supposedly belonged to the cultural center director Elvira's grandmother and illustrated the work of women from surrounding villages.

Ruza's dress was not even forty years old. She had made it herself in an apartment above the bus station and last seen it in a trunk in the attic. Her husband Branko insisted the trunk had been damaged when the roof leaked. He said he saved the photographs but had to throw away the fabric. Ruza had comforted him then because the loss seemed to hurt him more than her.

She approached Elvira as she adjusted the microphone. She did not shout. She showed her a wedding photograph on her phone and asked her to remove the item from the exhibition. Elvira first said dresses could resemble each other. Ruza described an inside pocket where she had kept a bus ticket during the wedding. The catalog said nothing about a pocket.

The curator unlocked the case and carefully examined the lining. The ticket was still there, faded, with a date matching the photograph. They postponed the opening for half an hour. Elvira took Ruza to her office and admitted that Branko had given her the dress. He said Ruza had no sentimental attachment to objects. Their affair had lasted almost a year, long before the roof leaked.

Ruza leaned against a chair without sitting. Elvira tried explaining that shame had made her invent the grandmother story. "You turned my life into a decoration for your own," Ruza said. She requested the dress back,

a correction to the catalog, and the restoration invoice so she could learn what had been changed. For her marriage she had no request that could be settled in that office.

The center published a correction, and Elvira withdrew from organizing the next exhibition. At home Branko tried to discuss love that had happened unexpectedly. Ruza asked him to fetch the ladder first. Together they opened the attic. The trunk was dry, filled with his old magazines. Only then did she cry, angry at the small, practical tidiness of his lie.

She later offered the dress to a craft collection, with her name and the correct date. She did not want it in her bedroom while deciding how to live next. The curator asked whether the incorrect twig should be removed. Ruza slipped her finger beneath the gold thread. "That one is mine," she said. The new label stated that the dress had been made by twenty-four-year-old seamstress Ruza for her own wedding.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Wedding Without a Cover Photograph

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wedding-without-a-cover-photograph/

Nera, the photographer, had a rule that she showed family photographs to the couple before sending them to anyone else. At a wedding in a riverside restaurant, the groom's father challenged that rule. He approached while she was changing a battery and asked her to send him one picture for the relatives' group chat. Nera said she first had to ask Dunja and Filip.

"Just tidy up the edge a little," he added, pointing to Dunja's brother and his partner on the screen. He did not mean the lighting. He wanted the partner to disappear and the brother moved closer to an aunt. Nera lowered the camera and explained that she did not make such changes without the consent of the people pictured. The father laughed as though she had refused to move a chair rather than a person.

Dunja overheard the conversation while looking for a lost earring. She told Nera to leave the picture as it was. The father took her two steps aside and explained that some older guests should not have certain things forced on them. Dunja looked toward her brother, who was sharing cake with their grandmother at a table. Nobody there appeared threatened.

At first Filip suggested taking another photograph, just the immediate family. Dunja asked whether that meant without his father or without her brother. He was tired, his tie was tight, and he wanted the day to end without an argument. Only after saying "let's not make a scene" did he notice his wife remove her hand from his shoulder.

Nera withdrew toward the window. She did not want her camera to turn someone else's conflict into a spectacle. Dunja switched off the microphone the host offered for her toast. Instead of speaking, she asked Filip to come outside. Through the glass Nera saw them talking without

grand gestures. They returned after ten minutes. Filip went directly to his father.

He told him he could remain at the wedding only if he stopped rearranging their family for his own comfort. His father refused to apologize and left before the music. His departure prompted whispers and later an angry exchange of messages. Dunja did not answer everyone. She told her brother what had happened because she did not want him to learn the truth the next morning from a well-meaning relative.

They collected the album a month later. The cover did not show the large family group but Dunja and Filip in the courtyard, photographed only after they had signaled for Nera to approach. They were not smiling. Filip held her earring in his open palm. The family photograph remained inside, with everyone in their places and an empty margin nobody needed to fill with explanations.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Signature Beneath Someone Else's Wall

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-signature-beneath-someone-elses-wall/

In the photograph for the local news site, Lana stood beside a bucket of blue paint. Her partner Vedran stood in front of the completed mural with his hands on his hips. The headline called him the artist who had awakened the neighborhood. Lana enlarged the picture and saw a white smear on her cheek. She had finished the last bird that morning before going to her job at the print shop.

The mural had grown from sketches she drew during long bus journeys. Vedran submitted the project because he had a registered studio and experience with competitions. They agreed that both would be credited. Now only his name appeared on the wall, carefully sprayed in black beneath a window where someone's towel was drying.

"The plaque will come later," he said when she asked. Yet the invitation to the formal opening described Lana as a technical assistant. The organizer thanked her for her patience and asked her to arrange water for the speakers. For the first time she did not overlook a small insult to keep the evening comfortable. She said she wanted to see the application describing how their work had been divided.

Vedran did not send the document until after midnight. Beside his biography were her sentences about birds carrying traces of vanished houses. He had entered himself as the author. In the morning Lana went to the studio, collected her notebooks, and photographed them alongside dated messages. She published nothing before sending a request to the association that had funded the work.

At the meeting Vedran argued that an idea belonged to everyone who worked on it. Lana asked him to name at least one change he had proposed himself. He remembered the color of the border. She

acknowledged that contribution. Then she showed the first drawings, the agreed fee, and the message promising her equal credit. The association's chair withdrew the invitation and scheduled a new presentation.

Some comments accused Lana of turning a private breakup into a cultural scandal. There had not yet been a breakup. It came when Vedran told her at home that she had destroyed their future over a single plaque. She packed her notebooks into the same bag she used to take them to the studio. "I didn't ask for your name to disappear," she said. "I asked for mine to exist."

The new plaque carried both names, with a clear description of their contributions. Lana did not attend the new photo session. She came on Sunday with her nephew, who wanted to find the bird from her notebook. The boy pointed to one beside the gutter. Lana corrected him, then changed her mind. Each bird already belonged to the people passing underneath. Only her work no longer belonged to somebody else's biography.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Gifts Without a Price List

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/gifts-without-a-price-list/

The host opened the first envelope while Anja and Damir were cutting the cake. They thought he was reading a greeting. Then he announced the name of Damir's uncle, held up the banknotes, and loudly stated the amount. Some guests applauded. The uncle stood and bowed as though he had just won a prize. Anja lowered the knife, but the host was already reaching for the next envelope in the box beside their table.

They had provided the box so they would not spend the whole evening carrying gifts in pockets and bags. In none of their conversations about the program had they mentioned opening them in front of guests. Damir started toward the host, who winked at him and said this would liven things up. He opened the envelope from Anja's friend Vesna. Inside was a handwritten message and a smaller amount. As he read it out, somebody at the back joked about rising prices.

Vesna straightened the napkin in her lap. Anja knew her friend had traveled all night and swapped two shifts to attend. She did not want to defend the size of Vesna's gift publicly by listing those sacrifices. She approached the box and closed the lid. "This stops now," she said loudly enough to be heard without the microphone. The host laughed, convinced the bride was joining the joke, then offered Damir the next envelope to open himself.

Damir returned it to the box. He requested the microphone and said people had been invited to their wedding because they wanted their company. Nobody would read out the remaining amounts. The host protested that everyone loved this part at other celebrations. Anja asked him to play some music. She did not wait for his agreement. She carried the box into the room where they had left their coats and gave the key to Damir.

When she returned, the uncle was explaining that generosity was nothing to be ashamed of. Vesna had gone to the restroom. Anja waited beside the door instead of following her inside. "I'm sorry," she said when Vesna emerged. Vesna replied that she did not want to spend the rest of the evening as the woman everybody comforted. She asked Anja to return to cutting the cake because she was hungry and wanted the biggest slice. Anja smiled for the first time since the envelope was opened.

After midnight, the newlyweds read the messages in their room. Damir put the money into a single envelope without listing names and amounts. Anja placed Vesna's card in the bag she would take on their short trip. As he was leaving, the host said he had never encountered such sensitive newlyweds. Damir paid his agreed fee. At that moment Anja was carrying two slices of cake for Vesna's journey, and she did not stop to make the uncomfortable farewell easier for him.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Tears That Did Not Arrive on Cue

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/tears-that-did-not-arrive-on-cue/

On his last day at the workshop, Mladen brought an empty box for his belongings. There was little: a mug, safety glasses, a photograph of his grown daughter from when she still wore braces. The work was moving to a larger facility, and he was retiring. He felt sad about the people he would no longer see every morning and pleased that he would stop rising before dawn. Neither feeling canceled the other until a crew arrived to film their farewell.

The reporter was pleasant. She asked how many years he had worked there and what he would miss most. He answered honestly, mentioning colleagues and morning coffee. Asked what he would do with himself now, he said he would first sleep as long as possible for several days. The cameraman laughed, but the reporter was unsatisfied. She asked him to say more about the emptiness. Mladen looked at his box. He did not know how to describe emptiness before even arriving home.

They filmed him walking through the door. Then they sent him back because someone had passed behind the camera. He repeated the exit, more slowly. The third time they asked him to pause and look back at the workshop, like a man leaving forever. There was enough truth in that sentence for him to comply. He looked at the tables, windows, and place where he had stood for years. He did not cry. He heard the reporter quietly ask whether it could be a little more emotional.

He set down the box. He said he did not know how to cry on time. His younger colleague laughed, more from nerves than amusement. The reporter explained that the story had to reach viewers. Mladen asked why his relief could not reach them. He did not hate his work. He was tired of it. He wanted both things to be allowed into the same sentence, without having to turn his departure into a misfortune somebody expected.

The workshop manager approached and asked him to help the crew finish. Mladen lifted the box and said he had already answered their questions. He did not demand deletion of the footage or declare himself the voice of every worker. He simply stopped entering the same doorway to emerge again with a better expression. His colleagues shook his hand. One offered to carry the box together, although it was light. That moment nearly made him cry, but the camera was pointing elsewhere.

The evening report retained his sentence about morning coffee. He watched at home in old sweatpants. His daughter asked whether it was difficult. He said yes, and that he also felt lighter. She did not have to choose which half of the answer to keep. She brought two cups, and for the first time that week he left the box unpacked and decided it could wait until morning.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Robe Over an Unfinished Drawing

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-robe-over-an-unfinished-drawing/

Lada worked as a model for evening art workshops. She was forty-six and knew how long she could hold a position before her leg went numb. The agreement was simple: adult participants drew, phones stayed in bags, and breaks were respected. That evening she posed seated, fabric draped over her shoulders. She expected nothing beyond fatigue and the money that would pay part of her bills.

She noticed the phone in the third row. A man held it low above his sketchbook, but its glass caught the light. Lada said photography was not permitted. He replied that he needed it to finish his drawing at home, as though he had explained why he would do something she had not agreed to anyway. The instructor approached and quietly asked Lada to endure another ten minutes. The others were making good progress.

She put on her robe. Several pencils stopped above the paper. The instructor said interrupting people's work over a misunderstanding was unkind. Lada reminded him that she had not invented the rule halfway through class. The man with the phone insisted the photograph was only for him. She did not say she believed him. She asked him to delete it in front of her, then asked the instructor what he intended to do to keep their agreement for the rest of the evening.

The man showed his screen and deleted the photograph. Lada could not know whether he had saved a copy. She said so aloud, without shouting. The instructor sighed and checked the time. He offered everyone a five-minute break, as though she had forgotten to request one. Then a woman in the front row closed her sketchbook. She said she did not want to draw someone who had to beg for her work to be respected. Another participant put down a pencil. The rest waited.

The class ended early. The instructor paid Lada the agreed amount and said he would probably find someone more relaxed for the next session. She had no witty reply. She needed the money, and choosing between it and a boundary she believed had already been established hurt. She packed the robe, changed behind the screen, and left carrying a bag that felt unusually heavy that evening.

The woman from the front row waited outside. She offered neither rescue nor a speech about courage. She asked whether she could keep the unfinished drawing. Lada said yes; that was exactly what she had come for. The woman showed it to her. The paper held a shoulder, part of a chair, and a large blank area. Lada looked at that empty space for a long time. She was glad nobody would fill it using a picture she had never agreed to leave behind.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Jacket That Opened the Door

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-jacket-that-opened-the-door/

For dinner Mirjana wore black trousers, a silk blouse, and shoes she could tolerate all night. The hotel advertised a formal evening, and that was her understanding of formality. Her husband put on a tie he loosened in the elevator. At the dining room entrance a young employee greeted them with a smile and a reservation list. She found their name, looked at Mirjana, then looked back at the paper as though an explanation might remain there.

She said ladies were expected to wear a dress or skirt. Mirjana looked at the guests passing them. All the men wore trousers, some much more creased than hers. She asked where the rule appeared. The employee pointed to the formal attire notice and said she was only relaying instructions. Mirjana recognized the discomfort on her face and asked to speak to whoever had given them. Her husband suggested she quickly change into something from her suitcase.

There was no dress in the suitcase. She was sixty and no longer bought dresses for other people's dinners. The dining room manager arrived, assuring them that he wanted to preserve a particular atmosphere. Mirjana asked exactly what atmosphere her trouser legs were spoiling. He replied that they could not debate every rule individually. A line was already forming behind them. Nobody said anything, giving the scene a weight much greater than one item of clothing.

Her husband then took off his jacket. He made no speech. He offered it to her and asked the manager whether she could enter dressed like him. The jacket was too wide and its sleeves covered part of her hands. She looked less tidy than before, but now she had a suit. A woman in the line laughed, and Mirjana followed. The manager said there was no need for a performance. She replied that she wanted to end the performance and occupy the seat she had paid for.

They were admitted with a reminder that this was an exception. Mirjana did not thank him for it. At the table she returned her husband's jacket and ordered dinner. She did not immediately feel comfortable. Her hands were still cold and she barely tasted the first mouthful. Her husband admitted that his quick fix had been easiest only for him. She did not comfort him. She asked him to pass the water and let the conversation remain unfinished for a while.

The next day she sent a short complaint from reception before leaving. She described what had happened and requested a clear answer, without asking for the young employee to be punished. No reply arrived during their journey home. Mirjana folded the trousers among her clean clothes. Her husband asked whether she would wear them on another evening out. She looked at him across the suitcase. He said it had been a stupid question and helped her close the lid.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Holiday with a Bedtime

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-holiday-with-a-bedtime/

Zora paid for a week's holiday so that, for the first time in years, she would not have to tell anyone when she was coming home. She was sixty-eight, had comfortable sandals, and shared a room with a friend. The offer said excursions and evening entertainment were optional. On the first evening she listened to an accordion, on the second she played cards, and on the third she wanted to sit beside the sea after the promenade emptied.

She told her friend where she was going. At reception she left her key and asked how late the side entrance stayed open. She had not disappeared. She bought ice cream, sat beneath a lamp, and removed her sandals. Dance music drifted from somewhere behind the hotel. She liked it from that distance. She did not want to join people merely to explain why sitting was enough. Her phone rang as the ice cream began to melt.

Her daughter sounded breathless. The organizer had reported that her mother was absent from the entertainment and refusing to participate in group activities. Zora looked at the hotel, brightly lit and very close. She explained where she was sitting. Her daughter exhaled, then asked her to return and stop making trouble. Those words hurt more than the call. She stood, wiped her fingers on a napkin, and walked slowly back, angry that her holiday already had a supervisor.

The organizer stopped her outside the hall. He said he had to consider the safety of his pensioners. Zora replied that she was his guest, not his pensioner. Several people stopped dancing. She showed him the sheet describing the optional program and asked why he had not called her own phone first. He had the number. He said families liked to be informed. Her friend then added that he knew perfectly well where Zora was because she had already told him.

There was no great uprising. Two guests said the fuss was excessive; others wanted the music back. The organizer apologized for the misunderstanding and started offering Zora a better chair. She declined. She asked him to keep her daughter's number for an actual emergency, as agreed when she registered. Then she called her daughter in front of him and said she was an adult woman on a holiday she had paid for. Her voice shook, which made her angrier still.

The next day she skipped morning exercises. Nobody called. Her daughter later sent a brief apology, without asking where she was. Zora replied with a photograph of her own sandals beside the water. That evening her friend joined her on the bench. They brought an ice cream each and stayed until they felt cold. They returned because they had felt it for themselves, each in her own shoulders.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Question That Did Not Fit the Award

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-question-that-did-not-fit-the-award/

The award came in a heavy frame, more expensive than Amra expected. The director held it with both hands while praising her loyalty before colleagues. Fifteen years, countless extra evenings, always available when things grew difficult. Amra stood beside him hearing precisely what she had spent months requesting a conversation about. The extra evenings had become a virtue in the speech, neatly separated from how she would be compensated.

She had not planned to interrupt. She wore a nice blouse, accepted flowers from colleagues, and thought perhaps she could enjoy one part of the story. But the director finished by saying such dedication had no price. Her face grew hot. Her husband sat in the audience, the man who attended family lunches alone for years while she finished urgent work. He knew there was a price, even when nobody named it.

As he handed her the frame, Amra accepted it and asked whether they would finally discuss extra hours that week. The microphone was close enough for everyone to hear. The director tried making the audience laugh by saying she never forgot work, even at a celebration. Amra did not repeat the question more loudly. She simply waited for an answer. The wait lasted longer than the room was prepared to tolerate.

He said they would speak privately. Amra thanked him and left the small platform. She neither refused flowers nor destroyed every chance for colleagues to congratulate her. She knew some loved her, not the story the director celebrated. Her husband approached and took the frame so she need not carry it all evening. He did not call her brave. He asked whether she wanted home or to stay longer.

The conversation occurred days later. She did not receive everything requested. Some time remained disputed, and they agreed compensation for some. More important to her was ceasing to accept every new urgent assignment without clear agreement. Colleagues initially seemed surprised when the usual departure time actually meant she left. The director repeatedly mentioned the award. Amra replied that gratitude for past work did not determine the price of every future afternoon.

The frame stood at home against a cabinet because they did not know where to hang it. One Saturday her husband took a measuring tape and asked whether she wanted it above the shelf. Amra looked at the beautiful lettering and said not yet. They went to lunch together, without a call interrupting the journey. She did not discard the award. She simply no longer gave it the best place in the room before seeing how much space her life gained outside it.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Room for Men Who Wait

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-room-for-men-who-wait/

We came to the workshop together, a little excited and aware of how little we knew. The room held chairs, cloth bags, and dolls for simple practical exercises. It was not medical instruction but a gathering about everyday life after a baby arrived. The facilitator invited women closer to the table and directed men to the hallway coffee machine. She said they could rest while mothers learned important things. My partner Omer stayed seated.

He asked whether he could approach too. The facilitator laughed and said seeing an interested dad was lovely. Even that praise sounded strange. We had paid two fees and arrived with identical questions. Omer received applause for wanting to participate while my interest was assumed. When he took a doll to try arranging clothes, she took it back and said she would show the women first; they could explain to their men at home.

Omer lowered his hands and asked why he must learn through me. The room grew uncomfortable. A man joked that he should not spoil an opportunity for free coffee. Women laughed, some genuinely, some wearily. I nearly said it did not matter, that we would manage. It was an old reflex: preserve the mood by accepting additional work nobody had yet called work.

Instead I said I had not come for instructions to repeat later to the adult beside me. I wanted us both to hear and try. The facilitator replied that she was simply following experience; women generally handled these things more. Omer said we had come precisely before such a division became our experience. He spoke quietly but did not try winning sympathy with jokes about his incompetence.

We continued the practical section together. Everything did not become equal in minutes. The facilitator still addressed me more often and occasionally praised Omer for an ordinary attempt. Another man

nevertheless returned from the hallway to sit beside his partner. Afterward a woman said she thought she was the only one bothered by the beginning. I regretted that we all initially waited for somebody else to make the discomfort visible.

On the way home Omer said he did not want celebration for things we would both do. I replied that I did not want to be his teacher in everything we were still learning. We bought two notebooks, then laughed because we probably needed no such orderliness. At home we put our bags on the table and wrote remaining questions together. The heading did not say helping the mother. It simply said our first month.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Bucket They Declared an Artwork

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bucket-they-declared-an-artwork/

The bucket remained beside the wall because I was waiting for the floor to dry. It was old, blue stained, with a rag hanging over the rim. Everything ran late at the gallery that day, including clearing things before guests arrived. I maintained the premises, while my husband helped install lighting. When I returned for the bucket, four people stood around it listening to the director discuss a bold relationship with everyday labor.

I thought he was joking. Then he pointed to the rag and said its position was deliberately unresolved. A guest nodded as though grasping something important. I tried approaching quietly to explain the bucket was mine, no part of the exhibition. The director turned, recognized me, and said we could discuss technical matters later. He gestured toward the side entrance without interrupting his account.

My husband stood near a switch watching with an uneasy smile. He whispered that I should wait; surely it would not last long. But the director was already inviting more people closer. Asked about the artist, he said some works emphasized experience rather than a name. Suddenly that sentence revealed the whole room: people working namelessly every day, and a man able to turn their forgotten object into his own importance.

I approached, took the bucket, and said I needed to finish cleaning. I explained to the guests that it had simply been left there. The director tried arguing that art was not exhausted by the intention of whoever brought an object. I said they could discuss that without my bucket because I needed it for work. Someone laughed; someone moved away as though no conversation had occurred. My husband finally approached and opened the door.

Later the director said I could have preserved the event's dignity. I replied that I had approached him quietly for precisely that reason. He had chosen to continue. I demanded no public apology or admission that art was meaningless. I liked working in the gallery and knew I understood little of some things. I simply refused the assumption that my ignorance was certain while his mistake mattered so much everyone must maintain it.

At home I spoke longer with my husband than with the director. He said he feared for his work. I understood the fear but wanted him to understand my exhaustion from waiting while others finished discussing my labor. Next day I marked the bucket with my name. A colleague said it looked even more like art now. I laughed and added enough water to prevent him considering exhibiting it.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Children Are No Reason for Everyone Else to Be Silent

Read online:
ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/children-are-no-reason-for-everyone-else-to-be-silent/

The holiday visit schedule arrived in the family group without a question. Beside my name were shopping, driving to my aunt's, and preparing lunch on the first day. My sister added that I could manage most easily because I had no children. Reading on the bus after a long shift, I wondered when my life became empty space for everyone else's duties. My partner waited with tickets for an outing we had planned for months.

I wrote that we would be away that weekend. Replies came immediately. Children were hard to organize, older people needed help, somebody must think of family. Nobody asked where I worked, how tired I was, or why the trip mattered. I did not expect parenthood to be easy. For years I had babysat, shopped, driven, and gladly helped. But each previous favor became proof there was no need to ask next time.

At a family lunch I tried discussing it calmly. My brother said I would understand when I had children. I replied that I might never have them and my time could not wait until then to acquire value. Silence fell. My mother tried changing subjects, and my sister said nobody meant harm. I showed the schedule. My name appeared repeatedly where others had already written rest.

I did not ask for every task to divide into identical minutes. My aunt needed food, my mother help with heavy things, and the children a normal holiday. I offered what I could do before leaving and kept the rest blank. The blankness angered them most. While I filled every space, nobody had to see how much the shared arrangement depended on the person they claimed had the fewest responsibilities.

My sister was cold for several days. Then she called and admitted exhaustion without comparing it to mine. We spoke at length. I could listen and help with one concrete thing without canceling my weekend. My brother did not apologize. He did the shopping with many complaints. The family lunch still happened, less elaborate than previously and without the disaster predicted when I said I could not do everything.

On the outing I checked my phone too often. My partner neither confiscated it nor lectured about boundaries. He simply waited for me to return it to my bag. A path lay ahead along which we need not hurry. I thought of my sister, tired and dear, then of myself. I could love the family's children and still preserve a day when nobody expected proof through canceling my own life.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Desk Beside Someone's Dog

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-desk-beside-someones-dog/

The owner's dog appeared at the office one Monday and immediately received more attention than the new employee had the previous week. He was small, lively, and accustomed to people approaching him. Most colleagues were delighted. I stayed at my desk with my feet tucked beneath the chair. I did not hate dogs. I feared them, without an interesting story to justify it. That fear had never caused major difficulty until a dog began coming to work daily.

I asked the owner to keep him away from my desk. She said he was harmless and let him sniff my bag. Colleagues laughed at my stiffness. One suggested I must stroke him to get accustomed. I said I did not want to. The owner said everyone could use more warmth. Suddenly a discussion about workspace became an assessment of my character, as though fear meant I was not a sufficiently good person.

During the following days the dog lay near the exit, jumped on chairs, and sometimes barked during my telephone calls. Whenever I stood, I searched for him. I finished work more slowly but hesitated to admit how much attention I spent on an animal nobody had asked employees about. Worst was colleagues beginning jokes before I said anything. I had become the person whose reaction they awaited as brief entertainment between tasks.

At a meeting the owner placed the dog in my lap. I stood so quickly she had to catch him. Silence fell. I said I had clearly refused repeatedly and nobody could make that decision for me. I was not demanding the dog disappear from the planet, only to work without contact I had declined. The owner looked offended, as though I had rejected a present every reasonable person must want.

Afterward a colleague admitted the barking bothered her but she did not want to seem unfriendly. I said next time she should say so herself, not only to me in the kitchen. The dog began staying in the owner's office. People treated me more coldly for a while, then slowly returned to ordinary work questions. Nobody became a great advocate for my right to fear. It was enough that they stopped making a game of it.

In spring a colleague brought his child briefly to visit. The owner immediately moved the dog when the boy said he was afraid. I watched that simple movement, made without argument. I added nothing. I returned to work and, for the first time, finished my report before the break. My bag still sat in a drawer from habit, but that day I stretched my legs beneath the desk without checking the space around me.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Room for a Bag, Not for a Person

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/room-for-a-bag-not-for-a-person/

We set out on an outing with people my husband knew through work. On the bus our new acquaintances immediately claimed the back section and spread bags across empty seats. At first I did not mind because there was space. More people boarded at the next stop. The service was not exclusively for our group, although its leader behaved as though he had hired the bus himself. His bag stayed beside the window while a woman in the aisle sought somewhere to sit.

She asked whether she could sit. He said he was saving it for a friend. I knew that friend was already seated two rows ahead, but looked out the window. My husband whispered not to interfere; she would not stand long. Minutes later an older man caught a seatback as the bus turned. Bags still traveled more comfortably than people. Someone in our group remarked that securing your place early mattered.

I stood and put my bag beneath my seat, inviting the woman beside me. The group leader immediately said I was disrupting the arrangement. I asked what arrangement, since our names were not on those seats. He replied that he knew the driver and understood how things were arranged. I said acquaintance created no extra seat for a standing person. My husband tugged my sleeve, not forcefully, but clearly enough.

I did not lecture the rest of the bus. I moved another bag only after its owner reluctantly agreed, and the older man sat. At the next stop the driver requested that belongings be removed from remaining seats. Our group became quiet. Somebody said we had come to enjoy ourselves, not argue over every detail. The woman beside me stared ahead, evidently wanting an ordinary journey without the role of grateful witness.

At our destination my husband said I had put him in an awkward position before coworkers. I asked why my voice embarrassed him more

than their lie about occupied seats. He did not immediately answer. We spent most of the outing apart from the group. It was not especially romantic. I was also angry with myself for initially staying silent, waiting for somebody without a comfortable seat to resolve the discomfort.

On the return journey my husband put his bag in the luggage space first. He sought no praise from me. We sat together, neighboring seats empty until people boarded. The group leader invited us on no more outings. My husband said he regretted losing the company, but not the trip we later organized with two friends. We brought fewer belongings and needed to know nobody to understand where to put them.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Contest for the Best Silence

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-contest-for-the-best-silence/

The outing facilitator distributed cards and asked us to write the colleague we found most difficult to work with. He called it an honesty game, useful for improving cooperation. We sat in a hotel room after waiting longer for lunch than for the bus. The director smiled, convinced a little openness would bring us closer. I stared at my blank card, thinking how tomorrow we would all sit in the same office without the facilitator to collect the remains of his game.

Beside me sat Mirna, a quiet colleague who often requested written confirmation of agreements. Some disliked it. It helped me, but I had repeatedly stayed silent when people called her difficult. As others wrote, I saw her fingers tighten around the pen. She did not need to read names to know her assigned role. The facilitator explained that cards were not anonymous because courageous teams stood behind their views.

I returned a blank card and said I would not participate. The director asked what frightened me. I replied that I was not afraid to state concerns but would not turn them into a vote about a person. The facilitator tried softening matters by saying it was all well intentioned. I asked whether we would also publicly select the manager who changed agreements most frequently. The laughter in the room was no longer entirely relaxed.

I did not merely want to transfer humiliation to someone else. I put down my pen and suggested discussing concrete work: missed deadlines, unanswered messages, assignments arriving at the end of a shift. It immediately became less entertaining. The director said serious topics belonged at another time. Mirna spoke for the first time, asking why time had already been found for the serious consequences of this game.

The cards were not read. The facilitator moved to harmless paper tower building, and the director avoided me for the rest of the day. I was not as

proud as others later expected. I knew how often I had said nothing while Mirna requested clarity alone. On the bus I admitted it. She said she knew. She did not comfort me by saying everything was fine, and I was glad no longer to take away her right to anger.

On Monday I sent the first assignment with a clear deadline and confirmation of our agreement. Nobody applauded. Mirna replied briefly with a useful question. For some time the director said I could not take a joke. I did not argue about my sense of humor. When a new agreement remained unclear, I asked the question Mirna had previously asked alone. It attracted less attention than the outing and was much harder to continue every day.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Speech That Stayed in My Pocket

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-speech-that-stayed-in-my-pocket/

My aunt gave me the speech in the kitchen, folded beside a coffee saucer. She said I was the eldest and should say something about my father. We had already returned from the funeral. In the living room sat people who remembered him as a funny colleague, a good neighbor, and a man who never refused to help. I read the page and wondered where it contained the man who went months without calling his children.

I did not want to reduce that day to accusations. My father had good qualities I need not erase simply because he rarely showed them to me. But the speech said he had always supported us, sacrificed everything for us, and taught us security. My brother stood in the doorway watching me read. He knew what security looked like in a home where our mother quietly borrowed money so we would not have to ask our father.

I returned the page to my aunt and said I could not read it. She paled and whispered that one should not speak ill of the dead. I replied that I had proposed no cruel words. I simply would not say beautiful ones that were not mine. She said this was no time to settle old scores. I looked toward the room, where people were already rising to hear a speech I had not promised, and felt how long the family had lived on my wrongly assumed consent.

My brother approached and took the saucer from my hand. He said nothing grand, only that I could sit. My aunt nevertheless called for silence and said my name. I stood without the paper. I thanked everyone for coming, said each person carried different memories and that we needed time. Then I sat. Discomfort settled over the room, harder for some than all the beautiful lies they had been ready to hear.

Later a cousin accused me of denying my father final respect. I did not recount my childhood to earn the right to silence. I said I had attended

the funeral, welcomed visitors, and spoken courteously. I could give no more on demand. That afternoon my mother sat for the first time before all the guests left. My brother brought her tea. For a moment the three of us did not have to maintain anyone's image before others.

Several days later I found the speech in my coat pocket, where my aunt had slipped it again. I did not tear it up. I filed it with other papers as evidence of the story they wished to tell. Later I wrote my own letter to my father. It contained both anger and tenderness. Nobody heard or approved it, and for the first time I could finish a sentence without checking whether it would offend the relatives.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Queue for People with Time to Spare

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-queue-for-people-with-time-to-spare/

The parcels were ready before noon. Volunteers stacked them along the small hall's wall, checked the list, and opened the doors to people waiting in the cold. Then Nedžad, the organizer, said distribution would not start yet. The sponsor was late and wanted to hand out the first parcels personally. Alisa looked toward the entrance, where a woman in work uniform checked her watch. She asked whether they could at least begin with those needing to get to work.

Nedžad replied that explaining who received priority would be difficult afterward. The argument sounded orderly until an older man said his bus left in twenty minutes. Missing it meant a long wait. Nedžad advised patience. Alisa felt the discomfort she had previously suppressed, believing good causes should not be criticized over details. Now she watched somebody's time become material for someone else's ceremony.

Another half hour passed. The uniformed woman left the queue and said she had to go. Perhaps she could collect her parcel another time. Nedžad was already on the telephone and did not hear. Alisa took a parcel, checked the woman's name, and carried it to the door. When she returned, several people stood, assuming distribution had begun. Nedžad pulled her aside and said she was ruining his entire plan.

She asked which part of the plan included a woman potentially losing part of her day's pay because of the delay. He said he could not know everyone's story. Alisa replied that he needed no individual stories to begin at the time he had announced. She neither took his phone nor called on people to protest. She returned to the table and began calling names. Another volunteer stood beside her handing over parcels.

The sponsor arrived when half the hall was already empty. He did not look offended. He asked whether boxes needed carrying. Nedžad offered him a speech, but the man removed his coat and helped an older woman take her things to a taxi. Alisa felt no satisfaction at the organizer's embarrassment. She was angrier at how much humiliation arose from his assumption about what an important guest wanted, without asking a single real question.

They did not invite her to manage the list at the next event. Nedžad said they needed people who could follow agreements. Alisa offered help to another group, asking one simple question about the start time. Later she met the uniformed woman in the street. They waved and continued toward their respective jobs. There was no speech or shared photograph, only several minutes that day nobody had been forced to give away.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The First Day That Keeps Repeating

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-first-day-that-keeps-repeating/

Dora showed the new young woman where the glasses were and told her not to worry about mistakes. It was her first trial day at the event venue run by Dora's partner. He had promised they were seeking another permanent server. Dora prepared schedules and welcomed guests but did not make hiring decisions. She believed previous applicants had simply withdrawn because work often continued late into the night.

The young woman was Nika. She worked carefully, asked when uncertain, and stayed until the last table was clean. Before leaving she asked when she would hear the result. Dora's partner said he would call, then gave her taxi money as though generously considerate. Dora noticed no mention of the whole shift. Nika explained she had been told the trial was unpaid but she was almost certain to get the job.

A new applicant arrived the following week. Dora asked what happened to Nika. Her partner said he wanted someone who fitted better. She had heard that sentence several times. At the next event a guest recognized another young server and said her brother had done the same trial the previous month. Nobody had called him either. Dora began counting evenings applicants worked as though already employed.

At home she asked whether a vacancy existed at all. Her partner laughed at her seriousness and said every small business must find ways to survive. Applicants gained experience, they gained help, nobody forced anyone. Dora looked at a schedule full of Saturdays where trial stood beside fresh names. It was not clumsy recruitment. The first day was the whole system, endlessly repeated before people promised a second.

When the next applicant called, Dora did not give her rehearsed reply. She said she could promise no employment and a paid shift must be discussed before arrival. Her partner overheard and accused her of

destroying his business. Dora replied that she would not lend her voice's credibility to an offer she knew was unreal. They worked the rest of the evening alone, exhausted as others had previously been, leaving with hope instead of earnings.

Dora left the job and soon the shared apartment. She called Nika and apologized for not asking clear questions earlier. The young woman said she had found other work and wished her luck without particular warmth. Dora accepted that no gratitude was owed for her belated withdrawal. On her first day at her new job, she asked when the shift ended and how she would be paid. She asked both questions without the smile that used to soften them.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Bread Nobody Could Take

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bread-nobody-could-take/

At the end of lunch three baskets of wrapped bread remained. The guests had left, the music stopped, and workers were gathering tablecloths. Alma was helping her husband Jasmin, the event organizer, because an employee had canceled. She had never stayed beyond the final toast before. Usually she knew only the tidy hall, guests' compliments, and his exhaustion at home. That evening she saw people taking exhaustion home on the last bus rather than in a car.

A young waiter asked whether he could take several wrapped rolls. Jasmin immediately said no food left the hall. The waiter pointed at the rubbish bag beside the baskets, puzzled by a rule he did not understand. Jasmin said he did not want people saying leftovers were carried away from his events. He spoke firmly, as though delivering business wisdom requiring no explanation. Alma held one end of a tablecloth and waited for him to laugh.

He did not laugh. He ordered everything into the bag before he returned for the equipment. The waiter reddened and stopped asking. Alma thought of mornings when Jasmin took her wrapped sandwiches from home to avoid buying breakfast. She asked why anyone should feel ashamed of the same bread once the person carrying it had served it. He gave her a warning look, as though she had forgotten that arguments belonged in their apartment.

She said she would not discard untouched rolls. Jasmin repeated that she did not run the business. That was true. She helped for free, without the rights she had assumed until trying to decide something he disliked. She put down the cloth, opened a box, and invited staff to take bread. Some did; others would not risk it. She neither urged them nor demanded that her conflict become theirs.

At home Jasmin talked about the authority she had undermined. Alma said she had seen for the first time how he used that authority. His explanation that he was tired no longer satisfied her. She had been tired too, as had the people ordered to discard food they wanted to take. She stopped helping at events. Next time he had to pay a replacement and seriously account for work he had previously received as a marital favor.

Several weeks later she met the waiter at a bus stop. They discussed the rain, not the bread. He was polite but made no attempt to become her ally in her marriage. Alma appreciated the distance. She carried her bag home and left only two cups on the table. The conversation waiting between them could not end merely because she had done something decent one evening.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Name on the Bathroom Door

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-name-on-the-bathroom-door/

The board appeared beside the shift schedule. Small empty squares stood next to every name. The hotel owner said they were introducing clearer break management. Only after her second bathroom visit did Leona understand the squares: he recorded every departure, whatever the reason. The board hung behind reception rather than in the office, close enough for guests to read names while waiting for a key.

The employees' first reaction was laughter. The cook suggested an award for holding out longest. The owner laughed and told them not to exaggerate. Leona found nothing funny. A colleague had previously asked to swap shifts for personal health reasons. Now she stared at the board, gripping a water bottle she did not open.

Leona asked the owner to remove the board. He replied that conscientious employees had nothing to hide. He said it before a guest to whom she was handing a key. The guest looked at the wall, then at her stomach, as though entitled to guess a reason. Leona felt her face grow hot. She lifted the board from its hook and carried it into the owner's office.

She neither broke it nor erased it. She rested it in front of his desk and returned to reception. The owner followed but did not want to continue the argument before guests. His restraint showed her how well he did understand the difference between private and public conversation.

Her husband called during her break. A longtime friend of the owner, he had already heard that Leona was being dramatic. He asked her not to damage the relationship over an ordinary board. She asked whether he would accept having his name and visits recorded before clients. He said that was different. Leona lacked the energy to explain why it was not. She ended the call and drank water alone in the small courtyard.

The board was not returned the next day, but the owner was cold. At home her husband claimed he had defended her. Leona said she did not need a report on his defense but wanted him to ask her first what happened next time. She did not quit that day. She began seeking another job slowly, without turning departure into a threat she could not fulfill.

Two months later she handed the keys to the new receptionist. She explained where towels were kept and how shifts were arranged. She did not leave her a duty to continue somebody else's struggle. Her colleague gave her a small bottle of water for the journey. Leona opened it as soon as she reached the street, stopped beside the crossing lights, and drank as much as she needed.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Too Many Years to Be a Beginner

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/too-many-years-to-be-a-beginner/

The application said no previous experience was necessary. That was why Zora, who had drawn nothing in sixty years except a flower in a margin, paid for the workshop. Her daughter gave her pencils, and her husband joked that somebody would finally improve their living room pictures. Zora did not expect to become an artist. She only wanted to learn how a cup on paper could look like an object standing upright instead of a falling circle.

On the first day the instructor called her their bravest granny. Zora had no grandchildren. She corrected him with a smile, expecting that to end it. Yet whenever he approached her table, he spoke a little louder than to everyone else and praised her effort before looking at the drawing. He explained shading to younger students. He told her that socializing and staying active were what mattered.

During the third class she asked why the cup's front edge looked strange. The instructor held her paper up to the group and said some beginnings lasted longer than others. Several people laughed, more from habit than amusement. Zora felt the familiar urge to make a joke herself to soften the discomfort. Instead she asked him to put the paper back and answer the question she had paid to learn about.

He said he had meant no harm. Zora replied that she believed him but still could not draw a cup. The young man beside her then said his drawing was poor too and asked the same question. Two more people moved their papers closer. The instructor finally came down among the tables and began explaining. It was not a memorable public apology, but an awkward return to the job he should have been doing all along.

During the break a student said she admired her courage at her age. Zora felt tired before she had drunk any water. She asked whether she would

say the same to a man learning to repair a bicycle for the first time. The young woman blushed and admitted she would not. Later they discussed pencils, prices, and the room's poor lighting. That ordinary conversation meant more to Zora than a whole series of compliments.

She finished the workshop with one decent cup and many ugly drawings. She did not invite her family to the final presentation. She wanted the right to a beginning that did not immediately have to become an occasion. This time the instructor introduced her by name, without mentioning age. At home her husband asked whether she would draw him. Zora looked over her glasses and said she was still practicing simple shapes, so he should not get his hopes up yet.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Nickname Behind the Screen

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-nickname-behind-the-screen/

When my colleague said the Countess had arrived, I laughed before looking toward the door. That was what we called Mrs. Anka, who always wanted the same appointment, the same cup, and a cushion behind her back. She was tidy, polite, and slow taking off her coat. None of it justified the nickname, but nicknames were how you showed you belonged in the salon. New employees learned them alongside the towel arrangement.

That morning Anka was already behind the screen, changing shoes soaked by the rain. She heard my colleague say the royal court needed special preparations again. She heard my laugh too, the loudest in the room. When she emerged, nobody immediately noticed anything wrong. She put her wet shoes in a bag and asked whether the cushion was such a problem. Suddenly everyone found something to examine on the floor.

The owner tried explaining that it was an affectionate nickname. Anka said she had not asked what to call the nickname but whether her visits bothered us. At that moment I could stand beside her or beside the story protecting us. I said we had only been joking. The moment I said it, I saw her look more hurt. For years I had washed her hair and heard about the husband who no longer left their home.

She made no scene. She put on her coat, declined the offer of a free haircut, and said she would call another time. We knew she would not. After she left, the owner became angry with the new worker for not warning us Anka was behind the screen. I could no longer bear how easily we found the wrong person to blame. I said the problem was not who heard us. It was why we found a woman asking for comfort funny.

My colleagues looked at me like a traitor who had been the merriest person ten minutes earlier. They were right that I had participated. So I gave no lecture. I called Anka and apologized for my laughter, without

inviting her back. She said she was sorry she had believed we had become close. I had no sentence that could remove that sadness from her or make the conversation easier for me.

We stopped using nicknames in the salon. The atmosphere was stiff for several weeks, and the owner claimed people could no longer say anything. Anka found another salon. I sometimes see her at the market, and we greet each other politely, like two women who know each other superficially. When I arrange a cushion for a new customer, I do not imagine it has made me a better person. I simply arrange it and ask whether she is comfortable now.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Price of a Broken Cup

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-price-of-a-broken-cup/

The cup broke as the server cleared a plate from the edge of the table. Tea landed on the floor, a few drops on Damir's shoe. He jumped so suddenly that Belma first thought he had been burned. Then he began talking about incompetence, the price of service, and people who did not belong in front of guests. The server apologized while crouching beside the fragments. Damir demanded the owner, increasingly loudly, as though distance justified him.

Belma knew the sequence. Something small went wrong, he made a scene, the staff yielded, and she left a larger tip afterward. At home she would say he had gone too far. He would reply that someone had to maintain standards. For years she had called his rudeness demanding standards, words that better suited the man she married. That day she watched the server's fingers among the porcelain and could no longer sustain the substitution.

She told the young woman to fetch a broom rather than collect sharp pieces by hand. Damir interrupted, furious she was interfering while he solved the problem. Belma stood. She said a broken cup was no reason to humiliate an adult in a full room. Several guests looked over. Damir lowered his voice and told her not to embarrass him. That sentence, spoken after everything, finally stopped her hands from shaking.

The owner approached, offering free tea. Damir refused and repeated that he wanted consequences for the server. Belma said she would pay for their drinks and leave. She did not ask the staff to support her or praise her politeness. She took money from her bag for the bill. The owner finally said dismissal was not a subject for discussion with guests. Damir looked toward Belma, awaiting the familiar sign that everything could still be calmed down.

She left alone. At the tram stop she felt no triumph, only exhaustion from all the previous occasions when she had stayed seated. Damir sent messages about loyalty. She only replied that they would talk at home once he stopped demanding an apology from her. She would not make this another argument after which she repaired the atmosphere. She called her sister and described exactly what had happened, without her usual minimizing.

Their conversation lasted several evenings. Damir first claimed he had been tired, then that he had not meant it that way. Belma offered him no easier version of events. She stayed married, but no longer stayed at the table when he began insulting people. Months later she returned to the same tearoom alone. The server did not recognize her. Belma ordered tea, grateful that nobody expected her to tell a story.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Bench That Suddenly Became a Problem

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bench-that-suddenly-became-a-problem/

The bench had stood beneath the chestnut tree longer than the building where Jasna bought her apartment. She first noticed it while waiting for a repairman, grateful not to sit on the steps. Months later a message appeared in the residents' group saying the bench should be removed. It supposedly attracted noise and spoiled the entrance's appearance. Jasna looked out at the man in a brown jacket eating an apple on it. Nobody else was there.

At the meeting her partner Emir supported the proposal first. He talked about property values and people who did not live in their building. Jasna asked when he had heard noise. He said it was not about one particular day. Another resident mentioned the bags the man kept beside his feet. A third said passing him made her uncomfortable. Nobody cited a threat, insult, or conflict. They disliked a presence they had not chosen.

Jasna made no speech. She asked them not to order anything yet and sat on the bench with a book the next day. The man moved to make room. His name was Salko, and he was waiting for his daughter, who cleaned apartments in the next street. His bags contained groceries for their dinner. His daughter disliked leaving him alone all day, and he did not want to stay in her small apartment in good weather.

When Jasna told Emir, he replied that not every man carrying bags was obliged to have a touching story. She agreed. That was exactly why they should not first turn him into a problem and then seek an acceptable explanation. Emir became angry that she spoke as though he were a bad person. She said they were discussing his proposal, not his whole character. He struggled with that sentence for the rest of the evening.

The following week a courier, two neighbors, and a man waiting for a taxi used the bench. Jasna neither organized nor photographed them. She simply opened the window when another discussion began and invited the residents to look. Removal was postponed. Some accused her of making a drama from an ordinary maintenance issue. Salko knew nothing of their argument, and Jasna did not think she owed him the burden of gratitude.

One afternoon Emir messaged that he would be a little late home. From the window she saw him beneath the chestnut tree. He sat at the other end of the bench, tired after work, while Salko peeled an orange. They were not talking. Jasna did not go down to assign meaning to their quiet scene. She put water on for pasta and left the window open to the entirely ordinary murmur of the city.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Room for the Walker

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/room-for-the-walker/

The club chairwoman said walkers should be left in the cloakroom with the coats. At first Mara thought she had misheard. Tables were set for the annual celebration, white cloths straightened, narrow passages left between them. Her walker stood before a chair she could not sit in without support. The chairwoman repeated that the servers would bring them everything and that the room needed to look harmonious when the guests arrived.

Mara had come there every Thursday for seven years. She knew the people now avoiding her eyes. With them she played cards, complained about prices, and celebrated grandchildren's births. Her friend Adnan whispered that she should not argue over a single afternoon. He had already propped his cane behind a curtain. He did not want to look like an old man lacking something. Mara asked how he planned to get to the bathroom.

The question hung awkwardly between the glasses. The chairwoman said somebody could always help and tried to take the walker. Mara gripped it more firmly. She did not raise her voice, but people at neighboring tables stopped talking. She said she was not ashamed of the object that allowed her to come to the celebration by herself. If there was no room for it, the room was not prepared for her either, however tidy it looked.

The youngest server moved an empty chair to get through with her tray. Mara asked her to leave it aside. A sufficient passage opened. Soon another member shifted a decorative plant blocking the way to the door. These were not major alterations. Their very simplicity angered the chairwoman most. She talked about the effort she had invested while people looked for the first time at where they could actually walk.

Adnan retrieved his cane only after standing and having to catch the edge of the table. Mara did not tell him she had been right. She waited beside the empty chair. During lunch the chairwoman skipped her while toasting, and two friends later told her she had ruined the mood. Mara ate her cake and admitted it had not felt good to be the person making everyone fall silent.

The following Thursday she came despite wanting to stay home. Adnan had already dealt the cards. Beside her chair he had left enough space, without a sign or any special explanation. The chairwoman greeted her briefly, still offended. Mara positioned her walker, sat down, and took her cards. She did not win the first game. She accused Adnan of remembering other people's moves too well, and he said she was finally complaining about something normal.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

One Bill for the Entire Shift

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/one-bill-for-the-entire-shift/

Ema had changed into flat shoes when her manager put the bill back in her hands. It belonged to the owner's son's celebration in the restaurant's private room. That afternoon, she carried plates, cleaned spilled wine, and heard guests praise their generous host. Now the manager said staff would share the cost as their collective wedding gift. Nobody had asked whether they wanted to give it.

The owner's son, Dino, worked occasionally at the restaurant but controlled neither schedules nor wages. Ema knew him as decent and slightly absent-minded. She doubted he knew about the charge. His father, Rade, had already publicly thanked "our wonderful team for an unforgettable gift." The photograph showed smiles made before employees learned the price of their presence. Ema read the sentence several times, feeling exhaustion become anger.

She called colleagues into the changing room. Not everyone wanted to object. One had just started; another awaited days off Rade kept postponing. Ema didn't demand equal bravery. She simply asked whether anyone had agreed beforehand. Nobody had. Together, they wrote a brief message stating they hadn't approved the expense and requesting their names not be used to confirm a donation they hadn't made.

Rade called a meeting and began discussing family. Ema asked the exact amount he would voluntarily give her if she presented a completed bill. The room fell silent. Dino learned about the charge only then. He told his father that he and his wife would handle their celebration's cost, and staff had worked rather than attended as guests. He wouldn't preserve generosity's image at the expense of those not displaying it.

The post was corrected, and no money was taken. Still, Rade spoke coldly to Ema for days, so she recorded shift arrangements and sought another job. She didn't want every future decision to resemble possible punishment. Dino thanked her privately without asking her to stay for him. She said she regretted his wedding ending with that conversation, but didn't regret beginning it.

On her last day, colleagues brought a small cake. Everyone contributed what they wished, while one woman brought only a handwritten card. Ema cut equal slices and saved one for the cook still working. There was no public photograph. For the first time that season, a gift had a simple meaning: people chose it, knew its cost, and could decline without fearing the next schedule.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Free Workshop Until the First Payment

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-free-workshop-until-the-first-payment/

The poster declared "Free Mosaic Workshop" in large letters. Jelena agreed to teach because the cultural center wanted to attract people who didn't usually attend. The organizer, Denis, said materials were covered. Twenty adult participants had chosen colors and begun arranging pieces when his assistant brought her a payment list. Every started frame required an amount nobody had mentioned beforehand.

Jelena asked whether it was a voluntary contribution. The assistant said no, because materials were expensive. She looked around. One woman brought her sister as a birthday gift, a young couple shared a box, and a pensioner carefully copied a flower from his handkerchief. Nobody had come seeking a service without value. They came to an event whose organizer had already stated its price as zero.

Denis claimed only teaching was free, which everyone should understand. Jelena showed him the poster, but was angrier that he wanted her to collect payment. Hers was the face people had just begun trusting. She said she wouldn't continue until he clearly explained what happened and offered everyone the chance to leave without cost, including those already using materials.

He explained with many words about misunderstanding. People reacted differently. Some could pay but didn't want to. Others blushed because they hadn't brought money. Jelena said nobody needed to explain personal finances before the room. The center director, summoned from his office, covered materials from the event budget and addressed Denis separately. The workshop continued, but the feeling of welcome didn't immediately return.

Near the end, the pensioner asked whether he could take his frame home without a later bill. Jelena felt shame she hadn't caused. She clearly said yes and gave everyone brief confirmation that no payment was due. Afterwards, Denis accused her of overdoing paperwork and questions. She replied that people whose terms had already changed couldn't regain trust through another vague promise.

She organized the next workshop directly with the center. Its invitation stated what was included, its duration, and that there were no later costs. The pensioner returned with a neighbor. He brought a photograph of the mosaic hanging above his kitchen table. Jelena didn't ask him to advertise the event with his smile. She asked which colors he wanted today. He chose red and began without glancing toward the door, like someone who knew what he had agreed to this time.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Two Rows Ahead of Everyone Else

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-rows-ahead-of-everyone-else/

The bus was due to leave at seven, but complaints began by six forty. Two people held the same seat number, one woman had no seat despite paying, and Zoran's friends occupied the front rows. His wife, Mirjana, managed registrations for the recreational association's outing. She knew their names weren't listed when capacity was reached. The previous night, Zoran said he had merely tidied the seating plan.

Mirjana asked the friends when they registered. They said Zoran invited them the day before, assuring them a few places were always free. They didn't know someone else was left outside. Mirjana felt anger turning toward her because she held the folder. Zoran stood beside the driver pretending to check the route. He wouldn't approach until she called his name loudly enough for everyone to hear.

He said they would squeeze in somehow. The driver refused to depart until everyone had a proper seat. Mirjana thanked him and closed the folder. She wouldn't ask older members to withdraw merely because her husband wanted to appear generous before friends. She asked everyone to leave while the confirmed registration order was restored. There were complaints, but visible relief too from people expecting to defend their right to travel alone.

Zoran's friends offered to drive their own car. One said he could simply have explained that the bus was full. Zoran lost the audience that might consider his favor successful. Departure was almost an hour late. Mirjana publicly acknowledged responsibility for organization and said future changes would require two people to confirm. Zoran had to state clearly that he had made the changes alone, without her knowledge.

They didn't sit together at lunch. Mirjana wanted several hours without discussing his hurt feelings. Later, she said the mistake wasn't what

angered her most, but his willingness to leave her facing people as the face of its consequences. For the first time, Zoran listened through. He stepped down from organizing the next outing himself, without claiming his wife forced him.

The next time, he came as an ordinary passenger. His seat was in the back row beside a window that opened with difficulty. Mirjana checked registrations until he handed her coffee, then sat without comment. At a rest stop, she found him helping the woman previously left without a seat. He wasn't explaining what a good organizer he usually was. He held her bag while she tied a lace and waited for her to finish.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Dress Supposedly Donated

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-dress-supposedly-donated/

The host raised a card and announced that the next dress was a generous gift from an anonymous bride. In the audience, Amina immediately recognized the small fold by the left shoulder. She had lent the wedding dress to her friend, Sara, for photographs advertising a charity fashion show. She hadn't donated it. Sara promised to return it cleaned by week's end. Now a model wore it on the runway while someone prepared to bid.

Amina stood and approached the stage edge. She didn't grab the model's arm or loudly demand she undress. She told the host she owned the dress and hadn't agreed to its sale. The microphone caught part of the sentence. Unhappy murmuring rose, as though she interrupted a noble act through petty concern over fabric. Amina felt that this pressure was probably why Sara hadn't expected resistance.

Sara emerged from backstage, smiling too firmly. She whispered that it was for a good cause and Amina never wore the dress anyway. Amina replied that a donation counted only when someone actually chose it. She kept the dress because her mother helped sew its lining, but didn't want to offer the hall a private memory as proof she could retain her property. She didn't need a sufficiently sad reason.

The host stopped bidding and explained that an agreement had been mishandled. The model went behind the curtain to change while they continued with an item confirmed as donated. Sara later claimed Amina embarrassed her before sponsors. Amina said one message beforehand could have avoided embarrassment. If asked, she would have said no, and that was precisely the answer Sara hadn't wanted to hear.

The dress returned the next day. The association reviewed other borrowed items and separated them from donations. They found no similar case but stopped basing the entire event on one person's verbal

assumptions. Amina retained the right not to resume friendship immediately. She supported the association with her own monetary donation only later, when it no longer resembled payment for an apology she didn't owe.

Several months later, she removed the dress from its cover and showed a niece planning her wedding. The young woman asked whether she could try it on. Amina agreed and carefully adjusted the shoulder fold. Eventually, she chose to lend it for the wedding with a clear return agreement. It wasn't a change of mind justifying Sara's actions. It was the first time since the show that the same dress again became part of joy she chose herself.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Question That Never Reached the Guest

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-question-that-never-reached-the-guest/

Sonja heard the audience question through her headphones and prepared a translation. A woman asked why local participants weren't allowed to discuss their own projects. The host, Igor, waited several seconds, then told the foreign guest the audience wanted to know how much she liked the city. Sonja lowered her pencil. She was hired to interpret the guest's answers, while Igor handled questions himself, claiming that made conversation flow more naturally.

The discussion belonged to a small cultural festival Igor had organized for years. Sonja was his partner and had agreed to work there for the first time under a clearly arranged professional engagement. She knew criticism from local participants made him nervous. She hadn't known he would turn their language into a filter admitting only praise. The guest sincerely answered that the city was lovely, while the woman in the audience remained confused.

The next question concerned a canceled workshop. Igor again transformed it into a general remark about young people's interest. Sonja quietly said that wasn't what had been asked. Over the microphone, he explained that the interpreter might not have heard properly. Several audience members nodded, ready to accept a technical problem instead of deliberate redirection. Sonja felt her work becoming cover for his decision.

She requested the microphone and repeated the original question in both languages. She didn't accuse the guest or attempt to take over the entire discussion. She explained that the previous answer hadn't addressed the question because it hadn't been conveyed. The guest immediately requested both earlier questions again. Igor tried discussing limited time,

but the audience now waited for the woman invited specifically to speak with them.

The guest hadn't known about the workshop's cancellation and was willing to stay longer. She couldn't resolve every organizational failure, but the discussion finally acquired real substance. Afterwards, Igor said Sonja had embarrassed him. She replied that he first publicly attributed a mistake to her that she hadn't made. She requested a correction alongside the recording because those present weren't its only future audience.

The correction appeared. Sonja declined another engagement until someone else oversaw the discussion, and ended her relationship with Igor after several attempts at serious conversation. For months, he claimed he had merely protected the atmosphere. She didn't want to live in an atmosphere where her words could change for his peace. At the next discussion, she sat in the audience. After asking a question, she listened to the full translation and, for the first time that evening, calmly lowered her pencil.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Camera in Front of Someone Else's Lunch

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-camera-in-front-of-someone-elses-lunch/

Lejla noticed the queue moving more slowly than usual. Plenty of hot meals remained on the table, but people paused before a camera brought by the new sponsor. His assistant told everyone to stand beside the logo first and say how much the help meant. He didn't state that there was no lunch without recording. Still, he held the boxes behind him, and the queue understood the condition without further explanation.

Lejla ran the small neighborhood kitchen with her friend, Darija. The sponsor, Milan, was Darija's partner and had promised a month's ingredients. Lejla agreed to filming food preparation, with an understanding that recipients stayed out of frame unless they chose to participate. Now she saw a neighbor who always collected two meals turn his face toward the wall. People from his former company would recognize him.

Lejla took the boxes and continued distributing lunch past the camera. The assistant protested that she was spoiling the filming plan. She said the plan had never included a gratitude examination. Milan approached, worried the footage would look empty. Lejla asked why he needed other people's faces to show what he paid for. He had no answer that didn't begin by saying people online liked emotion.

Darija stood between them, confronting for the first time the difference between her partner's generosity and his need to be seen. She told him to switch off the camera. He replied that he would reconsider his promised support. Darija paled but repeated the request. Before people waiting for lunch, she couldn't claim to protect them and then pay for ingredients with their faces. Filming stopped, and people already recorded were offered the chance to request deletion.

Milan withdrew the donation. The kitchen operated two fewer days the following week, which was difficult to admit. Lejla and Darija didn't publish an angry account with recipients' photographs to replace the loss. They published an accurate ingredient list and schedule. Several small shops contributed what they could. Darija spoke separately with Milan about a relationship that couldn't survive if every objection became ingratitude.

A month later, the neighbor who turned away came to help wash large pots. He had found temporary work and wanted to repay some time. Lejla gave him gloves without inviting him to tell his success story before a phone. While working, he described a colleague who oversalted everything he cooked. They laughed, and nobody reached for a camera. The kitchen held enough sound to show that people weren't merely a queue for someone else's story.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Man Who Attended His Own Memorial

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-who-attended-his-own-memorial/

Hasan first thought the photograph belonged to an exhibition of old school classes. Then he saw the black ribbon and candles. He had entered the community hall to return a book borrowed before his summer holiday. Two former students stood so abruptly that their chairs struck the floor. The screen above the stage displayed his name and the word "remembrance." Hasan put the book on the nearest table and asked whom he should tell he had arrived.

The news began in a former-students group. Another man with the same name had died in a nearby town. Someone added Hasan's photograph, another arranged a gathering, and a third contacted a local page. Nobody called his wife, Alisa, assuming the family needed peace. Hasan and Alisa returned from traveling the previous night and hadn't checked messages. Now their peace was full of people who didn't know where to look.

The organizer, a former student named Vedad, apologized through nervous laughter. He suggested simply turning the event into a celebration of life. Hasan replied that he first needed a chair and water. He wasn't ready to become amusing news merely because the previous news was wrong. He called Alisa and asked her to come, explaining before she saw it on someone's phone.

Alisa arrived angry. She didn't shout at students who sincerely came to pay respects, but asked why organizers checked hall availability without verifying the central fact. She refused to give the local page footage of her husband's entrance for a humorous post. She requested a clear correction and a message to everyone invited. Hasan asked for a respectful apology to the actual deceased man's family, without making their loss a footnote.

They extinguished the candles and removed the photograph. People stayed to talk only after Hasan invited them himself. He heard several fond memories he was glad to know while alive. Still, he wouldn't let that justify the mistake. Over the following days, Vedad called people individually to correct the news rather than publishing one funny status and considering the job finished.

A month later, the students organized ordinary coffee with their teacher, by agreement and without a stage. Hasan attended with Alisa and personally selected the invitation photograph, in which he held an oversized fish in his youth. Someone asked whether he had felt more famous then than now. He replied that at least the fish had been real. They laughed together, this time at a joke he chose and an event he knew would happen.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Microphone Left on the Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-microphone-left-on-the-table/

"None of this would be possible without our dear volunteers," Zlatan told the full hall. Then he placed the microphone on the table, turned to his assistant, and added that at least the women would keep quiet this time if they received flowers. The speakers carried every word. One nervous laugh sounded, followed by silence. In the front row sat the women who had spent two days arranging chairs and packing gifts for the town festival.

His partner, Jasmina, was among them. She didn't accept the bouquet the young assistant offered. For years, she had organized volunteer schedules, repeatedly asking for shorter shifts and meals on time. Privately, Zlatan said he understood. Publicly, he praised her as the organization's heart. Now she heard how her voice and the others became noise in his mind, to be silenced with carnations.

Zlatan quickly took the microphone and said an awkward joke had gone wrong. Jasmina stood and asked for it. She didn't disclose their private life. She asked whether tomorrow's team would finally receive the break she requested. One woman added a question about transport home afterwards. Another asked about cleaning gloves. Every question was so ordinary that his earlier speech suddenly sounded like an expensive substitute for simple answers.

The center director interrupted the presentation and invited them to sit immediately with the coordinator, while Zlatan answered the audience. They neither abandoned the festival nor saved it at any cost. They agreed on shorter shifts, food, and transport, then continued the jobs they had accepted. Part of the program was canceled because there weren't enough free working hours anymore. For the first time, Jasmina didn't offer her own evening to patch someone else's plan.

At home, Zlatan said she needn't have made things harder before everyone. Jasmina replied that he had brought the audience into his opinion himself. She wasn't angry only about one sentence, but years of gratitude used instead of changing anything. She asked him to manage household arrangements she had previously remembered for a while. It wasn't punishment with a precise deadline. She wanted to see whether he noticed work without a microphone.

The next year, Zlatan gave no opening speech. He worked at the entrance, distributed water, and respected break times. Jasmina attended as a visitor with friends. When he offered to let her skip the queue, she declined. She waited her turn, bought a ticket, and entered. He remained at the table, this time without flowers to shorten the conversation. Later, they met for coffee and finally discussed a program she had actually had time to watch.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Invitation That Arrived After the Vote

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-invitation-that-arrived-after-the-vote/

The announcement of a new term arrived in the morning, with a photograph of chairman Dženan before the same poster as four years earlier. His wife, Belma, also recognized the tablecloth she had lent the association. She didn't recognize the meeting date because she hadn't known a meeting occurred. She had belonged since its founding, organized workshops, and recently called loudly for a different hall schedule. Dženan had said members would decide everything at the regular assembly.

Over breakfast, she asked when the assembly had taken place. He said last night, briefly, since everyone knew how they would vote anyway. Belma examined the photograph more carefully. Nobody who requested schedule changes was there. Dženan claimed invitations were sent but some people didn't read messages. Belma asked him to show hers. He couldn't. He had invited only a smaller group he considered reliable enough not to turn the meeting into an argument.

"Reliable for whom?" she asked.

Dženan grew angry that his own wife didn't understand how exhausting running an association was. Belma understood exhaustion. She had cleaned the hall after his events for years. She didn't understand why criticism made her someone denied a vote. She called the other excluded members. They agreed on a joint request for a repeated meeting without competing over who felt most hurt.

At the new meeting, Dženan tried managing the agenda, but members first elected someone else to chair it. Belma didn't nominate herself. She wanted everyone to hear proposals and vote, including those supporting her husband. The discussion lasted a long time, sometimes awkwardly.

Dženan lost by a few votes. The new hall schedule didn't completely suit Belma, but she accepted the result because her question had at least been heard.

At home, their relationship was tense. Dženan said she could have supported him privately, while she said marriage didn't mean an automatic vote. They didn't resolve that conversation over one dinner. They needed to discover whether anything between them existed without her confirming his public role. Belma continued attending the association, while he avoided the hall for several weeks.

He returned for a workshop repairing old toys, without a position or opening speech. He sat at the table where Belma arranged materials and asked whether there was room. She moved a box but didn't give him work that would immediately make him the leader. He received a small brush and a wooden horse. By the evening's end, he was listening to other people's instructions for the first time without searching for an attack within them.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Applause for Someone Else's Secret

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/applause-for-someone-elses-secret/

When Emir read the first sentence, Nejra thought the resemblance coincidental. By the third, she knew. It was the conversation they had after her return from her family home, the evening she first admitted how painful her estrangement from her father had been. Emir had sat beside her and promised she needn't explain anything to others. Now he read her words before a full room, with an invented name for the heroine.

The audience listened quietly. In the short story, the father was crueler, the daughter more helpless, and the partner far wiser than in their actual conversation. Nejra even recognized the way she had turned her cup while speaking. The story wasn't merely revealing something private. It rearranged her experience so that the man beside her received the finest role. Her palms grew cold, although the room was too warm.

After the reading, the moderator praised Emir's ability to understand women's pain. Nejra stood and left before the applause. She didn't want to explain to the audience which sentences were real, since that would disclose even more. Emir found her in the hallway and asked why she was leaving. She said she recognized the conversation and hadn't consented to publication. He replied that literature always partly came from life, as though that broad statement resolved her very specific problem.

Nejra asked the editor attending the event for a brief conversation. She didn't ask her to judge their relationship, only to stop the planned publication until the matter was resolved. The editor agreed to speak with the author. Emir was angry that Nejra had brought a private conflict into his work. She reminded him that he had already brought her privacy onto the stage without asking anything.

The story was withdrawn from the announced collection. Emir sent the audience a brief explanation that he had used confidential material

without the necessary agreement, without naming Nejra. At home, he apologized, but continued discussing the lost story before the lost trust. Nejra moved out. She didn't want every future conversation to include an internal check on whether a sentence might become someone else's successful ending.

A year later, a friend invited her to another literary evening. Nejra accepted, surprised that she again wanted to sit among people and listen. Afterwards, she didn't meet the author. She went for tea with her friend and shared something from her own life. Before she finished, her friend said the conversation would stay between them. It didn't sound like a grand declaration. Precisely because of that, Nejra continued without fearing the next applause.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Pie Nobody Tasted

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-pie-nobody-tasted/

Fadila held her plate with both hands because the rim was still hot. Applause had just begun for the winner of the homemade-pie contest. Fadila hadn't expected to win. She had expected someone at least to taste her pie. Number seventeen remained on her tray while the host announced that the judges had assessed every entry. The woman beside her had number eighteen and the same expression.

The winner owned a new pastry shop sponsoring the event. Her name was Maja, and she looked as puzzled as Fadila. She accepted a bouquet while searching for someone behind the stage. Fadila approached the judges' table and asked when they had tasted her pie. One judge said she had probably confused the order. She showed him the untouched plate. Steam still rose from the cut piece, a sufficient answer.

The organizer tried taking her into the hallway. Fadila said she could speak calmly here, without a microphone. She hadn't come to argue about a trophy. She had risen at five, paid for transport, and brought the food they requested. Other contestants began approaching. Their dissatisfaction wasn't particularly dramatic. It was tired and precise, full of questions the organizer couldn't answer decently.

Maja removed her sash and joined them. She admitted being told she would receive thanks for her support, but no competitive award. The organizer then said he had wanted to surprise the main sponsor. "You've surprised my customers too," she replied. "Now it looks as though I bought the prize." She asked the host to stop the music and explain what had happened without portraying Fadila as a woman who couldn't lose gracefully.

They canceled the formal award. Instead of hastily repeating the vote, the contestants decided to open their tables to the audience and share the

food. Fadila served Maja first, and Maja sincerely praised the crisp crust. They didn't instantly become friends. They discussed ovens, transport, and the difficulty of attending an event when someone else chose the start time while you had to bring a hot dish.

A recording of the discussion circulated for several days, but Fadila didn't share it. She entered the next event only after seeing a clear schedule and a genuinely separate sponsor role. She finished fourth. She received no prize, but one judge said the bottom crust was slightly overbaked. Fadila took the remainder home and checked. The judge was right. That criticism pleased her more than any belated trophy someone might have offered to silence her.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Woman Beneath the Wrong Title

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-woman-beneath-the-wrong-title/

Beneath her portrait were the words: "The Last Night Without a Roof." Zlata leaned toward the small caption, convinced she couldn't see properly. In the photograph, she sat at a bus stop with a large bag, tired after a night shift. She had an apartment, a job, and a sister she was traveling to visit that day. The photographer, Aleksa, had asked to photograph her for an exhibition about waiting. She agreed because she was waiting for a bus, and the theme sounded accurate.

Now several visitors stood around the portrait holding glasses. One woman said her face revealed a lifetime of rejection. Zlata looked at her own exhaustion, which had suddenly acquired a biography without her knowledge. Aleksa noticed her and approached with a broad smile. He expected gratitude because her face occupied the largest wall. Zlata asked whose story appeared beneath the picture.

He said the title should be understood symbolically. The exhibition included a charitable element, and he wanted to encourage compassion. Zlata replied that compassion didn't require making her homeless in someone else's text. Aleksa tried moving the discussion into a corner, but several visitors were already listening. She didn't raise her voice. She said she wanted the caption removed immediately and the photograph withdrawn until its use could be agreed again.

The gallery owner stepped between them, initially worried that the opening was becoming a confrontation. Zlata repeated what she had approved. She didn't ask the owner or audience to confirm how respectable her life was. She simply didn't want an invented story. The owner removed the caption and covered the photograph, then explained to guests that consent to a portrait hadn't included consent to its published description. The charitable part of the evening continued with clear information about the actual recipient.

Aleksa came to apologize the following day. He said he had wanted to show something larger than an individual life. Zlata replied that her life was precisely individual, and he had no right to use it as an empty space for his message. He returned her agreed copy of the portrait and confirmed he wouldn't publish it further. She promised no future collaboration. She owed his mistake no prettier ending.

She took the photograph to her sister. Together, they studied it on the kitchen table. Her sister noticed that the bag looked too heavy, and Zlata explained that it contained homegrown peppers and spare shoes. Both laughed. On the back, she wrote the date and two Bosnian words in ordinary pencil: "Waiting for the bus." Then she put it in an album among other days that didn't need to represent the whole world.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Winner Who Never Crossed the Bridge

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-winner-who-never-crossed-the-bridge/

Boris reached the finish so early that the organizer hadn't taken out the ribbon. Everyone laughed as his wife, Elvira, handed him water. Their small recreational race had no grand prize, only a wooden medal and the winner's right to choose the lunch restaurant. Boris raised his arms, pleased as a child. Elvira noticed his shoes were dry. The others had to cross a shallow stream by the old bridge, where morning rain had raised the water.

She asked how he had crossed the bridge. He said there had been no problem, then began adjusting the helmet he had already removed. Elvira knew that movement from when he bought an expensive bicycle part and didn't want to reveal its price immediately. She asked whether he had followed the marked route. Boris led her behind the drinks van. He had missed the turn, he admitted, and accidentally found a shorter road straight to the finish.

"Then tell them," she replied.

He refused. He said he would look ridiculous, the competition wasn't serious anyway, and he had lost so often. Elvira said she wouldn't expose their private argument to everyone, but wouldn't confirm that he had completed the course either. She went to help cut fruit. Boris remained with the medal around his neck and his explanations, which sounded louder now that nobody interrupted them.

The second rider, Nedim, arrived wet and exhausted. He immediately congratulated Boris and asked which gear he had used on the final climb. Boris tried answering, then stopped. He watched his friend sincerely admire him for a section he hadn't ridden. He removed the medal and called the organizer. He admitted the wrong turn and the fact that he had

known about it before accepting victory.

Nedim was angrier about the delay than the mistake itself. He didn't accept the medal immediately, so the organizer left it on the table until everyone returned. They still had lunch, with a few uncomfortable jokes that soon stopped amusing people. Boris didn't ask Elvira to defend him. On the journey home, he said he was ashamed of how badly he had needed one victory. She replied that she could listen to him about that without a medal.

There was no race on the next outing. Boris rode beside Nedim and, for the first time, slowed down to hear his story through. At the bridge, he stopped, dismounted, and carefully waded across. Elvira waited on the other side. He offered her his wet shoe as a joke, and she kissed his cheek before they climbed onto their bicycles again.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Laughter from the Third Row

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/laughter-from-the-third-row/

The first laugh came in the wrong place. Lora spoke a line about a lost sister, and mocking snickers rose from the third row. She wondered whether she had overlooked something funny in her costume. She glanced at her scene partner, who continued as though he had heard nothing. The second laugh was louder. In the amateur theater's small hall, every sound had a body, and this one stood between her and the rest of the play.

She had received her first leading role after eight years of smaller appearances. Her colleague, Viktor, said she deserved it, although he had previously promised his girlfriend the role would be hers. After the premiere, he brought Lora water and said she mustn't be so sensitive. Lora cried in the dressing room, angry at herself for rushing the final scene. She didn't know that the three loudest spectators were Viktor's friends.

One of them, Miran, came to the next rehearsal. He waited by the door until they finished, then asked to speak with Lora. Viktor had told them to play a joke, he admitted, claiming her nerves would supposedly improve if the audience weren't too serious. Only after the performance had he realized how cruel it was. He didn't ask for immediate forgiveness. He offered to repeat the account before the company.

During the discussion, Viktor claimed it was a misunderstanding. His girlfriend, Mina, sitting beside him, asked why he hadn't told her about the joke beforehand. He fell silent. Mina stood and moved to the other side of the table. She said she hadn't wanted a role obtained through someone's humiliation, especially the humiliation of the woman who had helped her learn lines for months.

They removed Viktor's responsibility for arranging audiences and asked him to leave the next production. Lora didn't want to cancel the play, but couldn't simply repeat the premiere. The director gave her time for another rehearsal before a few acquaintances. She could stop whenever necessary. On her first attempt, she did stop, drank water, and began the line again. Nobody turned it into a lesson about courage.

At the second public performance, the third row was full. Lora didn't avoid looking at it. During the final scene, someone sniffed quietly, and she continued at her own pace. After the applause, Mina helped unfasten her tight costume. She said the final pause had been good. Lora replied that she had finally heard the silence written into the script. They went for a late dinner together, still bearing traces of stage makeup behind their ears.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Speaker Who Wasn't on the List

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-speaker-who-wasnt-on-the-list/

Stjepan brought spare shoes for the bride. He knew her new sandals would give her blisters because she had worn them around the apartment the previous evening with a frown. He left the bag beneath his chair in the back row, beside distant relatives. He was her stepfather, the man who had lived with her mother for thirty years. Her biological father sat nearer the stage, restored to the family picture only a few months earlier.

The bride, Mila, hadn't chosen the seating plan. She left it to the groom's family to avoid another argument about music that pleased nobody. When his uncle began speaking, he called her biological father the man who had "set her on the right path." Stjepan looked toward Mila's mother. She pressed her lips together, tired of politeness that always demanded the same withdrawal from the same people.

The uncle then invited her father to receive a thank-you gift and said nothing compared with a real parent. Stjepan stood. Several guests turned, anticipating a confrontation they could recount later. He didn't approach the microphone. He picked up the shoe bag and walked toward Mila, who had already removed one sandal beneath the table. He put the bag beside her and said he was going outside for some air.

Mila caught his hand. Until then, she hadn't seen where he was seated. She asked the host for the microphone and said she first wanted to thank the man who taught her to drive, waited after examinations, and repaired her poor shelving. She didn't insult the father who had returned, but wouldn't let his return require somebody else's erasure. The uncle tried saying that wasn't what he meant. Mila replied that she believed him, but he still needed to correct what he had said.

The groom brought two chairs for her stepfather and mother nearer their table. Someone moved the flowers, plates rattled, and the music finally

stopped. The discomfort didn't vanish immediately. Stjepan sat stiffly, thanking everyone who didn't know what else to say. Mila whispered that she was sorry she hadn't noticed sooner. That meant more to him than applause.

Later, they danced, with her wearing the spare shoes. Stjepan didn't know the steps, so he followed her small movements as he once had when she learned to walk on an icy pavement. They didn't become the subject of a family post. Mila kept that dance for herself. The photograph she later framed showed the ordinary plastic bag beneath the table. She didn't ask the photographer to remove it.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

One Dog in Three Different Homes

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/one-dog-in-three-different-homes/

Zora recognized the dog by a white spoon-shaped patch. She had photographed him in spring while he kept trying to eat her camera strap. In the shelter's new calendar, he appeared in May as Laki, in August as Beni, and in November as happily adopted Roki. Each photograph featured a different family. Zora knew that two showed the same woman in different jackets.

The "Mala šapa" shelter was run by volunteers. Its president, Melisa, was Zora's friend and had helped her after her divorce. That was why she called her first. Melisa said the calendar showed examples rather than precise information. Yet the final page claimed sixty successful adoptions. Zora asked them to check whether the same examples had also entered that total.

"People don't donate to a photograph of an empty bowl," Melisa replied.

Zora went to the shelter and found Laki there, alive, playful, and still without a home. Adem, a volunteer, was replacing his water. He showed orderly arrival and departure records because he handled daily care. The true number of adoptions was smaller. There was no evidence of neglected animals, but the public success didn't match the records. Zora didn't secretly photograph people. She asked the board to review the material together.

Melisa admitted repeating photographs to conceal slow results. She feared donors would leave if they saw how many dogs stayed for years. The board halted calendar sales, published a correction, and offered buyers refunds. Accurate records remained available with adopters' private information protected. Zora declined a local page's invitation to tell "all the dirty details" because she had no details beyond the verifiable ones.

A few donors left, but the food didn't disappear. Adem proposed weekly open walks where people could meet dogs without promises of perfect endings. Melisa stayed to volunteer with feeding, without managing money or reports. Zora didn't repair their friendship with a single embrace. She came on Sundays and talked with her about what had actually been done that day.

Laki was adopted in February. His new owner didn't want her photograph taken, so with permission Zora photographed only the dog sleeping beside a radiator. The post contained one name and one date. When Melisa suggested adding that it was the shelter's happiest day, Adem shook his head. They wrote that he was settling in well and still chewed laces. That was enough for Zora to press send.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Donation in a Borrowed Name

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-donation-in-a-borrowed-name/

A plaque bearing donors' names hung at the entrance to the new youth art studio. Ružica found hers at the top in large lettering. She had come to the opening because her salon donated six packages of hair dye for a theater workshop. Beside her name, however, stood an amount that would cover half her annual rent. She turned toward the organizer, Siniša, her longtime friend, and saw him avoiding her gaze.

A month earlier, he had asked to borrow money briefly until a payment reached the association. He returned it four days later. Ružica had asked no further questions because they had known each other since school. Now she realized he had presented her transfer confirmation as proof of a large gift. The repayment wasn't mentioned. A photograph of the plaque was already circulating with a message that small local businesses could change the city.

"People like seeing an example," Siniša said quietly. "Nobody lost any money."

Ružica looked at the young painter counting plastic cups beside them. A few days earlier, the woman had come asking for a discount on materials because the studio had supposedly spent every donation. If a loan counted as a gift, there was a report somewhere that didn't match reality. She asked Siniša to show it to her before the speeches began.

He refused. He said she would humiliate him before the children and guests. Ružica replied that they were talking in the office precisely so the audience wouldn't be the judge. She called the association's president and calmly showed her the payment and refund, with unrelated information covered. The president postponed the financial portion of her speech and ordered every stated amount checked. The studio opened, but the plaque came down that day.

The review found two more repaid loans presented as donations. No money was missing from the till, but the help raised was much smaller than announced. The association corrected its report and informed donors. Siniša left his organizing role. He messaged Ružica that she had ruined his reputation over a technicality. She didn't answer immediately. The next morning, she wrote that their friendship had meant more to her than he apparently thought.

She brought additional materials to the second workshop, with a clear list and receipt for their actual value. Nobody requested a photograph. The painter asked her to help paint an old folding screen, so she stayed until closing.

When the paint dried, the screen bore uneven blue lines and one print of Ružica's palm. It was the only trace of her name in the room. She was entirely happy with it, although she spent a long time washing paint from beneath her nails at home.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Fastest Swimmer in the Slower Group

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-fastest-swimmer-in-the-slower-group/

The card beside his name said fifty-five. Ivana knew that her partner, Slaven, was forty-nine. They had celebrated his birthday three weeks earlier with a cake that stayed raw in the middle. She assumed his entry had been copied incorrectly and approached the head official before the start. He showed her the electronic form. Slaven had entered the birth year himself.

The adult recreational competition was supposed to be a cheerful Sunday at the indoor pool. Ivana volunteered because the organizers lacked experienced people. The prizes were modest: trophies, towels, and an annual membership. Slaven had trained for months, becoming more serious as his results at work declined. He said that at least in the water he knew where his goal was. Ivana supported the training but hadn't expected the goal to alter somebody's age.

She called him behind the stands. At first, he laughed. Then he said the age groups weren't fair anyway, since some older people had swum all their lives. "Six years won't kill anyone," he added. Ivana replied that he didn't need to explain what nobody would suffer; he needed to correct his entry. Slaven asked to discuss it after the race.

"You'll already have a result by then," she said.

The correction came too late to place him in his own group's earlier race. An organizer offered to let him swim outside the competition. Slaven refused and went to the changing room. Some spectators had heard the argument. An acquaintance told Ivana she could have shown some loyalty. She removed her official badge and handed it to another judge so that the private conflict wouldn't affect later decisions. Then she sat in the last row.

Slaven returned in his swimming trunks and agreed to swim without a ranking. He was slower than in training. Afterwards, they sat in the café with wet bags beneath their feet. He admitted wanting one photograph in which he looked like a winner. Ivana said she had come to watch him but couldn't applaud someone else's place that he had intended to take. She didn't comfort him by promising he would certainly win next time.

The following month, he entered his own group and finished second to last. Ivana wasn't officiating; she stood beside the barrier with his towel. When he emerged, he asked her to photograph him by the results board. The picture showed his full name, correct birth year, and time. He sent it to friends without a joke to explain the defeat beforehand. That evening, they walked home carrying their wet clothes in separate bags.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Wrong House on the Poster

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-wrong-house-on-the-poster/

On the poster, her house looked abandoned. The windows were dark, ivy covered the wall, and the caption said a greedy owner would demolish everything for a parking lot. Azra stood outside the shop holding a bag of potatoes. She had lived in that house for thirty years. She was currently replacing rotten windows, under a permit she had waited all spring to receive. A parking lot had never crossed her mind.

She recognized the photograph by the lace curtain she had given her sister six years earlier. Someone had found an old advertisement and turned it into fresh news. On social media, she saw a protest invitation shared by her neighbor, Davor, the man who had repaired the fence with her the previous summer. She called him. He spoke quickly, excited that people were finally fighting for the neighborhood, and asked whether they could talk later.

Azra attended the group's meeting carrying the permit and photographs of the new roof. The young organizer, Mirza, asked them to wait for a lawyer. "I was waiting for someone to ask me first," she replied. She showed them the curtain in the photograph and the advertisement's date. Davor went quiet, but one woman said owners always had convincing explanations. Azra then understood how difficult it was to escape the villain's role once that role had been printed in color.

She didn't forbid them to check the documents. She invited them into the house, provided they recorded nothing without her consent. They saw the basin beneath the window and books wrapped against dust. Mirza photographed only the permit, with personal information covered. Davor stood in the kitchen where he had often drunk coffee and couldn't look up. Azra didn't help him find an excuse.

The group withdrew the poster and issued a clear apology, but some shared images continued circulating. Azra demanded they send the correction to everyone who had received the original invitation. They turned the protest into an open discussion about the neighborhood's actual plans. She attended and sat in the front row, not as an honored guest, but as a resident who wanted her question recorded before any vote.

When the new windows arrived, Davor offered to help carry them inside. Azra accepted but told him he wouldn't repair their friendship with a single favor. They worked silently until noon. Then she opened an old photograph album in front of him and found a picture of their fence. "If you ever post this, call me first," she said. Davor nodded. She put no curtain on the new window. For a while, she wanted to see the street clearly.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Five Stars for an Empty Room

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/five-stars-for-an-empty-room/

The guesthouse called "Obala" had no room with a sea view. The third room's window faced a garage and one stubborn walnut tree. Yet a new review praised the seaside sunset from its balcony. Marta, the receptionist, sent a screenshot to the owner, Elma, asking simply whether someone had confused their guesthouse with another. Elma read the author's name and recognized her own mother's surname.

Her mother had never stayed at the guesthouse. She said her pillow at home was better. Elma then examined the other compliments and found Marta's name, the delivery driver's name, and an invented married couple whose photograph she had previously seen in a mattress advertisement. A month earlier, her partner, Goran, had taken over promotion. He said they finally needed to explain how hard they worked. Bookings increased, and she thanked him for each new call.

Goran first claimed an agency was doing it. When Elma requested the contract, he admitted managing the accounts himself. Real guests rarely wrote, he said, so he had merely provided an initial push. Elma showed him the sentence about an elevator they didn't have. "This isn't a push. Someone will book a room they can't reach because of this." Goran fell silent, seeing the review as a promise rather than decoration for the first time.

That afternoon, a guest who had booked for his father with limited mobility contacted her. Elma explained the actual conditions, refunded the payment, and helped find alternative accommodation. She then contacted the platform to remove the false ratings and published an accurate room description. Marta asked them to specify that staff hadn't written praise for themselves. Elma agreed, although she was ashamed that it needed saying at all.

Bookings briefly declined. Goran wanted to remain responsible for promotion, with her checking each post. Elma refused to become the supervisor of his decisions. They ended their business arrangement in writing and discussed their relationship separately. She didn't throw him out in the middle of the night, but she didn't promise their shared home would survive merely because they had bought the same refrigerator.

In spring, a real guest posted a brief review: tidy room, steep stairs, lovely walnut tree. She gave four stars because the pillow was too hard. Elma printed it and left it on Marta's desk. Then she ordered several softer pillows, including one for her mother. Goran came to help carry them by prior arrangement. As they worked, he didn't mention how good the scene would look in a photograph.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Voice Behind the Curtain

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-voice-behind-the-curtain/

Vera played the winning recording only after washing the cups from rehearsal. In the final song, a clear high note rang out, followed by a brief breath in the wrong place. She knew that breath. It belonged to her former soloist, Jelena, who had left the choir six months earlier. At the competition, Jelena had sat in the third row beside her husband, whose arm was in a cast.

This year's soloist, Hana, had been hoarse. Before the performance, the organizer, Damir, assured Vera that the microphone could soften the problem. Vera was arranging twenty chairs and asked no further questions. Now she stopped the recording and called Hana. The young woman began crying as soon as she heard the reason. She had been told to sing softly over a supporting track, supposedly as a precaution. She hadn't known her microphone would be switched off.

Jelena arrived for their conversation carrying oranges. She thought Vera wanted to discuss her return. When she heard the recording, she put the bag on the piano. Her voice had been taken from an old rehearsal without permission. At home, her husband had recognized the song but not her voice because she never played him her recordings. What hurt most was being made an accomplice while she had sincerely applauded Hana from the audience.

Damir claimed that reporting it would destroy the choir. He displayed the bus invoice and spoke about people who had taken a day off. Vera called a meeting. Hana asked to speak first. She explained what she had been told and offered to return the prize herself. Jelena interrupted: "That prize bears all our names. You won't carry it back alone." This time, the twenty chairs didn't need moving. Everyone stayed until the end.

They sent the recordings to the competition committee and surrendered the award. Damir no longer organized performances. Some neighbors called them naive for announcing a mistake many wouldn't have heard. The choir lost two members, but neither was Hana. At the next rehearsal, she sang more quietly and in her own voice while Vera deliberately stood farther from the speakers.

For the winter concert, Jelena agreed to sing one song live. Hana held her music because the stand squeaked. Before the last refrain, both women breathed in together, looked at each other, and burst out laughing. The audience didn't know why. Vera waited for the laughter to pass, raised her hand, and signaled a fresh beginning. This time, the small interruption remained in the recording.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Auction Without Raised Hands

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-auction-without-raised-hands/

From the stage, Nermin announced that the picture of the blue bridge had sold for a record amount. Applause filled the hall, a waiter raised his thumb, and Nermin's wife, Iva, wrote the buyer's number on an envelope. She was responsible for handing over the works after the charity auction. Only she was troubled that the seat with that number had been empty all evening, beside the broken speaker.

They were raising money to renovate a small reading room. Every institution and participant belonged to their modest neighborhood, so Iva wasn't expecting strict procedures. She had still kept the numbered cards and blank receipts. In recent weeks, Nermin had felt useful for the first time since losing his job. He promised everyone a successful evening. Iva knew how much it meant to him that people were trusting him with something again.

When the final guest left, the four most expensive paintings remained against the wall. "The buyer will get in touch," Nermin said as he removed the decorations. Iva showed him the card that had never been raised. He admitted inventing the first bids to encourage the others. Then the audience had stopped bidding, and he hadn't known how to admit that his imaginary generosity had no wallet.

By morning, the local group was already sharing his photograph with glowing praise. Nermin asked for a week to find a sponsor who could cover the difference. Iva didn't deny him that chance, but she refused to sign the final report. At the committee meeting, she stated the actual amount, keeping both hands on the table to hide their trembling. At first Nermin looked out of the window, then he confirmed every word she said.

One committee member asked Iva why she hadn't stopped him that evening. "I didn't know then," she replied, without apologizing for what she couldn't have known. They published a correction and offered refunds to anyone who had donated because of the false result. Nobody asked for their money back, but the next auction acquired different rules. That winter, the reading room renovated only one room. Children could still read in it.

At home, Nermin slept in the living room while they discussed trust that couldn't be raised through applause. Iva didn't promise quick forgiveness. A month later, they returned the unsold paintings together. Before each artist, Nermin explained his decision. At the end of the corridor, he asked Iva to wait. She stayed, for the first time not because his report needed fixing, but to hear what he would say without a stage.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Gratitude Is Not Consent

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/gratitude-is-not-consent/

Selida knew exactly what she owed her aunt. The first year's rent, a job recommendation, and an endless series of dinners at which her gratitude was the favorite topic. Now she was thirty-one and managed purchasing for the family business, yet still felt like a guest who should be careful not to take the last piece of cake.

When their business partner Vedad began inviting her to dinner, the family was delighted. He was wealthy, entertaining, and knew how to improve the mood at a table. Selida saw something else: the way he flirted with her married cousin Merima whenever conversation grew dull. She did not want to date him. Her aunt called it insecurity that a good opportunity could cure.

Then Vedad helped Selida's brother make a business contact. The family immediately turned the favor into an argument. Selida thanked him but did not change her answer. At the office, she heard that she thought too highly of herself. At a family lunch, she received a joke about remaining alone if she insisted on perfection.

A few weeks later, Merima's husband came to the office looking for Vedad. He had discovered their affair. Merima admitted it had lasted months, including the time when Vedad was sending Selida flowers. The hallways filled with whispers. Her aunt closed the office door and said the most important thing was preventing public shame.

She asked Selida to confirm that she had known about a separation Merima and her husband had supposedly agreed on long before. She had known nothing, because no agreement existed. She said she would not lie. Her aunt replied that perhaps all this could have been avoided if she had accepted Vedad and settled him down. Selida stared at the folder between them, trying to understand how someone else's affair had

suddenly become another unpaid debt of hers.

She opened the folder and submitted a request to complete her departure paperwork. For several months, she had been considering a job at another company. Now she signed the offer and rented a small apartment. She told Merima she could help find a counselor and transportation, but would not rewrite dates or make excuses for Vedad. For the first time, her cousin spoke to her without a patronizing tone.

Before the move, her aunt brought a box of plates. She stood on the threshold, unsure how to enter an apartment where no one owed her anything. Selida invited her for coffee. She thanked her for the plates and left them unpacked while they talked. There was still much to clarify, but this time she held the conversation as an adult woman in her own kitchen.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Man for the Front Page

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-man-for-the-front-page/

After helping carry residents out of ground-floor homes during a flood, Ognjen spent three days on every local news website. On the fourth, he returned to his warehouse job. People stopped to shake his hand, but no one offered higher pay. His partner, Lidija, noticed him receiving each compliment more coldly, like a banknote he could spend nowhere.

They started a fund to restore damaged houses. Lidija kept the accounts; Ognjen appeared before the cameras. At first, they worked honestly. Then he began claiming expenses he had never incurred. He recorded one trip twice. Donated equipment was entered as purchased. He said the organization had to pay for his effort too, even if the formalities were not yet settled.

Lidija requested a contract and a clear payment amount. Ognjen took offense. He reminded her who had waded through water and who had sat somewhere safe. That sentence remained between them at dinner. The next day, she found a supplier's invoice with a number absent from his records. When she called, he confirmed he had not issued it.

That afternoon, a respected business group offered Ognjen the directorship of its foundation. They wanted a face the public trusted. They invited Lidija to the ceremony too. The draft speech said his success proved that persistence and honesty were always recognized. Ognjen read the sentence aloud and, for the first time in ages, sounded relaxed.

Lidija placed the false invoice on the table. She asked him to return the money and inform the board before his appointment. He said she would destroy his life over a bookkeeping detail. Once he had the new position, he added, he could easily replace whatever was missing. She realized that, to him, wrongdoing stopped being wrongdoing as soon as it produced enough success.

She did not attend the ceremony. She submitted the documents to the board and withdrew her signature from the fund. Ognjen's appointment was suspended pending an investigation. Some acquaintances accused her of jealousy. Others quietly asked how much money was missing. She answered with available receipts, not posts about her character. Ognjen moved out, leaving the framed front page about the flood on a shelf. Lidija took the photograph to the fund's storeroom with the rest of the archive. She did not deny that he had helped people that day. She simply stopped allowing one good day to sign an excuse for everything he had done afterward.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Haircut She Did Not Choose

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-haircut-she-did-not-choose/

Ruža had worked at the design studio for four years before anyone invited her out after work on Friday. The invitation came from her colleague Ema, who knew every waiter and never ran out of conversation. She said Ruža only needed a little courage. She chose a dress for her, showed her how to start a conversation, and forbade her from answering a compliment by explaining how long she had spent sewing.

On the first evening, Ruža listened. On the second, she described drawing a client's logo on a pizza box because his computer had broken. Andrej, an architect, laughed longer than the others. He asked to see her sketches. Ema remarked that Ruža had become much more interesting since emerging from her cave.

Ruža took the comment as a joke. She did not notice that Ema no longer sat beside her or suggested going home together. When Andrej invited her to an exhibition, Ema said it was time for a bold change. She arranged a free haircut filmed by a local salon. Ruža agreed to have it shortened, confident her friend would help explain what she wanted.

In front of the camera, Ema requested an extremely short cut. Ruža tried to say that was not what they had discussed. Laughing, Ema reminded her that brave women did not abandon a challenge halfway through. The hairdresser paused and asked Ruža directly whether she wanted to continue. She looked at the lock of hair already cut in her lap. She said she wanted only to tidy what had been started, with no further shortening and no filming.

Ema was angry about the ruined content. In the changing room, Ruža heard her say that at least Andrej might see what his new favorite looked like without long hair. The sentence hurt, but clarified the past few weeks. Ruža requested that the recording be deleted, paid for the

hairdresser's work, and went home alone.

She came to the exhibition with shorter hair and a dress chosen without advice. Andrej said it suited her, and then they talked about the paintings. Ruža was almost disappointed by how little the world had changed because of something she had feared so much. She accepted Ema's apology as the beginning of a possible repair, not an obligation to restore their closeness immediately. Later, when a new colleague asked what she should wear on Friday, Ruža showed her two options. Then she handed back the phone and asked what she felt comfortable in. She did not try to improve the answer.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Portrait Without Softer Light

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-portrait-without-softer-light/

For the construction-company director's portrait, Nikola prepared a plain background and cool side lighting. He wanted the face people saw in meetings, decisive and somewhat unapproachable. Then the director's daughter, Hana, entered the studio. She and Nikola had been together for a few months. She brought the glasses her father had forgotten and said official photographs never showed how gentle he could be.

Nikola changed the lighting. During the shoot, he listened as they recalled family outings. The director was attentive to Hana, impatient with the assistant, and almost obedient to his own phone. In one brief pause, Nikola photographed his face without a posed smile. The image was powerful. Hana chose another, in which her father looked tired but approachable.

Before the portrait was delivered, a story emerged about unpaid workers. Nikola knew one of them. The man showed him his contract and bank statements with no payments. The director's company claimed it was a misunderstanding with a subcontractor. Hana repeated that confidently until she read a document her father sent and noticed that the page bearing his signature was missing.

She came to the studio asking to see every photograph. Nikola had hidden the sternest shot because he thought she did not need another hurt. Hana looked at it for a long time. She said the problem was not the shadow across his eyes. For years, she had allowed her father to show her only the parts of his work he could explain nicely. Now the man she loved was also deciding what she could bear.

Nikola apologized, then asked whether she wanted him to cancel the assignment. She did not want him making that decision for her either. They agreed not to turn the portrait into a verdict or an advertisement for

kindness. He delivered a clear, neutral image that did not conceal the face. Hana requested an independent review of the family business and temporarily left her job there. For weeks, her father did not answer her personal calls.

Her relationship with Nikola continued more cautiously. One Sunday, he photographed her arranging plants on the balcony of her new apartment. She asked to see the image before he edited it. A line was visible on her forehead, and unpacked boxes stood behind her. She said the photograph was good. Nikola saved the original and sat beside her on the floor. They still had much to unpack, but no longer sought more favorable light before every conversation.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

She Did It All for Him

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/she-did-it-all-for-him/

Before every talk, Vildana showed the same photograph. In it, her son stood outside his university with backpacks and an oversized smile. "I do all this so he doesn't have to give up," she told the audience. People applauded more warmly and bought her home-decoration guide, even when they already owned the previous edition with almost the same title.

Saša met her while traveling. He was a widower, worked as a sound technician, and loved how she brought every story to life over dinner. He began helping with her sound equipment. He refused payment, saying he knew how expensive education was. Vildana squeezed his hand beneath the table. She did not lie in every sentence. She simply never added to the first one.

At a hotel, a man approached carrying a box of electrical tools. He kissed Vildana on the cheek and asked why she had not told him she was appearing in town. He was her son Adis, the forty-year-old owner of the company replacing the hotel's lighting. Saša looked at the photograph on the promotional stand. The young man in it and the man before him shared a smile, but almost twenty years stood between them.

Adis heard the introduction at the start of the evening. He waited until the end, then asked his mother to remove the photograph. He had graduated long ago, he said, and did not want clients thinking he still lived off her travels. Vildana took offense. She reminded him of everything she had once sacrificed. He did not deny the past. He asked her to let him have the present.

Later, Saša asked whether she would ever have told him the truth. She admitted that being a self-sacrificing mother had felt easier than being a woman who loved the stage, travel, and her own income. She feared the audience would resent her enjoyment and he would consider her selfish.

Saša said he had gone to dinner with her because he liked her. He had worked for free because of a false impression she allowed him to keep. Those were not the same thing.

For her next talk, Vildana wrote a new introduction. She offered Saša a contract and compensation for his earlier work. They did not immediately resume their relationship, but met for coffee several times without equipment or folders. On stage, she explained that she would discuss redesigning a space after a major life change. She replaced her son's photograph with one of her own kitchen. No one in the front row sighed with pity. A woman raised her hand and asked where she had bought the green cabinet handles.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Headline She Refused to Inherit

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-headline-she-refused-to-inherit/

Selma learned about the website's lead story from her hairdresser. The photograph showed a former colleague beside a man whose face she did not recognize, under a question suggesting an affair. It had been taken outside a hospital. Her colleague was accompanying her adult brother to an appointment. Selma called her fiancé Haris, the website's owner, expecting him to remove the story immediately.

"We didn't claim anything," he replied. "We asked a question." He added that other sites were already sharing the photograph and the whole thing could no longer be taken back. Samples of tablecloths for their wedding lay in the living room. Selma folded them and put them in a drawer slowly, as though a sudden movement might turn her doubt into a final decision.

Haris's mother invited her to lunch. She spoke about work pressures, employees' wages, and things people wrote when tired. Selma said she could not plan a shared life funded by turning someone's hardest day into a headline. The older woman defended her son but stopped eating as she spoke. In the end, she only asked Selma not to decide in anger.

They did not speak for a month. Haris sent flowers and promised editorial changes without making a single concrete alteration. The website published another story about an unknown couple's divorce. Selma was almost ready to believe she could stay with him and influence his work when his mother called again. This time, they met on a bench outside the library, without lunch or family photographs.

She took an old newspaper page from her bag. Haris's father had once run the same business in print. He published a letter from a woman who had begged him to protect her privacy because he knew it would sell better. "I thought I could change him by being good to him too," she said.

"In the end, I only learned not to read what paid for our house." She did not tell Selma to leave. She gave her back the chance to see the full price of staying.

Selma returned the ring, and they divided the venue deposit according to their payments. Haris later published a correction to the story about her colleague. She was glad for her colleague, but did not take it as an invitation to return. She remained in occasional contact with his mother. One spring, they met outside the library again, both carrying books. They discussed what they had read without needing to defend the author.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Dinner for People Who Know Everything

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/dinner-for-people-who-know-everything/

The hostess pronounced Mirna's occupation more loudly than her name. "She makes cakes," she said, while introducing the others as authors, curators, and people from foundations. Mirna had come with her partner, Luka, a translator. She carried the dessert they had ordered for dinner. When everyone sat down, her plate was at the very end of the table, near the kitchen door.

They discussed a well-known novelist who was also a guest. No one asked Mirna what she read. When she tried to say something about the novel, the hostess asked whether the cake contained walnuts. Luka offered an apologetic smile with his eyes but continued talking about the new edition. Mirna set down her fork and mentioned that the entire novel was clearly influenced by the theory of the "Velirian encounter."

A brief silence followed. She had just invented the word while looking at the label on a fan box in the hallway. The oldest guest said the theory was already outdated. The hostess defended it as the basis of modern intimacy, and the curator claimed that infidelity could not be understood without it. Mirna listened as they explained with growing confidence something that had not existed a minute earlier.

The novelist leaned back in her chair. "I don't know it," she said. "Explain it to me." Mirna admitted there was nothing to explain. She had invented the name because no one wanted to hear an ordinary sentence from someone who baked cakes. She did not look triumphant. She was tired and a little ashamed of her trap, but more ashamed of how readily they had filled it.

The hostess accused Mirna of ruining the evening. Luka finally spoke, but first explained that she was not usually like this. That hurt more than the

seat beside the kitchen. She stood, collected the empty platter, and thanked them for the invitation. The novelist held the door for her. In the hallway, they spent several minutes discussing the novel's ending. They disagreed, and both found the conversation interesting.

Luka caught up with her at the tram stop. Mirna told him she did not need a defender after everyone had gone, but a partner while they sat at the same table. She did not immediately accept his apology. The following week, he came to the pastry shop for a public reading she had organized herself. The chairs were all different, and so was the audience. When someone introduced her as a person who made cakes, Mirna added the title of the story she would read. Luka sat in the third row and listened.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Scandal Ordered for Monday

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-scandal-ordered-for-monday/

"A lovely, gentle book," read the first review. Nera placed her phone face down on the table. She had spent three years writing a novel about an affair in a building full of respectable residents, expecting to unsettle the city. Instead, one reader recommended it to a gardening club. The bookshop sold seven copies, four of them to her father.

Her editor, Aida, called an acquaintance who ran a channel about family values. The arrangement was simple: he would call the book dangerous, they would express outrage, and then everyone would appear on talk shows. Nera said she did not want to lie. Aida replied that no one would claim anything not already in the novel. The distinction was just narrow enough for Nera's conscience to slip through.

The denunciation appeared on Monday. By noon, the bookshop's remaining copies were gone. The presenter held the book closed before the camera, spoke of the destruction of marriage, and hinted that the author was describing real neighbors. That had not been agreed. Commenters immediately identified Nera's friend Dunja, who lived in a similar building and had recently changed her surname.

Dunja arrived unannounced. She did not shout. She sat down, took out her phone, and showed messages from her husband's colleagues. One contained a photograph from a business trip, asking whether the man beside her was the character in the novel. He was her brother. Nera began explaining that the character had a different profession, a different apartment, and an entirely different name. Dunja only asked when she would tell that to the people harassing them.

Aida advised waiting. A new shipment of books was arriving on Thursday. Instead, Nera published their correspondence about the planned campaign after removing private information. She stated clearly

that the novel was fictional and had nothing to do with Dunja. The presenter declared himself a victim of deception. Aida canceled the launch event. The bookshop kept the book on its shelf, now without the cardboard sign reading "Forbidden Love."

A month later, Nera read to ten people in a small library. One woman asked why the heroine always justified herself to a man who never listened. They talked for a long time. Dunja did not attend, but later accepted Nera's brief apology without promising an immediate reconciliation. On her way home, Nera bought a notebook. On the first page, she wrote a scene she did not know how to turn into an advertisement. This time, that suited her.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Invitations Never Sent

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-invitations-never-sent/

Fifty unsent invitations lay on the table. Nina examined each one, looking for a printing error she could correct. The date was right. So were the names. The paper was the color her future mother-in-law had chosen. Nothing was wrong except the relief Nina felt every time she left an envelope unsealed.

She was twenty-eight and engaged to Robert, a man she had known almost all her life. He was neither cruel nor unfaithful. He loved her in a way that assumed she wanted everything already arranged: an apartment above his parents, a job in the family company, and holidays in the same place they had visited for years.

Nina had graduated in architecture but had never done the work that truly interested her. Secretly, she had applied for a year-long program restoring old buildings. When her acceptance arrived, she opened it in the bathroom with the faucet running, as though reading it were itself an act of infidelity.

She tried talking to Robert. He said they could go there for a long weekend after the wedding. When she explained that she wanted to study for an entire year, he asked why what they had was suddenly no longer enough. It was not sudden. She had simply said something for the first time that could not fit between choosing a cake and arranging the guests.

The turning point came during a visit to their future apartment. Robert showed her the room he already called her office. Inside was a desk facing the wall because the window was occupied by a family wardrobe that must not be moved. Nina asked whether the wardrobe could go elsewhere. Three people answered at once.

That evening, she said she was canceling the wedding. She did not claim Robert was a bad man. She said marrying him while hoping he would

later allow her a different life would be dishonest. The family spoke of expense and shame. Nina accepted her share of the costs and stood by her decision.

She left in September with two suitcases. During the first weeks, she missed everything familiar, even the things she had escaped. The window in her new room was hard to close, and the radiator knocked at night. No one was there to confirm every day that she had made the right choice.

For her first field assignment, she received the key to an abandoned school. She opened the door, entered with her notebook, and stopped before a large window. This time, she decided for herself where to put the desk.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

An Engagement on the Wrong Slide

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/an-engagement-on-the-wrong-slide/

Milena brought Nikola to her father's birthday with a warning that her family was warm in a way that sometimes required recovery afterward. They had been dating for three months. She was thirty-two, had her own apartment, and did not want to explain her schedule to relatives. Nikola thought she was exaggerating until her aunt asked whether he preferred large weddings or small ones.

Milena changed the subject. Her mother interpreted this as shy agreement. A cake with two extra hearts was already waiting in the kitchen, and her father was preparing a slideshow of family photographs. Among pictures of seaside holidays and celebrations, he had secretly added a slide announcing the future bride and groom.

The plan was not born of malice. Her parents truly loved their daughter and truly believed they were helping. That did not make their decision any smaller. Milena's mother had already spoken to a restaurant owner and sent photographs of reception rooms to a cousin. Whenever Milena said she was planning nothing, her mother replied that everyone said that until things got moving.

After dinner, her father dimmed the room. Photographs passed amid laughter. Then he paused, raised his glass, and announced special news. Milena understood what was coming from his tone. Before she could stand, an image of a wedding-venue quote appeared on the wall with her mother's comment: "If we announce it in front of everyone, saying no won't mean disappointing only us."

The guest count appeared at the bottom of the document too. Milena recognized people she had not seen for years, while her best friend was missing from the list. Nikola tried to stand, but his chair caught on the rug. Its small scraping sound was all anyone could hear as her mother

pressed the remote control in vain.

Her mother had opened the wrong document. No one laughed. Nikola set down his glass, and Milena walked to the projector and switched on the light. She said there was no engagement and that she was sorry her relatives were finding out this way.

Her father tried to explain that it had all been a joke. Milena asked him not to make her into someone without a sense of humor because she did not want someone else's timetable for her life. Her mother cried. Milena did not withdraw her words to stop the tears.

Nikola drove her home. In the car, he admitted that he liked her but did not even know whether he would be living in this city the following year. It was their first serious conversation about their relationship. It did not sound romantic. It was far more useful than the cake.

A week later, her parents came for coffee without catalogs or relatives. They apologized. Milena accepted, then asked them to speak to her first next time. Her father looked at the dark television and said he had not brought a presentation this time.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Woman at the Head Table

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-woman-at-the-head-table/

At their first restaurant dinner as a married couple, Anja learned that her new husband considered bills a personal insult. The high price of the wine he ordered did not bother him. What bothered him was that she had ordered dessert without asking. He said it quietly, smiling, then left the waiter a tip large enough to be remembered.

She married at thirty, after years of insecure contracts and apartments shared with roommates. Nenad was a respected consultant, fifteen years older, attentive in public and obsessed with his status. He promised her peace. Only after the wedding did Anja understand how much of that peace depended on her asking for nothing.

For his business association's charity dinner, he asked her to help with the guests. The organizer was ill, the schedule had fallen apart, and Nenad was nervous about sitting too far from the main sponsor. Anja took over the phone, rearranged the tables, and solved a problem with the performers. For the first time that year, she was doing something better than he could.

The evening was a success. People asked for her business card, but she had none. The foundation's president offered her a paid project. At first, Nenad explained that his wife did this only for pleasure. Anja interrupted him and accepted the offer.

Over the following months, she had fewer and fewer free evenings. She earned money, met people, and finally bought things without preparing an explanation. Nenad began leaving documents on her desk, hoping she would recommend him to one of her new contacts. His tone grew gentler. Anja enjoyed the change more than she wanted to admit.

Then her sister called for the third time that week. Their mother needed help moving. Anja promised to come, then canceled because of lunch

with an important guest. Her sister said, "Now you always have someone more important too." Anja was angry, but could not get the sentence out of her head.

At the next ceremony, Nenad tried to reserve seats for them in the front row. Anja took her place card and moved it to the working table with the crew. After the program, she went to help her mother, still in her formal shoes. Her sister handed her a box of books without comment.

She ended the marriage later, when she had somewhere to go and something to say. She did not take the family silver. She took her business cards and her mother's old lamp, the one she had almost forgotten to come and pack.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Man Who Took the Shame

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-man-who-took-the-shame/

Dora recognized him by the way he folded his ticket between his fingers. Nermin sat on the train opposite an older man with a canvas bag. She had not seen him since graduation. Back then, he had been the loudest person in their class and the only one who said he would own a company by thirty.

Now they were both past forty. Dora ran a small marketing agency, and she had heard only fragments about Nermin: construction, large contracts, a lovely apartment. She approached him with a smile. He stood too quickly, struck his knee against the table, and told her she looked exactly the same. It was a polite lie she decided to accept.

The older man introduced himself as Goran. When Dora asked whether they were traveling together on business, he answered before Nermin could. He said Nermin was taking him home because he had just closed his company and did not feel up to traveling alone. He spoke calmly, as though admitting he had lost a suitcase.

Dora looked at Nermin with new respect. He had always seemed like someone who avoided other people's problems. Now he was clearly supporting a friend. She sat down and began talking about the reunion. Nermin listened, said little, and never corrected Goran's story.

At the next station, Goran stepped off to buy water. His phone remained on the table and rang. The name of a law firm appeared on the screen, followed immediately by a message Dora could not avoid seeing: the papers for Nermin's bankruptcy were ready.

Nermin turned the phone over. "I'm the one going home," he said. There was no defensiveness in his voice. The apartment was no longer his. His company had failed. Goran, a family friend, had come to collect him because for three weeks he had spoken to no one but his lawyer.

For a while, Dora looked at her own ticket. Then she told him how her agency had fallen behind on wages the previous winter, and how she had posted photographs of a successful celebration the day after selling off the office furniture. Nermin looked up. She was offering neither a job nor empty assurances that everything would be fine. They simply no longer seemed to inhabit different kinds of lives.

When Goran returned, Dora thanked him for the water. As they got off, she gave Nermin her number and told him to call if he wanted to take a walk before the reunion. Goran went ahead with his bag. Nermin called after him to slow down. This time, he was carrying his own suitcase.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Circle of Important People

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-circle-of-important-people/

In the photograph, Vuk appeared to be kissing Sara on the cheek. She was laughing, his hand rested on her shoulder, and her husband stood far in the background. By morning, the picture had circulated through every hotel staff group. Someone added a comment saying the events director had finally entered the social circle she had always wanted.

Sara had approached Vuk because he was a well-known festival organizer. For months, she had been trying to get his recommendation. When he recognized her at the reception and greeted her warmly, she leaned closer to hear him over the music. Her husband, Emir, was helping the hotel technician that evening because the sound system had broken down.

Vuk did not stay beside Sara for long. All evening, he was trying to reach Dijana, an investor whose foundation could fund his festival. He spoke too loudly and laughed before anyone had finished. His partner, Nina, watched him from their table and wondered when he had last listened so attentively to anything she said.

Dijana, however, was looking for Emir. She had heard that he had repaired the heating in a small home for adults with disabilities without charging them. She wanted to arrange work on another building. When she found him behind the stage, she took off her expensive shoes and sat on a case of cables. The photographer did not notice them.

Emir explained that they did not need new equipment, only a repair previous contractors had refused because the job was not profitable enough. Dijana wrote the name of the part on the back of her invitation. Later, she mentioned their conversation in her speech without naming him. Vuk applauded and imagined how her foundation could help him. Meanwhile, Sara adjusted the seating so that Vuk's team would be visible

in the final photograph.

The next day, a relative sent Emir the picture of his wife and Vuk with nothing but a question mark. He did not forward it to Sara. He showed it to her over breakfast and asked what had happened. She explained, but paused when he asked why she had not come over to him once during the evening.

"I thought you were working," she said.

"I was. You could still have seen me."

At the foundation's next meeting, the circle closed. Dijana recommended Emir to Vuk as someone trustworthy, Vuk praised Sara's organization, and Sara realized she had spent the evening seeking approval from a man who was waiting for someone else's. No one's position was high enough to stop them looking over another person's shoulder.

She asked the hotel to remove the inappropriate comment beneath the photograph. Then she invited Emir to lunch. She did not show him her new contacts or explain why the reception had been a success after all. She asked about the fault he had been fixing and listened until he had drawn the entire sound system on a napkin. The napkin stayed among her business notes. Beneath the drawing, she wrote the date of their anniversary, without a guest list.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Two Women Behind the Same Counter

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/two-women-behind-the-same-counter/

Maja could estimate the price of a watch before a customer rested his hand on the counter. Ines remembered who had been rude to the cleaner last time. They sold handbags neither could afford without several months' pay, and spent every break debating which way of judging people was more useful.

When the owner of a restaurant chain began taking Maja out, Ines told her to be careful. His name was Viktor. He always reserved the best table and rarely asked when Maja's shift ended. He simply sent a car. Maja said love did not have to involve splitting electricity bills to be real.

Ines was dating Davor, a delivery driver. She loved his laugh and the fact that he never put on airs. But when she was offered a job managing a new branch, he began teasing her about her business vocabulary. He said he would now have to make appointments with his own girlfriend. She laughed until it stopped being funny.

Both women brought their partners to the store's annual dinner. Viktor was late, and Davor was annoyed that Ines had been invited to sit at the management table. On her phone, Maja saw a photograph Viktor had just posted from an event across town. Beside him stood a woman introduced as his fiancée.

When he arrived, Maja took him into the hallway. He said the engagement was a long-standing family obligation and that she knew how much their special closeness meant to him. Maja did not raise her voice. She returned the key to the apartment he had given her and asked him to stop sending cars.

Inside, Davor was telling everyone that Ines could not even organize their refrigerator at home. An uncomfortable laugh went around the table. Ines interrupted him. "You can be nervous. That doesn't mean you can

humiliate me in front of my colleagues." Davor tried to call it a joke. She stood up and went for her coat.

The friends met in the cloakroom. Maja waited to hear that she had been warned. Ines expected a lecture about how a modest man was no guarantee of kindness either. Neither said any of it. They went out for a late bowl of soup and shared a taxi.

Davor later offered a sincere apology, but Ines asked for time. Maja stayed single and accepted the additional training she had previously turned down because of Viktor's trips. Behind the counter, they still assessed their customers. They simply stopped expecting either a watch or a pair of modest shoes to tell them everything about a person.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Promise Outside the Closed Cinema

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-promise-outside-the-closed-cinema/

The cinema had become a mattress shop, but the canopy was the same. Alen stood beneath it with two paper cups of coffee. Fifteen years earlier, he and Nera had agreed to meet there again, wherever life took them. They had been twenty-four, with one camera and the conviction that love could survive any timetable.

Nera arrived in a gray coat. She did not look like the woman on the large posters for her new documentary. She looked tired and a little chilled. She took the coffee, thanked him, and said she had thought he would forget. "I wrote it down," he replied. He did not add where.

In his pocket was an old notebook containing their plan for a film. They had filmed railway workers before a local line closed. Nera had later moved abroad, while Alen stayed to care for his sick father, and their work together ended up in a cardboard box. Their relationship had fallen apart in phone calls that grew shorter and shorter.

Her new film used the same interviews. The same final scene. His name was absent from the credits.

At first, they talked about family and work. Nera described festivals, and Alen told her about the workshop he had opened. There were moments when he wanted to leave the notebook in his pocket. He remembered how she laughed when coffee burned her tongue. She still did it in exactly the same way.

Then he placed the notebook between them. Nera did not ask what it was. She said the producer had not wanted to complicate the rights because they had never put their old agreement in writing. She explained how many years she had spent trying to finish the film and how hard it had been to find funding. Alen listened until he heard the word gratitude.

"I'm not asking you to be grateful. I'm asking not to disappear from something we made together."

Nera set down her cup. In her bag was a ticket for that evening's screening, intended for him. She did not take it out. She asked if she could have a few days. He said she could, but he would not surrender his name for the sake of their memories.

At the next screening, Nera explained the origin of the footage before the film began and announced that the credits would be corrected. Later, they signed an agreement on authorship and payment. Alen did not suggest reviving their relationship, and she did not ask. Still, when they came outside, they looked toward the old cinema together. This time, they made no promise about fifteen years. They arranged coffee for the following Thursday.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Traffic Jam Someone Paid For

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-traffic-jam-someone-paid-for/

Everyone loved the story of their proposal. Ena and Vedad were trapped in a street as snow fell on the windshield, missed a concert and ended up in a little bakery. There, between a sack of flour and a tray of warm rolls, Vedad produced a ring. Ena said yes. His father called it proof that fate knew better than schedules.

Three weeks later, while reviewing invoices for the renovation of the family hotel in her work as an architect, Ena found an unusual item: private access closure. The date was the day of the proposal. Attached was a message instructing a delivery company owner to keep two trucks in her street for at least forty minutes.

Vedad's father greeted her question with laughter. He said there had been no danger, only a little organization. The baker was an old friend. The rolls had been ordered too. His son had hesitated too long, Ena was always rushing somewhere, and someone had needed to help happiness along.

A framed photograph of the proposal already stood in his office. In it, Ena recognized the man who had supposedly happened to pass through the bakery and offered to take their picture. His father said the man worked at the hotel; she simply had not met him. Every detail that had held her surprise now revealed someone's instructions. Even her favorite song on the radio had been arranged.

"What if I'd said no?" she asked.

He waved away the question as though she had asked what would happen if cherry trees flowered in January. That was when the story first disgusted her. It was not the preparation of the proposal that disturbed her. It was that everyone had treated her answer as a foregone conclusion.

Vedad had not known about the trucks. He had known about the bakery and allowed his father to help. When she showed him the invoice, his face changed. He did not try to defend his father, but asked whether one excess had to spoil a beautiful memory. Ena removed the ring and placed it on the kitchen table.

"We can repair the memory. First, we need to see who's arranging our lives."

They canceled the hotel wedding the family had already begun organizing. The venue payment was not refunded in full, causing more complaints than the canceled plans themselves. Vedad told his father he would cover the lost deposit himself. Ena did not ask for another proposal. She asked to discuss their apartment, his work and her wish to spend a year on a project in another city.

In April, they went to the municipal office simply to ask about available dates. A fine rain was falling. Outside the entrance, Vedad paused, and Ena laughed and checked for delivery trucks. There were none.

Then she took the ring from her own pocket. "September suits me," she said. Vedad opened his calendar, looked at her and closed it. "Me too."

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Divorce Her Lawyer Had Already Celebrated

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-divorce-her-lawyer-had-already-celebrated/

Every morning, Senka opened her flower shop as Damir, a lawyer, passed on his way to the office. At first, he stopped to buy one flower for the reception desk. Later, he stayed for ten minutes. He knew her husband worked seasonally, rarely sent money and came home with promises that lasted less time than his suitcase in the hallway.

When Senka mentioned divorce, Damir offered a legal consultation. She brought documents and a list of expenses she had covered alone for years. He clearly explained possible steps and did not promise an outcome. That was why she trusted him. At last, someone was writing down her sentences instead of interrupting with advice to be patient.

Over the following weeks, his morning visits grew longer. He began wearing a new coat and leaving business cards for restaurants they should visit, he said, when everything was over. Senka understood the suggestions as kindness. In his mind, he was already turning them into the beginning of a life together.

One Friday, she brought news that her husband had returned. He wanted to talk and had shown her a contract for permanent work. Damir reacted before she finished explaining. He said she was naive to believe him again, that all their effort would be wasted and that she deserved a man who was present. He spoke the final sentence while looking directly at her.

Senka put down her bag. She asked whether he was speaking as her lawyer or as a man hoping for her decision. First, Damir said he kept those things separate. Then he admitted he cared for her. She was not pleased in the way he expected. She felt that here, too, she was being asked to declare someone else's desire her own solution.

She asked him to prepare her documents for another lawyer. She paid for the work done and thanked him for his initial help. She neither forgave her husband immediately nor let him return to the apartment. She arranged conversations, separate finances and a period in which to see whether anything had changed beyond another promise.

In the end, she filed for divorce. The decision came quietly, after a morning when she realized she no longer wanted to test someone else's seriousness. She did not tell Damir personally. When he passed the flower shop and asked how she was, she said she was well and had many orders that day.

For the window, she prepared an arrangement without roses, using branches and small white flowers. A customer asked whether it represented a new beginning. Senka said it represented what she had found beautiful that morning. She enjoyed having one thing that did not have to announce the man who would come next.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Fifty Minutes by an Open Window

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/fifty-minutes-by-an-open-window/

The information came through a colleague, then his wife, and finally to Nadina's sister. The bus her husband was supposedly traveling on had been in a serious accident. His name appeared among the unconfirmed reports. Her sister came in person, pale, carrying a phone that would not stop ringing. No official service had confirmed the news.

Nadina called her husband several times. His phone was unreachable. She sat on the hallway floor because the chair seemed too far away. She remembered being angry the previous evening because he had again decided where they would spend their vacation without discussing it with her. Now that anger seemed both trivial and terrible.

While her sister checked the information, Nadina went into the bedroom and opened the window. In the street, someone was carrying plants into a flower shop. A woman in a red jacket bought a parking ticket. Everything continued, almost indecently normal. Nadina cried, then stopped, not knowing how to fill the next minute.

Then a thought came that flooded her with shame: she could finish the degree she had postponed. Not because her husband had explicitly forbidden it, but because all their plans eventually became his. For his work, it was time to move. For his tiredness, it was time to be quiet. For her, they always had to wait for a better moment.

She did not wish him dead. She wished her life did not have to depend on his absence. She recognized the difference clearly, before she could forgive herself for thinking at all. She found her old university record book in a drawer and put it on the bed beside the tissues.

Fifty minutes after the first call, her sister knocked. Her husband was alive. He had taken a later bus, and his phone battery had died. Nadina heard him over the speaker, puzzled by the panic. She began trembling

with relief. She asked her sister to step out for a moment and asked him to stay on the line.

She did not tell him every thought at once. She said she loved him, had been terrified and needed to talk when he arrived. That evening, she held him for a long time. Then she took out the record book. At first, he suggested postponing the discussion until they had both calmed down. Nadina looked at him and said postponement was precisely what she wanted to discuss.

Their marriage neither ended that night nor improved by itself. The following week, Nadina submitted an application to resume her studies. When asked for a contact number, she wrote her own. Afterward, she called her husband to tell him how it had gone, not to check whether she was allowed to continue.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Closed Marina, an Open Story

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-closed-marina-an-open-story/

A sign announcing an urgent technical inspection appeared at the marina gate. Boats stayed at their moorings, and walkers had to go around the entire bay. Danilo, the manager, told the worker on duty to close the entrance until ten. He supplied no written order. "I'll take responsibility," he added, as he always did when he expected others to obey.

Emina waited at the end of the pontoon. They had known each other only a few weeks. Her marriage was falling apart, but she had not yet spoken her decision aloud at home. She had told Danilo they could meet for a short walk, without promises. He turned it into dinner on an empty boat, with lights and music.

At first, it looked beautiful. The sea had calmed, nobody was around, and Danilo knew how to speak as though every sentence she uttered deserved special attention. Then Emina heard an argument at the entrance. An older married couple could not reach the boat where they had left their medicines and jackets.

She asked why they were not being let through. Danilo waved a hand. "Tonight, all of this is just for us." He gestured toward the lights as though he had given her the bay. Emina looked at the empty walkways and the worker apologizing to angry people. Suddenly, the dinner lost its warmth.

She took her coat and said she wanted to leave. Danilo thought she was afraid of running into her husband. He promised nobody would find out. She explained that the problem lay precisely in what he considered romantic. If her arrival justified closing someone else's route home, he did not care enough about how his actions affected others.

At the exit, she asked the worker to record the actual closing time and the reason he had been given. She made no statements about her marriage to

the gathered passersby. The next day, she sent the marina's administration a factual account. An inquiry confirmed there had been no technical inspection. Danilo was temporarily removed from duty while the consequences were assessed.

At home, Emina admitted the meeting. Her husband was hurt and did not want to hear how she had ultimately behaved correctly. She accepted that. Their separation did not become simpler because of Danilo's mistake. She had to answer for her own choice, separately from the man who had overstepped his authority.

The following summer, she walked through the marina with a friend. The gates were open, tourists looked at boats, fishermen repaired ropes, and someone loudly searched for a missing hat. There was less silence than on that evening. Emina bought two coffees and sat among the people. A view of the sea did not require anyone else to be kept outside.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Marriage Package for Sale

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-marriage-package-for-sale/

The advertisement read: "Family guesthouse, established business, home cooking and personal attention." Amra read it on her husband's laptop while waiting to print the menu. She had not known they were selling the guesthouse. Still less had she known that her labor was included in the price.

Faruk said he was only testing the market. A buyer would come on Saturday, have lunch and look at the rooms. "If he's serious, we'll all sit down together," he promised. In the advertisement, Amra noticed a sentence saying the hostess would stay to run the kitchen. It did not sound like a question still waiting to be asked.

The buyer arrived with a folder and a very detailed plan. He praised Amra's food, then asked whether she could guarantee breakfast before six every morning. He added that he expected her to be present during holidays too, since guests were buying a family experience. Faruk agreed before she could open her mouth.

Amra removed her apron and sat down. She asked the buyer what salary he had budgeted for the role. He looked at Faruk, then said he had thought that part was included in the agreement. "In the price of the building?" she asked. She did not raise her voice. Suddenly, the refrigerator behind the counter was clearly audible in the dining room.

Faruk tried joking that without her, the guesthouse was not worth half as much. Amra took a sheet of paper and wrote down her working hours. She cooked, managed reservations and sent the linens to be washed. Yet he made the business decisions because he had inherited the land from his father. For years, they had called it a division of responsibilities.

The buyer closed his folder. He admitted that he had not understood what was actually being sold. Amra offered two clear conversations: one

about the property, the other about any contract she might accept. Faruk said she was humiliating him in front of a guest. She replied that, for the first time during the negotiations, she was being treated as a person who could agree or refuse.

The sale was not completed that day. Over the following weeks, Amra sought independent advice about her work and property position. Faruk had to cover several morning shifts himself. He discovered that the family experience began very early and that gratitude did not wash plates. The discovery did not automatically repair their marriage.

In the end, she stayed to run the kitchen under agreed conditions, and they did not sell the guesthouse. One evening a week, she closed early and went to a pottery class. At first, Faruk grumbled about lost bookings. She set the first plate she brought home in front of herself. It bore her own name, not the guesthouse's.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Door Opened at the Wrong Moment

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-door-opened-at-the-wrong-moment/

Dinner was being prepared for the new neighbors. Mirza insisted they also invite the architect working with his wife Sonja on the restoration of an old bookshop. He had noticed her returning from meetings in a brighter mood and turned it into a story he never told her directly.

Sonja considered the architect, Luka, a friend. She liked the way he asked about her sketches instead of immediately suggesting changes. Mirza had done that for years, even when he knew nothing about the work. He claimed he was merely honest, and she brought drawings home less and less often.

Before the guests arrived, Sonja developed a migraine. She went into the small study, removed her jewelry and sat behind closed curtains. She asked her husband to say she would join them later. Luka arrived first. Mirza offered him a drink and began talking about how demanding creative women were.

Then, supposedly looking for photographs of the house before its renovation, he threw the study door wide open. Sonja sat with a cold towel over her eyes, wearing an old T-shirt and surrounded by unopened boxes. She flinched at the light. Mirza apologized theatrically, holding the door open long enough for the guest to see everything he had intended to display.

Luka immediately turned away. He asked Sonja whether she wanted water and closed the door as soon as she confirmed she needed quiet. Mirza laughed, expecting a shared understanding. Instead, Luka asked why he had not respected her request. Mirza said Luka clearly had not yet seen what a real marriage looked like.

The rest of dinner was strained. Sonja came out only to thank the guests, without apologizing for her appearance. When everyone had left, she told

Mirza she had heard their conversation. He tried to reduce the incident to clumsiness. She described how he had paused in the doorway, how he had waited and how he had looked at her when Luka failed to react according to plan.

She did not move out that night. For months, they talked with a counselor's help, trying to establish whether there was a willingness to change. Mirza kept steering the conversation back to Luka, although there had been no romance. Sonja finally understood that, in their marriage, any happiness she found outside the house was treated as a threat.

When she signed the lease on a small apartment, she measured the study herself. Luka later helped her carry her books, then left without expectations. The new door had no lock meant to punish anyone. There was simply a habit of knocking. At first, Sonja needed time to believe how peaceful such an ordinary thing could sound.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Last Letter Was Not a Goodbye

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-last-letter-was-not-a-goodbye/

The notary opened the envelope only after they had gone through the formal part of the inheritance. In their mother's handwriting, it instructed that the letter be read before all three adult children. Lejla sat by the window, Senad near the door, and Dario, the youngest, opposite the empty chair of their father, who had refused to attend.

In the letter, their mother described years of loneliness within her marriage. She did not list every argument or ask her children to take sides. She wrote about a man named Boris who had been her friend and lover. They knew him as the quiet colleague who brought books and never stayed very long.

Dario heard his own name before he understood the sentence. His mother stated that Boris was his biological father. She asked that, if Dario wished, he be given the letters preserving details of that part of her life. The notary stopped reading when Dario raised his hand. An old lamp buzzed in the room.

Senad was the first to say it was impossible. Lejla asked whether their father knew. Nobody had an answer. Dario asked for water, then went into the corridor. His whole life suddenly looked like a photograph in which someone was only now pointing out a person hidden behind the others.

Boris agreed to meet him the following week. He did not greet him with the word "son." He showed him the letters and admitted accepting silence out of fear, although for years he had justified it as concern for the family. Dario said he needed time and would not change his surname to ease someone else's regret.

The conversation with the man who had raised him was harder. He had suspected, but never asked. Now he demanded that Dario cut off all

contact with Boris. Dario replied that he loved him and that their shared life had not been erased. But he could not ask him to surrender his questions simply because the adults had once lacked the courage to answer them.

The siblings, including the half-sister from their father's first marriage whom Lejla had also invited, gathered at her home for dinner. They did not read the intimate letters aloud. They agreed to settle the inheritance according to the documents and their family relationships according to how they treated each other. Senad apologized to Dario for his first reaction.

Months later, Dario went with Boris to collect books from his garage. He found one with his mother's notes in the margins. He took it home, along with a photograph of the man who had taught him to ride a bicycle. He placed both on the shelf without requiring himself to understand that same day where everything belonged.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

A Hole in an Expensive Umbrella

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/a-hole-in-an-expensive-umbrella/

When Adis bought a good umbrella for the first time, his wife Mirna filed the receipt among their important expenses. Their income was respectable, but she had grown up in a home where every unexpected cost was felt for weeks. Adis often joked about it instead of asking what still frightened her.

On the third evening, he came home with a small hole in the black fabric. Mirna noticed it while the umbrella dried in the bathroom. It looked like a cigarette burn. He did not smoke. He said he did not know how it had happened, which was true, but he used the voice with which he sometimes avoided conversations.

Mirna immediately thought of a colleague who smoked outside his building. Once, Adis had held an umbrella over her while she searched for her keys. Now an ordinary memory became evidence. Mirna asked where he had been, who he had had coffee with and why his phone was on silent.

They argued. The next morning, Adis noticed another small hole, made while the umbrella was leaning against an old heater. He showed Mirna the hot metal projection. She was silent, then said their home insurance might cover heat damage. Apparently, filling out a form was easier than saying she was sorry.

At the insurance office, she described a spark and a possible fire. The clerk asked her to write down exactly what she had seen. Mirna looked at the blank form. She had seen no spark. There had been no fire. There was a heater, an umbrella and an argument she was now trying to turn into a refund.

She crossed out the first sentence and handed back the form. "I'm not sure I have anything to report here," she said. The clerk gave her the

address of a man who repaired umbrellas. Mirna left without any money, but for the first time that morning, she could breathe more easily. She called Adis and asked him to meet her at the repair shop.

The repair cost less than lunch. While they waited, she apologized for the accusation. She also said she feared the moment when one expense would leave her having to ask other people for help. Adis stopped looking in the window. He told her how exhausting it was to experience every broken thing as a personal failure.

They set up a small repair fund and agreed on an amount each could spend without explaining it. Two neat seams remained on the umbrella. The next time it rained, Mirna took it to meet Adis. They stood close together beneath it, concerned only that they both fit, not whose side was drier.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

How to Stay Silent Before the Whole Town

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/how-to-stay-silent-before-the-whole-town/

The photograph appeared on Friday evening. It showed Anja leaving a restaurant with a man holding her coat. Beneath it was a headline about the secret romance of a well-known local restaurateur's wife. The man in the picture was her brother. He had returned from abroad after six years.

Anja sent a brief explanation, then a photograph from a family celebration. The website replied that it merely reported what the town was talking about. The comments filled with names, invented encounters and insults. Her husband wanted to go to the newsroom and shout. She asked him to let her go first.

The editor sat behind a desk covered in advertising offers. He said he understood her discomfort, but that it was the price of a public life. Her husband's restaurant had many customers, and their wedding had once appeared in the newspapers. Anja asked whether that meant facts about their private lives no longer needed checking.

"You shouldn't feed the story," he replied. "It's best to say nothing." She took a notebook from her bag. "Then explain how you do it. I've seen comments calling you a hired mouthpiece. How do you learn to swallow every insult?" She did not say it as an attack. She genuinely watched him, waiting for an answer.

The editor straightened his pen. He immediately deleted comments about himself. He did not permit articles about his own divorce. Anja knew this because a friend had previously worked in the newsroom, but she did not need to mention a name. She left her correction request on the desk, along with the telephone number of her brother, who had agreed to confirm his identity.

That afternoon, he called. He apologized without using the word "if." He published a correction as prominently as the original headline and removed comments inventing private information. He instructed the photographer to check context before submitting pictures in future. He could not take back every sentence people had read, but he could stop profiting from them.

That evening, Anja went to the same restaurant, this time with her husband and brother. She did not want another photograph as proof of respectability. When the waiter offered to take their picture, she thanked him and declined. Her brother talked about the small apartment where he now kept too many plants. Her husband listened attentively.

A week later, the website offered her an interview about the harm caused by rumors. She declined. Instead, she suggested that the editor explain his own decision to publish an unchecked story. When the article appeared under his name, Anja read it to the end, turned off the screen and continued a dinner that no longer needed an audience.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Painting He Could Not Buy

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-painting-he-could-not-buy/

An empty gold frame already stood in the entrance hall of the new house. Robert showed the artist where the portrait of him and his wife would hang. He wanted the painting to feel intimate, yet formal enough for entertaining business partners. He offered double the fee if she finished it before their wedding anniversary.

The artist, Nika, asked them to attend the first sitting together. Only Iva came. Robert sent an assistant with photographs and a message saying he had a meeting. In the pictures, Nika saw a woman in different dresses and a man whose hand always rested on her shoulder in the same way, as though it were the back of a chair.

Iva did not criticize her husband. She described his workload as though it were bad weather that could not be changed. While Nika sketched, Iva mentioned her love of old buses, journeys without reservations and kiosks selling cheap comic books. Nothing in Robert's house suggested any of it.

At the second sitting, Robert stayed for nine minutes. He gave Iva a bracelet and asked whether it would appear in the painting. Then he took a call. Before he left, Nika asked him to suggest a scene in which the two of them felt close. He listed hotels, resorts and restaurants where the staff knew them by name.

"And something you didn't pay for?" she asked. There was no mockery in her voice. Robert paused, looked at Iva and offered to bring a photograph of their first apartment. Iva said she could not remember where they had put it. She was already reaching for her phone to call the assistant when she lowered it back into her lap.

The portrait was not ready for the anniversary. Nika returned the extra fee, along with a simple sketch of two empty chairs. Robert angrily called

the gallery that had recommended her. Iva interrupted him. For the first time, in front of someone else, she said the sketch looked more accurate than their photographs. In the next room, guests waited for cake.

The following day, Iva moved into a smaller apartment for a month to think about what she wanted. Robert visited by arrangement. One Saturday, he brought a bag of old comic books from the basement. Sitting at the kitchen table, he admitted finding them by accident and not knowing how much they meant to her. Forgiveness did not come immediately.

A few months later, they sat for Nika again. Iva still lived in her own apartment, but they saw each other and talked without their phones. In the painting, Robert listened as she showed him a torn comic-book page. They sold the gold frame. The portrait was smaller than they had planned, and for the first time, it truly belonged to them both.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

The Bill for Morality

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/the-bill-for-morality/

A proposed set of house rules appeared on the noticeboard, including a new restriction on visitors after ten. Selma read it while waiting for the elevator. She had divorced a year earlier, and her partner Alen sometimes arrived after his late shift. Nobody had written her name. There was no need.

Branko, the residents' chairman, gave a speech about the building's reputation. He spoke while looking at the ceiling, as though everyone who disagreed with him lived up there. Selma sat in the front row with the communal heating bills. She had come because of cold radiators, not to explain who made her tea.

"We can't allow every passerby to have access," Branko said. His wife added that they had to think of families. Selma asked why the rule concerned visits to adults rather than noise or actual damage. They replied that some people understood decency without legal arguments.

Ibro, the plumber called in to explain the fault, put down his tools. "If we're charging for other people's visits," he said, "what rate applies to Branko's fifth year of free parking in a space we all pay for?" Several residents laughed, but he did not continue the joke. He took out the plumbing plan and pointed to the blocked passage leading to the main valve.

Branko insisted that his car bothered nobody. Ibro explained that it had prevented him from reaching the valve the previous morning, too. The chairman had been in another building, visiting a female friend, with his phone switched off. Selma did not ask what kind of friend. She did not want to use someone else's private life to defend her own.

"We can discuss my visitors if they make noise," she said. "Let's discuss your parking because it's costing us our heating." She separated the two

folders, house rules and bills. A neighbor from the second floor, silent until then, asked that they fix the fault first. The meeting finally had an item about which everyone knew something.

The proposal about visitors failed. They agreed on a nighttime noise rule that applied to everyone and scheduled the repair. Branko had to move his car and hand the keys to the communal space to the building manager. On the way out, he quietly told Selma she had taken everything personally. "It was aimed at me," she replied, "but we were voting about everyone."

That evening, Alen brought soup. On the stairs, he met Branko's wife, whose bag of apples had spilled, and helped her pick them up. Selma heard him introduce himself. Later, she put two spoons on the table, opened the window and, for the first time that week, stopped listening to every sound outside her own door.

SCANDALS · 3 MIN READ

Three Identical Rings

Read online: ljubavniromani.com/en/stories/three-identical-rings/

Three rings with dark blue stones lay on the white tablecloth. While he was alive, their father had told each daughter she would receive the ring their mother wore at her wedding. Now all three were at the same table for the first time since the funeral. Nobody touched the food.

Vera, the eldest, immediately recognized a scratch on the band. Hana, the middle sister, pointed to the same scratch on her own ring. Nela, the youngest, tried joking that their father had clearly appreciated mass production. The joke fell flat. To each of them, the ring was proof that she was the one he had told the truth.

Vera had cared for him during his final years. Hana had sent money from abroad. Nela visited rarely, but she could talk to him about their mother without an argument. Within half an hour, they were listing visits, bills and missed birthdays. Their partners withdrew to the kitchen.

They called Sanela, the jeweler whose receipt was in the box. She arrived in her work apron, having closed her shop only briefly. Vera demanded to know which ring was the original. Hana offered to pay for an expert appraisal. Nela opened her phone, ready to record the verdict.

Sanela laid the rings in a row. Their father had brought her one old ring and ordered two identical copies, including the scratch. He had asked her to renew the markings on all three. "I know which one I first held in my hand," she said, "but he never told me to use his decision as a measure of you."

From her pocket, she took an envelope left with the order. Inside, he had written that he was tired of trying to promise each of them a special kind of reassurance, so he had made three identical promises. It was not an admirable excuse. Hana cried with anger. Vera said he should have spoken to them while he could still hear their answers.

Nela turned off the camera. She asked whether the stones could be removed from all three rings. Sanela nodded. The sisters talked for a long time, this time about their mother. They remembered that she disliked wearing the ring while cooking and often kept it in a box of buttons. In their stories, the object suddenly grew smaller, and the woman who had worn it became much more real.

They agreed on three different pendants. Each kept a stone, without a certificate of precedence. Vera invited both sisters to Sunday lunch the following month. Hana asked whether she should send money for groceries. "Bring a cake," Vera replied. Nela arrived early and, for the first time, did not wait for someone to ask her to set the table.