

The Night

April 1993

»When the imam calls to evening prayers, you have to be home. And not one second later!«

My mother's words cross my mind. Today again, they were so insistent, when I left our home in the afternoon to play. This coming home on time never used to be an issue. Mother has become over-protective and anxious at the same time, in the last couple of months. There is no doubt, our parents want to protect us from something. My two sisters and me. From what or from whom, I don't know. When I ask, the answer is always the same:

»It's nothing, don't worry!«

But it must be something terrible. So disturbing that it has changed our parents somehow. In a way that I even sometimes believe, these are different people before me. People that I love and respect, but that I don't recognise anymore. Fear has been written all over my mother's face for weeks.

This is hard to understand for me. By drawing pictures in my head I try to imagine what the problem could be. But I realise that this only heightens my own fear. Every sound makes me shudder. Now it's here, it's coming to get us! Whatever it may be! I can feel the horror. It's coming closer. It's surrounding us. It's casting an invisible net around us. Visible to no one, but still one feels able to grasp it. It's something bad, for which I can't find a pattern in my mind. I lie in bed and my thoughts circle around the next day.

*I hope that tomorrow more friends will come to play again.
Strange, none of the Croat children came to school today.*

There, my heart is racing again, I can literally hear it. The same thoughts come back over and over. Like they often did in the last few days. What would I have given to sleep next to my sisters, only not be

alone. And to be able to block these images. Those images swirling in my mind and that I simply cannot understand.

Unable to sleep, I turn from one side to another. Something is wrong. I perceive the darkness and the night differently, since I know that there is something there. A threat. The darkness suddenly feels cool, as if someone was blowing cold air on you. Like in winter, when you play outside. Invisible to others, staring at me, I imagine something that is slowly coming towards me. In the darkness everything feels alive. The trees. Their shadows take up forms, sometimes they are faces looking at me threateningly. It used to be different. »The others« seem to determine the events, our actions, our everyday life. Not directly, but they take possession of the spirits and minds of the inhabitants. For weeks, they've been setting the pace and lead us, as if we were puppets. At least that's the way it is with the adults of our village. And we children don't know how to deal with these impressions. Can't process them. How could we. We don't know this kind of fear. We've all grown up feeling secure and cared for. A good village life for us children, without barriers or problems.

I shouldn't have told Mother that the Croat children did not come to school today.

This preoccupied her the whole day, and she was like a different person. But actually, her behaviour did not surprise me, because it had been changing for months now. When my father's company had been bombed and he had lost his job. Since then she had been anxious, easy to scare and overcautious. The slightest noise makes her flinch. During the day it's not that bad. But when night falls, she becomes gripped by fear, and is unable to shake off. Her behaviour is so different then, without her however becoming less caring towards us children. Quite the opposite, she becomes more caring every day. So that it's sometimes becoming too much for us. But everything else about her is not the same. Our mother. She has become a different person.

Father was very quiet, when he came home at night. A good sign. He doesn't seem to share my mother's anxieties. Not even, when

she told him about school. But despite his calm, he appeared even more preoccupied and helpless than in the last months, since the men have been doing their rounds. He hasn't been going to work for a few months now. He used to be at the factory during the week and home for the weekend, when he was mostly helping out the neighbours. »We have to make money«, he told me over and over, when we had the Sundays to ourselves.

»Then we can fulfil our dreams. Have our own shop. And build a house for you«, he said full of pride.

But that is over now too. He is home all the time, unless he is doing his rounds with the men at night. They are armed then, each the men has a gun. My father does not actually own a gun, but when they are doing their rounds, they carry guns. Even though I am only 13 years old, I notice that something is off in our village. Perhaps something has already happened. And so that it won't happen again, the men go on their nightly patrol. With weapons.

That must be it.

I imagine the most horrible things. I am sure that my parents know something, but won't tell us children. They don't want to scare us. And so everything feels all right again, my thoughts are dissipating. Everything is all right!

But so much has become funny. Different somehow. In the village. At school. On the football ground. Just everywhere. And that hasn't just occurred to me. Also to my friends. Even though many of them don't come to my place anymore.

Surely, that must be connected to »the others« that their parents won't let them come anymore.

I am tired. In my mind, the events of the day change minute by minute, and this is why I can't sleep, although I am tired. My thoughts circle around the day at school again.

The children from the next village did not come to school today.

Normally we take the same bus. In my class too they were all missing. And in the afternoon Igor and Sladjana from the house across from us left by car. They both had their large backpacks with them, as if they were going on a trip. A hour later, their father came back. Without the two of them.

Strange. It's not the holidays, and school is on again on Monday.

There it is again, this strange feeling in my belly, which I usually get before exams. Or when I've done something wrong and I am waiting for my father's reaction. It's hard to describe. It feels as if everything tightens and starts to tingle. Fear and queasiness are starting to mount. Why don't the neighbours inform us, if they know something about »the others«. Then we could have left too. Which is what my mother is telling my father we should do. Go to the upper village, to my grandmother. My parents don't want to leave, and so going to the upper part of the village already provides a little added security. In the village everyone knows everyone else and everyone helps the neighbours out. Everyone watches everyone else. And everyone knows everything about everyone else. Normally.

But in the last few weeks, these rules seem to fall apart. The women don't gossip in front of the store, the men don't chat on the street. A few groups of men are standing next to one other. But only separately. Not like before, when they stood together. The main street of the village has become an unsurmountable barrier.

I am staring at the opposite wall. The clock is ticking and I can see the small red light of the television. My room on the first floor is actually our kitchen. I am sleeping on the sofa. My own room. My two sisters have to share one. I squint and look at the clock. Even though it's pitch dark outside, there is a reflection in the window, so that the dial is being slightly illuminated. Enough to read the time. It is 10 p.m. already.

*You have to sleep now. Tomorrow a new day is waiting for you,
to play with friends. It's the weekend, no school.*

The endless thoughts won't let me come to rest, however. I am trying to distract myself. To tell myself that my father knows what he's doing. He always has the right advice or the right answer to every problem. Now too. I am sure about that!

Tomorrow is a Saturday, I don't have to go to school.

The queasiness in my belly does not disappear, however. It is persistent, nourished by uncertainty. The evil is here. I can feel it, with its invisible cold breath. But I can't grasp or see it, to understand it. Finally, my eyelids are getting heavy.

Suddenly I am being roused from sleep. The scary and anxious cries of my parents reach my ears. I am disoriented, don't know what's happening. Even though I have been roused from sleep, I can pull myself together quickly. My eyes move to the window, to the garden in the back. I can see that it's very bright. Too bright for this time of day. I look at the kitchen clock. It's half past five. Actually, it should still be dark. Around me it seems to be raining broken glass, that's the way it sounds. This well-known clattering sound of breaking windows is starting to become constant, accompanied by the snap of bursting tiles. This unreal and overwhelming sound increases second by second. Mixed with the unmistakable weeping of my sisters, and my mother's cries. Panic is gripping me. I run to the window and shudder.

The village's houses are ablaze. It's dark on the horizon, the fire in our village is turning the night into day. My mother's cries don't stop. They are desperate and helpless. My whole body starts to shake, and I am standing there, as if rooted to the spot. I don't know what to make of the images before me.

What happened? Is it here? Or are they? »The others«.

My father flings my door open and storms in.

»Quick, we have to go down, our house is on fire.«

His voice sounds so strange. I stare at him, but can't utter a word. My father's face, distorted by fear and hard to recognise! Father has tears in his eyes.

My sisters whimper. Out of fear and despair. But mostly because they don't know what is going on, because they don't know what to make of our mother's repeated scary sighs, the way she shakes her head. Over and over she's letting her head fall from one side to the other.

Flames are bursting from one of the rooms. Smoke is coming down from the attic, thick wads are winding down the stairs. The fire is illuminating the staircase and my parents' faces.

Father is white as a ghost. His eyes, wide open, seem to be popping from their sockets. He doesn't say a word. My mother's face is black and white. A mix of soot and tears, an unreal pattern created by wiping away tears. In spite of the gravity of the situation, she's trying to hide her feelings, trying not to make us children feel even more insecure. It's all so unreal. From one second to the next, our entire life was turned upside down. Without any warning. Just like that.

My heart is racing and seems to want to jump out of my breast. The blood is pulsing in my ears, my temples throb, my veins are about to burst. I am standing next to my door, as if frozen. Time has stopped. At least for us. But not for the fire. It's spreading very fast. Its yellow tongues are avidly shooting out of the rooms into the hallway. It's constantly getting hotter and more unbearable.

»We have to go down, we can't stay here«, my father's voice calls out loudly.

Quickly, we gather some clothes from our rooms and scramble down to the ground floor. We slip under the curtain on the right of the stairs. First us children and then my parents.

»Babo, what happened, why is our house on fire – and the whole village?«

My voice is cracking out of excitement and fear, so that I have to start twice. But my father doesn't answer. There is probably too much going through his head. The fear for his family, but also for his own life is written into his face.

»We must hide here, be quiet, we'll be all right there. We'll be safe if the fire doesn't come down, and can leave the house as soon as it gets light.«

He turns to my mother and takes her head in both hands.

»My love, I know I should've listened to you. I'm sorry. But trust me, we will be out of here fast and then we'll go to somewhere safe. The way you wanted.«

My mother's sigh breaks the short silence.

»Trust me, my love!«

My mother doesn't say a word, she only looks into my father's face, impassively. Only her deep sobs can be heard.

What might be going through my mother's head? Her fears of the last few months have all come true. She had been right.

Huddled together we cower below the staircase, one after the other slipping into their clothes. My father lights a candle, which we keep there for emergencies. The weak light illuminates the dark hiding-place slightly and makes it possible to see the outlines of faces. For the moment everyone seems to have quietened down a bit. But this impression is misleading. The silence reinforces the tension, and my sisters start to cry loudly.

»We can't stay here«, my mother suddenly says with a clear and calm voice.

»We have to get out of the house and hide away from the houses.«

Then she jumps up from her crouching position and runs towards the stairs. »If we leave, we need our money and the jewellery«, she calls down, while bounding up the stairs.

My father wants to hold her back, but this reaction was a

surprise to us all. Before he could do anything, she had already reached the middle of the stairs. Then we hear an ear-splitting bang and a piercing cry. Father and I jump from our hiding-place and see my mother stand at the upper end of the stairs. A shrill hissing sound and another loud bang shake the upper floor. My mother comes rushing down. Her voice is cracking. All the rooms are in flames and something was just thrown through the window. Shots can be heard from the outside. Uninterrupted salvos, first short and then longer. Accompanied by heavy explosions. I'm only noticing that now. It can't be ignored. They're getting louder. These are people shooting. People are the reason why my parents and many neighbours have been so distressed in the last few weeks. But now I notice, this is something else. Something unimaginable is happening. This is about our future. About our survival. About our lives. I can't think straight, but can't ask anyone in this situation. For explanations. For answers. I am on my own, even though I am surrounded by my family.

In school, we learned that there were wars from time to time. That people humiliate and kill each other. Just like that. But that was always so far away, both in time and in place. I imagined myself in these situations that our teacher told us about or I had read about in books. I thought about why people were doing that to each other. This question has often come to my head and occupied my thoughts. But these stories always felt so distant and unimaginable to me.

My father's words pull me out of my thoughts. The fire in the house is gaining strength and threatens to make it collapse. The smoke is getting thicker and the curtain does not protect us any longer. The smell is sharp and unbearable.

»We have to get out. We have to get away from here. The shots are coming from the street, so we have to get up to the village through the garden«, my father yells.

»First to Zijad's, and then further up.«

We wait and hope that the shooting will diminish. And get less loud, because this would mean that it's further away now. But its intensity does not fade, quite the opposite. The guns' salvos are getting louder. One doesn't have to see, to understand that it is getting closer. My father grasps my shoulders with both hands and I can feel his forehead on mine.

»We'll get through this, Adnan. I'm proud of you, son!«

»Babo, what's happening here?«

»Everything's going to be fine!«

The shine of the candle is reflected in his eyes. I can see his eyelids twitch and hear him choke. Clearing his throat, he turns to my mother and my sisters. He takes all three of them into his arms and hugs them closely. That's not new to me, but at that moment I feel something else, something changing. A feeling as if a barrier had dropped, as if a door had closed. My father opens the front door. It's still quiet in front of the house. No sign of »the others«. Whoever that may be. I don't know. They wish us ill. For whatever reason, they are out to get our village. Our house. Our family. The evil has reached us.

»We'll meet at Zijad's house!«

My father's words go through my head. He knows what to do. He's always there for Mother and us children. Always when things are getting tight, when we were having a fight or something was off. Father is my role model. My hero. He always does the right thing.

The door is open. My mother and my little sister are the first ones to run out. Then my older sister, then I, and finally my father. Our destination is Zijad's house. That's what we had agreed on. Since we don't know if there is someone in front of the house or close-by, we take the direct route through our garden. I run as if in trance, my eyes always fixed on the neighbouring house. It's light all around us because of the burning houses. Detonations everywhere, as well

as shots, paired with hits on the houses. The bursting of windows and people crying in the distance are impossible to overhear. I run past the first house next to us towards my destination, can hear shots whizzing by next to me. For protection I squat next to the fence and catch my breath. I'm gasping for air and can hear myself panting. At that moment I see my parents with my sisters next to our barn. They haven't gotten very far yet, were slowed down by the fighting. The shooting is getting more intense and louder, further bullets whizzing close to me. I throw myself to the ground and wait for a short while. Then I continue slowly, my eyes always fixed on my destination.

Suddenly there's a man standing in front of me. His face is painted black, there is a weapon in his hand. He is wearing a military uniform and he just appeared out of nowhere. Or I had just overlooked him, in my fixation on Zijad's house. Next to the armed man is a dead body. It's my neighbour.

What's going on here? Why are people getting killed?

Rooted to the spot, I stare at my neighbour's motionless body. I can't avert my eyes. I've never seen a dead man before.

»What are you doing here, kid?«, the soldier's voice is hollow.

I look at him, frightened and distressed. After a short pause, I tell him that I am fleeing the fighting. He motions me to go on. I turn around and notice that I have lost track of my family. I continue to run to Zijad's house but don't get very far.

Three armed men are blocking my way. Their faces are also painted with black stripes. With their weapons they indicate that there was no going further and that I had to turn around. I turn and start to run. After a few steps I can hear shots. I can hear the sound of the bullets and how they whizz by close to me. Zsss! Zsss! Zsss! Over and over this noise close to me. Suddenly I can feel a piercing pain on my left leg, then a second one. I was hit, I'm going to die now! My left leg gives out from under me and I fall to the

ground. Just like that, like mown grass. Instinctively, I thrust my arms out, to cushion the fall, and fall on my left side. Everything is numb, I can't feel a thing.

At that moment, I can see my parents and my two sisters. They are fleeing from the direction of our barn and coming directly towards me, hand in hand, not knowing that the direct way to the house is barred. My father is holding my elder sister by the hand, my mother the younger one. I want to pick myself up, but can't, because of the pain. I want to call out to them, but can't get a word out. So I stay on the ground and see them coming towards me. Time seems to have stopped. I can feel my left leg again. The pains are unbearable. It stings and burns at the same time. I feel how warm blood is leaking out of the wound on my thigh, finding its way and then being soaked up by my trousers. My heel is throbbing and my shoe is slowly filling with blood. But I focus on my family and block out my injuries, the pain and the thoughts of the consequences.

They must have seen me lying down here already.

Just when I wanted to reveal myself, three men in uniform appear next to my family. Aiming their guns at them, they tell my family to stop. Father and Mother, my two sisters by the hand, stop. A few moments pass and I deeply hope that the soldiers might wave them on. Just like me, the first time around.

»Shoot them!«, a voice shouts.

Nothing happens.

»Shoot them«, someone yells a second time.

Please, no, I pray silently. God, don't let that happen!

My whole body starts to shake. The pain in my left leg is gone.

I have to prevent the inevitable.

Then my father's voice breaks the silence.

»Shoot me, but let my wife and my daughters live.«

His voice sounds determined and calm. My mind is unwilling to take this in anymore.

*Babo ... you can't do that ... I need you ... we have so many plans
... Babo ...*

Talking to myself, I want to shout that out immediately. But I can't.

»Shoot them!«, sounds the order for the third time.

As soon as the words are spoken, I can hear the gunshots. Countless shots. They are falling to the ground. Their bodies slump down. My father, my older sister. My mother. My younger sister.

They are lying there next to each other. No more than 15 metres away from me. Almost within my grasp and still so far away. Instinctively I reach out for them. My fingers glide in their direction, try to get close to them in a twitchy movement. I want my body to follow. But I notice that I can't move, not a centimetre. I can't feel my leg anymore. I'm lying there, as if nailed to the ground.

My hands claw the moist earth of the path. I can feel the pebbles go under my fingernails, until they are blocked and the nails curl. No pain. Completely blanked out. The only thing working at that moment are my eyes and my mind. I am desperately looking for signs of life on the bodies of my parents and sisters. I focus on them, close my eyes and open them again. Over and over. Nothing happens. I realise that they are dead. Killed. Just like that.

The night, deprived of its essence by the fire, slowly yields to the day. Dawn breaks. The three men are lowering their guns and turning into my direction. The steps and voices are getting louder and coming closer.

Pretend you are dead!