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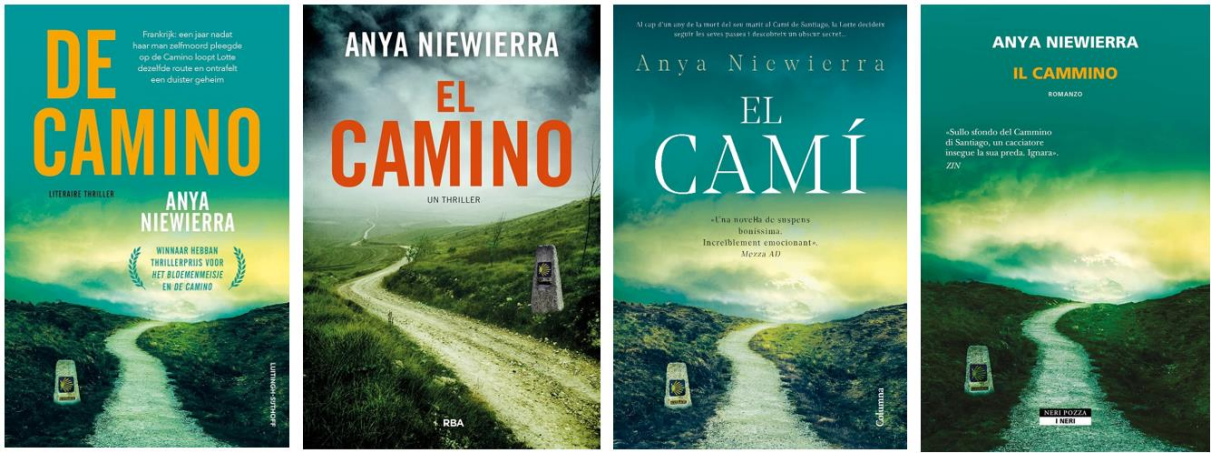

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‘Set against the rugged landscape of Central France, a tense game of cat and mouse ensues between a hunter and his unsuspecting prey.’

Zin

‘The author has outdone herself.
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De Volkskrant

1. FULL SYNOPSIS

General: The Camino takes the reader to the Massif Central, a sparsely populated mountain region of southern France, and a lonely stretch of the pilgrim's route to Santiago de Compostella in Spain. The reader tags along with main character Lotte and experiences what it's like to walk the Camino: long and lonely hikes through dark forests and across vast plateaus, bleeding blisters, back and knee pain, bedbugs, searching for overnight lodging, lying awake from the snoring of fellow pilgrims in mountain huts, visiting age-old churches and monasteries, cairns at crossroads, guestbooks full of emotional stories, wise proverbs posted on paths, encounters with intriguing fellow pilgrims, getting drunk and dancing with strangers, carrying on under the scorching midday sun, trudging through the pouring rain and, naturally, philosophizing about the meaning of life...

The high-spirited 44-year-old chocolatier Lotte Bonnet and former Bosnian refugee Emil Jukić have been happily married for two decades and live in Lotte's farm in the village of Vijlen in the southern Netherlands, not far from the German city of Aachen, just over the border. They have two grown sons who attend university in Amsterdam.

Lotte is a passionate chocolatier whose atelier is in a wing of her family farm. Emil takes care of all the organizational aspects of the BonneBon company so that Lotte can focus entirely on creating new chocolate products. Emil has also been working in Aachen for many years as a project manager for a real estate company owned by his German friend, Paul Müller.

Emil has recovered from stomach cancer, after having been diagnosed with the disease six years prior. To celebrate having been declared 'clean' by his doctor after five difficult years of intensive treatment, he's decided to walk the Camino de Santiago. He gets underway and is enjoying the journey, all the while sending Lotte loads of sweet messages and making frequent calls to tell her how happy he is with her. But then, entirely out of the blue, Emil commits suicide in the forest near the city of Conques, in the Massif Central region of southern France.

Lotte is devastated. Why would he have killed himself, without any warning signs whatsoever? During the difficult months that follow, Lotte receives a lot of support from the friendly Paul Müller, who is not only Emil's former employer, but also the widow of her cousin Marjo. Lotte and Marjo had grown up together and were bosom friends, until Marjo died in a car crash shortly after having given birth to her now 12-year-old daughter Caroline. Lotte took it upon herself to take care of the baby, while Paul, in mourning, threw himself into his work and established a real estate company in the nearby city of Aachen. After Marjo's death, Paul and Caroline moved into an apartment at Lotte's farm. Since then, Caroline has grown up within Lotte and Emil's family and has a strong bond with Lotte.

Eleven months after Emil's suicide, Lotte travels to his native village in Bosnia to scatter his ashes. There, she discovers that Emil had lied to her about his identity. The real Emil Jukić had actually died in 1995 during ethnic cleansing operations committed by Bosnian Serbians. His body was found twenty years later in a mass grave and identified through DNA analysis. Lotte is in shock and calls Paul from a hotel room in Sarajevo. They discuss what course of action to take and decide that Lotte should hold off telling her sons what she's discovered. Paul points out that she risks losing their trust by withholding this information, but Lotte is prepared to take this risk. She first wants to find out Emil's true identity, and to do so engages a Bosnian lawyer by the

name of Omer Zečinić to perform an in-depth investigation. Zečinić soon suspects that an incident that occurred on the Camino drove Emil to commit his act of desperation.

Back in the Netherlands, Lotte comes into contact with Selma Jensen, a professor of psychology at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). Selma's PhD research centered on war trauma suffered by Bosnians. Selma is married to a Dutchman and has lived in the Netherlands for many years, but was born and raised in Bosnia. Selma had also been impacted by the Bosnian War, as her brother disappeared in 1995 during hostilities in northern Bosnia. Selma and Lotte hit it off and Selma provides Lotte with information about war trauma and translates Bosnian texts into Dutch for her.

At a certain point, Lotte decides that she wants to unravel the mystery surrounding her husband's suicide and, to do so, will walk the Camino herself. Her journey will begin a year to the day after Emil's departure and follow his exact route from day to day, using the pictures and texts he sent her as a guide. Paul doesn't approve of her plan. To him, it's much too dangerous for a woman to hike through such an inhospitable region alone. Lotte brushes aside his warning – she's going regardless.

On the evening before her departure, Paul asks Lotte to marry him. His argument: he and Lotte have been best friends for years and already constitute a family, as they both live on the farm and are raising Caroline together. Paul says that he's afraid that he'll have to leave the farm and take Caroline with him if Lotte meets a new man. And he's sure that that time will come because Lotte is an attractive woman who is nearing the end of her time of grieving. He wants to beat other men to the punch, and is convinced that their marriage will be a success. He also tries to persuade her to go on vacation with him and Caroline to Florida. The trip had already been booked months earlier and starts in two days. But Lotte stands by her decision to walk the Camino.

Lotte is taken by surprise by Paul's marriage proposal, but understands where he's coming from. It's true, she and Paul have been living in the same house since Emil's death and are raising Caroline together. Their relationship is harmonious, but purely platonic. If she were to marry Paul, she would also have to sleep with him and that is a sticking point for her because she is not physically attracted to him. Lotte does not yet say 'Yes' to Paul's proposal. She wants to think about her future while walking the Camino.

A bit thrown off by Paul's proposal, Lotte departs the following morning by train, heading for Le Puy-en-Velay in the Massif Central in southern France. When she checks into her hotel that evening, she meets Nicolas Arnaut, a French journalist and war correspondent of about 50. Lotte feels attracted to Nicolas right away.

The next morning, Lotte sets off on her first day of the Camino. Hiking in the extreme heat is difficult and her entire body aches, but she soldiers on. Everywhere she comes, she investigates aspects related to her late husband's trip the year before – asking the owners of accommodations about Emil and leafing through guestbooks at churches and museums, for instance. The rigorous journey takes her across the desolate Massif Central and brings her into contact with three French sisters, a British woman by the name of Maddie, a French woman by the name of Solange and, of course, the intriguing Nicolas Arnaut, for whom Lotte develops romantic feelings and with whom she eventually goes to bed. This is an intense experience for her, as he is the first man with whom she has been intimate since Emil's death.

Little by little, Lotte discovers new facts about Emil. Omer Zečinić in Sarajevo is also making progress in his investigation and calls her from a hotel room in Banja Luka, Bosnia, when she reaches Monistrol-d'Allier. He tells Lotte that he has made a gruesome discovery and asks her for an address where he can send the report with his findings. He will send this by registered mail so that she alone will be able to access the information. Lotte gives him her address, but just when Omer is about to tell her more about the report's contents he receives an urgent phone call on his mobile phone. He is suddenly in a hurry and promises Lotte that he will call her back that evening to discuss the content of the report with her in detail.

Lotte never receives this phone call, as Omer is shot to death in Banja Luka that same afternoon. Lotte doesn't hear about this until the next day. She is in shock. She continues her journey on the Camino and experiences several near-accidents. She escapes being buried under a rockslide, run over on a road with poor visibility and is almost trampled to death by a stampeding herd of cattle. What Lotte doesn't know is that someone is following her; someone who doesn't want her to find out the true identity of her husband. This man is trying to murder Lotte, but her death has to look like an accident.

In the meantime, Lotte continues to send pictures of the Bosnian messages that Emil wrote in guestbooks to Selma Jensen in Amsterdam, who texts her back the Dutch translation. The messages seem to suggest that Emil was suffering from war trauma. Selma finds the long message Emil left in the guestbook at the subterranean chapel De La Madeleine particularly alarming. In it, an emotional Emil writes in Bosnian that the cave reminds him of a similar cave in Bosnia where a mass murder took place. However, it's not clear from what he writes whether he himself participated in the massacre of Bosnian men or just witnessed it. Could her husband have been a war criminal? Lotte decides that it is too dangerous to text Selma any more of Emil's messages. She wants to read Omer Zečinić's report first.

Lotte has daily contact with Caroline (and Paul), who are still in Florida, and also texts regularly with her sons, who are on vacation in Spain. But it's becoming increasingly difficult for her to stay in touch with the home front. Slowly but surely, she gets drawn into the rhythm of the Camino.

As she continues her trek, she notices that the lonely journey does her good. She stops worrying. She hikes alone, sometimes for hours, through dark forests and over vast plateaus, she enjoys the nature and the grand vistas, she muses about the wise proverbs she sees along the route, she has healing conversations with other pilgrims and she falls in love: with Nicolas. And the love is mutual.

But then Solange dies from a heart attack in a room that was originally supposed to be Lotte's room. Solange's death initially seems to have been due to natural causes, but then the forensic institute discovers traces of nerve gas. This prompts the French police to launch an investigation. The investigators contact Lotte and ask her about the circumstances of the room switch and who knew about it. No one, as far as Lotte knows. The police keep the option open that Lotte may have been the intended victim, but there is no apparent motive for her murder. There is, however, a motive for murdering Solange, who had just made a breakthrough in a sensitive scientific study being conducted at her lab in Paris.

Lotte continues her trek, but no longer on her own. She's now accompanied by Nicolas. Two days before reaching Conques – the spot where Emil committed suicide – she discovers that someone has sewn a tracker into her backpack. She's clearly being followed and it dawns on her that she

had been the intended murder victim and not Solange. Lotte calls the police. The head investigator arranges a security detail for her and asks her to travel back to the Netherlands.

The next day, however, an anonymous tip leads to an arrest warrant for the murderer, a man by the name of Mikhail Mijakovic. When the police arrive to arrest him, he flees in his delivery van. Driving down a forest path at breakneck speed, he loses control over the wheel, crashes into a tree and dies instantly.

The man who had been following Lotte turns out to have been a former Bosnian-Serbian soldier who was wanted for war crimes committed in Bosnia between 1992-1995. This Mikhail Mijakovic had stayed at the same asylum seekers' center as Emil and a third man in Cologne in 1995, and just like Emil had obtained a new false identity via a corrupt employee of the German Immigration and Naturalization Service. Mijakovic subsequently lived under this false identity in Germany, while Emil moved to the Netherlands after marrying Lotte. The French police suspect that Mijakovic wanted to kill Lotte because he was afraid that she had found out about his false identity through Emil. He was afraid of being arrested and sentenced to life in prison.

But there is still a loose end in the investigation: who had provided the anonymous tip? Someone had obviously known who this Mikhail Mijakovic was and knew about his intent to have Lotte suffer an accident. And who was the third man with whom Emil had stayed at the asylum seekers' center?

Now that there no longer seems to be a threat of a subsequent attack, the French police recall the security detail assigned to Lotte. Prior to traveling back to the Netherlands, Lotte decides to visit the spot in the forest near Conques where Emil committed suicide. Nicolas accompanies her to the medieval cross situated high up on a hill, but suffers an ugly cut from a fall during the hike back down to the car. While Nicolas visits a doctor to have the cut stitched, Lotte visits the art gallery in Conques that Emil had visited a year earlier. His visit had coincided with the opening of an exposition which was covered by a regional television station. Their video shows Emil checking out at the counter, only to race out of the gallery once he spots the camera and crew approaching. Why did he run away? And what did he buy? Lotte asks which exposition had been on display in the gallery a year earlier and discovers that it had been an exposition by the French-Bosnian photographer and former war correspondent Nijaz Arnautović, also known as Nicolas Arnaut. Lotte is in shock. Nicolas, too, had concealed his true identity from her! He is originally a Bosnian Muslim who was born in the same village as Emil and had fled to France in 1995.

Suddenly, Lotte realizes what must have happened. Nicolas and Emil had run into each other on the Camino and this encounter likely led to Emil killing himself. Lotte is devastated. For the second time she has been betrayed by a man with whom she had felt an intense connection. She moves up her departure and takes the overnight train back to the Netherlands that same evening. In a fit of anger, she sends Nicolas a message telling him that she knows who he really is and that she never wants to see him again.

When Lotte wakes up in her bunk on the train to Paris, she finds an email in her inbox from Nicolas in the form of a letter (the 2nd storyline). Nicolas had already begun writing this letter the night they met each other in the hotel in Le Puy-en-Velay.

In this letter, Nicolas writes that the real name of her husband was Milan and that he was a Bosnian Serbian. This Milan grew up together with Emil, a Bosnian-Croatian, and Nicolas, a Bosnian Muslim. The three boys were best friends until Milan allowed himself to be

indoctrinated by Serbian populist propaganda and started to hate Muslims. During the 1992-1995 war, Milan joined a violent Bosnian-Serbian paramilitary militia and committed war crimes. He murdered his childhood friend Emil, whose identity he would assume after the war. Eventually, in August 1995, Nicolas and Milan met again, face to face. Nicolas, who was wounded, was fleeing to Croatia from Bosnia together with his heavily pregnant girlfriend, Nadia, but ran into Milan's militia in a forest a few hundred yards from the Croatian border. Milan burst out in anger because he and Nadia had been a couple and in love with each other when they were teenagers. But Nadia's parents left the village and took Nadia with them, after which the two had grown out of touch. Now, Nadia stood before him, pregnant with a Muslim's baby. Furious, Milan held Nicolas at gunpoint, handed him a knife and gave him the following choice:

1. Nicolas slits his own throat in front of Nadia, after which Milan will grant her free passage to Croatia. His wife and baby will thus remain alive.
2. Nicolas does not kill himself with the knife. In this case, a member of the militia will shoot and kill Nadia.

When the feverish Nicolas briefly hesitated, a drunk militiaman shot Nadia in the head without waiting for Milan's order. Milan screamed, threw himself upon Nadia and began to rock her back and forth. Nicolas used the commotion to jump into the bushes and escape. The militia members shot at him, but he avoided their bullets and reached Croatia. He continued on to France, where he applied for asylum. In all the ensuing years, he was unable to maintain a stable relationship due to the trauma caused by the moment of hesitation that led to the death of Nadia and his unborn child.

When the Croatian army launched Operation Storm (the final battle) in August 1995, Milan and two other militia members decided to flee to Germany, with Milan assuming the identity of Emil, the friend he had murdered. He was afraid that he would be put on trial for war crimes after the war ended. On top of that, something had snapped in his brain after Nadia's death – he was no longer capable of killing. In Germany, he and his two comrades bribed an employee of the German Immigration and Naturalization Service, thereby acquiring a new identity. Milan began a new life in Germany as Emil, and, on a sunny spring day in 1997, met Lotte, the love of his life, at an outdoor cafe in Aachen.

After a long career as a war correspondent based in France, Nicolas retreated to the Massif Central, where he bought a remote farm and picked up nature photography again, a hobby that he had practiced as a child in Yugoslavia. At a certain point later on, an employee at the local tourist information office asked him if he would be interested in contributing a few of his nature photographs to an art project promoting the Aubrac region. Nicolas said yes and put together a series of photographs which included a newly edited photograph of an old Yugoslavian plate of a black lamb and gray falcon next to a wrought iron cross – the picture that he had taken as a teenager on the plateau above his village. The old photograph had a political significance, alluding to the medieval battle in which the Serbians lost their kingdom to the Ottomans and became their subjects. Milan/Emil recognized the picture because the village imam had given him this special photograph as a present when he was fifteen. The photograph was meant to remind Milan/Emil to never follow manipulative politicians. Years later, Milan/Emil had taken the photograph with him when he fled to Germany, but he had never taken the imam's advice.

Then, when Milan/Emil hiked the Camino a quarter of a century later, he chanced upon a nature photography exposition in the Aubrac and saw Nicolas' so familiar photograph of a black lamb and gray falcon. Milan/Emil was in shock because he realized that Nicolas was still alive. He

visited the Aubrac tourist information office and asked for the address of the photographer of the photograph. The employee referred him to Nicolas' website, which only listed an email address. Milan/Emil's questions gave the employee a bad feeling and prompted her to call Nicolas to let him know that a Dutch man had been asking questions about him. Based on her description of Milan/Emil, Nicolas knew right away that Milan/Emil was still alive and had assumed a new identity. All these years, Nicolas had thought that Milan had died during Operation Storm and was buried somewhere in a mass grave.

A confrontation ultimately took place between the men at a medieval cross in the forest above Conques. Nicolas lay in wait for Milan/Emil with a hunting rifle, wanting to hold him prisoner in his cellar until he could hand him over to the police. However, Milan/Emil decided to commit suicide by slitting his throat with his hunting knife. He didn't want Lotte to find out that he had committed crimes, and thus spare both her and his sons the accompanying pain and shame. Nicolas has no other choice than to look on and remain silent; otherwise he could possibly be accused of murder.

After Milan/Emil's death, Nicolas looked into the woman who Milan/Emil had loved so much that he chose to give up his life for her happiness. Nicolas followed Lotte on social media and discovered her plan to walk the Camino exactly a year after Milan/Emil's death. He then decided to follow her and set up a 'chance encounter' with her. During this first encounter in the hotel in Le Puy-en-Velay, Nicolas fell head over heels for the widow of the man who, as opposed to himself, had had the courage and strength to kill himself to ensure the happiness of his wife and children.

Nicolas concludes his letter to Lotte with the following passage about Emil (who Nicolas refers to as Milan):

> '*It wasn't until the winter after his death that I began to understand Milan's transformation towards good. I was in Nord-Pas-de-Calais in northern France, where I was writing an article on the impact of Brexit. It was a sunny, but cold evening and there was an orange-purple hue to the wide sweeping vistas. I was walking alongside a large lake when I heard a strange sound. I looked up and saw a dark cloud of starlings approach. The buzzing sound was new to me and nothing like I had ever experienced. It made me think of a swarm of bees. The cloud was enormous and circled in ever-changing shapes above my head for many minutes. I gazed in amazement at the rarefied air. I had never seen anything like it and I held my breath. Thousands of starlings were moving like one being – in fact, they were one being, because you couldn't see or hear any individual birds any more, just the droning swarm... And when the cloud of birds descended before me into the waving reed, I suddenly thought of Milan. He felt so close, and I recognized a truth that I hadn't previously wanted to accept. During the war, Milan had been swallowed by the swarm, he had flown in a black cloud and he had been absorbed into a new shape, a new being. He had lost his own voice and his own thought. He had become the swarm, and he killed within the swarm. But the man I met again last year on August 6th at that medieval cross in Conques after half a life had broken free from the swarm and had once again become an individual, a person with his own sound, his own direction. He had once again become the Milan of my childhood.*'

Nicolas tells Lotte that he loves her and hopes that she will forgive him for having concealed his true identity. When they had met each other for the first time in the hotel in Le Puy-en-Velay he

had considered telling her the truth about himself and about Emil's suicide, but that would have meant confronting her with her husband's gruesome past. This knowledge would cause her and her sons much sadness, and Milan/Emil would have killed himself for nothing. So he had decided to hold his tongue to spare her such suffering, after which his moment of truth passed and a lie was born.

Nicolas writes that he will respect Lotte's wish and not seek contact with her. Whether there is any future contact will be up to her. At the same time, he tells her that he will be waiting for her, however long it will take.

Nicolas concludes his letter with a warning. He repeats that the police still do not know who the anonymous informant was (the man or woman who had betrayed the German-Bosnian former soldier Mikhail Mijakovic, who had wanted to kill Lotte on the Camino). Lotte is still in danger and needs to be careful.

The information from Nicolas disconcerts Lotte. When she arrives in her village of Vijlen, she goes to the post office right away to pick up the certified letter sent by Omer Zečinić. Once home, she scans and translates the tests and comes to the shocking discovery that Paul Müller is the third Bosnian-Serbian soldier who fled Bosnia with Emil in 1995 in order to avoid being sentenced as a war criminal. In the report, Lotte reads about the terrible acts committed by Emil and Paul and is unable to reconcile them with the kind men she has known for half her life.

When Paul and Caroline return from their vacation in Florida that evening, Lotte confronts Paul with his war crimes, as exposed by Omer Zečinić's report. Paul tells her that he also has a hard time understanding how he, as a young man, could have allowed himself to be so swept up by the Serbian propaganda of violence. He explains that the hopeless future, the unemployment, the poverty, the unresolved suffering experienced by his Serbian grandparents (who were persecuted by the Croatian ustaša during WWII), the deceitful propaganda machine of the Bosnian-Serbian leadership, too little sleep, too much alcohol, too much noise (especially Serbian turbo folk) and young men competing with each other created a toxic mixture that drove both of them to do what they did. They stopped thinking for themselves and became part of a relentless group dynamic. It wasn't until they were in the asylum seekers' center in Germany that they 'woke up' and it began to dawn on them what they had done.

Paul also tells her that he was the one who had asked Mikhail Mijakovic to keep an eye on her and prevent her from discovering any incriminating evidence. However, without consulting Paul, Mikhail decided that it was necessary for Lotte to have a fatal accident. When Paul discovered this, he immediately informed the French police, which led to Mikhail dying in a wreck when fleeing them.

Paul asks Lotte what she plans to do now. Will she report him to the police or not? Lotte says that she doesn't know. She is unsure whether it is desirable or acceptable for her to burden her sons and Caroline with the war crimes of their fathers. What is loving about that? Is it desirable to burden this new generation with war trauma and the ethnic hate of previous generations? Wouldn't that perpetuate the vicious circle of violence? Lotte needs more time to think about this dilemma.

Paul goes back to his apartment to sleep. He is tired and jetlagged from the night flight. He has had issues for insomnia for years, as it is. Lotte decides to take a walk – on the Camino she had learned that walking helped her to clear her mind. When Lotte returns to the farm a few hours

later, she sees that the light in Paul's room is still on. She goes to check on him, but finds him dead in bed.

Epilogue:

In the epilogue, the reader comes to find out that Paul probably died of cardiac arrest following an overdose of sleeping pills, but the doctor can't say this with 100% certainty. Consequently, it remains unclear to Lotte as to whether Paul died due to a weak heart muscle or from deliberately swallowing too many sleeping pills.

The last scene takes place five months later, on New Year's Eve. Lotte is at her farm in Vijlen, sitting in her pajamas near the hearth, watching television. She is alone because Caroline is at a slumber party and her sons are celebrating the evening in Amsterdam. Lotte has been thinking about Nicolas a lot and now has a better understanding than six months ago in Conques of why he kept silent regarding Milan/Emil and himself. She hasn't told her sons or Caroline anything about their fathers' war crimes and chances are that she will continue to remain silent on the subject.

Lotte has been following Nicolas on Instagram for a while now and enjoys seeing his beautiful photographs. A week before Christmas, however, she liked one of his photos for the first time. It was a winter scene of the spot where they had made love in the summer while on the Camino. A few days later, she opens her postbox to discover the photograph in the form of a Christmas card, with a quote written on the back by Nicolas. It is clear that he still loves her and is waiting for her. Lotte has been in a state of confusion for the past six months, but something is stirring within her. She wants to feel alive again, and with Nicolas she felt alive. A few minutes before midnight Lotte sends Nicolas a text thanking him for the Christmas card. He texts back immediately, asking her whether she would like to ring in the New Year with him via video. Lotte jumps up, runs through the house and back, grabs her phone and types 'Yes❤❤❤!!!'

2. EXTERNAL READING REPORT

The Camino is a multi-faceted thriller that impressively weaves together the themes of love, loss, betrayal/deception, war trauma, atonement and self-discovery. The present action is set at Lotte's home in the Netherlands as well as a stretch of the Camino de Santiago in the Massif Central region of southern France, while a second storyline recounts events that took place in the former Yugoslavia prior to and during the ethnic conflicts that broke out in 1991 and ended in 1995.

The majority of the chapters are narrated from the main character's perspective, interspersed with chapters devoted to installments of a 'tell-all' farewell letter that seems to have been written to Lotte by her late husband Emil, in which he comes clean to her about his past – at least this is what the reader is likely to assume. For most of the book, we don't know whether, when and/or how Lotte actually ends up receiving this letter. The letter provides us with information that Lotte hasn't yet discovered during her own narration. A third narrator appears in a few short chapters and is written from the perspective of someone who has designs on Lotte's life. Here, too, the author sends us up the wrong tree by having us believe that the narrator of these chapters is none other than Lotte's new love interest, Nicolas, the fellow pilgrim who Lotte falls for on the very first day of her Camino.

It's not until page 76 that Lotte herself senses that she could be in danger, and yet the backstory of her life with Emil and her discovery of his identity fraud is important for setting the stage for the psychological aspect of the thriller to come. The action picks up from there, as she embarks on the Camino and her quest to discover clues about the reasons for Emil's suicide and move on with her life. After multiple attempts on her life and the deaths of several people connected to her, Lotte's would-be assassin ends up dying in a car crash while trying to flee from the French police. This initially seems to rob us of a harrowing climax in which Lotte comes face-to-face with the man trying to kill her. However, we then find out about the existence and involvement of his former militia commander, Boris. This time, the author doesn't mislead us and we can all guess at Boris' true identity – namely Paul. This only adds to the suspense, as we know that there will be a perhaps deadly confrontation when both he and Lotte arrive home.

The former Yugoslavia and the Camino serve not only as the décor of the drama, but they are integral to the story's broader philosophical themes of war trauma, atonement and self-discovery. It is this unique focus that elevates the book above the level of a standard thriller. It feels more important, at least. We read about ordinary men getting swept up into the madness of war and committing atrocities as part of a swarm, rather than as individuals. After the war and in a different society, these same men become devoted husbands and fathers. When their past threatens to be brought to light, they can be seen as 'atoning' for their sins by taking their own lives in the hopes of sparing their families the trauma of such revelations. Lotte's struggle with how to view these men poses us an intriguing problem that is anything but black and white.

The war's impact is so palpably described and thoroughly researched that it makes one wonder whether the author lived it in any way herself. A certain amount of suspended disbelief is needed to believe that the thought had never occurred to Lotte during her 21 years of marriage that her husband might have been a war criminal, given where he had come from and that he categorically refused to talk about his past, and yet the author makes a plausible argument for

this, both based on Lotte's naïve, optimistic character and the historical references to the collective silence of those who've experienced war crimes, either as perpetrators or as victims.

The Camino is a memorable novel that not only grips us with its suspense, but also confronts us with the horrific realities of war, while at the same time delivering an uplifting, romantic conclusion.

3. SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Prologue

August 6th
On the Camino to Santiago de Compostella, in the forests near Conques in the French department of Aveyron

He took off his backpack with gentle movements, laid it on the soft moss next to the path and kneeled down. It had been drizzly all morning, but just at that moment the clouds gave way and the sun appeared. Its rays fell on his backpack, illuminating the white Camino shell. It was as though a higher power wanted to highlight this moment. The singing of the birds rose and, just like in the summer of 1995, the earthy odor of steamy ferns prevailed.

His shirt was unbuttoned and flapped in the wind. His black, curly chest hair was wet from sweat and glistened in the bright light. My thoughts slowed and I saw things I wouldn't usually notice, like the color of his hiking clothes. Their gray matched the hue of the weathered stone cross six feet away.

He took his hunting knife out of its holster and brought the shiny blade to his throat. He closed his eyes and murmured a few words. I stood next to him, but couldn't move. I could only look at what was transpiring before my eyes. Was this real?

He straightened his back, took one more deep breath in and out, screamed your name and slit his throat. He fell forward, gargling, and landed on the ground with a dull thud. Blood streamed from his throat and trickled onto the sandy path of the Camino.

I was still unable to move. My entire body was trembling. I saw the gold ring on his left hand and thought of you, the woman who had driven him to this heroic deed. Lotte…

Eleven months later

July 13th
Lotte in Bosnia-Herzegovina

The thundering of the waterfalls is penetrating. What a din! I bend over, pick up the urn and press the pot containing Emil against my damp shirt. I walk a few more yards downstream, stop and look around. Yes, this is the place where the picture was taken. I kick off my sneakers, take a few steps on the large pebblestones and listen again. Bizarre. I never realized that a river could produce so many different sounds, from a pleasant babbling to a wild roar.

The towering rock face with the frothy waterfalls appears to tilt forward. I take a sniff. The wild stream has the particular smell of mud and forest after a rain shower. I put the urn back down, hop over the hot pebblestones to the bank, uproot a slender tree stump and roll it into the

churning water. The rocking piece of wood races towards the bend and disappears from sight. I inhale and exhale a few times. The stump will soon be approaching the house where the real Emil Jukić was born. The villa sits halfway up a hill a few hundred yards downstream, where the river once again gently meanders, making hardly a sound. There, you could hear the birds sing and you could see the deep blue water and dark green hills. It was so peaceful there. An elderly woman said that the real Emil Jukić had lived back there and the children had played here, at this inlet, surrounded by gray rocks, where the wild river drowns out the beating of your heart. Where I now stand is where the picture of him and his two friends was taken; the picture he had taken with him when he fled Bosnia in 1995.

We'll do it here. I step back towards his brass urn, pick it up, return to the water, twist off the lid and slip it into my handbag. '*Emil Jukić*' is engraved on the side of the urn in elegant letters. Seeing his name like this feels strange. Clearly I still need to come to grips with the fact that my husband had a completely different name. The real Emil Jukić had been missing since the summer of 1995, according to Omer Zečinić, a Bosnian lawyer who specializes in missing person investigations and whom I hired to find out who Emil actually was. I saw him last Wednesday in his office in Sarajevo. The real Emil Jukić disappeared after a Bosnian-Serbian militia had massacred half the village, purging it of all Bosnian Croats and Muslims. It wasn't until 2017 that his bones were found in a mass grave and identified. When Zečinić broke this news to me, I first fell silent and then burst into tears on his desk. It was so embarrassing. Since that meeting, my emotions have been all over the place, alternating from bewilderment to rage and from disbelief to grief. At one moment I might be pacing back and forth in my hotel room in the middle of the night, while at the next I race to the window and throw it open in panic, gasping for fresh air. I'm putting on an especially brave face for the boys today, of course. My maternal instinct gives me the primal strength that's always there when concerns the children. I can't let them notice anything. I can't let them know anything. Not yet.

I run my thumb over the engraved letters on the urn. But… who was he actually? Who had I been married to for 21 years? Who was the father of my sons? I sigh and feel the weight of his urn in my hands. Emil is now a few pounds of ash. I close my eyes and recall his stocky figure, square face and thin lips, the deep-set brown eyes, the slightly protruding ears, the black eyebrows and the coarse brown hair that grew all over his body. I teased him sometimes by affectionately calling him 'my gorilla', and in a way that was what he was, with his robust movements and dark coat of hair: a human gorilla. I can hear him again now, talking with the boys on the phone and asking how they are doing at college, and his mischievous laugh when telling guy jokes that make Stefan and Joran laugh so hard. Or his cheerful voice with its characteristic accent, asking me which chocolate creations I'd come up with in my atelier that day. I thought I had known him so well, but that was evidently not the case. The only thing I knew for sure was that my sons had been conceived with his sperm. Everything else about him could have been the truth or a lie.

I turn around and wave to the boys, who are waiting by the car for my signal. Stefan and Joran are holding white roses in their hands and talking with Jelena, the journalism student from Banja Luka who has been figuring things out for me and interpreting for me for the past two weeks.

'We're going to scatter Dad's ashes here!' I scream as hard as I can to make myself heard above the waterfalls and point to the spot where I had just pushed the tree stump into the river.

Stefan gives me a thumbs-up and both boys start walking my way.

I stick my nose into the urn and smell. I sneeze right away. Good lord. So these are my husband's ashes. I bend over, touch the water with my index finger and then dip it into his ashes. I inspect my gray finger. Whose ashes am I actually scattering? Who was he? I wobble a bit on my feet and try to concentrate. Emil – that's what his name continues to be to me – brought me to this place. After almost of year of mourning, I wanted to pull myself out of that dark hole. I wanted to use this ash scattering ceremony to lighten my spirits and respect his suicide, because that lies at the root of it all: for a year I've been wrestling with the fact that he slit his own throat on the Camino with his Yugoslavian hunting knife.

'He looks different,' the French inspector had warned, before ushering me into the mortuary in Rodez. Stefan put his arm around my shoulder and offered to identify the body, but I refused. I wanted to see for myself the man who lay there and check whether it was true. I couldn't believe that my Emil had committed suicide. It had all been a mistake. The man in the cold store was someone else – I was so sure of it. But the dead man was really Emil. He lay there as though he was asleep. Suddenly, I remembered the scars on his back, and I had the urge to touch the lines one more time. With unexpected strength, I rolled over his rigid body and caressed the bumpy skin. Three pairs of male hands grabbed me and pulled me away from the steel plate. I was not allowed to touch him. But I had already felt the ribbed mosaic and his cold skin had told me the truth. Emil was dead, and never again after a shower would I dry the folds of his skin with the corner of my towel.

How was it possible that I had never noticed that he was weary of life? Had I been too focused on myself? Too focused on my chocolate art? Emil had simply been there, but now, suddenly, he was gone.

As his first birthday after his death approached, a voice in my head urged me to take action. Things couldn't go on like this. I had to get a grip on myself. I had to accept that he had ended up on a parallel path that had branched off towards death. I began reading books about coping with grief and came across a study that described the positive effects of an ash scattering ceremony. Now *that* is a good idea, I thought, and took a picture of the summary and sent it to the boys. 'We're going to scatter Dad's ashes,' I apped and asked them if they could come home that weekend to talk about it. It was getting towards the end of the semester and there was nothing for them to do in Amsterdam anyway. They came and we discussed the big ash scattering ceremony. Stefan and Joran came up with some good ideas. Where had Dad been most happy? We took out our photo albums and, with tears in our eyes, leafed through our past. We started with the birth of Stefan 21 years ago in the hospital in Heerlen. Emil always said that that was one of the most beautiful days of his life, but the ugly Zuyderland MC building didn't strike us as the right place. While we were thumbing through the pictures of a canoe trip we went on in the Ardèche region of France a few years ago, Joran suggested that we choose the waterfalls in Emil's native village in Bosnia.

'That's where Dad played as a child, Mom. Those waterfalls are also in one of the pictures that he took with him when he fled. And remember when we were standing on the river bank in the Ardèche and he broke down and began to cry? He told us that he still had memories of the river next to his village. He said that he had played there as a child, every summer for many years. Remember, Mom?'

Yes, Mom remembered that well, because I was shocked to see Emil in such a state. I bent over, embraced him and began to rock him back and forth. He recovered, stood back up and kissed me ardently. In tears, he told me I was the best thing to have ever happened to him.

Aside from that one moment on the bank of the Ardèche river, Emil rarely talked about his life in Bosnia. Too much war, he would say. I knew his administrative details and some childhood stories, of course, but not much more than that. Until last week, I had thought that he was a Bosnian-Croatian war refugee who had requested asylum in Germany in the fall of 1995. I knew that he had obtained a German residence permit, as we had had to submit that paperwork to the municipality in order to marry in 1998. Shortly afterward, he applied for Dutch citizenship. And I also knew that he had gone through a lot of misery between 1990 and 1995 because I could see it. He had a cut on his cheekbone, as well as scars on the front of his shoulder and on his back. He also suffered from tinnitus – something he had incurred after a grenade exploded next to him, according to a story he told an ENT doctor we visited together years ago.

So I had traveled to Bosnia for the big ash scattering ceremony. During the first two weeks, I would travel with a guide to places where he had spent his childhood, using a grand total of three pictures as clues. The boys would come down the last weekend for the ash scattering ceremony at his native village. This trip was to serve as the watershed moment between my life with Emil and my life without Emil. We chose Emil's birthday as the date for the commemoration in order to reinforce the symbolic nature of the act. I would scatter Emil's ashes in his beloved river, close to the high waterfalls, next to his native village, on his birthday. I was enthusiastic despite the grief that was still pressing on me, because I was doing something meaningful. But that was before I knew that I would be scattering the ashes of a stranger.

I wipe my finger off on my shorts and swallow the almost melted chocolate tablet. My tongue plays a bit with the pieces of mint that I had mixed in with the cocoa. According to the book, I had to smell, listen, watch, feel and taste – I had to activate all of my senses during the Big Moment. *Check*.

And now time to commemorate. Stefan and Joran are standing next to me, with tears running down their cheeks. The boys mumble a few words about love and saying goodbye and touch my shoulder. I plant my feet firmly on the pebbles and run my hands over the urn. We begin. I breathe in and blow out. In my mind, I rewatch the movie from last year, from the night of August 6th. I had been watching TV in my pajamas when the doorbell rang. I shuffled to the front door and opened it. Two police officers stood there, eyeing me gravely, and asked if they could talk with me for a minute. Seated at the kitchen table, they told me that my husband had committed suicide, on the Camino near Conques. A pilgrim had found him there just before noon. I thought them that they had made a mistake. My husband would never commit suicide. They were sitting at the wrong kitchen table.

I think it would have been easier for me to come to grips with his death if he had fallen and broken his neck – if it had been 'something normal'. But his suicide was not normal. I'm still wrestling with *why* he died. How is it possible that my husband, who was so full of life, who was so happy to have survived bloody awful stomach cancer, would have put a knife to his throat and applied pressure? And to have done so while hiking the peaceful Camino, just a few hours after having sent me an app telling me how much he loved me. No, no, I had thought after the two officers had left, people who commit suicide are depressed first and give off signals. They have issues. My Emil had *no issues*. He was healthy and upbeat. So I traveled to Conques and told the

French police that it could not have been suicide. Emil must have been coerced. They had to launch an investigation, I ranted, showing them his apps with all their smileys and hearts. But the conclusion remained the same. A thorough forensic examination had been conducted and Emil had most certainly committed suicide. There was no doubt about it. I started to unravel.

I hold the urn aloft and take a few steps into the river. The boys follow me. The flowing water swirls around my bare calves, seemingly wanting to drag me along with it. When the water gets up to my knees, I stop. This is far enough. Tottering on my bare feet, I turn my back to the wind. I bend over, partly submerge the urn and then tilt it into the water. Emil's ashes exit the urn and form an even darker streak, which the river then sweeps along with it.

'*Goodbye, my sweetheart*,' I whisper, weeping.

'Goodbye, Dad,' Stefan and Joran cry out in unison, laying the roses on the water's surface. We embrace each other. After the flowers and the gray streak disappear from view, I straighten my shoulders, take the lid back out of my handbag and twist it back onto the urn. In silence, we walk back over the crunching pebbles to the car. Jelena nods to us discretely, opens the door and gets in the backseat. My breathing is uneven, as though I've just run a marathon. This ash scattering ceremony hasn't helped one damn bit; I feel the panic bubbling up again. I open the trunk of the car, shove the empty urn in between our suitcases and slam the trunk shut. I proceed to driver's side of the car and get in behind the wheel.

'Is everything okay, Mom?' asks Joran, while he opens the door behind me. 'You're so… different.'

'Yes. It was really intense for me, just then. But I've made a decision.' I put down my handbag next to the parking brake.

'A decision? What is it?' Stefan asks, as he gets in next to me on the passenger side. He turns his head towards me.

'I'm going to France.' I put the key in the ignition.

'France?' Stefan asks, while fastening his seatbelt.

'What are you going to do there?' Joran asks from the backseat, while caressing my curls.

'I'm going to walk the Camino, just like your father.'

July 26th
A man in Le Puy-en-Velay, France, in the Massif Central

Hey Boris, everything is ready. I'm in Le Puy-en-Velay.
M.

I set my phone aside, leaf through the report on Lotte Bonnet again, stop at her portrait photo and gaze at it for a while. Peculiar woman. I unfold the map and, one by one, mark her overnight stays on the Camino. The day after tomorrow she will be sleeping at Hotel Galain in Le Puy-en-Velay, so I've also made a reservation for myself there. She will arrive at the station at 5:37 p.m. and probably go somewhere to eat after checking in. She will probably attend mass at the cathedral, as that's what almost all pilgrims do. In all likelihood, she will leave her baggage in her hotel room. Many hikers are happy with the chance to get that load off their back after their first day. I will then attempt to put a tracker in her backpack. The day after tomorrow I will follow her on the last part of her train journey, starting in St. Étienne, in order to get an up-close impression of her: what her voice really sounds like, how she observes her surroundings and how she interacts with others. That won't be as easy to do while walking the Camino because I will stick out more. On a train there are more people, which muddles one's powers of observation.

Boris is underestimating this. He only wants to prevent her from discovering any incriminating evidence, but the ball is already rolling. This woman is dangerous. She knows too much. She has to be taken care of. But her death has to look like an accident. Under no circumstances must it lead to an investigation, because then we'd be even worse off.

I take another look at the map and note the potential spots for the liquidation. I visited them yesterday. The most suitable spot is the narrow path above the river near Monistrol-d'Allier. I'll be able to stage a rockslide there. Once the tracker is in her backpack, I'll know exactly where she is at any given time. When she passes the narrow ledge, I will dislodge the rock that I worked on today and set off an avalanche of rubble that will sweep her away with it, into the ravine below. It's a clean death. She won't notice a thing. There are enough other options if that doesn't work out.

I flip open my laptop and rewatch one of the videos on Lotte Bonnet's Instagram account. She's standing next to a steel countertop, in a chef's jacket and brightly colored skirt. With a spoon, she scoops some liquid chocolate out of a white bowl and brings it to her mouth. She then licks it up with a seductive smile. She goes on to give a whole spiel in Dutch, none of which I can understand. Her slender fingers then move towards pots containing spices. Her actions are both fast and slow. Everything moves when she talks. This woman is a bundle of contrasts. There is something rebellious about her, with her lively gait, long frizzy auburn hair and gypsy dresses. She is the prototype of an artist. When she's talking to the camera, she's uninhibited and there's a mischievous expression on her face. She moves about her atelier quickly and nimbly. She's clearly got a fiery disposition. Last night I dreamed that she was sitting on me, moaning, letting her long curly tresses fall on my face. I woke up with a hard-on.

I shut my laptop with a snap. No, I shouldn't watch any more of those videos. That would be inadvisable. I must maintain a distance.

Lotte hikes Emil's Camino,
the Via Podiensis,
from Le Puy-en-Velay to Conques

Day 1
Friday, July 26th
Preparing to go

"Perhaps our life is no more than our long preparation for our leaving of it."

John Banville, Irish writer (1945 –)

Day 1: Friday, July 26th, morning
Vijlen, The Netherlands: the ultimate Camino packing list
Overcast and gusty with occasional showers. 20°C

I examine the piles on my bed and once again consult the ultimate Camino packing list: '*The rule for baggage is to carry no more than 10 percent of your body weight*.' That's really what it says and all the experts agree: don't put more than 10 percent of your body weight into your backpack, or it will break you down. Pfft. There are 13.2 kg of items on the bed and my maximum weight is 6.5 kg. I have to make choices.

I hesitate as to whether to take my tablet. It has the reports about the war in Bosnia on it, but I can also read them on my Galaxy Note. I take another look at the pile, pick up the tablet and its charger, weigh them in my hand, and lay them down on the left side of my bed. Everything that ends up there remains here.

From the looks of it, I have everything I need except a pocketknife. I'll just buy one in Le Puy-en-Velay. While I check the list, my thoughts drift back to the hunting knife Emil used to kill himself. It wasn't among the items sent back to me by the French police, and that's a good thing too – I wouldn't have been able to handle coming across the weapon that ended his life in that box. The package did contain its beautifully crafted brown leather sheath, but I threw that away immediately. That's something I now regret, as it might have held clues about his past. It's not uncommon for me to do stupid things on impulse, that's for sure.

I sigh and pick up Emil's dark-blue backpack from the floor. I run my fingers over the white Camino shell he had tied to the shoulder strap with a red ribbon. He bought his *coquille* on the day of his arrival in Le Puy-en-Velay: July 27th of last year. That brings me right away to my next question: should I buy my own shell in the same shop tomorrow or keep this one? I scratch a mosquito bite on my forearm. No, I'll buy one myself. I won't be taking any shortcuts. I'll be doing *everything* Emil did. That will bring me the closest to him during this journey. Which means I'll be going to Le Coin in the center of Le Puy-en-Velay tomorrow at 6:47 p.m.

I grab a pair of scissors, cut the red ribbon and smell the shell. There is a chemical scent to it, reminiscent of the smell of clothes that have come back from the dry cleaner's. With a resolute gesture I cram his shell into the bulging garbage bag, which I tie shut and put out in the hallway with the rest of the stuff I'm getting rid of.

I click the light on, because it's dreary outside. The raindrops tap against the window and cast a gray veil over the landscape. The hills across the street have become dull, undulating silhouettes. The weather had also been bad when Emil packed his backpack last year. I had sat on our bed, following his movements, until he came over, grabbed me and tickled me, making me squeal with laughter.

I pick up his backpack. Do I use it or buy myself a new one this afternoon? I hold it up and fidget with its zippers and feel around in its compartments. It's an expensive brand and it's only been worn for two weeks. There was no blood on it when I got it back from the French police, but I had it cleaned anyway. I hang the empty thing from my shoulders for the umpteenth time. It sits just right. Yes, I'll stand by my decision and hike the Camino with *his* backpack. I'm not made of money. And I'm going to fill it *now* and follow the official ultimate lightweight Camino packing

list. So no high heels, no skirts, no makeup, no hair dryer, no nail polish, none of that. For the next few weeks I'm not a woman, but a pilgrim. I'll manage. I must.

As I make two piles, one for the things that are going with me and one for the things that will remain here, I glance at the wall and the two photographs Emil took with him on his escape from Bosnia. It wasn't until after his death that I had hung them here, on our wall of beautiful memories. Emil didn't want them in his sight, because they reminded him of a lost world. During his life, they had been in his desk drawer. I'd come across them by accident a few years ago when I was looking for my passport. They were in a brown envelope. One of the photos is a summery scene of three boys standing in front of a waterfall. Emil was ten years old at the time, he told me, and is the one in the middle. The boys are small figures standing on the pebbles at the spot we had scattered Emil's ashes. The waterfall seems to have been the photographer's main focus, as it dominates the picture. You can't make out the boys' faces. The second photo is a snapshot of a strikingly beautiful girl with brown hair in a trendy white dress leaning against a stone wall. She's about fourteen and gazing dreamily into the distance. I secretly had the photos framed and gave them to him as a birthday present. Upon unwrapping them he broke down and told me that the girl had been a childhood love and was no longer alive. His two childhood friends had also died during the war. His whole body shook from crying. I clasped him and vowed to myself to never bring up his childhood again.

There was a third photo in that same desk drawer. It's now hanging on the wall in my atelier. The photo is the size of a regular sheet of paper and centers on a black wrought-iron Serbian Orthodox cross on a desolate plateau. A gray falcon is sitting on the cross and next to it is a black lamb. Both animals are looking straight into the camera. There's something threatening about the image and it fascinated me from the very first moment I laid eyes on it. Only after I had visited Bosnia and read *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, which the Brit Rebecca West had written during her trip through Yugoslavia in 1937, did it begin to dawn on me that the photograph might contain a political statement. In her story, West warns against demagogues and the rise of fascism. Emil told me he didn't want to see the photograph because it reminded him of misery. Women and children had been killed near that cross during World War II. Abashed, I had rolled the frame back into the gift wrapping paper and hung it on the wall of the small changing room of my atelier, where Emil never came.

My gaze glides further over the many snapshots of our family's wonderful times and stops at a picture of me and Marjo, my dear cousin, at the beach. As cousins and the dearest of friends, we had been inseparable. We were born in the same week, in April 1975, here on the farm. I had been a surprise; my parents were already in their mid-forties when they had me. Divorced and unstable Aunt Annie also lived with Marjo on our farm. Dad had converted a stable into an apartment for both of them, next to our main house. Marjo and I grew up as sisters, but were opposites in everything. She was analytical and super smart and breezed through high school; I had more trouble with learning and just barely made it through vocational school. Marjo went to technical college, graduated *cum laude* and became a chemist; I trained as a chef and became a chocolatier. Our difference in character is especially well expressed in this photograph.

Dad took the shot on a summer day at the beach in Domburg when we were eighteen. We're standing next to a sandcastle. Marjo is posing in a tight pink dress with no jewelry and I have a wildly flowered gypsy skirt on, with a motley collection of beads and necklaces around my neck and arms. Dad always said you could tell that we were related and maybe that was true, but only if you looked at the details. We were the same height and both slender, with the frail build of the

Bonnet family, as well as the distinctive big topaz-blue eyes of our ancestors, but Marjo had her father's soft golden blonde hair and I had my mother's wild, chestnut brown frizzy curls. Our faces were also completely different. Marjo had a long and oval face with stern features, while my face is heart-shaped with jet-black eyebrows, a small nose, full lips and a roguish look. During my teenage years, girlfriends of mine said I was the brunette version of Meg Ryan from the hit movie *When Harry met Sally*. There was some truth to that and it shows in this photo, where you can see the uninhibited nature that was already evident in the playpen. While Marjo obediently played with blocks within its confines, I was trying to devise ways of climbing out of my wooden prison, which I did, using her back as a step. And while she obediently listened to the teachers in elementary school, I was constantly getting into mischief. When I was an apprentice chef on a Holland-America Line cruise ship and sailed all over the world at the age of twenty, Marjo was doing research on vitamins in the university laboratory. She wrote me long letters telling me how much she enjoyed her work surrounded by tubes and climate chambers. I would always receive her epistles when my ship called back into port somewhere and enjoyed reading about her dull discoveries at the microscopic level. I mostly wrote her about my numerous relationships, as at the time I was still tumbling from one love affair into another. Meanwhile, Marjo remained a virgin and was waiting for Mr. Right. And he came, one sunny spring day in Aachen, in the person of the Pole Paul Müller.

Tears once again well up in my eyes. The beach scene so clearly depicts a calm Marjo next to an exuberant Lotte. Marjo is smiling like Mona Lisa, with her hands neatly clasped on her belly, while I'm screaming with laughter and spreading my arms. We complimented each other in every way. And yet I couldn't prevent gloomy thoughts from flooding her mind at times. Just like Aunt Annie, Marjo also suffered from depression and was afraid of everything. On occasion, her fears clouded her perspective on life. But Marjo didn't kill herself because of the demons in her head like Aunt Annie did in the year Marjo turned twenty five. Marjo died shortly after the birth of her daughter Caroline, when she ignored the warning labels and got behind the wheel of a car after taking antidepressants.

Heavy footsteps sound on the stairs. *Speaking of the devil*. It's Paul.

'Hey Lotte,' he says when he enters my bedroom. There is a look of concern in his dark-brown eyes. He doesn't like it one bit that I'm going to walk the Camino, as a woman alone. This morning he had brought to my attention an article about an American woman who had been murdered on the Camino in Spain. He says that I'm 'making myself an easy target' and 'seeking out danger'. On top of that, he's still disappointed that I won't be flying to Florida with him and Caroline on Sunday. We'd booked the trip during carnival and Caroline has been talking about it for months. She cried when I told her I wasn't coming, and if there's something Paul can't stand it's seeing his little girl in tears. But I'm going to go through with this, because I *must* close the chapter on my life with Emil. And I also know her well enough to know that she'll be smiling again when she's walking hand in hand with Paul around Disneyworld. She goes on vacation with him for a few weeks every summer, just the two of them, and always enjoys it.

'I put some bags of junk out in the hallway.' I point to the door. 'The ones with white stickers are for the thrift store. They've got clothes in them. The others can go to the recycling center.'

'Okay.'

Paul inspects the items on my bed.

‘Is all of that going into that backpack?’ he asks.

‘No, I have to whittle it down. I’m following that list.’ I point at the print-out on the dresser.

‘Aha.’

Paul sits down on the bed, on my side, in the same spot where I sat around this time last year, just before Emil pounced on me and we made love for the last time. If I had known it would be the last time, I would’ve paid more attention. All I remember was worrying about Caroline and her girlfriends. Quiet, I had told him, and put my hand over his mouth. Sex during the day, with children at home – who does that? Emil smiled and kissed me, but I was so tense that I didn’t remember the last time with my husband. With Emil Jukić, who was actually someone else. He had betrayed me with his deception. If you lie about your identity, aren’t you lying about everything? The anger wells up in me again and I feel like kicking something.

Who was he? Why had he assumed the name of a dead man? He must have known that the real Emil Jukić was lying in a mass grave, because one doesn’t steal the identity of a living person when applying for asylum. The risk of discovery would be too great. Who was he? A deserter? Someone who had run away from the mafia? A war criminal? No, there’s no way he could have been a murderer. Emil was a good person, a kind father and a loving spouse.

Paul gets up and steps towards the wall with our family photos. He takes the picture of Marjo and me off the wall.

‘She was so sweet,’ he whispers.

‘I know, Paul.’ I pat him on the back amicably. ‘But you still have Caroline. She’s so much like Marjo.’

‘That’s true, fortunately.’

Paul runs his finger over Marjo’s serene face. I stand next to him and look at the other photos. I’m smiling in every single one, but Marjo is only smiling in one: her wedding picture with Paul. It was love at first sight between the two. I’d been there, on that glorious spring day in 1997, and saw Cupid hit the bull’s-eye with one arrow. Marjo and I had descended on our favorite terrace at the market in Aachen, with a view of the cathedral, and were drinking Rivella. Marjo was talking about the clotting process of chocolate, a subject I had brought up because I had already begun experimenting with cocoa at the time. When she started talking about what happened when alcohol was added, the sun came out from behind the clouds and illuminated her long, golden blonde locks. Marjo reached for her bag to take out her sunglasses when she suddenly froze. Something had caught her attention. Two attractive young men were approaching the empty table next to us. Both of them looked Southern European, with black eyebrows, dark hair and brown eyes. German-speaking Italians? One was tall and slim, with broad shoulders and a smooth gait. The other was shorter and stocky and moved about more stiffly. Marjo’s eyes lit up and seemed to be glued to the tall man. Paul stopped and gazed at her. It was as though a fairy had frozen his body with her magic wand. Emil continued walking and sat down next to us, followed by Paul.

I looked at Emil’s face while he grabbed a chair. A red line ran across his right cheekbone, as though he had drawn a thick line there with lipstick. He looked like an Indian on the warpath – an image that was reinforced by his angular face and narrow lips. That afternoon, I asked him how he got that scar. Emil had replied that it was a war souvenir, but gave me no further details. Only

later, after we became friends and I pressed him on the matter, did he tell me that it was a gunshot wound he had received during the war in Bosnia. He provided no additional information. In his younger years, he would sometimes apply concealer to the scar, which made it almost unnoticeable. In our wedding photos, the red line is no more than a faint shadow that seems to accentuate his high cheekbones. After he fell ill, he stopped concealing the scar, as though he had reconciled himself with the visible reminders of his life.

In any case, when Paul and Emil approached us on that sunny terrace in Aachen, Paul and Marjo were instantly smitten. Marjo's fingers trembled as she put on her sunglasses. She picked up the menu and pretended to pick something out. A deep blush appeared on her cheeks. Paul sat down, but continued to gaze at Marjo and didn't seem to react again until Emil nudged him and asked him something in German. Emil was the one who took the initiative and struck up a conversation. He asked me where we were from. He correctly judged me to be the chatty one of the two of us and within a few minutes the gentlemen had turned around their chairs and we were all sitting at one table. They turned out not to be German Italians. Paul was a Pole and came from Silesia, where a small German minority still lived. Emil was from Bosnia-Herzegovina. The two had met while renovating a restaurant in Aachen. Paul was doing the brickwork while Emil did the plastering. They hit it off right away. Marjo and Paul started going steady that same day.

Aunt Annie wasn't happy with "the Pole" and tried to thwart the relationship, which she didn't succeed in doing, because within a year Paul and Marjo were married. My parents never knew Emil. When I met him, I had been running the farm together with a cousin, but the cousin left that same year for Australia to start his own farming business there. I didn't know what to do, but Emil did. He helped me with everything and in the months that followed we went from being friends to getting married. We tied the knot after I unexpectedly turned out to be pregnant with Stefan. But neither of us were enthusiastic about running a farm. So after Stefan was born I decided to stop operating the dairy farm. I sold all the machinery and leased the land to a farmer from Vijlen, after which things became quiet in the courtyard, with the empty stables on each side of the main house providing a sea of commercial opportunities.

During the same time, Paul's real estate company began to take off. Before leaving Silesia in 1992, he had been a construction worker in Breslau after dropping out of college. He came to Aachen to visit a friend and stayed. He worked very hard, saved every penny and bought a dilapidated property in Aachen, fixed it up in his spare time and then rented out its rooms to students. He then used the rent to buy a second building, and then another, and another, and another. Emil became the project manager of Paul's company. The men worked together closely. Paul took the financial risk and was the creative mind behind the enterprise. Emil did the accounting and was in charge of planning. And even though Emil was employed by Paul, I never got the sense that there was a hierarchy in their relationship. That was probably because of Caroline.

My gaze wanders to the photograph of Marjo and Paul with little Caroline. Both are blissfully admiring their beautiful baby. Caroline came into the world only after ten years in and out of fertility clinics. The joy of her birth lasted only briefly, however, as Marjo died in the car crash two months later. Paul had a hard time coping with her death and suffered from bouts of depression. At my insistence, he moved to our farm and set himself up in the apartment where Marjo and Aunt Annie had lived. I took over the care of Caroline and essentially became her mother. Over time, Caroline came to be the mascot of the four men on the farm, as not only did

Paul adore our blonde angel, but also Emil, Stefan and Joran tried to read every wish on her sweet face. Nonetheless, Caroline preferred and prefers to be with me the most. Every spare moment she seeks out my company. She helps me make chocolate art and babbles incessantly while doing so.

Paul hasn't had a steady relationship since Marjo's death. He threw himself into his business and became a well-known Aachen real estate millionaire. Emil told me that Paul has the occasional fling. The women he goes out with are all tall, slim and blond. I felt sorry for Paul when I heard that.

I analyze the close-up of Emil, the man I had been married to for more than two decades and yet apparently knew so little about.

'What are you thinking about?' Paul asks.

I shrug.

'That his suicide has something to do with his past. Something I don't know anything about. Something happened on the Camino. I feel it.'

Paul takes a step back. The familiar frown appears on his forehead.

'You feel it.' There's irony in his voice.

'Yes,' I snap and turn toward the piles on the bed. 'And I'm going to go back to packing now, Paul. Can you pick up Caroline? And take the garbage bags downstairs.'

'Yes, boss,' he says, stepping to the door and grabbing the handle. 'When's dinner?'

'Six o'clock. Tell Caroline I'll be cooking her favorite meal. *Spaghetti à la Lotti*!'

'A fitting last meal.'

'Stop it, Paul.' I unzip Emil's backpack. 'I'm going to walk that Camino, no matter what you say.'

Paul grumbles a couple of words and steps into the hallway, after which I hear the rustling of plastic bags. He always does what I ask of him. After Emil's death, our friendship became even closer. Paul was also the first person I called from Bosnia after I discovered Emil's identity fraud. We were on the phone for an hour; me at the bare desk of an Ibis hotel in Sarajevo and him at home on my floral patterned couch in the living room. At first he was totally taken aback, just as I had been a few hours before, but he recovered and started asking pointed questions. Where had I gotten this information? How could I be so sure? How could he have slipped through the German asylum procedure? Could any mistakes have been made? And so on and so forth. When it became clear to him that the *real* Emil Jukić had been killed by Bosnian Serbs in 1995 and that his *real* body had been identified by means of a DNA test in 2017, a moment of silence followed, after which he asked if I was going to tell the boys, to which I said that I wanted to wait. I wanted to know the whole story first and then decide how to deliver the message to Stefan and Joran. Paul listened attentively as I reasoned out the pros and cons. People who flee their country in wartime and assume a different identity do so for a reason. They have something to hide. Perhaps he was an important witness to war crimes and feared an attempt on his life? Witness assassinations were common at the time. Or perhaps he had committed crimes of his own? He could have also been a deserter, right? Whatever the case, the reason for his deception must have been serious, otherwise he wouldn't have lied about his identity for a quarter of a century.

Paul and I had to exercise discretion at this stage and not talk about this to anyone. That was also the advice of Omer Zečinić, my lawyer, I argued.

Paul understood my point of view and supported it. As long as we didn't know who Emil had actually been, there was no point in turning the boys' lives upside down.

Exhausted, I had stumbled to the bed of that bare room in Sarajevo and crawled under the sheets, shivering. Yes, Emil's lie had to remain hidden for a while and not only because of my sons. Omer Zečinić also thought it wiser in general. In the past, the family members of war criminals and mafiosi had already been victims of threats and assassinations, he explained. We first had to find out why Emil had assumed the identity of a dead person and make sure that we, as a family, wouldn't get into trouble.

Day 1: Friday, July 26th, afternoon
Vijlen, The Netherlands: screenshots of texts
Overcast, rainy and windy. 23°C

July 19th, 1:05 p.m.

Dear customers, as of Friday, July 26th, I'll be on vacation for three weeks! I'll be walking part of the Camino de Santiago in France, the Via Podiensis. And this is my backpack!
BonneBon will reopen on Monday, August 19th. With new bonbons in the shape of the shell of Saint James 😊
You have one week left to place an order.
BonneBon voyage! 😊

Finished at last! All of BonneBon's social media accounts are up-to-date. Last week's post about my plan to walk the Camino had led to a slew of messages. It took quite some time to respond to all of them. I log out of all my accounts, scroll back to my cell phone's photo gallery and check whether all of Emil's photos have been transferred. Yes! I'm glowing with pride, having managed it on my own. My sons tell me I'm the classic example of a digital dimwit. They could be right, given that I'm not interested in technology in the slightest. Emil was the gadget man and when we watched TV together the only buttons I ever used were the on-off and volume buttons. I weigh my new phone in my hand. It's pretty heavy, actually. It's a supersonic Samsung Galaxy Note that I hastily purchased yesterday afternoon when my old device started acting up. I chose this device because of its big screen on which I could read the reports about Bosnia during my journey, but I'm suddenly second-guessing my decision. I don't understand all of its different functions and I have no time to figure them out. But still, I know how to do the important things, like call, send emails, browse the internet and take pictures. I once again open the folder containing the screenshots of Emil's messages.

He had sent me countless messages while walking the Camino. I was clearly on his mind and yet he committed suicide. Or had he feigned his affectionate messages? What was going through his mind on the morning he ended his life? My eye comes to rest on the folder containing the digital versions of the photos he took with him when he fled Bosnia in 1995. I scroll to the image of the black cross on the vast plateau with the falcon and the lamb. I had visited this high plain near the village of the real Emil Jukić when I was in Bosnia. Jelena had shown me the way and confirmed that the cross had been erected in remembrance of the Serbian women and children who had been massacred there by Croatian fascists during World War II. Emil had thus been telling the truth; it was a place of misery. I began to understand that it was the stories behind the images that change your point of view. Could Emil have seen something on the Camino that had changed his outlook on life?

With a quick motion, I insert the charger into my Samsung and turn on my computer to print out my train tickets. I'm almost there. The route is correct, and so are my overnight accommodations. Everything's been booked on the same day, just exactly one year later. My train journey will also begin at the exact same time: tomorrow morning at 9:00 a.m. from the TGV station in Liège.

I turn back to my screen, open my email account, begin to print and scroll through the reservations. In contrast to Emil, I won't be winging it. Emil often didn't text me the address of where he'd be staying that night until the late afternoon. 'My bed for the night is my surprise of the day,' he joked on his second day, adding an anxious-looking smiley, after not being able to find a place in Saint-Privat-d'Allier and having to leave the route and head over to a small village named Dallas. My beds won't be a surprise, because I'll be sleeping where he slept. The hosts had been understanding when I emailed them in my best French that I was the wife of the man who had committed suicide on the Camino, in a forest near Conques, on August 6th of last year and that, as part of the grieving process, I would be walking the same route exactly one year later, on the same days and at the same times, and that as such I also wanted to sleep in the same bed as my late husband. All of the responses were polite, with condolences and a confirmation that the room had been arranged. And tomorrow, on the train from Paris to Lyon, I'll even be sitting in the same seat as Emil: number 37C, car 28.

As I put paper in the loading tray of my printer, I think about Mom and Dad. They had constantly implored me to be careful, because in my youth I always had the urge to discover new things and therefore often flirted with danger. But I knew no fear, until a few years ago I almost drowned during a vacation in Tenerife. At sunrise, I had walked way too far into the sea by myself, up to my shoulders, gloriously bobbing up and down with the waves as they came and went. But suddenly I noticed that there was an undertow pulling at my legs. I struggled to remain upright, to no avail. Fear set in and I started screaming, but there was no help – no one was around. Panting, I started stepping toward the dunes, but they became smaller and smaller, because with each step I lost a bit of my balance and was lifted up slightly by the current. The fear became panic and I knew I had to choose: let go of the bottom and swim to shore, or keep stepping and struggling against the undertow, wearing myself out and then having the sea take me to untold depths. Swimming was a risk, because I had no idea where the waves would take me. Still, I chose to let go of the sandy bottom. I pushed off with all my strength and threw myself onto a rolling wave, swimming with the current until reaching a beach farther down the shore, where I fell down, exhausted. Now I'm actually doing the same thing. I'm leaving the safe bottom of home behind and diving into Emil's past by walking *his* Camino, not knowing where the waves will cast me…

The idea of finding answers by walking *his* Camino actually arose back in Sarajevo, after having that conversation with Omer Zečinić.

I lean back and once again smell the fumes of his filthy cigarettes. I couldn't help but cough when I entered the smoky room of the law firm. Omer had been recommended to me by my interpreter Jelena. He's an authority in Bosnia and has been hunting war criminals and helping people find their lost loved ones since way back in 1996.

'They're two sides of the same coin,' Jelena said, when describing Omer's work. 'When you do research on the bodies in the countless mass graves, you often come across evidence about the militias that were behind the massacres.'

In the middle of Omer's room was a classic oak desk, covered with tall stacks of folders. Omer stood up and gave me a firm handshake. His scrawny build and thin, boyish hands didn't match his large, unshaven face, curly gray hair and piercing black eyes.

'Take a seat, Mrs. Bonnet,' he said in English, pointing to the leather chair in front of his desk.

After a short introduction, Omer confirmed that Emil Jukić had been identified by means of a new DNA test in 2017.

'The ICMP, or the International Commission on Missing Persons, began collecting blood samples from the family members of missing persons a few years ago. These samples are recorded in a database and compared with the remains of people who have been found in the mass graves. Emil Jukić's mother had provided a blood sample, and based on it the ICMP was able to identify his bones.'

'His mother is no longer alive, so I can't ask her any questions,' I replied and fidgeted with my wedding ring. 'My interpreter told me that everyone who used to live in that village is either dead or gone, aside from one elderly woman, and she's not that sharp anymore, though she did tell me that Emil had been murdered in 1995.'

Omer nodded affably and took another puff of his cigarette. 'Yes, the ethnic cleansing was efficient.'

A strange silence fell and I thought back to the gruesome photos of the war I had seen over the past days on my trip through Bosnia. Emil had lived during that war and had been part of it. What had his role been?

'And how do I find out who my husband was?'

'We gather everything you *do* know, Mrs. Bonnet, both about his past in Bosnia and his life since. I'll email you a form for you to fill out. Information about his asylum procedure is especially important. Where did he apply for asylum? When? Who was he with when he was there? Did he still have friends from that time? And I'd like you to send me a few clear photographs of your husband from the 1990s. It's also important that I get a blood sample from one of your sons. Perhaps the database contains the DNA of a family member of your husband. That'd give us a lead for further investigation.'

'A blood sample?' I shook my head. 'That's not possible! I'd already have to tell my sons that their father wasn't Emil Jukić. No way. Not until I find out more.'

Omer looked at me thoughtfully. 'I know of a lab where they can do DNA testing based on the root of a hair. But I'd have to get a complete hair of one of your sons. That means one that's been pulled out of his scalp, root and all.'

'No problem, I'll take care of that.' Joran was always happy to get a firm hug from Mommy.

'Good. Then I'll get right to work on your request.'

'Great, thank you.' I looked at the tall stacks of folders on his desk. So many missing persons. So many perpetrators. So much misery. But also a lot of knowledge and instinctive suspicions.

'Why do you think my husband used Emil Jukić's name?' The question just slipped out. 'Was that a common thing for people to do?'

Omer smiled at me, but there was no twinkle in his eye.

'Yes. We often see it in the case of war criminals, but also with people who quickly realized that they could pose a threat to high-ranking figures because of their knowledge of war crimes or mafia contacts,' he replied, taking another puff of his cigarette. 'Whatever the case, we should

assume that your husband knew Emil Jukić and knew that he was no longer alive. So digging into Emil Jukić's life is also important. Who did he associate with?'

Omer then took the time to explain to me in depth the balance of power between Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, the autonomous Bosnian-Serbian federal state within the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina where many Bosnian-Serbian war criminals had gone into hiding after the war.

In my mind, I put the various options side by side and concluded that Emil had likely fled because he was afraid that he knew too much. Yes, of course, *that's* why he never told me anything. He must have been a threat to a power-hungry bigwig and had kept quiet to protect me and the boys.

'What did your husband die of?'

Omer's voice brought me back to his smoky office.

'He committed suicide.' I reached for tissues in my handbag. I was welling up with tears again. 'While walking the Camino to Santiago de Compostella. It was entirely unexpected.'

Omer raised his head and look at me thoughtfully.

'I'm sorry,' I whispered, while dabbing my eyes.

Omer smiled at me affably.

'There, there, Mrs. Bonnet. Your grief is very understandable. But you said that your husband took his own life? On the Camino?'

'Yes. I couldn't believe it either. Walking the Camino to celebrate surviving a serious illness, and then committing suicide – it couldn't be true! That's what I told the French police, too. He'd sent me an upbeat text just a hour before it happened. He was happy. And yet it turned out to be suicide. According to the investigators, there was no doubt whatsoever about the circumstances.'

'And what exactly happened?'

'He slit his throat with a knife.' I made a cutting gesture with my hand.

Omer didn't say anything and jotted something down on a sheet of paper.

'It's entirely possible that something happened on the Camino, Mrs. Bonnet,' he said, tapping his pen on the paper. 'Maybe your husband saw or heard something during his journey that drove him to suicide. Perhaps his past tracked him down.'

I gazed into the piercing eyes of the man across from me and suddenly realized that he was right. Something had to have happened during his trip. But what? Just then, there was a knock at the door and his assistant informed him that the next appointment had been sitting in the waiting room for a while.

'Thank you, Mrs. Delić, we'll wrap things up,' he said with a nod in her direction, before turning back to me. 'Do you have a private email address?' he asked, while standing up. 'One which only you have access to and no one else?'

‘Of course,’ I said in a daze. I picked up a yellow post-it and pen from his desk, jotted down my email address and gave it to him.

‘Thank you.’ He stuck the post-it to Emil’s folder and read my email address out loud. ‘Lotte@bonnebon.nl. Is that correct?’

‘That’s right.’

Omer smiled and held out his hand to me.

‘One more thing, Mrs. Bonnet,’ he said, while firmly squeezing my fingers. ‘I would advise you to talk about your husband’s identity fraud with as few others as possible, for your own safety. We don’t know who he was or who he associated with.’

‘But there are already a few people who know about it.’

‘Nothing can be done to change that. But it’d be better not to expand the circle.’

I nodded and let go of his hand. My legs were shaking as I left his office.

As the printer slowly spits out my train tickets, my eyes come to rest on the small, dingy paperback entitled *The Way of St. James in France*. Emil had used it intensively. On the evening before his departure, he had read a few pages from it to me about the history of the Camino. I was cooking and only half-listening. Now, I actually have to pay attention. I can’t really walk the Camino without knowing *what* it is I’m going to be walking. I open the book and flip to the page that goes into the background of Saint James and the famous pilgrimage route. Saint James was one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, so the story goes. After the crucifixion, he left the Middle East to bring Christianity to the West. He began his evangelism in Spain. His mission succeeded, but cost him his head – literally. It turns out that in 44 A.D. he was beheaded while on a brief visit to the Virgin Mary in Judea. His followers brought his body back to Spain and tied up their boat to a beach in Galicia, where they buried him. I look at the photo of a magnificent rocky coast, turn the page and read on. As Christianity spread through Europe in the centuries that followed, pilgrims from all over the continent began to walk to Saint James’ final resting place, after which established routes arose. One of those routes was the Via Podiensis, which came into vogue starting in the 10th century. It ran from Le Puy-en-Velay in France’s Massif Central to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in the Pyrenees. From there, pilgrims bear off towards Santiago de Compostella, where they made a stop, and then, before heading home, walked to the beach in Finistère. There, they would pick up a shell and take it home with them as proof that they had actually been to visit Saint James. From the 13th century on, the shell even became the symbol of pilgrims, who would sew one to their coat or hat.

Today’s pilgrims walk the Camino for the same reason as the pilgrims of earlier times: to test themselves both physically and spiritually. This was also the case with Emil.

He left here last year on July 27th to reflect on ‘the value of life’, as he put it, while walking. He hadn’t chosen Le Puy-en-Velay as a starting point for no reason. Five years earlier, we had been on our way to the Ardèche region with the boys when we had made a stop in this beautiful town in the Auvergne. We marveled at all those pilgrims trudging up the steps to the cathedral in the scorching heat under the weight of their backpacks to pray or get a stamp. On a terrace outside the church, Emil struck up a conversation with two Dutch men in their early fifties who had been

traveling for a month and a half. They looked skinny, tired and unkempt, but they were beaming, albeit in a serene way. It was as though they saw something we didn't see. When the boys became restless, I took them for a walk through the city, but Emil stayed sitting with the pilgrims a while longer. Later, in the car, he was remarkably quiet.

'I'd like to do that, too,' he said, when we had arrived and the boys were already walking to the reception desk.

'What?'

'To just walk, eat and sleep and let go of my past.'

I was startled and turned towards him. 'Let go of us?' I asked. 'The kids and me? Why?'

'No, of course not, my dušo,' he exclaimed, embracing me. 'You are everything to me. I mean that damn war.'

I didn't say anything, because I knew that he wouldn't answer any of my questions about 'that damn war'.

During that same vacation Emil began to lose his appetite and develop a constant, burning pain in his stomach. His appearance also began to change: his face became gaunt, which served to highlight his high cheekbones and red scar. Upon returning to the Netherlands, tests revealed a dramatic result: Emil had stomach cancer. He survived the operation and the chemotherapy, and was eventually declared 'clean' last July after five years of check-ups. He was *so* happy as we were walking out of the hospital after that last doctor's appointment. He strode down the high hallway in his robust gorilla gait.

'I'm going to walk it,' he said when reached the parking garage moments later.

'You're going to walk *what*?' I asked in surprise, while taking the parking stub out of my bag and inserting it into the payment terminal.

'The Camino.'

Day 1: Friday, July 26th, evening

Vijlen, The Netherlands: the question
Overcast with moderate winds and occasional showers. 22°C

I brush off the steel workplate, dry the molds and stow them in the cabinet. I then take a photo of my newest florentines, like I'm busy straightening up after finishing the job. That gives it more of a dynamic look than just some cookies on a plate, as I learned during a photography workshop I took at Emil's insistence. He was also the one who encouraged me to be active on Instagram and Facebook, posting artistic photos and special stories. His advice proved to be right. Since I started showing my beautifully stylized chocolate art to the world, orders have been pouring in. Emil knew how business worked.

'We're selling the illusion of pleasure, my dušo,' he had said when he signed up BonneBon for an Instagram account and recommended that I post a new photo at least once every two days. That hadn't been the only illusion my Emil sold.

After posting the photo online, I carry the stone trays with the fresh florentines to the cold store one by one. I won't put them in the boxes until later; they're too fragile right now. I'll ask Paul to deliver them to the customers tomorrow.

I turn off the exhaust hood, walk to the changing room and undo the buttons on my apron, which still smells strongly of my penultimate creation: cocoa and goat cheese bonbons. So blissful.

'You make sweet art,' Emil said when I started experimenting with cheese and chocolate. He loved being with me when I was in our kitchen working on my cocoa creations. In fact, Emil was the one who encouraged me to start my own business and specialize in luxury chocolate products with special ingredients. I followed his advice and after just one year I was supplying exclusive restaurants and stores. I could barely keep up with the demand and our kitchen transformed into a chocolate atelier. My materials and ingredients were everywhere.

Emil then suggested that I convert part of the farmhouse into my atelier, with a workspace, a cold store, an office, a warehouse and even a modern teaching space. I was enthusiastic and Emil did a lot himself, so the costs weren't that bad. He also gave my little business a name: BonneBon, a combination of my last name, Bonnet, and 'bonbon'. He then designed a logo, a website, letterhead and business cards, and went out to promote me. His commercial campaigns were a success.

BonneBon grew bigger and bigger. My chocolate-making courses were continuously fully booked and I designed a lot of new flavor combinations. Everything was going well, until Emil's suicide. When he passed away, I not only lost my husband, but also my head of HR, my head of finance, my head of procurement and my head of logistics. I had only focused on selecting the best ingredients, making chocolate art and giving the courses. It wasn't until after his death that I realized how much work he had done and how little I actually knew about the ins and outs of my business. Paul rescued me, and with his help I went back to the small and artisanal atelier that best suited me as an artist. Since April, I've been working alone again and making chocolate art for a few exclusive clients. We also scaled back the number of training courses. Paul then recruited Monique, an enthusiastic woman from the village who had just had a baby and wanted

to freelance from home. She has a background in finance and got to work on my bookkeeping and the organizational aspects of BonneBon. Together, we make a great team.

I turn off the light in my changing room, walk to the door that opens out into the courtyard, turn around and take a look at my atelier. ‘See you in a few weeks!’ I say to the tall room, then step outside.

I sit with my drawing pad on the couch in the living room, designing a wedding cake for a couple who love horses. I’m looking for inspiration and am gazing at a painting on the wall of two ponies in a pasture. It’s been hanging there since before I was born. I changed little of the interior of my farm after Mom and Dad died. Emil also loved our house the way it was and loved the nostalgic and stately atmosphere, with the many ornaments and high ceilings.

Paul enters the room. He had taken Caroline to bed because she wanted to chat with him about their trip to Florida. He walks over to the liquor cabinet, pours himself a glass of his very expensive Beluga vodka and then proceeds to the patio door. He opens it a bit more and stares outside for a while, over the rolling hills. The wind has died down, but the clouds have remained. His breathing is heavy and his chest moves up and down rhythmically. He takes a sip, lifts his dark head and looks at the clouds. He’s barefoot and wearing his easy-fitting beige linen pants with one of his white polo shirts. It’s already starting to rain again and the smell of damp forest is pouring into our room. After a few minutes, Paul turns around, sits down across from me in his reading chair, puts down his vodka and picks up his book. My gaze lingers on his glass. He’s poured it quite full and that makes me uneasy. Shortly after Marjo’s death, we discovered that Paul has a weakened heart muscle. This led to medication and the urgent advice from our family doctor to drink less hard liquor, and that’s hard on him. Paul has sleeping problems and enjoys his Russian nightcap. It calms him down, he says, and it’s a tradition he brought with him from ‘the East’. And who am I to point out the dangers to him? I’m not his wife, but I am something similar, because I’m his daughter’s foster mother. If he kicks the bucket, Caroline and I will be alone. Should I say something about it or not? About that glass being much too full?

Just as I’m about to say something, Paul interrupts my flow of thought.

‘It’s getting harder to get her to bed on time,’ he says bemused. ‘Especially now, during school vacation.’ He flips open his book.

‘That’s true. A lot of things will be changing for her in the coming months, Paul, with high school and all.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

We look at each other. Something is brewing in his eyes. He’s different than usual.

‘What are you thinking about?’ I ask.

He shrugs and leafs through his book.

‘About the right time to ask you an important question.’ He raises his eyes to meet mine.

‘An important question? What is it then? Tell me you’re not starting up about the Camino again.’ I sigh demonstratively. This is bound to be his umpteenth attempt to dissuade me from getting on that train tomorrow.

‘No, Lotte. My question is more important than that. And maybe now is the right time.’

He falls silent for a moment.

'Will you marry me?' he then asks. He suddenly sounds very formal.

His words take a moment to register with me… *Will you marry me?* I put my drawing pad aside, bend forward and touch the coffee table, as though it has a button I can press in order to repeat his question.

'Marry? You and me?'

'Yes.'

I shift and stare at him. Something isn't right here. 'Is this a joke or something?'

'No, Lotte. I'm very serious. I want to marry you.' He smiles at me in a seductive way. He's never looked at me like that before. What is this? My body begins to glow and I brush my hand across my forehead.

'But you don't love me at all. And I don't love you.'

'That's not true. I do love you.' He continues to hold my gaze. A charming smile appears on his face.

I suddenly feel like a completely different man is sitting across from me. Not Caroline's well-behaved father and Marjo's grieving widower, but the slick real-estate millionaire hunting for his night's prey. He must've used that penetrating gaze to pick up all of those beautiful blondes.

'Stop with this nonsense, Paul.' I get up because I suddenly feel the need to move. 'You do *not* love me. I know how you look when you love a woman because I know how you looked at Marjo. She was your true love! You'll *never* look at me the way you looked at Marjo. So stop it, okay? We're friends, nothing more. Stop acting weird.'

Paul crosses his long legs.

'No, it's not okay. I mean it, Lotte. I want to marry you, and I really do love you. Not in the adoring way like I loved Marjo, you're right about that. My love for you is different. I like being with you and I feel at home with you. You're cheerful and uncomplicated. It's fun being around you and your cooking is divine. And you like me, too. I know you do.'

'Yes, I'm very fond of you. But that's not the basis for a marriage, Paul.'

'Sure it is, Lotte. There's a Chinese proverb that goes "Take as your wife she who you'd also choose as your friend." We've been each other's best friend for years and we've actually already been living like husband and wife for the past nine months. We live in this house together, we eat together, we go on walks together, we watch TV together, we do groceries together, we laugh together, we're raising Caroline together, we have the same interests and we almost never argue. What more do you want?'

I observe him as I amble over to the TV and back. He's right in a way. After Emil's death, Paul and Caroline moved from Marjo's apartment into my big house. Caroline installed herself and her things in the spacious guest bedroom and Paul took the large studio in the attic. The new living situation was primarily meant to make it easier on Caroline, who'd no longer have to lug her bag across the courtyard when Paul would go on business trips. And Paul and I would still have our own space, we reasoned. He had an apartment upstairs where he could live with Caroline. But

after just a few weeks, both of them we're living downstairs with me because Caroline wanted it that way. Paul now only went upstairs to his studio to sleep or shower – if he was able to sleep, that is, because he has insomnia and frequently wanders through the house at night. Since Emil's suicide I haven't slept well either, and sometimes we find ourselves sitting on the couch together in the middle of night, drinking tea and chatting a bit, before going back upstairs again, each of us to our own bedroom. And now the idea was that we'd be sharing one bedroom? And one bed?

Paul leans back in his reading chair and tilts his head slightly. My gaze goes to his crotch.

'But we don't sleep together, Paul! I mean: people who are husband and wife have sex with each other. We don't.'

'True, not yet.' His gaze is intense.

'Paul, stop it. These are strange thoughts.' I sit down again, pull up my legs and then pull my XL pajama shirt over them to cover my bare thighs.

'Does that thought bother you so much, Lotte? Do I repulse you? My appearance, I mean.' Paul gets up and sits down next to me, in his regular TV spot. I slide to the edge of the couch and wrap my arms around my legs.

Paul shakes his head. 'Jesus, Lotte, I'm not doing anything to you,' he says, referring to my posture. 'I'll never touch you if you don't want me to. So relax, okay?'

Although Paul is now sitting in his regular spot and I'm sitting in mine, with still enough space between us, for the first time he's too close. We look at each other. His gaze is dark and his erotic energy forces itself upon me. His words have awakened thoughts in me that weren't there before. Thoughts about him as a man. He *is* objectively attractive. My girlfriends say so and behave accordingly. I can see how they act when he walks into our living room, or how they sneak a peek at him when he gets out of his expensive BMW. I've known that he is a handsome man since we met on that terrace in Aachen, but I've never translated that into a feeling that went beyond friendship. To me, from day one, he was Marjo's Paul, and later Caroline's father. And everyone around us sees it that way, too. As far as I know, they don't gossip about us in the village. After all, he's Marjo's widower and has lived on the farm for years.

I shift slightly. With a few words, Paul has now changed from a family friend into a man. I now register for the first time consciously that he has graceful hands with slender fingers and perfectly well-kept nails. Until today, they were the ordinary hands of a man. They were connected to his arms and they peeled potatoes, washed the dishes, dug into the bag of chips we'd sometimes put between us while watching TV here on the couch, and yet I'd never really noticed them. Until he posed the question just now. I look at my own hands. There's still cocoa under my nails from the afternoon's creations.

'Tell me, Lotte, do I repulse you? Is that it?'

'No, that's not it. You're definitely attractive.' I stretch out my legs. 'But your question's taken me by surprise. The same thing happened with Emil.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I married him for practical reasons. I was expecting. It was unplanned. After just one time. Emil and I were drunk and let ourselves go. I didn't realize I was pregnant until the fourth month.

I was in shock and had no idea how I was going to handle all of it. I was here alone on the farm, after my cousin had gone to Australia, and now on top of that a baby was on the way… I panicked. After he heard the news, Emil immediately asked me to marry him and I said yes. He was my pal and he adored me.'

'But you two were so close.' There was surprise in his voice.

'Yes, we were a good match, Paul. And the longer we were married, the more I grew to love him. But I had never been *in love* with him.'

'You see! It'll be the same with us.' He sounds like a fishermen who's gotten a bite and starts to reel in his catch.

'No, Paul, it won't be the same.' I fiddle with the fabric of my pajama. 'Emil worshipped me. You don't.'

Paul puts his bare feet up on the coffee table and gazes at his toes. A silence falls.

'What are you thinking about?' I ask.

'About that day in Aachen, when we met each other for the first time. I fell in love with Marjo at first sight and Emil fell heads over heels for you. That night, Emil and I talked about the two of you. He'd already seen what I hadn't: your positive life energy. You know, Lotte, when you walk into a room, it's like a joyful breeze has blown in. Over the years, I began to recognize that more and more, especially during the times that Marjo was depressed and you came to take care of things. Your smile and decisiveness wins people over. Even the animals want a bit of your attention. Remember that aggressive dog when we were walking in the Eifel over Easter? He attacked me, but when you spoke to him, he laid down and let you hug him. And you know, after Marjo's death I was sometimes jealous of Emil, because of the warmth and stability he had found in you, despite your wild nature. Before he met you, he went after every woman he could get, but when the two of you got together, he became monogamous. I was astonished. While he was working he could've cheated as much as he wanted to, but he never even considered it. "After Lotte, all other women are like plastic dolls," he told me once, when we were in a pub and two chicks tried to hit on us. He brushed them off. They were just bodies, he said. You were different. He'd fill up his tank with joy when he was in your arms. That's what he said, literally. Your pureness chased away his demons. More or less.'

He stops for a moment, picks up his glass and takes a sip of his vodka, and then gives me a penetrating look. I think about Marjo again and her dark periods that were as changeable as the weather.

'And now I'm experiencing the same thing, Lotte, after having lived with you in this house for nine months. I breathe more deeply and am calmer. And that wasn't the case with Marjo because of her bouts of depression, and you know that, too. And I want to marry you before another man comes along and Caroline and I have to leave here. Because the men are already starting to come forward as they sense that the end of your mourning period is approaching. And I want to get ahead of them. I don't want to lose you, Lotte. We may never have been in love, but we're very fond of each other. You can't deny that. We've got it so good together, better than most couples I know. Our relationship is respectful and warm, and I don't want to lose our beautiful life as a family. And that includes Stefan and Joran, too. The boys and I have been pals

for years. And with me you're sure to get a man who has great respect for your work as a chocolate artist.'

I stare at him, not really sure what to say. It is true; we are a good match. And he does indeed encourage me in my artistic work. His marriage proposal seems almost logical, especially from *his* perspective. He wants to secure his life with me and Caroline. Somehow, the same holds true for me, as well. Caroline feels like my daughter, but of course formally she is not. Paul is her father and he could decide to go live with her somewhere else tomorrow. Legally speaking, I wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. For a long time after Marjo's death, I was afraid that Paul would meet a new blonde and leave with my little Caroline, but thank goodness that never happened. And now he probably feels the same fear, even though it's baseless.

I lean forward, grab a couple of cashews and toss them into my mouth. Paul's breathing is steady. We're sitting here as always, yet everything is different than it was a half hour ago. Invisible electrical waves are now running between us, giving each new thought a different charge. The same thing happened with Emil on that hot summer evening in 1997, when we slept with each other after that dazzling party. I have only vague memories of that first time, like my surprise at his hairy body and his careful touch and the many kisses he gave me. And he kept whispering sweet words in Bosnian. Yes, Emil made love that first time, and I had sex. And I didn't feel any sparks after I married him either. Was that because I put all my passion into my chocolate? Am I even capable of feeling the same passion for a man as I put into my chocolate? That kind of vibrating and enchanting sensation, like your head's no longer there, just those bursts of erotic energy coursing through your body? The last time I was genuinely hopelessly in love and couldn't think straight was during puberty and my memory of that boy's face has faded over the years. Maybe Paul is right and love fades over time. Still, that whole sex thing does remain a bit of an issue. If we marry, I'll have to sleep with him, and that's the problem. His naked body on top of mine? No! Yuck! But maybe I should just try it once. I was drunk when Emil and I did it the first time and it was fine after that. Emil was a skilled lover. And how important is sex anyway? It had often felt routine with Emil in recent years. And since his suicide I've had zero sex and haven't missed it. My grief pushed away all my old desires; even good food no longer fascinated me. My sorrow even disrupted my regular sleep, which led to a loss of creativity and an inability to come up with new chocolate products.

'Do you snore?' I ask.

Paul bursts out in laughter.

'Well, Lotte, that's what I mean. That kind of pragmatism and directness makes you unique! And no, I don't snore. At least, no one's ever complained about it.'

'That speaks in your favor.' I'm smiling now, too.

'So you're saying yes?'

'No. You've surprised me, but you're in luck,' I say with a grin. 'Starting tomorrow, I'll have plenty of time to think about your proposal while I'm on the trail.'

The letter

I

A ghost from the past

My dearest Lotte,

I'm in Conques right now and today I'm writing the last words of this letter. It's turned into a long missive because I really hope you will understand me. It was in Le Puy-en-Velay, on the first day of my Camino, in the cathedral, next to that modest statue of Saint James, that I began to feel the urge to tell you about those dark years before you literally lit up my life. Every night before I went to sleep, I picked up the thread of my youth and wrote a bit. Memories came back to me that I had thought lost for decades.

Yes, I kept silent about who I really am and I want to take the time to explain why I couldn't tell you about my true identity. With this letter I'm also bidding you farewell, knowing that with all your lust for life and creativity you will wander new paths. It makes me so infinitely sad to know that we won't be able to continue on our path together because of my past.

A person always carries his past with him, even though that past is over. And the darker that past is, the heavier the burden. My past is pitch-black.

I fled Bosnia in 1995 and I've never been back. In the years that followed, I learned that there is a kind of twilight zone between the realities of war told in history books and the memories of a Bosnian who survived the insanity. The stories in the media about Srebrenica, for example, or the acts of our politicians, are not mine. My memories are those of a man who grew up in a peaceful Yugoslavia and who was sucked into the conflict at the age of twenty four. My associations with the war are not with military operations and shifting national borders, but with stinking corpses, torture, mortar fire, rape, hunger and especially blind rage…

During all the years since, I've really done my best to forget the war and build up a new life. And I thought that I had left the past behind. But that wasn't the case. He was suddenly standing before me again and I was back with him in Bosnia, in that dark forest, and I heard her scream.

Day 2

Saturday, July 27th
Train journey from Liège to Le Puy-en-Velay
Off and away

"Traveling is the best means of self-study."

Karl Julius Weber, German satirist and writer (1767 – 1832)

Day 2: Saturday, July 27th, morning
Liège-Guillemins TGV station: waiting for the train
Sunny with moderate winds. 19°C

I walk up the stairs of the Liège-Guillemins railway station, designed by world famous architect Santiago Calatrava. At the top, I turn around one last time and wave to Paul and Caroline, who are standing down at the BMW. They wave back, after which I enter the hall and consult the departure screens. My train is leaving at 9:00 a.m. in the direction of Oostende – Brussel Midi from Track 3a. I still have a half hour.

I make my way towards Platform 3. My steps sound heavy on the concrete floor and my backpack is already weighing down on my shoulders. The thing weighed 6.9 kg this morning, without water or food. I have one apple, two cheese sandwiches, twenty homemade nutty chocolate bars and a liter of water in two 500-ml bottles, placed into the nets on each side of the backpack to nicely distribute the weight in accordance with the instructions of the Dutch Camino Society. I'm now carrying almost 9 kg and I'm already groaning under the extra weight after one flight of stairs. And I've got another one to walk up. My god, what I have I gotten myself into?

As I'm halfway up the stairs, my telephone rings. I stop, unzip my fanny pack and take out the device. It's a video call from Stefan!

'Hi sweetheart!' I exclaim, out of breath. Stefan and Joran's faces appear on the screen. 'Make that two sweethearts!' I laugh.

'Hi Mom, we just wanted to wish you luck.' Joran waves.

'That's so nice!' My heart melts upon seeing my sons. My, they look a lot like Emil, and how sweet of them to call. They got that thoughtfulness from him, not me. I rely on my telephone to remind me about birthdays and other special events. Emil was genuinely interested in others and was a people person. The grief hits me again. I try to breathe it away and concentrate on the boys' happy faces. Leaning against the railing, I chat with them about the upcoming vacation with their group of friends. My boys are flying to Salou tomorrow. I make them both promise that they'll behave themselves in that Sodom and Gomorrah and that they'll send me a text every night to let me know everything is okay. After some virtual kisses, we hang up and I resume my climb.

Panting, I reach Track 3a. I take off my backpack, sit down on a steel bench and stretch. I grab my phone and open the screenshot of the first app Emil sent me last year when he was waiting for the train. It's a picture of his backpack and the white Calatrava roof.

08:46
Oh, my dušo, I miss you already ♥ and my train
hasn't even left yet. The station in Liège is
massive, by the way. ♥

I look up and blink. The sun is shining again today and the enormous steel-and-glass structure is reflecting the bright light. Emil was looking at the same white beams exactly one year ago and found them to be massive. What else was he thinking? It's getting harder and harder for me to picture Emil in my mind. My present is pushing my past further and further away. Front and center is Paul's proposal and the way in which we just parted ways outside the car, with him

subtly brushing my cheek with his hand and whispering my name in German: '*Tschüss, liebe* Lotte…' A dirty shiver ran down my spine. A massive switch would have to be flipped for me to marry him.

I point my Samsung at the station's white covering and take my first Camino picture. As I look at the picture, the phone beeps in my hand. A new email from Selma Jensen has arrived in my inbox: probably more reports about Bosnia. Jensen is a professor of psychology at the University of Amsterdam who specializes in war trauma. I came across her name on the Facebook page of the Bosnian community in the Netherlands. Someone had posted a link to an interview with her in which she talks about her doctoral research on war trauma among Dutch Bosnians.

Selma herself was also born in Bosnia, and earned her Master's degree in psychology at the University of Banja Luka. In 1991, she was able to secure a temporary position in Amsterdam and met her Dutch husband there, whose name she took when they married. She continued to live in Amsterdam and made a career for herself at the university there. However, she, too, didn't come out of the war unscathed, as her brother disappeared during Operation Storm in West Bosnia in August of 1995 and has never been found. After reading her profile, I knew that I had to talk with her. Perhaps she could tell me why my husband took his own life? I emailed her about the inexplicable suicide of my spouse, Emil Jukić, and my decision to walk his Camino. I asked her if she had information about similar suicides. Maybe there were studies that I could read during my trip that could help me understand what had taken place in my husband's mind. I kept his identity fraud to myself.

Selma responded the same afternoon. Emil's case fascinated her and she found it unusual that a widow was going to walk the Camino of her deceased husband. She promised to send me some documents, but she wasn't sure whether I'd be able to decipher the scientific jargon. We could also talk over the phone, if I wanted to. I emailed her that I'd be in Amsterdam on Wednesday, July 24th, to visit my sons and that I'd be happy to drop by if she had the time. I knew the university because my older son studied there. That day, we talked with each other in her drab office that overlooked gray flats and perfunctory green space. The room smelled like cigarette smoke; she apparently ignored the smoking ban. I had brought a large box of chocolates with me, half of which she scarfed down during our meeting. Her first questions were about Emil's place of birth and his ethnicity.

'When was your husband born, and where?'

'He was born in 1967,' I replied, spelling out the name of his hometown.

As she wrote something down on a sheet of paper, her light brown wavy hair fell in front of her oval face and gray eyes.

'Jukić sounds Croatian.'

'That's right,' I said and coughed. I had looked up the name Jukić in Bosnia and found that it was common among ethnic Croats. I felt uncomfortable providing her with the details of a man who was not my husband. 'His grandfather was from Croatia and had fought with Tito against the Nazis,' I added to reinforce my lie.

I was taken aback by her question about Emil's ethnicity, but the feeling wasn't new. During my marriage, I had already experienced people from the former Yugoslavia immediately questioning each other about their ethnicity upon meeting, insofar as it was not apparent from their first or

last names. Sometimes they did so subtly, sometimes very directly. Selma Jensen was no exception. Evidently, ethnic differences were still relevant to her as well, a quarter of a century after the war.

Selma asked more questions about Emil's background and I answered them. She then addressed our marriage and his behavior shortly before his departure for Le Puy-en-Velay. She looked for evidence of post-traumatic stress syndrome, PTSD in professional terms, and I explained that Emil had suffered few nightmares or strange reactions. It wasn't until he got cancer that he began to experience psychological symptoms, but they were related to his illness and the chemo. And they were typical for most cancer patients. He talked little about the war because it was over. His silence didn't necessarily mean anything, according to Selma. Sometimes symptoms didn't manifest themselves until decades later. She knew a Bosnian Muslim woman who had been imprisoned in Omarska concentration camp in 1992 and had been a victim of rape. After the war, she picked up her life again and seemed to function normally, with no apparent problems, until more than twenty years later, on a hot summer day on a crowded bus in Sarajevo, when she stood close to a man wearing an open green shirt and her gaze fell on his sweaty chest hair, topped by a gold chain. The image instantly brought her back to Omarska, during the hot summer of 1992, and the first gangbang she had to endure. There, on that bus in Sarajevo, seeing that gold chain and smelling the man's sweat caused her to start screaming and flailing about, after which she had to be admitted to a psychiatric clinic. Perhaps something similar had happened to my husband, Selma suggested. Perhaps Emil had met someone, or seen something, or heard something, or even smelled something, that had caused the dam to burst in his head.

While Selma talked enthusiastically about PTSD and bombarded me with scientific analysis, I waited for a moment to ask the question that truly concerned me: how can someone lie about their true identity for a lifetime? Selma brought up this topic herself a little later when she talked about the period after World War II, during which time similar things had happened, and how German soldiers remained painstakingly silent about their experiences at the front after they returned home.

'Many German women had no idea what their husbands had done during the war. At home, they spoke only in general terms about the atrocities that had occurred at the front. Just read the book *Ordinary Men* by Christopher R. Browning, then you'll begin to understand that mechanism better. And you saw it the other way around, too. In 1945, the advancing Russians raped half a million German women in East Germany, but after the war the women maintained a collective silence about it. As though it had never taken place. The children born of the mass rapes were neatly registered as the son or daughter of the German husband.'

'But how is that possible?' I asked, seizing on the subject. 'How can people live in a marriage without talking about their past?'

'Because they adapt their identity to the new situation, to the new place where they live, to the new people they interact with. They mirror their behavior,' she said. 'I saw it from up close after the war. In my circle of friends, there are some Bosnian Serbs who did horrible things, but don't say a word about it. When I talk with men over fifty, I often doubt the veracity of their stories when they talk about the years from 1990 to 1995, simply because many of them had been at the front during that time. This is especially the case in Republika Srpska. That's why I'm also

careful about what I say when I'm there. You never know who was what and who you're talking to,' she said, taking another chocolate.

My thoughts drifted away to my interpreter Jelena's sad stories about Republika Srpska, an autonomous Serbian federal state within Bosnia-Herzegovina. Jelena is still young, but sounded much older when she talked about the political situation in her country. According to her, the politicians were dancing to the tune of a few oligarchs who had enriched themselves during the war. She listed one example after another: stories of clientelism, corruption, favoritism in exchange for jobs, foreign interference, journalists who were much too cozy with politicians and suspicious crimes. I remember feeling sad because outside, behind the window of our car, we were passing breathtakingly beautiful landscapes where there were such lovely people, whom I felt had been defiled by a few individuals who had sucked an entire nation into their downward spiral of misery.

Selma and I hit it off and she gave me her phone number as we wrapped up our conversation and we chatted for a while about my plans for walking the Camino.

'When are you leaving?' she asked as we got up.

'Saturday morning, at 9 o'clock. That's when I'll be taking the TGV from Liège.'

'Okay, then I'll send you some reports on Monday about the questions you asked me,' she said as we walked to the door. 'But have no illusions that you'll find THE answer. Even though I've researched the war in Bosnia for a quarter of a century, I still feel like I'm stumbling through the caverns of the human mind.'

Platform 3a fills with passengers. The train is about to pull in. The bright rays of the morning sun fall on my backpack. A strange truth strikes me: I'm not only walking the Camino to discover why Emil committed suicide. I'm also walking the Camino for myself. Ever since I learned that my husband lied about his past, I too have been stumbling through a labyrinth of dark thoughts, searching for an answer to the question of how I could have lived with an impostor without realizing it. And I'd do anything to escape from those eerie caverns, like talk to experts or read books about Bosnia.

I open Selma's email. She's been thinking about me over the past week, she writes, and has unearthed a few reports that could be of help to me. Unfortunately, none of them are in Dutch. She'll be sending me a link to the documents shortly via WeTransfer. I'll be able to download them when I get to my hotel and have wifi.

As I scroll through the list of complicated academic titles, I'm once again grateful to my dear parents for having paid for my two-year program at the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu school in London and Paris. There, in addition to mastering sophisticated chocolate techniques, I also learned fluent English and decent French.

Day 2: Saturday, July 27th, afternoon
TGV station in Lyon: lunch on a concrete block
Sunny with approaching clouds and a weak wind. 30°C

The crickets are singing their monotonous song, drowning out all other sounds. Emil is walking up a hill in the distance in his striking gorilla gait. The vegetation around me is rugged and Mediterranean, with boulders, cork oaks and thorny bramble bushes everywhere. Emil is wearing his Camino backpack and a green military uniform and has a knife in his hand. The blade glitters in the sun. The white shell is hanging from his backpack, swishing back and forth with each step. I try to catch up with him, but can't make any progress. I'm in a cemetery with thousands of white miniature minarets, and the ground I'm trudging through is one big pool of blubber. It's as though I'm sinking deeper into the ground with each step and as though my hiking boots are getting stuck in the mud. The distance between Emil and me grows. 'Wait for me!' I shout as loud as I can, but he doesn't respond and marches on rigidly.

Sounds echo. A loud, cracking voice says something in an unknown language. Emil disappears and I bolt awake. Bewildered, I look around and realize I'm on a train. It's 1:54 p.m., my watch says. I've actually slept for an hour. I was so tired, too, after a virtually sleepless night in which I couldn't stop thinking about my trip and Paul's proposal.

I sit up straight, stretch my legs and check whether my backpack is still next to my feet. Yes, fortunately. My stomach growls. I need to eat something, but I have no desire whatsoever to eat the cheese sandwiches Paul prepared for me this morning.

Emil had eaten a lush salad in Lyon and drank a white wine along with it. Seeing the photo of his dish just now made my mouth water. I'm going to do the same: enjoy an hour on a terrace in the sun! The train slows down and the conductor continues his announcement. We're approaching Lyon. I stand up, lift up my backpack, loop my arms through its shoulder straps and tighten the hip straps. The enormous weight pushes my head forward and, bent over like an elderly person, I get off the train and walk down the stairs to the underground station hall. The hall is stuffy and much too small for the teeming crowd. There are soldiers everywhere, probably because of recent terrorist attacks. Their presence feels menacing and I hurry to the exit. I have an hour for lunch before my TGV to St. Étienne leaves.

Outside, my hopes for a sumptuous lunch on a sunny terrace fade, as the area in front of me is one big construction site. I'd have to walk a long way around to it reach the restaurants on the other side and I don't have enough time for that. I sigh and explore my surroundings. To my left, under young plane trees, are some bright yellow concrete blocks between raked up rubble. Young people are using them as benches. I follow their example, choose the last free spot and take the smushed sandwiches out of my backpack. Cars are pulling up and then driving off, and the sun is shining brightly. I grab my cap and put it on. Should I continue to sit here? Isn't it better to wait in the station hall, in the shade? No, it's grim in there, with all those soldiers. I think back to the dream I just had. Emil was also a soldier. Where was he marching to? And what was beyond that hill? Just as I take a sip of water, my phone beeps. It's an email from Omer in Sarajevo. It's long and I scroll through it slowly.

He writes that after my visit to his office, he started an investigation into Emil's asylum procedure in Germany. His inquiries led him to a Sabine Ehring from Bremen, who worked for the *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge* – the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees –

at the asylum seekers' center near Cologne, where Emil was also staying. Sabine was the one who handled his file and in recent years had risen up the career ladder within the BAMF. She made it to head of the asylum seekers' center in Bremen, but became the focus of a scandal there in 2018. She had been accused of having unlawfully granted residence permits to asylum seekers and a subsequent investigation was launched, but that investigation has now been suspended because she was run over by a car and died last Wednesday. There's no trace of the perpetrator. German authorities are now investigating what happened, which they consider suspicious.

Omer is now looking for other names of officials or refugees with whom my husband had contact during his asylum procedure in 1996.

Other names? I look up and stare for a moment at the reddish-brown marble façade of Lyon's modern TGV station. The building is the same color as my famous cherry liqueur that Emil was so fond of and that I used to add flavor to my chocolate brownies.

Once, Emil got drunk on my cherry liqueur. That was on the night after he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and was waiting to be called in for surgery. We were in shock and were sitting outside on the terrace after dinner, watching the sunset, which was spectacular, as though the sky wanted to cheer us up with its orange glow. Emil drank one glass after another, because he wanted to enjoy my nectar. It could be for the last time, he said. I let him do it, dumbfounded, because Emil rarely drank alcohol. Sometimes, during a fancy dinner, he would pour himself a glass of wine. At the end of such a lavish evening, he was often melancholy and told anecdotes about his youth in Bosnia, mixing his mother tongue in with his Dutch. I'd always have trouble following him, but still listened attentively, because it was such a rare occurrence for him to talk about his younger years in Bosnia.

That evening, after he had already drunk the umpteenth glass, he told me with a thick tongue an incoherent story about an asylum seekers' center in Cologne and about the orchard next door where there were cherry trees whose branches were bent with fruit. I was surprised. It was the first time he had spontaneously begun to tell me about his stay at an asylum seekers' center. I had inquired about it more than once during our first years together, but his answer had always been the same: 'A wound has to heal, Lotte, and that won't happen if you keep scratching it open.'

So I let it rest and stopped asking questions. But that evening at sunset he began to tell about his flight from Bosnia himself, recounting his arduous journey over mountain passes, the dingy places where he had slept, the hunt for food, the humiliations during the asylum procedure, but also the camaraderie, after which he went on about his stay at the asylum seekers' center, about crammed rooms, about boredom, about language lessons and about his pal, a guy by the name of Boris. While narrating, Emil also sometimes called this Boris by his last name, which began with an A and also had a 't' or a 'd' in it.

'And where's he now?' I asked. 'This Boris? Are you still in touch with him?'

My question seemed to wake Emil from his stupor, for he looked at me, startled. He shook his head, pushed back his patio chair, got up laboriously and walked unsteadily into our living room. He seemed to be in a panic. Alarmed, I went after him, asking again who this Boris was, but Emil shouted for me to leave him alone and pushed me away roughly. I fell hard against the china

cabinet and screamed as the glasses toppled over behind me. What had gotten into him? Emil was startled.

'Sorry, my *Anđele*,' he cried out. He folded his hands and bowed to me, as if I were his holy Madonna. 'Sorry, sorry, my love,' he said again. 'Forgive me, alcohol awakens the devil in men. Sorry.' He then clutched me and began to cry. His body shook and his tears dripped onto my bare shoulders.

'I didn't mean to hurt you, Lotte. You are my everything. Sorry,' he said again.

'I know, Mielke.' I ran my fingers through his stiff black hair.

We uttered a few more words of affection, then Emil let go of me, turned around, stumbled out of the room and went to bed. I stood there, not knowing what to think. Why did he explode like that when I asked about this Boris guy? Who is or was this man? A strange urge led me to my study, where I turned on my computer and googled the name Boris A. After finding a whole slew of Borises with last names beginning with an A, I quickly came across the name of a certain Boris Žigić. This man was a Bosnian-Serbian prison guard who had been convicted by the Yugoslavia tribunal in The Hague for war crimes against Bosnian Muslims in concentration camps. When I met Emil I had also done an Internet search on the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but in the early days of the Internet the information had been limited. I had never delved as deeply into it as I did that night. The atrocities I read about seemed to pull at me. I suddenly wanted to know everything about it and clicked from one brutal crime to another. I couldn't believe that people of my generation had really carried out those tortures – modern, well-educated people who knew about the Holocaust.

I'll never forget one picture. According to the caption, it was a picture of two children and a mother locked in a cellar and then burned alive. The picture showed the charred corpses of a boy and a girl. Near their crooked black hands was a blackened toy car. Their mother lay by their little heads. From all appearances, she had tried to protect her little ones from the fire in her dying throes. As I looked at the picture, my stomach rebelled and I tasted bile and the paprika-flavored chips I had snacked on an hour earlier. I realized that this, then, was the world in which my Emil had fought. This was the inferno from which he had managed to escape. And suddenly I understood why Emil didn't want to talk about his past; I understood why he didn't want to keep scratching that nasty wound open. The wound could become inflamed and infect his life with madness.

'My husband mentioned one name,' I email Omer Zečinić. Two pigeons are leering at the sandwich I had put down next to me. 'They were at the same asylum seekers' center. His first name was Boris and his last name started with an A and has a 't' or a 'd' in it.'

Day 2: Saturday, July 27th, evening
Le Puy-en-Velay: the Azzaro man
Sunny with no wind. 29°C

I exit the station in Le Puy-en-Velay, turn left and trudge down the road towards the city center. After I pass the Boulevard de la République, a rocky outcropping appears in the distance with a gigantic reddish brown Madonna holding a plump Jesus in her arms. The place looks familiar to me, and not just because of our visit to Le Puy six years ago. Emil had sent me his first picture of this colossal Mary from this intersection. Countless pictures would follow. The image fascinated him, but he didn't text me why. Did he take so many pictures of it because of the peculiar shape of the rock, or because it was the Madonna with her child? What touched him about it? When I looked at the pictures shortly after his suicide, I was still under the impression that he had been fascinated by the volcanic landscape around Le Puy-en-Velay, with all the thin cone peaks from which lava once flowed. But after my trip through Bosnia, I now realize that bulge on which the Madonna is situated is very similar in shape to the tall towers of Bosnian Orthodox churches. Did it remind him of his youth or the war?

Since my trip through Bosnia, I've constantly wondered what ethnic group Emil belonged to. Had he really been a Catholic Bosnian Croat? Or an Orthodox Christian Serb instead? Or perhaps a Muslim Bosniak? Absolutely meaningless classifications in the Netherlands, but reason for hatred or friendship in Bosnia. In recent weeks I had dipped into my memory, looking for clues of sympathy towards one group or the other, but that proved to be a challenge. Emil rarely talked about politics, and in hindsight he had always been on his guard when talking about religion. A few years ago, we were driving through Rotterdam when we saw a few Muslim women on the sidewalk up ahead of us walking in our direction in their long black robes. I was behind the wheel and Emil was sitting next to me, talking endlessly.

'Look out!' he shouted as the women unexpectedly crossed the road.

I braked and came to a stop just in time. After I drove off again, we began to talk about Islam and the various branches within it. Emil appeared to be knowledgeable about this and told me that the Muslims in Bosnia belong to the Slavic peoples, just like the Russians, Serbs and Croats, the only difference being that they had adopted Islam during the time the Ottoman Empire had ruled over the Balkans. When the war broke out in 1990, most were Muslim only on paper. At most, they still celebrated a few Islamic festivals.

'Then why were they massacred by the Serbs and Croats?' I asked.

Emil shrugged, turned his head away and looked out the window. Tears were running down his cheeks.

I stop at the crosswalk and look around me. Everyone continues on their way, undisturbed, paying me no mind. And yet, since St. Étienne, it feels as though strange eyes are poking into my back, as if someone is following me. The feeling began back on the train, when the conductor announced the Le Puy-en-Velay station. I quickly grabbed my things and got off with the crowd, but I had the impression that someone was watching me. I move around my neck to shake off that unpleasant sensation. Maybe Stefan and Joran were right, after all. They didn't like it one bit, me chasing Emil's ghost. The three of us had gone to Bosnia to say goodbye to him, hadn't

we? Then why couldn't I just let Dad rest in peace? His ashes were back at their source, in the land where he'd been born and raised. Things were fine the way they were.

No. To me, things were *not* fine the way they were. Could it be that Emil's ghost has joined me now that I'm following him on his journey to death? No, a dead man is a dead man. It's just the tension I feel about what I'm about to undertake.

My gaze returns to the rocky point. I grab my phone, step slightly to the right and take a picture of the Madonna from exactly the same spot as Emil did. I examine the result: nothing special. Emil's shot was much more beautiful and captivating. He was really good at taking pictures. I cram my cell phone back into my fanny pack, continue on my way and catch a whiff of my own body odor. My shirt has the familiar smell of sweat mingled with synthetic fabric. I begin to wonder whether it was wise to bring quick-drying clothes. Cotton smells less. And with this hot weather, cotton dries well, too, doesn't it? *Yes, Lotte, but dwelling on the 'what-ifs' won't get you anywhere*. I'm going to soak everything I'm wearing in just a moment, and it'll all be fresh again tomorrow. Where's that hotel? I scan my surroundings and recognize in the distance the bronze fin-de-siècle façade from the photo on the reservation confirmation. Thank goodness! It'll be such a relief to take off this backpack!

The building is on a corner and is only a few meters wide. I open the hotel door and follow the signs to the front desk. I end up in a narrow dark hallway with black and white photos of saints on the walls. There's a familiar smell in the room and I straighten my back. Pierre Lascoli isn't here, is he? That's *his* aftershave, that blissful Azzaro pour Homme! That would be something; seeing my master pâtissier again after so many years! Yoo-hoo! The memories of my apprenticeship in Paris with the French chocolate magician once again fill my mind. Pierre introduced me to the enchanting world of chocolate art. I became totally absorbed by the mousse, truffles, sauces, cream, jellies, sorbets, ganache, carrés, caramels, croquettes, babas, cookies, cakes, bavarois, florentines.... The tantalizing scent of his Azzaro pour Homme aftershave would already be hanging in the atelier first thing in the morning when we came in and he read the day's class schedule off the white board. The aromatic *fougère* lingered around him all morning, wonderfully complementing the scent of cocoa. When I returned home, I also bought a bottle of Azzaro for Emil, but the stuff turned out to stink on him and subsequently disappeared down the drain.

I walk on quickly and reach the cramped reception area. There's only one man in the room. I move a bit closer to him. He is indeed the wearer of the Azzaro, but is clearly not Pierre. I can't see his face, as he's standing with his back to me and talking to the receptionist, but he is tall and slender and has gently wavy brown-gray hair that curls up at the nape of his neck. No, this is most definitely not Pierre Lascoli, who was my height and stocky.

I take a step closer and sniff. The scent is different from Pierre's, after all. Even better! Who is this man? The young, red-haired woman at the front desk checks him in. I take off my backpack and wait. A tent and a sleeping mat are attached to his burgundy backpack, but no shell is dangling from it yet. Maybe he's also just beginning, like me? Or is his shell hanging from a chain around his neck? That's also possible; a fair number of pilgrims do that. Or they draw the shell on something they're carrying, like a man I spoke with on the train who'd drawn a shell on his backpack with a black marker.

In any case, the Azzaro man has been hiking, because his navy blue sports shirt is wet with sweat and there are dark circles under his armpits. His back muscles are bulging under the straps of his

backpack. He and the receptionist are speaking in French. His warm voice is calm and has the timbre of a person who is in balance with himself and who doesn't just go along to get along with others. It sounds like they'll be busy for a while. I move my shoulders to loosen my muscles. My neck is already cramped, even though I haven't walked a kilometer. How am I going to manage tomorrow? I have to walk 24 kilometers, according to Emil's schedule. *Don't think about it, Lotte. Just think of the hot shower you'll be having in a few minutes and fresh clothes. Ahh...*

The receptionist takes a key from the wall and hands it to the man in front of me. He says a few more words and then turns around. He smiles kindly as he passes me. I straighten up and smile back. I sniff again and enjoy the unique interplay of the Azzaro and his sweat. My gaze follows his smooth gait until he disappears around the corner.

'*Madame?*'

I turn back towards the receptionist.

'I have a reservation under the name Lotte Bonnet.'

Her phone rings.

'Just a moment,' the redhead says with a nod and she picks up. The call is brief. She puts down the receiver.

'Thank you for your patience.' She taps something on her screen. 'Yes, I see it. And you insisted on room 28, on the top floor, under the roof? Is that correct?' My request seems to surprise her.

'That's right,' I say.

'And do you still want that room?' she asks, glancing at my backpack. 'We don't have an elevator and there's no air conditioning in that room. I can also give you a free upgrade to an air-conditioned room on the second floor. I just got a cancellation.' She points to her phone.

'No, thank you,' I reply firmly. 'I want room 28.' I stick to my resolve to experience everything Emil experienced, including that hot single room under the roof.

'No problem,' she says and takes a key from the hook on the wall.

'Breakfast is tomorrow between 6:30 and 10. And the reception is open until midnight. We don't have a night porter, but you can use this code to open the front door.' She hands me the key and a slip of paper, and then slides me a map of Le Puy-en-Velay.

'The stairs are around the corner.' She points to a spot behind me. 'You'll also find our vending machine in case you need any drinks or snacks. Your room is on the fourth floor.'

'*Merci*.' I put the papers in my fanny pack and stuff the key in my pocket. I then pick up my backpack, trudge down the corridor and turn right.

'Oh no!' I cry out when I see the steep stairs ahead and drop the backpack.

'Are you okay?' a voice beside me says.

I swivel my head to the left. The Azzaro man is standing in an alcove, in the process of retrieving a bottle of water from the vending machine. He puts it in his backpack, which is on the floor next to him.

‘The stairs,’ I say in English and point up. ‘There are an awful lot of them, and I’m on the fourth floor.’

His eyes flash from the steps to my backpack.

‘I’ll help you!’ Without asking, he picks up my backpack and starts walking up the stairs with it. I decide not to play the feminist, mutter ‘merci’ and follow him. As I do so, my attention is drawn to his hairy calves and I notice how the muscles of his buttocks move during the ascent. On the first landing, my gaze drifts to his hand. His knuckles have turned white from carrying my backpack. It’s as though someone is warning me to be extra vigilant; I’m noticing things I normally wouldn’t.

Upon reaching the fourth floor landing, he asks what my room number is.

‘Twenty-eight,’ I reply, panting. I was already out of breath by the third floor. How will I manage tomorrow, when I get to the first hill? With my pack on?

‘Then we’re neighbors!’ he says, pointing to the door next to mine with the number thirty on it.

‘Oh’ is all I can manage to say and a strange tingling goes down my spine.

The man puts my backpack down in front of my door and turns towards me.

‘Merci!’ I suddenly feel the urge to show my gratitude and produce a radiant smile.

‘You’re welcome.’

A silence falls. For a moment we stand facing each other on the narrow landing without saying a word. We’re both breathing heavily and the smell of our sweat fills the small space. The man’s bright green eyes catch mine. He examines me the same way I analyze a cocoa pod: looking for peculiarities on the skin that tell something about the essence of the bean. I’m doing the same thing now, and I estimate him to be around fifty. He has high cheekbones, a straight nose and full lips, yet he is not handsome in the classic sense of the word. It’s his sensual energy that attracts me and the fluid way in which he moves and how he stands before me now, with his head tilted, his tall body leaning slightly against the railing. His oval face is regularly tanned, bearing the wrinkles of a person who spends a lot of time outside. There is something unseemly about him and yet he acts civilized. A man of contrasts. If I had to guess his profession I would say something related to nature or art. This sudden interest in a man surprises me. It’s as though I’ve suddenly reached a clearing after a long walk through a dark forest and details light up in front of me that had been invisible in the shadows. I recall the words of Shirley MacLaine.

‘Almost all pilgrims have erotic thoughts,’ she writes halfway through her book about the Camino. ‘Because they break free from the familiar.’

Wishful thinking for this dried up widow, I thought when I read that passage. But now I’m beginning to wonder if she was on to something, because I suddenly recognize that age-old ritual of temptation.

‘I’ve got something for you,’ I exclaim. ‘As a thank you, I mean, for carrying my bag upstairs.’ I grab my backpack, unzip its side compartment and take out a chocolate bar.

‘Here! I made it myself with white criollo beans from Mexico, and plums and nuts from my garden. I’m a chocolatier. This is an energy bomb – it’s got more power in it than six granola bars. The chocolate might be a little soft right now because of the heat, but it’ll harden up.’

The man takes a step back, raises his dark eyebrows and accepts the bar.

'Merci!' He smiles, as he appears to weigh the bar in his hand. 'You didn't need to, but that's nice of you. Are you going to be walking the Camino?' He points at my backpack.

'Yes, until Conques. I'm starting tomorrow.'

'Me too. The same route. So we'll probably run into each other again.'

'I hope so.' The words just slip out.

'My name's Nicolas, by the way.' He holds out his hand to me.

Nicolas? That's a lovely name. It suits him.

'And you?' he asks.

'Me? Oh, yeah, sorry. Lotte. I'm from the Netherlands.'

We shake hands while continuing to observe each other.

'I'll leave you alone now,' he says, letting go of my hand. 'The mass for pilgrims at the cathedral is about to begin, and I'm going.'

I move my fingers. My skin is still vibrating from his handshake.

'Me too!' Somewhat reluctantly, I take my room key out of my pant pocket. 'But I want to take a shower first and put on some clean clothes,' I add, just to say something.

'Don't we all.' He smiles again. His teeth are crooked, but that doesn't bother me. On the contrary. Imperfection suits this man.

'*Enfin*, good evening, Lotte.' He turns around and walks down the stairs to get his own backpack.

I watch him go and, just before disappearing from view on the third flooring landing, he looks up. Our eyes meet and a serious expression appears on his face.

'Bye Lotte,' he says, and after a brief hesitation continues his descent.

'Bye!' I automatically wave my free hand at the empty hallway, then listen to his footsteps on the creaking steps for a moment.

I lie motionless and quiet as a mouse on my back and stare at the shadows of my hotel room. The curtains are closed, but the light of the streetlamp forces its way through the striped fabric, revealing the lines of the lathed ceiling. The hectic sounds of the city outside are so different from the silence at home. I am dead tired, but can't get to sleep. My attention is on the man in the room next to me, Nicolas. He wasn't at the cathedral tonight. Such a shame, because the ceremony was beautiful. When he came back to his room at around nine o'clock, I was already in bed and from then on registered every movement he made. He had been rummaging around until a few minutes ago and only just went to sleep. The walls of the old hotel are paper-thin and I could follow everything he did: walking, opening and closing a closet door, moving a chair, sitting at a desk, brushing his teeth, and receiving and sending text messages. The beeps sounded muffled and piqued my curiosity. With whom was he communicating? A woman? Children? A friend? A business associate? The creaking of his bed and a short cough just told me

that his pillow was on the other side of the wall. His head is no more than half a meter from mine. I imagine I can hear him breathing. My full attention is now on that intriguing stranger behind the wall. I sigh and turn onto my side. Carefully and without making a sound, I lift my hand and run my fingers along the ribbed wallpaper close to his head.

The letter

II

My childhood in Tito's Yugoslavia

You know, Lotte, if you want to understand something about my history, I have to take you back to my childhood. 'Freedom' is the first word that comes to mind. That might sound strange coming from the mouth of someone who grew up under a communistic dictatorship, but that's what it felt like. Sure, Tito ruled Yugoslavia with an iron fist, but I don't have any memories of that. My parents were obedient people and didn't meddle in politics, so there wasn't any kind of a fearful atmosphere at home when we talked about him. Our village was an idyllic place without any strategic importance to the government and was situated on a hill, with a meandering river below it and surrounded by mountains.

As kids, we lived with the seasons. I'll never forget the carefree and endless summers, most of all. We spent the days swimming or near the water and in the evenings we played dodgeball or hide-and-seek at the village square. Our campfires were also memorable. On cool evenings in the late summer, we'd put on sweaters and sit in a circle around the fire and roast the potatoes we'd dug up from the fields earlier in the day. We peeled off the charred skins and ate them while they were hot, taking care not to burn our tongues. Meanwhile, we'd pass around bottles of Ožujsko that we'd lifted from our refrigerators at home and tell each other tall stories. To this day, I can still conjure up the distinct smoky taste of those roasted potatoes.

Oddly enough, I also have fond memories of 'playing war', which we'd do in the spring and fall up on the barren plain where there'd been heavy fighting during World War II. The evidence of that battle was still visible, as we'd find shells and bullets in the tall beach grass that we'd collect in glass jars and use to wager with when playing marbles. We knew exactly which bullet or shell came out of which gun or rifle. Yes indeed, we were already war experts at a young age. We also wore green camouflage suits and had pistols and rifles made of wood. We played that we were partisans of our great Marshal Tito and were fighting against 'the dirty fascists'. It wasn't until high school, when we became interested in girls, that our guns ended up in the corner of our basements. Later in life, I sometimes wondered how it was possible that we hadn't seen the horrific sides of war as children. That said, neither do today's kids when they kill each other online. Perhaps our childhood enthusiasm for the game of war is the prelude to the carnage that could follow during our adult lives.

And when the snow fell above, we moved our playground to the mountains, where we sledded down the steep slopes, laughing and full of bravado, only to climb back up the hill silently and as fast as we could. During the long, dark evenings, we usually sat in the library at my house and played card games. When we got a TV, we often watched exciting shows like Winnetou *or* Sandokan*.*

Yes, the clock of my childhood ticked pleasantly, as we only went home when we got hungry and we moved about our village without a worry. No one locked our doors and there was no crime. And yet the Yugoslavia of my youth was a modern country with a similar level of amenities as here. We could travel freely because we weren't locked behind the Iron Curtain like those poor

souls in the Eastern Bloc. Yugoslavia wasn't under the Soviet sphere of influence because Tito's partisans had chased the Nazis out of the country without any help from the Russians.

As a child, I didn't know much about the ethnic differences that would destroy my life later on. The same was true for Milan and Emil. They were my best friends from the moment we could walk and talk and our ethnic differences felt like belonging to different football clubs: it wasn't really important. I knew that my family had a glorious past, of course. You could see it, too. We lived up on the hill in a little castle next to the old fortress. Milan lived in a small and damp farmhouse down below. Emil also lived in the desirable higher part of our village, and you could tell from his house that his parents belonged to the new elite. They had built their spacious villa in the early seventies on a plot of land below and off to the side of our property. Every day, my mother complained about 'the white pimple' that blocked her view of the river. The villa had been built on the site of a stone stable that our grandfather had had to sell for lack of money two decades earlier, but she didn't mention that part. And yet Emil's haughty mother was jealous of us, as our castle remained the most important building in the village and a testament to our illustrious history.

From an early age, I knew that we were the descendants of a distinguished Ottoman Muslim family who, in the name of the sultan, had ruled for centuries over our region and the Serbian serfs, from whom Milan descended. During a war in the 17th century, a distant ancestor of mine had acquired the honorary title of 'beg'*, after which he had commissioned a portrait of himself in oils. The painting of 'the Turk' hung above the fireplace in our living room and served as proof that noble blood flowed through our veins. However, the power of my family was already on the wane when I was born in 1967. Tito had seen to that, because after World War II he had nationalized my family's agricultural lands. My father reconciled himself to the fact that he was no longer a large landowner and went off to study medicine. He became the general practitioner of our region and thus remained a distinguished man, just like Emil's father, who was a prominent party member and the director of a nearby factory. Noble blood thus also flowed through Emil's veins, but of a more recent vintage, as his grandfather had been a decorated war hero and had fought with Tito against the fascists.*

My parents were only Muslims on paper. My mother and sister never wore a headscarf and were well-educated. My mother was a mechanical engineer and earned even more money than my father because her profession was highly regarded. My dad was a steadfast atheist, who even mocked Allah by drinking šljivovica *after dinner. The only person who still honored Islamic tradition was my grandmother. She could read and write in Arabic because she had learned it at the mosque as a child. I still remember her delicious baklava, a pastry filled with nuts that she'd bake at the beginning of the Festival of Sweets.*

Milan's parents were formally Serbian Orthodox, but they didn't believe in God either. However, they wisely kept quiet about this, as they lived in the damp, low-lying farmhouse of Milan's strictly Orthodox grandmother. Milan's parents were simple farm workers and worked for the zadruga*, which was our village's agricultural cooperative, run mainly by Serbs. Milan's dad would lie on the couch in the living room during his free time and watch TV or sit in the pub and get drunk. He was a worthless figure who thought of himself as a big deal but accomplished nothing. I felt sorry for Milan's mother; the poor woman was beaten by her husband and terrorized by her mother-in-law. The grandmother was the real boss in the house and all the rooms were filled with Serbian Orthodox icons. When you walked into Milan's living room it was like stepping foot in a church. That's what it smelled like, too: mold and incense.*

And then there was Emil. His dad was a communist and believed only in the teachings of Marx. But Emil had been baptized by our village pastor because his Catholic grandmother had demanded it and his dad didn't want a fuss. Emil's snooty mother was Catholic only on paper, but liked Catholic traditions, like hunting for eggs at Easter or decorating the tree at Christmas. She didn't believe in a god. She was also a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist and an active member of the party. She was on the board of the high school in the town a few miles away, where she worked as an English teacher.

Anyway, even though none of us believed in our god, we could tell you exactly who in our village belonged to which ethnic groups. Our grandfathers and grandmothers knew it all. We could point to the houses of Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbians or Islamic Bosniaks. But our neighbors' religions didn't matter in those years. At least I didn't think so.

When all three of us were doing our military service in 1986, we discovered that ethnicity was much less of an issue among city dwellers. Some didn't even know what *they were. Many were the product of mixed marriages, although the term 'mixed' didn't exist then. The background of the young people we interacted with was also difficult to determine. Sometimes only their last name revealed their origin, but not always. And you couldn't rely on appearance at all. Racially speaking, Bosnian Muslims belong to the Slavic peoples, just like the Croats and Serbs. So there was nothing genetically 'Turkish' about them. Many had dark blond hair with fair skin and light eyes. I remember walking through the streets of Sarajevo in the summer of 1989 after a racist speech by Serbian Slobodan Milošević, looking for the ethnic differences between all of those faces. I didn't see them, but Milošević saw them.*

A few years later, Milan saw them too, because then he was involved in the ethnic cleansing of Emil's Croatian family. On that sweltering hot day in 1995, his Bosnian Serb militia raided their villa. The gang drove Emil's family, along with the other Croats and Bosniaks, into our village's small Catholic church and locked elderly people, women and children inside its meter-thick walls. Their leader then threw firebombs inside and chanted Serbian war slogans as their screams echoed through the broken window. Emil was strapped into the militia's open jeep and had to watch as his family was burned alive. Only his mother survived the war. She was visiting a friend when the paramilitaries drove into the village.

She spent the rest of her life searching for her missing son.

Day 3
Sunday, July 28th
From Le Puy-en-Velay to Saint-Privat-d'Allier, 24 km
Atoning for guilt

"What is deservedly suffered must be borne with calmness."

Ovid, Roman poet (43 B.C. – 17 A.D.)

Day 3: Sunday, July 28th, morning
Le Puy-en-Velay: a message for Saint James
Sunny with little wind. 24°C

07:59
My dušo, I just dropped a note into St. James' wish box at the cathedral in Le Puy. I wrote that my greatest wish is that I may grow very old with you, Lotte. I cried as I was standing there, but then I thought of your smiling face and everything was fine again.♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥

P.S. Today I'm walking 24 km to Saint-Privat-d'Allier

It's now official: I'm registered as a pilgrim! We just received the bishop's blessing during a short mass and got the first stamp in my pilgrim's passport, the *credencial*. My passport even has its own number. Me, a pilgrim? It hasn't sunk in yet. My attention turns to the wooden statue of Saint James. His austere figure is surrounded by dozens of burning candles. A brown letterbox has been placed at his feet, with a tray containing pens and sheets of paper, for pilgrims to leave a personal prayer. The message will be entrusted to another pilgrim who will pray for me during my *Way*, my *Chemin*, my *Camino*...

What do I write on that sheet of paper? I know what Emil wrote. But his prayer went unanswered, because he was dead ten days later. Why did he suddenly no longer want to grow old with me?

I turn around and check to see whether my backpack is still on the bench. It is. Last night, when I returned from mass at the cathedral, it had fallen over and was lying on the dingy carpet, despite having been proudly upright on the luggage rack while I had showered and changed clothes. I had the urge to check with the front desk to see if maybe someone had been in my room, but didn't call. Nothing had been stolen from my bag or room anyway, so perhaps it was just gravity, after all.

The church is almost empty, as the other pilgrims have already left. They want to make progress before it gets hot. Nicolas was also up early. I was awakened by noises in his bedroom at half past five, after which he closed the door behind him and walked down the stairs. I dozed off for a while after that.

The cathedral has the familiar scent of incense and a serene silence hovers around the image of Saint James. What is my personal prayer?

The bright morning sun shines through the high stained-glass windows, illuminating the frail Christ above the altar. What was *his* wish when the Romans nailed him to that cross? Was he praying for others or for himself? I'm inclined to pray for the boys and Caroline now and to write down my hope that my children will live long and happy lives. I roll the pen between my fingers. But why am I actually praying for their prosperity? Is it because I want my children to be happy, or do I want to be happy *myself*? Because sad children make for sad mothers. When Omer

Zečinić told me in that dank office in Sarajevo that Emil wasn't Emil, my first anxious thoughts went to the boys. What would this discovery mean for them?

'You always think of the children first,' Emil said, as I adapt important choices in our lives to the interests of the boys and Caroline. In fact, I had even married Emil because of the children, because if I hadn't gotten pregnant unexpectedly, we would've just remained friends. And I stayed married to Emil because he was a great father AND because he encouraged me to make the most of my creative talents. Our relationship was uncomplicated and I was able to be myself with him. He loved his tomboy wife and tolerated my outbursts with a smile. I was relaxed with Emil. That's why his suicide hit me so hard, because it didn't fit at all with the different roles we had in our marriage. Emil was not one to have emotional outbursts. I was the fury who slammed doors. Emil was the one who always waited calmly until the storm passed, then took me in his arms, kissed me and whispered that I was his dušo. My mourning for Emil has lasted so long mainly because I'm still unable to wrap my head around what he did. I remain connected to him on account of my confusion, and on account of my sense of guilt that I apparently didn't recognize the signs. In fact, my self-centeredness clouded my powers of perception. My journey through Bosnia only added to that jumble in my head, because his unexpected suicide had now been compounded by his inexplicable identity fraud. All this puzzling is wearing me out.

But starting today, I'll be walking his Camino....

I hold my hand above the candles that are burning around Saint James. The warmth of the mini-fires causes a tingling sensation.

You don't walk the Camino for others, I read somewhere. You walk the Camino for yourself.

'*Maybe you start the Camino thinking about others*,' the text went, '*but the Camino eventually forces you inward, to that wandering being within yourself*.'

I tap the pen against the wood of the letterbox.

Come on, Lotte, hurry up! What is your personal prayer? I stare at the white paper. I breathe in and out a few times. Yes, what I actually want is to remove myself from that rainbow of emotions that has colored my feelings since his suicide.

'I want to be balanced again!' I write on the sheet of paper, fold it up and drop it into the slot.

Day 3: Sunday, July 28th, afternoon
Montbonnet: a church in the meadow
Sunny with little wind. 30°C

I take a selfie with the Montbonnet town sign and send the picture to Paul and the boys.

'A Bonnet is in charge here, too,' I write below the picture, adding a v-sign. I don't mention that the Bonnet from Vijlen is completely worn out. I put the device back into my fanny pack and trudge on. After a hundred meters, the picturesque Chapelle Saint-Roch comes into view. The low stone church with a red-tiled roof stands in a valley, surrounded by dry meadows, with here and there a fruit tree. A few people are standing at the entrance. I look at my watch for the umpteenth time. It's almost half past two. I'm two hours behind Emil's schedule and already completely exhausted. According to the pedometer, I'm going 2.6 km an hour; even a snail is faster. During the first stretch of the walk things had gone well enough. The open and gently sloping landscape resembled the pleasant hills of South Limburg, but from the hamlet of Tallode onwards things got serious and I've done nothing but climb. By noon I'd already finished my packed lunch. In a moment I'll scarf down a bar of mushy chocolate and refill my two water bottles at the next village. I'm drinking more than usual because of the heat.

'*What is deservedly suffered must be borne with calmness*.' I came across the quote written in white letters on a dark green fence a while back and it's been running through my mind ever since. It is *so* true. Now is definitely not the time to complain, because this backache is of my own doing. There are plenty more words of wisdom along the Camino and I notice that I muse about each quote for a while. So there really is something happening in my head. Yes, indeed, I'll make something of myself yet on this journey.

Behind me I hear the tapping of sticks again. Another pilgrim is about to overtake me. The place is teeming with hikers. I estimate that half are tourists, because they're wearing sneakers and carrying mini-backpacks. The other half are pilgrims. They use walking sticks and moving forward with the rigid strides of a soldier at a steady cadence. I have nothing that resembles a cadence yet. I stop too much. Each time I come across a low wall somewhere, I sit down and rest my backpack on the stone for a minute to relieve my shoulders.

When I walked out of the cathedral, I had resolved to think about myself during this journey. I'm doing so, but not in a good way. I'm mostly thinking about my aches and pains: in my toes, my knees, my shoulders, my swollen fingers and even my tooth, because a moment ago it actually felt like I had a toothache. That pain has now gone away, but it was replaced by a nagging pressure on my hip. And all of that on day one! What possessed me to do this? I have to quit the Camino, because this isn't for me. Paul was right, too, dammit. He predicted that I'd return home within 48 hours.

'You're untrained, Lotte,' he said, as we approached Liège station. 'Your mind might want to see this through, but your body is going to send you home within 48 hours. Don't fight it. Don't overexert yourself, because those kinds of injuries will persist for a long time.'

True. My whole body is rebelling, and not just my muscles and joints. Even my teeth and my skin are rebelling. My back is itching incredibly, despite my backpack's ventilating frame. *Fuck*. *Fuck*. *Fuck*.

The pastor of Chapelle Saint-Roch beckons me from the driveway. The cleric's thin hair is as white as his ironed long-sleeved shirt. Is there no priestly attire for the summer? I descend the steps and arrive at a small table next to the church's modest entrance. Two elderly ladies ask me if I'd like water. I most certainly would. I take off my backpack for the umpteenth time, scratch my back, accept the cup eagerly and immediately empty it. One of the women asks me where I'm from.

'*Pays-Bas*,' I reply. She puts a check next to 'NL' on a list. The woman then asks me in decent English why I am walking the Camino. She holds the tip of her pencil near some options to the right.

'My husband committed suicide on the Camino last year, and I'm now following his route, exactly one year later, to find out why.'

The woman's pencil tip falters. She has no box for this answer.

'You're the wife of the man who committed suicide last year near Conques?' a voice to my right says.

'I am.' My head swivels towards the voice and I look into the pastor's water-blue eyes. 'Do you remember my husband?' I immediately take out my phone, scroll to the picture gallery and show him a picture of Emil in his pilgrim's outfit.

The pastor leans forward.

'Yes, that's him! I recognize him from that scar on his face. We spoke to each other briefly. And I saw him a moment later sitting on that little wall, crying.' He points to the steps near the street.

'My husband was crying?' My hand goes to my mouth.

The priest hesitates.

'I'd like to know everything.' I smile pleadingly at the man. 'To understand him.'

'Yes, his shoulders were shaking as he cried, like someone who was having a breakdown. But when I approached him to ask if I could help, he got up and hurried away. That's why I remember him. You don't often experience something like that.'

Emil burst into sobs? In dismay, I survey my surroundings and let the idyllic spot sink in. Why here?

New pilgrims arrive. The pastor makes room and takes a few steps aside. I follow him to a spot in the shade of an old walnut tree.

'And do you remember what you talked with him about?'

'No, not really. But there's something else that made him stick in my mind.' He points to the small table with the registration form.

'When the ladies asked him what country he was from, he said "Yugoslavia". When Madame Madeleau replied that that country no longer exists, your husband reacted slightly annoyed and asked if Bosnia-Herzegovina was on her list then.'

'He stated Bosnia as his country?'

'Yes, that too confused me, because a few days later it turned out that he was a Dutchman.'

The pastor takes another step further back into the shade.

'Oh? How'd you find that out?'

'Well, I saw it on TV that a pilgrim had committed suicide. France 3 Auvergne broadcast footage from the day before his death of the opening of an exhibit in an art gallery in Conques. Your husband was there, at the cash register to check out a gift when the TV crew walked in and shot footage. In the clip, you could see him rush out without purchasing the item. I recognized him immediately from that scar on his cheek. It was the first suicide on the Via Podiensis and was therefore big news. It was also in the newspaper – the fact that he was a Dutchman, I mean. With a photograph. I found it strange, because he had told us so emphatically that he was from Yugoslavia.'

'He visited an art gallery? I didn't know that.' It's true he hadn't bought anything there, because there was no art among the things I had recovered from the French police. I remember that moment well, when that big box was delivered. Each object was individually wrapped in a blue Ziploc bag. I took out his meager possessions one by one from the carton and I remember holding his alarm whistle to my mouth crying and imagining his lips giving me a final kiss.

'There was TV footage, you say? My husband was on TV? Is it still online somewhere?'

The priest shrugged. 'I don't know. Maybe it's still on the Internet. If not, you can probably request it. Hold on, I'll look it up for you.'

The priest takes his smartphone out of his pocket, types something, scrolls down and shakes his head. 'No, they only go back three months. Last year's footage is no longer online, but if you request it from France 3 Auvergne I'm sure they'll send it to you. They might charge a small fee. You can probably still find the name of the gallery on the Internet. The photo of him at the exhibit was in the next day's paper.'

'I'm definitely going to look it up, because I'd like to see what my husband looked like the day before he died.'

'I see.' He pauses. 'By the way, your husband wrote something in our guest book.'

'In your guest book?' My head swivels towards the entrance of the church, as though something of Emil is still there.

'Yes, a few sentences. In Cyrillic. I can't read it.'

'In Cyrillic? And do you still have it?' I ask.

'Of course.'

'And you didn't report it to the police.'

'No. Why would I? It was suicide. And I wasn't surprised to hear the news, because I immediately thought back to that moment of him crying on that low wall. I wondered later if we hadn't been remiss, whether we should've done something.' He points to the women at the entrance to the little church. 'We talked about it with each other, and yet we never could've suspected that he was tired of life.'

'No one saw his suicide coming, *mon père*.' I stroke his arm with a comforting gesture. 'Not even me. May I read what my husband wrote?'

He nods and leads me into the chapel. He stops at a table and opens a thick, old-fashioned notebook with a red leather cover and flips back to a page near the front of it.

'Here,' he says. 'July 28th of last year.'

He slides the book my way. My gaze goes to the indecipherable sentences. I don't immediately recognize Emil's handwriting, but my eyes come to rest on his clearly recognizable initials and the words *From Yugoslavia*, with which he signs the text.

I step back and bump into a pew. My heart is beating like mad. *From Yugoslavia*. Yugoslavia, indeed! Why? That country fell apart back in 1990 – three decades ago! He lived in the Netherlands and was a Dutch citizen, wasn't he? And I didn't know he could write Cyrillic either. What does this mean? I need to know what it says! I take a photo of the text with my phone and on an impulse send it to Selma, asking if she can translate the sentences for me. I then email the same photo to Omer, telling him that my husband wrote this in a guest book in a little church in France while walking the Camino and ask him, as well, what this could mean.

'Are you all right?'

I turn around. There's a worried look in the priest's eyes.

'I don't know,' I answer truthfully.

Day 3: Sunday, July 28th, evening
Dallas near Saint-Privat-d'Allier: the scars
Sunny with moderate winds. 28°C

I click on 'send', close my inbox and go to the bathroom. Let's hope now that France 3 Auvergne can email me the footage from the opening of that gallery soon. According to the information on their website, there's a processing time of up to two weeks after receipt of payment – way too long! I did already find and read the article about it in the newspaper from August 7th. It included a photo of Emil and the Galerie Art Conques, taken by the film crew that had walked in unannounced to shoot footage of the exhibit. The article contained no new facts.

I take off my clothes and step into the shower. As the water flows through my hair, I draw Cyrillic letters on the white tiles. This afternoon, Selma sent me the translation of the sentences Emil wrote in Cyrillic:

'*Long ago, in my other life, I was at a similar little church and heard the screams of women and children inside. They were being burned alive. I can hear their screams again. The stench of their charred bodies made me gag*.'

I was utterly devastated when I read that. Selma also texted me a little while later that the Cyrillic might indicate that the writer was a Serb. She informed me that nowadays Croats and Bosniaks no longer write in Cyrillic, but in Latin, and then asked if Emil had written that text. Alarmed by her question, I decided to tell a truth that was nevertheless a lie.

No, this was written after Emil's death.

Selma then inquired how I liked the Camino and whether I had managed to stay on schedule, as I had emailed her my itinerary previously. I replied in the affirmative. She responded with a smiley face with startled eyes and a raised thumb. I think she thinks I'm walking a lot of kilometers. I think so too.

I also received a response from Omer, who reported that Croats and Bosniaks also used to learn Cyrillic in school. So it's not certain that the writer was a Serb. He was still keeping all options open in his investigation.

All the way from Chapelle Saint-Roch to my B&B in Saint-Privat-d'Allier, I tried to link Emil to that message, and the words are still haunting my mind. Was Emil a Bosnian Serb because he wrote in Cyrillic in that book last year?

'Penance' was the word the priest used when I read him Selma's translation, and I keep repeating the word. 'Pénitence'. This certainly wasn't how I had envisioned Emil's Camino; as a penance, as a reflection on his life, on his sins, on the possible horrors, committed during his earthly existence. But perhaps it was, for he wrote nothing in the guest book about the joy during his life. He thought about the suffering of those who were dying. That was the focus of his memories, on the madness of war. Pénitence. I read somewhere that many pilgrims walk the Camino as penance. In the Middle Ages, church judges sometimes even imposed walking the Camino as penance for having committed earthly offenses. Had Emil seen it the same way?

At that lovely little church, he had thought back to the screams of people being burned alive. He had been there. In what capacity? As the one who set the church on fire? Or as someone who had hidden somewhere and watched from a safe distance? The images of the war in Bosnia take

hold of me and cause an unpleasant cramp in my stomach. I have to let that go, because I'm here now, on the Camino. And *I* don't have a past in Bosnia.

I aim the shower head a little higher and let the water stream over my face. This B&B is a former farmhouse. The property was renovated three years ago by a French couple who moved back to the French motherland from the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. In their previous lives he had been a teacher and she had been a nurse, and both considered themselves too young to stop working when they retired at fifty-five. So they started a second working life in tourism. Most of the people who run the *refugios* are energetic seniors, Emil had written. This place matches his description to a tee and is beautifully decorated, with Caribbean colors. The bathroom is huge and looks a lot like ours at home. When Stefan and Joran left for Amsterdam, Emil decided to turn one of the bedrooms into a large bathroom with a sauna. We often stood belly to belly in our lovely walk-in shower. Emil always gave me the best spot, right under the rain shower head. He used the regular shower head himself. Those were beautiful moments. We chatted endlessly. He especially enjoyed it when I dabbed the ridges on his back dry with the tip of my towel.

'Yes, I remember your husband,' the owner said in proper English, when I asked her at check-in if she remembered anything about Emil. 'He was the first Dutch pilgrim we'd had at our B&B since we began. But his scars made the biggest impression.' She gestured to her back.

'You saw his back?' I couldn't contain my surprise.

'Yes, by accident. I passed him in the garden as he was hanging up the clothes he had just washed on the clothesline,' she said, leading me up the stairs. 'The image of his back remained in my mind for a long time, longer than that streak on his face. Those whip scars were horrific. How did he get them?'

'Whip marks? No,' I said, as we walked down the hall. 'They were burns.'

The woman stopped and looked at me probingly. I stopped too and felt the straps of my backpack pulling down on my shoulders.

'Then how old was your husband when he got those burns?' she asked and looked at me with furrowed brows.

'I don't know,' I replied after a brief hesitation. 'He never wanted to talk about his back. So I just assumed that they were burns. From the war. He was originally from Bosnia-Herzegovina and fled in 1995.'

The owner shook her head.

'No, madame,' she said with a resolute tone in her voice. 'I treated burns in my previous life as a nurse and they really have a different structure and do not leave such streaks. Your husband's scars were almost certainly from whipping. I nursed a patient in my early years at the hospital who had been whipped by her husband. Her skin was completely open and had become infected. I cared for her back for a long time, even after all the wounds had closed up. The skin on her back had the exact same ribbed texture as your husband's.'

'Whipped,' I repeated in shock, and the gruesome flogging of the slave Kunta Kinte from the series *Roots* came to mind. I had watched that movie as a teenager and the images were etched into my mind.

'And did my husband say anything else?'

‘No. He said very little,’ she said and opened the door to my room. ‘We have mostly French guests and your husband didn’t really connect with them. Because of the language, I think.’

So he’d been whipped, I think again, as I turn off the shower tap. I feel the cramping sensation again. The horrific pain he must have suffered! It probably happened during the war. He must have been imprisoned. How awful. Yet another trauma. So that’s why he always wore a t-shirt while swimming and always made sure no one could see his back. I was the only one who knew about his scars. I was the only one he allowed to caress those ridges. Emil always remained silent about the circumstances relating to his mutilated back, responding only in broad terms: ‘I want to forget that period of my life. Just let me be.’ I let him be and inferred from his vague replies that they were burns.

Why had I let it rest? Why hadn’t I pressed the issue? I had always wanted to know everything down to the last detail about my cocoa beans, but not about my own husband. Had I really been interested in Emil? He had just been there. He put bread on the table, he went to soccer with the boys, he did our bookkeeping. He organized our entire existence, in fact. And I was perfectly fine with that and lived my own life in my chocolate atelier. I wasn’t a real member of our family all those years. I lived in my workshop, so to speak, and then went to visit the big house. When I was there I focused mainly on the children. Emil was the real heart of our family and held things together. If the boys or Caroline were having problems, he got them to talk about it. He was the one who asked the questions during parent-teacher meetings at school. He created our family chat group. He posted most of the messages, he arranged the apartment for our sons in Amsterdam, he renovated the place. He coordinated everything. Except for cooking and shopping, that is. I took care of that, but only because those were things I like to do. And all those years I thought we were a tight-knit unit. But I was wrong, because I had lived with a stranger who had covered up his childhood from me. His silence was in actuality a vote of no confidence. Did he doubt my love for him? Was he afraid that I would send him away if I discovered that he had committed crimes during the war? Was that it? Or perhaps he doubted my ability to keep my mouth shut? Was he afraid that I would blab about his secret? Or perhaps he doubted my strength to endure his misery? What does marriage really mean if you can’t share what’s really on your mind?

‘He was actually lonely,’ I say to my reflection, wiping away the condensation with the towel. I nod to myself and notice the tears welling up in my eyes again. I can’t think about this right now. Quickly, I walk over to the bed, sit on the edge, dry my feet, stand up and slip my black silk crinkle dress over my head. As I step to the dresser to grab the hair dryer, my phone catches my eye. A message has arrived: a selfie of Paul and a smiling Caroline, with airplanes in the background. They’re at the airport and ready for their flight to Orlando. She’s looking forward to the vacation, she told me this afternoon when I called her on my lunch break. She didn’t seem to miss me yet. Thank goodness. Paul asks how things are going. I type some generalities about having a painful blister and the swarms of flies that make it impossible to eat outside tonight. The B&B is located next to a horse farm, I write. Everything smells like horse, too. I send him some pictures of my day.

He asks if I experienced any special things today. I consider telling him about what Emil wrote in that guestbook, but decide not to. I don’t want to spoil his carefree time with Caroline with war stories.

Then the phone rings. It’s Paul.

‘Lotte!’ Caroline’s voice immediately cheers me up.

‘Hi sweetheart! So, are you already looking forward to Disneyworld?’

‘Yayyyy!’ she exclaims enthusiastically, and a whole story follows about all the attractions they’re going to visit. Caroline is a smart girl, just like her mother, but fortunately has a carefree quality about her that Marjo lacked. A boarding announcement echoes in the background.

‘Hey Lotte.’ It’s Paul’s voice. ‘We’re about to board.’

‘I hear that. Have a good trip, Paul.’

‘Thanks, I’m sure we will. Are you doing okay?’

I hesitate. Should I tell him? No. No. Now is not the time.

‘Yes, fine! Just one big blister on my toe.’

The other end of the line is silent for a moment.

‘Uh huh. And have you thought any more about my proposal?’

I hesitate again. After that chapel, I haven’t thought about Paul at all.

‘Yes, I have.’ I’m not lying, I tell myself soothingly. I did think about him for a few minutes this morning.

‘And?’

‘Stop it, Paul, don’t nag me. This is only day one of my Camino.’

Downstairs, a gong sounds. It’s time for dinner.

‘I have to go to the dining room. Can you text me when you’ve landed?’

‘Will do!’

I make a few kissing sounds and hang up. As I slide my slippers on my feet, I decide to send him a sweet message anyway. I then take a selfie, puckering my lips into a kiss.

‘A kiss for both of you!’ I write in the caption. I add a few hearts and press send.

I grab the hair dryer and dry my hair. As the hot air blows over my head, I think again about his proposal. Why don’t I actually say yes to Paul? What’s holding me back? After all, I married Emil even though I wasn’t really in love with him at the time. I bend over and push apart my wet curls with my fingers so that the hot air can reach them better. Marjo would’ve supported this marriage, I think. Marjo had also encouraged me to marry Emil, too. “He suits you, Lotte,’ she’d said. ‘And he doesn’t just treat you like a queen, but an empress. He respects your desire for freedom. With him, you can do whatever you want.’ And in that respect she was right. This afternoon, while walking, I had talked to Emil, raising my head to the swaying treetops. It was like he was up there on a branch somewhere looking down on me. I chatted endlessly and he felt so close, just like before his death, when we had those cozy little conversations together when he would spontaneously come into my atelier and sit down on a chair next to me, and I’d philosophize about new flavors and unique chocolate combinations with him while working. This afternoon I cried, telling Emil that I was so sorry I’d never told him how much joy his visits gave me and how much I miss him. A sudden gust of wind brushed against my cheek and it was as

though he was caressing me. I broke down and began to sob. I didn't recover until a young couple caught up with me and asked if I was okay. I nodded and walked on determinedly, but moments later anger welled up again within me at his lies. Ever since Bosnia, my emotions have been swinging from one extreme to the other.

I unplug the hair dryer and put the device back on the dresser. Done! As I walk to the door, I pass my bedroom window. Downstairs in the yard, a tall man with wet dark hair is hanging a dripping shirt over the clothesline. His upper body is bare. I can't see his face, only his back. The sight grips me and I stop and follow his movements. He has a nice build and the evening sun reveals the even undulations of his shoulder muscles. If you'd caress *his* skin, you'd feel no bumps, just soft and even skin. My brain searches the backs of the men before Emil, but finds only vague memories. Excesses often blur that which is normal. I close my eyes and the red lines reappear. I move my index finger along the grooves of his damaged skin and feel the moisture collecting in the crevices. My breathing quickens and a grim emptiness presses down on my gut. No, I'll never again dry Emil's scars with the tip of my towel and he'll never again hold and cradle me, full of love. I clutch the windowsill and begin to shake with sobs. The man at the clothesline turns around and looks up. I recognize him: it's Nicolas. Our eyes meet. He smiles at me, in an encouraging way, the way my friends looked at me as they walked past Emil's coffin in the crematorium, shortly before he disappeared into the fire.

III

At Tito's school

In our classroom there was a huge picture of our almighty leader, President Josip Tito, who started building the Yugoslavian workers' paradise in 1945. Our Tito ruled with an iron fist, just like his counterpart Stalin in the Soviet Union, except our marshal was popular because he had a keen eye for the needs of the people. We could travel freely and we enjoyed free health care, job security and excellent pensions. Moreover, Tito allowed for regional cultural expressions, such as music and folk dancing. And above all, he provided us with tangible economic prosperity. Between 1945 and the year I was born, 1967, the number of refrigerators, cars, washing machines and televisions doubled. We also benefitted. In 1971, my father was the first resident of our village to own a car – a privilege that owed itself to his profession, of course. As a general practitioner, he had to travel many kilometers and he could do so faster in his gray Zastava.

A few years later, Emil's mother was the first woman with a fully automatic washing machine. I still remember it being the subject of conversation at the dining room table. My sister, brother and I sat across from our parents and listened to our mother rattle on about how furious she was with that bitch, Mrs. Jukić, because the foaming suds from that appliance ran directly into our lower vegetable garden, making our vegetables taste like soap. There was no sewer on our street in those days, and Emil's family discharged its kitchen water onto our property, after which it made its way to the river. For a long time that had been just fine, until that washing machine arrived....

Tito was also smart to give the republics of Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina a measure of self-government. Through a clever strategy of 'divide and conquer', the regional leaders obediently toed the national line. The message was clear: the different groups had to live peacefully with one another and nationalist sentiments were mercilessly crushed. On TV, Yugoslavia looked like one big communist Woodstock, with images of cheerful gatherings of ethnic brothers. Meanwhile, the bishops, imams and patriarchs saw their followings dwindle. Tito condemned the church to the fringes of society, and the clergy were clearly not happy with that.

An important part of Yugoslav success was education. Immediately after the war, Tito introduced a central and free education system with textbooks that sang the praises of our beautiful nation and, of course, our marshal and his heroic deeds, rewriting history in the process.

In short, Tito was the undisputed alpha male of our Yugoslavian monkey rock. And when Tito died in 1980, a fight over the top spot broke out between the alpha males of the six republics, who fought that battle along the lines of ethnic differences. Goaded on by their power-hungry leaders, Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks once again began to openly point fingers and blame each other for the earlier massacres. Church leaders of the three ethnic groups also saw the opportunity to win back souls and openly supported the populists. The fact that this was pushing towards war didn't deter them; they wanted their power back.

The educated and wealthy inhabitants of the cities were initially indifferent to the ethnicity of their neighbors and friends. They often weren't even aware of what it was either. But in the much poorer countryside, things were different. Especially in rural areas, where families had known each other for centuries, memories of the past were still fresh and tensions were brewing under the surface. The same was true at our school, where we had a teacher with Croatian roots who hated the Serbs.

Emil, a Croat, was the hero of our class – first of all because his dad was the boss of the communist party in the region, of course, but also because he was super smart. He always got the highest marks in all subjects. Milan and I were also at the top of our class, but as a Serb, Milan received nothing but criticism. That had everything to do with our teacher, whose father had taken part in the fascist Ustaše movement and had served a prison sentence after the war. He had never gotten good work after that. And because of that Ustaše past, there had also been incidents between our teacher and Milan's father.

The man took revenge on the son and was constantly looking for excuses to punish Milan. Corporal punishment was forbidden, so he did it in a more subtle, and possibly much worse way. He humiliated Milan with words, in front of all the children. He asked him questions he couldn't answer and then laughed at him and told him he was stupid. The children would then repeat this in the schoolyard, because it had to be true if the teacher said it. Of course we never mentioned the fact that none of us had known the answer either.

I also clearly remember the image of Milan standing in the front left corner of our classroom, with his face against the wall and his hands folded behind his back. That was a regular occurrence. The teacher would accuse Milan of bad behavior for no real reason and then have him stand in the corner in an uncomfortable position for hours. He also always gave Milan menial tasks to do during P.E. The subtle physical violence against Milan is etched into my mind. It mostly happened during gymnastics class. Once, for instance, we had to jump over a leather vaulting buck and the teacher would catch us on the other side to keep us from falling onto the hard floor. When Milan jumped, the teacher stepped just to the side and Milan fell flat on his face. Milan then scrambled to his feet and stumbled back to his place at the back of the line. When it was his turn to jump again, the teacher stepped aside again and Milan fell again. The pain was on his face, but he kept his mouth shut. His mouth hardened into a line and tears ran down his cheeks, but he didn't utter a peep. When Milan didn't dare to jump again after four falls, the teacher reproached him in front of the whole class for being a coward. And what did we do? We bowed our heads and remained silent. We clearly saw what was happening, but we said nothing. And I'm ashamed of that to this day.

Day 4
Monday, July 29th
From Dallas-Saint-Privat-d'Allier to Saugues, 24 km
A planned coincidence

"Everyone is the smith of his own happiness, but coincidence helps with the forging."

Fliegende Blätter, German weekly humor and satire magazine (1844 – 1944)

Day 4: Monday, July 29th, morning

Through the forests towards Monistrol-d'Allier: eyes in the bushes

Sunny with a weak wind, 23°C

The distance between me and the three French sisters is growing. They've become dots that are fading into the green. This morning while examining the map in my Camino guide – a guide which bears the childish name of *Miam Miam Dodo* – I noticed that there was going to be a lot of forest on the route. I decided as a result to stick close to the three sisters. Nicolas had already left when I came down for breakfast, otherwise I would have asked him if he was up to escorting me through the forests. Even though we didn't talk much with each other yesterday evening, as he was sitting at the far end of the long table, our mutual sympathy revealed itself once again from the few words we did exchange. And my intuition tells me that he's the kind of guy who is happy to help a woman in need, and this woman is in need. Paul's horror stories about women getting raped have hit their mark. At home I'm relaxed when I go for a walk in the forest, but here I can't help but imagine there being an attacker behind every bush. It's so strange, I had never known this type of fear until yesterday. In my twenties I traveled alone all over the world and never felt afraid, so why now? That's something I have to think about. I sigh and slow down, as the sisters disappear from sight.

The three sisters from northern France are talkative brunettes in their late thirties. They're small, but wiry and fanatic hikers. Every summer they go on a long trek on one of the French GR routes. This year they're tackling the Via Podiensis. We hit it off right away yesterday evening during dinner. The three are not afraid of attackers, which is understandable given that they have each other and six trekking poles. I only have myself and a knife.

To allay my new fear with facts, this morning during breakfast I asked my fellow pilgrims whether they knew of any incidents involving women traveling on their own.

'What kind of incidents are you referring to?' they asked.

'I mean, have any women been raped or murdered?'

The entire table burst out in laughter. Apparently my question came across as a joke. The owners assured me that there had not yet been any 'incidents involving women'. I bashfully thanked them for their assurance, but the fear continued to linger within me. I had hoped to assuage my unease by sticking close to the three sisters, but after tailing them for an hour I have to face up to the fact that these French mountain goats climb too quickly for my Dutch calves. I can't keep up with them. Out of breath, I decide to take a break. I take off my backpack with a sigh, sit down on a low cobblestone wall, take the time to drink some water, break off a thin branch from a bush and use it to give my sweaty back a nice, thorough scratching. I moan with pleasure because the itching has been driving me crazy.

I observe the rolling landscape which contains a few gray farmhouses in the distance. In one of his apps, Emil had mentioned that the houses here look like those at home. I hadn't given much thought to the comment last year – when looking at the picture he sent, I had paid more attention to the red geraniums in the foreground than to the farmhouses behind them. Only now do I realize that he wasn't referring to South Limburg when he wrote about 'home', but to his village in Bosnia, for in Bosnia they do indeed use a lot of dark gray stone. In South Limburg it's a

sporadic sight and only present in Vaals, near the border with Wallonia. This was yet another example confirming the fact that I had been living in a different reality than Emil. I throw my itching stick onto the ground and shift my weight on the bumpy cobblestone. I run my index finger over the rough stone beside me and yawn. I didn't sleep well because all night I kept going over in my head what Emil had written in that guest book and which words he had used to sign off: 'from Yugoslavia'. In his mind, he was from a country that no longer existed. He was the inhabitant of a lost world.

Whatever the case, enough musing for now. Time to get back on the trail!

Once I get moving again I reach a fairylike forest. I also recognize this stretch from Emil's photos. The path is becoming more and more narrow, closed in on both sides by human-high walls of gray stones stacked upon each other. The scent of honeysuckle is intoxicating and thin rays of sunlight shine through the thick foliage. The birds sing and somewhere a brook gurgles. The intimacy and beauty of the path strike me, and my thoughts seem to slow down. My fear gradually ebbs away and my gait settles into a fixed cadence.

After a few kilometers, I arrive at the top of a steep descent. The route winds downward and ends far below at a hedge of shrubbery. I take a few steps onto the path and analyze the situation. Good lord. This is really incredibly steep, and the worn cobblestones are covered with a layer of sand. Descending here is like skiing on a double black diamond trail with ice under the snow. I need to be careful. My eyes survey the ravine, looking for an alternative route, and at the bottom left spy a strange flickering of light, as though someone is taking pictures with a flash. I take my phone out of my fanny pack, activate its camera and zoom in on the bushes where the flashes came from. I gasp. The image of a pair of binoculars between prickly blackberry bushes appears on my screen. Two spheres are gazing up at me, reflecting the sunlight when its rays strike the lenses through the gently blowing leaves. The man or woman holding the object is not visible, but I can make out hands with white skin. My heart begins to pound wildly.

What the fuck is this! I quickly take a picture. I scan the bushes once again, but the binoculars are no longer to be found. It's gone! I put my phone back in my fanny pack and dazedly peer into the ravine. What was that person doing in those bushes? Watching deer? Or bees? Or birds? Or me?

Nonsense. Everyone was sure of it at the breakfast table this morning – no incidents involving women occur on the Camino. So keep moving! *Don't forget that hip pocketknife you bought in Le Puy-en-Velay, Bonnet*. My hand moves to my pocket and grips the weapon. But it doesn't help, the fear persists. I walk backwards a few steps, then turn around and hurry back to the path I came from. I hide behind a wide oak tree with my switchblade at the ready. Gasping for air, I lean against the tree.

Now what?

Now nothing. I'll wait for the next group of pilgrims and walk with them into that ravine.

'Coward!' my brain yells. 'You aren't scare of a pair of binoculars, are you?'

'I sure am!' my feeling screams and wins.

[Note from the editor: this chapter continues after this sentence for a bit. The letter hereafter would normally follow after 11 more chapters, but those were skipped in this sample translation.]

The letter

VI

The gray falcon and the black lamb

There are people who enrich your life, who do or say something that sticks in your mind. The old imam in our village was one of those people. Not because he bombarded me with stories about Allah and Islam, but because he spoke to me about the power of nature and the beauty of everyday life.

'People prefer to listen to fantastic lies than to sober facts,' he said on a sunny evening in October of 1985, and he took me with him to the world of demagoguery. Our hodža wasn't only wise, but he also had two unusual hobbies: photography and falconry. Starting in our early childhood, Emil, Milan and I went on walks with the hodža a few times a year. During these walks we would release the falcon and use the hodža's camera to take pictures of the things that caught our eye. We'd develop the pictures later that evening in his darkroom. There, under the intimacy of the red light, he'd ask each of us why we had chosen that specific subject for our photograph, listening attentively to our explanation. By asking these questions, he taught us to interpret what we actually saw. I didn't begin to realize the significance of this instruction until after the war.

In any case, on that particular fall day in 1985 the hodža already predicted that the war was coming. It was a sunny day and we were climbing up a path through the oak forest to the bare, rocky plateau above. Our ascent was different than it used to be – less exuberant, and less carefree too. Emil, Milan and me were beginning to drift apart, as we had been going to different schools for some time now. Hyperintelligent Emil was attending Gymnasium, of course, I belonged to the class one level below his and was going to the Real Gymnasium and Milan was going to a technical high school. He could have easily made it into Gymnasium with his excellent grades, but his parents wouldn't let him. He had to learn a trade and start earning money as quickly as possible. Milan did what he was told and made new friends, but we still saw each other on weekends and still had a good time with each other.

We were chatting about all kinds of things as we followed the hodža up the path and reached the open plain where there was a wrought-iron Serbian orthodox cross mounted on a rock. The cross had been erected there in remembrance of the Serbian women and children who had been murdered at the site by the Croatian ustaša during the war. Milan stopped in front of the cross and began to pray. Emil and I were bewildered. Since when had Milan, an atheist, become religious? We asked him and he snapped back that we had no idea what we were talking about. We changed subjects and took a break to have something to eat and drink. A herd of sheep was grazing between the rocks and a black lamb broke away from the others, hopped towards the cross and began to nibble on the grass next to the rock. The hodža started his ritual and asked me if I could hold his camera for him. He moved away from us, released his gray falcon and made a few sounds. The bird flew up and shortly thereafter landed on the black cross. On an impulse, I took a picture of the gray falcon on the cross with the black lamb next to it.

That evening, the hodža and I were alone in his darkroom. It wasn't until my picture of the falcon and the lamb became visible in the stop bath that I saw that both animals were looking directly at the camera and that the picture was special.

'Well, well. This picture could have been on the cover of The Black Lamb and Gray Falcon,' the hodža reacted, while leaning over the tray. I asked what that book was about and whether I could read it. The hodža said that it was an English language travel guide about the Yugoslavia of the 1930s. The British writer drew parallels between a Serbian myth and the threat of war at that time.

'This Rebecca West pointed out that a gray falcon named Hitler would promise the Germans an eternal Reich and predicted that the docile German sheep would follow him, into the hell of war,' he said in a sad voice.

'The same thing is about to happen again, boy,' he whispered after a moment of silence. 'But now here, amongst us. A gray falcon is flying over our country. This time he's a Serbian by the name of Slobodan Milošević, and he will lead the docile Serbian sheep into a new war and drag us into it along with him.'

He then told me that people always prefer to listen to the fantastic lies of the opportunists than to the sober facts of the experts. And the more splendid the fabrication, the more people there are who will believe in it, he said. Then, as an example, he told me the myth about the weak Serbian prince Lazar. After Prince Lazar was cut to pieces by the Ottomans on Kosovo Field in 1389, the Serbians became the pitiable subjects of the Turks. But what did the Serbian Orthodox church do? Instead of portraying Prince Lazar as a loser, they portrayed him as a great hero. For after receiving a message from God – brought by a gray falcon – Prince Lazar had chosen a heavenly kingdom over an earthly kingdom. The Serbians had thus been venerating a loser for almost six hundred years because he would lead them via the path of earthly misery to eternal happiness in heaven. The hodža advised me to always be critical towards the rhetoric of leaders, to always search for different perspectives and to never go along with the herd. And I had to keep my picture of the gray falcon and the black lamb with me at all times to remind me of this advice.

When I then went to hang my picture on the line to dry, I thought of Milan, the atheist, who had prayed before the Serbian cross that afternoon and who, a few hours later, had pontificated about Slobodan Milošević and the fact that the new great leader of Yugoslavia wouldn't be a Croat, but a Serbian. It was then that I realized that Milan had become a believer of fantastic lies, and that his and my paths were diverging into different lives.

The hodža made prints of my picture of the gray falcon and black lamb for all three of us and urged us not to become docile sheep who go running off after a screaming demagogue. Milan took the picture, but didn't listen.

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