

TEA TULIĆ  
**FATHER (A FRAGMENT)**

*Translated by John K. Cox*

“WE TRAVELLED ALL OVER THE PLACE. Whatever city you want, just pick, and I’ll draw it for you,” my father says.

We look at photos, and he passes his hand through his scraggly beard, makes coffee, and travels through cities wearing dark clogs. The water roars through the house.

“Whatever city you want.”

In my father photographs gather from the lake where we were happy. In one photograph I’m five years old and standing naked on a floating wooden dock. My father caught a snake with his hands, pulled it out of the water, beat it to death with a shovel, and then hung it up on the trunk of a tree. We grinned; my grandma lifted her dress up over her knees and launched her legs into the lake.

“There won’t be a lot of photographs left behind after me, but when you go, child, the world will be crammed full of pictures of dead people.”

Earlier, my father used to travel and read books. He was capable of quarrelling with anyone. Now, though, he needs more sleep. He sleeps until ten in the morning, after he prepares lunch, and during the evening news. At night he smokes. And he is often cold. He drags a big heater all around the apartment with him. He curses up a storm at the hot oil that pops up out of the skillet when it spatters him, at the washing machine when its door falls open, at the dog that licks his hands compulsively. Sometimes, in the half-hush of his apartment, he swears at civil servants, politicians, people who say they always speak the truth, and people who think but don’t say that he annoys the crap out of them. But he no longer looks to have a falling-out—he just looks at them in confusion.

He arranges all of his shoes in a row on the floor, he piles dozens of pieces of paper outlining various plans and solutions on his work desk, and

he waits for his birthdays to pass so he can officially take retirement.

“I’m not going to wash dishes anymore,” he says frequently.

All of my father is in that swarthy face of his; it’s as if he’s concealing salt in the deep seams around his eyes. I can imagine him bringing a bowl of soup up to his face and then closing his eyes as the salt falls like snowflakes.

In my father photographs gather from the island that we used to go to every summer. Sometimes we’d get visits from the animals that would swim across the sea. Hysterical tourists would wait for them on the beaches and offer them their scented hands. That much swimming exhausts any animal. When they arrive, they always nap for a bit in the sun. Recently deer on the island drank seawater. Everything was vibrating, evaporating by the millimetre, and falling into the blue. Three days in a row they came, one after the other, large and small deer; they drank from the sea and disappeared. The children cried, and low tide arrived. There was singing and dancing on the piazzas. Some people played cards and drank everything that was put before them. We didn’t see this part, but we saw that big passenger ship. They announced its arrival. Several hundred airily dressed people disembarked, and our fellow citizens dashed over. They more or less went for a swim. They touched the ship’s bow, which was bigger than our small city with its breast-shaped hills.

Water gathers in my father. His legs and eyelids swell up. He takes pills for that. We don’t visit that lake anymore; it’s far away now, and we don’t know the people who own it, who have built houses for recreation there. The island is also far for us, and our relatives there want it that way. We don’t have our own vacation house on the lake or at the sea. Our vacation homes are the ones where we stare up at high ceilings until late in the night. The homes that weary us.

My father pulls a long hair out of his mouth and takes a seat in his plush armchair. The impending emptiness of that chair belongs to me. While he watches television, I’m looking into his eyes, which are closed, surrounded by flowers; a great number of petals have been shed and are lying on his face, neck, and chest. He’s wearing the suit he was married in. There he lies with everybody around him, quiet and decorous. No draft reaches him, and I caress his rubbery face, which is going to turn into porridge, a meal for something.

“My hair’s dead,” he says.

I cut his hair, and it falls onto the terrazzo. There are no curtains on the windows but also no daylight. The blinds are closed. His hair is soft, silky, black. I use scissors around his ears, and I'm careful with the ear that's been operated on. I take care with both of them. Father sits, tiny, on the chair, like a little crow. He smells like roux. I take care not to cut his hair too short, so he won't vanish, for he has a small head like me. Nobody has such small heads, and other people are always smiling at us. They believe we're good people.

"It's dead," he says.

"Yes, it is," I respond as I sweep the terrazzo floor and the silky black nothingness falls from his shoulders.

"Would you like to live in an apartment with more light?" I ask.

"No, because then I'd never leave it," he counters.

When I call my father on the phone, I want him to pick up. If he doesn't answer immediately, I call back incessantly. "Where are you? Pick up," I say. When he answers, I ask if his legs are swelling. I do not tell him that we could go to the cemetery. What will we do there? When we stand over my mother, over the white gravel, we know she isn't there, but she's also not here. Our small white heron, all mysterious.

When I call, I think about how I cannot say "dearest" to him. That's not up to me.

God needs people like the two of us so he can remain shy, quiet, and dignified. So he can drink from the sea like a deer and disappear. So we can throw his little bones into the distance.

For his birthday I give my father undershirts and cologne. I tell him to take care of himself, drink water, and eat ginger.