

Miro Gavran

Forgotten Son

(excerpt)

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The First Notebook

June 14, 1986

I will write in this notebook the way our teacher Anna told me. Write down everything, everything that happens every day, she said. And I was crying, and she said that we might meet again someday. And I said, I will be very happy if I see you again, and she said you will be happier now, you will be with your parents and with your brother and sister, you'll be happy won't you, and I cried even harder, and Mama said we must go now, and shook hands with Anna, and Dad said nothing, just looked down at the ground. And I said I would like to stay, and Anna said Sweetheart, you know you are too old now, you know that you can't stay here anymore. I heard something just now, when I was writing the last sentence, I heard something from that room where Mama and Dad are, and it sounded like a quarrel, but I did not understand what they were saying, what they said to each other, hissing at one another so you couldn't understand anything. I am alone in this room, I was never alone before. There were six of us in each room there at the home, and today Mama said, when we got here, here, this is your room, aren't you pleased, and I said nothing, and my brother and sister are in the other room, this one next to mine, and I am here alone and it is all so very sad, and I should fall asleep now, because Mama and Dad said goodnight, Son, and today Dad said, just when we arrived at the house with the bus, Dad also said welcome to your home, Son, and Mama said why was he making a speech when Mislav didn't understand anyhow, what she really said was that he didn't fully understand. Mislav, that's me. And now I can't fall asleep, and everything is so sad, and there is a lovely bed in this room. And my friend Grga always croaked like a frog before we fell asleep, and that's how it used to be, and we all laughed. And Zdravko would say can't you croak louder than that, Grga, and then Grga would try harder, and then we all laughed in the dark, because the lights had to be off after the teacher on duty said under the covers and good night.

And in the bus today a large lady was vomiting and Mama said who ever heard of eating boiled eggs before a journey, and Dad said be quiet or someone will hear you. And the trees on the way went zoom zoom as the bus went faster and faster, and when we stopped, I went to pee, and Dad

went where they drink coffee and other stuff, and Mama said I'll have a juice. Then we drove along again, and Dad looked at me and smiled at me so that I smiled back, and Mama looked at nothing and said nothing, and kept on saying nothing, so Dad asked why are you keeping quiet so loudly, and she did not answer, and after two more turns in the road Dad said what's wrong with you, and Mama said it will all be different, and Dad said where, and Mama said in our village, in our house. I just listened. Dad said he is our child and he has to live with us. And Mama said it will be harder for him and harder for us, and Dad said something I have forgotten, and Mama said the people in the village will be surprised to see him, and Dad said are you thinking about us or about him, and Mama shouted angrily I am thinking of our other children, I am thinking of Dubravka and Nicky, I am thinking what their lives will be like now - and then they looked at me, and Dad said we won't talk about it now, and they were silent, and I looked at the trees going zoom zoom as the bus went faster.

When the bus came to Nova Gradiska we got out and went into another bus with ordinary seats, and Mama said just a little more and we'll be in our Omorina. And when the conductor said tickets please, Mama and Dad said here you are, while I put my hand into my pocket, and there was nothing there, and the conductor said your ticket please, young man, your ticket please, and my hand was in all my pockets, and Mama says show him your ticket, and I say it isn't in my pocket any more, and the conductor said then you have to pay, and everyone was looking at us, and Mama said why didn't you look after your ticket, and I could see how those people were not just looking at us but at me, and I started crying, and Dad took out money, actually he first took his wallet out of the pocket which is hidden inside his coat. And then some woman who was standing at the front near the driver took a good look at us, and then came towards us, and said hello to my mother and my father, and then asked my mother if they were already back from Zagreb, and Mama said yes we are, we went to pick up our son. And that woman said has Nicky been in Zagreb, and Mama said not Nicky, Mislav, this is our oldest son, and that woman looked at me, and her eyes were this big, and she got all confused, and said you are joking, and Dad said this is our son Mislav, and the woman held out her hand to me, and Dad said Son, shake hands with the lady. And that woman was all pale when she saw that I don't know what to do, because when I took her hand, I held on to it for too long, and that woman said I did not know you had another son. Mama was all red in the face, and that woman looked at Dad, and his lips were all trembling as if he was going to say something any minute, but the words would not come out. And Mama and Dad looked away, as if they were scared that their eyes would meet the eyes of that woman. So nobody moved for a while, until that woman said your son ... but she didn't continue the sentence because it looked as if she did not know what words to use to finish it, and then Mama said our son has been at school in Zagreb, and that woman said oh, I see. And then we were all quiet again until we reached my parents' village which is called Omorina, and the three of us got out and so did that woman and two other people, and while we walking from the station Dad and Mama said hello and good-day to some people, and they said it back, and they all looked at me and I felt as if the new shirt they had brought me was making me itchy, and I looked at the village, and how not many cars passed, and a cart went by pulled by two horses like in the movies, and the man who was sitting in the cart said hello to Dad.

When we came into the yard, she and he were standing at the door to the house, and Mama said Mislav this is your brother Nicky, and this is your sister Dubravka. Then they looked at me, and I

looked at them, and I felt that they felt they were looking at something ugly, and I was uncomfortable, and I thought I am going to start crying now, but I didn't.

Mama told me to shake hands with my brother, but Dubravka held out her hand first, and then Nicky held out his hand. Dad said that Nicky was fifteen years old, and Dubravka was seventeen, and I told them that my teacher Anna had told me that I am twenty years old, and Mama said yes, Mislav, you are twenty, and you are already very big, but you will listen to your parents if you want to be ... and Mama said all sorts of things like that.

Then they let me wash my hands and wash myself, and they showed me the yard, and they showed me the house, and I had a small rest sitting in the biggest room which is the first one when you come in, and Mama said your sister Dubravka cooked lunch today, Mislav, now we will have lunch, and my brother said I have picked some cherries and some black cherries for after lunch, and Dad said you picked them for your brother Mislav, didn't you, and my brother Nicky did not reply. So we started to have lunch, and Dad said it is hot today. I was very hungry from the journey and I started eating, I ate quickly, and then I stopped, I felt they were all looking at me. Dubravka and Nicky looked at me in such a strange way, and Mama and Dad, they were all silent, and I could not eat any more, and I remembered my teacher Anna who was now far away and I remembered Grga, and Zdravko, and I started crying, they never looked at me the way these people did, and it was useless for Dad to ask me to eat, and he could not eat himself, and Mama said you have to eat if you want to be a big boy.

Later I sat on a bench under the walnut tree, because it was not hot there, and Dad sat beside me, and when the night came, Dad said we have to go into the house, it is time for supper and bed.

June 15, 1986

Today was Sunday, I mean it still is Sunday, but it's night-time already and everybody has gone to bed. When I woke up this morning Mama and Dad were already up, and Dad said that there was nothing he liked as much as Sunday morning, and Mama said all days are the same as far as I am concerned. And then Dubravka came into the main room and said good morning, and Mama said the same, and she said Mislav, dear, say good morning to your sister, and I said good morning, Sister, and Dubravka didn't say anything. Then they talked about something but I have forgotten what, and then Dad said I will show Mislav the village today, and Mama said perhaps that would not be a good idea, and Dad said why would it not be a good idea. Mama said don't do it yet today, perhaps it's better that he stays at home for the first few days. Dad looked straight into Mama's eyes, and she had to look down at the floor. Dad said Mislav has to see the village he is going to live in, and Mama said perhaps you are right, there really is no way out of it now.

After breakfast Dad said let's go, Mislav, and I said where, and Dad said to do the rounds of the village. And then Mama handed me the shirt they had given me yesterday when they came for me, and that shirt was still biting, I mean it made me itchy, but that's probably the way it has to be with a new shirt.

We went down the street and Dad said this here is the post office, and it was a big house with a strange roof. See, this is the store where we do our shopping, and later he said this is the church, this is our Catholic church, your mother and I are Catholics you know and so are your sister and brother. And what is a Catholic, I asked, and Dad said they were people who believed in God and went to the same church, and I asked Dad am I a Catholic, and Dad said yes you are, Son, you were baptised when you were born. And I asked Dad where was I born Dad. Dad said you were born in another village and you lived there until you were five, and then we took you to Zagreb, and we moved here after that. Don't you remember the village where you were born, Mislav? I don't remember it, Dad, I only remember Zagreb. Dad didn't say anything to that but his eyebrows were somehow different and his eyes, too. Then a man came along and said good morning, Joe, to my father, and my father said it's not really morning any more, it's already eleven o'clock, and the man said that on Sundays eleven o'clock was still morning. And then Dad said let me introduce you, this is my son Mislav. And that man said aha, I did not know you had another son, and he held out his hand to me, and I took hold of his hand, and he said his name, and I said my name, because that's what you are supposed to do when someone shakes hands with you. Have you come to visit for a while with your father, the man asked me, and Dad answered instead of me saying no, he is going to live with us. And what do you do or are you a student, asked the man, looking at me, and Dad said he has finished his apprenticeship as a carpenter. Then a silence fell, and that man looked at me one minute and at Dad the next, and he said good, go on with your stroll, I won't keep you, and he quickly walked away in the other direction and Dad gave a deep breath as if he had been doing some hard work or running up a hill. Then Dad said this here is the village soccer field, and some boys were making those white lines for soccer, shaking white powder out of tins, and the white lines were falling behind them, and then some other man passed us and said hello to Dad, and Dad told him, too, this is my son, and the man said from your first marriage probably, and Dad said from the first one and the only one, and that man said wait a minute, are you saying that this young man is your son and Neda's, Dad said yes, and the man said you are joking, and Dad no I'm not joking, and the man said how come I have never seen him, and Dad said the boy lived in Zagreb, and the man said but you never talked about any other son, and neither did Neda, and Dad did not reply, but you could see he was uncomfortable and did not know that to say. That man had a strange face and big eyes, and he looked at me a bit and then at Dad, and Dad was looking away, and I did not like it either that that man was looking at us like that.

Then that man said Joe, I don't understand, and Dad said the boy went to school in Zagreb, and the man said but why didn't he come home, and Dad said it was one of those schools, and the man took a good look at me and it was as if something became clear to him and he simply said oh, that's the way it is. Then that man and Dad said goodbye, and I was in the road again walking with my father. And then you could see some other man coming towards us, and Dad asked me: would you like to walk a bit in the forest, and I said alright, and we turned away from the road onto some narrow path, and when we entered into the forest it seemed to me that my Dad liked it more being with me here, than there on the village road, where he had to talk with the people who chanced along.

It was not so hot in the forest, only those branches which grab at your face aren't very nice, even though Dad kept on telling me to take care. And we walked a lot in the forest, and Dad only spoke when a lot of time had passed in silence, and I would answer his questions. Later we came

back to the same place where we had entered the forest, and I was very surprised, because I thought we were walking in a straight line, and I couldn't understand how we were now back at the same place, and everything in the forest must have turned around in my head, but Dad said we had walked in a circle, and we were soon on the road in our village, and my Dad asked me did I like our village, and I said no, and Dad asked why not, and I said that Zagreb was a hundred times more lovely and there were more people going here and there, and Dad said you will come to love your village, too.

And when I was sitting beside the well today, my brother Nicky was kicking a ball around the yard, and then two of his friends came, and they kicked the ball around together, and they somehow kept laughing, but they were around my brother's age, around fifteen years old, and one of them said to me do you want to play with us, and my brother said he doesn't like football, and I said I like football, and Nicky said again Mislav, you don't like football, but that's not true, so I said again that I really like football. Then that young man said why shouldn't he play, and Nicky said I don't want him to play with us, and that young man said Nicky, come on, don't be silly and then he kicked the ball towards me, and I went to kick it, but my stupid foot missed, and they all laughed. And I don't know how it happened that I missed the ball, because I have always played football well. And the other one said that was great, like in American comedies, and I sat down again beside the well and turned my head away so I did not have to hear them laughing, but I could hear them as well as if I was looking at them, then my brother Nicky said he missed it on purpose, and that one said you're kidding, and Nicky said no, I'm not. And then the other one said is he a relative of yours, and Nicky said he is my very own brother, and that one said you're kidding, I had no idea you had a brother, and Nicky said I had no idea either until a week ago, our parents only told my sister and me we had a brother one week ago. Come on, introduce us to your brother, said the first one, and Nicky why do I have to introduce you, he's not quite all there you know, the doctors say he's like a child of ten. You mean he's backward, that one said. That's the word they use for them, said Nicky. And soon after, those two boys said they had to go home, and Nicky said you just got here, why do you have to go, it's Sunday, there's lot of time, but they left, and Nicky was sorry they did not stay. Then Nicky started looking at me in a strange way, and then he went into the house, and I sat sitting by the well for a long time.

It's really sad in this house, and if my teacher Anna hadn't given me this notebook, I have no idea what I would do like this at night when they say goodnight, Mislav, sleep well. I wish my teacher Anna was here, because I always liked looking at her, and when she was beside me, there was always some sort of fine feeling in my chest, and a flow of sweetness all around me, and I was very happy whenever I saw her, and now my teacher Anna is far away, and I would like it very much if she were here, but she is not, she just is not. And I always liked playing with Grga when we piled up those blocks, and how one block fitted into another block, and they all fitted, and we played to our heart's content. And now in this room everything is so empty, and there's no-one here except me, I am the only one who sleeps in this room, and now I don't feel like writing this any more, so I will stop writing now, and I am going to sleep for a while, or I will just lie there, because that's nice, too.

June 16, 1986

When Dad went to work today, and that was when I was still asleep, Mama said ah now I am going to teach you as if you were going to school, and I said why when school is over now, but Mama said you still have a lot to learn. And I didn't feel like working like that, so I asked will Dubravka and Nicky be learning something, and Mama said no, they won't, their school holidays started on Friday, and I said but my school finished on Friday, too, and my teacher Anna said to me on Friday Mislav, this is your last day of school, and Mama said, when I said that, she said maybe school is over, but your real learning is just beginning, I shall teach you lots of things your professors and teachers didn't, or perhaps they did, but they left out a lot of things. And then Mama started to teach me from some books about domestic animals and animals which live in the forest, and the wild beasts are the most dangerous. And it was interesting but I knew a lot about it before. Then Mama taught me from some fat book marked with the words CONQUERING SPACE and it said there when the first space ship had flown off into space, and Mama said, just turn these last pages and you will find an explanation of all the words, and it really did tell you there what space is, but I can't just simply explain it all now. And Mama taught me who the first people were who climbed up onto the Moon, and all about how it happened. After that Mama taught me from a book called ETIQUETTE AND POLITE BEHAVIOUR, and in that book they tell you all about when you have to stand up and why, who sits in the front of the car, and who sits in the back and how to write a letter and what a telegram for a man who has died is supposed to look like. And then Mama took hold of some yellow book called MATHEMATICS, and I froze because I don't understand anything about numbers. And then Mama asked me how much you get if you take something away from something, and how much you get if you add something to something, and I hardly knew anything, and then Mama made me think, and then I had to tell her how much you get when you multiply a number by some other number, and then what you get when you divide that same number by some other number, and I still did not know anything about the answers, and Mama only shook her head and said dear God, dear Lord, they didn't teach you any maths, but never mind, I'll teach you, they'll see, I'll show everyone that you can do much more, and that you know much more, one only has to work with you in the right way. And then Mama set me some problems out of the yellow book called MATHEMATICS and made me learn and repeat some answers to her, and since it all made no sense to me, and who could remember all that anyway, she got angrier and angrier with me, and said you must concentrate, you yourself have to want to learn something, and I said that I would rather learn all that about the domestic and wild animals, and Mama said now we are covering the basics of maths, and your natural history and civics class is over. Mama made me repeat the answers over and over, and when I got something wrong again, she shouted how is it you don't understand that, and I started crying. Then she said don't cry now, take a hold of yourself, and when I stopped crying she wanted me to copy something out of the yellow book, and I started crying again, and then she said alright we won't do any more maths today, now I will read you a story, and then she took some other book and read me a story about two brothers somewhere, and they put some old woman in a sack, and threw her into a stream, and the story was all strange like that, and when Mama had read me the story, then she told me to tell the story briefly in my own words, and then I started telling it and every little while Mama said you left something out, and I would remember what I had skipped over and go back and tell it. And that's how I learned all morning with Mama, and when Mama said that's it for today, I was already very tired, and very happy that it was over.

And this morning, when I had just woken up, and I wake up all at once, it suddenly came into my head, but I'm not in Zagreb any more, I am in a village, here at my parents' place, and suddenly it came to me that I was sad that Zagreb was so far away, and that I could not ride in the tram, and I really did enjoy it when Grga and Zdravko and I went riding around Zagreb in a tram, and that was very nice. And I liked going with Grga, but Zdravko didn't ever want to, I liked going to the station to watch the trains arriving and leaving, and when a lot of passengers suddenly appeared, and then just as suddenly there was hardly anyone, and then again a crowd of them with bags and big suitcases, but some of them had nothing at all. And it is so lovely in Zagreb when it is not raining, and a lot of people are going along the street and you can hear them all saying something, but still you can't quite understand what, and then you just walk along, and the weather is nice, and everything is lovely, and no-one takes any notice of you, and you, that is, me, are very happy if it's me who's walking along. And then, just like that, when I thought about that this morning when I woke up, and it suddenly came to me that I was sad that I was not in Zagreb, and I felt like closing my eyes and falling asleep, and finding when I opened them that I was in my home in Zagreb where I was with my friends, and then my brother Nicky came into the room and said come on get up, breakfast is already on the table, and I could not sleep any more.

When Dad came home from his job in Nova Gradiska, we all went out to do the digging up i.e. digging up around the corn. They even took me with them. Mama had just asked Joe, should Mislav stay home to look after the house, or should he go with us, and Dad said of course he will go with us. Then we started towards the field, and you go to the field by going out of the yard, behind our house, through a small gate which squeaks, and you enter the vegetable garden, and through the garden into the orchard, and then from the orchard you come to where the corn has sprouted. And all of us carried our own hoe, and then Dad, Mama, Dubravka and Nicky each stood at the beginning of their row, and Dad said Mislav, to start with just watch how we do it, and later we will teach you too, and then they started striking at the ground around the corn stalks, and used their hands to weed out the small blades of grass huddling by the stalks, and then they used their hoes to pile up soil around the stalks, and so on around each corn stalk, and the rows are very long, and you only hear the hoes striking the soil, and no-one, just no-one, talked much, just a word or two. When they finally reached the end of their rows, then they turned around and stood at the beginning of a new row. Then Dad said Mislav, watch me now, watch how I dig up around this corn, it is best to hold the hoe like this, and then around the corn stalk like this, not too deep, these blades of grass have to come out by hand because they are too near the stalks, you see, come on Mislav, you try it now, and then I took my hoe, and stood at the beginning of a row, and started striking the soil around the corn, and pulled out two blades of grass with my hand, and just when I was trying to pile up the soil around the corn, I missed and cut the corn instead. My brother said this is not a job for him, and my sister said nobody could teach him how to hoe around corn in Zagreb, Mama said he just better walk around, and Dad said just you keep on hoeing up slowly Mislav, and if you cut into a stalk or two it doesn't matter. But he said look how I do it, see Mislav, I will do it slowly like this around these two, just watch, see, you do not have to go faster. So I keep on digging up around the corn, and it's not easy to hold the hoe at first, if you aren't used to it, and at the beginning of that row I didn't want to but I cut into every second stalk or even sliced right through it, and Mama was already saying you had better leave that, but I said I like this game, and I kept on digging with them, and soon I was hardly cutting into the stalks at all, and I got better and better at it. And when I came to the

end of that row, and when we all turned around again and stood at the beginning of a new row, and started digging up again, my hoe damaged almost no stalks at all, and Dad said Bravo Mislav, I have never seen anyone learn so quickly to hoe up around corn, and I felt very pleased. Then Mama shouted at Nicky look how much corn you have cut into, be more careful, do it right or don't do it at all. And Nicky said what are you shouting at me for, anyone can see that Mislav has destroyed half the corn, and you haven't said anything to him. When we reached the end of that row, then we took a small break and we sat down in the orchard under the shade of a large pear tree, we drank water, Dad and Mama talked, and we all rested together, and then went on with our work. We worked right up until night started to fall, and then we started off home. Mama fried eggs and potatoes for supper, and I was very hungry, and enjoyed everything I ate. After supper we all went into the big room where the TV is, and I liked the part when they showed the ads, because that was what I liked best in Zagreb, and when the ads finished tonight, and then some play started, I came here to my room and I was alone and I played with my toy car for a long time, and then Mama came and said don't forget to wash your feet, so I went into the bathroom to wash my feet, and when I came back to my room from the bathroom, I played with my car for ages and ages and then you could hear how they had stopped watching television in the big room, because you could hear their voices, and most of all you could hear my Mama and my sister shouting. My sister was shouting why have you been hiding him from us all this time, why. And she said something else, and then you told us you had to look after a distant relative, all these years we didn't know we had a brother, and what a brother - and Mama said you are too young to understand, and my sister said I will be eighteen next year, and Mama said we only wanted to bring you up without knowing the awful truth, we did not want to burden you with him, and my sister said that is simply stupid, you are both crazy. And Mama said it was my idea, your father has been against it all these years, you were two years old, and Nicky was expected any day when we decided to sent Mislav to Zagreb, and we moved here to this village where nobody knew us. And my sister said that doesn't make sense either, you have always been like that, and Mama said do you think a cheeky little girl like you is going to teach me how to live, and Dad said something and my brother, and my ear, even though it was pressed up against the door, couldn't hear everything, but I could hear my sister and my mother because they were so loud, and my sister shouted again and said you have a lot of explaining to do. And after a while they all quietened down, and when the door opened and shut a few times, then I knew they had all gone to bed, and then I put away my car and started writing in this notebook about what happened today.

June 19, 1986

I haven't written anything for a few days but here I am writing again in this diary just the way my dear teacher Anna told me to. Where is she now, she must still be in Zagreb, probably getting ready to go to the seaside. The lovely way she laughed, and she never shouted, and she gave me good stories to read, because she knew I liked good stories. Once my teacher Anna said Mislav, you are such a fine looking young man, you don't seem to belong here, you are so different from your class-mates, you have such a big heart, and you are a good pupil, and she stroked my hair, and it all made me very pleased.

Yesterday Dad said Mislav, go to the shop and buy two bottles of mineral water and some toothpaste. Mama said it would be better if Nicky went to the shop, and Dad said no, Mislav has to go, he knows where the shop is. And then I went to the shop, and I walked down the street through what is now my village, through Omorina, and I met a man who stared at me so strangely that I did not know what to do with my hands, and I met a woman who did not look at me at all but just walked past, and I came to the shop. When I went into the shop, the people there, who were all talking loudly, suddenly stopped talking, and then the shop-keeper served some people until it was my turn. And before it was my turn, I could feel how all those people looked at me every little while, and I know what they were seeing, and they think I am all like that, but I'm not. And when it was my turn, the shop-keeper said what can we do for you, and I said Dad had sent me to buy two bottles of mineral water and something else, and the shop-keeper said here we are, two bottles of mineral water, and what else did you want, and then the other thing just flew out of my head i.e. I had to buy some toothpaste, and I said to the shop-keeper wait a minute till I remember, it's here at the tip of my brain, but I can't remember, and some tall man laughed when I said that and they all looked at me with a cruel look so I asked the shop-keeper how much I owed for the mineral water and I went home with just the bottles. Dad said it doesn't matter you forgot the toothpaste, it's my fault, he said, I should have written it down on a piece of paper, and Nicky said then he would have forgotten the paper, and Dad said how can you say something like that.

When Dad went to work today Mama said let's do some studying Mislav, and I said do I have to every day and Mama said yes you have to, but you will have Sundays off, and I said I can hardly wait for Sunday. And as soon as we sat at the table, Mama took out the yellow book, the one called MATHEMATICS, and I said do I have to start with maths, and Mama said that's your worst subject, so you have to study it the most. And then she made me work on those problems, and I was very unhappy and nervous, because I just can't do it, I am not a stupid child, but I can't do anything with those numbers, and I was very, very upset, and Mama was even more upset because I couldn't do it, and we were both the way people are when they are angry at each other, and when I couldn't stand it any more I started to cry, and Mama said you won't get anywhere this time by crying, this time you have to learn even through your tears, and then she made me repeat after her how much it is when you have so many apples and you multiply them by so many apples, and then you divide them by so many, and some numbers are in square brackets, and some are in curly brackets, and how many do you have then, and it was all so stupid and boring, and I had no will for it, and Mama said I will show everyone that you are not mad, that you, too, have intelligence, I will show everyone that it's their fault because they didn't teach you properly, you are not as retarded as they claim you are, and so we tortured each other for a long time until Mama took another book called GEOGRAPHY, and she read from it about some country where black people live and where they grow bananas and there is a great forest with wild animals and all sorts of other animals. So I only had to write some things down in a special notebook with GEOGRAPHY written on the cover, but Mama still asked me to repeat what she had just read, and these things were very interesting, and I thought to myself everything will be alright if she doesn't pick up that yellow book, and luckily she didn't, so I didn't have to be afraid, even though I still was.

When Dad came home from work, Mama asked him how did it go, and Dad said don't even ask, everything is always the foreman's fault, and Mama said what happened, and Dad said our plant

ran out of raw material again and now the workers want me to take care of the problem, but it's not so easy when there is no material available, it's not my fault that the staff in the planning department do everything wrong, now we'll be idle for a few days, and our pay on the first of the month will be so small that everyone will be angry. And Mama said what can you do about it, you are only the foreman, and Dad said you come and explain that to my workers, Mladen's line is working at full speed, because he made a deal with the director that he could take material from the reserves, the problem is that pay is based on output, and Mama said they respect you as a good foreman and they know there is nothing you can do, and Dad said I'm fed up with the factory, I'm only messing with my nerves there and wasting time, all for that miserable pay, it would have been better if I had stuck to raising our pigs, and looking after the land and the chickens, and Mama said what can you do when you know that we can't live off that, and Dad said you can't live off anything any more. And they were both frowning after that conversation, and then Dad carried out the slops in large buckets, and went to feed the pigs.

I spend most of the day out in the yard, somehow I don't like going out into the street, because I don't like meeting people, but I don't really know why but I don't. And I've noticed that neither Dubravka nor Nicky like it when I go out into the street with them, because then some of their friends come up to us, and then they don't know what to do with me, and I can see that I bother them even for just an ordinary conversation, and I don't know what to do with my hands, and it is all screwy somehow. So that's why I'm in the yard mostly, and then I take Nicky's ball, and I kick it at the wall of the house, and then it comes back, and then I kick it again and again, and I go on like that until someone calls me and says come on Mislav this, or come on Mislav that, and then I am sorry that they are interrupting me, but I go and do this or that without complaining.

And tonight when all five of us were in that big room, and when the silence lasted a long time, then Mama sighed and said nobody from the village comes to see us any more, simply nobody, and Dad said they don't have to come, at least now we can see what sort of people we have been living with for fifteen years, now we can at least see what people are like, and Dubravka and Nicky looked at me, and I didn't know why, why they were looking at me like that.

June 22, 1986

Today was Sunday and today was a very strange day. First thing in the morning Mama and Dubravka started tidying up the house and baking all sorts of cakes, and making lots of food. Dad and Nicky went to church, and when they came back, Dubravka and Mama were still in the middle of everything, and everyone was somehow hurrying, and Dubravka was very excited, and then I understood from what they were saying why this was so, because there is a boy who rings up every day, and then whoever answers says just a minute, and says Dubravka, telephone, and that young man who calls is Dubravka's first boyfriend, and he calls from Nova Gradiska, and once Dubravka went to Gradiska to see a movie with him, and once she went because of a dance. And that boy is twenty-one years old, and one day Mama said to Dad it is really good that Dubravka is going out with such a fine young man from such a fine family, it really is good that her first boyfriend is so nice, if it lasts, God willing, it will end up in the right way, it's a fine family, and Dad said I agree, I agree. And today they invited that Mladen for lunch, because that boyfriend of Dubravka's is called Mladen, and he has never come to the house before and this was supposed to be the first time and that is why they were doing all that cooking so that they

can give him a good lunch. And when Dad and Nicky came back from church, and we were all in the big kitchen where they were finishing cooking the lunch, then Mama suddenly stopped what she was doing and looked at Dubravka and said did you tell Mladen about Mislav, and Dubravka stopped what she was doing and her face suddenly became serious and she said no, I didn't. And Mama said didn't you tell him anything, and Dubravka said no, nothing. And Dad said you should have, and then they were all quiet for a long, long time, and they looked the way someone does when someone steals his toy car and he doesn't know who it was, and then Dubravka said I wanted to but I didn't know how, it is all so mixed up, I didn't know how to tell him. And then they were all quiet again for a long time, and you could see they were in big trouble, and they weren't looking forward to Sunday lunch any more. Then Mama said: the best thing to do in that case is that we don't tell him anything now so as not to spoil his first impression, tell him next week, and today it would be best to do this: let Mislav have a good lunch now, and let him stay in his room, until Mladen leaves. Dad said that makes no sense at all, there is nothing to hide.

Mama said Joe, it would be for the best that the young man knows nothing about Mislav, that would really be for the best. And Dad said we have kept quiet long enough, I don't want to keep quiet any longer and hide my son. Mama said I agree that the young man should be informed about the situation but as things now stand it would be best that he does not find out about Mislav today. Dubravka said perhaps Mama is right. Dad answered this with a deep sigh and said have it your way, but I still don't like it. And then they all agreed somehow, and they gave me all sorts of things to eat, and those five types of cakes, two from each type, and then I had to go to my room, and they said play with your toy car and don't come out of your room until we call you. And I played in my room for a while, and then I heard a motor-bike stopping in front of the house, and a young man got off the large motor-bike, and walked towards the main door, and Dubravka ran out to meet him and they gave each other happy smiles and took each other by the hand, and that young man was really handsome, and then they walked into the house. And I played with my toy car for a long time, and I could hardly hear anything from the big room - except the voices, and then the knives scraping on the plates. And then I wanted to go to the toilet, I really wanted to go badly, but Mama and my sister had said Mislav, don't come out of your room until we call you, so I didn't want to go any more but I just hung on. But soon I had to go to the toilet even more, and I was thinking what can I do, because you could not get to the toilet without passing through that room where my brother, my sister, Dad, Mama and that young man with the motor-bike were, and then I could not hold on any more and I went towards the toilet, and when I opened the door to the big room, where they were all eating, and when I stepped into the room, the buzz around the table suddenly stopped and they all looked at me and they had shocked expressions on their faces. And Dubravka stuttered saying this is my brother Mislav, and then that young man stood up in confusion from the table and held his hand out towards me and said I'm Mladen, but I did not take his hand, because I needed terribly to get to the toilet, so I said I have to pee, and I ran off towards the toilet, and that young man and my sister grew pale. When I had finished in the toilet, I went back into the big room, and they were all green in the face, and Dad said sit down with us Mislav and I sat down with them for a long time but nobody talked any more. Then Dad said do you know the joke about the two Slovenians and the two Bosnians, and then he told the joke but nobody laughed, and then they all kept on keeping quiet. It seemed to me that they were not talking because I was there, so I got up from the table and said I was going to play with my car.

And this evening, before bed, while I was with my family, nobody felt like talking to me, and that's why I went to bed early i.e. I said I am going to bed, but here I am writing this, and not sleeping, but now I really am sleepy so I am going to bed.

June 24, 1986

When Dad came home from work, he said to Nicky and me come on boys let's go out to the field. And then we walked to the field, out there behind the orchard which is behind the yard at the back, and when we got to the potatoes, Dad took three cans out of his nylon bag, he gave one to Nicky, and one to me and then he said now we have to collect the Colorado potato beetles from the leaves, those small yellowish bugs all over the leaves of the potato plants, but you can't see them all unless you lift the leaves a little, because there are sometimes more on the underside of the leaf than on top, and I often used to say before to Mama that I would rather not use pesticide powder to kill them, and Mama said it's better to use the powder than to pick them off the leaves, and I used to say no, you are wrong. So Nicky, Dad and I collected the potato beetles today in those cans, and when one of them crawls up the side of the can, you flick it and it falls back into the can. Then when Dad saw that we had collected a lot of beetles in those cans, he said give them to me here and we'll destroy them, and then we came to a large flat stone, there where the soil was hard, and Dad took the cans and poured the beetles out into one heap, and then he picked up the flat stone and covered them with it, and they were all squashed, and then we started out all over again collecting new beetles in the cans. And while we were collecting the beetles, Nicky asked Dad when are you going to buy a car, and Dad said never, and maybe not even then, and Nicky said pity, and Dad said I could even find the money to buy some second-hand jalopy, but there would not be any money to run it. Then Nicky said everybody has a car, and it's a shame that we don't, because it makes everything possible, and you can go everywhere when you have a car, and you don't always have to be waiting around for the next bus, and then Nicky asked me would you like us to have a car, Mislav, and I said yes I would, but best of all I like riding in the tram in Zagreb, and there is nothing I like better than that, and Nicky said that he had never heard that anyone enjoyed riding around in a tram, and that it takes all sorts, and Dad said Nicky watch your tongue. And we talked about a lot of things, but I have forgotten what now even though I might remember, and we collected a lot of potato beetles in those cans.

And when night came, then it suddenly started to rain, and I sat at the window and watched it falling, and there was lots of lightning in the distance, and the thunder grew louder and louder, and then there was a flash of lightning close by, and I jumped with fright, and Mama said get away from that window so you don't attract the lightning, and then I hurried off to wash my feet, and went into my room where I remembered how Grga and I were once on the *Floral Square* in Zagreb when it started raining, and we hid under that awning in front of the Zagreb Cinema, and we waited for ages for the rain to stop, so that we wouldn't get wet, and when the rain did stop after a long time we went to our home, then one of our teachers asked where have you been so long, shame on you, I was just going to call the police and ask them to start looking for you, and we said it wasn't our fault but the rain's - but she didn't want to stop but kept saying that it was our fault, not the rain's.

June 27, 1986

Today Mama came into my room, around wake-up time, and said happy twentieth birthday, my son, today you are twenty years old and then Mama kissed me on both cheeks, and later Dubravka came in and said happy birthday and she was going to kiss me like Mama did, but then she stopped, and only squeezed my hand, and Nicky did the same thing, and when Dad came home from work, he squeezed my hand and kissed me and said I wish you happiness, and all sorts of things like that. And when we were eating he said that this was my day, and that I could pour soup into my plate first, and when I spilled juice on the tablecloth soon after, Mama said it doesn't matter today is your birthday, and what was most interesting, even though today was not Sunday, Mama did not make me learn from the yellow book, and Nicky held out a small package to me and said here, Dubravka and I have bought this for your birthday, and when I untied that lovely ribbon, there was a very nice car inside, and I was very happy and I thought how nice it would be if it was my birthday at least once every week, but it can't be like that, so what can you do. And today I had a lie-down after lunch just for a short rest, because we ate a lot and even too much because of my birthday, but I did not fall asleep, but was just lying down a bit.

June 29, 1986

After breakfast today Dad took a large rifle with two barrels and he took that belt with the bullets in it, and he said today Mislav is going hunting with me, and Mama said are you normal, and Dad said yes, I am, and Mama said why are taking him with you, and Dad said he is in the house all the time and so he has nobody for company except us, so why shouldn't he at least go with us when we go somewhere, and Mama said what will the other hunters say, and Dad said I did not discuss it with them, only the two of us will be hunting together, Mislav and I. And then Dad took some bag and Mama put sandwiches and a water-bottle in it, and they gave me the bag to carry, and Dad had the rifle hanging from his shoulder with the barrel pointing downwards, and Dad also had a green bag, in case we caught something so he could put it in the bag, and then we walked out through our orchard over the field to the forest, and from the forest we came out onto a meadow, and then into a field, and we walked all over the place, and I saw all sorts of things with my own eyes, and it really is lovely everywhere in Nature where there are no houses and no people. And every little while Dad and I talked about something, and Dad liked talking to me, and I liked talking to him, and I would like it if I could talk so nicely with Dubravka and with Nicky, but they are always in a hurry to finish their conversations with me, and they don't seem to like being in my company very long, so they are always in a hurry, and Mama would be dear to me if she wasn't always teaching me mathematics, and she always wants me to know some things I don't know, and there is nothing I can do about it when I just don't know. And then after a long walk we sat on the trunk of a huge tree which had fallen in the forest, and we took sandwiches out of the bag I was carrying and we ate them, and then we drowned them in water, and we had a bit of a rest, and Dad patted me with his hand once and asked do your feet hurt, and I said no. And we walked a lot more all over the place, and we crossed a lot of meadows, fields and all sorts of little hills and up and down, and then we turned back home, but it didn't go as

quickly as I thought it would, and we arrived home in the late afternoon, really tired, and still in a good mood somehow.

July 3, 1986

My sister Dubravka has been crying and crying for four days now and she doesn't come out of her room, and when Mama says come to eat something, she says: I am not hungry, and then she cries some more. Then Mama lets her cry, and then she says come on, why are you still wailing he is not worth it, and Dubravka cries even harder, and Mama says the world is full of men, but it looks as though Dubravka is does not want to see or listen to anybody. Mama said to her yesterday there must have been something between you, something unpleasant, it couldn't have been just a quarrel, and Dubravka said we did not have any sort of quarrel at all, he only said I don't want to go out with you any more, and Mama said for the hundredth time for goodness sake, Dubravka, he could not have left you just like that, there must have been some reason, and then Dubravka looked at me, and then at Mama, and then Mama looked at me, and then at Dubravka, and then they both nodded their heads the way you do when something becomes clear to you. And this morning before he went to work Dad was talking with Mama, and I heard them because I woke up, and Mama said to Dad you can see that everything has gone wrong since he came into the house, you can see that I was right when I wanted to maintain a healthy environment for Nicky and Dubravka for as long as possible, you see that Dubravka's boyfriend has left her because of him. Dad shouted how can you talk like that, how can you talk like that about our child, it's shameful that he wasn't with us all the time, I shall never forgive myself to the grave that I agreed to your stupid ideas about protecting Dubravka and Nicky in a healthy environment, because the fact that Mislav was not with us, that is sick, and when he said that Mama started shouting even louder you are talking absolute nonsense why don't you admit it to yourself what this means to the family that he is with us here. You see the way nobody comes to see us any more, nobody even calls us on the phone, you see that all of our friends have disappeared overnight. And Dad said what I can see is that they weren't real friends. And Mama said overnight we have been banished, we don't have anyone any more, and Dad said we have each other, we don't need anyone else, and Mama said tell that to Dubravka, try to comfort her if you can, and Dad said why are you telling me all this when you yourself know that there is no other way now, if only Mislav had always lived with us as his family, and Mama said you are talking nonsense. And then Dad left the house, and he didn't even have breakfast because Mama shouted as he was leaving you could have at least had some milk and bread and jam, and Dad said I don't feel like having anything. And since she started crying, for four days that is, Dubravka has stopped talking to me, as if I don't exist, she just walks past me, and if I say goodnight, she doesn't say anything.