FIKRET PAJALIC

Tomorrow

It's early March, a sunny Friday. My divorce papers are in the mail, but this doesn't stop my soon-to-be-ex-wife asking me to go with her to her friend's birthday party in Preston. We've been living apart for almost three months, but she still calls me a few times a week. There's always something: leaky taps or the garage door jammed. Just last week I was stapling posters with Roscoe's photo onto electricity poles.

Roscoe is our cat. My wife had him for five years before she met me. She brought him with her into the marriage and I've been cleaning up his piss, shit and fur-ball vomit ever since. In summer Roscoe would sleep at the foot of our bed next to my feet and in winter he'd wrap himself around my head. He's fifteen and has spent all his life inside the house and then last week he decided to chase a stray cat he sniffed in the backyard. Maybe he was thinking it was his last chance for a breath of freedom.

There are things I want to do around my new flat, I say to my wife. This is a lie. I'd set myself up with a television, fridge and new furniture within a week of moving out. Even gave the place a fresh coat of paint.

I can't face Jill by myself, she says.

Jill is her friend celebrating turning thirty-six. Jill has two daughters. My wife and I have no children. The fault is with me.

Shrapnel, a burning piece of metal from an anti-personnel mine, struck me in the groin during the war in Bosnia and I was patched up in a field hospital. The parts of my balls that produced sperm were burnt forever. Singed like two marshmallows in the hands of a drunken man over a campfire. My private bits were working, but as a result of the injury my sperm count was weak. If I had sex every day for the next thousand years the little suckers would never swim to where they were supposed to.

After ten years of trying to conceive, my wife said she had always wanted to have children. It was about being fulfilled, she said. She was still young and she loved children. She said her pursuit would continue without me. After hearing this, relief spread through my veins as if I had just received a blood transfusion. I said I wouldn't stand in her way.

Anything about Roscoe? I try to steer the topic away from the party.

No, I would've told you, my wife says, but Jill invited me to this mother-daughter sleepover in two weeks' time. Can you fucking believe it? Four mothers and four

daughters coming over to her house and she invites me. She reckons it would be good for me. You have to come with me. I'm not sure I'll keep it together at this stupid party.

We talk some more. She cries, she begs, and finally I give in to her.

There's a Bosnian bakery in Preston, on High Street, not far from where Jill lives. I'm going to buy myself some *burek* and *baklava* to go with my all-night cricket watching.

I'm only staying for two hours, I tell my wife, and we're going by taxi.

Don't worry the party is in the early afternoon, she says, plenty of time to get home and watch the cricket.

It gets annoying being predictable. The first test match between South Africa and Australia played in Pretoria is starting tonight and I'm going to watch every ball bowled. And then, the plan is to sleep in until midday tomorrow.

We get to Jill's and the party is a wank fest. Some pricks I've never met are sloshed by three o'clock. Grog is served before finger food and it quickly fills empty bellies, making tongues loose. I don't drink, and I ate before I came. I know how it is at these parties.

A dickhead across the table wearing an *X-Files* t-shirt asks me why I'm not drinking. A faded mug of Agent Mulder is stretched across this guy's man-boobs.

Religious thing, right? he asks. Where are you from?

St Albans, I say.

No, I mean which country? You're not from around here.

I ignore this wanker.

Soon these people switch from footy and television to politics, religion and crap like that. They say things about asylum seekers and refugees. They touch on the war in Iraq and in Bosnia. They call the war a conflict. They don't know I was once a refugee. Between mouthfuls of sausage and beer they say heaps of rubbish.

I get up to leave but Agent Mulder yells after me and calls me rude.

I open my mouth and the moment I do I know it's a mistake. But it's too late. The dam inside me breaks and my words drown everyone on the table. It gets real ugly, but I feel real good.

Just before my yelling and fist-thumping reaches a crescendo Jill's husband and my wife drag me out of the house.

Outside, while we wait for a taxi, my wife tells me that I embarrassed her. She's red in the face and her palms are sweaty. She wipes them on her thighs until she leaves wet marks on her dress, but I don't really listen. I was right. My wife knows it, Jill knows it, everyone at that table knows it, but God forbid you raise your voice and hit the table so you can be heard. Not in the company of those wankers.

There are ways to make your point without being rude, my wife says.

She doesn't think those people were rude. She says they were opinionated but not rude. She thinks I was rude for making a scene.

This is your problem. Not your sperm count, she says. If you had any friends you would understand.

My friends aren't tosspots, I say.

They can't be tosspots or fuckwits or anything because they don't exist, she snaps back. Why do you always argue with drunkards? She asks me this like we're still married. But documents have been signed. The divorce letter will arrive any day. She's not my wife.

I cross the street and leave her.

You're the reason we're getting divorced, she yells after me. Not your dead sperm.

I walk to High Street and start looking for the Bosnian bakery, but I can't find it. Everything looks different. I try to remember the last time I was here. Five years ago? I get hungry. I find a kebab shop and order a chicken kebab with the lot with garlic sauce. I go outside and sit on one of the garden chairs in front of the shop and dig in. Sauce drips down my chin and I wipe it off with my sleeve. A guy in nice clothes sits next to me. He's quiet for a minute and then he asks me if I could spare five dollars. Not one or two but five. I stand up and walk back into the shop.

While I eat I look through the window. I used to know these parts. I lived in North Fitzroy, Northcote and then Thornbury. When my ex-wife and I were ready to buy a house we couldn't afford it here. Cunts and tossers with deep pockets replaced wogs and students from the inner north. As I eat I wonder if Ermin still lives around here.

I first met Ermin on the plane to Australia. The two of us and another thirty-four Bosnian refugees came to Melbourne in May 1994. It was the third year of the war. Ermin was ten years older than me. He told me on the plane he needed someone like me. Someone young and smart who could speak English. He said he was a chemistry professor back in Bosnia and he had big plans for Down Under.

Then, he said, you better smoke your cigarettes, because when we enter Australian airspace there won't be any smoking on the plane.

I told him, I don't smoke. He stuck a cigarette in my lips and said, What kind of a Bosnian are you? I let him light the cigarette, but after I started coughing, he smoked it.

Ermin and I ended up renting a two-bedroom flat on Holden Street in North Fitzroy. But before that we stayed for a month in government housing in Springvale. There we saw the woes of the world. Refugees and asylum seekers from every corner of the world. We had to run away. It was too much like home.

Within a month of moving in together Ermin bought a car. He said he always had a car and he couldn't imagine himself without one. It was an old, silver, two-door coupe, automatic shift Mitsubishi Scorpion. He said he brought some money with him from Europe. There are ways to make money without using your back, he said.

Soon all sorts of people from the former Yugoslavia were coming and going through our flat. He was trying to bring his sister to Australia. He was chasing papers, making phone calls to the Department of Immigration. He spent all of his money on that.

I got a cleaning job in the Regent Hotel on Collins Street and started saving for a car. I sent some money to my sister, Fadila, in Bosnia. In a letter I begged her to come over. She said she couldn't leave her boyfriend. Her boyfriend was shot in the stomach during

the war and she was taking care of him. This happened shortly after I was evacuated through the tunnel under the airport runway.

In the meantime Ermin organised all the paperwork for his sister. His sister just needed to pay for her airfare. In the same breath he said he had no money left and that everything he did for her was about to vanish.

I've got no one else to turn to, mate, he said. I hate to ask you, but you're like a brother to me.

We'd known each other less than a year at that point.

I'm good for it. Please help. He put his hand on my shoulder.

I told him he could sell his car. I needed my money so I could bring my own sister. He knew this.

Brother, I got jibbed, he said. That car's a dud. No cunt would buy it. Trust me on this. I bloody tried.

He put me on the spot. My sister still hadn't made up her mind, but that could have changed at any time. This I knew.

I gave him all of the three grand I'd saved up. A couple of days later I came back from work and found Ermin had moved out. I heard later he was living in Preston with his sister. I never got my money back.

When my sister's boyfriend passed away, Fadila said she couldn't come because a stray dog had a litter in the garage and she had to take care of them. Then it was the house, which was in disrepair, she said. The roof needed fixing. Then she asked me, if she came to live with me, who would take care of our parents' graves? Years went by in correspondence like this. Then one day, not that long ago, she said she was too old to go anywhere now.

I cross High Street and head for the side streets. I remember one of the streets leads to the Bell train station and if I follow that street I'll get to Ermin's house. I walk slowly checking out the houses and front yards. Then I see a silver Mitsubishi Scorpion. I open the gate and walk up the steps of the small porch. I knock on the door but there's no answer. I call out. Nothing. I walk around the house, up the driveway to the backyard. I peek over the fence and see a man with long, grey hair wearing only his shorts, digging a hole. Something is wrapped up in a blanket next to the hole. I recognise a large U-shaped scar on the right side of the man's abdomen. It's Ermin. He'd told me it was a knife wound he suffered in hand-to-hand combat. Later he revealed the scar was from a rudimentary removal of an inflamed gallbladder full of gallstones, done somewhere in the woods of eastern Bosnia while he was running away from *chetniks*.

Because of this operation Ermin had trouble with his stomach and always ate lots of vegetables and fruit. One day, while we still lived together, he brought home two mangoes. I had never eaten a mango and I grabbed a small kitchen knife and started peeling the skin.

Slow down, peasant. That's not how you eat mango, he said. He took the knife from me and cut the sides and then sliced the exposed flesh into cubes, which he ate off the skin.

All I can think, as I watch Ermin dig the hole, is that I shouldn't be here. He's really into digging. He swaps between pick and shovel. He's got a method. The hole's getting bigger by the minute. Whatever is wrapped up in that blanket could almost fit in the hole. I decide to leave but I can't move. My shoes are glued to the ground.

What are you doing here? I hear Ermin.

It's me, mate.

I know who it is. His angry voice bounces in my eardrums and spreads to my temples.

I see an old, gaunt man, with a face hidden behind a bushy beard. It's Ermin, but it's not him.

I'm busy mate. Ermin points at the hole with his shovel. What do you want?

Had something to do on this side. Thought I might stop and see how you going.

Ermin drops his shovel and puts on his singlet. He walks over to me.

Listen, he starts, about the —

Not why I'm here, I cut him short. What's with the hole?

My dog died early this morning.

Sorry.

He was old. Been sick for a while, something with his lungs.

Ermin doesn't look like a drunken, angry man who once provoked a hall full of equally plastered Bosnians. Most of them were refugees like us, and one of the drunks scoffed at how a chemistry professor was one of them now and soon would be forced to work in a factory. In return Ermin wished *chetniks* raped their females before killing them all. They were in shock by Ermin's words just long enough for me to take him out and drive off.

How are you doing? I ask.

My dog died, that's how I'm doing.

Your sister? She still lives with you?

She drowned in the Yarra a few years back.

Sorry. I didn't know, I say.

It wasn't on purpose. A truck hit her from behind and she flew off the bridge. Ermin opens the gate to his backyard and lets me in.

I'd offer you a shovel, but I only have one.

How about I dig for a while and you take a rest?

Thanks. I'm almost done.

Can I see your dog?

Haven't you seen enough dead?

People only, but no dogs, I answer.

I still remember seeing my parents dead, putting their body parts in bed linen and then taking them in a wheelbarrow to be buried. They were waiting in a bread line when the shell struck.

But I don't remember seeing any dead dogs. Or cats. I'm sure many of them died from bombing and machine gun fire. Most animals disappeared when the war started. Those that were trapped with us during the siege of Sarajevo looked like skeletal ghosts of the past. And when they were ready to die from hunger, they would just find a hole and die. Alone.

People, dogs, same thing, Ermin says.

What happened mate? I can't resist asking.

Ermin takes the shovel by the top of the shaft and sticks the blade into the ground. There are droplets of blood coming out of his cracked palms. Mud is stuck under his fingernails. I look at his face hidden behind the beard and notice white vitiligo patches in the corner of his lips, under his ears and eyes.

Darkness ate me, Ermin says and puts his dog in the hole.

Ermin begins shovelling back the earth and I walk back to the station. It starts to rain and I hide under a tree. A girl in her early twenties does the same. We nod at each other and our lips stretch in that awkward half smile. After that we don't look at each other. She's pretty. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Milky skin. Like the first girl I ever met here in Australia. Like my ex-wife.

When the rain stops and before she walks away I ask the girl if she knows where the bakery is. She tells me to follow her. She takes me through a little park and behind the town hall.

They make great pita, she says as she points at the shop.

When I get home I find a letter with my divorce papers in the letterbox. It's finished. I'm no longer married. Time to watch cricket.

I take off my shoes in the hallway and see the flashing light on the answering machine. I press the button and hear the voice of my officially ex-wife.

Roscoe is dead, she cries. He was found on the street, a block away from our house. A car hit him. I need you to come and help me dig a hole in the backyard, she says. There's a short pause and I can hear my ex-wife sobbing.

I'll try calling again a little later. Then she takes a deep breath. No, scratch that, you watch cricket tonight. Tomorrow. I'll try again tomorrow.

I pick up the phone and start dialling her number.