

Lidija
Dimkowska
**A Spare
Life**

*Translated by
Christina E. Kramer*



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Translation:
Christina E. Kramer

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Jakob Bekš for Studio Signum d. o. o.

Layout:
Jerneja Rodica

Foreign rights:
Lidija Dimkowska, lidija.dimkowska@guest.arnes.si

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That June afternoon in front of our apartment building on the outskirts of Skopje, Srebra, Roze, and I were playing a brand new game, fortune telling. On the steamy cement of the laneway that sloped down to the residents' garages, we drew squares with white chalk and then wrote inside them the age at which we wanted to get married. We must have caught the eye of every passerby, in particular that of the neighbors sitting on their balconies or standing by the open windows of the apartment building who knew us very well. In fact, my sister and I were twins—conjoined twins—our heads fused at the temple right above my left ear and her right ear. We were born like that, to our misfortune and our parents great shame. We both had long, thick chestnut brown hair that concealed the place we were joined, or so we thought, at least. At first glance, it appeared as if we were squatting with our heads leaning together, since our bodies were free the full length down. We were dressed in little summer dresses which didn't have shoulder straps, but were held up by a band of elastic at the breast, I was in a green dress with little yellow flowers and my sister was in a red one with blue and white dots.

At the age of twelve, the only thing my sister Srebra and I, Zlata, had to be ashamed of was our names. Why would any parents name their children Srebra 'silver' and Zlata 'Gold'? Let alone children already singled out by their conjoined heads and considered abnormal in their community. These were the names of old women, or janitors, or the women selling potatoes in front of the bakery. Our mom used to silence us with her reasons whenever we complained to her about our names.

»That's what your godfather wanted: Zlata after Saint Zlata of Meglen and Srebra after a certain Srebra Apostolova who killed two Turkish beys in Lerin.«

»That's stupid.« That's what we always said, one of the few things we agreed on. Our godfather never once set foot in our house after the christening; it was as if the earth had swallowed him up.

In fact, he left for Australia to earn a living and erased us from his consciousness forever.

»Block-head Zlata, Ribless Srebra!«, the children would say, taunting us in the street and, apart from Roze and on occasion Bogdan, no one else ever played with us. Some were forbidden to by their parents to prevent them from having nightmares by playing with us—the »weirdos«—during the day, and others fled from us of their own free will and threw pebbles at us from a distance, shouting »retards«.

Roze was the only one who had no problem with our physical deformity. She lived on the second floor of our apartment building; she was a year older than we were, and had thick, curly black hair and dark skin, she was a little on the short side, but sturdy. There are children so delicate, with their skinny legs, pale faces, and small hazel eyes, like us, you'd think the wind would blow them away, and then there are the ones that look muscular, healthy, heavy to carry in your arms, with firm hands, like Roze. She was so strong-willed and her word so firm that we always agreed to her suggestions.

That day was no different than other days; she suggested we draw squares, inscribe in them the age at which we wanted to get married, then the initials of three boys we liked (candidates for husbands) above the squares, then, below the squares, the numbers one to three (how many children we'd have), on the left the first letters to designate how much money our husbands would have: P for poor, R for rich, and M for millionaire, and then on the right, the first letters of three cities where we would like to live with our husbands. My square and Srebra's were closest to each other, and Roze drew hers a little way off. Then we counted up the handwritten characters as many times as the number written in the middle of the square and circled the ones we'd reached by this calculation. Here is a sketch of what the future married lives we imagined for ourselves looked like:

Roze wanted to get married in eight years, which seemed a long way off to her, when she was 21 like her mother had been, and in fact she would marry a boy whose name began with »P.« Yes, it was so nice she ended up with Panait from the Greek village of Katerini where she went on vacation every summer with her family where they stayed in some old house near the cathedral that had apartments. Panait lived in the house with a garden next door, he was a nice boy who had learned a few Macedonian words on account of his love for Roze, enough for their shy communication through glances, hide and seek, and swimming in the sea.

»Sure, we'll be poor!« she exclaimed, because that was what her counting had shown: Panait would be poor, they would have one child, and they would live in Salonika, the city Panait loved more than any other in the world because he had been born there. He had been premature, but his life had been saved so, once a year, he and his parents went on a pilgrimage to the Church of St. Demetrius to give thanks to the saint. »Only one child,« Roze said sadly because she had imagined that one day when she was grown and happily married to Panait she would have a house full of children, or at least two, like her and her sister, who was three years older. For Srebra, who had wished to get married at the age of 23, it turned out that she would marry a boy whose name began with a »D« (although she had had no particular name in her mind, she had just scribbled it off the top of her head just to have three boys' names); »D« was to be rich and they were to have two children (»Good for you!« Roze exclaimed), and live in a city whose name began with »L«.

»London!« I cried out, and in my surprise, tugged on her head as I shook my own. »Why London? You don't even know what it looks like! And it's really far away! I don't want to live in London! How will you live there if I don't live there, too? You only think about yourself!«

Yes, even from my earliest childhood I felt that Srebra was always thinking only of herself and that she couldn't care less that we were joined at the head, and that we could not possibly lead

separate lives, but only one single one, shared as if we were one person in two semi-fused bodies. We had to do everything together: eat, sleep, go to the bathroom, go to school, go out, go in, everything. Even when we were little, if she felt like she needed to pee during the night, she would throw off the comforter and jump out of bed, which meant she would, with no consideration at all, tug at me, jolt me awake from my sleep and force me to my feet even though I was still in a haze between dream and reality. The pain would be so intense in the spot where we were conjoined that I would scream in horror, while Srebra, teeth clenched, would already be running to the bathroom, dragging me along with her. Once there, while one of us sat on the toilet seat, the other had to bend down and sit too, which most often meant hitting one's bottom on the blue plastic trashcan that we moved to the left or right of the toilet depending on which of us was sitting on the seat. In that trashcan we didn't only throw away the paper—which was not scented toilet paper, but typewriter paper my mother would sneak from her office and then tear each piece into quarters so we could wipe ourselves after doing our business—but also kitchen waste, leftovers, and all other kinds of garbage.

I, too, was often cruel, yanking her suddenly in some unexpected direction, but I was aware that our heads were joined together, that we should be careful how we moved every minute so as not to hurt ourselves, because the pain at our temples where our heads were joined was unbearable anytime one of us made a sudden, unanticipated movement. Srebra was also aware that we were two in one, but only physically—whenever her head started to ache—not psychologically; she would dream up great plans for her life and she simply took no account of my desires or of our joint capabilities. She was certain that one day when we were grown up and had a lot of money, we'd be able to pay for the surgery that could separate conjoined twins.

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Contact of the publisher
Slovene Writers' Association (DSP)
Tomšičeva 12, SI-1000 Ljubljana
Phone: +386 1 251 41 44
Email: dsp@drustvo-dsp.si
Website: <https://litteraeslovenicae.si/>



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