

MA 1: LAVORO  
MA 2: LAVORO  
Periodo MA 1  
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# CASSANDRA

BY ASJA BAKIĆ

Translated from Bosnian by the author



As soon as she entered the room, Leila threw *Cassandra* in my lap. She sprawled in a reclining armchair, opposite Lara, and put her feet up on my bed. She didn't even take her shoes off.



**“LOOK!” SHE SAID.**

Inside, she'd marked and underlined the sentence: "Time stood still; I would not wish that on anyone."

"You're writing about Christa Wolf?" I asked.

"No, no," she shook her head. "I'm writing a longread about medical curiosities. I'm writing about us."

Leila was a columnist for the weekly magazine "Thursday," which came out every Wednesday, and sometimes she wrote longer pieces for the foreign press, explaining to international audiences why the Balkans have it the toughest. Foreign editorial boards paid incredibly well for these lamentations, and Lara, who managed us all, was really happy about it.

"I'm tired," Leila said. "You?"

We'd come to the *Golden Dome* ten days before, and we still had to stay at least that much longer for all the tests to be done. I was lying in my bed and couldn't move much. There were needles stuck in my arm, so I just rolled my eyes emphatically. Lara didn't say anything, just disappeared in her chair. She didn't want to talk about her feelings.

"Sometimes," Leila continued, "I think we were born tired."

Just like she'd almost hit me with *Cassandra*, Leila regularly aimed at us her deep and simple truths. Here, we had nowhere to hide from them. Our hospital walls were, after all, completely made out of glass. We were exposed to chemists, IT personnel, medical doctors, plenty of scientists and, of course, Leila's sharp mind.

"Where're Jovana and Teodora?" she asked. "They should participate in this conversation."

I rolled my eyes again. Even my left hand, which was free, hurt so much I couldn't gesture theatrically.

"Teodora is going over her text in her room. I don't know where Jovana is."

"She's almost certainly pacing the hallway," Lara said.

Just at that moment, a bunch of nurses walked by my door. But nobody entered to remove the device, even though I was all cramped up from lying down the entire day.

"Do you think they torment others like this?" I asked.

"Of course not!" Leila said. "We're cheap goods. They can do with us as they please. Just look at our accommodations. Ground floor. We're even facing north."

Over the entrance to our ward was written: "Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina," but, to be completely honest, that meant Croatia and Montenegro too, because Croatians had sold all their real estate to retired Englishmen and Germans. With their country's demographics radically changed, Croatians had come to live with us. They had nowhere else to go. Montenegro had sold its coastline to Russians, and people had moved inland. They'd populated eastern

Serbia. Bor and Majdanpek had livened up. Some of them, unexpectedly, had gone to Livno. Nobody could explain why.

Considering the scope of the research, in which we were participating as subjects from Southeastern Europe, it came as no surprise that the *Golden Dome* was huge. They'd literally put the entire world inside one building. Right next to us, for example, women from Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso were warded. We communicated with them through thick glass. Sometimes we would wave happily to each other passing by, but that seldom happened. Most of the time, we were confined to our rooms. Doctors made their rounds unannounced. We always had to be at their disposal. Jovana, however, whenever she could, would walk up and down the long hallway separating West African countries from the Balkans on one side, and Central America on the other. Everything was mixed, but in a very calculated way. Even the scientists weren't allowed to forget the geopolitical strategies of their superiors. Those who paid the bills shuffled women around. That was the agreement.

Jovana had once described the *Golden Dome* as a big airport. Girls would fly in still young, and leave as adult women, transformed, resembling worn-out pincushions. She had the rare and poignant gift of finding the right words at the right time. I deeply envied her that talent. She was a singer, but she dealt her pretty words better than most writers. Her descriptions of her gigs in Austria and France were almost travelogues. She had,

at the same time, a soothing voice that often landed her acting jobs in animated movies and commercials. Here, people took her impatience with medical staff as a sign of snobbery, but we knew the real truth. Jovana was afraid that all these checkups, all this poking and prodding, would expose us. She couldn't believe it hasn't already.

"They plied you with testosterone again?" she asked entering the room.

"Yeah, they're checking something out."

"I don't get it. They know perfectly well we all entered menopause two years ago. Why are they torturing you?"

As our reproductive health had collapsed, all the core values they'd instilled in us from a very young age, here in the *Dome*, and at home, had come crashing down. Still, we didn't take hormonal changes caused by global warming and poverty fatalistically, as a burden we had to carry in silence. The world we once knew melted into an unrecognizable quag of sketchy relations we wanted to leave as winners.

"The psychologist was already here?"

Dejected, I pointed to the tests he'd left behind.

"Jovana, 10 more days, just 10 more days," Lara said. "Be patient."

"It's terrible not being able to use your own body and time as you please," Jovana said. "I earn so much, yet I can't buy my life back."

If Jovana, or any one of us, had declined to come to the medical center, a huge diplomatic scandal would have hit the *Dome*. We were aware of it, always. The World Health Organization coordinated global efforts to curb problems with premature menarche in young girls, and early menopause in young women. This organized attempt, however, had long before ceased to be a question of female reproductive health. Instead, it had soon turned into pure politics. The Christa Wolf sentence that Leila had underscored, the one about time standing still, echoed in my mind even before I'd read it. This sentiment was understood by every woman inside the *Golden Dome*: whenever the subject of ovulation came up, women fell into the background, and impersonal, male concerns about the future of the human race moved swiftly to the forefront.

"Be patient," Lara repeated, but there was no patience left.

"They spent too much time imaging her head this morning," Jovana said.

**YOU COULD TELL FROM HER TONE THAT SHE WAS BECOMING MORE AND MORE AGITATED. THIS ANGRY VERSION OF JOVANA COULD NEVER LAND A JOB VOICING CARTOONS, OR TOY COMMERCIALS FOR KIDS.**

"Teodora?" she asked.

"She's rehearsing. Her premiere is in two months."

"I don't understand why she decided to do such a complicated performance," Leila said. "How much of her artistic intention will our audience get anyway? Monodrama would have been much better."

"The Balkans are poor literally, not in spirit," I told her. "People will chant her name, believe me."

"The audience's reaction is of no importance," Lara said. "Everything Teodora does, she does for her own amusement."

I wanted to tell her that wasn't true, but the doors opened wide, and in came Nurse Nilsson.

"How come sitting in complete silence doesn't bother you?" she asked us.

Jovana shrugged.

"Who knows sign language?"

Before Leila and Lara could help translate, the nurse pointed to the device and then to my wounded arm. I nodded slightly, to let her know I understood.

"Why don't you talk to her?" persisted Nilsson. "She has to be bored to death."

"She's never bored," Lara replied. "She's always reading."

"Silent lips," added Jovana.

Nurse Nilsson was a newcomer to our ward. You could tell she was doing her best, but it was hard for Scandinavian kindness to penetrate our Balkan cynicism. She'd give up fast enough.

"Oh, poor Nilsson, how surprised she would be!" Jovana said sitting right behind her back.

"The psychologist even more so," Leila said.

I was silent. The Nurse was taking a fat needle out of my vein. Whether I wanted to or not, I had to concentrate on that. She then pushed the machine into the hallway and smiled at Jovana.

"Tomorrow's your turn," she winked at her, and left.

Our eyes followed her for a long time. First, we watched her through the thick glass walls, then through the thin ones, and eventually, we saw her disappear through the cloudy doors that barred us from leaving.

"I'm afraid," Jovana said. "One of these days, someone smart will come along, someone who'll understand hormones are the least of our problems."

"Don't worry," we heard Teodora say from the other side of the hallway. "The advantage

of the Balkans is that we haven't digitized anything. No doctor will ever comb through all the archives just to find our mothers' medical records."

"Plus," she continued, "nobody here has any time to investigate telepathy. They're too preoccupied with ovaries."

"It's a good thing they're underestimating us," I said, knowing my words did little to comfort Jovana.

"But what if," Jovana said, "someone with the right priorities shows up? Someone who'll see us for what we truly are? Then what?"

I wanted to dispel her fear with a joke, but Jovana went into the hallway. She thought she saw Monique, but there wasn't anyone on the other side, so she soon came back. We all went silent then. Leila and Lara were looking absentmindedly through the window. I was rubbing my arm nervously, and had to agree with them: the north side was gloomy, even in summer. Canadian geese, waddling slowly through the grass, didn't help the mood.

We were six years old when we first came to the *Golden Dome*. Every summer, while others went to the seaside, we would travel here for a battery of medical tests. Three weeks, for the past 30 years. We grew up together, surrounded by glass. At first, we weren't very talkative. Lara spoke first. She said something banal, I think she whimpered: ouch. Quickly, we left onomatopœias for childish jokes about people around us. Then, we started talking

more seriously about life, and afterwards, we lamented how much the Dome irritated us.



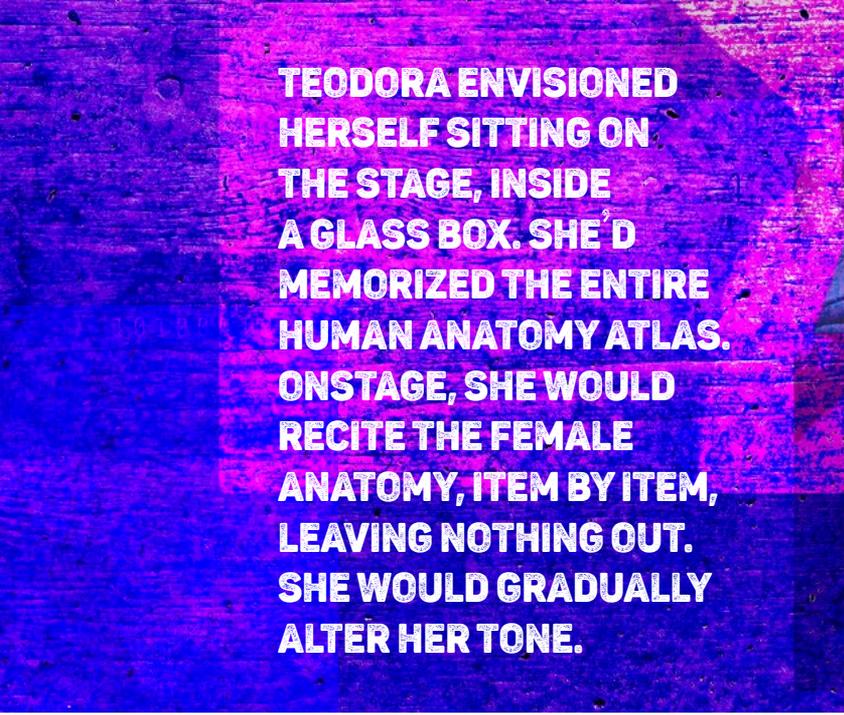
When medics look at your throat, for example, and they say: say *aaaaaa*, you say: *aaaaaa*, but then, at the same time, you're making vacation plans with Teodora, Lara, Jovana, and Leila for when you get back home. As soon as we came of age, we stopped giving our allowances to our parents, and gave them directly to Lara. She handled numbers and money better than any central bank governor could. She invested our assets in bundles, mostly in cryptocurrencies.

"Just to be safe when we enter menopause," she said.

We laughed at her seriousness: "But, we're still kids," we used to say.

Before we could even get used to menstruation, it had already stopped. We were just briefly women in the traditional sense of the word.

When the rest of the girls left, Teodora asked me to assess some of the intonations in her performance. Leila had commented on them earlier. So had Jovana and Lara. Since my tests were more exhaustive than usual, she wanted to spare me as much as she could. Still, she wanted my sincere opinion.



**TEODORA ENVISIONED  
HERSELF SITTING ON  
THE STAGE, INSIDE  
A GLASS BOX. SHE'D  
MEMORIZED THE ENTIRE  
HUMAN ANATOMY ATLAS.  
ONSTAGE, SHE WOULD  
RECITE THE FEMALE  
ANATOMY, ITEM BY ITEM,  
LEAVING NOTHING OUT.  
SHE WOULD GRADUALLY  
ALTER HER TONE.**

She recited the head in a monotone, authoritative voice, as if the bones of the skull, the brain, the eyes, were important documents she was dictating to a typist. But as she transitioned to the digestive tract, her voice would change, continuing until it was time for the female reproductive organs. Then, she moaned. Instead of a band, she used medical devices as background music: ventilators, ECG, respirators. She said they were her choir.

"Jovana is right," she said.

She'd just finished reciting hand and wrist bones.

"It's only a matter of time before technology finds us out."

We were careful not to converse telepathically during head examinations, but that wasn't enough anymore. Jovana had every right to be nervous. We couldn't catch up with technological advances. The only thing developing faster than our doom was technology. I could vividly imagine lines and lines of code, illegible algorithms written by a doctor's hand, connecting and dividing us instead of these glass walls.

"Have you seen what Leila wants to write for the Americans?" she asked me.

We just couldn't fall asleep. My arm hurt. Teodora was still going over her dramatic text in her head.

"The thing about medical curiosities?"

"Yeah. She's playing with fire."

"Americans think we're freaks anyway," I said.

If someone had the stomach for it, and went through our archives, he'd notice how the Balkans had been used as a landfill for Europe's medical waste. For decades and decades. Everything past its expiration date ended up in our drugstores. Pharmacists would give us our medicine in tiny plastic bags. They would write down the content by hand. You had to take them at their word. Going to the pharmacy equaled going to the market: we could buy a dozen eggs, and 50 pills of bromazepam. The entire Balkan Peninsula was on pins and needles, anxious, bound by time that permanently stood still. People bought painkillers, anxiolytics and antibiotics of their own volition.

I don't know who first noticed something wasn't right. The older generations had no idea that their longtime experiment with the expired drugs no one in the West wanted to take had serious pharmacological consequences. Telepathy wasn't the only side effect. Some of the kids hallucinated, developed a perfect sense of smell, could hear and see things older people couldn't. Every single talent we had, came from 100 milligrams of something our mothers and grandmothers had taken 60 years ago. They transferred generationally, from one woman to another, their ova, and their problems.

"We're not freaks, don't be dumb," Teodora said.

"It's easy for you to say! You have perfect memory, and look what I have to live with."

"Your gift is..."

"It's not a gift," I said. "I don't want to listen 24/7 to what others have to say."

I had to pretend I couldn't hear anything, or talk. As they were unable to find a physical cause for my deafness, the *Dome* terrorized me with a psychologist every year. He went through all my childhood "traumas" that had, allegedly, caused my hearing loss. The psychologist said he wanted to "give me my voice back."

"Everybody has problems," Teodora said. "Take Jovana, for example."

An ominous question that had haunted us was whether the doctors already knew what we were and how we lived. It was possible they sent us these drugs knowingly, nudging us to take them with abandon. Were the Balkans a medical experiment?

"They even bombed us with depleted uranium," Leila said.

"The Italians gave us all their hazardous waste illegally," Jovana said.

They were right.

"The *Golden Dome* should be called *Petri Dish*," I said right before Teodora and I finally fell asleep.

I never could tell exactly if I was listening to someone, or eavesdropping on them. I didn't keep my ears open during my sleep, but here and there, a voice would pierce even the deepest of my dreams. Especially if it had something important to say, something that concerned me. A murmur, uttered several floors above, now woke me up.

"They have to stay," said a doctor whose voice I instantly recognized. "I found something interesting on Jovana's pituitary gland, and Lara's prefrontal cortex."

I got promptly out of bed. Barefoot, I stepped out into the hallway. Jovana was wide awake.

"They know," I said.

She was calm.

"That's why Nurse Nilsson winked at me yesterday," she said.

The sun wasn't out yet. From the other side of the glass wall, Monique was waving frenetically at us. She'd obviously been

watching closely, and knew what was happening. Her symptoms and Jovana's were alike. That's why they'd become so close. They could communicate only through the glass, but it was enough.

"Did you see the code Nilsson typed in yesterday when she left?" Jovana asked Monique.

They changed it every 24 hours. We still had a little time left.

"Sixneufseptzerozeroun," Monique said.

Lara, Teodora and Leila were already dressed.

"Let's go!"

Never had any hallway seemed longer. This one was endless.

"Shame we don't possess the gift of invisibility," Leila said.

She always made jokes when she was nervous. Teodora was softly reciting the inner parts of the ear. Maybe she was trying to wake herself up. Just as she was saying malleus, incus, stapes, we opened the door. The rest of the codes were child's play.

Lara knew her numbers. Before any medics could notice we were gone (video recording was strictly forbidden, thanks to diplomatic reasons), we were already out in the open. Geese flew low over us, as if they were trying to hide us from view.

"Damn!" I shouted. "I forgot *Cassandra*."

"Don't mind the books," Lara said. "We have all the bank cards here."

When we were far enough away, Teodora turned to the *Golden Dome*, and mumbled something. I don't know what part of the female anatomy she recited, but Jovana laughed wholeheartedly.

