

An Extract

Tisja Kljaković Braić

The Two of Them

Translated, from the Croatian, by Jacob Agee

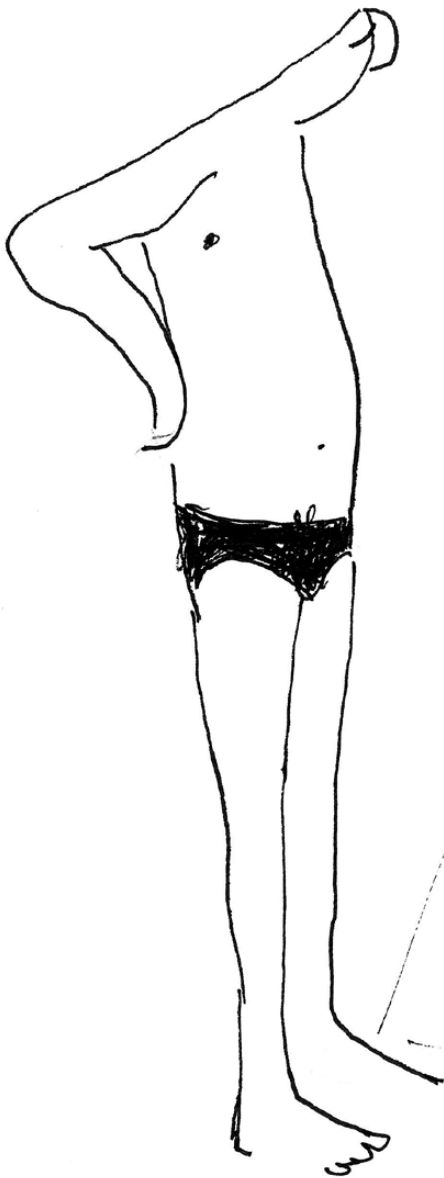
SHALL WE
STAY HERE?
NO ONE YOU
RECOGNIZE ...



DIDN'T
HAVE TIME



ANOTHER
TODAY?

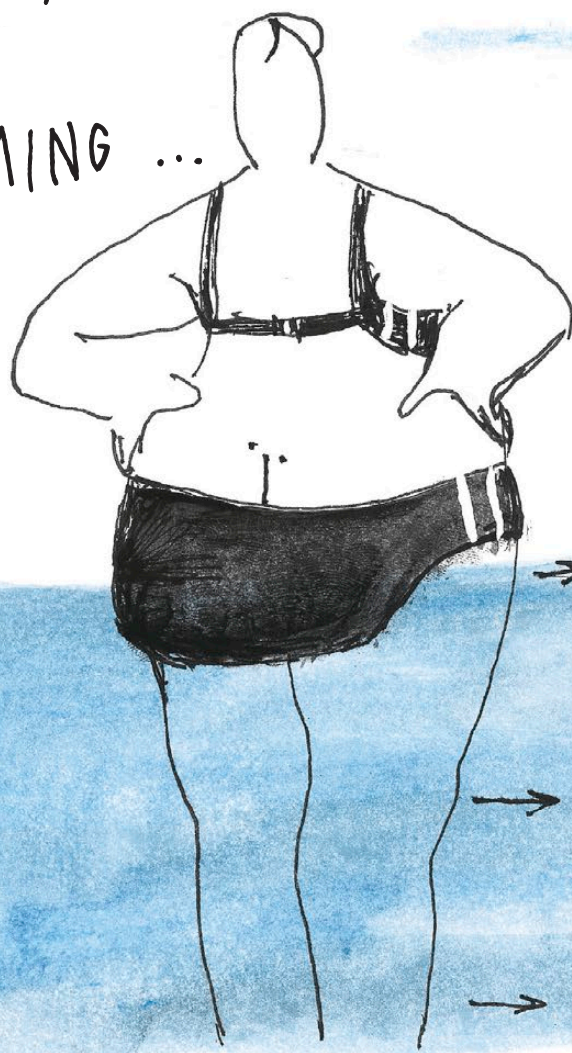


I'LL SWIM
NOW...



LOOK,
I'M
COMING ...

2.7

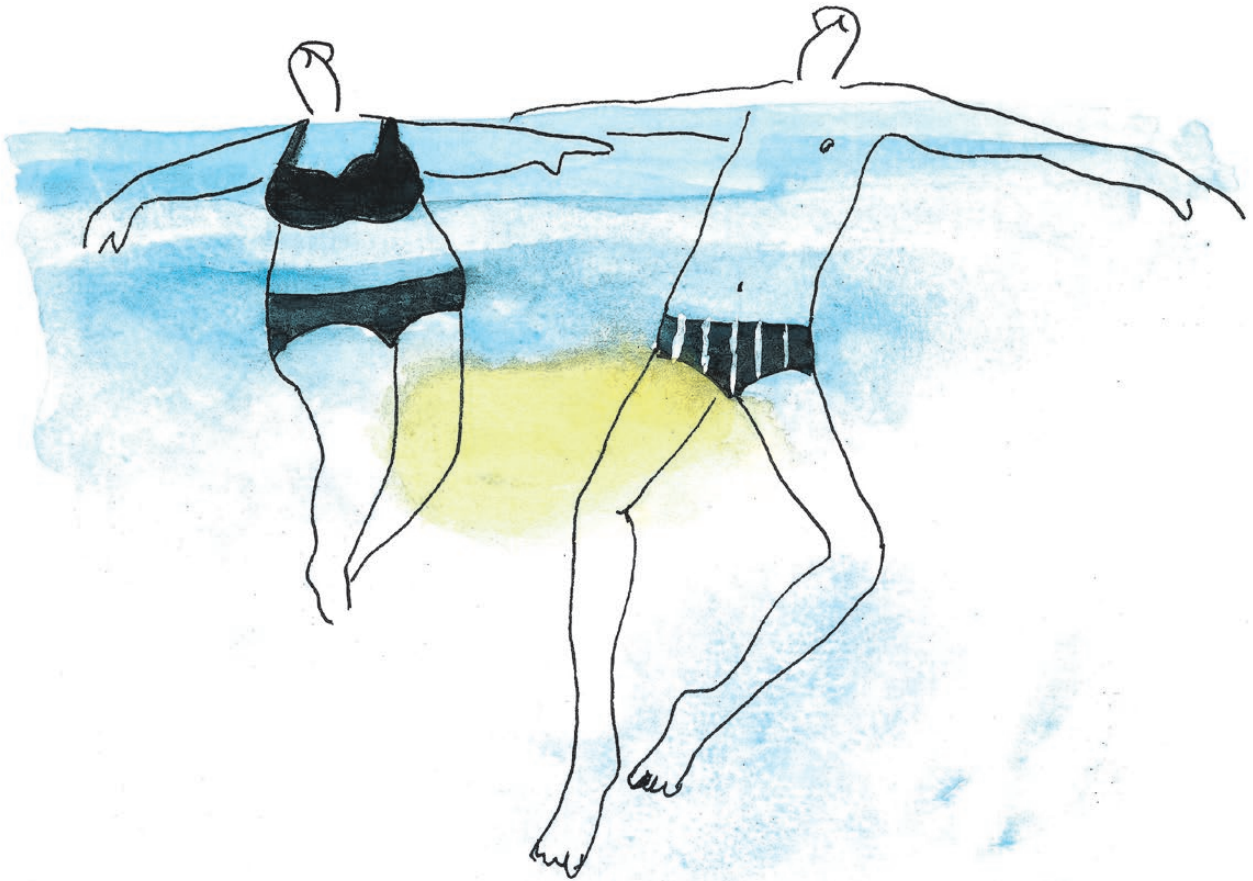


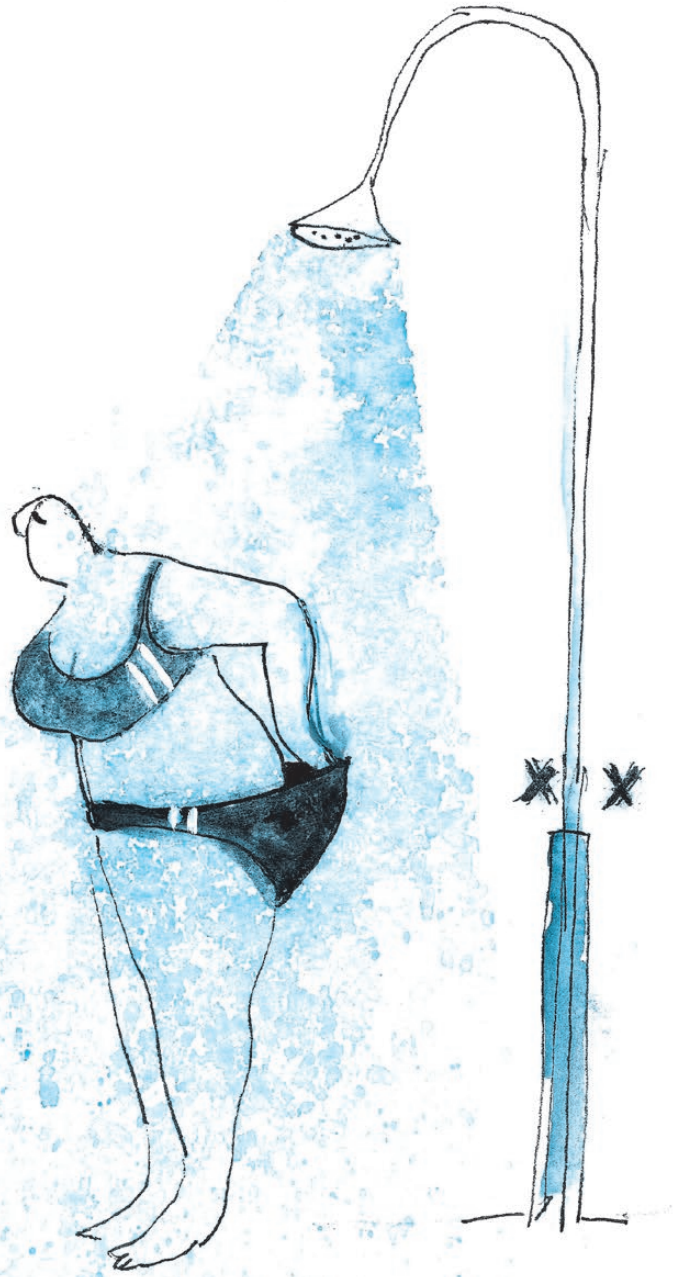
→ 15 MINUTES

→ 10 MINUTES

→ 5 MINUTES

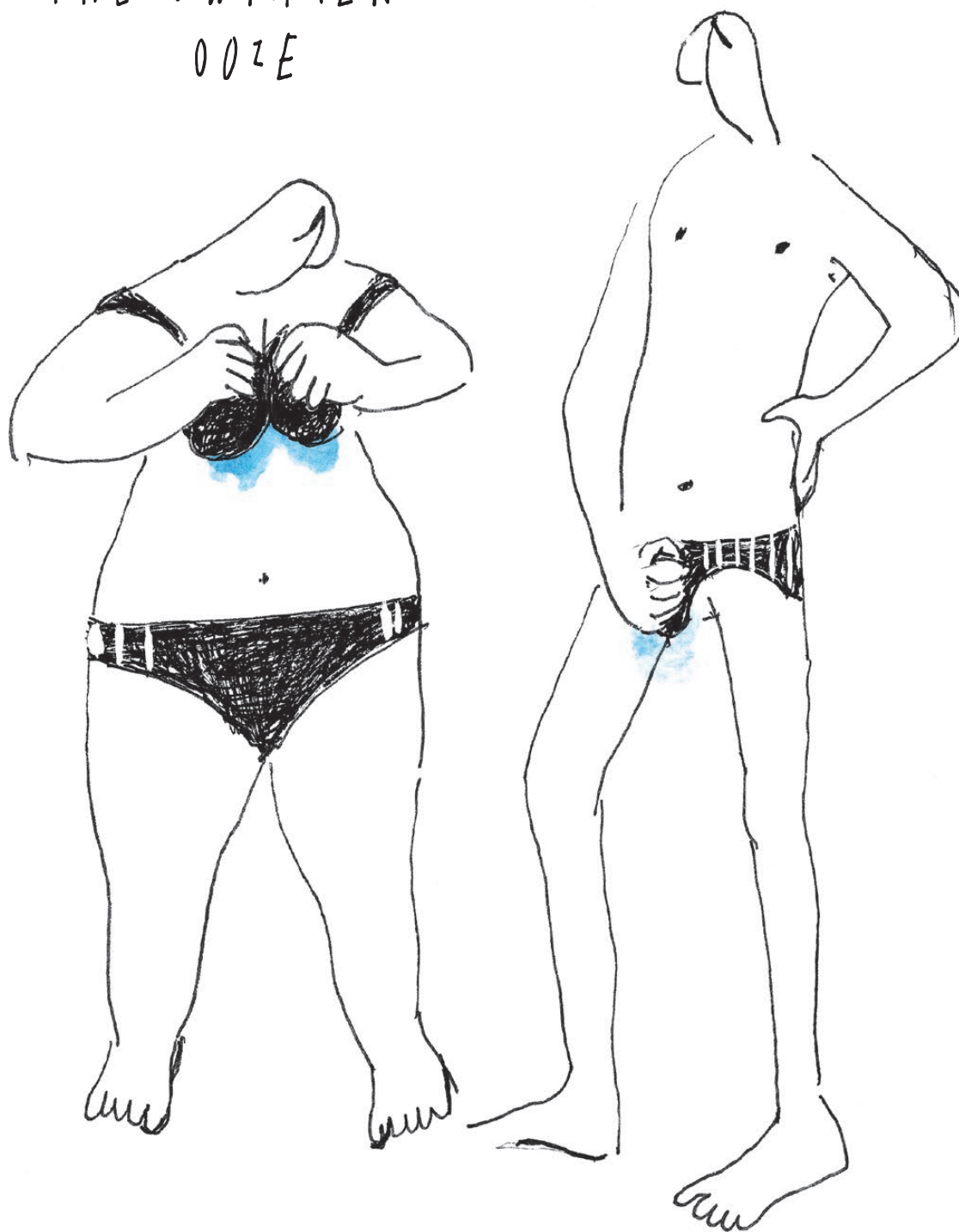
- FEEL A
WARM CURRENT?







THE SWIMMER'S
OOZE





- GIMME
THE LEG

OCH, NOT THAT...
YOU CALL
THOSE TITS?

WHERE...WHERE...WHERE...
WHERE... ?!!!?



A SKIRT...
I KNEW IT



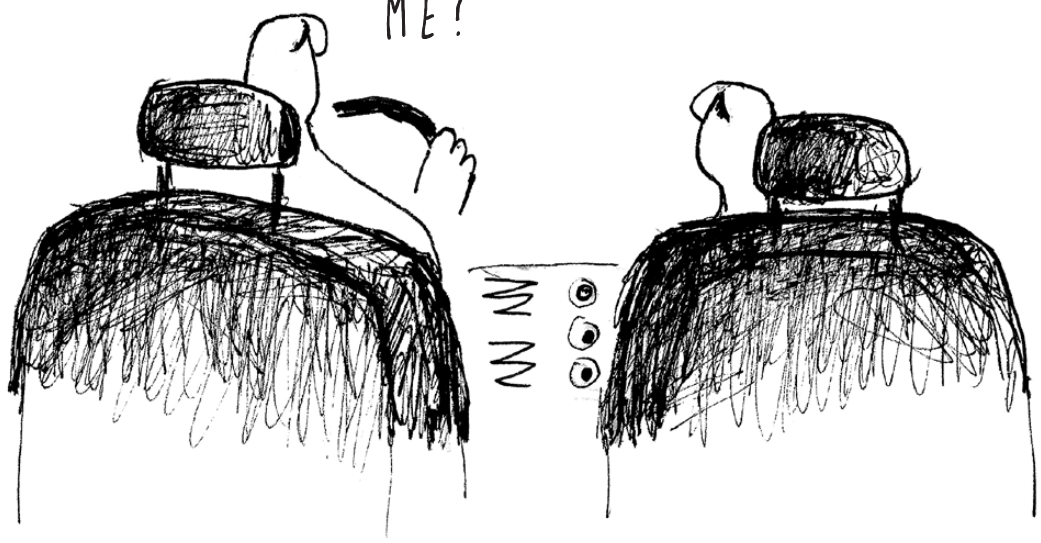
WHAT DID SHE SAY TO YOU
BATHROOM MATS...

THREE PILLOWS
THOSE GLASSES...
THAT'S WHAT LILIA
SAID...
SO I WON'T
GET BACK NOW...
WHICH SHEETS...
ONES WITH THE
FLOWERS...
THEY ONLY
HAVE ELASTICS...



I CAN'T
TAKE IT
ANY
MORE...

ARE YOU
DRIVING, OR
ME?



A Singular Perspective on Dalmatian Marriage

There is an ingrained stereotype of the Dalmatian marriage, and the Dalmatian family, as patriarchal. This stereotype is so contagious and common that it is practically pointless to spell it out. The images basically conjure up themselves: of moustachioed, chain-wearing men at the doors, of a patronizing Mišo Kovač; of his tame, loyal wife; of the big mother/mother-in-law for whom the young bride is never good enough, and her son never pampered enough. A scene of noisy households in which cooking and baking go on all day, and the liturgical and calendric years bicker in a regular rhythm of cod, *pašticada*, broad beans, artichokes, Advent dumplings, Istrian Easter brioche, grapes, berries and stuffed sauerkraut. There is also – to be sure – the image of the man, devoted to the public sphere, whose natural habitats are the *kavana* and the *boules* patch, and whose natural interests are politics and ball sports. Finally, there is also another image of the woman, she who switches between the public and private spheres, she who looks after – a major maxim – “three quarters of the house”, but also exists in a parallel universe of red wine, cognac and coffee with girlfriends.

This stereotype is so fixed that it is very difficult to challenge, even when the challenge rests on empirical foundations. Many sociologists – from those of the interwar period to Inga Tomić Koludrović, with her sociological study *The Shift to Modernity* – have empirically demonstrated how the myth of Dalmatian patriarchy is *myth* even at its basis. How, in the spheres of work, money and decision-making, the Dalmatian woman is – statistically speaking – more emancipated than, for example, women from continental northern Croatia. Instead of the simple but arresting images of the submissive Mediterranean woman and of southern patriarchy, sociology as well as daily observation offer us an immeasurably more complex dynamic of

male-female relations in which traditional culture and modernity are, in a strange way, mixed – an economy dependent on both female employment and traditional domestic functions. It is a world in which economic emancipation and the need for a pretence of the traditional – for the rituals of the permeated household – often go hand in hand.

Milan Begović, Marko Uvodić and Miljenko Smoje have immortalised, in prose narrative, this dynamic of the ostensibly “traditional” Dalmatian family, in different ways and at different phases of development. Two brilliant Dalmatian short story writers, Olja Savičević Ivančević and Tanja Mravak, have created prose worlds inhabited by such families. Most of these depict this dynamic of the Mediterranean family by making use of an alluring mix of wistfulness and humour, delicacy and mockery.

So here we have another book speaking to Mediterranean marriage, with this same entwined sense of delicacy, humour and light mockery. The book, simply called *The Two of Them*, by Split painter and cartoonist Tisja Kljaković Braić, consists of ninety (mostly black-and-white) cartoons in which there exist, in principle, but two figures. Namely, “The Two of Them”: A Wife, a woman of unspecified middle age who is at war with surplus kilograms and the metamorphosis of her own body; and A Man, a guy who is, for much of the book, on the couch in his nether garments (or underpants) watching football. Kljaković Braić develops these two figures over ninety situational sketches drawn over a year, and mostly released in phases, in irregular weekly schedules. In terms of genre, the art of Kljaković Braić diverges from the classically accosting cartoon, with its gags and/or lines, being instead lyrical sketches rooted in emotion and neat visuals. Visually, all the sketches are similar. They lie against the backdrop of large white planes, on which the authoress sketches in a simple way, with paunchy contours and abstract situations. Colours – red, yellow, blue – appear only rarely, and always as a kind of gag.

Kljaković Braić’s visual minimalism goes hand-in-hand with a thematic minimalism. Hers are little themes, small everyday situations. Like Raymond Carver or Joyce, Kljaković Braić searches for moments of “epiphany”, short fragments of reality, sentences or gestures which reveal characters and intrapersonal dynamics. The world of *The Two of Them* is one of the bathroom, kitchen, bed – and only sometimes the beach or car. The “settings” are – literally – the couch, chair, wardrobe and toilet bowl. First and most often, there is the discontent of the chubby Wife with her own looks. Second, there is the cliché of the Wife’s dissatisfaction with her wardrobe. Third is the capricious, irrational, football supporter passion of the Husband. A fourth sphere typical of Kljaković Braić’s book is that of food: food that is warmed up, or debated and quarrelled over. The caricature of the spouses overwhelmed by a debate on whether they will cook the cod grilled or stewed is only one of many in which Kljaković Braić evokes the centrality of food in the chemistry of the Mediterranean marriage. Simultaneously, food is

also a sphere of saving and economizing, and of instrumentalizing one another, for example in the sketch in which She places before Him a reheated dinner “so it doesn’t go to waste”.

To be sure, there also appear in Kljaković Braić’s sketches, typical battlegrounds in the prolific war between patriarchy and matriarchy (that is, household affairs...). Here, the relation between man and woman, curiously, ceases to be a relation between the overburdened servant girl and the male sponger. In place of this, Kljaković Braić offers an unusual glimpse into a Dalmatian marriage in which the Female assumes the role of the competent patron, and the Male is depicted as the immature, incompetent child who puts a pot in the dishwasher, and cannot do any job without ensuring it gets screwed up. “It’s easier for me to do it than explain it to you” exclaims She in one of the classic sketches; in another, she simply says to the man “Where did you get these”. There is something in front of them on the table, not clear to us if it is dough, vegetables or piles of washed things; less explicit is whether the “emancipated” man has again screwed up an attempt to be useful. Here She needs (her “needs”) to assume a role that at least gives her a grain of pleasure – the impression we have the whole time. This role is that of the matriarchal ruler who, as it is said, looks after “three quarters of the house”, and is for her spouse (evidently sub-adult in the serious sphere of the household) not only a wife, but also a guardian and a protector.

With the gift of the subtle humourist and the eye of the astute observer, Tisja Kljaković Braić recreates, over ninety sketches, situations that are so typical that they are part of every marriage: though here these sketches are also ones of southern brightness: extrovert, operatic and shameless. Our culture has seen a long line of such southern pairs. We remember, too, Roko and Cicibela, Luigi and Bepina. *The Two of Them* is a beautiful continuation of this tradition.

Jurica Pavičić

About the Author

Tisja Kljaković Braić was born in 1979 in Split, and was educated at the School of Visual Arts, Split. She took a degree in Painting at the Art Academy, again in Split, studying under Gorki Žuvela, and graduated in 2003.

She has exhibited her work in over thirty joint exhibitions, and in over thirty-five solo shows, both in Croatia and overseas.

Her work is included in many individual, national and international collections, including the Zagreb Modern Gallery and the Sveti Krševan Gallery in Šibenik.

She is the author of a previous similar volume, *The Devil in the Girl*. She is a member of the Croatian Society of Independent Artists as well as the Croatian Society of Visual Artists.

She continues to live and work in Split.