

**THE  
CUCKOO'S  
SONG**

*Short Stories*

**AMRA PAJALIĆ**



# Praise

## *Nervous Breakdown*

'Rebellion is fuelled by the cultural disconnect between themselves and their migrant parents.' Sydney Morning Herald

## *Siege*

'A powerful and moving story of family dissolution and the suffering, deprivation and terror of war.' Australian Book Review

'Amra Pajalić's Bosnian Diary is a masterpiece of broken elegy.' Bulletin Review

## *Flirty Eyes*

'Interesting' and 'original' writing. Australian Book Review

'Marvellous' and 'brisk' writing. Rip it Up Review

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# The Cuckoo's Song

I was ten years old when the gypsy fortune-teller told me the day and the hour of my death and I have been waiting since. As the hour draws nearer peace descends upon me. A lifetime of waiting has its own price to pay.

The gypsies followed the fair that came to my hometown every year. When the gypsies came we locked our belongings away. We called them the plague, but at least we only had to endure them for the week of the fair.

I went with my older sister, Cosima, and her husband, Lorenzo, to the fair. As we got closer the noise got louder. There was shouting, a band playing loudly and the noise from the rides and the screams of those riding them. On the street were many stalls with people selling jewellery, knitting, preserves. I looked at everything with wide eyes, my hand in my pocket as I smoothed the coin my father had given me. In the spaces between the tables beggars sat on the ground, their eyes on the ground as they pleaded for money. We passed a gypsy woman with a young girl on her lap, the child's arm burnt and twisted.

‘They do that to their children,’ Lorenzo told me. ‘It’s how they get pity and earn a few lires.’

I gasped, my eyes glued to the child’s arm.

The gypsy woman heard him, her face hardened and her eyes flashed her ire. Lorenzo met her gaze and hurriedly walked away. I followed Cosima and Lorenzo, still thinking about the gypsy woman and her child. They had looked hungry and tired.

I ran back to the gypsy woman. ‘Here.’ I thrust out my coin.

‘Thank you my child,’ she said, taking it. ‘You have done a great deed for me and my child.’

I tried not to stare at her daughter but was helpless not to.

‘I too will do you a great deed.’ She gripped my hand and pulled me to her. Her hot breath tickled my ear as she whispered against it.

I stood and looked into her eyes. They were blacker than coal and bitterer than pepper. I tore away and ran, terror making me fleet-footed and nimble as I weaved through the crowd, the gypsy’s whispers echoing in my head.

A hard hand gripped my shoulder, making me shriek. ‘Where are you running off to?’ Cosima slapped me on the shoulder. She took hold of my hand and roughly pulled me back to Lorenzo. ‘Father told you not to run off without us or he’d give you the belt.’

I started sobbing and huddled against her side.

‘It’s all right.’ Cosima smoothed my hair. ‘I won’t tell Father.’

For the rest of the night I stayed glued to my sister. Each time Lorenzo reached for Cosima I pulled her toward me, forcing him to walk apart from us.

‘I didn’t let the brat come so she could keep me away from my wife,’ he muttered.

‘Lorenzo,’ Cosima said with her sweet voice. ‘She misses me.’

My sister had married Lorenzo a few months before and moved away. This was her first visit as a married woman and she’d lorded it over me since she came, making me do her washing, brush her hair, make her bed. All the things she’d forced me to do when she’d lived at home but that I’d had a reprieve from when she married.

With the gypsy’s words a faint echo, guilt bit me like a wasp. I’d been wishing for my sister to leave and never come back again and according to the gypsy, my wish would come true.

Cosima packed a few days later and I watched her every move. ‘Are you happy with Lorenzo?’ I asked.

‘What a silly question,’ Cosima admonished as she folded Lorenzo’s shirt.

‘Does he hurt you?’

Cosima looked at me. She sighed and sat on the bed. ‘Come here.’ She patted the bed beside her and when I sat, she put her arm around me. ‘You’ve probably heard noises at night.’ Her face turned pink and she avoided my gaze.

‘This is what a man and woman do to make a baby. It sounds like it hurts and it does hurt the woman a little bit,’ she shrugged.

‘But it’s a welcome pain because it means that I could have a baby.’

I looked at her with scorn. ‘I know how a baby is made. A man puts his pippy in the woman’s—’

Cosima clapped her hand over my mouth. ‘If you know then why are you asking your silly questions?’

I pushed her hand off my mouth. ‘Does Lorenzo hit you?’

‘Of course not.’ Cosima didn’t meet my gaze as she continued packing.

‘When are you going to visit again?’ I asked.

‘Are you ready?’ Lorenzo asked as he entered.

‘Yes.’ Cosima kissed me on the cheek. I latched onto her hand and held it tightly. I started crying, my mouth open and snot dribbling onto my lips.

‘You’ll see me again soon.’ Cosima pried my fingers off her.

I shook my head, not letting go.

‘When I have a baby you can visit and help me take care of it.’ Cosima patted my hand and went to Lorenzo. He put his arm around her and led her outside to their car.

I watched through a veil of tears as she left. I tried to run after her but my father held me against him. It was the last time I saw my sister. She’d twisted in the seat and was looking out the back window, smiling and waving as she drove away to her death.





The cuckoo clock rang, bringing me back to the present. As the cuckoo bird popped out of its house thirteen times and trilled its high-pitched song I sat up heavily and pushed myself off from the sofa. My youngest daughter was coming and bringing the grandchildren to visit me. For the next few hours my house would be filled with noise and laughter as my eight year old grandson and six year old granddaughter told me all their secrets.

When I greeted my daughter she looked tired and drawn, closer to my age than to her own forty eight years. I clucked my tongue as I hugged her. 'No good,' I said in my broken English. 'Look like old woman.' In my day we'd had our children young and spent our middle age in peace. I'd had all six of my children by the time I was thirty years old.

'I know Ma,' my daughter said, her forehead wrinkling so that she was the spitting image of what Cosima would have looked like, had she lived.



The gypsy's words had faded over time and I no longer feared her predictions, but in my sixteenth year her words proved true. I spent my days after completing my chores sneaking away to be with my love, Marco.

Marco was a neighbour's son and we'd secretly loved each other since we were twelve years old. We were going to be married when the wretched war ended. It was already the fourth year of harsh deprivations that had stretched everyone's endurance to snapping point.

We'd meet in the cornfield at the edge of our property. Lying side by side we talked about our dreams.

'Australia is the place for us, Francesca,' Marco said, holding my hand. 'It is the land of opportunity.' He lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a kiss there, his gaze still on the bright sky above us.

I turned my head and watched his profile. My Marco was strong and determined. Whatever he put his mind to he achieved. Even in this time of hardship his fields produced the most crop and he always had a little extra food to give to my family.

I kissed his cheek. His eyes focussed on me and he smiled. I leaned over his chest and kissed his lips. He kissed me back for a moment, before pushing me away.

'No, Francesca,' he said as I continued kissing him.

'But I don't want to wait.' I pressed my breasts against his chest. My parents didn't want me to marry while the war was on and Marco agreed with them. I was the only one who thought waiting in this time of uncertainty was crazy. 'The war could last forever,' I murmured against his lips.

For a moment he weakened and kissed me back with all his pent up desire. My heart raced as I felt his need against my thigh,

his strong hands gripping the back of my head as he devoured my lips. He wrenched himself away and stood, offering his hand to help me up. ‘The war will only be a few more years.’

‘A few more years,’ I shouted. I slapped his hand away and pushed through the corn, walking home in a snit.

‘Such passion,’ Marco teased. ‘You will scorch the sheets on our wedding night.’

‘There won’t be a wedding night,’ I shouted over my shoulder, not breaking my stride. Marco’s laugh wrapped itself around me like the warm tendrils of a summer breeze.

This was our little game. I knew the next time I saw him Marco would have a gift, a flower or an apple, to give to me as he sweet-talked his way back into my good graces.

Except, there would be no next time. When I came home that day there was a visitor and my life changed.



My daughter walked into the living room carrying a box. ‘Look what I found in the bedroom.’

‘I was cleaning,’ I said as I watched her rifling through the box.

‘You should put some of these out in frames.’ She caressed a yellowed black and white photo of a man in a soldier’s uniform, stony-faced as he started down the camera. ‘Have some reminders of Dad around you.’ She handed me the photo.

‘I have memories here.’ I tapped my head. ‘I don’t need this.’ I put the photo back in the box and handed it to her. ‘You take and put in frame.’

She looked uncertain.

‘Take, take,’ I insisted.

She put it in her bag. ‘I’ll pick out a few and bring the rest back to you.’

I didn’t say anything. I had already left all my photos and memorabilia to her in my will. She was the fairest and most sentimental of my children and I knew she’d be the one who’d divide them fairly among her other siblings.



I’d walked into my parents’ house rosy-cheeked from my fight with Marco, grass sticking to my dress and legs from lying on the ground. There was a soldier in the living room and my parents’ faces were sunken with worry. It was never good to find a Black Shirt in your house.

‘Hello Francesca,’ the soldier said.

My eyes widened. How did he know my name? Fear blurred my vision and it took me a while to recognise him as Lorenzo, my sister’s husband. ‘Cosima,’ I whispered, looking around for my sister.

My mother sobbed and I saw she was holding a bundle of rags in her arms. As she cried, her arms tightened on the bundle and

it let out a shriek. I walked to my mother and saw the screaming red face of the baby she gripped. Mother told me my sister had died bringing her daughter into the world.

Lorenzo took the baby from my mother and placed it in my arms. 'Here is Cosima,' he said, as my hands curled around the squirming bundle.

I looked down at the baby and saw Cosima's eyes looking at me.

'It is time for you to keep the promise you made your sister,' Lorenzo said. 'You promised you would help her take care of her baby.' He took something from his pocket and gripped my hand. 'And now you have to keep your word.'

I felt something cold slide onto my finger and looked down to see my sister's wedding ring on my left hand. My legs gave out. The gypsy's burning black eyes filled my vision and I heard her whispered words once again. 'You will marry your sister's killer,' she had told me and within a week, I did.



The cuckoo bird started singing to mark the fourteenth hour of the day. As it jumped out of its house my grandchildren watched enthralled and counted its cuckoos.

'One, two, three.' The cuckoo's song died. 'Ohhhh,' my grandchildren exclaimed their disappointment and watched as it continued leaping out of its house mutely.

My grandson peered at the shelf above the heater, his index finger pointing at the clocks as he counted under his breath.

‘Mum, why do old people have so many clocks?’

‘Because we are marking the time left to our death,’ I said.

‘Mum, don’t be morbid,’ my daughter snapped. ‘Because they like the sound that clocks make.’ She told my grandson.

‘We will all die.’ I placed my hand on hers. ‘It is nothing to be afraid of.’

‘Don’t talk like this.’ My daughter gripped my hand briefly. ‘You’re going to live forever.’

I shook my head. ‘No.’ I tried to find the words to make her understand. ‘We all have a time to live and a time to die,’ I wanted to tell her, but even after fifty years of living in Australia, the English words would not trip off my tongue.

By the time I had remembered the English words she was already lost in the tide of life, rushing to separate her children as they slapped and screamed at each other. I smiled. She would learn, just as I had to learn.



While knowing that I would live a long life made some burdens easier to bear, it made others intolerable.

‘She must be at least three months old,’ I said to my mother as I changed baby Cosima. Mother fearfully looked around to see

if Lorenzo was nearby. ‘If Cosima died in childbirth, why did it take three months for him to come here?’

Mother didn’t answer. She took Lorenzo’s dirty uniform out to wash, her eyes flashing her warning. After the uniform was dry Mama took the cast iron out and started ironing.

‘I’ll do it.’ I took the heavy iron from her hands. I pressed the iron onto the shirt and moved it. The iron stuck to the shirt, slightly singing it.

Mama winced. ‘You have to do it gently.’ She instructed me as I slowly ironed.

I was hanging the shirt on a coat-hanger when Lorenzo entered. He looked at the shirt, noticing the singe on the front pocket. His arm arched back and his face contorted into rage and hatred. I flinched, closing my eyes as I waited for him to strike. He struck, his hand glancing off my head as if he attempted to swerve at the last moment. I opened my eyes.

‘Do better in future,’ he snapped, and took the shirt away.

Mama hugged me and we both trembled against each other in terror. Is this what my poor sister had to contend with?

The mailman arrived the next day. The mail was sporadic in this time of war, arriving every two to three months. He handed me an envelope that was creased and torn, as if it had travelled over the whole countryside before it arrived to me. I looked at the writing as the mailman pedalled away and gasped—it was Cosima’s handwriting. I ran to the barn and climbed the ladder to the attic where the corn was stored, before opening it.

*My dear Francesca,*

*I have given birth to a beautiful baby girl that I named Violetta. She reminds me so much of you when you were first born with her rosy cheeks and long black eyelashes. She suffers from colic and cries a lot, my poor love. I find myself carrying her around all day, attempting to comfort and soothe her.*

*Lorenzo has joined the Fascists and is serving our beloved leader Benito Mussolini. He is under a lot of pressure as a soldier, trying to prove himself in this time of division to make our country whole. He gets frustrated with my lax housekeeping and says that my ironing of his uniform is inadequate. I remember how your little hands are so deft and careful as you ironed Papa's good suit for cousin Piera's wedding.*

*Please promise me you will come. I need you so much.*

*Your loving sister,*

*Cosima*

Now I knew what had happened. Lorenzo must have used his brute strength and struck her. Struck her hard enough to kill her. I closed the letter and cried. If only I had received it earlier.

I held out against my parents' entreaties for a week, attempting to find a spare moment to speak to Marco, but between my parents' watchful eyes, Cosima's demanding screams and Lorenzo's suspicious gaze, it was never to be.

The Black Shirts held the power of life and death in their hands, and in the end there was only one choice to be made. I lost my virginity in the bed that I'd shared with my sister, keep-



ing my eyes closed as my lips formed Marco's name. The next morning I left my sleeping husband and went to the cornfield to meet my love.

Marco sat on the ground and didn't look at me as I sat beside him.

'I didn't want to do it,' I said to his profile.

'I know.' He still didn't look at me.

'I had to because of—'

He stopped me by taking hold of my hand. I gripped it tightly, knowing this was the only touch permitted to me.

'I'm joining the Partisans.' Marco let go of my hand.

'No,' I said. 'You promised you wouldn't leave.'

'Yes and you promised you would be my wife.' His smile was bittersweet.

I covered my mouth as I cried. 'I'm sorry,' I gasped between sobs. 'I'm sorry.'

He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. 'So am I,' he whispered as he left.

I prayed for death as the gypsy's words taunted me with the knowledge of the years that stretched ahead of me, but even as the war raged around us and many died, I was immune.

I thought that losing Marco was the worst thing that could happen to me, but in my seventeenth year I was to learn different. That was the year that I lost Cosima for the second time.

The fever I thought was from teething carried her away in her sleep. She was thirteen months old when she died of measles and

joined her mother. I wrapped her in her mother's wedding dress and we buried them next to each other.

'Don't worry, Bella,' an old woman said after she offered her condolences to my parents. 'You will have your own children soon.' She patted my stomach.

I flinched from her touch, thinking about the children I would have. Children that would have Lorenzo's black wiry hair instead of Marco's chocolate-brown eyes.

I was in my bedroom after the funeral writing a letter to Lorenzo, who was on the front, to tell him about his daughter's death.

'Francesca.' My father knocked on the door gently and entered. He was fighting to hold back tears.

I turned away from him.

'Marco is missing,' he put his hands on my shoulders. He didn't have to say anything else. I knew that Marco was thought to be dead. My father patted me and left.

I had no more tears left. I closed my eyes and swayed from despair, the grinding pain of so many losses wearing me down.

'Your love will remain lost to you if you give up hope,' the gypsy whispered.

I snapped my eyes open and looked around me, but I was alone. I touched my heart and felt it stir to life. There were many people who had been declared missing and been found again. Just the other week my neighbour Giancarlo had returned to his wife and children after they'd mourned him for a year.

I looked at the letter I had been writing to my husband. I had kept my promise to my sister, now it was time for me to keep the promise I made to my love. I crumpled the letter and started again on a new sheet.



'I'll see you next week, Ma,' my daughter said as I walked her to the door. I touched her face with my hand. When she smiled I felt Cosima with me once again.

'*Uno momento.*' I went to the fridge and removed a container. 'I make meatballs for you.' I handed them to my daughter.

'Keep them here for next week.' She tried to hand it back but I pushed it away.

'It's okay.' I squeezed my grandson's cheeks. 'I know he likes meatballs.'

'Muum.' My grandson put his hands onto the container. My daughter sighed and put it in her bag and I saw the photo of my husband in his uniform again.

I closed the door behind them and lay on my sofa and waited. The empty house sighed around me. The weighted silence interrupted by the ticking of the clocks. I'd had plenty of practice at waiting.



I waited for him every day in the cornfield, holding onto the gypsy's words. She'd been right about so much, she had to be right about this too. He came back to me on a warm summer day in 1943 after the Americans swarmed Rome.

I was lying on the ground, the corn rustling around me as the breeze rifled its branches, when he called my name. I opened my eyes and saw that in the two years since we'd said what we thought were our final goodbyes, he'd grown from a boy into a man. He was gaunt and his uniform hung on him. Later he told me about the two years we lost while he was a prisoner of war.

'Marco,' I said his name like a prayer and ran to him.

He hugged me, before quickly letting me go. 'I have to go.' He started to walk away.

'No, please don't go,' I begged as I clutched at his hand. 'I have so much to tell you.'

He pulled his hand away. 'You will have to tell those things to your husband.'

'No.' I threw myself in front of him. 'I want you to be my husband.' I looked down at the ground. 'As long as you will have a divorced woman.'

I had divorced Lorenzo after baby Cosima's death, while my parents howled their protest. Lorenzo had reluctantly let me go, after I wrote to him what I'd learnt about my sister's death.

Since the divorce I'd become the social outcast of my village and the only thing that had sustained me was the hope that Marco and I would be together. But now that the moment of truth was finally upon me I couldn't look at him for fear of the

disgust I would see on his face. He placed something in my hand. I looked down to see an apple.

‘I guess we will have our wedding night after all.’ He smiled.□

The cuckoo bird fluttered, doing its mute dance fifteen times. The fortune-teller had told me, ‘You will die when your hair is grey, when your face is like a dried fig, and when the cuckoo bird stops singing.’

It was time.



# About the Author

**Amra Pajalić** is an award-winning author, an editor and teacher who draws on her Bosnian cultural heritage to write own voices stories for young people, who like her, are searching to mediate their identity and take pride in their diverse culture.

She won the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature's Civic Choice Award for her debut novel *The Good Daughter*. The anthology she co-edited, *Growing up Muslim in Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2014), was shortlisted for the 2015 Children's Book Council of the year awards and her memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me* (Transit Lounge, 2019) was shortlisted for the 2020 National Biography Award. Her short stories and non-fiction articles and essays have been published in anthologies, journals and shortlisted in writing competitions. She works as a high school teacher and is completing a PhD in Creative Writing at La Trobe University.

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# Short Story Publication Credits

Amra's stories were previously published in online journals, anthologies and shortlisted in prizes:

'The Cuckoo's Song', Second Prize, 2006 *Brimbank Council Short Story Competition*

'Siege' published in 2004 *Best Australian Short Stories*, Black Inc

'Flirty Eyes' in 2005 *Best Australian Short Stories*, Black Inc

'In Treatment' published in the 2011 *Ada Cambridge Competition Anthology*

'Fragments' published in *Bronzeville Bee Online Journal*, 2019

'Nervous Breakdown' previously published in 2016 *Rebellious Daughters Anthology*, Ventura Press

'School of Hard Knocks' in *Meet me at the Intersection* anthology, Freemantle Press, 2018

'Woman on Fire' in 2013 *Etchings* journal



# A guide for international readers

This book is set in Australia and uses British English spelling. Some spellings may differ from those used in American English.

Australia's seasons are at opposite times to those in the northern hemisphere. Summer is December–February, autumn is March–May, winter is June–August, and spring is September–November. Christmas is in summer.

In the Australian school system, primary school is for grades Kindergarten to Grade 6, and high school is for grades Year 7–12. Secondary college is a name frequently used for high school. Tertiary education after high school is either at universities and TAFE (technical and further education) institutions.

In Australia, each school year starts in late January and finishes mid-December.

The legal drinking age in Australia is 18 years old.

AUSTUDY is financial help if you're 25 or older and studying or completing an Australian apprenticeship.

