We – Zlatko and I – are stepping out of the bar and onto the cobbled street. We leave behind us Gligor, Gligor’s sudden temper and the chair he has just thrown against a wall and broken to pieces. All the way back to Zlatko’s flat, we walk without talking about this or anything else. We dodge the mid-summer, late night crowds, Ohrid lakeside tourists and locals alike. We pass by the post office, the old telephone exchange, the new McDonalds, a supermarket and the international bus stand situated across the road from Zlatko’s graffitied block. We enter and climb the bare concrete stairs, five floors of them, until we are standing outside Zlatko’s wooden door.

Without a key, he opens it. It’s not locked – it’s never locked – for philosophical reasons, as he’s already explained. We take off our shoes before we cross the threshold. We leave them outside, as is his ritual, and then Zlatko hands me a pair of the thick, woollen, crocheted house-socks that he keeps in a stack for visitors on the other side of the frame. We wear the socks so that the almonds and walnuts that he has spread thickly on the floor don’t hurt our feet, mine or his. Those nuts can be dangerous, especially the ones that have been husked. I put on my nut-protection socks and walk down the hall into the living room, in the dark. Zlatko doesn’t like electricity.

Instead, he lights some candles and begins to boil some water on a portable gas ring – which also gives off a bit of extra light. He’s making a pot of Na Majchina Dusica, A Mother’s Little Soul’s Mountain Tea, for me. It’s meant to be calming. And I’m trying to relax, but I’m finding it difficult after Gligor’s violent outburst.

Still, I sweep aside some nuts and sit on the floor next to the fridge which, in the last days, I have come to know is not really a fridge but a cupboard for clothes. It stands across from the TV which is just a box for wires. The electric kettle – a vase for plastic flowers. In the same way, all of Zlatko’s household appliances have been disentangled from their regular meanings and functions. There is only one piece of traditional-seeming furniture. A bookcase which displays books: seminal works such as the Bible, the Koran, American Psycho, Tito: Life and Times, Capital, The Brothers Grimm. But the books’ insides have been gutted. Perfect rectangles have been cut out of their centres to fit, snugly, Zlatko’s cigarette packets.
What else is there to do? I pull down one of the nutcrackers that hangs on a hook from the ceiling, attached to a piece of long, stretchy cord. And I think back to the time I asked Zlatko what they were about, for – the nuts, the nutcrackers – but he told me that I should make my own mind up, like with art.

Anyway, I haven’t yet.

Using the plier-ends, I grasp a tough, old walnut. I squeeze and crack it open, picking bones and flesh apart. I put the meat in my mouth, chew. But it isn’t a good one. It’s rotten. I swallow, anyway, grimacing as Zlatko arrives in perfect time to wash the bad taste down with the pot of tea he’s brought. He sits beside me, opens a little tin, and with the things inside begins to prepare a joint for himself – his herbal remedy. I sip my tea, hug my knees and rock gently, watching, until the paper’s licked, he’s lit the match and begun to draw deeply.

Then I say, “Well, that was weird.” It’s the first time either of us has spoken since we left the bar and Gligor, the smasher of chairs.

“What was it all about, do you think?” I ask.

Zlatko concentrates on inhaling and exhaling. Then he says, “All that was for you. Gligor thought he would be with you tonight.”

“But where would he get that idea? We only met this afternoon.”

Zlatko, with a calm face, free from any sudden furrows, tells me, “In Macedonia, we didn’t have a war when Yugoslavia broke apart, not like Croatia and Serbia and Bosnia. The young people feel they didn’t get a chance to vent their anger, their tensions. But this country was affected as well. The young people have no future. There are no jobs. No security. The young people are suffering mentally. Gligor is suffering mentally. He takes pills.”

I nod taking in this information, Zlatko’s argument: that a war would help someone, would help Gligor who takes pills and breaks things when he doesn’t get girls, feel better in the short and long term. I consider it. Then I begin to feel panicky.

I say, “Okay. Well, I’m a bit freaked out, actually. Do you think Gligor will come tonight? He knows I’m here. Do you think he’ll come?”

Zlatko says, “No. He won’t come.”

I say, “Are you sure?”

Zlatko says he is sure.
My eyes dart around.
“Still,” I say, “would you mind, would it be okay, if we locked the
door to your flat? I know it’s against your philosophy. But just in case.”
Zlatko says that we could, if it will make me feel safer.
“It would, it would,” I say.
Soon, when he’s stubbed out the butt of his joint, Zlatko gets up
and unscrews the mouthpiece of a non-functioning telephone and digs
out a key – calmly, too calmly, I think. With it he goes down the hall to
lock the door. And as I observe him do this, as he slides the inside chain
across its slot as a final measure, I begin to wonder if Zlatko really is the
kind, wise, laid-back yet slightly eccentric person I have judged him to
be. What if I’m wrong? What if in trying to protect myself from what I
imagine lies outside, I have now willingly locked myself in with the real
monster?
Maybe the whole scene in the bar was planned, choreographed
so that Zlatko could get me here alone: a young female traveller who
knows no-one. Probably, Gligor is in on it as well. Soon, he will come
with his own key, his own way to open the sliding lock – with a push and
shove. He’ll bring with him three other young, angry men with no
futures and no jobs and they’ll rape me. They’ll laugh as they do it. I
torture myself. You’re an idiot. You don’t even know this guy properly.
No-one knows you’re here.
I try to get a grip. I tell myself: Breathe, breathe. Look around.
What’s really happening? What’s reality right now? I watch Zlatko for
cues to this reality, but he’s just plodding around in his woollen nut-
protection booties – they’re green and pink with stripes. He’s getting
ready for sleep, he’s brushing his teeth. He’s doing normal things like
folding up his dirty clothes and putting them in the vegetable crisper at
the bottom of the fridge; picking up my empty tea cup and putting it in
the sink. He wants to show me the room where I can comfortably rest.
He’s offering me his hand.
“It’s okay. I can do it,” I say. I lift myself off the floor with my own
hands. I wipe the nut shells and husks from the back of my dress and
follow Zlatko down the hallway to see what he wants to show me. A few
steps and we’re there. Zlatko’s standing in front of a door which I have
never been inside of, never really noticed before.
“It’s the guest’s room,” Zlatko says, pausing, explaining. The room he rents out to tourists in summer so he can pay his heating bill in winter – when he likes electricity. But tonight, tonight, it is free for me. I don’t have to pay. Because I am a friend. “You are a friend now,” he says.

I want to believe him, but I don’t.

My eyes are two slits as he opens the door and turns on the light switch. Amazingly, the light works. I peer in, afraid of what I might see. Yawning, Zlatko only starts introducing me around.

“This is the bed,” he says. But it’s just an ordinary object, a thing to lie in, as beds usually are.

“Here is the window.” It’s hidden, closed behind some curtains, but I could open it if I wanted to.

“You have a blanket.” It’s one of those hairy, red rug-like things they have in cooler mountain climates, nothing more.

“There are clean sheets.” These are made of linen, as anyone might expect, and tucked in extra-tightly around the mattress.

Everything is what it is, what it appears to be. But Zlatko doesn’t mention the floor which is, strangely, completely nut-free. There are no nuts and no nut-crackers hang from hooks from the ceiling.

“Oh. I almost forgot,” Zlatko says, gesturing towards an ordinary-looking small table sitting by the bed, “This is the bedside table.”

And then he goes, closing the door behind him.

On the table, I notice there is a book. I pick it up and turn it over. I open it to see that it, too, simply is what it is – not a home for a packet of cigarettes but for words arranged in sentences. I recognise the book’s blue, watercoloury cover. It is a memoir by a French woman who recounts, vividly, her memories of the first three weeks of her life. Zlatko read pieces of it to me in the park where I met him a week or so ago. I remember watching his face, beautiful under the daytime trees, expressive as he translated from French to Macedonian to English, his lips moving like an underwater acrobat falling without taking a breath, between grammars and syntaxes, genders and cultures to produce a meaning I could understand. I was moved. It’s not something I know how to do so well – this almost effortless-seeming linguistic shapeshifting.
Now, in the guest’s room, I flick. I stare dumbly at the pages. I can’t make sense. I close the book, turn off the light. I lie down on the bed, feeling the hairy, red rug-blanket beneath my back. I keep all of my clothes on, removing just the woollen socks. I push them off with one foot, then the other and kick them to the floor. I try to sleep but, instead, I lie with my eyes wide open, feeling the release of tension in my body, my earlier fears diminishing.

I think of the night that is passing and about my life and how it’s come to this. I think of Zlatko and how he seems to have made his life, in part at least, from the walnuts, almonds, the nuts he has scattered on his floor. I think about Gligor in the bar, right before he demolished the chair. How his mouth opened and closed like a wooden puppet’s, up and down, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying because of the blaring Euro-techno. I think about Macedonia as a whole and the civil war that was averted. The war that Zlatko thinks Gligor needs and wants. I wonder, really, if he does. I try to remember the first three weeks of my life, but I have to admit I can’t.

Outside the closed window, there’s a lot of howling and hooting and hollering going on. I listen to the cries and imagine all the mistakes people might be making, the things people might regret in the morning – or not. And I wonder how it is that I got to be so sober, so careful, so afraid. I decide to get up. I pull back the curtains and open the window to let in some air. Then I leave my room and creep down the nutty hall – barefoot, unprotected – to where Zlatko is resting under a sheet, a lump on the floor on some foam.

I stand there and ask in a half-whisper, “Zlatko, are you awake?”
“No,” he says, joking. “What is it?”
I say, “Sleep won’t visit me.” The way he might, poetically.
Zlatko lifts his head. He says, “Do you want me to come?”
I say, “Will you come?”
He says, “Do you want me to come?”
“Yes,” I say.
Then we walk back down the nutty hall to the room for guests and lie on the bed on the red-rug blanket, next to each other, on our sides.
We look, for what feels like a very long time, soulfully, seriously, into each other’s eyes. Then we drift into sleep.
Tamara Lazaroff is a Brisbane-based writer of fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry. Her short stories have won the Biennial Literary Award (2015), been longlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize (2018) and Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize (2014), and been published in various literary journals in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, including Meanjin, Headland and The Wrong Quarterly. Late last year, she completed her first interlinked short story collection/manuscript, In My Father’s Village & Other Stories. Inspired by her roots tour travels through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and growing up in Australia, these cross-cultural stories all deal with celebratory liberation – breaking free from memories, places, identities and ways of thinking that limit or confine the spirit. She works as an English Language teacher and is a cat lover and yoga enthusiast.