

CHAPTER TWO



The swansong

I WAS NEVER SURE if I was dreaming my life or living in my dreams. I would fall asleep at night as if plunging in deep water, then simply open my eyes in the morning and continue to swim. Far from being vague, I had an exceptionally sharp mind, but I never thought of dreams as something unreal. My imagination was so acutely vivid that fantasy sometimes seemed even more plausible to me than the reality itself.

The night after we found the satans in our forest, I dreamt of dancing in moonlight. Standing on the lakeshore, I saw the cosmic sphere mirrored on the silver surface. A sad, beautiful melody echoed from the sky. Violins and oboes wept as I spread my arms and glided in circles above the still water until the rolling drums announced the handsome prince's arrival.

I prepared to fly into his arms when I heard my mother's voice.

"Wake up, little Trumpet! It's the first day of school!"

It took me a moment to realise that the loud drumming I heard in my head was the mechanical alarm clock in my parents' bedroom.

"We're taking Marta to the bus station." Mum pulled off my blanket. "Get up. We must leave in half an hour."

I rubbed my eyes and jumped out of bed, dancing to the sound of our household cacophony. The door banged in Marta's room and the toilet tank flushed with a rumble. Mum's slippers flip-flapped down the stairs. Water started to run in the bathroom. Dad coughed and tapped the sink with his razor.

I waltzed to my wardrobe to put on my best dress, blue with white dots and frills. Buttoning it up, I dashed to our hallway to check my reflection in the mirror. It was an antique piece carved in wood, which my father rescued from a garbage dump and had restored. Painted in gold, it looked like a majestic gateway. I liked to dance in front of it, imagining that it was the National Theatre stage. After I performed a couple of flawless pirouettes, I concluded my solo by bowing to an invisible audience. Satisfied with the inaudible applause, I parted my chestnut hair in the middle and plaited it in two braids, fastening my hairdo with elastic bands, pins and ribbons.

“What time does Marta’s bus leave from the station?” My dad rushed past me to the garage. Wearing a business suit, he looked fresh and handsome. I caught a whiff of spicy aftershave.

“Eight thirty.” I informed him. “My opening ceremony starts at ten.”

My mother and sister were arguing upstairs.

“I don’t need your advice. I’m twenty years old!” I heard Marta scream.

“Sometimes I forget how old you are.” Mum’s voice sounded shrill. “You act like a teenager!”

Unsurprisingly, my sister left the packing of her bags to the last minute.

Marta departed to Liberec, a town close to the East German border, where she was supposed to study mechanical engineering. The Technical College was an odd choice of specialisation, seeing that my sister was never very good at mathematics or descriptive geometry. She merely wished to get as far away from home as possible. The Technical College in Liberec was the most remote of the available options and it didn’t require the entrance exam.

A moment later, my mother’s reflection appeared in the mirror. She looked good in a scarlet two-piece with a grey, silken blouse. The tight jacket clutched her slender waist. I watched her put on a pair of high heels and a black hat that she adjusted to the most becoming angle with an aristocratic gesture.

“You look like a queen!” I felt proud of her.

“Don’t exaggerate, Trumpet.” She laughed. “I put on a bit of make-up. That’s all.”

Mum didn’t only have the talent to produce delicious meals out of leftovers. She was capable of following the latest fashion by dressing in second hand clothes and hats she bought at clearance sales.

“How do I look?” Marta came into my view with her suitcase.

She wore a black elastic shirt without a bra and a green miniskirt with yellow stripes. Marta's eyes were so heavy with mascara she could barely keep them open.

"What do you want me to say?" Mum resignedly sighed. "You're an adult now."

I led the way to the garage where Dad was busy giving technical instructions to his employee. Peter Hába was a tall nerd with knock-knees, thick glasses and a bald scalp surrounded with a greasy crown of long hair. He serviced the Aparatura while my father drove off to do business.

"Good morning, Marta." Peter almost fell down the ladder when he saw my sister's bulging cleavage. The young man agreed to work for my father's capitalistic wages only because he was desperately in love with Marta. "Can I help you with your suitcase?" He rushed down to her.

"If you insist." My sister haughtily handed him her luggage as if she was doing him a favour. "Put it in the trunk. Will you?"

I followed everyone outside to our rusty yellow Škoda. Our car was typical of the Normalization, looking like a can of sardines on wheels. It featured two pairs of round headlights and an unreliable engine at the back.

"Remember to keep an eye on the distillation column, Peter." Dad exhaled cigarette smoke out of the car window, turning on the ignition. "I should be back early in the afternoon."

The engine feebly coughed and wheezed, refusing to perform.

"Can you give me a push, mate?"

My father's request sounded more like a command.

I pulled up my sleeves to help Peter push our Škoda down the street while Mum and Marta trotted behind on high heels. Seconds later, the motor roared and the exhaust pipe spewed a stinky cloud into our faces. I saw Dad impatiently gesture us to board the car. Running to the door, I hurled myself onto the back seat while the car was still in motion. Mum and Marta accelerated, following my example.

"Bye, bye, Peter." I saw my father's employee disappear behind a curtain of dust and petrol fumes. "Have a nice day."

"Didn't you recently see a mechanic to get the engine fixed, Jirka?" Mum seized her position on the front seat, looking upset. "How much did it cost you?" I watched her straighten her hat and dust off her stylish shoes.

"Don't get me started on this." Dad snorted. "Those thieves at the Mrakotín garage

screwed me over.” He slammed the steering wheel. “It’s cost me a fortune to change the candles, but I bet they’ve put in used parts to increase their profit. I’ll need to have a word with them about it.”

Push-starting cars was an important part of the daily routine in the eighties. The recent models of Škoda especially seemed every bit as moody as the blue-collar workers who cheerfully sabotaged the communist ideology of working towards a better future. The Normalization promoted sloth, theft and professional sloppiness. “A sparrow in hand is better than a pigeon on the roof.” A Czech proverb warns against ambitious aspirations. Back in those days, few mechanics were willing to make an honest effort to repair your vehicle properly. Not even for money. The drivers who drove functional cars were the mechanics themselves. Fine-tuning their engines represented the sole exception to their laziness.

“Slow down, Dad!” Marta yelled in terror while we raced across the fields to Prague. “You’re going to kill us.”

My father overtook cars left and right, doing his best to make the engine repent. As a former cabbie, he trained to bend the traffic rules. Pressing the gas pedal to the floor, he squeezed the maximum horsepower from the howling engine. We nearly flew to the suburban panorama of smoking chimneys and tower blocks. Burning the tires, Dad shot through a busy intersection while the green light turned orange. When we crossed Palacký Bridge on tram tracks, the Prague Castle emerged into my view on the left side, towering above the river like a fairy tale château.

“*Do prdele.*” Dad jammed on brakes, seeing the traffic lights switch to red. “We’re not going to make it.”

After the signal eventually allowed us to take off, I drew a breath and closed my eyes, fighting motion sickness. My father switched his way through the dense traffic, avoiding several collisions. He committed a number of offences, but we managed to get to the Florence Station in time to catch Marta’s bus.

“*Ciao* everyone.” My sister kissed us goodbye like a Hollywood star. “I’ll send you a postcard.” I watched her mount a rickety coach at the platform number 8.

As soon as she handed her ticket to the driver, the rusty bus shuddered. Releasing a cannonade of farting sounds, the vehicle vanished behind a dense cloud of pitch-black smoke.

“So, this is it.” My mother’s eyes filled with tears. “One bird has left its nest.”

“Don’t be sad, Alice.” Dad wrapped his arms around her waist. “She’ll be back before you know it.”

I watched my parents kiss. They were a good-looking couple.

“What are you up to now?” Dad was always quick to snap out of emotional mood to affront practical concerns. “Do you want me to give you a lift to the Conservatory?” He hurried to leave.

“Thanks, but I prefer to walk.” Mum gave him a sad smile. “We have time.”

“*Tfuj. Tfuj. Tfuj.* Little Trumpet.” He spat on the ground, making a show of kicking my bottom, which is a local way to wish someone good luck. “Let the Devil take you.”

Mum and I watched him drive off before we crossed the bus station to visit Grandma Helga at her kiosk.

“Miranda, *me* dear granddaughter!” Grandma cried in her North-Moravian ‘short beak’ accent when she saw us walk over. “I’m so happy you *drop* by! Is this a new outfit you’re wearing, Alice?” She bitingly added. “It must have cost my son a fortune.”

My father’s mother moved to Prague from the coalmining town Ostrava to start a new life after she had divorced my grandfather. Grandad apparently loved her so much, he followed her to the capital, but his broken heart sent him to the grave. Darkly attractive, Helga was a merry widow in her early sixties. She liked to wear crimson lipstick with a matching nail polish. Massive golden rings glittered on her fingers. A pair of big breasts bulged out of her deep cleavage. She made piles of money in her kiosk by wooing her customers with sugary compliments. I watched Grandma bend over the counter to rake generous tips for every little cake and sausage she handed over.

“And how about Marta?” She wanted to know. “Did she leave town without saying goodbye to me? I *go* to miss *me* treasure!” Grandma wiped imaginary tears from her eyes.

My sister used to earn her pocket money working part-time at Helga’s kiosk. She got famously well on with my grandmother, having inherited both her enormous breasts and business skills. It was following Grandma’s example that Marta took to wearing shirts without a bra.

Consequently, she broke the sales records and my mother’s heart.

“I hope you’ll be able to cope with your workload without Marta.” Mum said tartly.

“Don’t worry. I was never *scare* of working overtime.” Helga pursed her crimson lips. “How is *me* son? His business must *do* well if you can afford to buy new clothes?”

There was no love lost between Grandma and her daughter-in-law.

Luckily, a queue of impatient customers saved my mother from having to pursue the conversation. “I’ll be right with you.” Helga smiled at the shoppers, handing me a parcel wrapped in brown paper. “I’ve *make* them for you in my free time.” She beamed with grandmotherly pride. “I *use* the best yarn to keep you warm in the dancing studio.”

“Thanks Grandma.” I pulled out a pair of hand-knitted legwarmers. “This is what I needed.”

Helga was normally too busy to play my grandmother. She dated a different boyfriend every week and her primary preoccupation was to look young. Whenever she tried to do something nice for me, it turned into a major disaster. This time, however, Grandma exceeded all my expectations. She proved unusually thoughtful and I couldn’t thank her enough for her gift.

“Good. I’m happy to see that you’re happy.” Helga posed in the role of a loving grandmother like a sitcom actress. “*Prosím?* How can I help you?” I watched her serve an elderly client at the head of the queue. “Coffee with rum and a Sacher torte? That’s five crowns sixty.”

“*Nashledanou.*” Mum said goodbye and grabbed my hand.

We walked to the quay and followed the river upstream. After we passed the gothic cloister of St. Agnes, I stopped in front of the hospital Na Františku to see if the large windows fronting the operation theatres on the third floor radiated fluorescent light. My mother’s dad used to work in the large edifice as the head surgeon. I imagined that if the lights were on, Granddad might be saving someone’s life.

“He’ll be retired by now.” Mum pointed out.

“What a pity that we can’t say hello to him.” I sighed. “Granddad would have been so proud to see me become a student at the Conservatory of Dance.”

I had met my grandfather only once when I was four years old. Having convinced my mother to visit her estranged father at work, we surprised him in his office. After a brief moment of initial embarrassment, he seemed happy to speak to me and even asked us to come again. When we returned at the occasion of his 70th birthday, however, Granddad refused our presents and slammed the office door in our faces. The Red Countess had presumably made him change his mind, which was a terrible heartbreak. He and I had so many things in common.

“He would love to see you dance in Swan Lake.” Mum’s eyes glazed over. “It’s his favourite ballet too.”

A flock of white birds landed on the river by the Čech Bridge.

“Look, Mum!” I cried. “Four swans. Just like in *Pas de Quatre*.”

“What a coincidence.” She incredulously wiped her tears. “Let’s hope that this is an auspicious omen.”

Housed in a yellow three-storey building with a green copper roof, the Conservatory headquarters stood on the quay behind the Rudolfinum Music Hall, across the street from the Jewish Cemetery. Facing the entrance, I listened to the sound of tortured musical instruments pouring out of the windows. It dawned on me that I was about to cross an invisible line that divided the carefree time of my childhood from the cruel world of professional competition.

My hands began to sweat. “Let’s wait a minute.” I stepped back. “What do you think, Mum? Will everything turn out alright?”

“I hope so, Trumpet.” My mother clutched my shoulder. “If not, you can always quit.” She was never convinced that I should dedicate my life to ballet.

Walking through the revolving door, I feared that it would mince me like a giant meat grinder. The guard in a reception booth at the bottom of the stairway peeked out of the window, reminding me of a butcher.

A group of girls stood in the hallway with their mothers. Dressed up like dolls, they sported elaborate hairdos made of pleated braids, decorated with hair clips and ribbons. Noting my mother’s hat, my classmates grew quiet and curiously stretched their necks to check me out.

“*Ahoj*.” I recognised most of the faces I saw. “Isn’t it exciting to meet here?”

Many of the present girls had frequented the National Theatre Preparatory School of Ballet with me. We used to perform together in children’s roles on the celebrated stage, although I could call none of them my friend. They typically came from well-established Prague families and perceived me as an outsider. Their fathers belonged to the top of the political hierarchy and their mothers bought clothes in TUZEX, a department store for privileged people such as my grandmother, the Red Countess. You had to have access to foreign currency to obtain TUZEX vouchers.

“What are you doing here, Miranda?” A pale girl in Levi’s jeans and a cool T-shirt by Benneton gave me a saccharine smile. “I didn’t think you’d make it through the auditions.”

Ivana Gypsy was traditionally my nemesis. Her dad was a prominent member of the Politburo. The Gypsies lived in a luxurious villa in the best Prague neighbourhood. They

allegedly owned a couple of paintings by Picasso and often travelled to the West. Ivana shunned me, because I didn't wear the right clothes and couldn't boast of any celebrity in my family. Our dead Saint Bernard, who had starred in popular movies during his youth apparently didn't qualify as an enviable acquaintance.

"Really? I can't say I'm surprised to see you here." I was used to the rich girl's snide remarks. "With all your father's connections."

A thick smell of expensive perfumes hang in the air. Ivana was lost for words and nervously giggled. I turned around to greet the less presumptuous girls while my mum politely chatted with their mothers.

"Are these the first year students here?" A fat woman with a face covered in freckles walked over to our group. I watched her count the girls. "Nobody seems to be missing. Follow me to the Assembly Hall." She commanded. "The boys are already waiting there."

The mothers surrounded the freckled teacher with charm. Clicking the heels to the auditorium, they expertly pushed their daughters to the front row. Ballet was similar to politics. Diplomacy and gifts were the best way to the teachers' hearts. I suspected that several of my classmates had passed the three rounds of difficult auditions, because their parents bribed the jury. I didn't remember Ivana Gypsy as a great dancer. My mum and I ended up taking a place in the third row, next to a veteran mother, Mrs Walnut, who accompanied her second daughter to the Conservatory.

"*Čest práci, comrades.* Welcome to the State Conservatory of Dance." An obese man chaired the panel of teachers on a stage. "My name is Comrade Baba and I'm your new headmaster." He cleared his throat into a microphone, reminding me of a sweating hippopotamus with giant nostrils and skin flaps.

"Did you know that Baba directed variety shows before he came here?" Mrs Walnut whispered into my mother's ear. Having two daughters at the Conservatory, there was nothing Mrs Walnut didn't know. She informed us that the former headmistress held her position, because she was the wife of an old guard communist. "Comrade Bílá wasn't an outstanding dancer, but at least she used to dance in small roles during her youth." Mrs Walnut complained. "Baba never had anything to do with ballet, but I don't think he is a Party member."

This was a typical nonsense of the time. Normalization public offices and institutions lived in fear of the changes proposed by Gorbachev. The workplace collectives tried to manoeuvre by changing their leadership. In Prague, the Perestroika was like a game of

musical chairs played to the sound of *Kalinka*, where incompetent turncoats with sharp elbows supplanted the semi-competent hard-line Bolsheviks.

“Comrade Baba surely doesn’t give the impression of being a ballet enthusiast.” Mum frowned.

“Certainly not.” Mrs Walnut keenly agreed. “He’s famous for snoring at the National Theatre production of *Sleeping Beauty*.”

In the meantime, the former variety show director revealed his original strategy for running the ballet school.

“Due to the shortage of space in the main building, we were forced to hire additional studios at the National House of Railways.” He rumbled. “The first year students will frequent classical dance classes in Vinohrady in the mornings. Later, they’ll transfer to Podskalí High by bus to receive standard education in theoretical subjects during the afternoons.”

A wave of quiet discontent passed through the audience.

“Excuse me.” My mother stood up. “Podskalí is miles away from Vinohrady. Does this mean that our children will run around the capital without supervision?”

“A good question.” Comrade Baba clearly didn’t have any answers. “What was your name? Aha. Thank you, Mrs Urban.” Wiping his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief, he turned to consult the freckled teacher next to him.

I watched the red haired woman provide the headmaster with instructions as if she commanded at his place. Directing an unkind look to my mother, she quickly scribbled something into her paperwork.

“Right.” Comrade Baba shuffled his notes. “We’ll do our best to keep an eye on our students.” He said unconvincingly. “Unfortunately, our budget for this year is low. Other questions?” He assumed a threatening pose.

“No. Thanks.” My mother sat down.

None of the murmuring mothers dared to raise a hand to voice their concerns. They clearly feared to offend Comrade Baba by questioning his leadership.

“Great.” The headmaster contentedly handed the microphone to the freckled teacher, introducing her as Comrade Rum.

“Now about the rules.” Comrade Rum begun severely. “As you might know, the Conservatory is a selective school.” She froze the audience with her steel-grey eyes. “We watch our students’ weight and grade their progress on a daily basis. At the end of each

semester, a jury of teachers determine which of the students shall pursue their studies further.” I saw a cruel smile play on the freckled face. “I must warn you that every year, several girls fail to meet our standards.” Comrade Rum added dangerously, eyeing my mother.

There was intense silence in the room as the mothers sneaked looks at each other’s daughters, wondering which one was going to become the sacrificial lamb. Oddly, the teacher’s statement didn’t concern the boys. Mrs Walnut explained to us that due to a permanent shortage of male dancers, even the least competent contenders could always count on passing the exams.

“I probably don’t need to add that discipline and punctuality are our main criteria.” Comrade Rum concluded her speech. “Excellent results in theoretical subjects and good piano skills are a big plus. I hope you understand that our intent is to raise world class ballerinas.”

Comrade Baba nodded approvingly, passing the word to yet another pedagogue who began to read an endless list of things that we were forbidden to do and eat and the equipment the Conservatory staff expected us to bring to school.

“Comrade Rum used to dance in Baba’s shows.” Mrs Walnut hissed.

“What?” Mum gasped. “Is she a vaudeville dancer?”

“What did you expect?” Mrs Walnut sniffed. “The first thing the new headmaster did when he took over his office was to replace the old teachers with his friends.”

I couldn’t believe my ears, listening to Mrs Walnut’s informed gossip. She claimed that she had no respect for Comrade Baba, but at the end of the ceremony, she stood up to applaud him like everyone else.

“I think I need to go to the toilet.” I dragged my mother to the door, feeling queasy in my stomach. Everyone seemed to play a role in the auditorium. I found it difficult to understand my part in the whole production.

Later on, as we walked to the exit, I saw a group of young boys running inside the revolving door. The elderly concierge yelled at them from the reception booth, but they blatantly ignored his complaints. It wasn’t until the boys noticed my mum’s hat that they started to behave with politeness.

“Forgive us, madam.” One of them held the door. He had a tall, sculpted body and blonde hair. We were about the same age. “Now you can go ahead.” He bowed like a handsome prince.

I couldn't tell if he was serious or he merely performed a funny stunt for his friends.

"Thanks." I brushed past him.

"It's my pleasure." The boy flashed me a glowing smile.

I couldn't help blushing. My knees nearly gave in when I revolved through the door. I had to take a breath to prevent my head from spinning.

"What should we do now?" My mother asked, crossing the tram tracks to the Jewish Quarters. "It's a nice day."

"Let's go to Old Town Square." I proposed.

I felt proud walking by Mum's side. She attracted a lot of attention with her stylish appearance while we ambled down Pařížská Street, past the Christian Dior shop on the corner. Most passers-by wore shapeless clothes made of poor quality materials. Faded, gloomy colours prevailed in everyone's attire. My mother looked like a hummingbird amongst the sparrows.

By the time we arrived at the iconic town hall tower, the astrological clock sounded midday. We stopped to watch the twelve apostles stroll through the windows. After the Death clinked her bell and the golden rooster crowed at the end of the performance, we crossed the square to sit on the steps surrounding the sculpture of Master Jan Hus. The imposing monument represented the Czech priest condemned to death as a heretic for criticising the immorality of the Catholic clergy. In 1415, the Constance Council burned Master Jan Hus at the stake, because he refused to take his critical comments back. Immortalized in bronze, the bearded martyr towered above a sculpted group of destitute humans crawling on the grey pedestal. My mother and I made it a habit to repose in the martyr's shade whenever we wandered through Old Town. Placing a plastic bag on the sandstone steps to protect our clothes, we sat down to have a quiet talk.

"How did you like your school, little Trumpet?" Mum asked. "What was your first impression?"

"I think it's okay." I squinted in the sun. "Why?"

I saw a group of Japanese men snapping pictures of the baroque palaces around the square. Apart from the tourists and the occasional passers-by, the historical centre was empty. Pigeons looked for crumbs between the cobblestones and swallows circled the Týnský Cathedral gothic spires.

"I'm not happy about the organization of your classes." My mother's voice sounded serious. "Comrade Baba did little to convince me that the teaching staff will ensure your

safety during the transfers.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m not sure if it was a wise decision for you to become a Conservatory student, Trumpet.” Mum looked worried. “I have a strong feeling that this school won’t give you what you’re looking for.”

“Yes it will!” I cried. “I’ve been working for years to get there. I’ll never give up on dancing.” Tears flooded my eyes. “It may be harder than I imagined, but I still want to go ahead.” I struggled to convince myself. “Didn’t you tell me that to attain one’s goals one must make sacrifices?”

My mother remained silent.

“He did!” I pointed to the statue above me.

“Jan Hus fought for the truth, not his dream.” Mum pointed out. “Your father and I supported you in your decision to study ballet, because we didn’t want to force you to sacrifice your passion. We were secretly hoping that you would change your mind as you grew older.”

I looked up to Jan Hus and clenched my teeth. “I’d rather burn at the stake than stop dancing.” I declared.

The bony martyr with sunken eyes seemed to beckon me.

“How about we take a walk to the Charles Bridge, little Trumpet?” My mother could clearly see my distress and decided to press no further. “We can catch a tram to the train station from Malá Strana.” She stroked my hair.

I loved strolling around Old Town with my mother. She showed me secret shortcuts through forgotten passages and obscure courtyards. We walked beneath the canopies of corroded scaffolding that coated the antique palaces to protect the pedestrians from the peeling facade. Angels with broken noses peeked from dark corners. The clicking of my mother’s heels echoed through the empty streets and the damp scent of lime, urine and pigeons’ droppings was both nauseating and lovely.

After we passed the gothic Bridge Tower, we paused to admire the scenery on the opposite side of the river. Red roofs with slanting chimneys crouched at the foot of the Castle. The clear sky hung above the spires and domes like velvet. St. Vít stained-glass windows reflected sunbeams. The whole panorama shone with gold. Vltava noisily rolled down the weir, swirling beneath the bridge pillars, the sandstone saints mirrored on its surface.

“Aren’t you hungry, little Trumpet?”

A small bakery in Malá Strana displayed fresh bread rolls and delicious pastries in the window. I savoured an irresistible scent of warm dough. This is where my mother and I usually bought our lunch.

“No thanks.” I swallowed the temptation. “I better watch my diet.”

“Do you mind if I buy something for me?” Mum headed inside.

I preferred to wait for her in the street, watching her through the window while she bought a couple of cheese rolls. They were still warm when she carried them out. I nearly fainted with the desire to eat one.

“Are you sure you don’t want any?” She asked me. “You didn’t have anything for breakfast.”

Mum always watched my diet. There was no chance that I would overeat under her supervision. Keeping in mind Comrade Rum’s speech, however, I was scared of putting on weight.

“I don’t feel well in my stomach.” I lied. “Those satans we had last night killed my appetite.”

My stomach rumbled almost as loud as the rails as I watched our tram approach the platform. The carriages screeched to a halt in Malá Strana Square. I climbed inside and slumped down onto a plastic seat opposite my mum. Behind the window, the beautiful panorama receded into a dreamy blur, replaced by the depressing scenery of an industrial neighborhood. I avoided watching Mum eat her crispy roll. The sound of her chewing irritated me. Instead, I gloomily thought about Master Jan Hus and the sacrifices I was required to make in order to follow my dreams.



THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up to the sound of my grumbling intestines an hour before my mother’s alarm clock went off next door. It was drizzling outside. I could see leaves tumble to the ground in the dim morning light.

“Gosh, what did you put inside, little Trumpet?” Mum lifted my schoolbag to help me strap my arms into it. “It’s twice as heavy as you!” She cried.

“Just my dancing gear and school books.” I hurried to the front door. “Let’s get going,

Mum. It's getting late."

When we headed down the hill towards the Post Office, I heard the sound of wheels rattling across the train bridge in the distance and shortly after came the ringing of gates at the railway crossing. "Oh Christ." Mum and I accelerated our pace, jumping over the potholes. My schoolbag kept bouncing off my back and the straps painfully cut into my shoulders, but we managed to cross the slippery rails as the gates started to come down. Mum trotted right behind me with an umbrella. We stepped onto the platform when a locomotive came out from the distant curve. The crowded station rippled with joyous anticipation. People moved to the edge of the platform to board the shuttle when they realised that it was a military freight loaded with tanks. Letting out a collective sigh of disappointment, everyone stepped back under the roof. Mum nervously glanced at her wristwatch while I counted the carriages. The train monotonously clattered by, pointing barrels in the faces of sleepy commuters.

It was a common occurrence in the eighties that public transport gave precedence to military transports. Most passengers merely shook their heads and lit another cigarette. Running twenty minutes behind schedule, the regular shuttle eventually pulled into the station. The pneumatic doors opened with an angry puff and the passengers fought to get inside the crowded carriages. Mum and I ended up standing in the aisle leading to a stinky toilet, sandwiched between a group of high school students and a fat woman with a wet umbrella who luckily got out in Mrakotín, the next stop before Prague. Ten minutes later, the train screeched to a halt in Smíchov and we hurried down the stairs to catch the tram number 16. Elbowing our way inside the crowded car, we travelled squashed against the misty window, zigzagging across Vltava River and up the hill to Peace Square, where the National Railways had their headquarters.

"Take care of yourself and good luck." Mum kissed me on the wet forehead when we reached our destination. "Don't forget to eat your lunch, Little Trumpet. I put some rye bread with a slice of ham in your bag. And be careful on crossing the rails during the transfers." She warned me for the tenth time. "Remember, it's better to arrive late than to get injured or killed."

"No worries, mum." I reassured her. "I'll be super careful."

By the time I had pushed the heavy door to the majestic lobby, the clock on the St. Ludmila church tower showed a quarter past eight. I noticed a crimson canvas suspended above the wide marble stairway. *"THE BLUE ARMY FIGHTS FOR BETTER AND*

FASTER PUBLIC TRANSPORT!” It ironically declared.

“*Dobré Ráno.*” I greeted the indispensable guard who was busy reading the Red Right newspaper inside the reception booth. As a member of the Popular Militia, the wrinkled fellow wore a dark blue uniform with a red armband. Carrying a massive gun inside his holster, he couldn’t care less about intruders.

“Why are you so puffed out, young lady?” He inquired without lifting his eyes off the page when I flashed him my school ID. “What’s the hurry?”

“My train was twenty minutes late!”

“Oh, that’s not too bad.” He laughed. “It could have been hours.”

A paper sign pointing to an obscure corridor upstairs advertised the Conservatory of Dance. I followed the signs to a dressing room. Heaving my schoolbag onto a bench, I rapidly undressed and pulled on my stockings with a leotard. I then rolled on the new legwarmers and laced up my slippers. Grandma didn’t exaggerate when she promised that her hand-knitted present would keep me warm. The wool she used was so thick I struggled to bend my knees as I ran to the studio with my report book stuffed behind an elastic waistband.

“Do you realise what time it is?” Comrade Rum X-rayed me with her steel-grey eyes. “You’re twenty minutes late.” Standing in the middle of the studio, she tapped the palm of her freckled hand with a wooden stick.

“I’m terribly sorry.” I panted. “The trains were running late today.”

“That’s not an excuse.” She hissed. “Next time, you must either take an earlier train or don’t bother turning up anymore.”

I was speechless.

My ballet teacher reminded me of a boa constrictor. Looking in her face, I felt like a mouse in an open field. Unconsciously, I searched for an escape route when I saw my classmates standing at the bar, white and motionless like marble sculptures.

None of the girls dared to wink.

“Give me your report book!” Comrade Rum snatched it from me before I had time to hand it to her. “I’ll remember you, Urbanová.” She meaningfully lifted her red eyebrows, reading my name. “Get up on the scale.”

She pointed to an old-fashioned device by the door. I stepped on the scale and watched her press a right-angled rod to my crown to measure my height, shifting the stainless steel cylinders to establish my weight.

“It looks like you didn’t inherit your mother’s slender figure.” Comrade Rum sounded pleased to pronounce her verdict. “You either lose five pounds before the end of the semester or say goodbye to ballet.”

She gave me a piercing look and grinned.

“Are these handmade?” I saw her point to my woollen legwarmers. “Let me give you priceless advice, Urbanová. I wouldn’t wear those things if I had your chunky legs. They make you look like a goose.”

I could see Ivana Gypsy’s reflection in the mirror laughing behind my back. Her pink legwarmers made of mohair came from TUZEX. Once again, Grandma Helga got me in trouble with her good intentions. Not to mention that her thick yarn made my legs unbearably itchy.

“Sweat it out.” Comrade Rum sent me to the bar.

I took my position by the window. It was the coldest spot in the room reserved for outsiders. “*Abojky*.” I stood between a mulatto whose father came from Cuba and Ilona Walnut who had teeth wired with braces.

“Don’t worry about the old witch.” Ilona whispered to me. “She said everybody was overweight, including me.”

“She must be nuts.” I rolled my eyes. Apart from Ilona’s braces, there wasn’t an extra gram on the girl’s tall body. Her ribcage reminded me of a harp and her shoulder blades looked like chicken wings.

The large studio was completely bare and hostile with slippery floorboards, bars and mirrors on three sides. We used to have a pianist at the Preparatory School of Ballet who played classical waltzes while we exercised at the bar. The only accompaniment at the Conservatory was a big clock on the wall. Once in sixty seconds, the longer hand jumped ahead with a loud click.

“Legs in the fifth position, arms in the second.” Comrade Rum commanded. “*Grand battement* and hold!”

Walking past each girl, she closely inspected our postures, prodding and poking our bodies with her baton. “Stand still!”

All my teachers had been severe, but none of them would ask us to perform difficult exercises without a proper warm-up. Comrade Rum’s approach to classical dancing was unnecessarily cruel.

“Straighten your knee, Urbanová!” She made me almost topple over by slapping my standing leg.

Seeing her freckled face in the mirror, I winced with horror. Drops of sweat began to trickle down my spine despite the low temperature in the studio.

“Lift your tiptoe higher.” Comrade Rum hissed almost tenderly.

My other leg formed the right angle with my torso. When I forced it up, my muscles started to quiver. Closing my eyes, I swallowed tears and fought the urge to throw up. I thought I could hear the stretched tendons vibrate around my bones like the strings on a violin.

“Please, my little God, make her stop. *Prosím.*” I silently prayed.

“That’s enough.” Comrade Rum’s voice exploded next to my ear like a hand grenade. “Let’s move to the other leg.”

Gasping for air, I lowered my foot. As I let go off the bar to change sides, I nearly collapsed to the floor.

“This is not ballet.” I heard Ivana Gypsy say to her friends. “It’s torture.”

This time, I had to agree with her.

The reality of institutionalised ballet was so different from my dreams. Dancing under Comrade Rum’s supervision seemed like the worst nightmare come true and I started to wonder what it was going to take to wake up from it.

Hours later, I sat on the bench in the dressing room, massaging my aching limbs. My leotard was drenched in sweat and my back was so sore, I found it difficult to unlace my slippers. Cold water ran from both taps in the showers. Most girls merely towelled their naked bodies before they put on the clothes. Angela Ghost was the only one who had courage to venture under the icy stream. The country girl with a long neck and limbs reminded me of a baby giraffe. Her movements always seemed slightly uncoordinated, marking her as the least competent dancer in class.

“*Ježíšmarja.*” The blonde girl came out clattering the teeth, her skin covered in goose bumps. “Look what I’ve got.” She unwrapped her towel to display a painful contusion on her bottom.

“It’s a blood pudding!” Ilona Walnut referred to the scarlet bruise with the colloquial expression. “How did you get it?”

“Comrade Rum pinched me real hard.”

“Let me take a look.” The girls surrounded Angela. They made a show of looking concerned and compassionate, but I sensed that several of my classmates were secretly delighted to see Angela hurt.

“She’s only got what she deserves.” Ivana Gypsy said to the daughter of a famous pop singer, an arrogant smirk playing on her lips. “She shouldn’t be at the Conservatory if she can’t dance.”

I looked at Ivana in amazement. She had a pointy face, a small nose and pink circles around her beady eyes like a rat.

“That’s nonsense!” I scolded her. “Comrade Rum is the one who shouldn’t be at the Conservatory. How can a former showgirl teach ballet? Besides, it’s forbidden to beat children unless you are their parent.”

There was deadly silence in the dressing room and I could see two dozen pairs of frightened eyes look in the direction of the door. Even Angela stepped away from me as if I had leprosy.

“What are you staring at?” I asked.

Turning around, I saw Comrade Rum lean against the doorframe.

“Jolly good.” The fat teacher said in a dangerously sweet voice. “I just remembered I forgot to tell you to bring your points tomorrow morning. I want to start practicing the Russian technique.” She gave me a piercing look and shut the door behind her with a meaningful bang.



“HOW WAS YOUR DAY, little Trumpet?” My mother was curious when I returned home in the evening. “What did you think of your teachers?” She asked me a thousand questions while I was eating dinner.

“They’re wonderful.” I forced myself to smile. “I found it really exciting to learn the Russian technique with Professor Rum.” I realised that if Mum suspected that my ballet teacher was brutal and highly incompetent she would immediately tell me to leave the Conservatory. “Did you know that she has learned her teaching method in Moscow?” I decided to talk Comrade Rum up.

“I thought that she used to dance in a hotel bar.” My mother looked doubtful.

“No. No. She was actually a prima ballerina.” I had a gift for making up stories. The problem was that I often ended up believing my own lies. “In her youth, Comrade Rum performed in the Bolshoi Theatre.” I lied. “She had to quit the big stage, because of an injury.”

“Really?” Mum exchanged looks with my dad who turned off the Voice of America, listening to us with interest. “Do you think she’s a good teacher?”

“I’d say she’s very experienced.” I maintained an enthusiastic expression. “Her workouts are a touch more demanding than the training routine back at the Preparatory School, but this is what it takes to become a world class ballerina.”

“What’s the Russian technique like?” Dad growled.

“Similar to the Czech one.” I was quick to reply. “You just have to do everything extremely slowly.”

I felt much better about my school now that I told my parents about it. Painting the gloomy picture in bright colours, I ended up talking myself out of doubts. The vegetable broth warmed the knot inside my stomach and the anxiety in my heart dissipated like rainclouds on a windy sky.

It wasn’t until I was lying in bed that night that the ugly truth started to weigh on me again. “Please, help me get through eight years of Comrade Rum’s training, my little God.” I whispered in the darkness. “Give me courage to resist her insults and enough strength to perform her cruel exercise.” I was on the verge of tears, wondering how I was going to endure the ordeal.”

It took me ages to fall asleep, which was unusual and I found it even more difficult to wake up in the morning.

“*Ježíšmarja.*” I hoisted my body on elbows to roll out of bed, feeling as if all my bones were broken. My eyes seemed filled with sand and my vertebrae cracked loudly when I straightened my back.

“Your face is so white, little Trumpet. Is anything hurting you?” My mother looked alarmed as I drank tea with milk at the dining table. “Shouldn’t I take your temperature?” She kept touching my forehead.

“No. No. I’m fine.” I made an effort to walk away for her with my back straight. “I’ve got to hurry up.” I told her. “I need to catch an earlier train today.”

“I don’t understand why you must go so early.” She fretted, biting her nails. “Are you sure you will manage to get to school all by yourself?”

“I’m nearly eleven years old, Mum.” I snapped at her offendedly. “I know Prague better than my own shoes. Of course I will manage.”

This was the first time I went to school alone. Dad had driven off before the dawn to meet Comrade Kocián in Moravia. Mum’s job was to keep an eye on Peter Hába and to answer the phone while dad was gone. It was his idea that she should quit her job at the Institute of Economy where she had been employed for twenty years as an oil trade analyst. Comrade Kocián recently hired her as dad’s assistant. Dressed in an oversized lab coat, she wore an anxious expression on her face as she waved me goodbye from the front door.

The dark grey sky threatened rain when I trotted down on the muddy ground covered with a thick layer of red and yellow leaves. I gathered a handful of walnuts beneath Mr Šimek’s tree and cracked the nutshells with teeth while walking down to the train station. This was my breakfast.

“Why did you turn up so early, young lady?” The old guard inquired from behind his newspaper when I ended up pushing the door to the House of Railways.

“Today the trains ran on time.” I unhappily replied.

“I see.” The old man smiled, chewing a cigarillo. “Trains are like people. Completely unpredictable, aren’t they?”

I climbed the stairway to change into my leotard and spent the next half an hour by massaging my throbbing muscles in the empty studio.

“Isn’t this good of you, Urbanová?” Comrade Rum came ahead of my classmates. “I’m happy to see that you took my advice and removed your legwarmers. You don’t need to worry about catching a cold today.” A smile creased her freckled face. “I promise to keep you warm.”

Unsurprisingly enough, she kept her word.

“One and two and three. *Jeté. Plié. Relevé. Attitude!*” She would use the tiniest excuse to unleash a storm of insults and physical violence. “Is this what you call the fifth position?” Comrade Rum hit my shoes with the tip of her baton when she saw a small gap between them. “Suck your belly in. Arms up.” She pinched my bottom.

The ballet points have wooden soles. I did everything I could to maintain the correct position on the waxed floor, but my feet kept slipping apart. I struggled to keep the points aligned, toe to heel and heel to toe. My knees hurt and I was afraid to breathe, because Comrade Rum ordered me to keep my stomach flat. I still miserably failed to follow her instructions and she made me stand on tiptoes as a punishment with my arms raised above

the head. She surveyed me closely, tapping the ground with her baton. Before the clock clicked a dozen times, my feet covered in huge blisters and a warm liquid seeped into my socks.

“Excuse me, Comrade. Is there any chance I could use some *kalafuna*?” I pointed to a wooden box with rosin powder by the window. Professional ballerinas dusted their shoe soles with it to prevent them from slipping.

“Absolutely not!” Comrade Rum sneered. “If you can’t keep your points steady on the floor it’s you who shouldn’t be at the Conservatory!”

“Pssst . . .” The mulatto standing by my side nudged me when the teacher turned her attention to another victim. “Try this.” Sucking in her cheeks, she spat on the floor and wiped the saliva with her points.

This was an ingenious solution. By wetting the wooden soles, I was able to make them stick to the floor.

Unfortunately, it only worked until the saliva dried out. It took between two to five minutes, depending on the size of the spit. Adopting the Cuban technique, I started to accumulate as much saliva in my mouth as I could and whenever Comrade Rum wasn’t looking, I spat on the floor. With mirrors hanging all around the studio, it was rather dangerous, but I became quick as a cobra and cunning like a fox. The fat teacher never noticed anything.

“Click.” The clock on the wall echoed every sixty seconds. This is how I learned to measure my classes. It took about eighty-two spits before the minute hand travelled two times around and the lesson was over.

Spitting became one of the most useful skills that I had refined to perfection at the Conservatory of Dance. For years to come, I would impress boys by spitting at a great distance with an astonishing accuracy.



AFTER THE CLASS, I washed my blistered toes with cold water and squeezed them into my moccasins. Buses to Podskalí stopped on tram tracks behind St. Ludmila Church. As I limped across the road to the Peace Square Park, I had to bite my lips to stop myself from crying. My feet were bleeding and the schoolbag painfully weighed me down.

“Can I give you a hand?” A soft voice spoke beside me when I finally made it to the sidewalk.

I looked up to see the blonde boy whom I had met inside the revolving door at the opening ceremony. He was my new classmate.

“Your bag looks heavy. Let me carry it for you.” He offered kindly.

“Thank you.” I flashed him a grateful smile while he helped me unload my burden. “What’s your name?”

“Martin.”

“Aha.” I wanted to say something meaningful, but was suddenly lost for words.

We walked to the platform in silence. I could see Ivana Gypsy inside the glass shelter, entertaining her friends by making her Barbie dolls dance on a bench with Ken. The long-legged dolls by Mattel were incredibly rare. TUZEX didn’t carry them on stock, but Mr Gypsy apparently bought Ivana’s dolls during his recent trip to Switzerland along with a plastic suitcase full of miniature clothes. Ivana’s collection made a huge impression on the girls, but when they spotted me with Martin, they immediately lost interest in Barbies and started to whisper in agitation.

“It’s quite warm today.” Martin squinted his blue eyes at the sun peeking through the shredded clouds.

I noticed that his ears were red as if on fire. “Yes, it is. Isn’t it?” I swallowed.

The rest of the male dancers queued in front of a kiosk on the other side of the tram tracks, buying hotdogs for lunch. “Should we get you one, Martin?” The boys jiggled the coins. “With ketchup or mustard?” They wanted to know.

“Thanks.” Martin yelled back, showing them two fingers. “Both with ketchup. I hate mustard.”

Boys didn’t have to worry about diet.

I could see our bus wait by the traffic lights on the opposite side of the intersection. Before it rattled to the platform, the boys ran across the tracks with hands full of warm sausages. “Hurry up, mate.” They surrounded the back door as it jerked open like an accordion.

“Will you manage?” Martin handed me my bag with an apologetic smile.

“No worries.”

I hungrily watched Martin run to his friends and take a bite from the warm bread roll stuffed with a weenie. As the back door swallowed him, I climbed to the front with the

females. Heaving my bag down, I firmly planted my feet on the dirty floor to maintain balance while the crowded bus bumped down the hill. Eventually, the sound of rattling cobblestones lulled me to daydreams. Clinging to the support bar, I closed my eyes and pictured the moon above the lake. The oboes and violins began to play. I tiptoed to the illuminated stage in a glittering tutu and the Russian points. Martin was present, wearing a regal outfit. When he saw me, he whirled across the silver surface. I waved my wings, becoming a swan.

“Ježíšmarja.” I hit my head on the window as the bus driver jammed on brakes.

It was time to get out.

When I got off the bus, I saw a tidal wave of school children pouring out of a large building. Carelessly tossing their schoolbags on the sidewalk, the Podskalí boys and girls formed a disorderly queue outside the canteen. I jealously watched them chatting and laughing under the trees. Their classes were over when mine were about to start. I might have been privileged as a Conservatory student, but I would have preferred to play outside like everyone else.

My heart grew heavy when I walked up a dim stairway littered with bits of paper and remains of food. The air in the classrooms was stuffy. The garbage bins overflowed with empty yoghurt cups and apple cores. We had to open the windows to let in some fresh breeze, but it carried careless laughter from the street, making it impossible for us to concentrate on our lessons. I wearily curled up on my seat, using a pile of textbooks to support my head on the bench. I could hardly keep my eyes open. Most of our teachers lacked a sense of humour and were also exceptionally strict. They appeared even more exhausted than we were. I had the impression that they blamed us for making them work overtime. Hours endlessly ticked by. Mathematics. Chemistry. Czech grammar. Russian conversation. Every forty-five minutes, the school bell wearily chimed at the end of the lesson. The sun rolled over the steel train bridge to the opposite shore and set behind the Děvín Hill.

“Urbanová.” The head teacher inquired from her desk. “What did you fill in as your father’s occupation on the school form?”

Comrade Wakeup was in her early seventies. The old teacher had varicose veins in crooked legs. Massive earrings stretched her earlobes down to her shoulders, making her look like Buddha. Despite being entitled to a pension, she continued to teach Czech and geography to replace a teacher on maternity leave.

“I can’t read your handwriting.” She complained. “You scribble like a cat.”

“Dad works for the Agricultural Cooperative in Austerlitz.” I cautiously replied.

“Is he a farmer?”

The girls in the first row sniggered.

“Not exactly.” I hesitated.

My parents explained to me that nosy teachers could cause more trouble than gossipy neighbours could. I also didn’t want to look like a country bumpkin in front of my posh classmates.

“Dad’s more like an inventor or a technical developer.” I explained.

“I don’t understand.” Comrade Wakeup wouldn’t let go of the subject. “How can your father keep a job in Moravia and live in Prague?”

“He drives a lot.”

“And how about your mother?”

“What about her?” I felt exasperated.

“What does she do for a living?”

“She works with my dad.”

“What’s her occupation? Is she an agriculturalist?”

“Why does it matter to you?” I blurted out angrily. “I thought this was a public High School, not a police station.”

Comrade Wakeup turned red in her face.

“What an unheard insolence!” She puffed out her cheeks. “I’ll write a note in your file!”

I watched her furiously scribble across the pages in our class diary. The Podskalí staff were so different from my old teachers at the elementary school who respected my intelligence and made Dad’s political record disappear from my file to protect me from discrimination.

After the daylight faded behind the windows, the school bell rang for the last time. I hobbled down the stairs behind my classmates when I spotted a silver, Italian limousine parked in front of the school entrance.

“Hello Father.” Ivana Gypsy officiously greeted the imposing man in the driver’s seat. “How are you?” She climbed inside the car like a princess.

“That’s a Fiat Regatta.” I heard Martin’s friends whistle with admiration. “Wouldn’t you love to drive inside with Ivana?”

“Maybe?” The blonde boy shrugged. “If she asked me to.”

I felt a pang of envy in my stomach.

“My dad drives a Volvo.” I couldn’t help boasting.

“Oh really?” Ilona Walnut laughed. “I thought it was a Mercedes.”

Ever since we frequented the Preparatory School together, I made up stories about my father driving Western cars. I kept changing the brand and colour so often, I sometimes forgot which car my father currently had. Unfortunately, Ilona remembered my lies better than I did. Before I could think of a credible reply, I froze at the sight of a yellow Škoda hurdling over the potholes up the hill.

“Oops. I’ve got to go.” I sprinted down the street despite the cutting pain in my feet. When I thought that my classmates couldn’t see me, I motioned my father to follow me around the corner.

“*Aboj tati.*” I jumped inside the ugly vehicle, planting a kiss on Dad’s shaven cheek. “I didn’t realise you were supposed to pick me up today from school.”

“I thought you’d be happy if I saved you the trip home on the train.” Dad frowned, pulling away from the curb. “Why did you hide me from your new classmates? Are you ashamed of me?”

“It’s not that.” I assured him. “I just told everyone that you drive a Volvo.”

“I wish!” Smoke billowed out of my father’s mouth while he laughed. “You’re limping like a horse after Steeplechase. Did anything happen to your feet, little Trumpet?” He growled.

“Oh, that’s nothing.” I cheerfully lied. “I just kicked my toe in the door as I ran to the dressing room.”



THE FIRST WEEK WENT by in a frenzy of painful exercise. I was so exhausted on Friday evening I decided to skip dinner and crawled straight to bed like a wounded soldier into a trench.

“Help me, my little God.” I desperately prayed. “I need a real miracle. Comrade Rum wants to kick me out of the Conservatory. What can I do to show her that I’m a good dancer?”

As I prayed, the friendly God of my imagination appeared before me, smoking his porcelain pipe. He sadly observed me with his celestial eyes and shook his head as if to suggest that I was heading in the wrong direction. Before I could ask him what I should

change, he disappeared. I was beginning to feel torn apart. Real life seemed too different from my dreams and the two worlds inevitably drifted apart like ice drifts on a spring river.

The following morning, Marta unexpectedly turned up at our doorstep, carrying her battered suitcase and a defeated expression on her face covered in thick makeup. Clearly, I wasn't the only one whose dreams didn't work out.

"There's no chance that I will ever go back to Liberec." My sister declared when we gathered around the table to eat lunch. "The Principal is an old partisan from Yugoslavia who models himself on General Tito. He has a cantankerous temper and runs the college like a military unit."

Marta had visibly lost weight. I watched her hungrily stuff potato dumplings into her mouth as if she hadn't eaten for several weeks.

"The dorms look like military barracks and the food in the canteen tastes as if it was cooked in a field kitchen." Her litany was endless. "The curfew starts at nine pm and we sleep on hard bunks." She moaned. "To make the matters worse, I forgot to sign my geometry assignment and the professor failed me." My sister didn't hesitate to speak of discrimination when she recalled the pedagogue handing out the graded sheets to the first year students. "I don't know which of you, guys, is responsible for this clumsy drawing." Apparently, the sarcastic teacher told the class. "However I'm not surprised that *she* didn't write *her* name on it."

"How did he know that it was you?" My father looked puzzled.

"I'm the only girl in whole class!" My sister exclaimed. "The rest of my classmates are nerds like Peter."

It wasn't Marta's desire to work as an engineer that drove her choice to study technical design. She merely intended to buy time away from home in the hopes that her Italian sweetheart was going to save her from the dire reality of life behind the Iron Curtain by making her his wife.

"I have a good idea." Dad boomed. "Why don't you ask Peter to help you with your assignments? He's great at descriptive geometry. I'm sure he would be glad to do you a favour."

"He would be, but that's not the point!" Marta made a long face. "I'm in love with Gianni." Her black-rimmed eyes welled up with tears. Crying was my sister's way of asking for help. "I don't want to go back to Liberec." She sniffed. "I prefer to work in Grandma's kiosk."

Marta was usually quiet by nature, but when she became frustrated, she could fill our house with loud sobbing.

“Stop soiling my tablecloth, Marta.” Mum sternly held my father back with her gaze. “Liberec was your choice. I warned you that it might not be a good one. You refused to listen. Now you must live up to your decision.”

“Why?” Marta glared across the table, streams of mascara running down her cheeks.

“Come on, darling.” Despite his tough appearance, my father’s heart was made of wax. He couldn’t stand to see his daughters upset. “I’ll try to talk to the principal. Maybe you could transfer to another school?”

Mum had to play the disciplinarian.

“No!” She raised her voice. “It’s time Marta learned that adulthood comes with a price. It’s not about wearing miniskirts and tons of make-up!”

At this point, my sister let out a howl and dropped her cutlery. Pushing her chair away from the table, she stormed up to her room. As the door banged upstairs, our big house filled with deadly silence. I preferred to leave while my parents cast looks of blame at each other.

“I’m going to get some milk.” I grabbed the pail in the pantry. Heading up the stairs, I heard an explosion of voices behind the closed doors.



IT WAS ALWAYS LOVELY to walk across our hill. The sun shone bleakly over the naked trees. Our neighbours worked in their gardens, raking fallen leaves and making bonfires with them. Our valley filled with thick smoke and the smell of burning grass. Gossamer floated in the wind along with feathers. I could see starlings and swallows flock on the telephone lines overhead.

“Goodbye swallows.” I called out to the small birds in black tuxedos. “Have a nice holiday in Africa. See you next spring!”

A pack of barking Dachshunds surrounded the gate after I pressed the bell at Mrs Backyard’s farm. Letting myself inside, I bent down to give my friends a pat. The dogs jumped to my face, trying to give me a kiss.

“*Dobry den.*” I greeted the tall woman in dirty blue overalls and Wellingtons. “What happened to Max? Where is he?”

Maximilian Ferdinand von Ackerman was the grandfather of the whole brood. I had a tender spot for the noble dog.

“We buried him last Sunday.” Mrs Backyard replied grimly.

“Oh no. Time flies so quickly.” I handed her the milk pail. “I didn’t realise he was so old.” Following Mrs Backyard down the garden path made of marble tiles, I cautiously stepped over gnawed bones and animal shit.

“Yeah. That’s life.” Mrs Backyard shrugged. “So, how’s your new school?” She asked, entering the shed behind her art-deco villa where she kept her cows. “I heard that the teachers at the Conservatory are extremely severe.” The muscular woman grabbed a full bucket to pour milk into my pail. “They apparently kick a few students out every year.”

“Those who work hard have nothing to fear.” I turned to pat a cow to conceal my insecurity. “You know better than anyone that hard work pays off.”

“Does it?” Mrs Backyard handed me the full pail in exchange for twenty crowns. “Tell me something about it.” She wearily stepped behind a wheelbarrow loaded with dung and pushed it out of the barn.

I was beginning to feel tired of pretending that I was happy with my life. My troubled conscience weighed me down while I carried the heavy pail across the hill. I remembered that telling lies was a grave sin. The next morning, I switched off Studio Friend fifteen minutes earlier to go to confession.

“*Dobry den*, Father.” I hailed the priest through the grid. “I came to see you, because I have sinned against God.”

“I’m listening to you, dear.” Father Eugene made a sign of the cross.

“I lied to my parents that I’m having a great time at the Conservatory and I made up stories about my teachers.”

“Go on.” Father Eugene glanced at his watch, suppressing a yawn.

“The truth is . . .” my eyes welled up with tears, “I hate it there.”

The priest looked surprised.

“Why don’t you quit then?” He suggested.

“I can’t.” I sobbed. “Everyone would laugh at me.”

“Why?” Father Eugene blinked. He raised his hand as if he wanted to give me a pat. Realising that he couldn’t reach out to me through the grid, he decided to give me a comforting smile instead.

“The local kids are jealous of me, because I work hard to get what I want.” I sniffed. “The problem is, now that I’ve got what I always wanted, I’m not so sure if I want it anymore.”

“What is it that you actually want?” The priest furrowed his eyebrows.

“I don’t know.” I wiped my nose with my sleeve. “I just don’t want to become a failure.”

Father Eugene gravely nodded and took off his glasses. For a while, he seemed busy wiping them.

“It sounds to me that you have been lying to yourself, actually.” He breathed onto his lenses. “Why don’t you say two Our Fathers and five Hail Marys and ask the Lord to help you stay true to yourself?”

Placing the glasses back onto his nose, he gave me absolution and blessed me with the sign of the cross.

“Amen.” I wiped my tears. “Thanks be to God.”

I felt better about myself for the rest of the day while I sang in the choir and talked to little Rose at the cemetery. Later in the afternoon, seeing the daylight wane outside our kitchen window, I became aware of an anxious knot in my stomach.

“Please, my little God, make the time slow down.” I silently prayed as I sat down for dinner with my family. “I hate Mondays.” I wished that the peaceful evening would last forever.

Tossing and turning in bed, later that night, I felt strange sensations as if I were approaching the Niagara Falls in a frail rowboat. I had the impression of hearing the thundering mass ahead. Unable to stop the time from flowing, I thought of my father’s stories about his coalmining days in Ostrava. He had spent two years underground as a punishment for a high school prank. After the Red Army invaded Hungary in 1956, the atmosphere in the communist society was apparently pulsing with the threat of counter-revolution. My dad was seventeen years old when he turned up at the May Day Parade dressed like Elvis Presley instead of wearing the obligatory pioneer uniform. The ensuing scandal had terrible consequences for him after the Bolshevik high school headmaster rejected his application to study at University. My father had to choose between the compulsory military service and a coalmine. He ended up working in shafts that were so narrow he had to crawl to his shift like an earthworm. Becoming a member of the ruling working class, he started to work six days a week, breaking the rock with a jackhammer thousands of feet below the ground.

For the first time, I realised how Dad must have felt when he turned up at his shift. Boarding the shaft elevator, he never knew if he was going to see the daylight again, he frequently recalled. If he didn't believe that the little God was looking after him as he plummeted in the darkness, he wouldn't have made it through. He saw too many of his colleagues perish underground.

Now it was my turn to fight the cold stream of my destiny, I realised. It forced me to navigate through the dangerous rapids that threatened to overturn my lifeboat and shatter my dreams.



LEAVES CONTINUED TO FALL from Mr Šimek's walnut tree and soon all the branches were completely bare. Gusts of icy wind started to blow from Greenland and continuous downpours turned the ground in our garden into mush. Each morning was colder and darker than the previous one. My mood was mostly black. I was no longer dreaming my life, but survived by dreaming. The only bright prospects during my school week were my encounters with Martin and my piano lessons with Professor Curly. The Russian pianist with dark, velvet eyes and a magic touch made my fingers dance on the keyboard on Thursday evenings. This was the closest I came to dancing at the Prague Conservatory.

"I didn't realise that Comrade Baba enrolled talented musicians." Professor Curly was very enthusiastic about my interpretation of Beethoven's Für Elise. She complained that most of the dancers were still struggling to master the basics of the fingering technique.

"Mum wanted me to follow in her footsteps. She plays piano really well." I modestly explained. "My fingers are too short for a professional player, but I've been frequenting Music School since the age of six."

The piano teacher inspected my hands. "Your fingers as small as you are, but your expressivity is huge." She disagreed. "Later on, you could even consider the possibility of transferring to the musical section. Are you sure you want to become a ballerina?"

Everyone seemed to doubt my choice of profession.

By mid-November, a jury of teachers examined my technique, marking my ballet skills with the equivalent of a D. Comrade Rum explained to me that while I was sufficiently competent at dancing, I was far from being good. She said that if I didn't improve my

elasticity, I risked failing the semester exam scheduled for the end of January. This was extremely bad news.

I felt terribly let down as I presented my report book to my mother, having burned countless candles in church and on little Rose's grave. Every evening, I recited a rosary, praying for a decent mark.

"I don't know what to say." My mother seemed shocked to see the low grade on the yellow page. It was a matter of course to my parents that I aced all the subjects at the elementary school.

"None of the girls scored well." I stammered an apology. "Only the boys got higher grades. Females either got a C or a D."

"That doesn't seem right." Mum squinted her eyes.

"Comrade Rum said that it's her policy to never grade the first year students with high marks. She thinks that bad marks will keep our confidence low and will motivate us to progress on the technical scale."

"Is this the Russian technique for encouraging students?" She sarcastically observed, signing my report book. "Perhaps Comrade Rum has learned it in the Gulag?"

"What was it?" My father was busy listening to the Radio Free Europe's analysis of the latest developments of the war in Afghanistan.

"I think it's about time we had a word with Miranda's classical dance teacher." Mum sounded serious. "I'm suspecting that she is not very competent at her job and might be abusing her authority."

I knew I was in huge trouble. I was finding it more and more challenging to justify Comrade Rum's methods.

Luckily, my mother decided to change the subject. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, Trumpet." She recalled. "Do you remember the young sculptor whose brother went to school with Marta?"

I was familiar with most of my sister's peers, having frequented the Rotten Pub where they gathered on Saturday evenings. Marta used to drag me to the local discothèque as her decoy during her teens. She made my parents believe that she was taking me for a bedtime walk.

"Are you talking about Jana Sparrow?" I recalled the short artist with black eyes and a pointy nose that made her look like a bird.

“That’s her.” My mum nodded. “I ran into Jana at the Post office this morning. She prepares to graduate at the Academy with a sculpture of a ballerina and was apparently hoping that you would become her model.”

“I’d love to do that!” I lit up. “When does she want me to start?”

“I told her that you are rather busy these days.” Mum carefully replied, looking at my father. “You could catch the train to the Academy with her on Saturday morning. She promised to provide you with lunch and cover your travelling expenses.”



THE ACADEMY OF ART stood in an unkempt garden full of sculptures near the Stromovka Park. The imposing Art-Nouveau building was morbidly gloomy inside. The indispensable guard with a red armband allowed us to cross the empty lobby. The whole school was deadly silent. I followed Jana to the ateliers at the back, walking through a long corridor adorned with Communist art.

“Welcome to our den.” The young sculptor opened one of the doors.

The students’ workshop looked like a greenhouse with the ceiling and exterior walls panelled in glass. I saw bunches of pencils, paintbrushes, scrapers and chisels stick out of terracotta pots instead of plants. The exotic smell of turpentine and the sculpting clay permeated the whole space.

“Let me introduce you to my classmates.” Jana walked to the hot stove in the corner, where a couple of young men drank mulled wine from tin cups and ate sausages from a greasy sheet of paper.

“This is Honza.” She encouraged me to shake hands with a lanky, longhaired fellow in John Lennon glasses and oversized overalls soiled with plaster. “He makes sculptures of prisoners of war.”

I noted a collection of wiry structures coated in white bandage behind Honza’s back.

The other classmate was short and stocky. In sharp contrast to his hippie friend, he sported a flat haircut and a hairy neck.

“Igor is responsible for the army of parachutists you can see everywhere.” Jana pointed around the room. “He loves the war.”

Half the floor was crammed with plaster skydivers. They came in different sizes and colours and wielded all sorts of guns.

“Cool.” I politely smiled and quickly changed subject to avoid commenting on Igor’s work. “Why are you at school on a Saturday?”

“Can’t you see? We’re busy working towards our graduation.” Igor laughed with his mouth full. I watched him cut off a piece of sausage with his pocketknife. “Do you fancy some homemade blood pudding?” He offered.

“Thanks. I’m on a diet.” I declined.

I decided not to tell him that I already had one on my bum. The mere sight of this charcuterie filled me with revulsion.

“Igor has a golden heart. He always brings us fresh products from the country” Jana wrapped her arms around her classmate’s broad shoulders.

Igor’s parents apparently owned a mountain cottage in Beskydy. They were successful sculptors, she explained.

“His mother specialises in sculptures of Marx and his dad makes Lenins.” Honza informed me with a smirk. “He used to do Stalins, but they went out of fashion. He’s probably going to swap to Gorbachev now.”

Igor didn’t seem slightly bothered to see his classmates poke fun at him. “So fucking what?” He chewed the sausage with the look of self-contentment playing on his greasy cheeks. “Sculpting is business like any other.” He said. “You just have to make sure to immortalise the right ruler at the right time.”

“Isn’t it immoral?” Honza scoffed at his view.

“Who gives a fuck about morality?” Igor burst out into laughter. “You’re eating my sausages, aren’t you? So shut up, mate.”

“Watch your language, Igor.” Jana reprimanded him.

She led me to the back of the atelier, advising me to put on my tutu behind a canvas screen. When I walked out on my points, she asked me to climb onto a platform by the window.

“Can you show me some interesting postures?” She sat down in front of me with a sketchbook. “Brilliant.” Jana drew surprisingly fast while I performed different moves. “I need to get an idea on how to position your sculpture.”

It was unbearably cold inside the atelier. The hot stove on the other side was too far to make any difference to me. On a closer inspection, I noticed that quite a few windowpanes were broken in the glass walls. My skin rapidly covered in goose bumps while the young sculptor sketched me with a crayon.

“I’d hate to pose as a model.” Igor mumbled by the stove. Wrapping his shoulders in a military blanket, he tossed a bucketful of black coal into the flames. “I’m freezing my balls off just by looking at the girl.”

Honza was busy fiddling with the radio.

“I have an idea!” He announced. “I will put on some classical music and Miranda can dance to it. This will provide us with entertainment and keep her warm at the same time. What do you say, Jana?”

“I can’t see any harm in this.” The young artist lifted her eyebrows, also drawn with a black crayon. “Go ahead.”

A short moment later, warm tones of Mozart’s 23rd piano concerto flooded the gelid studio. I was familiar with the melody. My parents bought season tickets for the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and I regularly accompanied them to the concerts. The second movement started with a piano solo, following a slow melodic line that evoked a painful feeling of lost innocence. Closing my eyes, I absorbed the music and let it take over my imagination. The space around transformed into a green pasture. I pictured the sun setting behind the mountains. The air smelled of hay, ripe fruit and something faintly rotten. I realised that my childhood was over. It was time to grow.

I stood on the points and began to dance.

The tones of the piano became the rays of sunlight. Moved by my emotions as if in a trance, I crossed an abyss of time on a luminous bridge. My body felt light, my mind enlightened. I floated above the stage as if in defiance of the law of gravity. This is how I danced since I was little. I didn’t have exceptionally flexible muscles, but I had talent for improvising. Original moves came naturally to me. Many of my classmates could perform better splits, but whenever it came to improvisation, everyone stepped aside to watch me take over the stage. Sadly, since we started at the Conservatory, we weren’t allowed to improvise anymore. Comrade Rum choreographed our steps to the slightest detail. We danced mechanically, like lifeless marionettes. This was the first time after months of mindless drill when I had the opportunity to express my authentic feelings in my best performance ever. Taking possession of the space around me, I let my body speak, experiencing pure pleasure in balancing the inner and outer forces that contrasted the timeless perception of my soul. By the time the music stopped, I slid to the ground and remained motionless.

“Fuck me.” I heard Igor groan. “This is art, mate!”

“Shut up. You know shit about real art.” Honza jumped to his feet to applaud me. “Bravo!”

When I came back to my senses, I saw the three young sculptors looking at me with respect. “I’m terribly thirsty.” I panted, wiping my brow. “Can I get some water?”

“Sorry. You’ll have to drink directly from the tap.” Igor pointed to a dirty sink by the door. “We don’t stock any non-alcoholic beverages.”

Bending over the porcelain basin, I lapped up the icy stream like a thirsty dog to cool myself down.

“I think I’ve got exactly what I wanted.” Jana’s fingers were black from working with charcoal. “Now, I will need you to stand still.” I saw her flip through the pages in her sketchbook. “Here’s the posture I like the most.”

She showed me the selected position.

Bending the knee of my standing leg, I stretched my other leg out in front of me and lightly touched the floor with my tiptoe while bringing my arms up above my head like a halo. It was an easy posture, but I found it unbearable to stand still in it for minutes on end with my back perfectly straight.

A cold draft came through the broken windowpanes while Jana attached wires to a wooden turntable to create the skeleton for my sculpture. Before she was ready to start covering it in clay, I could see first snowflakes whirl from the ashen sky. After a while, I began to clatter my teeth.

“I think this will do for today.” Jana mercifully sent me to throw on my clothes. “We’ll need to meet a few more times to get the sculpture into the right shape.”

“Would you like to try my special infusion, Miranda?” Igor called out from the stove. “This will warm you up.” I saw him pour a generous splash of homemade Slivovitz into a chipped teacup with hot water. “It’s the best prevention against catching the cold.” He handed it to me with a friendly wink.



MY THROAT FELT RAW the following morning and I lost my voice, singing in the church choir. Despite my intense prayers, I woke up with a swollen throat on Monday morning. Pulling up the blinds, I saw icy flowers on my window, an indication that the temperature outside was several degrees below zero. The whole town reposed under a white blanket of crystalline snowflakes that glittered in the streetlamp illumination like diamond

dust.

“Help me, my little God. Don’t make me come down with a cold now.” I moaned, wrapping my neck into a woollen scarf. “I need to stay fit till Christmas.”

I recalled the times when I was feigning sickness to get a day off from my elementary school. Now I was gravely ill, but I couldn’t afford to miss a single class. Comrade Rum rehearsed a choreography we were supposed to perform at the semester exam. Instead of asking my mother to measure my temperature, I told her to give me an extra orange for breakfast. The sour fruit from Cuba was hard to peel and I usually avoided it like a pest. Forcing myself to swallow three pieces, I prayed that vitamin C would rapidly spur my immune system into action.

“You dance like a lame donkey, Urbanová!” Comrade Rum was in a particularly foul mood that morning. “Kick your stumpy legs higher or I’ll kick you out of my class.”

As I sweated at the bar, my throat glands swelled up to the size of walnuts. I could no longer swallow. Luckily, I was able to spit my saliva on the floor. My breathing became shallow and laborious. In the afternoon, I feverishly sat through endless hours of theory classes as if in a dream. Teachers turned up and left the room like apparitions. I watched their moving lips, but couldn’t make any sense of what was being said. By the time I had caught the train home, my lungs sounded like a broken accordion.

“You’re the colour of lemon, Trumpet.” My mum knitted her eyebrows, seeing me struggle to stay awake during dinner. “Let me take your temperature.”

She slid the thermometer in my armpit while I pretended to eat my soup at the table. Unable to swallow, I merely played with the spoon. As soon as Mum walked off to the kitchen and my father directed his full attention to the Voice of America, I emptied the contents of my plate back into the soup bowl and shook the mercury level down on the thermometer.

“Isn’t it strange?” Mum sounded intrigued, studying the glass tube in the lamplight. “I was pretty sure you had a fever.”

“I feel okay.” I pulled away from her when she tried to touch my forehead. “I’m just overworked. That’s all.”

She gave me a doubtful look and made me swallow two aspirins. I did my best to send them both down with a gulp of water without screwing my face with pain. I really was a talented hypocrite. Dad was too busy listening to the political forecast to notice my health condition.

I had a strange nightmare that night. Standing on a snow-covered platform, I saw a glistening locomotive wheeze into the station. Sparks flew out of its chimney and steam billowed from the greasy pistons. A deep, humming sound echoed from the furnace. The pounding wheels generated a current of chilling air that threatened to suck me under the train. To resist the pulling force, I leaned back and made myself heavy. The string of old-style carriages with brass rails and doorknobs came to a halt and I heard the conductor whistle. Seeing other passengers board the train, I decided to walk to the closest carriage when I realised that my feet stuck to the platform. As I struggled to lift my legs off the ground, they grew heavier with every step until I became paralysed. Unable to advance, I threw my torso forward and ended up performing some sort of a summersault before I landed where I had stood before—one step too far from the brass handrail to be able to grasp it and pull myself up.

“Wait for me. I’m coming!” I helplessly waved arms. “Don’t do this to me. You can’t leave without me. No!”

The engine made too much noise, preparing to depart. No one heard me. A hostile magnetic force bound my physical body to the platform. My voice sounded deep and contorted as if played on a broken tape recorder. I could still hear it in my head after I regained consciousness.

It filled my heart with abstract horror.

“I’m taking you to Dr Polaková!” My mum refused to believe that I was feeling well enough to go to school. “You’re seriously ill.”

“It’s a banal flu.” I quickly threw on my clothes and dashed to the door before Mum could stop me. Crunching down the street through the snow, I saw her stand outside the garage with a worried look on her face. “It will pass.” I called out to her. “Believe me. Christmas is only two weeks away.”

When I stepped on the scale that morning, I was pleasantly surprised to see that my miserable condition had a positive side effect.

“Fifty four pounds.” Comrade Rum nodded with approval for the first time in three months. “You’re nearly there, Urbanová.”

I felt light, exercising at the bar. My body seemed almost ethereal and I couldn’t stop admiring my skinny legs in the mirror. Minutes rapidly ticked by in a feverish haze. I had plenty of saliva to spit out. My chest steadily burned, keeping me cosy and warm in the freezing studio.

Later on, I made myself comfortable in the overheated classroom at Podskalí High. Cushioning my head with a geography textbook, I kept myself awake by observing the dangling earrings in Comrade Wakeup's earlobes. They reminded me of Christmas tree decoration. I had the impression of hearing carols playing in the background. My mouth filled with a sweet taste. I smelled vanilla biscuits, eggnog and incense, feeling blissfully happy.

"Excuse me, young lady!" A book landed on my bench with a loud thump. "Am I disturbing you?"

Comrade Wakeup stood above me.

"If you can't bother to follow my lesson, why do you bother turning up at school?" Shaking her head with anger, the teacher made her earrings wildly swing in her earlobes "Podskalí High is not a dormitory!" She shrieked. "I had enough with you. You deserve detention." Walking up to her desk, she marked my sentence in the class diary. "You can remain in the classroom after school until you memorize the names of the fifteen Soviet republics including their capitals."

"I'm going to miss my train if I do!" I nearly cried.

"That's too bad." Comrade Wakeup snarled. "You'll have to catch the next one."

An hour later, I called my mum from a pay phone outside the school building. "I got detention." I managed to wheeze into the receiver. "I'm about to catch the tram to the station."

As if in my nightmare, I heard the conductor whistle while I ran up to the platform, watching the red taillights disappear in the night. The next shuttle was due to leave in an hour. Smíchov was hostile, lacking a heated area where one could curl up on a bench. Walking up and down the platform, I shook with cold. Christmas lights flickered in the windows opposite the station. A handful of passengers stomped their feet around me, exhaling clouds of mist. The air was so sharp it hurt my lungs to breathe. When I finally spotted the train's headlights in the distance, I gasped like a Christmas carp pulled out of water. Boarding the warm carriage, I proved a sensation of weariness that forced me to collapse onto the nearest seat. Fits of hacking cough shook my body during the whole journey home.

"You're going straight to bed, little Trumpet." My mother was waiting for me on the platform. "Why didn't you listen to me this morning?" She took off my bag and threw a

woollen plaid over me before we headed home. “Do you want to drive yourself into the ground?”

My knees were so weak I had to lean against her to stay on my feet. Every three steps, I paused, shaken with another fit. Heading up the laneway in front of the Post Office, I coughed so hard, I nearly threw up. The streetlamp lit the snow and I noticed a couple of crimson drops sprinkle the ground.

“You’re coughing blood!” Mum sounded hysterical. “This is terrible. As soon as Dad returns home, we’re taking you to hospital.”

Next thing, I was lying in the back of our Škoda. Dad burned the tires and we nearly broke the bar at the entrance to the Motol hospital as we raced to the emergency room. When dad carried me inside the surgery, a female doctor ordered me to open my mouth. Poking my throat with a wooden spatula, she seemed unimpressed by what she had discovered. To confirm her diagnosis, she requested an X-ray exam. I had to strip to my panties and press my flat chest to a metallic device next-door. I stayed alone in the cold chamber until I heard a hollow click.

“The good news is that the bleeding was probably caused by a broken capillary.” The doctor announced, studying my X-ray. “The bad news is that you have a classic case of pneumonia. On both lungs.”

“I knew it.” Mum exchanged an exasperated look with Dad.

“Let’s start with a large dose of penicillin.” The doctor asked me to lie on my tummy. Lowering my panties, she stung my bum with a syringe.

“There are some rather curious bruises on your daughter’s bottom.” She turned to my parents. “I’m not sure what to think of them.”

“What bruises?” My father stood up, alarmed.

“That’s a blood pudding!” My mother cried. “How did you get it?”

“I forgot to tell you.” I hurried to pull my panties back on. “I accidentally fell down the steps at school.”

“When did it happen?” Mum incredulously narrowed her eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“I didn’t think it was serious. It didn’t hurt so much.” I averted my parents’ gaze. “I slipped on the wet floor while I was running to the bathroom at the House of Railways a week ago.” To change the subject, I turned to the doctor. “When do you think I’ll be in shape to go back to school?” I keenly asked.

The woman looked at me gravely over the rim of her reading glasses. “You will be required to take three doses of penicillin a day for a few weeks and remain at home for another month.”

“So long?” I gasped. “Oh no!”

“What’s the hurry?” The doctor seemed surprised. “Most children would be happy to extend their Christmas holiday.”

“I study at the Conservatory of Dance.” I wretchedly explained. “If I miss too many classes I’m going to fail the semester exam and will get suspended.”

“I see.” She sadly smiled. “If this is the case, I can try to administer a new type of medication.” I watched her type the prescription. “I can’t guarantee the results. There’s a chance you could go back to school after New Year if you take this.” She handed me the piece of paper.

Leaving the emergency room, I could see that my mum was angry with me. She had a quick word with Dad in the parking lot while I sat inside our Škoda. We drove home in silence until my father broke the mounting tension.

“Your mother doesn’t believe that you fell down the steps. She thinks that your ballet teacher hits you.” He sounded dead serious. “Is it true?”

I knew there was no point in lying. “Yes, but she didn’t mean to hurt me.” I peeped.

My mother turned around to look at me.

“This is insane.” She clenched her jaw to preserve self-control. “Don’t think that you’re going back to the Conservatory, ever.” I saw tears in her eyes.



WE CELEBRATED A SAD Christmas that year. An acrid whiff of epichlorohydrin wafted from the garage, blending with the scent of vanilla cookies and cinnamon. A day before Christmas Eve it started to get warmer outside. I heard water gurgling in the rusty gutters and observed melting icicles on Mr Šimek’s roof from my bed. To keep myself entertained, I read fairy tales and produced handmade Christmas gifts for the members of my family. My lungs felt better, but my heart was broken, as Mum refused to take into account any mitigating circumstances to change her decision of transferring me back to a regular school. To make matters worse, the antibiotics left a bitter aftertaste at the back of

my throat. Three times a day I swallowed the bitter pills and thought about the satan mushrooms we had picked in our forest at the end of summer.

My father had left the shopping to the last day. Everything was hopelessly sold out. Having driven around the whole district for the entire morning, he returned home with a dead carp in a nylon bag. The small, crooked pine, which he brought, looked more like a broom than a real tree. It's the Czech tradition to eat fried carp with Russian salad for Christmas Eve dinner. Before, we used to buy live fish. We kept it in our bathtub until December 24. Dad would scoop the carp out in the morning and murder it on the kitchen counter with a hammer. Pulling out the entrails, he would peel the silver scales off with a knife. They looked similar to coins. I washed them clean and dried them up on a warm radiator. My parents stuffed them into their wallets on New Year's Day to ensure good fortune in finances.

Another local superstition claims that if you abstain from eating on December 24 until dinner, you get to see a golden pig. Having skipped breakfast, I got up from bed to help Marta decorate the ruffled pine in our living room with fairy lights. Before, I was never allowed to enter the backstage of the Christmas show. Now that I discovered the truth, I wished that I had never stopped believing in baby Jesus. I used to prove so much more excitement during the previous seasons. Christmas was a thousand times nicer when wrapped in mystery. My parents would invariably send me outside with Marta in the afternoon. Trampling through the frozen snow, I would count the Christmas trees in our neighbours' windows and gardens, impatient to return home. As soon as I would stand in the door, I could hear the ringing of the magic bell. *Ding. Dong.* I would race to our living room to see baby Jesus. The Christmas tree always looked much taller than the ceiling, sparkling with real comets and stars.

I didn't see a golden pig that night and felt cheated to see Dad ring the bell when we surrounded our tree. Christmas was an illusion. It was similar to watching a magician on stage, having discovered the technical tricks behind his performance. The humble pile of packages under the decorated branches no longer filled me with a wave of excitement. Knowing that my presents weren't heaven sent, but came from a shop instead, I didn't appreciate them as much anymore. Now I started to find it more thrilling to give than to receive as I watched my parents and sister unwrap the original gifts I had made for them during my illness. Dad pulled out a wooden ashtray. Mum rejoiced to see a beautifully embroidered tea towel. Marta got a necklace made of glass beads.

After dinner, Mum sat down at the piano to play Christmas carols. We gathered around her to sing together as in the old days, yet the peaceful atmosphere in our home was a ceasefire. After the Boxing Day my sister and I were back on a warpath with our lovely mother. Both of us fought for completely opposite reasons. Marta continued to bawl her black-rimmed eyes out, because she wished to quit her studies. I couldn't stop sobbing as I refused to renounce on mine.

Combining our efforts, the two of us shed a river of tears in the week leading to New Year. The sound of banging doors and grinding teeth echoed throughout our big house, filling the festive season with bitter resentment. At first, Dad tried to act as a mediator between his beloved wife and daughters. His patience eventually failed him when Marta engaged in a screaming match with Mum during the last dinner of the year. My father proposed to seek compromise, but when it became obvious that pure reason would never prevail over stirred, female emotions, he unexpectedly resorted to crude force. Marta and I watched with our mouths open as he threw our protesting mother over his shoulder and carried her upstairs to the master bedroom like a Neanderthal warrior. Resisting the pounding of her fists on his backside, he made sure to turn the key in the lock. After a moment of dramatic commotion behind the door, there was dead silence. We didn't get to see our parents until the next morning.

Whatever it was that my dad did to change my mother's mind. She looked serene at breakfast. Her New Year resolution was to grant my sister permission to abandon the Technical College under the condition that Marta was going to repay my parents for her studying expenses. As for me, I could continue to study at the Conservatory after Dr Polaková pronounced me recovered. To appease my mother's concerns, Dad promised to have a word with the headmaster Baba about Comrade Rum's unprofessional behaviour.

"Now everyone shake hands." We toasted our peace agreement during the celebratory lunch. Sitting down to eat the traditional lentil soup and smoked pork, we chinked our glasses. *"Na zdraví!"*



AFTER EPIPHANY, Dr Polaková carefully examined my lungs with her stethoscope. Taking my measurements and weight, she soberly advised me to put on ten pounds. The local paediatrician concluded that I was in shape to go to school, but she stressed that I should take my dance classes easy for the first couple of weeks.

“What a charming surprise.” Ivana Gypsy ironically greeted me when I walked in the dressing room at the House of Railways. “Oh dear!” She made a long face. “I thought I would never see you again.”

Judging by Ivana’s brand new rabbit coat, I could tell that the Gypsies enjoyed a posh Christmas.

“It doesn’t surprise me that you didn’t think.” I expertly struck back. “We all know that you’ve got no brains.” I patted Ivana’s white fur. “Is this made of polar rats?”

I might have displayed a good-humoured mask, but Ivana succeeded in shaking my confidence. None of my classmates seemed thrilled to see me back. They were probably hoping that my permanent departure would fill the year’s quota of suspended students. Recovering from pneumonia, I had cast the dice back onto the table. I could see Angela Ghost eye me with disappointment. She grew even taller during Christmas and was clearly reluctant to go back to being the worst dancer in the class.

When I entered the cold studio, I saw Comrade Rum lift her eyebrows, but she said nothing to acknowledge my presence.

“Quickly to the bars.” She tapped the floorboards with her baton. “I want you to run through the whole choreography to see how much of it you forgot during the Christmas holidays.”

I took my usual position between Ilona and the Cuban mulatto, hoping to copy their moves, but as I started to dance, I was horrified to discover that my muscles had become inflexible during the weeks I had been lying in bed. Before I knew it, I was puffed out. Struggling to follow the choreography, I merely sketched the complicated figures, when I lost the count of my steps and stumbled in the middle of a turn. There was no point in persisting.

I watched my classmates perform with chilling precision. Seeing their arms and legs mechanically move up and down like pistons, recalled the glistening locomotive from my nightmare.

There was no mistaking it. Even Angela Ghost could dance better than I could. I had missed the train.

It slowly dawned on me that Comrade Rum had already written me off. Instead of chastising me for interrupting my performance, as she would normally do, the fat ballet teacher walked past me as if I was made of air. She didn’t even bother to hit me with her stick.

“Excuse me, Comrade.” I feebly called out to her.

“What is it, dear?” She sounded almost gentle when she eventually addressed me. “Why aren’t you dancing?” Her thin lips stretched into a spiteful smile. “If I were you, I would work extra hard to catch up to the rest of the class. You’ve got less than three weeks to prepare for the exam.”

“I find it hard to learn the new moves alone.” I became teary. “I need you to take me through the choreography.”

“You need me?” The teacher laughed as if I said something hilarious.

“Help me, please. *Prosim.*” I begged.

“Why should I?” She asked in a sweet voice. “You are nothing to me, dear. Another wannabe with a big mouth and no talent to speak of.”

My eyes overflowed with tears. “Why are you always so unfair to me?” I dared to say. “What have I done to you?”

I would have preferred it if Comrade Rum slapped me or pinched me if she decided to give me another chance. It almost looked that I provoked a violent reaction with my comment, when an impatient knock on the door interrupted our escalating verbal confrontation.

“As far as I’m concerned you’re already gone, Urbanová.” The teacher merely hissed. “What do you want from me? Give me a single reason why I should waste my time with you?” She turned to confront the intruders. “Who the hell is it at this time of the day?” Striding to the door, she flung it open.

I saw my parents look inside the studio.

“Is this the first B?” My father growled.

Unconsciously, Comrade Rum stepped back.

“How, how can I help you?” She stammered. “I’m in the middle of the lesson. I can’t speak to you now.”

“My name is Urban.” Dad shook her freckled hand with the confidence of an official authority figure. “Don’t mind our presence. It’s not our intention to interrupt your dance class, Comrade.” He and Mum walked in. “Feel free to keep doing what you were doing before. We are here to watch.”

“I don’t understand.” Comrade Rum made a weak effort to smile. “Are you Miranda’s parents? This is quite an unusual procedure.”

“We have our reasons.” Mum retorted, looking dangerously pretty in her Stetson hat. “Before Miranda became ill, she fell down the stairs under your supervision.” She gave Comrade Rum a sharp smile. “The emergency room staff at the hospital took a note of bloody bruises on our daughter’s bottom. Naturally, my husband and I were wondering about the conditions in which Miranda studies.”

“I hope you don’t mind our investigation.” My father sniffed around the room like Sherlock Holmes.

I could see the freckles fade on Comrade Rum’s face.

“No. Of course.” The fat woman swallowed. “The marble stairs to the lobby can be slippery. The janitors mop them every morning.” She explained. “I’m sorry to hear that Miranda was injured.” Comrade Rum displayed fake compassion, patting me on the head. “Poor sausage.” She blabbered. “She’s been through so much since the beginning of the school year.”

“I wonder why.” Dad observed my classmates. “Is Miranda the only one who has bruises?”

The girls fearfully looked at each other, squirming at the bar.

“It’s getting late.” Comrade Rum shrank from a giant boa constrictor to a tiny lizard. “Perhaps, we can discuss the whole issue after the class.” She cast a desperate look at the clock on the wall.

My parents made themselves comfortable on a bench by the wall, becoming a silent audience.

“Let’s run through the choreography all over again, my dears.” The teacher cheerfully clapped hands, showering us with smiles. “We’ll do it slowly to help Miranda learn the moves.”

I watched her in astonishment. Similar to the evil sorcerer in my favourite TV series, Comrade Rum instantaneously transformed her harsh voice and body language, becoming the new Mary Poppins. She patiently corrected each of my ballet postures, lavishing her attention on me until I memorised the whole sequence.

“It’s true that Miranda must do some extra work to catch up to her illness, but she’s a talented dancer.” I heard her telling my parents after the lesson. “She shouldn’t have any trouble passing the semester exam.”

“Maybe we could apply to the headmaster to get the exam postponed?” My father suggested.

“No. No. There’s no need to complicate things.” Comrade Rum assured her. “I’ll be happy to give Miranda individual classes in the mornings to help her recover her lost flexibility. She can turn up at school an hour earlier two times a week until the end of January.”



MY PARENTS MUST HAVE made a strong impression on my ballet teacher. She became so good to me, I wished her to stop. Practicing stretching exercises with her, I engaged in auto-torture. She never laid a finger on me again, but her vengeance was in supervising my ordeal.

“Lift your right foot to the bar and slide down until you end up standing in a split.” Comrade Rum breathed down my neck in the morning when we worked in the deserted studio. “Now, try to pull your head all the way down to your knee, keeping your back straight!” She pointed her stick at the back of my neck like a loaded gun. “Lovely.”

The fat teacher particularly enjoyed making me spread my legs into *écarté*, delighted to watch me freeze on the floorboards.

“Today, I want you to start by performing a fish.” Comrade Rum ordered me one morning.

This was my least favourite exercise. Lying flat on my tummy, I would have sworn that the temperature in the studio was many degrees below zero. I pushed my arms to arch my torso backward while keeping the pelvis down, then lifted my legs with my knees bent, struggling to reach my crown with my tiptoes.

“You can do better than that.” Comrade Rum scoffed.

My body nearly formed a circle. I was like a snake biting its tail. Only a very small gap separated my feet from the top of my head. I tried to force my spine a bit further, but it refused to obey.

“It won’t do.” I bit my lips.

“Let me help you.” Someone pulled my feet up with a jerk.

I heard a loud crack in my spine.

“See?” Comrade Rum laughed. “Everything goes if you want.”

My feet comfortably rested on my head now, but I couldn’t feel them. Looking at Comrade Rum upside down, I saw her smile. She seemed pleased with her results and oblivious to my condition.

“You can relax.” She said joyfully.

“I can’t.” I groaned. “I’m stuck.”

“Ah. This happens all the time in classical dance.” She laughed. “Don’t worry. I know how to fix it.”

When she forced my legs down, I heard another crack in my spine, which sounded significantly louder than the one before. Miraculously, whatever had been stuck came unstuck. I was able to stand up and continue exercising. Since this fateful day, my back became perfectly flexible. It was as if my vertebrae were made of rubber. I was able to perform like a professional contortionist.

Comrade Rum’s methods might have been unorthodox, but they worked wonders. I regained my peak form and passed the semester exam. In recognition of my efforts, the teachers marked my technique with a D plus.

“If you keep working this hard, you’ll upgrade to a C minus by the end of the year.” Comrade Rum reassured me.

Finally, I could see the light at the end of a long tunnel.

Martin asked me to become his dance partner in the Easter Show. Professor Curly proposed to play a piano duet with me. I continued to see Jana until my sculpture was finished. On my eleventh birthday, Dad surprised me with a white tutu covered in fake diamonds. When I wore it to the dance class the following morning, Ivana Gypsy turned green with envy.

The sun shone bright at the beginning of spring, gradually warming up the studio. It seemed that nothing was going to stop me from attaining happiness until I began to experience an uncomfortable tingling in my hip during an intense rehearsal.

“What’s going on, Urbanová?” Comrade Rum was quick to notice my difficulty. “Is anything wrong with your foot?”

“It’s just a cramp.” I shook my leg.

Ballerinas are used to suppressing physical discomfort. I ignored the pain and kept on dancing.

For a few days, I either felt burning or freezing sensations in my leg as if there was something wrong with my circulation. My lower back became increasingly painful. Sharp pain sometimes shot from my hip to my toes like a lightning flash. Afraid to show my handicap, I bit my tongue each time to stop myself from screaming out. Like the Little

Mermaid, I seemed to dance on invisible pieces of shattered glass. Suffering in silence, I stiffened my lips into a happy smile and pretended to move with ease.

“Your insteps appear to have gone flat, Urbanová.” Nothing escaped Comrade Rum’s vigilant scrutiny. “Show me your feet.” She suspiciously tapped my soles with her baton. “Your mother should take you to an orthopaedist.”

Extreme flexibility of the feet is of great importance for a professional ballerina. A classical dancer should almost be able to reach her heel with her tiptoes. A flat instep automatically disqualifies you from dancing. Unable to ignore the issue, I confessed my problems to Mum. On Monday leading to Easter, she took me to see Dr Polaková who referred me to the Klimentská Clinic.

Three days later, I was leaning against the wall in a crowded hospital corridor. Aged patients with broken bones and arthritis occupied the handful of available seats. I had nowhere to rest my sore foot. My mother and I waited for hours before a cranky nurse barked my name.

Entering the orthopaedist’s office, I was shocked to see her enormous size. Dr Parsley was a short, cheerful woman who looked like a balloon. I estimated her weight at two hundred and fifty pounds.

“I used to be like a twig when I was your age.” She assured me when she read in my paperwork that I was a Conservatory student. “Oh dear.” I watched her wriggle in her armchair like a worm. “This is what happens to you when you quit dancing.” Dr Parsley apparently aspired to become a ballerina when she was a girl.

Despite her excessive weight, the orthopaedist was surprisingly agile. Puffing like an engine, she confidently ran her stumpy fingers across my spine before she handed me a typewritten request for an X-ray examination. When I came back to her office with the picture of my bones, she took her time to study my skeleton against the lamplight.

“Hmmm. Uhm.” Dr Parsley murmured something to herself in Latin, furrowing her eyebrows. “There seems to be nothing wrong with your daughter’s bones.” She told my mother. “Hopefully, the problem with Miranda’s insteps is temporary, caused by rapid growth. To be completely sure, however, I need to see her blood analysis.” She rapidly pounded the request on an electric typewriter. “While I’m at it, I’ll also send you to a neurologist.”

On Good Friday, by the time Juda had kissed Jesus on the cheek, my mother and I returned to the hospital. I had given up on breakfast to have my samples taken. A young

nurse stabbed my arm two times before she finally nailed the vein. Surprised that I didn't burst out into tears, she praised me for being an exceptionally tough patient. Later on, my mother accompanied me to the neurology ward. I chewed a dry bread roll for snack as we waited in the lobby, anxiously observing an endless procession of miserable people on crutches or in wheelchairs that passed through the doctor's office.

"Urbanová." I heard a flat voice call out.

The neurologist had a black moustache and reminded me of a train conductor. He whistled to himself when he hammered my knees and shone a small torch into my eyes. "Everything seems normal, but to confirm my diagnosis, I must send you to EEG." He announced. "Let me call Dr Fousková on the fourth floor to see if she can find a way to squeeze you in before Easter." I watched him dial the numbers on the desk phone. "Hi, darling. I was wondering if you could take a look at a young dancer for me, preferably this afternoon. Wonderful!" He kissed the earpiece as if to reward his female colleague for her readiness. "Thanks. I knew I could rely on you."

After he hang up, he quickly dictated a formal request for my examination to a young nurse who handled the typewriter.

"It's a rather painful procedure, but I imagine as a ballerina, Miranda is probably quite resistant to pain." He gallantly shook my mother's hand and showed us the way to the elevators.

We found the EEG examination room in the attic. An enamel plaque on the door nominated Dr Fousková as the medical expert. The empty waiting room featured a low ceiling and was frightfully overheated. I was the only patient, but it transpired that Dr Fousková was out on a lunch break. To appease our hunger, Mum bought a couple of Russian eggs in the hospital buffet on the ground floor. We ate them with plastic forks, patrolling in front of the EEG door.

"Isn't it ludicrous?" She complained. "I come from a family of doctors, but nobody is willing to move a finger for you. Not to mention that my mother is responsible for the terrible state of the national healthcare.

Dr Fousková's prolonged lunch break stretched into the late afternoon. Jesus was about to die on the cross when Mum became so frustrated, she decided to call my dad from a payphone. Luckily, he was at home. After he listened to her grievances about the socialist medical system, he promised to pick us up from hospital later on.

Jesus had already given up his ghost and the light was beginning to wane outside the window when a neurotic woman in a bleached blouse finally stormed to the EEG door. Without bothering to give us an excuse, she vanished inside and came out again fifteen minutes later to call my name.

“I would prefer it if you could wait for your daughter outside while I will conduct the examination.” She slammed the door in my mother’s face.

Dr Fousková’s domain comprised of two rooms. The first one was crammed with electronic equipment and the other featured a big, scary armchair. The strange piece of furniture seemed to serve to the purpose of torturing people. Dr Fouskova asked me to remove my clothes except for my panties. In contrast to the external area, the massive radiators didn’t work inside the examination room. Trembling with cold, I watched the woman strap my arms and legs to the armchair. She smeared my skin with a lubricant, covering my body in plastic suckers. It took her a couple of minutes to wire me to the electronic devices next door.

“I must send electrical shocks through your body to measure the tonic activity in your muscles.” Dr Fousková pushed a wooden gag into my mouth. “This is to stop you from biting off your tongue.”

As she left the room, I began to twitch with a series of electrical charges. They became progressively stronger and lasted longer until I was half-dead.

“How was that?” The doctor wondered when she came back. “I’m going to test your insteps with a syringe now.” She pulled out my gag. “I’ll need you to tell me exactly how much it hurts you.”

I watched her remove a plastic wrap from a long needle. Before I could protest, she plunged it deep into my instep. I recalled Father Eugene describing the terrible pain of crucifixion and thought of Jesus nailed to the cross as I moved my foot, following the instructions.

“What hurts you more?” Dr Fousková was curious. “When you contract your foot or when you relax it?”

“Perhaps it gets a bit worse when I arch my instep.” I ground my teeth.

I would have never dreamed of celebrating Good Friday in such an authentic way.

“Good.” The doctor jerked the needle out. “Let’s try the other foot now.”

After what seemed like eternity, Dr Fousková concluded the painful examination and allowed me to put my clothes back on.

“I understand that you study classical dance at the Conservatory.” She disinterestedly thumbed through my file. “Do you plan on becoming a professional ballerina?”

“My dream is to dance Odette in Swan Lake.” I gave her a hopeful glance.

“Let’s take a look.” Dr Fousková tore a roll of paper from one of the devices. “The tonicity in your right instep is alarmingly irregular.” She said, studying the unintelligible graphs. “Since the X-ray didn’t reveal any visible malfunctions in your bone structure, I suspect your problems might be caused by chronic hepatitis.”

“What do you mean?” I swallowed. “Exactly?”

“Well, if the blood tests confirm my diagnosis.” Dr Fousková replied coolly. “You will have to quit dancing.”

My mouth became dry and my head began to spin.

“This can’t be.” I found it difficult to speak. “I have been dancing for the past seven years.”

“You’ll be lucky if you are going to walk.” The doctor gave me an ominous gaze and closed the file. “There’s a serious chance that you could end up in a wheelchair before reaching adulthood.”

Her words suddenly sounded contorted as if in my nightmare. Anxiety filled my lungs with fire. My legs became heavy. I could hear myself breathing as if I were a scuba diver, walking on the bottom of the ocean. In the meantime, Dr Fousková invited Mum to her office to break the bad news to her.

“I think your diagnosis is grossly premature.” My mother flared her nostrils, trying to appear composed. “Let’s wait to see the blood tests first.”

My mind had switched off by then. It sounded to me as if the two women discussed my condition in Hebrew. In a state of shock, I numbly walked out of the EEG office and boarded the elevator to the ground floor.

“What’s going on?” Dad jumped out of his Škoda when he saw me walk out of the hospital building. He looked alarmed when Mum told him about the outcome of my examination. I didn’t wait for my parents to discuss the situation and continued to walk across the lawn to the riverbank.

Looking down the stream, I saw the big building covered in dirty white tiles on the opposite shore where I had made my first ballet steps seven years before. How far away it seemed now. My eyes flooded with tears when I leaned against the wrought iron railing to watch the swans floating on the waves.

“Cheer up, little Trumpet.” Dad’s heavy paws landed on my shoulders. “The little God wouldn’t let anything happen to you.” He tenderly growled. “You won’t end up in a wheelchair.”

One of the swans swam toward the slanted platform leading to the quay. As soon as the elegant bird emerged from the water, she no longer moved with grace. Looking ridiculously awkward, she waddled over the cobblestones on her short legs.

“I’m like her.” The pain of bitter disappointment swept me off my feet. “I will never dance Odette with Martin.” I sobbed. “I’m never going to perform on stage in my tutu. Everything I hoped for comes down to nothing!”

“This can’t be true.” Dad lifted me in his arms and carried me to our Škoda, delivering me into my mother’s loving embrace on the back seat. “Mum has a strong feeling that Dr Fousková is wrong.”

Turning on the ignition, he talked to me the whole way home.

“Maybe it’s a good thing if you quit ballet.” My father did his best to squeeze some lemonade out of my bitter lemons. “Do you know how the other stage performers refer to ballerinas?” I heard him boom on top of the howling engine. “Corkscrews!” He slammed the steering wheel, recalling the scornful conversations he had overheard in the National Theatre vestibule while waiting for me to come off the stage. “You are way too intelligent and pretty to become a corkscrew, Trumpet! You deserve to star in musicals like Barbra Streisand!”



AFTER EASTER, the blood tests revealed that Dr Fousková’s diagnose was incorrect. Everything seemed fine with my metabolism. My nerves and bones didn’t show unusual malfunctions, yet my insteps rapidly continued to collapse and I was always in great pain. Unable to pin down the cause of my problems, the corpulent orthopaedist advised me to quit the Conservatory.

“I know how you feel.” Dr Parsley tried to sound sympathetic when I last saw her. “Obviously. I’ve been through it myself.” Her fingers reminded me of sausages while she pounded her typewriter. I couldn’t help wondering if I was going to put on as much weight as she did after I stopped exercising.

Few days later, Jana Sparrow invited me to her graduation party at the Academy of Art. An eccentric collection of local artists and intellectuals in dark clothes surrounded my sculpture. Sipping wine from mustard glasses and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, they whispered critical remarks to one another and accompanied their deep statements with meaningful glances.

“Congratulations.” Several people shook my hand and took a photo of me.

“Thanks.” I felt as if I was attending my own funeral.

Immortalised in plaster, with my arms beautifully raised above the head, I dominated a pedestal in the centre of the atelier like Master Jan Hus; except that my sculpture was the monument to a loser.

“You have a muscular body for a dancer.” Jana’s professor sleazily gurgled in my ear, looking like a vampire. “When can we expect to see you on the national stage?” He had bloody teeth from drinking too much red wine and his breath made me almost faint. According to Honza, the elderly alcoholic had built a successful career after the war by sculpting Soviet soldiers on tanks.

“I will never become a professional dancer.” I pulled away from him. “Something is wrong with my legs, but nobody can find out what it is.”

Igor luckily saved me from the drunken academic.

“Excuse me, professor. Do you mind if I steal Miranda from you for a second?”

He led me to an improvised banquet loaded with refreshments.

“It’s too bad if you had to quit ballet,” he told me, “but isn’t it wonderful to be able to eat to your heart’s content?”

“Yeah. I suppose.” I sighed with resignation.

I was tempted to kill my disappointment with food as I watched the dignified scholars stuff slices of ham and cheese in their mouths.

“Why don’t you take a bite of this?” The young sculptor pushed a plate with blood pudding under my nose as if he read my thoughts. “It will cheer you up.” He gave me an encouraging smile.

The black sausage smelled delicious.

I diffidently dipped it in seed mustard.

“I hate to see you look so sad, Miranda.” Igor wrapped his chunky arm around my shoulders. “Let me give you a piece of rare wisdom.” He led me to my sculpture. “See

yourself up there? You're bloody famous." He laughed. "Fuck the dreams. The only thing you need to worry about from now on is money."

Seeing the baffled look on my face, Igor pulled five crowns out of his pocket to demonstrate his theory.

"Every coin has two sides." He flipped the change and snatched it in the mid-air as if catching a fly. "Head or tails?" He challenged me to a bet.

"Don't know." I shrugged. "Head?"

Igor opened the palm of his hand. "Nah. It's tail." He showed me the coin. "But, it shouldn't really matter to you."

"Why is that?" I wanted to know.

"It's quite simple." Igor pressed the coin in my hand. "Now it's yours," he gave me an encouraging wink. "Always remember. Regardless of how it lands, both sides will buy you the same value."

