

CHAPTER THREE



Chicks or Eggs?

DAYS AFTER THE GRADUATION party at the Academy of Art, a nuclear reactor melted down at the Chernobyl power plant in Ukraine. A cloud of deadly dust began its journey across the European sky. While the Western media raised an uproar, warning of radioactive rains, the authorities behind the Iron Curtain preferred to keep the lid on the disaster. During the week leading to the Labour Parade, the national radio broadcast promising weather reports. The TV news featured banal footage of award winning cows, sportsmen training for the world cup and our senile President kissing the Warsaw Pact officials at the Prague Airport. We heard nothing about the approaching environmental threat until my Dad switched on Radio Free Europe during dinner.

“Jirka!” Mum typically flared her nostrils. “Can’t you respect our family meals?”

“Come on, sweetie. I just want to hear the news.”

The jamming frequency seemed even louder than usual. Eventually, the voice of the dissident reporter, Karel Jezdinský, surfaced between the waves, sounding like a cry of a shipwrecked victim.

“Yuiii . . . the chain reaction . . . grrrr . . . on April 26 . . . yuiii . . . nuclear radiation . . . grrrr . . . out of control . . . grrrr . . . thousands of victims . . . yuiii . . . global catastrophe.”

I pieced the fragments of the sentences together and it dawned on me that we were the ones on board the sinking ship. I pictured an atomic cloud floating above the low hills. Looking like an enormous satan boletus, it obscured the setting sun.

“Daddy.” I tearfully looked across the table. “Is this the end of the world?”

The two wrinkles deepened around my mother’s mouth and Marta heaved a miserable sigh. Fortunately, my father’s optimism prevailed over our fears.

“Hopefully, the consequences of this disaster won’t be as serious as feared.” He lit a Sparta, exhaling smoke. “This could be the finger of God and the beginning of the end of the Cold War.” He wishfully pointed out. “People need to wake up. There are dozens of potential Chernobyls in the Eastern Block and the ecological threat they represent for the global environment is far superior to the one posed by the Soviet missiles. I suspect this might actually help Gorbachev push for nuclear disarmament in exchange for massive financial help from the US.”

“How about us?” Marta cried.

“We’re trapped like chicken behind a fence!” Mum bit her nails.

My father remained calm.

“When I drew the plans for the reconstruction of our house I took the possibility of a nuclear conflict into account.” He told us. “This is why I dug our cellar extra deep and strengthened its walls with lead.”

A sharp ringing of the phone made me jump in my seat.

“*Pronto?*” Marta picked up the receiver. “*Si, amore.* We’ve already heard about it.”

Her Italian fiancée was concerned about our wellbeing. Gianni informed Marta that according to RAI 1 the Chernobyl cloud was heading in the direction of our capital. The Italian television apparently maintained that unless the wind turned, we should expect a radioactive downpour early in the morning.

“This means that we won’t be able to burn the witches tonight.” I was disappointed.

On April 30, the Czechs traditionally make bonfires in the evening. We throw straw dummies in the flames in a pagan celebration of the spring’s conquest over winter.

“The heavens will open and all hell will break lose . . . *grrrr.*” The radio wailed in the background. “It can’t be coincidence . . . *yuiii* . . . that Chernobyl stands for a bitter, toxic herb.” Mr Jezdinsky recalled Nostradamus’ prophecies. “It’s an ingredient indispensable in witches’ potions . . . *yuiii* . . . At the same time, Halley’s Comet is passing near the Earth . . . *grrrr* . . . Last Judgment is clearly near . . . *yuiii!*”

Opening the window, I studied the overcast horizon for the signs of doom. It seemed that the dark forces were cooking up a deadly storm. I could picture the wicked witches dancing around their cauldron.

“We must not resign ourselves to death.” Dad commanded us to action. “The smartest thing we can do at this point is to take refuge in our cellar until the nuclear precipitation blows over.”

Working as a team, we rapidly furnished the dusty room behind our furnace with air mattresses and food. My mother revealed a secret stash of canned food in the pantry. It transpired that she had also prepared for the possibility of a nuclear emergency during the previous years.

“The idea that the world might blow up someday has always been at the back of my mind.” She confessed to me while I helped her carry boxes with flour, sugar and spaghetti downstairs. “If we must die, at least we’ll go down with a full stomach.”

This was an uncharacteristic statement for someone who always watched my diet.

Dad pulled down the blinds on our windows and made sure to shut the flaps in the chimneys. Switching off the Aparatura, he didn’t forget to grab the gas masks and the chemical protection suits he was bound to keep in the garage in case something in the Aparatura broke down. A radiation dosimeter came in handy now. It was another of Dr Steinein’s prototypes that Dad intended to turn into a patent.

“We have a great opportunity to test it now!” He pointed out.

“Cool.” My sister rolled her eyes, pointing at a lab bottle marked with the skull and crossbones. “What’s this?”

“I thought it won’t do any harm if we stock up on homemade rum.” A cunning grin rippled across my father’s face. “It’s crucial to have enough disinfectant.”

When we were ready to retreat to our shelter, Dad gave us five minutes to pack our important belongings. I hurried up to my room to seize my rosary and teddy bear, Misha. Despite his huge size and shabby appearance, I deemed the furry toy indispensable to my survival. Remembering the Civilian Protection Course that was a compulsory measure in communist education, I followed the instructions for a nuclear crisis by putting on my wellingtons and a yellow raincoat. I tightly wrapped my hands in plastic sacs and secured them with elastic bands.

“One, two, three . . .” The public speaker on the pole outside my window gurgled in anticipation of the Labour Day Parade.

It was dark. I could see fires burning in our neighbours’ gardens. Teenage silhouettes jumped over the flames. Mr Šimek’s shadow prowled in front of his fence. The gossiping neighbour seemed to study the forming precipitation on the Eastern horizon, blissfully unaware of how deadly it was. It occurred to me to call out to him, but I doubted that he would take my warning into consideration. He was the sort of person who believed in everything the television said. My heart filled with guilt when I pulled down the blinds,

leaving the old man to his fate.

“This will come as handy to you as a trench coat to a dead man, little Trumpet.” Dad burst out laughing when he saw me come down to our living room.

“Take the elastic bands off before they cut off your circulation!” Mum rushed to remove my plastic outfit.

A heavy stomping of feet announced my sister’s arrival. Marta was wearing the most transparent of her elastic shirts atop a miniskirt that seemed at least a size too small. As always, she had plastered her face in thick make-up.

“Dear me.” Mum winced. “Aren’t you a bit overdressed?”

“If I have to die young, I want to die beautiful.” She retorted.

Our cellar smelled of germinating potatoes and apples that my mother kept stored on wooden trays. Through a ventilation hole fitted with an anti-radiation filter, (which was another of Dad’s prototypes), filtered in the air from the garage located directly overhead. Dada hang a hurricane lamp from the low ceiling to have some illumination in case of a blackout. It cast a faint light on the concrete floor. Our improvised kitchen consisted of a couple of crates carrying a portable gas burner. Two buckets with clean water served as our bathroom. An empty one in the corner was the emergency toilet.

“Welcome on board.” Dad shut the metallic door and carefully sealed the lock with a water proof tape. “We don’t need to worry about radiation here.” He assured us. “Of all places in the world, we couldn’t find a safer shelter.” I watched him prepare my bed by pumping air into a mouldy mattress.

The walls in our cellar must have been exceptionally thick. The reception on Dad’s portable radio was worse than usual. We could only hear ghostly rustling, occasionally disrupted by frightful words torn out of the context. “Total annihilation . . . *grrrr* . . . contamination . . . *yuiii* . . . leukaemia . . . *grrrr* . . . cancer.”

“Please, my little God, make those bad clouds go away.” I thumbed the beads on my rosary, feeling claustrophobic. “I don’t want to die.”

“Don’t worry, little Trumpet.” Mum wrapped her arms around me. “You’ll get used to living in a shelter.” She recalled spending many nights in a cellar as a little girl before the American army liberated Pilsen. “We stayed at hospital during the war where my father worked as a surgeon.” She told me. “I remember seeing him pull out shell splinters from people’s arms and legs in candlelight while the ground above us shook with violent explosions.”

“Were you afraid?” I pressed my cheek to hers.

“Strangely not.” She smiled. “I actually liked the howling of sirens and the sound of bombs plummeting from the sky. It was the only time when I saw my parents behave affectionately towards each other.”

“You were way too small to understand what was going on.” Dad poured himself a glass from the bottle with the skull and bones. “I was almost five when the Red Army came to Ostrava.”

The smell of caramel hit my nose.

“We used to hide in our potato cellar during the air-raids.” He recalled, toasting our survival with disinfectant. “Our shelter wouldn’t resist a direct impact of a bomb, but it protected us from the bullets whistling outside like metallic rain. I can’t say I liked that sound.” He shuddered, pouring himself another glass. “One evening, while the Soviets shelled the German positions behind our house, a young soldier in German uniform came knocking on our cellar door.” Dad continued. “He spoke Croatian, begging us to let him inside. He wasn’t our enemy, he insisted. The Wehrmacht had conscripted him only two months before.”

I watched Dad empty his glass as if to wash down a bitter memory.

“I remember standing naked in a washtub. My mother just covered me up in soap.” His raspy voice filled with sadness. “I can still picture the boy’s eyes filled with horror and the tears running down his rosy cheeks. He was barely seventeen, but my father slammed the door in his face. Minutes later, we heard an explosion in our courtyard. The next day, I saw his dead body on the ground, torn to pieces.”

“That’s terrible.” I exclaimed. “Why didn’t Granddad let him inside?”

“I don’t know.” Dad shrugged. “I guess he was worried that the Russians might shoot our whole family if they found out that we have helped a German soldier.”

“How would anyone know?”

“Our nation has never been short on informers.” Dad sighed with regret. “The same traitors who used to denounce the patriots to Gestapo started to snitch to the Russians.” Refilling his glass, he scratched his head. “Besides, I’m sorry to say it, Dad was always a coward.”

“Why?” Marta protested. “What’s wrong with putting your family’s interests first?”

“I can recall a number of situations when my dad failed to act in our family’s interest.” My father sourly disagreed. “He could have saved that boy’s life.”

We spent the rest of the evening discussing the Second World War and the fact that pragmatic people, such as my paternal grandfather, had a higher rate of survival than the idealists did. My mother's uncle was a member of the Resistance and had died young in prison. Yet Mum was of the opinion that it was better to face physical death than to live without a clean conscience. Marta, similar to Igor, believed that idealism was stupid. She thought that if people looked after their own interests instead of trying to live up to a collective ideal, the world would be a better place. Dad correctly pointed out that if the idealists had not fought against Nazism, it would have conquered the world. To achieve ethnic cleansing, Hitler would have gassed many more millions of 'lesser' people in concentration camps, including the pragmatic types.

"Grandma Helga comes from a German family." Marta objected. "Nobody would send you to a gas chamber."

"Who can tell?" Dad shrugged. "My father had a catholic birth certificate, but he didn't exactly look like someone who could claim a pure pedigree. During the war he sold dental supplies all around the country for a German company, yet his card playing pals back in Ostrava referred to him as the White Jew."

I never knew my paternal Granddad. The black and white image in the columbarium window displayed a balding man with a hooked nose, carrying a basketful of velvet mushrooms from the forest. He was a perfect example of a Czech soul who preferred to keep his beliefs to himself.

"Wow. A white Jew who worked for Germans during the whole war?" Marta crumpled her brow, putting the two and two together. "Of course. The darkest shadow teds to hide beneath the candleholder, right?" She recalled the Czech proverb. "Grandpa was a smart Jew!"

"How can you be so cynical, Marta?" My mother scolded.

"I'm not, the world is." My sister offensively winked her thick eyelashes.

The valve in my mattress was faulty and my bed continued to deflate as I tried to fall asleep. I couldn't stop thinking about the world and the terrible state it was in. Closing my eyes, I saw the planet Earth divided by a barbed fence. I pictured grey battleships and submarines cruising the oceans, waiting to trigger missiles. I didn't have to stretch my imagination. A secret underground military base loaded with SS 23's was located a short distance from our hometown. Each of the hundreds of warheads had the potential to obliterate our whole nation. All it would take was for some military nutcase to press the

wrong button, and the planet would go up in smithereens, I fretted.

I tossed and turned in my sleeping bag, hugging Misha, until I dozed off. At around midnight, a deafening clap jolted me out of sleep. Scared and confused, I sat up in the darkness, trying to remember where I was,

“Mummy. Mummy. There’s war!” I was covered in a cold sweat, convinced that the blasting noise was an atomic missile flying overhead.

“It’s a rainstorm, little Trumpet.” Mum wrapped her arms around me. “Lightning probably just hit Babka. That’s why the thunder sounds so loud. Go back to sleep, sweetheart.”

Seeing that my mattress was flat on the ground, she allowed me to crawl in the warm space between her and Dad.

“What are the atoms?” I curled up beneath the woollen blanket.

“They are the smallest known particles.” Mum whispered. “So small you can only see them with a special microscope, yet everything is made of them, including our house, the plants and trees, you and me.”

My father’s snoring sounded like a chain saw cutting through a log while Marta was speaking Italian in her sleep on the other side of the cellar.

“How can the atoms be so harmful if they’re so small?” I wanted to know.

“They are only dangerous when you break them to release the energy inside.” Mum explained. “This is what causes the radiation.”

“Does it hurt when the atoms kill you?”

“How would I know?” She sighed. “Theoretically, when a nuclear bomb goes off, subatomic particles fly right through everything, including human bodies, destroying the structure of our tissues until nothing is left of us.”

I recalled the pictures of black silhouettes of humans burnt into the Hiroshima walls, which I had seen in elementary school.

“Nothing? Not even our soul?”

“The soul isn’t made of any substance. Unless you lose it, it can’t be harmed.” Mum tenderly stroked my cheeks. “Enough of gloomy thoughts, little Trumpet.” She planted a warm kiss on my forehead. “Hopefully, tomorrow will be a new day.”

“I wish.” I buried my head in the pillow, whispering Hail Mary so many times over, I prayed myself to sleep.



THE NEXT MORNING, THE public speakers outside exploded with marching band music. The cheerful sound of trumpets and trombones rolled down to the valley like an avalanche.

“Dear citizens. Comrade women and men.” The National Committee chief’s booming voice echoed many times over due to the lack of synchronisation in the public speaker system. “Notwithstanding the bad weather . . . bad weather . . . weather . . . the Labour Day Parade . . . Day Parade . . . Parade . . . begins at eight thirty . . . eight thirty. . . at the Rotten Pub . . . Rotten Pub . . . Pub.”

I heard my father stir in his sleeping bag.

“Can you believe this?” He growled. “Those assholes at the National Committee will force the locals to march in the radioactive rain.”

“Most people will probably stay at home.” Mum yawned.

“Of course they won’t.” Dad put on his glasses, reaching out to switch on the radio. “Unless they listen to the Voice of America.”

“*Grrrr* . . . the situation is grave . . . *yuiii* . . . the threat of mortal illness . . . *grrrr* . . . irreversible damage . . .”

Listening to the grim broadcast, I felt sorry for our neighbours parading through the streets like wet chicken, waving national flags and posters with the portraits of cynical politicians who had exposed them to radiation.

“It’s nasty of me to say it, but today we celebrate our moral victory, Alice.” I saw my father grin. “Those who are not afraid to stand by their moral principles will most likely abstain from celebrating the Labour Day despite the threat of sanctions for their non-participation. Only the Bolshevik brownnosers and opportunists will venture under the radioactive shower.”

“Don’t be so naive, Dad.” My sister rolled her eyes. “A typical opportunist will have bribed his GP to obtain sick leave. Smart people will spend the Labour Day by roasting sausages in their weekend cottage. Only dumb people are going to turn up at the parade. Serves them right.”

“How can you say that?” My mother frowned. “It’s the majority of our nation you’re talking about.”

The sound of heavy steps echoed from our garage, interrupting our conversation.

“*Sakra*.” Dad slapped his forehead. “I forgot to call Peter to give him the day off.”

“It’s a national holiday.” Mum looked surprised. “How come he’s working?”

“Seeing that we’re behind with the production and Peter didn’t wish to march in the parade, I proposed to him to earn some extra money.” Dad guiltily explained. “I should probably go up and tell him about Chernobyl. What do you think?” He pulled out the dosimeter to measure the radiation levels inside our cellar.

“You don’t intend to ask Peter to join us down here, right?” Marta worried.

“Don’t be so selfish.” Mum scolded her. “Do you, guys, fancy English breakfast?”

She lit up the gas burner and handed Marta a can of frankfurters along with an opener.

“Cssssssssss.” The can dangerously sizzled as soon as my sister pierced it, releasing a sweet smell of rotten meat.

“Is this some kind of biological weapon?” Dad pinched his nose. “Its use by date is November 20th, 1984.” He frowned.

I quickly calculated the difference. “That’s a year and half ago!”

“*Ježišmarja*. How come I didn’t notice anything?” Mum threw up her hands. “What a waste!”

Inspecting the rest of our emergency stash, we discovered that most of the cans had bulging lids, which was a clear sign of decomposition. Suddenly, the plastic sacs I had used for nuclear crisis came in handy. We ended up throwing the green weenies inside, sealing them with elastic bands.

“What’s the point of building an atomic shelter if you get to starve to death in it?” My father never missed an opportunity to poke fun at Mum.

“We can always eat biscuits and fruit.” She looked offended.

Presenting us with a crateful of apples, Mum invited us to sit down on wooden boxes around the gas burner. We cut off the rotten pieces with plastic knives and sipped hot camomile tea for breakfast.

The hissing of the Aparatura’s valves came down through the ventilation hole and the vacuum pump buzzed like a bumblebee trapped behind a window.

“I’ll go up to have a word with Peter.” Dad climbed the stairs with the dosimeter and inspected the area around the door.

“How does it look?” Mum wanted to know.

“It’s within the limits.” He called out, having studied the data collected by the device. “The strong winds last night have probably ended up carrying the radioactive clouds away

from here. I suppose it's safe enough for us to evacuate the cellar now, as long as we keep inside the house."

The vacuum pump overhead began to make strange choking noises.

"What's this?" My sister suspiciously sniffed the air. "I can smell Christmas biscuits. Is Peter cooking up something?"

I noticed a white foam bubbling through the ventilation grid into the shelter. It smelled of coconut, which was a strong indication that it had leaked from the Aparatura, seeing that my father used coconut acid to make his antistatic potion.

"Do prdele!" Dad jumped to his feet. "I'm going to kill the guy! Each time he works without supervision something goes wrong."

It was as if in the tale about the enchanted pot that could make infinite amounts of porridge. According to the story, one had to pronounce a magic formula to stop the pot from boiling. "Enough little pot, enough!" I cried, but it didn't work. If anything, the foam continued to gush from the ventilation hole even faster. Before we realised what was happening, it covered the floor and started to rise up to our ankles.

"What are you waiting for, Jirka?" My mum pulled a gas mask over my face. "Quickly. Let's get out of here. Open up the door!"

I was breathing so hard my goggles turned misty.

"Krucináljagot!" I heard my father struggle with the key.

For a moment, I thought we were going to drown in coconut mousse, but the lock eventually snapped open. As we leapt outside, I remembered my teddy bear.

"I've got to go back!" I could see Misha helplessly floating in the foam. "He's my friend."

"Fuck him." Marta dragged me out by the collar.

My parents sprinted upstairs. We followed closely behind them, peeking through the glass-panelled door that separated our entrance hallway from the garage.

"Holy cow!" Marta whistled, on seeing the mountain of foam that piled up high to the ceiling. "How did this happen?"

The Aparatura was virtually snowed under. The lights on the computer's control panel flashed on the wall, making beeping sounds. Peter stood high on the ladder, desperately clinging to the Aparatura's frame like a sailor to the mast of a sinking boat.

"Don't ask me how the coconut acid got inside the pump!" He sounded hysterical. "I swear it's not my fault, Jirka. I've checked it twice before switching it on."

The automated laboratory operated by maintaining subatmospheric pressure in the

system. Equipped with hermetic valves, the vessels sucked in determined quantities of chemicals directly from the barrels. For some strange reason, the water-ring air pump, designed to generate suction force in the Aparatura, ended up drawing coconut acid from one of the containers. Blending it with water, it rapidly whipped it into cream.

According to another local proverb, the Devil has a tendency to shit on the highest mound, meaning that one disaster often follows another. In the aftermath of the world's biggest nuclear catastrophe, we were facing a Chernobyl of our own.

"Where's the key to the fuse box?" I watched my dad wade through the drifts of foam. "The wires could burst into flames any minute. I must kill the central switch!"

The brass orchestra gleefully pounded outside as if to highlight our despair. Sparks glittered in the fuse box as my father pried it open with a screwdriver, frantically pulling down the levers. Eventually, the flashing control lights died out. The valves wheezed in mortal agony and the water-air ring pump took one last breath to spray Dad's face with coconut bubbles.

"I guess it might be a good idea to give Dr Steinein a call." My sister grimly suggested. "He's the one who's got Dad in this mess. Maybe he can pull him out of it as well." She stomped down to the phone

Cautiously, I opened the garage door and pushed the elephant-like trunk of my mask inside. "Argue gogay, Dag?" I burbled, sounding like Mr Šimek.

"Yep. I'm fine." My father emerged from the foam, looking like the Grandfather Frost from the Russian fairy tales.

"Do you realise that foam is highly conductive?" Mum threw herself around his neck. "You could have been dead, Jirka!"

"Thank God it's over." Peter's knock-knees trembled when he climbed down the ladder. His thick glasses sat skewed on his nose and the little hair he had left on his head virtually stood on end. The nerd's feet had barely landed on the slippery floor when an ominous sound of car brakes screeched in front of our garage.

"In the name of the law. Comrade Urban, open up!" Someone pounded on the wooden gate. "I'm Comrade Ram from the National Committee."

My parents exchanged worried looks. I saw a blue vein pulse across Mum's forehead.

"I know you're in there." The National Committee chief stubbornly rattled the door handle. "Your neighbours alerted me to a disturbance of public order. Not only are you working during the national holiday, but you're also causing dangerous pollution to the

Socialist environment.”

“I’m glad to hear that the usual suspects have done their duty by dobbling me in!” My father vigorously flung the gate open, making Comrade Ram jump back. “Which is more than can be said for you, Comrade.”

Whenever dealing with ‘small-town apparatchiks,’ Dad followed the golden rule that attack is the best way of defence.

“Did you by any chance inform your loyal subjects about the nuclear emergency in Chernobyl before you ordered them to parade in the radioactive rain this morning?” He made sure to speak loud enough for our neighbours to hear him.

The National Committee chief had a square face and hands like spades. Like so many other Bolshevik functionaries, he was a slow thinker. Towering high above Dad, he had trouble finding words.

“What emergency are you talking about, Comrade?” He was dumbfounded. “Let’s get this straight. You are in the wrong here.” He pointed at the coconut snowdrift inside our garage. “Not me.”

I could see Mr Šimek rake his way down the stairs. Mr Hašek grabbed Buddy from the kennel and Mr Deer who lived next door to the Šimeks crept onto his veranda with his binoculars. Dad always suspected that the retired prison guard’s hobby was to note the number plates of the vehicles that stopped at our doorstep and to forward the gathered intelligence to the STB.

“Watch out. I could send you to jail for spreading dangerous rumours.” Comrade Ram threatened. “I have never heard of any Chernobyl, but I have heard plenty about you and your suspicious activities. People like you are a threat to our society!”

“A threat you say?” Dad cocked his head. “And exposing school children to nuclear radiation is not a threat to our society? I tell you what, Comrade. That’s a crime.”

Comrade Ram frowned, looking up to the sky.

“I can’t see any radiation.” He feebly protested. “Seriously, Comrade Urban. This is not time for jokes.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” The tone of Dad’s voice left no doubts that he was deadly serious. “If you find it funny that a nuclear power plant blew up in Ukraine, I really don’t. This rain is highly radioactive, believe me.” He growled, baring his teeth. “If I were you, I wouldn’t stand in it, Comrade.”

A hellish rumbling of a two-stroke engine preceded the arrival of Dr Steinein’s green

Trabant, an East German car made of Duroplast.

“Here comes a respected physicist from the Macromolecular Institute.” My father told Comrade Ram. “Why don’t you ask him to measure your jacket with the dosimeter if you don’t believe me? I bet you a hundred crowns that he’ll tell you to take it off and bury it at the bottom of your garden in a sealed plastic bag.”

“It won’t be necessary.” The National Committee chief’s eyes were the size of flying saucers when he jumped into his Lada. “We’ll continue our conversation another time.” I watched him reverse all the way down our street.

“Go maggot!” Mr Šimek realized the seriousness of the situation. “Ovary man foreign cells!” He dropped his rake and ran for cover.

“*Z cesty!*” Dr Steinein motioned my dad to step out of his way before he plunged his Trabant into the coconut foam. “I don’t want to get caught in this rain, thank you very much.” Parking his plastic car next to the Aparatura, he killed the rumbling engine with a regal twist. “I prefer to take a bath in coconut acid.”

Dr Steinein’s sense of humour was far superior to his theories, which often proved relative. Short and peppy, the scientist sported a wild tangle of white hair and a greying moustache. He modelled himself on the famous genius, which is how he came by his nickname.

“I must say, the timing for this accident is rather peculiar.” We watched Dr Steinein inspect the Aparatura. “There must be something wrong with the stars these days.” He danced around the broken pump like a mumbling sorcerer.

“Since when did you get into Astrology, doctor?” Dad regained his calm by lighting a Sparta. “I was hoping that you would give me a more scientific explanation, because I’m legally bound to answer for this disaster.”

My father had met Dr Steinein during his taxi driving days due to interrupted public transportation to Petřiny where the Macromolecular Institute had its seat. Desperate to attend an important reunion at work, the scientist requested Dad’s services. He had little money on him, but my father agreed to a heavy discount. In course of a spontaneous conversation, the two men quickly established that their political opinions were similar, although Dr Steinein was much more cautious about voicing them. At the peak of his academic career, the physicist was sadly broke and exasperated. He complained about the lack of government support in scientific research, saying that the financing of technical development depended on bureaucratic processes, similar to those described in Kafka’s

novels.

“All I can do is to write papers.” Dr Steinein confessed. “Most of my ideas will never make it off the page.”

The approval process at the Ministry of Industry ran in a vicious circle. To obtain the financing, the scientists were required to present a prototype of their invention, which typically involved a serious financial investment. Seeing that researchers typically earned lower wages than the bureaucrats at the Ministry did, most of the ideas ended up at the bottom of someone’s desk drawer.

This is exactly what my father hoped to change. “By turning original inventions into approved products, I can make a decent living and promote a worthy cause at the same time.” He famously declared.

This was clearly a foolish plan until he had chanced upon the chief of the Austerlitz Agricultural Cooperative, who thought of himself as an indirect descendant of the French Emperor. It took my father one afternoon and a bottle of Napoleon cognac to persuade Comrade Kocián to provide a legitimate platform for his ambitious project. Agricultural cooperatives were generally more independent on the Party’s politics than the industrial sector. They also typically disposed of more finances, which some of the entrepreneurial chiefs preferred to invest into useful projects rather than paying the money back into the State’s pocket. The vision of rustling banknotes made Comrade Kocián cheerfully overlook Dad’s political record. He formally employed him as the Head of the Austerlitz Joint Production in Prague.

Practically, this meant that as long as my dad earned the cooperative money with his projects, he was able to run an independent business. At the same time, the agricultural chieftain could always change his mind, which would be disastrous, seeing that Dad had mortgaged our house to build the Aparatura.

“You shouldn’t have been insolent to Comrade Ram, Jirka.” Mum was nearly in tears. “What if he gets on the phone to the police and accuses us of breaking the law? The cooperative could cancel our contract.”

“I’d say Comrade Ram has enough to worry about.” Dad resolutely shook his head. “Besides, we’re not breaking any rules, Alice. There isn’t any existing law for what we’re doing in here. And, technically speaking, everything which is not explicitly forbidden, is allowed.”

Despite his contagious optimism, I sensed deep down that he was worried about the

impact of the Aparatura's disaster. The town's sewage system consisted of a single pipe running straight to the river. It was more than likely that the coconut foam would cause serious pollution. Once again, the mythical sword of Damocles was dangling above our heads. Our prospects seemed as grim as the future of the whole planet.



ON MY WAY TO Sunday mass, I took a detour past the river to see if the family of swans nesting above the weir survived the Chernobyl disaster. To my disappointment, the birds were gone. I noted several silver fish, floating belly up amidst the reeds.

“How could you let this happen?” I scolded the little God, praying to him after the Communion. “Why did you create the world if you want to see it destroyed? What sort of God are you to stand back and watch the humans play with atoms, breaking the rules of Nature?”

The bell rang at the end of Mass and the organ played the recessional hymn.

“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” Father Eugene blessed the congregation.

“Thanks be to God.” The old people laboriously stood up and left.

Eternal light sadly flickered above the side altar as I turned to the mother of Jesus who wept at her son's feet.

“Holy Mary, tell me what to do.” I kneeled before the virgin. “I'm scared of living and afraid to die. Show me the light in the darkness and help me overcome my anxiety.”

“By the Lord in the heavens, is anything wrong with you, Miranda?” I heard Father Eugene's soft voice behind me. “Why didn't I hear you singing this morning?”

“I can't sing when I'm upset.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. What made you so upset if I may ask?”

“God.” I sniffed.

The priest made the sign of the cross and kneeled down by my side.

“Dear Lord forgive our foolish ways.” He exhaled. “What did our Lord do to make you so angry with him, my dear? Is this because of your failure to pursue your studies at the Conservatory?”

Shaking my head, I sprinkled his face with tears. “It's because he is not doing his job

properly.” I sniffed. “If he behaved the way he should, there wouldn’t be any wars and disasters in the world!”

Father Eugene couldn’t help smiling.

“That’s a very serious accusation.” He took off his glasses to wipe the drops from his lenses with a handkerchief. “It’s not God who makes wars, but people do.” He sighed. “Whether they claim to fight in His name, they are merely using God as an excuse. Our Father loves all His children the same. He doesn’t want people to kill one another for any good or bad reason.”

I looked up at the dead Jesus on the cross.

“Is He the proof of His love? God led His own son to death!”

“We all must die, dear.” The priest handed me his handkerchief with a tender gesture. “Life is a path to eternity made of God’s infinite love. The main trouble is that the Devil always tries to steer us off the Godly path. Beware of Satan, Miranda. He is the one you should blame for all the suffering in this world.”

I wiped my nose, taking a moment to think about his words.

“How can I keep safe from Satan?” I wondered. “He seems to be everywhere.”

“By having plenty of love inside your heart, my child.” Father Eugene stood up and brushed his knees. “As Saint John has said: ‘Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love.’”



IT TOOK ALMOST A MONTH before the Normalization authorities admitted to the Chernobyl disaster and even then, the mainstream media did their best to undermine the seriousness of the radioactive leak from the reactor. Funnily enough, my dad adopted a similar strategy, preparing to face hygienic control over the Aparatura’s malfunction. Not only did he talk his way out of paying a hefty penalty, he actually managed to squeeze lemonade out of the Chernobyl lemons.

“You should help me build more Aparaturas to prevent the future Chernobyls.” He advised the inspectors in our garage, lubricating their good will with homemade booze. “I don’t need to tell you, Comrades, things can always go wrong when you are working with

toxic substances. Our technology has the potential to produce chemicals on a large scale, depending on the amount of modules you put side by side.” Dad said. “But the crucial difference between a traditional chemical plant and our type of production is that when something in the Aparatura breaks down, you clean up the whole mess with a mop and a bucket. If I slightly exaggerate.”

He wasn’t exaggerating. This is how we disposed of the coconut foam in our cellar.

“I *sees* your point.” Comrade Kocián nodded gravely, emptying his glass. “This is the direction we *needs* to be heading.” The chief of the cooperative came all the way from Austerlitz to attend the critical meeting. When the hygienic inspectors concluded that the Aparatura didn’t cause serious damage to the environment, the stocky Moravian visibly cheered up. “How about we *goes* down to your living room to further discuss the issue?” Comrade Kocián suggested in his South Moravian *‘long beak’* accent.

At the beginning of summer, the cherries ripened on trees and the velvet mushrooms popped out in legendary clusters all over our forest. Ironically, Mum forbade me to pick them, because they were likely to contain carcinogens. Concerned about the widespread contamination, my parents stopped buying milk from Mrs Backyard. I no longer had the responsibility to carry the pails across the hill. Suddenly, I had nothing to do. It was as if Nature became my enemy. My body proved unreliable and painful. I wasn’t safe playing outside.

Inevitably, I ended up retreating inside my head. This is how I found my refuge in literature. Collecting the children’s tales I had borrowed from the Public Library, I carried them down the hill in a canvas bag.

“*Dobry den* Mrs Mašková.” I stacked up the books on the desk in the young readers’ section. “Can I return those?”

“You are a quick reader, Miranda.” The plump woman gave me a warm smile. “What would you like to borrow next?”

“I want to start reading books for grownups.” I told her.

The librarian looked up at me from her filing cabinet, adjusting her glasses.

“Isn’t it a bit early for you?” She blinked.

“I think I’ve read everything you’ve got here.”

“Surly you haven’t, dear.” Mrs Mašková gave me a sceptical look. “How about this new title from Albatros?” She presented me with an illustrated book.

I politely broke the spine. Thumbing through the glossy pages, I saw caricatures of

eccentric travellers and pirates.

“It looks nice.” I shrugged. “But I’m bored with the children’s stories. I want to read about real life now.”

The librarian regretfully handed me my membership card. “Why is it that children can never wait to grow up?” She sighed.

A velvet curtain divided the children’s library from the adult section. Parting it, I confidently stepped into the new domain. The room next door was a labyrinth of dusty shelves, crammed with more books than I could have read in a lifetime. Despite the censorship law, the long racks contained several controversial titles by authors from the capitalist countries. I immediately identified the popular volumes by the way their covers looked tattered. It didn’t come to me as a surprise that the titles written by communist authors had a clean borrowing record and smelled of mildew.

Inspecting the shelves, I wondered where to begin my reading adventure. Too many options left me confused. I decided to pick the books by the cover, selecting the most exciting titles.

“How do you do Mrs First?” I built up a column of English novels in front of the bewildered librarian. “Can I transfer my membership to your library?”

The shy lady with delicate skin and manners squirmed on her chair. “Aren’t you Mrs Urbanová’s daughter?” She correctly associated me with my mum who was one of the library’s most frequent visitors.

“I don’t think you would appreciate reading *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.” Mrs First winced, thumbing through my selection. “How about you swap it for *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen?”

“Is it also about love?” I wanted to know.

“Oh yes, it’s full of love.” She blushed. “A different kind of love than the one D. H. Lawrence talks about.”

Her cryptic remark disturbed me.

“What do you mean?” I frowned. “I thought love is only one.”

“Don’t you love children when they’re still so innocent?” I heard Mrs Thunder crow behind me. Our neighbour’s wife imposed herself as the local intellectual authority. She typically volunteered to apply her analytical mind almost to anything, anytime, except for when it really mattered.

I excused myself before Mrs Thunder had a chance to elaborate on the subject.

Walking up the slope, I pulled *Pride and Prejudice* out of the canvas bag and began my reading adventure. I could easily relate to the heroine. She also seemed to think too much for her own good and her heart overflowed with strong feelings that she found hard to express. Before I came home, Miss Austen had me hooked. Devouring one page after another during the afternoon, I became so absorbed in the world of eighteenth century England, Mum had to confiscate my bedside lamp to enforce the curfew in the evening. When she killed the light, I felt as if she had snapped a film reel in the middle of the projection. I found it impossible to go to sleep before Mr Darcy proposed to Elisabeth. Hearing my mum shut the kitchen door downstairs, I tiptoed out to the stairway. Here a single lightbulb dangled on a wire from the high ceiling, feebly shining overhead. Barefoot, dressed in a nightgown, I squatted on the stone steps. Picking up the story where I had interrupted reading, I plunged back into *Pride and Prejudice*.

“Grrrr . . . the Soviet Politburo accused Washington . . . yuiii . . . are threatening to use nuclear missiles . . . grrrr . . . quickly becoming an international crisis . . . grrrr.”

The Voice of America bemoaned the Cold War, howling with the wind in our chimney. A chilling air stiffened my shoulders. I couldn't stop clattering my teeth while I turned the final pages, but when Mr Darcy found courage to kneel in front of Elisabeth, my heart erupted with emotions.

“This is what real love is about.” I felt warm inside. “It's similar to a thermal spring blocked by a rock. Pushing against the obstacle, it continues to grow bigger and stronger until it gushes out in a fountain of pure affection.”

I might no longer be able to dance to the music of my heart, but this didn't mean that I had to stop listening to it, I realised. I fell asleep looking forward to becoming an adult woman and finding the love of my life.



DAYS LATER, I DISCOVERED a lump in my nipple when I woke up. It was the size and the texture of a jellybean and I immediately mistook it for cancer. While I frantically fondled the suspected tumour to make it go away, it somehow occurred to me that the swollen glands were my budding bosom. My next concern was that I had only sprouted a single breast.

I jumped out of bed and went to consult my mother.

"I'm no longer a child, but I'm not a woman either." I found her brushing teeth in the bathroom.

"What?" She spat out the toothpaste. "How did you come to this conclusion?"

"Look what I've got!" I removed the top of my pyjamas. "Do you think I'm a freak of Nature? The right breast is the size of a pea while the other one is missing."

My mother wiped her mouth with a towel and took a close look at my nipples.

"Everything seems perfectly in order, little Trumpet." She reassured me. "Don't worry. I'm confident that you'll grow another breast soon when the time is right." She gently led me out of the bathroom. "How about we sit in my armchair?"

The purple chair in my parents' bedroom where Mum and I usually had our talks was comfortably soft. It was deep enough for both of us to sit in together.

"Time goes by so quickly. I didn't notice how much you have grown up." Mum began. "You still look like a small girl, but the biological processes inside your body are already preparing to transform you into a woman."

I loved to curl up on my mother's lap, soaking her affection.

"What processes?"

The blinds were drawn down and it was quite dark in the room, but I couldn't help noticing that my mother blushed. "Do you recall when I told you that women carry eggs inside their belly?" She carefully asked.

"You said that children's souls live inside these eggs like angel chicks."

"That's correct . . ." Mum cleared her throat. "There's one thing I forgot to mention. When a girl becomes a woman . . . sometimes, usually once in four weeks, some of these eggs need to come out of her belly." Her voice almost faltered. "This process is called menstruation and it can be quite painful. It involves bleeding." She paused to study my reaction. "So, if you see blood on your panties come straight to see me before you start panicking."

"What are you saying?" I cried out. "I'm going to lay eggs like a chicken when I'm a woman?" I was perplexed. "What happens to the children inside the eggs after they come out? Why is there blood? Do they die?"

"No. No." My mother smiled. "There are thousands of eggs in your ovary, but only a limited number of them can become children. Those egg cells, which aren't meant to be born, must wash out of your body to make place for those who will."

“What a terrible waste!”

“That’s the way Nature works.” She shrugged. “To make sure that only the best and strongest survive.”

“So, I was one out of thousands?”

“Yes. You can call yourself lucky.”

I pictured my mother’s womb like a transparent drum filled with eggs, something of Nature’s lottery. Consequently, I started to wonder how the biological mechanism worked and who was responsible for turning the wheel and drawing the numbers.

“It’s a miracle of mutual love.” Mum replied mysteriously. “Every human being stems from his or her parents’ love in the same way the plants germinate from seeds when the father Sun warms the mother Earth in the spring.”

“Father Eugene says that God is love and through him everything is created.” I agreed.

“Exactly.” My mother didn’t sound too confident. “To understand the process of life creation, you can imagine a man revolving around a woman until his powerful emotions illuminate the core of one of her eggs, triggering some sort of nuclear reaction inside her uterus.”

“Now I get it!” I slapped my forehead. “Dad’s love lit up the flame inside your womb when my number was drawn.”

“That’s right . . .” My mum clearly wasn’t sure what numbers I was talking about, but preferred to agree.

“How did it feel being mutually loved?” I imagined the rays of light sparkling from my father’s heart when he conceived me. “Did you love him as much as he loved you?”

My mother’s face turned the colour of beetroot.

“It has to go both ways otherwise it wouldn’t work, little Trumpet.” She concluded. “Love is similar to dance. It always takes two to waltz.”



I HAD NO DOUBTS that love could work miracles. The best proof of my mother’s theory was Marta. When Gianni wrote to her that he planned to come to Prague during summer, her black-rimmed eyes started to glitter like Christmas lights. A smile lit up her sullen face and she became a kind, hard-working person. My parents and I incredulously watched her bustle around our house with a vacuum cleaner. Crooning Italian love songs,

she polished everything in sight. None of us could believe that Marta volunteered to do house work.

“Ti a—mo, io solo, ti a—mo.” She scrubbed the bathroom tiles on her knees.

“Don’t get too excited.” I warned her. “You don’t want to get pregnant before your wedding.”

“Excuse me?” My sister dropped the brush in the bucket. “What do you know about pregnancy?” She gasped. “You don’t even know what your belly button is for.”

“Mum told me everything.” I triumphantly declared.

“Did she?” Marta looked annoyed. “Are you trying to pull my leg?”

I began to worry that she might want to roll on top of me and stifle me with her big breasts as a punishment for my outspokenness. To distract her, I pulled up my T-shirt, exposing the swollen nipple.

“Look, I also have a goat!” I proudly used the colloquial term for a female breast.

A smile crept back onto Marta’s lips while she observed my chest.

“Are you sure it’s not a goose bump?” She teased me.

“I only grew one for now.” I explained to her. “Mum told me that the second goat is going to sprout when the time is right.”

“What else did she say? Did she tell you that I take pills?”

“No, she only spoke about eggs in our belly and that it can be quite painful when they come out.” I replied. “Do you get menstruation every four weeks? Is this why you need to take painkillers?”

“Ježišmarja!” Marta spat. “I’m talking about hormonal pills, not painkillers! Do you or don’t you know anything?”

“What’s there to know?”

My sister studied my face for a trace of mockery. When she saw my ignorance, her eyes sparkled with humour. “Did Mum tell you that you must first have sex before you can become pregnant?”

“Sex?” I was dumbfounded.

“Yeah. That’s when a man and a woman lie down naked in bed.” She informed me. “Obviously, you don’t need to tell this to Mum and Dad. Understood?” She symbolically sealed her lips with a forefinger. “If you keep it to yourself, I promise to buy you a new bathing suit with a proper bra for Christmas.”

My sister gave me a conspicuous wink and went back to scrubbing the bathroom tiles,

leaving me to ponder the subject of human sexuality alone. I retreated to my room, temporarily experiencing mental chaos. Unable to comprehend the importance of physical nakedness in the process of life creation, I recalled the oil paintings I had seen with my mother in the National Gallery in Prague. Most of the canvases depicted nymphs and frolicking Greek gods and there was nothing even remotely vulgar about their nudity. I regained my balance by embracing a theory that what Marta referred to as sex was a pure embrace of naked lovers.

A week later, Gianni's crimson Lancia drove up our street, stirring a cloud of dust and our neighbours' curiosity while it bumped over the potholes. I saw Mr Deer peer down through his binoculars. Mr Šimek grabbed his rake and Mr Hašek clipped the leash to Hektor's chain collar. The two gossips came running out of their gardens in time to see Marta's fiancée come out of his car.

"Amore mio!" Marta jumped around Gianni's neck.

"Finalmente." He beamed. "How I have missed you!"

Gianni was tall for a Mediterranean man, but his chest was typically hirsute. He looked darkly handsome next to my blonde sister, wearing a pair of jeans and a blue linen shirt. I was especially impressed with the rich smell of his aftershave. Gianni's red Lancia proved slightly rusty on closer inspection, but it still looked like a Ferrari compared to our Škoda. I curiously eyed the speedometer on the cool dashboard. It read up to 160 miles per hour. Ours stopped at one hundred.

"Welcome." My father heartily cracked the bones in the young man's hand before he dragged him inside our garage to show him the Aparatura. "This is what I do for a living." Handing Gianni a test tube filled with rum, he proudly roared the one word he knew in Italian. *"Salute!"*

"Grazie, ma non bevo." Gianni shook his head to decline the toast.

"An Italian who doesn't drink?" My father frowned. "What's wrong with you?"

"Gianni had to help harvesting grapes in his grandfather's vineyard when he was a boy." My sister readily translated her fiancée's explanation. "This is when he became a sworn teetotaler. He likewise doesn't smoke."

Sitting down for dinner, I observed Gianni's big hands with delicate fingers. The Italian handled the cutlery with a fussy precision of a mechanical engineer that he was hoping to become. He made humming sounds as he tried to formulate his answers and clicked his tongue to express polite disagreement. My father's chain smoking habit visibly gave him a

headache, but he patiently answered each of Dad's nosy questions with a straight face, admitting to being an atheist and a member of the Italian Communist Party.

"A what?" Dad nearly choked on a schnitzel.

"Get a grip on yourself, Jirka." My mother discreetly thumped his back. "This is what freedom is about." She reminded him in Czech. "In democratic countries everyone can choose their beliefs."

Mum and Marta conversed with Gianni in English while Dad and I depended on the translation. The mere fact that my sister's fiancée was a Westerner gave him an aura of prominence. Like the basket of exotic fruit he had presented to us as a gift, the young foreigner was far beyond our experience and as such, exempt from criticism. We ate the mangoes and lychees instead of dessert, savouring the unusual taste for the first time in religious silence.

After dinner, Gianni clicked his tongue, declaring that while the Czech cuisine tasted delicious, it was unusually heavy. Blaming his fatigue on the daylong trip, he asked for permission to retreat to our guest room.

I was secretly reading *Wuthering Heights* in the stairway later on in the evening, when I heard someone tiptoe from downstairs. It was my sister. Carrying a glass of water and a package of aspirin, she furtively looked around before she knocked on Gianni's door and disappeared inside.

There was no mistake to it. I heard the sound of a key turned in the lock.

"I wonder if Marta and Gianni are going to have sssex tonight." An unfamiliar voice hissed inside my head. "I sssuposse that the Italian hasss a hairy bird."

I had never heard this voice before. I didn't know where it came from and refused to acknowledge any responsibility over it. It disrupted my thoughts in the similar way the jamming frequency disturbed the Voice of America.

"A black bird with two eggsss." The vulgar thoughts didn't belong to me, but they prompted me to view my naked sister and her hirsute fiancée on the white sheets. "Two goatsss with a yellow cake!"

The involuntary image made me nervous.

What sounded like a description of a still life composition by an Italian master was a cryptic portrayal of the male and female reproductive organs. Birds, eggs, goats and cakes have more than one meaning in Czech.

"*Apaga Satana!*" I was horrified to experience what Father Eugene would have called

sinful thoughts. “Shut up, Satan!”

The voice inside my head laughed.

“I don’t need to assk for permissioin to ssspeak out. I can sssay whatever I pleasse.”

I sprinted to my room to grab the rosary. “Our Father who art in heaven.” I kneeled down by my bed. “Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil. Amen.”

The Lord’s Prayer might have silenced the Devil’s voice, but I had a strong feeling that the evil spirit didn’t quite go away. He merely curled up at the back of my mind like a poisonous snake and watched me with his cynical, bead-like eyes, waiting for the next opportunity to reappear.



THE NEXT DAY MY parents appointed me as a chaperon to Marta while she took Gianni sightseeing. My sister was less than thrilled to see me come along, but Mum was adamant about doing things the proper way, as she put it.

“If you want Gianni to marry you,” she advised Marta, “make it difficult for him to become intimate with you or he will end up stealing your virtue and leave you in tears.”

I wasn’t quite sure what virtue the young Italian could possibly steal from my sister. I thought she had none. Nevertheless, I was determined to protect her.

I virtually breathed down Gianni’s hairy neck while we drove around to visit the local monuments. My mission was to watch Marta like a hawk and follow the young couple everywhere. It was a very hard job. Despite my vigilance, they frequently managed to slip away from me, but I always tracked them down. At first, I found them hugging behind a large stalagmite in the Koněprusy Caves. Next thing, I caught them kissing beneath the Karlštejn Castle walls. Each time, Gianni’s hand seemed to push deeper into my sister’s cleavage and he became increasingly reluctant to remove it. Eventually, when the Italian realised that he could never get me off his back, he decided to change the strategy. As a committed Communist, Gianni was against corruption, but I left him little choice, but to bribe me.

“Would you like to go for a ride, Miranda?” He pointed to a merry-go-around that the Gypsies had temporarily built by the river in Karlštejn. The small amusement park was deserted at midday. A dark man lazily chewed a toothpick inside a ticket booth.

This was a serious temptation. When Marta topped Gianni's offer by buying me pink cotton candy, I dropped my resistance.

"A single ride?" The Gypsy sensed his opportunity to rip off a Westerner. "No. No. *Signore*." He vigorously shook his head. "I would need another five customers to make it worthwhile to give it a spin."

"Okay. *Nessun problema*." Gianni pulled a green bill from his valet after Marta translated the man's request. "Tell him to make her spin at least for an hour."

The Gypsy's eyes lit up with greed. He snatched the money and plugged the extension cord into an electric socket.

"Love is in the air."

The speakers thundered in English as I climbed onto the platform with a fluff of pink cotton candy in hand. Picking my seat, I barely had time to clip the safety chain across my lap when Marta with Gianni cheerfully waved me goodbye and ran away, leaving me to enjoy the longest ride of my life.

Hours later, the Gypsy finally unplugged the power cord. I nearly tumbled down the platform when I got off the seat. My head kept spinning as if I had downed a bottle of Chianti. Weaving across the car park, I looked for a crimson Lancia when I accidentally bumped into Marta.

"Someone broke into Gianni's car while we were away." My sister looked upset.

We found the young Italian fussing around his car, looking even more distressed than Marta did. The interior of the Lancia was upside down, including the car trunk. The glove compartment where Gianni kept his documents was wrenched open, yet nothing seemed missing. The car didn't display any damage from the outside. It would take an experienced burglar to snap the lock open, but it simply didn't look like we were dealing with regular criminals.

My sister's fiancée probably remembered James Bond movies and I noticed that his hirsute arms were shaking when he turned the key in the ignition. The whole way home, Gianni continued to glance in the rear view mirror. Verging on a nervous breakdown, he clearly worried that someone was following us.

"It looks like the STB might be on to you." My father confirmed Gianni's suspicions. "It's a normal procedure for the domestic secret service to monitor the Western visitors. They have nothing better to do."

"Ma perché?" Beads of sweat covered the young man's forehead.

“Why is that, Dad?” Marta translated.

“How would I know?” My father was amused to see the Italian Communist so scared. “Maybe the STB suspect that Gianni is an Italian spy? You must have driven around the military base in Mořina, no?”

“Yes, we did!” I nodded. “On our way to Karlštejn.”

“*Dio buono!*” Marta’s fiancée choked on a potato dumpling.

I could see him immediately lose his appetite. When Marta reminded him that he had promised to take her to a discothèque in Prague, he began to complain of headache. He already prepared to beat a retreat upstairs when my sister’s eyes welled up with tears, threatening to ruin her elaborate make-up. To save face, Gianni had no choice, but to gather what remained of his Mediterranean courage and keep his word. I watched the young couple drive into the night.



I WAS FINISHING *WUTHERING Heights* in the stairway when our phone began to ring shortly before midnight. I heard Dad pick up the receiver.

“*Halò*. What police station? Where?” He sounded alarmed. “Yeah. She’s my daughter. What’s this about? Did she have an accident?”

A pang of fear hit my stomach. I ran down the steps to our dining room. My mother stood by my father’s side. She typically chewed her nails while Dad talked on the phone. “Come here, little Trumpet.” She wrapped her arms around me. I could hear her heart anxiously pound inside her ribcage.

“It looks like Marta has been arrested.” Dad announced after he hang up.

“*Ješči Kriste!*” Mum wrung her hands. “What for?”

“The officer on the phone refused to quote the charges the police held against her.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We’ll sort this out like everything else, trust me, Alice!” Dad’s eyes shone dangerously yellow. I saw him pull the car keys out of his pocket. “We’re going to bring Marta home tonight! Make sure to put on your best clothes, high heels and a hat.” He commanded. “Miranda, get dressed. You’re coming with us.”

Miraculously, our Škoda started on its own this time. We sped to Prague, burning our

tyres.

“Do you think Marta’s arrest has anything to do with the STB?” Mum fretted. “We shouldn’t have let her drive to the city with Gianni if we suspected that he was being followed. It’s our fault.”

“Nonsense!” A cloud of smoke billowed out of Dad’s nose. “The second you take this approach you might just as well stop breathing!”

Marta was detained on Peace Square, opposite the House of Railways where I used to study classical dance. Dad wedged our Škoda between a couple of Ladas painted in white and yellow stripes. The police vehicles reminded me of wasps, featuring black VB on the hoods, which stood for *Věřejná Bezpečnost*—Public Safety.

“*Tfui, tfui, tfui.*” Dad spat on the sidewalk, leading the way inside the station. “You don’t need to say anything.” He instructed us as he pushed the doors with his ex-miner’s arms. “Just back me up in everything I’ll say!”

“*Mamma mia!*” Gianni waited in front of the grid protecting the police desk from the public. He was holding onto the bars like an orphan, his eyes red from crying. “They have taken Marta inside.” He explained to my mum in English.

“Stay calm.” Dad squeezed the young man’s shoulder and rang the bell on the wall. “Miranda will keep you company.” He ordered me to wait outside while the desk officer approached the gate.

“*Čest Práci.* How can I help you, Comrade?” The young cop appeared as green as his uniform. I saw his Adam’s apple jump up and down when my dad requested to see his daughter’s file.

“My name is engineer Urban.” My father handed him a business card, speaking with impatient arrogance, so typical for communist officials. “I already spoke to your superiors on the phone.” He gained the upper hand by creating the impression that he was an important Bolshevik. The officer hesitantly unlocked the gate to let my parents inside. I watched the three of them walk over to the desk to discuss Marta’s arrest.

“Your daughter’s case was handed down to us by the undercover officers after Miss Urban failed to provide them with the details of her current employment.” The young man struggled to keep his voice low while my dad glared at him, listening to his explanation. “Comrade Urbanová’s citizen ID features an outdated stamp.” He pointed out. “She no longer studies at university, but she currently doesn’t seem to have any legal employment. Seeing that she was intercepted in the company of a foreign driver,” the officer’s cheeks

turned bright red, “she was detained under the Vagrancy Law on suspicion of working . . . ehm . . . as a prostitute.”

The Vagrancy Law was a notorious legal tool that enabled the counter-intelligence to harass dissidents. Officially aimed at eradicating crime and prostitution, it punished the political rebels who had trouble securing employment. The obligation to work was a specialty of the normalized legislation. The bureaucratic system created a vicious circle by banning unemployment while preventing individuals with tarnished political records from gaining employment. All citizens were legally bound to carry a pink ID on them on reaching fifteen years of age. Unless you could display a current stamp from your school or a workplace, you risked months of imprisonment.

“This has to be an honest mistake!” My mother said with indignation. “My daughter comes from a good family.”

She explained that after Marta left school, she went to help her grandmother to sell refreshments in a kiosk, forgetting to update her stamp.

“Anyone could say that.” The officer staunchly stood his ground. “It will become the subject of our investigation.”

“You might not be aware that Miss Urban’s family is rather influential, Comrade.” My father assumed a threatening pose. “My wife’s grandfather was the director general of the chain-store cooperative, *Věla*, and the founding member of the Communist Party!” He growled.

This was audacious. I had to admire the cold-blooded arrogance with which Dad mentioned my mother’s background, having no idea what information the undercover officers had passed to the uniformed police.

“If I were in your shoes, I would brush Miss Urban’s case off your table.” My father switched to a more gentle tone, like a senior cop speaking to a lesser charge. Leaning over the desk, he looked like a wolf about to swoop. “You’re standing on a shaky ground, Constable. This could be the end of your career!”

The young officer’s face changed the colour from bright red to chalk white and his Adam’s apple began to jump in his throat like a yo-yo.

“I’m trying to do my job.” He began to sweat. “I’ve started my shift an hour ago. My colleagues went out to answer a call.”

My parents clearly understood that they had to resolve the tricky situation before the experienced officers returned to the station. Mum adjusted her straw hat and seized the

opportunity to chip at the young man's faltering resolve.

"You see. Our daughter was acting as an interpreter to a visiting member of the Italian Communist Party. She was supposed to take him on an unofficial tour around Prague tonight." She flared her nostrils. "I hope this is not going to become an international scandal."

On hearing the words Italian and Communist, Gianni correctly guessed that Mum was speaking about him and took his cue.

"*Sono comunista!*" I heard him exclaim. To prove his bold claim, he pulled the party-membership card out of his wallet and waved it through the bars. "Look here! I'm a communist. Not your country's enemy."

Amazingly enough, Gianni's statement tipped the scales. The officer worked up the courage to release my sister from of the cell. Marta was still in tears when she signed her release. I noticed that she had fingertips stained in black ink. Sporting a running nose and pools of mascara smeared around her eyes, she reminded me of a panda bear when she hurried out through the gate.

"*Amore mio!*" She threw herself in Gianni's arms.

It looked as if it was the young Italian and not my parents who had saved her from spending the night in prison. Marta clearly didn't behave like Gianni's interpreter, but the desk officer preferred to turn a blind eye on her, clearly resigned to accept my mother's version.

After we walked outside the station, Gianni unexpectedly dropped to his knee on the sidewalk. "*Ti amo, Marta*" He declared in a trembling voice. "Do you want to marry me?"

"*Sì!*" Marta sobbed.

A bubble of snot formed at the tip of her nose.

With a romantic gesture, Gianni dipped his hand in the pocket and pulled out a blue package. I held my breath, watching him open the plastic wrap with the slowness of a perfectionist. I expected him to put a diamond ring on Marta's finger, but to my huge disappointment, he only handed her a tissue.

"*Grazie.*" My sister blew her nose to seal their marriage agreement.

Minutes later, my parents and I silently headed back home in our rusty Škoda with Gianni's Lancia following closely behind. When I turned around, I could see an attractive blonde woman on the passenger seat, resting her head on the driver's shoulder.

"Why did the undercover cops think that Marta works as a prostitute?" I asked.

“What was that?” Dad rolled down the window to light a cigarette.

“What is a prostitute exactly?” I wanted to know.

My parents exchanged an exasperated look.

“It’s a sort of woman who doesn’t believe in mutual love. She makes a living out of pretending that she’s in love with the men she’s dating.” Mum hesitated before giving me the definition.

“Something of an actress?”

“Yes. You could say that.” She uncomfortably agreed.

“But why would anyone want to pay money to spend an evening with a woman who pretends to be in love with him, when she actually isn’t?” I wondered. “And by the way, doesn’t it bother her if the man she doesn’t love is trying to touch her?”

“You wouldn’t believe what people can do for money!” Dad exhaled smoke from the window. “Not only prostitutes. Anyone who sells his soul is a whore.”

I was shocked.

Later, when I lay in bed, trying to make sense of my sister’s he’s arrest, the Devil’s voice inconspicuously slithered into my consciousness.

“Sooo there. Prostitutesss are the sssame thing ass whoresss. They both sssell their sssoulsss for a fissanstful of casssh.”

My skin covered in goose bumps on hearing the Devil’s hissing.

“Go away Satan! I don’t want to listen to you.” I blocked my ears with fingers. “Holy Mary, mother of Jesus, protect me from evil.”

“Do you think you can essscape me?” The sinful voice laughed before sliding away. “Ssooner or later you will dissscover the truth.”



BY THE END OF summer, a veil of morning mist started to shroud the meadows around our river. Gianni left for Italy with a promise to return the following year with his parents and make Marta his wife. As the walnuts began to drop from Mr Šimek’s tree, I prepared to start at a new school in Mrakotín, the nearby industrial suburb. The local secondary teachers were infamous for keeping the students’ political files up to date. To avoid my scandalization, my parents decided to transfer me to a public school that had a reputation of being rough, but where the teachers weren’t familiar with my background.

It was raining when I caught the train on my first day of school. The working-class neighbourhood looked even greyer and more depressing than usual with black smoke billowing from the factory chimneys. Further up in the limestone valley, the cement mill churned out dust, covering the surrounding woods in grey powder. Blocks of concrete dangled from a crane on the construction site opposite the train station. At seven in the morning, doors were open at a pub that shared the space with the police station in a dilapidated building. I could see the bartender serve beer to men in overalls and green uniforms. A group of elderly women queued for a delivery of bananas at the greengrocer next door. The faces of commuters at the bus station looked unhealthily ashen. The men's eyes fixed the sport's page of the 'Red Right' newspaper. Women preferred to study the gossip columns in *Květy*. Even very young girls had lips drooping at each end. Trucks rumbled up and down the main avenue, squirting brown rainwater from beneath the tires.

"FREE EDUCATION PAVES THE PATH TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE." A bright poster attached to the public school's front quoted V. I. Lenin. "TO LEARN, TO LEARN, TO LEARN!"

Heading to the entrance hallway, I had the impression of entering a chicken farm. The concrete corridors swarmed with flocks of identically dressed children. Brown colour prevailed in everyone's attire. It looked as if the students wore uniforms, but they merely displayed the same taste in fashion. The surveying female teachers reminded me of hens. Most of them were overweight, sporting fleecy perms and weary faces. I watched my schoolmates swap their muddy shoes for the school slippers, twittering and cackling like poultry while the teachers clapped hands and flapped their arms.

"Keep your voices down!" The school staff rounded the disorderly kids in military formations. "Don't rush. Move on quietly to your classrooms."

The short headmaster perched on the stairs like a rooster. He carried a silver whistle around his neck and had the bandy legs of a soccer referee. It was a Normalization policy to replace intellectuals with sportsmen in positions of school supervision, seeing that the socialist education aimed at teaching the youth to play by the rules rather than to think independently.

"Beauty and Malý. The usual suspects!" The headmaster blew his whistle whenever he saw someone misbehave during the noisy transfer. "I'll see you both in my office after recess!" He threateningly rattled a bunch of keys on a ring.

I located my classroom on the first floor. Entering inside, I faced a wall of unfriendly

faces. The working class children elbowed one another when they noticed my presence, glaring as if I had arrived from another planet.

“*Ahoj*, I’m Miranda.” I made a weak effort to smile. “I’m new.”

Nobody smiled back.

I took up an empty bench in a back row by the windows.

A moment later, a fat teacher in a flowery blouse burst into the classroom. Comrade Samovar taught mathematics. She spent less than twenty seconds to introduce me to my classmates before she took to scribbling equations on the blackboard, making awful screeching noises with the chalk. No one bothered to pay attention to her lesson and I seemed to be the only person in the whole classroom who prepared to transcribe the numbers in my notebook.

“Hey babe. Show me your boobs.” A cheeky boy with a freckled face called out to a blonde girl across the aisle.

A muffled giggle swirled around the classroom, making the fat mathematician turn around. Placing her hands on her plump hips, she threateningly overlooked the rows of benches. My classmates assumed blank expressions, pretending to be absorbed in their schoolwork until Comrade Samovar went back to writing on the board.

“Come on, Andrea. Let me touch your tits.” The boy continued to pester the girl who occupied the bench in front of me. Judging by Andrea’s confident pose, she was the unofficial queen of our class.

“Don’t even think about it, wanker.” She sneered. “Why don’t you touch yourself?”

“Silence!” The plump teacher scanned the class with her small eyes. “Procházková. Beauty. Are you spoiling out for detention?”

After the mathematician resumed her work, the dialogue between Procházková and Beauty continued in a sign language, which I found difficult to decipher. I heard my classmates chortle when Beauty formed a circle with his left thumb and the forefinger, repeatedly pushing his right middle finger through as if it was a ring. The blonde girl responded by pointing her middle finger to the ceiling. My naïve interpretation of this pantomime was that Beauty made a marriage proposal to Procházková, who told him to marry someone upstairs.

Things became less clear during recess. After Comrade Samovar left the classroom, Beauty jumped off his chair like a monkey, instructing his friends to help him drag Procházková to the corner. The boys jeered like chimpanzees as they lifted her T-shirt,

pawing at her breasts.

“Get your hands off me!” The blonde girl slapped her assailants even if she actually seemed to enjoy being touched.

The less attractive girls gathered by the bulletin board.

“Procházková is a real slut.” I heard them say. They looked upset, because nobody volunteered to fondle them. “Did you know that she already has periods?”

In the meantime, a group of smaller boys wrestled on the floor under the sink. They grabbed each other’s crotches and squealed like girls. “Watch out, buddy. I’m going to castrate you!” I heard them threaten one another.

Someone let out a fart and the air in our classroom became unbearably thick. Overwhelmed by the bestial noises and my classmates’ vulgar behaviour, I preferred to retreat to my bench.

Luckily, the school bell ended recess and the sound of rattling keys signalled the headmaster’s presence in the corridor. The tough boys scurried back to their seats like frightened mice.

“The Rattler’s out.” I heard Beauty whisper. “Watch out for the Rattler!”

“*Priviet, rebyata.*” A bleached blonde greeted the class in a disturbingly high-pitched voice. “Aren’t you happy to see me again after two months of holidays?” The teacher ironically inquired. “*Pravda* Beauty? I imagine that you really missed me.”

“*Da, Tovarisz* Rottová.” The boy sheepishly agreed, looking harmless.

“I’m happy to hear that, George. You still owe to kiss my hand for promoting you last year. How about you come up to my desk and tell me about your holidays?”

Listening to the freckled boy’s performance at the blackboard, I had to suppress a yawn. George Beauty couldn’t speak Russian, but was good at making the Czech words sound Russian.

To overcome my boredom, I looked out of the window.

An ugly housing estate loomed on the other side of the train tracks where most of my classmates lived in identical one-bedroom apartments. I could see identical cars parked by the curb, sometimes varying in colour. Identical clothes hang from the laundry lines on identical balconies, representing a characteristic image of normality in Normalisation.

Every now and then, the sound of rattling wheels reverberated through the sleepy classroom. I escaped the Russian lesson by mentally catching the trains that sped in the direction of my hometown. At half past ten, I heard a sharp whistle and saw a string of

colourful carriages whoosh past the school building. This was the legendary Schirnding Express to Paris.

Without leaving my seat, I travelled to the famous city of lights.

With my eyes half closed, I pictured the umbrellas in the Bois de Boulogne, ladies in vibrant clothes and hats, colourful café awnings on Montmartre as I had seen them in Renoir's paintings at the National Gallery. I could see the Moulin Rouge dancers kicking their long legs to the sound of the accordion, a carousel with white horses and acrobats breathing fire below the Eiffel Tower. This was my idea of normal life and I desperately wished that my father's political prophecies would come true and the Iron Curtain would open during the coming years.

I couldn't wait to catch the Schirnding Express for real.

"*Dievochka*, what's your name?" The Russian teacher yelled in my ear. "Are you a new student?" She spoke with exaggerated slowness as if she suspected that I was dumb. "Do you understand Russian?" Comrade Rottová tapped my shoulder with a wooden ruler. "*Govorish Poruski?*"

"*Da*. Of course. *Ponyatno* that I do." My heart sank when I came back to my senses. "*Menya zovut* Miranda Urbanová."



THERE WAS NOTHING EVEN remotely interesting about Mrakotín. The only cultural event in the working-class suburb were the Friday nights at the local cinema that showed Russian war movies to an audience of pensioners. During the week, Mrakotín's windows lit up with TV screens at night. Each morning, I heard my classmates discuss the latest plot development in the Normalization series. On Friday afternoons, most families escaped their concrete cubicles. Loading their identical Škodas with similar items, people drove off to identical weekend cottages somewhere by the river and the housing estate remained dark until Sunday night.

"If this is supposed to be normal, I don't want to be normal." I complained to Mum. "The only things my classmates care about are soccer, gossip and food."

If there was a solitary isle of spirit in Mrakotín's cultural wasteland, it was the Music School. Housed in an inconspicuous, brown building behind the tower block estate, it represented the only place in town where one could hope to cultivate artistic skills. Two

times a week after school, I headed to the passage beneath the train tracks to play piano under the supervision of the stern headmistress.

“Your piano fingering technique reminds me of type-writing.” Professor Drozdová frequently invented sarcastic metaphors to evaluate my interpretation. “You sound like a crow pecking the grains of wheat.” She was so highly sophisticated, she alone counter-balanced the spiritual vacuum in Mrakotín.

The headmistress had a snow-white hairdo, a wrinkled face and a withered sense of humour, which I found difficult to stomach. She looked so dignified, I always ended up feeling inadequate in her presence. Single and childless, Professor Drozdová was almost religiously devoted to classical music. She knew no limits in worshipping her idols and snubbed most of the earthly pleasures except for listening to Chopin’s preludes and Beethoven’s sonatas. Her teaching team exclusively consisted of spinsters who were as passionate about classical music as the local population was about ice hockey and soccer. Under Professor Drozdová’s fanatic leadership, the Mrakotín Music School boosted its reputation, attracting students from far better neighbourhoods.

“Music is a sensual experience.” The headmistress smoked cigarettes from an amber holder and took pride in teaching me emancipated manners. “It’s not something that peasants like you can trample over in your muddy boots!”

She liked to exhale smoke through her flared nostrils.

I was as impressed with her noble behaviour as I was ashamed of my dirty footwear. Obviously, the ambitious headmistress agreed to include me in her class only because of Dad’s irresistible charm. After I quit the Conservatory, my parents thought that I would forget about ballet if I dedicated myself to playing piano full time. Chatting Professor Drozdová up in her office, my father quickly discovered that the headmistress shared his aversion for anything Bolshevik. She apparently admitted to joining the anti-communist resistance by employing a dissident composer in her school. Thanks to her courage, the blacklisted artist could show a stamp in his ID and was able to earn a small wage as an accompanist in the folkloric dance class.

“I wish I had never promised your father to take you as my student. You can’t play Beethoven like Radetzky March.” She never ceased to complain about my poor technical skills and insufficiently refined manners. My interpretation could never satisfy her high standards. “It’s unbearable to listen to your playing.” She regularly moaned as if someone pulled her teeth. “*Ježíšmarja*. I’ll have to ask for a pay rise.”

Back at the Conservatory, my hands used to run effortlessly on the keyboard during Professor Curly's lessons. I usually hit the keys with uncanny precision. My fingers felt flexible and light, but ever since I transferred to Mrakotín, they became stiff like laundry pegs. The more I tried to please Professor Drozdová, the less happy she was with me. She loathed the way my music scores were crumpled and my nails chewed. No matter how frequently I practised my repertoire, I continued to strike the wrong keys with the stern headmistress sitting by my side.

It didn't take long before I stopped looking forward to my lessons. My passion for performing classical music drastically weakened during the first month of school until I reluctantly dragged my feet across the housing estate in the afternoon, carrying the music sheets under my arm.

"Hey you, baby, where are you off to?" The boys from year eight congregated in the passage beneath the train tracks, smoking cheap cigarettes. "Come with us. We've got interesting instruments for you to play with."

Clutching Moonlight sonata to my single breast, I blushed like a chilli pepper when I passed the teenagers. The concrete floor smelled of urine. My steps reverberated with a hollow sound. The boys' raucous laughter made my skin crawl and I could feel their eyes burning through my clothes, but I held my head high and ignored their comments.

The Music School invariably smelled of Ajax and echoed with disharmony. When I entered, I typically heard Professor Duckling sing passionately out of tune on the ground floor. The ancient piano teacher had a bad temper. She was known for spitting out her dentures on the keyboard whenever she became frustrated with her students.

"It doesn't go like this. *La la la la laa—laaaaaaa.*" She howled in desperation. "It's *laaaaaa—la la—laaa.*"

Professor Blahová was in charge of the string section next door. "Has anyone ever explained to you that a violin isn't a crossbow, my dear?" She chastised a lame student. "Enough please! What have I done to deserve this torture?"

A familiar sound of Tchaikovsky's Overture echoed from the music theory classroom upstairs. I heard Professor Kindly praise the school's most promising pianist on the first floor.

"Excellent, Alenka. You're playing won—der—fully today."

I felt jealous of Alenka who was only a year older. The headmistress always marvelled about the girl's advanced technical skills

The times when I was a star were long gone. My vertebrae cracked as I bent down to unlace my shoes on the bench. I moved like an old woman. The melody from *Swan Lake* filled my heart with regret and I became tearful, but when a group of parents flooded the changing room, I swallowed my grief and put on a smile. Collecting my sheets, I went to knock on the headmistress' door.

"Come in."

My palms began to perspire.

I took a deep breath and stepped across the threshold. "*Dobry den.*"

"Didn't your mother teach you to use a towel after washing your hands, my dear?" Professor Drozdová greeted me with sarcasm as usual. "Is it your intention to mop the keyboard?"

Taking my position on the round piano stool, I felt as vulnerable as if I was about to expose my neck to a razor. For the next ninety minutes, the headmistress systematically bladed my interpretation of every piece I played until my self-esteem became so bruised, I could no longer strike any chords with her. According to her opinion, I lacked the basic understanding of music.

Ten minutes past the end of our lesson, the headmistress was still busy criticizing my incorrect strike. She was so intent on improving my performance, she ignored a hesitant knock on the door.

"Can I come in?" A blonde boy with a pale face fearfully peeked in.

"It's not a question of whether you can or can't." Professor Drozdová turned around. "You must." She narrowed her blue eyes behind a veil of cigarette smoke. "You're ten minutes late.

Honza Pechman was the only boy in Mrakotín who could play anything else besides soccer. Reliable and quiet, he attended the seventh grade at the public school. The headmistress often sang praise of his unwavering discipline and technical perfection, lamenting his inability to express emotions with the same breath.

"Should I wind down the stool for you, Honza?" I eagerly got up.

"Thanks, Miranda." The boy didn't seem keen to take over my place.

I hastily prepared to retreat to the exit, when the headmistress stopped me in my tracks.

"Urbanová. I didn't give you permission to leave." She crowed. "Before you go home, I have an announcement for you, dears. Something, which concerns both of you."

I saw her pull a yellowish music score from her desk drawer and lay it on the piano.

Engraved in an Art Nouveau font, the ornamental title read *Slavic Dances for four hands* by *Antonín Dvořák*.

“You might be aware that our school was invited to participate in the National Piano Contest this year.” Professor Drozdová’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “This extremely important event takes place once in four years.”

She thumbed through her desk calendar.

“On October 25, we’re going to select the best players who will have the honour to represent Mrakotín in the district round.” She highlighted the date with red colour as if it was a communist holiday. “I see it as a matter of professional prestige to see my students score well in this contest.”

“Naturally.” I swallowed, counting the days left to the school round of the National Contest.

It was only three weeks away.

“Since neither of you is a talented player, I decided that you two should compete together.” Professor Drozdová revealed her strategy. “If you play four hands, you can balance each other’s shortcomings. Honza can play the lower part, providing a steady technical support, and Miranda will be in charge of the melody.”

Opening the Slavonic Dances at page 26, the headmistress pointed at the dense music script. “This shouldn’t be too hard for you to learn in a hurry. What do you say?”

For the first time in weeks, Honza and I exchanged looks.

“Great.” We rolled our eyes behind Professor Drozdová’s back.

“I’m glad to see you are thrilled.” She said dryly. “Another advantage of competing in the four hand category is that it’s quite small. You’ll only face two other rival couples in the school round, which means that even if you completely screw up your performance you’ll always win the third place and cause minimal damage to my reputation.”



HONZA AND I COULDN’T have been more different from each other. Like cream and chocolate, we made a handsome couple. I was attracted to the blonde boy, but didn’t dare to show my feelings. Whenever I saw him at the public school during recess, he ostentatiously ignored me, maintaining a neutral expression. He typically hung around his soccer friends and never even cast a look in my direction. During the piano rehearsals,

however, if our fingers brushed on the keyboard, I couldn't help noticing that Honza's cheeks changed the colour and his marble forehead was covered in beads of sweat.

As the day of the competition drew close, the Music School was abuzz like a beehive. There wasn't a question that Honza and I could win, but I was scared at the prospect of becoming losers.

"Your performance is an absolute disgrace!" Professor Drozdová miserably wrung her hands during our last run through. "The two of you sound like a barrel organ playing alongside a machine gun."

No matter how many sly insults she threw at Honza, he rhythmically continued to hammer the keys, oblivious to my efforts to bring out the melodic line. To make things worse, he unfailingly pressed the damper pedal each time I hit the wrong chords, making them reverberate longer than necessary.

"Thank God, it's nearly over." The headmistress pushed us out of the door with a disgusted look. "Make sure to give it your best tomorrow morning to save your face." I watched her sniff a perfumed handkerchief as if to combat a headache. "As soon as the contest is over, I'm going to transfer you to another teacher." She threatened. "You're a hopeless case!"

After she slammed the door on us Honza silently laughed.

"I hope she'll keep her word."

"Me too." I made the sign of the cross.

We had to take a day off school the next day to play in the contest. My mother accompanied me to the Music School in the morning. Children and parents nervously swarmed in the dressing room. A group of young piano players sat upstairs as if awaiting execution. Occasionally, an upholstered door opened in the wall and an elderly professor sputtered someone's name. The selected candidates always looked up in horror as they gathered courage to enter the gloomy classroom. I was surprised to see Alenka's knees tremble when she got up to face the challenge. The prominent pianist competed against Honza and me in the four-hand category, performing a technical piece by Mozart with another girl.

Shortly after the two girls disappeared inside, I heard the sound of twenty fingers pounding the keyboard with astonishing speed and accuracy.

"Oh dear." I turned to Honza who sat next to me. "Are you resigned to losing?"

"Oh well." He slowly wiped his palms into a handkerchief. "I don't give damn about

winning. How about you?”

“I don’t know. Bible says that the last will be the first.” I remembered. “But I don’t think we should give up before we even try. Nobody is expecting anything from us. We’ve got nothing to lose.”

The boy’s cornflower eyes widened and for the first time, his lips stretched into an affectionate smile.

“You’re damn right, Miranda.” He warmly squeezed my hand. “It’s like in a game of soccer, we’ve got to give it our best no matter how badly we are doomed to score.” He decided. “Let’s lose with dignity.”

While our fingers entwined, my heart nearly stopped beating inside my ribcage. Warm emotions erupted in my tummy as if I was about to become pregnant. The boy’s eyes reflected the fire in my soul. Becoming aware of Honza’s love for me, I loved him back a thousand times more.

“Urbanová. Pechman.”

The door yawned open like the gate to hell. I saw a group of spinsters behind a table, peering at us with feigned interest.

“Hello dears, how do you do?” Professor Blahová gave us a scary smile, revealing advanced parodontosis.

The headmistress looked even sterner than usual in her role as the jury chairman, displaying objective attitude.

“What did you chose to play?” She asked as if she didn’t know.

“The Slavonic Dance number 8.” My mouth was so dry, I found it hard to unglue my tongue from my palate.

“Very good.” Professor Drozdová scribbled a quick note in her paperwork. “You can begin when you’re ready.”

My body temperature started to soar as I walked over to the lacquered instrument, adjusting the seat to my height. By the time I was ready to perform, I had fever and was virtually on the verge of fainting. Resting my hands on the keyboard, I listened to my partner’s regular breath.

“*Tfui, tfui, tfui*, Miranda.” Honza spat out and we hit the keys with our entire bodyweight.

We played the piece quicker than usual, but our performance sounded sensitive and harmonious. Never before did our hands move across the keyboard with so much grace, without stepping on each other’s fingers. Each time Honza pressed the damper pedal, our

thighs touched and we merged into a single body with four arms. Pain and suppressed affection poured from our frightened hearts, becoming music. It seemed to bubble from beneath the piano lid like a thermal spring from beneath a rock face. I nearly cried with pleasure and exhaustion when we struck the final chords.

“Thank you. You can go now.” The familiar dry voice brought me back to my senses. “You will find the official results on the bulletin board downstairs. The prize-giving ceremony is scheduled early in the afternoon.”

“*Nashledanou.*” I stiffly bowed to the jury.

When I stepped out of the room, my knees buckled with relief.

“How did you go?” Mum waited on the ground floor.

“I’d say that we’ve fared pretty well.” I collapsed onto a bench, fanning myself with the music scores. “I don’t think that I hit too many wrong notes and we managed to play the whole piece without stopping.”

Honza didn’t comment on our performance. Sitting down on the opposite bench, he quietly assembled a Rubik’s cube while we waited for the jury’s verdict.

When Professor Blahová came downstairs to pin the list of the winners to the bulletin board, a crowd of parents surrounded the display and I heard Alenka’s father murmur in disagreement.

“This has to either be a miracle or a mistake.” I rubbed my eyes when I read the announcement. “Can you believe it?” I gasped. “We won the first prize!”

Honza stood next to me, deeply unimpressed.

“This means that it’s not yet over, yeah?” He wore an impenetrable expression on his marble face as usual.

I couldn’t tell if he was pleased or annoyed when we returned upstairs to accept the award. Hiding behind a neutral mask, Honza didn’t smile once during the prize-giving ceremony.

Professor Drozdová, on the other hand, no longer attempted to appear objective and composed as she presented us with the diploma. Beaming with unconcealed pride, she ordered Professor Blahová to snap pictures of our winning team. After we toasted our triumph with grape juice, the headmistress ordered us into her office.

“I hope that you realise the amount of trouble you got me in?” She collapsed in her armchair with a groan. “I’ve warned the jury that your performance was so exceptionally brilliant, it’s highly unlikely that you’ll ever repeat it, but they insisted on sending you to compete on the district level.”

Leafing through her calendar, Professor Drozdová counted the days left to the next round. I watched her circle the critical date in mid-December with a black pen as if to remember someone's funeral.

“What am I going to do with you?” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “We have less than seven weeks to rehearse the prescribed repertoire. Unless we can count on another miracle, you're going to disgrace our Music School in the eyes of the whole Prague 5.”

Rummaging through her handbag, the headmistress pulled out a packet of Dunhills. I watched her insert a filter inside the brown holder and inhale the smoke, when her eyes suddenly lit up with an idea.

“Didn't you say that your mother plays the piano?” She rushed to the door. “Mrs Urbanová.” She called out. “Can you please come in?”



AS A GIRL, MY mother used to accompany her dad on the piano while he played the violin. She developed a light finger stroke and became very good at reading the scores. Whenever my parents had an argument, our house typically started to resonate with the melancholic sound of Chopin's preludes. While piano was an emotional remedy to my mother, it had become the cause of the greatest turmoil for me ever since Professor Drozdová appointed Mum as my practice supervisor. She sacrificed an hour of her time every day to help me refine my repertoire, but I wished she never did. Her determined attitude and inflexible work ethics got on my nerves. I could never escape her responsible attitude.

“Miranda. It's time for the piano.” She never forgot, no matter how much stressful work she had on her hands. I dreaded the moment when she called me. “Come down, little Trumpet. I'm waiting for you.” My entrails invariably churned on hearing her words.

She regularly picked the wrong time to start the rehearsal, when I was reading an interesting book. What irritated me even more was the glee with which she anticipated playing Honza's part. Better was her mood, darker was mine. Within five minutes of beginning our practice, we always got into a wild dispute. She would quickly become frustrated with my insolence and slap me. Bursting into tears, I would run to the garage to seek justice with my father.

“I agree that Mum can be overzealous sometimes.” Dad sympathetically listened to my

grievances, fiddling with the Aparatura, but he offered me little comfort beside his usual lemonade. “You must appreciate that she does this for your own good.”

I was beginning to wish that I had never won the piano contest. It was as if someone placed a curse on me. I couldn’t comprehend why every form of art I had touched turned into an instrument of torture in the hands of my ambitious teachers and now even my beloved mother.

“Go back and apologise to her.” Dad patted my back, pushing me out of the door. “Stiffen up your lip, Trumpet. Do you know how many times I had to pull my head in, accepting jobs I hated to feed my family?”

Grinding my teeth with humiliation, I cursed *Mr Steinway and his sons* for manufacturing our baby grand, which was another reminder of Mum’s wealthy communist past.

“See? You can play well if you apply yourself properly to it.” My mother invariably triumphed after I crawled back to her feet. “You need to adopt a positive attitude.”

In addition to the home practice I spent countless hours honing my technique with Professor Drozdová.

As the cold rains begun to lash the concrete playground at the secondary school, my classmates somehow found out about my platonic relationship with Honza and started to torment me with bizarre comments.

“How does Pechman like to play it with you, Miranda?” Beauty poked me with his compass. “Does he usually go down on you or you’re the one on top?”

“What do you mean?” I was lost for words. “This is not up for him to decide. The headmistress assigned me the top part.”

My innocent answers triggered explosions of vicious laughter. I had an inkling that there was another meaning to Beauty’s questions, but I preferred not to know it. My love for Honza was pure. I refused to see it sullied by a savage, whose farts were legendary in Mrakotín High. The teachers had to interrupt classes to open up the windows whenever George let out his winds.

Rejecting the crude reality of the working class life, I survived my time at school by daydreaming. I learned to hide my English novels under the bench and read during the lessons. As the only intellectual in class, I didn’t need to expend much effort to excel in theoretical subjects. The teachers usually left me alone and preferred to focus on the less endowed students. I read all day and continued to turn pages at night in the stairway, consuming up to five volumes a week. Literature became my drug. Whenever I finished

reading, I would curl up in bed and imagine myself in different romantic situations with Honza. Our love affair always ended with spectacular marriage. Bells tolled in the Castle cathedral. Rice and cherry petals snowed on my head. I played the footage of the happiest day of my life over and over, editing the smallest details to perfection. After the opulent banquet, my husband would carry me in his arms to our bedroom and discretely blow out the candles. I never worked out exactly how, but we somehow ended up taking off our clothes before we hugged on the white sheets like Apollo with Aphrodite.

“I’d like to see Honza’s bird.” Satan taunted me with forbidden thoughts while I engaged in innocent fantasizing. “It’s probably blonde and small. He doesn’t come across very masculine.”

Nothing, not even a drink of holy water helped me cleanse the Devil from my mind. Things only became worse when I sprouted the second breast, becoming a fully-fledged woman. After I started to carry menstruation pads inside my school bag, my budding womanhood became a cross I bore on my shoulders.



THE DISTRICT ROUND OF the piano competition took place in a neighbourhood mostly inhabited by Gypsies. Travelling through Prague 5 by tram, I saw dark, scarcely clothed women smoking cigarettes on the sidewalk. Unsupervised children engaged in demolishing the local playgrounds. Adult men in stained trousers loitered on the street corners, observing the passers-by with creepy looks on their faces. Dog shit and rubbish littered the sidewalks. The façade flaked off the once stylish town houses that featured broken doors and shattered windows. This represented the sad result of the Bolshevik integration program aiming to help the Gypsy citizens attain equity with the rest of the population.

“Don’t you hate this vermin?” The headmistress cringed, looking out of the window. “The Gypsies will never learn to work.” She was in a particularly bad mood that morning. “These people are like cockroaches. They’re only good at stealing and multiplying.

“It’s a pity that you should say this.” Mum objected. “Gypsies may not be good at discipline and hygiene, but many of them are talented musicians. If only some of those children down there had the opportunity to have you as a piano teacher. They would

presumably collect many prizes for you in the district round.”

“Thank God this is not the case.” Professor Drozdová rolled her blue eyes. “I have enough trouble teaching Miranda to follow hygienic habits as it is.”

She didn’t miss an opportunity to give me grief and continued to pick on my flawed character traits after we got off the tram. We walked up the slope to an austere building, where the best players from the Prague 5 district gathered to compete for the privilege to perform in the regional round.

“*Tfui, tfui, tfui.*” Honza spat on the ground as we pushed the door inside the crowded lobby. “Brace yourself, Miranda.”

“Let the Devil take us.” I squeezed his hand. “We’ll go down with dignity.”

“Do you know what? I don’t give a damn about dignity anymore.” My heartthrob mumbled after he made sure that the headmistress wasn’t listening to us. “Let’s lose as quickly as possible and go home. I’ve already missed two soccer matches because of this nonsense.”

I was so nervous, I felt like vomiting when I heard the jury read out our names. We entered the auditorium and put our hands on the keyboard as if laying our heads under a guillotine. But when we played the first tones, the chemistry of our mutual love kicked in. The less we cared about the impression we gave to the jury, the more we succeeded in charming them with our dramatic interpretation. To our huge surprise and considerable devastation, they rewarded our expressive performance with the first prize.

“This is unbelievable!” The headmistress sounded hysterical as we rode back to the Smíchov Station on the tram. “You weren’t able to run through your repertoire slowly yesterday and today you aced it, playing fast.” She incredulously shook her white head, blabbing like a child. “I can’t comprehend what makes the two of you rise so high above your limits whenever you get to compete.”

“It is probably their survival instinct.” My mother offered her theory.

Honza and I said nothing. Glaring out of the misty window, we counted our losses. Neither of us drew satisfaction from our Pyrrhic victory, realising that we had been condemned to another three months of musical torture.

The following day in school, the plastic speaker box in the corner of the classroom exploded with the headmaster’s voice.

“*Halò, halò.* I have the pleasure to announce that Miranda Urbanová from 6B and Jan Pechman from 7C became the champions in the district round of the National piano

competition.” The Rattler rejoiced. “This is the first time in Mrakotín’s history that our students have passed the official selection to the regional round. Thank you for your attention. End of announcement.”

Everyone’s heads turned in my direction and I couldn’t help blushing with pride.

“Congratulations.” Comrade Rottová enthusiastically clapped her hands, urging my classmates to give me a standing ovation. “*Kcho-ro-sbo, de-voch-ka.*” She encouraged them to chant as if during the Labour Day Parade.

During recess, I discovered the downside of becoming a celebrity when Beauty stole a menstruation pad from my schoolbag. Staining it with blue ink, he planted the forged evidence beneath my bench.

“Now it’s proved beyond doubts that Miranda has noble origins.” He picked up the stained pad from the floor as if he had accidentally found it. “Take a look everyone. She’s got blue blood!” He waved it above his head.

The whole class roared with laughter.

I tried to snatch the pad from George, but he jumped on his bench, screeching like a monkey. To save face, I took to chasing the savage around the classroom. Upset and humiliated, I didn’t hear the ringing of the bell and eventually ran out of breath when Comrade Rottová walked back in through the door.

“Will you put that dirty piece of cotton in the trashcan, Beauty?” She screamed. “Or should I send you to the headmaster, little asshole?”

“It’s not mine. I found it under Urbanová’s bench.” The freckled boy shrugged and dropped the menstruation pad onto my desk. “She can throw it out herself.”

“*Chto?*” The Russian teacher became bright red in her face. “Do I look like an idiot to you, Beauty?” She strode to the blackboard. “I’m going to teach you to talk to me with respect. Watch out.” Grabbing a wet sponge, she threw it at George.

Comrade Rottová was a typical, working class queue fighter, unafraid of using strong language and physical punishment. Her devotion for the communist ideology was as infamous as her temper. Her aim, however, wasn’t half as good as her intentions and I watched the sponge fly over Beauty’s head. It ended up hitting an unpopular son of the Mrakotín’s evangelical pastor. The fat boy who sat behind George was painfully honest, frequently acting as a snitch. His clothes smelled bad and he never seemed to wash his crimped hair.

“*Pochemu?*” He burst into tears after the sponge hit him between his eyes. “Why me,

Comrade? What have I done?”

“Because you stink, fat ass.” George Beauty laughed out. “*Tovarish uchitel'nitsa* did you a huge favour. You needed to wash your face anyway. I bet that you only have holy water running from both taps at home since your Dad's a fucking pastor.”

Once again, the whole class jeered with laughter and even Comrade Rottová's face displayed amusement. As a devoted communist, she disapproved of religion. It took her a while to pull herself together and hand out detention to George.

“Bring me your report book, Beauty!” She slammed her desk with the wooden ruler. “Quickly, you little scumbag.”

The cheeky boy leisurely strolled to the blackboard, an insolent smile playing on his freckled face. Presenting the teacher with the requested document, he looked proud of himself. I watched the boy pose like a hero in front of the girls while Comrade Rottová scribbled a disciplinary note to his parents. Later, on his way back down the aisle, George released the deadliest fart ever to vindicate himself.

“Oh my God.” I pinched my nose.

“What did you eat for breakfast, Beauty?” Comrade Rottová screwed her face. “Bad eggs?” She fanned herself with a Russian grammar test. “Quickly children. Open up the windows!”



ONCE AGAIN, I WASN'T allowed to enjoy the Christmas season. Unwrapping my presents, I was disappointed to find a collection of music scores and a metronome. Mum dragged me to the piano and forced me to play carols at four-hands with her. Yet, my desperation was nothing compared to Marta's grief. Shortly before Christmas, she had received the paperwork she needed to complete to get a permit to marry a Westerner. I watched her tearfully leaf through the blank forms during Christmas Eve dinner, black mascara running down her cheeks like mud.

“What am I going to write? I'll never get my application approved because of Dad's political record.” She moaned. “The passport police want to know every detail about my family.” As she read some of the questions aloud, it became clear that she could never provide the authorities with correct answers. “I refuse to waste my youth in this stupid country and remain for vinegar.”

Similar to mushrooms with vinegar, the colloquial expression for staying single also alludes to a notion of good wine becoming sour, identifying the failure to find love as the major cause of people's disappointment with life. My sister's black tears dripped on the tablecloth when she rebuked my parents for refusing to conform to the Normalization, accusing them of ruining her chance to find happiness. Her reproaches turned bitterer with every mouthful of the Christmas carp I swallowed.

"I had enough." Mum nearly choked on a fish bone. "We did everything we could to make you grow well. What else do you want us to do?"

"I don't know." Marta began to bawl as a cow lost in a mountain pasture. "It's not my fault that I fell in love with an Italian."

Puddles of black tears blotted her paperwork.

"I'm sure there's a way to get around filling those forms." Dad grumbled in a feeble attempt to reconcile his wife with his daughter. "Let me have a look, Marta." He tried to reach out across the table.

"No!" Mum stopped him. "Months ago, when you offered assistance to Marta, she advised you to mind your own business. She was confident she could take care of her marriage application all by herself." My mother accusingly pointed her finger at Marta, looking like Master Jan Hus. "She should live up to her choices now." Righteous flames flashed from her eyes. "Did your daughter thank you for saving her from prison or for providing her with a legitimate job?" She held my father back with her blazing gaze. "Mushrooms! She can cry rivers. It's theatre anyway."

It was against my mother's objections that Dad had asked Comrade Kocián to employ Marta as a helping hand in our garage. According to the stamp in my sister's ID, she was working for the Austerlitz Joint Production in Prague. The reality was different. Marta received a regular wage for smoking cigarettes and chatting with Peter who never let her touch anything.

"You are right, Aličko. Marta did little to deserve our trust in her." Dad took off his glasses to massage the bridge of his nose. "But this is too serious. I don't want to see my child remain for vinegar, because of my incorrect political convictions."

"Mushrooms!" My mother spat.

"No. Alice. We're not joking here." My father went to an inhuman effort to preserve calm. "Even if Marta came from a working class family, she could wait years to get an expatriation passport to join Gianni abroad. There are heaps of cases of women like her."

Radio Free Europe recently featured a program about the local girls who had married Western men. Some of them gave birth to children before they were able to join their husbands abroad. The Bolsheviks use the bureaucratic procedure as an excuse to deny the married couples their unquestionable right to live together.”

Hearing Dad’s words, Marta started to twitch as if in an epileptic seizure.

“If I’m not allowed to marry Gianni, I’ll either kill myself or cut my way through the wires.” She sobbed uncontrollably.

“You will kill yourself? Of all people!” Mum laughed out in outrage. “You can’t even stand the sight of a syringe and you have actually told me that you don’t want to have children, because childbirth hurts.”

“What reason do I have to live?” My sister typically retorted. “You brought me to the world without my consent!”

“Come on girls, it’s Christmas.” Dad stood up, spreading his arms like a referee in a boxing ring to prevent the two women from becoming physically violent. “Please.” He pleaded. “Why don’t we go for an evening walk, Alice? We can resolve this issue after Midnight Mass.”

Like the previous Christmas, Mum and Marta continued to fight until New Year’s Eve when my parents took their conflict to their bedroom. Again, Mum emerged the next morning, looking calm. She shook hands with my sister and promised to help her to get married. After dark, we filled a washbowl with water and floated four nutshells with a birthday cake candle inside each of them.

“Let’s see what the future holds in store for our little family.” My father optimistically ignited the wicks.

We normally performed this ritual as a part of the Winter Solstice tradition, but this Christmas, we were too busy arguing to observe ancient customs.

I watched the flames flicker in the washbowl while the four nutshells drifted apart, predicting the course of our destiny. It seemed as if an invisible hand drew the lights in different directions until they floated on opposite sides of the bowl. It was a bad omen. Despite my father’s enthusiasm and the promise of Gorbachev’s planned visit to Prague during the spring, I sensed that the candles predicted an impending break up in our small family. It was as if the imaginary personage of Death was walking around our house on tiptoes. I pictured the skeletal woman in a veil topped with a wreath of artificial lilies. Sharpening her scythe, she waited for an opportunity to sever the threads that bound the

four of us together.

Ding-dong. Ding-dong.

My great grandmother's porcelain clock chimed on the cupboard while we sat in the darkness. I thought I could see the ancestral shadows dance to the clock's muffled sound, sliding up and down the walls while the flames flicked. Afraid to find out, which of the candles was going to die out first, I retreated to my room. With my hands knotted in an earnest prayer, I cried myself to sleep.



ACCORDING TO THE COMMUNIST ideology, future has nothing to do with fate, but it depends on careful planning.

“It’s an imperative that the wheels of the Five-Year Plan start turning faster than ever before.” Gustav Husák declared on television, staring in the camera with watery eyes. The Presidents’ hands, covered in large liver spots, never stopped trembling during his speech. The ancient head of the State blabbered in Slovak about bygone achievements and future goals. “We must not rest on our laurels, but forge ahead with courage to refurbish our Socialist society according to the Soviet model.”

As the year began, I could almost hear the sound of rusty cogs and broken springs of which the Normalization machinery consisted. Like an old-fashioned engine driven by a drunken conductor, it appeared to aimlessly head off the rails in the face of everyone’s resignation.

The only place in our country where I could see tangible results of the Perestroika was our house. Here, the wheels of my dad’s grandiose plans continued to spin non-stop. I watched him chisel at the rock-solid obstacles that stood between his aims and reality. Studying Marta’s questionnaire, he devised a cunning strategy to sort out her marriage application. His first move was to persuade Grandma Helga to put my sister on her apartment lease with the intention to transfer Marta’s permanent residency to another district. Dad wanted to lodge my sister’s paperwork in Prague where the passport police department wasn’t likely to connect her unusual surname to his. His next step was to personally fill in the forms, lying through his teeth about Marta’s origins.

What if the police will find out that it’s all hogwash?” Marta freaked out when she read

his answers. “They could send me to jail for misinforming the authorities.”

“Trust my experience.” Dad looked calm. “If you want those bureaucrats to stamp your papers you must bore them to death.”

Reading his dull, predictable responses, I couldn’t help yawning. My father presented Marta as a humble, Agricultural Cooperative worker. Claiming that he and Mum were agriculturalists with a working class pedigree, he highlighted Gianni’s membership in the Italian Communist Party. His answers read like the Marxist-Leninism textbooks that my parents had wedged between their matrimonial bed and the bedroom walls to prevent the antique piece of furniture from falling apart. Dad took Marta’s application to the police department, handing out gifts to anyone wielding the mythical power to stamp or not to stamp. A sample of antistatic fabric softener here, a bottle of homemade booze there. He knew where to press buttons when it came down to manipulating the corrupted system. Making himself irresistible, he befriended the female passport police staff in Prague 2 by praising their hairdos.

“With a bit of luck, we’re going to sleepwalk through the ceremony before the STB catches up to the fact that Marta is my daughter.” Dad rubbed his hands, seeing that everything was going according to his plans.

He booked the wedding on the first Friday in June. “What do you think, Alice?” I saw him come downstairs with a look of self-contentment on his cheeky face. “I thought we could use this joyful event as an incentive to mobilize our joint forces and refurbish our house to make it more presentable.”

“Finally.” My mother became teary. “After all these years.”

I found it difficult to share my father’s optimism. His ambitious projects collided with those of my piano teacher. After the snow melted in our garden and the travelling birds returned to town, I had to put aside the books and dedicate all my free time to playing classical music.

“The members of the regional jury are amongst the most respected teachers in the country.” Professor Drozdová stressed the importance of the next round of the piano contest scheduled in March. Nervously tearing the leaves on her desk calendar while we approached the D date, she became increasingly unhappy with our rehearsals. “If you perform as bad as you did today, the entire musical community in Prague will lose their respect for me.”

She went so far as to threaten us with eternal flames if we destroyed her professional

reputation.

“Don’t count on any more miracles.” She warned us. “There are children like Miroslav Sekera on the list of your competitors.”

Honza and I exchanged exasperated looks. I vaguely recalled the child prodigy who enacted the young Mozart in Miloš Forman’s *Amadeus*. The perspective of having to compete against the local genius seemed comically absurd.

“Faster! Faster!” The headmistress kept on screaming.

We were like a pair of oxen harnessed to a cart loaded with heavy rocks. I had the impression of scaling a mountain to the sound of her whip. “One, two, three, two, two, three.” Professor Drozdová furiously clapped her hands, forcing us to accelerate.

Honza and I continued to grow closer together through the hatred of our teacher’s methods. We expressed our mutual affection by bitching about the headmistress in the changing room.

“I hope that we will embarrass her with our performance this time around.” Honza vengefully declared after the lesson. “I’d much rather face eternal shame than fame.” I watched him heave down onto a bench, looking like an air-raid survivor. “I don’t think I could survive another round.”

“Don’t worry. This time is definitely the last for us.” I assured him. “We don’t stand a chance to win, but even if we failed to lose, our age category doesn’t compete past the regional level.”

“Thank God for this.” Honza groaned. “I can’t bear it any longer.”

“Me neither.

“I feel like killing the old hag.”

“Me too.”



SHORTLY AFTER MY TWELFTH birthday, Honza and I stood shivering on the sidewalk in the embassy district. The sound of too many pianos playing simultaneously echoed through the broad chestnut-tree alley. I could see foreign flags flutter on the surrounding roofs. Limousines with dark windows surveyed the fences and some of the lampposts carried miniature cameras.

“See that house across the street?” I pointed to an Art-Deco villa next to the Chinese

embassy. “My great grandfather lived there when he was the Minister of Trade.”

“Are you serious?” Honza’s eyes popped out. “When was that?”

“After the war.”

“Hurry up, children.” Professor Drozdová poked my back with her index finger as if holding me at gunpoint. “It’s now or never.” She pushed us through the gate.

The lobby inside the Music School was abuzz with parents and teachers. Most of our competitors were skinny, neurotic children with long, delicate fingers and veins pulsing across their pale foreheads. I recognised a short, curly pianist as the famous film star. Seemingly unaware of the attention he attracted, Miroslav Sekera was leafing through a collection of Beethoven’s sonatas as if it was a book of adventures. The boy had all the makings of a child genius. I wondered if he was going to play blindfolded as he did in *Amadeus*.

He was the first to climb the stage and I listened to the waterfall of intricate chords thundering from the instrument. Before the boy finished the first piece, my self-respect deflated like a pierced tyre. My jaw hardened and my mouth dried out. I felt like an incompetent impostor, fighting the urge to flee. Unlike anywhere else in communist Czechoslovakia, there was nothing fake about the piano contest. No posters. No false friendships. No politics. Only honest work and talent could make any difference to the regional jury.

I was so embarrassed when Honza and I walked onto the stage, I couldn’t look the audience in the eye. The atmosphere inside the concert hall was thick with anxiety and ambition. We were the last couple to perform before lunchbreak. I saw that the jury was struggling to appear fresh and objective.

“Number twelve.” The chairman flatly announced. “Urbanová and Pechman.”

We found an upholstered concert stool in front of the black grand piano. It was a professional model, wide enough for both of us to sit on it together.

“Yuck. Did someone spill glue on the keyboard?” Honza took his time to wipe the instrument with his handkerchief.

The black and white keys were virtually drenched in our competitors’ sweat and the floorboards seemed equally wet with unidentified body fluids. I found it unpleasant to rest my hands on the sticky keyboard. Taking a deep breath, I resigned myself to committing a musical suicide.

“*Tfuj. Tfuj. Tfuj.*” I spat out. “Let’s go down to hell.”

Professor Drozdová's strategy was to make us perform a fast piece of contemporary music by the dissident composer she employed at Music School. It was a good choice, involving technical acrobatics and lots of body movement. We often crossed arms and treaded into each other's territory. The piece lasted three minutes and it appeared more challenging than it actually was, providing us with countless opportunities to touch one another.

Determined to crash and burn, we struck the opening chords and Honza pressed the damper pedal. I took to pounding the high keys in the synoptic rhythm, when our stool began to slide away from the piano. With my fingers jumping and running all over the keyboard, I felt that the lower part of my body was drifting away as if I stood on moving sands. Honza and I had to lean forward to reach the keyboard until we could no longer remain seated.

Playing on our feet, we struggled to keep balance on the slippery floor.

"Watch out!" Honza somehow freed his left hand and pulled the naughty stool back without interrupting his performance.

Heaving down with profound relief, I regained my grip on the sticky keyboard and unconsciously accelerated to get quickly to the end. We played half the piece when the naughty stool resumed its journey backwards.

As I heard the audience giggle, it occurred to me that Honza and I played a couple of clowns in a grotesque attempt to give a concert. Without missing a single beat, Honza brought the stool back to heel.

"Bravo!" The spectators spontaneously laughed out.

I could see Professor Drozdová faint into my mother's arms.

The stool drifted back three more times before we played the last chords. When we bowed to the audience, the concert hall shook with roaring laughter. I saw several jury members wipe tears from their eyes.

"I want you to know that Mr Kopelent didn't compose his piece with a sliding chair in mind." I felt compelled to explain, advising the contest organizers to give the stage a good mop. "The floor is flooded with children's sweat."

My innocent suggestion triggered another wave of laughter, releasing tension from the atmosphere. The sound of scraping chairs indicated that it was time for lunch. Everyone rushed to the doors.

No matter how badly Honza and I screwed up, I felt proud of myself.

Finally, our ordeal was over.

“How dare you make a spectacle in front of the jury, Miranda?” Professor Drozdová looked as if she was about to have a heart attack. “What were you thinking?”

I watched the headmistress chew on her amber holder, so disoriented, she ended up stuffing her Dunhill inside it the other way around.

“This is going to be my professional death!” She lit up the filter. “No one is going to perceive me seriously from now on. Ouch.” She jumped up to put out the flame. “I’m a laughing stock!”

Professor Drozdová was so upset about our performance she didn’t eat anything for lunch. During the prize-giving ceremony, later in the afternoon, she stiffly sat in the auditorium and absentmindedly stared ahead, with her eyes glazed over. When the jury prepared to read the results for the four-hand category, she let out a harrowing sigh and pressed the root of her nose, expecting the worse.

“The first prize in the group of the youngest competitors,” the chairman opened the sealed envelope, “goes to Miranda Urbanová and Jan Pechman.”

“What? This can’t be!” The headmistress sprang from her seat and wrapped her arms around our necks. “My dearest darlings! You have won me the first prize.” She nearly strangled us.

Gleaming like a neon red star, she pushed us to the stage. The jury enthusiastically applauded and cameras flashed from the audience. I saw the less successful pedagogues acerbically struggle to accept the jury’s decision. “Aren’t you lucky to have such talented students?” They said to Professor Drozdová. “Where did you find them?”

“Yours was the most original performance we have seen here in years.” The reputed pianist who chaired the regional jury presented us with the gold medal and a bunch of carnations. “Absolutely brilliant.”

I could see Professor Drozdová burst into tears of joy.

“This is why we decided to make an exception to our rules.” The greying professor announced after the applause faded. “Despite your young age, we think that you should compete on the national level.”

“Mushrooms!” Honza and I cried out in horror.

“Oh yes.” Our piano teacher punched the air. “Yes!”



IN THE DAYS LEADING to the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, an army of tradesmen invaded Prague in anticipation of Gorbachev's planned visit. In the spirit of Perestroika, the city council decided to give the grey capital a much-needed facelift by spraying the peeling facades with pastel colours. But whether the tradesmen didn't get enough paint or they ran out of time, the implemented changes had merely cosmetic character. It was as if the idea of Refurbishment pertained to building modern Potemkin villages. Most of the houses had new facade up to the second floor with the top part remaining dilapidated. Seeing that the Bolshevik lords intended to drive the Soviet ruler around Prague in a government limousine, someone had probably figured out that the narrow view from the car window wouldn't permit Gorbachev to appreciate the local architecture above the street level.

"The wolf has eaten and the goat remained whole." Dad quoted the Czech aphorism when the Voice of America derided the Potemkin-style welcome to the Communist Tsar. "This reminds me of my days in the army." He said. "We also painted the grass green whenever the high charges planned a visit to our unit."

During the weeks leading to my sister's wedding, the Perestroika of our house seemed every bit as hasty and superficial as the recent redecoration of our capital. I watched my parents and Marta arm themselves with sheets of sand paper and cans of pastel paint. Restricted by the lack of time and resources, they glossed over our interiors, working graveyard shifts. To conceal the granite steps and the horrid jigsaw puzzle tiles in our stairway, my father decided to glue a cheap carpet to the floor. Setting out to cover my childish murals on the stairway walls with lime, however, he quickly found out that it's impossible to paint over wax pencils. He had no choice, but to purchase several rolls of wallpaper to hide my art.

"*Ježíšmarja*, Alice!" I watched him balance on top of a stepladder. "What have you been thinking when you encouraged Miranda to use our walls as a canvas?"

He furiously dipped his brush in a can of glue.

"It was actually your idea, Jirka, remember?" Mum snapped her scissors, cutting up a piece of beige paper, the best we could find in the poorly supplied stores. "And the wax pencils were a Christmas gift from your mother."

This was another example of Grandma's disastrous talent for gifts.

"Watch out, Dad." My sister cried, standing on the ladder beneath my father. "You're squirting the glue all over the carpet." She frantically pressed the wet paper to the wall,

smoothing the creases with a wet sponge. “Keep on working. I’m catching up to you. Gianni’s parents arrive tomorrow and we’ve got another floor to cover.”

“Maybe I could give you a hand.” I offered.

“Mushrooms.” My mother declined. “Go back to practicing the scales, Trumpet.” She commanded. “And while you’re at it, put on the gloves I gave you for Christmas.”

This was the latest of Professor Drozdová’s cruel inventions designed to improve the accuracy of my finger stroke. As the date of the national piano contest drew close, the headmistress was beginning to lose her mind. She required me to rehearse blindfolded, wearing woollen gloves.

“What have I done to deserve this?” I nearly cried as I clumsily hit the keys with my fingers covered in yarn. “I’d rather sweep the streets than become a professional piano player.”

The following afternoon, I found a fleet of Italian cars in front of our garage when I returned from school. Mr Šimek was raking invisible leaves by his fence as usual and Mr Hašek lurked on the sidewalk with Buddy. Four pairs of swanky leather shoes sat on our hallway floor. Judging by the large hand imprint on the entrance doorframe, one of the Italians had accidentally leaned against the white coat of wet paint.

I walked downstairs to meet Gianni’s parents and his best man.

“Madonna mia, Marta. Ma che grande casa, che avete?”

Gianni’s mother marvelled at the size of our house. The short woman had a dignified posture and small, suspicious eyes. She spoke fast and stressed her words, sounding like a machine gun.

“Maria wants to know whether we’re rich or poor, Dad.” Marta acted as a translator. “What should I tell her?”

“Explain to your future mother-in-law that everything she can see here I’ve built with these!” Dad displayed the palms of his hands to the wedding guests.

“Bravo! Si vede, che ha fatto un buon lavoro.” Gianni’s father was a tall, balding man with a groomed moustache. As if to mirror Dad’s comical gesture, he also showed us his hands, revealing that his right palm was covered in white paint. “You’ve done a great job.” Mr Papazzani’s eyes sparkled with humour.



ON THE DAY OF my sister's wedding, our house was upside down. I watched the Italian men trot up and down the stairs like racing horses, catering to Mrs Papazzani's demands. The tiny woman made herself the centre of everyone's attention as if she was Gianni's bride and not my sister.

"How do I look, *amore?*" She tried on different dresses in front of our hallway mirror, none of which seemed to improve her looks.

"*Bene. Mamma. Bene.*" Gianni tirelessly reassured her.

Mr Papazzani nodded with unconditional approval like a toy dog that people put on dashboards in their cars.

"*Buon giorno* everyone." Marta came down in a pink wedding dress, looking more like a bridesmaid than the bride. She didn't wear any make-up on her pallid face and seemed strangely virtuous in her long gown.

"How did you sleep, *tesoro?*"

I noticed that Mrs Papazzani's lips turned white while my sister hugged her groom.

"*Bene. Bene.*" Gianni nervously stammered.

"Tell everyone to hurry up, Marta." I saw my father's reflection in the mirror. "*Presto. Presto.*" He gesticulated at the Italians. "The ceremony starts at ten o'clock." Dressed in a beige, linen suit, he rushed to the garage, carrying a cardboard box with the three-storey wedding cake.

"Are you nervous Trumpet?" My mother adjusted my white cotton dress, pinning an artificial rose to my chest. She wore a grey silken dress in the style of the thirties with a matching hat that looked like a helmet.

We followed the Italians to the entrance to put on our shoes while my dad and Peter loaded our car trunk with the wedding accessories.

"Do you need me to give you a push, Jirka?" The poor nerd was probably hoping that our Škoda would sabotage Marta's wedding. Peter looked heartbroken when our engine caught the spark. "I'm going to miss you Marta." His thick glasses misted over when he watched the bride board our rusty car. Standing in a cloud of petrol fumes like the last Mohican, he miserably waved goodbye to the love of his life.

With the car's hoods and windows traditionally decorated in white ribbons and small branches of myrtle, our wedding fleet ceremonially bumped down the hill to the railway crossing. The signal flashed red, clinking monotonously. We could see an endless queue of

vehicles on both sides of the gates. Most of the drivers had stopped their engines, smoking outside or leafing through newspapers. The sun was shining hard at nine thirty in the morning. Flies buzzed in the warm air. Judging by the look on people's faces, the gates had been down for a long time. Nobody expected to move on anytime soon.

"Do prdele." Dad glanced at his wristwatch. "We're not going to make it!"

No trains were coming from either direction, but the gates stayed down due to a faulty relay system. This was a regular occurrence in Normalization. Usually, my father would command Mum and me to hold the stripy bars up for him and, looking right and left, fearlessly drive across the rails. His bad example would typically trigger a mass following amongst the other drivers.

This time, however, he couldn't afford to take a risk. Mrs Papazzani didn't look like someone who would have courage to break foreign safety rules.

"Follow behind me!" Dad waved at the Italians.

The alternative road to Prague ran behind our township, winding up through the oak forest and across the fields. Paved in deep potholes, the narrow detour was full of mud despite the warm weather. By the time our wedding fleet arrived in Prague, it looked more like a military convoy. Gianni's red Lancia was brown and the Papazzanis' Panda dripped with mud like a miniature tractor.

"Did you have to drive to Prague through a dump, Jirka?" Uncle Miloš sarcastically laughed when we parked in front of the town hall. "I don't think your foreign guests appreciated the adventure."

Looking like a paparazzi, my father's brother readily aimed his handheld camera at the Italians who obsessively brushed imaginary dirt off their clothes.

"Me favourite granddaughter!" Grandma Helga's flamboyant outfit reminded me of a circus costume. "It will break *me* heart to see you move abroad, dear." She threw herself around Marta's neck.

In the meanwhile, my father introduced his family to the Papazzanis.

"Piacere." Gianni's mother appeared as dignified as the English queen when she shook hands with Miloš's wife.

"It's a pleasure." My aunt echoed in Czech, going to a considerable effort to display a friendly appearance. "Isn't Marta lucky?" I heard her say to her teenage daughters after Gianni's mother turned to greet Grandma Helga. "Make sure you grow big tits and find yourself a Western husband like her."

I felt embarrassed to see our wide family pose together, flashing phoney smiles to my uncle's handheld camera. Miloš worked in the film industry as an assistant to a camera operator. As the wedding guests poured inside the town hall, he assumed a professional attitude in capturing the spirit of the moment.

"I can't believe that neither of your parents turned up." Marta said to Mum. "I've sent Grandma a letter with invites. She didn't even bother to give me a formal excuse." Tears glistened in my sister's eyes.

Marta had developed a strong emotional attachment to the Red Countess as a little girl and was hoping to receive Grandma's blessing at the occasion of her wedding. The bitter dispute in our family was a traumatic experience for her. She never understood which side to take.

"What did you expect?" My mother gave her a sad smile. "You can be glad that Mum didn't denounce your identity to the passport police. It was pretty risky of you to tell her about your wedding plans."

An irritatingly cheerful sound of the electronic organ flooded the lobby. The carved doorway to the ceremony hall opened and I could see a bearded man stand at a lectern, wearing a bronze medal around his neck. Everyone walked in to take a seat. When the opening tune triumphantly ended, the wedding crowd turned heads to see Gianni march down the aisle with his dignified mother. *Signora* Papazzani wore a tragic mask, as if the Mayor's lectern were gallows and the wedding was a funeral to her. She nearly burst into tears when she kissed her only son goodbye to the sound of Italian Capriccio. My father looked equally miserable, offering his arm to my sister. I watched Marta's breasts sway beneath the silken fabric while he accompanied her to the groom.

"Mr Gianni Papazzani, will you take Miss Marta Urbanová as your lawful wife?" The mayor declaimed with a pathetic tremor. "Will you be her partner for life, supporting and loving her, through all the joys and challenges you may face together as a couple?"

"Sì."

"He does." The official translator flatly affirmed.

As the couple pronounced their wedding vows, I imagined myself in Marta's place.

"Miss Miranda Urbanová." I heard the mayor ask. "Will you take Mr Jan Pechman for your lawful husband?"

"Yes." I whispered.

"*A-no.*" My sister replied in Czech.

Grandma Helga let out a muffled howl.

The Italian wedding guests looked up in confusion. They clearly thought that Marta refused to marry Gianni.

“Sì.” The official translator saved the day. “She does.”

“*Meno male.*” Mr Papazzani laughed out with relief, but his tiny wife looked almost disappointed.

Exchanging their rings, the newlyweds kissed and bent down to sign the Marriage Certificate. The audience applauded and my eyes flooded with tears. Gianni’s best man snapped pictures with his Japanese camera while a queue of well-wishers lined up at the lectern. Grandma Helga stamped Gianni and Marta’s cheeks with lipstick and my aunt foretold them lifelong happiness, forcing herself to smile for as long her husband Miloš filmed the sequence. After everyone gave the young couple their blessings, the mayor discretely pointed at his watch. I saw another wedding party waiting in the lobby. The following ceremony was due to begin shortly. After we left the town hall building, the newlyweds posed for memorable snapshots before everyone walked over to the nearby restaurant.

“To your everlasting union!”

My father threw a plate on the tiles to open the wedding banquet with a typical ritual. When the porcelain shattered into thousand pieces, he handed a brush to the bewildered groom and a dustpan to the bride.

“Sweep it up. It will bring you good luck!” He encouraged the newlyweds. “Let’s see if the two of you can work together as a team.”

I watched the couple elbow each other while they cleaned the floor.

“Bravo!” Everyone clapped hands.

The next part of the ritual involved tying a large napkin around the newlywed’s necks. They had to eat soup from the same plate with a single spoon.

It was a hard task and I nearly peed myself with laughter when Gianni dropped a liver dumpling into Marta’s cleavage.

“To your mutual love!” Uncle Miloš raised a glass full of homemade gin. “Have many beautiful children.” Following his toast with many others, my uncle began to sound increasingly emotional.

During the main course, my father’s brother laid his camera to permanent rest to concentrate on drinking as much Champagne as he could. It didn’t take long before he

became aggressive with Dad.

“I don’t understand how you do it, Jirka.” I heard him hiccup. “Why do you always succeed in everything you set to do?” Miloš glared across the table. “How come the Bolsheviks allowed you to give your daughter to a Westerner? You, of all people in the world!”

“Look at my hands.” Dad jokingly replied. “I won’t take them to the grave.”

Using his favourite gesture, he showed his big paws to Miloš, to convey that his success was due to hard work and talent, which was something his younger brother could never appreciate.

Grandma Helga did little to appease the growing tension.

“Always remember that it’s only because of *me* sacrifices and *me* sweat that *me* sons can live the lives they live.” She boasted to my aunt who pretended to agree with a fake smile creasing her facial mask.

My cousins sat across the table from me, ignoring me as usual. I saw them whisper comments into each other’s ears. Mrs Papazzani scanned the wedding guests with her suspicious eyes. An impending scandal seemed to hang in the air. It didn’t escape my attention when my parents exchanged a worried look.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?” Dad chinked his glass with a knife. “I have an important announcement. I’m sorry, but I must drive Gianni and Marta to the Italian embassy before three o’clock.” He explained to his family that the couple was required to deliver the wedding certificate to the Italian authorities to apply for my sister’s visa. “We need to conclude the celebrations early or Marta won’t be able to drive off to Italy with Gianni next week.”

This was a smart move on Dad’s part.

To make it up to his disappointed brother, he told him to take the remaining food and alcohol home. “You can have the wedding cake if you want.” He encouraged Grandma Helga. “We’re too full to eat it, anyway.”

My grandmother didn’t hesitate and grabbed the tray on which the three-storey cake towered. “Thanks, Jirka.”

“Let me help you, Mum.” Miloš stumbled over.

“Keep your paws off *me* cake, you villain.” Grandma rightly suspected that my uncle intended to steal her trophy. “It’s mine!”

“Come on, Mum. You will get sick if you eat so much cream all by yourself.” He

attempted to wrestle the tray from her hands.

The following scene could have easily taken place in Federico Fellini's movies. The Italians dropped their jaws as Miloš and Grandma began to pull the cake backwards and forwards with all their strength.

"I said back off, you *drunk* fool!" Helga shrieked.

The icing cracked and the sugar doves tumbled to the floor.

At some point, my grandmother jerked the tray so hard she made my uncle stumble. Unexpectedly losing his grip, he tipped Grandma's balance. She landed on her bottom, squishing the spongy dough against her large bosom.

"Look what you've *did!*" I saw her sit on the floor, her mouth and eyes wide-open, chocolate chips and whipped cream dripping into her cleavage. "You've ruined *me* best dress!" She was on the verge of crying.

Everyone in the room had tears in the eyes while they watched my uncle scrape the remains of the cake off Grandma's breasts.

"Maybe we can still salvage it." My father's brother slurred. "It must have cost Jirka a fortune to get it made."

I was laughing so hard I nearly threw up the liver dumplings I had eaten for lunch.

"*Dio buono.*" Mrs Papazzani was the only person who remained serious. "*Mamma mia.* What a family." She gave Marta a derisive look.



MY SISTER HAD BARELY left her homeland when my mother and I packed our suitcase to travel to the national round of the piano contest, which took place near the Austrian border, in Břeclav. We caught the train from the Central Station with the headmistress and Honza. Taking a seat next to my heartthrob, I listened to the wheels hammering the rails. Scared of competing against the best pianists in the country, I was thrilled at the prospect of spending three days with my future husband at the same time, wondering what it was going to be like to sleep in neighbouring hotel rooms.

Shortly after midday, the train brakes screeched to a halt on reaching our destination. I could see border police stand on the platform with German shepherds on leash. The uniformed men shone torches under each train, making sure that nobody escaped the Socialist block by clinging to the undercarriage. According to the Voice of America, this

happened quite often. Some people were so desperate to pass the Iron Curtain they were prepared to risk their lives. Farther down the train tracks, I noticed an enormous gate surrounded with a barbed wire fence. Camouflaged watchtowers stood on each side with Kalashnikovs pointed in all directions.

“Isn’t it reassuring to see that we are so safely guarded?” Professor Drozdová’s voice dripped with sarcasm when we got off the train. I watched her insert a cigarette into her amber holder. “I’ll sleep like a baby tonight.”

The Concert Hall in Břeclav was a typical example of the Normalisation architecture. Brown ceramic tiles covered the rectangular walls with tons of glass and aluminium doing little to improve the dull aesthetics. After we checked in the nearby hotel, the contest organisers assigned us fifteen minutes to run through our repertoire on the official stage. Surprisingly, the acoustics in the modern auditorium flattered our style. What was more incredible, the headmistress approved of our performance. My technique had apparently reached her standards for the first time in nine months.

“Well done, Miranda.” She clapped her hands. “I’ll be more than happy to hear you perform with as much confidence tomorrow morning.” I watched her rummage in her handbag. “Why don’t you take the afternoon off, dears, while Mrs Urbanová and I drink coffee in the hotel lobby?” Professor Drozdová handed a brown note to Honza with unprecedented generosity. “Ten crowns should buy you enough ice-cream to keep your heads cool.” She winked at Mum to assure her compliance. “We’ll meet you for dinner in two hours.”

It was a warm summer day. Strolling to the historic centre with Honza by my side, I savoured the honeyed scent of the blossoming trees by the river and felt happy to be a woman.

“Should we go there?” Honza pointed to a pastry shop on the main square.

“Why not? It looks nice.” I blushed.

“*Prosím.*” A plump woman in a white apron expertly topped two cones with a green, creamy substance. I watched her wrap each of the wafers in a napkin before she handed them to Honza with a smile.

“*Díky.*” He collected the change.

“Pistachio is my favourite.” I enjoyed licking the ice cream on the quiet square. “*Na zdравí!*” I made a show of chinking my cone against Honza’s as if they were glasses of Champagne. “To our success.”

The national round was the official end of the contest. Seeing that I no longer had anything to lose by winning, I began to anticipate sweet victory instead of defeat. The summer holidays were a week away. I assumed that I would go back to living a quiet life afterwards.

Seeking the shade in the local park, Honza and I sat by the fountain. I listened to the gurgling sound of water and my heart filled with so much love, I worried that it would explode like a firecracker. The frozen cream melted in the blazing sun and I licked it to prevent it from staining my clothes. After I finished my wafer, I washed my hands in the fountain while Honza still struggled with his cone. He was usually meticulously clean, but there was a crack in his cone. Green droplets ran down from his fingertips, forcing him to stand up and hold the ice-cream as far away from his trousers as he could.

“Would you mind doing me a favour, Miranda?” He blushed. “Can you pull out a handkerchief from my pocket?”

“Of course.” I rushed to him. “With pleasure.”

Without thinking, I pushed my hand into his pocket, when I realized that the hole ran much deeper than I cared to know. Penetrating to the bottom, I took a grip of a strange, rubber object. I wasn't sure what it was, but it appeared to change the size and shape in contact with my fingers.

“Oh—” I scrambled around the pocket before I pulled out a neatly folded cloth.

“Here's your handkerchief.”

“Thanks.” Honza's pale forehead covered in cold sweat when he wiped his hands. I watched him dip the handkerchief in the fountain and rub his white trousers with the wet cloth to remove the pistachio stains. “This is the best pair I have.” He told me. “I want to wear them tomorrow.”

I wasn't quite sure what to say. We walked back to the hotel, sweating with mutual embarrassment.

That night, I tossed and turned in bed. Unable to fall asleep, I listened to my mother's peaceful breathing.

“That thing you touched in Honza'sss pocket,” the Devil inside my head seized his opportunity to perturb my thoughts, “wasss actually hisss penisss.”

“Get lost!” I tried to ignore him.

Rolling over to face to wall, I could suddenly see penises everywhere. They came in various colours and shapes, slithering across my sheets like snakes, their tiny tongues

wriggling inside their mouths.

“Thiss isss what sssex isss about.” The sinful voice continued. “To make kidsss, you musst ssstick a penisss inssside . . .”

“Mushrooms!” I bit my knuckles. “This can’t be true. It’s disgusting!”

“Of coursse it isss.” Satan laughed. “Ssstop lying to yourssself.”

“My parents would never do such thing.” I buried my head under the pillow to escape the disturbing image of my father’s penis sliding inside my mum like a snake between the roots of a tree.

“Asssk them. Sssee what they’ll sssay to you.”

I spent the best part of the night pondering the frightful concept of human sexuality. Dozing off after the dawn, I dreamed of falling into a snake pit full of penises. They attempted to bite me with their toothless mouths. Some tried to enter my body cavities, including my nose and even ears. Hairy eggs piled at bottom of the pit and baby penises hatched from them. Devouring one another, they quickly became big. The biggest of the penises wrapped its tale around my neck like a carpet snake. It nearly strangled me before my mother shook me awake.

“Get up, Trumpet.” Her voice seemed to come from a great distance. “You have to perform in two hours!”

I sat up in bed, trying to catch my breath.

“Is it already the morning?” My eyes burned and I felt exhausted. On my way to the bathroom, I recalled the conversation I had with Satan during the sleepless night. After I took shower, I was ready to face the truth.

“Why exactly do men grow penises?” I asked my mother while we brushed our hair in front of the mirror. “Is it just to make it easier for them to pee or is there some other important reason for this?”

“What makes you ask?” She looked shocked. “The timing of your question is rather peculiar.” I saw her glance at her wristwatch. “You should get dressed now.”

“Why?” I ignored her reluctance to discuss the topic. “It just occurred to me that it’s rather suspicious that men and women have different things down there.” I studied her reflection. “Don’t you think?”

“Well, if you really need to know this today,” her voice started to tremble, “I already explained to you that women have eggs in their ovaries.” She nervously winked. “Men produce seeds in their testicles, the glands that look like eggs and are lodged in a pouch

attached to the penis.”

“I think I see what you mean.” A terrible premonition made me shiver. “What do the men need the seeds for?” I had trouble breathing as if the big penis from my nightmare continued to strangle me.

“To fertilize the eggs, of course.” Mum replied.

“Didn’t you tell me that the eggs inside our bellies get fertilized by mutual love?” I frowned, desperately hoping to hear some other logical explanation to the one Satan gave me.

My mother took a long time to clear her throat.

“There are different forms of mutual love, you know, little Trumpet?”

“What do you mean?” I cried out. “Stop speaking in riddles. You sound like Mrs Thunder.”

“I’m talking about the physical side of love.”

“So it is true?” I froze with horror.

“What is?”

“There is no such thing as mutual love.” I burst into tears. “It’s all about sex.”



HOURS LATER, HONZA AND I bowed in front of the national jury and a large audience of music connoisseurs. I noticed a TV camera at the back of the auditorium. A group of radio journalists held up poles with fluffy microphones beneath the podium. Strangely, unlike never before, my perception remained perfectly clear. I wasn’t slightly nervous. My heart regularly pounded inside the ribcage. The absence of fear was almost frightening. A chilling sensation permeated my body as if the erupting volcano of my affectionate nature grew cold overnight.

I began to play, hitting the keys with precision. There was nothing miraculous about music, I realised. It wasn’t love that drove my interpretation this time, but my correct understanding of the piano mechanism. Having mastered the technique, Honza and I performed our moves like sex. Our music no longer expressed emotions. It sounded like raindrops drumming onto the piano lid. We played fast, better than ever before, yet I continued to have the impression that the audience was stirring with boredom.

“*Děkujeme.*” The head of the national jury thanked us in a flat voice after we finished. “Next, please.”

A polite applause lasted less than five seconds. It coincided with the arrival of our competitors. I didn’t need to wait to see the results. Retreating backstage, I had the word loser written all over my face.

“Are you okay?” Mum worried.

“I must go to the loo.”

I raced down the corridor and locked myself inside the toilet booth. Kneeling down, I heaved my breakfast into the porcelain bowl. The stink of my own vomit made me feel nauseous. Streams of saliva dripped out of my mouth and my stomach churned out bitter juices like an empty tumble dryer. Facing the truth about my physicality, I observed the remains of human faeces at the bottom of the toilet bowl.

A moment later, the door to the lavatories swung open. I heard two female voices chatting by the sink.

“Yes. It’s the first time I have joined the national jury.” The first one affirmed. “How about you?”

“I’ve been doing it for years.” I heard the other woman respond.

The sound of running water and the hand dryer made the following conversation inaudible. I wiped my mouth with the toilet paper and prepared to flush, when the noise abruptly died out.

“That couple from Prague was quite weak, don’t you think?” The senior jury member paused in front of the mirror to retouch her make-up.

“Who are you talking about?” The second woman brushed her hair.

“That girl with pigtails and the blonde boy who played the modern piece with lots of gratuitous hand crossing and arm swinging. What did you think of them?”

Realising that the woman spoke about Honza and me, I didn’t dare to move, afraid to alert her to my presence in the toilets.

“I found their performance technical, but meaningless.” The younger woman applied lipstick to her mouth. “You must wonder how someone as average as those two children from Prague could make it to the national round?”

The older jury member let out a short, bitter laugh before she sprayed herself with deodorant.

“I don’t need to tell you how this works, do I?” She lowered her voice. “I’d say one of

their daddies is high up on the Party ladder.” I heard her throw the perfume inside her handbag. “I’ve seen too many children like these two. They come and go.” The woman concluded. “That’s the great thing about classical music.” She said. “When it comes to judging talent, there’s no such thing as communism. You either have a gift from God or nothing. Love it or leave it.”

