

CHAPTER FOUR



The Greenest Grass

WHENEVER DAD WASN'T WORKING on our house or listening to the Voice of America, he loved to explore the globe in his study. He had the adventurous spirit of Christopher Columbus, but the passport police never allowed him to travel. Pointing his finger to the places he dreamt of visiting, he would sail the Pacific Ocean or climb the Cordilleras. I frequently accompanied him in his virtual escapades, watching him tread across the Chihuahuan Desert and touch the Texan soil. He loved the United States more than any other country in the world and insisted on teaching me the names of all of its fifty states, including their capitals. When he spoke about the New World, his yellow eyes invariably gleamed with admiration. I was happy to learn about American history and listen to my father's tales of discovery and adventure.

"American society doesn't impose limits on individual expansion." He would marvel. "American citizens are free to make their dreams come true for as long as they respect the freedom of others." Dad brushed off the dust from the globe to show me the American continent. "Canada and United States are the only countries on our planet ruled by the pioneering spirit and fairness." He mused. "This is where Mum and I would have settled, had we absconded in 1968."

"What pioneering spirit are you talking about, Dad?" I was puzzled.

To me, pioneers were communist children dressed in blue uniforms and red kerchiefs who assisted the politicians during Bolshevik festivities, playing the role of altar boys and girls in the materialistic cult of the working class rule.

“Never condemn a word because you connect its meaning with the negative image it currently projects.” My father lectured me. “The original pioneers were explorers who trampled over the swamps and deserts to find the Promised Land.” He lit up a cigarette, blowing a cloud of blue smoke over the Rocky Mountains. “Pioneers are courageous individuals who refuse to take no for an answer. They’re the brave people who make discoveries and inspire progress. I define a pioneer as a person who never backs away from a challenge or worries about losing money, whose reason to breathe is to make the world a better place.”

I pictured Paul Newman and Robert Redford riding horses through the Grand Canyon, although I wasn’t quite sure if the two actors were supposed to impersonate pioneers or bandits in the movie my father took me to see. American films were Dad’s big passion, especially old westerns. He had seen *Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid* half a dozen times, but his all-time favourite was *High Noon*. He never failed to mention Gary Cooper as the example of an American pioneer.

“I love the way Gary fearlessly takes on a bunch of armed crooks who terrorise the population in his town even if the cowardly citizens refuse to back the sheriff up.” Dad moved his finger to New Mexico where the discussed plot took place. “It’s just him and Grace Kelly in the role of Cooper’s Quaker wife, running against the odds. Doesn’t this remind you of something?”

“It sounds a lot like what you and Mum went through.” I span the globe, sliding my forefinger along the equator. “Do you think of yourself as a pioneer? Wouldn’t you be terrified to walk alone through a jungle?”

Landing in Western Africa, I traced the River Congo to Lake Victoria in search of the source of White Nile. After I climbed the Kilimanjaro, I decided to cross the Sudan and Sahara Deserts, heading to Giza to check out the Egyptian pyramids.

“Imagine trekking across these territories on camels.” I calculated the vast distances. “Look. This is where Marta lives.” I sailed the Mediterranean Sea and moved to the top of the boot-like peninsula. “Why does Italy qualify as a western country when it’s actually in the south? It doesn’t make any sense.”

East and west had crucial significance for us, other than the cardinal points on the compass. When I listened to my father, I had the impression that his sense of direction worked in reverse. Up until the Perestroika, Dad looked out for sunrise in the west and associated east with darkness and cold winds, usually blowing from the Kremlin.

“East Germany, on the other hand, is in the north. See?” I observed, scaling the Alps. “Why does Austria belong to the Western Block if Vienna lies further to the east than Prague?”

A bitter smile rippled across Dad’s lips.

“Political geography is totally different from the natural division of the world.” He explained. “See how the Czech basin is wedged in the West German territory? We should have never been part of the Eastern Block. It was an arbitrary political decision that had transformed us into a Soviet satellite after the Second World War. Our nation might be insignificantly small, but we traditionally occupy the centre of the continent. From the strategic point of view, whoever controls us can tip the geopolitical balance in Europe. Roosevelt wasn’t very smart to concede Czechoslovakia to Stalin. Had he known that our soil is exceptionally rich in uranium, he would have probably thought of it twice.”

I followed my dad’s finger to the passage between the Black and Mediterranean Seas. “Look here.” He showed me. “Would you believe that this narrow strip of water cost our nation four decades of Communism?” I watched him rub the blue streak between Turkey and Greece as if to cancel it. “The Yankees had swapped us for the strategic control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles.” Dad pointed out, veering his finger towards the Crimean Peninsula. “Here in Yalta,” he said, “the ‘Big Three’ sliced up Europe like pizza into four zones in February 1945. Franklin D. Roosevelt agreed to the liberation of Prague by the Soviet Army, even if Churchill opposed his decision. Contrary to General Patton’s plans, Eisenhower ordered the allied forces to stop at the demarcation line, miles away from Prague.” Dad drew an imaginary border across Europe to demonstrate the result of the political agreement. “For three days,” he growled, “the Yankees stood by and watched the fleeing Germans butcher the Prague revolutionaries on the barricades.” He said that the Czech heroes belatedly rose up to challenge the defeated Wehrmacht in anticipation of approaching liberation, but the Russians took their time to show up.

“I don’t understand.” I nearly had tears in my eyes. “How could the Allies be so insensitive? Mum says that the American soldiers were friendly and compassionate when they came to Pilsen. They apparently played jazz in the streets, danced with the girls and handed chocolate to everyone.”

“Well, little Trumpet.” Dad’s eyes gleamed behind his glass frames. “The backstage of politics is ugly. This wasn’t the first time when our allies have sacrificed us to their wider geopolitical interests.” He sighed. “Before the war, the French and English governments

betrayed their promise to protect our independence when they handed us to Hitler in Munich. When the Russians invaded Prague in 1968, nobody in the West bothered to challenge them about it either.” Dad killed his cigarette in an ashtray. “If anything, the Western governments were probably glad to see the Prague Spring squashed. They were having enough problems with their own student rebellions at the time. It surely wasn’t in their interest to help the young Czechoslovaks out.”

It upset me to think that the Americans didn’t care about our small nation while we regarded them as our saviours. Ours was clearly a one-sided love affair.

“I bet that Stalin somehow tricked President Roosevelt into signing us off to him.” I refused to blame the American authorities for our suffering. “Stalin was evil. Everyone knows that.”

I desperately needed to find a plausible excuse to preserve my faith in the fairness of American leaders and the image of the United States as the global referee. Growing up behind the Iron Curtain would have been unbearably depressing had I not imagined the world on the other side completely different from the one we inhabited. The people governing the Western Block had to be more competent and honest than our detested politicians.

The TV news frequently displayed American missiles blowing up at various strategic locations and the South Korean riot police beating up unarmed students in the streets of Seoul. Nonetheless, I firmly believed that any footage depicting the West in negative light was photomontage, a product of communist propaganda. Hearing the Bolsheviks accuse the Western democracies of ruthlessness and corruption made me laugh. I was too smart to accept this kind of nonsense.

When I was younger, I invariably combated under the English or American banners, playing at war with the local children. If the English pilots and the US marines greatly outnumbered the Russians, I would stubbornly refuse to enact a Red Army soldier. “I’d rather play a Nazi than a Russian partisan.” I insisted.

In my mind, the United States was heaven on Earth and the other Western countries merely represented the pathway to its gates. My sister’s letters confirmed my belief. The glossy postcards she sent us from Italy featured sunlit villas and rows of glamorous cars parked along the golden beaches. I could see fashionably dressed, tanned people strolling under the palm trees. Pressing my nose to the coloured paper, I thought I could smell freedom. If I closed my eyes, I heard the waves slapping the shore.

Whenever I found an envelope with an Italian stamp in our mailbox, I took it to my parents. “We’ve got news from Marta!” I would carry the letter above my head like an Olympic torch. Mum and Dad would interrupt their work to sit down around our dining table and read my sister’s pages aloud.

“What is she saying? Have Gianni and Marta moved to their new home?” I would impatiently watch my mother unfold the sheets of paper covered in illegible handwriting.

In her early letters, Marta had mentioned that Gianni was considering a job offer by a respected Italian car company in Northern Italy. After several months of sharing the household with the in-laws, the young couple prepared to move on. Gianni’s native town was apparently nice and Mrs Papazzani proved a skilful cook, but Marta couldn’t wait to leave. She was looking forward to starting a new life in Turin, but for some reason, continuous setbacks kept stalling the young couple’s departure.

Initially, Marta painted her life in Italy in the brightest colours, but her enthusiasm gradually turned pastel until it completely washed out with the autumn rains. Her letters became shorter and her tone began to sound weary. She eventually wrote to us that Mr Papazzani’s health was in peril. The medical experts gave Gianni’s father a few months of life. Mrs Papazzani was in tears, pressing her only son to remain close to her. In the end, Gianni declined the lucrative offer in Turin to accept a teaching position at the local high school.

From what Marta wrote, we gathered that Mr Papazzani used to work as a bus driver prior to becoming ill. This irregular occupation presumably provided him with countless occasions to cheat on his wife before a bowel cancer forced him to early retirement. Following a series of operations, including the colostomy, Mr Papazzani ended up in his wife’s vengeful care. He might have received a fat disability pension, but Mrs Papazzani forced him to follow a tasteless diet. According to Marta’s observations, Gianni’s dad continued to cheat on his wife by eating foods that threatened his health. He regularly overdosed on cheese and wine, coming close to death. These dramatic episodes would provide Mrs Papazzani with the opportunity to play a victim and coerce her son to keep watch by his father’s deathbed.

By the end of autumn, Marta’s handwriting began to slump and Mum couldn’t help frowning at the underlying sadness she could read between the lines. The young couple occupied a room on the same floor with the in-laws. Mrs Papazzani was particular about keeping her house clean and refused to let Marta use the kitchen. She also pedantically

insisted on serving the meals at precise times and had a tendency to become offended if Gianni took Marta out. The Papazzani's house included a large basement apartment, yet Gianni's mother preferred to rent it cheaply to an elderly acquaintance to prevent the newlyweds from living an independent life downstairs. Gianni's wage was so low, it was going to take him ages to save up a deposit for a flat. By the look of things, the in-laws conspired to trap the married couple in their miserable life.

In her latest letter, Marta described how her mother-in-law rushed to the newlyweds' bedroom with a vacuum cleaner on one Sunday morning. Wearing an apron and rubber gloves, she didn't bother to knock. When Gianni attempted to challenge her, Marta complained, the Italian woman indignantly pointed at the clock. She would have never thought of finding them in bed after nine am. They should be ashamed, she declared, switching the vacuum cleaner on. The naked couple were condemned to watch her clean their room from beneath the sheets. Apparently, they weren't able to lock the door the previous night, because the key went mysteriously missing.

I could see my mother's hands tremble in the lamplight while she read out Marta's account. "Can you believe this?" She gazed at my father.

"Yeah." He scratched his head. "It's just like when we used to live with your parents."



THE DAY WHEN MARTA turned twenty-three, we stood around the phone to sing Happy Birthday to her. As Dad dialled the international number, it occurred to me how much I missed my sister. It was the first time we didn't celebrate her birth together as a family.

"Pronto?" Mrs Papazzani's shrill voice echoed from the receiver. "*Chi parla?*"

I had never seen my father so lost for words.

"*Un momento.*" I watched him pass the phone to my mother. "It's Marta's in-law." He cowardly whispered. "You talk to her."

My mother was our polyglot, speaking seven languages, including Latin. She spent the summer holidays by memorizing an Italian textbook she had found in the public library. "*Ciao Maria.*" Mum carefully chose her words, making sure to pronounce them correctly. "How are you? Can I speak to Marta, *per favore?*"

“*Marta non c’è!*” Mrs Papazzani declared my sister absent.

“Where is she?” My mother nervously winked. “It’s her birthday today.”

“How am I supposed to know this? *È fuori!*” Gianni’s mother snapped. Claiming that Marta was out, she hung up.

Hearing a busy tone, my mother peered down the receiver as if in the hope to see to the other end of the line. Mrs Papazzani’s response was unclear. Mum couldn’t tell whether Marta wasn’t at home on that particular evening or if the young couple had permanently moved out from the in-laws.

“Don’t you find it strange, Jirka?” She bit her nails. “I had the impression of hearing Marta’s voice in the background. Could it be that Mrs Papazzani is preventing us from speaking to our daughter?”

“Do you think this is the case?” Dad’s eyes changed colour, becoming wildly yellow. “Maybe Gianni took Marta out for dinner?”

“She knew we were going to call!” I cried out.

“She probably forgot . . .” Despite my father’s usual optimism, I sensed that he was beginning to worry.

I saw the forest sway outside in the northern wind while the three of us sat down in austere silence, watching the candles burn down on the cake Mum and I had baked for Marta’s birthday. An empty plate sat in my sister’s place. It was months since Marta had moved out, but I continued to set our table for four.

“I must say, I hate having no control over what’s going on down there in Italy.” Dad uncorked the bottle of Bohemia Sekt, the Czech version of Champagne. “*Na zdрави.*” He sadly raised his glass to chink it against Mum’s.

“Have the two of you finished your homework?” My mother preferred to steer the conversation to the Italian lessons to which we had collectively subscribed in a Prague language school. “I was unimpressed with your inability to hold a conversation with Mrs Papazzani, Jirka.”

Taking a gulp of the sparkling wine, my dad screwed his face as if he swallowed acid. “How was I supposed to greet the old hag? *Buonasera signorina* or *Ciao bella, ciao ciao?*” He recalled the popular songs. “Besides, why bother learning the language if I can’t dream of travelling to Italy?”

Looking indignant, he snuffed out the candles and carved himself a large piece of the birthday cake.

“I don’t have any intention to make a clown of myself on the phone.” He boomed. “Especially when I suspect that the STB is listening to our conversations.”

A couple of months after my sister’s departure, the STB finally made the connection between Marta and Dad. The letters from Italy arrived late and in unsealed envelopes. Whenever we picked up the phone, we could hear a click, followed by an unmistakable squeaky sound. Someone from the Czechoslovak embassy in Rome had also apparently phoned the Papazzanis up, trying to extort money from my sister. The anonymous caller threatened her with jail if she travelled back to see her family. Marta didn’t provide the Normalization authorities with her Italian number. The secret police did a good job of tracking her down.



THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, I bumped into a devil when I got off the train after school. It was December 5th when angels and devils traditionally swarm around the Czech towns.

“Hey, Miranda. What are you up to?” The Devil grinned.

I recognised the tough leader of the local horse-riding girls. Hana and I used to be classmates in elementary school.

“Did you hear that my parents have divorced?” Hana Buková looked menacing in her costume. “I live with Dad now.” Removing the black nylon stocking from her face, she showed me a friendly smile.

“Wow.” I was shocked. “Are you touring the town alone tonight?”

“Of course not.” She jiggled the chain she was carrying around her waist. “Dad’s going to be Mikuláš and my sister wants to play the angel.” She told me. “Would you consider joining us?”

“Sure. That sounds great!” I was excited.

Mr Buk was a songwriter who owned a big house by the river. He was a notorious alcoholic. Whenever he wasn’t writing lyrics for country-music songs, he could be seen drinking at the Rotten Pub.

“I brought you another devil, Dad.” Hana announced on entering the Buk’s villa.

“Cool bananas.” I noticed that Saint Mikuláš was unstable, leaning against his staff. “There are never enough devils in the world.”

Mr Buk had an entire package of cotton wool attached to his sunken face and I saw a bottle of vodka stick out of his handmade cassock.

“Where the hell do you come from, Devil?” He asked me.

“It’s Miranda Urban, Dad.” Hana introduced me. “She went to school with me.”

“Do I have to play a devil?” I pleaded. “I’d rather be an angel.”

“Angels or devils? Hell if I care.” Mr Buk dangerously swayed, holding onto his mitre. “Whatever you prefer.”

An hour later, I was walking around town, dressed in a white sheet. I had a pair of cardboard wings clipped to my back and a halo made of wires attached to my head. Saint Mikuláš carried a list of households he promised to visit. He was planning to earn some alcohol as a reward for our performance. Hana’s sister was in charge of ringing doorbells while I sang angelic songs. The Devil ran around, rattling her chains and making loud snorting noises that would better suit a horse.

“Thank God you showed up!” Most parents were happy to see us, handing us baskets with treats at the house entrance. “Our Kuba has been so naughty lately!” They typically complained about their offspring. “Make him repent.”

The Devil’s job was to scare the children into kneeling down in the living room. Saint Mikuláš read a list of sins from his book and menaced the rascals with hell if they didn’t improve their behaviour. After the kids promised to be good, reciting a short poem or performing a song as their penitence, the angels rewarded them with candies and ginger bread.

“Let me see if you listened to your Mum and Dad during the last year.” I watched St. Mikuláš sway back and forth like a poplar tree in the wind, leafing through the phone directory. “What was your surname again, honey?”

When I was a small girl, I used to dread December 5th. Mr Caesar looked scary even without wearing a costume. His raucous laughter would give me heart palpitations and sometimes, if the Devil had too much to drink, I preferred to crawl beneath the couch to hide from him. It was a traumatizing experience, but it usually worked marvels. All my mother had to do if I misbehaved was to dial 666 on the phone to bring me back to my senses. The times had changed since then, however. I was astonished to see preschool children failing to show respect for the Devil. Entering the house of the local young intellectuals, I watched in amazement while their two sons pulled Hana’s tail. When St. Mikuláš told the naughty boys to repent, they laughed at him.

“Your beard is peeling off, Grandpa!” The first grader painfully kicked Mr Buk in his knee. While the boy’s parents stoically overlooked the whole commotion, the younger brother tried to break my cardboard wings.

“Both of you clearly belong in Hell.” I felt that someone needed to restore the order. “Come on, Devil. Take them.” I picked a plastic sword from a pile of toys, holding the weapon above my head like Archangel Gabriel.

Unfortunately, the Devil was meek. Afraid to recourse to violence, Hana continued to issue toothless threats. To make things worse, Saint Mikuláš stumbled over a folded rag, helplessly heaving himself into an armchair.

“Mikuláš *na goulash.*” The boys knocked off Mr Buk’s paper mitre, rolling on the floor with laughter.

“Enough is enough!” I pinned one of the brats to the wall, holding him by his neck. “Never mind if the Devil doesn’t want to take you to hell.” I heard myself spontaneously declare. “You’re going to fare much worse if I bring you to Heaven.” I threatened him. “You’ll mop the church tiles with holy water for eternity and I will nail you to a cross whenever you misbehave!”

Miraculously, I scared the hell out of the little rascal. Bursting into tears, he ended up running for the safety of his mother’s skirt.

“We’re trying to bring up our children by using the non-directive method.” The boy’s father was so upset with my performance he refused to reward Saint Mikuláš with the obligatory shot of booze. “This is not quite what we’ve imagined.” The tall intellectual complained, seeing us to the door.

It was dark outside, but I could see that Hana’s father was pissed off.

“We can’t use an angel like you.” Mr Buk mumbled. “Go home.” He waved me away. “You have an overwhelming personality.”

I handed my wings to Hana’s sister and sheepishly said goodbye to the trio before I climbed the hill to our house.

“*Aboj.*” I found my parents sitting at our dining table with their heads buried in their hands. “What’s going on?”

“We spoke to Marta on the phone.” My mother informed me. “She was in tears.” I noticed that Mum’s eyes were also red from crying. “The reason why we couldn’t talk to Marta last night was because Gianni took her to hospital. She had an accident at work and keeps peeing blood.”

By the look of things, my sister was in big trouble.

The owner of the local pastry factory where Mrs Papazzani arranged a job for Marta, apparently had an eye for my blonde sister. His wife grew jealous and a few days before Marta's birthday, she sent my curvaceous sister to fetch dough from an industrial fridge, locking her inside as if by mistake. Luckily, one of the employees freed Marta before she ended up freezing to death. Suffering severe hypothermia, my sister didn't go as far as to denounce the owner's wife for trying to kill her. She merely announced her intention to resign from work, but Mrs Papazzani became mortally offended. She blamed Marta for having attracted the proprietor's interest and subsequently his wife's jealousy by wearing inappropriate attire. The incident obviously stirred wild gossip in the small town, with rumours about Marta's shady past in a communist country adding spice to the story. And even if Gianni dismissed the widespread lies as downright outrageous, his mother took matters of honour seriously.

My sister had to use a public payphone to call us.

"This sounds like in Sicily." My mum despaired. "Do you remember that movie by Roberto Rossellini where Ingrid Bergman marries an Italian prisoner of war to escape the internment camp? She ends up living in a remote fishing village and her mother-in-law mistreats her like a slave until she escapes across the mountains."

"Do you mean *Stromboli*?" Dad growled.

I pictured the blonde film star scrambling up a smouldering volcano in a desperate attempt to regain freedom. Bergman's breasts were huge. She looked a lot like my sister. "What can we do to help Marta out?" I tearfully asked.

There was silence. I watched my father take off his glasses and light a Sparta. Mum nervously chewed her nails. The wind howled in our chimney and the trees in the forest seemed to moan.

"What can we do?" My father clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. "In normal circumstances, I would jump in my car and drive down to Italy to set everything straight like any other loving father would do." He paced around the dining room like a captured predator, his eyes glistening with determination to escape. "Unfortunately, I can't travel abroad, can I?" He despaired. "It's been years since Comrade Rabbit refused to issue me with a passport. I'm sorry to deny your application, Comrade Urban. I'm told we can't trust you." Speaking in a spitefully sweet female voice, Dad imitated the passport police officer from our district.

For a long moment, he pensively peered out of the window, furiously puffing on his Sparta. “You know what, Alice? This time, the fat bitch won’t stop me.” He announced. “Where my daughters are concerned I won’t take no for an answer. I swear to God, we’ll drive off to Italy before Christmas, even if it means that I’ll have to strangle someone or slash my way through the wires.”

“*Ježíšmarja*. How do you think you can do this?” My mother’s eyelashes fluttered like butterfly wings.

She recalled the Voice of America reportage about a Czech man who attempted to fly over the Iron Curtain in a homemade hang glider. He ended up losing his altitude in the morning fog and the border patrol shot him down.

“Don’t worry, Alice. I’ll think of something less risky.” My father bared his incisors, exhaling smoke. “Watch me.”



A COUPLE OF DAYS later, during our Italian lesson, I noticed that Dad was more distracted than usual. My mother frequented an advanced class. The two of us shared the bench in a small classroom, learning to pronounce ‘*buon giorno*’ and ‘*arivederci*’ with another dozen beginners. I was the youngest student. Our teacher was a delicate lady in her early sixties with the patience of a saint. She did everything she could to make my father concentrate on the lesson. He was very naughty that day. She caught him copying my homework and he repeatedly failed to give her correct answers.

“Mr Urban. What is the singular form of the adjective ‘*tipici*?’” She asked.

“*Ti-pee-cho!*” He blurted out without thinking.

Not only did he shamefully mispronounce the Italian word. By stressing the second syllable instead of the first, Dad seemed to have insulted the poor teacher in the most obnoxious way. The class collectively recoiled on hearing him shout “you cunt” before everyone realised his innocent mistake. While the students hid their faces behind open textbooks, suppressing hysterical laughter, the elderly teacher nearly fainted. I saw her disappear beneath her desk, looking for a box of mints in her handbag.

“The accent falls on the first syllable, *Signore* Urban.” The poor teacher corrected Dad after she eventually recovered. “The ‘c’ has to be pronounced as ‘k’. *Tee-pico*. Try to repeat after me.”

“What a stupid language!” My father was out of the door before the lesson was over. “How am I supposed to remember the nuances in the accent? Am I some bloody opera singer or what?”

I watched him throw on the black leather jacket, grumpily flipping a Sparta from his packet of cigarettes as we walked out of the school building.

“I’ve got to attend some important business before we drive home.” Striking a match alight on the sidewalk, he cupped the flame with his hand to protect it from the wind.

I followed him to our new Škoda. We had recently swapped our yellow vehicle for the latest model, 120, but the body of the new car looked identical, except for the different colour, which was beige. It featured bigger, oval headlights and the engine proved more reliable than the previous one.

“Why don’t you wait for me inside?” Dad handed me the car keys. “I won’t be long.”

“Can’t I come with you?” I made a long face. “Where are you going?”

“To see Mirek Reichert. It won’t take me a minute.”

My eyes welled up with tears. “You always say that and I end up waiting for you for hours.” I sniffed.

“Alright then.” He capitulated.

Mr Reichert was one of my father’s closest friends who had an exceptionally hirsute disposition and an adventurous past. A flamboyant storyteller, he made it no secret that he used to work as a spy before 1968. According to Mr Reichert’s legend, the Czechoslovak intelligence service had sent him to Washington DC in the sixties to oversee the North American division. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War Crisis, Mr Reichert apparently initiated the negotiations between the CIA and the KGB. The first meetings took place in his apartment. After the Soviet invasion of our country, the intelligence service changed leadership and called Mr Reichert to home base. His refusal to express support for the occupation had earned him immediate dismissal from his job, despite his professional achievements. Struggling to secure another employment, the celebrity ex-spy eventually managed to find a safe niche in the legal department of the State Trades Cooperative. Ironically, his new office was located on the corner of Bartholomew Street, opposite the infamous building covered in tiles that housed the STB.

“Great to see you, Jirka!” Mr Reichert stood up to squeeze my father’s hand when we entered his basement office. “What have you been up to lately, mate? Still cooking illegal booze in your garage?”

Green patches of mildew covered the moist walls and I noted that the brown carpet distinctly smelled of mouse shit. Mr Reichert's young assistant was working at her desk in the corner. The overweight secretary, Mrs Lunchbreak, had crimson nails that looked a couple of inches too long to make it possible for her to do any typing. The office was crammed with cardboard boxes containing dusty files and chunky law books. A narrow window, secured with bars as if in jail, was level with the sidewalk, framing the view of passers-by's shoes.

"Have you already met Jolana?" Mr Reichert introduced Dad to his assistant.

The young woman timidly looked up from her paperwork to shake my father's hand. Skinny and tall, she reminded me of a frightened doe.

"Before she came here, she used to spend much of her time on the other side of the street." Mr Reichert told us how the young Jolana fell in love with a dissident pastor, a signatory of Charta 77. Months after the wedding, the STB found a pretext to throw her husband in prison.

"The Bolsheviks wouldn't even let her sell cucumbers in a greengrocery." The ex-spy shook his grey head with outrage, describing Jolana's fate. Stigmatised as the wife of a political criminal, the young woman lived alone in a small town where nobody dared to approach her. "Her only company were the STB agents who surveyed her house and interrogated her for days on end." Mr Reichert said. "When Jolana came to see me, I recognised her potential and employed her." He puffed out his hairy chest like a mating pigeon. "Using some old contacts, I was able to push through her application to the law faculty. As from September, Jolana started to work towards her degree."

My father's friend reclined in his office chair.

"Guess what, mate?" He chuckled, incredulously rolling his eyes. "Who do you think Jolana bumped into on the first day of school?" Mr Reichert made a rhetoric pause before delivering his punchline. "The bloke who used to question her at the STB headquarters studies in her class!"

"What?" Dad sputtered. "Is he trying to upgrade his qualifications?"

"Yes. That's exactly what he's hoping to achieve." Jolana shyly confirmed. "He always gives me a wink as if we were old friends."

"They all seem very busy upgrading now." Mr Reichert grinned. "See?" He pulled a spyglass from his desk drawer, walking over to the window. "I watch the STB employees walk in and out of their burrow every day. They look unusually alert these days, sniffing

around like mongooses before a storm. Something is hanging in the air since Gorbachev came to Prague.”

Standing by the windowsill, Mr Reichert thoughtfully paused to observe the shoes stepping inside and outside the secret police headquarters.

“I take it you are exceptionally well informed, Mirek.” Dad meaningfully cleared his throat. “I was hoping to ask you a few delicate questions.”

“Give me a sec.” Mr Reichert laid the spyglass onto his desk, pulling a crumpled note from his pocket. “Mrs Lunchbreak.” He called out to his secretary. “Would you mind fetching us some refreshments?”

“With pleasure.” The fat woman stopped filing her red nails. “It was time for break anyway.” When the clicking of her heels receded in the stairway, everyone in the office relaxed.

“You can speak frankly in front of Jolana.” Mr Reichert assured Dad. “She’s got my confidence.” Reaching behind a stack of dusty files, the ex-spy pulled out a bottle of red Johnnie Walker. I watched him pour Scotch in two glasses.

“Thank you, mate. *Na zdravi*,” Dad took a gulp. “Listen, do you have any idea who’s currently pulling strings at the first division?”

“Maybe. Why?”

“I want them to remove the ban preventing me from holding a passport.” My father explained. “I need to drive down to Italy to sort out Marta’s marriage situation, but the passport police won’t let me travel anywhere except to Poland or Hungary. Not even to Yugoslavia.”

“That sounds rather tricky.” Mr Reichert scratched his hairy neck.

“Look, mate.” Dad pressed him. “Give me the guy’s name and I’ll find a way to get to him. Who do you think has the power to make this kind of decision?”

A deep wrinkle appeared on the ex-spy’s forehead as he poured another two glasses of Scotch. “I don’t think the chief of the Clandestine Service is your man.” He thoughtfully swished the drink in his mouth. “Judging by the amount of time he spends in the nearby restaurant, he is an incompetent drunk.” Mr Reichert rubbed his nose. “I heard his new deputy is a cunning whore who’s got the minister’s ear.” He finally said. “You probably remember him under his undercover name, Venda Veselek.”

“You’re joking. Are you telling me that this *ti-peecho* made it to the top?” Dad looked appalled. “Forgive my Italian.” He turned to Jolana. “I too had some assholes as classmates.”

“I know what you mean.” The young woman looked unfazed. “There aren’t strong enough words to describe people like this.”

“Do you have any idea where Venda lives?” Dad went back to quizzing his friend.

“Nope.” Mr Reichert leaned back to his chair, polishing the spyglass. “I did write his licence plate somewhere in my files if you think this could help, but it probably wasn’t Venda’s private car.”

“Do you think Béd’a Stein would know?” My father glanced at his wristwatch. “It’s a quarter to four. I could still get him at his regular joint.”

Mr Stein was another of my father’s old friends. A fatherly figure, he was a founding member of the dissident organisation, Charta 77. As a pre-war communist, Mr Stein had fought against the Nazis in Spain and later in the local Resistance. Having survived a few years of detention in a concentration camp, he made a rocketing career after the war. Following the Soviet invasion in 1968, Mr Stein had lost his job and became the target of political persecution on the account of his affiliation with the Prague Spring’s leaders. In spite of his bad experience with the totalitarian regime, his faith in Karl Marx’s ideal of communism remained unshaken.

“Béd’a taught Venda at school.” Mr Reichert nodded. “Who knows? Maybe the two of them kept in touch?”

“Thanks, mate.”

Dad was ready to leave when Mrs Lunchbreak burst in through the office door with a package of pastries. “Won’t you stay for coffee?” She cooed.

Seeing a miserable look in my eyes, my father relented. Letting me enjoy a chocolate hedgehog as a reward for my patience, he smoked another Sparta.

“What do you make of the new business law, Mirek?” Dad preferred to change the conversation subject. “The Bolsheviks promised to launch it in January to comply with Gorbachev’s requests.”

“If I were you I wouldn’t give it much hope, mate.” Mr Reichert doubtfully raised his furry eyebrows. “This is yet another of their feeble efforts to conform to the Perestroika. Bolsheviks are only good at making it sound like something has changed, but if you stick your head out for the new rules, you’ll quickly find out that the individual business law is tailored in a way to make it impossible for anyone to comply with it.”

“I’ll give it a try anyway.” Dad’s yellow eyes glowed with mischief. “I want to get out of my contract with the cooperative to become an entrepreneur after the New Year.”

“How foolish of you.” Mr Reichert shook his head in disbelief. “But I can’t say I’m surprised to hear you say this, mate. You have a long history of running your head straight into the wall.”



A MINUTE LATER, DAD and I were driving down along the Vltava River. Woolly clouds piled above the church spires like a duvet. Fat snowflakes whirled in the air. We followed the quay to Holešovice, a dreary neighbourhood crouching between the foot of Letná and the river port.

“Why did you never tell me that Mr Stein worked as a teacher, Dad?” I couldn’t stop thinking about what Mr Reichert had mentioned before.

“He was actually a headmaster.” My father corrected me.

I was intrigued. “At what school?”

“A . . . special kind.”

“What was so special about this school?” I intensely watched my father’s face while he backed into a vacant spot near the restaurant where Mr Stein usually played chess in the afternoons. “Go on. Tell me.” I nagged him.

“Alright, Trumpet.” Dad let out an exasperated sigh, pulling up the handbrake. “It’s a secret, okay? You must immediately forget what I’m about to tell you.” He glared at me, letting his words sink. “Béd’a wouldn’t want you to know about his involvement with the Intelligence Service.”

“What?” My jaw dropped.

“He was in charge of the Spy Academy in the sixties.”

My father was out of the car before I could ask any more questions.

Dietní Restaurace on the corner of Strosmajer Square was empty at this time of the day except for a small table behind a canvas screen where Mr Stein motionlessly sat at a chessboard, facing an elderly rival. The game timer ticked away in silence. A group of pensioners stood around, rubbing their chins.

“I’m sorry to disturb your game.” Dad rushed in. “I was hoping to have a quick word with you, Béd’a, if you have a minute.”

A wave of profound displeasure washed over the onlookers’ faces, but Mr Stein was delighted to see us.

“You just saved my skin, son.” He interrupted the game with a stately gesture. “The General and I were at our wits’ end, trying to solve this hopeless stalemate.” His grey, translucent eyes overlooked a few remaining figures. “It’s like the Cuban Crisis.” Mr Stein pushed the chessboard out of the way. “The smartest move we can make at this peculiar stage is to cut our losses and get out of the game.”

The short, balding retiree was dressed in a blue nylon jacket and a chequered shirt. He looked like the sort of harmless old man to whom I would offer my seat on a bus and it would never occur to me that he was actually an ex-spy. A closer observation revealed a certain quality to his body language that gave him an aura of strong authority. He made everyone retreat from his table by merely raising his hand, including the man called the General.

“I’ll see you here tomorrow afternoon, boys.” He dismissed his old friends. As the pensioners walked out of the door, Mr Stein whispered to Dad. “That was Standa Vacek from the military contra.”

“Was it?” My father took the General’s chair.

“Hello Miranda.” Mr Stein patted me on the shoulder. “Would you fancy a blueberry pancake?” He waved at the waiter, pulling a skinny wallet out of a mesh bag that hung on the back of his chair.

“Venda Veselek.” Dad went straight to the point after Mr Stein had placed the order. “Does this name tell you anything?”

The old man’s face remained perfectly neutral. “Can you play chess?” He asked me.

“Not really, but I’m very good at playing *Mate, don’t get mad!*” I referred to the Czech version of Parcheesi in which the players throw dice to get their pawns to home base, bumping their opponents off the track.

“That’s an excellent game. Very unscrupulous.” Mr Stein pointed to a box with board games by the window. “Why don’t you have a look if you can find it, sweetie, while your father and I have a talk.”

I took my cue and transferred to a remote table to play *Mate, don’t get mad* by myself. Leaning back on my chair with my ears pricked, however, I could still hear the ensuing conversation.

“If I had to remember Venda Veselek for his school results,” Mr Stein murmured, “I wouldn’t know him from any other.” He cautiously checked on me. Satisfied to see me absorbed in the game, he turned back to my dad. “He was a mediocre student with a

remarkably flexible character. His Russian was also exceptionally good. Venda has done extremely well for himself by dishing on everyone after the invasion.” The former Spy Academy headmaster paused as the waiter came out of the kitchen, carrying a plateful of pancakes to my table.

“*Děkuju.*” I put the board game back in the box and armed myself with a fork.

“What else can you tell me, Béd’a?” Dad whispered. “Do you have any dirt on Venda? Marta is in trouble in Italy and Mirek Reichert says that it’s within Venda’s competence to issue me with the passport.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Trust me.”

“Well, as a matter of fact there’s something you might be interested to hear.” Mr Stein scratched his grey stubble, furtively looking around. “Keeping in mind Venda’s shitty character and his rank at the time, I’d say it was him who had signed the order for your execution.”

Hearing his last words, I almost choked on a blueberry. For a second, I thought I was going to vomit. Struggling to maintain an inconspicuous appearance, I let out a discreet cough to send the berry out of my windpipe.

“You don’t say.” My father gasped. “I knew that Venda was a gutless *ti-peecho*, but I wouldn’t have made him out for a murderer.”

“Yes, son. Impressions deceive.” Mr Stein smiled sadly. “These spineless types can be surprisingly cruel, especially if they command someone who’ll do the dirty job for them. Guys like Venda will kill you with the stroke of a pen.”

“Where does he live?” My father wanted to know.

“I can’t say.”

“Who do you think I should ask?”

“If I were you I’d ask someone who was formally fired from the service, but is likely to moonlight for them.”

“Sochor?”

“Good idea, son.” Mr Stein nodded, turning around. “I forgot to wish you *dobrou chut*, Miranda. Did you enjoy your pancakes?” Fans of wrinkles unfolded around his grey eyes, when he smiled. “Which one of you won the game?” Seeing my confusion, he laughed. “Don’t mind me joking. I frequently play chess with my own shadow.” The old man explained. “Whether he’s my friend or enemy, he keeps me company in times of solitude.”

Mr Stein accompanied us to our Škoda, carrying his wallet in the mesh bag like a dead fish. “It was nice seeing you, Miranda.” He opened the car door for me.

“Say hello to Eva from me.” Dad shook his friend’s hand. “By the way, how is she? I haven’t seen her lately.”

Mrs Steinová acted as the spokeswoman for Charta 77. Having spent her youth in the concentration camp, the former ballerina found herself harassed by the STB during the Normalization. The secret police regularly detained her in jail along with her best friend, Václav Havel.

“I’d say she’s okay.” Mr Stein shrugged. “Last week she gave her interrogator a heart attack.” He rolled his eyes, laughing. “You know her temper. He was apparently getting rough with her. She called him a rat and accused him of working graveyard shifts at the Pankrác Jail during the German occupation.” The old man said. “Obviously, she was bluffing, but judging by the copper’s reaction, Eva was right on the money. He was apparently dead on the spot.”

“*Ježíšmarja.*” Dad roared with laughter. “I wouldn’t want to pick a fight with your wife. It’s no wonder you spend so much time outside.”

“You got that quite right, son.” The old man grinned, waving us goodbye from the sidewalk.



IT WAS THE PEAK hour by the time we drove over the bridge on the cross-town expressway. Cars queued in both directions. The congested lanes reminded me of slow-moving conveyor belts loaded with identical cans of sardines.

“Who is Sochor?” I interrogated Dad while we waited in the traffic jam.

“Excuse me?” He gave me a scolding look. “Have you been eavesdropping on our conversation?”

“I’ve heard everything you said, including that thing about your execution.” I proudly declared. “Do you think I’m stupid?”

I watched my dad lick the side of his cigarette before he rolled down the window to breathe out smoke into the freezing darkness. The sickle-shaped moon climbed over the National Museum and the brake lights in front of us glimmered like red stars.

“Who wanted to kill you?” I was curious. “And how come you’re alive?”

“Good question.” Dad scratched his scalp. “The only explanation why I’m still here is that the little God wished to preserve my life. My name figured on a long list of people, all of whom died young under suspicious circumstances. There were about sixty-eight of them, mostly my former colleagues. One of them drowned in his bathtub, another ended up squashed under the wheels of an unidentified truck while waiting on a tram platform. Miraculously, I’m the only one who has escaped my execution.”

“You’re kidding. Tell me about it.”

“Later.”

“But why?” I cried out. “What did you do?”

“I knew too much.”

“So what? What’s wrong with knowing?”

“Everything.” Dad laughed. “Depends on who you work for.”

“Who did you work for?”

“Didn’t you guess by now?” My father slowly shifted gears. “I was also a spy.”

It took me a while to process the missing piece of information. It was as if Dad had thrown a rock into a bottomless well. I watched it plummet through obscurity, waiting to hear the sound of the impact.

“Do you realizzee what iss a ssspy?” The Devil’s voice sizzled like a pressure cooker inside my head. “Sssomeone who worksss for the SSSTB.”

“So you and Sochor were colleagues?” I swallowed.

“That’s correct.” My father switched on the indicator to drive up to Žižkov, another neighbourhood mostly inhabited by Gypsies. “I shared the office with Sochor when I was working as a lieutenant in the German Section.” He clarified.

As the green light turned orange, Dad squeezed the gas pedal to pass the intersection. “After the KGB took over our command, I handed in my resignation. Sochor opted to remain, like the majority of my ex-colleagues.” He continued. “He was prepared to do anything to keep his position. He even helped the uniformed police beat up the rallying crowds in Prague on the first anniversary of the invasion.”

We drove up a gloomy boulevard made of broken houses and crowded beer pubs. Performing a sharp U-turn on top of the hill, my father blatantly ignored the interdiction road sign on the sidewalk when he stopped by the curb. “Despite Sochor’s willingness to serve the new leadership, the Bolsheviks kicked him out two years later and he plays a dissident now.” Dad pointed to an obscure bottle-shop. “This is his new office.”

Studying my father's face, I suddenly had the impression that I didn't really know him. Anxiety and anger rose to my throat until it was throbbing with pain.

"Why did you lie to me?" I croaked.

"I didn't lie." Dad frowned. "I just never told you the full truth."

"Why?" I was hurt.

"Because you were too little and wouldn't understand."

He turned off the ignition to put his arms around my shoulders and I cried on his chest while he patted my head with his heavy hand.

"Come on, little Trumpet. Let's go to see Sochor."

I blew my nose and followed him inside the shop.

"Hello, Mr Gamble, what are you doing in here?" I recognized the stocky man in black apron behind the counter as the owner of a weekend cottage at Sázava River where my parents and I occasionally dropped by for a friendly chat. Mr Gamble and his blonde wife liked to see us, even if the grownup conversations invariably turned into heated political discussions.

"What a surprise." Mr Gamble smiled, but I had a feeling that he was nervous about something. There weren't any other customers inside the shop apart from us. "Wait a minute." He rushed to lock the door. "I'll be right back with you, Jirka." I watched him scribble onto a blackboard with a chalk. *Closed for delivery.*

"Where is Sochor?" I whispered to Dad, wondering whether his colleague was hiding behind the greasy curtain that divided the small shop from the stock room at the back.

"That's him." He pointed at Mr Gamble, grinning. "Sochor is his *left* name. I mean the undercover name."

"What was that?" Dad's ex-colleague must have overheard us, because his face turned ashen and his eyes started to twitch. "That was rather indiscreet of you, Jirka, don't you think?" He scolded.

"Sure." Dad leaned against the counter. "Indiscretion is my middle name."

"I tell you what, mate. You always had a big mouth for a spy." Mr Gamble grumbled, disappearing behind the curtain. "You would make a good soccer commentator."

I heard the chinking of empty bottles. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Have you got anything special under the counter?"

"What do you think?" Mr Gamble reappeared with a flat bottle of Hennessy. "I'm not here to fuck spiders."

I watched him pour a trickle of cognac into my father's glass and a big splash into his own. "Since you're driving." He explained with a conspicuous wink. "So, what's going on, mate? Don't tell me that you just happened to drive by and remembered how much you missed your old friend."

"See?" Dad nudged me. "Once a spy, always a spy."

I blushed with embarrassment, looking at my feet.

"Would you like some Coca-Cola, Miranda?" Mr Gamble asked me.

"Thanks. That would be lovely." Coca-Cola was the same thing to me as the cognac to the two men. I sipped it from the bottle with a straw, trying to remember the last time I drank one.

My father inserted a Sparta between his lips and took his time to light it with a match. "When was the last time you saw Venda Veselek?" He snuffed out the flame. "The two of you have been pretty close, no?"

"What makes you think that?" Mr Gamble visibly stiffened.

"Nothing. Call it intuition."

At this point someone started to knock on the glass door. I could see a queue of male customers waiting on the sidewalk. The men gestured wildly behind the windowpane, sounding loud.

"Can't you fucking read? Come back in half an hour." The ex-spy yelled. "Bloody Gypsies." He sneered, turning his back to the clients. "Today is payday. As soon as they pocket their children's allowance they come running for a case of rum."

"Ha! I bet you never thought you would end up spying on the Gypsies." Dad roared. "These guys might be small-time criminals, but Venda is a big one. According to a trusted source, he was behind the failed attempt on my life fifteen years ago. Where does he live now? I need to find him."

"I told you, I have no idea." Mr Gamble averted Dad's gaze.

"Mushrooms! I wouldn't be surprised if you kept an extra bottle of Hennessy for him under the counter."

"No way!" My dad's ex-colleague vigorously shook his head. "I've got no reason to do him any favours."

"Yes, you do." Dad's voice sounded deeply serious. "Do you really think I was born yesterday, my friend? You and your wife have gone to see your son twice since he has absconded to the States."

I could see a vicious look in Mr Gamble's eyes. The corners of the ex-spy's mouth drooped, but he said nothing to defend himself.

"I too have a daughter in the West and she's in trouble now." My father continued. "I take it, you wouldn't want the CIA to make a connection between your name and your celebrity agent, Alfred Frenzel? I suppose that they would love to have a word with you about Alfred the next time you cross the Atlantic. Wouldn't they?"

Calmly finishing his cognac, Dad placed the empty glass on the counter.

"Come on, mate. Out with it."



BACK IN OUR NEW car, I watched my father grin with satisfaction. He licked his thumb, leafing through the street directory. "It's a joke that someone like Venda lives in Ďáblice." He looked intrigued.

"Yeah." I shrugged. "Where else should the Devil live?"

"That's right." Dad laughed. "*Nomen omen.*"

Translating as Devil's Town, Ďáblice was an eerie Normalization housing estate at the north end of Prague, made of endless blocks of concrete that towered up to fifteen floors high. Each of the buildings could house an entire village and there were dozens of them geometrically arranged around the site.

"What would you say if we went to see him?" My father checked his wristwatch. "He should be at home by now, watching the TV news after a hard day at work."

Pulling away from the curb, we sped towards the industrial zone.

A moment later, Devil's Town emerged from the dark haze like a futuristic vision of inferno. Apart from the bare hedges shielding the crowded parking lots, I couldn't see a single tree in the whole area. Everything was made of concrete. The long tower blocks featured up to ten entrances each. TV screens flickered behind the hundreds of identical windows like candles in the columbarium. The central heat-station reminded me of a crematorium.

"What a horrible place!" I shivered when we drove up a street called *By the Furnace*, stopping in front of number 566.

"Pity it's not 666!" My father joked. "That would have really topped it."

I watched him jump out, leaving the key in the ignition.

“You wait here, Trumpet.” He commanded. “I left the engine on in case we’d have to drive off in a hurry. This way you can also keep warm when I’m away.”

“I’m scared for you, Daddy.” My heart jumped to my throat.

“Nonsense. I’ll be right back.” He slammed the door. “You can lock the doors from inside while I’m gone.”

Zippering up his leather jacket, he strode to the entrance. The glass doors featured an electric lock. My father studied the intercom board when the lights came on in the glass-panelled stairway. I saw an elderly woman walk out of the elevator, pulling a fat poodle behind her on the leash.

“*Dobry Večer.*” I heard my father greet her.

He gallantly held the door for the woman, patting the dog before he slipped inside. I wiped the misty car window to see what was going to follow. Dad walked up the stairs, reading the nameplates on the doors. Stopping on the third floor, he pressed one of the doorbells and stood away from the peephole as the lights in the stairway timed out. A moment later, a narrow beam came out of the door. I had the impression of seeing two shadows wrestle in the doorway before everything went dim.

In the meantime, the fat poodle sniffed around our tires and squeezed a poo on the concrete playground. His mistress eventually dragged him back inside, switching on the lights. I saw my dad speak to a skinny man cornered with his back against the stairway window. Venda Veselek wore a checked dressing gown over his pyjamas and seemed to shiver with cold. During the following verbal exchange, my father’s assassin continued to blow his nose in his handkerchief as if Dad made him cry. Everything about his body language betrayed the desire to escape. I watched the STB supervisor shake his head. Eventually, Mr Veselek switched to vigorous nodding until Dad released him from his clutches.

Seconds later, my father was back in the car and we drove off.

“That went well!” He rubbed his hands. “The timing couldn’t have been better.”

Venda Veselek was apparently in bed with the flu. He was feeble and terrified of the Perestroika.

“Venda has doubtlessly bad conscience.” Dad rejoiced. “When I suggested that I was thinking about informing the Voice of America about his role in the executions of our colleagues, he pissed himself with fear.”

“For real?”

“I hope not. Not that I could smell anything suspicious.” Dad rocked with triumphant laughter. “In any case, he promised to take care of my passport. I can pick it up the next Monday.”

Dad and I raced from Devil’s Town as if someone had set our tail on fire. I saw the imposing silhouette of the gothic cathedral on the hill ahead of us. Old Town looked mysterious covered in pristine snow. The castle bathed in golden floodlights, looking deserted while we drove past. I observed the presidential banner droop from the pole, indicating the presence of Gustáv Husák and the absence of the wind.

“Can I ask you something, Dad?” I cleared my throat, finding it hard to formulate my question. “What team are you actually kicking for? The good guys or the bad guys?”

Our wheels rattled on the cobblestones. “What was that?” Dad removed his foot from the gas pedal to perform a U-turn. Driving down to the Archbishop’s Palace, he abruptly parked in the castle square.

“I think it’s time we had a serious talk.” He announced in his raspy voice. “Let’s take a walk outside.”



THE OLD-FASHIONED LAMPS cast a yellow light on the ground, making our shadows stretch all the way to the castle entrance. The sickle moon swam between the shredded clouds like a luminous gondola and icy snow crackled beneath our feet as we strolled past the sandstone lions and the warriors wrestling above the massive fence. Breathing out mist, we paused on the terrace above the old city, admiring the view of hundreds of roofs and spires covered in the glittering white dust.

“I’d like to set this straight with you, little Trumpet.” Dad growled, making sure that nobody overheard us. “I might have made some huge mistakes in my life, but I’ve never been an asshole. Mum would never put up with me if I betrayed my ideals.” He lit up a Sparta, deeply inhaling smoke until his lungs exploded into a nasty cough.

“You should seriously quit.” I pointed out. “This is going to kill you.”

“Do you believe in fate?” He asked me when he finally caught his breath. “I do. I’m convinced that no matter how recklessly you live your life, you don’t get to kick the old bucket until the little God rings his bell.” Clearing his throat, he spat onto the frozen cobblestones. “What I’m about to say to you is the best example of this theory.” He

promised. “After what I’ve been through, it makes no difference if I smoke another fag. Now, let me explain to you the reasons that have led to my brief involvement with espionage.”

“Alright then.” I leaned against the wall. “What’s the story?”

Pulling on his cigarette, Dad narrowed his yellow eyes as if to rewind the reel of his memories to the beginning.

“I guess it takes us back to the fifties when I was your age.” He began. “After the Bolsheviks kicked my father out of his dental business, I was growing up poor in the dirty streets of Ostrava. This was shortly before Stalin’s death. We lived in perpetual fear of persecution. The secret police revived the practice of arresting people in the middle of the night. Life was the same as during the German occupation. Only the hammer and sickle replaced the swastika on the flag.”

I was familiar with the story of my father’s early adolescence. Like the other boys in Ostrava, he dreamt of becoming a scout. After the Communist Putsch in 1948, the Bolsheviks banned scouting and replaced scouts with pioneers. Despite the threat of persecution, a single scout club continued its existence. Everyone suspected that it was operating somewhere in Ostrava, but nobody knew where. It survived as a selective, top-secret organisation, a children’s version of the Resistance. The scout leader, Karel Líba, risked a jail sentence by running the club, but the STB had never sniffed out the club’s whereabouts and neither did the local boys. Apparently, all Dad’s friends were dying to become club members.

“We tailed anyone who we suspected was involved in the club’s activities, but without success.” Dad remembered. “One day, out of the blue, an older classmate discreetly approached me. He took me out for a walk in the park where he told me that the club members had been watching me for some time, concluding that I was a good chap. He offered me to join the club.”

Dad’s eyes shone yellow when he described how proud he was to accept. From that moment, his life had taken a radically different course, he told me. Scouting made him become a team player. He learned to cooperate with others in the face of adversity. Discovering the power of loyal friendship, he began to live up to the values he had been reading about in books until then.

“You name them. Fairness. Courage. Honesty.” Dad’s lips curled into an ironic smile. “All the noble ideals in which guys believe when they are boys to betray them later as

grownups.” I watched him flip the cigarette butt over the stone wall, making the sparks glimmer in the darkness.

“What happened then?” I was impatient.

“Eight years later, the Bolsheviks have sent me to dig coal as a punishment for my rebelliousness in High School.” Dad replied. “It was a living hell. The only way out was through joining the Party.”

Exhaling smoke, he seemed to deflate with guilt.

“I was nineteen years old when I signed the paperwork.” He sheepishly confessed. “Who can judge me for this? I desperately wanted to stay alive. Anyone who had served his time underground knows what it takes to get out.”

“No worries?” I patted his big hand to show him forgiveness. “You ended up getting kicked out of the Party anyway.”

“I certainly wasn’t a good communist.” He laughed. “Some people would call me a redeemed sinner today. When I entered the university in Prague at the beginning of the sixties, I helped to transform the Students’ Party Organization into a hot seat of counter-revolution. One day you’ll read about it in my political file.” Dad joked. “Everything you need to know about me is written in there.”

The discussed document allegedly denounced my father as an irredeemable counter-revolutionary who had worked closely with the Prague Spring reformists such as Ota Šik, promoting heretic ideas of political plurality and free trade amongst the fellow students. Unsurprisingly, Dad got into heaps of trouble with his conservative teachers.

“I still have the best memories of the times.” I saw him nostalgically gaze towards the university campus. “We were young and hopeful and we firmly believed in the global revolution represented by the three K.

“What three K?” I frowned. “Are you talking about Kukluxclan?”

“No.” Dad chuckled. “Three K stand for Kennedy, King and Castro.”

“Do you mean Fidel Castro?” I was shocked. “Isn’t his name spelled with a C? Besides I thought Castro was a bad guy?”

“Yeah. That seems to be the fate of all charismatic leaders.” My father agreed. “They either die young or become cranky dictators. When I was a student, Fidel Castro was a different person. Who knows what John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King would have become had they not been assassinated?”

I saw a black cat walking on the roof edge below us. Carefully laying his paws on the

frozen snow, he tiptoed to a smoking chimney where he curled up on the warm tiles.

“Do you see that dull building near the Charles Bridge?” Dad pointed across the river. “We used to call it the Barn. This is where I had my office after I started to work as an intelligence officer in 1966.”

The Barn hid in the bridge tower shadow. I would have never guessed the strategic importance of the inconspicuous edifice.

“How did you find your job?” I was curious. “I imagine you didn’t see an ad in the newspaper?”

During his military service, Dad told me, two mysterious men approached him in the same way the boy from the scout club did in Ostrava. They had been also presumably watching him for some time, concluding that he was an able, intelligent lad. The only difference was that the two men weren’t scouts, but spies, Dad pointed out. They were wondering if he would be interested in joining their club.

“I was already married to Mum and I warned them that my wife and I were dedicated Prague Spring supporters.” My father said. “They assured me that this is what they were looking for.”

They needed young, intelligent people like Dad to replace the Communist spies, they claimed. My father’s professional mission would be to help the local Intelligence Service become independent of the KGB, the men explained to him. The new leadership was planning to develop a neutral espionage program to reclaim our country’s status as the Central European Switzerland.

“Did Mum know about this?” I wondered.

“Of course.” My father looked offended. “She told me to accept the offer. We thought that I would give it try for three years and that if I didn’t like my job, I could quit the Intelligence Service. We were both very naïve.”

“Why?”

“Signing a contract with the Intelligence Agency is like making a pact with the Devil.” Dad grinned, struggling to open a box of matches to light a cigarette. “It’s for life.” He growled. “The only way to leave the world of secret agendas is to die or survive your execution, as was my case. It’s an unwritten military law that you can never put a man to death twice in a row.”

“You didn’t know this back then, when you agreed to become a spy, did you?”

“No.” Dad’s face showed an emotion that I had never observed in him before. As if

standing on a bridge between his old-self and the person he had become, wrapped in the blue haze of cigarette smoke, he seemed to revive his youthful expectations through the gloomy filter of his subsequent disappointments.

“Mum and I had romantic ideas about the world.” Shivering with cold, he straightened the collar of his coat. “Neither of us could anticipate what was going to happen and it’s probably a good thing that we didn’t. We wouldn’t have had courage to face so much hardship without our faith in better tomorrows.”

The sound of unstable steps in Nerudová Street disrupted our talk. I saw a couple of shadows stumble out of the Two Suns pub.

“A pity about the love I gave you!” The men sang the original version of *Roll Out The Barrel* in Czech. Clinging to each other for support, the two drunks weaved their way up towards the Strahov Monastery.

“Where does one learn to become a spy?” I asked after they vanished.

“In school. Obviously, you must also have talent, like in anything else.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you’d better be a quick thinker, because a dumb spy is a dead spy.” Dad grinned. “Advanced driving skills and good knowledge of foreign languages are a big plus, but the most important thing is to be a gifted liar.”

I studied my father’s face as if for the first time. “Do you have all those qualities?”

“Yes and no.” I could hear self-derisive amusement in his laughter. “I’ve never been a stranger to the art of deception, sure. I’m a natural storyteller.” My dad paused to think through his reply. “The one thing I could never do well was to lie to myself. Being a successful spy requires you to understand the roles that people play in life. You must also believe in the script you’re helping to stage. The trouble starts when you realise that your director and the author are lying to you. They run the show to cover up for the fact that neither of them has the slightest idea of what it’s about.”

“A show?”

“What else are politics if not a big theatre?”

I observed the lights swaying on the river surface in front of the Golden Chapel. The sandstone theatre on the quay reminded me of a Spanish galleon with the brown prow adorned in sculptures of flying horses.

“Why would you want to accept a role in this stupid show?” I knitted my eyebrows, experiencing sharp pain in my heart. “Didn’t you always disapprove of the people who

pretended to be your friends, informing the STB about your plans? You always said that spying was an act of evil, but you've done it yourself."

"You don't understand the difference between the foreign Intelligence Service and the domestic one." My father gasped with indignation. "I've never worked for the counter-intelligence!" He spat on the ground to express profound disgust.

"What do you mean?" I was confused.

"Let me make it simple for you." He fumed. "The first organisation must defend the country from external threats and inform the government about what's going on in the world. The domestic branch specialises in dealing with disrupting elements in the society, but it also tends to gather intelligence about the citizens, often misusing the collected information to control the populace."

I was glad to accept his explanation. "Sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to upset you."

"No worries. A lot of people get this wrong." He calmed down. "My training was to operate abroad. I was hired to work as a diplomat and shield our country against hostile foreign activities by building a network of our nation's allies." Finishing his Sparta, Dad squashed it under his shoe. "It's completely below me to pry into people's privacy." He scowled.

"So . . ." I preferred to change the subject. "Was it Béd'a Stein who trained you?"

"Yeah." My father nodded. "I couldn't have wished for a better mentor, although I was one of his best students too."

On leaving the Spy Academy, Dad proudly recalled, he had earned Mr Stein's highest recommendations and the intelligence service offered him a prestigious position that his classmates envied him. Seeing that my dad spoke good German, the head of the Service apportioned him as an operating officer to the German division. He had a work car with a driver and a private plane at his disposal.

"I'm glad to say that I had never misused my privileges like so many of my colleagues did." Dad fixed my eyes to convey his honesty. "For a twenty-seven years old fellow, I wielded quite a bit of power back then." He couldn't help smiling. "Even your grandma started to respect me."

My father reminded me that the Red Countess found herself on the receiving end of mounting criticism during the Prague Spring. She suddenly became very friendly to her detested son-in-law in the hopes that he would protect her.

"I refused to act as Grandma's advocate, but I didn't use my opportunity to crush her

either.” Dad admitted that he had good reasons to vindicate himself, having shared the household with the in-laws for two years. “I came to regret my benevolence later on, discovering that the Red Countess was involved with the group of traitors who formally invited the Soviets to our country.”

“This happened shortly after you started working as a spy, right?”

“Yes. The Soviets have rolled to Prague on August 21, 1968, and I’ve actually gathered intelligence about the planned invasion.”

“Did you?” I was beginning to freeze.

“Let’s take a walk to warm ourselves while we talk.” Dad hooked my arm into his. Heading down the castle stairs to Malá Strana, he revealed the details of his first and last work assignment.

“My primary task was to monitor our West Germans counterparts, but I ended up becoming the only Czechoslovak intelligence officer during the communist era who had received instructions to spy on the Soviets.”

Ironically, it was Sochor who alerted him about the International Student Festival in Bulgaria, Dad said. His experienced colleague explained that the principal reason behind organising student festivals was to create fishing ponds for future agents. The event was supposed to take place in Sophia in summer 1968. Dad’s idea was to use a handful of Czechoslovak students as a bait to catch his West German counterparts who cruised the waters with the intention to entangle our country’s young intelligence into their fishnet. Assembling a team of eight agents, it took my father a year to train them to perform the assigned roles in his script. In June 1968, he flew to Sofia to prepare the stage, when he accidentally tapped into a source suggesting that the International Student Festival merely provided the cover to a top-secret conference of the Warsaw Pact Intelligence Services.

“Since I knew that our Intelligence Service has never received any invitation to this reunion, I took it upon myself to investigate the backstage of the planned event.” Dad seemed amused and perplexed at the same time. “I could immediately smell the fish.” He recalled while we strolled through the narrow, scarcely illuminated streets in Malá Strana. “The more evidence I gathered, the more it stank.”

“Was it a big fish?” I clattered my teeth.

“A huge one!” He sputtered. “It was a whale and I thought I could catch with a scoop net and a fishing rod.”

We walked around the corner to a baroque cathedral with an enormous green dome,

pausing on Saint Mikuláš steps to catch our breath. Looking up, I could see crestfallen pigeons huddle together in the bell tower.

“When I returned from Bulgaria, I went to see the head of the Intelligence Service to inform him about the on-going conspiracy against our government.”

Dad’s boss was apparently a dedicated reformist and a good man. He gave him his blessings to gather the intelligence about the top-secret meeting behind the scenes of the student festival.

“What Míla Čech didn’t know, but should have known, his office was bugged from the floor to the ceiling.” Dad snorted. “The tapes with our confidential conversation are still probably filed somewhere in the KGB archives.”

Apart from the passing taxis, the historic centre was empty. Snowflakes glided around us in a spiral as we strode back up to the castle through Nerudová Street, discussing my father’s second trip to Sofia.

“I could write a thriller about what I’ve been through during the two weeks when I investigated the backstage of Soviet imperial politics.” Dad bared his incisors in a wolf-like smile, pleased with his performance. “I swear to God, James Bond sounds like a fairy tale compared to my story.”

“Tell me. Tell me.” I was keen to hear the details.

“Nah.” He stomped the snow off his shoes, walking up the hill. “I’ll tell you about it someday when you get older.”

“Why not now?”

“Because it’s a long and complicated story. All I can say for now is that I’ve met with Satan and told him to go to hell when he attempted to corrupt my soul.”

I watched my father pull another Sparta from his pocket.

“I risked my life to find out about the invasion plan, including the dates and the names of the traitors.” He stopped to light a match.

Speeding home on a Yugoslavian highway, he told me, the car brakes on his Simca unexpectedly ceased to work. Before crushing into the back wheels of a truck, my father managed to shift down the gears and pull the handbrake. The little God didn’t yet ring his bell, he pointed out. He and his colleague on the passenger seat got through the accident without injury.

“The Serbians did their best to help me get home on time.” He recalled. “They were sympathetic to our cause, unlike the General Secretary Dubček, who refused to take my

report into consideration when Míla Čech took it to him. He was convinced that Soviets wouldn't dare to invade us, which was total bullshit. He must have known. He was a shameless coward." My father shook his head with disdain. "Two weeks later, our nation woke up to the sound of the MiGs thundering overhead."

"That's terrible!" I exclaimed. "You've risked your life for nothing!"

"Yes. Trumpet." He sadly nodded. "I discovered the futility of being a Czech patriot. Serving this nation is a job repaid with ungratefulness. That's definitely the case with the Intelligence Service and the same goes for the military. It doesn't matter how honest and brave you are if your politicians are liars and cowards."

"I thought Dubček was a hero."

"Me too." Dad shrugged.

Completing the full circle, we stopped on the castle square, overlooking the beautiful scenery at our feet.

"I believed in the Prague Spring and Dubček's Socialism with Human Face until I saw our leader cry on television, advising the people to cave into the Soviet demands." Dad became teary. "I should have ran away to the United States instead of sticking around to fight alongside my compatriots. But it was too late by then."

"Why didn't you and Mum escape like everyone else?"

"There were numerous things we needed to take into consideration. I would have to commit treason by divulging information about my friends and colleagues to the CIA in exchange for protection. The Service was likely to deploy a squad to kill me if I stayed in Europe. Your sister was a toddler and I didn't want to go from one devil to another."

"The CIA would have helped you, surely?"

"Maybe." Dad blinked. "Mum and I gave it much thought during the days before the invasion, but in the end, we opted to stay. I was prepared to die in defence of my country. When you'll have a chance to read through my political file, you're going to see that I've actually raised my gun against the Russians."

"I didn't know that you could shoot."

"You bet. I had to return my weapon when I quit the Service disgusted with the way things turned out."

My father's face looked tired in the streetlight as he explained to me how our nation initially outwitted the Russian brutal force by waging a peaceful partisan war during the invasion. Working spontaneously together, people turned the road signs to confuse the

military transports. Railway workers cunningly redirected trains carrying weapons onto forlorn tracks. The local girls demoralised the hungry soldiers by explaining to them that Czechoslovaks were friendly and there wasn't any contra-revolution in our country. We didn't need their brotherly hand, they told them in faultless Russian. "Go home, Ivan. Natasha is waiting for you."

The cultured act of the national resistance took the wind out of Brezhnev's sails, Dad marvelled. The Soviets were planning to shoot thousands of rebels and drag people to concentration camps in Siberia.

"I would have been one of the first to face the wall if the military intervention went according to the plan, but the moral strength of the peaceful nationwide rebellion was unbelievable." Dad heaved a bitter sigh. "It broke my heart to see it fail because of our politicians' cowardice."

A gust of eastern wind fluttered the presidential banner, making it dance on the castle roof like a ghost.

"Let's go back to the car." My father wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "Your mother is waiting for us with dinner. She's probably worried to death, wondering what happened to us."



BACK IN OUR ŠKODA, Dad turned the ignition and switched on the heating. The engine obediently started to roar. A warm draft blew into my face through the ventilation grid and I thawed as if waking up from a state of hibernation. After what my father had revealed, I could never go back to being a careless child.

"You have to yet tell me about your execution." I reminded him when we drove down from Strahov.

"This didn't happen until four years later." Dad kept his eyes on the road, carefully steering through the serpentines. "After I had quit the Service, I worked for a short time at the Institute of Economy until I failed to pass the character screening with the Normalization committee." He recalled, saying that when the Bolsheviks established that he would never betray his principles, they excommunicated him from the Party and dismissed him from his job. This was a typical Normalization procedure. As a soft way of disposing of the sinners, the Party gave them a chance to redeem. All my father needed to do to preserve his position

was to sign a political document to avow that the Prague Spring was a counter-revolution. Similar to St. Mikuláš, the Normalization Committee was willing to give the reformists a mere slap on the wrist if they acknowledged that the Red Army was right in invading our country. If my father was willing to repent and felt sorry for joining the reformation movement, he could retain his regular wage.

“Most of my ex-colleagues ended up signing.” Dad said. “I was one of the few who refused. Afterwards, everyone became furtive and started to avoid me like a scabby dog, unable to look me in the eye.”

We drove past the stone pedestal carrying the first Red Army tank that had rolled into Prague at the end of the Second World War. A poster on a peeling wall at the back of the square boasted something about *Celebrating 70 years from the Great October Revolution!*

“With my political file trailing behind me like a stinky tail,” my father continued, “I couldn’t find any job. Not even as a garbage collector.”

“Everything is the Russians’ fault.” I boiled with hatred against our country’s liberators. “They’ve ruined your life!”

Without employment, Dad found himself on the wrong side of the law, he said. The Bolsheviks classified him as a vagrant. This was the whole point of the Normalization strategy. The Normalization regime didn’t give the Prague Spring dissidents the chance to blame the political system for their trouble. If a judge sentenced my father to prison, it wouldn’t be because of his diverse political opinions, but because he was a criminal.

“The post-invasion society was governed by hypocrisy. Everyone would conveniently overlook the fact that I was unable to feed my family as a result of my convictions.” Dad pointed out. “I felt like a failure and nearly went insane, trying to loosen the circle of anonymous shadows that tightened around me. I sensed the looming danger, but I could never name it. It was everywhere. I received invisible kicks from my hidden enemies, accompanied by apologetic smiles, which is so typical for the local mentality. Too many people were secretly delighted to stab me in the back.”

We stopped at the traffic lights, preparing to turn onto the highway, when my dad’s expression became serious.

“One night, in 1972, around this time of the year,” he told me, “I had just refuelled in Opletal Street and was about to drive home when I noticed suspicious cars sitting on my tail.” Dad’s voice began to sound raspier than usual. “It was actually here.”

He shifted the gears to drive down the road unwinding in front of us to the south.

“Checking the rear view mirror,” Dad re-enacted the situation, “I could count four black Volhas. You know the old models made of massive steel.”

“Ježíši Kriste.” My skin covered in goose bumps. I turned around to examine the cars behind us. Luckily, with the exception of a single taxi, I couldn’t see any Volhas.

“Each of these vehicles weighs two tons.” My father pointed out. “I was sitting in a Trabant, made of fibre-reinforced plastic.”

Speeding out of Prague on the snow-covered highway, Dad reminded me of his ex-colleague who had died with his head inside the oven a few weeks before that year. The uniformed cops had apparently found the spy tied to the stove, but concluded that he committed suicide.

“It was a dark night.” Dad recalled. “The highway was empty and slippery with ice. I slowly accelerated to avoid skidding while the four Volhas tailed me all the way to the Intelligence Bridge.”

I could see the looming edifice in front of us, built by a prison gang of doctors and engineers sentenced to hard labour in the fifties. Supported on massive pillars, the train bridge was grounded in a former swamp and remained unstable. It had never served its purpose. A discreet petrol station crouched behind its ghostly arc where we frequently stopped to refill our tank.

“The Volhas continued to follow me closely behind with their long-distance lights switched on.”

“I see.” I was beginning to bite my nails.

“Driving past the petrol station, I could see a plough-truck parked by the curb.” Dad pointed to the bus stop on the right roadside. “As I prepared to drive by it, its headlights suddenly came on and it started to roll in front of me. There wasn’t much snow to be ploughed and I wondered about the purpose of the blade on the truck. The Volhas increasingly pressed me from behind, but I hesitated to overtake the truck, fearing that the driver intended to squash me against the guardrail in the dividing strip.”

“Gosh.” This was a notorious area for car accidents. Every second lamppost on the highway seemed to stand askew as a result of a direct impact.

“In the end, the Volhas left me no choice but to overtake the plough truck.” Dad accelerated. “I struggled to keep my grip on the frozen road when a pair of long-distance lights hit me from behind and I heard the sound of metal scraping my bumper.” Dad’s breathing became agitated. He let go of the steering wheel as he relived his traumatic

memories. “Each second seemed like a century while I drove inches ahead of my death, balancing my whole existence on the slippery surface. I felt as if I was steering a nutshell between the feet of a stomping giant.” I saw a powerful emotion ripple across Dad’s lips. “That’s when the little God saved my life.”

“How did he do that?” I squirmed on the passenger seat.

To my great relief, my father placed his hands back onto the steering wheel when he recalled his salvation. “It was a miracle.” He smiled. “I could clearly hear someone’s voice inside my head. See that curve by the hippodrome?” He pointed to the sharp exit on the right side. “The little God advised me to flip on the indicator and tickle the brake pedal to signal that I was preparing to turn.”

I nearly stopped breathing while my father recreated the scene.

“The plough truck driver slowed down and altered its trajectory with the intention to bump me off the road while I cut the curve. Instead of turning, I went full steam ahead, following the little God’s instructions. By the time my assassins realised that I’ve tricked them, I’ve gained crucial fifty metres on them.”

Snow tumbled before our headlights and the engine howled while my dad evoked his heroic moments.

“What the STB didn’t realise,” he laughed, shifting up gears, “I was the owner of the fastest Trabant in the world!”

During the two years of unemployment, Dad was able to earn the pocket money by helping his brother to repair cars. This was when Miloš was still single, before his wife estranged him from our family. My uncle was passionate about car racing. He ended up convincing Dad to compete in the rallies with him. The two brothers spent hours in our garage, reconditioning second-hand engines. Too broke to buy original parts, they had to employ creative intelligence. Getting their hands on two broken Trabants, which nobody wanted, they ended up pulling the plastic cars apart to build a single supercharged model.

“From the outside it looked like any other Trabant. White, rectangular. It smelled and sounded like hell.” Dad chortled. “But the two-stroke engine was infallible. It went up to one hundred miles per hour. I was flying past the hippodrome with the Volhas and the plough-truck giving me chase.”

Moving to the side lane, he switched on the indicator to turn right to Mrakotín.

“Don’t ask me how I got through this turn at high speed without skidding. This is a mystery.” Dad marvelled, approaching the curve reasonably slowly this time. “The road

covered in ice. Thank God I had the experience from the rallies. I stayed close to the edge, hoping to get the grip on the gravel with my right wheel. The back of the Trabant is light and it began to slide sideways.” Dad jerked the wheel, hitting the accelerator instead of brakes. “When it looked like I was about to spin, I did this, see?” He demonstrated his mastery in driving. “And eventually straightened my course.”

“What about the Volhas and the plough-truck?” I fearfully clung to my seat.

“They must have missed the turn.”

Crossing the fields to Mrakotín, Dad lit his last Sparta and exhaled smoke out of the window. He seemed at peace now.

“Glad to be alive, I didn’t wait for anybody and raced home. Parking in front of our garage, I ran straight to the bathroom and threw up.”

I found it hard to believe that the familiar places I had driven through so many times before had set the stage for Dad’s execution. I couldn’t help imagining what would have happened if the killing squad succeeded in doing their job.

“I guess I would have never been born.” It dawned on me as we hurdled across the Mrakotín railway crossing. “Did the STB leave you alone after that?”

“They had to. I made a gentlemen’s agreement with them.” My father looked proud of himself. “The day after the failed attempt on my life, I went to Bartholomew Street and screamed the whole place down until the leadership had to send someone down to run damage control.”

The two STB officers who took my father upstairs were from the sixth division, he remembered. This particular unit was in charge of dealing with former employees and keeping track of their activities.

“At first, they tried to threaten me with prison and everything else they could think of.” Dad switched on the fog lights, following the snaking river to our hometown “Having narrowly escaped my death, I had nothing to lose. I told them I didn’t have time to play games and went straight to the heart of the matter. When I asked the agents what the intelligence service wanted from me, they responded: leave us alone and we’ll leave you alone.” Dad mimicked the typical STB’s diction. “Okay.” He slipped back to his rasping voice. “It sounds fair enough to me.”

Before he shook hands with the agents, my father said, he informed them about his intention to apply for the position of a taxi driver at the Mrakotín Communal Service Company. “If for some reason I can’t get this job,” he apparently said to the men, “I’ll

consider our deal revoked and take measures to make your lives surprisingly unpleasant, Comrades.”

“Why did they listen to you?” I was astonished. “What could you have done to them? You were an unemployed vagrant with a family. They could have beaten you up and sent you to jail in the same way as they disposed of the dissidents from Charta 77.”

“It wouldn’t have been that easy.” Dad shook his head. “I was ready to fight back.” I watched him shift down the gears at the entrance to our hometown. “I was one of them, don’t forget.” He winked at me. “I had the same training, if not better, and I was holding strong cards in hand. My plan was to denounce the Clandestine Service to the KGB for withholding an important source from them.”

This was in connection to a CIA false flag operation in Jordan that resulted in Black September, my father explained while we wound our way home. Mr Reichert had sent a warning from Washington D.C. The Jordanian army was preparing to kill thousands of Palestinian refugees in an orchestrated rebellion, but the local Service failed to pass the information to the KGB, because the jealous officers in Prague didn’t want to help their colleague get another pat on the shoulder. These were the same people who ended up running the Service after the invasion, Dad told me. Seeing that the Soviets backed the Palestinian movement, the KGB would have been mad to find out that the Czechs had enabled the Jordanians to butcher Israel’s enemies and then justify the staged bloodshed in the United Nations by blaming the victims for instigating the violence, my father wisely concluded. Had the KGB known about the CIA plan, they would have surely taken determined steps to foil it.

“What do you mean?” I was horrified. “Are you telling me that thousands of innocent people have been murdered because some idiots at the Clandestine Service didn’t want to see their colleague promoted?”

“Yeah. Most likely.” Dad nodded, driving to our cul-de-sac. “You wouldn’t believe it, Trumpet. Sheer stupidity and envy are the main reasons leading the nations to historical tragedies.”

Stopping at our broken fence, he fumbled in his pocket to pull out the house key.

“Is this all true?” My head was beginning to spin with everything I had seen and heard that day. “What a terrible world we live in? People get killed like the pawns in a game of *‘Mate, don’t get mad!’*”

“Yep.” My father ruffled my hair before we walked home. “It’s called reality, little

Trumpet. Still, you must never stop believing in fairy tales and goodness. Keep dreaming about the better days to come.”

