

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 dialed 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.”

