

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.”



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-peecho!*” 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.”



IN SPITE OF MY father’s shocking revelations, I experienced an elevated level of excitement in the days leading to Christmas, similar to the times when I believed in baby Jesus. It was official. We were going to the West!

“I wish you were there at the Passport Police when that stupid cow got off the phone, having consulted her superiors.” My father came home on Monday night, wielding a fresh green booklet. “This time she didn’t smile! If anything, she reminded me of a murderous widow seeing her dead husband get up from his coffin.” He mimicked Comrade Rabbit’s facial expression. “Her three chins started to quiver.” Dad hooted. “She became so white, she seemed to merge with the wall.”

“Hurray! The power of the STB dragon is defeated!” I threw myself around his neck. “Does it mean that we’re off to see Marta next week?”

“Just as I promised.” Dad patted my head. “We’ll deliver our Christmas gifts to her in person.”

My mother sounded a little bit more realistic.

“Don’t start crying hoopla until you’ve landed on the other side of the wall.” She remembered the proverbial wisdom. “There are still many hoops to jump through.” She warned us. “We have yet to apply for our visas, obtain the exit permit and the foreign currency allowance.”

In Normalization, strict regulations prevented the ordinary citizens from buying the Western currency on the official market. Unless you were a member of the Politburo or artistic elite, you had to get the permission to exchange a rationed amount of money. It usually wasn’t enough to cover the basic travelling expenses. Unless you could rely on someone abroad who would sponsor your trip, you had to eat and sleep like a beggar. Naturally, there was always the possibility of exchanging the domestic currency for extra Deutsch marks or US dollars on the black market. The so-called *vexláci* typically operated near TUZEX shops, specializing in selling TUZEX vouchers. The local moneychangers

enjoyed the STB's pimping protection, same as the cabbies and prostitutes. During the eighties, *Vexláci* made astronomic profits by buying hard currency from the tourists and selling it to the compatriots for two times as much. Profiting from the widespread moral corruption, they formed the wealthy class of the Normalization underworld.

It took my father two weeks to gather the required paperwork. The only thing he had failed to obtain was the permission to exchange Italian liras.

"I've bought a hundred marks from a *Vexláek*." He informed us at the dining table, studying the blue banknote against the lamplight.

Buying US dollars on the sidewalk might have been easy, but the level of scrutiny at the Austrian and German borders was notoriously thorough. If the authorities caught us smuggling more money than allowed, Dad risked a jail sentence.

"Florence is about eight hundred miles away from our home." He devised our travel itinerary over a greasy map of Europe, gauging the distances with a tape measure. "If everything goes according to my calculation," I saw him scratch his hair with a pencil, "twenty five gallons of petrol should get us to Marta. With ten gallons in the tank and four large canisters behind the front seats, we shouldn't need to spend any money for fuel and could even end up with a small reserve."

My mother didn't seem so thrilled, listening to Dad's strategy.

"How do we refuel on our way home?" She bit her nails.

"Marta promised to lend us some of the money she's earned in the biscuit factory." Working with the pencil, Dad estimated the fuel price for the return trip. "It should be enough." He rubbed his chin. "She also suggested that Gianni was willing to contribute something from his thirteenth wage."

"Aren't you ashamed to accept donations from a newlywed couple?" Mum looked distressed. "It's absurd that the banking system denies us the possibility to pay with the money we have."

"Oh yeah." My father agreed. "The system works well for *Vexláci* and their counter-intelligence pimps! You could write an academic paper about the socialist economics, my love, but even if you received the Nobel Prize, nothing would change." Wrapping up his travel plans, he hugged my mother like a frightened child. "You don't need to feel guilty, Alice. We're doing what we can."

"Yes." Mum was on the verge of tears. "You're probably right, Jirka."

"We're bringing Marta and Gianni expensive wedding presents." Dad reminded us. "I

remember that Mr Papazzani loved the Hungarian salami. We can buy him two rolls and some Prague ham as well. Let's toss in a set of crystal glasses for Gianni's mother with traditional, embroidered tablecloths and napkins. A case of Pilsen Urquell, a bottle of homemade gin and our Christmas biscuits."

"Where do you want to put all these things?" My mother worried, wiping her eyes. "There's not enough space in the car."

"We'll manage." Dad kissed her to lift up her spirit. "Let's get to work."



ON DECEMBER 23, WE pushed our new Škoda inside the garage to load it with luggage. To prevent another technical mishap during our absence, Dad switched off the Aparatura and sent Peter Hába on leave for the duration of our whole trip. Instead of decorating the Christmas tree, we spent the day trying to figure out how to stuff the cardboard boxes and suitcases inside the small car along with bags full of food and the canisters containing enough petrol to torch the Italian Parliament.

"I hope you realise that you won't be able to smoke inside the car during the whole journey?" Mum sniffed the explosive fumes. "Where do you intend to hide the Deutsch marks, Jirka?" She wondered.

"Aren't you planning to wear a hat?" Dad wanted to know.

"Mushrooms!" She screamed. "Don't count on me! You know that I can't lie."

"How about Miranda?" He winked at me. "Let's plait the folded note into her hair."

"Are you nuts?" My mother's tapped her forehead. "You are a trained spy. Can't you come up with some intelligent ideas?"

In the end, my father decided to plant the blue banknote inside a flat wooden case containing a crystal mirror that my parents had bought for Marta as a wedding present. Holding together with long nails, the timber casing carried a virgin customhouse seal to certify that its contents had been controlled and that my father paid an expensive fee to export his gift.

"The border control will never think of poking inside this case." Dad reassured us, attaching the mirror to the roof racks with an elastic cord. "A single official stamp is sometimes worth more than a dozen safety locks." He joked.

“Where should I put this, Dad?” I handed him a package with my present for Marta. Having used all the money I had earned over the years on the National Theatre stage, I couldn’t resist buying my sister an old-fashioned bedside lamp made of blue glass and porcelain decorated with golden ornaments and enamel flowers.

“Let’s take a look, Trumpet.” Dad jumped down from the roof. “Fragile items must go behind the back window screen.” He cleared some space for my precious gift. “Did we declare it in our custom paperwork?” I watched him double-check the thick document. “Good.” He looked satisfied. “I claim that you’ve paid 988 crowns for this item, in case someone should ask.”

Unless you paid the costly custom duties, you weren’t allowed to export any articles exceeding the value of one thousand crowns. With the exception of the mirror that was clearly worth a fortune, my father’s strategy was to undervalue everything we carried on-board in our declaration.

“Cool.” I watched him rub his hands after he wedged the lamp behind my mother’s hatbox. “We’ll look like a Christmas tree on wheels tomorrow morning.”

Our Škoda sat heavily on the garage floor, stuffed from the floor to the ceiling. We managed to fit everything in, but there wasn’t any space left for me to sit at the back. Rearranging the storage system, my father was forced to pull things out when I heard someone ring our doorbell. I rushed to the door, surprised to see my father’s old friend, Lukáš, walk in with a bottle of Bohemia Sect.

“Merry Christmas to everyone!” The dark man curiously peered around the garage. “Don’t tell me you’re off to the mountains. There’s not enough snow to make a ball.”

“It’s a pity about the thaw.” Dad coolly replied, exhaling a cloud of smoke. “Since we can’t go skiing, I decided to go down to the sea for a change. We’re heading off to Italy tomorrow morning.”

“Are you serious?” Lukáš handed the sparkling wine to Dad. “Open it up.”

“*Na zdraví!*” Uncorking the bottle with a twist, my father poured out the bubbles in a couple of test tubes he always kept handy by the Aparatura. “To my new passport!”

“Your what?” His friend gasped. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Lukáš knew my father since their days at university. My parents cultivated a reserved friendship with the Jewish intellectual and his first wife before they split up in an acerbic divorce. We even briefly provided Lukáš with shelter when he was temporarily without a home. Ultimately, he found his feet and remarried to a secretary fifteen years his junior.

Lukáš's new wife was quite simple and practical. She persuaded him to become a Party member to advance his career. The couple had recently moved to a stylish villa in our neighbourhood and purchased a new Daewoo.

“Wait a minute, Jirka.” Lukáš wiped the fizzing foam from his black beard. “Are you saying that the STB removed the ban on your travels abroad?” His brown eyes filled with envy. “Did you sign for collaboration?”

“Sign for collaboration? *Tjui.*” Dad indignantly spat on the floor, near his friend's feet. “Never. Not me.”

The bearded man nervously jumped as if stung by a bee.

“What are you trying to imply?” He nearly spilled his wine, looking distressed. “Don't bother to play a moralist with me.” Lukáš tried to compose himself, but I sensed that my father had touched a raw nerve. “Signing the Party membership is a different thing than to agree to work as a mole.”

His shoulders slumped and his voice betrayed a guilty undertone.

“A mole you say?” Dad raised his eyebrows. “How lovely of you to come all the way from downtown to have this conversation with me today? Why don't we go to the living room and continue in private, my friend? I'm sure Mr Šimek is raking gravel outside our garage as we speak.”

Two hours later, I saw my relatively sober father accompany his completely drunken friend to the front door.

“Are you sure you're in shape to drive back home?” Dad supported Lukáš while he fumbled in his pockets in search of his car key.

“No worrrries.” The bearded man slurred. Miraculously, he managed to unlock the Daewoo and stick the key in the ignition. “It's only few hundrrred meterrrs down the rrrroad frrrrom herrrre . . .” The roaring of the engine swallowed his last words.

“Make sure to follow it.” Dad called out behind his friend.

I listened to the sound of the gurgling motor until it faded, relieved when I didn't hear any noises indicating an imminent collision.

“I'm surprised that you have informed Lukáš about our intention to leave tomorrow morning when you suspect he's a mole.” My mother scolded after Dad came back to the garage. “What if the STB had sent him to find out what we're up to and they're going to arrest us at the border?”

“Mushrooms. I don't think Lukáš works for the counter-intelligence.”

“If he agreed to work for you, he’ll work for anyone.” Mum sharply pointed out.

I must have made a hilarious facial expression, because my father felt compelled to elaborate on the subject.

“Lukáš was my former agent before we became friends.” He explained. “Speaking six languages, he was a great asset, which is why I suspect that the Service had kept in touch with him after I discontinued our collaboration.” I watched my father scratch his grey stubble. “Obviously, he is privy to my past. That’s why he asked me if I wasn’t scared to drive through West Germany, trying to insinuate that there’s a chance the Germans might want to have a word with me.”

My heart grew heavy as I summed up the amount of perils we had to face during our travel to the West. I wasn’t so sure if my fear of foreign secret services actually didn’t outweigh my excitement at the prospect of exploring the world beyond the Iron Curtain.

“What are we going to do if the Germans stop us?” I felt like crying.

“Everything will work out fine.” Optimism shone in Dad’s eyes like a beam from a lighthouse. “Don’t worry girls. I’ve never worked against them. They have no reason to question me. Lukáš is a harmless big mouth.” He concluded. “I always make sure to feed him more booze than information. He won’t get up from bed before tomorrow noon.” Checking his wristwatch, my father confidently rumbled. “We’ll fly out of the cage long before that.”



THE NEXT DAY, LONG before sunrise, we drove out from our garage with the headlights dimmed. Heading to the West, my father decided to take the alternative road through the forest. Our car was so heavily loaded, the under-carriage nearly scraped the tarmac whenever we bumped into a pothole. I squatted behind my mum’s seat, wedged between a pyramid of boxes and the car door with a couple of full canisters under my feet.

“Daddy. I feel claustrophobic.” I couldn’t get used to the sharp smell of petrol.

“Once we get across the border, we’ll make more space for you, Trumpet.” My dad growled. “Until then, try to be patient and keep your mouth shut. No matter what anyone asks you, you’ve seen and heard nothing, okay? Pretend to be deaf, blind and mute all together!”

“Don’t forget to act completely stupid.” My mother jokingly added.

“Of course.” I swallowed the urge to throw up. “I’m just a small, stupid child. A small child. A stupid child.” The car jumped as I repeated my mantra and I hit my head on the misty window screen each time. “Ouch.”

Behind us, looming silhouettes of factories and agricultural silos disappeared into the distance. We slowly drove through the sleeping villages towards the black, tsunami-like mountain range that formed the Western rim of the Czech Basin. Soon, I could see searchlight cones flash across the horizon like lightning bolts. It looked as if we were travelling back in time. The view ahead of us reminded me of pictures from the Nazi concentration camps. I observed the concrete hedgehogs surrounding the road and razor spider-webs linked to high-voltage poles. Khaki watchtowers with guns sticking out of peepholes looked similar to cactuses covered in spines. Soldiers with growling German shepherds patrolled the border area, deadly efficient in tracking down and killing the absconders.

“Passport control!” A uniformed shadow pointed the loaded rifle at our windscreen. “Turn off the engine, Comrade driver. Get out of your vehicle!” The soldier boomed, flashing a torch into our faces.

The dogs’ barking echoed loud in the morning fog, making me feel like a small rabbit during the hunting season. I curled up behind my mother, watching a woman in green uniform stomp out of a rundown customhouse. Judging by the dour expression on her swollen face, she was tired and pissed off to work on Christmas Eve. We were the first travellers to reach the Western border that morning.

“Take everything out of the car!” The big blonde displayed a row of horse teeth.

Collecting our documents, she disappeared inside her office while we unloaded our luggage under the supervision of the gunman. I could see the female officer through the customhouse window. Instead of reading our declaration, she stood by an iron stove, warming her hands. The whole time inside she appeared to flirt with an older colleague. When she was ready to deal with us, she made sure to straighten her smile as well as the crumpled skirt.

“Comrade Urban.” She made a show of reading my father’s name from his passport. “Don’t think that because you have arrived so early we’re more likely to be asleep on the job.” Sporting a cruel smile, she tore our custom declaration in two pieces as if she was performing a customary ritual.

“You’re pretty ignorant for an engineer.” She clearly felt empowered, discarding the

document. “Can’t you read? You’ve signed the paperwork on the wrong side. See? It’s invalid.” She laughed with scorn. “Before you fill it in again, I want to check your entire luggage.” I watched her stride to the customhouse door to call out her male colleague. “Tonda. Can you take a look at the case on the roof?”

The dishevelled man in uniform looked unhappy to face the morning frost. I saw a cigarette burning between his dry lips. His steps seemed a touch unstable. He had clearly consumed a bit of alcohol during his shift. I cringed in horror, seeing him lean over our canisters with petrol.

“What’s in there?” He tugged at the elastic cord on our car roof, the hem of his shirt sticking out of his pants.

“It’s a crystal mirror, Comrade.” Dad bravely maintained his calm while the officer suspiciously slid a finger around the side of the wooden casing. “As you can see, it’s been checked by the central customs in Prague. Would you like to see the receipt?”

The female officer expertly ran her hand through our clothes like a thief, acting with arrogance as if we were the ones who were criminals.

“We decide what needs to be checked, not the customs in Prague.” I heard her bark.

Her colleague coughed, clearing his throat, and spat in front of my mother while she struggled to zip up our suitcase on the road with her trembling hands. The morning star twinkled overhead and the dogs began to howl.

“Please my little God. Please. Please. Let us get through.” I silently prayed, hoping to hear the rooster crow at the dawn.

“What’s this?” The female officer pointed to a twisted brass tube covered in blue and green glass grapes.

She was looking at a kitsch chandelier Grandma had bought for my sister. Seizing the receipt that Helga had stupidly planted inside the box to display how much money she sacrificed for Marta’s present, the blonde officer laughed. “This says that you’ve paid 2133 crowns for this article.” She triumphantly waved the piece of paper in my father’s face. “That’s twice as much as allowed!”

“I would never pay a penny for something like this.” Dad lifted his hands to distance himself from Grandma’s gift. “My mother sent it to my daughter who lives in Italy.” He argued. “She must have made a mistake.”

Ironically, Grandma’s silliness saved us. As the eastern sky turned pink, both officers redirected their attention from the crystal mirror to the kitsch chandelier, tearing the

cardboard box to shreds like starving vultures.

“You can either leave it here or take it home.” The man in uniform exhaled smoke in Dad’s face, making him sign the paperwork.

After my father renounced the ownership of the ugly light fixture, the female officer visibly reached her peak. She was beginning to get cold. Looking at her wristwatch, she yawned. It was clearly time to eat breakfast.

The noise of marching feet announced the swapping of the guards.

A moment later, I heard the cracking sound of the customs stamp. We stuffed our luggage back inside our Škoda before the border officers could change their mind. Dad turned on the ignition and advanced to the stripy tank barrel fashioned into a gate that blocked the road between the Eastern and Western Europe.

“It’s now or never!” He whispered.

I held my breath, seeing the red and white stripes on the barrel veer out of our way. Behind us, the sun rose above the treetops, paving our path to the West with gold.

As if someone had waved a magic wand, the road suddenly became smooth and the silhouette of the landscape in front of us miraculously changed colours, becoming bright green despite the winter season.

“*Grüß Gott.*” A relaxed officer in a bomber jacket greeted us in a Bavarian accent. He needed a minute to read our passports before he waved us through with a friendly smile. “*Wilkommen in Deutschland.* Merry Christmas.” He welcomed us to Germany.

“Hurrrraaayyyy!” I cried and both my parents joined in with me, laughing with relief. “Thank you, little God. We’ve made it!”

Winding down the window, I took my first gulp of free air. It seemed filled with the promise of adventure and something vaguely undefined. My lungs inflated with a joyful sensation. Everything, including the grass, sky and the trees, looked so much cleaner in Germany than back home. Even the clouds were bleached and the river polished. The morning sun increasingly gleamed with gold as it progressed to the west. Each town we passed glittered with Christmas decorations. There were fairy lights in the gardens, on balconies and in windows. I couldn’t decide where to look first. When we reached the highway, the traffic flow became dense. I speechlessly marvelled at the variety of new vehicles, all of which overtook us.

“Did you see that Mercedes, Dad?” I exclaimed, reading the symbols on the blurred, colourful shapes that zipped around us like fireballs. I was familiar with the Western car

brands, having memorised the Michelin encyclopaedia Gianni had bought for Dad as a present when he returned for the wedding.

Our Škoda proved reliable, but lazy. Whenever we drove up the slope, it started to shudder, sounding like a worn-out angle grinder. Luckily, there was no speed limit on the German highways otherwise we would have risked a penalty for driving too slowly. Dad visibly felt humiliated about our Škoda's performance, seeing that he usually tended to dominate the roads back home. We had to move to the side lane reserved for trucks and caravans, but even here, we continued to block the traffic flow. The Germans typically behaved with politeness and never hit the horns. Some Westerners waved at us, but the majority of the German drivers glared as if we were aliens travelling in a Soviet-made spaceship.

The sun stood high when we pulled over to a highway rest area close to Munich. It reminded me of a Luna Park with neon signs and Christmas illumination decorating the windows, walls and trees. Instead of heading to the petrol station with the Germans, we discreetly parked at the back of a modern *gasthaus* with the intention to refuel from the canisters we carried on-board. After Dad inserted a funnel in the side of our Škoda, my mother and I hurried to the toilet. Traversing the car park, I could see a German driver perform magic. The rosy man pointed his car key at a silver coupe and the sports car recognised his master, flashing its headlights and making beeping noises. The car doors miraculously unlocked by themselves.

The life in the West was a fairy tale come true.

The German toilets somehow knew when to flush. Water would run from the taps as soon as I prepared to bend over the sink. As for the hand dryer, I suspected it read my thoughts. I merely brought my hands up to it when it started to blow warm air. I never pushed a single button, but the most fascinating thing about West Germany was the cleanliness of the public facilities. Compared to the communist toilets, they looked and smelled like a ballroom.

I nearly had tears in my eyes when I told my dad about our experience.

"It's amazing! You must try it." I described the automatically diffused perfume in the toilet booths. "You can fart as loud as you want." I marvelled. "There is classical music playing from hidden speakers to muffle out impolite sounds."

We were the only travellers eating our homemade food at the picnic table outside. I chewed my bread roll with cheese and observed the German clients in the self-service

restaurant. It was cold and I wished I could choose lunch from the inviting display as everyone else did. People's faces looked merry behind the big window. I watched the customers load plastic trays with an array of meals, patiently queuing at the register and chatting with the smiling cashier. The women seemed careless and the men's behaviour showed self-confidence and dignity. I saw them pull banknotes from leather valets with nonchalant ease and tip the girl in a Bavarian costume. I had never seen so many relaxed people in one room. Nobody cast furtive looks over their shoulder or critically peered at their neighbours. If anything, a few of the West Germans eyed our small group with suspicion, presumably wondering if we were a bunch of Gypsies planning to steal their expensive car.

"Let's take a look where we are." My dad lit up a Sparta, inhaling smoke with the expression of someone deprived of oxygen.

I watched him unfold the map and retrace our journey with his forefinger as if to make sure that he wasn't dreaming it.

"Have you never been to West Germany, Dad?" I blurted out. "How could you have spied on them then?"

"Watch your tongue, Trumpet." My mother nervously turned to see if anyone was listening. "Never use the expression 'spying' in public." She whispered. "It's international. Do you want to get us in trouble?"

Dad didn't appear perturbed. He took off his clumsy glass frames to polish the lenses with the hem of his flannel shirt.

"Czechoslovakia doesn't have the embassy in West Germany." He said. "I've been to Berlin, but I never had a chance to gather intelligence abroad except during my trips to Sophia. This is why I'm not worried about the Bundesnachrichtendienst. I have a clean conscience."

"Is this your first time in the West?" I couldn't believe that for once my dad was as inexperienced at something as I was.

"I had to wait forty five years for this day." He breathed out, squinting in the sun.

I suddenly perceived him poor and insecure in comparison to the German men. The Westerners wore new, comfortable clothes, polished shoes and drove powerful cars with leather seats.

"Don't you wish that you had run away?" I asked. "You'd be driving a Cadillac in the States by now, wouldn't you?"

“Probably.” He scratched his scalp. “I returned from Bulgaria two weeks before the invasion. Mum and I had plenty of time to pack the most important belongings in our Trabant.” He grabbed my mother’s hand and sighed. “It seems like yesterday, doesn’t it Alice? We drove to the border with little Marta at the back. Before we crossed over, we decided to take some time to discuss our options, pitching a tent in the woods close to Bayerisch Eisenstein.

“It was me who convinced your father to go back.” My mum admitted, collecting the remains of our humble feast. “I felt it was the right decision for us to stay loyal to our colleagues and friends and stick around to defend our country even if we risked losing everything, including our lives.”

“Why?” I exclaimed. “No one ever thanked you for your courage. Dad’s colleagues betrayed him later on. Your friends started to avoid you when you were poor. Nobody bothered to help you. Had you escaped, I would have been born in the United States. Everything would be so much better!” I felt like crying. “We would eat lunch inside the *Gasthouse* like everyone else.”

“You don’t know what would have happened.” I couldn’t see a trace of regret on my mother’s face. “Life is only as good as you are.” She wrapped the leftovers in a sheet of newspaper. “Doesn’t matter where you are.”

Back on the highway, I cheered up when I recognised the snow covered peaks on the horizon as the Alps. Heavy traffic forced the fast cars to slow down to snail’s pace. Advancing side by side with shiny limousines and coupes, we finally felt equal to the Germans.

Look, Daddy. Isn’t it an American Jeep ahead?” I rolled down the window to salute a convoy of US Army transporters that accompanied a huge missile truck masked below a khaki mesh. “What a pity we don’t have a camera to shoot the pictures!” I waved at the soldiers. “*Abooo!*”

“Just as well.” My dad growled. “The Yankees would probably arrest us if we did. I imagine that the nuclear warheads on the truck are subject to military secret.”

None of the Germans looked happy to see the US Military block the traffic. I was the only person around who cheered at the sight of the American flag. When we eventually overtook the US Army, Dad’s deflated self-confidence returned back to normal. He was happy to see that we didn’t drive the slowest vehicle on the German highways after all. Several miles later, the cars started to form a single queue in anticipation of the Austrian

border control.

“The most important difference between the Eastern and Western Europe is that the democratic governments don’t try to exercise permanent control over the residents.” My mother observed.

I watched the Germans flash passports out of the open windows while the Austrian border patrol casually waved them through.

“This is freedom.” Dad pulled a couple of green booklets from his pocket. “Nobody sticks their nose in your business.” He marvelled. “The police don’t give people a hard time because of what they believe in or where they come from.”

The Austrian officers wore grey uniforms and rigid expressions on their shaven faces, radiating benign authority. On reading the Czechoslovak number plate, however, they became visibly hostile. I watched a senior official run out of the customhouse door and gesture my father to pull over to the side while the other drivers continued to cross the borderline. After the man shouted something in German, two soldiers came out of an adjacent hut, wielding automatic guns.

“*Tschechoslowakei?*” The Austrian’s face seemed sculpted in marble. “Who are you and where are you heading?” Flipping through my parents’ passports, the tall officer sharply ordered us to pull everything out of our car, ignoring Dad’s attempts to entice him into a friendly conversation. “*Was is das?*” He suspiciously studied the wooden case on our roof. “Take it down.”

The Austrian’s expression suggested that he knew something that nobody else in the world did. I couldn’t help worrying if the reason why he had singled us out for a search had anything to do with Dad’s clandestine past.

Heads turned in our direction as my father struggled to bring the mirror down to the ground, but none of the Westerners looked at us with sympathy. It was as if everyone suspected that we were terrorists. The Austrians probably thought that we were carrying Kalashnikovs on our roof racks in the same way they carried the skis. The fact that our clothes looked threadbare and reeked of petrol didn’t help.

“Open it up, *bitt!*”

The officer remained deaf to my father’s arguments about the Czechoslovak customs sealing on the case. Dad had to seize a hammer and a chisel to remove the lid. While he chipped away at the wooden casing, I was amused to see the uncompromising Austrian cautiously step back as if in fear of an imminent explosion. When he saw the Bohemian

crystal, he looked surprised.

“Das ist ein Spiegel.” He waved his arms like wings as if to make sure that we weren’t smuggling an Austrian customs officer inside our case.

“A mirror. *Ja,*” My father couldn’t help smiling. “Bohemian glass is world famous for casting the best reflections.”

“Are you a communist?” The officer gave him an indignant look, making it clear that Austrians didn’t appreciate Czech humour.

“Excuse me?” Now it was Dad’s turn to look incredulous. *“Nein.”*



WE CONTINUED TO SHAKE our heads all the way across Austria to the Brenner Pass. It took us hours to recover from our public humiliation.

“How do the Austrians dare to assume that we’re communists only because we come from a communist country?” My mother sounded hurt. “I wish I had asked the officer if having the same nationality as Adolf Hitler automatically meant that he was a Nazi.”

“I’m happy you didn’t.” Dad growled. “He would have probably sent us back home. Austrians don’t have any tolerance for jokes.”

“Didn’t the Hapsburgs enslave our nation for over three hundred years?” I recalled. “Austrians cut the heads of the Czech nobles and stole our treasures. These guys don’t deserve to be in the Western block.”

Fortunately, we reached the Italian soil without any more unpleasant encounters with Austrians. A handsome Italian officer in leather boots and tight-fitting trousers gave my mother an appreciative look when he compared her photo in the passport with her live appearance. An amused smile played on his lips as he walked around our Škoda to write down our number plate.

“Bella macchina!” He whistled, winking at his colleagues. *“Va veloce?”*

He was doubtlessly joking when he reminded my father of the Italian speed limit. At one hundred and thirty kilometres per hour, it exceeded our maximal velocity by ten kilometres.

“Now that I come to think of it!” My mum freaked out after we crossed over to Italy. “What happened to those hundred marks inside the mirror case?”

I was relieved to see my father pull out the folded banknote from his breast pocket, looking like a magician. “It’s me you’re talking to, Alice.”

There was an exchange office at the back of the Italian customhouse. Dad took the Deutsch marks inside and came out with a fistful of liras a moment after.

“It’s nearly a hundred thousand.” He counted the notes, leading us to a cafeteria next door. “Life is sweet in Italy.”

I queued with him at the counter, observing the barista expertly push buttons on the stainless steel machine. The charming man fluffed up milk with steam and sprinkled the white foam with cocoa. Mum sat a table by the window, waiting for us to bring the cappuccino to her.

“Can I get ice-cream?” A colourful Algida poster caught my eye.

“Pick anything you want.” Dad benevolently acquiesced.

“But which one should I take?” Overwhelmed by the necessity of having to choose, I studied two dozen pictures of delicious frozen products. It never occurred to me what a terrible dilemma variety could pose. There were usually only two kinds of ice-creams in Czech shops.

I solved it by selecting the most expensive cone.

My mouth filled with saliva as I unwrapped the crunchy chocolate wafer. Joining my mother at the table, I savoured the authentic taste of Italy in euphoric silence while my parents sipped coffee. A sentimental cantilena tinkled in the background. None of the chatting Italians seemed to have a single care in the world. The clouds outside floated between the icy mountaintops like a river of whipped cream.

“Back in June, who would have thought that we would drive down to see Marta for Christmas?” My mother’s voice shook with suppressed joy. “I thought it would take years before we’d meet together again as a family. I can’t believe that we’re hours away from throwing our arms around our daughter.”

“This is the best Christmas Eve ever!” I enthused.

I felt like in the old days when I was a little girl and the winter holidays seemed magic, filled with love and hope.

“Do you know what I think, Mum? Baby Jesus exists inside our hearts.” I declared, walking back to our car. “It’s so much more fun to deliver presents than to receive them, isn’t it?” I giggled. “I can’t wait to see Marta’s reaction when she sees my lamp!”

We drove through a set of gates to board the Italian expressway. The wide road hung suspended between towering mountainsides like a delicate lace, snaking above the deep abysses and through endless tunnels.

“How much time would it take to build something this?” I was amazed.

The twisting lanes reminded me of a roller coaster. As we changed altitude, my ears became blocked.

“I can’t imagine.” Dad’s eyes shone with admiration. “It would take a high level of engineering to erect a bridge hundreds of meters above the ground.” He pointed to a concrete edifice with staggeringly tall pillars. “It’s great to see that the Italian government invests so much money into infrastructure.”

“It goes to show that corruption is the biggest flaw of the communist system.” Mum concluded. “Our roads wouldn’t be half as broken if our taxes didn’t end up in private pockets.”

Two hours later, we crossed the river Po and our Škoda filled with a putrid smell emanating from the brown surface. I was unpleasantly surprised that dirty rivers didn’t exclusively flow in Communist countries, where the corrupted governments allowed the industry to plunder Nature. Since everything belonged to all, nobody wished to assume responsibility for anything.

The sun faded above the Lombardy Plain, obscured with a grey veil of smog. As we approached Modena, I noted a mysterious set of gates blocking the road ahead of us. PEDAGGIO. I read the Italian sign.

“What is this supposed to mean?” Dad frowned.

We watched the Italian drivers hand out tickets to a tall clerk behind a window. Each time, an electronic board on the side of the small booth displayed an unreasonably high amount in liras.

“Oh no!” My mother inspected the toll ticket we had received on passing the border. “This is a private highway.” She pointed out. “The Italian government didn’t invest the taxpayers’ money in building those bridges.”

It was a strange concept that someone should own a public road.

“*Buon giorno.*” The weary man in brown uniform snapped the receipt from my father’s hand. The display lit up with five ciphers that represented nearly half the money we had exchanged.

With a tragic gesture, Dad parted with our liras, handing the notes to the clerk who impatiently grabbed them as if they were a handful of fallen leaves. As soon as the gate opened, Dad steered to the exit.

“We can’t afford drive down to Tuscany on the highway.” He nervously jiggled the

remaining change when we stopped on the roadside to unfold the map of Italy on our bonnet. “See?” I watched him stab the sheet of paper with his finger. “We’re not far away from Florence. Let’s take the alternative route across the Apennines.” He traced a thin crimson line over the towering mountain range. “It doesn’t actually look so much longer than the private road.”

It was beginning to get dark. Swarms of headlights flickered on the highway bridge overhead. The car tires bumped over the seams in the slabs of concrete. The air was unpleasantly moist and cold. Shrouded in mist, the Apennines loomed on the horizon, dividing us from our destination. The road my father proposed to follow twisted to the invisible hilltops.

“Do we have enough petrol?” Mum worried as we drove up the endless serpentines. “Wasn’t this the last canister you just put in, Jirka?”

“Yeah. That’s it.” Dad uneasily wriggled in his seat. “The tank is almost full, though.”

“Good God in heaven.” She bit her nails.

I made the sign of the cross, wondering if we had enough coins to ring Marta from a payphone in case we got lost in the mountains.

Fairy lights glittered in a myriad of colours and comets flashed above the road in every village we had passed. *Felice Natale*. The local shops featured illuminated windows with reindeers and sleighs on display. Sometimes, we were driving so close to the houses we caught the glimpse of the Italian families inside, gathered around the dining table with a Christmas tree in the background as if in a nativity scene.

“Come along to Bethlehem, doodlay, doodlay, doodlay dah.” I sang traditional carols. “Baby Jesus, little boy, let me rock you in your cradle. Baby Jesus, little boy, let me sing to you with joy.”

Seeing that we didn’t have a radio in our Škoda, I took it upon myself to entertain my parents with live music. It transpired that my father’s shortcut across the Apennines was much longer than what it seemed on the map. I ended up running out of songs. The surrounding fog became dense like milk and the Christmas decoration started to have a blinding effect on us. Dad’s eyes became bloodshot behind his glasses and Mum took to rubbing her temples to relieve her headache. Our engine groaned as if in painful agony, threatening to overheat. We continued to drive up to the clouds as if heading to Italian Heaven when I noticed an orange light flick on our dusty dashboard.

“We’re down to our reserve.” Dad rumbled. “We’ve got two gallons left in our tank.”

Progressing to the top, we drove on the edge of gaping precipices. Gravel crunched beneath our wheels and our tires sometimes slid on the wet road. My stomach began to grumble. My eyes burned, but I was afraid to close them. I intensely watched Dad as he wearily turned the steering wheel. He was evidently beginning to lose concentration, but Mum couldn't drive and I was too young to replace him on the driver's seat. Scared of plunging into the void, all I could do was to whisper my prayers. "Hail Mary, full of grace. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." My only hope was that the little God would save us again.

As if in response to my desperate supplications, the misty curtain parted to reveal a luminous cluster of townships in the valley. Half way down the slope, our engine died. Rolling down in silence, we approached a road sign that indicated the next settlement. It seemed like a miracle when we recognised the name of the town where Marta lived. We counted down the numbers on the main street, coming to a halt a short distance from the Papazzanis' house.

"*Veni, vidi, vici!*" My mother appropriately quoted Julius Caesar. "Isn't it amazing? We came, saw and conquered. Sometimes it takes a lot of bad luck to get a little lucky." She happily clapped hands like a child.



MY BODY ACHED AND I was so tired, my knees nearly buckled under me as I scrambled out of our car to breathe fresh air. Yet my physical discomfort could never overshadow the joy I felt in anticipation of seeing Marta. Stars flashed on the lamp poles overhead while I prepared to perform in the role of baby Jesus, ringing the bell on the Papazzanis' door.

"Come along to Bethlehem!" I sang when the front door opened. "Doodlay. Doodlay. Doodlay dah."

"*Zitta. Zitta.*" Mrs Papazzani silenced me. "Do you realise what time it is?"

Her pronunciation was razor sharp. I wasn't sure if I understood what she meant.

"*Si.*" I replied in broken Italian. "*Ease* Christmas Eve!"

"*No, cara.* Christmas Eve is over." Mrs Papazzani's small eyes narrowed. "It's way past midnight."

Wrapping the dressing gown around her bony hips, Gianni's mother came down the

garden steps to greet my parents. Mr Papazzani stood in the door, yawning. I could see Gianni peek out from behind him and a young woman in a baggy nightgown.

“*Ahoj* Marta.” I unconsciously stepped back instead of throwing myself in my sister’s arms. Marta reminded me of a ghost with her hair cropped short, tinted in an ugly, brown colour. There wasn’t a trace of blood in my sister’s waxen face.

Mrs Papazzani attempted to dissipate the initial shock. I watched her fuss around my parents, stiffly kissing them on cheeks. The sound of smacking lips was supposed to demonstrate affection, although I had the impression of seeing an imaginary glass wall between the Papazzani clan and our family. My sister behaved like a robot. Her voice sounded hollow and her smile appeared fake. It stuck to her unhappy face like a plastic carnival mask.

“See how many gifts we’ve brought for you, Marta?” I pointed to a pile of boxes my parents pulled out of the car.

“Thanks. That’s nice of you.” She robotically replied.

I carefully picked up the packaging with my present and followed my sister inside the house. “Where’s your Christmas tree?” I asked her as we walked up a slippery marble staircase. “Have you already unwrapped your gifts?”

Marta ignored my question. She led me through an obscure corridor to a small living room. “Here.” She pointed to an artificial pine that stood on a metallic coffee table. Decorated in red ribbons and gold plastic balls, the Christmas tree was less than thirty centimetres tall.

“*Felice Natale!*” A large TV set in the corner bubbled with gleeful laughter.

“You have no idea how much I missed you, Marta.” I tearfully confessed. “Aren’t you going to open it up?” I handed the box to her. “I hope you’ll like my choice!” My heart pounded with excitement while I watched her tear the wrapping.

“It’s cute.” My sister made an effort to smile when she pulled out the blue cylinder covered in tiny enamel flowers and golden paint.

Before she had time to thank me, Mrs Papazzani burst in through the door.

“*Bellissimo lampadario!* Can I have it?” I saw her snatch the lamp from Marta’s hands, without expecting to hear my response. “*Grazie mille.* It’s going to look sensational on my bedside table.”

Marta didn’t even think of protesting.

I was so upset, I couldn’t find any words and moved my mouth like a Christmas carp

before it gets killed. “*Ma, ma . . .*” I could never tell Mrs Papazzani how much love I had invested into my present. The ornate bedside lamp summed up my entire ballet career, representing over fifty performances in different children’s roles.

In the meantime, heavy steps echoed from the hallway. I could hear Dad asking Mr Papazzani, where he should store the crystal mirror he and Gianni were carrying upstairs inside the wooden case.

“Take everything up to the attic.” The bald man told him. “There’s not enough space down here.”

“What was that?” Dad assumed that he misunderstood.

Mr Papazzani motioned towards the steps leading to the dusty room under the roof. “*Sofita.*” The old man panted and heaved himself onto the coach. I watched him press buttons on a mysterious device that enabled him to remotely change television channels. There were countless late night programs, but Gianni’s father was too restless to watch anything for more than ten seconds.

“I think I’ll go down to help Mum.” I said to Marta, swallowing the dumpling in my throat. I was about to walk to the marble stairway when Mrs Papazzani’s piercing voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Take the door at the back, *cara.*” She emphasised her words as if she was talking to a retard. “The front door is reserved for the guests and you are *famiglia.*” She led me out through the kitchen.

I came down the concrete steps to the backyard, following a narrow path around the corner of the Papazzanis’ town house. The one-story building looked significantly less impressive from the back than from the street. When I passed the basement apartment window, I saw a lonely, old lady inside. Motionlessly facing a flashing TV screen, she appeared to talk to herself.

I found my mother alone in the driveway. She guarded a pile of bundles beneath the canopy of glimmering Christmas paraphernalia.

“This must be the worst Christmas Eve ever, Mummy.” I threw myself around her, choking on disappointment. “What’s wrong with Marta?”

“Don’t cry, little Trumpet.” She patted my hair. “We arrived too late and everyone is probably extremely tired. The morning tends to be wiser than the evening.” She quoted another Czech proverb. “Let’s wait until tomorrow before we make any judgements. We need to repose our minds.”



WE ENDED UP GOING to bed without dinner. Nobody thought of asking us if we had eaten and Mum didn't think it appropriate to let the Papazzanis know that we were hungry. Gianni and Marta unfolded a couch in the guest room before they went back to sleep. The temperature inside the Papazzani's house was as cold as outside. Our room reminded me of an aquarium with glass-panelled doors on two sides and a window in the remaining wall. Switching on the lights, we floated around like exotic fish before we eventually crawled beneath a thin woollen blanket, spread over a queen-size sheet. As we plunged into the darkness, I heard the bells toll in the distance. After a while, Mum and I started to clatter our teeth. To warm ourselves up, we cleaved to Dad's body. He radiated solar energy despite the gloomy circumstances, but his snoring, in combination with the springs in the mattress, kept me awake for most of the night. Outside the big window, I could see artificial stars monotonously flicker on and off. I counted them like sheep, attempting to doze off.

It was still dark when I woke up. Different snoring sounds indicated the location of bedrooms. Compared to my dad's heroic rumbling, Gianni's snoring reminded me of a gargling gutter during a rainstorm while Mr Papazzani sounded like a concrete mixer. I tiptoed out of our room, feeling my way through the hallway in search of a bathroom. Surprisingly, it was the nicest place in the house. Decorated in black and white tiles, it featured a polished chessboard floor. A porcelain bowl stood on an elevated stage like a lonely chess figure, opposite a large mirror framed with lightbulbs that covered the wall above the sink. As I stepped up on the podium, I preferred to close my eyes to avoid becoming the audience to my rude performance. Patting the roll of toilet paper, I was astonished to feel the soft texture. I couldn't resist to take a close look. The pink tissue covered in flowery imprints and it smelled of roses.

I felt guilty about wasting it in such a primitive way.

After I washed my hands, I took my time to sniff different flasks with lotions and shampoos that covered the shelves above the spotless bathtub. There were mysterious containers with toiletries and facial creams in the bathroom cabinet drawers. I found my sister's make-up bag and sprayed my armpits with her deodorant before I was ready to venture outside. My next steps directed me to the kitchen where I admired the polished counter equipped with cool appliances. It was the first time when I set my eyes on a dishwasher, disappointed to see that it looked similar to an ordinary washing machine. I imagined that it was a human-like robot with four arms. Next to it was a massive fridge.

Curious to check out its contents, I carefully opened it.

“Wow. This is a dream.” I was enchanted to see the light flick on inside. The shelves virtually overflowed with food.

My mother’s fridge was small and always empty. Mrs Papazzani’s fridge was so full of treats, I didn’t know where to look first. Every article was wrapped in rainbow colours. Pictures of smiling cows with bells adorned the cheeses. Images of freshly harvested fruit covered the plastic cups with flavoured yogurts. Even boring items such as butter and skimmed milk promised some other magic qualities beside the taste. When I dipped my finger into a cute jar with anchovy paste, however, I was disappointed to establish that it tasted exactly as salty and disgusting as the product Mum bought in an ugly tin tube back home.

“What are you doing in my *cucina*?” I heard a sharp voice behind me.

Mrs Papazzani stood in the door. Noting my hand inside her fridge, she didn’t look surprised to see me behave like a thief.

“Are you hungry?” I heard more scorn than genuine concern in her voice when she handed me a glossy package with pictures of brown biscuits. “*Per favore*, don’t drop any crumbs on my floor.”

The sound of running water echoed from the bathroom and I heard my parents stir behind the glass-panelled doors. Taking a seat at the dining table, I tore the package and started to crunch the biscuits. Unlike our homemade cookies, the industrial Christmas biscuits were dry. Looking around, I noted Mr Papazzani’s remote control on the coffee table and couldn’t resist the temptation to press one of the buttons.

The TV screen exploded with festive atmosphere, attracting the old man from the bathroom. I watched Gianni’s father collapse onto the leather couch. “Eh. Give me that thing.” He stretched out his hairy arm to reclaim his favourite gadget. “Italians celebrate Christmas today.” He informed me, rapidly swapping channels. “What do you prefer to watch?”

Once again, the pressure of having to choose from an array of options paralyzed me. There were only two channels on Czechoslovak television, both broadcasting fairy tales during Christmas season. Having seen most of them several times over, I still found it difficult to pick one over the other. The annoying thing about Mr Papazzani was that he never watched anything long enough to let me decide if I liked it.

“Can I see this fairy tale?” I begged him. “*Per favore*.”

“That’s a *pubblicità*.”

“*Vote?*” I could see a blonde princess running along the beach. A fiery, black horse galloped in the shallow water. A sailboat swayed on the clear blue surface, indicating the beginning of an adventure. A handsome, young man dressed as a sailor faced the strong wind. I comfortably leaned into my seat. While the lovers hugged, sealing their lips in an endless kiss, a masculine voice murmured behind the screen. “Pursue your dreams while you’re young. Don’t be afraid of living your passion.” The camera cut to a package of chewing gums. “Enjoy the fresh taste of Wrigley Spearmint.”

The fairy tale was over before it began.

“Is this some kind of propaganda for food?” I felt cheated.

The communist television never advertised items available in shops. The few quality products always vanished from the shelves.

“In my country, we make publicity only for the *sinks* that aren’t any good.” I tried to explain to Mr Papazzani. “Like politics.”

“That’s because good things don’t need any *pubblicità*.” He nodded.

“*Ease* Wrigley Spearmint no good?”

“*Non lo so.*” He shrugged. “I don’t chew gums.”

“Do you want a biscuit?”

Mr Papazzani leaned over to make sure that his wife was busy in the kitchen. Then, looking like a monkey in the zoo, he grabbed a handful of dry cookies and stuffed them inside his mouth.

“Giuseppe!” The tiny woman appeared in the doorway before he had time to swallow. “Didn’t you forget about the turkey?”

“Hmmm. Ummm.” The old man nodded, his eyes bulging from his sockets.

“When do you plan to kill it, *caro?*” She wanted to know.

“What do you need a turkey for?” I saved Mr Papazzani from having to reply with his mouth full.

Gianni’s mother explained that Italians traditionally baked the big bird for Christmas lunch. “Keep it in mind that I need to put it in the oven three hours before, *caro.*”

When she retreated to the kitchen, her husband gave me a grateful wink.

“Come with me.” He wiped his mouth.

I followed Mr Papazzani down the steps to a garden shed where he kept a set of sharp knives. A noisy flock of poultry clacked behind a fenced enclosure at the back of the

Papazzani's yard, passing their lifetime by laying eggs and awaiting execution. A big brown rooster observed us with one eye before he let out a warning cry.

"*Ciao Giuseppe!*" I saw a lively man with white hair and a black moustache wave at Mr Papazzani from the neighbouring garden. "Do you have guests from Prague?" His eyes sparkled with curiosity.

"*Salve Marco.* How did you guess where they've come from?" Mr Papazzani clicked his tongue to convey that he disapproved of spying.

"I saw the Škoda outside." Marco tapped his wrinkled forehead with his forefinger to suggest that he wasn't being nosy, but ingenious. "Poor people." He turned to me. "I remember seeing the Russian tanks on television when they rolled into your country. I felt terribly sorry for you guys. It must be awful to live behind the Iron Curtain like those turkeys."

I was surprised to see that the relationships between Italian neighbours were the same as those in my hometown. Even if I couldn't see anyone in the surrounding windows, the loudness of Marco's voice suggested that he spoke to a large audience. I could sense the presence of eyes peering from behind the closed shutters.

"Here you go, buddy." Mr Papazzani grabbed the biggest turkey by the red neck and carried it to a log by the shed.

The poor bird began to cry for help, desperately flapping its wings.

"*Assassino.*" Marco stuck two fingers inside his ears, calling Mr Papazzani a murderer. "*Aiuto.* I can't suffer to watch this!" I saw him sprint back to his house.

"*Ma dai!* Stop behaving like a hypocritical pacifist." Gianni's dad called out behind his fleeing neighbour. "Do you think that you're better than me because you buy your turkey from a butcher?"

The noisy commotion attracted Marta and my parents. They ventured out onto the veranda, watching Mr Papazzani wrestle with the screaming bird. The old man held the turkey with its head down, stabbing its neck with a long knife, but none of the wounds proved fatal. Even after he decapitated the bird, the headless body ran off to the fenced enclosure as if to return home, spraying the white garden path with blood. My stomach turned.

I no longer looked forward to eating Italian Christmas lunch after this.

"We normally eat fried carp." I felt compelled to inform Mrs Papazzani when she delivered a tray with the golden carcass to the table.

“A fish?” Gianni’s mother raised her eyebrows with derision. “That’s what I made for Giuseppe. Did you hear this, *caro*?” She said to her unhappy husband. “You can think of your diet as the Czechoslovak Christmas.”

Pressing the remote control, Gianni’s mother turned off the sound on the television, where scantily clad female dancers kicked their legs to the sound of electronic music. We lunched in silence. Marta heaved sighs and Gianni occasionally cleared his throat as if he wanted to say something, but he never did. My father slurped the Chianti Mr Papazzani brought from his cellar and my mother chewed soundlessly as usual. The old man made disgusting noises as if to spoil our enjoyment of the delicious dishes he couldn’t eat. Mrs Papazzani headed the table, dignified like the English queen. She barely touched her meal. Each time I attempted to start a conversation, she gave me a look that made me shut my mouth.

“*Buono?*” She kept asking.

“*Buonissimo.*” Everyone politely answered in chorus. “*Grazie.*”

By the time we got to ice-cream, my stomach was so stuffed I had to refuse. I never thought this would happen. Having too much to eat was as bad as not having enough, I realised. At the end of the afternoon, I heaved myself down on the couch next to Mr Papazzani, feeling as miserable as the old man did.

“Time for presents.” Gianni’s mother announced after coffee.

She explained to me that children in Tuscany didn’t know baby Jesus. They waited for *Babbo Natale* to come down the chimney and bring them gifts. I watched her pull a nylon stocking from her apron pocket. “There you go, children.” She handed it to Marta and Gianni. “This way you can buy yourself whatever you fancy.” It contained a roll of banknotes.

Seeing the disappointed look on my face, Mrs Papazzani dipped her hand back in the pocket and fished out a ten thousand liras note. “This is for you. *Auguri.*”

Behind her back, Mr Papazzani furtively took a swig from the wine bottle, pressing a button on the remote control. “*Felice Natale.*” A curvaceous TV host exclaimed on stage, echoing Mrs Papazzani’s tone of voice. Optimistic music filled the room. “*Volare. Oooh. Cantare. Oooh.*” The fat tenor on the screen crooned.

“Do you know Luciano Pavarotti?” Gianni’s father asked with a condescending tone. “He’s the best singer in the world.”

“*Sì.* I’ve heard him sing opera before.” Mum politely replied.

“I hope you don’t mind it if Marta and I will give you our presents after New Year.” Gianni told us. “We prefer to shop after the holidays when everything is on discount.” I watched him count the money in his mother’s sock. “I refuse to pay exaggerated prices because of some stupid tradition.”

I turned to my sister to see what she thought of this, but her pallid face didn’t show anything at all. I could sense that Marta was deeply unhappy behind her stiff mask. My parents also looked alarmed to see her silent, but they didn’t know how to get to her. Obviously, it was going to take a professional spy to investigate what was wrong with my sister. My father was facing a powerful adversary in Mrs Papazzani. He would have to be extremely resourceful and discreet in gathering intelligence.



THE NEXT DAY, WE prepared to drive to Mrs Papazzani’s birthplace to meet her elderly parents. Prior to our departure, Gianni’s mother herded us in the driveway and pushed Mum and Dad to the back of her husband’s Panda to keep them separated from Marta. “*Presto. Presto.*” She rushed. “I don’t want to see my sister’s family get there first.”

Her silver perm was sprayed stiff, reminding me of cauliflower, and her narrow lips covered in red lipstick evoked a bleeding wound.

I climbed into the young couple’s car with the intention of cheering my sister up during the short ride. “Can you define the difference between a deaf and a dumb person?” I asked Gianni. This was a joke I heard in school.

“No.” He shook his head.

“*Vote?*”

“I told you, I don’t know.”

“*Vote?*” I cupped my ear to suggest that I was deaf.

I was glad to hear Marta’s bubbly laughter. Gianni knitted his furry eyebrows, looking offended. He clicked his tongue with disapproval and switched on the indicator to depart from the driveway.

“Gianni is in his darkest mood.” My sister explained in Czech. “He hates the family gatherings, because he can’t stand his aunt.” It was apparently a family secret that Mrs Papazzani’s sister ran a knitting workshop in her garage with the money inherited from a

wealthy lover. Her husband was a humble bricklayer, but Aunt Gina employed a dozen women in her home factory to produce woollen sweaters and scarfs. Having grown up in poverty, Aunt Gina liked to flaunt her wealth in the Papazzanis' face like a glove. "She's a terrible snob." Marta concluded.

Rocky vineyards and olive groves surrounded San Geronto, a stone-built village in the mountains populated by a handful of octogenarians. Since the end of the eighties, the younger generations abandoned the hills, Marta told me.

We stopped in front of a grey mansion with metallic shutters in the windows. Empty flowerpots surrounded the entrance stairs. Broken rural appliances and rusty tools lay scattered around the unkempt garden.

"Mamma!" Mrs Papazzani threw her arms in the air.

A tall sinewy woman came out of the front door with her back perfectly straight. She didn't seem pleased to see her older daughter and shooed her kisses as if they were flies. *"Felice Natale, mamma."* Gianni's mother behaved like a school girl, presenting us to her mother.

"Buon giorno." Dad greeted the old woman who visibly cheered up when he heartily squeezed her withered hand. "How are you?" He remembered to ask.

"It's not as good as it used to be. I can no longer see the cross on the Pistoia church tower." She replied in a strong dialect, motioning to a remote town on the horizon.

I followed her hand, but couldn't see anything either. She smiled, looking at me with perfectly clear blue eyes. We were about to enter the house when a glistening limousine crunched to a halt in the driveway.

"Buon Natale a tutti!"

A strong smell of expensive perfume filled my nose. Gianni's controversial aunt wore a full-length mink coat despite the temperate weather. I watched her lead the way upstairs, shielding her son and his family from harm's way. Her thin husband faithfully followed behind like a dog.

The two clans met in the dark hallway, triggering a quick round of smacking kisses. Nobody seemed to be happy to see one another, presumably harbouring longstanding grudges that were so old no one could tell what they stemmed from. The Italians were accomplished actors. Everyone made an effort to put on a friendly face, laughing and speaking too loudly.

"Ciao babbo!" Mrs Papazzani rushed to the living room.

Her ancient father sat in an armchair with eyes intensely glued to the TV screen. The Italian television featured a compilation of memorable moments in the national soccer history.

“*Come stai, Daddy?*” She bellowed into his ear. “How’s life?”

“What life?” The old man turned around to check out the intruders, showing us a toothless smile. “I’m practically dead.” His eyes sparked with humour. I saw that his legs were grotesquely bent out of shape, forming an O. “Your *mamma* can’t wait to bury me to finally have fun.” He joked. “During the seventy years of living together, she has never learned to love me.”

“You don’t have any time for love when you pass your lifetime by milking cows and hoeing the fields, *babbo*.” Gina jumped to her mother’s defence. “Love is supposed to be pleasure.”

“Love is duty.” Mrs Papazzani demonstratively put her hand on her father’s shoulder. “Naturally, I’m talking about faithful love, *capito?*”

Gina raised her thin eyebrows and patted the dyed blond helmet as if to show that her sister’s poisonous remark left her unruffled. Gianni’s mother clearly found a ferocious opponent in her.

“When the wife makes love out of duty, it’s a little wonder that her husband makes it when he’s on duty, *capito?*”

She must have hit a sore spot, because Mrs Papazzani painfully bit her red lips.

“*Madonna mia*. What a great goal!” The Italian men cried, pretending to be absorbed in the soccer game.

“The next time you’ll want to give me a lesson on morality, *cara mia*, don’t mix it with love.” Gina triumphed. “When Carlo got married to Patrizia, I bought him a house, *vero amore?*” The aunt crossed the living room as if drawing an invisible line between the two clans. “My son doesn’t have to share the same floor with us. Show me a better proof of love.” Standing by her son’s side, she beamed with maternal pride.

Gianni nervously cleared his throat, trying to look superior.

His cousin, Carlo, was a dental technician. He never obtained a university degree, but thanks to his mother’s financial help, he ran a successful clinic, employing a number of graduated dentists in his private practice.

“Love is just a dream.” Carlo’s wife offered her opinion. “You believe it’s yours for as long as you can, then it’s gone.” She sadly rolled her big black eyes, jiggling the golden

bracelets. She used to be a beauty, but had a prematurely wilted face and a tendency to become overweight.

Patrizia's sons aimlessly ran around the living room, rattling plastic machine guns. The boys could have been seven and eight years old. They both had disturbing facial tics and neither of them seemed to know how to play. When their mother ordered them to keep quiet, they blatantly ignored her existence and continued to make racket until Carlo lost patience and angrily silenced them with a slap.

"To me, love is in forbearance." Gina's husband mumbled from his wife's shadow.

"Why do we have to go on and on about love whenever we get together?" His son interrupted him. Carlo had a thin moustache and cynical wrinkles around his mouth. "It's much more simple than you think." He declared. "Give people enough money and they'll love you. Take it away from them and they'll hate you. This is hardly science. Don't you agree, *ingegnere?*" He challenged Gianni to contradict him.

My brother-in-law looked uneasy. "*Bob.*" He turned to see what his father thought of Carlo's question. Mr Papazzani was busy watching soccer, unwilling to elaborate on the subject of love.

"We shouldn't underestimate the role of money in love relations, but I'm afraid the response is not that simplistic." Gianni replied coolly in the end. "Love can be viewed as a form of debt. Children owe it to their parents. A husband to his wife and the other way around." He cleared his throat.

My sister didn't say anything. Exchanging a sad look with my parents, she frowned. Obviously, none of the members of her Italian family were ever going to love her as unconditionally as we did.

"Would you like a cup of *caffè?*" The grandmother invited Mum and Dad to the table. "God saved Italians from the Fascists, but the Devil made us rich." She told them. "The young people know nothing about love. All they worry about is *soldi.*"

To demonstrate what she was talking about, she rubbed her withered fingers as if to sprinkle salt into my mother's cup.

"*Capito?*" She heaved herself onto a chair, taking up her knitting. "Today, everything is about money, money, money." She shook her head. "When my daughters were born, we lived in a single room with our goats. We survived on bread, tomatoes and olives. No one got sick or depressed. Instead of watching television, we entertained ourselves by telling stories. We recited poetry and sang songs as we tended our olive groves. On Sundays,

everybody danced. Today, people can't sing or dance and they swear at work."

I watched her make small loops, rapidly pulling the yarn through each hook with the needle. She never missed one. "You look like such a nice woman and your husband too." She leaned over to squeeze Mum's hand. "I'm making woollen bed socks. You are from a cold country. I'll give you some to keep you warm in bed."

"*Grazie.*" My mother smiled.

"Nobody in my *famiglia* wants to wear them." The old woman grumbled. "They're an ungrateful bunch."

She got up to bring us three pairs of slippers from the bedroom. Decorated in satin ribbons, they looked like oversized babies' shoes. My father looked bewildered when Gianni's grandmother invited him to try the biggest pair on.

"Usually, when we get cold in our beds in *mine* country, we prefer to make love." He joked, speaking in a dreadful accent. "*Grazie* anyway. Perhaps, if we make too *match* noise, we can bite on the sock."

Dad's statement instantly met with success. Italians clearly didn't take matters of sex seriously, unless discussed outside the family. Everybody exploded in laughter and the tension between the warring clans relaxed. I noticed that Carlo expertly examined my mother's figure with the eyes of a connoisseur. He looked like someone who frequently bought love from pretty women and he seemed to value Mum's beauty so highly, he perceived Dad as a wealthy man. Gianni's Grandad was equally impressed. He made the effort to stand up from his armchair and give my father an encouraging pat on his back.

"*Ecco*, what keeps me warm ever since my wife refuses to give me love!" The old man pulled a dusty wine bottle from the kitchen cupboard. "Have some." He poured out two glasses to my parents. "It's from my vineyard. I've put all my love into it."

"*Grazie.*" My parents were glad to accept.

The grandfather's eyes filled with sparks when he saw them appreciate his homemade Chianti. The members of Gina's clan were clearly used to drinking fine wines and the Papazzanis didn't drink.



LATER IN THE evening, my parents and I held a top-secret conference on the couch. The wind rattled the windowpanes and the guest room seemed colder than the previous nights. Suddenly, the grandmother's slippers came in handy. After we put them on, Dad

pulled the blanket over our heads and we warmed each other up with our breath.

“Can’t the Papazzanis switch on the central heating?” I clattered my teeth. “The only warm place in this house is the kitchen.”

“That’s the irony of modern age.” Mum shivered. “Mrs Papazzani may live in a town house with a marble staircase, but her mentality is still that of a peasant. Her entire life revolves around the kitchen like in the days when she was growing up with goats in the mountains.”

“Gianni spends most of his time in the bathroom.” I pointed out.

“It’s no wonder that Marta looks so blue.” Dad pointed out. “Every time her husband owes to stand up to his mother he retreats to the loo with a book.”

“Did you have a chance to talk to Marta?” Mum whispered.

“Nah. She refuses to open up as if she was scared of something.”

“Or someone.” I frowned. “What do you propose we should do?”

“I’ve already thought everything through, but we’ll have to tread very carefully.” Dad revealed his professional plan. “What I’ll need from you is to distract the Papazzanis’ attention. The next time Gianni goes to the loo, I’ll try to take Marta out for a walk.”

His strategy sounded like a real conspiracy. I was impressed to see Dad in action and proud to be on his team.

The next morning after breakfast, seeing Gianni lock himself in his favourite place, I convinced Mr Papazzani to take me out shopping.

“It’s one *sink* to watch the advertised products on TV, but I would like to see them in reality.” I told him.

He was glad to announce to his wife that we were off. Before she could protest, my mother skilfully interfered.

“That tiramisu you’ve made for Christmas was simply exquisite, Maria.” She took Mrs Papazzani by the elbow, leading her to the kitchen. “You must give me the recipe.”

As Gianni’s father and I were preparing to leave, I saw Dad’s shadow creep down the hallway. I heard him silently knock on my sister’s bedroom door. Everything was going according to the plan.

The shops were located on the square, a few hundred metres up the road from the Papazzanis’ house. Nonetheless, Mr Papazzani insisted on driving in his Panda. After he parked in front of the town hall, he waved at a group of seniors playing chess by the sandstone fountain. “*Ciao ragazzi.*”

“Giuseppe. Are you still alive?” I saw the Italians shake hands like the veterans of war. *“Come stai?”*

“Don’t ask me how I am.” Mr Papazzani screwed his face. “You know my wife.”

“Eh. Wives are all the same.” The old men laughed. “At the beginning, they’re full of honey, but in the end, they sting like bees.”

I admired the pastel houses on the square built in Renaissance style. The local church featured walls made of blocks of limestone and an unusually tall bell tower. There was a charming café bar and a small cheese shop. I saw the greengrocer arrange baskets with tropical fruit and exotic spice in the window display. The winter sunbeams stroked the peaceful square. The scent of dough wafted out of a traditional bakery and the adjacent flower shop emanated the smell of lilies.

“Dio mio.” Mr Papazzani clicked his tongue, cherishing the lovely aromas. “Wouldn’t I swap a kingdom for a nice slice of Mortadella?” Following his instinct, he headed to the butcher. “How’s business Dino?”

A half a cow hung from a hook inside the sunlit shop. I could see pieces of skinned animals on display as well as homemade sausages, hams and salamis. Dino’s apron was spotlessly white, although his hands dripped with blood.

“Don’t even get me started on this. It’s no good lately.” The butcher’s bovine eyes betrayed a tender soul. “What can I get you?” He wiped his bloody palms into a cloth.

“Are these garlic sausages fresh? Two of those will do fine.” Mr Papazzani clicked his tongue in yet another way. He could express so many different meanings by making wet noises with his mouth, it became a whole new language. “What’s bothering you? Is the Ipercoop stealing your customers?”

“Don’t mention those bloody communists.” The butcher’s face turned red. “If they continue to drive down the prices, most shops in town will have to close down.” He unhappily sighed, wrapping the sausages in a sheet of wax paper. “Nowadays, the local families drive to the hypermarket on Sundays instead to Mass. They prefer to load the shopping trolleys with heaps of junk rather than to pay for quality food in our shops.”

I was sure I must have misunderstood. To me, small shops were the best thing about Capitalism. I associated Communism with monopolized services, industry and the mass production. The first thing the Czechoslovak communists did after they overthrew the elected government was to close down the local businesses. From what Dino had said, it sounded as if there had been a communist putsch in Italy.

“It’s always nice to see you, Giuseppe.” The butcher collected the liras and heartily squeezed Mr Papazzani’s hand. “*Arivederci*. Say hello to Maria.”

I noticed that Gianni’s father furtively looked around before he walked out onto the sidewalk as if he was scared of something. “My wife doesn’t need to know that we have visited the butcher, *capito?*” He offered me a piece of sausage for my loyalty.

“*Capito.*” I chewed the dry meat with garlic while we walked back to his Panda. “What communists was Dino talking about?” I wanted to know.

“*Aspetta*, I’ll show you.” Mr Papazzani turned on the ignition and drove out of town. Crossing the rolling fields, it took him fifteen minutes to get to our destination. I was astonished see a colossal shopping centre in the middle of wasteland surrounded by an overcrowded car park. The grey edifice was made of concrete blocks, reminding me of a typical communist factory plastered in crimson propaganda posters. Giant neon letters dominated the flat roof like red stars.

“Ipercoop is the most successful cooperative of all times.” Gianni’s father told me. “There’s a chain of hypermarkets like this one across the whole *Italia.*”

“Oh my God.” I gasped, pushing the trolley through the doors, which automatically opened and closed. I wondered what my great grandfather would have thought of the Ipercoop, having founded a shopping chain cooperative across our country. His *Včela*, translated as the Bee, connected small, private shops into a powerful organisation. The Ipercoop was as big as a hangar. It embodied everything I had learned in school about Communism. I could see posters advertising for a better future. According to the poignant slogans, one didn’t even need to pay for some of the articles on display.

“Buy two shampoos and receive the third for free!” I read in astonishment. “For each bottle of Campari we’ll give you two glasses as a present!”

A long row of busy cash registers revealed the business side of the whole operation. Instead of using money, however, the shoppers handed plastic cards to the cashiers and merely signed the receipt before wheeling their trolleys out. As if in a dream, I floated between the full shelves. There was everything from food to car tyres. Electronic music played from hidden speakers, lulling me to a state of hypnosis. The shop assistants wore plastic gloves and hygienic smiles. There was no end to the variety of cheap, beautifully packaged products that filled the different sections.

“Please, take me, take me!” Colourful inscriptions and attractive images screamed from everywhere. “I’ll make your life so much better.” The ads seduced us. “It’s scientifically

proven. Your wrinkles will disappear. Your child will feel happier. Your lawn will grow greener.”

Mr Papazzani’s eyes also glazed over. As if in trance, he started to toss the packaged promises by the handful into our trolley until the pyramid of packets piled up so high I couldn’t see where I was pushing it.

“Why do you support the communists by shopping in their hypermarket if you don’t approve of them?” I questioned Gianni’s father while we queued at the register.

“When communists do business, they can be a hell of a competition.” Mr Papazzani loaded our shopping onto the conveyor belt. “Ipercoop is very practical and hell of a lot cheaper than everyone else. *Naturalmente*, as a customer, I choose the best price.”

“What is this *sinke* you’ve just pulled out of your wallet?” I observed the small piece of plastic with a magnetic strip at the back.

“That’s a credit card.” The old man showed me. “*Guarda*. Don’t ask me how, but this thing can somehow link the cash register with my bank.” He gave the card to the young cashier. “Each month, the Italian state electronically sends my pension into my account. Soon, I won’t need any paper money to pay for anything.”

I watched the cashier swipe the packages over a magic sensor. Back home, the shop assistants had to punch in the price manually. Here, the register could read the black and white codes on the wrapping while the items came down the conveyor belt. Each time, I heard a beep and the digital display showed the virtual value of each of the products Mr Papazzani bought on credit.

“Wow. This is exactly what Communism is supposed to be about!” I was impressed. “What a pity it doesn’t exist in *mine* country.”

