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33,400 words.

The town of ormož and its surroundings

By Kate Wagner

For Jan and Jon

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“It is the sufferings of men that should be shared: the smallest step towards their pleasures is one towards the hardening of their pains.”

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

The following work exposes the reader to content involving eating disorders, suicidal ideation, drug use, and mentions of sexual assault.

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## Part One

### I.

Karel Kavčič wept in the balcony of the Musikverein in Vienna in May of 1990, let it be known, he thought, committing it to memory, and let it be known that he wept there because the Pops were playing the Adagietto from Mahler 5 and he had loved Mahler 5 as a child, all that military nonsense at the beginning, bah bah bah bahhhhh, a little march for walking to school to, tin-soldier-like, not really getting the Adagietto until around twelve, the age he — not unlike most people — first felt love in his heart, some deep ache speaking to him that said yes Karel Kavčič, son of a signalman in Celje, yes, devote yourself to me entirely, a whole life's worth of devotion, and look, now he was twenty-seven in Vienna listening to Mahler 5 in the Musikverien, a whole life's worth of living, and he wept because it was over.

He stank in his old concertmaster's clothes, a tailored suit from many fashions ago, tight in the buttons but wrinkled everywhere else because he had been wearing the suit for four days

because he could not go back home except to check on whether he had received a letter from the chamber orchestra, because something terrible had happened at the apartment, unknown to him but terrible, the kind of terrible that causes people in uniforms to scour big old stultified cities trifling about in other people's business even though it is really their boss's business, but, he supposed, it was also his business because his not having a visa was the whole country's business, albeit unspectacular, an ordinary rather than extraordinary crime unlike the one committed in the apartment, but don't worry, he told the invisible policemen in the Mahler horn section, I am going home tomorrow, I am going home. None of the phone numbers he wrote down worked anymore — seven years is a long time, after all — so he would be going home as is, which was to say, bereft of guidance, hoping someone would remember him there, maybe his old teacher Dr. Matej would still be alive, maybe he could lend him a room and a little bit of money, maybe then Karel could return to the tiny jewel box auditorium in Ljubljana, yes... His breath stank of alcohol as he sighed at a diminished 9th that resolved cleverly, yes Dr. Matej would be there and all would be well, but alternatively Dr. Matej could also be dead and no one would remember Karel Kavčič and if they did they'd say, it's all about to be split up, your country boy, sorry Vienna didn't work out for you. We tried to warn you about the Austrians and about the futility of musical dreams in a city where achieving them had long been notoriously difficult, yes, Karel, you silly boy, silly, silly, silly—

He caught himself before falling asleep and remembered that Mahler 5 was on and his tears began again. He watched the unison quivering tremolo bows of those perfect coattail wearing freaks who were born in some other world and came back up to the surface of this one perfectly formed violinists whose only strifes were in losing weight from eating off those fat

paychecks, because that's all perfect people had to worry about: artifice, and so they could devote themselves to it while the rest of the world and all the violinists in it devoted themselves to being perfect, running themselves ragged on the hamster wheel of never catching up to the perfect-born. How many hours of scales? 10,000 at least, you need scales before everything else; scales and arpeggios in the damp basement of the music school in Celje, right on the small square with the sweet little baroque statue devoted to the great muse, the hills towering dizzyingly behind the slightly askance pastel buildings, hills covered in precipitous forest, and after enough scales in every key, only then could he taste the real stuff of music, the Savinja rushing by the windows while he played the Saint Saëns B minor concerto (always a minor key with him) over and over again, testing the patience of his great aunt at the piano, his fingers coasting through all the runs and arpeggios as though they were the Savinja itself, passing over his toes in little ripples.

He could play the Saint Saëns at fourteen. Perhaps if he could have played it at twelve things would have been different. He read in the paper that there was a guy in the second violin section of the Vienna State Opera (the second violin section!) who made his debut at four with the Mendelssohn concerto with some rank little orchestra in Prague or Krakow or some other Slavic hole that more people nonetheless knew about because wars were fought there by great Austrians, yes, the Austrians, like Bruno from the chamber orchestra sitting behind his desk in the basement (the labor of classical music always took place in basements without exception because the concert hall was always on the mezzanine floor) his hands folded so precisely he may as well have been named Leopold and he might as well have been wearing white butler's gloves. I am sorry Herr Cowkick (the indignity), said Bruno, but it is just too much legal red

tape, too much paperwork and rehearsal for next week's concert begins Monday. It's Scriabin you know, not exactly easy. Really, my sincere apologies. You are a very talented young man, and I am sure you will find opportunities in your home country. Why don't you say "Go with God" if you're so intent on acting like some stuffed up Habsburg archbishop, Karel wanted to say, but he took his rejection letter and balled it up in his fist and walked out with the shred of dignity he had left which he promptly liquefied at the nearest bar with what cash remained to his name. Then, when he was too drunk to think, he pawned off his grandfather's gold chain, the chain which had won socialism and which Karel had kept through many times of abjection and desperation but the thing, he thought, as the Adagietto swelled into a sickening heartthrob, is that there is a lowest point for every man, the point where he sells the gold chain that survived the prison in Maribor and the Nazis and the story went that long before the execution in the town square (one of many), old Juraj Kavčič told his wife that it would be wrapped around the one place the guards wouldn't check and you know what, it was, and his wife sent their boy, Karel's father, to go out and get it once the bastards went back inside the jail, tired from another hard afternoon shooting people and it was a miracle, a miracle that the little dangly made it that far, wrapped around cocks and shoved up assholes and rinsed in the sink because that's what one does with all one has when it's worth as much or even as half as much as liberation.

These are all just stories, Karel told his grandmother, there is no way any of that happened. Grandfather probably gave the necklace to his son before the war and the story, reckoned adult Karel, was merely intrinsic to the kind of myth making it took to build nations from scratch. He thought then, in the Musikverein: I'm glad I'm an only child and I'm glad my family are all dead now so they don't have to watch the news about the country or worry about

their dear old boy Karel who was so talented and within whom lived, as great aunt Marija used to say, the great muse, and oh, I'm really weeping now, won't this stupid tune give up on itself? Mahler's heart gave out from feeling too much, that's what Dr. Matej used to say. That was the kind of thing violinists always said to each other, the little stories they fabricated about music because thinking about them while playing made them do it better or a little bit more rawly, put a snarl in their Shostakovich so to speak. No Stalin lovers in Yugoslavia, that's for sure. *Testimony*, all those squabbling subversive texts bemoaning the big man for hating *Lady Macbeth*, full of lugubrious details about apocryphal suitcases packed in full next to the bed just in case the poor composer was called up to die — now *that* was a best seller at the University of Ljubljana. But only Karel knew the truth, which was that Stalin didn't give two shits about old Shosty and that the whole thing was made up for the West and really if Shostakovich wanted to defect he would have done so easily, but he was either a coward (who wasn't?) or just some flunky paying his bills bitter about the same problems everyone is bitter about but if it makes you play better, he thought as the recapitulation of the harp part came in warm and tingly in that big gold-dipped lush hall columned by caryatids brandishing their round, identical breasts, then it makes you play better. That's what Dr. Matej used to say. Whatever works, boy. Whatever works.

Karel stumbled out of the auditorium in search of the equally gilded bathroom so as to vomit in the toilet of cultured people and after he vomited he lay on the marble floor and wept, the muted sound of Mahler radiating from the floor and the bathroom attendant, one of the four Black people in Austria, said in German, Sir, I must ask you to kindly leave, and Karel said back to him, is it a crime now to be moved to tears by Mahler? But when he heard the attendant step out Karel knew that he would return with someone bigger and scarier and so Karel brushed down



his wrinkled suit and left (avoiding the mirror), walking as straight and upright as a drunk could muster to the lobby, the plausibility of his actions covered by the pouring in of ruffled applause and the opening of the doors for intermission and just in time, for Karel had avoided the line for the coat check where he picked up his violin from the gentleman at the counter. “Thank you, sir,” he said as though he was not the stinkiest drunk in Vienna. Calmly he walked outside and as soon as the cool spring air hit his face and the doors shut behind him — really, for good, goodbye— he began to cry again.

Walking to the train station he did not rush. He wasn't the type of person who knew what streets he walked on or what neighborhoods he was in, the kind of person who made a big show of living in cities, or indeed of living in general, the kind who wrote novels that started with “On the Rue de...” no, in Vienna, there was only the train station, an apartment, an immigration office, two churches and the surrounding touristic gathering spaces rife with prime suckers, and in Vienna, because the IMF didn't lurk there, everything seemed under construction, seeping with gooey capital: glimmering glass-facaded buildings for businessmen who never had to worry where their next meals were coming from, every overpriced room in every five story baroque building on every heavy-handed Germanic square, a bigger, richer version of Celje, yes, rich, rich, rich, and when Karel got to the train station, itself under construction into something more silvery, he bought a ticket for Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, and then went to the little grocery store in the train station that sold beers by the can and bought five of them. Sitting on a bench, he drank one after the other, his violin case in his lap, the strap looped around his waist so no one could steal it off him, waiting until morning, not trusting sleep because the train was supposed to come at six and it was late then, who knew, midnight or even later — time got all different when he

ended up in a stupor so thick he couldn't even think or even cry anymore, and when the train for Ljubljana, that seventies piece of shit Brižita, as his father used to call the snout-nosed Polish engines (referencing, he explained in the bawdy way men do, the tits of Bridget Bardot) came into the station, Karel boarded, handed the ticket to the attendant for stamping, climbed into his assigned seat, and promptly fell asleep. That was the last thing he remembered. Really, that was the last thing Karel Kavčič remembered.

II.

When he awoke, he did so in an unfamiliar place clothed in a white, paper-thin hospital gown. It really did happen like that, just like in crank movies. Alcohol, nothing, something. The bed he slept in was not a beeping hospital bed, but rather a birdcage-wrought-iron type deal with a springy mattress, very Dr. Živago scene with the iron, he thought, but couldn't, on second pass, remember if there was such a bed in that scene and either way, his head hurt terribly and, not knowing where he was or what had happened to him, he became pathetically afraid. Someone must have given him a sponge bath between the train station and the present, for he no longer smelled like booze and vomit and wait, he panicked, wait, where is my violin, where is my — but then he saw it in the corner of the room owing to the fact that it was one of the only items in the room that wasn't ecru-white— come to think of it, everything was ecru-white, and he wondered, what is this place, a sanatorium or something? The door opened and a doctor with a clipboard came in. He stood short for a man, clean-shaven with round little coke-bottle glasses

like Shostakovich but his face was fleshier, bereft of nasal nerviness.

“I see you are awake, Mr. Kavčič!” the doctor said briskly, really putting an exclamation point on the end.

“Where am I?” Yes, it was just like in a crank movie, the amnesiac wakes up, asks, where am I?

“I am Dr. Resnik. You are in Ormož, Mr. Kavčič.”

Ormož! So it was the sanatorium, or rather the psychiatric hospital — people were more frank about these things now — oh!

“Ormož? But I was in Ljubljana... was Polje not closer?”

“Polje was full. So is everywhere else. You are very lucky to have gotten a bed here, you know.”

Karel grasped his piercing forehead, swung his feet over the side of the bed, babbling something like, thank you Dr. Resnik but really I will be checking out now, I really am in no need of a sanatorium, excuse me, psychiatric hospital, and there is business I have to get to at the Filharmonija, so if you could direct me to the train station, I really will be going on my way —

“Sit down, Mr. Kavčič,” said Dr. Resnik, who was in his forties, Karel reckoned, sitting down, obedient as a dog. “Do you know why you are here?”

“Because I am an alcoholic,” said Karel, hoping this was the right answer.

“Not quite, and you are not an alcoholic, just a man who has been on a week-long bender, it seems, which, fortunately for you, does not an alcoholic make. No, Mr. Kavčič, you had a psychiatric incident in the office of your old teacher Dr. Mlakar, and it was he who had you sent here — do you not remember?”

Karel shook his head, his mind racing, a psychiatric incident? A seizure? A schizophrenic meltdown? Hopefully nothing involving human shit, dear God, and, wait, Dr. Matej was alive... Resnik pulled a clipboard from behind his back — indeed that's where his hands had been the whole time, which was very doctor-like, thought Karel — and began to read:

“Patient — that's you, Mr. Kavčič — visibly inebriated, forced his way the office of Dr. Mlakar, director of the Slovenska Filharmonija and promptly collapsed on the ground, emotionally distressed and in a psychologically unstable state, weeping and speaking incomprehensibly, unable to restrain himself until patient became unconscious and — I am sorry Mr. Kavčič — soiled himself in the process. The trigger for this episode appears to be the sight of Dr. Mlakar, who, according to the latter taught Mr. Kavčič as a youth. In other words, a severe mental breakdown, Mr. Kavčič, an episode. Dr. Mlakar sends his regards. He is very worried about you. But given your fragile state and the violent nature of the incident, I'm afraid it is unlikely that you will find employment there upon return, if that is what you are indeed after.”

Karel, feeling as though he were being swallowed alive by the earth: “His words?”

“The whole orchestra watched you be dragged out in a straitjacket, Mr. Kavčič.”

Karel nodded again, and this time, he was too stunned to think anything at all. Resnik began to pace around the room, eyes towards the ceiling, clipboard back behind his back as though the motherfucker hadn't destroyed a man's only lifeline to hope but was instead a punchline to some kind of ethnically insensitive joke about lightbulbs.

“Now, Mr. Kavčič, a psychiatric breakdown is not uncommon among you artist types, and I'm sure a little stay in Ormož will have you right as rain after, well, however long it takes to get to the bottom of how you came to have this episode in the first place so as to prevent a repeat

offense. For the sake of gainful employment, of course. And at no cost. Now, Mr. Kavčič, are you employed?”

“No,” said Karel, looking at his feet, fighting back tears. The violent nature of the incident...unlikely to find employment...the whole orchestra...a straightjacket...

“Are you living somewhere?”

“No.”

“So you are homeless, then.”

“Functionally.”

“No need to get clever, Mr. Kavčič. Why did you come back to Yugoslavia if you had no place to stay?”

“I was living in Vienna. I couldn't get a visa so I had to come back.”

Karel half expected Resnik to make a joke at stuck-up Vienna's expense, like everyone did, but he only nodded and scribbled.

“What were you doing there?”

Agitation: “Is this a police interrogation or something?”

“It is an intake questionnaire, Mr. Kavčič. You were too drunk to do one before and after your drunkenness wore off you slept like a man who'd been staying awake as a form of competition.”

“You should be a writer with fancy metaphorical language like that.”

Exasperated: “Mr. Kavčič, please. Now, what happened in Vienna that caused you to become so psychologically distressed?”

“Look, doctor,” said Karel, trying to set some kind of boundary and hoping the attempt

wasn't futile, "I want to be alone. I need to get my bearings. My whole life is over. I know that is the kind of thing all your patients say, my life is over, but for me it is certainly true, and now I must mourn my lost life and I would really appreciate some time for, what is it you people call it? Self-reflection? You know, if there are any drugs known to help speed that process along, barbiturates or something, I would gladly like to have some."

Resnik laughed, a big ho ho ho from his slightly protruding little belly, and really, thought Kavčič, who was thinking again, it took a certain kind of evil to laugh in the face of a man's abject despair, but then again, you couldn't be a shrink, could you, if you really felt despair; it just didn't add up, it didn't make sense to right what's wrong with other people if the same wrong's in you, and by that logic, maybe Dr. Resnik had the purest of souls, a real Musikverein second violinist motherfucker —

"You are no addict, Mr. Kavčič, nor are you a suicide risk — you would have attempted already. You are embarrassed and distressed, which in this country remains very curable. Be thankful for that, you know, the others of your generation certainly aren't. You are also alone, or at least according to your record, you are unmarried and have no living kin. We made some phone calls. But it is peaceful to be alone in Ormož, Mr. Kavčič. Not much happens in these parts except the healing process and the cultivation of wine, wine I find a bit too sour for my taste. It is a simple time you will find here. Calming. Many even come to like it."

"Am I being held against my will?"

"No, Mr. Kavčič. Let us say that you are under close evaluation to make sure you are not a danger to yourself or others. Once that evaluation is concluded, you may leave." Resnik opened the door, half stepped into the hallway; "But do not worry. I have hopes for your swift recovery. I

really do.”



### III.

After the initial shock and anguish wore off, Karel Kavčič did not so much mind sitting out (or at least in) his own disappointment, not that he had a choice. He knew all too well that there was nowhere else for him to go, that he had nothing else and no one at all, and so why not? Why not be one of the people to whom nothing happened in little Ormož with its changeless days and deep sleeps, its wavy hills punctured with the rote crucifixes of vineyards, its blue skies that filled the sum void of his window when he reclined in his bed in his room in the quiet wing on the top floor, the wing for the kind of sick people who could only be fixed with a little peace. This was the longest he'd gone without practicing the violin. Two weeks had passed since the incident and all the while the damn violin lashed out at him from within the case leaned against the wall in the tiny ecru-white room, beckoning insultingly, yes, Karel why not get back to it, hm? There is hope yet, you know, hope can only avoid extinguishment in the form of self perpetuation, so why not a little bit of the Sibelius? You always liked that D minor mournful

opening, as though emerging from the fog Dr. Matej used to tell you, singing in his off-kilter voice, Yeee da duhhhh (diminuendo on duhhhh), and then Karel! Quickening! Like a silvery fox, yes, my boy, but not too quick and breathe out the little harmonic — breathe (he inhaled) — in those quiet, withering phrases, and.....now sigh.....yes, good, and now the recapitulation must come in strong and you must sing it, like a great choir, Karel, yes, yes this is a heart that understands Karel, remember to breathe, unclench your jaw, and now in this final bit, really saw it in, rough and forest-like, you know what I mean by that, Karel, you've been in the woods, you've seen a tree snap, faster, throw it Karel, throw it back into the theme, yes now sink, sink into it, heave it out, and...final chords, nice, nice, yes, lovely finish, lovely, but my, you are sweating something awful, Karel, Mrs. Horvat really should cut that hair of yours.

Then Dr. Matej would sigh and wipe his bleary eyes because back then people used to cry when Karel played, especially mother and later the townspeople at her funeral and his first girlfriend who always talked about how he had some tenderness in him, great and unexplainable, living only in the body of the instrument, yes, that was the kind of thing women his own age used to say to him and he used to hate it, all this discussion of his immortal soul, as apocryphal as Dr. Matej's fox in the silver forest of the Sibelius concerto, and yet deep down something Karel, too, believed in, at least for the many years his curly hair spent growing out to his shoulders, growth he committed to because it made him look different and now there was no mirror in the room because mirrors were always a portal to suffering for the anguished but he knew what he looked like, dark brown curls, pretty dimple-chinned face all stubbled now but never quite capable of growing a beard, sly eyes, that's what Maja used to say, Maja with the rich parents and the shithole flat and the stinking anarchist roommates and the paint-stained floors,

Maja and her drugs and her not letting him stay more than a few days because it was anti-feminist — yes, it was anti-feminist of Karel to be poor and crammed into a flophouse with five other people, some of them living in the ceiling and climbing down on ladders in the middle of the night to take a piss, to cede their spaces when strangers arrived with borrowed keys to fuck girls up there — don't ask questions, Karel — the motion of it all causing plaster to rain down on those sharing rooms, sharing mattresses on the parquet floor that had finger-sized chunks of it missing that Pavel the double bass player would light his cigarettes with in order to make a show of irony in front of that Berlin girl he was seeing before she caught scabies and fleas at the same time, occupational hazard, thought Karel who was really willing to live with fleas and scabies and Russians and Hungarians and Czechs and Poles and the crazy fucking scumbags who ran the whole thing because someday it would all work out.

In Ormož, he did not pick up the violin. He got up and walked over to it and put the case where it couldn't look at him or talk to him in the voice of Dr. Matej: under the bed. Then he took his afternoon barbiturate and looked up at the plaster ceiling waiting for it to kick in. A broad aural patina plaster had to it, doing for sound what radiators, when they worked, did for heat — dissipating it strong and thick across a room...but when he closed his eyes, Karel could no longer conjure up any specific room, only the darkness in the vast innards of the Karlskirche after the music had ended and that swindling bastard had since counted through the cash from any given night of the ceaseless, automaton concerts they played. Now that, Dr. Resnik, was insanity: Vivaldi's *Spring* and *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* every evening at three, five, and seven for three years and then the same thing at cavernous St. Stephen's on Sundays, each time dressed in the same humiliating Mozart costumes and when they weren't playing in them they were out

hocking the concerts to hapless tourists who spoke whatever the fuck language, walking up and down St. Stephen's square, a gaggle of trained musicians, luminaries of their minuscule towns made by necessity and dreams no better than beggars or dogs who could do tricks, kept in line through all those promises of visas or visa renewals, or even better, some mythical thing called "regularization" but only if you did just one more thing for me Karel, clean out the fleas, mend up the costumes, talk to the rector about his cut of the deal, scrub the floors after the concert.

A Czech, a Pole, a Russian, a Hungarian, and a Yugoslav walk into a bar... Christ, what a motley crew they'd made, communicating in mixed-Slav and half-learned Germenglish doing those concerts until the whole thing collapsed under its own spindly complexity like a bad fugue you'd write in school so you could pass counterpoint and get back to playing the violin; a bad fugue of human frailty performed by disposable people glared at by strangers while standing outside the immigration office. Maja got around it by only being half Polish and half Viennese but one does not make art about being half-Viennese, only about the half-Polish part, yes, Maja, the non-immigrant yearning for the mother's simpler homeland, the bourgeois daughter yearning for the most middling form communism ever came in. But I loved her, thought Karel, scratching his stubble with what fingernails the nurse allowed him, the barest slivers of quick. He didn't love her enough to cry about it.

He looked out the window, which faced in the direction of town. In the distance, through tree branches, he could see the sleepy little town headed by a castle, and from the perspective of being far away and two stories high, all the buildings seemed to huddle together as though about to catch cold, the old ones filled in with silly seventies brick infill — modernist apartments, a faux-historic covered bridge over the street. These reminded Karel of when an amateur

woodworker tries to clamp two pieces of wood together with too much glue and the glue squeezes everywhere and dries funny afterward. In the foggy mornings only the castle tower stood above the mist, a square thing with a silly hat that better resembled a bell tower than any kind of fortification. Something about Ormož reminded him of the slow movement of Sibelius — Dr. Matej used to call it the sleeping doe movement — this made Karel want to play it, to match music with image, but something else told him he'd already forgotten it in his hands and only knew it by ear, and thus its only true utterance at this point would take the form of a forlorn, pathetic attempt at singing and of course Karel did not want to sing, suspecting it might be a dangerous thing to do in a mental institution and he really did prefer the quiet wing to whatever it was he heard emanating from elsewhere on the walks they were permitted to take around the tree-shaded grounds, walks which were never very far, given the fact that the distance between the back door and the ravine plunging through forest into train tracks was only about twenty meters or so, a fitting site for involuntary commitment. The hospital consisted of a conglomerate of buildings of different ages. From above, Karel reckoned it looked like a capital-E with a fourth leg attached, the composition that of a kind of pared down early 20th century monastery topped with a nice clay-tile roof, the walls — yellow-brown-painted concrete, he suspected — interrupted by polite windows, casement windows, single paned, and a glass, modern atrium glued onto the entrance...

Yes, he would have to be out of here by winter lest he catch a chill, though looking back across the entirety of his life, this had never finished him off before, not even in the flophouse by the Karlskirche where Jan, the first violinist from some panelák shithole in Prague used to plug an electric blanket into a socket outside the window intended for some kind of exterior light

metered to the city and therefore free, and beneath the blanket they used to sleep together but apart, like brothers wary of summer camp pranks. Karel thought of him then, Jan with his nasal Czech *mislím*, his words all clipped in that weird cousin-language, his soft face and long nose, his eyes made too-close by round glasses...the image in Karel's mind began to fade in and out, a sign the barbiturates were starting to work, but even in flickering piecemeal he saw Jan hawing away at that dour Bruch G minor opening still trying to get some job at a tourist pops joint only barely more dignified than what he was already doing. Jan's dreams were more distant than even Karel's, but Jan had a kind of dour optimism to him, a weird plague doctor's acceptance of the sick turgidity of the world, reinforced by the fact that he even looked like a plague doctor with that nose of his and those big glasses, not at all like the little round glasses of Dr. Resnik's that sat at the end of his nose like a joke. Might as well be Austrian with that pinched up Gorenjska accent and that slack upper lip longing for a toothbrush mustache to fill it in.

Karel disliked Dr. Resnik's stupid and lazy questions about his childhood like "what age were you when your mother died; and your father?" And "was it traumatizing for you?" As though there was some secret non-traumatic version of your parents dying when you are nine and thirteen respectively; or "Tell me more about the boarding house in Ljubljana?" What was there to say about that, really? That the director of the music school in Celje sent him off to live with the widow of a friend of his, Mrs. Horvat, whose house was like a shrine to death? Whose husband, a beloved photographer, had supposedly fallen asleep at the wheel on the bridge over the Savinja near Celje after coming back from doing some minor public interest story or another, nothing suspicious enough to kill a man over, but he would have killed himself anyway and probably did because everyone who ever knew Tone, that was his name, knew that he was a sad

man, a terminally sad man — his coworkers at *Delo* knew, the intelligentsia in the cultural institutions knew, everyone knew Tone Horvat killed himself except for his wife who chose to believe it was an accident.

Nevertheless, Karel, who had been subjected to so much death was subjected to so much more, to photographs and artworks and collections upon collections of books and clippings. The whole house was as if Tone never left, never died, and his widow lived on because, not in spite of his death, took out her bitterness on young Karel, who was talented and full of life and had no reason at all to be sad because his parents smoked themselves into a preventable death which was not as dramatic as driving off a bridge into a great ravine. Karel made a face. He wished not to think about Mrs. Horvat anymore, whom he despised, and returned his focus back to his friend in Vienna, who unlike her and Dr. Resnik, was talented. That was so clearly obvious about Jan, obvious from the very first notes he pulled out of Bruch, which could be so maudlin and sloppy in the wrong hands, but when he did it, you could feel the real piquant sadness in those forlorn and beckoning opening phrases which of course in Bruch serve only as a prelude to a tumultuous and frothing anger, and that was perhaps why Jan so succeeded in playing it, not because Jan was angry but rather because to a fault he was rarely ever angry and therefore he could tackle the Bruch in a more artistically interesting way than the sorry lot who just slammed the bow across the strings, letting their emotions get the best of them.

That was the problem Karel always had with the damn thing because he, on the other hand, always had something to be angry about: women (mostly Maja), the unyielding mechanical repetitiveness of performing the same four pieces every single day for years and years to small groups of philistine, ripped-off tourists; his dead parents; Mrs. Horvat who, as he

got older, made overtures of wanting to sleep with him. Yes, so much to be angry about! Playing in an orchestra made up of adults who treated him with nothing but jealousy and derision, then, in Vienna, taking auditions for positions in even the most insignificant ensembles, week after week with nothing ever panning out because of the papers situation, because even in a blind audition everyone knew you were a Slav, they could smell it on you, and if they couldn't, they'd make up the scent of slivovitz based on what shoes you were wearing, we are sorry Mr. Kavčič (if they bothered to pronounce it right, which they didn't) yada yada and then the inevitable journey back to the flophouse on foot, not having enough for train fare, muttering about the Austrians and their hatred of immigrants even though it was all of Yugoslavia who came there in the 80s to build the horrid new apartment buildings the Austrians rented for two times the working man's wage — the rent controlled ones, ha, good luck — and speaking of the immigration office Karel hated that too, hated how, by nine, the line would already be wrapped around the block which meant that by the time he got near the door they'd invariably shut it for the day; the inability to secure or renew a visa via the mail because one needed a permanent residence and no one with even the vaguest sense of what the word liability meant would rent — on paper — to an illegal immigrant, and of course, perhaps most of all, and consequently, the rotting flophouse on the street near the Karlskirche — decrepit, moldy, cold in winter, suffocating in summer, smelling of cigarettes and piss and bad food — and the people who lived there.

It this respect, it was easy for Karel to say who he liked most (Jan) but those in the middle were more elusive, for example, Ferkó the violist who everyone called Ferkó Liszt because he was a virulent Hungarian nationalist (a very funny thing for an illegal immigrant to



be) and because he was a virulent Hungarian nationalist, Jan discovered that invoking the great master was a good way to flatter Ferkó into doing onerous tasks such as cleaning literally anything at all even his own overflowing ashtray but in truth they also called him Ferkó Liszt because Ferkó really did look like Franz Liszt: long hair, aquiline nose, dark eyes, all of which Ferkó hammed up with black turtlenecks and a pseudo-intellectual affect, behaving always like a great man still in search of a milieu. To the rest of the household the Liszt bit had long been a running joke, but Ferkó took it completely seriously because he considered Franz Liszt to be the greatest musician who ever lived and also because merely looking like Franz Liszt not-so-secretly filled Ferkó with a pathetic nationalist's pride, a belief that the great genes lived on in a pack-a-day violist playing bit parts in tourist renditions of *The Four Seasons* for a suspicious Austrian amateur cellist and his suspicious Turkish concert promoter, but even so, at least he was living, oh they were all living, Jan used to say with his sweet, ironic smile, in the Great Habsburg Imperial Core, even though Ferkó was too vain to see that the most fearsome Habsburg forces left were the great lice regiments marching along their scalps in the summer because Pavel the double bass player and Jacek the second violinist were no longer capable of growing a full head of hair which meant they had to wear the filthiest powdered wigs ever to see the light of day in the last two centuries and these raggedy wigs (sometimes even with a little tricorne hat attached) were magnets for lice because they were used across many different tourist scam concerts across Vienna, concerts which Jan suspected were money laundering schemes for the Catholic Church but Pavel suspected had more to do with the mob and while Karel could dismiss Jan's conspiratorial irony, he somewhat believed Pavel, who, being deeply Russian and just as deeply middle-aged, looked like a guy connected to the mob and spoke in the quiet voice mob guys

tended to use in movies before the guns started blazing, but scary as he was, a Soviet defector in a Mozart wig was probably not connected to any crime ring save for the one they'd all formed against dignity.

All things considered Pavel was still a nicer guy than Ferkó Liszt who was nicer than Jacek who had already been divorced twice and was at the end of hope's tether, which was to say, the stage of life wherein one stops thinking about changes to make and dreams to fulfill and starts reflecting on what's already been lived and lost. Thus Jacek could oft be found in fruitless and unyielding fits of rage because for some reason he got it extra bad from life, it being misfortune and he always seemed on the verge of quitting the whole business — whether he meant music or living, was never clear — but fortunately for Jacek and for the household peace, these fits could often be ameliorated with sympathetic conversation — and everyone in the house was sympathetic to Jacek — or with a little vodka (not surprising behavior from a Polack said Ferkó Liszt.) Hence, vodka was what Jacek's paycheck mostly went to, or so Karel assumed, because it certainly wasn't sex or clothes or any kind of human joy, really Jacek was the one who should be at Ormož, figured Karel, a real depressive, the sad clown in a French painting Jan used to say, but despite these unflattering words, all of them — ridiculous Ferko, morose Jacek, quiet Pavel, ironic Jan, were better than Heinrich who didn't even live there just used the place as a dumpster for whatever sordidness was needed to keep the whole operation running, who Karel did not even want to think about not for one second no, not at all, not Heinrich and not the incident in the apartment that night, the incident that may or may not have happened, he didn't know, and you know what, thought Karel, you know what? The worst part was, none of this had anything to do with music.

Music was just another vehicle by which the lot of them could be kept in their places, not only at the hands of slimy concert promoters extorting illegal immigrants, but at the hands of the whole city of Vienna and its cultural institutions which believed themselves so much better than any other in the world that it empowered them to make swift judgements. Not even their own women were good enough to play for the Vienna State Opera — women, the Austrians must have believed, lacked some kind of essential musical spirit, perhaps even a soul — and if a woman from Austria wasn't good enough what hope was there for any lesser people from lesser countries whose very birthrights were inherently indicative of a lesser talent? In some ways, remarked Jan, Nazism never died. And yet, it was amazing, thought Karel, how much he and the others were willing to live through and with just to make music — to make music there — and despite all that had happened to them, it really was all innocent in the beginning. We really did just want to make music and bring art and its attendant joys into the world and to ourselves which was why we played the hell out of those concerts with real pride and feeling and gusto before they became predicated on doing the same stale repertoire, that is, the only classical repertoire every human being on earth in possession of the sense of hearing was already familiar with, like a kind of sweatshop for music run on the fringes of the moral world because who knew where that money went? Every day, they asked themselves that. Sometimes a hundred people would show up to those shows during peak season at fifteen marks a head and yet, they'd be lucky to get fifty marks each on a given night. No, what money was made certainly didn't go to the five of them. Maybe it went to the Catholic Church, or the mob, or whatever it was Amir did, or Heinrich with his handsome-faced, obsequious way of being, his promises, his fake trips to the immigration office where he was trying the best he could as their ad-hoc and unpaperworked

employer. It's just that it's a bad time, he said to them in English, there's too many immigrants, not enough of them want to work, communism is still in the process of falling and the world is in chaos and that's why the power's been out in the flat for three days... Whatever, the money went somewhere, but certainly not to them.

On the other hand, was that not just the nature of life as a musician? A real bohemian? That's what Karel told himself when he first started, recalling how happy, so happy, he was to have a job playing violin in Vienna even though it was a massive step down from being the 20 year old concertmaster of an entire, if marginal, orchestra simply because Vienna was a dream from birth, a stamp of historico-musical approval on all that Bärenreiter sheet music in his violin case, all those records his father kept in a neat, glass-doored cabinet in the tobacco-smothered living room; was the prime mover in all the music history books Karel religiously read even after he'd stopped real school at fourteen in order to play the violin full time, yes, Vienna, the home of Beethoven and Mozart and Mahler, the whole city one neat, perfect New Year's waltz under the baton of Herbert von Karajan. Wasn't that understandable? Karel asked Dr. Matej after telling him that even playing last chair in the measliest chamber orchestra in Vienna was closer to his deepest want — to play for the *Wiener Philharmoniker* in the Musikverein, a position one must attain before the age of thirty-five, tick-tock, tick-tock — than having a career stagnate in the country of his birth, and yes, in retrospect, thought Karel, so worked up even the drugs couldn't stop his brain from going where it wanted to go, this was a cruel thing to say, over and over again to the teacher who perfected him, who — rightly — tried to warn him, saying, you know, Karel, in Yugoslavia you will live a comfortable life and with total certainty become one of the best violinists of your generation. Faust, you know, is more than just (here he hummed a few bars of

the Liszt “Mephisto Waltz”)...But Karel had long made up his mind which was like a steel trap, so imbued it was with pride and a youthful belief in oneself that could only be accrued by way of being the best at what one did. Success, to him, was obvious. But now in Ormož he didn't think that so much anymore. Maybe this said something about his ego or super ego, was further proof of some latent and finally expressed medical condition, or, alternatively, of the progress he had been making in healing, but on the other hand perhaps the truth was not so clinical: that which had made his life had also unmade it and now in its place was simply nothing.

No, unraveling the whole story was something Karel could do on his own time — he did not need the help of Dr. Resnik or Dr. Freud or that stultifying group therapy they put him in as though he didn't know about the one-way glass and the shrinks behind it watching and listening for all the shit a nut would rather tell a stranger than the doctor. None of it worked on him because Karel knew that once he confessed something it would become an incident by way of his sheer proximity to whatever it was that happened in the apartment that night, and what it meant for himself and people about whom he worried, which is why, for the first time in his life and out of sheer necessity, he had stopped being selfish even if it meant having to stay in the loony bin a little bit longer. That's right, Karel smiled, pleased with himself, I'm not selfish, he thought, closing his eyes to relax, but the second his lights went out he could see himself like magic, dressed in coattails in the jewel-box hall in Ljubljana putting the finishing touches on the last movement of the Saint-Saëns B minor, the horn section braying too loud for the little hall, the audience packed with ordinary faces, bourgeois and proletarian, which one never saw in Vienna; old people and young people and even children, and all were transfixed by him waiting as one does when watching a difficult sport, say, ski jumping, to see whether the athlete's momentum

could really be sustained to completion, and when it could, when they realized young Karel was going to make it to the end without fault and splendidly too, the whole audience couldn't wait to leap out of their seats and applaud him and as soon as the crack of hand on hand started Karel's eyes flew open just to stop the vision, and he let out a sob so involuntary it took on the violent characteristics of vomiting. These were things he did not want to remember — success, happiness, comfort, goodwill, warmth — because he was no longer deserving of any of them and had squandered the time in which he once was, he thought miserably, following it up with deep breaths like the doctors said, Karel, deep breaths. Time passed this way. Christ, he really needed something to read. He called for the nurse via the button. She came promptly, pretty little thing, probably thinking he needed a trip to the bathroom.

“Do you have anything to read?”

This nurse was Gita and she had a sweet demeanor to her when she said, “Sure, Mr. Kavčič — what would you like?”

“No novels, and nothing about World War II.”

She said she would see, and then after a few minutes, she returned and handed him a slim book titled “The Town of Ormož and Its Surroundings.”

“I apologize Mr. Kavčič. If you want something more specific, I can request it from the library.”

“What about a newspaper? *Delo*? I have money for it, you know — marks, too — worth ten times more than whatever a dinar is worth now, if anything.”

“We don't like to talk about politics in here Mr. Kavčič.”

“I'm sure you don't,” said Karel.

The nurse folded her arms, her demeanor no longer as sweet. “Is that all you need, Mr. Kavčič?”

The jocular smile faded from his face. He told her it was.

## Part Two

### I.

That summer, the inhabitants of the psychiatric hospital were smothered by heat after a decision was made to shut all the windows. The powers that be did this to keep out the sounds of the people gathered in the town shouting something muffled, something important, something Karel suspected would drive half the people inside even more insane than they already were, the priors of their worldview being more and more shattered by the day, even though those who ran the building did their best to make sure the people inside knew nothing, at least until they could be coaxed into the stability necessary to process events and developments that might hurt them. This was seen as a kindness — this is a place for healing and peace, said the group therapist Dr. Jerman as way of explanation — but Karel knew that for a certain set, it was also a form of torture. On Wednesdays, group therapy days (as opposed to Tuesdays, when he could read in the courtyard, or Thursdays, which were meditation days, or Mondays and Fridays which were Dr.



Resnik days) Karel saw all forms of people talk in that little room with the microphones in the ceiling and the two-way mirror window (walls ecru-white, of course) but most of the ones in his wing at that time were government people, politburo people, one could say they were two-way mirror people, people who invariably suspected they were not insane and were being held against their will for political reasons, even though it was just as likely that a simpler truth had come to pass, that politics itself had driven them insane, and that they, like Karel, had embarrassed themselves in some grand way via their fracture with reality.

Karel never felt sorry for the government people except for one, the mathematician Julija. Julija, who, like Karel was really just beginning the journey of life, and who had already crunched the numbers and saw what, given her morbidness, must be a grim desiccated future. She peered into the window in the group therapy room watching as the raindrops collected into rivulets, gained momentum as entrails engorging and expanding until they could sustain themselves no longer, and bulged, split, diverged, before coming to rest, with all the others, in the bottom rim of the casement windows, locked shut of course to keep out the sound, and when Julija watched this, Karel knew she was seeing whole systems, perhaps everything that ever was, for she had the big tiny-pupiled eyes of someone who could see the whole world in unknowable raindrop fragments and incomprehensible numbers. When he asked her about it, she merely shook her head. She was discharged after two weeks, a more or less typical case. But if people kept talking about politics, at least in group settings, they got sent elsewhere and when word got around about elsewhere — some said it was Serbia, though no one there could tell malicious rumor from fearful delusion — there was no more talk about politics, about the end of the world as they knew it, the end of their fathers' socialism, the end of the whole, endless century.

Such things simply didn't happen within the walls of Ormož. At Ormož there was no socialism or capitalism or Yugoslavia or Slovenia, only Dr. Jerman's "healing and peace" and the absence of anything life-altering, even good food. Not that Karel ate it. That was the thing.

For the first two weeks, Dr. Resnik gave him barbiturates, sedatives, just so he could "regain control over his most destructive emotions." The drugs made him feel clean and smooth, eliminated the friction in his life. Sometimes, especially early on, his intrusive or deliberate thoughts could cut through the fog, but even when they did, there was no doubt that the pain he felt had been blunted from what it could be. Even in his remembering, his little fits of crying, a part of him, perhaps the part that wanted to kill himself, remained inaccessible. Best of all, the pills made him terribly sleepy, so sleepy he could barely stay awake despite devoting his every faculty to that specific task. Occasionally, the staff would have to move a second bed into his tiny room but in his state he could tell no difference from one roommate to the next. Some patients only needed a night in Ormož to get walked down from the cliff because there was nothing really wrong with them besides an immediate if deep pain from whatever situational, personal event, and through these people's weeping and babbling — *how could she leave me? How could they fire me?* — Karel sat dumbly as though language itself had abandoned him and all that remained was vague, plaintive sound. He was a very good listener. During the barbiturate days, there were afternoons he fell asleep sitting upright in the chair in Dr. Resnik's office, afternoons he slept for six, seven hours, awoke for dinner, which he ate without tasting, and then slept, blissfully, for another ten. When he slept on the pills, everything disappeared. The resulting void soon developed a warm, treacly pleasantness. He walked among the living not quite one of them, not wanting to be one of them anyway, knowing that if he ever got ahold of the pill bottle instead of

his allotted dose, he would swallow the whole of its contents, and it was often this very thought which lured him to sleep in the first place, a nihilist fantasy of unbecoming, an easy way out of an impossible situation.

But after two weeks, the doctors said, enough, and the pills got smaller and smaller until they stopped. And when they stopped, the totality of life rushed back at Karel with the heavy, imminent speed of one of his father's trains. The resumed boredom and misery of having nothing to do but consider himself drove him to try and find alternatives to medically-induced sleepiness. After some trial and error — forced naps, closed curtains, clandestine masturbation, embarrassed jumping jacks in his room — starvation came to him like a revelation.

Every day, he would descend into the alcove-like dining room, which was lit tenderly from above, stare at his plate, and push food around, repulsed by the thought of consuming it, whether it was goulash, salad, or tiramisu. He made himself numb to the idea and sensation of hunger, and after some time, hunger abandoned him, too. He ate just enough to avoid suspicion which was just enough to stay among the living, his cheeks growing slightly gaunt as time passed, his mind slowing down, thinking, blissfully, of less and less, his body exchanging nervy restlessness for intermittent but frequent bouts of sleep. And nobody noticed, because that month, the doctors saw so many patients in Ormož due to what were politely deemed by the two-way mirror people "uncertain times," it necessitated new measures of adaptation, which Karel first knew from the doublings up in the single rooms, and later in the bays where five or six beds were once spaced out with dignity, ten or fifteen were crammed together. These were beds for the short-term visitors, of which Karel once, but increasingly no longer, considered himself.

At first the doctors, understandably considering their taxing schedules, thought Karel's

problem resided in a lack of stimulation, which was another way of saying exercise. He wasn't deemed a flight risk so they allowed him to go for walks and reprieves in the courtyard, still ascribing to the 19th century idea that fresh air did a body good. Karel's outside clothes were disintegrating and even if no one of substance ever saw him, it embarrassed him to still be wearing the same outfit from the episode that brought him there and because he had no other clothes and could not change — which struck him as absurd; how hard was it, collapsing Yugoslavia be damned, to get him a pair of pants and a shirt instead of washing the same ones into rags — he wanted to initiate some form of severance from that past. Hence he asked the nurses to cut his long hair and they did, right to his skull, which was the only way they knew how to cut it. Ah, Sampson, Sampson, thought Karel, referencing not the Bible but the Saint-Saëns opera, closing his eyes, listening to the razor, knowing that if he picked up the violin now, he would be terrible at it because his power was gone, his calluses were becoming smooth, and now that the hair once distinguishing him from other people had been shorn in the manner of a dog — swept up off the ecru-linoleum floor appearing more lifeless and ashen than it had on his head — he had been rendered quality-less.

These transformative processes, good and ill, along with the so-called therapeutic isolation were like a kind of chemotherapy intended to excise from him the cancer of that which did harm, a cancer extending deep into marrow of Karel's entire life, and the more time he spent in Ormož the more the unassailable guidance of Karel's senses, whose service he had been blindly beholden to as long as he could remember, began, through starvation and sheer boredom, to fail him. Yet something in Karel never gave into the catharsis of totally revealing himself. It took weeks for Dr. Resnik to progress past childhood into Karel's adolescence, believing, as

shrinks do, that all psychosis resided in those two periods of development, owed itself to some great and unwavering internal shame instilled in toddlerdom, but Karel resisted this hypothesis, knowing that his breakdown stemmed from the culmination of an entire life and that it was the world that had subjugated him and no shrink could cure the world.

By the time they first acted on his anorexia, Karel had become so weak he'd begun to forget everything save for the last few hours of his days, days of which he had long lost track, going to sleep every night hoping to not wake up in the morning only to be greeted once more with the same ecru walls, the same bright sunlight, the same birdsong. One evening, a middle-aged nurse came with a tray of food, telling him, "If you do not eat, we will have no choice but to send you to the hospital and put you on a feeding tube."

"I do eat," protested Karel. "I am merely watching my weight, given my sedentary lifestyle."

"Then I won't leave until you eat it. Not all of it, mind you — you'll get sick. Half will do," she said, folding her arms. And Karel wanted to say, *well, you'll be here all night*. But nevertheless, after an hour passed under the heavy weight of her no-nonsense demeanor, he began to reluctantly put the fork in and out of his mouth with food on it, a rather dry cut of pork, peas and potatoes, chewing mechanically, swallowing without breathing so as to smell nothing, believing that if he smelled the food for more than a moment he would vomit. Wise to the eating-resistant, the nurse forbade him from going to the bathroom for an hour, with the added provision that if he went, an attendant went with him. The next day, Dr. Resnik gave him the same spiel he probably gave all the other anorexics and bulimics, the insecure women, the clothes racks, the hollow-faced homosexuals, so he assumed meanly in his self-loathing, listening to Resnik drone

on, “The restriction of eating makes us feel like we have control over our lives, during times where they feel uncontrollable. But we always, in the end, have the agency and self-forgiveness to change...”

The only thing this maudlin session resolved in Karel was his desire to make his eating habits more clandestine. And so he began hiding mouthfuls of food in his napkins after a bout of acting that saw him stuffing them in his cheek, then under his tongue, to make it look like he swallowed. He began requesting vegetarian meals because they were always easier to dissolve into goo in his mouth before regurgitating. If hospital gowns had pockets, he would hide the napkins there and flush them down the toilet in secrecy. But alas, he had to do his best by wadding them up as convincingly as possible, stylizing them to look casual, stuffed with nothing but air. Every day he got away with this was a secret victory.

Understandably, his progress stagnated. No one seemed to know what to do with Karel, only that he remained in an emotionally suspended state, one that would end badly for him if he insisted on returning to public life. This was made repeatedly clear to him by Dr. Resnik. Now Karel, we cannot make progress in healing if you aren't forthright with me...but Karel did not know what Dr. Resnik wanted except to know that which Karel refused to talk about: the events that triggered the breakdown leading to him being where he was at that very moment, sitting in front of Dr. Resnik. Even though they hadn't made it that far in the story yet, sometimes Dr. Resnik would ask him, out of the blue, Karel, what happened in Vienna? And Karel would merely say, I couldn't get a job and had to come back, and Dr. Resnik would shake his head muttering, No, Karel will have to be re-evaluated surely. Meanwhile, they gave him a tether of freedom to see if that would help. They let him out in the courtyard for longer spans, an hour

instead of thirty minutes, but only after the protests had stopped, of course. No more *svoboda*, *svoboda* leaking through the windows sounding as if it were being said into a gloved fist.

Karel loved the courtyard, an outside embraced by the finiteness of a building — and Ormož was finite — the flower beds full of immaculate geraniums, the trimmed lawn, the concrete benches stocked with nurses taking their smoke breaks, a little mass-produced fountain bubbling in three tiers, the sounds of birds, of larks and robins singing and sparrows squabbling, the grand old firs with their drooping branches, the big filmic Ormož sky, the little houses across the street, and from the rear, the Drava river and the forest and beyond them, the plains and, if one stood in just the right spot, the road passing into the town, which Karel had never been in but knew well because he had the book, *The Town of Ormož and its Surroundings*, which let him imagine the town and all the people in it: the castle haunted by old dead lords, Velika Nedelja with its quartet of round turrets and marauding crusader knights, the Hungarian barons and their Baroque accoutrements, the 1970s additions made amid the good times, the natural landscape with its flora and fauna.

He went through little guide over and over, noticing something new each time he read it, sitting on his concrete bench, no one paying him any mind save for the nurse whose job it was to bring him back inside that day, except on that day, that particular day, when Karel was sweating through his stiff dress shirt, reading about some one-storeyed building on Kerenčičev Square — a charming example of the Classicist style articulated with three bays and seven windows — another person paid attention to him. It was the woman in her forties who tended the garden, who, while coaxing new plantings into holes dug into the topsoil with a trowel, peered at him from behind what frizzy dark curls couldn't be coerced into a pony-tail, and like any man, Karel

immediately became aware of the repeated but discreet attention of a woman in his proximity. The two peeked at one another the way interested strangers do, wary, of course, of the barriers between a free person and an unfree one, until this spindly social situation could no longer be sustained and the woman, being older, was the first to act. Sheathing her trowel in her work belt, she approached Karel, who looked around as though this meeting between two worlds was about to be put down in its infancy by the powers that be, only to see the nurse in charge lighting another cigarette, gossip magazine in her hand.

“What’s that you’re reading?” The woman asked, wiping her brow. Karel deemed her attractive in the elegant, unapproachable way older women were, and, combined with the fact that he hadn’t spoken to anyone he wasn’t supposed to or in fact wanted to for a very long time, was unable to find where his voice had gone. Instead he merely handed her the little book. She pocketed her gloves, skimmed through the stiff pages.

“Christ, this is terrible,” she muttered, “This is all wrong. Damn tourist boards never know how to write.”

“What do you mean?” Asked Karel, shocked because he loved the little book with its staid photographs and dull, comforting prose. The woman took an irreverent seat next to him, pointing to a page.

“Here, on the very first page, it says that in 1199, the ministerial Frederick II of Ptuj, in the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg, defeated the Hungarians at Velika Nedelja with the help from the Teutonic Knights. It was Frederick III who did that, not Frederick II. And here, in the part about Velika Nedelja itself, it says that Frederick IV and Hartnid I were Frederick III’s nephews when they were his sons. Here they spelled the name of the midcentury architect Dušan



Moškon, Dušan Meskon. There's nothing in here about the Second World War, but that's to be expected because it's a tourist publication and tourist boards believe that tourists should only learn about dead things, out of time and out of order. It drives me insane, you know." She stopped to reconsider her word choice, remembering that Karel was in the loony bin, but this embarrassment of hers was expressed only in an askance glance toward the ground.

"How do you know all this?" He asked. The woman laughed.

"You think I'm a gardener. No, I just volunteer here. My sister is in there," she pointed toward the wing where the electroshock therapy happened, or so it was rumored, and Karel replied, "I'm sorry."

"Sad story. Schizophrenia. She comes and goes." The woman produced a pack of cigarettes from her shirt pocket. She offered one to Karel, who accepted it out of politeness, along with the matchbook, and when he struck from it, she shielded Karel's flame from the wind with her hands. "What doctor did they give you in there?"

"Dr. Resnik," he said, and the woman smiled knowingly.

"Ah, that's hers too. Nice enough guy. Real old school though. A different doctor handles the more serious treatments. Vesna, by the way." She extended her hand.

"Karel," said Karel, who shook it. Callus met callus.

"Well Karel, anything you want to know about Ormož I can tell you. I came from here, so did my family. I took up the business of my father, which is to say, local history. Though his work was more interesting than mine. I just fix old paintings at the museum next to the castle."

"What did your father do?" Asked Karel, waving away the smoke.

"He was a medievalist, or rather a failed one."

Karel wondered aloud how one became a failed medievalist.

“Well,” Vesna answered, “After the war, my father didn’t have the stomach to go back to his doctorate in Graz and instead became the history teacher at the grammar school in Ptuj, which was a good gig at the time. The war did a number on him though. Hell, who didn’t it do a number on?”

Karel paused, waiting for her to tell him, if she so inclined, on which side of the war her father fought because in this part of the country, a man could go either way.

“Partisan, obviously.” Vesna took a long drag on her cigarette. “He came out the other end a Marxist, though at home he was more inconsistent, too weird to be assimilated into anything that fully-formed. Like most medievalists he saw the specter of the Middle Ages in everything. Anyway, he told us a bunch of knights and castles stories growing up and that’s how I know.” She flipped through the book again. “Why are you reading this anyway?”

“Nothing else to read,” said Karel. “I don’t like novels, and I didn’t want to read war books. You know, in my sensitive state.”

She smiled, her smile deepening her crows’ feet, pulling her dimples taut. “You’ll get out fine. I’ve been volunteering here for years now. I’ve seen all kinds.”

“So you often talk to patients?”

“Only sometimes. The ones on their way out usually. Otherwise I’d get yelled at by the nurses. And no, I can’t tell you what’s going on out there. I got an earful for doing that once.”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t really care,” said Karel, rolling his cigarette between his fingers, letting it burn free. He wasn’t a smoker. “I haven’t known what’s gone on in this country for seven years. When I left, I assumed it would be permanently and thinking about home only

made me feel guilty. I shut it out. No newspapers, nothing. It was for the best that I didn't see whatever bad things have resulted in whatever's happening now. Then I would be sad. It'll be better for me if everything is different from what I grew up with."

"Well, that's wise of you, then," she said in a way that indicated that she did not believe in the image of wisdom he'd crafted for her. Vesna rubbed out the butt on the concrete bench, making a little drawing with it, an ashy arc. He did the same. He liked her immediately, her steadiness, her wry undercurrent.

She stood, showing him her watch, a masculine thing with a hairline crack in the face. "Ah, knowing the schedules, and after years planting geraniums, I know them pretty well..." Indeed, it was time for Karel to return to his ecru sanctuary.

"Karel, I'll see you again, alright? If only to set the record straight on the town and — if you're so inclined — its surroundings." Then, ignoring the smile Karel made at the reference to the book — a small meaningless attache to his life, itself something no one paid any organically derived attention to — Vesna returned to planting flowers.

II.

Lying on the courtyard grass beneath the canopy of the sky, Vesna said:

My father was a strange man, Karel, a bit of a mystic. He believed in things like curses and history as a kind of spirit. The last one he probably got from Hegel, because my father studied in Austria and received a fully German education even as a child. It was just those times — we can't imagine them now. He believed all of history was the same story, the cyclical and inevitable progression towards whatever freedom meant at that moment, and he spoke to us about how Hegel said there were only four kinds of men in the world: those who sustain history, those who transcend it, those who are its subjects and those who are its objects. And for my father, the story of Ormož throughout the years was the same story, namely it was the story of Frederick V of Pettau — that's Ptuj in German — told over and over again from different perspectives, in different ways, because to my father Frederick V of Pettau, a cut-off medievalist's obsession, was all four men of history embodied in one, which is not how it goes in

Hegel, but who am I to say otherwise? Frederick V isn't even mentioned in that little book of yours, Karel, which is ridiculous because he was the one who made Ormož, the Frederick responsible for the town's German name, Friedau, and it was by his orders that the castle was built in the twilight years of the thirteenth century.

My father used to tell us all kinds of stories about *Die Herren von Pettau* growing up. He was an assistant to a professor in Austria who was doing the preliminary research on them at that time and after the war, my father and his advisor kept a rather one-sided correspondence. But to my father, the Pettaus were always more than historical people, distant medieval rulers of where we are now. They were parables and metaphors, something I believe he clung to as a way of coping with the terrible things he witnessed during the war. There were nine generations of the Lords of Ptuj, but as far as my father was concerned, the ones after Frederick V did not matter, were only the entrails of a decaying class that met its demise through debt and lack of feasible marriages.

As children, the Pettaus were like real people to us, that is, me, my sister, and my brother who works now as a hotel clerk in Ljubljana. There were good Pettaus and bad ones; they had enemies and friends, their escapades filled up volumes of stories. Most of the men were named Frederick, but some Fredericks were more important than others. Frederick I established the family, his son started the border squabbles with the Hungarians. Frederick III finished that war and went on to be a great crusader, though unfortunately he died young. Frederick IV was a bit of a mystery, but his brother Hartnid was a belligerent schemer. Frederick V was the son of Hartnid, and he was a generational culmination, everything a man could be. He lived through no fewer than three regime changes after the Emperor died, and ushered in each of them within its time.

In Frederick V, my father saw both spirit and curse, for Frederick was of two worlds in one man — he bore the spirit of any man in search of the freedom he is owed and the curse of the man who subjugates others, for he was still a nobleman. His lot was a unique synthesis of the two, a member of the feudal German class known as *ministeriales*, the ministerials, men who had pulled themselves up from the lower ranks of land-owning peasants into those storybook positions of power such as castellan, steward, marshal, chamberlain — men who were in their first generations ignoble and in subsequent ones noble in social status but politically unfree, unable to use their power for their own gain, unable to choose their own marriages, unable to forge alliances. In other words, totally controlled, in theory, by a suzerain, in this case the Archbishop of Salzburg. They were a kind of proto-bourgeoisie different, however, from that of the townspeople in those times, in craftsmen and burghers and this was something my father went to great lengths to explain: that these ministerials could not be extrapolated onto contemporary understandings of class, were anomalies even within feudalism.

In my eyes, he merely wanted to believe in something ancient and contrary to the way the world worked either before or after the war. Regardless, Frederick V's ambition was to secure his and his family's freedom and I think it's fine to extrapolate that freedom to that of his entire class. After all, Marx said that the bourgeois revolutions were a necessary progression towards a proletarian one. Hence, to my father in Frederick lived the potential and choices offered to all men with the power to become free but who had yet to do so, and all the paths such men could take, good and bad, cowardly and brave, ruthless and merciful, as we'll see, and in this respect, about Frederick my father was very ideologically flexible and by extension deeply irrational. To him, Frederick V was the writer who held power over hearts and minds yet lived in poverty; the

partisan who must choose between betting his personal freedom against that of his comrades; the young academic smothered under the stifling influence of a domineering advisor, for example, really, anyone at all on the middle rung of liberation and the top rung of potential.

And Karel said: Is that not every man these days?

And Vesna smiled and said: You can understand why my father told us the stories.

### III.

On the concrete bench smoking a cigarette Vesna said:

Frederick was born sometime around the mid-1230s and first showed up in the sources in 1246. His father was Hartnid I, the jealous younger brother of Frederick IV. My father had his suspicions about Hartnid. He believed that Hartnid was a literate man, that he had been sent off — as was the case with many second sons — to a monastery for lay training. He believed this because there were some questionable documents that showed up around Hartnid's time regarding ownership of Velika Nedelja, documents that backdated the granting of the land there to the time of Frederick II, even though the Teutonic Knights did not come to Ormož until the time of Frederick III. There were a few similarly suspicious cases regarding other Pettau holdings. In other words, my father believed Hartnid to be a serial forger, though his advisor very much disagreed. Even if he wasn't, Hartnid was shrewd, forming political alliances with other ministerials and attending many meetings, a practice adopted by his son. He married an



important ducal ministerial, Mathilde of Hollenburg, who brought into Pettau hands two key castles and the coat of arms the family would use for two generations. I should also add that Hartnid was the only Pettau known to father a bastard. Despite his moral laxness, Hartnid was brave, perhaps irrationally so — he subverted his suzerain by acquiring swaths of property and fought in other people's battles on his own accord, sometimes with mixed results. In the 1240s he was captured by the Hungarians and, humiliatingly, had to be bailed out by his own brother.

As for the brother, my father felt sorry for Frederick IV. So did I. Secretly I think I loved him best, felt kinship with his quiet mediocrity. Once he finally escaped the deep shadow of his father — crusader, defeater of the Hungarian army, political adviser to the great powers — Frederick IV became trapped in the bigger stories of his younger brother and nephew. His father passed during the early reign of the man the scribes called *Stupor Mundi*, the emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen and his nephew would eventually die in a stable empire. But Frederick IV never knew peace. He was born into one interregnum and perished at the height of another. My father, when he read between the dry medieval lines of charters and records, saw the human in dates and names. He believed that Frederick IV's personal sadness was well documented. For example, he inferred that Frederick deeply mourned the death of his wife, Herrad of Montpreis, whom he married young, because he dedicated the castle Stattenberg and pretty penny's worth of land to a nearby monastery in her memory, explicitly because they used to go on many lovely trips together there. He never remarried despite the fact that he was still young and marriage brought great material gain — castles, fiefs, a dowry. It was recorded that though Frederick and Herrad had a number of children, though we know not how many, only one survived infancy, a daughter. The relatively young death of his wife at the age of 35 implied she lost her life to yet

another unsuccessful childbirth in pursuit of a male heir. My father would choke up at this sometimes, always saying how astonishing it was that by the time of Herrad's death she and Frederick were nearing their 20th year of marriage. All in all, Frederick was quiet and content being a castellan, a real sustainer of history, as my father would put it, while Frederick's brother Hartnid stopped at nothing to undermine him, which he effectively did by being the one to continue the family line with Frederick V. Ah, Karel, she interrupted herself, are you tired?

Karel's eyes flew open, the images before them — in which he imagined Frederick IV looking more like him than Hartnid — dissipating. "I'm listening," he said, with some embarrassment. Vesna put out her cigarette.

"You seem a little weak today. Are you sick?"

He half expected her to touch him, on the shoulder perhaps, but she kept her hands in her lap with the obduracy of someone who knew better. At this inquiry he became rather guarded.

"Sick, no..."

"Perhaps some lunch would help? Half a sandwich?"

He shook his head, feeling bad about hiding from her. "I'm not hungry."

Vesna merely shrugged, and in that shrug, Karel, with an anorexic's paranoia, sensed not only a knowledge of his condition, but disappointment in both it and his refusal of her help, as though she knew that disappointment was inevitable. The look wives gave to their alcoholics.

The need to move forward beyond this tortured moment pressed direly upon him, and he offered,

"You were saying?"

"About?"

"You really think I wasn't listening," Karel frowned. "About young Frederick."

“Yes, Frederick,” Vesna continued, collecting herself.

As you can see, those were the circumstances of his birth, one which was both necessary for continuation of the family and bitter to it. Young Frederick must have seen his father’s striving growing up, must have known his father’s anger, must have felt the same indignity towards the lack of control over what was effectively his. What he deserved by way of his talent. In adolescence, one can only imagine how he rankled at the way the Archbishop told his father to go before the *Stupor Mundi* himself just to secure a charter for Frederick’s sister Adelaide so that she — and by extension her sons — would remain subjects of the Archbishop no matter who she married. Even worse, the Archbishop forced Hartnid to agree that his eldest son would only form a family with another Salzburg ministerial. Time and time again it must have become clear to young Frederick that the Archbishop negotiated land, negotiated money, negotiated military power with Hartnid as though he were an equal yet all the while insisted that this was not true, that Hartnid was instead utterly beneath him. Really, Karel, think of how these things must have grated on such a precocious man, how they must have instilled such vehement resentment in him.

As Frederick grew — and we can judge that he grew competently given his later exploits — the world began to change in profound ways. In 1251, the Emperor died and a tripartite interregnum gripped this little part of the world. There were fights for power for the Empire itself, for the Duchy of Austria and Styria, for the Archbishopric of Salzburg, all of which involved Pettau, and during which, Frederick V, now a young man and most certainly acting in the manner of his father, which is to say, usurping his poor uncle who was still alive, seized every opportunity for power and autonomy by building and purchasing castles, streamlining

incomes, making alliances. A lack of power begetting power is one of the fascinating cycles of history, I think, Karel. Anyway, after the heirless death of the last Duke of Austria-Styria, Styria became subjected to the Hungarians, who established themselves at Ptuj Castle, and at the time this was seen by the Pettaus as favorable because they would have something very special indeed: a direct line to the King of Hungary, Bela IV, who installed a viceroy at Pettau.

But the Hungarians were pretentious and sanctimonious Catholic rulers bent on wresting from the nobility land stolen from the monasteries and this caused great discontent, the kind that empowered men who had not been so empowered before, to join with one another and formulate a plan. A plan they did make. A dramatic one. Young Frederick of Pettau, who not long ago was the king's confidant, and his maternal kinsman Siegfried of Mahrenberg gathered their men, took advantage of the element of surprise, and together ran the Hungarians out of Pettau, allegedly forcing the viceroy to ford the Drava on foot, or so my father told me. But Hungary was a great power and this defeat embarrassed them. Soon after, the Hungarians besieged the castle and the Archbishop of Salzburg, in his final act before dying and opening up another dire absence, pledged Pettau to Hungary for thousands of silver marks just to keep it from being destroyed.

And Karel said, dejectedly: So that's it then.

And Vesna said, Not at all. The die of history had already been cast, and another actor emerged on the horizon, the King of Bohemia, who, by way of marrying the dead, heirless Austrian duke's sister — a sham marriage to a woman twice his age, mind you — claimed legitimacy to her lands.

Vesna lit another cigarette, saying, I can see young Frederick so clearly, Karel. I used to draw him in my notebooks. I imagined him black haired, beardless, with a thin mouth and a

crooked nose, elegant, proud, the weight of history on his shoulders. He broke rank by allying and then betraying a foreign power. He disobeyed with an arrogance only a young and talented person could have. The Archbishop knew that if Frederick successfully defended his castle, if he proved that a small subservient man could shut down an entire kingdom on a much more politically significant scale than last generation's mere border squabbles, it would only give this young man further legitimacy. That could not come to pass. But Frederick was not deterred by things like permission or the limits of vassalage because he knew bigger forces were at play than the archbishopric, that this battle was a battle for the whole headless empire. He himself became one of those forces, someone worth aligning with in his own right, a man who leaped off of the four-generation-long construction his forefathers built into the unknown. My father used to tell us, over and over again, shaking his head in disbelief: this man was only a ministerial. But the young are always so full of dreams, aren't they, Karel? Don't they deserve to be?

Before Karel left that day, having said nothing much at all to Vesna, so engrossed he was by her knowledge and his lack thereof not only about this subject but about anything really, so swept away he was by the natural, interminable cadence of her storytelling, all he could do was ask her what he wanted to ask her at the beginning of their visit, stupidly, humbly, if she would be willing to take his money and buy him some clothes in town. Vesna smiled benevolently at him, which warmed him to smile in turn, and wrote down his measurements on her arm with the ballpoint she kept in her shirt pocket alongside the cigarettes, promising that she would, and she did, because Gita, the nurse, visited Karel that Friday and told him that someone had left him a gift at the front desk.

In the paper bag were five collared shirts, two pairs of trousers, a week's worth of

underwear and socks, and a cheap pair of loafers. All were plain and inoffensive, evident of a woman's tasteful restraint. When Karel tried the clothes on, he felt like a new man, cleansed, in possession of something other than a violin and sad story, the kind of man who went into the world proudly but anonymously, a citizen like any other, made different only through the sublimation of his victimhood, the way his grandmother must have walked out into the city after the war was over, looking out upon what was only days ago hostile space, onto streets that for years had been evil vectors for conflict and surveillance, and seeing in real time that which was available to her expand and brighten with the sun of liberation, taking those first reticent steps into the future, the after. He recalled also the day he, Karel, stepped off the train in Vienna, the scent of sugary bread in abundance coming from the cheap, train station bakery, the chiming of the announcements, the exchanging of his money at a loudly-colored kiosk, the purchasing of a map, the largeness of the buildings outside, five stories instead of Celje's three, each its own layer cake with whitewashed frosted pediments. Two images formed a diptych in his consciousness. Karel, taking the tram into town, listening to the brilliant sounds of a new, bright place. Frederick V in his recaptured castle, sitting on his meager ministerial's throne, head in his palm, imagining the horizon.

IV.

Karel took a seat in a wooden chair in the two-way mirror room, already glancing at his truest keeper — the clock above the door. The man he'd been working with in group therapy for the last month, Boštjan, a bleary-eyed gambling addict, had, perhaps after making so little progress with Karel, been assigned to someone else. In his place, a young, handsome man around Karel's own age sat across from him, bringing his legs up to cross them, his facial features vulpine, his limbs oozing flexibility. Dance was never so far — in terms of location or culturally — from classical music and Karel had long since learned how to recognize a dancer when he saw one. The task of the day was for pairs of patients to talk about their goals — what they hoped to achieve by way of healing, and how those goals made them feel in the present moment. Karel deemed the second question rather stupid — how should goals make anyone feel? Either the goal was attainable — in which case, hope was on the horizon, or it was not and all that was left was either disillusionment, delusion, or despair. What other emotions were there? These shrinks, all

they wanted was for people to be pleasant and boring. To be pleased with everything including not reaching that which was most unattainable, as if to say, ah, well, I'm so self-adjusted, I shall merely get on with the world and never look backwards, there are more goals to set, more living to do, bright, expansive living, yes, that was the kind of person Dr. Resnik wanted him to be. But healing, thought Karel, is that ever an achievable goal? Perhaps *managing* was the best word; managing the symptoms of one's sickness in service of one's obligations.

"Mitja," introduced the dancer, interrupting Karel's thoughts.

"Karel."

They shook hands.

"Why are you here, Karel? Sorry, I mean, what are your goals with healing?"

Mitja spoke in the manner of a snotty child, one who understood an assignment but didn't believe in it and whose participation in what was asked of him took the resultant form of irony.

"My goals?" Karel pretended to ponder, behaving similarly as a point of social inclusion.

"To be honest, I'm not sure. I don't think happiness is an achievable goal. In Ormož or in life. So I suppose my goal is to merely be less sad. I think I am making good progress."

"So you're a depressive, then. The goal for your ilk is probably staying alive."

Karel laughed at his own expense. But wasn't that the whole battle in which every man is a protagonist? The one against extinguishment? Sometimes he wondered, especially when staring down a plate of broccoli linguine, whether he was winning or losing.

"And how does that make you feel?" Asked Mitja.

"Even sadder," Karel said, grin twitching at his lips. "And what about yourself?"

"Me? I've got bulimia."



Now Karel understood why they'd been assigned to each other. His food-hiding techniques perhaps weren't as convincing as he previously thought. Mitja lowered his voice into a conspiratorial whisper. "Karel, I'll be honest with you. I don't think there's anything wrong with me and I'm no victim of anything I can't abandon. I want to be thin, beautiful. That is my goal. That's what these shrinks don't understand. They think I want to get better, and that I don't improve because of subconscious things I can't control, forces deep inside of me. It's silly. I am very much in control. I choose to be a bulimic. You know, this is my fifth stint in one of these places. Usually it's Polje, but they were full. Everyone's got problems it seems these days, though between you and me, the times aren't so bad — some of us find a smidge of change exciting."

"So why are you here, then? Did something happen?" Pass out at a performing arts institution, perhaps?

"No, no. It's my lovers who always make me check in. I go for maybe a week or two, eat enough to get discharged, then I return home appearing a little better only to disappoint them once more. And what happens after? Unable to save me, they leave me. This, Karel, if we're being honest, is what I don't understand. I once thought love was about acceptance, but it never is, only possession, a possession that wears various disguises. Everyone wants to be the one who changes the life of another, so that when that person wakes up in the morning, they say, thank god for so and so. It's narcissism masquerading as selflessness. So here I am, doing the same old song and dance. My goal is to get on with it and about that goal I have no feelings."

Karel appreciated the honesty, one with which he mostly sympathized. "It's hard for you dancers, isn't it? I played violin my whole life, did a lot of Nutcrackers. You couldn't pay me to

be one of your lot.”

Mitja smirked. “Is it that obvious?”

“Who else sits in a chair cross-legged?”

“Homosexuals.”

“That was my second guess and I still would have been right.”

They laughed. Yes, thought Karel, let’s all laugh at ourselves.

“You seem alright to me, Karel,” Mitja observed. “A little morose maybe.”

“I’ve been here a while, I know how it goes.”

“Why do you think they keep you around?”

“Probably because I’m also starving myself.” Karel made his confession blunt for a comedic effect that fell flat, so he continued, more vulnerably — “But unlike you, I have no reason for starving. It has nothing to do with how I look — I was already too skinny. I don’t know why I stopped eating. I see food and feel disgusted. Something in me doesn’t want to eat.”

“You know,” said Mitja, “My shrink here says deep down everyone wants to die in their own way, to choose how they die. Bulimia, anorexia, whatever, that’s just a slow suicide, he says. A cowardly one, too, because its uncommitted. Unlike with a gun, there’s always the possibility of continuing to live. An escape from the brink. He thinks telling me such things will sort me out. People believe the worst thing someone could want is to die. But some of us simply weren’t supposed to live a long time. A star goes out when it goes out. It’s funny, you know, Karel. Ballet works to kill me by forty, while socialism works to keep me alive. So here I am, for now — for a few days. But you won’t be seeing me next week.”

Mitja’s morbidness no longer amused Karel. The smile left his face. He began to worry

that what Mitja said would infect him with similar maladjusted thoughts. For the remainder of the session they talked half-heartedly about ballet, about Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky, talked like boys kicking rocks around a patch of dirt just to pass the time, the way Karel used to when waiting for his father to get cigarettes and a newspaper on the way home from school, and as they talked Karel all the while avoided Mitja's eyes, which seemed to have a streak of daring in them, a yearning for the exact opposite of what Mitja supposed others wanted — to save somebody.

Later that night, Karel wondered if he wanted to die, secretly or deliberately. When he first came to Ormož the answer seemed an obvious yes, but upon further rumination, he was not so sure. Presupposing that his subconscious would be eponymously unavailable to him, he could only perceive — and therefore quiet — the seas of his active mind. After a lengthy sojourn looking up at the ceiling during which little fragments of memory surfaced just long enough to spark an emotion in favor of or against living — recent humiliation, past victories, foiled love, possessive fear, childhood happiness — before he shoved them back in his gut where they belonged — he decided that he didn't want to die. But he didn't quite want to live either, or at least live fully, having, he believed, nowhere to go, nothing left to live *for*. What he still wanted was to sleep, which seemed, as it always had, to him a happy medium. To sleep like he did in the barbiturate days, for long bouts without dreaming; or, should dreams come upon him, for them to be pleasant and nonsensical dreams, dreams about shapes and colors, about contorted places, passages through creative visions inaccessible after the fact, images one couldn't paint, buildings one couldn't visit, music one couldn't play, faces one couldn't recognize, yes, this was the state in which Karel Kavčič wanted to stay — alive, yet far removed from the painful collection of

memories and the vast array of things which triggered them that together one nominally called life. But what tipped him over to the side of living was that he had already lived thus far — even this suspended-state Ormož type of living was still living, and the time in which he was at his lowest had already begun to pass into a vague after where his truth was somewhat less painful than it was, which, paradoxically, upset him because such an event was supposed to be life-ending — it seemed to him a kind of narrative disrespect to keep living after the fact. Yet he lived. For nothing.

He thought of Jacek then, for the first time in a while, morose Jacek, who sat glumly at the kitchen table pondering the minutes as they passed, in a personal limbo Karel and Jan used to make fun of, yet probably wouldn't now, since Jacek was like that because he'd lived through many life-altering situations, situations which scattered him further and further from home and hope and the bleak period which represented a beginning, albeit rough, for Karel and Jan had, for Jacek, been an end, and if not an end, a layover in transit to *the* end, and perhaps for Pavel also, though he still had the wherewithal to seek pleasure and camaraderie — indeed, there were many forms acceptance could take, and if not acceptance than a certain kind of performative nihilism that replaced it. What struck Karel then was that when he was in Vienna, he fundamentally did not accept his lot in life — the tourist concerts and the shithole flat were something he had to endure, transcend, and it was this transcendence he did not question until the very end, and if he did not question it then, why should he question it now? Was this not also something to endure? Suddenly he found himself pathetic. This wanting to sleep all the time. Why? Because he couldn't make it as a violinist in the most difficult city to make it as a violinist in? Because he had shit himself in front of Dr. Matej? Would it really kill him to play bit parts at the theater in

Maribor? Was it worth dying over?

He thought briefly of Vesna, then, and her story about Frederick V and his defeat at Ptuj Castle, and his petty feudal spitefulness that provided a way forward into the next phase of history, short as those phases were, because politics had the lifespan of a single man and his decisions — and yet, wouldn't such times soon be upon him, too? Without socialism, everyone would become an individual like in America about which his father always said with a shrug, "What you own, owns you." The thought, as someone who owned nothing, disgusted him. He'd already seen firsthand what happened to the kind of people such a society preferred to forget. Even a soloist plays in the orchestra most of the time. Regardless, he didn't know why Vesna talked to him or seemed to want to help him. It all seemed quite odd, how she just showed up one day, perfectly formed and full of stories. But then he remembered the little book, the obvious connection. She wanted to talk about the book and because her own interests were bearing down on her — to share them with a similarly interested someone.

He took a no-nonsense stance on the Vesna question. Something about it made him unusually frank with himself, circumvented his now ordinary paranoia. Of course, Karel thought, Vesna's kindness came across as suspicious after such a long time without kindness, after such a long time spent alongside people, perhaps Jan excepted, who feigned it in order to get what they wanted from him, after such a long time in the kingdom of the Austrians which was ruled not by kindness but by manners, manners like they had at the immigration office, where, if you got a woman working the desk, she would say, sometimes with a benevolent smile, I am sorry Mr. Kavčič, we need a form from your employer stipulating that you have work here and cannot do anything more to help you until then...yes, compared to all those people and to the shrinks here

who took care of you for the state's money, whose kindness was just as false because it was predicated on work, of course Vesna seemed like some kind of apparition when she was, in all reality, a nice, curious person who maybe had a spell of pity for him, though Karel did not want to think so, indeed, the thought made him very upset, that Vesna pitied him because she didn't talk to him that way, in the immigration office way, in the group therapy way, no, she talked to him like he was no different than her neighbor, like it was just an ordinary fact of life that Karel was in the psychiatric hospital, no different than if her neighbor's garden gate had rusted shut which necessitated talking over it, and when Karel thought this, he smiled at the image of himself and Vesna as neighbors, neighbors in Ormož where everyone knew everyone else, where they lived out their dull, ordinary days in the shadow of a history unknown to all but Vesna and himself. But his smile faded when he realized how far from reality this was, how obvious it probably was to Vesna that he was unwell, nigh insane really, and this cruel fact necessitated a certain distance even if she didn't show it and despite her smiling at him in her friendly way, she likely didn't want to end up in a room alone with him, even though he wouldn't hurt anyone, especially not a woman, no, he was only capable of hurting himself as he hurt himself then, imagining Vesna's private repulsion towards him as though it were an inevitable fact. Maybe he shouldn't see her the next day. And yet he wanted the answer to his inquiry, wanted the opportunity to search her face for any sign of pity or fear. He couldn't think about anything else until he had that answer.

Karel curled up into a ball on his bed, pulled the covers over him, wanting sleep to put an end to his constant meandering, but the light from the sun shone through the duvet and the recapitulation of his thoughts comprised never-ending rondo, and when night fell once more

without dinner, no peace came and wouldn't until the wee hours, the hours when the nurses stopped stumping around and even the most dedicated talkers had given up the comfort of discourse, when even the wind had stilled and all that remained available to listen to was Karel's own shallow, uneven breathing.

V.

Taking off her sunhat, Vesna rose to greet Karel as he approached her dressed in the clothes she'd bought him.

“A new man,” she crowed.

“Thank you, really,” he told her, so sincere he couldn't look her in the eye.

“Please, no woman ever says no to shopping. I have to ask, though, your wearing that old outfit all the time... What were you, a butler?”

And Karel said: Chamberlain, actually.

And Vesna laughed and when she laughed, Karel's sleepless fears began to dissipate — see, Karel, mere nonsense — because here was Vesna as her ordinary self, sitting down in the grass, draping her arm over her knee, her skin already a little tan, the pits of her t-shirt damp from her earthly labor, laughing, and something in her laugh invited him in, made him want to say, for the first time, something about himself, about what he really was and so he did. He told



her the most guarded version of his story he could muster, to both protect himself from her inevitable judgement and also to test the waters of their still emerging intimacy. He is — was — a violinist who found himself out of work and had been forced back to the country of his birth from an uncaring, foreign city.

“And that’s why you’re in Ormož? You couldn’t get a job?”

“We can call it general life instability,” said Karel, evasively. “To be honest, I’m not sure why I’m still here.”

“Well, me either. You seem pretty stable to me.”

“Perhaps you can tell Dr. Resnik that the next time you visit your sister.”

Vesna waved him away. “But now my interest is really piqued, Karel. Here I’ve been talking all this time about my dad and his stories. I barely know a thing about you.”

“Like?”

“Like where you’re from.”

“You can’t tell from the accent?”

“Štajerska somewhere. Not here, though.”

“Celje.”

“Ah, a city boy,” she teased. He shook his head.

“Barely a city, Celje.”

“You’re in Ormož, Karel,” Vesna said, and when they both smiled, this mutual recognition relaxed him further, and to Karel came as a watershed after a whole night spent agonizing over wanting to live or die, and once that was settled (on the side of living but without hope) her perception of him. He felt her eyes on him then, not only waiting, but considering him

— considering him and no other. A singular and unbroken attention.

When he began to talk about himself, Vesna had this way of pulling details from him, this way of looking into him and rousing him to talk more — to talk about his father's janky record player, his mother's tarok cards and the Thursday night games she played with the women who worked at the laundromat, the weeks they went without sugar which wasn't really that great of a hardship said his father who had known worse, the trips with him to the railway station where all the signalmen smoked one cigarette after the other in the dark control room full of big knobby switchboards; how every apartment building added to a concrete forest towering over this little tiny town and how his family was one of the first to move into the eighth floor of the tallest one; about his great aunt's mothball-scented cardigans, her showy kisses, the dull scales and etudes in the mildew-scented basement of the music school, the joy of his first concerto, Vivaldi's Spring at six, how proud the whole town was of him, how they thought him a little prodigy, a beacon from above; how they all came to each of his parents' funerals and his great aunt's just to hear him play; how they raised the funds for him to go to Ljubljana and live there until he could get work even though he was so young; how they all waved goodbye as he boarded the train; how the hills were parted by the tracks his great uncle helped lay and how his departure was watched over by that towering yet ruined castle, and Vesna listened as though this were the most interesting story in the world and maybe it was to someone raised to believe in the potentiality of men, and when Karel went back inside his blood was rushing past his pulse points, bringing color to his cheeks and one of the nurses asked, *been running Karel*, and Karel ignored her because music had returned to him, a Bach Courante, not even a violin piece, the G major one from the first Suite for Cello and when he looked out onto the landscape outside his window he

saw it not as some reprieve from his plaster walls but as the domain of Vesna's great men who made great decisions, or at least tried to, flawed as they were — weren't we all? The rest of the evening he spent trying his best to recall parts of his and Vesna's conversation, tried to keep track of what he had told her, of her responses, which were always kind — kind and imbued with the sense that her mind never once strayed when he spoke to her.

“I don't know,” he had said, “Maybe what I did with the violin wasn't really so impressive. Everything's impressive when a child does it. Look what little Karel can do...no different than a pet.”

Vesna, head propped up on one arm as they laid in the grass: “I wouldn't say that. You sound like you were a real miracle, Karel.” Remembering this, Karel felt his cheeks warm.

“Frederick, how old was he when he started getting involved in politics?”

“Oh, I don't know. Probably in his late teens. But things were different in those days. Frederick wasn't acting as a child — at fourteen he was already considered a man.”

“This was true of me, too, and at the same age.”

“Must have been hard, going to live in the city so young.”

But Karel wasn't ready to talk about that yet, so he said, “With a little time, people can live wherever they end up. Even Ormož.”

“Either way,” said Vesna, taking the hint, “You seemed like a great kid.”

Over and over Karel replayed this conversation, and when he did, a part of him wanted to tell a lie to himself, to deliberately misremember Vesna as saying, You sound like you're a real miracle, Karel. But another part kept him grounded in reality, in the gentleness expressed as it was, directed towards his younger self, which really should have been enough, and he thus

categorized the other phrase as a mere fantasy, yet even within that categorical setting, still dwelled on it. He wondered where this impulse came from, but only for a moment, because his very next thought was about wanting to see Vesna again, wanting to see her more. But, he knew, to see her more would require certain concessions.

When Dr. Resnik came in the next day, Karel gave him an abbreviated version of the story he told Vesna about his parents' funerals and all the townspeople who came to hear him play, two new kernels not yet given up before and at this Dr. Resnik seemed genuinely pleased. Karel used the leverage to get more time in the courtyard because the breeze was doing him good and after he'd spent his time in the courtyard with Vesna, he noticed that he'd started humming again when he walked, hummed like a busybody, hummed like his father used to, and all it took, he thought, was someone caring even mildly if he lived or died, someone who listened to him for reasons other than work, someone even stranger than him, what with all that mashed up Hegel nonsense (Karel had never read him) and tales of a kooky traumatized father and his overblown knights.

Tell me more, Vesna, Karel thought, opening the window, humming the Courante, prancing, springy little ditty. He watched the ash trees shushing along with the wind in big tremolo swells and sighed with them. The sky was especially blue.

### Part Three

#### I.

Karel's inner life teemed with images from history: Catholic kings and knights on horseback, brave conversations about the duties of a man, the funerals of ambitious fathers, the whole of Hungary falling to the sword of little Ptuj, now a sleepy tourist destination for no one in particular except perhaps wine enthusiasts and amateur ethnographers. How vast Vesna's stories were, marveled Karel. One day, they'd be about Hartnid and his visit to that great and splendid Emperor in Pavia, or about how the Pope wiped the Emperor's family from the face of the earth in retaliation for the Emperor's incursions into Italy and Sicily; the next day she'd tell the story of a panicked Ormož fortifying itself against the Turks in the 15th century, or about the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus who lent his visage to the old legend foretelling a deep-sleeping king who would awake to aid his suffering people when they needed him most.

All of Vesna's stories followed certain paths, certain themes, like how politics formed a

complex constellation of events and people, an astrology of the mortal world, or how the death of every generation felt like the end of not just a man's life but of his time, and how there could never be peace in the uncertain spans between powers, only a wandering gravitation toward whoever and whatever seemed to be going somewhere. In Frederick V's world, control lost its meaning in an era with neither certainty nor media, a time when travel took weeks and was full of risks, a time when candlelight was the only line of defense against nighttime, a time without time, or rather with the flexible time of hours set only in monasteries or by the perambulations of the sun across the sky.

Béla IV, King of Hungary, was no small man, Vesna would say, lying in the grass or sitting cross legged on a bench or smoking a cigarette, lost in the world of her father, formulating her tales from a historian's pattern book. She always began with descriptions of great deeds: Béla was the rebuilder of his nation, first after his father rendered it penniless and later after it was sacked and destroyed by the Mongols. Then she described the nuances of this new character: he was a fine negotiator, a quiet, pious man, albeit one not to be trifled with, as the rebellious nobles of his father's time learned the hard way after Béla put them in check — and then his faults: yet Béla could not foresee what the situation in Styria where the nobles were more decentralized and economically autonomous, in other words, where Hungarian rule did not fit with Styrian reality entailed — and then Vesna would always bring her story back home to where they were now: Styria, where Frederick of Pettau and his kindly uncle perhaps had long talks about the future or perhaps not, perhaps instead the elder Pettau banished his troublesome nephew to Wurmburg or Hollenburg, his father's castles via marriage to his mother, we do not know, but it was Frederick V who showed up one day on horseback with an army and weapons, brave and rebellious,

internally and deeply free.

Karel lost himself in these words, became a part of them, recognized himself and his life in them, wondered if the universality of the human spirit was what enabled things like music or stories or the psychology forced down his throat every day, whether everything was a kind of conduit for everything else, whether life was a tautological play unfolding, and he would say as poignantly as he could muster, Vesna, I know what it is like to want something so badly, to give up peace and home for it. He would tell her these things in a low voice. He would tell her all he could remember, about the jealousy of the old he experienced when he was young, about the mourning widow, about winning first chair at the orchestra in Ljubljana, his personal moment of youthful accomplishment, and all the other Frederick-like experiences he could remember, and beyond those, he spoke of his great and central unbelonging, about the concerts in Vienna, about all the people who lived in the house, Ferkó Liszt and Jan and Pavel and Jacek, about Amir the loud and brash promoter who always touched everyone too much, smoothed their hair and clothes like a parent does their children, even, if vaguely, about Heinrich, Heinrich with his threatening mouth, his empty promises, who'd scammed them out of rent and papers time and time again, and when he spoke of these people (Heinrich excluded) he tried to paint them as detailed as Vesna painted her characters. When he spoke about himself he tried to convey to her his lostness, his yearning, his perseverance, his destituteness and his self-belief, the little Fredrickian flame inside the dark chamber of his body that kept him working and living.

He told her these things, never once questioning either her nor himself, always thankful for the leniency of the underpaid nurses who let him visit with Vesna and even for Dr. Resnik who got more out of him than — the two of them had finally made it to Vienna in their

conversation, were at the point where he was running out of money looking for work, chased off by cops for busking in the streets without a license, how he was saved by the last minute by a dark-skinned Turkish man wearing a powdered wig.

But the more time he spent with Vesna, the more he wondered about her, about her life, the life that happened beyond her childhood spent listening to the stories she now told him. Indeed, she had seemed so forthcoming in the beginning that it never occurred to him how little he knew, or that she'd withheld swaths of herself from him. What, really, did he know? Only the barest gestures of her family — her medievalist father, her brother in Ljubljana, her sister in the more serious wing of Ormož, and that was it. No mention of a mother, no mention of school, though she worked in the museum fixing paintings so she must have studied art somewhere. No mention of a husband or children. No ring. This last thought tied a knot in Karel's stomach. Surely someone like Vesna, someone who lived in a little town like Ormož had a family. If she did, why not bring it up? Did she think it would upset him? But this was absurd — what made him think she would think that? He dug deeper, struck something sore, the idea of Vesna returning home to people who loved her while Karel slept alone in the mental hospital with no one at all to return to, not even Dr. Matej, brought him an unearned sense of bitterness, as though she had been playing some kind of trick on him with her availability — but as what? A woman? A friend? That familiar, circular anxiety returned to him, that unavoidable sense of needing to know. But how could he ask her? How could he approach the topic of herself without appearing nosy or even worse, leery? Of course. Yes. It had to be through the stories, thought Karel, feeling quite clever then. And if it came through the stories, why shouldn't she tell him? Through the stories, he was already telling her everything.



II.

Asked Karel, his back leaned up against a tree, “What about the women?”

“The women?” Vesna replied in a voice muffled by the cigarette between her lips she was trying to light. It was a hot day, but the boughs of the fir cooled everything beneath them, framing them in mottled shadow, and to Karel, fostered a special intimacy. He sat there for a reason.

“You know, the mothers and wives.”

“That’s very feminist of you, Karel,” Vesna teased, crossing her legs. Karel folded his arms, not knowing how else to respond.

“But yes, the women. There are some good stories there for sure. Early on there was Benedicta of Pettau, wife of Frederick II. She was from a higher family, and, having exhibited a taste for the courtly culture of the time, inspired the Pettaus’ longing for the trappings and culture of nobility. A man like Frederick II, a man who disobeyed his sovereign to go to battle with his

neighbors — the Hungarians you remember, Karel — needed a strong woman behind him, and certainly Benedicta, elegant and clever as she was, fit that role. A woman like that got into trouble of her own, the kind of carefully controlled trouble only a woman could find. One could perhaps even call it a love story — oh Karel, the look on your face.

The subject of the story wasn't Benedicta herself. You see, William II, Count of Heunberg and the ministerial Herrand I of Wildonie had both fallen in love with two young daughters of Liutold of Waldstein. Who knows how this happened; maybe they'd seen the girls at some tournament or dinner party; maybe they just wanted, in the form of dowry, what old Liutold had in his pockets. At any rate, Liutold denied them the girls' hands in marriage, and who could blame him considering what happened next. William and Herrand decided to take the romance into their own hands. With only the entitlement such men could muster, they stole the girls from their castle and rode off with them in the dead of night, draped them over their warhorses, bound and terrified. But because their end goal was not lustful satisfaction but instead rich, marital bliss, they knew, first of all, that they couldn't immediately return home, and second, that they had to preserve the girls' honor — a woman was worthless without it —and so by precarious lamplight, they took their prey to a place unknown to Liutold, the castle of Pettau, where Benedicta, their collaborator, awaited them. The girls were kept in Benedicta's care, perhaps a welcome reprieve from a gaggle of unruly sons, while the kidnappers negotiated with the Archbishop of Salzburg. Eventually the Archbishop proffered a deal between the two suitors and Liutold. Romantic, hm?"

"Is it?" Wondered Karel.

"Was anything, then?" Vesna smiled. "Frederick III married Mathilde of Trixen, or at

least my father thought so. Medievalists still dispute what family she belonged to but my father firmly believed she was a Trixen. The Trixens were a very powerful and well-branched family whose castles stood guard over an important trade route between Styria, Carinthia, and the Lavanttal. While Frederick was serving as lord — finishing the battles his father started, when he was on crusade, when he was cavorting with dukes and princes and archbishops — his wife stayed behind, raising her children, Frederick IV and Hartnid, and their brother Henry who, like all third Pettau brothers would end up in the priesthood. She was very religious, Mathilde, and one could say, at least for the Middle Ages, future-oriented, which in those days meant securing her and her family's eternal salvation through religious deeds. After her husband's early death, she devoted herself wholeheartedly to establishing the Dominican monastery in Ptuj, you know it Karel, the pink building with all that silly baroque ornament, though on the side you can still see the vestiges of the gothic windows and arches, and inside the cloisters are thankfully relatively intact. In the monastery, Mathilde specified that the family would keep an archive, which unfortunately was damaged several times by flooding. She lived quite long, until 1253, when her grandson Frederick V was already entering politics. Perhaps it was his grandmother who inspired him, near the end of his own life, to found a monastery for the Minorites. They were an odd match, Frederick III, an ambitious man in the secular realm, and his overtly pious, presumably much younger wife.”

“And then there was Frederick IV.”

“Yes,” said Vesna, looking away. “And Herrad. You know about them already.” She put out her cigarette, rubbing it against the bark of the tree. “And Hartnid and Mathilde of Hollenburg, about whom and whose marriage we know little, only that he committed adultery

against her.”

“Alright, so what about Frederick V?”

“I’ll tell you about that later — it’s a broader political story.”

Karel, with a lump in his throat: “And what about you Vesna?”

“Me?” Vesna asked, raising her eyebrows. Karel looked at the ground, where some small beetles were crawling, hating them as though they were intruding on their conversation.

“Well, I know nothing about you and soon you will know everything about me.”

“There’s nothing to tell, really.”

“Of course there is,” said Karel, with more tenderness than he wished to express. “For example, you’re a painter —”

“Let me stop you right there. I’m a conservator. Only people with vision go on to become painters. People like me fix their paintings after time and dirt happens to them.” This bitterness surprised Karel. It sounded like something he would say. He didn’t know how to proceed, and so, resigned to awkwardness, remained silent and deferent. Vesna sighed.

“Alright, Karel, what is it you want to know?”

*Are you married?* Thought Karel. But only thought.

“You never said what your mother did, for one. Just your father.”

“I don’t have a mother,” said Vesna bluntly. “My mother left us when I was little and she didn’t do it with the kind of dignity one finds in death, Karel. She married my father prior to the war and didn’t like who he was after, thought him weird and insular, not like he was before, when he was outgoing and funny and full of life. She stuck around, had children, tried to fulfill some kind of old fantasy, lived by the social protocol women follow blindly not knowing any

better. She worked too, at a tailor's shop doing alterations. One day a strong, handsome man from Zagreb came in to get his trousers hemmed before heading West for a meeting of some kind in Ljubljana. I don't know what happened that day but when the man came back through Ptuj, my mother went with him, leaving only a letter. It destroyed my father. He never saw himself the same again after that, only retreated more and more into his own world. Life's a family affair here, so my aunt, a spinster if there ever was one, came to help raise us, lived in our spare bedroom, but everyone knew it wasn't the same as having a mother. There was a lot of shame. Everyone blamed themselves. My mother's family felt bad for a while, you know, her parents visited on the weekends, but it only made my father's mood worse. So, after a while, he pushed them away and what was once a big, happy family became so very small." Vesna pawed for her cigarettes, her hands trembling slightly as she pulled back the top of the packaging. "Maybe that explains everything about me."

"What do you mean?" Karel asked, wanting to add, 'I'm sorry,' on the tail end of his question, but stopped himself, sensing in Vesna's taut shoulders and the grimace on her face that his sympathy was unwelcome.

Lighting her cigarette, Vesna said: I became weird and insular, too. Other kids didn't want to hang around me when I was growing up because I was a teacher's daughter and because of my embarrassing family situation. I didn't want to hang around them either. I thought myself better than other people, probably got that from my mother, and if not, it was compensation for her absence. For a while, the family tried to get in touch with her, but we gave up pretty soon. Some people don't want to be found. It's probably best to respect that, you know, Karel? But growing up, I was so angry and lonely. I'd spend all my time in the woods on long walks telling myself

the same stories about aggrieved lovers and monks in search of God, real 19<sup>th</sup> century stuff. I read novels, read Kosovel and the French surrealists, lived in the library until it closed.

I started drawing early on. Used to get in trouble for doing it during class. By the time I was twelve or thirteen, I wanted to be an artist. I drew obsessively, made still lifes of everything in the house, from bars of soap to the windows. My teachers encouraged me, including my father, who eventually was one of them. He bought me my first set of paints, some cheap acrylics, and an easel. To me, painting was something you did outside. I painted what was around me. I painted the castle, trains parked on the tracks, the river. I went out on my bicycle and painted the fields, did a lot of paintings of nothing, of little snippets of earth with sticks jutting out of them. Rabbit warrens. But never anything abstractly. I hated abstraction, which seemed to me then as an evasion of reality, a coward's art, but that was just my father's socialism talking. Back in those days, there was a lot of support for the arts. I took classes in the evenings for free. Painted my colleagues who were mostly retirees. In more advanced classes I painted nudes, though later on I swore off painting people because I hated how they looked at me, with this insecure expectation, this begging impatience. I had my own impatiences. I started smoking at fourteen, and at fifteen started drinking in the evening with my father and his colleagues from the grammar school, where they'd have long debates about politics and art. I believed I was so grown up.

Then, like you, like everyone, I went to Ljubljana. I started at the Academy of Art a year early, at eighteen. We had good teachers there then, not like they do now, though everyone probably thinks that about their teachers. Gregorčič, Novak, Sraka, not that you know who these people are. They're before your time. Gregorčič was the token socialist realist, painting still lifes

and all those Tito murals and portraits of bureaucrats, but they were good quality and no one could say otherwise, with great texture and composition. Novak was more abstract, messier because it was personal. He worked on a bigger scale. Being, as I saw myself, which is to say smarter than everyone, I found his art juvenile and unnecessarily provocative and even though he was a nice guy, I refused to take lessons with him on principle. It was Sraka I liked best, though I don't think he remembers me these days. He was old then, and he's quite old now. I guess you could call him my Dr. Matej, but he probably was not as kind as you make Dr. Matej out to be. Often the opposite. I didn't need kindness, though. I didn't need to be talked down to, my worst impulses encouraged. Sraka was fine with my drawings and paintings of empty rooms and ditches on the sides of roads. He did a lot of similar work when he was young. The thing about him was, he always wanted to make sure you were really fucking solid at drawing before you branched out into your own world. If you wanted to do abstraction or surrealism or what have you, he made sure you could draw the best trees on earth first. He would often throw out students' drawings for lack of technique or attentiveness and I remember how they would get so upset, thinking their individuality was at stake, their creativity. But you couldn't really be creative until you were good. That worldview suited me fine.

By that point in his own career, Sraka was making these fucked up drawings of old Greek myths, painting rotting organisms, thinking a lot about death. He was always morbid and a bitter that socialism didn't turn out the way it wanted to, and who could blame him — my father felt the same and frankly so do I — but now Sraka seemed to accept this grimness as a permanent condition. A diagnosis of himself. The death stuff wasn't my thing. I was young, free. But often I would hang around and watch him draw, and when he drew he entered a state unlike any other, a

complete devotional state. It was hypnotizing, the way he would glance up at whatever he was drawing and then, like singing, like dancing, make it appear with just the right angle of pencil, humming some aria or another — he always had the radio on blaring classical music. I wanted to be like that, someone who could transform reality into what we call art. But my problem was, Karel, I didn't know what to paint. I didn't have any vision. I became talented at replicating what was in front of me or what other people did instead of speaking for myself. I couldn't, like Sraka, access that part of me which felt pain in a way that could be communicated to others.

So I did what all uncreative people eventually do: I taught. I got a job in Kranj at the gymnasium there. A miracle of a job, really. Paid well, the students were smart. I lived alone in a brand new flat. From the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, I could see the mountains, though I'm not a mountains person really, and the town below, the blue Sava snaking through it. I painted from there a lot, sold my paintings to my neighbors who had similar views worth commemorating. I started to travel. I went to France, to Spain, to Austria and Italy. Saw the great museums, the great cities, the great works of art. I took classes for adults, learned French. All by myself. Then, as is the case with most women, there came a man.

For a moment, something in Karel wanted to interrupt her, saying, I don't really need to know about this, Vesna. But he did. He did need to know. Sitting there listening, his heart already threatened eviction from his ribcage, his pupils had already shrunk, his mouth had long since gone dry, not because there was now a man in the story but because she was *so much like him*, no, was the most like him, indeed, they were versions of the same person, separate but now together, sitting, talking listening, and no wonder she'd listened to him like that, listened to all his stupid, insistent babbling — she must have felt the very same thing he was feeling, this



uncanny closeness, this proximity of the self within another.

“You can tell me, Vesna,” he said, trying to manifest both courage and some spit in his mouth.

And so Vesna told him: His name was Miha. He worked as a book editor. We met at the library. We were both trying to read the same Nabokov novel but it was checked out. Miha was beautiful. Tall, dark haired, with big, expressive eyes behind the kind of glasses that make a man look intelligent and sophisticated, which he was. He had a literature student’s way of speaking in which the whole world deserved its own analysis. A phenomenon couldn’t just exist, it also had to exist in writing which itself was up for interpretation. He knew everything about anything, including art, had a whole lexicon of Yugoslav art, Western art, the avant garde. I showed him my sketchbook and after he pondered it for a while, approved and gave attentive verbal feedback. Impressing him, even in the most minor way, felt like a cultural achievement. We went to a bar together, stayed there until closing, which in Kranj was around midnight on a Friday. I was in no way naive to men at that point in my life. I was, I don’t know, twenty-four or so. But Miha was different. That’s what all women always say when they’re in love. So and so was *different*.

We started seeing each other every day after we’d get done with work. We’d cook dinner for each other in our respective apartments. He recited poetry for me from memory, sang songs in his off-kilter voice. He knew a lot about flowers because his father was a florist and would go out and make me wildflower bouquets with an accompanying scrapbook of annotations. Looking back at it now, these things all seem like cheap parlor tricks, but back then, they made me feel so specific, like I was the only and most important woman in the world. Even so, being independent

and a child of divorce, I was wary of him. I was afraid he would leave after sleeping with me, but instead he asked to move in. For two years we were in that tiny flat together, unable to bear the ten minute walk between our apartments anymore. When I was 27, he asked me to marry him. Ours was a small wedding, mostly just our families. We had it in Škofja Loka, where he was from. We went to Florence for our honeymoon, where I talked his ear off about Brunelleschi and he talked mine off about Dante. I loved Miha. For so long, we were incredibly happy together.

Karel, feeling as though every bit of praise about this Miha character was said, in some way, to make him feel ever more small, glanced up morosely, picturing a younger, happier version of Vesna, which was not hard because she had long since been beautiful to him. He knew, despite his own jealousy, that Miha was being referred to in the past tense, that the cadence of her voice had changed when she paused on the word happy, when she stopped looking so wistful, and thus he sat there with a certain audience's helplessness waiting for the hammer to fall.

Vesna said: When I was thirty-three, my father became ill. Cancer. Around that same time, my sister got, you know, sick. She's not the first in my family, my great aunt on my mother's side also had the same problem. It was only a matter of time before it showed up in the bloodline again. It manifests late, schizophrenia. She was twenty-seven at the time, started hearing things, seeing things I'd rather not talk about. She was sent to Dornova, the asylum for really terrible cases, all of them shoved into this wretched Baroque mansion. I remember it was always cold in there, even in summer. We take care of people much differently now. I'm grateful for that. But my brother, he couldn't handle so much pain. He left for Ljubljana without saying goodbye. For years I hated him, as was my right. He was always a coward, my brother, unable to

face any fear, unable to risk any harm. He took the path of least resistance his entire life, lazy and stupid, destined for a dull job and a wife who hated him and two buzzcut sons who played with matches. Watching him live his life was like watching an ice cube melt in the sun.

I had no choice but to transfer my job to Ptuj in order to be closer to my family. Miha did too. We moved into my childhood home. Everything was horrible. Too much was happening at once. Life became almost impossible because it all fell on my shoulders, this trying to juggle my sister's illness, my father's dying. I'm sure you understand, Karel, having lost your family to the same wasting away. Except cancer killed my father quickly. It was stomach cancer. They discovered it late, misdiagnosed it as ulcerative colitis years back. By that point it was terminal. They said he had four months. He stuck it out for five. During his last days, I used to go to the hospital and tell his own stories back at him, to show that I remembered and that I would continue in my own way his great project, which seemed to calm him, seemed to make accepting what was to come less frightening, this thought that he would live on through me. When he left us, the grief that opened up was unfathomable. It came over me like a sickness. I couldn't move or think, only lie under the covers in the dark for days on end, getting bedsores. Miha made me get help. After two weeks at the clinic in Maribor and a prescription for tricyclics, I could get through daily life, felt a little bit of my old self coming back one day at a time. But it never really goes away, that missing someone, the emptiness they leave behind, a cavity in the mouth of your life.

Miha thought it would help if we repainted the house, cleaned out the past. Now I wish we didn't. Now I wish I could be there with more of my father's things, his clothes, our old childhood detritus. All that's left is his archive and his books which were kept in the basement in

shitty cardboard boxes. It was a small house, but there still managed to be three bedrooms in there, if you could call them that. One of the rooms, the spare bedroom, we cleared out and painted yellow, anticipating a nursery. We'd been trying to have children on and off, but for whatever reason, nothing seemed to happen. By the time I reached thirty-five, Miha began to panic. All he wanted was to have a family. Even when we met, he was already dreaming of a gaggle of perfect beings whose faces looked like ours, whose talents would exceed those of their meager parents. He was always saying things like, when we have kids, Vesna, we'll all go to the puppet theater in Ljubljana, or camping near where I grew up, or go to Croatia and stay in the family beach house, and even though these were all things we could have done already, for Miha, they were sacred milestones meant to be crossed later in the company of the next generation. Our trying became excessive — and excessively futile, to put it euphemistically, and we started to fight. We blamed each other. We saw some doctors. When Miha's tests came back saying that his seeds could sprout, everything became my fault. More doctors, more poking and prodding, screenings for everything from cancer to iron deficiency, but to no avail, and the diagnosis came back as plain old infertility.

I told Miha, we can get through this. We can adopt. But he didn't want to. Men are funny that way, Karel. Possessive. They don't really want children as a concept, only children that look like them, that exist as proof of sexual ownership over the woman, virile success. It's quite feudal, really. Backwards, like all things related to one's blood. Things changed between us. We limped along, tried to take some vacations, saw, independently, psychoanalysts, his a newly-minted Lacanian, mine a typical Freudian, but all psychoanalysis seemed to do for us then was give us better ammunition for hurting each other. When he was out on a business trip, out of pure

spite, I bought some bookshelves, painted the nursery room a soft green, and put my father's archive in it, and when Miha came home he got so mad he went to go stay in a hotel in Ptuj. I didn't recognize him anymore. He was no longer handsome, no longer intelligent, in fact, this whole thing seemed to make him base and stupid. It was like all the life went out of the house, out of our lives, and no matter what I did, no matter how many concessions I made, no matter how many times I tried to transform myself into someone else, someone more feminine, someone more pliant, motherlike without children, none of these aliases worked, and the ugly truth was, I was barren and getting older, losing my promise with nothing to show for it. I started wearing makeup for the first time, put relaxers in my hair to try and get rid of the curls. Lost weight. But all he would do was make a mild comment of approval before heading into the bedroom to read with the door shut. For hours I sat in the dining room alone with an unread book of my own wanting to disappear. The day before my thirty-sixth birthday, he left me. He said, I don't love you anymore. I want different things from life. I didn't fight it. I was relieved it was over. We divorced that summer. I pawned the ring because I needed the money, though I wish I could've thrown it in the Drava for added catharsis. After that, I didn't want to be around children anymore, even teenagers. I took the job at the museum. That was seven years ago.

Vesna wiped the tears from her eyes, a few stray drops that had gotten through a long-fortified stronghold, saying, "I shouldn't have told you all that, Karel. I don't know why I did. " And Karel looked at her, trying but not quite able to process what he'd just heard. Without even debating within himself whether he should or not, he embraced her, partly to avoid looking at her longer, because if he looked at her longer, he didn't know what would happen — he only sensed the possibility of a deep pain that would manifest itself in unaccountable ways, and so he hung

himself on her like a jacket on a coat tree, limp and unintimidating, unable to say anything or think of anything to say besides, stupidly, so stupidly, I can understand why Frederick IV was your favorite, which he mumbled into the frizzy expanse of her hair, and he felt her twinge with a slight laugh, the laugh of an injured person aspiring to stability. Vesna smelled like geraniums and earth. Karel knew he should not hold her any tighter, not like he wanted to and had wanted to for a long time, perhaps since the very first day she sat on the bench beside him and offered him a cigarette. Vesna ran her hands along the knobby spine of Karel's back with a reciprocal, platonic firmness.

“Christ, Karel,” she murmured, “You're so frail. I worry about you, you know?”

“Sorry,” whispered Karel, knowing she would pull away, and she did. Once more, he couldn't meet her eyes despite wanting to.

“I'm alright now,” Vesna said, describing her extended as well as her current state.

“Seven years is a long time.”

“That's good,” said Karel dumbly. He could tell she wasn't looking at him either. She exhaled, and the way she exhaled, with a kindly but measured frustration made him believe she really did spend years as a teacher. Her pupil, he waited for his punishment, which was delivered in a deliberative tone.

“We really shouldn't hug, Karel. You being a patient...I'll get in trouble. It looks bad, you know? I'm sorry. Look, I got ahead of myself too, lost myself a bit. I don't know why, probably because you remind me of myself, my own story. Maybe mine reminds me of yours, at least what I know of it so far. I'm sure there's more to it still.” She paused. “Sometimes you're too easy to talk to.”

“I understand,” said Karel trying to conceal that his whole body ached something dull and stupid as he stared at his two weak hands as they mourned the curvature of her body, stared as though if he looked hard enough he could see how it felt against them in the form of a residue left upon his palms, a residue that smelled like geraniums. “It’s alright, really. I lost control of myself, too. I’m sorry, I didn’t know what else to do after, after you told me. Thank you for telling me. Really. But I wish there was something I could say that would make what happened to you, all that sadness and suffering, worth living through.”

And Vesna said, putting a hand on Karel’s shoulder: It’s fine. I’m fine. All suffering ends. Mine, yours. My father always said, that’s the only good thing about it.

For a small moment, they looked at one another. Just a few uncertain seconds. Then her hand returned to her lap.

I should go inside, said Karel.

### III.

Weeks passed and the summer hours expanded day by day, approaching their final, stifling breadth. When he wasn't with Vesna, Karel thought endlessly about Vesna. Sometimes he would even request extra trips to the bathroom because the clerestory window in there opened up onto the courtyard and he would stand on the toilet bowl and wait for her to walk in from work around four in the afternoon, would watch her start planting the flowers or watering the beds with a hose or mowing the grass with a mechanical push mower, none the wiser that he was watching her, taking in the sight of her dense, tightly curled hair boasting its first gray streaks, the visible spans of her sun-kissed skin, the ordinary, proletarian strength of her arms.

He began, then — and only then — to think about his own freedom. For hours in his room, he gazed out the window upon the leafy trees and filmic sky, wondering if Vesna would talk to him once he was free or whether her attention was predicated solely on his unfreedom, a situational kindness, one someone only has for sick people. But Vesna, he wanted to say, I am not



sick, I am not sick, I will get better, I will, can't you see that I am sane, that I am healing and becoming more alive with every passing moment, that I have regained a sense of will? I wanted to die, Vesna. Without the bravery to kill myself, I wanted to simply fall asleep and never wake up, a victim, an object of history through and through, haunted by my own youthful happiness and the evil that was done to me by others, done to me by the world. Vesna, I've told you about my privation and humiliation, my exploitation, my longing. You know me now better than any other, you are all I have, and when you look at me you see me as I am in my most humble, human form, in possession of so little other than a potential I no longer believed in until you looked into me and saw it. And I know you, and when I look at you, I see you, and when I see you, I wonder who on earth could not want you, who could ever have such capacity for cruelty to hurt you in the way you have been hurt, the way only men can hurt women, the way that forecloses an entire life and all its happinesses, and I know, Vesna, I know what it is like, I know, I know...

June tilted into July. Big, broad July. Rain fell mightily and the clouds towered in tall, ungainly cumulus heaps and all the rivers of Slovenia swelled, fat and heavy and brown and stinking of detritus. The heat grew thick and moist and laborious and in it, a breeze was greeted as though a long-lost friend. Vesna traded her overalls for loose khaki shorts and a linen blouse and her boots for old sneakers with soles on their way out. The summer heat expanded into Karel's insides by way of Vesna's proximity to him, and he found himself beholden to his need to ask her about her paintings, about her time in Ljubljana, about the Pettaus — even the uninteresting ones, about the buildings in Ormož and which Baroque-era baron was responsible for them; his need to make her smile. He spoke with her, too, about music, singing excerpts of

pieces he played or knew or loved, swaying, drawing an invisible bow across an invisible violin, and Vesna watched him with luminous attention.

How did this happen to me, wondered Karel, what miracle was this woman, sent down as though God were real and had just remembered Karel Kavčič? Karel loved Vesna, inevitably and painfully, all the while refusing to believe that he loved her as though it were a lie someone else were telling about him. She is old, he scolded himself, forty-three, and Karel was twenty-eight on July 1st, a day on which Vesna brought him a little slice of cake from the grocery store, no candle, no fork, so Karel the anorexic ate it with his hands, pretending it didn't feel like sand as it went down his throat, shoveling crumbs and icing and his fingers into his mouth to Vesna's great and buoyant happiness, and a second miracle occurred when he no longer thought about the cake when it was finished — because Vesna was with him, speaking to him, and not a word could be missed or wasted on such a pathetic, miserable thought. The day after he ate the cake, she showed him one of her sketchbooks, in which every page was filled with drawings of the ground, of grass growing in various situations, pulled out by its roots, kicked up by animal tracks, of earth tilled into big, violent chunks of soil, of plants growing on hillocks, of the way the river lapped at the shore, these small, ordinary moments rendered in soft, charcoal detail, Vesna's fingers becoming black with the stuff as she gingerly turned the pages. His greatest wish was to be drawn by her, to see what he looked like in her eyes, but he knew from what she told him that she did not draw people, probably for the same reason the old violinists were afraid of recording — that it captured their souls.

He behaved in her presence frictionlessly, warmed as a person through the embrace of his own love, even though he sensed there was always a part of her unavailable to him, a moving

goalpost in their conversations, something that gave them and Karel the momentum needed to pull more and more detail out of his own stories, an exchange Karel felt was mutual because with and in response to his life, her stories of the distant past flowered, adapted to whatever place in a man's historical timeline approximating where Karel was at in his. This created the sensation that whenever he was with her the subsequent centuries never happened, that they were instead collaged together in a time outside of time, Ormož time, limbo, the great cosmic waiting room of Purgatory in which they played Dante and Virgil, watching events and the cycles of history unfold, interjecting themselves within each narrative until it was time to go inside, and inside, Karel grew more and more afraid, especially after their hug, afraid that the doctors and nurses would take Vesna away from him.

He never spoke about her. Sometimes, and this would cause him horrible agony, he did not take his courtyard time so as to not seem too dependent, too eager to see her. Sometimes he would go out and ignore her and feign casualness, but she was always wise to his act and gave him a sly look that placated the torture of having to ignore her. He offset the assumed disobedience of seeing her by being even more forthcoming in the various forms of therapy, really trying in the group sessions to compare his plight to the depressed politicians and gambling addicts and breakup victims that came in and out of Ormož at a faster rate than Karel because Karel's psychosis resisted treatment, or so it said on the clipboard, itself a fancy phrase for "won't give up his secrets." To the state, to the doctors who allegedly worked for them — which to him sounded like something Jan would say, wherever he was now — who knew?

Whatever odious task stood in Karel's path to seeing Vesna he tackled with Frederickian valor, and that, above all, included eating. Hated, wretched eating, the food worse to swallow

than bricks, chased with glass upon glass of water to wash the taste out of his mouth. And when he began to eat once more, regardless of whether it was pleasant to him, he began to feel hunger again, and when he began to feel hunger, he could no longer barter starvation for peaceful exhaustion, a salvo against the long evenings alone. Despite this pain, he ate. When he ate, he thought of her hands running up his spine, the gentle concern in her voice when she said, *I worry about you*. And thinking about that, he would eat, no matter what was put in front of him — he'd been through the full rotation of meals a dozen times, if not more. He ate because to see her was his reward, to receive her blessing of his eating in the form of "You're looking a little better these days;" to hear her voice saying Karel in the middle of her long essayistic sentences, real graduate school sentences unlike the ones Karel spoke which were lengthy but confused and grammatically tortured; to feel her proximity and smell the scent of tobacco on her breath; to gaze upon her upturned nose and gray-blue eyes, her chapped lips and makeup-less face betraying all the minute details of age still missing from him; to watch her forehead bead with sweat, shaded by a broad straw sunhat.

At night, Karel especially thought of Vesna because he loved her, and nighttime was the inevitable canvas upon which lovers imagine love, even those in the mental hospital, perhaps especially so, seeing as they lived such dull, repetitive lives in which even the merest scintilla of something like love felt monumentally significant. What would loving her be like? He wondered. He imagined her a hundred different ways. He had never been with a woman older than him and knew nothing about such relationships, which always struck him as taboo, if not oedipal. But Vesna was different. He could only picture her as she was, holding his hand, falling asleep, head on his shoulder beneath the great fir tree, walking with him in a field, sketching dirt, inviting him

into her house, making him tea, sitting and reading with him, and when Karel imagined these things, he was not sure what his role was in them as a man, could not envision himself engaging in his usual awkward yet wily seduction, no, in his own fantasies he had been rendered harmless and pathetic, peering up at Vesna with begging eyes, not wanting to be a man at all but merely someone beloved and invited to love. He saw the two of them standing in a sunny, cluttered kitchen, their uncertain silence terminated by Vesna's wavering voice, saying, *It's alright, Karel.*

At first, Karel pushed further visions away due to their painfulness and his youthful embarrassment, his physical shyness, but the temptation to think of Vesna in a certain way proved impossible to dismiss and one evening he couldn't stop himself anymore and he thought of her right there, in his room, with him. How she got there, he did not know and it did not matter; the story did not have to be plausible, plausibility was for writers and he was a violinist, and so by dim lamplight she entered his cramped room, sat at the edge of his bed dressed in her ordinary gardening clothes, shadows gathering in the soft parts of her face, in the corners of her eyes which peered at him with tenderness, and he would take her hand and rest it upon his cheek, closing his eyes and sighing.

Nothing would be said between them. She would simply turn towards him and stroke his face, and when she could no longer bear not doing so, she would press her forehead against his, their mouths close, brushing, connected, deepening, his arms reaching for her, pulling her against him, on top of him, her muddy sneakers kicked onto the floor, his mouth on her neck, his face buried in her shoulder, his eyes watching her as she moved to undress, watching her breasts, free from their containment, hover above him as he took off his shirt, removed his trousers so she could straddle his legs, so she could take him inside her, and he let her, clinging to her, marveling

at the slight elasticity of her skin, her sunkissed freckles, smelling geraniums in her fingers as they cradled his face, as she made love to him and as he in turn held her tight and moved within her, the shallowness of their breathing, the sighs that escaped their open mouths, the arc of her neck as it tilted ever so slightly towards the ceiling, saying Karel in a different kind of voice, the way he needed her like no other, close like no other, totally like no other, and just as Karel was about to come, he wrapped his arm around his own chest, his hand caressing his own shoulder, trying to imagine it was her pulling him to pieces, only to remember, at the last second, the necessity of muffling his moan in the crook of his elbow, and with this, the illusion shattered at the same moment as his climax.

As soon as his heat faded, a great pain emerged in its place, the jarring pain of her absence, the truth of his pathetic loneliness, the toil of yearning blindly and without hope, and, wiping himself off with a tissue from the bedside table, shame. Nauseated, he broke into a cold sweat, as though ill. Everything will end soon, Karel thought then, totally awake. It felt inescapable. He was running out of things to tell her, running out of madness to cling onto, hurdling towards some kind of final threshold, perhaps the threshold between staying and leaving, sickness and health. What was had become unsustainable. I don't care if you're older than me, he said aloud into the room, startled by the regurgitation of his thoughts in the form of his voice, which tenderness had rendered boyish and questioning. I love you, he said, just to say it, as though saying it, even to himself, would relieve the great pressure sitting on his chest. It didn't.

IV.

Vesna, balling her hair up into a bun, asked, rhetorically: Karel, does a man betray his loyalties if they are loyalties in name only rather than in deed? If they are not imbued with the action that perpetuates them, the mutual friendship of power? Ottokar II was the King of Bohemia. He took Frederick V with him hunting across the Bohemian lands, spoke to him endlessly of all the troubles of kingdoms and bishoprics, bemoaned the Austrians for their greater wealth and culture compared to Bohemia, letting slip that the only way to feel as competent as his rivals was to capture and subjugate them. What a great listener Frederick must have been, a kind of human confessional, a lover of talk and of intimacy. He married around that time, in the 1260s. He'd long had his eye on an unattainable countess, Sophia of Pfannberg, a free noble, perhaps to him even the symbol of freedom itself. Though her brothers Henry and Bernard were vehemently against the marriage, Frederick would not be deterred. He pledged an army of his men to aid in some escapade — I no longer recall which — of the Salzburg archbishop-elect Philip of

Spannheim whom my father deemed an odd and pathetic man bereft of the political acumen necessary to usurp his brother and become Duke of Carinthia like his father, a whole other game of intrigue that ended badly for everyone, especially Frederick's younger brother Hartnid II who lost his life in it. Still, Spannheim, being archbishop-elect gave Frederick permission to marry the countess, and so he did, to his great happiness.

Yet soon after, Frederick had to bid farewell to his new wife so as to tend to the whims of the king. We take risks in this life to get what we want, I can imagine Frederick telling himself on those long, arduous journeys without her, week-long stretches from little Ptuj to Prague and Vienna just to go shoot living things with a paranoid and resentful king whose desires ran amok, whose heart craved empire. Things will be good for me, Frederick must have thought, thinking of his wife, if I stay on this path. But Ottokar had his pans in too many fires. Carinthia, Styria, Austria, the empire, and this culminated in a proxy war for control of the Archbishopric of Salzburg between the Ottokar-backed Philip of Spannheim, who refused to be confirmed as a priest, still holding out, as he was for Carinthia, and the Hungary-backed Ulrich of Seckau. Philip was the favorite of the ministerials because he was distracted with Carinthia and, as evidenced by Frederick's marriage, made political deals easily, whereas Ulrich had no such other goals and represented a return to the status quo.

"Sanctimonious Catholics," Karel smiled, twirling a plucked flower in between his fingers. They abandoned the bench in lieu of grass under the shade of the great fir.

Vesna said: This should have been a small conflict, but in the vacuum of an emperor-less world, it scaled up into bigger fights, bigger goals, more uncertainties. Fatefully, Ottokar went on crusade against paganism in Prussia and Lithuania and took his best ministerials with him,



including Frederick of Pettau, and this crusade was truly a disaster — the ground was wet from thaw and swallowed up horses and men alike. The weather was dreadfully rainy and would sometimes freeze overnight into ice. Ottokar made no progress against the heathens, and during this time, the ministerials began talking amongst themselves and with the free counts who went on crusade for their own spiritual or political reasons. There in Lithuania emerged great discontent with Ottokar who was now seen as being no better than the Hungarians, and who had not delivered on the freedom he promised — in fact the very opposite was true. Imagine the king's confidant Frederick, holed up as he was in some withering tent, starving to death slowly upon the icy plain, listening to the conversations of his hated brothers-in-laws, or between the two poets Ulrich of Liechtenstein and Herrand of Wildonie, a few others too, all talking about how it was terrible to be starving and lacking in progress against the heathen and most of all about the arrogant and stupid king.

Here Frederick had to make a decision, Karel, because at that time a (non-Hungarian) opposition to Ottokar was still in its infancy and whatever happened would have massive ramifications for the ministerials, who despite the royal annoyance had grown powerful over the years of fruitful interregnum. But on the other hand, Frederick was close to the king, and the king's favor was an elusive prize. It would secure his own personal freedom should he hedge it against the desires of his class, and you know what, Karel, this is what I mean by a curse. Frederick made his choice and by making his choice, he set in motion that the same choice would be made at a different time hundreds of years later when Ormož was once more, and perhaps for the very last time, important.

Giving up your friends is hard to do. The circumstances have to be extraordinary, they

have to be extraordinary like they were for my father, who was secretly mining the railroad with the partisans, meeting with them in a little tavern, a tabernacle of comradely trust, theirs a delicately wrought politics of secrecy, the future decidedly in their hands, all of them on the very brink of success that would stun the enemy and stunt his movement until one day the Nazis came barging through the door of the tavern, and everyone scattered and my father who was taking a piss at the time climbed out the bathroom window and escaped with his life, running through the fields, running alone into darkness, being shot at, dodging death until he could reach the woods, where he hid and survived, moving west, hunted like a dog, and one must wonder, Karel, how it happened that way. It happened because the Nazis caught some field woman who had overheard this conversation, who was of partisan sympathies but not of partisan strength, who was tortured in gruesome ways, thumbscrews, beatings, and intimidation until she gave them up, and because of her, my father's friends were sent to Dachau and died there, and the woman was shot. And when Frederick of Pettau told the king about the traitors, the king locked Frederick up with them for being a gossip, informed their wives and destroyed most of their castles.

Upon release, in an added bit of maneuvering, Ottokar forbade any of the others to hurt Frederick, to challenge him to a judicial duel, that is, a fight to the death. Alas, our hero, fallen. That was the paradox, Karel. Even in Frederick's trustworthiness he had been untrustworthy, willing to rat out, but at the same time he was useful and could be made useful again. But imprisonment does not sit well with a man, and Frederick was like a frog in a pot; the heat was simmering to a boil and he remained paralyzed by cowardice. What awakened him, Karel, was the violent murder by Ottokar of Frederick's cousin Siegfried of Mahrenberg, the man with whom Frederick had recaptured Pettau at the beginning of this long journey of his. The murder

was gruesome, on display for everyone, and even those who didn't see it knew of it and reacted with revulsion. Only then did Frederick go running to the opposition, to Rudolf of Habsburg, hoping to earn back his political favor, his place in the great pageant of the world, that to which he had dedicated his entire life since childhood, his entire —

I was in a situation, a situation like this, whispered Karel, sweating through his linen, the words choking him like a shirt collar, but I did not give up my friends. What happened wasn't my fault. I don't know what happened. There was this man, Heinrich, I told you about Heinrich, Vesna, but not everything. I had no choice other than to leave. I thought if I could go back to Dr. Matej, I could help them, myself...No, I'm sorry.

Vesna, taking his hand, said: No, please, Karel. Go on. You can tell me.

V.

The next time Dr. Resnik came into Karel's room, he was brandishing an Austrian newspaper and in the Austrian newspaper was a small black-and-white photo and in the small black-and-white photo was Karel, wearing a Mozart costume, playing in the Karlskirche with the Vienna Mozart Chamber Sextet, as it was called on the loud, overproduced flyers plastered on every streetlamp pole in Vienna.

“A colleague of mine here just got back from a conference in Vienna and read this on the train,” said Dr. Resnik, pacing around the room. He read slowly, making for Karel a rather decent translation:

New information has come to light on the assault that shocked the Vienna tourism industry. On May 3rd, Austrian authorities apprehended Mr. Heinrich Bachmeier, aged 33, at his apartment in Heiligenstadt on charges of felony rape after a Japanese tourist was found in critical condition in a property he owned. Further investigation in that case has led to human trafficking

charges being made against Mr. Bachmeier in connection with an immigration scheme. Mr. Bachmeier first became known to police last month when they discovered twenty-one year old Mika Tsunota, unconscious in a derelict apartment near the Karlskirche where Mr. Bachmeier was known to have run a series of heavily-marketed tourist concerts, in which he himself often performed. Police, thanks to new help from EUROPOL, are now claiming that the concerts, a long-time annoyance for Viennese residents tired of being accosted in the streets by promoters in Mozart costumes, were part of a broader scheme in which Mr. Bachmeier and his associate, Turkish national Amir Tiryaki, solicited vulnerable immigrants from neighboring, poorer countries looking for cultural work in Vienna and kept them, with threat of deportation, living in deplorable conditions. The men in question were sometimes being forced to play no fewer than three concerts per day six days a week and five on Sunday. According to one of the musicians, who chose to remain anonymous, the group would play the same works every single day for poor wages despite the high cost of the concerts. “We don’t know where the money goes,” the man said.

Mr. Bachmeier and Mr. Tiryaki often promised their workers residency and visa procurement that never materialized, and even if victims of the scheme wished to leave, force was often used as a last resort. Another member of the group, who wished only to be known by his first initial, J, said that Mr. Bachmeier was prone to violence and coercion, often showing up unannounced at properties that he owned, in which authorities discovered widespread pestilence, disrepair, and even people living in the ceiling. Authorities further found that Bachmeier used the concerts to discreetly deliver women for sex work in connection with an Austrian crime ring. According to sources, Bachmeier would occasionally use his cultural sway as a musician for

sexual gratification, often luring tourist women unable to speak German or English back to the properties he owned and where, according to the same victim of the scheme, Mr. Bachmeier had “rough and loud sex” with them. The revelations have shocked Vienna, and have opened up new outrage about the way immigrants are being treated in the city, which many seek as a refuge from disintegrating communist regimes. Dr. Resnik put down the paper, and said, “Karel, I am so sorry.”

Karel stared blankly at the wall, stunned, his mind tearing through memory. Yes, that’s how it happened that night after the audition, going home to find the locks changed, to find Jacek in a state of shock on a nearby bench telling him, it’s over, it’s over, something really fucked up has happened, Karel, something really fucked up and the police are going to come any minute, and you can’t talk to them Karel, and Karel asking where is Jan, where is Ferkó and Pavel, and Jacek saying Jan’s gone to see if any cheap motels have room, Pavel’s gone who the fuck knows where because as a big Soviet guy he’s an instant suspect, Ferkó was the one who called the police, and I wasn’t home until just a few hours ago when he told me, he said, Heinrich’s fucked up one of his tourist girls, she won’t wake up, she’s breathing but she won’t wake up, she’s drugged out of her mind, and it had to be Heinrich because now the locks are changed and we can’t go back inside, and what am I gonna do, Karel? My violin is in there. And Karel said, stammering, I’m waiting for a letter, it should only take a few days — I’m waiting to know if I got into this chamber orchestra out in the suburbs, and if they let me in then they’ll give me a visa and it’ll be alright, and if I get in, I’ll put in a good word for you, I promise, and even if there is no way to read the letter, I’ll go there myself and ask... And Jacek said, staring into the maw of a flask concealed in his big hands, no, I don’t think that’s smart, Karel, waiting around

for a letter. The cops are looking for witnesses, they'll be back any minute to deport us and the only reason I'm sitting here waiting is because they already took my answers, didn't get shit from me. It's over Karel. I just want my violin. It's really over. For all of us. Go home before they force you to, or before they force you to answer questions and if they do, don't say shit because Jan and Pavel are still out there. Do you understand?

These words were carried on Karel's lips as he remembered him, winged Orpheuses of truth, and Dr. Resnik nodded and sighed, walking him step by step, saying good, Karel, good, keeping Karel from the brink, keeping him in reality, as one coaxes a scared cat down from a tree it's been stuck in for a very long time, and J must have been Jacek, thought Karel, because Jan would never talk to a reporter, never in his life, and wasn't it good for Heinrich to be apprehended, not only for the woman's sake and for her honor but for all of them, even if it meant being scattered like ashes in the wind — their castles destroyed, he stupidly remembered Vesna saying. Their castles destroyed.

And for the next few days Karel did not go outside or do anything at all. He merely sat with the reality of what had happened, talked it out to Dr. Resnik, processed it only because he knew it was really and truly over. He was not ratting out anyone because Jan and Pavel, wherever they were, didn't end up in the article, because maybe the city finally cared about immigrants now, because the press did the snitching for him, because the ending had come and all was resolved. But something kept nagging him. Something in the back of his mind which he tried to dispel but couldn't as an insane person's misremembrance: *Last month, authorities...*

After he started to feel better, he waited for Vesna in the courtyard to tell her what happened but she didn't come that day, and the next day, he waited from his perch in the

bathroom for her to come and she didn't come then either, nor did she come the day after and by the fourth day, his stomach sank, poisoned by a fear he wouldn't make known even to himself, a fear he forced down along with his food, as though continuing to eat would bring her back, but day after day passed and it didn't. Now he only wanted and believed in and needed his freedom, to get the hell out of this place. And so, he became utterly blank, faceless, tepid, genial. A week later, Karel asked if he could leave. That afternoon, he received news that he would be discharged from Ormož with a clean bill of health.



#### Part Four

Karel, rucksack in one hand and violin case in the other, went immediately to the museum, looking at his feet the whole time, thinking in circles, his trajectory, a monomaniacal forward, because if he looked up, even once, he would collapse under the weight of his own task. The museum, a stark, monastic building sat on its patch of grass seemingly empty, save for a few cars parked beside it, though they could have been guests of the bus station nearby. When he opened the door, the relief of cool air greeted him before any human. He looked up. In front of him, on a little carousel, were dozens of copies of the very same book, “The Town of Ormož and Its Surroundings.” Averting his gaze, he asked the museum receptionist for Vesna, if she really worked there, which she did, and the museum receptionist led him through the dimly lit, monastic building full of obscure art no one other than people from Ormož cared about into the back room where the conservators worked, and in this room was Vesna in a painter’s apron, standing over a broad canvas full of nightmarish creatures and twisted spirits, all contorted into some kind of surreal composition on a black field. The receptionist left. Vesna returned her brush to its cradle but her eyes refused to meet Karel’s, refused to latch onto anything except the

tortured painting on the easel. Karel put down his things, fighting against his rough, injured need to shout, trying instead to better formulate his words. But when he spoke, his voice came out quiet and steady. He found it surprisingly easy to speak. Even when her eyes finally, reluctantly settled upon him.

“I figured it out when Dr. Resnik brought in the paper. He slipped up there, saying ‘last month’ when it is July, almost August, and they were referencing May. It was an old paper, one that had to be procured maybe from a library for the purpose, one that required knowing certain information they did not yet have, because even though I was in the photo, I wasn’t listed by name. You know, I wasn’t mad, when I realized, Vesna. There is still a part of me that believes that the friendship between us was real and that you told Dr. Resnik about the incident because you wanted me to be free, wanted me to be standing here right now talking to you, and you did it for no other reason than that, certainly not because the hospital paid you, — at least I hope they did — and certainly not because there were never enough beds in there and if someone could be shoved out faster it would be worth their while, unmentionably and under the table of course, and wouldn’t that explain it? Wouldn’t that explain why the nurses never shooed you away, why I was never punished for talking to an outsider, why Dr. Resnik was fine with all those little trips for fresh air? But I couldn’t see that at the time, Vesna, because I was so happy to sit beside you and listen to you talk about your father and his silly knights and kings, thinking that someone out there cared if I lived to see tomorrow, who liked me because I was worth liking.”

“I did care,” Vesna said. Whether her voice quivered with surprise or emotion, Karel couldn’t tell.

“You cared,” he repeated back meanly.

“I did. Don’t think for a second that I didn’t.”

“So I was right.”

“No, Karel, you weren’t. You’re real cynical, you know, talking about a lack of beds, but that had nothing to do with it. People stay in Ormož as long as they need to, and as far as I knew, you yourself never once asked to be discharged. I’m really not a doctor, a secret shrink. I told you the truth. I come to Ormož to help with the garden, to visit with people who have no one to visit them, to help with their socialization. It’s true, I work for the clinic and they pay me. If something important comes up, we have to report it. It’s protocol. But after I told him about what happened to you in Vienna, I made it clear to Dr. Resnik I didn’t want to do this anymore, that after you, I couldn’t do it again, that —”

“What counts as important?” Interrupted Karel.

“What?”

“What are the things they make you report?”

“There’s a lot of them. They’re what you expect. Suicide risks, sexual assault, threats of violence, that kind of stuff. But when you came in, there was suspicion about your story from the higher-ups, a need to find out whether what you were doing in Vienna was related to the political situation here and more importantly, to know if you had committed a crime. Those are just the times we’re living in. I’m sorry for that, too, that this is the way things are. But Karel, I need you to know and to believe me that nothing I said to you was a lie. The stories were real, how I felt about them was real, my own life, what I shared of it, was real.”

Karel folded his arms, hugging himself, as though bracing against his own pain. “And your sister? Is she really at Ormož or was that just a convenient excuse?”

“She’s really in there and that’s why I work on the garden — she loves geraniums. She’ll probably be in and out of there forever.”

“Then tell me what happened to her.”

A grimace. “Nothing happened to her. She has schizophrenia. She can’t re-enter society the way she is, afraid of everything.”

“I’m sorry,” said Karel. He was — for her and for bringing it up, which he had done to hurt her.

After sighing her teacher’s sigh, Vesna asked: “Why did you come here, Karel?”

“I have nowhere else to go,” he told her, trying to conceal his true pathetic state, but it leaked out in the roughness of his voice and the pauses he took, the arms still around his own waist and his slight, flimsy sway. “Can I say something? I came to say something.”

Vesna gave him an unsteady nod, and the look of nausea on her face almost stopped Karel, but his need to confess overpowered all discomfort, for no discomfort was worse than not confessing.

He said, “Even after figuring out that you worked for the clinic, that you sold me out to Resnik, which is what happened, mind you, I still choose to believe in my own memories of you, to deny that they were all built on lies. I hate to think of a version of that first day in the courtyard, one where you’d already been briefed on who I was and were just waiting for the right time to intervene, pretending to garden, the curiosity all false. It can’t be like that, I told myself, still tell myself. There is truth in every story, I think. But maybe I should stop thinking that way. Maybe I only believe that because I loved you.”

Vesna looked away.

“Stop it, Karel, you’re just hurting yourself further.” She tried to be stern, but Karel heard in her a hint of bargaining, of pleading, which only strengthened as she continued. “If you want, I can give you some money, some of the money the clinic gave me, if that feels like justice to you. I can send you on your way wherever you need to go, back home maybe, and with enough for a little rent until you can find a job. It’s the least I owe you. And don’t love me, for Christ’s sake, Karel, I’m old enough to be your mother.”

Karel remembered then what he’d said into the empty room that night, felt that he had to say it into this room, too, the one with her in it. “I don’t care if you’re older than me. You’re not old. You’re definitely not old enough to be my mother. Your math’s all wrong.” He smiled sadly, shook his head, feeling all jumbled up. “No, I loved you. I really did. The things I felt, the things that happened to me in there, Vesna — you know, before we met, it’s hard to say now but I wanted to die, to sleep forever—” He stopped himself then, not wanting to come off desperate, like a man on the brink, but also because standing before him, Vesna had begun to cry and this almost spurred him to cry as well, made him taste the tears in his throat.

“Sorry, I don’t know,” he said, swallowing them, “How to say it, really. And don’t worry, I’ll live, Vesna, more out of spite than anything else. Somewhere, doing something. Probably not playing the violin. But when I was here, doing nothing, I felt you could see the truth of me, the good no one else saw but also the bad, which was sometimes so wretched, really, the mental hospital patient with the anorexia and the shaved head and the ruined life. I don’t know how you kept a straight face through it. Maybe because beneath all that, I was someone not so different from yourself, maybe even someone you thought about when you went home. The way I thought about you and your stories in that little room with only myself and what happened to me. But by

the end of our time together, there was something like a tomorrow, an after. A false one, but a tomorrow nonetheless, where I imagined we could maybe take care of one another after having survived all the sadness life dealt us, our similar, ordinary tragedies. And after I started thinking like that, everything became something I had to get through so I could sit under a stupid tree at the sanatorium inhaling your cigarette smoke. Even if none of it mattered, even if I was only hurting myself in a different way. I don't know. Or why I'm saying this. We all deserve to know the truth."

Vesna, wiping away her tears, said through them, "Karel, I'm sorry. Really, God, I'm sorry. I don't even know...I can't talk about this now. Someone important is coming soon to pick up the painting for an exhibition. I need to work." She grabbed a pen and tore a page from a notebook on the table and began to scribble. Only then did Karel become aware of the dizzying, dark room stacked to the gills with canvases and books and tables with dried paint on them, the whole thing reeking of turpentine and dust. "Here—" she handed him the paper, which he pocketed without looking. "It's my house. There's a key under the flowerpot in the backyard. Wait for me there. Please. We can talk about it later. I'll be home around —"

He interrupted her. "How does the story end?"

"What?"

"With Frederick of Pettau. I want to know."

Vesna tried to persuade him first with her bleary eyes then with a "Karel—"

But Karel said, "Tell me and I'll leave."

She sighed. She took off the apron, hung it on a hook on the wall. There were a few swivel stools in the room and she gestured for Karel to take one. She took one as well, and, her

voice still shaky, said:

After the death of Siegfried of Mahrenberg, Frederick defected to the Hapsburgs. By that point in his life, he was old, in his fifties. He had begun building Ormož with Rudolf of Habsburg's permission. She paused. Took a deep breath. Averted the gaze of the man sitting across from her but his stare forced hers. Ottokar and Rudolf had been friends, you know. They were both in the same Prussian crusade that caused all the discontent in the first place. Rudolf even named Königsberg, which he captured, after Ottokar. But the Empire was on the line, which was to say everything. Later, Rudolf denigrated and embarrassed Ottokar in front of his men. They went to war on the Marchfeld. It was a fitting end that Ottokar was slain by a different cousin of Siegfried of Mahrenberg. Frederick, as though to atone for cowardice, brought two-hundred men for Rudolf and as a result, Rudolf gave him Pettau as his to own outright, and Frederick truly believed that he had won, that his great generational task had been awarded to him. That he was free.

“But this was not true,” said Karel pointedly, and, mouth trembling Vesna said: “No. It was not. The Archbishop and the townspeople were both furious. They went to war against Frederick of Pettau and deposed him from his castle. The archbishop stripped him of his rights and fiefs, and condemned him in a court of his peers, a humiliating trial in which every wrong Frederick had ever committed was read back to him. After, Frederick was sent to Friedau — Ormož — to live in exile. For years he did so, quietly, sadly, his wife long-since gone, his children squabbling over their inheritance. He persuaded Rudolf to negotiate with the Archbishop on his behalf. Rudolf did so, and the Archbishop eventually forgave Frederick. But in the end, Frederick wound up where he had started at birth, which is to say, unfree. He died that

way too. That's the story. That's how it ends.”

Startling Vesna, Karel rose and hastily gathered his things. He looked at her one last time.

“I hate that story,” he said, and left.

Outside, he looked at the castle, which was across the street, small, whitewashed, made feckless from so many later accoutrements, no longer a threat to anyone, a fitting place for a great man to pity himself to death, he thought, turning his back to it, wandering instead under the faux-historic covered bridge into the town, taking note of all the buildings that he was finally seeing for the first time in spatial color, buildings he recognized from the photos in the field guide, and like the photos in the field guide, no one was in them. The town, in the middle of the afternoon, was empty of passersby, which gave his passage through it a kind of solipsistic succor. He knew which buildings were built in the seventies, which were done in the baroque versus classicist style, knew about the baron's house that was now a shoe store, the vicarage built by Hungarian noblemen that had been turned into a large house, the various monuments to socialism, now defaced, the careworn butcher, bank, and tailor holing up in the baby-blue, neatly bayed Tanzhoferjev Manor, the 14th — or was it 13th — century sweetly steepled parish church of St. Jacob, which he elected not to enter out of a kind of irreligious dignity, yes, he knew this town and all the buildings in it and all the things that had passed — including himself— through it.

He found a bank and exchanged his marks for dinars — seven dinars for each mark.

Finally his wandering took him down past the castle to the river, green in the summer sun. He stared at it for a while, trying to feel something profound but came up empty, and so he followed the river towards the train station, really a bench under a long, outstretched canopy, on which he



sat for hours remembering Vesna's father and the partisans and the mining that never happened, the foiled explosion, the history that had long since stopped, the cycles disrupted, the spirit exorcised, he thought, watching the train finally pull in, fat-nosed Brižita, yes, the spirit exorcised, stepping up into the cabin, buying a ticket from the conductor, taking a seat. He looked out the window at the rushing scenery and thought: Nothing will ever happen again.

## WRITER'S STATEMENT

The seed for this novella was sown a few years ago during the pandemic, when I was drafting social critical stories about people who had to do the most mindless jobs imaginable. I've been to Vienna several times and often experienced the strange, industrial nature of the tourist concerts there and was struck by the aggressive way they were marketed in St. Stephen's square, increasingly by immigrant workers. Owing to my long history as a classical musician, I'd wanted to write about a violinist who ended up doing those mindless, mediocre Vivaldi concerts every Sunday, but unable to develop the story further, I tabled the idea for quite a while.

Many factors combined to make this piece, which could probably be better executed as I am only beginning to write fiction, but which I maintain is at least very unique in its content. In 2022, I spent a day in Ormož covering the Tour of Slovenia as a journalist. The press room was in the Ptuj Ormož Regional Museum, a building which, along with the small town, left an indelible impression on me. The genesis of this project, the book *A Guide Through Ormož and Its Surroundings* is a real (albeit outdated) tour guide available at the museum. The guide does in fact have some errors, but having read the Slovenian version, these errors can be explained as translation errors, as the grammatical structures of Slovenian and English are very hard to reconcile with one another in certain aspects such as pronoun assignment to nouns. The book was published in 1998, after this novella takes place. The humiliating, Kafkaesque nightmare I suffered in order to secure a visa for cultural work in Europe also formed the backbone of this story. Additionally, the artist Sraka in Vesna's story is a fictional iteration of the midcentury Slovene-Yugoslav painter France Mihelič, another years-long fascination of mine.

In 2023, I was working on several attempts at a historical novel about the Lords of Ptuj, a project that remains unfinished. The character of Vesna arises out of that research combined with the influence of Hegel's *Reason in History* which I was reading in order to better understand feudalism within a broader historical trajectory as it related to the ministerials, which were class anomalies of the Holy Roman Empire, but specifically of Austria (see John B. Freed, *Noble Bondsmen*; Otto Brünner, *Land and Lordship*). The sources for the historical material in the novella include material from the permanent collection at Ptuj Castle, the extensive doctoral research of Martin Bele at the University of Maribor, and the work of medievalists John B. Freed and Hans Pirchegger. The part about Ormož during WWII is also based in historical fact, adapted from the Slovenian paper by Vladimir Trop "Ormož(ani) in 2. svetona vojna." I would like to thank Omar Asm for his help with translations from Slovenian.

The physical setting of the psychiatric hospital at Ormož was based off of descriptions of a very generous friend who spent some time there and allowed me to interview them

about it. (Obviously the hospital doesn't give tours to writers.) However, beyond the physical setting, the rest owes itself to memories of my own extensive dealings with psychologists (behind their two-way mirrors, which do not exist in Ormož to my knowledge) and a brief hospitalization endured as a teenager suffering from debilitating anxiety (hello barbiturates) and anorexia, an old and never fully-slain enemy of mine. However, the story, especially the parts about politics is highly fictional and, albeit not by the end, ironical. The work is a pastiche of different genres (sanatorium novel, crime fiction) and styles that eventually settle, as Karel gradually gets better, into rather ordinary sincerity in a contemporaneous mode. Aside from my friend Jan, who shows up as a violinist iteration of himself, all characters are from my imagination and, other than the qualities they may share with myself, are not based on real people.

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