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THE GAME OF
OPPOSITES



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THE GAME OF OPPOSITES

Norman Lebrecht



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In memoriam

Myriam (1932-2006)

It was May

*And all the blossoms burst forth;
Blue lilac spindles spread their fragrance.*

*May imposed itself on the land
And everyone touched freedom,
As a blind man, the face of a loved one.*

—Dagmar Hilarová, “Mai 1945”

FLIGHT

Chapter One

At four in the morning, an hour before the cement mixer is due, Paul creeps downstairs in woollen socks and pulls on his trousers in the wood-panelled tavern bar, the air heavy with the past night's conviviality. Fumbling past the silent coffee machine, a stair light winking off its curved steel wall, he brews himself a small black pot on the old crusted hob and sips the scalding bitterness through a rock-hard almond biscuit, the last of the batch that Alice baked for Easter. Crossing the room once more, he caresses the coffeemaker with trailing fingertips.

THE COFFEEMAKER was Paul's dearest possession, his defining object. He had picked it up "on the black" and trundled it for miles on the back of a jeep before unwrapping it in front of the twitter of village wives, his masculine perversity gratified by their shrieks of dismay. He had hoped the contraption would cause alarm, and it satisfied his wishes to the full. To the huddle of black bonnets around the bar, Paul's machine was a pulsing threat, a disruption to the natural order. There was no telling the harm it might do. A man in need of strong coffee after a hard night's lambing in the fields would be lured away from hearth and hob by this sibilant hussy. One sip, and a husband was lost. The ladies had read of such things in picture magazines and were not about to permit them in the village. "Take it away, landlord," shrieked the butcher's wife, "before I ask Father Hitzinger to denounce it this very Sunday."

It cost Paul three rounds of free tastings to convince the bonnets that his novelty was innocuous, its dainty servings so different from their kitchen dispensations as to pose no challenge to their domain. A real man, he explained, would always require a large dose of the handmade. His tiny shots of steam-pressed coffee were meant for visitors, for city people jaded by luxury and condemned to a vapid quest for extreme sensation, effete couples who came to the inn for cynically themed "country weekends." This machine was strictly for what Paul called "passing trade."

The ladies, receptive to slick assurances, flattered by his attention, and emboldened by the fierce extract that surged through their child-worn frames, turned bold and mildly flirtatious as people do when free drinks are being served. "It is a fine beverage, landlord," declared the market carrot seller with the comically jutting bosom. "It is hot and aromatic and rasping on the tongue, but it is not what we *around here* call coffee, oh no. Coffee is what we *grind* by hand, with the grime of our fingernails and a fleck of sweat from the brow. When you want *real* coffee, landlord, boiled through and through and served in a *man-sized* mug, just knock on my door and I will show you proper *coffee*."

"And if her gimpy old man is out in the fields," cackled a wrinkled head scarf at the fringe of the throng, "our Regina will show you plenty else besides."

"Shut your cesspit, Elsa," snapped the carrot woman. "The landlord is a Christian gentleman. He does not need to hear such filth. I apologise for the feeble *old lady*, landlord. This posh coffee of yours has gone straight to her head."

“‘Old?’” squeaked her antagonist. “She and I were in the same class at school. She’s got prolapsed womb and can’t stand up straight for arthritis. I’ll give her old....”

“Ladies, ladies,” soothed Paul, shepherding them to the door and bolting it when the last was gone, his plan fulfilled. Soon no man within miles would be unaware of his acquisition or incurious to see it in action, eager to sacrifice another slice of rural lore for the benefits of modern convenience.

As if in response to the women’s sensitivities, Paul hung a sign on the machine the next morning, saying that it was out of order, awaiting a vital part. For a whole month, it stood bare and idle on the bar top, like a villain in stocks on assizes day, an object of casual derision. Two days before its reinauguration, Paul posted a notice outside and took on extra hands behind the bar to cope with the anticipated rush. At the second unveiling of the miraculous steam machine, the Laughing Hind was packed so full with unfamiliar faces that its wooden beams seemed to bend outwards to accommodate them all. Rye farmers in mud-caked boots jostled lumberjacks from deep in the forest. Poachers were drawn from their traps and goatherds from vertiginous mountain huts. All converged to inspect a mechanical intruder which, rumour had it, was about to change a staple of their existence.

They rallied much as their great-grandparents had gathered a hundred years before to watch curls of smoke from the first locomotive, aware that the steady tread of their lives was under attack, that a man might no longer earn his keep from the shearing of sheep, as his womenfolk spun wool and his sons repaired the looms and shod the village horses. The puffing iron carriageway would render their rustic crafts redundant and all would be forced to work in dark factories while the land returned to wilderness and foxes copulated on the parents’ graves, as the priest of that day thundered from his pulpit. His gruesome fears proved, by God’s mercy, to be greatly exaggerated, thanks to a hostile gradient which even mountain folk found intractable and an absence of commercially extractable mineral resources. A century later, at the coming of the coffee machine, the nearest railway station was still hours away by winding road and the village existed much as it had done since legendary times. The surrounding slopes were coated in virgin oak, uncut by fire lanes. Crested eagles, the last of their species, nested balefully on craggy heights. Hyenas howled at night. Pagan rituals were whispered in forest glades. Ramblers, ornithologists, and election-year politicians who reached the village on a bone-rattling detour from their cardinal occupations marvelled at its remoteness. It was a place where no radio signal was received and a person could sit all afternoon in a beer garden without hearing so much as a cough or internal combustion. “Paradise it is,” sighed the Christian party cheerleader over his frothing beer jug. “The crucible of our civilisation,” agreed the contented Socialist candidate.

The villagers smiled thinly at these pitiful compliments, the perfumed words of city folk who could not milk a goat to save a dying child. What did their paper-white fingers know of the skin-cracking struggle to hack sustenance from hard rock, their fat bottoms of hoar frost at dawn in a December earth closet? Waiters who replenished their tankards and chambermaids who turned the corners of their eiderdowns knew the cost in quotidian brutality of a picture-postcard charm. They did not ooh and aah at the loveliness of a living thing before it was killed, stripped, and eaten, its bones crushed for manure, its offal fed to the chickens. Paul, stomping through blood pools big as duck ponds in his backyard, warned

his staff to mask their contempt for the visitors. Personally, he told them in a low voice, he would cheerfully suffocate townies who drooled at dinner over a dish they had photographed a couple of hours earlier frolicking in the field. Someday, he would frog-march their fat asses into a tour of the slaughterhouse before he admitted their hungry faces to the dining hall. "Good for you, landlord," chimed an ancient jug washer. "Come the millennium, we'll choke the parasites with their duck pillows and bury them in a compost heap."

Paul's righteous anger endeared him to the village as a man whose instincts were in the right place—who, although he came from "over there," was at heart one of them, a straightforward man who valued the simple life. They loved the landlord's colourful phrases so much more quotable than the priest's dull, repetitive homilies. *Drooled over a dish they had snapped an hour earlier in the field.* Now that's telling 'em: so apt, so true.

So when the first election came around after the war, the village voted overwhelmingly to elect Paul as mayor, in preference to official party candidates, confident that he held its interests at heart and could squeeze the ministries for permits and subsidies to support the rural heritage. Paul, from the day he arrived, had proved that he could work the mechanism of government the way a potter worked his wheel. He had time for every villager and limitless patience for those who, for one reason or other, lagged behind the growing prosperity. He was, both in smile and in deed, a caring and capable leader.

What the village did not see was the rage that welled within the landlord, now mayor, as he went about his duties. Every aperitif he poured for city guests, every souvenir walking stick he sold them brought up on a parallel screen in his mind's eye the same people being dragged out dead and broken from the rubble of an apartment block laid waste by aerial warfare. Try as he might, Paul could not block out visions of urban destruction. An inner voice assured him that it was only right and proper that buildings which had watched stone-faced as certain residents were selected for eviction and death should themselves be pulverised by high explosives falling from a starry sky. The nocturnal destruction of cities upon their inhabitants seemed to Paul a just and necessary punishment for their daylight indifference to murder. He hated the city, hated it as one who had witnessed its nameless cruelties. The village was his refuge from the city of his past.

But the village, haven that it was, was no less complicit in recent crimes. Where the city had turned a blind eye, the village had sat and watched a daily march of death from the top of the hill, through its main street, past the Laughing Hind, and down to the bedrock quarry. Paul had been one of the head-bowed marchers not that long ago. Forty minutes down in the morning, fifty-five up at night. In a village where no leaf falls unnoticed, every evil done was an evil known. Ignorance is impossible, innocence an untenable defence. The village had not been blind to murder as the city was; it had seen all and said nothing. The village must be made to pay for its impassivity. It merited retribution. Paul, now mayor, was in a position to inflict it.

He began to alter the landscape, to transform it beyond hope of recognition, so that grandsons and daughters in decades ahead should never reconcile the view that met their eyes with sepia photographs in family albums. Every defining feature was to be changed. Pasture would be turned into housing estates, primal lakes into parking lots. The washhouse would become an electric Laundromat, the smithy a gas station; the neighing of horses would

give way to a growling of jeeps. Paul ripped wooden frames out of gabled windows. He bricked over wells, kicked over earth walls, and enforced city laws on child labour that put family farms out of business. He imposed safety regulations on peasant handicrafts, condemning them to extinction. The village, unaware of his motives, danced beneath his fluorescent filaments in the light of an equinox moon.

Dismayed at the lack of resistance, needing some sign that his measures were causing pain, Paul pushed through a cross-valley merger of two villages which loathed each other with such historic fervour that girls from one could not marry men from the other without being branded harlots and driven from their homes. The plan aroused a ripple of opposition, all too easily overcome with bland promises. In a matter of months, two enmities were welded into a new town so anodyne that Paul named it New Town and filled its pre-fabricated houses with itinerants who smudged what remained of the indigenous character of the two villages and their connecting valley.

And still his rage burned white, perhaps because there was no-one to share it. Like a mad Roman emperor, Paul built a needless town on a high mountainside without anybody demanding to know why. His was a triumph made hollow by stealth. Paul had rewritten the map and torn up his workings. By suppressing his punitive intent, Paul succeeded in effacing not just the village but his driving role in its effacement. By the time he was done, people could barely describe the old washhouse and smithy, let alone remember who it was that had ordered their demolition. The history of Paul Miller, which a historian will one day struggle to uncover, is made the more poignant by his complete disappearance from the scene.

In future times, if drinkers at the Laughing Hind were asked for a symbol of Paul's rule as mayor, they would omit to mention the new roads he laid out, the centrally heated public housing, the cottage hospital, the school he furnished with an Olympic-length swimming pool, football pitches, a language laboratory, and all pedagogic aids. These amenities are all forgotten as, across the rims of trademarked beer glasses (no jugs or tankards anymore), one fellow points, with wavering fingers, at the emblem of Paul's glory, there on the half-marble bar top: the huffing, hissing, spitting coffee machine, the ultimate non-necessity. The machine, one of them points out, was the landlord's pride and joy, the last thing he touched on his short sojourn on this troubled earth, rest his dear soul.

What kind of man was he? the historian asks. Popular, they say. Just that? Yes, popular, a good man, well liked. Was he tall, short, fat, thin? On the thin side, not too tall. Hair? A bit thin, maybe. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"What became of him?"

"Shame, it was, terrible shame."

"What happened? Did any of you see anything?"

Heads shake, lids fall like blinds on watery eyes, and the drinkers lapse into a dialect so thick, it could be sewn as curtains. Paul's legacy has evanesced into nothingness, faded to white. *Popular* and *coffee* are all the historian gets for his beers, useless and inconsequential as an advertising slogan. Paul has made himself a nullity, the man who never was.

The small black pot stops its bobbling on the rickety hob. In the breathless silence, Paul takes his cue

to the sink, rinses it under the cold tap, and upends it on the draining board. Returning, he stops the coffee machine, bends at the knees, and plants a farewell kiss on its motherly mound. In pitch darkness, he feels for his jacket on the wooden coatrack, his boots in the porch, and, opening the front door with both hands to mute the squeaky hinge, pulls it shut behind him.

This is the hour that Paul knows best. Too late for owls, too soon for cockerels, it is the time when free men sleep and only slaves jump to attention.

PAUL WAS UP most nights at this hour, unable to shake off the habits of servitude. His eyes would snap open, his legs would swing over, and his feet would reach for the floor in a response—“Pavlovian,” he told Dr. Kovacs—that had been drilled into him before, in the life he had talked of to no-one, not even to Alice, who slept through his disturbances, her measured breathing beckoning him back to bed, her warm body to a merciful forgetfulness that he had longed for but could not embrace.

Paul resisted the comforts of love. He would stand night after night at the window, staring at the pane and beyond into a raven blackness that stretched from the crest of the hill where the camp had been, down the village street, past church and inn, and down to the quarry where men like him once slaved and died. Camp-inn-quarry. Quarry-inn-camp. The route had been drummed into his feet, tramped dawn and dusk, down and up, eyes to the unyielding ground, any upward glance an invitation to assisted suicide by means of a bullet in the back of the neck. He knew the Laughing Hind at first acquaintance by the number of paces, thirty-eight, that it took to cross its perimeter length, from stable to grinning shield, pickaxe on his shoulder, calluses swelling on his broken feet, killer dogs at his heels. He knew the inn by the clink of summer drinkers in its garden, their backs turned away from the march of the damned. He knew the Laughing Hind as a place he dared not look. He knew it as a religion denied.

And now he stood nightly on its topmost floor, ruler of all that lay beneath—the inn, the village, the whole goddamn valley. “Come to bed,” Alice would murmur from the depths of sleep. But Paul stood frozen at the window, his eyes tramping the old trajectory, camp-inn-quarry quarry-inn-camp, up and down, down and up, dawn and dusk. He stood and stared until he started to shake, trembling with cold and shame, rattling with worthlessness from head to toe. To settle his treacherous limbs, he crept down a flight of stairs to Johann’s room, the boy’s catarrhal sighs a slow assurance that some good had come of the shaming things his father had done, the hateful thing he had become. Johann was his refuge from the past, his hope of salvation, his *apologia pro vita sua*. Johann, his son.

They named him for a saint who baptised a saviour, or so Alice declared, genuflecting at the font. Paul had said nothing. He often said nothing so that he could listen to a soundless noise in his head. What he had heard at the font was his mother’s name, Johanna, a saint unknown to Alice or anyone else in his present life. Johann to Paul was short for Johanna. To Alice it was a name without burdens, for she knew nothing of his mother’s martyrdom.

Alice shortened the name as soon as the baby began to smile. “Jo-jo-jo,” she crooned, then “Hans-hans-hans.” The soft consonants sat better with her tune. Paul heard her sing “Hans-hans” over Sunday lunch. He clutched his throat as if he had swallowed a wasp and rushed

choking, from the room. "Hans," Alice was still singing when he returned, "Hans, hans, hans" Paul, in a firm tone, asked if she would not mind calling the baby by his full name. Alice declined. Such a sweet little thing—she would call him whatever she liked. She was his mother, wasn't she? Johann is his name, said Paul. We agreed on it. So what? snapped Alice.

The argument sputtered between them like an oil lamp, flaring intermittently. Alice could not understand why Paul reared in fury at what was, for heaven's sake, a sound as common as Kurt, Karl, Klaus, Heinz, Franz, or Paul itself. Paul, flustered, said it was a question of taste; her stub of a name was inadequate for their beautiful boy. Johann was a dignified name, one he could wear with pride. Alice replied that Johann was fine for a man but pompous for a boy; he would get teased for it at school. Hans would do for the time being. Paul fled the table once more, hand to mouth. *Hans*, an exhalation that ended in a serpentine hiss, the sound a rabbit made when you snapped its neck, was an evil noise. It made his flesh crawl, his feet twitch in terror.

The next time he complained, Alice blew up. "What's the matter with you? What in hell is wrong with Hans?" she yelled, and Paul, doubled up in an agony of confusion, fled outdoors into the chirruping night, hurtling down the hill to the valley of the dead. It had to stop, her Hans calling; he had to make it stop. There would be more bodies in the quarry if she didn't stop. What was he to do?

He considered taking Alice into his confidence, including her in his abhorrence of the name by telling her all about Hans and the things he had done. But even as he contemplated letting his openness into their marriage, he knew that the past lay beyond its beyond a love that began at the zero hour and must never look back. He could not change their rules of engagement by exposing Alice to an unforgiven past. He cared too much for her to make Alice choose between then and now, between her village and her man. And if she were forced to make that choice, he was not altogether sure which way she would turn. He was trapped in the silence of their pact, unable to reach out, or to retreat.

It fell to Alice to make a conciliatory move, taking his right hand between her lips in bite and biting the fleshy mound beneath the thumb, a prelude to love. Alice was wise, as country girls are, in treating male distress with the elixir of sex. She would not allow a domestic quarrel to fester overnight. Paul was just as keen to make up, but he needed to resolve his feelings in words before plunging into love. Alice, yawning, rolled over and fell asleep before his statement was finished, leaving Paul stranded and alone. At his next session with Dr. Kovacs, he avoided any mention of the name row until he got stuck in one of those interminable silences that are supposed, according to the theory, to bring out buried truths.

"You had a convulsive reaction when she used the name Hans?" asked the therapist.

"Correct."

"Coughing, retching, shortness of breath?"

"Correct."

"It sounds like a conditioned response."

"Meaning?"

"The name provokes a reaction; it's cause and effect."

"I have explained the cause."

"Indeed you have. But you react only when the name Hans is attached to your son. You do not convulse, I think, when Alice mentions Hans the plumber, Hans the goatherd. Hans the village half-wit. Why do you think that is?"

"The others mean nothing to me. I cannot let my son bear an evil name."

"What if it is not evil?"

"What do you mean?"

"One person never sees the whole picture. You experienced a series of incidents over a certain period. You blame your suffering on a man you called Hans. But what if this Hans is no worse in relative conduct than, say, Hans the plumber?"

"That's ridiculous. Hans the plumber repairs taps and toilets. The Hans I knew killed me for pleasure."

"What if he were not responsible?"

"He was mad, you mean?"

"Or acting under orders."

"That's no excuse."

"It might be to Hans."

"Are you asking me to understand him? Is that what I come here for?" cried Paul, rising from his seat.

"Let's agree that Hans is evil incarnate," said Kovacs, unmoved.

"Fine," said Paul, sitting down.

"Nobody is worse than Hans."

"Correct."

"How about someone who helped him?"

"Bad, but not worse."

"Someone who encouraged him?"

"Likewise."

"Someone who might have stopped him? Who could have stopped him to save lives?"

A fit of coughing propelled Paul out of his chair and left him in a gasping huddle on the floor in a far corner of the room. "I think that's enough to be getting on with," said the doctor, scribbling a note and blotting the ink with exaggerated care on his pad.

Most nights when Paul came home from the analyst, he liked to make love to his wife, who was generally willing. The release numbed him into a sleep that ran through until morning, leaving him to think that the therapy was doing him some good. On this occasion, though, he slept no longer than an hour before his feet hit the floor and he was back at the blackboard window, running the shrinks question over and over in his head. What if Hans was not the worst? Who could be more culpable than Hans? A man who might have stopped him and didn't. Who should have chased him, caught him, brought him to justice. Someone who shielded him behind a false name. Now who might that be? Who let Hans get away? Who

stayed on in this valley of the shadow of death as if nothing had happened? Who let Hans live? What kind of monster? Why, there he is, staring at you out of the windowpane, the most evil man alive.

Paul glared at his image until it blurred. Then he began to shake as he never shook before. The tremors did not stop until he swore, on Johanna's sainted memory, to put an end to Hans. He would deal with Hans without delay and regardless of risk, even if it cost him Alice and his son, along with the sham of his second life, as mayor of the idyllic village.

Chapter Two

HANS WAS the commandant's name; everybody knew that. They knew it by rumour, by inference, from overheard snatches of guard conversation. The prisoners relied on such scraps, since names were prohibited items, punishable by death. Guards were addressed by rank and never looked in the eye. Prisoners, heads bowed, caps off, hands behind back, said Yes-Corporal, No-Corporal, Right away-Corporal. To identify themselves, they shouted out a number, the one tattooed on their left arm, below the elbow. They had this in common with guards and prisoners: the absence of names.

Anonymity was the guards' insurance against a day of reckoning, when those who survived would come in search of vengeance. The guards knew the war was going badly, that the end was near. The prisoners, sensing their fear, called it hope and collected curriculum vitae. They eavesdropped on guards and filched letters from wastepaper bins. A market was created in personal data. Marezek, the comrades' boss, paid for a guard's birthplace in bread and tobacco. Finkel, the romantic nationalist, offered his morning soup for a date of birth. Milman, the dissident pastor, promised eternal life for an addressed envelope. In the long, low huts where the prisoners slept and no guard dared to brave the stench, men from every land of occupation jigsawed together profiles of oppressors, reclaiming invisible identities.

A bowl of soup, equivalent to a day's strength, was weighed against the risk entailed in obtaining a name, and the risk was mortal. Paul had seen a man flayed to pulp across a stone bench for shouting "Hans is coming!" and another shot on the spot for having a guard's name written on his palm. Among the offences that could cost a man his life, the possession of a name ranked with attempted escape. The rules were enforced by the shadow they knew of Hans. Shorter than most of his inmates, bristle-headed in a knee-length leather coat that made him seem shorter still, Hans walked with a limp that rumour ascribed to a war wound. He walked alone, unescorted, inviolable, unforeseen. On summer nights, he would sharp-shoot men from his upper window and call the dogs to finish them off; in winter, he patrolled the camp on silent snowshoes, heaving any curfew breaker into a water barrel and leaving the poor wretch to freeze overnight. Hans was the law in camp, a law unto himself.

"He, too, will hang," growled Marezek in Paul's ear as, eyes to the front, they stood on the parade ground, watching Finkel swing on the gallows for some hapless misdemeanour. "You can help us, Paul. Get us addresses, his family, friends. The people's security bureau will do the rest, when the day comes."

Paul was what was known as a privileged prisoner. He did not hack rocks. A lucky choice of vocation allowed him to spend much of the quarry day in a cabin, designing an underground storage system for the wonder weapon that was going to help Hans win the war. The tunnel he was drawing and revising would house the weapon in specified conditions of temperature and humidity, to avoid spontaneous combustion. So long as Hans needed Paul's skills to perfect the silo, Paul could expect to live. He would have liked to drag out the project with minor errors and slow-motion working, but errors when discovered were

punishable with death, and Hans, across the cabin, kept a corner of his eye on Paul, barking out a threat if he suspected a slackening of effort. Much of the time, Paul just drew and drew, aiming to turn himself into backdrop, a beat-up sofa in the far corner of the cabin. Much of the time, he succeeded.

He, alone among the prisoners, got close to Hans—close enough to kill him. The opportunity arose every day when, after lunch, the commandant took a snooze at his desk. Paul, had he been so minded, could have taken the knife from Hans's tray and plunged it into his throat. It would have got him beaten to death by a rush of guards, but fellow prisoners were urging him to do it. Killing Hans, preached Pastor Milman, would delay the wonder weapon and save many lives. At the next hanging, Marezek attacked Paul. "It's your fault," he hissed; "you could have stopped that." Paul, though, was no hero. His emaciated stick of an arm was, he told himself, too weak to carry out an assassination, and his sacrifice would, in any case, not hold back the war effort. Another Hans would see it through; there would never be another Paul.

Each cabin day as he faded into furniture, hope grew in Paul's heart that he might outlive the camp. Hans was his ticket to a future life; he was not going to jeopardise that chance with a reckless gesture. He would rather be alive than an honour plaque on the wall of his university dining hall. He kept his head down and his arm busy on paper, raising neither until Hans was gone from the cabin and he was alone.

One such rainy afternoon, while Hans was taking a party of army brass around the site, Paul exploited his solitude to stare out of the streaked window at a chain gang, soaked to the skin, lugging sledloads of slate into the mouth of the unfinished tunnel. A river flowed at the foot of the gorge. The opposite slope was decked in primal foliage, old as the universe. On the near side, the incline was slashed white by a quarry, disfigured for all time to come. Paul tried to find a moral in that stark contrast, but his brain had lost all power for philosophy.

Sliding off his chair, he sidled across to the commandant's desk, keen to see how Hans organised his work. The desk was organised along conventional lines, two piles on either side for incoming and outgoing mail and a folio-size blotting pad dead centre to absorb surplus ink on the authorising signature. On top of the outgoing pile was a cardboard personnel file, of the stationery-shop kind to be found in any firm that employed more than a dozen staff. Paul tried to read the name on the cover but could not decipher it because a wristwatch had been left across the dossier, a semi-precious Swiss job—a Tissot, by the look of it.

Paul used to own a Tissot, a thirteenth-birthday gift from his mother. He had lost it at the strip-down parade on entering the camp. Paul had cherished his watch, winding it up late every thing at night, checking as he awoke that it was on the bedpost, where he had left it. His Tissot had no numerals, the hours faintly indented at its perimeter, a delicate suggestion of the slippage of time.

Hans's watch was meatier, more manly, with a heavily scratched glass cover that left only the hands visible and a steak-thick leather strap, criss-crossed in a runic pattern. It was worth more than a man's life to touch that timepiece, but temptation drew him closer and closer. Cocking an ear for approaching footsteps, Paul took the watch in his palm and tested its heft as a prospective customer might in a jeweller's shop. It made him feel powerful, holding Hans's watch, and at the same time contaminated. He put the watch down with a shudder.

and as he did so, the name on the file leapt to his eyes in the twenty watts of an overhanging lightbulb.

“Hannes Joachim Kerner,” it said. Not Hans, but Hannes—more Nordic and esoteric than Hans, possibly snobbed up to give an illusion of aristocracy. And there was a surname as well, a priceless find. Paul’s heart hammered a tattoo of terror on his ribs. He had unlocked the secret of secrets, the name which, after the war, would be the hanging of Hans. His cheeks swelled. Chilled as he was by fear of getting caught, he knew that his life, short or lasting as it might be, would never be the same again. The knowledge beneath his fingertips had ended his slavery, his state of impassivity. Paul was a free man once more, free to make decisions and determine a course of action.

Aware that he could be suddenly disturbed, he skim-read the dossier, taking in cogent phrases, discarding detail. Unfit for active service, said an army discharge certificate for Hannes Kerner. Reason: left leg and lung weakened by infantile poliomyelitis (so, not a war wound after all). Hero of the Great Struggle, proclaimed a Party commendation, rubber-stamped with famous signatures that ran all the way up to the top. A glossy photograph showed Hannes saluting the leader, man-to-man, at a mass investiture beneath sky-high light columns.

The ensuing pages squirmed with intimacies, an orgy of information. A set of divorce papers (domestic violence cited), reports from a state children’s home on a mentally retarded child, a police record (assault on two boys, case quashed by a Party tribunal), the map of a bifurcated farm and—what’s this?—a ministerial order to subsidise the owner in feed and seed. All was laid out before Paul’s incredulous eyes.

The land deeds were meat and drink to a man of Paul’s profession. They showed that Hannes owned one tract around the quarry (a paternal legacy) and another (on his mother’s side) on the crest of the hill, in a forest clearing. Both were wretchedly infertile, yielding by way of income little more than their cost in tax. It did not take much for Paul to work out that Hannes had persuaded his Party pals to lease his useless legacy—the quarry site for tunnel, the hilltop for a labour camp. This was, by any measure, a brilliant deal. In exchange for uncultivable land, Kerner acquired wealth and power. He was not only commandant of the labour camp but owner of all within, free to do as he pleased—so long as he delivered in the tunnel on time and on budget.

A welter of correspondence described the recruitment of guards at convalescent homes for wounded soldiers. Prisoners came from the state agency for conscripted labour, purchased by the truckload for a few coins a head. Replacement orders for “breakages” and “wasteful disposal” revealed the death rates, 96 one month, 142 the next. The euphemisms reminded Paul of collusions back home, where his uncle, a master of palm greasing, was the middleman in grubby deals between lazy landowners and underpaid municipal officials. It pleased Paul to find graft and corruption flourishing at the summits of a regime that trumpeted a ruthless purity. It signified structural weakness, a portent of downfall.

Listening for footsteps, hearing nothing but the patter of rain on the cabin roof, Paul flipped back through the file, searching for something he might have missed. He worried that the material was too clear-cut, too one-dimensional. Could it be a hoax? Was Paul being set up? Was someone, a mutinous guard perhaps, trying to plant false rumours about Hans? Had hunger unhinged Paul’s critical mind? He reread the dossier, cover to cover. The leader saluted

was no fake. The deeds confirmed that Hans had friends on high. It did not matter how the file had come to be left on the desk. What mattered was that Paul had the facts of Hans's life in his trembling hands and the opportunity to use them to incalculable personal advantage.

Shutting the dossier, replacing the Tissot across it, Paul scuttled back to his desk to reroute a service lane in short, brisk strokes, consigning to memory by whispered repetition every salient fact from the file, eager to get out of the cabin before the commandant remembered what he had left on his desk. The sketch done, he delivered it in teeming rain to Hans, who taking the paper scroll in one hand, cuffed Paul with the other across the skull, the blow rendered painless by practised anticipation. In the dance of slave and master, the slave was choreographer.

That night, scratching a louse bite in his bunk, Paul silently recapitulated his findings. First names first: not Hans but Hannes, a limp suffix, a dragged leg, a sigh, and a lisp. The supererogatory syllable softened the man's dread. This was not so much a mad beast as a harassed contractor running a delayed operation with a disloyal team. In different circumstances, Paul might have felt a tweak of sympathy for the project manager.

It was a tough job, construction, with no second chance. He was almost inclined to offer the commandant expert advice, when emptiness gnawed at his organs and he remembered who was who in this situation, he and murderous Hans.

The file, he knew, could feed him for months. Bread from Marezek and soup from Finkelstein. People. Loaves of fresh bread, great tureens of soup. He could taste them on the tip of his tongue, feel them slip down his throat in gulps and into his concave stomach. Craving howled at him, as an infant screams for the breast. He would do anything to placate those needs, anything except put his life at risk. That stopped him short. With the acuity of an actuary, he calculated his chances and rated them low. If Hans's real name got into circulation, it would be swiftly traced to the source. There were traitors in the camp, known as *shtinkers*, who would sell their own brothers for a slice of liver sausage. Hans would remember leaving the dossier on his desk and have Paul dragged to his dungeon. It was more than Paul's life was worth to share the information, much as he desired the nourishment, the prestige, and the solidarity that would be his in exchange. He would have to keep the Hannes name to himself.

Feeling guilty at letting the others down, Paul convinced himself that it was not in their interest to know the truth. Hans was the name they had pinned on an enemy. Any other name would confuse starved minds, sap resistance, and deplete the will to live. Paul, empowered by knowledge, felt that he was responsible for upholding camp morale, for reinforcing the bonds between men, founded though they were on myth and misapprehension. The things the other men shared—the Hans name, the common dread—these things were worth more to the human spirit than actual fact. Regret it though he might, he would not divulge the contents of the dossier.

That decision set Paul apart from his fellow sufferers. He owned fact; they indulged in fantasy. He had light; they fumbled in murk. "Hans will hang" was Marezek's daily mantra. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," chanted the Professor at dawn ablutions. "A life for a life," preached Milman. "Hans's for ours."

"Kill him it today!" hissed Marezek as Hans, not long before the end, stamped on the

pastor's fingers that clung to the cliff edge of the quarry. That night, Paul had a dream. As a boy his mother had taken him every Friday to a fleapit to see none-too-recent American film on an old projector that kept breaking down, either stopping in mid-frame or screwing the image to one side so that faces were lengthened and half the screen was left blank. Paul was more delighted by the breakdowns than by the silly plots, imagined that an unseen story was being told on the empty half of the screen. He could see the story inside his head and hear the salient voices. It was his private movie world and it came to his rescue many times when he got into trouble at school or work and he would stop the reality reel and run his personal version instead. The trick came in handy on the parade ground when men were hanged and he could see them bright and laughing in a different state of being, on the other half of the screen.

On the night of Milman's murder, Paul harked back to a Harold Lloyd movie he had seen with his mother, where the hero was clinging to the arms of a giant clock at the top of a skyscraper. On the other screen, he saw Hans and himself hanging from opposite arms of an outsized Tissot. Paul was dangling from the hour arm at nine o'clock, ticking upwards second by second towards the apex of noon, from where he could scramble onto the safety of a roof. Hans was on the long arm, heading for a perpendicular abyss at the stroke of the half-hour. Paul knew that he must hold himself at the opposite extreme from Hans. He must be as far from Hans as it was possible to be if he wanted to escape. He must not be like Hans in any way, or he was doomed. If Hans scowled, Paul must smile. If Hans ate, Paul must starve. If Hans killed, Paul must renounce killing now and for evermore. He must be the opposite of Hans.

Paul awoke next morning with more clarity of mind than he had known in months. He understood that if he killed, he would become Hans; therefore, *he must not kill*. Let Marezek rage and the Professor sulk. If he wanted to be Paul, *he must not kill*. Dawn after dawn, he repeated that rule to himself amid the vengeance chants, smiling not so much with morose superiority as with an iron sense of purpose. He knew what he must not do.

And when the day of freedom broke, when prisoners awoke and found the watchtower unmanned and the double gates creaking in the wind, Paul stayed alone in his bunk. Marezek and the Professor led a pack of avengers on the guards' accommodation block. Striped skeletons chased ghosts with self-made knives and shards of stone, ransacked beds that had been warm an hour before. All they found was Hans's idiot valet, asleep in his iron cot, a teddy bear on his pillow. They bludgeoned him to death anyway and surged on to the food stores, which gaped empty, every last can removed in the guards' retreat. Exhausted prisoners pounded bleeding fists on cupboard doors and howled at the sky. Fights broke out over a sack of turd-like potatoes found in a scullery. Marezek, firing the valet's pistol, claimed the turds for "the people's pantry." Chaos mingled with misery at the dawn of liberation.

"What now?" said Paul when the Professor crawled back into the bunk they shared, panting with exertion.

"Now nothing," said the thwarted avenger.

"Are we liberated?"

"No, but close," cried Marezek. "I heard artillery fire."

“Shall we go out to meet them?”

“Who cares?” said the Professor, his pale cranium shining in spring light.

They called him “Professor,” though he was no more than a lab assistant from a Balkan capital. Mircea Vitse, his name was, or so it had said on the clipboard when the men in black arrived with a conscription list for voluntary labour.

“But I didn’t volunteer,” Vitse had protested. “There must be some mistake.”

“No mistake,” said the chief thug. “The penalty for not volunteering is five years in labour camp. You’re sentenced. Get moving.”

Paul was seized that same day in a different country, frog-marched out of his uncle’s office and pummelled onto an open-topped truck. He did not protest, accepting his fate as if it were self-inflicted. They met, Paul and the Professor, on a forced march uphill from the quarry, brandishing ironic banter as whips snapped at their legs.

“You’re designing an escape chute,” quipped the Professor.

“No, I’m helping them dig to invade Australia,” laughed Paul. “What’s your job?”

“I’m supposed to curate the weapon that will bring victory. But their scientists haven’t managed to mix the right potion without fritzing their balls, so for the time being I am compiling temperature charts for elements of the periodic table.”

“The weapon, will it combust?” asked Paul, thinking of wall thickness and foundation depths.

“It is more likely to bring us out in boils,” smiled the Professor. “The devil’s spawn are experimenting with a bubonic plague virus, among other mediaeval reversions.”

While the two friends made deskbound calculations, others carved slate for the silo. The rock-face work was murderous. Men dropped from heat, cold, and hunger. There were frequent avalanches. The guards veered from bullying to a playfulness that was even more dangerous. A man accused of slow working was made to carry a full load of slate to the cliff top, where, harried by dogs, he jumped or fell. Hans turned this torture into sport. Two men would jump together while the guards laid bets on which would land first, and whether on his feet or head. “Skydiving,” it was called. The other prisoners, summoned to watch, welcomed the respite from hacking and stacking. Three rounds of skydiving could take an hour out of the unending day and tire out the savage dogs.

The dead were carried at close of day in sombre quickstep, quarry-inn-camp, up the road past the Laughing Hind, the church, the shops, to the lime pit outside the camp, where each corpse was lifted up to have its arm number ticked off a list, then tipped into the mass grave. The living were counted through the gates one by one and made to stand on parade for an hour or two while they were counted once again for Hans’s meticulous bookkeeping. Roll-call gave Paul the time to map his surroundings. The camp was built as a set of squares. Four blocks of service units—kitchen, sickbay, storerooms, torture cells—enclosed the parade ground. Row upon row of prisoner barracks made up the next square, itself surrounded by the guards’ block and its herbaceous borders, which presented a respectable façade to passersby, unlikely as anyone was to pass so far off the forest path in violation of the KEEP OUT notice.

In the last months of war, when the roads were bomb-cratered and dead workers could not

be replaced, the skydiving stopped. So did Paul's cabin privileges as every last prisoner was hurled into a frantic effort to finish the tunnel. "I'm glad I volunteered," coughed the Professor through a lungful of slate dust. "I should hate to have to perform such unpleasant work under duress."

"It will provide research for your doctorate." Paul grimaced.

"I have no wish to be doctored."

"They will make you rector of the academy when you get home."

"My dear Pavlov," said the Professor, "has anyone told you that you are full of shit?"

"Pavlov" was the Professor's name for Paul.

"Why Pavlov?" Paul demanded.

"After the Soviet scientist who made his dogs salivate as he withheld their food."

"Am I withholding something?"

"You know what you know."

"What does that mean?"

"You play your own game. You stand apart and observe us like laboratory rats."

Paul had met the Professor's type before, clever, bitter men who by reason of poverty or personality faults had failed to attain a good degree and earned a pittance in white coats as scientific auxiliaries, despising men of lesser minds who were addressed as "Doctor." The Professor was a mass of resentments, a man of preposterous self-esteem who always used long words where short would do. At university, he would have been an impossible colleague; in camp, he was life itself. Many times that perishing last winter, he saved Paul from collapse at the quarry face. He taught him to save energy by bedding his sled with bracken to make the guards think it was full. "Minimum effort, minimum, minimum," he mumbled. "Three centimetres," he chimed on the evening march. "Don't lift your feet higher than you save strength."

Paul repaid his friend with grateful deference. He may have outranked the Professor in academic qualifications, but the bald technician had vital life skills, garnished with a rare gift of irony. Each night in their upper tier, the two men broke bread on a spread handkerchief, pretending they were dining at a gourmet restaurant.

"May I replenish your water glass, Professor?"

"Thank you, Pavlov. Another morsel of this delicious baguette?"

"I'm quite full, thank you."

Other inmates crowded round for a front-row view of the comedy. They were a pair, Paul and the Professor, and their antics provided an illusion of normality. After the tablecloth was folded away, each crumb lifted off with a damp finger and placed on lips to avoid waste, the Professor would sit in his corner, honing a knife, while Paul held open surgery at the edge of the bunk. Word had got around that Paul held two anomalous doctorates, in psychology and architecture, and prisoners looked to him for help and advice. Tamas, the brawny Hungarian, commissioned him for a fistful of vegetable peelings to design an extension to his father's brewery. Angelo wanted to learn how to reproduce a drawing of two naked nymphs he had

seen in the Uffizi Gallery back home. Twenty-year-old Janko confided that he felt sexual attracted to men. Vremi, from the Ukraine, feared his foot rot was turning gangrenous. The Professor himself, blade in hand, asked Paul, once the last of his clients had gone, what he ought to do about a little domestic problem, a flat-chested, pasty-faced year-two biochemist student with whom he had shared a stairway closet during a militia raid, an encounter which resulted in an unintended pregnancy, the consequence (he complained) of his partner's previous inexperience and lack of precautions.

Benignly and with serene patience, Paul addressed each request on merit. For Tamas, he knocked up a lean-to with storage for hundred-litre barrels. For Angelo and anyone else who cared to attend, he gave a Sunday-morning class in life drawing. Janko he told not to worry, saying he would lust once more for big breasts the day he left the camp. Vremi's wound, he lanced with the Professor's tool, drawing out the pus and bandaging it with the dinner-table handkerchief. The Professor, he congratulated on becoming a father, even with such an unappealing a mate as the virgin biochemist.

"What am I to do about the child?" fretted the Professor.

"First, get out of here alive," said Paul. "The rest will fall into place. You may find when you get home that motherhood has turned the girl into a Mona Lisa and you won't believe your luck in landing such a beauty."

"I've never had any luck worth believing," grumbled the Professor.

"You have a child."

"I never wanted one."

Paul changed the subject, wary of giving offence. His alliance with the Professor was founded on mutual need and respectful distance. "Like frock-coated diplomats in a cannibal kingdom," in the Professor's creative allegory, they maintained a pretence of civilised conduct in the narrow bunk. Feet to face they slept, an intolerable proximity. Each morning they congratulated each other on being one day closer to the glory of a single bed.

"What now?" said Paul as the Professor rose from his shroud of liberation gloom.

"We wait," said the Professor.

"How long?" cried Tamas. "There's nothing to eat. If we are not out of here in a day or two, we're dead."

"What do you suggest, dear Pavlov?"

"Why don't we get out and forage, go down to the village and knock on doors for food," Paul suggested.

"Are you crazy?" said Janko from the bunk below. "Do you think farmwives will give you eggs and milk and a bed to sleep in? They'll shoot the first of us that opens a gate and set the dogs on the rest."

"And who's to say that Hans isn't out there, sitting in the forest with a bottle of schnapps and a rat-a-tat machine gun?" rumbled Vremi. "We're best off staying here. The liberators can't be far. That rumbling is cannon fire, not thunder."

A hush fell upon the bunkhouse as men wrestled with unaccustomed freedoms of decision. The Hungarians were all for getting out without delay, but Paul urged them to listen to

Janko, who, in his market town before the war, saw urchins stone a stray Gypsy child to death. If there was one thing that united peasants of the world in ways that Karl Marx had not foreseen or Marezek could admit, it was xenophobia. Men in camp stripes could expect no favours from country folk who had buried their heads until now in beer mugs as the death march passed through their village.

“Janko’s right,” said Paul. “Let’s wait. If no help arrives by daybreak, we’ll go out and beg.” That night, the men talked in the future positive, a forgotten tense. Janko wept at the thought of embracing his widowed mother. Angelo described his plans for reunion with Renata, up in the hills with partisans. He wished he could show them a photograph of his lovely fiancée; instead, he circulated a naked drawing he had made under Paul’s tutelage, expatiating on her pale olive complexion, her oval black eyes, her classical contours, and his vociferous enthusiasm for the act of love beneath the naked sky, a description that Paul interpreted as a generous effort to distract his friends from racking hunger, impotence, and the fear of morning.

Andras and Tamas keened a ballad of Balkan treachery in the centre of the hut. Marek, the Pole, ruminated aloud on car repairs. Dragan, the Serb, filed his spoon handle to a lethal point. Nils, the Norwegian, sat still at the door as a fisherman beside an ice hole. The hut was a united continent of the dispossessed.

“What about you, my Leonardo?” piped Angelo, addressing his art teacher. “What will you do?”

Paul had no home, no plans, no-one to see.

“Where will you go?” pressed Janko.

“Canada, maybe. There is a cousin in Vancouver, on my mother’s side....”

“It’s a land of plenty,” said a disembodied voice.

“Plenty cold,” said the Professor, and a shiver gripped cadaverous men beneath the sketchy blankets.

“Who will go out first tomorrow?” asked Angelo.

“Let’s draw lots,” proposed the Professor. “No point all of us getting shot together.”

“One man,” said Marezek, “the most presentable, should scout the area and bring back what he can. When the rest have eaten, we’ll make a second sortie.”

“Any volunteers?”

“Might as well be me,” said Paul. “I speak the language and I have the least to lose.”

“Let’s sleep on it.” The Professor yawned. Consensus settled on the blockhouse night, the last that Paul would endure.

A full hour ahead of dawn, he was up by force of habit, rushing out for roll-call before he remembered that the counting was over, the counters gone. He lingered at the wash table alone beneath the diamond stars, buttoning his jacket to the throat against the cold. Returning to the hut, he felt Janko’s eyes upon him from the bunk below.

“I’ll go with you,” whispered the young man.

“Better not, safer on my own.”

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