

Silvester Lavrik The Gilded Red Cage

Part I. Blind Love

Here I am, Love. Everything is exactly the way you wanted it. I guess. Maybe. There's no one left in the bar. You know the owner would do anything for me. God knows he's invested enough in me, and in my eyes. No. It should be different. One more time.

Here I come. A young woman. Me. I'm carrying a bucket of champagne on ice. And two glasses. On the counter there's a beautiful purse. It's mine. I always wanted this kind of purse. Always. A recorder. I know, there's a more intelligent word for it, but I don't think it will be offended. I'll put it here...is it recording? Yeah, it's working.

If only my puppies could see me now, they wouldn't recognize me. I don't even recognize myself. I have a tattoo – here, on my shoulder. I didn't think about it today when I decided to wear this sleeveless dress. Mainly I didn't think about it when I decided to have it done. I have another one, but I won't say where. That woman in all these mirrors is me. This is what I look like. My name is Hana. Hanichka. Brown eyes. They look around and they see. A strange feeling. I close them and I know who is here. I open them – and suddenly it feels like it's somebody else. But this is a pretty woman. You have good taste, Love. And you taught me to drink champagne too, Love. Cheers!!

I'm so happy that I don't see you, Love. Should I go underground, he asked me. What are you talking about, you'd never do it anyway. Be clear now. No, you don't have to. No need....because I know how. I never doubted that. A kiss to you, Love. He calls me Love. I call him the same. When I'm having a good day. Or a good morning. Blood-red. What kind of morning is that – blood-red? Will you think about it, Love? Yeah, I'll think about it. Love. That's how he trains me. I only know bloody hellish mornings, not blood-red ones. That's it! I'll beat you bloody. Ooooh, so far, I've only ever had a few pathetic slaps. You're the best! You see – I try, I do what I can. That's how he teased me. Then suddenly he got serious. But jokes aside, he wrote. Have you ever really been hit by a man, Love? Yeah, I've been slapped around a few times. But I didn't feel like a victim of violence, more like a victim of his desperation. Who was it? Do you really need to know? I don't need to, I want to. It was Alte. Can we not talk about him? OK, Love, pas de probleme. I was dying to say everything, absolutely everything, but I couldn't get it out. Or I guess I couldn't. He finally got it all out of me. He was an unbelievable agent. With his little comments like “you're not serious”, he finally got everything he wanted out of me. And I wrote that to him. Yes, I'm an agent. I have an agency that's sending you kisses everywhere he hit you. Keep kissing...I'm already on your neck. I wish you were here. And you could take me out somewhere. Neck included. I'm coming. Your neck will get to go out, agreed. And I want to have sex with you too. At least once a month. I'm a big girl now, you know? OK, I'll make a note of it. Sex in public, once a month. DON'T LOSE THAT DATEBOOK THEN, I wrote back immediately. I was basically never joking. But he couldn't know that. How are men supposed to know that a woman is only pretending to have a sense of humor? When a woman is in love, she hangs on a man's every word and all she can do is listen hard so that not one word her Love says gets away. She doesn't hear the words, only the melody of his voice. As long as it gives her butterflies in her stomach, a man can say whatever he wants and the woman will listen. She'll just let him go on and on and on We usually wrote to each other. So I could only imagine the sound of his voice. Which totally pissed me off. So we always argued. I wanted to tell him that I was longing for him, not only with my heart, head or pussy, but my whole being, the whole, whole Hana, the one living behind the eyes, behind those brown eyes that he likes so much, but I only wrote – SO DON'T LOSE THAT DATEBOOK!! If computers had dynamic keyboards, like a piano, my answer would've blasted him like a fog horn. OK, I won't lose it, he wrote. I'll trust you then. Yes! Finally! How simple it is suddenly. And beautiful! You going out to save the world, Love? Yeah just a bit, Love.

Our whole relationship was just correspondence. Yeah, relationship. What else could I call it? Once we slept together, once he bought me cigarettes, and twice we went out for coffee. When I dared to call him on it, he

said he still regretted buying those cigarettes. And the rest? Love, I'm not in the mood to take inventory. But I am...I want to know! I bugged him so much, he wrote back that he'd rather fuck me somewhere in a public bathroom and forget me, then get stuck with me. I didn't know what to answer. So I didn't write back. And I erased that horrible answer of his. From the e-mail trash too. If someone told me I could erase him from my head by just deleting, resetting and reformatting my brain, I'd do it. Even that probably wouldn't help. I was so stunned when I realized I was in love with him. What were you expecting? Pejo asked. That after everything he did to you, you'd forget to remember him?

Thanks for wishing me a happy name day, Love. Today's your name day? No, it was. A week ago. Today is Igor. Well then – all the best, Igor! I can be Igor, for example, if you take me out for a stupid coffee. Okeydokey, Igi. So when I talk about sex, it doesn't interest you, but if I pretend to be Igor, it works. You finally figured out my tactic. OK, then I don't want sex anymore. If Pejo asked me today why I went to bed with him in the first place, I guess I'd just tell the truth. Because he's my Love. And I'd also say that at home I love to wear his t-shirt. The eyes of my childhood – that's Pejo. We told each other every single thing. And I mean everything! We could still do it then. Because he's my Love, Pejo. I don't have any other reason. I'm not going to pretend that I know things I don't. Pejo deserves to know the truth. But Pejo's in Bratislava. Thank God. I don't need any more questions. I have enough of my own. As it is, I know way more than I want to. I don't need to know about stuff I can't handle.

Lalalala!

Oooh hoo hoo

God, why am I so friggin' stupid?

I'll let him be, I told myself. At least for one whole day. I almost made it. To be honest, I didn't even last an hour. What's your mother's name, Love? It took him a week to answer. With a question. Why do you need to know? You really are a jerk. I just want to know. I want to know the name of the woman who gave birth to the man I love. And then you're going to make me call her on her name day? Do you have a problem with that? My mother never answers the phone. Do you even have a mother?...he didn't answer all evening, and there was nothing in my mailbox in the morning. I didn't mean to offend him. I didn't mean to offend you, I wrote. I can't stand the way he's so old-fashioned. He refuses to Skype or chat, he won't go on Facebook for anything, even though I set up a profile for him when I was still blind. When I think how much effort I went to, I hate myself for it. He hates to talk on the phone, max he'll send a text message, or an e-mail. And sometimes, when I'm lucky and he's on-line, we talk. Otherwise, I have to wait days for an answer. I feel like I'm in some 19th century novel where the heroine waits for the postman at the gate and the flowers in the garden are wilting at some ungodly fast pace while I wait, and wait...and the postman doesn't come....The worst was when we were together, and I couldn't talk to him at all. Alte and I used to talk like crazy. But he was an old pig. Basically he did all the talking. He took me out in public like a trained monkey. He got me concert dates with rich assholes. He assured my father that he was looking after me. He said me that he loved me. When Martin came into my life, I didn't have to do anything. Alte yelled at me, I cried. Martin told Alte to behave, Alte told Martin to fuck off, Martin punched Alte. He was so flattened that by the time he came around, Martin and I were already sitting in a cab. I was crying so hard I couldn't even say my address, so we ended up at his place. And I only screwed up one concert. That evening the world came to an end, in the morning I was convinced that I'd been reborn. In your arms, Love. I took off for America because I hoped I could get away from Alte. The last thing he said to me before I left was – you'll end up on the street.

Sometimes he wouldn't write for a whole month, or a month and a half. At least you remembered me? I asked him, when he finally wrote. Of course, violet. I'm not you're Love anymore? Has something changed? Yes, something's changed. Today I love you like a violet. Why? Because it's the first flower I thought of. Do you know any other flowers? Roses, lilacs, orchids. And why can't I be a rose? Or an orchid? Today you're a violet. Which one of the others is your rose? I don't know, I can't remember. Flowers wilt quickly. That's the end. Time to break up. Good-bye. Good-bye. I can be your little violet too. See, I told you. My Love. Love. Where were you for a month and a half? Are you sure you want to start with that again? My Love? Love. Love. Too bad you're not as frivolous as you are intelligent. Why?

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You'd have an easier time of it. But I want YOU! ONLY YOU!! But that's the problem. Are we still just joking, Love?...I'm not sure. You don't want me because I'm fat, right?

I complained to him that he never has any time for me. I wrote him that the owner of the bar has Crohn's Disease. I didn't know how to spell it, so I wrote it phonetically – Crone's. What kind of disease is that? He eats almost nothing at all. He can't get drunk either, he'd die. It's something with your intestines. Then I asked him when he was coming to see me. I didn't want to bug him, I was just asking – so when will I see you, Love? I don't know. He answered. Not even a ball park? NOT EVEN A BALL PARK, he shouted in capital letters. Because THIS is Crone's Disease, not what your boss has!... I don't understand, Love. Kronos was the god of Time in the ancient world. He devoured his father Chaos and, since then, time has existed on Earth. It took me two days to reply to that one. Now you've devoured me. I died. Even so, I admire him for being so patient with me!

They hired a new girl at the bar, a student. Nina. She's Slovak. Nice too. I liked her right away. She isn't complicated, and she's always happy. She has a nice voice and smells good. She has nice skin too. We agreed that she would move in with me. I wanted to share it with him. I was excited that I had met someone nice. Someone I could talk to about us. He took it completely differently. He made a scene. I'm not even going to talk about all the horrible things he wrote to me. I sent him a link to a picture of her. Her date of birth was there too – August 7, 1989. Let him see that she's really nice. Suddenly he was playful as a puppy. What's that you sent me? Nina's picture is on that link. Fine. Get me her social security number too. What do you need it for? I have to know something about a woman if I'm going to start something up with her. Never without full info. You don't have mine and you still started something with me. Yeah, and how has that turned out? That's true. You hardly even slept with me. What?!! OK, once. When it happened you said I showed you pure happiness. I felt him like hunger, thirst, fatigue, with my whole body. You see, I'm right. Will you send me her social please, Love? That's how we joked, my Love and I, for hours.

Dogs are dangerous creatures. I mean those little furry darlings people have at home. Their puppy-poops. It's stupid when people get dogs to keep them company because they're lonely. What a naive strategy. A lonely person buys a dog so they won't be lonely. But the only difference between a lonely person with a dog and a lonely person without a dog is that the first gets to be lonely in the park, freezing their butt off while they wait for their darling to poop and the other one gets to be lonely in a nice warm bed. I could be a dog! It would be enough if you just smiled at me, Love. I can't get a dog. I would smother him with all that attention.

In Slovakia, tomorrow is the name day for Katarina, in case you want to attack your mistresses. I don't know about any Katarinas in my life. You only catch exotic ones, huh? Yeah. Like piranhas. But they're lucky enough not to have name days. Don't be nasty, OK? I have my period. What else is new, my Love? I got a new uniform. And, also, I want you to take me out. Is it new? Take me out!! On Thursday? To the sauna...Out!! In the fresh air! OK. I'll go to the sauna and you can sit by the cold pool. They have one outside on the terrace. When I'm finished sweating, I'll come out and cool off. We'll see each other three times during the evening, you'll be out in the air and the whole time you can have a great time hating me. Now you've really made me laugh. Really. I'm having a good laugh. Finally. You're my Love. So next week? When I lose some weight. My love, are you sure there's nothing else bothering you today besides your period? I'm going to smack you!

I sit and wait and think. I'm afraid to say that I'm thinking about you and me, but I'd be happy if I could think about us. I know he's not coming, but even so I sit and wait. Nothing that's important to me means anything to him. I'll write him that I've finally found a roommate I get along with and he'll immediately suggest that he come over and we have a threesome. He sat me down at the piano, disappeared and left me to wander around New York by myself. He never has time, but then suddenly he's ready to get on the first plane and fly in. And if I refuse, he'll suggest that we become lesbian lovers and live happily ever after. Because he's never coming back, since his male ego is fundamentally wounded. And I'm just pretending that we're happily writing to each other "good morning darling", "sweet dreams, honey". And there are things that make me really mad! He's never talked to me about my piano-playing, for example. It's the only thing I'd be able

to really talk about. But my playing has never interested him at all. Actually I think that besides that one memorable time when he punched Alte, he's never heard me play.

In Slovakia, there are horizontal and vertical villages, he told me once when I tried to explain to him that I think differently because he's from the village and I'm from the city. He laughed at me. In Slovakia, there are horizontal and vertical villages. The horizontal ones are reconciled to their village origins; the vertical ones have risen as concrete apartment complexes around the ruins of medieval cities. They've smothered the place's ancient urban soul and renounced their village one. So, while I have an identity, you have none. So don't tell me that you think differently from me. You and your neighbors don't think at all, you use all your energy trying to successfully imitate city people according to some Biedermeier pattern from Vienna. But there must be some exceptions, no? Two or three in each city, but they're usually forced to emigrate. And has someone banished you? I exiled myself. Life is even more cruel in the village. You get the crap beaten out of you if you dare to stick out. You never know which direction it's going to come from. Why did you take me to New York? So you could make something of yourself. Your talent deserves a chance. So why did you leave me here alone then?

So go and live your life, he wrote a week later. Forget about me. About you? NEVER. No answer came. That's what hurt the most. When he was suddenly silent for no reason. And when he didn't even bother to react. For him there were only topics that interested him. Today I have a surprise for him. Several surprises. God I wish I were wrong and he would come to see me. I'm wrong so often that it could happen easily. He'll be surprised that I can see. At first, he won't notice, I'll pretend I'm still blind, I certainly know how. I'll feel around with my hands, then I'll feel his face with my fingers, his jacket, hands, and then I'll tell him that he has a nice blue shirt on. And he'll ask, with surprise, how I know it's blue. And then he'll get it. And the other two surprises I'll leave for later. I'll just ask him: Do you like her? Who? Nina. He'll definitely say something witty and intelligent, like: I don't know, she hasn't seen me yet. I couldn't see you, but it didn't matter. Then I saw you, and what happened?! Nothing. With my eyes it did. I don't understand. I did everything to you with my eyes. With my eyes! Do I have to tell YOU how important eyes are? Whatever...Better than nothing, or no? No. If you didn't exist, at least I'd get laid once in a while. That's all for now folks about sex in the last quarter. That's it for surprises. Maybe I offended him. And now he's not coming.

If he comes today, I'll do a striptease for him. That will be the second surprise. The bar-owner was smart enough to know that he couldn't let them ogle a blind girl, they could probably lock him up for it. He paid for my operation out of his own pocket, up front. Except that then, in the evening, I fainted. I did everything as usual - got dressed, did my make-up, and when I got up to the pole, I collapsed. But I'll do it for my Love. I deserve a nice present for my 25th birthday. I want to see his eyes wide and shining with lust. I can't imagine anything more beautiful than that.

Lalalala!

Oooh hoo hoo

God, why am I so friggin' stupid?

I'm so happy that I'm working tomorrow too. When I'm on the street, I don't have to think about myself. Even when I was still working here in the bar, I was happier at work than at home. Even though sometimes I got so tired I could fall down. I don't understand women who can work and still manage to take care of the house. And of their husbands. And children! There's a lady from the cleaning service who works here, she takes care of seven kids. She does it for the extra cash. Her own two kids have no father. Two of the others have fathers who are policemen, one of which is in prison. Another has a father in prison, but he's not a policeman. There's one whose mother is a policewoman and he has a father too. Only one of the kids has both parents free and they're not police. Love, I could never have children with a cop. And does a sexy man like you sleep with exhausted women with circles under their eyes? I don't know. I've never been with one like that. You're lying. I'm lying. So stop lying... I'd be lying if I said I wasn't going to lie anymore.

You know what, Love, come and look me in the eye, I wrote to him, when he wrote again that he didn't know when he was coming. Where are you? In Berlin. What are you doing there? I have to wait for some

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woman from the accounting office, so she can pay me for the lecture. She was supposed to come yesterday. But she didn't show up at all. Maybe she got killed and her body is stinking up her little studio apartment. Accountants are loners, you know. Those who say you'd kill to get what you want are right. Who says that? Men whose wives you've dishonored, discarded women, etc. I don't know about any like that. Shut up, Love. I haven't dishonored anyone. All the women have been happy about it. My Love!!! Shut up. Why don't you come see me? I just told you why. What if I don't believe you. OK, I'm off to ruin someone else's life, then. And what am I supposed to do? Find yourself a girl. I don't want a girl. I want you. So find one for us. You mean, like for us to share? Yeah. I get her legs, heart and hair. You know what, Love, come and say that to my face. Can we leave it open? How do you mean open? Like a fracture, for example. Nina finally agreed. But she had to swear to me that she wouldn't steal him. When I thought about it for a bit longer, I asked her to move out. She understood right away. That very same evening she tried to seduce him, on Skype. And of course he sucked up to her on Facebook. Of course she answered him. Of course I found out when it was too late. Of course he refused to chat with me and do the other internet stuff. He just didn't want me to look for him at all. As soon as it occurred to me I went online. Of course he was there. He hadn't even changed his nickname. He kept the one I made up for him - Love.

I became a dog-walker purely by chance. When they discharged me from the clinic, I hailed a cab. I was waiting on the sidewalk. Everything, everything was new for me. And on the lamp-post there was an ad with the word DOGWALKER and a phone number. Now I understand dogs much better than people, including myself. I used to have a concert pianist's career in front of me. I came to America to live it out. It looked like my big break. And with a man I loved. Young, talented pianist leaves for her first overseas concert tour. They even sensitively mentioned how impressive it was that a handicapped girl from the former East Bloc could finally live out her dream after the fall of the Iron Curtain. I felt a little bit like an Olympian when I read the Slovak newspapers on the net. And Martin, my Love, fed the fire in me. Love, you'll shine on the concert stages, America will fall at your feet. I didn't have any reason not to believe him. He only appeared in public with influential people. And beautiful women. As a former young communist and then a "velvet revolutionary" he had a leg up on the others, and he used it. He learned how to do business really fast. In any field where he could run his mouth. And his talent for making promises.

So being a dogwalker - that was a real shock for me. But basically it was a relief. After everything I went through after leaving home, it was a clear and achievable goal. In the morning I put up some flyers in the East Village and by evening I was already walking my first dog. Within a week I had five regular clients. The only time I got to play in New York was in a bar. When Martin took me there, he assured me it was an artsy cafe and he told the owner I was a jazz pianist. Neither one was true. By the time the owner and I figured it out, he was gone. He only paid the deposit on the apartment. It's urgent, he wrote. I'm in Havana. You're where?! I'll explain when I get back. He's still not back. Maybe he'll explain it today.

I understood why the owner sent me away. Except that I couldn't leave. I wouldn't have known how to get home to our apartment. I was blind, didn't speak the language and was dying inside of fear every other minute. I couldn't cry, but only because I didn't understand what was happening to me. I accepted the owner's offer just so I wouldn't end up on the street. He offered me a job singing in the bar. I learned those thirty songs really fast. The customers liked me. Paradoxically, being blind brought more customers in. There was just one thing I didn't understand. My Love, why did you bring me here with you?

I finally got used to working in the bar. I was afraid it would happen. The minute I realized it, I started to get antsy. I didn't feel bad there. But it was a trap. We had all kinds of customers. There was hardly an evening that I didn't get a marriage proposal. Once some doctors from Boston came in. After some conference. First there were the usual invitations to lunch. But I saw through them. But one of them offered to arrange an operation for me. An operation that would allow me to see. I didn't even write my Love about it. I imagined how beautiful it would be when he came back and - I could see him! I agreed with the bar owner. He'd lend me money for the operation. I'd work off the debt. I've never been so afraid in my life. I don't mean the operation. I didn't think about that. I was afraid to open my eyes. OK, you can open them, said the doctor who operated on me. I was so afraid and so full of expectations, I didn't sleep for two weeks. I gently touched my eyes under the bandage, just to make sure that they were still there. Finally

I opened them. The biggest surprise was how close everything looked to how I had imagined it. Pejo's great descriptions are largely to thank. At least first loves are beautiful. And so useful!

...you're not writing today. You're not coming either? He never once responded to that question. He didn't come either. For example, now I would really need you here with me, my Love. I already promised we would come. What am I supposed to do now? I wanted to take you to the International Women's Club Christmas Bazaar. That is, I actually want you to take me. I can't tell them I have a boyfriend that I write to once in a while! And if you're not going to take me out, then I'll take you out. We have only two options. Either we can go and air out the New Yorkers' dogs or we can go to the International Women's Club Christmas Bazaar. They asked me if I would play the piano there. I like charitable events. In Slovakia I used to go regularly. It was so symbolic, the blind pianist...One of my clients' wives invited me. I walk their dog. They have an excellent Steinway in the hall, once the wife played it and I told her she was good. Then I played for her and she was amazed and excited. So she invited me. Enjoy it, my Love, I can't stand altruism. You mean I have to go alone? Send me pictures of the committee. Look at me. I'm looking. I want them as the background. The committee is 90% ambassadors' wives. What a tempting thought! You're not going anywhere and that's it. I'm not taking you to the anniversary ball either, they invited me to that too. Agh, that's what I feared most, Hanichka!! You haven't called me that in a long time. In my head I call you that all the time. You know what I would do now if I were home. I would sit down at the piano and cry. I would cry my way through the holidays. This is the third Christmas in a row. I shouldn't have mentioned that Christmas bazaar to him. That's why he didn't come. I think he's ashamed of me.

I just got off the phone with my mother, the cleaning lady at the bar told me once after closing. Her voice was so sad that I was afraid her heart would burst. The first 30 seconds she had no idea who I was. She's completely lost it. She doesn't go out at all. She just sits and smokes and watches TV, five years now. And twenty stories over and over again. Mentally she's about 90. And how old is her mother, he asked. When we talked about other people, he always acted much more normal than when we talked about us. Seventy. That fits. What fits? Seventy plus twenty is ninety. You're a cynical bastard, Love. Can I help it if I have strong math skills? The cleaning lady should be happy there aren't fifty of those stories.

I want sex. I want sex, period. Nothing. I wrote it to him thirty more times. I sent a hint too – maps.google.com. Is something the matter? Put in my address and come. When? At five, idiot. I won't make it at 5:00, I'm in Kabul. I know you're not coming, but I wanted to give you a chance before I let myself go completely. I can't let you do that. ARE YOU COMING OR NOOOOOOOT?? Really, I can't, Hanichka. You have sex wherever you go, you just can't and WON'T find time for me. Are you nuts? When? where? With whom? I didn't answer. Let him suffer a little.

He asked if he should be careful. I told him he didn't have to. Of course I got pregnant. He was thinking about contraception, I was thinking about my hymen. Technically I wasn't a virgin anymore, I wasn't a child anymore, and what was he? A prick? I guess. Definitely. What did he expect from a blind girl? When we were together the first time, I had no idea that it was actually the last time too.

I finally have a potential lover, I wrote to my Love about a month after the operation. I didn't want to write him about the operation. I wanted to surprise him. But I had to write him something. So I wrote something dumb. Finally I have a potential lover. A boy about 15 years old who makes extra money at the bar washing dishes in the evenings. He's truly a perspective candidate. He brings me flowers. So you're giving me the boot? I wouldn't replace you for anything, OK maybe Dr. House could give you a run for your money. Does he have a sexy voice?...yes, I wrote and quickly deleted the rest. I almost gave myself away. I almost let it slip out that I can see. How else would I know that limping is sexy? In a sexy man, everything is sexy. Yes, he has a sexy voice. And maybe, as opposed to you, he would actually want me. Oh, no he wouldn't. What would he want me for. He gets escorts, I'm sure. He's just an actor, but I don't think he's that stupid. What's stupid about it? Everything. Well, I didn't expect that from a macho guy like you. It's stupid to pay money for any kind of attention from another person. Instead of using your free time, you waste your time. It's demeaning. For both sides. Except that there are women who men without money would never get in their lives. So let them jerk off. And those women? If someone wants sex, do they have to have a relationship? Or be without sex when they're not in a relationship? Sex without a positive broader context – a relationship,

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being in love, a situation of some kind...is just unnecessarily tiring masturbation. Men get the kind of women they can handle – materialistically and personality-wise. Women get the kind of men they deserve – not the ones they can get into bed. Solitude and loneliness are nothing strange – in a relationship or out. Above a certain IQ and EQ level, everyone is destined to it. Love, do you lecture on this stuff when you're not with me? Wouldn't it be better if you lectured me about it? Love, we're talking about sex now, not relationships. Love, I don't even know what we're talking about anymore. I want to see you. I just attacked your IQ, not your EQ. Both my IQ and EQ have reached my own personal ceiling. So you can walk on it upside-down like a fly. And you can buzz too. I adore you for that. For what? That even though you're my number 1 you never get tired of being really sweet. Really, I don't have to be? You don't have to. Oh, and so I don't forget – the dishwasher bought me flowers. The owner fired him for it. Smart. He saved the kid's life.

Today I slept about an hour, and woke up three times in between. The only thing that saved me is that I don't have any rugs, just wood floors. I was spewing vomit like some gothic gargoyle. I made myself sick. I need to hug someone, desperately. I really need it. Whenever I wrote that to him, he didn't answer. So I tried another tactic. Some cardio-surgeons came into the bar. After some medical congress. Half of them were Jews from Boston, I basically got a general invitation to lunch and two invitations to come to Boston. If they have a Beacon Hill address on their business cards, drop everything and go. Thanks for the tip. An American cardio-surgeon is a real catch, not like some post-pubescent dishwasher or some balding, development volunteer from Central Europe! YOU are my catch, Love. And what if I don't want to be? It's not up to you, sorry. Despite the fact that I'm not your catch, I thought to myself. I only thought it. I wrote to him – YOU are my catch.

In the beginning I wrote to him about everything. For example...Yesterday I couldn't fall asleep. I came out of the metro on the corner of 2nd Avenue and 13th and before I could even think, a group of guys came up to me and said I couldn't go anywhere until I went for a drink with them. I held onto the railing, thinking, should I scream? Or throw a fit? I burst into tears. With those blind eyes of mine. Tears as big as billiard balls pouring down. I swear I could hear them hitting the sidewalk. You should have been there. You should have been with me and told them to fuck off, assholes. I can never sleep when something like that happens to me and you're far away. So these circles under my eyes are all your fault. And then later I understood that I couldn't reveal absolutely everything to my beloved. But he can. Strange how different the same thing sounds when a woman says it to a man and a man says it to a woman.

The owner of the bar said that I could do some pole-dancing. Apparently some of the singers do it. And I don't have to give a damn who's looking at me if I'm blind. I wanted to slap him. But I miscalculated and when I swung, I fell down. The owner picked me up and kissed me. On the mouth. That did it. Nobody is going to slobber all over me just because I'm blind.

My dogs love his jeans even more than I do. Yuck, I have to wash them. I'm going to lose my mind that I waiting here for him and no one else. I'm going to go crazy because I don't know what else to do. He tells me that he's never been so in love with anyone. That I make him better. He's not lying. Not about that. Is this love, Love?

It always hits me like this before Christmas, hard. I'm going to write him three e-mails a day. And all the same. I'd like to know if there is theoretically any chance of being with you for the holidays. No chance, he answered. That was the better case. In the worst case he didn't answer at all. Despite that, I kept asking and asking. When are you coming then, if it's not too much trouble? I don't know. And when and where should I come smack you around after the New Year? Anytime. And where? Wherever you want. Couldn't you come here to me? I can. So why aren't you coming now? Because I can't. But you just wrote that you can. Really?! God am I irresponsible! Love, you torture me. Love, you torture yourself. But you would come if you could, right? You know very well that I would. I love you. And I love you, Hanichka. But I hate you too, a little. Only a little? I guess about as much as I can love you. But only when I can't love you anymore. They're only moments! Right now I love you and hate you at about the same level. And what are we going to do with that? Anything, just come. OK, I'll come. Yayyyyyy! This is going to be a great Christmas! What are we going to do? I can take you skating if you want. At Rockefeller Center.

The Gilded Red Cage, by Silvester Lavrik
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What are you nuts? I was a blind child, how can I possibly go skating? OK, so I won't come. That conversation was the only Christmas present he gave me.

Even in Bratislava I couldn't understand where he was always disappearing to. Sometimes he'd come back in pretty bad shape. I honestly thought he was out whoring. Or that he was a pimp. Or a drug dealer. And all he was doing was exporting our fragile democracy to countries that are only a hair worse off than we are, hardly even a noticeable difference. He told me himself, when I caught him in a moment of weakness. Otherwise he refused to tell me anything about himself or his work. At the beginning it seemed noble. As opposed to Alte, who spoiled my tender youth with his talk of all his dirty business dealings. What an exemplary family friend! If Daddy knew about all the stuff Alte told me, he'd probably shoot him. He'd wait for him on the balcony and when he came out on the street below, he'd fill him so full of bullets they'd need 12 pallbearers just to carry his coffin. Except that what did I know about the world then? Exactly nothing. And I still don't know anything.

My Love, where are you? In Moscow. Until when? I'm going to finish reading your e-mail and go straight to Sheremetevo airport. You never finish reading all my e-mail...Yeah I do. Sorry for underestimating you, Love. You are a strong man, after all. I am. But you're sensitive too, aren't you? How did you come to the conclusion, that I'm sensitive? I would never even get involved with a man who wasn't sensitive. Jeez, are we back to that again? Do you do anything else besides think about our relationship all day? When we were still at home before New York, you wrote me a beautiful e-mail about how we have to clarify: blah, blah, blah history, blah, blah, blah and expectations, blah, blah, blah, the minimum and maximum version. So it's your turn and you're still boycotting us and now I don't understand. It's all too clear to me, so if I wrote it down, I'd feel like I was just filling out some questionnaire. Now I have to go to the airport. You are a total weirdo. Better than a limp prick. I would never call you that. At this stage in the relationship. Did you used to call Alte that? No. Only later. He called himself that. So you see, time heals all. I'm taking off!!! And he went offline. He didn't react at all to the two-page, whiny exercise in self-torment that I sent him after that.

He called when he landed. So I asked him if he'd snogged anyone on Red Square while they were drinking champagne. No. But I could have. So why didn't you? I didn't want to. I preferred to contemplate historical, geopolitical paradoxes. So kindly focus your desire and ability on me. My desire has been focused already for several months. But I meant your desire in regard to me. And he was quiet again.

I'm going to a photo shoot for some women's rag. I'm supposedly the most beautiful non-dancing stripper in Manhattan. The owner wants to put my face on the menu and arrange for a promo piece on the cover of some lifestyle magazine. One day I'll be Miss Cemetery. Don't you want to see me before then? I'm in Moscow. Again? Again. I'm thinking about whether this is the maximum or minimum version of a relationship. Maximum, definitely, look at how easily we transcend oceans, continents, time zones. Kisses. And the minimum would be what? The minimum version would be if we were writing to each other like this in the same room. I want kisses here, for real. Hang in there. Kisses are coming. Even three. At least take me somewhere for a couple of days after the New Year. All I need is hot running water and you. But you'll say OK and then it won't work out or you'll just say that you can't because the pandas in China have already eaten all the bamboo and you have to go there and plant some more, or shoot some pandas or something. OK, get a panda costume, I'll bring the bamboo, it'll be an impressive finale to a great love story.

In the middle of the night I got up and wrote to him: a) Dear Hanichka, I haven't seen you for a long time and sometimes I miss you, b) Dear Hana, I don't give a flying fuck about you. He wrote back: a) stands, I don't give a flying fuck about b). He doesn't keep any secrets. Doesn't hide anything. He just lives his life and I stick out of it like a sore thumb. When I told him I was probably pregnant, he turned so cold that I'm surprised I didn't catch pneumonia and die. I could have - at least it would be behind us. If we hadn't already bought the air tickets to New York, I think he would have left me right there and then. He took me to the abortion clinic and brought me home and I was surprised how embarrassing it was, nothing more. I mean all the sneaking around. Until then we didn't talk much, but since then we hardly talk at all.

Love, is that you being so secretive and hidden on Facebook?...I don't understand. Is that you on Facebook without any photos or visible friends? I don't know. I don't go on Facebook. Through Facebook you can be in touch with people who you normally wouldn't meet. That's exactly why I don't like it. So, why do you write to me then? Because. I understand. The Facebook issue is closed. And he had a profile with a hundred and fifty friends. There's a function on it called virtual hug. I thought about sending him one.

I figured it out. My love scared him. I don't know what he was expecting when he brought me over here. Maybe he wanted to believe in me. But I've never believed in myself. He's never said it, but maybe it's really my fault that we can't be together. Alte always said that I shouldn't think too highly of myself. You're a blind chick, so play your piano if you don't want to wait for the golden goose. So I practiced. All day. And for what? I have talent. And I can stick with it. Don't avoid the issue, he wrote once. You can be very precise in your thinking. It was comments like that that made me fall in love with him like an idiot again.

Apparently the photos came out great, the owner said. Nina liked them too, he said. I regret having been so nasty to Nina. Lucky that Martin hasn't written to her in a long time. Otherwise she would have given it away long ago that I'm not a blind chick anymore. But I don't even have the self-confidence to tie my shoes in the morning and go out. If I bumped into the golden goose, it would probably peck me to death. Any chick is a hawk in comparison to me. █

When I actually saw Martin for the first time, I almost died of excitement. I think the only thing that saved me was that he was 10,000 kilometers away and it was on TV. I just couldn't keep all that happiness to myself. I wrote to him right away. You are apparently a handsome man, Love. Who said that? The cleaning lady. Does she know me? I told her about us. The one with the seven children. Yeah. Where did she see me? On TV. There were shots from a conference on the fall of the Iron Curtain. You're a handsome man, Love. You believe her? I'm so happy that I have you. I can't even breathe! It's like the calm before the storm. And have you already chosen the storm? Why are you so nasty to me sometimes? Sorry, Hanichka. Sometimes I annoy myself. Do you save our correspondence? Only the stuff from yesterday. And today. I delete it. Too bad. Do you delete it from the trash too? Why? Because. I think that if we took our Top 10 e-mails, I could just send a standard response to any chosen theme. What would that be good for? We would save time and we wouldn't ruin the mood. You should have thought of that earlier, you asshole. OK, now I've screwed up. I delete them automatically, too bad. Too bad. My mistake. Of course I didn't tell him that I save all our e-mails on the hard disk. And I read it and read it over and over again. How else would I remember all of this? Maybe if I had some extra money, I'd get a dog. Now I just read our e-mails over and over again.

I got my tattoos before the owner agreed to pay for my eye operation. Here, on my shoulder, I have a butterfly. They did that one for free. Apparently because I have beautiful skin. Once I read on the internet that men love these kinds of little things. I asked Martin if he would like it if I got a tattoo. Of course, he wrote back right away, get yourself a tattoo of Donald Duck. Where? Wherever you want. So I have Donald Duck just above my bush. How was I supposed to know he was joking? How was I supposed to know who Donald Duck is? When after the operation I saw that horrible thing on my body, it was clear that there weren't going to be any stripteases with Donald peeking out of my bush. And I couldn't admit it to the owner, he paid for the whole thing. He'd never get over it, even though he's a Slovak and he obviously has a thing for me.

I didn't have any clear evidence that he was playing around with other women and that pissed me off the most, I think. Are you still chasing skirts? No. It's no fun winning all the time. Am I one of your trophies? No you're above them. So like there are medals on the wall and framed diplomas and trophy cups and I'm above all of them? Something like that. It's important to enjoy the small things in life. I don't know why you're growling. If we meet once a year, it'll be once a year. If it's a hundred times a year, it's a hundred times. I'll be happy however many times it is, I just don't know why you're snapping at me. I didn't want to bother you or offend you, or send you to hell. So don't send me. In all the time we've known each other have you ever heard me snap? I don't snap or bark. I just bite. So you're advising me – we're finished? He didn't answer.

Those trips of his – New York, Havana, Moscow, Berlin and back again. Lectures! Pphfeh! I can't stand those naïve, nonprofit games for disseminating democracy. Love, I finally figured out why you brought me here. You wanted me to feed your ego. You wanted a pianist, singer, bar dancer, you would have even taken a hooker, anything except someone who would scare you off with their love. And I'm grateful to you for it, Love. You don't have to hide anymore. I'm smarter now. So come and show yourself. Please. Instead of just saving the world, come and save me a little bit too. Please...Where is my personal happiness in this free society?

Sometimes I wonder whether I have any dignity left at all. Because I can only be thankful that I'm in this trap that I'm in. Otherwise, I'd do whatever it took for us to be a normal couple. I'd have no problem kissing the ground you walk on, Love. Sitting for hours in front of your door waiting for you to come out and kick me. That's how Alte wanted me to be. That's how my whole well-behaved little world there wanted me. My dearly departed father, the priest, parliament, Mr. President. That's how I want to be. And I don't think I'm asking a lot. I just want to have a normal relationship. I want to be able to love you normally. By "normally" I mean what any potential suburban wife wants. My talent has nothing to do with it. I'd like to go out for dinner with you on the weekend. Meet up, hug you, let myself be held. Cry normally on your shoulder.

I reconciled myself to the fact that after that message he'd probably never be able to write to me again. It beeped at 3:00 in the morning. Incoming mail. What kind of trap are you in? How can you be so thoughtless? How can you ask such a question? I have no money, I'm in a foreign country, working off an eye operation, for which I owe money to someone and the only reason he hasn't slit my throat yet is that there wouldn't be anyone to make payments on the money he invested in me. Because I promised him that when I can see, I'll be his little busy bee who buzzes around the pole, but then when I went there and saw all those totally disinterested faces, I couldn't even move, so I fainted instead. All that after I failed to make it as a pianist, a bar musician and a bartender too. After all that I expected from life when I was at home on the terrace in our high-end neighborhood with the big houses, at the piano with my unbelievably talented students... I only wanted to be a concert pianist because of you. The sightless wonder from Bratislava! And you were the one who convinced me to do all this, my Love. And I'm still grateful to you for it. Grateful. For the fact that I have anyone to love at all. And for the fact that you smell good. Because the thing I hate most is people who stink. Maybe if the owner smelled good, I wouldn't even remember your name anymore. But he doesn't. But you don't care about my gratitude and I understand that. And I totally envy your freedom. I wanted to write all that to him. And I did. But I didn't send it. I only sent him a message that said: tomorrow's my birthday. You promised you'd come. Are you coming? He didn't answer.

Alte was right. As usual. In the end I did end up in the street. Luckily only as a dogwalker. So I'll be paying off my operation my whole life. But it's OK. I've already gotten used to the feeling. And the owner is a Slovak. I'll think of something for him if this starts to get on my nerves. Now I'm sitting in the bar, which was supposed to be an artsy cafe, and I'm waiting for my Love. A chambre séparée, just the two of us, my Love and I. Hey, I'm here with my love. But totally alone. The owner was so nice, he gave me a big discount. Maybe because he's permanently on the verge of death. Crohn's disease. His, not Martin's. Both are fatal.

At least I'll call Nina...she doesn't answer. I'm not surprised. Or I could call Pejo. Pejo is my sure thing. Sure thing that I'm never going home. It would just be the same questions again. And what do I need other people's questions for? I have more than enough of my own. If he asked me today why I love him, I'd probably tell the truth again. Because I need to love somebody. Anybody. I don't have a better reason. And if someone asked me whether I'm happy, I'd say – not yet. But I'm learning. This city doesn't give any gifts. But it doesn't deny you anything either. Don't judge it and it won't judge you. Use the City. Yes, I'll learn to use it.

So I'll celebrate my birthday alone. I'll pour myself a glass, and make a toast, and sing to myself. And I'll give myself a gift. I'll give Donald Duck some fresh air. I got it when you stopped getting annoyed, Love. Then you stopped writing. I knew you wouldn't come. I couldn't not know it. You haven't written to me in two and a half months, do you realize that, Love? I don't love you any less than in the beginning. Or more. I couldn't love you more than I do. You don't have to hide from me. Or pretend to be better. You don't

have to soothe your guilty conscience with altruistic expeditions to developing countries. They don't give a shit about you exactly the same way you don't give a shit on me.

The recorder's still going. I hope it recorded it all. Don't test me anymore, Love. Couldn't we just agree that all this is because I'm dumb? I'll record a song for you.

Lalalala!

Oooh hoo hoo.

God, why am I so friggin' stupid?

...do you know this one? Come on, it's time for the striptease. After all the things you know about me, Donald Duck can't surprise you.

Silvester Lavrík

The Gilded Red Cage

Part II. The Canary that Ate the Cat

I. I'm just a "hurdy-gurdy man", as the English say. An organ grinder. I only know a few half-baked songs. And I play them over and over again. When I came home after years away, I was surprised how many ghosts from my childhood were still living in my native land. Memories, friends, old loves, parents and grandparents. And many others who were my world once and who I then lost. I left, they stayed. And now I'm surprised that they're still here. I feel their presence much more intensely than I would have, had I stayed. So why am I talking about this anyway? My only excuse is that I've discovered how good it feels when you realize that there are even bigger losers out there in the world than you.

II. ... where to begin and when to stop are two key moments in all memoir texts.

My name is Sugar. My father's father was originally called Joshua Zukermann. Right after the first fall of Czechoslovakia, the one in 1938, he became Jozef Malina (which actually means Joseph Raspberry). So my father was Jozef Malina his whole life and I've been Jozef Malina my whole life. But whenever one of my classmates from elementary school would mention me to their family, their grandfather would remember who my grandfather was. And Zukermann was back. When the fascists aryanized property during the war, the only thing I got was the new name Sugar, the Slovak version of the name carried by half my ancestors. First I thought we were poor because when we converted from Judaism to Christianity, we forgot how to be good businessmen. But after '89, during the restitution process, I learned the real reason. The pub and shop that caused my grandfather Zukermann to become Malina were nationalized by the Bolsheviks in '48 anyway. It seems that whatever the fascists didn't take, the Bolsheviks found.

Till this day, I don't understand why my classmates called me a Jew, because my mother definitely had no Semitic roots. And I know this not only from that endearing, little, round Slavic nose of hers. When the subjects of religion and nationality came up in our family, it always ended in an argument. Everybody had a different idea. My father was an atheist, Mama a catholic from Spiš. My grandmother had ecumenical tendencies, usually illustrated by her high level of all-embracing tolerance. But maybe it was just proof of her great, personal wisdom and a lack of formal education. My grandfather was whatever he felt like being at the moment. For example, on Saturday mornings, he was Zukermann the devout Jew, who didn't leave the house on the Sabbath. On Saturday afternoons, when it was time to play cards in the pub, he was Jozef Malina again.

In socialist Czechoslovakia, the right to work was firmly grounded in law. Everybody had to work. Even pensioners, if they didn't want to starve. Especially those the regime had relieved of their property. The Bolsheviks set pensions on the basis of employees' pay. And independent businesspeople weren't employees. One day, my grandmother, despite protests by the rest of the family, took me by the hand and led me straight to the young communists' organization, the Pioneers. "At least they'll watch over him while we're at work," she said. "The boy can't just wander around the village all day."

So, as far as my upbringing is concerned, when a plate of mouthwatering, homemade pork sausage brings out a pang of guilt, I shake it off with the words "I baptize you as a fish" and it tastes better right away. I also have a career as an altar boy behind me, but that's another story.

III. So, Sugar. I've gotten so used to it that I even use it when I introduce myself. Sometimes I abuse it. More often than sometimes. It's an addiction thing, actually. You know the kind of guy who can look like the cat that just ate the canary? I'm exactly that kind of guy. "Who me? Don't look at me, I'm just the musician." That's what we say about that kind of face. In the toughest moments, I can do even better. I can look like the canary that just ate the cat, if necessary. I know how to talk too. "You can talk your way out of anything," my classmates used to say to me with envy. They were right. Almost. If a smile didn't help, I would add a promise. It's important to know how to tell people what they want to hear. It's even more important to know how to promise people what they wish for. Twenty years ago we promised each other

love, as one popular song goes. Today, it means only one thing – for twenty years we’ve been frustrated because there isn’t enough love. Only a political dilettante intends to fulfill his promises. One has to learn to make promises in such a way that no one notices if you keep them. It won’t even occur to them. One should be very careful with promises. Making promises is absolutely addictive.

IV. I built my career on the strength of my smile. Both my careers for that matter. Actually, all of them. And on the strength of my accordion, but that just happened – it wasn’t the result of any conscious decision. With my angelic smile and a pull on the accordion I navigated all the traps of the collapsing Bolshevik system. In the fall of 1989, I was in the right place at the right time. On the square, at the podium, in full view. Of everyone. With an accordion and a smile. Altar boy and builder of a new society, we were both there. Both sides believed in me. My career took off.

From the moment I stepped up to the podium, I wasn’t building socialism anymore, but capitalism. I’m still working on what the difference is between the two. Paradoxically, democratic freedoms don’t help me much with it. They don’t put any pressure on me. And even if they do, I have somewhere to escape, since there’s no more Bolshevik paranoia hanging over us. Into nostalgia, for example. The Czech writer Karel Čapek said: “the young are convinced that with them the golden age has arrived. The old think that with them the golden age has ended.” And I’m not young anymore.

Tonight I’m celebrating. It’s actually related to November ‘89, but my friends and I have an additional reason for celebrating. I’ll get out my accordion, what else? I haven’t played in a long time. I’ll probably play some wrong notes, but so what? My old accordion burned under circumstances that I’ll describe later. That night, as they say, we were reborn. So there really is something to celebrate. Today I bought a new one. Well, sort of new. Second-hand, from an ad. I’m going to play the best songs all night. My collection of golden oldies. I’ll throw a party. For my friends. They got their invitations. Before I lost the elections, I had friends coming out of my ears.

As for the accordion, we call it a harmonica. We used to call it a Russian organ. By that we meant Soviet. For my generation, Russian was the same as Soviet. We only recognized the difference when it came to borscht and piroshky. In a wave of Pioneer zeal, in seventh grade geography class, when we were talking about Georgia, I said that it’s a country known for the cultivation of Soviet tea. “Georgian tea,” my teacher corrected me. “Georgia is Soviet and therefore Georgian tea is also Soviet.” Before that we knew about Russian tea and Georgian tea, now there’s only Soviet tea. That teacher didn’t ask me anything else the whole year. I think she couldn’t figure out whether I was a complete idiot or just making dangerous fun of her. I swear I wasn’t joking.

But back to my harmonica. I mean, my accordion. Originally, I wanted to become a church organist. I got the idea when I was working the organ bellows. I was imagining how beautifully my voice would carry under the vaulted ceiling of the church while my friend Mišo Slivka had to work the bellows under the severe eye of the priest and the entire parish. The main thing was for Jana Novyvedláková to see me. She’d watch only me and listen only to me and then she would understand that the singing and that huge sound of the organ belonged first to her and only then to God. And then, during recess, she would only go for a walk with me. And her friend Katarina Omelková could come too, because I liked her too, but not as much as Jana. Or Adrián Koluš could come with us. He never talked back to me and he used to bring those great Marina biscuits to school, because his mother ran the grocery store.

My mother never bought me cookies because she was convinced that the bakeries put ground pig bones in them. My mother didn’t trust the socialist food industry, and didn’t trust the agricultural sector at all. Everything we had was homemade or homegrown: the milk, butter, even the roast chicken. Of course in the beginning they weren’t roasted. They ran around in the yard and I had to tend to them and that was a totally humiliating hell. They were only roasted afterward, on Sundays, and they were delicious, with wild mushroom stuffing that smelled really good. Other food was homemade too, including the layer cakes we always had on birthdays. My aunt Marta used to bake them because she was one of us and my mother trusted her not to put any “margarine made of crude oil in the filling or store-bought eggs that have yolks that look like whites and whites that look like water and shells covered in chicken poop because the hens on the egg farms are kept in cages without anything under them and the socialist hens don’t see the sun their whole henish lives, never mind real grass. I’m surprised that the hens even know when to lay eggs on those big poultry farms where the only light they get is from a bulb,” she said, shaking her head, because she knew what I didn’t – that a normal hen lays an egg only once a day. My mother had a clear and uncompromising opinion on many things. And the world outside the confines of our family rarely fared well under her critical eye. That is, it got a failing grade or worse, which was truly a sign of pure incompetence because not even Mišo Čonka had such bad grades. Mišo

The Gilded Red Cage, by Silvester Lavřík

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Čonka was the kid in our third grade class who repeated the year a few times. At least in gym Misho got a 'B' because he could go twice as far as the rest of us in the long jump. Would have been weird if he couldn't, since we were nine and he was 15.

Mišo Čonka first appeared in my life when he stole my mid-morning snack. Two pieces of homemade bread with butter and homemade sausage. A short scuffle ended in me being pulverized. The then 15 year-old giant just couldn't get past the third grade, but the socialist school system, as opposed to all his teachers, didn't give up hope. It ended when, in his last year of compulsory school attendance, his homeroom teacher forced him to at least make decorations for the school assembly honoring the 58th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, because he refused to learn to sing the Socialist International. In fact, we risked the whole class having to stay after school. The homeroom teacher was so happy when Mišo finally took the scissors and started cutting out decorations from red construction paper. You had to put a model of a star as big as the palm of an adult hand on the paper, trace the outline with a pencil and cut it out. It was a simple approach and in the end truly tedious, since we each had to make ten of them. Mišo started cutting with great enthusiasm, illustrated by how his tongue was stuck between his teeth, which were already yellow from smoking cheap cigarettes with no filter. At the end of class, the bell rang, and Mišo was hitting his stride. The teacher left him there to keep cutting and tiptoed away gesturing to us not to disturb him. When she came back after the break, you could see she was truly sorry she had. Mišo hadn't made 10 decorations, but one for every student in the class. He pasted one onto everyone's forehead. Five minutes before the bell rang for class to begin, we were already standing at attention, waiting. The teacher was late, as usual, which meant that Stephanie Maliňáková fainted. And at that moment we heard the steps coming down the hall. It was our teacher. Finally, I thought, and took a deep breath because I was feeling lightheaded, as I did whenever I had to stand up straight for more than five minutes. When she put her hand on the doorknob, I began to sing. And the others joined in.

The teacher had brought with her Comrade Director (the Principal), to show him and prove to him that Mišo really wasn't such a good-for-nothing after all. And indeed he wasn't. He was an even bigger screw-up. When the teacher and the Principal walked into the classroom, 23 kids were standing at attention among the desks and each one of them had on their forehead... a big red diamond. The mark of a communist pinko pussy as big as a house. And we were singing the International en masse. The 24th student only began to sing and then bolted for the open window. The stunned Principal and collapsing teacher saw only his back as he disappeared among the orange-leaved autumn trees in the schoolyard. That's how Mišo Čonka took his leave - of me and the school forever.

V. When I made it to the level where the altar boys kneel in front of the altar and then stand and then kneel again to the rhythm of the mass. When I made it among those who bring the chalice, pour the wine and turn the pages in the prayer-book, which is basically a very high function, my great career as an altar boy had begun. I only had two more levels to reach in my career - reading from the scriptures, and the post of head altar boy, which was a totally prestigious position.

Practically all the head altar boys were also chairmen of the school Pioneer organizations, which was a position occupied by the most promising future party cadres during their last two years of school. In addition to the formal benefits connected with the position, such as the Pioneer's large pin and stylish cap and the altar boy's gown, which was already basically a predecessor of the priest's robes, it had tens of practical advantages. The head altar boy made the service schedule, for example. It made a big difference whether you served during the small Sunday mass, or the main Sunday mass. Or whether you served during Christmas or not, when the church was packed and the pious population was somehow automatically more generous. So there was something to skim from when the altar boy returned from the choir via the back of the church to the vestry. And not only was there something to skim from, but the financial percentage that the priest gave altar boys personally was higher during the big church holidays.

But the Chairman of the All-School Pioneer Organization had a whole truckload of perks and benefits. Besides the automatically positive recommendation for further study and the obvious assumption that this young cadre would make a reliable party functionary in the future, the position provided a million opportunities for playing truant. We often took part in district, regional and I don't know what other kinds of conferences, meetings and training sessions so we could hold similar events at our own school. And then we put on those same events with the splendor of a despotic Asian sultan. But our lower-level classmates participated readily. The events were held during school hours and those who participated were exactly the same kind of little ass-kissing bastards that we were. The lucky youth who became head altar boy also qualified for the position of Head Pioneer. The school

Principal and priest even consulted each other on it. Just when my career in my home village was, because of my tender age, in danger of stagnating, it was saved by chance. Or Providence. Take your pick.

In the middle of the Sunday sermon, the cantor fell asleep on the organ keyboard. His head fell onto the keys, the organ bellowed, the old ladies whooped and crossed themselves and the priest almost fell down, but when the boys in the choir brought both the cantor's head and then his body to safety, the father finished his sermon. After mass, he called the cantor into his chambers. But the cantor didn't come. He couldn't. He was already stiff. He hadn't fallen asleep, he'd died.

When his wife and family came for the stiffened man's body, the wife wrung her hands and cried: "Frank, my Frank, who's going to play at your funeral?!" I was there. "I am! I piped up." I don't even know why I said it. It sounded so determined, that at that moment I even convinced myself that I could do it. The reward would be the grateful eyes of the widow and I went home feeling proud of myself, as if there were a reason. Even the bewildered and skeptical look from the priest didn't change that. As opposed to me, the priest knew what, in fact, I had actually promised.

The only person in the village with a musical education approaching something that qualified him to be an organist was Comrade Borovsky. He was a caregiver in the orphanage, a structure that had been located by socialist planners in a former Cistercian-Benedictine monastery. Comrade Borovsky had been placed by the party in my village and I heard him more than once, drunk, yelling into the starry night that he considered it a punishment comparable to eternal damnation. "My God, what did I do to you to deserve this? Why do you punish me by making me live in this armpit of a place?" he would call out in the same voice he used to lecture all day long on the role of Marxism and Leninism. But no one answered. Probably because our Lord God cannot hear communists, since they don't believe in Him.

I ran to see Comrade Borovsky first thing on Monday. I told him I needed to learn how to play the organ. By Saturday. He was entertained and pissed off all at the same time. "In four days?" he asked disbelievingly. And when I nodded that I was serious, he burst out laughing and snot blew out of his nose onto his vest. That was the moment that pissed him off the most, I assume. He was extremely conscious of preserving his dignity. Mainly because, as an outsider, a drunk and a communist, he had none. He would inflate his balloon of self-confidence in front of the church on Sundays, after the main mass. He knew that no one could haul off and hit him there.

Once Comrade Borovsky had wiped the snot off his vest, he wanted to send me away, but I insisted that I had promised the priest and widow of the deceased that I would play the organ at the church in place of the deceased. And," I added, "how would it be if the cantor's own organ didn't get to say good-bye to him?" and then I added that "a Pioneer must always keep his word." He gave me exactly the same look that my geography teacher did when I explained about the cultivation of tea in the Soviet Union. When I didn't say anything else, he nodded and said "OK. OK, but we'll do it differently." And he presented his own plan to me. I agreed with everything. It was brilliant. "And you'll become a member of the Kalinka accordion band," Comrade Borovsky added at the end. And I nodded at that too.

The Kalinka accordion band actually had no name, and in fact, wasn't really even a band in the real sense of the word because its repertoire wasn't very big. Specifically, it consisted of the song Kalinka, that is, its first stanza. Comrade Borovsky held two concerts a year – in honor of Victorious February and Victorious October. The big, socialist, revolutionary celebrations. He always had to hold rehearsals beforehand because between February and November and then between November and February the group always fell apart. They were in honor of the Soviet victory and our, then Czechoslovak, brotherly victory and also the victory of the working people. Despite this fact, on the stage, under the direction of Comrade Borovsky, stood seven kids, staggering under the weight of seven accordions. They would always trip, because they couldn't see their feet over the tops of those enormous instruments, which were the property of the state, administered by the orphanage. And they always started with Ka-lin-ka, ka-lin-ka maja...

After three minutes of pulling and pushing, playing wrong notes, and careening in and out of tempo, the seven suicidal accordionists would finish playing and there would be applause, a bit tepid, as if the audience were clapping dust off their hands. And that's basically the reason why it was hard to find a kid in the village who was willing to go through that humiliation more than once. The exception was Martin Galas, whose mother was the cook at the orphanage. Comrade Borovsky continually threatened to lower her pay if Martin left the band. Not that the boy was such a good musician, not at all. He was one of those who, after an exhausting practice session still couldn't play the song from beginning to end without mistakes, never mind staying in tempo. He was the one who usually made them fall apart during a song. Except that, if he quit, Comrade Borovsky would no longer be able to say the magic words: "Look, if Martin Galas can last five years, you can do it once."

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After 1989, Martin Galas became one of the first businessmen in the village. In the first half of the 1990s he even managed to privatize three apartment buildings, but his empire fell apart even faster than it had been built. They didn't find Martin's body until years later. In the woods after a windstorm when they were clearing away fallen trees. I can't say how much of the responsibility for that lay with Kalinka, maybe he had a tendency toward submissiveness genetically encoded in him – his mother is a shining example of that. But, when I look back at it all today, with thirty years in between, I can see that already then, he was the only one of us whose whole head was visible above his 90-bass accordion and he had a victim look about his face, and we were all pathetically pale. I don't want to sound cynical, but everything points to his irreversible fate as a fall guy. I have to admit that after Martin Galas, I was the second kid in the village who got up on cultural center stage with the Kalinka group more than once. As opposed to him, I didn't take it as a tragedy. On the contrary, the accordion grew on me, and if I weren't so naturally modest, I'd say that I grew on it. I definitely figured out that in the most shameful public moments, it's good for hiding behind.

The Cantor's funeral turned out very well. The women wept, the men crushed their hats in their hands with emotion. Organ music filled the church and the instrument's bellowing tones inspired piety even in those who were usually pretty indifferent. The agreement that I had accepted was simple. Comrade Borovsky would play the funeral for me, but I would become a member of the accordion band and would bring two friends to join as well. Comrade Borovsky would, of course, be at the organ, as we say, incognito and if anyone found out it was him, Comrade Borovsky would pull me by the ear and arrange with the school Principal for me to get a 'B' for behavior. Or maybe a 'C'. And the same thing would happen if I quit the accordion band.

The funeral went well, everything went smoothly because I brought the priest into it as well, of course with the agreement of Comrade Borovsky, who had no problem with it. Comrade Borovsky was once, in fact, a student of theology. How else would a communist functionary come to have musical training? I think it was that fact that made them, as we say, allies. Later I understood that there is little that brings together those with different opinions better than the feeling of being partners in crime.

As long as it was just between us, we could consider it an agreement. If someone had made it public, it would have been pushed over the edge into "collaboration". It's not clear to me, though, who collaborated with whom, but that it was about collaboration – that was clear. If even one of the old women had seen us coming out of the locked choir box, it was guaranteed the whole village would find out. Except that not one old woman, but all the mourners saw us coming out of the choir box door, so nothing happened and I don't know whether to chalk it up to the emotion of the moment, or to the generosity of the congregation, but they simply decided not to notice. There was probably a role played by the fear that Comrade Borovsky's function engendered. Who would want to report on the chairman of the local party cell? In the village, there was basically no one to complain to, since he held the highest position and no one took the comrades at the district office seriously.

VI. I entered prep school so I could get a good base for studying theology. Of course, I did it despite protests from my entire family and mostly it was very calculating. I was a little over 14 years old, had a promising future and no idea what I wanted to be. But I definitely didn't want to be anything ordinary. I hoped that when I announced that I wanted to become a priest, that for my family it would be something like the end of the world. Mama would burst into tears, Dad would clear his throat in shock and then I would get some reward when I finally gave in. Summer was coming and I really wanted a racing bike with those curved handlebars.

When I told my parents that I wanted to become a priest, I had the feeling that I had fought the hardest battle of my life. I needed to be so determined! I've never been so determined and so vehement since then. The rest of my life is a festival of compromises. And the majority can only be considered compromises by a big stretch of the imagination. The only one who was happy about my decision to become a priest was my grandmother. She said that at least there would be someone to bury me. My father looked at my mother and my mother looked out the window and burst into tears. I don't know why I had the feeling that, at that moment, my parents were looking for an answer to the same question as my geography teacher. Is our son a total idiot, or is he just making total fun of us? I still don't even know myself.

I got through my prep school studies – I don't even know how. I only remember how much I wanted it and what a desperately bad student I was. I wasn't mentally equipped, I had no knowledge and no experience, and I definitely had no courage whatsoever. I wanted to travel, see the world, but given the reality that I would need cash collateral even to get to the Hungarian People's Republic, I gave up from the beginning. Our closed borders made geography, history and aesthetics at best abstract notions. I considered English language about as

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important as the basics of embroidery. After all, where the hell was I going to meet an Englishman in the middle of Poprad in 1979? Let alone an American. Only in my dreams. And there I could talk to them in Slovak.

The determination to become a priest left me even sooner than it stopped irritating my parents. And I would have liked to forget completely about my past life as a head altar boy. I discovered the charm of historical novels about great people in history. I longed to be big and famous like them. I wanted to become a great painter, sculptor, discoverer of Troy, whatever, as long as everyone was talking about me – oh, what a great man! I wanted to be at least as famous as Henri Toulouse – Lautrec. Or Picasso.

In my last year of school I applied for accordion studies. The entrance exams went horribly. I played one song with my right hand, and a different one with my left. Don't even ask how it could have happened. It did. The worst thing about it was that I didn't even notice. I was concentrating on fingering and I only noticed that there was something wrong from the look on the judges' faces. They were cringing from physical pain. Imagine someone rubbing sandpaper on your teeth for about 5 minutes without stopping. I didn't make up that analogy. The head of the selection committee did. He used it when he verbally evaluated my performance. When I got the refusal letter, I was so offended that out of spite I filled out an application for military school. I wanted to be an agent. I longed for things that had nothing to do with reality. It was then that I was just finishing a book about the notorious Soviet agent Sorge and I imagined how I would ruin one of the enemy powers' big and devastating plans, whose goal was no less than to take over the world. When I gave the completed application to my father, he immediately smacked me and tore it up.

To get out of military service, I ended up at the education faculty, a repository for young people whose ambition far outstripped their abilities. I continued in the career that I had started so well during elementary school and which, because of acne and frequent wet dreams, I neglected in high school. I represented my university in sports and in literary and art competitions. I was also a teaching assistant. Despite this, my teachers didn't like me. And if they did, then they did it carefully. They felt instinctively that I was one of those weirdoes, from whom one can't expect anything good in a pinch. I think it was because of that smile of mine, which I've already talked about and which, as we say, had developed. And because of the accordion. I took it with me on all the excursions and temporary student jobs. I even found the courage to sing. Not everyone enjoyed it. Certainly not always.

At the beginning of university I went through a short, but militant period of atheism and terrible scenes with my mother, who in her old age had started insisting that I go to church and keep all the holidays. So that I wouldn't lose my faith, when I became a socialist teacher. This did not fit well at all with my concept of weekends spent largely lying around in bed.

Then for a time I became an upright young political cadre. I was angry with Havel, Patoček, Černogurský and the other dissidents. And at Karel Kryl, Peter, Marián and Anton Šťastný and the other emigrants. I was mad at them for complaining about us from abroad instead of joining us, the builders of society, here. That way they could have contributed to a better tomorrow constructively, not with some empty words on the radio and for an American paycheck.

Except that I had luck with my teachers, who were pushed aside to Prešov after '68 for being unreliable. They were the kind of personalities where you could say one thing and they would take it and relate a whole book about it. Or they could change a young person's view of the world. We were like sponges. Whatever they dipped us in dripped from us.

In the evenings, I began to realize more and more that you couldn't believe in official propaganda, and that I had no more energy to hope. And there wasn't anything to build either, if we were talking about a developed socialist society. This broke my already fragile character. November '89 found me totally decomposed. We all felt clearly that we couldn't go on living the way we were living. But we couldn't begin to imagine any other way to live, let alone fight for it.

VII. In '87, we got our diplomas and they sent us out to teach. I ended up in Bánovce. In the beginning, I hated it I guess about the same way Comrade Borovsky hated my home village. As for Comrade Borovsky, today he is a proper organist in our church and also directs the church choir that sung for Pope John Pall II when he gave mass at Levočská Hora for 250,000 people.

Bánovce is a small, friendly, nasty town full of the same kind of people one would find in a forgotten short story by one of Slovakia's greatest writers from a hundred years ago. The right size for there to be enough of those people who were always ready to point out any extravagance. This is where I experienced that whole key-jingling thing, as they called it in the town when we still weren't sure which side the discussion partner was sitting on.

After the news of the events of November 17, 1989, there were those who got drunk in celebration, repeatedly. There were those who went up to the podium and those who were pushed up there. Complete with musical instruments. The latter was my case, of course. Play, they said, and at first I didn't know what. I was terrified. There was nowhere to hide, and even if there had been, it was too late and I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of the whole town. I mean, I was their children's teacher! And furthermore, during those days, to us it wasn't clear at all how it was going to turn out. The communists were meeting, sending reports and people were scared it would all end the same way it did in '68.

Phys-ed specialist and body occupying the Principal's office, Stano Mizík, was yelling just as he always did when he got drunk that he hang us from the chandelier. Whom he meant, I don't exactly know, but it was clear that I would be among them. I had stolen his girlfriend, even though I don't understand why she liked me better, even for only one evening. And I married her, but after a year she left me too. In an unfurnished cooperative apartment. She took the couch and the color TV and moved back in with her mother saying that this was not how she had imagined marriage to be. I spent days gluing model ships out of toothpicks and put them in bottles. That is, I glued them directly inside the bottle. It takes unbelievable patience, because...I just realized that my wife never let me talk about my hobby for this long, ever.

I guess it was a pretty big waste of time, now that I look back. My wife couldn't possibly have understood that it was my way of dealing with my lost illusions. Sometimes I would play the accordion, but it got on the neighbors' nerves. That's because, as you've probably realized by now, I'm no concert musician. Not even close. I could haltingly play those 10-12 songs over and over, that's it. Because I couldn't read music and my brain simply couldn't remember any more than that. If I managed to learn a new piece – with much sweating – it automatically pushed one of the old ones out of my head. I never knew which old one would disappear, so I just stopped learning new ones.

So my neighbors' attitude was understandable. As opposed to my wife, they were relieved when I started make model ships in a bottle. And I came to terms with my lost illusions and my mid-life crisis, which usually came earlier under socialism. Of course, my wife couldn't possibly have had any idea what was going on, because at the time, neither did I. It seemed like a noble and meaningful way of passing the time. We had nowhere to rush to and nothing to strive for. I had about 40 years of teaching in front of me and life in the same apartment, with the same woman, so I needed some hobbies that would – as we say – lead somewhere. One ship took about six months.

Everyone I knew had something like that. My colleague Kosek, a math teacher, carved night-lights out of old crates with a hack saw. Laco Viskup from the seventh floor found himself in his car, a Skoda. He would take it out of the garage on Saturday mornings, crank it up on a jack, take two of the wheels off and get down under the car. And he wouldn't come out until Sunday. When it rained, his wife had to stand over him with an umbrella. This scene would repeat itself the following weekend, except that he would take the other two wheels off.

There were those who spent all their free time in the pub. They drank beer and gin and cursed the communists, Moscow and America. Almost nothing has changed there, it just occurred to me. I tried it too a couple of times, but it didn't do me any good. The drinking, that is. I have no problem cursing at anything at all. But it was no fun. By that time, the communists were as boring for us as their television newscasts. Really nothing was happening. Although we didn't realize it, we were waiting for the end of the world. No apocalypse, grinding of teeth, groans and shrieks. Nothing like that. Just a quiet death from interminable boredom.

We cursed at everything. But quietly. We called it beer-talk, that is, actually not we, but our wives called it that. They were the ones trying to bring up the next generation of builders of a better tomorrow while we sat around in pubs with names like "Star", "Kazachok", "Friendship" and "Sputnik". At that time, only the most ambitious collaborated with the communists. And I, having become slightly pudgy and very lazy, was certainly not one of them. I do know one person who joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia on November 17, 1989 after trying to get in for seven years. But he was not an everyday sort of guy. Among other things, he's an actor. Can you imagine what kind of an incompetent idiot he was? I mean the normal waiting period for acceptance into the Party was – at that time – six months? And anyone who could sign their name was good enough for them.

One morning sometime in the summer of 1989, I woke up and was reconciled to the fact that I would never be a grown-up. I wasn't even particularly disappointed. I was even relieved, if I recall correctly. It was a Saturday. I put on my slippers and shuffled into the kitchen so I could see what I looked like. Nothing. If I don't count the stupid expression everyone has on their face when they've just gotten out of bed.

Except for actors in American movies. Until then I hadn't seen many and so I thought it was just something the directed wanted. But since then, I've seen hundreds of them and I still haven't seen an American movie where the hero or heroine had trouble opening their eyes. As soon as the phone, the alarm clock or the postman rings, or a thief, murderer or detective comes into the bedroom, American actors are always immediately fully awake and thinking clearly. And they don't have stinky morning breath. Maybe, it occurred to me then, that's the reason America is so ahead in everything. I still suspect the same today.

So November 1989 interrupted these meditations of mine. When I was 13, I figured out that I would be 36 when the year 2000 came around. And I was excited that I would probably live to see that great moment. But then I was sad that I would already be so old and wouldn't really see anything of the 21st century. I couldn't prepare for November. I wasn't expecting it at all. Did it come too soon? Too late? I really don't know. And I've been thinking about it for 20 years.

VIII. I became a revolutionary because I was angry with Alexander Dubček. My accordion played the main role there. And my smile. I had forgotten that I even had one once, but when I got up on that podium, it was back. I can't say it was gentle, but it worked, that's for sure. But let's take this story in order. Sometime during the fall of 1989, I started to seriously consider emigrating. I kept remembering more and more often my father's subtle statements about how nothing was happening here and that I should do something with my life or I would end up like him. I used to see him on Sunday afternoons sitting on the wooden bench under the apple tree looking down into his hands. They were empty and I didn't understand why he was always looking at them. I have the feeling he saw that stupefying emptiness in them. Despite the calluses, which would have made a great exhibit on the efforts of those building a new society. What he created belonged to everyone. And no one. What he failed at, was only his. I'm afraid that there was much more in the second category. And those like him were the majority in our small, sad country on the other side of the fence. A true majority. The silent majority. He looked into his hands and couldn't understand where all his effort had gone to.

Then he would raise his head and sigh. Later he not only sighed, but cursed. Long before November happened. As if something were eating him up inside. "I won't kick you out of the house, son, but you don't have to make the same mistakes I have", he would say during moments of sincerity. I always thought he was talking about the limited world of our village. Only in those last years just before November did I realize what he was actually telling me. We never talked openly about the regime, the system or – as we used to say then – about politics. When I was a child, I didn't understand yet and could have slipped up and said something dangerous at school. Those were the 1970s. The years of brutal normalization and committees that verified citizens' loyalty to the regime. Do you agree with the entrance of the Warsaw Pact armies into Czechoslovakia? Answer 'no' and that was the end of your career. Are you reconciled with the question of religion? 'No' and it was the end of your children's children's careers. Those who said 'NO' were truly few and far between. Most said 'Yes' and meant 'No'. It was somewhere in there that our schizophrenia began. In the West they call it "doublethink". In the West they know how to find such nice names for everything. But, in reality, we were truly a schizophrenic society.

The worst thing was that lots of people weren't bothered by it. I saw it as a child. Then I wasn't a child anymore and my father was the one who didn't understand what was happening. I saw that maybe he was waiting for me to begin, but I didn't. To this day I don't know why. Well, I do know. I was lacking self-confidence. And an elementary pride that I was an independent human being. But where was I supposed to get that pride if I wasn't an independent human being? I wasn't fighting for freedom because I had no idea what real freedom even was. I had nowhere to learn it. Freedom is an amazing thing, but it's not going to look for you. You have to look for it. Just like in a fairytale. The boy character had to leave his house and go out into the world. And at the crossroads he had to choose the right road. Then it goes by itself. OK, almost. One can deviate from the right road anytime.

Except that I had no idea about this then. And so we lived in a kind of silent agreement based on the assumption that if we didn't get mixed up in politics, politics wouldn't get mixed up with us.

You know that kid's game, hide and seek, where the child stands in the middle of the room, hands pressed hard over their eyes and shouts – "You can't see me! You can't see me!" And the adults walk around the child, looking under the bed, under the table and behind the cupboard again and again and say, "Where could that little snot-nosed brat of ours be? Where could he be?" A nice game, till you're about three. And that's exactly how old we were, as a political nation. Mentally we were at the level of a child who is just beginning to understand the difference between "I" and "we".

At the end of November 1989, when the Bánovce revolutionary party finally found the courage to hold a demonstration in support of the student leaders' demands, I had just gone to sell my accordion. Actually, I was already on my way home because I couldn't sell it. The buyer didn't show. It was a parent of one of my students who wanted it for his son. It occurred to me that the Russian organ had just gone out of fashion with blinding speed, as I sat waiting for him at the Filagoria pub. I wanted to sell my accordion because my decision to emigrate had reached the acute stage.

Later I found that I wasn't alone. We didn't know anything yet about the East Germans climbing over the walls of the embassy in Prague. We didn't know that the Hungarians had opened the border with Austria. We had no idea that in August almost two and a half million Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians took each other's hands and made a living chain from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius. Or the other way around, if you go from south to north. They did it to protest against the occupation – by the Soviet Union. We also had no real information about the communists' election defeat in Poland. We didn't believe what was on national TV and radio, and all kinds of rumors were going around. Any reasonable person didn't believe anyone or anything and an even more reasonable person didn't even listen to any of people's "guaranteed news". They sat at home, making model ships in a bottle and didn't give a damn about anything. From this point of view, there was no limit to my wisdom.

In Prague and Bratislava they were already demonstrating and my other quiet, insistent self had decided to emigrate. As you can see, I actually wasn't that rational. But I was lucky. For once in my life I was lucky. Good thing I didn't blow that luck by winning some lottery or marrying well! It was already getting dark under the chestnut trees and the buyer and I had agreed to meet at two-thirty, when he came from the Tatra factory. I was already on my second beer and he still hadn't come. It only occurred to me afterward why the pub was empty. Everyone was on the square. I paid for the beer and left for home. Through the square. I couldn't walk diagonally across – it was packed with people. At the podium, someone was giving a speech. I have no idea what they were saying because the sound was terrible and he was interrupted every two minutes by applause and shouting. The thing they shouted most often was "We have empty hands! We have empty hands!!" They could have just as easily shouted "we have empty pockets". That was true too. It looked like I was going to get through, but then my colleague Stano Mizík saw me. "Here comes the accordion!!" he shouted. "Sugar, come here!!" And suddenly lots of hands were pulling me forward and up onto the podium. The minute I got up there, they started clapping. I don't know who took my accordion out of its case, I don't know who handed it to me. I only noticed how Mizík furiously whispered in my ear. "What?! Play!! What? Anything! We're waiting for a car full of actors from Bratislava and Dubček is supposed to come. We've all spoken already at least twice. We need to entertain them somehow, those asshole actors are late." "But I..." "PLAY!!" In the meantime the citizens were clapping and shouting: "Sugar play! Sugar play!!" My accordion buyer was standing right in front under the podium slapping the podium rhythmically. Then it happened.

I put my fingers on the keys and the bass buttons and started to play. The well-known notes floated out across the main square of Bánovce. I played the only song that I knew I had some chance of playing right. Yellow Submarine by the Beatles. And I sang the Russian version of the text: "my pastrojili zholty parachod, zholty parachod"...The whole square sang with me. When I finished, they yelled – more! MOOORE!! So I played Yellow Submarine again: "my pastrojili zholty parachod, zholty parachod"...And again they sang.

A legend circulated among people that it was a brilliant combination of satire addressed to the East and those in power – read Moscow and our nomenklatura – and expectations addressed to the West and to the people – read the normal world, the newly-awakened people and democracy itself. I don't know. I think that even if I had played Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, they would have interpreted it the same. Today we would say it was "by popular demand".

When I had played it for the third time, someone yelled: "Let him speak! Speech! Speech!" shouted the whole square. What should I say? I asked, turning to the others on the podium. "Anything", someone shouted back. Dubček's not coming anyway, he added. I turned to the crowd under the podium and automatically smiled. Instead of shouting there was applause. It lasted for as long as I smiled.

Sometimes I'm tempted to think that if I hadn't stopped smiling, they'd still be clapping today. But I cleared my throat. And the square was quiet. I took a breath and slowly, clearly and in a shaking voice, said: "I've been waiting for this moment my whole life". It wasn't true. I hadn't been waiting for that moment at all. But when I heard myself say it, I wanted to believe it. I took another breath and wanted to continue. Except that I couldn't. The square exploded into frenzied applause. Alexander Dubček had stepped onto the podium.

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He shook my hand and came to stand next to me. The applause was for him. Dubček smiled. So I smiled too. We just stood there, smiling. I guess Dubček knew why he was smiling, but I didn't. That is, if I exclude the possibility that it was a cramp. Nonetheless, since then I've been using it. That smile. I call it the Alexander look. Do you remember his smile? Like your kindly smile uncle with the crinkly eyes. As if it were a sunny Sunday afternoon, the apple pie and coffee are about to be served, you can smell the lilacs outside the window, the bees are buzzing from flower to flower and kids in white knee-socks are playing on the swing in the garden. Then we built the whole election campaign on that smile, too.

At that moment, I didn't realize yet that that broad smile was more effective than most of my arguments. It's reassuring – above all to me. Or at least it gives me time to think of something to say. I never realized it, but it means that I used it. We do so many things unconsciously, completely automatically and they influence our life more than anything else. For example, washing your hands after using the bathroom.

A certain Mr. Duračka kept forgetting that, because he just couldn't get used to the fact that in an apartment building there are bathrooms where there are, as opposed to a latrine, not only flush toilets, but also soap and running water. I basically taught him to flush, his widow told us at his funeral. But if I wanted him to wash his hands, I had to stand in front of the bathroom door and shout "wash your hands! Even so, he never listened to me. He did it himself only once and...the last time," she added through her tears. Duračka used to smoke in the bathroom. And they had a gas water heater in there. When he turned the hot water tap on, something in the water heater clicked and made a loud noise. Duračka was curious about the noise and leaned over to look into the heater, forgetting that he had a cigarette between his teeth. What's interesting is that he didn't die from burns – the flame that devoured his cigarette like a torch only singed his eyebrows. He died from a compound fracture of the skull. He was so startled by the fire that he fell backwards and hit the back of his head on the shelf on the opposite wall. So, in fact, if he hadn't gone to wash his hands after using the toilet, he'd still be alive. And his wife shouldn't have put that shelf there. If you look at it that way, she's the one who killed him.

But back to my smile. Velvet, friendly, call it what you will. It was the smile of a sweet and peaceful revolutionary. Sweet mainly to himself. I became a revolutionary because I was mad at Alexander Dubček. Just when I had the feeling that all the glory was mine, he came and took it from me. I didn't like that. So I started to smile too. And then I never stopped. I can tell you with a clear conscience that it works. You don't believe me? Look at the Americans. The Japanese. Even the French have learned how. When they're at work, they smile at each other. They smile so they can avoid problems. If it works for the French, it has to work for anyone, I told myself. Good thing I did. You should try it yourself.

IX. Bánovce is generally an interesting town. Monsignor Jozef Tiso, the first Slovak president worked there. Ľudovít Štúr, our greatest political strategist, father of the formal written Slovak language and of the Slovaks as a political nation, was born nearby in Uhrovec. And Alexander Dubček too. I have to smile when I think how easily that information comes out of me. When I listen to myself, I feel like some kind of guide in the museum of lost chances, who takes visitors through the exhibit with a kind of bored joviality. Exactly like that lady in Štúr's and Dubček's birth-house. Because, actually, Štúr and Dubček were not only born in the same town, but in the very same house and the same bed. I always liked to emphasize to my students that they had the same mother. When they would look at me in disbelief, I would smile cunningly like a fox – the motherland. They couldn't say anything to that, so at least they would roll their eyes.

Who could ask for a better indicator of the smallness of our environment? You just can't find a better one. We have four internationally-known figures and two of them had to be born in the same place; and the third one used to go there on Sunday afternoons and play cards with the pharmacist. At least Štefánik, one of our country's founders, didn't fly his plane over Uhrovec on his last flight. At least he crashed near Bratislava. If he had flown over Uhrovec, he definitely would have crashed in the yard of Štúr's birth-house.

Slovakia is small, but it's ours. And we're not giving it to anyone. Please, do not mistake me for some vulgar nationalist. I'm quite respectful in this sense, especially since my second wife left me. "Hungarian slut!", I yelled at her, when she took our furniture out of the apartment. She even took the TV. Right when they were showing the soccer game with the Czechs! The qualifying round. And we were leading. In Prague!! Do you get it?! That's what you Czechs get for stealing our flag. And our airline. And the historical victories of our hockey players during federation times. And who scored that goal against the Russians in 1970 in the World Championships? Granddaddy the Czech? No, Golonka, a Slovak!!

They were losing and they lost. That soccer game. That's what you get for shooting down Štefánik, I thought to myself then. We won 2 : 1. But that I learned from the Bishop's car radio, because my wife took the TV. She certainly left me with a strong feeling of historical betrayal. What else could one expect from a Hungarian?

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Hand on my heart. I cursed her unjustly. At least because she could have picked a better time to take the TV. That wasn't at all what I was cursing at her about. She simply fell in love with another man and ran away with him. God forbid she should have stayed when I wasn't even home for Christmas sometimes. I was building my political career. And that other guy must have had something going for him if he managed to get her and our twins. I think he's a better father to them than I could ever have imagined. And she's not even Hungarian. She's only from Nitra, where there are lots of them. And anyway, we curse at the Hungarians all the time.

In Bánovce my whole political career was played out. I was a city councilman and a founding member of the Slovak National Party, the Christian Democratic Party and the Greens. Not all at once, but gradually. Some would call me a turncoat, but I would prefer the term political maturation. The declaration of Slovakia's independence was a surprise for me. I was furious again. This time at Havel.

We, down here, had no idea what was going on. Again. I considered this not only a lack of democracy in politics, but as Havel's personal mistake. I had chosen him as the guarantor of everything we wished for then, when we still didn't even dare to dream about it. This was simply because we still had no idea about all those things, all the temptations that life in a free world could offer. For me he was the only politician who spoke and acted the way I myself would have liked to act and speak. I was mad at him for letting himself be fooled and allowing the division of Czecho-Slovakia. Do you remember? That's exactly how the war of the dash ended. Czecho-dash-Slovakia. With a capital 'Č' and a capital 's'. And a dash with no spaces around it. On paper. In reality it meant shit. And then we went our separate ways. So I took that divorce personally too. I broke up with the Hungarians in the guise of my second wife and with the Czechs as personified by Vaclav Havel. The fact that they don't care pisses me off twice as much.

I got used to an independent Slovakia so fast, that I even surprised myself. Today I think it should have happened much earlier. And I'm convinced that it's Havel's fault. How could such a wise and principled person be against such a natural and inevitable thing as Slovakia having its own star on the European Union flag? Today I'm mad at him just because. As a matter of habit. One has to be angry with those who can take it, after all. And besides that, in political practice, if you don't have a scapegoat that you can blame everything on, that you can't or don't want to do anything about, you're finished before you even begin. Here at the regional level, it's even more true.

So, smile, promise everything that people want and when it doesn't work, find a guilty party. Or in a pinch, find objective reasons why. This is the only real work of a politician. And you are being told this by a person who was elected to city parliament three times in a row, and each time as the member of a different party! So one can understand that this is why I've neglected my accordion for the past 20 years. But I still remember the Yellow Submarine once in a while. And tonight I'll play it. As soon as someone rings the doorbell, I won't even say "come in", I'll just start playing!

X. In the last elections I ran for city council again. This time as an independent. After all those years of work on behalf of the citizens of my town and through practically every political party, I can afford it. At least I thought so. I thought wrongly. So now I feel a little like Churchill. I've won the war and lost the elections. It doesn't matter. It has to be clear to everyone that it wasn't about some party loyalty for me, or personal benefits, but about the substance. For the good of the citizens. For their benefit. About democracy, freedom and those other fundamental things. About values as such. So I decided to found my own party. It'll be called the Party of Mutual Admiration. Its founding members will be those who come to my party tonight. That's why I'm waiting so impatiently for my friends. Yes, November 1989 represents a certain milestone. But for me, it's much more meaningful to remember that night when my friends and I were reborn. Under circumstances that aren't even very important. What's important is that we made it through that test and came out stronger. And most importantly, we survived.

We grew up, as they say, overnight. The silent masses became citizens, citizens became a political nation, and some members of the political nation became their elite – the political leaders. Exactly the way Ľudovít Štúr wished it to be. It did take us almost 150 years, but it had to happen sometime. I'm hearing myself say this for the first time in 20 years and I'm impressed all over again. God, I am so sensitive to true values! What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, we said, as we dug the remains of our revolution headquarters in Bánovce out of the ashes the next morning. And it happened so innocently. We came together, as usual, late in the evening. After all the visits to the surrounding schools and plants and "houses of culture". I became one of the main participants of these visits. My accordion did, that is. It couldn't go without me. It's part of human nature for a person who's heard a lot of talk to want to rest and digest what he or she's heard.

That's when I stepped in, with my accordion. When I finished playing, I would smile. Then, when the dramatic pause started to get awkward, I would say my famous line: I've been waiting for this moment my whole life...They would clap and I would smile. I tried other songs too, like Kubišová and Brother Close the Gate, and Hoffman's *We Prooomised Each Other Looooove*. Yellow Submarine always had the biggest success. In Bánovce and the surrounding towns, it became a revolutionary song, period. I waited for that moment my whole life, I told myself when I was falling asleep at night. I always remembered that moment when I was all packed up. That Saturday morning and my wrinkled face in the mirror. It was gone. Instead of that face, I now wore the smile of a velvet revolutionary. Velvet, above all, to myself, of course.

On that fateful evening, we were coming back from Uhrovec, the home village, once a town, of Dubčák and Štúr. The citizens were disappointed because they'd been waiting for their famous and freshly-resurrected native son. We were both tired and enchanted, but events overtook us. Someone had returned from Bratislava and was claiming that everything was clear and we didn't have to make such an effort. Havel and Budaj had agreed with the communists and were going to quietly divide everything up, without Dubčák. We didn't want to believe it. We resisted with logic and when it didn't help, with other, even more fantastic theories. In those theories roles were played by Moscow, or Washington. And of course the STB, KGB and CIA. Everyone pretended to know exactly where things stood. But the fact that we'd forgotten about the Mosad showed our level of naiveté clearly.

At the beginning of the evening, it looked as though we would be arguing about who was right. Not more or less right, but about the one and only truth! It wasn't about who was right in the end, but that we had learned to seek the truth. We learned how to formulate what we actually wanted. We learned how to debate. We learned how to carry on a dialogue. When the tension and smoke in the room were so thick you could cut them with a knife, somebody suggested we sing. And he was looking at me. I told him to fuck off. The others nodded. It looked like I knew what I was talking about. But I really, really didn't feel like picking up that monster again. And I was already a little bit ashamed of those old ditties I kept playing over and over again. In fact, I was mortified. From the very beginning.

I took a breath and prepared to yell at them. That they could all go to hell, that I would tell them it's time for us to stop playing revolutionaries and go home quietly. Enough. Let's stop playing at democracy, we don't know how! We're doing something we don't know how to do! Let's go back to our beekeeping, our model shipbuilding and our tinkering with cars in the garage in front of the apartment building.

Today I know that I was frightened by responsibility. I was exhausted from all that freedom. All those choices. Just like any insecure, cowardly creature, I wanted to shed them. If at that moment someone else had appeared and offered to decide for us and tell us what to do, we would have picked him up and carried him around for joy. And we did carry him. Maybe that's what made us so tired. We had no more strength to argue, never mind carry on a constructive dialogue. My God, how I hated that expression! I tried to smile, but in vain. I deduced quickly from this that my smile only worked on public podiums.

I was annoyed and ashamed at everything that was going on. I was also afraid. And I wasn't alone. That doesn't excuse it, I know. But it was true. We weren't prepared. We weren't prepared to take responsibility or demand it from others. Especially not from politicians. Not even if we ourselves were the politicians. We slept little and badly. We woke up in the middle of the night. From fear. What are we doing? Seriously, I was afraid that someone would stop me and ask – OK, but why are you actually doing all this? And what do you actually hope to achieve? And who is the enemy now? Where are they? How will we recognize them? I was unhappy then because I didn't know the answers to those questions. Today I'm unhappy because I'm not even sure of the questions. At that time, at our revolutionary headquarters, I had no doubts. There was no time for them. Basically only one thing worked – the instinct for self-preservation.

I wanted to tell them this. Out loud. Like at the podium. With a smile too. I stood up, took a breath and said: "Come on..." and they began to applaud and some shouted: "Right! Let Sugar speak!" And what did I do?! Well of course, I smiled. And as I was smiling, I got an idea. And I said it immediately. "We should prepare for the elections."

The people in the headquarters fell silent, like in those American movies when someone declares the awful truth. It only took a second, maybe less, but I saw amazement in everyone's eyes. An amazement that came out of the realization that in our revolutionary fervor, we had forgotten to do the most important thing. We'd forgotten to divvy up the pie.

Let's prepare for the elections. Let's agree on post-election cooperation. Let's divvy up the pie. At that time we didn't know that those three sentences meant the same thing. But we all got it right away. Such

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a hubbub broke out, that if it had been a fountain, it would have sprayed as high as the church tower. By the way, did you know that to this day, on the Bánovce church, below the cross, there's a swastika?!

What began as a routine meeting of the party became a huge divvying up party. We parceled out absolutely everything. Community services, garbage disposal, household heating, even the bulletin boards at the cemetery. There were those who were unhappy with the result, but we told them they could leave. And we managed to wait until they did actually leave. Stano Mizik, the pinnacle of revolution in our town, didn't want to leave, so he talked a lot. He started shouting something about ideals. We were really tired. So we beat the crap out of him. He still limps today. He may even have a wooden leg. I think I even lent a hand with it, I don't remember exactly. I was too taken by the idea of post-election cooperation.

When everything was agreed, and no one had been left without a job and a sphere of influence, we returned to ideals. There was wine on the table all night, but we only began to pay close attention to it from that moment on. In the end, I took out my accordion myself. Somehow it was a relief. In my own defense I can only say that the only thing I asked for was to be Director of the Town Cultural Center.

Midnight was approaching, the party was heating up and then I only remember the sirens of the fire engines, the blinking blue lights and the flames rising from the headquarters building. We watched the firemen and shivered under blankets. Someone came with one of those guaranteed pieces of news that STB secret police agents had set it on fire. They wanted to choke the revolution off, someone shouted into the December night. It didn't fly. It was clear to everyone that we'd just spent the whole night getting drunk.

When the fire had gone out, one of the firemen came out with a jug of wine in his hand. He raised it over his head and yelled: "Hey, anyone want some hot mulled wine?" There was laughter. We were relieved that no one had been caught inside. And at that moment I felt like a character from that Steinbeck novel

Tortilla Flat. There too, a beautiful friendship ended because a group of vagabonds fell asleep before they had finished drinking. I had to agree with that brilliant author that for such thanklessness we deserved nothing else but an exemplary punishment.

In my case, the accordion was the one that suffered. It stayed inside the building, in the fire. Along with our revolutionary solidarity. The investigation showed it was caused by an electrical short circuit. A piece of paper in the garbage pail caught fire from the oil-powered radiator and there were "flames shooting up to the roof". So no secret police agents. No counter-revolution. Just bad wiring. The revolution in Bánovce burned itself out. At the last moment. We didn't have the strength for anything more.

In the end, the elections turned out better than expected. Specifically this meant that the communists didn't win. The people below the podium had more courage and smarts than those who had called them there. What more could we have wanted at that moment? Nothing. And so we're here. A free country of free people in a free world. Europe can count on us. On me for sure. Just what it will do with us, I truly don't know.

XI. When my political career petered out, I suddenly had a ton of time on my hands. Some elementary sensitivity returned as well. Some questions came back. Those fundamental ones, unfortunately. The urge to look for answers returned. That feeling that I should, after all, somehow deserve this life, came back. So I became a civic activist. I travel around the world and lecture on the horrors of totalitarianism. About the dangers of the transition period. No theories, just lots of specific examples. Hundreds of tiny cowardly moments. Tens of big failures. Two-three successes. I have a list. Disappointments, compromises, mistakes. Everything based on actual experience. People react very well when, in my non-existent English or stammering Russian, I let them feel appropriately superior. After all, no one could be as big a bungler as me. Of course, this post-totalitarian enlightenment work is not enough for one to make a living. So I started a company that tests the quality of security services. But that's another story. As you can see, a schizoid life once again. To cover myself, I did learn one new song. Leonard Cohen's *Dance Me to the End of Love*. I am trying to keep pace with the world. Even if, as you see, only with the lighter side of it. It would be right to admit one more thing here. I fell in love. I called her Love. With a capital L. She called me the same. I learned to sing Cohen because of her. I'm afraid, though, that she wouldn't listen to my singing today. Because there's a difference between falling in love and loving. And generally, I have the feeling that the world is fading a bit. It's losing its color, or something. Even sugar isn't what it used to be. Or salt. And Sugar - not at all. At least I've discovered whisky. So these are my worries at the moment. Lately I've been thinking about whether I should change my name back to Zukermann. Except that who will guarantee that in my case history won't repeat itself? I guess I'll stay

Malina. If history wants to deal with me, at least it won't steamroll me completely. Better if it swallows me. Like a raspberry.

Have you noticed what a big difference there is between past tense and present tense? Not only in terms of grammar. In terms of quality. As if it weren't even the same physical measure. Sometimes in the corner of my soul, I still hope that in the future, if I manage to make as many right decisions as I've made wrong ones so far, I won't have to look into empty hands. That is, if I somehow live so long that I deserve to sit on a wooden bench under an apple tree. Given my compromising nature, it's not very likely. But who would want to take away my hope if I don't give it up myself? And that's the difference for me. Until 1989 we weren't allowed to think this way. After 1989, we can. I can try to live my life with dignity. I don't have to, but I can. If I decide to do it, it's purely my business. A good motto for the Party of Mutual Admiration, don't you think?

XII. It's late. No one's coming tonight. It's OK. I'm used to drinking alone. Long live freedom! Democracy! I don't even know where I went wrong. Maybe it was when I realized that I don't know how to smile so nicely anymore. Maybe I should never have come down off the podium. I should have let myself be shot. Die like a hero. With a sweet smile on my lips. But that's probably something one has to deserve as well. I don't even have anything left to promise. My accordion is all I have left. For sale in an ad. I hope there's at least some joy left in it. Mr. Sugar and his golden oldies. So come on down. You'll see the smile of a man who ate both the cat and the canary. You'll see a smile that helped build socialism for twenty years, helped tear it down for a month and has spent the last 20 years recovering.