

Sebastijan Pregelj: White Horse

an excerpt from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh

1.

My great-grandmother Marija often said that people are worse after every war. She knew. She lived through two world wars and the war of independence, she outlived an Emperor, a King, a Regent and a Marshal. When gunshots resonated through Sarajevo and the First World War broke out, she was a girl of eleven. By the time peace came, she was the age when she looked at boys and boys looked at her. When the Second World War erupted, she was a woman at thirty-eight with a husband and three children. All five survived the war but soon after her husband and the oldest son died as a result of internment and forced labour. At the time of the War of Independence, she was eighty-eight. She had a son, a daughter, three grandsons, a granddaughter and two great-grandchildren. She worried about all of them but fortunately no harm came to any of us. Then another thirteen years passed and there came a day when she was lying in her bed and I was sitting on the wooden side rail. All of a sudden, she grabbed my hand, Look, a white horse! Raising her shaking head slightly from the pillow, she gazed at the half-open wardrobe door and smiled. I gave her a puzzled look, What do you mean? A white horse, she repeated. It came out of the wardrobe. See? Out of the wardrobe? I was surprised. Yes, she nodded. I have had it in there for a long time. But that's a secret, she gave me a mischievous smile. I haven't told anyone and nobody knows about it. Now *you* know, she dropped her head back onto the pillow.

When I was no longer a girl but also not yet a woman, it came running into our yard one day. Not here, she raised her thin hand in a barely perceptible gesture. At our place, out on the Marshes. Nobody knew who it belonged to. I asked my father whether we could keep it but he wouldn't hear of it. My father was strict. He said we couldn't keep something that wasn't ours.

She fell silent for a few moments and then continued, The horse stayed in our yard for a few days. It didn't go anywhere and nobody came for it. Eventually I let it

into the house and hid it in the wardrobe. Father thought the animal had gone away. Sometimes, when I woke up in the middle of the night, I could hear the horse neighing and stamping its feet lightly. Over time, the noises from the wardrobe died down and I forgot about the horse. As you know, I had other things to worry about.

And now it is here again! It appeared to you. That means that it likes you, trusts you. I nodded that that was probably true. You will be able to look after it when I'll be gone. Will you? I will. Promise? Promise, I nodded and with my right hand straightened the blanket that had begun to slip from the bed. Where do you feed it? I asked. In the kitchen, Great-grandma answered softly. It doesn't need much.

A few moments later she fell asleep. I stroked her cheek and straightened the lock of white hair on her forehead. I knew she was approaching the end. That was what the visiting nurse had said the previous day. Your grandmother's heart is slowing down. It will beat for another day, two, perhaps almost a week, but not more than that. Use the time you have left with her. I didn't explain to the nurse that she was my great-grandmother, not my grandmother. She was there doing her job and it didn't matter to her.

While Great-grandma was sleeping I observed her. Ever since I can remember, she had always worn a headscarf. Normally she would wear a grey skirt, a light blouse and a blue patterned apron, her head covered in a headscarf. Only if I called in on her so early that I surprised her and she was not entirely ready for the new day, did I ever see her without one. But on such occasions she disappeared quickly into the bathroom to re-emerge in a few moments with her head covered. Now she wasn't wearing a headscarf. I stared at her straight white hair and tried to recall whether she had ever told me about the horse. She had looked after me when I was a child until I was sent to nursery school at the age of three. I remember her cooking, tidying up and reading the newspaper all day, in between she would tell me stories. Sometimes she read books to me, more often feuilletons from newspapers that she would carefully cut out and kept in the kitchen table drawer. Occasionally she would just sit there, her hands resting in her apron, watching me play. At the time my favourite place to play was under the table. It was a different world down there. I would take my best-loved toys with me and stay there until lunch.

We would have lunch before everyone else. Every day, Great-grandma would place an enamel plate with soup on the table at just after twelve. The bottom of the plate had ducklings on it. She urged me to eat everything so I would see the ducklings. If I close my eyes, I can still see the colourful ducks with remnants of soup noodles and the odd piece of carrot all over them. Usually this was followed by potatoes and beef from the soup, sometimes she would cook me a chicken drumstick in the frying pan. When we had beef, I would ask her for more of the white parts. The white parts were fat, which I liked more than any cake. Great-grandma would try to convince me to have the meat instead, but the meat would stick in between my teeth, while the white fat melted in the mouth. At the time, chicken drumsticks seemed like food fit for royalty. If I were a prince or a king, I thought to myself, I would have chicken drumsticks every day for lunch and sometimes also for dinner.

How long ago is all that, I smiled. Far back. Too far, I stroked Great-grandma's bony cold hand. Showing through her wrinkled, translucent skin were dark veins and purple patches, bruises that she now got from the slightest blow whenever she was doing something. I thought about how as her heart gets weaker and slows down, her hand will become colder. Until she eventually falls asleep. She will not die, just sink into a deep sleep and stay there.

As I sat on the edge of her bed, watching her, I wondered how it was possible that at her age her skin is so smooth, barely a wrinkle. She reminded me of the saints sleeping in churches and monasteries. They are usually kept somewhere out of sight or down below in a cold underground crypt. Once a year, usually on their feast day, they are brought out and displayed for the people visiting the church on that day in much larger numbers than usual. Lining up to touch the glass coffin with the tips of their fingers, some of them even kissing the glass, believing that the kindness and grace of the holy person will help them. The lignified bodies of these saints in all the monasteries and churches have thin fingers, perhaps a little less knobbly than Great-grandma's, a little whiter, their nails perhaps a tone less yellow, their skin waxy. They look as if they are asleep. It is a long sleep. Some have been sleeping for five hundred years, some even longer. And so they will sleep until Judgement Day.

I stood up and walked past the living room where Mother was comforting my Nan, went into the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water I drank instantly. I could hear Mother telling Nan that she will not be alone. That she has us. I have you, Nan sobbed, but your mother is your mother. I cannot even imagine... it will be so empty.

Everything in the kitchen was as it had always been. Even the large black and red enamel pot with its lid chipped on one side stood on the back burner on the stove. Every few days, Great-grandma would make two litres or more of coffee substitute. Whenever she wanted a drink, she picked up the lid and used a ladle to fill her coffee cup. Then she added a heaped spoonful of sugar, stirred it, took a quick sip and nod, satisfied that it is good.

The last time she had made herself coffee was the previous morning. Then she said she wasn't feeling well. She returned to her room, lay down and fell asleep. Nan kept going in to check on her. She was worried. She could not recall the last time her mother had lain down and fallen asleep mid-morning. Even when she was ill, she used to lie down and look towards the door as if she was waiting for someone. At a hundred years of age, she was still healthy and with it. She knew everything that was going on. She would remember what she had read in the newspaper, heard on the radio or seen on TV. She remembered events from thirty, fifty, even ninety years ago. But she didn't talk much about that. Occasionally with Nan, not others.

She slept so peacefully that Nan stepped closer to the bed a few times, placing her hand under her mother's nose, holding it there until she could feel her exhalation. She was slightly relieved but still called her daughter, my mother, to come. As soon as possible. Together they called the doctor who promised to send a visiting nurse that very day. The nurse arrived just after four o'clock, less than half an hour after I had.

2.

You're still here? I was woken by a voice coming from Great-grandma's room. It was only a few steps away but sounded as if it was coming from some other space and

time. Yes, I'm here, I called out and returned to her room. As before, I sat on the edge of her bed.

You see, Great-grandma looked at me, the war was over at some point. I nodded, though I wasn't sure which war she was thinking about. Not long before, it had seemed as if it would never end, she continued, then Janez the postman came down the road, shouting from afar: The war's over! The war's over!

My father stood on the threshold and twisted his moustache. Did I tell you that my father had a moustache? A neat moustache, not like others who had bushy moustaches that made them look like stray dogs. Finally, he sighed and stepped across the yard to the road. I followed him. We saw people coming out of their houses upon hearing the news, happy that the bad times were over. For a moment we forgot about worries and fear, enthusiastically repeating: The war is over! The war is over!

No more terrible news from Galicia, no more horrific reports from the Isonzo Front! Now our boys just have to get back, said the postman when he reached our gate. Our boys now just have to get back, my father repeated and leaned against the wooden fence. He found his pipe in his pocket, packed the tobacco with his browned thumb and lit it. The men stayed silent. I didn't know why. Why were they silent at such good news?! Only later did I understand more clearly, Great-grandma moved her head and gazed at me. They were both silent because they knew that many of our boys would not return, and that many of those that will, would have an arm or leg missing or something wrong with their head. The return of many of these men would not bring relief but further worries. We knew how things had been until then. Nothing good. Messages came about those who had died, those who returned were maimed. Mica Hribar was left alone with five children, Vesna Maček with three, Franc Petelin returned blind and deaf, Miha Lužar missing both legs, Ivan Zalar without his right hand. My father would often sigh, It's hard to say what's better, to be left without a husband or for him to return a cripple, an extra mouth and no helping hand that can work. Yes, that is what it was like, Great-grandma Marija nodded slightly at her own words, or she didn't move and her head was simply shaking more intensely.

My father puffed a cloud of smoke and pushed back his hat, she smacked her lips. I can still see him, standing at the gate, still smell the sweet smoke of his pipe. I can still hear him ask, though my father didn't ask because he didn't know. He wanted to hear what others thought. And now? he looked at the postman on the day he brought the news about the end of the war. What will happen now? You tell me, said the postman. You have important men from Ljubljana come to visit you. I am just a simple man delivering parcels. I know you, my father smiled. You get around houses and offices, you hear many things. You must have heard something. I hear many things, Janez the postman was reticent, but I don't know what's true and what isn't. Well, we have a National Council in Zagreb, my father took the pipe out of his mouth. It looks as if things will be different from now on. It looks as if we will finally be masters of our own land. That is good. Goddam good, Janez agreed and spat in the mud. I need to carry on. Of course, my father nodded.

You see, Great-grandma stared at the ceiling, it seemed for a long time that it was all over. Soldiers on both sides dug in, shooting blindly at each other without moving a single millimetre forward. They could stay like that until the end of time. Then the Miracle of Caporetto happened. Yes, she smiled, that is what they said, a miracle. As if this was something good, something beautiful. The Austrians and the Germans broke through Italian defences and used mustard gas to drive the enemy away. And then, for a short while, it once again seemed that the war would never end. Of course, who could even think of something like that? For as long as there was a single boy still at home with both hands who could carry a gun, there is no need for the war to end. As long as there is a single boy left whose girl will cry for him, whose mother will mourn him, the war can endure, Great-grandma sighed shakily. But the war did finally end and we were all glad of the news!

When my father thought I could not hear him, he said, Now every soldier will pick up their dead, find the ripped off limbs, the shot heads, pray to their God on the grave, then give the dead a decent burial, erect monuments and return home. Slowly we shall stop mentioning those terrible names of towns that can mean nothing but pain and death to people around here. Most don't even know where to look for them on a map. Husbands, fathers and sons that will not return will live on in memories and

tales for a while. Over time, memories will fade and tales fall silent. The pain will settle and eventually pass. Those of us who are left will get on with life.

And we did get on with life, Great-grandma grabbed my hand. You have to get on with life. Whatever happens, you have to persist. That much we owe to those who didn't make it.

Our family was spared the worst, she turned her head towards the window. My father was initially too old to be called up, and when they also began drafting older men, they left him out because of his work at the quarry. The foreman had to stay, otherwise the work would stall. Father stayed but, despite this, the work stalled as there were not enough men to blow up the rock and cut the stone.

Great-grandma stayed silent for a few moments. She gazed out of the window, as if beyond the glass she was seeing her father, her brothers, mother, grandmother, aunts and uncles, cousins, all gathered together, all as they were on that day when the postman brought the news about the end of the war to their village. Our family was immensely lucky, she repeated somewhat absently. My brothers stayed at home. They were too young to be called up. But it could have been very different. We saw what it was like in other households! Husbands and sons left, one after the other. Some left right at the beginning, before news of the horrors reached us. Many among them were excited about going off into battle. Oh, my boy, they marched along proudly with their gun over their shoulder and couldn't wait to chase away the Italians or the Russians, as they said, as they heard others say. The poor boys didn't know what awaited them. And even if they would have known they could not have imagined what it was really like. And even if they would have imagined, they could not have changed anything. The ones who left later were convinced that they would soon return, as war cannot last forever. Just a little more, and it will be over. With a little luck they might spend a few months on the Front, that much one can put up with, and then they would come home. Those amongst the last to be called up knew that it didn't bode well. By then it was clear to everyone that there had never been a war like it. There had never been so many dead, so much devastation! In the final years many boys and older men hid in the forests even though they knew the fate of deserters that the gendarmes pursued more zealously than thieves and bandits. If they caught someone, shame was brought

upon the family. A man locked up is no better than a bandit. If they were not caught, the shame was still brought upon the family. They were hiding while others bled and died. Should they die? If mine died, yours should too! That is what people said, all without reason, all without a heart.

Eventually the war did end, Great-grandma found my hand and held onto it, squeezing it a few moments later, lifting it and dropping it again. Eventually peace came. And peace is good. But you see, this is quickly forgotten. Whilst the memory of the horrors is alive, people are still aware. But when the memory fades, people forget the fear, the hunger, the diseases they had not known before, well, then they also forget how good peace is.

With these words Great-grandma closed her eyes. It seemed she was sleeping.

3.

The Wolf of the Marshes, Great-grandma suddenly opened her eyes. Old Tomažin. Have I told you what happened with him? I looked at her and shook my head. I didn't know who Old Tomažin was. Let her tell me, I thought to myself and waited. Well, anyway, she smacked her lips. Old Tomažin returned from the war. He had both his hands and both his legs. His wife Marjanca could not stop thanking all the angels and saints who had watched over him for three long years. True, he came back skinny and starving but everyone coming back at the time was like that and those at home were not much better. The joy lasted a day or two, after that the signs of his illness began to show. There was something wrong in his head. Old Tomažin would walk up and down the village as if on guard, then, all of a sudden, he would start shouting, Attack! Attack! All attack! And run across the fields, sometimes in one, other times in the other direction.

People kept telling Marjanca not to take it to heart. He had been through a lot, goodness knows what he had experienced and seen. He needs time. You must give it to him. He will slowly improve. And Marjanca gave him time. If anything, time was what she had plenty of. But Tomažin didn't get any better. Weeks, months later, he was

still the same, if not worse. He would walk through the village, then suddenly cry out, Attack!

Whenever he appeared children came out of the houses and laughed at him. He's mad, they would repeat what they had heard from the adults. He has lost his mind! Young boys jumped around, following him, mocking him until their fathers, uncles or others slapped or kicked them and made them go home. You can't make fun of the poor man! they reprimanded the boys, but to no avail. Old Tomažin kept bringing them out into the street, they continued to run after him and shout with him, Attack! All attack! In the end, one of the men would stop him and tell him, It's over. There is no more danger. Let's go. And they would leave together.

Whenever Tomažin, all torn and muddy would see his Marjanca, he opened his arms and called out, I am home! I have returned! Oh, how I missed you! And how beautiful you are! More beautiful than the day we got married.

Marjanca couldn't hold back her tears. She wasn't sure how much longer she could take everything. It seemed that it was easier before, waiting in fear for news from the battlefield. Then she still had hope. Now she turned to him and would say, Well, look, you're back! I knew you would return.

You know, Great-grandma looked at me, old Tomažin didn't sleep in a bed at night! No way! He slept on the floor. He would curl up against the wall and often howl and cry out. The neighbours were at first alarmed by the noise but got used to it over time. With his howling, they laughingly called him the Wolf of the Marshes.

After telling me this, Great-grandma fell silent. I stared at her, wondering where these stories, these memories were all suddenly coming from. She rarely talked about herself. Sometimes she would drop the odd piece of information into the conversation, things all of us already knew, but she never spoke at length like she did after the visiting nurse said that her heart was slowing down. She was lively, as if she was seventeen or eighteen again.

Before, despite her venerable age, I had never for a moment thought that the day would come when she would finally leave. Great-grandma had been with us

forever, she had always been old, the oldest among all the people I knew. And while many younger than her had left, she stayed on. I thought she would be with us forever.

4.

Jakob, my husband, was among the last to return, Great-grandma shook her head. But then he was not yet my husband. Not by far! Another five years passed before we noticed each other and I started calling him Jaka, he started calling me Mica. Then we got married. When he returned, I found him ugly, she laughed. He was skinny and hairy, had a low, raspy voice and spoke with a strange accent. And I barely knew him, anyway. I did know his younger brother Andrej. Drejček, we used to call him. He was in my class at school.

She was silent for a few moments, then continued, You see, the war was long over. Winter passed and spring came, everything was in blossom. Oh what a beautiful spring came after the war ended! Things were budding and blooming the previous springs as well, but then nobody saw the colourful flowers. People didn't speak about anything but the dead. The previous springs it had seemed that everything blossomed merely for us to pick the flowers and take them to the graves. Then peace came. But Jakob, like many others, didn't come back. And people who didn't come back for so long were presumed dead. Nobody was expecting him, not his father, nor his brother, nor the neighbours. Only Jakob's mother, old Mrs Prežar insisted, even though her husband kept urging her to stop. He asked her to forget, said it would be easier that way. But the woman persisted, she kept saying that she had not yet received any notification of death and, until she has a death notice, her son is not considered dead, and for as long as he is not considered dead, she will continue to believe he is alive. This you cannot deny me! Nobody can deny me this, she would say. Every morning she would walk to the wayside crucifix at the far end of the village where she would pray for her son's return. You know where the crucifix is, don't you? Great-grandma looked at me. Yes, of course, I nodded, even though I was not certain I knew which shrine she was thinking about. I recalled two, but at that moment it was not important which one of the two was the right one.

You need to know this, Great-grandma moved her shaky head, every few weeks some starving, ragged man would return from somewhere far away. We would all see them. At houses where they still had a missing husband or son, they hoped that the next one to come would be theirs. It was a wish only very few were granted. She fell silent again. A few moments later she looked at me, as if checking whether I was listening, following what she was saying.

Easter came late that year, on the twentieth of April, Great-grandma moved her entire body under the thick blanket. She reminded me of a giant pupa about to hatch into a butterfly. It was a sunny Sunday, Great-grandma continued. In the morning we all went to Mass. Oh, the joy that filled our hearts! We had decorated the church the previous day with flowers, and we sang heartily at Mass for the first time in years. After church we went straight home. The table was modestly laid. Of course, at the end of the war nobody had very much, but we were all gathered, together, we had each other, unlike families with painful empty places at the table that could not be filled even if they attempted to rearrange the seating. The road through the village was empty and serene calm reigned across the plain. Until a thin figure appeared in the distance. People with a constant eye on the window stirred and before the figure reached the bridge, they were at the windows, standing on doorsteps. Another one is coming! Another one!

Nobody recognised the man who was slowly approaching. Long hair, beard, hollow cheeks and grey circles round his eyes, he was probably from some other village, people guessed, perhaps from Lipe, Črna Vas or Jezero. The man walked past with heavy steps. He greeted the people standing outside their houses and they returned his greeting even though he looked like some bony apparition with oversized teeth. Eventually, to the great surprise of everyone, he turned towards the Prežar house. People waited anxiously to see what would happen.

At first there was a deathly silence but very soon they could hear old Mrs Prežar shrieking loudly. She rushed into the yard so the whole village would hear her, not only the village, the entire world! He's alive! My Jakob is alive! And not only is he alive, he's whole! It's a miracle! tears rolled down her cheeks. It's a miracle!

The following Sunday the priest said at Mass that Jakob's return was an Easter miracle. And that idea prevailed, Great-grandma smiled. Even later, when we learned that he had been in a Russian prison camp for two years where he had soaked up a few revolutionary ideas, as they said at the time, this conviction did not waver. What did happen was that a few days before Pentecost two gendarmes called in at the Prežar house and had a long conversation with Jakob. The men who saw the gendarmes enter the house wondered what would happen. Would they take Jakob away? Would they lock him up? In the end they left alone, just as they had come. Word soon spread round the village that their visit was merely of an informative nature. That was what Miodrag Petrović, who was newly appointed, and Anton Hladnik who had been with the police for a while, had said.

My father often said after that that Jakob should be careful about what he uttered. What he had heard in Russia might be valid for Russia but certainly isn't valid here. Of course, I was interested in what the neighbour's boy was saying but my father didn't want to talk to me about it. He was strict and unyielding. And stubborn. He said politics was not for women. I don't know why, of all children, you are the one asking me about politics! he was angry. Politics attracts trouble like juice attracts wasps and meat attracts flies. You saw how quickly the gendarmes appeared at the Prežars! Great-grandma lowered her voice to mimic her father. Then she laughed mischievously as if she was once again fifteen. I had never seen her like that.

When my brothers Pavle, Stanko and France were at the table, our father said a number of times that Jakob should be more careful about the words he uses, but I think it was aimed at my brothers. The boys were too young and were not interested in what Jakob was talking about. Father probably just expressed out loud what he was worried about. Not so that anyone might answer him, merely to get it off his chest.

But I was interested in everything. Unlike my brothers, I liked going to school. They would spend their time in the forest or by the river, I preferred to sit with my books. I was the best in class and there were many children in our class! I must have been good if Mr Šimenc suggested to my father that he should send me for further schooling, hinting at the same time that he should not worry about the financial aspect because the Parish would help and the Bishopric also has money for such cases. But

this meant I would have had to go to Ljubljana. And my father, oh, he was so angry! The town spoils people, he said to the priest. Especially girls. It won't happen and the bishops can say what they like! The priest never mentioned school again to my father after that and the matter was closed, Great-grandma Marija pressed her pale lips together.

Silently she gazed at the window and eventually continued. Regardless of what the neighbour's boy Jakob was saying, or perhaps because of it, his mother continued to pray loudly every morning at the crucifix at the far end of the village. Sometimes she would be joined by one of the women who was still waiting for their son or husband, hoping that the Heavenly Mother would hear her prayer and return them as Jakob had been returned to Mrs Prežar. To them Jakob's return was solid proof that it could happen, even if many months had passed since the end of the war and everyone was saying that they needed to come to accept that those who were going to return have done so, those who haven't never will.

When the priest walked past, he would stop and pray the Lord's Prayer of a Hail Mary, and then walk onwards while Mrs Prežar stayed on, muttering to herself. The women understood her, said she had a point, while the men kept saying she was overdoing it. You see, during the war the men got a thick, hard skin. They had got used to everything, especially death and loss. They had seen enough killing. They knew that those who were missing would not return. Yes, perhaps the occasional man returns. Very rarely. But this is not something you can count on. Full stop. Amen. Sign of the cross.

The priest said that there was much goodness in old Mrs Prežar's prayer, and that she should pray if that is what she wants to do. About Jakob, people said he was under the strong influence of his time in Russian captivity. They had filled his head with their stupidities. The boy needs time. You'll see. He will calm down and be just as he was.

Like everyone, the priest was right about some things and not about others, Great-grandma looked at me. With time, Jakob did indeed calm down, but he didn't give up his ideas. He merely stopped talking about them in public as he didn't want to

deal with the gendarmes and even less so with agents that would most certainly come from Ljubljana were they to hear about what he was saying.

Great-grandma was silent for a few moments, then she closed her eyes and whispered that she was tired. I will sleep for a while now.

You go ahead, I stroked her hand and got up carefully. I step over to the window that Great-grandma so liked to look out of. She hadn't been outside for a long time. I don't know why. I never asked. She was still strong, had no problems, but still hadn't been outside for at least the last ten if not twenty years. One exception was when she was taken a few years ago first to the health centre and then to the hospital for various check-ups. I can't recall exactly what for.

The day was drawing to a close. The hedge separating the grass from the road was darkened by the shadows. The lower part of the tall silver birch tree growing on the lawn was also dark as were its lower branches, while the leaves at the top of the tree were bidding farewell to the last rays of the day's sunshine with light green hues. There were cars parked in the road beyond the hedge. No more empty spaces left.

5.

So you did come, after all, Great-grandma had been waiting for me the following morning propped up with two pillows under her head. I thought you wouldn't come. What day is it today? Wednesday, I replied. You're not at work? I'm not going in today. How come? I don't have to. She was silent for a few moments, then looked at me, Because of me? No, I shook my head. Well, yes, a little also because of you. How did you sleep? Well, she straightened a few white hairs that fell across her eye. Go over to the table and open the drawer, she extended her hand and pointed towards the table. I went over, lifted the patterned tablecloth that fell over the edges, and opened the drawer. Inside was a plastic box filled with photographs and religious images. When I was a child, Great-grandma would sometimes bring it into the kitchen and then spend hours staring at the pictures, sometimes telling me things in connection with them. But I was a child, I didn't understand what or who she was talking about, and I wasn't

interested. More than the black and white photographs, I was attracted to the colourful holy cards of all sizes depicting holy men and saintly women. I liked the details I would discover in the background. Sheep, birds, trees, rocks, a snake. Because we no longer lived in the same house, I had forgotten all about the box of pictures and prayer cards. Now it was here again. Can you bring it over? Of course, I picked up the box and carried it to the bed, sat on the edge and placed it into her extended hands. As if she had been waiting for this moment ever since she woke up, she impatiently opened the box and took out a few photographs. Well, look at him, my Jaka, she smiled, holding out her shaking hand so I could see the man in the picture. When he recovered, he was really handsome, she said. He gained some weight, the grey circles around his eyes disappeared. He had his hair cut, shaved off his beard. I never saw him with a beard again, she shook her head. He did have black circles around his eyes again when he returned from Austria in forty-five. But that was later, much later. There were quite a few years in between.

Now listen, she smoothed the sheet between us with her hand. Just before that summer, news broke which was almost greater than the news of his return. One fine day, Jakob came home in a blue uniform with golden buttons, and people in the village couldn't believe it. They stopped in the middle of the street, words were left half-uttered in the air, even cigarette smoke seemed to stay still, not moving as the entire village held its breath in disbelief. Jakob had got himself a job on the railway!

His mother asked him where he had got the uniform from. She was suspicious, Great-grandma looked at me. You see, Jaka was something of a trickster. And, after returning from Russia, he had talked about all those matters, so his mother was worried about him. She was afraid he might get into trouble. Instead of settling down and starting to live like everyone else, he always did things in his own way. When he told her he had found a job on the railway, she asked him two or three times, whether it was true. Only when he swore by the deceased Emperor Franz, the Regent Alexander, and the Virgin Mary, did she grab him by the ears, move right up to his surprised face and kiss him on both cheeks before hurrying off to the wayside shrine to give thanks.

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