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# The Oratorio of Scented Time



*Tuesday, 4 June 2019, start at 08:30*

I spent a large part of my life travelling the world so changes back in my hometown always surprised me. They awoke in me a kind of melancholy, even though it made little difference to me what the streets and squares there actually looked like. What I missed was our home, the odour of our town house where my room and our sunny veranda always awaited me. I liked returning to the safety of familiar scents I used to love, carefully nourishing them while away like the postcards from home that émigrés keep in the drawers of their nightstands for decades.

The town did not only change during my absence, as time passed it grew older and lost its verve. The street through the centre that should reveal the town's most distinguished face was now showing its most dismal side. Gone is the old hardware store with its long wooden counter where shop assistants in brown overalls measured out chains, weighed

nails and occasionally went up to the gallery with its skilfully crafted forged iron railings to look in the hundreds of drawers for what was ordered. There was iron and steel everywhere, mixed with the clearly recognisable scent of factory workers, women who at the end of the production line wrapped screws and nuts into wax paper and packed them into cardboard boxes. Even the scent of woollen yarn has gone from the tiny shop selling fabric by the yard, thread and buttons, the place disappeared just like Mrs Cizej's fur shop with its smell of fur and posh old ladies who were her best customers. The small flower shop has also gone. On Women's Day the scent of withered roses and damp potting compost drifted from it. Until late in the evening men would go there to buy flowers for their dear wives, avoiding all the flak they would have had to take if they had forgotten altogether.

Today the town is full of large, new shops with ready-made clothes, cosmetics and Italian shoes. They exude a synthetic smell of plastic flooring and terrible air fresheners. How I hate these small monstrous devices! With their chemical aromas they damage us, castrate our senses and to the unsuspecting person change the world in an instant. The government



should never have allowed these gross chemicals to pollute our memories and rob us of our experiences. Is it not criminal to hijack someone's memory of a beautiful spring afternoon?

This is why I was so pleased to still find the watch and clock repair shop, probably the only place that had survived the transformation of the town centre. Hanging above its door for as long as I can remember is a watch the size of a car wheel. Even when I was a child it looked old, brown and in need of a fresh coat of paint. It looks just as scruffy today. In the shop window with its wooden frame hangs a faded advert and a dusty mechanism from some long disassembled timepiece.

Clockmaking is to me a very special craft. Repairing instruments that measure time is very different work to that carried out by cobblers, tailors or chandlers. Time doesn't stop, just the clock comes to a halt. The clockmaker must repair the device so it can once again catch up with time and measure it correctly. Not too much and not too little. Clocks are anyway very special instruments, perhaps the strangest ever built by man. The wheels, the face, the hands, the escapement – all these components of the time keeper are totally flat. I find it incredible

that merely two dimensions are enough for measuring time but I never imagined that it would be clocks that would make such a deep impression on my life.

I went to the shop to collect an Iskra wall clock that I had brought in to be repaired fourteen days ago. At the time there were other people in the shop, perhaps admirers of timing devices, more probably pensioners. Pains in their hips and knees, they sat on the bench by the counter, searching for a little morning company. I am not very good with people, especially not in a confined space, so I handed in the clock and left quickly. Now it was different, I was the only customer there, I could take a look at the shop and the clockmaker in peace. The man on the other side of the counter made an impression on me because of his unusual looks, in his tick-tocking world he appeared unusual, almost weird. Clearly he was a very tall and slender man. He bent over his work desk so his pointed nose almost touched a pile of clock mechanisms, replacement batteries, weights, alarm clocks and watches. At first I didn't even notice that this was his work surface, no bigger than a spread-out lady's hanky. In all this chaos he was looking for microscopic screws with a monocle

in order to lift them with his tweezers into the watch movements. He only interrupted his work to hand over the repaired wall clock. A large wooden box with a dial and a single weight. It used to be part of a set of furniture designed in the dull, realist spirit of the late 1950s. The clockmaker briefly explained what he had fixed, took the payment and apologised that he was busy, working alone without an assistant. Clearly a sincere man who didn't mind me hanging around a little longer to take a look around his workshop.

There was a cast-iron heater in the middle of the room. Its flue covered the distance to the wall straight across the space. Traces of white plaster on the old-fashioned green paintwork indicated the course of the electric wiring that then disappeared behind all the clocks hanging on the wall. There was something constantly moving in the clocks, as if the wooden hatcheries had locked inside them the fledglings of some mechanical creature, the pendulums swaying, each at its own pace, counting time. Some clocks seemed to me to be happy, others indifferent, all of them very steady. In the middle of a longer wall stood a huge clock with a pendulum the size of a tennis racket. It must once have been

part of the furnishings of a large town flat, one with three-metre ceilings, cherry and plum wood parquet flooring and a large white ceramic stove in the corner. The dark wood and decoration of the clock gave it a solemn air, very Austrian. It also measured time in its own way. Slowly, very slowly. The large pendulum moved back and forth with weary, long swings, as if it was about to stop at any moment. In the tiny workshop the clock appeared far too big, far too posh. But time passes and times change. Its story might end next to this wall with flaking green paint or perhaps it is merely waiting for a new chapter to be written.

Even more than the clocks, what impressed me was the special scent of the place. As soon as I walked in I was greeted by an intensive odour but to start with I did not pay any particular attention to it. What went through my nostrils did not attract attention or, to put it differently, the scent was initially not unusual for the place I was standing in. You could easily attribute it to mould, the kind common in old flats in the centre of town. You almost expect blackened, wooden floors polished by people walking over them and walls that have not been given a fresh coat of paint for decades to have a stuffy, sweet

aroma infused with the smoke of cigarettes smoked long ago. But no, this was not merely the scent of a rundown workshop in a mouldy room. In the air the scent of the wooden floorboards mixed with the scent of oak panels and dried veneer, crackling at the edges but still binding solidly the sides of wall clocks. They smelt of the hardened and long-dried-up woodworm from the wooden frames. Larvae from the driest environment in the planet burrowed through the dehydrated wood for a year or two and, when they could no longer continue, shrivelled up into tiny dried-up mummies. I was charmed by the discreet scent of brass from the hundreds of wheel trains. The hint of metal gave the place a sense of reality and an expectation of chimes every fifteen minutes. There were other kinds of bouquets in the workshop, smells I now clearly picked up on, though I still didn't know what to attribute them to. I stood in the middle of the room, my head raised and tilted back slightly, savouring the thin rays interlacing in the still air before me. I would have gotten entirely lost in the scene were it not for the gaze of the young clockmaker. His attention was probably drawn by how I inhaled the air through my flared nostrils and he was, despite the previous indifference, now watching me with obvious

interest. This time he spoke to me in a much kinder, more personal tone of voice, “I see that you’ve picked up on them, most people don’t even notice them.”

I must have raised a quizzical eyebrow because he tried to explain in a more direct way. “You smell the clocks. Nobody else knows how to smell them. It’s not enough to have a good nose, you need to also understand the scent!” From a silent, inaccessible man the clockmaker turned into a garrulous fellow. At the time I was not yet ready to abandon my investigation of invisible finesse and ornaments in the air in front of me. At tense and deep moments there was no time for discussion.

As a rule, I don’t reveal myself in public. As a research panellist, one of the last great *noses* of our times, I always find it embarrassing to introduce myself, especially because I cannot handle the fake modesty very well. I happen to be the best when it comes to smelling, a perfectionist among professionals, by some strange coincidence chosen and protected from the terrible excommunication from the art of smell that has so destructively marked the human race. I am probably the only one to still be able to smell danger, ripe fruit at a distance of ten kilometres, the fear of being exposed when telling a

lie, and of course an eligible girl or woman's oestrus. I am devoting my mature age to building a giant olfactometer with the purpose of exploring the nanocosms of smell. It is probably understandable that I cannot reveal much about my device. What I can vouch is that with it we will be able to reveal history in an entirely different way, perhaps it will even once help us understand the evolution of our species. We will be able to read forgotten messages written long ago into the scents of our animal ancestors. It will be a kind of cyclotron, a scent accelerator that will return us to the origin of everything. With it I will silence all those who insist that scents from the past are mere associations of memories and as such merely figments of our imagination.

To me scent is indispensable, without it I would be quite debilitated. Even a simple cold causes me blindness and distorts my world. Deprived of scent I am also left without memory, demented and lost, a mere shadow of a wandering person. In the clockmaker's shop, however, I kept these explanations to myself. A sudden draught could carry away my only just discovered treasure of tiny, exquisite pearls.

All this made the clockmaker even more excited. "Sir, you see, the scents come from the old wall

clocks.” Clearly I was the first to whom he could entrust his discovery. “These clocks hung for decades on the walls of flats around town. Some of them are eighty, even a hundred years old and all this time the scents wound themselves into the clock mechanisms. Look at this clock, sir,” he stepped to a clock that looked like the one I had brought in, opened the door to the chamber with the pendulum and weights. “Every eight days, when the owners of the clock pulled the weights up to the clock face, the scents of the space wound themselves into the spindle. Only a tiny trace every time. Over a decade it captured thousands. Now they are slowly, one after the other, being released. Step over here. Look, sir, smell your own clock.” With his thin fingers he demonstrated how he envisaged the scents being wound onto the spindle. He really was an unusual figure, a very thin and tall young man. It would be hard to say whether he was close to thirty or forty. Undoubtedly he was also a rather simple man, almost annoying with his repetitive ‘Look sir, here sir, there sir.’ His perception indeed indicated an inborn talent but I know from experience that the road from talent to mastery is a long one.



*Thursday, 6 June 2019, start at 10:30*

People are perhaps not aware of the art of smell but that does not mean it doesn't exist. Smelling the wonderful spirit of a woman as she approached me and vanished in the following moment, offers no less enthusiasm than admiring Van Gogh's Sunflowers or listening to Debussy's Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. I can compare my smelling to the work of great conductors of symphony orchestras. They not only mastered all the instruments in the cast but could also coordinate their playing into deep emotion. Some smellers experience scent as colours, others as a melody or even as cold, heat or a shudder on the skin. I can perceive smells as colour or music, as rough words in poetry or a rash on the skin. Becoming known as the Maestro, the professional public paid tribute to me due to my perfect analytical abilities, my exceptional olfactory awareness and sensitivity.

The watchmaker picked up my repaired clock from the counter, hung it on an empty space on the wall, and balanced its pendulum. Due to my rather low build he hung it lower than the others. My nose was already itching but were I to scratch it or even

blow it now, I would shatter the entire composition, structure and colour, all the details of scents only I could pick up. He wound the weight under the dial and used his finger to set the pendulum in motion. He was right, the mechanism of my own clock also revealed smells. Suddenly playing out before me was a great oratorio, a wonderful composition of smells in which the symphony orchestra collaborated with exceptional soloists. Now I had to work quickly and carefully. The scents were thin, barely noticeable, and the following moment overpowered by others, mighty and robust, and despite their age still very convincing. Characteristic of the first sentence were soft, impressionist moves. They brought scents of the damp soil of early spring when a south-easterly wind melted the snow on the peaks. The power of the rays of sunlight thawed the dog faeces that had been frozen all winter in the snow and ice and it now began exuding its odour. The warmth softened it and mixed its scent with that of rotting leaves on their way to decompose into humus. In any other season it would be just an unpleasant stench but at the end of winter it is special, the distinctive smell of the awakening of new life and new expectations. Immediately after it came the smell of April. In a gentle

succession followed the scents of flowering apricots, cherries and the always excessive, pungent magnolias. The next moment belonged to the crescendo of sharp wood-tar creosote. The neighbour coated his shed and fence with it but despite the protection the wood was still being consumed by sweet decay. I could barely hold back the rush of scents packed with memories. I had to make sure this *séance* wasn't interrupted, a new customer might walk into the workshop and dissolve the scenes from the clock on the wall.

I returned to early summer. The tree-lined road had the pleasant noble scent of flowering lime trees. During a sharp phrase it stood against the smell of used engine oil. Residents had poured it out onto the gravel road to prevent the dust from being blown around. Most of the August scents were hot and dry. Not all though. A part of the smell of Sunday afternoons had such a strong aroma of beef soup that you could almost hear the voice of the regular presenter of the local radio's Sunday afternoon programme. Scorching summer scents unwinding from the wheels in the clock mechanism also smelt of a washed car, a Peugeot model 504, at the same time freshly-clean white shirts flapped in the wind,

smelling of the badly-disguised detergents of *Plavi Radion* hand washing powder. The interlacing scents of a late summer storm and rotting plums under the trees in the garden was a wonderful counterpoint, created as a highlight of the second sentence.

The strain of untangling the scents of the old wall clock was becoming unbearable. Despite their extremely low concentration, the cilia began to swell and more and more receptors became preoccupied with the molecules of released aromas. I should have stopped, paused, but I wanted to experience everything that was preserved in my wall clock. I stepped forwards once again and slowly took in the oncoming scents.

Autumn struck in heavy, almost exaggerated rhythms. I once again sensed the lush scents on the central part of my olfactory epithelium. The entire town smelt of grape must. As if it was bubbling in a huge gut filled with the juices of sweet grapes somewhere under the paving. Below ground around the town castle heavy gasses were being released from the huge municipal wine cellar. Alcohol and sulphur fumes intoxicating the rodents in the sewage system, small dogs being taken out for walks swayed peculiarly and often lay down on the pavement. Even the

pigeons seemed unsteady on account of the alcoholic vapours and dared not fly between the roofs until late autumn. The following moment, in an increasing staccato, winter appeared. A strong scent of turkeys and geese mixed with the smell of coal from the cellar where the live animals were enclosed a few days before Christmas. Once again I could smell excitement, one could feel the snow in the air. Perhaps it was only soot in the cold of the evening? How wonderful these times of the past smelt!

I finally touched my nose with my handkerchief and with a familiar gesture squeezed it softly and rubbed it slightly. My instrument will need at least a week to recover. But the experience was worth every second.

Satisfied, I turned to the clockmaker, enthusiastic about my unexpected experience. It felt like I had been flicking through an old photo album from forty years ago. Only now did I notice the proud look on his face as he observed me from behind his work counter. As much as he seemed naïve and almost slow, in the next instant he stabbed me and depleted my soul.

“I know, I know. You see, sir, I collect old scents from clock mechanisms. When there are no

customers, I build scents into the wheels and springs of wall clocks. You won't believe it but this way I can assemble an entire composition of scents. From clocks that people bring in for repair I can compose an entire concert that can be smelt as music. Every place, every quarter and every house has a smell of its own. Decades especially have their own scent. I have so far assembled clocks with smells of the sixties and the seventies." In his enthusiasm the clock-maker could not stop talking, he had finally found someone who could understand his masterpieces.

At the same time he was mercilessly destroying my world. The realisation that some ignoramus had composed a great oratorio of scents from my past hit me with the force of a sledgehammer. Only a few minutes ago he had been leaning over his clocks like some huge, curled-up reptile protecting its nest, now he was explaining to me how he is able to play with the most intimate scents of my memory. How did my unfortunate fate come across this stick insect who was now getting on my nerves with his naïve simplicity? And especially, how could nature have endowed him so richly with a virtuoso nose? Most terrifying of all was the realisation that my majestic olfactometer, my life's work, had suddenly gained

a rival in a plain old wall clock. Will we now, instead of with my ingenious instrument, research the evolution of human kind with a cuckoo clock with pine-cone-shaped weights? This was too much for a single day. Despite my hands being full, I managed to open the door and escape into the street.

Outside was the usual four-o'clock hustle and bustle. Everyone was hurrying somewhere, only I was totally confused. There I was, like some old lady suffering from dementia, standing outside her own house, unsure whether she is just returning home or leaving to go somewhere. The scents of memory were propelled by the pumping heart, so they came in throbbing associations. I kept returning to the chaotic scenes from the past with such intensity that I barely managed to drag myself home.

*Tuesday, 11 June 2019, start at 08:30*

As expected, the olfactory epithelium did indeed need a week of rehabilitation. All this time I did not leave the house. For the first few days I experienced serious consequences of the intense emotional olfactometry. It was particularly hard at

night. Hundreds of clocks with scents of past events wound up in their mechanisms hung on the walls of huge halls. There was one for every person and each individual stood before their own clock, the springs releasing the scents, the scents bringing back memories. People in front of their clocks were happy, some laughed out loud, one lady even cried with joy. Then the people disappeared and standing by the clocks were long and lanky clockmakers, sticking their pointed noses into the mechanisms, discovering other people's memories. They raised their thin fingers as if conducting the oncoming scents, sucking in other people's secrets with relish. I also dreamed about myself but always only towards morning when the increased noise from the road began melting into the subconscious. Now I was the one doing the conducting. Hundreds of clocks played an oratorio of scent, yet I was unable to smell anything in my current state. I stood in front of the orchestra in desperation like a deaf Ludwig van Beethoven, without knowing what to do and how to escape.

Fortunately my nightmarish dreams never chase me for more days in a row. As with all top artists and athletes, rest for me is also a carefully planned activity. I prefer a comfortable armchair in the company



of one of my brilliant performances, the magnificent olfactory events of my rich career.

With such a dramatic experience as the visit to the watchmaker, there was but one choice. My first performance at the Tokyo Opera House. I remembered how my baggage that day was weighed down with doubts and uncertainty. I worried about the auditorium and the crowds, even though I had chosen the city and its people precisely because of their sensuousness. My concern was not unfounded since their exquisite sense of beauty had over the centuries degenerated into pathetic customs and lately into cheap tourist performances. It later emerged that the auditorium was without smell and at the same time olfactive enough in as much as this is within reach of a music auditorium.

I always recall with happiness that evening when I conquered the world with a single performance.

I allowed only a handful of chosen guests into the auditorium, all in special clothes that would not absorb or, even worse, release any smells. After the initial silence I did not allow an applause, instead I moved down invisible paths that I intertwined with the most exquisite, fine and also realistic and crude scents. At the beginning of the first sentence

I walked in a carefree way through town and turned into the park where in the piano of dawn I strolled through the scent of flowering cherry trees. Even though it was mid-winter, the scent of cherry blossom brought the audience to its feet. The gentle combination of the smell of early morning cyclists and honey bees on the abundant, pinkish-white blanket of flowering cherries brought spontaneous tears to the eyes of every last member of the astonished and otherwise very reserved audience. In a leisurely exchange of staccato and legato, I sent the breaking dawn towards the peak of the morning that culminated in a forte of traffic chaos. I admit that in this section I had entered swampy ground in which a performer might easily become mired and sink. The stench of morning exhaust fumes is extremely hard to balance and keep within artistic pretence without causing your audience to leave the auditorium.

In the second sentence I returned to the Shizuoka Prefecture from the sea. Ageing and tired *ama*, female divers that collect pearls, brought with them the scent of the ocean with a faint impression of iodine from kelp and a hidden scent of strong *sake*. The scent from the sea came slowly, evenly like

the waves that after roaring all night in a terrible storm reach the sand dunes as mere faint splashes.

Visitors felt incredible pride and self-confidence during these wonderful scenes from the sea and seaside towns, and it especially stirred in them an endless love for their homeland. With tears in their eyes they stood up and placed their hands on their hearts, rapturous as if listening to their national anthem being played at their nation's hardest ordeals. Even during the performance it occurred to me that I had gone too far but at the time I could not allow myself to slacken my concentration for what followed was the highlight of my masterpiece.

In the finale I reached into the personal memories of each visitor. I stepped into their early childhood, called up the scent of their grandparents and school kitchens where they crowded as twelve-year-olds. I performed this extremely complex creation with immense internal energy and with a wonderful realisation that my creation was perfect, unique and never before experienced in the history of mankind. I brought them the invisible threads of first love, the birth of their children, their mother's milk, I played with their summers and the scent of short winter days in wet Tokyo.

The end of the performance was met with standing ovations, the sirens of ambulances wailed outside the opera house. The emotional strain was just too great for two aged ladies and Mr Funaki from the executive committee of a construction giant the name of which there is no need to mention in this context. Later, in the spirit of the island's culture, each of them sent me a very personal letter with an apology for their inappropriate behaviour during the performance. Mr Funaki died soon after the event. In his will he noted that, thanks to my creation, he is dying the happiest man in the world, so his heirs were not surprised that his last wish was to bestow upon me half his fortune.

In the days that followed, my fame went round the globe. All the greatest artistic scenes wished to present me to their public. But it was not merely art directors who had an eye on my talent. Clearly the Japanese intelligence services were also well informed about the explosion of patriotic emotions at the performance and this set in motion also the machinery of intelligence services in other countries. At the time I could not have even imagined all the people who work in the twilight between two worlds, the one that the media show us on a daily basis and the

other in which people have no shadows. Even years later, during my visit to Dallas, Texas, the American secret service tried to recruit me in a rather unpleasant way, but that is already an entirely different story!

After a week of isolation, I opened the windows and went out for a brief walk. Nothing too demanding, a slow stroll to the main square and back. I was walking towards the town hall when it dawned upon me out of the blue, making me freeze there in the middle of the street. The clock! Above the balcony of the town hall is a very large clock! If scents can be wound up into the wheels of wall clocks, why not also the mechanisms of town hall and church time keepers? This one above the balcony of the town hall lived through all the most important moments of our town. What horror! Had not Adolf Hitler as soon as the War began shouted from this very balcony of the Maribor Town Hall that they should once more make this land German for him!? Perhaps I would be able to smell Adolf Hitler himself. Here, under this clock, the most dramatic and darkest moments in the history of my town happened and I could be witness to them. In my mouth I felt how my heart thumped with excitement. But how could I reach the clock on the top of the town hall? The

clockmaker! I remembered the clockmaker! The kind and annoying clockmaker seemed to be the only solution. Why did I have to be so cruelly punished with this toothpick? Why did he have to be the key to my most spectacular discovery of archaeological olfactometry?

On the way to his shop I did at least manage to calm down slightly. The clockmaker, bent in his usual strange way over his work desk, flinched when I barged in. With wide open eyes he stared at me while I, still overexcited, explained my whole plan. It did occur to me that I had just disclosed the most ingenious olfactory idea of the millennium. A moment of silence followed. The tension within me began to ease. He merely leaned back his head and an almost mischievous, impish smile flashed across his face. "An excellent idea, there must be a true treasure trove of ancient smells there. The clock was installed before the Second World War." In his almost child-like enthusiasm he stopped for an instant. "Were you thinking we might go up there?" In the following moment he remembered that the person looking after the town clock was Štefan, the retired diocesan clockmaker. "Look, sir, he is, how can I put this, rather weird."

Well, here we go! Now I find out that weirdos also exist among clockmakers. Do these people never look at themselves in the mirror? What now? Do we climb up across the balcony? Surely some retired friar won't stand in the way of such a colossal discovery?

The clockmaker's eyes moved around with the same speed he was thinking at. "No problem. We shall go there at night. Meet you at midnight in the passage under the town hall."

So we will go out hunting like a pair of vampires. Fine by me. I much prefer to inhale in the night when the air is of an appropriate dampness. Scents draw themselves out in greater contrasts on a dark background and the surroundings interfere less with my work. The only thing I was not sure about was how we were to climb up to the clock since I had no intention of clambering over roofs like some scoundrel.

Five minutes before midnight I was at the arranged spot. The full moon beamed above the Pohorje Hills and the sleeping town was doused in sliver light. The clockmaker was already waiting for me. He was quite inappropriately dressed in narrow drainpipe trousers and a flannel shirt under a work

coat. Looking as if we were going to repair the clock, not smell it. I always wear odourless clothes made to measure.

Unusually, the entrance to the staircase seemed to be open. Only at the next door we came across did I notice that my accomplice was opening it with a set of burglar's keys. "A clockmaker needs to have all kinds of tools, customers often lose the keys to their wall clocks," he whispered to me without me asking. Easily we reached the door to the clock tower. The light from the main square fell through the windows, illuminating our way comfortably. Only in the actual tower it would have been pitch black were it not for the thin beam of light coming through the gap under the door. The darkness wasn't a real problem for us. Any educated nose can also move in total darkness with ease, orientating by the smell of things. The clockmaker moved swiftly and precisely like a snake. Over the years I have learnt to hurry slowly so I followed him more cautiously and also more softly. We arrived at the landing from where the clock mechanism could only be reached up a short ladder. Here we stopped. I asked him to first open up the mechanism. I was too out of breath for the precise task awaiting me. Nobody can start



smelling after walking up three flights of stairs. The man climbed half way up the ladder, enough for his head to disappear inside the clockworks. He would spend at least half an hour up there so I began with selected exercises recommended by contemporary olfactometry. It is a kind of warm-up before taking on demanding sniffing material: modestly airing the left nostril, palatalisation, airing the right nostril, deep spiritual relaxation. Despite my complete mastery of the technique, it was most difficult to put aside the sweet excitement that shook my entire body. How could it not? I was about to smell one of the biggest dictators in the history of mankind.

To my surprise, less than three minutes later, the clockmaker climbed back down the ladder. Once again words cluttered from him at high speed. "Look, sir, something isn't right. I found the day, it rained heavily in the morning, I smelt very distinctly how the moss in the gutter soaked up the water. From the balcony, however, all I get is the smell of military loden cloth and gun oil to lubricate breeches. A soldier stood on guard up here, oil on his hands, he had cleaned his gun in the morning. There certainly wasn't a huge crowd of people under the balcony of the Town Hall. What seems even more unusual is

that at the same time there were two other people here, undoubtedly young, I would say they were boyfriend and girlfriend. You see, sir, what's most interesting is that they weren't even on the balcony, I could smell them up here, in the clock. They too had a weapon, probably a revolver or something like that. Interesting, isn't it? Some time after this, in late summer, two other gentlemen stood on the balcony, cleanly shaved, they both used the same aftershave. I don't know what to make of all this. Take a look for yourself, Adolf Hitler was never on this balcony!"

No, this was not possible. It was not possible that within a few minutes a person could so precisely place themselves into a past seventy years ago. I climbed the ladder up to the top rung and thrust my head inside the clock mechanism. A terrible unease overcame me in the wheel train. I had just about managed to sort myself out when I picked up the odour of pigeons. There was excrement everywhere, corpses, unhatched eggs. Feathers and down rose into the air with my every move. Using the very demanding Gernstein technique of peeling back the layers I managed to work my way through all the hurdles to the scents coming from the clock. The smell of frankfurters and bread rolls from the breakfast

bar next to the butcher, the sooty exhaust fumes from busses and people crowding at the bus stop. It was all there. The cursed flocks of pigeons kept hovering round my head. I began to panic. Where the hell was that wet April in forty-one? I could not get any further. The interlaced strains of scent were becoming impossibly brittle, before my nose they broke up and disappeared. In desperation I slipped off the ladder. In pain and without any dignity I collapsed at the clockmaker's feet. The hunt for the most prestigious trophy that I had been so looking forward to had altered into a shameful defeat.

We slipped out of the clock tower without saying another word. I did not feel like talking and the evening could just as well have finished there on the staircase at the Town Hall. But misfortune had not had its final word that night. I don't want to relive the events that followed but I can say that it was a case of a sequence of misunderstandings and an extremely unpleasant, even brutal security guard who caught me at the entrance to the Town Hall. He did not want to hear anything about archaeological olfactometry. He handed me over to the police as a dangerous burglar. I could never have imagined just how idiotic are the staff security firms employ.

I was even more upset with the arrogant police officer who shattered all my hopes of confidence in the State's organs of prosecution. The clockmaker who was the only one who could have confirmed my testimony had disappeared. The policeman just laughed me off, saying that the clockmaker's shop with the sign in the shape of a huge watch has been closed for years. Truth be told, the staff at the sanatorium were just as obtuse. If my opinion counts for anything, the institution that is currently hosting me does not deserve this name.

No, I won't complain. I have no reasons whatsoever for anger. Quite the opposite. After a number of turbulent days, I have finally found some peace and time to think about the incredible events of that night. Trying to smell Adolf Hitler was undoubtedly a difficult and traumatic experience. But only the greatest masters of this art have the ability to internalise a still vivid, untamed pain. Deep within us we can pacify it to the extent that in the following moment it can grow into a powerful, unrestrained inspiration. An inspiration that has given rise to a magnificent olfactive opera about a young couple, two secondary-school graduates. They were prepared to sacrifice their love and their lives to save the

world from the bloodiest dictator of the twentieth century. Hitler was in fact always distrustful and would often change his plans and itineraries. This time too, at the last minute, he called off his speech from the balcony of the town hall and merely took a stroll across the bridge. In the meantime, the boy and girl, armed only with a pistol, remained hidden in the clock on the town hall, awaiting their fate. A wonderful libretto about love and bravery, wrapped in the scent of the carefully maintained leather coats and soft gloves of Nazi dignitaries and the cheap soap of ordinary soldiers. About the polished shoes of townspeople on the wet pavement and the heavy fumes of military trucks, all set against the background of the wide river that, after the April rains, flows all muddy through the town and carries with it the scents of hundreds of kilometres of upstream riverbanks and people from the year 1941.

I cannot reveal more, let some of it be a surprise for the premiere.



# The Martyrdom of Aunt Martha





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I remember Aunt Martha for her pasta dumplings, her divine poppy seed roll and the best roast ham in the world, that every Easter, no persuasion needed, certainly had our family converted. The smell and taste of her food are imbedded eternally in my brain as an age-old standard of good grub. Never again did I have such excellent beef soup with noodles, or turkey brought to the table with such tasty, crispy roasted skin on its thighs. Her veal roast was scintillatingly soft and juicy on the plate, surrounded by sautéed potatoes and rice soaked in a light brown sauce. King of the table, however, was her capon with croquettes and lamb's lettuce in pumpkin oil. Upon hearing the word capon, most people today sooner think of a gangster surname rather than the crown jewel on menus in the most distinguished European restaurants. Whenever I remember those meals, I envisage Aunt Martha in a Renaissance painting – the creator of all the delicacies, standing over the table, glowing with joy at the sight of our family's voracious appetite.

Visits to Aunt Martha were organised by our mother. She got us kids ready, made sandwiches, packed juices and filled the thermos with hot coffee. In the days before our departure, Mother was particularly kind to Father. We all felt the immense pressure Father was under. In those times the two-hundred kilometre journey meant almost five-hours on winding roads, crawling behind smelly lorries that barely managed to drag their weight uphill. Five hours of driving with three small children in the car. Roads back then were built winding by default, and any attempt at overtaking was a game of Russian roulette. My father was a careful driver. He had his wife and children in his white Peugeot 504. He liked Mother and he liked us kids, but he adored to the heavens his white Peugeot 504 with wine-red seats. He would never allow anything to happen to his favourites, so the two hundred kilometres dragged on for what seemed like forever. On the way we children argued, fought, cried most inconsolably about a world full of injustices and were hungry and thirsty at least four times. We had to stop for a pee three times; the one time Mother needed to pee, she slipped and fell into the roadside ditch. Father put up with all this without saying a word. Well, he

did ask Mother whether she was all in one piece. Actually, when he was driving, Father fell into a kind of trance. Now I know that that is a unique survival technique employed by men stuck in a car with a wife and three quarrelling children. Whenever we were returning home on a Sunday, we listened to the radio broadcast of the football game. To me it seemed as if Father was not in the car on such occasions. Although he was in control of the wheel, in spirit he was sitting on the tiers at one of our two local stadiums.

Our family's ravenous hunger brought such immense joy to Aunt Martha because she herself also loved to eat. Her partiality to food resulted in a number of surplus kilos and she fought a lifelong battle against excess weight. The wonderful lunch and the sinfully delicious dessert that raised Father's blood sugar for a month were inevitably followed by a discussion about new dieting methods from a women's magazine that was the only one Aunt Martha read regularly and faithfully. The victim was always our mother. Aunt Martha greatly admired Mother's slender figure. It was as if Mother knew the secret recipe for maintaining body weight. As far as I know, however, Mother never made the slightest

concerted effort to stay slim. It was just how she was. Despite this, she was happy enough to engage in conversations on dieting. Aunt Martha would produce a plateful of the fluffiest cream puffs to help keep under control any excitement during the discussions of exotic slimming diets. On our way home, Mother explained the tragedy of our aunt's endeavours to lose weight. Aunt Martha would endure her dieting fervour for five days and during this time lose just over one and a half pounds but, come the weekend, she easily replenished the loss. Even worse, she would manage to add an extra four pounds to her hips.

The last time we all visited her, Aunt Martha was especially excited. With poorly veiled pride she showed Mother and Father her picture on the cover of her favourite women's magazine, explaining how the local health centre participated in some research where they took a sample of her fat and she had the highest results among all the participants. The caption under her picture read 'World Record'. Mother stared at her in disbelief but said nothing.

I was happy that Aunt Martha was a world record holder even though her image did not really fit in with my idea of world record holders, for

example ski jumpers or javelin throwers. But if the newspaper said 'World Record', then a world record holder is what our aunt must be. I was not interested in all the rest. Only years later did I find out the terrible truth behind the innocent article in that weekly magazine for women and mothers.

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It was early spring when Father called me to tell me that Aunt Martha had died. Father had had a stroke a few years earlier so he no longer drove, neither was he fit for a long bus journey. Both he and Mother were happy for me to volunteer as the representative of our family at the funeral. Via some distant lorry-driver cousin they sent me money for the funeral Mass. As far as Father was concerned, the matter was sorted. It always surprised me how old people stoically accept the death of their peers. When she died, what Father, who had a genuine fondness for Aunt Martha, was most interested in was making sure that the funeral would be conducted decently. That someone might not find something to stick their nose in and then people would start talking.

At the time I was just completing my internship at the main national daily newspaper. My mentor

was a rather bulky man with an expressed aversion to any kind of work. He especially hated reporting from the field. Unless, of course, it involved some event that also included food. In that case he made sure he was included. He had no problem going to a premiere of a ballet performance or the opening of the new dairy farm by the local cooperative, as long as there was a tray of champagne and snacks somewhere close to him. It was the reason we got on quite well together. I instantly understood what he wanted and he was well aware what he could expect from my novice enthusiasm.

I thought of a way of covering some of the costs of going to Aunt Martha's funeral in the place forsaken by God and the State. It was only fair: a short report from a part of the world where readers would never see my mentor, in return for half the daily mileage and meal allowance. "Damn it, intern, make sure you don't just hang around the bar all day! Better get a move on and take a look around. The place has the best vintage velvety reds, so make sure you don't bring back some sour plonk."

He pressed into my hands a ten-litre plastic canister. This was new. Normally he would just take half the allowance. I was already at the door when he

remembered the reason he was sending me out into the field. “Take a camera and film. Make sure you get some shots of the locals. Let’s say hunters with a trophy bear. Write about the damage bears cause to beehives! And don’t forget to call me when you are on your way back so I can wait for you at the station.”

The idiot! There might indeed be bears in those forests but how does he expect me to chance on a hunted one right in the middle of the village? He can’t be serious! He will wait for me at the station? In order to get my report straight to the editing room? Of course not, that was the last thing on his mind. He was exclusively interested in the ten litres of red wine. It was the wine that made him sign my travel reimbursement order, and it was the wine that he did not trust his intern with once I was back at the central station. It is not a simple matter, crossing town late in the evening with a canister full of red wine. Alright, this is something I cannot begrudge him. Anyone knows what might happen if one goes into town in the evening and happens to meet an acquaintance with ten litres of wine on their person.

I believe that a good mentor’s priority is setting an example for their trainee. In this respect, I am

convinced that my mentor was the very best one could have – he was an excellent example of the kind of journalist I would myself never want to be. I once asked him where the house archive was and he just laughed cynically. “Damn it, intern, you either are a journalist or you aren’t, you can find out all you need to know at the bar, rather than skiving off in the archives!” I had enough time before the bus left to do some research on what else besides excellent red wine and bears I could expect to find in the remote rural area where Aunt Martha was to be buried.

To my surprise, the newspaper archives had a thick dossier on the place. A number of years ago there had been an environmental accident in the only factory in that part of the country. It had caused a lot of damage but fortunately nobody had been hurt or killed. Perhaps I could dig up the already rather dusty story about the factory and toxic chemicals. But that was not all. The same dossier also had a copy of a women’s magazine. Immediately I recognised the front page.

It all instantly fell into place. There had been a leakage of polychlorinated biphenyls at the factory, the notorious PCBs, one of those super-chemicals



that initially accumulate in small fish, then large fish, and are eventually found in the fat of polar bears somewhere in the north of Greenland. Clearly not only in polar bears. Our Aunt Martha was a phenomenon. The level of PCBs in her fat was higher than had been measured in anyone else in the world so far. I remembered my childish deliberations about Aunt Martha as a world champion. Perhaps she did not throw the javelin or jump on skis but beside her cooking talent she must have had other natural gifts necessary for a world record. What I could never have imagined, even in my wildest dreams, were the complications that a tiny piece of fat belonging to my dear Aunt Martha would lead to.

After a torturous bus journey, I spotted the familiar church spire, village hall and pub. The place hadn't changed since my last visit. Old-fashioned red tractors drove bovine manure to small cultivated fields at the bottom of slight depressions in the landscape. Everything unfolded in a slow, lazy manner, smelling of manure and damp spring soil. People in their battered *Zastavas* were returning from work. Most of them still worked in the factory a few miles out of the village where the chemical accident had occurred.

I intended to first sort out everything to do with the funeral so that I might have more time later for my report, for all the bears in the world, and for the velvety red, of course. The village church was in a rather sorry state. Not only was the crumbling plaster calling for a little restoration work, its sagging roof resembled the back of an old nanny goat. Long dark patches on the wall made it obvious that the gutters had long stopped serving their purpose. I went to the nearby rectory to arrange all that was necessary for the funeral mass.

“Good day to you!” the priest must have only been a year or two older than myself. Pale and thin, he looked just as miserable as the building he worked in. “We haven’t met yet, I’ve only been here for half a year. Father Aegidius.” He shook my hand and invited me into a small office where he sat me down in front of a work table. “If that makes you feel uncomfortable, you can call me just Aegidius.” He offered me some biscuits that showed sure signs that they must have been the legacy of Aegidius’s predecessor. “I succeeded Father Eugene. He died last spring, God rest his soul. He had been ill for quite a while before that and looked after the church as well as he could.” We quickly sorted out all for Aunt Martha’s funeral.

He made me a tea which, under the circumstances, I was unable to refuse.

“The church will need some maintenance work. I will arrange it as soon as I collect the necessary money.”

Why does this guy keep apologising for the state of the building? What business of mine is that? Surely he can't believe that I am some religious enthusiast he might squeeze money out of until I drop dead, poor as a church mouse. That wasn't it. The man simply wanted to tell someone about his plans. Alright, even priests need someone to confess to. I had nothing against that, especially since people's confessions are the main part of our profession, just that we journalists are not bound to secrecy. The chap really was in a terrible quandary. His bosses probably didn't even know where he was performing Mass. In this we were alike. Even less did they plan restoration work on an unimportant local church. “Since I arrived here, I have sent at least five letters to the bishop's office.” Disappointed, he lifted up some folded pages that were still lying on the table. “I only received a response this morning. They very clearly suggested that I ought to raise the funds for restoring the church myself.”

How, poor chap, will you raise that amount of money? Certainly not from your one hundred and twelve parishioners on prehistoric tractors. Perhaps you could succeed if you robbed a bank, maybe the one in the Vatican. So you don't do anyone any wrong and then have a guilty conscience. Or you can wait for a miracle. There is no other solution. Of course, I didn't have the heart to tell him this to his face. But the priest was certain that he would succeed in raising the funds. "On Saint Stephen's I will bless the horses and also the tractors, because there are not many horses left. Both are tractive forces, a horse can fall ill, a tractor breaks down, so a blessing is very welcome for both. There will be a fair as well. Let people come. It will all have its purpose. People also have more fun if they know that there is a purpose to their party. What is important is visual communication. I also thought about organising a concert. In the summer, out in the open, because we don't have a large enough hall."

Visual communication? An open-air concert? Come on, please, in this place there are all of nineteen people even capable of going to a party, all the others are old men and pre-school children. Who in their sound mind would drive for five hours to reach this forsaken corner of the Earth?

As I left, the man glowed with almost religious zeal, firmly convinced in the success of his endeavour.

How desperate people must be around here, if they turn to me for therapy.

I chose the local inn as a temporary information centre, the only place in southeast Slovenia that offers horse meat goulash and tripe, and also had three rooms they occasionally rented out cheaply to road and forest workers. For a ridiculously low price, I was offered food and lodgings, as well as, most importantly, the use of their phone. The proprietor, a man in his early fifties, was clearly bored out of his mind in the terrible mental desert of this place and would probably have also paid me as long as I was prepared to listen to him.

After the essential morning coffees and early shots of wormwood liquor for his regular guests, we were left alone.

I was still trying to discern a more appropriate theme for my report, hoping that I might avoid having to photograph a dead bear in the centre of the village. “And how’s the bear situation around here? Have any hunters recently shot any problem-causing bears?”

“Bears? What are you taking about? I’ve no idea about bears. Never seen one around here,” the owner didn’t hide his annoyance. “What the hell do you folk in the capital imagine? That here in the periphery you’ll find dead bears lying in the middle of the road?”

“Hey, hey, nobody thinks that,” I tried to calm him and at the same time consolidated in my mind my opinion about my idiotic boss. “Anyway, what about that PCB pollution that there was so much talk about some years ago, how was that sorted out? Did it affect people in any way?” Suddenly the inn owner was back in a good mood.

“Of course it did,” he nodded emphatically and poured us out a spritzer even though I had not ordered anything. “Some people changed entirely. Like Martin Moškrič. We all knew him as a good man, a loner, long a pensioner, even though he is only in his mid-fifties. He lives in the ground floor one-bedroom flat in a block beyond the bus stop. He was always invisible and you would only see him if he was out in the hallway cleaning his shoes or when he came to the tenants’ association meetings to support the proposal for cable television.” His glass was almost empty so he clinked it against mine,

an excuse to refill both of them. “Then, one fine day, I found out from the newspaper that a Green Movement had been founded in our village. And who’s its leader? The very same Martin Moškrič!” He was fiddling with a half-empty packet of cigarettes and now lit himself one. He was the kind of person who liked to dramatise a little but seemed like a good guy.

“That in itself would not really be newsworthy, were it not for the fact that the man has totally lost it. He organizes demonstrations on an almost daily basis. The other day he was protesting against our old-fashioned tractors, claiming that they totally pollute the air and how that is the reason that so many older people in the countryside die before their time. Another time he fell out with all the cows and bulls because they release harmful gasses when they belch.” Momentarily he fell silent, took another sip, constantly watching me to check whether I have managed to get the picture on the nascent local green fundamentalism.

“A few days ago a neighbour who is a chemistry teacher complained to my wife. Within the scope of the school science day, the children went to the local stream and dipped thermometers into the water, measuring whatever school kids can measure in the

school lab. Moškrič was instantly there and when the teacher explained that the water in the stream was hard and has a high pH he instantly went on the offensive. The following day he demanded from the mayor that the water in the stream should be softer and contain *no* pH whatsoever.”

“And why should the water in the stream not be hard?”

“I haven’t got a clue why that bothers him. Perhaps so that ducks landing on the surface don’t break their legs.”

“Thanks for the information, this Moškrič guy sounds deplorable.”

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The procession with Aunt Martha’s coffin set off from the house of mourning towards the graveyard. The mourners waved their handkerchiefs and made a point of displaying their sorrow, in the front rows a couple of old ladies were even crying while at the back end the discussion concentrated more on the funeral meal that would follow.

Moškrič’s followers were clearly well prepared for a diversion. Outside the cemetery we were met



by a cordon of protesters armed with posters and all the other equipment needed for such occasions. In front of this living wall stood Martin Moškrič, his legs spread defiantly. In his green uniform with golden buttons, wearing high brown ankle boots and a billed cap on his head, he looked like some hunter-fireman. Or fireman-hunter.

The mourners had no idea what this state of siege at the entrance to the cemetery was about and initially simply wanted to walk past, as if the demonstration had nothing to do with them.

“Stop!” Moškrič shouted at the top of his voice.

“No more PCBs in our place!” the demonstrators shouted in unison.

The funeral procession stopped. Aunt Martha was not exactly light, so the coffin bearers put her down on the ground.

What do these people here want? I was not sure what was going on and was just as surprised and confused as all the other mourners.

“Martha is full of PCBs! All the world knows that! Six hundred milligrams per kilo! Martha is hazardous waste!” Moškrič was waving about a copy of the women’s magazine with Aunt Martha on its cover.

Now, at this point my blood pressure began to rise as well. It is clear what a person needs to do if someone insults his favourite deceased aunt by publically accusing her of being waste. Such an occasion calls for no mercy. I jumped towards Moškrič and was about to punch him in the face but the inn owner got there first and did the job instead of me. In doing so he saved my article and probably also my career. After the punch, Moškrič momentarily fell silent, touched his swelling lips and checked the state of his teeth, which gave me just enough time to compose myself and realise the uniqueness of the moment. What luck! I would never have forgiven myself if I had at that moment gotten into a fight with Moškrič and compromised my work as a journalist.

What followed was a scuffle between the mourners and the demonstrators. People at the back were wondering what was going on and were especially concerned what would happen with the funeral repast. Soon a police car, blue lights flashing, sped onto the scene. An elderly policeman, short and rather bulky around his waist, was clearly in charge of the police intervention unit. He spoke, while the younger, lanky, spotty-faced policeman did not say

a single word, merely standing next to his colleague like a totem of despondency.

“We will not allow the disposal of hazardous waste in our cemetery!”

“Moškrič, don’t be such a fool, can’t you see that this is a funeral. Show a little human sensitivity and wait for the poor dead woman to be lowered into the pit. Then you can demonstrate all you want!”

It was interesting to observe the older policeman trying hard to use a psychological approach. The notion of demonstrations was still relatively new at the time, only two years earlier, before independence, standard public militia practice had been to rush in with their old-fashioned cars and vans, use their batons to impose order and only talk to those arrested the following day. It was so touching to see the poor policeman pleading with Moškrič, appealing to him to put reason and piety before his constitutional rights. Without doubt we can anticipate a great State.

The policeman trying to persuade Moškrič was interrupted when a fight broke out between the women from the funerary party and those from the civil initiative movement. During the intervention, the younger policeman came off worst, first being bitten by a redhead from the protest group and immediately

after that receiving a knee kick under the belt from a younger brunette from the funeral procession. Later there was talk that the policeman was not the victim of violent protest but merely jealousy. In his report the bitten and kicked policeman wrote that the incident was simply a case of accidental injuries which occurred when trying to separate the quarrelling sides.

During all this Moškrič howled about the future, about our children and about the poor polar bears that will, thanks to Aunt Martha, be full of PCBs. The more they tried to calm him, the louder his calls for the inspector from the government environment agency to come to the scene.

An hour and a half later the agency did indeed send one of its inspectors who merely complicated matters further. The man must have been the most miserable being in the entire world. Everyone in favour wanted him to sign and everyone against also wanted him to sign. He was the only person who was against signing anything. When he mentioned that, in theory at least, Moškrič had a point and that, at least according to the law, due to her high PCB content, Aunt Martha was indeed hazardous waste that should not just casually be buried in the ground, the whole scene turned chaotic.

The coffin with Aunt Martha was carried off into the church and placed somewhere in the vestry.

A scandal broke with full force. In an exclusive article I overdid myself. This was followed by a number of longer articles for the Saturday supplement, I even commented on the events for national TV. All the media wrote about Aunt Martha, to all I was the first point of reference. I was sorry that Aunt Martha never saw all the articles in women's magazines where her name was printed in bold.

In the meantime, the environmental protest reached a stalemate. Nobody knew how to proceed. The result of the inspector's findings that the only legal way of removing Aunt Martha from this world was by burning her body in a special-waste incinerator was that he too received a punch in the face.

It was Father Aegidius who found a solution to the mess. As he was praying for the soul of my dear deceased aunt, a beam of bright white light came through the ramshackle roof and enlightened him. The ray apparently inspired the priest with an ingenious solution, more or less triumphant for all affected parties. That same morning he called in to see me at the press centre. Instead of herbal tea and biscuits with archaeological significance, we had two large

spritzers in front of us as we waited for a small portion of tripe for me and a sausage with mustard and a large bread roll for him.

“If we cannot bury Aunt Martha, we will have to find some other solution. We don’t have much time.” I raised my brow as I looked at Aegidius, waiting for him to explain why we were here, both waiting for our morning snack and drinking large spritzers this early on in the day.

“The Church also has a solution for cases like this. After all, Aunt Martha is an environmental martyr.” Aegidius leaned across the table and whisperingly explained his plan on how Aunt Martha would find her peace without this leading to civil war.

The day after all the media pomp and exclusive reporting on the incident at the cemetery, I received a call from the chief editor at the newspaper, telling me that my internship was over. I was dumbstruck, which had clearly been his intention. Well, after a moment of cold silence, he told me that there was a contract for the post of assistant editor at the chronicle section of the paper waiting for me at human resources. What could have been better? This also meant that from the following week, I was also my former mentor’s superior. The first measure I

took was to appropriate the ten litres of velvety red. I love my job as a journalist!

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I only returned to the place of Aunt Martha's now legendary funeral on the fifth anniversary of her death. I had to see for myself the results of Father Aegidius's idea. I almost did not recognise the church spire, the village cooperative and the inn as I had known them since childhood. The place was simply glowing. There were new pavements along the roads, the houses were newly plastered and the cooperative had on its wall a huge fresco of a merry tractor driver driving off into the sunset. Parked in front of what used to be the inn but was now called a motel, were three busses with Italian, Austrian and French number plates and the rest of the parking was also completely full. The entire place was different, changed, though to me it still felt as if as recently as yesterday small, old-fashioned tractors still chugged along the only asphalted road. Now I barely managed to find a parking space for my humble Daihatsu. The motel was totally full, so the owner invited me to stay at his home, a new house where he had plenty of space in his guest room.

I wished to see Aunt Martha as soon as possible. Father Aegidius was waiting for me at the rectory door. In a splendid black cassock and Italian shoes, Ray-Ban sunglasses on top of a head of slicked-back hair. As if he had just stepped off a Milan catwalk.

“Greetings, Aegidius, I can see you have managed to successfully restore the church and rectory.”

“That’s the least we can do for Our Martha, our first Eco-Martyr, and of course for the crowds of pilgrims who come to visit her. As you can see, we have become a major pilgrimage centre and this brings with it great responsibility.”

“I can see that business is booming. What happened to Moškrič? Is he still protesting?”

“Oh, no, Moškrič has changed entirely. He now runs a successful tourist agency. He organises group pilgrimages to visit Our Martha. I do pride myself that all businesses here work together very decently. I think it is best you go in right now, we are just on a break, in fifteen minutes’ time the church will be filled with a large group of pilgrims from France, and there is a busload of Italians coming right after that.”

The open casket with Aunt Martha’s embalmed body was placed under a glass dome in a church niche to the right of the altar. Her face was illuminated



with a faint light. I must admit that the master embalmers did an excellent job. Aunt Martha had finally found her peace, dozing with a slight smile on her face. My dear Aunt Martha, the best cook, world champion, and environmental martyr.



# Willows



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In my early memories all the images of my first encounter with willows retain yellowish-brown hues. Not, however, as faded photographs in old albums – what brought them about was a thaw at the end of some distant winter. A yellow-grey sky and the melting snow in large yellow patches, all the rest in lighter or darker tones of brown. Despite the sudden warmer weather in February which brought dampness and mud, the snow in the fields persisted. After Sunday lunch at our grandparents' we went for a walk down the village road, through fields and pastures. In later years I grew to hate these long walks after Sunday family lunch because they were terribly boring but that late winter I was still a small boy, there was snow outside, and the sledge was waiting for me. Mother ran after me to put on my hat and gloves, buttoning up my chequered coat before she finally let me go. It must have been one of those particularly neat children's coats with a large collar and patch pockets, similar to those worn by adults

at the time. Only that on me it looked as if I had a half-open umbrella pulled across my head. Not that I cared. My adolescent uncle pulled along the sledge and zig-zagged it through the snowy slush with muddy molehills peeping through in places. I held onto its wooden frame as tightly as I could, shrieking with delight. On the sharper turns I mostly fell into the wet snow but quickly climbed back, knowing that the sledge would not wait for long. This game would have gone on forever had I not spotted some low, stocky trees. From afar they looked like black, hunchbacked men with yellow withies sprouting out of their heads. Bristly giants turned to stone, standing on the banks, thoughtfully gazing into the frozen pond.

I stopped, fell silent, and started crying quietly. Mother didn't understand. She probably thought that my foot had been caught under the sledge blade and gave my unfortunate uncle who was not at all to blame a nasty look. She picked me up so I no longer had to look at those horrible monsters waiting for spring, deep in thought.

Upon the remnants of forgotten fears grew first a curiosity and later an admiration for these trees. I liked seeing them, bending across pools and

fishponds, spreading along the stony embankments of nearby rivers or spreading across scree high up in the mountains.

Before the end of winter, I planted some around the frog pond so their roots might stabilise its banks. To look at, the cuttings were just dead sticks, without roots or branches and without any signs that would indicate they contained any remnants of life. I stuck them into the wet ground, softened in the mild morning warmth in the spots where the wind had blown away the snow.

It was the time of year when amphibians begin awakening. After long months of sleep in icy stupor, the scent of thawing soil awakes them like an aromatic morning coffee. I also enjoyed stomp-ing around in rubber boots on the patches of bare, damp earth. Every animal, tailless or betailed, that had survived the winter was now crawling out of its still semi-frozen dwelling and joining the festival of spring. After a winter-long night of fasting, salamanders and agile frogs were crawling to forest pools and the occasional frog pond. Rolling in the same direction were fat toads, still too frozen to be capable of anything more than their clumsy hop. This was a morning paean of joy, bustling with

enthusiasm over the new world that was becoming more fragrant by the moment, warmer and more colourful.

The willow cuttings were also waiting for the soil to get its breath of dampness and beneath the dead grass things began to stir. That was also when my sticks awoke, sprouted roots and grew into the bank. No other tree had such a will for life. In the time between the full moons leaves began to bud. By the beginning of summer the growth was so vigorous that nobody would recognise the young trees as the lifeless sticks pushed into the cold ground.

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The throbbing heat of the early August afternoon did not allow any kind of movement. It pressed persistently until all life stopped and even thoughts came to a standstill. Only the grasshoppers tirelessly persevered. They chirped all afternoon as if the chirping was protecting them from being baked in the hot air just above the surface of the scorched grass. Only well into the evening did the heat abate, providing some respite.

I went down to see my willow trees on the banks of the frog pond. First I sat, then soon lay in the



grass. Tired, without any real strength, I looked at my young trees and listened to the still-warm ground. Time flowed very slowly. In the meantime, the willows grew vigorously. Their roots covered me, enveloped me and pushed my one side into the soil while my other side was observing the sky and the warm, dwindling pool with frogs, diving beetles and striders. With one ear I listened to crickets digging out their underground burrows, with the other their chirping outside the entrances to their holes. Earthworms too rustled pleasantly. I could listen to them devouring the soil.

I hadn't imagined just how many animals fed on soil. I must admit that initially their behaviour seemed terrible and repulsed me. It was so unusual and different. I had once read some advice by an elderly lady (a distant cousin of mine) referring to the *Great Wormhole Challenge*. Apparently it is something we can come across in our later years and may change the course of our life entirely. Understandably, without thinking about it too much, I took up this unique challenge and at the same time faced a bizarre demand: I should, from then on, live in a dark round pantry only as big as I can nibble out for myself! But the burrowing was so irresistibly

inviting. I closed the eye still facing the sky and no longer listened to the rustling in the grass. Now I too began swallowing tiny bits of soil. Corridors became my home, endless corridors I had to eat out myself. The destination was unimportant, my journey was my food. Whenever I came across hard, tasteless clay, I simply turned around, looking for soft soil in a fresh direction. It brought me great satisfaction in the darkness of the badly ventilated underground burrows.

All the other annelids moved with incredible elegance through the stuffy passages. With their sparse but tough bristles on either side of their bodies, they pushed against the walls of the tunnels and, anchoring their head firmly, pulled the back end of their body towards it. Tensing their abdomen, they thrust their bristles into the wall and pushed the head forward. They did this with a particular swiftness when they had to disappear in the face of danger or when they went down the wrong hole. I could only move through the soil as fast as I could eat my way through it. Unshaven, I tried to climb through existing tunnels but my bristles are not particularly suitable for this kind of movement and I didn't get very far. My otherwise well hirsute chest and shoulders

totally failed me. I admit that, comparing myself to the elegant oligochaetes and their steady undulation through underground wormholes, I felt deprived and disabled.

An earthworm rarely meets another earthworm, so I was particularly happy of the unusual acquaintance with someone who was quite a character even in this underground world. I would never have thought that fate might intend such a bizarre path in the life of an earthworm. As with all unusual life stories, his too was a combination of circumstances and a peculiar love affair that my acquaintance had become involved in. With earthworms every individual carries within them a male part and a female part, so that one day they will become both father and mother. And that is not all. Sometimes it happens that one animal can become two. My new friend was once chopped in half by a hoe and when the two halves grew into new animals, something highly unusual happened. The two earthworm halves that lived entirely separate lives, actually met. After a brief ceremony of checking each other out, the former earthworm married twice with itself, produced two new generations of earthworms, experienced dual paternity and dual maternity. The

life of these half-worms became terribly complicated and I could no longer really follow the situation that had arisen but I later often dreamed of living a quadruple life of two females and two males with numerous descendants.

My oligochaetic friends might have an unusual sex life but the underground world is in fact the domain of fungi and springtails. The tiny collembola with their thick heads constantly seek out the scented white threads that spread like capillaries through every inch of soil. Everywhere around me is teeming with them, there are thousands. Tiny, purple, soft as velvet. In their wake the gentle scent of fresh earth. It is thanks to them that the enchanting odour of geosmin spreads discreetly through this dark underworld. They are the ones who create the scent of spring when the snow vanishes and the damp earth appears.

On my way I did not only meet springtails. Whenever I ate my way to the soft humus close to the surface, tiny moss piglets and unusual diplurans came crawling my way. The most entertaining animals in this light ground, however, were the family clans of centipedes. Diplopoda, symphylans and pauropods, each one advocating their own concept

of movement even though they all rely on dozens and dozens of pairs of legs. These arthropods are really quite crazy. Why would it matter how many pairs of legs someone has and how large their feet are?

I had kept the eye that was facing the sky closed all the time, listening to and smelling only the life beneath the surface. So one night I also opened the other eye and listened to the other side. In the sky the night could be darker than the night below ground. When the night is dense enough, silence also stills, is less audible, every call without an echo. But normally the darkness had a greenish hue and the silence echoed in the chirping of crickets and waves of croaking from frogs. The roots were damp in the night and cooled my body pleasantly. The only problem was that unpleasant visitors also found shelter in them. Hedgehogs stalked mice and voles which crept out of their burrows into the coolness of night, looking for seeds. My God, how these animals stank! And as if that was not enough, in between their spines they were full of fat ticks, sucking on their blood. They kept sniffing and pushing their snouts under the roots until they dragged out into the open a blind baby mouse. When they had

finished with this, they grabbed a maybeetle grub that happened in its ignorance to crawl too close to the surface. In the next jaunt it was the turn of an earthworm that resisted desperately, causing it to lose its abdomen, part of its liver and stomach. With its other end, saving its head, it managed to escape down a burrow, outside the reach of the hedgehog's claws. The gorging wasn't over until morning when the hedgehogs and shrews withdrew to their stuffy dens.

With the eye turned towards the sky, I preferred to watch the plundering owls. They too had a scent but they did not touch me. As soon as they seized their prey, they disappeared somewhere into the forest. At night there was no blood, bodies were devoured instantly.

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It began to rain. The rain fell slowly and persistently. Dampness returned to the cracked earth, bringing with it sweet relief to my desiccated body. But also swelling and growing were the white strands of fungi. Their mycelia intertwined as they spread unstoppably, their strings sticking to my body, and before I was able to do anything, the part of me

buried in the soil was entirely covered in a soft fungal mesh. The mere thought that this underground mould would drain the life out of me and convert me into decomposing blackness terrified me. The prospect of such a horrible, inescapable fate brought me waves of acute nausea. It was probably just caused by the intoxicating smell for the severe sickness soon began to give way to a sensation of comfort that slowly prevailed.

The snow-white outfit had clearly not found me by chance. No, the almost forced benetting of my underground body was intended as the start of some kind of celebration. This was foretold by a multitude of welcoming greetings. These came in regular pulses along the white filaments from the direction of the forest and initially rendered me weak. I could never have imagined that my stay on the banks of the frog pond meant this much to the other trees. The tangle of fungi from my body grew into a web through which I became acquainted with an almost five-hundred-year old oak tree, a wonderful blue-grey beech, a silver birch, a spindle tree and a bunch of young hornbeam shoots. Trees old and young were greeting me and hailing my role on the banks of the frog pond. Belonging to

the community of trees and their warm welcome touched me deeply. Only now do I realise how superficially I used to consider the forest, without ever even trying to understand it.

After a night of incredible dreams the morning found me covered in dew. It was time I returned to my daily routine.

I stand hunched over the pond that is vanishing in the summer heat. I will continue to stand here for decades to come, watchfully observing the murky water. I will wait for the first late-autumn winds to blow bare the leaves from my yellow withies. During the dormant period of icy stillness, I will think about the events of the past year. Until the end of winter I will stand in the thawing yellowed snow, donned in a judicial robe of damp, dark, almost black bark. Despite my stooping posture and bristly crown, nobody will be so disrespectful as to disturb my peace before spring.

But now it is still the height of summer drought. The pond before me will dry up in a few days' time. Frogs and newts are jostling and crawling over each other in the shallow water that no longer offers any real shelter, either from the rays of the sun or from predators. The water beetles have already flown



away, perhaps even this very night the amphibians will also set off for the nearby fishpond.

About the Author

# Boris Kolar



Photo: Matjaž Wenzel

Boris Kolar, PhD, is an ecologist and ecotoxicologist, an international expert on environmental risks. He has written columns for a daily newspaper and published the occasional text in Slovenian literary magazines, but he is most well-known for his humorous novel *Iqball Hotel* set in Africa, which tells the story of a tourist who slowly turns into the proprietor of a hotel in the middle of nowhere. The novel was shortlisted for the Kresnik Award for best novel in 2009. More than a decade later, in 2020, Goga published his book of short stories *Trinajst (Thirteen)*. In 2021, he published his second novel *Potopimo Islandijo! (Let's Sink Iceland!)*. His writings are in touch with nature, bright and, above all, extremely humorous.

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Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying Archaeology and History of Art at UCL in London, he taught English in Greece for a while and then returned to England to complete a Masters at the University of Kent. He now lives in Cyprus and regularly translates contemporary Slovene literature for publishing houses and authors in Slovenia, with translations published in both the UK and US.



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