

# **BORIS KOLAR** THIRTEEN

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**B O R I S  
K O L A R**



# THIRTEEN

*short stories*

*keywords: animals, ecology, nature, humor*

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## About the book

At first glance, these humorous stories seem fantastic, but above all, they bring to mind the incredible variety and heterogeneity of the world that is right before us, but that we manage to overlook every single day. And it is this variety that whispers in our ear: I am here, too, the world is bigger than you. If earthworms under the earth can feel, even the sky can come alive for a moment: »Perhaps the sun rose an inch too high that day and an error occurred in the sky. Why else would there be numerous white lines left behind by airplanes cutting across the sky?« The animals in these thirteen stories are often more human than people, and people are what they always were – animals. Both animals and people pay more attention to their instincts rather than reason and find the most incredible solutions to their problems.

About  
the  
book

## About the author

Dr Boris Kolar is an ecologist and ecotoxicologist and 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)*. His writings are in touch with nature, bright and, above all, extremely humorous.

## About the translator

Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying at UCL in London he taught English in Greece and then completed a Masters at 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.





# Sample Chapter

## The Oratorio of Scented Time

*Tuesday 04 06 19, 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 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 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 but became aware of 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 noticed them, most people don't even pick up on 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 pannelist, 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 assure you 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 06 06 19, 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 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. 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, you 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 smelled!

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 clockmaker 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. I stood there like some old lady with dementia 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 06 19, 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 and 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 in a state where I was unable to smell anything. 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 sportsmen, 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, the choice could only be one. 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 Pohorje 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 them 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 one kind of 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 a further 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 tell you more, let some of it be a surprise for the premiere.



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# **BORIS KOLAR**

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