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Chapters 2 and 3

kissing stone
Split, May 1932

Antun knew it would work, the minute he caught sight of the block of stone left outside the courtyard. The sun picked out the sheen of the tiny seashells embedded in the soft cream stone. In his mind's eye, he saw Milan's torso emerge from its nubby texture, as if he were a storybook's genie softly shooting through a bottle's stem. He crouched down in front of the block and ran his hands over its surface. He could sense by touch alone where his lover's shoulders would break through. He let his hands rest. It was almost a shock to realise it was just stone that he was tracing with his excited fingers. Milan had come alive again as Antun imagined his carving's potential. He looked anxiously around the courtyard, worried he might have been seen so obviously caressing a block of stone. But it was early and no one stirred. He studied the windows in the building opposite, many of them patched over with odd bits of fabric, or sheets of cardboard. Several of the tiny windows under the uneven roof were missing frames, or they had been left hanging, their hinges long gone.

He straightened up and lit a cigarette. How to get hold of the stone with Fisković still angry at his sudden return to the workshop the other week? They'd had a huge argument about his leaving college and Fisković hadn't come round yet, not even with Jakob's attempts at intervention. "You might well ask, what does a merchant like me know about art?" Well, I know this much: what you have is a gift, not just a means to trade."

Antun drew in the smoke from his cigarette, deep down into his lungs. Jakob had urged him to return to his studies, conceding only that he should stay home for a few months if he really were that exhausted from his academic labours. But Antun was struggling with something he couldn't really share with his patron, a devout Jew and a married man. Quite simply, he couldn't imagine his life without Milan's noisy presence. The workshop in Split, the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, they were just flat backdrops to a life that had come to an abrupt halt when Milan had gone into hiding. He had no idea where he was exactly, but he could make an astute guess. Milan was probably already in Italy, training with Pavelić's ustaše. And if that were the case, what was the point of sitting in any more life drawing classes?

Antun threw his cigarette down and angrily ground it under his boot's heel. Milan was a fool, but he was also beautiful. Antun had first caught sight of him after paying one kuna for a life drawing class off Ilica, a dismal experience otherwise because it wasn't art most of the other clientele were after. Antun had been mesmerised at that initial session, just like the voyeurs around him with their empty sketchbooks and blunt pencil stubs. Milan's lean, muscular strength had transferred well into his pen and ink sketches, but later, he found his extraordinary power with words and the vividness of his facial expressions much harder to convey. Maybe the stone would finally hold fast his elusive lover? Antun felt tears of frustration prick at the back of his eyes. He could hardly breathe when he thought too long about Milan. He put his cheek against the sun-warmed stone of the wall in front of him, but it felt wrong. The idea that he would never rest his cheek against Milan's flat belly again, nor listen in as his breath slowed after lovemaking was unbearable. He could hardly imagine how he was going to walk into the workshop and pick up his mallet and chisels as if it were just any other Tuesday morning. He wanted to shout his loss out to the cloistered courtyard; he wanted the world to bow down and suffer his grief.

He knew he was being self-dramatizing. It was a fault he'd developed since Milan turned round on his stool and let his robe fall to his ankles; deliberately slowly, his eyes fixed on Antun's. Calculating eyes that had recognised immediately the hunger of desire in Antun's own. Milan knew his worth, measured it out like a pharmacist would a prescription of arsenic. He had taught Antun a hard lesson: it was safe to take a little of what you fancy; take too much, and it would be a living death. Milan had let him take so much because he needed something from him. And that need met, he had taken obvious delight in paying him back with humiliation and ridicule. But what else could Antun do, but follow his lead? He was in love for the first time – and it would be the only time. He would die, surely, before letting himself experience a love like Milan's again?

Antun returned to the block of stone and walked round it, clockwise and then anti-clockwise. The rhythm consoled him. He remembered his birthday, just weeks ago, running up the stairs to their shared room, Milan

several steps ahead, and then Larissa, the pretty girl from the next room along, bumping into them on the landing. Milan's face cruel under the exposed light bulb that lit up their encounter. "You must give Antun his birthday kiss, Larissa. Go on!"

He'd pushed her in the small of her back and she'd knocked up against him, close enough for him to feel how her heart beat through her thin chiffon blouse. Antun had flinched visibly when she'd kissed him on the mouth. He'd wiped his lips clean against the back of his sleeve and only then noticed poor Larissa's look of dismay.

Antun tried to blot out the memory. Larissa worked as a secretary in the Sculpture Department, typed up the fees for the models and let him have Milan's address in exchange for a palatschinken. His beautiful Milan, living in a room the size of a suitcase with mouse droppings crusted on the floorboards. Milan needed a clean room where he could lie low whenever his political antics brought the police too close to his heels; Antun just needed him. It seemed like a fair exchange at the time, but he had got greedy.

"Hey, you doing a magic trick?"

Antun looked up, startled to find himself back in the courtyard outside Fisković's workshop. It took him a while to identify the speaker, but he found her eventually, on the third floor up, her head poking through a broken window pane. "It's Fisković's boy, isn't it? But you know, I didn't recognise you in that dandy suit. Last time I looked you were a barefoot vagabond."

"I've been away studying."

He tried to remember the woman's name, but failed. She loosened her thin hair from its stringy bun and shook it out. "A likely story, Antun Fisković. You're a born seducer. Just look at you. Enough to tempt a saint."

Antun smiled up at her. He knew her at last, Lidia Vucetic, a whore who worked the little bars off Zagrebacka. Fisković had recommended her when he came of age, whispered her price list to him over a plum brandy and winked in a way that had nearly turned his stomach. But Lidia had shot away inside when she heard Fisković shouting from the workshop. "So, you've decided to stroll in for the afternoon, have you?"

It was barely ten o'clock in the morning, but Fisković would have been up and about since five. Antun knew his routine almost as well as he knew the scars on his hands. He sighed, adjusted his hat and stepped into the workshop. Fisković was sitting on a lump of stone, his hands idle on his lap. Beside him stood two very large, half-finished carvings of angels blowing trumpets. A pot of coffee stood on the windowsill by the door. Antun crossed over and poured himself a cup. The workshop expanded into the next courtyard along, where Fisković carved outdoors under an awning made out of slatted wood. Inside, he kept his blocks of untreated stone alongside a bench of tools, an old book press and copy books full of different styles of calligraphy and architectural details. Fisković was a stone mason. His trade was largely the carving of tombstones, but he also helped work on restoration projects in the city. In recent years, that work had been hard to come by, but the steady trickle of deaths in the crowded streets around the Peristyle had begun to make up for the loss.

Antun had worked alongside him ever since he had adopted him as a young boy. Fisković assumed he would inherit the business, but Jakob Eschenasi had had other ideas when he saw his precocious talent. Jakob traded artefacts from across the globe, including ivory carvings from Japan and China, and he knew quality when he saw it. He praised God when he saw Antun had the gift to carve like a Michelangelo and offered to fund his studies in Zagreb. Ivan Meštrović taught there and only he was good enough to channel Antun's latent talent. Meštrović was also renowned for supporting students from impoverished backgrounds. He had been poor himself once; had travelled to Vienna, without even a pair of shoes on his feet, in order to find an education that would match his talents. Jakob had made contact with the Academy in Zagreb and the sculptor had offered Antun a scholarship on the strength of a single carving, depicting a young man in a sailing boat.

Fisković stared over at his son. He was nearly sixty and it was showing. The lines on his face looked as though they had been branded. He was frowning into the sunlight that came through the open windows, his brows contracting into a terrible glare. Antun drank his coffee and waited for the storm to erupt. He knew his father's moods only too well. Fisković stayed surprisingly silent.

"I went for a walk," Antun began. "I went up to the chapel in the Marjan Hill. I wanted some peace and quiet."

"Barely turned twenty and you're planning to die, are you?"

"No. I just wanted to see the sun come up."

"Ah, you watch the weather, and I work myself into a grave. That's the plan, is it?"

"Pappa, I'm sorry. I'll stay on tonight. We'll get everything finished."

"It's not the commissions I'm worried about. It's you. Moping like a bloody girl." Fisković paused. A sly look came over his face, rather similar to the one he had adopted when he talked up Lidia's charms. "Your mother thinks it's a girl, anyway."

Antun found himself blushing. He quickly turned to look out of the window. "I'm not sure about my college course, that's all."

"And I'm sure you have the brain of a grasshopper," Fisković thundered back. "One minute here, the next minute there. Make up your mind, once and for all."

Fisković lurched off the stone block and headed back out to the courtyard. Minutes later, Antun heard mallet strike against chisel, a sound as familiar to him as the summer cicadas in the hills beyond. He put his cup down and went over to inspect the angels. Fisković was experimenting with a new pattern and he'd struggled to carve a trumpet without disaster. Antun ran his hands over the hands of one angel. They were still like a rough sketch. He knew Fisković was waiting for him to take up his chisel and smooth away the planes, which he knew he was capable of finishing such a task without mishap. At the feet of the angels, several chipped fingers sat like a warning. Antun turned one of the fingers round between his own. His father didn't seem to consider that there were times when a piece of stone had to be tempted to give up its secrets, cajoled like a small, shy creature. Stone might seem solid, but Antun had always relished the challenge of making it respond to his touch, like a lover under his palms; stroking and easing skin and bone; teasing out the details, melding insight and technique until the secret inside the stone emerged. He looked up and found himself eye-to-eye with one of the angels. She was boss-eyed. "Damn, I'll need to start the whole thing from scratch," he thought. "That's why Pappa is so angry."

the wolf and the owls
Zagreb, May 1998

The owl family is still in place, a little dilapidated and stowed away under a wire mesh, but otherwise unharmed. It was one of the last things I remember seeing, before taking a train out of Zagreb – forever, or so I thought. Sometimes, it feels as though I left in another century, but actually it was only fifteen years ago. I try and convince myself that the survival of the owl family on an apartment block near the station is a good omen, but my rising sense of panic is getting the better of me.

“Can you stop?” I ask the cab driver.

He shrugs, but parks up, close to the National Theatre. I stumble out and wait for my feelings of panic to pass. Deep breaths. In and out, in and out. I try and distract myself by watching what else is going on around me. A woman is weeding the flower beds outside the theatre; chairs are being set up outside cafes and the felt grass squares in front of them are being slowly swept of fallen leaves and abandoned cigarette packets. A tiny, blonde-haired girl walks a huge dog on a lead. It’s as if I’ve never been away. I almost expect to hear Goran calling me from the cab. “You okay, Ana? Shall we go back to the apartment?”

But our apartment disappeared long ago, and not long after that Goran went too. I had to leave, because I was lost in this city without him. And now? I’m back because I’ve been asked to conduct an interview with President Tudjman, live on Croatian TV. I’m back, because I’m a survivor like the President. “A fellow traveller,” he called me in his letter. It can be the only reason I return. Everything else is lost to me. I don’t expect anything else to happen, but my panic attacks and sleeplessness give the game away. The truth is, I really do want to see them, Darko, Rosana and my little girl. Except she’s a grown woman now – twenty-three on her last birthday. I sent her a beautiful bronze scarf, hand embroidered with a feather fringe, the gift of a Slovenian designer I’d profiled in *Neu Style*. I have no idea if it was the right choice.

“Bloody wolf, not a dog,” says the cab driver, nodding to the little girl and her pet, as I return to the car.

He holds the door open for me, sensing I’m someone with a history he should maybe acknowledge, but I doubt he recognises me. He can’t have been much more than a schoolboy when I first took to the airwaves of Radio Zagreb. He’s mid-thirties, a chain smoker and garrulous. His face is flat like a sting-ray’s and he has very hairy, muscular shoulders, visible beneath his vest. Maybe he’s been serving in the army, or with the paramilitaries? We start a conversation about the hotel I’m booked into, just off Ilica. His cousin helped build the place, one of many being constructed to meet demand.

“UN bureaucrats, not tourists,” he says, but without rancour. My cab driver has evidently made a pretty profit from the overseas peacekeepers and their administrators, judging by his designer sunglasses and exquisite Armani black jeans. “And you’re back for pleasure, of course,” he says, studying me without embarrassment in his mirror. “Are you from the city?”

“Once upon a time, not anymore.”

“Ah, the story of our times.”

He swings a sharp left, across a tramline, and we’re outside Hotel Callas. He jumps out and delivers my suitcases to the reception lobby, before taking his farewell. He kisses the back of my hand and declares he knew me at once. “My girlfriend watches all the soaps,” he confides. In some ways, he’s right. I am an actress, although I doubt a very good one. The receptionist waves him away and checks my reservation details and passport.

“Welcome to Zagreb, Mrs Dodig.”

“It’s Ms Petrić now.”

She shoots me a look, but doesn't comment. My room is the first off the corridor leading from the breakfast verandah. It's compact, not luxurious, but what I expected after my conversation with the cab driver. I don't take long to unpack, but spend some time checking on my emails. I had hoped my visit wouldn't compromise deadlines for the next issue of *Neu Style*, but everything has been thrown upside down with the collapse of our cover feature. I fire back a suggestion that I work up my interview with the President, but I doubt we can persuade him to model the same suits we planned for the Slovene actor and award-winning skier Ivo Kucar. Besides, rumour has it the President has not made progress after surgery for stomach cancer. The interview might yet prove to be another phantom I chase in my return to Zagreb.

Back at reception, I ask for a map. I've seen the television news reports about the air raids in Zagreb and haven't been sure what to expect. Outside in the streets, all looks much as it did before, except people look less drab. The fashions are current, the young men and women walking in Gornji Grad all cut from the same pattern: tall as catwalk models and just as striking. I dread catching their eye: what if one of them turns out to be Dagmar? When I've imagined our first meeting, I never thought of it taking place in an impromptu fashion on a street corner. Since I booked my trip, I have built the idea of our reunion up into a Chekhovian-style scene, acted out in Rosana's front room – but hopefully without that awful draylon sofa and giant sputnik table lamp to distract from the emotion of the moment.

My daughter. It sounds odd, even whispered to myself. Can you still claim to be a mother when you've rarely seen your child outside of a photograph, when you've never held her after her nightmares, or wiped her tears, or cheered her on in a relay race? What I have done is live a lie. I'm not a mother. But each step back to Jesuit Square convinces me I do have a claim on the title. I left, I know, because I needed to give myself a chance, one I could never have been given in the old Croatia, "the silent republic," which had destroyed a whole generation. My generation. I think of the song by The Who, one of Goran's favourites. He'd played it at top volume on Darko's record player before we went to the rallies, ignoring the angry shouts of the neighbours below. We'd screamed ourselves hoarse, demanding change, a new constitution free of Belgrade's control – and, most passionately of all, a future. But our brave roar had been reduced to that deafening silence.

I head for St Katarina's, the church in Jesuit Square I attended when I still lived in Zagreb. It's hard to think why a church should be my first port of call, as it was the church that turned its back on me as squarely as my former employers had at Radio Zagreb. Goran had committed a sin when he took his life, according to my church's teachings. Another door closed, and my heart had broken. But still I can't resist a look. The young woman I had once been used to love the ceremony and mysteries of the Mass; once I'd even thought of becoming a picture restorer so I could spend my life rescuing old church frescoes and involving myself in a non-stop Mystery Play, acted out by centuries old figures missing eyes, limbs or jewelled headdresses.

Inside, it takes a while for my eyes to acclimatize to the shrouded gloom. I hunt out the side chapel where the Virgin stands, fairy lights twinkling above her head and plastic ivy twined around her bare feet. Small bouquets are still slotted in the rail around her shrine, some carrying little prayer cards. I cross myself and kneel down. Shortly afterwards, an old woman joins me, dropping two heavy shopping bags either side of her. The church has always been a favourite for the housewives on their way home from Dolac market. The woman prays fervently under her breath. Suddenly, the church springs into a blaze of colour and movement. Someone has put on the overhead lights so that a party of tourists can record the interior on their camcorders and the church is revealed as a baroque interior of amazing splendour – every square inch decorated with dancing putti, framed by pink and white garlands. I sit quietly, as always stunned by this view. I have no words to offer Our Lady, so light a votive candle instead.

Leaving the church, I walk into the nearest café and order a black coffee and a Jamaican water. I don't need a map to take me to Darko and Rosana's apartment, but an armed escort to stop me running when I approach the entrance. What are my feelings about returning to my old home? Guilt is mixed in there somewhere, along with apprehension and despair. I have left it too long, I know. But what is strange is how it doesn't feel like fifteen years have gone by; one minute, I was a young woman desperate to escape a world that had stripped me of any identity for a crime I barely knew I had committed. The next minute, I'm here sitting in this café, sipping coffee like any other elegant, middle-aged divorcee, my past a footnote in a text book (if that) and my immediate concern writing a list of questions for Croatia's esteemed President. The maspok

survivor; the people's hero. Who would have thought it, after what has been? Goran wanted independence for Croatia, like Tadjman, but would he have been happy paying the price that was eventually paid?

Goran has disappeared into the past, like the dancing putti into the gloom of the unlit cathedral behind me. He's a shadow, not a real life person. Defeat left him vulnerable; he barely spoke to me the last few months of his life, caged up in his brother's apartment like a sacrificial ram. In the end, he'd delivered the blow himself. I've never forgiven him for leaving me behind. Is this what I'm afraid to tell my daughter? I can't remember your father, not the flesh and blood man, just the shadow who silently exited my world, softly like a stone dropping through an ocean. For she will ask me things I can't hope to answer, I know that. She will ask the questions I asked myself in the days before I found my new life. She is twenty-three, with all the resolve and conviction of anyone else her age, the same formidable confidence of being right which I once possessed when I questioned Yugoslavia's government ministers relentlessly on my radio show. Behind the story with Ana Petrić. But the one story I should have held on to and explained has been lost with time, and by Goran's final act of despair. Dagmar will hate such a spirit of defeat, if she's anything like I was in those days of protest. I'm frightened of her, but why, when I know her in part, because she is my daughter.

Maybe I can turn the tables. I can ask her questions, because I'm the master interviewer when all is said and done. I take my mobile out of my handbag and check down the list of names. And there it is: Darko's number. 796-046. I'm about to ring when the waiter glides up and asks if I want anything else. The moment is lost.